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# On the Authorship of the Old Turkic Inscriptions\*

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## Abstract

*This article focuses on the authorship of the Kül Tëgin and Bilge Kağan inscriptions and manages to reveal the different layers of the text. Through a careful analysis of the Old Turkic inscriptions and the relative Chinese accounts concerning the Türk royal lineage after Bilge Kağan, it concludes that the text on the south side of the Kül Tëgin Inscription and the north side of the Bilge Kağan Inscription were narrated by the younger son of Bilge Kağan, Teŋri Teg Teŋride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan, in Kaiyuan XXVIII (ca. 740). In that year his elder brother (Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan) passed away, so the Chinese emperor sent envoys to ‘appoint’ him as the new Türk kağan. He took the opportunity of the visit of Chinese delegates led by Li Zhi to ask the Chinese craftsmen to inscribe his words onto his father’s memorial. The same text was also inscribed onto the blank side of his uncle’s memorial, while inserting a quotation of his father’s words.*

Over more than a century, many editions and translations of Old Turkic inscriptions have been published in different languages.<sup>1</sup> However, most of the editors involved have been philologists or linguists. As a result, generally speaking, historical research on Old Turkic inscriptions is less than satisfying. On the one hand, scholars in this field have not made full use of Chinese sources, even though there is already a collection of Chinese materials

\*This article is based on a chapter of my doctoral dissertation *A History of the Second Türk Empire: Through a Combination of the Turkic Inscriptions and Chinese Sources* (Free University of Berlin, 2016). Two relevant articles have been published in Chinese. See Chen Hao, 阙特勤碑南面铭文的作者与镌刻年代问题 ‘The Background of the South Side of the Kül Tëgin Inscription’, in 学术月刊 *Academic Monthly*, June 2017, pp. 148–54; Chen Hao, 登利可汗考 ‘Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan and Teŋri Teg Teŋride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan’, in 西域研究 *The Western Regions Studies* 4 (2016), pp. 33–40. 本文是国家社科基金青年项目“突厥”的概念史研究 (18CSS001) 的阶段性成果。

<sup>1</sup>For example, V. Thomsen, *Inscriptions de l’Orkhon, Déchiffrées MSFOu V.* (Helsingfors, 1896); W. Radloff, *Die alttürkischen Inschriften der Mongolei*, Lieferung 1–3 (St. Petersburg, 1894–5); W. Radloff, *Die alttürkischen Inschriften der Mongolei*. Neue Folge. Nebst einer Abhandlung von W. Barthold: Die historische Bedeutung der alttürkischen Inschriften (St. Petersburg, 1897); H. N. Orkun, *Eski Türk Yazıtları I* (Istanbul, 1936), S.E. Malov (Малов С. Е.), Пам’ятники древнетюркской письменности (Москва, 1951); T. Tekin, *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic* (Bloomington, 1968); A. Berta, *Szavaimat jól halljátok... A türk és ujjur novásírásos emlékek kritikai kiadása* (Szeged, 2004); Geng Shimin 耿世民, *Gudai tujuewen beiming yanjiu 古代突厥文碑铭研究 (Studies on the Old Turkic Inscriptions)* (Beijing, 2005); C. Alyılmaz, *Orhun Yazıtlarının Bugünkü Durumu* (Ankara, 2005); E. Aydın, *Orhun Yazıtları. (Köl Tëgin, Bilge Kağan, Tonyukuk, Ongi, Küli Çor)* (Konya, 2012); and M. Ölmez, *Orhon-Uygur Hanlığı Dönemi Moğolistan’daki Eski Türk Yazıtları. Mertin-Çeviri-Sözlük* (Ankara, 2013, the first edition was published in 2012).

published in German.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, our knowledge of Old Turkic inscriptions remains in the field of philology and literature, while questions concerning the structure, authorship and background of the Old Turkic inscriptions have rarely been discussed before. For example, why was an almost identical text inscribed both on the Kül Tëgin Inscription and the Bilge Kağan Inscription? When were they inscribed, and by whom? Previous scholars have taken the answers to these questions for granted. This paper is going to apply both the Chinese accounts and the Old Turkic inscriptions to the discussion of the authorship issue.

We know that all four sides plus two edges of the Kül Tëgin memorial were inscribed with text. There are 40 lines on the east side, 13 on the north side and 13 on the south side, plus two lines on the edges that were inscribed with Old Turkic text. The west side was inscribed with a Chinese text and one line of Old Turkic text. This extra line of Old Turkic text was obviously added to the Chinese text at a later time. Since the decipherment of the Old Turkic inscriptions, scholars have not reached a consensus on which side constitutes the beginning of the Old Turkic text. For example, W. Radloff and V. Thomsen regarded the east side as the beginning.<sup>3</sup> However, on the contrary, T. Tekin took the south side as the beginning.<sup>4</sup> After a careful analysis of the Old Turkic text and a comparison of the Chinese accounts concerning the Türk imperial lineage after Bilge Kağan, we come to the conclusion that the south side of the Kül Tëgin Inscription is an independent text from the east side.

The east side and north side plus the two edges of the Kül Tëgin Inscription consist of a complete inscription. The text starts from the east side. Lines 1–4 talk about the rise and the heyday of the first Türk Empire. Lines 5–7 talk about the crisis in the Türk Empire. Because of the crisis, it had become subordinate to Tang China. Line 8 mentions that the Türks served the Chinese government for 50 years. Lines 9–10 talk about the Türks' rebellion against Tang China. However, they failed and surrendered again to China. Lines 11–14 talk about the successful rebellion led by Kutluğ, the later Élderiş Kağan. Under the leadership of Élderiş Kağan, the Türk Empire revived. Line 15 talks about the military achievements of Élderiş Kağan. Line 16 talks about the death of Élderiş Kağan and the enthronement of Kapğan Kağan. Lines 17–21 talk about the military career of Kapğan Kağan, especially his campaigns against the Türgiş, On Ok and Kırkız. Lines 22–24 talk about the death of Kapğan Kağan. The Türk officials and common people are accused of having been disloyal to Kapğan Kağan. Lines 25–28 talk about the enthronement of Bilge Kağan. Together with his younger brother Kül Tëgin, Bilge Kağan managed to deal with the political chaos within the empire. Lines 29–30 mention that the Türk Empire went through a political crisis.

Starting from line 30, the inscription comes to the biography of the deceased Kül Tëgin. The story begins when he lost his father at the age of seven. Lines 31–32 mention that at the age of 16 Kül Tëgin joined his uncle's campaign against the Sogdians in Altı Çub (i.e. Six Prefectures). Lines 32–34 talk about his participation in the battle of Beş Balık when he was

<sup>2</sup>Liu Mau-tsai, *Die chinesischen Nachrichten zur Geschichte der Ost-türken (T'u-Küe)* (Wiesbaden, 1958).

<sup>3</sup>Radloff, *Die alttürkischen Inschriften der Mongolei*, pp. 4–31; Thomsen, *Inscriptions*, pp. 97–121.

<sup>4</sup>Tekin, *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic*, pp. 261–263.

21 years old. Line 34 talks about the victory over the Bayırku. Lines 34–40 talk about the campaign against the Kırkız when he was twenty-six years old. Afterwards, the Türk army crossed the Altay Mountains and advanced as far as the Iron Gate.

The text then continues on the north side. Line 1 talks about the rebellion of the Karluks when Kül Tégin was 27 years old. Line 2 talks about the Türk campaign against the Karluks when Kül Tégin was 31 years old. Lines 2–9 talk about the war between the Türks and the Oğuz. Kül Tégin was very brave on the battlefield. In the following year, the Türks campaigned for a second time against the Oğuz people, while Kül Tégin stayed at home to protect women and children. Lines 10–11 talk about the death of Kül Tégin. Lines 12–13 mention that many international representatives came to express their condolences. Line 13 talks about the construction of a memorial and a shrine by the Chinese craftsmen led by General Zhang. The text on the northeast edge offers us the dates of his death and funeral. Finally, on the southeast edge is the information concerning the scribe Yolluğ Tégin.

The text up to here constitutes a complete eulogy for Kül Tégin. It was narrated by his elder brother Bilge Kağan and written down by his cousin Yolluğ Tégin. The Chinese craftsmen helped them inscribe the text onto the marble. The whole construction was finished on the 25th day of the 7th month of the monkey year (22 Aug. 732).

What about the south side of the Kül Tégin inscription? For further discussion, we will first cite the translation of the original text.

1 I, Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmış Türk Bilge Kağan, have ascended the throne at this moment. My words shall be clearly heard by all my brothers and sons, by my united tribes and people, by the chiefs of Şadapıt in the south and the chiefs of Tarkat Buyruk in the north, and by the chiefs and people of the Otuz ... and 2 the Tokuz Oğuz. You should listen carefully to my words and keep them in mind. The people who live in the east towards the sunrise, in the south towards midday, in the west towards the sunset and in the north towards midnight, all look up to me. I put all these people 3 in order. Now they are not evil. If the Türk kağan lives in Ötüken, there will be no sorrow in the land. I campaigned eastwards as far as the Shandong Plain and almost reached the sea. I campaigned southwards as far as Tokuz Ersin and almost reached Tibet. I campaigned westwards, crossing the Yinçü River and 4 reaching as far as the Iron Gate. I campaigned northwards as far as the land of the Bayırku. I marched to all these many places. But there is no better place than the Ötüken mountain forest. It is the place to take hold of the country. Settling down in this place, I was on equal terms with the Chinese people. 5 They gave [us] immeasurable quantities of gold, silver and silk. The words of the Chinese people were sweet and their treasures were fine [lit. soft]. With sweet words and fine treasures they brought the distant people near. After [they] had settled nearby, [the Chinese people] conceived evil thoughts [in their hearts]. 6 They did not let the truly wise men and truly brave men succeed [lit. to walk, march]. If one man committed a crime, [the Chinese] would not spare his clan, his relatives or even his children. Having been deceived by their sweet words and fine treasures, many Türk people died. You Türk people were dying. If you said “I shall settle down in the southern Çuğay Mountain and the Ordos Plain”, you would die. 7 The evil men [i.e. the Chinese] tempted you by saying: “If [you are] faraway, I will give you inferior things; if [you are] nearby, I will give you superior things.” This is how they tempted you. The unwise believed [lit. took] these words [at face value] and drew near [to the Chinese]; many people died. 8 By going to that place, you Türk people came close to death! [But] if you settle in Ötüken and dispatch envoys and caravans, there will be

no kind of sorrow. If you live in the Ötüken mountain forest, you will take hold of the everlasting country. Türk people, you are people who think that you are [always] well-fed. You do not think that there will be [both] hunger and fullness. Once you are full, you do not think about being hungry. Because you are like this, <sup>9</sup> you did not accept the orders of your kağan who had fed you, and you fled in every direction. All of you were tired and exhausted. The people who remained had [scattered] everywhere; they all became weak and died. Because of the mandate of Teḡri and because I myself had the good fortune, I became kağan. Having become kağan, <sup>10</sup> I collected all the poor people together. I made the poor people rich. I enlarged the small population. Is there anything wrong with my words? Türk officials and people, listen to this! I have inscribed on this [stone] how you Türk people came together and held the country. I have also inscribed <sup>11</sup> on this [stone] how you erred and died. Whatever words I had, I have inscribed them on this everlasting stone. You, the present Türk officials and people, should read this inscription and comprehend it! Will you officials, who look up to the royal throne, misbehave [again]? In order to establish an everlasting inscription, I have sent for painters from the Chinese emperor. I willed them to ornament [the stone]. [The emperor] did not refuse my request. <sup>12</sup> He dispatched his imperial painters. I let them build a gorgeous shrine. I let them paint gorgeous frescoes both on the inside and on the outside of the shrine. I let them make an inscription and engrave my heartfelt words. [People,] including the linear descendants and collateral branches of the On Ok, you should read and comprehend this inscription! I let them make this everlasting inscription. <sup>13</sup> I let them make and inscribe this everlasting stele in such a bustling place for the people either of neighbouring realms or who are now [living] in this bustling place. You should read and comprehend it well! I ..... this stone. The scribe of this text is his nephew Yolluḡ Tégin.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>For the transliteration, transcription and translation of the Old Turkic text, cf. Chen Hao, *A History of the Second Türk Empire*. The parallel text on the north side of the Bilge Kağan Inscription is as follows: <sup>1</sup> I, Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan, have ascended the throne at this moment. My words shall be clearly heard by all my brothers and sons, by my united tribes and people, by the chiefs of Şadapıt in the south and the chiefs of Tarkat Buyruk in the north, and by the chiefs and people of Otuz Tatar and Tokuz Oḡuz. You should listen carefully to my words and keep them in mind. All the people who live in the east towards the sunrise, <sup>2</sup> in the south towards midday, in the west towards the sunset and in the north towards midnight, look up to me. I put all these people in order. Now they are not evil. If the Türk kağan lives in Ötüken, there will be no sorrow in the country. I campaigned eastwards as far as the Shandong Plain and almost reached the sea. I campaigned southwards as far as Tokuz <sup>3</sup> Ersin and almost reached Tibet. I campaigned westwards, crossing the Yinčü River, as far as the Iron Gate. I campaigned northwards as far as the land of the Bayırku. I marched to all these places. There is no better place than the Ötüken mountain forest. It is the place to take hold of the country. Settling down in this place, I was on equal terms with the Chinese people. They gave [us] immeasurable quantities of gold, silver and silk. <sup>4</sup> The words of the Chinese people were sweet and their treasures were fine [lit. soft]. With sweet words and fine treasures they brought the distant people near. After [they] had settled nearby, [the Chinese] conceived evil thoughts [in their hearts]. They did not let the truly wise men and truly brave men succeed (lit. to walk, march). If one man committed a crime, [the Chinese] would not spare his clan, his relatives or even his children. <sup>5</sup> Having been deceived by their sweet words and fine treasures, many Türk people died. You Türk people were close to death! If you said "I shall settle down in the southern Çuḡay Mountain and the Ordos Plain", you would be in danger of dying. The evil men [i.e. the Chinese] tempted you [by saying]: "If [you are] faraway, I will give you inferior things; if [you are] nearby, I will give you superior things." This is how they tempted you. <sup>6</sup> The unwise believed [lit. took] these words [at face value] and drew near; many people died. By going to that place, you Türk people came close to death! If you settle in Ötüken and dispatch envoys and caravans, there will be no kind of sorrow. If you live in the Ötüken mountain forest, you will take hold of the everlasting country. Türk people, you are people thinking you are [always] well-fed. You do not think that there will be [both] hunger and fullness. Once full, you do not think about being hungry. Because you are like this, <sup>7</sup> you did not accept the orders of your kağan who had fed you, and you fled in every direction. All of you were tired and exhausted. The people who remained had [scattered] everywhere; they all became weak and died. Because of the mandate of Teḡri and because I myself had the good fortune, I became kağan. Having become kağan, I collected all the poor people together. I made the poor people rich. I enlarged

Who was the author of the south side of the Kül Tégin inscription? Previous scholars have never asked the question of authorship. They thought that it was self-evidently Bilge Kağan.<sup>6</sup> However, there are at least four counter arguments to the idea that the text on the south side of the Kül Tégin Inscription was composed by Bilge Kağan on the occasion of Kül Tégin's funeral.

- (1) The first sentence on the south side of the Kül Tégin inscription is: *teŋri teŋ teŋride bolmuş türk bilge kağan bu ödke olurtum*, which can be translated as “I, Teŋri Teg Teŋride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan (lit. the heaven-like, created in/from heaven, wise Türk kağan), have ascended the throne at this moment”. There are two questionable points in this sentence. First, the kağan title here is much longer and more complicated than that of Bilge Kağan. Before Bilge Kağan, the Türk kağan titles were very short, e.g. Élderiş Kağan, Kapğan Kağan and Bilge Kağan. The practice of adding attributive components to the kağan titles in the Türk Empire was probably started by Bilge Kağan's successor. Second, Bilge Kağan ascended the throne in the year 716, 17 years before the establishment of Kül Tégin's memorial in 732. The statement that “I have ascended the throne at this moment” was no way spoken by Bilge Kağan at the occasion of the construction of the Kül Tégin memorial.
- (2) The campaign itinerary described here does not agree with the itinerary described by Bilge Kağan on the east side. K. S. 3-4: “I campaigned eastwards as far as Shandong Plain and almost reached the sea. I campaigned southwards, as far as Tokuz Ersin and almost reached Tibet. I campaigned westwards, crossing the Yinçü River, and as far as Iron Gate. I campaigned northwards, as far as the land of the Bayırku.” K. E. 17: “Together with my uncle, the kağan, we campaigned eastwards as far as the Yellow River and Shandong Plain, westwards as far as the Iron Gate, [northwards] across Kögmen Mountain as far as the land of the Kırkız.”

It is not difficult to notice that apart from the western campaign towards the Iron Gate and the eastern campaign towards Shandong, the campaigns in the other two directions are totally different. The latter itinerary does not even mention any campaign in the south. In fact, the western campaign towards the Iron Gate and the eastern campaign

the population. § Is there anything wrong with my words? Türk officials and people, listen to this! I have inscribed on this [stone] how you Türk people came together and held the country. I have also inscribed on this [stone] how you erred and died. Whatever words I had, I have inscribed them on this everlasting stone. You, the present Türk officials and people, should read this inscription and comprehend it! Will you officials, who looked up to the royal throne, misbehave [again]? ... Türk people, as long as you don't leave this kağan, those officials and this country, 14 you will look after yourselves well, you will return home, you will become [the people who have] no sorrows. ... Then I sent for all the painters from the Chinese emperor. He did not refuse my request. He dispatched his imperial painters. I let them build a gorgeous shrine. I let them paint gorgeous frescoes both on the inside and on the outside of the shrine. I let them make an inscription. I let them engrave my heartfelt words [onto the stone]. ... 15 [You, the people,] including the linear descendants and collateral branches of the On Ok, you should read and comprehend this inscription! I let them establish this everlasting inscription. ... I let someone write it down. You should read and comprehend it well! This stone and shrine...

<sup>6</sup>For example, cf. V. Thomsen, ‘Alttürkische Inschriften aus der Mongolei’, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (ZMDG) 78 (1924), p. 127. It was originally published in Danish: ‘Gammel-tyrkiske indskrifter fra Mongoliet i oversættelse og med indledning’, *Samlede Afhandlinger* III (København, 1922), pp. 465-516. The German translation was carried out by H. H. Schaefer. E. D. Ross also translated it into English, as ‘The Orkhon Inscriptions: being a translation of Professor Vilhelm Thomsen's final Danish rendering’, *BSOS* 5, 4 (1930), pp. 861-876, and ‘The Tonyukuk Inscription: being a translation of Professor Vilhelm Thomsen's final Danish rendering’, *BSOS* 6, 1 (1930), pp. 37-43.

towards Shandong were two regular campaigns of the Türk kağan. Before Bilge Kağan (including himself), every kağan had made such two campaigns.<sup>7</sup> If both of the narratives were by Bilge Kağan, we should ask two questions: What was the necessity for him to describe his campaign itinerary twice on the same stone? Why were the two narratives different from each other?

- (3) The basic tone of the text on the south side is threatening. The narrator spoke to his audience with an arrogant air. His audience included Türk officials, common people, and even the On Ok people. As his subjects planned to move to Chinese territory, he warned them of the Chinese people's trickery and cunning, pointing out that their fine treasures and sweet promises were only sugar-coating reality. Obviously, the crisis situation described here does not agree with the actual situation of Bilge Kağan's reign. After 18 years' peaceful relationship with the Tang government, the Türks had grown to be very strong and united under the leadership of Bilge Kağan. Türk officials and common people had no reason to escape from their homeland.

Rather, the severe situation described here looks more like what was happening at the end of the second Türk Empire. Moreover, the anti-China sentiment expressed in this text contradicts the pro-China posture of Bilge Kağan, who maintained peaceful relations with the Tang government during his 19-year-long reign.<sup>8</sup> Besides the campaign against the Kitañ and Tatabı in Kaiyuan XXI (ca. 733), which happened one year after the construction of Kül Tégin's memorial, there was only one small clash between the Türks and Tang during his reign.<sup>9</sup> Bilge Kağan also persisted in pursuing a Türk-Tang marriage alliance through his friendly gestures.<sup>10</sup>

- (4) The whole text does not mention a single word about Kül Tégin, which indicates that it has nothing to do with Kül Tégin and could not have been composed upon the occasion of his death or funeral.

Considering the above four counter arguments, we would argue that it is necessary to abandon the traditional theory and to look instead for a new solution. A slightly different text was inscribed on the north side of the Bilge Kağan memorial. Moreover, the background of the east side and south side of the Bilge Kağan inscription is very clear. According to his inscription, Bilge Kağan passed away on the 26<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the dog year; and his funeral was held on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> month of the pig year.<sup>11</sup> However, his epic autobiography does not mention the cause of his death.

Chinese sources tell us that he was poisoned by his minister Buyruk Çor. The reason why Buyruk Çor attempted to murder Bilge Kağan is unclear. But Bilge Kağan did not die instantly after being poisoned. Having recognised the conspiracy, he took some emergency

<sup>7</sup>About the campaign towards Iron Gate in the reign of Élderiş Kağan, cf. T. 18–19, 44–45; as to the reign of Kapğan Kağan, cf. K. E. 17–18.

<sup>8</sup>It is true that Bilge Kağan also blamed the Chinese for being tricky and deceitful (cf. B. E. 6), but the historical context was the time of his forefathers, not his own time.

<sup>9</sup>Concerning the Türk conflict with the Kitañ and-Tatabı, cf. B. S. 7–8; *Jiu Tangshu*, (eds.) Liu Xu et al. (Zhonghua Publishing House, 1975), 103: 3199; *ZZTJ* 213: 6801–2.

<sup>10</sup>Accounts of the issue of the Türk-Tang marriage are scattered in the biography of the Türks in *Xin Tangshu*, (eds.) Ouyang Xiu et al. (Zhonghua Publishing House, 1975) (hereafter *XTS*), and in *Jiu Tangshu*, (eds.) Liu Xu et al. (Zhonghua Publishing House, 1975) (hereafter *JTS*).

<sup>11</sup>B. S. 11.

actions. Bilge Kağan executed Buyruk Çor and other members of the latter's clan. Unfortunately, sometime later, the poison in his body began to show effect and eventually took his life. The news of Bilge Kağan's death arrived at the Tang court on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month (21 January 735). The Tang emperor ceased court meetings for three days, expressing his condolences for Bilge Kağan. He composed an edict, in which he spoke highly of Bilge Kağan's friendly policy towards the Tang. Four days later, the Tang court held a funeral ceremony for Bilge Kağan at the south gate of Luoyang. General Li Quan attended the ceremony and expressed his condolences.<sup>12</sup> According to the information on the Bilge Kağan inscription, his official funeral was held on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the pig year (Kaiyuan XXIII). The Chinese emperor sent Li Quan to Türk to attend the funeral.<sup>13</sup>

There is still one thing that must have been done by Bilge Kağan in his last few hours or days in the world. We are not sure how long he did survive after being poisoned, but since he still had enough energy to execute Buyruk Çor and his entire clan, this leads us to believe that he also had the energy to finish his autobiographical narrative before he died. If we make a comparison between the Kül Tégin inscription and the Bilge Kağan inscription, we can see how Bilge Kağan re-edited his earlier narrative, which had been prepared for his younger brother two years earlier.

Bilge Kağan borrowed the passages concerning his forefathers, father and uncle from his previous composition, making only a few minor changes. But he replaced the biographical description of his younger brother with his own autobiography, which means that he changed the narrative pronoun from the third person singular 'he' to the first person singular 'I', as the two brothers had been involved in most of the campaigns together. There are also a few other campaigns narrated only in the Kül Tégin inscription, and vice versa. Hence, the two inscriptions supplement each other and offer us an almost complete chronology of Bilge Kağan's reign.

The opening sentence of the east side of Bilge Kağan Inscription reads as follows: "These words are mine, i.e. Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan. My father, the Türk Bilge Kağan... Having ascended the throne..." It directly tells us that Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan was the son and successor of Bilge Kağan. The content from the second half of line 2 to the first half of line 10 on the south side is the narrative of Bilge Kağan. The rest of the inscription (lines 10–15, the southwest edge and 1 line on the west side) concerns Bilge Kağan's funeral, of course also narrated by his son and successor, Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan. In other words, the establishment of Bilge Kağan's memorial was organised by his son and successor Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan, who simply inserted an introduction about his own enthronement and an ending concerning the funeral, while the main body of the eulogy was made up of the autobiographical text left by his father.<sup>14</sup>

The successful identification of Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan can help us solve the authorship of the north side of the Bilge Kağan inscription and the south side of the Kül

<sup>12</sup>XTS 215a: 6054, JTS 194a: 5177.

<sup>13</sup>The Chinese delegates were sent off at the end of Kaiyuan XXII. JTS 8: 202; JTS 194a: 5177; XTS 215b: 6054.

<sup>14</sup>Earlier scholars have also partly correctly pointed out that Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan should be identified with Yiran Kağan in the Chinese sources, but they did not try to figure out the relationship between Yiran Kağan and Dengli Kağan. For example, cf. Thomsen, 'Altürkische Inschriften aus der Mongolei', p. 128.

Tégin inscription. The first sentence of the text in question is “I, Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan, have ascended the throne at this moment”. The subject is a complicated kağan title. As we have discussed above, the phenomenon of having complicated kağan titles appeared *after* Bilge Kağan. This title is similar to “Teḡri Teg Teḡri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan”, but the difference lies in the middle as *teḡri Yaratmış* means “created by heaven” while *teḡride bolmuş* means “born in heaven”. If the former was the successor of Bilge Kağan, who could the latter be? We have to look at the Chinese accounts for an answer.

Chinese accounts concerning the imperial lineage after Bilge Kağan are ‘contradictory’. On the one hand, *Jiu Tangshu* (hereafter *JTS*) and *Xin Tangshu* (hereafter *XTS*) say that after Bilge Kağan’s death the new Türk kağan was Yiran (EMC: *?ji-nian*).<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, in the letters of Zhang Jiuling addressed to the Türk kağan and in the Chinese text of the Bilge Kağan inscription his name is written as Dengli (EMC: *təŋ-lɪʰ* < OT: *teḡri*).<sup>16</sup> As to the length of the reign of Bilge Kağan’s successor, there are also contradictory reports in the Chinese sources. According to *JTS*, after his enthronement, “later, Yiran died of sickness, and his younger brother Dengli ascended the throne”. In Kaiyuan XXVIII, the Chinese envoy Li Zhi was sent to “appoint” Dengli Kağan.<sup>17</sup> However, *XTS* offers us a slightly different version of the story. It says that Yiran stayed on the throne for eight years and then died. His younger brother was appointed by the Chinese envoy as Dengli Kağan.<sup>18</sup>

Previous scholars have attempted to explain this contradiction. For example, Paul Pelliot proposed two solutions. One solution is that Yiran was the successor of Bilge Kağan, but when the Chinese envoy arrived, he had already passed away and his brother Dengli had ascended the throne. The other solution is that Yiran was the successor of Bilge Kağan and he himself later changed his title to Dengli.<sup>19</sup> Cen Zhongmian rejected Pelliot’s first proposal and agreed with his second that Yiran and Dengli were the same person.<sup>20</sup> Xue Zongzhen also followed the second proposal of P. Pelliot but he made some modifications. Xue pointed out that Yiran and Dengli are transcriptions of different parts of the same title: *teḡri yaratmış bilge kağan*.<sup>21</sup> However, Pelliot’s second proposal obviously contradicts the

<sup>15</sup>*JTS* 194a: 5177; *XTS* 215b: 6054. The reconstruction of Early Modern Chinese follows Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin* (Vancouver, 1991).

<sup>16</sup>Zhang Jiuling *ji jiaozhu*, (ed.) Xiong Fei (Zhonghua Publishing House, 2008), p. 627. See the Chinese side of the Bilge Kağan inscription, Cen Zhongmian 岑仲勉, *Tujue Jishi* 突厥集史 (*A Compilation of Chinese Sources on Early Turks*) (Beijing, 1958), p. 841.

<sup>17</sup>*JTS* 194a: 5177. The ‘appointment’ by the Chinese envoy should be understood as a ‘recognition’, because the Türk Empire was still an independent regime.

<sup>18</sup>The original text is as follows: Yiran Kağan stayed on the throne for eight years and passed away. He dispatched three delegations to China in total. His younger brother ascended the throne and was known as Bilge Qutluḡ Kağan. General Li Zhi was sent by the emperor to appoint him as Dengli Kağan. *XTS* 215b: 6054. The element ‘qutluḡ’ was an unofficial addition to the Türk kağan titles. For example, Élderiş Kağan’s title in Chinese is also ‘qutluḡ’ and Kapḡan Kağan’s title in the Chinese sources is also recorded as “Qutluḡ Mochuo Grand Qağan” (Cen, *Tujue Jishi*, p. 809).

<sup>19</sup>P. Pelliot, ‘Neuf notes sur des questions d’Asie Centrale. “VI. L’inscription chinoise de Bilgä qaḡan”, *T’oung Pao* (TP) XXVI (1929), pp. 239–241.

<sup>20</sup>Cen, *Tujue Jishi*, pp. 232–240.

<sup>21</sup>Xue Zongzhen 薛宗正, *A History of the Tujue* 突厥史 (Beijing, 1992), p. 572, Xue Zongzhen, ‘A New Study of the Chart of the Clan Relations of the Tujue khans’ 突厥可汗譜系新考, *Journal of Xinjiang University* 26, 4 (1998), p. 45.



report in *XTS* and *JTS* that, after the death of Yiran Kağan, his younger brother Dengli Kağan ascended the throne, which means Yiran and his younger brother Dengli should be recognised as two different people.<sup>22</sup>

As we have discussed above, the east side of the Bilge Kağan inscription clearly indicates that Bilge Kağan's successor was Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan. Our solution to the conflicting accounts in the Chinese sources is that there were *two* Dengli kağans after Bilge Kağan (the elder ascended the throne in Kaiyuan XXII while the younger ascended the throne in Kaiyuan XXVIII), and the Chinese accounts saying that Yiran and Dengli were the successors of Bilge Kağan are both correct, as they are in fact two different transcriptions of the title of the first Dengli Kağan, Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan. More exactly, *yiran* was a transcription of *yaratmış*, and *dengli* was a transcription of *teŋri*. Meanwhile, *yiran* was an abbreviated form, corresponding to *yarat-* "to make", the suffix *-mış* was not transcribed. Therefore, the records in the Chinese sources concerning the identity of Bilge Kağan's successor are actually not contradictory.

As to how long Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan stayed on the throne, this is not difficult to answer. According to *XTS*, he ascended the throne in Kaiyuan XXII (ca. 734) and ruled for eight years. *XTS* also informs us that his successor was acknowledged and legitimised by the Tang envoy in Kaiyuan XXVIII (ca. 740), indicating that he died in this year.<sup>23</sup> However, from Kaiyuan XXII to Kaiyuan XXVIII there are only seven years, if we count in the Chinese way.<sup>24</sup> This mistake by the author of *XTS* should be regarded merely as carelessness. On the contrary, the information in *JTS* is much more ambiguous: "Yiran ascended the throne. Later, he died of sickness".<sup>25</sup> We cannot figure out how long "later" was. So, here we follow the record of *XTS*, except for the arithmetic error, which means Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan reigned over the Türks for seven years from ca. 734 to ca. 740.

The reason why many scholars were confused by the Chinese accounts on the Türk imperial lineage after Bilge Kağan is that in Kaiyuan XXVIII the successor and younger brother of Dengli Kağan/Yiran Kağan was also called Dengli Kağan. If the Dengli Kağan who ascended the throne in Kaiyuan XXII was Bilge Kağan's son and successor Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan, then who can the other Dengli Kağan be? It must be the so-called Teŋri Teg Teŋride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan mentioned on the south side of the Kül Tégin inscription and on the north side of the Bilge Kağan inscription. Obviously, *dengli* was a transcription of the first attributive part of his title (i.e. *teŋri*). In other words, the author of the south side of the Kül Tégin inscription was Teŋri Teg Teŋride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan, who was one of Bilge Kağan's sons. He ascended the throne in Kaiyuan XXVIII (ca. 740). He is recorded in the Chinese sources as Dengli Kehan (< *teŋri kağan*).

In his narrative, Teŋri Teg Teŋride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan first addressed his listeners and declared his authority over a large territory.<sup>26</sup> Then he talked about the military

<sup>22</sup>*JTS* 194a: 5177, *XTS* 215b: 6054.

<sup>23</sup>*XTS* 215b: 6054.

<sup>24</sup>Pelliot counted in the European way and said there were six years (cf. Pelliot, 'Neuf Notes', pp. 230-1).

<sup>25</sup>*JTS* 194a: 5177.

<sup>26</sup>B. N. 1-2, K. S. 1-3.

campaigns that he had joined and the places that he had reached, and came to the conclusion that Ötüken was the best place in the world.<sup>27</sup> He must have accompanied his elder brother in these campaigns, because his own reign lasted for only one year. He went on to remind his people of the Chinese being tricky and deceitful and to try to persuade them not to leave Ötüken for China. He emphasised the potential benefits for his subjects if they stayed in Ötüken.<sup>28</sup> In the end, he threatened his people and ordered the craftsmen to carve his words upon the everlasting stone, so as to let his people read and comprehend them.<sup>29</sup>

The image given by Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmış Türk Bilge Kağan's narrative agrees perfectly with the situation in the Türk Empire after his enthronement. From the Chinese sources we know that he faced many challenges both internally and externally. Externally, he faced a challenge from the Tokuz Oğuz tribes, who were ready to replace the Türks' dominant status on the steppe. Internally, he lost control of the army. His two uncles, the Right Şad and the Left Şad, both had a considerable number of well-equipped troops in their hands.

In order to decrease his two uncles' military influence and retake power over the army, he made a plan with his mother. They decided to deal with the Right Şad first, managing to kill him and absorb his military forces. However, before they carried out the next step of their plan, the Left Şad realised what they were doing and preempted them. The newly enthroned kağan was killed by his uncle in the second year of his reign.<sup>30</sup> The news of his death arrived at the Tang court on the 18th day of the 7th month of Kaiyuan XXIX (2 September 741).<sup>31</sup> If we take into consideration the two months spent on the way, Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmış Türk Bilge Kağan is likely to have passed away in June 741.<sup>32</sup> The purpose of Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmış Türk Bilge Kağan in inscribing such a text was, of course, to persuade the Türk people not to leave their country. He wanted to stop or at least to slow down the decline of his empire.

The text of lines 1–8 and 14–15 on the north side of the Bilge Kağan inscription is almost the same as that of the south side of the Kül Tégin inscription. Therefore, the author should also be Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmış Türk Bilge Kağan. However, there are a few lines (i.e. lines 9–14) that cannot be found on the south side of the Kül Tégin inscription:

9 When my father, the kağan, and my uncle, the kağan, ascended the throne, they ruled the people in the four directions well. As mandated by heaven, I myself ascended the throne; I organised and ruled the people in the four directions [too]. I made ... I married off my daughter to the Türgiş kağan with an extremely grand ritual. I married the Türgiş kağan's 10 daughter to my son with an extremely grand ritual. I made ... peaceful the people in the four directions. I caused the people who had heads to bow down and the people who had knees to kneel down. As mandated by heaven above and earth below, 11 I settled the people, who had been never heard of nor

<sup>27</sup>B. N. 3, K. S. 3–4.

<sup>28</sup>B. N. 4–6, K. S. 5–8.

<sup>29</sup>B. N. 7–8, 14–15, K. S. 9–13.

<sup>30</sup>*JTS* 194a: 5177–8, *XTS* 215b: 6054, *ZZTJ* 214: 6844.

<sup>31</sup>*ZZTJ* 214: 6844, *JTS* 9: 213, *Cefu Yuanguai* (hereafter *CFYG*) (Jiangsu, 2006), 975: 11288. *Bing-yin. CFYG* recorded the news as arriving in the 4<sup>th</sup> month. Here we should follow the date recorded in *JTS* and *ZZTJ*.

<sup>32</sup>On the asynchronous character of the medieval world and the time differences between the Old Turkic inscriptions and the Chinese sources, cf. Chen Hao, 'A Study on the Chronology of Old Turkic Inscriptions', *Central Asiatic Journal* 61, 2 (2018), pp. 313–22.

been seen before, eastwards as far as the sunrise, southwards as far as the sun–zenith, westwards as far as the sunset, and northwards as far as the night–zenith. I strove for yellow gold, white silver, damask with selvages, silk with hems, high-bred horses and stallions, black sabres, <sup>12</sup> and grey [or blue] squirrels, for my Türk subjects. I organised. I removed all their sorrows. Mighty heaven above...ten thousand...“You should <sup>13</sup> feed both officials and people! Don’t make them suffer or be in pain!”... I bestowed titles on the Türk officials and people...stones...striving for ... Türk people, as long as you do not leave this kağan, these officials and this country, <sup>14</sup> you will look after yourselves well, you will return home, you will become [people who have] no sorrows. ... Mighty Teḡri above...ten thousand...“You should <sup>13</sup> feed both officials and people! Do not make them suffer or be in pain!”

Judging by the context, the words of lines 9–12 cannot have been spoken by Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan. Instead, we must assume that these words are a direct quotation from his father Bilge Kağan.<sup>33</sup> The form of address, i.e. “my father, the kağan” and “my uncle, the kağan”, can help us identify the speaker as Bilge Kağan, because among the rulers of the second Türk Empire, only he had both a father kağan and an uncle kağan.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the formulation of “I caused the people who had heads to bow down and the people who had knees to kneel down” appear several times in the autobiographical narrative of Bilge Kağan.<sup>35</sup> As to the marriage relation with the Türgiř kağan, we can also find supporting evidence in the Chinese sources and Old Turkic inscriptions.<sup>36</sup> From line 12, more exactly after the formulation of “Mighty heaven above”, Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan returns to his own crisis situation. He attempts to persuade his people not to leave their country.

At the end of his narrative, Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan mentions that he asked the Chinese craftsmen to build a gorgeous shrine and establish an inscription. According to the Chinese sources, in Kaiyuan XXVIII, when Yiran/Dengli Kağan (Teḡri Teg Teḡri Yarattmış Türk Bilge Kağan) passed away, the Chinese emperor dispatched General Li Zhi to ‘appoint’ the new Dengli Kağan (Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan).<sup>37</sup> It does not mention the construction of an inscription or a shrine. Teḡri Teg Teḡride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan must have taken the opportunity of the visit of the Chinese delegates and asked them to carve his words onto the stones. The text of his inscription commemorates not his brother but his father, i.e. Bilge Kağan. That can also explain why it was carved on Bilge Kağan’s memorial, and why he inserted a quotation of his father’s words (lines 9–12). Almost at the same time, a shorter edition of the same text was inscribed on Kül Tėgin’s memorial. The Türk scribe of the text is still Bilge Kağan’s (also Kül Tėgin’s) nephew Yolluğ Tėgin.

It is noteworthy that in the text concerning Bilge Kağan’s funeral in 735, Teḡri Teg Teḡri Yarattmış Türk Bilge Kağan does not mention the construction of a shrine and stele.<sup>38</sup> The

<sup>33</sup>These words of Bilge Kağan might have been left by him in his last hours/days.

<sup>34</sup>The formulation “my father, the kağan” and “my uncle, the kağan” can be seen in K. E. 12, 15, 16, 17 and 25.

<sup>35</sup>K. E. 2, 15, 18; B. E. 3, 13 and 16.

<sup>36</sup>After Kaiyuan III (ca. 715), the Türgiř kağan was Sulu. According to the Chinese sources, Sulu married three wives, one of whom was a Türk princess. (cf. *JTS* 194b: 5192) In the Kül Tėgin Inscription, Bilge Kağan mentioned the Türgiř kağan as being his son-in-law, when talking about representatives at Kül Tėgin’s funeral. (cf. K. N. 13)

<sup>37</sup>*JTS* 194a: 5177; *XTS* 215b: 6054.

<sup>38</sup>B. S. 11 and S. W.

Chinese accounts on the other hand say that the Chinese craftsmen built an inscription and shrine.<sup>39</sup> However, the Chinese accounts do not mention whether the craftsmen painted on the sides of Bilge Kağan's shrine. Considering the fact that Bilge Kağan's tomb is much larger in scale and much richer in treasures than Kül Tëgin's, it is reasonable for us to assume that Teŋri Teg Teŋride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan might have repaired his father's imperial tomb in the year Kaiyuan XXVIII (ca. 740), and had his words inscribed onto his father's (and also his uncle's) stele. If so, the report that he asked the Chinese craftsmen to build a gorgeous shrine and decorate the interior and exterior of the shrine could be well explained.

Let us now sum up the main points of the above discussion. The successor of Bilge Kağan was his elder son: Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan, whose title appears at the beginning of his father's memorial because he was the organiser of the memorial's establishment.<sup>40</sup> The title of Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan was transcribed into Chinese in two different ways: Yiran and Dengli. The two variant Chinese terms were transcribed from the two different parts of his Turkic title, from *teŋri* and *Yaratmış* respectively. Teŋri Teg Teŋri Yaratmış Türk Bilge Kağan ascended the throne in Kaiyuan XXII (ca. 734), and his reign lasted for seven years, until Kaiyuan XXVIII (ca. 740), if we count in the traditional Chinese way. After his death, his younger brother ascended the throne, and his title is also recorded in the Chinese sources as Dengli Kağan. The younger Dengli Kağan corresponds to the Teŋri Teg Teŋride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan on the south side of the Kül Tëgin inscription and the north side of the Bilge Kağan inscription.

To conclude, the author of the south side of the Kül Tëgin inscription was Bilge Kağan's younger son Teŋri Teg Teŋride Bolmuş Türk Bilge Kağan. Likewise, he was also the author of the north side of the Bilge Kağan inscription, except for a brief quotation of his father's words. He must have taken the opportunity of the visit of the Chinese craftsmen in Kaiyuan XXVIII (ca. 740) and asked them to inscribe his words onto his father's memorial.

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### Abbreviations

- B.: Bilge Kağan Inscription  
 CFYG: *Cefu Yuangui*  
 E.: East side  
 EMC: Early Modern Chinese  
 JTS: *Jiu Tangshu*  
 K.: Kül Tëgin Inscription  
 N.: North side

<sup>39</sup>JTS 194a: 5177.

<sup>40</sup>It is noteworthy that Bilge Kağan lost one of his sons in the war against the Tatabi-Tang alliance. Cf. B. S. 9.

S.: South side  
T.: Toñukuk Inscription  
W.: West side  
*XTS:* *Xin Tangshu*  
*ZZTJ:* *Zizhi Tongjian*