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# Ottoman Tents in the Context of the Ancient Sky God (Gök Tanrı) Belief of the Turks (1453–1566)

**ABSTRACT**

It is possible to explain the Ottoman understanding of mythology and cosmology through the meanings that ancient Turks attributed to the universe. The symbolic value of the tent, which was associated with the cosmological understanding of the Sky God belief, was highly significant. The tent was established upon the main theme of earth and sky, and it represented the world of the sultan. In fact, all the magnificent elements of ancient Turkic cosmology were manifested in the sultan's imperial tent (otağ). This study aims to examine the motifs related to the earth and sky in Ottoman tents established in connection with the Sky God belief, as well as their practical applications during the Ottoman period. This research has been conducted based on historical sources written during the Ottoman era, contemporary visual materials, literary texts from folk and classical Ottoman literature, and data drawn from scholarly studies and analyses.

**Keywords:** *Gök Tanrı, Ottoman Empire, Mehmed the Conqueror, Suleiman the Magnificent, Tent*

## Introduction

A significant part of the material and spiritual cultural elements of the Ottomans carries traces of the ancient Turkish culture. After converting to Islam, the Turks continued to preserve and express their pre-Islamic cultural values alongside Islamic values in a new sphere of life. The mythological beliefs, cosmological understanding, and the values attributed to material and spiritual cultural elements by the Ottomans are undeniably connected to ancient Turkish culture. Like all nations, the Turks expressed their values in areas such as language, literature, and metaphysics through symbols. For something to have symbolic value, it must be comprehensible through thought and possess emotional reality. According to Martin Lings, a symbol is "the reflection or shadow of the truth.". (Karadayı 2021, 450) It is known that many symbolic elements have been sustained in different societies with similar or varying meanings. Specifically, sky symbolism—pertinent to our topic—exists in many cultures. The duality of earth and sky, one of the main themes of universal mythology, has been attributed similar meanings across the world (Eliade, 2014, 244).

The Turks not only influenced the cultural life of the nations with whom they interacted, but also assimilated many of their cultural motifs. These traditions were passed down to subsequent Turkic states, one of which was the Ottoman Empire. However, the origins of ancient Turkish traditions lie beyond the scope of this study. The main thesis of this work is that the majority of Turkish traditions connected to the pre-Islamic belief in the Sky God (*Gök Tanrı*) were preserved and sustained by the Ottomans. Naturally, it is not possible to completely abandon ancient cultural codes. As Cenap Şehabettin aptly stated, "No one can entirely rid their tongue of their village's dialect or their heart of the imprint of their religion." This precisely reflects the idea in question. Especially due to the differences between Islam and the Sky God belief system, some ancient traditions had to be abandoned. However, as will be seen in the following pages, many of these traditions were not entirely forsaken—or perhaps could not be. Although the adoption of Islam brought about partial changes in the cultural values of the states that embraced it, theFköp conceptual framework and essence of many values were transmitted to future generations just as they were. Others were integrated into Islamic culture and sustained by being placed within a new conceptual framework.

In addition to cultural values, legal customs followed a similar pattern. When necessary, the Ottomans addressed matters that contradicted Islamic (Sharia) rulings through customary laws (*örf*) rooted in pre-Islamic traditions. In short, the traces of the Sky God were never erased from social life. There are even early historical observations attesting to this. In the early 10th century, Ibn Fadlan, upon encountering the Oghuz Turks, noted that they tried to appear devout to those around them. However, he also observed that they could not completely detach themselves from their beliefs rooted in the Sky God tradition, and therefore lived in a state of religious and cultural contradiction. The famous traveler recorded in his diary that when struck by misfortune or injustice, people would raise their heads toward the sky and utter "bir Tengri" (one God), not invoking Allah, but rather Tengri—the great Sky God of the nomads (Frankopan 2018, 117). Even today, expressions such as "There is God above" (*Yukarıda Allah var*) are inspired by the same worldview and can be seen as remnants of the Sky God belief. At the same time, it can be said that this ancient discourse has, in part, taken on an Islamic character.

The historiography of Ottoman culture—which in many respects remains under-researched—also suffers from significant gaps in the areas that have been studied. At the very least, it becomes apparent that some studies have not sufficiently investigated the historical background of cultural values. As a result, certain elements have been reduced to nothing more than simple material culture items. This study aims to examine the mythical and cosmic tendencies in the cultural motifs associated with the tent—a symbol inherited from their ancestors—during the period spanning from the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror (1444–46/1451–81) to the death of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566). Although there are no original scientific studies on this topic, it is hoped that this article will fill this gap in the literature.

### 1. The Sky God Belief

It has been established that the cosmological worldview of the Altai Turkic communities—whose influence was strongly felt in the Ottoman Empire—was fundamentally composed of a three-tiered structure. However, this structure occasionally includes more detailed and varied elements. The earth, along with the humans it hosts, is cosmically connected to the realms of the sky and the underworld. All divine beings who are creators and protectors, along with benevolent spirits, reside in the layers of the sky; whereas evil spirits, demons, and related deities dwell in the dark layers of the underworld. The earth and sky are connected by a central axis, known as the pillar of the sky, which represents the connection between these layers—a reflection of the three-tiered cosmological model. One of the Orkhon Inscriptions, the Kül Tigin Monument, begins on its eastern face with the words: *"When the blue sky above and the dark earth below were created, mankind was created between them,"* clearly reflecting this three-tiered view of the universe (Arslan 2006, 66).

The sky, regarded as sacred by many civilizations, was also considered sacred by the Turks. According to the earliest cosmological understanding of the Turks, the universe represented by the sky and the earth was seen as a system composed of two fundamentally opposite but complementary universal breaths: the sky and the earth. Being at the highest point is a divine attribute (Arslan 2006, 65). The sky—unreachable by humans—possesses qualities exclusive to the gods, such as absolute truth, infinity, and transcendence. It symbolizes power and permanence. The sky is exalted, untouchable, infinite, and powerful. This is because, in a religious sense, to be "sacred" and "powerful" is essentially to be "exalted." (Eliade, 2014, 61- 62; Emeç 2019, 89).

The ancient Turks believed that God resided in the sky. This understanding should be seen as quite natural. In the steppe culture to which the Turks belonged and with which they strongly identified, there were no castles, walls, or boundaries in the way of life. For a society that spent daily life immersed in nature—regarding nature as a fundamental component of existence—the only thing visible on the horizon in the vast emptiness of the steppe was the infinity of the sky. Therefore, it was believed that the supreme creator could only dwell in this seemingly endless space or that He could demonstrate His greatness and sublimity through it (Ahmetbeyoğlu - Şen, 2018, 47).

Fuzuli Bayat defines the Sky God (*Gök Tanrı*) as "the greatest spirit dwelling in the heavens, the one who is invoked in prayers; the being who created humans and nature, fire and earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars, the celestial dome; who governs the order of the world and ultimately determines human destiny." (Emeç 2019, 89). The Turks established a definite connection between the unity of God and the unity of the sky (*sema*), and for this reason, the "sky" was regarded as sacred. Moreover, in the mythologically rooted Turkish worldview, the sky was the dwelling place of "Gök Tengri." The Chuvash people refer to God as *Turi*, believing that He created everything and resides in the heavens. In ancient Turkic cosmology, the concept of "God" and the "sky" were used interchangeably (Altaylı 2021, 76-77).

The cosmic meanings attributed to the tent by the Ottomans—including the tree of life, the pillar of the sky, and other images associated with the earth and the heavens—are elements closely connected to the belief in the Sky God. In the Ottoman era, the tent was constructed around the central theme of earth and sky, representing the world of the sultan and his closest advisors. The top of the tent symbolized the celestial throne (*arş*), while the ground represented the earth. The sultan was considered the successor and shadow of God on earth, and his throne was seen as the pillar of the sky. Thus, the ancient tripartite cosmic model was completed. Additional symbolic elements could also be mentioned here and will be referred to where relevant. In essence, all the magnificent components of Turkic cosmology found vivid expression in the sultan's tent (*otağ*). However, the symbolic value of the tent carried similar meanings for other people as well.

The belief that souls and prayers ascend to the sky in the Ottoman tradition is directly connected to the ancient Sky God (*Gök Tanrı*) belief. In the shamanic tradition, Ülgen—a deity placed in the highest levels of the sky—was believed to have lived in ancient times and ascended to the heavens. According to this shamanistic folkloric understanding, the severing of human souls by God was also associated with this ascent (Sagalayev 2020, 79). It was believed that when a person died, their soul left the body in the form of a bird, and this transition was described using expressions such as "he became a falcon" or "he became an eagle" (*"sungur oldu, şahin oldu"*) (Ahmetbeyoğlu - Şen 2018, 47). This belief was frequently encountered during the Ottoman period. For example, in Bâkî's elegy (*mersiye*) for Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the line *"Mürg-i revânı göklere irdü hümâ gibi"* (His soul-bird rose to the heavens like a Huma bird) illustrates the idea of the sultan's spirit ascending to the sky in bird form, similar to the mythological Hüma (Yücel-Sevim, 1991, 225). This reflects the manifestation of the earth-sky symbolism, a key component of the tripartite universe concept, and motifs containing both elements are also present.

Numerous other examples of the Sky God belief can be found in the Ottoman context. After the execution of Prince Cem, and in the absence of a legal heir to the throne, the historian Hoca Sadeddin interpreted Sultan Bayezid II's (r. 1481–1512) relief through the symbolism of earth and sky. Influenced by Islamic belief in destiny, he remarked that the underworld (earth) was given to Cem while the surface (the world above) was granted to the sultan (Hoca Sadettin 1992, 234). He also noted that prayers for Cem had reached the skies—a phrase again tied to the Sky God belief. The Turkic tradition of raising hands toward the sky while praying originates from mythic periods and is another remnant of this belief system.

One of the symbolic elements connected to the tripartite cosmology was the motif of the *Tree of Life* (*Hayat Ağacı*), which served as a link between the realms (Ögel 2014, 107). Before the advent of Islam, the *Tree of Life* was a significant mythological element. In some religions, the sacred tree holds symbolic value associated with the belief that it is a manifestation or theophany of God. According to the Abrahamic religions, this tree is believed to exist in paradise, while in mythology, it is placed at the center of the world. It is imagined as a motif that connects all realms—its trunk representing the earth, and its branches embracing heaven. The ancient Turks, in connection with this worldview, believed that the *Tree of Life* served as a means of ascending from the earth to the sky and ultimately to the divine realm of God (Ağaç-Sakarya 2015, 5.). Concepts related to the Tree of Life can be encountered during the foundational years of the Ottoman Empire and in later centuries as well. Within the framework of

the Ottomans' universal ambitions, the ideal of *Kızılelma* (the "Red Apple")—representing the goal of global sovereignty—symbolized the sun, moon, and star on the branches of the ancient Tree of Life. Indeed, there is a cosmic connection between the tree in Osman Bey's dream and the Tree of Life. In his vision, a tree emerged from his chest and cast a shadow that covered the entire world. From the mountains beneath its shade, streams began to flow (Şentürk 2019, 136). Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror's legal code (*kanunnâme*) includes the decree: *"Whoever cuts down a tree from my forest shall be executed!"*—a manifestation of the sacred Tree of Life concept (İnan 2015, s. 34). The motif of the Tree of Life is frequently encountered in both written and visual Ottoman literature. This reflects the close relationship the ancient Turks had with the cult of the tree. Also known as the *World Tree*, it was believed to connect the world to the *Pole Star*, referred to as *Demir Kazık* ("Iron Stake") in Turkic mythology. The navel of the earth was believed to be connected to this tree, which was nourished from the sky. Furthermore, the central pillar of the shaman's tent was thought to symbolize the Tree of Life (Taşağıl 2025, 236).

Traces of ancient Turkic traditions can be observed in Ottoman-era prose and literature. Verses and sentences containing imagery related to the Sky God belief (*Gök Tanrı*) are frequently encountered. However, the symbolic elements within these expressions are often interpreted through the lens of Islamic values.

*"Döksün sehâb kaddin anup katre katre kan*
*İtsün nihâl-i nârveni nahl-i ergavân*
*Bu acılarla çeşm-i nücûm olsun eşk-bâr*
*Âfâkı tutsun âteş-i dilden çıkan duhân*
*Kılsun kebûd câmelerin âsmân siyâh*
*Geysün libâs-ı mâtem-i Şâhı bütün cihân*
*Yaksun derûn-ı sîne-i ins ü perîde dâğ*
*Nâr-ı firâk-ı Şâh Süleyman-ı kâm-rân*
*Kıldı firâz-ı küngüre-i 'arşı cilve-gâh*
*Lâyık değildi şânına hakkâ bu hâk-dân*
*Mürg-ı revânı göklere irdü hümâ gibi*
*Kaldı hazîz-i hâkde bir iki üstühân"*

The metaphors and descriptions in Bâkî's elegy for Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent clearly demonstrate a blending of the Sky God (*Gök Tanrı*) belief and Islamic faith. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the traces of ancient traditions containing cosmic motifs remain predominant. For instance, the practice of wearing black clothing during mourning, the soul of Suleiman ascending to the heavens like a Huma bird, the purple color (*erguvan*) associated with the myth of death and rebirth, smoke enveloping the skies, stars shedding tears from their eyes, and the celestial dome (*arş kubbesi*) are all concepts reflecting the legacy of the Sky God belief. It is also important to note that Bâkî's poetry contains very weak Sufi imagery. The connection between the symbolic elements and ancient culture is evident. İsmail Soyyiğit, evaluating Bâkî's poems in light of Sebahattin Küçük's findings, clearly states that this classical Ottoman poet did not include Sufi elements in his works and instead focused on the realities of the world (Soyyiğit 2006, 5). There are other sources that support this view as well (Demirel, 2007, 10).

**2. The Tent**

According to Ahmet Rasim, the tent was the Ottomans' first home, their first throne, and their first palace (Atasoy 2002, 55). During the Ottoman period, tents were used by various social groups. The tent erected for the sultan was called the *Otağ-ı Hümâyun* (Imperial Tent). When the Ottomans went on military campaigns, they established nomadic settlements composed of tents at their encampments (Düzlü 2016, 79). When setting up the *Otağ-ı Hümâyun*, fabrics in *al* (red) hues were typically used. Red satin (*atlas*) fabrics and other red textiles held special significance because red was the color of sovereignty during the Ottoman era (Çoruhlu 1999, 472). This historical background is rich with symbolic elements. Since the earliest periods of Turkish history, *al* has been regarded as a national color

symbolizing excitement and power. Additionally, the red used in flags represented a protective spirit (Kahraman 2020, 56).

Large circular yurt-type tents, built with wooden frames and covered with felt—commonly used by nomadic Turks and Mongols—were also utilized during the Ottoman period. These tents are reflected in the miniature art of the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, with vivid depictions found in the *Hünername* (Urhan 2018, 62). This type of tent was known as the sacred home of the Turk. Besides yurt-type tents, the Ottomans frequently used *kara çadır* (black tents), *topak çadır*, and single-pole tents. They also occasionally used canopy-style tents called *sâyeban*, as well as tents supported by three or multiple poles (Çoruhlu 1999, 470).

The tent is one of the elements that holds an important place in Turkish cosmology. Essentially, it functioned as a microcosm physically representing the cosmic meanings that the ancient Turks attributed to the universe. This understanding was also embraced by the Ottomans, and the example of the tent clearly demonstrates that cultural codes and cosmic tendencies have continued uninterrupted. Therefore, the necessity of approaching Turkish history as a continuous and holistic whole emerges once again. In particular, examining findings that show the tent's various functions as a carrier of culture supports this view.

### 2.1. The Tent as a Conception of the Universe

The tent was considered a small archetype of the universe among the Turks. In Inner Asia, where the Turks lived in ancient times, the dome of the otağ (tent) symbolized the sky. In this context, the ruler's palace was also the center of sky worship. Just as the ruler was the earthly representative of the Sky God (Gök Tanrı), his palace or otağ was considered the threshold of his temple (Esin 1983, 35). The tent is not only one of the tangible elements of ancient Turkish culture but also a strong cultural carrier that has always preserved the cosmic meanings attributed to it since antiquity.

These living spaces, which are part of the nomadic Turkish culture, were also a component of the Ottoman social and cultural life. It is evident that these portable living spaces, which are carriers of ancient culture, gained an important place in Ottoman cosmology. According to the Turks' belief in the Sky God, space consists of the sky and four directions. Although sovereignty originates from the Sky God, the state represented its existence on earth. Due to this understanding, power descended from the sky downwards (Türkmen 2011, 13). The notion that the tent was designed as a conception of the universe also existed during the Ottoman period and was mentioned by Ottoman historians on various occasions. The sultan's otağ was described with expressions such as "the otağ that holds the skies," "the otağ that embraces the world," or "the otağ elevated to the heavens," which are clear indicators of this belief (Solakzâde 1989, s. 145, 232; Hoca Sadettin 1992, 23).

Under the influence of the symbolism that the Turks attributed to the universe in connection with the Sky God, the universe was manifested in their tents, which they envisioned as its small miniature. Likewise, the universal image attributed to the tent remained significant during the Ottoman era. In Matrâkçı Nasûh's *Süleymannâme*, the description: "Before the throne of the exalted ottoman tent, a splendid and lofty pavilion was erected whose dome was vast and whose imperial columns were adjacent to the sky; the pins of the tent were firmly fixed to the ground like daggers" (Erkan, 2005, 162) serves to emphasize the grandeur and magnificence of the era. However, the analogy of the celestial dome and tent elements with the sky relates back to the pre-Islamic cosmological understanding.

### 2.2. The Tent as a Symbol of Sovereignty

Since ancient times, the tent has been one of the symbols of rulership. This ancient archetype, also known as the *otağ-ı hümâyun* (imperial tent), symbolized the palace of the sultan with its symbolic value, representing grandeur and magnificence. Especially during military campaigns led by the sultan, the sultan's tent embodied fear, majesty and splendor in the eyes of the enemies. This magnificence is

frequently described in historical sources. Leading the army in person was a tradition up until the reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, with only a few exceptions. After his reign, this practice was abandoned. By the end of the century and in the following centuries, it became an exceptional occurrence for the sultan to go on campaign with the army.

The descriptions of the *divan* tent, erected during Sultan Süleyman the Lawgiver's (Kanunî Sultan Süleyman) 1529 campaign to liberate Buda from the Habsburgs and subsequently besiege Vienna, are noteworthy. These depictions left a lasting impression in the minds of the besieged as a symbol of Ottoman grandeur. The *divan* tent, which could also be called the council tent, was placed at the center of the Janissary tents arranged in a circle. It was decorated with valuable atlas curtains and victory arches. The interior was lined with a dark blue fabric embroidered by hand with gilded patterns and arrows. The tent's suspension rings, made of gold, were striking. The sultan's golden throne, adorned with diamonds, pearls, and rubies, was placed in the center of the tent (Celâlzâde 2011, 174).

Dark blue was one of the cosmic colors of the ancient Turks. The circular tent complexes with the *otağ-ı hümâyun* at the center symbolized the solar system centered around the world, indicating a cosmological understanding. According to the central approach, the very top of the tent was open, and a hearth or throne was placed directly beneath this opening. Foreign observers also described similar images of the *otağ*. Georgieviç, a war captive who had the opportunity to see Kanunî's tent up close, noted that from a distance one might mistake it for a city, while from nearby it looked like a military camp. This eyewitness, who described the sultan's throne like Celalzâde, recalled round objects hanging from the ceiling, shining brightly, but he could not decide whether they were made of gold or crystal (Kumrular 2016, 228).

The symbolic value of these rings, described by both local and foreign observers, is also significant. These rings are manifestations of the sun and moon symbolism found in the Sky God (Gök Tanrı) belief. The sun, one of these elements, was considered sacred by the ancient Turks, making the sun cult an important institution (Ahmetbeyoğlu - Şen, 2018*,* 48). It is worth noting that sun symbolism is also known in Europe, Asia, and Mexico (Eliade, 2014, 160-161). Returning to these round objects, it is clear that they are connected to the image of the tent and, by extension, the universe. With the Turks' acceptance of Islamic culture, Islamic motifs also reflected in art and cosmology; however, the almost identical use of pre-Islamic tent culture indicates that the cosmic understanding related to the tent has roots in pre-Islamic traditions. Before converting to Islam, Turks likely adorned the tops of their tents with spheres called *monçuk* ("little moon"), which symbolized the moon, as well as precious-metal idols known as *töz* (Bozkurt 1993, 160). These rings, connected to cosmological mythology, originated primarily from sun and moon symbolism. In the Divan poetry of Sünbülzâde Vehbi, the lines: *"Fezâ-yı câhın içre muhtasar bir haymedir gerdûn İki altundan topdur onun üstünde mihr ü mâh"* are striking. Rabia Oktar clarifies these verses as: *"The universe (Felek) is a small tent within your sky of fortune. There are two golden spheres above it representing the sun and the moon."* (Oktar, 2022, 371).

In the Ottoman Empire, spherical images and physical objects related to sky symbolism were also present on flags and standards. When the fortress of Moton was conquered, a Janissary planted the sultan's flag bearing the sun emblem on the walls (Esin 1985, 798). Celalzâde witnessed the preparation of seven flags with golden knobs and tuğ (horse-tail standards) for Sultan Süleyman the Lawgiver's second campaign against the Safavids (Celâlzâde 2011, 274). These flags are vividly depicted in the *Hünernâme* as well. Besides the sun symbol on the standards, the spherical emblem represented the universe. It can be inferred that the centuries-old concept of the "gökkubbe" (sky dome) is related to this symbolism. Regardless of changes in place and time, the cultural codes have remained almost the same. Changes in location, new beliefs, new cultural spheres, and the passing of thousands of years could not prevent people from thinking and living independently of the ancient culture.

A miniature depicting Yavuz Sultan Selim (1512–1520) hunting a deer, which also includes the figure of a tent, shows nature as composed of three layers of earth and the sky above. In the miniature, a broad natural layer representing the action area is present. Behind the tent figure, the hills end and the

sky begins (Urhan 2018, 178). This depiction is closely connected to the cosmological meaning attributed to the tent in ancient Turkish culture. If the ground of the tent is perceived as the earth, it takes the form of a sky dome that encompasses the world. Similarly, in the *Oğuz Kağan* Epic, the universe is envisioned as an arc-shaped, curved dome.

### 2.3. Tent as a Method of Punishment

In Ottoman cosmology, tents—manifestations of the universe on earth—contained rich symbolic elements. A tent, and its settled equivalent, the house, represented a person's small world—their refuge. Thus, the tent was a person's little world. Just as the world provided people with safety for their lives and possessions, maintaining life in peace was one of the vital conditions. The existence or absence of private living spaces, the most important parts of private life, was evaluated in this context. In our opinion, expressions like "the world collapsed on one's head" stem from the literal destruction of the tent or its equivalent, a closed living space.

In ancient times, the tent, otağ, or dwelling representing the world collapsing on a person was a physical event. However, over time, this phenomenon was also expressed symbolically. It is possible to say that this metaphor found concrete application during the Ottoman period. The Ottomans did not hesitate to enact certain sayings; in other words, some actions became idioms over time.

The actions of Ottoman sultans, who literally "brought down the world on people's heads," support our claim that the tent was used as a punitive sanction. The destruction of the tent meant both the destruction of shelter and the total ruin of reputation. Moreover, there are clear references to this in divan poetry. In Nedim's lines "Hayme-i câhınla gerdûn-ı çihârüm yek-nesak," it is evident that the words "fortune," "glory," and "luck" are identified with the tent (Oktar, 2022, 368).

The tradition of destroying tents can be traced back to the era of Mehmed the Conqueror. Mehmed had the tent of Mahmud Pasha, who served as chief chamberlain in the Empire of Trebizond and was the nephew of the philosopher Georgios Amiroutzes' aunt, destroyed over his head. The Ottomans had gone on the Karaman campaign in 1468 while Mahmud Pasha was grand vizier. Âşıkpaşazâde, in his writing on Mahmud Pasha's relocation of several hundred households of craftsmen from Karaman and Konya to Istanbul for the city's restoration, mentioned accusations by Rum Mehmet Pasha. According to him, Mahmud Pasha settled many artisan families in Istanbul, but Rum Mehmet Pasha's claim that only a few poor families had been settled incited Mehmed. According to the somewhat emotional Âşıkpaşazâde, this Rum vizier was seeking revenge against Istanbul. Mehmed, influenced by these accusations, dismissed Mahmud Pasha and had his tent destroyed. (Âşıkî 2015, 279-280; Tekindağ 2003, 377; Keil 2008, 226-227). This suggests that the Pasha's tent was closely related to his fortune and status. This event was connected to the process leading to Mahmud Pasha's execution in 1474.

There are many other examples illustrating the relationship between the otağ and a person's reputation, life, and fortune. At least it is clear that this event was not an exception. Yavuz Sultan Selim had the tents of many viziers destroyed over their heads. After the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, when the army entered Amasya, the Janissaries revolted and plundered the people's property. Yavuz had the tents of the grand vizier Hersekzâde Ahmed Pasha and the second vizier Dukakinzâde Ahmed Pasha destroyed over their heads and also dismissed them from office, holding them responsible for the incident (Solakzâde 1989, 32; Özcan 1994, 550).

Yavuz also had the tent of Vizier Hüseyin (Hüsam) Pasha destroyed. However, Hüseyin Pasha was not as lucky as the others. This time, Yavuz's act of tent destruction ended in death. In 1516, after the Ottoman victory in the Battle of Marj Dabiq against the Mamluks, Yavuz began preparations to completely eliminate the Mamluks. Near Gaza, he faced opposition from his commanders who argued

the desert road was impassable. Unable to persuade them, he had Hüseyin Pasha, whom he suspected of leading the opposition faction, first lose his tent and then executed (Emecen 2009, 412). Critics noted, "After all this suffering, half the army was lost in the battlefields, and Egypt remained in the hands of a treacherous Circassian." (Ünlü, 1990, 213). Hüseyin Pasha's world had collapsed on his head—first symbolized by the destruction of his tent, then finalized by his death.

### 2.4. Tent in Relation to Spatial Symbolism

Just as the roof and body of the tent symbolized the perpetuation of life and sovereignty, its floor represented the earthly domain connected with these elements. The tent representing a sultan's reign during his lifetime would symbolize his tomb after death. Thus, the sultan would remain in this sacred space, linking his two worlds. Turgay Yazar provides many examples of the tradition of erecting a tent over tombs, tracing from Attila through the Seljuks and Ottomans. However, he also notes that early Islamic tradition had a few isolated examples of this practice but was prohibited by the Prophet Muhammad's saying, "Only one's own deeds shade the dead in the grave." (Yazar 2014, 104). The continuation of this tradition in the Ottoman era, despite its Islamic prohibition, reflects a traditional tendency. It is highly probable that ancient burial mounds (kurgans) for important individuals transformed into tombs under Islamic influence. Emel Esin has shown that the custom of burying beneath dome-shaped tents has roots in ancient Turkish culture. The Göktürks buried the dead under a domed otağ during funerals and would circle around it while also injuring their faces and ears (Esin 1978, 124). This indicates that the Ottomans did not entirely abandon their traditional and mythical customs but in some cases applied them directly. Therefore, it can be said that the Ottomans created shared values within two cultural spheres, blending old and new and preserving ancient habits. It also appears that in some cultural dilemmas, they sought traditional legitimacy.

After tents were initially erected over tombs, they were later removed and replaced by mausoleums (türbes). These türbes were inspired by the Göktürk's domed tents used for burials, continuing the tradition in sturdier structures (Esin 1978, 124). For example, after the death of Murad I (reign 1362–1389) in the Battle of Kosovo, a tent was immediately erected over his body. His internal organs were buried beneath the tent, and later a makam türbe (mausoleum) was constructed. Yavuz Sultan Selim is known as the first sultan to have a tent erected over his tomb. After his death, he was washed and shrouded, temporarily interred in the Otağ-ı Hümâyun (Imperial Tent) and later his body was brought to Istanbul and buried in a lofty türbe topped with a high tent (Solakzâde 1989, 98-100). Tents were always erected high, whether during the sultan's life or after death, reinforcing the cosmological symbolism.

Given these customs, washing the deceased in a tent is not surprising. However, among Kyrgyz and Kazakh Turks, tents were used to wash and display the corpse for three to five days. Even in 20th century Anatolia, there are examples of funeral washing performed in tents (Vatin –Veinstein 2023, 429).

After Yavuz, his son Kanuni Sultan Suleiman was buried in a tent erected in the Süleymaniye Mosque's cemetery. When Kanuni's son Mustafa was strangled, a tent was immediately placed over his body. Yazar, interprets the tradition of erecting tents over tombs as a sultanic symbol, a sign of exaltation and prestige. He also suggests a second interpretation: making sultan tombs visible and protecting them from external threats (Yazar 2014, 94-117). The latter is a worldly precaution lacking symbolic value. However, his interpretation of tents over tombs as signs of prestige and sultanic distinction is somewhat contradicted by his examples, which do not always address the tent's historical image. He also mentions that some heroes and martyrs who died in battle were buried in the sultan's tent, indicating their exaltation. Although martyrs are indeed considered virtuous in Islam, this ritual in the tent aims to emphasize their sanctity and legitimize martyrdom. In Islamic tradition, martyrs are generally buried

where they fell. Even before Islam, martyrs and heroes were attributed sacredness (Şaylan 2022, 160-176).

After a sultan's death, many traditions inspired by ancient Turkish culture occur, such as scattering earth on the head, wailing, throwing the turban aside, wearing mourning clothes, breaking the bow, overturning the tent, and reversing the saddle of the horse. Âşık Paşa's lines, "If the person who rules the throne dies / The throne does not perish, know this well / Because these are the pillars of the sky," express the throne as the pillar of heaven and its sacredness in the eyes of people. Thus, the throne concretizes the central axis of the threefold universe design. The phrase "Whoever ascends the manliness throne" (Âşık Paşa 2000, 106, 135) relates to the sky's pillar in Turkish cosmology and the creation myth associated with the concept of "manliness."

The inscriptions referring to monumental tombs (makam türbe) are interesting. Solakzâde notes that after Kanuni's body was washed and shrouded, it was temporarily buried beneath the throne, opening the door to interpretations of throne and spatial symbolism. The throne symbolizes the concentration of power at the center according to the centralist approach. Correspondingly, Ülgen's golden palace and throne were regarded as the center of the state and universe. The throne's golden color is also linked to its sacredness (Kahraman 2020, 58). Kanuni's golden throne was likely connected with this symbolism. Even the golden finials atop the tent derive from this symbolic reality. Moreover, sitting on the throne semantically means rising high, both literally and metaphorically. According to a Chinese source, Turks aspiring to the throne would jump upwards (Sagalayev 2020, 102). During the Göktürk khan's enthronement ceremony, the khan was lifted by high-ranking nobles on felt cloth and turned nine times facing the sun, related to the sun and universe cults. The khan resembled the sun, and the tent resembled the cosmos (Esin 1978, 102; Erkoç 2024, 191).

After Kanuni's body was brought from Zigetvar, a türbe was built where his internal organs were buried (Solakzâde 1989, 303). Monumental tombs recall ancient Turkish kurgans. Solakzâde's expression of placing the body beneath the throne is noteworthy. The tradition of keeping the deceased in the tent until burial existed in ancient Turkish culture (Çoruhlu 1999, 470) The act of burial beneath the throne is thought-provoking because the throne symbolized sovereignty. Although no clear tradition exists in ancient Turks of burial beneath the throne, Emel Esin notes the Göktürks buried the dead under domed tents during funeral rites. Ultimately, sovereignty was expressed by ascending the throne, bringing the state into being. The wisdom saying, "If one sits on the throne, sixty ride horses," reflects the vast and unlimited power of the throne. From this, it is likely that the throne, as the earthly manifestation of God or Allah's shadow, was linked to the Gök Tanrı belief (Bitlisî 2019, 87). More precisely, this is related to the "earth god" belief. According to the Göktürks, the earth god granted sovereignty to the ruler (Esin 1974, 87).

In communities adopting the Gök Tanrı belief, tents opened their doors eastward. Since the east was sacred for Turks, khans faced east when ascending the throne. However, Ottoman sources do not record the tent door facing east. Meanwhile, Islam also highlights the throne's sacredness. The "Kursi" in Ayat al-Kursi (Quran 2:255) signifies Allah's throne encompassing the heavens and the earth, symbolizing divine power and knowledge enveloping all creation. According to hadiths, Prophet Muhammad first saw the angel Gabriel sitting on a throne covering the entire horizon between earth and sky at Mount Hira (Merçil 2010, 434-435). Thus, the throne's sanctity may have been further reinforced with Islamic identity. However, the key point is the burial beneath the throne ceremony's relation to the Gök Tanrı belief. Ottoman depictions of thrones adorned with golden gilded bird motifs symbolize the ascent to the heavens, reinforcing this symbolism. Therefore, the throne's symbolic function was emphasized even in the sultan's death.

The Ottoman belief that the throne's owner was chosen by Allah relates to ancient traditions. When Çelebi Mehmed and his brother Musa fought for Edirne, its people told Çelebi Mehmed they would only surrender the city to the victor. Çelebi Mehmed accepted and fought his brother because contemporary rulership was seen as divine judgment. After Musa's defeat and execution, this was

accepted as the inevitable outcome of divine law. Similar views applied to father-son conflicts. When II. Bayezid faced his son Selim and Kanuni faced his son Mustafa, they believed their fate was subject to God's absolute will, not their own will (İnalcık 1959, 94). Perhaps they made divine attributions to their actions to maintain legitimacy among the people and army.

### 2.5. Tent Demolition as a Symbol of Mourning

The fact that some people experienced both the demolition of their tents and their own deaths indicates that the tent and human life were, in a way, identified with each other, with the tent serving as a physical symbol of human existence. The wrath of the Ottoman sultans leading to death was primarily expressed through the demolition of the tent or otağ. To deny someone life under the same sky was no different than denying them life within the same household or tent. The symbolism of tent demolition also manifested as a sign of mourning. When Yavuz Sultan Selim passed away, all the left-handed soldiers threw their headgear to the ground and all the tents were demolished (Yazar 2014, 108). The death of the sultan, who was God's sole representative on earth, had devastated their world as well. At the very least, the demolition of their tents had become a meaningful symbol of mourning in action. The act of throwing turbans to the ground is also a tradition inspired by ancient Turkish culture. This tradition is documented in the foundational work of Turkish history and literature, the Book of Dede Korkut. When Bamsı Beyrek's father learned of his son's death, believing the bad news, he removed his turban and threw it to the ground (Dede, 2023, 40).

### 2.6. The Tradition of Hanging the Sword on the Arsh

In studies related to tents in the Ottoman Empire, these symbolic values have not been sufficiently addressed, and the tent has been isolated from its historical background, almost reduced to a simple material cultural element. Although it might be assumed that Islamic culture and long historical processes caused the forgetting of the mythical and cosmological understandings at the roots of some traditions, the reality is different. Ottoman chroniclers were generally silent when it came to the connection between Ottoman traditions and the ancient Turkish culture. In fact, it seems they were uneasy discussing such topics (Vatin- Veinstein 2023, 424). Still, they occasionally made references with phrases like "according to an old tradition." Perhaps due to their tendency to explain their traditions in accordance with Sunni Islam, they avoided conceptions that contradicted this.

According to the oldest cosmological understanding of the Turks, all manifestations of the universe, represented by the sky and the earth, consist fundamentally of two universal breaths that are opposing yet complementary: sky and earth. Moreover, in Hünername, where the sultan's tents are depicted, the overall composition is patterned on two layers of the universe consisting of earth and sky (Urhan 1990, 176). The burial of the sultan inside his otağ (tent) is closely related to the understanding that the otağ symbolizes the universe. The dome of the tent or otağ, also called the arsh, symbolizes the sky, while its floor clearly symbolizes the earth. Considering that these symbolic values have actual counterparts in cultural elements, there should be an explanation for the otağ floor where the sultans are buried. It cannot be adequately explained by reasons such as security or prestige that the otağ and tomb were built within the complexes of mosques and palaces for the burial of the sultan.

The tent had many other functions as a symbol of life and power. One of these was the tradition of hanging the sword on the arsh. The arsh is one of the layers of the sky frequently mentioned in Ottoman sources and originates from Islamic texts. After the Turks converted to Islam, they began to call the dome of the otağ (tent) the arsh under the influence of their new faith, thereby integrating Islam into their traditional worldview to some extent. In the 17th verse of Surah Al-Mu'minun, it is stated, "We have created above you seven layers of heaven," and in the 18th verse, "Ask them, 'Who is the

Lord of the seven heavens and the Lord of the arsh?" (Altaylı 2021, 79). Inspired by this, victorious commanders would hang their swords on the highest place of the tent, the arsh, which is the archetype of the universe, symbolizing the understanding of jihad carried out in the name of Allah and the victory achieved. Barbaros Hayreddin Pasha emphasized that his sword was hung on the arsh after his victories. Similarly, Piyale Pasha hung his sword on the arsh after winning the Battle of Djerba. (Saka 2022, 122/123). These examples demonstrate that the traditions of Gök Tanrı (Sky God) and Islam share common motifs. It is observed that the influence of Gök Tanrı beliefs was more pronounced in the early Ottoman period compared to later times. In the following centuries, Islamic motifs became more dominant than in the early period. For example, at the beginning of the 18th century, the raising of the tent pole was accompanied by prayers and praises, the pole was erected with the Basmala (Islamic phrase "In the name of God"), and for the sultan's tent, ten sacrifices were made, while seven sacrifices were performed for the grand vizier's tent, (Atasoy 2022, 70), indicating the increasing dominance of Islamic values in tent culture.

The expression of some images from the Gök Tanrı culture, blended with Islamic culture, through the new belief system requires not overlooking the historical background of these phenomena. Moreover, the symbolic value of the sword remained the same as in ancient times. The ancient Turks called iron "sky iron," regarded it as sacred, and swore oaths on the sword (Ögel 2014, 75). There is clear evidence that this belief was practiced exactly the same way during the Ottoman period. Âşık Paşa wrote as early as 1330 that oaths were sworn on the sword. It is also recorded that Mehmed the Conqueror swore on his sword in his covenant given to the people of Galata and the clergy of Bosnia. Furthermore, there are records showing that this practice continued in the Kanuni (Suleiman the Magnificent) era with oaths sworn on the sword. Descriptions in the sources such as "gömgök demire müstağrak" emphasize troops equipped with steel armor and signify the continuation of this belief. There are also other indications that traditions such as swearing on the sword and hanging the sword on the arsh are connected to pre-Islamic sword symbolism. Most nomadic groups of Inner Asia worshipped a war god and regarded weapons like swords as symbols of this deity.

While victories were celebrated by hanging the sword on the tent, the capture of tents by enemy forces also held symbolic significance. Since this place was a symbol of sovereignty, its falling into enemy hands was a humiliating situation that cast a shadow over the ruler's reign. The Ottomans displayed the tents of defeated rulers of the states they conquered, thereby creating an image of invincibility in the public mind and physically symbolizing their victories. In At Meydanı (Hippodrome), the Ottomans exhibited the imperial tents of sultans such as Uzun Hasan, Shah Ismail, and Kansu Gavri, who had been previously defeated, thus publicly declaring the victor and the vanquished in a humiliating manner for their enemies. It is also known that tents served purposes such as hosting feasts, viewing, and entertainment.

**Conclusion**

The sultan's otağ (imperial tent), which symbolized the world over which the sultan believed he ruled or would rule with universal claims, was at once the house where he sustained his life, the place where his victories were celebrated, and the tomb where his body was laid to rest. It was quite natural for the ancient cultural elements associated with the Sky God to be preserved within new cultural contexts, including Islam, and for even the sultan's resting place beneath the earth to be imbued with cosmic significance. This sacred space, representing both the sultan's reign and his grave, also held important symbolic meaning for his commanders. For instance, the destruction of a vizier's tent was a harbinger of dismissal or death. In short, the Ottoman understanding of cosmology was woven with the motifs of the Sky God belief system.

The sultan's otağ (imperial tent), which symbolized the world he ruled or aspired to rule with universal claims, was simultaneously his home where he maintained his life, the place where his victories were celebrated, and the tomb where he was buried after death. It was quite natural that ancient cultural textures related to Gök Tanrı (Sky God) were preserved within new cultural frameworks,

including Islam, and that even the sultan's subterranean resting place was endowed with cosmic meaning. Additionally, due to the tent's roof and ground symbolism related to heaven and earth, it represented the sultanate, the continuity of life, and the brightness of prosperity.

This sacred place, representing both the sultan's reign and tomb, also held significant symbolic meaning for the sultan's councilors. For example, the destruction of a vizier's tent was an ominous sign foretelling punishment, dismissal, or death. The tent or otağ, an active figure frequently referenced in various contexts, carried rich symbolic significance. Many events and phenomena were linked to the symbolism of heaven and earth and were approached accordingly. The ancient cultural textures related to Gök Tanrı intertwined with Islamic traditions, sustaining themselves within a new cultural milieu. In summary, the Ottoman cosmological understanding was woven with motifs from the Gök Tanrı belief.

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Depiction: Sultan Suleiman's Coffin in Belgrade, the Imperial Tent, Surrounding Tents, Selim II's Accession, and His Prayer for His Father

Source: Seyyid Lokman, *Hünernâme*, TSMK, Revan Kitaplığı, nr. 1524.