

The Yenisei Runic Inscriptions and the ‘Manas’ Epic

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Chinese chronicles mention the Qyrghyz people under their own name between 202-200 B.C. However only the persistent work of several generations of Russian archaeologists allows to reconstruct, at least to some extent, the earliest history of the Qyrghyz state and people, who dwelt in the upper Yenisei region, to study their culture, which reached a very high level by the standards of that time. Cattle-breeders and plowmen, warriors and builders, the Yenisei Qyrghyz took active part in the political and cultural life of Central Asia. But only a thousand and three hundred years ago the Qyrghyz began to speak to their descendants in their native language, which survived in numerous memorial runic inscriptions on stone steles scattered over the steppes and mountain valleys of South Siberia and North Mongolia. At present we know over two hundred inscriptions engraved on steles and rocks, carved on silver vessels and other utensils, though it is only a small part of what has once been written.

Time has not spared many of the inscriptions, but those which survived preserved to us the stories of heir heroes and episodes of their lives. Only few of the inscriptions contain historical data. Two of them were found in the Minusinsk basin near the lake of Altyn-köl (Golden Lake). The steles of the Golden Lake preserve the story of the Qyrghyz khan Bars-beg and his brother. Bars-beg's brother went to Tibet with an embassy to seek a military alliance against the Qagan of the Turks, whose growing power worried Bars-beg. Another ambassador, the prominent

military leader Chabysh Ton-tarkhan, was sent by Bars-beg to Kara-khan (Uibat I inscription). Whom the Qyrghyz knew under the name of Kara-khan is made clear by another inscription, carved on the back of a stone monument from the river Tes valley. The text in the name of the memoriant tells that he was a türgesh and ichrek, i.e. a person empowered to act for Kara-khan. The khans of the Kara-türgesh dynasty, whose official title was 'the qagans of the (people) of ten arrows' are mentioned in the Yenisei inscriptions under the name of Kara-khans, so Chabysh Ton-tarkhan was sent to look for allies on the banks of the Chu river in Suyab.

The runic monuments of Mongolia, especially the inscription of Tonyuquq, tell that the diplomatic activities of Bars-beg did not remain unnoticed by the Turkish qagan. Although Bars-beg was married to a niece of the ruling Turkish qagan Qapagan, it did not stop the violent raid of the Turks across the Sayan mountains in winter of 710-711. Bars-beg was killed in this uneven combat, as well as his brother, who has not returned from Tibet. Both were eulogized by their congeners in the epitaphs on the steles of the Golden lake. Chabysh Ton-tarkhan also perished abroad.

One more Yenisei epitaph tells of the same events (Kyzyl Chyraa I). Its hero, whose name is lost, was killed in battle against the army of Beg-chor. But Beg-chor was the 'male (warrior's) name' (*er aty*) of Qapagan-qagan. Chinese dynastic chronicles mention him under that very name - Mo-ch'uo, i.e. Beg-chor. In the last line of the inscription the memoriant is mourning not over his own death, but the death of his elder brother, the khan of the Qyrghyz, i.e. Bars-beg. Even the age of Bars-beg is mentioned - he was forty two. Let us remember that the epitaph of Bars-beg (Altyn-köl I) tells of four 'noble brothers' who were 'separated by Erklig', the god of the underworld.

Other inscriptions of historical value belong to a different epoch, when the Qyrghyz state flourished and dominated the whole Central Asia. A hundred and thirty years had passed after the death of Bars-beg and a hundred years after the fall of the Turkish qaganate, when the Qyrghyz state, now firmly established, crashed the Uighur qaganate, the former

predominant power of the steppes, in 840. The Qyrghyz empire at that time extended from the Angara and the Baikal to the Altai and Semirechye, from Syberia to the Great Wall of China. Till recent time the only known monument of that imperial epoch (840-918) was the Suja inscription discovered at the beginning of the 20th century by Finnish scholar G. Ramstedt in North Mongolia. It was inscribed by the order of Boila Qutlug-yargan 'the son of Qyrghyz', who took part in the victory over the Uighurs in 840. The first line of the inscription mentions Yaylaqar-khan, whom the investigators first took for the khan of the Qyrghyz and the prototype of Manas. Later it was found that the Yaylqars was the Uighur khan family. The Sujine inscription tells of their defeat and exile. Qutlug-yargan moreover tells about his part in the victory over the Yaylaqar dynasty.

One more Yenisei inscription tells about the defeat and destruction of the Uighur qaganate (Uibat IV). Its hero, Bars Tirig-beq 'was like a wild boar on the field of battle when the land of the powerful Uighur khan was conquered'. Thus he is praised in his epitaph, and then a sorrowful lamentation follows - the late hero has left his retinue 'of forty men-warriors'.

The Qyrghyz did not stop after the conquest of North and North-West Mongolia, the principal territory of the Uighurs. Their power spread to the Altai - one of the inscriptions (Ujuk-Oorzak III) mentions the Qyrghyz ruler of the new yurt - the jabgu of the Altai. Most interesting evidence is preserved in the inscription from the Begre river, the right tributary of the Bij-khem. Its hero, mentioned not under his own name but by his title - the ichreq, i.e. the officer of Tör-apa, tells in his epitaph: 'in my fifteen I went against the Chinese khan. Due to my valour as a man-warrior, my heroism, I captured gold and silver, camels and wives!' The memoriant, who died when he was 67, laments over the separation with his wife, whom he took when he was 15, i.e. at the time of his campaign in China. This narrative could have been left an isolated one and incomprehensible, if it were not for other ones, not directly connected with the story of the Chinese campaign.

In 1960 in Tuva, at the site of Kherbis Baary a previously unknown Qyrghyz stele with a runic inscription was discovered. It was twice published by A.M. Shcherbak. The inscription contains an epitaph to a noble warrior named Kulug Iige. His greatest exploit was a campaign against the Tatars: 'in my twenty seven, for the sake of my country, I went against the Toquz-Tatars'. In 1976 L.R. Kyzlasov discovered one more stele with a short inscription by the Uibat river (Uibat IX). It mentions 'the hostile el of the Tatars' and the tribute paid by them.

Where and when the Yenisei Qyrghyz could wage successful wars against the Tatars? The Tatars are mentioned in the Uighur and Qyrghyz runic inscriptions in 732-760 in connection with different episodes of the rebellions and wars of the 7th-8th centuries. In all cases the Tatars figure as enemies or rebellious subjects first of the Turkic and then of the Uighur qaganates, as immediate or eventual allies of the Qyrghyz, with whom they had no common border but had common enemies.

Finally, in connection with the events of 842, when the Qyrghyz were firmly established in North Mongolia, the Tatars are first mentioned in a Chinese chronicle, but this time, which is important, as allies of the last Uighur qagan and the enemies of the Qyrghyz. And they are mentioned in connection with the Qyrghyz raid to Tien Shan. The matter is that the main direction taken by the defeated and retreating Uighurs was the Gansu-Tarim direction, the northern Tien Shan branch of the Great Silk Route. There, in the upper course of the Etsin-gol river and in the Tarim basin survived separate western enclaves of the Uighur empire. There the Uighurs expected to find a refuge and to restore their state. But not later than the early 9th century one of the tribal groups of the Tatars has settled there. At least their leader, Tatar apa teqin, is mentioned among local dignitaries in the Pehlevi Manichaean treatise 'Mahr-namag' (825). By the time when the Qyrghyz pursued the Uighurs retreating to the west, the political situation there became rather complicated. Numerous local domains, among them city-states of the Tarim basin, were ruled either by the Tibetans, who, however, lost much of their former authority, or by Chinese governors formally subject to the Tang Empire, or by local chiefs, among them the leader of the Tatars. To some extent the situation

is made clear due to surviving letters and reports by a prominent Chinese official Li Te-yu, who maintained relations with the Qyrghys suddenly appearing by the frontiers of the Tang Empire. This correspondence has been studied by Qyrghiz sinologist G.I. Suprunenko.

In 842 in the frontier fortress T'ien-te Li Te-yu negotiated with a Qyrghyz embassy headed by 'general' T'apu Ho-tsu. From this Qyrghyz dignitary Li Deyui learned about his campaign to the west, of the subjugation of the 'old Uighur land' in Kan-su, the conquest of Kucha, Beshbalyq and the Tatars. The subjugation of the Tatars is a special topic. It is the first and the only passage which mentions a military conflict between the Qyrghyz and the Tatars somewhere in Kan-su or East Turkestan, the outcome of which was the subjugation of the Tatars. Now the context of the Kherbis Baary inscription mentioning a campaign against the Tatars and of the Begre inscription telling about the Chinese campaign becomes clear. Next year, in 843, T'apu Ho-tsu became the head the first Qyrghyz embassy to the imperial court of China.

In 1975, in North-West Mongolia, in the Tes valley I discovered a runic rock inscription. It contains a name which after the revision of the inscription in 1989 I surely read as Töpek Alp Sol. The name is repeated twice, in an abbreviated version with tamgas and in a full version with no tamgas:

- 1) alp sol (tamgas)
- 2) töpek alp sol bitidim 'I, Töpek Alp Sol, wrote this'

The fact that in the version with family tamgas the first part of the name is abbreviated testifies that töpek was more likely a family name than a personal one; the presence of the tamgas makes it excessive.

Due to the consultation of S.E. Yahontov it was established that the Chinese inscription of the general's name T'apu Ho-tsu was a corrupted version of the Turkic name Töpük (Töpek) Alp Sol.

The context of the inscription dating to the middle of the 9th century shows that it marked the center of a new estate owned by a Qyrghyz dignitary, military commander and diplomat, which became his yurt after the conquest of North-West Mongolia including some part of the Altai. Thus the evidence from the report of a Chinese diplomat and from the

narratives by the participants of the Qyrghyz campaign to the south agree even in minor detail.

Now we can be sure that the only 'great campaign' of the Qyrghyz to China took part only in 842-843, at the down of the ' Qyrghyz Empire', and that it was headed by Alp Sol, Qyrghyz military commander, whose estates (yurt) were in Tuva and the Altai. Many centuries have passed, but that campaign was not forgotten - it became mixed with many other events, its hero received a new name among the Altai Qyrghyz - Alp Manash. When in the 16th century the Qyrghyz people migrated from the Altai to Tien Shan, the story of the great campaign and its principal hero Manas became transformed in their new land into heroic folk epic, which embraced the memory of the numerous other events of the Qyrghyz history. Now we can clearly see that thousand year old thread of memory which starts from runic rock inscriptions of the Yenisei Qyrghyz and brilliantly develops in the works of the Tien Shan manaschi.

Notes

1. Klyashtornyj S.G. "Steles of the Golden Lake. To the Dating of the Yenisei Runic inscriptions", *Turcologica*. Leningrad, 1976, pp. 258-267 (in Russian); Citation of the Yenisei inscriptions: Malov S.E. The Yenisei Texts of the Turks. Texts and Translations. Moscow-Leningrad, 1959; Vasil'ev D.D. Corpus of the Turkish Runic Monuments of the Yenisei Basin. Leningrad, 1983 (in Russian).
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4. Klyashtornyj S.G. The Ninth Inscription from Uibat. // *Sovetskaya Turkologiya*, Baku, 1987, No. 1, pp. 33-36 (in Russian).
5. Suprunenko G.P. Documents on the Relations between China and the Yenisei Qyrghyz. // *Izvestiya Akademii nauk Kirgizskoj SSR, seriya obschestvennyh nauk*, t. I, fasc. 1, Frunze, 1963 (in Russian); Suprunenko G.P. Some Sources on the Ancient History of the Qyrghyz People. // *Istoriya i kul'tura Kitaya*, Moscow, 1974 (in Russian).
6. Klyashtornyj S.G. Rock Runic Inscriptions of Mongolia. I. Tes, Gurvalzhin-ula, Hangyta-had, Hen tei. // *Turkologicheskij sbornik*, 1975, Moscow, 1978, pp. 151-159 (in Russian).