COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL D'ÉTUDES PRÉ-OTTOMANES ET OTTOMANES
VIth Symposium
Cambridge, 1rst-4th July 1984

Proceedings edited by
Jean-Louis BACQUÉ-GRAMMÔNT
and
Émeri van DONZEL

Published under the sponsorship of
the French Institute of Anatolian Studies (İstanbul)
and the Netherlands Institute for the Near East (Leiden)

THE DIVIT PRESS
İSTANBUL · PÂRIS · LEIDEN
1987
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BAYRAK. SOME MOTIFS OF OTTOMAN TURKISH FLAGS AND FLAG-POLE FINIALS

Emel ESİN
BAYRAK. SOME MOTIFS OF OTTOMAN TURKISH FLAGS AND FLAG-POLE FINIALS

It will be tried, in this essay, to comment on three motifs of Turkish flags and flag-pole finials, which emerge from the remote ages of national culture: the luminaries, the bifid sword and the dragon. The tail-standard (tuğ) finds its place in the same category, but it has already been studied elsewhere. The archaism of the three motifs points to their being a mixture of elements of pre-Islamic mythology and of Islamic pious inscriptions which, from the point of view of Islam, are highly unorthodox.

I- THE LUMINARIES.

The historical texts and the iconography tend to show that Ottoman Turkish luminary symbolism does not derive, as thought at times, from Near Eastern, but from Inner-Asian precedents. It is in Eastern and Inner-Asia, that pictograms and ideograms of luminaries, which can be viewed as prototypes of early Turkish ones, may be seen, already in the first pre-Christian millenary (pl. I/e). In uninterrupted line, the link can be followed in Turkish work, from the eighth century A.D. onwards. One may briefly mention some forms of the Turkish luminary representation. The circular, or crescent-shaped, letter of the Kök-Türk alphabet (pl. I/h, I/m) can be read, either as əy (moon), or as əyəy (bow). Iconographically, as well as metaphorically, the sun may be represented as an arrow-formed ray (pl. I/o). Thence the equivalence of tamğa (tribal, or personal, or royal seals), formed with bow and arrow (pl. I/s, upper.

3. Our plates I/A, to N and P to X, are after Esin, "Kün-ay", pls. I/1, 11, 13a, 16; pl. IV/7; VII/26; IIA/5a, b, c; VII/A10, VII/B5, 9; VII/B/1,2; IXA/1, 2a, b, 6, 20, 21. Our pl. I/o is after M. Şinexuu, "Orxon-Şelengiyn bıçqıyn şine dursal", Studia Archaeologica, VIII, Ulan-Baatar, 1980, 23, 62.
part), with the pictogram of the solar-lunar conjunction, known in China since the first millennium B.C. (pl. I/e) and called in Turkish texts, Künąy. Its early form consisted of a crescent and a dotted solar disc. It thus appeared as symbol of brilliancy on the imperial flag of the Chou dynasty of China, who were non-Chinese northerners, perhaps Turkic-tibetans. As vivifying power from heaven, the luminaries figured also on funerary stele. As part of the regalia, luminaries were cited in the titles of the monarchs of the Uyghur Turks of the eighth century and it has been observed that the royal tamğa (pl. I/o) was of a variety similar to the trisula (pl. I/n), depicted in Uygur art. Like the bow and arrow, the tamğa had the same significance as Künąy. The disc and crescent version of Kü瑙y (pl.I/m) could take the alternative shape of Kü瑙y, Mihanah, gradually superseded the Turkish term.

The conjunction of luminaries, considered to be an imperial emblem, figured on the flags of the Ottoman sultans (pl. II/b) in multiple forms. Somewhat later, the solar-lunar pictogram appeared on the weapons of admirals-in-chief. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, regulations, which were following European models, brought about some changes. The radiant solar pictogram, still considered the Sultan’s emblem, took a more elliptic shape. The older forms, extended into several divisions, began to be called a star.

The radiant variety of the sun appears to have been introduced in Turkish art through Buddhism, as an eight-pointed star, or as a lotus in bloom. In southern Central Asian areas (pls. I/e, f), the Parthian (pl. I/d) prototype seem to have prevailed. The symbolism and various pictograms of luminaries can be followed, also after Islam, in Khaqanid (840-1220), Selçuqid (pis. I/s, t, u), and Ottoman (pls. I/v, w, x), periods. But, Islam was instrumental to an influx of Near-eastern culture, both Persian and Arabic, so that the Persian translation of Kü瑙y, Mihanah, gradually superseded the Turkish term.

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In an earlier study, I had reached the same conclusion as others, that the bifid form in which Dhu‘l-faqar, the sword of the Prophet and of ‘Ali, is represented in the Ottoman period, has no material, or semantic antecedents in Arabic tradition. It has been maintained that ancient Arabic swords were not at all bifid, but double-edged. On the other hand, the trail of the bifid sword led to eastern Asia, via the northern Eurasian area. The northern Eurasian peoples, Scythians, Huns and others, had revered the blades and the metallic element, in conjunction with the cult of an astral war god. The ‘Turks, (including the Oğuz clans) traditional ironmongers, had inherited the rites of the cult of metal (copper and iron), as well as of the oath being sworn over cup and sword. The Oğuz and the Magians, even after Islam, thought that the metallic parts of weapons had fallen from heaven on earth with lightning and thunderbolts. The rite of the oath (and), attested among Turks in the eleventh century, in which the sword was invoked as a vengeful witness, supposes the remnants of earlier belief that the blade was animated with a celestial, or dracontine spirit. The attribution of a male of female character to swords, depending upon the metallic alloyage, had equally persisted down to the Ottoman age.

The ancient concept of a pair of dragon-sword and scissors, as a magic weapon, leads, through geographic vicinity and cultural relations, to China and the early eastern Turks. In ancient China, the scissors were one of the weapons of the god of thunder, as well as of other celestial figures.

12. Ibn Sa’d, Kökbân Tabaqat’ül Kubh, Beyrut, 1380, 485 (early source on Dhu‘l-faqar). On the opinion of specialists, see note 13.
18. See note 16.
19. See note 17.
21. Ibid., 208.
Professor Chi Tang even informed me that the bifid weapon was used by Chinese warriors, to squeeze, or push upwards, the opponent’s sword in order to disarm him.

The scissors, as well as the bifid or double-sword, are mentioned by the encyclopedist Mahmuud Khashgar in the eleventh century (qos-becaq and qos-gilhs). In Turkish iconography the double or bifid sword is found from the seventh-eighth centuries, onwards, in emblematic guise. The numismatist O. N. Smirnova observed a blade-like tamga, on several coins of that period, including one inscribed with the highest Turkish title, qaghan. She relates this form to the Chinese Han-period coins, marked with the magic blade tao. Another Turkish coin of the same age (pl.II/a) shows an undoubted-bifid sword, surmounted by a crescent. The double, or bifid, blade or scissors are equally seen on a petroglyph of the Koko-Turk period, with an attached pennon, as well as on an Uygur mural, in the hand of a demonic genie, and on a Khaqanid ink-pot showing an astral or royal personage.

Dhu'l-faqar was generally represented, in bifid aspect, on the flags of the Ottoman sultans (pl. II/b), of military and naval dignitaries, of Janissary regiments (pl.II/c) and on the flag-pole finials of some dervish orders (pl.IV/c). Real forked swords, on which Prof. N. Goyun kindly documented me, were equally made and presumably used by Ottoman Turks (pl. II/r).

III. THE DRAGON

The dragon, known in old and middle-Turkish under various names, evoked, with the appellation buke, the concept of heroic ardour. It has been noted that, amongst ancient eastern Asian ironmongers, whose craft was inherited by the Koko-Turk, the dragon had mythologic links with blades. The magic swords were thought to be animated by a dragon-spirit.

Like metal, the mettle of weapons, the dragon also was associated with heaven. The Turks, like the Chinese, gave the name of Azure dragon (Koklu, in Turkish), to a constellation whose course constituted a calendar and had thus come to represent the whole sky. As a symbol of heavenly charisma, the dracontine arch figured on the steles of Turkish monarchs of the 8th century. On an Uygur mural, dated between the 9th and 12th centuries, a dragon-head surmounted the curved flag-pole on which the buddha banner (sojra kettu) was represented (pl. IV/a).

Islamic Turkish literature of the 11th century imagined the celestial dragon, then called Evren (the Rotator), as a giant reptile, coiled around the wheel of the ecliptic, which caused its rotation and the succession of days and nights. The literary metaphors indicated Evren as cause of auspicious as well as of undesirable events. As the personification of time, Odleq, the treacherous archer, seems to be another incarnation of Evren. Odleq, first vanquished, but ultimately victorious rival of Arefasab, the ancestor of the primate Turkish dynasty, is called Tonga-al-p-er (the heroic Tiger) in the Turkish version of the epic. Like other combatants in eastern Asia, the dragon, when vanquished, became a servile spirit and trophy. It was perhaps under this aspect that a Timurid painting, whether authentic or not, showed the dragon on the flagpole of the Khazanid dynasty, the scions of Arefasab.

During the Seljuq period, the symbolism of the dragon was expressed, even with minute iconographic distinctions, in art and literature, both in Turkish and Persian. The vivacity of the theme had probably survived through a renewed influx of eastern Asian myths, the bearers of
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which may have been the Uyğur literati, in Mongol service. But the dracotine imperial emblem was then the privilege of Mongol rulers. The dragon-head, as flagpole finial, was used by the Timurids and by Babür.

Ottoman court literature saw the legendary Turkish universal monarch, Afrâsiâb, as well as Mehmed II, the conqueror of Istanbul, as the subduers of the ecliptic’s dragon. A coin of Mehmed II represents the cosmic reptile. In order to the dragon’s traditional link with swords, hilts and blades, as well as the flags of sultans, dignitaries or Janissary regiments, were ornamented with dragons. The dragon, either as emblem of bravery or of the universal monarchy in temporal or spiritual sense, figured also on the flag-pole finials of military persons and of heads of dervish orders.

A military specimen, a brass-work finial from Afyon Qara Hişâr Şâhib, now at the Ankara Etnografya Müzesi, is dated H. 1071/1650 and bears an inscription, wishing victories to the forces of a Mustafa Paşa. The artist, whose name has been tentatively deciphered as Müsâ added a Turkish inscription, beginning with: *Cihan bir ejderHADur.*

Another Seyyid, Mehmed Celâlî, probably one of the heads of the heterodox orders prevalent in Turkey in the 16th and 17th centuries, is depicted on a book-painting, while holding in his hand the çöğen, the stick for riding ball-games, a princely emblem, also used by dervish orders. The çöğen’s curved form and dragon head resembles again the Uygur Buddha’s *vajra-ketu*. The figurative insignia, evocative, of pre-Islamic religions, gradually became obsolete under the impact of Muslim aniconism. The dragon and bifid sword were to be relegated to oblivion. But the crescent and sun, now called a star, remained the perennial emblem of the Turkish nation.

55. N° 487 of the Ankara Etnografya Müzesi, See Köpay (our pl. IV/c).
Plate I

Plate II/a

Plate II/b

Plate II/c
Robert MANTRAN, Images de Galata au XVIIe siècle
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