

Turkic Mythology - The Origin of the Turks

The Turks entered in world history in 552 when the first Turkish Empire was founded. This state started Turkish history in the pre Islamic period, which lasted until the tenth century. The first Turkish state ended in 630 at the end of its long-lasting raids and wars with China, and the second one started in 682 and ended in 744. The pre-Islamic Turkish political history continued with the establishment of the Uyghur Kaghanate in the East (744-840) and the Khazar Khanagate in the West (630-965). The legends of Turkish origin vary depending on the sources, documentations, various Turkic communities, and those who tell the myths. Almost all Turco-Mongolian legends refer to a wolf story, a mythic mountain, a valley and a cave, a female figure, and iron forging; the themes of hiding and re-emergence of the Turks. The Chinese sources tell the origin myths depending on a she-wolf ancestor. This myth tell about the Turks as the ancestors of a tribe which was part of Hsiung-nus, and called themselves as Ashina, who lost all the members of the clan against the enemies except one boy. The boy lost his feet, so the legend says the enemies left him free. A she-wolf found him, milked him and when the boy grew, mated with him. Upon return of the enemies to kill the boy, the she-wolf run to a cave secluded in the mountains, and gave birth to ten boys, each got married with women from out, and adopted a family name, one having the name of Ashina. According to some sources Ashina appears to be the name of the wolf, while some others claim it meant blue, "gök", in old Turkish, depending on the Sogdian vocabulary. The families grew in the mountain valleys, and when they reached big numbers, they emerged out of the mountain. Becoming a subject people of the Rourans, the Turks served them as ironsmiths.

The wolf is also part of the origin myth of the other Turkic peoples such as the Kazakhs and the Kirghizes. Of the three origin myths of the Turks told in Chinese sources, only one does not include the wolf figure, the wolf in the others are related to the Ashina tribe. Though the eight century Orkhon inscriptions only weakly mention the wolf motif, it reached to the modern Turkish nationalist rhetoric as a political symbol.

Readings

Findley, Carter Vaughn, *The Turks in World History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; Chapter I: The Pre-Islamic Turks and Their Precursors, pp. 21-55.

Golden, Peter, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992.

Roux, Jean Paul, *Histoire des Turcs: Deux mille ans du Pacifique a la Méditerranée*, Paris: Fayard, 1984; Chapitre III: La civilisation Turquie de l'Antiquité et du haut Moyen Age.