

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Turks, the Emergence of

The Emergence of the Turks

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Summary: History needs men and women of thought and those of action. In the 8th and 9th centuries, the Arabs, Persians, Spaniards and Africans had laid the intellectual foundation of Islam. In the 10th century, the Turks provided the primal energy to renew Islamic civilization and supplied the men and women of action who propelled it for over a thousand years. The Turks tower over the last thousand years as the dominating force in Islamic history. They substituted the Sultanate for the Caliphate as the effective temporal power in Islam (10th century), defended the Abbasid orthodoxy against the Fatimid challenge (11th century) and provided the shield against the Crusaders (12th and 13th centuries). They stopped the Mongols at the gates of Jerusalem (13th century), opened up Anatolia and Eastern Europe to Islamic penetration (11th through 14th centuries) and provided Islamic history with women sovereigns (13th century). They won back West Asia from the Tatars after the devastations of Timurlane (15th century), captured the Byzantine capital of Constantinople in 1453 and advanced into Central Europe with a siege of Vienna in 1526 and again in 1683. They militarily dominated Eurasia for more than five hundred years, defended the Muslims of North Africa against the Spaniards (16th century) and contained the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean (16th century). They made the term ghazi a respectable term in the languages spoken by Muslims, gave the world a distinct architectural style with its sleek minarets, produced master-builders like Sinan, reinforced the pre-eminence of tasawwuf in the Islamic body politic and reigned over the longest lasting dynasty the world has even known (the Ottomans).

In the second half of the last millennium (768–965), three mass conversions took place that sealed the fate of Eurasia. The Germans were inducted into the Latin Church, the Turks accepted Islam and the Russians chose the Eastern Orthodox faith. The history of the Old World during the last thousand years is but a footnote to these galactic events.

Charlemagne (768-814) played the first gambit in this global chess game. By the time he ascended the throne of France, the geopolitical situation in the eastern Mediterranean had undergone major changes. Byzantium had lost Egypt and Syria to the Muslims and was under pressure from the Lombards in northern Italy. The Roman Popes could no longer count on the military protection of a weakened Byzantium. In 751, to assert their independence from the Byzantines, the Roman Pope appointed Pepin,

predecessor of Charlemagne, as the King of the Holy Roman Empire. Charlemagne inherited this title. An alliance was thus forged between the Church and State that provided a foundation for the Carolingian Empire and proved to be the first stage in the awakening of Europe from its Dark Ages.

Charlemagne took his title of Holy Roman Emperor seriously. In 778, he launched a campaign against the Muslims in Spain. He had little success except in the border areas around Barcelona. Turning to the southeast he overran the Lombards, captured a large treasure from them and used it to finance further conquests. Then he turned his attention to the northeast and occupied northern Germany. At its height, Charlemagne's empire (the Carolingian empire) embraced France, Germany, Austria and northern Italy.

At the time, most of the eastern Germans (the Ostrogoths) were pagan. Charlemagne waged a relentless war against them, subduing and baptizing them with force. Each time he turned his back, the Germans rebelled against the imposed faith and Charles would return with increasing ferocity. In one single campaign in the year 782, he killed over 4,000 Germans for their recalcitrance. It was not until 804 that Charlemagne's control of central and northern Germany was consolidated. And it was not until a hundred years later that the combined power of Frankish arms and monastic priests finally succeeded in converting the Germans. Thereafter, starting with the 10th century, the Germans provided their immense energy for the revival of Western Europe and were in the vanguard of the Crusader armies in the 11th and 12th centuries.

The next major move was the acceptance of Islam by the Turks. This happened gradually, over a period of two centuries, from 800 to 1000. The Turks were a family of tribes inhabiting the vast territories on the plateaus of Central Asia. In the 6th century they formed a small kingdom in Turkistan. When it broke up, the Turks were scattered over territories from Mongolia to Russia and the borders of Persia. Some of them were settled, but most lived as nomads who made frequent raids into China and Persia. They were bound together by a common language and a common shamanist faith. In 751 the Muslims won the Battle of Talas over the Chinese and established the Rivers Oxus and Talas as boundaries between the Caliphate and the Tang Empire of China. The border areas of Khorasan were incorporated into the Caliphate, prospered and great cities like Samarqand and Bukhara grew up. The powerful Caliphs kept the Turks at bay. But due to their reputation as good soldiers and their demonstrated skills on the battlefield, their services were in great demand in the armed forces of Baghdad and of the provincial rulers and the Turks made their way back into the centers of power.

Islam had entered the world stage proclaiming the transcendence of *Tawhid*. It was this transcendence that animated Islamic history between 622 and 664, from the Hijra of the Prophet to the assassination of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r). *Tawhid* provided the energy that propelled Islam onto the world stage. This changed with the Omayyads. Muawiya was the first soldier-emir of Islam. Thenceforth, dynastic rule prevailed and the Caliphate was more often propped up by military power than by piety. The Turks possessed in abundance the martial qualities required to compete in an age dominated by soldiers. They were superb horseman and fierce warriors, known for their courage, steadfastness and propensity for justice. However, the primary characteristic that stood them well was their allegiance to the clan and dedication to their chief. This tribal cohesion provided the cement in their triumph over more settled nations. Their entry into the fold of Islam was slow and deliberate, but once inside, they quickly rose to the center stage of power, displacing both the Arabs and the Persians. And there they remained for eight centuries, until the rules of competition for power changed; the merchants of Europe rose to dominate the world (circa 1750) and were in turn supplanted by the bankers in Europe and America (1800-1900).

The Abbasid Caliph al Mu'tasim (833-842) was the first one to create a Turkish bodyguard. He did this to balance off the power between the old Arab aristocracy and the rising power of the Persians in the empire. But the Turks had other ideas. Al Mu'tasim's successors were feeble and incompetent and the Caliphate in Baghdad rapidly lost its political power. Far away provinces first became autonomous and then declared their independence. The Aghlabids established their rule over the Maghrib, in modern day Algeria and Morocco. The Turks, who had rapidly risen through the military ranks and had been appointed governors in several of the provinces, were not far behind. By the reign of Mutawakkil (847-861) the Turkish guards had become the effective power brokers in Baghdad. In 868, Ahmed bin Tulun, a Turk, seized power in Cairo and established the Tulunid dynasty in Egypt. Another Turkish tribe, the Ikhshidids displaced the Tulunids and ruled Egypt from 933 until the Fatimids defeated them in 969. And it was a Turkish General, Jawhar, who led the Fatimid armies in their victorious march on Cairo.

To the east, the Samanids ruled Khorasan (874-999). With their capital in Bukhara, the Samanids created a brilliant urban-based civilization known for its industry, agriculture and great centers of learning. The Tahirids held Nishapur and competed with the Samanids for power and prestige. These principalities ruled in the name of the Abbasid Caliphs. But in practice, they were independent with the right to mint their own coins and proclaim their own names in the Friday khutba. It was during this period, in 921, that the Bulgars, a Turkish tribe, accepted Islam. The Bulgars, along with Arab and Jewish merchants, carried on a brisk slave trade with the Vikings along the Volga River. The large number of Abbasid coins found recently in Scandinavia testifies to the extent of the trade. In 961, the Oghuz family from the Caspian Sea area, forerunners of the Seljuks, entered Islam. The Turks carried their mission of Islam into the very heart of Russia, into Moscow and Kiev. However, in 988, the Russian Count Vladimir of Kiev spurned the invitation of the Bulgars to accept Islam. Instead, he embraced the Eastern Orthodox faith, which was at the time championed by the Byzantines based in Constantinople. The die was now cast with the Turks in the fold of Islam, the Russian and Eastern Slavs under the Eastern Orthodox faith and the Germans under the Roman Catholic Church.

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