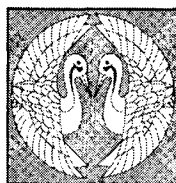


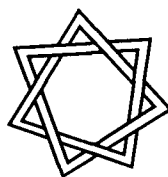
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TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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PRE-ISLAMIC TURKIC TRADITION IN THE WRITINGS OF THE EARLY OTTOMAN HISTORIOGRAPHERS

A number of Ottoman chronicles compiled after the most impressive political success of the Turks, the capture of Constantinople in 1453, are obviously eulogies which glorify not only Ottoman Sultans but, in no less degree, Islam too. This is particularly true with the writings of Aşık-paşa-zade and Mehmed Neşrî. In effect, Islam played an exclusive role in the formation of the Ottoman state. Islam, a religion which the Turks had come to know and had adopted long before their appearance on the borders of Byzantium, was a key element in the process of Turkic conquest of Asia Minor and the process of state-formation. The scholars has never doubted that the Islamisation of the ruling elite in Anatolian beyliks was complete by the thirteenth — fourteenth century, although many facts indicate that at that time the Anatolian Turkic nobility still retained many pre-Islamic traditions, not to speak of the broad masses, where these traditions, nourished by the constant influx of Turkic tribes, lingered on for centuries.

It is believed that towards the beginning of the sixteenth century the complete victory of Islam in the Ottoman state ideology was indisputable. Really, it is hardly possible to suspect the Ottoman clergy or authors of historical writings of the period in supporting any pagan beliefs which were invariably considered as infidelity. Nevertheless, one cannot but notice some passages in the works by Aşık-paşa-zade and Mehmed Neşrî which can be regarded as a significant compromise in favour of traditional Turkic beliefs: they had little to do with official religious doctrine of the state. These passages are generally evaluated as a common folklore contribution to historical narration made with no special aim except an entertaining effect. However, in our opinion, there must have been some special reason which made those Muslim authors include these passages of folkloric or not wholly Islamic nature in their historical writings.

To illustrate this, let us turn to the texts themselves. In evaluating the historical value of the early Ottoman chronicles, the modern researcher usually turns his gaze away from that part of the work, which records material of a folkloric and mythical nature. They consider it from the viewpoint of its historical reliability [1], though, such an approach narrows the scope of historical research, excluding extremely valuable information which can sig-

nificantly broaden our understanding of the early Ottoman state and its ideology.

Islam was the official religion of the Ottoman state; the ulema class was the guardian and disseminator of the religious values and views in society. But while it had official status, it was not the only ideological “cement” which guaranteed the unity of the state and its Turkic subjects. The role of the traditional cultural legacy and pre-Islamic values and views was still substantial in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The first Ottoman historiographers could evaluate it too, and the Ottoman rulers themselves were not free from the influence of this powerful cultural sub-stratum. Both groups could not have failed to take into account this factor and employ it to achieve the state's goals of societal consolidation and strengthening the sultan's authority. In our opinion, that was the reason why folkloric or semi-folkloric materials were included in the chronicles, and not merely because of considerations of artistic form in historical works or holding readers' interest.

To cite some examples, Aşık-paşa-zade tells in his chronicle about a dervish who lived in the area of Keşiş Dağı in the reign of Orhan Ghazi (*ca.* 1324—1360). The historian tells that there lived in the region a famous warrior-ghazi by the name of Turğut Alp, who had given up martial matters because of old age. According to the story, that was he who offered Orhan to visit this dervish. Orhan himself did not go to him at first, but sent an invitation to visit him at Bursa. He received, however, the following reply: “Dervishes can see the future. They penetrate [what is concealed] and appear only when their prayers are accepted [by God].” It was only later that the dervish himself appeared in Orhan's capital, Bursa, carrying on his shoulders a poplar sapling which he planted by the gates of the Ottoman ruler's palace. Addressing Orhan, who had come to witness the event, the dervish said: “The dervish's prayer has been heard,” and after saying a prayer by the tree he had planted, the dervish retreated. The story then tells: “This poplar stands to this day and they remove the dry branches [from it]”. According to the same tale, Orhan rewarded the dervish by building a dervish abode and mosque for him, in accordance with the latter's wishes [2].

Although the tale is put strictly into Muslim context, it betrays obvious non-Muslim origins. Indeed, the story appeals to the ideological concepts of the pre-Muslim past of the Turkic peoples and was meant to be intelligible to the reader. Citing this story, Aşık-paşa-zade does not deem it necessary to explain the concealed meaning of the dervish's actions, which must have been clear to the reader. Meanwhile, these actions of the dervish implied both the veneration of sacred trees, practised by Turkic peoples, and the concept of the "world tree" as well. According to the shamanistic beliefs, this "world tree", a mythological poplar with golden branches and broad leaves, grew in the centre of the earth [3]. Its crown was located in the heavens, and the prayers and complaints of people reached heaven through the tree. Viewed in this light, the actions of the dervish, who appears to have been well familiar with shamanistic beliefs, were meant to symbolise the special, central place of the Ottoman capital, the ruler's palace, and an immediate connection between this place and the Heavens.

A non-Muslim sense of the episode is, however, concealed by a Sufi fleur. The special aim of including the episode in the chronicle is evident: the author aims at demonstrating the central place of Orhan's state among contemporary Turkic beyliks in Anatolia as well as to show heavenly protection this ruler receives. Orhan himself is presented in the episode as a Muslim sovereign who graciously accepts the whole ritual which can hardly be termed as a true Muslim. The pre-Islamic Turkic tradition is here clearly placed in the service of glorifying the authority of the Ottoman ruler.

Another noteworthy passage which employs not only the "world tree" motif but also much more old layers of Turkic culture heritage is told by another Ottoman historian, Mehmed Neşrî. In one of his accounts of Osman Ghazi (d. ca. 1324), the historian speaks of a dream which this Ottoman ruler had and which is interpreted for him by the famed sheikh Edebalı. In the dream, the eponymous founder of the Ottoman state sees the moon leaving the breast of the sheikh and entering Osman's own breast; at the same moment, an enormous tree grows from the latter's navel and fills the world, leaving the mountains in its shade. Springs flow among the foothills of these mountains, branching out into streams, watering gardens and filling reservoirs. The interpretation which sheikh Edebalı gives Osman's dream is that he and his descendants have received from God the sultanate, which will, in time, spread over the entire world [4].

The meaning of the dream is clearly explained in the text. Most likely, in this case the signs and symbols of the dream were only vaguely familiar to the Turkic reader, except the image of the "world tree" symbolising the axis of the earth (that is why the tree is shown as growing from Osman's navel). The symbols of the mountain and water streams at its foot were borrowed from ancient Iranian mythology where we find the image of the world mountain from which flow two rivers which encircle all dry land, as it is recorded in the *Bundahishn*. We also find here other Iranian mythological elements. According to the myth, at the base of the mountain lay the vast lake of Vorukasha, where the "world tree" of *haoma* grew by the spring Ardivisura [5]. Surely, the elements of this myth in Mehmed Neşrî's text appear in distorted fashion, but they are woven into the fabric of a historical tale quite naturally. Very ancient beliefs which entered into the mythological ideas of the Turks during their long and close co-existence with Iranian peoples,

later found their way into Muslim writings, preserving these beliefs for centuries. The interpretation which is given in the text of Mehmed Neşrî's chronicle leaves no doubt that the episode was included to exalt the Ottoman dynasty and to demonstrate the high power of the Ottoman state. It is important to note that, in this particular case again, the non-Muslim tradition is put into a Muslim context as an important ideological element in order to glorify the Ottoman dynasty.

One element of the story, the moon, which leaves the body of the sheikh and enters the body of Osman, is difficult to interpret. We know that the moon played an important role in the religious beliefs and mythology of the Turkic peoples. For example, the Uighurs and tribes related to them worshipped the sun and moon (*kün, aj täñri*). In Manichaean texts, a wandering and powerful "Moon divinity" (*aj täñri*) is frequently mentioned [6].

We can cite another two folkloric-mythological episodes, found in Aşık-paşa-zade, which are also of interest. Both concern a tree, a motif which was evidently especially popular among the Turks. The historian tells about Osman's brother, Sarı Yatu, who perished during the Ottoman capture of Byzantine Melangia. On the place where he was killed, writes Aşık-paşa-zade, a pine-tree grows which people call the "shining pine-tree" [7]. One more tree endowed with unusual qualities appears in Aşık-paşa-zade's tale describing another Ottoman battle, fought by Murad I (1360—1389). During the extended siege of a fortress called Belanya (?) in Aşık-paşa-zade's chronicle, Murad addressed God with a request: "May God [himself] destroy [the fortress]." After this, he departs for a "beneficial giant tree" (*devletlü kaba ağaç*), seats himself at its base, leans his back up against its trunk, and sits in this fashion until messengers run up to him with the news that the fortress has collapsed of its own accord. We read in Aşık-paşa-zade: "[Only] the stump now remains of this tree, and a well is found by it" [8].

In both cases, the tree appears in the story as a sacral object which serves as a link to other-worldly forces. The well-known Turkic veneration of large trees [9] is reflected in these episodes. In the first case this element of old Turkic tradition is used by the historian to demonstrate the sacredness of Osman's lineage; in the second, divine intercession which the Ottoman ruler receives with the aid of a giant tree. The utterly non-Muslim content of both tales does not trouble the historian in the least. Moreover, the pre-Muslim religious and mythological legacy — as something familiar and intelligible to a broad readership — is explicitly used once again to glorify the Ottoman dynasty.

Finally, one more episode recorded in Aşık-paşa-zade's work and later repeated by Ibn Kemal in his "History of the Ottoman Dynasty" deserves special attention. It concerns a funeral feast held by Mehmed II (1451—1481) on Kosovo Field during his return from the campaign against Serbia in 1455. The ancestor of Mehmed II, Murad I, was killed by a Serb on Kosovo Field in 1389. Murad's body was transported to Bursa and buried there; however, as Lütfî Pasha recounts, a türbe was erected at the place of his death [10]. Lütfî Pasha's mention of a türbe should probably be understood as the monument built by Murad's son, Bayazid I (1389—1402). The surviving upper part of this monument, together with a mosque built later, was preserved until recently [11]. One cannot but recall in this connection the old Turkic custom of erecting memorial stelae for members of the ruling family and outstanding

warriors at the place of their death. Most likely, this custom existed later among the Ottoman Turks as well. We know, for example, that a tombstone with a memorial inscription was put up at the place where a relative of Sultan Murad II (1421—1451, with intervals) was killed in the battle at Kunovica Hill in 1444 [12].

Turning now to the episode about Mehmed II, Aşık-paşa-zade recounts that various dishes to be served to all were prepared at Kosovo Field in 1455 after the victorious military campaign of this Sultan [13]. The funeral feast held by Mehmed II at the place where his great-grandfather died seems to be extremely interesting. The feast appears to reflect the ancestor cult and a pre-Muslim Turkic belief that the souls of the dead can fly about and appear to relatives [14]. The ceremony can be seen as an offering to the ancestor, which took place far from Murad's place of burial, where the "soul circulates". An echo of this belief in "flying souls" can be glimpsed in a remark by the above-mentioned Lütfi Pasha, who takes credit for his reform of the *ulaqs* (courier service), writing that it pleased the "wandering" souls of the Sultan Suleyman's fathers and grandfathers [15]. The ancient Turks believed that the souls of their ancestors could influence their living relatives and they attempted to gain their good graces with the aid of lavish feasts. At the same time, the prosperity of the deceased in the next world depended on the abundance of the funeral feast [16].

It should be stressed that the funeral feast was held not at Murad's grave, and it is important that the meaning of the ceremony was transparent to its participants, at least to Turkish warriors and the Sultan himself. Its consolidating effect is evident. It is worth noting that the episode is not of a folkloric character, here we have the well-testified historical fact.

The aim of the inclusion of such kind of material in the writings of the Ottoman chroniclers seems to have been wholly political. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, despite the apparently final victory of Islam, constituting the foundation of the state ideology, Ottoman society, with its not completely lost tribal consciousness, demanded evidently firmer ideological ground.

It should be noted that the process of state-formation, inevitably includes a certain transitional period in the evolution of societal consciousness which is accompanied by changes in ideological orientation, culture, and religious beliefs. The history of the Ottoman state demonstrates it in full measure. A characteristic feature of the Ottoman state's formation was that it took place on lands inhabited by an ethnically foreign people possessing quite different political and religious culture. Besides, the initial sparseness of the Turkic population in the border region, gradually overcome through migration from the interior parts of Asia Minor, demanded more attention to the question of consolidating the state's Turkic population — on whose unity the state's security and potential for future development depended — as well as to the question of increasing the status of Ottoman rulers authority.

The consolidation of the Turkic part of society within the nascent state took place not only with the aid of Islam but also with recourse to the pre-Muslim cultural legacy of the Turkish people, despite the fact that Islam played the dominant role in the formation of the state ideology. The compositions by Aşık-paşa-zade and Mehmed Neşrî reflect this deep concern with the ideological consolidation factor, though not always explicitly. Turkic folklore, pre-Islamic beliefs, up to a certain moment were a good means for the self-identification of the Turkish people. Pre-Islamic tradition was also intended to increase the status of the Ottoman state and its first rulers.

The use of this Turkic tradition in the early Ottoman historiography seem, therefore, to have been absolutely inevitable and necessary. What have usually been considered solely as remnants of an archaic consciousness were one of the most important elements for the construction of the Ottoman state in this early stage of its development. Even with the final victory of Islam as the state ideology, these pre-Islamic Turkic elements did not completely disappear; they were marginalised by Islam and exiled to Sufi orders, remaining for long an important element of lower mass culture.

Notes

1. See e.g. Pál Fodor, "Ahmedî's Dāsītān as a source of early Ottoman history", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, XXXVIII / fasc. 1—2 (1984), pp. 41—54.
2. 'Aşık-pâşâ-zâde, *Tevârih-i Âl-i 'Othmân* (İstanbul, 1332/1913—14), pp. 20, 46—7.
3. *Traditionnoe mirovozzrenie tiurkov iuznoi Sibiri* (The Traditional World-Outlook of the Turkic Peoples of Southern Siberia) (Novosibirsk, 1989), pp. 71—2.
4. Mehmed Neşrî, *Kitâb-i Cihan-Nümâ. Neşrî tarihi*, hazırlayanlar F. R. Unat, Dr. M. A. Köymen (Ankara, 1949), i, pp. 82—3.
5. *Mify narodov mira* (Myths of the Peoples of the World) (Moscow, 1987), i, p. 562.
6. *Drevnetiurkskii slovar'* (Old Turkic Dictionary) (Leningrad, 1969), pp. 24—5, 326.
7. 'Aşık-pâşâ-zâde, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
9. Cf. O. Turan, "Selçuk devri vakfiyeleri. I. Şemseddin Altun-Aba, vakfiyesi ve hayatı", *Bellekten*, XI/42, Nisan 1947 (1947), p. 216.
10. Lütfi Pâşâ, *Tevârih-i Âl-i 'Othmân*, manuscript of the Vienna National Library, fol. 13 b.
11. *Zapiski ianychara. Napisany Konstantinom Mikhaïlovichem iz Ostrovitsy* (Notes of a Janissary, Written by Konstantin Mikhailovich of Ostrovica), introduction, translation, and commentary by A. I. Rogov (Moscow, 1978), p. 121.
12. I. Irichek, *Istoriia Bolgar* (History of the Bulgars) (Odessa, 1878), p. 473.
13. 'Aşık-pâşâ-zâde, *op. cit.*, p. 146. Following Aşık-paşa-zade, another Ottoman historiographer, Ibn Kemal, also considers it necessary to mention this feast. See Ibn Kemal, *Tevârih-i Âl-i 'Othmân*. VII. Defter Önsöz, İndeks ve içindekileri hazırlayan Dr. Ş. Turan (Ankara, 1954), pp. 117—20.
14. G.-P. Roux, *La mort chez les peuples altaïques anciens et médiévaux d'après les documents écrits* (Paris, 1963), pp. 98—9, 117.
15. Lütfi Pâşâ, *op. cit.*, fol. 88 a—88 b.
16. Chokan Valikhanov, "Sledy shamanstva u kirgizov" ("Traces of shamanism among the Kirghiz"), in Chokan Valikhanov, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow, 1986), p. 312.