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OLD TURKIC ORACLE BOOKS

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Professor Wilhelm,
When I began research on this topic some months ago, I had expected to find many obvious influences of the *I Ching* on the Turkic works. As you will see, the results were quite different; nonetheless, I hope you will find my short study interesting and enjoyable.

Writing a completely certain history of the origins and affiliations of oracle books is undoubtedly an impossible task. Their beginnings are covered with the shroud of prehistory. In addition, "fortune telling" of one sort or another is probably found in all cultures of the world, and parts of one tradition will invariably be discovered in a neighboring civilization. What I propose to do in this paper is to examine the Turkic oracle books from Central Asia (dating roughly from the eighth to the eleventh centuries) in the hope of perhaps casting some light on their origin and usage. Minimally, I would hope to clear away some of the scholarly cobwebs that surround their current interpretation.

When Bang and von Gabain published the first of the "Türkische Turfantexte" in 1929, they listed the three types of divination texts written in Old Turkic that had been published. These were:

1. The text in runic script, *Irq Bitig*, published by Vilhelm Thomsen in 1912. Its origin was attributed to a vague *ostasiatische Kulturkreis.*

2. A supposed oracle text of Christian origin, published by von Le Coq in 1909.

3. The text then being presented by Bang and von Gabain, which contained the well-known hexagrams of the *I Ching*

and was therefore assumed to be a translation or at least a *Bearbeitung* of the famous Chinese work.[1]

Since the second mentioned of the above texts does not have, and was never suggested to have, connections with Chinese practices, we shall not mention it further in the body of this paper.[2]

Let us instead turn our attention to the last mentioned of the works above. The manuscript, undoubtedly a fragment of a larger work, contains thirteen hexagrams taken from the *I Ching*, and each is provided with a Uighur name which reasonably approximates the original Chinese title.[3] Each hexagram is introduced by a slightly varying formulaic statement of which the following may be taken as typical:

𐽆 *birök*	*bu*	*täring*	*quduγ*	*atlγ*	*ïrq*	*käl — sär*	
now	this	deep	well	named	ïrq	comes	when

saw — ïn	*inčä*	*tir:*	(ll. 101-102)	
word by	thus	it says:		

= When the *irq* named "deep well" comes up, by its word it says:

The word *ïrq* is obviously used here as the equivalent of the Chinese *kua* 卦 "hexagram,"[4] and the title of this particular hexagram (no. 48) in Chinese is 井 *ching* "well," here rendered expres-

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1) An additional part of the same manuscript was later discovered and published by Rachmeti (1936) as ms. 30 of "Türkische Turfantexte VII."

2) There is appended to this article a short section entitled "The So-Called Christian Oracle Book." As the reader will see, I doubt very much that this particular text is a fortune-telling book of any type.

3) A fourteenth is found in Rachmeti (1936), cf. note 1.

4) The one instance where we can definitely correlate *ïrq* as a translation of a Chinese expression is in the Uighur translation of Hsüan Tsang's Biography (von Gabain, 1935, lines 36-37) which reads:

aq	*taš*	*alïp*	*yir*	*čizip*	*ïrq*	*sačtï*
white	stone	taking	ground	threw	*irq*	chose

This is an almost word for word translation of the Chinese:

索	一	白	石	畫	地	而	筮
so	*i*	*pai*	*shih*	*hua*	*ti*	*er*	*shih*

Here, we can clearly see that the Uighur phrase *ïrq sač-* is a translation of the Chinese 筮 *shih*, "to divine."

sively in Uighur as *täring quduγ* "deep well." The order of the hexagrams in the Uighur text does not follow the order given in the *I Ching*, and no reasonable explanation for the Uighur system has been found.

While the Uighur names generally correspond quite closely to their Chinese equivalents,[5] the oracular texts accompanying the hexagrams appear to come from a completely different tradition. In 1929, Bang and von Gabain (p. 242) expressed the hope that specialists in ancient Chinese literature would make a rigid comparison of this text with the Chinese original. As far as I know, this has not been done, and until now the relationship of this manuscript to the *I Ching* has remained in a sort of limbo.

By comparing some of the texts in the Uighur manuscript with the texts and commentaries on the *I Ching* (given in the Wilhelm translation), we can make the following general observations. First of all, the Turkic book is not in any sense a translation of the Chinese. The images, and the judgments given in no way correspond to the Chinese. Secondly, it appears also that it is not even a *Bearbeitung* (as suggested by Bang and von Gabain, 1929, p. 241).

It might possibly be considered a translation of some lost or obscure Chinese commentary. This also is highly unlikely. When the Uighurs translated works from Chinese into their own language, various elements of Chinese syntax, such as the word order subject-verb-object, usually crept into the Uighur text.[6] We find no trace of that or any other Chinese construction here. Secondly, we find

5) There is one instance where Bang and von Gabain fail to give a complete identification of a hexagram and its Turkic name. This hexagram and the immediately following text appear in the badly damaged line 69. The editors thought the hexagram might be either 27 ䷚ 頤 *i* "the corners of the mouth" or 42 ䷩ 益 *i* "increase." The name consists of some illegible word which might be read either *qatqa*, or *qanqa*, or *arqa* followed by the verb *birmek* "to give." We can immediately eliminate the possibility that we are dealing with *kua* 27, since this later occurs in the same text on line 205. We can also now identify the first word as probably being *arqa*, a form attested in later edited texts with the meaning "quantity" (cf. Nadelyaev *et al.*, p. 53-54). This would give the complete Turkic title as *arqa birmek* "to give quantity," a not unreasonable translation of the Chinese 益.

6) The normal order of words in a Turkic sentence is subject-object-verb. For examples of how Chinese heavily influences Turkic syntax when a work is translated from Chinese, cf. among others, von Gabain, 1935.

none of the sophistication or complicated structure of the *I Ching*, such as the breakup into trigrams or the consideration of lines in particular places in the hexagram, or moving and resting lines.

To illustrate the complete divergence of this ms. from the *I Ching*, we might compare small sections of the two works dealing with *Kua* 44.

Turkic text: (ll. 13-19)[7]

䷫ Wenn dieses "Zusammentreffen" genannte Zeichen herauskommt, so sagt es durch sein Wort folgendermaßen: Grimmige, strenge, heftige Worte sind in deiner Gegenwart hochgekommen. Wind auf Wind wehte brausend (unaufhörlich) bei deinem Haus. Wenn du zur Krankheitszeit... siehst... durchstach dich, um dich zu verwunden. Krankheit verfolgte dich, um deinen Körper zu quälen. In den Oberarm trat Krankheit; (nun) sind (dort) Schmerzen; man muß ihn pflegen.

I Ching (vol. 1, pp. 127-128)

姤 Gou/Das Entgegenkommen

Das Urteil

Das Entgegenkommen. Das Mädchen ist mächtig.
Man soll ein solches Mädchen nicht heiraten.

Das Bild

Unter dem Himmel ist der Wind:
Das Bild des Entgegenkommens.
So macht es der Fürst beim Verbreiten seiner Befehle
Und ihrer Verkündigung an die vier Himmelsgegenden.

Such comparisons could be continued indefinitely; none of the commentaries show any further resemblance to the Uighur text.

Our conclusion, then, must be that the text in question was simply an indigenous collection of obscure oracle texts which one consulted on making decisions. Onto this native text were imposed the hexagrams of the *I Ching* together with their names. The

7) The... indicate lacunae in the original manuscript. The mention of the wind in both texts is probably coincidental since similar parallels do not occur elsewhere. This does not preclude the possibility that in selecting the hexagram for this particular section the Uighur author just happened to notice the character for "wind" in the Chinese.

composer of the work must have known some Chinese, and simply included random hexagrams, and translated their names to label sections of a work that otherwise has nothing to do with the *I Ching*. Undoubtedly, a reason for this was that it would enhance the cultural prestige of a work by, as it were, varnishing it slightly with elements of the more sophisticated Chinese variety.

Let us now consider the first of the oracle books to be published, namely the *Irq Bitig*, which was edited in 1912 by Vilhelm Thomsen.[8] The manuscript itself is of considerable Turkological interest since it was and is the longest handwritten document in Runic script that we possess.

The document is divided into sixty-five sections or paragraphs plus a colophon. Each of its sixty-five paragraphs is preceded by a series of from one to four little circles in groups of three. For example, the first paragraph is numbered ○○ ○○ ○○, the sixth ○○ ○○ ○, the eighth ○○○ ○○ ○, the tenth ○○○ ○○○○ ○○, and so on. Thomsen, and later writers, saw no rhyme or reason in the numbering system, and four of these collections of circles are repeated at random. One fact worthy of note is that the mathematical possibility of numbers is 64 (4^3), and yet there are sixty-five paragraphs.

The more important number, I submit, would be the possible (64) as opposed to the actual (65). The numbering system clearly indicates that the desired or optimum output should have been sixty-four paragraphs. Perhaps the author remembered a story from a different tradition. Besides, his repeating certain combinations indicated that he probably couldn't count very well anyway.

Each of the sections consists of a short, imagistic story, and ends with a judgement. For example, the first and sixth paragraphs read (in Thomsen's translation):

I. I am Ten-si (i.e. the Chinese Emperor). Early and late I enjoy sitting on the golden throne. Know ye this. This is good. (*ädgü ol*)

8) In reading the Thomsen edition one should have at hand the article by Clauson (1961) which contains certain corrections and additions to Thomsen's work. Clauson (p. 218) gives the ninth century as the probable date of this ms.

VI. A bear and a wild boar had met in a mountain pass. The belly of the bear was torn open; the tusks of the wild boar were broken. Know this.—This is bad. (*yablaq ol*)

Two other endings are found. One is a simple "Know this" (*anča biliŋlär*); the other remains equally noncommittal by saying: "This is evil and good (*añïγ ädgü*)."

Of course, questions followed as to the origin of this work, or indeed its purpose. In the original article, Thomsen gave a short, singularly unenlightening, footnote (p. 194 n. 1):

> Professor F. W. K. Müller, of Berlin, to whom I had orally mentioned the contents of this remarkable book... immediately advanced the supposition that it might probably be a dreambook of similar nature to those known from the Chinese.

If this were an interpretation of dreams, it would probably be of limited value, in that those seeking guidance would have to have had rather specific dreams. In addition the little story itself would provide the means of identifying the proper paragraph to be consulted. This would then make the numbering system of circles totally irrelevant.

When Thomsen republished this article in his *Samlede Afhandlinger* in 1922, the short footnote given above about the purpose of the book had been considerably expanded, so that it now ran over the bottoms of three pages (p. 230-232). First of all, Thomsen then found that Müller's hypothesis was "utterly unacceptable." Instead, he was now inclined to accept an explanation offered by Elias Tegnér. Tegnér suggested that the book was written to accompany a type of game board. Reference was made to boards found in Tibet with sixty-four (eight by eight) squares, some of which contain pictures of various objects, and others appear to have certain amounts of Tibetan writing. Presumably, also certain "moves" across the board are made by the throw of a die or a series of throws. While the use of a die in selecting the proper paragraph seems reasonable,[9] the additional element of a picture board of some Tibetan type seems superfluous or erroneous.

9) We can be reasonably certain that the method of consulting the *Irq Bitig* involved casting a die. This was probably of oblong shape, with from one to four circles

First we note that in the two sources cited by Thomsen (Culin, 1895, p. 821, and Schlagintweit, p. 302) there are indeed pictures or diagrams of game boards. On neither of these boards are there sixty-four pictures or legends. Presumably, our text would belong to a tradition in which the number sixty-four would be of crucial importance. Secondly, in no way does our text give indications that any moves are to be made across a board.[10]

The notion that the *Irq Bitig* was accompanied by pictures of some sort was accepted by Bang (1925, p. 395). In this article (p. 392) he cites one of the passages from Thomsen (in German translation) and concludes in the footnote (n. 3):

> Selbstverständlich muß man sich eine Abbildung dazudenken. Das merkwürdige *tir*... können wir am besten durch "besagt (das Bild), stellt dar" usw. übersetzen.

As can be seen, Bang's argument hinges on the use of the word *tir*, literally, "says" after the story and before "know this, etc." This, however, is not convincing since *tir* probably should not be translated as a whole word, but merely as "close quotes," i.e., the little story is ended. We can note that Thomsen does not translate it as "says" anywhere in his version. Bang and von Gabain repeat the picture board and dice theory in their 1929 list; Clauson (1961, p. 218) mentions the dice but makes no reference to an accompanying board.

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on each face. The die would be thrown three times, and the three different combinations noted and the appropriate paragraph sought. Francke (1924, p. 12) described a particular type that might have been used. Later archeological discoveries in Central Asia (cf. Clauson, p. 218) uncovered exactly the sort that appears to have been used with the *Irq Bitig*.

10) A.H. Francke (1924 and 1928) published two Tibetan oracle fragments, which contained the series of three groups of circles from one to four as in the *Irq Bitig*. He compared these texts with other known works in the area, including some of the Indian tradition, and was forced to conclude (1929, p. 118):

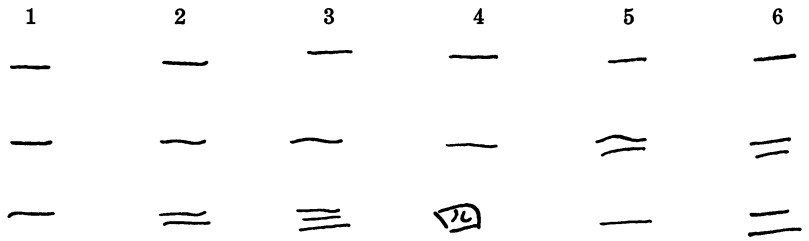
> Aus all dem ergibt sich, dass die vorliegenden tibetischen Losbuchfragmente dem Losbuch in türkischen Runen noch am nächsten stehen.

This, of course, sheds no light on the origin of the *Irq Bitig*, since it appears just as likely that the Tibetan version finds its origin in Turkic sources as vice-versa. It is also interesting to note that nowhere does Francke suggest that his Tibetan manuscripts were to be accompanied by pictures.

Let us now consider some rather speculative thoughts about the origin of the *Irq Bitig*. Although there may be a few borrowed words, we would concur with Clauson (1961, p. 219) that it is wholly Turkish in flavor. However, there is the nagging correspondence of the ideal number of paragraphs with the number of hexagrams in the *I Ching*, though it does not appear that the *Irq Bitiq* is in any sense a descendent or later version of that Chinese classic.[11]

Culin (1895, p. 66-77, 1898, p. 681-685) describes the Korean game which is called *nyout*. This involves a system of throwing four two-sided staves three times, so that one arrives at three series of numbers from one to four. This would of course correspond numerically to the sets of circles found at the head of each *Irq Bitig* paragraph.[12]

Interestingly enough, Culin also records that at certain times of the year, a book is available which lists the possible combinations (in Chinese characters) with an accompanying Korean commentary. Thus from the photocopy of the first page of such a book, we find the following combinations:



Culin (1895, p. 73-74) further hypothesizes that such casting of staves may very well be at the origin of the Chinese hexagrams, by perhaps two throws of three staves where one side would indicate a *yin* line and the other a *yang* line. He draws further implications of how this might have led to various other games known in the Orient and nowadays throughout the world.

11) I have tried to collate the collections of circles with various parts of the hexagrams, to no avail.

12) It most likely is true that the oblong die, and not staves, was used for the *Irq Bitig*. Cf. note 9.

Without trying to draw any explicit line of descent of the types of divination we have mentioned, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that the Korean method does indeed preserve the most ancient method which has been transformed into the Chinese system of counting yarrow stalks (and its simpler form of casting coins)[13] as well as the Turkic system of throwing dice as for the *Irq Bitig*. This would also shed some light on the Turkic text with the hexagrams. There, it appeared that the Uighurs had already some oracular tradition, dependent on the number sixty-four onto which they grafted the *I Ching* hexagrams, probably for prestige reasons. The method for consulting this oracle book was probably also borrowed from the Chinese.

It is worth repeating that I do not consider the Chinese or Turkic traditions to be *descendents* of the Korean. Rather, the Korean is the most archaic attested form of a particular type of divination. It may have started in China itself or in Central Asia and was diffused like any cultural item from those areas. The Turkic tradition reflected in the *Irq Bitig* took up the use of dice and the consultation of simple imagistic texts. Together with the development of a highly sophisticated philosophy, the Chinese tradition continued to move forward to culminate in the quite complicated, difficult and mystical work we know as the *I Ching*.

Conclusively, then, we can join in the statement of Professor Wilhelm (1958, p. 18):

> Wir haben gesehen, daß das Material, aus dem sich das Buch zusammensetzt, durchaus heterogener Art ist, daß es also nicht aus einer Zeit oder gar von einem Menschen stammt.

APPENDIX

The So-Called Christian Oracle Book

There is real doubt as to whether or not the second item listed by Bang and von Gabain (1928, p. 241) is in fact an "oracle book"

13) Cf. H. Wilhelm (1958, p. 100–102) where the Chinese methods are described in detail.

of any sort. The manuscript in question consists of a single folio (recto and verso) first published by von Le Coq in 1909. At that time, he noted its apparent Christian origin, but made no guess as to its use. After Thomsen had published the *Irq Bitig* (1912), Bang (1926, p. 55) returned to consider the purpose of the Christian text and concluded that it must have been an oracle book.

Bang's conclusion was based on the fact that after the number of a section was given, there followed the words: *ädgü ol* or *yawlaq ol*, which to him appeared the same type of judgement found in the *Irq Bitig*. These formulae would then be read "It is good" and "It is bad," respectively. In his article on the Uighur script (1919, p. 104), Le Coq accepted the opinion of Bang and noted that the Christian text was probably a dream or fortune-telling book. In the same place, he offers a tentative date of composition around the tenth or eleventh centuries.

There are, however, certain other moments in the manuscript which raise doubt about the oracle-book interpretation. The first of these is that the sections are not referred to as *ïrq* (as in our other manuscripts), but rather as *yarlïγ* "commandment, prayer," perhaps also "saying, lesson." Another point is that the given formulae could be merely descriptive statements of the lessons they accompany. Thus, the eighteenth lesson is called "good" (*ädgü*). From the sayings of the apostle Zawtai(?), it tells the story of a cow seeking and being reunited with its calf and finding peace. Then it reminds the reader that he too shall be reunited with the things that are his in great joy. The nineteenth lesson, which is called "bad" (*yawlaq*), contains stern commandments: "Keep your hands clean! Keep your thoughts clean! Do completely what you should for the love of God!"

The position that *ädgü ol* and *yawlaq ol* are descriptive statements instead of oracular judgements is confirmed by the punctuation of the original manuscript. The photocopy published by Le Coq (1919, facing p. 108) shows that no punctuation intervenes between the number of the lesson and the supposed judgement. On the contrary, the punctuation mark (four dots) stands on both sides of the whole sentence. Thus, we have in fact:

⁘	*säkiz ygrminč*	*yrlγ*	*ädgü*	*ol*	⁘
	eighteenth	lesson	good	is	

Four dots standing on either side set off this line as a sentence, which should be translated: "The eighteenth lesson is good."[14] In his transcription Le Coq, and following him Bang (1926, p. 53), put a semicolon after *yrlγ*, thus making it seem that the number of lesson appeared as a title or heading and that this was followed by a judgement as a separate clause or sentence. This minor interpolation then led to the false translations. Bang's reads: *18. Befehl (Gebot). Günstig ist er.*, and von Le Coq (1919) translates: *Achtzehntes Gebot (Ausspruch); gut ist es.*

Starting off with this misunderstanding, a Christian source for this type of work was sought. Basing themselves on an unpublished(?) letter from F.C. Burkitt, Bang and von Gabain (1929, p. 241) connected ("*ganz unzweifelhaft*") this document with the so-called "Sortes Sanctorum" or "Sortes Apostolorum," a medieval Christian device of seeking answers or advice by randomly turning to a page of the Bible in which there were marginal statements of one sort or another. Examination of the original "Sortes Sanctorum" turned up no resemblance whatsoever between them and the Turkic ms. The "Sortes Sanctorum" presented in Harris (1888) consist of single sentences or phrases, appropriate to the adjoining Biblical passage, such as *perfectum opus* "the work [is] completed" or *gloria magna* "great glory."

In conclusion, I see no reason for considering this ms. to be an oracle book of any kind. Bang and von Gabain (1929) admit that they have no idea how one would pose questions to it. It is probably merely a collection of apocryphal sayings intended for inspirational reading. The words of commentary *ädgü* and *yawlaq* should probably be read as descriptive of the particular lesson. *Ädgü* describes a passage that is consoling, uplifting, in the sense of reminding the reader of God's goodness. On the reverse side, a

14) This construction is not at all unattested; at the end of the *Irq Bitig* (line 101), we find the sentence:

bu ïrq bitig ädgü ol

this *ïrq* book good is = "This *ïrq*-book is good."

lesson called bad (*yawlaq*) is one that sternly reminds the reader of the commandments and his obligations.[15]

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15) Cf. John 6:60: "This is a hard saying; who can hear it?"