

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR  
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

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# Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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## Contents

István Zimonyi Preface.....	7
Augustí Alemany A Prosopographical Approach to Medieval Eurasian Nomads (II).....	11
Tatiana A. Anikeeva Geography in the Epic Folklore of the Oghuz Turks.....	37
Ákos Bertalan Apatóczy Changes of Ethnonyms in the Sino-Mongol Bilingual Glossaries from the Yuan to the Qing Era.....	45
Chen Hao Competing Narratives: A Comparative Study of Chinese Sources with the Old Turkic Inscriptions.....	59
Edina Dallos A Possible Source of ‘Tengrism’ .....	67
Andrei Denisov Scythia as the Image of a Nomadic Land on Medieval Maps.....	73
Szabolcs Felföldi Personal Hygiene and Bath Culture in the World of the Eurasian Nomads .....	85
Bruno Genito An Archaeology of the Nomadic Groups of the Eurasian Steppes between Europe and Asia. Traditional Viewpoint and New Research Perspectives.....	95
Zsolt Hunyadi Military-religious Orders and the Mongols around the Mid-13 <sup>th</sup> Century.....	111
Éva Kincses-Nagy The Islamization of the Legend of the Turks: The Case of <i>Oghuznāma</i> .....	125
Irina Konovalova Cumania in the System of Trade Routes of Eastern Europe in the 12 <sup>th</sup> Century...	137
Nikolay N. Kradin Some Aspects of Xiongnu History in Archaeological Perspective .....	149
Valéria Kulcsár – Eszter Istvánovits New Results in the Research on the Hun Age in the Great Hungarian Plain. Some Notes on the Social Stratification of Barbarian Society .....	167

Ma Xiaolin	
The Mongols' <i>tuq</i> 'standard' in Eurasia, 13 <sup>th</sup> –14 <sup>th</sup> Centuries .....	183
Enrico Morano	
Manichaean Sogdian Cosmogonical Texts in Manichaean Script .....	195
Maya Petrova	
On the Methodology of the Reconstruction of the Ways of Nomadic Peoples .....	217
Katalin Pintér-Nagy	
The Tether and the Sling in the Tactics of the Nomadic People .....	223
Alexander V. Podossinov	
Nomads of the Eurasian Steppe and Greeks of the Northern Black Sea Region: Encounter of Two Great Civilisations in Antiquity and Early Middle Ages.....	237
Szabolcs József Polgár	
The Character of the Trade between the Nomads and their Settled Neighbours in Eurasia in the Middle Ages.....	253
Mirko Sardelić	
Images of Eurasian Nomads in European Cultural Imaginary in the Middle Ages .....	265
Dan Shapira	
An Unknown Jewish Community of the Golden Horde .....	281
Jonathan Karam Skaff	
The Tomb of Pugu Yitu (635–678) in Mongolia: Tang-Turkic Diplomacy and Ritual .....	295
Richárd Szántó	
Central Asia in the Cosmography of Anonymous of Ravenna .....	309
Katalin Tolnai – Zsolt Szilágyi – András Harmath	
Khitan Landscapes from a New Perspective. Landscape Archaeology Research in Mongolia.....	317
Kürşat Yıldırım	
Some Opinions on the Role of the Mohe 靺鞨 People in the Cultural and Ethnical Relationships between Tungusic, Turkic and Mongolian Peoples....	327
Ákos Zimonyi	
Did Jordanes Read Hippocrates? The Impact of Climatic Factors on Nomads in the <i>Getica</i> of Jordanes .....	333
István Zimonyi	
The Eastern Magyars of the Muslim Sources in the 10 <sup>th</sup> Century.....	347

## Geography in the Epic Folklore of the Oghuz Turks

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Geography is an important element of the monuments of epic nomadic folklore of the Oghuz Turks (from the earlier “Oghuz-nama” to the only written epic among the Oghuz, the “Kitab-i dedem Korkut”/ “The Book of Korkut” and even to prose medieval Turkish folklore) which are generally on the border between oral and literary tradition and between folk narrative and historical writing.

The Turkic medieval written epic “The Book of Dede Korkut” (“Kitab-i dedem Korkut”) is undoubtedly the most important source on social and cultural life of the Oghuz Turks of the early Medieval Ages. Customarily the composing of the twelve stories of which “The Book of Dede Korkut” consists is said to have taken place in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but the stories were fixed in writing only later, approximately in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. “The Book of Dede Korkut” (according to the Dresden manuscript) consists of twelve songs-legends, which tell of the exploits of the Oghuz heroes. The main plot the core of which is framed by these stories is the struggle of the Oghuz tribes against the infidels, non-Muslims (*kafir*) in the lands of Asia Minor, as well as constant internecine strife among the Oghuz themselves. This text reflects both the events of early Turkic semi-legendary history (not only historical facts, but also a set of mythological beliefs) and later events connected with the spread of their power in Asia Minor and with their contacts with Byzantium. The stories that comprise “The Book of Dede Korkut” display a clear connection with both common Turkic literary and folk traditions as well as more recent strata.

The geography in the “The Book of Dede Korkut” combines two main strata, which are: the real geographical placenames and toponyms mentioned in this epic and the so-called “mythological” geographical and spatial orientation.

### Transcaucasian toponyms in “The Book of Dede Korkut”

Geographical toponyms in “The Book of Dede Korkut” have repeatedly been the object of special studies (see: Ergin 2014: 51–54). The geographical names that can be met with in the chronologically heterogeneous songs of the “Kitab-i dedem Korkut” reflect the gradual movement of the Oghuz tribes to the territory of Asia Minor and Trans-Caucasian area, from the East to the West.

The enemies of the Oghuz tribe in “The Book of Dede Korkut” are connected with some specific geographical toponyms (mostly the names of fortresses) mainly in the South Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia: “The damned accursed infidels from the castle of Avnik” (Lewis 1974: 60) / “*Evnik kalasinun kafirleri*” (Evnük, or “the fortress of Basin”, turk *Pasen* not far from Erzurum), “The black pass of Pasin”, Georgia, where merchants carry their goods from Istanbul (see the 3<sup>rd</sup> tale of the epic, “Bamsi Beyrek of the Grey Horse”); the fortresses Alinca,<sup>1</sup> Bayburt<sup>2</sup> on the coast of the Black Sea, Sürmeli,<sup>3</sup> Barda and Ganja (turk. *Gence*) which are located beyond “the land of the Oghuz”<sup>4</sup> and some others (Mardin, Dizmerd, Akhaltsikhe (turk. *Aksaka / Ahıska*) and so on).

Although the geography of “The Book of Dede Korkut” is a topic of separate research, in this case, a clear localization of the epic characters illustrates the fact that the formation and the cyclization of a large part of the tales must have taken place already in the respective territories.

At the same time the second stratum of geography in “The Book of Dede Korkut” has been less investigated. These are the mythological geographical

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- 1 Alinca (*Alincak*) is a fortress located on the territory of modern Azerbaijan, near Nakhichevan. It stood 20 km above the estuary of the river of the same name, flowing into the Arax river, on top of a high mountain. The name of the fortress is found in many historical sources and geographical works since the 13<sup>th</sup> c. It played an important role in the Timurid (late 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> cc.) period of the history of Transcaucasia (Anikeeva 2018: 100).
  - 2 Bayburt (Bayburt) is a fortress located in the North-East of Anatolia on the Choru river, at an altitude of about 1500 m above sea level (now Bayburt is a city in the North-East of Turkey). Bayburt has always played an important role in Turkish culture and was glorified by ashiks and folk poets. The Seljuk Turks conquered the region in 1054-1055, and after the battle of Manzikert in 1071, when the Byzantines were defeated, the fortress of Bayburt finally passed into the hands of the Seljuks. In the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> cc., Bayburt, as part of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum (and then under the rule of the Ilkhans) flourished, being on the trade route leading from Trapezunt to Erzurum and further to Tabriz (Barthold 1930).
  - 3 Sürmeli (*Sürmeli, Surmari, Sürmelü*) — a fortress located on the right bank of the river Arax. The name “Surmari” comes from the Armenian name of the Church of Saint Mariam (Surb Mari), which was located there (Anikeeva 2018: 100).
  - 4 Barda (turk. *Berde*, arm. Partav) — once the capital of Arran, ancient Albania, and the largest city in the Caucasus. In the time of the Sasanids (251-651) a high fortress was built in this place, which protected from raids from the North and West. At that time (932), according to al-Istakhri, it was the largest city in the entire space from Khorasan in Iraq to Ray in Iran. The mosque, treasury, and palace were inside the fortress walls, and bazaars were located in the vicinity. Barda was famous for its orchards and silk, which was exported from there to Khuzistan and Iran. However, soon, in 943, the city was burned by the Rus, and after that it never fully recovered. In the period of the Mongol conquest it was partially rebuilt, although references to it in historical sources are extremely rare: it is spoken of only as a city located 9 *farsakhs* from Ganja. Much later, Barda was a small village and the ruins of a fortress could be found 20 km from Teker Suyu, a tributary of the Kura. Ganja is a city at the foot of the Lesser Caucasus mountains, on the Kura tributary, the Ganjachay river, founded in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> c. (859). After the fall of Barda, it was the capital of Arran. In the 12<sup>th</sup> c. the city was almost completely destroyed by an earthquake, then rebuilt and, according to historians, was considered one of the most beautiful cities in Western Asia (Anikeeva 2018: 101).



images which are traditional for the Turks and, to a lesser degree, in Islam, and which exist along with the real ones and are embedded into the system of existing geographical names (e.g. Mount Kaf). Along with the system of archaic traditional Turkic spatial orientation (which undoubtedly partly remained in the “Kitab-i dedem Korkut”) these reflect the nomadic world-outlook, connected with Turkic mythology and with the influence of Islam and the relevant literary tradition.

### Geography and the representation of the enemy in the epics

The dwelling place of the ruler of Trapezund in “The Book of Dede Korkut”, despite being described in geographically precise terms, is presented as a kind of otherworldly space, one of several “evil places” (turk. *yavuz yerler*) antagonistic to “the land of the Oghuz” (turk. *Oğuz eli*). For example, Kanlı-koja tells his son Kanturali, who is going on a journey: “Thereupon Kanli Koja declaimed; let us see, my Khan, what he declaimed

‘Son, in the place where you would go,  
Twisted and tortuous will the roads be;  
Swamps there will be, where the horseman will sink and never emerge;  
Forests there will be, where the red serpent can find no path;  
Fortresses there will be, that rub shoulders with the sky;  
A beautiful one there will be who puts out eyes and snatches souls;...

To a terrible place have you set your foot; Stay!” (English translation cited from: Lewis 1974: 119)

(“*Kanlı Koca burada soylamış, görelüm Hanum ne soylamış, aydur: Oğul, sen varacak yerün Dolamaç dolamaç yolları olur Atlu batup çıkamaz Anun balçığı olur Ala yılan sökemez Anun ormanı olur Gökile pehlu uran Anun kalası olur Göz kakuban gönül alan Anun görklüsü olur Hay demedin baş getüren Anun celladı olur... Yavuz yerlere yeltendün*” (Gökyay 2000: 85)). Likewise, the image of the king of the infidels Shokli-Melik also includes demonic traits: “The news had reached the Iron Gate Pass.<sup>5</sup> King Shokli of the dappled horse is ill-tempered; The smoke of his ill temper has fallen on the black mountains...” (Lewis 1974: 156)/ “*Alca atlu Şökli Melik katı pusmuş pusduğundan kara dağlara duman düşmüş*” (Gökyay 2000: 119).

5 Derbent, or – in “The Book of Dede Korkut” “*Kara Dervend ağzı*” (turk. *Kapılar Dervendi, Demir Kapu* – “Iron Gate”; in medieval Arab sources — *Bab al-abvab*, “Main gate”) — a fortress located on the shore of the Caspian Sea. During the composition of the tales of “The Book of Dede Korkut” Derbent was part of the Arab Caliphate (7<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> cc.). The name of the fortress — “The Iron gate” — arose due to the geographical location of Derbent: the city with the fortress was located on a narrow, three-kilometer coastal strip on the West coast of the Caspian sea at the mouth of the Samur river, thereby closing the territory off from the attacks of the infidels — the Khazars and the Alans.

Thus, an external enemy of the Oghuz in “The Book of Dede Korkut” has geographically specific (“Tagavor of Trabzon”, “evil infidels of the Avnik fortress” and so on) and at the same time mythological features, thereby marking the boundary between the world of nomads and neighbouring sedentary world.

The world of the infidels in “The Book of Dede Korkut” at the same time has some formal, outlined (although, as a result of mutual raids, changeable) boundaries, beyond which begins the land that is hostile to the Oghuz. These boundaries are repeatedly mentioned, for example, in the tale “How Prince Uruz son of Kazan-bek was taken prisoner”: “I shall take him to the infidel frontier, to Jizighlar, to Aghlaaghan, to the Blue Mountain” (Lewis 1974: 90) / “*kafir serhaddine Cızığlara, Ağlaagana, Gökçe Dağa aluban çıkayın...*” (Gökyay 2000: 61). In other words, the border of the world of the infidels in the epic is quite clearly localized at the named mountains, apparently, passing through the territory between the modern Kars and Akhaltsikhe (see also Gökyay 2000: 332–334). Ağlaagan is a mountain in the north-west corner of Armenia, Cızığlar (“Jizighlar” in Lewis’ translation) is located to the south-west of it (“The Blue mountain” – Gökçe Dağ – has been still unidentified).

### The system of spatial orientation in “The Book of Dede Korkut”

Traces of the archaic spatial Turkic system of orientation partly remained in the text of “The Book of Dede Korkut”.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> tale of the epic “How Bisat killed Tepegöz”, Bisat says: “*kalarda koparda yerüm gün ortaç// Karañu dün içre yol azsam umum Allah// Kaba alem götürün –animız Bayındur Han*” (Gökyay 2000: 113) (“The place where I dwell and from where I rise is *gün ortaç*, when I lose my way my hope is Allah, Our Khan who carries the great standard is Bayindir Khan...”). The word *gün ortaç* was identified in several research works (for example by V.V. Barthold and A. N. Kononov) as a geographical name (see their footnote: admittedly, *Günortaç* – is the name of a place in Qarabakh) (Barthold & Kononov 1962: 275). In all probability, Orhan Şaik Gökyay understood this word as a place-name too (also see his Index of geographical names (Gökyay 2000: 332–338). In spite of the fact the V.V. Barthold notes that the word-for-word translation of that place-name is “where the sun is at its zenith”, he nevertheless, supposes that *gün ortaç* is the geographical name of a definite place. O. Gökyay only makes a casual remark about the possible connection of this name with the marking of the cardinal points among Turks (he refers to Fahrettin Kırzioğlu (Gökyay 2000: CCXXIX; Kırzioğlu 1952)). And, as it seems to us, with a high probability we can suppose that here the word-combination *gün ortaç* keeps its main meaning (‘southland’) which wasn’t mentioned by Barthold. According to an Ancient Turkic Dictionary (see also Clauson’s etymological dictionary), one of the meanings of the word-combination

*kün ortu* – “the South, or midday (South)” (Drevnetyurkski Slovar 1969: 326, Clauson 1972: 725).

In the next story of the “Book of Dede Korkut” – “Emren Son of Bekil” we can find the fragment:

*Kalkubanı yeründen duru-geldün  
Arku bili Ala Dağdan dünün aşdun  
Akındılı görklü sudan dünün geçdün  
Ağ alınlı Bayındur Hanun divanına dünün vardun [...]  
Begil soylamış, görelüm Hanum ne soylamış, aydur:  
Kalkubanı yerümden duru-geldim  
Yelesi kara Kazılık aluma butun bindüm  
Arku beli Ala Dağdan dünün aşdum  
Akındılı görklü suyu delüp dünün geçdüm  
Ağ alınlı Bayındur Hanun divanına çapar vardum*

(Gökyay 2000: 116–117)

That has been translated and interpreted as: “looking round (back), you climbed the many-coloured mountain with a cliff; you forded the deep and beautiful river; you went to the divan of Bayindir-khan...”. The word-combination *arku bili* “[looking] round (back)” can also be interpreted, according to V.V. Barthold, as *at night* (Barthold & Kononov 1962: 276), i.e. its direct lexical meaning.

Besides, the word-set *arku bili* in that fragment interpreted by Barthold as “looking back, looking round” can have other interpretations, which are perhaps more suitable by their meaning. In “Secere-i tarakima” by Abu-l-Ghazi-khan we can read: “In 1040 (=1630–1631) ten thousand *kibitka* came from the North (*arka tarafından*), from the Kalmyk *il*” (Secere-i tarakima 325, in: (Kononov 1958: 44)). The words *arka tarafından* (ارقا طرفندن) are translated and interpreted by Kononov as “from the North side”. As we know from his commentary note, there also exists the translation of A. G. Tumanski which reads: “from the back side”, referring to the fact that Turkic people of Central Asia used this word combination (*арка мепаш*) to refer to their land of origin. For example, the Turkmen referred to the Syr Darya as *arka teraf* (Kononov 1958: 88). There are many examples in Turkic languages (Kara-Kalpak, Nogay, Tuvinian, Turkmenian and Teleut) of different groups (see *ibid.*) which confirm the fact that the word *arka*, besides its first and main meaning “back, to the back, back side” also means “north”.<sup>6</sup> The historical context (the Syr Darya, especially its estuary, is to the North of the area of settlement of the Turkmen tribes) allows us to interpret the word-combination *arka tarafi* not as “the back side” but as “the North side”.

<sup>6</sup> See also the root *arha* (in Tofalar) in the Mongolian language which means “the north side (of a mountain)” (*ibid.*: 88).

Thus, the expression found in the above-mentioned fragment of the “Kitab-i dedem Korkut”, *arku beli*, evidently preserves traces of the traditional Turkic system of spatial orientation according to which the North can be marked in the way described above. The word *bel*, which in ancient Turkic that has the meaning of “a waist”, can mean “a hill” (Drevnetyurkski Slovar 1969: 93).

As is well known, the ancient Turks had (and some Turkic people still have till the present day) several linear ways of spatial orientation which are characterized by the position of the sun: the rising sun (the East), the midday sun (i.e. the place where sun is at its zenith, *kün ortu*, i.e. the South), and the midnight side — *mÿn opmy* (Kononov 1978: 73). As is well-known, in some Turkic languages the North side is connected with the concept of darkness, being marked as *mÿn* — “night” (see the examples above (ibid.: 84)). The orientation by the Sun at its zenith, i.e. oriented towards the South, in the opinion of researchers, reflects the ancient cult of the South of the Turkic people which has replaced (but not completely) the worship of the East, or of the rising sun (ibid.).

In addition, there was another way of orientation on a vertical line:<sup>7</sup> the East and the West are defined as “up” and “down”, the South and the North are “forward” and “back”), the South, as the midday side of the sky, is “forward”. This way of spatial orientation has remained among different Turkic people: the Turkmen, Sari Uyghurs, Salar and the Khakas (ibid.). This case, where the starting position is the South, and the North is accordingly “behind”, is closely related to the worship of the Sun at its zenith (ibid.: 84).

“The Book of Dede Korkut” has preserved some notions both of this vertical orientation centered on the midday sun, and this is confirmed by the many examples from the text and the connection of the examined word-combinations with spatial position.

It is interesting that there are no elements of a system of orientation connected with the influence of Islam in the epic like the orientation towards Mekkah//*Kibla*. Mekkah is mentioned in “The Book of Dede Korkut” several times: for example, in the Introduction, which undoubtedly was written later than the stories of “The Book of Dede Korkut” themselves; but nowhere in the text itself can the connection with Mekkah and this way of orientation be traced. Geographical objects which ascended to Islamic mythology (like mount Kâf<sup>8</sup>) are also absent. As we know, “the orientation to the South as the real manifestation of the cult of the

7 Furthermore, there are two possible initial orientations when using a vertical line to mark the cardinal points: to the East - the top, the upper part vs. the west: bottom, down) and to the South (the top, the upper part vs. the north: bottom, down) (Kononov 1978: 84). This system of spatial orientation has been preserved in folklore, particularly in Eastern Turkestan, for example in the relatively contemporary texts of the folklore of the Salars that were collected by Tenishev in the 1950s (Tenishev 1964).

8 As it is well-known, the image of Kaf that admittedly goes back to Iranian mythology played an important role not only in the mythology of Islamic and Arabic, Persian and Turkic folklore but also in Arabic geographical literature (Krachkovskiy 2004: 45).

South among Turkic people who had accepted Islam (8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> cc.) was strengthened by the traditional Islamic orientation to Kiblah” (Kononov 1978: 79). At the same time in the other Oghuz epics, the Turkmenian oral epic “Göroğlu” and the image of mount Kâf play an important role in terms of the orientation towards the Kibla.

“The Book of Dede Korkut” reflects the Pre-Islamic Turkic world outlook, and the system of spatial orientation is an essential part of that world outlook. This shows how the archaic Turkic orientation system is very stable and traces of it remained for a very long time in spite of the Islamic influence not only in the text of the epic but also in later times, in texts of other genres like the historical “Şecere-i tarakima” by Abu-l-Ghazi-khan.

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