

A HISTORY OF INNER ASIA

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CHAPTER ONE

The beginnings

To most contemporaries, the year 622 must have appeared fairly ordinary. No great battle or upheaval took place. The principal empires of the time – Tang China, Sasanian Iran, and Heraclian Byzantium – were busy building up their strength, recovering from recent confrontations, or preparing for new ones; and the petty princes of Transoxania were content in their prosperous though diminutive domains, while recognizing, when necessary, the suzerainty of the nomadic Turks, whose empire stretched along a long swath of Inner Asia from China's northern frontiers to the Caspian steppes. Meanwhile Sogdian and other merchants of the Silk Road trade kept criss-crossing Central Asia, as they had done since antiquity and would continue doing until the end of the Middle Ages.

China, Iran, and Byzantium were ancient empires with civilizations and records older than their ruling dynasties. The Turks, on the other hand, had established their qaghanate only recently, in the middle of the sixth century, and never raised it above the fragile and ephemeral existence characteristic of most nomadic empires. Known in modern historiography as the K^ök Turks or Tu-chüeh or Türk empire, it lasted from 552 to 744. Its territory stretched along a rather narrow latitudinal steppe belt interrupted or fringed by mountain chains dominated by the Altai and Tianshan ranges. The geopolitical peculiarity of this formation may have played an additional role in the characteristic tendency of a Turkic state to split up into two branches, a senior and a junior one. The senior branch of the Ashina dynasty ruling the K^ök Turks lived to the east of the Altai range, with the Orkhon valley of northwestern Mongolia as its center of gravity; this is why their group is also called Eastern Turks (or Northern Turks, a confusing concept, correct only with respect to China). The junior branch ruled in the west, with the western Tianshan and the region of Semireche as its principal home; it is thus also known as Western Turks.

In 622, too, Muhammad, an Arab of the merchant city of Mecca who had failed to convince his fellow citizens and fellow tribesmen the Quraysh that God had chosen him as His final prophet (*khatam al-anbiya*) in order to convert people to a definitive form of monotheistic faith, left that city and moved to Yathrib (eventually known as Madinat al-Rasul, “The Prophet’s City,” or simply Madina, our Medina), an agricultural oasis some 100 kilometers to the north. Known in Arabic as *hijra* (usually spelled *hegira* in English, and meaning emigration), Muhammad’s move signaled a radical change in his prophetic mission; for at Medina he not only succeeded in assembling a community of believers composed of both those who had come from Mecca to join him and of local converts, but also in organizing that community along political lines – in short, in laying the foundations of a theocratic state. Islam, the religion founded by Muhammad, quickly won great victories both on the spiritual and temporal level. Not only Mecca but much of the Arabian peninsula was converted or conquered; and by the time the founder of Islam died in 632, the vigorous young state, directed from Medina by his first successor (*khalifa*, hence our caliph) Abu Bakr (632–34), was poised to launch an unprecedented series of conquests both east and west. Known as *jihad* (lit. supreme effort [in the cause of God]), Holy War, it gained under the second caliph, Umar (634–44), Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Persia for Islam. The next major wave of conquests – the last one directed from the center – occurred during the rule of the first Islamic dynasty, that of the Umayyads (661–750), which succeeded the four caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali) who had ruled from Medina. Most Umayyad caliphs resided in Damascus, and by the time their rule had run its course the Islamic empire comprised Transoxania (Mawarannahr) in the east and Spain (Andalus) in the west.

If we look again at Central Asia in that crucial year of 622, we find a multifaceted scenario that can be summarized in the following manner. Khurasan was a province of Sasanian Iran, with Merv as its chief city. Beyond the Amu Darya, Transoxania and Sinkiang were mosaics of petty principalities marked by such centers as Bukhara, Samarkand, Shash, Khujand, Kashgar, Khotan, Kucha, or Qocho (predecessor of Turfan); Khwarazm continued to be ruled by the Afrighid Khawarazmshahs residing in Kath; and the territories farther north and east, beyond the other river, the Syr Darya, belonged to the western branch of the Kök Turks, while at the same time a process of agricultural and urban colonization from the south gave them some of the characteristics of Transoxania proper. The situation was complex in many

ways: a diversity of ethnic groups, languages, religions, cultures, economies, political systems, and allegiances. The aforementioned suzerainty of the Turks over the local dynasts of Transoxania may even have facilitated this reverse spread of the Sogdian element into the steppe fringes of the nomadic empire. Sogdian, an Iranian tongue, was the principal language of Transoxania. Another related language was Khwarazmian; other languages of the same family are believed to have been spoken to the east or southeast of there: Khotanese in the western part of Sinkiang, Bactrian in Tokharistan for example. In contrast to Sogdian and Khotanese, Khwarazmian and Bactrian have left virtually no written traces; their further destinies present a curious contrast: Khwarazm and Khotan gradually became Turkic-speaking areas, whereas Bactria, as Tokharistan, conserved its Iranian identity but became "Persianized," like its Sogdian neighbor to the north. There is a double irony in this outcome; one is the adoption of the name of the non-Iranian Tokharians for that of the region, the other the fact that at the time of the rise of Islam, most rulers of Tokharistan were scions of Western Turkic dynasties.

As we have said in the introductory chapter, the Iranian idioms formed part of the eastern group of Indo-European languages called *satem*, like the Slavic ones. Tokharian, the language spoken in the eastern part of Sinkiang, was Indo-European as well, but pertained to the *kentum* or western branch of this linguistic family (like Italo-Keltic and Germanic); it was eventually to give way to victorious Turkic, not unlike Khwarazmian and Khotanese. Both the Iranian and Tokharian groups were neighbors of three other major families of languages: Turkic, Sino-Tibetan, and Indian. Although for the time being eclipsed on the level of cultural and religious sophistication by its neighbors, Turkic would gradually prove the most vigorous medium of Inner Asia. In 622 and for several centuries to come, however, it contented itself with being the principal idiom of the steppe and mountain belt to the north of Transoxania and Sinkiang.

Several religions coexisted in Central Asia of that time. An amalgamation of Zoroastrianism (and in some cases also of Hinduism) with kindred ancient native beliefs, Manichaeism, Buddhism, Christianity, and shamanistic cults were close neighbors without the fierce competition that would soon come with Islam. In Khurasan, Zoroastrianism, a dualistic religion practicing fire worship and special burial customs, occupied a dominant position – without, however, eliminating the other cults; it had sprung into being perhaps as early as 1000 BC in that prov-

ince, and was thus the only genuinely Iranian religion among those mentioned above. Zoroastrianism's strong position in 622 may have been partly due to the support it received as the official cult of the Sasanian dynasty of Iran, which had, as we have seen, incorporated Khurasan into its empire. Significantly, beyond the Amu Darya and thus outside the direct control of Sasanian governors, Zoroastrianism had to cede primacy to other faiths, especially Manichaeism in Transoxania and Buddhism in Sinkiang. Manichaeism was another dualistic religion founded by Mani (216–77) in Iraq, then a Persian possession, but subsequently all but extirpated in territories under Persian or Byzantine rule. Mani spoke a Semitic tongue related to Syriac, a later form of Aramaic, the language spoken by Christ. Transoxania and Sinkiang became the principal home of this religion during the next few centuries, and the stamp that it left there went beyond the bounds of the spiritual: its Syriac alphabet was adapted by the Sogdians and was later passed on to the Turks – among whom it eventually ceded the place to the victorious Arabic script – and to the Mongols, who used it until 1940. Buddhism was the third, and with Zoroastrianism the earliest, of the three major creeds of Central Asia prior to the arrival of Islam. Its presence in Khurasan and Transoxania was only marginal, but in Afghanistan and Sinkiang it became the dominant religion: Balkh, Khotan, and Qocho were the foremost among Buddhist centers. The devoutness of the king of Qocho is vividly described by the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan Tsang (600–64) who passed through it in 629. Sanskrit and its derivatives and alphabets such as Brahmi, as well as another script named Kharoshthi and derived, like the Sogdian one, from Syriac, came with this religion from northwestern India, but despite initial vigor these writing systems gradually gave way to the Manichaean Sogdians' Syriac script. Christianity too arrived early in Central Asia: Merv was the seat of a bishopric by the fourth century, and the religion spread in its Nestorian form throughout the area under discussion. Alongside its own sharp individuality, this denomination had certain features in common with Manichaeism: Syriac liturgical language and script in particular. Christianity never managed to gain a leading position in Inner Asia, but it later played an at times significant role among the elite of the otherwise shamanistic Turks and Mongols.

This, then, was the general situation in 622. Meanwhile the birth of Islam in distant Arabia signified more than just another religion that would soon join those existing in Inner Asia. It meant a new and uncompromising way of life, both spiritual and temporal, wherever Muslim

armies or missionaries could successfully penetrate. In Khurasan, Transoxania, and Khwarazm Islam was victorious by the time the second major Islamic dynasty, that of the Abbasids, came to power in 750. Farther north and east the process took longer, and the wave never reached Mongolia. But this exception alone illustrates the phenomenal dynamism of Islam, and the seminal role it played in the history of Inner Asia.