

## Turkic People

There are perhaps 135 million Turkic people in the world today, with only about 40 percent of them living in Turkey. They rest are scattered across Central Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and northern and western China, making them one of the most widely scattered races in the world. All these people descended from a small tribe of horseman that originated in the Altai region

The word "Turk," is derived from the Chinese character Tu-Kiu, which means "forceful" and "strong." The Chinese believed the Turkic descended from wolves and the Great Wall of China may have been built to keep them out. According to legend a gray wolf led the first Turkic tribes from their homeland in Central Asia into Anatolia. They lived as nomadic people in the vast steppe lands. Areas that they conquered were subject to a tribute system, the most favored items being silk silver, and tea from the Chinese. They were excellent horsemen, the ancient Chinese called them "horse barbarians." Turkic women reputedly could conceive and gave birth while riding. Based on excavations in Mongolia, archaeologists say that early Turkic people dressed themselves in silk, wool and animal skin garments; men wore daggers in their belts and earrings in both ears; and both men and women braided their hair.

Turkic farmers raised millet, lived in felt yurts like Mongolian nomads today, and worshiped a fertility goddess, a god of the underworld and their Turkish ancestors. They made swords and spears from iron and were known for their metal working skill. Some of their leaders wore armor made from golden plates.

Known throughout history for their fierceness and fighting skills, most of the warriors in the Mongol armies were Turkic. They were one of the first groups of people to use saddles with stirrups. This enabled them to swiftly attack their enemies because they could stand up and shoot their long bows while riding. They were so attached to their horses that rulers and warriors often had their fully harnessed mounts buried with them after they died.

They also dominated the Mamluk forces and joined the Persian Safavid and Indian Mogul armies. Turkic tribes were a threat to the Byzantines and Persians starting in the 6th century. They absorbed Islam during the Arab invasions which began after Mohammed's death in 632. They became the third major carrier of Islam, after the Arabs and Persians.

The first Turkic nomads spoke a Ural-Altai tongue similar to Mongolian, Finnish, Korean and Hungarian. Other Turkic people include the Uzbeks in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan, Turkmen in Turkmenistan, Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, Mongolians, Tartars in Russia, Uighars in western China, Azeris in Azerbaijan, and Yakuts in Siberia. Some even regard Koreans and Hungarians as the relatives because their languages are similar.

Throughout Central Asia, Mongolia, the Altai area of Russia and western China they left behind large stone figures known as balbals or man stones. Dated to the 6th through 8th centuries, memorials erected to honor warrior who had fallen in battle. They face east towards the rising sun. Most hold a sword and a bowl and wear a distinctive belt and earrings. They are often found with lines of stone slab that perhaps represent the number of men killed by the person the man stone honors.

In the 11th century, Turkish tribes began invading Anatolia (Turkey today) in western Asia from their homelands in Central Asia. The strongest of these tribes was the Seljuks. They would eventually take over the Christian and Greek Orthodox regions of the Byzantine Empire. By 1500, the population of

Anatolia was 90% Muslim and largely Turkic-speaking. Christians, though seldom forced to convert, suffered many discriminations. They had to wear special clothing pay special taxes and were forbidden to ride saddled horses or carry swords.

In the wake of the Samanids (Turkic people in Iran) between 819 and 1005, Persians who set up a local dynasty in Central Asia within the Abbasid Empire, created two Turkish dynasties: the Ghaznavids, based in Khorasan in present-day Turkmenistan, and the Karakhanids from present-day Kazakhstan. Karakhanids are credited with converting Central Asia to Islam. They established a large empire that stretched from Kazakhstan to western China and embraced three important cities: Balasagun (present-day Burana in Kyrgyzstan), Talas (present-day Tara in Kazakhstan) and Kashgar. Bukhara continued as a center of learning. The Karakhanids and Ghaznavids fought one another until they were both out maneuvered diplomatically and militarily by the Seljuk Turks, whose empire then stretched from western China to the Mediterranean.

With the establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi, India in 1206, Turkic rule became more systematic, although the Turks' small numbers and internal conflicts allowed only a very modest penetration of Indian society. Later on more Muslim communities would emerge in India, particularly with the Sufi population. [Sufism is a form of Islamic mysticism that emphasizes introspection and spiritual closeness with God. While it is sometimes misunderstood as a sect of Islam, it is actually a broader style of worship that transcends sects, directing followers' attention inward].

During the 13th century Mongol invasions, Turkic people fled to remote areas near the shores of the Caspian Sea and remained relatively isolated. Unlike many other Central Asian peoples, they were not influenced much by Mongol culture or political traditions.

Because of their origins and nomadic background, Turkic traditions offered a freer, more gender equal life for women.

