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A new interpretation of omen 27 of the Irk Bitig

Irk Bitig'in 27. Falının Yeni Bir Yorumu

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Since the first edition of the Irk Bitig (Thomsen 1912), several scholars have worked on the analysis of the texts, primarily from a linguistic point of view. Some of the short stories in the omens are clear and easy to understand, but there are also many that are grammatically or semantically rather problematic. The meaning of the 27th omen is relatively clear and easy to analyse. In the translations so far, controversy has arisen over the precise meaning of only one word. Some translators have interpreted the Old Turkic verb *ämsi-* as a simulative form of the verb *äm-* 'to suck / suckle', but in fact there are no other examples of such a deverbal verb formative. Although the linguistically verifiable verb *ämsi-* 'to cure / medicate', derived from the noun *äm* 'medicine', was raised as a possibility, it was rejected as semantically unacceptable and incompatible with the text. In this article, I offer a new interpretation of the omen, and show that the previous interpretations were based on a premise (in the case of the sheep and the wolf, good and evil could only be manifested in the opposition of 'good sheep – bad wolf'), which was in fact induced by the cultural background of the interpreters, and which may not be taken for granted in the case of the old Turks.

Key Words: Old Turkic, Irk Bitig, divination, Omen 27.

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I. Introduction

In the field of historical cultural studies, there is an almost insurmountable difficulty: even if the researcher tries to temporarily suspend the perspectives and interpretative concepts of their own time and culture, and interpret the given phenomenon within the framework of the given time and culture, they cannot succeed entirely, since they can never completely step out of their own culture. Thus, their interpretation, often unwittingly, and perhaps even without realising it, is often misguided. I would like to give an example of this in the context of the interpretation of the 27th omen of the Irk Bitig.¹

The Irk Bitig is a small booklet written in runiform script (13.1 x 8.1 cm in its current form), found by Aurel Stein in 1909 while excavating the Thousand Buddha cave temples in Dunhuang. The small book consists of fifty-eight sheets of Chinese-made paper, folded in half and glued together, on which the Old Turkic text is written in black and red Indian ink. Furthermore, two Chinese Buddhist texts were later written on the first and last few blank pages before, after and slightly overlapping the Old Turkic text.² The Irk Bitig contains 65 divinations, a short concluding section and a colophon. The divinations begin with a numerical code, followed by a brief description of a situation, genre picture or story and, in most cases, an assessment of whether the omen is good or bad (or in some cases, very good or very bad, and some omens lack this concluding part).

The Old Turkic text in Latin transliteration, with English translation, was first published by Wilhelm Thomsen in 1912; then, with some minor modifications, in Turkish by Orkun (1936-1941);³ in Russian by Malov (1951) and in Japanese by Ikeda (1984). Talat Tekin published the text in a separate volume with several important corrections, English translation and facsimile in 1993. Yakovlev also published the text in a separate volume, with a Russian translation and a less precise philological apparatus in 2004. Most recently, Yıldırım

¹ In the article, I give the Old Turkic names and titles in their English form; I use the international Turkological transliteration only for linguistic data.

² All former authors held the same opinion, but recently Imre Galambos expressed a different position in the case of the colophon: he believes it was the Old Turkic text that was written later (2022: 88).

³ The Irk Bitig is in the second volume on pages 70-96 (on pages numbered continually through all four volumes: 262-288).

published it in Turkish translation, based on the literature to date (2017); and Garkavec in Russian (2022). The morphological analysis of the complete text was carried out by Nevskaya under the supervision of Erdal, and was published together with the English translation on the website *Vorislamische Alttürkische Texte : Elektronisches Corpus*.⁴ Important linguistic and interpretative corrections to several (but not all) passages have been published by Clauson (1961, 1972)⁵ and Erdal (1978, 1997). In addition, several articles have been written on the interpretation of certain omens or even of certain words contained in them.⁶

The text of the situations and stories contained in each omen is very concise, and no attempt has yet been made to define their genre. Some of the texts seem to suggest a longer epic genre (such as a tale or *saga*), others a single, momentary situation. The interpretation of these passages is often not easy even at the linguistic level, and it seems almost impossible to map their cultural background. In this article, I will try to describe the difficulties of reading and interpreting a single divination, a sentence from the twenty-seventh omen and, along with the results of previous research, present a new interpretation of this omen.

II. Omen No27

First, I will present the omen in its transliterated (letter by letter) and its transcribed (interpreted) form, followed by a morphological analysis and its translations so far. In the case of the transliterated text, the folio number, the abbreviation of the recto or verso page and the line number are indicated in brackets:

⁴ In several places in the literature, this analysis, which can only be found on the Internet, is referred to as Vatec, so I will proceed in the same way.

⁵ Clauson, in his Old Turkic dictionary (1972) gives a translation of almost the entire Irk Bitig – although only in small units of phrases and clauses.

⁶ Just a few examples: the colophon was analysed in detail by Hamilton 1975; Omen 12 by Molnár 1996; Omen 40 by Ünal 2022.

Transliteration

(25 r2) b¹y¹ : r² : k¹Uñl : (25 r3) Ür²k²Üpn² : (25 r4) b¹r¹mIs² : b²Ü (25 r5) r²Ik²A : s¹Uk¹ (25 r6) Us¹mIs² : b²Ü (25 r7) r²l : g¹zl : m (25 r8) s²ImIs² : s²n² : (25 r9) t²Üük¹l² : b¹Ul¹m (26 v¹) mIs² : t²Ir² : (26 v2) nčA : b²Il²Iñ (26 v3) l²r² : d²g²Ü : (26 v4) Ul¹ :

Transcription

b(a)y (ä)r qoñi ürküp(ä)n b(a)rmış börikä soqušmiš böri (a)ğ(i)zi (ä)msimiš (ä)s(ä)n tük(ä)l bolmiš ter (a)nča bilinl(ä)r (ä)dgü ol

Morphological analysis

[rich man sheepPOSS3SG frightenedGER goPST wolfDAT meetPST wolf mouthPOSS3SG ?PST sound healthy isPST sayAOR itEQT knowIMP2PLU good it]

Previous (significant) translations:

Author	Translations
Thomsen, 1912: 201	A rich man's sheep took fright and went away. It met a wolf. The wolf's mouth (still) sucked (?). (The sheep) was hale and hearty. Know ye this. This is good.
Orkun, 1936-41: 272	(...) zengin adam kuyonu ürküp varmış kurda rastlamış kurdun ağzı sulanmış sağ, keyifli olmuştur bunu biliniz iyidir bu (...)
Malov, 1951: 87	Говорят: овца богача, испугавшись, побежала и столкнулась с волком. Волк сосал у нее (молоко). Она осталась совсем благополучна (жива). Так знайте – это хорошо.
Clauson, 1961: 5	A rich man's sheep took fright and ran away. They encountered a wolf. The wolf's mouth began to water. (Omission?) It (or they) was (or were) safe and sound. Know that this is a good omen.
Clauson, 1972: 164, 248	A rich man's sheep ran away in a fright and met a wolf. The wolf's mouth watered [...] healthy and complete; safe and sound [...]
Tekin, 1993: 15	A rich man's sheep went away in a fright. It met a wolf. The wolf's mouth (somehow) got poisonous. (Thus, the sheep) became safe and sound, it says. Know thus: (The omen) is good.
Vatec ⁷	A rich man's sheep went away in a fright. It met a wolf. The wolf's mouth got (...) (The sheep) became safe and sound. (Thus) it says. Know thus: that is good.

⁷ Vatec: <https://vatec2.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de> (February 2, 2024.)

Yıldırım, 2013: 29-30 ⁸	(Fal şöyle) der: «Zengin bir adamın koyunu ürküp kaçmış. (Koyun) bir kurda rastlamış. Kurdun ağzı zehirlenmiş. (Koyun böylece) sağ salim kalmış.» „Öylece biliniz: (Bu fal) iyidir.”
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III. Interpretation

This omen is one of the relatively easy ones to understand. In fact, there is only one word, (*ä*)*msimiš*, which has caused problems in previous translations. Furthermore, in the sentence after the one containing the word of doubtful meaning, the researchers inserted a subject originally not included in it. First of all, let us look at the meaning of the verb *ämsi-*.

Clauson, in his etymological dictionary, discusses the verb *ämsi-* as a hapax legomenon and the simulative form of the verb *äm-* ‘to suck, to suckle’ (1972: 155, 164). Thomsen had previously interpreted the word in a similar way, albeit questioningly, adding to the translation that the context here suggested that it could most likely mean that the wolf was toothless or lacking some teeth, and therefore unable to bite, and so it sucked its mouth (1912: 201, 212-213). Malov’s solution is that the wolf was sucking milk from the sheep – perhaps an even stranger explanation than the previous one.⁹ Orkun’s and Clauson’s translations suggest some kind of mouth-watering, which is again difficult to interpret (both linguistically and semantically). All these solutions were rejected by Erdal because in Old Turkic there was in fact no deverbal verb formative {+sI-} (or +sX-) (1978: 98).¹⁰ There is, however, a denominative verb formative {+sI-} in Old Turkic,¹¹ of which there are several examples in Maḥmūd al-Kāšyarī’s work (Dankoff & Kelly, 1982-1985). But in that case, the word would have a completely different base and meaning. There is a noun *äm* ‘medicine, remedy’ from which

⁸ Although the dissertation was later published in print (Yıldırım, 2017), for ease of access, in my article I quote from the dissertation in its digital format.

⁹ This interpretation was also adopted by Garkavec (2022: 40).

¹⁰ This deverbal verb formative is discussed by Gabain (1950: 82) and Clauson (1972: xliv), but both of them can only give this single data (*ämsi-*) as an example, so we can certainly agree with Erdal’s opinion that this formative did not really exist.

¹¹ These were summarised by Erdal (1991: 534-535). He tries to associate some specific function with the formative, which he also considers a kind of simulative: „the object named is altered from its original state and takes on the nature of what serves as base for it”. Even though Erdal’s definition is somewhat complicated, it does not seem to apply to all the examples he gives. In any case, this formative deserves further investigation.

the verb *ämsi-* ‘to cure, to heal’ may be derived. Erdal, however, finds this possibility meaningless in the context of this omen (1978: 98). A new possibility was put forward by Tekin who, on the basis of a Yakut verb (*ämtiy*), suggests that the Old Turkic verb could have the meaning ‘to be poisoned’ (1993: 15, 36). Although there is indeed such a verb form in the Yakut language, it is a later derived form of the word *äm* ‘medicine, remedy’.¹²

To sum up, one of the difficulties of the interpretations so far is that they start from a non-existent verb form, which is still not suitable for a clear translation of the sentence. This is compounded by the fact that, according to previous translations, the following sentence (‘it was safe and sound’) must be considered incomplete, ‘accidentally’ missing the subject, the sheep. There is, however, a linguistically perfectly explicable, clear verb derived from a noun (*ämsi-* ‘heal’ or ‘as if to heal’), which the translators either ignored or rejected as not fitting into the text. If we distance ourselves from this interpretation, we can see that, on the contrary, the verb ‘healed’ is followed by the sentence ‘it became safe and sound’, which fits perfectly. But what, then, is causing all this misunderstanding? The wolf.

So far, only Clauson has explained why the subject of the sentence ‘It was safe and sound’ should be the sheep, and thus why the Old Turkic text is incomplete here. According to Clauson (and presumably other translators, too), the reason is that the omen ends with the phrase: ‘Know ye it is good’, and an encounter between a sheep and a wolf can only end well if the sheep escapes (1961: 5).¹³ Clauson’s interpretation is understandable – at least from a European perspective. But is it equally clear in a 10th-century Eastern Old Turkic work? I think that to answer this question, it is worth proceeding at two levels: on the

¹² In the Yakut language, the word *äm* ‘medicine’ has a relatively extensive word family (cf. Pekarskiy, 1907: 262). In the majority of Turkic languages, the equivalents of the Old Turkic *äm* have retained their meaning ‘medicine’; at the same time, in some languages, like in Yakut, secondary meanings of the word appeared, such as ‘healing (the process itself)’, ‘quackery’ and ‘drug’ (cf. Sevortyan, 1974: 270). In addition, this interpretation of the word (which Yıldırım also adopted from Tekin) is questioned by the fact that the noun and verb *ayu* ‘poison’ and *ayuq-* ‘to be poisoned’ already existed in Old Turkic at the time of the creation of our source (cf. Clauson, 1972: 78, 83).

¹³ Yıldırım also gives a similar explanation later (2013: 114), although he tries to support Tekin’s translation with it.

one hand, by examining the Irk Bitig, or other Omen texts, and on the other, by taking a broader view of the images attached to the wolf in early Turkic culture.

In the Irk Bitig, several of the omens include some kind of animal; many of them have one or two animals as ‘protagonists’ (and the number of these is even slightly higher than of the divinations involving humans). Most of the animals are wild, a much smaller number are domestic, and there are also mythical animals. In addition, it is important to note that parallel (and, to a lesser extent, opposite) structures are common within and between omens, and should be taken into account when interpreting Omen 27.

There are two divinations that may be particularly relevant to our analysis. One is Omen 31, in which a leopard goes hunting. „[...] He found prey-food. Happy and rejoicing, he comes to his den, it says. Know ye it is good”. So, if a predator finds prey, it may be a good omen, i.e. the phrase at the end of the omen is not based on a contrast between „bad predator” and „good prey”. This omen, by the way, bears a resemblance to Omen 30, where a poor young man goes to buy goods, his purchase is successful, and he returns home happy. The text thus suggests a parallel rather than a contrast between the man and the predatory beast.

The other divination worth considering is Omen 49: “A leopard went to get wild prey. In an open place he met a wild mountain goat. The spotted wild mountain goat went leaping on a barren rock. Having escaped death, it rejoices, happy, it says. Know ye it is good”. Apparently, this little story would support the earlier interpretations, as the goat eventually flees from the hunting leopard. But, as we have seen above, there is also an opposite omen. In addition, there is another feature of this omen, which relates to the structure of the story. This omen does not begin with the same animal about which the final phrase is formulated. Here, we first see the leopard, which is ultimately left without prey, and in Omen 27, we see the sheep, which in turn becomes the prey of the wolf. The final phrase of both omens is positive (“Know ye it is good”), i.e., the outcome of the story, the good or bad nature of the omen, is not seen in terms of the animal that first appears in the story. This way of telling the story is perhaps surprising, mainly because of its conciseness, but we can see that it is not unprecedented.

No less important for our topic is the role of the wolf in the culture of the early Turkic-speaking peoples.¹⁴ During the Türk period, the wolf appears in three different functions and contexts. The mythical ancestor of the Türks was a wolf; the top of the khagan's flag staff was decorated with a golden, wolf-headed finial (which was later also used by the Uighurs for a time); and the leaders of the khagan's bodyguards were also called 'wolves' – all of which we know from descriptions in Chinese sources.¹⁵ Although we have no written sources of internal origin, the top of the Bugut inscription of the first Turkic khaganate shows a relief of a she-wolf nursing children. In the Turkic runiform inscriptions of Orkhon, which are the first group of written texts in Turkic, the word 'wolf' appears in one place. The wolf and the sheep appear together on the memorials to Bilge Khagan and Köl Tegin: „The army of my father, the khagan was like a wolf, that of the enemy like a sheep” (line 12 of the eastern side of the Köl Tegin inscription, line 11 of the eastern side of the Bilge Khagan inscription). The words *böri* 'wolf' and *qon* 'sheep' are used here in the same form as in the Irk Bitig.

The simile used in the text of the Turkic inscription clearly shows that there is no aversion to the wolf even in the wolf : sheep opposition; in fact, the wolf is rather a symbol of masculinity, heroism and courage. This is illustrated by another statement in Maḥmūd al-Kāṣṣarī's dictionary: the sex of the newborn child was asked „Is it a wolf or a fox?” (Dankoff & Kelly, 1982–1985: I/266), where wolf meant a male child. In the narratives of Turkic heritage, the wolf continued to appear as a mythical helper for centuries, for example in the Uyghur *Oguz Nāme*,¹⁶ and in the narratives about the Cumans,¹⁷ who ruled the Western Eurasian step.

¹⁴ There is extensive literature on this; here are only a few important works with additional literature: Clauson, 1961; Tryjarski, 1979; Golden, 1997; Roux, 2011: 57–59. It is worth noting that in this article Clauson expresses his doubts as to the totemic nature of the wolf among the early Turks, and even the existence of a wolf cult. However, his examples are not always convincing - the subject deserves a separate study.

¹⁵ Collection of Chinese sources on the Turks: Liu Mau-Tsai, 1958.

¹⁶ Latest edition: Danka, 2019.

¹⁷ *Povest' vremennyh let* (or *The Russian Primary Chronicle*), of which several Russian editions (one of the latest reliable editions: Likhachev & Tvorogov, 2012: 161) and foreign language translations (probably the most used English translation: Cross & Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 1953: 196) have been published.

While these examples cannot be linked to the Uyghur community that presumably recorded the Irk Bitig in writing, they do demonstrate how widespread in time and space the positive image of the wolf was among the early Turkic peoples. Thus, the reinterpretation of the linguistically clear meaning of Omen 27 in previous research is not supported by cultural historical arguments, either.¹⁸ I myself would give a crude translation of the Omen as follows: „A rich man’s sheep was frightened and went away. He met a wolf. The wolf’s mouth healed. It became healthy and sound [i.e., it ate its fill], it says. Know ye it is good”. Also, if we take into account Erdal’s +sI- formative data, the sentence in question, containing the verb *ämsi-*, could perhaps be translated as follows: „It was as if he cured the wolf’s mouth / He had medicine for the wolf’s mouth, so to speak”.

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¹⁸ We can add to this that although all previous researchers of the Irk Bitig considered it to have a specifically Turkic (and “pagan”) background (for example: Thomsen, 1912: 194; Clauson, 1964: 5), at the same time our analysis does not seem indefensible even if we assume some Buddhist influence in the background of the text. Perhaps it is enough here to refer to the Legend of the Hungry Tiger, which was preserved in the 10th century Uighur translation of the Golden Light Sutra (*Altun Yaruq Sudur*) (cf. Zieme, 1996; Uçar & Demiryakan, 2024). I am grateful to András Róna-Tas, who drew my attention to this approach.

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