



The stele of Ghengis Khan



In 1818, G.I. Spasskii, a Russian scientist specializing in Siberian studies, published in the *Sibirskii vestnik* newspaper the first information about a stone with Oriental inscriptions that had been found in a factory in Nerchinsk (Eastern Siberia). This stone stele is the most ancient monument bearing an example of the Mongolian Uigarin script known as the *Ghengis Khan's stone script*. The inscription is dedicated to Esunge, the son of Ghengis Khan's brother Khasar, although it begins with the name of Ghengis Khan. The stele was discovered at the basin of the Kharkhiraa river, which is the left tributary of Urlengui river that flows into the Erdene (Trans Baykal).

In 1832 the stele was removed from Nerchinsk to St. Petersburg, and it is still in the Hermitage State Museum. There is no certainty about the monument's exact age, but scientists have come to the common opinion, based on the meaning of the text, that it dates from about 1226.

Recently, in June 1996, the Ministry of Mongolia's forum for the protection of historic and cultural heritage funded the production of a copy of the stone stele, which was then exhibited in the Mongolian Museum of National History.

The stele has great historic and linguistic value, and this is reflected by the inter-

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est of many scientists in carrying out various research and studies of the script. But it would be reductive to consider the monument important only because it contains the most ancient example of Uigarin Mongolian script. The meaning of the text also bears thorough investigation.

What event in the life of Khasar's son Esunge, known as an able marksman, led to the erection of the stone monument? This question draws the attention of many researchers.

One interpretation of the inscription could be: "during an assembly of Mongolian dignitaries, held by Ghengis Khan after his conquest of Startaul (East Turkestan), Esunge shot a target at a distance of 335 alds (536 m)". The text definitely tells us something about sports practices in Mongolia in this period. The quotation: "during an assembly of Mongolian dignitaries, held by Ghengis Khan after his conquest of Startaul...", shows that the Mongolians celebrated military triumphs by organizing traditional festivities (*naadam*) consisting of "three manly games" - wrestling, archery and horse racing - in which the most vigorous wrestlers, eminent marksmen, and fleet-footed horses participated. To celebrate the conquest of Startaul in East Turkestan, Ghengis

Khan organized a grand holiday including the traditional sporting competition. This celebration was remembered for the record set in marksmanship by Esunge, who "shot a target at a distance of 335 alds".

This event illustrates the strength, accuracy, sharp eye and physical prowess of the Mongolians who lived more than 700 years ago. One could even consider the inscription as historical proof of the outstanding archery skills, training methods and techniques which flourished in Mongolia at the time.

Converted to modern metrical units, Esunge's shot which hit a target at a distance of 335 alds produces an interesting length. The alds is an ancient Mongolian measure equal to the distance between a man's outstretched arms. This length is said to be the same as a man's (warrior's) height, so we may assume that one alds equalled 160 cm. This means that Esunge Mergen (the title given to him for his accuracy) hit a target from a distance of about 536 metres.

This was therefore a monumental event, especially considering that in modern archery it is generally acknowledged that hitting a target from 500 metres' distance, unless by accident, is impossible. The most famous Mongolian archers were successful in hitting such targets, and several historic documents

confirm the outstanding performances of archers who aimed at and hit 500-metre targets.

One example is given in the historical novel *Khokb sudar* by Injinasshi, a Mongolian philosopher, historian and writer. In chapter 12 of the 4th book, the historian describes a competition among all Mongolian civil military staff which took place in around 1194 or 1195: Dzulgetii, a 16-year-old from Dzurgen province, Gologoon baatar from Sonod province, Khuildar from Monguur province, and Subeedei baatar and Togtongo baatar from Djurchid province, each hit a target from a distance of 500 bows (1 bow = 1 metre) three times.

Therefore, Esunge's record of shooting a target at 335 alds wasn't just a case of luck according to Mongolian history; it was one of the main feats which the best soldiers were expected to perform, proving their excellence and accuracy. Hence, 536 metres was considered a feasible, realistic distance for Mongolian archers to obtain.

The contents of the Ghengis Khan script merit investigation, and many researches specialized in Mongolian studies have been interested in their meaning since the last century. In addition to its historic and linguistic significance, the stone stele explains in part the excellence of the Mongolian military and hence the reasons for the success of their 13th-century campaigns in China, Middle Asia, Europe, and elsewhere.

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