

# Pre-Islamic Turkic Borrowings in Upper Asia: Some Crucial Semantic Fields

*Louis Bazin*

This inquiry will be limited to an analysis of Turkic borrowings that have been attested in inscriptions found in Mongolia and southern Siberia in the period beginning around the year 700 A.D., as well as in Turkic-Uighur manuscripts, beginning around the year 900 A.D., conserved in northern Tarim (especially in the Turfan region) and in Dunhuang, which is a Chinese outpost on the main road of the silk trade. We will look only at borrowings that predate Islamization, a process that developed rapidly during the eleventh century and of which some borrowings are still part of the language of the Islamic Turkish world. Although most of our study will concentrate on pre-Islamic borrowings that were fully assimilated into written words, we will also investigate some transcriptions of foreign terms that are mentioned in various manuscripts of a theological bent (most notably of Indian, Iranian, Chinese, and Syriac origin and found in Buddhist, Manichaean, and Nestorian Christian texts) as well as words of a very technical nature. We will also look at more contemporary terms that are derived from several major semantic fields.

The world of trade and commerce is a source of numerous loan words and deserves separate study, such as J. Hamilton's work on the names of textiles. This subject, however, is beyond the scope of the present work.

Religious vocabulary, which makes as extensive use of such words as does the world of commerce, presents clear and well assimilated borrowings of Buddhist or Manichaean origin that survived Islamization. The best preserved examples (probably because of their immediately perceptible Persian origin which,

along with Arabic, was the great language of culture of the Muslim Turks) are of Iranian derivation. Thus, even before their conversion to one of the universal religions, the ancient Turks who practiced the national religion of the Sky-God, *Tängri*, borrowed, from the Middle Persian Sassanid language, the word *köt*, in the form *kut*, which means "divine blessing" or "happiness." The word *kut* is still used today, both among Muslims and the Shamanists living in Siberia. The Uighur Turks, whether Buddhist, Manichaeian, or Nestorian Christians, took the words for "heaven" and "hell" from the Sogdians: Sogdian *ušt̄māx*, Uighur *ušt̄max*, which means "heaven"; Sogdian and Uighur *tamu*, which means "hell." The original meaning of these two words was preserved, albeit in an Islamic context, by the Karakhanid Turks of Kashghar in the eleventh century, and these words continued to exist in Old Ottoman and in Chagatai, in the latter language becoming *uçmak* by way of popular etymology in connection with the verb *uç*, "to fly away." The Sogdian Manichaeian word *brišti* (with the spirant *b*), "angel", and the Sogdian Christian word *patgambar*, "prophet", were adopted respectively by the Manichaeian and Christian Uighurs, and were reproduced by the Muslim Karakhanids, then by all the Islamized Turks, who however preferred their Persian analogs, *fārištā* and *pāyğambār*. The Sogdian *dīndār*, "(Manichaeian) monk," which became *dintar* in Uighur, was reproduced in its Persian form *dīndār* by the Islamized Turks, meaning "pious Muslim," which is still current. The Sogdian word *rōc*, "day," borrowed by the Uighurs with the meaning of "day" and "fast day," became, with the addition of a prothetic *o*, *oruč*, which is the name of a religious fast celebrated by Turkish Muslims. From Indian Buddhism Uighur borrowed, in the form *buyan*, the Sanskrit word *punya*, which means "religious worth earned through acts." This same *buyan*, used by Turkish Buddhists and Manichaeians, and which became *muyan* among the Karakhanids, served as a synonym for, and was used concurrently with, the Arabic *sawāb*, a word that refers to the Islamic concept of "worth." Finally, it should be mentioned that the Chinese word *dao-ren*, "Daoist monk," became, in Uighur Buddhism, the word *toyin*, which means "Buddhist monk." Unfortunately we do not have the space here to enter into a detailed discussion of the numerous words

that the Buddhist and Manichaean Uighurs took from Sogdian, Sanskrit, and Chinese, nor of those that the Christian (Nestorian) Turks borrowed from Syriac.

The language of social structures and their hierarchies is another semantic field from which the pre-Islamic Turks borrowed heavily, both to the west and east of their zone of habitation. Most of the oldest borrowings derive primarily from the Iranian world; it seems that those from China do not become extensive until after the first direct contact between the Turks and the Chinese, which Chinese historiography has identified as occurring in the middle of the sixth century and is continuous after that period. Since the Turks had no written culture prior to this time, it is difficult to give an accurate estimate of the relative antiquity of their borrowings from the Iranian linguistic field; nor is it easy to ascertain with precision the paths of this advance. The only borrowings that can be established with any real certainty are those that come from the Sogdians, since their manuscripts can be accurately dated and their written language is understood fairly well. For the interpretation of older borrowings we are dependent on historical data supplied by Iranian philology.

Such is the case with the title *bāg*, later to become *bey*, which has had wide currency amongst the Turkish aristocracy, both ancient and modern, and which originally designated a "lord" or chief of a large tribe. It exists in Sogdian in the form of *bāḡ*, and it could be hypothesized that it comes from Turkic. However, we have epigraphic evidence in the honorific Turkish title of *baḡa* – a rare but certainly attested form – that comes up in the title, dating from around the year 726, given to the father-in-law of the Turkish sovereign of Mongolia, Bilgā Kagan, Tonyukuk. There also exists in Middle Persian, albeit with *bāḡ*, meaning "lord" or "god" (cf. the name of the city Bāḡ-dād, "Gift of the Lord" or, in Slavic, the Russian word *bog*, meaning God), a more ancient form with final *a*, *bāḡa*. There is thus no reason to assume that the Sogdian *bāḡ* comes from Turkic; rather there is every reason to believe that the Turkic word *bāg*, "lord," as in the Turkish title, *baḡa*, is a borrowing from a relatively ancient form of Iranian. Moreover, in Middle Persian there exists another, more evolved, form of *bāḡa*: *bāy*. However, in ancient (and modern) Turkish *bāy*/*bay* means "rich," and in Uzbek

Turkish there exists *bāy* ("rich" and "notable") instead of *bey* in its use as a title. The meanings of "lord" and "rich" are connected: cf. the Russian *bog*, "Lord God," and its derivatives *bogatyi* ("rich") and *boyar* ("nobleman"). In Turkish the meaning of *bāy* as "rich" and "rich lord," sometimes takes on quasi-religious overtones, similar to "sacred." This is the case, for instance, in *Bāy-kōl* (with *kōl* meaning "lake"), which is the original name of Lake Baikal, a lake that remains sacred to the Buriats. It is also the case with *bāy-kuš* (with *kuš* meaning "bird"), which is the word for "owl," a bird believed to possess supernatural powers. Finally, this meaning is found in the expression *bay-sös* (with *sös*, the ancient *söz*, meaning "word"), which Turkish shamans of the Altai use to designate tabooed words.

Another ancient Turkish title, *šād*, which was given to hereditary princes entrusted with important duties, is also of Iranian origin (cf. the Persian *šād*, "happy"). However, after the first direct contacts with China, which began in the middle of the sixth century, and especially during the period of the Chinese protectorate over the Turks of Upper Asia between the years 630 and 680, the Turkic vocabulary of titles is most influenced by borrowings from Chinese. The Emperor Bilgä Kagan states this directly – even while deploring it – in the epitaph to his younger brother Kōl Tegin, who died in 731: "The Turkish Beys abandoned their Turkish titles. Under Chinese influence the Beys took Chinese titles and obeyed the Chinese Emperor" (Orkhon I, Est 7-8). Although the half-century long Chinese protectorate was brought to an end by Bilgä's father, El-teriš Kagan, during the years of 680-683, the titles used by eastern Turks retained a large number of the Chinese loan words. Their neighbors to the north, the Čik and Kırküz (the ancient Kirghizes) peoples of the Upper Yenisey, also took to using Chinese titles, which is evident in the numerous funerary inscriptions they left behind, some of which date from as early as the eighth century. Along the same lines it can be observed, among the Uighurs of eastern Turkestan in the period dating from the middle of the ninth and the end of the tenth centuries, that persons of middle rank bore Chinese titles of a rank superior to their real station. In most cases, it would seem, these were honorific titles. The following titles were the most common:

- *sāngün* or *sangun*, “general,” from the Chinese *tsiang-kün* [*jiang-jun*], a title that was quite commonly used by Uighur merchants of the tenth century.
- *totok*, “military governor,” a title found in inscriptions in Upper Yenisey and used by tribal chiefs or tribal groups; this is a loan word from the medieval Chinese *tuo-tok*, the classical Chinese *tu-tu* [*du-du*].
- *totong*, “civil governor,” commonly used in late Uighur of the Mongol period (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries) and most likely of a purely honorific nature; from the medieval Chinese *tuo-t’ong*, classical Chinese *tu-tung* [*du-dong*].
- *čigši* or *čikši*, “prefect,” from the Chinese *chig-chi*, classical Chinese *chi-chi* [*ji-xi*]; the impoverished nature of the funerary steles bearing this title in the Upper Yenisey basin would seem to cast into doubt the extent of the power of those who bore it; moreover, the context within which this title is attested among the Uighurs of eastern Turkestan would suggest that it corresponds to no real functions.

It is open to question whether the Chinese authorities conferred these honorific titles on the Turks for political ends or whether their extensive use was not fundamentally decorative, the result of a superficial veneer of Chinese culture on Turkish society. We are inclined to support the second hypothesis.

Among the Turkic speakers of the Upper Yenisey, either *Kirkiz*, *Čik*, or others, the widows of dead males were always bestowed – on funerary inscriptions – with the title of *kunčuy*, from the Chinese *kung tchu* [*gong-zhu*], meaning “princess.” This is clearly an honorific title, without any relation to genealogy or implying any real function; indeed it merely designates a spouse whose actual name, in any case, is never given. The use of this conventional title, in its anonymity, seems to be the result of a law that forbade a husband from uttering his spouse’s name in public. To this day there exist traces of this custom in various places in the Turkish world. The use of a foreign word, in this case Chinese, in other cases an Arabic word (such as *a’ile*, meaning “family” or even its plural *iyâl*, pronounced *ayâl*), tends to reinforce this anonymity.

Another Chinese loan word, which can be found in funerary epigraphs and in Uighur, preserved by the Karakhanid Muslims,

is the word *ka*, from the classical form *kia* [*jia*], which also means "family." It is often found, in conjunction with the suffix *daš*, in inscriptions in the Upper Yenisey. It indicates that its bearer belongs to a specific group, from which we get the word *kadaš*, "parent," or, with doubling, *ka kadaš*, "parental." This term, which designates the totality of family relations, makes it possible, in these epitaphs, to avoid omitting mention of any family members. Generally speaking, these loan words from Chinese to Old Turkish relating to the designation of persons have the role of facilitating social harmony.

\* \* \*

The cultural influence of China on its Turkic-speaking neighbors to the west grew during the period that stretched from the middle of the sixth to the thirteenth century. It did not, however, completely supplant Iranian (notably Sogdian) and Indian influences, the latter felt chiefly through Buddhist and Sanskrit texts. The Old Turkish word for writing, *biti-*, is an *i* derivative of the Chinese word for writing instrument, *piēt*, in classical Chinese *pi* [*bi*]. However, the cursive alphabet usually used in Turkish is adapted from the Sogdian alphabet, which itself is of Semitic origin. The word for "paper," the fabrication of which developed quite early in the Sogdian lands, is in Uighur Turkic *kägdä*, from the Sogdian *kägdì*. It was only in the second half of the eleventh century, in western Turk-Oghuz, that a verb meaning "to write", *yaz*, first appeared, perhaps in relation to the verb, *yar*, "to split open" or "to trace a line in the ground." Along with this, through Islamization, the Arabic alphabet was gradually put into use by the Turks (beginning with the Karakhanids).

Whether we are talking about a single leaf of paper, a bound book, or an inscription on stone, the Old Turkish word that is used is a derivative of *biti* (thus a second derivative of a Chinese loan word), *bitig*. When it is a question of a roll of paper, the Uighur Turkic word is *küin*, from the Chinese *küan* [*juan*]. It should be kept in mind that parchment was not used in this region.

Although most of the musical instruments used by the ancient Turks were of Iranian origin, it was from Chinese that they borrowed the word for "harmony", *kog* (from the Chinese *k'i ok*, in

classical Chinese *k'u* [*qu*]), from which was derived, with the addition of a Turkic suffix, the verb *köglä*, which means both to “sing harmoniously” and “tune” (a musical instrument). This word passed into Mongolian where it exists to this day as *xöglö*.

The Turks, living as both nomadic shepherds and warriors who frequently engaged in long military campaigns or raids that sometimes extended over vast territories, had a practical knowledge of the geography of Upper Asia, of the Siberian lands, northern China, and of Central Asia all the way to Transoxania. Their theoretical knowledge of geography came simultaneously from China, Indian Buddhism, and the Iranian world.

In all likelihood they took their word for Ocean, *taluy*, from China, on the basis of the Chinese word *ta* [*da*], “large,” and for *luy*, the Chinese word *liu*, “wave.” This hypothesis was advanced by Annemarie von Gabain in the final – Turkish – edition of her Grammar (1988), which thus rejects Hirth’s hypothesis (1899), based on the word *Lei*, the ancient name of Sang-gan He.

At the same time, it would appear that the ancient Turkish conception of the Ocean does not derive from Chinese sources. It comes instead from Indian Buddhism, itself influenced on this point by Hellenistic cosmology, according to which the Earth is circular and is surrounded by an immense “Oceanic River” (by contrast, the Chinese tradition sees the Earth as square and the sky as a circle). In Turkish, *taluy* can be used alone in the sense of Ocean, but it is more often used in conjunction with *ögüz*, “river,” thus *Taluy ögüz*, “the Oceanic River,” as its most ancient attestation demonstrates: the great General Tonyukuk, in his autobiography, dated around 726 and constituting his epitaph, writes: “I reached the Shandong and the great Oceanic River.” (He is speaking here of the Yellow Sea, which is part of the Pacific Ocean.) Soon after he brags of being the first Turk to have led his army there.

As for the terrestrial world, Old Turkish has the word *yer* to signify “earth” in the sense of “territory;” but for the idea of “universe” it makes use of the Sogdian word *ažun* which was eventually adapted to the Turkic phonetic system as *azun*.

Although Turkish shepherds certainly had recourse to popular astronomical traditions, we have virtually no information as to what their system was like. By contrast, thanks to the manuscripts

left behind, we are well informed on the learned Uighur tradition of astronomy. Most of these texts consist of translations or adaptations of Sanskrit and Chinese treatises. The most detailed of these use Buddhist Sanskrit texts as their models; indeed the Uighur version reproduces, in Turkic transcription (bearing in mind the modifications necessitated by its phonetics), the Sanskrit form of the names of all the stars. Thus we have Sanskrit *aditya* instead of Turkic *kün* for the sun and *soma* instead of *āy* for the moon. In addition, the names of the houses of the moon in their zodiacal constellations (*nakṣatras*), and their respective durations, are also given in Sanskrit. In connection with this, differences in the systems of *nakṣatras* can be observed among Uighur authors (in all likelihood bonzes) depending on whether they begin with the house of *Kṛttikā* (Taurus), according to an ancient tradition, or from the house of *Aśvini* (Aries), according to another tradition, under the influence of Greek astronomy. The most ancient Turkish attestations of the *nakṣatras* are found on two Uighur inscriptions, dating from the early eleventh century (the years 1008 and 1019), on the foundation posts of two Buddhist monasteries. There also exists a Uighur manuscript, dating from the year 1202, that presents complete lists of the houses of the moon in Sanskrit; and there is another, undated manuscript, that mentions twenty-seven *nakṣatras*, not twenty-eight as are found in the other manuscripts. (The two systems co-existed in India.) In this same manuscript of 1202 we also have for the first time – at least as far as current knowledge has established – the list of the seven stars of the planetary system, in the classical order from Sunday to Saturday, and with their Sanskrit names; the term that is used here for “planet,” *grax*, comes from the Sanskrit *graha*.

In Uighur texts written under Chinese influence we find five of these stars designated not by transcription but in Turkic translation of their usual Chinese names: “Star of Fire” for Mars, “of Water” for Mercury, “of Wood” for Jupiter, “of Metal” for Venus, “of Earth” for Saturn. As Chinese astrology is based on the “Five Elements”, the Sun and the Moon keep their Turkish names here: *Kün tängri*, “the Sun God,” *Āy tängri*, “the Moon God” (this in late Uighur of the Mongol period, during the fourteenth century). Moreover, it is in their translation (except for the Dragon, which is typically Chinese,



and where we find *lung* [long] transcribed in Turkic as *lu*) that the Turks, beginning with the most ancient texts we have (dating to beginning of the eight century), give the names of the Twelve Animals of popular Chinese astrology, which corresponds to the twelve classifications of the learned tradition. However, when combined with the ten other classifiers to form cycles of sixty, which serves as a basis for the creation of series of years, months, and days, the literate Uighurs reverted to phonetic transcriptions from the Chinese. They did the same for the technical terms of calendar-based astronomy as well as for the terms designating the "Twelve Portents" of astrology. In Manichaean calendars Uighur borrowings are made primarily from Sogdian.

As for numeration, Turkish speakers borrowed only the important number "10,000," originally from the Middle Persian *tumān* (Turkish *tümān*), then, sporadically, from the Chinese *ban* [*wan*], Turkic *ban*. For numbers greater than ten that included single digits, the ancient Turkish system, which used a prospective numerical system, had the single number precede that of the final ten (thus *üç ellig*, "3-50", which equals 43). Among the Uighurs this system was soon contending with a rival one, based – like ours – on a retrospective numeration. Here the single number that surpassed the final ten would appear to the right, with the word for "add" or "supplement", *artuk*, between them (thus *kirk artuk üç*, "40 add 3"). In later Uighur, under the parallel influence of the Chinese and Iranian languages, the *artuk* disappeared (thus *kirk üç*: 43). This mode of numeration was accepted by all later forms of the Turkish written and spoken languages.

Generally speaking, we can say in regard to vocabulary that borrowings were initially oriented largely toward the Iranian languages (Middle Persian, Sogdian, etc.); in the second period they were mainly from Chinese and Sanskrit, due to the double influence of Chinese culture and Chinese-influenced Buddhism; beginning in the eleventh century, with Islamization, Arabic and Persian loan words dominate. However, these are not the only languages that have over the centuries enriched the vocabulary of the Turks. Much research on etymological questions remains to be done. Most notably, it is to be hoped that progress in Tokharian Studies will help reveal the extent to which speakers borrowed

from this most eastern – as least as far as current knowledge has established – of the Indo-European languages and which constituted an important substratum of the Uighur-Turkic language north of Tarim.