

MAN AND THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY
IN TURKISH CENTRAL ASIA
DURING THE EIGHTH CENTURY

The most ancient Turkish texts known to us at the present day consist of inscriptions carved onto tombstones, which are to be found in Central Asia, in territories, where, from the fifth century of the Christian era, vast confederations of Turkish tribes, comprising nomad shepherds and soldiers, had formed powerful States, which, strongly national in character, promoted the development of a truly original culture.

Although in constant relationship (of a political, diplomatic, military and commercial nature) with the Chinese world, the Iranian world, and even the Byzantine West, these Turkish states of Central Asia preserved their own economic, social and religious traditions until the end of the eighth century, on the whole with great fidelity. Among these religious traditions funeral rites played a fundamental role. A particularly important requirement of these funeral rites was the recital of a public eulogy of the deceased person, couched in set forms, with the

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aim, in the case of a warrior of some importance, of immortalizing his glory.

The introduction of an alphabet, derived from Iranian elements and specially adapted to their language, supplied the Turks with a means of reinforcing and immortalizing this oral funeral eulogy, by complementing it with an inscription carved on "eternal stone" (*bengü taş*, ancient Turkish name for a funerary stele).

These carved epitaphs, of which, at the present moment, more than a hundred of varying length, ranging from a few words to a long well-composed text, have been recorded and recopied, are, in fact, the oldest testimony of the Turkish language and thought. The more archaic, laconic and unadorned, seem to date from the seventh century. The more recent appear to date from the year 1000 or thereabouts. But the most important group of inscriptions, the most reliable in date and historical interpretation, due mainly to cross-checking with foreign sources of the same period (Chinese in particular) belong, with certainty, to the eighth century of the Christian era and are to be found in the territory of present-day Mongolia. Among the major documents which this group contains, the epitaphs of the great warlord and statesman, Tonyoukouk, (on two steles, erected about 725, near the river Tola, not far from Ulan Bator), and of Prince Köl-Tegin, who died in 731, and of his elder brother, the Emperor Bilgä-Kagan (son-in-law of Tonyoukouk), who died in 734, may be mentioned; these two last-mentioned monuments, which are to be found near the upper course of the river Orkhon, a tributary on the right hand side of the Selenga, are well-known under the name of *Inscriptions of the Orkhon* (1 and 2).

The ancient eighth century Turkish inscriptions of Mongolia, and in particular these three inscriptions, possess a very rich and well-interpreted historical content. That is the reason why we are taking them as the basis for this study.

By way of comparison, we shall also occasionally make reference to a large group of epitaphs, known as the *Inscriptions of the Yenisei*, also in the ancient Turkish language, briefer and without dates, but, without doubt, originating from a period bordering on that of the previous group. These inscriptions are

to be found more to the North-West, in the upper-basin of the great Siberian river, the Yenisei, in the territory of the present-day Soviet Republics of the Khakass and of Tuva. It is believed that the larger part of these monuments were left by the ancient Kirghiz who then lived in these regions.

In order that this all too brief account shall not become confused, we shall have to leave aside similar ancient Turkish epigraphic texts scattered throughout other regions of Central Asia (in particular much further to the West, in the valley of the Talas).

The first observation that we are led to make, when examining the Turkish inscriptions of Central Asia, which are the most ancient Turkish texts containing historical information known to us, is that in them history appears spontaneously as the natural development of the funeral rite.

One of the essential functions of this rite is to maintain a certain ideal life for the dead hero and to preserve, upon the termination of his earthly life, the ties that bind him to his social group. In this respect the funeral eulogy (particularly if it is immortalized by a text carved in stone) is considered to be extremely effective: it maintains in existence the name, the renown and the memory of the hero; by recalling his family and tribal associations and the role that he played in society, it also preserves his integration within his social group. Thus a double danger is avoided: that the dear departed be completely wiped out; or that, once the harmonious relationship that bound him to his earthly society is broken, he may become, in the other world, either indifferent or, worse still, hostile to this society. The preservation on the part of the dead person of a certain existence and of his social rank, the safeguarding of the members of his group who are still alive, these two aims are believed to have been effectively attained by the funeral eulogy and, even more so, by the epitaph carved on the "eternal stone."

That is why it is important that, in the more detailed epitaph not merely the important deeds (and above all the noble deeds) of the earthly life of the hero be recalled but also the fundamental elements of his social rank, of his actions within the group. Therefore the history of the individual in funeral epi-

graphy will of necessity become integrated into the history of his society. Such an integration is particularly notable in the three great Turkish inscriptions of Mongolia which we have previously mentioned. Thus, far from being simple personal biographies, more or less anecdotal in character, they are true historical syntheses, representing the dead person at every important moment of his life, within his social environment, whose detailed description retains all the attention of the composer of the text. It is even quite frequent that the description of the details of the social background assume greater proportions than the account of the personal life of the hero.

Thus, the epitaph of Tonyoukouk (where, as in most of the ancient Turkish funerary inscriptions, it is the dead man who is supposed to be speaking) commences with these phrases: "I, the Sage, Tonyoukouk, was born during the period of Chinese domination. The Turkish people were subject to the Chinese." It can be seen that here the political context, the subjection of the Turks and the Chinese protectorate are considered essential circumstances of the hero's birth rather than, for example, his family context: in no place are his father or mother mentioned. And the inscription continues, not with the narration of the personal life of Tonyoukouk during his childhood and adolescence, but with that of the political events which occurred during this period of his existence: the first mass revolt of the Turks against the Chinese, crushed through lack of discipline, then the setting-up of Turkish "maquis" for a war of independence in which the hero will play an important role.

In the same way in the epitaph of the Emperor Bilgä-Kagan, the childhood and the youth of the deceased person are not related (with the exception of a few brief references), but a detailed and coherent account of the political and dynastic vicissitudes of the corresponding period is to be found. The deeds and exploits of Bilgä-Kagan (as, also, those of Köl-Tegin, his brother, in the latter's epitaph) are only related in as far as they have a bearing on social life, on the lot of the State and of the Turkish people: military campaigns, political tendencies, tribal organization, measures to promote the economic prosperity and the national strength of the Turks' diplomacy, acts of State of a religious character. Under these conditions, as the individual,

and in particular, the Leader was always considered as being closely integrated into the social and national whole, the composition of the epitaph of a leading personality, as it forms part of a funeral rite with religious aims in view, necessarily requires a historical awareness, the work of a historian who will keep in mind the need for truth, relevance and logical cohesion. This is why, setting out with the funeral eulogy of one man in view, the ancient Turkish inscriptions of Central Asia (the most important at least) tend to lead to a historical synthesis of the whole period of his life.

The recalling of a man upon the occasion of his funeral leads therefore to a history of his age, which to a large extent outweighs the attention given to the individual. On the other hand, history is conceived in terms of a human life-span. The field of vision of that authentic historian, the composer of the epitaphs is, according to the logical process of the ritual, limited in practice to the duration of the hero's earthly existence. In general, the narration of events starts with the hero's birth and ends with a description, brief or detailed, of his funeral. But this last element can easily be left out, as is the case with the *Inscription of Tonyoukouk*. On the other hand, mention is sometimes made, though very rarely, of periods precedent to the birth of the hero, but this reference is then very brief and very hazy, such as the "Genesis" taken from the *Inscriptions of the Orkhon* (1 and 2) which claims to refer back to the beginning of the world:

"When, on high, the blue Heaven, and, below, the brown Earth were formed, between the two the Humans were born. Over the Humans my ancestors, Boumyn-Kagan and Istemi-Kagan reigned. While reigning, they took into their charge and formed the Empire and the law of the Turkish people."

This passage represents the greatest effort ever made by the composers of the ancient Turkish inscriptions of Central Asia to go back as far as possible into time. Now, in the text carved in 732, the most ancient precise historical facts to be noted refer to the Turkish Emperors, Boumyn and Istemi, of the sixth century of the Christian era, who were already believed to have been contemporaries of the first men...

The inability of this form of history, originating in the

funeral rite, to cover a vast period of time can easily be understood. The recent nature of the introduction of writing into this civilization explains also the fact that the memory of events that go back too far into the past can not be retained.

Limited, by principle, to the framework of a human life, the historical narrations contained in ancient Turkish epitaphs up to the eighth century are also based on a chronology, relative to the dead hero alone. The various periods of his life (sometimes vague, usually dated) serve as measuring rods for marking the progress of time.

The first in date (circa 725) of the three great inscriptions of Mongolia which we have mentioned, that of Tonyoukouk, begins its narration as we have seen with the birth of the hero. After this it follows an order evidently chronological but without any specification regarding his age. Moreover Tonyoukouk states at the end of his account: "Now I am old." The author of this text is therefore but little concerned with chronology, although he gives evidence, in other respects, of certain intellectual qualities: clarity, logic, and concern for the development and the construction of his account.

On the other hand, the two *Inscriptions of the Orkhon*, carved shortly afterwards, in 732 and 735, the epitaphs of Köl-Tegin and of Bilgä-Kagan contain a detailed chronology based on the ages of the two heroes. We may quote, as an example, the following passages:

"When my father, the Kagan (= Emperor = Great Khan) flew off, my younger brother Köl-Tegin remained orphan in his seventh year—in his sixteenth year the following are his achievements for the Empire and the States of my uncle the Kagan:—In his twenty-first year, we fought against the Sengün (= General) Chacha"—etc. (*Orkhon* 1, Epitaph of Köl-Tegin).

"In my seventeenth year"—it is Bilgä-Kagan who is speaking—"I made an expedition against the Tangout—In my eighteenth year I made an expedition against the Sogdians—In my twenty-second year I made an expedition against the Chinese—In my twenty-sixth year, the Chik united with the Kirghizi became our enemies"—etc. (*Orkhon* 2, Epitaph of Bilgä-Kagan).

There is ample evidence of this same chronological system,

calculated according to the age of the deceased person, in the group of *Inscriptions of the Yenisei*, which are very "primitive" however in their technique. In particular his age at the time of his death is very frequently mentioned. In a society, where this type of calculation is the custom, this represents the equivalent of our indication of the date of a person's death. For purposes of symmetry, some of these texts indicate, after a certain fashion, the "date of birth" of the deceased person, following the same system, by making him declare: "I was born during the tenth moon" (counting that of his conception as the first). This statement, which might appear very naive to us, is merely the consequence of a chronological system of purely relative definition based on the life-cycle of the individual.

These few facts show clearly how, in a civilization where, however, he is profoundly integrated within the social group, it is man, the individual, who serves as a measure for history.

The inconvenience of a chronology relative to each human being did not fail to make itself felt among the ancient Turkish users of this system, who occasionally felt the need to remedy the situation by making a parallel use of other systems. Among these, one of the simplest, which also retained the principle of man as the measuring scale of time, consisted in choosing, within the social group, a privileged being, the Sovereign, who could serve as an objective historical point of reference. Following this system, a supplementary dating of events according to the age or even the year of reign of the Kagan was possible. In this way, several episodes in the life of Köl-Tegin have been dated, in this epitaph, by reference to the age of the Emperor, his brother, Bilgä-Kagan.

Moreover, under the growing influence of the Chinese civilization, the Turks of the eighth century, in order to note certain dates of exceptional importance (death of the hero, his funeral, the termination of the inscription), will begin to make use of an entirely objective calendar, defined no longer according to a human but to an astronomical reference, that of the Twelve Animals, a simplified adaptation of the official Chinese calendar. A decisive step shall then have been taken towards a scientific chronology. In the following centuries, particularly in the ninth and tenth, during the period of the Ouigur Sovereigns, the use

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of this calendar shall prevail in all documents of a historical nature including the epitaphs.

The chronology of the Twelve Animals raises complex problems which can not be set forth here. We shall merely indicate that it is a luni-solar system, which divides the year (solar, as a rule) into twelve lunations and groups twelve consecutive years, each one classified by the name of a symbolic animal (with all the astronomical implications that this involves) into cycles, which repeat themselves indefinitely.

“Having accomplished all these things, in the year of the Dog, the tenth moon, the twenty-sixth day, my father the Kagan, flew away and departed. In the year of the Pig, the fifth moon, the twenty-seventh day, I authorized the funeral ceremonies—.” (The two above-mentioned dates correspond respectively to 25 November 734 and to 22 June 735, in the Calendar of the Christian era, Julian style.)

But in the eighth-century Turkish inscriptions of Central Asia, such objective chronological specifications are rare. The most widely used procedure is always that of counting the age of the deceased person.

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Of course, the very principle which determines their creation deprives the historical accounts contained in these epitaphs, limited to the life of one man and measured to his scale, of the breadth and the chronological precision which our modern conceptions of history require. To compensate for this, however, it assures to a large extent their veracity and their realism.

The public and religious nature of these epigraphic texts, carved in order to satisfy the requirements of the funeral rites and set forth on steles which everyone would be able to see, excluded all possibility of insincerity. In fact, in order to guarantee their religious efficacy and to make sure that they preserve an authentic existence for the deceased person in the other world and maintain solid his ties with his social group, it is necessary that they conform to the truth, that they be not blemished by error or falsehoods, and that they reflect to the utmost possible extent the truth of events that have occurred. Any distortion of

the facts would bring about a change in the character of the deceased person, prejudicial to his survival, or liable to provoke his wrath against the living. It would also be condemned by popular incredulity, as it refers to events that have remained in the memories of his contemporaries and the disaffection resulting from this would bring about the risk of compromising the preservation of social ties with the dead person.

The importance attached to the correctness of the epitaph must have been very great, and in two cases at least, those of Tonyoukouk and Bilgä-Kagan, it may be noted, the person involved, while still alive, himself prepared the essential details of the text that was to be carved upon his tomb in order to avoid any errors. It seems highly probable, in the case of the *Inscription of Tonyoukouk* that the whole text is the composition of the deceased person, a fact which leads to the curious consequence that his old age is recalled but not his death. However in the epitaph of Bilgä-Kagan, composed mainly by himself, his son completed the text with certain details clearly separate from the rest. In both cases Tonyoukouk and Bilgä-Kagan express themselves directly in the first person singular. Numerous epitaphs of the same period are composed in the same manner. More rarely it is a close parent of the deceased person who addresses the public, as is the case with Bilgä-Kagan in the epitaph of his younger brother Köl-Tegin.

In any case, veracity seems to be the fundamental law of these ritual texts. Upon several occasions a suggestion of eulogistic embellishment is to be noted, which never leads however to contradictions of the truth and evident precautions are taken in this respect. For example, when Bilgä-Kagan refers to the extreme limits of his raids, he is strongly inclined to extend them, in speech, to the "ends of the earth," which, for him, were represented by the Pacific Ocean and the mountains of Tibet: but as in reality he has merely approached these ideal boundaries, he resists the temptation and writes, as if with regret:

"Forwards (= to the East), I conducted a campaign in the plain of Shantung; it is only by little that I failed to reach the Ocean. To the right (= to the South) I conducted campaigns as far as the nine Ersin: it is only by little that I failed to reach Tibet."

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When, in spite of everything, he gives way to a moment of boasting, he does it in such general terms that his statements can not be challenged.

"I have formed the people of the four corners of the world, I have made those who possess heads prostrate themselves before me and those who have knees kneel down before me. By a mandate from Heaven above and from Earth below, together with my people, I have achieved such successes as eye has never seen nor ear ever heard." (It may be noted that in the very middle of this piece of boasting he does not forget to mention his people united with him as creative forces of his success, showing that he has not lost sense of realities nor that of social ties.)

Disagreeable truths are not passed over. As well as this, from time to time, euphemisms may be noted. But often the style is without pretence, even brutal. This is how Bilgä-Kagan recalls to the minds of his people the revolts and the tribal secessions that led to the civil war during which his uncle and predecessor perished:

"Reflect! Against your Kagan who guided you thanks to your obedience, against your good Empire, which had achieved its independence, it is you, yourself, who erred; it is you who introduced evil. Did armoured men come from some place to scatter you or to drive you away...? Did lancers come from somewhere, to deport and chase you? People of the Sacred Forest of Ötüken, it is you yourselves who went away! You went away as far as one can go. In the lands where you went off to,—and you deserved it—your blood streamed like water, your bones were strewn over the ground in mountains: your youths, of the race of lords, became slaves; your noble daughters servant. Because you did not know, because of your wickedness my uncle the Kagan flew off and left us..." (It is only in the last phrase out of respect for the Kagan's memory that the euphemism "to fly off and leave" for "to die" appears; this Emperor had been beheaded as we know from the Chinese Annals.)

This sincerity in the reporting of facts and of their interpretation is accompanied by a spontaneity of sentiments which is one of the most remarkable qualities of this epigraphic literature.

Thus, old Tonyoukouk, at the end of a life filled with military glory, does not hide the fact that certain of his military successes were achieved by disobeying the central power, represented by the Kagan of those days, father of the reigning sovereign, Bilgä-Kagan, and he refers to this latter, his son-in-law, with great condescension.

As for Bilgä-Kagan, he does not hesitate, at the very moment when he is ally (and, in fact, the vassal) of the Chinese Emperor, to attack violently the Chinese civilization which he accuses of weakening the warlike spirit of the Turks; and he openly refers to his treaty with China as being dictated by simple considerations of material interest, at the same time vaunting a nationalism full of pride.

"There has never been anything superior to the forest of Ötüken. The land ruled over by the Empire has (always) been the Forest of Ötüken. While dwelling in this territory I have made arrangements with the Chinese people; in this way they give gold, silver, brocades, velvet without restriction."

And this same Bilgä-Kagan, while pointing out the immensity of his power which extends "to the four corners of the world," mentions his uneasiness about the future which the turbulent spirit of his people and of his Beys causes him.

"You, oh Beys and Turkish people, listen to me! How, if you are obedient, you shall preserve the Empire, I have carved here. And how, by straying, you shall perish, I have carved here. All the words that I have to address you I have carved in the Eternal Stone; know and obey! Then, Turkish people and Beys, you, Beys, who at this moment are obedient, will you by chance go astray?"

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This manifest sincerity and spontaneity, which give to these texts a profound historical and documentary value, are not, however much it might be considered necessary, tests of impartiality. The modern conceptions of historical objectivity and impartiality are completely foreign to these men, for whom the only truth is their own; they never even ask themselves whether ways of life or thought other than their own have any *de facto* or *de jure* justification.

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For them the only existence worthy of a man is that of the Turkish nomad shepherd or warrior, the only conceivable social structure, that of tribes in a strong military hierarchy, confederated under the leadership of a Kagan, an absolute Sovereign designated by Heaven itself, and this Heaven, Tengi, the highest divinity of the ancient Turkish pantheon, which even tends to eclipse all the others, which inspires and supports the Turkish Kagan, assures the victory of the Turkish armies, the immortality of the Turkish people, and its hegemony over all its neighbours. The Heavenly mandates and the cosmic order require the Turks' obedience to the Kagan and that of the other people to the Turks. This obedience can not be altered unless the Cosmic order itself be momentarily disturbed:

"The people of the Nine-Oghouz were my own people. Because Heaven and Earth were in discord, it became my enemy" (*Epitaph of Köl-Tegin*).

"Unless Heaven above collapsed and Earth below sank into the void, who, oh Turkish people, would have been able to destroy your Empire and your States?" (*Inscriptions of the Orkhon* 1 and 2).

The political doctrine which emerges from the eighth-century Turkish inscriptions of Mongolia is, therefore, after a certain fashion, a national monarchy based on divine right. The universe like the tribe is conceived hierarchically; over the mass of the peoples of the "four corners of the world," there reigns the privileged group of federated Turkish tribes, dominated in its turn by the imperial clan, at the head of which the Kagan master of the Universe, appointed by Heaven, is enthroned. Each Turkish tribe has its slaves of both sexes, prisoners of war and of raids; above them, there are the popular classes, the "obscure masses," as the Inscriptions call them, ruled by an aristocracy of military chiefs and of rich graziers, organized into a hierarchy and obedient to a Bey, himself vassal of the Kagan.

The epigraphic texts express clearly certain preoccupations of a conservative nature; all political, social and religious changes, all violations of ancestral customs, in whatever field it be, are considered evil. Now, in Central Asia, in the eighth century, among the Turks as among their neighbours, the economic and cultural influence of China (not to speak of its influence in the

strictly political sense, through the mediation of certain tribal chiefs) made itself felt more and more. In the eyes of leaders who were profoundly conservative such as Tonyoukouk of Bilgä-Kagan, this represented a danger which the latter denounced upon numerous occasions even though he was the ally of the Chinese emperor at the time.

"The Chinese people have words as smooth as milk and soft silks. With their smooth words and their soft silks they seduced people from afar off, drawing them nearer. When these have settled down close to them, they then begin to think according to the evil doctrines..." (*Inscriptions of the Orkhon* 1 and 2).

The Turkish emperor also puts his subjects on guard against the temptations of a sedentary life, of agricultural life in the plains, and beseeches them to continue their life of nomads and of caravan leaders, with the mountainous zone of the Sacred Forest as their rallying point:

"Oh Turkish people, it will be your death, if you say: Let us settle down to the right (= to the South), not in the forest of Chogay but in the plain, of Turkish people, that will be your death! But if, dwelling in the land of Ötüken, you send out caravans and convoys, you shall never know the slightest misery. If you dwell in the forest of Ötüken, you will remain in possession of an eternal Empire" (*Inscriptions of the Orkhon* 1 and 2).

These passages indicate clearly how, in the eighth century, animated by their conservative passion, the great Turkish chiefs of Central Asia became political doctrinaires, judging historical events according to their own vision of the world and of society, and willingly offering advice and warnings of a didactic nature.

These dogmatic preoccupations, of which no trace exists in the earlier or more "primitive" texts, illustrate accurately the fear of the traditional ruling classes, confronted with the rapid evolution of ideas, the consequence of ever closer contacts with the intellectually and technically more advanced civilization of neighbouring China.

This evolution, moreover, is clearly illustrated in the case of Bilgä-Kagan himself (whereas Tonyoukouk, his old father-in-law, it appears, put up a very firm resistance) at the same time as

he increases his councils of defiance against the Chinese and their way of life, the Turkish emperor does not disdain the use of their calendar (under the simplified form of the Twelve Animals) and in a religious act of the importance of the funeral ceremonies of his brother Köl-Tegin, he makes an appeal for Chinese artists to take part in the erection of a temple, and the carving of an inscription, partly in Turkish, partly in Chinese, which has come down to us almost in its entirety.

And what is more, Bilgä-Kagan, no matter how conservative he wished to appear, is the only ancient Turkish author of epigraphs, during this period, who dared to direct his attention, in the form of a logical criticism, towards the traditional funeral rites themselves, going as far as to criticize the excesses, which the funeral lamentations usually provoked:

"My younger brother, Köl-Tegin, met with Fate. I have reflected. My eyes which once saw have become as without sight, my wisdom has become as without knowledge. I have reflected: 'The God Time commands. Humans are all born to die'. Thus have I reflected: 'If tears come to the eyes, if sobbing afflicts the soul and the heart,' thus have I reflected, thus I reflected profoundly, then also the two Shad (Viceroys), and also my younger brothers, my Beys, my people shall have their eyes and their brows downcast" (*Orkhon* 1).

Discreet though it may be, this invitation to make funeral lamentation more moderate, and the philosophic meditations that accompany it, clearly indicate, in Bilgä-Kagan, a rational evolution of thought.

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The great eighth century Turkish inscriptions of Mongolia (in contrast with most of the *Inscriptions of the Yenisei*) express, in very general terms, a way of thought that contains nothing "primitive," where logical reasoning is predominant and where notions of chronology relative to causality are clearly present. It can be noted, however, in connection with causality, that there exists a certain confusion between "causative cause" and "final cause;" the same particle in fact means "in order to" and "because." The chain of historical events is usually related from

an objective point of view, but considerations involving ultimate ends are almost intermingled among them: the intentions of the leading personalities, and, insistantly, the will of the Turkish gods (Heaven, Earth and Water) who intervene through the mediation of the Chiefs or of the Sovereign for the benefit of the nation.

Thus Bilgä-Kagan relates how his father succeeded to the throne at a very critical moment when the Chinese emperor wished to destroy what remained of the political organization of the subject Turkish tribes.

"But the Turkish Heaven above, and Earth and Water sacred to the Turks, said the following: Let the Turkish people not be wiped out. Let it become once more a people. And for this reason Heaven seized my father, the Kagan El-Terish and my mother the Khatoun El-Bilgä by the crown of their heads and they were raised up into the heights."

This type of religious explanation of historical facts is not peculiar to eighth-century Turkish ideology; it can also be found, under very similar forms, among almost all historians, eastern and western, of Antiquity or of the Middle Ages. It exists even among modern authors belonging to widely differing civilizations.

It is however not predominant among the eighth-century authors of the Turkish epitaphs of Central Asia, despite certain appearances: it only occurs among them in a limited number of critical cases in order to explain an unexpected remedying of a situation in the favour of the politics or armies of the Turkish people. On the whole its character is nationalist rather than mystical. For events which appear to take place in accordance with rational expectation, the explanation given is always of a "natural" order.

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As far as the historical information which they contain is concerned, these epigraphic texts offer a particular wealth, and satisfy to a large extent the curiosity of modern science.

Most certainly, like all ancient historical narrations, they grant a very important position to dynastic and military happenings. As, on the other hand, the purpose of their

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composition is the glorification of a deceased hero, numerous passages can be found that recall his noble deeds after a fashion which is epic rather than historical, with passages of an extravagance of imagination that recall the "chansons de geste."

"The Chinese Wang-Toutouk came with an army of fifty thousand men. We fought Köl-Tegin, on foot, leapt to the assault. With his own hand, he captured the young brother-in-law of Wang-Toutouk, completely harnessed, and, completely harnessed, presented him as homage to the Kagan. We then totally destroyed the army." (*Orkhon* 1).

However, as can be seen from this example, the recording of individual noble deeds is brief, sober almost, in comparison with other texts of the same type. Moreover, the statement of dynastic and military facts is never isolated from their political and diplomatic context, nor from what we would nowadays call its economic context: the material situation of the tribes and their flocks, the means of subsistence, goods and merchandise at the Turks' disposal, mentioned, it is true, in general terms, without any figures being specified. Material prosperity is, in fact, one of the objectives pursued by the Sovereign.

"Yellow gold, white silver, stamped velvet, sewn brocade, saddle-horses, stallions, black sables, blue squirrels (= the Siberian Grey Squirrel), I have won all these things, I have made sure that my people, my Turks shall have them, I have left my people without cares," said Bilgä-Kagan, in his own epitaph.

In the same way, the geographic context is referred to, with precious toponomic indications that permit us to follow the march of the tribes on the map. The principal directions of space are regularly mentioned, according to a system of orientation, which takes the rising-sun as reference point: "forwards" means "to the East," "backwards," "to the West," "to the right" means "to the South," "to the left," "to the North."

Apart from the chronological data which we have previously mentioned, frequent references to the seasons of the year can be found (following a system of four seasons similar to that of Europe): or, sometimes, the moments of the day, without any specification as to the hour; it does not seem that the division of the day into hours had at this period come into use among the Turks of Central Asia.

Extensive Chinese historical Annals, as well as various Western texts (Byzantine in particular) make it possible for us to cross-check the information supplied by the eighth century Turks of Central Asia in their epitaphs. These comparisons show the seriousness and the high documentary value of the ancient Turkish epigraphic texts, which not merely have never been found lacking in veracity but also supply, upon numerous subjects, a wealth of precious information absent from other texts.

The ancient Turkish epitaphs could be reproached, in the name of the modern objective conception of history, with an overfrequent introduction of facts under a subjective aspect, of judgements according to standards which reflect the author's own viewpoint. This would mean a misunderstanding of the essential function of these texts, which, as we have seen, is religious. It would also mean failing to see the deep, unequalled interest of these testimonies, which inform us not merely about the taking-place of historical events but, what is more, about the psychology of the individuals and of the people, the motives for differing ideological tendencies, about the mental evolution of the nomad Turks of Central Asia, during the period.

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It seems to us, in fact, that the ancient Turkish inscriptions of Mongolia represent a particularly interesting moment in the awakening of the historical consciousness of an oriental nomad people, which remained for a long time outside the spheres of the great settled civilizations, retaining forms of social and economic organization that are obviously archaic and having but recently acquired the use of writing.

Derived directly and spontaneously from the funeral rite, the history of the deceased hero becomes all of a sudden the history of his age. Man, the individual, remains at the centre of this history and his life-span fixes its chronological limits. But as the individual is bound by ties of close solidarity to his society and to his people, his history is also theirs. This fact gives rise to the flourishing of a type of history typically national (and nationalist), a very remarkable fact in the eighth century of the Christian era.