

Manuscripts and Digital Technologies: A Renewed Research Direction in the History of Ilkhanid Iran¹

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The writing of history is a dynamic process in which events, institutions, and personalities of the human past are interpreted and reinterpreted by different generations of historians. They systematically look back at a given historical moment to confirm, nuance, or debunk interpretations made by their predecessors. That is the usual cycle of historiography, which incorporates contemporary methodologies and paradigms to the discipline and then uses them to revise our interpretation of the past. The historiography of the Ilkhanate (r. 1260–1335)—that is, the dynasty of Mongol origin that ruled Iran—has also undergone different stages marked by the various approaches used by scholars interested in this

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period.³ From the *catastrophist* view of the Mongol conquest that dominated the first half of the twentieth century, to the *cultural history* approach that marked most of the beginning of the current century, studies on the Mongol domination of Iran has evolved to uncover a fascinating period of political uncertainty, economic dynamism, religious plurality, and cultural diversity.⁴ However, as scholars of the period, we cannot be complacent—albeit happy with this historiographical evolution—and remain neither stationed in the same paradigm nor constantly revisiting the same sources. With this idea in mind, this short essay aims to open a discussion on the possibilities that focusing our research efforts on the study of manuscripts and digital humanities can offer in bringing novel research perspectives into the field. We propose to embrace a new research path that, although it has been growing in recent years for other fields of study, has remained only marginal in the study of the Ilkhanate. This proposal does not attempt to invalidate other approaches in the field or the use of more traditional source material, but rather suggests that manuscript studies specifically for the study of the Ilkhanate have the potential to reveal new and unexplored aspects of our understanding of the Mongol domination of Iran in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This paper does not aim to present new research but suggests to scholars of the Ilkhanate, especially those new to the field, that they engage further with manuscript studies and available technologies in an attempt to reevaluate the literary and cultural history of Ilkhanid Iran.

The Ilkhanate: Mongol Rule in Medieval Iran

From the perspective of world history, the rise of Chinggis Khan as

³On the political history of the Ilkhanate, see John A. Boyle, “Dynastic and Political History of the Il-Khāns,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5, ed. John A. Boyle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 303–421.

⁴General accounts on the historiography of the Ilkhanate can be found in David Morgan, “Mongol Historiography since 1985: The Rise of Cultural History,” in *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016), 271–82; Peter Jackson, “The Mongol Empire, 1986–1999,” *Journal of Medieval History* 26, no. 2 (2000): 189–210; Charles Melville, “Historiography IV. Mongol Period,” *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. 12 (2003): 348–56 (online version updated in 2012, see www.iranicaonline.org/articles/historiography-iv); Michal Biran, “The Mongol Empire: The State of the Research,” *History Compass* 11, no. 11 (2013): 1021–33.

ruler of the Mongols and his conquests had a deep historical impact in the present territories of China, Russia, eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Iran. The establishment of the empire that followed these conquests would connect, under a single political entity and through a multitude of land and maritime routes, the Far East with the Mediterranean Sea for the first time in history. Although other nomadic peoples had previously conquered and settled in these territories, the Mongol conquest of the thirteenth century was unique in terms of scale and impact over the native populations of Asia and eastern Europe. The conquered populations were incapable of stopping the advance of the Mongol military machine and had to surrender to the advance of the Mongol armies from the East. Although the conquest was especially bloody in certain regions such as Nishapur in Khurasan or Kiev in eastern Europe, other areas remained untouched, as the Mongols spared from destruction those towns and kingdoms that surrendered to their command.⁵ However, the horrors of conquest were followed also by a new political landscape that opened East and West to the migration of skillful artisans, scholars, and religious leaders, while promoting the development of local craftsmen, intellectuals, and personalities.⁶ Trade acquired a global dimension, with merchants traveling between China and Europe across the Mongol Empire under the protection of the Mongol Khans.⁷ All the territories where the Mongols settled would be deeply transformed by the conquest and establishment of the newcomers, marking the beginning of a distinctive new period in the history of each of the regions dominated by the Mongols.

In the case of Iran, Mongol incursions can be summarized in three main phases. They began in 1218–19, with Chinggis Khan defeating the

⁵For an overview of the Mongols' conquest from a military history perspective, see Timothy May, *The Mongol Art of War: Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Military System* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2016); Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World: From Conquest to Conversion* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2017), 71–181.

⁶Thomas Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Bruno De Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran: The Khātūns 1206–1336* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

⁷Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World*, 210–41.

Khwārazmshāh armies, which paved the way for his advancing into eastern Khurasan. The pursuit of the defeated ruler into central Iran saw the coming of Mongol horses led by the generals Jebe and Subotei galloping across Iran and heading north into the Caucasus to enter the Russian steppes in the early 1220s. After Chinggis Khan's death in 1227, his successor, Ogetei, dispatched Churmāgūn (d. c. 1242) with another army in 1229 to defeat emperor Jalāl al-Dīn Khwārazmshāh (d. 1231), who was trying to reestablish his dynastic power in the area. The successful new campaign not only defeated Sultan Jalāl al-Dīn but secured the loyalty of Fars, Kerman, and Isfahan to the Mongol emperor and the incorporation of the kingdoms of Georgia and Armenia into the empire. By the early 1240s, the Mongols had established a governorship in Khurasan, controlling most of today's Iran and the Caucasus and began to advance against the Seljuqs of Rūm in Anatolia. The final Mongol advance on Iran occurred in the 1250s when Hülegü (d. 1265), a grandson of Chinggis Khan, assembled a large army in Mongolia and advanced westward. Without finding any serious military opposition, the Mongol military annexed the territories corresponding to present-day Iran and eastern Turkey to the Mongol Empire and went further into the Arab world by conquering Damascus and advancing as far as Jerusalem. In the process, the Mongols added the newly conquered territories to their dominions and destroyed the hitherto impenetrable fortress of the Ismailis in Alamut, sacked the city of Baghdad, and executed the Abbasid caliph in 1258.⁸

Hülegü's conquests led to the establishment of the Ilkhanate, or Mongol dynasty of Iran, which ruled the present territories of Iran, Iraq, the Caucasus, Greater Khurasan, and Eastern Anatolia between 1260 and 1335.⁹ From the point of view of Mongol history, the newly added

⁸For an overview of the Mongol conquest of the Islamic world, see, inter alia, Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World*. On the death of the Abbasid caliph and the sacking of Baghdad see, inter alia, John A. Boyle, "The Death of the Last 'Abbasid Caliph: A Contemporary Muslim Account," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 6, no. 2 (1961): 145–61.

⁹On the impact of the Mongols in the Middle East, see Bruno De Nicola and Charles Melville, eds., *The Mongols' Middle East: Continuity and Transformation in Ilkhanid Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

Mongol domain quickly became an autonomous political entity within the Mongol Empire that competed with other similar Mongol khanates in Russia and Central Asia. But from the point of view of Iranian history, the Ilkhanate transformed the political borders of the previous Abbasid, Seljuq, Khwarazmian, or Ayyubid dynasties and provoked a profound change in the conception of rule in Iran, which for the first time in over 600 years was ruled by a non-Muslim, with a seemingly omnipresent military power.

In terms of politics, the history of the Ilkhanate is marked, on the one hand, by its dynastic relationship with the emperor of the Yüan dynasty of China, which was the basis of its political autonomy but also of its cultural development.¹⁰ On the other hand, its development was also shaped by the enmity with the Mongols khanates of Central Asia (Chaghataids) and the Golden Horde (present-day Russia and Ukraine) and the Mamluk dynasty of Egypt.¹¹ In addition, the Mongols facilitated the commercial integration of a truly world economy that had Iran at the center of trade routes connecting China with the Mediterranean, and Siberia with India. Finally, the religious landscape of the region had undergone important transformations. The pagan affiliation of the initial rulers of the Ilkhanate facilitated a short-lived optimism for Christian communities in Iran as well as favored the spread of Buddhism in the area.¹² Eventually, the conversion of the Mongols to Islam in the Ilkhanate would reduce the expectations of religious minorities while adding complexity to the religion milieu of the Ilkhanate where different Islamic sensitivities (Sunni, Shia, Sufi, and others) competed and coexisted under the newly converted Mongol rulers.¹³

¹⁰Reuven Amitai, "Evidence for the Early Use of the Title *Īlkhān* among the Mongols," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1, no. 3 (1991): 353–61; Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*.

¹¹Boyle, "Dynastic and Political History of the Il-Khāns," 303–421; Reuven Amitai, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk–Ilkhanid War, 1260–1281* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹²For overviews on the Mongols' relationship with Christianity and Buddhism, see Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West: 1221–1410* (London: Routledge, 2014); Roxann Prazniak, "Ilkhanid Buddhism: Traces of a Passage in Eurasian History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 3 (2014): 650–80.

¹³Peter Jackson, "The Mongols and the Faith of the Conquered," in *Mongols, Turks, and Others:*

These complexities associated with this period in the history of Iran provoked both rejection and fascination among scholars. Some nationalistic historiography produced in Iran has often viewed the Mongol domination of the region either as a dark age or simply reduced it to a hiatus in Islamic history between one glorious period, such as the Abbasid caliphate, and a restoration, generally attributed to the rise of the Safavid Empire.¹⁴ In fact, it took some time for Iranian scholars to begin to see the Ilkhanate not as an interregnum between “proper Islamic dynasties” but as a foundational moment in the history of Iran. It was not until the 1970s when scholars such as Shīrīn Bayānī began to redefine the role that the Mongols played in setting the basis of long-standing political, religious, and cultural institutions that have been generally seen as “Iranian.”¹⁵ The change in paradigm that occurred—albeit with differences to one another—between Iranian and Western scholars in this period transformed scholarly views on the Ilkhanate, opening the field to new research perspectives and approaches that would redefine the influence of Mongol domination in the history of Iran.

A Quick Overview of Scholarly Research on the Ilkhanate

The Ilkhanate, at once at the heart of the medieval Islamic world and an integral part of the larger Mongol Empire, attracts different historiographical traditions, which at times overlap with one another. Mongolian and Islamic studies are the most dominant among them. Scholarship on the Ilkhanate has gone through different stages, generally developing closer to those trends dominating Mongol historiography

Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 245–90; Charles Melville, “Padshāh-i Islam: The Conversion of Sultan Mahmud Ghazan Khan,” *Pembroke Papers* 1 (1990): 159–77; Reuven Amitai, “The Conversion of Tegüder Ilkhan to Islam,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (2001): 15–43; Michal Biran, “The Islamization of Hülegü: Imaginary Conversion in the Ilkhanate,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26, no. 1–2 (2016): 79–88.

¹⁴This is by no means a unique Iranian phenomenon; for example, similar perceptions of the Mongol period are reflected among both Chinese and Turkish historiography.

¹⁵Some of the most influential works on the Mongol period by Shīrīn Bayānī are her pioneering book on women, *Zan dar Īrān-i ‘aṣr-i Muḡhūl* (Tehran: Intiṣārāt-i Dāniṣgāh-i Tihṙān, 1973) and her three volumes on the history of government and religion in Mongol Iran, *Dīn va dawlat dar Īrān-i ‘ahd-i Muḡhūl* (Markaz-i Nashr-i Dānishgāhī, 1370–1375 [1991/1992–1996/1997]).

rather than Islamic studies. Scholars trained in classical Islamic history have generally overseen the Mongol domination of the Islamic world. Often, they refer to personalities (mainly Muslim elites who lived under the Mongols) or specific sources composed by Muslim intellectuals in this period but disassociating, consciously or unconsciously, Mongol rule with cultural developments of the Islamic world. It has been a common assumption that these nomadic conquerors “ruled from the saddle,” leaving the day-to-day administration of their territories to native bureaucrats.¹⁶ This approach suggests a form of social organization where nomads and their sedentary subjects lived apart in some sort of mutually beneficial, but culturally differentiated, social arrangement that only allowed discrete exchanges.¹⁷ However, recent and ongoing studies are pointing in a different direction, suggesting that nomadic rulers interacted with sedentary elites more closely than some historians had previously anticipated.¹⁸

The Ilkhanate has primarily been studied by scholars who saw it as part of the Mongol Empire or a phase in the larger history of Iran. From the perspective of Mongolian studies, in recent decades the Ilkhanate has been part of the trend described by David Morgan as “The Rise of Cultural History,” which has dominated the field since the turn of the twenty-first century.¹⁹ This tendency of reevaluating the role of the Mongols as more relevant than “barbarians” began to take shape in the 1970s, when pioneering studies began to recognize that the Mongol period had remarkable influences in the history of medieval Iran beyond the destruction provoked by the conquest. A reexamination of the

¹⁶Thomas T. Allsen, “Ever Closer Encounters: The Appropriation of Culture and the Apportionment of Peoples in the Mongol Empire,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 1, no. 1 (1997): 7–8.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁸See, for example, the case of Anatolia in Andrew C. S. Peacock, “Court and Nomadic Life in Saljuq Anatolia,” in *Turko-Mongol Rulers, Cities and City Life*, ed. David Durand-Guédy (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 191–222; see also Bruno De Nicola, “The *Fuṣṭāṭ al-ʿAdāla*: a Unique Manuscript on the Religious Landscape of Medieval Anatolia,” in *Literature and Intellectual Life in 14th–15th Century Anatolia*, ed. Andrew C. S. Peacock and Sara Nur Yıldız (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2016), 49–72; Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran, eds., *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaiʻi Press, 2016).

¹⁹Morgan, “Mongol Historiography since 1985.”

institutional, economic, and religious legacy of the Mongols began in these decades with the publication of the fifth volume of the *Cambridge History of Iran* in 1968, edited by John A. Boyle,²⁰ which dedicated a number of detailed studies to different aspects of the Mongol domination of Iran. This new tendency was also followed by the works of pioneering scholars in the field such as Ann K. S. Lambton or Shīrīn Bayānī, to mention but two, who began to consider the Ilkhanate as an integral part in the understanding of medieval Iran.²¹

In parallel with this development, there is a substantial effort made in Iran during these decades for the editing and printing of sources of the Mongol period. Multivolume editions of the Persian chronicles related to the Ilkhanid period began to be edited by Iranian scholars, facilitating access to this material not only in Iran but also specially in Europe and the USA. Western scholars will soon capitalize on their new access to this material and initiate a process of translation of original sources that has been one of the key components behind the revival of Mongolian studies in recent decades.²² As noticed by Michal Biran, this was a way to partly overcome the linguistic barrier posed by the multilingual nature of the source material connected to the Mongol Empire and facilitated access to the original sources.²³ In this context, the last two decades of the twentieth century saw the publication of research on the Ilkhanate where the religious element acquired a new preponderant dimension. The conversion of the Mongols to Islam and the role of religious minorities under Mongol rule generated productive scholarly

²⁰John A. Boyle, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

²¹For Shīrīn Bayānī [see n. 14]; Ann K. S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia: A Study of Land Tenure and Land Revenue Administration* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953); Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia Aspects of Administrative, Economic and Social History, 11th–14th Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988).

²²Especially influential for historians of the Ilkhanate have been the translations of the works of ‘Atā Malik Juwaynī (d. 1283) and Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318); see *The History of the World Conqueror*, trans. John Andrew Boyle, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958); *Jami‘-t-Tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²³Biran, “The Mongol Empire,” 1023–24.

debates whereby the religion of the Ilkhanate became the topic that included both Islamic and Mongolian historiographical dimensions.²⁴

The field would take a new impetus with the consolidation of the ideas of Thomas T. Allsen, who, after making an impact in the mid-1980s with his dissertation on Mongol *imperialism*, became the referent for a new generation of scholars after the publication of two of his books at the turn of the twentieth century.²⁵ Allsen's unique multilingual and comprehensive approach to the study of the Mongol Empire allowed a reevaluation of the role of the ruling nomads in medieval Eurasia. He suggested that nomads acted as cultural brokers in the territories they ruled, breaking away with the paradigm that saw nomads solely as a military power while cultural, religious, and economic activity rested in the hands of sedentary elites. This paradigmatic shift liberated the field from old stereotypes and released a new generation of scholars, who expanded the scope of the research on the Mongol Empire by introducing new research questions, using novel methodologies and engaging with a multidisciplinary approach. Michal Biran has summarized the progress made in the field within recent decades, highlighting our understanding of the institutions, economy, and religion of the Mongols and their subjects, and integrating scholarship and sources from Eastern and Western sides of the empire.²⁶

Research on the Ilkhanate has also widened its horizons in the last few decades following this general trend in Mongolian studies. New documents and edicts have emerged and we now have a better picture of the important role played by different urban centers in the development

²⁴Especially influential in opening new approaches to the conversion of the Mongols to Islam was the work of Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1994).

²⁵Thomas T. Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism: The Policies of the Grand Qan Möngke in China, Russia, and the Islamic Lands, 1251–1259* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²⁶Biran, "The Mongol Empire."

of religious and secular sciences in Iran.²⁷ Art history and archeology have made a major contribution to our understanding of the religious and cultural landscape of the Ilkhanate by complementing the abundant narrative sources so characteristic of this period.²⁸ Moreover, aspects of gender studies have also developed further in recent years with the appearance of monographs and articles that have reshaped some of the long-held preconceptions about the role of women in nomadic societies.²⁹

The editing and translation initiative mentioned above is at the core of the emergence of these new research trends. The dissemination of original sources made in Iran, and facilitated access to original sources related to Ilkhanid history, to a new generation of scholars from Iran and abroad has expanded research and helped to better contextualize the history of the Ilkhanate between both Islamic and Mongolian studies. However, access to these edited sources also co-opted research in the sense that the overwhelming majority of studies related to the Ilkhanate are almost exclusively based on those printed sources (either in their original language or in translation). Notwithstanding the fact that these publications remains fundamentally important in advancing the discipline, our impression is that we are at risk of entering a stage in the historiography of the Ilkhanate that is stationary and lacking the dynamism that the field enjoyed during the last few decades.

There is an unbalanced use of resources in the field. While scholars (myself included) have been debating over the same edited/translated sources, using and reusing them in search of new information and ap-

²⁷See, for example, the research done initially by Minoru Honda in Japan, a trend that has been continued more recently by Ryoko Watabe, “Census-Taking and the Qubchūr Taxation System in Ilkhanid Iran: An Analysis of the Census Book from the Late 13th Century Persian Accounting Manual al-Murshid fī al-Ḥisāb,” *The Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* 73 (2015): 27–63.

²⁸On Persian narrative sources from the Mongol period, see Charles Melville, “The Turco-Mongol Period,” in *History of Persian Literature: Persian Historiography*, vol. 10, ed. Charles Melville (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 155–207; Melville, “Persian Local Histories: Views from the Wings,” *Iranian Studies* 33, no. 1–2 (1999–2000): 7–14.

²⁹De Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*; Anne Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

proaches, they have been narrowing down the scope of the research to a limited amount of narrative sources that only represents a tiny portion of the literary heritage of Ilkhanid Iran. In turn, we have largely neglected the abundant written source material that remains in manuscript form—thousands of such manuscripts remain unstudied in Iranian and European collections.³⁰ We believe it is towards those manuscripts where efforts should now be directed in studying the history of the Ilkhanate. To be sure, this is a line of research not bereft of its own set of challenges, but, at the same time, has the potential to unlock a productive and stimulating period in the study of Mongol-dominated Iran.

Manuscript Studies and Digital Humanities

The study of manuscripts has become an important research focus in Islamic studies in recent years. Scholars have noticed that Islamic manuscripts were essential for the production, circulation, and transmission of sciences, literature, and historical knowledge.³¹ Even before the arrival of the Mongols in the thirteenth century, a variety of literary genres covering a wide range of subjects—including mathematics, astronomy, religion, politics, law, and literature (poetry and prose)—circulated in the territories of what is today Iran. However, the Mongol conquest and settlement would transform these literary practices and interests of authors, patrons, and readers, triggering the emergence of a literary world that matched the cultural mindset of the new rulers and the local elites that were being assimilating to the nomadic conquerors.³² The Mongol

³⁰See, inter alia, Robert Hillenbrand, “The Arts of the Book in Ilkhanid Iran,” in *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courty Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353*, ed. L. Komaroff and S. Carboni (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 134–67; Sheila Blair, “The Ilkhanid Qur’an: An Example from Maragha,” *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 6 (2015): 174–95; more recently Mohammad Reza Ghiasian, “Images of the Peoples of the World Encountered by the Mongols in the Jami’ al-Tawarikh,” *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 57, no. 1 (2019): 71–82.

³¹A good example of how manuscript studies can contribute to the cultural history of a period can be seen in the work of Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Damascus: Plurality and Diversity in an Arabic Library* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

³²An example can be seen in the specific rewriting of the *Siyasatnāmah* of Nizām al-Mulk by a thirteenth-century Persian writer to suit the literary taste of his Turkmen patron in Anatolia; see Bruno De Nicola, *Writing Persian for Turkish Rulers in 13th Century Anatolia: Politics, Pa-*

domination of Iran is a period in which Persian became a major literary language, with Arabic (still having a preponderant presence) being often limited to religious works. Courtly patronage propitiated a booming literary environment where reproductions of the same work were copied simultaneously in different regions of the Islamic world, extending from Samarqand to Konya and from Cairo to Delhi. Mongol rulers of Iran, such as Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304) and his brother Uljaytu (r. 1304–16), were themselves active patrons of literature, history, and scientific knowledge as would be some of their successive Timurid rulers such as Iskandar Sultan (r. 1409–14) or Ulugh Beg (r. 1409–49).³³

Although increasing manuscript production and transmission of knowledge has been documented during this period, we only have a broad picture of its scale and know very little about the details of the cultural life in the Ilkhanate.³⁴ Despite important research conducted on courtly patronage and the involvement of rulers in financing and promoting knowledge in the period, evidence suggests that production of manuscripts developed in different environments. Manuscripts were copied to supply not only court libraries but also to satisfy a growing number of private collections of wealthy individuals or the need of textbooks for different educational institutions such as madrasas or Sufi lodges

tronage and Religion between Byzantium and the Mongols (London: Routledge, forthcoming), esp. chapter 4; an early version of this phenomenon was presented in Bruno De Nicola, “Updating Nizām al-Mulk: Advising Local Rulers in 13th Century Anatolia,” International Conference ASPSP, Mimar Sinan Üniversitesi, İstanbul (TR).

³³See, for example, a recent article on a copy of the Quran made for the Mongol Ilkhan Uljaytu (r. 1304–16) in Boris Liebrecht, “Troubled History of a Masterpiece: Notes on the Creation and Peregrinations of Öljeitü’s Monumental Baghdad Qur’ān,” *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 7, no. 2 (2016): 217–38. On patronage in the Mongol Empire, see also Reuven Amitai, “Hülegü and His Wise Men: Topos or Reality?” in *Politics, Patronage, and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th–15th Century Tabriz*, ed. Judith Pfeiffer (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 15–34.

³⁴Recent studies by Andrew Peacock and Michal Biran, respectively, show the potential manuscripts studies in this field; see Andrew Peacock, “Islamisation in the Golden Horde and Anatolia: Some Remarks on Travelling Scholars and Texts,” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 143 (2018): 151–64; Michal Biran, “Libraries, Books, and Transmission of Knowledge in Ilkhanid Baghdad,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62, no. 2–3 (2019): 464–502.

(*khaneqahs*).³⁵ Despite having hundreds of manuscripts documenting this phenomenon, we barely understand how the process of book production and knowledge transmission worked in Ilkhanid Iran. The lack of comprehensive studies on this topic prevents us from better understanding not only book production but also other relevant aspects of Ilkhanid cultural life such as literacy, *multilingualism*, or the role played by books in the economy of the period.

The relevance of manuscripts as sources resides not only in the fact that they would substantiate a specific text: for example, although handmade copies were intended as identical reproductions of a given literary work, the handcrafted process in which each manuscript was produced makes each codex a unique object. Each copied manuscript was crafted in a specific place, by a defined group of individuals, and during a particular historical context containing unique information in each codex. Therefore, even if the intention of copyists was to reproduce a text, there are distinctive elements in the *paratext*³⁶ that offer a unique window into the past. In this way, each manuscript becomes a unique historical source that provides information on aspects of cultural, economic, and political history that go beyond the text they support. The challenge remains in the capacity of scholars to untangle this information, which is not only scattered unevenly among manuscripts but also dispersed among thousands of extant manuscripts from the period.

³⁵Manuscripts were kept in madrasas and Sufi lodges to be used in the study of Islamic tradition and Sufi doctrines across the Persianate world. Some well-documented examples can be found, for example, in Mongol-dominated Konya in the second half of the thirteenth century. See Richard Todd, *The Sufi Doctrine of Man: Šadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī's Metaphysical Anthropology* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 22.

³⁶We understand *paratext* here as all the written elements that can be found in a manuscript which go beyond the main text. In other words, those elements that accompany the main text such as information on the author, copyist, or patron but also preface, colophons, marginal annotations, etc. For a more comprehensive definition of paratext, see Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (Literature, Culture, Theory)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). More precisely for Islamic codicology, see François Déroche, ed., *Islamic Codicology: An Introduction to the Study of Manuscripts in Arabic Script*, with contributions by Annie Berthier, trans. Deke Dusinberre and David Radzinowicz, ed. Muhammad Isa Waley (London: al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2006); Adam Gacek, *Arabic Manuscripts: A Vademecum for Readers* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

The total number of manuscripts produced during the Ilkhanid period that are currently housed in Iranian, Central Asian, and European libraries is difficult to establish but may be reckoned in the thousands.³⁷ Although there have been recent improvements in library infrastructure, cataloging efforts, and accessibility of the material, the exact number of texts held by different institutions is not always known by library staff or shared with researchers. However, major public libraries in both Europe and Iran provide relatively easy access to their material, with large collections digitized and fully accessible *on-site* to researchers in the field. While an imprecise number of manuscripts remain in private collections owned by individuals or corporations with varying degrees of commitment to (and interest in) research on their possessions, abundant material remains virtually unexplored, meaning that there are still thousands of books that were copied, circulated, and read during the Ilkhanid period that remain totally unstudied by researchers. Paradoxically, the sheer volume of material, while being a stimulating aspect to advance research in the field, is one of the reasons that has prevented scholars from engaging with this material, as the large number of codices available may have been seen as an unsolved challenge by some researchers in the past.

To overcome this challenge, scholars have been applying methodologies that help to tackle the considerable amount of extant manuscripts. One approach has been restricting the temporal and geographic scope of the research by focusing on manuscripts of a certain literary genre or on manuscripts produced in a particular place or short period of time.³⁸

³⁷There are, to my knowledge, no statistics on medieval manuscript production done for the Ilkhanate. The only serious attempt to count surviving codices has been done for medieval Anatolia. See Osman Gazi Özgüdenli, "Persian Manuscripts in Ottomans and Modern Turkish Libraries," *Encyclopedia Iranica Online* (www.iranicaonline.org/articles/persian-manuscripts-1-ottoman).

³⁸See, for example, some recent research surveying the production of historical narratives in manuscript form during Mongol and post-Mongol Eurasia: Stefan Kamola, *Making Mongol History: Rashid al-Din and the Jami' al-Tawarikh* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Philip Bockholt, "Weltgeschichtsschreibung zwischen Schia und Sunna: Hwāndamīrs (gest. 1535/6)

While providing useful case studies, this approach will not offer a comprehensive view of the cultural life of the Ilkhanate. Therefore, in addition to case studies, we propose that digital technologies can become a key factor in making large collections of manuscripts manageable for researchers and meaningful for the study of the Ilkhanate as a whole. The aid of new technologies and the application of digital humanities to the study of Islamic manuscripts can play a fundamental role in a quicker and more efficient identification, evaluation, and analysis of the information provided both by the text and the paratext of medieval Islamic manuscripts. Recent research projects such as ISLAMANATOLIA or MONGOL have shown how digital databases not only accumulate large amounts of information but also render useful, and often previously undetected, data to researchers in the field.³⁹

Digital technologies allow us to collect, store, and process large amounts of data and to present it to the researcher in an organized manner that enhances scientific inquiry. Although not deprived from challenges of their own, they are a fundamental tool that can allow researchers to manage large amounts of data in a systematized and coherent manner.⁴⁰ These technologies can help us, for example, to collect not only metadata (mainly contained in library catalogs) about the large number of manuscripts but also complement this data with some relevant codicological and paratextual information contained in manuscripts from the Ilkhanid period. This could include information about the production, circulation, and consumption of manuscripts that can be found, for example, in colophons, *shamsas*, or ownership marks that are generally disregarded as sources of information. The comprehensive study of the paratext, always in conjunction with the main text included in the man-

Habīb as-siyar und seine Rezeption im Handschriftenzeitalter” (PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 2017).

³⁹For more information on these projects, see www.islam-anatolia.ac.uk/ and <http://mongol.huji.ac.il/>.

⁴⁰There are a variety of frameworks and methodologies developed to convert textual information into machine-readable data. We will not enumerate them all here but those interested in knowing more about it may consult, for example, the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), a consortium that has developed a set of guidelines for the representation of text in digital form. See <https://tei-c.org/>.

uscript, could provide pivotal information to the hitherto poorly understood cultural milieu of the Ilkhanate.

Fortunately, these impressions will have the opportunity to be tested soon as part of the newly funded project NoMansland (Nomads' Manuscript Landscape), which will be carried out at the Institute of Iranian Studies (Austrian Academy of Sciences) in Vienna, Austria.⁴¹ The project that will begin in 2020 aims to use both manuscripts and digital technologies to investigate aspects of *Transculturation*⁴² between nomadic rulers and sedentary subjects in Iran and Central Asia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Transculturation offers a different methodological angle to processes of cultural exchange that can be seen as multilayered and affecting both interacting cultures, where aspects of "native" culture permeate the "migrant" culture and vice versa.⁴³ There are studies documenting the existence of this bidirectional flow of cultural trends in medieval Eurasia, for example, in the construction of a common narrative of the past, in which the idea of "foreign conqueror" fades away and is replaced by a shared cultural identity between nomadic rulers and local, sedentary elites.⁴⁴ However, research on the cul-

⁴¹The project is funded by the FWF Der Wissenschaftsfonds (www.fwf.ac.at/de/).

⁴²The term *transculturation* was initially coined by the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz Letelier, especially in his chapter "El mutuo descubrimiento de dos mundos," in *Etnia y Sociedad*, ed. Isaac Barreal Fernández (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1993), 21–27.

⁴³The two paradigmatic studies on the subject for the Mongol and Timurid period are Jean Aubin, *Émirs Mongols et Vizirs Persans dans les Remous de l'Acculturation* (Paris: Studia Iranica, 1995) and Maria Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition: Turko-Persian Politics and Acculturation* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁴⁴For works dealing with nomadic–sedentary relationships, see Jürgen Paul, "L'invasion mongole comme 'révélateur' de la société iranienne," in *L'Iran face à la domination mongole*, ed. Denise Aigle (Téhéran: Institut français de recherche en Iran, 1997), 37–53; Charles Melville, "History and Myth: The Persianisation of Ghazan Khan," in *Irano-Turkic Cultural Contacts in the 11th–17th Centuries*, ed. Éva Jeremias (Piliscsaba, Hungary: Avicenna Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, 2003), 133–60; Carole Hillenbrand, "Ravandi, the Seljuq Court at Konya and the Persianisation of Anatolian Cities," *Mesogaios (Mediterranean Studies)* 25, no. 6 (2005): 157–69; Andrew C. S. Peacock, "Court Historiography of the Seljuq Empire in Iran and Iraq: Reflections on Content, Authorship and Language," *Iranian Studies* 47 (2014): 327–45; Beatrice Forbes-Manz, "Nomad and Settled in the Timurid Military," in *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Brill: Leiden, 2005), 425–57;

tural symbiosis between nomads and sedentary people has so far been significantly limited in terms of its temporal, geographic, and thematic scope.

The amount of material available, the use of both Persian and Arabic languages, and the expansive territorial landscape that needs to be traversed are just some of the challenges presented to the project. It becomes clear that proving the hypothetical statement of a transcultural process occurring in Iran and Central Asia between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries cannot be carried out by a single individual; rather, it requires a collective research effort sustained over a period of several years. With this idea in mind, a team will be assembled to search and find clues of transculturation in available manuscripts from the period by combining data contained in text and paratext. The project aims to achieve not only a better comprehension of how cultural interaction between nomads and sedentary people worked but also to offer a different model of cultural interaction based on transculturation and the study of codicological information from Islamic manuscripts. We expect that the approach, methodology, and digital tools developed during the project will expand research on aspects of cultural history of Ilkhanid Iran and highlight the scientific impact that studying the abundant corpus of Islamic manuscripts available can have in our understanding of the period.

Conclusion

Ilkhanid studies have come a long way from when they were considered an obscure, historical hiatus in the history of the Islamic world to become a recognized, pivotal moment of cultural transformation in the history of Eurasia. In this short article, I have provided a brief overview of this transformation and humbly suggested a possible way forward for the field. I have consciously avoided being too specific here about

Forbes-Manz, "Multi-ethnic Empires and the Formulation of Identity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 26, no. 1 (2003): 70–101; Forbes-Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Evrim Binbas, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī and the Islamic Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

the digital technologies that can be applied to the study of manuscripts because there are many available, and under development, in different institutions and departments of digital humanities across the world. My intention is not so much as to inform readers about these technologies but to raise awareness of their existence and the need to apply them to the large corpus of Islamic manuscripts from the period that is awaiting researchers of the Mongol Empire in different Middle Eastern, European, and American collections. We believe that a collective effort dedicated to identifying, mapping, and analyzing the massive literary corpus surviving from the Ilkhanid period could further drive the understanding of the sociocultural impact that the Mongol conquest had over the Islamic world. My proposal, therefore, is that the rise of cultural history highlighted by David Morgan some years ago can be complemented with a rise of manuscript studies that unveil the understudied corpus of surviving Ilkhanid manuscripts for a better understanding of the history of the period.



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