The Administrative Origins of Mongolia’s ‘Tribal’ Vocabulary

Christopher P. Atwood
University of Pennsylvania, catwood@sas.upenn.edu

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At the time of publication, author Christopher P. Atwood was affiliated with Indiana University. Currently, he is a faculty member in the East Asian Languages and Civilizations Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

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THE ADMINISTRATIVE ORIGINS OF MONGOLIA’S “TRIBAL” VOCABULARY

Introduction
The term “tribe” is commonly found in works on Mongolian history, both in modern scholarship and in translations of primary sources. As nomadic peoples, it has been assumed that “tribes” and “clans” were the basic grassroots units of Mongolian society. Behind this viewpoint lurks the widely accepted sequence of social evolution in which state formation takes place as the culminating process of clans agglomerating into tribes which then become tribal federations and finally states. Before the formation of the state exists a type of “primitive society” organized in kin-based tribes and clans. In the case of the “Turco-Mongolian” peoples, however, this process is seen as naturally limited by the nature of nomadism. Thus states remain feeble and subject to easy disintegration, forcing the Turkic and Mongol nomads to pass time and time again through stages which Chinese, Middle Eastern, and European peoples were able to traverse once and for all in their earliest documented histories.

Traditionally, scholars have assumed that the Mongolian society developed from a tribal, kin-based organization to a state-based territorial organization within the fairly recent past. Boris Ja. Vladimircov gave a famous picture of this process in his classic work, Obščestvennyj stroj Mongolov: Mongol’skoj kočevoj feodalizm or “Social Structure of the Mongols: Mongolian Nomadic Feudalism” [97]. In his opinion, the clan regime broke down during the rise of the Mongolian empire, to be followed by the feudal stage which last through

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1 An earlier version of this paper was published in [6]. Since then I have been assisted greatly in understanding the topic by discussions with Temür (Temule) of Nanjing University. I am grateful to Pavel Dudin and the editors of the journal «Eurasia: statum et legem» for a chance to publish here a revised version of the previous paper. All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

2 The most penetrating critique of this position is Kuper (1988).

3 Thus Pamela Crossley [23, p. 24–25; 24] has emphasized how the Mongols were organized into fissiparous “federations and tribal (aimagh) units” lacking any sense of unity.

4 This work was translated many times, but not into English. See for example the French translation by Michel Carsow, Le Régime social des Mongols: le féodalisme nomade [98].
the time of the Qing dynasty. Scholars in China such as Gao Wende have proposed a somewhat different scheme in which the clan society gave way to slave society under Chinggis Qan, which then developed into a feudal society under the influence of the conquest of China. Owen Lattimore [56, p. 89, 97, 381] argued against Vladimircov that territorially-based state structures could not really develop in truly nomadic conditions and thus tribal society appeared broke down only when Mongolia was ruled by non-nomadic rulers, most especially under the Qing dynasty and under the influence of Buddhism. Others have even seen tribes and clans as existing among the Mongols all the way up to the revolutionary changes of the twentieth century.

The Tribal Vocabulary in Modern Mongolian Historiography

Regardless of exactly when they place the transition, all of these writers imply that the clan system among the Mongols existed in the early historical period and is attested in known histories and documents. Needless to say, if that is the case, one would expect that the Mongolian language would have terms for “tribe,” “clans,” “tribal federations,” and other such social units essential to tribal society. Indeed names for all of these units can be found in modern Mongolian dictionaries. Altangerel’s English-Mongolian Dictionary translates the English word “tribe” as owog, aimag, udam, or ugsaa (s. v. “tribe” and “tribal”) [2]. This usage is confirmed by Charles Bawden’s Mongolian English Dictionary, where we find the following definitions: owog aimag: “clan,” owgiiin baiguulal “clan structure,” aimag “tribe”; aimgiin xolboo “tribal confederation”; and nüüdelčin aimguudyn xolboo “nomadic tribal confederation” (s. v. owog) [12].

Of the two more common words, owog and aimag, owog refers to a smaller, more clearly kin-based unit, while aimag refers to a larger unit, less clearly based on kinship and formed by a confederation of owog. The two terms combined together form a binome, owog aimag, which translates “tribe” and, in the genitive form owog aimgiin, the adjective “tribal” in the most abstract, social scientific sense. A 1998 historical encyclopedia defines the term aimag or “tribe” this way:

«In ancient times clans (owguudyg) were called aimag/tribes. In the initial stage of the break down of primitive communal structures tribal confederations (aimgiin xolboo) were formed. The aimag/tribe had its own distinct name and territory it occupied. It had a unified dialect and customs. It depended on territorial affiliation. Whichever was the leading one of the various clans and lineages (owog ugsaatan) within the composition of the tribe gave its name to the tribe (s. v. aimag)» [43].

1 See [37]. Other writers [60, p. 21–29] have interpreted earlier dynasties founded by non-Mongolic speaking peoples as also being slave societies formed as part of the break up of an earlier clan society.

2 This description is an abbreviated form of the description of the owog and aimag given in [40, p. 8–9, 29].
It then goes on to mention how the name of aimag was used for various administrative units “after the appearance of the state” (tör üüssenees xoiš). The entry on aimgiiin xolboo, “tribal federation” situates this concept in the period between the breakdown of the primitive commune and the rise of class dictatorship. So in this point of view an aimag was the Mongolian version of the cross-cultural concept of “tribe”: a territorial federation made up of clans or owog, each itself with its own name and territory (s.v. aimgiiin xolboo) [43].

The term owog is defined in the same dictionary as follows:

«Owog/clan designates an ancient Mongolian group comprised of people with a blood relationship (cusan törlin xolboo). . . . Among the common features of the ancient owog/clans were origin from a single ancestor, its own elders, a special name or title, a banner, grazing territory, a hearth, a common burial ground or ancestor’s land (ixsiin gazar), a place of common worship, an assembly in which internal and external affairs are discussed, and a self-defense army (s.v. owog)» [44].

This definition is in fact merely a summary of the description of the ancient owog given by D. Gongor [40, p. 7–10] in his classic work in late medieval Mongolian history, Xalxtowčoon1. The term owog, in its Middle Mongolian form oboğor obok, even became well known outside of Mongolist circles. Vladimircov [98, p. 56 ff.] used it as a chapter sub-heading in his classic study and, based on his usage, Elizabeth Bacon [9] used it as her name for the segmentary patrilineages she considered characteristic of late tribal, proto-state societies throughout Eurasia. She even titled her book on the topic as Obok. According to these definitions, the owog designates a concrete social group, a group of people characterized by a single name, identity, and unity of action as a result of real or imagined common ancestry.

Since these terms are Mongolian, one would assume that they were derived from the Mongolian sources of the era when tribes were still existent, such as in the thirteenth century Secret History of the Mongols. Before the formation of the Mongol empire under Chinggis Qan, there were many socio-political units in Mongolia, which one would presume would be such tribes. Indeed, these units, such as the Kereyid, the Tatar, the Merkid, the Naiman, and so on, are in fact called aimag or aimgiiin xolboo (“tribal confederation”) in standard sources on Mongolian history both in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia [88, p. 96–108; 89, p. 1:170–191; 26, p. 2:51–81; 64, p. 16–47; 65, p. 1–35; 63, 5:3–35]2. One would assume therefore that aimag (Middle Mongolian ayimağ) is the tribal period name for tribes and “tribe” would thus seem to be a truly Mongolian concept.

1Gongor in turn cites Vladimircov.
2Dalai and Išdorj’s Mongol ulsyn tüüx of 2003 does refer to the Kereyid, Tatar, and Naiman polities as xanlig, a calque translation of the Russian xanstvo. This change in terminology indicates some (I believe justified) dissatisfaction with the general assumption that all polities in pre-1206 Mongolia were “tribal.” Yet aimag and aimgiiin xolboo are still the general terms under which pre-1206 polities of the Mongolian plateau are subsumed.
Recently, however, David Sneath [91] has challenged the validity of “tribe” as a concept in Inner Asian studies in his book Headless State. According to his argument, the concept of “tribe,” and of the kin-based society it is supposed to be a part of, is a product not of some early stage of socio-political development but rather of colonial expansion and rule. In his view, what other scholars have seen as tribes were actually aristocratic houses, more like the houses of Hohenzollern, Wittelsbach, or Habsburg in medieval German history.

If this is the case, however, and the concept of tribe is not indigenous to the Mongols, but is rather a form of rule imposed by outsiders, how can we explain the fact that the Mongols seem, according to the standard authorities, to have in aimag-ayīmağa widely used word for “tribe” and its component unit “clan” (owog–obog)? This Mongol example would seem to cast doubt on Sneath’s hypothesis. The distinguished Turcologist Peter Golden, in a review of Sneath’s book wrote:

«As with Mongol aimag (“tribe, clan” and “administrative unit”), Sneath projects the latter meaning alone into the early history of the steppe. Are we to posit “administrative units” as developing first (implying the existence of a state) and then their transformation into tribes or aristocracy-led named groups? This seems more than unlikely» [39, p. 295].

Clearly, here is a question that needs to be addressed from Mongolian sources from the thirteenth century onward. What, if anything, is the Mongolian word for “tribe”? When did they get it and what are its connotations? Here is an important contribution which those working with Mongolian sources can make to the study of the Mongol empire.

The Term Ayīmağa in Middle Mongolian

The obvious place to begin looking for a terminology of “tribes” and “tribalism” in Mongolia is the Secret History of the Mongols (hereafter SHM). Written in 1252, this work covers the period from the legendary origin of the Mongols up almost to the conclusion of the reign of the second emperor of the Mongols, Ögedei Qa’an (r. 1229–1241). If there was a social revolution in Mongolian history associated with the transition from a kin-based tribal society to a class or territory based state society, then it should be revealed in the transformation of social terminology found in the SHM. Even more, if the state formation of the Mongols remained very weak and nomadism meant that clan-tribal structures maintained a tenacious hold on Mongolia (as is frequently

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1Earlier, Morton H. Fried [35] had made a similar argument about “tribes” in general in his The Notion of Tribe, although without proposing any specific application to Inner Asia or any alternative explanation of Inner Asian society.

2In the interests of readability, I have eliminated Golden’s in text citation of Ferdinand Lessing’s Mongolian English Dictionary for the meaning of aimag and his citation to p. 67 of Sneath’s book for his discussion of the term aimag.

3On the dating of the Secret History of the Mongols, see [4, p. 1–48].
claimed), this terminology should be found throughout the work. In fact the word *aimag*, or in its Middle Mongolian form *ayimaq*, the word defined in modern dictionaries as “tribe” is found in the work only twice. The first instance occurs in §156 as follows:  

1) ta ede ele či’uluşad haran (人) bügüde’er ayimaq (部落) ayimaq (部落) bayidqun o’er-eçe busu ayimaq-un (部落的) kii’un-i o’ere böldevidgedkün ke’en jarlıq bolba tedii ayimaq (部落) ayimaq-iyar-iyan (部落自的每) bayı’asu . . .  

“He spoke, ‘All you of these assembled people each stand by ayimaq and let every one in an ayimaq different from your own stand apart.’ When they stood ayimaq by ayimaqthus, . . . .” [102, p. 165].  

The second occurs in §262:  

basa Sübe’etei Ba’atur-i ümegsi, Qanglin (種), Kibča’ud (種), Bajigid (種), Orusud (種), Majarad (etc.), Asud, Sasud, Serkesiid, Kesimir, Bolar, Kerel, ede harban nigen ayimaq (部落) qarin (邦) irgen-tür (百姓行) kürtele Idil Jayaq usutan müred getülün Kiwa Menkermen balagasun-dur kürtele Sübe’etei Ba’atur-i ayala’ulba.  

“Also Sübe’etei Ba’atur was sent on campaign north up to the these eleven ayimaq-states-peoples, the Qangli, Qibchaq, Bashkort, Russian, Magyars, Ossetian, Sas, Cherkes, Bulghar, and Hungarians, and crossing the Volga and the Ural rivers, Sübe’etei Ba’atur reached the town of Kiev Menkermen.” [102, p. 363].  

These instances of *ayimaq* have been translated as “tribe” by most translators of the text. Gongor [40, p. 27] cites the former passage in his section on *aimag* as “very clearly” (*tod tomruun*) showing the nature of the *aimag* as a social unit.  

These two instances of *ayimaq* share some common features. In both, the emphasis is on the large number of similar units. In the first passage Chinggis Qan is trying to find what he suspects is a man of the defeated Tatar coalition who has infiltrated his ranks. In the second the author is listing eleven different peoples whom the Mongol general Sübe’etei Ba’atur is assigned to attack. In both cases, the word *ayimaq* is being used to designate a large number of parallel units.  

Only in the first case, however, is the term *ayimaq* given alone as if by itself
In the second case, ayimať is combined in a trinome with qarin “state, country” and irgen “common people”. Clearly in the second case, ayimať is being used as part of a phrase designating different ethnies or pre-modern ethnic groups. But does ayimať carry that sense on its own? Are the ayimaťs in which the Mongol soldiers are being asked to divide themselves in §156 tribal units? That is, did they designate preexisting units which had their own dialect, customs, name, territory, and so on, and which were at least to some extent independent of and prior to the new Mongol state? The Chinese translation as buluo 部落 might suggest so (about which more later), but nothing in the Mongolian would require it. The sense of the passage would require only that every man under Chinggis Qan’s command and gathered in that particular meeting be assigned to one and only one ayimať, and that they know which ayimať they belonged to. Such a definition would fit military units formed out of his subjects by imperial command as much or better than it would fit preexisting tribal entities. Indeed as Cai Meibiao [15] argued, in context the assembly described seems to be a gathering of the court or of the budding imperial family and its servants, rather than one of the entire following of Chinggis Qan.

Strong evidence that the word ayimať in Middle Mongolian does not, by itself, refer to tribal-style groupings comes from the example of the other instances of the word as found in Middle Mongolian texts. Although it is not common enough to be found in the many vocabularies of Middle Mongolian, it is found fairly commonly in the surviving corpus of Middle Mongolian literature. As a rule, however, it is used only for groups that have no analogy with tribal units. Thus we find the term ayimať being used for queens (i.e. women in a harem), of demons, of deities and dragons, of guards, of soldiers under a king, or of ants. Thus, the entourage of the Buddha is described thus:

$qagalgag sakišsan dörben ayimaťcerig-ud ba qağan qamuq sakiliq-ud kiged noyad ba qamuq qatud-un ayimať ...$

“The four ayimať of soldiers guarding the gates, all the bodyguards of the king, and the ayimať of nobles and all the ladies” [93, p. 119].

Elsewhere the king Sudadani has the city Basar built and defended by $sakišag-ün ayimať-iyar “ayimať of guards.”[3] In several places in the same work, we find references to ayimať of demons. The gods and dragons also

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1 Ethnie is the term used by Anthony D. Smith [90, p. 21-46] for pre-modern ethnic groups that form the building blocks of modern nations.

2 “Twelve Deeds of the Buddha,” 21b. Qatud-un ayimať “ayimať of qatud (i.e. palace ladies)” is a particularly common phrase: see “Twelve Deeds of the Buddha,” 6b (twice), 11a, 16a, 17a (twice), 17b, 18a, 18b. Ayimať for divisions of soldiers is also found in the Subhāṣitaratnaśīla; see §246 (VI.15a): mağui dayisun-u arban qoyar ayimať čerig.

3 “Twelve Deeds of the Buddha,” 15b.

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proceed in ayimağ. In this text and in the Subhāṣīṭaratnanidhi, we find ayimağ used of both bees and ants.

What these units share is that none of them are self-sufficient units composed of clans, none of them has a distinct territory, but all of them share some distinct occupational or personal character. Most importantly, none of these ayimağ have a distinctive name and none of them designate a preexisting, bottom-up social group. Rather they all represent temporary groups formed top-down by assigning people from one larger social group to temporary units.

In short, the usage of ayimağ elsewhere in Middle Mongolian texts overwhelmingly supports an interpretation of ayimağ in SHM §156 as referring to military units and/or attached subjects of family members and vassals created after the conquest by the command of Chinggis Qan, not to named tribal groups formed independently from the Mongol empire.

**Ayimağ in Yuan-era Administrative Documents**

The term ayimağ is, however, also used fairly frequently in administrative documents from the Mongol Yuan dynasty, and in this context it has been read as an instance where the connotation is clearly “tribal.” A typical example of this usage comes in an inscription issued by the empress-dowager under Emperor Haishan (Mongolian temple name Külüg Qa’an) conferring immunity on a Daoist temple, dated to 1321. The order to respect this exemption is addressed to the following categories of people:

«1) čeri 'ü-n noyad-da 2) čerig hanan-a 3) balaqad-un daruqas-da 4) noyad-da 5) ayimağ-iyar qotalağ-ud-ača dağalun yabuju “The gods and dragons all followed after him in ayimağs” (“Twelve Deeds of the Buddha,” §23b). In a text from the Arjai cave (II. 14 1; p. 44), the worshipper bows down to Delekei-yi sakiçin ayimağ-ud-i “the ayimağs of the protectors of the world”.

2) El ulus-un jügei-yin ayimağ gaşiğudan gasalbai (“Twelve Deeds of the Buddha,” §20b) and Subhāṣīṭaratnanidhi § 203 (VI. 4a): Siroğöljin ayimağ-iyaran çiğilju bürün. (s.v. ayimağ) [50]. Kara defines the meaning of ayimağ as found in this source as “class, division”.

3) This list adds doton-a şadan-a bükün yekeš içikled yamun-ud-a noyad-da “to the officials of all the yamens internal and external, great and small” and olon senşing-ud-de “to the Daoist priests”.

A virtually identical list of persons addressed is found in a 1314 inscription as well. [42, 14.6–8; 94, §21.6–8]3. Nicholas Poppe understood these elders of the ayimağ to be elders of a rural social unit, a subdivision of the otoğ–otoğ (a territorial-administrative term):

«The word aimak as used in this edict has a different meaning from that in

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more recent times\(^1\). Aimak is a name for a group of yurts which nomadizes in the same territory, a *fratia sui generis*. Such aimak’s were of various sizes. Several aimak’s made up an otok. An aimak was by no means a clan, but the total sum of related families or sub-tribes, and even contained persons who belonged to different sibs (Mongolian *yasun*). Basically, the aimak was a union of families related to each other, who came from the breaking up of the old clans, the so-called *obo*’s. An unfailing sign of an aimak is the possession of a common nomad camp ground... By elders of the aimak’s are meant persons who headed the groups of related families of nomadic Mongols, who had a common nomad area\(^2\).

So finally here we have the *ayimaq* serving as the designation of a suitably “tribal” entity: groups of pastoral nomads linked by blood (“groups of related families”) and territory (“common nomad area”). The elders of these “tribes” are presumably being called upon as local authorities to heed the inscription, calm disputes, and prevent their members from harassing the clergy in the temples. Later historians, such as Gongor, cite exactly this passage as further documentation for the aimag as a tribal unit in Mongolia: “Based on how the Square Script monument of 1321 speaks of *aimag aimaguudyn ötgös* [elders of every aimag], each *aimag* had its ruling elder” \(^3\).

Unfortunately, Poppe’s interpretation paid no attention to the Chinese translation of these and other *darqan jarliq* or “decrees of immunity”\(^3\). The Chinese translation for *ayimaq ayima’ud-un ötgös* “elders of the various *ayimaq*” is given as *gezhi’r toumu mei gendi* 各枝兒頭目 “from the heads of every branch.” \(^4\) The term *zhi’r* 支儿 “branch” is quite vague, but its homonym *zhi* 支 is used as a measure word for branches of administrative organizations, or for military units. In no case that I know of is it ever used as a term for pre-existing divisions among civilian populations. Chinese indeed has a word for “tribe,” that is, various compounds of *bu* 部 (on which more later), but it is not used in this connection. Thus, the Chinese translation is the first problem with Poppe’s “tribal” interpretation of *ayimaq*.

Moreover, the discovery of new *darqan jarliq* have made his interpretation still less plausible. The term *ötgös* “elders” appears many times in newly discovered inscriptions, but in every other case is used for elders in a monastery or temple. Thus we find: *sensing-üd-in* ötgös *balaqad-un noyad-lu’a* [94, §5.33; §21.35] “with the elders of the xianshengs [i.e. Daoist priests] and officials of the cities,” or *balaqad-un noyad doyid-un* ötgös “officials of the cities and elders of

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\(^1\) By this, Poppe means the use of *aimag* as an administrative term, meaning province (in Mongolia) or district (in Inner Mongolia or Buriatia).

\(^2\) Poppe’s discussion derives heavily from Vladimircov \(^98\), p. 173–178. There is a patent anachronism in his discussion, i.e., the appearance of *otoq*, an important administrative term from the sixteenth century on, but utterly unknown in genuine Mongol empire sources.

\(^3\) On this term and genre in Turco-Mongolian political history, (s.v. *jarliq*) \(^101\; 3\).
the *doiyid* [i.e. Buddhist monks] [94, §33.18–19]. While these elders do calm disputes, they do so only between the monasteries and the public [94, §21.33–34].

And in another inscription in this very stereotyped genre, we find a list almost exactly parallel to that containing the supposed “tribal elders.” Yet in the parallel version, the supposed “tribal elders” actually appear as monastic elders.

1) çeri‘üd-ün noyad-da 2) çerig haran-a 3) balaqad-un durugas-da 4) noyad-da 5) todqa ‘ulamasarsaqiňnharan 6) doiyid-unotögüs-de 7) yorčiqun yabuqnelčin-e...

«1) to the officer of the army; 2) to the people of the army; 3) to the officials of the cities; 4) to the officials; 5) to the *todqa‘ul* [officials of the post-road system] and people who guard the passes; 6) to the elders among the *doiyid* [Buddhist monks]; 7) to the messengers traveling to and fro» [94, §9.3–4].

That religious figures were so addressed in these introductory formulae is confirmed by the 1314 inscription, in which *olon senšing-üd-de* “to the Daoist priests” appears in a parallel list [42, §14.8; 94, §21.8]. The parallels here are too close to admit of any doubt: the elders of the *ayima‘gü* mentioned in the 1321 and 1314 inscription are elders of the divisions of Buddhist monks, not elders of “tribal” *ayima‘güs*. So elders of the Buddhist monastic colleges replace “elders of the tribes”—in fact, colleges within Buddhist monasteries have always been known in Mongolian as *ayima‘gü–aimag*.

But *ayima‘gü* appears elsewhere in such *darqan jarliğs* with a different Chinese translation. In a 1280 inscription, *ayima‘güs* are ordered not to take duties from the Daoist priests:

*Basa bidan-ača qağarqai jarliğ üge üge‘ün bö‘etele ayima‘ud-da ala /=eleʃ šıltajу senšing-üd-deće ya‘u ba guyįju bii abtuqai.«

«Moreover, as long as they have no specific decree from us, let not the *ayima‘güs* under any pretext demand anything whatsoever from the Daoist priests» [42, §04.24–27; 94, §5.24–27].

In this passage *ayima‘ud* (i.e. *ayima‘gü* plural) is translated as *zhutouxia* 諸投下 “various appanages.” A similar passage reappears in a 1314 inscription:

*Basa bidan-ača qağas neres anu oroşqad jarliğ bö‘etele ayima‘ud-dača ele šıltajу senšing-üd-deće ya‘u ba guyįju bii abtuqai.«

«Moreover, even if there should be a decree in which their name appears, let not the *ayima‘güs* under any pretext demand anything whatsoever from the Daoist priests» [42, §14.27–30; 94 §5.27–30].

In this version, the word *ayima‘ud* is translated as *gezhî‘r touxia* 各枝兒頭下 “any one of the appanages.” While given the history of conflict between the two religions under the Mongol Yuan dynasty it might be possible that Buddhist monks would demand things from the Daoist priests, in this case, the translation makes it clear that here *ayima‘gü* is a translation of *touxia* 投下, an

1 On the translation of this passage see [68, 402–03 n. 147].
2 On the translation of this passage see [68, 401–02 n. 147].
administrative term for princely appanages that already had a long history in North China\(^1\).

As discussed by Cai Meibiao [15], this term originated in the Kitan Liao 遼 dynasty in a homophonous form as *touxia* 頭下 or “body” (literally, “below the head”). The *Liao shi* 遼史 defines the term twice, once as "appanage armies and prefectures" (*touxia* junzhou 頭下軍州) and once as “appanage prefectures and armies” (*touxia* zhoujun 頭下州軍). [62, 37.448 and 48.12] Both definitions are essentially the same, defining such appanages as towns or military units created for prisoners of war or other persons assigned to princes of the imperial family, imperial relatives on the distaff side, or great vassals. This definition makes it clear that these units were created purely by a top-down administrative process, in which high-ranking members of the elites organized estates or military units for the prisoners of war and other subjects they had been granted.

The term first appears in the Mongol period in an inscription of 1240, which contains a line parallel to those ordering the *ayima*\(^2\) not to interfere with the Daoist priests:

> 兼不以是何頭下官員人等，無得搔擾

"Moreover, the official personnel of the appanage (*touxia* 頭下) shall not for any reason harass them" [14, pl. 2; 20, p. 65].

In the reign of Qubilai, however, *touxia* 頭下 was mostly replaced in administrative usage by *touxia* 投下, a homonym literally meaning “thrown below.” As Cai concludes [15], this change seems to be the result of a desire to lessen the impression of autonomy of such units. In this form, the term is explicitly said to be the same as *aima* 愛馬, the standard transcription into Chinese for *ayima*\(^2\). The equivalence of *ayima*\(^2\) with *touxia* 投下 shows that *ayima*\(^2\) was not seen as being a pre-existing bottom-up unit, but rather a unit defined by top-down subjugation of prisoners and subjects to princes of the imperial family, the in-law families, and great vassals.

To conclude this discussion of Middle Mongolian and Yuan administrative usage: *ayima*\(^2\) is, on its own, never used as a classifier word for tribal names in any Middle Mongolian text. Not a single Middle Mongolian text pairs *ayima*\(^2\) alone with any named tribal or ethnic unit. Instead extant Middle Mongolian texts use *ayima*\(^2\)s only in the abstract, to describe units or divisions within a single category: all the *ayima*\(^2\)s of soldiers, and so on. To refer to “such and such” *ayima*\(^2\)–*aimag* – the Tatar *aimag*, the Khereid *aimag* and so on – is com-

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\(^1\) I thus believe that in the 1314 inscription, *ayima*\(^2\) is being used with two senses: in the addressees listed in lines 6–8, it is to be understood as the divisions of the monasteries, while in lines 27–30, *ayima*\(^2\) refers to appanages of high ranking princes and vassals. This difference is highlighted by the different Chinese translations: in the first translating it as simply *gezhi’er* 各枝兒 “every branch” and in the second adding the word for appanage *touxia* 頭下.

\(^2\) See the *Shanju xinyu* 山居新語 of Yang Yu 楊瑀 in [100, p. 199].
mon usage in modern Mongolian, but has no foundation in Middle Mongolian. Thus David Sneath’s revisionist position is indeed borne out by the philological data: the administrative meaning of aimag~ayimaŋ is indeed prior to its “tribal” meaning, which must have come into use some time after 1368.

The Term Oboŋ in Middle Mongolian

Aimaga~aiyimaŋ is not, however, the only word used by scholars to denote the complex of socio-political institutions forming supposedly clan-tribal Mongolia. Leaving aside secondary social-scientific terms such as aimgiin xolboo “clan federation,” there is the term owog~oboŋ “clan,” referring to social groups founded on common ancestry and characterized by a distinct names, flag or banner, territory, burial ground, government and militia. As I mentioned above, Vladimircov named a chapter after the oboŋ, and Elizabeth Bacon named a book after it.

In fact, however, the word oboŋ is in fact not attested in Middle Mongolian text or vocabulary known to me. What are attested fairly commonly in the SHM and a few other sources are two derived forms, oboŋtu and oboŋtan. Both -tu and -tan form attributives from nouns, in the singular and the plural, respectively. Thus oboŋtu and oboŋtan mean “the one or ones with such-and-such oboŋ.” This may sound like a quibble, but it demonstrates one thing right away: that oboŋ, at least in Middle Mongolian, did not designate a human social group or category. What it designated was rather the name inherited from an ancestor. Its meaning is thus closer to the English “surname” than it is to “clan”. Indeed in Chinese of the Yuan period, the term is always translated with either xing姓 or more rarely shì氏, both terms that by themselves refer in Yuan times only to an inherited surname, and not to a social group or clan. By contrast, actual social groups or clans, then growing in influence in Chinese society, were designated by terms combining either zu族 or zōng宗. [34, esp. 21–23; 29, “Introduction”; 19, p. 9; 46, p. 89–119, cf. 61–62]. Still, since Chinese terminology itself was not very precise, the meaning of the Middle Mongolian oboŋ, and the attested terms derived from it, oboŋtu and oboŋtan, should be determined from the actual use in the sources.

There are eleven distinct passages in the SHM in which terms derived from oboŋ are used. The vast majority of them come in the beginning of the work where the genealogy describes the origins of the various houses[1] or families into which the noble-born Mongols[2] [79, p. 1:79, 98, 117; 76, p. 152, 178; 77, p. 15–16] were divided.

§9 Qorilar (姓氏) oboŋtu (姓) bolju
“he became one of the Qorilar oboŋ” [102, p. 3].

§11 Dörben oboŋtan (姓) bolju Dörben irgen (百姓) tede bolba.

1 On the use of this term see [91, p. 111–112].
2 All of the groups included in this genealogy are classified by Rashīd al-Dīn as niru’un or of divine ancestry.
“they became those of the Dörben oboğ; they became the Dörben irgen/people” [102, p. 4].

§40: Jadaran (一種) oboğtan (姓氏每) tede bolba.
“they became those of the Jadaran oboğ” [102, p. 12].

§41: Menen Ba'arin (一種) oboğtan (姓氏每) tede bolba.
“they became those of the Menen Ba’arinooboğ” [102, p. 12].


The ellipsis contains exactly parallel statements about the descendants of Buqu-Qatagi and Buqutu-Salji.

§44: jügeli-deče ğarğaju Je’üreyid (一種) oboğtu (姓有的; those with the surname) bolgaju, Je’üred-in (一種) ebüge bolba.
“[Bodonchar’s sons] expelled him from the jügeli sacrifice and made him into one of the Je’üreyid oboğ; he became ancestor of the Je’üred” [102, p. 13].


§47 Tayiči’ud (一種) oboğtan (姓每) bolba . . . Besiid (一種) oboğtan (姓每) tede bolba . . . Oronar (一種), Qongqotan (一種), Arulad (一種), Sönid (一種), Qahturgas (一種), Keniges oboğtan (姓氏每) tede bolba [102, p. 15].

§49 Yörki (一種) oboğtan (姓每) tede bolba [102, p. 16].

These stereotyped phrases tell us that Mongols, or more precisely the higher-status Mongols with some political significance, generally possessed oboğ names, that these oboğ names were traced to male ancestors (presumably in the male line), and that possession of this common oboğ could be attached, through the idea of patrilineal descent, to the right to participate in a common sacrifice. That is, if some one’s descent was challenged, such a challenge would implicate both one’s right to the surname and one’s right to participate in a particular sacrifice. Various etiological stories associated with the origin of these oboğ also indicate that the surnames could also be stereotypically associated with particular characters: Barulas were gluttonous, Noyakin were arrogant, Adarkin were backbiting, and so on.

At the same time, however, only some of those people defined by common possession of these surnames actually formed the kind of concrete, unitary socio-political groups described in modern histories of the period as “clans” or oboğ. The name Borjigin, for example, was an oboğor family name but the history of the descendants of Bodonchar makes it clear that they were divided into many groups, frequently in conflict and which had large numbers of non-Borjigin subjects under their rule. Thus both the Middle Mongolian text and the
Chinese translation differentiate fairly strictly between the common oboğ or surname, and the social group which in some cases was associated with it, but more often was not. It is for this reason that the Dörben are described first as an oboğtan, the people sharing the Dörben surname, and then as an irgen “common people,” indicating that the those with the Dörben surname and the members of the Dörben group were not actually synonymous. Likewise in Chinese, while the word oboğ is glossed as “surname” (xing 姓 or xingshi 姓氏), the actual groups sharing names with such oboğ are consistently glossed as a “kind” or “race” (zhong 種). When the Qatagin, Salji’ud, Dörben, and other such groups appear later in the narrative as political actors (see for example §§146 or 191), they are again glossed as zhong 種, not as xing or xingshi.

Once the accounting of the origin of these various surnames is finished, the word oboğtu or oboğtan appears subsequently only twice in the whole SHM, and only once for the kind of minor polities that are usually considered the clans of the pre-Chinggisid Mongol world. This one instance occurs where Chinggis Qan is destroying the Yörkin:

§139: Yörkin (種) oboğtu-yi (姓有的) үлдеке. Irgen-i (百姓) ulus-i (人烟) Činggis Qa’an o’er-үүн эмчү irgen bolğaba.

“[Chinggis Qa’an] destroyed those of the Yörkin oboğ surname. Chinggis Qa’an made these commoners and this people his own patrimonial people” [102, p. 129].

The Yörkin are defined once as possessors of a common surname, but then as a body of common people and subjects of a common rule. Given the usage elsewhere in the SHM, including in the immediate context, it is certainly the term irge(n) “common people,” not oboğ “surname,” which is the principal descriptor term defining what type of social group the proper name Yörkin is. The final occurrence of oboğ in the SHM only underlines the point that oboğ by itself signified nothing more than a surname that had no essential link to any concept of a solidary socio-political unit. Describing the famous administrators Mahmud Yalawach and his son Mas’ud Beg, the SHM introduces them thus:

§263 qoyar Qurumši (姓) oboğtan (姓有的) Sarta’ul (回回) irejü . . .

“two Sarta’ul [Turkestanis] of the Qurumsi surname arrived ...” [102, p. 364];

Unaware that Qurumši (that is, Khorazm–Khwarazm) is a region, the SHM’s author simply took Mahmud’s nisba (local name) [1, p. xii-xiii] Khwarazmi, attested in the Yuan shi 元史, [106, 2.30] and treated it as the father-son pair’s surname, distinguishing their family from others among the

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1 Vladimircov [98, p. 73] was at one level aware of this, distinguishing the irgen and the ulus as the general term for actual groups (which he translated as “tribe” and “fief” respectively) from the oboğ as “clan.” Yet by translating oboğ as “clan” rather than “surname” or “family” name, and according it the fundamental role in his exposition of Mongolian society, he seriously distorted the actual picture given by the Middle Mongolian and Mongol empire sources.
Sarta’ul or Turkestani people. This Sarta’ul people is elsewhere called an irgen, or “common people,” like the Kereyid and so on. The two examples of usage of the word oboğ (or more properly, its derivatives) in Middle Mongolian sources outside the SHM follow the same pattern as §263. The word is rare, and not found in any of the vocabularies. But two instances are found with Chinese surnames: Lii obuqtai “Of the Li surname” in the Zhang Yingrui inscription and Yin oboğtu noyan “Lord of the Yin surname” in the Xiaojing.

The conclusion from the Mongolian evidence is inescapable: oboğ is no more part of the fundamental Mongolian social terminology than is ayimağ. Both have been taken to be part of the clan-tribal social structure that was overthrown in the putative Chinggisid social revolution, yet both are in fact terms more at home in the centralized and imperial socio-political structure established by Chinggis Qan. Ayimağ refers primarily to administrative or military divisions and units established top-down by imperial authority, while oboğ refers simply to surnames. Even though the Mongols did not routinely use them with their given names the way the Chinese did, there is no indication from the SHM that in itself a common oboğ necessarily formed a single social group anymore than a common xing 姓 or surname necessarily formed a single social group in China.

Ayimağ and Oboğ in Chinese and Persian Sources from the Mongol Empire

Attentive readers will have already noticed a problem with this conclusion, however. While ayimağ doesn’t seem not mean anything like “tribe,” in the few cases where it appears in the SHM, it is translated by buluo 部落 in Chinese. This binome has long been used in Chinese to designate sub-divisions of “barbarian” (i.e. non-Han Chinese) peoples, a usage that is fairly close to that of “tribe” in English. One should also note that the term buluo 部落 is also found elsewhere as a Chinese descriptor for the precise Mongolian terms, such as Naiman, Kereyid, or Merkid, that I have argued are not referred to as ayimağ in Mongolian. So if ayimağ does not mean “tribe” or buluo 部落, why did the Chinese interlinear translators of the SHM around 1400 [21, li-li, 75, [xl-v-li] translate it as such?

This first part of the answer is to understand the derivation of the binome buluo 部落. The binome is from bu 部 “section, part, department, (military) unit” plus luo 落 “settlement, village.” This binome is not used for “barbarian” groups in the earliest imperial histories, such as the Shiji 史記 or Hanshu 漢書, or other sources before the Latter Han dynasty, although it is attested as a designation of outlaw gangs [10, p. 72.3088-89]. Buluo as a binome seems to

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1 Zhang Yingrui inscription, l. 14 [93, p. 15]; Xiaojing, 13a.3 [93, p. 65].
2 See for example in §14, how Uriyangqai and Qori-Tumad are glossed as buluo 明 “name of a tribe”.
3 On the date and process of transcription of the SHM.
first appear in accounts of the semi-nomadic Avars 部族 in Manchuria compiled at the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period, where it was a contraction of 部族“military following” and 部族“village settlement”

The meaning thus combined bu in the sense of group of people under one command, with luo people settled in one place; roughly a “local following”. By the sixth century AD, buluo had become a standard term for political sub-units among all barbarians. Only in the nine or tenth century AD, probably at the court of the Turco-Sogdian Shatuo rulers of North China, was the term buzuzbu部族 coined, combined the martial overtones of buluo with the idea of clanship found in zu 族. This new binome was widely used in Liao and Jin administration, probably because of the civilized and imperial connotations that attached to the notion of zu 族

Under the Yuan dynasty, however, buluo and buzuzbuzu were virtually forbidden. Neither binome can be found at all in important Chinese-language sources such as the Shengwu qinzheng lu 聖武親征録 [45; 99] and are both exceedingly rare in the Yuanshi. This cannot be accidental and must be a result of the Yuan court’s sensitivity to the “barbarian” connotations of these words. But the character bu 部 by itself is anything but rare. In fact in official Yuan usage after 1260, the Chinese term bu “unit” was the officially approved translation of ayima 亞馬, in the sense of a group of people under a single civilian or military leadership. The basic meaning of the two terms as “unit, division, section (of a larger whole)” made them natural equivalents.

This equivalence of bu and ayima is clear from an odd feature of the language of the Yuan shi’s Basic Annals (benji 本紀). While the term bu appears constantly in the earlier Basic Annals to designate the followings of Mongol princes or commanders of a thousand, the word is hardly found in the Veritable Records of the last Yuan emperor, Toghan-Temür. Instead, where bu would appear in previous chapters, in his basic annals, the word aimsa 愛馬 appears, a transcription of the Mongolian ayima 亞馬. Here are some examples (with the characters aimsa bolded):

庚寅，宗王脫歡脫木爾各愛馬人民饑，以鈔三萬四千九百錠賑之。

壬戌，賜皇太子五愛馬怯薛丹二百五十人鈔各一百一十錠。

“In the day geng/yin, the people in the ayima 亞馬s of the prince of the blood Toghan-Temür suffered famine and they were given bills worth 34,900 ding in relief” [106, p. 40.852].

壬戌，賜皇太子五愛馬怯薛丹二百五十人鈔各一百一十錠。

“In the day ren/xu, the 250 men of the five ayima 亞馬s [i.e. divisions] of keshigten [i.e. guardsmen] of the crown prince each received bills worth 110 ding.” [106, p. 43.912]

1 See Sanguo zhi (30.1232, 833); cf. Hou Han shu 90.2979, 2980); cf. Parker (1892-93, 73, 75). The original of this passage comes from the Wei shu of Wang Chen (d. AD 266), as cited in the Sanguo zhi. Fan Ye’s version in the Hou Han shu is actually later than that in Sanguo zhi.
諸王各愛馬，應該總兵、統兵、領兵等官，凡軍民一切機務，錢糧、名爵、黜陟、予奪，悉聽便宜行事。

“The ayimağs of all the princes, with their mobilizing, commanding, and petty officers and all the civilian and military organizations, funds, promotions, dismissals, and requisitions are placed under [Köke-Temür’s] direction” [106, p. 46.971].

Clearly Toghan Temür’s Annals preserve the original transcribed usage, while in the previous Annals the term aima was replaced by the translation bu. As is well known, the early Ming editors of the Yuanshi first compiled the Basic Annals of the earlier Mongol emperors on the basis of Yuan-era Veritable Records (shilu 育録), but then had to hastily compiled from separate documents the Basic Annals of Toghan-Temür. It was this difference in composition that generated the difference in usage, one having bu and the other ayimağ.

Thus we can be confident that in the Yuan dynasty, the correct Chinese translation of ayimağ was not buluo, with its “barbarian” connotations, but rather bu, a word used regularly in all dynasties for Chinese civilian and military organizations. Buluo is found very occasionally, and buzü even more rarely in contexts where we would expect bu. But these usages are simply slips made by Ming editors or copyists used to using the word buluo for non-Han Chinese social groups. Secondly, this equivalence tells us that far from fading out of use in the state-based, imperial organization of the Yuan Mongols, as we would expect with a term meaning “tribe,” use of the term ayimağ appears to have increased sharply after the organization of the Yuan dynasty.

As I have shown, ayimağ was used as an official translation of the Chinese touxia 頭下～投下, an existing administrative term for the appanage of subjects and/or prisoners attached to a high-ranking princes or vassals. Since ayimağ translates both touxia and bu, this would suggest that the two Chinese terms are more or less equivalent, with bu being the more classical version and touxia the contemporary administrative term. This equivalence can be confirmed by examining the instances of bu-aima within the Basic Annals of the Yuan emperors. I have done a survey of these instances with relation to famine relief, and the vast majority of such bu-aima stated as receiving famine relief are defined by the name of their leader, usually a prince or a commander of a thousand. Only rarely are they defined by a “clan name” such as the Qonggirad, Ikires, Baya’ud, or Önggüd. Even these groups, however, were

1 The following is the list of all cases in the Yuan shi Basic Annals where these binomes are used. Buluo: [106, p. 1.3, 18.387, 22.477, 31.698, 34.756, 35.944]; buzü: [106, p. 1.3, 10.216 (Southwest tribes), 38.815].

2 Partial counts show 109 instances of bu 部 receiving famine relief are identified by the either the name of the unit’s commander or its administrative position. 52 are defined by some kind of ethnonym (with or without a place-name or commander’s name). Of these only 14 are defined by the sorts of names found in the SHM or Rashīd al-Dīn as Mongol sub-groups, and only 9 use only this ethnonym, without the name of
also state-defined political entities under high-status ruling families. The bu/aima/ayimağ in the Yuan is thus overwhelmingly defined as a top-down unit defined by designated imperial leadership, not a bottom-up autonomous “tribe” potentially opposed to the state.

In this context, the Ming translators’ definition of ayimağ in the SHM as buluo is more comprehensible. Bu in the sense of section or part or unit of people in Chinese, and ayimağ in Mongolian as division, category, or unit of people were quite close in basic meaning and had long been treated as versions of the same term. Ming era translators, no longer subject to Yuan-era taboos, naturally reverted to the long-standing Chinese practice of using buluo “tribe” for bu “unit” when the term pertained to the “barbarian” Mongols. But once bu was thus changed to buluo and the various connotations for buluo as a “tribe” of barbarians were attached to buluo, then a passage speaking of Chinggis Qan sorting out his men by the princes and commanders to whom they were attached thus came to be interpreted as him sorting out his people by tribes.

Another instance of “tribal” terminology found in non-Mongolian histories of the empire is found at the other end, in the Il-Khanate in the Middle East. Rashid al-Dīn’s encyclopedic history of the Mongol empire contains the following reference to oboğ:

«For years [the Mongol progenitors] and their progeny remained in that place [i.e. Ergüne Qun], and multiplied. Each branch of them became known by a specific name and epithet, and they became an obagh. (The word obagh means to be of a specific bone and lineage.) Those obagh branched out again, and at this time the Mongol tribes have already made it clear from investigation, that all those who came into being from these branches, most are more closely related to each other, and they are all Dürlükin Mongols» [79, p. 1: 80; 76, p. 153–54].

It is probably no coincidence that both this passage here, referring to the multiplication of the Mongols’ legendary ancestors, and the passages in the SHM likewise referring to the multiplication of the Mongols, both use derivatives of the term oboğ. This highlighting of the term oboğ in the same context in both works may well be the result of literary dependence. Although Rashid al-Dīn was never allowed to read the SHM, he occasionally cites information from that same tradition which Mongols with a higher “security clearance” supplied to him. A Mongol thus explaining the multiplication of the Mongols as seen in the SHM or a similar text, might have noted the common use of oboğtu or oboğtan and told Rashid al-Dīn about this term.

a commander or a place name. The rest of the ethnonyms are much larger units, such as the Jurchen, the Water Tatars, the mDo-sMad Tibetans and so on.

1 It might seem unlikely that over 100 years of Yuan usage would be so rapidly reversed at the beginning of the Ming. Yet we see the same thing happened with the word Mongol in the SHM, which is translated throughout by the word Dada 達達 “Tatar,” the officially approved Ming version of the same word.
This passage in Rashīd al-Dīn naturally was cited by Vladimircov and even more than the SHM constituted the foundational text for the Russian scholar’s understanding of the meaning and significance of oboğ. Like some other of Vladimircov’s conclusions, however, such as his discussion of the supposed term unaghanbo’ol, he was the victim of textual problems in Rashīd al-Dīn’s text. The widely used text of Berezin had the form umāq (to be read as omaq), which was then connected by Vladimircov to several other supposed Turkic forms: omagh, omaq, obaq, and oba [98, p. 56]. Later writers extended the net of supposed cognates even further:

Übāgh (or oboğ, obox)–clan. On this term, see: B. Ja. Vladimircov, op. cit. p. 46ff. Among others, in mss. V and in Berezin² [78, p. 1: 1: 4–6] instead of ūbāgh is used the Turkic umāq, also with the meaning of clan. The word is also the same as uymāq, sometimes pronounced and transliterated as aymāq, and in that latter form, among others, it designates some nomadic tribes in northern Afghanistan, where exists firstly, the Čār-Aymāq (i.e. the Four Tribes): the Džemšid, the Teimen, the Firuzkuh, and Hezareh [76, p. 153–54n].

In face of such barrage of misleading data, it is important to emphasize first that ayimağ and oboğ are both words of Mongolian, not Turkic, origin, and second that they are quite certainly not related to each other. The form uymāq for ayimağ, and the form umāq for ūbāgh are both later (in the case of uymāq, much later) than the alternative forms. Aymāq in Turkic usage is purely derived from the Mongol imperial usage, in which as we have seen it designates imperial appanages assigned to princes or high ranking members of the decimal hierarchy, not tribes.³ Oboğ in Mongolian is also later found as omog, although its relation to the term omağ “pride” is unclear⁴.

¹ I have argued elsewhere [8] that despite being one of the most brilliant Mongolists of his–or any–time, Vladimircov’s understanding of Mongolian society was built more on Rashīd al-Dīn’s secondary explanations than directly on the SHM and Middle Mongolian sources.

² That Rashīd al-Dīn’s own text had ūbāgh (to be read obagh), not umāq cannot be doubted. The base text for Xetagurov’s translation, which reads ūbāgh, is A, that is, Oriental ms. 1620 of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences. This reading is also found in the Revan Köşkü 1518 in the Topkapı Palace library, as well as in the ms 2294 of the Islamic Assembly of Iran and in the British Library Or. Add. 7628. By contrast, the umāq of ms. Д66 in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, by itself has little authority.

³ Although aymaq is found in Kyrgyz and Kazakh in the sense of “province,” it is not found in Mahmud al-Kashghari’s lexicon of Middle Turkish, nor is it listed in Drevnetjurkskij slovar’, unless ajmaq (=aymaq) [70, p. 30], defined as “explanation” “debate” is cognate. The form aymaq– uymāq seems clearly to be a late rounding of initial a- common in eastern Iranian dialects, as seen in the change of “Tajik” to “Tojik,” and so on.

⁴ Despite the common statements that omaq is the Turkic cognate of Mongolian oboğ, I have not been able to confirm any possible cognate of oboğ in Middle Turkic except for oba [51, p. 122; 70, p. 362]. Although omog is not uncommon in modern dialects for owog (the modern reflex of oboğ), the b > m alternation appears to be a late
In any case, if as seems likely, Rashīd al-Dīn’s only data on the word oboğ comes from a text in the SHM tradition, then it would be foolish to give his vague, second-hand understanding of it priority over one derived from analysis of the extant Mongolian text and thorough Chinese translation. Moreover, he defines it twice, first as a “specific name and epithet” and second as “to be of a specific bone and lineage.” Either meaning is consistent with our conclusion from the Mongolian data that oboğ refers not to a clan as a group of people but to a family name, passed in the male line.

Our conclusion then is consistent with both the Mongolian evidence and the evidence from Chinese and Persian writings from the Mongol empire. Ayimağ and oboğ are not part of any special pre-state “tribal” terminology of Mongolian social organization. Ayimag in particular refers, when it is used as a socio-political term at all, either to state-organized and created military and civilian administrative divisions, or to divisions within organizations such as harems or garrisons or Buddhist monasteries. As such it became more common after the formation of the Mongol empire and the Yuan dynasty, not less. Such ayimağunits are usually unnamed (being temporary) but if named are designated by their commander’s name. Oboğ refers virtually exclusively to “surnames” that are transmitted patrilineally and is not used to designate concrete social groups that might be characterized by such a common surname. In other words, if there are words for “tribe” and “clan” in Middle Mongolian, they are not ayimağ and oboğ.

Socio-Political Terminology in the Mongol Empire

This leaves the question, however, of what word the Mongols did use for the numerous groups into which they were divided. On the Mongolian plateau before the unification under Chinggis Qan there were in fact numerous polities, ranging from the large Kereyid and Naiman through the middle sized and fissiparous Merkid and Tatar, to the small Tayichi’ud, Dörben, Salji’ud, Qonggirad, and so on. Of what broader category, if any, were these groups seen as being examples? If they were not called ayimağs or oboğs, with what term would a speaker of Middle Mongolian refer to them? And what can we learn about how Mongolian speakers of the time conceived of these groups from the terminology they used?

The primary terms used for such pre-Chinggisid “tribal” groups are in fact strikingly untribal: irge(n) glossed as “common people,” ulus glossed as “dynasty,” “state,” or “subjects,” and qarī glossed as “state” or “realm,” and only occasionally as “tribe.” All of these are terms which Middle Mongolian speakers later had no problem applying to social units of the Han, the Turkestanis, or Iranians. In other words, if we were to proceed simply from the evidence of Middle Mongolian, there is no evidence whatsoever that the Mongols envisioned that what happened from c. 1200 to 1250 was some kind phenomenon. Omoğ in the SHM always means “brave” or “proud,” and never “surname.”
of transition from a “tribal” socio-political structure to a “state” socio-political structure. Nor does the terminology indicate that they saw any fundamental difference between their polities and those of the surrounding sedentary peoples. Instead, as far as we can see from the Middle Mongolian sources, they saw the polities existing on the Mongolian plateau in 1200 as being fundamentally comparable in nature with those existing at that time in China and Turkestan, and with what the Mongols had established by 1250, only smaller.

Let us look at a few examples. In SHM, §§5 and 28, the representatives of the ancient imperial lineage come across small bodies of other people of unknown lineage. In both cases these groups are titled as irgen, glossed in Chinese as baixing 百姓 “people, common people.” Likewise in his famous speech in §64, Chinggis Qan’s father in law, Dei Sechen describes his Onggirad–Qonggirad people as an irgen, and states that they “do not struggle for ulus and irgen,” with ulus here glossed as guo 國 (“state, dynasty”) and irgen again as baixing 百姓 (“common people”). On a much larger scale, the Kereyid, Tatars, Merkid, and Naiman are also referred to repeatedly as irgen.

Quite as common as irgen, and often identical to it in meaning is ulus. Ulus in the SHM is used most often to mean the “common people” or “subjects,” being glossed in this sense by Chinese baixing 百姓 (e.g. §110, Merkid-ulun ulus; §272, olan Mongol ulus). Ulus and irgen are similar enough to be found in corresponding positions of parallel phrases such as in §§130 and 279. The other meaning of ulus, rather rarer, is as state or dynasty, in which meaning it is

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1Irgen appears in the Zhiyuan yiyu 至元譯語 vocabulary as one of the entries in the jungguanmen 君官們 “Lords and Officials” section, defined as minhu 民戶 “commoner households” [59, p. 265, pl. 3; 49, p. 300]. It also appears repeatedly in the Hua-Yi yiyu 華夷譯語 where it is always translated as baixing 百姓 [69, p. 64]. It also appears in Kirakos of Gandzak’s Armenian-Mongol vocabulary along with Turkic el as one of the words meaning “land” [58, p. 292-93]. As Ligeti pointed out the link with “land” here was formed via Turkish el, which, like Mongolian ulus (but unlike irgen), has the meaning both of the people under a single rule and the territory those people live on.

2Kereyid: §§96, 150, 186, 187, 200, 208; Tatars: §§53 (3), 58, 67, 68, 133, 153, 154, 156, 157, 205, 214 (2); Merkid: §§110, 113 (2), 152 (2), 157, 177 (2), 197, 198; Naiman: §§190 (irgen ulus), 192, 193, 200. The numbers in parentheses refers to the numbers of instances in the section in question.

3Of the three words I am considering here, ulus is the most widely attested item in the Middle Mongolian vocabularies, and the one with the widest variety of meanings. In the Hua-Yi yiyu 華夷譯語 it is given the primary meaning of guo 國 “realm, state, dynasty” but is also glossed as guotu 國土 “country, state territory,” baixing 百姓 “(common) people” and min 民 “commoners/civilians” [69, p. 105]. In the Rasulid Hexaglot, ulus is equated with Turkish il, Persian vilâyathā, and Arabic al-buldān “countries.” Turkish il is elsewhere linked to Arabic al-wilāya “province,” Persian vilâyat, Greek horan, and Armenian ergir; p. 144, and defined as “subordinate” and linked with Arabic al-muṭfī’ “obedient” [38, p. 248, 144, 112].
glossed as guo (e.g. §64, ulus-i ülí temčed; §121, ulus-un ejen boltuŋai, ulus mede’ülí ’esii). Finally, ulus irgen together form a relatively common binome. In these cases, irgen is glossed as baixing, and ulus as either guo (e.g. §148, 281) or renyan 人烟 “inhabitants” (e.g. §139). Contrary to modern usage, however, ulus is as a rule abstract, being modified only rarely used with a proper noun. Where one might in modern Mongolian refer to the “Naiman ulus,” for example, in the SHM usage one would rather refer to the “Naiman irgen.” Similarly while the Jin dynasty would later be referred to as the Altan ulus “Golden Dynasty,” in the SHM the state is referred to by the name of the ruler Altan Qan “The Golden King” and the realm as Kitad irgen “Chinese people” (see e.g. §§132, 247, 250, 251, 271, 272).

Of the three terms irgen, ulus, and qarin(n), it is only the last which the Ming dynasty translators sometimes glossed as buluo 部落 or tribe. Qarin(n) in modern Mongolian is a noun or adjective for a person or thing who is ethnically alien, but it is used in the SHM for diverse polities where some form of ethnic diversity and alliance is highlighted. Sometimes, clearly foreign people are in question: thus qari is used frequently to describe the peoples to the far west assigned to Chinggis Qan’s oldest son Jochi (§255) and against whom the Mongols campaigned as far as Russia and Hungary:

činadu dayisun kii’un onol qarin (邦) bui
“the enemies yonder are many qarin” [§270; 102, p. 381].
orusud irgen-i (百姓) ta’uliju harban nigen qarin (邦) irgen-i (百姓) jüg-tür oro’ulju
“plundering the Rus’ irgen, and making eleven qarinirgen to submit sincerely.” [§275; 102, p. 387]

Early on when his generals promise to bring fair maiden and fine geldings from various peoples to Chinggis Qan, the peoples to be plundered are called qari irgen, with the gloss being in one case bang 邦 “realm” or “state” and in the other waibang 外邦 “foreign realms” (see §§123, 197).

Yet qarin(n) designates not only distant peoples, but also the various “tribes” of the Mongolian plateau. For example in §129, we read how Jamuqa brought together thirteen peoples to form his coalition:

Jamuqa teri’üten Jadaran arban ğurban qarin (bu 部) nököčejü ğurban tümed bolju.
“The Jadaran led by Jamuqa, thirteen qarin [units or divisions?] concluded a friendship and made three tümen [i.e. 10,000].” [102, p. 118]

In §141, where there is a long list of the people who joined together to elevate Jamuqa, including the Qatagin, the Salji’ud, the Dörben, the Tatar, the Ikires, the Qonggirad, the Ghorulas, the Naiman, the Merkid, the Oyirad, and the Tayichi’ud, they are also called ediin qarin “so many qarin,” with a Chinese gloss of buluo mei 部落 each “tribes-PLURAL.” The term can even refer to units under Chinggis Qan, when their diversity in origins needs to be stressed. In describing how the Baya’ud and Negüs “brethren” (aqade’ii) do not form their own unit, but are scattered among the other Mongol divisions,
they are said to be qariqari tutum-turbatarabu “scattered and dispersed in every qari” (§§213, cf. 218) with qari glossed as buluo 部落. The Ming dynasty translators of the SHM translated qari(n) as buluo or “tribe” when it was obviously referring to units within the Mongols, and as bang 邦 or “state, realm” when it was obviously a matter of large kingdoms or ethnic groups outside the Mongolian plateau. Yet this distinction is imported into the translation by the Ming translators; it has no basis in the original Mongolian. On its own, Ming translators considered qari(n) to mean primarily “realm” or “country.”

Unexpectedly, the closest equivalent to “clan,” meaning a group of people related patrilineally, may be the phrase aqa de’ü “elder and younger brothers.” Used particularly commonly with the Tayichi’ud (a rival branch of the Borjigin lineage opposing Chinggis Qan), it is also found with two dispersed surname groups, the Baya’ud and Negüs. Such usage may also be connected with the use of other terms such as Tayiči’ud kö’üd “Tayichi’ud sons” found in the SHM (§83), and the “Jalar and aqas [i.e. elders]” and “Sö’egen [=Sökeken] jala’us [i.e. youths]” found in the list of Chinggis Qan’s supporters in the Shengwu qinzheng lu 聖武親征録 [45, p. 1:13a-b, 17a-18a; 99, p. 24 [9b], 28–29 [11b-12a]]. The purely patrilineal nature of aqa de’ü cannot be taken for granted, however. Such family based terminology is used in Mongolian for any form of solidary grouping and was not solely a question of kinship, but also of age, common residence, and comradeship. The image of a fighting fraternity may be just as good or better a context in which to put the phrase of “Tayichi’ud brethren” as that of a patrilineal kin group.

To conclude this discussion of the terms for “tribe” and “clan” in Middle Mongolian: there is no term with anything like the meaning of “tribe” in Middle Mongolian. The word usually taken to mean tribe, ayimağı, actually meant “military-administrative division.” Another word occasionally glossed as “tribe” by Ming translators, qari(n), has the basic signification of “any territorial unit with a distinctive population” and hence was no more distinctively “tribe” than it was “nation.” In any case, the polities of the pre-Chinggisid world were in the vast majority of cases referred to as irgen, a word that carries the full freight of connotations attaching to state society. As for clan, oboğtan “those with such and such surname” is occasionally used for it, but again, any “clan” operating as an autonomous political unit was as a ruled referred to as a qari or irgen, or in a few cases as aqa de’ü “brethren.” While lineage was absolutely crucial for status within groups, unity of surname, considered apart from unity of administrative and territorial position, simply does not appear to have been a formative organizing principle of Mongolian groups before or after 1206.

1 Qari appears in a derived form in the Hua-Yi yiyu 華夷譯語, as qaritan, which is translated as bangtu 邦土 “country” [69, p. 88].
2 See §§74, 76, 77, 78, 82, 94 (Tayici’ud aqa de’ü); §120 (Tayici’udai aqa-nar de’ü-ner); §213 (Baya’udaqaṭe ẑiminu); §218 (Negüṣaqaṭe ẑiminu).
“Tribes” and “Clans” in the Northern Yuan Dynasty?

So far our search for a terminology of “tribes” and “clans” has been very disappointing. But what about the time after the fall of the Mongol empire, when central rule broke down again? Historians have envisioned the possibility that the Mongols reverted to a tribal state in the chaos of the period after 1368. Could it be that ayima and obo change their meanings and become more common in that period? Vladimircov in fact discussed the term ayima as a socio-political unit in this period. What did he base this on?

Researching this period in Mongolian history is difficult, due to the lack of adequate sources. The Ming dynasty frontier literature, while voluminous, is very inadequate for investigating the finer points of Mongolian socio-political systems. Traditionally, the Mongolian sources used for investigating this period are the so-called “Seventeenth Century Chronicles”: Lubsang-Danzin’s Altan tobči, the anonymous Erdeni-yin tobči, the Asaraçı-yin nereti-yin teike, and the Sira tuuji. All of these chronicles, however, were in fact compiled well after the advent of Qing rule in Inner Mongolia. As I will demonstrate, Qing rule brought about major changes in the terminology of socio-political groups and this terminology is reflected to some degree in the text of all of these chronicles. Thus we need to use sources from the period before 1636, when the new views and institutions of Manchu Qing rule had not yet influenced the Mongols.

Before 1980, such a study would have been almost impossible to conduct. Up to that time, the only purely pre-1636 text of any length extant would have been the Çagan teüke, the 16th century apocryphal text describing a Yuan Buddhist utopia supposedly set in the era of Qubilai Qa’an. Since then, however, several new texts have been discovered, edited, and published. This includes a set of ritual texts relating to the Eight White Yurts, the Çinggis Qa’an-u altan tobči, a mid-sixteenth century version of the life of Chinggis Qan, the Erdeni-yin tunumal, a biography of Altan Qa’an dated to 1607, and a large number of Mongol letters from the 1620s on preserved in the Manchu Qing archives and published by Li Baowen. Together, these sources give a much better picture of Mongolian usage in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, from the reunification of the Mongols in 1510 by Dayan Qa’an to the civil war provoked by Ligden Qa’an’s ambitions and the surrender to the new Manchu empire in 1634–36.

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1 The Eight White Yurts ritual texts and the Çinggis Qa’an-u altan tobči were published by Dorungg-a (1998). The ritual texts have also been translated and edited by Elisabetta Chiodo [17, 1989, 91, p. 190–220; 1992, 84–144]. The Çinggis Qa’an-u altan tobči has been transcribed and translated with a concordance by Leland Liu Rogers (2009). On the Jewel Translucent Sutra [47; 30]. Erdenijab-un Li Baowen [57] published the early Manchu documents in the China No. 1 Historical Archives (Zhongguo diyi lishi dang’an guan 中国第一历史档案馆), and these documents were translated and further studied by Nicola Di Cosmo and Dalizhabu [22].
The picture painted by these sources with regard to “tribal” terminology is not much different from that of the Mongol Empire. The terms ayimağ and oboğ simply do not appear in the Činggis Qa’an-u altan tobcü, nor in the preserved ritual texts or the Mongolian language documents preserved in Manchu archives. Although the term oboğ is not found in the Jewel Translucsent Sutra, ayimağ does appear frequently but only in the sense either of a division of Buddhist monks, or else as a short-term, small scale military unit. The former usage is more common in the text. [30, lines 531, 814, 839, 899, 1028, 1033, 1351, 1430, 1434] The latter occurs only twice, where we read of “five ayimağ of scouts”:

Uyiğurjin-ağa Ong Güsi Yisütei Sarmili kiged sayid tüsimed terigüten tabun ayimağ tursiğul-i čuğlaguluğad . . .

“They assembled five ayimağ of scouts from the Uyghurs, led by Ong Güshi Yisütei Sarmili and the wealthy officials” [30, lines 1506 and 1450].

Obviously ayimağ here has the purely military-administrative sense of “unit.” The two senses, military and religious, are nicely combined in a metaphorical passages eulogizing monks as qutuğan-u mör-tür üçüldüği ayimağ-ud-un noyan “the lords of the vanguard units (ayimağ-ud) on the path of the blessed ones.” [30, line 1068]

In the Çağan teüke or “White History” we find both oboğan and ayimağ, each used in ways very similar to that of the earlier Middle Mongolian texts. Oboğan is found in an identical passage given twice describing in a schematic way Chinggis Qan’s conquests:

tegün-ü qoyına, Jad Manggöl-un ğajar-a Temüjin suutu boşda Činggis Qağan töröjü Čambudib-taki ğurban jağun jiran nigen keleten doluğan jağun qorin nigen oboğan, arban jirğuğan yeke ulus-i tabun öngge dörben qarı bolğan yirtiçü-i toğtagağsan . . .

“After that, Temüjin, the brilliant and Holy Chinggis Qa’an, was born in the land of the Jad Mongols and pacified the world making the speakers of the 361 languages and the bearers of the 721 surnames and the sixteen empires (yekeulus) in the continent Jambudvīpa into his ‘five colors and four foreigners’…”

Although it would be a mistake to read too much into a utopian and schematic passage like this, surnames, like languages and political empires, are one of the coordinates of the human continent Jambudvīpa’s diversity which Chinggis Qan united under his own rule. Nothing suggests, however, that these surname groups are somehow specifically formed into separate clans. The one passage with the word ayimağ uses it solely in the military-administrative sense:

Tabun önggetü dörben qarı ulus-tur arbatu-yin aqa tabitu, jağutu, minggatu, tüteten, tük tümen-ü noyad-i inu ayimağayimağulus-iyan tusburi medetügei.

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\[1\] See Klaus Sagaster [84, I:1.2 [81] and I:3.1 [82]], with slightly different wording. This part is not found in the text of Liu Jinsuo [61].
“In the realm (ulus) of the ‘five colors and four foreigns’ the elders of the
tens and the commanders of the fifties, hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, and
supreme ten thousands shall each rule his own ayimağ and subjects (ulus) [84,
p. II.7:41 [91–92]; 61, p. 86].”

Just as in the Yuan texts, the ayimağs here designate the range of adminis-
trative and military units into which the Mongol population under Yuan rule
was divided. They are most certainly not“tribes.” And as far as we know in the
actual Dayan Qa’anid period, the Mongolian people were organized into
administrative units divided up among the descendants of Dayan Qa’an,
conventionally divided into six tümen and 54 otogs. Tümen or “tenthousand”
being derived from the imperial census and otog being a Sogdian for country or
territory, neither had any connotation of tribe. Although Vladimircov wrote
extensively about how ayimağ and otog were coordinate terms, there is no
attested use of ayimağ as an actual administrative term in Dayan Qa’anid
Mongolia. (The case of the Çağan teïike is one of a deliberately archaizing
vocabulary, purporting to describe thirteenth century vocabulary.)

Thus although the sources may be thinner than in the case of the Mongol
empire, the picture they paint is no less clear. The Mongols of the sixteenth
century did not have any word for “tribe” as we understand it, and certainly did
not use ayimağ for that purpose. Indeed there is no evidence that outside
nostalgic references to lost Yuan institutions the word ayimağ was used for
anything other than temporary military task forces. Oboğ was still the word for
surnames, but it was rarely used and never appears as a term of social
organization.

Ayimağ and Oboğ in the Manchu Qing Era: “Tribalizing” the Mongols

This picture began to change already in the seventeenth century chronicles
of the early Manchu Qing dynasty. Both ayimağ and oboğ began to take on the
types of connotations that would result in them becoming the preferred word
for tribal society in the twentieth century. Ayimağ began to take on the
connotations of “tribe” and oboğ ceased to be just a surname and began to
mean a body of people sharing the same name and affiliation.

In the sixteenth century chronicles, ayimağ still remained a term primarily
used for divisions of soldiers, messengers, palace women and so on.1 However,
in some passages we see ayimağ being used in contexts where it had not ap-
ppeared before. In the Altan tobci, a captive Mongol is told by his sympathetic

1 Soldiers: dörben ayimağ çirig tegüşüsen ([96, p. 132b], describing Qubilai
Sechen Qa’an’s administration), qoyar ayimağ qara moritan [82, p. 72r19];
messengers: dörben ayimağ elcis [82, p. 12r14]; tabun ayimağ elcis [82, p. 14r13];
deities: naiman ayimağ doği [82, p. 18v18]; scriptures: şurban ayimağ saba-yin
yosugor [82, p. 19v22]; palace ladies: ekener-ûn ayimağ [82, p. 21r10]; the three
provinces of mNgari in Tibet: Mgari şurban ayimağ [82, p. 22v17–18, 23r29, 36v26–27];
the Upper and Lower Yellow Uyghurs: degedii dooradu qoyar ayimağ Sira Uyiğur [82,
p. 70v03].
mistress to say to the Oirats who suspect him of continuing loyalty to his Mongol family,

*ečige eke nutuğ [or otoğ] ayimağ-iyán bağadu abtağsan-u tula uglify medem gejü*

“Say, ‘Because I was taken away while still small, I do not know my father and mother or nutuğ [or otoğ] and ayimağ’” [96, p. 150b [104]]; 18, p. 56b23 [80, 313]; 11, §84 [170].

Unfortunately, in the ambiguity of the unpointed Uyghur-Mongolian script, it is impossible to be sure if the word before ayimağ is nutuğ “homeland” or otoğ “county.” If it is otoğ, then the word ayimağ here could seem as simply reduplicating the meaning of otoğ as administrative region (although the use of ayimağ with otoğ in this fashion is otherwise unattested). But if it is nutuğ then we have a new binome nutuğayimağ in which ayimağ seems to imply not a temporary administrative unit, but a particular neighborhood as defined by territory and the people living in it.

In the Mongol-Oirat čağaji or “Mongol-Oirat Code,” dated to 1640 (although all the extant mss. have been transcribed into the Clear Script which was not devised until 1648–49) we also see a few cases where ayimağ is used in a way that seems to mean “neighborhood” in an informal, non-administrative sense. In describing the procedure to be followed in determining the truth in lawsuits, one provision says:

*Ünen qudal qoya r-ine şuqer-ече medeye... Gereči ügei bolqula ayimağ-un aqa-y{l} anu şuqaya...*

“Truth and falsity shall be determined by witnesses. If there are no witnesses, the elders of the ayimağ shall be pressed [to give testimony]” [27, §108, p. 183].

In describing compensation to be given a husband whose wife has run away, the brothers of the wife are expected to pay back the bridewealth the husband gave her at the betrothal.

*Aqa degüü inu öggügsen mal-un kiri-ber mal ögčü abqu bolba... Mal ügei bügesü ayimağ aqa degüü inu yıšü ögčü abqu bolba... Ayimağ-un aqa degüü ügei kimün-i noyad medekü bolba...*

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1 In the Mongol-Oirat code, however, we find yeke ayimağ ulus “the main ayimağ realm” and in the laws of Dondug-Dashi we find ayimağ döchin “the ayimağ forty” (referring to a known administrative unit of forty households) [27, §§1, 2 [16–17], §41 [299]]. In both cases, ayimağ seems to be added as a kind of measure word for administrative units, which could be of any size. Although the order is reversed, this could be the case here with otoğ ayimağ, if it is to be read that way.

2 Vladimircov [98, p. 177–78] appeals to this passage to prove that “the ayimağ is obliged to possess a territory for nomadism, nutuğ, and without this condition the group cannot be designated by the name ayimağ.” As Bawden [11, p. 170n1] already pointed out there is uncertainty in the reading, which could be otoğ or nutuğ. I would also point out that this use of ayimağ with otoğ or nutuğ is paralleled in no other pre-1636 text.
“Her brothers shall pay livestock according to the measure of livestock given before. If the livestock is no longer there, her ayimağ brothers shall pay a “nine” [a measure of livestock used in fines]. If the ayimağ brothers are no longer there, the persons involved shall be handled by the nobles (noyad)” [27, §115, p. 193].

Vladimircov took ayimağ in these two cases to be an official administrative unit, analogous to the otoğ, except that in the ayimağ the members were related to each other by kinship [98, p. 177–78]. Since these are the only two passages in the original 1640 code where the term ayimağ appears, it seems hard to believe that it was a distinctive, major institution.¹ In the passages, the ayimağ appears to have no connection with the administrative hierarchy of nobles (noyad), nor the “forties” headed by the demći, or the “twenties” headed by the šüülengge. As has already been noted, the term “brothers” (aqa degüü) in Mongolian can have a very loose sense of those related in any way (paternal, maternally, or marriage relatives) and even simply comrades and friends. The possibility that the “ayimağ brothers” might be absent from the scene certainly makes the ayimağ sound like a fairly informal group. Certainly nothing in these passages would necessitate seeing ayimağ as a tightly organized “sub-tribe” or “phratry” as Vladimircov does. Whether this sense of ayimağ as neighbors and relatives might have been there all along, but undocumented, or else might have been connected with the changes in the word’s association that would become clearer later awaits further research. A final possibility, given the Oirat provenance of these examples, is that ayimağ in Turkic languages, originally borrowed from Mongolian during the Mongol empire, may have in turn influenced Oirat usage.

A much greater innovation appears when ayimağ begins to sound much like the old ulus as designating the area ruled by a single lord, but now seen as a bottom-up unit. When Lord Jaisai of the Five Otog Qalqa is captured by the rising Manchus and his family negotiates for his release, the second Manchu Qing emperor criticizes their foolish policy:

öber-ün ayimağ-yi yakın eyin mağülamai ta?

“How can you ruin your own ayimağ like that?” [82, p. 92v03–04]²

In this case, ayimağ appears to designate all of Jaisai’s people, but carrying the sense of a homeland. Similarly in describing how the Manchus granted titles to secure support, Saghang Sechen writes:

yerüngkei ulus, ayimağ-taki qad noyad, tusimed-nugud-ta, wang beile, beise giing-üd kemekü terigüten čolas-i ögcü . . .

“To the khans, lords, and ministers throughout the people and ayimağs they gave titles such as wang, beile, beise, and gong.” [82, p. 95v04–05]

¹ The other instances cited by Vladimircov belong to the later amendments of Galdan Khung Taiji and Dondug-Dashi in which later Qing-style terminology, such as qosığu “banner” appears. They thus cannot be used to establish pre-Qing usage.

² I have of course made extensive use of the concordance and word-index of Sayang Secen, by I. de Rachewiltz and J. R. Krueger [83].
Here, in context, ayimağ is a preexisting socio-cultural unit, like ulus “dynasty,” “country,” whose support could be won over by appointing people in it various titles. Although the difference between this and the previous meaning of ayimağ as an often temporary administrative unit is subtle, it is real. Ayimağ around this time also begins to be used as the descriptor term for named regional units in Mongolia. In the genealogy of Lubsang-Danzin’s Altan tobči, we read:


“Qasar’s descendants beginning with Shirakhan became the ayimağ and nobles of the Khorchin. These are the present-day right flank five banners of the Tüşiyetü Čin Wang and the left flank five banners of the Joriqtu Čin Wang of, in total ten banners” [96, p. 173b [120]].

Here ayimağ designates the Khorchin as a whole, particularly in distinction to the nobles. The bottom-up sense is quite clear—and new for ayimağ.

Most clearly indicative of changing usage are passage where material from the SHM is rewritten or summarized, but with the word ayimağ inserted. Thus in the anonymous Altan tobči, there is a passage on the descendants of Bodonchar’s brothers.

Bodončur Boqda Qabči Külüg-eče busu ayimağ-un ulus-i čöm qaračus bolğaşan yosun eyimϋ bülüge.

“This is how all the people (ulus) of the ayimağ not descended from Bodonchur Boqda Khabchi Khüług were all made vassals (qaračus)” [18, p. 8a12 [35]; 11, §8 [115]].

In a passage of the Asarağiči-nin neretü-yin teüke corresponding to the SHM §141, we finally see the word ayimağs being applied to the “tribal” units of the pre-Chinggisid period:

Qatagin, Saliüşud, Tatar-un beki terigülen dörben ayimağ Tatar, Ikiris, Qongkirid, Ğorlusun Ğindan Ğağan terigülen . . .

“The Qatagin, the Salji’ud, the four Tatar ayimağs led by the Beki of the Tatar, the Qonggirid, those led by Chindan Chaghan of the Gorlos ...” [87, p. 12b02 [23, 247]].

And in the passage corresponding to §153, the passage “Chinggis Qan set himself in array at Dalan Nemürges against the Tatars, the Chagha’an Tatar, Alchi Tatar, Duta’ud Tatar, and Aluqai Tatar” becomes:

Noqai jil-dür Ğinggis Qağan dörben ayimağ Tatar-tur mordaju...

“In the year of the dog, Chinggis Qa’an rode against the four ayimağ of the Tatars” [87, p. 13b28 [24, 248]].

Finally, the Asarağıči neretü-yin teüke’s passage corresponding to §198 refers to nigen ayimağ Merkid “one ayimağ of the Merkid” [87, p. 15b09 [27, 249]]. In all of these cases, the SHM original does not have ayimağ1.

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1 As Oyunbilig [105, p. 31-44] has shown, the Asarağıči neretü-yin teüke does not actually make use of the SHM. But it does appear to have made use of some other, now
By this time ayimağ is clearly being used for a pre-existing subdivision of a people, that is, roughly a “tribe.” In other words, the Mongolian sources demonstrate that the modern usage that I described in the beginning of this article, in which sub-groups or “tribes” of Mongols are designated ayimağ dates back to the second half of the seventeenth century. Already by the end of that century, the Mongols were rewriting the remains of their own Middle Mongolian historical works to reflect this newer vocabulary.

What then was the reason for this relatively sudden spread of the term ayimağ among the Mongols of the second half of the seventeenth century? I believe the answer is quite clear: it was the influence of Manchu on Mongolian usage. Specifically, the Manchus used the term aiman, itself a loan word from Mongolian ayimağ, to translate the Chinese bu 部 and buluo 部落. Thus as the Manchus translated extensively from the Chinese sources, they assimilated the practice of seeing the peripheral peoples around China as naturally have a special organization into “tribal” units: aiman. When Manchu sources were translated into Mongolian, whether in the form of legal codes or historical literature, then aiman was naturally translated by its cognate ayimağ. Through this pathway, the Mongols assimilated the Chinese view of themselves as naturally “tribal” and being organized into peculiar units appropriate to “barbarians.”

The operation of this path from bu to aiman to ayimağ can be seen in the Manchu and Mongolian translations of the Liao shi 遼史, the Jin shi 金史, and the Yuan shi 元史. As Ulaanbagana [104] has emphasized in his recent study of these translations, the Manchu translation and Mongolian translations of the Yuan shi in particular exercised a very powerful influence on the Mongolian historical tradition. The citations in his work also show many examples where bu was translated in Manchu as aiman and then in Mongolian as ayimağ [103, p. 33, 37, 64–65, 66–67, etc.]. Legal and geographical literature also played a major role in popularizing the habit of referring to Mongol subunits as ayimağ.

lost, Yuan-era Mongolian source. It is thus theoretically possible that the use of the term ayimağ in these contexts derives not from the usage of the editor Šamba writing in 1677 105, p. 15–18], but from the Yuan-era source he drew on. Although more research is needed, some of the incidents mentioned in this source, such as Ilqa Senggün taking refuge in Tibet are found elsewhere only in the Shengwu qinzheng lu, a Yuan era text originally composed c. 1276, and reedited c. 1318. It is possible therefore that the Asarağı neretü-yın teüke used a similar source, and that ayimağ could represent not the Qing-era usage , but the Yuan era popularization of ayimağ as a translation of Chinese touxia. Either way, it does not represent any actual use of ayimağ as the pre-Chinggisid word for “tribe.”

1 See for example [55] (s.v. aiman); [92] (s.v. aiman §10224 [573]). See also [81] (s.v. aiman). The term aiman is not found in any of the Ming-era Jurchen vocabularies, so it may have been a fairly recent borrowing from Mongolian into Manchu [52; 48].

2 It is notable that all the terms connected with the office of tusi 土司, petty officials of the non-Han peoples in southern and western China, use the term aiman/ayimağ to mark their “tribal” character [92, §1483–1491 [85]].

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According to Qing administration, each Mongol banner (the real administrative unit) was also affiliated with a particular ayimağ (Manchu aiman, Chinese bu), whose noble families were related and whose commoners had a common history. Thus in the famous peerage of the Mongol and Inner Asian nobility of the Qing, the so-called İledkel şastir, each noble family was assigned to an ayimağ [66; 71], and it became a common place to survey the Mongols by the numbers of their ayimağ. In the official view, Mongols were now seen as a swarm of peripheral tribes, as found in the clichéd phrase Gadağadu ayimağ-un olan mongöl “the Mongols of the outer ayimağ/tribes”.

Just as with the text of the SHM, we can see this new understanding of ayimağ as “tribe” in rewrites of sixteenth century texts and themes as well. Thus the geographical schemata describing the Mongol conquest known as originally found in the Çağan teüke “White History” had no reference to the word ayimağ. One had seven named countries (ulus) as representatives of the sixteen empires of Jambudvipa. The other, the famous “Five Colors and Four Foreigns” (tabun öngge, dörben qari) scheme had the “Blue Mongolia” (Köke Mongöl ulus) in the center and nine different named countries (ulus) distributed around, two to each cardinal direction [84, II:2:2[83], II:8:3 [92]; 61, p. 73, 86]. But when this latter schema was set out in the early eighteenth century work, the Altan kürdüngan kegesütü, the terminology used was pervasively shaped by usage calqued from Chinese via Manchu:

Tendeče Boğda Çinggis Qağan tngri-yin jayag-ar Çambutib-un dorona eteged-in arban qoyar qağan-u ulus-i ejelefji, yisün muji tabun öngge dörben qari ulus-i bolğaşsan inu:

Çool inu dalan qoyar ayimağ döčin tümen ilegüü Mongöl dumdadu yeke muji;
Dorona-yin olan ayimağulus inu, Çağan Solonggas, Kılıged qoyar muji;
Emüne-yin olan ayimağulus inu, Ulağan Kitad, Bitegüd qoyar muji;
Öröne-yin olan ayimağ ulun inu Qar-a Tangğud, Tasaq qoyar muji;
Umara-yin olan ayimağ ulun inu Sira Sartağul, Tomoğ qoyar muji büged yisün muji bolai.

“Then Holy Chinggis Qaghan conquered the realms of twelve emperors of the eastern part of Jambudvîpa by the destiny of Heaven and made them his nine provinces, five colors, and four foreigners.

«In the center there was the great central Mongol province with more than seventy-two ayimağs and forty tümens;
«In the east with many ayimağ and realms, there were the two provinces of White Koreans and Kılıged;
«In the south with many ayimağ and realms, there were the two provinces of Red Chinese and Bitegüd;

1 E.g. “Inner Mongolia is in total six leagues, 25 ayimağs, and 49 banners,” [85, p. 21–23].
2 See for example [86, p. 2.17a.3–4].
«In the west with the many ayimağ and realms, there were the two provinces of Black Tanguts and Taziks;
«In the north with the many ayimağ and realms, there were the two provinces of Yellow Turkestanis and Tokmak;
«These were the nine provinces» [25, p. 340].
By this time, ayimağ had become the accepted term for a traditional subdivision of any ulus, which in turn would be part of an empire or ulus ruled by a great qağan. This pattern of subdivision was extrapolated from the known sub-units of the Mongols to those of the Koreans, Chinese, Tanguts, Taziks, Turkestanis and so on. This passage points up the speed with which the Mongols picked up and used for their own history anachronistic administrative terms, including not just ayimağ, but also muiji “province,” usually used only for the provinces of China.

By the nineteenth century Köke tüüke, the idea that the Mongols are divided into ayimağ and oboğ “tribes” and “clans” was a commonplace among Mongol writers. David Sneath has described how the institution of oboğ was spread among the Mongols by the Manchu rule as well, as a translation of the Manchu hala and the Chinese xing [91, p. 93–97]. Like ayimağs, oboğs too were inserted where they had not been before. Under the sixteenth century Dayan Khanid dynasty, Mongolia was often seen as being divided into six tūmens and 54 otoğs, a term derived from Sogdian and meaning “district.” When this organization was recounted in 1835 by the monk Ishibaldan, the term otoğ “district” was replaced by oboğ “clans”—similar in sound, but very different in meaning [41, p. 47 [23r], cf. xvi].

Once the larger ayimağs (once “province” or “division,” now a “tribe”) and the smaller oboğs “clans” came together, the picture of clan-based tribal society was almost complete. The following statement summarizes this picture of the Mongols:

tedeger Monggol-un ayimağ tus tus-un dotor-a oboğ vasun adali busu alan bui . tedeger Monggol ulus-un dotor-a yeke . bağ-a qad noyad [-un] uğ udum buluşan-u jerge inu

Mongolia is divided into ayimağs and each ayimağ has many different clans (oboğ) and patrilineages(vasun, lit. “bones”). And the ranks of the greater and lesser lords of lineage is this: ... [13, p. 42].

1 On the various lists of peoples here [84, p. 304–17].
2 That the ulus of the “nine provinces” equals the tūmen (the unit of sub-rule under Dayan Qa’an, conventionally counted as six) of the Mongols can be seen on in Dharma’s Altan kürdün minggān kegesütü [25, p. 342]. On the meaning of the term ulus in Dayan Khanid Mongolia [31, p. 17–19, 22, 29–30, 66–70].
3 In using this text, I have been greatly aided by the translation, transcription, and commentary by Č. Udaanjargal [95].
This picture of the Mongols as being divided into ayimağ “tribes” and oboğ “clans” has been widely accepted as the original, pre-imperial, pre-state situation of the Mongols. A description such as this nineteenth century one could thus be taken to indicate the preservation of traces of the clan-tribal regime into the nineteenth century. But in reality this passage indicates nothing of the sort. It is no survival of earlier terms and institutions, but rather a result of thorough assimilation of Manchu Qing ideas and naming practices. It is these ideas and practices which modern Mongolian writers unwittingly reflect when they emphasize ayimağ and oboğ as fundamental terms for the study of pre-Chinggisid Mongolia.

Conclusion

In summary, let us summarize how the Mongols got a word for tribe. The answer is, they took an existing Mongolian word, ayimağ and, via the Manchu aiman, gave it the connotations of the Chinese bu and buluo. Originally, however, the word ayimağ meant a division or category, and as applied to social groups meant an administrative or military unit, often temporary. This process of acquiring a “tribal” vocabulary points up several important conclusions, both methodological and substantive:

1) Mongolian sources are indeed important for Mongolian history, and the uncritical use of translations can be extremely misleading.

2) In the case of Mongolian, at least, David Sneath was correct that ayimağ began as an administrative-military term, and only later acquired “tribal” connotations.

3) Oboğ in its original signification refers not to a “clan,” i.e. a group of people, but simply to the common surname descending in the male line. It was rarely if ever used to refer to actual social groups, but only to family names born by persons.

4) The Middle Mongolian sources show no distinctive linguistic reflection of what we can call a tribal or clan order. Actual socio-political groups were usually termed called irgen or qari(n), terms that denoted political and territorial unity, and which were used for Mongol and sedentary peoples alike.

5) The importance and frequency of the term ayimağ, as an administrative-military unit, increased after the founding of the Mongol

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1 David Morgan [67, p. 6–7] notoriously declared that “the corpus as a whole does not in itself really justify the very considerable effort involved in learning Mongolian,” but later acknowledged the importance of Mongolian in the afterward to the second edition of his book.
empire. Later it declined again in use, although it seems to be attested in the sense of “neighbors and relatives” by the mid-seventeenth century.

6) The term ayimağ in the sense of “tribe” was created as part of Sino-Manchu administrative vocabulary, while also retaining in other contexts the original Mongolian meaning of administrative division.

7) The modern vocabulary used by scholars to describe Mongolian “tribal” institutions of the pre-Chinggisid period was actually imported into the Mongolian language by calque translation from Manchu and ultimately Chinese. Its application to the pre-Chinggisid period is anachronistic and unwarranted.

Although the evolution of tribal terminology here may be surprising, it is in line with what Morton H. Fried has outlined in his *Notion of Tribe* [35]. In his viewpoint the “tribe” as a socio-political entity has never existed apart from the state. Far from being a pristine, pre-state social unit, the tribe is formed when a peripheral non-state people comes within the sphere of influence of an expanding imperial state. Tribal structures can serve two purposes in the resulting interaction. In some cases, the non-state people will create a tribal structure as a kind of simplified imitation of the state with the aim of resisting incorporation. In other cases, the peripheral people will be partially incorporated into the state with the “tribal chief” serving as the point of articulation between the centralized, bureaucratic state and peripheral people.1

The Mongolian case here is a kind of historiographical version of what Fried described as a socio-political process. The language of oboğ and ayimağ was never imposed on the pre-Chinggisid Mongols by any expanding imperial power. As far as the sources can inform us, the pre-Chinggisid political concepts were aristocratic, territorial, and state-based, albeit on a small scale. This should not be surprising given the documented history of statehood on the Mongolian plateau dating back at the very least to the Xiongnu period. And of course, ultimately it was the Mongols themselves who became the great imperial power of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. But once the Mongols came under the Qing dynasty, their history was re-envisioned in “tribal” terms taken from Chinese historiography, and this “tribal” reading of Mongolian history proceeded to pervasively shape how scholars, both Mongol and foreign, understood the Mongol past. If Fried is correct, the tribes of modern ethnography exist as the result of incorporation into expanding states. In this case, the pre-Chinggisid “tribes” were formed at the time not by any expanding state, but retrospectively by the action of an expanding Qing historiography that “tribalized” the pages of Mongolian history as a byproduct of their

1Fried applies his viewpoint to Chinese interactions with the peoples on the border in Fried [36, p. 467–94].
administration of the Mongolian plateau. Moving beyond this Qing-era reconceptualization of Mongolian history will demand moving beyond the paradigm of “tribes” and “clans.”

Bibliography


1 I have attempted this task in [7].


Christopher P. Atwood, PhD, Associate Professor of Central Eurasian Studies of Indiana University.
Indiana University, Goodbody Hall 321, 1011 E. 3rd St., Bloomington, IN 47405-7005. Phone: (812) 855-4059. E-mail: catwood@indiana.edu