QAN, QA’AN AND THE SEAL OF GÜYÜG

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Two of the most important ‘mots de civilisation’ of Inner Asia are undoubtedly the title qan and qa’an (qa’an), the origins of which are lost in the prehistory of the Altaic languages. These titles have been the subject of investigation by several distinguished scholars, such as K. Shiratori, B. Ya. Vladimircov, P. Pelliot, L. Hambis, F.W. Cleaves, L. Krader, H.F. Schurmann, L. Ligeti and G. Doerfer, to mention only the authors of some of the most important contributions. Valuable, however, as these contributions are, we still lack a comprehensive historical survey which takes into account all the available sources, including evidence from coins. The present tentative review is an attempt towards comprehensiveness with regard to the use of qan and qa’an by the Mongols in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, fixing as terminus ad quem the collapse of the Mongol Yüan dynasty in A.D. 1368. Unfortunately, space limits make it impossible for me to dwell on the sources as I would wish, and my choice of references and illustrations is, therefore, confined to the essentials.

The turning point in our survey is the year 1229 in which Ögödei, the third son of Činggis-qan, was elected to succeed his father as supreme ruler of the Mongol world-empire. Accordingly, we shall divide the survey in two parts: (A) the use of qan and qa’an before 1229, and (B) the use of qan and qa’an after 1229.

A. BEFORE 1229
1. Qa’an was not used as a title by the tribes of Mongolia or by Činggis-qan.
2. Qan was used as:
   a. the title borne by the elected leaders of important tribes of people (ulus), such as the Monggol, e.g. Qabul-qan, Qutula-qan, Ambaqai-qan; the Kereyit, e.g. To’oril/Ong-qan; and the Naiman, e.g. Buiruq-qan, Incanča-bilge-qan, Tayang-qan, Güçülük-qan;

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1 The linguistic relationship between these two terms is still a moot point and I shall not discuss it in the present paper. For an overview of the problem, see now G. Doerfer, Türkische und mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen, III (Wiesbaden, 1967), no.1161 (pp.176–79). Paul Pelliot was going to deal with this question in his note on Marco Polo’s ‘Kaan’, but he unfortunately never did. See his Notes on Marco Polo, I (Paris, 1959), p.302. The reading qa’an which I use throughout the paper is the Middle Mongolian form of Old Turkish (* Precl. Mong.) qa’yin. It corresponds to Persian qā’ān/qāqān.

3 The variant qa that we find in the Secret History of the Mongols (hereafter SH) deserves special study. For the text edition of the SH, see I. de Rachewiltz, Index to the Secret History of the Mongols (Bloomington, 1972), Part One.

4 See SH §21, 57, 74, 112, 149, 244, 272. In §244, qa is defined as the person whose function is ‘to hold the nation’ (ulus bar-i). With regard to ‘the lords and rulers of land and rivers’ (qafar usun-u ejet qat), cf. the later use of qa (Khalilka xan) as an honorific term for mountains: Xentei-xan, Delger-xan, Burin-xan, etc.


b. the title borne by the leaders of tribal confederations, including Činggis’ pan-Mongolian nation, hence Činggis-qan, Jamuqa-qan;

c. the title employed by the Mongols and, presumably, other tribes of Mongolia, for the rulers of other countries and the leaders of important tribes or tribal confederations outside Mongolia, e.g. Altan-qan of the Kitit, Burqan-qan of Qaśin or Tang’ut, Arslan-qan of the Qarlu’ut, Qan Melik of the Qangli;

d. a term (~qa; pl.qat) designating the leader of a tribe or confederation, the ruler of a nation, and the powerful nature spirits in the Altaic shamanistic conception of the world. See the SH: tus qa, qa ergü- qa muq-un qa, qafar usun-u ejet qa, etc.;

e. a term (~qa) meaning ‘qan-ship’, i.e. ‘rulership, government’, hence ‘pertaining to the government’, as in the expression qa bolqa- of SH §249 (where qa ‘government property’). This meaning seems to be an extension of 2(d).

After the death of Činggis-qan in 1227, his sons inherited the vast Mongol empire and each of them became qa in his respective dominion (ulus). Since these dominions had been established before Činggis’ death, the imperial princes were no doubt called qa already before 1227. In any event, the title of qa became unsuitable to designate the appointed successor to Činggis’ throne also because this was a title traditionally associated with the leader of a tribe or tribal confederation. Mongol expansion and world rule called for the adoption of another, more exalted title. As the Mongol court was then largely under Uighur Turkish cultural influence, the title they adopted was then ancient Turkish title of kingship, ’qan’. I think this retrospective conferment took place early in the reign of Qubilai (r. 1260–94). This title ceased to be used when the Mongols were overthrown and replaced by the Ming in 1368;

B. AFTER 1229

Qa’an was used as:

a. the imperial title and personal epithet of Ögödei — the first ruler to use this title — who, as a result, was thereafter usually referred to simply as ‘(the) Qa’an’, i.e. ‘the qa’an par excellence’;

b. the title borne by all subsequent emperors of the Činggiside line, even when their authority as qa’an of the greater Mongol empire had become largely nominal, as was the case already under Qubilai (r. 1260–94). This title ceased to be used when the Mongols were overthrown and replaced by the Ming in 1368;

c. The title retrospectively conferred on Činggis-qan and his most illustrious ancestors, both direct and collateral (Qubul, Qutula, Ambbaqi and Yisügi). I think this retrospective conferment took place early in the reign of Qubilai, perhaps in 1266 or thereabouts, but this point requires further investigation;

d. the term for ‘emperor’, with reference to (b), as in the expression qa’an-uly-iyar ‘by imperial edict’;

e. a term (~qa) designating the ruler of a nation or people (‘king, sovereign’), also used as a title, mainly in Buddhist texts, e.g. Ašug (=Aṣoka) qa’an.
2. Qan was used as:

a. the title borne by the imperial princes, son of Ćinggis, and their descendants, such as the khans of the Golden Horde and Il-Khans of Persia. Thus: Tolui-qan, Batu-qan, Ħülegü-qan. The implication of this usage is that these rulers, although sovereign (qan) in their respective dominions (ulus), were still subject to the supreme authority of the qa'än/emperor;13

b. a term (=A.2[d]) designating the ruler of a nation, and, specifically, the Mongol sovereign, this being the ruler of the Great Mongol nation and the world, e.g. qan ergü - (SH §269), yeke Mongol ulus-un qa'an, dalai-yin qaän (see below);

c. a term (=A.2[e]) meaning 'government'.14

With regard to the expressions yeke Mongol ulus-un qa'an and dalai-yin qaän quote above (b), some comments are necessary. In the SH §280, Ögödei is called dalai-yin qaän (read qaän),15 rendered into Chinese as hai-nei huang-ti 'emperor of [all] within the sea[s]'. The same concept is expressed in lines 2–4 of the legend of the famous seal of Güyüg: yeke Mongol ulus-un dalai-in qaän jrlγ 'Order of the ruler of the Great Mongol nation and of [all within] the seas (= the whole world').16 My interpretation of these lines diverges from that of Pelliot (‘du khahan oceânique du peuple des grands Mongols, l’ordre’),17 and of Mostaert and Cleaves (‘Ordre du Dalai-in qaän [m.à m.: “Souverain (de ce qui est à l’intérieur) des mers”] de l’empire des Grands Mongols’).18 In the first place, I understand the words yeke Mongol ulus as meaning 'the Great Mongol Nation' and not, as the above-mentioned authors do, 'the people of the Great Mongols' or 'the empire of the Great Mongols'. I base myself chiefly on the corresponding Turkish expression in the preamble of the letter of Güyüg to Innocent IV on which the seal in question is affixed. In the preamble, As W. Kotwicz noted long ago,19 the corresponding expression is kül uluγ ulus ‘the whole Great Nation (= the Great [Mongol] Nation).’20 The expression yeke Mongol ulus is to be compared to expressions like qamuy Mongol ulus ‘the entire Mongol nation’, olon Mongol ulus ‘the numerous Mongol people’, etc.21 The expression Mongol ulus ‘the Mongol nation (or people), without the attribute yeke 'great', is, of course well attested in the SH and other documents of the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries.22 Moreover, yeke ulus ‘the Great Nation’, that is, the Mongol state or world-empire, is a well-known expression in later Mongolian political writings.23 While I do not for a moment wish to deny the existence of the expression yeke 'Great Mongols', amply documented by Mostaert and Cleaves,24 I do not share their view that in the present instance this expression constitutes 'une locution adjective déterminant ulus'.25 The interpretation of Mostaert and Cleaves should also be reviewed in the light of the recent comments by N.C. Munkuev and J.-Ph. Geley.26

Secondly, I take the two expressions in the genitive case, i.e. yeke Mongol ulus-un and dalai-in, as both qualifying qaän (gen.), but independently of each other (‘of the ruler of the Great Mongol Nation and of the whole world’), whereas Mostaert and Cleaves understand ‘du Dalai-in qaän (m.à m.: “Souverain [de ce qui est à l’intérieur] des mers”) de l’empire des Grands Mongols’.27 This use of the double genitive without the conjunction ba is fairly common in Middle and Preclassical Mongolian.28 Moreover, the expression yeke Mongol ulus-un qaän ‘ruler of the Great Mongol Nation’ is well attested. It is found

† Professor de Rachewiltz made the following written addition in his offprint at this point: Cf. F.W. Cleaves in HJAS 46 (1986), 191, n.4.

8 Juvaini, and Rašīd al-Din following him, always refer to Güyük (r. 1246–48) as Güyük-xan, i.e. Güyük-qaän, not Güyük-qaän, no doubt because the legitimacy of his rule was questioned when, with Môngke (r. 1251–59), the imperial dignity passed from the line of Ögödei to that of Tolui. Cf. H.F. Schumann, in HJAS 19 (1956), p.315, n.11. However, Pelliot, loc. cit., was mistaken when he stated that Qubilai was the first Mongol ruler to take the title of qaän as a mere epithet. Like Ögödei, Güyük too bore the title of qaän during his short reign, as attested by the legend on his coins (Güyük-qaän). See M. Weiers, ‘Münzaufschriften auf Münzen mongolischer Il-khane aus dem Iran, Part One’, The Canada-Mongolia Review 4.1 (April 1978), 43. Weiers’ authority is E. Drouin’s article ‘Notice sur les monnaies mongoles faisant partie du receuil des documents de l’époque mongole publié par le prince Roland Bonaparté’, in Journal Asiatique, IX Sér., 7 (Mai–Juin 1896), [486–544], p.506. The coin in question is ‘un dirhem frappé en Géorgie par Davith V, en l’année 646’, i.e. in A.D. 1248. Coins issued during Güyük’s short reign are extremely rare, and I failed to find the one described by Drouin in the Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale in October 1981. I wish to express here my thanks to Mme A. Négre, Chargée des monnaies orientales, for her kind assistance in my research at the B.N.). However, Güyük’s title of qaän is confirmed by other documents in Latin in which Güyük is actually designated as chaam (= qaän). See Simon de Saint-Quentin, Histoire de Tartares, ed. J. Richard (Paris, 1965), pp.90, 92, 94; P. Pelliot, Les Mongols et la Papauté (rep. in one vol., by the Persian authors and on his coins (see Weiers, loc. cit.), he is also designated as qayn in the Mongolian inscription on the monument in his honour erected in 1257 (i.e. two years before his death), and in the legend of the seal that he bestowed on the Nestorian Patriarchate. See N. Poppe in CAJ 6 (1951), 17–18; J.R. Hamilton in Journal Asiatique 260 (1972), p.160.

9 See Pelliot, Notes on Marco Polo, II (Paris, 1963), p.657. In Iran the name and title of the qa’an ruling in China disappears from coinage after Qubilai’s death and the conversion of the Il-Khans to Islam (1295); and in the Persian tributary documents of the early Ming even the Chinese emperor is addressed as xän. See B. Spuler in The Encyclopedia of Islam, New Ed., Ill (Leiden–London, 1971), p.121b; Schurmann, op. cit., p.315, n.11.

10 The date for the beginning of this practice is uncertain, but it must be placed between 1260 and 1271, as the title qa’an is not used for Ćinggis by Juvaini, but it occurs already in Grigor of Akner’s History of the Nations of the Archers. See F.W. Cleaves in HJAS 12 (1949), pp.418–19. Thereafter, the title appears in Sino-Mongolian inscriptions
in Uighur-Mongol script, in the 'Phags-pa inscriptions — albeit irregularly (see below) — in the SH (see also below), and in the later Mongol sources, such as the seventeenth century chronicles and inscriptions. Rashid al-Din, like Juvaini, uses xan throughout for Činggis, but both xan and qa’an for his ancestors. A comparison of all the MSS of his work is, however, necessary to throw light on the peculiarity of his usage of qa’an. See, provisionally, Doerfer, op. cit., pp.150–53. Since posthumous titles were conferred on Činggis’ father Yisügei (or Yesügei) in 1266, it is possible that the extension of the title qa’an to Činggis originated about that time. See Pelliot and Hambis, op. cit., p.2.

11 See F.W. Cleaves in HJAS 17 (1954), pp.43 [4–166a7], 85.

14 Schurmann, op. cit., p.316, n.11; Poppe, op. cit., p.129a.
15 See Yuán-ch’ao pi-shih (Su-pu ts’ung-k’an ed.) S.2, S.2a. For the reading qa’an in place of qahan, see my discussion further on. On qa’an ~ qa’an, see F.W. Cleaves in HJAS 12 (1949), 107n.64; A. Mostaert, ibid. 13 (1950), p.347, n.58.
16 The legend in Uighur-Mongol script is reproduced as Figure 1, from Pelliot, Les Mongols et la Papauté, Pl. II (opposite p.22), but with some modifications. These are: 1) the filling in of the damaged areas of the border of the seal, and 2) the addition of the small circle at the end of line 6. This will give a better idea of how the original seal impression looked like. For the question of the final circle, corresponding of course to a dot or punctuation mark, see I. de Rachewiltz, ‘Some Remarks on the Stele of Yisüngge,’ in W. Heissig a.o. (eds), Tractata Altaica: Denis Sinor, sexagenario optime de rebus altaiisc merito dedicato (Wiesbaden, 1976), pp.503–504, n.39.

With regard to the term dalai (= Tu. talui), I cannot accept P.D. Buell’s interpretation of it as meaning here the qa’an’s ‘estate’. The special meaning of dalai, as the ‘imperial patrimony’, which developed later in Central and Western Asia, is definitely excluded in my view because of the overwhelming evidence from Mongol, Persian and Chinese sources to the effect that in the expression dalai-in qa’an with which we are concerned, dalai can only mean ‘all that is found in the land within the sea(s)’, hence ‘the whole world’. This is confirmed also by the corresponding imperial titles in the Persian sources discussed by V. Minorsky and on contemporary coins, such as pādšāh-i jahān ‘sovereign of the world’ and xān-i alam ‘ruler of the world’. The ruler in question, Güyüg, is designated in his coins with these titles, as well as with that of qa’an discussed earlier.

From the above it appears, then, that a Mongol sovereign like Güyüg and Möngke bore the title of ‘emperor’ (qa’an) because he was the formally elected and consecrated successor of Činggis, hence the legitimate inheritor of the highest dignity in the empire which, since Ögödei, pertained to the qa’an. He was, at the same time, designated as ‘ruler of the Great Mongol Nation’ (yeke Mongol ulus-un qa’an) and ‘ruler of the world’ (dalai-in qa’an), i.e. ruler of the Mongols (senu lato) and of the world at large — the whole world belonging by divine right to the Great Mongol Nation. Thus, the term qa’an found in the legend of Güyüg’s seal is not the imperial title borne by Güyük, which as we have seen was qa’an, but a term (see above, B 2[b]) occurring in, and an integral part of, the standard designations or appellations of all Mongol emperors. It follows, then, that from the point of view of the legend alone, the ‘seal of Güyük’ could have been the one belonging to Ögödei or even to Činggis-qa’an, and doubts concerning the origin of this seal have, indeed, been expressed by Kotwicz, although on different grounds.
The above covers, I think, the main points. I should mention, however, that as with almost all Mongol institutions and practices, there is also a certain inconsistency in the actual usage of the terms qan and qa’an. This is particularly evident in the ‘Phags-pa inscriptions, where ‘Jiŋgis qan’ alternates with ‘Jiŋgis qa’an’ (qan in Ligeti’s transcription). In the Sino-Mongolian inscriptions in Uighur-Mongol script studied by Cleaves we observe the same phenomenon. In my opinion, the reason for this inconsistency is that, in the case of Čiŋgis-qa’an, after he was retrospectively conferred the title qa’an, both forms existed side by side. In written language and the administration, the Mongols relied heavily on people of different countries, background and culture, and had no means of effectively and strictly enforcing uniformity of style and usage, since most of the Mongol officials lacked competence in such matters. This largely accounts for our own misunderstanding of their practices, as exemplified in the case of Čiŋgis qa’an, which deserves full re-examination. As with almost all Mongol institutions and practices, there is also a certain inconsistency in the actual usage of the terms qan and qa’an. This is especially evident in the ‘Phags-pa inscriptions, where ‘Jiŋgis qa’an’ alternates with ‘Jiŋgis qa’an’ (as distinguished from the other meanings of the word) borne by members of the Mongol ruling clan being substituted with that of qa’an (–qa’an). However, lack of accuracy and consistency on the part of editors and copyists was responsible also for (1) cases where qa’an was retained where it should have been changed to qa’an, and (2) changing qa’an into qa’an in cases where the change was not warranted. Similar inconsistencies are also found in the Persian sources (where they may be attributable in some cases to copyists was responsible also for (1) cases where qa’an was retained where it should have been changed to qa’an, and (2) changing qa’an into qa’an in cases where the change was not warranted. Similar inconsistencies are also found in the Persian sources (where they may be attributable in some cases to copyists, in others to the sources used by the author), in Uighur documents of the Mongol period, and elsewhere. The misinterpretation of the role of the word qa’an in the legend of Güyûg’s seal has unfortunately further clouded the issue. Another problem related to qa’an and qa’an which deserves full re-examination is the influence Chinese, Turkish and Nestorian political and religious elements in early Mongol statecraft, but the problem is too complex to be discussed here.

Figure 2

See note 30

20 Cf. Kotwicz’s rendering (loc. cit.) ‘entier (universel) grand empire’. Pelliot’s rendering is ‘grand peuple tout entier’. See Les Mongols et la Papauté, p.22. See also below, n.30. The words kür uul uulus are of course not the exact counterpart of the Mongolian, as this would be uul Majol ulus. This expression is actually found on a coin struck in Tiflis in A.H. 644 (A.D. 1244–45). See Sir G. Clauson, An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth Century Turkish (Oxford, 1972), p.153a, s.v. ‘ulul’. However, they constitute an interpretation, or close approximation, of the Mongolian expression. Cf. M.A. Seifeddini, Monete eti i dervnnee obratvennie v Azerbaïdzhane XII–XV vv., I (Baku, 1978), pp.159–64.
21 See, for example, line 2 of the so-called ‘Stone of Chingis’, and SH §272. Cf. I. de Rachewiltz, op. cit., p.487, where my rendering ‘the empire of all the Mongols’ should now read ‘the entire Mongol Nation’.
22 See SH §202, and A. Mostaert, Le matériel mongol du Housa i i i iu de Hounq-qaun (1389), I, ed. par I. de Rachewiltz avec l’assistance de A. Schönbaum (Bruxelles, 1977), p.9 (3v, 5).
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27 Cf. Pelliot’s rendering ‘du khan océanique du peuple des grands Mongols’ (my emphasis).
For the text and transcription of the preamble, see Fig. 2 and Pelliot, op. cit., pp.15, 22. Pelliot’s rendering (ibid., pp.16, 22) ‘[nous] le khan océanique du grand peuple tout entier’ is not correct. Equally faulty, therefore, are those citations or translations of the preamble by authors (like G. Soranzo, A. Van den Wyngaert, F. Risch, E. Veogelin, N.P. Sastina, B. Spuler, J.A. Boyle, J.J. Saunders, etc.) who followed Pelliot’s interpretation. A notable exception is Doerfer (op. cit., no.1672, p.634), who rendered it as follows: ‘Chan des machtvollen großen (Mongolen-) Staates und des Welkreises’. Cf. also his remark (loc. cit.) that ‘das ist in etwa eine Übersetzung des mo. Siegels’.


In Iranica. Twenty Articles, University of Teheran, Vol.775 (1964), p.65.

As I explained there, a reproduction of the coin bearing the legend ‘Gūyüg qa’ān’ is not available to me at present; however, thanks to Prof. Weiers of Bonn I have obtained a photograph, reproduced in Fig. 3, of Gūyüg’s coin from Sayyid Jamāl Turābī Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s Catalogue of Mongol coins from Iran (see Weiers, op. cit., p.42, n.2). The full text of the legend is: 1 Guyūk 2 pādišāh-[i] 3 Jahān xān-[i] 4 ālam. See ibid., p.43. For pād(i)šāh =qan, see Schurmann, op. cit., p.315, n.11, and Ligeti in Acta Orientalia Hung 14 (1962), p.40, n.57. As is known, neither John of Pian di Carpine nor William of Rubruck distinguishes between qan and qān, and in their reports they use chan (~ kan, can, cham) throughout, whereas Marco Polo seems to make a distinction between the two. See Pelliot, Notes on Marco Polo, I, p.302. In the case of Pian di Carpine and Rubruck, their ‘chan’ obviously corresponds to both qan and qān (‘qa’an’); however, this problem deserves further study. For additional references to coins minted under Ögödei and Gūyüg containing the title qa’an, see ibid., pp.155–156, 158, 165–66; E.A. Pakhomov, Money Gruzī (Tbilisi, 1970), p.119.


See Kotwicz, op. cit., p.278, n.1.


For example, Qabul-qan in $2139, 140; Činggis-qan in $255.

For example, Ong-qahan in $510, Altan-qañ in $8250, 251. See Pelliot et Hambis, op. cit., pp.15, 212.

See, for example, L. Ligeti in Acta Orientalia Hung 27 (1973), 15, n.44. Cf. also the Uighur text of the Sino-Uighur inscription in honour of the Īduq Qut of Qočo of 1334. See Geng Shimin and J. Hamilton in Turcica 13 (1980), 51a.

For some interesting insights, see H. Franke, From Tribal Chieftain to Universal Emperor and God: The Legitimation of the Yuan Dynasty (München, 1978), pp.18–19, 26ff.