
Sorghaghtani Beki and the Influence of Mongol Noblewomen on Succession

Cybele Zhang

Stanford University

Introduction

For many modern people, especially those in the West, the Mongol Empire brings to mind an inherently masculine image. Popular culture perpetuates images of a civilization of godless, nomadic warriors, but this stereotype is problematic and greatly simplifies the authentic, diverse nature of the empire — one of this stereotype's most harmful exclusions: women. Due to the biases of subsequent Islamic sources and the lack of female authors, the true agency of Mongol women is downplayed in subsequent scholarship far too often. In reality, women, noble women in particular, exerted tremendous influence on all avenues of Mongol life. Sorghaghtani Beki — principal wife of Chinggis Khan's son, Tolui — is one such example. Beki held not only military and social power but also shaped the entire governmental structure of the empire. Because of the inherent ambiguity of Mongol succession and the fact that the Great Khan is determined via *quriltai* (a somewhat democratic meeting of imperial leaders), Beki was able to smartly use diplomacy to exploit the malleable *quriltai* structure and certified that power would transfer to her sons instead of their relatives. Beki thus ensured that the Toluid line was supreme, which largely influenced the expanding empire and its political landscape, illustrating the agency of noble Mongol women and their integral role within the nomadic empire.

The role of women in greater Mongol society was often ambiguous. Females in the steppe region were frequently objectified and subordinated, but they simultaneously held more power than their

sedentary counterparts and had the right to property and divorce.¹ As nomads, Mongol women were involved in most aspects of life, including battle.² The women were tasked with managing the family, livestock, and belongings, which gave them substantial agency within familial units.³ Additionally, noble women had expanded more public roles and were integral facets of courtly life — serving informally as advisors, regents, and teachers for their children, the future khans.⁴ George Lane writes, “Even a cursory look at the genealogical tables of the Mongol Great Khans reveals extended periods when women effectively ruled over the whole empire...Though a woman could not formally become Great Khan, women effectively achieved the highest office not infrequently at the local, regional and highest imperial level.”⁵

For historical purposes, Beki’s life began with her marriage to Tolui around 1203.⁶ Little is known about her early life before her intermarriage with the Chinggisids. She was the daughter of Jagambu, the brother of Ong Khan, the ruler of the Kerayit, who dominated much of central Mongolia in the twelfth century.⁷ The Kerayit tribe was constantly either at war with or in an alliance with Temüjin’s (later known as Chinggis Khan) tribe until 1203, when Chinggis defeated the Kerayit in a surprise attack — in effect, consolidating the two tribes.⁸ Rashid al-Din, a 14th century Ilkhanate statesman and historian, saw the inter-tribal dynamic more positively and described Ong as having a

¹ George Lane, “Daily Life in the Mongol Empire,” (Indianapolis: Hackett Printing, 2009), 230.

² *Ibid.*, 227-228.

³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, translated by W.M Thackston, (Harvard: Harvard University Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1999), 381-386.

⁵ George Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 230-232.

⁶ Arthur Waley, *The Secret History of the Mongols, and other pieces*. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964).

⁷ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 399.

⁸ Timothy May, “Sorghaghtani Beki,” *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*, 2018.

“friendly,” “father-son” relationship with Chinggis; al-Din’s view, however, was likely heavily biased in an attempt to legitimize the empire. Ultimately, Ong and Chinggis arranged a marriage between their children, Begututmish for Jochi Khan and Beki for Tolui Khan, to solidify the merging tribes. Thus, the sisters thus joined the Mongol aristocracy, and their sororal relationship ensured a lasting bond between the Jochid and Toluid lines, which would later prove crucial for Beki in the 1251 *quriltai*.⁹

Now a princess, Beki steadily gained power and established herself as an intelligent, capable leader, proving that women were in many ways equal to their male counterparts. ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Aṭā Malik Juvaynī, a 13th century Ilkhanate historian, wrote that Tolui commanded that their four sons, the army, and people all follow Beki’s command.¹⁰ Juvaynī also added, “In any business which [Tolui] undertook, whether with regard to the weal of the Empire or the disposal of the army, he used first to consult and confer with her and would suffer no change or alteration of whatever she recommended.”¹¹ Giving noble women power was not uncommon at the time, but even amongst her peers, Beki’s expansive role stood out — which is why her influence was of note to historians even decades later. At *quriltais* and other assemblies, Juvaynī noted, “she was distinguished above them all with respect both to her retinue and to her troops.”¹² Al-Din’s illustrations further displayed Beki’s extraordinary power; her portrait of her alongside her husband in the *Compendium of Chronicles*, which appears to be the only surviving image of Beki, shows Beki seated with equal stature as Tolui. The portrait thus implies that the Kerayit princess was just as powerful

⁹ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 471.

¹⁰ ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Aṭā Malik Juvaynī and John Andrew Boyle, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1958), 550.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 550.

¹² ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Aṭā Malik Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 551.

as her impressive husband.¹³ Beki is also the only woman included in al-Din's published family trees, and thus further flaunts her influence and how integral she was in subsequent dynastic histories.¹⁴

Following the death of her husband in 1233, Beki's power continued to grow as she endeavored to protect the status of the Toluid line. Beki took on the administration of *ulus* (a natural, inherited community of tradition, custom, law and descent) and military affairs that her husband formerly oversaw, further proving that women could perform equally as men.¹⁵ She acted with such authority that al-Din proclaimed her "the most intelligent woman in the world" and said, "Sorqaghtani Beki laid a foundation that would have been beyond the capability of any crowned head."¹⁶ Juvaynī also wrote, "And if women were unto her, then would women be superior to men."¹⁷ Even the Great Khan, Ögedei recognized her astuteness, "consulting with her on all important administrative matters and never disregarded her advice or allowed any change in what she said."¹⁸ Much of Beki's positive perception was also due to her prowess in diplomacy. She frequently gave gifts to family, troops, and foreigners to keep them "obedient and on her side."¹⁹ Like her positive relationship with her sister, these connections would prove integral when called upon in the 1251 *quriltai*.

However, Beki's uniquely feminine approach to leadership makes her stand out as even more capable than her male counterparts. Beki was a doting mother and used unique appeals to pathos to reinforce her power, besides balancing military and governmental affairs. One such example was when Beki requested an *ortaq* (merchant partner) from the

¹³ Timothy May, "Sorghaghtani Beki."

¹⁴ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 383.

¹⁵ Lhamsuren Munkh-Erdene, "Where Did the Mongol Empire Come From? Medieval Mongol Ideas of People, State and Empire," *Inner Asia* 13, no. 2. 2011: 211-37. www.jstor.org/stable/24572092.

¹⁶ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*. 401.

¹⁷ 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Atā Malik Juvaynī. *The History of the World-Conqueror*. 552.

¹⁸ Rashid al-Din. *Compendium of Chronicles*, 401.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 401.

Qa'an's court, likely seeking financial independence through trade and money-lending.²⁰ Ögedei initially refused, but Beki countered with a reminder of her late husband's sacrifices for the Great Khan. Ögedei soon relented and not only granted her request but apologized for his initial insensitivity, and his ultimate supplication thus illustrates how masterful a rhetorician she was. Her plea was emotional and uniquely feminine, coming from her status as a widow — not just violent, as was common among Mongol men. Another display of Beki's influence was her ability to unite the Toluid line despite a family history of fratricide. Al-Din credited this unity to her high intelligence and cleverness.²¹ Every source that mentions Beki praises her virtuousness, demonstrating her favorable reputation and legacy. The subsequent references are undoubtedly biased given the fact that her descendants commissioned many. Still, it is impressive that hardly any criticism of her exists — especially in contrast with other noble women of the time, who were highly criticized.²² The frequent use of superlatives demonstrated this widespread admiration for her, such as when al-Din wrote, "She outshone all women in the world, and she possessed chastity and purity to the fullest degree."²³

In addition to her leadership prowess, Beki's influence is visible through her hands-on parenting. Because her husband died prematurely, Beki's children were especially attached to her. Through a structured upbringing, she ensured that they learned from prior Chinggisid mistakes to prepare them for their future positions of power.²⁴ Understanding the Chinggisid history of fratricide, al-Din wrote, "She never allowed even an iota of disagreement to come between them, and she made certain that their wives love[d] each other too," thus

²⁰ Enerelt Enkhbold, "The Role of the Ortoq in the Mongol Empire in forming Business Partnerships," *Central Asian Survey*, 38:4, 2-9, 531-547

²¹ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 387.

²² George Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 232-251.

²³ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 387.

²⁴ George Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 241.

cementing the line's unity despite the lack of patriarch.²⁵ In addition to learning traditional Mongol skills of riding, hunting, archery, wrestling, and combat, her sons learned to read and write in Mongolian from a Uighur Turk named Tolochu.²⁶ Traditionally, it was common for widowed noble women to remarry a husband's relative, so Ögedei's offer of his son Güyük's hand came as no surprise.²⁷ However, what was revolutionary was Beki's rejection to dedicate herself to raising her sons.²⁸ The joining of the Ögedeid and Toluid lines would have cemented the families' bond and shared influence. Still, it also would likely have prevented her own children from taking the highest throne themselves. Al-Din argued that this rejection proved her loyalty to the Toluids and made her superior to even Chinggis Khan's mother, who remarried.²⁹ Despite improving upon tradition, Beki also made sure to incorporate traditional doctrine into her parenting. She followed the *yasaq* (Genghis Khan's Code of Laws) more strictly than any other noble, which proved necessary when Güyük punished violators after being elected Great Khan in 1246. Juvaynī wrote, "All were put to shame save only Beki and her sons, who had not swerved a hair's breadth from the law, and this because of her great wisdom, self-discipline and consideration of the latter end of things, whereof, even wise and experienced *men* are negligent."³⁰ Beki's discipline, moral fortitude, and forethought would also come to benefit her children in the 1251 *quriltai*, as their unblemished records would make her children prime candidates for leadership.

Another unique value Beki passed along to her children was religious tolerance. The Kerayit princess was a Nestorian Christian,

²⁵ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 386.

²⁶ George Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 242.

²⁷ Timothy May, "Sorghaghtani Beki."

²⁸ Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, translated from the Persian by John Andrew Boyle. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 186.

²⁹ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 386.

³⁰ 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā Malik Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 552.

uncommon for Chinggisid leaders, but was known for caring for all religions. She promoted Islamic law and frequently gave large donations to Muslim leaders, the poor, places of worship, and schools until her death.³¹ Beki also was benevolent to Daoist and Buddhist monks in China.³² Her charity and lack of prejudice not only furthered her favor amongst the public but also taught her progeny religious tolerance, although none converted to Christianity themselves. Timothy May argues that her teaching prompted her sons' acceptance of all religions.³³ However, this tolerance upon all religions existed before as long as the faithful would pray for the khans. Nevertheless, Beki's influence certainly reinforced the preexisting emphasis on freedom of religion.

Beki's public persona, parenting skills, and power all came to a head with the 1246 and 1251 *quriltais*, as her opinion and actions proved integral in determining Mongol leadership. Following the tribal model, succession traditionally moved from older to younger brother, then to the older brother's children, and so on.³⁴ However, this system was inherently bloody, as heirs would often commit fratricide to improve their chances of taking the throne; to quote Peter Golden, "anarchy always beckoned."³⁵ If the deceased khan had not indicated a sole heir, the ambiguity of succession thus warranted discussion at a *quriltai* to determine the next leader.³⁶ When Ögedei died in 1241, he had designated his son Shirämün as his desired successor, but his eldest wife, Törghänä Khatun, stood in the way.³⁷ Khatun instead took rulership herself and called a *quriltai* in attempt to enthrone her son, Güyük,

³¹ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 401.

³² Timothy May, "Sorghaghtani Beki."

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Peter Golden, *Nomads and Sedentary Societies in Medieval Eurasia*, Washington D.C: American Historical Association, 1998, 13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁶ 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā Malik Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 183.

³⁷ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 387.

arguing that he was older than Shirämün and the rightful successor.³⁸ Beki and her sons were the first to arrive in support of Güyük, offering him an essential and highly regarded endorsement.³⁹ Khatun also summoned Batu, the eldest Chinggisid and thus most esteemed, to the *quriltai*. He was hesitant to attend due to gout and set out eastward from the Golden Horde intentionally slowly.⁴⁰

According to al-Din, Güyük was highly offended by his absence.⁴¹ Becoming impatient, Khatun and her allies set Güyük on the throne before Batu arrived and, without his approval, broke tradition. With this new power, Güyük set off with a large army towards Batu.⁴² His intentions were unclear, but Beki feared the worst and sent a message ahead to Batu, an ally through her sister's intermarriage with the Jochids, warning them of treachery.⁴³ Al-Din wrote, "Now Sorqoqtani Beki, being an intelligent woman and extremely shrewd, realized that his haste in that journey was not devoid of guile."⁴⁴ The message was not intended to slander Güyük, as Beki and her sons had initially supported his campaign but supposedly came out of genuine concern for Batu's wellbeing.⁴⁵ In response, Batu prepared for war and set out to meet Güyük.⁴⁶ However, the new khan died en route after ruling for only a year, and he took his true motives to the grave.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Batu stayed on edge.⁴⁸ In the meantime, Güyük's wife, Oghul Qaimish, stepped in as regent and stalled numerous attempts to convene a *quriltai*

³⁸ Ibid., 387

³⁹ 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā Malik Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 180.

⁴⁰ Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, 120.

⁴¹ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 387.

⁴² Ibid., 387.

⁴³ Ibid., 387.

⁴⁴ Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, 185.

⁴⁵ Timothy May, "Sorhaghtani Beki."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā Malik Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 185.

⁴⁸ Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, 120.

to keep power herself.⁴⁹ Unlike Beki, Oghul Qaimish was often portrayed in sources as witch-like and power-hungry.⁵⁰

Once again without a khan and clear successor, the khanate was left open, and Beki saw her chance to cement Toluid authority. Al-Din wrote, “Without doubt through the intelligence and competence she possessed she made the sons’ rank surpass that of their cousins and got them to their rank of emperor.”⁵¹ Since the previous *quriltai*, Beki’s favor and positive reputation had grown even more. Juvaynī wrote, “She has won favor 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.”⁵² Therefore, she ensured the support of key allies in electing her son. Beki sent her eldest son, Mongke, to secure the most important vote to meet the eldest Chinggisid.⁵³ Batu, still holding a grudge against the Ögedeids, was pleased with Mongke’s arrival and claimed to have perceived signs of power and greatness in Mongke. Batu soon granted him the endorsement that he refused to give Güyük a few years prior.⁵⁴ With this support, Beki helped organize a *quriltai* to officially elect Beki’s eldest son Great Khan at Onan-Keliiren, the original yurt of Chinggis Khan.⁵⁵ Al-Din wrote, “In short, the bringing of the Khanate to the house of Tolui Khan and the placing of the right in its due place were due to the competence and shrewdness of Sorqoqtani Beki and the help and assistance of Batu, because of their friendship for one another.”⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Timothy May, “Sorghaghtani Beki.”

⁵⁰ Timothy Michael May, *The Mongol Empire: A Historical Encyclopedia*. 2017, 169-171.

⁵¹ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 387.

⁵² ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Aṭā Malik Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 552.

⁵³ Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, 121.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

Despite her efforts, the throne was not yet wholly secured for Mongke, as Chaghatai and Ögedei's lines refused to legitimize the endorsed leader.⁵⁷ Beki was resilient; however, al-Din wrote, "Möngkä Qa'an and Sorqaghtani Beki sent representatives to each one to placate them and win them over...The recipients kept making excuses, but [Beki and her allies] countered their objections every time, hoping that through conciliation they might be restrained and awake from their slumber of headlessness and pride."⁵⁸ This back-and-forth lasted for two years until Beki ultimately used her leverage, adeptly accumulated over decades, to send an order: "No excuses or postponements will be accepted. If you have any thoughts of cooperativeness and unity, you must come to the *quriltai* so that together the best interests of the empire may be served."⁵⁹ This message, along with her history of loyalty to the empire, eventually forced the hesitant parties to attend, and Beki's efforts finally paid off in February 1251 as Mongke was elected Great Khan.⁶⁰ For greater Mongol society, the long wait was celebratory, ending the period of "confusion" following Ögödäi's death.⁶¹

Although Sorghaghtani died in the winter of 1252, her legacy lived on through her four sons, who all grew powerful. Her burial in Buda Ündür, the holy "great sanctuary of Genghis Khan," further illustrates her esteemed status.⁶² Her children shaped the course of the empire, carrying on her values of tolerance, diplomacy, and order. Her children expanded the empire, and although not entirely peaceful, ensured the supremacy and continuation of the Toluid line. Her teachings carried on directly in many of her sons' policies.⁶³ For example, Kublai's successful taxation system and abolishment of special levies to entice sedentary farmers in China were based directly on Beki's value in the

⁵⁷ Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, 400.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 404.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 460.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 460.

native agrarian economy. However, it ran contrary to traditional nomadic beliefs.⁶⁴ Even postmortem, Beki's *ordu* had lasting symbolism, becoming such an important location that Mongke insisted on going out of his way to visit the site with the visiting Flemish missionary, William of Rubruck.⁶⁵ Despite the absence of other women, Beki's repeated inclusion as an integral figure in subsequent histories elevated her as a model empress and further demonstrated her lasting legacy and lingering positive reputation.

Although not as well-known as her male counterparts, Sorghaghtani Beki, an early feminist, proves the true agency of Mongol noble women. Her radical ideas and quest to serve her empire and family manifested in countless benevolent actions and a groundbreaking *quriltai* that altered the course of steppe history forever. Her intelligence and daring illustrated the capability of women, despite its limited documentation, and she instilled lifelong values and morals in her four sons that trickled down to modern countries spanning the Asian continent.

⁶⁴ George Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 242.

⁶⁵ William of Rubruck, *1253-1255. The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke*. Translated by Peter Jackson, Chapter 16,
<https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/rubruck.html>.

Bibliography

Primary:

- al-Din, Rashid. *Compendium of Chronicles*, translated by W.M Thackston, Harvard: Harvard University Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1999.
- Juvaynī, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Aṭā Malik, and John Andrew Boyle. *The History of the World-Conqueror*. Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press. 1958.
- William of Rubruck. *1253-1255. The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke*. Translated by Peter Jackson, Chapter 16, <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/rubruck.html>.

Secondary:

- De Nicola, Bruno. "Regents and Empresses: Women's Rule in the Mongols' World Empire." In *Women in Mongol Iran: The Khatuns, 1206-1335*, 65-89. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g09tw.9>.
- Enkhbold, Enerelt. "The role of the ortoq in the Mongol Empire in forming business partnerships," *Central Asian Survey*, 38:4, 2-9. 531-547.
- George, Lane. *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*. Indianapolis: Hackett Printing, 2009.
- Golden, Peter, *Nomads and Sedentary Societies in Medieval Eurasia*. Washington D.C: American Historical Association. 1998
- May, Timothy. "Sorghaghtani Beki." *Salem Press Biographical Encyclopedia*. 2018.
- Munkh-Erdene, Lhamsuren. "Where Did the Mongol Empire Come From? Medieval Mongol Ideas of People, State and Empire." *Inner Asia* 13, no. 2. 2011: 211-37.
www.jstor.org/stable/24572092.

Rybatzki, Volker. *Central Asiatic Journal* 52, no. 1 (2008): 128-50.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41928481>.

Waley, Arthur. *The Secret History of the Mongols, and other pieces*.

New York: Barnes & Noble. 1964.