

The Origin Myths of the Turkic Peoples: From the Wolf Tale of the Gaoche to the Kazakh Legend of Alasha Khan

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The Turkic peoples have left behind numerous origin myths, ranging from the Gaoche/Tiele wolf legend to the Kazakh tale of Alasha Khan. This paper offers an overview and comparative study of these origin myths, classifying them into the narratives of three major Turkic groups: the early Turkic peoples of eastern Inner Eurasia, the medieval Turkic peoples of pre-Mongol Inner Eurasia, and the »Turko-Mongols« of the post-Mongol period. The comparative analysis shows that Turkic origin myths are marked by discontinuity, heterogeneity, historical oblivion, and external cultural influences. The famous wolf-descent origin myth of the early Türks, for example, was not inherited by later Turkic dynasties, demonstrating the absence of mythic continuity. Later dynastic narratives, influenced by Perso-Islamic and Mongol traditions, incorporated figures such as Afrāsiyāb, Dhū al-Qarnayn (Alexander the Great), Oghuz Khan, and Alan Qo'a – each emerging independently of one another. Ultimately, this study concludes that the »Turkic origin myth« should not be viewed as a single evolving mythological tradition but rather as a broad category encompassing the diverse and independent myths created by various Turkic-speaking peoples across time and space.

Keywords: Turko-Mongols, Timurids, Chinggisids, Japhethic tradition, Oghuz Khan narratives, Alan Qo'a myth, Afrāsiyāb

Introduction

The »Turks« founded the first Turkic empire, known as the Türk Qaghanate (552-745), in the mid-6th century CE, which came to dominate much of Inner Asia. Although the Türk Qaghanate collapsed in the mid-8th century CE, various Turkic peoples continued to establish numerous states and empires in the centuries that followed. Among these were empires such as the Uyghur Qaghanate (744-840), the Khazar Qaghanate (mid-7th c.-c. 969), the Seljuk Sultanate (c. 1037-1194), and the Ottoman empire (1299-1922), among others. During the post-Mongol period, the Turkicization of the Mongol elements residing across central and western Eurasia also led to the emergence of several new Turkic (or »Turko-Mongol«) peoples, who founded the Timurid empire and the Uzbek, Crimean Tatar, and Kazakh khanates.¹

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1 For an introduction to Turkic ethnogenesis and history, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*.

Importantly, the Turkic peoples have left behind numerous origin myths – narratives explaining the beginnings of peoples, dynasties, and states – ranging from the Gaoche/Tiele wolf legend to the Kazakh tale of Alasha Khan. This paper offers a broad study of these origin myths, classifying them into the narratives of three major Turkic groups: the early Turkic peoples of eastern Inner Eurasia, the medieval Turkic peoples of pre-Mongol Inner Eurasia, and the »Turko-Mongols« of the post-Mongol period. It aims to provide an overview of these myths, examining their continuities and discontinuities, as well as their shared and distinctive features. It also seeks to explore the possibility of formulating a working definition of »the Turkic origin myth«. This paper puts forward the thesis that the origin myths of the Turkic peoples do not constitute variations of a connected, unified mythological tradition; instead, they comprise distinct and largely unconnected narratives.

The Origin Myths of the Early Turkic Peoples of Eastern Inner Eurasia

The Wolf Motif Tale: The Origin Narrative of the Türks and Gaoche

The earliest Turkic peoples developed a wolf origin myth to explain their genesis. The Türks, who founded the Türk Qaghanate (552-745), believed themselves to be descended from a union of a she-wolf and a sole surviving boy. One of the origin tales of the Türks recorded in Chinese historical sources runs as follows:

The ancestors of the Türks lived on the right bank of the Western Sea. The Türks are a separate tribe of the Xiongnu. Their family name is Ashina. They formed a tribe that was independent of the Xiongnu, but later were attacked by a neighbouring state and all were killed except for a ten-year-old boy. When the enemy soldiers saw that he was so young, they did not have the heart to kill him, so they cut off his feet and threw him into a grass-covered swamp. Here, there was a she-wolf who fed the young boy meat. He grew up and had relations with the she-wolf, who became pregnant. When the king of the neighbouring state learned that the youth was still alive, he again sent men to kill him. When they saw a she-wolf beside the young man, they wanted to kill her too. The she-wolf fled to a mountain in the north in the state of Gaochang (Turfan). There was a cave in this mountain in which there was a broad plain with abundant grass. This plain, which stretched out for hundreds of *li* and was surrounded on all sides by mountains. The she-wolf hid in the mountains. Here, she gave birth to ten sons. When they grew up, they went out of the cave and married women from the outside. They brought many children into the world. Each of these descendants took a family name and one of them took the name Ashina. Their children and grandchildren increased until they constituted some hundreds of families. After some generations, they became subjects of the Ruru. In the period of the Great Yabǵu their lines/families became stronger. They settled/lived in the southern slopes of the Jinshan (Altay Mountains) and worked as blacksmiths for the Ruru. Since the Jinshan had the appearance of a helmet (兜鍪 *doumou*); and they called a »helmet« *tujue*, they called themselves *Tujue*.²

2 Linghu Defen, *Zhoushu* [Book of the Zhou], 50:907-8. The English translation is from Golden, *Ethnogenic tales*, 298-299. The wolf-mother motif also found expression in imperial monuments. The Bugut inscription – a multilingual monument dedicated to Taspar (r. 572-581), the fourth Qaghan of the Türk Qaghanate – features at its top a depiction of a she-wolf suckling a child.

The wolf motif in Turkic mythology had earlier appeared in the origin myth of the Gaoche, a Tiele Turkic people who founded a state in Xinjiang in the 5th century CE.³ According to the Gaoche myth recorded in Chinese sources,⁴ the Gaoche were descended from a union of a he-wolf and a Xiongnu princess:

It is said that the Xiongnu Chanyu [the title of the Xiongnu supreme ruler] had two daughters, who were so beautiful that all of the people of the country regarded them as mysterious beings. The Chanyu said: »I have daughters like these, how can they marry men? I will marry them to heavenly beings.« Then, in his country's uninhabited northern land, he built a high structure, and placed his two daughters on it and said: »May Heaven take them!« Three years passed. As their mother wanted to take them back, the Chanyu said: »This cannot be allowed. They have not had any relationship with Heaven yet.« Another year passed. An old wolf came and growled, guarding the tower day and night. It then dug a den beneath the tower and would not leave for a while. The younger daughter said: »My father left me here, wishing to wed me to Heaven. Now the wolf came. It may be a godly being or Heaven may have sent it to me.« Then she wanted to go down. Her elder sister was greatly surprised and said: »Are you going to disgrace your parents because of this old animal?« The younger sister did not listen and went down. She became the wolf's wife and gave birth to a son. Later, they eventually multiplied and established a state. This is why they like long songs, which sound like a wolf's howl.⁵

The dynastic wolf-descent origin myths, however, were not continued by subsequent Turkic dynasties in Inner Eurasia. While the wolf motif itself survived in Turkic myths after the mid-8th-century collapse of the Türks,⁶ no other subsequent Turkic dynasties claimed descent from a wolf. Ironically, it was the Mongols, a non-Turkic people, who produced an origin myth claiming descent from the union of a he-wolf and a doe. This myth is preserved in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, a 13th-century Mongol history of Chinggis Khan and his ancestors:

3 On the formation and history of the Tiele, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 12-21.

4 The earliest record of the wolf motif in Inner Asia appears in connection with the royal myth of the Wusun, an ancient Indo-European-speaking nomadic people who occupied areas near the Ili River Valley (modern-day southeastern Kazakhstan and parts of Xinjiang, China) during the Xiongnu period. The *Shiji* [Records of the Grand Historian], the first universal history of China written by Sima Qian (c. 145-c. 86 BCE), records a miraculous survival story of the Wusun ruler Kunmo, who was abandoned in the wild as a baby but nursed by a she-wolf, as follows: »Kunmo's father had been the ruler of a small state on the western frontier of the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu attacked and killed his father. Kunmo was born and abandoned in the wilderness. A crow brought meat and flew above him, and a wolf came to nurse him. The Chanyu was astonished and regarded this as a divine sign, and thus took him in and raised him.« (昆莫之父，匈奴西邊小國也。匈奴攻殺其父，而昆莫生棄於野。烏曠肉蜚其上，狼往乳之。單于怪以為神，而收長之)。 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, chapter 123, accessed on 10 October 2025: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=906691>.

5 Wei Shou, *Weishu* [Book of the Wei Dynasty], 103.2307. Here and below, unless indicated otherwise, the translations and bracketed insertions are mine.

6 For instance, a wolf appears as a divine guide – but not as a biological ancestor – in the pre-Islamic Oghuz Khan legend. The wolf theme across Inner Asia has been thoroughly discussed in Golden, *Ethnogenic tales*, 306-310. Golden also suggests that relics of the Türk wolf tradition may have remained among the Qaraçay-Balqars of the North Caucasus. Golden, *Tale of lupine origins*, 160-163.

At the beginning there was a blue-grey wolf, born with his destiny ordained by Heaven Above. His wife was a fallow doe ...⁷

Non-Wolf Motif Origin Myths of the Turfan Uyghurs and the Qirghiz

The Uyghurs, a branch of the Tiele confederation, to which the Gaoche had also belonged, replaced the Türks as the dominant power in the Mongolian steppe and founded the Uyghur Qaghanate (744-840 CE) in the mid-8th century CE. The Qaghanate was destroyed by the Qirghiz, a Turkic or Turkicized people residing in the Yenisei region in 840 CE.⁸ A group of Uyghurs subsequently migrated south and settled in the Turfan region, in what is now modern-day Xinjiang.⁹

According to the *Xin Tangshu* [New book of the Tang Dynasty], the Uyghurs of Mongolia possessed wolf-head banners (*langdao* 狼纛). It records that a Tang Chinese general was granted an audience with Bayan Chor (also known as El-Etmish Bilge Qaghan, r. 747-759), the second ruler of the Uyghur Qaghanate, »only after he had prostrated before the wolf-head banners.«¹⁰ However, unlike the Gaoche/Tiele and the Türks, the Uyghurs of the Turfan region developed a non-wolf origin myth. Their dynastic origin legend is recorded in a genealogical memorial inscription of the Uyghur rulers, erected near Turfan in 1334.¹¹ It relates that their rulers were descended from a boy born from a tree, known as Bügü Khan. The inscription runs as follows:

One evening, a heavenly light shone down upon a tree that was situated between two rivers. The people of the realm drew near and waited. The tree developed a swelling, as if a woman were pregnant. This light was continuously visible for nine months and ten days, and then the lump burst open. They were taken in and raised. The youngest among [the babies] was called Bügü Qaghan.¹²

The Yenisei Qirghiz also possessed a founding legend that was unrelated to the Türk wolf-descent origin myth. The *Youyang zazhu* (西陽雜俎), a 9th-century miscellany containing both Chinese and foreign legends, records that the Qirghiz regarded themselves as descended from the union of a god and a cow. The account runs as follows:

The Jiankun (堅昆) [Qirghiz] tribe, [unlike the Türks], is not of wolf descent. Their ancestors were born in a cave located north of the Quman Mountain. They themselves say that in the

7 Anon., *Secret History*, trans. de Rachewiltz, 1:1.

8 On the origins and history of the Qirghiz, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 48-56.

9 On the Turfan Uyghurs, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 40-42.

10 »拜狼纛而後見.« Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tangshu* [New book of the Tang Dynasty], 217a, accessed on 10 October 2025: <https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/%E6%96%B0%E5%94%90%E6%9B%B8/%E5%8D%B7217%E4%B8%8A>.

11 This inscription is titled »The Genealogical Memorial Inscription of the Idikut, King of Gaochang« (亦都護高昌王世勳碑).

12 »一夕,有天光降於樹,在兩河之間,國人即而候之。樹生癭,若人妊身然。自是光恆見者越九月又十日,而癭裂,得嬰兒五,收養之。其最穉者,曰卜古可罕.« Yu Ji, *Gaochang wang shi xun bei* [The Genealogical Memorial Inscription of the Idikut, King of Gaochang], vol. 2, 259-270.

ancient times a deity mated with a cow in this cave. Their people have yellow hair, green eyes, and red beards.¹³

In sum, the Yenisei Qirghiz and the Turfan Uyghurs did not inherit the wolf-descent origin myths from the Gaoche/Tiele and the Türks. Moreover, their respective origin myths were unrelated to one another and shared no identifiable common elements that could be characterized as distinctly »Turkic« in a mythological sense.

The Origin Myths of the Medieval Turkic Peoples of Pre-Mongol Inner Eurasia

Turkic rule in the Mongolian steppe came to an end by the mid-9th century, when the Qirghiz, who inhabited the Yenisei River region in present-day southern Siberia, destroyed the Uyghur Qaghanate but did not relocate their political center to the Mongolian steppe. Nevertheless, the Turkic world continued to expand, as various other Turkic groups – including the Khazars, Bulgars, Oghuz, Qipchaqs, and Qarakhanid Türks, among others – established states in South Siberia, the central and western Inner Eurasian steppes, the Central Asian oases, and the Volga-Kama region, among other areas.¹⁴ These Turkic peoples developed various non-wolf origin and founding myths; many of these traditions were influenced by Perso-Islamic cultural elements.

The Afrāsiyāb Tradition

Afrāsiyāb is a king and hero of Turan and Iran's archenemy in Iranian tradition.¹⁵ In the *Shāhnāma* (*Book of Kings*), the monumental Persian epic poem written by Firdawsī and completed around 1010 CE, which recounts the mythical and historical past of Greater Iran up to the Arab conquest in the 7th century CE, Afrāsiyāb is portrayed as the principal adversary of Iranian champions (particularly Rustam and Kay Khusraw). Importantly, Afrāsiyāb was later claimed as an ancestral progenitor by the Qarakhanid Qaghanate (992-1212), a Türk successor state and the first Turkic Muslim polity in Central Asia. Although the Qarakhanid state itself left no dynastic origin myth in writing, the Qarakhanid philologist Maḥmūd al-Kāshgharī (fl. c. 1075), who was active in Baghdad and well-versed in the Turkic world of Central Asia, identified Afrāsiyāb with a legendary hero of the Turkic epic tradition, Alp Er Tonga, in his Turkic-Arabic dictionary *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* [Compendium of the Turkic Dialects].¹⁶ Similarly, Yūsuf Khāṣṣ Ḥājib, an 11th-century Qarakhanid poet and court official best

13 »堅昆部落非狼種，其先所生之窟在曲漫山北。自謂上代有神與牝牛交於此窟。其人髮黃，目綠，赤髭髯.« Duan Chengshi, *Youyang zazu* [Miscellany of Youyang], chapter 4, accessed on 10 October 2025: <https://archive.org/stream/06047413.cn#page/n120/mode/2up/>.

14 On the origins and history of these Turkic peoples, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 56-89.

15 The mytho-geographical term *Tūrān* comes from *Tūr* + *-ān*, »the land of Tūr.« In Iranian epic tradition, Tūr was a son of Farīdūn, and his descendants became the enemies of *Īrān*, the land of Īraj, another son of Farīdūn. Afrāsiyāb was a descendant of Tūr in this tradition. *Tūrān* originally denoted the lands of Iran's nomadic enemies to the northeast, beyond the Oxus River (Amu Darya), but in later traditions it came to be identified with the lands of the Turkic nomads. However, it should be noted that in its earliest usage, »Tūrānians« referred to all the nomadic tribes residing north of the Amu Darya River, including Iranian nomads. On this point, see Kowalski, *Turcs dans le Shah-name*, 89-90.

16 al-Kāshgharī, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects* 2, ed. and trans. Dankoff, 225.

known for his *Kutadgu Bilig* [Wisdom That Brings Happiness], also equated Alp Er Tonga with Afrāsiyāb.¹⁷ Jamāl al-Qarshī, a 13th-century scholar from the former Qarakhanid realm based in Kashgar, likewise claimed that Afrāsiyāb was an ancestor of the Qarakhanid ruler Satūq Bughrā Khan (d. 955).¹⁸ Accordingly, the Qarakhanids were referred to as *Āl-i Afrāsiyāb*, meaning »the House of Afrāsiyāb« by their contemporaries.

Some medieval Persian historians also regarded the Seljuks as descendants of Afrāsiyāb. Ibn Ḥassūl (d. 1058), for instance, connected the Seljuks to him.¹⁹ However, it is not clear if the Seljuk rulers actually viewed themselves as descendants of Afrāsiyāb.²⁰ According to Osamu Otsuka, following the fall of the Seljuks, Persian historians prioritized the Seljuks' Afrāsiyāb lineage over their ancestry from Qiniq, a grandson of Oghuz Khan, aiming to link the Seljuks and other Persian dynasties to legendary figures in Iranian tradition.²¹ Importantly, according to A. C. S. Peacock, the Qarakhanids, »who were identified with *Afrāsiyāb*«, were regarded by some contemporary historians as having greater prestige than the Seljuks.²² That is, it was the Qarakhanids, not the Seljuks, who were primarily identified with Afrāsiyāb.

The Japhethic Tradition

In Islamic historiography, as in other Abrahamic traditions, the lineages descending from Noah's three sons, Shem (Sām), Ham (Hām), and Japheth (Yāfith), were believed to have repopulated the Earth after the Flood. Within this framework, the Turkic peoples were regarded as descendants of Japheth. For instance, the Muslim historian and exegete al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) mentions the genealogical connections of the world's peoples to Noah's three sons, according to which the Turks, Slavs, and other non-Semitic groups descend from Japheth, Shem is the ancestor of the Arabs, Hebrews, and other Semitic peoples, and Ham is associated with Africans and certain southern populations.²³

This Japhethic tradition was clearly influential among the Muslim Turks of Islamic Central Asia. Notably, regarding the progenitor of the Turkic peoples, Maḥmūd al-Kāshgharī writes in his *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*:

The Turks are, in origin, twenty tribes. They all trace back to Turk, son of Japheth, son of Noah.²⁴

17 Yūsuf Khāṣṣ Ḥājib, *Wisdom of Royal Glory*, trans. Dankoff, 48.

18 Jamāl al-Qarshī, *Mulḥaqāt bi-ṣ-ṣurāḥ*, ed. and trans. Abuseitova *et al.*, 101, cxlii (text). Describing Ögedei Khan's (r. 1229-1241) capital, Qaraqorum, located in the Orkhon valley, Jamāl al-Qarshī also writes: »His abode of dominion Qarā-Qurum was the abode of Afrāsiyāb's kingship (*kāna daru mulkihi Qarāqurum, dāru mulki Afrāsiyāb*).« *ibid.*, 119 (trans.), clxiv (text).

19 Frenkel, *Turkic Peoples in Arabic Writings*, 75.

20 Mecit, *The Rum Seljuqs*, 2.

21 Otsuka, Kinikushizoku to afurāsuiyābu [The Qiniq and Afrāsiyāb], 83-84.

22 Peacock, *Great Seljuk Empire*, 136, n61.

23 al-Ṭabarī, *Ta' rikh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, 1:223; al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, trans. Brinner, 21.

24 al-Kāshgharī, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects* 1, ed. and trans. Dankoff, 82.

The Japhethic tradition was also adopted by the Khazars, a nomadic Turkic people who founded the Khazar Qaghanate (mid-7th century-c. 968/969), a successor state to the Western Türk Qaghanate.²⁵ More specifically, the Khazar ruling elite, who converted to Judaism in the late 8th or early 9th century, saw Togarmah, grandson of Japheth, as the progenitor of the Khazars, Pechenegs, and Bulgars. In a letter known as the *Khazar Correspondence*, sent to Ḥasdāi b. Shaprūt (d. c. 970), the Jewish courtier of the Caliph of Córdoba, the mid-10th-century Khazar ruler Joseph enumerated his ancestors as follows:

You ask us also in your epistle: »Of what people, of what family, and of what tribe are you?« Know that we are descended from Japhet, through his son [sic!] Togarmah. I have found in the genealogical books of my ancestors that Togarmah had ten sons. These are their names: the eldest was Ujur, the second Tauris, the third Avar, the fourth Uauz, the fifth Bizal, the sixth Tarna, the seventh Khazar, the eighth Janur, the ninth Bulgar, the tenth Sawir. I am a descendant of Khazar, the seventh son.²⁶

Alexander-Related Legendary Traditions among the Volga Bulgars

The Volga Bulgars were a Turkic people who, after migrating north following their defeat by the Khazars, established a state in the Volga-Kama region that converted to Islam in the early 10th century.²⁷ In the Volga-Kama region, lying beyond the sphere of the »Turanian« world,²⁸ the Muslim Volga Bulgars adopted the Islamic Alexander legend, rather than that of the Turanian king and hero Afrāsiyāb. In Islamic literature, Alexander the Great is commonly identified with Dhū al-Qarnayn, the »Two-Horned One« mentioned in the Qur'an.²⁹ The Qur'an portrays this figure as a God-guided, just ruler who travels widely and builds a barrier to restrain Gog and Magog (*Yā jūj and Mā jūj*).³⁰ Medieval Islamic sources, as cited by Allen J. Frank, associate the Volga Bulgars with Alexander the Great (identified with Dhū al-Qarnayn) in both dynastic and legendary contexts. Frank notes that Najīb al-Ḥamadānī reported that Bulgar rulers claimed descent from Alexander – an idea also reflected in pre-Mongol Persian poetic literature. The *Sikandar Nāma-yi Bārā*, for instance, portrays the Bulgar rulers as Alexander's descendants and notes that Alexander founded the city of Bulgar during his journey to the *diyār-i zulmat* (»land of darkness«).³¹ In short, it appears

25 The Khazar Qaghanate became the dominant power in the Black Sea and Caspian steppes in the 8th century CE, stretching from the northern shores of the Black Sea in the west to the Aral Sea in the east and from the Middle Volga region in the north to the steppe of the North Caucasus in the south. On the ethnogenesis and history of the Khazars, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 56-64.

26 Marcus, *Jew in the Medieval World*, 229.

27 On the ethnogenesis and history of the Volga Bulgars, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 65-68.

28 The boundary between *Īrān* and *Tūrān* in the Perso-Islamic tradition was the Oxus River (*Amu Darya*). Therefore, *Tūrān* was mainly used to refer to the Transoxianan region (*Mā warā' al-nahr*), that is, the lands beyond the Oxus and the adjacent steppes.

29 For a general discussion of the Alexander tradition in the Islamicate tradition, see Doufīkar-Aerts, Alexander in Medieval Arab Minds, 308-333.

30 See Qur'an 18:83-98 (Sūra al-Kahf), accessed 10 October 2025, <https://quran.com/alkahf/8398>.

31 Frank, Historical legends, 89-90. Najīb al-Ḥamadānī is a 12th-century Persian chronicler whose texts provide critical evidence for reconstructing the early history of the Volga Bulgars, among others. According

that medieval Volga Bulghar Muslims regarded Alexander the Great as an integral figure of their dynastic and mythic past.³²

As demonstrated by the Afrāsiyāb and Japhethic traditions, as well as by the legends of the Volga-Ural Muslims concerning Alexander the Great (Dhū al-Qarnayn), the wolf motif was not dominant in the medieval Islamic Turkic world.³³ Importantly, these non-wolf traditions lacked direct genealogical or structural connections between them, nor did they share significant thematic similarities. Moreover, it should be noted that the memory of actual historical figures or dynastic founders had largely faded. The Qarakhanid writers, for example, make no mention of historical figures associated with the (Western) Türk Qaghanate, and the extant Bulghar traditions likewise fail to mention figures such as Qubrat (r. c. 632-c. 665), the founder of Great Bulgharia.

The Oghuz Khan Tradition

The Oghuz were a Turkic tribal confederation that nomadized across the Aral and Caspian steppes during the ninth and tenth centuries CE. After migrating south of the Syr Darya River, they came to be known in the Islamic world as the Turkmen.³⁴ They are historically significant because their descendants went on to establish such great Turkic empires as the Seljuk, Ottoman, and Safavid empires in western Eurasia. The Oghuz tribes developed an origin narrative that was distinct from the Afrāsiyāb and Japhethic traditions. Their prevalent origin myth was the Oghuz Khan narrative, which recounts the miraculous birth, heroic deeds, and conquests of Oghuz Khan, the legendary progenitor of the Oghuz people.³⁵

The Oghuz Khan narrative exists in two different versions: the pre-Islamic (or pagan) version and the Islamic version. The former, written in Uyghur script, is believed to have been recorded in the 14th or 15th century.³⁶ According to this version, Oghuz Khan is born with supernatural features. He refuses milk, demands food, meat and wine, and begins to speak soon after birth. He starts walking after only forty days. His feet resemble those of an ox, his waist that of a wolf, his shoulders those of a sable, and his chest that of a bear. He later demonstrates heroic strength by slaying a fearsome monster. Oghuz marries two divine

to him, »in the city of Bulgar lived their padishah, who was one of the descendants of Zu-l-Qarnain.« This passage is cited in Kovalevskii, *Kniga Akhmeda ibn Fadlana*, 61, quoted in Stepanov, *Waiting for the End of the World*, 179.

32 Following the establishment of the Orenburg Spiritual Assembly in the late 18th century, Muslim scholars (ʿulamāʾ) of the Volga-Ural region fostered a sense of regional »Bulghar« identity. Within this »Bulgharist« historical tradition, narratives connected with Alexander the Great once again came to prominence. Frank, *Islamic shrine catalogues*, 265-286.

33 In his pioneering and insightful writing, Ron Sela argues that the Islamization of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia led them to abandon their ancient Turkic traditions and to adopt the Japhethic and Afrāsiyāb traditions. See Sela, *Revisiting the origin myths* (blog), accessed on 10 October 2025: <https://rsela.wordpress.com/2013/04/24/revisiting-the-origin-myths-of-the-turks/>.

34 On the ethnogenesis and history of the Oghuz, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 84-89.

35 For an introduction to this legend, see Binbaş, *Oğuz Khan narratives*, accessed on 10 October 2025: www.iranicaonline.org/articles/oguz-khan-narratives.

36 For a comprehensive study of the pre-Islamic version of the Oghuz tradition, including an English translation, see Danko, *“Pagan” Oyuz-nāmā*.

maidens – one from the sky and one from the earth – who bear him six sons: Sun (*Kün*), Moon (*Ay*), Star (*Yulduz*), Sky (*Kök*), Mountain (*Tag*), and Sea (*Tängiz*). He dispatches envoys to the four quarters of the world with a message demanding submission. Guided by a sacred wolf, he conquers Urum (Rum) and leads extensive campaigns across vast lands. In the course of his conquests, he grants names to various tribes such as the Qipchaq, Qarluq, and Qangli. Oghuz Khan organizes his sons into two groups: the Broken (*Buzuqlar*), his three elder sons, to whom he gives a golden bow broken into three pieces; the Three Arrows (*Üç Oqlar*), his three younger sons, to whom he gives three silver arrows).³⁷

The Islamic version of the Oghuz Khan narrative is preserved in the *Jāmi' al-Tavārikh*, a universal history written by the Ilkhanid vizier and historian Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318). In this version, Oghuz's birth is also marked by extraordinary signs. He refuses to drink his mother's milk for three days and nights until she promises to believe in God. At the age of one, he asks his father, Qara Khan, to name him Oghuz. Later, Oghuz marries three of his cousins, but only loves the one who professes the oneness of God and believes in Him. When Qara Khan discovers his son's monotheism and plots to assassinate him during a hunting expedition, Oghuz, forewarned of the plot, acts first and slays his father in battle, seizing the khanship. Thereafter, he launches a series of military campaigns and emerges as a world conqueror. In the course of his conquests, much in line with the pre-Islamic narration, he names various tribes such as the Qipchaq, Qarluq, and Qangli. Oghuz Khan then organizes his sons, Gün, Ay, Yulduz, Gök, Taq, and Dengiz, into two groups: the *Buzuq*, his three elder sons, to whom he gives a golden bow, and the *Üç Oq*, his three younger sons, to whom he gives three golden arrows.³⁸ Importantly, the Islamic version of the Oghuz Khan narrative, unlike the pre-Islamic (or pagan) version, contains no reference to a wolf serving as a divine guide.

The Islamic version of the Oghuz Khan legend was later incorporated into the dynastic genealogies of not only the Ottoman empire and other Oghuz-speaking dynasties, but also of the non-Oghuz-speaking Timurid empire, as well as the Crimean Tatar and Uzbek khanates.

Turkic Origin Myths Uninfluenced by Persian or Islamic Traditions

The Qipchaqs were a Turkic tribal confederation that dominated the vast steppe region of Eurasia encompassing the Black Sea, Caspian, and Kazakh steppes – collectively known in the Islamic world as *Dasht-i Qipchāq*, or the Qipchaq Steppe – from the mid-11th to the early 13th centuries CE. Nothing is known about their own collective origin myths. According to an origin narrative concerning the Kimeks, recorded by the mid-11th-century Persian historian and geographer Gardizī (d. c. 1061) in his *Zayn al-Akhbār* [The Ornament of Histories], the Qipchaqs were originally a tribe within the Kimek confederation,³⁹ which, in turn, was said to have been formed from a group of Tatar fugitives.

37 Danka, "Pagan" *Oyuz-nāmā*, chapter 3.

38 For the legend of Oghuz Khan, see Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-tavārikh*, ed. Karīmī, 29-45; Rashiduddin, *Jami'u't-tawarikh* 1, trans. Thackston, 27-35.

39 The Kimeks were a Turkic confederation of tribes that inhabited the steppe zone around the Irtysh River prior to the emergence of Qipchaq power.

The origin of the Kimeks had been that the chief of the Tatars died and left two sons. The elder son seized the kingship and the younger son became jealous of his brother. The name of this younger brother was Shad. He made an attempt to kill his elder brother but could not and became worried about himself. There was a slave girl and she was his lover. He took that girl and ran away from his brother. He arrived at a place where there were a great river, many trees, and abundant game. There he pitched his tent and settled down. Every day this man and girl, the two together, would hunt and eat the meat of the game and they would make garments from the skins of sables, grey squirrels, and ermine until seven persons from among the clients of the Tatars came near them. The first one was Īmī; the second, Īmāk; the third, Tatār; the fourth, Bayāndur; the fifth, Qipchaq (Khifchāq); the sixth, Lanīqāz; and the seventh, Ajlād ... They stayed there until winter and because the snow came, they could not return. There was abundant grass in that place and they were all there. When spring arrived and the snow melted, they sent a person to the abode of the Tatars so that he may bring news of that tribe. When he arrived there, he saw that the whole area had been emptied. It became devoid of people because the enemy had come, plundered and killed all the people. The remnants, who had remained, came to him from the foot of the mountains. The man told of Shad and his own friends' situation. All the men headed for the Irish. When they arrived there, they greeted Shad as their ruler and held him in respect. Other people who heard this news began to come. Seven hundred individuals gathered. For a long time, they stayed serving Shad. Later when they multiplied, they spread to those mountains and formed seven tribes named after these seven persons we have mentioned.⁴⁰

Another unique Turkic origin myth, notably uninfluenced by Persian or Islamic traditions, was recorded by the Mamluk historian Ibn al-Dawādārī (d. after 1336), who claimed to have found it in a rare, centuries-old source originally composed in Turkic. In Ibn al-Dawādārī's account, the Alṭun Khāns, or »Golden Kings«, a Turkic dynasty that the author claims existed and was overthrown by Chinggis Khan, were descended from Ay Aṭām Kujukrī, the eldest son of Ay Aṭām (»Father Moon«). This progenitor, according to Ibn al-Dawādārī, came to life when the four elements – the life-giving sun, the wind, the primordial waters, and the dust – were mixed together within a cave on Mount Qarāṭāgh (the »Black Mountain«).⁴¹

Turkic Dynastic Origin Tales in Post-Mongol Inner Eurasia

The Combined Japhethic and Oghuz Traditions

The Mongol conquests and the resulting unification of various Mongolic and Turkic groups had a significant impact on ethnogenesis within the Turkic world. Some Turkic groups disintegrated, while others underwent significant ethnic transformations. New Turkic peoples also emerged, including the two »Turko-Mongol« groups – the Jochid and Chaghatayid *uluses*

40 Gardizī, *Tārīkh-i Gardizī*, ed. Ḥabībī, 549-551; for another English translation, see Martinez, Gardizī's two chapters on the Turks, 109-217.

41 Frenkel, *Turkic Peoples in Arabic Writings*, 60-66. For a detailed study of the origin myth of the Alṭun Khāns, see Haarmann, *Alṭun Ḥān und Čingiz Ḥān*, 1-36. For a study examining the Mongol origin myth in Ibn al-Dawādārī's work, see van den Bent, *Mongol origins*, 37-67. (Interestingly, that Mongol origin tale claims that Chinggis Khan descended from a man named Alp Qarā Arslān Biljiki, meaning »Son of the Black Lion (*farḥ al-asad al-aswad*)«, who was raised by a lioness after being carried away by an eagle as a newborn, *ibid.*, 45-47; Haarmann, *Alṭun Ḥān und Čingiz Ḥān*, 22-25).

(peoples)⁴² – formed through the intermixing of the original Mongols with various Turkic and Mongolic populations.⁴³ Over time, the Jochid *ulus* fragmented into the Crimean and Kazan Tatars, the Kazakhs, and the Uzbeks, whereas the Chaghatayid *ulus* divided into the Timurids (Chaghatays) and the Moghuls.

In the post-Mongol Turkic world,⁴⁴ these »Turko-Mongol« peoples and the Oghuz Turkic peoples (the Turkmens) emerged as the two dominant Turkic ethnic groups, founding powerful states such as the Timurid and Ottoman empires. Importantly, most of them adopted the combined Japhethic and Oghuz traditions to legitimize their rule. Starting in the 15th century, Ottoman chroniclers began asserting that the Ottoman ruling house descended from the legendary Oghuz Khan and, through him, from Japheth, son of Noah.⁴⁵ In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, some Ottoman historians claimed that the Ottoman ruling house descended from Esau (son of Isaac), a descendant of Shem – not Japheth – thus asserting a Semitic or »prophetic« lineage. However, after the mid-16th century, the Japhetic tradition once again became dominant in Ottoman historiography.⁴⁶

Beginning with the Timurids, the »Turko-Mongol« dynasties also adopted the Japhethic and Oghuz traditions.⁴⁷ Notably, the Timurid historian Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī, in his *Ẓafarnāma* (the most comprehensive and influential chronicle of Temūr’s reign), expanded upon the Japhethic genealogy that had earlier been presented by the Ilkhanid historian Rashīd al-Dīn.⁴⁸ More specifically, Yazdī claimed that the Timurids and the Chinggisids were descended from Japheth’s eldest son, Turk. He writes about Japheth and Turk as follows:

42 The Mongolian word *ulus* means »people« or »state«.

43 On the formation of these new Turkic peoples, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 109–113, 127, 140–141, 149–151.

44 The Sakha (Yakut) *Olonkho*, the Kyrgyz *Manas*, and the Oghuz *Dede Korkut* represent the major epic traditions of their respective peoples. The *Olonkho* consists of numerous tales featuring ancient warriors, deities, spirits, and animals. The *Dede Korkut* comprises twelve stories, each focusing on a particular hero and his family, while the *Manas* cycle recounts the life and heroic deeds of its eponymous hero, as well as those of his son and grandson. Since this paper focuses on the origin myths associated with specific peoples, dynasties, and states – rather than on heroic epics or cosmogonic myths – it does not examine these or other Turkic heroic epics. It should be noted that although wolves do appear in these narratives, they are not presented as ancestors of a dynasty or people. In the case of *Dede Korkut*, however, one of the heroes, Salur Kazan, mentions that his roots are growing from a lion, a »male wolf,« a falcon, and white rushes. *Book of Dede Korkut*, ed. and trans. Sümer *et al.*, 161. In the *Olonkho*, horses, not wolves, act as the main helpers. Kim, Yakut Gubi-seosasi »Ollongho«, 223. Also, wolves are associated with negative imagery: more specifically, tree stumps in the Lower World are likened to wolves. Lvova, *Biomorphic images*, 143.

45 Notably, see Aşık Paşazade, *Osmanoğulları’nın tarihi*, ed. Yavuz and Saraç, 53, 321. In the 15th century, the Oghuz narrative was employed to legitimize the Turkmen and Ottoman dynasties by attributing their origin to one of the twenty-four grandsons of Oghuz. Binbaş, *Oğuz Khan narratives*. The Aq Qoyunlu claimed dynastic descent from Bayundur Khan, son of Gün Khan, son of Oghuz Khan. For a discussion of the Aq Qoyunlu genealogy, see Woods, *Aqquyunlu*, 173–182.

46 On the rise and fall of the Esau origin myth in Ottoman historiography, see Ogasawara, *Quest*, 37–63; Binbaş, *King’s two lineages*, 63–96.

47 In his pioneering and eye-opening article, Dobrovits examines the Chinggisid and Timurid dynastic genealogies contained in the Ilkhanid, Timurid, and Uzbek histories in detail. See Dobrovits, *The Turco-Mongolian tradition of common origin*.

48 The Japhethic tradition had been introduced earlier by Rashīd al-Dīn as an origin narrative of the Turkic peoples. In the *Jāmi’ al-tavārikh*, he presents Japheth (Yāfath), whom he claimed was also known as Abūlja Khan

[After the Earth was repopulated following the Flood], Noah gave the land of Tūrān to Japheth (Yāfith), who was the eldest son, the land of Īrān to Sām, and Hindūstān [India] to Hām. And all human beings are the descendants of these three sons of Noah. Therefore, Japheth is called the Father of the Turks (*Abū al-Turk*), Sām the Father of the Persians (*Abū al-ʿAjam*), and Hām is called the Father of the Indians (*Abū al-Hind*) ... [After his passing], the people reached a consensus and appointed Turk, son of Japheth, as their ruler, and they called him Yāfith Oghlān [meaning Son of Japheth].⁴⁹

Yazdī also traced the descent of the Timurids and the Chinggisids through Oghuz Khan, who was himself presented as a descendant of Turk and Japheth. Crucially, Yazdī here depicted Oghuz Khan as a Mongol ruler, not as the eponymous founder of the Oghuz/Turkmen nomads. He included Oghuz Khan in the lineage of the ancient Mongols, namely as the third khan of the Mongol branch (*shaʿb-i Mughul*) that began with Mongol Khan, the purported progenitor of the Mongols.⁵⁰ In turn, Yazdī identified the Oghuz/Turkmens as descendants of Mansak (*Mishak*), another son of Japheth, and thus formally excluded them from »the Turks,« who after all descend from Japheth's son Turk. In this framework, he describes a conflict between Turk, the ancestor of »the Turks«, to whom the Mongol Timurid and Chinggisid ancestors belonged, and Bayghur, grandson of Mansak and ancestor of the Turkmens. »From that day on,« he narrates, »enmity between the Turks and the Turkmens has persisted.«⁵¹

This Timurid account of origins – blending the Japhethic and Mongolized Oghuz traditions – became an established historical narrative that was widely repeated and disseminated across Mongol successor states. It was featured in other Timurid histories, such as Ulugh Beg's *Tārīkh-i arbaʿ ulūs*,⁵² a history of the four Chinggisid *uluses* (khanates), and Khvāndamīr's *Ḥabīb al-siyar*.⁵³ The narrative extended into the Timurid Mughal empire, appearing in Abū al-Faẓl's *Akbarnāma*.⁵⁴ It was also adopted by various Uzbek histories, including Ḥāfiẓ Tanish Bukhārī's *ʿAbdallāh-nāma* (*Sharaf-nāma-i shāhī*) and Abū al-Ghāzī Bahadur Khan's *Shajara-i Türk*.⁵⁵ Two early 18th-century Crimean Tatar chronicles, *Es-Sebu's-Seyyar fī Ahbar-ı Mulūk-ü*

among the Inner Asian tribes, as ancestor of all the Turks. More specifically, he writes that the four sons of Dib Bāqūy, son of Japheth, became the ancestors of all the nomadic Turks (*Atrāk-i shaḥrā-nishīn*). Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmiʿ al-tavārikh*, ed. Karīmī, 25; Rashīduddīn, *Jāmiʿ u't-tawārikh* 1, trans. Thackston, 25.

49 Yazdī, *Ẓafar-nāma*, ed. Šādiq, 85-86. The pagination is based on the electronic copy of this edition. All bracketed insertions are mine.

50 See Yazdī, *Ẓafar-nāma*, ed. Šādiq, 88-100.

51 See Yazdī, *Ẓafar-nāma*, ed. Šādiq, 86.

52 See *Shajarat al-Atrāk*, fols. 27-83; *Shajarat Ul Atrak*, trans. Miles, 22-58. The *Tārīkh-i arbaʿ ulūs* by Ulugh Beg, grandson of Temūr, is no longer extant; the anonymous *Shajarat al-atrāk* is considered to be its abridged version.

53 See Khvāndamīr, *Tārīkh-i Ḥabīb al-siyar* 3, ed. Humāʿī, 4-6; Khwandamir, *Habibu's-siyar* 1, trans. Thackston, 1-3. Khvāndamīr (d. c. 1535) was a later Timurid historian.

54 See Abu-l-Faẓl, *Akbar Nama* 1, trans. Beveridge, 167-185. Abū al-Faẓl (d. 1602) was a historian and statesman in the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605).

55 See Bukhārī, *Sharaf-nāma*, ed. and trans. Salakhmetdinova, fols. 10a-19b (text), 1: 47-65 (trans.). Ḥāfiẓ Tanish Bukhārī was court historian for the Chinggisid Uzbek ruler ʿAbdallāh Khan II (r. 1583-1598); Aboul-Ghāzī Bēhādour Khān, *Histoire*, ed. and trans. Desmaisons, 9-68 (text), 8-72 (trans.). Abū al-Ghāzī Bahādūr Khan (r. 1644-1663) was a Chinggisid ruler of the ʿArabshāhid Uzbek dynasty, also known as the Khanate of Khiva.

Tatar by Sayyid Muḥammad Rezā and *ʿUmdat al-aḥbār* by ʿAbd al-Ghaffār Qırımı, also traced the origin of the Crimean Tatar dynasty to Japheth through the Mongol Oghuz Khan.⁵⁶

The Tale of Alan Qo'a

Alan Qo'a was another mythical figure that featured prominently in the dynastic origin myths of the Turkic-speaking Chinggisid and Timurid dynasties in the post-Mongol period. She is presented as a mythical ancestress of Chinggis Khan and first appears in the 13th-century *Secret History of the Mongols*. According to the account, after the death of her husband, Dobun Mergen, Alan Qo'a was miraculously impregnated by sun rays and gave birth to three children, including Bodonchar, the ancestor of both the Chinggisids and the Barlas tribe (the Timurids):

Every night, a resplendent yellow man entered by the light of the smoke-hole or the door top of the tent, he rubbed my belly and his radiance penetrated my womb. When he departed, he crept out on a moonbeam or a ray of sun in the guise of a yellow dog.⁵⁷

Yazdī and other Timurid historians also incorporated the Mongolian mythical ancestress Alan Qo'a as an ancestor of Temūr, presenting her as a progenitor of the Timurid lineage. Yazdī describes her miraculous conception by sun rays following the death of her husband as follows:

When her husband died, she took charge of governance and raising her sons. And at that time, divine will so decreed that this peerless lady was lying asleep on her resting bed, when suddenly she saw a light that shone upon that dark room, and that bright light entered into her mouth. She found in herself a form of pregnancy, just as Mary, daughter of ʿImrān, became pregnant by the breath of Gabriel, without a father, and neither phenomenon is strange in the power of God.⁵⁸

The aforementioned Timurid histories also included Alan Qo'a in Temūr's ancestry.⁵⁹ Notably, Khalil Sultan (d. 1411), grandson of Temūr, commissioned a genealogical tree made up of roundels that feature drawings of Temūr's Mongol ancestors, including Alan Qo'a.⁶⁰ This mythical ancestress also figured as an important progenitor for the Timurid Mughals. Abū al-Faḍl (d. 1602), the court historian of Akbar, later reiterated Yazdī's account, reinforcing Alan Qo'a's importance in the imperial Mughal genealogy:

One night this divinely radiant one was reposing on her bed, when suddenly a glorious light cast a ray into the tent and entered the mouth and throat of that fount of spiritual

56 See Riza, *Sem' planet*, ed. Abduzhemilev, vol. 1, 50; vol. 2, trans. Gibadullin, 39-40; Kyrymi, *Umdet al-Akh-bar*, ed. Mirgaleyev, vol. 1, 22-23; vol. 2, trans. Karimovoy and Mirgaleyev, 13.

57 Anon., *Secret History*, trans. de Rachewiltz, 1: 4.

58 Yazdī, *Ẓafar-nāma*, ed. Šādiq, 96.

59 See *Shajarat al-Atrāk*, fols. 66-67; *Shajarat Ul Atrak*, trans. Miles, 46-47; Khvāndamīr, *Ḥabīb al-siyar*, 3, ed. Humā'ī, 4-6; Khwandamir, 1, *Ḥabibu's-siyar*, trans. Thackston, 1-3. Two Arabic inscriptions in Temūr's mausoleum, the Gūr-i Amīr in Samarkand, attest to a genealogy linking him to Alan Qo'a. The first is engraved on the marble of Temūr's tomb in the crypt, while the second appears on the stone of his cenotaph on the ground floor.

60 For a study of this Timurid genealogy included in the album (H2152) kept in Istanbul's Topkapı Palace Museum, see Sertkaya, *Timürlü şeceresi*, 241-259.

knowledge and glory. The cupola of chastity became pregnant by that light in the same way as did her Majesty (Ḥaẓrat) Miryam (Mary), the daughter of 'Imrān (Amram).⁶¹

The tale of Alan Qo'a also functioned as a dynastic origin myth in the Turkicized Chinggisid dynasties, including the Uzbek and Crimean khanates. The aforementioned Uzbek and Crimean Tatar histories present Alan Qo'a as an ancestress of their dynasties.⁶² The *Umdat al-ahbār* by 'Abd al-Ghaffār Qırımı provides a slightly modified version of the legend:

The aforementioned Alan Kuan Biyim Khatun, after the death of her husband, refused to remarry because of her pride and noble dignity, and continued to live proudly as a widow. One night she went out of the house to relieve herself and returned some time later, saying: »Since only the Moon is perfect, only the Moon is worthy to be my husband.« She proposed marriage to the Moon. When she informed her servants and relatives about the place of the supposed wedding, they confirmed and bore witness that it was not a human being. After that, three sons were born.⁶³

The Kazakh khanate did not produce a written history containing a dynastic origin myth. However, Kazakh nomads preserved their own version of the Alan Qo'a tale through oral tradition. This narrative was recorded in the 19th century by Vasily V. Radlov under the title »The Origin of Kazakhs (*Qazaқтың түбі*)«. In the Kazakh version, a khan's daughter, secretly confined because of her extraordinary beauty, becomes pregnant by the sun's rays – or more specifically, by the Eye of the Exalted God (*Alla Tağalanyñ közi*) – after a brief exposure to the outside world. In the face of her father's fury, her mother places her in a golden chest and sets it adrift on a river. The chest is discovered by the hunter Toktaghul Märgän (who corresponds to Dobun Mergen in the *Secret History of the Mongols*), who takes the princess as his wife. She then gives birth to a divinely conceived son, Chinggis, who grows to be so excellent and just that he is chosen by the people and successfully enthroned as their Khan.⁶⁴ Unlike the original Mongolian version, the Kazakh variant presents Chinggis Khan as her son rather than a later descendant, and the princess remains unnamed.⁶⁵

A version of the Alan Qo'a legend closely resembling the Kazakh variant also existed among the Turkic nomads of the Volga region. In this version, recorded in the *Dāftār-i Jingiz-nāmā*, an anonymous chronicle narrating events in the territory of the Ulus of Jochi (also known as the Golden Horde) from the 13th to the 17th centuries,⁶⁶ Alan Qo'a (Alaŋgo) also appears as

61 Abu-l-Fazl, *Akbar Nama* 1, trans. Beveridge, 179.

62 See Aboul-Ghāzi Bēhādour Khān, *Histoire*, ed. and trans. Desmaisons, 50 (text), 52 (trans.); Bukhārī, *Sharaf-nama*, ed. and trans. Salakhedinova, fols. 23a-23b (text), 1: 70-71 (trans.).

63 Riza, *Sem' planet*, vol. 1, ed. Abduzhemilev, 54; vol. 2, trans. Gibadullin, 48; Kyrymi, *Umdet al-Akhbar*, ed. Mirgaleyev, 23-24; vol. 2, trans. Karimovoy and Mirgaleyev, 14.

64 Radloff, *Proben der Volksliteratur*, 3, *Kirgisische Mundarten*, bk. 1, 63-68 (Original Text) and bk. 2, 82-89 (German Translation) (St. Petersburg, 1870). See also Dobrovits, Maidens, towers and beasts, 51-52.

65 According to the *Secret History of the Mongols*, Alan Qo'a was impregnated by a radiant being and gave birth to three sons, including Bodonchar, from whom Chinggis Khan was descended. See Anon., *Secret History*, 1, trans. de Rachewiltz, 2-8.

66 The place and authorship of this work remain uncertain. For more on this work, see Ivanics, *Book of the Činggis Legend*, 1-16.

the mother of Chinggis Khan rather than as an ancestress. She gives birth to Chinggis Khan after being impregnated by her deceased husband, Duyin Bayan, who »descends in the form of a ray of light and departs in the shape of a wolf«.⁶⁷

The Kazakh Legend of Alasha Khan

The legend of Alasha Khan is an oral tradition that narrates the origins of the three Kazakh *jüzes* or hordes.⁶⁸ In most versions, the Kazakhs are said to have originated from a group of fugitives who selected Alasha, an outcast prince, as their first khan.⁶⁹ One of the most detailed accounts of this legend was recorded by the Kazakh historian Chokan Valikhanov (1835-1865):

Very long, long ago, in Turan there was a king called Abdulla, but according to other [versions] Abdul-Azis-Khan. This king had a leprous son, thus named Alasha – »blotchy-faced«. His father, following an old tradition of ousting all those who are afflicted with contagious diseases, banished his son. At the same time, many of his subjects, dissatisfied with the cruelty of Abdulla and driven by hunger, went into the steppe, which lies north of the Syr River, to the deserts of Karakum and Bursuq, and started to live the life of *qazaqs* [»vagabonds, freebooters«] (*kazachestvovat*). The brave and bold *batyrs* [»heroes, warriors«] increased in number to three hundred and gained fame, power, and wealth in a short time ... The steppe vagabonds (*vol'nitsa*) suffered hunger, and a lack of leadership and disagreement among the members of the brotherhood led them to disorder and internecine strife ... they invited the leprous son of Abdulla, Alasha, and made him khan ... the neighbors and Abdulla himself, still saw them as vagabonds-freebooters (*brodyag-razboynnikov*), and the name Qazaq (Kazakh) stayed with them.⁷⁰

Historically, however, the first »Kazakh« state was founded by Jānibeg Khan and Girāy Khan, who were both descended from Jochi, the eldest son of Chinggis Khan.⁷¹ This contrast between historical reality and the legendary accounts of Alasha Khan reveals that Kazakh nomads,

67 Ivanics, *Book of the Činggis Legend*, 24, 28-29 (text) 76-77, 83-84 (trans.). Duyin Bayan corresponds to Dobun Mergen in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. In the *Dāftār-i J'ingiz-nāmā*, Duyin Bayan appears as a son of a princess named 'Ülāmālik Kōrikli, who is confined in a stone tower forty fathoms high by her father, Altun Hān, the khan of Mālta, because of her extraordinary beauty. However, after being miraculously impregnated by a ray of sunlight, she is placed in a golden ship and sent to the North Sea. She then meets and marries Tumaul Mārgān, *ibid.*, 20-24 (text) 69-75 (trans.). In short, the story of Duyin Bayan's mother, 'Ülāmālik Kōrikli, is virtually identical to that of the princess in the Kazakh variant.

68 The Kazakhs are divided into three *jüzes*, or hordes: the Ulu Jüz (the Senior or Great Horde), which occupy southern and southeastern Kazakhstan; the Orta Jüz (the Middle Horde), which inhabit central and northern Kazakhstan; and the Kishi Jüz (the Lesser or Junior Horde), which reside in western Kazakhstan. Because the origins of the three Kazakh *jüzes* are not documented, historians are unable to explain the origins of this tribal division or precisely date its formation.

69 For a detailed discussion of the legend, see Lee, *Formation of the Qazaqs*, 140-154.

70 Valikhanov, *Kirgizskoye rodosloviye*, 126-127.

71 Today, scholars consider Alasha Khan to have been a real historical figure. Scholars have proposed several candidates for his identity, including Urus Khan, the great-grandfather of Jānibeg Khan and Girāy Khan; Haqq Nazar Khan, grandson of Jānibeg Khan; and Jochi Khan, son of Chinggis Khan. See Lee, *Legend of Alasha Khan*; Sabitov, *Alasha-khan mif i real'nost'*, 110-116; Karatayev, *Ob Alasha khane*, 241-255; Yerofeyeva, *Alasha-khan*, 268-272.

lacking a written historiographical tradition unlike the Timurids, Uzbeks, and Crimean Tatars, forgot the specific details of their own formative history.

Epilogue

This comparative study of Turkic origin myths demonstrates that they constitute a disparate body of narratives. They are characterized by discontinuity, heterogeneity, historical oblivion, and external (Perso-Islamic and Mongol) cultural influences as well.

First, the wolf origin myth illustrates discontinuity: it did not persist as a »dynastic« foundation myth among later Turkic dynasties after the fall of the Türk Qaghanate. Notably, neither the Uyghurs of the Turfan oasis nor the Qirghiz of the Yenisei region, who succeeded the Türks in eastern Inner Eurasia, developed a wolf origin myth.

Second, the dynastic origin myths of the Turkic peoples – spanning the wolf-motif narratives of the Türks and Gaoche/Tiele, the Perso-Islamic traditions of the Qarakhanids, and the Mongol-influenced dynastic accounts of the Turkicized Chinggisids and Timurids – display marked heterogeneity. Ancestral figures such as Afrāsiyāb, Alexander the Great (Dhū al-Qarnayn), Oghuz Khan, and Alan Qo'a are entirely unrelated, and the origin tales involving them evolved independently of one another.⁷²

Third, a striking feature of the Turkic origin traditions is their historical oblivion. For example, the Qarakhanids did not recall the names of any historical Türks from whom they were descended, and similarly, Kazakh oral traditions failed to preserve the specifics of their formative history.

Finally, Turkic dynastic origin myths were influenced by external cultural traditions, particularly by elements from Perso-Islamic traditions, such as the Japhethic and Afrāsiyāb narratives, and from Mongol traditions, such as the story of Alan Qo'a.

In sum, one may conclude that the origin myths of the Turkic peoples do not constitute variations of a connected, unified mythological tradition. Rather, they consist of distinct and unconnected narratives that do not share a common lineage or form a coherent mythological continuum. Therefore, the most appropriate working definition of a »Turkic origin myth« may be expressed in the simplest terms as: »The origin myths created by the various Turkic-speaking peoples.«⁷³

72 The cross-cultural practice of claiming external ancestry from powerful external figures for political legitimacy is discussed, among other topics, in the conclusion to this volume, Langelaar, Stranger-kings, animal guides, and sibling trios.

73 I view the highly distinctive nature of Turkic origin myths as the result of the heterogeneous origins of the Turkic peoples. There exists a popular belief that the Turkic peoples were and are a single, unbroken ethnolinguistic entity that originated from the Türks of the Türk Qaghanate and spread to the wider Eurasian world. However, the ethnogenesis of the Turkic-speaking peoples was a long process of amalgamation and integration, which involved the Turkicization of various Indo-European, Uralic, and Mongolic groups. For a comprehensive discussion on this historical process, see Lee, *Turkic Peoples*.

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