

MÁRTON VÉR

The postal system of the Mongol Empire in northeastern Turkestan

Ph.D. Dissertation

OUTLINE

Szeged

2016

Introduction

During the last three decades the study of the Mongol Empire went through a huge development and was affected by fundamental changes. These changes and development – of which a good deal can be credited to the works of Thomas T. Allsen – were not accomplished mainly because of the inclusion of new primary sources in the research, but through the alteration of the approaches which were applied by scholars. The two main characteristics of these changes are the implementation of cultural history, and the application of the so-called holistic perspective, i.e. the study of the Mongol Empire not only in local or regional perspectives, but in its entire Eurasian context. With these new approaches in the study of the Mongol Empire plenty of new topics emerged, which were earlier less studied, such as the economic, cultural and religious exchanges in Eurasia during the Mongol period (13th–14th century). Due to these new studies our image of the Mongols has changed fundamentally. Most of the contemporary scholars of the history of the Mongol Empire do not deny the initial brutality and devastation of the Mongol conquest, but they stress more and more the importance of the Mongols as the founders of those macro structures (political, economic, religious and cultural) in Eurasia which led to unprecedented cultural and economic exchange. Moreover, research over the last thirty years pointed out that many of the administrative and political structures of the Mongol Empire are still vivid in the early-modern states of Eurasia, and that the effects of the cultural changes that they caused, are still felt. With regard to the above mentioned facts, the Mongols actively participated in the transition of the “Old World” into the early-modern ages.

One of the numerous topics which gained more attention in this last period is the postal system of the empire. On the one hand, thanks to the general interest in the communication and information history, the postal systems of many pre- and early modern states and empires were subject to increasing scholarly attention, while on the other hand, due to its implicit role in the connection and inner cohesion of the vast Mongol Empire more and more scholars devoted some paragraphs or a separate chapter of their works to the subject. It is important to call attention that in the pre-modern states the postal system had a slightly different meaning than in the modern period. In contrary to their modern successors these pre-modern institutions did not serve the transmission of personal correspondence of civilians, but their main aim was to enable

and support the communication of the state (transport of couriers, foreign and domestic envoys and other officers of the state, etc.). In the case of the Mongols these duties were combined with the support of the commercial activities within the empire. In the literature as well as in the dissertation the expressions post system and postal system, as well as the Turkic and Mongolian technical terms for the postal stations (and probably for the postal system in general), *yam*-system and *ǰam*-system are used as synonyms for postal relay system. In this outline only postal system and *yam*-system are used to avoid confusion.

Parallel to this process in the research of the history of the Mongol Empire, the philological study of the Old Uyghur civil documents and Middle Mongolian documents made a significant progress, too. In the present study, the term Uyghur civil documents refers to a group of those sources, which derive from Eastern or Chinese Turkestan (eastern part of present day Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the Peoples Republic of China) and from the Gansu corridor, mainly from the vicinity of Dunhuang (today in Gansu Province in the Peoples Republic of China), and which are not religious texts. These documents were written in a semi-cursive or cursive style of the Uyghur script in Turkic language during the West Uyghur (9th–12th centuries) and Mongol periods (13th–14th centuries).

These changes and progress in the study of the history of the Mongol Empire and in the study of the Old Uyghur and Middle Mongolian documents form the basis on which this study came into existence. This dissertation is intended to fulfil a double aim: on the one hand, it aims at presenting a critical edition of the Old Uyghur and Middle Mongolian documentary sources unearthed from northeastern Turkestan concerning the postal system of the Mongol Empire, including the philological study of this material. On the other hand, these results of the philological research will be interrelated with our existing knowledge about the postal system and placed in a broader historical frame of interpretation. In this way the historical frame of interpretation will be broadened.

Structure of the dissertation

Those both aims outlined above have determined the structure of the dissertation. The present study consists of two parts: the first part contains the delineation of the historical background, the general sources of the *yam*-system and their research history, the

description of the Uyghur and Mongolian documents and three case studies concerning the material; the second part contains the research history of the expeditions which unearthed the documents under discussion, the research history of the documents and the critical edition of those sources with an English translation of the documents and appendices. In the following the structure of the dissertation will be described chapter by chapter.

The first chapter gives a brief survey of the historical background of the subject from the fall of the Uyghur Khaganate (840) till the dissolution of the Chaghadaid *ulus* in the middle of the 14th century with particular regard to those events which affected the postal system. The second chapter presents an overview of the most important traditional sources of the *yam*-system, i.e. the *Secret History of the Mongols*, the Chinese sources (*Yuanshi*, *Jingshi dadian* and the *Yuan dianzhang*), the works of the Persian historiographers (Juvainī, Rashīd al-Dīn and Vaṣṣāf), the Latin (Carpini, C. de Bridia, Rubruck, Marco Polo and Pegolotti) and various further sources (*History of the Nation of the Archers*, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, etc.). The third chapter presents the research history of the postal relay system of the Mongol Empire in five sub-chapters as: 1) the creation of the postal system 2) purposes and services of the postal system 3) administration and finances 4) runners (Mong.: *güyükçi*) 5) inheritance of the *yam*-system. The fourth chapter contains a detailed description of the material (i.e. the Uyghur and Mongolian documents) and some of the results of the philological study of the documents. The following three chapters (Chapter V–VII) are case studies concerning particular questions concerning the material and the *yam*-system. The subjects of these three studies were chosen in order to show the different aspects of utility of the (Old) Uyghur and Middle Mongolian documents. The fifth chapter deals with the animal terminology detected from the Uyghur documents (e.g.: *ulag*, *at*, *at ulag*, *boguz at*, etc.) to show how the results of the philological investigation of the material can contribute to our knowledge about the postal system of the Mongol Empire and broaden it. The sixth chapter re-evaluates one of the most controversial issues concerning the *yam*-system, i.e. the origin of Mongol Empire's postal system through the comparative analysis of the linguistic data, historical sources and the Uyghur documents. The seventh chapter deals with the different aspects of relations between the religious communities and the postal system of the Mongol Empire. This chapter focuses on the social aspects of the

postal system and builds the final part of the first part of the dissertation. The second part of the dissertation starts with an introduction concerning the structure of the critical edition, i.e. the order of the documents, the arrangement of the entries, the system of transliteration and transcription, etc. In order to gain a better understanding for the edition of the documents the research history of the material is presented (Chapter VIII in sub-chapters: 1) the research history of the expeditions and the related excavations which unearthed the documents (8.1), 2) and the research history of the philological study of the material (8.2). This chapter is followed by the critical edition of the (Old) Uyghur (Chapter IX) and Middle Mongolian (Chapter X) documents. The conclusion as the final part of the dissertation (Chapter XI) is to be found after the critical edition of the documents. It is divided into three parts: the first two give a historical survey of the postal system in time (11.1) and space (11.2), as it can be reconstructed from the comparative analysis of the documents of northeastern Turkestan and other sources of the *yam*-system while the last part (11.3) contains the bare enumeration of the results of the research offered in the dissertation on hand and a short description of the prospects for further studies in the field. The conclusion is followed by a series of appendices, i.e. the vocabularies of the Uyghur and Mongolian documents, list of personal names and toponyms of the documents, tables, maps and the bibliography.

Results

1. The most important result of the dissertation is the critical edition and translation of the Uyghur and Mongolian documents concerning the postal system of the Mongol Empire. From the edited 63 Uyghur documents 33 have never been translated into any western language, more precisely 18 were never published, and for 15 exist only Chinese or Japanese translations so far. On the one hand, with this edition the study of these documents is possible for those specialists of the history of the Mongol Empire who has no access to the Turkic and Mongolian original sources. On the other hand, this edition provides some further texts concerning the history of the Chaghadaid *ulus*, what is the less studied realm of the Mongol Empire due to the limited amount of sources.

2. In the fourth chapter a new assumption is proposed concerning the military background (Yuan intervention and their military-agricultural colonization) of those *käzig* documents which are related to the postal system.
3. Furthermore a new group of the documents, the so-called official accounts are identified, which were issued on the local level of the administration concerning the finances of the postal stations.
4. In the last section of the fourth chapter as a result of the comparative analysis of the Uyghur and Mongolian documents the different levels of the Mongol administration in the Uyghur territories were reconstructed.
5. In the fifth chapter new interpretations were offered for two technical terms: *ulag* and *boguz at*. In the Uyghur documents of the 13th–14th centuries *ulag* referred to any kind of livestock which were the property of the postal system of the Mongol Empire or were used by it.
6. In the same sources *boguz at* is used as a term for ‘led horse’ or ‘fodder(-carrying) horse’. In general we can state that a very sophisticated system of technical terms was in use in the postal system of the Mongol Empire, which differed from the ordinary animal denominations and was based on practical considerations (e.g.: *kısga at* ‘short (range) horse’ or *yüdgü äšgäk* ‘a donkey to carry’ etc.) .
7. In the sixth chapter the continuous tradition of the maintenance of a postal system in Central Asia from the middle of the 7th century was reconstructed, that most probably highly influenced the formation of the Mongol postal system in the 13th century.
8. If we take into account all the information collected from the documents (Chapter IV–VI) becomes obvious that one of the main duties of the *yam*-system was to supply animals for the travellers. Seemingly a whole sub-system of the postal system was responsible for the uninterrupted supply of animals, what according to the new interpretation of the word *ulag*, should be called *ulag*-system.
9. The results of the seventh chapter can be summarized as follow: at least three different aspects of the relations between the religious communities of the Mongol Empire and the imperial postal system can be detected: the taxation, the

requisitions and the use of the postal system by the clergy. Of course these three aspects were interrelated closely. On the one hand, concerning the taxation it could be proved that in the Turfan region already before the Mongol conquest the clergy (or at least the Church of the East) was involved in the maintenance of the local postal system. Later, in the Mongol period, in the local and regional administrative levels the members of the clergy and the religious communities in general were subjects to burdens concerning the maintenance of the postal system, however sometimes they managed to get exemption decrees from the higher levels of the government. This practice was surmised by several earlier scholars concerning the tax exemption decrees, but was not proved in details concerning the Turfan region. On the other hand, it could be proved that the religious communities benefited from the operation of the *yam*-system. They had access sometimes on the highest level to its facilities and could use it during their pious activities. On the whole it can be said that those one-sided contemporary accounts and the later scholarly descriptions are mostly false. The relations between the religious communities of the Mongol Empire and the postal system were not unequivocally good or bad, but rather varied with advantages and disadvantages for both sides.

10. In general, the results of the dissertation strengthens the theory that the postal system was one of the most important institutions of the empire in northeastern Turkestan – and, probably on the other territories of the empire, too – since almost every group of the society (postal households, army, clergy, merchants, etc.) had some kind of interrelation with it. In general, the fact that the Mongol Empire was the largest inland empire of the pre-modern history explains the importance of the postal system. In particular, the position of East Turkestan between the Chinese and Iranian territories increased the necessity of a well-functioning postal system in the region.

In the conclusion of his indispensable book (*Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World*) Adam J. Silverstein stressed the simplicity of the pre-modern imperial postal systems: their main aim was to connect the centre of the empire with the provinces and in doing so they supplied provisions and animals for the couriers in order to grant the

highest possible speed of the flow of information. In my opinion the results of the present study provide the basis for arguing that, however, the services of the *yam*-system were more or less simple (mounts, provision, fodder, etc.), but the system itself and its social relations were highly complex. The functioning of the postal system within the different territories of the Mongol Empire was effected not only by the geographical, social and economic conditions, but also by the local cultural traditions as well. In the special case of the postal system in northeastern Turkestan the interactions between the Chinese and the Central Asian traditions are well attested in the documents and some territorial differences (e.g. concerning the usage of camels) could be detected as well.

The further prospects for the study of the postal system in the Mongol Empire can be divided into two levels: micro and macro levels. Under the micro level the further philological and historical study of the *yam*-system is meant. In spite of the results of the present study several philological and historical questions concerning the material and the postal system of the Mongol Empire in northeastern Turkestan still remained open. One of the prospects for further studies of this topic is to answer these questions. The yet unpublished documents and the ever growing number of the new findings in general make it probable to answer some of the remaining questions in the near future. Beside the research of the Uyghur and Mongolian material the study of the Chinese texts and the comparative analysis of both groups of sources could be the next step in this field of research. On a macro level there are at least two directions of further research. On the one hand, as Allsen proposed in his review on Silverstein's book, the comparative analysis of the imperial postal systems could bring some new results. On the other hand, the comparative analysis of the Islamic, Central and East Asian administrative traditions in general, could contribute in large to our understanding of the pre-modern empires.

Publications related to the topic of the Ph.D. dissertation

Információtörténeti markerek a Mongol Birodalom történetében. [Information historical markers in the history of the Mongol Empire] *Aetas* 2012/4: 144–154.

A Mongol Birodalom postahálózatának kutatástörténete. [The research history of the Mongol Empire's postal relay system] In: *Ábrándjaink kora. X. Nemzetközi Vámbéry Konferencia*. Szerk.: Keller László. Dunaszerdahely, 2013. 118–144.

A pusztából a kancelláriába, avagy hogyan lettek az ujugrok steppei nomádokból a Mongol Birodalom tanítói és szürke eminenciásai. [From the steppe to the chancellery. How did the nomadic Uyghurs become the instructors and éminence grises of the Mongols] In: *A megértés mint hivatás. Köszöntő kötet Erdélyi Ágnes 70. születésnapjára*. Szerk.: Bárány Tibor et al. Budapest, 2014. 327–344.

A Mongol Birodalom postahálózatának ellátmányi utasításai Kelet-Turkesztánból. [The provision orders of the Mongo Empire's postal relay system from East Turkestan] In: *Európából Ázsiába, és vissza – ismét. XI. Nemzetközi Vámbéry Konferencia*. Szerk.: Keller László. Dunaszerdahely, 2014. 118–144.

Animal terminology in the Uyghur documents concerning the postal system of the Mongol Empire. [Forthcoming 2016, in the volume of the *Substandard-Vokabular der türkischen und mongolischen Sprachen* conference]

Religious communities and the postal system of the Mongol Empire. [Forthcoming 2016, in the volume of the *The Role of Religion in Turkic Culture (RRTC) Conference*]

The origins of the postal system of the Mongol Empire. [Forthcoming 2016, in the *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*]

Conference papers related to the topic of the Ph.D. dissertation

2011. szeptember 30. International Conference on Integrated Information. (Kos, Görögország): *The Role of Information and Disinformation in the Establishment of the Mongolian Empire*.

2012. október 5. X. Nemzetközi Vámbéry Konferencia. (Dunaszerdahely, Szlovákia): *Információtörténeti markerek a Mongol Birodalom történetében*. [Information historical marker sin the history of the Mongol Empire]

2013. június 17. VIII. Medievisztikai PhD Konferencia. (Szeged): *A Mongol Birodalom postahálózatára vonatkozó belső keletkezésű írott források*. [Internal written sources concerning of the Mongol Empire's postal system]

2014. április 25. Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Collegium Turfanicum. (Berlin, Németország): *The postal system of the Mongol Empire according to the Old Uygur and Mongol civil documents - work in progress*.

2014. május 21. SZTE-BTK Történelemtudományi Doktori Iskola, Medievisztikai Program. Műhelyszemináriumi előadások. (Szeged): *A Mongol Birodalom postahálózata az ótörök civil dokumentumok tükrében – a kutatás új eredményei*. [The postal system of the Mongol Empire according to the Old Uygur and Mongol civil documents - work in progress]

2014. június 29. Mobility and Transformations: New Directions in the Study of the Mongol Empire. (Jeruzsálem, Izrael): *The Provision Orders of the Postal System of the Chinggisid Empire*. (poszter)

2014. október 7. Substandard-Vokabular der türkischen und mongolischen Sprachen. (Göttingen, Németország): *Ulag and some related animal denominations in the Old Turkic documents concerning the postal system of the Mongol Empire*.

2015. június 22. Association for Asian Studies (AAS) in Asia 2015 Conference (Taipei, Tajvan): *On the Origins of the Postal System of the Mongol Empire*.

2015. szeptember 10. The Role of Religion in Turkic Culture (RRTC) Conference (Budapest, Magyarország): Religious Communities and the Postal System of the Mongol Empire.

2015. október 1. III. Ókori Történelmi Földrajz és Gazdaságtörténelmi Konferencia. (Pécs): *A Selyemút fénykorának utolsó epizódja: a mongolok és a kereskedelem*. [The last episode of the Silk Road's heyday: the Mongols and commerce]

2015. október 9. XIII. Nemzetközi Vámbéry Konferencia (Dunaszerdahely, Szlovákia): *Közép-Ázsia újkori felfedezőinek útleírásai a középkori források értelmezésének szolgálatában*. [Itineraries of the modern explorers of Central Asia as tools for interpreting medieval sources]