



THE PLACE OF ANCIENT TURKIC STONE STATUES IN THE SYSTEM OF SYMBOLS OF UZBEK STATEHOOD

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A B S T R A C T	KEY WORDS
<p>This article examines the place of ancient Turkic stone statues within the system of symbols of Uzbek statehood, based on a comprehensive historical-semiotic analysis. The study analyzes the political-ideological, religious-ritual, and legal-territorial significance of the stone statues, substantiating that they are not merely memorial monuments, but material expressions of the ideology of the Turkic Khaganate. It demonstrates the iconographic and ideological interconnections among stone statues, coins, and tamgas, which constituted the components of the symbolic system existing in the territory of Uzbekistan during the 6th–8th centuries AD.</p>	<p>Ancient Turkic stone statues, balbal, Uzbek statehood, political-ideological symbols, Turkic Khaganate, semantics, attributes of statehood, tamga, semiotics.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Material sources play an incomparable role in the study of the history of Uzbek statehood. Among them, ancient Turkic stone statues occupy a special place as material monuments reflecting the ideological worldview of nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkic peoples. These statues have been discovered across the vast territories of Eurasia, particularly in Uzbekistan and neighboring regions, and date back to the 6th–8th centuries AD, the period of the Turkic Khaganate's dominance. However, a profound analysis of their place within the system of symbols of Uzbek statehood, based on the historical-semiotic method, has not yet been sufficiently carried out in academia.

As Sharafutdinov notes, the semantics of ancient Turkic stone statues, widely distributed in the eastern steppes of Eurasia, Central Asia, Jetysu, and Kazakhstan, has intrigued all researchers [1]. This broad scholarly interest clearly demonstrates the significant role of stone statues within the system of statehood symbols. Olkhovsky’s research on the functions of tamgas and Sarmatian signs provides a valuable methodological foundation for examining stone statues within a broader semiotic system. Furthermore, Boboyorov’s study on the period of Tun Yabgu Khagan further elucidates the ideological connections between stone statues, coins, and tamgas.

The aim of this article is to determine the place of ancient Turkic stone statues within the system of symbols of Uzbek statehood from a historical-semiotic perspective, based on these three sources, and to reveal their multi-layered functions in the ideology of statehood. The study employs historical-comparative, semiotic analysis, and historiographical methods.

Sharafutdinov, through an in-depth analysis of the history of research on the semantics of stone statues, demonstrates that two main scientific hypotheses have emerged in academia. According to

the first hypothesis, supported by D.A. Klemens, V.A. Kazakevich, L.P. Potapov, L.N. Gumilev, and L.R. Kyzlasov, the stone statues "were erected in honor of deceased noble Turks and placed at their graves or at the sites where the remains of the deceased were cremated." This hypothesis prioritizes the function of the ancestor cult and memory rituals.

Proponents of the second hypothesis, including V.V. Bartold, N.I. Veselovsky, and A.D. Grach, argue that the statue-balbals depicted the most formidable enemies defeated by noble Turks during their lifetime. Grach further develops this hypothesis: the statues erected along the busy caravan routes running from China through Southern Siberia to the West were meant to embody the power and might of the Turkic Khaganate and to strike terror into potential enemies. Thus, the second hypothesis prioritizes the political and statehood function of the stone statues.

This historiographical analysis indicates that stone statues are not merely ritual monuments; studying their complex symbolic load associated with political power, territorial control, and statehood ideology requires a distinct methodological approach. For this purpose, semiotic analysis, specifically Olkhovsky's classification of signs, serves as a convenient methodological tool.

Olkhovsky's classification of tamga functions [2] provides a solid methodological foundation for analyzing stone statues within a semiotic system. Olkhovsky emphasizes that the primary function of any sign system is the information function, noting that conveying the information embodied in a sign to the perceiver implies adjusting their behavior in a specific direction.

The function of a "sign of patronage and subordination" in Olkhovsky's classification is particularly crucial for stone statues. The tamga of a powerful ruler was used as a sign of patronage in the territories subordinate to him. As shown in Grach's studies, the stone statues along the caravan routes fulfilled precisely this function; they served as a material sign proclaiming the political supremacy of the Turkic Khaganate in a specific territory. From this perspective, viewing stone statues solely as religious-ritual objects fails to capture their full essence.

Stone statues also fulfilled the function of a "sign of presence (territorial)" according to Olkhovsky's classification. As Olkhovsky notes, the discovery of tamgas in specific locations—on roads, mountain passes, and borders—indicates their use as signs of territorial affiliation and markers of political events. The placement of stone statues in strategic locations, such as mountain passes, caravan routes, and cemeteries, served exactly this territorial function. This function defines stone statues as material expressions of statehood borders and control.

Olkhovsky's conclusion that a set of coherent graphic signs becomes a system only if it possesses inherent order—namely, rules governing the formation and functioning of the signs—is fully applicable to the system of stone statues. The six-group classification of stone statues, strict iconographic rules, and ritual placement all prove that they are not random, but constitute a symbolic system governed by specific patterns.

G. Boboyorov's studies on the period of Tun Yabgu Khagan (618–630) [3] demonstrate the intrinsic connection between stone statues and the system of symbols of Turkic statehood. As Boboyorov notes, in the ancient Turkic tradition, military figures, especially rulers, were referred to by a nickname or title based on their military prowess and human virtues, rather than their birth names. These same nicknames and titles are also reflected in the inscriptions carved on the stone statues, which demonstrates the consistent coherence of statehood ideology across both material and written sources. Describing the headquarters of Tun Yabgu Khagan in the city of Suyab, based on the records of Xuan Zang, he writes that the Khagan's tent was decorated with golden patterns, officials wearing gold-

embroidered and silk garments sat in two rows inside the tent, and the Khagan's guards stood behind them. This description illustrates the system of official ceremonial receptions of the Turkic rulers; the iconography of this very ceremonial system is also reflected in the imagery of the stone statues: the depiction of a ruler holding a vessel, sitting or standing by a throne, mirrors the formal ceremonial space.

In the history of Uzbek statehood, stone statues are intrinsically linked to the period of the Turkic Khaganate in the 6th–8th centuries AD. This period is considered a crucial stage in the development of statehood in the territory of Uzbekistan: Chach (present-day Tashkent), Samarkand, Bukhara, and other cities functioned within the sphere of influence of the Turkic Khaganate. During this era, stone statues were erected in the territory of Uzbekistan as a material expression of the Khaganate's political-ideological system.

Archaeological finds in the territory of Uzbekistan specifically, the remains of statues discovered in the Fergana Valley, the Zeravshan basin, and the Kashkadarya region confirm that the tradition of stone statues was also widely prevalent in Uzbek lands. The fact that these monuments are located in areas that established relations not only with nomadic Turkic tribes but also with the sedentary Sogdian culture indicates that stone statues served as an ideological tool facilitating inter-civilizational interactions.

This study demonstrates the necessity of examining ancient Turkic stone statues as an integral component of the system of symbols of Uzbek statehood. Based on a comparative analysis of the studies by Sharafutdinov, Olkhovsky, and Boboyorov, it can be concluded that stone statues simultaneously embodied political, religious, and juridical functions, which fundamentally distinguishes them from mere ritual monuments. In our view, studying stone statues solely as "archaeological finds" is insufficient: they constitute the material text of statehood consciousness formed in the territory of Uzbekistan during the period of the Turkic Khaganate. When analyzed in conjunction with coins and tamgas, these monuments reveal the complete symbolic and political logic of that era. In the study of the history of Uzbek statehood, this holistic, systematic approach remains a field of inquiry that has not yet fully realized its potential in academia.

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