
One of the most interesting but, until now, least-studied regional empires in pre-Mongol Central Asia was that created by the Qara Khitai. It was truly an empire "in the middle." Located in one of the most remote regions of Eurasia, between Lakes Balqash and Issyk Kul in present-day Xinjiang, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, the Qara Khitai governed a highly disparate group of peoples and client states that shared no common language, religion, or culture. They created an empire that differed considerably from neighboring sedentary or nomadic empires and was known by at least two quite different names, Qara Khitai and Western Liao.

Occupying this middle ground may have served the Qara Khitai well, but it has made the historian's work difficult, as anyone who studies Central Asian history knows. A solid body of important Chinese and Muslim primary sources documenting the history of the Qara Khitai survive, and several excellent studies of the Qara Khitai have used either Chinese or Islamic sources. Finally, thanks to Michal Biran's ability to use both, we have a well-written, thoughtful, and thorough account of the Qara Khitai empire that reflects the full range of sources.

Biran divides her book into two parts, starting with a political history of the Qara Khitai empire and then moving on to discuss the major cultural and institutional elements around which the Qara Khitai empire was built. Her main thesis is that the Qara Khitai empire was not a prototype for the later Mongol empire, as some have claimed, but that it should be understood as a unique regional Central Asian empire whose history has for too long remained relatively unknown. The enormity of Biran's goal of bringing this little-studied empire to light is made apparent in her introduction in which she introduces the wide range of primary textual and archaeological sources that exist on the Qara Khitai (which reminds us why a complete history of the Qara Khitai using all of the sources has not been done until now).

The first three chapters are a straightforward political history of the Qara Khitai empire. Chapter One, "From Liao to Western Liao," documents the establishment of the Qara Khitai empire under the leadership of Yelü Dashi, first as a breakaway remnant of the Khitan Liao empire and then in its own
right. She makes excellent use of a dizzying array of Chinese and Muslim sources, and it is here that she introduces the notion of a Sino-Khitan identity that combined Khitan ethnic and Chinese cultural elements and so enabled the Buddhist Qara Khitai to rule successfully over Muslim states and peoples. I found her discussion of Qara Khitai identity to be one of the most interesting parts of this first chapter and was puzzled that Biran did not develop this point in the first paragraph of her introduction. In fact, her argument that this identity allowed the Qara Khitai not to convert to Islam is just as important as showing “the extensive cross-cultural contacts between China, Inner Asian nomads and the Muslim world” (p. 1) that existed because of and throughout the Qara Khitai empire.

Chapter Two, “The quiet period,” deals with several important issues, including relations between the Qara Khitai and various nomadic groups, Qara Khitai’s relations with the Muslim Khwarazm kingdom to its west, the weakening of Qara Khitai hold over eastern parts of its spread-out empire, and the impressive role of women in power. This is a relatively short chapter, due no doubt to the fact that Biran is working with far fewer sources than exist for the early and later periods of Qara Khitai imperial history. It could also be titled the “middle period,” since it really deals with the apex of Qara Khitai power. For this reason it is also a very complex chapter, and it is frankly difficult to keep all of the several actors straight, even given Biran’s chronologically-oriented narrative. In fact, the title of this chapter somewhat belies the reality of the time, at least if one equates “quiet” with lack of activity. The complex picture that emerges in this chapter of Qara Khitai involvement both east and west of its central territories makes clear that Yelü Dashi’s successors had their hands full trying to manage their empire. It also reminds the reader once again just how difficult it is to write a history of Central Asia, and that Biran’s contribution is of signal importance.

Chapter Three, “The fall,” explicates all of the problems that the Qara Khitai imperial experiment faced and why the experiment failed. Torn between having to deal with the rebellious Muslim Khwarazm kingdom in the west and the rise of the united Mongol confederation under Chinggis in the east, one wonders how the Qara Khitai empire actually lasted as long as it did. These were intractable problems that the most skilled leader would have trouble quelling, and as Biran shows, the last Qara Khitai rulers were nowhere near as politically savvy and astute as their predecessors. This chapter makes
the point that many Muslim writers viewed the Qara Khitai as a buffer state and defense against the rising Mongol tide and lamented the fall of the Qara Khitai even though the Qara Khitai had remained steadfastly non-Muslim.

Chapters Four through Six deal with the three main cultural components of the Qara Khitai: China, nomads, and Islam. Biran has organized this second part of her book around three questions not addressed by other scholars: "Why did the Qara Khitai retain their Chinese characteristics in the new Central Asian environment? How did these 'infidel' nomadic rulers acquire legitimation among their mostly Muslim sedentary population? And why, unlike their predecessors and successors in Central Asia, did they not embrace Islam?" (p. 2) The answer to all three questions can be summed up in the Qara Khitai's unique Sino-Khitan identity.

In Chapter Four, "China," Biran argues persuasively that the Qara Khitai gained legitimacy in Central Asian eyes because of their association with China. This was not an artificial construction, since the Qara Khitai retained many Chinese administrative features and cultural elements that had been adopted by the Khitan Liao dynasty. Perhaps the most interesting part of this chapter, however, is Biran's argument that the Qara Khitai's Sino-Khitan culture enabled them to escape any move towards Islamization and that the Qara Khitai were really more closely identified with China than many scholars have long argued. Since they interacted so closely with Muslim societies such as the Qarakhanids and Khwarazm, and so much of what we know about the Qara Khitai comes from Muslim writers, it has been assumed that they were primarily Central Asian and Muslim in orientation. Biran effectively dismisses this argument by detailing their central Sino-Khitan identity. Of course, this does not come as a surprise to those of us who only read Chinese sources and are familiar with Wittfogel and Feng's earlier work. But this is a perspective not shared by those familiar with the other side, i.e., the substantial body of sources and scholarship on the Qara Khitai from the west. The only drawback to this important but long chapter is that at points the narrative seems to lose its focus on China. But this probably cannot be avoided in a narrative that tries to do full justice to this complex society.

In Chapter Five, "Nomads," Biran moves on to discuss the Qara Khitai's relations with the many nomadic groups that were part of that empire. She brings back into focus the fact that the Qara Khitai were themselves mainly nomadic, and that a healthy symbiosis between nomadic and sedentary groups was maintained for quite a while by the Qara Khitai rulers. She reminds us
that the relatively few Qara Khitai had to forge alliances with the Central Asian nomads in order to create and consolidate their empire. Here is where the Qara Khitai were brilliantly pragmatic, since the same Yelü Dashi who claimed his position of leadership by the rational Chinese system of imperial title also presented himself as a charismatic Khan of Khans who would attract the support of nomadic tribes. In fact, it was only when the balance was upset by the influx of nomad refugees from the east into the Qara Khitai central lands that their power was threatened and eventually diminished. Biran then goes on to show the many ways in which Qara Khitai relations with nomadic tribes were the product of earlier Khitan association with Turkic and Mongol tribal traditions. This section of the chapter not only reinforces her earlier arguments about the Qara Khitai’s flexible identity, but also provides a good counterweight to the mass of evidence presented earlier that shows the Qara Khitai’s indebtedness to Chinese political and cultural influences. Her narrative presses home the fact that the Qara Khitai did adapt to their new Central Asian nomadic environment in ways that moved well beyond their Khitan roots.

Her last chapter in this section, “Islam,” extends this argument further in showing that the Qara Khitai faced a situation quite unlike their Khitan ancestors, not least in the fact that they had to deal with significant numbers of Muslim states and societies. Here, too, Biran makes an important new contribution to our understanding of Central Asian history with her argument that, in fact, it was the Qara Khitai who first unified all of Islamic Central Asia under non-Muslim rule. Here, if anywhere, the Qara Khitai do seem to have set a precedent for the better-known Mongol empire, and it is a good thing that Biran has recovered Qara Khitai agency in this important aspect of Central Asian and world history. In spite of the fact that the Qara Khitai never submitted to Islam themselves, however, they always remained on good terms with their Muslim subjects. In this way, they differed from the Mongols. In fact, as Biran shows in her narrative here, the Qara Khitai were highly tolerant of all religious traditions within their sphere of influence. Many of the Muslim sources that document Qara Khitai history even make it difficult to tell that the Qara Khitai were not themselves Muslims, such was the latitude granted to local religious traditions and authorities by the Qara Khitai rulers.

Biran concludes her book by reiterating her opening argument that the Qara Khitai were not prototypes for the Mongols and reminding the reader that the Qara Khitai empire really needs to be understood as a regional Inner
Asian empire quite unlike the universalistic Mongol empire. In her closing narrative, Biran briefly visits two other regional empires of Inner Asian origin that resemble the Qara Khitai: the Saljuq and Moghul empires. Curiously, she only invokes Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital” here in passing to describe Qara Khitai and Moghul legitimation. This reader, at least, thought these categories of “capital” could have been usefully employed to describe Qara Khitai strategies of identity from the very first pages of this book, and wondered why they only appeared at the very end. My only other argument with Biran’s approach was her initial claim that this study of the Qara Khitai would shed light on the Mongol empire. Since, as she demonstrates, Qara Khitai history is an important piece of Central Asian history in its own right, why did Biran feel the need to justify her study in this way at the outset? Yes, she drew some interesting conclusions about the Mongols along the way. But these were neither her main focus nor were they rigorously pursued in her narrative. Rightfully, we are left with the image of a pragmatic group of Sino-Khitans who forged their own way in a new environment and managed, in spite of (or because of?) their peculiar cultural-geographic-political situation to unite under one umbrella a hugely diverse group of peoples.

Michal Biran has produced a long-needed history of this important Central Asian empire that is unusual not least because it spans and incorporates both sides of the usual Central Asian divide, that between Chinese and Muslim sources (and for later scholarship, that between East Asian and Russian-Western traditions). She packs a great deal of important data and analysis into a lively narrative that anyone from the interested generalist to the specialist will find accessible. And there is plenty for the specialist, from her extensive notes to the several useful appendices that summarize a large amount of data not easy to find in any single work. Michal Biran is to be commended for this invaluable contribution to Central Asian history, and it will be essential reading for anyone interested in the topic.

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