

IMPERIAL BACKGROUND OF ANCIENT TURKIC CIVILIZATION

*Serghei Klyashtornyj**

Keywords: empire, Turkic civilization, kagan, central Asia.

Cuvinte cheie: imperiu, civilizație türccică, kagan, Asia centrală.

The factor of imperial tradition in the history of formation of ancient Turkic civilization has still to be thoroughly explored. Meanwhile, all signs of civilization and, first of all, developed written language and related historical memory proved to be a direct consequence of the creation of the Turkic Empire and its state-successors in the steppe zone (6–10 centuries).

The dynamics of the origin of the nomad-initiated Central Asian Empires seems to be simple and transparent. Suffice it to say that an initial aggressive impulse was directed not so much to the expansion of pasture areas (anomalous case) as to the subordination of countries with different economic and cultural structures. Note that steppe tribes were consolidated under the dominion of one chief, one clan and one dynasty. After conquering the competing tribes, the conqueror aspired to subdue countries with multiple types of economic activity and, as a rule, countries with developed statehood. This dependence manifested itself either in the form of direct submission of the conquered countries to the new dynasty or payment of an appropriate contribution. At this stage, the nomad-led state was transformed into Empire¹.

Initially, a tendency toward integration into an imperial-type association of poly-lingual and poly-ethnic mass of cattle-breeding tribes was accounted for by military potential of Yue Chi tribal union. Note the unions' dominion or military might was indisputable on the expanse from Eastern Tien Shan

* Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Department of Central and South Asian Studies, Sankt Petersburg, Russia, e-mail: klyashtor2004@mail.ru.

¹ Подробнее см.: Кляшторный С.Г., *Стенные империи древних кочевников Центральной Азии*, in *Этнокультурное взаимодействие в Евразии. Программа фундаментальных исследований Президиума Российской Академии наук*, Под ред. А.Н. Деревянко, В.И. Молодина, В.А. Тишкова. Кн. 1., Moskva, Наука, 2006, p. 192–195.

and Mountain Altai to Ordos. However, in the 3–2 centuries B.C., following prolonged and bloody wars for supremacy over steppe, military priorities went over to their north-eastern neighbors and former tributaries — Hsiung-nu (Huns) tribes.

During the Hsiung-nu epoch, simple entities of social and quasi-political structure, generically titled in the scientific literature as “chieftainship”, evolved, to our thinking, into the state we define as “early state”, and conformably to place and time, as force- or threat of force-caused “archaic Empire” composed of early state formations and chieftaincies. Grown out of the military democracy of Jun tribes of the 6–4 centuries B.C., the Hun power fought to death with neighboring tribes and Chinese kingdoms to survive.

As viewed by T.J. Barfield (1992), it would be wrong to undervalue importance of tribal aristocracy and term them the Hun power as “imperial confederacy”. Barfield holds that no state structures were required for internal development of nomadic society and that these (state structures) did come as a result of external factor’s effect to make neighboring states paying subsidies or opening border markets through the use military force².

Instead, the state of Huns, in E.I. Kychanov’s opinion, came into existence, like other nomad states, as a result of internal processes in the very nomadic society, including property and class stratification to shape a state with all the necessary attributes³. At any rate, J. Fletcher is right in holding that “a tendency toward Empire” in the early state formation of the Central Asian nomads became apparent, first of all, in ever increasing absolutization of khan’s power and the development of strictly militarized structure of their administrative and political formations⁴.

In this respect, it would be appropriate to retrace functional statue-prescribed deeds of kagan as specified in the texts of ancient Turkic runic monuments.

First of all, kagan was guarantor of the well-being of “eternal EI” (i.e. Empire) with loyalty of begs and the “entire people” to him as indispensable condition of their existence. Kagan’s name is an eponym (“in EI of Ilterish-kagan”; “in EI Bilge–kagan”) and a synonym (“land of Kapagan-kagan”) of

² Barfield T.J., *The Perilous Frontier. Nomadic Empires and China*, Cambridge Mass., 1992, p. 45–60.

³ Кычанов Е.И., *Кочевые государства от гуннов до маньчжуров*, Moskva, 1997, p. 36–37.

⁴ Fletcher J., *The Mongols: ecological and social perspectives*, in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 46, 1986, no. 1, p. 21.

the name of the state. It is the prosperity of “Turkic El” that urges kagan “to acquire” (i.e. conquer) to the point of exhaustion; he cannot sleep by nights and stand idle by days. It is the will of kagan to decide on war and peace, battle or alliance — all these for well-being of “Turkic El”. Military and diplomatic prerogatives of kagan are absolute but his duties are not confined to these. Inscriptions specify actions of kagan and identify his place within the system of administration. Thus, kagan is entitled to a) settle and transfer conquered tribes, i.e. indicate their territory over again; b) settle Turks on the conquered territory and distribute lands between tribes; c) gather, settle and accommodate Turks in “land of Otjuken” i.e. the aboriginal territory of Turks; d) grant a part of tribal lands in his own country to a group of immigrants (for instance, Sogdians). The gravest crime against kagan and “eternal El” was the moving-on to new places, i.e. succession from kagan’s power. For this reason, monuments are full of warnings and threats against those willing to move to new territories, hence, the major duty of kagan was “to gather and accommodate” people on a subordinated territory, i.e. creation of political system, system of subordination.

As for social and political structures of Turkic El, it should be noted that the Turkic tribal alliance (*türk kara kamag bodun*) consisted of tribes (*bod*) and families (*ogush*) to form *el* as political entity. Tribal organization (*bodun*) and military-administrative organization (*el*) supplemented each other and thus accounted for compactness and durability of social ties. As a runic monument said, khan “maintained el and led bodun”. He performed functions of the head of this own tribal alliance (people) as senior in the genealogical hierarchy to act as military leader whose responsibility was to conquer other tribes and countries and make them pay tributes and taxes.

Note that khan relied on the tribal aristocracy — begs. Turkic kagan appealed to his audience with the so-called manifests (“listen to me attentively!” — Bilge-kagan demanded). They singled out two estates: nobility and people. A stereotype of address sounded like *türk begler bodun* (“Turkic begs and people”). Monuments of Uigur epoch strictly set off nobility and people: *atlygh* (“distinguished”) against *igil kara bodun* (“commoners”). Begs were aristocrats by blood and origin, with their particular status, incontestable and sanctified by tradition. The elite of aristocracy by blood in the Turkic el was the clan of Ashina; in the state of Uigurs — clan of Yaglakar. Together with other noble clans whose hierarchy was generally recognized, they constituted the most privileged estate. Arising from them was the supreme imperial

aristocracy which ruled over el — the so-called *ayguchi* (“counselors”), *apa tarkan* (“supreme army commanders”) and nine “great *buyuruks*” (three “external” and six “internal”) as unit of El administration or other military-administrative heads of the state⁵.

Kagan and his entourage’s mission were to take care of well-being of their fellow-tribesmen. All inscriptions pertaining to kagans and their associates insist that it was kagan and his relatives only who were able “to feed people”. Extant fragments of Bugut inscription repeats this formula thrice. It says that Muhan-kagan (553–572) “fed people to their heart’s content”. Bilge-kagan permanently reminds that he “made clothes for naked people” “fed hungry people” “enriched poor people”. It was Bilge-khan who contributed to “the welfare of the Turkic people”. For the prosperity of “the Turkic people” he and his younger brother Kül-tegin “worked indefatigably day and night”. Bilge Tonjukuk, *ayguchi* of three kagans, mentions “incessant efforts of Ilterish-kagan and him personally to contribute to the prosperity of the Turkic people. He concludes as saying: “If kagan were idler, the people would be distraught with grief!”

Despite an obvious predominance of military aspirations, some other motifs become apparent in the political programs of the rulers of the Turkic el. In particular, they aspired to establish symbiotic ties with other civilizations and spiritual values. Taspar (572–581), the fourth Turkic Kagan, is credited to have created a new Buddhist *sangha*, i.e. adoption and dissemination of Buddhism in the Turkic nomadic environment; suffice it to remember a Sanskrit inscription on Bugut stele authored by Indian missionary Chinagupta. Note that Chinagupta and his disciples lived at court of Taspar and persuaded him to adopt a new belief. To much greater degree than mere sermons of the Indian monk, Taspar tended to change his views in an effort to get spiritually communicated with the universal Empire created by his grandfather and father. It was fierce internecine war and related disintegration of the country that discontinued the conversion⁶. In the 720^s, following a victorious war

⁵ Подробнее см.: Кляшторный С.Г., *Формы социальной зависимости в государствах кочевников Центральной Азии (конец I тыс. до н.э. — I тыс. н.э.)*, in *Рабство в странах Востока в средние века*, Москва, Наука, 1986, p. 217–228; Klyashtornyj S.G., *Customary Law the ancient Turkic states of Central Asia: the legal documents and practical regulations*, in *Central Asian Law and Historical Overview*, Topeka, University of Kansas, 2004, p. 13–39.

⁶ Klyashtornyj S.G., Livshic V.A., *The Sogdian inscription of Bugul revised*, in *AOASH*,

against China that solved the problem of southern caravans, i.e. Chinese contribution to peace in the northern border, Bilge-kagan (716–734) sharply changed a political line of his father and uncle — Kapagan-kagan (692–716). In his *apologia pro vita sua* inscribed on the posthumous stele of his younger brother, Bilge-kagan wrote: “I have linked my life and the life of my people with that of Tabgach people!”

It was the change of faith that accounted for the change of Bilge’s political line: the point was about Buddhism so widely spread in China in the reviewed period. However, the kaganat’s elite gave an utterly hostile reception to the Bilge’s pro-Chinese policy, so that he had to renounce his idea.

Meanwhile, forty years passed, the Turkic dynasty was replaced by the Uigur dynasty. Founder of the latter, Eletmish Bilge-kagan (747–759) focused on a new direction of imperial expansion toward oasis kingdoms’ of Eastern Turkistan⁷. Begju-kagan (759–779), son of Eletmish, succeeded in converting his people into Manichaeism. He made no secret of the fact that his choice came as a result of collusion with state-towns of Tarim basin headed by Sogdian Manichaeic congregations.

The experience of adoption and dissemination of alien faith was not the only way to develop a universal imperial ideology. Recent studies into religious-mythological stratum of the ancient Turkic culture revealed system identities in the remote regions, such as North Mongolia, Caucasus and Danubian Madara.

One of the inscriptions of Madara sanctuary refers to the supreme deity of pre-Bulgarians revered with ings by “khan and commander” Omurtag. This deity’s name is Tangra. A researcher deals with the world of the oldest religion of Central Asian nomads, the world of Orkhon Turks. Still, terminological likeness in the names of supreme deities is not enough to draw categorical conclusion on their propinquity. For lack of facts of Danubian Bulgars of the First Bulgarian kingdom, pre-Bulgarian pantheon remains unidentified. For this reason, it is essential to look at tribes of pre-Bulgaria period. Meanwhile, a source far from Danube and Central Asia provides unexpected and detailed information about subject. In particular, there is a text in “The History of Albanians” by Moses Kalankatuiskiy (10 century) titled “The Life of Bishop

XXVI, 1972, fasc. 1, p. 69–102.

⁷ Подробнее см.: Кляшторный С.Г., *Памятники древнетюркской рунической письменности и этнокультурная история Центральной Азии*, Sank Petersburg, 2006, p.309–319.

Israel” head of the Albanian Christian mission which visited in 682 “the country of Huns” in the mountain valley of Dagestan. As far back as in the 6 century a group of Turkic-language Hun-Bulgarian tribes succeeded in creating a sustainable state structure called “Kingdom of Huns” by Ananiy Shirakatsi in the 7 century. The author of the “Life.....” Albanian clerical, broke into abuse in describing “devilish delusions and evil deeds” of idolaters plunged, as he puts it, “into dirty pagan religion”. It was these exposures that helped obtain valuable data on pantheon, rites and custom of pre-Bulgarian tribes. Supreme deity of pantheon is Tengri-khan. There are also other deities, including the one of Land-Water (Orkhon Jer-Sub); woman’s deity of fertility, which the Albanian author, not alien to the classicism, termed Aphrodite (Orkhan Umay); “certain path deities” (ancient Turkic Jol-Tengri). As is seen, the Hun-Bulgarian pantheon of the 7 century concurs with pantheon of runic texts of Mongolia and Eastern Turkistan.

In considering an indubitable identity between Hun-Bulgarian and old Turkic pantheons, as well as the period of migration of pre-Bulgarian tribes (tribal super alliance of Oghurs) which abandoned their Central Asian pre-home not later than 5 century, it be would appropriate to assert that a complex religious-mythological system which we term as “ancient Turkic” had shaped before the mid-I Millennium A.D. During the Turkic kaganat, this system went through essential transformation: politicized imperial cult of kagan couple “born in Heavens and granted by Heavens”, cult of kagan and his senior wife in the capacity of “heavenly couple” — Tengri and Umay, patrons of dynasty. Along with “sacred cave of forefathers”, with its annual rituals and offerings, there arose temples of kagans-predecessors, particularly, the temple of Bumyn (6 century), founder of the Empire. It was prayers in this temple and “consultations” with the spirit of deified kagan-predecessors that urged Taspar to adopt important state decisions and demonstrate his will as kagan-founder.

Thus, analysis of the runic monuments and other sources made it possible to address the problem of formation of social-cultural and ideological views that challenged the ancient Turkic statehood inside and outside the Central Asian habitable globe. The formation of Turkic El gave impetus to new forms of traditional culture with its qualitatively different forms of being and new means of communication, including sedentarization and urbanization of a part of the population; erection of towns in place of steppe prince’s headquarters; religious quests and, finally, as culmination — written language which ranged from lithographed steles to manuscripts

to manifest itself in the rich and multiform literary traditions of the 8–13 centuries.

Recognizing this, one can conclude that the ancient Turkic civilization of the Central Asia was a system which included, together with archaic and conservative elements, progressive and mobile structures that accounted for comparatively high, momentary though, dynamism of its development. This civilization was inseparable from or, rather, genetically linked with Turkic EI, the first Eurasian Empire founded by nomadic tribes of the Central Asia.

FACTORUL IMPERIAL LA VECHILE CIVILIZAȚII TÜRÇICE

Rezumat

Tradiția factorului imperial în istoria formării vechilor civilizații türçice nu a fost încă evidențiată în totalitate. Triburile stepei își consolidau puterea sub conducerea unui șef, a unui clan sau a unei dinastii, încercând apoi să își extindă autoritatea asupra altor teritorii. În epoca Hsiung-nu aceste triburi evoluează spre tipologia statală, o așa numită confederație imperială. În vechea lume türçică un rol esențial îi revenea kaganului, văzut drept garant al statalității. În afara aspectelor militare în programul celor care guvernau conglomeratul politic (EI) türçic și-au făcut loc și considerente de natură spirituală care au contribuit la dezvoltarea ideii imperiale. Afirmarea acestei viziuni imperiale a marcat cultura tradițională a stepelor și a condus la un nou tip de civilizație marcată de sedentarizare, urbanizare și de apariția culturii scrise.