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## A New Hypothesis of the Genesis of the Ottoman Yataghan: the Crimean connection.

*Von Sergey Samgin and Ariel Barkan*

Even though the Ottoman yataghan is one of the most popular and easily recognizable examples of the bladed weapons, its origins have not been elucidated. In particular, the unusual design of its blade is obscure as are its origin and development.

The yataghan as a distinct entity appears suddenly as a fully developed weapon of high status. The earliest known example is the yataghan of the Sultan Bayazet II that dates back to between 1481 and 1512. It is attributed to the master known as Mustapha ibn Kemal al Akshehri and is currently exhibited in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar (Fig. 1). There are also 3 almost identical yataghans, almost certainly coming from the same workshop of Ahmet Tekelu. The first one was likely made for Selim I between 1500 and 1515 and currently belongs to the collection of the Furussia Foundation (MOHAMED, 2008). Soon thereafter a similar yataghan was made likely for Suleiman the Magnificent and is currently in the Topkapi collection. Another one is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Fig. 2) and is unique in being dated 1526-1527 and signed by Ahmet Tekelu.



*Fig. 1: Yataghan of Bayazet II from the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar.*



*Fig 2: Yataghan of Suleiman the Magnificent from the Metropolitan Museum, New York.*

There are several important considerations regarding these weapons. First, they all belonged to the Ottoman Sultans and were therefore weapons of high status. Second, as opposed to the traditional curved Islamic sabers or straight European swords, they had recurved blades with the edge situated at the concave side. Third, the contours of these blades were unusual: of even width along the first half of the length, then widening at the expense of their edge sides and then tapering to an acute point at the very end. Fourth, the length of these blades (>70 cm) allowed them to be placed in a category of long-bladed weapons that in Turkish was called *kilich* (sword). Finally, none of them had the *eared* pommels that are the characteristic of later yataghans. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, yataghans had already been documented iconographically among the officers of the Janissary corps and had acquired their distinct characteristic of the *eared pommel*. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, yataghans spread along the vast territory of the Ottoman Empire with multiple decorative variations in their construction that, nevertheless, never prevented them from being immediately and categorically defined as yataghans and no other weapon.

The origin of the recurved yataghan blade is traditionally attributed to European sources: the Iberian Falcata or Greek Kopsis (GORDON, 1958). However, these are ancient weapons, dating back to pre-historic times, and the at least 1,500-2,000 year gap, during which no similar weapons were manufactured in Europe, makes this theory implausible. Another feature of the classical Ottoman yataghans, i.e. their eared pommels, was traditionally traced back to the bronze Luristani daggers making the latter a tempting predecessor of the later Ottoman examples. However, once again, there is even a greater gap of at least 2,500 years, during which eared pommels vanished from the Persian area. Thus, neither Celtic-Iberian, nor Greek or Persian military traditions seem to be able to explain the appearance of the Ottoman yataghan.

However, analysis of the existing sources allows an alternative hypothesis suggesting that Central Asian nomads were the source of the appearance of the yataghan blades in Ottoman Turkey. Specifically, there is a feature of the classical Ottoman yataghan blade that has never been considered in the analysis of their origin.

We would like to draw attention to the so-called *tunkou*, i.e. the collar of appliquéd leaf-like fittings of various forms and sizes covering the ricasso of the blade. Usually, they are roughly



Fig. 3: Examples of *tunkou* on later yataghans. Above: Balkan example. Below: North African example.

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collar of appliquéd leaf-like element. Usually, they are roughly

triangular, with the shorter side adhering to the bolster, the longer one extending along the back of the blade, and the diagonal side exhibiting crenellated form of different complexity. The surfaces of those fittings are often lavishly adorned with chased decorations, precious stones, or colored glass. On some North African examples these fittings are short and rounded, while on the Anatolian and Balkan yataghans they may be long and massive (Fig. 3). Some especially extravagant examples, such as all three attributed to Ahmet Tekelu have a highly artistic rendition of the *tunkou* with two-dimensional gold inlays of the dragon and the phoenix whereas on some extremely simple examples, the outlines of the fittings are just crudely incised into the blade. Tom (TOM, 2001) has published an example of the Chinese saber with Japanese blade ca. 1750-1800 having the *tunkou* that is not a physical object, but rather a pattern of gold inlay, similar to the yataghans of Ahmet Tekelu, thus demonstrating the continued practice of the technique over many centuries.

The oldest examples of a *tunkou* are attributed to the Enisej Kyrgyz tribes and have been described by Khudyakov (KHUDYAKOV, 1980) and are dated to as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 4). From there on, the *tunkou* feature of the Turkic Mongols weapons has traveled both eastward to China as well as westward, as far as Bulgaria, Hungary and the Balkans. Its purpose was described by Tom (TOM, 2001), who explained that the collar assured tighter insertion of the blade into the scabbard, preventing penetration of moisture. Additionally,

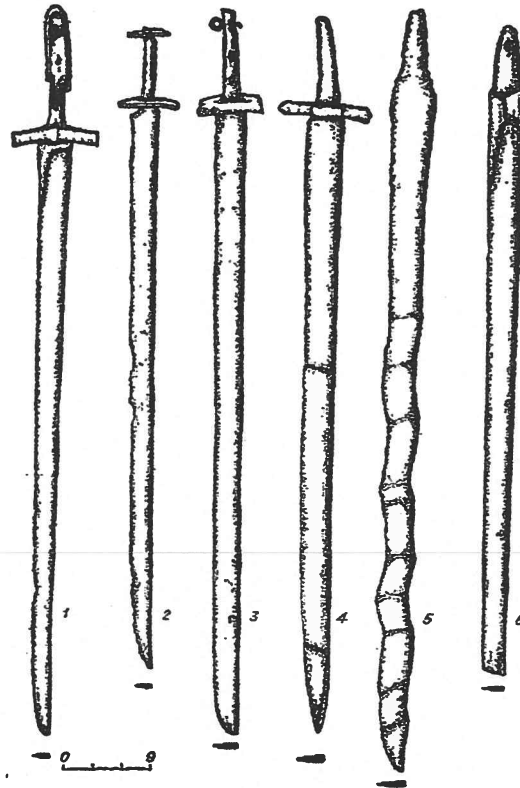


Fig. 4: *Tunkous on the sabers (palasbes) of Enisej Kyrgyz.*

Fig. 3: *Examples of tunkou on later yataghans. Above: Balkan example. Below: North African example.*

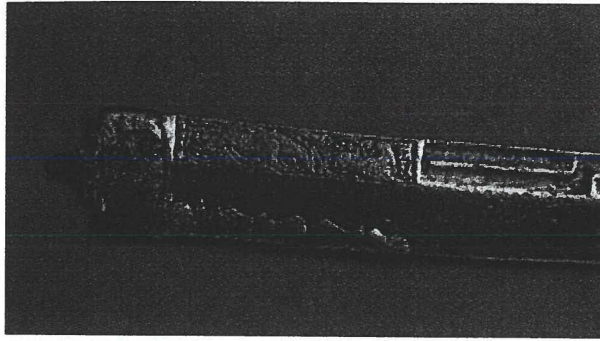


Fig. 5: *Tunkou* on the Seljuk saber from the Furussia collection.

being somewhat wider than the blade proper, it isolated the edge from contact with the wooden walls of the scabbard: the blade was therefore touching the wood only by its point at the bottom and the *tunkou* at the top. Khudyakov thinks, however, that *tunkou* served as a protector of the wooden inserts of the scabbard (KHUDYAKOV, 1980).

The form of the *tunkou* varied. Some ancient nomadic examples (KHUDYAKOV, 1980) had no separate collar, but just a ricasso that was wider than the blade proper (Fig.4, example 5), or, more often, had a narrow collar of softer iron parallel to the quillons, and a longer tongue covering the beginning of the edge, forming a semblance of ricasso (Fig.4, examples 1 and 6). A Seljuq saber of 11-12<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 5) with a *tunkou* of that form is preserved in the Furussia collection (MOHAMED, 2008). Some Qing Dynasty sabers in the Metropolitan Museum in New York have a *tunkou* of a mixed construction, with horizontal bands covering both the edge and the back (TOM, 2001). However, a fresco of St. Nikita at the Serbian monastery of Gracanica dated to 1321 shows a typical nomadic sword with the horizontal part of the *tunkou* covering the back of the blade and approximating the configuration of the leaf-like fitting of the later yataghans (Fig. 6).

These examples indicate that the fitting at the ricasso of the Ottoman yataghans is a direct descendant of the nomadic *tunkou*. This constitutes a proof that the yataghan, a characteristic weapon of the Ottoman janissaries (and subsequently of the Balkan people) derives its origins from the *Steppe Belt*.

To summarize, the *tunkou* of the Turkic tribes of Siberia migrated along the pathways of the Turkic eastward and westward expansions and eventually reached Ottoman Anatolia and the Ottoman-controlled territories of the Balkans and North Africa. The technique and the form of the *tunkou* varied depending on the complexity of individual weapons as well as local esthetic preferences, but the general pattern remained firmly preserved as a specific “fingerprint” of its ancient and common Turkic origin.

The next question arises: which part of the *Steppe Belt* did the Ottomans get the yataghan from? Again, a Seljuk source is the simplest and the most direct source. The Seljuk Empire was established in the 11<sup>th</sup> century in what is now Northern Iran and Iraq and, having fallen in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, its various successor states supplied the bulk of the Iranian military till the time of Shah Abbas I, who replaced them with the Georgians, Circassians and Armenians. Indeed, an 11-12<sup>th</sup> century Seljuk saber from the Furussia collection has a perfectly preserved classical “nomadic” form of a *tunkou* (see above). However, despite more than four centuries of Seljuq control of the Iranian military, neither the recurved form of the yataghan blade, nor

any examples of the “tunkou-like” elements are present on subsequent models of Iranian weapons, making the Seljuq influence unlikely. Thus, while the existence of a “tunkou-like” fitting on the ricasso strongly suggests the nomadic origin of the yataghan blades, its origins need to be sought not in the Eastern domain of the Turkic tribes (such as Seljuqs), but elsewhere.

This brings us to the alternative source of the inspiration: the Crimean Khanate. The Golden Horde of the Mongol Empire had governed the Crimean Peninsula since 1239. The local separatists invited Haji Giray, a Ghengizid, to become their khan and his rule was established in the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Upon his death, a succession war had begun, and in 1475 the Ottoman Empire sent a force under the command of Gedik Ahmet Pasha who conquered

5: *Tunkou on the Seljuk saber from the Furussia collection.*

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*Fig. 6: Fresco of St. Nikita from the Gracanica monastery (~ 1321) holding a saber with a tunkou.*

the Greek and Genoese colonies in the Crimea, installed Menli Giray (Haji Giray's son) as a Khan of Crimea, and made the Crimean Khanate a protectorate of the Ottoman Empire. This was the first contact between the Ottomans and the Crimean Tatars.

At its height the Crimean Khanate controlled the Crimean Peninsula proper, the Southern Ukraine, the Kuban, Don and Northern Caucasus areas and comprised a multitude of Turkic tribes, including the Tatars, Kipchaqs, Pecheneg, Khazars, etc, inheriting the military traditions of all. The Ottomans and the Crimeans related more as allies rather than sovereign and subjects. The respect paid by the Ottomans to the Crimean Ghengizid dynasty was such that it was assumed that, if the Ottoman Dynasty comes to an end, a Crimean Khan would become an Ottoman Sultan (SEBAG-MONTEFIORE, 2005). We therefore suggest that the historical data, as well as the analysis of other sources, allow us to propose an alternative hypothesis of the appearance of yataghan in the Ottoman Empire as a result of contact with the Crimean Tatars following the Ottoman invasion of Crimea in 1475. This hypothesis is substantiated by the analysis of several bladed weapons excavated by the Russian archeologists in the area of the Crimean Khanate or its predecessor, the Golden Horde.

The first one, known as the *saber from Tekstilshchik* was excavated in 1975 in Donetsk, Ukraine from a Golden Horde burial site of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (DANILENKO, SHVETZOV, GERSHKOVICH, 1991). Its distinctive feature is a non-traditional (for a saber) blade: the edge is almost straight in its first 2/3 of the blade's length (66.7 cm), and only in the distal 1/3 it is gently recurved. The back of the blade is largely parallel to the edge: for 36.7 cm from the crossguard it is straight, then for the next 33.3 cm it is convex with a "height" of approximately 6 mm, and is slightly concave in the lower third (by ~ 1.3 cm) (Fig.7). The ricasso is widened, imitating the *tunkou*, as seen on the earliest known examples shown by Khudyakov (KHUDYAKOV, 1998).

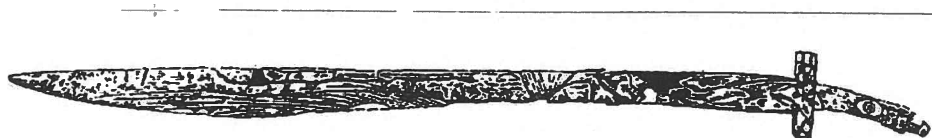


Fig.7. *Saber from Tekstilshchik.*

This unusual form so stumped Russian archeologists A. EVGLEVSKY and T. POTEKINA, who are the authors of multiple studies of nomadic sabers of that period, that they just noted the similarity between their 12<sup>th</sup> century saber and the 16<sup>th</sup> century yataghans and dubbed it a *unique example* (EVGLEVSKY and POTEKINA, 2000).

The second one, known as the *saber from Kairka* was discovered in 1983 near Kairka, which is a village next to the Sivash, a system of shallow lagoons separating Northern Crimea from the mainland and is a site of extremely rich Golden Horde burials dating to the 14<sup>th</sup> century (KUBYSHEV, DOROFEEV, SHILOV, 1983). This saber, just like the previous one, is dramatically distinct from the classical nomadic sabers of that period. Its back side widens by up to 0.6 cm in the distal third of the blade, forming a rudimentary yelman and the edge side of the blade also starts widening at the distance of 37.5 cm from the crossguard, and reaches the

maximal width of 5.5 cm at a point of 58.5 cm from the crossguard. As a result of it, the edge of the saber is concave in the first 2/3 of the blade and convex at the distal third. This is further exaggerated by the internal bend of the tang (approximately 12 degrees) (Fig.8). In effect, the yataghans of Bayazet, Selim and Suleiman faithfully reproduce the unique form of the saber from Kairka.



*Fig.8. Saber from Kairka.*

The unusual blade of this saber was so noticeable, that the leading Russian historian of weaponry, Michail Gorelik, tried to trace its construction to the European falchions. To do that, he constructed a complicated scheme involving a Mongol bladesmith who was acquainted with a European bladesmith living at that time in Crimea and manufacturing falchions. The obvious differences between the falchions and the saber in question were glossed over (GORELIK, 2003).

However, the uniqueness of the sabers from Textilshchik and Kairka may not be so extraordinary if one takes into account the similar feature they share with early Ottoman yataghans of Bayazet, Selim and Suleiman, i.e. the recurved construction of their blades.

These two sabers carry yet additional features strengthening the connection between Crimean and Ottoman weapons. As mentioned above, the saber from Textilshchik has an approximation of *tunkou*, the hallmark of the nomadic sabers (KHUDYAKOV, 1980) and, subsequently, of the decorative appliquéed leaf-like fittings of the classical later yataghans. Additionally, the saber from Kairka had a preserved handle with a pommel in the form of a cap similar to the one seen on the yataghan belonging to Bayazet II, the earliest known example of the Ottoman yataghan. This form is highly prevalent on Qipchak swords of the Mamluke Empire, with multiple examples preserved in the Topkapi collection and published by Yucel (YUCEL, 2001) as well as by an example of a gorgeous 34.5 cm knife (dagger) with a recurved blade and a capped pommel (Fig.9) found in the extremely rich Qipchaq burial excavated in 1981 from the Chingul Kourgan (OTROSHCHENKO and RASSAMAKIN, 1986). The Polish weapon historian Kwasniewicz attributed this type of handle/pommel to the Central Asian Turkic Kyrgyz tribes, one of the chief constituents of the Golden Horde (KWASNIEWICZ, 2002).



*Fig. 9. Dagger from ChingulKourgan.*

The yataghan form borrowed from the Crimeans was used by the Ottomans not only for long-bladed weapons (*kilich*) but also for the later Ottoman multitude of the yataghan-like knives (yataghan-bichaq). In support of it is a poorly preserved 58 cm dagger with a recurved profile from Bilyar (Bulgar Kingdom) and dated to the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries (HALIKOV, 1985) as well as the above-mentioned dagger from the Chingul Kourgan (OTROSHCHENKO and RAS-SAMAKIN, 1986).

The Tatar version of the genesis of yataghan-type blades is based on yet another line of documentary evidence. In a Turkish document dated 1634 there is a mention of a bladed Janissary weapon called *varsak* that is defined as *yataghan of Tatar origin* (SOKOLSKI, 1966). Its potential nature as a long-bladed weapon (*kilich*) but not as a short-bladed one (bichaq) is emphasized by yet another Turkish document of the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – *History of the origin of laws of the Janissary Corps* (PETROSYAN, 1987) – in which it is specifically stated that *the novelty of carrying both varsak and bichaq is against the law* clearly separating both. The text further identifies varsak as *a short curved saber that is prevalent amongst the Crimean Tatar*. Together with the data from Sokolsky (see above) it is tempting to suggest that varsak was a local Crimean name for a long bladed (>70 cm) yataghan-like weapon.

Thus, we propose a novel hypothesis of the sudden appearance of the yataghan in the Ottoman Empire at the very end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The synopsis of the hypothesis is as follows:

- Contact between the Crimean Tatars and the Ottomans occurred approximately in 1475, during the Ottoman invasion of Crimea. Within six years there appeared the very first Ottoman yataghan made for Sultan Bayazet II.
- It and subsequent yataghans made shortly thereafter for Selim I and Suleiman the Magnificent contain all the elements of the Crimean *sabers* (varsaks?), i.e. the recurved blade with the widened distal part, the tunkou-like feature of the ricasso and the handle without "ears" but with a classical Quipchak-Kyrgyz cap like pommel.
- The Genghizid origin of the Crimean dynasty and the deep respect the Ottomans paid to it justified viewing the novel weapon as a royal one. Thus, the first examples of these sabers were made for the Ottoman Sultans who related to the Crimean Khans as honored allies and potential inheritors of the Golden Porte.

Further development of the yataghan followed the traditional path: it "diffused downward", soon becoming the personal weapon of the high officers of the Ottoman army, gradually penetrating into the entire Janissary corps and eventually becoming the most popular weapon of the Ottoman subjects across the entire Empire. The development of *eared pommels*, this characteristic feature of the yataghans from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and further might have been due to still-unidentified sacral or artistic influences, but was by no mean universal and depended on the local tastes of the inhabitants of a giant multiethnic Ottoman Empire: while Anatolian and Balkan examples sported widely-spaced "ears", the Cretan ones had very small ones, and the North-African yataghans adopted a totally different, earless, *karabela-like* pommel.

However, the Crimeans maintained their native form for at least another three centuries: the yataghan of the last Crimean Khan Shahin Giray bin Adil Giray (end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) sports a blade virtually identical in its form to the Golden Horde blade of the *sword from Textilshchik* and the earliest yataghans of Bayazet II, Selim I and Suleiman the Magnificent, and an earless pommel reminiscent of the *saber from Kairka* and the yataghan of Bayazet II (AYDIN, 2014). Indeed, the connection between the Golden Horde/Crimean and the Ottoman traditions never really died.



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Fig. 6: Online: <http://srpskoblogo.org/Archives/Gracanica/exhibits/digital/s1-w1e5/s1-w1e5-87.html>

Fig. 7: DANILENKO, SHVETZOV, GERSHKOVICH, 1991: V. DANILENKO, M. SHVETZOV, Ya GERSHKOVICH. Report of a Donetsk new construction expedition of the study of a kourgan burial site of the Bronze Age, the early Iron Age and the late Middle Age in the construction area of the new suburb named "Textilshchik" in 1975. In: Archives of the Institute of Archeology of the National Academy of Ukraine, 1991, vol. №1991/58. (=В. ДАНИЛЕНКО, М. ШВЕЦОВ, Я ГЕРШКОВИЧ. Отчет Донецкой новостроечной экспедиции об исследовании курганного могильника эпохи бронзы, раннего железного века и позднего средневековья в зоне строительства микрорайона «Текстильщик» в г. Донецке в 1975 г. В: Архив института археологии Национальной академии наук Украины, № 1991/58).

Fig. 8: KUBYSHEV, DOROFEEV, SHILOV, 1983: A. KUBYSHEV, V. DOROFEEV, Yu SHILOV. Report of activity of Kherson archeological expedition in the area of Kakhovka irrigation system in the Kherson and Zaporozh'e Oblasts. In: Scientific Archives of the Institute of Archeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 1983/26, 1983 (= КУБЫШЕВ: А. КУБЫШЕВ, В. ДОРОФЕЕВ, Ю. ШИЛОВ. Отчет о работах Херсонской археологической экспедиции в зоне строительства Каховской оросительной системы в Херсонской и Запорожской областях в 1983 году. Научный архив института археологии Национальной академии наук Украины, 1983/26, 1983).

Fig. 9: OTROSHCHENKO and RASSAMAKIN, 1986: V. OTROSHENKO, Yu. RASSAMAKIN. Polovtsian complex from the ChingulKourgan. Archeologiya, Vol. 53: 1986 (= ОТРОШЕНКО: В. ОТРОШЕНКО, Ю. РАССАМАКИН. Половецкий комплекс Чингульського кургану. Археологія, Вип. 53, 1986).

## Zusammenfassung

Der Jatagan – eine im osmanischen Reich weit verbreitete Waffe mit einschneidiger, gerader oder leicht s-förmiger Klinge und einem Griff mit „Ohren“ – ist gut bekannt. Nicht genau bekannt ist dagegen, von woher er in diese Region gelangte. Einige Experten vermuten die Herkunft des Jatagan aus dem antiken Griechenland (Falcata und Kopis) oder Luristan (Griff mit Ohren). Einer anderen Version nach wird er den Seldschuken zugeschrieben. Allerdings kann diese Annahme nicht bestätigt werden, da frühe Jatagan-Arten in deren Herkunftsregion Anatolien nicht gefunden wurden.

Der vorliegende Beitrag bietet eine alternative These des Ursprungs des Jatagan an und siedelt diesen in der europäischen Türkei an. Die Autoren glauben, dass die Entstehung dieser Waffe mit der mongolischen Waffentradition in Verbindung steht, und sie aus dem Krim-Khanat, das im 15. Jahrhundert ein Vasallenstaat des Osmanischen Reiches wurde, in die heutige Türkei gelangte. Diese Hypothese basiert auf einem Vergleich osmanischer Jatagane mit solchen, die von Nomaden der nördlichen Schwarzmeerküste vom 12. bis zum 14. Jahrhundert erzeugt worden waren und bei Ausgrabungen ans Tageslicht kamen. Diese Funde stimmen mit türkischen Jataganen vom Ende des 15. und Anfang des 16. Jahrhunderts weitgehend überein.