

# TURKIC HISTORY – Ancient Period

Peter B Golden, PhD

## PART I – Introduction

### **Central Asia : Geography**

#### *Introduction*

**The Geographical setting.** The region comprises an area from the Volga-Ural zone to the northern borderlands of China. It includes the present day states of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, as well as the Tatarstan and Bashqortostan republics and western and southern Siberia in the Russian Federation, Mongolia as well as the Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan) autonomous regions in the People's Republic of China.

**Ecology.** It is an area of striking ecological contrasts, frigid winters, scorching summers, oases, deserts, steppes, forest-steppe and the taiga of the northlands. Far from any oceans, it receives, overall, little precipitation. Erosion and desiccation are an ongoing problem. Much of the region, which historically, has also comprised parts of the North Caucasus, southern Russia and Ukraine, consists of steppe lands extending from the forests of Manchuria to the Hungarian Plain.

**Rivers.** The river systems are marked by inland drainage. Rivers, such as the Amu Darya, Syr Darya, Talas, Ili, Tarim as well as those of Siberia (Ob'-Irtys, Yenisei and Lena) have never been important routes of communication. The overflow of some, such as the Amur Darya (Oxus) allows for agriculture as do the oases and elaborate irrigations systems that have been built to retain the runoff from the snow-covered mountaintops.

#### *Readings*

D. Sinor (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 1-40.

D. Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, xv-xxiii, 3-20.

Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, 13-27

#### *Recommended*

Owen Lattimore, *The Inner Asian Frontiers of China*

#### *Questions*

1. What are the definitions of Central Asia and why do they differ?
2. What role has geography and climate played in shaping the dynamics of Central Asian history? Can we speak of geographical determinism?

## Central Asia : Languages

### *Introduction*

**The ethno-linguistic dimensions of Central Asia.** The peoples of Central Asia were formed through a complex process of ethno-linguistic layering, not unique to the region. A number of ethnonyms still used by modern Central Asians can be found in antiquity or in the Middle Ages. In some instances there is a direct line of continuity; in others, the relationship is much more complex, recent or invented to varying degrees. Modern empires have engaged in nation-building here, sometimes reviving ethnonyms and "creating" peoples for political purposes.

**Language Families.** The peoples of Central Asia are divided historically and today into a number of *language families*: Uralic (in the northwest), Indo-European (in the south-southwest), Altaic (in the center and east, with populations in northwestern and northeastern China and with possible, but much-debated connections to the peoples of Korea and Japan). In addition, there are a number of language isolates, often termed "Paleo-Siberian": Chukchi-Kamchatkan, Yukaghir (the sole survivor of a previously more numerous group which may have been related to Uralic), Kettic (the only survivor of the Yeniseian group), Gilyak (in Sakhalin Island) and various Eskimo-Aleut languages. With the exception of Indo-European all have problematic internal relations, i.e. it is not clear (or satisfactorily proved) how the different components relate to one another.

**Indo-European.** According to the most widely held theory, the Indo-European linguistic community occupied a territory, about 6-7000 years ago, extending from the Eastern European plains to the Caspian sea. By 3000-2500 BCE, this linguistic community broke up, ultimately expanding over regions from South Asia to the British Isles. Of the Indo-European languages, Tokharian (now extinct) and the various Iranian languages have played the greatest role in ancient and medieval Central Asia.

**Altaic.** Altaic presents a number of problems. The debate is ongoing as to whether the Altaic languages are genetically related or share a number of features as the result of long periods of interaction and borrowing. The presumed Altaic "ancient homeland" (*Urheimat*, *Anayurdu*) may be placed in southern Siberia, Mongolia and Manchuria. Those who argue for a genetic relationship (which would, for some scholars, include the linguistic ancestors of Korean and Japanese) date the break up of the Altaic linguistic community to the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE, at which time it divided into three branches: Turko-Mongolic, Manchu-Tungusic and Korean-Japanese. Much of this remains controversial. For our purposes we can note that Turkic peoples are clearly in evidence by the late 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE-early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE.

**Writing systems.** By the early 8<sup>th</sup> century CE (and probably earlier) Turkic was a written language with its own script system (the runiform script). Mongolic was present in a number of varieties by this time, but it is only with the rise of Chinggis Khan's Empire (13<sup>th</sup> century) that Mongol was written down in an alphabet borrowed from the Turkic world and ultimately going back through the Soghdians to the Aramaic scripts of the Middle East. The Para-Mongolic Qitan language was written by the Qitan/Liao (916-1125) in two writing systems that derive but are quite distinct from Chinese.

### *Readings*

Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, 31-49

*Recommended:*

P.B. Golden, *Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 15-38

J.P. Mallory and D.Q. Adams, *The Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

J. Janhunen, *Manchuria. An Ethnic History*, 237-256.

A. Vovin, "The End of the Altaic Controversy" *Central Asiatic Journal*, 49/1 (2005), pp.71-132.

*Questions*

1. Define and trace the movements of the different language groups and their interactions.
2. Discuss the Altaic Theory.
3. Discuss the writing systems employed by Central Asian peoples. What are the external influences?

## PART II – ANCIENT CENTRAL ASIA

### Pre-history of Central Asia

#### *Introduction*

**The earliest settlements.** The peoples of Central Asia were largely either nomads or dwellers of oasis-riverine agricultural zones. These are the two major ecological options - in addition to the hunting-gathering economy of the forest belt and taiga, which supported much smaller populations. The history of Central Asia, which has played such an important role in World History, has been shaped by these peculiarities of ecology. Those steppe peoples who were closest to sedentary society and had the most interaction with it, were also the ones that developed the largest populations. Frontiers are important zones, the scenes of profound interactions between steppe and sown. This was where history was made.

**The origins of nomadism.** The chronology of the origins of nomadism and whether it began in one place (the western Eurasian steppes) or had multiple points of origin remain debated questions. It has become increasingly clear that pastoral nomadism was an adaptation by stock-raising, settled agriculturalists, who advanced into the steppe, seeking greater pastures. Pastoral nomadism provided great personal mobility as well as a sense of freedom that most settled agricultural workers did not have. It could also generate wealth through the sale of cattle and goods derived from them- as well as by raiding, a resource vouchsafed by nomads' control of equine power.

**Interaction of nomads and settled peoples.** All of this involved *interaction with sedentary society*, a major theme of Central Asian history. Some would argue that this was the main catalyst for the development of confederations and states among the nomads.

**Urban developments.** Although we are most familiar with cities such as Bukhara and Samarqand, which became important points on the "Silk Road" and remained continuously inhabited since antiquity, archaeological discoveries indicate that there were substantial proto-urban and urban developments in ancient Central Asia. These were founded by Iranian nomads that settled in water-accessible areas by at least 500 BCE (often claiming far older roots) - and perhaps by other groupings whose ethno-linguistic affiliations are unclear. Soviet archaeologists termed the region from the Urals to western Siberia "the country of towns" dating to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 1<sup>st</sup> millennia BCE because of the numerous fortified settlements unearthed there.

#### *Readings*

- A.M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*
- T.J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 1-31
- D. Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, 21-119
- R.N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, 53-63.
- P.B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, 9-20
- D. Sinor (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 41-96

#### *Recommended:*

- C.I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, xxi-xxv, 320-362

B. Lewis, *Bukhara. The Medieval Achievement*, 3-13

*Questions*

1. "The pure nomad is a poor nomad." Discuss.
2. What is the nomadic cycle?
3. What is the nature of nomadic contact with the sedentary world? Discuss the raid or trade thesis.
4. Are polities that arise in the nomadic world primary or secondary formations? What role does interaction with sedentary society play in the creation of states in the steppe zone?
5. Were the nomads "barbarians"?
6. Discuss the peoples of Pre-historic Central Asia
7. Discuss the rise of cities in Central Asia

## The Rise of Polities

### Introduction

#### **The rise of the first tribal confederations and early states: The Iranian tribes.**

The Iranian peoples derived from the Indo-Aryan/Indo-Iranian linguistic community within Indo-European. Loanwords attest to their early contacts with Uralic and Altaic peoples. The Iranians divided into three groupings: two remained in Central Asia either as pastoral nomads in the steppe where they were loosely organized into various tribal confederations (Scythian-Saka and others) that extended from Siberia and Mongolia to Ukraine, or those that settled and founded city-states in the oases and riverbanks of Western and Eastern Turkestan. The third grouping entered Iran ca. 1500-1000 BCE, becoming the ancestors of the Persians, Kurds and other Iranian-speaking peoples of the Middle East.

**Zoroastrianism.** Zoroaster (dates uncertain, ca.1200 BCE? ca. 600 BCE?) reformed and preached a new form of their traditional religious notions (that shared elements with Indic beliefs). He is thought to have done this in the "expanse of the Aryans" (*âryânâm vaêjô*), probably to be located in Central Asia. The Scythian-Saka nomads appear to have been less impacted by the "new" religion. They were in contact with the Persian Achaemenid Empire (556-330 BCE), which had some success in bringing them under Persian political subordination.

**Alexander the Great in Central Asia.** Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia (330) was quickly followed by the subjugation of much of Iranian Central Asia: Khwârazm (western Uzbekistan), Soghdia (central Uzbekistan and parts of Tajikistan) and Bactria (modern Afghanistan).

**Graeco-Bactria.** After Alexander's death (323), a Graeco-Bactrian state formed (mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), which bequeathed elements of its Hellenistic culture to successor states. Graeco-Bactria was destroyed ca. 128 BCE by the Yuezhi and other tribes coming from the east set in motion by the rise of the Xiongnu/Asian Hun state.

### Readings

T.J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 32-84

D. Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, 121-208

R.N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, 65-130.

P.B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, 21-31

D. Sinor (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 97-117

### Questions

1. Discuss Zoroastrianism
2. What was the culture of the Scythian-Saka world?
3. What was the impact of Hellenism in Central Asia after Alexander's conquest?

## **Xiongnu / Huns / Successors**

### *Introduction*

**The Xiongnu/Asian Hun state (late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE-middle 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE).** Of still undetermined ethno-linguistic affiliations, the Xiongnu became the dominant power in steppe Central Asia and a trading partner and often foe of Han China. The latter sought to manipulate the relationship by alternately offering or withholding trading rights. Xiongnu-Chinese warfare led to the westward migration of some of the subject peoples of the Xiongnu, these included Turkic peoples. The political and military traditions of the Xiongnu polity set the style and tone for a number of political and institutional features of future steppe formations.

**The Xianbei and later Hunnic states.** The Xiongnu were succeeded by a series of polities, composed mainly of their former Xianbei subjects (probably largely Proto-Mongolic in speech) or mixed Xianbei-Xiongnu peoples in Mongolia and in the northern Chinese borderlands. The title *Qaghan* ("Emperor") is first noted among Xianbei tribes in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Subsequently, it became the standard imperial title in the steppe world.

**The Tuoba Northern Wei/Tabghach.** The Northern Wei-Tuoba/Tabghach state (386-534, split into Eastern Wei, 534-550 and Western Wei, 535-556, and their short-lived successors) of probable Xianbei origin, controlled northern China and periodically asserted its power in the steppes.

**The Kushan Empire.** The tribes that had earlier been pushed westward destroying Graeco-Bactria, replaced it with the Kushan Empire (ca. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE/1<sup>st</sup> century CE-ca. 270s CE), which fell to the Sâsânid Empire of Iran (ca. 226-651). The Kushans created a syncretistic culture, drawing on traditions from Graeco-Bactria, India and the Iranian world. Buddhism made some headway there and the Kushan state became the source for Buddhist proselytizing, via the oasis city-states of Xinjiang/Eastern Turkestan, as far as China.

**The Huns of Europe.** Peoples set in motion by the Xiongnu collapse and bearing the name "Hun" appeared on the borders of Iran and then the Volga River by 350. A generation later they crossed the Volga, destroyed the Goths and periodically raided the Eastern Roman Empire ultimately creating the "empire" of Attila (d. 453).

**The Oghuric peoples.** Shortly after Attila's death, Oghuric-Turkic-speaking peoples, fleeing turmoil in the eastern steppes related to the activities of the Rouran/Asian Avars, crossed the Volga and made contact with Constantinople ca. 463.

### *Readings*

T.J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, 85-129

D. Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, 209-243

R.N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia*, 131-166

P.B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, 35-44

D. Sinor (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 118-205

### *Recommended:*

P.B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 69-104

H.R. Roemer (ed.), *History of the Turkic Peoples in the Pre-Islamic Period*, 52-101.

### *Questions*

1. Discuss the origins and organization of the Xiongnu polity. Was the Xiongnu realm a state or an "imperial confederation"?
2. Discuss the rise of the Northern Wei/Tuoba-Tabghach state, its polyglot, multi-ethnic population and political organization.
3. Discuss Barfield's notion of dual administration. Why is this associated with the "Manchurian" peoples?
4. Discuss the Kushan empire, its political and cultural significance across Eurasia.
5. Discuss the formation of Attila's "empire" and its impact on Europe.