

Women Behind the Throne

In Mongolia, where Temuchin is honoured today as a national hero, women enjoy a remarkable degree of economic and social independence compared to their counterparts in other Asian countries. That is not to say freedom and equality have progressed as far as in Western societies. However, when studying the Mongol Empire in the days of Genghis Khan and his successors, one cannot help but conclude that the emancipation of women in those days had proceeded far beyond anything existing in Christian Europe.

The Mongol Great Khans ruled half the world. But it often happened that their wives held the reins of power. The Mongol women of the Steppes, like the men, knew how to fight; they could handle bow and sword, often with great skill. Their responsibilities extended beyond cooking, housekeeping and caring for young children to managing the clan economy. When the military leaders were away on campaign, it was often women who made political decisions and commanded the defence of cities.

It did not end there. When a Great Khan died, his chief wife became regent. It was she who summoned the nobility to the *quriltai*, the assembly that would choose his successor. It was she who managed the empire until that successor was chosen. Often too, it was this woman who, openly or covertly, exerted the greatest influence on the choice of the new Khan. Moreover, her influence might extend beyond the new ruler's enthronement into all matters of empire policy.

This is the story of two women, Sorqoqtani and Toregene, who are rarely mentioned in Western history books but who, for a time, held the fate of the world in their hands.

Sorqoqtani Beki (Queen Sorqoqtani) was born around 1190 in the Chinese province of Hsi-Hsia, where her father, named Jakha, was a prominent military commander. Though he lived among the Tangut people, Jakha belonged to the Keraites, one of the great tribes of Mongolia. His brother, Toghrul, was the Kerait chieftain and foster-father of the young Genghis Khan.

In the first decade of the 13th Century, when Mongols and Keraites were still close allies, Jakha returned to Mongolia and joined forces with Temuchin. However, Toghrul's sons resented the favour that Temuchin enjoyed and plotted against him.

In the fighting that followed, the Keraits were divided. Toghrul turned reluctantly against his former protegy. Jakha remained loyal and supported the young Mongol leader throughout his final struggle for supremacy. When Temuchin stood finally on the pinnacle of lordship over the tribes, their friendship was cemented in two marriages. The World Conqueror took Jakha's elder daughter for himself and gave Sorqoqtani as a bride to his youngest son, Tolui.

Together, in the years that followed, these two would have four sons whose names have resounded through the centuries almost that as much as that of Temuchin himself - Mangke, Kublai, Arik and Hulegu.

Sorqoqtani was an ambitious and resourceful woman. The contemporary historian 'Ata-Malik Juvaini says of her ...*the report of her wisdom and prudence and the fame of her counsel and sagacity had spread to all parts, and none would gainsay her word.* Rashid ad-Din describes her as ...*elevated over all other women in the world...*

Juvaini even quotes lines from a tenth century Arab poet in praise of her: ... *and if women were like unto her, then would women be superior to men...*, strong sentiments from a Muslim man who was known to take a very negative attitude to women in politics!

When Genghis Khan died in August 1227, the Mongol Empire stretched from the Yellow Sea to the Volga and from Siberia in the north to the Himalayas in the south. Under the ruling family, it had unity, and that unity made it strong. Genghis had created it and had given it purpose. He had framed its laws and, mindful of his own mortality, had made a judgement about his successor.

His chief wife Borte, to whom he had been betrothed at the age of nine and had married in his teens, had given him four sons, Jochi, Chagatai, Ogodai and Tolui, and it was from those four and no other that the choice had to be made. Genghis chose Ogodai. The other three promised to honour their father's wishes. Now, by tribal custom, the youngest, Tolui, took charge and called the *quriltai*, the great assembly that would decide the future. It took place in 1228 in the Mongol homeland and was a simple affair compared to those that would become the norm in later years. The Mongol nobles endorsed the choice of Ogodai as the new Great Khan and confirmed formally the allocation of territory, the *ulus*, to the other princes.

Jochi, who, despite his qualities as a leader, had not been considered for supreme ruler because of questions over his legitimacy, had held all the lands north

of the Caspian and Aral Seas as far east as Lake Balkash. However, he had died six months before his father, and the allocation was divided between two of his sons, Batu and Orda. Chagatai took central Asia south of Lake Balkash - what equated more or less to the old Kara-Khitan empire. As well the imperial throne, Ogodai held personal territories to the east and north of his elder brother. For the present, Transoxiana, Persia and China were to be ruled from Mongolia and administered by local governors.

Tolui retained responsibility for the Mongol homeland. Had he become Great Khan, it is possible that Mongol and world history might have been very different. Sorqoqtani, like the majority of her clan, the Keraites, had been brought up as a Christian. Thus, as a woman of strong character, she would have been in an ideal position to woo the Khans away from their native shamanistic ways and convert them to Christianity.

There is no solid evidence that such a thought was ever in Temuchin's mind or in the minds of the imperial family. However, the historian John Man, in his biography of Genghis Khan, hints that it may have been fear of such a loss of identity that caused Tolui to be passed over as heir to the Empire.

Sorqoqtani's destiny was rather different. Despite Tolui's brilliance as a military leader, he was passed over for the Great Khanship and Sorqoqtani became Queen of the Steppes. Her time, and that of her sons had not yet come.

Ogodai ruled as Great Khan for twelve years. Towards the end of his reign, power began to drift into the hands of his wife *Toregene Khatun*. Princess Toregene came from the Merkit clan, another of the Steppes peoples conquered by Temuchin, and her history was similar to that of Sorqoqtani. Though not the most senior of Ogodai's wives, she was certainly the most capable. She was also the mother of his eldest son Guyuk.

The historians, Juvaini and Rashid, depict Toregene unfavourably as cunning, masterful, ugly and a shrew. How could it be otherwise! Even today, successful women are rarely given proper credit for their accomplishments. Toregene undoubtedly had a ruthless streak, and was particularly vindictive when it came to dealing with politicians - and even princes - who openly defied her. But these were characteristics to be found in equal measure in the Mongol men.

As soon as the Khan was dead, she took charge. Dismissing the rights of Moge, Ogodai's senior wife, she persuaded his brothers and nephews to grant her the regency. Guyuk had not been Ogodai's choice as successor - the Great Khan had named instead a grandson, Shirimun - and Toregene needed time to groom her son into an acceptable candidate.

By distributing favours and gifts, she softened up the rival princes, with the exception of Batu, who remained intransigent. Sorqoqtani, the one princess who might have challenged Toregene's supremacy, stood aside. By following her instincts and those of her four sons, and by combining their strength with that of Batu, she might have made a difference. She chose not to.

Toregene remained in the driving seat for nearly five years. She postponed the *quriltai* and set about making her mark on the politics of the empire. She appointed her own ministers, including a number of women, of whom the most influential was *Fatima Khatun*. The title was unfortunate, because this Fatima was certainly no princess or lady. She had once been what we would call today a *Madam* and was recruited by Toregene principally to spy on her relations.

The Empress may have been a shrew, but she seems to have been one who knew how to keep men on her side. From a Persian perspective, she may have had little to offer, but the Juvainis at least had reason to be grateful to her. Baha ad-Din, father of the historian, who could have so easily been brought down too in the political scheming of the capital Qaraqorum, survived the fall of his superior, the Persian governor, Korguz.

Moreover, in the end, Toregene may have done some good for it was during her reign and under her patronage that there came to prominence in Persia the man who would become its most effective and longest-serving governor. Known as the Emir Arghun, or Arghun Aqa, to distinguish him from the later Il-khan, he was undoubtedly responsible for shaping Persia over the next thirty years.

Governor Korguz, with Arghun as deputy and Baha ad-Din as *sahib dewan*, had done much to restore the infrastructure and economy of Khorasan. However, acting under the personal authority of the Great Khan, whom he flattered with gifts, he went about his duties in an overbearing manner. He antagonised people and made powerful enemies. Recalled to Qaraqorum to answer trumped-up charges against him, he apparently insulted an emir of the House of Chagatai.

Whether this insulting took place in Ogodai's lifetime, as suggested by Rashid, or after his death is not clear. If the former, and had Korguz come before the Khan, he would probably have triumphed as he had done in the past by a combination of flattery and skilful argument. As it was, Korguz was arrested and taken to the court of Toregene, though he was apparently denied an audience, possibly as the case was filtered through Fatima. If so, she would have nothing to do with it and sent him on to the Chagataids who had him executed by suffocation. His mouth was filled with stones until he stopped breathing.

The fate of Fatima was even more gruesome, and typifies the barbarity - perhaps even the originality - of Mongol methods. Having fallen foul of Guyuk and having lost his mother's protection, she was starved, beaten until she confessed to witchcraft and other spurious crimes of which she was accused. Finally, her torturers sewed up all her orifices and suffocated her in a rolled-up carpet. To make triply sure, they then tossed the bundle into the nearest river.

Toregene delayed the *quriltai* until 1245 but by then she was ailing. She must have recognised that Guyuk was a weak man, even more of a drunkard than his father but without Ogodai's good nature. However, parents often make light of their offspring's shortcomings! Toregene called the assembly and the princes formally endorsed Guyuk as Great Khan. Having relinquished her hold on the empire and given her son his chance, the Empress succumbed to age and died within a year of his accession.

Guyuk did not long survive her. He died in 1248, poisoned some said by his wife Ghaimish, leaving a vacuum that only another strong woman had the political acumen to fill. His reign is notable in only two respects.

The 1245 *quriltai* was a lavish affair. It brought to Mongolia for the first time representatives of the princes of the West, including Giovanni di Pian del Carpini, a Franciscan monk sent by the Christian Pope. Guyuk behaved despicably to Carpini, who was nearly seventy years old at the time, threatening war if the Pope and his allies did not bow at his feet. Nevertheless, the old man brought back to Europe the first detailed account of the Mongols and their ways.

In 1247, the Khan decided to send an army against Batu, who continued to oppose him and did not come to his coronation. The expedition came to nothing. Sorqoqtani had warned Batu of the threat and offered him the support of the House

of Tolui. Guyuk died before the respective armies could meet, but the battle lines were finally drawn for the civil war that was to come.

Ogodai, with Tolui's help, had extended Mongol domination eastwards. However, Tolui did not long survive the campaign. Thus it was that Sorqoqtani had been, for fifteen years, empress of a huge territory comprising not only the 'Three Rivers' of the Mongol homeland but Northern China as well.

During those years, she received ambassadors, dispensed favours and was a chosen counsellor of many of the Mongol princes, including Ogodai himself. Though a Christian, she gave generously to Muslim and other causes. Her wisdom was to pay off. Sorqoqtani had brought up her four sons strictly according to the laws and morality established by Genghis, and she was now about to see that they inherited his empire. She could be sure of Batu's support, but she needed more.

The regency fell, in accordance with the *yasa*, to Guyuk's widow, Ghaimish. Sorqoqtani and Batu did not dispute the arrangement. Ghaimish, like Toregene, was a Merkit, but unlike Toregene she was a lightweight and would be easy to control. Moreover, her children were too young to be eligible for the throne.

Ghaimish, eager to retain power in the House of Ogodai, put forward a nephew for the khanship, but he was too distantly related to Temuchin to be acceptable. Shirimun was again a candidate. Batu, probably the eldest prince, and himself a grandson, was a strong contender, but he stayed loyal to his alliance with Sorqoqtani. Either he was content with his own kingdom – the so-called Golden Horde - or, mindful of the cloud over his father's legitimacy, felt that the sons of Tolui had a better claim. At the first *quriltai* - in his own territory - he nominated Mangke, Sorqoqtani's eldest. Ogodai's family sent agents but stayed away.

There is little doubt that Mangke was the best candidate. A brilliant general in his own right, he also had three brothers who had seen action and had led armies to victory. All four had been well brought up in the traditions of Temuchin and had received a broad education at their mother's court.

Her minor treason against Guyuk forgotten, Sorqoqtani played a straight game. She insisted on proper election procedures be followed and that existing decrees remain intact until a second *quriltai* confirmed the decision of the first. She argued Mangke's case skilfully. The throne should go to a grandson of Genghis

rather than a great-grandson; since Batu, the first choice, had declined, her eldest was the next in line.

Her arguments prevailed. Mangke was enthroned, though not without blood being spilt. Shirimun and the sons of Ghaimish prevaricated and would not answer the summons to attend the final *quriltai* in the Mongol homeland. When they did at last set out, it was with mischievous intent - or so the contemporary historians would have us believe. According to Wilhelm van Ruysbroeck, ‘...Keu [Guyuk] had a brother called Siremon, who on the advice of the wife of Keu [Ghaimish] and her vassals, went in great state towards Mangu as if to do him homage. In truth, however, he intended to kill him...’

Shirimun was of course Guyuk's nephew, not his brother, but that makes little difference. There are several versions of the story, but all are agreed that the supposed conspirators were put to death, including Shirimun, Ghaimish and her progeny.

Both Ghaimish and Toregene, along with her confidante Fatima, have been cast, on the basis of contemporary opinion, as scheming harpies. Khan Mangke, in a letter to the King of France later described Ghaimish as *viler than a dog*. We do not know what Ogodai thought of Toregene. Perhaps she was merely the woman who gave him children. She was certainly not his favourite wife. That honour went to Moge Khatun, who was apparently a beauty in her day. She had already been a wife of Temuchin himself and had come to Ogodai by virtue of the strange Mongol custom whereby a new khan often married all his predecessor's wives, save only his own mother. Chagatai too had wanted her but was denied the privilege.

What was the truth about these women? In all probability, they were neither better nor worse than their male counterparts, nor than other queens and empresses down the ages. One has only to think of the adulation given sometimes to Queen Elizabeth I of England and compare the invective against her sister, Queen Mary. Neither is wholly deserved.

Of the Mongol queens considered so far, only Sorqoqtani comes out well. She died in 1252, still very much the mother figure and supporter of charity. Among her many projects was the founding of an Islamic college in Bukhara.

We shall let Juvaini have the last word:

And her hand was ever open in munificence and benefaction, and although she was a follower of Jesus she would bestow alms and presents upon imams and

sheikhs and strove also to revive the sacred observance of the faith of Muhammad (may peace be upon him).