

SOME REMARKS ON THE TERM *BALBAL* OF ANCIENT TURKS

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Abstract

Two important concept related to burial customs, evolved in the belief of Turkic tribes in Early Medieval Ages. The first is inhumation that anyone dies in the steppe as anywhere else in the world, have to bury somehow. The second is their cultic (memorial) sites; the structures built as an act of recalling in honor of those who have died.

Archaeological and historical sources confirm that these cultic constructions were built mainly for representatives of the aristocrats. There are two different type of cultic sites in the steppe: The ones built for Kaghans (and their family members) are more complicated than the ones built for the Beghs (Lord, head of the tribe). Those built for the Beghs (and their families) are more common in the Steppe. A statue was placed in the east section of a square area made of slab stones and has a single stone line extending through east. Each stone in this line is called *balbal*. Different views exist among the researchers regarding the purpose of these stones, although many of them agree that each stone symbolizes the enemy killed by the buried in his lifetime.

Despite this, there are uncertainties regarding the purpose and functions of these line of stone. In this article, our inquiry focus on this confusion about the meaning of the concept and propose the probable function according to historical, archaeological and social data overlooked by researchers.

Keywords: Balbal, non-anthropomorphic stele, Turkic Khaganate, cultic site, Eurasian nomads

Gök Türklerin Balbal Terimi Üzerine Bazı Notlar

Öz

Erken Ortaçağ'da, Türklerin gömü adetleri arasında iki farklı gelenek gelişti: İlki, dünyanın herhangi başka bir yerinde olduğu gibi, ölen birisinin kendi kültür ve geleneklerine göre toprak altındaki ebedi istirahatgâhına bırakılmasıdır. Diğerisi ise, ölümlerin ardından onları anabilmek için geliştirilen kült (ritüel/hatıra) alanları.

Arkeolojik ve tarihi kaynaklar göstermektedir ki, bu kült alanları politik gücü ellerinde tutan Beyler (ve aileleri) için yapılmaktaydı. Stepte bu tarzda yapılmış

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kült alanlarının iki farklı mimarisi vardır: Birinci tipe giren alanlar Kağan ve Kağan soylu kişiler için planlanırken, Boyların başındaki Beyler için planlanmış olanlar daha basit bir mimari içerirler. Blok taşlardan kare/dikdörtgen yapılmış bu kült alanlarının doğu kısmına, bir heykel ve yine doğuya doğru uzanan tek sıra taşlardan oluşan bir hat planlanmaktaydı. *Balbal* ismi verilen bu taşların ne anlama geldiği yönünde akademisyenler arasında bir görüş birliği var gibidir. Aralarında farklı düşünceler olsa da çoğu, yazılı kaynaklara dayanarak bu taşların ölen düşmanlar olduğu yönünde bir fikir ileri sürerler.

Arkeolojik ve yazılı kaynaklar karşılaştırıldığında, kabaca yontularak ya da tamamen uzun formlu taşlardan seçilen bu stellerin, farklı bir anlam taşıdığı da iddia edilebilir. Makale, bu kaynaklar arasındaki farklılıkları inceleyerek, araştırmacıların pek de dikkate almadığı arkeolojik, tarihi ve sosyolojik kavramları karşılaştırarak balbal kavramı hakkında farklı bir görüş ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Balbal, baba, Gök Türk kağanlığı, kült alanı, Avrasya göçerleri

Introduction

Turkish Khaganate emerging in mid-6th century AD. has ruled over the northern steppes of Asia for almost two hundred years. This formation is not limited only to political unity, at the same time similar artistic pattern spread all over the steppe. One of the unique practice perform by ancient Turks is their funeral ceremony. And this ceremony involves two different concepts: Kurgans, are the burial places; and the cultic sites are the place for recalling the deceased. We can presume that both concept built for the Aristocratic class of the society. The bigger your cultic site is, you get the higher status in the society.



Illustration 1: Reconstruction of Kül Tigin's memorial. Only altar [behind the bark] and the balbal line [in front of the entrance] cannot be seen (after Nowgorodova 1981).

Evidently, ancient Turks built complex cultic sites after the death of their Kaghans. This complex has been formed of a combination of a few multi-purpose

structure. We can talk about an evolutionary process of architectural development of the structures but the most advanced ones have a building called bark, contains paintings and the sculpture of the deceased; sculptures of the guests; “bengü tash” remarks of the works and words of the deceased and the altar where animals are sacrificed (ill. 1).¹

Beghs took the second place in the social hierarchy, have more humble cultic sites. Those cultic sites are planned as square (or rectangular) and have a statue on the eastern side of the structure.

Either planned as a complex or a plain cultic site, there is a single line extending to the east made of roughly curved stones each of which is called balbal (ill. 2). After Chinese chronicles revealed, it is presumed that these stones symbolize the number of enemies slaughter by Gök Türk Beghs during his lifetime.



Illustration 2: Cultic site of a Gök Türk Begh's Sogoo Gol, Mongolia. Balbal extending 92 m. (Photo Gary Tepfer and the Mongolian Altai Inventory of Oregon University)

As convert to Islam, Turks had to abandon some traditional performs such as making human sculptures. Another forgotten concept, and the subject of this article is ‘balbal’.²

Analyzing

There is a sufficient information about Gök Türk traditions and way of life in Chinese annals³ and they all repeat almost same expression as follows:

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- ¹ Lumir Jisl, “Kül-Tegin Anıtında 1958'de Yapılan Arkeoloji Araştırmalarının Sonuçları”, *Belleten*, XXVII/107, (Temmuz 1963), pp. 387-410.
 - ² Subject of the article, is the essence of my doctorate thesis: Anıl Yılmaz, *Türk Dünyasında Balbalların Dağılımı*, Doctorate Thesis (Unpublished) in Istanbul University, Institute of Graduate Studies in Social Sciences, İstanbul 2003.
 - ³ Chou Shu by Ling-hu Te-feng in 629, Sui Shu by Wei Cheng in 636, Pei Shih by Li Yen-shou in 659, T'ung Tien by Tu Yu in 801 and T's'e-Fu Yüan-Kui written by a commission headed by Wang Ch'in-Jo and Yang I in 1005-1013 (Ahmet Taşağıl, *Göktürkler*, Ankara 1995, 2, 3, 98, 112).

After buried the ashes they built a mast, over the tomb. They construct a room over the tomb and inside this room there were the illustrations of the scenes in which the wars he had joined before he died. If he killed one enemy one stone erected before the tomb. Sometimes the number of these stones reach hundreds even thousands.⁴

In the chronicle of Ibn Fazlan⁵ (in 921) and missionary Rubrouck⁶ (in the middle of 13th century) express; Türks erect statues over their tombs and kill people in order to be a company to deceased in afterlife.

It should be pointed out that different cultures from different places (Chinese, Europeans and Arabs) repeat almost the same statement in different times (7th and 10th-13th centuries) about Nomads:

They erect as many stones as (or wooden) the number of people they have slain in battle in order to help them in the afterlife.

If there is no connection between those sources how would they express same expression after hundred years of interval? Furthermore an eminent merchant Marco Polo⁷ from the end of 13th century expresses for another nomadic tribe from Mongolia perform the same practice about slaying people. So combining these informations most of the researchers agreed on, balbal symbolizes dead enemy to serve their master in afterlife.

Moreover, such information also found in Gök Türk stelae seem like to prove the idea:⁸

a. Kül Tigin stele Eastern face 16th line / Bilge Kaghan stele Eastern face 13th line:

... q(a)n(i)m : q(a)γ(a)nqa : b(a)šl(a)yu : b(a)z q(a)γ(a)n(i)γ : b(a)lb(a)l : tikm(i)š ...

... *instead of my father the kaghan we raised up baz kaghan was the first balbal...*

⁴ Liu Mai Tsai, *Çin Kaynaklarına Göre Doğu Türkleri*, (Trans. Ersel Kayaoğlu – Deniz Banoğlu), İstanbul 2011, p. 64; N. Y. Bichurin (Otets Iakinf), *Sobranije Svedeniy o Narodab Obitařih v Sredney Azji v Drevneya Vremena*, Çast I, Otdeleneje 2, Sankpeterburg 1851, p. 271.

⁵ *If he happens to have slain a man, and to have been of great valor, they carve effigies out of wood according to the number of men he has slain, place them on his grave and say: "These are the slaves who will serve him in paradise."* (Ibn Fazlan, *Seyabatname*, Trans.: Ramazan Şeşen, İstanbul 1995, p. 40)

⁶ *The Comans build a great tomb over their dead, and erect the image with his face towards the east, holding a drinking cup in his hand, at the height of his navel.* (Manuel Komroff, "The Journal of Friar William of Rubruck, A Frenchmen of the order of the minor Friars to the east parts of the World, in the years 1253 to 1255", *Contemporaries of Marco Polo*, USA 1928, p. 73.

⁷ *When they are carrying the body of any Emperor to be buried with the others, the convoy that goes with the body doth put to the sword all whom they fall in with on the road, saying : 'Go and wait upon your Lord in the other World'.* (N. Brooks, *The Story of Marco Polo*, New York 1898, p. 86.)

⁸ For transliterations and contributions, I like to thank my dear colleague Doç.Dr. Rysbek Alimov.

⁹ E.D. Ross & V. Thomsen, "The Orkhon Inscription: Being a translation of Professor Vilhelm Thomsen's final Danish Rendering", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4, (1930) , p. 866.; According to Talat Tekin, Baz Kaghan is 'dependent hakan' and erected by Kapgan for Iterish who starts 2nd Gök Türk Kaghante (Talat Tekin, *Orhun Yazıtları*, Ankara 1998, p. 13).

b. Kül Tigin stele Eastern face 25th line:

... b(a)šl(a)yu : qırq(ı)z q(a)γ(a)n(ı)γ : b(a)lb(a)l : tikd(ı)m ...

... as the first one i had the kirghiz kaghan raised to be balbal...¹⁰

c. Bilge Kaghan stele, Southern face 7-8th lines:

... (a)lp (e)rin : öl(ü)r(ü)p : b(a)lb(a)l : qılu : b(e)rt(ı)m : (e)l(ı)g y(a)š(ı)ma : t(a)t(a)bı : bod(u)n : : qu s(e)ñün : b(a)š(a)du : tört tüm(e)n : sü k(e)lti : töñk(e)r : t(a)γda : t(e)g(ı)p : tokid(ı)m : üç tüm(e)n süg : [öl(ü)rt]t(ü)m : ...

... i have slaughter their (atabı) brave men and have them balbal when I am fifty tatabı people left kitais¹¹ küg sängün came at the head of an army of 40.000 men i met him at the mountain tünğär and defeated him and beved down 3000 men ...¹²

d. Bilge Kaghan stele, Southern face 9th line:

... ul(u)γ : oγ(u)m : (a)γr(ı)p : yoq bolča : k^uuy : s(e)ñün(ü)g : b(a)lb(a)l : tike : birt(ı)m : ...

... after my eldest son had died of sickness i had küg sängün¹³ set up as balbal ...¹⁴

e. Ongin stele 3rd line:

... (a)lp : (e)r(i)n : b(a)lb(a)l : q(ı)sdi : türk bod(u)n : (a)tı y(o)q boldu : b(a)rm(ı)š : (e)rti :

... he made his brave men balbal the name of turk people was almost lost.¹⁵

... their warriors, and thrust balbals (commemorating their slaughter) in the ground the name türkü was on the way to complete disappearance.¹⁶

... they made their brave men balbal the name of turkish people almost totally disappeared.¹⁷

On the first stone in balbal line:

the balbal of ishbara tarkan¹⁸

There are also readings about balbal in Yenisei inscriptions. It should be noted that, recent readings sometimes offer a new idea about statement but sometimes completely eliminate the previous readings. One of them is Yenisei 32 (Uybat III):

f. Yenisei 32 (Uybat III) 10th line of the script:

... b(e)d(i)zin : üç(ü)n : türk : q(a)n b(a)lb(a)lı ...

¹⁰ Ross & Thomsen, "The Orkhon Inscription ...", p. 866.

¹¹ Talat Tekin, *Orhun Yazıtları*, p. 53; Ross and Thomsen prefer not to read the broken part of the stele.

¹² Ross & Thomsen, "The Orkhon Inscription ...", p. 866.

¹³ New readings prefer Kü not Küg: Talat Tekin, *Orhun Yazıtları*, p. 53.

¹⁴ Ross & Thomsen, "The Orkhon Inscription ...", p. 866.

¹⁵ Hüseyin N. Orkun, *Eski Türk Yazıtları*, Ankara 1994, p. 128.

¹⁶ Gerard Clauson, "The Ongin Inscription", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Journal*, (October 1957), p. 188.

¹⁷ Talat Tekin, *Orhun Türkçesi* Grameri, İstanbul 2003, p. 224.

¹⁸ Orkun, *Eski Türk Yazıtları*, p. 130.

... the balbals of turk kaghan for his statue ...¹⁹

Kormushin edited completely different statement and no similarity with the previous one;

... i entered the combat commending thirty (guard) soldiers ... leave²⁰

Even in Yenisei 34 and Yenisei 36 no clear reading of term balbal.

g. Yenisei 34 (Uybat V) script,

č(ï)t : y(a)b : n(e)ŋ : y(e)rde q(a)š(u)q taš : b(a)lb(a)li

there is a stone balbal of kasuk at the border where inherited to others²¹

h. Yenisei 36 (Tuba II) script 3rd line,

... id(i)l y(e)r(i)me : b(e)ŋgü b(a)l[b(a)li] ...

... my idil (?) place stone of inscription, balbal ...²²

i. Yenisei 51 script 4th line,

... uzy(a)r (?) nä (?) (a)ltü (ä)r b(a)lb(a)r(i)m ...

.. ozgar what (?) ... six balbal of the enemy (I've killed)...²³

As seen from the Turkish texts above, balbal is connected to someone passed away but no clear definition about it meaning. We have already mentioned how this concept explained in Chinese annals and the chronicles of the Missionaries. Both resources tell that: Statues are erected before deceased's tomb and stones (balbals) are put up according to number of people were killed.

One of the most important problems about those records is that they do not coincide with archaeological evidences. So far we do not come across to any Gök Türk kurgan with erected stones forming a line or spread randomly around it. Nevertheless no one was allowed to attend the burial ceremony (to kurgan) of a Türk Kaghan except the closest relatives and the shaman (or shamans) who is leading the

¹⁹ S. Ye. Malov, *Yeniseyskaya Pismennost Tyurkov*, Moskva-Leningrad 1952, p. 62, 63; Orkun, *Eski Türk Yazıtları*, p. 554-555.

²⁰ We prefer following Kormushin's reading. İgor V. Kormuşin, *Yenisey Eski Türk Mezar Yazıtları Metinler ve İncelemeler*, Trans.: Rysbek Alimov, Ankara 2017, p. 123.

²¹ Orkun, *Eski Türk Yazıtları*, p. 557.

There is an alternative transcription (and translation):

Bit(i)g bu öng y(e)rde kaş (e)r k(a)ş(i)g? taş b(o)l(mış) ? y (b?) ? y?

this script is the bravery border stone on the east.

Kyzlasov, L. R., Kyzlasov, I. L., "Srednevekovaja pograničnaja nadpis's nizovjev Uyбата (Hakasija)", *Sovjetskaja Tjurkologija*, Issue 1, Baku 1976, p. 60.

²² Orkun, *Eski Türk Yazıtları*, p. 580; Sema B. F. Özönder, "Yenisey Kitabeleri ve Yer-Sular", *Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 22, 1998, p. 180.

²³ Kormuşin, *Yenisey Eski Türk Mezar Yazıtları*, p. 292-293 (text in the article is translated into English by the researcher)

ceremony. Chinese and other attendants welcome only to yog-ash ceremony which held after burial in order to complete the ritual.²⁴

Discussion

As we interpret the Turkish texts:

7th line of southern face of Bilge Kaghan inscription, there is such a statement: 'The brave men of were killed and made balbal' whereas the following line says, 'I attacked the army of General Ku and killed 30.000 soldiers' rather than making balbal!²⁵ Again on the same inscription southern face line 9: we see that General Ku was erected as a balbal for the son of Bilge who died because of disease. In Bilge Eastern face, 27th and 28th line; Kyrgyz Kaghan and Türgish Kaghan (along with Yabgu and Shad) were killed not made balbal. At the same time, the privilege of having balbal is not related with how many soldiers slaughter in the battle.

From dialectical point of view, this concept has also some problems within self.

1. The case of General Ku: Ku was erected as balbal by Bilge for his son. In this case, Ku do not serve to one who killed himself but somebody else's. In another words, Bilge sacrifices his right over Ku and transfer it to 'his beloved son'. Furthermore, it is not clear in the script if General was killed or not!

2. Baz Kaghan case is also similar to Ku's. From Kül Tigin stele, we understand that Baz Kaghan was made balbal by Kapgan Kaghan to his elder brother. We know that the sons of Ilterish got power after their uncle Kapgan's death. If Baz slaughtered by Ilterish then he had to serve to Ilterish nevertheless he killed by Kapgan and have him served to Ilterish. Even it is not clear Baz by whom

²⁴ Burial tradition follows completely different pattern: Kurgan of an important person such as Kaghan, Tigin or Shad, were expected to be full of richness. In order to prevent tomb raiding, the burial ceremony has to be done in great secrecy. Therefore foreigners could attend only to yog-ash ceremony which took place quite after the burial. Most probably, Chinese annals were dependent on the information gathered from their Embassy committees who welcome to the yog-ash ceremony. Of course Rubrouck or Marco Polo should not have been invited to any burial ceremonies either, these merchants had compiled what they have seen in cultic sites or heard from other colloquies yet they are not different places (kurgan and cultic site) in Christian culture. Therefore it might be misleading us to consider as a pure fact what we are reading from Chinese or Christian sources. Here we should also consider: the cultic sites of Kül Tigin and Bilge Kaghan were constructed by Chinese masons and this was clearly mentioned on the parts of the monuments and in Chinese annals (Mau Tsai, *Çin Kaynaklarına ...*, pp. 250-250, 317-318) Therefore it is fair for Chinese masters to consider these complexes as a burial monument. Also in their culture burial and ritual places are not far from each other as it is in Qianling. Kyzlasov mentioned the confusion of cultic sites and kurgan in Chinese annals too (Leonid R. Kyzlasov, "O naznacheniï drevnetjurskikh kamennykh izvajaniï izobrajajushikh ljudej", *Sovjetskaja Arkeologija*, Issue 2, (1964), pp. 31).

²⁵ Same expression 'warriors were killed did not become balbal', can also be observed in Yenisei writings (Kormuşin, *Yenisey Eski Türk Mezar Yazıtları*, p. 140 (E-98), 192 (E-42), 196 (E-49) ...).

erected as balbal, but it is clear that Baz have been balbal for Ilterish for some time later his death.

3. Another case could be considered for Kyrgyz Kaghan as well. Kagan ordered his nephews (Bilge and Kül) to campaign against Kırğız and in the battle, Kyrgyz Kaghan was slaughtered by brothers. Consequently, the Kyrgyz Kaghan should have been Bilge's or Kül Tigin's balbal. But this was not the case and the brothers transfer their rights for their uncle.

As we understand from the examples, these people whom became balbal, do not serve to their slayer!

There is another problematic status within the concept. Conqueror Kaghans, campaign against enemy before their army. Kagan beheaded by another nomadic tribe. Also Tigin's (as Kül and Bilge) charged in the battles by their uncle purposely in hope of failure. So dying one of those bloody battles was highly probable. In this case, would these extraordinary men who conquer countries, won numerous of battles became a balbal of an ordinary soldier, and serve him afterlife!? If interpretation was right, Gök Türks are using the men they killed in the war and use them as a servant in afterlife, why the same shouldn't have been the case for themselves as well?

8 There is a family logo (damga) on many stones of the balbal line in Bilge Kaghan and Kül Tigin cultic sites.²⁶ On the first stone of the balbal line in Bilge Kaghan's cultic site, we see the statement of 'Tölis Shad balbal'²⁷. Shad, is a high rank title given the one who were in charge to govern left or right side of the Kaghanate.²⁸ By following the traditional judgement we should interpret this statement as follows: Tölis Shad was assigned by Bilge to govern east side of the Kaghanate. But after a while he became a rebel and was killed in the battle and became Bilge's balbal to serve him afterlife! But we do not have any evidence showing such a civil war in the chronicles. Most probably it is better interpreting this statement as Kljachtornyj offers: 'the balbal given by Tölis Shad'.²⁹ Because Shad

²⁶ Lumir Jisl, *Balbals, Steinbabas und andere steinfiguren als ausserungen der religiösen vorstellungen der Ost-Türken*, Prag 1970, p. 26-28.

²⁷ Sergei G. Kljashtornyj, "L'interprétation du mot bediz dans les inscriptions runiques", *Hungaro-Turcica. Studies in Honour of Julius Németh*, Ed.: Kaldy Nagy, (Budapest 1976), p. 54; Sergei G. Kljashtornyj, "'bediz' kelimesinin runik yazıtlardaki yorumu", (Trans.: Mehmet Zeren), İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Tarih Dergisi, (2002-2003), Sayı 38, İstanbul, 2003, s.156.

There is an alternative translation as, *the name of türiük stone* (in: Wilhelm Radloff, *Die Alttürkischen Inschriften der Mongolei*, S. Peterburg 1895, p. 374; Jisl, *Balbals, steinbabas*, ... p. 20; Cengiz Alyılmaz, "Moğolistan'daki Türk anıtları projesi 2000 yılı çalışmaları ışığında bazı tespitler", *Göktürk Devleti'nin 1450. Kuruluş Yıldönümü Sempozyum Bildirileri*, Ankara 2001, p. 68.)

²⁸ Abdülkadir Donuk, *İdari-Askeri Üman ve Terimler*, İstanbul 1988, p. 33-35; Lumir Jisl, *Balbals, Steinbabas*, p. 25; Rene Giraud, *Gök Türk İmparatorluğu*, Trans.: İsmail Mangaltepe, İstanbul 1999, p. 112-113; Sergei G. Klyashornyj, T.I. Sultanov, "Gosudarstva i Narody Jevraziyskikh Stepey", *Drevnost' i Srednevekovije, Peterburgskoje Vostokovedenije*, Sank-Petersburg 2000, p. 114.

²⁹ Kljashtornyj, "L'interprétation du mot bediz ...", p. 54.

remained loyal to Bilge that logo on the stone proves it. If Shad was a rebel, there wouldn't be a family logo on the stone and his title would be called back and no title would be given to him anywhere on the stone. If we take into consideration of alternative translation (name of T'ürük stone) it is again understood that balbal is a matter of gift rather than obligation of being slay.

Under these circumstances the translation in Bilge Kaghan stele should be 'the balbal given (most probably gifted) by Kyrgyz Kaghan' instead of 'balbal of Kyrgyz Kaghan'. In Ongin script translation should be 'the balbal gifted by Ishbara Tarhan', instead of 'the balbal of Ishbara Tarhan'. And in Kul Tigin stele 'the balbal gifted by Baz Kaghan' instead of 'the balbal of Baz Kaghan'.

As we already mentioned above, after considering the archaeological data and reanalyzing the scripts pushed us for a new proposition for balbal concept.

Funerals are always considered as the political event throughout the history of mankind. As it is today even hostile countries feel necessity to participate in the funeral of an opponent leader passed away. The condolence today is the flower but when we back more than a millennium ago we presume that among Turks it was the 'balbal' lying in front of the cultic site.

The Tribes, Countries or Kingdoms invited to yog-ash ceremony have given privilege to deliver a prestigious present: according to our thesis this present should be such an erected stone (balbal) which symbolize one of their strongest and popular living warrior to serve Kaghan during the journey to pastures of heaven!

Then how it would be?

Throughout the Medieval Ages, connections between Turks and the Chinese was more than just political but also cultural. This can be follow on many aspects. And one of them is their funeral ceremony.³⁰ Chinese archaeological items might help us to formulate why there is such a stone line lying eastward in front of Turkic cultic sites.

Comparing the cultic sites of two countries, Chinese rituals seem to be more sophisticated. As it is well known, Huang Ti the first emperor of united China after a long interval, buried with his terracotta army with one to one scale of real human to serve him afterlife. This was more humanitarian form of bloody tradition shaped in Shang era. Shang used to sacrifice soldiers to escort their emperors' afterlife.³¹ Chou, Chin and Han dynasties replaced this bloody tradition by terracotta soldiers. Especially sculptures belong to Chin dynasty, unique even for Chinese culture (ill. 2).³²

³⁰ Nejat Diyarbekirli, "The origins of cultural relations between the Chinese and Turks", *The Symposium on Oriental Aesthetics and Arts-National Museum of History 02-04 December 1998*, Taipei 1999.

³¹ J. Rawson, *Ancient China*, London 1980, p. 47.

³² Audrey Topping, "China's incredible find", *National Geographic*, Vol. 153, (1978), p. 448-449.

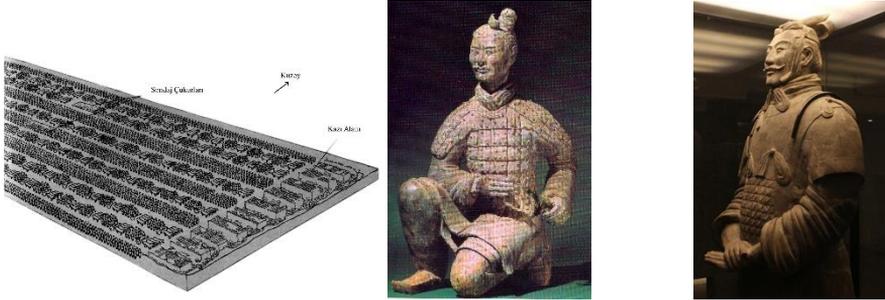


Illustration 2: Military order of terra cotta army of Chin Huang Ti [after Topping 1978], soldier and a commander.

Tang dynasty, contemporary to Gök Türks, adopted similar burial method. Qianling memorial site hosting some important Tang royal tombs, have enormous similarities with Gök Türk complexes built for the Kaghans. High ranked state officers and guards (ill. 3a, b) and the neighbor ambassadors have been showing their respect hundreds of years on the way (shéndào) to Emperor tombs (ill. 3c). Even the stele in front of the entrance with its dragon hood (ill. 3d) is just the same with the one in Kül Tigin and Bilge Kaghan’s cultic sites.³³

This order in the burial complexes also followed by the Songs successor to Tang dynasty.³⁴

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Illustration 3a, b, c, d: Tang dynasty (618-907) tomb site located in Qian, China. (Diyarbakirli archive)

³³ Diyarbakirli, “The origins of ...”, p. 76.

³⁴ A. F. Howard - L. Song - W. Hung - Y. Hong, *Chinese Sculpture*, New York 2006, pp. 183, 184, 188.

Advantages of urban life cannot be compared to nomadic life style. So craftsmanship of Chinese, is beyond the Nomads whom had to move twice between seasons. Furthermore we are aware that Chinese were invited to build some of the Turks memorials.³⁵ It is clear that the interaction goes long before this invitation hereupon some practices about burial customs of both parties definitely look alike. Contrary to Chinese, Turks bury their dead somewhere far from memorial site but the house (bark) hosting statue of dead lodge at the center of this site. Right before house, high ranked Turks were lined up on opposite sides of the shéndào (spirit way). Stele, just like statues, placed in the middle of the road, states the bold and divine works of the deceased (Ill. 1).

What differs between two cultural practices, are the guardians! The guardians in Qianling, as it is tradition in Chinese history, chosen from supernatural animals and infantries because of Chinese combat procedure (Ill. 4).³⁶ For this reason there must be guards in the cultic cites of Turks with a similar point of view.

Whereas the war strategy of Turks developed on the cavalry battle, that's why they have to replace somewhere around cultic site the cavalry sculptures to guard and company to Kaghan. But they cannot effort such a craftsmanship. So they put a line of stone to symbolize the concept. In other word, each of stone (balbal) in this line must be a symbolic image of the cavalry.

This being extended in a single line is because of a necessity. In battles, in time of attack or retrieve, the cavalries must form their position in a line. During the war, to identify the mounted-squads, each of them must know whom to follow, when to attack and where to stop without any hesitation. So each squad have to line up before battle field and wait their turn to attack. When it is time to attack to enemy, each unit from 10 to 20 cavalries, assault after another and loosen their arrows. It is important to shoot the arrows simultaneously because only continuing rain of arrows had a devastating effect over the enemy.



³⁵ Mau Tsai, *Çin Kaynaklarına ...*, p. 317.

³⁶ M.E. Lewis, "Writings on warfare found in ancient Chinese tombs", *Sino - Platonic Papers*, No 158, (2005), p. 8. Up to Tang dynasty, guards always chosen from infantry. But after Buddhism some spiritual beings have also be seen as guards in tombs.



Illustration 4: Terracotta guards from different tombs and periods of China.

- 4a. Guard carrying spear and shield from Yangjiawan. h. 48 cm. Western Han (206 BC.-24 AD.).
4b. Archer with quiver from tomb of Ruru princess, Cixian. h. 28.5. Eastern Wei dynasty (535-550).
4c. Guard discovered at Luoyang, h. 86.7 cm. Tang dynasty (618-907).
4d. Celestial guardian King, Lokapala, discovered at Zhongpucun, h. 49 cm. Tang dynasty (618-907).
4e. Mythical tomb guardian from Provincial Museum of Henan, h. 91 cm. Tang dynasty (618-907).
[all pictures after D. Elisseff, *China Treasures and Splendors, The Chinese Archaeological Overseas Exhibition in Montreal*, May 18 - October 19 - 1986, Montreal 1986, ill.45, 75, 93, 87, 86]

Also in nature, animals such as horses or goats living among herd are instinctively tend to make a line (ill. 5). So Turk's domesticated horses unless their cavalry directs them, should get in to line instinctively. That's why each horseman loosen bit to stretch the bow, horses should follow the one in front. So when these units move swiftly after another around the enemy, loosen again and again their arrows at the same time with sudden maneuvers, they not only make a big casualty but also ruin the enemies' moral resistance.



Illustration 5: Wild horses, running in a row.
(Captured from various documentary on YouTube)

So participants of the ceremony probably would see in front of the cultic sites; not a single line of stone as we see it today, but a mirage of a cavalry (ill. 6).

Conclusion

After all of these discussion, our suggestion for balbal is: each of those stone is a symbolic cavalry escorting their Kaghan (or Shad or Beghs, etc.) through the journey to the steppes of heaven. Just like the guardians in Qianling complex, lining stones are the Turkic ceremonial form of the steppe version. The longer the balbal line, aside from the fact it shows how prestigious life the deceased had, is not only impressive over the participants of yog-ash ceremony but also the more crowded soldier company to Kaghan in afterlife.

Balbal lines are seen only in Mongolia and south Siberia. Surveys done in Ukraine, southern Russia³⁷ and southern Kazakhstan³⁸ refers no line of stones. During the survey done with Prof. Tabaldiev³⁹ in 2000 and from 2005 to 2007 in almost all Kyrgyzstan we came across no such a line of stones. Today numbers must have changed but one of the Kızlasov' article written in 1964, refers 42 cultic sites in Tuva and only 19 of them have balbal line.⁴⁰ Likewise we can follow such a variability from the paper of contemporary academicians.⁴¹

We are well aware that executive class of Western Turks (On Ok) descended from Ashina tribe. Naturally some of the cultic sites around Tengri Mountains should belong to great Yabghus like Istemi. And if their keens around Altai have balbal line before their cultic sites, we have to encounter a balbal line at least some members of On Ok's royal family's cultic site. But as we mentioned above the latest archaeological reports give no information about it.

So this behavior among Turks seems like not traditional but regional even personal.

We should review balbal concept sociologically as well. In the steppe, leaving the tribes vagabond which don't have a common purpose definitely create unrest among the society. Starting from Bumin Kaghan including Ilterish and Kapgan, Gök Türk rulers have foreseen this possibility and determined a common purpose: Plunder of their rich neighbor, China. So all they need was a warrior not a herdsman. From this point of view killing enemies in a battle might be considered as a bravery and the one can also feel proud of that.

Of course being brave in the battle must have praised in ancestor cult. But in fact real bravery is far from slaughtering enemies! Instead it is taking responsibility of the whole battle or making decision for the benefit of the society. As we already

³⁷ S. A. Pletneva, "Polovetskije kamennyje izvajanija", *Arkeologija SSSR. Svod Arkeologičeskikh Istočnikov*, Vypusk E4-02, Moskva 1974.

³⁸ Ayman Dosymbajeva, *Zapadnyj Tjurkskij Kaganat. Kulturnoje nasledie Kazakhskich stepej*, Almaty 2006.

³⁹ Kubat Sh. Tabatdiev, Professor in Manas University, Department of History, Bishkek - Kyrgyzstan.

⁴⁰ Leonid R. Kyzlasov, "O naznachenii drevnetjurskikh...", p. 30.

⁴¹ Yuliy S. Hudyakov, "Drevnetyurkskiye pominalnye pamyatniki na territorii Mongolii", *Drevnije Kul'tury Mongolii*, Ed. Vasiljevskij R.S., Novosibirsk, 1985, p. 183, ill: 1, 3, 8; Vladimir D. Kubarev, *Kamennyje izvajanija Altaja. Gorno-Altajsk 1997*, pp. 11, 13.

expressed above; killing enemies such as Chinese or Avar even Arab and making them a servant should not be considered in the same level by killing their people such as Turgish, On Ok or Oghuz which from their own blood.⁴² So it is the bravery sublimated in the text of Turks, not slaughter a man as mentioned in Chinese annals.

‘Ancestor cult’ has an important place and praises the person to be a model to next generation. To be chosen to the guarding team of Kaghan must have a privileged status among the Tribes under control of the Turks. Most probably each soldier was chosen for this position after proving his bravery and talent in the battle fields also their loyalty is questioned.

If as we suggested in this article, balbals are the symbols of the warriors escorting to Kaghan, then this assignment full of honor will be a model for the juvenescence. If they can useful enough in the battles in this life, then they might be chosen for an honorable position which they might be serving to their Kaghan in afterlife. And this will lead them to a position approved and appreciated by the society.

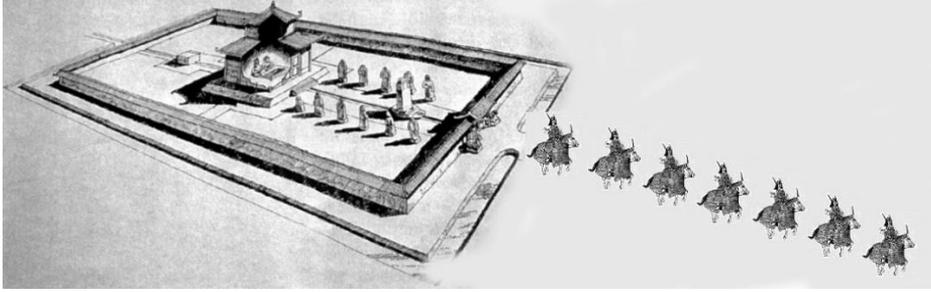


Illustration 6: Kül Tigin's memorial site

(Restitution after Nejat Diyarbekirli, “İslam öncesi Türk ve Çin mezar anlayışı arasındaki bağlantılar”, *Uluslararası 3. Türk Kültürü Kongresi Bildirileri 25-29 Eylül 1993*, Ankara 1999, ill. 10-11 and Eleonora Nowgorodova, *Alt Kunst der Mongolei*, Leipzig 1980, p. 215.)

Up to date, balbal as a word was reviewed mostly by the etymologists. Clauson, in his dictionary the word was described as the ‘slaughtered enemies’.⁴³ Whereas Jisl expresses, ‘this concept cannot be explained only with the written sources’ much before in 1970.⁴⁴ Kızlasov differentiates the words balbal and statue (as in Russian, *izvayaniya*) but he also agrees with Clauson’s conclusion.⁴⁵ Giraud, like many other academicians, uses the balbal and statue (*bediz, kamennaya baba*) by

⁴² Kül Tigin East: 18-23.

⁴³ Gerard Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth Century Turkish*, Oxford 1972, p. 333.

⁴⁴ Jisl, *Balbals, steinbabas ...*, p. 7-8.

⁴⁵ Leonid R. Kyzlasov, “O znachenii termina balbal drevnetjurkskikh nadpisej”. *Tyurkologičeskiy Sbornik. K 60-letiju Akademika A. N. Kononova*, Ed.: Kljashtornyj, Sergei G., Moskva 1966, p. 208; Anıl Yılmaz, “Baba mı, balbal mı yoksa bediz mi?”, *Modern Türklük Araştırmaları*, Vol. II, No. 4, (2005), p. 211.

completely mixing to each other.⁴⁶ Kubarev offers totally new idea: according to him, those stones are not representing dead foes but merely stones to tie the horses of the Beghs who joined to yog-ash ceremony (ill. 7).⁴⁷ New researchers also asking the meaning of this concept.⁴⁸ Tekin suggests that this word derived from barmal/barimal which mean is ‘statue’ in Mongolian.⁴⁹ Ölmez in his article, addresses Tekin and Doerfer which the word was adapted from Mongolian to Turkish.⁵⁰



Illustration 7: Contemporary visitors and way of binding their horses.
(photo Vladimir Dimitriyevich Kubarev⁵¹)

Again if we come back to our hypothesis, Baz Kaghan’s by being the first balbal mentioned in Kül Tigin and Bilge Kaghan’s inscriptions, was given a privilege to put (erect) the first stone (balbal) in the line. So he must have chosen one of the bravest men in his tribe and symbolically made him one of the cavaliers accompanying Ilterish during his journey to afterlife. So if we are able to find the cultic site of Ilterish, most probably the first balbal in the line will give us the family logo of Baz or the name of his tribe.

As a result; balbal term, should not be interpreted as used in traditional method. When we combine written, archaeological and sociological values yes, ‘balbal concept’ contains the idea of serving to person whom they were erected for

⁴⁶ Giraud, *Gök Türk İmparatorluğu*, p. 181.

⁴⁷ Kubarev, *Kamennyje izvajanija ...*, pp. 21-25.

⁴⁸ Lucie Smahelova, Kül-Tegin monument. Turkic Khaganate and research of the First Czechoslovak- Mongolian expedition in Khöshöö Tsaidam 1958, Karlova 2014, p. 20.

⁴⁹ Talat Tekin, *Orhon Türkçesi Grameri*, Ankara 2003, p. 61.

⁵⁰ Mehmet Ölmez, “Eski Türk yazıtlarında yabancı ögeler (2)”, *Türk Dilleri Araştırmaları*, No. 7, (1997), p. 177.

⁵¹ Photo is good opportunity to commemorate unique researcher, colleague Kubarev [hopefully he is in peace along with ancient Turks].

but this fact is more than an obligation because of being killed in a battle; on the contrary it must be a voluntarily completed task. Each and every balbal stone must symbolizing a single cavalry and must have been gifted by the loyal tribes to Kaghan (or distinguish brave Beghs) to serve and protect him in afterlife.

‘Uncivilized barbarian nomads’ created in the ‘fears of agrarian communities’ does not match with the archaeological facts. Almost in all monuments except the ‘battles for the unity’ and ‘continuity of the nation’, reconciliation were dictated as a main philosophy.⁵² That is why being proud of the enemies they slaughtered does not seem to be a realistic.

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⁵² Bilge Kaghan Eastern: 4, 16, 22, 33 ...; Kül Tigin Southern: 3, Eastern 29.

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