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Source: *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, Vol. 36, No. 1/3 (1982), pp. 61-68

Published by: [Akadémiai Kiadó](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23657839>

Accessed: 15-02-2016 02:29 UTC

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THE MOTIVE OF THE TRIPLE COFFIN IN A MONGOLIAN FOLK TALE

BY

LAJOS BESE (Budapest)

The historical Hun tradition, which was noted for posterity in old records, excites the imagination of many people. A captivating episode of this Hun tradition was the funeral of Attila, the king of the Huns. Earlier, Sándor Eckhardt (1940 : 153) took the position that «it is difficult to tell whether the description of the funeral of Attila registered by Jordanes is authentic and how much of it was embroidered by the fantasy of Priscos». However, not all researchers seem to be as doubtful as Sándor Eckhardt was. E. A. Thompson (1948 : 150), for example, in referring to the account of Attila's funeral, notes : «No part of these rites can be claimed as Germanic.»

The chronicle of Jordanes also includes the allusion that the body of Attila was laid in a triple coffin of gold, silver and iron : «Then in the secrecy of night they buried his body in the earth. They bound his coffins, the first with gold, the second with silver and the third with strength of iron, showing by such means that these three things united the mightiest of kings ; iron because he subdued the nations, gold and silver because he received the honours of both empires.» (Mierow 1908 : 81.) Franz Altheim (1951 : 148) remarks on the subject that «selbst das Ineinander von Särgen begegnet bei den Hiung-nu». This allusion, however, is not wholly confirmed as the Hsiung-nu tombs are partitioned and have no space for coffins. Even these few viewpoints mentioned in passing intimate that the evaluation of the funeral of Attila, and more accurately the account of the triple coffin, is an intriguing problem that has captivated the interest of scholars working in source criticism as well as in ethnography and archaeology. The author entertains the view that these problems could also be approached from the aspect of folklore. To confirm this assumption, a datum from Mongolian folklore will be presented here, which will hopefully be a fruitful contribution to the research on the motive of the triple coffin of Attila.

The folk tale concerning the triple coffin was published in a booklet (Njam-Osor 1958 : 14–16) containing Mongolian folk tales. The booklet is a rarity today, therefore the complete Mongolian text of the tale is included here. It reads :

Элдээ Дэлдээ хоёр, Эрдэнэдондог дүүтэйгээ гурвуулхан амьдран суудаг байжээ. Элдээ Дэлдээ хоёр нь эхнэртэйгээ суудаг, Эрдэнэдондог дүү нь ганцаараа суудаг байжээ. Хоёр ах нь ан гөөрө хийж, халиу, булга албал дүүдээ өгдөг, үнэг, хярс албал хоёр эхнэртээ өгдөг байжээ. Нэг өдөр хоёр ах нь ан хийхээр явж, дүү нь гадуураа тоглоод үлджээ.

Хоёр ахын эхнэрийн нэг нь нөгөөдөө ингэж хэлжээ:

— За хөө, Эрдэнэдондогийг алъя. Үүнийг байхаар цаад хоёр ах нь халиу, булга албал дүүдээ өгөөд, үнэг, хярс албал бид хоёрт өгөөд байх юм. Хэрэв Эрдэнэдондог байхгүй бол бид хоёрт өхгүй яах вэ? гэхэд нөгөө нь:

— Энэ хөөрхөн амьтныг харсаар байгаад яаж алах вэ? Тэр хоёр ганц өнчин дүүдээ өгөлгүй, хэндээ өх вэ? Вид хоёрт үнэг, хярс нь болохгүй яахав гэжээ. Нөгөө нь:

— Элдээ Дэлдээ хоёрын хамг хүнд хүчир ажлыг бид хоёр хийж муугий нь аваад, зүгээр тоглож явдаг дүү нь хамаг сайн сайхныг авна гэсэн чинь юу гэсэн үг вэ? Үүнийг алахад амархан. Хоёр эгчтэйгээ тоглоё гэж авчраад амархан алж болох юм гэхэд нөгөө нь:

— Тийм амархан юм бол яахав дээ гэжээ.

— Эрдэнэдондог нааш ир! Хоёр эгчтэйгээ тоглоё. Чи юунд ганцаараа тоглож байдаг юм бэ? гэж хоёр эгчийгээ хэлэхэд Эрдэнэдондог дуртай гүйгээд иржээ.

— За гурвуулаа бүлзэг үмхээд шилээрээ гаргая гэж нэг эгч нь амандаа бүлзэг үмхэж, шилэн дээрээ нэг бүлзэг сэм тавиад:

— За би гаргачихлаа. Миний дүү одоо гарга гэхээр, Эрдэнэдондог за гэж бүлзгий нь аваад залгих гэж оролдож байгаад хахаад үхчихжээ. Хоёр эгч нь түүнийг чирч аваачаад гэрт нь хаяжээ.

Элдээ Дэлдээ хоёр ан ав хийж халиу, булга олныг алаад, за өнөөдөр муу өнчич дүүдээ өх юмтай. Дүү минь унтаж байгаа юм болов уу. Вараа харагдах газраас хоёр ахыгаа тосоод ирдэгсэн. Яагаа юм бол? гэж ярилцаад гаднаа ирж, дүү яав? гэж эхнэрээсээ асуухад, хоёр эхнэр нь: Яав гэждээ, саяхан гадуур тоглож явсан, бодвол унтаж байгаа биздээ гэжээ. Хоёр ах нь дүүгийнхээ гэрт орсон чинь дүү нь үхчихсэн байжээ. Хоёр ах нь даагатай гүү далд ортол, унагатай гүү урастал гурван өдөр гурван шөнө дүүгээ тэврээд уйлжээ. Элдээ нь Дэлдээдээ:

— Чи яваад нэг буга бариад ир. Дүүгээ эврээс нь зүүгээд тавья. Ийм хөөрхөн дүүгээ яаж газар дээр зүгээр тавих вэ гэжээ. Тэгээд Дэлдээ нь буга барихаар явж, Элдээ нь дүүгээ хөвөнд хучих, торгонд ороогоод, алтан хайрцагт хийж, алтан хайрцагны гадуур мөнгөн хайрцаг, мөнгөн хайрцагны гадуур төмөр хайцгаар хайцаглажээ. Тэр хооронд Дэлдээ нь буга бариад иржээ. Элдээ Дэлдээ хоёр уйлж, бугын эврээс зүүгээд тавьчихаж гэнэ.

* * *

Далайн зах дээр байдаг ганц үнээтэй, үр хүүхэдгүй эмгэн өвгөн хоёрын гэрийг нэг том юм мөргөхөөр эмгэн нь гараад хартал нэг буга гэрий нь шөргөөж байгаад эмгэнээс үргэж ухасхийж эвэртээ байсан нэг том юмыг унагачихаад явчихжээ. Эмгэн тэр юмыг аваад:

— Өвгөөн бид хоёрт буга юм хайрлалаа шүү. Лав бугын эвэрт яасан ч муу юм байхгүй шүү! Өвгөөн, задлаарай гэхээр өвгөн нь:

— За яахав, гурав хоног бурхан дээрээ залъя гэж бурхны авдар дээр тавьж гурав хоног тахижээ. Эмгэнийг өглөө босоод цайгаа чанаж, тогоотой сүүгээ юүлээд хусмаа хусаж байтал:

— Ээжээ хүүдээ хусамнаасаа өгөөч гэх дуу гарчээ.

— Өвгөөн, би чамд юү хэллээ. Хусамнаасаа гэж байхыг дуулж байна уу? Восоорой гэж эмгэн хэлэхэд өвгөн нь санд мэнд босон харайж, гар нүүрээ угаагаад өнөөх юмаа задалжээ. Гэтэл төмөр хайрцагнаас мөнгөн хайрцаг, мөнгөн хайрцагнаас алтан хайрцаг, алтан хайрцагнаас торгонд ороож, хөвөнгөөр хучсан хөөрхөн бүсгүй хүүхэд гарч, тэрний дэргэд зэвтэй бүлзэг байжээ. Өвгөн эмгэн хоёр хөөрхөн охинтой болсондоо их баяр хөөр болжээ. Охин нь том болоод хааны бэр болж нэг хүү төрүүлж гэнэ.

Нэг өдөр хоёр ах нь ан гөрөө хийж яваад тэр айлд буужээ. Эрдэнэдондог нь хоёр ахдаа танигдах санаатай, хоол цай хийж өгчээ. Гэтэл хоёр ах нь таньсангүй гэнэ. Хоёр ах нь хээр гараад, энэ хөөрхөн авхай чинь ямар сайн хүн бэ? Маргааш ирээрэй гээд байх юм гэж ярилцсаар явжээ. Тэгээд тэр хоёр өдөрт ирж хоол цай идэж уугаад явдаг байжээ. Нэг өдөр Эрдэнэдондог, хүүхдий нь авч байдаг эмгэндээ хэлсэн нь:

— Өнөөдрийн ирдэг хоёр гөрөөчнийг маргааш ирвэл би хоол цай хийж байна. Та хүүхдээ уйлахгүй бол чимхэж уйлуулаад, ингэж хэлээд бүүвэйлээрэй: Хар Лувсан хааны ач юм шүү. Харалтай тайжийн хүү юм шүү. Элдээ Дээлдээ хоёрын зээ юм шүү. Эрдэнэдондогийн хүү юм шүү гэж бүүвэйлээрэй гэж эмээдээ захижээ. Маргааш нь хоёр ах нь ирж, Эрдэнэдондог дүү нь хоол цай хийхээр бэлтгэж байтал эмгэн хүүгээ чимхэж уйлуулаад:

— Хар Лувсан хааны ач юм шүү. Харалтай тайжийн хүү юм шүү. Элдээ Дэлдээ хоёрын зээ юм шүү, Эрдэнэдондогийн хүү юм шүү бүүвэй бүүвэй гэжээ. Юу гэнэ ээ, эмээ минь дахиад хэлж өгнө үү? гэж Элдээ Дэлдээ хоёрыг хэлхэд эмгэн:

— Хар Лувсан хааны ач юм шүү. Харалтай тайжийн хүү юм шүү. Элдээ Дэлдээ хоёрын зээ юм шүү, Эрдэнэдондогийн хүү юм шүү гэж бүүвэйлэхэд хоёр ах нь дүүгээ тэврэн авч ах дүү гурав даагатай гүү далд ортол, унагатай гүү урстал уйлжээ. Хааныхан юу болсон тухай асууж мэдэв. Хоёр ах нь дүүгээсээ юу болсон тухай асууж, дүү нь хоёр ахдаа өнгөрсөн явдлаа бүгдийг ярьжээ. Хоёр ах нь уурлаж, уушиг зүрх нь амаараа гарах шахаад, гэр лүүгээ явах гэхэд Эрдэнэдондог дүү нь хорьж:

— Ухаантан хүн урьдынхаас сэрэмж авч хойшид болгоомжилдог юм шүү. Тэр хоёрыг битгий зовоогоорой гэж захижээ. Хоёр ах нь гаднаа очмогц:

— Та хоёр юугаар дутаад ганц өнчин дүүг минь алав. Хурдан морины сүүлэнд үхнэ үү? Хурц хутганы ирэнд үхнэ үү? гэж агсарчээ. Гэхэд нэг эхнэр нь:

— Ви алахгүй гэхээр энэ ална гэсээр байгаад алсан. Вид хоёр хурдан морины сүүлэнд үхье гэжээ. Тэгээд тэр хоёр хүүхнийг жаран адууны дэл сүүлнээс хаа гуяар нь зүүж алаад ах дүү гурав амар сайхан жаргажээ.

English version :*

Both Eldee and Deldee dwelt with their younger sister Erdenedondog as a threesome. Eldee and Deldee dwelt together with their wives; their younger sister Erdenedondog dwelt by herself. The two elder brothers hunted. When they slew otters and sables, they would give them to their younger sister. When they slew foxes and steppe-foxes, they would give them to their two wives. One day the two elder brothers set out for the hunt and their younger sister played outside and remained behind.

One of the two elder brother's wives spoke thus to the other: «Well now, let us slay Erdenedondog! As long as she exists, those two elder brothers, when they slay otters and sables, give them to their younger sister and, when they slay foxes and steppe-foxes, give them to us two. If Erdenedondog does not exist, why should they not give them [all] to us both?»

The other said: «How could we slay this lovely little creature, having gazed upon her? Those two ought certainly to give them to their only, orphaned younger sister. To whom would they give them [otherwise]? For us two, foxes and steppe-foxes are a matter of course.»

The first said: «What are these words of yours that we do all the coarse, heavy work for both Eldee and Deldee and receive what is inferior, when their little sister who simply plays receives the very best! It will be easy to slay her. When we have drawn her hither in the wish that she play with her two elder sisters, we shall slay her easily.»

The other said: «If it is so easy, then very well.»

«Erdenedondog, come here! Let us play, you together with your elder sisters! Why do you play by yourself?»

When the two elder sisters had thus spoken, Erdenedondog came at an eager run.

«Well now, let us three hold a finger-ring in our mouths and then make it come out through the napes of our necks.»

With these words, one elder sister held a finger-ring in her mouth and secretly placed a [second] finger-ring upon the nape of her neck.

«Well now, I have made it come out. My little sister, you make it come out now.»

Erdenedondog, pronouncing her assentment, took the finger-ring and attempted to swallow it, then choked and died. The two elder sisters dragged her away and threw her into her yurt.

Both Eldee and Deldee had hunted and slain many otters and sables.

* Translated by Dr. Thomas Raff. Translating Mongol into English is a tough job for foreigners. For this reason I am very indebted to Dr. Raff for his English version of this Mongol tale. — Lajos Bese.

«Well, today we have something to give our poor, orphaned younger sister. Is my younger sister perhaps asleep? She usually intercepts her two elder brothers from the look-out place. What ever she is doing?»

Thus they chatted with each other and then arrived outside.

«What has happened to younger sister?» they asked the two elder sisters.

The two elder sister said: «What has happened to her? Why, she was playing outside a short while ago. We suppose that she is asleep.»

The two elder brothers entered the yurt of their younger sister when lo! their younger sister had died. The two elder brothers enfolded their younger sister in their embrace and for three days and three nights wept till a mare with a two-year-old colt took shelter and a mare with a one-year-old colt flowed downstream [— such was the deluge of their tears].

Eldee said to Deldee: «Set out and bring back a stag. We shall hang our younger sister upon its antlers. How could we simply place our so lovely little younger sister upon the soil?»

Then Deldee set out to size a stag. Eldee covered his younger sister in cotton, wrapped her in silk, put her into a golden box, enclosed the golden box in a silver box and enclosed the silver box in an iron box. Meanwhile, Deldee had seized a stag and returned. Both Eldee and Deldee wept and wept and hung it upon the stag's antlers.

*

There were, on an ocean-shore, an old man and woman who possessed a single cow and no children. When one day something big butted the couple's yurt, the old woman came into the open. She looked: A stag was rubbing itself against the yurt. Then it took fright of the old woman, dashed forward, dropped a large object which had been upon its antlers and fled. The old woman took the object.

«Old man! A stag has made the two of us a gift. Certainly nothing paltry is upon a stag's antlers! Old man, undo it!»

«Very well. I shall set it upon [the shrine of] Buddha for three days and nights.»

With these words, he placed it upon the Buddhachest and prayed for three days and nights.

The old woman, having risen in the morning, cooked tea and poured a potful of milk from one vessel into another [so as to cool it]. Then, while she was scraping the pot of its burnt milk-clings, a voice issued forth saying: «Mother, please give your child some of the burnt milk-craspings!»

«Old man, what did I say to you? [Why, nothing at all]! Do you hear the words 'some of the burnt milk-craspings'? Rise to your feet!»

When the old woman had thus spoken, the old man jumped helter-skelter to his feet, washed his face and hands, then undid that object. However,

from the iron box emerged a silver box, from the silver box emerged a golden box and from the golden box emerged a lovely little girl wrapped in silk and covered with cotton. With her was a spiked finger-ring. The old man and woman were in raptures at having a lovely little daughter. Their daughter grew up, became the daughter-in-law of a khan and gave birth to a child.

One day the two elder brothers went hunting and dismounted at that settlement. Erdenedondog, intending to be recognized by her two elder brothers, made food and tea and served it. However, the two elder brothers did not recognize her. The two elder brothers went out into the wilderness. «What a good person she is, this lovely little noblewoman! She said that that we should come tomorrow.» Chatting with each other in this manner, they went their way.

The two men then used to arrive in the daytime, eat food and drink tea and depart.

One day Erdenedondog said to the old woman who used to hold the child: «If the two hunters coming these days come tomorrow, I shall make food and tea. Pinch the child, if it does not weep, and set it weeping, then lull it to sleep with the following words: 'Tis the paternal grandson of Khar Luvsan Khan. Tis the son of Prince Kharaltai. Tis the maternal nephew of Eldee and Deldee. Tis the son of Erdenedondog.' Lull it to sleep that way.» Thus did she instruct the old woman.

The next day the two elder brothers came and, while their younger sister Erdenedondog was preparing to make food and tea, the old woman pinched the child and set it weeping.

«Tis the paternal grandson of Khar Luvsan Khan», she said. «Tis the son of Prince Kharaltai. Tis the maternal nephew of Eldee and Deldee. Tis the son of Erdenedondog. Hush-a-bye, hush-a-bye.»

«What did you say? Old woman, would you please repeat it?» said both Eldee and Deldee.

«Tis the paternal grandson of Khar Luvsan Khan», lulled the old woman. «Tis the son of Prince Kharaltai. Tis the maternal nephew of Eldee and Deldee. Tis the son of Erdenedondog.»

The two elder brothers took their younger sister into their arms and the three siblings wept till a mare with a two-year-old colt took shelter and a mare with a one-year-old colt flowed downstream [— such was the deluge of their tears].

The Khan and his retinue inquired and learned of what had happened.

The two elder brothers asked their younger sister what had happened and the younger sister told her two elder brothers the whole lot of the past events. The two elder brothers were wroth and their lungs and hearts well-nigh erupted from their mouths [— such was the pitch of their anger]. When they said that they would be off to their yurts, Erdenedondog held them back:

«The judicious person beforehand takes precautions and afterwards takes care. Do not cause those two any suffering!» Thus she advised.

As soon as the two elder brothers arrived outside [their yurts], they stormed: «What did you lack that you slew our only orphaned younger sister? Will you die by the tails of chargers? Or will you die by the blades of sharp knives?»

One wife said: «As long as I said that I would not slay her, this one continued to say that she would do so and finally did. The two of us will die by the tails of chargers!»

So they hung to the manes and tails of sixty horses, alongside their front forelegs and thighs, the two young women and [, driving the horses apart,] had them slain. Then the three siblings lived happily ever after.

*

The tale belongs to the magic tales in the Aarne system, constituting an unmarked sub-type of category No. 709 in the Aarne-Thompson catalogue (cf. Lőrincz 1979: No. 146, and p. 282, resp.). What is of interest here is that the passage twice quoted in the tale contains the motive of the triple coffin. It is first mentioned when Eldee's sister is put into the coffin: «Eldee covered his younger sister in cotton, wrapped her in silk, put her into a golden box, enclosed the golden box in a silver box and enclosed the silver box in an iron box.» It occurs again when the old man undoes the packet: «... from the iron box emerged a silver box, from the silver box emerged a golden box and from the golden box emerged a lovely little girl wrapped in silk and covered with cotton.» As far as I know, the motive of the triple coffin does not occur in any other publications on Mongolian folklore, and this fact alone encumbers its evaluation. By the same the conduct of research into (Mongolian) folklore is not my specific field, thus I must renounce further examination of the triple-coffin motive. Let it be suggested, however, that research on the motive of the triple coffin seems to have further prospects in Mongolian folklore: the late B. Sodnom, a Mongolian literary historian, said in the autumn of 1978 that reference is made to a double silver-golden box (*altan möngön khojir khajrtsag*) in Mongolian folklore.

The occurrence of the motive of the triple coffin in a Mongolian folktale is all the more strange as burial in a coffin generally was alien to (old-time) Mongolians. (See e.g. Boyle 1977: XXIII, 5–14, and his bibliography.) Therefore, it is almost impossible to disentangle the question: What reality did popular memory register with this motive? Be that as it may, it is hoped that this occurrence of the triple coffin motive in Mongolian folklore will be of some assistance in further research on the description of Attila's funeral by Jordanes.

Supplementary notices: This short paper was read at the Symposium «Myth and History» organised by the Ethnographical Research Team of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in the autumn of 1978. The Hungarian version was published in the volume comprising the lectures of the symposium. (Cf. *Előmunkálatok a magyarság néprajzához*. [Outlines for the Ethnography of the Hungarians.] No. 2. *Mítosz és történelem*. Ed. by Mihály Hoppál and Márton Istvánovits. Budapest 1978, pp. 77–80.) The volume contains two other papers with references to the Huns. One of them is by Gyula Kristó (Volt-e a magyaroknak ősi hun hagyományuk? [Did the Hungarians Have an Ancient Hun Tradition?] *Op. cit.*, 55–64), who in the basis of historical source analysis — inferred the conclusion controverted by several scholars that the Hungarians had no ancient Hun tradition. The second author, Ildikó Ecsedy (A magyarországi «Attila-sírja»-hagyomány keleti háttéréről. [On the Oriental Background of «Attila's Tomb» Tradition in Hungary.] *Op. cit.*, 64–77) asserts that the natural cause of the persistent Hun tradition in Hungarian (historical) literature is an oral Hun tradition of eventually steppic origin, which had been either brought along or found in the area of present day Hungary, modified by various other elements, but essentially existing before and beside the written tradition. (Ildikó Ecsedy's paper, in a considerably enlarged form, is published in the present volume of *AOH*.)

A very profound contribution to the symposium came from Dr. Márton Istvánovits, who spoke about the occurrence of the motive of the triple coffin in the folklore of the Caucasian peoples. However, it should be emphasized that **the Mongolian folklore occurrence of the motive or similar historical or ethnographical data do not constitute conclusive evidence of the authenticity of the description of Attila's funeral by Jordanes.**

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