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“Rex Corum” and the Archbishop of Khanbaliq in the Letter of Pope John XXII (1333)

INTRODUCTION

The news that John of Montecorvino (1247–1328), the first archbishop of Khanbaliq (the capital of the Mongol Empire and present-day Beijing), had passed away probably reached Pope John XXII (r. 1316–34) as early as 1333. As soon as he heard the news, he appointed and dispatched a Franciscan friar, Nicolas de Botras, as the new archbishop. Five years later, however, in 1338, an embassy sent by the Mongol emperor Toghon Temür (r. 1333–70) arrived in Avignon and delivered his message, along with a letter written two years earlier—in 1336—by a group of Alan chiefs in the Khanbaliq region. They wrote that Montecorvino’s successor had not yet arrived and asked the pope to hurry the dispatch of a new archbishop. This shows that Nicolas did not reach his final destination. We know that he visited Almalig sometime in 1335–36, but after that we lose track of him, and it seems that he disappeared somewhere in Central Asia or Mongolia.¹

Before Nicolas departed, the pope gave him five letters, copies of which are stored in the Vatican. Among these letters, the one addressed to a certain “Rex Corum” (i.e., the “King of Corum”) has drawn special attention from scholars.² In the letter, he was also referred to as “Soco de Chigista,” though in copies of the letter, the first part of his name was variously rendered as “Socho de,” “Sece,” “Secede,” etc. Regarding this puzzling title and name, the French scholar Jean Richard proposed in 1948 that Corum represents “Gori,” i.e., Koryŏ (Korea), and “Soco” should be read as “Soc,” the title of a Koryŏ king, “Chung-suk.”³ Since then, most scholars have followed this interpretation.⁴

¹Girolamo Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell’Oriente francescano* (Karachi, 1906–27), 3:422.

²The copy of this letter is in the Archivum Secretum Vaticanum (MS A.S.V. Reg. Vat. 106f, 176r–v, no. 164).

³Jean Richard, “Un texte latin du X^{IV}e siècle concernant le Corée,” in *Actes du XX^Ie congrès international des Orientalistes, Paris, 23–31 juillet 1948* (Paris, 1949), 349–50; idem, *La papauté et les missions d’Orient au Moyen Age (XIII^e–XV^e siècles)* (Rome, 1977).

⁴Folker Reichert, *Begegnungen mit China: Die Entdeckung Ostasiens im Mittelalter* (Sigmaringen, 1992), 94; James D. Ryan, “Preaching Christianity Along the Silk Route: Missionary Outposts in the Tartar ‘Middle Kingdom’ in the Fourteenth Century,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 2, no. 4 (1998): 368; Alexander Toepel, “Ein Brief Papst Johannes’ XXII. an den koreanischen König,”



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This theory, suggesting that in the early fourteenth century Pope John XXII sent a letter to a Koryŏ king, has triggered diverse reactions in Korea. Korean Catholics seem to welcome and publicize this theory as evidence that the first arrival of Christianity in Korea occurred much earlier than previously thought. Some scholars, such as An Jaewon and Nam Jongguk, however, have criticized Richard’s proposal and put forward new hypotheses. We will explain their criticisms later in detail.⁵

In this article, I will examine the primary sources and historical circumstances related to the dispatch of the new archbishop Nicolas and attempt to solve the mystery surrounding the identity of “Rex Corum” in the pope’s letter. At the same time, I hope to provide new information on religious exchanges between the Christian West and East Asia during the Mongol era, as well as shed light on the political situation of the ruling circles in the Yuan Empire during the 1330s.

THE POPE’S LETTERS

In September 1333, Pope John XXII gave at least five letters to Nicolas when he appointed him as the archbishop of Khanbaliq. We know of at least five leaders whom the Pope addressed in his letters:

1. Leone, the king of Armenia (Leo IV, r. 1320–41)
2. Giacomo, the patriarch of Armenia
3. Özbek Khan, the ruler of the Qipchaq and Khazars (r. 1313–41)
4. “Soco (or Sece) de Chigista,” the king of Corum
5. The Great Khan, ruler of the Tatars⁶ (i.e., Toghon Temür)

The recipients of these letters were all political or religious leaders in the regions Nicolas was supposed to pass through. The pope asked them to provide protection and care for the Christians under their rule and to assist the new archbishop on his way to his destination.

The first two letters were written on 1 October 1333, while the others were written on 31 October. Nicolas could not leave immediately after he received these letters, but departed five months later, on 13 February 1334, with twenty

Scrinium 7–8, no. 2 (2011): 307–13; idem, “Was There a Nestorian Mission in Korea?” *Oriens Christianus* 88 (2004): 29–35.

⁵An Jaewon, “Gyohuang Yohan 22ga bonaen pyeonji e naoneun Regi Corum eun Goryeo eui Chungsusuk Wang inga [Can Rex Corum be King Chungsusuk of Goryeo?],” *Gyohoe sahak* 14 (2016): 129–63; Nam Jongguk, “Who is Rex Corum in the Letter of 1333 by Pope John XXII?” *Mediterranean Review* 12, no. 2 (2019): 23–51.

⁶For the Latin text, see Luke Wadding, *Annales Minorum* (Lugduni, 1625–54), 7:138 ff; I. L. Mosheim, *Historia Tartarorum Ecclesiastica* (Halle, 1741), 154–60; Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica*, 3:419–23.



friars and six laymen belonging to the Franciscan order, whom the pope had selected to accompany him. For some reason, however, the pope cancelled Nicolas's mission on 10 October and died two months later, on 4 December 1334. We cannot find any papal bull ordering Nicolas to resume his journey.⁷

However, his mission does not seem to have been completely revoked, because we find an interesting remark in the letter dated 13 June 1338 by the next pope, Benedict XII (r. 1334–42), which was addressed to “Magnifico Principi Chansi Imperatori Tartarorum de medio imperii” (The great ruler Chansi, Tatar emperor of the Middle Empire). Here, “the Middle Empire” denotes the Chaghadai Ulus, which were also called in contemporary Mongolian sources “Dumdadu Mongghol Ulus,”⁸ and Chansi is none other than Changsi (r. 1335–37), the ruler of that ulus. In this letter, the pope mentions:

We have perceived with joy that you have graciously received our venerable brother Nicolas, Archbishop [of Cambalech], and the beloved friars of the Franciscan Order, who were sent to those parts by the happy memory Pope John XXII, our predecessor. You have extended to them a generous and bountiful hand, and for the sake of God, you have granted them permission to repair destroyed churches, to construct new ones, and to freely preach the word of God to those who are willing to listen.⁹

This letter apparently shows that before his death Pope John had again commanded Nicolas to depart. In 1338, Pope Benedict entrusted this letter to an embassy of Toghon Temür Qa'an who were set to return to Khanbaliq, most likely passing through Almaliq, the capital of the Chaghadai Ulus. Having arrived at the papal court on 1 March of that year, this embassy presented, as mentioned earlier, a letter from the qa'an and another from the Alan chiefs, both of which were written in 1336. The qa'an expressed his desire for papal blessings and a resumption of friendly relations with the pope, while the Alan chiefs requested a new leader and spiritual comforter, as they had not received a new archbishop, after more than eight years had passed since Montecorvino's death. In response, Pope Benedict likely informed them that a new Franciscan bishop—Nicolas—had already departed for the East at the end of 1334 and that he was known to be in Almaliq at that time.

⁷Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica*, 3:420.

⁸Matsui Dai, “Dumdadu Mongyol Ulus ‘the Middle Mongolian Empire,’” in *The Early Mongols: Language, Culture and History: Studies in Honor of Igor de Rachewiltz on the Occasion of His 80th Birthday*, ed. V. Rybatzki et al. (Bloomington, 2009), 111–19.

⁹Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica*, 3:422.



Now, one can ask: why did Nicolas visit Almaliq? This question is justified because, in the list of five papal letters above, we cannot find any letter addressed to someone in or around Almaliq. Thus, we can assume that Nicolas and his party were initially going to take the northern route, crossing straight through the steppe to the east. They had no intention of going through Almaliq, which is a more southern passage, but they must have changed their plans along the way. It is possible that they obtained new information while staying in Saray about the situation in Almaliq and were encouraged to change their route. We cannot, however, confirm any of these assumptions due to the lack of relevant evidence.

So, what became of Nicolas and his companions, who were reportedly staying in Almaliq? The answer may lie in the report of John of Marignolli (d. after 1355), a Franciscan friar who led a return embassy following the visit of Toghon Temür’s envoys in 1338.¹⁰ Pope Benedict designated him as a papal ambassador and enlisted three other friars—Nicolas de Maiano, Gregory of Hungary, and Nicolas Boleti—to join him on the mission. While the ultimate goal of the embassy was to reach the ulus of the qa’an, they were expected to pass through the uluses of the Jochids and the Chaghadaids along the way. Their mission was to present papal gifts and extend friendship to the rulers of these regions in order to strengthen ties and pave the way for more active evangelical work.

In December 1338, the Marignolli embassy came to Naples and awaited the arrival of the qa’an’s envoys. They then crossed the Mediterranean together, arriving in Constantinople at the beginning of March 1339. From there, they traveled through the Black Sea to Caffa on the Crimean peninsula before continuing on to Saray, where Özbek Khan was staying. It was there that they presented the pope’s letter and gifts. After spending the winter of 1339–40 in Saray, they departed in May and traveled through Urgench before arriving at Almaliq, the capital of the Chaghadai Ulus at the end of 1340.

In Almaliq, the embassy was able to carry out religious works without hindrance, including the erection of churches and the performance of baptisms. They also discovered that just a year earlier, in 1339, friar Ricardo from Burgundy had been martyred along with four other friars who were assisting him: Francis of Alexandria, Pascal a Spaniard, Laurence of Ancona, and Peter. An Indian friar-cum-interpreter and a merchant named Gilotto were also killed. The embassy reported that, as a result of this massacre, no Catholic friars were present in Almaliq when they arrived. The fanaticism had diminished, however,

¹⁰For more information on the embassy of John of Marignolli and his report, see Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China* (London, 1866), 3:175–269. See also A. C. Moule, *Christians in China before the Year 1550* (London, 1930), 252–60; Igor de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans* (Stanford, 1971), 191–201.



and non-Islamic religious activities were again permitted.¹¹ What is striking in Marignolli's report is that he does not mention Nicolas by name when he lists those who were martyred, including even the names of an Indian interpreter and a merchant. It is highly unlikely that Marignolli would omit Nicolas, the new archbishop of Khanbaliq, if he had truly been martyred just a year prior.

In 1341, the Marignolli mission departed from Almaliq and headed for Khanbaliq. A year later, they reached their destination and were granted an audience with Toghon Temür Qa'an on August 19, 1342, where they presented him with the pope's gifts and letters. According to Chinese sources, the "kingdom of the Franks" sent an awe-inspiring tribute to the emperor: a majestic horse that measured an impressive eleven feet three inches in length and six feet four inches in height. This "heavenly horse," with its striking black body and two white hind hooves, captured the imagination of the Chinese contemporaries, who were mesmerized by its uniqueness. It was none other than a giraffe, which they hailed as a "heavenly horse," inspiring odes and praises to be composed in its honor.¹²

Marignolli and his company spent almost four years in Khanbaliq, but they were forced to leave due to widespread rebellions and rapidly deteriorating political conditions in China. Prior to their departure, the qa'an entrusted them with a present for the pope, as well as a letter requesting a priest with the rank of cardinal to come and stay in his realm with full powers. Accompanied by two hundred royal guards, they traveled across the land of "Manzi" (southern China) and reached the seaport of Quanzhou. On 26 December 1346, they embarked on a voyage across the Indian Ocean and finally arrived in Avignon in 1353, where they presented the qa'an's letter to Pope Innocent VI (r. 1352–62).¹³

Despite staying in Khanbaliq for almost four years, Marignolli made no mention of Nicolas in his report, despite describing the church and other buildings belonging to the archbishopric in detail. If Nicolas had been present and actively engaged in missionary activities, it is difficult to understand why Marignolli would have failed to mention him. This strongly implies that Nicolas was not in Khanbaliq when Marignolli and his colleagues were there, and suggests, again, that he likely disappeared or died on his way from Almaliq to Khanbaliq.

It is impossible to confirm what actually happened to Nicolas, as there is no evidence at all. We do, however, have a clue that might help us speculate about where he went after leaving Almaliq: the letter addressed to the King of Co-

¹¹ Moule, *Christians in China*, 252–57; Regina Müller, "Jean de Montecorvino (1247–1328): Premier Archevêque de Chine (III)," *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 44 (1988): 269–70.

¹² *Yuanshi* [Yuan dynastic history, hereafter YS], ed. Song Lian et. al., Zhonghua Shuju critical edition (Beijing, 1976), 864; Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys*, 193–95; Saguchi Tōru, *Mongoru Teikoku to Seiyō* (Tokyo, 1970), 241–43.

¹³ Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys*, 196–201.



rum. As previously mentioned, Pope John XXII gave Nicolas five letters, and if we mark their locations on a map, we can easily see that they all relate to Nicolas’s travel routes.

First, there is the king of Armenia, Leone or Leo IV, the last Hethumid ruler in Cilicia or “Little Armenia.” At that time, his capital was Tarsus, an important seaport on the eastern Mediterranean. Undoubtedly, Nicolas sailed across the sea and disembarked in Tarsus to take the route over the Caucasus Mountains. It would have been indispensable for him to have support and protection from the ruler and the patriarch of the Armenian kingdom.

Having crossed the Caucasus, he probably headed north to the Qipchaq steppe. At the time, Özbek Khan, the ruler of the Jochid Ulus, was nomadizing along the middle and lower Volga, which flows into the Caspian Sea. Only a few years earlier, Ibn Baṭṭūṭah had visited his capital, “al-Sarā,” also known as “Sarā Barka,” and met with Özbek Khan. Scholars, including H. A. R. Gibb, have regarded this “Sarā Barka” or “Saray Berke” as “New Saray” (*Saray al-jadīd*), located in modern Tsarev, about 225 miles north of Astrakhan.¹⁴ It turns out, though, that both Saray Batu and Saray Berke are in fact the “Old Saray,” and the “New Saray” became the new capital only in the early 1340s when Janibek came to power.¹⁵ Thus, we can assume that Nicolas passed through Tarsus, crossed over the Caucasus, and went to this Old Saray; in other words, his route differs from the one taken by Ibn Baṭṭūṭah in 1333 and Marignolli in 1339, who went via Constantinople.

Therefore, we are certain that, of the five letters entrusted to Nicolas, the aforementioned three letters were addressed to political and religious leaders on his way to Khanbaliq. The remaining two letters included one to be presented to the qa’an upon his arrival in Khanbaliq. It is reasonable to assume that the recipient of the last letter, the King of Corum, was located between Saray Berke and Khanbaliq. In fact, we can find the following solicitation from the pope:

. . . when the aforesaid Archbishop and Brothers arrive at your kingdom, you receive them with a serene countenance, and cause them to be received by your subjects and command that they be treated with benevolent affection, and that you treat them kindly.¹⁶

Upon leaving Özbek Khan’s domain, we have confirmed from Marignolli’s report that Nicolas journeyed to Almaliq, and after having spent some time there,

¹⁴ Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, A.D. 1325–1354*, trans. H. A. R. Gibb (London, 1972), 2:515.

¹⁵ See Thomas T. Allsen, “Saray,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 9:41–44.

¹⁶ For the Latin text, see Mosheim, *Historia Tartarorum*, 157–59, and An Jaewon, “Gyohuang Yohan,” 137–43.



departed shortly before the notorious massacre of 1339. While one might be inclined to consider the possibility of the King of Corum being the ruler of the Chaghadai Ulus, no historical or linguistic evidence exists to support this claim. Hence, it appears that we must explore alternative candidates located further to the east.

WHO IS REX CORUM?

As mentioned earlier, Jean Richard took notice of the letter to the King of Corum. He gave a short paper at the 1948 International Congress of Orientalists convened in Paris and published a revised version in 1977.¹⁷ Explaining the phrase “*magnifico viro Soco de Chigista, regi Corum*,” he interpreted Corum as Gori (Korea), and Soco as Soc (a part of the name of King Chung Suk). With regard to Chigista, admitting its ambiguity, he suggested that it might be related to the word Sol’go, an ancient native name for Korea. His theory was quite widely accepted by scholars like Folker Reichert, James D. Ryan, Alexander Toepel, and others.¹⁸

However, upon examining the body of past research regarding the identity of Corum, it becomes evident that the theory of Corum-cum-Korea has a much longer history than previously thought. In fact, as early as 1837—almost a century before Richard’s proposal in 1948—a book was published in Paris that suggested a link between Corum and “Solho” or “Korei.” This argument was first found in Conrad Malte-Brun’s (1775–1826) *Précis de la géographie universelle, ou description de toutes les parties du monde*,¹⁹ which was later cited by P. Maracellino da Civezza in his book *Storia universale delle missioni francescane*.²⁰ Another book published in 1895 also repeated this argument.²¹

Richard may not have known of these preceding works, since he did not quote them. Nevertheless, his new hypothesis differed significantly from the previous one. Unlike the former opinion that connected Corum to Solho, Richard interpreted Corum as Gori. He identified Soco as Soc, a name found in the title of Koryŏ king Chung Suk, and, last, he linked Chigista to Solho, also called Sol’go, an old name of Korea. His theory is more refined than the earlier one. It is, therefore, not surprising that a number of scholars have accepted it without criticism.

¹⁷Richard, “Un texte latin”; idem, *La papauté et les missions*.

¹⁸See note 4.

¹⁹(Paris, 1862), 9:254.

²⁰(Rome, 1859), 3:623.

²¹On these, see Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica*, 3:421; Charles de La Roncière and Léon Dorez, “Lettres inédites et mémoires de Marino Sanudo l’ancien (1334–1337),” *Bibliothèque de l’École des chartes* 56 (1895): 30.



Richard’s arguments suffer from a serious defect, however, since all three equations—Corum = Gor, Soco = Soc, and Chigista = Solho—rest solely on phonetic similarities without solid linguistic and historical evidence to support them. Of particular concern is Richard’s identification of Soco with King Chung Suk (r. 1313–30, 1332–39), which is erroneous. In reality, “Chung Suk,” meaning “Loyal and Virtuous,” was merely a title bestowed by the Yuan court after the king’s death in 1339, making it impossible for the pope to have known it six years before his passing. We must, therefore, reject Richard’s theory and start anew with a fresh inquiry.

Recently, two articles by Korean scholars have shed light on this topic. The first, published in 2016 by An Jaewon, challenges Richard’s argument and proposes a new theory. An argues that Corum is the plural genitive case of “Ci” in Latin, which sounds similar to “Khitān.” Thus, “Rex Corum” could mean “King of the Ci (=Khitān) people.” He also suggests that the name of this king, which can be read as Saca, Sece, Soco, Sace, or Secede, implies that he belongs to the Saca family.²² Although I am not a Latin specialist and cannot evaluate the validity of An’s interpretation of Corum, I find his hypothesis of Ci being related to Khitān unconvincing. The only tribe that sounds somewhat similar to Ci is the Qi or Qai tribe, which inhabited Manchuria in the tenth century. However, there is no evidence that this tribe migrated to Central Asia in the early twelfth century or played any role in the formation of the Qara Khitay kingdom. Moreover, there are no historical records of a Saca or Sece family among the Khitāns.

In 2019, Nam Jongkuk also published an article challenging Richard’s theory. Nam strongly argues that the king of Corum cannot be the king of Koryŏ and proposes that the king of Corum was a ruler of the Chaghadaid Ulus, as Archbishop Nicolas passed through Almaliq. Nam makes an interesting interpretation of the word Corum, suggesting that it is a misspelling of the word “eorum,” which means “their” in Latin. Thus, the phrase “Rex Corum” should be understood as “their king,” “their” referring to the Tatars or the Mongols.²³ I cannot accept Nam’s new hypothesis either, however, as it seems awkward for the pope to address the person receiving the letter as “their king” at the top of the letter. There is no evidence of such a case in the papal letters addressed to Mongol rulers. Moreover, Nam fails to provide any historical evidence linking this “Rex Corum” to the king of the Chaghadaid Ulus.

Thus, to solve this mystery, let us start from scratch and consider a few preconditions. First, we must locate the King of Corum along the route taken by Nicolas to reach Khanbaliq. As he passed through Cilicia, the Qipchaq steppe, and Almaliq, we need to find a suitable candidate along this passage. We cannot

²² An Jaewon, “Gyohuang Yohan,” 129–63.

²³ Nam Jongkuk, “Who is Rex Corum.”



find any suitable candidate up to the point of Almaliq, so it is possible that the King of Corum was situated between Almaliq and Khanbaliq.

Second, the kingdom of Corum should be a region where a significant number of Christians lived. The papal letter given to the king of Corum states:

By the living and true God, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords, you render pleasing obedience when you treat with kindness and gentleness *the Christians, whether ancient or new, dwelling in your kingdom*, which we have joyfully heard you have done. Therefore, as this adds good reputation and honor to your name, may you kindly continue to do so in the future, lifting up the eyes of your mind to the Divine Omnipotence, which you have so praiseworthy done thus far. For your throne in the said kingdom will be strengthened in glory by this, and if you believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, are baptized, and receive and fulfill the Christian law, without which no one is saved, you will be saved.²⁴

The two groups of Christians mentioned in the letter—“ancient” and “new”—probably denote Nestorians and Catholics, respectively. Additionally, it is clear that the pope had received information about this kingdom, as he wrote that “you treat [Christians] with kindness and gentleness . . . [as] we have joyfully heard you have done.”

The third and final precondition is that we need to find a name—either regional or tribal—that is phonetically similar to Corum.

My proposal for a candidate fulfilling these three conditions is none other than Qaraqorum, the capital of the Mongol Empire established by Ögödei Qa’an that was later moved to Shangdu and Dadu. European missionaries and merchants had been visiting Qaraqorum since the 1240s, and there were several routes from Europe to this imperial capital. One of the most common routes passed through the Crimean Peninsula and the capital of the Jochi Ulus on the Volga River, then went over the Ural Mountains and, via the Irtysh River, reached Qaraqorum. This is known as the “steppe route” and was, along with the “desert route,” one of the two most important arteries of the Silk Road. At the same time, as Rubruck describes in detail, Christians belonging to the Nestorian and Armenian churches, as well as Catholics, resided there. This was a place where “ancient” and “new” Christians were found. Thus, Qaraqorum meets at least two of the three preconditions I proposed earlier: both old and new Christians were present there and it is located on the route that many travelers, including Nicolas, would have taken to go to Khanbaliq.

²⁴Mosheim, *Historia Tartarorum*, 157 (italics added).



Qaraqorum also satisfies the final precondition, phonetic correspondence. The word Qaraqorum consists of two parts: *qara* means “black” and *qorum* means “rolled stone” or “boulder.” Historical usage shows that both Qaraqorum and Qorum interchangeably referred to the Mongol Empire’s capital during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Let us delve further into the details of this name.

Upon investigating European and Muslim records from that time, it becomes clear that the term Qaraqorum was used almost exclusively, whereas the shorter Qorum was rarely employed. For instance, Carpini and Rubruck, the earliest two Europeans to visit the city, referred to it as “Caracoron” and “Carachorum.” Marco Polo, who spent considerable time in China and was well acquainted with the city, also referred to it as “Caracorom” (or “Caracoran” and “Caracoron,” depending on the manuscript). On a map drawn by the Venetian friar Fra Mauro around 1450, the city is labeled as “Charocharā” and “Characoracur.” Armenian historian Kirakos used the term “Tarayoum.”²⁵ All these examples suggest that the Mongol capital was known as “Qaraqorum,” not “Qorum,” in Europe. Muslim writings do not differ much in this regard, with Juvaynī and Rashīd al-Dīn using spellings that are similar to “Qaraqorum,” with only minor variations.²⁶

If we shift our focus to East Asian and Chinese sources, we discover a striking difference in the way Qaraqorum is referred to compared to Western accounts. Here, the city name, fully transcribed as “Hala Helin,” is frequently rendered as simply “Helin,” i.e., Qorum. In fact, “Helin” appears at least two hundred times in *Yuanshi*, whereas the form “Hala Helin” is used only three times. Even in the literary works of the Yuan period, such as *Yuan Wenlei* or *Guochao mingchen shihlueh*, the city is primarily referred to as Helin. Therefore, it is evident that among the Han Chinese in the Qa’an Ulus, the old imperial capital was commonly known as Qorum, rather than as Qaraqorum. The Chinese practice of calling this old capital “Helin” is certainly reflecting and transcribing contemporary Mongolian usage. In other words, it suggests that the Mongols in China commonly called their old capital just “Qorum.”

Next, can we find any evidence of this city being called simply “Qorum” and not “Qaraqorum”? While the available evidence is not definitive, we can make an informed guess based on a few sources. In the *Secret History of the Mongols*, likely written in the first half of the thirteenth century, we find Qaraqorum mentioned only once and no reference to Qorum. In paragraph 273, it notes that after Ögödei subdued cities in North China, he “peacefully returned home, set-

²⁵ See Paul Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo* (Paris, 1959), 1:165–69.

²⁶ ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Atā Malik Juvaynī, *Tārīkh-i Jahān Gushā*, trans. J. A. Boyle as *The History of the World-Conqueror* (Cambridge, MA, 1958), 1:54, 213, 217, 220.



ting up camp at Qara Qorum.”²⁷ A century later, however, in 1347, a Sino-Mongol bilingual stele called “*Chici Xingyuange bei* [The Stele of Xingyuan Pavilion Erected by the Imperial Edict]” was erected in Qaraqorum. In the Mongol text, the name of the city was written as Qorum. For instance, on line 2, it reads: “Cinggis qan yeke or-a sayuysan arban tabuduyar on ging luu jil-dür Qorum-a sayuju balayasun orosiyuluysan ajuyu” (“In the year of *gengchen*, the fifteenth year after Cinggis Qan had mounted the great throne, he established the capital city at Qorum”). The form “Qorum” is also found on lines 7, 18, 22, and 27.²⁸

The stele offers two important insights. First, it suggests that the form “Qorum,” without “Qara,” was in use among the Mongols in the first half of the fourteenth century, though we do not know how prevalent this form was. Second, the stele indicates that “Qorum” referred not only to the name of the old capital but also to the wider region of northern Mongolia. This region was known as *Lingbei Xingsheng*, or Lingbei Province, in Chinese, and Qorum-šing in Mongolian. Lines 27 and 28 of the stele state, “As for Qorum, formerly it was the district by the name of *On cang luu* (*Yuanchang lu*). Afterwards again it became *Jon yin si* (*Zhuanyun si*). Afterwards again it became *Son ui si* (*Xuanwei si*). Afterwards again it became *Ling bui qing Jungsu sing* (*Lingbei Xing Zhongshusheng*, Lingbei branch secretariat).”²⁹

To summarize the analysis above, while Europe and West Asia tended to use the name “Qaraqorum” for the first capital of the Mongol Empire, the form analogous to “Qorum” was more commonly used in China and Mongolia. The fact that a stele erected in the 1340s, around the time of Archbishop Nicolas’s journey to Mongolia, revealed that Qorum referred not only to the city but also to the northern Mongolian region known as Lingbei could mean that when Pope John XXII referred to the King of Corum in his letter, he may have been alluding to a ruler of a much larger region that encompassed the Mongolian steppe.

Our proposal that Corum is none other than [Qara-]Qorum is supported by another piece of evidence. In the papal letter, the king of Corum was called “Sece (Saca or Soco).” We have made it clear that Richard’s earlier identification with the Koryō king Chungsuk is implausible. Scholars have struggled to interpret the name Sece and its relation to “de Chigista.” If we are correct in our conjecture that Corum is the Qaraqorum region, then its king should have been in northern Mongolia around the 1330s and 1340s. Since the pope referred to

²⁷ *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, ed. and trans. Igor de Rachewiltz (Leiden, 2004), 1:205.

²⁸ Francis W. Cleaves, “The Sino-Mongolian Inscription of 1346,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 15, nos. 1–2 (1952): 25–26, 29–30, 69, 95; Matsukawa Takashi, “Chokusi Kōgenkakuhi Mongoru bunmen yakuchū,” *Nairiku Azia gengo no kenkyū* 23 (2008): 40–41.

²⁹ Cleaves, “The Sino-Mongolian Inscription of 1346,” 81.



him as a king, he was probably a Chinggisid with the status called *köbegün* (son) in Mongolian or *wang* (king) in Chinese.

Our search through the sources led us to a Chinggisid prince named Secetü or Chechetü. He was the great-grandson of Möngke Qa’an (r. 1251–59) and was given the titles of Wuning wang and Tan wang, ruling the city of Qaraqorum and a wider region of northern Mongolia in the 1320s and the 1330s. One can find the etymological origin of the word Secetü/Chechetü in the Mongol-Turk word *seceg/čečeg* (flower). Thus, the name Secetü/Chechetü means “flowery, of flower.” Phonetically, the name of the King of Corum, “Sece de,” is very similar to Secetü.³⁰

Therefore, based on the discussion above, we can hypothesize that Corum is the Qaraqorum region in northern Mongolia, and its king, Sece de, is Secetü, the Chinggisid prince who ruled the northern Mongolian steppe. To determine whether he was a powerful enough monarch to receive a papal letter, we need to examine his activities more closely, especially in the region of Qaraqorum. Though scholars have only sporadically mentioned him in later Yuan political history works, it is worthwhile to explore more about his biographical data.

SECHETÜ, PRINCE TAN

The first mention of Secetü, Prince Tan, in the *Yuanshi* dates to the seventh month of 1324.³¹ It was during this time that Yisün Temür Qa’an (r. 1323–28) directed the inheritance of the “people” that his father Öljei had administered, and bestowed upon Secetü his father’s “old seal.”³² Öljei was the son of Ürüng-tash, who in turn was the son of Möngke Qa’an. After Möngke’s demise, Ürüng-tash participated in the *quriltay* in Mongolia where Ariq Böke was elected as the next qa’an in 1260.³³ Later, when Ariq Böke’s power waned, he submitted to Qubilai Qa’an (r. 1260–94), who granted him the Circuit of Weihui (in the Henan province at present) as his fief (*fendi*) in the third month of 1266. He also received a golden seal adorned with a camel ornament (*jinyin tuoni*), which ranked third

³⁰J. Deny, “Un soyurgical du Timouride Šāhruḥ den écriture ouigoure,” *Journal asiatique* 245, no. 3 (1957): 260–61. I would like to express my gratitude to the reviewer of this article, whose insights enlightened me regarding this article and the etymology of Secetü/Chechetü.

³¹In *YS* (27:601) we find another Chinggisid prince named Sečetü or Čečetü, who is the son of Kōkōčü, who is in turn the son of Qubilai. He was granted the title of Ningyuan Wang in 1320 and subsequently elevated to Ning Wang. However, his actions are quite obscure in the *YS* and do not extend beyond the era of Yisün Temür Qa’an, who died in 1328. Hence, it appears reasonable for us to exclude him as a candidate for our Secetü.

³²*YS*, 29:649.

³³Kim Hodong, *Mongol jeguk gwa Goryo* (Seoul, 2007), 26.



in the hierarchy of various princely seals.³⁴ Although Möngke Qa'an had an elder son named Baltu, the latter passed away in 1259 during the campaign that his father led against the Southern Song. Consequently, Ürüngtash became the sole surviving son of Möngke and inherited his *ulus*.

Following the passing of Ürüngtash, Qaishan Qa'an appointed his son Öljei as the Prince of Wei in 1310, a title befitting his fief in the Weihui Circuit. Öljei probably inherited the "old seal" during this time. As previously mentioned, Sechetü inherited his father's "people," which presumably referred to Möngke Ulu. But where exactly was this *ulus* located? The Weihui Circuit, with its appointed officials to collect dues and tributes, was not an ideal place for nomads to reside. It is necessary to explore the Mongolian steppe to locate Möngke Ulu.

A *Yuanshi* record from the seventh month of 1322, two years before Sechetü inherited the office of his father Öljei, mentions that Sidebala Qa'an (r. 1321–23) sent Prince "Chechetü" to the northern frontiers to command a comprehensive military force. At the end of the same year, Sidebala Qa'an enfeoffed him as Wuning Wang and presented him with a golden seal.³⁵ Evidently, this "Chechetü" is Sechetü, which proves Sechetü's enormous military power and influence in Mongolia. This fits with a recent study, attesting that the pasture of Ürüngtash and his descendants was in the Khangghai region near Qaraqorum.³⁶ Thus, the military power and influence of Sechetü was closely connected with that of the Möngke Ulu around that region.

At the beginning of 1326, Sechetü visited the court alongside Prince Qonggho Temür, receiving lavish gifts of gold, silver, paper money, and silk.³⁷ Qonggho Temür, the son of Sirigi, Möngke's son born from a concubine and Ürüngtash's brother, accompanied him. Their joint presence at court indicates that Sirigi's descendants also resided in the Qaraqorum vicinity, the primary base of the Möngke Ulu.

Subsequently, Sechetü's military influence grew considerably. Following the death of Yisün Temür Qa'an in 1328, two factions emerged: the Dadu group, which supported the family of Qaishan, and the Shangdu faction, which endorsed Yisün Temür's young son Aragiba. This led to a civil war, ultimately resulting in the triumph of the Dadu faction. Tuq Temür, Qaishan's second son, initially assumed the throne, but he ceded power to his elder brother Qoshila

³⁴ YS, 6:110, 108:2745; Li Zhi'an, *Yuandai zhengchishi yanjiu* (Beijing, 2003), 301–2.

³⁵ YS, 28:623, 626.

³⁶ Muraoka Hitoshi, "Monke Kaan no kōzokutachi to Karakorumu," in *Mongoru koku genson Mongoru Teikoku Genchō hibun no kenkyū: Bichiēsū purojekuto seika hōkokusho*, ed. Matsuda Kōichi and Ayudai Ochir (Osaka, 2013), 97.

³⁷ YS, 30:688.



when the latter arrived from the west, where he had been in exile, with the support of the Chaghadai Ulus.³⁸

According to the *Yuanshi*, upon Qoshila’s arrival in the Altai region heading toward Qaraqorum, Sechetü went there and welcomed him. Qoshila was later enthroned as qa’an during a *quriltay* held in Qaraqorum. He appointed his brother Tuq Temür as the crown prince and, in the fourth month of 1329, dispatched Sechetü to deliver his edict to Tuq Temür in Dadu. The events of 1328 and 1329, after Yisün Temür’s death, clearly indicate Sechetü’s political and military stature in Qaraqorum and northern Mongolia.³⁹

Although Sechetü showed his loyalty to Qoshila by welcoming him, he was shrewd enough to maintain a cordial relationship with Tuq Temür, probably foreseeing potential conflicts between the two brothers. Thus, in 1329, when Sechetü was staying in Qaraqorum before Qoshila dispatched him to Dadu, he sent his own man to Tuq Temür, informing him of Qoshila’s itinerary going to the capital city of Dadu.⁴⁰

In the fourth month of 1329, Sechetü met Tuq Temür and delivered Qoshila’s message that he would appoint Tuq Temür as the crown prince. In response, Tuq Temür bestowed upon Sechetü a generous reward of five hundred *liang* of gold.⁴¹ After Qoshila’s abrupt death due to poisoning in Ongghuchatu, which lies midway between Shangdu and Dadu, in the eighth month of 1329, Sechetü, thanks to his previous efforts, had won the confidence of the new qa’an Tuq Temür and received lavish cash rewards.⁴² Finally, in 1331, Sechetü’s princely title was elevated from Wuning wang to Tan wang. This title was reserved only for the highest-ranking Chinggisids.⁴³ Sechetü had truly established himself as an influential figure within the Qa’an Ulus.

The stele fragments discovered at the site of Erdeni Juu, the Buddhist monastery at Qaraqorum, shed light on the activities of Tan wang Sechetü, confirming his power and influence in the region of Qaraqorum.⁴⁴ The stele was erected to

³⁸After Ayurwarwada (Renzhong) became emperor in 1311, succeeding his elder brother Qaishan (Wuzong), he, in order to secure the future succession of his own son Shidebala, appointed Qaishan’s eldest son Qoshila as Prince of Chou in 1316 and expelled him to a southern remote region of Yunnan. Qoshila, on his way to Yunnan, fled to the west and defected to the Chaghadai Ulus, where he hoped to win support.

³⁹YS, 31:695, 697–98; 33:733.

⁴⁰Ibid., 33:727.

⁴¹Ibid., 33:734

⁴²Ibid., 33:740.

⁴³Ibid., 35:777.

⁴⁴Muraoka Takashi and Taniguchi Aya, “Karakorumu San-kōbyō zanhi to Monke Kaan no kōzokutachi,” *Nairiku Ajia sho gengo shiryō no kaidoku ni yoru Mongoru no toshi hatten to*



commemorate the repair of the Shrine of The Three Emperors, where sacrificial rites for the legendary emperors Fuxi, Shennong, and Huangdi were performed. During the Yuan period, these rites became a state service in 1295. The two figures depicted in the fragments are identified as Tan wang and Bin wang, who are Sechetü and Qonggho Temür respectively. This identification allows us to date the stele to after Sechetü's enfeoffment as Tan wang in 1331. Further evidence of Sechetü's influence can be found in another source, which records that during the reign of Taiding (Yisün Temür, r. 1324–27), a need to repair the Shrine of The Three Emperors arose. The repair work was carried out with the permission of a certain Chechetü, who we can safely assume is Sechetü, Tan wang.⁴⁵ All these pieces of evidence confirm Sechetü's importance and power in the region of Qaraqorum, which he likely inherited from his father when Yisün Temür ascended the throne in 1324.

In the biography of Xiahou Shangyuan, there is evidence of Sechetü's remarkable military power in Mongolia.⁴⁶ Xiahou served Shidebala Qa'an until his assassination at Nanpo. Later in 1328, when Qoshila marched towards the east, Xiahou went as far as Qaraqorum to welcome him. It is highly likely that Sechetü was present there for the same purpose, given that Xiahou probably knew him well. In Xiahou's aforementioned biography, we come across the following statement: "Prince Tan commanded an army of 48 *tümen* [i.e., 480,000], and all the army's generals had confidence in him on the whole."

However, Sechetü's power was not long-lived. His relative and colleague Qonggho Temür, Prince Bin, suddenly collapsed amid the political conflicts between Tankish, El Temür's son, and Bayan, the majordomo in the court of Toghon Temür Qa'an. At first he had supported Tankish, but when Tankish attempted a coup but failed and was arrested, Qonggho Temür decided to kill himself in the sixth month of 1335.⁴⁷ Sechetü sided with Bayan and accused Tankish. In other words, the two princes of Möngke's family chose different political camps. As Bayan won the conflict and took full power, Sechetü's career seemed to be on a smooth path.

However, when Bayan proposed a marriage between his son and Sechetü's daughter, the latter could not accept it because Bayan was from the Merkits, and his pride would not tolerate a marriage between the Chinggisids and a family of "slave" origin. Enraged by this refusal, Bayan made an accusation against

kōtsū ni kansuru sōgō kenkyū (Osaka, 2008), 137–89; Taniguchi Aya, "Karakorumu San-kōbyō zānhi," in *Mongoru koku genson Mongoru Teikoku Genchō hibun no kenkyū: Bichiēsu purojekuto seika hōkokusho*, ed. Matsuda Kōichi and Ayudai Ochir (Osaka, 2013), 61–90.

⁴⁵ See the works cited in the previous note.

⁴⁶ "Xiahou Shangyuan zhuan," *Wei Xueshi Quanji*, juan 10 (Jinan, 1992).

⁴⁷ YS, 138:3334.



Sechetü in front of Toghon Temür Qa’an and submitted a petition to execute him. When the qa’an did not grant the sanction, he fabricated an edict and killed Sechetü. Later, when Yuan minister Toqto eliminated Bayan and took power, he put forward a number of reforms, one of which was “to cleanse the grievance of Tan wang Sechetü.”⁴⁸

We have now examined the career and activities of Sechetü, who, as the leader of Möngke Ulus, wielded enormous military power and influence in Qaraqorum’s region as well as northern Mongolia in general. He was a great-grandson of Möngke Qa’an and was commissioned to command the entire northern army, which consisted of about 48 *tümens*. His power reached its zenith in 1331 when he was appointed Tan wang, but it came to a halt abruptly in 1339 with Bayan’s persecution. Sechetü’s existence as a powerful prince in the Qaraqorum region was probably transmitted to Europe and reached the Pope’s ear. This was probably why Pope John XXII wrote him a letter of recommendation on behalf of the new archbishop of Khanbaliq, whose route lay across his kingdom.

CONCLUSION

We have delved into the intricacies surrounding Pope John XXII’s 1333 letter to the “King of Corum,” which was entrusted to Nicolas, the new Archbishop of Khanbaliq, following the passing of his predecessor, John of Montecorvino. Scholars have put forth several hypotheses regarding the letter’s intended recipient, a king named “Sece (or Soco) de Chigista.”

Although the previous hypotheses were intriguing, they fall short both phonetically and historically and lack concrete evidence. Consequently, I propose a new hypothesis, suggesting that Corum refers to (Qara)qorum, the old capital of the Mongol Empire, and “Sece de” to Sechetü, a Chinggisid prince who held extensive power and dominion in northern Mongolia during the 1320s and 1330s.

My hypothesis stems from Nicolas’s probable eastward route, which we can infer from the list of letters he received from the pope. This list includes two letters addressed to leaders of the Armenian kingdom, a letter to Özbek Khan of the Jochi Ulus, a letter to the mysterious King of Corum, and finally, a letter to the great khan. Other sources reveal that Nicolas also visited Almaliq, the capital of the Chaghadai Ulus, departing just before the Christian massacre in 1339. Although a ruler of the Chaghadai Ulus could have potentially been the King of Corum, no evidence supports this claim. Therefore, we must look further east to uncover the identity and dominion of this enigmatic king.

After careful consideration, we have arrived at the conclusion that Qaraqorum fulfills the necessary criteria to be identified as Corum. Firstly, its strategic

⁴⁸Ibid.



location along the primary route across Eurasia during the fourteenth century is well documented by the accounts of travelers such as Carpini and Rubruck. Secondly, the presence of various Christian denominations, including Catholics, Nestorians, and Armenians, in Qaraqorum aligns with the pope's statement in the letter that the king treats Christians, both ancient and new, with kindness and gentleness. Finally, the name "Corum" is a perfect match for (Qara)qorum, the old imperial capital of the Mongol Empire. In China, the city was more commonly referred to as "Helin (Qorum)," which not only denotes the city but also a much larger region in northern Mongolia.

We also identified a Chinggisid prince named Sechetü or Chechetü, who is a strong contender for the "Sece de (Chigista)" mentioned in the letter. Although we do not have a clue to solve what "Chigista" is, "Sece de" corresponds well with Sechetü. This Sechetü was the great-grandson of Möngke Qa'an and was entrusted with full command of the northern frontier in 1322. He inherited his father's status as the leader of the Möngke Ulus, which centered around Qaraqorum and the Khangghai region, in 1324. Sechetü supported Qaishan's two sons and won the full confidence of the new qa'an, Tuq Temür, who elevated him to "Prince Tan." According to a Chinese record, he commanded an army of 48 *tümens* in Mongolia. Additionally, fragments of a stele discovered near the site of Erdeni Juu in Qaraqorum in 2007 suggest that he had considerable power and influence as Prince Tan, particularly in the restoration of the Shrine of The Three Emperors. Unfortunately, he later fell victim to the tyranny of Bayan and was killed in 1339.

In the twenties and thirties of the fourteenth century, Sechetü had reached the peak of his political and military power, particularly in the Qaraqorum region, which was commonly referred to as Qorum. Thus, it is not unlikely that when Pope John XXII sent Nicolas as the new archbishop to Khanbaliq, he provided him with a letter intended for the "King of Qorum" requesting his kind reception and support. If our hypothesis is correct, Nicolas likely journeyed towards Qaraqorum after departing from Almaliq before 1339. However, we have no records of his arrival or whereabouts thereafter, and thus his fate remains shrouded in mystery.

