
When reading the history of Central Asia, at the beginning, some may be confused by the term “Turk”, since it has a double meaning in English and other modern languages. “What is the double meaning? What are the differences between them?” These questions are answered in the reviewed monograph, Οι Τούρκοι ανάμεσα στην Κίνα και το Βυζάντιο (552-659 μ.Χ.).

The monograph, written by Dr. Stefanos Kordoses, is adapted and expanded from his doctoral dissertation “Diplomacy, Strategy on Eurasian Steppes from the Middle of 6th Century to the Middle of 7th Century: West Turks, Khazars and Persians from China to the Aegean Sea” which was finished at the University of the Aegean in 2007.

Beginning with an explanation of the double meaning of “Turk”, the author gives specific emphasis to the medieval Turkic Empire, and its role among the super powers of the period from the middle of the sixth century to the middle of the seventh century. When reviewing the historical origins, he manages to explain to us the modern geo-political situation in the Eurasian Steppes. The Turks were a powerful and influential force, particularly active from the sixth to the seventh centuries CE in the Eurasian Steppes. They conquered a vast territory, penetrating from west to east along the northern branch of the Silk Roads, by-passing Persia and across the steppe connecting Constantinople with Central Asia and China. This period of activity for the Turks coincided with a phase of frequent communications among the three huge empires: Byzantium, Persia and China. Hence, the special geographical position of the Turkic Empire allowed it to play a key role in the relations among the three powers.

The book comprises of eight chapters with a short prologue and an introduction. In addition, it also provides the following abundant information as supplement: an English summary, a broad bibliography, five tables of the Emperors and Khans from Byzantium, Persia, China and Turks, eight geo-political maps, a Greek term index, a Latin term index and a comparative table of basic Chinese names in Pinyin, Wade-Giles and Chinese characters.
At the beginning of the introduction, the author explains his intention for this work: the relations of the Turks with the two superpowers, China and Byzantium, and mainly with Byzantium, have not been sufficiently researched, especially in Greece. Hence, his research is valuable for understanding the history of Turco-Byzantine relations directly relating to the Greek history. Dealing with the Turks from their first appearance in the records of history will be helpful to better understand the developments in subsequent periods, when Byzantium and the New Hellenism engaged with the Seljuks and Ottomans and Turks of modern Turkey.

The first chapter shows a general impression of the Turkic world and its modern political formula in Eurasia. Firstly, the author expounds clearly the difference of the two terms: Turkish and Turkic, between which the former means the modern nation-state and its people, while the later means the people who live in Central Asia and speak similar languages belonging to a branch of the Ural–Altaic Language family. On this basis, he continues to discuss the relation of the modern Turkish people with the Turkic people, and the organization of the Turkic people. He emphasises that the misunderstanding of the difference between the two people led to the enlargement of the Pan-Turkism from the nineteenth century. After a general description of the historical geographical distribution of the Turks, he turns to the political formula of the nineteenth century in Central Asia with the discussion of the Turanism and, later on, to the modern political picture in this area.

With the following four chapters, the author chronologically addresses the relationship of the Turkic Empire with its neighbours, especially with China and Persia: the emergence of the Turkic power in north China, its relations with the Chinese dynasties, and its neighbours the Rouran Empire, Persian Empire and Byzantine Empire; the military activities of the West Turks in Central Asia and their diplomatic activities with Persia and Byzantium; and the cooperation and antagonism between the Turks, China, Byzantium and Persia in light of the

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2. Kordoses, Οι Τούρκοι ανάμεσα στην Κίνα και το Βυζάντιο, 21.
3. Pan-Turkism is a movement that emerged in the 1880s among the Turkic intellectuals of the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, with the aim of cultural and political unification of all Turkic peoples, see Jacob M. Landau, Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism To Cooperation (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).
4. Turanism, or Pan-Turanism, is a political movement for the union of all Turanian peoples. It implies not merely the unity of all Turkic peoples (as in Pan-Turkism), but also the unification of a wider Turanian race, also known as the controversial Uralo-Altaic race, believed to include all peoples speaking “Turanian languages”, see M. Antoinette Czaplicka, The Turks of Central Asia in History and at the Present Day (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 19.
5. Rouran was the name of a confederation of nomadic tribes on the northern borders of Inner China from the late fourth century until the middle of the sixth century, see Barbara A. West, Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Asia and Oceania (New York, NY: Facts On File, Inc. An imprint of Infobase Publishing, 2008), 687. It has sometimes been hypothesized that the Rouran are identical to the Eurasian Avars who later appeared in Europe, see Carter Vaughn Findley, The Turks in World History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 25.
resurgence and decline of the Turks. Through the four chapters, the author intends to provide the history of Turks’ “rise and fall”, as well as their complicated relationships with Persia, Byzantium, China, and other Turkic peoples through diplomatic and strategic activities.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 focus on the analysis of diplomatic activities. In Chapter 6, the author examines the significance of the marriages to diplomacy, the approaches, rules and the means of exchange of the embassies between Byzantium and Turks, as well as between the Turks and China. In Chapter 7, the author pays attention to the trade from China to Byzantium along the Silk Roads. He firstly describes the general conditions of the trades and warfare in Eurasia from the middle of the sixth century to the middle of the seventh century; secondly the focus is given on the trade through the northern part of the Silk Roads and the activities of the Byzantines, Persians and Turks; he lastly analyses the role of the Persians and Sogdians in trade.

Chapter 8, which is the longest of the whole work, analyses the diplomatic and strategic activities of the Turks in Central Asia through the theory of modern international relations. Although realising that there is a danger that the use of modern international theory, which did not exist in the historical era, will lead to false conclusions, the author manages to introduce the theories of Carl Schmitt, namely the theoretical tool of nomos and the bipolar definitions of friend and enemy, which he believes suitable for explaining the conditions of Eurasia in the sixth and seventh centuries CE without losing its value for explaining modern international relations. Using this formula the author presents an overview of the current antagonism of great powers over Central Asia and the modern Turkic nations in this chapter with a prediction of a new political order in Central Asia.

From the perspective of sources, he uses an abundance of materials, from Armenia, Syria, and Persia. Nevertheless, the main sources are Chinese. That’s because the Turks, especially the East Turks, lived in the area near to China, and further they had very close relation with Chinese Dynasties. Hence, their history intertwined with the Chinese history in Chinese writings. The most frequently used Chinese sources are Book of Sui, Old Book of Tang and New Book of Tang which are the official histories covering the period from the sixth to the tenth centuries CE. As the work focuses on the relations of Turks with China and Byzantium, the sources of Byzantium are also key to the research from the western perspective. The Byzantine materials mainly include the works of Procopius, Menander the Protector, Theophylact Simocatta, Theophanes the Confessor, etc. These writings mainly cover the
history from the sixth to the ninth centuries CE and provide information about the Turks and their relations with Byzantium.

The author masters a good knowledge of international theories from his undergraduate and postgraduate studies. With this advantage, he provides us with an excellent historical and geo-political picture of the Eurasian Steppes during the sixth and the seventh century CE. In this picture, the image and the role of the Turks, being situated in the multi-relation among Byzantium, Persia, and China, were well analysed. The author’s proficiency of many modern languages offers a vast global perspective to review the subject. Furthermore, his work also contains a rich bibliography which is of good value to the readers who are interested in further pursuing the subject. Though there are some small mistakes with Chinese spellings, they cannot detract from the merits of this work.

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