CHAPTER 4

The Economic Role of Mongol Women: Continuity and Transformation from Mongolia to Iran

Bruno De Nicola

Introduction

The economic history of the Mongol Empire has puzzled historians for decades. The information we have on the subject for the different parts of the vast territory conquered by the Mongols varies radically. This becomes apparent if we compare, for example, the fair amount of data available for the territories of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty of China (1279–1368) with the almost non-existent information we have on how these nomadic rulers administered the economy of, for example, Central Asia.¹ For the territories of the Ilkhanate, that is Iran, Khurasan and West Asia, it is important to highlight the relevance of the studies carried out by Lambton and Petrushevsky some time ago.² More recently, a more comprehensive framework for understanding the development of the Mongols’ role in the economy of the territories they conquered was provided by Allsen, who suggested a more nuanced view of the Mongols as rulers and administrators of a multicultural empire.³ The Mongol Empire underwent a bi-directional cultural and economic transformation whereby different territories had to accommodate their economies to the needs not only of the new rulers, but also of the conquered populations. Consequently, the different Mongol rulers had to adapt, with the help of the local elites, to different circumstances and economic opportunities presented by the newly conquered territories.

Because the Mongol conquest was not only a military enterprise but also a migration of people, women were not excluded from the economic activity of the empire. Further, the relatively high status enjoyed by Mongol Khatuns

² Lambton, Landlord and Peasant in Persia; Petrushevsky, “The Socio-Economic Condition of Iran,” 483–537.
across the empire made them, at times, important actors in the empire’s economy. This article will focus on how the role of Mongol women in the economy of the empire was transformed when these ladies settled in Iran after the conquest of Hülegü during the 1250s. I will use Allsen’s ideas on the economic activity of the Mongols in the early empire and contrast it with the information we have on female economic activity in Ilkhanid Iran. The ultimate aim is to show that women played a significant role in the economic life of the empire and that this role was transformed and adapted depending on the different circumstances faced during the territorial expansion of the empire.

**Female Economic Activity from the Steppe to World Empire**

Although recent archaeological research has documented the existence of agricultural practices in the steppe at the time of Chinggis Khan, in pre-imperial Mongolia wealth was based on two basic resources: cattle and people. As Chinggis Khan was subduing his rivals in the steppe, a process of systematized plunder, characteristic of this early stage, was carried out by his followers and relatives. In the *Secret History*, this process is especially vigorous when Temüjin (the original name of Chinggis Khan) conquers a rival faction. For example, immediately after he “crushed and despoiled” the Kereits, Chinggis Khan started “distributing them on all sides,” giving to some of his allies a full sub-group of the conquered people. He also took the nieces of his defeated rival from him, marrying one of them and giving the other to his son Tolui. He was merciful to the father of the two women, allowing him to keep his subordinates but placing under his control all the resources (mostly cattle) belonging to him and his daughters. The *Secret History* goes on to detail how the Kereit people were distributed among Chinggis’ allies according to their merit in battle, attesting not only to a system of plunder but also to one of distribution of human and material resources.

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4 I would also like to thank Timothy May for sharing with me an early version of his forthcoming paper. See May, “Commercial Queens.”
6 Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange*, 27.
7 It is mentioned that he gave to the Suldus Taqai the Jirgin branch of the Kereit people. Anonymous, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, §186 [hereafter SHM].
8 These women are Ibaqa Beki and Sorghaghtani Beki respectively.
9 SHM, §187. Similar examples can be observed during the defeat of other steppe factions such as the Merkits; see SHM, §198; on the Tatars’ extermination and the influence of women in saving some of their relatives, see Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi‘ al-tawārīkh*, ed. M. Raushan and