

A TURK OFFICER OF THE SĀSĀNIAN KING XUSRŌ I

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Contrary to earlier assumptions, the rich burial in qurgan no. 3 at Üç Tepe cannot be the inhumation of a Sabir or Avar warrior or that of a Persian officer. According to the testimony of the inscribed golden signet ring, whose legend runs as follows: *Silig ī abarzēnīgānbed* “Silig the commander of the guards of the royal tent”, the burial belonged to a Turk nobleman, Silig by name, who entered the service of Xusrō I Šāhānšāh and was appointed by him to commander of the guards of his general headquarters. The Kārnamag of Xusrō I mentions two settlements of Turkic tribes in Iran in 540/541 A.D. and 568 A.D. Very likely it was the latter one in the course of which the Turk chief entered the military service of the Persian king.

Key words: Üç Tepe, Turk, Sāsānian, Iran, Xusrō I, royal tent.

The rich burial discovered in qurgan no. 3 of the locality Üç Tepe (“Three Hills”) in Azarbaijan (20–25 km from P^ʼaitakaran) rightly aroused a keen interest in archaeological research by its historical relationships. Contrary to the assumption connecting this burial with the role played by the Khazars in the Byzantine–Persian War in 639 A.D. and ascribing it to a Khazar warrior or regarding it as the inhumation of a Sabir or maybe of an Avar chief or considering the buried person a Persian officer, by a thorough analysis of all Transcaucasian and East-European findings to be taken into account, Cs. Bálint pointed out that no element of this theory can be accepted. According to his convincing argumentation, we have to regard this burial as coming from the 6th century A.D. and the buried person could neither be a Persian nor a Khazar nor a Sabir nor an Avar warrior but we can very likely consider him a local chief of the region whose nationality cannot be determined on account of the ethnic variety of this territory (Bálint 1992).

Among the grave goods an important object was found, whose testimony could not be used by Bálint on account of the lack of reassuring interpretation. This is the golden signet ring, inscribed with a Middle Persian inscription, which did not receive due attention either by the excavator or by the later researchers of the find so far. It is true that A. A. Iessen, the excavator, mentioned (Iessen 1965, p. 193) the

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opinion of V. G. Lukonin concerning the inscription of the golden signet ring, but at first sight it is clear to anybody acquainted with the inscriptions of the Sāsānian seals and signet rings that the proposed reading cannot be accepted. The proposed reading was the following:

Line 1	<i>y'tgwb</i>	interpretation by Lukonin	“адвокат”
2	<i>hwłšyt'nR</i>		<i>hwłšt'nR</i>

Apart from the oddities of the orthography (*y'tgwb* instead of the correct *y'tkgwb'* and the wavering transcription *hwłšyt'nR* ~ *hwłšt'nR* (which may be a misprint), two striking phenomena definitely speak against this reading. The first phenomenon is that the official title precedes the proper name. Neither in the numerous seal inscriptions, nor in the monumental epigraphic records is any instance known of it. The other one is the occurrence in itself alone of the title *y'tkgwb'*. This never occurs in itself alone in the seal inscriptions, but it only appears in the compound title *dlgwš'n' y'tkgwb' Wd'twb'l'* “mediator of the poor and judge”. On the other hand, this title never occurs on the seals together with proper names (Gyselen 1989, p. 125).

As is well known, the institution of the *driyōšān yādaggōv u dādvar* was introduced by Xusrō I, as he reports about it in his *Kārnāmag*¹: “... J'ai chargé le juge de chaque contrée de prendre soin du peuple de sa contrée”. The task of this office was to protect the poor from the encroachments of the tax collectors. Therefore, Xusrō also prescribed that the tax should be paid in the presence of a judge. This explains why the title *y'tkgwb'* does not occur in itself alone, inasmuch as the task of the *y'tkgwb'* really meant the broadening of the function of the *dādvar* ‘judge’ and the task of the ‘mediator of the poor’ was administered by the judges. The judicial office was performed by the Zoroastrian clergy, i.e. by the mages during the Sāsānian Age. Accordingly, every *driyōšān yādaggōv u dādvar* was a mage at the same time. As a matter of course, this fact excludes the possibility that the person buried in qurgan no. 3 of Ūč Tepe could have been a *yādaggōv* inasmuch as the burial did not have Zoroastrian character.

Consequently, one may suppose at most that the golden signet ring was not the legal property of the buried person, but it got into his possession in an illegal way. Without doubt, however, several reasons exclude even this possibility. Procopius, the Byzantine historian gives (I, 17, 28) the following report about the wearing of golden signet ring, belt and clasp with the Persians in the second half of the reign of Kavād I (488–531 A.D.): “because here (*viz.* with the Persians) it is not permitted to anybody to wear either golden ring or belt or clasp or any other except that who is honoured by the king with them”. By this report of Procopius it becomes obvious that the

¹ Grignaschi (1966, p. 33) raised the question whether Xusrō I was not inspired by the function of the *defensor civitatis*, revived by Iustinianus, when he introduced the institution of the *driyōšān yādaggōv* “mediator of the poor”. Xusrō I himself answers this question in his *Kārnāmag* (p. 28): “(Aussi) avons-nous pris en examen les règles de conduite des ‘Roum’ et des Hindous et avons-nous choisi celles qui étaient louables. En les évaluant avec notre intelligence, en les choisissant avec notre raison. De toutes les normes, nous avons adopté celles qui ornent notre pouvoir et en avons fait notre loi et notre coutume.”

golden ring, the belt and the clasp had the function of indicating rank and only those persons were authorised to wear them who were honoured by the king with them. As one can state on the basis of Procopius' relation, the Persian ruler could even take back the presented insignia of rank, if somebody proved to be unworthy of the received distinction.

As Cs. Bálint correctly emphasised, Üč Tepe was situated in the territory of Sāsānian administration at the date of the burial. Consequently, it cannot be doubted that the golden signet ring and the belt of the buried warrior together with some other grave goods (as the double necklace, the sword, etc.) indicated his rank and were presented to him by the Persian king. The fact that these objects had an official function indicating rank on the territory of Persian administration, clearly excludes the possibility that the buried person would have acquired them in an illegal manner (*viz.* by robbery or by stealing), because this would have had severe consequences. Therefore, such a thing could only happen in a territory lying outside the control of Sāsānian power, more to the north of the Caucasian mountains.

Surely, the chief buried at Üč Tepe obtained his rank-indicating objects and the golden signet ring among them from the Sāsānian ruler. Thus the legend of the ring obviously indicates his name and rank, *i.e.* it is suitable for the identification of the buried person. Now, if we examine the considerably enlarged photo of the seal, published by A. A. Iessen, we shall be surprised that the spelling of the inscription has little to do with the reading proposed by V. G. Lukonin. Perhaps the reason for this phenomenon can be found in the circumstance that he did not yet have at his disposal the excellent documentation published in the meantime. The legend was written in Middle Persian cursive alphabet (not in Book Pahlavi as Lukonin believed) and its reading runs as follows:

Line 1 *sylyk' Y*
 2 *'plčyn' yk' nbd'*

As concerns this reading, we have to note that the joint letters *sy* and *y'* can clearly be distinguished in the cursive script. The design of the *k* coincides with that of the Middle Persian vessel inscriptions written in cursive script (Gignoux 1984, pp. 23, 26). In line 2, the joint letters *'p* can also be interpreted as *'č*, but it is impossible to read them as *hw* or *'w*. After *'plčyn*, the scribe or the engraver of the inscription inserted a *wāw quiescens*, indicating the end of the basic word. The form of the last joint letters in line 2 did not occur in Middle Persian seal inscriptions or in Middle Persian monumental epigraphy so far, thus its identification encounters some difficulties. However, if we assume that engraving the last characters the engraver turned over the ring and engraved these joint letters upside-down, then they can be read as *d'* or *y'*.

Passing over to the interpretation of the spelling, we can explain it in the following manner:

Line 1	<i>Silig ī</i>	“Silig the
2	<i>abarzēnīgānbed</i>	<i>abarzēnīgānbed</i> ”

In this epigraphic text, the word *Silig* is a proper name, while *abarzēnīgānbed* represents an official title. The name *Silig* is unknown in Middle Persian onomastics (Gignoux 1986). Nor can it be interpreted by the help of Middle Persian.² Consequently, it has to be considered obviously a foreign, non-Persian, more exactly Turkic proper name, formed from the Turkic word *silik* ‘of pure, noble origin’. As a semantic parallel to it, the Turkic proper name *Ariγ* (e.g. *Ariγ tegin*³) formed from the word *ariγ* of similar meaning can be mentioned.

The official title *abarzēnīgānbed* represents a compound word, whose second element is the term *bed* ‘lord, commander’, written with phonetic orthography. The base of the first element is *abarzēn*, the term for the royal tent, royal general headquarters in the mobilised army. The adjective *abarzēnīg*, derived from it, might mean ‘guard of the royal tent’, similarly as the derivative *zēndānīg* from *zēndān* ‘prison, gaol’ means ‘gaoler’. The form *abarzēnīgān* is a plural. Accordingly, the meaning of *abarzēnīgānbed* may be ‘commander of the guards of the royal tent’. This official title was unknown so far, which is not surprising, because the Sāsānian *Notitia Dignitatum* was not preserved. Therefore, almost every new discovered inscription or seal enriches historical research by new official titles.

It follows from the above that the dead, buried at Üç Tepe, might have been a nobleman of Turk origin, who obtained his official title and dignitary symbols, among them the golden signet ring, from the Sāsānian king and who was certainly subordinated to the *marzbān* of the region before his death. However, the question arises, how could the Turk nobleman enter the service of the Sāsānian Šāhānšāh. The Kārnamag of Xusrō I informs of two settlements of Turkic tribes in the territory of Iran, living to the north of the Caucasian mountains. The first one happened in the 10th year of Xusrō I’s reign (540/541 A.D.) (Grignaschi 1966, p. 35) and the Kārnamag describes it in the following way: “Les Turcs habitant dans les pays du Nord nous ont décrit la misère qui les avait frappés et comment ils seraient acculés à faire des razzias dans notre pays, si je ne leur accordais pas quelque chose. Ils demandaient des faveurs (?). L’une était de les admettre dans notre armée, de leur assurer de quoi vivre, de leur donner de quoi tirer leur nourriture dans la zone de *’lknğ*, de Balanğar (?) et la région avoisinante” (Grignaschi 1966, p. 19). Xusrō I marched through Ādurbādagān to the Bāb-Şūl, where he awaited the arrival of the Hazar Hāqān (the use of the name *Hazar* represents an anachronism of the source!): “Il vint chez nous avec une suite de deux mille compagnons, que nous avons accueillis en les établissant à côté de nos chevaliers dans cette région. Je lui ai passé, à lui et à ses compagnons, les ‘vivres’ et je les ai chargés de la défense de ces terres. J’ai ordonné la construction d’un temple pour nos prêtres et j’y ai placé un *mobed* et des ‘mages’. Je leur ai donné la mission d’enseigner aux Turcs, qui s’étaient placés sous notre autorité, les avantages immédiates que l’obéissance aux rois assure dans ce monde et la ré-

² Middle Persian *sel* (spelling *sl*) ‘lance, spear’, mentioned by MacKenzie (1971, p. 74) is a “ghost word”. Its reading is uncertain. Other scholars read it as *sar* and ascribe the meaning ‘arrow’ to it. Modern Persian *selah* (pl. *āsלה*) ‘weapon’, connected by MacKenzie with *sel*, represents an Arabic loan word, consequently it could not yet exist in Middle Persian.

³ For the Old Turkic data see *Древнетюркский словарь*, pp. 52, 500.

compense qui en suivra dans la vie future. Je leur ai donné l'ordre d'inculquer aux Turcs le devoir de (nous) aimer, d'être justes et loyaux (à notre égard) et de combattre les ennemis: d'enseigner aux jeunes nos croyances et nos rites" (Grignaschi 1966, p. 20). Since the relatively little Turk tribal group became converted to Zoroastrianism, the Turk nobleman, buried at Üç Tepe with a non-Zoroastrian ritual, could hardly belong to it.

From a historical viewpoint, the second Turk settlement in the Sāsānian Empire in the 37th year of Xusrō I's reign (568 A.D.) deserves more attention. The Kārnāmag informs about this event in the following manner: "Ensuite, au début de la 37e année de notre règne, quatre peuples turcs de la région du *Hazar* (se sont adressés à nous). Chacun de ces peuples avait un roi. Ils nous ont écrit pour nous mettre au courant de la misère qui les avait frappés et combien ils auraient aimé nous servir. Ils nous demandaient la permission d'entrer à notre service avec leur compagnons et d'obéir à nos ordres. J'écrivis au Marzbān de la Porte et lui ordonnai de les faire passer à mesure qu'ils arrivaient. Il nous communiqua que cinquante mille s'étaient présentés à lui avec leur femmes, leur fils et leur serviteurs. ... Je me suis dirigé vers l'Azerbaïdjān et, quand j'eus quitté l'Azerbaïdjān, je leur donnai la permission d'avancer. A la fin, je suis arrivé chez ces cinquante-trois mille Turcs. J'ai ordonné qu'ils défilassent là où ils se trouvaient. Je suis allé à cheval à cette revue et ce jour-là ils devinrent mes compagnons. ... Après avoir beaucoup remercié Dieu, j'ai ordonné que ces Turcs fussent distribués parmi leurs Grands, en les divisant en sept rangs. J'ai mis à leur tête des chefs choisis parmi eux et leur ai donné des fiefs; j'ai vêtu leurs compagnons et leur ai accordé des 'vivres'; je leur ai assigné de l'eau et de la terre. ... Je les ai répartis dans toutes les forteresses, pour lesquelles j'en avais besoin; je les ai rattachés au *marzbān*" (Grignaschi 1966, p. 23).

This report provides several important elements from a historical viewpoint. At this time the settlement of great Turk tribal groups took place and their conversion to Zoroastrian faith could not come into account. The greater part of these Turk groups was settled in the Transcaucasian territories under Sāsānian authority and Xusrō I granted to their noblemen Iranian ranks (and dignitary insignia) and supplied them and their warriors with food. Among these Turk noblemen the presence of the Turk Lord, appointed commander of the guards of the royal tent and later buried at Üç Tepe can well be assumed, and the peculiarities of his burial and his grave goods, precisely described and convincingly interpreted by Cs. Bálint, obtain a natural explanation.

The fact that Xusrō I appointed a Turk nobleman to commander of the guards of his general headquarters, can be interpreted in two ways. One can think of the possibility that the ranks given to these Turk noblemen, who entered Persian service and settled down in Iran, were only honorary titles, but did not go with real power. However, against such an interpretation speaks the fact that the service of the Turk warriors was a pressing need for Xusrō I and after all, according to his Kārnāmag quoted above, he subordinated the Turk warriors to the command of their own tribal aristocracy. Accordingly, it is beyond any doubt that the latter disposed of commanding power.

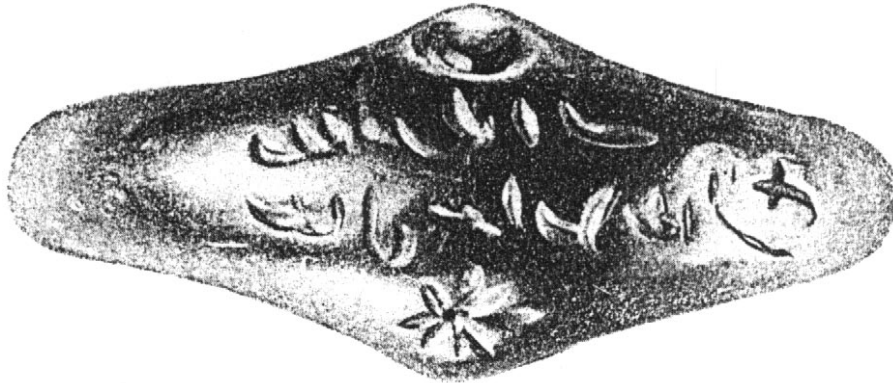


Fig. 1

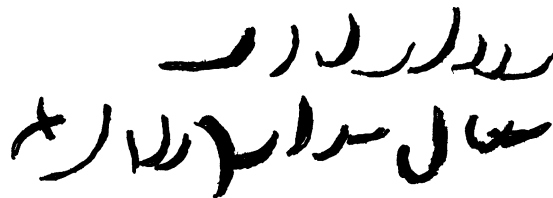


Fig. 2

The other possible explanation presents itself from the historical circumstances of the reign of Xusrō I. In the beginning of his domination a member of his retinue, his own knight, attempted his life, just when he wanted to give a banquet to the envoys representing the most important kingdoms of the epoch. On the basis of this experience, he regarded a guard organised of Turk warriors, who depended on him personally, as more reliable in all probability. The same practice can also be observed in several Early Medieval states, among others in the Late Roman Empire and Byzantium.

It would also be important to elucidate which Turk tribal groups became settled in Iran in 540/541 A.D. and 568 A.D. According to Byzantine sources, in 540/541 Xusrō I led military operations against the Onogurs, whose name was deformed in the Syrian variant of Mār Aba's biography by the erroneous interpretation of the Pahlavi spelling 'wngr (*Onogur) to hngr (**hangarāyē* and **hangarāyē* respectively). Thus, very likely, a little Onogur group settled in Iranian territory in 540/541 A.D.

On the other hand, the great Turk settlement of year 568 A.D. in Iran was already the consequence of the conquests made by the Western Türks in Eastern Europe, which concerned first of all the Ogur tribes living along the Volga river, and the Saragurs who settled in the Ciscaucasian area. The Saragur tribes could probably be the ones who asked for admission in the Sāsānian Empire at that time.

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