

ILTERİŞ KAGAN*

(681-92)

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I — THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Kök-Türk Kağanate had grown rapidly, and, within a few decades, between 545-80, extending its rule over the whole of Inner-Asia and the outskirts of eastern Europe.¹ The rapid development caused concern among neighbouring states. In these circumstances, the potential danger was discussed, in 581, at the Sui court of China.² One of the councillors pointed to a possible weakness of the Kök-Türk administration. Although a primate Kağan resided in the east, the rest of the vast territories had been factually divided between the members of the dynasty. The Chinese councillor observed already signs of discord, between these princes. "If" he said, "we succeed in flaring up their passions, they are certain to turn against each other".

The policy was put into practice, already in 582. The primate Kağan, whose name is reconstituted by Gumilev, as Er-beg Şad, İl-Külüg Şad-Bağa İşbara Kağan³ (580-87) had recently acceded. (The reconstitutions, even if open to discussions, have been preferred, for facility. The Chinese forms are given in the notes). One of the primate Kağan's privileges was the right to hoist the flag, surmounted by the golden mask of the totemic wolf.⁴ The Chinese emperor presented a similar flag to the ruler of the western region, Kara Çurin Türk Bayğu Tarduş Han⁵ (died 603).⁶ The two princes were thus brought into rivalry, and conflicts soon followed.

The policy of subversion had also cultural effects. Yañar Tölis İl-birdi⁷ Kağan (died 608), protected by China against his relatives, was wholeheartedly won to Chinese civilization and wished to live in China. He gave up the Turkish tradition of transhumance, between

* For footnotes see preceding article.

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hibernal fortified quarters and estival pastures. Settled in a Chinese palace, at the northern edge of the Great Wall, he even wished to discard the garments suitable for rider peoples, worn by Turks, in favour of Chinese garbs. He had wed two Chinese princesses.

Yaṅar's three sons who succeeded him had all, in turn, in accordance with the leviratic practice of the dynasty, raised their step-mother, the Chinese princess, to the rank of *katun* (head-consort). Yet none seem to have supported their father, in his contentions, or his pro-Chinese attitude.⁸ On the contrary, they strengthened the Kök-Türk armed forces, on the Chinese border. The third son, Bağatur Şad-Tuğ-bir Şad-Kat İl-ḥan Kağan (died 634),⁹ although favoured by the Chinese princess, above another brother, engaged military expeditions, against China. He had succeeded in penetrating Chinese territory, as far as a bridge, in the vicinity of the capital-city, but was dissuaded from further action, by the Chinese emperor's appeal (reminding him of a former peace-treaty).

The Chinese sources state that this Kağan neglected his relatives, relying on a Chinese and on other foreign councillors. The members of the dynasty were therefore discontented. The Kök-Türk clans, on the other hand, were said to suffer from prolonged wars and heavy taxes. Their cattle died extensively during the severe winter of 617 and food became scarce. The Chinese monarch attributed the misfortunes to the Kağan's irreligious attitude and his lack of respect for Turkish traditions. He said: "Affluence has ceased to prevail among the Kök-Türk". "Five suns have set and three moons have appeared simultaneously. A reddish mist covers the Kök-Türk pastures. The Kağan is not in awe of heaven and can engage in no meritorious actions." The Kağan was further accused of not offering sacrifices to the ancestral altar. He had ceased to incinerate the dead, in accordance with Turkish custom, and had adopted the Chinese way of burial. He had offended the gods and the spirits. "The doom of the Kök-Türk has come", omened the Chinese emperor.

The Kök-Türk epigraphic inscriptions explained differently the cause of their downfall:¹⁰

"The Chinese nation distributed countless, gold, silver, silk, and (embroidered) braids.¹¹ Their words were amiable, their gifts were pleasant. Their amiable words, their pleasant gifts attracted the

nations who staid aloof from them. But when they had drawn near, (the Chinese) began to remember their evil methods. Many Turkish nations, attracted by their amiable words, their pleasant gifts, have died". "The downfall of the Turkish state, founded by the Turkish nation, happened, because of the lack of order among the Turkish lords and the nation; because the Chinese people were wily and artful; . . . because younger and elder brothers were not in agreement; because there was a rift between the lords and the nation."

The *Ḳağan*, having apparently lost the support of the dynasty and perhaps of the people, was defeated and surrendered to the Chinese in 630. He nevertheless tried, through symbolic gestures, to affirm the continuity of the *Ḳağanate*.¹² He did not accept the titles and the estates proposed by the Chinese monarch, which would have implied a status of allegiance. He even refused to enter the palace reserved to him and ordered the erection of the Turkish cupola-tent. It was around the cupola-tent, as symbol of the universe, that the *Kök-Türk Ḳağans* were circumambulated, on the throne-carpet, on their accession. Together with his followers, the captive *Ḳağan* was said to weep, while chanting mournful songs, perhaps lamentations (*sığıt*) of epic character. He died soon after, in 634. Two of his retinue, one of whom had been his mother's bridal attendant and his own tutor, committed suicide, upon his death. Monuments were erected for them, within the *Ḳağan's* funerary temple's precincts.

The Turkish inscriptions described, in these terms, the "Fifty years" of interruption, in the history of the *Kök-Türk Ḳağanate*:¹³

"Thy son, worthy of the rank of a lord, became a slave of the Chinese nation. . . . Thy daughter, worthy of the rank of a lady, became a handmaiden. . . . During fifty years, the Turkish lords in China, forsook their Turkish names. Becoming vassals of the Chinese *Ḳağan*, they devoted to him their achievements and strength".

The Chinese sources¹⁴ equally note that thousands of Turkish dignitaries, together with their families, had settled in the capital. They were employed as court attendants, and in military service. The *Kök-Türk* clans were expatriated from their country and quartered within the Chinese wall. It was intended to use them in agricultural work. They were expected to mix with the local population. But the *Kök-Türk* clans did not forget their identity and uprisings

were frequent. The Turkish epigraphic inscriptions also outline the fidelity of the K k-T rk clans, to their own Kağanate¹⁶:

The Turkish common people said: "I was a nation with its own state. Where is now my state?"

The incessant uprisings obliged the Chinese to drive again the K k-T rk clans outside the Great Wall.¹⁶ But, in the meantime, the territories of the K k-T rk clans had been occupied by various turcophone and other tribes who opposed the return of the earlier population. A Kağan, nominated by the Chinese, had been rejected by the K k-T rk clans. The movement of liberation from China started, in 679. A second Kağan, although elected by the clans, was killed by his followers. A third Kağan, again elected by the K k-T rk, was caught by the Chinese and publicly executed, in their capital's eastern market.

It was in such circumstances that in 681, KutluĖ Beg, the future İlteriş Kağan (the Kağan who re-assembled the state),¹⁷ assumed the leadership of the K k-T rk struggle for liberation. KutluĖ was a distant relative of Kat İl-ħan, from a side-line, with *tudun* rank. His grandfather İtmiř Beg¹⁸ and his father Sıgun Beg¹⁹ had been among the administrators of the Y n-chung²⁰ area, at the northernmost border of China. İlteriş Kağan, as he was to be henceforward called, established himself at the peak of the Yin-shan range, called  oĖay-kuzy, in Turkish inscriptions.²¹ Kara-kum, mentioned in the same instance, appears in Chinese sources, as a town (Hei-shach'eng).²² It is pointed out, in this connection, that the K k-T rk had then already been adapted to sedentary life. They were soon to return to semi-nomadism, as it was better-suited to rapid retreats, necessitated by the attacks of massive Chinese forces. The Yin-shan, the traditional southern residence of the Hsiung-nu and of the K k-T rk, simultaneously indicated the frontier with China and enabled İlteriş Kağan to raid the enemy territory. The K k-T rk clans now gathered around İlteriş Kağan, whose strength increased progressively. Toņukuk, a member of the tribe next in dignity only to the dynasty (A-shi-te, in Chinese), had pretended to wish to fight İlteriş Kağan, in order to be allowed to go to the frontier line, to join him.²³ Toņukuk, whose wisdom was to become proverbial, became commander of the K k-T rk army, with the rank of Apa Tarkan. The struggle for liberation, called by the Chinese, the K k-T rk insurrection,

could not be checked. The punitive armies sent to the K k-T rk land were defeated, suffering considerable losses. The reigning empress of China was so vexed that she found solace in proclaiming an insulting title for İlteriŐ K gan. However, the development of an alliance between China and the tribes, who had settled in the K k-T rk territory, obliged the K k-T rk to fight their way to their northern residence, in a precipitate retreat. The K k-T rk, observed the Chinese, had gone northwards, beyond the Gobi desert.

The K k-T rk equally evoked these epic years, in their inscriptions.²⁴ Bilge K gan, son of İlteriŐ K gan, remembered also his mother, İl-bilge K tun, who apparently had taken part in the war of liberation. İl-bilge K tun, who after the death of İlteriŐ K gan, was to raise her younger son K l Tigin to heroic manhood, was compared by Bilge K gan, to the mother-goddess Umay. Tonukuk remarked that had it not been for Bilge K gan's and his own victory, the K k-T rk nation would have disappeared from the scene of history:

“If İlteriŐ K gan had not won . . . the state and the nation would have been annihilated”.

Bilge K gan expressed the same thought, in other words:

“So that the Turkish nation should not disappear, so that they should become a nation, Heaven seized, from the vertex, my father İlteriŐ K gan, my mother İl-Bilge K tun (and) raised them upwards. My father, the K gan, marched out with seventeen men. When the news of his outmarch were heard, those who were in the cities climbed up to the mountain; those on the mountains came down. They assembled as seventy men. Because Heaven gave strength, my father, the K gan's army were like wolves. . . . They became sevenhundred men and (İlteriŐ K gan) re-assembled the nation who had lost its state; the nation who had fallen to the status of handmaiden (and) slave; the nation who had lost the tradition of the Turks. . . . (İlteriŐ K gan) took part in fortyseven expeditions, fought twenty battles. He won back the (lost Turkish) tradition (and his soul) flew away”.

II — ILTERİS K GAN'S FUNERARY MONUMENT

The ruin now called Őivet-ulaan has recently been identified as İlteriŐ K gan's funerary monument.²⁵ The identification was

made possible through the resemblance with Köl Tigin's commemorative temple, with however some more archaic elements. Furthermore, the *tamğa* (seal) of the Second Kök-Türk dynasty, observed on the left frontpaws of the lion effigies, confirmed the identification.²⁶ This *tamğa*, apparently the pictogram of a yak, *kotuz* in Turkish, has been the subject of a former essay.²⁷

Şivet-Ulaan is situated in the steppes, between the two rivers, Selenge and Orkun, often mentioned in Turkish epigraphy, at the confluence of two other streams, now called Huni and Hanın-göl, on the northern bank of the latter (see map). The ruin rises on the southeastern slopes of a chain of hills, constituted by reddish composite rocks (a conglomeration of clay and sand). The foundations examined by Ramstedt showed that the monument had been built, within a rectangular sloping area of 40×100 ms, as a succession of terraces, with a temple of 35×35 ms. at the summit (figs. 1 and 2). The sanctuary was enclosed within a circumvallation of about 5m height, fortified with twelve towers. The temple's walls had been constructed with cobblestones, plastered with clay mortar and daubed with an earthen paint.

The excavations on the platforms brought to light nine anthropomorphic and eight zoomorphic sculpture (four lions, four rams). The heads of the statues had been lost, presumably during multiple transportations, with the exception of two, photographed by Ramstedt (figs 7 and 8). These two remaining heads are also now not mentioned, in recent accounts of the monument. A sculptured panel, which depicted the hunt of cervines, with unnatural avian beaks, is now seemingly, also lost (fig. 13).²⁸ The symbolism of this motif, connected with the belief that sacrificed animals were resurrected, in supernatural aspect, has been commented elsewhere. A stone jar was among the found objects (fig. 3). Ramstedt had seen the fragment of an inscription in runiform Turkish script, which, however, concerned an Uyğur Kağan. On the square platform at the monument's southern gate, a stele, in black volcanic rock ($9,4 \times 1,5$ m) had been erected (fig. 4). On the stele, various *tamğas* in irregular rows, had been seemingly drawn, in guise of signature, by the heads of clans, who attended the *yoğ*²⁹ (funeral cenemony) and later engraved.

The temple's architecture was in the usual style of the *ev-bark* (the dwelling built for the souls of Kök-Türk princes).³⁰ It has been

noted, in a previous study, that the Kök-Türk concepts on the residences destined to kings and deities were in eastern Asian tradition³¹. These cosmographic monuments represented world-dominion. The crowning edifice could be either an altar, in the shape of the cupolantent (fig. 5),³² or, as in the case of Köl Tigin's temple (fig. 6),³³ a Chinese laiosk. The square foundations of the temple, dedicated to İlderiş Kağan, indicate the latter alternative.

Eight of the statues (figs. 7, 8, 9) depict men, while one (fig. 10) is viewed as a feminine effigy. The masculine statues may have been those of the *sü eşi kezig*,³⁴ the phalanx of companions of arms, who served as sentry. These wore the *kur*,³⁵ the honorific military belt with metallic plaques, to which weapons were attached. They had sworn an oath of allegiance (*and*) which could include the decision to commit suicide, at the death of the superior. As in the case of the two who did so, at Kaat İl-ğan's decease, the monuments perhaps the statues (*bediz*)³⁶ of the faithful liege men were erected within the superior's funerary temple.³⁷ However, occurrences of suicide are very rarely noted in histories. The statues of the retinue must have been erected, independently of such extreme acts of devotion (the so-called *balbal*, representing enemies killed in battle, were not statues, but mere rocks). A peculiarity of Turkish grave statues, the cup, held at breast level, has been variously interpreted.³⁸ Among the Oğuz Turks, the warriors were buried with a cup in hand. The ceremony of the oath of allegiance included the symbols of the cup (and sword). A third explanation is suggested by an inscribed fragment, found in that same Hanın-göl valley, on which it was stated that "the servants (of the deceased) reach out food to him".³⁹ Ramstedt's photographs (figs. 7, 8) show that the effigies of İlderiş Kağan's retinue were in the realistic, even expressionist style of portraiture (*körk*).⁴⁰

Like the depiction of cervines (fig. 13), the ram effigies (fig. 11) appear as evocations of funerary sacrifices.⁴¹ They are witnesses of the artist's keen observation of nature.

Not so the lion depictions (fig. 12), as these beasts did not live in the same clime as the Kök-Türk and the artist had probably, rarely, if ever, seen one. Arslan, the leonine title of major Turkish kings⁴² seems to have been initiated by Taspar Kağan (572-81), when he adhered to Buddhism and adopted perhaps this Buddhist emblem.

The lion depictions, bearing the *tamğa* of the dynasty, which guard İteriş Kağan's temple, are stylistically closer to Indian prototypes, rather than the canine (Fo) Chinese ones.⁴³ In the course of their southern expansion, the K k-T rk had adopted the stratagem of launching droves of lions, on enemy armies.⁴⁴

Further excavations, at  ivet-ulaan, may reveal other works, perhaps, as in K l Tigin's temple, a statue of the Kağan and of the royal consort, in this case İl-bilge Katun. We Turkish students, who can only describe, from afar, the monuments of our early history, will endeavour to follow further, announced publications.