

## **Historical Documents on the Origin of the Gokturk Alphabet**

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## **Abstract**

The Gokturk Khaganate serves as a role model state for contemporary Turkic states. This can be proven from various aspects such as language, culture, law, social life, and governance. Particularly, when focused on the subject of language and alphabet, it is possible to dilate on this foundation. The foundation of the Gokturk Alphabet emerges as a manifestation of the abstract and concrete accumulation of Turkish culture spanning thousands of years.

When delving into the history of rock paintings, the earliest rock paintings belonging to the Turks appear in the Lena Rock Paintings area in Russia. These rock paintings, estimated to date back to 14,000-12,000 BC, can be considered the first traces of Turkish culture. By 10,000 BC, rock paintings gradually diminished in size, transitioned from concrete to abstract meanings, and became stylized, taking the form of tamgas. By around 8,000 BC, tamgas significantly reduced in size, almost turning into letters, and the intended message was conveyed not through significant efforts but rather through writing. The journey of Turkish culture through rock paintings, tamgas, and letters did not remain confined to a specific geography but spread and engraved across various parts of the world.

In conclusion, in this thesis, the origin of the letters in the Gokturk Alphabet has been investigated, and efforts have been made to determine the connections between letters and tamgas by examining them from various perspectives, including mythological, social, and political aspects. The combination of many letters to tamgas, establishing solid reasons for minor variations, identifying traces of common features of Turkish culture in tamgas and letters, and demonstrating the similarity of rock paintings, tamgas, and letters in different and distant geographical locations all contribute to supporting the idea we advocate.

**Keywords:** Gokturk alphabet; Orkhon inscriptions; rock paintings; tamgas; Turkish history

## **INTRODUCTION**

The origin of the Gokturk alphabet has been a topic of debate among scholars for many years. Some of the ideas suggested on this topic may be presented as: Otto Donner suggests that the letters in the Gokturk alphabet were derived from the Lycian and Carian alphabets; Thomsen, who deciphered the inscriptions, indicates that the Gokturk alphabet may have originated from the Sámi (Aramaic) alphabet; Russian linguist Polivanov points out that it was largely influenced by the Aramaic -Sogdian and Pahlavi alphabets; and Sir Gerard Clauson, an English Turkologist, suggests that the origin of this script was the Sogdian and Greek alphabets. However, Russian scholars Aristov and Mallitskiy traced the origin of the Gokturk alphabet to the Turkic tamgas and their evolved forms. Ultimately, even Thomsen comes to conclusion to agree with Aristov and Mallitskiy's view in terms of possibilities. A. CevatEmre, a Turkish linguist, suggests that the Gokturk alphabet had an ideographic aspect as well. Based on the research particularly carried out by ServetSomuncuoglu, our opinion also indicates that the Gokturk alphabet originated from rock paintings and tamgas. In this regard, considering the result of our research and on-site inspections on the matter, we believe that rock paintings have evolved into tamgas and tamgas into alphabets. In this context, while determining the headings included in the study, it is aimed to focus on not only rock paintings and tamgas, but also Turkish mythology, the formation of languages around the world, astronomy, Turkish art from past to present, and its use in fields such as carpet-weaving, kilim-weaving, and architecture. These headings will be included in our study without hesitation; however, rather than a form of general information, it is aimed to present these headings by referring to the subject without detaching them from their contextual narrative.

Our research shows that the history of almost each Gokturk letter dates back to very ancient times as well as allowing us to establish strong connections among Turkish mythology, belief system and rock paintings; rock paintings and tamgas; tamgas and letters. In this regard, the fact that tamgas refer to possession allows us to assign different meanings to Gokturk letters beyond simply resembling them to some types of shapes. In other words, we strive to reveal this aspect of tamgas and letters that contain different meanings. Our aim is thus to establish a solid foundation for the long-debated origin of the Gokturk alphabet and to lead further discussions, which are supposed to shed light on this area of Turkish history.

Previously, we mentioned the understanding in the Turkish mentality that states "whatever is in the sky is also on earth." We believe that this is not a simple understanding or belief. In other

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<sup>1</sup>Talat TEKİN, Tarih Boyunca Türkçenin Yazımı, p. 21-22.

words, it can be indicated that the actions and thoughts of the Turks on earth are shaped by this belief. The reason is that in the Turkish belief system and mythology; the sacred beings, spirits, God, and those close to God are related to the sky. Tamgas are the earthly reflections of abstract or concrete objects in the sky. Therefore, the Gokturk alphabet, which is the final form and pinnacle of tamgas, should be perceived not only as a means of communication but also as a continuation of a sacredness that stems from tamgas. The carving of tamgas on stone and their extension towards the sky are some of the most significant pieces of evidence for this perspective.

## **RESULTS**

We have intended to explain the relationship between rock paintings and tamgas with the Gokturk alphabet by scanning numerous sources, which form the basis of our research. During this process, we realized that rock paintings may vary within their process before transforming into tamgas. The same situation applies especially to tamgas and letters in the Gokturk alphabet. These situations are presented with their evidence in the process of writing this thesis. We believe that the variations within these processes stem from the fact that Turkish society is both a mobile and has an exceptional sense of belonging. Consequently, attempting to establish a foundation for the letters in the Gokturk alphabet solely based on obvious, tangible objects, or suggesting that it has derived from another language unless it resembles a certain object is a result of premature judgment and an attempt to maintain a tunnel vision. We believe that pursuing the meanings of tamgas and the smaller components of the alphabet and determining the essence or metaphors of these smaller components will shed further light on our current subjects. Involving different scientific disciplines in the research on this topic will also be part of the clarification.

## **DISCUSSION**

When additions or subtractions were made to tamgas to prevent confusion, was it a random method or a sacred thought process that was followed? To what extent did the strengthening urugs or tribes have an influence on the permanence of these changes? Especially in animal drawings and drawings related to the sky, how long did the original meaning of the tamga persist, and when did it evolve to reflect a customary sacredness phase rather than conveying a specific meaning? Regarding Turkish communities with their distinct ways of life in terms of culture, politics, society, etc., why wouldn't it be possible for them to have a unique tangible means of communication? Therefore, we do not see any problem in stating that pursuing all

these questions and similar ones is equivalent to finding the key to a significant gap in Turkish history. Considering the contributions of our esteemed scholars in this field, we have no doubt that this area, which is not very illuminated in Turkish history, will come to light even more.

## CONCLUSION

### First Traces of Turkish Culture

Turkish history can be traced back to 14,000 BC thanks to rock paintings. This can be observed in the Lena Rock Paintings area in Russia, where the inscription written by Russian scientists on the entrance indicates “14.000-12.000 BC”.<sup>2</sup>The fact that these rock paintings, which we see hundreds of examples of in different regions of the world in both prehistoric and post historic periods, are the products of a common culture and serve as representative elements of culture; overlaps with the migration routes of the Turks and the regions where they settled. Even though the work of researchers is complicated since the rock paintings and tamgas are both so ancient and widespread, the unifying and integrating reality of the Gokturk alphabet also emerges.

When we look at the migrations that the Turks have carried out throughout history, we can trace the 7 great migrations BC and 13 migrations AD. These are not simple, insignificant migrations; they are migrations carried out on a large scale. Through these migrations, Northern China, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Tien Shan Mountains, East Turkestan, India, West Turkestan, Khwarezm, Ural Mountains, western steppes of Eurasia and Balkans have been Turkified. It is even possible to say that places such as Persia, Iran and Arabia have also been Turkified.<sup>3</sup>As mentioned above, these migrations are not insignificant; they take place in the form of settlement and leave a mark. We understand this from rock paintings and tamgas.

The Gokturk alphabet is one of the most fundamental representatives of Turkish culture. This is because this alphabet is not composed of a simple and shallow system of letters, but rather is the result of a unique belief and cultural accumulation of many letters, as we can deduce from what we have been able to identify. If we consider the evolution of a vast concept like culture, we can see that the foundation of everyday social behaviors of humanity was laid 100,000 years ago, long before the invention of writing, which dates back to 5,000 years ago. For Turkish culture, the primary products that carry out the transmission throughout the in-between period are rock paintings and tamgas, which meet the fundamental beliefs and daily life. With

<sup>2</sup> Servet SOMUNCUOĞLU, Sibirya'dan Anadolu'ya Taştaki Türkler, p.12.

<sup>3</sup> Servet SOMUNCUOĞLU, Damgaların Göçü-Kurgan Ankara-Güdül Kaya Resimleri, p.86.

archaeology, it has become increasingly possible to find answers to questions such as where, when, how, why, among whom, and by who this transmission took place.

To better comprehend the historical development of the Gokturk alphabet and its relationship with rock paintings and tamgas, it is necessary to mention and understand the worldwide development of “writing” as a concept. In this regard, it should be taken into consideration that one of the most crucial factors, regarding the use of writing, is its facility to store information and present it again when the time and place is settled for reuse. This is due to the fact that human memory has a perfect structure in terms of storage, yet it has certain limits in terms of retaining information. Considering this fact, in Turkish history, retention of information was sustained through rock paintings and tamgas before writing was invented. The task here is to establish a strong foundation for the connection that is to be built between the concept of writing and the concept of visibility, relying on strong sources, opinions, and interpretations.

To emphasize the history of the Turkish language, it should be also noted that the Sumerians were the first civilization to use writing in the world and there are more than 160 words that overlap with Turkish<sup>4</sup>, which shows how far the Turkish language can date back among the languages in the world. This information provides us with data not only culturally but also geographically. It can be seen that Turkish has been named in different ways throughout its 1300-year history that we can trace through written sources. For Gokturk, because its characters resembled runic (mysterious, unknown) writing, it was called Siberian Run letters, Yenisei Run letters, Runic alphabet, and Turkish Run script.<sup>5</sup> According to our research, it seems possible to express the centuries in which Gokturk was used and the limits of its usage area in the light of written sources as follows: It was actively used by many Turkish states from the 7th century AD to the 11th century AD; Its usage covered an area of approximately 30 square kilometres from western Central Europe to the Pacific Ocean, from Central Afghanistan to Northern Siberia.<sup>6</sup> In terms of political and social purposes, Gokturk script was used particularly on rocks in high-altitude areas, on coins minted by the state, on metals with non-monetary value, on weapons of war, on tableware and utensils used for eating, drinking, and decoration, as well as in different parts of clothing items, and they were processed in carving, drawing, and cutting. In addition, there are Gokturk texts depicted on paper as well.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmet B. ERCİLASUN, *Başlangıçtan Yirminci Yüzyıla Türk Dili Tarihi*, p.36.

<sup>5</sup> Hatice ŞİRİN, *Başlangıçtan Günümüze Türk Yazı Sistemleri*, p.25.

<sup>6</sup> Hatice ŞİRİN, *Başlangıçtan Günümüze Türk Yazı Sistemleri*, p. 28-29.

## **Gokturk Khaganate and Its Place in History**

In this study, we deem it appropriate to provide information about the GokturkKhaganate not in a detailed and chronological order, but based on events and situations that we consider influential and important.

In the middle of the 6th century in Central Asian history, the “GöktürkKhaganate”was established, which carried the name “Türk” for the first time, explicitly mentioned as the continuation of the Huns. It lasted for approximately two hundred years and was an exemplary state. Their neighbors referred to them as “Türks” in their works in reference to this newly formed political structure. In their works, known as the “Orkhen Inscriptions”, they used the term "KökTürk" for themselves and left their mark in history as the KökTürks.

The Gokturks sustained their livelihood by engaging in blacksmithing in the vicinity of the Altai Mountains, under the authority of the Juan-Juans. After subjugating the Toles tribes, they defeated the Juan-Juans and established their own independent state. Over time, they ruled over a vast area from the Black Sea to Korea, overcoming occasional setbacks but maintaining their existence until 745 AD. Afterwards, they faced disintegration and migrations, leading to the emergence of great states such as the Karakhanids, Seljuks, Ghaznavids, and Ottomans. Prior to the Göktürk Empire, they had been a Turkic presence in history in various names and communities. However, it was through the Gokturk Khaganate that the name "Turk" and their culture and political existence became known to different nations.<sup>7</sup>

The origin of the Gokturks appears in sources intertwined with legends. The first legend is about their descent from a wolf, while the second is about their emergence from the Suo country in the north of the Huns.

Just before the establishment of the GokturkKhaganate, Bumin sent an envoy to the ruler of the Juan-Juan Empire, expressing his desire to marry his daughter after he had gained control over the Toles tribes. Bumin received the reply, “You are a slave working in my ironworks, and how can you make such a proposal?”<sup>8</sup>Over time and subsequent developments, in 552, Bumin launched a surprise attack on the Juan-Juans, officially declared the independence of the Gokturk Empire, and assumed the title of Il Kaghan. Following the surrender of the western part of the country to Bumin’s brother IstemiYabgu, and subsequent deaths and developments,

<sup>7</sup> Ahmet TAŞAĞIL, Kök Tengri'nin Çocukları, p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> Ahmet TAŞAĞIL, Kök Tengri'nin Çocukları, p. 128.

MukanKaghan, known for his intelligence, knowledge, and tactical skills, rose to power and ensured the rise of the state. After MukanKaghan's death, his brother TasparKaghan succeeded him and elevated the country to the level of a world empire. However, TasparKaghan's desire to change the religion had a negative impact on the fate of the country, and before his death, he bequeathed the throne to MukanKaghan's son, Ta-lo-pien. The council opposed this decision, and She-t'u ascended to the throne, assuming the title of Işbara. Meanwhile, IstemiYabgu contributed to positive developments in the West and even reached Crimea in 576 AD, capturing the Kerch Fortress. This was the farthest point reached by the Gokturks in the west. The Eastern Gokturk Khaganate, however, continued to prepare for its demise. Chang Sunsheng, a skilled and important diplomat sent by the Chinese emperor<sup>9</sup>, approached Işbara to gather the necessary information to divide the Gokturk Khaganate. Particularly due to famine and hunger, the power of the Gokturks diminished day by day.

As a result of the events, Il Kaghan assumed leadership of the state but made wrong decisions that led to the downfall of the country, despite having significant power. At the same time, severe winter conditions caused the death of animals, famine ensued, and as a result, the GokturkKhaganate faced rebellions and the separation of tribes. Through all these events, in 630, Il Kaghan was captured by the Chinese and taken to China, and the Eastern GokturkKhaganate disappeared. The Western GokturkKhaganate, under T'ungYabgu's rule, grew stronger, but Yabgu was assassinated by his uncle in 630. After this event, the Western GokturkKhaganate could not recover and remained in a state of turmoil.

Between 630 and 681, a period of anarchy occurred, and hundreds of Turks were forced to live under Chinese control. Despite several rebellion attempts during this period, no satisfactory outcome was achieved. The independence of the Second GokturkKhaganate was finally secured by KutlugKaghan in 681, who persevered in suppressing the rebellions. By appointing Tonyukuk, who had been captured by the Chinese, as the ApaTarkan, the GokturkKhaganate became even stronger. The raids continued uninterrupted, and after the death of KutlugKaghan, his brother KapganKaghan succeeded him. KapganKaghan engaged in great battles, conducted campaigns deep into the north, and introduced innovations in the organization, even requesting agricultural tools from China. These efforts by Kaghan aimed at rebuilding and renewing the state. During this process, some tribal rebellions occurred, and the state was shaken. While these events were unfolding, KapganKaghan was lured into an ambush and killed by the Bayırkuls.

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<sup>9</sup> Ahmet TAŞAĞIL, *Kök Tengri'nin Çocukları*, p. 139.



Although KapganKaghan had entrusted the leadership of the state to his young son, Inel, KulTegin disagreed and had Inel and his supporters killed, bringing his brother Bilge to power. Bilge Kaghan elevated Tonyukuk to a higher position, and with the strategic and rational actions taken by the trio of KulTegin, Bilge Kaghan, and Tonyukuk, the country was restored to prosperity. Tonyukuk, in particular, persuaded Bilge Kaghan not to implement certain misguided proposals that would not benefit the country.

After the deaths of KulTegin and Tonyukuk, Bilge Kaghan himself was poisoned by his vizier and died in 734. The subsequent rulers either died prematurely or made wrong moves, causing the country to plunge into chaos without any apparent reason. Taking advantage of this chaos, the Chinese, eager to exploit the situation, incited the Uyghurs, Turks, and Sasmils to attack the Gokturks. In 745, the Uyghurs declared their independence and established their own state. Although it is known that the Gokturks collapsed and were eliminated in that period, they continued to exist until approximately 941 (for about 200 years), and they were mentioned in Chinese sources.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Term “Tamga” and Fields of Its Use**

When we examine the historical journey of tamgas from the past to the present, we encounter interesting and striking information. We know that tamgas are shapes that indicate the affiliation of a tribe, clan, or person. These shapes are made by carving, hitting, scraping, cutting, painting, burning, or forging. Turks, as mentioned earlier, have stamped their tamgas on almost everything that exists in their social life. Especially in nomadic-herding societies, they stamped tamgas on their animals to prevent them from mixing with other herds and to identify to whom they belonged. These tamgas first emerged as a requirement of belief, and later became a manifestation of a sense of social identity. “We know that the word “tamga” was used as “tamka” in Old Turkish, and as “tamga” in KutadguBilig, Middle Turkish and Chagatai, “tamna” in Kumuk Turkish, “tanma” in Oirat and Soyon Turkish, and as “tamga” in Kazan Turkish.”<sup>11</sup> It is also an indisputable fact that although the Orkhon inscriptions are accepted as the first written works in the world of science, before that, the Turks used writing and frequently used tamgas in their daily lives.

Turkish tamgas are still used in different meanings by some families, tribes, clans, lineages, or tribes both in Central Asia and in some parts of Anatolia. Although some tamgas

<sup>10</sup> Ahmet TAŞAĞIL, *Kök Tengri'nin Çocukları*, p. 173 .

<sup>11</sup> H. N. BEĞİÇ, H. Ö. ÇAPIK, *Anadolu kültüründe Damga/Tamga/Dövme: Mardin Örneği*.

are known to represent meanings such as courage, bravery, strength, abundance, and prosperity, the meaning of some tamgas has been forgotten, and they are made only according to tradition. The places and ways in which tamgas are made contain different meanings. For example, tamgas made on the surfaces of high rocks are processed in accordance with beliefs such as praying to God, asking for health, and sacrificing to Him. However, as they are considered through their social life (such as to the edges of the sheepfold, daily objects, etc.), they have expressed ownership and sent messages of belonging to those outside the social structure.

The text on the left side of the Acura Inscription reads as follows: “... tamkalıyılıkbunsızıerti...” It is clearly understood from the part “tamkalıyılıkı” that Turks used to mark their horses with a “sign, symbol, or stamp,” which they called “tamga.” Moreover, it is observed in the inscriptions that the words “tamgaçı” (stamp maker, seal maker), “damgalamak” (to stamp, to seal), which are derived from the word “tamga,” are used as nouns and verbs. In the KutadguBilig, a book written in the 11th century, the word “tamga” was used as “tamga, damga, mühür, tamgaurmak, damgavurmak, tamgaçı, damgaçı, mühürdar, tamgalamak, damgalamak, mühürlemek”. As Ali ShirNevai used the word “tamgaçı” in Muhakemetü'l-Lugateyn, it can be understood that the word was still in use in the Eastern Turkish of that era.

Turkish tamgas are still used in Anatolia under the names of “damga (seal), im (mark)” in the following places: on horses and cats, on the ear or nose of rams and sheep, on the back-tail or head of rams or sheep, in beehives and wheat or flour stores, on tombstones or wooden boards replacing tombstones, on carpets and rugs, on felt and cloaks, on bags and sacks, in embroidery, in jewelry, in amulets, on the doors and walls of houses, on pots and pans, in tattoos made on hands-fore-forearm and chest, in horse harnesses... Turks recognized many animals as ongun (living and non-living beings believed to carry a spirit and considered sacred). They did not hunt or eat them, considering them sacred.

Tamgas were not only engraved on rocks, animals, and objects but they were also drawn on the human body as tattoos. Tamgas and symbols belonging to Turkish culture were found on the bodies of humans unearthed from graves dating back to the Hun or Scythian period. The figures used in these tattoos are generally wild animals such as deer, goats, cats, dogs, wolves, horses, bears, and birds of prey. Some of the tattoos on the bodies of humans found in certain kurgans -a kind of ancient grave mound- depict hunting scenes. Tattoos of ram figures, which hold a significant place in Turkish culture, are especially prevalent on the bodies of humans found in Hun graves. It is understood that this tattooing tradition, which was especially practised

by heroes during the Hun period, continued in the traditions of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh Turks as well. In his work “Divan-ı Lügat’itTürk,” KaşgarlıMahmut stated, "Oghuz is a Turkish tribe. The Oghuz are Turks. They are divided into 22 sections, each with a separate emblem and animal mark. They recognize each other by these symbols.”<sup>12</sup>

Considering the sources, it is possible to say that tamgas also indicate ethnic names. We can see this more clearly in Kyrgyz society. If it comes to why tamgas present such large numbers, one of the biggest reasons is that there are many signs belonging to urugs and tribes. We mentioned before that they considered these tamgas as their own and sacred; that they branded their animals, and especially the theft of animals of steppe communities was considered a great crime; that animal thieves were executed; that even Altai people of their horses, which carried tamgas, free, and the theft of these horses was still considered a very big crime.

Among the public, these tamgas, which are so sacred, widespread, and well-preserved, also ensure that literacy (reading-writing), which is considered to belong to the high class, becomes widespread among the people and is easily understandable and learnable. Those who do not know how to read and write are not aware of the purpose, meaning, and importance of these tamgas. One of the important conclusions we can draw from this is that tamgas also have the task and assistance of providing both intellectual and physical practicality and agility to the urug-tribe-bodun they belong to. Among the purposes of use of tamgas, it can be shown that it distinguishes between what is essential and what is not, shows that everything imposed on it belongs to a certain person or someone, facilitates the transition from general belonging to private belonging, indicates the occurrence of political-religious events or wars when they are frequently encountered in a region, serves as a document describing the person and the society in which the person lives, symbolizes obedience and protection, and regulates time. The reason why some tamgas resemble each other despite cultural and geographical differences is that people show parallels in their adventure of discovering themselves and their surroundings (Moon-Earth-Human-Source of Life, etc.). Trying to explain this parallelism only through a cultural exchange also complicates research, from our perspective.



<sup>12</sup> A. Bican ERCİLASUN, Ziyat AKKOYUNLU, Kaşgarlı Mahmud-DivanuLugâti't-Türk, p. 26.



The tamgas above belong to the Kyrgyz people living in different geographies.<sup>13</sup> The two shapes at the top (the tamga of the Kyrgyz tribe of the Bashkirs) are almost identical to the letter of the thin "l" sound in the Gokturk alphabet. Below them, the shape on the left (the general Kyrgyz tamga) also evokes the thick "g" and the thin "r" letters in the Gokturk alphabet. At the bottom, the picture on the right is a tamga belonging to the Kyrgyz people in Khakassia, and it can be thought of as the previous form of the aforementioned letters and tamgas.

### **An Overview of the Formation of the Gokturk Alphabet**

When we question the reasons for the emergence of the Gokturk alphabet and search through history, we first encounter tamgas and then rock paintings. The underlying cultural and belief accumulation presents us with the archetype of the Gokturk alphabet, which carries symbolic meaning. The archetype is a kind of subconscious that presents the fundamental reasons behind a person's behavior and thoughts from the embryonic stage to the last age. Based on this example, the archetype of the Gokturk script is the tamgas, whose archetype is rock paintings, and rock paintings mostly reflect social beliefs and totemistic approaches. First, humans started to depict their kind, and then they adopted the idea that they were not alone in nature, and even that nature itself was a source of life for them. Following this, by realizing the universe as a tertiary source, they included it in their thinking as well. Rock paintings, which are based on a belief system and attribution of sanctity, gradually turned into tamgas and continued to be used in different areas and thoughts. It started to become a coded agreement system, such as a sense of belonging, defining borders, trading, and making prayers and wishes. With the formation of writing, it evolved in completely different dimensions and became a part of writing, which became a common tool used by people. This idea is based on some proof, one of which is that the Gokturk alphabet is seen on everyday items such as knives, plates, bowls, leather, carpets, cups, earrings, rings, bracelets, grips, belt buckles, horse saddles, etc. In addition, the top executives of the state that erected the Gokturk inscriptions encouraged their people to read the inscriptions. Barthold interpreted this statement as the style that a speaker should have and stated that the expression is metaphorical; nevertheless, this interpretation has not been

<sup>13</sup>Olcabey KARATAYEV, Kayrıkan JANIBEKOVA, Damgalar ve Onların İşlevleri(Fonksiyonları)

emphasized because there is not enough evidence. Nowadays, the increasing number of findings written in Gokturk script supports that the Gokturk was also known and used among the folk. The main scientists who support this view are A.N. Bernstam, S. V. Kiselev, Lev Gumilev, S. E. Malov, DimitriVasilyev, O. F. Sertkaya...

One of the mistakes we believe is made during the examination phase of the transition process from rock paintings to tamgas, and from tamgas to the alphabet, is expecting a rock painting which expresses a meaning to evolve into a tamga in a way that expresses the same meaning, and then into a letter, meeting a similar or suggestive meaning rather than the exact meaning. Otherwise, the tendency to look only through this perspective perspective is a mistake, too. It was not known that a rock painting drawn thousands of years ago would turn into a tamga. Nor was there any thought or necessity for it to turn into a tamga by the people of that time. The same situation applies to the transformation from tamgas to letters as well. Specially, a tamga that emerged during and after the transition process from rock painting to tamga was used in every aspect of social life. Some people were only drawing these symbols so that their animals would not mix with others and did not feel the need to think about it. Some were using them for accounting purposes in a transaction and were musing over them to prevent mistakes and confusion. Imagination and aesthetics occurred in the production of clothing, utensils, etc., and changes on tamgas were inevitable. Those who had similar tamgas were making slight changes to prevent confusion. For example, by adding a dot inside a circular tamga, or the tamga of the Karkin tribe being in the shape of VI, but the tamga of the Kayi tribe being in the shape of VII... This variability of tamgas, although it seems to make proving our topic difficult, actually reveals the abundance of evidence in order to prove it.

The book “Defter-i Cengizname” contains seventeen tamgas, which were given by Genghis Khan to his nobles. It is also said that Genghis Khan gave an “uran” along with the tamgas.<sup>14</sup> In the Mongolian-Turkish dictionary, the word “uran” means "artist, master, craftsman," and we believe that it comes from the Old Turkish word “ur-“ “vurmak (to hit)” and means “a person who hits or marks with a tamga.” However, since there is not much explanation about this word in the mentioned book, it is not possible for us to present a certain opinion about whether “uran” refers to a tamga craftsman, an object, or a symbol (like tamga). Nevertheless, as a result, we have reached the conclusion that this word is related to tamgas. The expression “açamaytamga”

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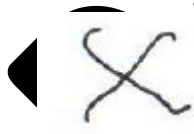
<sup>14</sup> Funda TOPRAK, Defter-i Cengiz-Nâme'de Boy Nişanları ve Damgalar

mentioned in the book means “a wooden piece placed in the shape of a fork” and reminds us of the “tree of life” motif that holds great importance in Turkish culture.



Also, the expression “karagayağacı (karagay tree)” mentioned in the book refers to the “çamağacı (pine tree)” in terms of its usage and meaning in different texts. The meaning of this word as “pine tree” still exists in Kumyk Turkish. The tamga shown above also resembles the needle leaves of a pine tree. According to a belief in Altai epics, “There is a pine tree at the center of everything”. This tree is the largest of the trees and extends to the house of Bay Ulgen” and it is considered as the “tree of life.” In addition, one of the most important features of pine trees is that they do not shed their leaves in summer or winter. They are known as the only type of tree that does not shed leaves. Another feature is that they are long-lived and durable. We believe that it is a reasonable justification to accept the pine tree as the “tree of life” figure because of these characteristics. In the following pages, we intend to explain the influence of mountain goat horns and the whole or parts of mountain goat on tamgas and then on the alphabet as a source point of the “tree of life” concept.

The same work also mentions the “evirnetamga”. The “evirnetamga” symbolizes two intersecting sticks and represents this meaning. It is similar to the oztamga, the Tengritamga, and the “z” letter in the Gokturk alphabet.



The possibility that the word “evirne” means evir- çevir-, dön (turning or rotating) is high and this is related to the content of the mentioned tamga.

Another tamga mentioned in the work is the “Ay tamga”. It resembles the “ay-ya” letter in the Gokturk alphabet in terms of shape, pronunciation and meaning.

### **Rock Paintings and Nature of Tamgas**

The geographic boundaries of rock paintings cannot be defined as a narrow area or a specific region where they are clustered. Rock paintings belonging to Turks can be found in various regions such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Anatolia, China, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan,

Uzbekistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Kosovo, Scandinavia, and even deep into Europe.<sup>15</sup> These regions are areas that have been identified through research. As support and interest in this field increase, we are confident that the number of areas with rock paintings belonging to Turks will increase as well. Especially in Kyrgyzstan, SaymaliTas is the richest area in terms of rock paintings. There are around 100,000 paintings on more than 10,000 stones. Rock paintings are found intensively wherever Turkish communities have lived throughout history. However, if we are to demonstrate where the most intensive rock painting areas are, we can present the followings: Southern Siberia, Mongolia, Southern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Eastern Anatolia, the Caucasus, and Azerbaijan. In Türkiye, rock paintings belonging to Turks can be found in Ordu-Mesudiye-Esatli village, Erzurum-Karayazi-Salyan village, Hakkari-Yuksekoa-Gevaruk Plateau, Kars-Kagizman-Saban village, Kastamonu, Samsun-Erzincan, Isparta, Burdur, and Samsun-Salipazari. One of the most important areas is Ankara-Gudul-Salihler village where a lot of rock paintings belonging to Turks can be found.<sup>16</sup> The fact that there are so many rock paintings belonging to Turks in Anatolia raises questions about whether Turks came to Anatolia before 1071. However, we leave these questions to other studies not to deviate from the main topic of our thesis.

Rock paintings appear as a form of communication used by the ancient Turks. In fact, it is possible to say that all rock paintings in the world emerged for the purpose of forming communication. The fantasies of humanity's abstract or concrete search were carved onto these rocks. This communication was attempted to be established with each other, future generations, and abstract entities or at least this was the intent. None of these rock paintings, except for those randomly drawn and destroyed recently, were randomly drawn. They were always drawn in the search for meaning and in a composition that would convey a general message. The abundance of rock paintings is related to Turkish culture, life, and traditions. Egypt developed its civilization on papyrus, China on silk, and the Sumerians and Assyrians were suited to writing or drawing on clay tablets. Their civilizations developed in this way. On the other hand, Turkish civilization and understanding were suited to carving their culture onto rocks. If the mystery of rock paintings can be fully deciphered, we believe that it could have a very different impact on Turkish history. If we accept that rock paintings have turned into tamgas and tamgas into alphabets over time, it is also possible to say that rock paintings serve as a bridge between unknown and known history.

<sup>15</sup> Servet SOMUNCUOĞLU, Sibirya'dan Anadolu'ya Taştaki Türkler, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Servet SOMUNCUOĞLU, Damgaların Göçü-Kurgan Ankara-Güdül Kaya Resimleri, p. 105.

The rock paintings generally contain a composition, and reaching or connecting with God is stated at the beginning of these compositions, which is achieved with the help of a shaman. These can also be considered tangible evidence of Turkish mythology. Additionally, there are rock paintings depicting birth, reproduction, entertainment, hunting, and belief. When we examine the symbols that emerge from these collective compositions, we encounter the elements of Turkish mythology and culture: the animal chariot with sun-like wheels, curves, snakes, rivers, wild animals, rams, goats, wolves, humans, tailed humans, sun, earth... There are also legends about flying humans that we encounter in rock paintings belonging to the Altai Turks. According to the legend, there was nothing before (neither the moon nor the sun), and people used to fly in the air shedding light. A similar example appears to the Deer Stones in Mongolia's Arhangay region. The deer on these stones, numbering around 500, are drawn as though they fly in the air. It does not seem possible to encounter these figures in any culture other than Turkish culture. The meaning of these illustrations is related to dead people ascending to the sky by taking the form of an animal and moving on to the afterlife. Another composition is found in the Gobi Desert representing: horses nursing their foals, hunters shooting arrows, people training their deer, images representing sexuality, wild boar hunts, people harnessing horses, and fairy tale humans shooting arrows at giants... What makes this area special for us is the presence of inscriptions containing prayers and wishes, written in the Gokturk alphabet. The most current and striking example of this is the mountain goat tamga on the KülTigin Inscription. The mountain goat tamga found in many rock paintings is interpreted as a symbol of death and eternity. On the rock paintings found in Ankara-Asmalıtepe, we can see people fighting, riding horses, praying, performing ceremonies with shaman drums, engaging in sexual activity, wielding swords, shooting arrows, engaging in duels, and kneeling in front of a large khan panel. We can also see flying horses in some rock paintings and remember Kaşgarlı Mahmud's words, "The horse is the wing of the Turk."

When we examine rock paintings and put them in chronological order, we see that the first paintings are concrete. In other words, nature has been taken as it is and engraved on the rock. Over time, these concrete paintings have been replaced by paintings with abstract meanings, and humans have begun to accept that they are a part of nature. This process did not happen suddenly or in a short period of time. It took place over a period of 10,000 years between 15,000 BC and 5,000 BC. In other words, a mountain goat drawn on a rock through these periods describes the concrete concept of the animal while it began to express death and eternity in an abstract sense as we moved towards 5,000 BC to the present day (until 1000 AD). Therefore, it



is possible to say that what is depicted is not what is seen but what is thought. The most significant evidence of this situation is that the concrete images are drawn in the same size as the object being depicted. In other words, they are drawn with large shapes and lines. During the transition to the abstract phase, these shapes and lines began to shrink and become more stylized. In this respect, mountain goats, deer, horses, and humans became smaller and almost took the shape of a letter. This is where the transition from rock paintings to tamgas begins. This transition is accelerated by the increase in both the number of people and animals, thus the emergence of a sense of belonging. Rock paintings have not only brought about the formation of the writing and alphabet culture, but many other cultures have also formed and continued to change and develop to the present.

The graves of deceased government officials or respected individuals in society were also brought to the areas where rock paintings were considered sacred, and the tradition of “Monumental Tomb” emerged. The first texts read in these areas were prayers and wishes. Initially, these writings were randomly scribbled on a corner of a large rock, but over time, they began to be written on tombstones. Along with prayers and wishes, the heroic acts of individuals were also narrated over time. Later, the description of geography, events, and people was established, and the Orkhon/Gokturk inscriptions emerged as the pinnacle, where the main theme of prayers, wishes, history, and heroism are beautifully depicted. It is possible to consider the Gokturk Inscriptions as the finest examples of this tradition that has risen from ground zero to this level.

We consider the transformation of the rock painting areas into the burial sites of important figures and statesmen as a significant issue since it can provide us with information about how a tradition began and how it developed over time. The “Monumental Tomb” tradition mentioned above can be seen in the form of small and large mounds in Central Asia (and also in Anatolia). The evidence of the “Monumental Tomb” tradition does not only consist of rock paintings and tamgas. The culture of the Turks is also mentioned in sources belonging to different nations. In Chinese sources, the expression “On certain days of the year, they climbed to the high points of the mountains and held ceremonies, sacrificing to the spirits of their ancestors,” is used many times. In Cuveyni's “Tarih-i CihanGuşâ”, the expression “They engraved marks on stones by holding ceremonies in the mountains with their Khagans” is mentioned.

Although the wide distribution of rock paintings and tamgas raises doubts about who made them, these doubts disappear regarding the common cultural characteristics. For instance, rock paintings found in Anatolia and those found in the Altai region show similarities. Oghuztamgas (especially Kayı and Avsartamgas) can be seen in different regions many times. Similarly, the carpet motifs in Central Asia and those in Anatolia are identical. Many of these motifs also appear in rock paintings and as tamgas themselves. The drawing of a man standing on a running horse in rock paintings is one of these examples, too. This has not been limited to just rock paintings, but it has also taken its place in our culture as a traditional game (Gokboru game). In addition, many of the rock paintings and tamgas we encounter in different regions face east. This reminds us of the “Güneş (Sun cult) kültü” specific to the Turks. The “Güneşkültü” is related to greeting, respecting, and considering the sun sacred, and it is a tradition which comes from this cult that the entrance of the tents of Turkish nomads was opened towards the east. In this regard, the fact that people living in such diverse geographies adhere to the same style can be explained by a common past social character, and social DNA.

One of the extraordinary examples of the transition from rock paintings to tamgas, and from tamgas to writing (the Gokturk Alphabet) can be seen in the “Bickti Boom” rock painting area in Russia’s Altai region. In this area, which means “Written Rock,” we can see that the size of the rock paintings has greatly become smaller, and there is a vague transition to writing. We consider the gradual shrinking of rock paintings and their increasingly stylized appearance as pre-writing experiments and also view them as a sign of transition. The paintings in the Kurbanaga Cave in Kyzyl, Kazakistan are more in the form of geometric shapes. We regard this as a method of expressing thought rather than action, as we have previously mentioned. Therefore, it is remarkable evidence of the search period of transitioning from concrete to abstract.

Rock paintings and tamgas can be demonstrated to be sacred not only by different evidence but also by being made in sacred areas or by being considered sacred themselves. None of the rock paintings or tamgas made in these areas has been damaged or defaced by individuals who came to the area for the same purpose. In other words, they were not defaced because the subsequent paintings or tamgas were also considered sacred by the next generations. However, in recent times, many damages have been caused by treasure hunters.

The tradition of engraving rock paintings and tamgas in sacred areas continued until the 1000s AD. Afterwards, with the spread of Islam and Christianity, writing started to be used by the

masses rather than being used only by religious officials, which caused the tradition of rock paintings and tamgas to come to an end.

When we look at all these developments, rock paintings, tamgas, abstract or concrete actions, and how they have developed from past to present, it emerges how the consciousness of being able to become a nation has meticulously proceeded. The formation of a language, which is indispensable for a nation, and the wide and different geographic areas where the unifying power of this language is strongly felt, are evidence that the roots of the Turkish language date back to ancient times.

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**FIGURES**



**Figure1: Altay-Üstkan Müzesi, Eski Türk Yazıtları Atlası(Üz...)**



**Figure2: Türkiye, Kağızman, Camuşlu Köyü, Taştaki Türkler**