

## On the Titles *Ten-si* and *Kan* in the Irk Bitig\*

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**Abstract:** Irk Bitig is an Old Turkic omen book which was written with Old Turkic Runic script at the beginning of the X<sup>th</sup> century. Although this book mainly reflects the nomadic-steppe Turkic culture, it contains some Manichaean elements, like the words *dintar*, *manistan*. Irk Bitig also has a few Chinese origin words. One of them is the title *ten-si*. Along with this Chinese ruler title there is a title, *kan* which is much more widespread in Turkic government tradition. Up to now, researchers have not sufficiently laid stress on the place of the title *ten-si* in the Irk Bitig. In this article, we will focus on the place of the title *ten-si* in Turkic culture and compare this title with the title *kan* in terms of their functions in the Irk Bitig.

**Keywords:** Irk Bitig, Ten-si, Kan, Teđri, son of heaven, Ongi inscription, Taryat (Terhin) inscription.

## Irk Bitig’de *Ten-si* ve *Kan* Unvanları Üzerine

**Özet:** Irk Bitig, X. yüzyılın başlarında Eski Türk Runik yazı ile yazılmış Eski Türkçe fal kitabıdır. Bu kitap temelde Türk göçebe-bozkır kültürünü yansıtmısına rağmen *dintar*, *manistan* sözcüklerinde görüldüğü gibi Maniheizt öğeler de barındırmaktadır. Irk Bitig’de aynı zamanda birkaç Çince kökenli sözcük de bulunmaktadır. Bunlardan birisi *ten-si* unvanıdır. Bu Çince hükümdar unvanı ile birlikte Türk yönetim geleneğinde çok daha yaygın olan *kan* unvanını da Irk Bitig’de görmekteyiz. Arařtırmacılar *ten-si* unvanının Irk Bitig’deki yeri üzerinde bugüne kadar yeterince durmamışlardır. Biz bu yazımızda *ten-si* unvanının Türk kültüründeki yeri üzerinde durup bu unvan ile *kan* unvanını Irk Bitig’deki işlevleri açısından karşılařtıracamız.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Irk Bitig, Ten-si, Kan, Teđri, göğün (tanrının) ođlu, Ongi yazıtı, Taryat (Terhin) yazıtı.

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In the Old Turkic cultural environment we encounter a lot of administrative or military titles that are not Turkic origin mostly. The title *kan* “ruler” is one of them. There are a lot of attempts to find the etymological background of this word in relation with the titles *kagan* “ruler or supreme ruler”, *katun* “*kan*’s wife” and *kagatun* “*kagan*’s wife”.<sup>1</sup> Actually, among scholars main agreement on this word’s etymology is just that the title *kan* is not a Turkic word.

Our principal goal in this article is not to deal with the etymology of the title *kan* and the title *ten-si* (天子 *tian-zi*) “son of heaven *namely* Chinese emperor”. I want to take the attentions for especially use of the title *ten-si* with respect to the title *kan* in the Old Turkic Runic text, Irk Bitig.

Irk Bitig is an interesting text in terms of its content, the environment in which it was written and the omen pattern used in it. Firstly, scholars concord on the point that Irk Bitig is not a translation from any foreign language.<sup>2</sup> It reflects the Turkic culture, mainly steppe life with some signs of sedentary lifestyle. By the way, in the Irk Bitig, one can either see the omen (#18) which talks about nomadic life’s main element “a tent” or the omen (#9) which talks about sedentary life’s element “a house”:

#### Omen 18.<sup>3</sup>

*kerekü : içi : ne : teg : ol : tügünüki* (Omen) says that: What is the inside of  
: *ne : teg : ol : köznüki : ne : teg :* the tent frame like? What is its smoke  
*körklüg : ol : egni : neteg : edgü : ol* hole like? What is its window like? It  
: *bağışı ne : teg : bar : ol : tēr : ança* is beautiful. How is its roof? It is good.  
: *biliñler : añug : edgü : ol : :* How are its ropes? They link (the tent).

Know thus: it (the omen) is very good.

#### Omen 9.<sup>4</sup>

*ulug : ev : örtenmiş : katıña* : (Omen says that:) A big house was  
*tegi : kalmaduk : bükiñe : tegi :* burnt down. Neither a *flat* nor a corner  
*kodm<ađ>uk : tēr : ança : biliñler :* of the house remained.  
: *yavlak : ol : :* Know thus: It (the omen) is bad.

Actually, the house that was burnt down in the omen nine is not an ordinary one. In this omen, because of the existence of the word *kat* “flat” in relation to the word *ev* “house” we can infer that this house had at least two flats. And, this feature of the house also gives us a clue about the development of the

1 For details see Vovin 2007.

2 See Thomsen 1912: 194, Erdal 1997: 66 and Tekin 1993: 3.

3 Aydın, et al. 2013: 366-367.

4 *ibid.*, p. 364-365.

Turkic civilization in terms of sedentary life.

Irk Bitig has nearly five hundred word entries, and among them only 14 words are originally foreign:

1. *burua* “omen” < Middle Persian *murwāg* [mwlw’k’ | Manichaean Middle Persian *mwrw’*, (early) New Persian *murwā*] “omen” MacKenzie, 1986, 57. (Colophon)
2. *çintan* “sandal tree” < Sanskrit चन्दन *kand-ana* (*caṇḍana*) “sandal tree, wood, powder, or ointment” MacDonell, 1893, 91c. Also see EDPT, 425a., entry *çintan*. (Omen 4)
3. *dintar* “monk” < Sogdian *δynd’r* “religious, priest, monk, electus” Gharib, 2004, 149b., entry 3772. (Colophon)
4. *guruşd*<sup>5</sup> “(?) sun; proper name” < (?) Middle Persian *hurhşyd*, *hwrhşyd* “sun” Durkin-Meisterernst, 2004, 369b. (Colophon)
5. *kan* “ruler, khan” < (?) Hsiung-nu language \**qā* “ruler”, see Vovin 2007. (Omen 28, 34, 63)
6. *kunçuy* “princess” < Chinese 公主 *gong zhu* “daughter of the emperor” Giles, entries 6568 and 2526. Also see Hucker, 1985, 291b., entry 3408; EDPT, 635a., entry *kunçuy*; Ölmez, 1999, 59. (Omen 5)
7. *manistan* “monastery, Manichaean monastery” < Manichaean Parthian *m’nyst’n* “dwelling place, monastery” (under the entry *mān* “house, palace”) Nyberg, 1974, 124b. Also see MacKenzie, 1986, 54, *mānistan* “= entries *māndan*” and *mānişt* “abode, dwelling”. (Colophon)
8. *sañun* “high-ranking military title, general” < Chinese 將軍 *jiang jun* “army commander, general” Giles, 1912, entries 1212 and 3276. Also see Hucker, 140a., entry 694; EDPT, 840a., entry *sañun/seqün*. (Colophon)
9. *taloy* “sea, ocean” < (?) Chinese 大壘 *da lei* Giles, 1912, entries 10470 and 6843. Also see EDPT, 502a., entry *taluy*. (Omen 3)
10. *tan* “skin, body” < Middle Persian *tan* [tn’ | same in the Manichaean Middle Persian and (early) New Persian] “body, person” MacKenzie, 1986, 81. Also see EDPT, 510a., entry *tan* (2). (Omen 3)
11. *taygüntan* “name of a monastery” < Chinese 大雲堂 *da-yun tang* “Grand cloud residence [or school]” Hamilton, 1975, 14. See Giles, 1912, entries 10470, 13812 and 10760. (Colophon)

5 Although we read this word as *guru* (*eşidip*) in Aydın, et al. (2013: 378), Zieme’s proposal (2001: 378) *guruşd* (< *hurş(i)d*) as a proper noun is much more appropriate in terms of the context of the Irk Bitig’s colophon.

12. *tenri* “god, heaven; sky” < (?) Chinese 天理 *tian-li* (Klaproth, 1820, 9). See Giles 1912, entries 11208 and 6879. (Omen 2, 12, 15, 17, 20, 38, 44, 47, 48, 52, 54<sup>(2)</sup>, 60)
13. *tensi* “‘Son of Heaven’ namely Chinese emperor” < Chinese 天子 *tian-zi* (*t’iēn-tzū*) “Son of Heaven: from Zhou on, a standard reference to the supreme ruler of China” Hucker, 1985, 510a., entry 6719. See Giles 1912, entries 11208 and 12317. (Omen 1)
14. *yalavaç* “envoy” < (?) Iranian language. “an Iranian loan word; *-va:ç/-wa:ç* is an Iranian word meaning ‘voice’, see *sanduwa:ç*; *-var* too is an Iranian Suffix, but the first part is not yet identified and the word has not yet been found in any Iranian language. It might be (Iranian) Xwarazmian. Originally ‘a diplomatic envoy from one ruler to another, ambassador’; adopted in Manichaeism and Moslem terminology for ‘Prophet’, i.e. God’s envoy to mankind...” EDPT, 921a.-b., entry *yala:vaç/yala:waç/yala:var*. Also see TMEN, IV, 106-107, entry 1807. (Omen 11)

As can be seen above, most of the foreign words are present in the colophon. And, some of them like the words *manistan* “monastery, Manichaeism” and *dintar* “monk” may be the sign for that Irk Bitig was written in the Manichaeist environment although its content does not include religious motifs about Manichaeism. However, Rybatzki (de Rachewiltz, et al. 2010: 46) points out that because these terms can be found also in Buddhist and Nestorian sources Irk Bitig may originate from another religious environment instead of Manichaeist one.

The title *ten-si* is one of the fourteen foreign origin words in the Irk Bitig. But its main importance arises from its rare usage in the Old Turkic corpus. We can not find this word in any other Old Turkic text except *Tunyukuk* inscription.

Scholars who studied on the Irk Bitig generally contented themselves with giving the meaning of *ten-si* briefly. Actually, we can say that *ten-si* is the key of the Irk Bitig in terms of showing us in which cultural environment it was written or which cultural environments affected it.

Vilhelm Thomsen (1912: 209), who was the first publisher of the Irk Bitig, with the help of Friedrich W. K. Müller notices that the word *ten-si* corresponds to the Chinese 天子 *tian-zi*<sup>6</sup> “son of heaven namely Chinese emperor”. Thomsen

6 Under the entry *T’ien* (Pinyin *Tian*) in *Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia...* (1999: 1096) we get this explanation: “(Chinese, literally, “Sky” or “Heaven”), in indigenous Chinese religion, the supreme power reigning over lesser gods and humans. ... The first mention of *T’ien* [*Tian*] seems to have occurred early in the Chou [Zhou] dynasty (1111-255 BCE). ... Chinese rulers were traditionally referred to as Son of Heaven *t’ien-tzu* [*tian-zi*], and their authority was believed to emanate from heaven.”

also remarks that there are instances in Uyghur with the form *si*<sup>7</sup> expressing Chinese 子 *zi*.

According to Sanping Chen (2002: 292), although the notion that Chinese emperors are Son of Heaven was first seen in the Zhou dynasty, Zhou's heaven worship and the related "mandate of heaven" and "son of heaven" notions had striking parallels in ancient Inner Asia. To him, the traditional sinocentric views in historiography would naturally ascribe this similarity to Chinese cultural influence. However, given the "conquest" nature of the Zhou dynasty and the sharp contrast between Shang and Zhou religious beliefs, in Chen's view it is no less plausible that the so-called Chinese influences may well have a common origin with that of the later Steppe civilizations.

The political notion that ruler's right to rule came from mandate of heaven (namely god) was available also among Turks. In the Old Turkic inscriptions this notion can be seen clearly:

*teŋri teg : teŋride : bolmış : tür<sup>ak</sup> bilge : kagan : bo ödke : olurtum* (Ölmez 2012: 78) (Kül Tegin Inscription, East, Line 1) "I, the Heaven-like and Heaven-born Turkish Bilge Kagan, succeeded to the throne at this time".

*él bərig[me t]eŋri...* (Ölmez 2012: 127) (Bilge Kagan Inscription, East, Line 21) "Heaven which had given (them) the kingdom...".

Turk Kagans go one step further and see themselves as mighty as heaven or god. As a result they take the name of heaven or god, *teŋri*, as a title. Among the Old Turkic runic inscriptions we see this title in two inscriptions, *Ongi* and *Taryat* (*Terhin*).

In the *Ongi* inscription in two lines we see the title *teŋri* which was used for Bilge Kagan (716-734) who is the kagan of the second Turk Empire (682-745).

*teŋri : bilge : kaganka : [t]akı : işig küçüg : bərsigim : bar ermiş erinç* (Ölmez 2012: 191) (Line 10) "Certainly, I still had a wish to give my services to Teŋri Bilge Kagan"

*teŋri : bilge : kaganta : adrılmalım : azmalım : tēyin* (Ölmez 2012: 191) (Line 11) "So let us not be parted from Teŋri Bilge Kagan or go astray."

In the *Taryat* inscription, in four lines (North, Lines 1, 2, 3, 4) we see the title *teŋri* or *teŋrim* "my *Teŋri*" as a title of the Turk Kagan.

*teŋri kanım athıgı tokuz tatar yeti yegirmi az...* (Tekin 1983: 807, 810) (North, Line 2) "My Teŋri Khan's mounted troops consist of *Tokuz Tatar* "Nine Tatars" and *Yeti Yegirmi Az* "Seventeen Az"."

7 For details and some instances see the entry *zi* 子 in Ölmez 1995: 136.

To Sangpin Chen (2002: 303), the ancient Turkic tradition, using the word *teŋri* always forming a part of the Kagan's formal royal title comes from Xiongnu. He says that "From the beginning, it appeared as part of the Xiongnu Shanyu's regnal name in the context of "son of Teŋri" according to *Han shu* 漢書 (94a.3751)".<sup>8</sup>

In the second Turk Empire there was a ruler, Bilge Kutlug (Pi-chia Kutuo-lu) -son of Bilge Kagan- who also had the title *teŋri* and was called *Teŋri Kagan*. According to Taşağıl (2004: 56) when Bilge Kutlug succeeded to the throne T'ang dynasty in China sent an ambassador, Li Chih, to the Turk Kaganate and he offered the title *Teng-li (Teŋri) Kagan* to Bilge Kutlug. Taşağıl gives the meaning of *Teng-li* from the Chinese historical book, T'ang Shu, as follows: "In the previous life, one who reaps what he sows (the punishment for the good or bad deeds)".

The information about Bilge Kutlug clearly shows us that *teŋri* is a title as *kagan* which qualifies the ruler. However, its meaning according to T'ang Shu is not directly in the meaning "heaven, god". Actually, whatever the *teŋri*'s meaning is, the important thing here is that the title *teŋri* is superior to the title *kagan*. And, it will be much more plausible not to translate the title *teŋri* to any language giving the meaning "lord", "majesty", "sacred" etc. in the Ongin and Taryat inscriptions. Instead of this, it should be used as bare as the titles *shad*, *baga* etc. Namely, just the word *teŋri* is enough in the translations of these inscriptions.

Now, let's see whether Turk Kagans exactly used the title "Son of Heaven" like Chinese emperors or not.

As mentioned above, the word *ten-si* apart from Irk Bitig, was used in the Tunyukuk inscription three times within the compound *tensi* (~ *tinsi*) *oglu* (Tekin 1994: 19). While Tekin gives the meaning of this compound namely *tensi* (~ *tinsi*) *oglu* as "God's son" within the text translation, he gives the meaning of *tensi* in his book's glossary as "son of heaven (within toponym)". According to H. Ş. User (2009: 149), *tensi* (~ *tinsi*) *oglu* is "a mountain range which is situated in the western part of Altai Mountains". To Sanping Chen (2003: 308), the compound *tensi* (~ *tinsi*) *oglu* in the Tunyukuk inscription corresponds to the *Tianshan* "Heavenly Mountain" and also known as *Ak-tag* in Old Turkic and *Baishan* 白山 "White Mountain" in Chinese, probably due to its permanent snow-cover around the peak.

It is interesting that although *ten-si* means "son of heaven" in Turkish, the Turkish word *oglu* "his son" comes together with the word *ten-si* and they make a compound. We can literally translate the toponym *tensi* (~ *tinsi*) *oglu* as "son of

8 For the interpretation of Xiongnu rulers' title *Chengli gutu Shanyu* see Sangpin Chen 2002: 308-309.

son of heaven” or “son of Chinese emperor”. According to Tekin (1994: 47) Old Turks supposed that *tensi* means “God”. He reaches this assumption because of the addition of the word *oglı* “his son” to the word *tensi*.

However, even if we consider that the compound *tensi* (~ *tinsi*) *oglı* is a set phrase in the meaning “son of heaven”, the long time interval between the Tunyukuk inscription and the Irk Bitig stands as a problem in front of us. Tunyukuk inscription was erected in 720-725 and the Irk Bitig was written circa 200 years later. This situation actually seems an obstacle to form a probable set phrase. This is because, if the compound *tensi* (~ *tinsi*) *oglı* formed a set phrase in the meaning “son of heaven” in the Tunyukuk inscription, it would be expected in this form in the Irk Bitig as well. However, in the Irk Bitig instead of this Sino-Turkic compound namely *tensi* (~ *tinsi*) *oglı*, we find just the Chinese word *ten-si* in the meaning “son of heaven (= Chinese emperor)”.

Although Sanping Chen (2002: 309) remarks that Turk Kagans did not use the title “son of heaven” he gives an instance of this title use for a Turk Kagan from Sui-shu (84.1868). In 584, the Turk Kagan Sha-po-lüe, wrote a letter to the Chinese emperor [Kao-tsu]. Bazin (2011: 122) gives the beginning of this letter as below:

“In the Tch’en year<sup>9</sup>, on the 9<sup>th</sup> month, on the 10<sup>th</sup> day, born from heaven, (I am) wise and blessed son of god (*t’ien-tseu*) of the Great Tu-kiyu empire *Yi-li-kiu-lou-chou-mo-hoche-po-lo-k’o-han*, I am writing this letter to the emperor (houang-ti) of the Great Souei.”

According to Pelliot *Yi-li-kiu-lou-chou-mo-hoche-po-lo-k’o-han* corresponds to Turkish form \**El Kül*<sup>10</sup> *Shad Baga Ishbara Kagan* (Bazin 2011: 122).

In the Chinese sources one can find examples that Turk Kagan relates himself with heaven, like in the Old Turkic inscriptions. However, apart from found one instance in above mentioned Chinese source there is not any Old Turkic written document in which the title *ten-si* “son of heaven” was used for a Turk Kagan.

By the way, one can assert that in the Irk Bitig, *Ten-si* may be a Turk Kagan. Actually, this assumption just would be a speculation. In the Irk Bitig, there are some creatures like tiger (Old Turkic *bars*) (omen 10), snake (Old Turkic *yılan*) (omen 8) etc. which speak in the beginning of the related omen. However, in the first omen which *Ten-si* speaks it is impossible to know who or which speaks. It can be either a human being or a creature (may be an animal like in other omens) which just claims that it is *Ten-si* “son of heaven, Chinese emperor”.

9 The dragon year (= Old Turkic *luu yıl*).

10 Bazin prefers to read the word as *Köl* instead of Pelliot’s reading *Kül*.

It is known that a ruler title used in a society might be used by other rulers for the sign of dominance or just for showing mightiness against the enemies. We can give an example of Mehmed II, namely Mehmed the Conqueror (1451-1481) in the Ottoman Empire. He started to use the title *Kayser* (*Caesar*) which was used by Roman-Byzantium emperors after he conquered Constantinople. In this context, Sha-po-lüe's use of "son of heaven" in his letter to the Chinese emperor can be seen as the sign of dominance or equivalence towards the Chinese emperor.

From this brief explanation we can say that the title *ten-si* "son of heaven" is clearly not a real element of Turkic culture but it belongs to especially Chinese emperors. As mentioned above in terms of content Irk Bitig reflects Turkic cultural elements and there is a conjecture that it is not a translation from any language. When we regard these two assessments it is interesting to see the Chinese emperor's title in the first omen which is in the quality of the introduction to the Irk Bitig. The creature that speaks in the first omen introduces itself as a Chinese emperor or it claims that it has the attributes of a Chinese emperor.

In the Irk Bitig we encounter with the title *kan* three times (omen 28, 34 and 63). All of the omens in which the word *kan* is present are about the *kan*'s activities entirely. And, when we look at the end of these omens where one can find the declaration about the omens whether they are good or bad, we see that all these three omens are favorable and good.

Although some scholars assert that the title *kagan* is a supreme ruler and superior to the *kan*, it is known that in Turkic culture these two titles namely *kagan* and *kan* were used interchangeably. Actually, because the title *kagan* does not exist in the Irk Bitig, one can not exactly judge whether *kan* in the Irk Bitig is a supreme ruler or just a ruler. However, in the Irk Bitig *kan* actually seems to be a supreme ruler who after having ascended the throne builds a palace or royal camp or goes on a campaign or goes out for hunting with his army.

So, it is interesting to see the title *ten-si* which is the Chinese cultural element and the title *kan* more or less Turkic cultural element together with in the Irk Bitig. And, it is also interesting to see that the creature introduces itself in the first omen of the Irk Bitig as *ten-si men* "I am the son of Heaven, Chinese emperor" instead of *kan men* "I am the supreme ruler, *khan*".

We can conclude that in the Irk Bitig the title *ten-si* is superior to the title *kan*. Also, *ten-si* appears to be concrete being and has personality unlike *kan*.



## Omens that Include the Titles *Ten-si* and *Kan* in the Irk Bitig<sup>11</sup>

### Omen 1.

*ten-* : *-si* : *men* : *yarın* : *kêçe* : *altun* (Omen says that:) I am *Ten-si* ('Son of : *örgin* : *üze* : *olurupan* : *meñileyür* : Heaven', i.e. Chinese Emperor). In the : *men* : *ança* : *biliñler* : *edgü* : *ol* : the morning and evening sitting on golden throne I am in a state of happiness.

Know thus: It (the omen) is good.

### Omen 28.

*kan* : *olurupan* : *ordo* : *yapmış* : *êli* : (Omen says that:) After having : *turmuş* : *tört* : *buluñtaki* : *edgüsi* : *uyuru* ascended the throne a *khan* built a royal : *têrilipen* : *meñileyür* : *bedizleyür* : camp. His realm remained. (Khan's) : *têr* : *ança* : *biliñler* : *edgü* : *ol* : good and skillful men in all quarters of the world having assembled there. They rejoice and adorn (his court).

Know thus: It (the omen) is good.

### Omen 34.

*kan* : *süke* : *barmış* : *yagış* : *sançmış* (Omen says that:) A *khan* went on a : *köçürü* : *konturu* : *kelir* : *özi* : *süsi* : campaign. He routed the enemy. He : *ögire* : *sevinü* : *ordosınaru* : *kelir* : *têr* comes back permitting (the enemies) : *ança* : *biliñler* : *edgü* : *ol* : to nomadise and settle down. He himself and his soldiers come towards his royal camp rejoicing and happily.

Know thus: It (the omen) is good.

### Omen 63.

*kanlık* : *süsi* : *avka* : *ünmiş* : *sagır* (Omen says that:) The army of the : *içre* : *elik* : *kéyik* : *kirmiş* : *kan* : khanate went out for hunting. A : *eligin* : *tutmuş* : *kara* : *kamag* : *süsi* roe-buck entered the battue. The : *ögirer* : *têr* : *ança* : *biliñler* : *edgü* : *kan* caught it with his hand. All his : *ol* : common soldiers rejoice.

Know thus: It (the omen) is good.

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11 Aydın, et al. 2013: for *omen 1* see p. 363; for *omen 28* see p. 368-369; for *omen 34* see p. 370; for *omen 63* see p. 377.

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