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The Sacred Ontology of the Wolf Cult in Turkic Tengrism: From Ancestral Myth to National Theology

Kunduzay Yerimbetova
PhD, Research Institute for Jochi Ulus Studies,
Astana, Kazakhstan
http://orcid.org/0009-0002-4589-2316

Myrzabay Meyrbekov
PhD, Department of Humanities,
JSC «Zh.A.Tashenev University»
Shymkent, Kazakhstan
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5968-6690

Assel Kurmangali
Master's program, Boston University, Boston, USA
http://orcid.org/0009-0008-4486-208X

Zharas Akhan*
PhD, Graduate School of Arts and Humanities,
Astana International University
Astana, Kazakhstan
http://orcid.org/0009-0006-3051-9382
*Corresponding Author: zharasakan@gmail.com

Zhaxylyk Sabitov*
PhD, Research Institute for Jochi Ulus Studies,
Astana, Kazakhstan
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7186-156X
*Corresponding Author: zh.sabitov@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article examines the complex phenomenon of the wolf cult within the Turkic spiritual and mythological tradition through an integrated theological and anthropological lens. For the Turkic peoples, the wolf (Böri) occupies a position that transcends the purely biological realm, functioning as a primary cultural code and a sacred ontological link between the Divine (Tengri) and the earthly community. The research critically analyzes the multifaceted roles of the wolf as an "Ancestor," "Nurturer," and "Celestial Savior" (Kök Qurt), exploring how these sacred narratives fundamentally shaped the socio-political structures and martial ethics of ancient nomadic civilizations. By synthesizing multifaceted evidence from medieval epics such as the Oguz-Name and the Book of Dede Korkut, alongside significant archaeological artifacts like the Bugut Inscription, the study demonstrates that the wolf acts as a metaphysical mediator that harmonizes the inherent "Nature-Culture" dichotomy in nomadic life. The theoretical core of the paper investigates the transition of the wolf from a totemic entity to a symbol of divine mandate, tracing its evolution across the Saka-Hun and Gokturk eras. The research argues that the wolf's behavioral traits collective cohesion and strategic intelligence provided the intellectual blueprint for Turkic statecraft and the "Turan Tactics." Ultimately, the article posits that the preservation of this cult within collective memory and oral folklore is not a relic of the

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past, but a vital paradigm for ethnic identity revitalization and spiritual decolonization in the contemporary digital age, offering a unique contribution to the global theological.

Keywords: Turkic mythology, Tengrism, wolf symbolism, totemism, sacred ontology.

Introduction

The spiritual evolution of humanity is deeply rooted in the continuous, multifaceted dialogue between the sacred realm and the natural world. In the ancient Turkic worldview, this relationship was never merely utilitarian or characterized by the simple exploitation of resources; rather, it was built upon a profound, almost mystical reverence for the elements of the cosmos. As nomadic societies navigated the vast, unforgiving steppes of Central Asia, they developed a unique cosmological perspective. They perceived nature not as a hostile force to be conquered or subjugated by human will, but as a living, breathing manifestation of the Divine Creator, Tengri. Within this sophisticated cosmogonic framework, the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual were fluid, allowing certain animals to be elevated to the status of sacred intermediaries or "messengers" between the earthly and celestial spheres.

Among the diverse fauna of the Eurasian steppe, the wolf (Böri) occupies an unparalleled and central position in the Turkic consciousness. Far from being a simple biological totem or a primitive object of pagan idolatry, the wolf represents a complex "Celestial Mediator" and a pivotal metaphysical entity. This research posits that the wolf cult is not merely a folkloric relic but a defining element of Turkic national ontology (defined here as a cosmological and socio-cultural ontology where the wolf is understood not as a mere symbol, but as an active constituent of the nomadic mode of being and structural order), reflecting the deepest layers of the people's resilience, social cohesion, and spiritual aspirations. The wolf was viewed as a "Spirit-Ancestor" that provided the ontological grounding for the existence of the Turkic tribes, acting as a guarantor of their historical survival.

By tracing the evolutionary trajectory of this sacred symbol from the ancient Saka-Hun and Gokturk eras through to the rich literary and oral heritage of the Kazakh people, this study seeks to uncover the profound ways in which the "lupine archetype" permeated every facet of nomadic life. This article argues that the wolf phenomenon serves as a primary paradigm for understanding the Turkic model of socio-cultural identity, offering a sophisticated example of how a sacred biological symbol can be transformed into a durable ideological framework that harmonizes the dichotomy between the wild environment and organized human civilization. In the context of modern theological discourse, the Turkic wolf cult presents a compelling case for the study of indigenous ontologies and the persistent power of sacred archetypes in the formation of national consciousness. Admittedly, scholarly literature frequently interprets wolf myths not only from a religious-sacred perspective, but also as a mechanism for institutionalizing clan genealogy or securing the political legitimization of the Khagans. Nevertheless, this study contends that all such functional dimensions fundamentally derive from the myth's deeply embedded ontological and cosmological foundations.

Materials and methods

The methodological foundation of this research is constructed upon an extensive interdisciplinary synthesis, integrating the analytical tools of comparative theology, cultural anthropology, and historical hermeneutics. Such an approach is essential for exploring the multidimensional nature of the wolf cult within Turkic spiritual traditions, as it allows for the examination of the subject across religious, social, and historical strata. Grounded firmly in the phenomenological method, this study treats the wolf phenomenon not merely as a biological entity or a simplistic social construct, but as a profound "lived experience" (Erlebnis) and a

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cornerstone of Turkic ontological cognition. By prioritizing the internal perspective of the nomadic subject, the research seeks to uncover the sacred meanings that the wolf holds within the Turkic metaphysical system.

To ensure a scientifically rigorous and culturally authentic interpretation, the research intentionally employs decolonial historiography. This methodological choice is a critical response to previous Eurocentric and sedentary analytical models that often misinterpreted nomadic spiritualities through the lens of primitive "paganism." Instead, this study seeks to reconstruct ancient Turkic religious systems by acknowledging their internal logic and complex theological structures.

The material basis for this study comprises a diverse and rich array of primary and secondary sources, ensuring a multi-layered evidentiary foundation.

Epigraphic and Philological Monuments: A meticulous analysis was conducted on ancient Turkic inscriptions, most notably the Bugut inscription (6th century CE) and the runic monuments of the Orkhon-Yenisei tradition (Bilge Khagan and Kul-Tegin stelae). These texts provide direct evidence of the early theological conceptualization of the wolf.

Literary and Epic Narratives: The research performs a detailed hermeneutic analysis of medieval Turkic literary masterpieces, including the Oguz-Name, The Book of Dede Korkut, and the Kyrgyz epic Manas. These narratives provide the primary framework for identifying the "Ancestor-Wolf" archetype and its role in communal survival myths.

Archaeological and Iconographic Evidence: The study incorporates extensive data from Saka-Hun "Animal Style" metalwork, petroglyphs from Anatolia and Central Asia, and military artifacts, such as standards featuring golden wolf heads. These materials are utilized to trace the institutionalization of the cult within Turkic statecraft and its symbolic representation in the material culture.

The analytical process involved a rigorous etymological investigation of key Turkic concepts, specifically Kök (Celestial/Sacred Blue) and Böri/Qurt (Wolf/Savior), to reveal the underlying linguistic links to the Divine. This is complemented by a symbolic functional analysis that examines how the observed biological and social traits of the wolf, such as hierarchy, discipline, and strategic hunting—were transformed into the high-level military models known as the "Turan Tactics." By synthesizing these linguistic, historical, iconographic, and ethnographic data points, the research traces the evolutionary development of the wolf symbol from its ancient totemic roots to its contemporary role as a primary paradigm of Turkic ethnic identity and spiritual resilience.

In this study, the manuscript was used only for English translation, grammatical revision, and language editing. The original work (and data) and the main content were not generated by artificial intelligence.

The wolf as an ontologically independent ancestor: decolonizing the origin myths of ancient Turkic peoples

In the ancient world and the Early Middle Ages, Turkic peoples regarded the wolf as their progenitor. This powerful, free, cunning, and intelligent creature of the wild was perceived as the guardian, nurturer, and saviour of the last survivor of a tribe decimated by enemy attacks -a small infant. In antiquity, Turkic tribes referred to the wolf as *Kök Qurt* (Akishev 1984).
. The word *kök* signifies "sky/heaven" and the color "blue," which is the sacred symbolic color of the celestial deity, *Tengri*. Meanwhile, the term *qurt* carries the meanings of "to save" or "to exorcise/expel." Based on these etymological roots, the full meaning of *Kök Qurt* is a "Savior

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from Heaven," sent by the Divine to prevent the total extinction of an entire tribe. The significance of the word *kök* is profound; historically, Turks were divided into groups such as blue (kök), red, and yellow. Among these, *kök* denoted nobility of origin and a high socio-political status (Akishev 1984).
Several legends substantiate the deep connection between Turkic origins and the "Celestial Wolf" (Gumilev 1967). The *Kök Böri* (Celestial Wolf) totem occupies a central place in Turkic life. Historically, Chinese chroniclers even recognized the terms "Turkic Khagan" and "Wolf" as synonymous concepts.

The ancient Turks adorned their battle standards with a golden wolf's head. Furthermore, the image of the wolf is a perennial archetype in the ancient literature and folklore of all Turkic peoples, traceable to the earliest runic monuments. One such foundational source is the epic *Oguz-Name* (1986), compiled between the 13th and 15th centuries. The phrase "Let the Celestial Wolf be our battle cry (*uran*)" within the epic carries immense weight, elevating the wolf to a sacred entity revered by all Turkic-speaking peoples. This imagery also appears in the *Book of Dede Korkut* (1950), a masterpiece of world literature, where the wolf symbolizes the greatness and heroism of khans and warriors (Manas 1946).

There are two primary reasons why the Turks viewed the wolf as their ancestor. First, the wolf's physical prowess and character served as a reflection of Turkic resilience and vigor. While neighboring Chinese dynasties often associated the origins of peoples with various animals or reptiles, the Turks found the wolf to be the most fitting embodiment of their identity (Tunç 2016). Second, the internal mythology of the Turks reinforced the belief that the wolf was their true genealogical match.

In the *Ergenekon* epic, the wolf as a progenitor is described as follows: "The Turks (*T'u-chüeh*) are descendants of the ancient Huns (*Hsiung-nu*) and represent one of their branches. They originated from the clan known as Ashina (*A-shih-na*). Later, they multiplied and began to live as separate tribes" (Tunç 2016). In this context, the wolf is a deity that protects and possesses the power of metamorphosis. Nearly all Turkic tribes share the foundational belief of descending from a wolf. According to the legend of the *Kao-ch'e* (Kangly) Turks, their first Khagan left his daughters atop a hill; the younger daughter eventually united with a Wolf-God who appeared in lupine form, and the Kangly people descended from their offspring.

While the ancestors of the Great Hun Empire and the Uyghurs, the Kangly, characterized the "Wolf-Father" as a male wolf, the "Blue-Maned Wolf" in the *Oguz* epic was also male (Öğel 1998). Among the Gokturks and Uyghurs, the wolf was accepted as an "ancestor" (*Ata*), whereas among the Oghuz, the male wolf appeared as a national leader (Togan 2002). In pre-Islamic Turkic epics, the wolf is specifically addressed as *Qasqyr-Ata* (Wolf-Father) (Sarı 2017), signifying the highest level of animal veneration.

In the Gokturk "Origin" legend, the first ancestors were nearly annihilated by a state called "Lin," which spared no one, woman, man, or child. Only one boy was left alive, though his limbs were severed and he was abandoned in a vast marshland (Öğel 1998). A she-wolf appeared, bringing him meat and food daily, enabling him to survive. Eventually, the boy and the she-wolf united, and she gave birth to ten sons (Öğel 1998). The ruling Ashina dynasty of the Gokturks traces its lineage back to this she-wolf (Kafesoğlu 1999). This Mother-Wolf protects all wolves, as the Turks believe they share her blood—a universal conviction that resonates across almost all Turkic tribal identities.

The wolf as a symbol in Turkic culture

During the formation of their states, the Turkic peoples transformed the wolf into a primary sovereign symbol. Under the Gokturk Empire, the wolf served as a state emblem depicted on

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banners and standards (Öğel 1995). Historical sources indicate that military commanders of the Gokturks adorned the tops of their standards with golden wolf heads. Furthermore, Chinese annals emphasize that the wolf represented independence and valor for the Turks. These records state: *"They place a golden wolf's head atop their banners. Their guards and warriors are called 'Fu-li' (Böri/Wolf), which in Chinese means wolf, implying they are born of a wolf."* Other records note that the Western Turks also displayed a she-wolf's head on their battle flags.

This designation was particularly applied to elite military units positioned at the front lines (Çınar 2016). The tradition of carrying a wolf-headed banner before the army was also prevalent among the Altai Turks. In some Turkic banners, the image of the wolf's head was rendered in red. The standard always preceded the army and was displayed in front of the ruler's headquarters (*orda*) (Çınar 2016).

In the Gokturk era, the Turkic warriors (*batyrs*) who constituted the Khagan's guard were themselves called "wolves." Turkic military technology also drew from the wolf; for instance, bowstrings were crafted from wolf sinew. In certain Turkic states, the title "Ilteber" was bestowed upon leaders of subordinate tribes, a name inherently associated with the concept of the wolf (Çınar 2016). Tai-wu, the ruler of the medieval Tabgach (Northern Wei) state, famously remarked: *"Faced with the Turkic army, which resembles a pack of wolves, the Chinese soldiers appeared frail"* (Kafesoğlu 2000).

During warfare, mounted archers would rain arrows upon enemy lines with lightning speed, causing disarray before other units surrounded and decimated the foe. This maneuver involved a crescent-shaped formation where the center would feign retreat, drawing the enemy into a trap as the left and right wings closed in. The Turks referred to this military strategy as the "Wolf Game" or the "Turan Tactics" (Kafesoğlu 2000). Upon ascending to power (situated in the mytho-historical antiquity), Oguz Khagan declared to his people during a grand feast: *"Let the howl of the Celestial Wolf be our battle cry (uran)."* Thus, the wolf's howl was chosen as a war cry, symbolizing the martial prowess and offensive power of the Turkic people (Sarı 2017). The wolf's inherent strength, predatory skill, and strategic cunning served as the foundational model for the Turkic military system.

Celestial nobility and indigenous ontologies: the triad of tengri, heaven, and the wolf in Turkic cosmogony

The image of the *Kök Böri* (Celestial Wolf) is found throughout oral literature and ancient Turkic epigraphic monuments. In the *Oguz-Name* (13th–15th centuries), the phrase "Let the Celestial Wolf be our battle cry" holds immense significance. Among the ancient Turks, the wolf depicted on banners served as a spiritual catalyst for warriors. This archetype also appears in the *Book of Dede Korkut*, and remains a frequent motif in Kazakh oral folklore and mythical concepts.
The religious cognition of the ancient Turks evolved from totemic concepts through Shamanism and Tengrism. Identifying themselves as "Gokturks" (Celestial Turks), they believed in the sky deity *Tengri* and recognized themselves as descendants of the Celestial Wolf. The blue sky (*Kök*) was perceived as an infinite, supreme, and sacred power. In the ancient Turkic language, the term *kök* was directly linked to both the color and the concept of Heaven. The Gokturks referred to their state as being "ordained by God." Runic inscriptions frequently mention that the Turkic state was established by the will of *Tengri (*Joldasbekov 2012).

In the Turkic worldview, the concepts of "Celestial Tengri," "Blue Sky," and "Celestial Wolf" gave rise to a myriad of myths. Cultural anthropologists note that the last vestiges of nomadic life are directly connected to Kazakh life. Serikbol Kondybay (2008) argues that *"Kazakh mythology does not possess a 'transparent' or explicit character; rather, it is hidden within the*

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layers of oral literature epics, genealogies, legends, riddles, proverbs, and religious narratives—as well as within the depths of the Kazakh vocabulary."

Kök represents the sky and the celestial realm. The foundation of ancient Turkic religious views lies in Tengrism, which emerged from the veneration of nature as the Creator. In this worldview, *Tengri* is the sole, invisible, and omnipotent Creator of the universe and humanity. Orynbaı Janaıdarov (2006), in his work *Myths of Ancient Kazakhstan*, notes that ancient peoples perceived the Sky both as a manifestation of *Tengri* and as His dwelling place. By worshipping the Sky (*Tengri*) and the Earth (*Jer-Su*), the ancient Turks recognized *Tengri* as the Creator and the Earth as the source of life. Consequently, they developed a profound love and respect for every natural phenomenon. Before the advent of Islam, Tengrism and Shamanistic concepts occupied a special place in the Turkic spiritual consciousness. The Turks believed that *Tengri* was their source of strength and their constant protector. As recorded in the inscriptions: *"Because Tengri gave them strength, the army of my father the Khagan was like a wolf..."* (Joldasbekov 2012).

The representation of the wolf cult in art

The artistic motifs of the Huns, the ancient progenitors of the Turkic peoples, are characterized by the "Animal Style," where the image of the wolf occupies a paramount position in metalwork across various eras. The wolf motif is extensively distributed throughout the geography of Turkestan, with a significant portion of archaeological artifacts found in Northern China, Inner Mongolia, and the Lake Baikal region originating from the hands of Turkic artisans. The preservation of the original character of Hunnic art across such a vast territory can be attributed to two factors: first, the oral transmission of national epics in their primordial forms; and second, the engraving of these epic motifs onto portable metal objects. This materialization of symbolism ensured that cultural values reached all strata of society, leaving a profound imprint on Turkic religious beliefs and cultural identity. The mastery and professionalism displayed in these works often emulated by diverse civilizations (Chinese, Greek, etc.) underscore the dominance and "professionalism" of Turkic art, which continually evolved and strengthened its universal values (Sazak 2014).

The effective utilization of the "Animal Style" serves as a crucial source for understanding the relationship between Turks and nature, their social structure, and their belief systems. In these works, the wolf frequently appears as a powerful protector and a symbol of heroism, reinforcing the visual narrative of cultural discourses.

A prominent example is the Bugut Inscription in Mongolia (Monument of Tatpar Khagan, 580-587 AD), which depicts a she-wolf suckling human infants (Klyashtorniy 1980). This imagery highlights the significance of the lupine figure in Turkic mythology, symbolizing the protective and maternal role of the she-wolf. Furthermore, bronze sculptures discovered along the Turkestan and Volga (Itil) regions are interpreted by researchers as representations of the "child raised by a she-wolf" found in early Turkic legends (Rutkovskaya 1968). The feeding of a human infant by a she-wolf signifies the rebirth of the Turkic lineage and the reconstruction of social identity. Both monuments and sculptures preserve the traces of deep-seated beliefs, playing a vital role in shaping the collective social existence.

Wolf imagery is also frequently encountered in hunting scenes within rock art (petroglyphs), illustrating the utilization of the wolf's strength and speed. Diverse forms of wolf figures are found in various regions of Anatolia, including Erzurum (Şenkaya/Çağlayan, Shirvaz Castle), Hakkari (Yüksekova/Gevaruk), Karaman, and Kütahya (Aizanoi Temple) (Aksoy 2022). These petroglyphs visually demonstrate the importance of hunting culture and mythological symbols in the daily lives of past societies. In this context, the wolf emerges not merely as an assistant in the hunt but as a manifestation of profound social and cultural values.

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Conclusion

This study has examined the multifaceted role of the wolf within ancient Turkic mythology, demonstrating that this zoomorphic figure was far more than a decorative motif; it constituted a cornerstone of early Turkic totemism and sacred ontology. By systematically analyzing early epigraphic monuments, such as the Bugut Inscription, alongside classical epic cycles like Oguz-Name, The Book of Dede Korkut, and Manas, this research has reconstructed how the lupine archetype operated simultaneously as a genealogical progenitor, a state symbol, and a tactical military model. The textual and etymological evidence analyzed demonstrates that the concept of *Kök Qurt* (or *Kök Böri*) was intrinsically linked with Tengrism. The semantic layer of the color kök (blue/celestial) structurally mirrors the divine authority of the supreme sky deity, Tengri, thereby elevating wolf symbolism from a mundane predatory association to a celestial savior sent to preserve the Turkic lineage from extinction. Furthermore, the archaeological distribution of the "Animal Style" in metalwork and petroglyphs across Turkestan and Anatolia confirms that this ideological triad—comprising *Tengri*, heaven, and the wolf—was deeply embedded in the material culture and collective consciousness of early nomadic societies.

Despite these structural findings, certain limitations must be acknowledged, as this research primarily focuses on antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, leaving the later transformations of these myths during the Golden Horde and the post-Islamic Kazakh Khanate eras largely outside its current scope. Additionally, due to the nature of the available sources, the study relies heavily on external Chinese dynastic annals and medieval compilations of oral epics, which introduces inherent historiographical layers that require cautious hermeneutic navigation. Consequently, future research should expand upon these foundations by conducting comparative structural analyses between early Turkic lupine myths and the totemic systems of neighboring Siberian and Mongolic peoples to map broader micro-regional exchanges. Furthermore, further interdisciplinary investigation is needed to trace the precise evolutionary path of these pre-Islamic ontological concepts as they adapted to, and synthesized with, Islamic mystical traditions and oral folklore in the post-medieval Kazakh Steppe, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Central Asian cultural continuity.

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