

DID CIVILIZATIONS START ONLY IN THE WEST?

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Annotation

The ancient Greco-Roman fantasy that pastoral nomadic tribes were barbarians and the descendents of evil spirits has changed little over the years. Since then, many scholars and historians have fallen for such stereotypes, arguing that nomadic tribes such as the Huns were excessively savage and wild. Unfortunately, they have not done much to correct those antique biases, even though supposedly more „advanced“ societies committed atrocities against the early Christians, American Indians, Africans and European Jewry. On the other hand, the Turks, believing that the Huns are the ancestors of all Turkic tribes, think that the pastoral nomadic way of life required the utmost rigor and aptitude, and therefore deserves as much respect as agrarian societies. Although contemporary conflicts between the West (consisting of Europe and North America) and Turks seem to have diverse sources, their roots may go as deep as Antiquity. The negative outcome of cultural encounters in our age may indeed be closely related with misconceptions of pastoral nomadic ways of life, barbarism and finally Islamic culture.

Keywords: Turks, Huns, Nomads, Islamization, East-West Relations, Modernization..

INTRODUCTION

Despite the gap of several centuries between their rise, most Turkish historians have a tendency to relate the ancient Hsiung- nu (Xiongnu) of East Asia with the Huns of medieval Eurasia and consider them the ancestors of the nomadic Turkic tribes. Having become known to Europeans by the name “Hun” or variants thereof, these westward migrants were probably related to the Hsiung- nu. The antique description of the Huns given by the historian Ammianus Marcellinus which states, “They were apparently (primitive) pastoralists who knew nothing about agriculture; they had no settled homes and no kings; each group was led by primates” is likely one of the earliest biased points of view of a nomadic society.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The image of the Huns did not change during the positivist era, and centuries after their first appearance, those ideas have been regenerated:

In the English-speaking world, the theme was picked up again by Edward Gibbon; Attila and the Huns play a dramatic role in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a very widely read and admired work which shaped all the subsequent accounts of these turbulent years. But the notoriety of the Huns was established forever during the First World War when British propagandists, hoping to cash in on the ancient reputation of these people, began using the term 'Hun' to mean Germans. By this they hoped to evoke those ancient images of brutishness and barbarism to stir up hatred.⁵

According to Denis Sinor, the first mention of "Türk" may date to the first century A.D. : "It could be that the first mention of the name Turk was made in the middle of the first century A.D. Pomponius Mela (I,n6) refers to the Turcae in the forests north of the Azov Sea, and Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (VI, 19) gives a list of peoples living in the same area among whom figure the Tyrcae."⁶ A search of archaeological literature for the word "Turk" reveals that the very first inscribed words are the two syllabic forms "Tü-rük" and "Tur-ku" can be seen in the Orkhon (Orhun) inscriptions (716-735 C.E.), and this is believed to have been transformed into the single syllable "Turk" that we use today. Those inscriptions were written by using a sophisticated alphabet, which implies that these letters date back to a much earlier period. Some earlier Chinese sources mention a people called the Tujue (T'u-chüe), whom modern scholars have identified as Turks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The original driving force of the very first migrations was the dependency of the pastoral nomadic economy on supplemental agricultural produce. During those times, Turkic tribes formed symbiotic alliances with the Mongols and Tunghuzs. Hsiung-nu (the early Huns) constituted the first nomadic confederation on the steppes. This loose-knit organisation helped establish linkages for the exchange of animal produce for agricultural products with sedentary societies. Later, they moved towards the cultivated south and started to enslave the northern Chinese. Defeating the Chinese army, they gained control of this territory, and China was forced to pay tribute (204-174 B.C.E.). During the drawn out fight against the Hsiung-Nu, successive Chinese dynasties built several walls, which together form the Great Wall of China: a 1845 km long fortification protecting mainland China from nomadic warriors. Perhaps this was one of the most significant conflicts in history: a clash between the agrarian Chinese and the early Turks, who were forced to rely on pastoralism, as they inhabited regions which were too arid for agriculture. This could also mark one of the earliest phases of state formation for the Turks and bilateral agreements.

The first political entity to bear the name "Turk" were the Gokturks (Kök-Türk) who lived in the area presently called the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region of China. The name derives from *gok*, which means "blue" or "celestial". From 552-745 C.E., the Gokturk leadership united all nomadic Turkic tribes into the Göktürk Empire and created a Pax Turcica. Like Hsiung-nu, the Gokturk Empire was a nomadic tribal confederation.

Prominently Turkic, one of the most noteworthy nomad-based state was the the Khazar Empire (650-965 C.E.). This was one of the largest states of medieval Eurasia, extending from the Middle Volga lands in the north to the Northern Caucasus and Crimea in the south and from the Ukrainian steppe in the west to the western borders of present-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the east. The Khazar royalty and nobility converted to Judaism by the end of the eighth and start of the ninth centuries, and a portion of the general population also followed suit.¹⁶ It is quite likely that the Karaims of Eastern Europe are the descendants of the Khazars. The Turkic tribes that converted either to Judaism or Christianity mostly abandoned their nomadic culture and Turkic identity. The Tatar tribes of the Kryashans (Kreshans), who converted to Christianity, and other tribes such as the Cossacks, whose name is based on the Turkic word "kazakh") and who speak a language that incorporates extensive borrowings from

Turkic-based Kazakh and Tatar, considered themselves to be distinct Slavic groups.¹⁷ The same holds true for the Bulgars; Slavicized and Christianized, they gave their name to present Bulgaria. On the other hand, Turkic Orthodox Christians who were more fastidious about protecting their original identities were the Gagauz of the Danubian delta and the Chuvash of the Volga region.

CONCLUSION

The time has come for us to ignore antique, medieval and religious stereotypes. The 21st century, an age of science and technology, is indeed no setting for prolonging the clash of civilizations which has been going on for 1,400 years or so.

Although faced by challenges and disappointments, Turkish civilization and society has succeeded in transforming traditional structures and becoming a part of the modern community. Today Turkey is a prime model for other Islamic countries in terms of how to become modern without becoming essentially western. Obviously, the West, as the champion of universal values and human rights, should have the initiative in abolishing biased policies and supporting the Turkish transformation.

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