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## Who were the *Türkmen* of Ottoman and Safavid lands? An overlooked early modern identity

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the history of the term *Türkmen* in western Asia, and asks how its significance changed with the spread of Ottoman and Safavid power in the early modern era. Although it always maintained its core connotation of uncouth tribes, the meaning of the term became more complex (and at times conflicting) after the Mongol period, a dynamic which this paper highlights by comparing it to the *Oghūz* identity. Poets and court historians developed novel ways of deploying both terms to explain the political dominance of Turkish speakers in the region. When *Türkmen* gained new import as a political label during the Aq Quyūnlū period, it came to have two contradictory connotations: tribal rebellion and the state-building aspirations of the Anatolian *Türkmen* dynasties. Both were marginalized by the subsequent establishment of Ottoman and Safavid power in the 16th century. However, the term continued to be widely used to describe Turkish-speaking tribes in the region, and manuscripts from the Caucasus version of the *Köroğlu* epic tradition show how it came to represent an autonomous tribal alternative to the new imperial status quo of the 17th century.

**Keywords:** *Türkmen*, tribe, *Oghūz*, Ottoman, Safavid, *Köroğlu*

Although scholars have long accounted for the vital military administrative role that Turks played in medieval and early modern western Asia by ruling over the likes of the Iranian Saljūq (1037–1194), Anatolian Saljūq (1075–1308), Mamlūk (1250–1517), Aq Quyūnlū (1378–1501), Ottoman (1299–1918), and Safavid (1501–1722) states, what we know about these Turks in the realms of politics and culture tends to be oriented around a select group who were conquerors and rulers.<sup>1</sup> Our under-

<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I use the terms *Turkish* and *Turks* to broadly indicate Turkish speakers to the west of Central Asia – namely Iran, Iraq, the Caucasus, Syria, Anatolia and the Balkans.

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standing of them is limited by the urban and elite origins of the written sources at our disposal.

This predicament is ubiquitous in the study of pre-modern history, and as such hardly unique to the Turks. But it is especially relevant in their case, for two reasons. The first is that the Turkish populations who migrated westward were predominantly composed of rural-dwelling nomads, a group which scholars of Eurasia have long demonstrated to be underrepresented and mis-characterized in written sources.<sup>2</sup> The second is that for many centuries, the Turks who came to constitute the ruling class in western Asia chiefly patronized literary forms and languages which pre-dated their arrival, giving the impression of an even wider gulf between themselves and their nomadic counterparts. As a result, the historical record offers two starkly contrasting images of the Turk, both distorted by biases in the sources: the pious Islamic ruler and the roving nomadic tribesman.

This essay examines the historical usage of a term which was frequently attached to the latter nomadic stereotype, *Türkmen* (Tur. *Türkmen*/*Türkmän*/*Terākime*, Pers. *Turkamān*/*Tarākimah*, hereby *Türkmen*), to compensate for the disproportionate scholarly attention granted the former. *Türkmen* was a term adopted to describe Turkish converts to Islam who composed the vast bulk of the nomadic tribal migrants into Iran, Iraq, Syria, the Caucasus, and Anatolia between the 11th and the 14th centuries. Despite its ubiquity in the historical record, the concept has remained marginal in the study of Turkish history because of its ambiguous connotation in the sources and its relative rarity in elite discourses.<sup>3</sup> These are precisely the features which render it productive to examine, owing to how it consistently denoted historical actors who today tend to fall outside of scholarly notions of the “Islamized” Turkish elite. After tracking its history, I show that the term remained relevant in the wake of the establishment of Ottoman and Safavid power in the 16th century by coming to represent a form of resistance to the new imperial order between Anatolia and Iran.

Türkmenler

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<sup>2</sup> PERDUE 2005, 7–8; GOLDEN 2011, 4.

<sup>3</sup> From the beginning of its use, *Türkmen* was more specific in its tribal connotation than its more generic counterpart, *Türk* in Persian (pl. *Atrāk*, Tur. *Türk*/*Etrāk*), with which it occasionally overlapped. In the later Ottoman context, for instance, *Türk* could also be pejorative, YILDIRIM 2008, 355.