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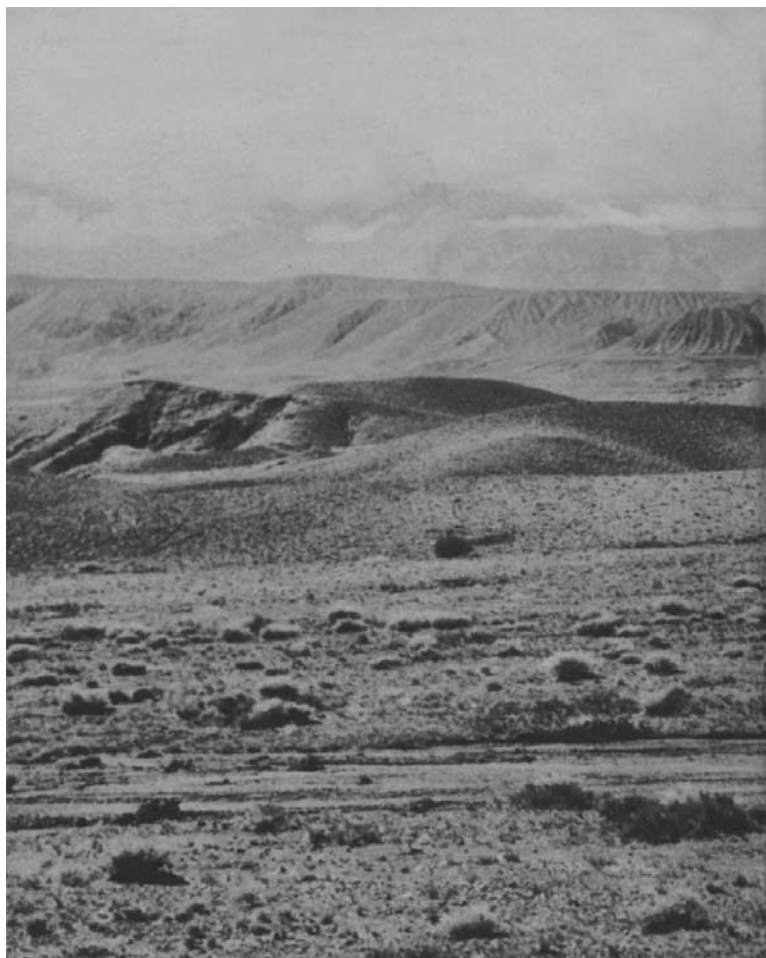
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The edge of the Gobi with the Altai in the distance. Photograph courtesy of the Embassy of the Mongolian People's Republic.

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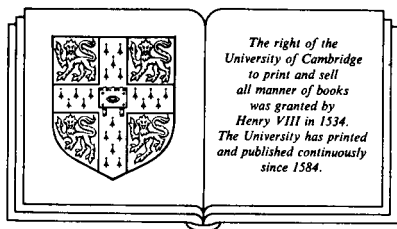
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# *Searches for an Imaginary Kingdom*

*The Legend of the Kingdom of  
Prester John*

L. N. GUMILEV

*Translated by* R. E. F. SMITH



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I dedicate this to the  
fraternal Mongol people  
*The Author*

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## Introduction

Few works of scholarly history have the range and exhilaration of Gumilev's *Searches for an Imaginary Kingdom*. Climatic history and ecological history, demographic history and social and economic history, are all interwoven here with the politics, religions, and literatures of the vast and varied area between European Russia and China during the centuries between 800 A.D. and 1300 A.D. There is no work quite like it, and it is hard to believe that any reader will not have his or her view of the history of the Old World significantly changed by it.

Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev (b. 1912) has been a somewhat unusual figure in the Soviet academic system. He is the son of Nikolai Gumilev, the poet, whose work has just begun to receive recognition again after decades of officially imposed silence, and of the often embattled poet Anna Akhmatova. He is a scholar of exceptional originality.

Yet a distinctive vision is not achieved without some cost. Historians of China will certainly feel that many of his judgements on Chinese history differ from those accepted by Western specialists, both in details and interpretations. Mongolists may prefer to read *The Secret History of the Mongols* as a map of past grievances and benefits among the elite, rather than as a political lampoon. A number of scholars, both Western and Soviet, are without question not as confident as the author is regarding the authenticity of *The Lay of Igor's Host*. But we think that almost every reader will find Gumilev's analysis of the inner dynamics of the steppe peoples that led to the world-shattering rise of Mongol power the most compelling so far produced, and his reconstruction of the realities behind the medieval legend of a Christian Kingdom in central Asia a fascinating piece of detective work. Above all, he fills in many of the missing spaces between the histories of medieval Europe and

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medieval China, and makes it possible to begin to think of them as being, in some sense, parts of a greater whole.

The Foreword to Gumilev's book is by S. I. Rudenko (1885–1969), a Soviet scholar who worked in the fields of archaeology, ethnography and anthropology. He wrote on the peoples and cultures of the Volga area and of Siberia, including especially the Mountain Altai.

R. E. F. SMITH

MARK ELVIN

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## *Foreword*

The book here offered to the reader's attention does not fall into any one of the forms accepted in modern scholarship. It cannot be called a popular sketch in the full sense of the word, although it is written in a popular form and is aimed at the general reader. It does not popularise the results of exclusively scholarly and academic research written for a narrow circle of specialists, but is a completely new investigation, self-contained and published for the first time. Perhaps this would seem to make it like a monograph, since its material is devoted to a single theme, the subject of the investigation. However, the popular form and, chiefly, the author's research method differ fundamentally from the form and method of the monograph. L. N. Gumilev's book is best designated a scholarly treatise, in the medieval sense of the word.

Can such a form, long disused, be considered suitable for a modern scholarly investigation? The book itself answers this question.

The development of scholarly thought has, over the last century and a half, travelled the road of differentiation. What were formerly single branches of academic knowledge have become fragmented and their parts have diverged further and further. Thus, history separated from geography and letters. Then, it split into a series of specialisms concerned with particular regions and chronological periods. Offshoots developed: the study of sources, the history of religion, culture, ethnography and a whole series of other disciplines which tended to become separate branches of knowledge. The same thing has taken place in other fields.

Such a development is quite regular in scholarship. It has proved fruitful. But now, ever more, the need for scientific synthesis, the need to make use of the achievements of the most diverse disciplines, makes itself felt. New scientific discoveries are, in our day, ever more frequently made not in some specific branch of knowl-

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edge, but at the interface of various fields. The author of this book, too, encountered the need to make use in his investigation of data from various branches of history, the study of sources, physical geography, climatology and investigative methodology. Each of these fields has its own research methods which differ from one another, so the form of a monograph was unsuitable for the author's theme. On the other hand, the treatise allowed him to accommodate and synthesize all the essential material.

The peculiar nature of the theme also affected the composition of the book. The author deliberately renounced the procedure, usual in scholarly works, of starting with a survey and criticism of the sources. To carry out a criticism of the sources for this theme, the reader would have to be acquainted in outline with the history of the period, he would himself have to sense where in this general picture the researcher encounters blank spots and contradictory information. Real and effective criticism of the most important sources could not be made without such preliminary knowledge. Furthermore, it is impossible to find one's way without this. Therefore, L. N. Gumilev makes his analysis of the sources only in the second part of the book in order to then return again to the general picture and fill in the blank spots which have been disclosed in the first part of his exposition. We have to recognise that that procedure, despite being unusual, is not only fully justified, but is the only possible one.

The book devotes much space to sorting out a whole series of religious systems which the author inevitably encountered in the course of his investigation. This concern with religious history is also linked with the peculiar nature of his theme. The author does not look at the religious systems with regard to their dogma or their social and economic aspects. He links them with the ethnography of the peoples of the Great Steppe and uses them as an indicator of those deep, latent processes of history which surface in religious form.

The book is entitled '*Searches for an imaginary kingdom*'. At first sight it is concerned with that historical curiosity which was the Kingdom of Prester John. Yet behind this curiosity lies concealed a whole epoch in the History of Central Asia's nomadic peoples, filled with important and dramatic events which had an enormous influence on the entire process of world history. These events gave birth to the Legend of Prester John and his kingdom; it is they that are the object of this investigation. We are dealing with the history of the

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Great Steppe from the fall of the Turkic kaganate in the eighth century to the formation of the Mongol Empire in the first half of the thirteenth.

L. N. Gumilev is the author of *The Huns* and *The Ancient Turks* (both in Russian); in these books he dealt in a systematic and detailed way with the history of the Central Asian nomads from the earliest times accessible to research to the ninth century. This book is a direct continuation of these works. It throws light on the darkest and least studied period in the history of the nomad peoples, discloses the processes which led to the rise of the Mongol Empire and the history of Chinggis Khan, the 'shaker of the universe' himself.

Historical writing usually considers the Great Steppe a certain unity and depicts all nomads as alike. L. N. Gumilev's treatise, as well as his previous works mentioned above, puts an end to such concepts. The Steppe had its own history, no less intense and vigorous than, let us say, that of Europe or the Near East. In the course of their development the nomad peoples created an original type of society and culture which were not at all stagnant or primitive. Each nomadic people had its own unique features, its own individual aspects which the author has succeeded in displaying in this book.

In this connection it is necessary to say a few words about L. N. Gumilev's research method. As regards rapidly achieving a reliable result, it is related to existing methods as algebra is to arithmetic. A minimum of four monographs would have to be written, accessible only to a narrow circle of specialists, and a whole lifetime spent on it, to achieve by ordinary methods what he has done in this book. His method has allowed him to avoid an expenditure of effort which would have led to approximately the same result. It can be briefly described as the application of historical deduction to the material that has been accumulated, rather than the generally accepted inductive method.

The latter, it goes without saying, is fine and essential when we are dealing with the accumulation of material. But it is powerless to create a generalised historical picture, particularly when scholars have only few and scattered sources. In such cases it is impossible to solve a problem by the inductive method.

It is not by chance that L. N. Gumilev has chosen the treatise form for his investigation. This has allowed him to apply the method and achievements of a whole series of fields to resolve his problems. By using the stereoscopic method of research, which he vividly calls the

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view from the mousehole, from the top of the barrow burial, the bird's eye view, as well as a wide historical panorama from the shores of the Atlantic to the waves of the Pacific, he has obtained data which are of significance not only for history, but also for ethnography, archaeology, physical geography, soil science, climatology.

The author has used this method not for the first time. Thanks to it he succeeded in unveiling Khazaria and in explaining the climatic history of the Eurasian steppe zone. Therefore, we cannot call the present book merely a historical investigation. It contains a synthesis of data from a whole series of fields and is a necessary step towards the creation of a synthetic science which can be called ethnology.

S. RUDENKO



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## *Translator's note*

The proofreader of T. E. Lawrence's *Revolt in the Desert* found it full of inconsistencies in the spelling of names. In reply, Lawrence noted that there were 'some "scientific systems" of transliteration, helpful to people who know enough Arabic not to need helping, but a wash-out for the world. I spell my names anyhow, to show what rot the systems are.' The reader of this translation will not find consistency, even though I do not share Lawrence's cavalier attitude to the problems of rendering Eastern names into English. The complexities are such as to make consistency unattainable, despite the excellent and unstinted advice and help I have had from colleagues.

I am most grateful to Charles Bawden who alerted me to many pitfalls, apart from undertaking the immense task of checking the Mongol items. Many of these items do not occur except in the Secret History of the Mongols, so the translation of this work by Igor de Rachewiltz (in *Papers on Far Eastern History*, Australian National University, Canberra, no. 4, September 1971, to no. 31 March 1985) has been used for the English versions. Some deviations have been allowed where the alternatives seem more likely to be known to the general reader. Thomas Bonington has performed similar outstanding service in checking the Chinese items, wherever possible against the Chinese characters. I am most grateful to Mark Elvin for his additional checking of the Chinese items and for his advice. The main works consulted were: N. Ya. Bichurin [Iakin], *Sobranie svedenii o narodakh, obitavshikh v Srednei Azii v drevnie vremena*, III, Moscow-Leningrad, 1953; K. A. Wittfogel and Fêng Chia-Sheng, *History of Chinese Society, Liao*, Philadelphia, 1949; and I. M. Oshanin et al., *Bol'shoi kitaisko-russkii slovar'*, 4 vols., Moscow, 1983–4. This verification from the characters was especially necessary since L. N. Gumilev is not always accurate in his Russian versions. The pinyin system has been used for the English romanisations, despite Gumilev's objections (see Chapter

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13, n. 19). Finally, Michael Hendy advised on the rendering of the Turkic items, consulting mainly Faruk Sümer, *Oğuzlar (Türkmenler)*, (Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih, Coğrafya Fakültesi Yayınları: 170), Ankara, 1972. No one could have had colleagues more generous of their time and erudition than these.

I would also like to thank Iain White for his painstaking work on a difficult, though I hope rewarding, manuscript.

Where no identification was made, items have been transliterated from the Russian version.

The jacket illustration was suggested, with his usual kindness, by Michael Rogers, to whom I am most grateful.

Gumilev's references to R. Grousset, *L'Empire des Steppes*, Paris, 1960, and to C. Diehl, *Histoire de l'Empire byzantin*, Paris, 1919, have been adjusted to refer to the English translations of these works.

'Central Asia' in the text refers to Soviet Central Asia (*Srednyaya Aziya*), roughly former Turkestan; 'east Central Asia', i.e. east of the Pamirs, is used to translate *Tsentral'naya Aziya* and 'Middle Asia' is used for *Sredinnaya Aziya*.

R.E.F.S