



THE ORIGINS OF THE ANCIENT KYRGYZ PEOPLE

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Annotation: The formation of the Kyrgyz people has been shaped through complex ethno-historical processes since ancient times. This article explores issues related to the ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz, their place within the Turkic language family, ethnonyms and toponyms found in ancient written sources, as well as migratory and political factors during various historical periods. The stages of development of the Kyrgyz language, its connections to the Altaic language unity, and the settlement areas of ancient nomadic tribes are analyzed based on historical sources. The article highlights the significant role played by Eastern Turkestan, the Tien Shan, and the Pamir-Alay regions in the formation of the Kyrgyz people.

Keywords: Kyrgyz people, ethnogenesis, Altaic languages, Turkic languages, ancient tribes, Eastern Turkestan, Tien Shan, Sima Qian, Barthold, Xiongnu, Tiele tribes, historical sources.

Introduction:

The formation of the Kyrgyz people is a complex and multifaceted process that continues to be the subject of discussion among historians and linguists. The presence of ethnonyms and toponyms related to the Kyrgyz in early written sources dating back to pre-Christian times confirms the ancient roots of this people. This article examines the historical territories of ancient Kyrgyz tribes, their linguistic connections to the Turkic language family, their position within the Altaic language framework, and how the nomadic lifestyle is reflected in the language.

Main Section:

The formation of the Kyrgyz people is a complex and multifaceted issue, characterized by numerous controversial aspects. Written sources from as early as two thousand years ago contain ethnonyms and toponyms associated with the ancient ancestors of the modern Kyrgyz people. Thus, the origin of the Kyrgyz ethnic group can be traced back to antiquity, closely connected to the regions of Eastern Turkestan, the Central Tien Shan, the Pamir-Altai, Yeti-Su, and Central Asia. The renowned statement by academician V.V. Bartold, "The Kyrgyz are among the most ancient peoples of Central Asia," is widely known not only among historians but also among scholars in various social sciences.

First and foremost, we shall briefly touch upon the historical development of the Kyrgyz language, which is the primary determinant of this ethnic group. The Kyrgyz language belongs to the Turkic language family. It is well known that the Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic-Manchu languages are all considered part of a broader group known as the Altaic language family. Since the 19th century, the concepts of "Altaic languages" and the "Altaic family of peoples" have become well established in academia, encompassing all Turkic languages, including Kyrgyz.

Scholars differ in their interpretation of the nature of this Altaic linguistic unity. Some linguists consider the Altaic languages a linguistic union—that is, a speech community formed through constant interactions among speakers of Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic-Manchu languages residing in close proximity. Other linguists, however, argue that the Altaic languages are genetically related and descended from a common proto-language, with their divergence occurring a very long time ago—no later than the 10th to 8th millennia BCE.

The original homeland of the proto-Altaic ethno-linguistic community is generally sought (by those who accept this theory) somewhere in Central Asia and the adjacent regions of Northern Iran, where the Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic-Manchu languages later dispersed. It is currently difficult to pinpoint the exact location where the collapse of the proto-Altaic language occurred; it may have happened somewhere to the east. Determining the precise time and place where the branches that later contributed to the formation of the Korean and Japanese languages diverged from the Altaic linguistic family also remains a challenge.

During the 2nd to 1st millennia BCE, proto-Turkic-Mongolic and proto-Tungusic-Manchurian language communities gradually emerged across the vast territories of Eastern Turkestan, Southern Siberia, Mongolia, and Manchuria. From the mid-1st millennium BCE, the formation of the proto-Turkic and proto-Mongolic languages began within the proto-Turkic-Mongolic community. Tribes speaking proto-Turkic languages inhabited regions from Central and Inner Mongolia to areas stretching from Lake Baikal to Ordos, while tribes speaking proto-Mongolic languages resided in Northern Manchuria and Northeastern Mongolia. Chinese sources already noted the ethnic distinctions among them.

During this period, nomadic peoples inhabiting Central Asia were referred to by Sima Qian as Rong and Di, and were later collectively called Hu. At the same time, the Shanrong ("Mountain Rong") and Donghu ("Eastern Barbarians") lived in the steppes of Inner Mongolia, Southern Manchuria, and the Greater Khingan mountain ranges. It is evident that the Rong were proto-Turks, and the Donghu were proto-Mongols of the time. Politically fragmented, they were described as "scattered along mountain valleys, each with their own leader; although the more than a hundred tribes of the Rong frequently gathered, they could not unify as a single whole."

Historical sources indicate that their primary occupation was nomadic pastoralism: "They migrate with their livestock depending on the abundance of grass and water. They do not have permanent settlements. They live in round yurts with east-facing entrances. They consume meat, drink kumis, and wear garments made from multicolored woolen fabrics. Those who are brave, strong, and capable of resolving disputes are appointed as elders. They have no hereditary succession. Each encampment has a lower-ranking leader. Communities consist of between one hundred and a thousand households. From the elders to the lowest servant, all tend their own livestock and property, and do not exploit one another's labor. On every matter, they seek the counsel of women. Warfare is considered a matter of utmost importance." The ancient Kyrgyz, too, lived in a similar "barbarian" lifestyle.

As Turkic-speaking tribes separated from the Altaic linguistic unity and began developing common Turkic features, new terms and concepts emerged in association with their nomadic way of life and evolving culture. These included the adaptation to new fauna and flora, the development of livestock breeding and agriculture, and the emergence of local industries. Moreover, continuous interaction among Turkic-speaking nomadic tribes contributed to the development of shared linguistic elements, which are reflected both in grammar and, to some extent, in the lexicon of modern closely related Turkic languages.

Regarding the Kyrgyz language, two stages can be distinguished in its development during antiquity and the early Middle Ages:

1. 3rd century BCE – 8th century CE: This ancient Kyrgyz stage in the history of the Kyrgyz language's features took place in the regions of Eastern Turkestan, the Tien Shan Mountains (Tengir-Too), the Minusinsk Basin, and the nearby areas of the Sayan-Altai Mountains.
2. 9th – 13th centuries CE: During this period, the Kyrgyz language developed its distinctive characteristics and dialects, forming its national features. The nomadic Kyrgyz tribes had largely formed into a nation.

The ancient Kyrgyz (referred to as "Jiangun" or "Tszyangun") lived during the second half of the 1st millennium BCE. In the region of Eastern Turkestan, specifically the Tien Shan (Pritianshan), they actively participated in the political events of that era. According to Sima Qian, during the Warring States period (403–221 BCE), a new political situation emerged in Eastern Turkestan, Central Asia, and Inner Asia. The once powerful Rong were replaced by strong alliances of

nomadic tribes in the north and west, such as the Donghu (Xiongnu) and Yuezhi (Tocharians). The nomadic Donghu tribes unified under a single ruler and entered a “flourishing era.”

Maodun, the founder of the Xiongnu Empire in the 2nd century BCE, subjugated the tribes of the Sayan, Altai, and upper Yenisei regions. Between 176–165 BCE, he and his successor Laoshan defeated the Yuezhi. The Yuezhi invaded Semirechye (Zhetyisu) and the Tien Shan regions. Later, they migrated southwest and contributed to the rise of the powerful Kushan Empire in Bactria. The Xiongnu established control over the wealthy oasis states in the Tarim Basin. Their undivided political influence in Eastern Turkestan lasted for over half a century. One of the last Hun tribes to migrate to Eastern Turkestan, according to Klyashtorny's research, had a significant impact on the region's fate.

During the second half of the 1st millennium BCE and the first half of the 1st millennium CE, the ancient Kyrgyz (Jiangun) lived in the territories of Eastern Turkestan and the Tien Shan region. According to Chinese Han sources, as cited by Yu.S. Khudyakov, the Jiangun resided north and west of the Usun, north of the Wujie, south of the Dinlin, and east of Kangju.

The earliest written records about the ancient Kyrgyz appear in Sima Qian's “Shiji” (“Historical Records”). In a narrative dated to 201 BCE, we read: “Later in the north, they (the Xiongnu – according to J. Baktigulov) conquered the lands of the Xunyu, Kyueshe, Dingling, Gegun, and Tsaili.” A number of researchers, including academician V.V. Bartold, believe that the name “Gegun” (also appearing as “Gyangun”) is a Chinese transcription of the word “Kyrgyz.” In turn, “Kyueshe” is believed to refer to the Kipchaks. This ancient Kyrgyz state (referred to as the “Dominion of the Kyrgyz”) emerged around the same time as Maodun's Xiongnu Empire. Unfortunately, researchers lack concrete information regarding its precise location, territory, and borders. Academician V.V. Bartold believed it was situated in the area of Lake Kyrgyz-Nur in Western Mongolia.

Modern calculations conducted by the Sinologist L. A. Borovkova have led to unexpected conclusions. According to her findings, in the 3rd century BCE, the Kyrgyz territories were not located in the vast region of Central Asia, but rather near the current borders of the Kyrgyz Republic — in proximity to Eastern Turkestan. She argues that the area inhabited by the Kyrgyz was situated north of the Boro-Khoro range and in the western part of the Dzosotin-Elisun desert. In the first half of the 1st millennium CE, during the wars with the Xiongnu and the Rouran, the ancient Kyrgyz-Jiankun became part of the Gaogü Dinlin alliance, which included Tiele tribes. As a result of the conflict between the Rouran and the Tiele, many ancient Kyrgyz from Eastern Turkestan likely migrated to the Yenisei region, while others remained and continued living according to the customs and laws of their ancestors. Following the fall of the Uyghur Khaganate in 840 CE, the expansion of the Yenisei Kyrgyz was directed toward Eastern Turkestan. At the same time, they followed other Tiele tribes who had fled the territories of the collapsed Uyghur Khaganate toward the Eastern Tien Shan regions.

The Chinese historian of Kyrgyz ethnicity, Anvar Boytur, in his book *Qyrghyz Tarikhinin Leksiallari* (“Lectures on the History of the Kyrgyz,” Bishkek, 1992), presents numerous new findings about the Kyrgyz who lived in Kyrgyzstan during the early feudal Turkic Khaganates. He notes that during the reign of the Qarakhanid Khagans, Kyrgyz tribes resided in the Tien Shan, Pamir-Alay, Issyk-Kul basin, and the Talas Valley.

Professional historians generally associate the beginning of Turkic ethnogenesis with the collapse of the nomadic empire of the Xiongnu and the emergence of previously unknown tribal groups in Central Asia. The early stage of Turkic ethnogenesis is documented in genealogical legends about the origin of the Ashina clan and the formation of a Turkic tribal union under its leadership. These legends also reveal the origins of three other tribal customs linked to the early ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz, Kipchaks, and Teles (Oghuz) peoples. These narratives reflect events that took place in the Eastern Tien Shan and Sayan-Altai regions during the 4th–5th centuries. On the borders of the early feudal Turkic states of the 6th–10th centuries, four major groups of Turkic-speaking tribes became centers for the formation of new ethnic groups.

The above allows us to conclude that Tien Shan (Pritianshanye), Pamir-Alay, and Eastern Turkestan were important regions in the ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz people. The ancient Kyrgyz-Jiankun who lived in these areas constituted the core of the Kyrgyz nation. According to the data presented in Anvar Boytur's Lectures on the History of the Kyrgyz, the presence of large Kyrgyz tribes in the territories of present-day Kyrgyzstan and Eastern Turkestan during antiquity and the early Middle Ages serves as evidence of this.

Conclusion

The ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz people is a subject that encompasses a wide range of historical, linguistic, and cultural data. Ancient Chinese sources, archaeological findings, and linguistic analysis all point to a long-standing presence of the Kyrgyz in Central Asia. Their language, culture, and territorial associations illustrate the deep historical roots and the continuity of the Kyrgyz ethnic identity.

The influence of various nomadic empires, migrations, and political shifts contributed to shaping the Kyrgyz people, but their cultural and linguistic core has remained distinct. Continued interdisciplinary research is essential to fully uncover the rich and complex history of the Kyrgyz people and their place in the broader Turkic world.

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