The life and autobiographical writings of the celebrated Sufi ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla Simnānī (659/1261–736/1336) remain strangely unexplored by students of the political, cultural, and religious history of Ilkhanid Iran. His own long service, and that of his father and two uncles, at the Mongol court gave him a distinctive perspective on court affairs, and his legacy as a Sufi shaykh and prolific author facilitated the preservation of several intimate and self-referential accounts, among Simnānī’s own numerous works and those of his direct disciples, that offer fascinating vignettes of the cultural encounter entailed by the interaction of Mongol and Muslim elites in northwestern Iran. The present study is intended to outline just one aspect of that encounter in the context of Simnānī’s life and the development of his Sufi career: the diverse religious influences to which he was exposed during the critical period following his initial turn to Sufism, while in Ilkhanid service. That period saw an increasing tension between Simnānī’s wish to withdraw from court service, and his growing desire to travel to Baghdad to meet a particular Sufi teacher, on the one hand, and the efforts of the Mongol elite—including the īlkhān Arghun himself—and his own family to keep him at the Mongol court near Tabriz, or, if that proved impossible, then at least to prevent him from going to Baghdad; those efforts included a series of religious encounters arranged for Simnānī while he was detained at the royal ordu near Tabriz for several months in 687/1288. These encounters no doubt had a lasting impact on Simnānī himself, but Simnānī eventually did make his way to Baghdad, and the course his religious life took afterwards obviously colored his recollection of the time he spent at the Mongol ruler’s court discussing spiritual disciplines and doctrines with practitioners of other paths, and with Arghun himself. Nevertheless, his accounts of that time in his life offer a glimpse of religious interaction in this era, as staged and “sponsored” by the Mongol elite, and of one remarkable individual’s efforts to make sense out of his own temporary engagement with religious diversity.
The outlines of ‘Alāʾ al-Dawla Simnānī’s life are relatively well known, thanks, most recently, to the study of Jamal Elias.1 Born into a politically prominent family of Simnān, he entered the service of Arghun at the age of 15, some nine years before Arghun assumed power in 683/1284; his paternal uncle, Jalāl al-Dīn, was Arghun’s vazīr from the beginning of his reign until 687/1288, when he was dismissed (his execution came a year later), while Simnānī’s maternal uncle, Rukn al-Dīn, and his father Sharaf al-Dīn were both among the loyal servants of Arghun who eventually ran afoul of rival officials under Ghazan and were executed (his father already in 695/1295, his uncle in 700/1301). ‘Alāʾ al-Dawla was spared his relatives’ fate by his departure from the court to adopt the life of a Sufi; he says relatively little about Ghazan, or his famous conversion to Islam, in his writings, and it seems that he was closer to Öljeytü, in whose encampment he spent considerable time even after he made known his wish to leave Arghun’s service (Öljeytü would later disappoint Simnānī, however,

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