

Pre-Manichaeian Beliefs of the Uyghurs I: Celestial and Natural Cults*

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■ Abstract

The original beliefs of Uyghurs, who were known for their conversions to Manichaeism and Buddhism, have not been examined in detail until now. Uyghur inscriptions as well as Chinese and Islamic sources provide some information regarding these beliefs. Historical sources indicate that they believed in a variety of celestial and natural cults, the most prominent being Tǎŋri, the god of sky. Cults devoted to other natural and celestial beings included earth, mountains, trees, sun, moon, and fire. The words *Tǎŋri* and *Tǎŋrikān* were also used for other beings, reflecting flexibility in their beliefs. Although some scholars thought that Buddhism was practiced prior to the official conversion to Manichaeism in the 760s, this article demonstrates that this is hardly the case and shows how these ancient cults survived even after their conversions to major religions.

■ Keywords

Uyghurs, early Turkic beliefs, Tǎŋri, Tengri, natural cults, celestial cults, shamanism, animism

* For the second article in this series, see Hayrettin İhsan Erkoç, “Pre-Manichaeian Beliefs of the Uyghurs II: Other Religious Elements,” *Journal of Religious History* 47.4 [2023] 586–603.



■ Introduction

The Uyghurs¹ were a Turkic tribe that first appeared in historical sources during the late-fourth century CE. Subsequently, they became one of the numerous tribal vassals of the First Türk (Tujue 突厥; 552–583), Eastern Türk (583–630) and Xue Yantuo 薛延陀 (628–646) qaghanates; starting from the 620s, they became one of the prominent members of the Toquz Oghuz tribal union in today's Mongolia. After the fall of the Xue Yantuo Qaghanate in 646, the Uyghurs became nominal vassals of the Tang 唐 Dynasty (618–907) in China. Meanwhile, the Toquz Oghuz established their own qaghanate, and the Uyghurs became its primary tribe. However, the Eastern Türks established their Second Qaghanate in 682 and subjugated the Uyghurs and Toquz Oghuz by 688. When the Second Türk Qaghanate started experiencing inner strife in 742, a tribal union of Uyghurs, Qarluqs, and Basmils rose up against it, establishing the Basmil ruler as their own qaghan. By 744, the Uyghurs and Qarluqs had already overthrown the Basmil qaghan; while relations between the Uyghurs and Qarluqs deteriorated, the former established its own qaghanate in the Orkhon region corresponding to today's Central Mongolia. The last Türk qaghan was killed by the Uyghurs in 745, which became the successor state of the Second Türk Qaghanate. The Orkhon Uyghur Qaghanate ruled as a major steppe empire until its sudden collapse and destruction by the Yenisei Kyrgyz in 840. Afterwards, the Uyghurs and other Toquz Oghuz tribes dispersed over a wide area, eventually establishing two smaller kingdoms in Gansu 甘肅 and Turfan (Gaochang 高昌, Qočo).²

The Uyghurs were most famously known for being the pioneers of several cultural transformations among medieval Turkic peoples, such as sedentarization and conversion to major religions. Originally adherents of ancient Turkic beliefs,³ the Uyghur ruling class converted to Manichaeism after Böğü Qayan (reigned 759–779) adopted it as the state's official religion in the 760s. However, Manichaeism does not seem to have gained much popular support, so it seems to have been restricted to a minority group. After the fall of the Orkhon Qaghanate and their migrations, Manichaeism continued to be professed by their elites for several decades (and there were also a few individual conversions to Nestorianism among the populace), but eventually most of the Uyghurs, including their elite, converted to Buddhism which became their dominant religion for centuries. However, Islam

¹ Known in the Chinese sources with a variety of forms such as *Yuange* 袁紇, *Weige* 韋紇, *Huige* 回紇/迴紇, *Huigu* 回鶻/迴鶻, etc.

² For an overview of Uyghur history until 840, see Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire (744–840) According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories* (Canberra: Center of Oriental Studies, The Australian National University, 1968); Colin Mackerras, "The Uighurs," in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (ed. Denis Sinor; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 317–42.

³ There have been many debates regarding how to name the native beliefs of early Turkic peoples, including terms like "Ancient Turkic Religion," "Ancient Turkic Beliefs," "Turkic Shamanism," "Tengrism" (or "Tengriism") and so on. Getting involved in that matter would highly prolong the length of this article.

also started spreading among them, and, by the sixteenth century, most of the Uyghurs had become Muslims.⁴

One major debate over early Uyghur religious history revolves around the question of which religion they practiced prior to the adoption of Manichaeism as their official religion. Some scholars like Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, Bahaeddin Ögel, and Özkan İzgi have been of the opinion that seventh- and eighth-century Uyghurs were Buddhists before they converted to Manichaeism, so the outline of Uyghur religious conversions followed this line: Ancient Turkic beliefs → Buddhism → Manichaeism → Buddhism again → Islam.⁵ One aim of this article is to find out whether this was really the case, while a second aim is to examine records in Uyghur, Chinese, and Islamic sources about the celestial and natural cults within the earliest native beliefs of Uyghurs and to determine their place among the ancient Turkic beliefs in general.

■ Tāŋri: The Cult of Sky

Tāŋri (Tengri) was the supreme god of pre-Manichaean Uyghurs just like all other early Turkic peoples. The word itself in Old Turkic originally denoted the physical sky but later also acquired the meaning of a creative supreme god.⁶ Cults devoted to the sky and worshipping it as a supreme deity have always been common

⁴ For the religious history of Uyghurs and how their new religions influenced their cultures, see Yukiyo Kasai, “Uyghur Legitimation and the Role of Buddhism,” in *Buddhism in Central Asia I: Patronage, Legitimation, Sacred Space, and Pilgrimage* (ed. Carmen Meinert and Henrik Sørensen; Brill: Leiden, 2020) 65, 71–76; Li Tang, *A History of Uighur Religious Conversions (5th–16th Centuries)* (Singapore: Asia Research Institute National University of Singapore, 2005); Münevver Ebru Zeren, “Maniheizm ve Budizm’in Uyğurlar’ın Kültür Hayatına Etkileri” (Ph.D. diss., Istanbul University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Turkology Studies, 2015); Peter Zieme, *Religion und Gesellschaft im Uigurischen Königreich von Qoço. Kolophone und Stifter des alttürkischen buddhistischen Schrifttums aus Zentralasien* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1992).

⁵ Özkan İzgi, *Uyğurların Siyasî ve Kültürel Tarihi (Hukuk Vesikalarına Göre)* (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü Yayınları, 1987) 11; Bahaeddin Ögel, *Türk Mitolojisi (Kaynakları ve açıklamaları ile destanlar)* (2 vols.; Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1993) 1:73; Münevver Ebru Zeren, “Göktürk ve Uygur Dönemi Yazıtlarında Budizm’in İzleri ve Etkileri,” in *Uluslararası Prof. Dr. Halil İnalçık Tarih ve Tarihçilik Sempozyumu: Bildiriler I. Cilt* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2021) 692. This topic was examined in a previous article (Erkoç, “Pre-Manichaean Beliefs of the Uyghurs II,” 587–589).

⁶ The etymology of *Tāŋri* has been a matter of debate. While some scholars were of the opinion that it was a pre-Turkic or non-Turkic word (Gerard Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972] 523; Gerhard Doerfer, *Türkische und mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen, unterbesonderer Berücksichtigung älterer neupersischer Geschichtsquellen, vor allem der Mongolen- und Timuridenzeit* [4 vols.; Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1965] §944, 2:577–85; Stefan Georg, “Türkisch/mongolisch *tengri* ‘Himmel, Gott’ und seine Herkunft,” *Studia Etymologica Cracoviensia* 6 [2001] 83–100), there have been scholars who also defended a Turkic origin. The hypothesis I am inclined to accept as the most logical explanation belongs to Talat Tekin, who suggested that *Tāŋri* might have been an Old Turkic noun derived from a hypothetical verb **tāŋir-* with an *-i* suffix, the former being an earlier form of the attested verb **tāgir-* meaning “to turn around, to enclose, to surround” (Talat Tekin, *Hunların Dili* [Ankara: Doruk Yayınları, 1993] 11).

among the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes, such as the Scythians, various Turkic peoples, and Mongols. Not only steppe nomads, but also other sedentary civilizations professed sky worship; in fact, Chinese *Tian* 天 (meaning both “sky” and “God”) is cognate with Turkic *Täŋri*. How and when Turkic peoples started differentiating between the physical sky and the supreme god that created it is a matter of debate, and this is also the case with early Uyghurs.

The earliest references to Uyghurs are found in Chinese sources, which record them as a tribe of the High Carts (Gaoche 高車), who were a Turkic people that consisted of numerous cart-riding nomadic tribes dwelling over a vast area covering Eastern and Central Eurasian steppes (*Weishu* 103.2310).⁷ These sources, primarily the *Weishu* 魏書, describe the culture of these High Carts including their religious beliefs, which can be used to shed light on the earliest beliefs of the fourth- through fifth-century Uyghurs. The earliest traces of the cult of *Täŋri* among early Uyghurs are also seen in these records. According to the origin myth of the High Carts recorded in *Weishu*, an anonymous Xiongnu 匈奴 chanyu 單于 (ruler) had two beautiful girls, whom the chanyu decided to marry to *Täŋri* (Tian 天)⁸ and locked in a tower located in the northern parts of his realm. The girls waited for four years, and then an old male wolf appeared; guarding the tower day and night, the wolf dug a cavern below it and never left there. Eventually, the younger daughter thought that the wolf was a messenger of *Täŋri* 天, so despite the objections of her elder sister, she went down the tower and mated with the wolf, their offspring becoming the High Carts (*WS* 103.2307). An interesting practice of the High Carts that can be associated with the cult of *Täŋri* was their ceremony regarding thunder. The *Weishu* tells us that the High Carts enjoyed thunder and thunderbolts; whenever a thunderbolt struck, they would shoot arrows into the sky 天 and then leave the place, leaving the arrows behind. The next year, when autumn came and the horses were fattened, they would gather at the place of the storm, burying the sheep they sacrificed, lighting fires, and drawing their daggers. Afterwards, a female shaman would pray (*WS* 103.2308). This shooting of arrows towards the sky seems like an offering to *Täŋri*. The *Weishu* also narrates that tens of thousands of people from the five High Cart tribes gathered together during the reign of emperor Gaozong 高宗 (Emperor Wencheng of Northern Wei 北魏文成帝; reigned 452–465) and made offerings to *Täŋri* 天. Our source notes that the High Carts used to ride horses, sacrifice animals, wander around, sing and celebrate during their big gatherings,

⁷ Wei Shou 魏收, *Weishu* 魏書 (Beijing 北京: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1974); hereafter, *WS*, appearing in parentheses within the text.

⁸ Some modern Turkish historians with deep nationalistic and conservative motives attempt to portray the Turkic supreme deity *Täŋri* as a monotheistic god very similar to Islamic Allāh. However, in the Islamic faith Allāh does not have a wife; contrary to that, there are several examples of Turkic peoples believing that *Täŋri* was a married deity (Hayrettin İhsan Erkoç, “Türklerin İslâmiyete Geçiş Sürecinde *Täŋri* ve Allah Algıları,” *AÜ DTCF Dergisi* 58.1 [2018] 301–26, at 318).

and the gathering organized during Gaozong's reign was unprecedented in size (*WS* 103.2309).⁹

It is thus evident that the ancestors of Uyghurs already worshiped *Täŋri*. When it comes to the eighth-century Uyghurs, both their inscriptions¹⁰ and Chinese sources give us details about their belief in this cult. However, when examining the inscriptions it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the sky, god, or both are meant. To see whether a distinction was made between the two, it is necessary to examine all the usages of *Täŋri* in these inscriptions:

Tes N1: *Täŋri* as the physical sky is counted among created beings: *täŋri qilintuqda* ("when the sky was created").

Tes E1, E4: *Täŋri* denotes the physical sky while being mentioned within the imperial title of the Uyghur ruler: *täŋr[i]dä bolmıš il itmiš uyyur qayan* (*täŋr[i]dä bolmıš* = "born in the sky") in E1 and *täŋridä bolmıš il itmiš [bilgä] qayan* in E4.

Tariat E4: The blue sky is counted as one of the gods said to have bestowed upon the ruler his title: *atımın üzä kök täŋri asra yaŋız yir yana* . . . ("my name was [given to me by] the blue sky above, the brown earth below again. . .").

Tariat S6, W1, 6; Shine Us N1: *Täŋri* denotes the physical sky while being mentioned within the imperial title of the ruler: *täŋridä bolmıš il itmiš bilgä qayan*.¹¹

Tariat W3: The blue sky is mentioned as one of the gods helping the qaghan in his organization of the realm: *üzä kök täŋri yarlıqaduq ücün asra yaŋız yir igit[d]ük ücün ilimin törümin itinti[m]* ("Because the blue sky above ordered, because the brown earth below fed, I organized my realm [and] my laws").

Tariat N1–4: *Täŋri* has the meaning of "heavenly" while being used as a title of the qaghan: *täŋrim qanım* in N1, 3–4 ("My heavenly, my khan") and *täŋri qanım* ("My heavenly khan") in N2.¹²

Shine Us E1–2: *Täŋri* denotes the sky as a god as one of the helpers of the qaghan in his victory over the Säkiz Oghuz and Toquz Tatars: *qulım künim boduniy täŋri yir ayu birti anta sančdım* ("For my male slaves, my female slaves [and] people the sky [and] earth said [ordered], I lanced there"); *yazuqluy atlıy[ıy] . . . täŋri tuta birti* ("The sinful cavalymen . . . *Täŋri* held [them]").

Shine Us S9: *Täŋri* again denotes the sky as a god as one of the helpers of

⁹ Similarly, the Xiongnu and Türks also held massive gatherings where they made sacrifices to *Täŋri*, other gods, spirits, and their ancestors.

¹⁰ The three famous Uyghur inscriptions at Tes, Tariat (Terkh), and Shine Us were erected during the 750s by *Täŋridä Bolmıš Il Itmiš Bilgä Qayan* (Bayan Čor; reigned 747–759), the greatest ruler of Orkhon Uyghurs. Being the second ruler of the Uyghur Qaghanate, it was he who conquered most of the nomadic peoples of the Eastern Steppes and transformed this polity into a major steppe empire.

¹¹ Tariat W6 has *qan* instead of *qayan*.

¹² For N1 and 3–4, Akio Katayama has separated the expression *täŋrim qanım* as two different words and translated it as "My Heaven, my Qan" (Akio Katayama, "Tariat Inscription," in *Provisional Report of Researches on Historical Sites and Inscriptions in Mongolia From 1996 to 1998* (hereafter *PRRH*) [ed. Takao Moriyasu and Ayudai Ochir; Osaka: SCES, 1999] 168–76, at 170, 172).

the qaghan in his victory over some enemy groups, perhaps the Oghuz and Türks: *künim qulim bodunıy täñri yir ayu [bi]rti anta sančdım* (“For my female slaves, my male slaves [and] people the sky [and] earth said [ordered], I lanced there.”).

First Qara Balghasun Inscription-Turkic Side (hereafter QBI-T) I/I line 1: The title *Täñrikän* is mentioned here. It is well known that this honorific title was formed by the combination of *Täñri* and *Qan* (*Khan*), here meaning “heavenly person.”¹³

First QBI-T I/I line 4–5: *Täñri* meaning “Heavenly” can be seen within the title of the ruler who erected the First Qara Balghasun Inscription: *[ay] täñridä qut bulmıš alp bilgä täñri uyğur qa[yan]*. It is interesting to see that “heavenly,” one of the meanings of *Täñri* in Old Turkic, continued to be used by the Uyghurs even after their adoption of Manichaeism.

Täñri is also seen in other Uyghur inscriptions, some of them containing no approximate dates:

Sixth Khoit Tamir line 1: *Täñrikän* (“Heavenly”) is seen within a title: *täñrikän alp qutluğ bilgä qan*.

Seventh Khoit Tamir line 2: It is possible that both the physical sky and the god might be meant here in the expression *täñridä qut bulmıš* (“Found *qut* [fortune] in *Täñri*”). Uyghur qaghanal titles from the Manichaean period, such as *Ay Täñridä Qut Bulmıš* (“[One who] Found Fortune in the Moon God”), *Kün Täñridä Qut Bulmıš* (“[One who] Found Fortune in the Sun God”) and *Kün Täñridä Ülüğ Bulmıš* (“[One who] Found Destiny in the Sun God”),¹⁴ demonstrate a similar case.

Seventh Khoit Tamir line 4: It is not so easy to determine the precise meaning of *Täñri* in the expression . . . *qut täñri qutluğ bolzun* (“ . . . fortune, may *Täñri* be blessed”).

Thirteenth Khoit Tamir line 4: The word *Täñri* is visible but erosions in this line make it impossible to determine the context.

- Twenty First Khoit Tamir: This very short and partially eroded inscription ends with the word *täñrim* (“my *Täñri*”), which most probably means “my heavenly one” as noted by Erhan Aydın.¹⁵

Xi'an 西安 line 9: This bilingual inscription in Old Turkic and Chinese has been recently discovered in Xi'an (Chang'an 長安 of the Tang period), erect-

¹³ Although the First QBI is from the period when the Uyghurs had adopted Manichaeism as their official religion, the title *Täñrikän* is a pre-Manichaean Uyghur title. In fact, we already see it in the Ongi Inscription of the Türks (E5–6, 8). In his famous eleventh-cent. Turkic-Arabic dictionary *Dīwān Luyāt al-Turk*, Maḥmūd al-Kāšyarī noted that *Täñrikän* meant “a wise man, a pious man” in the dialect of “infidel” Turks (Maḥmūd bin al-Ḥusayn bin Muḥammad al-Kāšyarī, *Kitāb Dīwān Luyāt al-Turk* [Millet Yazma Kütüphanesi, Ali Emīrī Arabī No. 4189, Istanbul] 609, 613; Maḥmūd al-Kāšyarī, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects (Dīwān Luyāt at-Turk)* [trans. Robert Dankoff and James Kelly; 3 vols.; Duxbury, MA: Harvard Print Office, 1982–1985] 3:343, 350).

¹⁴ The Old Turkic word *ülüg* normally means “share, part” but it was also used with the meanings “destiny and fate” (Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary*, 142).

¹⁵ Erhan Aydın, *Uygur Yazıtları* (Istanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat, 2018) 81.

ed in 795 for the Uyghur prince Qarī Čor Tigin who died in China. The title of his elder brother is given in the inscription as *bögü bilgä täñri qan*, with *Täñri* meaning “Heavenly” here.

Second Qara Balghasan line 6: This inscription was erected for an anonymous warrior who died in battle. The blue sky is mentioned while describing how unlucky the deceased warrior was: *kök täñridä qutum yuyqa boltı yayız yirdä yolım qışya boltı* (“My fortune in the blue sky became thin, my luck in the brown earth became short”).

Arkhanan line 1: *Täñrikän* is used as an epithet for a princess: *täñr[i]kän qunčuy* (“heavenly princess”).

Arkhanan line 2: It is evident here that the word *Täñrikän* was not reserved for human beings only, but it was also used for inanimate objects: *qaya täñr[i]kän qutluq boluq* (“Be blessed [like] the heavenly rock!”).

Gurvaljin Uul: This very short inscription is comprised of a single sentence containing just three words, in which the inscriber describes himself as a servant of God: *täñri qulı bitidim* (“I, servant of Täñri, inscribed”).

Bömbögör Side line 1: The Bömbögör Inscription is an undated inscription dedicated to a Turkic *qunčuy* (princess), but to which Turkic people or tribe exactly she belonged remains a mystery. Hatice Şirin pointed out that she might have belonged either to the Aşina (Ashina 阿史那) tribe of the Türks or the Yaylaqar clan of the Uyghurs.¹⁶ If the latter is the case, this inscription provides some interesting information about Uyghur beliefs as the inscriber sets worshipping of sky (Täñri) alongside earth: *üzä täñrikä asra yirkä yükün[t]üküm bar ärti yañıltuqum yoq* (“I had worshiped the sky above, I had worshiped the earth below; I have never gone astray”).

Besides Uyghur inscriptions, Chinese sources also provide us with some information regarding the cult of Täñri practiced by the Uyghurs.¹⁷ Although they believed that the qaghans acquired their right to rule through the *qut*¹⁸ bestowed upon them by Täñri, and although there are a few Chinese records regarding qaghans receiving *qut* (except the expressions we see in qaghanal titles),¹⁹ these records do not mention Täñri, as we will see later. A reflection of the Uyghur concept of *qut*

¹⁶ Hatice Şirin, “Bombogor Inscription: Tombstone of a Turkic *Qunčuy* (“Princess”),” *JRAS* (2015) 1–9, at 3.

¹⁷ As I have demonstrated in a yet unpublished study of mine, Chinese records about the cult of Täñri among the Türks are greater in number.

¹⁸ The Uyghur concept of *qut* was examined in a previous article (Erkoç, “Pre-Manichaeen Beliefs of the Uyghurs II,” 598–600). The word *qut* was used in Old Turkic with a variety of meanings such as “favor, fortune, luck, happiness, charisma, health, soul and spirit” (Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary*, 594; Jens Wilkens, *Handwörterbuch des Altuigurischen. Altuigurisch—Deutsch—Türkisch* [Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2021] 428–29). For the Turkic concept of *qut* in general, see Alessio Bombaci, “Qutluq Bolzun!,” *UAJ* 36 (1965) 284–91; idem, “Qutluq Bolzun!,” *UAJ* 38 (1966) 13–43; Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary*, 594. For the concept of *qut* among the Türks and other Turko-Mongol polities, see Hayrettin İhsan Erkoç, “Eski Türklerde Devlet Teşkilâtı (Gök Türk Dönemi)” (M.A. thesis, Hacettepe University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of History, 2008) 75–79.

¹⁹ Erkoç, “Pre-Manichaeen Beliefs of the Uyghurs II,” 598.

can be seen in an Uyghur legend about Buqu Xan (Bögü Qayan), recorded by the thirteenth-century Persian historian ‘Alā al-Dīn ‘Aṭā’ Malik Juvaynī in his work titled *Tārīḫ-i Jahāngushā*. Although recorded many centuries later when the Uyghurs were mostly Buddhists with a few adherents to other religions, the legend contains numerous elements from ancient Turkic beliefs. According to the legend, as Buqu Tigin (the later Buqu Xan) and his four other brothers were miraculously born from a beam of light descending on a mound, the Uyghurs decided to make one of them their ruler as the boys were sent by God Almighty.²⁰ After Buqu became khan, God Almighty sent him three ravens that knew all the languages, which also acted as Buqu Xan’s spies.²¹

The protective side of Tängri is also not mentioned in the Chinese sources, but there is one record demonstrating that the Uyghurs considered Tängri to be a punitive deity. The *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 says that, in 765, some Uyghur nobles were convinced by the rebellious Tang general Pugu Huai’en 僕固懷恩 (himself of Toquz Oghuz origin) to invade China because he told them that the emperor (Tang Daizong 唐代宗; reigned 762–779) had fled south and his famous general Guo Ziyi 郭子儀 had been removed from the command of Tang armies. But when the Uyghurs entered China, they came across Ziyi and, during their meeting, decided to halt the invasion as they understood that Huai’en had tricked them. During the conversation they told Ziyi that Huai’en was an ungrateful man and he was killed by Tängri 天 (*Jiu Tangshu* 195.5205).²² Yet, the qaghanal titles of Uyghur rulers recorded in Uyghur and Chinese sources provide us with hints regarding Uyghur beliefs, both in the pre-Manichaean and Manichaean periods. These titles have been written with a variety of forms in the Chinese sources, but James Russell Hamilton and Yukiyo Kasai have successfully reconstructed their Old Turkic forms. These titles include religious terms and formulae such as *Qutluγ* (“Blessed”), *Tängridä Bolmıš* (“Born in the Sky”), *Bögü* (“Wise, Sage, Sorcerer”), *Tängri* (“Heavenly”),²³

²⁰ *The Ta’rikh-i-Jahān-gushā of ‘Alā’u ‘d-Dīn ‘Aṭā’ Malik-i-Juvaynī (Composed in A. H. 658 = A. D. 1260): Part I, Containing the History of Chingiz Khān and His Successors* (ed. Mirzā Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abdu’l-Wahhāb-i-Qazwīnī; Leyden: E. J. Brill, Imprimerie Orientale, 1912) 41.

²¹ *The Ta’rikh-i-Jahān-gushā*, 41. Another version of this legend was recorded in the Uyghur *idūq qut* (ruler) Barčūq Art Tigin’s (Ba’ershu A’erte Dejin 巴而朮阿而忒的斤) biography in *Yuanshi* 元史 (hereafter *YS*). In this version, the divine light lands on a tree, and five boys are born afterwards, one of them being Bögü Qayan (Bu[gu] Kehan 不[古]可罕). However, the qaghan’s acceptance by the people for being sent by God and his God-sent ravens are not mentioned in this version (Song Lian 宋濂, *Yuanshi* 元史 [Beijing 北京: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1976] 122.2999).

²² Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Shanghai 上海: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1975) (hereafter *JTS*). The part of *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (hereafter *XTS*) describing this event does not mention the Uyghurs saying that Huai’en was killed by Tängri (Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 [Shanghai 上海: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1975] 217A.6120).

²³ *Jiu Tangshu* and *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑 (hereafter *ZZTJ*) tell us that when Bilgä Köl Qayan (Pijia Que Kehan 毗伽闕可汗; Tängridä Bolmıš II Itmıš Bilgä Qayan) died in 759, he was succeeded by his son Tängri Qayan (Dengli Kehan 登里可汗) (*JTS* 195.5201; Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑 [Shanghai 上海: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1976] 221.7076). He is the famous Bögü Qayan who is mentioned in these sources with that title (sometimes only as *Dengli* 登里) a few

Täñridä Qut Bulmıš (“[One who] Found Fortune in God”), *Ay Täñridä Bolmıš* (“Born in the Moon God”), *Täñridä Ülüg Bulmıš* (“[One who] Found Destiny in God”), *Ay Täñridä Qut Bulmıš* (“[One who] Found Fortune in the Moon God”), *Kün Täñridä Qut Bulmıš* (“[One who] Found Fortune in the Sun God”), and *Kün Täñridä Ülüg Bulmıš* (“[One who] Found Destiny in the Sun God”).²⁴

While narrating an Uyghur legend, the *Yuanshi* 元史 mentions that when Princess Jinlian (Jinlian Gongzhu 金蓮公主) from China married Geli 葛勵, son of the Uyghur ruler Yulun Tigin (Yulun Dejin 玉倫斤), she started dwelling in a place called *Bieli Boli Ta* 別力跋力答²⁵ meaning “Mountain Where the Wife Dwells”

more times as well (*JTS* 195.5201–5204; *ZZTJ* 222.7131, 7141, 226.7282). Jonathan Karam Skaff emphasized that the qaghan was invested with this title by the Tang court (Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2012] 125–26). *ZZTJ* also notes that the wife of Böğü Qayan sent from China (who was also the daughter of Huai'en) carried the title *Täñri Qatun* (*Dengli Kedun* 登里可敦) (222.7131). The Soghdian Side of the First Qara Balghasun Inscription mentions Böğü Qayan with the epithet “god(like) ruler” (*βγγ* 'xšy-wn'k) (No. 6 line 20). Prior to the Uyghurs, the Türks also used *Täñri Qayan* as an imperial title; one of Bilgä Qayan's (reigned 716–734) sons and successors carried this title (*JTS* 194A.5177–5178; *XTS* 215B.6054; *ZZTJ* 214.6809, 6844). The usage of this term goes back to the sixth century, as can be seen in the Soghdian side of the bilingual Bugut inscription. Here the expression *βγγ* (“God[like]”) is placed in front of the titles of several early Türk rulers (Yutaka Yoshida and Takao Moriyasu, “Bugut Inscription,” in *PRRH* [ed. Moriyasu and Ochir], 122–25, at 123–24). Besides calling their qaghans *Täñri* (“Heavenly”), the Türks used the formula *Täñri Täg* (“God-like”) for them in their inscriptions (for a complete list, see Erhan Aydın, *Orhon Yazıtları* [İstanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat, 2017] 169). The Old Turkic title *Täñri Qayan* was also used by Türks, Toquz Oghuz, and other Turkestanis for Chinese emperors during the seventh and eighth cents., recorded in Chinese sources as *Tian Kehan* 天可汗 (Erkoç, “Eski Türklerde,” 28–29; Skaff, *Sui-Tang China*, 119–127). This usage was continued by the Uyghurs, as both *JTS* and *XTS* note that, during the incident of 765 described above, the Uyghurs called the Chinese emperor *Täñri Qayan* 天可汗 (*JTS* 195.5205; *XTS* 217A.6120). These sources contain another example of the usage of this title; when Chinese emissaries visited *Täñridä Bolmıš* II İtmiş Bilgä Qayan in 759, the qaghan is recorded as having mentioned the Chinese emperor (Tang Suzong 唐肅宗; reigned 756–762) as *Täñri Qayan* 天可汗 (*JTS* 195.5200; *XTS* 217A.6116; Skaff, *Sui-Tang China*, 125, 347). Not surprisingly, the Chinese Side of the First Qara Balghasun Inscription mentions some of the Uyghur rulers with the title *Täñri Qayan* 天可汗 (line 12, 15–18). Quite interestingly, *Täñri* is also recorded as an Uyghur toponym in the early fourteenth cent. Persian work *Jāmi' al-Tavārīx* written by Rašīd al-Dīn Faḍlullāh-i Hamadānī. He devoted a chapter to the Uyghurs, in which a narration about their original homeland in Mongolia is given and two big mountains are mentioned, one of them called *Uşqunluq Täñrim* (Rašīd al-Dīn Faḍlullāh-i Hamadānī, *Jāmi' al-Tavārīx* [ed. Muḥammad Rūšan and Muştafa Müsavī; 4 vols.; Tahrān: Naşr-i Alburz, 1373/1953] 1:138). W. M. Thackston noted that the former word derives from *uşqun* meaning “rhubarb,” while the latter expression means “my god” (Rashiduddin Fazlullah, *Jami' u't-Tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles: A History of the Mongols* [trans. W. M. Thackston; 3 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998–1999] 1:75 n. 1). The Türks also used *Täñri* as a toponym for a mountain which was also considered the God of Earth (Hayrettin İhsan Erkoç, “Bozkır Halklarında Su Kültü,” in *Tarih ve Kültür Penceresinden Su ve Sağlık İlişkisi Uluslararası Sempozyumu Bildirileri—10-11 Haziran 2019, İstanbul* [ed. Arın Namal, Hacer Topaktaş Üstüner, and Bożena Plonka Syroka; İstanbul: Beykoz Belediyesi, 2020] 69–108, at 81–82).

²⁴ James Russell Hamilton, *Les Ouïghours à l'époque des Cinq dynasties d'après les documents chinois* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1955) 139–41; Kasai, “Uyghur Legitimation,” 64–66.

²⁵ Bahaeddin Ögel suggested that the words *Bieli* 別力 and *Da* 答 probably represented *Bäglig*

(Fusuojushan 婦所居山), located in Qara Qorum (Helin 和林). Another name of this mountain was *Tiangeliyu Daha* 天哥里于答哈, meaning “Mountain of the Spirit of Sky” (Tianlingshan 天靈山) (YS 122.2999). Bahaeddin Ögel suggested that *Tiangeliyu Daha* could stand for Turkic *Täŋrikän Tay*;²⁶ this does not come as a surprise, as we already saw above that the word *Täŋrikän* was used in the Arkhanan Inscription for a rock.

Thus, the Uyghurs considered *Täŋri* or *Kök Täŋri* to be both the physical sky and their supreme deity. Qaghans were born in this sky, which itself was considered to be one of the created beings in the universe. *Täŋri* as a god was believed to bestow imperial titles on rulers, help them organize their realms, and protect them in battles against enemies. Qaghans and other people were gifted with fortunes and privileges by *Täŋri*. In fact, people considered themselves to be servants of this god, whom they worshiped. Not just a protective god, *Täŋri* was also a punitive deity that killed wrongdoers. Yet, the words “*Täŋri*” and “*Täŋrikän*” also had the meaning “Heavenly,” and they were used for other godly and non-godly beings such as qaghans, emperors, princes, princesses, and mountains. This example demonstrates how flexible early Turkic beliefs could be, as also seen from other examples throughout Turkic history.²⁷

Before continuing with the other cults, there are a few issues that have to be addressed here. The first one is whether *Täŋri* was considered to be a creative god by the Uyghurs. Their inscriptions seem to be silent on that, except that *Täŋri* is counted among the created beings in the Tes Inscription. However, what we know about earlier Türk beliefs shows us that the Türks considered *Täŋri* to be the supreme creative god. The official title of *Täŋri Qayan* mentioned above was given in the Bilgä Qayan Inscription as *Täŋri Täg Täŋri Yaratmış Türuk Bilgä Qayan* (“God-like, Created by God, Türk Wise Qaghan”) (E1, S13).²⁸ While describing the beliefs of the Türks, the seventh-century Byzantine historian Theophylactus Simocatta wrote that they “honour fire to a quite extraordinary degree, they revere air and water, and they praise the earth; but they only worship and call god him

and *Tay* respectively, but he could not reconstruct the Turkic form of *Boli* 跛力 (Bahaeddin Ögel, *Sino-Turcica: Čingiz Han'ın Türk Müşavirleri* [Istanbul: IQ Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, 2002] 21 n. 8, 24 n. 8).

²⁶ Ögel, *Sino-Turcica*, 24 n. 9.

²⁷ In his entry for *Täŋri*, Kāšyārī gave several different meanings and usages. From his expressions, it is understood that Muslim Turks used this word as the Turkic translation of Allāh. However, he noted that the “infidel” Turks also used *Täŋri* for “sky” and for “anything that is imposing in their eyes,” “such as a great mountain or tree, and they bow down to such things” (Maḥmūd bin al-Ḥusayn bin Muḥammad al-Kāšyārī, *Kitāb Dīwān Luḡāt al-Turk*, 608–609; Maḥmūd al-Kāšyārī, *Compendium*, 3:342–43). For the Turkic flexibility in the usage of *Täŋri* with a variety of meanings, see Erkoç, “Türklerin İslâmiyete,” 313–15.

²⁸ Apart from the meaning “to create,” the verb *yarat-* was also used in Türk and Uyghur inscriptions with the meanings “to make, form and organize” (Aydın, *Orhon Yazıtları*, 175; idem, *Uygur Yazıtları*, 194; Talāt Tekin, *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968] 397).

who made the heaven and the earth” (7.8.14).²⁹ As his translators, Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby, noted, Tengri (Täñri) is meant here.³⁰ Thus, it can be remarked that, by the seventh century, the Türks were already making distinctions between the physical sky and a superior deity that created it along with other beings in the universe. Although Uyghur inscriptions are silent about the creative power of Täñri, we can assume that they also probably considered it a creative god.

However, we do have a problem here: if Täñri was the all-creator, why was Täñri also counted among the created beings in the Tes Inscription? This exact problem exists also within the Türk inscriptions. The Eastern Sides of both of the Orkhon Inscriptions begin with a short description of creation: *üzä kök täñri asra yayız yir qılınuqda ikin ara kişi oyli qılınmış* (“When the blue sky above, the brown earth below were created, human beings were created between the two”) (BQI E2; KTI E1). There seems to be a contradiction here. However, if the Türk inscriptions are examined in detail, there is almost always a distinction made between the physical sky (*Kök Täñri*) and the supreme god (*Täñri*) in these inscriptions.³¹ The things that are described in the Orkhon Inscriptions as created beings are the blue sky and brown earth, both physical beings. This also coincides with Theophylactus’s statement that the Türks believed in a god that created both the sky and the earth. Another problem we face here regarding creation is terminology. *Kök Täñri* by the Türks and *Täñri* by the Uyghurs are mentioned respectively with the reflexive verb of *qilin-* having the passive meaning “to be created, be born.”³² On the other hand, when an act of creation by Täñri himself is described, the causative and transitive verb *yarat-* is preferred. This seems to be a deliberate choice by both the Türks and Uyghurs. Jean-Paul Roux thought that, since the verb *yarat-* was not used in Köl Tigin E1 and Bilgä Qayan E2, a creation in the form of “creating out of nothing” was not the case.³³ Since both verbs *yarat-* and *qilin-* have generally the same meanings, and since early Turkic myths about creation are unfortunately not recorded in the sources in detail, it is quite difficult to find a definite answer to this question. However, the different reflexive and transitive forms of both verbs seem to be a significant difference.

Another slight difference between Türk and Uyghur perceptions of Täñri is its national versus universal character. Although the Türks viewed Täñri as an all-creator, they also named it *Türük Täñrisi* (“Täñri of the Türks”) (BQI E10; KTI E10). According to René Giraud, a “national god” was meant here. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak also compared this expression to YHWH of the Jews, stating that it described

²⁹ *Theophylacti Simocattae Historiarum Libri Octo* (ed. Immanuel Bekker; Bonn: E. Weber, 1834) 286; *The History of Theophylact Simocatta: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes* (trans. Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 191.

³⁰ *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, 99 n. 47.

³¹ A point emphasized in a yet unpublished work of mine.

³² Aydın, *Orhon Yazıtları*, 158; idem, *Uygur Yazıtları*, 146; Tekin, *A Grammar*, 344.

³³ Jean-Paul Roux, *La Religion des Turcs et des Mongols* (Paris: Payot, 1984) 106–107.

a national “Turkish God.”³⁴ It is understood from the formula *Türk Tāñrısı* that the Türks viewed Tāñri as a supreme god who created the universe but chose the Türks as his “chosen people,” appointing for them Türk qaghans to rule over the Earth on his behalf. However, we do not come across any expressions like *Uyghur Tāñrısı* or *Toquz Oғuz Tāñrısı* in the Uyghur inscriptions. This makes one wonder if the Uyghurs viewed Tāñri as a more universal god than the Türks did. Yet, the Uyghurs still believed that their qaghans received their *qut* from Tāñri, so they must have viewed their rulers as the representatives of Tāñri in the world. Besides, considering the fact that a significant part of the texts of Uyghur inscriptions have been eroded overtime, perhaps such expressions existed in the parts that are now illegible.

Comparing Türk and Uyghur beliefs about Tāñri, we observe that the Türks seemed to have a more concrete comprehension of this supreme being. They believed in a deity called Tāñri, who created everything including the blue sky (*kök tāñri*) above and the brown earth (*yayız yir*) below. However, while the Uyghurs counted Tāñri as one of the created beings (perhaps meaning only the sky, if thinking along the Türk inscriptions), both Tāñri and Kök Tāñri also acted as supreme gods. Turkic peoples are known to have worshiped Tāñri well before the Türks, but when and how they started making a distinction between god and sky is unclear. The earliest evidence we have of this separation is from the Türk period as we saw before, but we do not know if the earlier Xiongnu and High Carts made this distinction or not. Looking at the Uyghur samples, we can think that, prior to the Türks, such a distinction may not have existed yet, and before their conversion to Manichaeism, the Uyghurs still professed a more archaic version of the cult of Tāñri compared with the more complicated Türk version of this cult. In this archaic version, the sky and god were probably not differentiated yet, and the blue sky was probably worshiped as the supreme deity.

■ Cults of Earth (Yir) and Trees

Although Tāñri was the most important cult of pre-Manichaean Uyghurs, it was not the only deity or sacred being worshiped by them, thus signifying a polytheistic set of beliefs rather than monotheistic. Uyghur, Chinese, and Islamic sources point to cults associated with other sacred objects almost entirely consisting of natural and celestial beings. These cults demonstrate that a part of the original Uyghur beliefs was animistic in style and part of ancient Turkic beliefs. In these beliefs, the most significant difference between Tāñri and other cults was that the latter were not believed to possess creative powers; yet, we currently also do not know whether the Uyghurs considered Tāñri as a creative god or not.

³⁴ René Giraud, *L'Empire des Turcs célestes. Les regnes d'Elterich, Qapghan et Bilgä (680–734). Contribution à l'histoire des Turcs d'Asie Centrale* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1960) 102; Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Alevî ve Bektaşî İnançlarının İslâm Öncesi Temelleri* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2000) 68.

It is interesting that Uyghur inscriptions do not mention the goddess Umay, who appears in the Türk inscriptions as the second most important cult after Tāñri. Neither Chinese nor Islamic sources mention her, although perhaps she might have been mentioned in the now-eroded parts of the Uyghur inscriptions.³⁵ Following Tāñri and Umay, Türk inscriptions mention İduq Yir Sub (“Sacred Spirits of Earth and Water”),³⁶ while *yir* (“earth”) is also sometimes mentioned right after Tāñri (“sky” or “god,” depending on the context). The expression İduq Yir Sub and specifically the cult of water is not seen in the currently legible parts of Uyghur inscriptions, but a part of İduq Yir Sub, the cult of earth, is observed in these sources. As we saw before, the Tes Inscription mentions Tāñri as one of the created beings. The beginning part of the line is damaged; Takashi Ōsawa has left it blank, but Aydın has proposed that *yir* (“earth”) must have been written before *tāñri*. If this is the case, it demonstrates that the Uyghurs viewed earth as one of the beings created alongside the sky (N1).³⁷ The Tariat Inscription counts the brown earth (*yayız yir*), alongside the blue sky, among one of the gods bestowing upon the ruler his title (E4). The same inscription narrates that, together with the order of the blue sky above and the feeding of the brown earth (*yayız yir*) below, the qaghan organized his realm and his laws (W3). Meanwhile, the Shine Us Inscription reflects another aspect of the cult of earth as a helping deity. According to it, after the sky (*tāñri*) and earth (*yir*) ordered it, the qaghan won a victory over the Säkiz Oghuz and Toquz Tatars (E1–2). Again, the same inscription describes a victory of the qaghan over (probably) the Oghuz and Türks after the sky (*tāñri*) and earth (*yir*) ordered it (S9). The scribe of Bömbögör Inscription narrates that since he/she worshiped the sky above and the earth below (*asra yir*), he/she has never gone astray (Side line 1).

³⁵ The cult of Umay among Turkic peoples is first attested in the Türk inscriptions of the early-eighth cent. Although these sources mention her as one of the assistants of Tāñri in his earthly businesses and stress her femininity, not much is known about her cult during this period, as other Chinese, Byzantine, and Islamic sources do not mention her. Kāşyarī translated *Umay* as “placenta” and noted a Turkic belief in which Umay was considered a companion of a child in the mother’s womb, and those that worshiped her would have children (Maḥmūd bin al-Ḥusayn bin Muḥammad al-Kāşyarī, *Kitāb Dīwān Luḡāt al-Turk*, 74). Umay seems more like a cult associated with women and children, hence it is no surprise that the sedentary neighbors of Turkic peoples did not hear much about her, perhaps because they received most of their information from the male members of Turkic societies.

³⁶ For this cult of the Türks, which seems to be a major collection of animistic cults associated with natural beings, see Erkoç, “Bozkır Halklarında,” 73–85. Just as Tāñri was a more national deity for the Türks, İduq Yir Sub was also considered to be a specific Türk set of gods and spirits, as can be seen from the expressions *Türük Tāñrisi Türük İduq Yiri Subi* and *Türük Tāñrisi İduq Yiri Subi* (“Tāñri and Sacred Earth-Water Spirits of the Türks”) found in the Orkhon Inscriptions (BQI E10; KTI E10–11). A similar belief is narrated by Kāşyarī, who mentions provincial and earth genies, called Čiwī, protecting Turkic clans and tribes before they engaged in battles (Maḥmūd bin al-Ḥusayn bin Muḥammad al-Kāşyarī, *Kitāb Dīwān Luḡāt al-Turk*, 544).

³⁷ Aydın, *Uygur Yazıtları*, 35; Takashi Ōsawa, “Tes Inscription,” in *PRRH* (ed. Moriyasu and Ochir), 158–167, at 159–160.

The legend about Buqu Xan recorded by Juvaynī reflects some cults of early Uyghurs, including those about trees and earth. According to the legend, after a beam of light descends from the sky on a mound between two trees,³⁸ some time passes and five baby boys are miraculously born in the mound. After the children grew up and started speaking, they asked the Uyghurs about their parents, and the people showed them those two trees. The boys showed obeisance to the trees as children show to their parents, and they also showed respect and honor to the earth from which the trees had grown. Afterwards, the trees started speaking to the children and blessed them, wishing a long life for all. One of the boys was given the name Buqu Tigin, who would eventually grow up to become Buqu Xan (*The Ta'rikh-i-Jahān-gushā*, 40–41). Juvaynī also says that, during his own time, the Uyghurs used to fasten parts of that family tree on the walls of their houses as a symbol of their family trees (*The Ta'rikh-i-Jahān-gushā*, 45).³⁹ In the Chinese version of this legend recorded in *Yuanshi*, the divine light lands directly on a tree (*shu* 樹), and the children are born inside it. The connection between trees and earth is also not mentioned in this version (YS 122.2999). As J. A. Boyle already noted,⁴⁰ Rašīd al-Dīn and Marco Polo also very briefly mentioned this legend. Rašīd al-Dīn stated that Būgū Xan was an important Uyghur ruler of the past who was believed by them to be born of a tree (*daraxt*) (*Jāmi' al-Tavārīḫ*, 1:128). While describing *Iuguristan* (*Uyghuria*) in his famous late-thirteenth-century travel book, Marco Polo wrote, “but they say the king whom they first had did not take his beginning from human generation, but was sprung from a certain fungus which is made up from the sap of trees, what indeed is accustomed among us to be called *esca*; and from him all the others descended” (1.59). Regarding the legend of Bōgū Qayan, the version with birth from a tree seems to be more widespread.

■ Cults of Mountains (Tay)

The Uyghurs practiced mountain cults as part of their beliefs related to nature. Their usage of *Tāñri* as the name of a mountain (*Ušqunluq Tāñrim*) in Mongolia has been mentioned above (Rašīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-Tavārīḫ*, 1:138), as well as their usage of *Tāñrikān* for a mountain in Mongolia (YS 122.2999). Another sacred mountain for them was mentioned by both the *Yuanshi* and Rašīd al-Dīn. According to the Uyghur legend narrated in the former, a rocky mountain (*shishan* 石山) located to the south of Tāñrikān Tay was called *Qutluq Tay* (*Huli Daha* 胡力答哈) meaning “Mountain

³⁸ According to the legend one of the trees was called *qusuq*, a type of tree “shaped like a pine (*nāž*), whose leaves in winter resemble those of a cypress and whose fruits is like a pignon (*jilyūza*) both in shape and taste,” while the other one was called *toz* (*The Ta'rikh-i-Jahān-gushā*, 40; 'Ala-ad-Din 'Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror* [trans. J. A. Boyle; Manchester: Unesco Publishing, 1997] 55). J. A. Boyle has explained that the former was the Siberian cedar and the latter was the birch ('Ala-ad-Din 'Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan*, 55 n. 13–14).

³⁹ Throughout history, sacred trees and forests played an important role in the beliefs and mythologies of various Turkic peoples.

⁴⁰ 'Ala-ad-Din 'Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan*, 56 n. 16.

of Good Fortune” (Fushan 福山). When the envoy of Tang Dynasty arrived in the Uyghur country, he told other Chinese officials dealing with foreign lands that the prosperity and power of the Qara Qorum region derived from this mountain; if they could destroy the mountain, the Uyghur state would be weakened. Thus, all the Chinese officials told Yulun Tigin that, as his son was married to Princess Jinlian, he had to fulfill some requests from them. The rocks of Qutluy Tay were not used in the Uyghur country, but the Chinese wanted to see them. The Tigin agreed to their request and allowed the Chinese to take the rocks. As they were too big to move, the Chinese burnt them with fire and watered them with strong vinegars. Thus, the rocks broke into smaller pieces and were easily carried away by the Chinese. However, this brought bad luck upon the Uyghurs; the birds and beasts of their land started crying out in grief, and Yulun Tigin died in the next seven days. Disasters occurred frequently, and the people could not live in peace and comfort. Several successors of Yulun Tigin died, and the Uyghurs finally had to migrate to Qoço (Jiaozhou 交州, also called Huozhou 火州), also controlling the region of Beš Baliq (Bieshi Bali 别失八里) (YS 122.2999–2300).⁴¹ As observed by Ögel,⁴² *Yuanshi’s Qutluy Tay* is the same place as *Jāmi’ al-Tavārīḫ’s Qut Tay*, described by Rašīd al-Dīn as a mountain in the original Uyghur homeland in Mongolia (*Jāmi’ al-Tavārīḫ*, 1:138). Another mountain that can be considered as a sacred place for Uyghurs is mentioned again by Juvaynī. The legend of Buqu Xan recorded by him describes how the khan continues speaking with a sacred girl at a place called *Aqtay* (“White Mountain”)⁴³ for seven years, six months, and twenty two days (*The Ta’rikh-i-Jahān-gushā*, 42). As noted above, the epithet *tāghrikān* (“heavenly”) was used by the Uyghurs for a rock (*qaya*) (Arkhanan line 2).

Although the formula *İduq Yir Sub* is not witnessed in Uyghur inscriptions, a concept related to it can be seen in the form of a toponym in regards to mountain

⁴¹ A different version of this legend of migration is also narrated by Juvaynī. Here it is told that, after Buqu Xan’s death, one of his sons succeeded him, and eventually the Uyghurs migrated to Bišbaliq after following the cries of animals and children sounding like “Köç! Köç!” (“Migrate! Migrate!”). However, the disasters that befell them after their loss of Qutluy Tay are not mentioned in this version nor are any reasons given for their migration (*The Ta’rikh-i-Jahān-gushā*, 45).

⁴² Ögel, *Sino-Turcica*, 22–23 n. 8, 24 n. 10.

⁴³ As J. A. Boyle pointed out, this place could be *Ektag* where the Byzantine envoy Zemarchus met with the Türk ruler İstāmi/İstāmi Yabıy Qayan as described by Menander Protector. He considered that *Ektag/Aqtay* probably corresponded to the Tianshan 天山 (‘Ala-ad-Din ‘Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan*, 57 n. 19), known in modern Turkic languages as *Tengri Tagh* and other similar forms. The same toponym *Äk Tay* also appears in the Second Tunyuuq Inscription of the Türks. While describing various groupings of seventh-cent. Turkic tribes called *Tiele* 鐵勒 (*Tägräk*; the Uyghurs and other Toquz Oghuz were also members of this tribal union), Chinese sources mention a place in Turkestan called *Baishan* 白山, literally meaning “White Mountain.” Many studies on *Ektag/Äk Tay/Aqtay/Baishan* have been conducted by numerous scholars so far; for this mountain and various hypotheses about its location, see Erhan Aydın, *Eski Türk Yer Adları* (Istanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat, 2016) 66–71. If Juvaynī’s *Aqtay* is the same mountain as *Ektag/Äk Tay/Baishan* in Turkestan, then it is not located in the original Uyghur homeland in Mongolia, so this thirteenth-cent. Uyghur motif of “sacred mountain” must have been formed after their migration to the region following 840.

cults. Tājridā Bolmīš II Itmīš Bilgā Qayan mentioned in the Tariat Inscription that in 748 he set up his throne between two mountain tops called As Öñüz Baš and Qan İduq Baš, located right in the middle of Ötükān, the sacred political center of Turkic qaghanates (S6). The qaghan also narrated that in 752 he spent the summer to the west of As Öñüz Baš and Qan İduq Baš, and he set up his throne there (W2). A similar statement can be found in the Shine Us Inscription, in which the qaghan says that until the fifth month of 751 he spent the summer at a location where two rivers named Yabaš and Toquš meet, located to the west of Ötükān Yış, As Öñüz Baš and İduq Baš (without *Qan*), setting up his throne there (E9).⁴⁴ The word *ıduq* meaning “sacred,” is also attested in the Shine Us Inscription two more times, but erosions in the lines make it quite difficult to determine the context (N4, S4).⁴⁵ As is well known, Buddhist Turfanese Uyghur rulers of the Mongol period carried the title *İduq Qut*.⁴⁶

■ Cults of Sun (Kün) and Moon (Ay)

Records about Uyghur cults regarding the celestial objects of sun and moon are from the Manichaean period but reflect their ancient pre-Manichaean beliefs. The *Jiu Tangshu* and *Xin Tangshu* give detailed accounts of an Uyghur ceremony in 822 when the Chinese princess Taihe (Taihe Gongzhu 太和公主) arrived in the Uyghur capital to marry Kün Tājridā Ülüg Bulmīš Alp Küčlüg Bilgā Chongde 崇德 Qayan (reigned 821–824) and become his *Qatun* (chief wife). At the beginning of the ceremony, the qaghan climbed to a tower and sat there facing east throughout the ceremony. After some salutations and changes of clothing, the princess was led to a sedan chair by several Uyghur ministers. Nine Uyghur ministers from each of

⁴⁴ The word *baš* means “head” in Old Turkic as well as in modern Turkic languages. However, it also has the meaning “mountain top” and “spring, river head,” so different meanings are given by Turkologists to toponyms containing *baš*. As for the Uyghur inscriptions, Katayama and Takao Moriyasu preferred to translate *baš* as “river-head” while Aydın chose “mountain top,” which is more likely in my opinion as well (Aydın, *Uygur Yazıtları*, 44, 57–58; Katayama, “Tariat Inscription,” 169–171; Takao Moriyasu, “Site and Inscription of Šine-Usu,” in *PRRH* [ed. Moriyasu and Ochir], 177–95, at 179–80, 184). For Aydın’s explanation of the toponym *Qan İduq Baš*, see *Uygur Yazıtları*, 137; idem, *Eski Türk Yer Adları*, 86–87. Similar to the Uyghurs, Türk inscriptions also mention several toponyms named *İduq Baš*; for these as well as the debates on whether these are mountain tops or springs and river heads, see Erkoç, “Bozkır Halklarında,” 82–85. The Old Turkic word *ıduq* derives from the verb *id-* meaning “to relieve, to set free,” and hence it denotes sacred beings that are set free to be dedicated to the gods, thus indicating taboo practices (Erkoç, “Bozkır Halklarında,” 75–77).

⁴⁵ For S4, which has the word *üç* (“three”) before it hence pointing to three sacred beings, Moriyasu read *ıduq tay* meaning “sacred mountain” (thus “three sacred mountains”), but Aydın’s reading is *ıdok t’l’ı* (Moriyasu, “Site and Inscription,” 180, 184; Aydın, *Uygur Yazıtları*, 52, 60).

⁴⁶ During the Mongol period, the Uyghur title *İduq Qut* was transformed into *Idiqut*. Both Juvaynī and Rašīd al-Dīn have translated *Idi Qut/Idiqut* into Persian as *ḫudāvand-i davlat* (“lord of fortune”) (*The Ta’rikh-i Jahān-gushā*, 32; Rašīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi’ al-Tavārīḫ*, 1:140). As Boyle noted, Juvaynī seems to have confused the first syllable with Turkic *idi* meaning “lord, owner,” and “lord of fortune” should have been **Qut Idi* (‘Ala-ad-Din ‘Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan*, 44 n. 1). Apparently the same goes for Rašīd al-Dīn.

the nine Toquz Oghuz tribes then carried the princess with the chair, following the sun and turning rightwards around the Uyghur court nine times. Afterwards, the princess got down from the chair, climbed the tower, and sat next to the qaghan, sitting facing east like him (*JTS* 195.5212–5213; *XTS* 217B.6130). Although the Uyghur ruling elite were already Manichaean by 822, it is evident that this ceremony had pre-Manichaean origins. We know from Chinese sources that the doors of Türk tents faced east because the east was considered sacred as it was the direction from where the sun was born. Hence, Türk qaghans set their tents facing east. Another reflection of the sun cult among the Türks can be seen in the enthronement ceremony of their rulers, in which the new qaghans were lifted up on a felt cloth and turned nine times while facing the sun.⁴⁷ Hence it is also not a coincidence that the gates of the qaghanal palace in Ordu Balıq and the great Buddhist monastery in Qocho also face eastwards. The Uyghur qatun-making ceremony as well as their royal architecture show us that some of the ancient Turkic beliefs survived even after the adoption of Manichaeism.

The sun and the moon were sacred celestial bodies in Manichaean beliefs. Hence, beginning in 789, we start seeing the usage of epithets *Kün Tāgri* (“Sun God”) and *Ay Tāgri* (“Moon God”) within the titles of Uyghur qaghans after their conversion, with the latter seemingly more popular in use: *Ay Tāgri*dā Bolmıš Külüg Zhongzhen 忠貞 Bilgä Qayan (reigned 789–790); *Ay Tāgri*dā Ülüg Bulmıš Alp Uluy Qutluq Bilgä Huaixin 懷信 Qayan (reigned 795–805); *Ay Tāgri*dā Qut Bulmıš Külüg Bilgä Qayan (reigned 805–808); *Ay Tāgri*dā Qut Bulmıš Alp Bilgä Qayan or *Kün Tāgri*dā Qut Bulmıš Alp Bilgä Qayan (also known as Baoyi 保義, reigned 808–821); *Kün Tāgri*dā Ülüg Bulmıš Alp Küclüg Bilgä Chongde 崇德 Qayan (reigned 821–824); *Ay Tāgri*dā Qut Bulmıš Alp Bilgä Zhaoli 昭禮 Qayan (reigned 824–832);⁴⁸ *Ay Tāgri*dā Qut Bulmıš Alp Külüg Bilgä Zhangxin 彰信 Qayan (reigned 832–839).⁴⁹

These epithets are not seen in the titles of early Uyghur rulers. However, Harun Güngör ascertained that the usages of *Kün Tāgri* and *Ay Tāgri* by the Uyghur qaghans were more likely derived from ancient Turkic beliefs rather than Manichaeism itself.⁵⁰ Kasai noted that the beginning of the usage of these titles

⁴⁷ Similarly, the earlier Xiongnu rulers also gave prominence to the left (eastern) direction. Numerous Western Türk coins have images of the sun and the moon, which are connected with their cults according to Emel Esin (Emel Esin, “‘KÜN-AY’ [Ay-Yıldız motifinin proto-Türk devirinden Hakanlılara kadar ikonografisi],” in *VII. Türk Tarih Kongresi—Ankara: 25–29 Eylül 1970—Kongreye Sunulan Bildiriler* [2 vols.; Ankara: TTKY, 1972] 1:313–59, at 338–52).

⁴⁸ He is the one who erected the First QBI. The first fragment from its Turkic side gives his title as *Ay Tāgri*dā Qut Bulmıš Alp Bilgä Tāgri Uyğur Qayan; although the word in line 2 before *Tāgri*dā is currently not legible due to erosions in the fragment, Moriyasu has determined that it should have been *Ay* (QBT-I I/I line 2; Aydın, *Uygur Yazıtları*, 67; Yutaka Yoshida, “Studies of the Karabalgasun Inscription: Edition of the Sogdian Version,” *Modern Asian Studies Review* 11 [2020/3] 1–139, at 99).

⁴⁹ Hamilton, *Les Ouïghours*, 140–41; Kasai, “Uyghur Legitimation,” 64–66.

⁵⁰ Harun Güngör, “Uygur Kağan Ünvanlarında Kün ve Ay Teñri Kavramlarının Kullanılışı,” in *XI. Türk Tarih Kongresi—Ankara: 5–9 Eylül 1990—Kongreye Sunulan Bildiriler* (2 vols.; Ankara:

might be connected with the dynastic change which happened in the qaghanate.⁵¹ It seems Manichaean Uyghur rulers synthesized their new religion with their ancient beliefs, as both the sun and the moon were considered sacred objects by other Turkic and steppe peoples.⁵² It is interesting to see that no cults associated with stars, which is common in Turkic beliefs and mythology, can be found among Uyghur beliefs, but they may have existed.

■ The Cult of Fire

Another cult observed among the Uyghurs concerned fire. While talking about the Uyghur conversion to Manichaeism, the Soghdian side of the First Qara Balghasun Inscription mentions that “. . . (in stead of?) fire-burning religion (you) accept God(like) Mār Mānī’s religion . . .” (*J(ʿ) try swc(ʿ)y δynh β(γ)y (mr)m ʿny δ(ynh p) tcxš(δ)ʿ*) (No. 6 line 8). Although the expression “fire-burning religion” may point to the practice of Zoroastrianism, this pre-Manichaean religion of the Uyghurs cannot be that practice since the next line mentions the burning of idols.⁵³ Thus, it is evident that a fire cult of the Uyghurs was meant from this expression. Another reference to the Uyghur fire cult can be seen in Tamīm bin Baḥr al-Muṭṭawwiʿī’s travel report, which recounts his travel to Ordu Balīq as a Samanid envoy most probably in 821. Tamīm mentions that, before reaching the Uyghur capital, he travelled through villages for twenty days. According to him, most of the dwellers were Turks who included “fire-worshippers professing the Magian religion” and “Zindīqs” (Manichaeans). He also noted that the latter formed the majority in the Uyghur capital.⁵⁴ Although associating the “fire-worshippers professing the Magian religion” with Zoroastrians is tempting, V. Minorsky found it unlikely. According to him, this expression referred either to Buddhists or adherents of the natural Turkic religion.⁵⁵ I consider the latter to be far more likely, as throughout history the cult of fire was widespread among numerous steppe and Siberian peoples, including those of Turkic stock.⁵⁶

TTKY, 1994) 2:511–17.

⁵¹ Kasai, “Uyghur Legitimation,” 66.

⁵² Cults regarding celestial objects can also be observed among numerous steppe peoples like the Massagetae, Xiongnu, Caucasian Huns, Bulgars, Mongols, Altaians, and Siberian shamanists.

⁵³ Erkoç, “Pre-Manichaean Beliefs of the Uyghurs II,” 594.

⁵⁴ V. Minorsky, “Tamīm ibn Baḥr’s Journey to the Uyghurs,” *BSOAS* 12.2 (1948) 275–305, at 279, 283.

⁵⁵ Minorsky, “Tamīm ibn Baḥr’s Journey,” 296.

⁵⁶ The Türks honored fire, worshiped it, and also considered it as a purifying being, a belief shared by Mongols. Fire-worship is also observed among the Caucasian Huns. This widespread cult is again dealt with in a work of mine awaiting publication.

■ Conclusion

Uyghur beliefs prior to the conversion of their ruling elite to Manichaeism in the 760s consisted of various cults observed also among numerous Turkic and other steppe peoples throughout history. The most prominent Uyghur cult belonged to Tängri, the god of sky. Although the Türks, predecessors of the Uyghurs, made a distinction between the physical sky and a creative supreme god, the Uyghurs seem to have lacked such a distinction, considering the blue sky (*kök täñri*) as their supreme deity. Unlike the Türks, the creative power of Tängri is not stressed by the Uyghurs; in fact, the blue sky and brown earth are considered created beings without noting their creator. It is not clear whether the Uyghurs viewed Tängri as a national god like the Türks did or as a more universal deity. Uyghur qaghans believed that they were born in the sky, achieved their imperial titles from Tängri, and received help from him in their administrative organizations and battles against enemies; these might indicate that, like the Türks, the Uyghurs saw Tängri as a god that favored them. Tängri gave fortunes and privileges to the qaghans and other people who worshiped him and considered themselves his servants. Besides being a protective deity, Tängri was believed to punish wrongdoers by killing them. Like other Turkic peoples, the Uyghurs had a flexible understanding of Tängri as the words *Tängri* and *Tängrikän* also meant “Heavenly,” being used for other godly and non-godly beings such as royalty and mountains.

Besides Tängri, animistic cults about natural and celestial objects constituted a significant part of Uyghur beliefs. Cults about earth, mountains, trees, sun, moon, and fire are noted in historical sources. While the cults of Umay and water seen in earlier Türk beliefs are not mentioned in the written accounts, it is highly possible that they also existed among Uyghur beliefs. The brown earth (*yağız yır*) seems to be the most important of these cults as it is frequently mentioned as a helper of Tängri in aiding the Uyghurs with their administrative and military difficulties. Narratives about Uyghur legends mention several sacred mountains, thus pointing to cults related to them. Sacred mountain tops were called *İduq Baş* and the word *Tängri* was used as the name of a mountain. During the Manichaean period, the God of Sun (*Kün Tängri*) and the God of Moon (*Ay Tängri*) appear as divine helpers of Uyghur qaghans and sources of their legitimacy, but the religious practices of the Uyghurs indicate that cults about these celestial objects were also observed by them prior to their conversion. Fire was also an important cult, as it was used by Manichaeans and Muslims to name the native beliefs of Uyghurs. These natural cults demonstrate that early Uyghur beliefs were polytheistic in nature, not monotheistic.

In conclusion, I can say that prior to the conversion of the Uyghur ruling elite to Manichaeism in the 760s, the Uyghurs were adherents of their native beliefs. These constituted a part of the wider spectrum of ancient Turkic religious beliefs, as numerous similarities have been demonstrated in this article. However, some of these Uyghur cults seem to contain differences from other Turkic beliefs, which is expected because ancient Turkic beliefs were not an organized sedentary religion

and contained local or tribal differences. Comparing Türk and Uyghur cults about Tängri, we see that the Uyghurs professed a more archaic version of this cult. Some cults we know from Türk inscriptions, and other sources about later Turkic beliefs also do not seem to exist among the Uyghurs, but noting that a significant part of Uyghur inscriptions have eroded with time, it would be improper to conclude that these cults were never practiced by the Uyghurs. Another problem I have mentioned above is the question of which religion the Uyghurs practiced in the seventh and eighth centuries, before the conversion to Manichaeism. Some scholars have hypothesized that it was Buddhism; a few records about Uyghur beliefs might be interpreted as indications of the existence of Zoroastrianism among the Uyghurs as well, but this also hardly seems to be the case. Uyghur inscriptions from the pre-760s period contain no traces of Buddhism, nor do Chinese accounts dealing with the same period. All the cults noted in the Uyghur inscriptions prior to the 760s clearly point to the adherence of ancient Turkic beliefs, and Chinese and Islamic sources attest to this fact. Another conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that, although the Uyghurs converted to Manichaeism and Buddhism, most of their ancestral beliefs managed to survive under these new religions and merged with them. In fact, as seen above, some of the cases about original Uyghur beliefs found in the historical sources are from the period following their conversions to Manichaeism and Buddhism. This is understandable because this sociological phenomenon can be observed among almost every human group in world history who converted to a new religion.