

An Arabic Juvaynī: The Mongol Yasa in the fourteenth-century Mamluk sultanate

A major point of debate among historians of the Mongol empire is the question of the Yasa. What exactly was it; what did it contain? One of the most famous lists of Yasa rules in the Arabic sources is that given by Al-'Umarī (d. 1349), based on Juvaynī's history of Chinggis Khan. In his seminal set of articles, Ayalon raised the question of the provenance of Al-'Umarī's information. While it is evident that Al-'Umarī used Juvaynī as his source – not in the least because he repeatedly says so himself – several question marks remain. Ayalon gave various suggestions, concluding that that reason for the discrepancies between Juvaynī's original and Al-'Umarī's version are most likely due to the latter being misled by contemporary, Persian-speaking informants who helped him make sense of Juvaynī's original.

However, there is another author who used Juvaynī's chapters for the making of a list of Yasa rules, and to whom no attention has been paid in this respect until today: the famous historian Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373). In this paper, based on a comparison between his and Al-'Umarī's texts, I will show that it was not 'Persian-speaking informants' on whom these authors based their respective works, but rather an Arabic translation of (part of) Juvaynī's work that was circulating in the Mamluk sultanate. This textual transfer from the Ilkhanate to the neighbouring sultanate displays the interest in Mongol history present in fourteenth-century Syria and Egypt, as well as shedding light on contemporary translation practices.