

## Apropos of so-called ‘proto-Qarakhanid’ coins

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The mysterious coins cast to the shape of Chinese cash but with Kufi inscriptions (Fig. 1) were first published in 1972, though no reading of the legend was proposed at that time [Senigova, 1972, p. 142, fig. 21]. In 1987 V. Nastich suggested a preliminary reading of the inscription (as *malik-aram-yinal-chiğ* with the last word deciphered erroneously) and expressed the following idea: “judging by the topography of findings, this issue

may be related to certain Turk rulers of Semirechye; it is not improbable that it belongs to the so-called ‘proto-Qarakhanid’ coins issued before the establishment of traditional ‘Islamic’ design for the Qarakhanid coinage. Based on the paleography of the inscriptions, these coins may be dated back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD” [Nastich, 1987, pp. 52–53].

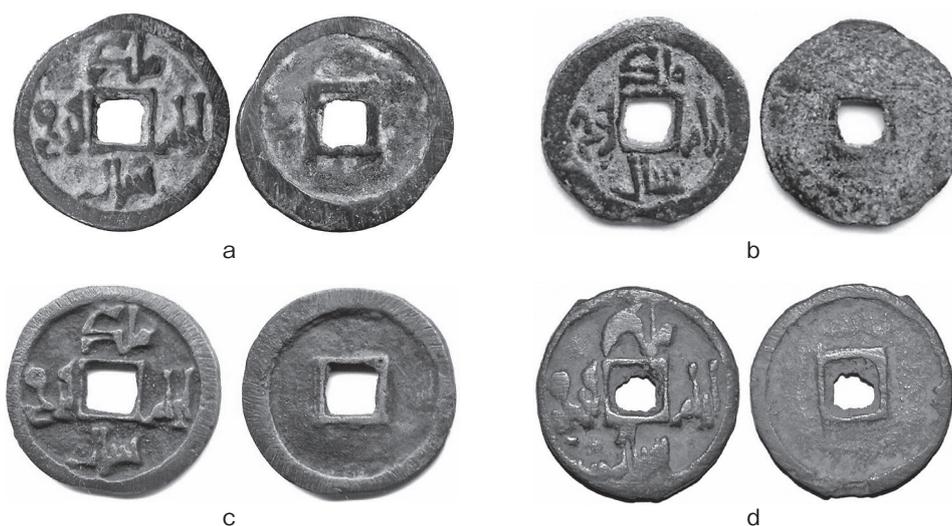


Fig. 1. So-called ‘proto-Qarakhanid’ coins:  
a) Zeno 77470; b) Zeno 303146; c) Zeno 21303; d) Zeno 292707.

Over the past few decades, a significant number of coins of this type has been unearthed. Findings of specimens both in good casting quality and preservation made it possible to specify the reading and clarify the interpretation of the legend. According to latest consideration regarding possible deciphering of the legends under review, separate words should rather read and mean as follows:

*top* — ملك = ملك [malik], apparently from Arab. ‘ruler’, ‘potentate’, hardly ‘king’ as such but somewhat similar to that, otherwise (perhaps less likely) a personal name;

*right* — آرام = آرام [ārām/erām or azām ?], very possibly

a proper noun, yet no lexical value or etymology thereof could be set forth so far for the definitely Turkic legend;

*bottom* — سنال = سنال [yīnāl], a Turkic word widely known as court title close in meaning to ‘prince’ or ‘heir’;

*left* — قراج = قراج [qarač/qaraj], another title, perhaps kind of ‘minister’ or similar to that, or else a Turkic proper noun.

The term *qarač* (*qaraj* or otherwise) could not be found in most of the accessible Turkic written sources; perhaps the only relevant reference can be made to G. Clauson’s historical lexicon [Clauson, 1972, p. 647, entry ‘Tris. ĞRC’]: “D *kara:çi*: apparently N.Ag. fr. *kara*: in

its special sense of 'the common people', but the form is odd. An early l.-w. in Mong. as *karaču* (*Haenisch* 60) which is discussed in *Doerfer* I 274 (where it is not realized that it is a Turkish word); in Mong. it seems to mean 'a man of the common people, not related to the family of Chinggis', which perhaps explains the curious translation in the *Chin.-Uyg. Dict.* In Turkish n.o.a.b. **Uyğ. xiv** *Chin.-Uyg. Dict.*, *tsai hsiang* 'Prime Minister' (*Giles* II, 490 4,249; presumably so called because not a member of the royal family; clearly the Mong. word.)"

Fortunately, rather close equivalents are fixed in certain Russian dictionaries, namely by I.I. Sreznevsky ('КАРАЧЬ') [Sreznevsky, 1893, col. 1197] and W. Radloff ('*карачу/карачы*') [Radloff, 1899, col. 162], confirmed later by M. Vasmer ('КАРАЧ') [Vasmer, 1986, vol. 2, sub verbo] in the meaning 'high-rank dignitary, minister among the Kazan Tatars' as going back to

Uyghur *qarači* > *karaču/karažu* 'minister'. So it looks quite plausible that قرچ of the coinage in question may be kindred with the above reviewed vocabulary.

However, even the present advanced state of reading and understanding of the coin inscription in its entirety, sheds regretfully little light on the acceptable attribution of these coins; meanwhile a hint thereof has come all of a sudden. Several years ago, coins of a previously unknown type were found in the vicinity of Bukhara (Uzbekistan): silver-washed copper dirhams with the name of 'Abbasid caliph al-Muqtafi, bearing on Rev. actually the same legend under review,<sup>1)</sup> just in a different layout (Fig. 2a, b, c). Shortly thereafter, a billon dirham struck by the pair of the dies closely similar to the specimens shown on Fig. 2a and 2c was found in the same region (Fig. 2d). Indication of the caliph's name allows us to date the coins within 530–555 AH (1136–1160 AD).



Fig. 2. Silver-washed AE (a, b, c) and billon (d) dirhams: Zeno 257890, 257930, 312214, 312978 accordingly.

The obverse center is adorned with a square cartouche, obviously imitating the traditional aperture of Chinese type cast coins, filled on our specimens with caliph's name *al-Muqtafi billah* engraved with tiny characters in two different positions (either horizontal or upright) relative to the outer legends placed around the sides of the square and containing as follows: (top) *lā ilah illā Allāh*, (bottom) *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*, (left) *al-*

*muzaḥḥar*, (right) *al- 'ādil*. The marginal circular legend, on all specimens preserved in fragments or virtually lost, is unreadable.

The reverse of the coins is designed similarly to the obverse: a central square decorated with floral motif, the inscription around reading as follows: (top) *al-khāqān*, (bottom) *malik ārām*, (left) *yīnāl*, (right) *qaraj*, thus unexpectedly repeating the legend of the 'proto-

Qarakhanid' coins, but with the additional title *al-khāqān* and in a different reading sequence (Fig. 3). The marginal

circular legend is also fragmentary and almost illegible.



Fig. 3. Reading sequence of the legend *malik ārām yīnāl qaraj* on cast 'cash' coins and struck dirhams.

Naturally, such a close coincidence of the legends on two completely different coin types cannot be accidental, and on this basis we can state with confidence that they both should belong to the same issuer. Taking all the above-mentioned into account, we also conclude that the Chinese type cast coins in question can in no way be considered a 'proto-Qarakhanid' issue dated back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, it is quite logical to attribute its issue to the Qara Khitai state, since the dirhams (given the presence of caliph al-Muqtafi's name) cover the period from the reign of Yelü Dashi 耶律大石 (1087–1143, ruled 1124–1143) up to Yelü Ilie 耶律夷列 (?–1163, ruled 1151–1163). The topography of 'proto-Qarakhanid type' coin finds does not contradict this assumption. Their distribution area includes South and Southeast Kazakhstan along with some other ancient settlements in Chu and Talas valleys, Kyrgyzstan [Nastich, 1987, p. 52; Baratova, 1999, S. 238–239; schematic drawing (Abb. 2, 20) on p. 235]. According to private correspondence with our Chinese colleagues, a small number of finds (up to 10) was also made in Xinjiang, in the vicinities of Kashghar and Yarkand. Thus, all finds of 'proto-Qarakhanid' coins are located on the territory of Western Liao, including its former capital Quz Ordu (also known as Balasaghun) as well as the finds of silver-washed AE dirhams in the vicinity of Bukhara.

It is obvious, however, that the issue of the Chinese type cast coins with the Kufi legend can neither be

attributed to the spouse of Yelü Dashi, Xiao Tabuyan 蕭塔不煙, ruled 1144–1150 as regent for their minor son, nor to the son Yelü Yilie himself. Among the other arguments, the following also speaks in favor of this idea: the struck dirhams with the legend *al-khāqān malik ārām yīnāl qaraj* were most likely issued in the 530s for a very limited time, which also explains their extreme rarity. Dirhams struck in Bukhara in the 540s are known, designed in a different layout and released by other issuers (in 541 and 544 AH — Qarakhanid khaqan Ibrahim b. Muhammad and his suzerain, Great Seljuq Sanjar b. Malik-shah, in 548 AH — Qarakhanid khaqan Ibrahim b. Muhammad alone).

The only person to whom these coins can be attributed is Yelü Dashi himself. The most probable date of issue of dirhams with the legend *al-khāqān malik ārām yīnāl qaraj*, in our opinion, is not earlier than the 5<sup>th</sup> of *Ṣafar* 536 AH (Sep. 09, 1141), when the Battle of Qatwan took place. After that Yelü Dashi 'quartered the troops at Samarqand for 90 days in total, rulers of the countries of the Western Region arrived [in his marching headquarters], offered local products as tribute' 駐軍尋思干凡九十日，回回國王來降，貢方物 [LS, ch. 30, p. 403; Wittfogel, Fêng, 1949, p. 639]. Yelü Dashi died in 1143 AD, so the suggested period of issue of these dirhams should lie within the range 536–538 AH (1141–1143 AD).

The eventual interpretation of the legend *malik ārām yīnāl qaraj* on both the cast coins and the struck dirhams

remains a question that should be solved based on the written sources, yet it can be confidently asserted that this titulature may belong to no one but Yelü Dashi. It contains the titles *malik* 'ruler', *yīnāl* 'prince' and *qaraj* (court title). In this regard, it is pertinent to note that Dashi's second name (normally given at the age of twenty) is Zhongde 大石字重德 [LS, ch. 30, p. 401]. Dashi is either a childhood name 大實則小名也 [QDGZ, ch. 19] or a nick-name, probably derived from the Chinese *taizi* 太子 'prince', *taishi* 太師 / *dashi* 大師 ('grand preceptor' or 'imperial tutor'), also a court title, which can be rendered with the Turkic words *yīnāl qaraj*.

Finally, we believe that the cash coins with the Kufi legend or so-called 'proto-Qarakhanid' coins were in fact issued by Yelü Dashi in the period 1124–1143 AD, although the terminal clarification of the time of issue is not possible at the moment.

#### Note

- 1) V. Kalinin (Moscow) was the first who noted the coincidence of the legend on the reverse of these dirhams with the legend on the 'proto-Qarakhanid' coins (see comments on Zeno 257890 dated August 30, 2020).

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