

The Sogdian Descendants in Mongol and post-Mongol Central Asia: The Tajiks and Sarts

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Abstract

“Just as there is no cap without a head, there is no Turk without a Tat (*tatsiz türk bolmas bashsiz bürk bolmas*).” This Old Turkic proverb, which was current in Qarakhanid Kashgaria, epitomizes the symbiotic relationship between nomad and sedentary in medieval Central Asia. Who were these Tats? The term *Tat* appears in the Old Turkic inscriptions of the 8th century and refers to the non-Turkic subjects who were chiefly Sogdians.

This paper examines the identity of the Sogdian descendants and their historical role in Mongol and post-Mongol Central Asia. After the Arab conquest of Central Asia, the ethnonym *Tajik* became attached to the Sogdian descendants. In addition, the Mongols in the 13th century began using the term *Sart* to refer to the same settled population of Central Asia. In the Chaghatayid Ulus (the Chaghatayid Khanate and the Timurid empire) and the Ilkhanate, the Tajiks/Sarts and the Mongols (and their Turkicized descendants) also maintained a symbiotic relationship. While the military was exclusively Turco-Mongolian, and the civilian was exclusively Tajik/Sart. The Tajiks/Sarts, as Persian-speaking inhabitants of the towns and cultivated lands, served as the bureaucrats, merchants, and artisans in the Mongol states and their successor states in Central Asia and Iran. Their role in the administration, commerce, and cultural life was indispensable. These states therefore used the phrase “Turk and Tajik (*Turk u Tāzīk/Tājīk*)” to refer to their population. In sum, one may also epitomize the relationship between the Tajiks/Sarts and the Mongols using the Old Turkic proverb: “Just as there is no cap without a head, there is no Mongol without a Tajik/Sart.”