



## Abstract

Turks are one of the most ancient nations in the world with their nearly five millennia history. According to [\*Sima Qian\*](#), grand historian of China who wrote *Shiji*, the Xiongnu were descendants of *Chunwei*, the final ruler of the [\*Xia Dynasty\*](#) (2070-1600 BC). The same information is recorded in *Han Shu* Chapter 94 on Xiongnu monography (Onat, Orsoy and Ercilasun 2004, 1). Turks were also the majority among the ethnical groups who established Zhou Dynasty in China (1050 B.C.- 221 B.C.) (Eberhard, 1977: 23). This history might be traced back to older times based on the old cultures flourished in the vast geographical regions they lived, and quite large number of petroglyphs left in overall Turkestan (“land of Turks”).

Buddhism survived more than one thousand years among Turks. This Buddhist era lasts from the 4<sup>th</sup> century when Buddhism was accepted by the Southern Xiongnu -as the founders of dynasties in North China- until 14<sup>th</sup> century when Turfan Uyghurs completely converted to Islam. This religion has gone into synthesis with the Turkish national religion, the earliest religion of Ancient Turks, called either as “Sky God (or Heaven God) religion” - because it is centered on Sky God faith- or as “Tengrism” in literature. Sky God emphasis and monoteistic approach of Altaic peoples’ religion was earlier mentioned by M. Eliade, who noted that Altaic people, mainly Turks and Mongols had different

understanding for their “Sky God” worshipped as the powerful single God, creator of the cosmos, not transformed to sun, moon or thunderbolt deities in later periods, not married and not had children, not represented with idols (Eliade 1996, 63-64). This ancient national religion of Turks, provides a faith system composed of Sky God faith, belief on natural powers called “water-land spirits” and the ancestor cult. This universal approach of Turks, building strong relationship between God, universe and man, served as a strong base when they adopted foreign religions.

## **The History of Buddhism Among Turks**

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Historical Silk Road lying between China and Europe was an extremely important communication channel through which many ideologies, religions and faiths were exchanged during centuries. One of these religions, Buddhism was flourished in Northeast India and the missionary actions started from Buddha Shakyamuni period onwards towards the different regions of Asia for centuries. According to the general propagation theory of Buddhism, Buddhist missionaries propagated dharma, the Buddhist law, to Turkestan and China by crossing the Silk Road via the big commercial centers, one after another. Buddhist missionaries came to China from Eastern Turkestan; Kucha in north and Dunhuang and Khotan in south. They built the first Buddhist communities and started to translate sutras in Indian languages to Chinese towards the second half of 2nd century. During this period, Mahayana Buddhism, which focused on community's salvation instead of personal salvation, became prominent among Turks. The propagation of Buddhism from Gandhara to Turkestan was accelerated especially during Kushan king Kanishka period and the religion was accepted in Kang-ju and Part regions within Western Turkestan. From there, it reached Eastern Turkestan where many important centers were established in Khotan and Miran on Southern Silk Road and Tumshuk and Kucha on Northern Silk Road in 2nd-3rd centuries AD. The connection to Tarim Basin towards Eastern Turkestan and to Oxus River towards Western Turkestan was done through auxiliary paths allowed by the passages of high mountains such as Himalayas, Hindukush and Karakorum (Neelis 2012).

Regarding the sources on Buddhism propagation in Turkestan, we can list the Chinese dynasty sources, archaeological records such as petroglyphs/graffitis left by the missionaries or merchants travelling on the roads from India to China and inscriptions erected by Buddhist rulers. The travel records of missionary Buddhist monks coming from India and Kushan lands to China and Chinese Buddhist monks who travelled to India from China for pilgrimage and for obtaining the sutras to translate to Chinese are extremely important.

There is no evidence of Buddhism contact with Xiongnu Empire. Although they dominated and ruled Eastern Turkestan cities during the first centuries A.D., they probably did not know this religion due to their remote governance (Ögel 1981, 244). The introduction of Buddhism among Turks dates back to 4th century based on written sources, during the period where Northern China was dominated and ruled by their northern enemies, especially Xiongnus (Baykuzu 2008, 195-198). A series of dynasties of Turkish ethnicity ruled Northern China between 3rd-6th centuries: Later Chao (329-352), Northern Liang (397-439) and Northern Wei (385-550) (Eberhard 1977, 125, 132, 138-139; Gabain 1961, 23; Baykuzu 2011).

During the period when Northern China was governed by foreign peoples, Buddhism, especially Mahayana School, flourished dramatically in China. Buddhism was adopted by foreign rulers as a favorable foreign religion suppressing national Chinese religions like Confucianism and Taoism (Eberhard 1965, 126-127). Another fact is that Buddhist monks played important roles as intellectuals and statesman in Turkish rulers' palaces to replace the Confucianist elite who refused to support foreign rulers and migrated to Southern China (Eberhard 1977, 134-137). One other possible reason for conversion could be that Turks accepted this foreign religion in order not to be assimilated by Chinese culture. After all, Turkish rulers got the help of Buddhist monks to settle bureaucracy and commerce in their new homeland while monks received great support to propagate Buddhism among people (Tezcan 2005, 129). W. Eberhard proposed that Mahayana Buddhism was born in Eastern Turkestan (especially Khotan) from where these monks came (Eberhard 1977, 136-137).

One of the first documents regarding Turks' adoption of Buddhism is a biography of the Buddhist monk Fu-t'u-teng who visited Later Chao Dynasty ruler Shih-Lo in 310 at Lo-yang, recorded in Chin-Shou (Bazin, 1948: 3-11; Baykuzu 2011, 47). It was recorded that he impressed Turkish ruler by displaying some methods of yoga and magic and by explaining

the importance of charity/good deeds in Buddhism (Tezcan 2005, 132). The translation activities of Sanskrit Buddhist books to Chinese, started by Buddhosingha in Shih-Lo's palace, were accepted as the beginning of Northern Buddhism developed under state patronage. Further on, Later Chao Dynasty accepted officially Buddhism during Shih Hu's governance (Baykuzu 2008, 202).

Northern Liang Dynasty was established by Tsü-küe (Chü Chü) Huns under the leadership of Meng-Sun. Their rulers supported the translation works of important Buddhist missionary monks such as Dharmaksema (T'an-mo-ch'an, 384-433) (Soper 1958, 141). Meng-Sun ordered the building of Buddhist cave temples in Ku-tsang (T'ien-t'i shan), Su-chou (Wen-shu-shan) and Dunhuang (Soper 1958, 141-142, 149). Mao-k'ien, the son of Meng-Sun, made Dunhuang a very important Buddhist cultural center. Northern Liang Dynasty was ended by T'ai wu (424-452), the emperor of Northern Wei Dynasty in 439. Buddhist monks were brought away to their capital P'ing-ch'en and 500 families of Tsü-küe Huns fled to Turfan to take refuge of Rouran State (Soper 1958, 139).

Northern Wei Dynasty was founded by Tuoba or Tabgatch nomad tribesmen, consisting mainly of Turkish tribes, speaking Turkish, under the leadership of T'ai-tsu in 386. T'ai-tsu was a Buddhist ruler and he assigned famous Buddhist monk Fa-kuo as high monk in order to establish state control over monasteries for monk hiring, construction of Buddhist stupa and monasteries (Tezcan 2005, 141). After defeating North Liang Dynasty, Tuoba rulers inherited Buddhist culture from them and continued to build cave temples in Shanxi (Yungang), Luoyang (Longmen) and Dunhuang (Fisher 1993, 92-94). An enormous increase in the construction of Buddhist monasteries, cave temples and statues appeared especially in the first half of 6th century. Northern Wei systematized Buddhist sangha and related institutions' activities and managed their official relationship with the state (Eberhard 1977, 147-150).

Buddhism was empowered in Afghanistan and Western Turkestan during Kushan times, especially Kanishka period. H.-J. Klimkeit proposed that Western Turks whose land borders were expanded till Afghanistan was one of the first peoples impacted from Buddhism. A. von Gabain indicated further that there were Buddhist temples built by Turkic Khaganate in Kapisa (Begram) region (Klimkeit 1990, 54). Although there is no written evidence that Hephtalites (also called White Huns), who ruled Transoxiana and Tokharistan in 5th-6th centuries, converted to Buddhism, it seems quite clear that they patroned this religion. Sung Yun, Chinese envoy of Wei dynasty visiting Tokharistan, recorded that most of the Hephtalites did not believe in Buddhism, had “foreign gods” (wai-shên) and Hephtalites of Gandhara glorified evil beings (kui-shên) (Litvinsky 1996, 150). Latest researches in Bamiyan date two Buddha statues mostly to 3rd-7th or 5th-6th centuries, either Hephtalites (Litvinsky 1996, 153, 158) or Western Turks (Tarzi 2007, 920-922; Klimburgh-Salter 1989, 91) periods. The testimony of Xuanzang who was the first to describe these colossal statues in a well-condition with their red and blue colors, gilded faces and hands shows that either they were not destructed by Hephtalites as earlier proposed or they were restored under Western Turks patronage in 630. (Wriggins 2004, 45-48).

Although there are some doubts about the Turkic Khaganate's official adoption of Buddhism, it is known that they had close contact with Buddhism due to the Silk Road traders, Sogdians who lived with Turks during centuries. They also knew previously Buddhism as Turkic Khaganate founder dynasty (Ashina) was one of the Northern Liang Turkish families fled to Turfan (Esin 1971, 314, 325-326). It is evidenced that Chinese dynasties Northern Ts'i (550-577) and Northern Chou (556-581) sent their Buddhist monks to Turkic Khaganate (Günay and Güngör 2009, 168). Yi-wen T'ai, the founder of Northern Chou Dynasty had built a “Turkish Temple” for Mu-han Kagan (553-572) in Chang'an (Klimkeit 1990, 54). Later Ming-ti built a commemoration inscription for this temple where mentioned that

Mu-han converted to Buddhism, which still seems doubtful. Mu-han's successor Tatpar Kagan (572-581) was also inclined to Buddhism as he ordered Buddhist scriptures to Ts'i dynasty. Thus, Niepan Jing (Mahaparinirvana Sutra) was translated to Turkish (Kudara 2002b, 184), probably with Sogdian script (Klimkeit 1990, 55) for the first time although it did not reach our days. Tatpar Kagan also built a Buddhist temple and a pagoda, got Buddhist title fatra (bowl of Buddha) and invited Buddhist monk Jinagupta, traveling from Kapisa to China, to his palace (Günay and Güngör 2009, 167; Taşağıl, 2003:28).

Bugut Inscription (581-582), erected during the First Turkic Khaganate (552-630), probably from Tatpar Kagan period, is an important evidence of Buddhism among Turks. The stela was found in a memorial complex site built in the Bayn Tsagaan Gol region of today Mongolia (Alyılmaz 2003, 12), currently kept at the Arkhangai Province Museum (Photo 1). The remaining readable lines on its three sided inscription written in Sogdian and one sided inscription written in Sanskrit with Brahmi alphabet seem to promote Buddhism (Kljaštornyj and Livšic 1972; Çağatay and Tezcan 1976, 251). The latter text is mostly unreadable but refers probably to a text from "Twelve Nidana Sutra" which reflects the essence of Buddhist doctrine (Ölmez 2012, 63-72).

Another inscription from the First Turkic Khaganate is Khüis Tolgoi (I), found in Khüis Tolgoi site discovered in Tuul River site of today Mongolia and currently being preserved in the storage of Institute of Archaeology in Mongolia (Maue and Ölmez 2017, 73). Recently, it was discovered that the language of Brahmi script was Mongolic and the content refers to Niri Kagan, who reigned from 595, fought against the Eastern Turks and died after being defeated by the Tiele tribes. (Maue and Ölmez 2017, 79). The Buddhist context is obvious as kagans were mentioned as reborn as Bodhisattva (Maue and Ölmez 2017, 86).





Photo: Dr. Cengiz ALYILMAZ

*Bugut Inscription (Alyilmaz 2003)*

There are some records regarding Buddhism among Western Turks, who ruled Western Turkestan in 580-658. At that time, Besbalik city was renamed as Kagan-stupa which refers to a Buddhist kagan sovereignty. The use of Turkic runic script with Brahmi script in Buddhist inscriptions (i.e. Kumtura Buddhist Cave Temple) is another evidence (Esin 1978, 128). The famous Buddhist monk Xuanzang passing over Turkestan in 629-630, visited Western Turks kagan T'ung Yabgu (died in 630) in his palace at Tokmak and was very well welcomed. Xuanzang visited also Tardu Sad, Tokharian yabgu (local ruler) in Kunduz, which was the son of T'ung Yabgu. Tokharistan local rulers (yabgu) from Turk Kagans family were also Buddhist as evidenced from their Buddhist centers Bukhara (derivated from "vihara") and Balkh. However, Xuanzang indicated that Turks were attached to their own religion,



without any mention on Buddhism (Klimkeit 1990, 54). This could be due to the synthesis of Buddhism with Sky God Religion, as Turks continued their earlier practices and beliefs after adopting to Buddhism. It was also known that another city ruler, of Beykent, called Yel Tigin and his wife were Buddhists and they built Buddhist temples in Peshawar and Kashmir (Günay and Güngör 2009, 168).

There is no trace of Buddhism from Second Turkic Khaganate period (681-744), especially in Orkhun inscriptions (Kultigin, Bilge Kagan and Bilge Kagan's vizier Tonyukuk) dating from 692-735 years. On the contrary, the wise Tonyukuk suggested his people to stay away of Buddhism as this religion could make them weaker and change their national identity (Taşağıl, 2004: 45-46; Togan, Kara and Baysal, 2006: 53). Another written evidence is by Korean pilgrim Hyeco travelling Western Turkestan cities in 726. He stated that although there were some Buddhist Turks in Kashmir, Gandhara, Huttal and Zabulistan, "the majority of people did not know Buddhist doctrine, there were neither monasteries nor monks and they had faith in Tengri" (Tezcan 2007, 177) .

In the eastern side of Western Turkistan (Argu, Fergana, Issyk Lake and around), other Turkish tribes, Turgishs (658-766) and Karlucs (766-840) ruled after Turkic Khaganate. Acinatepe Buddhist temple built in Vash Valley in 7th-8th centuries and Huttal are found in the region where Karlucs and other Buddhist Turkish tribes lived (Esin 1972b, 128). In Fergana and Kuba, another Buddhist temple showing Turkish Tantric Buddhist art style was found. In Akbeshim, old Turkish capital Suyab, two Buddhist temples from Turgish period were excavated (Esin 1978, 129).

A second phase of Buddhism propagation among Turks started with Uygurs, who migrated to Turfan and Gansu towards the end of the first half of 9th century and who converted to Buddhism after their previous official religion Manichaeism. Buddhism lived its most

glorious period in Turfan and Gansu Uygurs, especially between 10th-12th centuries. Uygurs, heirs of Xiongnu, probably had contacts with Buddhism much earlier than establishing their state in Orkhun region by defeating Turkic Khaganate (745). A written evidence from Chinese sources is that an Uygur tribe leader had name as Pu'-sa ("bodhisattva") (İzgi 1987, 11).

Third kagan of Orkhun Uygurs (745-840), Bogu Kagan (Mo-yu, 759-780) came into contact with Manichaen priests in China and adopted their faith after returning to his country. Manichaeism became the official state religion. In the Chinese text of the trilingual (Turkish, Sogdian and Chinese) Karabalgassun Inscription, there is a reference to "carved and painted images of demons" which were to be destroyed (Klimkeit 1990, 57). This could be interpreted as referring the material culture of Uygurs' Buddhist era before Manichaeism. Another strong evidence is that Manichaean terminology in Old Uygur used Buddhist concepts and terms to express Manichaean doctrine. It should also be noted that Buddhist centers of Eastern Turkestan, Kocho and Kucha were conquered by Uygurs before 760 and Manichaean temples were built. These temples were later used as Buddhist temples as evidenced from Eastern Turkestan expeditions.

When Uygurs were defeated by Kirghiz in 840, they fled in Turfan and Gansu regions and founded Turfan Uygur State (also known as Gaochang; Tianshan or West Uygur Kingdom, 847-1260 and later Mongol Yuan and Chagataid ruling periods until the end of 14th century) and Gansu Uygur State (856-1055) (Wilkens 2016, 197-198; Almas 2010, 413). At the end of 10th century, Manichaeism was almost totally replaced by Buddhism as their faith. The sources verifying this conversion are the Buddhist religious texts, the donors having Buddhist names, the usage of loan words from Sanskrit language and civil documents with Buddhist monks' names (Kudara 2002b, 186). The Buddhist conversion seems very related with

multi-ethnic and multi-cultural structure of the regions where Uyghurs settled, where Buddhist Tokharians, Sogdians, Chinese and Indians lived together (Kudara 2002a, 99). Wang Yen-Te, an envoy of Sung dynasty coming to Kocho in 10th century, recorded that there was a deep impact of Buddhist culture, with nearly around 50 Buddhist temples (against only one Manichaean temple) and a library full of Chinese Buddhist texts (İzgi 1989, 60-61).

Uyghurs adopted especially Mahayana Buddhism in 10th-13th centuries and Tantric Buddhism heavily after they became subject to Mongols (Esin 1978, 130-131). Xia Xia, known as heirs of Tuoba, appeared in history in 987 and founded a state in the east and south-east of Uyghurs. Uyghurs played crucial role in the political and cultural life (including Buddhist text translation) of Xia Xia, when Gansu Uyghurs' country was invaded after the mid of 12th century (Hao and Wang 1994, 180). Buddhism was still popular when Turfan Uyghurs first submitted to Karahitai and later to Mongols during Genghis Khan. Uyghurs propagated Buddhism and Turkish as cultural language among Mongols (Günay and Güngör 2009, 179-180) and took important roles in the state as advisors, high officials and scribes (Brose 2005).

Uyghurs started to adopt Islam gradually from 10th century onwards due to interaction with Muslim Turkish Karakhanid State and muslim merchants trading in Turfan. When the Silk Road was almost totally controlled by Muslim Turks and Iranians and when Ming Dynasty replaced Mongol Yuan Dynasty in 14th century, there were still Uyghur Buddhists in Turfan where many Buddhist temples survived and Buddhist monks lived. As noted by Ming envoy Ch'en Ch'eng, Uyghurs were speaking Turkish but were separated as Muslims and Uyghurs (Oda 1978, 23). It is generally accepted that Buddhism survived among Uyghurs until the end of 14th century during Chagataid governance. Today, there is a minority of Buddhist Uyghurs

living in Gansu as descendants of Gansu Uygurs and known as Yellow Uygurs. Their religion is highly impacted from Tibet Lamaism (Sarıtaş 2012, 189-194).

## **Conclusion**

Buddhist Turks afore mentioned with few samples from their existing cultural heritage served Buddhist doctrine and culture during a millennia. It is not possible to study the flourishing period of Chinese Buddhism, especially Mahayana Buddhism without the contribution of Northern Dynasties established by Turks. Buddhism became extremely important in diplomatical relations of Chinese and Turks from Turkic Khaganate period onwards. We tried to present few examples on traces of Buddhism in First and Second Turkic Khaganate based on Chinese historical sources and some Old Turkic stone inscriptions. Finally, we discussed about Buddhism among Uygurs very shortly as there is a huge literature for these Turks who stayed Buddhist during five centuries and shaped the Buddhist culture of Xia Xia and Mongols.

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As the writer does not have Chinese knowledge, below Chinese sources are used with their translation to Turkish/English/German or via English research articles using these sources.

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#### For Later Chao, Northern Liang and Northern Wei Dynasties and Buddhism in these periods:

*Chin Shu*, Chapter 100-107, 122, 129-130,

*Wei Shu*, Chapter 95, 99, 114.

*Pei Shih*, Chapter 98,

*Kao Seng Chu'an (Biographies of Eminent Monks)*, Chapter 9 (Biography of Fu-t'u-teng),

see Baykuzu 2011 for Turkish summaries of related chapters.

#### For Turkic Khaganates

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*Sui Shu*, Volume 84,

*Chiu T'ang Shu*, Volume 194

*Hsin T'ang Shu*, Volume 215,

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