

EMRE-E. YAVUZ

# THE GOKTURKS

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A Basic Overview Of  
The First Turkic Khaganate

This historical book was written by Emre-E. Yavuz. The author graduated in political science and history at a German university and has dealt extensively with the history of the Turks since his school days. The empire of the *Gokturks* especially garnered his attention, as it has not been treated as profoundly in the media or on an academic level as, for example, the rise of the *Ottoman* Empire. As the author sees the rise – and especially the fall – of the Gokturks as a catalyst for the subsequent spread of Turkic languages, culture and ultimately the migration of the Turkic peoples themselves, he wants to change the status quo. However, this book is not the first step in that regard.



The author is also the founder and owner of KHAN's DEN. What started out as a hobby in 2020 has since then expanded into a one-man media franchise. With high audiovisual standards in mind, he has produced numerous short documentaries on the history of Turkic peoples and uploaded them for free on YouTube and other social media platforms. The Gokturks, Seljuks, Ottomans as well as unknown Turkic history such as that of the Anatolian Beyliks and the religion of Tengrism are vividly explained in these videos either for the first time ever or from a new perspective.

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*For Sabiha and Aynur, who always supported me  
with optimistic thoughts, balanced critique,  
and lifelong confidence.*

*And to all naysayers who unknowingly motivated  
me to start this project in the first place.*

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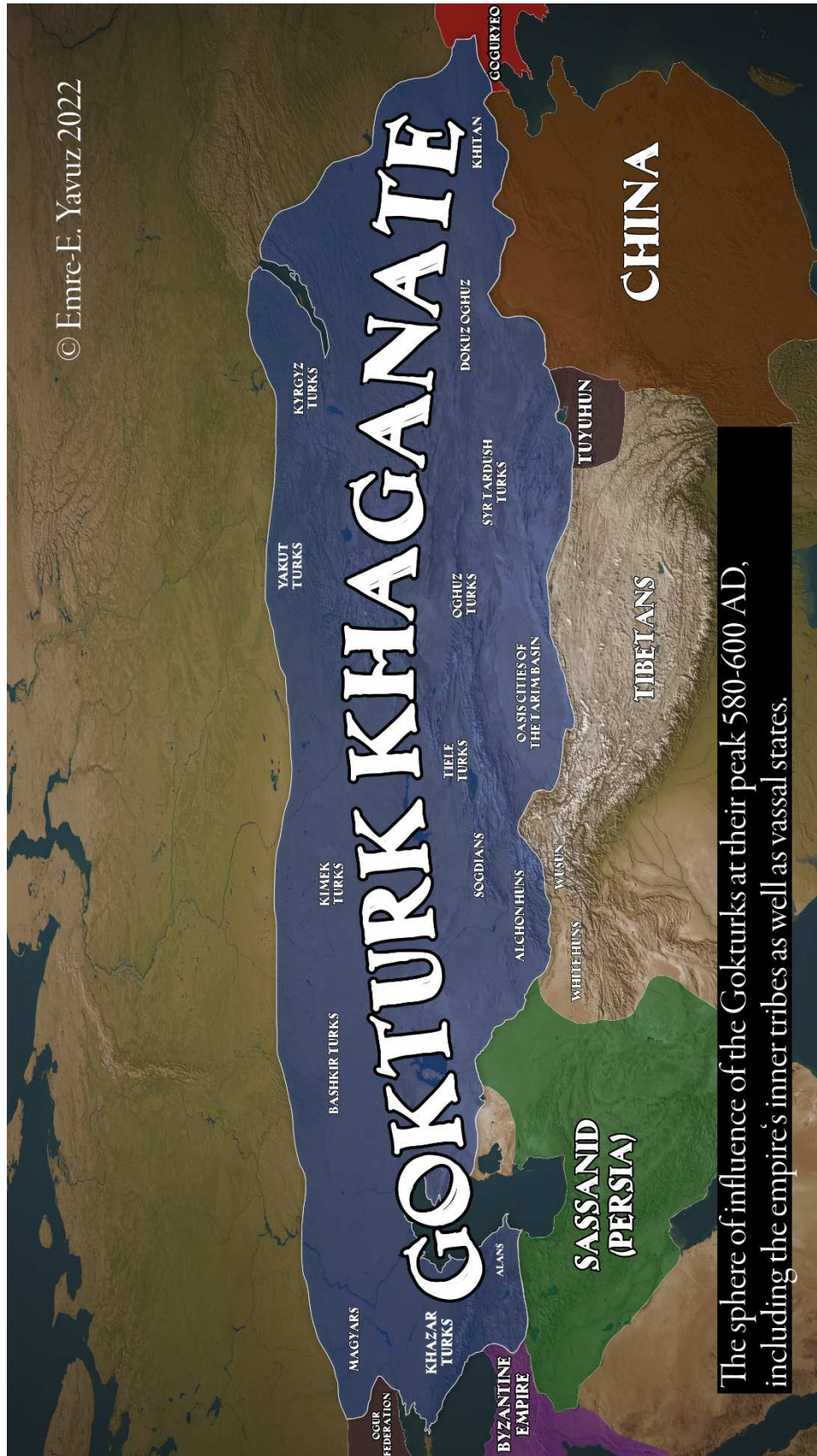
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*"When Father Tengri created the blue sky above us and Mother Umay created the earth below us, the human race was created in between. Two of her sons were my ancestors Bumin and Istemi. They became Khagans, rulers. People from all four directions were hostile to them, but they fought against them. Henceforth, those peoples had to bow their heads and bend their knees.*

*The Khagans were wise and fearless. They ruled over all the kingdoms of the Turk people. The Turk nobility and the Turk people were united... "*

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## Orkhon inscriptions Mongolia



## Prologue: Revolution

Picture it: the Eurasian Steppe Belt, 552 AD. It happened along the final frontier of civilization. The early morning began with an epic spectacle of nature. The yellow light of the everlasting sun shot in all directions and made the vast, cool steppe shine in a strong and warm green color. Gradually, the life in this part of the world awoke from its sleep – it had even undergone deep catharsis in the eyes of some. The trees, mountains, rivers and lakes suddenly did not seem as empty as during the silent night, as thousands of animals left their homes and went about the routine of their daily lives. And just like the eagles that were now scanning the earth from the sky for food, and the lions that sought to protect the well-being of their children from enemies, the family of *this* man who had taken to the cliffs and enjoyed the natural spectacle of sunrise to the fullest also began to pursue its destiny. After a long time of hiding, waiting and struggling, *he* was finally able to take a deep breath and relax. He was like a wolf who had broken away from the pack and had tried to go his own way. But he bagged one success after another, so that after some time the other wolves had caught up with him and joined his wolfpack. Now *he* was the new leader. All the hardships he had gone through had been worth it. The young man, who according to legend descended from a wolf, stood at the beginning of a new chapter in the history of his people. For the wolves of his pack were both his family as well as his subjects. He was both liberator and ruler. Bumin had finally arrived at his destination: he was now king of the Turks.

In the year 552 after the birth of Christ, 4313 after the beginning of the human age of the Hebrew calendar, and seventy-one years before Muhammad went to holy Medina, something had happened in the inconspicuous lands of the vast steppes of Central Asia that would perhaps shape world history as strongly as those known events. An event of which at first only few had gotten wind. So far away from the countries of the so-called *sedentary peoples* a gigantic Golem could have come to life and move whole mountains, one would not have noticed. But the surrounding nations of Asia and Europe – the kingdoms and empires of the Chinese, Koreans, Persians and Byzantines – would learn soon enough of the arrival of a new species of ruler. The



history of the Turks had just begun. And what has once run its course cannot be stopped.

Someone put a hand on Bumin's shoulder. "We partied all night and you're up so early again. I really admire you, big brother."

"There's not much to it, Istemi. Besides, I don't think much of these drinking excesses."

"Why not?" returned Istemi with a sneer. But Bumin was serious.

"Because there's still a lot of work to do. Any kind of fest would only hinder us in advancing further."

Istemi looked his older brother in the eye. He had fought with Bumin in the great war of liberation against *Anagui's* lackeys and had personally seen him in action. The other fighters, most of whom had volunteered from all over the country to overthrow Anagui, had been exhausted by the battles. But Bumin's drive knew no bounds. As much as Istemi admired his older brother, he was in awe of this mighty leader. He knew that Bumin wanted more than to free their own clan from the oppression of the foreigners. Bumin wanted much more. He always spoke of the *Turk Bodun*, the people of the Turk. Although this was the name for his own tribe, called *Ashina* by the Chinese, by definition he included more than just his own little dynasty.

Many Turkic clans in Asia, including the tribe of Bumin and Istemi, led a life as semi-nomads: with permanent residences, but moving to the cooler north or warmer south of the steppe, depending on the season. They maintained contact with traders from China and Iran, but always pursued their own conflicts. Often the Turks, just like other peoples of the steppe before and after them, were concerned with bare survival. However, the clans that lived in the Altai Mountains had a somewhat easier life than those in Western Asia, as they were in active contact with other peoples and thus could share in the trade of the Silk Road. They did not control the trade but exchanged highly bred horses from the steppes for silk, wool and jewelry from other countries, especially China.

The Turks in the Altai Mountains were led by Bumins clan, and so they had been the first to successfully gain their independence from Anagui. Neither the Mongols nor the Chinese nor even the Persians could now rule over the Turks – dictate them how much to eat and drink, what clothes to wear, or what language to speak. Bumin had grown up under these degrading conditions. His Ashina family belonged to the aristocracy in the country yet was still under the command of Anagui and powerless against the latter's henchmen. Bumin and Istemi rose early to the leaders of their clan and were now directly subordinate to the ruler of the Rouran. On the orders of Anagui, Bumin had put down several revolts of other tribes that were also subject to the Rouran. Even though it didn't seem like it, Bumin was gathering new soldiers for his command through every battle he won, increasing prestige and fame for his political career with each victory. It had looked as if he was about crush the new rebellions on Anagui's behalf. But in 546, the time had come. Bumin would take the next step. At last he would climb the career ladder. For putting down the uprising of the Tiele, with whom the Ashina were probably related, he dared to go to his liege lords and demanded more than just gold and material from them as a reward. Bumin had put on his battle armor and was in the palace of Anagui Khagan. Although he should have shown reverence before his liege lord, the young Turk stood tall and radiated all his pride.

"Well then. You have truly done a great job, Bumin. I never doubted your abilities for a second," said the visibly aged Khagan slowly, but audibly. Anagui sat on a gilded throne and had called his closest advisors to him. Next to him, his bodyguard had taken up position. *Not unusual for a coward like him*, Bumin thought.

But Anagui got right down to business. "And what brings you to me?"

"My Khagan," exclaimed Bumin. "As you know, I have spared no effort to end the uprising of the traitorous Tiele. This has not only burdened me financially but claimed the lives of many of my men. My family is in the process of wounding those who were injured."

"And you want me to provide you with gold and medicine?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I'll grant that."

"Thank you, Anagui."

Calling the Khagan by his first name? A faux faux, as the advisors noted. But precisely planned by Bumin. A few moments passed. The Turk still stood in front of his liege.

"Is there anything else?", Anagui wanted to know from his vassal, visibly irritated.

"Indeed. I think I'm entitled to something more."

"And what would be? "

"The hand of your only daughter."

Anagui widened his eyes, rose from his throne, and shouted so loudly at his vassal that the whole hall quite literally shook.

"You are just a blacksmith and my slave! How dare you utter these words?"

Anagui's advisors tried to calm him down. But when they turned their eyes to Bumin, they discovered a *smile* on his face.

"As you wish," shouted the Turk, addressing not only Anagui but also his bodyguard. These elite soldiers got into position in case of escalation. But it did come to an escalation, yet.

"We have put up with your shenanigans and arrogance long enough. It's time to put an end to it."

With these words, Bumin turned his back on Anagui, the throne, and the entire Rouran elite and left the palace. He had gone alone before his ruler, leaving his own Turk bodyguards waiting outside. Istemi was also there.

"We're leaving already?" he asked his brother, puzzled.

"Yes" Bumin agreed, "but we will be back, and we will be numerous."

With these words, Bumin rode toward the horizon. The setting sun cloaked the bodies of the Ashina soldiers in a red-black shadow. The bodyguard of Anagui had run after

them. But when they saw the silhouette of these confident Turks riding away toward the sunset, their own fate dawned on them....

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If you were holding a historical novel in your hands – or have one inside your eBook reader – this is how its story would have started. A novel that tells the story of two nomadic warriors who advanced from leaders of their tribe to rulers of the entire steppe. But such a novel does not exist, at least not in professional form, and certainly not on the international book market in the English language. The illustration of the so-called Gokturks in novel form – we will address the concept of that term, literally "heavenly Turks", a bit later – is probably too demanding, since there is also no factual model in form of an actual reference book, which would have processed the rise and fall of the Gokturks in its entirety. That is probably why you are holding my book (or your eBook reader) in your hands right now. You have either long wanted a work about the mysterious dynasty of the Ashina family and then purchased my work, or you came across this book by chance and found its premise quite interesting. Whichever side you are on, I assure you that this work is written for both laymen and experts of Turkic history. But first things first. What's the deal with these Gokturks, anyway?

The story of Bumin and Istemi is legendary yet little known. These two young men, descendants of the Turkic-speaking Ashina clan, defeated the armies of the Rouran emperor and led the *Turkic* people to liberty in 552 CE. Their story is not invented at all, the characters in the excerpt above really existed. The only thing that I added was the dialogue. The term *Türk*<sup>1</sup> initially referred to their own clan during the lifetime of Bumin and Istemi, but later also meant all other tribes and federations of the steppe that spoke a Turkic language and had been followers of Tengri.<sup>2</sup> The Rouran, feudatories of the Ashina and all other Turks, were probably of proto-Mongol origin.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally, the term was probably "Türk" which later became the simplified "Tür". The meaning of the word is disputed; suggestions by linguists and historians are: "strong," "born" or "developed," "(steel) helmet," and "mature." For a summary, see Sümer, Faruk (1992): *Oğuzlar (Türkmenler) Tarihleri - Boy Teşkilatı - Destanları*, p.16; Golden, Peter B. (2006): *Some Thoughts on the Origins of the Turks and the Shaping of the Turkic Peoples*, in Mair, Victor H. (ed.): *Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World*, University of Hawai'i Press. p.143; Grousset, René (1970): *Die Steppenvölker. Attila, Dschinghis Khan, Tamerlan*, p.130.

<sup>2</sup> Grousset (1970): 129; on the prevalence of the term "Turk" as an ethnonym, see Taşagıl, Ahmet (2016): *Gök Tengri'nin Çocukları*, 43-44.

They ruled over much of the Eurasian steppe beyond the territory of present-day Mongolia, with Kazakhstan as a buffer zone between their empire and Europe. Further south, in neighboring China, they traded with and fought against emperors who were of Turkic descent but had become virtually completely Sinicized, meaning that they had completely absorbed Chinese languages, tradition and state doctrine.

The largely nomadic Turks of the steppe therefore lived until Bumin's arrival under foreign rule by the Rouran, in a comparatively unfriendly region of the earth.<sup>3</sup> When Bumin led the Ashina to war against the Rouran, he also mobilized the *Tiele*, whom he had previously conquered himself. This eurasian nomadic federation also consisted of Turkic tribes.<sup>4</sup> If we add all the other smaller tribes that lived in the Rouran area, the reason for the overthrow of the Rouran is self-evident. With the death of Anagui Khagan whose took his own life after the defeat against Bumin ended the foreign rule in the land of the *Turkic peoples*, as the Turkic-speaking groups of late antiquity are collectively called in contemporary academia. This collection of semi-nomads then experienced for the first time what it meant to live in liberty, economically and culturally, but above all politically. For the term *Turk* could be applied to many different ethnic groups in Asia. From the Caspian Sea in the west to the Korean peninsula in the east of Asia, Turks were scattered everywhere.<sup>5</sup> The political unification of all these people under the banner of the Ashina tribe or any other family had never happened before. Bumin's success was a cultural revolution.

The Turks of that time, however, were living quite differently from the Turks as we imagine them as inhabitants of Anatolia nowadays. As should begin to dawn on you, *my* Turks are not the Turks *you* have in mind. There are two obvious reasons for this. First, *my* Turks lived in the Eurasian Steppe Belt, not in Anatolia and Thrace. Second, they were not sedentary, but (semi-)nomadic. Most of their tribes led a modest existence in mostly barren landscapes of the steppes, whether as hunter-gatherers, farmers, traders, or mercenaries. These early Turks, as they are also called, had neither been numerous nor a significant part of the Asian political establishment.

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<sup>3</sup> Deviously called "Juan-Juan" (wiggling worms) by the Chinese. See Grousset (1970): 104, 129.

<sup>4</sup> Grousset (1970): 130; Taşagıl (2016): 42.

<sup>5</sup> Beckwith, Christopher I. (2011): *Empires of the Silk Road. A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present*, 117.

There had not even been an "officially" Turkic nation until Bumin's Revolution. The Xiongnu, often referred to as the *Asian Huns*, had incorporated some Turkic tribes into their empire. But whether the Xiongnu leaders themselves were also Turks is not known, only that the political elite spoke an early form of Turkic.<sup>6</sup> This would certainly suggest that the Xiongnu were Turks or early Turks for that very reason. After all, this assumption coincides with the common definition of a Turk, that someone who learned a Turkic language as a native speaker and grew up with Turkic traditions-or whose parents are Turks, is ultimately a Turk and may be called such. But was only one possibly influential part of the Xiongnu Turkic? Or did the great leaders of the Huns like Tu-Man and Mao-Tun – called Teoman and Mete Han in Turkic – see themselves as Turks or belonging to the Turkic cultural sphere? Well-known greats of Turkology and other scientific disciplines relevant for this analysis, such as Shiratori, have spoken out in favor of this claim.<sup>7</sup> Others like Pritsak see at least overlaps between the Hunnic and Turkic languages.<sup>8</sup> Golden points to a likelihood of Turkic elements among the Xiongnu and considers the ancient Turkic language a connecting element between Xiongnu and the Huns in Europe.<sup>9</sup> There are also counter-arguments, for example by Shimunek, who considers a classification of the Hunnic language impossible, and by Jankowski, who suggests an Iranian origin of the Xiongnu.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Although ancient historians even considered the Turks as direct descendants of the Xiongnu Huns, this is not fully proven due to lack of information. However, it is likely that the Xiongnu political elite were indeed Turkic speakers. Thus, the theory of the Chinese about Bumin's Ashina clan consisting of descendants of the Xiongnu would not be illogical. See Savelyev, A., & Jeong, C. (2020): Early nomads of the Eastern Steppe and their tentative connections in the West in: *Evolutionary Human Sciences*, 2, E20. On the use of the Turkic language in the Xiongnu Empire, see further Scharlipp, Wolfgang-Ekkehard (1992): *Die frühen Türken in Zentralasien. Eine Einführung in ihre Geschichte und Kultur*, 2; Kim (2013): *The Huns, Rome and the Birth of Europe*, 176. Proponents of the theory that the political elite was Turkic-speaking include Wink, André: *Al-Hind: making of the Indo-Islamic World*, 60.

<sup>7</sup> Shiratori, Kurakichi (1900): On the language of the Hiung-nu tribe and the Tung-hu tribes. *Bulletin de l'Academie Impériale des Sciences de St. Petersbourg*, 5(2), 1-33; also Grousset (1970), who relies on Pelliot's thesis of the "early Turkic character of the Huns": 130.

<sup>8</sup> Pritsak, Omeljan (1982): *The Hunnic Language of the Attila Klan*, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (December 1982), 428-476, 470.

<sup>9</sup> Golden, Peter B. (1992): *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Shimunek, Andrew (2017): *Languages of Ancient Southern Mongolia and North China: A Historical-Comparative Study of the Serbi or Xianbei Branch of the Serbi-Mongolic Language Family, with an Analysis of Northeastern Frontier and Old Tibetan Phonology*; Jankowski, Henryk (2006): *Historical-Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Russian Habitation Names of the Crimea*. *Handbook of Oriental Studies* 8: Central Asia, 27-28.

The Xiongnu Empire should be classified as a federation of many tribes and less as a tightly run empire, although there were autocratic structures that held the state together.<sup>11</sup> In any case, it had at times posed a serious threat to the sedentary Chinese, whose attacks to the North had brought about the federation in the first place. Again, the Chinese had built parts of the famous Great Wall to deter the tribes of the Xiongnu Federation from invading northern China. After a successful foreign policy of *divide and conquer*, the legendary Chinese Han dynasty was able to divide the Xiongnu first into two, then into four smaller splinter groups and partly conquer the southern tribes. By the first century C.E. the Xiongnu influence had declined rapidly. Nevertheless, descendants of the steppe peoples successfully established new states along the border with China. Among them were tribes belonging to the Turkic-speaking group. As a side effect of sorts, the dissolution of the Xiongnu and in-fighting between the tribes had triggered the emigration of numerous Turkic tribes and clans to the West. Therefore, in the period between 200 and 500 C.E., that is, after the end of the Xiongnu and before the start of the Gokturks era, ethnic groups appeared in the Caspian Sea and even in Ukraine that spoke a Turkic language.

Some of these Turks were almost isolated from world events in the wilderness of the Central Asian steppes, no authority existed above them except Tengri – except God. But many tribes put themselves, rather involuntarily, in the service of dukes and kings of other ethnic groups. In the process, these Turkic peoples came into active contact with the Eastern European, Caucasian, Iranian and Chinese cultural spheres. This also explains the complexity of the Turkic peoples in their appearance. We may imagine the early Turks, i.e. before the beginning of the Gokturks era, as people with rather flat faces, flat noses and almond eyes. According to outdated representations of the European division of the world into "races," these Turks would have been "Mongoloid", although I must stress that this term was applied the peoples of Central Asia only because all steppe peoples were commonly thought of as Mongols or related to Mongols by European scholars. As we will see, Turks and Mongols did have a common origin which dates 9000 years back in time, when they were living in harmony side by side with the ancestors of the Koreans and Japanese in a common

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<sup>11</sup> Kim, Hyun Jin (2019): *Geopolitics in Late Antiquity. The Fate of Superpowers from China to Rome*, 21.

ancestral homeland. However, the influence of Mongolian culture and the early form of Mongolian language was not as dominant as in the time of Genghis Khan in the Middle Ages. Whereas even in the time of the great Mongol Empire in the 13th century, the Turks held great influence in the empire and, for example, made up a considerable part of the Mongol army. Because of the de facto fusion of Mongolian and Turkic traditions and languages, the term Turco-Mongol is popular today for that time period. But for the era that is the subject of this book, Late Antiquity, the term does not seem useful.<sup>12</sup>

Language aside, however, all early Turks had one thing in common, a trait they shared with the early Mongols: they were excellent warriors. Their mounted archers were keeping with the tradition of all steppe peoples, dating back to the time of Alexander the Great. In the often-barren steppes, the strongest, toughest and bravest warriors in the world were born and literally grew up on horseback, a Chinese scholar once remarked. He was not wrong. The history of the Turks *prior* to the Mongol Empire is the best proof of this claim. It is true that the history of this cultural group does not begin with the Ashina dynasty, with Bumin and Istemi. But it was not until the middle of the 6th century that Turkic acquired a unique identity, which was internalized by the Khagans, Begs, and Shads<sup>13</sup> of the Ashina Empire and nationalized at the political level, thereupon expanding in all four directions. For Bumin and Istemi's ambitions had been only half fulfilled with the liberation from Rouran rule. Their second goal was to integrate all the remaining Turkic ethnic groups on the continent of Eurasia into their empire, and accordingly to expand their influence as far as possible. Therefore, shortly after the founding of the empire, the Ashina armies came into contact and obviously conflict with the great sedentary peoples of Late Antiquity: the Chinese, Koreans, Persians and Byzantines. And so, this new empire, which shall henceforth be called the Khaganate<sup>14</sup> of the Gokturks,

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<sup>12</sup> While the Turkic identity experienced a kind of founding moment with the beginning of the Gokturk Empire, the Mongol identity was still far from emerging on the world stage. Even the mighty Rouran Empire can only be described as "proto-Mongol" with some degree of probability.

<sup>13</sup> Turkic titles of possibly Indo-Iranian origin, here meaning Emperors, tribal leaders, princes.

<sup>14</sup> However, "Gokturk" shall not stand as a term for all Turks of that era and instead designate the ruling caste (Ashina and Ashide) of the Khaganate of the same name. The term meant as much as "Turks of the East", "Celestial Turks" and "Original Turks". For more on this, see the chapter "Bumin: King of Turks"



stretched from Manchuria and Korea in the east across Mongolia and Central Asia to what is now Ukraine in the west, from Siberia in the north to Afghanistan and Tibet in the south. Their Khaganate became so powerful that one of them even used to call the Chinese emperors his "sons".<sup>15</sup> A certain Chinese empress even had to pay the Khagan enormous sums of silk as tribute and the Byzantine emperor courted the favor of the steppe warriors in his conflict with the Persians. A *Khaganate* is a large steppe empire whose ruler, the *Khagan*, lays claim to rule over all the steppe peoples. It is therefore equivalent to an empire according to ancient conception. A *khanate*, on the other hand, is a kingdom whose ruler, the *khan*, could simply lay less claim to power over events in the steppe area. Therefore, a Khaganate stood above a Khanate geopolitically. By the way, the titles *Khagan* and *Khan* are called *Hakan* and *Han* in Turkic. Later, the designation of Khagan became obsolete, which is why Temüjin is known to us as Genghis *Khan* and not Genghis *Khagan*.

All along the periphery, the Gokturks remained sovereign for some three decades, each new generation of princes and princesses even more ambitious than the last. The Ashina coveted world domination, it seemed. But all great empires in human history have a humble beginning. And every great empire must eventually perish. As already noted, the Turks of antiquity had been neither numerous nor politically prominent. How on earth, then, did the Gokturks manage to become so powerful and influential in the first place? Why did they come into conflict with their sedentary neighbors whom they used to trade with? What were the reasons for their rapid demise: hostile invasions, climate change, or indeed treachery? And why, prior to the purchase of this book, have *you* never heard of these *Celestial Turks*?

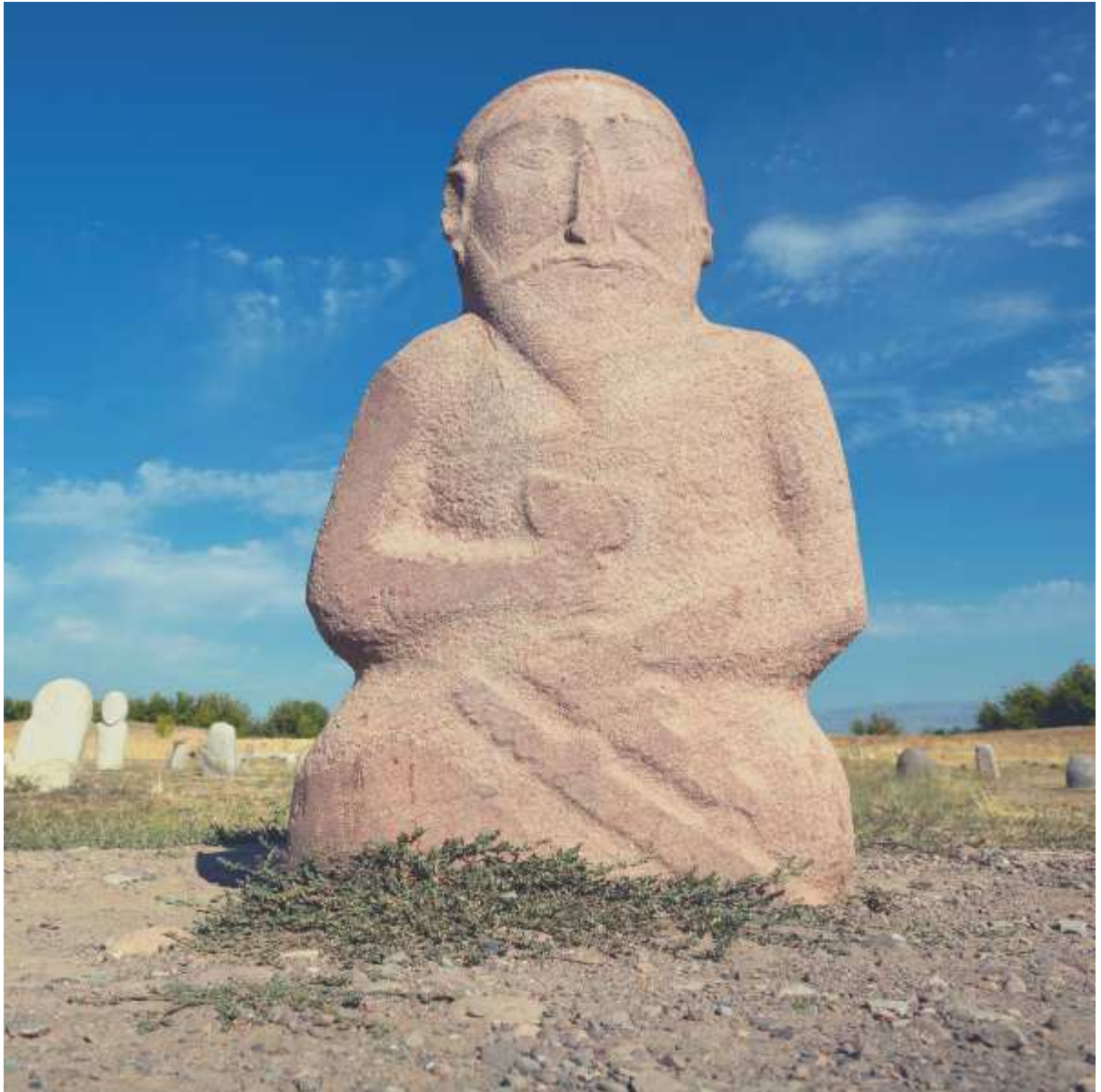
It is time to get to the bottom of these and other important questions of ancient Turkic and Asian history. There is a long and arduous way ahead. Well, arduous was only the research of the author. I started conducting research as a young student away from my studies in history and year after year I gathered new knowledge, which I would now like to share with you. You are about to embark on a journey through time to a world full of contradictions and absurdities, to an era of warriors, adventurers, and

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<sup>15</sup> We are talking about the legendary Taspar Khagan, the fourth emperor of the Gokturks from 572-581 C.E.

traitors. To a land whose inhabitants drew new strength from the suffering of their ancestors for a better, safer future. You, dear reader, need not worry about overcoming any hardships while reading on. I will not flood you with unnecessary information, nor will I tell you half-truths. Both sides of the same coin must be explained. I will accompany you and be your guide. Let us now dive into the almost forgotten homeland of all Turkic peoples: Central Asia.

## The Origin of Turkic identity



*Image 1A Balbal statue in Kyrgyzstan. Balbals are also known as kurgans. They function as gravestones and were erected in honor of the person being buried all over the Eurasian Steppe, from Mongolia to western Russia.*

## Spread of Turkic peoples and their way of life

According to Western conception, the term "Turks" refers to an ethnic group that has lived in Anatolia for about a millennium and forms the bridge between the Asia and the Europe. Their country, the Republic of Turkey – known as *Türkiye* officially<sup>16</sup> – is known for its geographical but also cultural diversity. Over time, religions and people from all over the world met here and formed a melting pot of cultures. And yet, the influence of non-European and non-Semitic Asian *Turkic* culture cannot be overlooked. Any visitor will experience flowing transitions between tradition and modernity from northwestern Edirne to southeastern Diyarbakir, from rainy Trabzon to sunny Antalya. Throughout history, the Turks of Anatolia and other places were known for their national pride and their will to fight. Without wanting to reduce the last centuries of Turkish history to a few sentences, it can rightly be said that many inhabitants are proud of their country – not necessarily of the current conditions or with regards to their entire past, but of their identity. What is this identity actually made up of? For a linguist, ethnologist or historian, language and common history are certainly the most important. But the Turks are known, especially in the West, for their delicious food, their coffee and tea, and cultural dispositions such as hospitality and family cohesion. A predilection for a passionate yet friendly culture of argumentation is also apparent. The Turks began settling Anatolia after Sultan Alp Arslan's victory of the *Seljuks* over Byzantium from about 1100, and established a world empire that stretched to the gates of Vienna in the name of *Ertuğrul* and *Osman*. However, there is one peculiarity that had strongly marked the Turks until their arrival in Anatolia. Their appearance may have changed, but the Turks in *Türkiye* speak a language and maintain traditions whose origins, for the most part, lie elsewhere entirely. And this is a special characteristic of all Turkic peoples. They never stay in one place for too long. Prior to the before arriving in Anatolia, the Turks, who in this context will also be summarized alternately as *Turkic peoples*, had already settled, conquered or left again large parts of Eurasia.

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<sup>16</sup> This Denomination was introduced by the Government of Turkey in 2022 in order to separate the country's official name from a certain bird. The animal is known as „Turkey“ to Americans because it was brought from the Ottoman Empire, known to the West as Turkey, to the United States. This Turkey animal on the other hand is known as „Hint“ in Turkey, because *they* imported the bird from India, known as Hindistan in Turkish.

The Turks of Anatolia are such a *Turkic people*, as are the Tatars on the Crimean peninsula and the Uigurs in China.. But conversely, at least in the West, Tartars and Uigurs are not called *Turks* in order to distinguish them from the inhabitants of Anatolia. This additionally has historical reasons, since at the arrival of the Seljuks in ByzantineAnatolia, the land of those nomads was called *Tourkia* (ancient Greek: *Τουρκία*). In the Ottoman period, *Turkey* was used as an endonym by Western Europe for the entire Ottoman Empire. Such a distinction does not exist in Turkiye, by the way. There, the Yakuts in Siberia, Gagauz in Lodavia or the Altai Turkic people are simply classified as "Turkish," although the different cultural development of all Turkic peoples over the millennia should be duly noted in that regard. Since from here on the history *prior* to the arrival of the Seljuks and other *Oghuz* Turks in Anatolia will be treated, the term *Turks* shall be used as an equivalent for all Turkic peoples of antiquity and the early Middle Ages.If it seems reasonable the respective tribal or state name will be preferred. As a summarizing term, which should describe those tribes in a generalized way, *Turkic peoples* nevertheless does not seem unsuitable. For the history of all Turkic peoples Central Asia is the most important region of the almost endless *Steppe Belt of Eurasia*. This term basically refers to the area between the plains of Mongolia in the east, and the transition of Kazakhstan into western Russia and Ukraine in the west. It was an ideal place for the migration and subsequentdecentralized settlement of the Hunic, Mongolic and Turkic peoples. The map of the Turkic scholar Mahmud al-Kashgari from the 11th century illustrates how the Turks were seemingly pulled apart from each other. For millennia, groups that spoke one of the many Turkic languages lived scattered throughout Eurasia. Instead of being united in an empire, they were grouped into smaller federations, and some tribes were even in political isolation from all others..

In our present day, Central Asia is politically divided into states that belong primarily to the Turkic world. Kazakhs, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks are all *Turkic speakers*, meaning they each speak a different branch of the Turkic language family. Accordingly, most of Central Asia is known to this day as *Turkestan* –land of the Turks.





Figure 1 Map of Mahmud al-Kashgari that shows the Turkic Oghuz and other peoples of Central Asia. The north is on the left, the west below.

Although the Turkic peoples, as is linguistically and archaeologically documented, probably originated further away in northeast Asia, they settled here after the demise of the Gokturks, spreading the influence of Turkic culture along the Caspian Sea. Before the *Turkicization* of this region, mainly Indo-European peoples were settled here, including the Bactrians, Sogdians, and Cimmerians. The elite of the Persian Parthian Empire, which is well known for causing headaches to the Romans two millennia ago, was also composed of steppe warriors from Central Asia. The "Scythians", an ancient Greek term for steppe peoples beyond the Ukraine, also dwelt in Central Asia.

And so, long before the arrival of the Turks, this area was already a place feared by the sedentary population of Europe and Asia. The harsh climate, the endless steppes and deserts, and the sparse vegetation forced the inhabitants to exercise modesty in hunting and to defend their families from invaders until their last breath. This favored their use of bows and arrows, as extensive plantations were rarely possible. Thus, most of the steppe peoples remained hunter-gatherers, and cattle breeders until the Middle Ages. They seemed to have lived a simple life in the eyes of the sedentary peoples, reminiscent of their own ancestors' old ways. But the harsh conditions of the steppe gave the steppe people decisive advantage. Due to their skills on horseback they developed into excellent warriors. From Tomris to Bumin, from Attila to Genghis Khan, the rulers of the steppe peoples were a nightmare for their sedentary neighbors. In many epic battles they spread fear and terror, from China to Persia to Europe. At least, this was the tenor of those peoples who saw in the tribes of Central Asia nothing more than a collection of infidel savages.



*Image 2 This collection of numerous balbals is probably part of a mass grave in Kyrgyzstan.*

However, to understand the rise of the Gokturks, we need to put ourselves in the lives of those "barbarians". How did the nomads of the steppes live in the first place? Apart from the fact that they were living in huts or tents and that they had to rely more on hunting than agriculture, you probably don't know much about them. That is absolutely understandable as nomadic culture is rarely taught in school anywhere in

the world. It sure wasn't part of the history curriculum I had to attend at school eons ago. Yet steppe life offers potential for expressive art, the stuff of which legends are born, scripts for exceptionally fascinating Netflix productions. We have to understand that the way of life of the steppe peoples consists of far more than what we as time travelers could have recognized at first glance. Rather, the really interesting part for us to experience would have been what was going on in the minds of those people. Their faith and their customs were central elements of their everyday life, because they determined their behavior –in terms of dealing with animals, nature and also in relation to other people.

In any case, as you might have guessed by now, the actual life of the Turks at that time was anything but mythical., It was exhausting and extremely routine. The Turks in medieval Central Asia seem to have led a completely different life than the people in the modern Turkic republics. This includes, of course, their lifestyle of domestic and livestock farming.<sup>17</sup> They lived not in houses but in *yurts*, large sturdy tents that could be dismantled and rebuilt elsewhere at any time. The yurt represented the center of Turkic nomadic life. In the winter, families used it to move with it to the warmer south and in the summer months back to the north to escape the heat. The Turks practiced private enterprise by hunting animals, raising livestock, in some parts of Central Asia even taking care of plantations, and participating in the lively trade along the ancient *Silk Road*. Learning the art of hunting was essential for every member of the family. From an early age, every boy and girl was obligated to learn how to ride horses and hunt wild animals. Therefore, in the course of time, the Turks developed into excellent fighters who could handle bows and arrows better than, for example, the Romans or the Chinese. They became masters in the Art of War, albeit certain aspects of military technology like siege weapons were uncommon. The same claim may be made regarding Huns before them and the Mongols after them. This was the heritage of the steppe. That being said, the Turks did indeed cultivate abstract thoughts and concepts, unlike common media portrayals may suggest. For example, they used a variation of the Chinese calendar, according to which each of the 12 months in a year was named after an animal. The year began with the month

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<sup>17</sup> Barisitz, Stephan (2017): Central Asia and the Silk Road. Economic Rise and Decline over Several Millennia, 52.



of the rat (January) and ended with the month of the pig (December). Below is an overview with all the month names.<sup>18</sup>

Traditions gradually crystallized and were retold from generation to generation, often in the form of oral drama and song. These traditions are summarized under the term *Töre*. The social system of the Turks differed from that of other steppe peoples, however, in that the *Töre* was supposed to regulate the lives of the Turks in the form of specific laws regardless of social standing within a tribe or state. The judiciary of the ancient Turks was based on the desire for social justice. For example, disobedience to the holy Khagan was frowned upon as it was he who was sent to earth by God, legitimized to rule over the Turks with benevolence and good will. Should the Khagan however at any point in time violate the terms of *Töre* – act against the law – his subjects were allowed to overthrow and exile or kill him. Rape or murder was punishable by death, but so was stealing cattle and horses. In addition, if someone was found guilty of rape, all his possessions had to be confiscated regardless of the severity of the case. The *Töre* also regulated how descendants were to deal with the death of a relative. As a rule, the corpse was placed in a yurt, while their relatives, men and women, young and old, each killed a sheep and a horse in his honor and positioned them in front of the yurt. A prayer was then spoken. Then, on a next day, the corpse was to be burned and cremated with all the personal belongings of the dead man. While endowments were quite common, here our main source encounters a conflict. In the case of burial, a tomb decorated with stones was erected, the number of stones signaling the number of people the deceased had killed in his life. This is related to the killing of enemies in battle. Depending on whether a man or a woman had died, there was a precisely regulated sequence regarding the social situation of the family. If a father or uncle had died, his sons or nephews were to marry the mother or sister-in-law. Before you jump to any conclusions, keep in mind that any kind of sexual relations were strictly forbidden and punishable. Inbreeding was an absolute taboo among the ancient Turks. The act of marriage served the purpose of securing the social position, especially that of women, within the tribe. As you can imagine, widowed women were often just as destitute and target of vengeful

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<sup>18</sup> Taken from Biray, Nergis (2009): 12 hayvanlı Türk takvimi. Zamanda ve insana hükmetmek, in: Türkiye Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi, No. 39, Atatürk Üniversitesi, 671-681, here: 673-674.

and greedy men in the steppe as they were in Europe. Through this marriage and survivorship policy, they were offered at least some protection.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Information taken from accounts of the Book of Zhou, Zhōu Shū: Volume 50.

## **Tengrism and Turkic Mythology**

This Töre, in turn, was closely connected with the religion of the ancient Turks in which a being called *Tengri* was at the center of worship.<sup>20</sup> He is the omnipotent ruler of the eternal blue sky, a being that unlike the gods of other religions was not personified. It was even forbidden to paint one's own artistic interpretation of Tengri, for Tengri is the only being in the world regarded as fully holy and untouchables. This being occupied a similar role in the cosmology of Tengrism as, for example, the deity An among the Sumerians, Aton among the Egyptians, or Zeus among the Greeks. But while Zeus was only one of many gods represented as a human-like figure, An, Aton or Tengri have obviously no personality traits. Nevertheless, it is difficult to describe Tengri's role without applying some kind of personification of his nature.

In summary, Tengri is omnipotent, for Tengri sees and hears everything. However, Tengri is not explicitly a punitive god. If someone had lived a morally good life, they would definitely be treated well in the afterlife. Someone who had constantly misbehaved and led a life full of what we would call „sins“, would have to bear the consequences, and pass through the many stages of the underworld until they had to answer to its Chief deity : Erlik.<sup>21</sup> This is the first aspect that makes Tengrism so unique. Despite its seemingly monotheistic orientation, there are many other divine beings such as Erlik or Umay, the protector of all unborn children, who is to be equated with Mother Earth. People whose souls were not at peace at death are reborn and given a second chance to live a decent life or depending on the severity of their sins sent to the underworld. The souls of all other people are either allowed to ascend to Heaven or are partially transferred into things of nature. Trees, mountains, rivers and lakes are inhabited by the so-called earth-water spirits, the yer-su, who are supposed to ensure a balance between nature and man and watch over people.

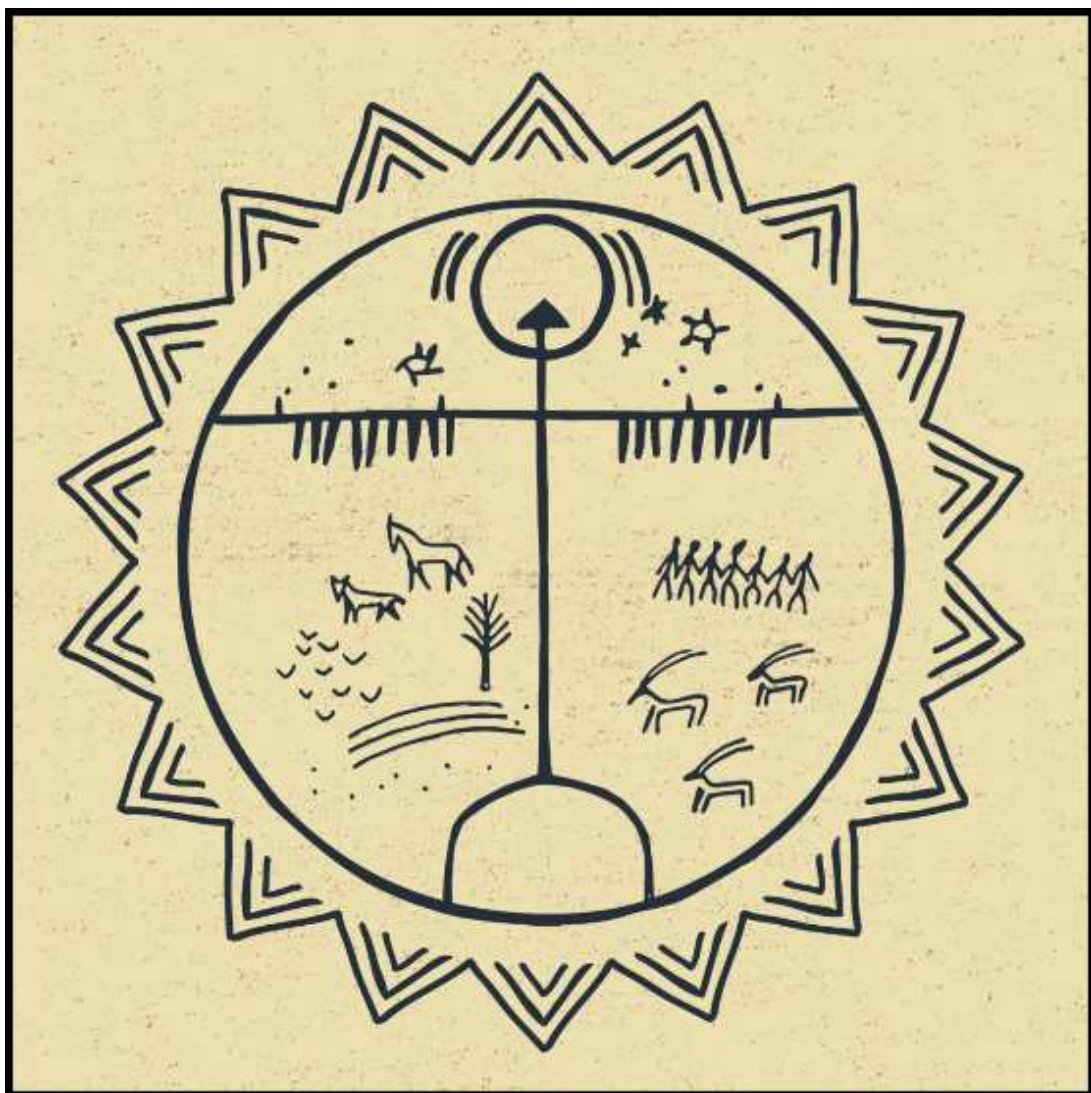
Tengrism was the predominant religion in the Central Asian steppes long before the birth of Christ and reached Europe due to the migrations of the European Huns,

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<sup>20</sup> Talgat, Moldabay; Ayman, Azmuhanova (2015): Religion of Old Turks, in *Anthropologist*, 31 (1,2): 46-50, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Roux (2015): 69.

Avars, our aforementioned Gokturks, Magyars and Bulgars. Gradually, the Bulgars became known as Bulgarians, were slavized and adopted Christianity, the Huns were completely assimilated in Central and Eastern Europe and virtually disappeared from the history books, and other Tengrists such as the Turks of Anatolia and Crimea slowly adopted liberal forms of Sunni Islam. Although almost all Turkic peoples today belong to other faiths, and the Mongols have officially pledged allegiance to a particular variant of Buddhism, elements of Tengrism continue to be evident in these societies. There are even societies founded in order to strengthen the role of Tengrism and Tengrist teachings in our contemporary world. But more on that in the next book.



*Figure 3 The cosmology of Tengrism summarized in one illustration. Man lives on earth side by side with the animals and nature in a harmonious balance.*

Thus, many Tengrism customs are still practiced in Turkic-speaking countries, from Türkiye to Kazakhstan, among the Yakuts in Siberia, and among the Tatars in Crimea.<sup>22</sup> Examples include certain rules of behavior after the birth of a child and before the funeral of a family member<sup>23</sup>, the decorating of wishing trees, sacred numbers such as "7" and "40" and the shaman drum. Incidentally, the shaman, originally called *Kam*, did not play a central role in Tengrism.<sup>24</sup> This needs to be emphasized, because the ancient Turks were not "shamanists", as some ancient historians or teachers in schoollike to claim, although the shaman did perform important ceremonial and advisory tasks. Thus, he or she mastered herbalism and acted as a healer of the sick. They also had to perform ceremonial rites to contact Tengri and the other deities, and thus communicate between the ruler and heaven along the World Tree.<sup>25</sup> The shaman was thus present, but not as crucial to the belief system as in pre-Tengrist primitive shamanistic cultures. It is likely that Tengrism developed out of those early cultural predispositions. This would explain the presence of animistic elements in Tengrism.<sup>26</sup>

The core philosophical concept of Tengrism is a harmonious *balance of power*. Ideally, people would live in harmony with nature. They should not eat and drink more than necessary. They should not cause destruction to other peoples and should not exploit others or nature for their own benefit. Related to this is the acceptance of other religions. Tengrism was syncretistic, meaning that its followers accepted aspects of other religions and even incorporated them into their belief systems, much like the Romans, Egyptians or Sumerians did centuries prior.

The polytheistic nature of the faith is reflected in the multitude of deities or god-like beings firmly rooted in Turkic mythology, such as Kayra, who carries the soul of

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<sup>22</sup> Even among the Turkish Cypriots there are elements of Tengrism left, which will be referred to as "shamanism" in the following work: Bozkurt, Ismail: *Traces of Shamanism in the Beliefs of Turkish Cypriots*, in: Kellner-Heinkele et al: *Man and Nature in the Altaic World. Proceedings of the 49th Permanent International Altaistic Conference, Berlin, July 30 - August 4, 2006*, 53-56.

<sup>23</sup> For the development of funeral rituals among ancient Turks, see Yasa, Recep (2019): *Eski Türk Cenaze Törenlerinde Ölü Yakma Âdeti*, in *Journal of Turkish History Researches*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 2019, 275-295.

<sup>24</sup> Divitçioğlu, Sencer (2004): *Orta-Asya Türk İmparatorluğu VI.-VIII. Yüzyıllar*, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Talgat, Ayman (2015): 47.

<sup>26</sup> A basic definition of animism is that everything on earth –besides people and animals, nature and objects – are alive and have a soul. In Tengrism, the influence of animism is evident in the belief that the deceased sometimes return to earth and dwell in mountains or lakes.

Tengri, being his offspring, and watches over the universe. The latter's son Alaz is the god of fire, who can purify people's souls after their sojourn in the underworld. Kuyash, another son of Tengri, is the ruler of the sun. Every morning people prayed to Kuyash for the sun to rise and fill the earth with its warm light. Ülgen acted as Tengri's deputy, standing for good, well-being and abundance of food and water. He is an antagonist of Erlik. In an epic battle, Ülgen was able to defeat Erlik and from then on assumed the role of protector of the people of Earth. Aysit, like Umay, was goddess of fertility and responsible for listing all newborns in the Golden Book of Destiny, while Ay Ata, god of the moon, dwelled on the sixth floor of the sky, along with Gün Ana, goddess of the sun.<sup>27</sup>

Values such as courage, modesty, and justice were held in high esteem by the Turks as well as the Mongols and Huns, and at least among the Turks, equality between women and men was considered more of a given than in neighboring sedentary societies.<sup>28</sup> While most of the rulers of the Tengrist states may have been male, women took on roles not only as diplomats but also as generals and governors. For the most part, their roles were to maintain social order and strengthen cohesion among the people. The Chinese scholars, who produced many writings about the ancient Turks, found such emancipatory practises unusual and even ridiculed them. During their first contacts, they made fun of the Turks for placing a higher value on women in Turkic society than the Chinese did at home. However, they were also amazed at the widespread honesty of the common people, from which they inferred, in part, the naiveté and good nature of certain rulers of the Gokturks.

However, the most important principle of Tengrism is to learn from mistakes, leave the past behind and create a better future for oneself and one's family. Everything that exists is thus part of an eternal cycle of life.<sup>29</sup> For this reason, trees, such as the aforementioned World Tree or *Tree of Life*, are still sacred beings in Turkic

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<sup>27</sup> In the ancient Turkic tradition, sun and the moon are always mentioned together, since they are supposed to symbolize the man and the woman, respectively, and therefore represent two aspects of one and the same entity. See Turan, Fatma Ahsen (2006): Rituals and Beliefs Related to Celestial Phenomena. Eclipse, Thunderbolt, and Rainbow, in: Kellner-Heinkele et al: Man and Nature in the Altaic World. Proceedings of the 49th Permanent International Altaistic Conference, Berlin, July 30 - August 4, 2006, 448-449.

<sup>28</sup> Taşağıl (2013): 179.

<sup>29</sup> Talgat; Ayman (2015): 49.

mythology, as are animals such as the wolf, the falcon, or the horse.<sup>30</sup> While the significance of the wolf goes back to the founding myth of the Gokturk dynasty – which is why the "wolf salute" is very popular today to commemorate the origins of the first Turkic empire of the Gokturks – the falcon as well as the eagle and other bird species can be found in many places as symbols of later Turkish dynasties and families such as those of the Seljuks. Falcons, of course, were also used to transmit information within Turkic states. A practice that was also widespread in other societies. However, the horse played the most important role in Tengrist societies. The horse was *the* means of transportation for steppe peoples, even more so than in sedentary countries. The horse made it possible to remain flexible in military operations, but it also allowed hit-and-run tactics, which the Mongols used especially during for raids. Whenever a noble Turk died, his horse was killed and buried side-by-side with them, as excavations in Kazakhstan have revealed.<sup>31</sup>

Humans are as much a part of this world as plants or animals, but unlike them, they can intentionally harm their environment. Therefore, they must observe certain rules in order to maintain the balance of powers. Someone who must go to the underworld after death is not trapped there forever, though. Instead, the souls are allowed to ascend to the Afterlife after their punishment has been served and settle on the third floor of the Afterlife. The Afterlife and the underworld have each risen to seven floors, they are connected by way of the World Tree. Tengri dwells on the highest floor of heaven, and Erlik on the last floor of the underworld. Consequently the World Tree serves as the *Axis Mundi* of Turkic mythology, which connects Afterlife and Underworld with Earth and allows ascent and descent between these worlds. The Turks thus shared in their cosmology a concept that exists in the Scandinavian countries of Europe, and Tengri bears striking similarities to the Sumerian god Dingir and Dyeus, the sky god of Indo-European mythology.

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<sup>30</sup> On the sanctuary of trees, see Ivanics, Mária: Der Sippenbaum im Buch der Dschingis-Legende, in: Kellner, Barbara et al. (2020, originally 2006): Man and Nature in the Altaic World. Proceedings of the 49th Permanent International Altaistic Conference, Berlin, July 30 - August 4, 2006, 179-180.

<sup>31</sup> TengriNews: Ancient instrument found in Turkic warrior burial in Kazakhstan, 10. 08.2014; TengriNews: Elite Turkic warrior burial discovered in Kazakhstan, 01.08.2014.

Over the centuries, however, this polytheistic religion became more and more specific. At the time of Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire, Tengri was not only the highest but the only really important authority that decided the fate of its people. Genghis Khan began his addresses to the soldiers prior to a battle with the legendary words:

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*"We have gathered here under the eternal blue sky (Tengri), the  
Creator of our people, the Almighty Lawgiver."*<sup>32</sup>

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In correspondence with European heads of state and even with the Pope, the rulers of the Mongol Empire always began their texts with this famous phrase, which could be interpreted as a religious creed.

In any case, Tengrism is not dogmatic. Someone who constantly praises Tengri but lives an antisocial life must pay a visit to Erlik after death. But another who would not have prayed to Tengri or even thought of him, someone who may have been a follower of other religions but led a good life, would be rewarded by Tengri. The details of social order, i.e. rights and prohibitions within a nation, must be worked out by the people among themselves. Tengrism merely provides the framework for living together. Even though Turkic, Mongolian and Hunnic history has been accompanied by wars and suffering, the connection to Mother Earth has never really diminished. Even if two people were obnoxious to each other and wanted to fight each other to the death, they had to respect the balance of nature and animals surrounding them. The exploitation of the earth always had to be limited to the bare minimum, the hunting of wild animals was only allowed to take place until the whole family was fed. Not appetite and the desire for pleasure were primary factors for the Tengrists, but the necessity to survive. No more, no less.

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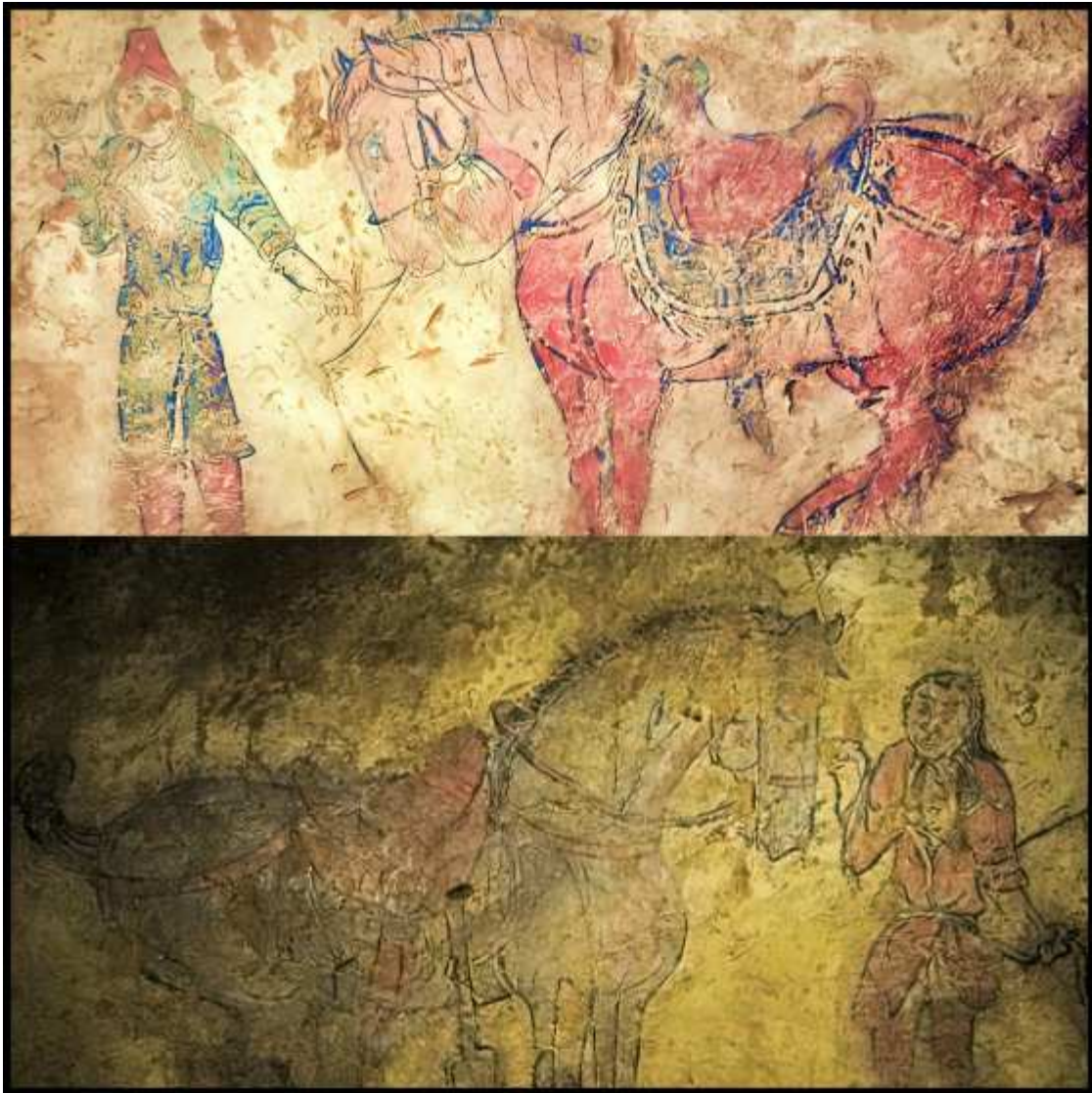
<sup>32</sup> Similar sayings are found in the Secret History of the Mongols: paragraph 224, in the translation by Francis Woodman Cleaves (1982): 162.



In this sense, Tengrism is less a religion and more a philosophy of life.<sup>33</sup> A philosophy with norms and rules that are still quite contemporary in our world today. A balance between man and nature, a balance within society, as well as the fact that man is, so to speak, part of a stream of life that flows eternally and connects all living things. Indeed, Tengrism bears elements that could be called "fantastic" or „superstitious“, but it profoundly summarizes motifs and beliefs from all over the world. There is no holy book for this so-called "religion". Everyone must find out by themselves how they want to organize their life. But in times of despair or even agony, Tengri can very well be a point of orientation that shows people the way to a better life. On the other hand, when writing these sentences, one cannot help but actually "personify" Tengri. Perhaps because, as in almost all religions, we humans feel safer with the idea in our heads that somewhere in the sky an omnipotent being watches over and protects us.

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<sup>33</sup> See the travelogue of a Taiwanese in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and the answers of the locals to his questions about Tengrism (translated): Peecen, Liao: Between Animism and Monotheism--Tengrism of the Nomads, via [Crossing.cw.com.tr](http://Crossing.cw.com.tr), 10.06.2020.



*Figure 4 Wall paintings in the Shoroon Bumbagar tomb near Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Both images depict noble Turks buried together with their horses. This cements the importance of the horse, along with other animals, in the cosmology of the Turks..*

Since the majority of the steppe peoples from the Scythians and Huns to the Gokturks and Mongols were followers of Tengri –each according to their own specific conception but all living under the same conditions of the steppe –the rise of the Gokturks can be placed in a series with that of the Huns and Mongols. For another aspect of Tengrism is still missing from our puzzle, one that only made itself felt in the time of the Gokturks: rulers who were placed on the throne by Tengri as god-like beings. This legitimization of rule first appears in a Chinese chronicle of the Asian Xiongnu Huns, but the Gokturks were the first to declare this claim by themselves. However, as I have already indicated , the rise of the Gokturks and generally of all

Turkic peoples of the steppes- from small nomads to great khans was a very difficult one. In general, you are probably wondering by now how the preceding paragraphs fit together. Tengrism, the wolf sign, the steppe and Khagans – and where do Bumin and Istemi, our heroes from the beginning, come into play? To understand the connection, we need to look a little deeper into the structure of Tengrism and examine the cosmology of the ancient Turks. For for all the similarities between the steppe peoples of antiquity and the Middle Ages, this belief system was most pronounced among the Turks.



*Figure 5 This is not the Turks' idea of what a pretzel should look like, but the representation of a "wolf-dragon" by the Seljuks in the 13th century. Although they had already accepted Islam in the 11th century, they obviously retained elements of the old Turkic mythology.*

Tengri himself is still at the center, one might think. After all, the "ruler of heaven" is also the eponym for that worldview. Tengri is indeed an omnipotent ruler, all-knowing and all-powerful. But to maintain the balance on earth, more powerful beings are needed to implement Tengri's will of harmony. Among them is Umay, who as we have seen can be equated with Mother Earth. Tengri and Umay were like man and woman, two beings who complemented each other. While Tengri ruled the sky and watched over the people from above, Umay was responsible for the balance on earth directly. Accordingly, she took the role of a protector of all those souls who had not yet come into the world and whose birth was imminent. Therefore, to this day, there are rituals before and after the birth of a child in which the family sends

petitions and thanks to Umay, in the hope that birth will go smoothly and that the infant will be born healthy with Umay's blessing. Umay's role is therefore more specific than Tengri's. But both entities have been used to legitimize certain ruling dynasties over the centuries. For example, the leaders of the Second Gokturk Khaganate who were from the Ashina and Ashide families claimed the following in the famous Orchon inscriptions:

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*"The entire Turk people were degraded, and the country lay in ruins. Then Tengri in heaven above, Umay on earth and the Yer-Su said: 'So that the Turks do not perish, they should become a nation again.'*

*Then they, Tengri and Umay, lifted my father and mother to the top and placed them on the throne.*

*My father gathered seventeen brave princes, then seventy brave men against his enemies. Tengri gave them power. My father's army was like wolves, their enemies were like sheep. "*<sup>34</sup>

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The speaker of this text is Kül Tegin, a famous prince and brother of the legendary ruler of the Second Empire, Bilge Khagan. He indirectly legitimizes the rule of his father, the Khagan, and his mother, the Khaghatun, through the intervention and will of Tengri, Umay and the Yer-Su. Thus, by the Second Empire at the latest, Tengrism was not only the state religion, but *the* basis of legitimacy for the rule of the Ashina dynasty and all other Asian Turkic states.

But Tengri and Umay have another teammate, who could also be called an adversary, as further south, in the literal underworld, Erlik dwells. The Turks referred to the underworld as *Tamag*. However, as mentioned *Tamag* is not to be understood as *hell* like in Abrahamic religions. There, evil people would burn forever in purgatory. But Erlik is not necessarily to be understood as a punisher with malicious intentions.

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<sup>34</sup> Kultegin Inscription, line 12.

Rather, he acts as a guardian who ensures that the lost souls atone for their sins and then, after some time, can ascend to the afterlife. It is not Erlik who decides whether someone has sinned or not. He can only decide the severity of punishment. But whether someone has to go to the underworld at all, instead of going to the afterlife right away, is not solely at his discretion. Instead, the interaction of Erlik, Umay and Tengri is responsible for this process. In the afterlife, called *Ucmag*, all the souls who have lived a good life already dwell, as well as some god-like beings mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Just as Erlik resides on the lowest level of Tamag, Tengri resides on the highest level of Ucmag. Ucmag literally means "to fly away" in Turkish, as the Turks assumed that the soul of a deceased person would leave the body and literally ascend to heaven. In Tengrism, the afterlife is a place similar to Earth but with untouched nature and full of souls who neither commit sins nor violate the rules of harmony. In a sense, the cosmology of the Turks is very similar to the worldviews of other cultures. Depending on the subject, parallels can even be seen with the ancient religions of the Chinese, Koreans, Vikings and Indians.

But to maintain the balance of power, Tengri, Umay and Erlik need other beings to serve as their assistants. Tengri and Umay regularly send messengers out into the world of humans to observe developments within society. Such messengers can appear in the form of animals as well as things in nature. Now, the aforementioned Yer-Su come into play, the earth-water spirits. According to the conception of the Altai Turks, after arriving in the afterlife some souls are sent back by Tengri and then take place in trees, stones or even whole mountains. Picture it. You are in the middle of the Altai region and your view is occupied by the breathtaking mountain ranges. Whether the grass beneath your feet, the trees in front of you or the mountains in the distance – in all of these things, souls of the descended are present. Unlike in Japanese Shinto religion, these souls are not malevolent. The idea that human souls can be found everywhere in nature, watching over people, perhaps might even create a sense of melancholy. There seems to be a kind of hidden animal kingdom within human society, too. An example: Ravens, which incidentally have very positive connotations among Asian peoples, gather information and pass it on to hawks, which then fly on from city to city, country to country, informing other messengers. Other animals such as lions and cheetahs also occupy important positions in human society, depending

on the cultural group. We must keep in mind that in ancient times and in the Middle Ages people and animals lived relatively close to each other. For example, it was not uncommon for noble families to acquire cheetahs as "pets". This could explain the role of these animals in the cosmology of the Turks.

The importance of the wolf among is another great factor. The wolf, or its descendants in the form of dogs, are consistently perceived throughout Turkic history as animals with important tasks. It was Asena, a she-wolf with shimmering blue fur sent by Tengri, who once saved a wounded boy from death and raised him. Asena thus laid the foundation for a new family, a new lineage of nobles, who later founded the Gokturk Empire.

But Asena and all the other animals had a point of reference during their stay on Earth, which served as the *Axis Mundi* of Turkic cosmology: the Tree of Life, which one may even label a World Tree similar to *Yggdrasil*. This tree, figuratively speaking of course, is to be understood as a connecting element through which information and even entities were transported from the earth to the afterlife above in the sky or to the underworld beneath our feet. The roots of the tree of life reached so deep into the earth, and its branches climbed so high into the sky, that all information generated anywhere was absorbed and passed on by the tree of life. The ensouled animals, which served as observers or protectors of the people, returned again and again to the tree of life to pass on their information or to exchange information directly, using it as a sort of assembly. Don't think of it too literally and rather figuratively, as in a way the Tree of Life further operated as an elevator for the deities, the deceased, and a few chosen people on earth to ascend and descend between the floors of the world. However, because the Tree of Life is connected to all living things, even if people did not sense it, the tree itself *did* feel any destruction of nature. The entire planet was its realm. If we take the known facts about the tree of life in Tengrism to hand and consider nevertheless that an invisible life stream flows through the earth, we might assume in the next step that the tree of life must have been connected to the life stream. Perhaps in old Turkic cosmology, the tree of life was supposed to serve in an articulate manner as the abstract idea of a life stream. This would suit the animist thought that basically everywhere – in every stone, river, lake, mountain and tree, even in every house or yurt – the souls of the deceased were somehow present,



watching over humankind. As you have seen, according to the teachings of Tengrism, people who violated the rules of Tengrism and harmed nature or other fellow humans in their lifetime were forced to atone in the underworld afterwards. But simultaneously the stream of life which consists of all souls would receive a *defect* of sorts, a disturbance. Let us assume that for some reason rows and rows of people mutated into evil souls, for example because they had been seduced by someone to do shrewd things. Perhaps by a man or a woman who rose to be the ruler of the people, and made his subjects exploit the earth massively for his benefit and in order to upkeep and expand their power. There would certainly be an imbalance within society. But we have to go a step further and construct the consequences for *all* living beings. The more evil souls there were the greater would then be the disturbance in the stream of life. Now, if this current flows through the tree of life, and the conscious tree “witnesses” everything that happens on earth – wouldn't it itself also suffer damage and decay? Wouldn't the leaves of the tree of life dry up, the branches fall down from the sky and the roots shrivel up under the earth? Wouldn't the tree of life fall apart, its energy having been sucked up by the evil souls, and die? As a result, the connection between Ucmag, Tamag and earth would be disturbed permanently. The tree of life could serve neither as a refuge for the animals that have retreated here, nor as a portal for exchange of information. And it could also no longer serve as an “elevator” for the deities or souls. This is only a theory of mine, but nevertheless it would be interesting to dive even deeper into such abstract thought play – and to re-think basic concepts of the Tengrism and Turkic cosmology from a new perspective, by the help of logic.

All in all, the tree of life is *the* central element of Turkic cosmology. That is why motifs depicting the tree of life in its full glory can still be found on textiles and even banknotes within Turkic countries. This is also true of the Turkic deities. But while Tengri, Umay, the Yer-Su and even Erlik seem to form a symbiosis to ensure the balance of power in the world, the story of Tengrism does not end there. For the overlap between Tengrism and Turkic mythology is great. The pantheon of Turkic deities is vast. Even if none of these beings possesses the kind of power that only Tengri was capable of, it is still worthwhile to look at the mythology, the numerous legends and myths, and the folklore that the Turks pass on from generation to

generation. To do this, we need to travel a little further east. On the border of Central Asia with Mongolia, in a region where China, Russia and Kazakhstan collide, the missing piece of the puzzle is hidden. Here, in the geographically deepest place in Asia and the very center of the continent, lies the supposed origin of all Turks, regardless of their dialect and way of life. We have arrived at the Altai.



## Tale of Asena

This region includes both green landscapes with many rivers and valleys and a mountain range that stretches across the entire area. Known as Tien Shan in Chinese, the highest peak is Tengri Khan named after the ruler of heaven in Turkic mythology. The name Altai is a combination of the Mongolian word for gold and the Turkic term for mountain; thus, it is the *Golden Mountain*. The high mountains stretch from southern Siberia in the north to the arid plains of present-day Xinjiang, the homeland of the Uyghurs, in the south.

Starting here, the geographical distance to Ankara, the capital of Türkiye, is 4000 km<sup>2</sup>. If this was the “starting place” of great Turkic history, then it begs the following question: How and why did the Turks migrate so far away to the West? In the nearer vicinity, in countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and also in the northeast and south of Russia, certain groups of people are classified as being part of the Turkic world, speaking a Turkic language, adhering to Turkic traditions and customs. But away from Asia, besides the Anatolian Turks, other ethnic groups have migrated even farther away, for example, the Gagauz of Romania, the Turkmen of Syria and Iraq, or the Tatars of Crimea. These people are not 100 percent of “pure” Turkic origin, because genealogy has shown that they are descendants of many different ethnic groups; Turkic as an ethnicity emerged only over time. The Turks are therefore of multi-ethnic origin, but their identity which was shaped by language, tradition and religion is precisely Turkic.<sup>35</sup> This identity has endured for many centuries, and after the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1922 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkic peoples from Europe to Asia began to become aware of the origin of their social order.

Nevertheless, the question why there are many more Turks living in these places nowadays than in the Altai region is absolutely justified. This issue as well as the preceding chapter lead us to the history of the origin of Turkic identity. It is a story

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<sup>35</sup> Sinor, Denis; Klyashtorny, S.G.: *The Turk Empire*, in: Litvinsky, B.A. et al (1996): *History of civilizations of Central Asia. Volume III: The crossroads of civilizations: A.D. 250 to 750*, UNESCO Publishing, 330.

connected with tragedy and hope at the same time. From the very beginning of thiof Asena.

As so often in history, wars between states or ethnic groups in Asia's late antiquity led to flight and displacement. South of the Altai is the Taklamakan Desert, an inhospitable place to live. On the northern ring, however, at the transition to the Altai, better living conditions prevailed. From the Tarim Basin to the Gaochang region, that this belt was dotted with many oasis towns. Many peoples including Chinese and Indo-Iranians lived and ruled over the millennia. In late antiquity, families who descended from the legendary Xiongnu Huns had say here. In 436 or 439, Chinese dynasties began to expel these families. In one village, all the family members were even killed by the invaders all except for a ten-year-old boy who managed to escape. However, the boy was injured and didn't get very far. That is when he came across a she-wolf who befriended him. The ruler of the invaders learned of this ordeal and ordered his soldiers to kill the boy as well as the she-wolf, but the she-wolf fled with the boy at inhospitable speed to a mountain, north of the Gaochang region. She housed him at a cave surrounded by a plain with rich vegetation. The she-wolf fed the boy and watched him grow into a man. At some point, the two merged, and she gave birth to ten little boys, half-wolf half-human, who then grew into strong men. In adulthood, these ten left the cave area and mingled with the surrounding villages. Each of them in turn had children, and so an extended family of 700 grew up. They all bore the name *Ashina* in honor of their mother, who was called *Asena*.<sup>36</sup> The symbol of the wolf has been omnipotent in Turkic literature and in some political circles ever since, but Asena was not a *gray wolf* at all, unlike the imagination of certain nationalist circles like to claim, but a *blue wolf*: Gök Börü. Blue because of her fur, which shimmered bluish when the boy saw her. And also because of her connection to *Gök Tengri*, the ruler of the eternal blue sky, who acting as a god had sent Asena to save the boy on earth and with him the family from extinction.<sup>37</sup>

With new courage, the ten men learned the art of war and took revenge on their father's enemies. At this moment, the legend of Asena turns into the legend of

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<sup>36</sup> Hunt, David (2008): The Face of the Wolf is Blessed, or is It? Diverging Perceptions of the Wolf, in *Folklore* 119 (December 2008): 319-334, p. 323.

<sup>37</sup> Candan, Ergun (2008): *Türkler'in Kültür Kökenleri* (Origin of Turkish Culture), 77-78.

*Ergenekon*. The protective mountain ranges, where the boy and the she-wolf had taken refuge, represented the only protection of the family from the enemies. A blacksmith named Börtecin, presumably one of the ten sons, made a hammer with the help of which the men could smash the mountain range and clear the way. This opened the gate to the outside world and became the moment of the mythical birth of the Turk. So the Turk was literally a *wolf's child* and had a talent for forging metals, with which weapons could be made.<sup>38</sup> The story is obviously a myth that is supposed to metaphorically explain the origin of the Turkic civilization. Interestingly, it has parallels with the origin stories of the Indo-Aryan<sup>39</sup> *Wusun*, who lived nearby, and even with that of the *Romans*. Believe it or not! The city of Rome came into being after orphaned brothers Romulus and Remus were taken in and suckled by a she-wolf. The two grew up to be men, and Romulus stamped out the city named after him. After killing his brother, that is. A fine detail that is extinct from the Tale of Asena. The wolf then played a not insignificant role in the collective consciousness of the Romans as a national animal, along with the eagle. Among the Turks, in turn, the wolf has played a particularly important role in their cosmology ever since; it is the original national animal of the Turkic peoples. The Gokturks, after founding their empire, introduced the wolf as a totem animal, which from then on was shown as a sign on official standards.<sup>40</sup>

But this myth is as so often in history indeed based on a real incident. For example, the special units of the Gokturks were called Börü, meaning wolves. Moreover, the rulers of the Gokturks held annual ceremonies in the "Cave of the Ancestor" to commemorate the *Ergenekon* legend.<sup>41</sup> And the Chinese annals tell us about a historical event that could explain the background of the legend: The last Hun princes in Gaochang, Wuhui and Anzhou, once fled north from an invading army and arrived in the Altai region, where they resettled with their families. They became vassals of

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<sup>38</sup> Öztuna, Yılmaz (1998): *Türk Tarihinden Portreler*, pp.11-13; Grousset (1970): 130.

<sup>39</sup> Especially in German historiography, the Indo-Aryans, whose settlement area stretched from Central Asia to India (no, not Europe), are referred to as "Indo-Iranians" or even "Indo-Europeans". This is all too understandable given the importance of the term "Aryan" in German history. However, since the majority of the historians whose insights I draw upon in this book have settled on the term Indo-Aryan, and since this work was written for an international audience, I am guided by that term.

<sup>40</sup> Grousset (1970): 130.

<sup>41</sup> Sinor (1996): 329.

the Rouran there. The Turks, as is well known, had later also become their vassals, and coincidentally appear in the chronologies of Asia at the very time in the Altai, in 439, when the last Huns disappeared from Gaochang.<sup>42</sup> This is the origin of the claim by Chinese scholars that the Turks would be the descendants of the Xiongnu, that is, the ancient Huns.



*Figure 6 Clockwise from top right: a female Kyrgyz falconer, a Mongolian falconer, the Orkhon Valley, and a view of the Altai Mountains.*

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<sup>42</sup> Golden, Peter B.: *Central Asia in World History*, 37.

## Searching for the First Turk

This story took place in the 5th century C.E., at the beginning of the European Middle Ages. According to a common theory, the term *Turk* also appeared for the first time in that period. However, there is evidence that this term was already in use in ancient times as the designation "Turks" was already mentioned by the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela in the 1st century C.E., as a name for a people north of the Sea of Azov in Ukraine. Pliny the Elder, who lived at the same time as Pomponius, spoke of the *Tyrcae* in Ukraine.<sup>43</sup> The ancient *Turucanian* people, situated between Mesopotamia and the Zagros Mountains, happened to bear a similar sounding name during the Bronze Age.<sup>44</sup> The history of the *Togarmah*, who according to the Hebrew Bible inhabited Anatolia, is also worth mentioning. Khazarian Khagan Joseph ben Aaron claimed in 960 C.E. that the Turkic peoples of his time were descendants of the Togarmah. This claim was taken up by the Jewish scholar Joseph ben Gorion as well as Arab scholars. A few decades later, an Arabic translation of Joseph's letters even claimed that the Gokturks belonged to the Togarmahs.<sup>45</sup>

These records have often been pushed aside by historians, with the main argument that there had been no Turkic *identity* at that time. But this is hardly a believable correct counter, it is not a falsification of the aforementioned theory. Therefore, Sinor correctly points out that an argument like "there were no Turks then, because they formed only in the 5th century!" is an exemplary form of *petitio principii*.<sup>46</sup> So, to quote Wikipedia for a change, it would be an assertion that is substantiated by a statement that already presupposes the assertion to be proven to be true. In other words, we do not know if the Turkic identity actually formed only around the 5th century, with the advent of the Gokturks. Perhaps it existed prior, just not yet in written form. Perhaps texts that would indicate this were actually written but have

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<sup>43</sup> Sinor, Denis (1990): *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, pp. 285, 287.

<sup>44</sup> An interesting introduction to this is provided by Jørgen Laessøe (1959): *The Shemshāra Tablets* and Daniel T. Potts (2014): *Nomadism in Iran: From Antiquity to the Modern Era*.

<sup>45</sup> Among others, he also lists the partly hostile Oghuz and Pechenegs as Togarmah, as well as the Alans and Avars, whose Turkic identity is interestingly almost always denied by German historians. For the influence of the Turks in the Caucasus, see Agustí Alemany (2003): *Sixth Century Albania. Between Byzantium, Sassanian Iran and the Turkic World*, 3. For Joseph's letters and other listings see: Pritsak O. & Golb. N (1982): *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century*.

<sup>46</sup> Sinor (1990): 285.

been lost over the millennia as have over 90 percent of all written texts in our human history. We simply do not know. We cannot say for sure. How then can someone seriously claim that the Turks and Tyrcae of antiquity could have been in no way – under no circumstances! – related to each other Turks? I will not mention by name the gentlemen who disparagingly dismissed these records as mumbo jumbo in their books. It should only be said that their works often, at first and even at second glance, made use of a narrative according to which Turkish and Turkic history before the advent of the Seljuks and Ottomans in Anatolia is described as small and unimportant. In my view, this is not how any decent historian should go to work. Whether they hold a PhD or not: even historians cannot hide their own bias, at most they can blur it with skillful argumentation. Therefore, of course, I point out that the remarks of Pliny and Pomponius should not be taken as absolute proof of the existence of Turkic peoples in ancient times. It is not proven. But it is not improbable, either. And it is certainly not *impossible*. Because in the following centuries, after the publication of Pliny and Pomponius' works and before the appearance of the Gokturks, there were indeed ethnic groups living in Ukraine and in the nearer surroundings which have finally been classified as Turkic peoples by historians, linguists and like. In Turkic textbooks they were already mentioned about a century ago. In the meantime, the claim that there had already been Turkic-speaking people in Europe long before the Gokturks has been accepted as truthful even by Western (and Russian) scientists. We are talking about the *Ön Türkler*, the foremost Turks.

However, before we take a closer look at the Turkic peoples of late antiquity, a question should be answered that has been far more controversial in the treatment of pan-Turkic history for decades, even centuries, and that may seem like an elephant in the room to you reading these lines. A question alluded to in the introduction to this book and essential to the political and socio-economic history of all Turkic peoples. Where did the Turks actually come from? More precisely, who was the *original first Turk*?

In view of the mostly unclear factual situation with reference to the early Turkic history I have often asked myself whether one should even be allowed to answer this most elementary of all questions at all. Thanks to the latest findings from the scientific disciplines of genealogy, archaeology and even climate research however,

it is worthwhile to finally dare to answer this question and start the search for the legendary *First Turk*. It should be noted at the outset that we are now venturing into territory over which a deep veil has been cast over the centuries, and that we should not expect *definitive* answers to anything. There are some believable claims by science, which I will explain to you now. But even these findings are built on probabilities. Nobody can claim to know the truth fully. But perhaps to a certain extent. For example, you have learned by now that many countries in Central Asia ending with a "-stan" in their names are inhabited by people speaking a Turkic language, and that there are a lot of these Turkic languages. Furthermore, you have found out that the so-called *Turkic speakers* are scattered from Moldova to Crimea to present-day China, and that they can even understand and converse with each other under certain conditions. Lastly, you may also have surmised that this dispersion of Turkic languages was due to a series of emigrations from Asia to Europe or the Middle East, and of course to Anatolia. These three findings – dispersion, language affinity and migration – allow the conclusion that the Turkic peoples originally had a common homeland, a *Urheimat*, and that this original homeland was somewhere in Asia as even today in the East there are far more Turkic languages and dialects to be stumbled upon than in the West of Eurasia. So far so good. Perhaps these facts were already known to you before reading this book, perhaps it has only now "clicked". In any case, the theory of a Turkic *Urheimat* is recognized and undisputed worldwide in all scientific disciplines. But where exactly was this place located?

An answer like "Central Asia" is not necessarily wrong, but much too imprecise. Because it depends on how far back in history we want to go. At the time when the legend of Asena is set, the Turkic peoples were already spread all the way to Europe. But the further we go back into the past, the smaller the dispersion of the Turkic peoples and the clearer their common origin becomes. In the period of the Asena legend and the Gokturk Empire that followed, most Turks most likely lived in an area between Turfan and Gansu (modern China) to the east, Lake Baikal (Russia) to the north, and Lake Balqas (Kazakhstan) to the west. Practically in between are the Altai and Sayan mountains, which became the seat of the Ashina clan of the Gokturks, and thus the center of political power in the Turkic world. If we turn back time a few centuries more, to the year 1 AD, the situation of the Turks looks significantly

different. Back then, many Turkic tribes were part of the Xiongnu Federation which is considered to be the Asian origin of the later Huns. While we do not know how great the influence of the Turks was, it is likely that the Xiongnu political elite spoke Turkic and accordingly belonged to one or more Turkic peoples. After the disintegration of the Xiongnu due to Chinese military operations, the federation fragmented, as noted earlier, first into a northern and southern and later into many different parts. In the process, the Turkic tribes migrated from the Xiongnu core area in eastern Mongolia primarily to the south and especially to western Asia.<sup>47</sup> Again, before the emergence of the Xiongnu, i.e. before the 2nd century B.C.E., we could narrow down the habitat of the Turks even further. Already around the year 1200 B.C.E. the so called *Proto-Turks* started to move south as cattle breeders and to make use of the wide steppe of the Eurasian belt, just from Mongolia to Kazakhstan.<sup>48</sup> In the process, they had encountered other nomadic tribes and mingled with them. This would explain why the Turks had become part of the Xiongnu political establishment about a millennium later. The integration process took a correspondingly long time. The Turks had not invaded the warmer, possibly more fertile south as invaders, but had migrated slowly along with the early Mongols, Koreans and Japanese. This leads us to the *real* original homeland of the Turks. As summarized by Junzo Uchiyama of the Institute of Japanese Art and Culture at the University of East Anglia, DNA studies indicate that the proto-Turks can be traced back to Lake Baikal.<sup>49</sup> The origin of the Turkic peoples would thus lie far more northward and more eastward than in principle still into the 21st Century is assumed. It was not in Central Asia, not at the Altai mountains. The Turks or Turkic peoples have not had their origin in the steppe belt, they migrated there later. Moreover, Uchiyama et al. point out that there was most probably a kinship connection between those people who emigrated to America via the Bering Strait and those who stayed behind (Turks, Mongols, etc.). According to this theory, the so-called genetic haplogroups of the indigenous people of North

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<sup>47</sup> Golden (2011): 34.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, W. T. T., Jargalan, B., Lowry, K. B., Clark, J., Tuvshinjargal, T., & Bayarsaikhan, J. (2017). A Bayesian chronology for early domestic horse use in the Eastern Steppe. *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 81, 49-58, 50.

<sup>49</sup> Uchiyama, Junzo; Gillam, J. Christopher; Savalyev, Alexander; Ning, Chao (2020): Population dynamics in Northern Eurasian forests: a long-term perspective from Northeast Asia, in *Evolutionary Human Sciences* (2020), 2, e16, 1-19, 12.



America can be traced back to the Sayan-Altai region. This would confirm a widespread opinion among today's Turks that the ancient Turks and *Native Americans* had a common origin.<sup>50</sup>

Northeast Asia is also an important keyword for our search for the original Turk: his neighbors were the original Japanese, original Koreans, original Mongols, and original Tungus, as a study by the Max Planck Institute for Human History at the University of Jena has shown. According to this study, the ancestors of the later Turks, Japanese, Koreans, Mongols and Tungus were all involved in millet cultivation, i.e. they were farmers in the field of agriculture. Thus, unlike their descendants in the steppe, the first Turks and Mongols were not only cattle breeders, but also farmers on extensive plantations. The common origin of these five peoples is estimated by the authors of the study to date back to 7000 B.C.E.<sup>51</sup> The emigration to Japan, Korea, Manchuria and Mongolia was gradual. Even during the Bronze Age, the peoples mentioned were in close contact with each other, as commonalities in archaeological excavations have shown.<sup>52</sup> The enumerated studies thus contradict those voices which for years have vehemently denied close connections between Turks, Mongols, Koreans, Japanese and other ethnic groups in between. It seems that the proponents of the *Altaic hypothesis*, i.e., a common origin of the languages just mentioned, may now be proven right after all. This is not to provide a platform for those who flirt with *pseudo-Turanism*. However, their assumption and those of many scholars, who hardly found attention with their assumptions and realizations in countries like Germany, have seemingly been confirmed. From today's view it seems absurd to regard Turks and Japanese as relatives. But we must consider that in all the millennia of migrations, climatic conditions, political changes, socio-economic differences have also formed. The further back in time we go, the stronger the connection between Turks and Japanese, between Mongols and Koreans become.

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<sup>50</sup> Uchiyama (2020): 15.

<sup>51</sup> Max Planck Institute for the History of Man (Jena 2021) press release: Trans-Eurasian languages spread with agriculture, Nov. 10, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Robbeets, M., Bouckaert, R., Conte, M. et al. (2021): Triangulation supports agricultural spread of the Transeurasian languages in: *Nature* 599, 616-621, here: 617-618.

But back to the Ön Turks of antiquity. In the so-called Pontic-Caspian area, which includes the region from the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus to the Crimean Peninsula, the Gokturks had to expect little resistance when they arrived there in 555. As this region had already been a permanent settlement area of Eurasian steppe peoples for centuries, which appeared in the writings of ancient historians. However, a collective name like the ever-popular term *Scythians* would distort the real relations among the ethnic groups. Because in the 5th century, the scholar Priscus of Panium reported that the Saragurs and Onogurs, who had then been part of the Hunnic Empire, arrived at the Eastern Roman Emperor in Constantinople and asked him for help. They had been driven out of their homeland on the Black Sea by the Sabirs. The Sabirs, in turn, saw themselves as victims of an attack by the Avars, who had extended their empire into western Asia and were trying to settle there.<sup>53</sup> Leo the First granted the Saragurs and Onogurs lands in what is now Ukraine, and they continued living in safety from the invaders for a while. We will come back to the Avars later. But the Saragurs and Onogurs? You guessed it. Yes, they were Turkic peoples. They were part of the *Ogur Federation*, a kind of union of various equestrian nomads. Among the most important and powerful tribes, besides Saragurs and Onogurs, were also Sabirs, Kutrigurs and Utigurs. All these ethnic groups were speakers of a Turkic language, which today is classified as being part of the Ogur branch, and was also spoken by the ancient Bulgarians who joined the region at the time of the Gokturks.<sup>54</sup> We can conclude from these findings that the influence of Turkic culture already reached deep into eastern Europe when the Ashina arrived there. For the Onogurs as well as the Saragurs were not only part of the Ogur Federation. The whole federation was in their turn a division of the *Turkic Tiele federation*, which play a particularly important role in our story.<sup>55</sup> On the one hand, this fact speaks for the wide sphere of influence of the Tiele on the Eurasian continent. It would on the other hand explain the absence of any sources about the battles of the Gokturks during their expansion into Europe as there were simply no greater battles to record. The Turks from East Asia did not vehemently fight the Turks in the West, and yet or perhaps because precisely of this were able to integrate them so quickly into their empire. The Ashina clan thus

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<sup>53</sup> Sinor (1990): 257.

<sup>54</sup> Sinor (1990): 233-235, 256-262.

<sup>55</sup> Golden (2011): 37

succeeded in what many before (and after) them failed to do: achieve unity among the Turkic peoples without too many wars.

In conclusion, you are now familiar with the situation of the Turkic peoples around the year 500 in Eurasia. But how exactly do the Gokturks fit into this picture? The ruling dynasty of the Ashina clan was not even listed as part of the *First Turks*. The reason is simple. The origin of the Ashina is far more complex and could fill a book of its own. To understand what made the members of this tribe so special, it is time for a brief outline of their history before we finally jump into the rise of the Gokturk Empire.

## The Ashina Clan from Gaochang

I must firstly address a claim that I have read in many history books and online forums. It is a claim that the Gokturks would not have been “real Turks” and its proponents can be traced back to the prehistory of the Gokturk Khaganate. The empire famously came into being when a certain Turk named Bumin rebelled against his overlord, the Rouran Khagan, in 546, defeated him in two battles, and then took power himself. Bumin left the Rouran administration untouched but installed his Ashina clan family members in the high positions of the state. And he proclaimed himself Khagan. Under the leadership of his younger brother Istemi, the empire expanded to present-day Ukraine. Later, the sons of Bumin preserved and expanded the wealth and influence of the Gokturks in East Asia. But the term *Gök Türk* does not encompass all Turkic peoples who lived in the empire at that time, only the *Ashina* dynasty. Since the Ashina united under their own banner practically all Turkic tribes existing in the world at that time, some believe that the Turks somehow ruled the empire together. It is true that the number of revolts in the Khaganate was virtually nil until the civil war in the 580s, suggesting widespread approval of Ashina rule by other Turkic peoples. First and foremost, however, all Turks in the empire were subject to the Khagan. And the Khagan was elected by the Ashina family, by no one else.

But were the Ashina themselves Turks? Let us do some clarification on this matter and list the facts one by one. The Ashina spoke the ancient Turkic language. This much is certain. And since they were as talented steppe warriors as the Xiongnu Huns before them, the Chinese, for example, assumed that the Ashina clan had been a successor tribe of the Huns as I have mentioned a few times already.<sup>56</sup> The Huns were a federation of different ethnic groups, but we know that there were Turkic-speaking people who had played an important role in the upper class of the Xiongnu confederation. There was definitely a Turkic influence among the Huns. I enumerate this fact for the umpteenth time because now the importance of it for our story should become very clear to you. Just as Genghis Khan considered himself the heir of the steppe warriors of bygone days, the leaders of the Ashina clan according to Chinese

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<sup>56</sup> Zhōu Shū (Book of the Northern Zhou Dynasty): Volume 50.

logic could have thought the same and acted accordingly towards China. But the Ashina names reveal something else that many combatants in the numerous forum wars on the Internet overlook. Bumin. Istemi. Mukhan. Taspar. Names of great Gokturk rulers that sound nothing at all like other ancient Turkic like Eren, Ilker or Kayra. Peter B. Golden, a luminary among Turkologists, concludes that the Ashina rulers bore names that would indicate Indo-Iranian origin.

"The Ashina were Aryans?" I hear some of you ask in amazement. This seems completely absurd at first and even more at second glance. Why would a non-Turkic clan suddenly become so popular among Turks, let alone freely emphasize Turkic identity? After all, the Ashina's proper self-designation was *Türk*. But there are some counter-arguments or facts that speak for a kinship with the Wusun. Before their arrival in the Altai, the clan had dwelled in the Turfan basin, close to the Aryan Wusun. And both the Wusun and the Ashina shared the legend that a wolf was their mythical ancestor. It is therefore not unlikely that the Ashina was a tribe related to the Wusun but fled from a Chinese invasion to the area where other Turks had lived for centuries. If one takes the latest studies of the Max Planck Institute at the University of Jena as an aid, this contradicts the origin of the Turkic language, which is said to have developed in Northeast Asia. If Turks, Japanese and Koreans had their common origin in Manchuria, how do the Ashina from the Turfan Basin fit into the picture? Well, one answer could be that they simply *don't*. One could argue that the Ashina clan was *not* originally part of the Turkic cultural world. But those who rely only on names or geography to feed their argument ignore the third pillar that we know defined the Turkic peoples: shared identity in the form of language, religion, and tradition. It is true that the Ashina seemingly appeared out of nowhere. But they did not invent Turkic identity, they were merely the first to make that identity visible on the world stage of great states. The Ashina worshipped the same God as all other Turks. They practiced the same rites and traditions as all other Turks. And as already mentioned, they spoke the same language. Doesn't that then make the Ashina Turkic, regardless of their non-Turkic names?

This is the crux of the matter. The Gokturk Khaganate was multicultural. However, this does not mean the pejorative term "Multi-Kulti" as our German readers may

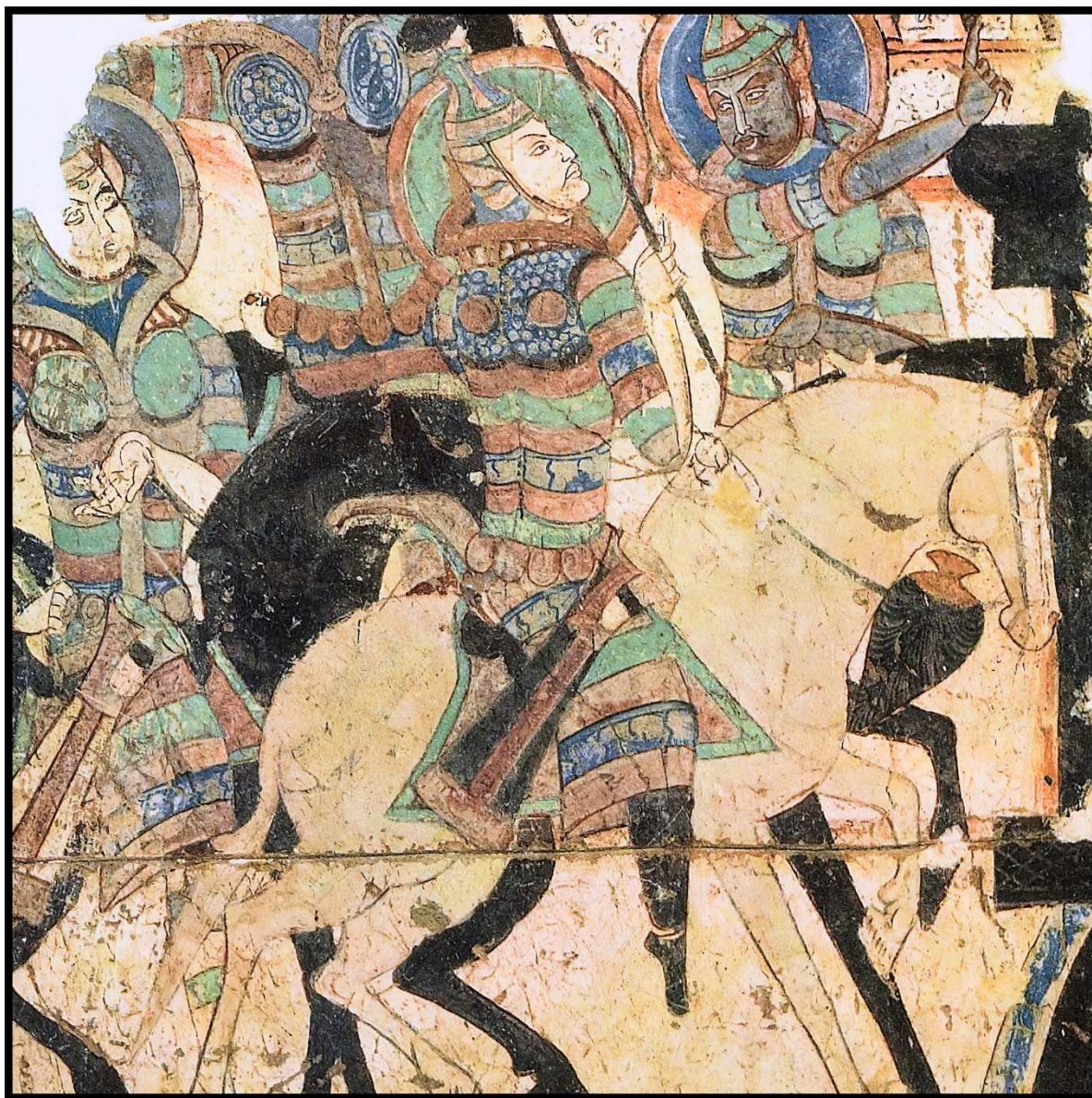
know it, but an organic coming together of many different cultures that were actually not so different at all. The Ashina ruled over the empire. The Tiele Federation, an amalgamation of many ancient Turkic tribes, fought for the empire aside from the White Huns. The Iranian-origin Sogdians traded for the empire. And all the other Turkic tribes and state-like entities formed the foundation on which the empire was built: the *Türk Bodun*, the Turk people. It was precisely the versatility of the Khaganate that massively distinguished it from all the other great empires, namely the Byzantines, Persians and Chinese, even though the latter were admittedly also multicultural to a certain extent. Moreover, there is a study that contradicts the idea of a non-Turkic origin of the Ashina. It was conducted in 2015 by Chinese genetic researchers. DNA samples from members of the Ashina clan were studied. The *Ashide*, who play a rather minor role for our story, were the second most powerful clan in the Gokturk Khaganate. They were closely related to the Ashina and provided the princesses and queens of the empire. The marriage of an Ashide woman to an Ashina man regulated the stability of their joint rule. For example, the mother of An Lushan, a general of the Chinese T'ang dynasty who instigated a disastrous rebellion against the T'ang emperor in the 8th century, had also been a member of the Ashide. The Ashide were instrumental in the Ilterish Khagan rebellion against the Chinese. In any case, the genetic samples suggest that both clans were tribes of Turkic origin. The result is that the Ashide belonged to haplogroup Q, more precisely to subgroup Q1a-L53, which corresponds to subgroup Q1a2. And this group was found in other studies in populations in Central Asia and Siberia. The results also show the general distribution of haplogroup Q. I leave uncommented the fact that the entirety of America, referring to the native peoples, the *Indians*, belongs to this group. After the emigration of the *Natives* about 10,000 years ago from Asia across the Bering Strait, this should not be a big surprise to anyone. But the study shows us that the Ashide had their origin in the area from Central Asia to Siberia, probably in Northeast Asia. This is the place described in the Jena University study as the original homeland of the ancient Turks, Japanese and Koreans. Ashide and Ashina were not one and the same tribe, but so closely related that this Northeast Asian origin can also be assumed for the Ashina. This is because another genetic study, this time by Russian scientists, has shown that the Ashina belong to haplogroup R1a, which has also been found

among the Turkic Salurs, Uighurs, and Yakuts. The subgroup shared by these Turkic peoples occurred primarily in the region of southern Siberia, including the Altai.

Regardless of the culture by which the naming of the first rulers may have been influenced, the Ashina were as deeply rooted in ancient Turkic culture as any other Turkic tribe in Eurasia in late antiquity. They may have migrated south in ancient times after the Xiongnu state fragmented, and then returned to the Altai around 436 or 439, where they were again surrounded by their own kin. In any case, the prehistory of the Gokturks is now clarified while the more extensive prehistory of the Ashina and Ashide Turks exists only in fragments. Perhaps even this chapter will be clarified one day with the help of genetic research. Until then we may state the following: the Gokturks were originally Turkic, both before and during the Khaganate period. Language, tradition, customs and even their genes do not allow any other conclusion. Even if this may be tempting for certain *armchair historians*.



## Rise of the Gokturks (542-575)





## Bumin: King of Turks



About a hundred years after the flight to the Altai Mountains, the descendants of Asena reappear in history, this time in the context of real events. In the meantime, the clan had joined forces with the surrounding population. There is evidence that the family now comprised far more than a few dozen members and had also integrated other tribes into its sphere of influence. For one, the Chinese chronicle already speaks not of one of "500 (!) families", which are attributed by the authors to the entity of the Ashina. Since the tribe had fled from the Gaochang region towards the Altai mountains in the same period as the Huns (436-439), the assumption that many of these refugees had united upon or after arrival at the Altai is not unfounded. Thus, the Chinese authors were most likely referring to the many small original Ashina families who were literally related to each other and over time merged with the other families to form a larger clan or tribe. Then again, the Ashina are described in both the *Book of Sui* and the *Tongdian* as a "mixture of various barbarian" ethnic groups. These *Tujue*<sup>57</sup>, as the Chinese called them, now dwelled with the Ashina being the core tribe in the Altai area. Through the trade routes in the south, they came into contact with the merchants of the oasis cities on the Tarim Basin. The later history of the Gokturks shows that they supported these city-states in their fight for survival against the Chinese. The close ties are also evident from the numerous images of Turkic soldiers and nobles from wall paintings in the Kızıl Caves near Aksu. The drawings in Hotan, which are supposed to depict the takeover of the city by Bumin's troops, also indicate this. Interestingly, these depictions were made in 552, the same year the transfer of power to the Turks took place. This is very unusual. Therefore, we may assume that already in the early phase of their ethnogenesis, the Ashina were in active exchange with cities such as Aksu, Kashgar, Hotan and Turfan, the neighboring cities in the original homeland of the first Ashina.

Did the Ashina then possibly already have significant influence on the Silk Road before the establishment of their empire? There is no evidence for this yet. All chronicles, excavations, and accounts found so far indicate that the Ashina clan later seized the cities along the Silk Road by force. Provided a city recognized the suzerainty of the Turks, the Ashina refrained from punishing them, added the area to

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<sup>57</sup> The correct pronunciation of *Tujue* is Tü-kü-eh. Interestingly, this coincides with *Türkiye*, the Turkish name for the modern Republic of Turkey.

their sphere of influence, and moved on. But unlike the western part of the Silk Road, in cities like Samarkand and Bukhara, the eastern part bordering China, Tibet and Mongolia had already come into contact with the Ashina. This possibly facilitated their integration into the Gokturk empire.

But the conquest of cities, the incorporation of trade routes and the recognition of local subjects were a pipe dream for a certain Ashina Tuwu. Tuwu was a 5th generation descendant of the she-wolf Asena, so the chronicles tell us. His father, Axian, had surrendered to the Rouran Khaganate several decades earlier. The Rouran, who figure prominently in the prologue of the book, were the undisputed lords of the steppe in Tuwu's time as well. They ruled a broad strip from Manchuria to Lake Balkash in Kazakhstan. They were later deviously called "wiggly worms" by the Chinese, presumably because they had never been a serious threat to the Chinese states. But for the steppe peoples, there was no escape. It was the Rouran who for the first time called their rulers Khagan and accordingly claimed suzerainty over the entire steppe. The origin of their noble dynasty is unclear. The claim that the Rouran were ancestors of the Mongols is simply not completely proven. Unfortunately, this did not stop generations of historians, including Grousset whom I hold in high esteem, from repeating this claim over and over again.<sup>58</sup> A Mongol influence on the linguistic level is certainly demonstrable, but it is equally likely that at least parts of the Rouran spoke Turkic. This does not make the ruling dynasty Turks, as long as Turkic was not the only mother tongue, as it probably was with the Xiongnu. Instead, we must assume that the Rouran as a whole, like many other ruling dynasties of antiquity, were a product of different ethnicities. "Turco-Mongol" would be a more appropriate term. And even this term only scratches the surface of the iceberg.

But those Turks and also the demonstrably actual ancestors of the Mongols did not live together *with* but *under* the rule of the Rouran at that time. It was not a totally just society, rather a *giving* on the part of the subjects and a *taking* by the ruling elite. As was often in world history, I might add. It had most probably been Ashina Axian who had reluctantly accepted the vassalization of his clan by the Khagan. We do not know what exactly took place in detail. But since Axian probably ruled around the

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Grousset (1970).

year 500, and the Turkic Tiele had surprisingly defeated the Rouran during an uprising in 508, I would argue that at the same time the Ashina also revolted against the Rouran but drew the short straw. From then on, the Ashina were no longer tolerated by the Rouran in their domain but had to be ready for action at any time on the Khagan's command to protect the rulers' interests militarily. Tuwu therefore continued to be Yabgu<sup>59</sup> of the Ashina but was officially subject to the Rouran Khaganate. The vassalization of the Ashina Turks was finalized.<sup>60</sup>

The period in which we find ourselves marks, as you might know, the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. We refer to the years between 300 and 600 more precisely as *Late Antiquity*, since in Europe the feudal societies we know from the textbooks had not yet established themselves at all in the year 500 (the "official" beginning of the Middle Ages in European school books). In Asia, the situation was quite different. Practically all states, those of the sedentary and those of the nomadic peoples, were feudalistic in structure.<sup>61</sup> One family held sway, depending on the culture being sometimes more and sometimes less dependent on the favor of the people and the lower nobility. A visitor from Europe could find strict slavery in China as well as watch the Rouran cattle breeders doing their farm labor. But a distinctive feature of late Asian antiquity were the constant migratory movements. While some Indo-Arian or Indo-Iranian groups stayed in the oasis towns at the Tarim, many Turkic-speaking tribes moved continuously westward since the end of the Xiongnu. Many of them were organized in the loose federation of the notorious Tiele who we have mentioned.<sup>62</sup> And when the leader of the Tiele Federation took up arms against the Rouran, the Ashina were not the only Turks to join the rebellion, it seems. The Turk ethnicity or cultural identity was by now certainly graspable. Only the term still referred to the Ashina clan, its fellow tribes, and all Turkic-speaking allies within their sphere of influence. The Turkic peoples with their respective dialects had risen to become the dominant ethnic group from the Altai to Eastern Europe, and the rebellion of 508 had left a deep impression on the Rouran nobility. Even if the Ashina

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<sup>59</sup> Title of the Ashina Turks, which is possibly of Indian origin and was equivalent to a lesser royal title, one beneath the Khagan later on.

<sup>60</sup> Taşağıl (2013): 127.

<sup>61</sup> Barisitz (2017): 58.

<sup>62</sup> The Tiele are also known as *Tölös* in Turkish historiography.

clan, the Tiele Federation and other ethnic groups such as the Ogur and Kirghiz did not live together under one roof, they were firstly all Turkic-speaking, secondly had demonstrably settled in the mentioned areas permanently and thirdly were not always friends, but rarely enemies against each other. A formerly common thesis, according to which the Kyrgyz were originally not Turks and were only Turkized in the 6th century, was vehemently contradicted by some historians. Thus, the appearance of the Kyrgyz, who are described in ancient sources as red-haired and with green eyes, should not be an exclusion criterion for the fact that they were Turkic speakers and belonged to the Turkic cultural sphere. The heterogeneity of the Turkic peoples should not be disregarded.<sup>63</sup> In any case, the coexistence of the tribes implies the existence of a conception regarding the common identity. Besides the Turks, proto-Mongols also lived in the steppes, mainly in Northeast Asia, but they were either subjugated by the Gokturks or driven out completely as we will see later. In any case, the Turkic-speaking ethnic groups enumerated, and others whose history remains to be told were aware of their commonalities. This cannot have escaped the glances of the rulers of the Rouran Khaganate.

After a long civil war, a certain Anagui ascended the throne of the Rouran in 520, sweeping away the second recorded rebellion of the Tiele.<sup>64</sup> In the meantime, the wounds in the Rouran state had already turned into deep scars. Accordingly, Khagan Anagui ruled with an iron hand from the newly established capital of Mumocheng under his command. He reportedly had the capital fortified with two rows of ramparts and protected by a group of elite bodyguards.<sup>65</sup> For thirty years he was able to consolidate his power in the state and put down any further uprisings. Among others, there had been a rebellion by the Turkic-speaking Dingling. Tuwu was still unable to free the Ashina from bondage. But when his son Bumin was crowned leader of the Ashina in the 530s or 540s, the fate of Anagui and his henchmen was theoretically already sealed.<sup>66</sup> For even if the geopolitical situation in the Eurasian Steppe did not

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Taşagıl, Ahmet (2016): *Eski Türk Boyları Çin Kaynaklarına Göre*, Bilge Kültür Sanat, 92-93.

<sup>64</sup> Golden (2011): 37.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Kim (2019): 28.

<sup>66</sup> The date of Bumin's accession to the throne has not been clarified. The information that his year of birth was 490 is also not provided with sources in certain online forums and encyclopedias and can therefore be dismissed as implausible.

change at first, Bumin's assumption of power was like a domino effect that set off a long, long chain of events. Almost a century after his ancestors had fled to the Altai, it was to be Bumin who not only took revenge on the old enemies of his ancestors but also led his family to new, previously unimagined power. He was apparently fed up with the Khagan's rule and was driven by his family's lowly position to change something about the predicament. But his path was one of trials and tribulations.<sup>67</sup>

Meanwhile, the Ashina clan had risen to unintended fame. According to the legend of Asena, they had been making their own weapons since their arrival in the Altai. The art of blacksmithing was indeed internalized by the family as they were located in or near the Altai Mountains and could make use of them accordingly. By supplying numerous states, tribes, and possibly even private mercenaries with those very weapons, the Ashina clan had earned a reputation as a family of excellent armorer.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, *their* very existence posed a permanent threat to the continued existence of the *Rouran*. No other Turkic people of late antiquity was as visceral in the production of weapons and armor as the Ashina. Possibly, despite the *de jure* political affiliation with the Khagan, the family members continued to live in economic self-sufficiency, as in fact did all the nomads of the steppe before them. Since they were also talented archers and horsemen who could very well take care of themselves in case of war, their military capacities were not bad at all. The Chinese *Book of Zhou* even records an event in 542 when an army of Turkic warriors attempted to attack northern China. A man named Yuwen, descended from the royal *Taizu* dynasty, was to make first contact with the Turks of the Ashina clan in the eighth year of his political career as governor of Suizhou<sup>69</sup>. The Book of Zhou, volume 27, tells us:

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Every year when the ice on the *Wei* River froze in winter the  
Turks came to invade and plunder the area. Yuwen ordered the

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<sup>67</sup> Drompp, Michael R.: Imperial State Formation in Inner Asia. The Early Turkic Empires (6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries),v in: Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae Vol. 58, No. 1, Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Mediaeval History of the Eurasian Steppe: Szeged, Hungary May 11-16, 2004: Part I (2005), pp. 101-111 (11 pages), 103.

<sup>68</sup> Barisitz (2017): 52; Sinor (1996): 331.

<sup>69</sup> A settlement near Chang'an, now Xi'an, which at that time had been the capital of alternating northern Chinese dynasties.

people of *Suizhou* to the castles in advance so that they would be protected. In December of that year when the Turks advanced from the valley, fire was set at the place where a lot of firewood was stored. The Turks, fearing the arrival of a large (Chinese) army, fled and trampled each other, leaving their animals and people behind. [...] Ever since the Turks did not dare to come back. It was arranged to establish a garrison to be prepared for them in the future.<sup>70</sup>

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The Turks of Bumin had been put to flight – the cited source implies a ruse and not real battle as the reason – but at least became known to the Chinese as a political entity. They acted independently of their liege Anagui. However, the Ashina's numerical inferiority to the Rouran (and other Turkic peoples such as the Tiele) kept Bumin from any further daring adventures. Moreover, his immediate neighbors of the Tiele Federation were once again in revolt against the Rouran. Once again, they were challenging the Khagan's supremacy over the Eurasian Steppe. Instead of joining their revolt, however, Bumin took a different path. He remained neutral at first. We do not know what was going on in his mind and whether he was following a *master plan*. Given the speed with which Bumin acted in the years that followed, it is not improbable to assume the latter.

We are going to reconstruct step by step the course of events in 545 and 552, the period that led to the creation of the Gokturk Khaganate. Instead of merely relying on the findings of historians, which may well be helpful to us, I will make use primarily of Chinese, Korean, and Turkic primary sources and provide a chronological listing of events.<sup>71</sup> Then a classification of all events into the larger framework will follow, which may help us to grasp Bumin's motives and intentions. In the end, you will be able to understand *why* this first great Turkic empire came into being and *how* it expanded so rapidly in all directions. It should be noted in advance that besides political ambitions and motives such as maintaining power and

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<sup>70</sup> Book of Zhou, Book 27, section on Yuwen Taizu 宇文測.

<sup>71</sup> Frankly, there have been no substantial theories of historiography on this subject. It has often been stated how Bumin became a Khagan, but not why and under what circumstances.

fame, climatic and consequently socio-economic changes of the 6th century will also play a role. But one step at a time. In the first year 545, when the Tiele were preparing their third rebellion, Bumin kept political distance from the troublemakers. But instead of doing nothing, as his father may have, he moved south. With a considerable army of steppe warriors in tow, he paid a second visit to the Chinese cultural area with the intention of supposedly plundering their cities and grabbing booty for his clan on the Altai. Until this event, none of the available sources reports any raids by the Ashina families against China in the hundred years since their arrival at the Altai with the exception of one passage in the already cited *Book of Zhou*. However, these annals were written over a period of almost 80 years. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that the Chinese wanted to retroactively attribute to the Turks something that did not take place in this way or that happened later. Forays had actually been commonplace even before the emergence of the Xiongnu, because while the nomads in northern Asia had food, metals or horses in their homeland available, they had little or no access to coveted luxury goods such as silk. This luxury good was exclusively processed by the sedentary peoples in the warmer southern regions. However, since the Ashina did not live in the Mongolian steppe but in the Altai mountains and were in active contact with the traders from the south, it does not lack a certain logic that they considered such raids "unnecessary". All the more astonishing then appears Bumin's "raid" of 542.

The Chinese cultural sphere is often abbreviated in this book as *China*, which simply means everything south of the Mongolian steppe. This term refers to the geographical and cultural conditions. It should be noted, however, that there had not been a politically unified China since the aforementioned Han Empire<sup>72</sup>. In northern China at that time, two large families ruling which actually descended from the ancient Huns. This so-called Tuoba family (Turkish *Tabgaç*) had later divided into several dynasties.<sup>73</sup> Now, in late antiquity, for several decades the Western Wei and the Northern Qi were hostile to each other and by this time they had already been sinicized. This means that the ruling families had adopted Chinese traditions, rites, and of course language, and cultivated them in the courts of their empires. The most

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<sup>72</sup> The Han Dynasty (202 BC - 220 AD) ruled unified China and parts of Central Asia.

<sup>73</sup> Golden (1992): 73; Barisitz (2017): 49.





Bumin sought out the territory of the Wei, as it was geographically closest. He had by now increased the prestige of the Ashina within the Rouran Khaganate, maintained an acceptable relationship with Anagui and dared without remorse to invade Chinese territory, capture valuable goods and retreat to the steppes. Or so it seemed. The Chinese, as the sources tell us, took the danger from Bumin seriously. To forestall his campaign, a certain Yuwen Tai was sent on a diplomatic mission by the Wei emperor. Tai was the chancellor of the Wei, a kind of supreme official who could also act as commander-in-chief of the army thanks to certain political powers. He sent a certain Nanai-Banda, a Sogdian from Bukhara, to the Altai.<sup>74</sup> Nanai-Banda's goal was to establish trade relations with the Ashina, both to stop the incursions and to allow economic profit. For the Wei were well aware of the large number of weapons and armaments produced by the Ashina. Moreover, probably the most important commodity that the Turks could have sold was traded in the form of horses.<sup>75</sup> Based on these accounts, we can assume that Bumin had invaded Wei territory at least once and then retreated. Bumin agreed. The decision should not surprise us. After all, trading with the Wei allowed him to get his hands on valuable Chinese silk without detours by, say, Sogdian traders who demanded certain prices and without the need to go on costly plundering campaigns every year. From a geopolitical point of view, Bumin may have provoked this deal. But what if the Ashina wanted to gain the Wei Empire as an ally in the fight against the Rouran from the very beginning? This is pure speculation on my part, of course, but it does seem unusual for a semi-nomadic clan to make such a deal with a sedentary empire in such a short time and without pre-existing relations. Moreover, since the Tiele were preparing their rebellion, and Bumin had demonstrably learned of it beforehand, we can assume that he reported it to the Wei. Why? This can be explained by subsequent events. In any case, this anecdote covers the *economic component* of Bumin's rise to stardom.

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<sup>74</sup> This is the reconstructed form of the Chinese name An Nuopanto of Rong Xinjiang. Cf. Shing Müller (2008): Sogdians in China around 600 A.D. Archaeological evidence of a life between assimilation and identity preservation, in: Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, Vol. 183-184, 123.

<sup>75</sup> Vaissière (2005): 210.

In the following year 546 the Tiele rebellion broke out, this time actually threatening Rouran rule. Anagui had been in power for nearly three decades and aged. Relations with the neighboring White Huns, who ruled over a broad swath from Central Asia to India, had once borne witness to friendship. Both great empires posed a military threat to the Western Wei and their ambitions of a unified China.<sup>76</sup> By the mid-6th century, however, these relations were on hold thanks in part to a disruption of Rouran-Hunnic relations by Wei agents seeking to diminish Rouran power.<sup>77</sup> Anagui was de facto on his own, his rule tarnished. But the Khagan unexpectedly received help from Bumin. He told Anagui about the Tiele attempt, then gathered his retinue and a large army and marched west. The young Turk advanced with his Ashina warriors into what is now Kazakhstan and crushed the Tiele uprising. It is said that shortly thereafter he brought 250,000 Tiele soldiers under his control. This is highly unusual. First, the official liege of both factions continued to be a certain Anagui; there was a branch situated in-between the Khagan and the lesser lords. Second, there is the question of how Bumin managed to defeat such a numerically larger army when his own clan is said to have been comparatively in the minority. Perhaps the Chinese sources reporting the event exaggerated or were misunderstood. It is quite possible that the figure of 250,000 that repeatedly appears in history books referred to the total number of potential warriors of the Tiele, not to the army that fought against Bumin in the field. Otherwise, these accounts imply that the Ashina were either a) valiant warriors with superhuman strength or b) already comprised a larger clan than just their own family members, with the others accepting Bumin as their Yabgu, their leader, as I have already indicated in my theory above. It seems logical to consider possibility b).

Once again, we have found evidence that the Ashina clan already included a larger number of members than just their own family members, and that they all accepted the Ashina leader as their leader. If the actual number of the Tiele army should have been clearly smaller, e.g. 100,000 instead of 250,000 men, then now the victory of

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<sup>76</sup> On containment attempts and peace efforts by the Wei against the Rouran, see De La Vaissière, Étienne (2005): *Sogdian Traders*, 205.

<sup>77</sup> On the relations between Rouran and White Huns see the doctoral thesis by Aydogdy Kurbanov: *The Hephthalites: archaeological and historical analysis*, dissertation at the Free University of Berlin, esp. pp.182-183.

the Ashina can be better understood. In addition, there is a Chinese source, which states the man strength of the Tiele after all with "only" 50,000.<sup>78</sup> Why and how a clan, which had been producing its own weapons and armor for a century and which still under the supremacy of an emperor independently established relations with a Chinese state (!), could defeat such a loosely organized group as the Tiele in the battle of 546 seems self-explanatory by now. Economic capacities were already being expanded upon. Now the Ashina clan was also increasing its military might. The capabilities of the Turks in general increased day by day. Bumin's self-confidence must have increased accordingly, so much so that he actually placed himself between his Khagan and the Tiele in the political hierarchy without the Khagan's blessing, Bumin was obeyed by tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of steppe warriors. Thus we have internalized the *military component* in the rise of the Gokturks as well.

Bumin had warned Anagui of the Tiele's revolt in advance and put it down with his own hands. On paper, he had protected his liege lord from an attempted coup. Therefore, in his view, he was entitled to collect a quid pro quo in return. Bumin sent an envoy to the court of Anagui in Mumocheng after his overwhelming victory. But Bumin did not want to be given gold or goods and instead asked the Khagan for the hand of his daughter. His self-confidence was now at its peak, evident to any observer including his new Chinese allies. The Yabgu of the Ashina wanted to marry into the Rouran dynasty. A shrewd move which would have injected him into the Yujiulü dynasty. And since the Rouran rule of succession only included male successors, Bumin could theoretically have become a successor to Anagui. Possibly, he could thus eventually reach the throne or at least exert influence over the rest of the Yujiulü nobility. But to accept Bumin – a Turk! – as the rightful heir, and even to have a half-Turkic grandchild, was out of the question for Anagui. For his part, he sent an envoy to Bumin's court in the Altai and had the following words conveyed:

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<sup>78</sup> Book of Zhou: Volume 50.

*"You are my slave and blacksmith! How dare you utter such words?"*

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Anagui openly regarded Bumin as a lowly slave blacksmith.<sup>79</sup> By saying that he was a blacksmith for the Rouran, the Khagan had not yet entered dangerous territory. For it is documented that some Ashina members supplied weapons to the Khagan, perhaps they were forced to do so.<sup>80</sup> But the word *slave* hit a sore spot. To clarify, the term was not meant literally by Anagui as Bumin was not *literally* owned by the Khagan. Instead, Anagui alluded to the fact that the Ashina were politically under the Rouran and had to obey the Khagan and his family.<sup>81</sup> A well-known Turkish saying "haddini bil!" ("know your place [in the hierarchy]!") would be a more appropriate translation for our understanding. Bumin simply should not dare to aspire to higher political offices. In this respect, Anagui's message was a rebuke and an insult, since Bumin had just done the Khagan a great favor. And that is the *political component* of Bumin's rise.

Three factors thus play a role in Bumin's rise and the creation of the Gokturk Empire. The young Turk had created *military capabilities* that posed a threat to his liege. He had established *economic relations* with a Chinese empire, thus securing revenues for steppe goods and the exchange or supply of goods even apart from silk.<sup>82</sup> And he was rebuked by Anagui at the last, while he sought more *political power*. It is evident that Bumin was always willing to test his limits in the process, and it is quite possible that he and his Ashina clan were merely stumbling from event to event, from one stage of the play to the next. But could it be that Bumin had secretly achieved his actual goal? Let us recapitulate the previous events of 545 and 546: Bumin, as leader of the Ashina clan, learns of a rebellion by the Tiele. He warns Anagui of this revolt, then leaves for China and independently establishes economic relations with the

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<sup>79</sup> Gao Yang, "The Origin of the Turks and the Turkish Khanate," *10th Türk Tarih Kongresi: Ankara 22 - 26 Eylül 1986, Kongreye Sunulan Bildiriler*, V. Cilt, Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1991, 731.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Golden (1992): 126.

<sup>81</sup> Sören: Stark (2016): Türk Khaganate, in: MacKenzie (ed.): *The Encyclopedia of Empire*, First Edition, 1st ed.

<sup>82</sup> A factor also emphasized by Stark (2016).

Western Wei. Bumin then returns and marches to Kazakhstan with a band of warriors to suppress the Tiele single-handedly. When Bumin returns and asks for the hand of Anagui's daughter, he is not rewarded but rebuked. As a Yabgu of the Ashina, he should have expected the Khagan's reaction. When, in response to the Khagan's insult, he had the envoys of Anagui executed on the spot and all relations with the Rouran severed, he was most likely not acting out of an emotional outburst but political calculation. However, for the period between the years 546 and 551, no evidence of Ashina activities is recorded. Accordingly, Bumin must have instructed his kinsmen to gradually leave the Rouran court in Mongolia and to cease all supplies to the Rouran, for several years passed before the first confrontation. During this time, surrounding (Turkic) tribes joined the cause of Bumin, possibly due to the prosperity-led perspective through trade with China.<sup>83</sup> However, there is an interesting claim regarding the waiting game of Bumin towards the Rouran. In a study on the conditions of climatic catastrophes on the course of Gokturk history, Gamiev and Kukarskhih list that in the period 536 to 545 extreme climatic conditions appeared that would have literally influenced the course of history. Since the nomadic societies of Eurasia had rarely if ever accumulated food and fodder, climatic catastrophes meant socioeconomic ruin. A disadvantage compared to the sedentary peoples who could save and store their harvests for bad days.<sup>84</sup> Researchers were able to identify events around the world for the above time period that had an unfavorable impact on crops in Eurasia. China was also affected and, as is known, divided into the Western Wei and Northern Qi Empires in the affected northern part of the country. The steppe peoples further north could make political use of this fact, but they had to wait for the normalization of food supply in cattle breeding. Therefore, it can be assumed that Bumin waited to attack Anagui in order to be able to mobilize its forces logistically as well.<sup>85</sup> This would explain the absence of any records in the otherwise precise Chinese chronicles.

The next recorded event took place in the early 550s, probably in 551. Remember: a few years earlier, the Western Wei had approached the Ashina and established

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<sup>83</sup> Strong (2016): 1-2.

<sup>84</sup> Ganiev, Rustam; Kukarskhih, Vladimir (2018): Climate extremes and the Eastern Turkic Empire in Central Asia, in *Climatic Change* (2018) 149, 385-397, 386.

<sup>85</sup> Ganiev; Kukarskhih (2018): 390.

economic relations. Now Bumin sent a diplomatic mission on *his* part to the Chang'an court.<sup>86</sup> He asked for a marriage on his part with one of the princesses of the Tuoba dynasty. If the Rouran would not bequeath him a wife, he would have to look elsewhere. And not surprisingly, Yuwen Tai as chancellor of the Wei granted Bumin's request. Tai dispatched Changle, a young daughter of the emperor, to the Altai. The marriage between Bumin and Changle took place on June 17, 551. The Wei emperor died shortly thereafter. Bumin, now allied with the Wei, sent 200 well-bred horses from the Eurasian steppe to the Wei court as a token of sympathy. Which emperor was Princess Changle's father, however, is disputed. In 551 Emperor Fei, and after his death Emperor Gong, ruled over the empire. However, Changle's name is not recorded under either emperor. It is also not known who her mother was. Could Changle have been the daughter of a lower nobleman who had agreed to the marriage in agreement with the emperor?<sup>87</sup> Since the Tuoba dynasty of the Wei the had Turkic origins, the Ashina-Wei alliance could have consisted of much more than realpolitik. Thus, Grousset summarized the situation as follows:

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*Bumin then allied himself with the Wei dynasty, a dynasty of the T'o-pa (Tuoba), thus presumably of Turkish origin [...] Although completely Sinicized, the T'o-pa were perhaps not insensitive to this Turkish blood relationship. In any case, they had to be happy about this alliance which threatened their old enemies, the Mongolian Juan-Juan (Rouran), in their back [...].*<sup>88</sup>

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The alliance of the two families was now complete and with the Tiele warriors in reserve Bumin began a revolt of his own against Anagui. The mobilization of his revolutionary army included the warriors of all the tribes integrated by the Ashina since 546. After six years of preparation, the Ashina went to war against their liege.

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<sup>86</sup> Chang'an served as the seat of the Western Wei, and later the Northern Zhou, in the 6th century. Cf. Stark (2016): 2.

<sup>87</sup> In such a case, however, the alliance would have been between the family of that nobleman and the Ashina, and not between the imperial family and the Ashina. For a listing of Changle, see Zhōu Shū (Book of Zhou): Volume 50.

<sup>88</sup> Grousset (1970), 131.

Bumin's army defeated the Rouran forces twice. First in January 552 in a small battle on the Altai-Mongolia border, and between February and March in a major battle north of Huaihuang near China.<sup>89</sup> The defeat was so crushing that Anagui committed suicide and his family fled to the south.<sup>90</sup> The Rouran were forced to retreat from the steppe and found refuge with the Northern Qi, rivals of the Wei. Another part of the Rouran fled towards Europe, as already mentioned. There were about 20,000 members of the Rouran in the territory of the Avars.<sup>91</sup>

Bumin now ascended to the vacant post of ruler, took the title of *Illig Khagan*<sup>92</sup> and founded his own empire, the *Empire of Turk*.<sup>93</sup> Princess Changle became Khaghatun, or Hatun, a fellow empress, and the Ashina the new ruling dynasty of the Eurasian Steppe belt. Within six years, Bumin had accomplished what the Ashina and other Turkic tribes had not in six hundred years. For the first time in history, a state emerged that was inhabited and led by Turks and became even larger than any other steppe empire before. The Ashina empire as a result of later campaigns of conquest stretched across the entire Eurasian steppe, from Manchuria to the Black Sea.<sup>94</sup>

*Figure 7 Depiction of the arrival of Turkic knights in the Buddhist city-state of Kocha, after Bumin's Revolution in 552. Found in the Maya Cave, Section 3, Kızıl Caves in Aksu, Xinjiang (East Turkestan), China.*

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<sup>89</sup> Book of Zhou: Volume 50.

<sup>90</sup> Barisitz (2017): 52; Golden (2011): 37; Grousset (1970): 131; Kim (2019): 61; Stark (2016): 2.

<sup>91</sup> Golden (1992): 128.

<sup>92</sup> Illig Khagan means "ruler of the land" in Turkic.

<sup>93</sup> Yavrucuk, Gökay (2019): Gokturk-Sui ilişkilerinde Politik hedefler ve yöntemler, in Ankara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, 10 (2), 2019, 135-146, 136; Golden (2011): 37; Golden (1992): 127.

<sup>94</sup> Golden (2011): 37.



The Ashina family referred to themselves as *Türük*, from which the name Türk is derived. Even today, Anatolian Turks are referred to as *Török* in Hungary<sup>95</sup>. The name probably referred only to their own tribe at first, as explained in detail above. But they were not the only Turks around. Most of the ethnic groups of the Tiele Federation as well as other tribes and kingdoms of Eurasia spoke the same language as the Ashina: Common Turkic. When Bumin's family extended their influence on the entire steppe, they too adopted the *Türk* designation. Their language and traditions had already been the same. But now the Turks of the early Middle Ages were also finally united politically. Bumin was not the first Turkic ruler in history, but he was the first to demand to be *called* King of the Turks. With the ambition to unite the remaining Turkic tribes of Asia under his banner and with them *all the* tribes of the steppe, Bumin set to work with his brother Istemi. Together they led the Ashina family to glory and power. Their first great goal, however, was not in Central Asia, China or Europe but in Korea. The Turks wasted no time. With the Turkic Ashina nobility as their backers and a large warrior caste in tow, they controlled all of Rouran territory, from Lake Alaköl in Kazakhstan to the Gobi Desert and the Tarim Basin to the Great Wall of China. In the north, Bumin's influence did not extend very far, as the Kyrgyz, also Turkic, dominated the Yenisey region. In the south, he was confronted with two empires whose leaders were of Hunnic origin: he maintained a good relationship with the Western Wei after they had indirectly supported him in the Turk War of Independence. The Northern Qi were in turn hostile to the Turks. They had granted asylum to the remnants of the Rouran dynasty and settled them in the border area with the steppe, so this diplomatic attitude of the Qi seems quite logical.

But while the revolution against the Rouran was still underway, Bumin had already turned to his first foreign policy goal. For he wanted to take advantage of the general chaos in the region and expand in as many directions as possible. The Koreans populated the outermost settlements on the coast to the Pacific and had led an independent existence for centuries. The settlement area of the Koreans had been divided into several empires. The southern part was ruled by states that competed

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<sup>95</sup>And the name *Hungary*, in turn, derives from the Old German transcription for *Ogur*, the Turkic tribal federation in present-day Ukraine that became a vassal of the Gokturks.

with each other in alternating coalitions. The north belonged to the dominion of the Goguryeo. This kingdom formed the spearhead of Korean civilization. For 500 years, they ruled over northern Korea, Manchuria and even parts of Mongolia. The Goguryeo had established contact with the Xiongnu Huns in ancient times, but this was prevented by the Han Chinese for fear of a Hunnic alliance with the Koreans.<sup>96</sup> Now, the Goguryeo again came into contact with people from the steppes. But the Turks did not come with peaceful intentions. Not yet. In September of the year 551, as the royal Korean chronology *Samguk sagi* describes it, an army of Turkic warriors appeared on the Goguryeo border. The army laid siege to the settlement of Sin-song. It then moved on and probably attacked Paeg'am-song nearby.<sup>97</sup> King Yangwon of Goguryeo then dispatched an army of 10,000 men. The Korean counterattack was successful, and the Turks retreated back to the steppe. In the process, the Koreans reportedly captured about a thousand Turks. Nothing is known about the level of casualties on the Turkic side, although the alleged Turkic strength of "one hundred thousand" may have been an exaggeration by contemporary Korean scholars.<sup>98</sup> The first contact between Turks and Koreans had been hostile in nature. But this event later turned out to be a key moment for Turkic-Korean relations. In the course of the following decades, a regular cooperation began between Turks and Koreans on economic, military and political levels.<sup>99</sup> The Gokturk-Goguryeo relationship was to prove seminal in the resistance to the Sui Dynasty in China, and enemies were to become friends. For the moment, the Liao River represented the easternmost border of the Turkic Empire.

Back home in the Altai, Bumin could take a look at an empire with a powerful army and considerable territory; in terms of power politics, he was in no way inferior to his predecessor Anagui. In the highest position was he himself, the Khagan – the emperor, if you will. Bumin's state, like that of the Rouran, was based on hereditary

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<sup>96</sup> Babayar, Gaybullah (2004): On the Ancient Relations between the Turkic and Korean Peoples, 152; Noh, Tae-Don (2016): Relations between Ancient Korea and Turkey. An Examination of Contacts between Koguryo and the Turkic Khaganate, in: Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 29, no. 2, 361-369, 361.

<sup>97</sup> Noh (2016): 362.

<sup>98</sup> Noh (2016): 362.

<sup>99</sup> Polat, Dilek (2016): "Blood Brothers. What is the Effect of Korean War for the relations between Turkey and South Korea?"

law.<sup>100</sup> The Ashina empire was furthermore not built on an invasion from outside, but on an internal revolution<sup>101</sup>. Therefore, he did not tamper too much with the political structures of the steppe. The Ashina simply provided the Shads and Tegins of the empire, high-esteemed princes and generals.<sup>102</sup> In addition, the title of Beg existed among the ancient Turks. These were tribal leaders originally. Since they were now all subordinate to the Khagan, the Begs no longer had autonomous foreign policy at their disposal, but they did have the authority to lead military commands. From Beg, by the way, the honorary title *Bey* developed during Seljuk and Ottoman rule, a title still used today in Türkiye as an equivalent to “sir”. Mostly, however, with reference to the first name. So for you I would not be “Mr. Yavuz”, but “Mr. Emre” – Emre bey. In any case, the legitimacy of the Khagan was built on the support of these Begs.<sup>103</sup>

But Bumin’s rule was indirect. In order to understand how the Khagan could be simultaneously appointed and legitimized by Tengri, even be untouchable, but nevertheless have preferred indirect rule over his empire, we must look at the size of the Khaganate. The takeover of the Rouran empire meant that the Ashina dynasty now had *de jure* control over 3-4 million square kilometers – *de jure*, that is, legally, because *de facto*, in reality, not every square kilometer belonged to the Ashina.<sup>104</sup> Rein Taagepera, who was a pioneer in the territorial estimation of great empires and whose data I originally wanted to adopt for this chapter, has given in his essay *Size and Duration of Empires* from 1979 the size of the empires of the Rouran and the Gokturks with 2.8-3.3 million km<sup>2</sup> and 5 million km<sup>2</sup>, respectively. Obviously, there is a discrepancy here, because at the founding of the state in 552 the Turkic empire did not extend further than the Khaganate of the Rouran once did. In other words, the Rouran Khaganate and the Gokturk Khaganate would have to be described as almost congruent territorially.

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<sup>100</sup> Barisitz (2017): 52.

<sup>101</sup> Sinor, Denis (1990): *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, 295; see also Sinor (1996): 331.

<sup>102</sup> Drompp, Michael R.: *Inner Asia*, in: Hermans, Erik (2020): *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, Amsterdam University Press, 227.

<sup>103</sup> Barisitz (2017): 52.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Taagepera, Rein (1979): *Size and Duration of Empires. Growth-Decline Curves, 600 B.C. to 600 A.D.*, in: *Social Science History*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (1979), 115-138.

Instead, Bumin took over the empire of Anagui and suddenly possessed over twice as much area? At first glance, this seems illogical. However, since many Turkic tribes joined the Gokturks while being located away from Rouran territory, the figure for the Gokturk Empire is probably *not* exaggerated. But Taagepera definitely *understated* the size of the Rouran territory. An own calculation of mine for the territory of Bumin's empire in 552 resulted in 4.5 million km<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, I estimate the size of the Rouran Khaganate before it was replaced by the Turks to be about 4 million km<sup>2</sup>. My estimate for the Gokturk territory is nevertheless smaller than Taagepera's figure. This can be explained by the fact that he wrongly stated an area of 6 million km<sup>2</sup> for the year 557, after the Gokturks had expanded into eastern Mongolia. But this is not true! As we will see in a moment, the Gokturks had already arrived at the gates of Korea in 551. It is likely that at least large parts of present-day Mongolia and, beyond that, Manchuria had fallen into the firm hands of the Turks along the way, when Bumin had not yet been proclaimed Khagan. Instead, Taagepera should have included the expansion to the west. At this point I would like to withhold some spoilers; it should just be mentioned that the Gokturks expanded not only to Korea but also to Ukraine on the other side of the continent. To be precise, up to Chersonesus on the Black Sea after declaring an indirect war on the Byzantines. We will talk about this event later. If we measure the territory of the Gokturk Khaganate for the year 580 during its greatest expansion, we conclude that the area was no less than 8.6 km<sup>2</sup>. You've heard right. Eight (!) million square kilometers. That's about 3.2 square miles. This exceeds the estimate of Taagepera by far.

It is difficult to say how big the Gokturk Khaganate really was at certain points in time because there were expansions and cessions of territory again and again, the latter especially from 581 on. In this respect, my estimate cannot be taken as a quotable measurement. However, the disagreement that exists about the expansion of the Khaganate should be addressed and discussed in the future, especially since the estimate of my mentioned colleague is at least partly based on maps of the *Putzger Weltatlas* and *dtv Weltgeschichte*. I had to buy the former in 7th grade for history classes at a German high school, and later got hold of the latter out of curiosity for 5 Euro at a bookstore. The editions he cites are from the 1960s and 70s, my editions were printed in the 2000s. I acquired the old editions from before I was born out of

curiosity. Believe me when I tell you that neither in Taagepera's time nor in my school days was there even a *single mention of the Gokturks* in these books, let alone an illustration of the extent of the empire.

Nonetheless, we can say one thing with justification: the empire of the Turks was vast and larger than its predecessor state. Moreover, the area stretched along the narrow green steppe belt, surrounded or interrupted by lakes like Baikal, mountain ranges like Altai, and the Caspian Sea.<sup>105</sup> As we have seen in the previous chapter, this region was and is geographically very diverse. Accordingly, the Ashina dynasty faced a major challenge: direct control of the *entire* Khaganate was neither politically nor militarily feasible. Bumin could not rule over such a large territory without resorting to deputies. Therefore, he appointed governors and tribute kings, Shads and Eltebers, early on to maintain unity among the various tribes and peoples.<sup>106</sup> His state is known to us today as the Empire of the Gokturks, but the meaning of this name remains disputed. *Gök in Turkic* stands for the color blue, and accordingly for the blue *sky*.<sup>107</sup> The eastern direction of the compass was also symbolized by the color blue among the Turks. Also, *gök* or originally *kök* in ancient Turkish, stood for *origin*.<sup>108</sup> *Gök Turks* can therefore be confidently translated as blue, original and *heavenly Turks* at the same time – heavenly perhaps because their leaders, empowered by Kut, were chosen by Tengri to rule.

The Khagan was after all sacrosanct. To fight against the Khagan meant to act against the will of Tengri.<sup>109</sup> He possessed more Kut than any other person. Kut means sacred power or energy and in terms of personal character, charisma and luck.<sup>110</sup> The mobile residence of the Khagan was in *Ötüken*, a forest city from which the Kut emitted. Whoever ruled *Ötüken*, the Kut bestowed them victory and success against all enemies.<sup>111</sup> The Khagan was thus *kutlu*, that is, endowed with luck and charisma. A

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<sup>105</sup> Soucek, Svat (2000): Inner Asia, 46.

<sup>106</sup> Drompp (2020): 228.

<sup>107</sup> Golden (2011): 37.

<sup>108</sup> Koniratbaeva, Zhanar et al. (2015): Kazakh Ethno and Lingvocultural Ideology. The Symbol of 'Blue', in: Anthropologist, 22 (3): 435-441, 437; Golden (2011): 37.

<sup>109</sup> Talgat; Ayman (2015): 48.

<sup>110</sup> Yavrucuk, Gökay (2019): 139.

<sup>111</sup> Gabain, Annermarie v.: Steppe und Stadt im Leben der ältesten Türken, in: Strothmann, Spuler (ed.): Der Islam Band 29 Heft 1, Berlin 1949, 35.

term that is still used in Turkic today. The Turkish saying for "Happy Birthday" translates to "Doğum günün *kutlu* olsun." The accumulation and one's radiation of Kut was the condition for successful domination of the steppe.<sup>112</sup> The exact location of Ötüken as the capital of the Gokturk Empire is not known. According to the Turkic inscriptions it was located somewhere between Tengri Khan (Tian Shan) mountains and the Orkhon River in Mongolia.<sup>113</sup> After the death of a Khagan, an elaborate tomb would be erected in his honor. But the Yabgu, one step below the Khagan in the political hierarchy, was also respected by the people. Between 2015 and 2017, researchers at Osaka University (Japan) excavated a tomb in modern-day Mongolia, the reconstructed form of which shows how serious the Turks were about their rulers. The body of the Yabgu was placed in a stone sarcophagus which, positioned centrally, was surrounded by fourteen stone pillars. On the pillars and the sarcophagus itself the names of about 100 tribes were inscribed in ancient Turkic script.<sup>114</sup>

Bumin died shortly after the foundation of the empire. The reason for death is still unknown. There are not even rumors of an illness or an alleged assassination attempt, as with Attila the Hun or Alexander the Great. Even before his death, he had made a momentous decision. Instead of one there were to be *two* rulers of the Khaganate. Given the sheer size of the empire, this was logical. But no dual kingship was established. The Khagan remained in Ötüken, while another member of the Ashina was to take care of all the territories to the west. After the empire's foundation, it was Istemi, younger brother of Bumin, who was given the title of Yabgu. He had to recognize the theoretical authority of the Khagan over his domain. In case of doubt, the Khagan had the say.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, Istemi was allowed to conduct a foreign policy autonomous from that of the Khagan.<sup>116</sup> After Bumin's death, his eldest son

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<sup>112</sup> For an explanation of Kut and its political implications, see Yıldırım, Ercümet (2021): A Comparison of the Understanding of Kut in Turks and the Sacred Belief of the King in Mesopotamia, 328-332.

<sup>113</sup> For discussion on the exact location of Ötüken, see Divitçioğlu (2004) 98-102; Bosworth, C.E. (2012): "Ötüken," in Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition.

<sup>114</sup> The excavation took place between the years 2015 and 2017 at the Dongoin Shiree excavation site in eastern Mongolia. See: Graduate School of Language and Culture at Osaka University: Discovery of ruins of ancient Turkic monument surrounded by 14 pillars with inscriptions, 08.12.2017.

<sup>115</sup> Drompp (2020): 227; Golden (2011): 39; Sinor (1996): 332.

<sup>116</sup> Baumer, Christoph (2018): History of Central Asia, The: 4-volume set, 198.

Kara assumed the Khagan title. The unexpected demise of Bumin collided with several events along the borders of the Khaganate. First, the Rouran remnants had far from given up their ambition to restore the Rouran Empire. They raised a new army and, with the help of the northern Qi, attacked the Turks from the south. Second, the Kyrgyz in the north were also eager to drive the Gokturks away from Lake Baikal in order to preserve their political autonomy. And third, the Turks in the east had just suffered their first major defeat against Goguryeo. Although the number of casualties is not known, this excursion into Korea was almost certainly associated with high logistical costs. Nevertheless, we are told that the Koreans apparently sent representatives to the Gokturk Khaganate to attend Bumin's funeral and, on behalf of the Celestial Kingdom of Goguryeo, pay respects to the Turks. In the *Kül Tegin* inscription of 732, nearly two centuries later, the Turks indicated that representatives of the *Bukli* attended the ceremony.<sup>117</sup> Linguists now agree that the *Bukli* meant the Koreans.<sup>118</sup> However, it is quite questionable whether the Gokturks would have already generated such attention at the time of Bumin's death, in the year of the founding of the state, that diplomats and prominent envoys from all over the world – i.e. also from Byzantium and Persia – would have actually moved to the Altai, as claimed in the inscriptions.<sup>119</sup> We can therefore assume that the Koreans already in a dynamic relationship with the Gokturks after the first contact. But the Gokturks were not world-famous. Not yet.

Thus, after the death of the founder, the fate of the fledgling Khaganate was absolutely uncertain. Responsibility for the Empire now rested on the shoulders of two men: Kara, as the next eldest son of Bumin, and Istemi, Bumin's brother and Yabgu of the West. While Kara had to take care of the Rouran remnants that plagued the border region with China, his uncle Istemi was already on his way to Europe.

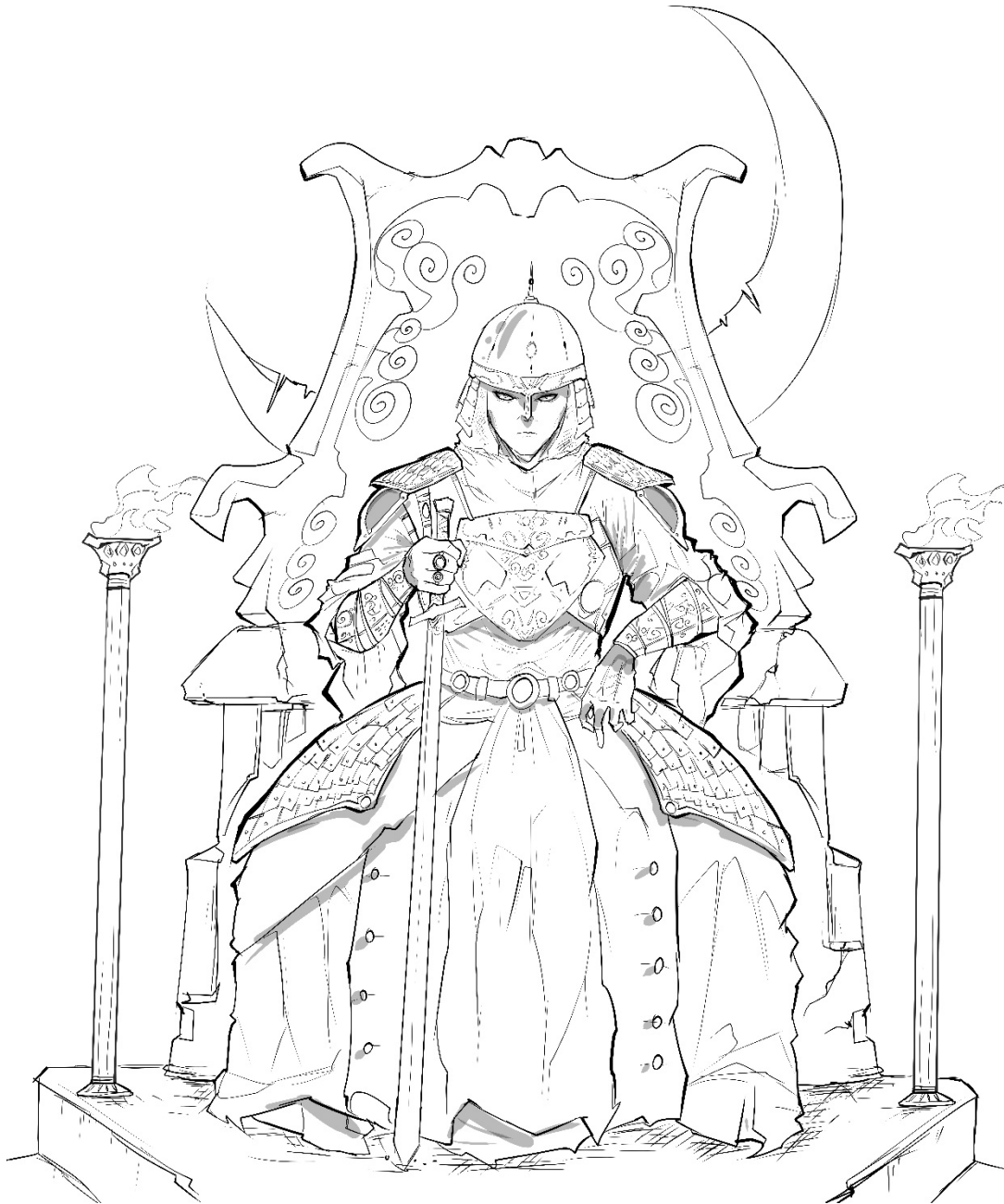
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<sup>117</sup> Babayar (2004): 154. Cf. rebuttal by Noh (2016): 362.

<sup>118</sup> *Bukli* is a variant of *Mokli*, the centuries-old short form for *Maekguryo* ("Maek people from Kuryo"). Again, *Kuryo* is the short form of *Goguryeo*. See Noh (2016): 362-363.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. discussion in Noh (2016): 363-364.

## Istemi: Conqueror of Eurasia





Bumin's death sent shock waves throughout the political establishment of the steppe. In 552, Bumin's Ashina family had risen to become a ruling dynasty with a claim to power over the entire Eurasian steppe. In addition, the Ashina wanted to extend their political borders as far as possible in all directions. However, this was not consistently successful. Instead of pursuing any campaigns, the Turks first had to settle the question of succession. According to old Turkic law, the *Töre*, there were to be no designated successors. Bumin would *not* have been allowed to choose his own successor before his demise. Therefore, with the stipulations of the *Töre* in mind, the throne was handed over to the next eldest son of the Khagan. In Bumin's case it was Kara, whose reign was to last mere two years. It is unclear whether the Khaganate had been divided into two administrative domains before or after Bumin's death. In any case, Istemi took over the western part of the empire. He was theoretically one step below the Khagan in the political hierarchy, as has often been noted, but now ruled autonomously over *all* territory west of the Altai. Consequently, any lands that Istemi got under his control by conquest or otherwise would be directly governed by himself and his deputies. Kara Khagan's domain included the Sayan Mountains, eastern Mongolia, Turfan, and Gansu. The border in the south extended to the oasis city of Hotan and included the entire Tarim Basin. The Turkic knights, depicted in the Hotan mural at the beginning of the chapter, quickly took control here. The influence of the Turks on the Silk Road therefore jumped in an instant. And in the east, as mentioned above, Turkic influence likely reached as far as the Liao River near Korea, the borderlands of Manchuria. Istemi's territory, on the other hand, did not encompass any fixed borders. We know that the Gokturks had taken over the entire territory of the Rouran Empire. However, the Rouran had been fought by the Hephthalites in the 5th century, and accordingly the Gokturks did not possess those territories in Western Eurasia that had been lost to the Hephthalites back then. These would consist mainly of the junction from the Tarim Basin to the Pamir Mountains. In view of this history, it becomes clear that Istemi proceeded exactly according to plan in his endeavor to expand the Gokturk Empire in the west.

But why did the Gokturks have to conquer new territories in the first place? Was the Ashina dynasty simply greedy for more territory, for more power? Or had there been

cultural reasons for the expansion as well? Peter Golden cites economic reasons.<sup>120</sup> I have already brought into play the ambition to integrate all other Turkic speakers into the empire. It is quite possible that Istemi and Kara Khagan had exactly the same goal in mind as Bumin. In any case, Istemi's campaign was not out of boredom as the western region of the Eurasian Steppe was already bulging with numerous tribes and city-states. Convincing these groups of the Ashina's rule was no child's play. Here, tribes were present that rejected any higher authority except that of Tengri and preferred self-government on the political level. However, a large part of them belonged to a Turkic people, as the following map for the year 552 shows.



<sup>120</sup> Golden (1992): 127.

It can only be speculated that *this* was the actual for Istemi's campaign to the west. The Ashina may not only have known that there were many other Turkic peoples beyond the Altai, but they had also set themselves the goal of integrating these Turkic peoples into their empire. The casus belli of the Gokturks was therefore *Turkic irredentism*. Apart from that, the Ashina dynasty also had an inherent desire to rise to become rulers of the entire steppe. Remember: whoever ruled over Ötüken, the mysterious sacred forest of the Turks, could proclaim himself ruler of *all* nomadic steppe peoples. In theory, the Gokturks already were. But in practice, they were still at the very beginning of a long, bloody adventure. So while Kara Khagan had to fend off Rouran attacks from China in the east, Istemi took the first step and put his plan for expansion into action. He began a major campaign in the spring of 553, when the Yabgu gathered a band of 100,000 warriors and reached the great lake Yedisu, the Seven Rivers Country, in present-day Kazakhstan in the summer.<sup>121</sup> From here, the Gokturks would have access to the trade routes of the Silk Road which ran from China to Persia. Numerous tribes such as the Hunnic Chionites now joined the Turks.<sup>122</sup> The Khaganate of the Gokturks thus already bordered the empire of the Hephthalites, who were also called White Huns, and ruled over a wide strip from the Aral Sea to India as mentioned. Practically situated between Gokturk and Hephthalite territory was the trading city of Bukhara. This ancient settlement was to blossom into an important trading metropolis along the Silk Road during the Middle Ages. Already in the middle of the 6th century, though, Bukhara possessed an important influence on trade in the region of Sogdia. Merchants from Byzantium, Iran and China met here and regularly exchanged goods. Bukhara occupied an important economic position along the Silk Road and would soon be at the geographical center of a major dispute, that much was obvious for Istemi.

On the northwestern front, around the Pontic-Caspian area, the Gokturks faced less resistance. This area had been a permanent settlement area of Eurasian steppe peoples for centuries, which appeared in the writings of ancient historians. You are already

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<sup>121</sup> Also known as *Zhetysu*.

<sup>122</sup> For a numismatic analysis of the Chionite rulers see: Fedorov, Michael (2010): Chionite Rulers of Chach in the Middle of the Fourth to the Beginning of the Seventh Century (According to the Data of Numismatics, in: Iran - Journal of the British Institute of Persian Study, 48:1, 59-67.

familiar with this part of the world by now, mostly Turkic and Indo-Iranian tribes had say here. But when Istemi's armies arrived in Eastern Europe, they were actually on the trail of another ethnic group. A federation of refugees who had tried to seek safety from the Turks: The Rouran. While their ruling dynasty took refuge in northern China, most of the lower nobility including the knight caste headed for western Asia. In the process, they encountered the Avars who probably had ties to the Rouran and mingled with them. It is still inconclusive whether the Avars who suddenly appeared in Eastern Europe were the Rouran from Mongolia.<sup>123</sup> Due to few sources, Rouran and Avars cannot be equated with certainty, but it can very well be assumed that the Rouran refugees took control over the Avar political entity after their arrival in Eastern Europe.<sup>124</sup>

This would explain how, within a short period of time, the Avars developed from a tribal federation to a Khaganate. The title of Khagan, which actually belonged to the Gokturks since 552, was still claimed and continued to be used by the Rouran in Europe. This complicated any kind of possibility regarding peace negotiations. A correspondence between Istemi and Byzantium further reveals that these "Avars" were well known to the Gokturks. Before their Khaganate could rise to a great empire, the Avars had to consolidate their rule over the Slavic and partly Germanic tribes, and for this they needed a promise of protection from Byzantium. In the process they were being pursued by Istemi's retaliatory troops. In a message to the Byzantine emperor Maurice, Istemi let it him understand what the Turks intended to do with the Avars:

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<sup>123</sup> Golden (2011): 38.

<sup>124</sup> Pohl, Walter (1988): Die Awaren. Ein Steppenvolk in Mitteleuropa 567-822 n.Chr., 28-29; Golden (2011): 38.

*"The Avars who took refuge in your kingdom once ruled us when we were their slaves. But now these Avars are neither birds that can fly away nor fish that can hide in the depths of the sea. Now they are the slaves. As soon as I finish the war against the Hephthalites, I will attack the Avars.*

*They will not escape our Turk swords!"<sup>125</sup>*

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The Byzantines, in turn, were already toying with the idea of being able to mobilize the Turks against their arch-enemy Persia in the East. The centuries-long wars between Byzantium and Persia were like a tug-of-war for supremacy in the Middle East, and the Turks could become an important factor in this confrontation.<sup>126</sup> But the Avars had successfully driven a wedge between the Turks and the Eastern Romans. There was no rapprochement between the Turks and Byzantines. For the time being.

After the consolidation of Gokturk rule in Kazakhstan and parts of Eastern Europe, Istemi turned his attention to Bactria and Sogdia, the gateways to the Middle East, with Sogdia being also known as Transoxiana – land beyond the Oxus River. The Persians used to call this part of the World *Turan*, land of the Tur people, in contrast to *Iran*, land of the Aryans. In Iran, the Sassanids who had established a new Persian Empire after the collapse of the Parthian Empire were eager to re-establish their historical dominance over Transoxiana which was completely under Hephthalites control. The Sassanids and Hephthalites were therefore hostile to each other. Then, shortly before the outbreak of hostilities between the Persians and Hunnic, the Gokturks arrived in the area. Similar to the Byzantine emperor, the Persian king Khosrow turned his attention towards the new power from Central Asia. Under the banner of the Khaganate, the Turks were militarily more tightly organized than ever before. All the smaller tribes in the area pooled their military capacities and could march off to war at any time at Istemi's command. But in the event of Istemi's

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<sup>125</sup> Baumer (2018): 176.

<sup>126</sup> Sinor (1996): 333.

conquest of Sogdia and possibly even Bactria, the Turks could have closed the Silk Road to Persian or Byzantine traders at will. Moreover, the sedentary peoples in the south were not aware of the Turks' further ambitions. Perhaps, they should not be trusted to roam around freely. Therefore, the Sassanids proactively approached Istemi and made him a proposal that he could not refuse, unbeknownst to any other political entities in the region, including the Hephthalites.

The first war of the Gokturks in Western Asia logically took place in Transoxiana, after Istemi's troops had marched as far as Bukhara. He had declared war on the White Huns, as stated in his letter to Maurice, and mobilized all available military might. Turkic and Hunnic armies would meet at the gates of the trading city, possibly a bit farther away. The exact location for the first part of the Battle of Bukhara is rather disputed. The exact date for the direct confrontation between Gokturks and Hephthalites is also unclear, approximations range between the years 557 and 563. As a compromise, many historians give the year 560 for the Battle of Bukhara and I tend to stick to this date.<sup>127</sup> According to Persian sources, Turks and Huns fought against each other for seven days and seven nights in a protracted battle, perhaps inside the city by now. On the eighth day, the Turks captured the "Ark", citadel and ruling palace of Bukhara, wresting it from Hunnic control. Later, it would later come to light for the inhabitants that Istemi had held a secret rendezvous with Persian king Khosrow prior to the battle. Both had agreed on a joint war against the White Huns. When the Turks entered Bukhara from the northeast, Persian soldiers from the southwest marched in at the same time. Thus the White Huns were crushed in from both sides and annihilated.<sup>128</sup> Bukhara became part of the Khaganate. After Istemi established his rule over the trading city, he learned that the Hunnic nobility had left the area before the battle even commenced and was en route to Bactria (Afghanistan). There, the nobility crowned a man named Faganish as their king. But after the Persians continued the war and invaded in Afghanistan as well, Faganish became distressed and had to submit his people to the rule of the militarily superior Persians. Istemi then changed his diplomatic stance toward the Huns and offered Faganish both refuge and a piece of land in the Khaganate. Faganish accepted and as a consequence

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<sup>127</sup> Cf. Golden (2011): 38.

<sup>128</sup> Soucek (2000): 51.

of the deal the remaining Hephthalites became subjects of the Gokturks. They were allowed to retain lesser Hunnic royal titles and were only required to recognize the authority of the Ashina dynasty. Istemi integrated the Hunnic warriors into his army, and with the conquest of Sogdia had simultaneously deprived the Persians of a strategically important source of power. In the following years, many Turks settled in the cities along the Silk Road, including Tashkent and Samarkand, so that they came into close contact with the Sogdians, a people consisting mainly of merchants, traders and diplomats.<sup>129</sup>

After the White Huns had been defeated, the Khaganate bordered the Sassanid Empire for the first time ever. The border remained unsettled. In addition, there was the question of the control of the trade routes that led to East Asia. King Khosrow's skepticism towards the Turks was great. And this skepticism of was mutual. One day, fearing that Istemi was secretly preparing an invasion of Sassanid territory, Khosrow personally marched with a large army to the border region of Tabaristan (Gorgan), on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. And indeed, there he met Istemi. But the Yabgu of the Gokturk Khaganate had not come alone. He came as a representative of the Turkic world, and with thousands of warriors at his command. A confrontation between Turks and Persians seemed inevitable. But both rulers managed to stay cool, calm and collected. Instead of commencing any fights, Khosrow gave gifts to the Yabgu in the spirit of hospitality. Istemi, in return, affirmed that he did not want to start a war against Persia. The two politicians then concluded a non-aggression pact. In it, they stipulated that the official political border between Turks and Persians shall run along the Oxus (Ceyhun) River, beginning at the Aral Sea in the northwest. The Oxus joins two tributaries in Afghanistan to the south, which run into Tajikistan. As I have mentioned, Iranian mythology regarded this area as the border region between *Iran* and *Turan*. It was also seen as the border between the sedentary and nomadic societies of Central Asia.<sup>130</sup> To seal the non-aggression pact, the kings agreed on the marriage of Istemi's daughter with Khosrow. An off-spring of theirs was, most likely, Hormizd IV, successor of Khosrow and king of the Persians for eleven whole years.

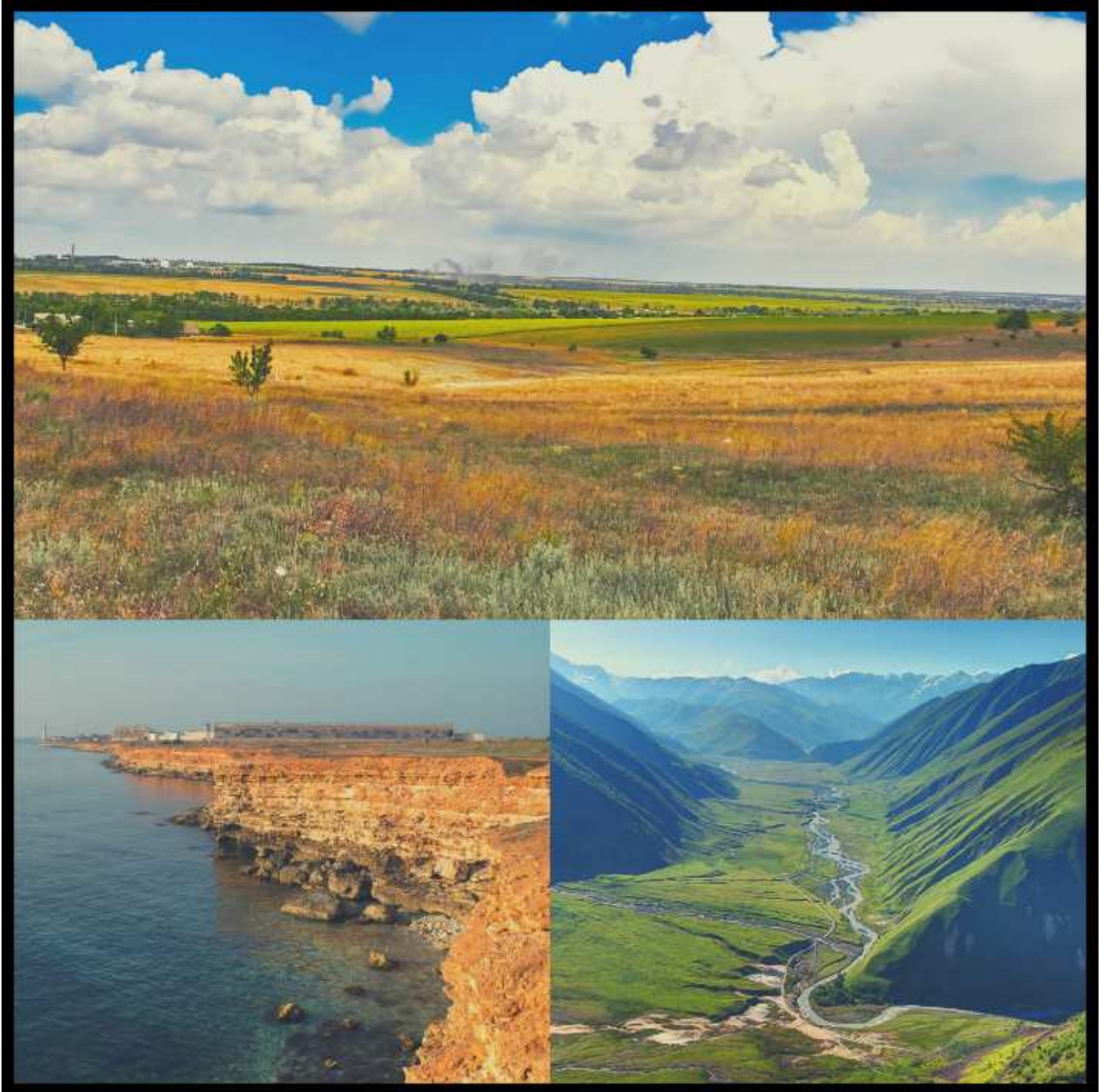
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<sup>129</sup> Drompp (2020): 229.

<sup>130</sup> B.Spuler: "Āmū Daryā", *Encyclopædia Iranica*, I/9, pp. 996-997. "[...] regarded in ancient times as the boundary between Iran and Tūrān".

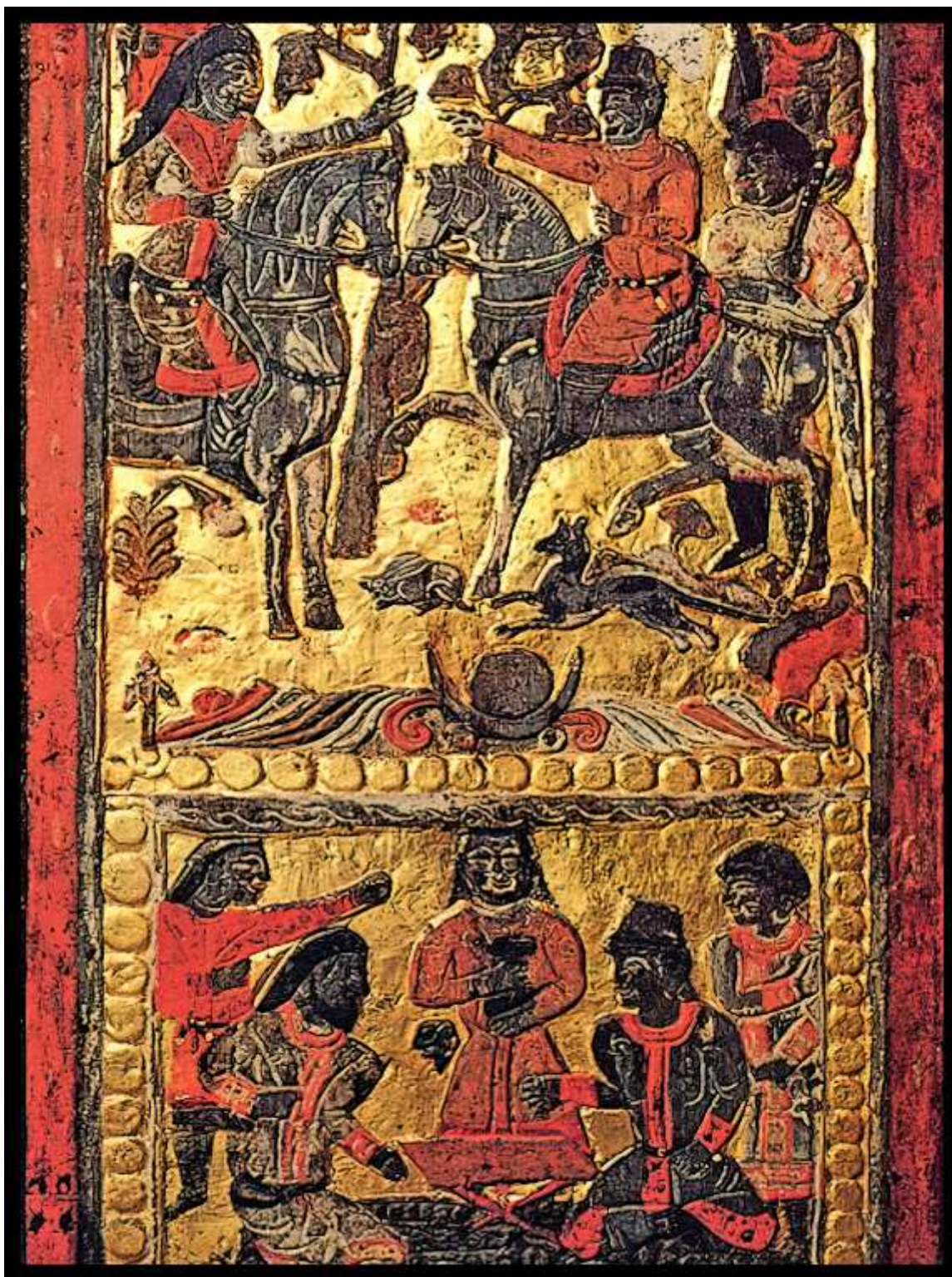


## Economy, Diplomacy and the Silk Road



*Figure 8 Clockwise from top: Arabat steppe in Ukraine, Caucasus Mountains, Chersonnes in Crimea.*





*Figure 9 Tomb of a noble Sogdian who invited a Turkic ruler to a banquet. The Turks can be recognized by their long braided hair.*

Istemi's rule over the oasis cities in Central Asia set in motion a process that was to last for centuries: the rapprochement between the Turks and Sogdians. Within a few years, the Turks developed a cordial and on a political level very friendly relationship with the residents of Bukhara and the other cities and towns of Transoxiana. The Sogdians were known as a people who specialized in trade with China, Persia and even India. The region had repeatedly come under the control of foreign powers due to the conquests of great figures. For example, Cyrus the Great from the Achaemenid Empire of the Persians, and later Alexander the Great from Macedonia, although neither had managed to annex all of Sogdia. We also know from historical sources that both Cyrus and Alexander had difficulty in convincing the unruly natives of the region to accept their rule. One so-called "recalcitrant" person had been Tomris, leader of the Massagetae, who were not directly related to the Sogdians but were perhaps forerunners and inhabited Sogdia and Bactria for centuries. Tomris lived during the time of Cyrus. She had been the only serious rival to Cyrus according to the lore of Herodotus, the famous Greek historian who had lived shortly after Tomris' and Cyrus' eras. Tomris managed to stop the invasion of Persian troops in 530 BC, even killing Cyrus in the process. A painting by Rubens illustrates the scene that took place at Tomris' court. In any case, Tomris rose to become a legendary figure among the steppe peoples of Eurasia. And since the Massagetae had a similar culture with similar traditions and a manifestation of Tengrism, Tomris is considered by the Turks to be one of theirs.

At some point, the Sogdian culture developed east of the Caspian Sea, and the region was given the name "Sogdiana". It can be located between the Oxus and Jaxartes rivers, the Amudarya and Syrdarya, and thus lies in present-day Uzbekistan. Sogdia was positioned exactly between the east and west of the Silk Road. As a result, cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent became "transportation hubs and trade hub" within the Silk Road.<sup>131</sup> Regardless of any foreign influence, the Sogdian culture which appears to be Iranian in origin remained intact. Foreign powers now had little influence on Sogdian autonomy.<sup>132</sup> Of course, it is also true that the Sogdians did not manage a tightly organized empire like the Persians, the Macedonians and later the

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<sup>131</sup> Müller (2008): 118-119.

<sup>132</sup> Müller (2008): 119.

Turks did. Rather, the numerous cities organized among themselves in a more or less federal constitution. The Sogdians thus specialized quite undisturbed in the trade of goods and commodities as all over the world. And this made them a valuable ally of the Gokturks. After the Battle of Bukhara, the Turks came to control the Central Asian part of the Silk Road. A "road" that actually consisted of many smaller trade routes, spanning two continents. The Silk Road owed its name to the rigorous silk trade. Silk was grown exclusively in East Asia for a long period of time. Later, the Persians also got hold of this luxury commodity, which was used not exclusively but primarily for the production of high-quality textiles. Besides silk, cotton, spices, drugs, and other valuable goods were also transported and traded on the trade routes. Trade was obviously conducted by merchants, all of whom acted as private individuals along the trading posts. But there were customs associated with trade. And a state that had the military upper hand along the trading posts could deny entry and trade to merchants from certain countries. After the Hephthalites had been demoted to vassals of the Gokturks, the Persian court envisioned how the Turks could possibly harm Persian trade by denying entry to Persian merchants, in order to create economic pressure on the Sassanid Empire.

Nonetheless, a distinctive feature of Turkic and Turkish rule is the fact that they did not plunder or even wipe out the cities along the trade routes, as the Mongols would do some 600 years later. Instead, they incorporated these cities into their Khaganate and in some cases took over their administration. Istemi appears to have been a diplomatically adept and intelligent politician<sup>133</sup>, as he was able to establish his rule over Transoxiana without causing resentment and rebellion among the inhabitants. Afterall, he did not interfere in the religion, culture or economy of the locals. Instead, he integrated individual personalities into his system of vassals, deputies, and courtiers.<sup>134</sup> In a way, his rule was not so different from that of the Persian and Byzantine kings and emperors of the sedentary world, albeit being perhaps more tolerant towards other cultures. This form of indirect rule was commonplace among Turkic empires, anyway. But Istemi certainly had further ambitions. The Sogdians' homeland as a location and their skills as merchants made them a valuable ally.

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<sup>133</sup> A view shared by Grousset (1970): "Istemi [...] a man of high intelligence", 133.

<sup>134</sup> On the integration of foreign peoples and tribes into the empire, see Barisitz (2017): 52.

Conversely, the Sogdians had already made plans to use the Gokturks to expand their influence along the Silk Road. They wanted to increase trade with the Byzantine Empire. But first they had to get permission from the Persian king to pass through Persian territory to reach Anatolia. However, the Turkic and Persian ambitions initially stood in the way of the Sogdians.

The “peaceful” Turco-Persian coexistence was shaken one day due to major incidents on an economic level. The leaders of the Sogdian trade guilds had asked Istemi to travel to the Persian court in Ctesiphon. They wanted to obtain permission from the Persian king to cross Persian territory. Istemi agreed. Given the well-developed roads along the Silk Road, it would further have been easier to send envoys on their way through Iran to Anatolia rather than have them cross the steppes in Ukraine, domain of the tribes. When several Sogdian merchants arrived in the Persian capital, Khosrow accepted the gifts they had brought with them, and had all the Sogdian (and Turkic?) goods purchased at a “fair price,” according to Menander Protector. To the delegation's dismay, however, the goods were set on fire by Khosrow's men in the streets of the city. Apparently, by buying up the goods, the Persian king wanted to show both the merchants and his own people that he was not acting out of malicious intentions, but with Persian national interest in mind. He made it clear that he would not allow any silk trade with the Turks. Perhaps his resentment indeed was directed towards the Gokturks, less toward the Sogdian merchants.<sup>135</sup>

This may have been regarded as a humiliation by the Sogdians, first being able to sell their goods and then watching them openly crumble to ashes. However, they were not discouraged by the incident, went home and reported to Istemi. The Yabgu also did not relent and sent a second delegation to Ctesiphon. But this time the Persian king's reaction was even harsher. He had consulted with his advisors at the court of Ctesiphon and had concluded that the “Scythians” – with which Menander describes the steppe peoples in general – simply could not be trusted. Khosrow had part of the legation, this time composed of both Sogdians *and* Turks, poisoned at a supper so that the Turks would finally stop sending emissaries of any kind to Persia. In order

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<sup>135</sup> Menander: Fragment 10,1, 10-26. In the English translation by Blockley, R. C. (1985): The history of Menander the Guardsman.



to maintain the impression of a just ruler, rumors were spread in Persia that the emissary from the north had perished due to the drought and heat. As if the Turks of the steppe would not have been able to cope with the climatic conditions of Iran. This does not change the fact that the entire Persian court had witnessed the murder of the envoys. Only a few Turks were spared so that they could report to their Yabgu about the reluctance of Khosrow.<sup>136</sup> Just as our highly esteemed Grousset (1970), Menander (6th century) also described Istemi at this point as a "shrewd, intelligent man" who, despite all rumors, would have understood what had been done to his diplomats.<sup>137</sup> Khosrow's action was a direct threat towards Istemi. There was no passage for Sogdian merchants, and thus no possibility for the Turks to establish relations with Byzantium via the southern land route.



<sup>136</sup> Menander: Fragment 10,1, 27-43.

<sup>137</sup> Menander: Fragment 10.1, 44-47.

Political pressure on Istemi was mounting. Then a Sogdian named Maniakh, influential merchant and politician in Bukhara, paid him a visit at court.<sup>138</sup> He asked Istemi to send an envoy under his own leadership directly to Byzantium.<sup>139</sup> The relationship between the influential Maniakh and Istemi seemed to have been friendly, as it is recorded that Maniakh helped Istemi establish contacts with influential elites in the Sogdian cities. In return, Maniakh had his son raised and educated at Istemi's court.<sup>140</sup> According to Maniakh's plan, the Sogdians would bypass the Persian market by taking the more dangerous route across the Volga River, where the Turkic-speaking Onogurs, Bulgars and other tribal federations were dwelling.<sup>141</sup> Maniakh assured Istemi that the Turks would generate high income by trading with Byzantium. Moreover, Maniakh would propose a political alliance with the Khaganate to the Byzantines. For these reasons, Istemi agreed to Maniakh's plan.<sup>142</sup>

In 568, approximately eight years after the Battle of Bukhara, Maniakh traveled to Constantinople where he and his friends were warmly received by Emperor Justin II.<sup>143</sup> The guests had brought valuable silk and a letter in the name of the Istemi.<sup>144</sup> The letter was written in "Scythian," Menander claims. We can only speculate about the script being used. However, a translator was on site to anticipate communication problems. Moreover, since Menander speaks several times of *Turkic* delegates who had traveled to Constantinople, I assume that the letter was indeed written in Old Turkic.<sup>145</sup> In any case, Byzantium and Persia had made peace for the time being in 562, but the emperor was still interested in the alliance offer regarding the rising Gokturk Empire. First, however, he wanted to be sure of the Turks' intentions and sincerity. Maniakh had brought valuable silk from Asia as a gift. But the envoys quickly found out that the Byzantines already had the means to produce silk

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<sup>138</sup> Menander: Fragment 10, 1-2.

<sup>139</sup> Hennig, R. (1933): Die Einführung der Seidenraupenzucht ins Byzantinerreich. Eine Studie zur Aufklärung der Unklarheiten in den überlieferten Berichten, in: *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* (edited by Albrecht Berger), vol. 33, no. 2, 295-312, p. 303; Grousset (1970): 133; Baumer (2018): 177.

<sup>140</sup> De La Vaissière (2005): 203.

<sup>141</sup> Hennig (1933): 304.

<sup>142</sup> De La Vaissière (2005): 228-230.

<sup>143</sup> Kim (2019): 61; Baumer (2018): 226.

<sup>144</sup> Menander: Fragment 10.1, 47-57.

<sup>145</sup> Menander: Fragment 10.1, 68-71.

themselves since the year 555. In what was probably the first case of economic espionage ever, two Sogdians had succeeded in smuggling silkworms from the Kingdom of Hotan and the Gokturk Khaganate to Constantinople on behalf of Emperor Justinian, Justin II's predecessor.<sup>146</sup> Therefore, the silk trade at this end of the Silk Road seems to have already been saturated. Nevertheless, Maniakh saw the purpose of his long journey to the land of the Eastern Romans confirmed, for an alliance with the Gokturks would certainly extend their economic influence into Byzantine territory. The Emperor of Rome then suggested that the high-ranking nobleman Zemarchus from Cilicia accompany the Sogdian back home on a diplomatic mission. Furthermore, Justin questioned the Sogdian guest about the people who inhabited the Gokturk Empire with great interest and also wanted to know how the foreign policy of Istemi's reign was positioned.<sup>147</sup> Justin asked detailed questions about the level of civilization of the "Hephthalites." But it turned out that Maniakh and his entourage did not come on behalf of those White Huns who had already been subjugated by Istemi. The ensuing dialogue between the Turkic envoys and the Byzantine king is revealing about the intentions of both sides:

"So you have taken all the power of the Hephthalites?" asked the emperor, addressing the Turks.

"Completely" replied the Turks.

"Do Hephthalites actually live in villages or cities?"

"In cities, my lord" the envoys replied.

"Then" concluded the emperor, "it is clear that you have now become the masters of all those cities."

"Indeed" said the Turks.

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<sup>146</sup> Barisitz (2017): 55.

<sup>147</sup> Lung, Ecaterina (2015): Barbarian envoys at Byzantium in the 6th century, in: *Hiperboreea* Vol. 2, No. 1 (June 2015), 35-52, 36.

The emperor asked, "Tell us if the Avars are the subject of your rule." By the Avars, Justin most likely meant those Rouran who had fled from the Turks and mingled with the actual Avars. These Avars were called *Apar* by the Turks.

"They are. O emperor, some still obey us. Those who have fled from us number probably 20,000."

Then the Turks listed all the tribes and subjects of their rule and proposed to the emperor a defensive and at the same time *offensive* alliance between the Turks and the Romans. They added that the Turks were willing to crush all those opponents of the Romans who disputed territory with them. Then Maniakh raised his hand, the others did the same, and all guests assured the emperor that they were speaking out of honesty. If they were ever to violate this oath and deceived the emperor, they themselves and even their lord, Istemi, should be cursed forever. And so the Turkic people and the Roman people became friends, as Menander concludes.<sup>148</sup> From this dialogue we can infer two new important factors for the Turks' will to enter into an alliance with the Romans. We had already mentioned the economic component. In addition, the Turks were in conflict with the Persians. By concluding this alliance, the Romans would have to come to the aid of the Turks in the event of a Turco-Persian war, provided they kept their part of the agreement. Vice versa, this would also apply to the Turks if another war broke out between Constantinople and Ctesiphon. The last and most important topic, however, was the Avars or Rouran. The Turkic delegation specifically enumerated that they had been on the heels of some 20,000 Avars. As we have already seen, these Avars had received a promise of protection from Byzantium shortly prior to this exchange. Maybe Istemi had placed his hope in the fact that through a Turkic-Byzantine alliance the emperor in Constantinople would refrain from maintaining friendly relations towards the Avars. If the Avars should even attack the Byzantines, for example to secure a piece of land in Pannonia or Dacia as a new settlement area and to come to safety from the Turks, then the Turks would have to rush to the aid of Byzantium anyway. This, of course, would be *purely* for defensive reasons. One can see that Istemi and his Ashina dynasty already made active use of realpolitik mechanisms so soon after their arrival

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<sup>148</sup> Menander:



in Europe. The alliance was in any case about to be sealed. Justin must have been extremely pleased with the offer, Maniakh was relieved at the persuasiveness of the delegation, and Zemarchus prepared himself for a longer diplomatic mission to territory deep in the heart of Asia, not necessarily unknown to the Byzantines but certainly veiled by the fog of war for the European sedentary world.<sup>149</sup> The emissary of Maniakh and Zemarchus began its journey in August 568 and was exposed to dangers during its journey to and back from Central Asia. According to Menander, the emissary almost fell victim to an ambush by Persian soldiers. But more about that later. Interestingly, Menander Protector, our main source on Turkic-Byzantine relations, records that between the years 575 and 576 there were about 106 Turks residing in Constantinople. Whether they were fellow travelers of the Maniakh or part of other emissaries is not known, but Erdemir considers it likely.<sup>150</sup> One might argue that they were permanent ambassadors, though this would certainly have been mentioned in the sources. In my estimation, the bulk of these Turkic guests had come to Constantinople as merchants and traders to coordinate trade with the Turks. The Sogdians themselves were mainly traveling on caravans rather than remaining in the cities of foreign nations.

Zemarchus' journey to the Turkic lands gives us information about the identity of the Turks of that time. When the emissary reached Sogdia, Turkic merchants quickly set about offering the guests high-quality iron for sale. As Menander correctly concludes, the intention of these Turks had been to demonstrate their skills in forging and to show that they had mines in abundance in the Khaganate.<sup>151</sup> However, whether iron and products such as weapons and armor ever became the object of Turkic-Byzantine trade is not recorded. Istemi probably did not receive Zemarchus in Bukhara, but on a mountain called "Ektag". According to Menander, this name stood for *Golden Mountain*.<sup>152</sup> Is this Ektag supposed to be the Altai, where the actual residence of the Yabgu was situated, and which was also called *Golden Mountain* in Turco-Mongolian? In any case, Zemarchus found the Yabgu, who is mistakenly called

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<sup>149</sup> Zemarchus: article from Encyclopedia Britannica (1911), 966.

<sup>150</sup> Erdemir, Hatice (2004): The Nature of Turko-Byzantine Relations in the Sixth Century AD, in: Cilt Belleten, LXVIII, sayı 252, August 2004, 423-430, 425.

<sup>151</sup> Menander: Fragments, 10.3, Exc. De Leg. Rom. 8.

<sup>152</sup> Menander, 10.3, 21-31.

Khagan here<sup>153</sup> , in a tent. Probably in an oversized yurt, with Istemi resting on a gilded throne on two wheels. They delivered gifts from Constantinople to the king of the Turks. Zemarchus then delivered by order of Justin:

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*Rulers of so many nations! Our great Emperor sends you the following message:*

*"May happiness always accompany you, may you be intoxicated with success, you who are our friend and have good intentions towards the Roman State. May you always conquer your opponents. May jealousy, which can destroy the laws of friendship, remain far, far away from us. The tribes of the Turks and the vassals of the Turks are my friends. May you feel the same way about us."*<sup>154</sup>

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Istemi certainly felt the same way and returned the message with similar words on his part, and from then on treated the guests in a friendly manner. They celebrated a feast of friendship, drinking Central Asian wine and finally sealed the Turkic-Roman Pact. However, Istemi received the envoys two more times, always at one of his other courtyards, all of which were decorated with silk and gold and probably even with gilded water dispensers. Zemarchus was amazed and impressed.<sup>155</sup> The guests also found many statues of animals in the streets of that settlement on the Altai. Menander notes that the statues of the Turks "were in no way of lower quality than those that we make."<sup>156</sup> What a compliment! Istemi suggested to Zemarchus that he and twenty others from the court accompany the Yabgu on a campaign into Persian lands.

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<sup>153</sup> This problem is also found in the Orkhon inscriptions, the most important of all primary sources on the Gokturks. At the beginning of the inscriptions, both Bumin and Istemi are referred to as *Khagans* of the Turks, although Istemi held only the title of *Yabgu* in his lifetime. However, since he acted de facto autonomously from the actual Khagan in the east, it may have been the intention of the descendants of the brothers to emphasize and legitimize Istemi's independence as ruler of the west for the following generations. Menander may have had the same intention in his records.

<sup>154</sup> Menander: Fragment 10,3, 32-41.

<sup>155</sup> Meier, Mischa (2020): Das Ende des weströmischen Kaisertums - ein Ereignis der chinesischen Geschichte? Auswirkungen von Mobilität in eurasischer Perspektive, in: Historische Zeitschrift, 311, 277-278.

<sup>156</sup> Menander: Fragment, 10, 3, 50-62.

Presumably, this "war" was a minor military campaign with the intention of plundering goods rather than permanently seizing territory from the Persians. The Greek envoy accompanied the Turkic king to Talas in Kyrgyzstan, where a diplomat from Persia suddenly arrived at the scene. Istemi invited him to another banquet with Zemarchus but treated the guest from the west with greater honors than the guest from the south. Instead of adhering to the tradition of the Turks and letting Istemi, who accused the Persians of injustice, finish his sentences, the diplomat made a serious mistake. He interrupted the Yabgu in mid-sentence and hurled accusations into the room. This confirmed Istemi in a decision to attack the Persians.<sup>157</sup>

For unexplained reasons, Maniakh had died in the meantime. Therefore, Istemi sent Zemarchus back home to Constantinople to have his part of the bargain and his oath of friendship delivered to Emperor Justin. Zemarchus took Maniakh's son with him to Constantinople. The young man had already received an honorary title from Istemi and was only one step below Tagma, a Turkic tarkhan of Istemi's, who was also to accompany Zemarchus.<sup>158</sup> On their way to Byzantine territory, the emissary was then beset by 4000 Persians in Kuban, located between the Caucasus and Volga delta. Their intention was to capture Zemarchus and thus prevent the Turks' alliance with Byzantium at the last minute. It is quite possible that the Persians had learned about the alliance through their sassy envoy in Talas. However, thanks to a Hunnic tribe that had recognized Istemi's authority the envoy was able to continue its journey through the land of the Alans toward Constantinople without any problems, albeit with ongoing skepticism.<sup>159</sup> Interestingly relations between Byzantium and the Avars then began to crumble, as Menander continues to report.<sup>160</sup> The Turks did not yet take advantage of this. Their main enemy resided in Ctesiphon. The Persian king and his armies obviously posed a far greater threat to Turkic and Sogdian security interests than the Avars, weakened by flight and expulsion. Five more Byzantine envoys to the court of Istemi followed until 576, all of which fell victim to raids by Persian mercenaries on the way.<sup>161</sup> Istemi died in 575, his reign lasting almost 23 years.

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<sup>157</sup> Menander: Fragment 10.3, 75-89.

<sup>158</sup> Menander: Fragment 10.3, 90-101.

<sup>159</sup> Menander: Fragment 10.4, Exc. De Leg. Gent. 8, 15-34.

<sup>160</sup> Menander: Fragment 12.5-6.

<sup>161</sup> Kim (2019): 62.

During this period, he had managed to double the territory of the Gokturks and annex Central Asia as well as parts of the Caucasus and Eastern Europe to his rule. He was able to defeat the Hephthalites in league with the Persians but incorporated the remnants of the Huns into his empire under the leadership of Faganish. With the Persian king Khosrow he concluded the Oxus River non-aggression pact and even gave bequeathed his daughter for marriage but did not hesitate to win over the Byzantines as allies with the help of the Sogdians. In our contemporary world Central Asia is still colloquially referred to as *Turkestan*, the land of the Turks, who rose to become the dominant culture in the following centuries. The foundation for this had been laid by Istemi. A fact that is hardly acknowledged even today. Wrongly so, because during the reign of the Gokturks there was an economic boom happening in Central Asia. Chinese reports prove that agriculture, industry, manufacturing and trade of the mainly Indo-Iranian natives in the west of the Khaganate experienced a new heyday. The Gokturks financially supported infrastructure development; for example, sewage systems in Sogdia were repaired after decades of wars between the Persians and the Huns. The Tashkent region of Uzbekistan also saw technical advances in pottery and glazing.<sup>162</sup> Istemi's legacy, therefore, includes not only political but also socio-cultural and economic gains, which his descendants had to preserve and expand. After his death, his son Tardush took power. He was considered particularly ambitious to reunite the now divided empire under his own rule. As a Yabgu he had to adhere to the hierarchy in the empire, just like his father did for 23 years. But Tardush was less like his father and more his cousins in the east, no more deterred from breaking against those Turkic traditions. He would actively interfere in affairs east of the Altai Mountains before the end of the 6th century. This represented a breach of Ashina law. Dark times were ahead for the empire. But how was the situation in the east anyway? Let us conclude the story of the *Yabgu* in the west, once again go back in time to the year 552 and now take the perspective of the only three recognized *Khagans* of the First Göktürk Khaganate: Kara, Mukhan and Taspar.

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<sup>162</sup> Barisitz (2017): 56.

## Kara and Mukhan: Consolidating the East



On the other side of the continent, political intrigues were afoot that would decisively shape the political future in East Asia for the next two hundred years. From a military-political perspective, however, the situation seemed less promising than in the West. Firstly, the Ashina continued to deal with the remnants of the Rouran who were to be finally destroyed under the leadership of Kara Khagan. This task should not have posed a major difficulty for the Gokturks because apart from military capacities the Khaganate had risen to become a major economic power, a geopolitical heavyweight. This is evident from the Gokturks' trade volume. It is recorded for April 553 that Kara traded with the emperor of the Western Wei ca. 50,000 horses – Fifty thousand! – and received several hundred thousand bales of silk in return. Not even the Rouran had had such economic capacities.<sup>163</sup> The Qi dynasty admittedly took note of this with suspicion. By accepting the refugees of the Rouran Yujiulü Dynasty from Mongolia, they had made themselves a target of the Ashina Dynasty. Therefore, fearing an invasion by the Gokturks, the Qi Emperor Wenxuan had a 400-500 kilometer long wall built along the border to the Khaganate.<sup>164</sup> The neighboring Wei dynasty on the other hand had immediately handed over Rouran refugees who arrived on their territory to their allies on the Altai. Even before these refugees could enter Gokturk territory, a Turkic commando appeared in China and allegedly had all 3000 Rouran members executed publicly outside the Wei capital of Chang'an.<sup>165</sup> The Turks, it seems, wanted to locate all the Rouran and finish them off. Why? Did the very existence of the Rouran pose a threat to the legitimacy of the Ashina dynasty, as Stark has argued? In any case, from all that we have learned so far memories of the time under Anagui's rule were certainly still present in the mind of the Turks.

Secondly, the geopolitical situation in China was rather complex at that time, as hinted at in the previous chapter. There had been a Cold War going on between Wei and Qi for some time, and the Gokturks would play a central role in the course of this conflict as a third faction, similar to their positioning in the conflict between Persia and Byzantium in the Middle East. In any case, Kara Khagan took the title of *Issik* and regardless of any possible Chinese interventions campaigned against Dengzhu,

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<sup>163</sup> Strong (2016): 2.

<sup>164</sup> Taşağıl (2016): 129.

<sup>165</sup> Stark (2016): 2; Liu, M. T. 1958. The Chinese News on the History of the Eastern Turks (T'u-küe), 35.

the leader of the remaining Rouran in Qi territory.<sup>166</sup> Emperor Wenxuan, himself descended from the Turco-Mongol Xianbei and actually named *Hounigan*, had offered Dengzhu and his family protection from the Turks. However, in February 553 Dengzhu was forced by Wenxuan to go into battle against the Gokturks by himself, with the long-term goal of the emperor being the maintenance of Qi influence on steppe politics. They never considered the Rouran as their friends or allies in need of help but as their barbarian vassals.

In the spring, Dengzhu marched into Mongolia. Issik Khagan was able to overwhelm his Rouran army and defeated them in the Battle of Ordos. After months of assassinations within the Rouran dynasty, Anlouchen as presumably the last son of Anagui assumed the position of leader on the orders of Wenxuan. Incidentally, Anlouchen had become a son-in-law of the emperor. Taking advantage of this new family alliance, the emperor hoped to persuade the Rouran to attack the Turks once again. But Anlouchen realized how he was being used as a pawn of Wenxuan and rebelled against Qi rule. He led 50,000 men into battle in September but was defeated by the Chinese imperial army. Wenxuan repelled a second Rouran attack in the winter and afterward had some 30,000 Rouran members captured. Women and children were sent into slavery.<sup>167</sup> The Qi had defeated the Rouran but exhaustion gradually set in due to the hardships of the past few years. Apart from the misguided strategy of Wenxuan, notorious alcoholic privately and grey eminence at the Qi court, their geopolitical position deteriorated massively following these events.<sup>168</sup> The Gokturks under Issik's banner had in turn secured the borders with the northern Chinese states and prevented a return of the former feudal lords to the steppes. Issik's last victory shortly before the dissolution of the Rouran by the Qi had taken place on January 20, 554.<sup>169</sup> Shortly thereafter, Issik died. Circumstance of death? Allegedly an illness. Fortunately, an imminent state crisis was averted after Mukhan, the next eldest son of Bumin, ascended the throne with the support of the nobility and stabilized the

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<sup>166</sup> Golden (1992): 121

<sup>167</sup> Pohl, Walter (1988): 36

<sup>168</sup> On the emperor's "erratic behavior" see: Sima Guang (1084): *Zizhi Tongjian (Comprehensive Mirror on State Counseling)*.

<sup>169</sup> Strong (2016): 2.

political situation in 554.<sup>170</sup> Mukhan is described in Chinese sources as a man with a "strange face, red hair, and glassy eyes."<sup>171</sup>

In the following years, Mukhan pursued an active foreign policy by destroying the remnants of the Rouran in the northwest and subjugating the "stubborn" Kyrgyz on the Yenisey. The Kyrgyz were known for their mining and now supplied the Gokturks with gold deposits.<sup>172</sup> Mukhan also conquered Khitan territory and integrated these proto-Mongols into his empire, but had them resettled to the outermost border of Mongolia to Korea. The power of the Turks grew rapidly in a short time. In 554 or 555, the empire had already become larger than the state of the ancient Xiongnu. And due to the Kyrgyz' assured supply of gold and iron and the Sogdians' control of trade along the Silk Road, the Khaganate became increasingly attractive to merchants and traders from all over the world.<sup>173</sup> The Turks hosted increasing numbers of diplomats and religious pilgrims from India, Tibet, and China. Although the Sogdians inhabited the western part of the empire, they had already opened trade routes to China when the Huns were rulers over the steppe.<sup>174</sup> After the establishment of the Turkic Empire, more and more of them flocked to the east. Gradually, Sogdian merchants settled in Ötüken and the Altai and took over administrative activities in the service of Mukhan.<sup>175</sup> The Sogdians became intermediaries of the Turks in their disputes with the Chinese.<sup>176</sup> In the process, they also "lent" the Turks their script, which later became the Old Turkic script.<sup>177</sup> The national alphabet of the Turks was born.

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<sup>170</sup> Taşağıl (2013): 132.

<sup>171</sup> Zhōu Shū: Volume 50.

<sup>172</sup> Sinor (1996): 332.

<sup>173</sup> In addition, the Khagan received direct income through trade tariffs and duties, see Barisitz (2017): 52; Drompp (2020): 228.

<sup>174</sup> Drompp (2020): 229.

<sup>175</sup> Taşağıl (2013): 185-186.

<sup>176</sup> Barisitz (2017): 55.

<sup>177</sup> Barisitz (2017): 57.





Figure 10 An overview of the old Turkic “runes” from the era of the Gokturks. There are amazing similarities to the Germanic runes.

Meanwhile, Mukhan was busy consolidating Turkic rule over Northeast Asia. Apparently, he had no interest in a confrontation with Goguryeo in Korea. Instead, he launched campaigns against two important tribes in the region: the Turkic Kyrgyz at Lake Baikal and the Mongol Khitan in eastern Mongolia. In a period between 554 and 560 the "godlike" Khagan accomplished the deed and conquered the territory of both tribes.<sup>178</sup> A special feature was the subjugation of the Kyrgyz on the Yenisei, who were known for mining and now had to supply the Ashina dynasty with gold deposits. They literally *had to*, as a Chinese source states that the Kyrgyz only "grudgingly" accepted Mukhan's suzerainty.<sup>179</sup>

Almost at the same time, the Western Wei collapsed. They were replaced by the Northern Zhou under the leadership of Yuwen Tai, Bumin's old acquaintance. Yuwen Tai had been active in the service of the Western Wei as a high-ranking general for nearly twenty years. He died in 557 after the establishment of his posthumously called *Northern Zhou* Empire. Looking at the map of Asia, we could now spot an empire in western North China called the Northern Zhou, and another empire in eastern North China called the Northern Qi. Confusing, I know. In the tradition of his predecessors, Tai held on to the alliance with the Gokturks to the very end, and in the last year of his life gave the very last members of the spurned Rouran dynasty to the Gokturks as a token of friendship. His two successors each died after a short time. It was not until Emperor Wu took office that a prolonged period of stability began in the Zhou Empire. Under these circumstances, Wu pursued a more offensive foreign policy against the Qi. To achieve his goals, he needed the help of the Turks with whom he had reaffirmed his alliance shortly after coming to power. Wu therefore made the following proposal to Mukhan: Turks and Zhou Chinese would jointly go to war against the Qi. In the process, the Turks would be allowed to keep their booty. In return, Mukhan would bequeath one of his daughters to Emperor Wu. Mukhan agreed. Thus, both rulers linked their family alliance with their geopolitical interests. In 563, Mukhan joined the Zhou Dynasty in the war against Qi Dynasty. The southern front was led by Zhou general Daxi Wu. His goal was to capture the border town of Pingyang. In the north, a combined Turkic-Chinese army attacked. The Turkic

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<sup>178</sup> Strong (2016): 3.

<sup>179</sup> Sinor (1996): 332.

warriors joined forces with an army of Chinese led by Yang Zhong. The combined troops then marched into the Qi area via Guang'an and advanced to Taiyuan, which was relatively deep in the Qi empire. Taiyuan was an important garrison of the Chinese in the fight against the nomads from the north, corresponding to its function as the "second capital" of the Qi.

The northern Qi, led by Emperor Wucheng, could not withstand the onslaught of the Zhou and Gokturks. However, Wucheng did not stand by idly. He instructed the legendary general Hulü Guang to stop the Zhou attack in the south. At the same time Wucheng himself marched off to Taiyuan with an army to repel Yang Zhong and the Turks. When he entered the city, he was so impressed by the strength of the enemy soldiers that he initially wanted to flee the battlefield. Only at the urging of some high-ranking princes did Wucheng turn back and face his enemies. The Qi were unable to drive out the attacking army but were able to hold Taiyuan for the time being. The city was then besieged by the Gokturk-Zhou army in the winter of 563/564, albeit never fully brought under control. It was not until the spring of 564 that Wucheng was able to turn the tide and force both the Gokturks and the Zhou to retreat. At the same time, Hulü Guang's forces were victorious over Daxi in the south. Thus, the first offensive of the Gokturks and the Zhou Empire had failed to meet expectations. Daxi led a second offensive the following year. This time, the Qi Emperor Wucheng ordered the two generals Duan and Hulü to protect Luoyang from the Zhou onslaught. Indeed, the combined Qi army quickly defeated the forces of Daxi. While Hulü could rejoice in the rise of his prestige and a title awarded by the emperor, Wucheng had to worry about the fact that it was mainly the Gokturks who had attacked and successfully plundered the Taiyuan area. The Turks had retreated without suffering any casualties and they had not even joined the second offensive, but the Zhou only narrowly lost the battle. In the end, the Turks had sent signs of strength to the Qi and asserted themselves as a major power in the region while successfully plundering the border towns of their rivals.

The alliance between the Gokturks and the Zhou included many conditions. For example, trade between the two empires was to be increased. In addition, Mukhan had promised his Chinese counterpart to bequeath one of his daughters to him. The

marriage between the Zhou emperor Wu and the Turkic princess, whose proper personal name is unknown, was to seal the alliance between the Gokturks and the Zhou. But the lost war against the Qi changed the political climate. In the spring of 565, Wu sent a delegation of 120 people led by Yuwen Chun, who was his brother and Duke of Chen, to Gokturks territory. The plan was to escort Mukhan's daughter to Zhou Territory and crown her empress. Mukhan refused and detained Yuwen Chun's envoy. A few years later, a great storm inflicted great damage on Mukhan's Golden Tent. The Khagan took this as a sign of divine disapproval for his revocation of the marriage offer and in return allowed Yuwen Chun's delegation to escort his daughter to the Zhou court. When the daughter and princess of Turkic descent arrived in the Zhou capital Chang'an in 568, she was personally welcomed by Emperor Wu and made his empress. At least *this* is the narrative of Chinese sources. The veracity of this story must not be assumed in its entirety, for it imposes on the Turks a stereotype that the Chinese often cultivated about nomadic peoples. Mukhan is portrayed throughout the chronology of the Chinese as a powerful and courageous ruler, but from the perspective we have just illustrated he was depicted as being stubborn and naïve, too. So were the Hunnic Xiongnu, supposedly. Only after a great storm did he realize his mistake and the Chinese emperor, unlike Mukhan, was merciful and held no grudge against the Turk. This, of course, was written in favor of the emperor's seemingly great character.

Nevertheless, it is a historical fact that the Turkic princess entered the service of the emperor and became as a Chinese Empress. She is described in the sources as immensely beautiful and always appropriate in her actions. Interestingly, Emperor Wu does not seem to have favored her personally, as there were other women at his court who were ethnically Chinese (or even Hunnic) and thus considered to be "first class." It was only after Lady Dou intervened in 572 that he treated her more favorably in day-to-day politics. Lady Dou was the emperor's niece. She reminded him of the power of the Gokturks, and that he had yet to face his rivals of the Northern Qi and Chen dynasties. The Chen State in the south had been established after the collapse of the Liang Dynasty in 557, the same year that the Zhou Empire came into being. Lady Dou wanted her uncle to show greater favor to the empress in order to appease her home state, that of the Turks, and to be able to take his side. This speaks

volumes about the connection between the young Turk and her family, the Ashina. She had been away from her home for almost five years but continued to be in touch with her father, Mukhan, as well as the rest of the Ashina dynasty. This woman proved to be the main link and guarantor of the Gokturk-Zhou alliance. At the Zhou court, she was given the name *Empress Ashina*. In 578 Emperor Wu died and his son Yuwen Yun ascended the throne as Emperor Xuan. He honored Empress Ashina as an empress dowager. This basically meant that even though Empress Ashina was a widow, she remained at the Chang'an court and was given preferential treatment by everyone else. She had risen one rank in the social hierarchy of court residents. The next emperor appointed Empress Ashina as "Empress Dowager". After his death, she was honored again by his successor, this time as "Great Empress Dowager". Shortly thereafter, the Zhou dynasty was usurped by Emperor Xuan's father-in-law Yang Jian who as Emperor Wen would establish the powerful and infamous Sui dynasty. He had most of the courtiers in Chang'an killed, but Empress Ashina was not to be harmed. This seems to have been a strategic decision on Wen's part, as he did not want to mess with the Turks for the time being.

A year later, Empress Ashina died. She had just turned 31 and the circumstances of her death are the subject of speculation as to what ailed her. She was buried on 29 April 582 and has recently attracted the interest of contemporary historians and archaeologists alike. Her tomb, discovered in 1993, is located in what is now Uyghur territory. It has been looted several times, but some of the artifacts including a certain seal have been preserved. The golden seal of Empress Ashina, seen below, is the first copy of the Golden Seal script. While this script was invented sometime during the Han Dynasty a few centuries earlier, it came back into use during the Zhou Dynasty.



*Figure 11: Seal of Empress Ashina as found in Xinjiang in 1993.*

## Harbingers of downfall (572-603)







*Figure 12 Clockwise from top right: Kalyan Mosque in Bukhara, fortress in Kabul, fortress in Pingyao (China), temple complex in Chang'an, Samarkand, Bukhara Citadel.*



## Taspar: World Ruler

Mukhan died in 572 and was succeeded by Taspar, youngest and last remaining son of Bumin.<sup>180</sup> Istemi, as we have seen, continued to rule the western regions until 575. Since de jure the Khagan continued to occupy the highest political office in the empire, he was also allowed to call the lands in western Asia "his" territory. The youngest son of Bumin was, exactly twenty years after his father's death, ruler of a world empire. Within two decades, the Ashina dynasty had created the largest steppe empire in history up to that time. The power of the Gokturks is truly not to be underestimated. Immediately after the new ruler took office, envoys from the Zhou and Qi territories in China rushed to deliver gifts and greetings to the Khagan.<sup>181</sup> Later, when the Zhou and Qi were at war, Taspar even referred to the Chinese emperors as his *sons*, who shall stop fighting against each other and make peace.<sup>182</sup> Nevertheless, Taspar took on an enormous responsibility the moment he became Khagan. As the undisputed leader of all the Turks and other peoples of the Eurasian Steppe Belt and beyond, he had at his disposal a wide range of military and political mechanisms with the help of which he could maintain and possibly expand his power. He was free to influence world history according to his ideas and in favor of his empire. However, the situation in the 570s was certainly not without conflict.

First, there was an organizational problem. The western and eastern territories of the Gokturk Khaganate together covered between 6 and 7 million km<sup>2</sup> in the time of Taspar. The Old Turkic Empire was even larger in area than the Ottoman Empire at 5.2 million km<sup>2</sup> about a millennium later. Therefore, changes had to be made in the political hierarchy within the empire. In the first year of his reign, Taspar appointed his nephews Ishbara and Börü as *lower Khagans* in the east and west of his domain. The Khagan suddenly had direct deputies who were allowed to act on his behalf – in summary, he had promoted at least eight deputies who acted as governors. As powerful as Taspar was, the political system of the Gokturk Khaganate was not as autocratic you might think after all the talk about the might, influence and Kut of the

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<sup>180</sup> Baumer (2018): 182; Taşagıl (2013): 133.

<sup>181</sup> Taşagıl, Ahmet (2003): Gök-Türkler I, 27.

<sup>182</sup> Zhōu Shū: Volume 50.

Khagan. Political power was indeed relegated down the Ashina hierarchy. Second, Northeast Asia continued to be in political turmoil. After decades of tensions, Northern Zhou troops finally invaded Northern Qi territory in 577.<sup>183</sup> Taspar, whose brother Mukhan had renewed the alliance with the Zhou, officially did the same. But in reality he was about to change his diplomatic stance towards the Qi, the long-time enemies of both the Zhou and Gokturks. This time the Zhou Emperor Wu, husband of Empress Ashina, was able to conquer almost *all* of Qi territory even without the need to ask the Turks for assistance. The once proud rulers of the Northern Qi Dynasty suffered massive territorial losses in a short period of time and were subsequently forced to cede the title of rulers over Northern China to the Zhou.<sup>184</sup> On paper, the Qi Empire was no more. But the Zhou were not the only ones with political and military power. When they controlled almost the entire border to the Gokturk Empire, Taspar made a logical decision. After 30 years of friendship with the Zhou he wanted to support their rivals to prevent a unified Chinese state and keep the balance of power in his favor. At least, that could be one theory regarding this train of thought. We cannot not say for sure. Then again, why else would Taspar have jeopardized the extremely good relationship with the Zhou that had been built on generations of trust between?

In accordance with the Chinese proverb “ally with the weak against the strong” the Gokturks intervened in this inner-Chinese war in favor of the weak, in favor of the Qi. However, declaring war on the Zhou and engaging in battle themselves might have been disadvantageous. Gokturks and Chinese shared the eastern Silk Road. Moreover, Empress Ashina, Taspar's sister, continued to be at the Zhou court in Chang'an. Instead of directly attacking the Zhou militarily, he took advantage of the desperation of a certain Gao Shaoyi. Shaoyi was a Qi noble who had roamed northern China with his few loyal troops, trying in vain to prevent Zhou rule in some parts of the country.<sup>185</sup> Supporting him financially and with military supplies was a subtle way to pressure on the Zhou on a political level. Shaoyi was born as the third son of Emperor Wenxuan. You may remember this man. Wenxuan had been the one who

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<sup>183</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): vol. 173, 1-3.

<sup>184</sup> Běi Qí Shū (Book of Qi): Volume 8.

<sup>185</sup> Zhōu Shū: vol. 50; Taşağıl (2003): 29.

ordered the construction of a wall along the northern border with the Gokturks just a few years earlier. At the same time, Wenxuan had also incited the Rouran remnants against the Gokturks. It was not until after his death, in 565, that in the Empire of Qi began a period of stability under Emperor Houzhu, shortly after the Qi had repelled three offensives by the joint Zhou-Gokturk alliance. Associated with Houzhou is another key figure in this conflict: Hulü Guang, commander-in-chief of the Qi army. Do you remember *him*? This is the proud general who had successfully defended his homeland against the Turks in 565. As commander-in-chief of the Qi, he had saved Wenxuan from embarrassment. But in 572 Guang became the victim of a palace conspiracy through Houzhou's intervention. His two sons were killed with him in the Qi palace.<sup>186</sup> The emperor must have been afraid of the Guang's power. But the general's assassination went against the long-term goals of the Qi dynasty and gradually ushered in the downfall of the Qi. When the Zhou marched into their territory in 577, the remaining generals were simply unable to repel the attack. Emperor Wu of the Zhou Dynasty aptly commented on this absurd situation once he arrived at the capital of the Qi:

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*"If Hulü Guang had still been alive, how could I have ever come  
this far?"<sup>187</sup>*

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This series of events spurred Shaoyi into action. In fact, the former administrator of Shuozhou Province made Shaoyi an offer to join the Qi resistance against the Zhou and even take the lead. When Shaoyi arrived in Mayi, the locals welcomed him and supported the resistance movement.<sup>188</sup> Shaoyi rallied the locals behind him and led them into battle with his loyal troops. In 577 Shaoyi's army, together with the troops of one Yuan Hongmeng, the governor of Lingzhou, attacked the settlement of Singhsing. The attack was unsuccessful, as the near-by settlement Bingzhou had already been taken by a large Zhou army. The situation worsened when the Zhou launched a counterattack in the direction of Shaoyi. The resistance army was forced

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<sup>186</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): Vol. 171.

<sup>187</sup> Běi Qí Shū: Volume 17, Section Huluguang.

<sup>188</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): Vol. 173, 5.

to retreat to Shuozhou. Within a few days, the Zhou army arrived there as well and the resistance once again retreated further north to the main base at Mayi.<sup>189</sup> The Zhou general Shenju attacked head-on, defeating Shaoyi in a battle and forcing him to flee the Qi area. This was reason enough for Shaoyi to flee his homeland for good. When Shaoyi arrived at the court of Taspar he had a reputation to repair. He wanted to become emperor of the Northern Qi, as his kin had wished, and thereby ruler of *all* of Northern China. Perhaps he even envisioned the conquest of the Zhou Empire, both as an act of vengeance as well as out of lust for power.

Shaoyi was fleeing to the Turkic Empire. Before arriving at Taspar's court, he gave his three thousand loyal soldiers and followers the opportunity to turn back and leave his army for two reasons: on the one hand, in order to possibly be able to surrender to the Zhou without getting killed or severely punished, on the other hand in order not to feel humiliated for serving a *hu*, a non-Chinese "barbarian." But Taspar nothing less than the most influential man in all of Eurasia and the most powerful ruler in the world in comparison. Perhaps he had not earned this reputation, for Taspar only followed in the footsteps of his brother Mukhan and inherited his, Kara's and their father Bumin's achievements. So now the Khagan was welcoming someone from a family that had fought against everything the Ashina dynasty had advocated from the beginning: an independent Turkic state. Presumably, Taspar still remembered the long-standing rivalry with the Qi, having witnessed the war himself as a younger man. This seems illogical at first, perhaps even traitorous towards the Ashina legacy. But both Taspar and Shaoyi had much in common. Both men had been raised by their respective families to be commanders; they were both opposed to the Qi leadership and thus the corrupt Emperor Huozhu; and they had a common enemy, Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou Dynasty. It seems that Taspar's decision was based on strategic geopolitical considerations. Pragmatism took precedence in these times. The Khagan tried to play both Chinese states off against each other.<sup>190</sup>

But the Qi resistance against the invaders continued. Some Qi nobles were forced to surrender. At a banquet with the Zhou emperor, one of them even wanted to take his

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<sup>189</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): Vol. 173, 5.

<sup>190</sup> Golden (2011): 39.

own life, so bad had been the humiliation that Emperor Wu had inflicted on the Qi dynasty.<sup>191</sup> Other nobles were waiting for the right time to instigate a large-scale rebellion. In the summer of 578, Gao Baoning, distant relative of Shaoyi, refused to officially cede Ying Province to the Zhou. A Chinese source credits him with strategic thinking and courage.<sup>192</sup> He sent a letter to Ötüken asking Shaoyi to accept the Qi imperial title and lure him back home. He also addressed Taspar in the letter. The Khagan sent Baoning a meager 70 horses. At least, that is what the Zhou agents got. In fact, Taspar was preparing a large army at that moment. They had promised military help to Baoning. Shaoyi, in turn, accepted the request of his compatriots and declared himself the rightful emperor of Qi in exile.<sup>193</sup>

At the same time, Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou Dynasty died. Shaoyi saw this as the perfect opportunity to march out and expel the Zhou. Wu's death, in fact, sparked several revolts throughout the Qi region. The most significant one took place in Youzhou, which is now part of the Beijing region. Lu Changqi became the leader of a peasant revolt and captured several small towns. He then welcomed Shaoyi, who had ridden in from the north, and allied himself with him.<sup>194</sup> As a ranking member of the Gokturk-Qi coalition, Taspar proposed that Shaoyi and his few thousand Chinese troops invade Zhou territory while being supported by Turkic forces. The Turks took action in April 578 and invaded Youzhou, in far northeastern China.<sup>195</sup> The response was prompt when General Gaozu attacked the Gokturks in May.<sup>196</sup> Shaoyi attacked Jicheng at the same time. This time he was successful and even defeated his old rival Shenju's subordinates. However, Shenju was again one step ahead and attacked the rebels' flank, killing the peasant leader Lu. This prompted Shaoyi's forces to retreat to Gokturks territory. After another unsuccessful attempt to drive out the Zhou, the Shaoyi planned a new offensive. The Gokturks continued their attacks on the Zhou, including the sacking of Suzhou.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): vol. 173, 8.

<sup>192</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): Vol. 173, 5.

<sup>193</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): vol. 173, 578 n.Cr., 23.

<sup>194</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): vol. 173, 578, 18.

<sup>195</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): vol. 173, 578, 12.

<sup>196</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): vol. 173, 578, 14.

<sup>197</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): vol. 173, 578, 28.

Unfortunately for Shaoyi, Turkic diplomats had sought an official peace treaty with the Northern Zhou on behalf of Taspar. Their new emperor Xuan tried to make a deal with Taspar. He promised him his cousin, Princess Qianjin, as a wife – under the condition that Taspar first deliver Shaoyi to the Zhou.<sup>198</sup> After a spectacular ruse involving Shaoyi, Taspar, an agent of the Zhou and a hunt in the forest of Ötüken, Shaoyi was captured and delivered with Taspar's consent. Thus, the Gokturks made peace with the Zhou Empire after nearly half a year of military conflict. Taspar Khagan had effectively abandoned his ally. This finally sealed the fate of the Qi and ended Taspar's supposed two-pronged strategy. Gao Shaoyi was exiled somewhere in present-day Sichuan. From there, he sent letters to his wife cursing the "barbarians" for their deviousness.

The third and final war between Wei/Zhou and Qi thus came to an end. From a political point of view, its significance for Chinese history cannot be underlined clearly enough. The Gokturks, as the third major power in the political structure of Northeast Asia, could not avoid to lose any influence and prestige in the conflict. Presumably, Taspar had abandoned the Qi because he no longer believed in their success and did not want to risk a major war with the now stronger Zhou. His plan to weaken the Zhou with the help of Qi resistance had not worked. The paradigm shift of 578 was therefore followed by another paradigm shift in 580, the year Shaoyi was delivered. As a result, the Zhou controlled the entire strip of Northern China bordering the Khaganate. The Ashina dynasty on the Altai had to accept this fact. Admittedly, this war also had socioeconomic consequences beyond China. The influx of Qi nobility into the Khaganate, for example, exerted quite some influence on internal affairs in Ötüken. The most notable example is the conversion of the Khagan from Tengrism to Buddhism. At an unspecified time in the late 570s, while the war of resistance was still going on, Taspar was visited by the Chinese monk Huilin. This Chinese "convinced" Taspar of the Buddhist religion. The Khagan then even built a Buddhist pagoda especially for Huilin, as well as for all his subordinates who were also to convert. During the conversion, Taspar also gained interest in Chinese culture, which he fully absorbed after building the pagoda.<sup>199</sup> But contrary to Taspar's thought

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<sup>198</sup> Zizhi Tongjian (1084): vol. 173, 579 A.D., 6

<sup>199</sup> Taşağıl (2003): 28.

process, the Turks did not follow him. According to the available sources, not a single member of the Ashina dynasty, no Oguz-Beg and no one from the common people converted to Buddhism during this period of time. The Turkic people still adhered to Tengrism. Perhaps this religion - or rather philosophy - suited their daily life and mentality better than Buddhism. After all, their connection with Mother Nature was already rooted in Tengrism. This was something they did not necessarily find in the teachings of Buddhism. Moreover, the Turks were skeptical of this form of Buddhism in particular. Actually, this religion originated in what is now Nepal and was only later spread to China. The version to which Taspar was converted corresponded to Chinese Buddhism – and thus included some views that were specifically Chinese. A potential danger for the semi-nomadic Turks of the steppe, as was to prove true. Thus Taşağıl summarized the situation as follows:

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*Taspar Khagan converted to a religion that did not fit the way of life of his people at all. The largest state in Eurasia, the state of the Gokturks actually had nothing to gain by its rulers and its people converting to Buddhism.<sup>200</sup>*

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<sup>200</sup> This view is also shared by Taşağıl, cf. Taşağıl (2016): 173-174.

## The Civil War

When Taspar passed away in 581 he left behind a world empire of epochal proportions. It had withstood all the crises and conflicts of the previous 30 years. There were no rebellions by foreign peoples and tribes, nor were there any major economic problems or social tensions. Istemi, who died in 575, had also made his contribution. But when the Turkic nobility arrived in Ötüken for the Toy, the national assembly, to appoint Taspar's successor a new chapter began in the history of the Gokturks.

For all the Khagan's power, he had not been a despot and the Töre pretended that in times of crisis the nobility had the right to elect the next Khagan. So far, the law had not been changed ever since Bumin's passing. However, the situation at the assembly was tense. Normally, the deceased ruler A was followed by his oldest son, then A's next oldest son until all had died, before his brother and his sons took over. But this time, tradition was overridden on the Toy by a prince named Ishbara. This young man had held the office of lesser ruler, thanks to his promotion by Taspar a decade earlier. Now he of all people objected to Taspar's inheritance. Perhaps he had good reason as Taspar's wish had been to select his nephew Töremen Apa, the son of Mukhan, as the next Khagan.<sup>201</sup> But again, designated successors did not exist among the Turks. The Khagan had no right to choose his own successor even during his lifetime. This ancient rule of succession to the throne was intended to prevent the power of the throne from remaining in the hands of a single line of Ashina for generations. Since all of Taspar's brothers had already died, the eldest male of the next generation would have had to follow after his death. In this case, the eldest of all was Amrak, the actual son of Taspar. But this not-so-young prince held back with his objection. Moreover, there was another problem with the succession to the throne that might have done him or Ishbara justice. Within the Ashina family, the local rulers of the Khaganate had the right to co-determine the successor or at least publicly support him over other candidates. It did not matter whether the person was of Turkic origin or, for example, a Sogdian. However, the majority of the nobility was made up of Turks or people who had defected to the Turks. Moreover, the Sogdians

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<sup>201</sup> Taşağıl (2016): 134.



themselves specialized in trade, not rulership. Finally, the founding of the Gok *Türk* Empire was due to a desire to lead the *Turks* to independence. So a *Türk* was to become Khagan, as before. Therefore, there was particularly strong opposition to Taspar's decision because Apa had had a non-Turkic mother. Allegedly, according to Ishbara, she had even been of lower rank.<sup>202</sup> Taspar's violation of tradition and Töremen's non-noble, non-Turkic origins sparked another major dispute at the Toy. At that moment Ishbara, who was the son of Kara Khagan, threatened all people present with a revolt should Töremen be elected. As a sizable alternative he suggest Amrak to follow in his father Taspar's footsteps and occupy the throne. The Turkic nobility accepted. Thus Amrak was elected Khagan.

You might be raising more than a few eyebrows with regards to the flow of this entire ordeal – and I tend to agree with any skepticism. As so often, the dispute at the Toy was reported by Chinese sources. The Turks, not without reason, never explicitly address the situation in later writings. In the aforementioned Orchon Inscriptions, the author of the text written in Old Turkic does mention “weak Khagans, weak rulers” among the nobility. But Ishbara was never mentioned by name, nor did any of the other princes of this story. What leads me to shake my head is why exactly the Toy tolerated Ishbara's insurgency – his personal name was Nevar, by the way. Perhaps his proposal to follow the rules of Ashina succession law seemed reasonable. However, it should have been noticed by the Ashina nobility that Nevar was a ambitious ruler. His nomination of Amrak was merely a ploy to keep the more powerful Turks out of the succession line. He might not have wanted to become Khagan by then already, but surely, he was interested in shaping the succession according to his wishes. Interestingly, Amrak's rule did not last even a year as in 582 Töremen rebelled against the decision and declared Amrak's rule illegitimate. Obviously, he had wanted to stick to Taspar's decision in order to become Khagan. Töremen enjoyed great prestige among his followers and was therefore able to mobilize them for a revolt, albeit did not order them to attack just yet as the cautious Amrak relied on diplomacy and resigned from office. He believed that he had thus averted Töremen's insurrection. But then he proposed Nevar as the new Khagan. Just

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<sup>202</sup> Taşağıl (2016): 134.

what was Amrak's train of thought here? We will probably never know. His decision to resign *and* nominate the overly ambitious Nevar does not seem to make a lot of sense, seeing as Töremen had already mobilized his loyal followers in case of another dispute. The displeasure of the nobility developed into an open, armed rebellion against Nevar when Töremen declared war on him.<sup>203</sup> Töremen, who was henceforth known as Apa Khagan, received support from Tardush, the son of Istemi and his direct successor. Tardush had ruled the west of the empire for six years and no longer resided on the Altai as the Khagan's neighbor in the east, as his father had, but in Suyab in present-day Kyrgyzstan.<sup>204</sup> However, as a result of the power struggle over the succession of Taspar Tardush intervened in the affairs in the east of the empire and in the process violated another unwritten rule of the ruling house. He had already developed appetites for seizing power in the Khaganate after his meeting with Valentinus, an envoy from the Byzantine Empire. He wanted to grow beyond his current role as Yabgu, a lesser king, to become Khagan himself, a great king or emperor. Due to Apa's open rebellion against Nevar, Tardush got the perfect opportunity.

Apa, Nevar, Amrak and Tardush. It had not been foreign powers that had put the welfare of the Khaganate at risk. Princes who were raised to be rulers all their lives and yet were not allowed to ascend the throne – the greed for power was too great for civil war to be averted.<sup>205</sup> But foreign countries did play an important role in the events that followed. While the princes only wanted to seize power and continue to rule, there were rulers elsewhere who had different, devious play for the fate of the Gokturk Empire. Since Taspar's death, a political entity had developed in the south that posed the greatest threat yet to the Turks. An empire that would act against the Turks not with soldiers, but with spies and agents: The Chinese Sui dynasty. Like the Ashina, the Sui's rise was one of trials and tribulations. The key figure is the founder of the dynasty, the former Zhou general Yang Jian. He been appointed deputy by the emperor's advisors after the actual emperor Xuan became ill, unable to govern the Zhou Empire. Those advisors happened to be friends with Yang. They ignored the

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<sup>203</sup> Taşağıl (2003): 34.

<sup>204</sup> Yılmaz, Anıl (2016): Arkeolojik Veriler Işığında Yedi Su Şehirleri ve Balasagun Üzerine, in: Modern Türklük Araştırmaları Dergisi Cilt 13, Sayı 4 (December 2016), 54-78, especially 56 and 62.

<sup>205</sup> Golden (2011): 39.

ambitions of other princes who wanted to rise to power and helped him become the official emperor's deputy. Emperor Xuan died a short time later, and the advisors issued an edict stating that Yang Jian shall be the new emperor. The former general now controlled the Zhou Empire and ruled one of the largest and most powerful states in Asia. His popularity at court was high, as he reversed many of his predecessor's supposedly reckless and illogical laws. However, some senior generals such as Yuchi Jiong were skeptical. Sensing their displeasure, Yang ordered them back to court. But they refused the order and openly rebelled against the new regent. General Yuchi revolted in Handan Province and General Sima in Xiaogan, both in the northwest, while General Wang took up arms in Chengdu in central China. Yuchi's rebellion was crushed after 68 days by General Wei, after which he took his own life. Wang was also defeated. Sima fled to the hostile Chen Empire in southern China. To ensure that no rebellion ever broke out again from Yuchi's headquarters in the northwest, Yang had the city of Yecheng, the former capital of the Qi, completely destroyed. In the following months and years Yang survived several assassination attempts. He had Yuchi's clan, the Yuwen, literally wiped out. The actual successor of Xuan, who was related to him, gave in to pressure and officially transferred the Zhou imperial title to Yang. Only now could Yang officially elevate himself to emperor and bury the Qi and Zhou dynasties forever. Yang was henceforth known as Emperor Wen. With new confidence and a centralized power over the state apparatus in the new Sui Empire, Wen turned his attention to foreign affairs. He ignored the Turks' expectations, because as Emperor of China he did not want to voluntarily submit himself to the Khagan, at that time Nivar – now called Ishbara Khagan. This in turn angered Ishbara. The Gokturks had held power in Northeast Asia for 30 years. The Sui seemingly opposed them.

The territory that Tardush ruled roughly corresponded to those lands that his father Istemi had left him. But the son, as we said, wanted more. The last diplomatic mission to the Byzantines that has come down to us was in 576. Turkshad, who was one level below Tardush in the political hierarchy, was the first to receive Valentinos' legation. He was extremely brash and unfriendly. Actually, Valentinos' task had been to inform the Turks about the rise of Tiberius II to the vice-emperor of Justin, and at the same time to reaffirm the Turco-Roman alliance against Persia. But Turkshad was beside

himself. He accused Valentinus of still harboring the Avars and thus preventing the Turks from taking revenge.<sup>206</sup> Because of his lowly position as governor, he did allow Valentinus and his companions to move on to the court of Tardush, but shortly thereafter he goaded Anagai, prince of the Utigurs, and Bokhan, a Turkic general, to invade Byzantine lands. In a surprise attack, the combined forces of Anagai and Bokhan besieged the city of Bosphorus on the Crimean peninsula that same year.<sup>207</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Gokturks joined in and laid siege to the ancient Greek fortified city of Chersonesus.<sup>208</sup> The Gokturks' empire had reached its westernmost frontier. However there was no large-scale war against Byzantium, and Tardush was able to negotiate with Valentinus that the alliance would continue. The occupation of Crimea was maintained by the Turks, perhaps as punishment for the Byzantine misbehavior and to forestall Avar expansion.<sup>209</sup> Ultimately, Khosrow II had come to power over the Persian Empire with the help of Byzantium shortly after the Turco-Persian war which will detail shortly. But instead of using this situation to his maximum advantage, Emperor Justin II turned his back, instead attacking the Avars and adopting a passive stance towards the Persians. A fatally wrong decision on a geopolitical level, as the Turks could not trust the Byzantines being loyal allies in case of war.<sup>210</sup>

Back at Ötüken, the civil war was expanding in scope. Ishbara's wife was a Chinese woman named Qianjin. She was of Zhou descent and detested Wen, who had ultimately destroyed the Zhou dynasty and executed all the Zhou nobles at court, with the exception of Empress Ashina. Ishbara was persuaded by Qianjin and immediately took advantage of the chaos in China by launching a campaign. He was helped by a rebel general named Gao Baoning, who had once fought for the Qi against the Turks and was a relative of Gao Shaoyi. Baoning ruled autonomously with his troops near Yecheng, the very area from which Yuchi had once rebelled. Ishbara intervened and together the Turkic and Chinese troops captured several border garrisons from the Sui.<sup>211</sup> Despite the disputes, Ishbara also requested Tardush, Apa and his younger

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<sup>206</sup> Pohl (1988): 28.

<sup>207</sup> Kim (2019): 62.

<sup>208</sup> Taşağıl (2013): 138.

<sup>209</sup> Kim (2019): 61-63.

<sup>210</sup> Kim (2019). 62-63.

<sup>211</sup> Taşağıl (2003): 34-35.

brother Bagha to help him invade China. For the first time ever the Gokturks actually attacked China full-throttle with the intention of capturing more than just a few villages. With combined forces, the western and eastern Gokturks seemingly in an instant controlled a wide swath of northern China.<sup>212</sup> Just as they were about to advance to the Sui capital Chang'an, news of a rebellion at home reached them. The Tiele Federation had taken advantage of Tardush's absence and revolted against Ashina rule. Oddly reminiscent of the Tiele Rebellion against the Rouran a few decades earlier, with the Ashina once again at task to quell their rebellion. As a result, Tardush withdrew his troops and quickly marched to the west of the Khaganate. Ishbara, Apa and Bagha held positions along the front in China. In order to quell the rebellion in his own empire once and for all, and at the same time drive the Turks out of China, Emperor Wen ordered a massive mobilization. Shuang, Prince of Wei, launched a surprise attack near Pai-tao in June 583. The Turkic army had been totally unprepared and was badly hit. After this act of recklessness, Ishbara, Apa and Bagha had to withdraw from China.

But the situation worsened: a deadly disease was rampant in the army. On the retreat back home, many Turkic warriors met their death. At that moment, the Chinese agents and spies intervened. It had not been unusual after decades of exchanges for there to be Chinese among the Turks. But these few Chinese stirred up discontent in the army and incited its commanders against each other. Another dispute arose between Apa and Ishbara.<sup>213</sup> Apa left with his soldiers to the west, but Ishbara followed him and attacked him. Apa's troops lost the skirmish and had to retreat even further west but again Ishbara was on their heels, and again they were defeated. Apa fled in panic to Suyab, to the court of Tardush, who was still busy with the Tiele rebellion. Ishbara, whose army had advanced very far to the west secured the obedience of the local rulers before returning. In doing so, he merged the armies of the lesser rulers with his own, and with a superior number of soldiers he marched back to China. Some Begs joined Apa's army in horror of Ishbara's recklessness. Within two years, the political conditions in the Gokturk Empire had completely been reversed. No longer the Khagan but the shads and begs, the princes and lesser nobles,

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<sup>212</sup> Taşağıl (2016): 140.

<sup>213</sup> Taşağıl (2016): 140-141.

determined the course of the empire. The strongest of them, Ishbara, had overridden the testamentary will of Taspar and ascended the throne himself. But his joy over the seizure of power lasted only a short time. After the failed campaign against the Sui dynasty in China, the ties between Ishbara and the other Begs finally broke down. On the one hand, Tardush had established himself as king in the west and gathered the local rulers around him. His ambitions to overthrow Ishbara from the throne and reunite the empire as Khagan were evident. At the same time, Emperor Wen was preparing revenge actions against the Turks from Chinese territory. Militarily, he had managed to drive the Gokturk army back to the Mongol plateau. Moreover, the Chinese were able to successfully foment dissent within the Turkic nobility: first, they had instigated Töremen Apa's war against Ishbara, and subsequently even turned Ishbara's brother Bagha against the Khagan.<sup>214</sup> After abandoning the pursuit of Apa to Kazakhstan and returning to Ötüken, Ishbara even had Apa's mother murdered.

The result of all these developments: Ishbara Khagan was politically isolated. More and more lower-ranking Begs turned their backs on him and went west to join Tardush's army. There was a looming threat to the Khagan's hold on power in the west. But how could Ishbara have possibly defended against it, being political isolated? His army in the east numbered perhaps 30, at most 40 thousand warriors. Tardush's, on the other hand, might have exceeded 100,000, due in no small part to the forcibly recruited warriors of the Tiele and more warriors from the Chionites and other tribes. Numerically his faction was inferior to the Western Turks. Therefore, the Khagan was on the outlook for new allies. And he found them in China. Princess Qianjin, as mentioned, nursed a grudge against the Sui dynasty for good reasons. However just in time Emperor Wen ordered a rapprochement with her. In fact, Qianjin received visits from Sui diplomats in Ötüken. As a result Ishbara also befriended the guests. The princess received the honorary title *Princess Dayi of the Sui dynasty* by Wen. Encouraged, she suggested to her husband that he approach the Chinese for political security. The intermediary was a spy named Zhangsun Sheng, who had traveled to Ötüken disguised as a diplomat.<sup>215</sup> He had befriended Ishbara and spent several years in the land of the Turks. During this time, he recorded in

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<sup>214</sup> Taşağıl (2016): 141-142.

<sup>215</sup> Golden (2011): 39.

detail all political and social institutions, traditions, and events, and reported them to Emperor Wen. His knowledge enabled the emperor to send out more spies, this time to the lands of the Western Turks. Ishbara had voluntarily offered himself as a subordinate to the Chinese. In return, he received military protection from Emperor Wen's troops.<sup>216</sup> As we have seen, Emperor Wen was able to pit Ishbara against the Western Turks who obviously posed the greater threat to China by 583. And the spies who were present at Tardush's court in Suyab were already planting the seeds for the next quarrel, the next rebellion and the next civil war, this time in the western part of the empire. For if Ishbara were to be defeated by Tardush, they would only have to give the order for the stronger Western Turks to be the next to splinter. In the end, the danger from all Turkic rulers, be they Khagans or Begs, would be banished. At least that was Emperor Wen's long-term plan. The Chinese played the game *divide et impera*: divide and rule. His plan happened to work out.

In September 585, in the third year of the civil war, the Western Turks marched to Ötüken. Ishbara had already fled to China. It is not known what really happened after that. We only know that Ishbara and Apa died simultaneously in 587. In the case of Ishbara, there is talk of a month-long illness as the reason for death. The Sui Emperor proclaimed three days of mourning in the Chinese state and sent five thousand balls of silk to the Turks.<sup>217</sup> But the Turks who had hoped for an end to the disputes at that time were to be bitterly disappointed. For the division of the Khaganate had already been completed. Tulan inherited Ishbara becoming new Khagan. Tardush had now seen his chance in the west to drive out Tulan and declare himself the sole Khagan. But his plan to generate support by defeating China did not work out due to the long distances his army had to travel from West to East Asia, and due to poisoned water supplies. He suffered massive losses without ever having to fight Emperor Wen's army. The Tiele and other tribes again revolted and expelled Tardush who had to seek asylum in northern Tibet. There he vanished in 603.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Baumer (2018): 187.

<sup>217</sup> Taşağıl (2016): 142.

<sup>218</sup> Golden (2011): 39; Taşağıl (2016): 145.

## The First Turco-Persian War

Before we conclude the story about the rise of the Ashina dynasty, it's worth making one last excursion to the west of the empire. Only one of the four ambitious princes remained after 587, Ishbara's presumably younger brother Bagha. Perhaps the most honorable event, free from fratricide and betrayal, befell him. But his actions are also connected with the later turbulences of the Western Gokturk Empire. The year is 588 A.D. Driven by the politically disastrous situation at home, and possibly by droughts resulting from major natural disasters, Bagha – as a lowly Khagan – invaded Iran with a large Turkic army, also composed of Hephthalites.<sup>219</sup> After crossing the Oxus, he conquered the cities Balkh, Herat, Talakan, and Badghis in Bactria, present-day Afghanistan.<sup>220</sup> Although the exact motivation for Bagha Khan's invasion of Persian territory is not known, two factors suggest the need for a military operation. First, the Gokturks were in the midst of a civil war. Faced with chaotic political conditions and a constant drain of food and gold for the mobilized troops of the civil war factions, the elite of the Western Empire may have felt compelled to organize a raid and at the same time increase their economic influence over the remaining non-Turkic cities along the Silk Road. On the other hand, climatic conditions also proved to be an issue with potential for conflict. As I explained to you in the chapter about Bumin, a recent study revealed that the history of the Gokturks paralleled extreme climatic changes. Bumin's revolt lasted six whole years because the Turks had still been affected by the consequences of the extreme weather of 536-545. The civil war in the Khaganate was also accompanied by extreme weather in 581-583.<sup>221</sup> In summary, based on the study and the events of the civil war, we can certainly speculate that Bagha Khan did not invade Herat and the other cities entirely voluntarily but perhaps out of desperation. Then again, a victory over the Persians would have amounted to quite some prestige for the young Turk in relation to other ambitious Ashina members.

However, the Gokturks did not stop in Afghanistan. They marched further west and reached Hyrcania in Tabaristan, the same place in northern Iran that Istemi had invaded nearly three decades ago. This time the Sassanids took up arms. Being in a

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<sup>219</sup> Taşağıl (2016): 148.

<sup>220</sup> Grousset (1970): 135.

<sup>221</sup> Ganiev; Kukarskih (2018): 390.



tumultuous situation towards the Byzantines, they did not even attempt diplomatic reach. The Persian king Hormizd IV who, as you might remember, was the son of Khosrow and a Turkic princess, organized an army to stop the advancing Turks. You might also remember that the marriage was to seal the Turkio-Persian non-aggression pact of 560. Hormizd nevertheless turned against his distant relative from Central Asia and dispatched General Bahrām Chobin for a massive counterattack. In April 588, he faced the Turkic army under the command of Bagha Khan. In the Battle of the Hyrcanian Rock, he decisively defeated the Turks and pursued them to the Oxus, where allegedly he personally hit Bagha with an arrow and killed him on the battlefield.<sup>222</sup> A typical *topos* of Persian storytelling, as not much is known about the course of the battle.<sup>223</sup> We also do not know how combatants were involved and how many of them were wounded and killed. Our Iranian source speaks of 12,000 Iranian soldiers vs. 300,000 Turkic soldiers, which is of course an exaggerated claim.<sup>224</sup> In 589, Bahrām marched east and recaptured the Afghan city of Herat. It seems that he had taken the golden throne of the Turkic Khagan there. Whether Bagha was in 588 the Khagan of all Turks or just ruler of the west, contrary to Tulan, is topic of controversial discussions.<sup>225</sup> Chobin even reached the area around Bukhara. However, a civil war ensued in Iran after Bahrām rallied many loyal troops behind him and proclaimed himself the new king of kings. As a result his opponent, the young Khosrow II, was supported by the Byzantines of all people. As mentioned, this support for Khosrow happened directly under Justin's orders in Constantinople. Bahrām lost and had to flee, ironically to Turkestan, land of his former enemies. But the Turkic people actually welcomed him into their society. Bahrām rose to become a respected general in Suyab, and even at one point uncovered a conspiracy within the Ashina dynasty. A short time later, Khosrow had him poisoned with the help of a Persian agent who must have infiltrated the court in Suyab.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Sinor; Klyashtorny (1996): 329.

<sup>223</sup> Rezakhani, Khodadad (2017): *ReOrienting the Sasanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity*, 177-178.

<sup>224</sup> Ferdowsi: *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), Book 8.

<sup>225</sup> Rezakhani (2017): 178.

<sup>226</sup> Shahbazi, A. Sh. (1988): Bahrām VI Čōbīn, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, III/5, 514-522.

Persian rule over the cities of Sogdia and Bactria was not to last long, but for the time being Bahrām had made a name for himself: on the one hand as defender of the Iranian homeland, and on the other as conqueror of Bagha Khan. Since our only primary source is the Iranian national epic *Shahnameh*, written by Ferdowsi 400 years later, we cannot say how these events really took place in detail. The Gokturks did not leave a single record of them. But from other later sources, some of which describe the first Turkic-Persian war, we can be sure that the war took place in approximately this framework.

Even with such succinct descriptions, this war provides us with three important insights into the relationship between Turks and Iranians in late antiquity. First, the border between the Gokturks and the Sassanids was unclear and victim of constant fluctuation. Although the Oxus was supposed to serve as a protective wall for the Persians against Central Asian tribes, against the people of *Turan*, the Turks passed through it without any problems and destroyed the garrisons in northern Afghanistan. Obviously, the Gokturks ruled over an empire that cannot be called a tribal political entity but truly a transcontinental Eurasian empire – as stated again and again in this book. Also the fact that a second Turkic army advanced to Tabaristan in the west indicates that the Turks planned their actions well-considered, since they could literally take the Sassanids by surprise in terms of time. Thus, secondly, this was not a "barbarian" raid or a spontaneous skirmish between Turks and Persians. The war was *wanted* by both sides because the economic tensions for both peoples had increased enormously and, moreover, the Persians had a claim to rule Transoxiana for historical reasons. While the Persians were constantly at war with the Byzantines, the Turks were trying to hold together their empire which had been torn apart by civil war. Long-term domination of the Silk Road would have helped the rulers of both empires during these difficult times. Third, it should be noted that there was no real *cultural* enmity between the two peoples. Looking at the primary sources, sooner or later you will be surprised by the fact that the Gokturks were not described in the same way in the records of the Chinese, Persians and Byzantines as earlier and later steppe peoples, e.g. the Huns and Mongols. Admittedly, they were often described as "barbarians" but just not as bloodthirsty or malicious people as the Hephthalites or proto-Mongols. We do not know the reason for the absence of such descriptions. But

consequently, it should not surprise us that a highly respected general and follower of the Zoroastrian faith like Bahrām Chobin suddenly changed sides, fled to the realm of the people he had fought just the year before and ultimately entered their service of being general of the Turkic army. Bahrām's professional career shows us that throughout history there have not only been wars between Turks and Iranians, but also personal and cultural contacts and exchanges thoroughly marked by mutual respect. Even if, in this case, the general had indeed acted for strategic reasons.

## Epilogue: Last Ember (603-630)



But what about the state of the Turks? Climatic disasters, droughts, civil wars, and trans-national disputes had visibly damaged the Khaganate. The lords of the steppe had lost Bagha, the last of the four great princes, in battle as well as important settlements along the Oxus River. Admittedly, these were later returned to the Turks. But the defeats at the hands of China and Persia, and especially the internal disputes, dealt a massive blow to both the Eastern and Western Khaganates. East and West also remained hostile to each other. In foreign affairs, the rulers kept exchanging friends and enemies with each other rationally in the short term but never according to a long-term plan. Who ruled hardly mattered anymore. Therefore, we will not go into the exact events leading up to the downfall of the Khaganate in 630 in this volume. Whether Tulan, Yami, Shibi or Tardush the Younger – the rulers of the Turks were no longer sovereign, and their desperation was fully visible to their opponents abroad. But this was not the end of the Gokturks, not by a long shot! About thirty years later after the civil war, the Ashina returned. This time in two imposing conflicts, once again against Persia and China. This time, the Turks were fortunate to be led by two very capable rulers. We will take a closer look at these two lords for the conclusion of our story.

The first great ruler Tong Yabgu. Tong meant as much as tiger or hero. The young king had indeed earned this name. Between 618 and 628, he united the Turks in the Western Khaganate, resumed relations with Byzantium, and intervened in the Byzantine-Persian war, which had now been going on for twenty years.<sup>227</sup> Since the first war against Persia in 588 and 589, there had been another war in 616-617. In it, the Gokturks had pushed deep into Persian territory even as far as Ray and Isfahan. For some unknown reason, the king in the west at the time, Sheguy, had the army withdrawn back into Central Asia. As a result, the Armenian general of the Sassanids, a certain Bagratuni, was able to defeat without difficulty the troops of the Hephthalites - still vassals of the Gokturks - near Balkh in Afghanistan. Eight years later, the Gokturks regained control of Afghanistan (Bactria), now under the leadership of the said Tong Yabgu.<sup>228</sup> Emperor Heraclius had promised Tong Yabgu gifts and booty in the Caucasus if he helped defeat the Persians. Tong then sent an

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<sup>227</sup> Golden (2011): 40.

<sup>228</sup> Baumer (2018): 99.

army of 1000 men through dangerous Persian territory to deliver his message to the emperor:

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*"I shall take revenge on your enemies and come to your aid with  
my valiant troops"*<sup>229</sup>

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Then he ordered Böri Shad, his nephew, into battle. In 627, the latter besieged the fortified city of Derbent in Dagestan with an army described in the sources as "Khazar". From here, the Turks were able to invade Caucasian Albania – not to be confused with modern-day *Albania on the Balkans* – and move into Persia. These "Khazars" were victorious and occupied numerous settlements. When the Byzantines joined from Anatolia, the Gokturks besieged Tiflis in the Kingdom of Iberia. Heraclius and Tong Yabgu met in the camp, embraced respectfully and gave each other gifts. The Turks withdrew after two months, and the Byzantines marched to Nineveh, where they triumphed over the Persian army. Encouraged, Tong Yabgu returned, successfully invaded Tiflis and had the city sacked. His tax plans indicate that he intended to incorporate the Caucasus into his empire rather than turn back after plundering. Three years later, when the Persians launched a counterattack, the Turkic general Khorpan Tarkhan moved into Armenia, lured the ten thousand Persians into a trap and utterly destroyed them in battle. But suddenly, the Turks retreated to the steppes: Tong Yabgu had been murdered. By whom is disputed. According to Baumer, the murderer, even more tragically, was Tong Yabgu's own son.<sup>230</sup> His tragic end notwithstanding, Tong Yabgu went down in history as the conqueror of the Caucasus, along with his Byzantine ally Heraclius. But he could have achieved much more for his empire had he not been killed by his own flesh and blood. Political chaos broke out again in the Western Khaganate. This time ten influential tribes called the On-Ok<sup>231</sup> took power. However, the Turks no longer acted

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<sup>229</sup> Cf. The History of the Caucasian Albanians, translated by C.J.F. Dowsett (1961): 106; Kerovbe Patkanian (1861): The History of Moses Kagankatvatsi, a 10th century writer (История агван Моисея Каганкатвацци, писателя X века), 155-156.

<sup>230</sup> Baumer (2018): 200.

<sup>231</sup> On Ok means "ten arrows" in Turkish. This entity developed into a federation that substantially shaped the future of the Western Khaganate in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. For better or worse.

in unity. When the Arabs advanced to the north from 636, Turkic power was already exhausted as were those of the Byzantines and Persians.

The second last great ruler was the Khagan of the East, Khagan. Until then, the Turks had been tribute vassals of the Sui Chinese. But after two devastating wars against the Koreans, the Sui Empire disintegrated in civil war. The Turks took advantage of the situation. Ilig invaded China. From 621 to 626, he gradually advanced into the interior of China with his relative Tölös.<sup>232</sup> Only 18 days after Taizong had become emperor and proclaimed the T'ang dynasty, Ilig's troops stood in front of the latter's capital Chang'an, ready to attack. How had it come to this? How, after all these years of humiliation, had the Gokturks of the East managed to turn the tide and put the Chinese on the spot in terms of power politics? The answer, once again, has to do with the division of China. Sui China had suffered under two devastating wars, both of which it had started. Both attacks on the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo went wrong, and both times the Chinese suffered very heavy losses. Between the years 598 and 614, in the course of four failed invasions, at least three hundred and two thousand Chinese soldiers fell in battle.<sup>233</sup> But when the Koreans met the Sui armies and confronted them in hand-to-hand combat, they must have been presented with a surprising picture. For many of the soldiers but especially the commanding officers on the Chinese side were not Chinese, but Turkic. This was diametrically opposed to the reason for these wars, as the Chinese emperor had scheduled the invasion of Korea because he discovered emissaries of the Koreans during a visit to the Turkic Khagan. Fearing a strong alliance between Korea and the Turks, the war between the Sui Dynasty and the Kingdom of Goguryeo was initiated.<sup>234</sup>

Ilig and Taizong met on the great bridge on the Wei River. The Chinese promised tribute to the Turk, so the enemy army was appeased and left. But when disputes broke out at Ilig's court the following year, Taizong intervened and supported the deserters. At the same time, Turkic vassals of Ilig, who were also supported by Taizong, revolted. They then proclaimed themselves the Xueyantuo and became independent. To make matters worse, there was also unrest by the Tatabi, a large

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<sup>232</sup> Taşağıl (2016): 146-147.

<sup>233</sup> *Sui Shū* (Book of Sui): Volume 60.

<sup>234</sup> National Institute of Korea History: Goguryeo's Victory over the Sui and Tang.

Mongol tribe.<sup>235</sup> When Tölös' attempt to suppress the Tatabi failed, Ilig had him - his own relative - tortured for ten days. As a result, Tölös fled to China, and Taizong took him benevolently into the court. Finally, Taizong launched a major attack on the Khaganate. He gathered and supported all those who had defected from Ilig and conquered the entire Turkic territory within a few years. Ilig was captured discouraged but was received with kindness by Taizong and treated respectfully at court. Nevertheless, Taizong did not stop there and began a decade-long campaign against *all the* Turks of the steppe. Step by step, the Chinese got rid of the Turkic threat. Taizong was not at all culturally averse to the Turks. He even took the title of "*Son of Heaven*" and is referred to in Chinese historiography as the *Heavenly Emperor of the Turks*.<sup>236</sup> A certain similarity between the *Tengri-like Khagans of the Turks* and the *Celestial Emperors* of the Chinese can certainly be seen. Nevertheless, he robbed the Turks of their independence in order to bind them to himself. Realpolitik at its purest.

These events were followed by more political fragmentation, hostile invasions, fratricide, environmental disasters, starvation, and death in both the west and east of the Turkic territories. Turkic culture had spread throughout Eurasia thanks to the valiant rulers, warriors, merchants and diplomats of the Ashina. They had advanced trade along the Silk Road and facilitated cultural exchange between China and Eastern Rome.<sup>237</sup> But the most important asset of a Turk, freedom, was lost. By the middle of the 7th century, the Gokturks no longer existed. Chinese in the East and Arabs in the West had given the final blow to both Khaganates. But the worst attacks and the greatest suffering had been self-inflicted by the Turks. The greatest enemy of the Turk was the Turk himself. At least in my view. For a long time they lived in darkness. Some of them literally, as the Ashina had seemingly disappeared one day without a trace, some of them having joined T'ang China. But they were never really gone and instead had hidden in a certain cave area on the Altai. There, where it had all started, they were waiting for their opportunity to strike. Like a phoenix they would rise from the ashes of bygone days and, like Bumin and Istemi, free the Turks

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<sup>235</sup> Taşağıl (2016): 154.

<sup>236</sup> Golden (2011): 41.

<sup>237</sup> Barisitz (2017): 55.



from bondage and lead them to freedom. But sovereignty is not simply given. It has to be fought for.

## On a personal note

For years, I asked myself the same question over and over again: "Can you do it?". This question was related to my school days, my studies, work. Since preschool, there have been many people who have supported me, and I appreciate them very much. I have been very lucky in life. But there were always doubters, naysayers who questioned my abilities, my talents, and even outright denied *me* as a person. They couldn't stand my style of writing. It bothered them that I wasn't as loud and annoying as the other school kids. It bothered them even more when I gave a presentation in a seminar at university, leading the discussion with class without explicitly involving the professor. It bothered them that I kept bringing up topics that were not in their syllabus, nor that they had even ever thought about. I could tell you a story or two especially about my seminars in Political Science and how certain profs neither understood the concept of professional education nor bothered to accept opinions other than their own. Perhaps they were also bothered by my origins or, as they say in Germany, my nose, my literal appearance. However, in adulthood I realized that it was precisely not my style, my background, my looks that bothered my teachers and lecturers but the combination of all of these. At no time did I fit into the image of the "typical Turk" in Germany. I couldn't be pigeonholed into one of the many categories, as is unfortunately the case in the country where I grew up. But I was never really "one of them" either. The name wasn't German enough for that. My name is Emre-E. Yavuz and not Hans-Peter Müller. Anyone who knows the meaning of my names will also understand why I like actually like them. So why am I telling you this? In short, because it was one of the reasons why I made this book.

Yes, I wrote this work out of personal motivation. Admittedly, one should not do such a thing as a studied political scientist or historian. Or at least not reveal it to the reader and keep it to yourself. But since so many stumbling blocks were put in my way immediately after graduation, so that I would eventually lose the desire for a PhD, I simply don't care anymore. Would you, in my shoes? I wanted to have a PhD so that I could write books that would be recognized by the academic world. Throughout school, I overcame the ignorance of my teachers, and by the finish line

of university all the naysayers of my style of working were practically silent. This was also reflected in the grading of my thesis. Although I had written a master's thesis with extremely controversial content and bold claims, my profs gave it a "very good" grade. Well, there ya go! I had made it. I had finally achieved my goals, graduated and disproved many other academics and their ignorant claims. But the PhD still was not available at the university where I had studied. To make matters worse, 2020 was *the* year of the pandemic. I am sure that I do not have to lecture any students reading these sentences about the extremely poor communication of the profs with their students. You, the younger people, unfortunately still have to go through hell. At least I don't have to anymore. But then? What was next for me after university? Political Science aside, the thought occurred to me that the subject of history had probably been in vain. I was depressed by this thought. Should I have chosen economics as my second subject instead of history? Despite my non-German last name, that would certainly have increased my chances for quicker career advancement. But then a friend gave me the reason to turn the tables. Now it turned out that it was not the study of Political Science but of history that should be more important – for me personally, for my new hobby, and perhaps also for my professional career.

I had met said friend in a café on a cold, rainy November afternoon in 2019. We talked about all and sundry, as we always do once we run into each other. Somehow, we got onto the subject of the Uighurs in China. He had probably picked up something from the news and asked me, the "expert" on history, about the background of the Uighurs. When I told him about it, he learned for the first time that the Uyghurs were actually a Turkic people. As open-minded as he is, he wanted to know more about the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples. Time ran out, and we went our separate ways. But those one or two hours with him in the café animated me to start a blog that same evening. On it, I wanted to tell Turkic history, to show that it consisted of more than Ottomans on one side and certain Turkic politicians on the other. I wanted to write about things that 99 percent of all Germans had never ever heard of. No, not made-up claims and forged history. As you may have noticed, many of my sources on the Gokturks were written by Chinese, Byzantines, Persians, Koreans, Tibetans, Sogdians and even Arabs. The evaluation of these sources was conducted in the 19th and 20th centuries not only but mainly by European historians,

linguists and archaeologists. From the beginning, it was not a matter of sugarcoating Türkiye or Turkic culture for whatever reason. I noticed early on that it was precisely some Turks who were bothered by the Gokturks. Funny, I know. Anywhere I got into conversation with people, at university, at work, at parties, I was confronted with so much ignorance. Not just ignorance actually, but with a mentality of *wanting to* remain ignorant. Is that the definition of being ignorant about one's own ignorance? Unfortunately, not everyone was like my said friend, many simply did not want to expand their horizons. Frankly, though, *I* had had enough of it. And I found that this ignorance was not something that developed on its own over time but was caused and, perhaps willfully, brought about by certain media, politicians, businesses and even academic circles. School systems around the world, of course, played a role in this. Believe me when I tell you that almost none of my knowledge of history comes from my time at a Bavarian high school. Well, apart from some topics like Charlemagne and Nazi Germany. The same-old same-old. But then again, these are topics that are chewed over on certain German "documentary channels" day in and day out. My German readers know what I'm talking about. They are important to know, but... history consists of more than just the same 3-4 topics, right? Right.

Well. If many people are not properly told what was right or wrong in history and, above all, there were usually two sides to the same coin – how on earth are they supposed to find out for themselves? By chance? Or is every person credited with retaining curiosity and inquisitiveness to the end of his life, if they ever possessed it at all? A busy hard-working person in adulthood simply does not have the *time* or *strength* to constantly educate themselves. Life consists of enough problems, conflicts to deal with. Under these two auspices, I then put into practice my ideas that had been accumulating in my head for years. There is a group of people who would like to know more about the story but are not well versed in it (e.g. said friend). And there is the other group of people who simply don't have the time. Both groups didn't need to sacrifice their valuable time for elaborate research and didn't need to wade through dusty, centuries-old books. That's okay. Because *I* would do that for them from now on. Why else had I studied history? Out of boredom? Surely not.

I quickly started to publish every blog entry about the Gokturks in three languages, including English and, of course, Turkish. The advertising I did for my blog on

Facebook even brought me over one thousand followers within a few weeks. The blog was read more by people from Germany, the Facebook posts by people from Türkiye. But writing was not enough. Just a month later, I published my first video on YouTube called *Rise of the Gokturks*. I knew that the only way to truly understand recent Turkish history – including that of the Ottomans – was to start from the beginning. Now, it's not easy to travel over 1500 years into the past and then draw parallels to the 20th century. It gets even trickier when you want to draw lessons from history with reference to the current political situation in Türkiye. But there *are* parallels, patterns that keep repeating themselves, and knowledgeable as well as attentive readers and viewers of my works may have already spotted them. So I proceeded to expand my channel on YouTube. But the year 2020 and the wait for the barely attainable PhD at university almost made me give up. I suddenly had the urge to translate *Rise of the Gokturks* into German out of sheer curiosity to see if it would bring in a few more viewers. Sure enough! Suddenly, the audience numbers shot up again. I even managed to reach one thousand subscribers. A milestone for any amateur YouTuber. I had almost given up, but my family and my new subscribers stopped me from doing so. Thank the almighty sky.

Instead of PhD and the fancy academic world, documentaries and YouTube were now on the agenda. Of course, I do have a job, just in case you were wondering. But it gets really interesting for me when I get to write books like this. Because in my videos, in my books, I get to really let off steam, let all my talents run wild. I did and continue to do the whole thing as a hobby, not as a full-time job. I simply have too few viewers for that. Whereas 19,000 subscribers (as of April 2022) are not few. I'm glad about every single one of them. After the mini-series on the Gokturks, I then published a movie-length documentary in the summer of 2021 that covered the entire history of the first Gokturk Empire, including prehistory, lifestyle, religion, and so on. The book you are reading is a massively expanded version of that film entitled *The Gokturks: History, Culture and Legacy of the First Turkic Empire*. The idea of making such a book in the first place had already occurred to me a few years ago. But the high audience figures for the film of which the English version has long since surpassed the German one, by the way, motivated me to work on the book again.

Admittedly. I don't have a PhD in my pocket and I don't have the support of the "academia", but I have the freedom to write this book – *my* book – the way I like it. And I like to explain complex issues in a way that every *ordinary person* can understand. If you feel addressed, that's fine! All the better. If you really made it to this very last chapter without any real prior knowledge about the Gokturks, maybe even without any prior knowledge about Turkic history in general, then I congratulate you. I know that the facts of this book can be irritating at times. The story also gave me a headache at some points. Believe me. Moreover, if time and budget were available, this book could have been a few hundred pages longer, even more comprehensive, so that I could have analyzed the history of the steppe peoples since the Scythians, the rise of the Huns, and the complex migratory movements across Eurasia. I would also then examine the role of the Indo-European peoples in more detail. Think of the potential connection of the Ashina clan with the Indo-European Wusun. On the other hand... writing books is difficult, but it's not the "writing part" that's so exhausting. At least, that's not the case for me. In fact, *researching* and *translating* all those ancient Chinese, Korean, Tibetan, Persian, and ancient Greek books was perhaps the most difficult part. But this project is really different. The subject, the style, the goal of this project are not something that many book publishers in this country would like to take up and put on bookstores. Be that as it may! You still managed to read the book to the end. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thus I have reached my goal. And if you were the only person in the world who bought and read the book, I would still be satisfied. At the end of the day, I wrote this to prove to myself one last time that I can do it. To write a story that people would be interested in and might even want to know more about. Of course, this story is absolutely based on real events, so below you will find a comprehensive list of timelines, lists of states, an index of names and terms and, of course, a list of sources.

The Gokturks. Their way of life, their philosophy characterized by humanity, their religion of Tengrism, which teaches harmony between humans and nature and of course their ruling dynasty, the Ashina. All these themes would guarantee a full-length exciting adventure novel. But before we drift into such semi-fictional works, we must first tell their actual stories. Their dreams, their ambitions, but most of all their transgressions, their suffering, and their ultimate downfall are what I wanted to

tell the world. Hard facts from which lessons must be learned. We could certainly learn from their mistakes. Did I succeed? You have to make this judgment now. Even though you may "only" be a layman, you are quite a bit ahead of many historians with your newly accumulated knowledge.

Go ahead and send me a message via email to **info@thekhansden.com**. Maybe I will draw new ideas and strength for the next book from it. And there will be another book. Because the story of the Gokturks is far from over.

## Timeline of the Gokturks

7000 BC -1200 BC	Millet farmers in Northeast Asia are gradually migrating south and southeast. Among them are the cultural ancestors of Koreans, Japanese, Mongols, Tungus, and Turks.
1200 BC -200 BC	The Proto-Turks, speakers of an early form of Turkic, leave Northeast Asia and infiltrate the eastern Eurasian steppe belt, thus turning their backs on the plantation economy.
200 BC -200 AD	The Xiongnu Empire, which was actually a confederation of many tribes of the Eurasian Steppe, is dominated by elites who spoke ancient Turkic.
200 AD -300 AD	After the collapse of the Xiongnu, Turkic tribes migrate westward. During the era of the Three Kingdoms dawns in China, anarchy reigns in the steppe which cannot be tamed by the Mongolian Xianbei Federation. In this multipolar world order states emerge that were ruled by Turkic-speaking tribes.
304	Foundation of the "Early Zhao" state in northern China by one million members of the Xiongnu, among whom were Turkic elites.
320	A part of the Xiongnu founds the Kidarite Empire in Bactria
327	Foundation of the "Late Zhaou" state in northern China by the Jie, an ethnic group composed of Turks and/or the Indo-European Yuezhi.
330	After decades of political anarchy, Shelun takes power over the eastern Eurasian steppe and establishes the Yujiulü dynasty. From then on, these so-called "Rouran" rule over large parts of the steppe world, including former Xiongnu territories.
397	Foundation of the state of the "Northern Liang" in northwest China by the Han Chinese Duan Ye. The empire is de facto led by generals who were all descended from the Xiongnu - including Wuhui and Anzhou.
430-440	The Rouran displace the Indo-Aryan (?) Wusun from the Tarim Basin westward and in turn displace descendants of the Hunnic Xiongnu. The latter



	fled to the Aral Sea and from there founded two Hunnic states: the Alchon Hun Empire (440-560) and the White Hun Empire (Hepthalites, 445-560).
439	After an invasion by the Wei dynasty, Wuhui and Anzhou fled from Gaochang (Tarim Basin) to the Altai Mountains and, probably, continued their dynasty under the name of "later Liang". First appearance of the Ashina at the Altai, who had also fled from Gaochang.
460	The Rouran spread their rule over northern Asia and put an end to the rule of the Hun Liang. After two decades of political independence, the Ashina were forcibly integrated into the Khaganate by the Rouran and henceforth functioned as vassals with an obligation to military service and regular tributes to the Khaganate.
508	1.Tiele rebellion and victory against the Rouran. The Tiele Federation was composed of dozens of large Turkic tribes throughout Eurasia. Presumably other Turkic tribes such as the Ashina were also involved in the rebellion. Restoration of the old order by the Rouran army shortly thereafter.
516	2.Tiele rebellion, which is again put down.
520	Anagui ends the Rouran civil war and declares himself the new <i>Khagan</i> .
532?	Bumin reportedly took control of Ashina that year.
542	First appearance of the Ashina Turks on the border with China. After plundering Suizhou (near Chang'an), they are put to flight in winter by a ruse of Governor Yuwen.
545	<b>3.Tiele rebellion</b> , which is suppressed by an operation of Bumin before the outbreak of military fighting. After a victorious battle, Bumin becomes the de facto leader of the Tiele, and thus master of an army of 100,000 to 250,000 Steppe warriors. Bumin rises in the hierarchy of the steppe.
546	Anagui denies Bumin his daughter as thanks for the suppression of the Tiele. Bumin breaks off all relations with his liege lord. He fakes new raids in northern China to provoke a profitable trade offer by the Western Wei.

546-551	Preparing the Ashina for the overthrow of the Yujiulü dynasty of the Rouran Khaganate.
551	<p>Chancellor Yuwen Tai of the Western Wei grants Bumin Princess Changle of the Tuoba Dynasty as a bride, sealing the Ashina-Wei alliance, which is indirectly politically opposed to the Rouran.</p> <p>Bumin begins the attempted overthrow of Anagui. While the revolution is still underway, tens of thousands of Turkic warriors appear on the Liao River to Korea and besiege Sin-song. General Go Heul of the Kingdom of Goguryeo repulses the Turks and captures 1,000 of them.</p>
552	<p>In February, Bumin's Turkic army defeats Rouran forces in a skirmish near the Mongol-Kazakh border. In March, the Turks defeat the Rouran again, in a major battle in Hebei, northern China. Anagui commits suicide, his family flees to the Northern Qi Empire in East China, and the knight caste migrates west to Europe.</p> <p>Bumin proclaims the <b>First Gokturk Khaganate</b> in March or April. He declares himself the new <i>Khagan</i> (king or emperor), his wife Changle the <i>Khaghatun</i>, and the Ashina the new ruling dynasty of the steppe. While Bumin takes direct control of the eastern part of the steppe, he grants his younger brother Istemi the lesser title of <i>yabgu</i> (viceroy) and all regions west of the Altai. Bumin dies shortly thereafter, and his son Kara takes over. Istemi remains Yabgu.</p>
553	Kara fights the remnants of the Rouran, who launch attacks on the new Gokturk Khaganate from the territory of the Northern Qi. The Turkic Kyrgyz to the north and the Mongol Khitan to the east of the steppe signal no willingness to submit to the Ashina. Meanwhile, Istemi launches a major campaign with 100,000 soldiers to the west.
554	Kara dies of illness and is succeeded by his brother Mukhan. Taking advantage of the short-term political instability, the Qi Emperor orders the Rouran to attack. However, Mukhan is able to repel this attack. Anlouchen of the Rouran turns against the Qi Emperor. After a losing battle, he is killed and tens of thousands of Rouran women and children are enslaved by the Chinese. The Yujiulü dynasty is extinct.

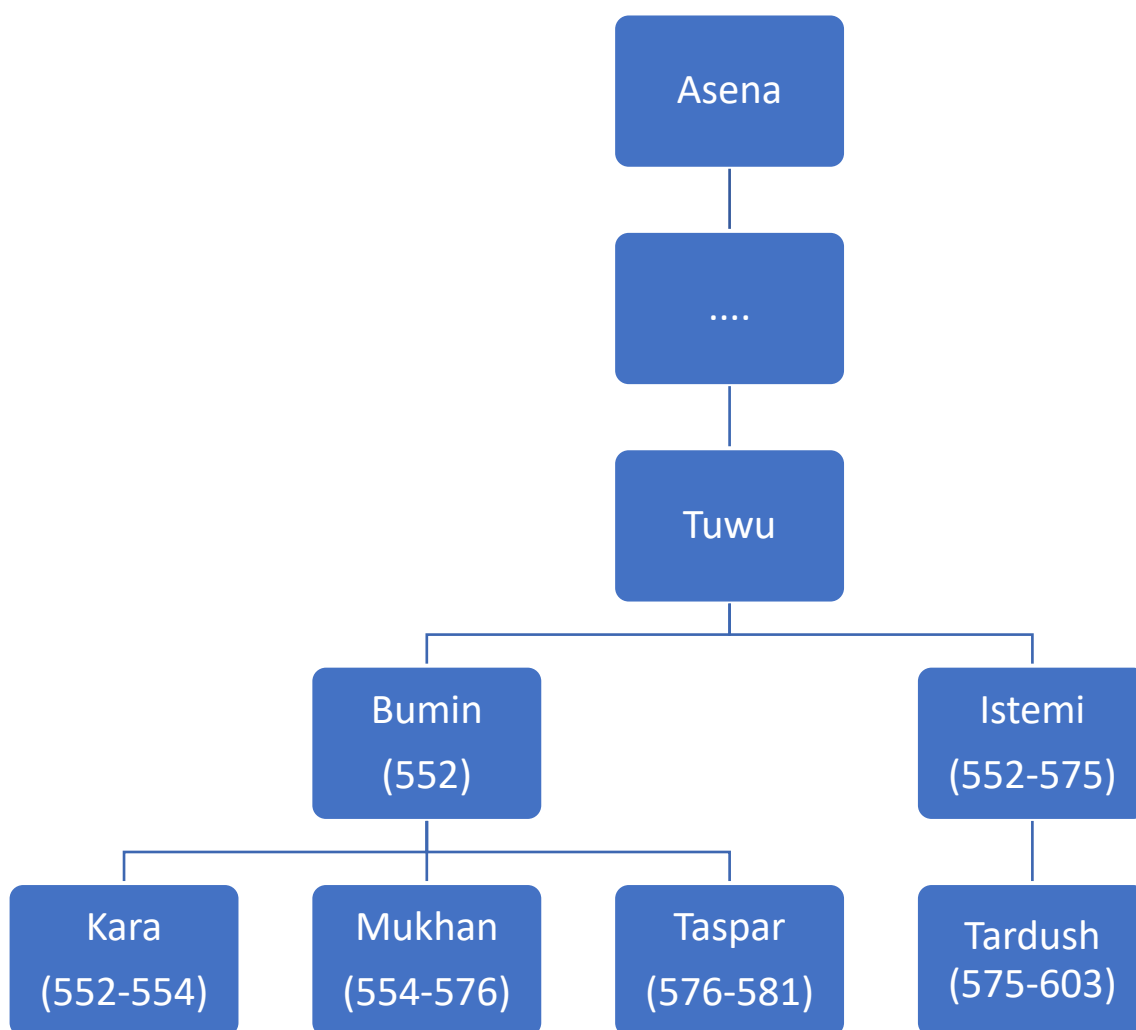
555	Istemi's army arrives in the Seven Rivers country in Kazakhstan (Yedisu) and integrates new tribes such as the so-called Hunnic Chionites into the empire.
556	Yuwen Tai founds the Zhou dynasty shortly before his death
558	Letter of Istemis to Byzantium. In it, the Turkic king demands the extradition of the Rouran/Avar refugees.
559	The Persian king Khosrow (Hüsrev) makes a secret agreement with Istemi. The two rulers agree on a joint attack on the Hephthalite Empire and consequently the division of this Hunnic state.
560	<b>Battle of Bukhara:</b> Turks and Persians crush the Hephthalites coming respectively from the northeast and southwest. Bukhara and Sogdia go to Istemi, while Khosrow incorporates Bactria and parts of India into his empire. The Gokturks advance further to Tabaristan on the Caspian Sea and are appeased into stopping by the Persians. Istemi and Khosrow conclude the <i>non-aggression pact of Gurgan</i> and establish the Oxus River (Ceyhun) as the new Turkic-Persian border. The pact is sealed with the marriage of Khosrow to an unnamed daughter of Istemi, which produces the later Persian king Hormizd IV.
563	<b>1st Zhou-Qi War.</b> Gokturks join Emperor Wu's Zhou Dynasty against their common rival in Northeast China. While Daxi Wu attacks the southern flank, Mukhan rides from the north across Guang'an to Taiyuan, which he besieges.
564	In the spring, the Qi put to flight the Gokturks from Taiyuan. At the same time, under the leadership of Hulü Guang, they defeat the Zhou in the south.
565	Renewed and unsuccessful attempt by Daxi Wu to invade the Qi Empire via Luoyang. After the unsuccessful attacks on the Qi, Mukhan refuses to marry his daughter to Zhou Emperor Wu.
568	After a "punishment from heaven" in the form of a devastating storm in Ötüken, Mukhan changes his mind. Marriage between his daughter and Emperor Wu seals the continuation of the Gokturks-Zhou alliance.  Istemi sends Maniakh to the court of Emperor Justin II in Constantinople to secure trade with Byzantium and offer an alliance.

569	Maniakh returns to the court of Istemi on the Altai with the Byzantine diplomat/politician Zemarchus. There, Zemarchus completes ceremonial rites to seal the Turco-Byzantine alliance and observes Istemi on an expedition into Persian territory.
572	Death of Mukhan. Taspar, the youngest son of Bumin, becomes the new Khagan.
575	Death of Istemi. His son Tardush takes over as the new Yabgu in the western Khaganate.
577	<b>2nd Zhou-Qi War.</b> Taspar, who is initially reluctant, tries to play both empires off against each other. After the Zhou conquer almost all Qi territory, he takes in the Qi prince Gao Shaoyi in Ötüken and supports his rebellion against the Zhou.
580	Taspar delivers Gao Shaoyi to the Zhou. Members of the Qi have fled to the Gokturk Khaganate or taken new positions in the state apparatus of the Zhou Empire.
581	Death of Taspar. On the Toy, Ishbara, son of Kara, forces his election as Khagan over Töremen Apa.
584	Apa's break with Ishbara and declaration of war for the throne of the Khaganate. Ishbara's group looted Apa's camp and killed his mother. Apa then fled to the west of the Khaganate and allied himself with Tardush. With the help of his brother Tamgan, Tardush is able to successfully support Apa in the fight against Ishbara and almost force the "Khagan" to surrender. Ishbara then voluntarily submits to the rule of the Sui in China in order to win them over as a protective power for his cause.
587	Death of Ishbara and Apa. In both cases the reason for death remains unknown.
588	<b>1.Turco-Persian War:</b> Led by Bagha, short-term pseudo-Khagan, the Gokturks conquer Balkh, Badgis and Herat in Bactria with Hun help. Bahrām Chobin repulses the Turks and annexes the territory up to Samarkand. After Ishbara Khagan's death, his son Tulan takes power in the east.

589	After being proclaimed Persian king of kings, Bahrām Chobin flees from an alliance of his rival Khosrow with Byzantium to the land of the Turks. There Chobin rises to the rank of general.
600	Invasion of the Persian Empire by the Hephthalites from Gokturk territory. The Huns advance marauding to Isfahan, in central Iran, and retreat again.
603	End of the civil war. Final division of the Khaganate into east and west.
627	<b>3.Turco-Persian War</b> , which was embedded in the Byzantine-Persian conflict since 602. After successful siege of Tbilisi (Georgia), Tong Yabgu annexed the entire Caucasus.
628	Advance of Böri Shad, brother of Tong, into Iran, where he destroys a Persian army of 20,000 men. After killing Tong, the Turkic army turns away.
630	Fall of the Khaganate in the east. From then on, the Gokturks in Mongolia were politically subordinate to the Syr Tardush and, de facto, to the T'ang dynasty. Emergence of a Khazar identity in Itil (Volga).
630-650	The western kingdom is divided and united several times. Internal turmoil and claims to power diminish the power of the Ashina, who are allowed to rule only thanks to the acquiescence of the powerful On-Ok (Nushibi and Tuğluk).
640-648	Continuous attacks by the T'ang Dynasty on the oasis cities of the Tarim Basin. After the fall of Karakhoja (Gaochang) and the Kingdom of Hotan, the Chinese snatch the Tarim Basin from Turkic hands.
640-657	<b>Turkic-Chinese War</b> , in which the T'ang Dynasty is able to conquer and subjugate the entire Western Khaganate. Chinese influence now reaches to the gates of Iran.
657	Fall of the Khaganate in the West. The Gokturks were finally defeated politically and no longer exist on the world stage of states. The members of the Ashina dynasty have either gone into hiding, openly rebelled against Chinese rule, or even joined the Chinese.
666	The Turk Shahi put an end to the rule of the Nezak Huns and became rulers over Kabul and its surroundings.

681	An Ashina native gathers all the Turkic tribes of East Asia, successfully rebels against T'ang China, and proclaims the <b>Second Gokturk Khaganate</b> . He will go down in the history books as the liberator of the Turks under the name Ilterish Khagan ( <i>il</i> : the land, <i>terish</i> : gathered).
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## List of definitive Gokturk Rulers



# Register of political entities



## Gokturk Khaganate

Founded by the Ashina Turks, the first transcontinental steppe empire in history controlling large parts of the Eurasian steppe belt from c. 551-630 and acting as a catalyst for the spread of Turkic culture and

Tengrist traditions in all directions. At times weakened by civil war (584-603) and divided into two, the rulers of the west came into active contact with Persia and Byzantium and the rulers of the east with China and Korea. Administration led by the Khagan (east) or Yabgu (west), who appointed Shads, Eltebers and other Ashina nobles as deputies in each province being supplemented by the merchant people of the Sogdians. Even at the time of the founding of the empire by Bumin and Istemi, the Ashina dynasty depended on the support of the Begs, the lesser nobles and original tribal leaders of the steppe. Rule over the legendary forest of Ötüken legitimized the Ashina claim to rule over the entire Eurasian steppe. Accordingly, the armies of the Gokturks in a brief alliance with the Persian Sassanids crushed the empire of the Hephthalites (White Huns) at the Battle of Bukhara (560). Subsequently, they ruled over the entire territory of the steppe empires that preceded the Gokturks, namely the Xiongnu Huns, Xianbei and the Rouran.

Acting as diplomats, the Sogdians facilitated an alliance between Gokturks and Byzantines in the West. In three wars against Persia (588/606/627), the Turks conquered the rest of Sogdia as well as large parts of Bactria (Afghanistan) and the Caucasus, although they were pushed back by the Persians almost every time. Due to Hunnic incursions in Iran, the mentioned area nevertheless passed into Turkic hands. Surrounding tribes in Europe, presumably Turkic, acted as low-ranking allies and conquered parts of the Crimean Peninsula on behalf of the Gokturks after the Byzantines failed to hand over the Avar/Rouran fugitive. Nevertheless, the alliance



with Byzantium as well as Turkic trade and diplomacy cemented Turkic power in Western Asia.

In the east of the Khaganate, the 30-year alliance with the Western Wei and their successors of the Northern Zhou dynasty led to wars against the Northern Qi (565) and later against a united China of the Sui dynasty (583), which brought only minor success. The clumsy playing off of the Chinese Zhou and Qi dynasties by Taspar heralded the gradual disintegration of the Khaganate. In the wake of the civil war of the second and third generation Ashina princes, the Gokturks' political power rapidly disintegrated. Henceforth, Begs, Shads and Khagans became vassals of the Chinese in turn. From a military point of view the fall of the Gokturks was unthinkable but political fragmentation increasingly weakened the authority of the Khagans.

In the 620s, Tong Yabgu in the west and Illig Khagan in the east scored final major successes against Persia and China. Tong conquered the Caucasus in a joint war against the Persians, while Illig Khagan, after several incursions deep into Chinese territory, was able to force the Tang dynasty to sign the Wei peace treaty and henceforth received tribute payments. However, after an assassination attempt on Tong Yabgu, the Gokturks were forced to withdraw from the Caucasus forever, while the alliance between Tang, Turkic Syr Tardush, and Uyghur forces led to the deposition of Illig Khagan. As a result, the Eastern Empire was replaced by the Syr Tardush, while the Western Empire fought desperately with Tang China for control of the oasis cities of the Tarim Basin. After Il-Kullig Khagan's defeat (657), Sui-China annexed all of the Gokturks' territory in the west. It would take several rebellions, assassination attempts, and popular uprisings for the Turks to achieve independence once again under Ilterish in 681.



## Tiele Federation

Collection of 40 mostly Turkic tribes and clans that lived scattered along the Eurasian Steppe Belt. As the name implies, all members of the federation carried out a common foreign policy. Thanks to Chinese sources, the history of the Tiele can be traced back to the 4th century. The Tiele rebellion, put down by Bumin, sealed the rise of the Gokturks. However, the federation took revenge a few decades later and interrupted the Turks' storming of China in 583/84.



## Kyrgyz of the Yenissei

The Kyrgyz were among the oldest of all Turkic peoples and lived for centuries in an area between the Yenisey River and Lake Baikal. Mukhan integrated them into the empire after the most severe battles. The Kyrgyz specialized in mining metals and supplied the Ashina clan with valuable gold deposits from North Asia. It would be three centuries before they could build an "empire" of their own.



## **Goguryeo (Korea)**

Korean kingdom that ruled large parts of North Korea, Manchuria and even Mongolia until the 7th century. After initially hostile contact, the Turks and Koreans developed a friendly relationship. The alliance of the Goguryeo and the Gokturks triggered the Sui Dynasty's attack on Korea. Due to the involvement of high-ranking Ashina members in the war on the side of the Chinese, an ambivalent relationship emerged in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. By the time of the Second Gokturks Empire, the dust had settled.



## **Western Wei (Northern China)**

Successor state to the Northern Wei Dynasty that ruled over western North China. Due to a pent-up rivalry against the Rouran dynasty, Chancellor Yuwen Tai allied with Bumin and supported him during the revolutionary period. After the Rouran attacks from Qi territory, the Wei helped the Gokturks get their hands on the last members of the Yujiulü Dynasty. Their successor state, the Northern Zhou, held on to the alliance.

## Northern Qi (Northern China)



Successor state to the Northern Wei dynasty that ruled over eastern North China. For decades it was in conflict with the Western Wei. When the Gokturks replaced the Rouran as lords of the steppe, the Qi absorbed the latter and used the nearly 50,000 Rouran remaining as a buffer against the Gokturks. After internal disputes, the Rouran turned against the Qi, whereupon Emperor Wenxuan had some 20,000 women and children enslaved and the men slaughtered. The Qi were able to defend themselves twice against attacks by the Zhou-Gokturk alliance but were annihilated in the third Zhou invasion in 577. Gao Shaoyi's resistance was unsuccessful despite unexpected Turkic help.

## Northern Zhou (Northern China)



Successor state to the Western Wei in northwestern China. Continued the alliance with the Gokturks. In two unsuccessful wars, they challenged the Qi for dominance over all of northern China. In the third attempt, however, they succeeded in completely conquering Qi territory, without Turkic assistance. Taspar's decision to support the Qi led to a war against the Gokturks in 578-579, which was settled in 580.



## **Sui Dynasty (China)**

The first state since the Han dynasty under whose banner the whole of China could be politically united in the years 581-589. The Sui rulers were aware that the fragmentation of dynasties in northern China had indirectly favored the projection of power by the steppe peoples, most recently the Gokturks. Accordingly, they destroyed the remnants of the Zhou (and Qi) and began a campaign of clandestine operations. Sui agents, often disguised as merchants or religious pilgrims, further incited the already ambitious Turkic princes against each other, thus inciting civil war in the Khaganate. In 583 and 584, the Sui revolution nearly failed due to a united front of Gokturk princes, but illness and internal strife once again caused the Gokturk army to disband on the North China border. The Sui Dynasty had successfully divided the Khaganate while keeping an eye on Goguryeo, the Gokturks' Korean ally. Due to a devastating defeat of the Chinese in Korea there was unrest throughout the empire, causing the Sui Dynasty to fall.



## **Tang Dynasty (China)**

After inciting his father to rebel against the Sui dynasty, Li Shimin established himself as the actual founder of the Tang dynasty. Under the title of emperor Taizong, he was able to absorb the entire Sui territory and eliminate all enemies of his new rule. Unlike the Sui emperors, Taizong took military action against the Gokturks. Under his successors, the Tang were able to subjugate the western Gokturk Khaganate in 657, but also absorbed many members of the Ashina dynasty into their military ranks. Taizong had been quite culturally sympathetic to the Turks and had all Turkic generals and nobles at his court treated with leniency and care. Moreover, the Tang did not necessarily act as oppressors of Turkic culture in the conquered territories.

Nevertheless, the Tang nipped any signs of discontent or revolt in the bud. Ashina Jiesheshuai, a Turkic general in the Tang army, nearly killed Taizong in 639 as a result of a palace conspiracy-a nationalist Turkic author developed the heroic figure of *Kürshad* from this. The Tang were able to continue to actually defeat Goguryeo with the help of the Korean state of Silla and had been grateful for the help of Ashina generals and officers.

However, in 681 a certain Ilterish managed to unite the Turkic tribes of Mongolia and declared the independence of the new Second Gokturk Khaganate from the Chinese. Although this empire was also defeated in 745, thanks to a Tang coalition with the Uighurs, the Turks continued to cause trouble in the Tang Empire. An Lushan, a Tang general, declared war on the emperor in the 750s and attempted to overthrow the dynasty. He received help from Sogdian traders, who may have been spies in China, as well as tribes from the steppes. He himself was the son of a Turk of the Ashide clan and a Sogdian. The Tang were able to defeat An Lushan's rebellion thanks to the new Uighur Khaganate, hostile to the Gokturks and their Gokturk friends. The turmoil and wars of the turbulent 8th century nevertheless left deep scars on the Tang dynasty.

## Register of persons

- Bumin: 6th generation Ashina leader, commander-in-chief of the Tiele Federation and founder of the Gokturk Khaganate in 552. Drove the Rouran Khagan Anagui to suicide and freed all Turkic tribes from foreign rule. Died shortly thereafter of unexplained causes. Responsible for the Turks' essential alliance with the Western Wei and their successor state of the Northern Zhou.
- Changle: Princess of the Western Wei dynasty and wife of Bumin from 551. After he appoints himself Khagan, Changle becomes Khagatun, a kind of co-emperor.
- Gao Shaoyi: Prince of the Northern Qi Dynasty and resistance fighter against the invaders of the Zhou Dynasty. He was admitted to the court of Taspar and received military support from the Turks, but after two unsuccessful military operations, Taspar handed him over to the Zhou.
- Heraclius: Byzantine emperor 610-641. Was able to win Tong Yabgu as an ally in the war against Persia. After Byzantine troops went as far as Nineveh and Turkic troops conquered the Caucasus, he celebrated a great festival of joy of the peoples together with Tong Yabgu in Armenia.
- Kara: eldest son of Bumin and direct successor as Khagan v. 552-554. Consolidated the power of the Ashina dynasty in the east. Died due to illness.
- Empress Ashina: Daughter of Mukhan, born in 551, moves to the court in Chang'an as part of her marriage to the Zhou emperor, where she rises to become a respected lady-in-waiting. Wure during the raid by the Sui followers, the only one spared at the court. According to Chinese sources, a woman of extraordinary beauty.
- Istemi: younger brother of Bumin and Yabgu of the Khaganate from 552-572. Responsible for the expansion of the empire, which resulted in a doubling of the territory, as well as the establishment of an alliance with Byzantium. Istemi integrated the Sogdians into the Turkic administration. Generally considered the most intelligent and successful of all Gokturks.

- Maniakh: Sogdian politician of high rank and initiator of the Gokturk-Byzantium alliance. He traveled to Constantinople in 568 on behalf of Istemi and returned to the Turkic court in 569 with the Byzantine diplomat Zemarchus. Family relationship with Istemi, who after Maniakh's death accepted his son at court for training.
- Mete Han: chin. *Mo-Dun*, son of *Teoman* and unifier of the Xiongnu tribes in 209 B.C. During his reign, which lasted until his death in 174 B.C., he consolidated the power of the tribes of Eurasia and successfully led campaigns against the Qin Dynasty in China.
- Mukhan: second eldest son of Bumin and Khagan v. 554-576. Displaced the Khitan from Mongolia to the east, absorbed the Kyrgyz at Lake Baikal in the north, and finally put an end to the Rouran in China. Married his daughter to the emperor of the Northern Zhou Dynasty. Participated in the Zhou-Qi War 564-565 without loss or success.
- Niri: also called Buyruk, grandson of Mukhan. Referred to in sources as Khagan of the West, but during a period when Tardush ruled as a clearly identifiable Khagan. More likely: secession of Dsungarei (south of Altai) under his leadership around 599/603 with the aim of inheriting Tulan as Khagan of the east.
- Taspar: youngest son of Bumin and Khagan v. 576-581. Took in refugees from the Northern Qi dynasty and supported the Qi prince Gao Shaoyi against the Zhou, whom he finally delivered to the Zhou court. First known Turk to convert to Buddhism.
- Teoman: chin. *Tou-Man*, first Chanyu (emperor) of the Xiongnu 220-209 B.C.
- Tong Yabgu: last great king of the Western Turks 618-630. Stabilized the political conditions in the Western Empire and conquered large parts of the Caucasus in the 3rd Turkic-Persian War. His long-term goals of permanent integration of these territories were thwarted by an assassination attempt by his uncle. Tong Yabgu is considered to be the Turk who laid the foundation for the Khazar Empire on the Itil.
- Illig Khagan: last great Khagan of the Eastern Turks 620-630.



- Tardush: son of Istemi and Yabgu of the Western Turks from 575 and brief Khagan of the entire empire from 599 to 603. Detached the Western Empire from the Khaganate during the Civil War, thus sealing the final division of the Gokturks. To legitimize his claim, he launched a campaign from Kazakhstan to China, but had to abandon the action prematurely due to the exhaustion of his soldiers. Thereupon, his subjects forbade him support, and he disappeared without a trace.
- Tuwu: Father of Bumin and Istemi, 5th generation Ashina leader and vassal of the Rouran Khaganate.
- Wenxuan: Emperor of the Northern Qi Dynasty 550-559, built a great wall from Lüliang to Shanxi shortly after Bumin's revolution in 552 to forestall an invasion by the Gokturks. Secured asylum for the Rouran nobility and in turn used them as puppets in the proxy war against the Gokturks.
- Wu: Emperor of the Northern Zhou Dynasty 561-578. son of Yuwen Tai, the chancellor of Wei and ally of Bumin. Wu rose in the political hierarchy of northern China to emperor over the northwest and conquered the Northern Qi in 577. Remained a loyal ally of the Gokturks until his death.
- Yuwen Tai: general-in-chief of the Western Wei dynasty, de facto regent of the Wei and founder of the Northern Zhou dynasty shortly before his death in 556. At his suggestion, Bumin agreed to the Ashina-Wei alliance. Then awarded Bumin a princess of the dynasty as a wife and delivered the last refugees of the Rouran to the Gokturks.

## Register of places

- Altai: Mountain range on the present-day border region between Mongolia, China, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Flanked to the north by the *Sayan Mountains*, to the south by the *Tarim Basin*.
- Arabat steppe: westernmost extension of the Eurasian steppe belt in Ukraine and, presumably, refuge of the Rouran/Avarians from the Gokturks.
- Aral Sea: today almost dried up lake in Kazakhstan. Between the years 750 and 1050, the 24 legendary tribes of the Oghuz settled here, which later gave rise to the Ottoman, Seljuk, Ak Koyunlu, Kara Koyunlu and Pecheneg empires.
- Bukhara: Trading city along the ancient Silk Road, in present-day Uzbekistan. Advanced to an important hub for merchants and diplomats from Europe and the Middle East during the rule of the Gokturks.
- Chang'an: ancient capital of Chinese empires, located in present-day *Xi'an* in northern China.
- Kherson: outermost tip of the Gokturk Khaganate on the Crimean Peninsula. Once the capital of the Kingdom of Bosphorus. Not to be confused with the city of the same name further north in Ukraine.
- Gaochang: today *Karakhoja*, oasis town on the northern ring of the Tarim Basin. Home of the Ashina ancestors before their flight to the Altai.
- Constantinople: formerly *Byzantium*, today Istanbul. For centuries navel of the world and already in the 6th century important for the Turkic history.
- Ctesiphon: ancient capital of Persia during the reign of the Sassanid dynasty. Located in Iraq.
- Ötüken: mysterious forest, which probably served as the "capital" and meeting place of the Gokturks. Located somewhere in Mongolia between the Altai Mountains and the Orkhon Valley. Whoever ruled over Ötüken was legitimized to rule over the entire steppe.
- Suyab: ancient settlement in present-day Kyrgyzstan. After Istemi's death, new capital of the Western Gokturks Empire.

- Tarim Basin: vast basin landscape whose outer belt provided space for numerous oasis cities. The Gokturks were the patrons of the Tarim Basin, but they did not intervene in its internal affairs. It was not until the Chinese of the T'ang Dynasty appeared that the Turks had to come to the military aid of the oasis cities.
- Taiyuan: important garrison city in the Northern Qi area.

## Register of terms

**Asena:** she-wolf with blue shimmering fur, who saved the last survivor of a tribe in Gaochang from death. When the Wei Emperor searches for him, she flees with the boy north to the Altai Mountains. There she raises him. In adulthood, the boy merges with her. She gives birth to ten boys, half-wolf and half-human. In adulthood, each of these boys looks for a wife from the surrounding villages and creates his own family. They all bear the family name→ *Ashina* in honor of their mother. The whereabouts of Asena and the original boy from the story are uncertain.

**Ashina:** Turkic-speaking clan with ties to the Indo-Iranian Wusun, and dynasty of the Gokturk Khaganate. After emigration from Gaochang to Altai, the young princes of the tribe rose to become the rulers of the Eurasian steppe. Most of the political and military posts of the first multi-cultural Gokturk Khaganate were occupied by members of the Ashina. According to DNA studies in the 2010s, their ancestors originally came from Northeast Asia, the original homeland of all Turkic peoples. The name is derived from the legendary she-wolf→ *Asena* from the legend of the same name.

**Bagatur:** honorary military title "hero" or "honorable warrior". Turkic in origin, this was the name given to generals and politicians with military commands among the Huns, Gokturks and Mongols. In letters and official transcripts, even the settled Turkic rulers of Anatolia were called *Bagatur*, such as *Uzun Hasan Bagatur* of the Ak Koyunlu Empire.

**Beg/Begum:** Turkic nobles who were either in the service of a clan and acted politically as princes or princesses or held a military command. The title appears particularly frequently in the 8th century and indicates the decentralized organization of the Turks after the fall of the Gokturk Khaganate. At the time of Bumin's rise, the Begs and Begums were an important part of the steppe's political system. They were subordinate to the all-powerful Khagan of the Turkic Empire, but could challenge his ability to rule and even depose him if necessary. Among the Khazars in the Middle

Ages, the title was "Bek" and was almost equal to the position of Khazar Khagan.

Elteber: tribute king of a vassal state of the Gokturks, later taken over by the Khazars.<sup>238</sup>

Hephthalites: also *White Huns*.

Huns: Generic term for a variety of nomadic tribes united in the 2nd century BC by Tou-Man (Turk. *Teoman*) and his son Mao Tun (Turk. *Mete Han*), who henceforth ruled large areas of the Eurasian steppe. After the fall of the first Xiongnu Empire, the Huns fragmented into different organizations, among them were the White Huns (Hephthalites and Alchon Huns) and, with high probability, those Huns who invaded Europe in the 4th/5th century AD. The phenotype of the European Huns may have differed from that of the Asiatic Huns due to emigration and intermixture with surrounding peoples, but the elite of both groupings demonstrably spoke an ancient form of Turkic. Accordingly, all Hunnic states in Turkiye are classified as part of the historical Turkic community of states. However, this did not stop the Gokturks from attacking and defeating the White Huns together with the Sassanids. Interestingly, however, Istemi integrated the Hun princes into his empire instead of punishing them like the Sassanids, which may be interpreted as an indication of the above-mentioned Hun-Turkic thesis.

Khagan/Khan: supreme unchallenged ruler of a (semi-)nomadic empire. The term first appeared in the 3rd century A.D. as a designation for the ruler of the Rouran and is derived from the Old Hun *Kehan*. After Bumin disposed of the Rouran and placed himself on the throne, he assumed this title. In the European sense, a Khagan is not so much a king as an emperor who rules over a large empire and is in almost continuous contact with other peoples. The difference between Khagan and the title *Khan*, which became commonly known in the Western world as the ruler's designation of the Mongols (e.g.

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<sup>238</sup> See Semenov, Igor G. (2018): The Origin and Meaning of the Title "Khazar-Elteber," in *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia*, 57:4, 278-279.

Genghis Khan), corresponds to the different characteristics between a Khaganate (empire) and a Khanate (kingdom). The khan rules sovereignly over a land that can be the size of the principality of Bavaria or even the Byzantine Empire - but in the early Middle Ages, khans ruled only over smaller duchies. A Khagan, on the other hand, ruled over such a large territory that the mere size of his realm led to an increase in his power position vis-à-vis the khan of the neighboring state. The Khagan thus saw himself as the legitimate leader of *all the* steppe peoples. Thus, the leaders of the successor states of the Gokturk Empire continued to bear the title *Khagan*, but when the 2nd Gokturk Empire came into being, the other rulers again restricted themselves to the self-designation *Khan* - out of respect for the Gokturks. We observe the same game after proclamation of the Uighur Khaganate in the 8th century. The designation *Khan* does not appear at all before the establishment of the Gokturks, instead Turkic princes are called *Yabgu* (Ashina) or *Beg* (all other tribes). The original Turkic version of Khagan was probably *Hakan*, which in turn corresponds to a popular Turkish male given name today.

Khitan: proto-Mongolian tribe that settled in Northeast Asia during the Gokturks' time.

Korea: peninsula northeast of China largely ruled by→ *Goguryeo* (*Celestial Kingdom*) at the time of the Gokturks. The Koreans' common ancestry with the ancient Turks and Mongols coincides with the initial cooperation of the Goguryeo with the Gokturks, although several members of the Ashina clan can be found among the generals on the Chinese side in the T'ang-Goguryeo War. The ambivalent relationship is reinforced by a record that Bumin launched a first campaign against Goguryeo in the very year of the revolution against the Rouran. Nevertheless, the two states and peoples became much closer in the decades and centuries that followed, so that today the Turks and Koreans consider their relationship to be extremely close, which can be described as friendly and even brotherly.

Kurultay: also called *toy*. National assembly of several clans or tribes. At the time of the Gokturks, the term for a "national" assembly in which representatives of

all regions of the empire were present and presented their wishes or proposals. Historical records also speak of Chinese, Persian, and Byzantine envoys using the Kurultay to carry out diplomatic missions to the Turks. Even today in Turkiye, the assembly of many a political party is referred to in this way.

**Silk:** a fiber obtained from the cocoons of the silkworm. It is characterized by its luster and is particularly strong. Due to its temperature-insulating properties, silk has been a popular fabric for making clothes and robes since ancient times, as can be seen in ancient fragments from the lives of wealthy Chinese as well as on the purple robes of Byzantine emperors. For a long time, silk production was denied to the Chinese, until at some point Byzantine monks, with the help of sogdian merchants, smuggled silk worms from East Asia to Anatolia, so that from then on the Byzantine Empire became the top producer of silk articles.

**Shad:** Governor or governor. Before the founding of the Gokturk Khaganate, the shad was one step below the yabgu in terms of power politics and possessed powers similar to those of a minor prince. Later, shad became an honorary title and was used to designate young princes who were appointed as deputies to local governors and governors. After the dissolution of the Khaganate, autonomous tribal leaders increasingly bore this title, which was now closely associated with the corresponding clan, e.g. "Tardu-Shad" as leader of the Syr Tardush. A Shad was consistently authorized to lead military commands.

**Silla:** also *Sara and Seona*. Korean principality in the south and east of the peninsula. Entered into an alliance with Sui and later T'ang China, indirectly triggering the fall of Goguryeo. After a failed attempt to unify all of Korea, Silla absorbed the remnants of the nobility from Goguryeo and successfully opposed the renewed Chinese attempt to conquer Korea for the first time. In doing so, they had to counter the Turkic cavalry, which had gone to war for the T'ang Dynasty.

**Sogdians:** ancient Central Asian civilization said to have sprung from an Iranian ethnic group and to have inhabited the eponymous region between the

Caspian Sea and the Aral Sea from the 3rd century BC to about 1000 AD. The Sogdians quickly made a name for themselves as a trading nation whose cities were conveniently located along the main route of the ancient Silk Road and acted as transshipment points for the Chinese, Persians and Romans. With the arrival of the Gokturks in the region, Sogdian-Turkic cultural exchange quickly began. The ancient Turkic script was introduced to the Ashina dynasty by the Sogdians, while the Sogdian culture was gradually influenced and eventually assimilated by the Turkic. The historical circumstances speak for a connection between the two cultures: when Alexander the Great appeared in Central Asia, he experienced nothing but resistance from the surrounding peoples (including Sogdians). But when Bumin and Istemi expanded the Khaganate here, they met little resistance. The Turks were, in a sense, welcome, while the neighboring Persians, who were related to the Sogdians, had to fight again and again for supremacy in Central Asia.

Tarkhan: honorary name for generals and widespread among all known steppe peoples of Eurasia, from the Scythians to the Mongols. Among the Gokturks, the tarkhan had privileges such as entering the Khagan house without notice. Allegedly, the family of a tarkhan was forgiven for its misdeeds until the 9th generation. Similar political position to a Shad, but focused on warfare. Not to be confused with the pop musician of the same name.

Toy: old Turkish word for a national assembly, see *Kurultay*.

Tudun: Governor of a settlement with diplomatic powers. In contrast to the *Shad*, he has less political power and is more of a representative of the respective ruler. Also common among Avars, Bulgarians and Khazars.

Tuoba: Turkic *Tabgatch*.

Türk: also *türük* or *török*, originally meant the Ashina dynasty after their migration from the Tarim Basin to the Altai. As a result of the establishment of the Khaganate of the Ashina, which was called *türük*, the term established itself as a designation for all steppe peoples who cultivated the Old Turkic language as their mother tongue. Thus, the Bulgarians, Khazars, Kyrgyz and Uyghurs



were also known as *Turks* or, more precisely, *Turkic peoples*. However, after the establishment of the Gokturk Khaganate in 551, there was only one other state with this designation in its name: the Republic of Turkiye, founded in 1923.

**Turkic people:** term used to differentiate the various Turkish ethnic groups. It is rarely used in Turkic; *Turk* is *Turk*. From a linguistic and socioeconomic point of view, however, its use is worthwhile in order to recognize the various gradations of Turkic peoples in antiquity and the Middle Ages. Ultimately, all Turkic peoples have in common that they or their ancestors actually had a common origin, according to the latest archaeological and genetic findings, this was in Northeast Asia. (→ *Urheimat*)

**First Turks:** for this book constructed proper name for the earliest ascertainable Turkic-speaking people. Around the year 1200 B.C., at the close of the Bronze Age, the Proto-Turks entered the North Asian steppe belt. From there, they gradually infiltrated into Mongolia and rose to become the elite of the Xiongnu Confederacy from 200 BC. After its disintegration, the Turks migrated westward and settled in the Turfan-Balkash area, with the Altai and Sayan mountains in the center. By 500 AD, however, many Turkic peoples, such as the Onogurs, had migrated even farther west and resided on the Black Sea (→ *Anterior Turks*). If Attila's Huns in Europe were indeed of Turkic origin, then his *original homeland* was also in Northeast Asia.

**Farthest Turks:** from Turkish *Ön Türkler*, refers to all Turkic-speaking peoples who lived outside Central Asia in Europe or the Middle East before the arrival of the Gokturks, Khazars, Seljuks, etc. Their existence is not disputed, but the connection of those peoples to Turkic is controversial. Besides Turkish researchers, Turkologists such as Jean-Paul Roux or Higashi Iwao, among others, considered it likely that the influence of the Turkic nomadic culture had already spread in all directions, mainly to East Asia and Eastern Europe, thousands of years before the arrival of the Gokturks. (→ *Ur-Turk*)

Urheimat: according to current knowledge, it is located in Northeast Asia. The Proto-Turks shared the land with the Proto-Mongols, Koreans, Japanese and Tungus. They were all millet farmers who emigrated to the southwest or southeast, possibly due to climatic conditions or expansionism.

## Short Q&A

Q: Why did you write this book?

A: This book is a novelty in the Western book market. It not only tells the history of the Gokturks but also explains in detail the origins of the Turkic people, their way of life and the religion of Tengrism. In addition, it does not simply string together facts in chronological order but puts forth new theories about the actions of certain important figures in the Khaganate. Unfortunately, I have not found this in previous books, in which the Gokturks are often mentioned only in passing – if even! Accordingly, I see an urgent need to explain the history of these mysterious steppe warriors concisely and comprehensively for beginners and experts if Turkic history alike.

Q: What do you aim to achieve with this book?

A: An ongoing, rekindled discussion about the significance of the Gokturks, the Ashina dynasty and the Turkic peoples of late antiquity in general to world history.

Q: Who is behind your "organization"?

A: Nobody. There's really no one working on this or any other project except me. I did the research, accumulated the notes, and wrote the text by using both ancient sources and contemporary research papers. The images in this book were licensed (photos) or created at my behest (portraits). I used self-publishing for the release of this book. Perhaps someday an actual book publisher will include my story – or the story of the Gokturks – in their canon of books. Until then, Khan's Den remains a one-man project.

Q: Will there be another book?

A: Yes! This book deals with the beginnings of the Gokturks. However, despite apocalyptic-sounding sentences at the end of the main section the Ashina dynasty did establish a second great empire some 50 years after the end of the first. In addition, numerous new states developed between the end of the first empire and the beginning

of the second, which are worth investigating. Therefore, you can expect a second book for the events of 630-681 and a third book for the period 681-745.

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