

PROBLEMS RELATING TO THE SOURCES ON THE ETHNIC BACKGROUND OF INNER ASIAN NOMADS UNDER THE TÜRK QAGHANATES*

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Abstract:

The goal of this paper is to discuss the ethnic background of Inner Asian nomads under the Türk qaghanates and, more concretely, the process of Turkicization of the West Eurasian steppes and the progressive withdrawal of North Iranian (Alanic) tribes, paying special attention to the problem of the Az people quoted in the Orkhon inscriptions.

Key words: *Türk qaghanates, Inner Asian nomads, ethnic background, Alans, Az*

Türk Kağanlıkları Yönetimindeki İç Asya Göçmenlerinin Etnik Arka Planları Hakkındaki Kaynaklara İlişkin Meseleler

Özet:

Bu makalede Türk kağanlıkları yönetimindeki İç Asya göçebe gruplarının etnik arka planları ve daha somut olarak da, Orhon Yazıtları'nda adı geçen Az halkı meselesine özel bir önem atfedilerek Batı Avrasya steplerinin Türkleşme süreci ve Kuzey İran (Alan) kavimlerinin yavaş yavaş geri çekilmesi ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Türk kağanlıkları, İç Asya göçebe grupları, etnik arka plan, Alanlar, Az halkı*

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Some fifteen years ago, when I was already done with my doctoral dissertation on the Alans, I “discovered” –so to say– an original copy of Thomsen’s *Inscriptions de l’Orkhon déchiffrées*¹ at my host institute in Saarbrücken. Coming from a country with little or no tradition in Central Asian studies, this was my first real contact with the Old Turkic world; and after spending a decade dealing exclusively with the *Nebenüberlieferung* of North Iranian nomads who had left no written record of their own, I was impressed by the spirit and strength of the earliest known texts in any Altaic language and the first epigraphic monument left by an Inner Asian empire. After a plethora of biased reports perpetuated by their sedentary enemies, I felt that I was hearing the true voice of steppe riders for the first time in history.

This is one of the reasons why during the last years I have centered my research in the study of the relations between Iranian and Turkic nomads in the Ponto-Caspian steppes from the arrival of the Huns to the downfall of the Khazar empire, or, in other words, the transition from Iranian to Turkic overlordship in the Western Eurasian steppe.

Quoting Sinor’s words (*Introduction*, p. 192), “the past of Central Eurasia opposes to those who want to explore it a resistance which, indisputably, is among the most persistent which a historian has ever had to face”; and in fact, in the earliest period, due to the lack of indigenous sources one feels constrained to rely on foreign documents in many diverse languages, often showing the nomadic foe through a ‘civilized’, negative perspective. Besides, the Roman Danube frontier, the so-called *limes Sasanicus* and the Great Wall were not only strategic defensive systems against the nomads, but also the farthest limit of eyewitness accounts in Byzantine, Near Eastern (Persian & Arabic) and Chinese historiography for most of time. With a few exceptions, like the reports on Zemarchus’ mission to Ištemi qaγan (ca. 571/2) and Theophylactus Simocatta’s excursus on the “Scythian” peoples, the horizon of Byzantine writers does not reach beyond the Volga river; Chinese reports on the “Western Regions” (*xiyu* 西域) provide meager evidence for distant lands outside direct imperial influence, like the kingdoms of Yancai 奄蔡 and Alan 阿蘭; and Islamic geographical and historical tradition, not prior to the 9th c. A.D., must be managed with caution for the earliest periods. All in all, there is a void of detailed information for most of Central Eurasia before the Köktürk empire connected both ends of the steppe –and, of course, even later until the rise of the Mongol world empire.

Although the ethnic and historico-geographical classification of the ancient tribes inhabiting the Ponto-Caspian steppes (Scythians, Sarmatians,

1 Vilh[elm] Thomsen (1896), *Inscriptions de l’Orkhon déchiffrées*, Helsingfors: Impr. de la Société de littérature finnoise.

Massagetae, Alans) is not at all clear, words and names preserved by classical authors –mostly in Herodotus’ Scythian *lógos*– as well as person names in the inscriptions of the Greek cities on the Northern Black Sea shore show clear East Iranian features, often close to Modern Ossetic, as stated in the various studies by Miller, Vasmer, Abaev, Harmatta and Zgusta, among others. On the other hand, the Kushān coinage and inscriptions in Graeco-Bactrian script from northern Afghanistan have led – thanks to the efforts of Henning, Gerschevitch, Humbach and Sims-Williams– to the knowledge of an East Middle Iranian language having its origins in the Central Asian Da Yuezhi 大月氏 nomads, according to Chinese sources originally living in the area between the Qilian mountains and Dunhuang, but defeated and displaced to the west by the Xiongnu 匈奴 in the 2nd c. B.C. And after the works of Bailey and Emmerick the materials in Brāhmī script recovered from the Medieval Buddhist kingdoms of Khotan and Tumshuq in Eastern Turkestan have attested another East Middle Iranian language, known as Saka after the name given to various groups of Iranian peoples by ancient sources (Greek Σάκαι, Old Persian *Sakā*, Chinese *Sai* 塞). All in all, available evidence points to the fact that there was a certain presence of North Iranian languages in the Eurasian steppes as far as Eastern Turkestan at least until the end of the first millennium A.D., when after their regression and final disappearance they were superseded by different forms of Turkic.

Some early Turkic titles, like *bäg*, *šad* or *tarqan* or even the clan name of the ruling dynasty *Ashina* 阿史那 have been explained as having Iranian origin, and research has been done on Turkic-Iranian language contacts in Chinese Turkestan. However, it is not always clear from which Iranian language the earliest loanwords were borrowed into Old Turkic: although our knowledge of Sogdian or Khotanese allows to regard them as the most valid option, the intermediary role of steppe nomads speaking a Middle East Iranian language, maybe incorporated to the Türk confederacy since its first stages, cannot be excluded.

As for the western steppe, we are informed by Ammianus Marcellinus about an Alanic empire shortly before its downfall because of the Hunnic invasion, but, in spite of a profusion of sources detailing the activities of Alan groups in Europe and Africa during the *Völkerwanderung*, there are almost no records about the Alanic tribes which remained in the Ponto-Caspian region after this date. According to Ammianus, the Huns “joined the survivors to themselves after forming an alliance”: here we can suppose from other similar, better-known episodes in steppe history that there was a combination of drastic military action and systematic redistribution of the vanquished throughout conquered territories and among different military units in order to break tribal loyalties.

However, the sources say nothing in this (or other) respect and, after the dissolution of the Hun empire, the western steppe seems to have fallen under the sway of the Oğuric tribes. Most of the scanty information available to us regarding Oğurs, Sarayurs and Onoğurs comes from half a dozen brief passages found in Early Byzantine historians like Priscus of Panium, Agathias of Myrina, Menander Protector or Theophylact Simocatta. Evidence is so meager that the facts reported in the sources often appear mixed with hypotheses in the scholarly literature on the subject. By mid 6th c. we are informed in some detail –mostly by Procopius of Caesarea and Agathias– about the endless internecine strife opposing their heirs –Kutrigurs and Utigurs– for almost a decade until their mutual annihilation and probable submission to the Western Türk: at least, Anagaesus, last ruler of the Utigurs, is said to have laid siege to Bosphorus in 576 fighting under Turkic banners. The fact that the chapter on the Tiele 鐵勒 in the *Suishu* 隋書 states that Alan 阿蘭, located east of Fulin 拂菻 (the Byzantine empire), belonged to the sixth group of the Tiele tribes, speaks in favour of seeing the Alans under Oğuric or West Türkic rule at that time.

The involvement of the Alans in the Byzantine-Persian wars of the 6th c. is the only event which sheds some light on their fortunes before they disappear from the sources for some hundred years, only to return later as Khazar allies (and subjects) during the wars against the caliphate. However, a fragment from Menander's *History* tells us of an incident with the Western Turks at the court of the Alan king Saroes, when the Byzantine ambassador Zemarchus returned from his mission to İstemi qaγan and the Türk emissaries who accompanied him were refused to be received unless they put down their arms. This or other similar episodes could have had certain consequences, since both Alans and Utigurs are reported to be under Türk rule some five years later, on the occasion of Valentine's embassy to *Türkšad (576).

Source evidence suggests that Türk presence west of the Volga, at least partially caused by their pursuit of the Avars, was probably short-lived and restricted to sporadic incursions (like the one against Bosphorus), but for some time the Oğur tribes between the Don and the Volga, as well as the Alan remnants after the migrations of the Hun period, were subject to the authority of the Turkic qaγan, which undoubtedly contributed to bring together and to agglutinate a wide variety of groups of heterogeneous origin and ultimately to lay the foundations of new state formations like Magna Bulgharia or Khazaria.

Unfortunately, the situation of the Alans in the 7th c. remains almost unknown, and the only available evidence to clear up their relations with the Second Turk Qaghanate is the problematic question of the people Az recorded in the Orkhon inscriptions. Three main events related to them are reported:

[1] the subjugation of the Az people in the 26th year of Bilge Qaγan (BQ E26: 709);

[2] the capture of an Az military governor (*tutuq*), a commander (*buyruq*) of the Türgiř qaγan, in the 26th year of Kül Tigin (KT E38: 710); and

[3] the revolt, defeat and capture of the Az *Eltäbär* in a battle fought at the Black Lake (*Qara-Köl*) in the 31st year of Kül Tigin; according to the relevant passage, “the Az people were annihilated there” (KT N2-3: 715).

We have also brief references [1] to the fact that the Türk rulers organized the Az and Qırqız peoples (KT E19-20 = BQ E16-17), who also appear together in Tonyukuk’s inscription (TI E6-7), where a “land of the Az” (*Az yir*) is mentioned, and [2] to the conquest of the Az people by Küli Čor (KČ W6).

Thomsen, at the time of his decipherment, understood the word *az* as an adjective meaning “few, not numerous (peu, peu nombreux)”, and thus he translated *az bodun* as “a small part of the people, the small people (une petite partie du peuple, le petit peuple)”, etc. However, later he and other scholars considered Az to be the name of a people, although no consensus was reached as to its ethnic belonging. To the best of my knowledge, the most outstanding defender of identifying the Az with the Alans was Giraud, who explained the unusual sibilant *-z* through the Turkic tendency to voice final *-s* in loanwords. Nevertheless, this theory poses problems of its own; it is not wholly impossible, but it is only based on phonetic similarity with the Alan *Ās* name and forces us to locate the Alans next to the Qırqız, beyond the Kögmen (Sayan) mountains, where they are no more to be found. Furthermore, Pritsak also tried to recognize the Alans in other names ending in *-s*, like *Kāñārās*, *Halis* and *Burṭās*, but his etymologies are hardly convincing.

On the other hand, some monuments in East European Scripts (Kyzlasov’s Don & Kuban group) have been found in the Northern Caucasus, mainly in Karačaj-Čerkessija and the Stavropol’skij Kraj, sometimes close to the site where the Zelenčuk Alanic inscription was discovered (and lost), or in the same Nižnij Arkhyz, which Kuznecov deems to be the medieval Alanic capital **Magas*, quoted by many Oriental literary sources. But the inscriptions in East European Scripts, which extend from Hungary to Kyrgyzstan, are not reliably published in a corpus and not satisfactorily deciphered, since there are too few specimens of some varieties and their text is often too brief. They belong hardly to a single writing system and, in spite of Turčaninov’s efforts to read most of them as Alanic, they were probably devised in order to write a language spoken in the Khazar empire, most probably a Turkic one. In any case, taking into account the places where they were discovered, any progress in their study will prove useful for a better understanding of the ethnic relations in the North Caucasian steppe.

From a linguistic viewpoint, according to Abaev, Turkic elements are the third largest group (after Iranian and Caucasian ones) in the vocabulary of Old Ossetic, the last scion of Scytho-Sarmatian. When it is possible to distinguish between a North or South Turkic origin for these loanwords, Ossetic is closer to North / Kipchak Turkic, as expected from its proximity to Karachay-Balkar since the Late Middle Ages. However, a desideratum would be the quest for an Oğuric layer among these Turkic borrowings in Ossetic with the help of Chuvash, after the prolonged Alano-Oğuric contacts elapsed between the downfall of both the Hun and the Khazar empires.

Here I would like to recall once more (I already did it in Cairo some months ago) an inspiring passage by Prof. Lars Johanson (“Roles of Turkic”, p. 163). In his opinion, “the old nomadic complexes were linguistically and ethnically heterogeneous, comprising elements of different origin. The known designations refer to the representative groups of the tribal confederacies, but do not tell us which tribes were included. The ethnic or linguistic affiliation of a constituent tribe is not necessarily identical with that of the leading elite group of the complex. Titles are not limited to specific linguistic groups”.

In my opinion, there is a strong tendency to assimilate nomadic peoples or empires to modern state formations without taking into account their distinctive features. Most of times, we are faced with punctual confederations of heterogeneous origin and relatively short duration, which attracted sporadically the attention of the chroniclers and are often nothing but a *hapax legomenon* with no further history. In our case, we are probably attending to the progressive arrival of Turkic groups to the Ponto-Caspian steppes, who managed to impose themselves on earlier Iranian or Finno-Ugrian tribes and incorporated their territories into the regions they ruled over. In a similar way, this heterogeneity is also in contradiction to the homogeneous treatment which some of these peoples have received after their involvement in the ethnogenetic processes of some modern nations. As for myself, evidence suggests that we must give up our prejudices and admit our ignorance: the steppe was not an exclusively North Iranian club before the Hun period nor it was a monolithic Turkic entente after Attila; in both cases we are seeing only the tip of the iceberg.

Some years ago, when I dealt with the biographies of the Alan (*Asud*) imperial guards in the Yuan military establishment, I became acquainted with the concept of *Semu ren* 色目人 “people of various kinds”, that is the Western and Central Asians in Mongol service (from the former Western Regions), the second class after the conquerors. I find it worth of mention, not only because today we are in Ulaanbaatar, but also because they are a good example of the heterogeneity, mobility and close ties of steppe peoples, Altaic or not,

gathered together into a nomadic empire to a great extent similar to that of the Köktürk. However, since the Mongol case is much better known, comparison with earlier periods can be of help when discussing which hypotheses are likely to be true -or not.

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