

# TURKIC INNOVATION

## Early Postclassical (Pre-Islamic) Period

**Overview** In comparison to other world empires and states the First and Second Gök Türk Empires, the Uighur Empire and the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho were all relatively short-lived. Despite this, each of these states had an influence on world history and culture that far exceeded their short existence.

**Gök Türks** The First Gök Türk Empire played a major role in the history of Eurasia due to the territorial extent of their state. By expanding westward beyond the bounds of the earlier Hsiung-nu Empire, the predominantly nomadic Gök Türk became the link between the settled states of the Byzantine Empire and Sasanian Iran in the west, and China to the east. Once linked through the Gök Türk state, long distance overland trade between China and the west revived, and where trade goes ideas, religions, and information generally follow.

It can be argued that the greatest historical contribution of Second Gök Türk Empire was leaving a written record of their leaders and the events of their time. The Old Turkic inscriptions from the Second Gök Türk Empire are the oldest evidence of the Turkic languages and are the only written records from any nomadic people in Inner Asia in the early medieval period. With these inscriptions historians who research Inner Asia are able to understand events from the perspective of a steppe people, rather than having to rely solely on the accounts of their often hostile neighbors.

**Uighurs** The Uighur Empire was doubtlessly an important state in the events in Inner Asia during its nearly century-long existence. However, the conversion of the Uighur elite to Manichaeism in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century would have influence on the region long after the downfall of the empire. By adopting Manichaeism, the Uighur Empire provided this persecuted faith with official support, thus allowing it to spread and gain new adherents. Without Uighur patronage, it is possible that Manichaeism would not have died out in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but much earlier. In addition, the Manichaean texts and artwork produced in the Uighur Empire and later discovered in Turpan and Dunhuang have provided much of the first-hand information on Manichaean beliefs and practices.

The Uighur Kingdom of Qocho, despite its more limited territory, was also historically significant in a number of areas. As the Uighur in Qocho became predominantly Buddhist, the translation of Buddhist texts from a number of languages into Uighur began. These translations are not only valuable as early examples of Turkic literature, but they can also be used to determine the content, development and spread of specific Buddhist texts. In addition, they are indicators of the state of and trends in Inner Asian Buddhism in this period.

The vast majority of these works were written using the Old Uyghur alphabet, developed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century from the Aramaic-based Sogdian alphabet. This script would continue to be used until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but more importantly it served as the basis for the Mongolian alphabet, and ultimately the Manchu alphabet as well. Both of these scripts are still in use today.

Uighur art, as attested from surviving frescoes and manuscript illustrations was a unique style that, like much of the medieval art of Inner Asia, blended native elements with artistic influences from China, Iran and India.

### Readings

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why are the Old Turkic inscriptions from the Second Gök Türk Empire historically significant?
2. In what areas did the influence of the Uighur outlive both the Uighur Empire and the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho?