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The Identity of Silzibul, the Early Monarch of Western Turks

Batı Türklerinin Erken Dönem Hükümdarı Silzibul'un Kimliği

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Silzibul, the early monarch of the Western Turks, can be identified as neither the İstemı Qaghan, nor the Western Junior Qaghan of the Eastern Turks, Bulı Qaghan. The name Silzibul cannot be decomposed into Silzi+bul, but should be decomposed into Sil+zibul. Its exact etymology comes from the Persian *srčypwk, which means "Lord Yabghu". It is a Hephthalite style name given by the Persian monarch to the early Turkic monarch. A lot of evidence shows that Silzibul's true identity should be the son of İstemı and the brother of Tardu. Silzibul and Mughan Qaghan are not uncle and nephew but cousins. In the early days of the establishment of the Turkic state, the most powerful and critical founders were not the first-generation brothers Bumın and İstemı, but the second-generation cousins Mughan and Silzibul. The two conquered and pacified the Mongolian Plateau and Central Asia respectively and reigned for almost the same period, when the Eastern and Western Turkic countries were in a state of relatively independence and non-interference most of the time but supporting each other occasionally.

Key Words: Silzibul, İstemı, Tardu, Western Turkic, Yabghu, title, genealogy.

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1. Introduction: Silzibul is not Ištemi Qaghan

Mainly based on Chavannes' research, the theory that the early Western Turkic monarch Silzibul was identified as Ištemi Qaghan has been the academic mainstream for a long time (Chavannes 1903: 226-228; Marquart 1901: 216-217; Markwart 1938: 147; Cen 1958a: 946; Cen 1958b: 110-119; Matsuda 1970: 248-259; Uchida 1975: 411, 432-434; Naito 1988: 385, 398-399; Wu 1988: 116; Wu 1998: 15; Golden 1992: 127; Yu 2012a: 130-131; Ren 2013: 73; Zhu 2015a: 50-51; Meng & Yu 2022: 166). However, opinions against this theory have always existed, which cannot be ignored in any case. Naito Midori had noticed in her research on historical materials related to the East Roman-Turkish negotiations that it was strange that Chavannes interpreted the Greek word *omaimon* 'relative' describing the relationship between Tardu and Turxanth as 'half-brother', because Greek often uses the word *'adelphos* to explicitly indicate the kinship of siblings. Another suspicious point is that the Silzibul's funeral was conducted by Turxanth rather than Tardu. If Tardu was indeed the son of Silzibul, as the new monarch who inherited the power and status of the Great Qaghan, it is difficult to understand that Tardu did not preside over the funeral of his father Silzibul. However, with the help of her explanation of ancient Scythian burial customs and her trust in the reliability of Chinese historical records guaranteed by the close relationship between the Tang Dynasty and Western Turks, Naito finally recognized Chavannes' theory (Naito 1988: 394-395, 404).

In contrast, the objections from Denis Sinor were firmer and more stable. He realized early on that the correct interpretation of the Greek word *omaimon* was crucial. Because if it is interpreted as "brother", then based on the two premises that Turxanth was the son of Silzibul and Tardu was the son of Ištemi, it is inevitable to identify Silzibul and Ištemi as the same person. However, in addition to doubting whether *omaimon* can be interpreted as "brother", there is also other evidence against this interpretation. Firstly, the pronunciation difference between *Silzibul* and *Ištemi* is too large. It is basically impossible for them to be different transliterations of the same name, especially when the name *Stembis* has been found in Byzantine Greek documents. Secondly, it seems unreasonable that Tardu did not attend Silzibul's funeral. Since Chinese historical materials did not record that Ištemi had other sons besides Tardu, then if Silzibul is really Ištemi, one of the two founding fathers of the Turkic Khanate,

and his name was still revered two hundred years later, then his son Tardu should officiate at his funeral. Therefore, it is wise not to identify Silzibul with Ištēmi as the same person (Sinor 1990: 304-305). In the relevant part of *History of Central Asian Civilizations*, Sinor once again emphasized this opinion and clearly pointed out that it was wrong to identify the Turkic monarch Silzibul as Ištēmi (*Stembis* in Greek historical materials) (Sinor & Klyashtorny 1996: 333).

Newer objections come from Meng Kaizhuo and Yu Zixuan, who proposed after detailed argumentation: “Judging from three perspectives: the character relationships recorded in Greek text, the name of *Shidianmi* 室點密 recorded in Chinese text, and the phonetic identification, Silzibul and Ištēmi cannot be identified as the same person at all” (Meng & Yu 2022: 168); based on the internal political structure of the early Turkic Khanate’s east-west integration, Silzibul was not a Western Turkic monarch independent of the Great Qaghan, but should probably be identified as the Western Qaghan Buli 步離 in the Mughan Qaghan era; as for Ištēmi, if he really existed, he may have only participated in the early Turkic conquest of Rouran and had nothing to do with the Turkic later foreign wars. Moreover, he should have died at the time of the conquest of Rouran or shortly after, so other contemporary historical materials rarely mentioned him (Meng & Yu 2022: 184-185).

The reason why the above objections cannot be ignored is that Chavannes’ identification was in fact relatively fragile, and its argument could hardly withstand scrutiny. It is indeed difficult to establish that Silzibul and Ištēmi are the same person. On the other hand, in the absence of strong evidence, it is not appropriate for us to rashly deny relevant records in Chinese historical materials about the ancestry and genealogy of Western Turkic Qaghans. The evidence for Ištēmi’s existence should be relatively solid, and Tardu must be Ištēmi’s son. So, if Silzibul in western historical materials was not Ištēmi, what was his relationship with Ištēmi and Tardu? This paper will first review the theory that Silzibul was Buli Qaghan, and then analyze the etymology of the name Silzibul, combined with the latest research results on Western Turkic genealogy, propose a new hypothesis of Silzibul’s true identity, hoping to be helpful to the advancement of research on Silzibul’s identification.

2. Silzibul is not Buli Qaghan

Meng Kaizhuo and Yu Zixuan proposed that the Western Qaghan Silzibul and the Buli Qaghan in the Mughan era were probably the same person. One of the bases for this view is that the last syllable *bul* in *Silzibul* can correspond to *Buli* (*bɔ^h-liə/li), and as for the etymology of the prefix *Silzi / Siza*, it is considered untestable for the time being, “because we do not understand the etymology of most of the names of the First Turkic Khanate” (Meng & Yu 2022: 184). However, no matter from which perspective, this speculation is difficult to establish. In Chinese historical materials, the identity of Buli Qaghan during the Mughan¹ Qaghan era is unknown, and there is no direct record of his residence. The conclusion that he ruled the West actually came from the “reconstruction of later historians.” Although Buli in the Mughan era appeared in several historical materials, they were only related to the same event, that is, the allied forces of Turkic and Northern Zhou Dynasty attacked Northern Qi Dynasty in 563-564, when Mughan led Ditou and Buli, a total of three Qaghans and 100,000 cavalries, and joined forces with the Northern Zhou Dynasty army to attack the northwest border of Northern Qi Dynasty (*Zhoushu* 19.318; *Beishi* 11.398; *Cefuyuangui* 447.5043; *Zizhitongjian* 169.5237). However, none of the relevant historical materials recorded which areas were ruled by Buli Qaghan under Mughan. It was only Hu Sanxing of the Yuan Dynasty mentioned that “Buli Qaghan ruled the west” in his annotations for *Zizhitongjian* (169.5237). Hu was more than 700 years away from the early Turkic era in the 6th century, so on what basis did he conclude that Buli Qaghan of the Mughan era ruled the west? We believe that Hu was unlikely to have encountered other materials on this issue that had been later lost. His relevant annotation was probably derived from a combined analogical reasoning based on the information provided by these two records: Buli Qaghan in Tabo era lived in the west (*Suishu* 84.1865; *Beishi* 99.3290; *Tongdian* 197.5404; *Zizhitongjian* 171.5314), and Ditou Qaghan in Mughan era lived in the east (*Zhoushu* 33.571). Therefore, the view that Buli Qaghan lived in the west during the Mughan era is not supported by direct historical evidence. It is more

¹ The correct Chinese translation of the Turkic Qaghan’s name “*Mugan* 木杆” should be restored to “*Muhan* 木汗/木扞”, and the turkic form should be “*Mughan*”, see Chen 2022: 43-49. This paper is generally written as “*Mughan*” unless it quotes the original text of historical materials and related discussions.

based on the “reconstruction of later historians”, and its credibility is questionable; to say the least, even if it is a relatively reasonable inference that Buli Qaghan lived in the west during the Mughan era, it is still difficult to connect him with Silzibul, the Western Turkic ruler of the same period.

On this issue, Lin Chaomin’s research is of great reference value. He clearly pointed out that in 563, the Turks had set up separate Qaghans to rule the east and west, but only within the scope of the East Turkic Khanate. Ditou and Buli were both Junior Qaghans who were subordinate to the Great Qaghan Mughan, and later Shetu and Noudan were also subordinate to the great Qaghan Tabo. Among them, the western Qaghan had no connection with the Qaghans of the Ištemi lineage of the Western Turks; moreover, words such as “xifang 西方” and “ximian 西面” were not special nouns with specific meanings, but general locative words. They can refer to either the Western Turkic Khanate or the western region under the control of the “Western Qaghan” in the Eastern Turkic Khanate. Such phenomenon of “same name but different reality” should attract our special attention (Lin 1982: 213-214). In addition, Ren Baolei’s views are also worthy of attention. When discussing the Turkic situation during the Mughan Qaghan period, he pointed out that before the Turkic Civil War, the Ištemi lineage rarely participated in the affairs of the Bumīn lineage from which the Great Qaghans came, while the two Great Qaghans, Mughan and Tabo, both had relatively close control over Buli Qaghan. From these two points, Buli Qaghan should not be of the Ištemi lineage, but he may indeed be located in the “west” of the East Turkic Khanate. The land belonged to him may be located in Altai Mountains area between the Great Qaghan’s court in Khangai Mountains and the royal court of the Ištemi lineage in the west, and he was responsible for controlling the Qigu and Tiele tribes. In this way, during the Mughan period, the Turkic Khanate had four major Qaghans who ruled four regions, which coincides with the situation recorded in *The History of Menander the Guardsman* in which Maniakh, the Turkic envoy to Eastern Rome in 568, said that the Turkic country was divided into four parts (Ren 2013: 74-76; Naito 1988: 386; Wang 1982: 22).

In fact, the more important reason why Silzibul and Buli Qaghan cannot be identified as the same person is that they appeared in different spaces far apart in the same time frame, and each shouldered very different important missions and responsibilities. This makes attempts to identify the two as the same person

will encounter great difficulties. For Silzibul, his reign of about twenty years basically coincided with that of Mughan Qaghan, both from the 550s to the 570s. The main achievements of Mughan Qaghan, according to the records of *Zhou Shu*, were “defeated Yanda to the west, drove away Qitan to the east, conquered Qigu to the north, and subdued all the countries outside the Great Wall” (*Zhoushu* 50.909). Most scholars believe that the actual executor of “defeating Yanda to the west” should be Silzibul, and only because he was nominally subordinate to the Great Qaghan, the matter was attributed to Mughan (Chavannes 1903: 227; Ma 1957: 18; Uchida 1975: 411-412; Wu 1988: 117; Yu 2012a: 128-132). From this, a rough distinction can be made. Silzibul’s main achievement is to pacify the Hephthalite, a powerful country in the Western Region and Central Asia, while Mughan’s main achievement is to suppress the remaining Rouran forces on the Mongolian Plateau and to overwhelm Qitan, Qigu and other surrounding powers. Based on the recent academic research on “Letter from a Turkic Qaghan to Emperor Maurice” (de la Vaissière 2010: 219-224; de la Vaissière 2015: 91-102; Meng & Yu 2022: 177-181; Chen 2023: 41-50), the achievements of Mughan and Silzibul can also be supplemented and detailed. Because Niri was the grandson of Mughan, the narrative of Letter regarded the Mughan lineage as the orthodox of the Turkic Great Qaghan, while the Ixiji lineage represented by Dulan (Turum) was regarded as a usurper, but sufficient respect was shown for Ištemi Qaghan (Stembis Chagan) (Chen 2023: 41-44). Observing from the standpoint and perspective of the Mughan lineage as the orthodox, Ištemi Qaghan seemed to be another relatively independent Qaghan. He joined forces with the Great Qaghan (i.e. Bumīn, the father of Mughan) to conquer Rouran (Avar), followed by the Turkic Khanate’s conquest of Yeda (Abdeli/Hephthalite) and Ogur (Meng & Yu 2022: 178-179). In fact, as far as the latter two opponents were concerned, it was basically impossible for the Turkic monarchs who conquered them to be Bumīn and Ištemi, but should mainly be attributed to Mughan and Silzibul. On the one hand, the conquest and pacification of the Hephthalites lasted from the mid-550s to the late 560s.² Most of the major military operations were initiated and

² Scholars have slightly different opinions on the specific time when the Turks defeated the Hephthalite. The representative views are listed below: Chavannes believed that the demise of Hephthalite should be between 563 and 567 (Chavannes 1903: 226); Yu believed that the Western Turks destroyed Hephthalite before 558, and from 562 to 567, they swept away the remnants of Hephthalite in the north of the Amu Darya River (Yu 2012a: 127-128); Sinor believed that the

implemented by the Silzibul side. The Mughan side only joined forces with Northern Zhou Dynasty to attack Tuyuhun in the early 556 year, which may be regarded as cooperation and support for Silzibul's conquest of the Hephthalites in the Western Regions (Xu 2004: 26; Liu 2013: 28; Wang 2015: 15-16). On the other hand, the conquest of Ogur can be seen as an extension of the pursuit of the remnants of Rouran and its defeated subordinates. In the east, one of the remaining Rouran tribes fled to Mucri (= Goguryeo, see Feng 2016: 98-101), which may have triggered Mughan's attack on Qitan, and the later annexation of Qigu may also include the pacification of most of the Tiele tribes on the Mongolian plateau. These Tiele tribes were the eastern branch of the Ogur alliance; as for the western branch of the Ogur alliance, it was mixed with the Avar remnants of Rouran who moved westward, and Silzibul was mainly responsible for pursuing and suppressing them. *The History of Menander the Guardsman* recorded that in 563, when Askel, the leader of the Western Turks, sent an envoy to Byzantium, quoting the declaration of Qaghan Silzibul, he predicted that an operation to hunt down the remnants of Avar would be launched immediately after the destruction of Hephthalite. In 568 the Western Turkic Qaghan Silzibul officially sent an envoy to Byzantium, there were still 20,000 Avar defectors who had not surrendered to the Turks (Blockley 1985: 45-47, 115-117; Harmatta 1962: 131-150; Uchida 1975: 411-412; Yu 2012a: 126; Yu 2012b: 319-321). This material showed that from 563 to 568, Silzibul had been busy conquering and pursuing the southern Hephthalite countries and the remnants of Rouran's westward movement. The areas where his army operated were mainly distributed in the Amu Darya River Valley in Central Asia, the Kazakh Steppe, the Volga River Valley and even Ukraine plain. During almost the same period from 563 to 568, Mughan had been busy cooperating with the Northern Zhou Dynasty to attack

Hephthalite was destroyed between 557 and 561 (Sinor 1990: 301); Litvinsky believed that the Central Asian kingdom of Hephthalite ended between 560 and 563 (Litvinsky 1996: 143); Felfoldi believed that the Persians launched an attack on Hephthalite in 557-558, the Turks joined the campaign before 561 (or 558), the Persian attack was completed in 561, and the Turkic attack ended before 568-569 (Felfoldi 2002: 63-87); Xu Xia believed that the demise of the Hephthalite was between 556 and 567, and the large-scale Turkic wars against the Hephthalite were mainly concentrated between 565 and 567 (Xu 2004: 26-27); Mishin believed that the decisive war that led to the collapse of the Hephthalite state occurred between 558 and 561 (Mishin 2014: 587); Wang estimated the demise of the Hephthalite Kingdom in August-September 556 (Wang 2015: 18-19); Meng and Yu believed that the Turks conquered Hephthalite in 559-560 (Meng & Yu 2022: 182).

the Northern Qi Dynasty, interspersed with which was the marriage between the Northern Zhou Dynasty and the Turks. In the end, Mughan's daughter married the Emperor Wu and became the Empress of Northern Zhou Dynasty (Zhu 2015b: 309-312; Zhao 2022: 157-162). During this period, the only time Buli Qaghan appeared in historical records was among the 100,000 Turkic cavalries commanded by Mughan in 563-564, in the northern part of the Shanxi Plateau. Then, considering the huge distance in geographical space, it is extremely unreasonable to regard Buli Qaghan, who focused on the eastern conquest of Northern Qi Dynasty, and Silzibul, who focused on the western conquest of Hephthalite and the remnants of Rouran, as the same person (Xu 2004: 26; Liu 2013: 28). As can be seen from the above, it is almost impossible to identify Silzibul as the Buli Qaghan who ruled the west under Mughan Qaghan.

Based on the above inference, we can re-examine the incident in the fourth year of Tianbao (564) in Northern Zhou Dynasty when the monk Daopan went west to seek Dharma and was blocked by the Turkic Qaghan in the west. As mentioned above, from 563 to 565, the Turkic Mughan was in a period of extremely close relations with Northern Zhou Dynasty. His two Junior Qaghans, Ditou and Buli, were under his command and directly participated in the attack on the Northern Qi Dynasty. Buli had a relatively close subordinate relationship with Mughan, and his residence should not be too far from Northern Qi Dynasty. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Western Qaghan west of Gaochang who prevented Daopan from continuing westward in 564 was the Buli Qaghan under Mughan. The reason is that Daopan held the passport credentials of both Northern Zhou Dynasty and Gaochang (Daoxuan 2014: 407). At that time, Northern Zhou Dynasty had close relations with the Turks, and the two parties were negotiating a marriage. Mughan's daughter was about to marry Emperor Wu of Zhou. And Gaochang was also a vassal state of the Turks, and the king of Gaochang had already been Mughan's son-in-law (Wang 2000: 435-441; Xue 2007: 123-124). If the Western Qaghan west of Gaochang directly obeyed Mughan, then he would have no reason to refuse Daopan's westward journey. On the other hand, the court of the Western Turkic Qaghan Silzibul was most likely located in the Ili Valley west of Gaochang (Ren 2013: 74-76, 85-99), and the year 564 was a critical period when Silzibul swept away the remaining Hephthalite principalities in the north and south of the Hindu Kush Mountains (Wang 2015:

19). Although the main body of the Hephthalite country had just been destroyed and divided by the Western Turks and Sassanid Persians, the territory formerly belonging to the Hephthalites in the northern part of the upper reaches of the Amu Darya River allocated to the Western Turks was still unstable (Uchida 1975: 447-448; Ghafurov 2020: 224, 226). Daopan's destination for seeking Dharma on his westward journey was in places such as Gandhara in northwest India, so his route will inevitably pass through the upper reaches of the Amu Darya River and the remaining Hephthalite principalities in the north and south of the Hindu Kush Mountains. Therefore, the destination and planned route of Daopan and his party will definitely arouse the suspicion of the Western Turks. In connection with the Hephthalite envoys going to pay tribute to the Northern Zhou Dynasty in 558 (*Zhoushu* 4.55), it would be rather difficult for Daopan to rule out the suspicion of being a spy or a potential spy. Even if he denied, it was hard to exclude that he would objectively play a role in communicating and transmitting intelligence between China and Central Asia. Therefore, the Western Turks did not allow Daopan to travel to the west through its territory, which was equivalent to a kind of wartime "traffic control", that is, the act of blocking traffic in local areas during the war. For Silzibul, his affiliation with Mughan was far less close (only nominal obedience), and at that time, he was focusing on the relatively independent important military operation of conquering the remnants of the Central Asian Hephthalites and the Avar and Ogur tribes who fled west, so, out of national security considerations, it is understandable that he refused to allow Daopan to pass. This also proved once again that the Western Qaghan who appeared west of Gaochang in 564 is unlikely to be the Buli Qaghan under the command of the Turkic Great Qaghan Mughan, who was not directly related to the Hephthalites in Central Asia, but is more likely to be the Western Turkic Qaghan Silzibul who established his court in the Ili Valley between 550s and 576 in Western historical materials.

3. The etymology of the name *Silzibul*

When analyzing the etymology of the names related to Silzibul, Meng Kaizhuo and Yu Zixuan pointed out that the Arabic transliteration *Sinjibū* experienced a longer chain of translation and transmission, and was less reliable than the Greek transliteration (Meng & Yu 2022: 184). To examine the reliability

of the Greek transliteration *Silzibul* / *Sizabul*, we need to further analyze the more precise etymology of the related names.

Harmatta discussed in detail the languages used in envoy negotiations between Turks and Byzantines. According to his research, when the two countries first came into contact in 563, given the difficulty of finding diplomatic translators who were proficient in both Turkic and Greek, they must have had to rely on an intermediate translator, but the intermediary language of this translator was not Sogdian but Persian. The main basis for this inference was that the name *Kirmixyōn* for the Turkic people recorded by Byzantium at that time actually came from Persian (Harmatta 1962: 146-150). Accordingly, the Persian form of the name *Silzibul* was clearly superior to the Greek form in retaining its originality. Harmatta pointed out that there were two main forms of the name of the Western Turkic monarch *Silzibul* recorded by Byzantium, which came from two envoys five years apart. The first was that in 563, the leader of the Western Turkic tribe *Askel* sent an envoy to Byzantium and mentioned that his Qaghan was named *Silziboulos* / *Σιλζιβουλος*. The second was that in 568, *Silzibul* sent the Sogdian leader *Maniakh* as an envoy to Byzantium and mentioned that his Qaghan was named *Sizaboulos* / *Σιζάβουλος* (Harmatta 1962: 135, 146-150). As for the other form of *Dizaboulos* besides the above two, it had been basically recognized as a corruption of *Sizaboulos*, so it will not be discussed (Markwart 1938: 147; Golden 1980: 188; Moravcsik 1983: 276; Blockley 1985: 262; Dobrovits 2008: 70). Harmatta also found that for the two different forms *Silziboulos* / *Σιλζιβουλος* and *Sizaboulos* / *Σιζάβουλος*, the slight difference between them cannot be explained as a spelling error, since both forms occurred multiple times each and were not confused with each other in the text, so they must have different sources (Harmatta 1962: 135). After careful analysis, Harmatta deduced that *Silziboulos* / *Σιλζιβουλος* came from Persian, and the original form is **Siljiβu* or **Siljiβuy*. Considering the /r~/l/ sound change that was quite common in Middle Persian, it can be further restored to **Sirjiβuy*, and because the /r/ before /ž/, /š/, /ts/, /s/, /n/ in Sogdian will fall off, it became **Sijaβu* or **Sižaβu* after entering Sogdian, and then entered Greek and was recorded as *Sizaboulos* / *Σιζάβουλος*. Such conclusion was also consistent with the fact that *Maniakh*, the Turkic envoy to Byzantium in 568, was a Sogdian leader (Harmatta 1962: 148-150).

Both *Silziboulos* / Σιλζιβουλος from Persian and *Sizaboulos* / Σιζάβουλος from Sogdian had the Greek suffix {-ος} added after entering Byzantine documents, still without a generally accepted and reasonable explanation for the {-λ} at the end of the word after removing {-ος} (Golden 1980: 189). Nevertheless, this issue can be left to professional linguists for further research and does not affect the purpose of this article. It should be noted that this {-λ} was only found in the Byzantine Greek form. However, as mentioned above, for the study of the etymology of Silzibul's name, the more valuable reference was actually the Persian form - both the Greek form and the later Arabic form *Sinjibū* were derived from the Persian form. Based on Harmatta's research, *Silzibul* came from Middle Persian *sr/nčypw/yk* < **srčypwk* (**Sirjīβuy*) (Harmatta 1962: 148). Newer research shows that this word can be split into two parts: *sr* (*sir/sri*) and *čypwk* (*jīβuy*). The first part was the common title prefix of the Hephthalite leader, which meant 'Your Highness, Your Majesty'. The second part was the senior official title *Yavuka* commonly seen in Kushan, Hephthalite and other Central Asian ancient tribes, which became *Yabghu* in the Turkic era (Dobrovits 2004: 111-114; Dobrovits 2008: 73-78). Therefore, the Persian name **srčypwk* can be interpreted as "Lord Yabghu", which may come from the Persians' honorific name for Silzibul. The first Persian monarch to encounter Silzibul was Khusrau I Anushirvan, who came to the throne in 531. His father Kavad had a strong Hephthalite background. He ascended the throne with the help of the Hephthalite army, also served as a hostage in Hephthalite for a long time and married a Hephthalite princess (Yu 2012a: 224; Litvinsky 1996: 140; Ghafurov 2020: 218-219; Ma 2008: 509; Mishin 2014: 306, 311-316; Long 2021: 192-193, 203). He was deeply influenced by Hephthalite culture, so Anushirvan should be no stranger to Hephthalite. Then, in the eyes of the Persian monarch at that time, the Turks, who had become rapidly powerful recently, were another barbarian tribe that emerged behind the Hephthalites. They belonged to the same category as the Hephthalites, and their titles and names were often close to those of the Hephthalites. Therefore, Anushirvan's name for the Turkic monarch may be due to a Hephthalite imitation, **srčypwk* 'Lord Yabghu' may have originally been a relatively common Hephthalite title. The Persian monarch in the 550s probably could not have anticipated that the Turks would later develop into an extremely powerful empire. This Persian name first appeared in the Sasanian Persian court

and was later introduced to the Byzantine court by Persian and Sogdian translators thus became *Silziboulos* / Σιλζιβουλος and *Sizaboulos* / Σιζάβουλος. Various other linguistic forms, including Arabic *Sinjibū*, can also be traced back to this word.

We can also provide circumstantial evidence that the Western Turkic monarch Silzibul was indeed called *Yabghu*. In the narrative of Narshakhi's *History of Bukhara* in which the Sogdians requested Turkic aid to overthrow the tyranny of Abruī whose prototype was generally considered to be the last Hephthalite monarch Wrz, who was killed by the Turkic Qaghan Sinjibū (i.e. Silzibul) in the decisive battle of Bukhara. Therefore, the prototype of the Turkic leader Qara Čorin recorded in the *History of Bukhara* was likely to be Silzibul. Narshakhi recorded that the person who directly executed Abruī was Šeri Kišwar, son of Qara Čorin. The latter's rule lasted for twenty years, but he was merely the ruler of Bukhara. His father Qara Čorin was the supreme monarch of Western Turks at that time, so it is more reasonable to identify Qara Čorin's prototype with Silzibul, and in the records of *History of Bukhara*, Qara Čorin happened to be called *Yabghu* (Marquart 1901: 308-309; Markwart 1938: 145-147). The prototype of Šeri Kišwar may be a son sent by Silzibul to the Sogdian region with Bukhara as its capital after the Turks defeated the Hephthalites. The first part of his name, *Šeri*, may have the same origin as *sir/šyr/sri*, which may also provide evidence for comparing the prototype of Qara Čorin to Silzibul; at the same time, if {-in} was regarded as a certain suffix and the etymology of *Qara Čorin* may be restored to *Qara Čor*, then in addition to *Yabghu* "Yehu", Silzibul may have another high-ranking Turkic official title *Qara Čor* "Keluo Chuo 珂羅啜" (Han 1982: 309; Naito 1988: 139-140).

The prefix honorific title *sr* (*sir/sri*) was popular in Hephthalite and Persia and other places. It mainly inherited an Indo-Iranian tradition.³ When the Turks defeated the Hephthalites and ruled the Sogdian region in the north, the status

³ Famous Hephthalite leaders such as Khingila and Toramana all had the prefix honorific title *śri*. The leaders of the Turkic Shahi dynasty also commonly used titles such as *śri shaho* (His Majesty the King) and *śri tagino shaho* (His Highness the Prince). This title appeared in large numbers in the titles of the rulers of various successive dynasties of Hephthalite in Tochara and Gandhara. The texts used include Brahmi, Bactrian and Medieval Persian, see Litvinsky 1996: 147, 167, 170, 171, 174, 175, 176, 370, 376, 377, 380, 390.

of the Sogdians in the Turkic court began to rise, and *sr* (*sir/sri*) gradually gave way to the parallel Sogdian title $\beta\gamma$ (Dobrovits 2008: 77). In the Sogdian part of the Bugut Stele written in the 580s, two famous early Turkic Qaghans, Mughan (*mwy'n*) and Tatpar (*t'tp'r*, = Tabo), both had the prefix honorific title $\beta\gamma$ (Yoshida 2019: 104-105). The famous Qaghan Ton Yabghu (= Tong Yehu) in the late Western Turkic period also had the prefix honorific title $\beta\gamma$ in some of the Sogdian inscriptions on the coins he issued (Babayarov 2007). Here, the title $\beta\gamma$ *cpyw* of Ton Yabghu Qaghan can be seen as a parallel translation of the title **sir čypwk* of the famous early Qaghan Silzibul. The literal meaning of both was “Lord Yabghu”. The honorific titles of the two famous Qaghans in the early and late Western Turkic periods were related to the honorific title of *Yabghu*, the senior official title of the Western Turks. This can also explain why historical materials sometimes used *Yabghu* or *Yabghu Turk* to refer to the Western Turks, and the Western Turkic Qaghan was often directly called *Yabghu* (Chavannes 1903: 95-96; Duan 1988: 66; Lu et al. 1996: 60-61).

Based on the hypothesis that Chavannes identified Silzibul as Ištēmi, Cen Zhongmian proposed that Ištēmi's honorific title was “Si Yehu”, and the key point was that “Si” was regarded as the Chinese transliteration of *sil/sir* (Cen 1958b: 116-119). However, the Middle Chinese **si* in “Si” did not have the final stop consonant -t, so its correspondence with *sil/sir* was not strict (Pulleyblank 1991: 292; Guo 2010: 96). More solid evidence came from numismatic materials. The coins of Si Yehu, the son of Tong Yehu, had been basically confirmed. The Sogdian inscription on them had been read as *'yrpy 'šβ'r' sy cpyw x'γ'n*, which corresponded to the complete name recorded in Chinese historical materials *Yipi Shaboluo Si Yehu Kehan* (Babayar 2017: 105-115, No. 3-4), among which the word before *cpyw* “Yehu” should definitely be read as *sy*, and there was no letter *r* in it. See Figure 1 for the line drawing of the coin containing the inscription *sy cpyw* (Babayar 2017: 115, Fig. III-4, 12); see Figure 2 for a clearer photo of it (Babayar 2017: 115, Fig. II-18)⁴. Therefore, Chinese “Si” (Middle Chinese **si*) was the exact Chinese transliteration of Sogdian *sy*, so the correspondence between it and *sil/sir* was difficult to establish. On the other hand, as mentioned before, another Greek form *sizabulos* in Byzantine documents came from the Sogdian

⁴ <https://www.zeno.ru/showfull.php?photo=105742>.

intermediary. The /l/ in *sil* was dropped because it came before /z/. This was due to the pronunciation rules of Sogdian. Then it was also conceivable that the Hephthalite title **srčypwk*, which originated from Persian, may evolve into a form such as **sycpyw* after entering the Sogdian language, and the Chinese transliteration *Si Yehu* may come from this. However, although the above-mentioned origin relationship may exist between the two, it is not accurate to say that the Chinese transliteration of the name *Silzibul* is *Si Yehu*.

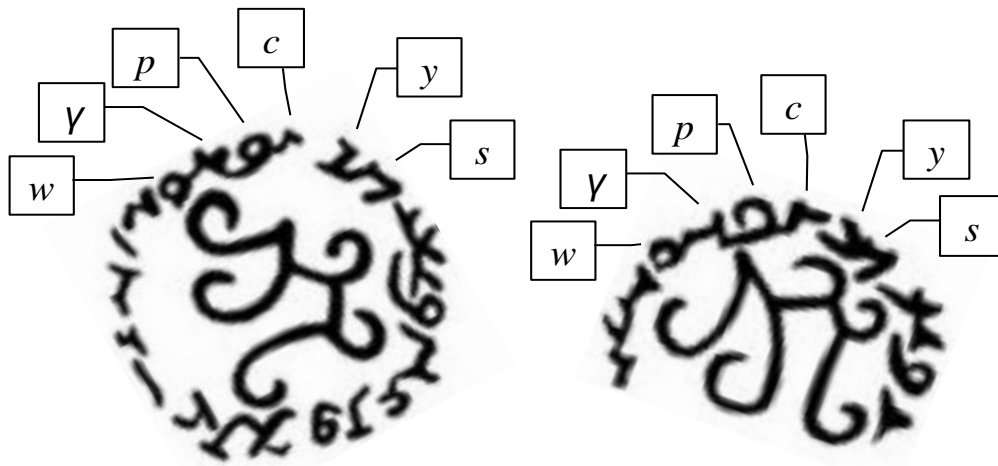


Fig. 1

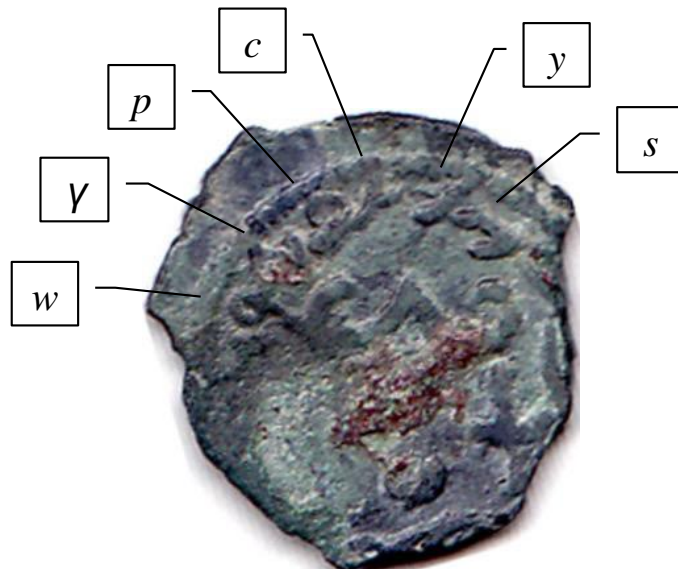


Fig. 2

4. The identity of Silzibul

As mentioned before, when stating the reasons for refusing to identify Silzibul with Ištemi, Sinor pointed out that Chinese historical materials did not record that Ištemi had other sons besides Tardu (Sinor 1990: 305). The purpose of raising this point was to use the method of proof by contradiction, that is, if it was believed that Ištemi was Silzibul, and Chinese historical materials did not record that Ištemi had any other sons besides Tardu, then it conflicted with the record that Silzibul had another son Turxanth besides Tardu. Therefore, Ištemi cannot be identified with Silzibul. However, the absence of records does not mean that it does not exist. Sinor's above argument was relatively weak and had limited persuasiveness. Regarding the assertion that Ištemi had other sons besides Tardu, although there were no direct records in Chinese historical materials, there were some indirect clues and some evidence from other sources that can be used for reference. Hence, we can find that the proof by contradiction used by Sinor did not hold.

Suishu and *Beishi* mentioned that Tardu sent “dizi Qilifa” when attacking Qimin (*Suishu* 84.1873; *Beishi* 99.3309). The same event was also found in Volume 179 of *Zizhitongjian*. The “dizi” in it should be understood as “son of younger brother”, so it can be seen that Tardu had another brother. On the other hand, there was evidence that Ashina Mishe, who was recorded as the fifth-generation grandson of Ištemi Qaghan in *Tangshu* and *Tongdian*, came from a non-Tardu lineage. When Mishe was mentioned for the first time in the *Yupi Lidai Tongjian Jilan*, it was noted that Mishe was “the fifth generation of clan grandson of Tardu Qaghan” (*Sikuquanshu* Edition 52.4; Ma 2002: 5248). According to this calculation, Mishe should be the sixth-generation grandson of Ištemi Qaghan. The inconsistency can be explained using two different generation calculation algorithms, “including himself” and “excluding himself” (Cen 1958b: 121-123). However, being called a “clan grandson” naturally refers to non-direct descendants, which showed that Mishe's direct ancestor was not Tardu, but Tardu's brother. In addition, there was also evidence that Ashina Helu, who was recorded as another fifth-generation grandson of Ištemi Qaghan in *Xin Tang Shu*, came from a non-Tardu lineage. When Helu was mentioned for the first time in the *Yupi Lidai Tongjian Jilan*, it was noted that Helu was “the great-great-nephew of Tardu Qaghan” (*Sikuquanshu* Edition 51.54; Ma 2002: 5224). According to its

calculation, Helu was the great-great-grandson of Ištemi Qaghan, which was equivalent to understanding the fifth-generation grandson as the great-great-grandson. This was because it used the generation calculation method that included himself; however, since he was called “great-great-nephew”, it obviously also referred to non-direct descendants, which also showed that Helu’s direct ancestor was not Tardu, but Tardu’s brother. In addition, according to newer research on coin legend interpretation and tamga analysis, Moheduo Hou Quli Qipi Qaghan (莫賀咄侯屈利俟毗可汗), Chach King Tegin line, and a certain Ferghana Qaghan line may all come from the non-Tardu line of the Ištemi lineage of Western Turks, and their ancestors were all Tardu’s brother (Chen 2025). Many of the above clues indicated that Ištemi, the founder of the Western Turks, did have other sons besides Tardu, and furthermore, the non-Tardu line was powerful enough to compete with the Tardu line.

In the process of Chavannes’s identification and argumentation, the most critical link was to interpret the Greek word *omaimon* as “half-brother”. In other words, the record that Tardu was Turxanth’s *omaimon* was understood by Chavannes to mean that Tardu is Turxanth’s half-brother. However, Meng Kaizhuo and Yu Zixuan have pointed out that Chavannes’ explanation was not valid. “*Omaimon* was most likely the Byzantine mission’s translation of the Turkic word *äči* ‘elder brother, paternal cousin or paternal uncle’” (Meng & Yu 2022: 185). Then, what kind of kinship relationship should be understood by the Turkic word *äči* here becomes the key to determine the true identity of Silzibul and his son Turxanth. According to the argument earlier in this article, Silzibul was neither Ištemi nor Buli Qaghan, and his reign was between Ištemi and Tardu. The above evidence indicates that, Ištemi also had other sons besides Tardu, and the non-Tardu forces were still quite powerful. Then, just think of *omaimon* as the calque of the Turkic *äči*, and restore it to ‘patrilineal uncle’ i.e. ‘father’s brother’, and you can understand that Tardu was the paternal uncle of Silzibul’s son Turxanth. Therefore, Silzibul was actually Tardu’s elder brother.⁵ In other words, Silzibul’s true identity was not Ištemi, but the eldest son of Ištemi. At the same time, he

⁵ According to Mas’udi, when the Turkic king Khakan (namely Silzibul) formed an alliance with the Persian monarch to conquer Hephthalite, he married his daughter and his brother’s daughter to the Persian monarch Khusrau I Anushirvan. This record proved that Silzibul had a brother, and this brother may be Tardu; See Mas’udi 1863: 200.

was also the ancestor of the non-Tardu line. Correspondingly, Tong Yehu's uncle Moheduo (莫賀咄) was also from a non-Tardu line (Chen 2025), and his genealogy can be revised to Turxanth's brother, another son of Silzibul. The genealogy of Silzibul is shown in Figure 3.

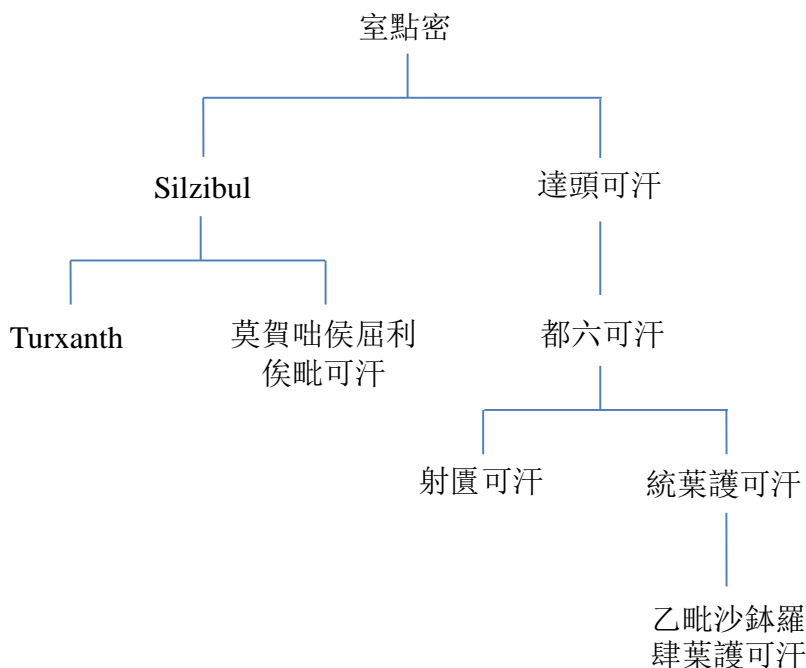


Fig. 3

5. Epilogue: Early East-West Turkic relations and Western Turkic internal divisions

After determining the identity and genealogy of Silzibul, we can provide a new understanding of the East-West relationship in the early history of the Turks and the emergence of internal divisions in the Western Turks. In the early days of the establishment of the Turkic state, the most powerful and critical founders were not actually the first-generation brothers Bumin and Ištemi, but the second-generation brothers Mughan and Silzibul. The two were cousins, each conquered and pacified the Mongolian Plateau and the Central Asia, and were almost in the same era: they both ascended the throne in the 550s until their death in the 570s, and their reigns lasted about twenty years, and the throne was not passed on to their sons but to their younger brothers - Mughan passed to Tabo, and Silzibul passed to Tardu. After Tabo's death, the Turks fell into a civil war that lasted for twenty years. After that, the Eastern and Western Turks were

officially separated, and the thrones of both sides were transferred to other lineages: the Qaghan position of the Eastern Turks fell into the Yixiji lineage (Qimin), and the Qaghan position of the Western Turks returned to the Tardu lineage (Shegui).

From 530s, when the Turks first emerged (Uchida 1975: 431; Meng & Yu 2022: 166), to 580s, when the Turks split and civil war broke out, the total period of about fifty years can be divided into two stages. The first stage was from 530s to 550s, when the first-generation Turkic leaders Bumīn and Ištemi brothers founded the country. At that time, Rouran and Gaoche were fighting each other, and both sides suffered losses. The new Turks took the opportunity to subdue the remaining troops of Gaoche, overthrew Rouran and replaced them, becoming the overlord of the Mongolian plateau. The second stage was from 550s to 570s. As Bumīn and Ištemi died one after another, the second-generation cousins Mughan and Silzibul came to the throne. They began to be independent and did not interfere with each other, but occasionally supported each other. Mughan in the east pacified the rest of Rouran and surrounding strong tribes such as Tuyuhun, Qitan, Qigu, etc. Silzibul in the west conquered Hephthalite, competed with Persia, and became the overlord of Central Asia. After 581, marked by the death of Tabo, the east entered the third generation, while the west was still ruled by the second-generation Tardu. The succession struggle in the east caused divisions, and Mughan's son Apa turned to Tardu for help. The west gradually intervened in the internal affairs of the east, ushering in the era of Turkic civil war. In the second stage, the Eastern and Western Turks occasionally supported and cooperated in larger external conquests, but they basically did not interfere in each other's internal affairs, that is, they generally did not intervene (at least on the surface) in each other's internal succession affairs.

For example, when Silzibul was conquering the Hephthalites in the west, Mughan borrowed the road to join forces with the Western Wei to attack Tuyuhun in the south in 556. This move can be regarded as an eastern support for Silzibul's westward expedition to the Hephthalites. For another example, when the Northern Qi Dynasty fell, Tardu's attack on Jiuquan may have been a response to Tabo's request to provide support from the west, in an attempt to help the restoration of Northern Qi Dynasty (Uchida 1975: 447-448); and Tardu

and Tabo were also cousins of the same generation. However, the death of Tabo in 581 was a key turning point, because the succeeding Qaghan already belonged to the third generation of the next generation. After that, the East Turks gradually divided themselves, and the Tardu of the West Turks upgraded to the elder generation, and he gradually started to establish a pattern of interfering in the internal affairs of the east, and finally developed the ambition to become the highest Qaghan in the entire Turkic Khanate. After the collapse of his rule on the Mongolian Plateau in 603, Tardu fled to Tuyuhun and ended up unknown. His grandson Shegui was temporarily attached to the command of Mughan's great-grandson Chuluo. Finally, in 610, with the help of the Sui Dynasty's canonization, Shegui defeated Chuluo and expelled him eastward, and the rule of the Ištemi lineage over the Western Turks was restored. From then on, the Eastern and Western Turks were officially separated.

For the Eastern Turks, the succession of the Khanate from the second to the third generation once caused violent divisions and turmoil, so much so that the civil war spread throughout the entire Khanate and lasted for about twenty years. Similarly, for the Western Turks, Tardu's death also marked the end of rule of the second generation. However, since he had fled the Mongolian Plateau at that time, the remaining remnants were involved in the struggle with the Mughan lineage and the Yixiji lineage for the highest Qaghan in the entire Turkic Khanate. Therefore, Dulu, the son of Tardu, the third generation of the Ištemi lineage, also had to temporarily accept the leadership of Niri, the grandson of Mughan. This relationship of high and low status continued to the next generation of both parties – Dulu's son Shegui was also attached to Niri's son Chuluo for a time (Chen 2023: 27-31, 50-51). As the fourth-generation ruler of Western Turks, Shegui's subsequent eastward defeat of Chuluo is generally available in historical data. However, within the Ištemi lineage before that, as the second-generation meritorious Qaghan and Tardu's eldest brother, Silzibil had huge influence and political legacy, and the power group formed around his descendants should not be underestimated. When they finally accepted and surrendered to Shegui's leadership, they would inevitably have to go through an arduous struggle and game - the result gradually developed into the separation of the left and right wings of the Western Turks in the future (Chen 2025), and then integrated into the confrontation between the northern and southern courts within the Western

Turkic Khanate. The detailed restoration of this process and subsequent evolution still requires further in-depth research in the future.

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