

# Buddhism in Central Asia III

*Impacts of Non-Buddhist Influences, Doctrines*

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# Contents

In Memoriam: Jan Assmann	IX
In Memoriam: Diego Loukota	XI
Foreword	XIII
Acknowledgements	XIV
General Abbreviations	XV
Bibliographic Abbreviations	XVIII
List of Illustrations	XXI
Notes on Contributors	XXIII

Introduction: The Meeting of Religious Traditions and of Beliefs in Eastern Central Asia 1

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## PART 1

### *Impacts of Non-Buddhist Influences*

- 1 Islamic Expansion into Central Asia and Muslim-Buddhist Encounters 13  
*Michal Biran*
- 2 Witch Women and Amorous Monkeys: Non-Buddhist Substrata in Khotanese Religion 65  
*Diego Loukota*
- 3 Uyghur Buddhism and the Impact of Manichaeism and Native Religion: The Case of Religious Terminology 90  
*Jens Wilkens*
- 4 The Christian Communities in Tang China: Between Adaptation and Religious Self-Identity 123  
*Max Deeg*
- 5 On the Presence and Influence of Daoism in the Buddhist Material from Dunhuang 145  
*Henrik H. Sørensen*

- 6 Non-Buddhist Superhuman Beings in Early Tibetan  
Religious Literature 183  
*Lewis Doney*
- 7 The Fluid Lives of Tibetan Ritual Narrations during the Imperial and  
Post-Imperial Period 212  
*Daniel Berounský*

## PART 2

### *Doctrines*

- 8 People, Places, Texts, and Topics: Another Look at the Larger Context  
of the Spread of Chan Buddhism in Eastern Central Asia during the  
Tibetan Imperial and Post-Imperial Period (7th–10th C.) 257  
*Carmen Meinert*
- 9 Sino-Tibetan Scholasticism: A Case Study of the  
*Pratītyasamutpādahṛdaya* in Dunhuang 296  
*Meghan Howard Masang*
- 10 Prostration as *wuti toudi* 五體投地 or *wulun toudi* 五輪投地?  
A Possible Trace of Contacts between Certain Uyghur Translators and  
Esoteric Buddhism 350  
*Yukiyo Kasai*
- 11 The Funerary Context of Mogao Cave 17 373  
*Mélotie Doumy and Sam van Schaik*

- Bibliography 401
- Index of Deities and Buddhas 463
- Index of Dynasties, Kingdoms, and Empires 465
- Index of Personal Names 466
- Index of Places 469
- Index of Technical Terms 473
- Index of Text Names 480

# Islamic Expansion into Central Asia and Muslim-Buddhist Encounters

*Michal Biran*

## Abstract

The study reviews Islamic expansion into Central Asia (from eastern Iran to Gansu in north-west China) from the seventh to the 16th century, highlighting Muslim-Buddhist encounters. It first discusses an initial period of Islamic imperial military expansion into Central Asia, where Buddhism was only one, rather marginal, religion practiced among the sedentary population met by the conquerors. It then argues that further Muslim expansion into Central Asia from the late 10th century onwards was mainly due the Islamisation of nomadic or post-nomadic collectives who had adopted Islam primarily to acquire communal identity and legitimation. Around the same time, other nomadic and semi-nomadic groups in East and Central Asia adopted Buddhism as part of their state formation, for similar reasons. These Muslim and Buddhist polities were connected by trade and sometimes also marital and political alliances, but there is hardly any evidence for meaningful intellectual contacts prior to the Mongol conquest. The Mongol period (13th–14th centuries) not only resulted in a huge expansion of Islam, it also brought Islam and Buddhism under one rule and invigorated Muslim-Buddhist intellectual exchange. Under Mongol rule, Muslims and Buddhists became the major competitors for converting the Mongols, a process which eventually led to the division of the steppe between Islam and Tibetan Buddhism.

## 1 Introduction

The meeting between Buddhism and Islam, in Central Asia and elsewhere, has often been conceptualised as a violent struggle in which Islam eventually had the upper hand, forcefully destroying the vestiges of the peaceful *dharma*. A powerful symbol for this alleged antagonism was the Taliban's bombing of the Bāmiyān Buddhas of central Afghanistan in 2001, even though Muslims had ruled in the Bāmiyān region for centuries beforehand without harming the magnificent sculptures, which they had treated as one of the wonders of creation.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the relations between Islam and Buddhism in Central Asia are more complex and non-linear. Not only were there periods of coexistence, economic co-operation, and cross pollination, but while Islam was making strides in Central Asia, Buddhism—though eventually losing ground in its Indian homeland—evolved in East, Southeast and Central Asia, and continued to spread into new realms (Tibet, Manchuria, Mongolia) and among new ethnic groups (Khitans, Tanguts, Mongols, Uyghurs), eventually making Tibetan Buddhism the main rival of Islam in Eastern Central Asia.

This chapter offers a bird-eye view of the gradual Islamic expansion into Central Asia from the seventh to the 16th century, namely from the rise of Islam to the division of the Eurasian steppe between Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists after the second conversion of the Mongols, with an emphasis on Muslim-Buddhist encounters. My focus is on Central Asia, the region stretching from the eastern borders of Iran to the eastern borders of Xinjiang (新疆) and neighbouring Gansu (甘肅) in North-Western China, including Tibet and Mongolia. Yet some of the most documented Buddhist-Muslim encounters during the period under review took place at court, away from the direct contact in Eastern Central Asia—for example in late eighth-century Baghdad or late 13th- to early 14th-century Tabriz.<sup>2</sup>

As for sources, very few primary sources were compiled in Central Asia itself before the 17th century,<sup>3</sup> so in reconstructing its history we are mainly

1 Inaba Minoru, "The Narratives on the Bāmiyān Buddhist Remains in the Islamic Period," in *Encountering Buddhism and Islam in Premodern Central and South Asia*, ed. Blain Auer and Ingo Strauch (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 75–96.

2 Note that while I sometimes refer to contacts with South Asia, the chapter does not cover Islamic expansion into India, which is another story.

3 Among the most important ones are Narshakhī's *Ta'rikh-i Bukhārā* [History of Bukhara], originally compiled in Arabic but surviving in a 12th-century Persian translation; an 11th-century mirror for princes, the *Qutadgu bilig* [Wisdom of Royal Glory] written in Balāsāghūn (Kirgizstan) and Kashghar in Turkic; the *Mulhaqāt al-Surāḥ* by Jamāl Qarshī written in Arabic in early 14th-century Kashghar; and Mīrzā Ḥaidar's *Tārīkh-i Rashīdī* [History for Rashīd (Khan)]—titled by its translator as *A History of the Khans of Moghulistan*—written in

dependent on historical works that treat Central Asia as a periphery. While archaeology, numismatics, travelogues, and a few documents enrich this picture, there is no Muslim equivalent to Dunhuang (敦煌) or Turfan with their rich documentary collections. Yet this long-range review is obviously based mostly on secondary sources, notable among them is Johan Elverskog's magnificent *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*.<sup>4</sup> My chapter, however, is written from the Muslim point of view, the only one to which I can do justice. The chapter is arranged chronologically and divided into four stages, covering *The Age of Empires: The Caliphate's Expansion* (7th–9th centuries); *The Era of Trans-regional States: Samanids, Karakhanid and Kara Khitai* (10th–12th centuries), *The Mongol Empire* (13th–14th centuries) and the *Post-Mongol Period* (14th–16th centuries). Due to my fields of research, more space is given to the second and third stages.

The chapter argues that after an initial period of Islamic imperial military expansion into Central Asia, where Buddhism was only one, rather marginal, religion practised among the sedentary population met by the conquerors, further Muslim expansion into Central Asia from the late tenth century onwards was mainly by voluntary association of nomadic or post-nomadic collectives who had adopted Islam for the purpose of acquiring communal identity, legitimation and institutions that would facilitate their expansion into and rule in Muslim sedentary realms. Around the same time, other nomadic and semi-nomadic groups in East and Central Asia adopted Buddhism as part of their state formation for similar reasons. These Muslim and Buddhist polities were connected by trade, and sometimes also marital alliances, but there is hardly any evidence for meaningful intellectual contacts among them before the Mongol conquest. The Mongol period (13th–14th c.) not only led to a great

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1546 in Persian (and later translated into Chaghatay Turkic). All are available in translations to English or Russian (in Qarshī's case) and are cited below. When the region began to have a thriving indigenous literature in the 17th century it was mainly in the form of hagiographies or *tadhkira* (Pers. *tazkirah*, lit. 'memorandum' or 'admonition'). They represented the local history of the Tarim Basin's cities and were closely connected to the veneration of local saints, at whose tombs they were read aloud to large audiences. Such hagiographies are of great value for understanding the society in which they were written, but their descriptions of the past, apart from colouring it with various legendary details, often reduce it to a struggle between good and evil, Muslims and infidels, that reflects the threat that Buddhist Empires like the Zunghar Khanate (1636–1757) and the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912, 清) posed to Central Asian Muslims during this period. See, for example, Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Jeff Eden, *Warrior Saints of the Silk Road: Legends of the Qarakhanids* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

4 Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

expansion of Islam (after the initial shock of the conquest), but also brought Islam and Buddhism under one rule and invigorated Muslim-Buddhist intellectual exchange. Moreover, under Mongol rule, Muslims and Buddhists became the major competitors for the conversion of the Mongols, a process which eventually led to the division of the steppe nomads between Islam and Tibetan Buddhism from the 16th century.

## 2 Stage One: The Age of Empires—the Caliphate's Expansion (7th–9th Centuries)

Islam first made strides into Central Asia when Asia was divided among several mighty empires that competed over the rule of the continent's heartland, the site of the lucrative continental trade routes. In China, the Tang Dynasty (618–907, 唐), a great supporter of Buddhism for most of its reign, expanded deep into Central Asia in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, reaching up to the borders of Persia. This was partly due to its rivalry with the Steppe Empires of the Turks (6th–8th c.), who for the first time in world history combined the territory from Manchuria to the Caspian Sea under one rule, threatening the Chinese states as well as the Sasanian Empire in Persia (224–651) and being in contact even with Byzantium (331–1453). However, in 581 the Turkic Empire dissolved into eastern and western realms, and the subsequent unification of China under the Sui Dynasty (581–618, 隋), and later, the Tang Dynasty, challenged their rule. The Tang subdued the Eastern Turks in 629, although in 681 the latter managed to establish the second Turkic Empire that lasted till 743, ruling from Mongolia also parts of Manchuria and Xinjiang. In 659 the Tang subdued the Western Turks, whose remnants continued to roam in Western Central Asia but never established an empire therein. The Muslims therefore met only post-imperial Turks when they arrived in Central Asia. A new regional actor were the Tibetans, who for the first and last time in their history created a strong empire, the Tibetan Empire (ca. 7th c. to 842, Tib. Bod chen po), which eventually adopted Buddhism. This empire was also aggressively expanding into the Tarim Basin, competing with Tang China and with the Eastern Turks' successors, the Manichaeen Uyghurs (744–840, also known as Uyghur Steppe Empire). Thus, when the Muslim Empire was founded in 622, the Chinese, Tibetan and Steppe Empires competed over ruling Eastern Central Asia.

In contrast, Western Central Asia, which was closer to the Arab realm, was highly fragmented politically and religiously on the eve of the Muslim conquest. Both Transoxania (or Sogd, the region between the Oxus and the Jaxartes rivers,

mainly modern central Uzbekistan) and Tukharistan (Bactria, fragmented today among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan), were divided among many local polities. Notable among those were the city states of the Sogdians, an Iranian-speaking people who since the fifth century had been the principal long-distance caravan merchants in Central Asia. United by language and culture but divided politically, the Sogdians established a network of trade diasporas working outwards from their centres in Samarqand, Bukhara and Kesh, which spread all the way to northern China. They made a fortune by trading the masses of silk that the Tang Dynasty had brought to Central Asia, mainly as salaries for its garrisons, and were also active in the steppe among Turks, and later, Uyghurs. In addition to the Sogdians, Tukharistan included local principalities of Hephtalites (White Huns, remnants of the empire that ruled in parts of Western Central Asia before the Turks) and Turkic dynasties, mainly remnants of the Western Turks. Many of the Sogdian city-states were nominal vassals of Tang China, and sometimes also of the Turkic confederations, that themselves often came under the Tang's nominal sway.<sup>5</sup> The religious situation in pre-Muslim Central Asia was also complex, combining local religions (such as the Sogdian religion; Turkic Shamanism) with various local forms of universal religions (Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, Christianity). Buddhism was apparent in both Transoxania and Tukharistan (notably in the city of Balkh, see below) but was far from being the dominant religion.<sup>6</sup>

The Muslims emerged from the marginal Arabian Peninsula, but soon established a mighty empire that rapidly overran the eastern parts of the Byzantine Empire (Syria, Egypt, North Africa), and eliminated the Sasanian Empire, thereby arriving at the gates of Central Asia. Muslim expansion into Central Asia aimed, like the Muslim conquests in general, at broadening 'the abode of Islam' (Arab. *dār al-islām*), namely the territories under Muslim rule, at the expense of the 'abode of war' (Arab. *dār al-ḥarb*), the realms ruled by non-Muslims. Another, more specific, incentive was gaining access to the

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- 5 For this period in Central Asia, see for example, David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 304–307; Peter B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 50–58; Étienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 95–260. On the Hephtalites, see e.g., Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), 79–84.
- 6 Christian, *A History of Russia*, 304–307; on Buddhism in Sogd, see for example, Xavier Tremblay, "The Spread of Buddhism in Serindia—Buddhism among Iranians, Tocharians and Turks before the 13th Century," in *The Spread of Buddhism*, ed. Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 75–129.

lucrative trade routes, known as the Silk Roads, that connected Western Asia to China.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.1 *The Arabs' Entry into Central Asia*

The Arabs had limited acquaintance with Central Asia, yet their advance into the region began during their attacks on the Sasanian Empire in the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (632–660), the direct successors of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632). In 651, the Arabs took over Khurāsān (modern eastern Iran, Turkmenistan and parts of Afghanistan), the eastern-most province of the Sasanian Empire, in pursuit of the last Sasanian monarch who had escaped eastwards. He was eventually killed in the Khurāsāni city of Marw (Merv), which became the Arabs' stronghold in the region. In 670, after the consolidation of the Umayyad Dynasty (661–750) a garrison of allegedly 50,000 Arab warriors—the largest group of Arab settlers outside Arabia—was stationed in Marw. Marw thus became the launching pad for further Muslim expansion into Central Asia, led by the governors of Khurāsān. These commanders were subject to the Umayyad governor of the East, who was based in Iraq, and above him to the Caliph in Damascus. Thus, the events at the centre of the caliphate greatly influenced Muslim eastern expansion.

The Arabs crossed the Oxus in 654, if not earlier,<sup>8</sup> and raided Transoxania in the 670s and the early 680s, but troubles in the centre delayed the conquest for a few decades. Already in 651, the Arabs sent a first embassy to China, and in Umayyad times fourteen embassies were sent from 681 to 747.<sup>9</sup> Systematic conquest, however, began only in the early eighth century, under the governor of Khurāsān, Qutayba ibn Muslim (r. 705–715). Qutayba enjoyed the support of the Umayyad Caliph al-Walīd (r. 705–715), and of the latter's powerful governor of Iraq, al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf (r. 694–714). Implementing an efficient divide and rule policy towards the various Transoxanian city-states and annexing the

7 For the Muslim conquests, see e.g., Robert G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: the Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007); Bruno De Cordier, "The Original Islamization of Central Asia: From the Arab Frontier Colonies to the 'Governate Dynasties' (650–1000)," in *The European Handbook of Central Asian Studies: History, Politics, and Societies*, ed. Jeroen J. J. Van den Bosch, Adrien Fauve, and Bruno De Cordier (Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2021), 77–83.

8 de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 265; Arezou Azad and Hugh Kennedy, "The Coming of Islam to Balkh," in *Authority and Control in the Countryside: From Antiquity to Islam in the Mediterranean and Near East (6th–10th Century)*, ed. Alain Delattre, Marie Legendre, and Petra M. Sijpesteijn (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 284–310.

9 Hans Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World, 589–1276* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 356–358.

army of his subdued rivals into his troops, Qutayba led the conquest of both Balkh—the central city of Tukharistan and a major Buddhist stronghold—and the Sogdian cities of Baykand, Bukhara, and Samarqand. He later advanced further into Khwārazm, Farghāna and Shāsh (Tashkent), and perhaps even planned to raid Kašgar (in today's Xinjiang). Yet the conquests were neither linear nor easy: in most cases they involved reverses caused by local revolts. The combination of the lack of central political power, the complex topography, and the warlike population that had fostered good connections with Turkic mercenaries and overlords, resulted in a piecemeal, long, arduous, and violent conquest, unlike earlier Muslim campaigns. However, the failure of the region to present a united front eventually led to its fall.<sup>10</sup> Simultaneously with Qutayba's achievements, another Umayyad general, Muḥammad ibn Qāsim (695–715), was advancing southwards towards Sind (modern Pakistan), another Buddhist stronghold. Excited by the success of his generals, al-Ḥajjāj allegedly promised the rulership of China to the commander who would reach it first.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the consolidation of Muslim rule in Transoxania was not a straightforward process. With the death of the Caliph al-Walīd, Qutayba rebelled against the latter's successor and was killed by his own troops. His demise coincided with the heyday of the strong Türgesh Confederation (716–738)—a scion of the Western Turks—that evaporated most of the Muslim advance beyond the Jaxartes and threatened even their rule in Bukhara and Samarqand. Only after the Muslims almost accidentally killed the Türgesh leader in 738, was the last Umayyad governor of Khurāsān, Naṣr ibn Sayyār (r. 738–748), able to regain Transoxania. Pacifying its Sogdian population and encouraging the return of emigrants to their former residences, he also advanced again beyond the Jaxartes. However, by then Khurāsān was already the nursery of the Abbasid revolution. The Abbasids (750–1258) soon deposed the Umayyads and moved the caliphate's centre from Syria to Iraq. The architect of the Abbasid

10 Hoyland, *In God's Path*, 148–154, 181–187. For a reconstruction of Qutayba's campaigns, see Sören Stark, "The Arab Conquest of Bukhārā: Reconsidering Qutayba b. Muslim's Campaigns 87–90 H/706–709 CE," *Der Islam* 95.2 (2018): 367–400.

11 Aḥmad ibn Abī Ya'qūb al-Ya'qūbī, *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī: An English Translation*, trans. and ed. Matthew S. Gordon et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), vol. 3, 998. For the Umayyad conquests in Central Asia in general, see for example, Christian, *A History of Russia*, 307–310; Hoyland, *In God's Path*, 118–121, 148–155, 181–187; Kennedy, *Arab Conquests*, 225–295.

revolution, Abū Muslim (d. 755), remained in Khurāsān and became the strong man in Muslim Central Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Qutayba is famous for his (futile) attempts to convert the population of Bukhara: first by force, then by bribe (offering two *dirhams* to anyone who would attend the Friday mosque), and later by assimilation, settling his Muslim troops among Bukharan families.<sup>13</sup> Yet this was the exception rather than the rule. Not only was forced conversion condemned in the Qur'an but making a territory part of 'the abode of Islam' meant subjugating it to Muslim rule, not converting its people. Furthermore, at this stage the Umayyads practised ethnic exclusivity, namely Islam was conceived mainly as the religion of the Arabs, and there was little pressure for the Islamisation of non-Arabs. Moreover, Islam rose to power in a multi-religious world and included mechanisms for treating non-Muslim subjects. Originally there was a distinction between "the People of the Book" (Arab. *ahl al-kitāb*), namely Jews and Christians, who were protected by the state and allowed to practise their religion in return for accepting certain legal obligations, and the polytheists, who were supposed to be killed. But soon the Arabs took over too many non-monotheist subjects and eliminating them was unrealistic. Thus, Zoroastrians, followed by Buddhists and Hindus were also classified as protected people (Arab. *dhimmi*) and were allowed to practise their religions in return for paying the poll tax (Arab. *jizya*), just like the People of the Book.<sup>14</sup>

The conquered population was also allowed to retain its local leadership. In other regions local leaders were religious clergy (Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Hindu), a fact that facilitated the retaining of the communities' identity under Muslim rule. Yet this was not the case in Sogd, where no hierarchy of religious clergy existed. The Sogdian city states were led by a civic elite (Sogd. *nāf*, lit. 'people'), that elected—and could depose—its leaders, who had administrative and ritual functions but not hereditary rights. After the conquest, the Muslims used the local leaders, giving them much broader authority especially in the economic realm (e.g., collecting taxes), that was previously managed by

12 On Abū Muslim and the Abbasid revolution, see e.g., Saleh Said Agha, *The Revolution Which Toppled the Umayyads. Neither Arab nor Abbāsīd* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Yury Karev, *Samarqand et le Sughd à l'époque 'abbāsside: histoire politique et sociale* (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2015), 41–126.

13 For example, Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Ja'far Narshakhī, *The History of Bukhara* (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1954), 48; Kevin van Bladel, "Arabicization, Islamization, and the Colonies of the Conquerors," in *Late Antique Responses to the Arab Conquests*, ed. Josephine van den Bent et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 108.

14 Derryl N. Maclean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 41–44; Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 86.

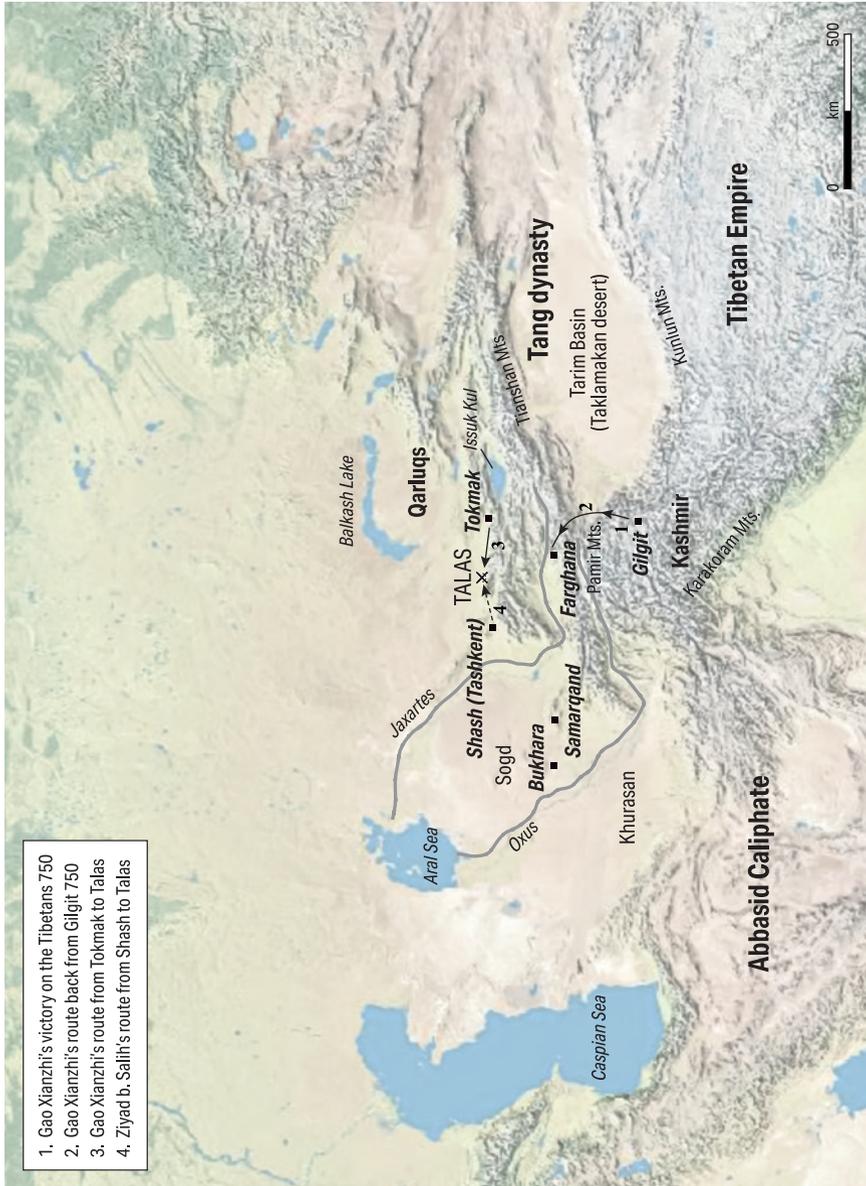
the civic elite. The local rulers used their new power for creating dynasties (like the Bukharkhudas, lords of Bukhara, who held power until the ninth century), thereby undermining the civic elite power and accelerating the decline of the Sogdian civilization. The violence that accompanied the conquest, combined with the mobility of the Sogdian nobility that allowed many of them to migrate eastwards to avoid Arab rule, also speeded the Sogdian decline. However, this state of affairs also prompted Islamisation, since quite a few members of the Sogdian aristocracy and intellectual elite joined the Arabs, notably during the early Abbasid period, and became instrumental in forging a new Islamic culture. The commercial skills of the Sogdians were highly appreciated by the Arabs, and obviously the socio-economic benefits of embracing the new religion, i.e., avoiding the poll tax and increasing the chance of getting a job in the new administration, also contributed, as did the colonisation of the Arabs in the main Transoxanian cities, which stood in sharp contrast to the behaviour of Sogd's former overlords, the Turks, or the Chinese. In fact, one of the problems the Umayyads had faced in eastern Iran and Transoxania was the growing Islamisation that threatened to reduce their tax base. While pious rulers readily exempted the newly converted, other caliphs preferred to doubt the sincerity of their faith and ignore their rights. The dissatisfaction of the new converts (Arab. *mawālī*, lit. 'clients [of an Arab tribe]'), due to their continuous discrimination, was one of the causes that promoted the Abbasid revolution.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 *The Battle of Talas*

After the Abbasid victory, Abū Muslim remained in Khurāsān and attempted to win support among the Central Asian principalities. This eventually resulted in the first (and last) military conflict between the Chinese and the Arabs, mainly because it coincided with a new wave of Tang forces advancing into Central Asia led by another ambitious general, the Korean Gao Xianzhi (d. 756, Kor. Ko Sōnji 高仙芝). The resulting battle of Talas (today's Taraz/Djambul in south Kazakhstan), which took place in 751 has often been considered a turning point in the history of Central Asia, beginning the dominance of Islamic civilisation in the region at the expense of Chinese influence.<sup>16</sup> More accurately, it was a minor border incident initiated by local politics of the rival

15 Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia* (Princeton: Marcus Weiner, 1996), 215–216; Michael Shenkar, "The Arab Conquest and the Collapse of the Sogdian Civilization," in *The History and Culture of Iran and Central Asia in the First Millennium CE: From the Pre-Islamic to the Islamic Era*, ed. Deborah G. Tor and Minoru Inaba (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2022), 95–124.

16 This notion was initiated by Wilhelm V. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion* (London: Luzac, 1968), 200.



MAP 1.1 The Battle of Talas, 751

MICHAL BIRAN, "TANG FOREIGN RELATIONS," IN *ALL UNDER HEAVEN: A HISTORY OF IMPERIAL CHINA*, ED. PINES YURI, GIDEON SHELACH, AND YITCHAK SHICHOR [RAA'ANA: OPEN UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013], 436

principalities of Shāsh (modern Tashkent) and Farghāna, that called the Arabs and the Chinese to their aid respectively. While the imperial policy of both the Tang and the Caliphate was to refrain from interfering in local squabbles, this time the regional commanders, Gao Xianzhi and Abū Muslim's general Ziyād b. Ṣāliḥ, chose to respond to the call due to their own personal interests. The Muslims won the day, mainly because the Chinese's Turkic allies, the Karluks, who had replaced the Türgesh, defected to the Muslim side.

Yet the victory did not start a new wave of Muslim expansion, as the victorious Abbasids preferred to consolidate their rule in their core territories in the Middle East. Abū Muslim, whom the new Caliph saw as a threat, was executed in 755, and the Abbasids had to cope with a few rebellions—often with religious undertones—led by his adherents in Transoxania.<sup>17</sup> The battle did not harm the Caliphate's relations with the Tang for long, as six Abbasid embassies, probably sent by Abū Muslim, reached Chang'an (長安, modern Xi'an 西安) in 753–754, and connections resumed, though less frequently, also after his execution. In parallel, the Sogdian city-states continued to ask for the Tang's help against the Arabs up to the early 770s, and the memory of Tang suzerainty in Transoxania lingered into the 12th century.<sup>18</sup> Yet the Chinese did not regain their former position in Central Asia for centuries.

The Tang retreat, however, was not due to the battle of Talas, but happened amid the An Lushan (703–757, 安祿山) rebellion. This rebellion plagued their capital, obliging the Tang Emperor to abdicate and escape westwards, and encouraging the Tibetans to advance towards the Chinese capital, Chang'an. Only with the help of the Uyghurs, who succeeded the Turks in Mongolia in 744, did the Tang manage to regain their capital, but it never returned to its former glory nor to its expansive foreign policy. The rebellion also encouraged a xenophobic attitude towards Central Asians in China, as An Lushan was of half-Sogdian and half-Turkic origin.<sup>19</sup> It also hampered Tang connections with the Buddhist kingdoms in India and the Tarim Basin, thereby encouraging the separate development of Chinese Buddhism. Furthermore, the end of the Chinese presence in Central Asia following the rebellion marked the conclusion of the enormous expenditure of silk on the Tang garrisons, as well as the peace maintained along the trade routes. Thus international trade was severely disrupted in the second half of the eighth century and reconstituted on a low

17 On the battle of Talas, see e.g., Karev, *Samarqand*, 62–78; see *ibid.*, 161–232, 271–344 on the rebellions.

18 Karev, *Samarqand*, 104–106; Shenkar, "Arab Conquest," 113; Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade*, 356–360; Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 98–99.

19 de la Vassière, *Sogdian Traders*, 178–180.

level during the ninth century with the help of the Uyghur Empire and its Sogdian middlemen.<sup>20</sup> The An Lushan rebellion is often regarded as a major juncture in the history of imperial China, and its chronological proximity to the battle of Talas resulted in the battle's retrospective importance for China's relations with Central Asia.<sup>21</sup>

More important than the battle's political results, however, were its well-known cultural ramifications: one of the outcomes of the battle was the considerable number of Chinese prisoners that fell into Arab hands. They took in various Chinese artisans, including, among others, weavers, metalsmiths, painters and, notably, paper makers. While paper making was introduced into Central Asia long before the battle, diffused mainly by Buddhist pilgrims from China, the expertise of the Chinese prisoners must have improved and expanded paper production in the Muslim world, thereby contributing significantly to the development of Muslim scholarship and trade. Samarqand, to where the prisoners were brought, remained a major centre for paper making for centuries.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, one of the captives who eventually returned to China left a travelogue of his journeys in Western, Central and South Asia, which includes the first Buddhist reference to Islam. Du Huan (fl. 751–762, 杜環), the Buddhist captive, was mainly impressed by the Muslim insistence on meat sacrifices, but he also informs us that in 751 there were two active Buddhist monasteries in Marw, the capital of Muslim Khurāsān, in other words the Muslims allowed the Buddhists to continue their religious observances.<sup>23</sup>

**2.3** *Buddhist Influence during the Early Abbasid Period: The Barmakids*  
Buddhist impact in Central Asia notwithstanding, the mid-late eighth century was the heyday of Indian knowledge, including Buddhism, in the Abbasid Caliphate. However, this new knowledge originated not in China but in India via Balkh, and the main cultural brokers who mediated it were the Barmakids, a family of Buddhist origin that provided the Abbasid caliphs with Muslim viziers during the second half of the eighth century. The Barmakids' ancestors administered the main Buddhist monastery in the Balkh oasis, known as the

20 Étienne de la Vaissière, "Central Asia and the Silk Road," in *Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 158.

21 For the An Lushan rebellion and its impact, see for example, Mark E. Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 40–60.

22 Jonathan Bloom, *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 38–45.

23 Alexander Akin, "The *Jing Xing Ji* of Du Huan: Notes on the West by a Chinese Prisoner of War," *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 5 (1999): 77–102.

Nawbahār Monastery, a richly endowed institution that according to Muslim sources controlled the whole oasis. During the conquest of Tukharistan that was completed under the Umayyad Caliph Hishām (r. 724–743), the Nawbahār was destroyed (although it remained a landmark up to the tenth century). The monastery's keeper, who bore the title Barmak (d. after 738) and his son Khālid (ca. 706–781) were taken captives. They converted to Islam in the last decades of Umayyad rule, joined the Muslim army, and moved up through its ranks. Returning to Khurāsān and perhaps also to Balkh, they became key figures in the Abbasid revolution. Khālid ibn Barmak was responsible for the army's finances in 749–753, and later advanced into high-ranking posts in the caliphate's central administration, nurturing close connections with the Abbasid family. The Barmakids reached their height—but also fell—under Khālid's son Yaḥyā (733/737–805), who was a foster father, tutor, and later the powerful vizier of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–909). In 803, however, the caliph deposed Yaḥyā and his sons (for reasons that are still debated), and the family lost its power for good.<sup>24</sup>

The Barmakids had their feet in two worlds—the Buddhist and the Muslim—and were well aware of the broader Indic world made available to them through Buddhist mediation. With Barmakid patronage, Indian works of science—astronomy, medicine, and mathematics—were translated from Sanskrit into Arabic in the new Abbasid capital Baghdad and integrated into the emergent Muslim imperial culture. This was part of the Abbasid translation movement (8th–10th c.), that mostly dealt with sources originally in Greek. Yet while the translated corpus from Greek was strictly scientific, excluding Greek mythology or literary works, the tale of the historical Buddha entered the Muslim literary canon. A version of the story, rendered in Arabic as *Kitāb Bilawhar wa Budhāsaf* [The Story of Bilawhar and Budhāsaf], was translated in the eighth century, and became extremely popular. Other Buddhist *jātakas* later circulated, especially among Shi'ites.<sup>25</sup> The Barmakids might have been involved in the original translation of the Buddha story, and a rhymed version

24 Kevin van Bladel, "The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids," in *Islam and Tibet: Interactions Along the Musk Routes*, ed. Charles Burnett, Anna Akasoy, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (Farnham: Routledge, 2010), 45–87; Kevin van Bladel, "Barmakids," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE, 2012, Online edition. Note that Barmak, which the Arabic sources treat as a name is actually a title, probably of the monastery's keeper or abbot.

25 Daniel Gimaret, *Le livre de Bilawhar et Būdāsaf selon la version arabe ismaélienne* (Geneva-Paris: Droz, 1971); Samuel M. Stern and Sophie Walzer, trans., *Three Unknown Buddhist Stories in an Arabic Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 72–73. For a recent engagement with the Buddha legend in Muslim and Christian contexts, see Jeremy Kurzyniec, "Buddha: The Story of a Christian-Muslim Saint," report of the AGYA Workshop in Meteora, Greece, July 21–22, 2017, accessed March 2, 2022,

of it (that did not survive) was prepared for Yaḥyā ibn Khālid. In addition, the same Yaḥyā also sent an agent to India to collect medical herbs and speak to doctors and scholars. The latter left a full report of his travels, which included the first extensive account of Buddhism in a Muslim source. He not only identified the different schools of early Buddhism and ritual practices such as pilgrimage, but was also the first to describe the nascent movement of Tantric Buddhism. The original report is now lost; but it was copied into various Arabic works. It served as the basis for the description of Buddhism (and Indian religions in general) in the tenth-century *Kitāb al-Fihrist* [The Book Catalogue] of the Baghdadi book seller Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 998), and later for the description of Buddhism in *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal* [The Book of Sects and Creeds] by al-Shahristānī (d. 1153). However, the fall of the Barmakids in 803 severely harmed Muslim interest in India and Buddhism up to the Muslim penetration into the subcontinent and the Tarim Basin in the late tenth–early eleventh century.<sup>26</sup>

#### 2.4 *Renewed Expansion into Central Asia*

Muslim interest in Central Asia arose once more under Hārūn al-Rashīd's son, the caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–833), who spent most of his life in Khurāsān. By then the Abbasids had quelled several rebellions in Khurāsān and Transoxania, and Muslim traders had gradually replaced the Sogdians as the main agents of long-range trade. Al-Ma'mūn renewed Islamic expansion beyond the Jaxartes, and his brother and general, the future caliph al-Mu'tasim (r. 833–842), created a new form of Islamic army, known as the *mamlūk* or *ghilmān* system, an institution that greatly encouraged Muslim interest in Central Asia. The *mamlūk* system was based on infidel Turkic (and at first also Sogdian) boys acquired through raids or bought in the slave markets. They were imported before puberty but after acquiring rudimentary skills in riding and archery, were enslaved and went through long and extensive training that usually included conversion to Islam and basic religious education side by side with structured military instruction. This army of military slaves was well-trained and devoid of family or tribal alliances (in contrast to the Arab or Khurāsānī army that preceded them) and hence loyal only to their master and peers. Thus, they soon

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[https://www.academia.edu/34649394/Buddha\\_The\\_Story\\_of\\_a\\_Christian\\_Muslim\\_Saint\\_-\\_conference\\_report](https://www.academia.edu/34649394/Buddha_The_Story_of_a_Christian_Muslim_Saint_-_conference_report).

26 van Bladel, "The Bactrian Background," 74–86; van Bladel, "Barmakids"; Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 59–61; Johan Elverskog, "Buddhist and Muslim Interactions in Asian History," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, last modified September 30, 2019; accessed July 31, 2022, <https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-418>.

became the backbone of the Abbasid army. The system might have originated in the Central Asian institution of the personal soldier-retainers of the nobility (Sogd. *chakars*, lit. 'guard'), but it soon became a typical Muslim institution. The new system encouraged raids and expansion into Central Asia as well as collecting information on its Turkic tribes, and was the first time in which Turks entered the Islamic world *en masse*.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, one of the main changes that occurred during the early Abbasid period was the transformation of Islam from an ethnic-Arabic religion to a universal one that encompassed people of all ethnicities and languages. This in turn encouraged conversion and facilitated the participation of the Central Asian population in the shaping of Islamic culture.

### 3 Stage Two: The Era of Trans-Regional States

Not long after al-Ma'mūn's reign, and partly due to the new Turkic army, the Abbasids lost more and more ground to their governors who, while nominally acknowledging Abbasid authority, were in practice consolidating their independent rule in large parts of the caliphate.<sup>28</sup> Such imperial dissolution was mirrored in other realms as well: the Uyghurs fell in 840 to the Kirghizs, who did not establish another steppe empire but retreated from Mongolia. The Uyghurs migrated to Gansu and Xinjiang, settled down, and became important actors along the Silk Roads; the Tibetan Empire collapsed in 842, and the Tang floundered for another half a century before it was finally overthrown in 906. The vacuum in East Asia was filled by the rise of new trans-regional and heterogeneous empires in Central Asia, the Khitan Empire (907–1125, in Chinese sources known as Liao 遼) that ruled Manchuria, Mongolia and parts of northern China; and the Tangut Empire (ca. 1038–1227, in Chinese sources known as Xixia 西夏) that took over north-western China. Both coexisted with the Han-Chinese Song Dynasty (960–1279, 宋) in China proper. The rise of the new dynasties, and especially the Khitans' conquest of Mongolia in the early

27 On the *mamlūk* system, see for example, Reuven Amitai, "The Mamluk Institution, or: One Thousand Years of Military Slavery in the Islamic World," in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age*, ed. Christopher L. Brown and Philip D. Morgan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 40–78, esp. 44–47; for the *chakars*, see Étienne de la Vaissière, "Čakar," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, accessed August 12, 2022. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/cakar>.

28 For the dissolution of the Caliphate, see for example, Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London: Routledge, 2022), 192–202.

tenth century and the consolidation of the Tangut Empire in the 11th century, led to migration of the remnant Turks from Mongolia westwards. This created a domino effect that reached up to Byzantium. These population movements drew many Turks westwards, closer to the Muslim world, and encouraged the creation of new Turkic dynasties such as the Karakhanids (ca. 999–1211) and the Seljuk Empire (1037–1194).<sup>29</sup> These new Central Asian dynasties on the fringes of China and the Muslim world each ruled over both sedentary and nomad realms (unlike former steppe empires). They adopted world religions, mainly Islam in the western steppe and Buddhism in the eastern steppe, in order to find a common ground with their heterogeneous subjects and enhance their legitimacy. The Buddhist and Muslim polities maintained economic, and sometimes even marital, relations but showed little interest in each other's creeds.

### 3.1 *The Iranians' Contribution to the Islamisation of the Turks*

One of the first regions to gain actual independence from Abbasid rule was Iran and Central Asia. There four Iranian dynasties rose to power, each of them ascribing its origin to a Sasanian figure, thereby adding an Iranian component to their Muslim legitimization. Among these dynasties, the Samanids (888–999, as Abbasid governors since 819) played a major role in the Islamisation of the Turks. Established by a noble Iranian family that attributed its origin to the Sasanian general and short-lived ruler Bahram Chobin (r. 590–591), the Samanids ruled from Bukhara over Khurāsān, Transoxania, Farghāna, Khwārazm and most of modern Afghanistan. They rose to power under al-Ma'mūn, when four Samanid brothers were appointed local governors in Khurāsān and Transoxania, and with the waning of the caliphate, they gradually became practically independent, although nominally they still acknowledged the caliph's position as the leader of the Muslim nation (Arab. *umma*) and received their titles from him.

To secure their legitimacy and increase their revenues, the Samanids resumed Islamic expansion into Central Asia, presenting themselves as warriors of faith (Arab. *ghāzīs*), and reconquering Talas from the infidel Turks in 893. The Samanids made a fortune from trading in *mamlūks*—brought from Central Asia and from among the Slavs in North-Eastern Europe and sold in the central Islamic lands—as well as used these slaves to man their own army. Famous mainly for their strong connections with Scandinavia where myriad

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29 Michal Biran, "Unearthing the Liao Dynasty's Relations with the Muslim World: Migrations, Diplomacy, Commerce, and Mutual Perceptions," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 43 (2013): 226–227.

Samanid coins have been unearthed, their commercial networks also expanded eastwards to the fringes of China as well as to India (*via* Balkh) and Byzantium, maintaining the Sogdian links. They received embassies from the Uyghurs, married into the families of non-Muslim rulers of Dunhuang and might have been in contact also with the Khitan Empire. Their commercial enterprises also led to the emergence of Muslim trade diasporas in places east and north of the Samanid realm (for example, in the Jaxartes region and among the Uyghurs), thereby intensifying contacts between Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, under Samanid rule, Transoxania became from a remote peripheral province to the centre of Islamic culture. The Samanids revived the use of Persian as a written language, while preserving Arabic as the language of administration, science, and religion. They sponsored luminaries like the poet Rudakī (d. 941); the vizier Bal‘amī (d. 997), who translated into Persian the most prestigious Arabic history, Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* [History of the Messengers and the Kings]; the polymath and physician Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037); and Firdawsī (d. 1019 or 1025), the compiler of the Iranian epos, the *Shāhnāmāh* [Book of Kings].<sup>31</sup> However, Buddhism played no role in this cultural opulence. In contrast, the emphasis on the Sasanian legacy led to the erasure of the Buddhist past, so that even the Nawbahār Monastery in Balkh was defined in the tenth century as a fire temple or the work of the Sasanians.<sup>32</sup>

The Samanids’ considerable military, economic and cultural prestige impressed tribes and people outside the realm of Islam and encouraged further expansion of Islam, mainly by voluntary association. While Muslim subjects often converted due to socio-economic factors and acculturation (including that practised through the *mamlūk* system), Islamisation outside the Muslim realm usually derived from political and strategic reasons. Thus, the Samanid influence encouraged their neighbours to join the winners, acknowledging also that adopting Islam could provide legitimacy for ruling (the extensive) Muslim territories, facilitate access to Muslim trade networks and military support, as well as assist in shaping identity (distinguishing between us—believers—and them—infidels). It also provided a set of Islamic institutions that came in handy

30 de la Vassière, *Sogdian Traders*, 314; Deborah G. Tor, “The Islamization of Central Asia in the Sāmānid Era and Reshaping of the Muslim World,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72.2 (2009): 289.

31 On Samanid culture, see for example, Frederick S. Starr, *Lost Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 225–266.

32 Étienne de la Vaissière, “Inherited Landscapes in Muslim Bactra,” *Eurasian Studies* 16.1–2 (2018): 132.

during the process of state formation.<sup>33</sup> Islamisation was further encouraged by commercial links, by the missionary activity led by the Samanid lawyers (Arab. *fuqahā*), and by the border forts (Arab. *ribāt*) system, that settled Muslim warriors acting out of religious zeal next to their non-Muslim neighbour-enemies, thereby promoting contacts between Muslims and non-Muslims. The result was the beginning of a large-scale Turkic Islamisation in the second half of the tenth century and the rise of the first Turkic-Muslim dynasties, the Karakhanids and the Ghaznavids (977–1186), the later rising from the ranks of the Samanids' *mamlūks*. By the end of the tenth century these two dynasties divided the Samanid realm between them—the Ghaznavids taking over Khurāsān, from where they renewed Islamic expansion into India, and the Karakhanids seizing Transoxania—thereby ending the 'Iranian intermezzo' in Islamic history and opening a millennium of Turco-Mongol dominance in the Muslim world.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.2 *The Karakhanids and the Islamisation of the Tarim Basin*

The Karakhanids, known as the first Muslim Turkish Dynasty, rose to power near Kašgar, and renewed the direct contacts between Muslims and Buddhists, not least in the form of holy war (Arab. *Jihād*). A Turkic confederation of complex tribal origin, the Karakhanids embraced Islam towards the mid-tenth century. Their first Muslim ruler, Satuq Bughra Khan (d. 955) converted with the guidance of a merchant-lawyer of the Samanid house. He used his conversion to depose his infidel father (or uncle) and took his place, eventually assisted by neighbouring Muslims.

Soon afterwards, the Karakhanids began to expand both eastwards and westwards. Serving first as mercenaries of the Samanids, in 999 they conquered Transoxania from their former overlords. Simultaneously, from 971 onwards, they were engaged in a long war against the Buddhist Kingdom of Khotan (ca. 1st c.?–1006), some 500 km southeast of Kašgar, eventually taking the Khotan oasis only around 1006.<sup>35</sup>

33 Biran, *The Empire*, 196–199; Devin A. DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 17–27.

34 For the Samanids, see for example, Tor, "The Islamization of Central Asia"; Christian, *A History of Russia*, 314–323; Golden, *Central Asia*, 69; Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 289–299; Luke Treadwell, "The Samanids: The First Islamic Dynasty of Central Asia," in *Early Islamic Iran*, ed. Edmund Herzig and Sarah Stewart (London: Tauris, 2012), 3–15; Jürgen Paul, "Islamizing Sufis in Pre-Mongol Central Asia," in *Islamisation de l'Asie centrale: Processus locaux d'acculturation du VII<sup>e</sup> au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Étienne de la Vaissière (Paris, Louvain: Peeters, 2008), 314; for the Ghaznavids, see e.g., Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 299–305.

35 Peter B. Golden, "The Karakhanids and Early Islam," in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 354–362;



FIGURE 1.1 The Mausoleum of Satuq Bughra Khan near Kaşgar  
PHOTO BY MICHAL BIRAN (2013)

Khotan was worth fighting for. The powerful kingdom was a major node on the Silk Roads connecting Central Asia with China, Tibet and India—a position it retained also in the 11th century. Khotan was a fertile oasis and source of jade that was highly coveted among its eastern neighbours, the Song Dynasty and the Khitan and Tangut Empires.<sup>36</sup> Buddhism played a significant role in Khotan's commercial networks: Buddhist monasteries functioned as postal stations along the trade routes, and Buddhist monks were favourite envoys for diplomatic and commercial missions—to Dunhuang, the Song Dynasty, Tibet, the Khitans and the Tanguts. Around the tenth century, the Uyghurs in Ganzhou (甘州) and Turfan also converted to Buddhism (from Manichaeism), not least due to the commercial advantages involved. Buddhist items such as *sūtras*, sculptures and relics were among the popular trading goods.<sup>37</sup>

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Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 226–234.

36 On Khotan on the eve of the Karakhanid conquest, see for example, *ibid.*, 199–226; Xin Wen, “Two Khotanese Account Tablets and Local Society in Pre-Islamic Khotan,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 63.1–2 (2020): 191–238; Hiroshi Kumamoto, “Khotanese Official Documents in the Tenth Century A.D. (Middle Iranian; Chinese Turkestan)” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1982).

37 Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 199–226.

The Karakhanids came to this Buddhist stronghold as warriors of the Islamic faith. Maḥmūd al-Kashgharī (1008–1102), the Karakhanid scion and lexicographer who compiled *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* [The Compendium of Turkic Dialects], an Arabic-Turkic dictionary which is a trove of information about the various Turkic tribes, commemorated Karakhanid conquests in these often-cited verses:

We came down on them like a flood,  
We went out among their cities,  
We tore down the idol-temples,  
We shat on the Buddha's head!<sup>38</sup>

Yet while the Karakhanids were certainly proud Muslims, they were well aware of the advantages of trade with the East and its Buddhist networks. Soon after the conquest of Khotan they began to send tribute missions, notably to the Northern Song (960–1126, 北宋) and to the Khitan Empire; with the latter they also concluded a marital alliance in 1021. The Karakhanids' most extensive connections were with the Northern Song, to which they sent ca. forty missions between 1009–1124, most of them in 1063–1098. Those missions arrived mainly via the Hexi Corridor (Chin. Hexi zoulang 河西走廊), ruled by the Buddhist Uyghurs, and from the late 11th century *via* the Buddhist Tsongkha Kingdom (ca. 1015?–early 12th c.) in Tibet, that provided guides and interpreters to the Karakhanid envoys to China. These envoys were often professional diplomats, who travelled for several missions, and none had typical Muslim names (as opposed to Abbasid envoys, for example). While many emissaries were military commanders, in 1117 and 1118 they were defined as 'great monks' (Chin. *daseng* 大僧). In addition, in 1085 the Karakhanid envoy "fed monks and performed rites to help the deceased Emperor Shenzong [(1048–1085, 神宗)] attain bliss";<sup>39</sup>

38 Maḥmūd al-Kāshgharī, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects (Dīwān lughāt at-Turk)*, trans. Robert Dankoff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures, 1982), 270; cited for example, in Hansen, *The Silk Road*; 228; Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 95. Such an image was also commemorated in the holy war literature (Arab. *tadhkiras*) that became extremely popular in Xinjiang from the mid-17th century onwards. Various Chaghatay sources abound in descriptions of the acts of martyrdom of Karakhanid khans, princes or elite Muslims and the shrines dedicated to their memory, many of them still active today, although these reflect the 17th century reality more than the Karakhanid period (see, for example, Thum, *Sacred Routes*, chap. 1; Eden, *Warrior Saints*, for the religious literature on Satuq Bughra Khan, the Karakhanids' forefather).

39 Tuotuo 脱脱, *Songshi* 宋史, juan 490, trans. in Dilnoza Duturaeva, *Qarakhanid Roads to China* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 216.

and in 1096 a mission from Kuča, by then probably in Karakhanid hands, sent a Buddhist jade sculpture as a gift. All this suggests that the pious Karakhanids were quite pragmatic and ready to tolerate Buddhism to secure the lucrative trade with Song China.

The Karakhanids also positioned themselves as the main middlemen of the continental Silk Roads between the Chinese-Tibetan Buddhist realm and the Muslim world. Thus, other Muslim missions to the Song, for example from the Seljuks or the Ghaznavids, accompanied Karakhanid delegations and benefitted from their expertise. In terms of goods, the Karakhanids traded not only local products (jade, animals, slaves, etc.) but also commodities that originated farther west and north. These included Nishapuri glass, amber from the Baltic Sea (popular especially among the Khitans), frankincense from south Arabia, pearls from Iran or India, and walrus tusks from the Kirghizs. They also imported various Chinese goods, notably silk and tea (as well as musk and slaves from the Khitan realm) to the Muslim world.<sup>40</sup> Their close connections with their Eastern neighbours encouraged the Karakhanids to retain their Turkic identity markers, and judging by the names they chose for themselves (Karakhanid is a later western denomination), these eastern connections were an important part of their identity. The Karakhanids called themselves “descendants of the Khagan” (Arab. *al-Khāqāniyya*), the Turks’ Great Khan, and claimed to be offspring of the Ashina, the royal clan of the Turkic Empire of the sixth–eighth centuries. Another appellation was ‘The House of Afrasiyab’ (Arab. *Āl-i Afrāsiyāb*), after the legendary king of Tūrān in Firdawsī’s *Book of Kings*, an appellation that both made them part of the Persian world and retained their Turkic identity. Furthermore, the Karakhanids also stressed their connection to China, many of their rulers bearing also the title of Khan of China (OT *tavgač khan*) or King of the East and China (Arab. *malik al-mashriq wa-l-šīn*) and referring to segments of their realm (notably Kašgar) as parts of China.<sup>41</sup>

Such connections with East Asia found visual expression in the wall paintings of the 12th-century Karakhanid palace in Samarqand, that are obviously

40 Ibid., esp. 37–97, 205–210; Dilnoza Duturaeva, “Between the Silk and Fur Roads: The Qarakhanid Diplomacy and Trade,” *Orientierungen: Zeitschrift zur Kultur Asiens* 28 (2016): 173–212; Dilnoza Duturaeva, “Qarakhanid Envoys to Song China,” *Journal of Asian History* 52.2 (2018): 179–208; Michal Biran, “The Qarakhanids’ Eastern Exchange. Preliminary Notes on the Silk Roads in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,” in *Complexity of Interaction along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium CE*, ed. Jan Bemmann and Michael Schmauder (Bonn: University of Bonn Press, 2015), 575–595.

41 Michal Biran, “Ilak-khanids (or Qarakhanids),” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. 12 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 621–628.

influenced by Dunhuang models and combine Chinese and Turkic motives with Persian content.<sup>42</sup> Some Buddhist impact might have been apparent also in the 11th-century Turkic mirror for princes, *Qutadgu Bilig* [Wisdom of Royal Glory], notably in the figure of the ascetic known as ‘Wide Awake’. Other possible links, such as the typical Karakhanid lofty minarets competing visually with Buddhist pagodas or the colleges (Arab. *madrasas*) that were established in Central Asian towns originating in Buddhist architecture and institutions, are harder to prove. Despite the close commercial connections and some cultural borrowing, there is hardly any evidence of meaningful intellectual exchange among Buddhists and Muslims during this period.<sup>43</sup>

This lack stands in contrast to the Ghaznavids’ simultaneous advance into North India, where in the late-tenth to early-11th century they famously demolished idol temples, including those of the local Buddhists who had been already losing ground to the Hindus. This advance produced, or at least made popular, the *Kālacakratāntra* [The Wheel of Time Tantra], by far the most extensive Buddhist source on Islamic practice and thought. The *Kālacakratāntra* highlights the myth of Shambhala, a legendary Buddhist kingdom. It claims that, after the world became fully Muslim, the king of Shambhala would ride forth with his Buddhist army—eliminating all the Muslims and ushering in a full revival of the *dharma*. The text also contains a framework of Islamic salvation history including Muḥammad and the various prophets who preceded him, for example biblical figures such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus (all of whom are considered prophets in Islam).<sup>44</sup> It includes a description of Islamic practices such as prayer, fasting, and circumcision, and lays a special stress on meat sacrifices and Islamic slaughter, which are

42 Yury Karev, “Qarakhanid Wall Paintings in the Citadel of Samarqand. First Report and Preliminary Observations,” *Muqarnas* 22 (2005): 45–84; Yury Karev, “From Tents to City: The Royal Court of the Western Qarakhanids between Bukhara and Samarqand,” in *Turko-Mongol Rulers, Cities and City-life*, ed. David Durand-Guédy (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 99–147.

43 Yūsuf, khāṣṣ-ḥājib, *Wisdom of Royal Glory: A Turko-Islamic Mirror for Princes*, trans. Robert Dankoff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), Introduction; Biran, “Qarakhanid Eastern Exchange,” 587–588; Elverskog, “Buddhism and Muslim Interactions,” 6–7.

44 Before Muḥammad, the text also mentions ‘the White Clad One’, probably referring to al-Muqanna‘ (‘the Veiled One’, d. ca. 783), a rebel and false prophet active in Khurāsān in the mid-late eighth century, whose adherents, known for wearing white clothes, fled from the Abbasids to north India where they survived up to the 12th century. This group might have been the *Kālacakratāntra*’s source about Islam. See Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 57, 98. On al-Muqanna‘, see Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 106–143; Karev, *Samarqand et le Sughd*, 161–232.

identified with the Vedic sacrifice, thereby linking the two main enemies of the *dharma*—Muslims and Hindus. The *Kālacakratantra* was also aware of the Islamic theory of the afterworld that refutes the Buddhist notion of reincarnation, an issue that would resurface during the Mongol period. Yet, it also acknowledged some positive aspects of Islam (for example, equality). In addition, the *Kālacakratantra* also reveals the impact of Muslim science on Indian knowledge, mainly in the astral sciences, thereby suggesting that scientific cross-pollination between Buddhism and Islam was not unilateral. This exceptional text also attests to a certain intellectual interaction between Buddhism and Islam, at least in India.<sup>45</sup>

In Central Asia, there was a certain parallel only to the first part of the *Kālacakratantra* that foretells the decline of Buddhism due to Muslim expansion: the Karakhanid conquest of Khotan might have given a boost to the earlier ‘prophecy of Khotan’, which predicted the decline of the *dharma* due to the rise of Persian, Turks and Tibetan kings.<sup>46</sup> Yet the Karakhanid conquest of Khotan also left more practical marks on the Buddhist realm: Many Buddhist Khotanese emigrated, notably to Tibet, thereby strengthening Tibet’s position as *the* Buddhist centre (at the expense of India), and the Muslim threat might have contributed to the sealing of the Dunhuang treasure cave in the 11th century.<sup>47</sup> Another effect of the Karakhanid conquest was the beginning of the Islamisation of Khotan.

Simultaneously with their continuous connections to the Buddhist east, the Karakhanids also tried to enhance Khotan’s Muslim character. Very little information is available on Karakhanid rule in Khotan, which is described as the eastern fringe of the world in contemporaneous Muslim poetry. Yet they certainly relocated to the city Muslim scholars and dignitaries, mostly from Transoxania.<sup>48</sup> Archaeology reveals that quite a few Muslim shrines were built over originally Buddhist sites and sometimes even retained similar rites, though in the long run the original Buddhist past was completely forgotten.<sup>49</sup> The Islamisation of Khotan was a gradual process: a deed from the Khotan

45 For the *Kālacakratantra*, see Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 98–104; Elverskog, “Buddhist and Muslim Interactions,” 5–6, 16; John Newman, “Islam in the Kālacakra Tantra,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21.2 (1998): 311–372.

46 Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 97–98; for a detailed discussion of the prophecy, that originated in the ninth century, see Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), 188–202.

47 Xinjiang Rong, *Eighteen Lectures on Dunhuang*, trans. by Imre Galambos (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 131–133.

48 Biran, “Qarakhanid Eastern Exchange,” 581.

49 Thum, *Sacred Routes*, 125–126.

area that was drafted in 1107 (501 AH), attests that the buyer, seller and witnesses were all Muslims. Judging by their names (for example, Ḥusayn ibn Lingūkūhī), some of these individuals were probably second-generation adherents of Islam. Similarly, the first Khotanese scholar who is mentioned in the Muslim biographical literature is Sulaymān, son of Dāwud, son of Sulaymān al-Khutani (fl. ca. 1119), whose family appears to have been Muslim—or at least not Chinese or Buddhist—for several generations. By the mid-12th century, however, the city had already produced several Islamic scholars; and by the early 1200s, Khotan was an entirely Muslim town boasting “three thousand illustrious imams.”<sup>50</sup>

### 3.3 *The Kara Khitai*

By this time and since the early decades of the 12th century, the Karakhanids had submitted to the Kara Khitai (ca. 1124–1218, in Chinese sources known as Xiliao 西遼). These were Khitan fugitives from northern China who escaped into Central Asia after their dynasty had been subsumed by their former vassals, the Jurchens. The latter established the Jurchen Dynasty (1115–1234, in Chinese sources known as Jin 金) that in 1127 pushed the Song into southern China. While the Jurchens were preoccupied in China, the Kara Khitai carved out for themselves a vast empire stretching from the Oxus to the Altai and centred in Balāsāghūn (modern Burana, Kirgizstan), overrunning both the Muslim Karakhanids and Buddhist Kočo (Chin. Gaochang 高昌)—as well as other polities and tribes—and famously subduing the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar in Qatwān near Samarqand in 1141. This battle gave a boost to the legend of Prester John, the Christian priest-king who was supposed to have hastened to the aid of his co-religionists in the Holy Land from his remote kingdom in Asia, as the rumours about the great Muslim defeat by their non-Muslim enemy reached even the Crusaders in Palestine. Indeed, the battle was the first setback of Islam in Central Asia since the Umayyad losses in the first half of the eighth century. Furthermore, it was the first time that Buddhist rulers governed a significant Muslim population, including centres like Bukhara and Samarqand. Interestingly, the infidel nomads managed to rule their heterogeneous but mostly Muslim population in rare harmony.

As I showed elsewhere, they cleverly manipulated their cultural capital as Chinese and Khitans, building on the remaining prestige of China in Central Asia since the Tang period (and through the Karakhanid incorporation of this

50 Ata-Malik Juvaini [sic], *Genghis Khan: The History of World Conqueror*, trans. John A. Boyle (Rpt. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 71; Biran, “Qarakhanid Eastern Exchange,” 581–582.



MAP 1.2 The Kara Khitai at its height: Asia in 1142  
MICHAL BIRAN, *THE EMPIRE OF THE QARA KHITAI IN EURASIAN HISTORY*  
(CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS 2005), 220 (WITH CHANGES)

trademark) and on their nomadic heritage, that was common to many of the post-nomadic Turks in Central Asia. Practising religious pluralism, leaving most local rulers intact and securing peace and prosperity in Central Asia up to the late 12th century, the Kara Khitai won the loyalty of their subjects, Muslims and others, and, unlike their predecessors and successors in Central Asia, did not embrace Islam. Only when peace and order deteriorated with the rise of Chinggis Khan (r. 1206–1227) and the decline of the Kara Khitai ruling house, did ‘religious war’ rhetoric come to the fore.<sup>51</sup>

Under Kara Khitai rule the Silk Roads shifted to the north, so that the Tangut Empire as well as the Kočo Uyghurs played a bigger role at the expense of the Khotanese. This was not only due to the inclusion of Kočo in the Kara Khitai realm, but also due to the enmity between the Kara Khitai and the Jurchen as well as the retreat of the Song to the south, which forced it to rely more on the maritime routes. The Tanguts exploited the upheavals to take over the Blue Lake region (Tib. mTsho sngon po, Mong. Köke nayur, Chin. Qinghai hu 青海湖, in western literature often referred to as Lake Kokonor), the former realm of Tsongkha, which the Jurchens had ceded to the Tanguts. Most of the merchants from the Kara Khitai realm, notably Muslims and Uyghurs, passed through the Tangut realm and did not advance to China proper or beyond Jurchen border markets. However, certain Muslim merchants, especially from Kašgar and Balāsāghūn, were active in the Jurchen’s western trade. The Jurchens ordered the resident Muslim merchants to settle in the villages of the Uyghur immigrants. Yet Zhongdu (中都, also known as Yanjing 燕京, present day Beijing), the Jurchen capital, also held a major settlement of Central Asian immigrants—Buddhist Uyghurs and Muslims.<sup>52</sup>

Central Asian Muslim merchants also maintained direct trade relations with the tribes of Mongolia, providing them with necessities such as clothes and commodities banned by the Jurchen (for example, ironware). Some of them, notably those active also in the Jurchen realm, were among Chinggis Khan’s first supporters.<sup>53</sup>

51 Biran, *The Empire*, passim; Michal Biran, “True To Their Ways: Why the Qara Khitai Did Not Convert to Islam,” in *Mongols, Turks and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 175–169.

52 Yihao Qiu, “Ja’fār Khwāja: Sayyid, Spy, Merchant and Military Commander of Chinggis Khan,” in *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia: Generals, Merchants and Intellectuals*, ed. Michal Biran, Jonathan Z. Brack, and Francesca Fiaschetti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 144–145; Biran, *The Empire*, 138; Biran, “Qarakhanid Eastern Trade,” 582.

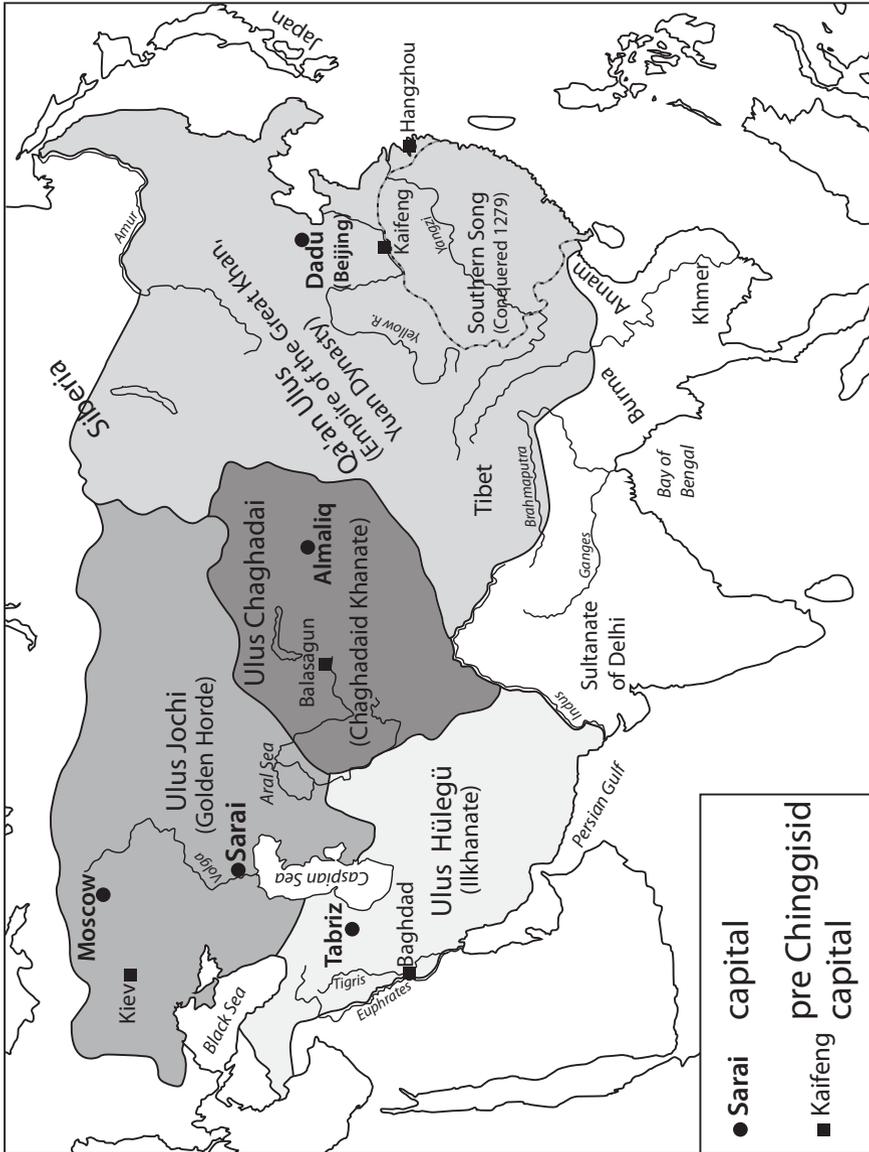
53 Qiu, “Ja’fār Khwāja,” 143–159.

The Kara Khitai period could have been a time of great cultural exchange between Buddhists and Muslims, not only through the merchants noted above but mainly in the central territory of the Kara Khitai, whose multi-lingual and multi-ethnic administration included Khitans, Uyghurs (including Buddhist monks), Muslims and Chinese. Yet we know nothing of such encounters, not only due to the dearth of sources about the Kara Khitai but also since Buddhism was less useful as a common denominator in Central Asia than in northern China: the ability of the Kara Khitai to achieve legitimacy among their mostly-Muslim population probably required them to downplay their Buddhist facets.<sup>54</sup> That said, Semirechye and especially the Chu Valley, namely the central territory of the Kara Khitai, are quite rich in Buddhist monuments: notably two monasteries in Ak Beshim, medieval Suyab, 15 km northwest of Balāsāghūn and two or three monasteries in Krasnaya Rechka (medieval Nawākit), 41 km northwest of Balāsāghūn. All are dated between the sixth and 11th century, even though Buddhist finds are sometimes uncovered together with Karakhanid-style bricks and ceramics dated between the 11th and 12th century, which may suggest that they were active also under the Kara Khitai.<sup>55</sup> In addition, a recently excavated tomb in the region of Kochkar in north-east Kyrgyzstan, a day's ride from Balāsāghūn, which my colleagues and I have argued was the first ever identified Kara Khitai elite tomb, contains many features unique to the Khitan Empire and attests to the retaining of the Kara Khitai's Khitan identity in Central Asia. While the findings do not include any specifically Buddhist items, the jade plates and ceramic tables that were found in the tomb are reminiscent of the banquet scenes which were typical of Buddhist tombs in the Khitan Empire, and the hanging mirrors unearthed in the tomb may also be part of a Khitan Buddhist ritual.<sup>56</sup> Further excavations

54 Biran, *The Empire*, 174–175; Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 127–129 refers to this period as a dark age in terms of Buddhist-Muslim interaction. My view is less categorical, mainly due to the newly excavated tomb discussed below.

55 Asan I. Torgoev, et al., “The Buddhist Monastery of Krasnaya Rechka Settlement: The Main Findings 2010–2015,” in *Urban Cultures of Central Asia from the Bronze Age to the Karakhanids: Learnings and Conclusions from New Archaeological Investigations and Discoveries*, ed. Christoph Baumer and Mirko Novák (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), 349–364, esp. 355. For the difficulty of differentiating between 11th- and 12th-century layers, see Asan I. Torgoev, “Remennye ukrasheniya Semirech'ya V–nachalo XIII vv. (voprosy khronologii)” (PhD diss., University of Saint-Petersburg, 2011), 113–114. How much of the monasteries' dating derives from the common assumption in Central Asia that the Karakhanid period witnessed the full Islamisation of the Chu Valley (and more) is a question worth pursuing. See also next note.

56 Michal Biran et al., “The Kōk-Tash Underground Mausoleum in North-Eastern Kyrgyzstan: The First-ever Identified Qara Khitai Elite Tomb,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*



MAP 1.3 The Mongol Commonwealth: The Four Khanates after 1260  
 MICHAL BIRAN, "MONGOL IMPERIAL SPACE: FROM UNIVERSALISM TO GLOCALIZATION," IN *THE LIMITS OF UNIVERSAL RULE: EURASIAN EMPIRES COMPARED*, ED. YURI PINES, MICHAL BIRAN, AND JÖRG RÜPKE (CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021), 238

will hopefully throw more light on Kara Khitai Buddhism. However, Islam continued to expand during the Kara Khitai reign by voluntary association, reaching eastwards into the Karluk principalities of Qayaliq (near modern Kopal in Kazakhstan) and Almaliq (near modern Yining 伊宁 in north Xinjiang, China), while Muslim scholarship and science continued to thrive in Transoxania and Farghāna.<sup>57</sup>

#### 4 Stage Three: The Mongol Moment (1206–1368)

The Mongol Empire that eliminated the Kara Khitai as well as their eastern and western neighbours, opened a new page not only in world history but also in Islamic expansion and Muslim-Buddhist encounters. Uniting the eastern Islamic world and various East Asian Buddhist polities—in China, Tibet, Korea, Uyghuria, Kashmir—under one rule, which extended up to the fringes of Orthodox Christianity in the Russian principalities; practising religious pluralism; and mobilising people, artefacts and ideas on an unprecedented scale, the Mongol Empire promoted religious exchange of unparalleled scope. It transformed the Eurasian religious landscape and encouraged religious relativism. The Mongols conducted their conquests under the banner of Tengri, the Sky god of the steppe, who conferred upon the Chinggisids the mandate to rule over earth and the charisma or good fortune required for holding it. They neither preached nor forced their ethnic, immanent religion, usually termed Shamanism, which was concerned mainly with the conditions of this life. Missionaries of universal, transcendental religions that stressed the afterlife saw the Mongols as a reservoir of potential converts, and competed over their conversion. Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists were pitted as the main competitors for converting the Mongols during the ‘Mongol moment’.<sup>58</sup>

The ‘Mongol moment’ in world history is usually divided into two main periods, that of the United Empire (1206–1260) and that of the four states/nations

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33.3 (2023): 713–745. Note that the Kochkar tomb was originally published as a unique Muslim tomb even though its characteristics are obviously not Muslim, due to the assumption discussed above.

57 Biran, *The Empire*, 177, 181–190; Michal Biran, “Scholarship and Science under the Qara Khitai (1124–1218),” in *The Coming of the Mongols*, ed. David O. Morgan and Sarah Edwards (London: Tauris, 2018), 58–72.

58 Michal Biran, “The Mongol Empire and the Inter-Civilizational Exchange,” in *The Cambridge World History*. Vol. 5. *Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict, 500 CE–1500 CE*, ed. Benjamin Kedar and Merry Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 547–550.

(Mong. *uluses*) or Khanates (1260–1368), known as ‘the Mongol Commonwealth.’ The United Empire was an ever-expanding unified polity ruled from Mongolia. After 1260, the United Empire dissolved in a process that eventually resulted in the creation of four regional empires, which centred on China, Iran, Central Asia, and the Volga region, each ruled by a Chinggisid branch. The Great Khan’s (or Qa’an’s) state was centred in China, its rulers became known as the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368, 元) and their realm enjoyed a nominal, though not uncontested, primacy over its counterparts. The Ilkhanate was centred in modern Iran and Iraq, while the Golden Horde (1260–1502) ruled from the Volga region, and the Chaghadaid Khanate (1260–1678)—called after Chinggis Khan’s second son Chaghadai (d. 1242) held power in Central Asia, from Uyghuria to the Oxus. Despite the many, and often bloody, disputes between the four polities, they retained a strong sense of Chinggisid unity. In the late-13th to mid-14th century, the three western states embraced Islam, whereas Yuan China adopted Tibetan Buddhism even earlier. In the mid-14th century, all four khanates were embroiled in political and ecological crises that led to the collapse of the Ilkhanate as well as of Yuan China and considerably weakened the two other steppe khanates. The retreat of the Great Khan from China in 1368 is generally deemed to be the end of the ‘Mongol moment’ in world history, since it brought the Chinggisids back to the steppe, and disrupted the economic and cultural exchange typical of Mongol rule, even though both Chinggisid polities and the memory of the empire survived much longer.<sup>59</sup>

#### 4.1 *Islam and Buddhism under Mongol Rule: Coexistence and Exchange*

Even though the Mongol era had begun with major blows to the Muslim world, from Chinggis Khan’s devastating invasion of Central Asia (1219–1225) up to the elimination of the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258 by his grandson, Hülegü, eventually the Mongol period resulted in an immense expansion of Islam. As stated above, three of the four Mongol khanates embraced Islam in the late 13th to mid-14th century. Moreover, the population movements induced by the Mongol Empire and the opportunities it offered to merchants, experts and adventurers, led to further dissemination of Islam into China, India, Southeast Asia and Africa. This was done by the agency of Muslim soldiers, administrators, merchants, refugees, and experts of various kinds (including religious experts like scholars [(Arab. *‘ulamā’*)] and Sufis) who were either employed by

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59 Biran, “The Mongol Empire,” 534–535.

the Mongols or quick to benefit from the open borders of the empire and the trade networks it invigorated that covered the entire Old World.<sup>60</sup>

Tibetan Buddhism went through a similar process, albeit on a smaller scale. While the initial Mongol conquest devastated Buddhist communities in northern China and Tibet, already in the 1260s the Great Khan state centred in China adopted Tibetan Buddhism, though mainly as a court religion. The Mongols also oversaw the completion of Tibet's unseating of India as the centre of Buddhism and the beginning of theocratic rule in Tibet. The Buddhist efflorescence is lastly attested by its return to Iran under Mongol aegis, centuries after it was largely erased from the Persian-speaking world with the spread of Islam.<sup>61</sup>

The 'Mongol moment' created direct encounters between Muslims and Buddhists on an unprecedented scale. These took place both at the Mongol courts, at which the khans presided over religious debates and employed multi-ethnic experts of various kinds (such as physicians, astronomers, administrators), and across the Empire, notably among various groups of migrants, often transported by the Mongols. The arrival of newcomers was not always easy for the receiving population and migrants often found it hard to accommodate to their new environment. Thus, these encounters were not always amiable, and also involved tensions, hostility, and the rise of nativist feeling. For example, the Buddhist priests from the Uyghur summer capital Beš Balık (Chin. Beiting 北庭), a town to which the Mongols transferred myriads of Muslim artisans in the 1220s, allegedly suggested to the Great Khan Güyük (r. 1246–1248) the elimination of all the Muslims or at least their emasculation.<sup>62</sup> Yet despite several cases of Buddhist or Muslim zealotry, and in spite of Chaghadaï's strict enforcement of the norms of the Mongol law code (Mong. *jasag*; Turk. *yasa*) ascribed to Chinggis Khan and often contradicting Muslim law, Mongol religious pluralism encouraged co-existence rather than persecution, certainly before Mongol Islamisation.<sup>63</sup>

60 Michal Biran, *Chinggis Khan* (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2007), 93–98; Michal Biran, "The Mongol Empire and Inter-Civilizational Exchange," 547–549.

61 Brian Baumann, "Buddhism in the Mongol Empire," in *The Mongol World*, ed. Timothy May and Michael Hope (London: Routledge, 2022), 681–696, though he exaggerates the importance of Buddhism in Ilkhanid Iran; Roxann Prazniak, "Ilkhanid Buddhism: Traces of a Passage in Eurasian History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56 (2014): 650–680.

62 Minhāj al-Dīn Abū 'Umar ibn Sirāj al-Dīn 'Uthmān Jūzjānī, *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāsirī*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī (Kabul: Duniyā-yi kitāb, 1963–4), vol. 1, 171–173; Biran, *The Empire*, 196.

63 Biran, "Central Asia," 64–65; Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 133–137, 182, 189.

The direct contacts between Muslims and Buddhists at the Mongol courts are documented already in the Mongol capital Karakorum where in 1254 the Flemish missionary William of Rubruck recorded the first court debate in which both Buddhists and Muslims took part, together with Christians of the eastern and Catholic churches. This debate famously ended with the Great Khan Möngke's (r. 1251–1259) statements that all religions are like different fingers leading to the palm in which God is located, putting all religions on equal footing.<sup>64</sup>

Muslim-Buddhists direct contacts are documented mainly in Ilkhanid Iran, where they resulted in the most detailed descriptions of Buddhism in the Islamic world, notably by the renowned vizier and historian Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318), but also by other dignitaries such as the Sufi 'Alā' al-Dīn Simnānī (d. 1336). Rashīd al-Dīn, a Jewish convert to Islam known as the first 'world historian', compiled the *Jāmi' al-tawārikh* [Compendium of Chronicles], which contains a volume on the history of the Mongols, from the rise of Chinggis Khan to the vizier's time, and a volume of 'universal history', including the histories of the Muslims, Chinese, Indians, Jews, Franks and Turks.<sup>65</sup> The *History of India* part of the latter includes a record of 'the life of the Buddha', which is the most detailed Muslim description of Buddhism. The account focuses on the Buddha's biography, the Wheel of Life, and the worship of the Buddha Maitreya, the Future Buddha. It also includes a detailed description of the *dharma*, recording Buddhist practices including those related to Chinese

64 William of Rubruck, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke, 1253–1255*, trans. Peter Jackson with David O. Morgan (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1990), 232–237; Benjamin Z. Kedar, "The Multilateral Disputation at the Court of the Grand Qan Möngke, 1254," in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, ed. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1999), 162–183.

65 On Rashīd al-Dīn, see for example Stefan T. Kamola, *Making Mongol History: Rashid al-Din and the Jami' al-Tawarikh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Jonathan Z. Brack, "Rashīd al-Dīn: Buddhism in Iran and the Mongol Silk Roads," in *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia: Generals, Merchants, Intellectuals*, ed. Michal Biran, Jonathan Z. Brack, and Francesca Fiaschetti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 215–237. Rashīd al-Dīn's authorship of the universal history was recently questioned and apparently considerable parts of it were taken from an earlier work by his protégé Abū al-Qāsim Qāshānī (d. after 1324; see Osamu Otsuka, "Qāshānī, the First World Historian: Research on His Uninvestigated Persian General History, *Zubdat al-tawārikh*," *Studia Iranica*, 47.1 (2018): 119–149); for convenience I still refer to it as Rashīd al-Dīn's work (even though his role might have been closer to that of general editor rather than author). His authorship of his theological works (below) is uncontested. For Simnānī, see Devin DeWeese, "'Ala' ad-Dawla as-Simnani's Religious Encounters at the Mongol Court Near Tabriz," in *Politics, Patronage and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th–15th Century Tabriz*, ed. Judith Pfeiffer (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 35–76.

Buddhist schools, notably Pure Land Buddhism. Indeed, Rashīd al-Dīn's version of Buddhism in *The History of India* demonstrates the impact of Buddhists of various origins—India, Kashmir, Tibet, Uyghuria and China—at the Mongol court of Iran. It also uses Muslim terms to explain Buddhist ideas. Famously, the Buddha is presented as a prophet with a book, and *nirvāṇa* is glossed by the Sufi term of 'the self-annihilation in the divine' (Arab. *fanā'*). A different description of the life of the Buddha—shorter and based on Chinese Chan (禪) Buddhist works—appears in Rashīd al-Dīn's *History of China*. All in all, these descriptions represent not only a quantum leap forward in Muslim knowledge about Buddhism but also willingness to engage with its creeds and not necessarily in a negative tone. Thus 'Alā' al-Dīn Simnānī, who recorded his meetings with Buddhist monks in the court of the pro-Buddhist Ilkhan Arghun (r. 1284–1291), could state that the *dharma* is similar to Muslim law while other Sufis borrowed notions from Tibetan Buddhism (for example, portraying Ilkhan Öljeitü (r. 1304–1316), the only Mongol ruler who [ephemerally] embraced Shi'ite Islam, as a reincarnation of 'Alī, the cousin and son in law of the Prophet Muḥammad and the father of Shi'ite Islam).<sup>66</sup> However, Rashīd al-Dīn's theological works, recently analysed by Jonathan Z. Brack, display a more ambivalent attitude towards Buddhism, based also on direct encounters with Buddhists in the Ilkhanid court. Rashīd al-Dīn praises the Buddhist priests' argumentation and logic, noting, for example, that they asked him what comes first, the chicken or the egg. Yet his theological works include three polemics against the Buddhists, dealing mainly with the question of the afterlife—the part that both Islam and Buddhism proposed to add to the mundane Mongol indigenous religion—and argues for the superiority of the Muslim notion of the afterlife over the Buddhist transmigration of souls. His detailed discussion attests not only that Hülegü's great grandsons and Arghun's sons, the Muslim Ilkhans Ghazan (r. 1295–1304) and his brother and heir Öljeitü, received Buddhist education, and were among Rashīd al-Dīn's informants on the foreign religion. It also states that Buddhist thought, and argumentation continued to have impact in Iran decades after the monks were expelled from the country after Ghazan's Islamisation in 1295.<sup>67</sup>

66 Brack, "Rashid al-Dīn and Buddhism," 217, 221–224; Anna Akasoy, "The Buddha and the Straight Path. Rashīd al-Dīn's *Life of the Buddha*: Islamic Perspectives," in *Rashīd al-Dīn as an Agent and Mediator of Cultural Exchanges in Ilkhanid Iran*, ed. Anna Akasoy, Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, and Charles Burnett (London: Warburg Institute, 2013), 173–196; Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 154ff.

67 Brack, "Rashid al-Dīn and Buddhism," 217ff; Francesco Calzolaio and Francesca Fiaschetti, "Prophets of the East: The Ilkhanid Historian Rashīd al-Dīn on the Buddha, Laozi and Confucius and the Question of his Chinese Sources (Part 1)," *Iran and the Caucasus* 23.1

Another major impact of Buddhism on Islam, widely attested in the illustrations to Rashīd al-Dīn's history, was visual. Buddhists (and Christians) used painting as a way to introduce their religion's pantheon and this technique was adopted by Muslims. Hence in Ilkhanid Iran, for the first time in Islamic history, we find various images of the prophet Muḥammad as well as other prophets and angels. These paintings were instrumental in encouraging Mongol conversion, as well as their further acquaintance with the new religion after its formal adoption. While we do not have illustrated manuscripts from the poorer Chaghadaid Khanate, there are many such manuscripts from the Timurid period (1370–1501), another golden age of Muslim culture in Central Asia, and later on. Some Timurid manuscripts include obvious references to Buddhist images. This is especially notable in representations of heaven and hell in manuscripts describing Muḥammad's night journey to heaven (Arab. *mi'rāj*), a story that fits well also in the context of Mongol Shamanism.<sup>68</sup>

While there is nothing comparable to Rashīd al-Dīn's interest in Buddhism in Yuan China, Muslim experts in sciences—astronomy, medicine, geography—were highly appreciated both at the court of Dadu (大都, modern Beijing 北京) and in the provincial princely courts, and Muslim administrators and commanders frequented the Yuan court, armies, and provinces. Thus, there were many opportunities and arenas for Buddhist-Muslim interactions. One case worth mentioning is that of Khubilai's grandson, Prince Ananda (d. 1307), who ruled the heavily-Buddhist former Tangut realm (today's Ningxia 宁夏 and Gansu), to which the Mongols early on transferred Muslim soldiers. Ananda received Buddhist education and married a Buddhist wife. Yet he converted to Islam through the agency of his Muslim wet nurse and the Muslim soldiers in his guard. The Muslim prince then actively propagated Islam, that henceforth took its first steps in the realm of north-west China.<sup>69</sup>

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(2019): 17–34; Francesco Calzolaio and Francesca Fiaschetti, "Prophets of the East: The Ilkhanid Historian Rashīd al-Dīn on the Buddha, Laozi and Confucius and the Question of his Chinese Sources (Part 2)," *Iran and the Caucasus* 23.2 (2019): 145–166; DeWeese, "Ala' ad-Dawla as-Simnani," 35–74; Elverskog, "Buddhist and Muslim Interactions," 9. The most thorough analysis of Buddhist-Muslim relations under the Mongols, notably in Iran, is provided in: Jonathan Z. Brack, *An Afterlife for the Khan: Muslim Buddhists and Sacred Kingship in Mongol Iran and Eurasia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023).

68 Christine J. Gruber, *The Timurid Book of Ascension (Mi'rajnama): A Study of Text and Image in a Pan-Asian Context* (Valencia, Spain: Patrimonio Ediciones in collaboration with the Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2008), esp. 311–326.

69 Ruth W. Dunnell, "The Anxi Principality: [Un]Making a Muslim Mongol Prince in Northwest China during the Yuan Dynasty," *Central Asiatic Journal* 57 (2014): 185–200; Vered Shurany, "Prince Manggala—The Forgotten Prince of Anxi," *Asiatische Studien /*



FIGURE 1.2 “The *Mi’rāj* or The Night Flight of Muḥammad on his Steed Burāq,” Folio 3v from a *Bustān* of Sa’dī, ca. 1525–1535, Bukhara or Herat  
COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.  
[HTTPS://WWW.METMUSEUM.ORG/ART/COLLECTION/SEARCH/452670](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/452670).  
ACCESSED JANUARY 19, 2023

The Mongol period indeed pitted Muslims and Buddhists against each other as the main competitors in converting the Mongols. Both Islam and Buddhism were universal religions that had already proved capable of absorbing characteristics of other religions. This is obvious in the case of inclusive Buddhism but is also true for Islam, which presented itself as the most up-to-date Abrahamic religion, subsuming its Jewish and Christian predecessors.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the interlocutors who initiated Mongol conversion in the different realms, probably aware of the translatability of the Mongols' indigenous religion, used the strategy of reversion, the claim to return to—rather than depart from—one's ancestral belief, to lay the foundation of Mongol conversion. Thus, Chinggis Khan was portrayed as a Buddhist king and a proto-monotheist (as well as an innate Confucianist), and converting to the new faith was presented to his descendants as a return to their ancestor's pristine path, not as a complete break with the past.<sup>71</sup> The political dimension of the religion, its mobile and mercantile orientation, and the ability of its 'holy men' to perform 'miracles' (mainly healing) were also useful in both cases. Furthermore, both Buddhism and Islam formulated a synthesis which transformed the immanent religion of the Mongols into a transcendental one. This changed the sacred kingship of the Mongols into that of the Buddhist 'Wheel-Turning King' (Skt. *chakravartin*, Chin. *zhuanlun wang* 轉輪王) and a Muslim 'Lord of Auspicious Conjunction' (Arab. *ṣāhib qirān*), who has a personal direct connection to Allāh, respectively. This latter new type of sacred kingship was adapted and developed by the early modern Muslim empires in Central Asia and beyond, notably among the Timurids, Moghuls and Ottomans.<sup>72</sup>

#### 4.2 *Mongol Central Asia: Interfaith Contacts and Islamisation*

Central Asia was among the first regions conquered by the Mongols already in the reign of Chinggis Khan. Therefore, its resources, both human and material, were channelled for the benefit of the ever-expanding empire, often at the

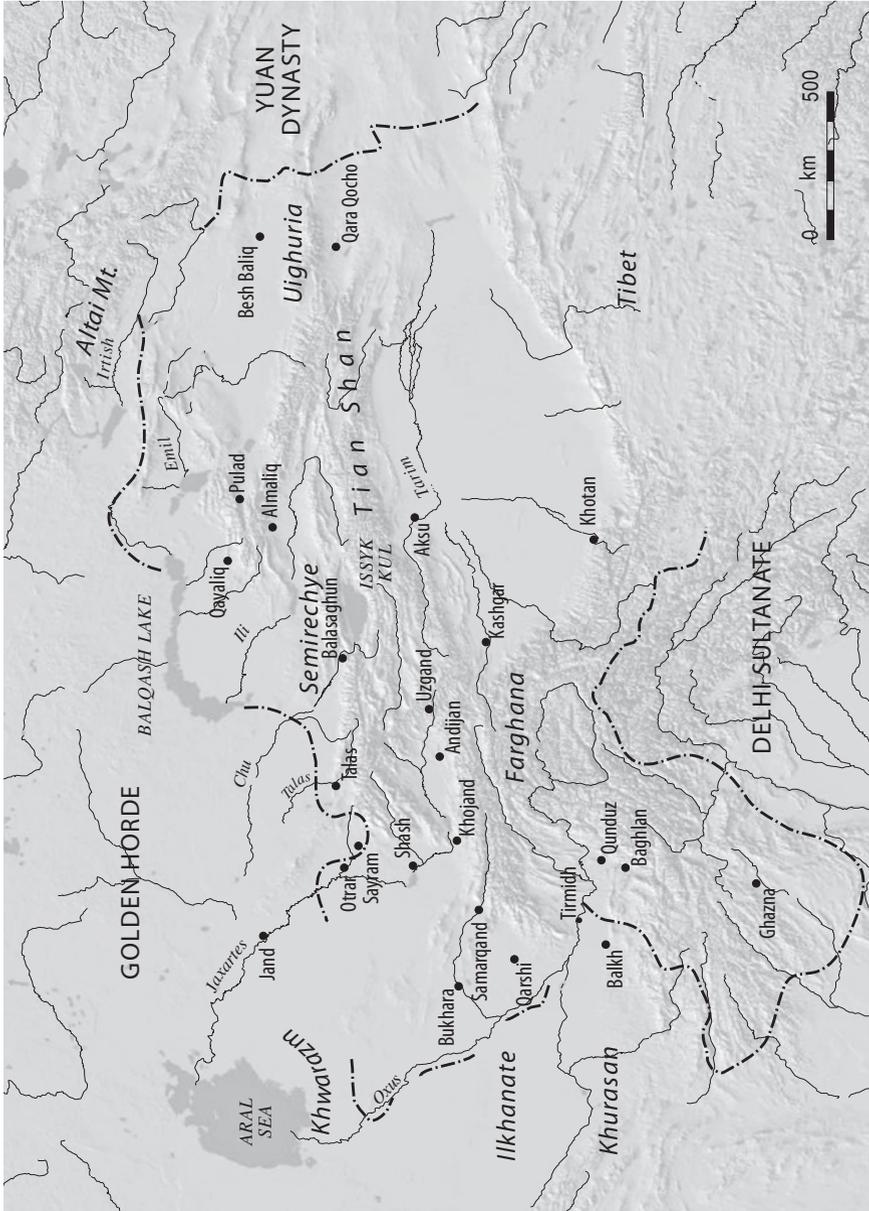
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*Études Asiatiques* 71.4 (2017): 1169–1188; Morris Rossabi, *From Yuan to Modern China and Mongolia: The Writings of Morris Rossabi* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 251–290.

70 Peter Jackson, "The Mongols and Religion: Precocious Tolerance or Cynical Manipulation?" Keynote lecture at the workshop "The Mongols and Religions," Austrian Academy of Science, Vienna, May 16–18, 2019.

71 Jonathan Z. Brack, "Chinggisid Pluralism and Religious Competition: Buddhists, Muslims, and the Question of Violence and Sovereignty in Ilkhanid Iran," *Modern Asian Studies* 56.3 (2022): 815–839.

72 Jonathan Z. Brack, "Theologies of Auspicious Kingship: The Islamization of Chinggisid Sacral Kingship in the Islamic World," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60 (2018): 1143–171; Brack, "Chinggisid Pluralism," 815–839.



MAP 1.4 Mongol Central Asia: The Chaghadaid Khanate ca. 1330  
 MICHAL BIRAN, "RULERS AND CITY LIFE IN MONGOL CENTRAL ASIA (1220–1370)," IN *TURKO-MONGOL RULERS, CITIES AND CITY-LIFE IN IRAN AND THE NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES*, ED. DAVID DURAND-GUEDY (LEIDEN: BRILL, 2013), 259

expense of local interests. Despite Mongol successful attempts of restoration, notably under the Great Khan Möngke,<sup>73</sup> the century and a half of the Mongol moment was far from being a golden age in Central Asia. The Chaghadaid Khanate, lacking a sedentary basis and imperial tradition comparable to that of China and Iran, was constantly plagued by succession and inter-Mongol struggles, and suffered from constant emigration. Yet Mongol rule was also a watershed era in Central Asian history, as much of the region's subsequent political culture, ethnic composition, and concepts of legitimacy and law go back to Chinggis Khan.<sup>74</sup>

Interfaith contacts, although less well documented, also existed in Mongol Central Asia. While most of the Chaghadaid subject population was Muslim, it also contained significant communities of Buddhists and Christians, as well as occasional Jews and others. While Buddhists were the majority in Uyghuria and Muslims in the western Khanate, the various communities—Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims—often shared the same space (partly due to the Mongol mobilisation policies mentioned above). Apart from Uyghuria, smaller Buddhist communities existed in Khotan, Kašgar and Qayaliq. Tibetan Buddhism was popular in Yuan China and introduced to eastern Turkestan via lamas (Tib. *bla ma*, lit. 'high master'), pilgrims, and merchants. It found many adherents among Uyghurs and Mongols alike, as proved by the number of Uyghur and Mongol Tantric texts unearthed in Turfan, and partly compensated for the ongoing Uyghur emigration. The Uyghurs maintained close connections with Buddhists in Yuan China, including the Uyghur diaspora there, notably in centres like Dadu, Hangzhou (杭州), and the closer Gansu, where a Chaghadaid branch subject to the Yuan patronised Buddhist translations and monasteries. Several Chaghadaid khans personally favoured Buddhism, mainly Du'a (r. 1282–1307), who gave his son the Buddhist name Tarmashirin (i.e., Dharmasīri d.u., lit. 'venerable in the *dharma*') and granted very generous exemptions to Buddhist monasteries, and Changshi (r. 1335–1337), who allegedly put-up Buddhist sculptures in every mosque. Other ephemeral khans, such as Eljigidei (r. 1327–1330) and Yisün Temür (r. 1337–1339/40), also patronised Buddhism, inscribing various forms of attributes of Buddhist iconography known as *vajras* (Tib. *rdo rje*, Mong. *ochir*, lit. 'jewel'), on their coins. Even after

73 Michal Biran, "Central Asia from the Conquest of Chinggis Khan to the Rise of Tamerlane: The Ögödeid and Chaghadaid Realms," in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia vol. 2: The Chinggisid Age*, ed. Peter B. Golden, Nicola Di Cosmo, and Allan Frank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 46–66; Michal Biran, "Mongol Central Asia: The Chaghadaids and the Ögödeids, 1260–1370," in *The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, ed. Michal Biran and Kim Hodong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

74 Biran, "Central Asia," 46–47.

his Islamisation, Tughluq Temür Khan (r. 1347–1353) is said to have invited a Tibetan Buddhist teacher (and miracle maker) to his court.<sup>75</sup> Yet Mongolian and Uyghur documents unearthed in Turfan, such as a Mongolian work of the ‘Alexander romance’ genre, an Arabic sand divination text translated into Uyghur, and Uyghur poems which included references (sometimes polemic) to Islam as well as Arabic and Persian words, all suggest that western cultural influence reached even the Chaghadaids’ most eastern and Buddhist realm.<sup>76</sup>

Simultaneously, significant Muslim scholarly activity continued in Mongol Central Asia under infidel rule. Before Chaghadaid Islamisation, local Muslim dynasties in Almalıq and Tirmidh recruited Muslim scholars. The Jaxartes region became more prominent, with centres also in Sighnāq and Farghāna. Lastly, Muslim jurists and Sufi sheikhs were active even further east, in such towns in Semirechye and Xinjiang as Qayalıq, Bārchkand, and Imīl, teaching and compiling books and commentaries. In the established Muslim centres of Transoxania, religious learning continued, often led by notable families some of whom originated during the pre-Mongol period and led the scholarly community throughout Chaghadaid rule. A good example is Şāhib al-Hidāya al-Marghīnānī (d. 1197), whose descendants took part in Chaghadaid’s administration and held religious posts in Samarqand well into the Timurid period. Bukhara in particular retained some of its pre-Mongol prestige as a centre of Hanafi law and Sufism, through luminaries such as Shams al-A’imā al-Kardārī (d. 1244), and his brightest student Ḥāfiẓ al-Dīn al-Kabīr (d. 1294), whose family continued its prominence in the scholarly community up to the Timurid period; the Maḥbūbī local leaders and eminent persons (Arab. *ṣadrs*, lit. ‘chest’), who headed Bukhara’s Hanafi school from 1238 to 1347; and Sayf al-Dīn Bākharzī (d. 1261) the Sufi sheikh renown for converting the Khan of the Golden Horde, Berke (r. 1257–1267), the first Mongol ruler to embrace Islam. The tombs of these religious luminaries, and quite a few other contemporaries, remained sites of veneration at least into the 15th century.<sup>77</sup>

75 Biran, “Central Asia,” 64–65.

76 Ibid.; Peter Zieme, “Notes on the Religions in the Mongol Empire,” in *Islam and Tibet: Interactions along the Musk Routes*, ed. Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 180–184; Márton Vér, “Interregional Mobility in Eastern Central Asia as Seen in the Old Uyghur and Middle Mongolian Sources and the Mid-Fourteenth Century Crisis,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (forthcoming); Biran, “Mongol Central Asia,” 381.

77 Biran, “Central Asia,” 65; Michal Biran, “The Mamluks and Mongol Central Asia: Political, Economic and Cultural Aspects,” in *The Mamluks in Global History*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Stephan Connermann (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2019), 380–384.

The infidel Mongols and their Muslim appointees established scholarly institutions in Central Asia. The Christian wife of the Great Khan Möngke founded an important endowment (Arab. *waqf*) in Bukhara for Sayf al-Dīn Bākharzī, which remained under the administration of the sheikh's family until the mid-14th century, accumulating considerable wealth. Both Möngke's wife and the Khanate's main administrator Mas'ūd Beg (d. 1289) built colleges in Bukhara that were thriving institutions allegedly serving a thousand students in the 1250s and functioning into the 14th century. The curriculum of such madrasas included, apart from religious sciences, also basic mathematics, medicine, and literature, all subjects favoured by the Mongols.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the many emigrants, often Hanafi scholars, who easily found a job in various realms, such as the other Mongol polities—including even Yuan China—or the Delhi and *Mamlūk* sultanates, brought local works with them so that Transoxanian masterpieces of the pre-Mongol and early Mongol periods, such the main 12th-century legal compilations, notably *al-Hidāya* [The Guidance] by al-Marghīnānī (d. 1196) and the *Fatāwā Qāḍī Khān* [The Legal Opinions of Qāḍī Khān], or *Miftāḥ al-'ulūm* [The Key of Sciences] by al-Sakkākī (d. 1229), continued to be studied and appreciated across the Muslim world from India and China to Egypt and Anatolia.<sup>79</sup>

Sufis also played a leading role in the Khanate's social and intellectual life and its cross-cultural contacts, and it is from the Mongol period that we see Sufis as conversion agents. During this period, they were acting more as individuals, as the orders were still nascent. Individual sheikhs (later defined as forefathers of the local Katakīyya order) were active in the eastern Chaghadaid Khanate, and some of them are credited with the conversion of Tughluq Temür Khan. The latter allegedly embraced Islam after the feeble sheikh defeated the local Hercules in a wrestling match. Bukhara was a centre mainly of the Kubrāwī order, called after Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 1220). Apart from al-Bākharzī and his family (mentioned above), another major branch was that of Bābā Kamāl Jandī (d. 1273). He was Mas'ūd Beg's sheikh, preached also in the Jaxartes region and beyond, and is even credited with the conversion of Kashmir. Sheikhs of the Yasawīyya order, ascribed to Aḥmad Yasawī (d. ca.1166, but probably later) were also active mainly among the Turks and in the Jaxartes region, but the order was consolidated mainly under the Timurids, where it prevailed

78 Biran, "Central Asia," 65; Or Amir, "Islamic Learning on the Silk Roads: The Career of Jalal al-Dīn al-Akhawī," in *Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia: Generals, Merchants, Intellectuals*, ed. Michal Biran, Jonathan Brack, and Francesca Fiaschetti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 290–314.

79 Biran, "The Mamluks," 378; Muhsin J. Musawī, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015).

especially among the Kazakhs. Itinerant Bukharan Sufis were also active in India, Kashmir, China, and the Volga region. Sufis and scholars were closely connected: Many Sufis were themselves respected Muslim scholars, (such as jurists, Hadith transmitters) rather than eccentric dervishes, or married into Muslim scholars' families. Even though some of them won popularity through 'miracles', mostly related to healing, the once automatic equivalence between Sufis and shamans has proved to be too simplistic.<sup>80</sup>

Both scholars and Sufis frequented the Mongol courts, manned Mongol administration, and played a major role in the khanates' Islamisation. While the extant conversion stories suggest that Mongol Islamisation began with a royal conversion and then spread downward, the current scholarly consensus, referring also to the better documented cases of Iran and the Golden Horde, is that the process was a bottom-up one, namely that Mongol khans accepted Islam in the wake of their rank and file. The existence of abortive Muslim khans, namely Muslim converts who did not manage to make Islam a state religion, in all three khanates reinforces this assumption.<sup>81</sup> Political reasons therefore played a major role in the khans' conversions. In the case of Tughluq Temür, for example, adopting Islam not only gave him an additional form of legitimation that allowed him to overcome the rumours about his dubious genealogy and check the power of his military commanders. It also facilitated his ephemeral attempt to unify the Khanate's eastern and western halves, as the western half had already been Muslim when he rose to power.<sup>82</sup>

As for the rank and files' conversion, it was accelerated by scholars and Sufis as well as acculturation. The scholarly elite appropriated the Mongol conquerors as 'God's party' (Arab. *ḥizb allāh*) and treated Chinggis Khan in messianic

80 Reuven Amitai, "Sufis and Shamans: Some Remarks on the Islamization of the Mongols in the Ilkhanate." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42 (1999): 27–46; Biran, "Central Asia," 65; Biran, "Mongol Central Asia," 383–384; Devin DeWeese, "Islamization in the Mongol Empire," in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia. The Chinggisid Age*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo, Allen J. Frank, and Peter B. Golden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 120–134; Devin DeWeese, "Khawja Ahmad Yasawi as an Islamizing Saint: Rethinking the Role of Sufis in the Islamization of the Turks of Central Asia," in *Islamization: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. Andrew C. S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 340–348.

81 Charles Melville, "Pādshāh-i Islām: The Conversion of Sultan Mahmūd Ghāzān Khan," *Pembroke Papers* 1 (1990): 159–177; Michal Biran, "The Chaghadaids and Islam: The Conversion of Tarmashirin Khan (1331–1334)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122 (2002): 742–752; DeWeese, "Islamization," 120–133.

82 Biran, "Mongol Central Asia"; for Tughluq Temür's conversion story see Mīrzā Ḥaydar Dughlat, *Ta'rikh-i Rashīdī*, ed. and trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization, 1996), vol. 2, 8–11.

terms long before Mongol Islamisation,<sup>83</sup> thereby enabling the newly converted Mongols to remain proud in their Chinggisid identity. The high mobility of both scholars and Sufis enabled them to meet the Mongol nomads, who were often located in the pasturelands outside the cities. Later sources and hagiographies probably exaggerate the role of the Sufis, projecting the Sufis' later status back to the realities of the 13th and 14th centuries. Yet the Sufis' charismatic personalities, religious zeal and social prestige were instrumental in the conversion process. Moreover, at the local level, Sufis played a major role in social conversion, establishing communal connections for the new converts. The Sufis offered social bonds (framed in family terms or as master and disciples) in the context of the disruption of nomadic tribal structures due to the Mongol imperial building and new military organisation. They mediated the adoption of new political, economic and ritual frameworks; asserted correspondence between Mongol and Muslim genealogical and historical traditions; developed narratives of Islamisation and, in general, embodied Islam for the nomads by providing them with a new communal identity.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, the highly Islamised landscape of Mongol Central Asia, which was dotted with colleges, Sufi lodges, winter and summer mosques, shrines, and mausoleums, was often venerated by both Mongols and Muslims. This must have been instrumental in attracting the Mongols to Islam, especially since some of the shrines also served as Sufi bases.<sup>85</sup>

While in the Ilkhanate lucrative painting played a major role in encouraging Mongol conversion, in poorer Central Asia it was stories of the prophets (Arab. *qiṣaṣ al-anbīyā'*), a kind of Muslim equivalent of Christian saints' stories and Buddhist *jātakas*, that were used to attract the Mongols further into Islam. The main surviving work, the first Chaghadaid Turkic version of these stories, was completed in 1311 by Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Rabghūzī, a certain Transoxanian judge (Arab. *qāḍī*). Commissioned by a young Mongol Muslim prince or commander from Ghazna (Afghanistan), the text includes not only the stories of the Israelite prophets and kings, Jesus, and St. George—all of whom are prophets in Islam—but also Alexander the Great, a highly popular figure among the Mongols, as well as the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, the Rightly Guided Caliphs and 'Alī's sons, thereby encapsulating everything the new converts

83 Jamāl Qarshī, *al-Mulḥaqāt bi-l-ṣurāḥ*, in *Istorija Kazakhstana v persidskikh istochnikakh* [sic], vol. 1, ed. A. K. Muminov (Almaty: Daik press, 2005), CLXIII, CLIX.

84 DeWeese, "Islamization," 120–134; DeWeese "Khwaja Ahmad Yasawi," 347–348.

85 Qarshī, *al-Mulḥaqāt bi-l-ṣurāḥ*, CLXXVIII–CCX; Biran, "Mongol Central Asia," 384–385.



FIGURE 1.3 The Mausoleum of Tughluq Temür Khan near Yining (medieval Almaliq), China  
PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAL BIRAN (2012)

needed to know about Islamic salvation history. It also gives pride of place to local heroes whose shrines must have been familiar to the audience.<sup>86</sup>

All these means of Islamisation came, like in the other Mongol khanates, against the background of ongoing contact between Mongols and Muslim Turks mostly in the Chaghadaid armies, part of whom—the remnants of the Karakhanid and Khwārazmian armies, the *mamlūks* of Transoxanian notables—joined the Mongol army as Muslims. In addition, the Mongol garrisons who were stationed in the region from the United Empire period lived for decades in close proximity to a vibrant Muslim population, with which they interacted and intermarried.

Despite all of this, however, it took longer to bring Islam to the Mongol law-code-oriented Chaghadaids than to the Ilkhanids or Golden Horde khans. Even when Tarmashirin Khan (r. 1331–1334) embraced Islam in Transoxania, improving his legitimation among the region's Muslim subjects and his

86 Nāṣir al-Dīn b. Burhān al-Dīn al-Rabghūzī, *The Stories of the Prophets: Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā': An Eastern Turkish Version*, ed. and trans. Hendrik E. Boeschoten and John O'Kane (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Biran, "Mongol Central Asia," 385–386.

commercial relations with the neighbouring Muslim states, his failure to combine Islam with the Mongol tradition contributed to his deposition by his eastern commanders. Two decades later, Tughluq Temür managed to successfully coalesce Islamic and Chinggisid legitimations. The khans' conversion in turn accelerated that of their subjects, both in the army and among civilians.<sup>87</sup> Chaghadaid Islamisation was also manifested in Muslim domed mausoleums (for Bayan Quli (r. 1347–1357) a.k.a. 'Puppet Khan' in Bukhara and Tughluq Temür in Almaliq), which became a common motif in the material culture of Mongol Eurasia, and a precedent for the magnificent Timurid architecture.<sup>88</sup>

## 5 Stage Four: The Post-Mongol Period

During the post-Mongol period, characterized by decentralization and the rise of non-Chinggisid rulers, religion became more dominant as a source of legitimation and unity. The last period discussed in this chapter (mid-14th–16th centuries) saw the final Islamisation of Eastern Turkestan, including its eastern part of Uyghuria (Turfan), as well as a massive increase in the Islamisation of northwestern China. It also witnessed another golden age of Muslim Khurāsān and Transoxania under the Timurids (1370–1501), in whose realm also arose the more institutionalised Sufi orders, notably the Naqshbandiyya, that played a major role in the further Islamisation of Eastern Turkestan and China, as well as in encouraging a Jihadi attitude towards non-Muslims. Simultaneously, Tibetan Buddhism made inroads among the Mongols, so by the end of the 16th century Central Asia was divided between Turkic-speaking Muslims and Mongol-speaking Buddhists.

### 5.1 *Moghulistan and the Islamisation of the Uyghurs*

The mid-14th century crisis that put an end to the Ilkhanate and Yuan China did not eliminate the Chaghadaid Khanate. Yet already in 1347 it dissolved into eastern and western halves and saw the rise of the emirs (military commanders) at the expense of the khans. In 1370 Tamerlane (Timür-i lang (r. 1370–1405), a.k.a. Temür the Lame), an emir of the Turco-Mongol Barlas tribe, took over Transoxania. Soon afterwards he conquered Iran and embarked on a series of large-scale invasions that reached Delhi, Moscow, Damascus, Ankara and

87 Biran, "The Chaghadaids and Islam"; Deweese, "Islamization," 128–133.

88 Sheila Blair, "Muslim-style Mausolea across Mongol Eurasia: Religious Syncretism, Architectural Mobility and Cultural Transformation," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62.3 (2019): 318–355.

Moghulistan. He appointed Chinggisid puppet khans, married Chinggisid princesses, celebrated his position as a Chinggisid son-in-law (Mong. *güregen*), and appropriated the legacy of both the Chaghadaids and the Ilkhans. Nonetheless, as a non-Chinggisid Tamerlane had to rely on other forms of legitimation. He therefore boosted his Muslim credentials, building mosques and shrines and sponsoring Muslim scholars and Sufis (while mercilessly butchering myriads of Muslims during his campaigns). In addition, Tamerlane used his incredible military successes to foster a personal legitimation, which eventually nearly equalled that of Chinggis Khan and was adopted by his heirs and later Central Asian rulers. The Timurids' reign saw another period of cultural splendour for Muslim Central Asia. The spoils—both human and material—of Tamerlane's campaigns across Eurasia were brought to adorn his capital Samarqand, that was also decorated by monumental building. His successors excelled more as cultural patrons—mainly in the fields of architecture, art, and literature—than as military commanders. The cultural norms and products created under their rule had a lasting impact on the early modern Muslim empires from the Ottomans to the Moghuls.<sup>89</sup>

In the eastern part of the Chaghadaid Khanate, the khans held power under Tughluq Temür, who after embracing Islam even managed to reunite the Khanate for the last time. However, his son already had to retreat from Transoxania before Tamerlane in ca. 1365. Soon after his return, a Dughlat commander, Qamar al-Dīn (d. ca. 1388), deposed the khan and held power for more than two decades. The Dughlat tribe, whose appanage was in the Tarim Basin, had been instrumental in enthroning Tughluq Temür, and retained its position as kingmakers or even alternative rulers throughout most of Moghul rule. Qamar al-Dīn withstood Tamerlane's attacks, yet his rebellion prevented the Moghuls from making any gains from the collapse of Yuan China. Only in 1389 did a rival Dughlat commander enthrone Khiḍr Khan (r. 1389–1399), Tughluq Temür's younger son, who became the ancestor of all the subsequent Moghul khans. The new khan had to submit to Tamerlane, to whom he paid tribute and gave his daughter in marriage, thereby bolstering Tamerlane's position as a Chinggisid son-in-law. Later Moghul khans attempted in vain to reconquer Transoxania (or secure the support of the Chinese Ming Dynasty [1368–1644, 明] for such acts) and were unable to defeat the Timurids. Timurid-Moghul

89 See, for example, Beatrice F. Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; Beatrice F. Manz, "Tamerlane and the Timurids." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, last modified April 26, 2018, accessed August 3, 2022, <https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-10?rskey=hPkWHl&result=11>; Starr, *Lost Enlightenment*, 478–514.

relations then alternated between raids (first by the Timurids, later by the Moghuls), and peaceful periods backed by marriage alliances, the most famous of which produced Bābūr (1483–1530), the Timurid prince who, escaping from the conquering Uzbeks, fled to India where in 1526 he established the Mughal Dynasty (1526–1858).<sup>90</sup>

Already Khidr Khan conducted raids eastwards into Turfan, allegedly bringing it into the domains of Islam, although the Moghuls continued to struggle for full control of the oasis well into the 15th century. In 1513 the pious Moghul Khan Manṣūr (1485–1543), who made Turfan his stronghold, took over Hami, expelling its Buddhist population, and raiding north-western China, while in 1532 his brother and co-ruler, Saʿīd Khan (1486–1533), ruling from Kašgar, marched on a failed religious war against Tibet, the main idol temple of which was defined as ‘the direction of prayer (Arab. *qibla*) of Tibet and Cathay [China]’.<sup>91</sup> While during this period the division of the Moghul realm between two khans resulted in stability, the endemic succession struggles among the Moghul royal clan were usually less beneficial and strengthened the position of the Dughlat kingmakers. Another strategic threat was the coveting of the Moghuls’ northern pasturelands by other, often newly founded, nomadic confederations—such as the Oirats, Kirghizs, and Kazakhs. These new forces gradually pushed the Moghuls southwards and eastwards, into the oases of the Tarim Basin, limiting their ability to sustain a considerable nomadic army and eventually forcing these ‘true Mongols’ to settle down, their new centres being Yarkand and Turfan. As the khans’ power dwindled, Sufis originating in western Turkestan began to play a bigger role in Moghulistan, replacing the Dughlat as kingmakers and eventually deposing the Moghuls and taking their place as rulers in 1678.<sup>92</sup>

From the early 15th century, the Moghuls conducted intensive commercial relations with the Ming Dynasty. The Ming’s *Shilu* 實錄 [Veritable Records] enumerates 766 embassies from continental Central Asia, and while obviously not all of them arrived from the Mughals, most of them passed through their realm, thereby contributing to Moghulistan’s economy and its contacts with the other, more established Muslim realms.<sup>93</sup> Thus, like the Karakhanids

90 For Moghul-Timurid relations, see, for example, James Millward, “Eastern Central Asia (Xinjiang): 1300–1800,” in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia. The Chinggisid Age*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo, Allen J. Frank, and Peter B. Golden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 261–265; Ali Anooshahr, *Turkestan and the Rise of Eurasian Empires: A Study of Politics and Invented Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 128–132.

91 Ḥaydar Dughlat, *Taʾriḫ-i Rashīdī*, vol. 2, 76, 253; Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 175.

92 Biran, “Mongol Central Asia,” 365–368.

93 Millward “Eastern Central Asia,” 267.

before them, the Moghuls positioned themselves as middlemen between more western Muslim polities and Buddhist East Asia, but here too there is no record of intellectual inter-religious exchange.

The Islamisation of the Moghuls was not complete even half a century after Tughluq Temür's conversion. His grandson Muḥammad Khan (r. 1408–1416), in whose time “most of the Moghul nation converted to Islam,” had to apply pressure on the Moghuls (for example, “if a Moghul did not wear a turban he would have a horseshoe nail driven into the man's head”).<sup>94</sup> A certain reaction to this expanding Islamisation can be seen in the Uyghur *Insadisūtra* unearthed in Turfan and dated to the late 14th century. It includes a denunciation of Islam, describing Muḥammad as evil, and expresses (the somewhat anachronistic) messianic hopes that upon the return of Maitreya he would win over both Baghdad and Byzantium.<sup>95</sup>

Yet at least until the 1420s, Buddhists were the majority in Turfan, and Muslim and Chinese travellers attest that Buddhist temples and Islamic mosques existed side by side in eastern Turkestan.<sup>96</sup> Later on, the Moghuls, by then under the influence of Naqshbandī Sufis, took pride in their forced conversion of the idolaters of Turfan and Hami.<sup>97</sup> Like in the case of Khotan about half a millennium earlier, with the Uyghurs' conversion, Buddhist sacred places and lore were appropriated by the Muslims who gave them new meanings (e.g., the Toyok Buddhist cave temples became the seat of Sufis, who described them as the caves of the seven sleepers) mentioned in the Qur'an [8: 19–26]).<sup>98</sup> Moreover, Uyghur Islamisation and emigration led to the gradual erosion and loss of Uyghur ethnic identity: Mīrzā Ḥaydar, the 16th-century Moghul historian, attests that in his time (1541) “what is called the province of the Uyghur is not now known at all; no place can be shown with this name,”<sup>99</sup>

94 Ḥaydar Dughlat, *Ta'rikh-i Rashīdī*, vol. 2, 31 (the Persian in vol. 1, 36 reads: *akthar-i Ulūs-i Mughūl dar 'ahd-i mubarak-yi wai dar Islām dar āmadand [...] agar Mughūl bisar dastār nibastī, mikh-i asb bar sar-i-wai furū bardī*).

95 Semih Tezcan, *Das uigurische Insadi-Sūtra* (Berlin: DDR Akademie-Verlag, 1974), 71, 75, 78 for the dating; Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, “Christians, Buddhists and Manichaeans in Medieval Central Asia,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 1 (1981): 47; David A. Scott, “Buddhism and Islam: Past to Present Encounters and Interfaith Lessons,” *Numen* 42.2 (1995): 143.

96 Morris Rossabi, *From Yuan to Modern China and Mongolia*, 45; Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 204.

97 Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 189–203.

98 *Ibid.*, 315, ns. 84, 85; Elverskog, “Buddhist and Muslim Interaction,” 23, n. 67; Scott, “Buddhism and Islam,” 146.

99 Ḥaydar Dughlat, *Ta'rikh-i Rashīdī*, vol. 2, 225 (vol. 1, 299), saying also the same on the name Tangut. The modern ethnonym Uyghur resurfaced only in the early 20th century, though its bearers ascribe themselves to the historical Uyghurs.

This was also the fate of other, mostly eastern, steppe peoples—Khitans, Tanguts, Kipchaks—after the end of Mongol rule. That the new Central Asian peoples that emerged at the wake of the Mongol Empire—such as the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Tatars who had coalesced around the dead or alive figure of a certain Chinggisid prince and still exist today—were all Muslims, also attest to the spread of Islam in Mongol and post-Mongol Central Asia.<sup>100</sup>

### 5.2 *Institutionalised Sufism: The Naqshbandiyya*

The further Islamisation of Eastern Central Asia and north-western China, that accelerated these ethnic changes, owed much to the rise of the more established Sufi orders, notably the Naqshbandiyya (that eventually subsumed the Kubrāwiyya, Katakīyya and Yasawiyya) in the Timurid realm. By the late Mongol period, Sufism had become an important force in religious, social, and political life. However, it was only in the course of the 15th century that most Sufi orders or paths (Arab. *ṭarīqas*) emerged as organisations with clearly recognised hierarchies, set practices, and a demand for exclusive loyalty. The most dominant of the new Central Asian orders which was also the most closely associated with the later Timurid sultans, was the Naqshbandiyya. The founder of the order, Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband (d. 1389), was active in the Bukhara region during Temür's reign. The order came to be known for its adherence to the Muslim law (Arab. *sharī'a*), its rejection of the use of dance and music, and its encouragement of taking an active part in the social and political spheres, as opposed to more ascetic orders. It also supported a jihadi policy against non-Muslims.

The Naqshbandīs began to send missionaries outside Bukhara already in the early 15th century but expanded considerably under Khwāja Aḥrār (1404–1490), who rose to eminence partly by supporting the Timurid Sultan Abū Sa'īd (r. 1451–1469) in his takeover of Samarqand in 1451. Khwāja Aḥrār then settled in Samarqand where he accumulated incredible wealth and considerable political power. Under his leadership, the Naqshbandiyya became more tightly organised, and as Khwāja Aḥrār sent disciples to distant regions, it began to spread well beyond the Timurid realm.<sup>101</sup> Already in the first decades of the 15th century Naqshbandī sheikhs found favour among the Moghul khans, and in the early 16th century they were highly involved in the Khanate's political affairs, eventually replacing the Dughlat as kingmakers, in-laws, and potential rivals. They were responsible for the Jihadi fervour that prompted the Moghul attacks against Tibet and north-western China, where Khwāja Aḥrār's disciples were also preaching. In both northern China and Moghulistan, the

100 Biran, "The Mongol Empire," 554.

101 Manz, "Tamerlane and the Timurids," 12–13.

Naqshbandīs played a major role not only in proselytising activities but also in invigorating Islam among the existing Muslim communities.<sup>102</sup>

In the late 16th and throughout the 17th century, the Naqshbandī Khwājās were the most influential men in Moghulistan. Originating in the lineage of one of Khwājā Ahrār's successors, the Samarqand master Aḥmad Kāsānī (1461–1542), known as the “greatest master” (Pers. *makhdūm-i a‘zam*), they soon split into two lineages, the Iṣḥāqiyya and the Afāqiyya, competed for the khan's favour and gradually took a greater part in the government. Yet, only with the aid of Buddhist leaders was the Afāqiyya able to depose the Moghul khan in 1678 (see below).<sup>103</sup>

### 5.3 *The Revival of Tibetan Buddhism*

While the Naqshbandīs were consolidating Islam in Eastern Central Asia, Tibetan Buddhism was advancing among the Mongol-speaking population further east and north. Around the middle of the 15th century, Esen Khan (d. 1455), the leader of the non-Chinggisid Oirats of western Mongolia, adopted Tibetan Buddhism, trying, just like Tamerlane, “to ameliorate his genealogical deficiencies by cloaking himself in the sanctifying garb of religion.”<sup>104</sup> Portraying himself as the heir of Khubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294), he was replicating the system of dual rule created by Khubilai's teacher, Phakpa (1235–1280, Tib. 'Gro mgon Chos rgyal 'Phags pa), according to which a political leader governed side by side with a religious one, a lama who legitimised the khan's rule. Esen's attempt to win legitimacy as khan failed miserably—he was deposed by his troops in 1454 merely two years after proclaiming himself—but it portrayed the Yuan rule as a wholly Buddhist one (which it never was) and encouraged the use of Tibetan Buddhism as an alternative or additional legitimation among aspiring Mongols and other North Asian rulers. The iconic meeting between Altan Khan (r. 1571–1582), a Chinggisid of the lesser Tümed branch, and the Lama Sonam Gyatso, who in 1578 received from the khan the title of (the third) Dalai Lama, signifies the second conversion of the Mongols to Buddhism, this time as a mass religion. Later on, other Mongol groups, notably both the Oirat's descendants, the non-Chinggisid Zunghars (1636–1757) and the Manchu Qing

102 Joseph Fletcher, “The Naqshbandiyya in Northwest China,” in *Studies on Chinese and Islamic Inner Asia*, ed. Beatrice F. Manz (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), vol. XI, 1–46; Millward, “Eastern Central Asia,” 268.

103 Fletcher, “The Naqshbandiyya in Northwest China”; on the Khwājās, see Alexander Pappas, “Khojas of Kashgar,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, last modified November 20, 2017, accessed August 2, 2022, <https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-12>.

104 Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 206.

(1636–1912)—who in 1644 succeeded the Ming and eventually conquered Zungharia, Mongolia and Xinjiang—embraced Buddhism, too. The result of the Mongols' second conversion was a division of the steppe between Islam and Tibetan Buddhism, which prevented a further nomadic unification under the standard of Tengri.<sup>105</sup>

The common Chinggisid origin still enabled friendly interaction between the Buddhist Tümeds and the Moghul khans, but when political power shifted to theocratic rulers, the Khwājās in Moghulistan and the Dalai Lamas in Tibet, this common denominator was eroded, and rivalry increased.<sup>106</sup> Even after that, however, Muslims and Buddhists sometimes cooperated for political reasons. A notable example is the case of the Afāqiyya leader approaching the Dalai Lama for help against the Ishāqiyya and the Moghuls in 1678. The Dalai Lama sent to his aid his protégé the Zunghar Khan, who deposed the last Moghul khan, appointing the Khwājās to replace him as rulers of the Tarim Basin, but under Zunghar aegis. The Muslim version of the incident includes a miracle competition between the Khwājā and the Dalai Lama, and the Khwājā's victory allegedly resulted in the Dalai Lama's embracing Islam.<sup>107</sup>

This wishful thinking, however, was a reaction to the change of the political balance between Buddhism and Islam in Eastern Central Asia: from the mid-17th century onward, the pendulum shifted to the Buddhists' side, as the Buddhist Zunghars and Manchus ruled over the Muslim population of Xinjiang (and Gansu). Yet religiously these regions, which maintained contacts with Muslim communities in Western Central Asia and beyond, retained their Muslim identity even after centuries of Buddhist rule.<sup>108</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Islamic expansion into Central Asia was a slow and incremental process. While beginning with violent conquest and marred by several cases of forced

105 Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 206–226; Thomas T. Allsen, "Eurasia after the Mongols," in *The Cambridge World History. Vol. 6: The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800 CE, Part 1, Foundations*, ed. Merry Wiesner-Hanks and Sanjay Subrahmainam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 159–181.

106 Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 214–215.

107 Ibid., 224–225; Thierry Zarcone, "Between Legend and History: About the 'Conversion' to Islam of Two Prominent Lamaists in the Seventeenth–Eighteenth Centuries," in *Islam and Tibet—Interactions along the Musk Routes*, ed. Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 281–292.

108 For this period see Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam*, 222–260.

conversions and religious wars, it advanced mainly through voluntary association. This was true both among the sedentary population living under Muslim rule, that embraced Islam mainly for social and economic reasons, and especially among the nomadic peoples roaming outside the abode of Islam, where political considerations were more potent. For the nomads, Islam gave new forms of communal identity, legitimation and means of state formation, as well as connections to the Muslim nation with its accompanying political, economic, and cultural benefits. Simultaneously, Buddhism provided similar functions for the more eastern and northern nomadic people notably those who took over parts of the sedentary realms.

The experience of converting nomads came in handy during the Mongol period. Although it began with a major setback for the Muslims, the Mongol moment ended with a huge expansion of Islam. This was mainly due to Islam's ability to make the best out of the possibilities offered by the open world of the Mongol Empire. Notably three out of the four Mongol khanates, including the Chaghadaid Khanate in Central Asia, embraced Islam, while Mongol China adopted Tibetan Buddhism. The connection between these religions and the Chinggisids was used in the post-Mongol period for legitimating non-Chinggisid polities or adding an additional layer of legitimacy to rulers with weak Chinggisid credentials. Eventually this conversion process divided the steppe roughly across the Altai mountains between Turkic-speaking Muslims and Mongol-speaking Tibetan Buddhists, thereby undermining their common nomadic tradition and preventing a further unification under the standard of Tengri.

Transoxania, the Islamisation of which was quicker than that of most regions in the Middle East, became both a centre for Islamic culture, thriving especially in the tenth and 15th centuries, and a launch pad for the dissemination of Islam eastward. Sufis began to play a major part as conversion agents during the Mongol period, first as individuals, and—especially from the 15th century onwards—as part of organised orders that disseminated religion and invigorated Muslim society in Eastern Turkestan and north-western China, albeit at the expense of the region's former tolerance towards other religions.

While Muslim-Buddhist encounters continued on a small scale throughout the period under review, they impacted Islam especially during the early Abbasid period, mainly by paving the way to the incorporation of the achievements of the Indian sciences into the nascent Muslim imperial culture. While absorbing Buddhist converts, for example in Karakhanid Khotan or Moghul Turfan, Islam appropriated Buddhist sacred spaces, lore, and artistic elements—usually without acknowledging their origin or while conferring upon them a new meaning in a Muslim context. Only during the Mongol

period were there extensive direct intellectual contacts between Muslim and Buddhists, initiated mainly by Mongol policies and following the interests of Mongol khans. These were documented mostly in Ilkhanid Iran due to some uniquely broadminded intellectuals like Rashid al-Dīn. While their long-term impact on the Muslim world is hard to assess, the impact of Buddhist art on Islamic painting of the late medieval-early modern period is visible, and the competition with the Buddhists at the Ilkhanid court affected the synthesis of the Mongol-Muslim variant of sacred kingship, which eventually impacted the early modern Muslim empires.

Evidence of Islamic impact on the Buddhist world is even more elusive: Islamic expansion into Central Asia encouraged the appearances of apocalyptic prophecies like the *Kālacakrantra* or the prophecy of Khotan. Khotanese migration after the Karakhanid conquest enriched Tibetan Buddhism and contributed to its later prominence in eastern Central Asia, and a few echoes of polemics against Islam can be traced in Buddhist literature also during the Mongol and post-Mongol period. However, the medieval expansion of Islam that eventually supplanted Buddhist presence from most of Central Asia, did not result in a full-fledged intellectual engagement with the Muslim challenge.