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# Commercial Queens: Mongolian Khatuns and the Silk

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### Abstract

*Three women dominated the politics and government of the Mongol Empire in the decade of the 1240s. Töregene and Oghul-Qaimish ruled as regents and are credited with corruption and petty politics throughout their regencies, while Sorqoqtani Beki became a paragon of virtue throughout the world for her adherence to the yasa of Chinggis Khan. Curiously, very little attention has been paid to this period to verify the accuracy of the statements. This study examines the role of all three women, but also attempts to place their actions in context, examine their role in commerce and how that affected their activities and their legacies. It argues that while the overall depiction of Töregene and Oghul-Qaimish may not be inaccurate, it overlooks some crucial elements and motives in their actions which also reveal that Sorqoqtani's actions were not as virtuous as the sources state.*

It is widely accepted that the rise of the Mongol Empire greatly expanded trade and the circulation of goods. Another, and often underappreciated, result of the expansion of the Silk Road was that many formerly remote regions of the world became connected. Since the fall of the Uighur Empire, Mongolia was a region removed from the main trade routes. Thus the Mongols irrupted into the wider world as a relatively unknown society. As the Mongol Empire dominated Eurasia, envoys, merchants and travellers came to the court of the Mongols from all over Eurasia, both within and without the empire, and participated in the Chinggis Exchange, or the exchange of goods, ideas, technology and people precipitated by the Mongol conquests.<sup>2</sup> Once at the court, many travellers observed that the Mongolian Queens or *khatuns* were quite unlike anything seen before in the Confucian, Islamic or Christian worlds.

During the apogee of the empire, three *khatuns* in particular played a prominent role in its politics and government: Töregene (wife of Ögödei Khan and then regent after his death), Sorqoqtani (wife of Tolui, Chinggis Khan's fourth son), and Oghul Qaimish (wife of Güyük Khan and then regent after his death). While most narratives have focused on their political involvement, scholars have overlooked the *khatuns*' involvement in commercial ventures and how these activities affected the politics of the empire. This paper will examine their

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Scott Jacobs for his support of my research.

<sup>2</sup>See Timothy May, *The Mongol Conquests in World History* (London, 2012), *passim*.

involvement in trade and how it impacted not only on the political affairs of the empire but other aspects of the Mongol empire as well.

### *Töregene*

One of the most powerful Mongolian queens ruled as regent of the empire for five years. The regency of Töregene (r. 1241–46) was also one of the most turbulent times of the Mongol Empire. While she ruled with absolute power, she planted the seeds for future dissension that spawned a rivalry for the throne and a revolution complete with a wave of executions throughout the empire. In the regent's own lifetime, however, she conducted her own purge of the ministry that threatened the very existence of a capable Mongol government. Although most of what we know about Töregene comes from sources hostile to her, what seems to be most important about her to her Mongol opponents is that she veered away from the advice and guidance of Chinggis Khan given before his death in 1227.

With Ögödei's death in 1241, the far-flung campaigns of the Mongols in Europe, East Asia and the Middle East came to a halt. The various commanders and princes had to return to Mongolia in order to elect a new khan. On the surface this should not have been a difficult process as Ögödei had nominated his grandson Shiremün, the son of Kochu, as his successor long before he died. But for the nomination of Güyük to the throne by the regent Töregene, Shiremün might have been elevated to the throne. Her intentions, although they seemed honourable, proved to be a single-minded attempt to override the succession wishes of the late Khan, Ögödei. In the end, Töregene was successful.

Töregene's rise to power is an interesting chain of events. She was the second wife of Ögödei, awarded to him after the defeat of the Merkit in 1204–5. Previously, she had been the wife of the Merkit prince Qudu, son of Toqto'a-Beki, the Khan of the Merkit.<sup>3</sup> After Ögödei's death, she began ruling in good faith. Her true nature and intentions, however, were not revealed until the death of the first wife, Boraqchin, and of Möge Khatun, formerly a wife of Chinggis Khan.<sup>4</sup> Juwaynī wrote that Töregene “was moreover shrewder and more sagacious than Möge Khatun”<sup>5</sup> and even before the death of these two other wives, Töregene took the initiative. She launched her climb to the regency with the objective of maintaining imperial unity:

<sup>3</sup> *The Secret History of the Mongols*, § 198 [henceforth *SHM*]. There are many translations of the *The Secret History of the Mongols*. The most authoritative is Igor de Rachewiltz (editor and translator), *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Leiden, 2003), but we also have Urgunge Onon (editor and translator), *The Secret History of the Mongols* (London, 2001), and, of course, Francis W. Cleaves (editor and translator), *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Cambridge, MA, 1982). Rather than cite page numbers for each edition, I will cite the section number of the *Secret History*. Rashīd al-Dīn, however, states that she was the wife of Dayir Usun rather than Qudu: Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh*, (ed.) B. Karīmī (Teheran, 1983), p. 444; Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jamī'u'ut-tawārīkh: Compendium of Chronicles*, translated by W. M. Thackston (Cambridge, MA, 1998–9), II, p. 304. [henceforth these works will be cited as RD/Karīmī and RD/Thackston respectively.] In this instance, *The Secret History of the Mongols* was written closer to the events and certainly began to be compiled during the lifetime of Ögödei and should be considered more reliable, particularly as Rashīd al-Dīn expresses his own uncertainty about the matter.

<sup>4</sup> RD/Karīmī, p. 564; RD/Thackston, II, p. 390.

<sup>5</sup> Aṭā-Malik Juwaynī, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World-Conqueror*, translated by J. A. Boyle (Seattle, 1997), p. 240 [henceforth Juwaynī/Boyle]; Aṭā-Malik Juwaynī, *Tārīkh-i Jahān-gushā*, ed. Mīrzā Muḥammad Qazwīnī, 3 vols (Leiden, 1912–37), I, p. 196 [henceforth Juwaynī/Qazwīnī].

She sent messages to the princes, i.e., the brothers and the nephews of Qa'an [Ögödei] and told them of what had happened and of the death of Qa'an, and said that until a Khan was appointed by agreement someone would have to be ruler and leader in order that the business of the state might not be neglected nor the affairs of the commonwealth thrown into confusion; in order, too, that the army and the court might be kept under control and the interests of the people protected.<sup>6</sup>

With this she gained the favour and protection of the senior member of the Chinggisid line and Ögödei's brother, Chaghatai, in addition to other princes. They proclaimed that, as she was the mother of sons who had a right to the throne, Töregene should be regent until the new khan was elected. The princes, perhaps in an attempt to curtail the regent's power, also maintained that the old ministers would remain in their current positions in order that the old and new *yasas* (decrees) might not be altered.

Töregene was a logical choice as regent. As one of Ögödei's wives, her sons were linked to the throne, despite the nomination of Shiremün as heir.<sup>7</sup> Still, the princes had to agree upon the new *qaqghan* and there was always a chance that Shiremün might not be deemed a viable candidate. Furthermore, it was necessary that a woman be regent. Only male descendants of Chinggis Khan could be a *qaqghan*. If another prince of the Golden Family had been nominated to the regency, then that individual might attempt to elevate himself as khan, although the regency of Tolui did serve as a precedent for a male regent. While a male regent might have been agreeable to the rest of the princes, the possibility of civil war still loomed. Thus, Töregene was the perfect candidate as not only could she not claim the throne for herself, but she was acknowledged by all as being very clever.<sup>8</sup> Ideally the empire would be governed well until a khan could take the throne. Töregene, however, quickly used her position of power for her own ambitions, primarily to place her son Güyük on the throne.

It appears that the other wives of Ögödei, however, wielded some power and influence, as it was not until after Möge Khatun's death that Töregene could control all aspects of the state. In addition, she won over many of the Chinggisid family by bestowing numerous gifts and favours upon them.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Töregene increased her influence within the government and throughout the empire. It must also be remembered that at this time she still enjoyed the patronage and protection of Chaghatai, who as the senior prince commanded tremendous respect and influence in court matters.<sup>10</sup> Secure in her position, she began to change the infrastructure of the government by purging those courtiers and ministers against whom she bore a grudge. As her position was unassailable, no one could effectively oppose her endeavours.

One of the key people whom she replaced was the able Khitan minister and governor of north China, Yelu Chucai.<sup>11</sup> His successor was a former Persian merchant, 'Abd al-Rahmān, who gained the regent's ear by promising to double the revenue of the province through

<sup>6</sup> Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 240; Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 196.

<sup>7</sup> RD/Karīmī, p. 445; RD/Thackston, II, p. 305.

<sup>8</sup> Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 196; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 240; RD/Karīmī, p. 564; RD/Thackston, II, p. 390.

<sup>9</sup> Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, 1912, p. 196; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 240; RD/Karīmī, p. 564; RD/Thackston, II, p. 390.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> For more on Yelu Chucai, see I. de Rachewiltz, "Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai", in Igor de Rachewiltz *et al.* (eds.), *In the Service of the Khan: Eminent Personalities of the Early Mongol-Yuan Period (1200–1300)* (Wiesbaden, 1993), pp. 136–172.

strenuous taxation. He accused Yelu Chucai of being too lenient with the population of China.<sup>12</sup> Yelu Chucai's removal from office marked a major divergence from the previous regime as he had been a very capable and trusted advisor of both Chinggis Khan and Ögödei. He died shortly afterwards in Qaraqorum at the age of 55 when he realised that his counsel would no longer be heard nor wanted.

Elsewhere in the empire she attempted to arrest another capable minister, Yalavach.<sup>13</sup> Yalavach tricked his would-be captors and fled to Töregene's second son, Köten. Another minister, Chinqai, also feared Töregene's designs and joined Yalavach under Köten's protection.<sup>14</sup> When Töregene attempted to extradite them from her son's protection, Köten refused. He sent a message to his mother saying that at the great *quriltai*, or meeting when a new khan would be selected, they would be judged and not until then. In other words, he would wait until an impartial judge would hear their cases rather than turn the two ministers over to his mother.<sup>15</sup> Emir Mas'ūd Beg, another important bureaucrat, also decided not to wait for Töregene to move against him and fled to Batu, the arch-rival of Töregene's son Güyük.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, she also sought to bind some territories closer to her—building a base of support. The governor of Transoxiana, Körgüz, who had been noted for his shrewdness and efficiency, was arrested and imprisoned and replaced by the Oirat, Arghun.<sup>17</sup> Töregene Khatun then placed the lands between the Amu Darya River and Rūm under the command and control of the Emir Arghun.<sup>18</sup> However, it should be noted that Arghun's authority was restricted to civil matters. This region would be further brought under Töregene's control with the appointment of Baiju as military commander upon the death of Chormaqan, although he was affiliated to Batu. Nonetheless, he had served in the region under Chormaqan since the latter invaded the Middle East in 1230.<sup>19</sup> Baiju proved to be an able general, extending Mongol influence into Rūm and firmly bringing Georgia under control. Güyük later replaced Baiju with his own lieutenant, Eljigidei.

Arghun, unlike 'Abd al-Raḥmān, proved to be a capable and law-abiding minister. The appointment of Sharaf al-Dīn as his under-secretary, however, tarnished Arghun's image somewhat. Sharaf al-Dīn proceeded to tax the populace heavily and imposed taxes on widows and orphans on which “there is no charge in the law of God, nor impost in the *yasa* of Chingiz-Khan”.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>12</sup>R. Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes*, translated by N. Walford (New Brunswick, 1970), p. 268.

<sup>13</sup>For more on Yalavach, see T. Allsen, “Maḥmūd Yalavac”, in De Rachewiltz *et al.* (eds.), *In the Service of the Khan*, pp. 122–127.

<sup>14</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 197; Juwaynī/Boyle, pp. 241–242; RD/Karīmī, p. 564; RD/Thackston, II, p. 390. For more on Chinqai, see P. Buell, “Cinqai”, in De Rachewiltz *et al.* (eds.), *In the Service of the Khan*, pp. 95–111.

<sup>15</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, pp. 197–198; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 242.

<sup>16</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 198; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 243. For more on Mas'ūd Beg, see T. Allsen, “Mas'ūd Beg”, in De Rachewiltz *et al.* (eds.), *In the Service of the Khan*, pp. 128–130.

<sup>17</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, 1912, p. 199; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 243; RD/Karīmī, p. 565; RD/Thackston, II, p. 391.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>For more on Chormaqan's authority and actions in the region, see T. May, “The Conquest and Rule of Transcaucasia: The Era of Chormaqan”, in J. Tubach *et al.* (eds.), *Caucasus during the Mongol Period-Der Kaukasus in der Mongolenzeit* (Wiesbaden, 2012), pp. 129–152.

<sup>20</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, II, p. 275; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 540.

In addition to the purge of the ministers and governors of the empire, Töregene single-handedly orchestrated the election of her son Güyük to the throne. Although a son of Ögödei, Güyük would never have obtained the throne without the substantial efforts of his mother. Despite being the nominated heir, Shiremün, was not guaranteed the throne as all of the Mongol princes and generals voted. Güyük, however, seemed an unlikely candidate. He had a history of illness, which certainly deterred some from supporting him.<sup>21</sup> In addition, it is doubtful that Ögödei considered Güyük as a candidate as khan since the campaign against the Russian principalities in the 1236–40. His animosity towards Batu, another senior prince, was well-known and not tolerated by Ögödei.<sup>22</sup> When this rivalry first came to the fore, Ögödei did not even speak to his son for several days. It is extremely doubtful if Ögödei or even Chaghatai would allow a *qaghan* to sit upon the throne with such an obvious rift between the Güyük and another senior Chinggisid prince. However, Töregene was able to manipulate the situation to her advantage as regent.

As the princes gathered, everyone began to attach themselves to various parties supporting several candidates. Only Sorqoqtani-Beki, wife of Tolui, and her soon-to-be famous sons adhered to the *yasa* of Chinggis Khan.<sup>23</sup> Pressing the issue of Shiremün's age, Töregene said he was not old enough and that Köten, Ögödei's second son, whom Chinggis Khan had suggested as Ögödei's heir, was sickly.<sup>24</sup> Güyük's own illnesses were downplayed as she lobbied behind the scenes to show that Köten's condition was more serious. Indeed, he later died during Güyük's reign—albeit under somewhat mysterious circumstances.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Töregene elevated Güyük to the throne by carrying out a brilliant and subtle mud-slinging campaign that blurred reality.

Although Güyük was now khan, Töregene continued to issue decrees. Only after he was firmly in power did she relinquish her control in 1246. Two or three months later, Töregene died. Curiously, during the interim between Güyük's accession and Töregene's relinquishment of power, Güyük became increasingly estranged from his mother. This, apparently, was because of the excessive influence over Töregene of the slave Fatima.<sup>26</sup>

Fatima came from the city of Meshed and was described as being shrewd and competent.<sup>27</sup> Her influence with Töregene was well known as those who would gain Töregene's ear used Fatima as an intermediary. It is ascribed to her counsel that “officers and ministers who had served in exalted posts during Qa'an's [Ögödei's] reign were dismissed, and in their place were put ignorant men”.<sup>28</sup> After Töregene's death, Fatima's demise drew near as she had made a number of enemies. Indeed, one revealed to Güyük that Fatima had bewitched Köten.<sup>29</sup> As his condition worsened, Köten sent a letter to Güyük asking him to avenge him if he died. When Köten died the minister Chincai, now back in favour, reminded Güyük

<sup>21</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 445; RD/Thackston, II, p. 305.

<sup>22</sup>SHM, §277. Also see H. Kim, “A Reappraisal of Güyük Khan”, in R. Amitai and M. Biran (eds.), *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World* (Leiden, 2005), pp. 309–338.

<sup>23</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 565; RD/Thackston, II, p. 391.

<sup>24</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 206; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 251.

<sup>25</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 566; RD/Thackston, II, p. 391.

<sup>26</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, pp. 201–202; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 245.

<sup>27</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 564; RD/Thackston, II, p. 390.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 566; RD/Thackston, II, p. 391.

of this. Fatima confessed to witchcraft under torture and was summarily executed. It should be noted, however, that some of the diatribe directed against Fatima in the Islamic sources may have been related to her Shī'a identity.<sup>30</sup>

Güyük's displeasure with his mother's advisors and appointees did not end there. He restored many of those who had fled during Töregene's regency to their original positions. In addition he executed 'Abd al-Raḥmān, the governor of Khitai. Still, the empire had lost two capable civil servants in the form of Kōrgüz, the once governor of Transoxiana, and the great minister of the empire, Yelu Chucai.

Despite these reversals of Töregene's policies, their ramifications were still felt after Güyük's death in 1248. Shiremün was still alive and once again touted as the rightful heir to the throne. However, Batu still carried significant influence in the empire and nominated Möngke, son of the virtuous Sorqoqtani-Beki and one of the princes who had accompanied Batu in the conquest of Russia. The regent Oghul-Qaimish objected, but Sorqoqtani Beki sided with Batu, bringing his seniority to the forefront, and sent Möngke to him when Batu suggested that the *quriltai* be held in his dominions as he was too ill to travel to Mongolia. Eventually Möngke won with the firm support of Batu. This prompted Shiremün to attempt a coup. Supporters of Möngke foiled this with the assistance of the large contingent of Batu's troops present in Möngke's camp. This in turn prompted Möngke to purge the empire of his own rivals and participants in the coup. Thus, Shiremün was exiled to the frontlines in China and the line of Ögödei was never a contender for the throne again, with the exception of Qaidu's resistance to Qubilai Khan. In effect, Töregene with her manipulation of the election of khan had sown the seeds of rebellion and caused the end of the Ögödeyid line upon the throne.

The above has become the standard interpretation. What is missed, however, are her motives beyond simply procuring the throne for Güyük. Why did she completely re-shuffle administration and staff it with talented and certainly less scrupulous personnel? In the sources Töregene is always described as an extremely smart and capable woman, yet always in slightly negative terms. She is cunning or shrewd, not intelligent. Or she is described as very clever, but not attractive. It must be remembered that all of the sources (Islamic, Christian, Chinese) come from patriarchal societies that tended to be hostile to any woman in power, yet praise women who "knew their place".

We know her intelligence was unquestioned by anyone, even by other members of the intelligentsia. So why do we understand so little? Although the sources portray her as simply being greedy, carrying out personal vendettas, and a political machine that manipulated the election of her son, what is missed is that her dismantling of Ögödei's efficient and effective civil administration was not simply to install tax farmers and appoint cronies in a way that would make Chicago mayors blush. Rather it is what allowed her to promote her son as a viable contender for the throne. Töregene's avarice and the placement of tax-farmers throughout the empire allowed her to accumulate wealth for a single purpose. This largesse provided gifts for the princes and other delegates. As she appears to have spent much of her own personal wealth prior to replacing key administrative figures, she now needed to refill not only her own coffers, but also maintain the support of the princes—possibly through

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

additional gifts. Through this, she bought silence from those who might otherwise grumble about her policies as regent, but also purchased support from those who might dismiss Güyük as a candidate. His illnesses, pride, arrogance, insubordination on the Western Campaign, and grudge against Batu could be overlooked—but for a price. As Hodong Kim suggests, much of his grudge may have been warranted; it was simply his public behaviour that needed refinement.<sup>31</sup> Thus, a few gifts may have been exactly what Töregene needed to lubricate the wheels of the election. Yet it also becomes evident that by the time her political machine had achieved its objective, she let go of the reins of power only with difficulty. In doing so she altered the process and concept of the *quriltai*. The ramifications of this were manifested during the regency of Oghul Qaimish, the widow of Güyük.

### Oghul Qaimish

For approximately twenty years, the Mongol Empire had been ruled by one branch of the descendants of Chinggis Khan: that of Ögödei. Ögödei came to the throne after the death of Chinggis Khan, and he, in turn, was followed by his son Güyük. When Güyük came to the throne, he took many steps to bring the empire back to order after the corruption of Töregene's regency, but his reign was short-lived. His wife, Oghul Qaimish, then served as regent. Although the sources reveal very little about her, the regency of Oghul-Qaimish was a pivotal episode in the history of the Mongol Empire. It is directly due to her neglect of imperial affairs and tradition that caused a revolution which led to the house of Ögödei losing the throne.

Güyük died in the year 1248. When he passed away, his primary wife Oghul Qaimish took control of his *orda* or camp as was customary. Upon his death she sent messengers to two people: Batu, the senior prince among the Chinggisids, and Sorqoqtani, the primary wife of Tolui, who was also the senior *khatun*. Oghul Qaimish may have notified the other princes, but the court historians only mention these two.<sup>32</sup> Oghul Qaimish took the body back to the Emil River, where his pasture ground and *orda* were located.

When Sorqoqtani received the news, she sent clothing, specifically *nasij* or cloth of gold, and a *boghtagh* or head-dress, and a message of condolence to the widow. Batu also sent a message of condolence, which said:

Oghul Qaimish will continue to administer the affairs of the realm, as before, in consultation with Chinqai and the ministers, and let her neglect nothing.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, Batu declared that all of the other princes should meet Ala Qamaq to choose a new *qaghan*, although he would not attend due to illness.<sup>34</sup>

Oghul Qaimish, who was from the Merkit tribe, had two sons fathered by Güyük: Khoja and Naqu. Both sons set out for the *quriltai* at Ala Qamaq and after arriving, stayed for only two days. When they left, they were careful to leave a representative named Temür Noyan, who was to act in accordance with the other princes. Thus when it came time for

<sup>31</sup>Kim, "A Reappraisal of Güyük Khan", pp. 318–320.

<sup>32</sup>Juwayni/Qazwini, I, p. 217; Juwayni/Boyle, p. 262.

<sup>33</sup>RD/Karimi, p. 571; RD/Thackston, II, p. 395.

<sup>34</sup>RD/Karimi, p. 571–572; RD/Thackston, II, p. 395.

the election, Temür Noyan agreed with the other princes and voted for Möngke to ascend to the throne. The princes also said that in the interim, the sons of Güyük should be regents with Chinqai, until the official *quriltai* for Möngke could be held.<sup>35</sup>

When Temür Noyan came back, he informed Naqu and Khoja of Möngke's election. They were naturally furious that neither of them was selected as qaghan and reproached Temür Noyan.<sup>36</sup> They then plotted to ambush Möngke on his return from Ala Qamaq to the Onan-Kerülen region. Möngke however, passed through before they could organise it. Still they continued to plan for other opportunities.

In the meantime, Oghul Qaimish continued to rule as the Queen-Regent. That is to say that she ruled in title only, for she spent most of her time with *qams* or shamans behind closed doors and only rarely attended to matters of the state. Exactly what she did with the shamans is a little vague. According to Rashīd ad-Dīn, who was *wazīr* to the Muslim Il-Khan Ghazan and biased against shamanism, she carried out the shaman's "blithering and fables".<sup>37</sup> According to Juwaynī, when she did act as a regent, she "hindered men of goodwill" and mainly dealt with merchants.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, Khoja and Naqu held separate courts in opposition to Oghul Qaimish. A rift grew between mother and sons, but the sources do not indicate the source of the disagreement. Thus three separate courts existed—one for Oghul Qaimish, another for Khoja, and one for Naqu. Yet, none of them actually ruled with any effectiveness or listened to the council of the ministers. Indeed, they often contradicted the ministers as well as each other.<sup>39</sup> In addition to their misrule, Khoja and Naqu sent a letter that they would not consent to the election of a *qaghan* other than one of themselves.

This stalemate led to disorder throughout the empire. Other princes began their own dealings and issued their own orders. No one listened to the ministers of state, or even Sorqoqtani, who was considered by many the paradigm of virtue and role model for all Mongols.<sup>40</sup> She never swayed from the *yasa* of Chinggis Khan. Thus Oghul Qaimish and her sons ruled, until the throne was eventually given to Möngke Khan.

At the second *quriltai*, Sorqoqtani and Batu actively lobbied for Möngke. The Jochids and Toluids supported it. Meanwhile, most of the Ögödeyids and Chagatayids postponed making their decision as they felt that the throne should stay in the line of Ögödei. While Batu and Sorqoqtani gathered support for Möngke, they sent Shilemun Bitükchi to Oghul Qaimish and her sons with the message:

Let all the princes come here. We will hold a *quriltai*, elect one who is worthy and whom we consider best, and enthrone him.<sup>41</sup>

After Naqu received the message to come, he set out. Khoja, however, continued to delay along with some of the Chagatayids. They thought that the *quriltai* would surely not start

<sup>35</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 218; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 264.

<sup>36</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 219; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 264.

<sup>37</sup>RD/Thackston, II, p. 395; RD/Karīmī, p. 572. Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 265; Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 219.

<sup>38</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 220; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 265.

<sup>39</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 572; RD/Thackston, II, p. 395.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 581; RD/Thackston, II, p. 401.



without them. The Jochid prince Berke, however, had other thoughts. He sent a message to Batu, saying: “We have been wanting to place [Möngke] Qa’an on the throne for two years. [Ögödei] Qa’an’s and Güyük Khan’s sons and Chaghatai’s son Yesü [Möngke] have not come”. Batu replied, “Seat him on the throne! And any creature that disobeys the Yasa will lose his head”.<sup>42</sup>

Naqu never reached the *quriltai*. He met another embittered contender for the throne, Shiremün, son of Ögödei. They agreed upon a plan to attack Möngke during the festivities surrounding Möngke’s election.<sup>43</sup> While their caravan moved closer to the *quriltai*, a servant of Möngke’s camp was searching for a lost camel. He blended in with them and travelled with them on the way to the camp. Quite innocently, he came across vast supplies of weapons and eventually discovered the plot. He made his escape back to Möngke and informed him of the plot. At first Möngke and his supporters did not believe the servant. Only after a long explanation did he convince Möngke, who led his forces against Naqu and Shiremün. These were large comprised of soldiers from Batu’s army under the command of Menggeser. With little difficulty, Menggeser captured Naqu and Shiremün.<sup>44</sup>

Now secure in his power, Möngke, in large part due to the military backing of Batu, began a purge of those who opposed him. Möngke sent Shilemün Bitikchi to Oghul Qaimish and her son Khoja with messages ordering them to his camp. Khoja almost executed the messenger, but his wife dissuaded him, as certainly only ill would befall him if he did so. Reluctantly Khoja and his followers then made their way to the *orda* of Möngke.<sup>45</sup>

Oghul Qaimish’s actions were quite different from that of her son. She countered Möngke’s accusations of intrigue with accusations of rebellion. To Shilemün Bitikchi she gave the following message for him to deliver to Möngke: “You princes promised and gave [a written oath] that the rule would always remain among [Ögödei] Qa’an’s offspring and that you would never rebel against his sons. Now you have broken your word”.<sup>46</sup> Naturally, Möngke was not pleased. He in turn issued a decree stating

The wives of Jochi Qasar, Otchigin, and Bälgütäi Noyan, the brothers of [Chinggis] Khan, have attended the deliberation of the *quriltai*, but Oghul Qaimish has not. If the shamans or Qadaq, Chinqai, or Bala (who were Güyük Khan’s *amir-ordus*) call or proclaim anyone *padishah* or *khatun*, or if anyone becomes a *padishah* or a *khatun* by their word, they shall see what they shall see.<sup>47</sup>

In reality, this was less a decree and more of a challenge to anyone, but specifically to Oghul Qaimish. In Möngke’s mind, he was the ruler now. It did not matter that some did not attend the *quriltai*; previous agreements were null and void.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup>RD/Thackston, II, p. 403; RD/Karīmī, p. 584.

<sup>43</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, III, pp. 27–28; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 567.

<sup>44</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, III, pp. 39–42; Juwaynī/Boyle, pp. 574–576; RD/Karīmī, p. 587; RD/Thackston, II, p. 405.

<sup>45</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, III, pp. 54–55; Juwaynī/Boyle, pp. 585–586; RD/Karīmī, p. 592; RD/Thackston, II, p. 408.

<sup>46</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 593; RD/Thackston, II, pp. 408–409.

<sup>47</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 593; RD/Thackston, II, p. 409.

<sup>48</sup>See Kim, “A Reappraisal of Güyük Khan”, pp. 324–325, for an extended discussion of the question of legitimacy, both of Möngke and of Güyük.

Again Möngke dispatched envoys to Oghul Qaimish, but this time they did not carry letters, but came to escort her. She returned with them, unwillingly and with her hands stitched together with rawhide. Once she was before Möngke, he accused her of treason and sent her to the *orda* of his mother, Sorqoqtani, along with the mother of Shiremün, Qadaqach.<sup>49</sup> Her trial was not delayed for too long.

Menggeser Yarghuchi presided over the trial during which he ordered Oghul Qaimish stripped naked before having her dragged into court. An interrogation then proceeded. Her only reply, according to Rashīd al-Dīn, was “How can anyone else look upon a body that only an emperor has seen?”<sup>50</sup> Clearly, this was another jab at the legitimacy of Möngke. Found guilty, she was wrapped in felt and then thrown in a river during Ramadan of 650 AH, or November/December 1252 CE, a punishment usually assigned to witches.<sup>51</sup>

Her sons met a different fate. Naqu, who openly bore arms against Möngke, was sent to the front in China with Qubilai, Möngke’s brother and future *qaghan* of the Empire. Spared from persecution and war due to the wisdom of his wife, Khoja was directed to move his camp to the Selenge River, near Karakorum, the capital, well within the reach and eyes of Möngke.<sup>52</sup>

Whereas Töregene was a political mastermind, Oghul Qaimish is much more difficult to define. In summary, as wife of Güyük she became the regent upon his death. She ruled ineffectively and due to her misconduct others intrigued to establish a new ruler. Furthermore, she never attended any of the *quriltai*s, indicating that she did not have any intention of relinquishing power. Unlike Töregene who actively lobbied for her son Güyük to ascend to the throne, Oghul Qaimish did not take such action on behalf of her sons.

Was she politically unmotivated? On the contrary, neither she nor her sons attended the *quriltai*, simply because they could not believe that an election could be held without them. Moreover, her not so subtle gibes at Möngke’s legitimacy of power are clear indications that she tried to undermine his authority. Finally, Möngke’s edict to Oghul Qaimish clearly states that no one shall be declared *khatun* as well as ruler. He legally attempted to prevent her from declaring herself ruler above her position as regent.

Nonetheless, her political manoeuvring was not sufficient cause for the method of execution. Being drowned alive was very unusual among the Mongols, particularly when one considers other decrees against polluting water.<sup>53</sup> The taboos included bathing, even the hands, in water. The reason is fairly simple. Water was the source of life not only for humans but also their livestock. If the water became polluted, then all would suffer. This leads to questions of what else could have triggered such a reaction. An execution was not beyond the pale, but other incidents of a drowning execution are rare.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup>RD/Karimī, p. 593; RD/Thackston, II, p. 409; Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, III, pp. 58–59; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 588.

<sup>50</sup>RD/Karimī, p. 593; RD/Thackston, II, p. 409.

<sup>51</sup>RD/Karimī, p. 593; RD/Thackston, II, p. 409.

<sup>52</sup>RD/Karimī, p. 594; RD/Thackston, II, p. 409. Shiremün was also sent to the front along with Naqu with Qubilai’s army.

<sup>53</sup>Mention of these taboos are recorded by a number of observers, but V. A. Riasanovsky, *Fundamental Principles of Mongol Law* (Bloomington, 1965), remains useful as a compilation of a number of decrees. For taboos on polluting water, see Riasanovsky, pp. 83–84.

<sup>54</sup>Jamāl al-Dīn ‘Abd-Allāh b. ‘Alī Qāshānī, *Ta’rikh-i Uljāitu Sultan*, (ed.) Mahin Hambly (Tehran, 1348 Sh./1969), p. 40. Qāshānī mentions that the husband and sons of Qutulun, Qaidu’s daughter, were put to death in this manner. My thanks to Peter Jackson for pointing this out.

Certainly her personality did not help her case. First, there is no question that she was an unpleasant person. The Persian historians never wrote anything complimentary about her, but then most of the contemporary sources were written by men from cultures hostile to powerful women. Of the three major women—Töregene, Oghul Qaimish, and Sorqoqtani—involved in politics after the death of Ögödei, only one fared well in the sources. Sorqoqtani was consistently raised to a paradigm of wisdom and virtue. Of course, she was the mother of Möngke, Qubilai, Hülegü and Ariq Böke, the four major figures in the post-1250 Mongol Empire. In addition, Hülegü was the patron of Juwaynī, one of the major Persian chroniclers. Thus it is not surprising that he wrote well of her while Rashīd al-Dīn wrote from a later period and for his Toluid patrons.

Still other authors seem to verify Juwaynī's depiction of Oghul Qaimish. Whereas Töregene, although viewed negatively, was always noted for her intelligence, it is extremely difficult to find anything complimentary about Oghul Qaimish. For instance, Möngke openly aired his opinion of Oghul Qaimish to foreign emissaries. In his description of Oghul Qaimish to William of Rubruck, a Franciscan friar visiting Mongolia on behalf of King Louis IX of France, Möngke stated

Your envoys arrived at [Güyük Khan's] residence after his death. [Oghul Qaimish], his wife, sent you *nasic* cloth and a letter. But as for knowing the business of war and the affairs of peace, subduing the wide world and discerning how to act for the best—what could that worthless woman, lower than a bitch, have known of this?<sup>55</sup>

Möngke, however, went even further and openly accused her of witchcraft. William of Rubruck wrote, “Mangu told me with his own lips that [Oghul Qaimish] was the worst of witches and that with her sorcery she had destroyed her whole family”.<sup>56</sup>

Although Möngke was known for his practicality and efficiency, it is also clear that he had a reason to carry a grudge. Still, his accusation is not without merit as there is other evidence. It has already mentioned that she spent much of her time with the *qams* or shamans. This in itself is not highly suspicious when we think of modern spirituality and the likes of Rasputin and other sensational figures; nor is it out of place when one considers that in the mid-thirteenth century the Mongols routinely consulted with shamans on a variety of matters. Nonetheless, the phrasing and the mention by the sources are odd. Perhaps Juwaynī and Rashīd al Dīn were simply writing a commentary that she was not supportive of Islam and/or other religions. Certainly they wrote in glowing terms when a khan or a *khatun* established a mosque or madrasa, but they also wrote when they supported other religious establishments. Yet rarely, however, did they even mention pagan practices except in a negative manner.

The other and most damning information about whether Oghul Qaimish was a witch is her death. First, it was the custom of the Mongols not to shed the blood of royalty. There are numerous examples of people being rolled up in carpets and suffocated or trampled, the most famous being the Abbasid Caliph. Oghul Qaimish is the one exception to this.

<sup>55</sup>William of Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, translated by P. Jackson (Indianapolis, 2009), p. 249 [henceforth Rubruck/Jackson].

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*

Certainly she was placed in a sack and sewn up, but she was then thrown into a river—not a lake, but a river.

The rivers of Mongolia are not particularly deep, and thus not an efficient way of disposing of a body for all time. A lake would have been much more practical. Nonetheless, dumping Oghul Qaimish into a river was the method for a single reason: there is a universal belief that evil cannot cross running water.

### *Sorqoqtani*

As the wife and widow of Tolui, the fourth son of Chinggis Khan, Sorqoqtani (d. 1252) became a dominant figure in the Mongol Empire. She began her life as the niece of Toghril Ong-Khan, the ruler of the Kereit confederation, which dominated much of central Mongolia in the late twelfth century. Very little is known about her early life, but following Chinggis Khan's defeat of the Kereit, she became the wife of Tolui in 1203.<sup>57</sup>

Sorqoqtani's husband, Tolui, a talented general in his own right, died in 1233. After the death of her husband, she never remarried which was somewhat unusual. Often the wives of nobility remarried a brother or other relative of the husband. Ögödei attempted to arrange a marriage between Sorqoqtani and his son (and future emperor) Güyük.<sup>58</sup> This marriage would have cemented a relationship between the families of Tolui and Ögödei and lessened the chance of conflict over the matter of succession to the throne.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, had the marriage taken place, the disputes and civil wars that later marred the Mongol Empire might never have happened. Sorqoqtani Beki, however, declined the offer and chose to devote herself solely to the upbringing of her children. Considering the careers of her sons, it was a most fortuitous choice, as she became a great influence upon their lives.

As a Nestorian Christian, Sorqoqtani Beki exposed her children to Christianity. Although none of her sons—Möngke, Hülegü, Qubilai and Ariq Böke—converted to Christianity, they demonstrated respect to it as well as other religions.<sup>60</sup> This was due to the influence of their mother who, although a Nestorian Christian, also provided funds for representatives of other faiths to build churches, mosques, madrasas, as well as Daoist and Buddhist temples. In addition to the patronage of building projects, Sorqoqtani cultivated relationships among Daoist and Buddhist monks in her appanage in what is now the Hebei province of China.<sup>61</sup> While her efforts gained her the support of her Chinese subjects, as with the building projects, her actions were due primarily to a general belief in tolerance of all religions as reflected in the policies of the Mongol khans.

Sorqoqtani also promoted education among her children. Although her late husband Tolui had been a great warrior and an exceptional general, Sorqoqtani Beki realised the value of

<sup>57</sup>SHM, § 186. Sorqoqtani's sister Ibaqa became one of Chinggis Khan's wives, although she was later given to a Mongol general, Jürchedei, in 1206 as a reward for his outstanding service. Although Ibaqa was no longer the wife of Chinggis Khan, she maintained the standing of a *khatun* as a result of their three-year marriage. SHM, § 208.

<sup>58</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 561; RD/Thackston, II, p. 387.

<sup>59</sup>M. Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 13.

<sup>60</sup>Rubruck/Jackson, pp. 224–225. Rubruck gives the impression that Ariq Böke was a Christian, but the other sources are inconclusive.

<sup>61</sup>Rossabi, p. 13.

education in addition to the valour of martial actions.<sup>62</sup> Thus she procured the services of a Uighur Turk, Tolochu, who educated her sons to read and write in Mongolian.<sup>63</sup> Her actions were exceptional as Mongolian had only recently adopted an alphabet after the defeat of the Naiman in 1204 upon the orders of Chinggis Khan.

Most of the sources, particularly the Persian sources, display her as a pillar of society. During the regency of Töregene, the wife of Ögödei, many of the sources recorded that she never veered from the *yasa and yosun*, the laws and customs, attributed to Chinggis Khan, and continually promoted the interests of the empire over the interests of individual princes and ministers. Of course, much of this depiction must be viewed with great scrutiny as the authors in question, Juwaynī and Rashīd al-Dīn, served princes descended from her: Juwaynī was an official in the administration of her son Hülegü, the first Il-Khan of Persia, while Rashīd al-Dīn served Ghazan, his great grandson.

These authors portrayed Töregene as a vile and corrupt woman who was constantly involved with misconduct. Their statements condemned her for carrying out her ambitions of personal vengeance and elevating her son Güyük to the throne. Ögödei had nominated another son, Shiremün, from a different wife as his successor. Sorqoqtani, on the other hand, was portrayed as promoting the interests of the empire.<sup>64</sup> She did later encourage her eldest son Möngke to pursue the throne after Güyük's death. When it came to Güyük's election in 1246, however, Sorqoqtani Beki, along with her sons, placed her considerable influence behind Güyük. Thus, Sorqoqtani was never portrayed as a schemer or a detriment to the Mongol Court.

These sources must be read with caution as their bias in favour of Sorqoqtani is apparent. Nonetheless, when compared with the regent Töregene, or Oghul Qaimish, Sorqoqtani remains unblemished. Although perhaps not as perfect as often depicted, she remained considerably less influenced by politics and greed than Töregene and Oghul Qaimish, although, much like Töregene, she spent her largesse on securing the favour of the princes and the generals so that most supported her efforts to raise Möngke to the throne.<sup>65</sup>

The court historians were not alone in their assessment of Sorqoqtani. Other chroniclers throughout the empire also marvelled at the qualities of Sorqoqtani. In addition, westerner travellers such as John de Plano Carpini, an emissary from Pope Innocent IV, remarked on her exceptional intelligence and noted that only Börte, the mother of Chinggis Khan, commanded more respect among the Mongols than Sorqoqtani.<sup>66</sup>

Her political acumen came to the fore during the period after Güyük's death. Although she publicly supported Güyük's election, Sorqoqtani carefully cultivated alliances with the other princes of the Mongol Empire. She alerted Batu, the ruler of the Jochid Ulus, when Güyük assembled an army to march against Batu in 1248.<sup>67</sup> This matter stemmed from a rivalry between the two princes during the Mongol invasion of Europe in 1240. Batu abstained

<sup>62</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 560; RD/Thackston, II, p. 386.

<sup>63</sup>Rossabi, p. 13.

<sup>64</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 211, and III, pp. 5, 8; Juwaynī/Boyle, pp. 255, 550, 552; RD/Karīmī, pp. 480, 568–569, 580; RD/Thackston, II, pp. 330, 392–394, 401.

<sup>65</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, III, p. 8; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 552.

<sup>66</sup>John of Plano Carpini, "History of the Mongols", translated by A Nun of Stanbrook Abbey, in C. Dawson (ed.), *The Mongol Mission* (Toronto, 1980), p. 26.

<sup>67</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 571; RD/Thackston, II, p. 395.

from the election of Güyük, excusing himself by claiming illness.<sup>68</sup> Güyük, however, died *en route* to Batu and potential civil war did not come to fruition.

With Güyük's death, his wife Oghul Qaimish came to power. Despite numerous attempts to arrange a *quriltai* or council to elect a new Khan, Oghul Qaimish stalled the process in order that she could remain in power. The court historians remarked extensively on the corruption of power and of officials during her regency, and noted the justness of Sorqoqtani Beki's character.<sup>69</sup>

As time passed, Sorqoqtani continued to work and built numerous political alliances with not only the Mongol princes but also ministers of state who increasingly became unsatisfied with Oghul Qaimish. Thus, in 1251 a council was held in which the majority of Mongol princes and generals elected Möngke, Sorqoqtani's eldest son, as the Khan of the Mongol Empire.

Although Sorqoqtani died in the winter of 1252, not long after Möngke was elected, the ascendancy of her family drastically altered the balance of power in the Empire. A purge quickly eliminated many of the lines of Ögödei and Chaghatai. With Möngke on the throne, his brother Hülegü received orders to finish the conquest of the Middle East, while Qubilai and Möngke marched south to fight the Song Empire in China.

Möngke died in 1259, which led to a conflict between Qubilai and his brother Ariq Böke for the crown. Although Qubilai ultimately won, the Mongol Empire essentially split apart. Nevertheless, Sorqoqtani's sons Qubilai and Hülegü established control and empire in East Asia and the Middle East respectively while other grandsons of Chinggis Khan ruled over Central Asia and much of what is now Russia and Ukraine.

Due to the relative overall gender equality among the Mongols, Sorqoqtani's contributions are noteworthy, not because she was a woman, but because she was an exceptional person in general. Unlike other societies at the time, the Mongol females had opportunities to influence the course of government, and they often did. Because of her involvement in politics, Sorqoqtani changed the ruling house of the Mongol Empire. Furthermore, her involvement in supporting various religious establishments ensured that religious tolerance was a cornerstone of the Mongol Empire. Her actions greatly influenced her sons, all of whom played significant roles in the course of the empire's history. With her wide range of activities and influence, it is little wonder that so many chroniclers and travel accounts consistently remarked on the quality of her character and her exceptional intelligence.

### Impact on the Silk Road

Töregene, Oghul Qaimish, and Sorqoqtani had a considerable impact on the Silk Road and Mongol Empire both directly and indirectly. With the exception of Güyük's brief reign, the decade of the 1240s was dominated by the actions and influence of Töregene and Oghul Qaimish. Western historians have often referred to them as the women who saved Europe, referring to the Mongol withdrawal from Hungary in 1241. Despite the fact that the Mongol

<sup>68</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 205; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 249; RD/Karīmī, p. 568; RD/Thackston, II, p. 392.

<sup>69</sup>RD/Karīmī, pp. 572, 581; RD/Thackston, II, pp. 395, 401; Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 217; Juwaynī/Boyle, pp. 262–623.

invasion of Poland and Hungary had been devastating, the Mongols did not follow up their attacks in any significant way. Part of this had to do with the fact that regents were on the throne. Indeed, the only significant conquest that took place between 1241 and 1250 was the conquest of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rūm in 1243. The rest of the conquests slowed to a halt or became holding actions as with the campaigns in China.

One reason for the lack of conquests was that only the *qaghan* could order the armies into the field. Güyük initiated orders, but with his death, actions once again halted. The other reason was tied to the *quriltai* process in which all of the princes and major commanders needed to be present for the selection of the *qaghan*. As the process of nomination and lobbying went for months or even years, all of the leading figures were preoccupied and thus unable to go on campaign except commanders on the borders.

Yet, at the same time, this lull also helped the *Pax Mongolica*. Although political manoeuvrings took place at the various courts of the Khans, princes, and queens, the rest of the empire still operated in a fairly normal manner. Of course, the lot of a peasant was typically an oppressive situation in any circumstance, but other groups prospered. Indeed, it appears that commerce flourished particularly as Töregene and Oghul Qaimish favoured merchants. The lull in the wars certainly made it easier to travel from areas outside of the empire as illustrated in the number of people who attended the coronation of Güyük. The period of peace also allowed for the trade routes to stabilise and encouraged commerce throughout the empire. Furthermore, we know that Töregene gave sumptuous amounts of gifts and money to secure Güyük's ascension to the throne. While much of it came from oppressive taxation, she still procured goods from merchants to insure that her "bought votes" materialised. This favouritism towards merchants extended not only to buying luxury goods, but also to appointing many merchants to government positions as in the case of 'Abd al-Rahmān and Sharaf al-Dīn.<sup>70</sup> Although the merchant class prospered, the efficiency and the reputation of the Mongol Empire's government suffered.

This is not to say that the administration of the empire suffered solely because merchants acquired positions in the government. Merchants, particularly Muslim merchants, had the skills required for administration—primarily knowledge of monetary systems and record-keeping. As Thomas Allsen has written, "While the involvement of commercial classes in government was commonplace in the Muslim world, this caused much consternation in China, where merchants held a much lower social standing and where, traditionally connections between commercial interests and official circles were always carefully concealed".<sup>71</sup> Despite biases against merchants in China, the use of former merchants as part of the administration in the rest of the empire was not seen as encroaching on the domain of another class. Rather, the breakdown of the administration had more to do with the avarice and ability of certain individuals not only among the bureaucracy but also at the highest levels of the government. Sharaf al-Dīn and 'Abd al-Rahmān are mentioned for their corruption, but considering the size of the Mongol Empire and its administration they seem to be an exception. Certainly, they were not the only corrupt administrators,

<sup>70</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 199, and II, p. 242; Juwaynī/Boyle, pp. 243, 504.

<sup>71</sup>Thomas Allsen, "Technologies of Governance in the Mongolian Empire: A Geographic Overview", in D. Sneath (ed.), *Imperial Statecraft: Political Forms and Techniques of Governance in Inner Asia, Sixth-Twentieth Centuries* (Bellingham, 2006), p. 123.

but it appears that their appointments were not a result of their religion or former life as a merchant. Rather, they had the ambition and character that met the needs of the regents at the time.

Töregene undoubtedly had the ability necessary to be regent, but she concentrated most of her attention on accumulating sufficient political power. Oghul Qaimish also focused on commerce, but both she and her sons paid insufficient attention to the actual administration of the empire as well as to politics. Possibly they concluded that it was unnecessary in view of Töregene's experience. If so, they unfortunately appreciated neither Töregene's political acumen nor her strategic vision. Töregene, while roundly criticised in the sources, displayed a high order of political ability. Indeed, her fund-raising and persuasion through gifts is on a par with the highest level of campaigning in modern American politics.

The fact that Töregene, Oghul Qaimish, and even Sorqoqtani had close relationships with merchants is not surprising. The *khatuns* of the Mongol Empire were encouraged to invest their wealth through trade, which helped establish the *ortoq* system. Chinggis Khan encouraged this practice from the beginning of the Mongol Empire.<sup>72</sup> To foster trade, Ögödei routinely paid extravagant amounts to merchants for goods, even those of sub-standard quality. Although not as profligate as his father, Güyük also paid higher than retail prices to attract merchants to the Mongol court. Oghul Qaimish continued this practice. One of the criticisms levelled against her was that when she was not with her shamans, she consorted with merchants.<sup>73</sup>

Sorqoqtani, despite the praise of her character, is not above scrutiny. Her influence in the empire was great and perhaps cannot be overstated, even with the bias found among Toluid sources. For instance, the empire was truly a family business and in newly conquered territories, the four sons of Chinggis Khan and their houses were represented not only militarily but also administratively. Thus when the Mongols expended into Khurāsān and Iran with Chormaqan's campaign in the 1230s, Ögödei decreed

that the leaders and *basqaqs* on every side should accompany the levy and render assistance to Chormaghun [sic]; and Chin-Temür set out from Khorazm by way of Shahrstan and at the same time placed at Chormaghun's disposal other emirs representing the princes. So too Chormaghun placed at his disposal an emir to represent every prince and prince's son, Kül-bolat representing Qa'an, Nosal Batu, Qizil-Buqa Chaghatai and Yeke Sorqoqtani Beki.<sup>74</sup>

Thus, Sorqoqtani was the official representative of the Toluids after the death of Tolui. As such, she had access to not only the wealth of her *orda*, but also to possessions and revenues in other regions through her representatives, just as did the other houses. In addition, Sorqoqtani, like other *khatuns*, also invested in *ortoq* ventures. Needless to say, the wealth at her command was enormous and Sorqoqtani used it wisely.

<sup>72</sup>T. Allsen, "Mongolian Princes and Their Merchant Partners, 1200–1260", *Asia Major* 2 (1989), pp. 87, 111.

<sup>73</sup>For Ögödei's actions, see Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, pp. 165–171; Juwaynī/Boyle, pp. 208–214; Allsen, "Mongolian Princes and Their Merchant Partners", p. 104. For Oghul Qaimish's time spent with merchants, see Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, I, p. 220; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 265.

<sup>74</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, II, pp. 218–219; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 482.



Juwaynī wrote:

As for Beki, from the time when Ulugh–Noyan passed away, she had won favour on all sides by the bestowing of gifts and presents upon her family and kindred and dispensing largesse to troops and strangers and so rendered all subject to her will and planted love and affection in everyone’s heart and soul, so that when the death of Güyük Khan occurred most men were agreed and of one mind as to the entrusting of the keys of the Khanate to her son Mengü Qa’an. For the report of her wisdom and prudence and the fame of her counsel and sagacity had spread to all parts, and none would gainsay her word.<sup>75</sup>

The phrasing of this passage is interesting. Juwaynī maintains the character of Sorqoqtani, commenting on her generosity and charitable nature. Preceding passages also note how she never strayed from the *Yasa*. Juwaynī’s account after this passage also notes her munificence towards religious institutions. This is well known and has been commented on earlier in this study. However, what is easily overlooked is the significance of the gift-giving to her family and kindred.

One must remember that Sorqoqtani’s family and kindred was the *altan urugh* or the Golden Kin of Chinggis Khan. This was a large family that required many gifts. Furthermore, after Güyük died, the majority supported Möngke’s claim to the throne, which Juwaynī further legitimates with a passage stating, “By the *yasa* and custom of the Mongols the father’s place passes to the youngest son by the chief wife”.<sup>76</sup> Juwaynī, in the same section, acknowledges that Ögödei was Khan because of Chinggis Khan’s command, but insinuates that it should have rightfully passed to Tolui by tradition. Furthermore, this passage delegitimises Ögödeyid claims to the throne as Güyük was not the youngest son of Ögödei’s chief wife. According to Rashīd al-Dīn, Ögödei’s chief wife was Boraqchin, but she bore him no sons.<sup>77</sup> Of Ögödei’s wives, only Töregene bore him sons. His other sons came from concubines, thus theoretically eliminating their claims to the throne. Güyük, however, was not the youngest son. This was Qashi, the father of Qubilai Khan’s great rival, Qaidu. Rashīd al-Dīn notes that Qashi died during the lifetime of Ögödei, and thus was could not be considered, but Güyük was the eldest son and even Köten was the second eldest.<sup>78</sup> Yet, in either case, this issue gave the Toluids cover for challenging the Ögödeyids’ right to rule.

This issue of legitimacy, tradition, custom, and legality may have swayed some members of the *quriltai*, but most importantly, Sorqoqtani learned much from Töregene’s example. Bribery is what sealed the vote for Möngke. Sorqoqtani’s reputation remains ‘unbesmirched’, unlike Töregene, as she had access to ample wealth. Töregene, however, only had the lucre to pull off her scheme by manipulating government posts to raise the funds through tax-farming. Sorqoqtani possessed the wealth, but also the access to merchants to secure appropriate gifts, such as *nasij* robes. With the misuse of the *yam* stations during the regencies of Töregene and Oghul Qaimish, merchants, particularly with the support of powerful patrons like Sorqoqtani, could traverse the empire in safety and in luxury. With the government covering their expenses at the *yam* stations, Sorqoqtani’s gifts were less expensive than normal, hence

<sup>75</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, III, pp. 7–8; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 552.

<sup>76</sup>Juwaynī/Qazwīnī, III, p. 3; Juwaynī/Boyle, p. 459.

<sup>77</sup>RD/Karīmī, pp. 444–451; RD/Thackston, II, pp. 304–311

<sup>78</sup>RD/Karīmī, p. 451; RD/Thackston, II, pp. 310–311.

giving her the capability to provide for most of the *altan urugh*, including members of the Chaghatayid and Ögödeyid families. In this manner, as stated by her own admirers, she secured the throne for Möngke. We will never be certain if Sorqoqtani's reputation was as sterling as portrayed. Like Töregene, she was very intelligent, but unlike her fellow *khatuns* she also had the benefit of being on the side that wrote the history of the Mongol Empire.

Curiously, Sorqoqtani's actions, while underappreciated by historians, did not go unnoticed by her son. One can see the tie between the Silk Road, merchants, and the Mongolian government among the first acts of Möngke Khan. The *yam* or postal system of the Mongols allowed messengers and officials to quickly traverse the empire. The postal stations were supported by the local population and were originally arranged so as not to be a burden. Yet, by the time of Möngke, not only did official messengers and officials use the system, but merchants used them as well. The increase in traffic due to permits given to non-government figures became a heavy burden to local populations, causing increased poverty as well as the flight of peasants and nomads, thus threatening the communication network of the empire. Möngke eliminated many of these abuses and restored the *yam* to its original purpose.<sup>79</sup> This is not to say that merchants no longer traversed the Mongol empire—they certainly did, but no longer could the web of government institutions and commerce become as intertwined as it did in the 1240s.

In summary, the Mongolian queens of the 1240s stand in remarkable contrast to each other. Nonetheless, they all left an indelible imprint on Mongol Empire for better or for worse. In addition, their actions impacted on the Silk Road and the Mongol Empire in subtle ways that cannot be ignored. Indeed, our picture of them is richer because of the *Pax Mongolica* that allowed merchants and envoys to traverse the Mongol Empire on the Silk Road. <[Timothy.May@ung.edu](mailto:Timothy.May@ung.edu)>

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<sup>79</sup>T. May, *The Mongol Conquests in World History*, pp. 119–122, provides a summary. For a more detailed study, see T. Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism: The Policies of the Grand Qan Möngke in China, Russia, and the Islamic Lands, 1251–1259* (Berkeley, 1987).