Zwischen Byzanz und der Steppe
Archäologische und historische Studien
Festschrift für Csanád Bálint zum 70. Geburtstag

Between Byzantium and the Steppe
Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honour of Csanád Bálint on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday

Institute of Archaeology
Research Centre for the Humanities
Hungarian Academy of Sciences
BETWEEN BYZANTIUM AND THE STEPPE
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Csanád Bálint in Istanbul, in front of the finds brought to light during the excavations preceding the underground construction (2013)
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Cover photo: Detail of an Early Byzantine mosaic floor, Kissufim, Israel (© Photo: Vladimir Naichin, Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority)

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HUNGARIANS AND MONGOLS AS “TURKS”: ON THE APPLICABILITY OF ETHNIC NAMES

István Vásáry

Ethnic names or ethnonyms, owing to political reasons, frequently become political names which can actually be considered pseudo-ethnonyms. In these instances the original meaning of ethnic names blurred as they basically expressed belonging to a political entity or polity irrespective of ethnicity. In this paper two case studies will be presented by utilising the Muslim sources to demonstrate why non-Turkic ethnic groups like the Hungarians in the 9th-10th centuries and the Mongols in the 13th century, were called and considered a branch of the Turks. The ethnonyms Turk and Mongol, originally referring to a smaller community, later, owing to large-scale conquests, were widely extended to other ethnically non-Turkic and non-Mongol populations as well. That is why the author proposes to separate this type of ethnonyms from the real ethnonyms and warns to be utterly cautious in handling these terms as indicators of ethnicity.

Keywords: ethnonyms, ethnicity, Turks, Mongols, early Hungarians

I.

It has long become a common-place in the research of medieval nomadic history that the usability of ethnic names is sometimes very limited. On the one hand, one and the same tribal unit may appear under different names owing to the ephemeral character of nomadic confederacies, while on the other hand, different tribes and ethnic groups can be labelled under the same ethnic name. Consequently, ethnic names can never be taken at face value, unless we want to avoid gross blunders. Especially, the names of vast nomadic confederacies and empires became, by the lapse of time, generalising terms displaying no individual character. The Xiongnu and the Ruanruan in the eastern half of Central Eurasia, and the Huns and Avars in its western half, were such generalising terms, sometimes with no real ethnic content. Similarly, the Turks (Chinese Tujue) appearing in the sources and history in the mid-sixth century A.D. became the name-givers of many successive nomadic formations irrespective of their ethnic character. In this paper I will present two case studies and endeavour to trace along the Muslim sources why two non-Turkic ethnic groups, the Hungarians in the 9th-10th centuries and the Mongols in the 13th century, were called and considered a branch of the Turks.

The Muslim drive to the east reached the Amu-Darya and Transoxiana by the first decade of the 8th century and was accompanied by constant clashes with the Türgesh, the Qarluq and other tribal groups inhabiting the territory of the one-time Western Turkic Empire. In 745, after the collapse of the Eastern Turkic Empire the Uighurs took over power in Eastern Inner Asia and became the heirs to the imperial heritage of the Turks. For the Muslim military and merchants driving victoriously forward in Central Asia, Turk (in Arabic plural Atrak) became the general term for all ethnic units
of the one-time Turkic Empire. In the forthcoming centuries Central Asia, or as the Arabs called it, the country of the Turks (bilād al-Atārīk) became the main resource of the slave trade of the Islamic world. In 751, the Battle of Talas landmarked the halt of Chinese influence in Central Asia. Along with the Arab military successes the local tributaries of Tang China switched to the authority of the Abbasids, Tibetans, or Uighurs and the introduction of Islam was thus facilitated among the Turkic peoples. First supported by the Umayyads (661–750), the Qarluqs could establish a state that would later be absorbed in the late 9th century by the Karakhanid Khanate. With the successful cooperation of Arabs and Turkic peoples, Islam began to exert its influence on the Turkic culture.

All the different nomadic tribal confederacies of the post-Türk period inherited the term Türk and were considered by their neighbours, inter alia by the Muslim Arabs and Persians, a part of the Turks. Beginning with ibn Khurdādhbih in the 8th century, the whole Muslim geographical and historical tradition in the 8th–12th centuries regarded the ethnic entities such as the Uighurs (Toquzghuz), the Qarluq, the Qirghiz, the Kimek, the Qipchaq, the Oghuz, the Pecheneg and others as Turks. Thus, the one-time tribal name Türk has first become the name of a great empire, then after the fall of the empire a collective name for all former subjects of the empire. Of course, for the most part the term Türk was applied for tribes, clans and ethnic groups that are rightly called even nowadays Turkic since most of them shared kindred languages, customs and manners, common cultural and historical traditions. In this respect, a proper analogy seems to be the case of the term Germanic: it is a generalising term for languages and ethnic entities having a common root.

In the 10th century, the golden age of Muslim historiography and geography, the same view concerning the Turks survived. More or less the same peoples and tribes were considered Turk, both in works of the Jaihāni tradition (Ibn Rustā, Ḥudūd al-ʿulām, Gardizī, etc.), the Balkhi tradition (Iṣṭakhri, etc.) and Masʿūdī and others. Iṣṭakhri’s remark in the Introduction of his work gives a clear-cut picture of what he meant by the term Türk: “As for the Turks, their complexity is made up of the Toquzghuz, Qirghiz, Kimek, Ghuzz and Qarluq. Their languages are identical: one understands the other, whereas the languages of the lands of China and Tibet differ from those.”1 In all other works of the Muslim authors in the 9th–10th centuries by and large the same names appear in the list of the Turkic peoples. The Uighurs (designated as Toquzghuz in the Muslim sources) and the Qirghiz, name-givers to two former empires, belong to the eastern half of Inner Asia, while the Qarluq, Ghuzz and Kimek were present in the western half of Inner Asia. In addition, the Qipchaq, the Pecheneg and Majghir (sometimes as Bajghir) are mentioned in the latter region. So the homeland of the Turkic peoples (bilād al-Atārīk) stretched along the Eurasian steppe belt, from present-day Mongolia as far as the Volga river. In those times the right bank of the Volga did not belong to the land of the Turks, and the Khazars were never mentioned as Turks in the Muslim sources. This is nicely demonstrated by the Ḥudūd al-ʿulām, in which two groups of the Pechenegs are mentioned: those who remained in Central Asia after the westward migration in ca. 895 are called Türkic Pechenegs, while the group that migrated to Eastern Europe is named Khazaric Pechenegs.2 The Khazars and Bulgars were never designated as Turks in the Muslim sources which is a clear indication that they fell outside the scope and direct influence of the Turkic Empire in the 6th–8th centuries.

The question now emerges why the Muslim authors enumerated the Hungarians among the Turkic peoples. I think I. Zimonyi convincingly demonstrated that the Hungarians were considered Turks since they were supposed to arrive to the East-European steppe region from western Inner Asia, i.e. the Kazak Steppe, homeland of the Turkic peoples.3 East of the Volga, between the Volga Bulgars and the Oghuz, a sizable Hungarian group remained that did not take part in the migratory wave in 895 which resulted in the conquest of the Carpathian Basin by the Hungarian tribal confederacy. This eastern group of Hungarians was found and rediscovered by the Hungarian

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1 For the Arabic text, see Iṣṭakhri (De Gejje 1870, 9). Cf. also Kmoskó 2000, 18.
Dominican Julian in 1236, prior to the Mongol invasion of Bulghar.\(^4\) Though the Hungarians were not Turks by language, for centuries they lived with Turkic tribes and intermingled with them. Their social and military structure was similar to those of the Turkic nomads, so no wonder that they were considered Turks by the adjacent Muslim world.

Although in the Muslim historical and geographical literature the Hungarians were generally enumerated as a group of the Turkic peoples (Ibn Rustā: jīns min al-Turk;\(^5\) Marwazi: wa’l-Majghariyya qaum\(^6\) min al-Turk;\(^6\) Gardīzī: jinsi and az Turkān;\(^7\) Hūdūd al-‘ālam: anwā‘-i Turk;\(^8\) Abū’l-fidā: jā‘īfa min al-Turk\(^9\)\) there are a few instances in which they are directly called Turks. E.g. Ibn Ḥāyān speaks of the Hungarians’ raid in Andalusia in 942, and he consistently calls them Turks.\(^1\)\(^0\) Similarly, the Cordovan historian al-Bakrī (1068) refers to Hungary of the Carpathian Basin as land of the Turks.\(^1\)\(^1\) Finally, Ḥārūn ibn Yahyā in his personal account, preserved in Ibn Rusta’s work and based on his observations during his custody in Byzantium, mentions that among the guards of the imperial palace in Constantinople there were Turks and Khazars.\(^1\)\(^2\) Here too, the Turks undoubtedly refer to the Hungarians. In all three instances the clue lies in Byzantium, namely, the Byzantines generally called the Hungarians Turks (οἱ Τουρκοί). The two former historians lived and worked in Andalusia, in the Cordovan Caliphate, and the appellation of Hungarians as Turks evidently owes its existence to the intensive Byzantine–Cordovan diplomatic contacts. The third historian, Ḥārūn ibn Yahyā stayed in Byzantium and he must have personally heard the name Turk as applied for the Hungarians.\(^1\)\(^3\) So the three occurrences of the ethnonym Türk in Muslim sources as a designation of Hungarians can be ascribed to the direct influence of the contemporary Byzantine usage.

II.

Likewise, a few centuries later in the 13th century, the Mongols were regarded as Turks in such historical works as Rashīd al-Dīn’s Jāmī’ al-tavārīkh. In Part One of Tome One of the ‘Compendium of Chronicles’ Rashīd al-Dīn relates the history of the emergence of the Turkic nations (aqvām-i Atrāk) and how they divided into various tribes (qabā‘il-i mukhtalīfa).\(^1\)\(^4\) From his Introduction we can gain a clear picture how he was thinking about peoples, tribes, history and geography. His views yield an insight into contemporary Muslim conception of ethnicity. In his opinion the basic concept of ethnography and history is the nation (aqvām in Persian, the Arabic plural of qaum). Nation or ethnos (if we want to avoid the modern connotations of the term nation) is the unit of human societies which is characterised by a separate dwelling place (territory), language, self-appellation and common descent. The latter, i.e. common ancestry, though for the most part was based on fictive or symbolical genealogies, played an important role in the self-consciousness of contemporary nations. Of course, the basic unit of nation was further ramifying into tribes, clans and other subdivisions, and Rashīd al-Dīn was well aware that they were constantly changing and mingling owing to conquest, migrations and other historical circumstances. “With the passage of time, branches and sub-branches have divided off from these branches, and in every era new branches have come into being, and each one has acquired a name and an epithet (īsmī va laqabī

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\(^{4}\) Sinor 1952; Dörrie 1956; G yöreffy 1965, 39–51.

\(^{5}\) De Goede 1892, 142.


\(^{7}\) Ḥārība 1984, 274.

\(^{8}\) Minorsky 1937, 101, §22.

\(^{9}\) Reinaud–de Slane 1840, 223.

\(^{10}\) Chalmeta et al. 1979, 324–326 of the MS; Elter 2009, 52–54 (facsimile), 55–60 (Arabic text).

\(^{11}\) Van Leeuwen–Ferre 1992, 449.

\(^{12}\) Ibn Rustā (de Goede 1892, 123–124); cf. also Kmoskhō 1997, 188.

\(^{13}\) Zimonyi 2005, 69–72.

yāfta) for some reason or other, like the Oghuz, the totality of which nation is at present called Turcoman and has branched off into the Qipchaq, Qalach, Qangli, Qarluq. […] This sentence reveals Rashīd al-Dīn’s perplexity with the confusing exuberance of ethnic names of the nomadic confederacies of his age and foreshadows that even such a sharp-minded historian as he was, could not totally elucidate the complexity of nomadic ethnonymy.

Similarly to his predecessors, he clearly separates sedentary and nomadic societies by calling the latter “people who inhabit the wilderness” and “who are far from civilization and agricultural lands.” Among the “wilderness dwellers” (saharanishinān), i.e. the nomads, he mentions the Arab tribes and clans and the “Turks, with all their tribes and subdivisions (tamāmat-i qabā’il va shu’b-i ʻishān).” Then he gives the dwelling place of the Turks in a long list in which he enumerates several ethnic and geographical names beginning in the west with the Qipchaqs and proceeding to the east as far as the Chinese Great Wall. It becomes evident from this curious list that practically the whole Eurasian steppe belt inhabited mainly by Turkic and Mongol peoples (the northern Caucasus, the Middle-Volga region, North-west Siberia and Mongolia included) was meant by Rashīd al-Dīn. In brief, Rashīd al-Dīn and his contemporaries regarded the nomadic peoples of Inner Asia as Turks.

He clearly asserts that “The Mongols were a nation of the Turks, and since they were favored by divine grace (va in Moğhûl yak qavm bûda and az aqvâm-i Atrâk, va chûn az inâyat-i azali dar haqq-i ʻishân bud), over a period of nearly four hundred years numerous branches of them appeared and they outnumbered all other nations. Because of their might, others in the area became known by their name, since most Turks are called Mongols, as it was before when the Tatars were dominant and all were called Tatar (akgar-i Atrak-râ Moğhûl mî-khwâmand chunânci pish az in chûn Tâtâr ghalîb bûdand jumla-râ Tâtâr mî-gufund). Among the Arabs, Indians, and Cathaians they are still known as Tatars.”16 It is evident from this passage and from other texts that it is “divine grace” (inâyat-i azali) that raises one people above the other by donating it power and might: “because of their great fortune, might, and magnificence”, “because of the glory, might and respect”, etc. This is nothing else in the Mongol tradition as güt was in the Turkic world. It meant the ‘heavenly good fortune, a princely charisma, the ruler’s success ordained by the gods’.

So it is political power, the subjugation of another nomadic polity that entitles the conquerors to extend their name to the subjected people. The original name of the subjected polity (be it a people, tribal confederacy, tribe or clan) may remain the same, provided the tribal and clan ties remain untouched. The new, political name is not forcefully coerced on the people or tribe but frequently voluntarily borne by them since belonging to a victorious political entity was always luring and prestigious. As Rashīd al-Dīn says of the Jalâyir, Tatar and some other tribes: “all are proud to call themselves Mongol”18

Rashīd al-Dīn makes it clear that even those nomadic peoples whose language and culture were similar to the Mongols and later automatically considered Mongols, originally belonged to the nomadic peoples that bore the political name Türk. As he puts it: “[…] their features and language [‘the Turkic nations that are now called Mongols” as e.g. the Jalâyir, the Oyirat, the Tatar, etc.] resembled those of the Mongols, for at that time the Mongol branch was one of the Turkic nations (dar ân zamân shu’ba-yî Moğhûl qavmi az aqvâm-i Atrak bûdand), whereas now, because of their great fortune, might, and magnificence (bi-sabab-i davlat va azimat va şawkat), all the other nations have been subsumed under the name Mongol.”19 Or, in another passage: “[…] In ancient times, the Mongols were but one of all the tribes of nomadic Turks, but divine favor shone upon them (dar

17 For güt see Clauson 1972, 594; Doerffer 1963–1975, III, 551–554 (no. 1568).
A similar case happened earlier to the name Tatar. In the description of the Tatar people, Rashid al-Din claims that the name Tatar, in time of Tatar military successes was transferred also to the subdued Turkic peoples: “Because of the glory, might and respect they commanded, other types of Turks, in all their variety and names, made themselves known by their name, and all were called Tatars. Indeed they considered it an honor to call themselves Tatar, just as at present, because of the great fortune of Genghis Khan and his urugh, because they are Mongols, other tribes of Turks like the Jala’ir, Tatar, Öyirat, Öng‘üt, Kerayit, Naiman, Tangqut, &c., each of which has its own special name and sobriquet, all are proud to call themselves Mongol.”

It becomes absolutely clear from his descriptions that not only peoples of Mongol and Turkic ethnic descent were united under the political appellation Mongol but Chinese, Iranians and captives of any race were included under the umbrella term Mongol: “At that time the other tribes were not called Mongol, but since they were close to one another, in terms of shape, form, vocabulary, dialect, customs and manners (shakl va hay‘at va laqab va lahiya va rusūm va shīva-yi ʻishān bi-yakdīgār nazdīk būda), regardless of the difference in dialect and customs that had existed in ancient times, now it has come about that the peoples of Cathay, Hindustan, Chin and Machin, the lands of the Qırqız, Kilar-Bashghurd, the Qıpçaq Steppe, the territories of the north, the Arab peoples, Syria, Egypt and Nort Africa.”

Finally, I would like to call attention to one interesting remark of Rashid al-Din’s, already cited above, namely to that in which he states that before Chinggis Khan’s coming to power, over a period of nearly four hundred years, numerous branches of the Mongols appeared and they outnumbered all other nations. Later, in writing about Alan qo’a’s time he corroborates that this happened some three hundred years ago. The time-span of three to four hundred years may well indicate the historical remembrance of the period between 840 (fall of the Uighur Empire) and 1206 (emergence of Chinggis Khan as ruler of the nomadic world) during which time the Mongols superseded, both in number and force, the original Turkic population of what is now Mongolia. We must bear in mind that the territory of what has been known for the past eight hundred years as Mongolia, in the 6th-9th centuries was actually Turcia, i.e. the core territory of the formation of the strongest early Turkic states in history. It was Chinggis and his descendants who finally transformed Turcia into Mongolia.

In sum, I would reiterate the basic assertions of this paper which I attempted to elucidate by a few examples. Ethnic names or ethnonyms, owing to political reasons, frequently become political names which can actually be considered pseudo-ethnonyms. In these instances the original meaning of ethnic names could blur as they basically expressed belonging to a political entity or polity irrespective of ethnicity. The ethnonyms Türk and Mongol, originally referring to a smaller community, later, owing to large-scale conquests, were widely extended to other ethnically non-Turkic and non-Mongol populations as well. That is why the author proposes to separate this type of ethnonyms from the real ethnonyms and warns to be utterly cautious in handling these terms as indicators of ethnicity.
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