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THE CASE AGAINST THE ALTAIC THEORY

by

SIR GERARD CLAUSON

London

In his review of Prof. Grønbech and Mr Krueger's *Introduction to Classical (Literary) Mongolian* in the *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. II (1956), p. 76, Prof. Udo Posch suggested that it was positively dangerous to mention to young students of Mongolian such a heretical idea as one that "the supposed genetic affiliation of these groups (i.e. presumably the Turkish, Mongolian and Tungus language groups) has never been proved", and asked the Professor, if he really took up such an extraordinary position, to prove his case.

Like most Turcologists, though apparently unlike most Mongolologists (if there is such a word), I share my old friend Prof. Grønbech's view that it has never been proved that the Turkish, Mongolian and Tungus languages have a common ancestor; indeed I would go further and say that, insofar as it is possible to prove a negative, it can be proved that they do not; and I am therefore, without consulting him, venturing to state the reasons for which I hold these views.

It is a commonplace of prehistory that when it is possible to identify a particular ethnic group with a particular language, the existence of that ethnic group can usually be proved for a much earlier date than the first datable remains of the language. The ancient Britons and their language are a case in point. It is therefore not strange that our first knowledge of Turkish and Mongolian speaking tribes (I shall say in this paper very little about the Tungus languages, because I am almost completely ignorant of them) antedates by several centuries the first substantial remains of those languages. The earliest substantial remains of Turkish are the "Orkhon" inscriptions of the first half of the 8th Century A.D., and the earliest substantial remains of Mongolian are the *Secret History* compiled in about A.D. 1240, partly from earlier material (but how much earlier is obscure). Any examination of the question of a possible genetic relationship between the two languages must obviously start from a comparison

between the two languages at this early stage, but it is legitimate, in order to broaden the basis of comparison, to include on the Turkish side the 8th–9th Century translations of Buddhist and Manichaean documents, other contemporary texts in the same dialects (Türkü and Uyğur) and the main 11th Century “Xakani” authorities, the *Kutadğū Bilig* and the *Dīwānu'l-Luğāti't-Turk* of Maḥmūd al-Kāşğarī.

Remains of the two languages earlier than the 8th Century for Turkish and the 12th Century for Mongolian are so unsubstantial, mainly individual words in foreign authorities (Chinese, Byzantine, etc.), that they hardly do more than identify certain tribes as speaking one language or the other at a certain date. The evidence available is often so unclear that it raises more questions than it settles. For example, though I share Dr Pritsak's view that the available evidence proves that the Hsiung-nu were identical with the European Huns and spoke Turkish, other scholars take different views. However, such evidence as there is proves conclusively that Turkish and Mongolian tribes were in intimate contact with one another long before the 12th Century. To go no further back than the evidence of the “Orkhon” inscriptions (and it would be possible to go back a good deal further) the Northern Türkü were in close contact with the Kitāñ, indisputably a Mongolian speaking tribe, more than five centuries before the compilation of the *Secret History*.

It might, therefore, reasonably have been expected that this long and intimate contact between tribes speaking the two languages would have resulted in the existence of a large number of words common to both, even if they did not have a common ancestor. But, strange as it may seem, comparison of the vocabularies of early Turkish texts and the *Secret History* discloses practically no common property at all, except one or two international words like *kagan* “supreme ruler” and *tenri* “heaven” (the latter traceable several centuries earlier still in Hunnish) and the fifty odd “Turkic Loan Words in Middle Mongolian” listed in Prof. Poppe's article in Vol. I, pp. 36 ff, of this Journal. The basic words, that is the numerals, the basic verbs like “to say, to give, to take, to go” and so on, the basic nouns like “food, horse”, and the basic adjectives like “good, bad” are all entirely different.

Admittedly words common to both languages began to be more numerous very soon after the end of the 12th Century. When Chinggis Khan swept across Asia into Europe and subjugated most of the Turkish peoples in the process, a lively interchange of words between the two languages began, which has continued intermittently almost to the present day. Since at this period the Mongols were far more “jungly” and

uncultured than the Turks, it is reasonable to suppose that they found it necessary to borrow far more words from the Turks than the Turks borrowed from them. The first exchanges were probably in the field of technical administrative terminology; thus for example Mongolian took *élçi* “ambassador” from Turkish and gave *alban* and *kupçur*, two kinds of taxes, in return. The exchanges no doubt soon broadened out, and included such things as names of previously unfamiliar animals and the like.

The process of exchange entered upon a new phase when the Mongols were converted to Buddhism. The translation of the Buddhist scriptures into Mongolian involved the incorporation in that language of a great mass of Turkish words, and indeed words from other languages (Sanskrit and the like) in Turkish dress. The phonetic system of Mongolian was to some extent different from, and on the whole poorer than, Turkish, and the adoption of Turkish words in Mongolian often involved some phonetic change, for example in the absence of a final palatal sibilant in Mongolian Turkish *ulus* “a country” became *ulus*.

The extent of Mongolian penetration in the North Western (Kıpçak, Koman, etc.), South Central (Çağatay, etc.) and South Western (Osmanli, etc.) Turkish language groups can be judged by a series of texts and documents running from the 13th Century onwards; generally speaking there is only a sprinkling of Mongolian words and even of these few one or two are really only old Turkish words in their Mongolian dress, like *ulus*.

The position was very different in the North Eastern (Tuvan, Khakas, Mountain Altai, etc.) and North Central (Kırgız, Kazakh, etc.) Turkish language groups which were spoken in areas where Mongol domination or influence continued far longer than it had in the West. Unfortunately it is impossible to chart the stages in the Mongolian invasion of these languages since they were unwritten and we have no evidence regarding them earlier than the texts and vocabularies collected by Russian scholars in the second half of the 19th Century.

When the curtain finally lifts, the picture is one of great variety. The extreme case is Tuvan, the language of the Tuvan Autonomous Province (*Oblast'*) of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic, which until about A.D. 1944 was reckoned a part of Outer Mongolia. In this language many original Turkish words for quite ordinary concepts like “to destroy” have been ousted by their Mongolian equivalents. Basically, when certain recent phonetic changes, such as the replacement of *-liğ* by *-tiğ* as the termination of the Possessive Noun/Adjective of most nouns ending in

consonants, have been discounted, Tuvan is one of the most archaic modern Turkish languages; it still has in use a number of very old Turkish words for which the only other authorities are the 8th–9th Century Uyğur texts or the 11th Century *Dīwān* of Kāšğarī. On the other hand Palmbakh's *Tuvinsko-Russkiy Slovar*, the only substantial dictionary of the language, is full of Mongolian loan-words, including some originally Turkish words handed back in Mongolian dress like *ulus*. On some pages nearly all the words are of Mongolian origin. It is probably not too much to say that, after the recent Russian loan-words have been eliminated, not much less than half the residue consists of Mongolian loan-words.

Indeed things have gone much further than that; in Tuvan alone of all the Turkish languages (apart from one or two odd words) a good deal of the morphology is also Mongolian. This is partly due to "normalization" of which there are clear signs in the dictionary, but much more to the actual condition of the language before any question of normalization arose. For example, the standard terminations for Deverbal Nouns of Action are *-a:şkin/-e:şkin* and *-lğa/-lge*, both of which are pure Mongolian. It is hardly surprising that intruding Mongolian verbs have brought their Mongolian derived forms with them; for example, given that in Tuvan "to destroy" is *üre-*, the modern Mongolian form of the Classical verb *ürege-*, it seems only reasonable that "destruction" should be *üre:şkin*. But exactly the same thing happens to pure Turkish verbs. For example, from *üle-* "to share out, distribute", a verb going back to the 8th Century, besides *ülüg* "a share" and *üleş* "distribution", which are equally old Turkish words, we find *üleşge* "(mathematical) division", with a Mongolian termination. This particular word is no doubt a neologism, but there are similar cases of Turkish roots with Mongolian terminations in Katanov's study of the Tuvan language (which he called Uryankhay) published at the beginning of this century.

Next after Tuvan, the two Turkish languages with the greatest Mongolian admixture are, as might be expected, Khakas and Mountain Altai. The vocabularies of these languages contain a good many Mongolian loan-words, but the morphology is hardly affected. As these languages are spoken in areas remote from the Moslem world, they contain practically no Arabic or Persian loan-words, except a few strays like *arba* "a cart", which probably reached them through one or two intermediaries and was greatly distorted in the process, the Arabic original being *arrāda* and the first borrowing in Turkish dating back to about the 12th or early 13th Century.

In the North Central languages, Kirgiz and Kazakh, the Mongolian

element is smaller, though still appreciable. On the other hand these languages contain an appreciable number of Arabic and Persian loan-words, often in a very distorted form, for example *ezir* for *hādir*. Indeed of all the Turkish languages, these are the two which are most difficult to divide up into their original constituents of pure Turkish and the Mongolian, Arabic and Persian loan-words, let alone possible minor categories such as Ugrian loan-words.

The impact of the facts which I have outlined above on the Altaic theory is obvious. If a particular word in Mongolian has the same meaning as the same word, or something like it, in, say, Kazakh, this is no evidence that the two languages have a common ancestor; it is merely one of hundreds of examples of the widespread exchange of vocabulary which I have described above. Similarly the fact that Mongolian has a termination *-sağ/-seg* to form nouns "designating penchant for or fondness of something", e.g. *emeseg* "a ladies' man", and Turkish has a similar termination with a similar meaning is no evidence that the two languages have a common ancestor. This termination is part of the morphological structure of Turkish, but not of Mongolian. Of the two, Turkish alone has a Denominal verbal termination *-sa/-se-*, used to form Desiderative verbs, e.g. from *suv* "water" *suvsa-* "to desire water, to be thirsty"; and from *er* "man" *erse-* "to run after men, to be a nymphomaniac". Turkish *-sak/-sek* is merely the Noun/Adjective of Action from such Desiderative verbs, that is *ersek* "nymphomaniac" is derived not directly from *er* but from *erse-*. Obviously Mongolian, though it did not borrow the Turkish verbal termination *-sa/-se-*, did borrow the Turkish Deverbal termination *-sak/-sek* (converted to *-sağ/-seg* to comply with Mongolian phonetic rules) and affixed it even to pure Mongolian nouns like *eme*, just as Tuvan affixes Mongolian suffixes like *-lğa/-lge* even to pure Turkish words like *üle-*. No arguments for the Altaic theory which are based on comparisons between material later than, say, A.D. 1200 on the Turkish side and A.D. 1240 on the Mongolian side have any validity whatever, since it can never be proved that one or other of the words involved is not a loan-word. By parity of reasoning, I assume that similar arguments relating to Tungus must be equally invalid, since intimate contacts between Mongolian and Tungus speakers are known to have existed for centuries before the first substantial material in any Tungus language.

This does not, of course, by itself dispose finally of the Altaic theory. It may be argued that it is too simple-minded to deny a genetic relationship between pre-12th Century Turkish and the Mongolian of the Secret History merely because their vocabularies look entirely different. After

all *five* – *fünf* – *cinq* – *quinque* – *penta* – *pañca* look completely different but have a common ancestor. The answer to this is that there are not enough pairs of synonymous words in the two earliest stages of the language to justify the theory of a common ancestor, however remote, and that the pairs do not occur in the right parts of the vocabulary. As I said above the synonymous basic numerals, verbs, nouns and adjectives in the two languages, that is those parts of the vocabulary in which the pairs should occur to be significant, are completely unlike one another and no amount of ingenuity of the kind which has proved the common parentage of, say, *five* and *cinq* has served to relate these basic words to one another. It is quite true that some pairs of words can be produced, Prof. Posch himself in his review of Prof. Grønbech's book has produced several, but the most which they seem to me to prove is that the process of vocabulary exchange which proceeded so vigorously from the time of Chinggis Khan onwards was probably proceeding also at a slower tempo at an earlier period, say when the Northern Türkü and the Kitañ were in contact in the 7th and 8th Centuries.

One of Prof. Posch's examples is particularly instructive. He lists the words: -Middle Mongolian *hüker*; Tungus *ukur/hukur*; Turkish *höküz* (a modern corruption) *öküz öküz*; Çuvaş *věGěr*, all meaning, according to him, "bull" (though actually "ox" would be more accurate), and from them deduces a "Proto-Mongolian" (though it would be more civil to the Turks to say "Proto-Altai") *pökür* "ox". Now it so happens that *öküz*, a word as old as the 8th-9th Century (*Irk Bitig*), is one of the very few early Turkish words for which Turcologists, who are not usually prone to such etymological adventures, have felt disposed to seek a foreign origin. On the one hand the ox is not an animal exactly characteristic of the supposed cradle of the Turkish race, wherever that may have been; on the other hand *öküz* is quite suspiciously like the synonymous Kuchaeen ("Tokharian B") word *okso*, indeed more like it than it is like *hüker*. It is in fact much more reasonable to suppose that at some moment in pre-history the Turks got oxen from the Kuchaeans or some other Indo-European people, and, as is customary in such cases, took the name with the animals, and that at some later period in pre-history the Mongols in their turn got oxen from the Turks, took the name with them and altered it to suit their own phonetic proclivities. If that be so, *pökür* is a mere figment of the imagination, as indeed I personally believe that the supposed Altai initial *p-* is.

The arguments which I have produced against the Altai theory seem to me to be overwhelming, but there may be some answer to them.

I very much hope that this paper will inspire some supporter of the theory, perhaps Prof. Posch himself, to produce an answer; but it must be a reasoned answer, not a mere appeal to authority, least of all to the authority of distinguished scholars now deceased, who did not have the inestimable advantage which we now possess of being able to survey the history of the two languages in their full perspective, and to study in intimate detail the morbid anatomy of such extraordinary mixed languages as Tuvan.