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## The *Qara'ul* in the Mongol Empire

Despite being arguably the most important institution in the Mongol Empire, there is still much that remains unknown about the Mongol military. One such component is the *qara'ul* (also seen as *qaraghul* or *qarayul* and in Persian, Arabic, and Turkic as *qarāwul* or *qarāvul*), which Reuven Amitai highlighted on a few occasions in his studies of the Ilkhanid-Mamluk conflict.<sup>1</sup> From his reading of the sources, this unit “combined the function of frontier guards and highway patrol, but little is known of its actual structure and numbers.”<sup>2</sup> Aside from Professor Amitai’s discussion of it, little other scholarly work has appeared on the *qara'ul*. This contribution will explore the *qara'ul* military unit and discuss its actual use and difference from other units that have often had overlapping functions. In this work, I shall use *qara'ul* as that was the Mongolian term, except where it is transliterated differently in a quote. What follows is a brief discussion of the *qara'ul* and connections with other similar military formations, such as the *algincin*. Space limitations prevent me from a full exploration of the *qara'ul* units, but this will serve as an appetizer (one hopes) for a more complete discussion in the future.

Perhaps the first recorded encounter in the Middle East with a unit specifically called *qara'ul* took place in mid-December 1260/late Dhū al-Ḥijjah 658 at

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It is my pleasure to dedicate this paper to Reuven Amitai, my friend, colleague, and erstwhile Yiddish instructor, whom I first met over breakfast when he spoke at the University of Wisconsin-Madison circa 1999. What I appreciate most about Reuven, when not discussing Mongols and medieval warfare, is that the rest of our conversation is generally about the Three Stooges, Marx Brothers, and other old comedies. While we unfortunately see each other infrequently, I can always count on a “Have you heard the one about . . .” instead of a hello. The only characteristic that can rival his intellect is his sense of humor. I would also thank the members of the Tom Allsen Seminar for their suggestions, particularly Anne Broadbridge and Ruth Dunnell for their detailed comments on this paper as well those of the anonymous reviewer. Any errors remain my own.

<sup>1</sup>Reuven Amitai, “Whither the Ilkhanid Army? Ghazan’s First Campaign into Syria (1299–1300),” in *Warfare in Inner Asia (500–1800)*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo (Leiden, 2002), 244; idem, “Northern Syria between the Mongols and Mamluks: Political Boundary, Military Frontier, and Ethnic Affinities,” in *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700*, ed. Daniel Power and Naomi Standen (New York, 1999), 144; Reuven Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Īlkhānid War, 1260–1281* (Cambridge, 1995), 62, 147.

<sup>2</sup>Amitai, “Northern Syria,” 144.



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Fallujah. At this time, al-Ḥākim Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥasan, a claimant to the Abbasid caliphal throne, collected an army from the Āl Faḍl Bedouins in Syria and challenged Mongol rule in Iraq. Taking the title Caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh, he marched along the Euphrates and allegedly conquered ʿĀna, al-Ḥadīthah, Hīt, and al-Anbār as he headed toward Baghdad. Amitai is rightly skeptical of these conquests.<sup>3</sup> Before arriving at Baghdad, however, Caliph al-Ḥākim encountered the *qara'ul*. Per al-Yūnīnī, Caliph al-Ḥākim defeated the *qara'ul*, inflicting heavy casualties by killing 1,500 of them.<sup>4</sup> Amitai suggests that these claims are dubious, as allegedly the Muslims lost only six. While we have no information on the size of Caliph al-Ḥākim's army, considering it was formed of Bedouin (and perhaps augmented by others as he marched), it is unlikely to have been more than a few thousand at most. Another reason for skepticism is that 1,500 seems large for a *qara'ul* unit. Caliph al-Ḥākim's grand conquest came to naught, however, as news of his invasion reached Qarābughā, the Mongol regional commander in Baghdad, who then approached with an army. Caliph al-Ḥākim made a strategic withdrawal to the safety of Syria.<sup>5</sup>

This encounter leads to several questions. Here, Amitai has defined the *qara'ul* as a road patrol. A unit of 1,500 (perhaps more) seems quite large to patrol a highway, logistically speaking. Thus, we must question whether it was truly a road patrol or if it was perhaps a regular military unit. If the latter, however, why would al-Yūnīnī have used the term *qara'ul*? While the term is mentioned in several sources, it is not used on a regular basis.

Chronologically, the next mention of the *qara'ul* took place during the reign of the Ilkhan Aḥmad Tegüder (r. 680–83/1281–84). As Amitai noted, the *qara'ul* had captured a Mamluk spy (*jāsās*) disguised as a *faqīr*.<sup>6</sup> In this, we can see that the *qara'ul* were effective. Not only did they have the capability to intercept or identify invaders, as was the case with Caliph al-Ḥākim, but they also had the authority to investigate incidents and apprehend suspicious individuals traveling along their patrol routes.

These are not the only mentions of the *qara'ul* in the Ilkhanid sources. This Mongolian term is also mentioned in a letter of safe conduct from Abaqa Ilkhan (r. 1265–82).<sup>7</sup> In their discussion of this letter Mostaert and Cleaves used Professor Kowalewski's *Dictionnaire Mongol-Russe-Français* for their definition, “senti-

<sup>3</sup> Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks*, 61–62.

<sup>4</sup> Quṭb al-Dīn Mūsá ibn Muḥammad al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mir'āt al-zamān fī tārikh al-a'yān* (Hyderabad, 1954–61), 1:485–86.

<sup>5</sup> Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks*, 62; al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mir'āt al-zamān*, 1:485–86.

<sup>6</sup> Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks*, 147.

<sup>7</sup> Antoine Mostaert and Francis Woodman Cleaves, “Trois documents mongols des Archives secretes vaticanes,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 15, no. 3 (1952): 433–34.



nelle, garde, piquet, corps de garde.”<sup>8</sup> In this letter, Abaqa instructs his governors and commanders to grant safe conduct to the bearer. He specifically mentions the patrols (*qarayul-a*).<sup>9</sup>

Based on these two incidents and despite the scant details, I concur with Professor Amitai’s definition of the *qara’ul* as a frontier guard and highway patrol. Unfortunately, he is also quite correct about the lack of information on the actual structure and/or numbers of the *qara’ul*. In this regard, the contemporary Arabic and Persian sources are deficient.

### LINGUISTIC APPROACH

Scholars have defined the term variously, although there is frequent overlap with Kowalewski’s definition. Nonetheless, the differences demonstrate disagreement, or at least difference in interpretation for certain situations, which may also be influenced by use of the word during different historical eras and in different places. Virtually all agree that *qara’ul/qarayul/qarāvul/qarāwul* meant “patrol.” Beyond that, slight variations in meaning occur often due to changes in how the units were used over time and with regional variations.

The Mongolist John C. Street defined it as “patrol, scouting party, scout.”<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Paul Ratchnevsky defined it as “*schutztruppen* [protection troops].”<sup>11</sup> Nikolas Poppe defined *qara’ul* as “*wachposten* [guard post].”<sup>12</sup> The Hungarian Mongolist Louis Ligeti translated it from the Chinese to mean “sentinel, patrol or guard,” but recognized that in other languages the term took on some new, yet related, meanings: in Chaghatay Turkic it also meant “guard or watchman,” while Manchu added the definition of a “picket.”<sup>13</sup> Mostaert and Cleaves also noted that *qara’ul/qarayul* stems from the verb *QARA-* “to watch or observe,” but remarked that *The Secret History of the Mongols* uses the word in the sense of “*guetteurs, éclaireurs* [lookouts, scouts].”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, they noted that the term continued to be used in the post-imperial period and in other states in the region, albeit with slightly changed meanings. Indeed, in the Qing Empire,

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 437; Joseph Etienne Kowalewski, *Dictionnaire Mongol-Russe-Français* (Kazan, 1844–49), 832

<sup>9</sup>Mostaert and Cleaves, “Trois documents mongols,” 434.

<sup>10</sup>John C. Street, “The Middle Mongolian Demonstratives *ene* and *tere* in the Secret History,” *Mongolian Studies* 13 (1990): 187.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Ratchnevsky, “Šigi-Qutuqu, ein Mongolischer Gefolgsmann im 12–13 Jahrhundert,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 10, no. 2 (1965): 104.

<sup>12</sup>Nikolaus Poppe, “Eine Viersprachige Zamxšarī—Handschrift,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 101 (n.F. 26) (1951): 318.

<sup>13</sup>Louis Ligeti, “Glossaire supplémentaire au vocabulaire Sino-Ouïghour du Bureau des Traducteurs,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 22, no. 1 (1969): 29–30.

<sup>14</sup>Mostaert and Cleaves, “Trois documents mongols,” 437.



*qarayul* were the guards along the Qing-Russian border (Manchu: *karun*; Chinese: *k'a-liun*) with the meaning of picket or “watch-tower in important passages.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, in the Qing period, it is apparent that the *qarayul*, regardless of their definition in Mongolian, Manchu, or Chinese, have a more stationary role and the patrol aspect is much more limited, which also reflects the changing nature of the state that used the institution. Curiously, there seems to have been a similar transformation in other parts of the former Mongol Empire as well. Gerhard Doerfer demonstrates the changing definition in his *Türkische und mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen*. His definition is “Spähtrupp, berittene Patrouille [scouting party, mounted patrol].”<sup>16</sup> While this initial definition is brief, his discussion of the term and how it enters numerous languages (approximately 30) with slight changes in meaning continues for 4 pages.

The term and definition of *qara'ul* stayed constant through the Mongolian literature, derived from *qara-* (modern XAPAX), meaning “to look at, glance, watch, observe, to regard, consider, to look after, to face.”<sup>17</sup> *Qara'ul* “patrol or scout” did not use the standard *nomen actoris* suffix “-ci”; *qaraci* does exist, but it means a messenger in a government office, a scribe, or a clerk.<sup>18</sup> This, however, appears to be a modern usage, as *bicigci* (literally, one who writes) was the term in use through the imperial period. The suffix *-yul* (the *γ* was not vocalized in imperial-period Middle Mongolian) also refers to an occupation. Indeed, the first example of this given by Poppe in his study of Mongolian grammar is *qarayul*.<sup>19</sup> It is curious, however, that this suffix is used instead of *-ci*, as so many other imperial terms designating occupations used the latter: *darquaci*, *jarquci*, *tammaci*, *alginci*, *bichigci*, etc.

*Qara'ul/qarayul* does have a modern equivalent: XAPYYJI, meaning “watch, sentry; guard, scout.” In classical Mongolian (seventeenth-eighteenth century), we also see a verbal form (*-yaryaqu*, to send out scouts), as well as a variety of related terms, both as verbs and nouns.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the *nomen actoris* form

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Gerhard Doerfer, *Türkische und mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen* (Wiesbaden, 1963), 1:399–404.

<sup>17</sup>Ferdinand D. Lessing, ed., *Mongolian-English Dictionary* (Bloomington, 1995), 932; also see Gombjab Hangin et al., *A Modern Mongolian-English Dictionary* (Bloomington, 1986), 618; Tserendorjiin Altangerel, *Mongol-Angli Toli Bichig saka utgatai xiigeed xolboo ügiin* (Ulaanbaatar, 2012), 532.

<sup>18</sup>Kaare Grønbech and John R. Krueger, *An Introduction to Classical (Literary) Mongolian*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden, 1976), 46; Lessing, *Mongolian-English Dictionary*, 932.

<sup>19</sup>Nicholas Poppe, *Grammar of Written Mongolian* (Wiesbaden, 1954), 46. Also see the footnote for §142 in *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, ed. and trans. Igor de Rachewiltz (Leiden, 2004), 527.

<sup>20</sup>Lessing, *Mongolian-English Dictionary*, 933; also see Hangin, *Modern Mongolian-English Dictionary*, 623; Altangerel, *Mongol-Angli Toli Bichig*, 535.



does appear in a relation to the modified verb *qarayul*: *qarayulci* (modern form ХАРУУЛЧ), meaning watchman or guard. This form demonstrates a slight difference from the imperial *qara'ul* and the modern meaning. While a watchman or guard patrols a limited area, the scouting function is no longer included in the definition.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the term retained much of its Mongolian and imperial-era meaning over the centuries, while also acquiring some additional meanings.

During the imperial era, the *qara'ul* entered Persian as *qarāvul* and retained the Mongolian definition for these special units. Even after the end of the Ilkhanate, *qarāvul* continued to have the definition of “sentinel, watchman, guard,” but also (over time) acquired new meanings such as “the sight of a gun.”<sup>22</sup> Two verbs also evolved. One is the relatively obvious *qarāvul kardan* (to mount guard), but, related to the gun sight definition, we see *qarāvul raftan* (to take aim at), which clearly recognizes the Mongolian root verb of *qara-*, meaning to observe, look at, etc.

More importantly, Steingass also recorded a noun that more clearly shows the duties of the *qarāvul*. *Qarāvuli* is a skirmish or a running fight.<sup>23</sup> This is clearly connected to the actual role of the *qarāvul/qara'ul*'s function as a scout or patrol, yet it can also mean “the duty of acting as scouts and sentinels to camp or out-post.”<sup>24</sup> While different, the terms are still directly connected to their traditional duties.

It is important to note that *qara'ul* was not the only type of scout that existed. There were also the *algincin* (sing. *alginci*). While it is unclear how their duties differed, the fundamental difference was that the *algincin* were associated and mentioned in conjunction with the *tamma* units that were stationed on the frontiers of the expanding empire. Like the *tamma*, the *algincin* were stationed in a region for years, even decades.<sup>25</sup> In this capacity, the *algincin* served as the reconnaissance wing of the *tamma*, but, like the *qara'ul*, their numbers and the nuances of the institution remain vague. The main point to remember is that although they were both scouts, they were separate and distinct units.

<sup>21</sup> Lessing, *Mongolian-English Dictionary*, 933.

<sup>22</sup> F. Steingass, *Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (New Delhi, 1996), 962.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Paul D. Buell and Francesca Fiaschetti, *Historical Dictionary of the Mongol Empire*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD, 2018), 239. Also see Paul D. Buell, “Kalmyk Tanggaci People: Thoughts on the Mechanics and Impact of Mongol Expansion,” *Mongolian Studies* 6 (1980): 41–59.



## SCOUTS AND VANGUARDS IN *THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS*

The best source for our understanding of the actual functions and purpose of the *qara'ul* and *alginčin* is *The Secret History of the Mongols*. Here we see these terms used on a frequent basis and in context, so we can see not only the precise circumstances of how the *qara'ul* and *alginčin* were used, but also gain insight into their nuances.

The first appearance of the term is in the context of Temüjin (Chinggis Khan) and Toghril, the Kereit Khan and Temüjin's suzerain, marching against Jamuqa (Temüjin's *anda* and Toghril's former leading general) and his Gur-Khanid confederation in 1201. Per the *Secret History* §142:

They set out downstream along the Kelüren River. Činggis Qa'an sent Altan, Qučar and Dāritai as vanguard [*manglai*]; Ong Qan for his part sent as vanguards [*manglai*] Senggüm, Jaqa Gambu and Bilge Beki. Patrols [*qara'ul*] were also dispatched ahead of the vanguard, at Enegen Güiletu they set up [*talbiba*] an observation post [*niken s'urin qara'ul*]; beyond that, at Mount Čekčer, they set up another observation post.<sup>26</sup>

Here we see two components of Toghril and Temüjin's army—the *manglai* and the *qara'ul*. *Manglai*, literally “head,” is used as vanguard. While the passage indicates that each leader sent three men, it is assumed by the Secret Historian that the reader understands that Toghril and Temüjin sent those men with their units (ostensibly a *minggan* or unit of 1000). These were then screened by the *qara'ul*. In this instance, *qara'ul* were sent in advance to establish observation posts to watch for Jamuqa's army and to ensure the *manglai* did not march into an ambush. The positioning of the *qara'ul* at Mount Čekčer is particularly significant, as from this vantage point they had a better view for observing any enemy forces.

Prior to this action (but situated later in §158 of *The Secret History*), we find a *qara'ul* skirmish as the *qara'ul* of Toghril and Temüjin pursued those of Buyirūq Qan, a Naiman leader. While a minor incident in history, it is nonetheless significant for our understanding of the *qara'ul*. “A chief named Yedi Tubluq, who was patrolling [*qara'ul yabuju*] was pursued by our patrol [*bidan-u qara'ul hüldekdejü*].”<sup>27</sup> Here we see *qara'ul* becoming a verb. *Yabuju* means “to go” in Mon-

<sup>26</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §142. I use the section numbers so it may be found in any translation. Where the section symbol (§) is not used, it indicates the page number in De Rachewiltz's commentary. The Middle Mongolian terms and text here and henceforth for the *Secret History* are taken from idem, *Index to The Secret History of the Mongols* (Richmond, UK, 1997), §142.

<sup>27</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §158; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §158.



golian. Thus, we have a literal translation of “to go to the duties of the *qara’ul*.” While in §142 we see the *qara’ul* setting up observation posts, here the *qara’ul* are actively scouting and engaging in combat, thus indicating that they could engage in violence in addition to collecting intelligence.

*Qara’ul*, thus far, have been involved only in active military operations—the conflict against the Gur-Khanid confederation and the Kereit-Mongol operations against the Naiman. In another instance, however, we find that the *qara’ul* did not exist solely in times of war. This incident occurs after the defeat of Toghriq Ong-Qan by Temüjin in 1203, after the Kereit-Mongol alliance fractures as described in §188:

Ong Qan and Senggüm escaped with their bare lives and went away, unwilling to submit to Činggis Qan. Ong Qan, who was suffering from thirst, was going to drink at the Nekün Usun of Didak Saqal when he came across the Naiman patrolman [*qara’ul*] Qori Sübeči.<sup>28</sup>

The mention in the *Secret History* makes it appear that Qori Sübeči is a solitary *qara’ul*. From Rashīd al-Dīn, we learn that Qori Sübeči was accompanied by Titig Sa’al, and both were commanders (امرای) of the Naiman leader, Tayang Khan.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the *qara’ul* that Toghriq encounters is not a lone patrolman or even two patrolmen, but a patrol troop. Indeed, the two Naiman commanders are identified by Rashīd al-Dīn as *qarāvul*.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately for him, Qori Sübeči did not recognize (or perhaps did not care) the undoubtedly bedraggled yet protesting Kereit khan and killed him, particularly as he was an outsider attempting to drink water at a spring in Naiman territory, although in Rashīd al-Dīn’s account, Qori Sübeči did recognize Toghriq but killed him because he was an enemy.<sup>31</sup> Upon hearing about the incident, Gürbesü, the mother of the Naiman ruler, Tayang Khan, ordered Qori Sübeči to retrieve the head. She then venerated it. After-

<sup>28</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §188; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §188.

<sup>29</sup>Rashīd al-Dīn Ṭabīb, *Jāmi’ al-tavārikh*, ed. Muḥammad Rawshan and Muṣṭafā Musavī (Tehran, 1994), 120, 126, 395, 397, 416; idem, *Jami’u’t-Tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles*, vol. 3 of *Classical Writings of the Medieval Islamic World: Persian Histories of the Mongol Dynasties*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (London, 2012), 46, 48, 135, 136, 142; idem, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’u’t-tawarikh = Compendium of Chronicles: A History of the Mongols*, trans. and annotated Wheeler M. Thackston (Cambridge, 1998), 1:65, 68, 192; idem, *Jāmi’ al-tavārikh*, ed. Bahman Karīmī (Tehran, 1983), 92, 96, 291. Also see De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, 676.

<sup>30</sup>Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi’ al-tavārikh*, ed. Rawshan and Musavī, 1:397; idem, *Jami’u’t-Tawarikh*, 136; idem, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’u’t-tawarikh*, 1:192; idem, *Jāmi’ al-tavārikh*, ed. Karīmī, 291.

<sup>31</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §188; also see De Rachewiltz’s commentary on p. 676. Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi’ al-tavārikh*, ed. Rawshan and Musavī, 1:120; idem, *Jami’u’t-Tawarikh*, 46; idem, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’u’t-tawarikh*, 1:65; idem, *Jāmi’ al-tavārikh*, ed. Karīmī, 92.



wards, the skull laughed, which so unnerved Tayang Khan that he promptly stomped on it until it shattered. This led the Naiman general Kökse'ü Sabraq to criticize both the beheading of Toghril by Qori Sübeči and Tayang Khan's desecration of the head.<sup>32</sup> In Rashīd al-Dīn's rendition of the event, Kökse'ü Sabraq is absent, but Tayang Khan criticizes the murders and tells his commanders they should have brought Toghril as a captive.<sup>33</sup> While Kökse'ü Sabraq's criticism may have been warranted, there was no punishment. Thus, we learn that the Naiman patrolled their frontiers and that even individuals of high rank undertook this task. Furthermore, they had the authority to eradicate potential threats and trespassers. As Qori Sübeči did not face any consequences for his murder of the Kereit leader, one can deduce that Kökse'ü Sabraq's comments expressed frustration at the mistreatment of an elite, not at a violation of the scope of the *qara'ul*'s duties.

We learn more about the *qara'ul* during that pivotal moment in the Mongolian steppe when Temüjin, the future Chinggis Khan, encountered the Naiman at Chakirma'ut (1204) in a battle that determined the fate of the Mongolian steppe and led to the rise of the Mongol Empire. Here, the *qara'ul* played a key role, with twelve mentions. In this instance we have *qara'ul* at observation posts, scouting, skirmishing with each other, and even eventually joining the main force. In these instances, the terminology is the same as in the previous ones. We also have a curious appearance of the term *alginci*, albeit as a verb. For the latter, when Chinggis Khan set out to fight the Naiman, "He rode upstream along the Kelüren River and sent Jebe and Qubilai ahead to reconnoitre [*algincilaju yabu'at*]." <sup>34</sup> Additionally, when they attack the Naiman, "Činggis Qa'an in person formed the vanguard [*algincilaju*]." <sup>35</sup> The *alginci* as a military component will be discussed below.

It is unclear why *algincilaju* is used instead of *manglailajü*, which also means to form a vanguard.<sup>36</sup> In the second instance, with Chinggis Khan leading the vanguard, it is the context of his assignment of the command of the center to his brother Qasar [*qasari qol jasa'ulba*] and the rear guard to his youngest brother Temüge Otcigin [*otcigin-noyan-i kötöt jasa'ulba*].<sup>37</sup> There are a few other instances

<sup>32</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §189; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §189. As De Rachewiltz comments, the laughing was probably *rigor mortis* causing a death grin. See the commentary in De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, 680–81.

<sup>33</sup>Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-tavārikh*, ed. Rawshan and Musavī, 1:397; idem, *Jami'u't-Tawarikh*, 136; idem, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami'u't-tawarikh*, 192; idem, *Jāmi' al-tavārikh*, ed. Karīmī, 291.

<sup>34</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §193; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §193.

<sup>35</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §195; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §195.

<sup>36</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, 705.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, §195; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §195.



prior to 1204 where *alginci* appears in *The Secret History*. The earliest deals with Bodončar, an ancestor of Chinggis Khan and the founder of the Borjigid Mongols. When he and his brothers decide to attack a group, Bodončar rode ahead as an *alginci* or “scout,” as De Rachewiltz translates it.<sup>38</sup> In his commentary on this incident, he notes that the derivative verbal form *algincila-* means “to reconnoiter.” This use occurs again in §38: “Bodončar, as he was riding ahead reconnoitering... [*bodončar alginci ha’ulju...*].”<sup>39</sup>

*Alginci ha’ulju* appears again when, early in Chinggis Khan’s career, after separating from Jamuqa’s tutelage, his uncles Altan, Sača, and Qučar elect Temüjin as Khan.<sup>40</sup> Here they swear an oath: “We shall make you *qan*. When you, Temüjin, become *qan*, we

As vanguard [*alginci ha’ulju*] shall speed  
 After many foes: for you  
 Fine-looking maidens and ladies of rank,  
 Palatial tents, and from foreign people  
 Ladies and maidens with beautiful cheeks,  
 And geldings with fine croups  
 At the trot we shall bring”<sup>41</sup>

In this passage, the Secret Historian again uses *alginci ha’ulju*. It is not clear why De Rachewiltz uses “vanguard” in this instance, though in his commentary on Bodončar he notes that in some cases *alginci* can mean “advance guard or party, vanguard.”<sup>42</sup> Urgunge Onon’s translation of the text also uses “vanguard.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, we find *alginci ha’ulju* and *algincilaju* carrying meanings of “reconnoitering or scouting” or “serving as the vanguard” in different circumstances, but it is not clear in which circumstances one should be used over the other.

Other uses of *alginci* occur in the final sections of the *Secret History* covering the reign of Ögödei Qa’an and his conquest of the Jin Empire: “Having established scouts [*alginci*] and garrison troops [*tammacin*], and having resident commissioners [*daruqachin*] in Namging, Jungdu and in cities everywhere, he peacefully returned home, setting up camp at Qara Qorum.”<sup>44</sup> *Alginci* is again paired

<sup>38</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §37; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §37.

<sup>39</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, 276; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §38.

<sup>40</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §123; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §123.

<sup>41</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §123; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §123.

<sup>42</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, 276.

<sup>43</sup>*The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan*, ed. and trans. Urgunge Onon (London, 2001), §123, p. 100.

<sup>44</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §273; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §273.



with the *tamma* when Ögödei berates his son Güyük for his conduct on the Western Campaign and says:

We shall place him in the vanguard (*alginci talbiju*)  
 We shall make him climb the town walls  
*Which are as high as mountains*  
 Until the nails of his ten fingers are worn away;  
 We shall place him in the garrison army:  
 We shall make him climb the town walls  
*Which are made of hard-pounded earth*  
 Until the nails of his five fingers are ground down.<sup>45</sup>

Here again, *alginci* is translated as vanguard by De Rachewiltz. The final appearance of *alginci* (alongside the *tammacin*) comes when Ögödei lists his achievements: “Further, I established scouts and garrison troops [*algincin tammacin talbiju*] among the people of cities everywhere and so I let the people live in peace, causing them to rest.”<sup>46</sup>

We see both *qara'ul* and *alginci* referring to scouts and vanguards, two very different military roles. Are these Mongolian terms synonymous? From their usage, it is doubtful. Regarding the *alginci*, it is usually glossed as “scout,” though, as discussed, “vanguard” and even “spy” have been proposed.<sup>47</sup> When either *qara'ul* or *alginci* is used, the other term is not, and when both do appear (such as at Chakirma'ut), they are used in very different contexts, not as synonyms. It is also curious that *alginci* is not in the plural form in §273 but is plural in §281. Was this an orthographic error in the text, or does it have some other meaning? De Rachewiltz does not discuss this variation, leaving this question unanswered. The usage however, leaves me unconvinced that “vanguard” is a proper interpretation for either *qara'ul* or *alginci*. Indeed, Nicholas Poppe first raised doubts about “vanguard” as a definition for *alginci*.<sup>48</sup> While he noted that “it can be connected tentatively with Turkic”<sup>49</sup> languages, with *alin* or *algi* (the one in the front, frontal, initial), he remained skeptical. In the English translations of *The*

<sup>45</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §276; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §276.

<sup>46</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §281; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §281.

<sup>47</sup>Buell, “Kalmyk Tanggaci People,” 46; Timothy May, *The Mongol Art of War* (Barnsley, 2016), 36–38. For “spy” see De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, 1015.

<sup>48</sup>Nicholas Poppe, “On Some Military Terms in the Yüan-Cha'ao Pi-Shih,” *Monumenta Serica* 26 (1967): 509.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.



*Secret History*, all three possible definitions are used: scout, vanguard, and spy. The following table lists the uses of *alginci* (as a noun and as a verb).<sup>50</sup>

Translations of <i>alginci</i> in <i>The Secret History of the Mongols</i>					
	§37	§38	§123	§276	§281
<b>Atwood</b>	outrider	outrider	outrider	scout	outrider
<b>Cleaves</b>	spy	spy	spies	spy	spies
<b>De Rachewiltz</b>	scout	reconnoitering	vanguard	vanguard	scout
<b>Dorjgotov &amp; Erendo</b>	vanguard (van of the raid)	vanguard (van of the raid)	vanguard (van of battling)	scout	administrators? <sup>50</sup>
<b>Onon</b>	scout	omitted <sup>50</sup>	vanguard	scout	scouts

From the examples found in the *Secret History*, we can deduce that *qara'ul* went in advance of the vanguard (*manglai*), and set up observation points at strategic locations. They also patrolled territory and were on guard for interlopers and threats. Finally, they could engage the enemy if they encountered them, but it is also clear that the *qara'ul* only attacked other *qara'ul*. There are no mentions of them attacking larger forces. Indeed, if one was encountered, the *qara'ul* (both Naiman and Mongol *qara'ul*) returned to the main force and reported its location, as occurred at Chakirma'ut.<sup>51</sup> So, how do the *qara'ul* and *alginci* differ? Both were engaged in intelligence gathering as part of their duties. In both cases, it is difficult to ascertain the numbers of *qara'ul* or *alginci* troops involved in any operation. A key function of the *qara'ul* was patrolling a region, and they eventually become a sort of highway patrol during the imperial period. There is no clear evidence that *alginci* ever performed this role. In his classic study of the *tamma*, Paul D. Buell was, to my knowledge, the first to understand the *alginci* in relation to the *tamma*, with which it is frequently linked. He wrote:

<sup>50</sup>Translations used in the table are: *The Secret History of the Mongols*, trans. Francis W. Cleaves (Cambridge, 1982); De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*; Onon, *Secret History*; *The Secret History of the Mongols*, trans. Christopher P. Atwood (New York, 2023); *The Secret History of the Mongols*, trans. N. Dorjgotov and Z Erendo (Ulaanbaatar, 2007). In §38, Onon passes over the phrase. Curiously, Dorjgotov and Erendo translated passage §281 as “Further, I appointed administrators, and assigned garrison troops...”

<sup>51</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §195.



Well forward of the main striking force, stationed at various strategic locations actually within the conquered domains were small groups of “scouts” (*alginci?*), assigned the function of supporting local forces directly where possible and of warning the main force in the event of a major crisis.<sup>52</sup>

Buell’s comments, however, are in relation to *alginci* being deployed in conquered areas with the *tamma*, which is the “main force” in the passage above, while the local forces are those clients who have submitted. In this regard, the *alginci* appear to have some other functions, and in some ways seem more comparable to what in modern parlance might serve similarly to a FOB (forward operating base) or perhaps a fire base, albeit a very mobile one. Like a FOB, the *alginci* aided in tactical operations as well as intelligence gathering, and, like a fire base, provided offensive capability and protected local clients.<sup>53</sup> In the table above, Atwood’s “outrider” seems the most accurate for the *alginci* in terms of functionality, as they screened the *tamma*, providing an offensive capability but not simply patrolling or scouting ahead.

At Chakirma’ut, the two noyans who commanded the reconnoitering [*alginci ha’ulju*] troops are Jebe and Qubilai, leading commanders that Chinggis Khan had designated as two of his *dörben noqas* (Four Hounds: Jebe, Qubilai, Sübedei, and Jelme). These *dörben noqas*, as well as the *dörben külü’üd* (Four Steeds: Muqali, Bo’orchu, Boro’ul, and Chila’un), were Chinggis Khan’s elite commanders and at least during the wars of unification in Mongolia, often operated as what might be considered brigades.<sup>54</sup> The *qara’ul*, even those led by the notable Qori Sübeçi, do not appear to have been specialists or elite troops. They were assigned as needed. Some members might have specialized as *qara’ul* due to certain abilities (keen eyesight, endurance, horsemanship), but the sources unfortunately fail to indicate this. As with the future association of *alginci* with the *tamma*, the *alginci* would (like the *tamma*) be a unit specially designated for service, though selection was more of a draft or lottery and not necessarily based on identifiable skills.<sup>55</sup> As evinced by the oath of Altan, Quçar, and Sača given above, the *alginci* undertook more aggressive actions in addition to scouting, and the acquisition

<sup>52</sup> Buell, “Kalmyk Tanggaci People,” 46–47.

<sup>53</sup> These concepts are explored in more detail in Timothy May, “The *Tamma* Institution and the Creation of a Mongol Diaspora,” in *The Cross Roads of the Steppe and the Sea*, ed. Timothy May (Leiden, forthcoming).

<sup>54</sup> De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §195.

<sup>55</sup> For the formation of the *tamma* and the *alginci*, see Buell, “Kalmyk Tanggaci People,” 45; May, *Mongol Art of War*, 36–38.



of booty was certainly on their mind.<sup>56</sup> Thus, while the *qara'ul* scouted, gathered intelligence, and provided security by patrolling and watching over areas, the *alginci* had an offensive function beyond skirmishing with other scouts. The *alginci* were also raiders in addition to being scouts; they were the ones who sowed chaos ahead of the army by raiding and perhaps disseminating misinformation, which also tied into their later functions with the *tamma* that were stationed on the frontier of the expanding empire. Defensively, as outriders, the *alginci* screened the army on the move, serving as first contact with the enemy, but not necessarily as a large body like the vanguard. In essence they were a tripwire or skirmishers.

Still, the question remains as to why *alginci* is sometimes translated as vanguard, but we also see this later with *qara'ul* after it enters other languages such as Persian (*qarāwul*). I believe that for both *qara'ul/qarāwul* and *alginci*, “vanguard” is an incorrect definition that springs from a misunderstanding of what they actually did, which was primarily to gather intelligence, with the latter also engaging in a bit of light pillaging when possible. Additionally, it is clear from previous examples that the Mongols had a clear term (*manglai*) for vanguard. This is best demonstrated not only in §142 of the *Secret History*, but also in its descriptions of the invasions of the Jin and Khwārazmian empires. Regarding the Jin Empire, Chinggis Khan assigned Jebe and Güyigünok ba'atar as vanguard [*jebe güyigüneke-ba'atar qoyar-i manglai ileba*].<sup>57</sup> For the Khwārazmian Empire, “He sent Jebe as vanguard. He sent Sübe'etei in support of Jebe and sent Toqučar in support of Sübe'etei [*jebe-yi manglai ileba jebe-yi gejiqe sübe'etei-yi ileba sübe'etei-yin gejiqe toqucar-i ileba . . .*].”<sup>58</sup> Additionally, when the Mongols moved against Jalāl al-Din and Malik Khan, “Šigi Qutuqu went as vanguard before Činggis Qa'an [*Činggis-qa'an-u urida sigi-qutuqu manglai yabuju-ui*].”<sup>59</sup>

*Manglai* is certainly not synonymous with *alginci* or *qara'ul*. While the *qara'ul* in the post-dissolution period (after 1260) did patrol the frontiers, as demonstrated by Amitai, this seems to have evolved from their traditional role of patrolling the liminal pastures and territories and warding off raiders and other intruders. Furthermore, the *qara'ul* as a highway patrol may reflect a transformation from imperial *Yeke Monggol Ulus* institutions that drew upon the resources of a transcontinental empire to regional empires that despite their size still needed to husband their resources. Without expansion, the *tamma* and *alginci* ceased to have a *raison d'être*. To be sure, the *tamma* and corresponding *alginci* did not van-

<sup>56</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §123; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §123.

<sup>57</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §247; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §247.

<sup>58</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §257; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §257.

<sup>59</sup>De Rachewiltz, *Secret History*, §257; idem, *Index to the Secret History*, §257.



ish overnight but slowly ceased to exist by those terms, perhaps transforming into the *qara'ul* in some areas.

As I've suggested, there is some overlap between the two terms, with the *al-ginci* perhaps merging or disappearing as the *qara'ul* becomes the standard term for scouts and patrols. In later periods, *qara'ul* (rather *qarāwul*, as used in the Persian sources), acquired additional definitions. As Doerfer and Steingass demonstrate, *qarāwul* was used in Persian beyond the Mongol period. It survived as a functioning institution in the Timurid (circa 1370–1500), Safavid (1501–1736), and Qajar periods (1789–1925). During the Safavid period, it functioned as an advance guard of the army. The Qajars also used it in this capacity as a vanguard.<sup>60</sup> While Rabi and Ter-Oganov suggest that the Qajars used the *qarāwul* as a vanguard, this definition might be misleading. While the *qarāwul* was undoubtedly sent ahead, it more likely performed a scouting function, serving as the eyes and ears of the army rather than that of traditional vanguard which operated as a larger and more coherent body. Evidence for this is found in the Timurid and Safavid periods, and at this point it is necessary to abandon the Middle Mongolian *qara'ul* and use the transliterated terminology found in the sources and scholarship, as it represents not only a regional and chronographical shift, but also some institutional changes.

## THE QARA'UL IN THE POST-MONGOL WORLD

Some of what we know of the Timurid *qarāwul* comes from the *Tuzūkāt-i Tīmūrī* (“The Institutes of Timur”).<sup>61</sup> In this source, *qarāwul* appears three times. While the question remains as to whether the text is truly Timurid or is really a Safavid construct, since it was edited and revised during the Safavid period, the work nonetheless provides a glimpse into both the Timurid and Safavid military worlds. The *Tuzūkāt-i Tīmūrī* draws heavily on the *Zafarnāmah* of Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī (d. 1454), demonstrating the importance of the *Zafarnāmah* as a source for later Timurids, and contains sections that discuss not only military ranks, but also battle formations.<sup>62</sup>

After the collapse of the Mongol Empire, we know that the Timurids drew heavily from Mongol institutions, including the *qarāwul*. Indeed, the *qarāwul* was

<sup>60</sup>John R. Walsh, “The Revolt of Alqās Mirzā,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde de Morgenlandes* 68 (1976): 69; Uzi Rabi and Nugzar Ter-Oganov, “The Military of Qajar Iran: The Features of an Irregular Army from the Eighteenth to Early Twentieth Century,” *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2012): 338.

<sup>61</sup>For more on this source see Gergely Csiky, “The *Tuzūkāt-i Tīmūrī* as a source for Military History,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 59, no. 4 (2006): 439–91.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 440–41.



associated with specific command titles in Turkic (*qaravul begi*) and in Persian (*amir-i qarāvul*).<sup>63</sup> These titles reflect not only the institution's incorporation into the dominant languages of the region but also the creation or use of new nomenclature for its commanders. Thus far, I have not found a Mongolian equivalent, although one would presume it was *qara'ul-u noyan*. This is different from *tamma-ci*, which referred not only to the commander of the Mongol *tamma* unit but also to individual members of the *tamma*. While *qara'ulci/qarayulci* does exist in Mongolian, it has a slightly different meaning than *qara'ul* ("watchman, guard") and is the *nomen actoris* of the Mongolian verb *qarayul-* (modern Mongolian *xapyynax*) as opposed to *qara-* (modern Mongolian *xapax*).<sup>64</sup> Csiky translates *qarāvul begi* as "head of reconnaissance," which seems appropriate not only in relation to the *qarāvul*'s Mongolian meaning, but also the Timurids' and Safavids' use of the *qarāvul* as scouts.<sup>65</sup> The context clearly marks the *qarāvul* as a scout. Csiky notes that in the battle formation, the *qarāvul* "were positioned to the right and the left side of the advance-guard (*hirävül*)."<sup>66</sup> The Timurids and Safavids viewed the *qarāvul* as a separate reconnaissance unit that proceeded ahead of the vanguard (*hirävül*). Furthermore, it should be noted that the Timurids also maintained the basic Mongol formations of a center (*qol*) and the right and left wings (*barangār* and *javangār* respectively).<sup>67</sup> Thus, based on the description provided by Csiky, the *qarāvul* during the Timurid and Safavid periods served as scouts and not as true fighting or battle formations that one might expect from a vanguard.<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

While it is risky to project onto the past, I think it is misleading to define *qara'ul* or *alginci* as vanguard. While "scout" covers part of their roles, it also does not do it justice. I have advanced ideas for the true role of the *alginci*, particularly regarding it being described as "vanguard," but I hope that this study has demonstrated that, in addition to providing a definition, scholars must also examine how the units functioned to understand the words' true meanings. Also, it is important to remember that many terms exist in the sources but are not always mentioned by name, as they were not recognized as such by outside sources,

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 449.

<sup>64</sup>Lessing, *Mongolian-English Dictionary*, 933.

<sup>65</sup>Major Davy, ed. and trans., *Institutes Political and Military written originally in the Mogul Language by the Great Timour, improperly called Tamerlane* (Oxford, 1783), 65–66, 103–4. This text has the English translation on the odd pages and the Persian text on the even.

<sup>66</sup>Csiky, "The *Tuzūkāt-i Timūri*," 449.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 483.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 484–85.



who either used their own terminology or did not perceive a particular group's unique function.

For instance, the *qara'ul* existed not only in the Ilkhanate but also in the Jochid Ulus.<sup>69</sup> Undoubtedly it existed in the Chaghatayid and Yuan Empires as well. With the Jochids, it retained the meaning of sentry or guard. From the Jochid use, it entered Russian and several Turkic languages. Vásary suggests that the continued use of *qarāvul* and other Mongolian terminology rather than Turkic synonyms is a symbol of Mongol dominance and a display of the prestige of those terms (such as *daruga* from *daruqaci*). I would venture that it also indicates that such positions and institutions possessed enough difference (either from their inception or due to transformation over time) that they merited keeping the Mongol terminology as no native term adequately fit. A demonstration of this is how the synonyms *shāḥnah* (Arabic and Persian), *basqaq* (Turkic), and *daruqachi* (Mongolian) changed over time so that in the later Jochid era *basqaq* and *daruga* (*daruqaci*) were different positions.<sup>70</sup> In the Jochid Ulus, a tax or levy known as the *qaraqolloq* or *qaravallaq* also existed, and travelers paid it directly to the *qarāvul* who patrolled the trade routes.<sup>71</sup> The fee undoubtedly helped sustain the *qarāvul*, as there is no indication of a regular salary to provide for their needs. It is unclear what amount was paid or how frequently a traveler would pay it. It does not appear frequently in the sources, which suggests it was an initial payment and one would assume that some form of receipt may have been given to prove it had been paid. Still, one wonders if this levy stems from the practice noted by John de Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck, who frequently encountered Mongol units whose commanders demanded gifts.<sup>72</sup> As they were travelling, these units might well have been *qara'ul*. If so, then Plano Carpini paid the *qaraqolloq* frequently, though it is likely that his “gifts” preceded the formal establishment of that fee. This is, however, a topic for future exploration. It should be noted that in the mid-thirteenth century, these units, which might have been *qara'ul* did not force payment but simply requested a “gift.” In both cases, the Franciscans were approached by a force of Mongols that was not

<sup>69</sup>István Vásary, “Mongolian Impact on the Terminology of the Documents of the Golden Horde,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 48, no. 3 (1995): 479.

<sup>70</sup>See István Vásary, “The Origin of the Institution of *Basqaqs*,” *Acta Orientalia Hungaricae* 30 (1976): 205–6.

<sup>71</sup>István Vásary, “Taxation in the Jochid Ulus,” in *The Mongol World*, ed. Timothy May and Michael Hope (New York, 2022), 474–75.

<sup>72</sup>John de Plano Carpini, “History of the Mongols,” in *Mission to Asia*, ed. Christopher Dawson (Toronto, 1980), 52–55; William of Rubruck, “The Journey of William of Rubruck,” in *ibid.*, 107–9; William of Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke 1253–1255*, trans. Peter Jackson (Indianapolis, 2009), 97–101.



unusually large but was attached to a larger camp.<sup>73</sup> This, then, links us back to Caliph al-Ḥākim's victory over the *qara'ul*, suggesting that his encounter was at least possible.

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<sup>73</sup>Plano Carpini, "History of the Mongols," 54; William of Rubruck, "The Journey," 108; idem, *Mission*, 100–1.



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