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The Medieval Uyghurs of the 8th through 14th Centuries

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Summary and Keywords

The medieval Uyghurs became a political entity in the mid-8th century when they established their steppe empire as the inheritors of the ancient Türk steppe tribal confederation. They ruled their empire for a century from their capital city in the heart of the Mongol steppe. Their empire ended when rival Kirgiz tribes attacked it, and the Uyghur aristocracy fled south into the borderland areas between China and the steppe. Two groups of diaspora Uyghurs built new states in Gansu and the Tarim Basin. The Gansu Uyghurs stayed in that region but never exerted any real power as a state. The Uyghurs who migrated to the Tarim Basin were more successful, building an independent kingdom that maintained a stable rule over the mixed population of city dwellers and nomads who lived in the far-flung oases of the area. The Tarim Basin Uyghurs readily adapted to the sedentary lifestyle and built one of the most highly diverse societies of the age, where Buddhists, Nestorian Christians, Manichaeans, Zoroastrians, and nomads all lived side by side. Even after they became subjects of the Qarakhitai and then the Mongols, the Uyghurs retained some autonomy as political rulers in the Tarim Basin. That ended when Khubilai lost control of the Tarim Basin and most of the Uyghur aristocracy moved to China. The Uyghur diaspora refashioned their identity a third time in China as members of the conquest government and the cultural literati. Their existence as a distinct political entity ended with the eviction from China of the Mongols.

Keywords: Tarim Basin, Gansu, Mongols, steppe, qaghan, iduqut, Türk, Buddhism, Manichaeism

Introduction

By the beginning of the 8th century, the Uyghurs had emerged from the great confederation of Turkic tribes with their own political identity secure and with plans to rule the steppe on their own terms. The next six hundred years witnessed their phenomenal rise to power as a steppe empire replacing their Türk overlords, then to be displaced by rival nomadic tribes, only to rise again in the borderlands between China and the steppe where one group of the diaspora constructed an urban, commercially focused kingdom that had as much in common with the great Eurasian states as with steppe nomadic culture. When Chinggis Qan emerged from the steppe leading the next great steppe confederation of tribes, the medieval Uyghurs willingly joined his venture. They only faded from the Eurasian political scene when the Mongol Empire dissolved in the mid-14th century. The appellation “Uyghur” was a political identity, not an ethnic, tribal, or territorial designation in those times.

Origins of the Uyghurs

The origins of the Uyghurs are difficult to unravel because of the nature of the earliest sources and how they understood, described, and named the array of steppe tribes and peoples. The first mention of the Uyghurs as a distinct tribal group is the 6th-century Chinese history of the Northern and Eastern Wei states (*Wei Shu*), which comments that the Uyghurs originated from the Xiongnu tribes, and that they were known at the time of the Wei states as the Gaoche (“high cart”) people, about ten thousand in number, who were a subgroup in the large confederation of steppe tribes known as the Tiele. The Gaoche eventually split into two separate groups; one group, called the On Uyghur (“Ten Uyghurs”), stayed in the steppe, living in the Orkhon and Selenge river valleys; the second group, known as the Tokuz Oghuz (“Nine Oghuz”), migrated southwest into the Altai region around the Tianshan Mountains.¹ These locations eventually became the centers of two Uyghur states. At that time, all of the tribes just mentioned were members of the reigning Türk qaghanate that ruled the steppe.

By the middle of the 7th century, the Türk qaghanate was declining, due not least to the fact that it divided into western and eastern groups with different leaders. By then the Uyghurs had begun to establish their own relations with Tang China, which gave them military titles as part of the classic Chinese strategy of pitting nomadic tribal groups against each other. It was also around the 650s that one Uyghur clan, the Yaghlaqar, emerged as the ruling clan and the appellation “Uyghur” became firmly established as their political identity. The Uyghurs were led by a skilled warrior named Pusa, who defeated a Türk army of some 100,000 and then submitted directly to the Chinese court as part of his strategy of separating fully from Türk authority. The Tang emperor rewarded Pusa with gifts and imperial titles. His successor, Tumidu, assumed the ancient Türk imperial title qaghan in 640. After Tumidu, little is known about the Uyghur state for the next several decades beyond the names of their leaders, which included a woman, Bilidu, who reigned from 664 to 680. One problem in following their history at that time is the fact that some sources continue to lump them into the larger Tiele confederation.

The Eastern Türk qaghanate regained its power late in the 7th century, and the Uyghurs once again came under their authority. The increasingly fractious Uyghurs rebelled against Türk authority again in 717 but were defeated. About that time, the Chinese Tang emperor sent an imperial envoy to the Uyghurs to encourage them to unite with two other Turkic tribes who were also chafing under the Eastern Türks, the Qarluq and Basmil. They joined forces and defeated their Türk overlords in 744. Turning again to China, the Uyghur qaghan had the head of the defeated Eastern Türk qaghan sent there, signifying his own newfound power and his interest in maintaining good relations with the Tang emperor. The last Türk steppe empire collapsed shortly thereafter, and the Uyghurs soon replaced them as masters of the steppe.

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The alliance between the three Turkic tribes did not last long; just as soon as the rebellion against the Türk qaghan was completed, the Uyghurs convinced the Qarluq tribes to join them in fighting the Basmil tribes. Once they had defeated the Basmil, the Uyghurs then turned against the Qarluqs. Once done, the Uyghur qaghan at the time, Gulipeiluo, announced the establishment of his state, structured largely along the lines of the old Türk qaghanate. He took the royal title Qutlugh Bilge Köl qaghan, the first ruler of the new Uyghur qaghanate, and his own Yaghlaqar clan became the Uyghur royal family. The rest of Qutlugh's reign was taken up with laying the groundwork to expanded Uyghur control over all of the territory formerly ruled by the Eastern Türks.

The Uyghur Steppe Empire

Society and Culture

The apex of power of the new Uyghur qaghanate was realized under the rule of Qutlugh's son, Mouyanchuo (titled Bayan Chor qaghan, or El-etmish Bilge qaghan, r. 747–759), and grandson, Mouyu (titled Bögü qaghan, r. 759–779). One of Bayan Chor qaghan's first tasks was to expand Uyghur power over other steppe tribes. Within a short period of time (between 747 and 755), he defeated or convinced tribes that lived across the steppe, from present-day Manchuria all the way west to the banks of the Syr Darya River (known then as the Jaxartes, flowing northwest out of the Tianshan Mountains into the Aral Sea), to unite under his leadership. This fractious lot did not all abide the fact of Uyghur overlordship for very long, and the Uyghur empire was undone within a century by the same centrifugal forces that the Uyghurs themselves profited from in their own quest for independence in the 740s.²

Bayan Chor qaghan continued the close relationship with Tang begun by his father. He also invested in city building, one of the cultural hallmarks of the Uyghur steppe empire. His capital, called Qara Balghasun (also known as Ordu Baliq) was built on the Orkhon river in the central Mongolian steppe, the cultural and spiritual center of the old Türk empire (and about twenty-five kilometers from the site of the future Mongol capital city, Qaraqorum). It was an important outward sign that the Uyghurs had inherited and saw themselves as continuing the Türk legacy. His other city, Bay Baliq, was built on the Selenga River by Chinese and Sogdians. The Arab traveler Tamim ibn-Bahr, who visited one of these cities, probably Qara Balghasun, in 821, has left a vivid description of the place as heavily fortified with twelve iron gates and a lively urban and commercial scene.³ As the qaghan's official residence it also contained a golden tent that could be seen some distance away from the city. The Uyghur city-building activities were also undoubtedly influenced by their connections to the Sogdians, an Iranian people who lived

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in the ancient trade centers Bukhara and Samarkand, and who specialized as brokers in overland international trade.

Under Bayan Chor's leadership, the Uyghurs developed a thriving urban culture with a sophisticated economic base that relied on their involvement in international trade and growing influence in the affairs of Tang China. That relationship was reified in 758 when the Tang emperor sent one of his daughters as a wife to Bayan Chor as thanks for his help in suppressing the rebellion of the Sogdian general An Lushan in 755. When Bayan Chor died in 759, he was memorialized by his son and successor, Bögü qaghan, with a large stone stele erected near Lake Shine Usu in the steppe. The stone recorded the history of Bayan Chor's military victories and activities.⁴ This stele inscription is one of the most important primary sources on the early history of the medieval Uyghurs.

Bөгü qaghan is perhaps best known for his conversion to Manichaeism, which occurred when he encountered Manichaean monks in China. He invited the monks to return with him to Qara Balghasun, and this resulted in the conversion of the Uyghur royal clan to that religion. The spread of Manichaeism among the Uyghur elite contributed greatly to their adopting a sedentary lifestyle. It also provided an opportunity for the Sogdians to gain influence with the Uyghurs.

Relations with China

The Uyghurs may not have succeeded in freeing themselves from their old Türk overlords and establishing their own steppe empire had not their relationship with China been as good as it was during Bayan Chor's and Bögü's reigns. After Arab armies defeated Tang forces in a crucial battle at the Talas River in Central Asia in 751, Tang was forced to pull out of the area west of Gansu. Those events weakened the Tang court and left it vulnerable to opportunists like the Sogdian general An Lushan, who had been given control of the entire Shandong area by the Tang court. He began his revolt in 755 and quickly overran the Tang capital. Fortunately, Bayan Chor was prepared to help his Chinese allies, and he answered the call in 757 with a force of some four thousand Uyghur mounted troops that advanced into China and quickly restored order, killing An Lushan in the process. In addition to providing critical military help, Bayan Chor also gave his younger daughter to the Tang emperor as a bride. The Tang emperor duly thanked Bayan Chor in 758 by sending his daughter, the Princess Ningguo, to him as a wife. This rare act was a serious commitment to the Uyghurs by the Chinese emperor, and cemented their position as important allies of Tang.

An Lushan was killed in 757, but his son and subordinates continued the rebellion. Bayan Chor's son, Bögü qaghan, led another Uyghur force into China to mop up the remaining rebel groups in 762, and it was then that he encountered the Manichaean monks in the Tang capital and converted to their religion. By this time the Uyghurs were able to force the Tang court to engage in a highly unfavorable trade relationship with them by which Uyghur horses were traded in exchange for Chinese silks. The Uyghurs profited

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handsomely from the deal, which was brokered by Sogdian merchants as the designated trading agents. Many Uyghurs were also given official Chinese administrative ranks and titles, and were granted extraordinary liberties to extort the Chinese population at will.

Bögü qaghan's conversion and declaration of Manichaeism as the official Uyghur state religion, and the increasing power of Manichaean monks and Sogdian personnel at the Uyghur court, was not universally accepted by all Uyghurs, especially those who objected to the shift to a more sedentary lifestyle that Sogdian advisors encouraged. Their objections occurred just at the time when a Tang regional governor defeated Bögü qaghan in a battle in China, part of growing Tang resistance to the ongoing and overbearing presence of Uyghurs who had settled in the capital Chang'an. The result was a revolt against Bögü qaghan in 779 at Qara Balghasun by his uncle Tun Bagha Tarkan, who had Bögü qaghan and his entire extended family and close associates—some two thousand people—killed. Tun then had himself enthroned with the title Alp Kutlug Bilge qaghan and ruled for a decade (r. 779–789).

The Tibetan kingdom took advantage of the political crisis to extend their power into some Tarim Basin oases. The Uyghur-Tibetan war of 790 resulted in Tibet pushing north into the Tarim Basin area and defeating Uyghur forces who controlled Beiting. That defeat contributed to the very short reign of Tun Bagha Tarkan's son, Tolosi, who was assassinated soon after his ascension to the title of qaghan after his father's death, and who was, in turn, assassinated by his younger brother. This rapid churn in the Uyghur leadership can be traced to the division between the pro- and anti-Sogdian factions among the Uyghur aristocracy. It also spelled the beginning of the end for the Uyghur steppe empire. Fortunately for the long-term fate of the Uyghurs, they regained control over the Tarim Basin oases by the end of the 8th century, helped in this by the fact that subsequent Uyghur qaghans renewed their faith and reliance on Sogdians and Manichaeans.

A total of nine individuals ruled as qaghan in the fifty-two years between Tolosi's confirmation as qaghan in 789 and the last Uyghur qaghan to rule a united empire from Qara Balghasun, Ögä qaghan (r. 841–847). By the time Ögä ascended the throne, the nomadic Kirgiz, one of the traditional enemies of the Uyghurs, were already well into a series of attacks begun in the 750s on the Uyghur state. They finally succeeded in driving the Uyghurs out of Qara Balghasun in 844, at which point the Uyghurs broke into three separate groups who fled south. Two of those groups recreated states for themselves; the largest group went southwest to the Tarim Basin, and the other group fled due south into present-day Gansu.

The Uyghur Diaspora

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The breakup of the Uyghur steppe empire was the first change in a quick cascading of geopolitical shifts that engulfed Central and East Asia. The Kirgiz tribes never established the same kind of imperial state in the steppe as the Uyghurs, nor, perhaps, did they have any interest in doing so. The Tibetan state soon followed the path of the Uyghur empire in suffering its own quick collapse, and Tang China, while it took longer to finally disintegrate, also did so in 907. Two new Uyghur states eventually arose out of that political vacuum in present-day Gansu and further west in the Tarim Basin oases. Relatively few details about the migration of the Uyghurs out of the steppe or the early history of either of the new states they established are known to historians, due to sparse extant records. But the records are clear that it was the Uyghurs who migrated into the Tarim Basin who continued the legacy of empire begun by their ancestors at Qara Balghasun.

Ganzhou Uyghurs

The Uyghurs who migrated south into Gansu continued to have good relations with the Tang court until its demise in 907, and then with the series of successor states to Tang that occupied northern China until 960, when the Song Dynasty was established.⁵ The complicated history of these post-Tang states need not be discussed here except to note that Ganzhou Uyghur leaders were given Chinese imperial titles by some of those rulers. The Ganzhou Uyghur leader known by the Chinese-style name Renmei conquered Dunhuang in far western Gansu in 911, and he sent envoys to the Later Liang and Later Tang courts around that time. He was given an imperial Chinese title by the Later Tang Dynasty emperor in 924, and was also identified in the sources at that time as the Yingyi qaghan. The sources identify six subsequent qaghans at Ganzhou who were given Chinese imperial titles.

The Ganzhou Uyghurs were also the tributaries of the Khitan (known as Liao in Chinese), the first semi-nomadic state to rule part of northern China immediately after the Tang collapsed. Several tributary missions between Ganzhou and Liao are recorded between the years 913 and 1053. Interestingly, that tributary relationship continued to be honored even after the Uyghurs had been taken over by the Tanguts in 1028. Once Tang collapsed, the Tanguts were able to expand their own state based on a combination of commercial trade and nomadic pastoralism. A decade after annexing the Ganzhou Uyghur territories, the Tanguts established their own state of Great Xia in 1038. Although now absorbed into the Tangut Xia domain, the Ganzhou Uyghurs continued to cultivate good relations with the next nomadic state that occupied part of north China, the Jurchen (known as Jin in Chinese), and also with Song China. Several tributary missions were sent by the Uyghurs from Ganzhou to the Jin court between 1127 and 1172. Song records also show some interactions with the Ganzhou Uyghurs, but Song attention was drawn mainly to the Uyghur kingdom in the Tarim Basin, most famously in the visit by the Song Chinese envoy Wang Yande in 982, who left a fascinating description of life in the two capital cities Qocho and Beshbaliq.

Tarim Basin Uyghurs

Like the Ganzhou Uyghurs, the new state constructed in the Tarim Basin by the largest group of Uyghur diaspora was different from their earlier empire because it was based in settled oasis areas rather than grazing grounds. Unlike the Ganzhou Uyghurs, the Uyghur Tarim Basin state maintained its relative independence for a long time, even while becoming subjects of first the Qarakhitai (the state founded by a remnant of the Khitan Liao ruling elite based at Balasaghun in present-day Kirgizstan) and eventually the Mongols.⁶ A member of the old Uyghur aristocracy at Qara Balghasun named Mangli (also known as Menglig Tegin) led a large contingent of some fifteen Uyghur tribes to the Kucha area on the northern rim of the Tarim Basin around 840 and asserted his identity as the first Uyghur qaghan in that region. Kucha, midway between Kashgar and Turfan, was one of the largest Tarim Basin oasis settlements at that time and the seat of an independent kingdom as far back as the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (r. 141–87 BCE). Kucha is also an excellent example of the multicultural milieu alive and well in the Tarim Basin well before that part of the Uyghur diaspora established their kingdom there; it was the center of Tocharian language and culture and Buddhism.⁷

The collapse of the Uyghur steppe empire and migration south destabilized Tibet's northern frontier zone, which helped the Uyghurs extend their power into other Tarim Basin oases. From his base at Kucha, Mangli evicted the Tibetans from the strategic oases Dunhuang, Hami, and Turfan. His victory was the final act in a long back-and-forth between the Uyghurs and Tibetans across the Tarim Basin.⁸ As a result, the Tang emperor recognized Mangli with an imperial title in 857. By that time, Mangli had re-established himself at the old city Beiting (Beshbaliq), which the Uyghurs had controlled on and off before. He further consolidated his control of the Tarim Basin area in 866 when he gained control of Gaochang (Kocho) on the south side of the Tianshan Mountains. Gaochang appears to have been the Uyghur winter capital, while Beiting (also known as Beshbaliq), on the north flank of the eastern Tianshan, remained the primary Uyghur capital until 1270.

The Tarim Basin provided a good environment for the Uyghurs to further their turn to the sedentary lifestyle that they had embarked on already in the steppe. A long line of nomadic and sedentary groups had populated the region for centuries, including the Xiongnu, Kushans, Hephthalites, Chinese, and Sogdians. By the 9th century, the local population consisted of a mixture of Uyghur and Iranian/Tokharian (Sogdian and Khotanese) urban and semi-sedentary peoples and nomadic non-Uyghur Turkic tribes (such as the Basmil and Toquz Oguz tribes). Tokharian language dominated the area, and Buddhism was the religion of choice among most of the inhabitants of the northern Tarim Basin. But because of its location, the Tarim Basin was home to other religions, especially Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity (Church of the East), Islam, and shamanism.

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Since the Uyghurs had established a presence in the Tarim Basin in the days of their steppe empire, it was also natural that the diaspora went there in 840. Their legitimacy as the new rulers of the region was also enhanced because they brought the Sogdian and Manichaean influence with them. In fact, Arab and Chinese sources are clear that the Uyghurs continued to profess Manichaeism until late in the 10th century, when many of the Uyghur ruling elite shifted to profess Buddhism. The Song Chinese envoy Wang Yande, in his visit to Gaochang in 982 reported the existence of some fifty Buddhist monasteries there!

The Uyghurs' adoption of Buddhism was due to the influence of at least two major centers of Buddhism in the northern Tarim Basin, the Tokharians in the Kucha-Karashahr-Turfan area, and Chinese in the region spanning Beshbaliq-Turfan-Dunhuang. Tokharians and Chinese occupied the leading religious positions as high priests until the mid-11th century, when Uyghur personnel came into their own as religious leaders. The conversion of the Uyghurs was also likely as much a political as a religious decision, since it would provide them with a claim that they represented the inhabitants of the oases across the entire northern Tarim Basin, who professed Buddhism, as a defense against the Muslim Qarakhanids to their west.⁹

One of the important legacies of the Uyghur conversion to Buddhism was the formation of a large corpus of Uyghur Buddhist literature written mainly in a new Uyghur script that replaced the old Turkic runic system, but also in Brāhmi and Tibetan. Mahayana and Theravada traditions dominated the Tarim Basin region until the late 13th century, when Tibetan influence grew, mainly due to Mongol control of China. One of the most important texts produced was the Uyghur translation of the biography of the Tang Dynasty Buddhist monk Xuanzang (602–664), who traveled across 138 countries in seventeen years of total travel (629–645) in his quest to go to India to locate Buddhist scriptures. The Uyghur Buddhist translator Šingqo Šāli Tutung (fl. 930s) produced this biography, the longest and most complete personal biography of anyone in Chinese history.¹⁰ It is important because it provides invaluable information on a host of other issues besides medieval Buddhism, ranging from archaic Turkic and Chinese languages to historical geography.

Thanks to their new writing system, much is known about daily life in the Uyghur kingdom, especially for lower classes, from the many civil documents produced there, such as labor contracts and bills of sale that have been found. Developing a new writing system was but one part of the Uyghur administrative system, which borrowed from Iranian, Turkic, and Chinese customs and terminology. These new systems were undoubtedly needed to enable the Uyghurs to effectively rule the very diverse population across the Tarim Basin. One example of that change is the title the Uyghurs adopted for their political ruler: *iduqut*. Rather than continue to use the old Turkic term “*qaghan*,” the Uyghurs took the term “*iduqut*” from the Basmil tribe. The Uyghurs also continued or improved on other technologies such as metal working, weaving, and visual and plastic arts. Uyghur craftsmen and artists gained a reputation as highly skilled producers of luxury items for sacred and secular consumption. The Uyghurs continued to rule over

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their Tarim Basin kingdom with a great deal of autonomy even after they became formal subjects of the Qarakhitai in 1130.

Uyghurs under Qarakhitai

The nomadic Khitan established their Liao dynasty that ruled Manchuria, the Mongol steppe, and parts of northern China for over two hundred years until they were defeated by Jurchen tribesmen in 1125. One Khitan prince, Yelu Dashi, refused to submit to the Jurchen and, with a small group of followers, fled west to Kedun in Mongolia, a garrison of the Liao, where he hoped to regroup and restore the Liao state. He eventually moved further west to the Chu River valley in present-day Kirgizstan, where he set up his capital at the Qarakhanid city Balasagun. His state, known as the Qarakhitai or Western Liao, used Liao and Chinese administrative structures and titles, and lasted less than a century (1124–1218) before being conquered by the Mongols.

The Qarakhitai territory eventually expanded east to include the Tarim Basin oasis towns Kashgar, Khotan and Beshbaliq, and southwest into the Ferghana Valley and eastern Qarakhanid state. By 1142 the Qarakhitai center controlled a large area of largely autonomous states and tribes that included most of modern Xinjiang, Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and southern Kazakhstan.

At first the Qarakhitai gorkhan required very little of the Uyghurs apart from annual tribute payments. No Qarakhitai overseers were stationed at the Uyghur capitals; instead, they used the traditional nomadic strategy, requiring the Uyghur iduqut to send his sons to live at Balasagun as hostages. The Uyghurs were otherwise free to administer their kingdom as they saw fit. By the late 11th century, the relationship between the Qarakhitai and the Uyghurs worsened when the Qarakhitai demanded increasing amounts of annual tribute payments and sent a Qarakhitai representative to live permanently at the Uyghur capital. By 1209, after the Qarakhitai sent a particularly ruthless overseer, the iduqut at the time, Barchuq Art Tegin (fl. 1200), had him assassinated and then promptly submitted to Chinggis. The iduqut's actions were timely, since the Qarakhitai would themselves soon be extinguished by the Mongols, and put the Uyghurs in Chinggis's favor. The iduqut and his fellow Uyghur aristocrats were thereafter given choice appointments in the Mongol administration, especially in China.

Uyghurs under the Mongols

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Barchuq Art Tegin did not have a personal interview with Chinggis until 1211, but when this finally occurred, Chinggis decreed that he was like a fifth son to him and gave him a daughter, Alche Altun, in marriage. Barchuq was allowed to retain his Uyghur title of *idugut* over the Uyghurs, and many Uyghurs were allowed to return to the Tarim Basin. In return, Barchuq was ordered to lead his tribesmen in several military campaigns, most importantly against the one remaining tribal group, the Naiman, in the long campaign in Khwarazm in 1216, and in 1225 when Chinggis turned to complete unfinished business against the Tanguts. Barchuq was apparently a skilled military leader; sources record his skills in the Mongol siege of the city Nishapur, and he crushed a rebellion of some ten thousand of his own troops who did not comply with his submission to the Mongols.

After Barchuq's death in Ogodei's reign (c. 1229–1241), he was succeeded by three of his sons, all of whom were invested with the Uyghur imperial title at Beshbaliq. His third son, Salindi (d. 1253 or 1254), however, backed the wrong side in the succession dispute that broke out after Guyuk's untimely death in 1248. After Mongke was elected as Grand Qaghan, Salindi and some other Uyghur aristocrats were put on trial as part of a wider purge instigated by Mongke, and Salindi's own brother, Ögrünch, was forced to be his executioner back in Beshbaliq. Ögrünch was then given the title *idugut*, and he held power until his death in 1257. Descendants of this family continued to hold the title *idugut* at Beshbaliq until the early 1270s, when they moved east to Qarakhocho to avoid threats from two Chaghadaid princes who were contesting Khubilai's control of the Tarim Basin. It was then that large numbers of Uyghur aristocratic families began to leave Uyghuristan for China. The dislocation of the Uyghur *iduguts* from their traditional centers of power became even more pronounced in 1283, when the Yuan court moved them to the walled city Yongchang in Gansu. From that point, while Uyghurs continued to be appointed as *iduguts* for the remainder of the Yuan, they had little real power over their homeland. Yuan efforts to maintain their hold over the old Uyghur areas in the Tarim Basin ended decisively by about 1295.

The Uyghur *iduguts* ruled their kingdom with almost complete freedom until Ogodei appointed the Türk Mahmud Yalavach to govern the entire Tarim Basin and Khwarazm state. That practice of appointing a trusted administrator over the region continued under Mongke, who also moved large numbers of Mongol forces into the area to destroy his rivals, the Ogodeid and Chaghadaid branches of the Mongol imperial clan. The amount of real power the Uyghur *iduguts* wielded decreased by degree after Chinggis's death until Khubilai's accession to power in 1260 and the start of a major civil war between Khubilai and his younger brother. That civil war ultimately involved the Tarim Basin, and necessitated the Uyghur *idugut*'s removal from Beshbaliq and Gaochang. From that point the *iduguts* became full-fledged dependents of the Yuan court, and most of the Uyghur aristocracy fled to China.

Uyghurs in Mongol China

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The settlement of the Uyghur aristocratic diaspora in Mongol China was something that concerned Khubilai greatly. In the late 1260s he ordered the sixth Uyghur iduqut, Qochgar, to gather the diaspora Uyghurs who had come to China under his leadership. Qochgar had moved east during his reign to Qamil (present-day Hami) where he died around 1280. His move out of Beshbaliq corresponded with attempts by the Yuan court to maintain control over the Tarim Basin; in 1281, Beshbaliq became the official seat of a Mongol military protectorate in the region, and two years later the Yuan court established the more comprehensive Pacification Bureau, also at Beshbaliq. That bureau directly supervised all military, economic, and political affairs in the Tarim Basin.

Qochgar's son, Ne'üril Tegin, was the first Uyghur iduqut who ruled from China proper when he moved his court to the city Yongchang in Gansu around 1283. Importantly, although he succeeded his father in 1280, he was not granted the title of iduqut until 1308 and ruled in that capacity only ten years until his death in 1318. From this point, the Uyghur iduquts had no influence over events in the Tarim Basin, but the title continued to exist and be inherited by descendants in China through the mid-14th century. In a nod to the lingering importance of the Uyghurs to the founder of the Mongol Empire, the Yuan court granted several generations of male descendants in the iduqut's family the honorific title "Prince of Gaochang" (*Gaochang wang*), with simultaneous appointments to real offices in the Yuan central secretariat or as provincial governors and military affairs officials.

Uyghurs followed the pattern of other Central Asian personnel in Mongol China; they began their careers by inheriting their father's military title, but most then shifted to take positions in the civil bureaucracy. Many Uyghurs also participated in the Chinese-style civil service exams once they were restarted in 1315, and they rose quickly through the ranks. Unlike their fellow Central Asians, Uyghurs enjoyed a special legal status in China. All legal disputes that involved a Uyghur had to be decided by a court that included a Uyghur judge. In 1281, Khubilai decreed a special court should handle all Uyghur legal disputes, and Uyghurs were appointed as judges and officials in that bureau, and it continued to function until the end of the dynasty.¹¹

The Uyghurs who served the Mongols in China from the first generation were highly valued for their military, linguistic, and administrative skills, and they were appointed to important civil and military positions right away. Because of their early, voluntary submission to Chinggis, as well as their experience, they were grouped with other people from Central and Western Asia into the administrative category called "Semuren" that was created by the Mongols to organize people in north China. The Semuren were viewed and grouped just below the Mongols themselves in this scheme, and above the third group, those who lived in north China at the time of the Mongol conquest (Chinese, Jurchens, Khitans) and known collectively as "Northerners" (lit. "Hanren").¹² Examples abound, including the two Uyghurs from the same aristocratic family who advised and tutored Chinggis's youngest brother, Odchigin Temur. Another Uyghur was put in charge of tax collection on Tolui's appanage estate in north China. Uyghurs continued to be appointed to high-ranking positions at the court and provinces until the very end of the

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Yuan Dynasty. For example, six Uyghurs were appointed as provincial governors out of a total of seventy appointees in those positions during the dynasty. Uyghurs also became part of Chinese literati society; some of the more prominent Neo-Confucian scholars were Uyghurs, and Uyghurs were appointed to be imperial tutors and members of imperial ideological and history bureaus. Others became well-known artists and poets. One such person, whose life trajectory was only different from many other Uyghurs by degree, not kind, was the poet Guan Yunshi, known by his Uyghur name as Sävinch Qaya (1286–1324).¹³ Guan's extended family were part of the Uyghur aristocracy at Beshbaliq. Like many other Central Asians, Guan inherited his father's official position as a commander of a military garrison, but then rose quickly in the ranks to appointments to the Mongol Imperial Academy and imperial Bureau of State Historiography. By 1317, Guan had retired from office to focus on his poetry and leading the life of a literatus. Guan serves as a nice example of the fate of the Uyghurs who entered China in service to the Mongols. Like Guan's family, most Uyghurs were able to shift career trajectories from the military by the second or third generation their families had lived in China. Their descendants became officials, teachers, artists, and members of the literati. Many Uyghurs adopted Chinese-style surnames, and blended in to Chinese society, where they continued to live and thrive after the Mongols were evicted from China by the next dynastic founder.

Conclusion

By the end of the Mongol period, the Uyghurs had largely lost their unique political identity that they constructed back in the 8th century when they separated from the old Türk confederation. In the six centuries between that time and the dissipation of the Mongol imperium, the Uyghurs went from being one of the most powerful and important nomadic tribes who helped the Tang Dynasty survive, to one of the best examples of how nomads managed to transition into a sedentary, urban- and commercially oriented state and society. That heritage served the Uyghurs well after they became clients of other states, especially the Mongols. They left a rich legacy of texts and material culture that scholars are still mining. Those findings reveal the medieval Uyghurs as one of the great peoples and states in world history.

Discussion of the Literature

Scholarship on the medieval Uyghurs falls into three major categories: (1) archaeology, (2) material and visual culture, and (3) textual studies. Archaeology has been conducted in the steppe and the Tarim Basin region by many explorers and scientists for well over a century. Studies of archaeological findings have yielded important findings on the medieval Uyghurs' society, culture, politics, economy, and relations with other steppe tribes and settled societies. Archaeological studies have been conducted on the Uyghur

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political capitals at Qara Balghasun, Beshbaliq, and Kocho. Perhaps more important than those sites, however, has been the archaeological work done on steppe and Tarim Basin sites that have yielded important material and textual findings. One example of important archaeological work conducted in the Mongol steppe was the discovery of the 8th-century Orkhon Inscriptions by a Russian archaeological expedition in the area of the Orkhon River in Mongolia in 1889. The runic scripts on that stone are the oldest preserved form of any Turkic language, and the find and subsequent decipherment of the texts has provided valuable information on old Uyghur language and society in the steppe.

Archaeological studies of the medieval Uyghurs have been done in the steppe and the Tarim Basin area. Expeditions to important sites in both areas have been ongoing for over a century, but the Turfan Basin has been the subject of more constant work because the area was at the center of the “great game,” the 19th-century geostrategic rivalry between the Russian and British empires. One of the earliest expeditions was the 1879 expedition of the Russian botanist Johann Albert Regel. He was quickly followed by further Russian, Finnish, Swedish, German, British, French, Japanese, American, and Chinese expeditions to the area. Those expeditions have yielded a vast find of artistic objects and texts that are invaluable sources on the medieval Uyghurs.¹⁴ Although they document events that long predate the medieval Uyghur kingdom, recent archaeological work on ancient mummies in the Tarim Basin showing western Eurasian roots to the Tocharians make clear why the Uyghur diaspora who had been evicted from their steppe empire felt at home in the Tarim Basin.¹⁵

Most scholarship on medieval Uyghur material and visual culture has resulted from the archaeological expeditions discussed above. Of that material, the vast majority relates to Uyghur religious history found in the abundant religious sites spread across the dry Tarim Basin. Perhaps the best examples are the Buddhist caves across the Tarim Basin such as Kucha, Bezeklik, Kocho, Kumtura, Tuyuq, Murtuq (near Turfan), and of course, Dunhuang. Publication of research on Uyghur history based on the artistic and other material objects found in those sites began almost as soon as the expeditions returned from the region, but new generations of scholars continue to work on them. These studies have fed one of the most important sectors of medieval Uyghur scholarship, studies of their Buddhist culture and religious system. Those findings have also yielded insight into Uyghur Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity. The material culture remains also tell a good deal about Uyghur social values, especially in their Tarim Basin kingdom. For example, the religious frescos found in many Tarim Basin caves clearly document medieval Uyghur social class structure and lifestyle.

The last category, textual studies, has been, if anything, even more important to furthering historians’ understanding of the medieval Uyghurs. The famous steppe stone inscriptions, such as the Orkhon inscription, tell about early Uyghur political life as a nomadic tribal group and also about the evolution of the Uyghur language. But most texts related to the medieval Uyghurs have come from the Tarim Basin expeditions. Owing to the unique multireligious culture that thrived in the Uyghur Tarim Basin kingdom, there is much known about the religious scene there. The most important textual findings

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include scriptural translations, transliterations, commentaries, and hymns in a number of ancient and medieval languages and scripts such as Parthian, Sogdian, Tocharian, Old Turkish, Brāhmi, and Tangut, as well as Uyghur and Chinese. The Uyghur Buddhist tradition has been particularly well researched, owing to the fact that most of the Tarim Basin texts are Buddhist. This is not surprising since Buddhism flourished in the area long before the Uyghurs founded their kingdom there. The Uyghurs also produced medical texts, land and labor contracts, and letters, which have provided historians with a good picture of daily life.¹⁶ The land and labor contracts have also been particularly important in revealing details about the lower classes, a group generally overlooked in the religious literature. Scholarship on textual materials is ongoing in several countries such as the United States, China, Russia, Japan, China, Germany, and Turkey.

Primary Sources and Links to Digital Materials

The earliest primary sources that document the history of the medieval Uyghurs in the steppe were written in Chinese and Turkish languages. The Chinese sources were all produced during or after the Tang period, and include the *Jiu Tangshu* (Old History of the Tang), written in 945 and covering the history of the Tang Dynasty between 618–906; the *Xin Tangshu* (New History of the Tang), compiled in 1060 and covering the history of the Tang Dynasty between 618–906; and the *Zizhi Tongjian* (Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government), completed in 1084. The Turkish language sources are all stone inscriptions, and include the Orkhon inscriptions, the Yenisei inscriptions, the Talas River inscriptions, and the Altai Mountain inscriptions. Of these, the Shine-usu inscription, written in the 750s, and the Qara Balsaghun inscription, written in 826, are the most important texts that relate the history of the early Uyghurs.

The history of the medieval Uyghurs after they left the steppe is much better documented, especially the Uyghur Tarim Basin kingdom. As discussed above, significant textual, artistic, and material findings have been made across the Tarim Basin by several generations of archaeological expeditions. Most of the artifacts and texts collected by Russian, European, and Japanese archaeological expeditions were deposited in museums and libraries around the world. Chinese scholars started archaeological work in the region later. Archaeological research on important known and new sites continues, most of it now under the supervision of China or Mongolia. Several Chinese and Mongolian provincial and local museums hold new primary sources related to the medieval Uyghurs, including the **National Museum of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar**, the **Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Museum** in Urumqi, and the **Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Museum**.

Thanks to new digital tools, many primary sources from earlier expeditions have been or are being digitized by the museums and libraries that hold them. The goal is to make access to these materials easier for scholars in any location. The most important initiatives at this time include the following.

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Türük Bitig, is organized and maintained by the Republic of Kazakhstan, Language Committee of the Ministry of Culture and Information. This organization provides information on the language, history, and scholarship of Türkic stone inscriptions and manuscripts found in the steppe and the Tarim Basin, including reproduced scans of all original inscriptions.

The **Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities** in Germany hosts and manages a web portal with direct links to several digital archives of primary sources and text research tools. These include a database of digitized scans of all extant Turfan texts held in Germany (the “Digital Turfan Archive”), a database of the pre-Islamic Old Turkic Turfan texts (“Vorislamische alttürkische Texte—elektronisches Corpus”), and a database of Middle Iranian Turfan texts (“Thesaurus indogermanischer Text-und Sprachmaterialien”).

The **Digital Silk Road** is hosted and managed by the Japan National Institute of Informatics, and provides links to primary textual sources and maps that pertain to the history of the Uyghur Tarim Basin kingdom.

The **Silk Road Seattle** is hosted and managed by the University of Washington, Seattle. This website includes links to texts, maps, artistic objects, museum collections, and virtual exhibits of materials related to the historic Silk Road through the Tarim Basin.

The British Library in London is the home of an international scholarly collaborative project called **The International Dunhuang Project** with a growing database of digitally scanned texts and artistic and material objects from Dunhuang. The project includes scholars and libraries or museums in Great Britain, China, Russia, Japan, Germany, France, and Korea. The website also features links to published articles on the sources, lists of relevant monographs and scholarly conferences, and historic maps.

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Notes:

(1.) Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 155–157.

(2.) Michael R. Drompp, "Centrifugal Forces in the Inner Asian 'Heartland': History versus Geography," *Journal of Asian History* 23.2 (1989): 134–168, examines the role of centrifugal forces that influenced steppe tribal relations.

(3.) Vladimir Minorsky, "Tamim ibn Baḥr's Journey to the Uyghurs," *Bulletin of the Society of Oriental and African Studies* 12 (1948): 275–305.

(4.) That inscription has been studied by many historians and philologists. A good starting point is Takao Moriyasu, "Site and Inscription of Şine-Usu," in *Provisional Report of Researches on Historical Sites and Inscriptions in Mongolia from 1996 to 1998*, eds. Takao Moriyasu and Ayudai Ochir (Osaka: Society of Central Eurasian Studies, 1999), 177–195.

(5.) The best account of the history of the Ganzhou Uyghurs remains that by Elizabeth Pinks, *Die Uiguren von Kan-chou in der frühen Sung-Zeit (960–1028)* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1968). James Russell Hamilton, *Les Ouighours a l'epoque des cinq dynasties d'apres les documents chinois* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1955), 143–144, provides a list of the Ganzhou Uyghur qaghans.

(6.) Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), is the best source for that rump vestige of the Liao.

(7.) Angela F. Howard and Guiseppe Vignato, *Archaeological and Visual Sources of Meditation in the Ancient Monasteries of Kuča* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), the latest

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in a long line of scholarship on ancient Kucha, provides a good sense of the rich culture at that ancient oasis settlement that the Uyghurs inherited when they settled in the region and established their kingdom.

(8.) Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), provides a detailed narrative of events.

(9.) Johan Elverskog, *Uyghur Buddhist Literature* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 6–9.

(10.) On the name and identity of this individual, see Kahar Barat, *The Uyghur-Turkic Biography of the Seventh-Century Chinese Buddhist Pilgrim Xuanzang, Ninth and Tenth Chapters* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), xi–xiv.

(11.) On this and other aspects of the Yuan legal code, see Paul Heng-chao Ch'en, *Chinese Legal Tradition under the Mongols: The Code of 1291 as Reconstructed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

(12.) The Chinese term *Semuren* literally reads “colored eyes” but meant “various types of people.” Variations of this term had been used in earlier periods in imperial China to also denote different types of people. The purpose of this ordering scheme was clearly administrative, and it was meant to retain all real power in the hands of the Mongols and their trusted Central Asian subjects. After Khubilai completed the south he added a fourth category to this list, “Southerners” (lit. “*Nanren*”) that included all Chinese and other peoples who had lived there at the time of the conquest. The *Nanren*, at the bottom of the list, were clearly limited by the ruling Mongols in the amount and kind of power they could wield in China.

(13.) See Richard John Lynn, *Kuan Yün-Shih* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).

(14.) For a description of these, see Werner Sundermann, “Turfan Expeditions,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* online.

(15.) J. P. Mallory and Victor H. Mair, *The Tarim Mummies: Ancient China and the Mystery of the Earliest Peoples from the West* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

(16.) One of the most prolific publishers of scholarship on these texts is Brepols, who has over thirty titles in its *Berliner Turfantexte* series, all studies of texts found by German expeditions to Turfan (<http://www.brepols.net/Pages/BrowseBySeries.aspx?TreeSeries=BTT>). On Uyghur medical texts and their medical practices in the Tarim Basin, see Catherine Despeux, ed., *Médecine, religion et société dans la Chine médiévale: étude de manuscrits chinois de Dunhuang et de Turfan* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des hautes études chinoises, 2010).

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