

The Probable Course of an Improbable Life: Migration, Rebellion, and Rashīd al-Dīn

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Since the nineteenth century, western scholars have mustered textual evidence for the life of Rashīd al-Dīn into a series of biographies treating select episodes of his life: the circumstances of his birth and conversion to Islam, his relationship with his co-viziers, and his eventual fall from grace. Such biographies for the central advocate of Ilkhanid dynastic ideology prove unsatisfactory on two levels. First, they accept at face value biographical data produced under highly charged political circumstances. Second, they do not address the formative “silent” periods of Rashīd al-Dīn’s life. This paper explores several opportunities for discerning the probable circumstances of Rashīd al-Dīn’s early life through the evolution and movement of groups with which he identified. For example, by collating known information about the Jewish community of Iran with the likely timeline of Rashīd al-Dīn’s life, we can better understand the pathways by which the “doctor from Hamadan” entered Mongol service. Similarly, by comparing Rashīd al-Dīn’s course of promotion through the Ilkhanid administration with those of his contemporaries, we can hypothesize his activities during the crucial years from the reign of Geikhatu through the rise of Ghazan. By using group dynamics to speculate on the probable circumstances of Rashīd al-Dīn’s life, and by seeing past the literary and ideological elaborations of the texts that provide more “objective” biographical information, this paper reevaluates his life, as well as the significance of narrating that life, both in its own time and today.