Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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A Possible Source of 'Tengrism'

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About the Concept of Tengrism

The term Tengrism, although already used in the 1930s by Uno Harva (1938), became known and widespread through the work of the French researcher Jean-Paul Roux (1956, 1957, 1962, 1984). However, only a few thorough analyses and critiques have been published on this topic. Although it is hard to briefly summarise Roux's idea, we can start by claiming that he reconstructed a monotheistic religion, which was characteristic of Turkic and Mongolian peoples at the time when they had attained a higher degree of social organisation. In short: Roux assumed that there had been a kind of monotheistic imperial religion, which centred around the worship of *täñri*, the "sky-god".

I studied in detail the Turkic runic writings of Orkhon, dating from the 8th century, in relation to the religious content of the texts in themselves, excluding potential later data (Dallos 2004). This approach seemed necessary because, although Roux elaborated his theory of Tengrism on the basis of the same body of texts, but because of their type (they are three epic epitaphs), the picture outlined here said rather little about the beliefs or religion underlying the texts. As a result Roux tried to supplement this picture with data that was far-fetched both in time and space. My study then was primarily aimed at exploring whether the picture reconstructed by Roux indeed remained valid, when considering only the writings he used as a starting point.

Although I have formulated a number of criticisms regarding Roux's theory, which I still consider justified today, in my present paper I accept Roux's most important axioms as my starting point. First, I am going to describe the difficulties surrounding the study of this topic, then I will present a source not included in studies on this subject so far and aim to draw some conclusions from it.

About some difficulties in this study

I would like to note that I have not dealt with this topic since 2004, but now I have returned to it in the framework of a Hungarian research project (Silk Road Research Group). Therefore, I have had to outline the questions and issues raised here also because of my own research.

If we presume that there is a monotheistic, imperial religion behind the beliefs reflected in the Orkhon inscriptions, then the researcher is faced with a number of questions to be answered. Here are a few to start with:

a) Where does it originate from? Is it possible to relate it to the religious concepts of the earlier Hsiung-nu (Xiongnu) people(s)? How long did it exist?
b) Did it have any connection with the religious beliefs of local (specifically, Eastern Turkic and, possibly later or even earlier, Mongolian) peoples?
c) Related to this, but posing the question from another angle: did this religious phenomenon belong to the ruling (elite) class only and, bound to the power structure, was it passed on within the ruling classes in the rapidly changing empires of the steppe?
d) Did it have any rituals? If so, were they specifically related to the empire and an elite status?
e) Is it possible to find out anything about its religious nature: did it have any doctrines, were there any symbolic expressions related to it (linguistic and non-linguistic symbols)? Were there any religious activities belonging to it on a daily or holy-day basis? Did they pray to *Täñgri* in the first place?

These questions cannot be answered on the basis of the Orkhon inscriptions only. If, similarly to Roux, we extend the circle of our explorations, we must first deal with the textual relics. Although we do not know for sure which texts constitute the material of our study, we can certainly distinguish between two groups of written sources: internal sources, left behind by those practising Tengrism as a religion, and external ones, written by followers of other religions.

As far as the sources of internal origin are concerned, I would only like to highlight three important ones (which are large enough to draw conclusions from). One of them is the already mentioned Orkhon inscriptions (which can be supplemented with smaller, Old-Turkic runic writings), the second is The Secret History of Mongols, and the third is the Uyghur script (or pre-Islamic) Oguz Name.

In all these works, *Täñgri* features in a privileged place, always with the meaning of 'sky-god'. However, the texts also display several differences. Here are just a few examples. In the Orkhon inscriptions, *Täñri* is described by the epithet *kök* 'blue'; the compound form *kök täñri* occurs in the pre-Islamic Oguz name; whereas in The Secret History of Mongols, *Täñri* is called *möngke* 'eternal', which does not occur in the other two sources in relation to *Täñri*. In the Orkhon inscriptions, it is not mentioned whether they would pray to *Täñgri* or whether

divination would be related to *Täñgri*, but both are mentioned in The Secret History of Mongols and the Uyghur script Oguz Name.

Here, a question of methodology arises. If we presume that the religious background to all three works is Tengrism, how do we explain the differences? Do we only regard the common elements as belonging to Tengrism (and relate the others to some other religion or belief in connection with local beliefs or appearing due to some external religious or cultural influence), or regard all elements as belonging to Tengrism and explain the differences with variations in time and space? In other words, do we accept that there was such a religion, which naturally had its own history and consequently, different versions?

The relationship between internal and external sources comprises another difficulty. As far as the Eastern Turks are concerned, Chinese annals have preserved some extracts belonging to their religious background (such as the two legends of origin of the Turks, the description of the initiation ceremony of the Khagan and burial rites). However, these external sources show no correspondence whatsoever with the Orkhon inscriptions internal to the culture.

About an external source not yet used

Despite the difficulties, we cannot rule out external sources. This is partly because there are very few internal sources and partly because descriptions by external observers may contain a lot of valuable information, even if they are heavily biased.

In the case of the Hsiung-nu and Eastern Turks, we primarily have Chinese sources at our disposal, whereas there are several different European and Middle Eastern sources providing important data about the later Mongolian and other – Turkic-language – peoples.

For the time being, all we can do is study the available external and internal sources from as many points of view and as thoroughly as possible. (Just a few items for the agenda: the thorough philological and religious-ethnological study of the texts presumed to belong to Tengrism, while tracing changes of the meanings of the terms and expressions used in the texts.) External sources also have to be collected as widely as possible (it has not happened yet) and analysed in great detail. Another thing to keep in mind: when analysing external sources, we must be aware of the cultural background of the given text and the traditions characteristic of the given text type. For example, medieval Muslim geographical and historical sources mention in relation to several peoples that they are "fire worshippers". This, however, does not mean that all of them are Zoroastrians; in fact, Muslim authors use this term to describe religious forms and belief systems which do not follow any of the distinct religions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism or Buddhism) known to them. In terms of European concepts, it could best be interpreted as 'pagan'.

In relation to Tengrism, research has so far concentrated mainly on Chinese and Muslim sources, but I found some very interesting data in a hitherto less studied group: in Syrian sources. At first sight, the data itself appears too short and insignificant. What is more, we cannot be certain of the time of its origin. Although its author is known, it is not known where he obtained the information in question.

Michael Syrus (the Syrian) was an Eastern Christian (Syrian Orthodox), Jacobite patriarch living between 1126 and 1199. He became patriarch in 1166 and wrote an extensive Chronicle consisting of 21 volumes.[1] This Chronicle is basically a church history, but it also includes a world chronicle in the middle of the three columns which he divided his work into. He devoted the second chapter of his 14th book to the description of the lifestyle of the Turks (in the source: *Tūrkāy*). In the last two sentences of this part, he talks about the religion of the Turks as follows:

> "They believe there to be one god in the sky, but ignorantly, because they regard the visible firmament as god. They have no knowledge of anything else, nor are they capable of listening to any other idea." (Kmoskó 2004: 222)[2]

Even though this source is reticent, it is also very interesting, as it summarises as briefly yet as succinctly as possible what we know or believe to know about Tengrism. Nevertheless, the evaluation of this source is not problem-free. Like other Syrian-Christian chroniclers, Michael Syrus used a lot of earlier sources in his work without providing the origin of his data. Michael Syrus primarily writes about the exodus of the Seljuks from their original abode (that is, about his own age and the period immediately preceding it), but he also includes excerpts from older works in his Chronicle (see e.g. Ginkel 1998, 2006), such as the writings of 6th century Joannes Ephesus or Pseudo Zacharias Rethor. Although he lists a number of authors and works that he used, he does not indicate these in the given text locations.

In fact, it is not clear which period the above-quoted source originates from or which it relates to. Yet we consider it important, as we learn something significant about the once-existing Tengrism of a (once-existing) Turkic people. For the sake of evaluation, here is another short quote from the work:

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1 Full text with comments and French translation was published by Chabot (1899-1910).

2 My translations (this and next one) are based on Kmoskó's Hungarian translation from Syriac (Kmoskó 2004). In his MPhil Dissertation Mark Dickens translates this part as: "They proclaim one God of the heavens, without knowing [him], thinking that that which is the visible firmament is God and they are not conscious of another thing (i.e. anything else) and they do not perceive or understand [anything else]" (Dickens 2004: 52). It is worth mentioning that Michael's Chronicle was translated into Armenian in the Middle Ages, and we know dozens of Armenian versions – translations and abridgements. One of them renders this part as: "They worship one god, and call him Ko'k'tanghri which means 'blue god', because they believe that the sky is a god" (Bedrosial n.d.: 171; see also Schmidt 2013).

> "... they are not used to making their clothing from linen and cotton, but their clothes and tents are made of the wool of sheep and the hair of goats. It is their special skill to tame livestock and animals in a way that, despite the multitude of horses, oxen and sheep filling their camp, they are able to drive them without any disruptions." (Kmoskó 2004: 222)

This is a description of a nomadic community, and by no means the description of a nomadic elite. Syrus, wherever and from whichever period he obtained this information, described a nomadic camp, concluding by saying that "They believe there to be one god in the sky, but ignorantly, because they regard the visible firmament as god."

I have always doubted Roux's claim in his theory that Tengrism was a kind of imperial religion. However, I have only had indirect evidence for this, namely, that the word *Täñgri* has remained in all the Turkic languages to this day (see Doerfer 1965: 577–585) and it is related to the transcendent in some way. Just to give one example: every Turkic-language people that has converted to a monotheistic religion uses the word *täñri* (or its present-day variation) as one of the names of God. A narrow elite, always changing in its composition and spanning over a millennium in time and thousands of kilometres in space, cannot have ensured the survival of this tradition. This source is another piece of evidence that the "blue sky", and the "sky-god", sometimes totally identified with it and sometimes related to it in a metaphorical sense, was one of the fundamental religious experiences of the nomadic Turks of the steppes.

The sky, which includes some transcendent feature in almost every religion, probably carried the experience of the supernatural even more strongly for nomadic peoples. The nomads of the steppes lived in constant locomotion between their winter and summer abodes, so their homes were not stable or bound to a single place. As opposed to and as a counterpart to this, above the steppes, there was always the unreachable, boundless, ever-changing yet eternal Sky.

Naturally, climate, lifestyle and the social structure are all factors which influence the beliefs or religion of a given human community. The phenomenon we call Tengrism may have obtained some extra meaning from legitimation by the imperial leader during a specific period, but this imperial faith was by no means independent of and certainly was not able to break away from the basic experience relating to the sky all day, every day.

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