

## [Carr on Eastmond, 'Tamta's World: The Life and Encounters of a Medieval Noblewoman from the Middle East to Mongolia'](#)

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The following book review from H-War may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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**Antony Eastmond.** *Tamta's World: The Life and Encounters of a Medieval Noblewoman from the Middle East to Mongolia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 480 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-16756-8.

**Reviewed by** Karen Carr (Portland State University) **Published on** H-War (April, 2019) **Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

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### Women and Power?

Antony Eastmond's new biography of Tamta, a medieval Armenian queen regnant, is very welcome indeed. There are now so many biographies of powerful women from medieval Europe—from Amy Kelly's 1991 *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* to Janna Bianchini's 2012 *The Queen's Hand: Power and Authority in the Reign of Berenguela of Castile* and many that have just appeared (see below)—that one might easily imagine that women in medieval Asia held much less power than their counterparts in Europe. *Tamta's World* dispels this notion. Eastmond shows that Central Asian women often held power, from Tamta herself to Tamar and her daughter Rusudan, both rulers of Georgia; Shajar al-Durr, who ruled Egypt; and Torogene, who ruled the Mongols with her assistant Fatima. Eastmond's careful research and cross-checking demonstrate that these women ruled in their own right, often for decades, and were able to implement their own policies both at home and abroad. That in itself is an important contribution to medieval studies. And—since the other biographies I refer to are all written by women—it is heartening to see a male scholar take an interest in the lives of medieval women.

What we know about Tamta herself is limited: she was born into a powerful Armenian family about 1190. When she grew up, she married one of Saladin's sons, and when her husband was killed a few years later, she married his brother. When she was about 35, her town was captured by the Khawarazmians, and she briefly married their leader, Jalal al-Din. After he was killed, Tamta went

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back to Akhlat. But when the Mongols invaded Armenia in 1236, they captured her. They sent her to Karakorum, where Tamta spent her late forties and early fifties. Then, about 1244, the Mongols sent her back to Akhlat as its ruler. Tamta stayed in power in Akhlat until her death around 1254, when she was in her mid-60s. That's about it.

Since we know so little, Eastmond spends most of the book seeking out every little detail we can know about Tamta's town, Akhlat, her father and her uncle and their political and military campaigns, her husband's and their concerns, and the religious controversies of her time. Eastmond's research is exemplary. Chapter 2's coverage of Armenian architecture of the early thirteenth century provides an outstanding model for explaining complex art historical issues and their implications, while his explanation of the architecture and significance of caravanserais in chapter 10 is equally compelling. Given Eastmond's background in art history, it is not surprising but very welcome to get a deep discussion of medieval Armenian architecture, both secular and religious. He recognizes that city walls and caravanserais served as much to enforce tax collection as for protection. The architecture does much to illuminate the priorities and concerns of Tamta's surroundings.

Eastmond is also to be congratulated for his excellent work exploring the interplay among the many different cultures of thirteenth-century Central Asia: Armenian, Georgian, Ayyubid, Seljuk, Iranian, Khwarazmian, and Mongol. It is a refreshing shift of perspective to see Central Asia as a location in itself, rather than as a fly-over zone between Rome and China. Eastmond succeeds magnificently in considering all of these different cultures in their own terms, without (as far as I could discern) privileging one over the other: Islamic, Christian, and Mongol perspectives all appear as reasonable views that normal people could hold. Within the faiths, both Sunni and Shiite are respected, and the distinctions between Armenian and Georgian Christianity are sympathetically expounded. At the same time, Eastmond shows (e.g., p. 233, with an engaging discussion of common visual traditions) the many ways in which these different faiths built on one another.

As might be expected from a single researcher pulling together such disparate scraps of information, Eastmond misses a few opportunities. His presentation of medieval Silk Road trade would have benefited from more thought about exactly what was being traded and why. What Eastmond describes as "silks and spices from the East" included Indian pharmaceuticals and food industry items like pepper, sugar, nutmeg, and cinnamon, which were already widely used throughout Eurasia. Central Asian trade at this time included high-quality steel, which was produced in Merv and northern India and purchased by Vikings who carried it back to Europe. Printed cotton clothing from India, paper, silk, porcelain, and knotted Persian carpets were also traded in large quantities. Generations of Western scholars have followed Pliny the Younger in denigrating Eastern imports. We need to move past this characterization of Silk Road imports as fripperies, feminizing them (and by extension the Asian places they come from).

It is also unfortunate that Eastmond neglects Akhlat's role as a manufacturing center. He depicts Akhlat mainly as a crossroads: "Its key value lay in its location: it was the meeting place of four different worlds," while he seems to disdain Akhlat's production capacity: "the factories of the only thriving industries that are recorded: fruit, beehives to produce vast quantities of honey, and salting factories to preserve the abundant stocks of *tirrikh*, a herring-like fish, that was caught in the lake and exported as far as Balkh in modern-day Afghanistan" (p. 74). Akhlat's strategy of specializing and producing exports was not a sideline but a successful strategy, common to most Eurasian cities.

Eastmond's brief description of Akhlat's municipal government as a cooperative of young men (p. 88) was also intriguing—reminding me of the council that reproves Gilgamesh—and could have been contextualized to good effect, along the lines of David Graeber's recent pushback against the idea that all cities naturally develop hierarchical structures of power.[1]

In a book concerned with the role of women in society, I would have hoped to see more acknowledgement of the importance of textile production and trade. The hundred “slave girls” who were included in a powerful woman's dowry in Aleppo in 1212 and who, we are told, “could make various wonderful crafts” (p. 93) were presumably valuable participants in the Silk Road's system of production and trade, not exotic curiosities. (Possibly we could retire the phrase “slave girl” in favor of something more respectful—enslaved women, or unfree craftspeople, or skilled workers.) Yet textiles do not appear in the index at all.

More importantly, I would have liked to see Tamta herself given more agency. The emphasis Eastmond places on Tamta's lack of control rubbed me the wrong way. How can he ask, “What authority could women wield in Christian and Muslim societies in the early 13th century?” (p. 104), a time when Blanche of Castile ruled France, Berengaria ruled Castile, and Maria had recently served as regent for Alexios in Byzantium? Tamta's “greatest triumph was survival” (p. 390), Eastmond tells us—as if she had been enslaved rather than successfully ruling her city for most of her life.

If we do not know how much of her life Tamta controlled, neither do we know that she was forced into passivity. I cannot accept Tamta as a mere pawn for the men in her life. Eastmond tells us that Tamta “clearly has no say in her involvement” in her marriage and “was forced to become part of a new family with a new identity” (p. 83). Again, “for Tamta, marriage was central to the establishment of her identity” (p. 84); she undergoes many “transformations” (p. 389). Eastmond gives us no reason to think Tamta was forced—she was grown, and obviously intelligent and able, and aware of the political situation. Tamar, the queen regnant of Georgia, was on her side. Her father had been captured. We do not have any reason to think Tamta was less than a full and enthusiastic participant in the decision that she would marry the Ayyubid prince. (And why wouldn't Tamar have weighed in, too?). Tamta might have been proud to marry a son of Saladin, even a less successful son, especially with an agreement that she would run the town of Akhlat in his absence. In the same vein, Eastmond tells us several times that Tamta was “allowed to keep her Christian faith” (e.g., p. 83), but that could also have been negotiated by Tamta herself as part of the terms of her marriage. Or perhaps it was not as big an issue as Eastmond makes it, since none of her other husbands or captors forced her to convert.

Eastmond has an unfortunate tendency to frame all women in power as *rarae aves*: “Georgia was in the exceptional position of having women in the supreme position of power twice within half a century” (p. 90). As Kathleen Nolan says, “The conversation at the moment is crystalizing around a critique of ‘exceptionalism’, the tendency to view every woman who wielded power as an exception, however many women there are who did so.”[2] Lindy Grant herself argues that we should see medieval (and other) women who ruled as rulers, rather than only as women rulers.[3] Eastmond emphasizes the limits on Tamta's power, but there were equally limits on her father's and uncles' power, and on her husband's power, and they, like her, used diplomatic methods to consolidate their power. Grant, again, argues that “Blanche faced few limits on her power because of her gender ... both male and female rulers experienced restrictions ... it is an oversimplification to think in terms of

'typologies of power' as being gendered." [4] Eastmond deploys gendered rules to discuss women in power, describing the queen regnant of Georgia, Rusudan, as "unfaithful to her husband" (p. 91). Yes, Rusudan demonstrated her power by choosing her own sexual partners, but so did male rulers, and we do not describe them as unfaithful.

Additionally, E. sometimes presents Tamta and other women as symbols rather than people. He suggests that Tamta's marriage "put her in a position to act as a figurehead to represent the interests of all the Christian groups to the new Ayyubid regime" (p. 83) and again mentions the "symbolic role it gave the wife as the link between the two sides" (p. 85). But how is Tamta only a figurehead or a symbol? Isn't she actually representing their interests? If not her, then who is? This attitude holds for other women as well as Tamta: "There is also a sense ... that the bride was simply one item in the inventory of beauty and splendor that actually reflected the father's wealth and status" (p. 94). Because little is known about Tamta herself, Eastmond says, he envisions Tamta as a personification of Akhlat, the city she ruled (p. 392).

Rather than flattening Tamta into a metaphor for her city, it might have been more useful to draw comparisons to European women, about whom we know much more. In that context, it is to be regretted that Grant's *Blanche of Castile*, Jacqueline Ario's *Margaret, Queen of Sicily* (2017), and Estelle Paranque and Valerie Schutte's *Forgotten Queens in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2018) all came out too late to influence this book. Still, Eastmond might have made more use of pertinent parallels. Constance ruled Sicily in the late 1100s, throughout Tamta's childhood. Berengaria controlled Castile more or less from 1217 to 1246, and Blanche ran France from 1226 to 1252. Three of the most powerful states of medieval Europe were under women's control during Tamta's lifetime, but these queens are hardly mentioned.

The book's production values are generally high. It was a pleasure to read, aside from the peculiarity of the repeated warning that some color photographs might not be available in all editions of the book. It was not immediately clear why the photographs were shown in both black and white and color. There were also a few grammar oddities that a copy editor might have caught (the use of "between" where "among" is meant, for example, on pp. 71 and 80). Occasionally, terms were used without being defined (e.g., "Jazira" on p. 81).

Eastmond brings us a much stronger sense of the cultural currents and tensions running through Central Asia and West Asia during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries than most of us will have had before. Despite being ostensibly centered on a woman in power, this is not a feminist take on medieval power structures, and should not be read as such. Nevertheless, it is a significant achievement to have explicated political, economic, religious, artistic, and architectural information and combined them successfully into a harmonious structure that illuminates this hitherto rather shadowy corner of the world.

#### Notes

[1]. "How to change the course of human history (at least, the part that's already happened)," *Eurozine*, March 2, 2018.

[2]. Review of Lindy Grant, *Blanche of Castile, Queen of France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University

Press, 2016), *Reviews in History* no. 2294, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/2294, accessed February 1, 2019.

[3]. Grant, *Blanche of Castile*, 3.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 265.

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