

Turks in Transoxiana

Richard N. Frye

It is over half a century since my roommate, the late Professor Aydin Sayili, and myself jointly investigated the disputed question of Turks in the Near East in the pre-Islamic period. Since that time more information has been gathered about the presence of Altaic speaking nomads in the eastern Iranian cultural area. I use the word "Altaic" advisedly, and we should examine several propositions before employing the designation "Turk". Here I do not wish to enter into controversies about the etymology of one or another word, name or title, but simply to present the most plausible general reconstruction of the presence of peoples in Central Asia in the pre-Islamic period. If we rely solely on outside written sources, as indeed we must, to identify the earliest usage of the name "Turk" then it is not earlier than the sixth century, when the *Tu-cheh* are first mentioned in Chinese sources. They were said to have been living in the Altai mountains, as vassals or subjects of a people called *Jouan-jouan* in Chinese. The latter is obviously an appellative rather than a name, which we do not know. Inasmuch as steppe empires were really confederacies of tribes, we may suppose that a number of tribes comprised the empire of the *Jouan-jouan*, one of which had the name "Turk".

It is important to review what had happened on the steppes of Inner Asia in the fourth and fifth centuries, to which subject we now turn. At the end of the fourth century on the western steppes, a tribe or horde of nomads appeared, who a few years later were to strike fear into the peoples of western Europe. They were called *Huns* in the West. Regardless of the controversy, whether or not these people were descendants of those whom the Chinese called *Hiung-nu*, there seems agreement on the fact that the steppes were no longer dominated by the Scythian-Sakas, presumably Iranian speakers, but by Huns, who were Altaic speakers. In the political history of the time, the Huns, as usual with the creation of a steppe empire, united various tribes in their confederation, among whom were the *Alans* or *As*, presumably those whom the Chinese called *Wu-sun*, and who were living originally in the Ili valley. These Iranian speakers may be the ancestors of the modern Ossetes in the Caucasus. The name *Hun*, in various forms, came to be used by settled folk for all of the nomads of Inner Asia, as previously they had been called Scythians by the Greeks or Sakas by the

Persians. In an account of the siege of the city of Amida by the Sasanian Shapur II in 356 A.C., we are told that Grumbates, king of the Chionites, took part. Since the Byzantine chronicler, Ammianus Marcellinus was on the spot in Amida, he surely was using a contemporary designation for the nomads who were allies of Shapur, and that can only be a form of the general term Hun.

Inasmuch as this period (middle of fourth to sixth centuries) in the history of Central Asia can be called a dark age, with little information about the peoples of Central Asia, we must speculate about the usage "chionite" in the context of Amida. It has been suggested that Grumbates is an Iranian name, and the Chionites then were Iranian speaking nomads. Few, however, would assert that the word "chionite" designates Sakas, or other Iranian speaking nomads. Then, it is further claimed, Grumbates assumed the name Chionite for his people, to frighten the enemy with the dreaded name of the Huns. But in the middle of the fourth century in Amida, would Ammianus have known previously of the Huns and the fear they inspired? Hardly; so we may conclude that this was the first time Ammianus heard of that people, and he did not refer to Huns in the same way as his countryman, Priskos did when he wrote about the court of Attila in Central Europe. Therefore we confidently may conclude that there were Hunnic elements in the people, tribe or horde, who were called Chionites, but how many? Was the proportion, 10%, 50% or more? The percentage really does not matter, for obviously the ruling class, or tribe, would be Huns, otherwise why use that name? Can we refer to a formula Huns=Turks? Obviously not, given the nature of steppe tribal organizations. But it would not be amiss to conclude that among the Altaic speakers in the people called Chionite, there were those who later appear with the name Turks, as well, of course, as other tribes. Some linguists might say that we should call these Altaic speakers, proto-Turks and/or proto-Mongols, and this need not be rejected.

But we could ask, in a parallel situation at this time, were the Poles and Czechs differentiated, or should we speak of proto-Poles and proto-Czechs or just Slavs? In my opinion, if the term "altaic" speakers is used, we may be closer to the actuality of the past. After the Chionites, in the middle of the fifth century, we hear of another people who came from the east into Transoxiana. According to Chinese and Byzantine sources, they were called Hephthalites, after the name of one of their chiefs. Since their homeland was said to be eastern Turkestan, or present Xinjiang, it is possible that they had fewer Altaic speakers in their confederation than the previous Chionites. This has given rise to controversies, whether they basically were mountaineers from Badakhshan, or nomads from the steppes of Inner Asia. Again one might play a game of numbers or percentages, which is really irrelevant, since obviously both elements, and more, were present in the large state of the Hephthalites, which at first, extended from Xinjiang to the Hindukush Mts., and then later into India. The fact that Latin was used as the lingua franca of western Europe in the Middle Ages, did not mean

that all the inhabitants were Romans or Italians. Likewise the use of an Iranian tongue, such as Sogdian and later Persian in Transoxiana, as the written language, does not mean that everyone was a Sogdian who used it. The poet laureate of the republic of Azerbaijan was Nizami, who composed his poetry in Persian. When the Ottoman Sultan Selim wrote to Shah Ismail, he wrote in Persian. In Central Asia always many languages have been used, and any disputes over an exclusive language need to be relegated to the dustbin of ethnic fanaticism.

Now we have only spoken of language, for that is the main determinant of identification of a person in the present. In the past, however, especially after the third century of our era, a person came to be identified primarily as the follower of a religion, and this persisted down to the Ottoman Empire and its millet system. But what of the actual background of a person and his locale? Is it important? I believe it has relevance to the question we are discussing. Rather than discussing theoretical questions about identity as race, language, locale, or whatever, in conclusion I simply would like to repeat a story which I have told many times. It has relevance to the above brief discussion and was told to me by a long departed friend, Hans. H. von der Osten, a German excavator of the Hittite capital at Bogaz Kuy. At a reception in the German Embassy he was presented to the guest of honor, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. The latter congratulated him on excavating the remains of the ancestors of the Turks. Von der Osten was about to protest, when a kick from the ambassador caused him to reply simply, "Yes, your Excellency". Afterwards many smirked at what they regarded as a foolish remark of Ataturk, but in my opinion, he was quite correct, for the ancestors of the people of the Turkish republic are both those who always lived in Anatolia, plus the nomads who came from Central Asia and gave their language to everyone. The heritage of the past of Anatolia and of Central Asia both today belong to all of the people of Turkey. This same concept could be applied to other lands and peoples, and not just in the Near East.

For sources and references, see Frye, R. and Sayili, A., *Turks in the Middle East before the Saljuqs*, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 63 (1943), 194–207., and Selklardan Evvel Ortasarkta Turkler, *Bellekten*, 10 (1946), 97–131.