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(1926–2015)

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The Coming of the Mongols

The Idea of Iran

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Scholarship and Science under the Qara Khitai (1124–1218)

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One of the distinctive features of the history of Greater Iran in the period between the Seljuqs to the Mongols was the establishment of the Qara Khitai, or Western Liao Empire, in Central Asia. This unique polity, established by Manchurian nomads who were expelled to Central Asia from north China, managed to govern the mostly Muslim population of Central Asia in near harmony, despite the "infidelity" of its rulers. In many ways, it had been a — rather benign — prelude to the coming of the Mongols into the Islamic world. Moreover, the relative stability and prosperity that the Qara Khitai brought to Central Asia enabled the flourishing of Islamic and non-religious scholarship under their reigns.

This chapter seeks to shed some light on Muslim intellectual activities under Qara Khitai rule. Based on a variety of Muslim and Chinese literary sources as well as archaeological evidence, and following the careers of twelfth- and thirteenth-century scholars, including migrants from the Qara Khitai realm who were active under Mongol rule, it reconstructs the main fields of knowledge and achievements of Central Asian Muslim scholars under the Qara Khitai, and their impact on the later Islamic world, including Iran.

Background: The Qara Khitai

The Kitans, a nomadic people of Manchurian provenance, arrived in Central Asia after more than 200 years of ruling — in Manchuria, Mongolia and parts of north China — as the Liao dynasty (907–1125). In north China the Kitans both maintained their native traditions — such as a nomadic way of life, the Kitan language, and shamanic rituals — and embraced the Chinese imperial tradition, including such of its trappings as reign titles, the calendar, and the Chinese language, which they used alongside Kitan and Turkic. Other major transformations of the Liao period were the invention of two Kitan scripts, large and small, intensive urbanization, which did not prevent the Kitans from maintaining their nomadic lifestyle (the royal court's seasonal movements continued throughout the Liao period); patronage of Buddhist institutions to enhance the Kitans' legitimacy; the modification of their burial customs; and
the emergence of a unique and sophisticated material culture that revolved around gold.

The Liao Kitans also set up a dual administration, in which the southern branch was responsible for administering the sedentary population and the northern branch for the nomadic sector. They managed to force the contemporaneous Han Chinese dynasty, the Song (960–1279) to acknowledge them as equal. Thus, the Liao and Song emperors both bore the title ‘Son of Heaven’ (the Liao emperor as the northern one and his Song counterpart as the southern), in contrast to the traditional Chinese worldview, according to which there is one sun in the sky and one emperor upon earth. Consequently, while preserving much of their original Kitan characteristics and nomadic political culture, the Kitans also managed to portray themselves both inside and outside their realms as no less Chinese than the Song. In fact the word Cathay/Khaz, which derived from the ethnic affiliation (Kitan/Khitai) of the Liao’s rulers, became the term for China not only in Mongolia but further west – in medieval Europe, Russia, and the Muslim world. The Liao conducted trade relations with the peoples of Islamic Central Asia, especially the Qarakhanids, with whom they also had marital connections.1

In the early twelfth century, when the Liao was overthrown by another wave of Mongol invaders, the Jurchens, one Khitan prince, Yelü Dashi, chose not to submit to the new rulers. Instead he led his few adherents westwards, hoping to return subsequently and restore the Liao in its former domain. In a little more than a decade he succeeded in setting up a new empire in Central Asia that was known there as the Qara Khitai, and in China as the Western Liao (Xi Liao). The dynasty persisted for nearly 90 years, and was finally vanquished by the Mongols in 1218.

As its height, after defeating the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar in the famous Battle of Qorón (1141), the Qara Khitai Empire stretched from the Oxus River in western Uzbekistan to the Altai Mountains in the Chinese–Mongolian border. Until 1175, the state’s borders ran even further east into the Nizam and Yenisei Qirghiz territories on the fringes of western Mongolia. The population of this vast empire was multi-ethnic and heterogeneous. Besides the Kitans, who constituted but a small minority in their own domain, there were Turks (Uighurs included), Iranians, Mongols, and a few Han Chinese. While most of the populace was sedentary and Musulim, there was an appreciable nomadic component (led by the Kitana themselves), as well as flourishing Buddhist, Nestorian, and even Jewish communities.2

In Central Asia the Khitans continued to adhere to Liao-Chinese trappings (languages, symbols of rulership and vassalage) and to Kitan identity markers. In fact, recent philological research and archaeological discoveries suggest that the Kitan character of the Qara Khitai was more pronounced than was previously thought: thus, for example, while the dynasty’s name was understood until recently to mean Black Khitai (Qara meaning black in Mongolian and Turkish).

Daniel Kane has shown, on the basis of the newly found Kitan inscriptions, that the Mongolian term *qara-khitai was actually a version of the Kitan *shirt(š) teke* (the Chinese equivalent of which is the Liao Khitai). This was the name by which the Kitans called themselves on the eve of the Jurchen conquest. This implies that the Liao dynasty in China and Yelü Dashi’s state in Central Asia were known by the same name (as reflected in the way in which The Secret History of the Mongols and Rashid al-Din treat the two peoples).3 As for archaeology, recent artefacts unearthed in Central Asia attest to the preservation of elements of Kitan material culture, script, and perhaps also historical writing under the Qura Khitai.4

Despite these similarities, and due to the impact of the new Central Asian environment, Qara Khitai rule was very different from that of the Liao. First of all, it was far less direct and centralised. Apart from its central territory, most of the Qara Khitai realm was administered indirectly and in a rather minimalist way: the local dynasties – most important among them were the Eastern and Western Qarakhanids and the Genghis Uighurs – remained largely intact, usually retaining their rulers, titles and armies, and no permanent Qara Khitai troops were stationed in the subject territories. Liao peculiarities such as the dual administration or the five capitals were not re instituted, and despite the use of Chinese titles, no Chinese bureaucracy existed under the Western Liao. Instead, in a typical Inner Asian amalgamation, the Qara Khitai administration also included Turkic and Persian elements, manifest, for example, in the use of the Persian and Turkic languages in addition to Chinese and Kitan, and in the prevalence of Turkic and Persian titles among the dynasty’s prominent titles, such as sayyid (Turkic: ‘chamberlain’) and zhīn (Persian: ‘local governor’). Even the ruler’s title, Gürkhan (‘universal khan’), was a hybrid Kitan–Turkish title.5 Despite these influences, however, and in sharp contrast to their predecessors and successors in Central Asia, throughout their rule the Qara Khitai did not embrace Islam, the dominant religion in their new environment. Instead, they constructed their identity and legitimacy upon a unique combination of a shared nomadic political tradition and the prestige of China in Muslim Central Asia.6

Despite the retention of their ‘Kitanness’ and ‘infidelity’, the Qara Khitai’s shared use of their Chinese and nomadic cultural capital, the relative prosperity and stability that they brought to Central Asia, their religious tolerance, and their own indirect style of rule, enabled the empire to govern its diverse population effectively, up to the rise of Chinggis Khan.

Until the deterioration of Qara Khitai rule in the early thirteenth century, local Muslim scholars were quite sympathetic towards the infidel rulers.7 At least two Hamawi scholars even concluded that under the Qara Khitai, Central Asia (or at least Transoxiana and Farghana) had remained ‘the abode of Islam’, as the region did not border the abode of war, and the infidels did not enforce their laws, instead retaining Muslim judges and mutes, and employing Muslim
regarding the important position they held among Bukhara's scholarly community. The fame of the Bahar family — both scholarly and political — was also known outside Transoxania, as attested by the reception of the Burhanid sa'd in Baghdad in 1206, when he led the pilgrims of Khurasan. Even into the late thirteenth century, scholars from both Central Asia and further westwards — from Iran to Syria — were proud to mention that they had studied with the sa'dars. While the Burhanid position was indeed exceptional, the local "ulama" continued to enjoy both scholarly and social prestige: nearly every town in Central Asia had its own Sheikh al-Isliam, or leading scholar, who enjoyed great respect, while even lesser scholars had considerable renown of students and followers, estimated at several hundred persons. Public discussion of legal, theological and philosophical issues was quite common, and attracted large crowds. Study was practised in colleges (madrasa), mosques and private houses, where study sessions (mualaj) took place often within a certain circle (halqa) of scholars. Major scholarly centres included Bukhara, Samarkand and Nasa, but many scholars were of rural background, originating in the various villages around these cities.

Closely connected to the Transoxanian community was the Muslim centre of Farghana, which in the Qara Khitai period produced prominent Hanafi legal scholars such as Qadi Khan (d. 1196) and al-Marghini (d. 1197), the compiler of the celebrated Hadis and student of the Burhanid sa'dars, whose son's sympathetic attitude to the infidel rulers was cited above. Late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century inscriptions from Uzgend and Safid Bolaya (near Asli in Farghana), as well as Avi's descriptions, attest that the towns had flourishing Islamic communities. The religious scholars remained leaders of the local population, mediating between the city dwellers and local rulers or occasional invaders, while quite a few held administrative posts in the Qara Khitai (and sometimes also the Qara Khitai) government, and later also in Chaghatayid's court.

The Qoro Khitai realm remained connected to other centres in the Muslim world through pilgrimage and travel in search of knowledge, and attracted a considerable amount of students from outside. Especially close connections existed with Khurasan, but western Iran and Iraq — and even India and Syria — were also among the places visited by Central Asian scholars, and from which people came to study in Central Asia. Yet the Transoxanian scholars often looked down on other centres of knowledge (Iraq and Khurasan) — a fact that infuriated Fakhr al-Din al-Razi.

Professor Shaheb Ahmad, who, based on a unique bibliography compiled by a certain Mahmid Faryab in mid- to late twelfth-century Bukhara, analysed the intellectual homogeneity of the Bukharan scholarly community of that time, concluded that the intellectual tradition there was mainly regional. He stressed the central position of Khurasan and Transoxania in the bibliography available for Bukharan scholars (61 out of the 76 identified books in the bibliography originated in these centres, nine other works originated in western Iran, and
there was one each from Baghdad, Mosul, Damascus and Egypt). This division ignores the political boundaries between Transoxiana and Khurasan, but creates a discernible northeastern regional tradition. Some of the works produced in Qura Khitai Transoxiana continued to be part of the Iranian and Central Asian curriculum up to the Timurid period. With the Mongol whiplash, however, as many scholars escaped from the incoming troops of Chinggis Khan or the later upheavals in the Chaghadid realm, refugees and migrants disseminated their regional traditions throughout the Muslim world. Thus Qadi Khan, al-Marghani, the Burhan family – and even their best students, such as Shams al-A’ima’ al-Sardari (d. 1246 in Bukhara) – continued to be studied and appreciated in Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and even India and China. The regional Transoxanian-Khurasanid tradition therefore became much more widespread and relevant in large areas of the Muslim world.

The same phenomenon is attested regarding Sufi activities: Sufis, some of them also renowned ‘ulama’, were quite active in the Qura Khitai realm, although we know very little about their whereabouts. The centres of Sufism were on the fringes of the Qura Khitai realm, in Khwarazm, where the leading figure was Najm al-Din Kubra (d. 1220 during the Mongol onslaught) and Balshi, the dwelling place of Baha’ al-Din Wa’id, father of Jalal al-Din Rum. Again, after the Mongol invasion, while a considerable Sufi community remained in Central Asia – leading to the conversion of, among others, Berke Khan (r. 1257–67), the first Mongol prince to adopt Islam – many of the eminent Sufi disciples migrated westwards and southwards, where they had a memorable impact on the later development of Islamic mysticism. Kubrawi disciples settled not only in Bukhara, but also in India, where they established the local branch known as the Firdawwiyya, and in Khurasan. From there the order expanded to Iran, where major figures such as ‘Ala’ al-Din Simnani (d. 1336) and the Sheikh Ibrahim b. Ha nine (d. 1322), who converted Ilkhan Ghazan (r. 1295–1304), were active later in the Ilkhanaate. Baha al-Din Wa’id migrated to Konia, where Jalal al-Din Rum (1207–73) became a leading figure. The father of Nizam al-Din Awliya (1245–1345), the founder of the Indian Chishti order, was a Bukharan Sufi who left Transoxiana for Delhi on the eve of Chinggis Khan’s invasion.

**Sciences: Non-Religious Scholarship**
Non-religious scholarship also flourished in Qura Khitai Central Asia, and was often practised by the same people, as many religious scholars were polyvalent, specialising also in various kinds of sciences. A good example is the physician of the Qura Khitai court, the judge (qadib) Shams al-Din Masar b. Mar’ud al-Urgandi, who was also well versed in astronomy, a notable poet, and a military commander. Is it no wonder that, when he offered his services to the Qura Khitai, they were glad to hire him, and he became a close companion of the rulers and their officials. Scientists were in high demand in the eastern Islamic world: Nizami-yi ‘Arudi, Samarkandi, a contemporary of the Qura Khitai active mainly in the Chaghadid realm, in his ‘Four Discourses’, tests four classes of men whose services were deemed essential to every king: secretaries, poets, astronomers and physicians. Medicine and astronomy were also highly regarded by nomadic and Chinese rulers, due to their functions of healing and reading (the will of heaven). Indeed these fields flourished in the Qura Khitai realm, often under the auspices of their vassal rulers or officials.

Medicine was a popular occupation, in continuation of the tradition of Ibn Sina (d. 1038) – especially in Samarqand, where one of the first Islamic hospitals was established by the Qajari rulers in the eleventh century. The medical works of Badr al-Din al-Qalasandi (d. 1194) and of Hamid Muhammad b. ‘Abdallah Najib al-Din al-Samargandi (d. 1222) are extant, and both doctors are recorded in geographical dictionaries written farther west. In addition, ‘Awfi provides us with information on various other doctors, including his maternal uncle, Majd al-Din ‘Adnan, the ‘King of the Doctors’, whose family specialised in providing medical care to local rulers for several generations. Medical works were studied in colleges, but the practice was learnt by apprenticeship. According to ‘Awfi, for a highly talented student, the training took four years.

The presence of astronomy is less prominent in the contemporaneous literature, although Fudhay al-Din al-Rumi’s attack on astrology was not well received in Transoxiana, and the reference to the above-mentioned Shams al-Din al-Urgandi, as well as Nizami-yi ‘Arudi’s description of the woman astrologer in his service, attests to its presence. Several astronomical works from the eastern Islamic world (Khwarazm and Ghuristan) survived, but the main evidence for the prominence of astronomy in the region comes from the Mongol period: when the Qajari patriarch Chaghsin arrived in Samargand to meet Chinggis Khan, he met ‘the head of the observatory’, a certain Mr Li. While this Chinese astronomer might have come to Central Asia with the Mongols, the Muslim astronomers, whose work was highly appreciated in the same period by Yehi Chucai, Chinggis Khan’s Khan advisor and astrologer, were certainly local. Jamal al-Din al-Bulharsi, whom the Mongol Qajari Minqar (r. 1251–59) invited to establish an observatory in Mongolia and who eventually stayed in one in Yuan China, was probably also educated in Transoxiana. The descriptions of Iranian astronomers who originated in or visited Mongol Bukhara, and the presence of Khawnaid and Kazakhid astronomers in the thirteenth-century Maraga observatory, attest to the high level of astronomical studies in pre-Mongol Central Asia. This is another clear case in which Mongol upheavals disseminated Central Asian knowledge across Eurasia and into Iran and China.

Mathematics was also practised in the Qura Khitai realm, and in the late twelfth century one of the members of the Burhanid family, Muhammad b.
In the humanities, many poets were active in Transoxania, and even further eastward. None of these poets reached the stature of contemporaneous Iranian luminaries such as Anwari (d. 1189), Khvaju (d. 1190), Farid al-Din 'Attar (1145–1221) and Sa'di (1044–1122), but some of them, such as Suzani Samaqandi (d. 1160), won certain fame even in the larger Iranian world. These poets made their living by panegyrising their various patrons (local rulers, commanders, the Burhanid sultan), competed with each other, and reflected on the era’s upheavals. As shown by 'Awwī, writing poetry was also a favourable activity of rulers and officials. In terms of historiography, the revised edition of Nasifī’s Tarikh-ī Bulakhī devoted its dedicatory sedeh in 1178, and a history of Turkistan was compiled (but did not survive) by 'Awwī’s uncle Majd al-Din ‘Adnan – the ‘King of the Doctors’ mentioned above. Around 1160, the Sindbad namah, a more literary work, was also dedicated to the Qarakhanid ruler Majdud b. Hasān. All types of scientific and literary activity certainly thrived in the Qara Khitai realm.

**The Qara Khitai’s Contribution**

How much of these flourishing intellectual activities can be ascribed to the Qara Khitai? Indirectly, they provided the political and economic conditions that enabled them, and their religious tolerance and respect for scholars were also highly beneficial. But was there more direct impact? Can we locate some specific effect of the unusual rulers who stressed their connection to China? The source documentation and the indirect role of the Qara Khitai complicate the task of answering this question, as in general assessing the impact the Qara Khitai had on Central Asia, but a few tentative remarks are in order.

First, throughout the reign of the Western Liao, the blurred boundaries between China and Central Asia, and the Muslim perception of Central Asia as a part of China (or vice versa), continued and were even strengthened. Thus, in 1206 Fakhr al-Din Mubarak Shah defined China (Chin) as part of Turkistan, while both Kishgar and Balasaghun (the Qara Khitai capital in modern Kyrgyzstan) are described as cities of China in twelfth-century and later geographical works. Francisco Caldelano, who recently studied the representations of the Chinese world in 'Awwī’s work, notes that even when retelling past anecdotes 'Awwī often replaces the ethnonym ‘Turk’ mentioned by his sources with ‘the Chinese’, thereby attesting to the growing affinity of the two groups among Qara Khitai subjects. The title Tumguli Khan (Turki: the Khan of China) remained popular among the Qarakhanids, who were Qara Khitai vassals. Moreover, in four epitaphs from Samaqand and Balasaghun, the title Muqil al-sharq (or al-mashrij) was given, the Muqil (southeast) of the East and of China, is inscribed, attesting to the religious elite’s acknowledgement of a certain Chinese connection (or even identity).

Another facet of Chinese influence is in the realm of architecture: Liao motifs are attested in the twelfth-century Alisha Bihā Masouleion in Talas, which was an important Qara Khitai centre, and some of the murals of the recently excavated twelfth-century Qarakhanid palace in Ašrafīyāb are reminiscent of Dunhuang models, thereby implying Buddhist-Turkestanian influence (but Iranian consent). They were described as early examples of Ilkhanid paintings, in which Chinese influence is of course apparent.

Moreover, some of the Muslims who fulfilled important posts in the Qara Khitai administration might have acquired a degree of knowledge of Kitāb or Chinese: we know that Mahmud Yalawach, Chinggis Khan’s favourite minister, who may or may not be identical with Mahmud Tai, the vizier of the last Gūrkhān, spoke Chinese (though he might have acquired it after the Mongol conquest) – and the same was true of a few commanders and scholars of eastern origin who were active in Ilkhanid Iran, some of them perhaps of Qara Khitai origin. Scholars and scientists who served the Qara Khitai were probably exposed to their diverse counsels – among whom the Uighurs, a well-educated community whose members served as the tutors of the Qara Khitai princes, played an important role. Furthermore, the emergence of female rulers in the thirteenth-century eastern Islamic world, most of them having Kitāb connections (a topic that lies beyond the scope of this chapter) suggests that the influence of the Qara Khitai on their new environment might have been deeper than the external sources enable us to detect.

**Conclusion**

While it is not easy to assess the full impact of the Qara Khitai on the Islamic world between the Seljuq and the Mongol periods, it can be argued that they gave the coup de grâce to Seljuq’s rule, thereby putting an end to the power of the Seljuqs in eastern Iran. What is more, their reign can be seen as a prelude to the Mongol invasion. Much less violent than that of the Mongols, Qara Khitai rule proved to the Central Asian Muslims that infidel rulers could be tolerated, and might have introduced them to some elements in the Chinese world order, notably the Chinese language. Both features facilitated the later inclusion of Central Asian and Iranian Muslims in the Mongol Empire, and enabled them to benefit fully from the opportunities opened up by the Mongol period.

More importantly, the relative stability and prosperity that the Qara Khitai brought to Central Asia enabled the flourishing of both religious and scientific activity under their rule, especially in the fields of Hanafi law, Sufism, medicine and astronomy. With the upheavals of the Mongol invasions and the relative instability of the Chaghatayid Khānate – the Mongol state in Central Asia – the educated elite of the Qara Khitai realm dispersed across Eurasia, thereby disseminating the regional intellectual and technical achievements of the period, and making them an important part of Muslim scholarship in Iran, the Muslim world and beyond.
Notes:

1. This study was supported by grant 602/12 of the Israel Science Foundation, and made use of the database of the ERC Project Mobility, Empire and Cross Cultural Contacts in Mongol Eurasia (Grant Agreement n. 312397).

2. On the Qara Khitai, see M. Biran, The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Wei Lianggao (魏良高), Kaibum wang chao shi, Xi Liao shi (喀喇汗王朝史, 喀喇汗史) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2010).


6. V. P. Zaynep, 'Romantika knizhnyh boev spisoi chna na poiski institut vostochnyx rivolutsii RAN', Pravovoe raspredelenie i sostav russkix knizhnyh knig (Nizhny Novgorod, 1999), pp. 132–139 (inscription 25–158); for discussion of the intercultural socalled 'invention' of a large kitai script, see B. Steuber, 'The Intermediary of the Text: The History of the Kitan a script, in Studies in Kyrgyzology. This is the only extant Kitai book, and by far the longest text of the Kitai large script. He suggested that the book is composed of several distinct compilations, one of them is the Kitai version in Chinese (while, the records subsequently used for compiling a dynamic history of the first nine Liao emperors, while another is a collection of corresponding biographies. Unfortunately the book remains mostly undeciphered. See also P. Renet, 'Missions de Samarkand, une metropole entre澤x', Sources dixit et archéologie', Annali di Storia, Sciences Sociali, XLIX (2004), pp. 191–215; for discussion of the curriculum, see especially pp. 157, 186. See also see V. N. Nautin, "K agronohniki Eirapol' sibirsckikh i tibet'skikh knizhnyh knig', in V. A. Likhachev, V. M. Plonchik and V. I. Goriachev, eds, Kritika i teoreticheskaya knizhnoe literatury (Moscow: Izd-vo Tretyakova, 1993), pp. 213–221. For the three authors, see below.

Nezami’s Giant Brain Tackles Eskandar’s Sharafnameh: The Authorial Voice of the Poet-Scholar-Rewriter

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This chapter opens with a programmatic authorial confession, indicative of a poet who considers his task as that of a scholar, committed to the ceaseless acquisition of knowledge:

I can’t find happy sleep at night on my bed, if that night I haven’t opened the door of a [new] knowledge.

The boast may sound pompous, but it is not an empty one, and internal evidence confirms that disperse for intellectual stagnation and its corollary, malicious innovation, characterise the poetical works of Nezami of Ganjeh (d. 1209), who lived at the edge of the Seljuk Empire in present-day Azerbaijan. Ganjeh was a cultural centre in a politically unsettled region. We may surmise—as evidenced in the poet’s works—that these uncertain times and invasions achieved cultural de-localisation, opening up the region to cross-pollination, and in turn impacted and matured its literary output.

Considering the prevalent political mobility and multicultural richness conjoined with his personality as a passionate scholar-poet, we may calibrate Nezami’s work as representing meaningful progression within continuity; it stretches as well beyond the attitude of ‘uninterruptedness’ in a chain of literary themes. Nezami has also been licenced as a representative of this dynamic cultural tradition, whose legacy extends to the later literary and art-historical production in the vast areas under Persian cultural influence. He resonates in the works that emerged in response to his Khamsheh, and also in separate verses or passages quoted in anthologies and albums, or integrated in narratives by later writers.

This chapter, entitled to the Sharafnameh, the first book of Nezami’s Estekhandnamah, considers the poet’s particular mix of continuation and innovation, shaped by his scholarly attitude and fascination for things scientific.