

## Turko-Mongol Tribes in Central Asia

*Imamnazarov Kakhramon Utkurovich*

*Associate Professor, Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Uzbekistan*

**Abstract:** This article explores the historical development of Turko-Mongol tribes in Central Asia and their role in shaping the political and cultural landscape of the Eurasian steppe. It examines the close interaction between Turkic and Mongolic peoples, emphasizing their shared nomadic lifestyle, social organization, and participation in tribal federations. Particular attention is given to the processes of political fragmentation and consolidation that characterized the region prior to the 13th century. The study also analyzes the broader geopolitical context, including the influence of neighboring states such as the Song dynasty, Jin dynasty, and the Khwarazmian Empire. The rise of Genghis Khan is presented as a culmination of long-term socio-political developments within the steppe world, leading to the unification of previously fragmented tribes and the creation of a vast empire. The article concludes that the emergence of the Mongol Empire was the result of deep-rooted historical processes, including cultural integration, military cooperation, and political adaptation among Turko-Mongol tribes.

**Key words:** Turko-Mongol tribes, Central Asia, nomadic society, steppe civilization, Mongol Empire, tribal federations, Eurasian steppe and medieval history, political organization, cultural interaction.

### Introduction

The history of the Turko-Mongol world in Central Asia represents one of the most significant and dynamic chapters in Eurasian history. For centuries, the vast steppe zone stretching from Manchuria to Eastern Europe served as a cultural and political arena for nomadic societies of diverse origins, including Turkic, Mongolic, Iranian, and Tungusic peoples. These groups shared similar patterns of life, social organization, and mobility, which enabled them to interact closely, form tribal confederations, and periodically establish powerful empires[1].

By the end of the first millennium, the balance of power in the steppe began to shift. While earlier political dominance had belonged largely to Turkic states such as the Turkic Khaganate and the Uyghur Khaganate, the rise of Mongol tribes marked a new phase in the history of Central Asia. These tribes, closely related to the Turks in both cultural and social terms, gradually consolidated their power within a fragmented political landscape characterized by the absence of centralized authority[2].

The emergence of the Mongols as a dominant force in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, culminating in the rise of Genghis Khan, was not an isolated phenomenon but the result of long-term interactions, alliances, and conflicts among steppe peoples. At the same time, the surrounding regions—including China under the Song dynasty and Jin dynasty, Central Asia under the Khwarazmian Empire, and other neighboring states—played a crucial role in shaping the geopolitical context in which the Mongol Empire emerged.

This article aims to examine the historical development of Turko-Mongol tribes in Central Asia, their socio-political structures, cultural interactions, and the conditions that led to the rise of the Mongol Empire. By analyzing both internal dynamics and external influences, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the processes that transformed the nomadic world into one of the largest empires in world history.



Kielce 2026

Material and methods: After a millennium of Turkic dominance in the territory of present-day Mongolia and across Central Asia, the era of the Mongols began. Mongolia can be considered the easternmost part of the Eurasian steppe zone, which stretches from Manchuria to Hungary. Since ancient times, this steppe zone has been the cradle of various nomadic tribes of Iranian, Turkic, Mongolian, and Manchu origin[3].

The term “Mongol-Tatars” is rather artificial. The name “Mongols,” under the forms “Mengwu” or “Mengwa,” is mentioned in the official histories of the Tang dynasty (618–908). The ancient Mongols originated from the Shiwei tribes. The Shiwei—one of the ethnic groups related to the Khitans—inhabited territories stretching from south to north along the Great Wall of China and existed at different stages of cultural development. Those Shiwei tribes that were called Mongols led a nomadic lifestyle in the steppe regions south of the lower Argun River and the upper Amur River. After the fall of the Uyghur Khaganate (mid-9th century), the ancient Mongols began migrating westward into the territory of modern Mongolia[4].

According to Mongol legends recorded by Rashid al-Din, the Mongol people—once subjugated by the Turks in ancient times—retreated to the mountains of Ergene-Kun. At some point, which Persian historians date to the 9th century, the ancestors of the Mongols are believed to have descended again from Ergene-Kun to the plains of the Selenga and Onon rivers. The word “Tatars” first appears in Old Turkic runic inscriptions in 732 and thereafter became widespread in Central Asia. It is believed that “Tatars” was originally the name of a specific group of tribes within the Shiwei tribal confederation[5].

Old Turkic and Muslim written traditions extended the name “Tatars” to all Mongolian- and Turkic-speaking tribes, thus turning this ethnonym into a general political term. The term “Tatars,” through the ancient Uyghurs, entered the Chinese language and was regularly recorded in Chinese texts from 842 onward. Meanwhile, in the 1160s–1170s, with the tacit approval of Chinese authorities, the Tatars inflicted a crushing defeat on the Mongols, and the name “Mongol” nearly disappeared within Mongolia itself, being replaced by “Tatars.”

However, at the beginning of the 13th century, Genghis Khan succeeded in defeating the Tatar forces. In the *The Secret History of the Mongols* (1240), this event is described in the words attributed to Genghis Khan: “...we crushed our hated enemies—the Tatars, the killers of our grandfathers and fathers.”

The name “Mongol” (in Muslim sources “Mogol” or “Moghul”) was not only restored, but from the time of Genghis Khan came into use as the official name of the dynasty and the state (from 1211), and later also as the name of the people. As for Europe, the Turko-Mongols, even after their rise, were known there primarily under the general name “Tatars.” This form of the name was partly influenced by its similarity to the classical “Tartarus.” As the chronicler Matthew Paris explains: “This terrible race of Satan—the Tatars... rushed forward like demons released from Tartarus (therefore they were rightly called ‘Tartars,’ for only the inhabitants of Tartarus could behave in such a way)”[6].

Result and discussion: Many of the warriors in the Mongol armies that invaded Russian’ were in fact Turkic peoples under Mongol leadership. Therefore, the name “Tatars” eventually came to be used in Russian’ for various Turkic tribes that settled there after the Mongol invasion, such as the Kazan and Crimean Tatars. The remarkable fact that the name “Tatars” soon came to denote all Turkic peoples and, more broadly, all steppe populations of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Siberia is not accidental. It likely reflects the significant role this group played within the Mongol political and military conglomerate[7].

Thus, until approximately the year 1000, the Mongol tribes were part of the ancient Turkic state of the Xiongnu; from the 6th to the 8th centuries, they were incorporated into the Turkic Khaganate; and from the 8th to the 9th centuries, into the Uyghur Khaganate. After the collapse of the Uyghur Khaganate, the Uyghurs left Karakorum, and the territory of modern Mongolia remained inhabited by Mongol and



Kielce 2026

smaller Turkic tribes. In the 10th century, the Khitan emperor of the Liao dynasty even invited the Uyghurs to return from Ganzhou to Karakorum, but they refused. For centuries, Mongol warriors, together with Turkic tribes, carried out campaigns against a common enemy—the Chinese Empire. As vassals of the Turks (who controlled Mongolia in the early period), the Mongols participated in nearly all military campaigns. Joint expeditions, coexistence, and, as a result, intermixing all undoubtedly influenced the customs and traditions of both Turkic and Mongol peoples. According to the traditions preserved by singers of the Mongolian steppes, the wolf and the doe were considered the primordial ancestors of royal lineages before the time of Genghis Khan. These symbolic animals have often been found cast in bronze in numerous settlements across Siberia[8].

The wolf was a totemic animal in the great ancient myths of Turko-Mongol peoples. At first glance, the pairing of a doe with a wolf—a predator that would normally prey upon it—may seem surprising. However, this likely represents a symbolic union of masculine qualities associated with the wolf—strength and courage—and feminine virtues embodied by the doe—agility and grace. Among the myths tracing back to the ancestors of Genghis Khan, there is a well-known legend that combines both animal and solar symbolism. From the union of the wolf and the doe was born a woman named Alan Qo'a. She was later miraculously impregnated by a ray of sunlight that entered through the smoke hole of the yurt and touched her body. From this divine conception were born the ancestors of the great khan—the Nirun Mongols, including Bodonchar Munkhag, who is regarded as the eighth-generation ancestor of Genghis Khan[9].

The Turks differed little from the Mongols. From ancient times, they had tribal federations that united the Altai steppe peoples—Turks, Mongols, and Tungusic groups. The distance between two different Turkic tribes was no greater than that between a Turkic and a Mongol tribe. Even if their languages were not similar, they shared the same syntactic structure, which implied a similar way of thinking. These tribes often acted together; however, in the battlefields of Western Asia and Eastern Europe, the number of nomads from Upper Asia—such as the Uyghurs, the subjects of the Karakhanids, as well as the Turkmens of Iran and Afghanistan, the Kipchaks, and the Bulgars—was greater than that of the Mongols[10].

Closely related to the Turks, born in the same spiritual environment of shamanism and settled on the same land from which they had drawn their strength for centuries, the Mongols gradually began to organize themselves and establish their dominance. They experienced a long and difficult “gestation period,” which eventually culminated in the emergence of a powerful force. For a long time, the Orkhon and Selenga rivers produced no major political power, yet there accumulated dynamic forces that were soon to erupt. Before the time of Genghis Khan, relatively strong states formed by Mongolic-speaking tribes—such as the Xianbei in Eastern Mongolia (1st–4th centuries) and the Khitans in Mongolia, Manchuria, and Northern China (9th century)—were unable to play a decisive role in steppe politics[11].

Nomadic society was characterized by a high degree of mobility, and the politics of nomads were highly dynamic. Seeking to utilize neighboring populations and control overland trade routes, nomads would periodically gather into vast hordes capable of launching campaigns against distant lands. However, in most cases, the empires they created were not particularly stable and collapsed as easily as they were formed. Periods of unity and concentration of power within a single tribe or group of tribes alternated with periods of fragmentation and the absence of political cohesion. It should also be noted that the western part of the steppe zone—the Pontic-Caspian steppes—was successively controlled by the Scythians, Sarmatians, Huns, Avars, Khazars, Pechenegs, and Cumans, while the Turks controlled Mongolia in earlier periods[12].

In the 12th century, there was no centralized state in Mongolia. Numerous tribes and clan groupings lived across different parts of the region without clear territorial boundaries between them. Most of these groups spoke Mongolian, except in the western regions, where Turkic languages were widely used. In the broader ethnic background, there was also an element of Iranian ancestry present among both Turks



Kielce 2026

and Mongols. Regardless of the ethnic origins of the tribes inhabiting Mongolia in the 12th century, they were similar in their way of life and social organization, which allows us to speak of their belonging to a single cultural sphere[13].

Thus, by the end of the 12th century, the map of Asia presented the following picture: China was divided into two empires. Southern China was under the rule of the Song dynasty, while the north was governed by the Jurchen conquerors, who had established themselves in Beijing in 1125. They were known as the Jin dynasty (the Golden Dynasty). Continuing the traditions of earlier Chinese rulers, the Jin closely monitored developments in Mongolia in order to prevent the emergence of a unified state there[14].

In the northwestern part of China, in present-day Ordos and Gansu, the Tangut kingdom of Western Xia was formed by Tibetan tribes. In the northeastern part of the Tarim Basin, from Turfan to Kucha, lived the Uyghurs—“civilized” Turks who had absorbed both Buddhist and Nestorian cultures. The region of Issyk-Kul, the Chu Valley, and Kashgaria constituted the empire of the Kara-Khitan Khanate, a people of Mongolic origin with a Chinese-influenced culture. Transoxiana (Mawarannahr) and Iran were almost entirely under the rule of the sultans of Khwarazmian Empire—Turkic by origin, Muslim by religion, and shaped by Arab-Persian cultural traditions. Beyond them, the rest of the Muslim world was divided among the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, the Ayyubid sultans of Kurdish origin and Arab culture (in Syria and Egypt), and the Seljuk sultans—Turkic in origin but deeply influenced by Iranian culture—in Anatolia[15].

**In conclusion**, the history of the Turko-Mongol tribes in Central Asia reflects a complex process of interaction, adaptation, and transformation within the Eurasian steppe. Despite ethnic and linguistic differences, Turkic and Mongolic peoples shared similar social structures, nomadic lifestyles, and cultural traditions, which facilitated close cooperation and integration over many centuries. Their joint participation in military campaigns, political alliances, and economic exchanges contributed to the formation of a common steppe civilization.

The political landscape of Central Asia before the 13th century was characterized by fragmentation and the absence of centralized authority. Various tribal confederations and short-lived states emerged and disappeared, while surrounding powers—such as the Song dynasty, Jin dynasty, and the Khwarazmian Empire—closely monitored and influenced developments in the region. At the same time, the steppe remained a zone of high mobility and constant political change.

The rise of Genghis Khan marked a turning point in this history. Building upon long-standing traditions of tribal organization and military cooperation, he succeeded in uniting the previously fragmented Mongol and Turkic tribes into a powerful and centralized state. This unification not only transformed the internal structure of the steppe but also led to the creation of a vast empire that reshaped the political and cultural map of Eurasia.

Thus, the emergence of the Mongol Empire was not a sudden or isolated event, but the culmination of centuries of socio-political evolution within the Turko-Mongol world. Understanding this background allows for a deeper appreciation of the historical processes that shaped Central Asia and its role in global history.

## References Used

- [1] V. V. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*. London, UK: Luzac & Co., 1968.
- [2] B. Ya. Vladimirtsov, *The Social Organization of the Mongols: Mongolian Nomadic Feudalism*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1969.
- [3] D. Sinor, *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990.



Kielce 2026

- [4] C. P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*. New York, NY, USA: Facts On File, 2004.
- [5] T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- [6] P. B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992.
- [7] R. Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia*. New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Rutgers University Press, 1970.
- [8] D. Morgan, *The Mongols*, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- [9] I. de Rachewiltz, *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004.
- [10] R. D. McChesney, *Central Asia: Foundations of Change*. Princeton, NJ, USA: Darwin Press, 1996.
- [11] P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the Islamic World: From Conquest to Conversion*. New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press, 2017.
- [12] N. Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- [13] T. May, *The Mongol Conquests in World History*. London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2012.
- [14] S. A. M. Adshead, *Central Asia in World History*. London, UK: Macmillan, 1993.
- [15] D. Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, vol. 1. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1998.

