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Banner calligraphy Huai Su 懷素 (737–799), Tang calligrapher and Buddhist monk

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Perhaps I should have entitled this paper 'The Names of the Mongols in Asia and Europe', since, at the time of their greatest expansion in the thirteenth century, the Mongols were known by several names which, curiously enough, were mostly inaccurate for different reasons.

In a Chinese source of the mid-10th century (the Chiu T'ang-shu), which refers to events in the previous century, the Mongols' tribal name appears for the first time. The Chinese transcription meng-wu 蒙兀 (*mung-nguat) represents an original *Mongγut or *Mongγul. In the corresponding passage of the Hsin T'ang-shu, in place of meng-wu we find meng-wa 蒙瓦 (*mung-ngwa), that is, *Mongγa. Although this may well be a mere graphic variant of meng-wu, as claimed by Pelliot, it is possible that *Mongγa is a phonetic variant of *Mongγut/*Mongγul in the form of *Mongγa(l), as suggested by H. Serruys. If the correct interpretation of meng-wu is *Mongγut, as I believe, this form is in all probability an ancient plural of *Mongγul. The tribal name in question would then occur in its earliest recorded forms as *Mongγul/*Mongγal.

By the thirteenth century, *Mongγul had developed into Mongγol through regular progressive assimilation in some Mongolian dialects, but Mongγul was still retained in other dialects and the form Mongγol is also well attested.

The Mongols' name is first recorded in Uighur script (which the Mongols had adopted early in the thirteenth century) in the legend of the seal of Güyüg (r. 1246–48) on the famous letter to Pope Innocent IV (1246) in the form MWNKQWL, that is, Mongγol or Mongγul. From then on, and irrespective of dialect variations, this name has always been written in the same way, which we have conventionally transcribed as 'Mongγol'.

(Regarding the etymology of the name Mongγul, the ending γul may be a suffix denoting a clan, tribe or people. If so, we are left with the root mong...
the origin and meaning of which still elude us.11 Other etymologies have been proposed, but they are hypothetical and speculative.12)

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, the name of the Mongols in Central and Western Asia, as well as in Europe, was either Tatar/Tartar, or a variation of Mogol (Moyol); only occasionally, but never in Central or Western Asia, do we find the name Mongol (Mongyl).

I shall only briefly review the designation Tatar/Tartar, since much has been written already on the subject and there is not much I can add to it.13

In the 12th century, the Tatar people of eastern Mongolia were the most powerful tribal complex north of the Gobi. Therefore, in China and Central Asia, and further west, the name Tatar became the general, common designation for all Mongol- and Turkic-speaking peoples of Mongolia just as, in the Middle Ages, 'Frank' designated any western European. 14 The Persian historian Rashid-al-Din (ca. 1247–1318), who discusses this question at length in his great work, can hardly disguise his wonder at the fact that the Tatar tribe's name and renown should have spread so far and wide, from China and India to Daš-i Qipčaq and Syria, and to the Arab populations of north Africa, indeed as far as the Maghreb.15

Because of this, the Mongolian tribesmen in Činggis Qan's time were also called Tatars by the Chinese and other peoples of Asia, and even after the destruction of the Tatar tribe by Činggis Qan in 1202, the Mongols continued to be referred to as Tatars, not only because the name had stuck, as it was, but also (and chiefly) because they had replaced the latter in the hegemony of the steppe. We must not forget that very few people outside the vast grassland of Mongolia knew what was happening there, and which of the many barbarian tribes roaming the steppe had conquered which.16

The Tatars thus enjoyed a posthumous, albeit undeserved glory (or notoriety) as their name penetrated Europe in the first decades of the thirteenth century from the south through the Near East and the crusaders, and via the Cumans, the Bulgars and other populations of the Volga regions in the north. The terrifying horsemen from the depths of Asia who defeated the Cumans, the Bulgars and other populations of the Volga regions in the twelve century from the south through the Near East and the crusaders, and via the Cumans, the Bulgars and other populations of the Volga regions in the north. The terrifying horsemen from the depths of Asia who defeated the Russian princes, destroyed Kiev, routed the Polish and Hungarian armies and nearly took Vienna in 1242 were, of course, the dreaded Tatars, promptly and pointedly renamed Tartaruus (Hell), and the invaders’ resemblance (in popular imagination) with devils.17

And so the Mongols, assimilated on the one had to a tribe which, ironically, had been their worst enemy, and on the other to a host of devils released from Hell, continued to be called Tatars by the Russians, and Tartars by the rest of Europe, and this not for a few decades but for centuries — in fact until modern times.18

This does not mean, however, that the name Mongol remained unknown in Europe after the European nations had established direct contact with the Mongolian empire through various diplomatic missions. Nevertheless, this true name was regarded as just another name for the Tartars, the latter designation being by now well established and widespread.19 The name Mongol appears sporadically in the thirteenth century chronicles and envos’ reports in several forms, often greatly corrupted in the course of transmission. Thus we find Mongal(i) in John of Pian di Carpine’s Historia, Moal in William of Rubruck’s Itinerarium, and Mongul in Marco Polo’s Il Milione.20 Simon of St Quentin alternates between Mongli and Mogli, Mongol and Mogol.21 Some of
the forms recorded by these travellers are either contracted (Moal) or denasalised (Mogli, Mogol), and this poses an interesting problem.

If we look at the name of the Mongols in Central and Western Asia at the time (middle and second half of the thirteenth century), we see that neither the Turks, nor the Persians, nor for that matter any other people who had close relations with the Mongols actually spelled their name with an \( n \). The Turks called them Moyul and Moyal (Moyul in Chaghatai), corresponding of course to Mongolian Mongyl and Mongyl respectively; the Persians called them Moyöl/Muyöl and Moyal/ Muyāl (according to the different transcriptions of the same words); in Arabic we have Mughāl (as in Persian); in Hindustani Mugh(a); in Armenian Muyal; in Syriac Müglâyê — a metathetical form from Mūgal; and in Greek Μουγόλιοι (from Muγul).22 All the vowel changes in these forms can be easily explained, but what happened to the \( n \)?

The mystery of the missing \( n \) has been puzzling me for a long time. It is evident that all the above-mentioned forms originally go back to Uighur Turkic. Now, phonetically, an alternation Moγul ~ Moγol is certainly possible in the Turkic languages,23 but in Uighur we find only the non-nasalised forms Moyul and Moyal. When it comes to the name of the nation there is no alternation: the form with \( -\eta \) simply does not exist in Uighur, witness the fact that in Persian and all the other languages which ultimately borrowed the word from Uighur we find only the denasalised form.

We must then ask ourselves: what made the Uighur Turks, who first taught their script to the Mongols and who, for several decades, acted as their scribes and secretaries, use the correct form Mongγol in the edicts and documents that they drafted in Mongolian for their masters, but Moyul (=Moyol) in those they wrote in their own language? There is no doubt that the Uighurs could write the correct form, and did so when it was part of an individual’s personal name (as in contract or business transaction), but not in the case of the name of the ruling nation.24

The answer, I think, may be provided by a passage from the Suvarṇaprabhāśa, Uighur text edited by V.V. Radlov and S.E. Malov.


6 The names in Chinese transcription found in the Chiu T’ang-shu 195, 3a; in the Wu-tai shih 五代史, 73, 9a; and in the Liao-shih 遼史 33, 8b, 35, 9a, and 46, 5a, which have been hypothetically reconstructed as *mäkas and *moyos, refer to Tangut and Turkic tribes, not to tribes or clans of Mongol stock. Therefore, these names cannot be called into question in the present discussion. See Serruys, op. cit. pp.476–77. Cf. K.A. Wittfogel and Fêng Chia-shêng, History of Chinese Society. Liao (907–1125), Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, N.S. 36 [1946] (Philadelphia, 1949), p.91, n.23.

7 The form Mongyl (= *Mongyl) is found, for example, in Simon de St Quentin’s Historia Tartarorum. See S. de Saint-Quentin, Histoire des Tartares, ed. J. Richard (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1965), p.92 (XXXII, 34): ‘Ipsi quoque Tar- tari proprie loquendo se vocant Mongli sive Mongol’. The form Mongyl is the one regularly attested in the Chinese transcriptions of the 13th and 14th centuries (in the Yüan chien-ch’ang 元典章, Yüan-shih 元史, etc.) as meng-hu 蒙古 (*Mongyl[l]; it is also the one
In Uighur there is a word muγul meaning ‘unwise, fool’ which in Uighur script is written exactly as the name Mongγol (as can be seen from the legend on Güyük’s seal, Figure 2). Clearly, it would have been courting disaster for a scribe in the Mongol khan’s service to employ the same name in Turkic (thus making the two words synonymous), for this would have been regarded as deliberately offensive. An act of lèse-majesté of this kind brought to the notice of the khan by a jealous colleague or enemy of the scribe would undoubtedly have cost him his life. But a very slight orthographic change — allowed moreover by the nature of the language (because of –ηγ- ~ -γ-) — would have easily solved the problem. This is why, in my opinion, Mongγol became Mongγol in Uighur and, ultimately, why the Mongols of Afghanistan are called Moghols and not Monghols, why the famous Turkish rulers of India are called Mughals and not Munghals, and also why today we read about ‘media moguls’ and not ‘media monguls’.

8 It is in the last word in the second line of the legend. See I. de Rachewiltz, ‘Qan, Qu’an and the Seal of Güyük’, in eds K. Sagaster and M. Weiers, Documenta Barbarorum: Festschrift für W. Heissig zum 70. Geburtstag, Veröffentlichungen der Societas Uralo-Altaica, 18 (Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), p.1 (p.274). The name Mongol (or Mongγul) occurs also in the second line of the so-called ‘Stone of Chinggis’, that is, the stele of Činggis Qan’s nephew Yisüngge, reputedly the earliest monument in Uighur-Mongol script (ca. 1225). In my opinion, however, this monument is of much later date. See my article ‘Some Remarks on the Stele of Yisüngge’, in eds Walter Heissig et al., Tracta altaica: Denis Siner, sexagenario optime de rebus altaicis merito dedicata (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), pp.487–508, esp. pp.494–95. The Uighur script does not distinguish between o and u, therefore the Mongols’ name can be read Mongol, Mongγol and Mungγul.

9 That is, in Script (or Written) Mongolian; however, ‘Mongγol’ is still occasionally employed by Mongolists. See, for example, J.R. Kreuger, Materials for an Oirat-Mongolian to English Citation Dictionary (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Publications, 1978–84), I–III, p.602. Mongol is also the form given in F.D. Lessing, gen. ed., Mongolian-English Dictionary (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press/London: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp.542b–3a (several reprints by the Mongolia Society, Inc., Bloomington, Ind.). This is no doubt ultimately due to G.J. Ramstedt’s influence. See his Kalmākisches Wörterbuch (Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura, 1933), p.264b: mongol, mongol. Some scholars in Japan, like S. Imanishi (1907–79), also use Mongol for Mongγol — an indication of the long survival of this old (and obsolete!) form. The precise Korean and Manchu phonetic transcriptions of the name confirm the correctness of Mongol v. Mongγol. There are no great dialect variations in modern Mongolian (in all dialects the vowel of the second syllable is of course greatly reduced), except for Mongγol in which the word for Mongol is Mongγor (mongγor ~ mongγer).
10 As we find, for example, in the word Sartayul (Middle Mongolian Sarta’ul) ‘Muslim native of Central or Western Asia’, from sartay = Turkic sart (= Sanskrit sārta ‘caravan, wealthy’ ‘an Iranian; merchant’. See G. Clauson, An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p.846a.


12 Rašīd al-Dīn says that the word ‘Mongol’ was originally ‘Mūngōl (mūng-ōl) meaning ‘feeble’ and ‘naive’ — clearly a folk etymology still current in Rašīd’s own time which, as we shall see, was not without some justification. (Rašīd naturally thought that mūng-ōl was a Mongolian expression and, in this respect, he was of course mistaken.) Other proposed etymologies include: < Mongolian mūngāl ‘silver’; Mongolian Mong Gol ‘the Mong (? River’; Chinese meng sǐ ‘fierce, valiant’; and Yakut meng ‘great, big’. See Ratchnevsky, Činggis-khan, pp.5–6, n.23; G. Doerfer, ‘Der Name der Mongolen bei Rašīd ad-Dīn,’ Central Asiatic Journal 14 (1970): 68–77.


14 On the Tartar tribe see Ratchnevsky, Činggis-khan, pp.3–4, and the literature cited on p.4, n.15. Pelliot (Histoire de campagnes, p.2) makes some interesting remarks on the manner in which the tribal name Tata became the generic name for the Mongols and also for part of the Turks. Pelliot’s remarks were prompted by Rašīd al-Dīn’s statement on this very question. See below, n.15. Cf. S.G. Klyavortnyi, ‘Gosudarstva Tatar v Central’noĭ Azii (dočingisova ėpokha),’ in eds V.M. Solnecv et al., Mongolica: K 750-letiju ‘Sokrovennogo skazaniya’ (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), pp.139–47; and Central Asiatic Journal 36 (1992), pp.72–83.


16 For the Chinese generic designation Ta-ta 羣 ( = Tatar/Mongol), see Meng-Ta pei-lu und Hei-Ta shih-lièh. Chinesische Gesandtenberichte über die frühen Mongolen 1221 und 1237, trans., annot. and eds E. Haenisch, Yao Ts’ung-wu, P. Olbricht, E. Pinks and W. Banck (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1980), pp.4–7, nn.1–5 [Asiatische Forschungen, 56]. It should be mentioned, however, that once China was under Mongol rule, the name Ta-ta was replaced by Meng-ku (see above, n.7).


19 This fact is epitomised in Marco Polo’s statement cited.

20 See above, n.7


22 Turkic Moyal is evidenced by William of Rubruck’s “Moal” which can only be a development of Moyal ( = Mçäl = Moal), a form that must be either Turkic or Persian, not Mongolian. The transcriptions from Persian sources (Juvannī, Rašīd al-Dīn, etc.) vary from author to author because of the ambiguity of o/a in Persian. In Juvannī the usual form of the name is Moyal/Muyūl — the form used also by Rašīd — but occasionally we find also Moyal/Muyūl. It is my opinion that


24 In the third line of the Uighur (private) document published by W. Radloff in Uigurische Sprachdenkmäler (Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1928) [repr. Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1972], p.137, no.81, we find a proper name spelled MWNKL PWQ’, that is, Monγol (? Monγul) Buqa. On the basis of this reading, L. Ligeti, loc. cit., gives the Uighur word for ‘Mongol’ as ‘Monγul’. This is not correct, since the word in question is the first element, that is, an integral part of a proper name and does not refer to the Mongol state. In a document of this kind, individual names would have, of course, to be spelled correctly, and here, in any case, the reading MWNKL may well be Turkic muŋul (= muγul) ‘foolish’. It is interesting to note that in this name we have a good example of ŋγ > ŋ (Moŋγol/Moŋγul > Moŋol/Moŋul). Cf. the Mukaddimat al-Adab, loc. cit., where the Mongol form is ‘Mongyl’ not ‘Mongyl’.