

**The Acquisition, the Legitimation, the Confirmation and the
Limitations of Political Power in Medieval Inner Asia.**

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*When Jesus went into Capernaum there came to him a centurion, beseeching him >Lord my servant is lying at home paralyzed and in great pain. Jesus said unto him, I will come and heal him. The centurion replied, Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof: but speak the word only and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to his man, go and he goes and to another, come and he comes; and to my servant, do this and he does it.
(Matthew 8:5-13).*

The capability of one human being to make other human beings perform or abstain from performing certain actions is a transitive ability or property which cannot manifest itself in a vacuum, and can only be activated in conjunction with its counterpart, namely obedience. Power and obedience are opposed and complementary. There can be no authority in the abstract, there must be someone who recognizes it. No order can be given if there is no subject to follow it. Obedience, of course, can be obtained by physical or mental coercion but it can be entirely voluntary as is typically the case, for instance with members of religious orders or even the military who joined their formation voluntarily. By political power I would mean the capability of one person to impose his or her will on a larger community, on persons with whom there is no direct, personal contact.

Acquisition

The basic mechanism of the acquisition of political power implies that one individual can, by whatever means, convince or persuade others that it is to their advantage to follow his or her leadership, i.e. obey his or her orders. The core group reaching such a conclusion may be quite small such as was the case in the early stages of the rise of Chingis. The Secret History reports (ch.123)¹ that three men, Altan, Quchar, and Sacha-beki, none of them of outstanding importance,

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¹ Throughout this essay I use the edition and translation of the *Secret History* of De Rachewiltz, 2004. SH stands for *Secret History of the Mongols*.

decided among themselves to make Chinggis a ruler. They informed him of their decision, they swore an oath of allegiance and, to quote, "made him khan" *qan bolqaba*. The act was quite unceremonious and amounted to little else than the recognition by three ambitious men that by "electing" Chinggis they could best serve their own interest, and that of a small group of people with whom they felt solidarity. To be of consequence, their choice needed to be approved by a larger gathering and this could happen only after the recognition that Chinggis had proven himself to be an efficacious leader. The acclamation happened in 1206. According to the Secret History [202]...["When] the people of the felt-tents had been brought to allegiance, in the Year of the Tiger [1206] they all gathered at the source of the Onan (river). They hoisted the white standard with nine tails and there they gave Chingis Qaghan the title of *qan*." It will be noted that this recognition came **after** "the people of the felt-tents had been brought to allegiance." Thus assent was publicly given arising from a choice proposed by a small group of people. Françoise Aubin and Roberte Hamayon² put it clearly: Ail [Chingis] est promu par l'accord de quelques-uns de ses fidèles et l'on se rallie à lui en raison de ses mérites, comme homme, comme guerrier et comme dirigeant, sans qu'il soit besoin d'une intervention divine." In its essence, the situation was similar to that which occurred in the Roman Empire for instance, when Titus (A.D.79-81) in a prearranged way followed his father Vespasian (69-79) but the decisive moment of the commencement of his reign. was his presentation as the new sovereign to the legions and their acclamation welcoming him as Imperator.³ Since there was but one candidate, the Inner Asian ruler was not "elected" in the strict sense of the word, he was simply confirmed in his position by a fairly large assembly which may or may not have represented the will of the majority of the people over which he was to rule.

In the rise of Chingis Khan we can clearly follow a three-step development. First, he secures for himself the devotion of a few individuals - we may call them "friends"; second, with their help he physically establishes his power over a relatively small group of people, let us say a "tribe"; third, this *fait-accompli* is solemnly recognized in an elaborate ceremony, performed in the presence of, theoretically, the whole people.

Unlike in a modern democracy where people elect their leaders on the assumption that these will perform their tasks adequately, in medieval Inner Asia it would seem that the leader was elected in recognition of proven capacity. The snowballing support given to a leader-to-be is quite dramatically expressed in the 8th century Old Turkic inscriptions of the Orkhon.

(Kül tegin E11-12) "My father the qaghan started with seventeen men. Having heard the news those who were in the towns went up into the mountains, those in the mountains descended and they were seventy. Since Heaven granted him strength, the warriors of my father were like wolves and his enemies were like sheep. Leading campaigns forward and backward he gathered men, and they were seven hundred. And when they were seven hundred he organized and ordered the people which had lost its state and its kaghan, the people which was enslaved, the people which had lost its Turkic institutions."⁴ The ruler then could proudly state that, "I clothed the naked, I made the poor

² Aubin, Françoise - Roberte Hamayon, (2002), "Alexandre, César et Gengis-khan dans les steppes d'Asie centrale." in *Les civilisations dans le regard de l'autre. Actes du colloque international Paris, 13 et 14 décembre 2001*, (Paris), pp. 73-105, 262-269.

³ Hodgkin, Thomas, (1880-1889), I-VIII, *Italy and its Invaders*, (London). p. 206.

⁴ The most recent edition of the Kül Tegin inscription can be found in Berta, 2004, pp. 89-205.

rich and the few I made them numerous.”⁵ To use modern political jargon, “he delivered.” Let me give another example of the role the subjects’ well-being played in the choice of their ruler. At the end of the 9th century A-pao-chi (872-906), founder of the Kitan state, was thrice reelected by his tribe for three-year terms. At the end of the last he was allowed to create a new tribe on his own which he moved to a region rich in coal, iron, and salt. The economic advantages he was able to secure for his followers induced the other tribes to recognize him as their ruler.⁶ The first chieftain of the Jurchen was elected “on account of his being able to manage their affairs.”⁷ The descendants of an elected ruler - the founder as it were of a dynasty - were strong candidates for the succession but the procedure was complicated by the multiplicity of direct male descendants, most of them possible candidates.⁸

Mention should be made of probably apocryphal instances in which the ruler is selected through a competition, a fictional joust, in which he establishes his superiority over the other contenders. Thus, for example, A-shih-na, the ancestor of the Türk dynasty that was to rule in Mongolia from the middle of the 6th century, is said to have been elected by his nine half-brothers because he could jump highest up on a tree.⁹ According to the Persian historian Juvaini (1226-1283) Buqu khan, the first fictional ruler of the Uighurs, who together with four brothers was born in miraculous circumstances, was made khan because he was “superior to the other children in beauty of features and strength of mind; moreover he knew all the tongues and writings of the different peoples.”¹⁰ In other instances the selection of the ruler has been described as the result of some elaborate lottery.¹¹

An election, in the modern application of the term, fiercely contested by peaceful means is attested in the well documented cases of the Great Khans Güyük (1246-48) and Möngke (1251-1259) both elected by great assemblies, *qur:ltays*. The elections were preceded by protracted and intense lobbying and negotiations in which the ladies Töregene and Sorqoqtani beki, respectively the mothers of Güyük and of Möngke, played key roles.¹²

On the basis of the above-mentioned examples it may be inferred, that the acquisition of power in medieval Inner Asia did not differ substantially from the political processes which have developed or still develop in other parts of the world and at other times. It behooves the “candidate” - if I may allowed to use such a modern term here - to gather around him a group of men who believe that

⁵ (Kül tegin E29) *yaling bodunuy tonluy Fiyan bodunuy bay qiltim*, (Kül tegin S10) *yoq Fiyan bodunuy qop qubratdim Fiyan bodunuy bay qiltim az bodunuy öküš qiltim*

⁶ Stein, Rolf, (1940) “Leao-tche. Traduit et annoté,” *T’oung Pao* XXXV, pp.1-154. p. 51.

⁷ Franke, Herbert, (1975), “Chinese Texts on the Jurchen. A Translation of the Mono-graphy San-ch’ao pei-meng hi pien.” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 9, pp.119-186. p. 149.

⁸ Drompp, Michael R., (1991), “Supernumerary Sovereigns: Superfluity and Mutability in the Elite Power Structure of the Early Türks (Tu-jue),” In Gary Seaman and Daniels Marks (eds.), *Rulers from the Steppe*, vol.2, *Nomads: Masters of the Eurasian Steppe*, (Los Angeles), pp. 92-115, 349-352. examined in great detail this question as it applied to the Türks.

⁹ Sinor, Denis, (1982), “The Legendary Origin of the Türks,” in *Folklorica. Festschrift for Felix J. Oinas*, E.V.Žygas and P. Voorheis (eds.) Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series, vol. 141.(Bloomington, Indiana), p. 227.

¹⁰ Boyle, John Andrew, (1958), *The History of the World Conqueror by +Ala-ad-Din +Ata-Malik Juvaini*, I-II, (Manchester). p. 57,

Sinor, Denis, (1993), “The Making of a Great Khan,” in Kellner-Heinkele, pp. p. 245.

¹¹ For some examples see Sinor, Denis, (1993), “The Making of a Great Khan,” in Kellner-Heinkele, p. 242-243.

¹² On the intense, often murderous conflicts that marked many successions in the Mongol Empire, see the fine study of Jackson, 1978.

their, and their followers' interest will best be served by following the Candidate's (and I switched now to capitalization) leadership by obeying his orders. It strengthens the Candidate's chances if his person can be linked to some supernatural elements, such as, for example, by attributing to him a non-human ancestry. Whether the small group of original followers believed in these extra-human connections must remain an open question. Once in power, success of the ruler could be attributed to divine help, thus further strengthening his hold on his followers and subjects.

Legitimation¹³

For the founder of a dynasty, the acquisition of power is usually deemed insufficient to justify ongoing rule; appeal is made to the supra natural. Linkage to the non-human can be of two sorts. The first of these can be quite direct, the ruler's persona is linked to an object, a phenomenon or an animal quite well known. For instance, our sources tell us that the just mentioned A-pao-chi was born of a sun-ray and had at his birth the body of a three-year-old child. In two of the three legends of origin of the Türks reported in Chinese sources, the first Türk ruler descends from a she-wolf.¹⁴ The three men who decided to make Chinggis a khan had known him and his family quite well, but by the time the Secret History was written it was deemed necessary to trace his genealogy through twenty-two imaginary generations (he being in the twenty-third) to the union of a Blue-Grey Wolf (Börte Chino) and a Fallow Doe (Goa Maral).¹⁵

In some instances, not only is the ruler's earliest traceable ancestor an animal, but among his ancestors appear quite a few abnormal beings. In the twelfth generation¹⁶ after Chinggis appears Du'a Soqor who "had a single eye in the middle of his forehead: with it he could see for a distance of three stages." This quality may be useful but it is certainly improper, perhaps slightly disreputable, so it is not surprising that Chinggis/Temüjin will descend not from him but from the lineage of his brother Dobun Mergen whose wife Alan Qo'a gave birth to five sons: two (Belgünütei and Bügünütei) from Dobun Mergen and three others (Buqu Qatagi, Buqatu Salji and Bodonchar Mungqaq) "from a resplendent yellow man who entered by the light of the smoke hole or the door-top of the tent and rubbed her belly."¹⁷ In this case tradition chose not the "regular" children but one of the three "unnatural" boys, those of doubtful origin, and even among them we find Bodonchar who, we are told "was a fool and a half-wit."¹⁸

¹³ While not directly cited in this short essay, on this subject see the excellent and wide-ranging studies of Franke, Herbert, (1978), "From Tribal Chieftain to Universal Emperor and God: The Legitimation of the Yüan Dynasty," *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Heft 2, 29.

Chan, Hok-lam. (1984). *Legitimation in Imperial China. Discussions under the Jurchen-Chin Dynasty 1115-1234*. (Seattle).

¹⁴ Sinor, Denis, (1982), "The Legendary Origin of the Türks," in *Folklorica. Festschrift for Felix J. Oinas, E.V. Žygas and P. Voorheis* (eds.) Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series, vol. 141.(Bloomington, Indiana), pp.223-257. Reprinted in Sinor 1997.

¹⁵ De Rachewiltz, Igor, (Leiden, Brill, 2004), *The Secret History of the Mongols. A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*. p. 1.

¹⁶ For a detailed study of the Chinggisid genealogy see Rybatzki, Volker, (2006), "Genealogischer Stammbaum der Mongolen," in *Florilegia Altaistica. Studies in Honour of Denis Sinor on the Occasion of his 90th Birthday*, Elena V. Boikova and Giovanni Stary (eds.), *Asiaische Forschungen* vol.149, (Wiesbaden), pp.135-192.

¹⁷ SH. ch. 21.

¹⁸ SH. ch. 23. For an analysis of the later, Islamic, versions of Chinggis' origin see Aigle, Denise, (2000), "Les transformations d'un mythe d'origine. L'exemple de Gengis khan et de Tamerlan." *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*. 89-90. 88-89 (2000), pp.151-168.

Among the ancestors of the Kitan rulers some were very uncanny indeed. One of them, called Nai-ho, we are informed, was nothing but a human skull hidden in a felt tent. He would assume human form and appear in public but on rare occasions. Another chief K'ua-ho, when not in public, wore the head and the skin of a boar: he **was** a boar. Both chiefs disappeared forever when their real identities were revealed.¹⁹ One is not he who appears in public but he who appears in private.

The second type of non-human connection links the ruler to an intangible, supra-terrestrial power, let me call it simply: to a divinity. I would go along with Di Cosmo's felicitous view that "the sacral sanction of political rule was an ancient belief initially shared by both northerners and Chinese that eventually generated, in China, a proper doctrine of Heaven's Mandate, and among the Hsiung-nu, the notion of a legitimizing supernatural deity."²⁰ In fact, by implication, this political doctrine presupposes the existence of a monotheistic belief.

It is most important not to confuse two concepts. The recognition that God's help was needed or even instrumental in achieving a certain action does not imply that God mandated its accomplishment. I might say and believe that "with God's help I will finish writing this article," without suggesting that God mandated me to do so. The above-cited Old Turkic formula "since Heaven granted him strength" *tengri küč birtük üčün*²¹ uses in part the very same words which some five hundred years later occurred in the Secret History attributed to Chinggis himself: "...by the strength of Eternal Heaven, (*möngke tengri-yin küčün-tür*)²² my power has been increased by Heaven and Earth and I have brought the entire people to allegiance, causing them to come under my sole rule."²³ This statement implies divine help but not divine mandate. Peter Jackson observes²⁴ correctly that the Secret History mentions Heaven's mandate only once in words spoken not by Chinggis but by a shaman and that the context shows that rule over the Mongols and not over the whole world is implied. It is to be noted that, unlike the Türk ruler, who claimed that he "made the poor rich and the few numerous," in the Secret History - written after Chinggis' death, - Chinggis does not boast of previous successes to assert his claim to power but attributes it to divine grace.

The ruler's virtue, strength, is so great that it extends even to deeds done on his behalf by others. Following his successful campaign in the West, Batu sends the message to his uncle the Great Khan Ögödei: "By the strength of Eternal Heaven and the good fortune of my uncle the Kaghan, (*möngke tenggeri-yin küčün-tür Qa'an abaqa-yin su-tur*) I have destroyed the city of Meget...."²⁵

¹⁹ Stein, Rolf, (1940) "Leao-tche. Traduit et annoté." *T'oung Pao* XXXV, pp.1-154. p.12.

²⁰ Di Cosmo, Nicola, (2002), *Ancient China and Its Enemies. The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002). p.172.

²¹ Kül Tegin East 12.

²² I transpose into the system of transcription used for Classical Mongol the short passages cited from the SH.

²³ SH 224, De Rachewiltz, Igor, (2004), *The Secret History of the Mongols. A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*. (Leiden, Brill, 2004). p. 152.

²⁴ Jackson, Peter, (2006), "World-Conquest and Local Accommodation: Threat and Blandishment in Mongol Diplomacy," Judith Pfeiffer and Sholeh A. Quinn, (eds.) *History and Historiography of Post-Mongol Central Asia and the Middle East. Studies in Honor of John E. Woods* (Wiesbaden), pp.3-22. p. 4.

²⁵ SH 275, De Rachewiltz, Igor, (2004), *The Secret History of the Mongols. A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*. (Leiden, Brill, 2004). p.206.

Thus Batu attributes his own victory to the virtue of his uncle (*abaqa*) the ruler.²⁶ Mongol *su/sutai* corresponds to Turkic *qut, qutlug* Para 74 Hö'elün feeds her *sutan kö'üd-iyen* "her sons favored with Heaven's good fortune."²⁷

Our earlier data are not as clear-cut. In the Terkh inscription, the Uighur No2 El-etmiş Bilge kaghan known also as Bayan-Fur (747-759), claimed - in words almost identical with those used in the Orkhon inscriptions - that he was favored "by the blue sky above" and "the brown earth below," the very powers which had lent their support to the Türk rulers of yore.²⁸ So the ruler has the support of the divinity but does not act on its behalf. The formula evokes the *Deo gratias* claim of European kingships.

Less clear is the interpretation of some other titles borne by the rulers of the Uighur empire in Mongolia. The most interesting among them may well be that mentioned in a Middle Persian text possibly referring to No3 Bügü qan (759-779), which reads *uluy ilig tengride qut bulmiş erdem in il tutmiş alp külüg Bilge qayan* and which I would translate (ignoring here the first two words) "Bilge kaghan who received good fortune from God and (who) through his virtue maintained the realm." Divine help and human endeavor are here jointly presented.²⁹ The title of other Uighur rulers, for example, No9 (808-821) and No12 (832-839) stated that they received the *qut* "good fortune" from the Moon God *ai tengride qut bulmiş* or, as was the case for No.10 (821-824), from the Sun God: *kün tengride qut bulmiş*.³⁰

While in the instances cited the ruler claims to have received divine help in his activities, reference to divine mandate appears only in documents destined to foreign potentates warning them with various degrees of intensity of the sender's supra-natural connections. The strongest claim to universal rule is made in the ultimatum sent probably by the Great Khan Ögedei and delivered in 1238 by the Dominican Julian to King Béla IV of Hungary. The preamble reads: *Ego, Chaym, nuntius regis celestis, cui dedit potentiam super terram subicientes mihi se exaltare et deprimere adversantes...* "I am the Khan, messenger of the Celestial King, to whom he has given the power on earth to exalt those who submit to me and to cast down the adversaries..."³¹ The Franciscan William Rubruck brings to King Louis IX of France "the decree of the eternal God" (*preceptum eterni Dei*) namely: "In Heaven there is only one eternal God, and on earth let there be only one lord: Chinggis khan."³² Similarly unequivocal language is used, for example, in the letter sent in 1262 by the il-

²⁶ De Rachewiltz, II, p.355.

²⁷ De Rachewiltz, II, p.355.

²⁸ Klyashtorny, Klyashtorny, S.G. (1982). "The Terkhin Inscription," *Acta Orientalia Hungarica* 36, 335-366. p. 342. I adopted the system first used by Chavannes, to number the Uighur rulers in the order of their succession.

²⁹ Rybatzki, Rybatzki, V., (2000) "Titles of Türk and Uighur Rulers in the Old Türkic Inscriptions," *Central Asiatic Journal* 44 (2000), 205-289. p. 258.

³⁰ Hamilton, James Russell, (1955), *Les ouïgours à l'époque des Cinq Dynasties d'après les documents chinois*, (Paris). p. 140.

³¹ On this ultimatum and on Julian's journey see more recently Sinor, 2002 with further references. Latin text in Dörrrie, Heinrich, (1956), *Drei Texte zur Geschichte der Ungarn und Mongolen*. Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Phil.-hist.Kl. Nr.6. p. 179.

³² Jackson, Peter, (1990), *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck. His Journey to the court of the Great Khan Möngke 1253-1255*, Translated by - Introduction, notes, and appendices by Peter Jackson with David Morgan, The Hakluyt Society. Second Series, No. 173. (London). p. 245.

khan Hülegü to King Louis IX of France: *In excelsis ego sum Deus omnipotens solus et te super gentes et regna constitui dominatorem et regem fieri totius orbis*. "I am the one almighty God in the highest and I have set thee above the nations and kingdoms to be master and ruler of the entire world."³³ Thomas Hodgkin,³⁴ cited Zosimus speaking of the imperial dignity as the "Lordship of the Universe" [*hé tón holón arkhé*] and speculated, "If it would be possible to penetrate into the secret thoughts of those long-vanished wearers of the purple, one would eagerly desire to know under what aspect the imperial deification presented itself to their minds." The question would be relevant also for the Chinggisid concept of rule. Interestingly, the claim of the Chinese emperors that they were "the son of Heaven" (*t'ien-tzu*) was not made by any Inner Asian ruler.

With passing time, claim of divine legitimation to world-conquest becomes muted or disappears altogether. The above-mentioned formula *Möngke tenggeri-yin kücüün-tür* opens the letter dated 1289 sent by il-khan Arghun to Philippe le Bel with an addition *qa'an-u su-tur*, "by the strength of Eternal Heaven and the kaghan's good fortune."³⁵ In this context the use of the formula does not imply any claim to the superiority of the sender. The virtue belongs here to the writer himself. The meaning, as I see it, is that the khan can write the letter, because God allows him to do so. In Öljeitü's letter to Philippe le Bel, written in 1305 there is less formality, it is more business-like: *Öljeitü sultan üge manu*. "Sultan Öljeitü - my word." It will be noted³⁶ that Arabic *sultan* is used in the Secret History, and in Öljeitü's letter it is applied indistinctly to himself and the king of France - no claim here to universality. There is no claim to universal power by the Mamluk Sultans, either Baybars (1260-77) or Qal'wün in their numerous treaties with various Christian potentates. True, in the treaty signed in 1290 between Qal'wün and King Alfonso III of Aragon, for instance, the first claimed to be "...the most exalted lord, the learned, the just, Sayf al-Dunya wa'al Din, the sultan of Islam and the Muslims, the sultan of the Egyptian lands and the Damascene territory and Aleppo, the sultan of the kings, the king of all the East, the sultan of the Nubians, the sultan of the Holy House [i.e. Jerusalem], the sultan of the High and August House in Mecca (may God exalt it) the sultan of Yemen and the Hijaz, the sultan of all the Arabs, the sultan of all Islam, the lord of the kings and the sultans..."³⁷ Yet, precisely, these specifications indicate that the claim to rule over peoples and lands is well specified.

Confirmation

John of Plano Carpini states it clearly: "... if anyone puffed up by pride wishes to be the Emperor on his own authority, without an election by the princes, he shall be put to death without any

³³Jackson, Peter, (2006), "World-Conquest and Local Accommodation: Threat and Blandishment in Mongol Diplomacy," Judith Pfeiffer and Sholeh A. Quinn. (eds.) *History and Historiography of Post-Mongol Central Asia and the Middle East. Studies in Honor of John E. Woods* (Wiesbaden), pp.3-22. p. 8-9.

³⁴Hodgkin, Thomas, (1880-1889), I-VIII, *Italy and its Invaders*, (London). I, p. 203.

³⁵Mostaert, Antoine - Francis Woodman Cleaves, (1962), *Les lettres de 1289 et 1305 des. ilkhan Aryun et Öljeitü à Philippe the Bel*, Harvard Yenching Institute, Scripta Mongolica Monograph Series I. pp. 16-22, with detailed discussion of the meaning of *su*, Mongol equivalent of Turkic *qut*.

³⁶Mostaert, Antoine - Francis Woodman Cleaves, (1962), *Les lettres de 1289 et 1305 des. ilkhan Aryun et Öljeitü à Philippe the Bel*, Harvard Yenching Institute, Scripta Mongolica Monograph Series I. pp. 16-22, p. 58.

³⁷Holt, P.M., (1995), *Early Mamluk Diplomacy (1260-1290). Treaties of Baybars and Qalawun with Christian Rulers*, (Leiden).p. 132.

mercy.”³⁸ The legitimation may be and most often is supra-natural, but the confirmation is a human decision.³⁹ Let me now briefly examine some of the ceremonies, accompanying or following the election, to wit the actions taken to induct formally the new ruler.

The investiture ceremony practiced in the 6th century among the Türks in Mongolia is described in the Chou-shu:

Wenn ein neuer Herrscher gewählt wurde trugen ihn die hohen Würdenträger aus seiner nächsten Umgebung in einer Filzdecke und drehten ihn dann der Sonne folgend neunmal. Bei jeder Drehung verbeugten sich alle seiner Untertanen vor ihm. Nach den Drehungen (und Verbeugungen) halfen sie den Oberhäuptling aufs Pferd und liessen ihn reiten. Daraufhin würgten sie ihn mit einem seidenen Tuch, dass er gerade noch am Leben blieb. Dann lösten sie die Binde und fragten ihn hastig: “Wieviele Jahre wirst du unser kaghan sein?” Da der Khagan benommen war, konnte er die Zeitdauer nicht deutlich sagen. Darauf schlossen sie aus den Worten, die er dabei (verworden) ausgestossen hatte, auf seine Amtsdauer.⁴⁰

One would doubt the veracity of this description were it not corroborated by the description of a similar practice of investiture recorded for the distant Khazars in the 10th century by the Arab historian al-Istakhri:

“When they wish to appoint a Kaghan they bring him and throttle him with a piece of silk till he is nearly strangled. Then they say to him >How long do you wish to reign?’ He says >So and so many years.” If he dies before then, well and good. If not, he is killed when he reaches the year in question.”⁴¹

It should here be noted that among the Khazars the position of the kaghan was purely ceremonial.

On June 13, 528, at the inauguration of the T’o-pa emperor Hsiu seven men placed him on a black felt rug on which, the new emperor, facing west made obeisance to Heaven. The *Pei-shih* where this detail is recorded, remarks that this was an ancient custom which the T’o pa had practiced prior to 494 when their capital was still in Tai.⁴² Attention should be paid to the role of the black felt, an important accessory to the investiture about which more will be said presently.

****Not surprisingly, we have more information about the inauguration of the Mongol rulers. In 1246 the Franciscan Friar John of Plano Carpini in company of Fr. Benedict the Pole attended the festivities surrounding the inauguration of Güyük and left a lengthy description thereof. (Ch.9, 32-34). Unfortunately, the text reveals next to nothing about the ceremony itself.

This lacuna is filled to some extent by a description, based on hearsay, given by the Armenian prince Hayton (Bk.III, ch.2) of the enthronement of Chingis. His *La Flor des estoires de l’orient* written in French in 1307 includes the following passage:

³⁸ V.18, p. 264 of the Menesto edition. The translation is that of Dawson, Christopher (ed.), (1966), *Mission to Asia*. Harper Torchbooks. (New York). p. 25.

³⁹ I dealt with some of the modalities of these elections in Sinor, Denis, (1993), “The Making of a Great Khan,” in Kellner-Heinkele 1993, pp. 241-258.

⁴⁰ Liu, Mau-tsai, (1958), *Die chinesischen Nachrichten zur Geschichte der Ost-Türken (T’u-küe)*, (Wiesbaden). pp. 8-9.

⁴¹ Dunlop, D.N., (1954), *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, (Princeton). p. 97.

⁴² Boodberg, P.A., (1939), “The Coronation of T’o-pa Hsiu,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* IV, pp. 240-252. p. 242.

“... the Tartars established a seat amongst them and extended a **piece of black felt** on the ground and had Chingis sit on it. And the captains of the seven nations lifted him with the felt and placed him on the seat and called him khan. And in kneeling before him they honored him and paid him reverence as to their lord.”⁴³

So far Hayton’s description is based on second-hand information and he allows himself to speculate on the reasons why the inauguration happened as it happened.

“Concerning the ceremony which the Tatars rendered to their lord at that time, no one should be astonished. For perhaps they did not know any better way or did not have a more beautiful cloth on which they have their lord sit.”

But, in the next sentences Hayton turns to the present:

“But one might well be amazed that they maintained their original ways after having conquered so many kingdoms and lands. When they wish to elect their lord, and I have been at an election of the emperor of the Tartars twice and have seen how all the Tatars assembled in a great field, **they have their lord sit on a black felt** and they place a rich seat in the midst. The great men and those of Chingis khan’s lineage came, lifted him up, and set him on the seat. Then they paid him homage and honored him as if he were their dear and natural lord.”⁴⁴

Hayton thus claims to have witnessed the enthronement of a Mongol khan twice.

Of what we know of Hayton’s life, it is perfectly conceivable that, as a child, he might have been present in 1246 at Güyük’s enthronement mentioned by Carpini. This is not the place to examine what the second occasion could have been.

A description similar to that given by Hayton, but more detailed, appears in what remains of a report given by the Dominican Simon of St. Quentin who in 1247 spent a couple of months in the camp of the Mongol general Baiju. The original of Simon’s description was lost but large sections of it were incorporated in the *Speculum historiale* of his contemporary, another French Dominican, Vincent of Beauvais.⁴⁵ Let me just give here the gist of the fairly detailed description of the ceremony.

It starts with a probably formalized dialog between the khan-elect already sitting on the throne and the assembled lords. The latter ask the khan-elect to become their ruler and the khan expresses his willingness to assume the charge on condition that he is **assured of the lords’ obedience**. This done, the khan apparently descends from the throne and takes his seat on a felt rug placed on the floor.

⁴³ ed. Kohler, p. 148. The English rendering is that of my friend and colleague Emanuel J. Mickel. Years ago we planned to publish a commented English translation of *La Flor...*

Professor Mickel promptly completed his task of translation while I woefully failed to complete mine which would have consisted of the commentaries. Here, I publicly apologize for my lamentable behavior.

⁴⁴ Ed. Kohler, p. 149.

⁴⁵ Bk. xxxii, ch.32, see Richard, Jean, (1965), Simon de Saint-Quentin. *Histoire des Tartares*, Documents relatifs à l’histoire des Croisades VIII, (Paris). pp. 90-92.

Another formalized dialog takes place in which the lords warn the khan-elect that if he rules well, to him will belong all the glory and the riches of the world, but if his rule is nefarious, he will be miserable and poor to the extent that not even the felt rug on which he now sits will remain his own. This much said, they place the khan-elect and his consort on the felt rug and then lift the two of them off the ground and proclaim their ruler. It should be noted that more than seven centuries had passed between the T'o-pa and Mongol inaugurations. By the time the latter occurred, the very memory of the T'o-pa had long since vanished yet the symbolism of the seat of felt had endured. Empires, peoples fade away, symbols, symbolic acts abide. One of them appears to be the throne which replaces the earlier felt rug.

Carpini describes the magnificent tent in which the ceremony of Güyük's enthronement was to take place, how the crowds gathered, how they stood facing south, how they moved forward "saying prayers and genuflecting towards the south"⁴⁶ After they had done this for a long while "they returned to the tent and placed Güyük on the imperial throne, and the leaders knelt to him in public and, after this all of the people knelt." Carpini did not witness, and hence did not describe, the essential act, namely the "placing on the throne" of the new Great Khan. It is as if a description of the inauguration of the president of the United States would omit any mention of what happens on the steps of the Capitol. The account given by the Friars John and Benedict prompted Pelliot to suggest⁴⁷ that the festivities described by them were of a seasonal character and not necessarily linked with the enthronement. If Pelliot's idea is correct, as I think it is, we must conclude that Güyük's enthronement was linked with these festivities, that a propitious day was chosen for the ceremony. This still leaves us with no information on what happened in the tent. One could even think that Carpini's use of the term "enthronement," literally "put him on the imperial seat,"⁴⁸ is a simple transference of western customs into the Mongol milieu, were it not that later on Carpini would actually see and describe in some detail the magnificent throne used by Güyük. Carpini does not say who the persons were, who, if anyone, actually put him on the throne.

There seems to be no other object involved in the inauguration. At the moment of his installation the khan is not surrounded by any of the regalia customary elsewhere - be it in East Asia or in Europe. There is no mention of robes, crowns, or scepters, he is not anointed and the seating on the throne is not simultaneous with, but follows the decisive moment which transforms the individual into a ruler. There seems to be no traditional sign or obvious symbol to mark his status. The sword mentioned by Vincent of Beauvais may be viewed as a regaliu or may just be - and I tend to look at it this way - an ad-hoc symbol of the military character of the khanship. First and foremost the ruler is the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.

It should be noted that in the inauguration processes described above, the legitimation of the newly elected ruler is procedural. **The ruler-elect becomes an effective ruler through demanding and receiving assurance of complete obedience.** The source of legitimacy is the will of those men - lets them call the electoral college - who had chosen him as their leader. Quite literally he becomes the ruler of those who had elected him. Unlike in China or in medieval Europe⁴⁹ the acquisition

⁴⁶ Dawson, Christopher (ed.), (1966), *Mission to Asia*. Harper Torchbooks. (New York). p. 63.

⁴⁷ Pelliot, Paul, (1973), *Recherches sur les chrétiens d'Asie centrale et d'Extrême-Orient*. (Paris). p. 59.

⁴⁸ The text (IX, 423, Menesto p. 320), has *posuerunt Cuyuc in sede imperiali*.

⁴⁹ See the very relevant remarks by Kern, 1970, p. 7.

of the right to rule was derived in its entirety from the will of the subjects to be. Supernatural qualifications of the ruler-to-be may induce such actions but do not, per se, secure election.

In contrast to the ritual dialog between the German coronation order of the 10th century in which the prince must answer in the affirmative questions put to him,⁵⁰ in the dialog described by Simon of St. Quentin it is the khan-elect who asks the questions and it is incumbent upon his future subjects to answer them in the affirmative. In contemporary republics the president-elect takes the oath to the effect that he will serve the people who elected him. In the inauguration described by Simon of St. Quentin, the ruler's subjects-to-be swear obedience to him. The belief that the khan, as in its western counterparts, was to rule by the will of God, *deo gratias*, or in Mongol *tengri-yin küčün-dür*, is supported by ample evidence but its expression does not seem to have been part of the inauguration.

Odd as it may seem, the political thinking behind the inauguration of the khan is comparable to that which governs the selection of the pope. Cardinals elect one of their equals and confer on him the awesome spiritual power of the pope. In the words of the Roman Catholic Code of Canon Law (Canon.332) "The Roman Pontiff acquires full and supreme power in the Church when, [together with episcopal consecration] he has been lawfully elected and **has accepted the election.**" (Canon 331) "...by virtue of his office, he [the pope] has supreme, full, immediate and universal ordinary power in the Church..." and (Canon 333) "...there is neither appeal nor recourse against a judgement or a decree of the Roman Pontiff." The khan, as the pope, obtains his power by the instrument of his equals. But, once he has accepted the charge, his power becomes unrestricted.

The Limitation of Power.

Papal power may or may not be unrestricted, but in medieval Inner Asia, claims to rule the world notwithstanding - and some examples have been given above - whatever the power of the ruler may have been, the enforcement of his will was at best sporadic and obtained only within a small radius. Physical force was not monopolized in the hands of the ruler whose military force was not better equipped than that which may have opposed him. It is likely that the rulers disposed of some elite troops linked to their person with special bonds like the *nökör* of the Mongol Empire⁵¹ a large body-guard as it were, or the *keshig* of the Chinggisids.⁵² But these were never the principal builders of conquest. The pattern prevailing in sedentary civilizations namely that the majority of the population is disarmed did not hold in medieval Inner Asia. The armament in the possession of a potential contender was equal to that of the ruler. Victory was a function of leadership and numerical superiority at the right moment in the right place.

In principle one can assume that political power is accepted, that is: people obey, as long as it seems to satisfy at least the majority of the people governed and it is not outbidden by a competing power. In 774 A.D. the fall of the Türk empire was not the doing of foreign invaders, it came about through

⁵⁰ Kern, Fritz, (1970), *Kingship and Law in the Middle Ages*. Translated with an introduction by S.B.Chrimes, (New York 1970). p. 76.

⁵¹ De Rachewiltz, Igor, (2004), *The Secret History of the Mongols. A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*. (Leiden, Brill, 2004).p. 257.

⁵² De Rachewiltz, Igor, (2004), *The Secret History of the Mongols. A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*. (Leiden, Brill, 2004).p. 691.

internal turmoil in which besides the Uighurs, the Karluk and Basmil participated. The alliance that put an end to the Türk state was short-lived, already in 744, Uighurs and Karluk banded together against the Basmil and soon after the Karluk, in their turn, had to submit to the Uighurs. The deposed kaghan of the Basmil belonged to the same A-shih-na clan that had ruled over the Türks.

In medieval Inner Asia, territorial sovereignty was an unknown concept; the rulers ruled over peoples and not over lands of undefined borders but their writ could be enforced only along narrow territorial bands, it could not be exerted over vast adjacent territories. It was not sustained by technical facilities such as, in modern times, railroads, wired or wireless communications. The final territorial conquest of the land that became the USA advanced along the rivers and followed the building of the railroads. Here again, the sole exception was the Mongol Empire with its postal system, the *Yam*, which allowed messages to travel with considerable speed. But, let us make no mistake, these postal routes crossed lands over which the Great Khan, or perhaps anyone else, had no demonstrable authority.

When the population over which it rules is sedentary, the state authority has constant access to its subjects and has powerful means to enforce its will. The situation is different when people have no permanent settlements, or the means of escape. In the Cold War period there was the saying going round that people who left a socialist country to find a new home elsewhere “voted with their feet.” Today there is a world-wide migration of people moving from their country of origin to lands more prosperous or at least safer. For a nomad, nothing was easier than to move beyond the power range of a central authority whereas sedentary populations were, by definition, denied this opportunity. There is in my view a quite stunning confirmation of this in an argument made in the below-cited Mongol ultimatum received at the end of 1237 by King Béla IV of Hungary enjoining him to deliver the fugitive Comans who had sought shelter in Hungary. I quote:

“...I know B writes the sender B that you are a rich and powerful king, that you have many soldiers under your command and that you rule alone over a big kingdom. Therefore it may be difficult to submit yourself to me; however it would be better for you to submit yourself spontaneously to me. I have learned further that you keep under your protection the Comans, my servants. I thus enjoin you not to keep them with you, and for their sake have me as an enemy; because it is easier for them to escape than for you. For they, without homes and on continuous move may perhaps evade, but you, who live in houses and have forts and cities, how shall you escape from my hands?”⁵³

The sender is thus quite aware of the advantages inherent to the lifestyle of the pastoral nomads, and the limitations of his own power over evasive populations seeking and finding refuge beyond the constraints of imposed statehood. The power of the ruler extended only to those willing to obey. To the adventurers or the desperate, escape was a constant option, and he who abused his power may have found no one to obey.

⁵³ For the Latin text see Dörrie, Heinrich. (1956), *Drei Texte zur Geschichte der Ungarn und Mongolen*. Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Phil.-hist.Kl. Nr.6. p. 179.