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MISCELLANEOUS

Turkish Inscriptions from Inner Mongolia

By K. Grœnbech

Considerable interest has been aroused in late years by the discovery of a number of mediaeval agricultural sites in Inner Mongolia. The first to draw attention to them was Mr. O. Lattimore, who in 1934 published an article on the Olan sümein tor, a ruined town near Pailingmiao or Batu Khālgha[1]. In 1936 several other sites were visited by Mr. Desmond Martin, who afterwards published a report of his tour[2], and the next year by Mr. Henning Haslund-Christensen, the Danish explorer.

It would, of course, be premature now to attempt to define the exact area once under cultivation, but the sites seem to occur most frequently in the district round Pailingmiao, extending probably as far north as close to the present frontier of Outer Mongolia, whereas their southern extension will now be difficult to determine since their traces are rapidly being effaced by the ever advancing Chinese colonization.

An outstanding feature of the sites hitherto examined is the presence of Nestorian tombstones, easily recognized by their ornamentation in which the cross plays a prominent part. Similar stones have been found elsewhere too, but nowhere in such numbers. The ruined cities of this district have, therefore, been ascribed to the Ongguts, who, according to all available historical sources, were Christians and lived in the Tenduc of Marco Polo.

These Ongguts play an important part in the ancient history of the Mongols; various considerations, however, have long made it probable that they were not really Mongols themselves, but a people of Turkish origin. It may interest historians to know that we are now in a position to support this contention with direct evidence.

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1) **The Geographical Journal**, LXXXIV, 1934, pp. 481-97.

2) **Monumenta Serica**, III, pp. 232-256.

Among the tombstones found in the burial grounds belonging to the various Onggut cities several are inscribed in Syriac characters, and these inscriptions furnish the clue to the language of the Christian Ongguts.

Unfortunately the material at present at my command is extremely scanty; apart from photographs of two different stones, kindly put at my disposal by Mr. H. Haslund-Christensen, I only know the inscriptions from the plates in Mr. Desmond Martin's article. I shall therefore not now attempt to edit the text of these inscriptions, but shall confine myself to some general remarks on their language.

All inscriptions known to me consist of a single line of writing in Syriac characters, and in all cases the same formula is employed. A very good specimen is the stone reproduced by Mr. Martin on plate VIII, b. The inscription reads:

bu qwra ... ning 'ol

That is:

This tomb is that of ...,

the words here indicated by dots giving, of course, the name of the deceased.

The same formula recurs on the two stones photographed by Mr. Haslund-Christensen; also it will easily be recognized in some other photographs of Mr. Martin's (especially Pl. V, a, b), and even on some of the stones of which only tracings by hand are given (pp. 246-48).

The orthography is the same as that followed in the Syriac-Turkish inscriptions of Semireche[3]. The letter usually transcribed *p* is used to designate the sound *b*, as in *bu*, written *pu*, the original letter for *b* being employed only for the bilabial sound *w*, as in *quwra*, written *qbra*. In the Syriac loan-word *quwra* the vowel of the first syllable is sometimes written in full, the *u* being rendered by a waw: *quwra*; sometimes, as here, the literary form *qwra* is being adhered to.

I shall not here attempt to give any readings of the names; that will have to wait until we have a sufficient number of inscriptions to become more fully familiar with the epigraphic peculiarities of the Onggut tombstones. As for the language, the material consists only of the words *bu* and *ol* and the genitive ending *-ning*; it also shows the regular Turkish word order. While these few facts prove conclusively that the language

3) D. CHWOLSON: **Syrisch-nestorianische Grabinschriften aus Semirjetschie.** St.-Pétersbourg, 1890. The same, Neue Folge, 1897.

is Turkish, they are very far from telling us anything about the dialectal affinities of the Ongguts. Of course, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Turkish dialects, with the one exception of the Bulgar or Chuvash, had as yet become comparatively little differentiated. Still it is much to be regretted that no longer inscriptions have come to light. We may, however, note the use of *ol* as copula, whereas in the inscriptions of Semireche, where our phrase is repeatedly employed[4], it is always replaced by *turur*. This seems to assign to the Ongguts a connection with eastern dialects like that of the Uighurs, rather than with the Western Turkish languages, where by this time *ol* had, as a general rule, been superseded by *turur* (or even *tur*) in its ancient rôle of copula.

The chief importance of these inscriptions, however, lies for the time being in the definite proof they offer that the Christian Ongguts, or at least the predominating element among them, spoke a Turkish dialect, which cannot be a mere ritual importation from the Nestorian communities in the west. If Turkish had not been the native tongue of the Ongguts, they would most probably have fallen back on the Syriac for a sacred language, as was to a large extent the case with the Nestorians of Semireche themselves.

We can only hope that in a not too remote future a greater amount of epigraphic material may be placed at the disposal of European science. Even if no inscriptions of greater length should turn up, a complete edition of all accessible Nestorian inscriptions of Inner Mongolia might offer some insight into the nomenclature of the Christian part of the population and so, incidentally, shed light on the cultural relations of that interesting people, the Ongguts.

Kalgan, March 1939

Note of the author: The **Tôhô Gakuhô** 東方學報 (Tôkyô), No. 9 (1939), reached us just as we go to press. In this issue Prof. Saeki publishes an article on the Nestorian tombstones and gives his reading of the inscriptions on three of them. One of these happens to be the one reproduced by Mr. Martin in Pl. VIII b, and as this part of Prof. Saeki's article is known to me through an English summary kindly prepared for my use by Mr. Achilles Fang, I shall here give Prof. Saeki's transcription and translation of it. He reads:

Pū Khabira Surta Koshtanz si, Amen!

which he translates as follows:

This (is) the grave of Surta Koshtanz, Amen!

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4) CHWOLSON nos. 21, 1. 28. Neue Folge nos. 69. 74. 76. 243.

si is stated to be a Turkish genitive suffix, here functioning as a separate word, a fact which is somehow explained by a reference to the Chinese genitive particle **chih** 之. Furthermore, Prof. Saeki thinks it possible to identify the supposed **Surta Koshtanz** with a man known from Chinese sources and thus arrives at the year A. D. 1305 as the approximate date of the inscription in question.

I cannot here enter into a detailed criticism, but must content myself with offering the following remarks. My reasons for reading the second word as **quwra** are given above. As for the name of the deceased, the word **Koshtanz** is obviously correct, whereas **Surta** is certainly wrong. It must be noted that in the inscriptions of Semireche the name **Koshtanz** is used as a female name only. What follows after the name cannot possibly be read otherwise than as **ning 'ol**, however much the reading **Amen** may please the fancy of the historians.