Book Review

Brack, Jonathan Z. *An Afterlife for the Khan: Muslims, Buddhists, and Sacred Kingship in Mongol Iran and Eurasia.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2023. ISBN 9780520392908. xvi + 213 pp. $95 cloth. $95 ebook.

Blain Auer

Université de Lausanne

The Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century, initiated by Chinggis Khan's (r. 1206–27) campaign against the Khwarazmshah ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Muḥammad in 1219, marked a transformative period for the Islamic world. In Iran and Iraq, these invasions dismantled existing political structures, paving the way for the establishment of the Ilkhanid dynasty, which governed much of the Middle East from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth century. The Ilkhanid court became a unique melting pot, uniting diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious communities—including Arabs, Turks, Persians, Mongols, Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians—under a single administration. This diversity necessitated innovative approaches to governance and kingship. The Ilkhanid rulers reimagined universal kingship by integrating elements from the varied traditions within their realm.

Jonathan Brack's *An Afterlife for the Khan: Muslims, Buddhists, and Sacred Kingship in Mongol Iran and Eurasia* offers a fresh perspective on these developments. Brack highlights the intricate exchange of ideas among the multi-religious and multi-ethnic groups within the Ilkhanid domain and examines how these interactions shaped new models of kingship. His work contributes to a fuller understanding of how Mongol rulers adapted to and influenced the cultural and political landscapes of the medieval Islamic world. Brack's scholarship complements other notable recent studies, including *The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), edited by Michal Biran and Hodong Kim, and monographs such as Peter Jackson's *From Genghis Khan to Tamerlane: The Reawakening of Mongol Asia* (Yale University Press, 2024) and *The Mongols and the Islamic World: From Conquest to Conversion* (Yale University Press, 2017).

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Brack has two main objectives in *An Afterlife for the Khan*: first, to outline the intellectual backdrop of the Ilkhanid rulers' religious policies, and second, to analyze how these rulers employed various concepts of "sacred kingship." Much of what is known about their religious policies comes from Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318), who initially served as the court physician to Ilkhan Arghun (r. 1284–91) and later became chief minister under Ilkhan Öljeitü (r. 1304–16). Rashīd al-Dīn personally participated in these religious debates and authored the *Compendium of Histories* (*Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh*), the foremost historical source providing an "authorized" perspective on Mongol rule in the Middle East. In this book, Brack oscillates between reflecting on Rashīd al-Dīn's intellectual contributions to his Ilkhanid patrons and his efforts to construct a history of Ilkhanid sacred kingship. Brack's book is organized into five main chapters: chapter 1 examines the portrayal of the Buddha in both Islamic and Buddhist contexts within the Ilkhanid milieu; chapter 2 explores debates over reincarnation and its refutation at the Mongol court; chapter 3 compares the Buddhist *cakravartin* (wheel-turning monarch) rulership models with Rashīd al-Dīn's refashioning of Islamic kingship; chapter 4 analyzes theological developments during the reign of Öljeitü; and chapter 5 investigates shrine visitation and its role in legitimizing kingship.

As Mongol rule spread, Mongol elites encountered diverse religious communities—Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian—that had divergent views on religion and its relationship to power. Catholic and Nestorian priests, Sunni and Shiʿa scholars, and Buddhist monks were given a platform to express their views before the court of Mongol rulers. In the push and pull of interreligious debates, and in the competitive atmosphere of scholastic disputations and theological arguments, Mongol rulers were persuaded to adopt elements of different religious traditions, according to what best suited their growing political influence and self-image. One of the strengths of Brack's analysis of sacred kingship is his ability to dissect the institutional mechanisms of Mongol rule and clearly illustrate their skillful management of religion, politics, and culture that contributed to their success.

To distinguish between the three major religious traditions that influenced the Ilkhanid court, Brack makes a theoretical distinction between immanentist (Mongol) and transcendental (Christian, Muslim, Buddhist) religious traditions, concepts presented in the introduction and discussed throughout the study. In immanentist religions, represented by the Mongols, supernatural forces are involved in the daily matters of the natural world. Those forces can be harnessed to serve the needs of the ruler. According to Brack, the Mongol immanentist religious perspective produced forms of divinized kingship in which the ruler controlled the supernatural world, just as a god would. From the time of Chinggis Khan, Mongol rulers claimed affinity with Tenggeri, the supreme deity of the sky found in Inner Asian traditions.

In Brack's analysis, immanentist religions are more inclusive, thus providing the explanation for Mongol tolerance of religious debate and the coexistence of competing ideas. This inclusivity contrasts sharply with transcendentalist religion, represented by Buddhism and Islam, whose believers are concerned with salvation. In transcendentalist contexts, the king is beholden to a religious elite (Buddhist monks and Muslim scholars, for instance) that monopolizes the religious sphere, and the ruler serves a protective function, guarding religion and justly and piously acting on its principles. Brack refers to the Buddhist

transcendentalist mode in the sphere of politics as "karmic-righteous kingship," which appealed to Mongol rulers. The fact that Mongol, Buddhist, and Islamic systems of kingship were not complementary, but often contradictory, required the work of reconciliation from members of those communities to adapt their beliefs according to the needs of Ilkhanid rulers.

Brack demonstrates how the general policy of religious tolerance led to significant changes in the religious culture of the court. Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim leaders strategically accommodated and modified Mongol immanentist religion, using tactics to win over Mongol rulers and reinforce their claims to rule. Brack argues that Rashīd al-Dīn succeeded in assimilating the Buddhist model of karmic-righteous rulership with an Islamic model of kingship by making "equivalences." For Buddhists, the Khan could be a *cakravartin*, an ideal dharmic universal ruler, while for Muslims, he could be a "Sahib Qiran," an auspicious and semi-prophetic leader as discussed in chapter 3. This blending of models of kingship was particularly useful in the context of a post-caliphal world. After the demise of the caliph following Hülegü's (r. 1256–65) invasion of Baghdad, Mongol rulers relied upon new saintly Islamic models of kingship, based on the concept of *vilāyat* and using titles like "Sahib Qiran," indicating a divinely ordained ruler, that could be translated into a Mongol idiom of immanentist religion.

Brack vividly demonstrates how Rashīd al-Dīn navigated the religious diversity of the Mongol empire through strategies that assimilated or refuted different propositions of sacred kingship. Not all ideologies were well-suited for reconciliation. Buddhist theories of reincarnation appealed to the Mongol rulers' assertion of special status, as discussed in chapter 2. It reinforced their claims to sacred kingship because Mongol rulers believed that they had been accorded good fortune for their virtuous previous lives, evidenced by their rebirth as kings. Rashīd al-Dīn strongly objected to ideas of reincarnation, which were fundamentally at odds with Sunni doctrine, a topic he specifically addresses in his *Compendium of Histories*. One of Brack's contributions to the study of Rashīd al-Dīn's career is the way he ably illuminates the role that Islamic theology played in Rashīd al-Dīn's construction of history and political thought. He does this by contextualizing Rashīd al-Dīn's writings within the background of Islamic theology and, more specifically, by showing the influence of the twelfth-century Ashʿarite theologian and exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210). According to Brack, Rashīd al-Dīn's foray into theology was driven by both political and personal factors. For instance, for Rashīd al-Dīn, a former Jew who converted to Islam, the refutation of Buddhist reincarnation beliefs reinforced his Islamic credentials.

Ultimately, Mongol policies of pluralism, the broader cultural and religious environment, and the efforts of figures like Rashīd al-Dīn led to the conversion of Ilkhanid rulers to Islam. In 1294–95, Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304) proclaimed his belief in Islam, most likely somewhere near Mount Damavand in Iran. This represented a radical break, though by no means a complete one, from previous Mongol cultural and religious traditions. Peter Jackson has provided the most comprehensive study of this transitional period in *The Mongols and the Islamic World*. Brack emphasizes the role of figures like Rashīd al-Dīn in facilitating the gradual integration of Islamic ideas into the Mongol political system. Nevertheless, it would have been interesting to see him delve more deeply into the complex question of conversion, considering changing political policies.

In the concluding chapter 5, "From Ancestor Worship to Shrine-Centered Kingship," Brack shows how the transition from Mongol cultural traditions to Islamic practice was materially expressed through the construction of monumental tombs and the veneration of the "special dead," a term employed by Peter Brown in his celebrated *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981). Before their conversion to Islam, Mongol rulers like Ilkhan Arghun avidly collected Buddhist relics to secure the blessings and exploit the power of those objects. Later, under the influence of Islam, Mongol rulers reformulated their claims to divinized kingship by adopting the paradigm of Islamic sainthood (*vilāyat*). Ghazan's successor Öljeitü in particular helped translate Mongol practices of ancestor worship and relic veneration into an Islamic idiom. In 1301, for instance, Öljeitü made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Salmān al-Fārisī in al-Madāʾin. According to Rashīd al-Dīn, on that occasion the Khan was touched by a light that passed through him and toward the direction of Mecca. There, he constructed a dome over the burial place of Salmān al-Fārisī (d. ca. 655–57), a Companion of the Prophet Muḥammad. Salmān al-Fārisī occupies a central place in the imagined history of Islam in Iran, as he is regarded as the first Persian convert to Islam.

Öljeitü adopted Shiʿism and made a pilgrimage to Karbala and Najaf. Brack describes the appeal of Shiʿism which "possessed multiple resources supporting Ghazan's and Öljeitü's claims to 'rightful' succession" (p. 109). Öljeitü embarked on the construction of his future resting place, the splendid mausoleum that he had built between 1305–6 and 1313–14 in al-Sulṭāniyya. This became a royal site for the veneration of the Ilkhanid dynasty. Similar processes were at work in the Delhi Sultanate where Muslim rulers relied heavily upon the legitimization of sainthood (*vilāyat*) and the construction of royal cults around the burial places of the "special dead." This raises important questions about the relationship between the specific impact of Mongol culture and larger political and social forces at work in the shifting landscape of Islamic power.

While Brack offers insightful commentary on the influence of Buddhism and Islam on Mongol kingship, the treatment of ancient Iranian cultural forms, such as the *farr* (royal glory) and the mythical Simurgh, remains comparatively underdeveloped. This is surprising given the rich Iranian heritage that the Mongols inherited and their continued engagement with Persian royal traditions. Although Brack touches on these influences, a more detailed examination of how ancient Iranian ideas shaped Mongol rule would further enrich the study. As much of religious change is viewed from the elite perspective, it would have additionally been interesting to understand to what degree those changes extended beyond the court into the daily lives of the rural and urban populace. Finally, Brack notes that the appeal of Buddhism went beyond formal religious instruction, as Buddhist practitioners also specialized in medicine and ritual practices often labeled as "magic," thereby providing additional valuable services to the ruler. Considering that Rashīd al-Dīn was himself a physician, and that such ritual and medicinal practices played an important role in medieval Muslim societies, a comparative study of these questions would have further enriched the book.

Overall, *An Afterlife for the Khan: Muslims, Buddhists, and Sacred Kingship in Mongol Iran and Eurasia* is a fascinating study of the religious policies of Mongol rulers. Brack's examination of the interplay between Buddhist, Mongol, and Islamic ideas provides valuable insights into how Mongol rulers sought to legitimate their authority in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious world of the Middle East. His focus on Rashīd al-Dīn's intellectual contributions is particularly noteworthy, demonstrating how the Ilkhanid court's policies reflected an adroit use of religious pluralism and political pragmatism.