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3-1-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Jackson, Sienna Z., "The Life and Works of Rashīd al-Dīn: Jewish Vizier in the Mongol Ilkhanid Court" (2012). Pepperdine University, *All Undergraduate Student Research*. Paper 35.  
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The Life and Works of Rashīd al-Dīn:  
Jewish Vizier in the Mongol Ilkhanid Court

Sienna Z. Jackson

Undergraduate Research Banquet

Pepperdine University

March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012

In this paper I wish to illuminate the life of historian and author Rashīd al-Dīn Fadhl-allāh Hamadānī, a Jewish vizier during the rule of the Mongol Ilkhans in Iran. By gaining a better grasp of the man's personal biography, I hope to give insight into his life's most notable work: the *Jami al-Tawarikh*, or the *Compendium of Chronicles* (ca. 1305-06), the first comprehensive world history of its kind ever produced and Rashid al-Din's greatest contribution to Ilkhanid literary space. It serves as our best source for understanding the *Pax Mongolica* of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that embraced Iran, and the Mongol understanding of their world and their place in history at that time. Its styles and motifs reflect the multicultural fusion of the Mongol dynasty, where eastern influences blended with a revived Persian aesthetic.

From 1278 until his execution in 1318, Rashid al-Din was a vital patron of culture and learning throughout his long and storied career in politics. He enacted sweeping administrative reforms within his considerable sphere of influence and committed vast sums of his own wealth to the cultural development of Mongol Persia.

It is certain that his life experience as an ethnically Jewish man influenced his political career and his charitable work. Rashid al-Din, sometimes referred to by his contemporaries as Rashid Tabib ("Rashid the physician"), is commonly thought to have been born ca. 1247 in Hamadan, Iran. Formerly the city of Ecbatana in Antiquity, the city was a vibrant Jewish cultural center, and home to a prominent Rabbinical College that he may have attended.<sup>i</sup> However, some sources suggest that Hamadan might only have been an ancestral family home, and that Rashid al-Din might have been born in Qazvin.<sup>ii</sup> Indeed, Rashid al-Din himself gives an account within the *Jami' al-Tawarikh* of staying with his family at the stronghold in Maymundiz (west of Alamut) in 1256, which was seized by Hulegu Khan's army on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November. In either case, Rashid al-Din, the son of a prominent Jewish apothecary and a family of scholars, was well

versed in Jewish tradition, customs and language by the time he began his service in the Mongol court.<sup>iii</sup> Rashid al-Din converted to Islam at age thirty (around 1278) when he began his service to Abaqa Khan (r. 1265-1281), as a court physician. During this period of civil unrest, Rashid al-Din slipped into relative obscurity.

It wouldn't be until the rule of Ghazan Khan (r. 1295-1304) that Rashid al-Din's considerable genius and skill would be properly recognized, marking the beginning of his meteoric rise in political influence and power under the Mongol Il-Khans. Ghazan converted to Islam when he took the throne, which permanently altered the character of the dynasty. He set out on an ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful campaign against the Mamluks of Egypt for control of Syria. Ghazan was multilingual and highly cultured – perhaps the foundation of his favoritism toward Rashid al-Din, which would only continue to grow throughout his reign.<sup>iv</sup> In 1298, Ghazan appointed Rashid al-Din as deputy to his powerful vizier Sadr al-Din.

Only months later, on March 28, Sadr al-Din was put to death, accused of embezzling court funds. His place was taken by Sa'd al-Din, who elevated Rashid al-Din to the position of associate. In this role, Rashid al-Din enacted sweeping financial and administrative reforms of his own design, which protected the sedentary population of the state from the extravagances of the Mongol elite.<sup>v</sup> During this time he amassed tremendous power and wealth and owned property in almost every corner of the Mongol Empire. Using his personal fortune he built schools, hospitals, and other public and educational institutions in many places in the empire, especially in the capital city of Tabriz and in the palatine city, Sultāniyya, where he established numerous charitable centers. It should also be noted that Rashid al-Din awarded further endowments to the city of Hamadan and to Yazd, a vital center of Zoroastrian culture.

The life and career of Rashid al-Din reached its apex under the reign of Sultan Uljeytu (r. 1304-1316), who was appointed to rule by his brother, Ghazan Khan, before his death in 1304. Uljeytu had converted to Islam along with Ghazan, and established a powerful trading relationship with Europe during his rule. It is under his reign that Rashid al-Din finally completed the *Compendium of Chronicles*, expanding it from an initial account of the family and successors of Genghis Khan into the comprehensive and universal world history we know today. To that end, Rashid al-Din commissioned the construction of his very own quarter in the northeastern part of Tabriz, that was devoted to the production of his manuscripts: The Rab‘-i Rashidi (‘Quarter of Rashid’). Rashid al-Din bestowed a large charitable endowment into the quarter that was, among other things, home to his tomb complex, a hospital, a university, and some 30,000 other urban constructions.<sup>vi</sup> It was in the scriptorium of this quarter where Rashid al-Din’s *Compendium of Chronicles* was produced, in Persian and Arabic versions, with lavish illumination and illustrations. Iran had once more become the center of cultural and artistic influence in the Islamic world during the rule of the Ilkhans, and it is in this context that Rashid al-Din made his own contributions to the cultural and literary space of Ilkhanid Persia. The *Compendium of Chronicles* was a comprehensive, universal history, the likes of which would not be seen in Europe for centuries.

To write the parts of the *Compendium* concerned with the history of other nations, Rashid al-Din relied on the written testaments of other historians, some of whom have been identified by modern scholarship<sup>vii</sup>: For the history of Europe, he made use of the *Chronicle of the Popes and the Emperors* of Martin of Opava (d. 1278), a thirteenth century chronicler of the Dominican Order. For the history of the Mongols in the period of Genghis Khan, he had oblique access to the *Altan Debter* through the ambassador of the Great Khan to the court of the Il-

Khanate, who would have recited the works orally to Rashid. Much of the accounts from that period are also borrowed from Ata-Malik Juvayni; material from his *History of the World Conqueror* is used extensively in *The Compendium*.

The first edition of the *Compendium of Chronicles*, ca. 1306, was likely structured in three parts, while a latter edition, ca. 1310, was produced in four. The manuscript was copied and distributed en masse and is now the most notable example of Ilkhanid manuscript production for modern scholars. Today, we only have a few surviving examples of the manuscript, two Persian copies (dated ca. 1314 and 1317, respectively) and one copy in Arabic, ca. 1306-7. The illustrations and illumination of these surviving manuscripts are sumptuous and vibrant. What is noticeable in the illustrations of the *Compendium of Chronicles* are the numerous depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, the blend of Persian and Chinese aesthetics, and the brilliant execution of the Persian Nastaliq script.

While Rashid al-Din enjoyed tremendous wealth and power, as well as the favor of the Mongol khans, he was accosted on all fronts by other power brokers of the Ilkhanid court who sought to oust him from power. In the *Tārikh-i Uljeitu*, composed by ‘Abdallah Kāshāni (d. 1337), a confrontation between Rashid al-Din and Sa‘d al-Din in the presence of Uljeytu is described. According to this account, Sa‘d al-Din verbally attacked Rashid al-Din by repeatedly making reference to his Jewish background.<sup>viii</sup> For his behavior, Sa‘d al-Din was dismissed from office and put to death on February 19, 1312, and Rashid al-Din remained in favor. In that same year, Rashid al-Din’s rivals forged a letter written in Hebrew script, which purported to describe his intent to assassinate Sultan Uljeytu.<sup>ix</sup> Rashid al-Din was able to debunk the letter, but six years later he was implicated in the death of the sultan for prescribing the wrong medicine, an accusation he couldn’t disprove. Rashid al-Din and his 16-year-old son, Ibrahim, were executed

in 1318 by the new emperor Abu Sai'd, the son of Uljeytu. Consequently, Rashid al-Din's property was confiscated and the Rab'-i Rashidi quarter was destroyed. Ghiyāth al-Din, vizier to Abu Sai'd (r. 1316–1335) and a son of Rashid al-Din, relates in a letter details of the disintegration of the Ilkhanid empire that followed Abu Sai'd's reign.<sup>x</sup>

Rashid al-Din was a remarkable cultural influence and political force in Mongol Ilkhanid Iran, a historian, author and polymath who rose to extraordinary heights of power under the reigns of four successive khans. His greatest contribution to the polity of Mongol Iran, and to its study by modern historians, is his *Compendium of Chronicles*, which so successfully encapsulates the cultural fusion and development that occurred under the Mongol Ilkhanate in Iran. Through the *Compendium of Chronicles* we can observe a unique view of religious and political history, captured within a literary space. Through this literary space, we get a sense of the scope of the greater sacred-cultural space that was Rashid al-Din's charitable quarter at Tabriz.

#### Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Krawulsky suggests in her book, *The Mongol Ilkhans and their vizier Rashid al-Din*, that Hamadan was actually an ancestral family home, and not the town Rashid al-Din in fact grew up in. Krawulsky suggests that Rashid al-Din may instead have grown up in Qazvin, as reported by Abu 'l-Ghazi Bahador Khan ca. 1726. Source: Dorothea Krawulsky, *The Mongol Ilkhans and their vizier Rashid al-Din* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 119.

<sup>ii</sup> Aboul Gazi Bahadour Khan, *Histoire généalogique des Tatars: traduite du manuscrit tartare d'Abulgasi Bayadur Chan* (Lyon: Bibliothèque jésuite des Fontaines, 1726), 77.

<sup>iii</sup> Rashid al-Din, *The successors of Genghis Khan; transl. from the Persian of Rashīd Al-Dīn*, trans. John Andrew Boyle (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 3.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art., Blair, S., & Rashīd, -D. T., *A compendium of chronicles: Rashid al-Din's illustrated history of the world*. (London: Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>vi</sup> Report from the Cultural Heritage News Agency, on a 2006 archeological excavation led by Laleh Roohangiz for the Wahesht Mina International Institute.

<sup>vii</sup> Peter Jackson. *The Mongols and the West, 1221-1410*. (Harlow and New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 329-330.

viii Encyclopedia Judaica. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Edited by Fred Skolnik. Gale Group. 2006.

ix Bernard Lewis. *The Jews of Islam*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 101.

x A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *The treasury of Tabriz: The great Ilkhanid compendium* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2007), 85-89.