

The runic inscription on a golden bracteat from Mongolia

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In 1983 the Mongolian archaeologist D. Navaan investigated a funeral complex near the Uvgunt mountain on the left bank of the Tola river. (Bulgan ajmak, Mongolia). In the course of excavations a somewhat unexpected discovery was made: a small golden disc with an *en buste* human image and an inscription was encountered.

In 1987 D. Navaan and B. Sumjabaator published a book dealing with the Uvgunt discovery entitled "A unique monument of the Proto-Mongolian language and script".¹ In the introductory part of the book D. Navaan draws the conclusion that "the burial investigated undoubtedly dates back to the Hun Period". The part dealing with the attribution and interpretation of the inscription is written by B. Sumjabaator. According to his interpretation, the inscription should be translated as "shan-yü tamga" or "the Khaan tamga"; it is written in the Hun (Proto-Mongolian) language.

In 1987 N. Tsultem published a colour photograph of the golden disc from the Uvgunt tomb without explanatory notes.²

The seven characters of the runic inscription bordering with the same chisel a the other elements of the composition.

Otherwise, if the inscription had been chiselled later, after the completion of the image, the lock and the pearl immediately adjoining the upper part of

1 Д. Наваан, Б. Сумъябатор. Овог монгол хэл, бичгийн чучаг дурсгал. Улаанбаатар. 1987.

2 Н. Цултэм. Декоративно-прикладное искусство Монголии. Улаанбаатар. 1987.

the inscription would have been inevitably deformed. (It should be mentioned, though, that without a closer inspection of the presently inaccessible original this observation remains somewhat speculative.) On the drawing the original margin around the inscription is widened for the better reproduction of all the compositional elements.

The uppermost of the five characters placed above the right shoulder of the portrayal and literally forced between the lock and the pearl consists of two unconnected parts (NN 1, 2), i.e. an upper mark, resembling a circumflex, a so-called "cap", and a lower dot. This character is reversed so that it forms a right angle with the shoulder. The rest of the characters of the first line are parallel to the shoulder with their bottoms pointing towards the head of the image. Two characters above the left shoulder, whose tops point to the bottom of the characters of the first line, form the second row. The characters are fairly neatly embossed on the golden plate and their attribution cannot be an arduous task: all of them represent the graphemes of ancient Turkic runic script (7th - 11th A.D.).

There are the following characters in the first line: a) the initial bipartite character (NN 1, 2) is an allograph of the graphem denoting a velar t (t^1). In ancient Uighur runic texts this character consists of two or three unconnected elements, i.e. a "cap", an unclosed loop and, occasionally, a dot inside the loop.³ In our case but two components are preserved, namely the "cap" and the dot below it. The wings of the cap are lightly curved, thus showing a trait characteristic exclusively of palaeographic variants dating from the late 8th-early 9th cc.; b) specific traits of the following character (N 3), which is an allograph of the a - graphem, is that it is mirrored, as well as the fact that both upper and lower strokes attached to the vertical are connected with it at right angle, thus being horizontally positioned. The latter trait is proper only to later Uighur script (9th - 10 th A.D.); c) characters NN 4, 5+7 r (r^2) also show an elaboration of writing typical of later Uighur script d) character N 6 denotes palatalised b (b^3); it is slightly inclined to the left, its bottom rests against the

3 S. G. Klyashtornyj. "The Tes inscription of the Uighur Bögü Qaghan" *AOH* 39 (1985)1, p.156.

pearl; e) the writing of the character N 7 -g is similar to the allographs from runic texts of the late 8th c.

The fact that the characters belong to distinct phonological rows (“*t*” being velarised, “*ŋ*” neutral and “*r*” palatalised) serves as a natural word-divider for the first line. Hence we distinguish three clusters of characters, namely *taŋ r* (first line), *bg* (second line).⁴ Thus, the likely varieties of transcription and the subsequent translation can be substantiated. The first sequence of characters (i.e. the first word) can be interpreted in two ways: a) *taŋ* “dawn”. This word occurs as a component of proper names in connection with high titles. Cf., for instance, the name of the author of the letter “Pelliot Ou. 4”: *Taŋ Qus Erdem Öge*; b) *Taŋ* the homonym of the former: “amazing, exceptional, rare”. As a personal epithet it occurs, for instance, in an ancient Uighur Buddhist text: *taŋ aryŋ qyzlar--* “amazingly pure maidens”.⁵

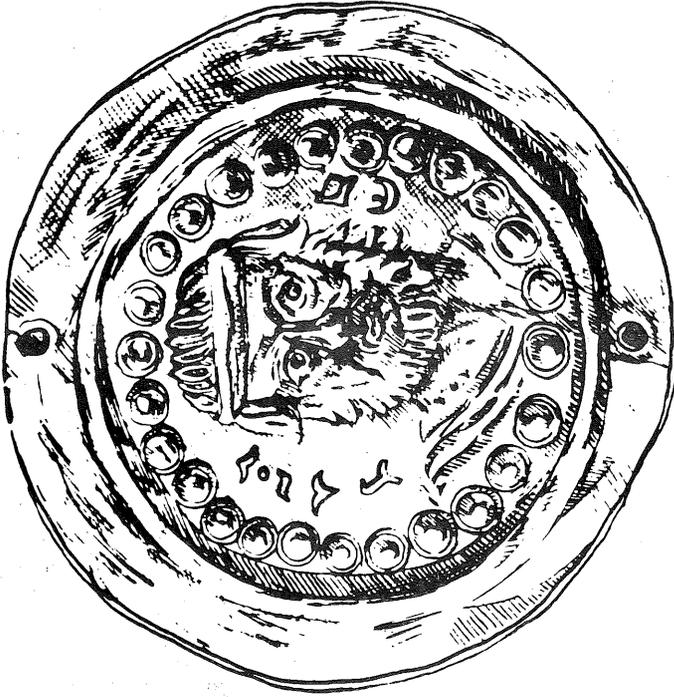
Er beg literally means “he-man + prince”, “warrior prince”. An inverted form of the same word-combination repeatedly occurs in ancient Uighur monuments of both runic and cursive scripts from Dunhuang and Turfan.⁵ In the proper name in question, *Taŋ Er Beg*, both variants of interpretation of the initial word are possible.

Thus, the inscription can with good reasons be interpreted either as a proper name or as a vague metaphorical denomination of man depicted on the golden plate in a prescribed, imitative manner, though the image is not devoid of individual traits.

Given all the elements encountered in the Uvgunt burial, its dating should range from 8th to 9th cc. A.D.

4 James Hamilton, *Manuscrits ouïgours du IX^e-X^e siècle de Touen-houang*. Tom I. Fondation Singer-Polignac, Paris 1986, 143-145.

5 J. Hamilton. *Manuscrits ouïgours de Touen-houang. Le Conte boudhique du bon et du mauvais prince en version ouïgoure*. Paris 1971, p. 30.



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