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THE COINAGE OF QARA KHITAY: A NEW EVIDENCE
(ON THE REIGN TITLE OF THE WESTERN LIAO EMPEROR YELÜ YILIE)

The dual (Chinese and Inner Asian) nature of the Qara Khitay Empire (Western Liao dynasty) is a well-known and thoroughly investigated fact. The cited duality was evident in all aspects of life of the Qara Khitay society – political, economical, social, cultural, etc. No exception in this regard is the numismatic aspect as well, although the very existence of intrinsic Qara Khitay coinage has been disputable until recently.

The problem of coin production and money circulation in the state of Western Liao still belongs to the least studied, first of all due to particular difficulties with singling the proper Qara Khitay coins out of the entire numismatic legacy of pre-Mongol Central Asia. For the moment being we know about a few coin issues undertaken in the Muslim (Qarakhanid) state, just most of those issues could be related to the Qara Khitays only on the basis of other sources witnessing that in the given years, mostly within the 2nd half of the 12th century, those towns or regions – in particular, Balkh and Tirmidh (modern Termez/Termiz) – were ruled by the Qara Khitay khans; however, the coins proper may not bear such indications at all – neither specific names nor any other obvious features (Fig.1); equally scarce are the respective publications on the topic [FEDOROV 2000; KOCNEV 2001; FEDOROV 2004; KOCNEV 2006]. Some coin types are supplied with impersonal term

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gür-khan and thus considered as related to the Qara Khitays [ALBUM 2011: p. 168, no. 3394] (Fig.2), while a certain Central Asian mintage seems to be

directly linked with that dynasty, namely the unique interregnum issue of broad silver-washed copper dirhams struck in 610 AH / 1213–14 CE at *al-Ūzjand* (modern Uzgend/Özgön, Kyrgyz part of Fergana/Farghana) with unusual Persian legend

خانان / خان عمرش بر / د هزار سال / تا ولایت گر / سنه سیر شو / د

“May the khan of khans live a thousand years until the starving country becomes sated” (Fig. 3). According to V. Nastich, who has first published this coins type and called it a «Starvation dirham» [NASTICH 2001], the title

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hānān hān, placed on the coins otherwise anonymous, could not be related to anyone else but the then Qara Khitay *gür-khan*, while the actual issue was undertaken by his formal vassal Küchlük the Naiman [BARTOLD 1963: p. 428–433; see also BARTHOLD 1968]. However, [LIN JUNYONG 2010] urges that the coins in question should belong to the last Qarakhanid who had allegedly survived after the terminal collapse of the whole dynasty, but in our opinion, such persistence is simply grounded on our opponent’s insufficient acquaintance with narrative and numismatic sources and literature on the topic. Finally, there exists a coinage of the Atabegs of Kirman, a dynasty of Qara Khitay origin (otherwise Qutlughkhanids; middle of 13th – early 14th cts.) [ALBUM 2011: p. 208, nos. 1935–1940]. In essence, the above mentioned facts, rather sparse indeed, are virtually all we know about the numismatic heritage of the Qara Khitay entity.

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As regards the Chinese coin shape (cast with a square aperture in the middle), until recently we had no reliable examples of such issues. One can come across sporadic mentions in the publications that the Qara Khitays used to cast coins of several various types (with different reign titles of Qarakhitay emperors), just it seems that nobody has seen such coins in reality. Naturally, the Chinese numismatic market would offer for sale the coins of almost all Western Liao reign titles, but virtually all of them are modern fakes, the fabricators of which, being familiar to some extent with the historiography of the subject, try to produce these fantasies imitating the coin style of the Liao dynasty. That these ‘ancient coins’ are abundant in China but absolutely absent from Central Asian markets, local ‘masters of all trades’ seemingly don’t care at all.

In November 2008 the authors received the information about an unusual coin of Chinese type unearthed near the Aq-Beshim site, Kyrgyzstan (Fig. 4, a). South-eastward of the site (the ancient city Suyab) is located an ancient residential area that was in the past inhabited by the Kidans (Qidan). Cash coins *kai-yuan tong-bao* of Tang and Northern Song dynasties are frequently found there. The mentioned coin was also found in this area. A preliminary reading of the legend was taken for *ji-xing yuan-bao* 績興元寶¹. Crude casting style and poor calligraphy witness that the coin hardly could originate from China, being rather a local production. The reign title 績興 *ji-xing* is unknown in Chinese historiography, so we may suggest that this item was not a normal coin but a coin-like charm (amulet) cast in Central Asia.

Almost two years later, in October 2010, we received a communication about one more coin found at the Qara-Jigach site (ancient Tarsakent), Kyrgyzstan (Fig. 4, b). Despite the lost (clipped?) part of the coin, the legend on it turned to be readable. Moreover, it helped to correct the reading of the legend on the first coin found at the Aq-Beshim site. It became clear that the legends of both coins should sound as *xu-xing yuan-bao* 續興元寶². However, the reign title *xu-xing* is equally unknown in the Chinese history.

Finally, in early April 2011 we received another communication from an independent source of information in Kyrgyzstan that in February of the same year one more coin – third in total with the same legend was found in a field some 0.8-1.0 km east of the central ruins of the ancient city of Navekat (Nawikath), now called Krasnaya Rechka (Fig. 4, c).

	Coin 1	Coin 2	Coin 3
Place and date of finding	Aq-Beshim November 2008	Qara-Jigach October 2010	Krasnaya Rechka February 2011
Weight, g	8.18	2.90 (broken)	7.72
Size, mm	27.2–28.6	24.0	23.63
Direction of legend reading			

Table 1. Comparison of coins with the legend *xu-xing yuan-bao*.

¹ 績 *ji* means 'a meritorious action', 'foundation of a dynasty'; 興 *xing* – 'thrive, prosper, flourish'; 元寶 *yuan-bao* is one of the 'standard names' of cash coins in China from 7th till 20th ct.

² 紹 *xu* – 'continue'; 'replenish'.

Based on the comparison of the three mentioned coins (Table 1), we can suggest that they do not belong to coin-like charms with monetary legends but are normal coins, just bearing an unknown reign title. The size of the specimens fits well to Chinese cash coins with value 1 and 2³. Fairly narrow range of finds within the Chu Valley (see Table 2), complete lack of mention of these coins in properly Chinese sources and numismatic publications, as well as deviant graphics of the legends logically lead to a tentative conclusion about the local origin of these coins.

Cast coins of the local production⁴ with Chinese legends are well known and published [KAMĪSEV 2002: pp. 31-37, 86-88]. They include imitations of Chinese cash coins of the Tang dynasty 開元通寶 *kai-yuan tong-bao* and 乾元重寶 *qian-yuan zhong-bao* issued during 621-762 CE. Their fabrication in the area of the Chu Valley continued even after 751 CE⁵ when the Chinese army was defeated in the Talas battle by the troops of Abbasid caliph [BOL'SAKOV 1980]. Most probably part of cash *qian-yuan* continued to flow from Eastern Turkestan where the Chinese garrisons were still stationed; otherwise it is impossible to explain the presence of local imitations of the coins with this reign title. The principal features characteristic for local issues are as follows:

1. Imitation coins were cast with deviations from standards approved in the mainland China. This means a reduced diameter and weight, rough casting manifested in guttered legends and unfinished inner and outer edges.

2. Imitations were cast exclusively basing on the Tang cash prototype, but they look like mintmasters were indifferent to the Chinese legends. It is confirmed, on the one hand, by the fact that imitations of Chinese coins continued to be cast after the withdrawal of the Chinese from the region, and on the other hand, by the fact that the legends on many coins are almost unreadable and can be deciphered only by outline. It is important to note that the cases of usage of original legends in Chinese by local mintmasters are not reported. The reason, obviously, lies not only in the aforementioned indifference of mintmasters towards the Chinese legends, but that the act of adopting of the reign title is an indispensable attribute of imperial China, so it was only a Chinese dynasty or a sinicized non-Chinese one that could

³ *Xiao-ping* (小平) and *zhe-er* (折二) respectively.

⁴ Here and further on in the article we mean only cast coins of Chinese type, i.e. 'cash' coins with square hole.

⁵ A.M. Kamyshev suggests that «the time of issue of local imitations can be limited by a long period from the first half of the 8th till the end of the 9th century» [KAMĪSEV 1973: p. 35].

«generate» a new coin legend. The discovered coins with the legend *xu-xing yuan-bao*, despite the hideous calligraphy, show rather high quality handling at the mint, their metric parameters cause no problems and, as it was shown above, meet the standards established for the coins of single and double value. It is clear that they do not fit in this group of local imitations, therefore they cannot be considered as issued during the period of the Tang dynasty.

However, no other issues of cash coins with Chinese legends were recorded in this region. A few imitations of coins of the 10th ct. *zhou-yuan tong-bao* 周元通寶 have been reported⁶, but those are rather an exception than the rule.

An interesting detail to the attribution of coins *xu-xing yuan-bao* is the formula *yuan-bao* in their legend. This formula first appeared in 759 CE when coins with the legends *de-yi yuan-bao* 得壹元寶 and *shun-tian yuan-bao* 順天元寶 were cast by a Tang dynasty rebel, Shi Siming. Coins of this type, as far as we know, were not reported among the finds in Semirechye, which is not surprising, since they are quite rare in China proper.

Next time *yuan-bao* appeared for a short while in the legend of coins *da-li yuan-bao* 大曆元寶, cast by Chinese garrisons stationed on the territory of Eastern Turkestan [WANG YONGSHENG 2007: pp. 45-48]. Findings of coins of this type originate from the same territory. Moreover, some quantity of such coins was encountered in Semirechye [KAMĪSEV 2002: pp. 88-89], but the question about the place of issue of the local imitations remains open. The exact date when the coins *da-li yuan-bao* began to be cast in Eastern Turkestan is unknown, but even if we assume that they were cast in the first year of the period *da-li*, the acquaintance of coin masters in Semirechye with the formula *yuan-bao* could not have taken place prior to 766 CE. However, as it was shown above, this did not prompt indeed the «invention» in Semirechye of the new coin legend containing the term *yuan-bao*.

The regular usage of the term *yuan-bao* in coin legends has begun in the period of Five Dynasties, reaching its peak during the Northern Song dynasty. It is also worth noting that the coins *zhe-er* started taking prominent part in the currency circulation in China from the second half of the Northern Song dynasty. Both above facts are additional arguments for a preliminary dating

⁶ The coins *zhou-yuan tong-bao* 周元通寶 were cast in 955 CE by Emperor Shi Zong 世宗 of the Later Zhou dynasty (period of Five Dynasties). This type of coins is notable for very high manufacturing quality, similar to that of the first issues of the coins *kai-yuan tong-bao* 開元通寶 in 621 CE. Yet the illustrations in [KAMĪSEV 2002, photoplate «Chinese coins on the Silk Road», No.11] definitely show low quality coins, most likely cast in private. It remains unclear whether they were produced *in situ* or were brought to Semirechye from Eastern Turkestan.

of the coins *xu-xing yuan-bao* found in the region not before the second half of the 11th ct.

By the late 10th century, the Qarakhanid state was established in Semirechye, where Islam was proclaimed an official religion. Money circulation of that period was supplied by the coins of Islamic types, so we shall not dwell on them.

For the next and actually the last time Semirechye fell into dependence on China (or more exactly, on the political realm of the «Chinese circle») as late as in the period of the Khitan dynasty, Western Liao (the Qara Khitay state). Thus we come to the conclusion that the cast coins *xu-xing yuan-bao* could be produced by some rulers of this dynasty. A very compact area, on which all known specimens were found, lies within the 50-km vicinity of the former capital of the Qara Khitay state, Balasaghun / Quz Ordu [PIKOV 1986].

What is really known about the cash coin issues in the Qara Khitay state? Wittfogél and Fêng, based on numismatic publications of Chinese scholars of the Qing dynasty, reported about the issue of Western Liao coins with legends *gan-tian yuan-bao* 感天元寶 and *kang-guo tong-bao* 康國通寶 [WITTFOGEL, FENG 1949: p.664]. This information was rehearsed by almost all authors, both Western and Eastern, addressing the issue of cast coins in Western Liao. The careful study of publications about the coin *gan-tian yuan-bao* 感天元寶 showed that it was a myth, the roots of which were stretching from the 12th century⁷. The coins with the legend *kang-guo tong-bao* 康國通寶, identified earlier as the issues of Yelü Dashi, the founder of the dynasty during the

⁷ The earliest of the Chinese numismatic works that have come down to our days, contains a notice of an unknown coin with the legend *tian-gan yuan-bao* 元寶天感 [QZ 1998]. Unfortunately, the original illustrations were once lost and only partially restored during the Ming Dynasty in 1603. It is obvious that not all the illustrations were made from original coins available to publishers; part of drawings was reconstructed according to the strength of imagination that the authors of the new edition could afford. The same fate befell the image of the coin *tian-gan yuan-bao* 元寶天感. Apparently, the illustration from this edition was copied later in numerous numismatic catalogues published in China and Japan in the 18–19th cts. Since its legend began to read in a different sequence – *gan-tian yuan-bao* 元寶感天, the coin itself was reattributed to Empress-Regent Gan Tian Hou 感天后 (1144–1150). However, none of the authors has noticed that Gan Tian Hou is a posthumous name of Empress Tabuyan 塔不煙, while the coin legend, as a rule, should contain the reign title (Tabuyan ruled under the *nianhao* ‘*xian-qing*’ 咸清). The Chinese numismatics does not know a single case when the temple name of a ruler was used in the coin legend, even written in reverse order. Thus, there is no reason to attribute the coin *tian-gan yuan-bao* 天感元寶 to Empress Tabuyan’s issues. In the 1940s, some Chinese coin collectors paid attention to this problem and suggested that this coin was a Vietnamese issue. However, one may come across the incorrect attributions in recent publications [WEI YUEWANG 1984: p.69].

period *kang-guo* 康國, are in fact a fantasy, because so far in the numismatic literature no reliable information has appeared about the real coins of this type; nor do they exist in museums or private collections. One can tell with confidence that the real cast coins of the Qara-Qhitay are virtually unknown⁸.

Now we may resume the survey of the coins *xu-xing yuan-bao*. It can be noted that the style of inscriptions reminds by its carelessness some coins of the Liao dynasty. For comparison, (Fig.5) shows the obverse of the coin *shou-chang yuan-bao* 壽昌元寶⁹. The emphasis may be placed on a similarity in the shift between left and right characters, a peculiar style of the right stroke with a 'hook' in the key 儿 of the character *yuan*, as well as features of the 'leg' strokes of the key 貝 in the character *bao*. Also stands out a peculiar style of writing of the character *xing* on coin #1 – this option can be found only on the coins of the Southern Song dynasty with the legend *shao-xing tong-bao* (Fig.6,a). The noted graphical peculiarities of the coin legends, however, are not that decisive, yet they serve as an additional argument in favor of the dating proposed by the authors.

So, on the one hand, coins *xu-xing yuan-bao* by all signs must not be dated earlier than 11th ct., but on the other hand, no information about such coins is available in or from China; again, on the one hand, the reign title in question is not fixed in the historiography of China, and on the other hand, it was only a Chinese or sinicized non-Chinese dynasty that could adopt the reign title. During the period under review, the only such dynasty in the region of Semirechye was Western Liao. Taking into account the above, including the topography of coin findings in the vicinity of Balasaghun, we dare confidently date the coins *xu-xing yuan-bao* by the period of the Qara Khitay state. Now we have to clarify what is the relation of the reign title *xu-xing* to the Western Liao dynasty.

⁸ In a book on the coins of dynasties Liao and Jin, recently published in China [LI WEI 2009], illustrations of cash coins are presented, covering all reign titles of the rulers of Western Liao. A quick viewing of images alone makes obvious that they are fakes made by unskilled hands – either entirely cast in molds or altered from the coins of Song and Ming dynasties. The author did not bother to attend to the fact that at the time when he was writing his book the numismatic community was unaware of the existence of a single genuine coin of the Western Liao. No importance for the author has also the fact that it would be but logical to hear first the information about these coins from the territory on which the Qara Khitay state was located, not from China proper where they simply had to be absent. Publications of fake coins of the Western Liao go on taking place in the numismatic periodicals, often with absolutely missing information on the origin of certain specimens [LI FENGQI 2011].

⁹ Cast by an Emperor of the Liao dynasty, Yelü Hongji 律洪基耶 (the temple name *Dao Zong* 道宗) during the period *shou-chang* 1095–1101 CE [ZHOU YASHU 2003: p.119]. About the reign title *shou-chang*, see below in the main text.

Of all the reign titles of the Western Liao, the authors' attention was attracted to the reign title *shao-xing* 紹興 (20.1.1151-25.1.1164 CE) of Emperor Yelü Yilie 耶律夷列. Exactly the same reign title was adopted by Gaozong, Emperor of the Southern Song dynasty (period *shao-xing* 31.1.1131-4.2.1163 CE). A lot of examples can be found in the history of Chinese dynasties when the same reign title was used by different rulers. However, the general practice was to follow to the rule of the uniqueness of this symbol of Emperor's power. In general, reign titles did not use to be repeated twice for different rulers, just as it is often the case, there is no rule without exception. A following Song dynastic source [GTL: Ch. 1, p. 5]¹⁰ describes exactly the case of avoiding reign titles used earlier:

“*Jian-long* 6th year¹¹ [Song] Tai-zu was talking about the replacement of the reign title, and [the Emperor] ordered to *zaixiang* to avoid using the reign titles of the past, – thus changed the reign title to *qian-de*. [However] after this [the Emperor], having seen in one of his concubines' internal chambers a mirror with inscription *qian-de* [carved] on its reverse side, asked for clarification by *xushi* Tao Gu, and Gu said: – This is the reign title of the self-appointed Shu.

Then they asked the concubine, – she turned out to be from Shu's *wan* subjects. After this [case] Tai-zu with even greater reverence began to treat the Confucian pundits, regretting that *zaixiang* has such a poor knowledge.”

It looks unlikely that an emperor of Western Liao would opt the reign title which had been used during about 20 years by emperor of the Southern Song dynasty, the more so that they had never been in friendly terms. It is a well-known fact that the history of the Liao Dynasty was compiled in a haste, and for this reason it contains many errors [XU ELINA QIAN 2005: p. 22]. The picture is compounded by almost complete absence of any significant epigraphic monuments found on the territory populated in the past by Qara Qidans. The three unearthed coins with the reign title *xu-xing* comprise a serious reason for the revision of available source data. Based on all foregoing information, we felt that only two explanations would be possible – namely either a mistake had crept into the source or the reign title had been deliberately modified. Taking into account that the basic meaning of both characters is almost the same (紹 – ‘to continue’, ‘to carry on’; 續 – ‘to continue’, ‘to replenish’), the most probable version seems to be that of a conscious

¹⁰ Our English translation of the quotation is based on the published Russian translation [ALIMOV 2009: p. 270].

¹¹ *Jian-long* 6th year is most probably a textual mistake, because *jian-long* reign title continued only 4 years, 960–963 CE

replacement of the character, which could be made e.g. due to the tradition of naming the taboo [CHEN YUAN 1997].

The explanation of such replacement is offered by [WITTFOGEL, FENG CHIA SHENG 1949: p.182]:

“Throughout the Liao Shih, the fifth reign title of Tao-tsung is written as *Shou-lung* 壽隆 except in 43, 9b where the title is rendered as *Shou-ch'ang* 壽昌. Since Shêng-tsung's Chinese name was Lung-hsü 隆緒, Tao-tsung would not, on account of the taboo, have used the first part of his grandfather's name for his reign title. We find that the reign title in question is rendered as *Shou-ch'ang* not only in the Liao inscriptions but also on the preserved Liao coins. This proves that Tao-tsung had not adopted *Shou-lung* but *Shou-ch'ang* as his reign title. The Liao Shih writes *Shou-lung* instead of *Shou-ch'ang* because during the time of Chin and Yüan the word *ch'ang* must have appeared in the name of a member of the Chin or Yüan house and was therefore a taboo. Hence the original reign title was *Shou-ch'ang* because of the taboo of the word *lung* during the Liao period, but was changed later to *Shou-lung* because of the taboo of the word *ch'ang*”.

The above example shows how the compilers of *Liao Shi* have replaced the character *chang* 昌 (‘prosperous’, ‘flourishing’) with its synonym *long* 隆 (‘grand’, ‘intense’, ‘prosperous’; ‘to swell’, ‘to bulge’). The same, in our opinion, could be done in the case of the reign title of Yelü Yilie, when the character *xu* 續 was replaced by a semantically cognate character *shao* 紹.

It is impossible thus far to state with confidence, when such replacement was made, but in *Liao Shi*, compiled in the middle of the 14th ct., the reign title is written as *shao-xing*. As is mentioned above, hardly any epigraphic relics have been preserved from the realm of Western Liao, so the cited replacement could simply have escaped the attention of historians until the recent discovery of coins with the legend *xu-xing yuan-bao*. Still this is naturally a mere hypothesis, and as such it needs to be confirmed someday by new finds of Chinese epigraphic monuments or otherwise. The earliest versions of *Liao Shi* are dated back to the late Yuan or the early Ming period. A detailed clarification of circumstances related to the supposed replacement of characters well deserves a separate study, being anyway beyond the scope of this article. It is important to stress once more that the indicated change in the reign title has remained unknown, and it is just the recent discovery of coins with the legend *xu-xing yuan-bao* that allows to look at the historical sources from a different viewpoint.

Ultimately, we may conclude the following:

1) The coins with the legend *xu-xing yuan-bao* are for the moment the first detected specimens of cash coins, which can be confidently attributed as issues of the Western Liao Dynasty. These cast coins could be fabricated during the reign of the Emperor Yelü Yilie alone.

2) The reign title *shao-xing* mentioned in the medieval sources should be corrected to the reign title *xu-xing*.

POSTSCRIPTUM

It was already after we had delivered our paper to the Assemani symposium in Rome that an information reached from Kyrgyzstan about the discovery of another coin with the legend *xu-xing yuan-bao* (Fig.7); its weight is 4.5 g and size 24.0 mm. The fundamental importance of this finding is that it was made on the site of Burana: firstly, it is reliably identified with Balasaghun, the capital of the Western Liao, and secondly, according to A.M. Kamyshev, “unlike Krasnaya Rechka and Aq-Beshim sites, there is no material from the early medieval period available at the Burana site. The ruins of Burana provide the material dated back to the 10-14th centuries” [KAMISEV 2002: p.66], which is a new serious argument in favor of the dating proposed by the authors. The calligraphy of this coin coincides completely with that of the specimen found in Qara-Jigach (Fig.6,b).

In this way, presently we dispose of four cash coin samples of the Western Liao dynasty *xu-xing yuan-bao*, unearthed in the area that once belonged to the Qara-Khitay state, representing two denominations (a single and a double value), and displaying three different calligraphic varieties of the Chinese legends.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. A bronze dirham of Qarakhanid Nasir al-Dunya wa'l-Din Malik Yaghan khan, Tirmidh, date missing (before 574 AH). *Image source - ZENO #76647.*

Fig. 2. A copper dirham of Qarakhanid Ibrahim b. [Muhammad] Arslan Khan (c. 1143–1153) with the title *gür-khan*. *Image source - ZENO #95386.*

Fig. 3. A “starvation” dirham (al-Ūzjand, 610/1213–14) with the title *khanan khan*.

Image source - ZENO #59269.

Fig. 4. Cash coins *xu-xing yuan-bao* 續興元寶 found on ancient sites of Kyrgyzstan:

- a) the Aq-Beshim site;
- b) the Qara-Jigach site;
- c) the Krasnaya Rechka site.

Fig. 5. Obverse side of the coin *shou-chang yuan-bao* 壽昌元寶, Liao dynasty. D=45.0 mm.

Fig. 6:

- a) The coin *shao-xing tong-bao* 紹興通寶, value 2, Southern Song dynasty. W=6.0 g, D=28.0 mm;
- b) The calligraphy of character *xing* 興 on the coins *xu-xing yuan-bao* (above) and *shao-xing tong-bao* (below).

Fig. 7. The coin *xu-xing yuan-bao* unearthed on the site of Burana.



Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

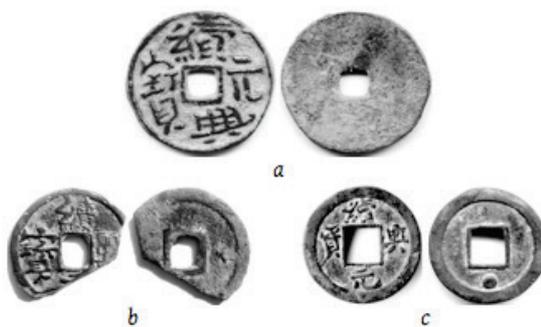


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

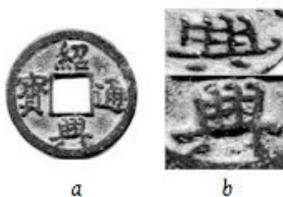


Fig. 6



Fig. 7