“RICH IN GOODS AND ABOUNDING IN WEALTH:” THE ILKHanID AND POST-ILKHanID RULING ELITE AND THE POLITICS OF COMMERCIAL LIFE AT TABRIZ, 1250–1400

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From the mid-13th century until the mid-16th century, Tabriz was Iran’s most important city, in terms of its political and economic life. Established as the Ilkhanid capital, Tabriz became the focal point for political action between the Hülegüid-Chinggisid dynasty, the Turkish and Mongol military elite, and the Persian administrators and intellectuals who served the Ilkhanid state. Following the death of Abū Saʿīd Bahādur Khān in 1335, and the dissolution of the Ilkhanid lands, Tabriz remained important as the seat of the Ilkhanid political legacy, and was the paramount prize for families such as the Chubanids, Jalayirids, Muzaffarids and Timurids who sought to associate themselves with the charisma of the Chinggisids in Iran through the 14th, and into the 15th centuries. In fact, not until the Safavid capital was transferred to Qazvin, and eventually to Isfahan in the 16th century, did Tabriz cease to have such a vital political importance. Closely related to its political importance was Tabriz’s role as an economic center, primarily as the setting for commercial transactions among merchants dealing in local and foreign commodities, whose exchanges connected Tabriz to wider networks extending to Central Asia, India, China, the Black and Mediterranean Seas, and Europe. Tabriz’s economic importance was closely connected to its central place in political life, of course, as the rulers and elite of the Ilkhanate and its successor states encouraged, and benefited from, revenue from trade conducted in Tabriz.

Much remains to be written about these complex connections. A generally accepted view of the period of Chingissid rule in much of Eurasia in the 13th and 14th centuries is that the Mongols created conditions favourable to overland trade between China and the Mediterranean. A *pax mongolica*, created by the Mongols’ interest in wealth from trade, and their willingness to provide the security necessary to encourage it, helped to revive patterns of trade on the so-called “silk roads” that had flourished in earlier periods, and especially under the Tang dynasty in China and the early Abbasid Caliphate in the Middle East, in the 8th and
9th centuries. The ways in which these larger processes aligned with more local histories raise further questions. While cities such as Tabriz, Saray and Samarqand are often recognized as significant points of transit and exchange along routes made possible by Mongol protection, less attention has been devoted to the interactions between commercial activities and the activities of the political elites—the dynasty, amirs, and men of the pen, whose livelihood depended on wealth from trade, and whose actions could promote, or harm, the commercial vitality of a city.

The purpose of this article is to offer a general overview of literature on the role of Tabriz in the political economy of the Ilkhanate and its successor states in the 13th and 14th centuries in the framework of relationships between three loci of political and economic interests: the Mongol-Persian ruling elite, merchants representing regional and long-distance trade networks, and the local conditions and interests of the city and people of Tabriz itself. The discussion that follows considers a series of relationships between these three sets of interests. While Tabriz came to prominence as a direct result of the Mongol conquerors of Iran choosing it as their capital, Tabriz and its distinct geographic setting served as a contact point between pastoral and agrarian economies, where a dual Mongol-Persian elite came together to serve the Ilkhanid dynasty and their successors. The Ilkhanid political elite created conditions for Tabriz, and thus themselves, to flourish economically, while also serving the interests of foreign merchants and encouraging wider trade contacts through partnerships and alliances. The ruling elite sought to sustain their benefits from these

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1 Janet Abu Lughod has written that the contribution of the Mongols in the 13th century was to create an environment that facilitated land transit with less risk and lower protection costs. See Janet L. Abu-Lughod, Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350 (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 154. According to Xinru Liu, a scholar of the history of the silk roads, with the rise of the Mongols, “for a century or so, the Central Asian steppe was once again the link between Europe and China, as Mongol conquerors facilitated commercial and cultural exchanges on the Eurasian land routes.” See Xinru Liu, The Silk Road in World History (Oxford: University Press, 2010), 199. Thomas Allsen has demonstrated brilliantly the ways in which the Mongols not only allowed for cultural exchanges across Eurasia, but in fact acted as the principal agents of these exchanges to serve their own political and economic interests. See Thomas T. Allsen, Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia (Cambridge: University Press, 2001). Scholars have also begun to call for a more nuanced use of the term “pax mongolica.” David Morgan has suggested that the term may be too simplistic to describe a complex collection of processes. See David Morgan, The Mongols, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 73. Nicola Di Cosmo has addressed specifically the meaning of “pax mongolica” as it relates to relations between the Mongols and Italian merchants in the Black Sea. See Nicola Di Cosmo, “Black Sea Emporia and the Mongol Empire: A Reassessment of the Pax Mongolica,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 53 (2010): 83–108.