

Central Eurasian Studies

Kubilai Khan's Square Script

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[Gyögry Kara](#)

In 1269 Emperor Kubilai issued a decree introducing a new writing system for his vast empire. His Tibetan high priest and statesman 'Phags-pa Blo-gros rgyal-mtshan created this script known by the Mongols as the Square Script, an alphabetical system based on Tibetan, Indian and Uygur traditions of writing. It has a syllabic orthography similar to the Indian systems, has free and bound graphemes, but is linear and vertical like the Uygur script. It was meant to offer an exact phonetic notation for Mongol, Turkic and Chinese. Its ornamental characters appear on seals, inscriptions, in manuscripts and printed books of the 13th and 14th centuries. Its monuments are important for historical, literary and linguistic research as well as for the study of writing systems. Its late form is used in Tibet as an ornamental script called *hor yig* 'Mongol script'.

The course offers the knowledge of the alphabet and its orthography, its history, an overview of its monuments, and reading and analyzing some of its Mongol, Chinese, Tibetan and Turkic written texts.

History of Emperor Kubilai's Square Script also known as 'Phags-pa script introduced by Kubilai's decree in 1269. History of research (Bobrovnikov, Pozdneev, Bonaparte, Poppe, Pelliot, Ramstedt, Aalto, Ligeti, Cai Meipiao, Juunast, Tömörtogoo, etc.). Kubilai's reasons to replace the Uygur script. The Tibetan Sa-skya high priest, scholar and statesman 'Phags-pa Blo-gros rgyal-mtshan's role in the Mongol court. The origins and nature of the writing system he created for the Mongol Empire. Its Mongol, Chinese and Tibetan names. Its Tibetan, Indian and Uygur components. Alphabetic script with syllabic orthography. Its vertical linearity; free and bound graphemes; phonemic and sub-phonemic notation; punctuation. Its significance for Mongol and Chinese phonetic history. Transliterations and transcriptions. 13th and 14th century epigraphical, manuscript and printed monuments in Mongol, Chinese, and Turkic. A late form (*Hor yig*) used as an ornamental script for Tibetan (seals, Reading and interpreting Square Script texts in Mongol, Chinese, Turkic and Tibetan.

Recommended readings:

N. Poppe, *The Mongolian Monuments of Phags-pa Script* (Wiesbaden 1972)

P. Michelove, *A Guide to Reading Mongolian Texts in the 'Phags-pa Script* (Bloomington: The Mongolia Society, [2004]).

G. Kara, *Books of the Mongolian Nomads. More than Eight Centuries of Writing Mongolian* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2005)