



Review Article

An Examination of Turkish Culture and Customs before Islam: Outcomes and Implications

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ABSTRACT



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This article first investigates the activities, life, and significant role of Turkish peoples in the history of Central Asia and the Middle East before the arrival of Islam. Initially, Turks were introduced as one of the major influential groups in the Central Asian region, living a nomadic and pastoral lifestyle in the plain areas. The article secondly, explores various pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices of the Turks, including Tengri or Tengrism (worship of natural forces), Buddhism, Manichaeism, Shamanism, and Zoroastrianism.

In addition, the paper describes the Turks' strategic location with the key trade routes, Turkish customs such as the celebration of Nowruz, the nomadic lifestyle, and the wide range of handicrafts including metalwork, pottery, and weaving. The paper also slightly covers the different ethnic and historical origins of Turkish people, such as the Oghuz, Seljuks, Kipchaks, and Ottomans.

Eventually, the article explains the tribal social structure of the Turks, the role of khans and traditional leaders in their societies, and the dominant feudal system before Islam.

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Introduction

Before going through the pre-Islamic history of the Turkish people, it is essential to begin with their identity and origins. Turkish and non-Turkish scholars generally agree that this ethnic group held remarkable historical importance long before being known as "Turks", however, the chronological placement of early Turkish history remains a subject of debate. Some historians trace Turkish origins to the 3rd century BCE. In contrast, others situate them to the 4th or 5th and even a third group of scholars pushes them further back, suggesting Turkish presence as early as the 12th to 15th centuries BCE.

It is worth noting that some historians argue that examining Turkish history before these periods, based on historical documents, oral traditions, and legends, is problematic, especially when dealing with Turkish people, because the history of this ethnic group is studied not from the time of their residence in their familial homeland, but from the beginning of their migrations from their original territories. These migrations are generally attached to harsh climatic conditions and environmental changes. Many scholars argue that the original Turkish homeland was located within the geographical boundaries of Central Asia. This article aims to provide a general overview of the Turkish people, including their geographical distribution, social structures, historical roots, lifestyle, and regional influences.

While examining this topic, we will consider the complex interplay of nomadic traditions, settled civilizations, and the vast steppe regions that shaped Turkish culture and history. The Turkish peoples' contributions to military tactics, animal husbandry, and their interactions with neighboring civilizations such as the Chinese, Persian, and later Arab-Islamic empires, have left a long-lasting mark in history. Furthermore, Turkish groups' linguistic and cultural diversity, spanning from the Altai Mountains to Anatolia, even today shows a rich tapestry of historical development that continues to influence geopolitics and cultural identity in many regions.

The Turkish Peoples: A Comprehensive Historical and Cultural Overview

The Turkish people are indicated as one of the most significant and influential groups in the history of Central Asia, playing a crucial role in shaping the region's civilizations and extending their influence far beyond their original homeland. Historically lived in the vast steppes from Mongolia in the east to the Caspian Sea in the west, the Turkish peoples have left an indelible mark on the cultural, political, and economic till today.

The primary geographical distribution of Turkish peoples circled with today's modern Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and some parts of China, Russia, Afghanistan, and Iran (Gombrich, 1987, p. 182). This social steppe region served as the ancestral homeland for

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nomadic Turkish tribes, who had lived in these areas since ancient times, and primarily engaged in pastoral nomadism and animal husbandry (Frye, 2006, p. 67).

Historical sources begin to mention Turkish presence and activity in these regions from the 6th century CE onwards, with one of the earliest known Turkish chains being the Göktürks, who established territory over parts of Central Asia in the 6th century (Grantovsky, 1984, p. 115), from China to Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). Notable empires include the Ghaznavids, the Seljuks, the Khwarezmians, and the Mongol Empire, which combined many Turkish peoples (Frye, 2006, p. 92). The geographical positioning of these peoples was critical at the crossroads of major trade routes between East and West territories, their control over key sections of the famous Silk Road was especially significant, contributing to economic prosperity and commercial expansion within their kingdoms (Gombrich, 1987, p. 219). This network of interconnected trade routes was decisive not only for exchanging goods but also for transmitting cultures, technologies, and ideas (Grantovsky, 1984, p. 183).

Beyond their economic role, Turkish peoples served as an important channel for cultural exchange in Central Asia, acting as a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures. They played a significant role in developing various literary methods, including the region's epic poetry, ghazals, and elegies. Turkish people facilitated the transfer of knowledge, art, and architectural styles from various areas. Diverse styles influenced Turkish architecture, including Persian, Indian, Chinese, and Eastern Roman (Byzantine) traditions (Hillen brand, 1989, p. 53). These combinations gave rise to a unique architectural style in Central Asia, exemplified by magnificent structures like the Bibi-Khanim Mosque in Samarkand.

The religious beliefs of Turkish people were diverse and developed. Turkish people adhered to various belief systems before the widespread adoption of Islam. Tengrism, a nature-centric religion involving the worship of natural forces, was common among early Turkish tribes. The central God, Tengri, was considered the supreme god and creator of the universe. Shamanism, one of the oldest human healing and medicinal traditions, was also practiced widely among these people. Other religions that gained superiority among Turkish groups included Manichaeism, which spread rapidly in the 3rd century CE, based on opposing forces of light and darkness. Buddhism reached Central Asia via the Silk Road in the late 4th century CE, and many Turkish people converted to this faith. Zoroastrianism, prevalent in Iran during the Sassanid period, also influenced some Turkish groups. Additionally, individual Turkish tribes maintained their own local and native belief systems.

This diversity of religions among Turkish peoples reflects their role as a crossroads of cultures and their adaptability to various traditions. It also emphasizes the complex tapestry of beliefs and practices that characterized the Central Asian spiritual landscape. The Turkish people's legacy continues to shape Central Asia's cultural, linguistic, and political landscape and beyond. Their historical contributions to trade, architecture, literature, and religion have impacted the region.

Turks Before and After Islam: Military Prowess and Ethnic Roots

In the military sphere, Turks played a well-known role in Central Asia. Forming powerful armies combined with Turkish cavalry was one of the main features of Turkish rule in these regions. Turkish warriors were famous for their proficiency in the arts of war and horsemanship during those periods (Frye, 2006, p. 102). For example, the Empires such as the Ghaznavids, relying on powerful Turkish military forces, were able to

conquer vast territories in Central Asia. Similarly, the Seljuk Empire, founded on the strength of its cavalry, brought an extensive empire from Anatolia to Khorasan under its control (Grantovsky, 1984, p. 278). This widespread military presence of Turks in Central Asia led to a shift in the balance of power in those regions, transforming them into one of the dominant forces in the area.

The historical and ethnic roots of the Turks, as one of the important peoples of Central Asia, have always been of interest to researchers. Based on archaeological and linguistic evidence, the Turks are of Asian origin, with roots in the central steppe regions. Linguistic studies indicate that the Turkish language belongs to the Altaic branch of the Eurasiatic (Asian-European) language family, originating from the ancient language of Central Asian peoples (Clude, 1997, p. 67). This language is closely connected with other languages in this family, such as Mongolian, Tungusic, and Korean.

These scholars confirm the presence of Turkish tribes in the steppe regions of Central Asia from the second millennium BCE. Archaeological findings in areas such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Xinjiang of China, indicate the settlement of human groups with cultural and lifestyle patterns similar to modern Turks in these regions (Christian, 2005, p. 119). Various Turkish ethnic groups lived in Central Asia in the past, including the Ghuz, Oghuz, Karakhanids, Seljuks, Kipchaks, and Ottomans. These groups lived in specific areas of Central Asia and its surroundings. One of the oldest known Turkish groups was the united tribes of the Ghuz, who ruled parts of Central Asia in the 5th and 6th centuries CE. Later, other groups such as the Oghuz and Karakhanids emerged (Grantovsky, 1984, p. 201).

The Seljuks (Ghuz origin) and Kipchaks (Oghuz origin) were two large Turkish groups that formed great empires in Central Asia, Anatolia, and Iran in the 11th and 12th centuries CE. (Sayed Jawadi, 1989, p. 45). The Ottomans were another group of Turks who played a significant role in Central Asia and Anatolia, they were a branch of Anatolian Oghuz who established a vast empire in Asia Minor and the Balkans in the 13th century CE (Qaragozlu, 1995, p. 198). The Turkmens were another important Turkish group that lived in Central Asia, Iran, and the Caucasus, they have been present in these regions since ancient times with the ancient culture and traditions of the Turks (Christian, 2005, p. 267).

Today, many ethnic and national groups in Central Asian countries have Turkish ethnic roots. Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Azeris, and Tatars are among these groups, all of whom owe their historical and ethnic roots to the Turks of Central Asia, and the Turkish presence in Central Asia and beyond has deeply impacted the region's history, culture, and geopolitics. Their military prowess, particularly in cavalry warfare, allowed them to establish great empires and influence the course of history across a wide swath of Eurasia. The linguistic and cultural legacy of the Turks continues to be felt strongly today, with Turkish languages spoken by millions across Central Asia, the Caucasus, and parts of Eastern Europe. Studying Turkish origins and early history is an evolving field, with new archaeological discoveries and linguistic analyses continually refining our understanding. The complex interplay between nomadic and settled populations and the interactions between Turkish groups and other peoples of the Eurasian steppe, such as Indo-European and Mongolic groups, always continues to be a rich area of academic inquiry.

The Ethnic Origins and Historical Expansion of Turkish Peoples

With their rich history and widespread modern distribution, the Turkish people present a fascinating subject for anthropological, historical, and linguistic study. Their origins and following development across vast swathes of Eurasia have significantly shaped the cultural and demographic landscape of numerous areas and the familial origins of the Turkish people from various disciplines strongly indicate their roots in Central Asia's steppe regions. As noted by (Cavalli-Sforza, 2000, p. 145), even genetic studies reveal close affinities between Turkish populations and other Asian groups, including Mongols and Tungusic peoples, this genetic closeness suggests a common ancestral population in the Central Asian steppes and Archaeological findings corroborate this genetic evidence. Excavations have unearthed evidence of human groups with lifestyles and cultural practices remembering modern Turkish people in Central Asian regions, dating back to the second millennium BCE (Christian, 2005, p. 119). These archaeological data provide sensible support for the indigenous Central Asian roots of Turkish peoples.

Linguistic analysis provides additional support for the Central Asian origin theory. It confirms the Turkish language is part of the Altaic branch of the Eurasian language family, which has its origins in the ancient languages spoken by Central Asian nomadic peoples (Clude, 1997, p. 67). Also, there is a strong connection between Turkish and other languages within this family, such as Mongolian and Korean, suggesting a shared linguistic legacy originating in Central Asia.

Physically, Turkish people exhibit Asian racial features, including almond-shaped eyes, yellowish skin, and high cheekbones (Rezaei Baghbidi, 2011, p. 102). These specifications align them closely with other Asian populations and support their Central Asian origins. The major growth of Turkish people began in the 6th century CE with the rise of powerful Turkish empires. The Göktürks, established in this period, extended its supremacy over parts of Central Asia, including present-day Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Xinjiang in China (Grantovsky, 1984, p. 201). This empire played a crucial role in the beginning spread of Turkish influence beyond their original homeland.

The following centuries saw the emergence of various Turkish bloodlines that significantly expanded Turkish influences. The Ghaznavids, Seljuks, and Khwarezmian Empire established control over vast territories stretching from Anatolia to northern India, and from Central Asia to the Caucasus (Frye, 2006, pp. 98-107). These Turkish empires not only facilitated the migration of Turkish populations but also led to the cultural and linguistic Turkification of many local populations in these regions.

Even the Mongol victories of the 13th century, while not being a strictly Turkish phenomenon, paradoxically contributed to further Turkish expansion. The Mongol armies combined numerous Turkish peoples, and Genghis Khan and his successors extensively utilized Turkish forces (Savory, 2013, p. 13). In the post-Mongol period, Turkish groups such as the Turkmen and Qizilbash expanded their presence to Iran and Anatolia (Rumlu, 1987, p. 229). The establishment of the Ottoman Empire marked another important chapter in Turkish expansion. From its base in Anatolia, the Ottoman Turks extended their rule and cultural influence across parts of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, leaving a long-lasting impact on these regions.

It's noteworthy that some researchers, such as Golden (2013, p. 48), suggest a more complex picture of Turkish origins, indicating historical interactions and admixture with various

populations, including European groups and this perspective acknowledges the dynamic nature of ethnic identities, and the influence of historical migrations and conquests on genetic and cultural composition. Today, as a result of these long histories of expansions and interactions, Turkish people are widely distributed across numerous countries. Major Turkish populations can be found in Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan as well as in parts of China, Russia, and various Middle Eastern nations. This immense distribution reflects the historical journey of Turkish peoples from their Central Asian homeland to become a significant existence across much of Eurasia.

The Nomadic Lifestyle and Cultural Tapestry of Pre-Islamic Turkish Peoples

The pre-Islamic Turkish peoples were resident at the vast steppes of Central Asia specified by their nomadic and pastoral way of lifestyle, which was deeply rooted in their historical past, and shaped every feature of their society from social structures to religious beliefs and artistic expressions, these societies were led by "Khans" or "Beks" selected from noble families (Gombrich, 1987, p. 187). These people were living in portable "yurts," ingeniously designed residences made from animal wool and hides that could accommodate families and small livestock (Christian, 2005, p. 206; Rezaei Baghbidi, 2011, p. 128).

Their spiritual landscape was diverse, surrounded by forms of paganism, shamanism, and nature-centric faiths. Turks respect natural elements and maintain strong beliefs in familial spirits and supernatural entities. Shamans served as intermediaries between the material and spiritual realms (Gölpınarlı, 1998, p. 92). Their religious practices were typically simple and suited to nomadic life, with influences from various ancient Iranian and Central Asian faiths (Frye, 2006, pp. 125-130). The Turks were very good in various crafts, particularly metalworking, pottery, and weaving. They build lightweight, portable goods adapted to their mobile lifestyle (Marshall, 1990, p. 117, 121). Women played a significant role in these activities, especially in weaving textiles, carpets, and kilims (Christian, 2005, p. 234).

Furthermore, Oral literature was a cornerstone of their culture, with stories, legends, and epic Stories like "The Book of Dede Korkut" and "Oghuz-nama" passed down through generations (Sajjadi, 1990, p. 38). Music and singing held special significance, with instruments such as the dutar and kopuz used in various ceremonials (Qaragozlu, 1995, p. 134). Seasonal festivals were also important to Turkish culture, with Nowruz, celebrated at the onset of spring significantly (Qaragozlu, 1995, p. 127). Their social customs were based on respect for elders, hospitality, and tribal honor. Women's position was generally lower than men's, but they actively participated in daily activities alongside men (Ivanova, 2016, pp. 90-110). Warfare and hunting were key aspects of Turkish life, accompanied by specific rituals and ceremonies. Their military prowess was famous, particularly their skilled cavalry and archery (Marshall, 1990, p. 135). The transition from pre-Islamic to Islamic Turkish culture was a slow process beginning in the 8th century CE, leading to significant societal changes. However, many pre-Islamic elements persisted, mixed with Islamic traditions to create a unique Turk-Islamic culture.

The Socio-Political Structure of Turkish Peoples before Islam

Before adopting Islam, the Turkish people had a well-defined socio-political structure rooted in their ancient customs. They lived in clan-based societies, with a tribal system dominating their social structures. Each Turkish tribe was led by leaders known as "Khan," "Bek," or "Bey," who were chosen from

among the noble families and deep-rooted rulers. These leaders played a crucial role in guiding the tribe and making decisions about wars. (Grantovsky, 1984, p. 187).

Tribal members were interconnected through blood ties and kinship. These familial bonds specified the social hierarchy within the tribe, with noble families occupying the top of this hierarchical structure (Christian, 2005, p. 265). Higher than tribe-level organizations, the Turkish people had larger political and military structures known as "IL" or "Ulus." Each IL was formed by the merging of several tribes and was governed by a leader called "IL-begi" or "IL-khan." These IL-khans were usually selected from among the powerful or noble tribal Khans and were in charge of commanding the IL's military forces and coordinating between the tribes under their ruling authority (Gombrich, 1987, p. 191).

During war times, different Turkish ILs could join to form a larger military force. These unions were sometimes temporary but sometimes led to the establishment of vast Turkish empires in Central Asia (Frye, 2006, p. 93). Each tribe or IL desired to expand its territory and increase its power, sometimes leading to tensions and conflicts. However, in the face of external conflicts, Turkish tribes would unite under the single leadership of a ruler. These temporary unions were formed to counter external threats (Gölpınarlı, 1998, p. 114). Warfare and military prowess were well-known features of pre-Islamic Turkish traditions, they were skilled horsemen and proficient in the use of weapons. These military skills supported them in territorial enlargement as well as the establishment of vast empires (Rezaei Baghbidi, 2011, p. 157).

The authority structure among pre-Islamic Turks looks like a feudal system, with the Khan at the top. Below the Khan, nobles and tribal chiefs held power and referred to the Khan on important matters. In tradition, governance was shared between the Khan and the nobility. Khans and tribal leaders not only came to have wealth and war spoils through victories but also increased their status and power. The acquisition of land and resources allowed them to expand their influence and domination over other clans. In this Turkish feudal system, warriors and cavalry held special conditions, the Khan would distribute conquered lands among warriors and loyal followers, to increase the Khan's power. Khans and tribal leaders tightened their right to rule through military victories, which motivated them to constantly seek new victories in battles to maintain their power.

The Role of Turkish Peoples in Strengthening Trade and the Silk Road

The Turks, one of the most significant ethnic groups living in vast regions of Central Asia, played an important role in the Silk Road trade, which was the major commercial route between China and the Roman Empire. Their most well-known contributions to the strengthening of trade via the Silk Road can be summarized as follows:

1. **Strategic Geographic Position:** The Turks reside in regions through which the Silk Road passed, allowing them to participate actively in trade and the transportation of wealth.
2. **Livestock and Animal Product Trade:** Animal husbandry was a primary activity of the Turks. They traded their livestock in other areas and utilized animal products such as wool, leather, and meat in commerce.
3. **Transportation, Caravans safety, and Guidance:** Due to their familiarity with desert and mountainous regions, the Turks played an essential role in transporting and guiding trade caravans. They also contributed to ensuring the security of these caravans.

4. **Horse Trade:** The Turks were famous for their swift and agile horses and were active in trading them to other territories.
5. **Trade mediator:** The Turks acted as trade intermediaries between different areas, facilitating the transfer of various goods from one area to another (Frankopan, 2015, pp. 24-30).

John Mair, in his work "The Silk Road and Asian Civilizations" (2020, pp. 23-31), discusses the cultural exchanges facilitated by the Silk Road. He declares that the Silk Road was not merely a trade route but a vast cultural corridor for the transmission of traditions, ideas, scientific knowledge, and artistic practices among diverse peoples. Mair specifically addresses the following points:

1. The spread of religious beliefs such as Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam via the Silk Road.
2. The role of the Silk Road in disseminating scientific and technological advancements, including printing, papermaking, gunpowder, and astronomical knowledge.
3. The transfer of artistic styles, architectural techniques, and handicrafts among different cultures along this road.
4. The mutual influence of Asian and European civilizations through the Silk Road.
5. The direct and indirect impact of the Turkish language and literature on neighboring cultures, contributing to the preservation of their ancient traditions and culture.

In Short Mair's work shows that the Silk Road was far more than a mere trade route; it was, in fact, a cultural bridge between East and West that facilitated the exchange and growth of knowledge, ideas, and human achievements.

Conclusion

The Turks have been a remarkable and influential ethnic group in the history of Central Asia, playing an important role in the formation of civilizations and events in the region. Historically, the Turks inhabited the steppe regions of Central Asia and engaged in nomadic sheepherding. They possessed a rich cultural legacy rooted in ancient beliefs and rituals. Their religious practices included shamanism, animism, Manichaeism, and other local traditions. Before the advent of Islam, the Turks operated under a political and military system based on tribal and clan structures. Tribal leaders, or khans, played a key role in guiding and leading their clans. Militarily, the Turks were renowned for their skilled cavalry and expertise in warfare, which facilitated the expansion of their territories and the formation of large empires.

A critical aspect of the Turks' influence in Central Asia was their role in securing and managing the Silk Road, their strategic position in this area allowed them to play a crucial role in the transportation and trade along this major commercial route. Beyond trade, the Turk people served as intermediaries for the transmission of cultures, ideas, and human achievements across the territories. Throughout history, they established powerful empires such as the Ghaznavids, Seljuks, Khwarezmians, and Ottomans, which extended their rule over parts of Central Asia, Iran, Anatolia, and even northern India.

Today, Turks are spread across various countries, including Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Central Asian countries, China, Russia, and the Middle East. Despite the diversity in cultures and languages among these groups, they all share a common legacy rooted in the ancient history and culture of the Turks of Central Asia.

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