IRANO-TURKISH RELATIONS IN THE LATE SASANIAN PERIOD

Firdausi's *Shāh-nāma*, completed at the beginning of the 11th century A.D. and incorporating epic material from earlier times, describes the battles between two equally courageous peoples, the Iranians and the Turanians. The word Tūrān is unrelated to the word Turk but since, from the 6th century on, the Turks, who had migrated from Central Asia, came to play a decisive role in the history of the Iranian peoples, by association it came to be applied—mistakenly—to these new arrivals.

At Panjikant in Sogdiana (in present-day Tājikistān, 60 km east of Samarkand), there is a wall painting dating probably from the 8th century A.D.,¹ which depicts a scene of mourning for some young prince; near the catafalque are male mourners with brown hair and light skins, while a little further off, in the foreground, are others of a different ethnic type, having black hair, a darker skin and prominent hooked noses. The two groups possibly represent Sogdians and Turks, but we cannot say for sure which is which (fig. 3, p. 1146).

Another wall painting of the same period,² from Afrāsiyāb (the northern part of the town of Samarkand) in Sogdiana, shows the dignified figure of an envoy mounted on a camel; the envoy's features—large, round eyes and a prominent nose—are those usually attributed to foreigners³ and in particular to the Sogdians by the Uighurs from Qočo (Turfan in the Tarim basin) (pls 142–3).

These examples may serve to illustrate the inter-relation of the older Iranian peoples with the newly-arrived Turks in Central Asia and Iran in the early Middle Ages. It may here be relevant to mention some of those peoples who, though remote from the centre of Iranian civilization in Sasanian times, spoke languages which can be classified as Middle Iranian.

In the region of the upper Oxus a kingdom had been founded by the so-called Hephthalites. In 565 A.D. they were defeated by joint forces of

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³ A. von Le Coq, *Chotscho* (Berlin, 1913), pl. 22, bottom, right.
Sasanians and Turks, but as late as the 8th century, Chinese sources are still found referring to a "king of the Hephthalites", although since their defeat the Hephthalites appear to have been subjected to a Turkish overlord. According to Chinese sources, they shared the same way of life as the Turks, both being nomads, but the nature of the cultural exchanges between the two peoples has yet to be established. For their coinage, the Hephthalites developed a special kind of writing, derived from the Kushan script, and samples of it found in Turfan show that their written language was Middle Iranian. It must be assumed, then, that the spoken language of at least part of the Hephthalites was also Middle Iranian.

More important for the study of Turkish culture are the Sakas (Scythians) whose language was also Middle Iranian. These Scythians, who were known to the Old Persians and Greeks from as early as 600 B.C., held sway from the Pontic Steppes to the river Jaxartes until around the start of the 5th century A.D. In the 2nd century A.D., they became overlords of north-west India, and the Chinese refer to them by the character ssk (Sai in southern Farghāna). On the whole, however, they had little intercourse with Turkish peoples, apart from skirmishes with those nomads. One branch of the Sakas, who founded a kingdom in Khotan (in the Tarim basin) were zealous Buddhists who may have been converts from Zoroastrianism (but not from Zurvanism or Manicheism). In the early period, the technical terms of Buddhism in the Saka language had reflected a late Indian spirit with influences from Prakrit, but from the time of the well-known Chinese pilgrim and Buddhist translator of the 7th century, Hsūan-tsang, these were mostly derived from the Sanskrit of the Sarvāstivādins. Documents in Saka language, written on leather, wood or paper, and dating from the 7th to the 10th centuries, have been found in Khotan and in Tunshuq (T’ien-shan nan-lu, "Silk road south of the T’ien-shan"); these documents are written in the Indian Brāhmi script and show a number of linguistic variants between the two districts. Manuscripts found in Murutuq (in the oasis of Turfan) have twelve additional characters to denote Iranian sounds foreign to Sanskrit phonetics. These "new" characters are also found in some Turkish manuscripts in the Brāhmi

2 Cf. e.g., G. Haloun, "Zur Ue-si-Frage", ZDMG xcI (1937), pp. 251–2.
3 See chapter 7, pp. 263ff. Ed.

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script which may have been written by Sakas or Tokharians after they had fallen under the dominance of the Turkish language.

Another people of the same language group of great importance for the culture of the Turks are the Sogdians. Their homeland, Sogdiana, with its capital Marakanda, later to be known as Samarqand, had suffered under the occupation of Alexander the Great and many had fled to seek a new home further east. Samarqand’s importance on the Silk Road from Ch’ang-an to Byzantium must have stimulated an interest in trade with the east, and Sogdians founded numerous settlements along this caravan route without, however, establishing a kingdom of their own. Among the extant Sogdian manuscripts are the “Ancient letters” on paper dating from the beginning of the 4th century A.D., found near Tun-huang in north west China and addressed to their commercial centre in Samarqand. According to one of them, there were at that time about a hundred Sogdian princes from Samarqand in Tun-huang; Other manuscripts in Sogdian have been found elsewhere, particularly in Turfan, most of which date to the 9th or 10th century, but with a few from the 8th and 11th. From Mount Mugh in present day Tadikistân come some commercial letters written on leather by a Sogdian dîwârtîf (“small king”), dating to the time of the Arab conquest in the beginning of the 8th century; one of them is written in “Runic” script (see below p. 622) but it has not, to date, been convincingly interpreted.

Extant Sogdian Buddhist texts are mostly translations from Chinese and are comparatively late in date. But the Sogdians themselves must have been Buddhists from much earlier times, for from the 2nd century A.D. colophons of Chinese Buddhist texts refer to translators into Chinese from An (Bukhârâ) and K‘ang-kû (Samarkand and its neighbourhood). Further proof of this is supplied by archaeology, although, as yet, only fragments of statues have been found. Sogdian Buddhism, however, showed the influence of the former religion of the country, Zoroastrianism, which appears to have staged a revival in Sasanian times. In 650, Hsûn-tsang came across only ruins of Buddhist temples, while former Buddhist monasteries had been given over to the Zoroastrians.

Buddhism was not the only religion found among the Sogdians in

3rd century A.D. by Mānī was at first favoured by the Sasanian king Shāpūr I (241–72) but later banned, and Mānī himself was killed. Many of his followers fled, either west to Egypt, or east to Mongolia, the Tarim basin and as far as the Chinese capital Ch’ang-an, where they were allowed to establish a cultural centre. Many fine Manichaean texts in Sogdian have been found in Turfan and Tun-huang.

Nestorian Christianity also existed in Sogdiana, the Tarim basin and China, and many Sogdian and some Turkish manuscripts with Christian content have been discovered in Turfan and in particular in the village of Bulayiq. The Christian–Chinese stele of Si-an-fu of 781 A.D. is well-known.

Other cultural influences reached the Turks from non-Iranian peoples. For instance, there had been Chinese settlers in the Tarim basin since the military activities of the Han Dynasty in the 2nd century B.C.; there were the Tokharians of Kuča, who spoke a west Indo-European language; and the Tibetans in the southern part of the Tarim basin. Further east, the Tabghach, a people of an Altaic language, ruled over the northern part of China in the 5th–6th century A.D., but by the time of the earliest Turks their kingdom of “Northern Wei” was in a state of decline. All these peoples were now eclipsed by the Sasanians, the fame of whose civilization spread throughout Central Asia.

In the Chinese dynastic histories the term “Turk” is mentioned for the first time in a reference under the year 552 A.D. to a people who, at least in the eastern half of their empire, called themselves Kök-Türk. Up to that date they had been under the rule of the Juan-juan, a people of uncertain race and language, but who, like them, were nomads and horse breeders. In 552, however, the Turks rebelled against their overlords and their ruler adopted the title of Qaghan, that is, virtually ruler over the peoples of the steppes, a title which had been well-known in Central Asia since the 3rd century. The Turkish empire of the steppes quickly spread to the south as far as the borders of China, to the west as far as the Aral Sea and to the south west as far as Bactria, controlling even the kingdoms of the Tarim basin. Except for a break of three generations, their empire lasted until the middle of the 8th century when it was overthrown by the Uigurs who dominated the steppes for approximately a hundred years. In 840, they were defeated by the Kirghiz Turks and the survivors fled south, south west and west. The bulk of the refugees came to Turfan where they founded a king-
dom which lasted, partly under Mongol supremacy, up till modern times.¹

The Kök-Türks worshipped the God of Heaven, an Earth Goddess and the spirits of their ancestors. At the end of the 6th century, Buddhists from north China sent the Qaghan a Buddhist canonical text entitled *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*² in an attempt to convert his people. The Chinese sources which mention this fact do not state into which language the text was translated from the original Sanskrit, but it was probably Sogdian, which was widely used at that time. In 568, the Western Turkish Qaghan Istāmi sent an envoy to the Byzantine Emperor Justinian II on a trade mission, choosing, not a Turk, but the Sogdian Maniax who took with him a letter in “Scythian characters” which the Emperor made his interpreter translate for him. Again, in 841 it was a Christian Sogdian from Samarkand, by the name of Nešfārn, whom the Uigur Qaghan chose to send to the king of Tibet and who left an inscription in Sogdian added to a Nestorian cross in Ladakh in the course of his journey. As for the oldest known inscription of the Old Turks, that of Bugut in Mongolia, it, too, is written in Sogdian (see below p. 621).³ In fact, in the 6th century the Turkish language was not sufficiently developed to be able to express the involved concepts of Buddhism. Thus it is more than likely that the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* sent to the Qaghan of the steppes had been translated, not into Turkish, but into Sogdian which would have been familiar to the Turks of the upper classes.

This 6th century mission must have been successful, although there is no reference to this in Chinese or other sources: the basic technical terms and proper names of Old Turkish (Uigur) Buddhism show the influence of Sogdian teachers in that they are predominately derived, not from Sanskrit, the sacred language of Buddhism, but from Middle Iranian and, in particular, Sogdian. Some words even betray the Zoroastrian past of the Sogdians.⁴

The following Uigur words are derived from Sogdian:

*azha* “existence” < Sog. *zəm*
*nom* “Buddhist teaching, law” < Sog. *nəm* < Gk. *nomos*
*dindar* “Buddhist monk, Manichaean elect” < Sog. *şiŋδr*

¹ Spuler, “Geschichte Mittelasiens”.
midik “layman” < Sog. nyŏkk
nikwani “sin” < Sog. nyz’an
ak “greed” < MP from Turfan ’zh
an’čan “community of monks” < Sog. ’nčnn
tanm “hell” < Sog. tmw
unsmzt “fast time” < Sog. βm’snty
āzhra “(god) Brahma” < Sog. ’zhw
χormuqda “(god) Indra” < Sog. χurmuq’d
šmnu “the devil” < Sog. šmnu
noi “elixir” < Sog. nw’

These Sanskrit words in Uigur have a Middle Iranian ending:
šamnāt “nun” < Sog. šmn’nt
upasat “lay sister” < Sog. wp’s’nt

The following Uigur words derived from Sanskrit show modifications from Middle Iranian:
darm “Buddhist teaching, law” < Sog. śrm < Skr. dharma
bodisawat < Sog. pwŏḥ < Skr. bodhisatva
nirvan < Sog. nyŏβ’n < Skr. nirvāṇa
bursang “community of monks” < Sog. pwrsnk’(’) < Skr. budha and sangha
tax̄kapat “commandments” < Sog. ōx’pō < Skr. śikṣāpada
r(α)xant “advanced monk” < Sog. ry’nt < Skr. aryant
šas “discipline” < Saka šāṣ < Skr. śāsana
tnk “name of one of the heavens” < Saka < Skr. tāṣita
upasi “layman” < Sog. ’wp’sy < Skr. upāsaka
w(i)r̥̄ar “monastery” < Sog. br’y”r < Skr. vihāra
āstuṣ “reliquary tower” or “shrine” < Sog. ’stwph < Skr. stūpa
maytri “name of the Buddha of the Future” < Sog. m’ytr < Skr. maitreya
kßen “very short moment” < Sog. kšn < Skr. kṣapa
samir “name of a mythical mountain” < Sog. sm’yṛ < Skr. sumeru
šlok “verse” < šl’wk < Skr. šloka
wāṭir “thunderbolt” < Sog. β̣ir < Skr. vajra

From this large number of Middle Iranian elements in fundamental Uigur Buddhism it is clear that it was neither the Indians nor the Chinese but the Sogdians who first brought about the conversion of the Turks to their religion. (These missionary activities were later carried on by the Tokharians, for most Sanskrit technical terms of Buddhism in Uigur have been modified in some way by Tokharian. This second wave of missionary activity must have taken place under Tokharian and Chinese influence when, after the fall of the empire of the steppes, the Uigurs came to Qočo which was mostly Buddhist.) Every religion undergoes some change in form and practice when it spreads beyond the boundaries of its original birthplace. Thus, the first
Buddhists in north central India had not attempted to represent the Buddha nor to develop a definite iconography of the saints. This was achieved under the influence of the Graeco-Indian and Middle Iranian spirit of Gandhara, Bactria and Sogdiana, when artists began to develop a standardized representation of the Buddhas, the Bodhisattvas, gods, demons etc. It found its way to the Tarim basin and even as far as China and Japan; for example sacred heroes such as the Four Lords of the Heavenly Quadrants, Vajrapāni, the Buddha’s bodyguard and the gods Indra and Brahma are depicted clad in armour derived either from the Parthians or the Sasanians; and the magnificent diadems of the gods and the Bodhisattvas have their prototype in Sasanian Iran.

As was the case with the Chinese, the popular Buddhism of the Uigurs was influenced by the ideas and images of Iranian religion; for instance, the fundamental doctrine of Buddhism is the law of retribution in some future existence for all good and evil deeds, called karma, a doctrine that was perhaps softened, possibly by filial piety, under the influence of Zoroastrianism. According to non-canonical Buddhist texts, every dead person has seven days, twice seven, three times seven up to seven times seven days, a hundred days, three hundred days and then three years to submit to the judgment of the Ten Kings of Purgatory. Two young men or one man and one woman bring scrolls recording the good and evil deeds he has done in his lifetime, while he sees in a mirror all his sins. In a vision he is shown the six rebirths (Skr. gati) possible according to his past behaviour: as god, man, animal, hungry ghost (Skr. preta), demon (Skr. asura) or inhabitant of hell (Skr. nāraka). In an illustrated Uigur scroll, the “animal” existence is symbolized by a goat and a wolf whom the Buddhist teachers thus debased to represent one of the lower forms of existence, the wolf being as much the sacred animal of the pre-Buddhist Turks as the goat had been of the Zoroastrian Iranians. Many of the symbols and pictures are known from older Iranian prototypes. According to Buddhist teaching, redemption followed if the dead person’s family recited and copied holy texts on his behalf. A holy guide, called “Storehouse of the earth” (Skr. kṣitigarbha) would then appear to the terrified soul and lead him to Amitābha, the Buddha of Eternal Light, in his Western Paradise. The idea of “Light” and “West” also suggest some Iranian origin.

Manichæism came to the Uigurs through the Sogdians of Ch’ang-an.

In 762, the Uighur emperor of the steppes came to Ch’ang-an with a strong army to support the Chinese emperor in his struggle against the insurgent An Lu-shan, and after defeating him, the Qaghan together with some of his people remained in the neighbourhood of the capital, where he was in contact with Chinese civilization. Here he became acquainted with and impressed by Manichaeism as practised by the Sogdians and he asked for Manichaean missionaries to be sent to him when he returned home. An account of the ensuing scene has been preserved both by a contemporary Uighur report and by a Sogdian miniature: four Sogdian missionaries arrived at the Qaghan’s court and for a whole night he discoursed with them; finally, at dawn, the emperor put on a golden diadem (didim < Sog. διδημω< Gk.), dressed himself in the purple cloak (al ton, the paludamentum of the Byzantine emperor), and seated himself on the golden throne (alsunley ḍorgan), another Sasanian importation, for the Sasanians used to sit at ease on chairs with their feet crossed and pointing downwards. He then proclaimed Manichaeism in place of Buddhism as the new religion of the empire.

The Sogdian origins for Uighur Manichaeism are also seen in the Middle Iranian derivations of the titles of the hierarchy and of a number of technical terms found in Uighur Manichaean texts, as, for instance, the following:

amordin “assembly, collection” < Parth. ‘mwrqdh
anšagan “immortals” < MP from Turfan ‘nwp-g’n
argon “the First” < Sog. < Gk. ἀρχόν
bele- “to pay attention” < Sog. ʾpš, ḫ- “to pay attention”
bogtag “redeemed” < MP from Turfan byxgt
frilhi “messenger, angel” < Sog. fršhy
maḫštak “presbyter” < MP from Turfan myystg
manistan “dwelling” < MP from Turfan mnyyst’n
mardaspant “element” < Sog. mrd’spnd
mrošg “archbishop” < Sog. mwšš
niyolak “Manichaean layman” < nyw’k
niw “hero” < Mid. Parth. nyw
patyamwar “apostle” < Sog. pyt’mhr
pärkhan “female sorcerers” < MP prxg’n
qīcitation “Manichaean presbyter” < Sog. xwlr
wulig “tutelary genius”, cf. MP wxt
yixr “friend” < MP from Turfan by’r

Many Turkish Manichaean texts are translations from the Middle Iranian, such as the Xv&ast;w&dagger;w&dagger;w&dagger;f&dagger;f, a prayer of confession with dogmatic introduction, and some hymns. Other hymns, of high literary value, are of Turkish origin.

Buddhist terms are frequently used in Turkish Manichaean texts, although their meaning has changed; in this respect, they resemble the Manichaean Sogdian texts which had been grafted on to Buddhist stock. The Turks also had recourse, though to a limited extent, to Middle Iranian for their liturgy, as is proved by some texts in Kök-Türk "Runic" writing.  

Nestorian Christianity must have been preached to the Turks not only by Syriac monks but also by Sogdian missionaries, for many Christian texts both in Syriac and in Sogdian have been found in the village of Bulayiq (in the oasis of Turfan), together with a few Turkish fragments. The Ugar version of the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus gives evidence of this missionary activity among fire worshippers, in other words among the Iranian people.

There is also evidence in Hsüan-tsang's report of a fire cult amongst the Turks of the western Qaghanate of the steppe in the 7th century, while, in the inscription to the memory of prince Kültegin of A.D. 733, which mentions öd tángri, "the God of Time", there is even a suggestion of Iranian Zurvânism.

There are many more borrowings from Middle Iranian in Turkish culture to be mentioned. Although the Turks learned writing soon after the foundation of their empire, their oldest inscription, as we have seen (see above p. 617), was in Sogdian, the lingua franca of the time, and in the Sogdian script, as is shown in the inscription near Bugut. Only with the beginnings of nationalism at the start of the 8th century did the Kök-Türk, and later the Ugar Qaghans in the 9th century, write their inscriptions in their own language alongside a version in Chinese or Chinese and Sogdian. The script used for these

3 W. Bang, "Türkische Bruchstücke einer nestorianischen Georgspassion", Le Musée xxxix (1926), pp. 41-75.
inscriptions, the so-called Kök-Türk "Runic" writing, was a lively adaptation, perhaps by a Sogdian, of cursive Aramaic, and indeed the Sogdian, "Uigur" and Manichaean scripts can all be attributed to the epigraphical inventiveness of the Sogdians. (For manuscripts in Brâhmi script, see above p. 614). Most Uigur manuscripts are written in "late Sogdian" or "Uigur" script; Old Turkish books were first written in the shape of codices like many Sogdian texts, but this format was later supplanted by the Indian palm-leaf books or the Chinese scroll.

Although they referred to it as bir (< Ch. pi < piêt), the writing implement used by the Uigurs was not the brush of the Chinese but the reed pen, qalam (< Sog. < Gk. κάλαμος); the word for paper, which is a Chinese invention dating from the beginning of the 2nd century A.D., is kāgdā/kagda in Uigur, being derived from Sogdian k'ȳdȳb. The Sogdians were obviously the writing masters of the Turks. Miniature paintings have so far been found only in Turfan, the early centre of Middle Iranian, Chinese and Turkish culture. The oldest of these, which were probably painted in the 7th and 8th centuries, come from Middle Iranian books. Only the later ones, possibly of the 11th century, are taken from Uigur works, but scholars have not yet determined a definite Middle Iranian origin for them or reached any firm conclusions about their circulation amongst the Turks.

When they adopted the imperial title of Qaghan, the Kök-Türk chose the law of the steppe, but some of their titles prove their respect for Middle Iranian culture, as, for example:

OT šad < Sog. or Bactr. *šad ~ *xšad
OT yabyu < Kušān yavuğa, from yam- "to lead" + -uka
OT šadapiti < OP *satapati
OT ḫbara, to be compared with ḫparaka, the name of a vassal Śaka in northwest India at the beginning of our era.¹

A most important title was bāg (< Sog. by "god, lord"), as was i(e)gin which is derived from the Kušān domain.

Apart from these titles of the Kök-Türk period and the technical terms in Buddhism and Manichaeism which we have mentioned, there are further loan words taken from everyday life which testify to the Turks' familiarity with the Sogdian language; among these are the Uigur words:

amari “innumerable” < Saka ahumara
qamay “all” < MP from Turfan hmu’g
tümän “ten thousand” < NP tumân, and in other languages
t(a)šn “a quarter”, cf. MP from Turfan ts(∧) “four”
āsān “sound” < MFr
šuk “silent” < Sog. šuk
iyar “strong” < Sog. yy’r
kād “much” < Sog. k’d

The Uigur emperor, as we have seen (see above p. 620), took over from the Sogdians such symbols of authority as the diadem, the purple cloak and the royal throne. Other symbols of Middle Iranian origin include the jewel of a prince, called y(a)lm(a)s, < Pers. < Gk. ἄλαμας; the short veil of the Sasanian kings was used by the Tabghach nobility, who are depicted bearing gifts in the 5th century Buddhist cave temples in Yün-kang in north east China;¹ it is also found worn by the Ten Buddhist Kings of Purgatory and even by higher Uigur nobles. The lion, arslan, was both the emblem and title of every Uigur king, and as the animal was not found in Central Asia but in Iran, this indicates a Uigur borrowing from the Sasanian royalty. Similarly, the crescent in the Sasanian crown came to be given to Buddhist deities and Bodhisattvas in both Central Asia and China.

In the middle of the 9th century, the Uigur Qaghan of the steppe, with the intention of introducing the nomad Turks gradually to the sedentary life, gave orders for a number of Chinese as well as of Sogdians to build him a “rich town”.² To a Central Asian people the concept of “town” was specifically Iranian, being represented by kēnt (< Sog. ktnb), although it is also covered by a genuine Turkish word baliq. The MFr kar (Khotanese Saka kara, “fort, town”) is to be found in the name Kâshghar. Even the Uigur word for “mortuary building” (subürvan < Sog. ṣmrγ’n) is of Sogdian origin.

The Sogdians, as the most important traders along the caravan route, acted as the middlemen providing the Uigurs with luxury goods, the names of which are frequently derived, at least indirectly, from Sogdian, such as

bor “raisin wine” < MP bwr = Gk. botros
bākini “wine from millet” < Sog. by’ny

¹ T. Mizuno and T. Nagahiro, Young-kang, the Buddhist cave-temples of the fifth century A.D. in North China xii.1 (Kyoto, 1954), pl. 37.

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kūntīt "sesame" < Mīr kūnēt
kūrkūm "saffron" < Mīr kūrkūm
lākūr "sugar" < Mīr lēr

Trade along the Silk Road was of benefit to all the countries of Central Asia through which it passed because of transit taxes, to cope with which nomadic methods of barter were obviously inadequate. Consequently, Sogdian, as well as Chinese merchants, were responsible for the introduction of certain weights and measures as: Uig. batman "a weight" < Mīr ptu'n; and stīr "(stamped) coin" < Sog. sty< Gk. στατίρριπον.

This short chapter has dealt only with the linguistic and cultural influences on Old Turkish from Middle Iranian. For the reverse process the reader is referred to C. Doerfer's Mongolische und türkische Elemente im Neupersischen. There are a surprising number of Turkish borrowings found in New Persian, and some even in Middle Iranian. Still, it was Iranian peoples whose cultural influence was most widely felt in Central Asia at the beginning of the Middle Ages; the Turks were as yet comparative newcomers whose rôle it was to preserve and develop these cultural elements for a later time.