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The name of the Mongols in Asia and Europe: A reappraisal

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 13th 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

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1. The Mongols first appear (under this name) as a small branch of the Shih-wei 室韋 tribe which in the 9th century resided in the valley of the Argun River near the present Sino-Russian border. In the following two centuries, no doubt as a result of internal and external pressures, they moved westwards, almost certainly along the Kerulen River (Xerlen Gol), eventually settling at the sources of this river on the wooded slopes of the sacred mountain Burqan Qaldun of The Secret History of the Mongols, i.e. present-day Kentei Qan (Xentii Xan) in northern Mongolia. Except for their mention in the Tang Histories (see below n. 2) in connection with the Shih-wei, and a few other tantalizingly brief and unlightening references to them in the Chinese sources (c.a. 1071 and 1084), the Mongols do not reappear historically as such until the 12th century. All we have for the preceding period are semi-historical accounts and legends preserved in The Secret History of the Mongols and in Raşid al-Din’s great work. See P. Ratchievsky, Les Che-wei étaient-ils des Mongols?, in Mélanges de sinologie offerts à Montier Paul Demidov (Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1966), t. 1, pp. 225–51 [Bibliothèque de l’Institut des hautes études chinoises, XX]; Idem, Činggis-khan. Sein Leben und Wirken (Wiesbaden, Steiner Verlag, 1983), pp. 5–14 (also for earlier references to P. Pelliot, Wang Kuo-wei, etc.). Cf. also Louis Hamis, L’histoire des Mongols avant Gengis-khan d’après les sources chinoises et mongoles, et la documentation

transcription meng-wu 蒙兀 (*mung-nguot) represents an original *Mongyut or *Mongyul. In the corresponding passage of the Hsin T'ang-shu, in place of meng-wu we find meng-wa 蒙瓦 (*mung-ngwa), i.e. *Mongya. Although this may well be a mere graphic variant of meng-wu, as claimed by Pelliot, it is possible that *Mongya is a phonetic variant of *Mongyut/*Mongyul in the form of *Mongya(l), as suggested by H. Serruys. If the correct

conservée par Rašid-ud-Dīn, T'oung Pao, 14 (1970), pp. 125–33. Besides the Shih-wei “Mongols” (who appear to have been a people of mixed Mongol and Tungus culture), other Mongolian-speaking tribes had had intercourse with China before the historical Mongols; those may be regarded therefore as “Proto-Mongols.” Among them are the T'o-pa (*Tabyač) founders of the Wei dynasty (386–534) and the Khitans who established the Liao dynasty (907–1125). However, the identification of these tribes as Mongols or Proto-Mongols is difficult and controversial.

2. See Chiu T'ang-shu 舊唐書 (all references to the Chinese Standard Histories are to the Su-pa ti'ang-k'ao 四部叢刊 edition), 149B, 10a; Hsin T'ang-shu 新唐書 239, 7a. Strictly speaking, the transcription *mung-nguot would postulate an original *Mungyut or, less strictly, *Mongyul (since Chinese cannot render the final ˀ). However, the character *mung/meng 蒙, as later the character meng, was used to render Mongolian mong, because Chinese has no other way of rendering that sound. Moreover, we know from the Latin transcriptions of the name that in the first half of the 13th century the vowel of the first syllable was definitely ə, not u. Since in Mongolian the vowel ə of the first accented syllable is quite stable, there is no reason to believe that it could have developed from an earlier u. Therefore, the Chiu T'ang-shu transcription must be interpreted as representing *Mongyut or *Mongyul.


4. See H. Serruys, Mongol: Mayal and Mongus: Mayus, Acta Orientalia Hung., 36 (1982), pp. 475 ff. However, Serruys reconstructs *mung-nguot (su) as Mongyol, and for him Mongyol < Mongyal (ibid. p. 478), as Onon “the Onon R.” < Onan, oon “many” < olan, etc. (For this common phenomenon, see N. Poppe, Remarks on the Vocalism of the Second Syllable in Mongolian, Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, 14, 1951, pp. 194–7.) This is also the view shared by Poppe, op. cit. pp. 189–90. In our case, however, the form *Mongyal is simply due to the weakening of the vowel of the second (unstressed) syllable which makes the u sound like an a. For example, *ordu (< Türkic ordu) “the khan’s encampment or palace” > Middle Mongolian ordo (through progressive assimilation), but orda in John of Pian di Carpinc’s and William of Rubruck’s reports. The “Caracaron” (= Qara Qorum) of one of the mss. of the Historia Mongolorum may be a metathetical form of “Caracoran”, cf. the “Carachora” of the Catalan Map. See
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The 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 13th 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.


6. The names in Chinese transcription found in the Ch’iu T’ung-shu 191, 3a; in the Wu-tai shih 五代史 73, 9a; and in the Liao-shih 遼史 33, 8b, 31, 9a, and 46, 5a, which have been hypothetically reconstructed as *mónγal and *mengγal, 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. 476–7. Cf. K. A. Wittfogel and Fêng Chia-shêng, History of Chinese Society. Liao (907–1127), Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, N.S. 36, 1946 (Philadelphia, 1949), p. 91, n. 23.

7. The form Mongγol (< *Mongγul) is found e.g., in Simon of St. Quentin’s Historia Tartarorum. See S. De Saint-Quentin, Histoire des Tartares, ed. by J. Richard (Paris, Paul Geuthner, 1961), p. 92 (XXXII, 34): “Ipsi quoque Tartari propriis locuplo se vocant Monguli sive Mongol.” The form Mongγul is the one regularly attested in the Chinese transcriptions of the 13th and 14th centuries (in the Yuan hien-chang 元典章, Yuan-shih 元史, etc.) as meng-k’u 蒙古 (*Mongγul); it is also the one found in Marco Polo’s book, but unfortunately in a passage of doubtful authenticity. See A. C. Moule and P. Pelliot, Marco Polo: The Description of the World (London, Routledge, 1938), I, p. 183: “And therefore the Tartars are sometimes called Mongul.” As for Mongal, it is found in this form in John of Pian di Carpine’s account (e.g. in the very title of the work: Historia Mongalorum), and in the Uighurized and contracted form Moal (= Mo’al) in William of Rubruck’s Itinerarium (Van den Wyngaert, op. cit. p. 205 et passim), about which see further on.
The Mongols’ name is first recorded in Uighur script (which the Mongols had adopted early in the 13th century) in the legend of the seal of Güyūg (r. 1246-48) on the famous letter to Pope Innocent IV (1246) in the form MWNKKWL, i.e. Mongγul or Mongγul.8 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.”9

(Regarding the etymology of the name Mongγul, the ending γul may be a suffix denoting a clan, tribe or people.10 If so, we are left with the root mong the origin and meaning of which...

8. It is in the last word in the second line of the legend. See I. de Rachewiltz, Qan, Qa’an and the Seal of Güyūg, in K. Sagaster and M. Weiers (eds.), Documents Barbarorum. Festschrift für W. Heissig zum 70. Geburtstag. Veröffentlichungen der Societas Uralo-Altaica, 18 (Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), pl. I (p. 274). The name Mongγol (or Mongγul) occurs also in the second line of the so-called “Stone of Chingis,” i.e. the stele of Chingis Qan’s nephew Yisıningg, 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 Yisıningg” in Walter Heissig et al. (eds.), Tractata altaica: Denis Sinor, sexagenario optimo de rebus altaicis merito dedicata (Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), pp. 487-508, esp. pp. 494-5. The Uighur script does not distinguish between o and u, therefore the Mongols’ name can be read Mongγol, Mongγul and Mongγul.

9. I.e. in Script (or Written) Mongolian; however, “Mongγul” is still occasionally employed by Mongolists. See, e.g., J. R. Krueger, Materials for an Oirat-Mongolian to English Citation Dictionary (Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Publications, 1978-84), I-III, p. 602. Mongγul is also the form given in F. D. Lessing (gen. ed.), Mongolian-English Dictionary (Berkeley/Los Angeles, Univ. of California Press/London, Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 542b-54a (several reprints by the Mongolia Society, Inc., Bloomington, Ind.). This is no doubt ultimately due to G. J. Ramstedt’s influence. See his Kalmückisches Wörterbuch (Helsinki, Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura, 1931), p. 264b: mongul, mongol. Some scholars in Japan, like S. Imanishi (1907-79), also use Mongγul 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 Mongγol v. Mongγul. 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 Mongγur in which the word for Mongol is Mongγur (mogGuor—mogGor).

10. As we find, e.g., in the word Sartγul (Middle Mongolian Sarta’ul) “Muslim native of Central or Western Asia,” from sart = Turkic sert (“Sanskrit sārtha “caravan, wealthy”) “an Iranian; merchant.” See G. Clauson, An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 846a.
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still elude us.\textsuperscript{11} Other etymologies have been proposed, but they are hypothetical and speculative.\textsuperscript{12}

In the 12th and 13th 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 (Mogol); only occasionally, but never in Central or Western Asia, do we find the name Mongol (Mongol).

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

\begin{enumerate}
  \item Rašid al-Din says that the word “Mongol” was originally “Mūngōl” (mūng-īl) meaning “feeble” and “naive”—clearly a folk etymology still current in Rašid’s own time which, as we shall see, was not without some justification. (Rašid naturally thought that mūng-īl was a Mongolian expression and, in this respect, he was of course mistaken.) Other proposed etymologies include: \< Mongolian mūngū “silver”\; Mongolian Mong I’l “the Mong (? River”\; Chinese mēng “fierce, valiant”\; and Yakut mūgol “great, big.” See Ratchnevsky, Cinggis-khan, pp. 5–6, n. 23; G. Doerfer, Der Name der Mongolen bei Rašid ad-Din, \textit{Central Asiatic Journal}, 14 (1970), pp. 68–77.
\end{enumerate}
name Tatar became the common, general designation for all Mongol- and Turkic-speaking peoples of Mongolia just as, in the Middle Ages, “Frank” designated any western European. The Persian historian Raṣūd-al-Dīn (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 Dašt-i Qīpčaq and Syria, and to the Arab populations of north Africa, indeed as far as the Maghreb.

Because of this, the Mongolian tribesmen in Činggis Qan’s time were also called Tatars by the Chinesē 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 were, 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.

The Tatars thus enjoyed a posthumous, albeit undeserved glory (or notoriety) as their name penetrated Europe in the first decades of the 13th century from the south through the

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14. On the Tatar tribe see Račhinevskiy, Činggis-khan, pp. 3–4, and the literature cited on p. 4, n. 15. Pelliot (Histoire des campagnes, p. 2) makes some interesting remarks on the manner in which the tribal name Tatar became the generic name for the Mongols and also for part of the Turks. Pelliot’s remarks were prompted by Raṣūd al-Dīn’s statement on this very question. See below, n. 15. Cf. S. G. Klyashtorny, Gosudarstva Tatar v Central’noi Azii (dočingisova epoka), in V. M. Solncev et al. (eds.), Mongolica. K 750-letiyu “Sokrovennogo skazaniya” (Moscow, Nauka, 1993), pp. 139–47; and Central Asiatic Journal, 36 (1992), pp. 72–83.

15. See Raṣūd-ad-Dīn, Sbornik latopisi, trsl. by L. A. Khetaqurov (Moscow/ Leningrad, AN SSSR, 1932), pp. 73, 101–3.

16. For the Chinese generic designation Ta-ta (Tartar/Mongol), see Meng-Ta pi-lu und Hei-Ta shib-lieh. Chinesische Gesandtenberichte über die frühen Mongolen 1221 und 1237, trsl., ann., and edited by 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).
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Near East and the crusaders, and via the Cumans, the Bulgars and other populations of the Volga region 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 Tartari in western Europe because of the phonetic affinity with the word Tartar (Hell), and the invaders’ resemblance (in popular imagination) with devils.17

And so the Mongols, assimilated on the one hand 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 13th century

19. This fact is epitomized in Marco Polo’s statement cited above, n. 7.
chronicles and envoys’ 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 denasalized (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 13th 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 Moγul and Moγal (Μογόλ in Chaghatai), corresponding of course to Mongolian Mongol and Mongyal respectively; the Persians called them Moγόλ/Muyul and Moγάλ/Muyāl (according to the different transcriptions of the same words); in Arabic we have Mughūl (as in Persian); in Hindustani Mugh(a); in Armenian Muyal; in Syriac Mūglāyē—a metathetical form from Mūgāl; and in Greek Μουγούλεα (from Muyul).22 All the vowel changes in these forms can be easily explained, but what happened to the *n*?

20. See above, n. 7.
22. Turkic Moγal is evidenced by William of Rubruck’s “Moal” which can only be a development of Moγal (> Mo’al > Moal), a form that must be either Turkic or Persian, not Mongolian. The transcriptions from Persian sources (Juvainī, Rašīd al-Dīn, etc.) vary from author to author because of the ambiguity of *o/*u in Persian. In Juvainī the usual form of the name is Moγόλ/Muyāl—the form used also by Rašīd—but occasionally we find also Moγάλ/Muyāl. It is my opinion that Persian Moγάλ/Muyāl, as well as Moγόλ/Muyul, reflect Turkic forms. Cf. also modern Uighur (Aksu) Moγal.

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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 \( \text{Moŋγul} \sim \text{Moyul} \) is certainly possible in the Turkic languages, but in Uighur we find only the non-nasalized forms \( \text{Moyul} \) and \( \text{Moŋγal} \). When it comes to the name of the nation there is no alternation: the form with \(-ŋ-\) 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 denasalized 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 \( \text{Moŋγul} (= \text{Moyol}) \) 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 a contract or business transaction), but not in the case of the name of the ruling nation.


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, i.e. Monγol (\( ? \) Moŋγul) Buğa. On the basis of this reading, L. Ligeti, loc. cit., gives the
The answer, I think, may be provided by a passage from the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa* in Uighur (the *Altun yaraq*) in the illustration at hand (Figure 1).²⁵

Uighur word for “Mongol” as “Monyul.” This is not correct, since the word in question is the first element, i.e. 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 MWNKWL may well be Turkic *mugul* (= *mugul*) “foolish.” It is interesting to note that in this name we have a good example of *γγ > η* (Mongol/ Monyul > Mongol/Mogul). Cf. the *Mukaddimat al-Adab, loc. cit.*, where the Mongol form is “Monyul” not “Mongol.”

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Fig. 2. Seal of the Great Khan Güyük (r. 1246–48).

In Uighur there is a word munyul meaning “unwise, fool” which in Uighur script is written exactly as the name Mongyol (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 -ŋ- ~ -γ-)—would have easily solved the problem. This is why, in my opinion, Mongyol became Moyul 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.”