

SIGNS OF AUTHORITY IN THE MONGOL EMPIRE

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Fig. 1 Mongol Messenger *Paiza* (*Gerege*) in Pakpa Script; Mongol Empire/Yuan dynasty (1206–1368), late 13th–early 14th century; iron with silver inlay; 7 1/8 × 4 1/2 in. (18.1 × 11.4 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; 1993.256; CC0 – Creative Commons (CC0 1.0)

MONGOL MESSENGER'S BADGE (*PAIZA OR GEREGE*) IN PAKPA SCRIPT

Mongol Empire/Yuan dynasty
late 13th–early 14th century

SUMMARY

Communication and command over resources were keys to control for the Mongols, rulers of the largest land-based empire in world history. At the order of Qubilai Khan, the Tibetan lama Pakpa Lodro Gyeltsen designed a script that could represent the sounds of all the languages in the empire. Historian Christopher Atwood tells the story of a bronze tablet inscribed in this Tibetan-derived script, which gave its bearer power to commandeer horses and accommodation along the Mongol postal roads.

Tablets of authority, such as the one pictured here, served as one of the central institutions of the Mongol Empire, giving the bearer power to requisition resources. Together with the “exemption decree,” or *darqan jarliq*,¹ which rendered the holder immune from requisitions by others, they were fundamental manifestations of governance under the Mongol Empire. These tablets were known most commonly in the Mongol Empire as *paizas*, a Persian reading of the Chinese *paizi*, “tablet.” The Mongolian name, *gerege*, meaning “that which bears witness,” is found only in Mongolian-language texts.²

PAIZAS IN THE MONGOL EMPIRE

The primary right granted by such *paizas* was the ability to requisition resources. The more basic type of *paiza* was issued to messengers (*elchin*) and was supposed to be used only on the Mongol Empire’s famous post-road (or *jam*) system.³ Such a *paiza*, as pictured here, gave the holder the right to receive room, board, fresh horses, and an escort while traveling from station to station on the *jam*.

The post-road system linked the entire empire together, enabling the famous level of cultural exchange achieved under the Mongol Empire. Despite the empire’s decentralization under regional princes, or khans, its maintenance was one of the key functions that princes owed the central government. In the late thirteenth century, the area directly ruled by Qubilai Khan had more than 1,400 stations and bridges, serviced

by 44,293 horses, 8,889 oxen, 6,007 asses, 4,037 carts, 378 sedan chairs, 5,921 boats, 1,150 pack sheep, and even 3,000 sled dogs in northern Manchuria. These statistics do not include Tibet; twenty-one major *jam* stations were established there from 1269 on.⁴ Although expensive for the regime and burdensome for the peasants and herders who staffed it in rotation, the *ulagha*, or post-road duty, was preserved in Tibet and Mongolia into the mid-twentieth century.

Another, more prestigious, type of *paiza* was issued to military commanders (*noyat*) at various levels, non-Mongol tributary rulers and local civil administrators, and overseers (*darughas*, *darughachin*) appointed by the Mongols to supervise non-Mongol officials. “Partner” (*ortaq*) merchants trading with funds from imperial or princely funds and clergy of the empire’s recognized religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, and Islam—also often received *paizas* as members of the imperial elite. These *paizas* granted the right to requisition goods and services not just from the *jam* but from the general civilian population as well. Such *paizas* were issued together with *jarliq*, or decrees,⁵ stamped with a red seal (*al tamgha*), that gave the reasons why the holder was privileged with a *paiza* and the specific degree of power that it conferred.

The issuing authority for either type of *paiza* included the great khan, as well as princes, empresses, princesses, and imperial sons-in-law entrusted with jurisdiction over a given territory. In theory, issuing *paizas* was supervised by the great khan, and all were recalled on the death of one great khan and the enthronement of another. In practice, however, these rules were often not followed.⁶

The *paiza* system in the Mongol Empire developed out of the badges used by those on assignment in the Khitan Liao (907–1125) and Jurchen Jin dynasty of North China (1115–1234) and in previous Chinese dynasties. *Paizas* for commanders were ranked by materials and design, ranging from the highest, in gold with a tiger head (*bars terigütü*)

inscribed on it, to the lower-ranked ones, in plain gold or silver. The tiger's head is depicted frontally, at the top end of the *paiza*, as can be seen in the molding on the object presented here, or else as incised decoration, as seen in the *paiza* for a commander issued by Abdulla, the khan of the Mongol Golden Horde (r. 1362–1370) (fig. 2). In many cases, as in the example shown, they were actually composed of base metals, with at most silver or gold inlay.

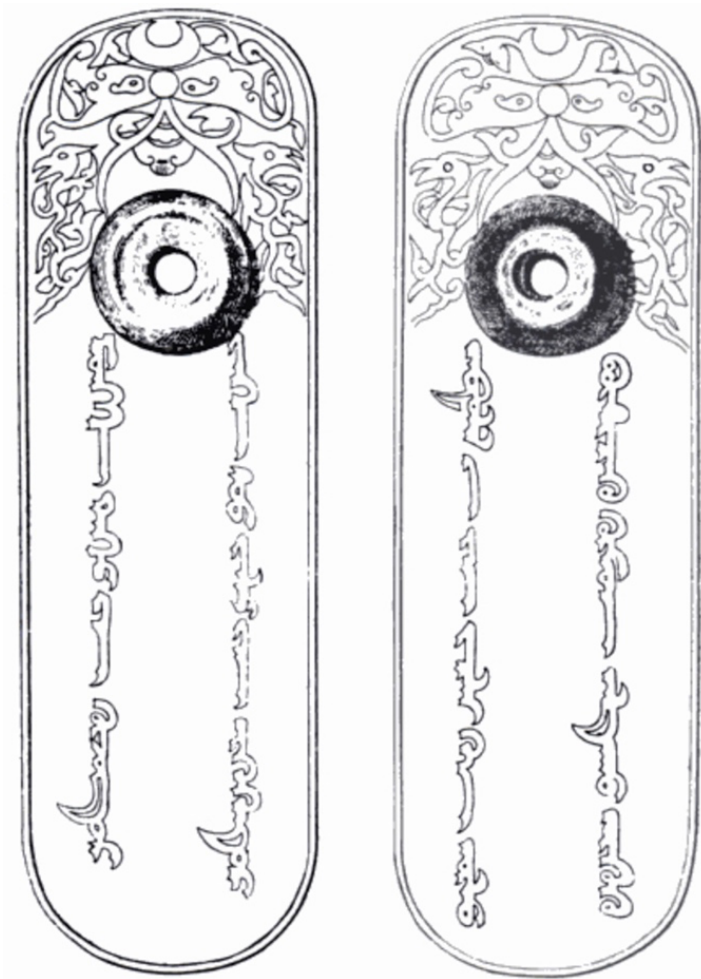


Fig. 2 *Paiza* found in the former lands of the Golden Horde (Dnieper River, 1845), 13th century. Unknown 954 Paiza Golden Horde; The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo / MNP4DJ

During the reign of Chinggis Khan (1206–1227), the inscriptions on the *paiza* were in Chinese on the obverse and Kitan language on the reverse, reflecting their origin in the

practices of the Jurchen Jin dynasty.⁷ Soon, however, they were switched to Mongolian. The extant Mongolian examples for officials always began with the famous phrase, “By the power of eternal heaven” (*Möngke tngri-yin kücün-dür*) (fig. 2). They conclude with the phrases, “The decree of the great khan [or whoever issued it]; any person whosoever who does not respect it shall be punished, shall die.” In between those two lines of texts, paizas for those of official or military rank carried an additional line of text: “By the protection of the imperial good fortune.” Those *paizas* only for use on the post roads, however, such as the one pictured here, did not include that phrase.

REFORMS UNDER QUBILAI KHAN

The *paiza* system was reshaped by the reforming zeal of the fifth Mongol khan, Qubilai (r. 1260–1294) (fig. 3), as were virtually all other features of the Mongolian government. The first reform, initiated in 1261, established a new level of urgent post-road *paizas*, marked not by a tiger’s head but by a gyrfalcon. Other reforms are visible in the *paiza* pictured. The inscription was simplified to no longer say “shall die.” The shape of paizas for messengers was changed from oblong to round; these new-style *paizas* were called in Chinese “round tallies” (*yanfu*). Post roads elsewhere in the Mongol Empire, however, retained the traditional oblong form and inscription (fig. 2).



Fig. 3 Qubilai; leaf from Album of the Bust Portraits of Yuan Emperors (*Yuandai di banshen xiang ce* 元代帝半身像册); probably Daidu (Beijing), China; Yuan dynasty (1271–1368); ink and color on silk; 23 3/8 × 18 1/2 in. (59.4 × 47 cm); National Palace Museum, Taipei

PAKPA LAMA AND THE SQUARE SCRIPT

Another major reform visible in this *paiza* was in the script used to write the inscription. Between 1269 and 1271, after defeating his rivals and securing the throne but before planning the conquest of the Song dynasty in South China, Qubilai Khan carried out a number of reforms that promoted a new multiethnic style of universal rule. These included claiming the Chinese-style dynastic title of Yuan and building and renaming a new capital at the site of present-day Beijing. Another of these universalizing measures was to commission his Imperial Preceptor, the Pakpa Lama, Lodro Gyeltsen (1235–1280),⁸ to create a script for the entire empire, suitable for writing Mongolian, Chinese, and Tibetan.

Pakpa Lama had entered the Mongol empire as a boy hostage in 1244 when the famous Sakya Pandita, his uncle (1182–1251), was summoned to the court of the Mongol prince Köten⁹ in what is now Gansu Province. According to Mongol practice, every local ruler and official above a certain rank had to submit a son, younger brother, or nephew as hostage to serve in the bodyguard (*keshikten*) of the khan or of the local member of the imperial family in charge of the area. As a local ruler in Tibet, Sakya Pandita had to nominate Lodro Gyeltsen and his brother as his hostages, and they entered Köten's entourage. After Köten died, his cousin Qubilai, then a prince supervising all of North China, took over his bodyguard. Lodro Gyeltsen soon graduated from the bodyguard and was ordained as a monk in 1255. Within a few years he was making his mark as a debater, Sanskritist, and tantric guru to Qubilai and his wife Chabui. One year after Qubilai became great khan in 1260, he appointed his young chaplain, now known as Pakpa Lama, or "Noble Guru," as "State Preceptor" and head of all Buddhists in the empire.

Pakpa Lama used his philological knowledge to create a script called the square script in Mongolian¹⁰ and the Pakpa script in the West. Up until this moment, the Mongols had been using the script of the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs, itself derived from the Sogdian and eventually the Aramaic script. Although well-adapted to Uyghur and Mongolian, the script was very poor at rendering Chinese or Tibetan. Pakpa Lama took the Tibetan letters, squared them off (hence the name), and reorganized them to be written vertically in columns left to right. With his training in traditional Indian philology, he added diacritical signs and special letters to handle the sounds of Mongolian and Chinese that were not available in the Tibetan script. The whole was proclaimed by Qubilai Khan in 1269 as the new script for the empire.

Although Qubilai established schools throughout the East Asian region of the Mongol Empire to promote the new script, it could not replace the Uyghur-Mongolian script, let alone Chinese or Tibetan, as the writing system of choice for scholars. Surviving samples of Pakpa scriptare mostly official pieces, such as the *paiza* shown here, or stone inscriptions, such as that at the Juyong Gate. Only a few pieces of printed literature are known (fig. 4). With the expulsion of the Yuan emperors from China, the Pakpa script fell out of use, except for occasional ornamental use in Tibet.

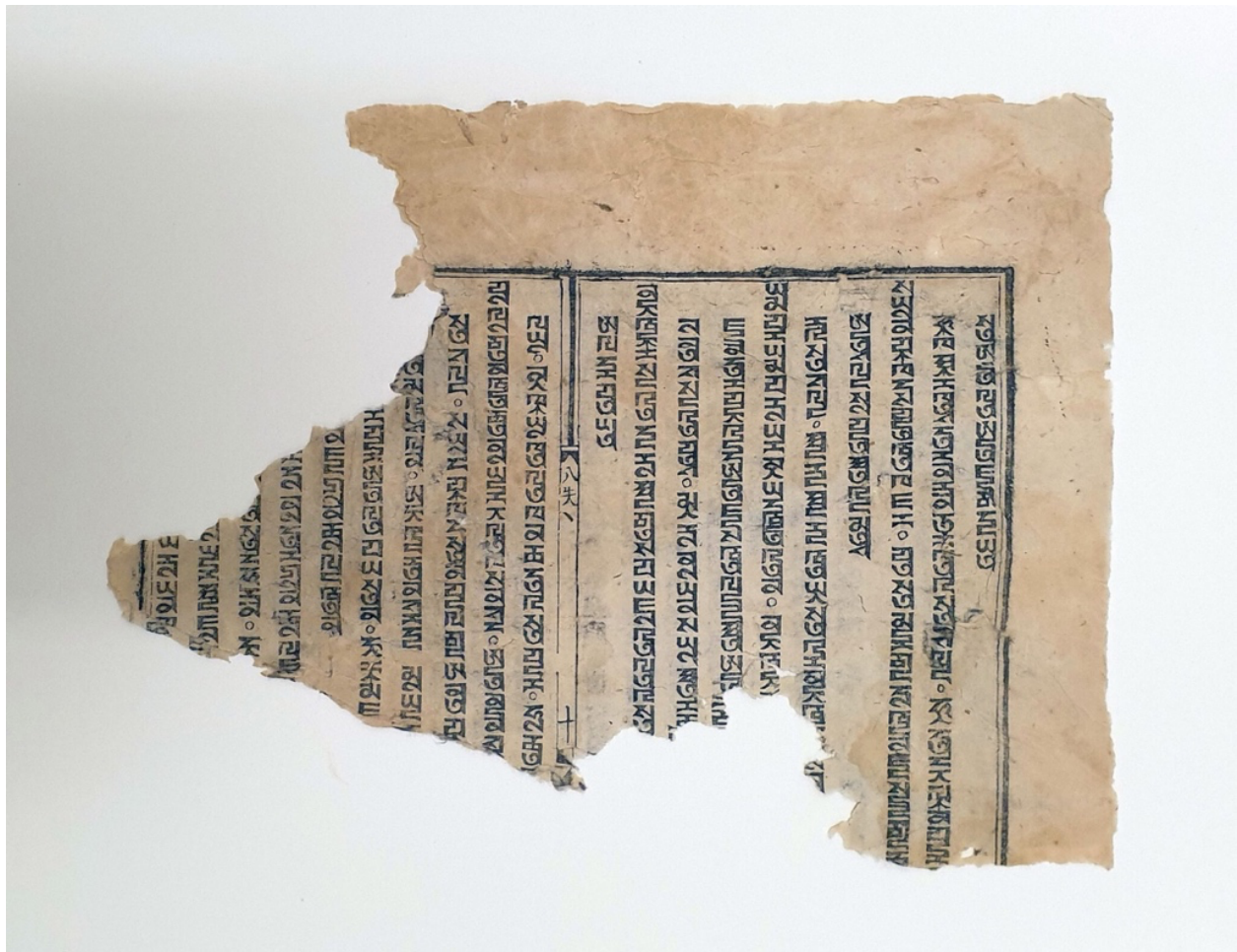


Fig. 4 *Subhasitaratnanidhi* (Treasury of Good Sayings) Mongolian translation in Pakpa (square script), Khocho, 13th–14th century, woodblock print on paper; inv. no. III 42; image © Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Ines Buschmann

The most commonly preserved genre in Pakpa script writing is that of exemption decrees, or *darqan jarliq*. These decrees declare that in return for clerics saying prayers

for the long life of the khan, this or that Tibetan Buddhist monastery, Eastern Orthodox church, Muslim Sufi lodge, or Daoist temple was exempt from any requisitions, whether demanded by messengers or by itinerant officials and commanders. These decrees were commonly bilingual, and in China, Mongolia, and Tibet, the Mongolian version was usually in the Pakpa script.¹¹ Such decrees are, along with the *paizas*, monuments to the privileges of the Mongol Empire's ruling class, privileges to requisition from others and to be free of requisitions themselves. Religious leaders were key members of this ruling class, using their prayers to preserve the lives of the khans and their learning to train the khans' heirs and improve the regime's governance.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all terms are Mongolian.

² See Gerhard Doerfer, *Türkische und mongolische Elemente in Neupersischen*, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965), 239–41; Francis Woodman Cleaves, “Daruya and Gerege,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 16, no. 1/2 (June) (1953): 255–59.

³ Uyghur and Persian: yam. See Dang Baohai 党宝海, *Meng-Yuan yizhan jiaotong yanjiu 蒙元驿站交通研究*, 2006; Hosung Shim, “The Postal Roads of the Great Khans in Central Asia under the Mongol-Yuan Empire,” *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 44 (2014): 405–69; Martón Vér, “The Origins of the Postal System of the Mongol Empire,” *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 22 (2016): 221–39 and Martón Vér, “Religious Communities and the Postal System of the Mongol Empire,” in *Role of Religions in the Turkic Culture*, ed. Éva Csáki, Mária Ivanics, and Zsuzsanna Olach (Budapest: Péter Pázmány Catholic University, 2017), 291–306.

⁴ Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols: The Yüan-Sa-Skya Period of Tibetan History*, Serie Orientale Roma 65 (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990), 61–68.

⁵ Uyghur and Persian: *yarligh*.

⁶ See Christopher P. Atwood and Lynn Struve, *The Rise of the Mongols: Five Chinese Sources* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2021), 148–49; ‘Ala’ al-Din ‘Aṭa Malik Juvaini, *The History of the World Conqueror*, trans. John Andrew Boyle, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 2: 508–9, 598–99.

⁷ See Christopher P. Atwood and Lynn Struve, *The Rise of the Mongols: Five Chinese Sources* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2021), 86–87, 112–13.

⁸ Mongolian. Paḡba Blam-a Lodoi-Jaltsan.

⁹ Tibetan. Goden

¹⁰ Mongolian. *Dörbeljin üsüg*.

¹¹ Christopher P. Atwood, "Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty: Religious Toleration as Political Theology in the Mongol World Empire of the Thirteenth Century," *The International History Review* 26, no. 2 (2004): 238–43.

FURTHER READING

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