

The Book Review of “Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours”

Kitap İncelemesi “Göçebe İnsanlar ile Yerleşik Düzene geçen Komşuları arasında Rekabet eden Anlatılar”

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Introduction

The book “Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours” serves as an illuminating odyssey through the intricate historiography of the Eurasian Steppe. Edited by Chen Hao, this volume originates from papers presented at the 7th International Conference on the Medieval History of the Eurasian Steppe, hosted by Shanghai University in 2018. Comprising 359 pages, this compendium is the 53rd instalment in the “Studia uralo-altaica” series, published in 2019 in Szeged. Its panoply of contributions from 27 scholars in the field provides a kaleidoscopic survey of the complex relationship between nomadic and sedentary societies, thus marking it as a seminal addition to medieval studies.

Content and Organization

The book starts with a preface by István Zimonyi. The book, consisting of 359 pages, including the preface, contains the full texts of the papers presented by twenty-seven scholars at the conference. It was published in 2019 in Szeged as the 53rd publication in the “Studia uralo-altaica” series.

First, it is necessary to discuss in detail the prominent articles in the book;

The book begins with the article “A Prosopographical Approach to Medieval Eurasian Nomads (II),” by Agustí Alemany who presents a continuation of his exploration into the benefits and challenges of a prosopographical approach to understanding the lives of Medieval Eurasian nomads, particularly during the Pre-Mongol Period. It is built upon his previous work presented at the Sixth International Conference on the Medieval History of the Eurasian Steppe in 2016. Alemany extends his focus to the period from A.D. 527 to 641 in this article. This second paper delves into post-Attilanic Huns, Avars, Turks, Khazars, and their interactions with sedentary empires and other related groups.

The paper follows a structured format, with tables detailing the names of individuals, references to PLRE III entries, sources, and chronology. These tables provide a foundation for a comprehensive prosopographical study of these nomadic and sedentary peoples.

Alemany mentions that this work is preliminary, and it aims both highlight the advantages and challenges of the prosopographical approach. This work might offer a practical reference tool for researchers. It serves as a primary step toward more extensive source analysis and the development of a specialized methodology.

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This work provides valuable insights into the lives and interactions of Eurasian nomads during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, and contributing a better understanding of this historically period.

The following article is from Tatiana A. Anikeeva which titled as "Geography in the Epic Folklore of the Oghuz Turks." This article offers a notable exploration of the role of geography in the epic nomadic folklore of the Oghuz Turks. The article focuses on "The Book of Dede Korkut". As it is a crucial source for understanding the socio-cultural life of early Medieval Oghuz Turks, and revealing how geography serves to distinguish the nomads from their sedentary adversaries as well as reflects the enduring influence of pre-Islamic Turkic world. The study emphasizes the special position of these narratives which were existed between oral and literary traditions, and blend of folk narrative with historical writing.

In summary, Anikeeva's work provides a deep analysis of how geography, culture, and mythology intersect in the epic folklore of the Oghuz Turks, focusing the persistence of pre-Islamic Turkic spatial orientation and its significance in these narratives.

The following article is "Changes of Ethnonyms in the Sino-Mongol Bilingual Glossaries from the Yuan to the Qing Era" by Ákos Bertalan Apatóczy. Apatóczy examines shifts in ethnonyms over time, shedding light on the dynamic nature of nomadic identities in the context of Chinese historical sources. His comparative approach aims to add deepening the understanding of how these identities evolved, connecting linguistic shifts with broader historical changes.

Another prominent article is "Competing Narratives: A comparative study of Chinese sources with the Old Turkic Inscriptions" by Chen Hao. Chen Hao's article delves into the historiography of the Eurasian Steppe. The article highlights the importance of considering multiple perspectives in understanding history.

Hao begins his article with discussion of the bias inherent in historical records from a single perspective. Particularly, it was in the portrayal of nomadic groups by Chinese historians. These groups were often depicted through a Confucian lens as lacking in culture. However, Hao challenges these judgments by exploring the viewpoint of nomadic people, such as Türks, who left historical sources in their own language and script. One of the article's significant findings is the contrasting perspective presented by the Old Turkic inscriptions. Chinese dynasties were referred to as "China," "Sui," or "Tang" meanwhile Türks used "Tabgach" for the Chinese dynasties that derived from Tuoba, a subgroup of Xianbei. This linguistic distinction reveals Türks' refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the Chinese regime as portraying China in an unfavourable light.

Also, The Old Turkic inscriptions describe China as well as the Chinese people in a negative light. They criticize Chinese practices, such as involving a criminal's family in legal cases. This offers a unique and unfiltered historical view that showcasing the importance of considering various perspectives.

Chen Hao's article points out the complexity of the relationship between nomadic and sedentary people in the Eurasian Steppe. It highlights the value of examining history through multiple viewpoints, particularly how nomadic groups like Türks perceived their sedentary neighbours. This approach provides fresh insights into historical narratives and emphasizes the need to consider diverse perspectives in historical analysis.

An interesting the article in the book titled as "A Possible Source of 'Tengrism'." It is penned by Edina Dallos. She offers a unique perspective in this article. The author delves into the intriguing possibilities of the origins of Tengrism. In her article, Edina Dallos explores the

concept of Tengrism which is a term introduced by Uno Harva. Then the term was made widespread by French researcher Jean-Paul Roux in the mid-20th century.

Tengrism is described in her article as a monotheistic religion practiced by Turkic and Mongolian peoples during periods of advanced social organization. Central to this belief system is the veneration of Tǎñri, the "sky-god." Dallos embarks on a detailed investigation of Turkic runic writings from the 8th century, such as the Orkhon inscriptions, focusing on their religious content.

The article begins with addressing the challenges surrounding the study of Tengrism, a belief or religion for which there are limited internal sources. Dallos raises essential questions in her article, including the belief's or religion's origin as well as its connection to the beliefs of local peoples, its association with ruling elites, rituals, and doctrinal and symbolic aspects. In her article, she mentions that these queries cannot be answered solely through the examination of the Orkhon inscriptions, and necessitating a broader exploration.

Dallos also points out the differences in portrayal of Tǎñri concept in various internal sources such as the Orkhon inscriptions, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, and the Uyghur script *Oguz Name*. These distinctions raise methodological questions about whether variations in time and space should be considered within the framework of Tengrism. Furthermore, an external source from Syrian chronicler Michael Syrus, an Eastern Christian who provides a concise yet significant summary of Tengrism is introduced by author. Syrus' description of the Turks' belief in "one god in the sky" as the visible firmament reflects the fundamental connection between Tengrism and the sky or the transcendent. This insight supports the notion that the sky and the concept of the "sky-god" were core elements of Tengrism, deeply rooted in the experiences of nomadic Turkic peoples.

In conclusion, Edina Dallos' article sheds light on Tengrism and the challenges of studying it. The importance of considering both internal and external sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of this ancient belief system is accentuated in this work by author. This reveals how the nomadic Turkic peoples' close relationship with the ever-present boundless sky that shaped their religious experiences and beliefs. Her exploration of shamanistic elements in ancient cultures adds depth to understanding of the nomadic worldview. However, while Dallos' work is compelling. It leaves some questions unanswered that points to the complex and elusive nature of religious developments in nomadic societies.

In the article "Personal Hygiene and Bath Culture in the World of the Eurasian Nomads" by Szabolcs Felföldi, the author delves into the fascinating topic of personal hygiene and bath culture among nomadic peoples in the Eurasian region. Felföldi astutely observes that written sources on these nomadic groups often paint a picture of their appearance, dress, and personal hygiene. However, it is important to acknowledge the inherent biases and stereotypes in these accounts since they were typically written by sedentary people who had little or no direct experience with the nomadic cultures they were describing.

Felföldi accentuates a striking contrast in these accounts, where some sources describe nomadic groups, such as the Turks and Avars, as unkempt and unclean, while others, like the Magyars, are portrayed as handsome and clean. This variation raises intriguing questions about why such different attitudes exist and why some authors perceived these nomads as tidy while others depicted them as unhygienic.

The author wisely suggests that the cleanliness of these nomadic groups is a complex and relative concept. Cleanliness standards in the past may not align with contemporary

views, making it challenging to determine whether these descriptions reflect the actual hygiene practices of these groups or were influenced by the biases of the authors.

Felföldi also examines how environmental factors, such as the proximity of nomads to sedentary civilizations, might have influenced their access to bath facilities and affected their personal hygiene practices. He references the use of baths by nomadic groups like the Avars, indicating that when nomadic peoples moved closer to sedentary societies, they might have adopted certain aspects of their culture, including cleanliness practices.

Szabolcs Felföldi's exploration of personal hygiene among nomadic peoples, for instance, calls into question the objectivity and reliability of historical sources, as well as the role of environmental factors in shaping nomadic lifestyles. It raises epistemological questions about our understanding of cultural practices through "othering" lenses, often contingent upon Orientalist or Eurocentric perspectives.

Overall, Felföldi's article provides a mind-stimulating analysis of the challenges and complexities in understanding the personal hygiene of Eurasian nomadic peoples, emphasizing the need to consider multiple factors like cultural backgrounds, geographical contexts, and religious beliefs in interpreting historical accounts.

Another interesting work on the book is "The Islamization of the Legend of the Turks: The Case of Oghuznāma," by Éva Kincses-Nagy. The author discusses the "Oghuznāma" which represents the epic tradition of the Oghuz Turkic people. Various versions of this legend and the different elements they contain which includes the birth of Oghuz, his characteristics, his struggles, and the role of his wives and other supporters are explored in the work by author.

Éva Kincses-Nagy's study of the "Oghuznāma" is particularly noteworthy for its focus on the fluidity of cultural narratives in response to shifting religi-political contexts. Her work resonates with post-colonial and subaltern studies which also investigate the ways in which dominant cultural and religious forms can subsume indigenous traditions.

Oghuz is described as having supernatural powers and attributes, such as speaking as a child, physical strength, and being covered in hair in the pre-Islamic versions of the legend. These attributes reflect totemic elements and ancient Turkic beliefs in Tengrism. The paper also highlights the motif of a grey he-wolf that helps Oghuz in the legend that indicates a connection to totemism within the ancient Turkic genealogical myth. The story is modified to align with Islamic beliefs in the Islamic versions. These versions emphasize Oghuz's Islamic character, his struggles for faith, and his role in establishing an Islamic empire. The roles of his wives and the elements related to them are also transformed to fit the Islamic narrative. The paper demonstrates how the Oghuznāma evolved over time as well as the study reflects changes in social conditions and the influence of religion. It is an interesting analysis of the legend's transformation from its pre-Islamic origins to its Islamic adaptations.

Another prominent paper is titled as "An Unknown Jewish Community of the Golden Horde" written by Dan Shapira. The article presents an important discovery of a previously unknown Jewish community in Golden Horde through a detailed analysis of the MS Evr.I.Bibl.143, an ancient Judeo-Turkic translation of the Pentateuch.

Shapira's research is a show us the importance of exploring ancient manuscripts. As this text which dates back to the late 15th century, provides insights into a community that was mostly undocumented. The paper begins with the author's initial surprise at the uniqueness of this text, as it predates other known Judeo-Turkic materials by centuries. Shapira sheds light on the linguistic and cultural aspects of this text, highlighting the existence of Jewish varieties of Qıpçaq Turkic, including dialects spoken by both Karaites and Rabbanite Jews. The

analysis reveals a complex linguistic and cultural web in the historical Turkic-Slavic contact zone.

The intriguing connections between this ancient manuscript with Slavic are investigated in the work. The author thought that it was created in a linguistic contact zone. It also provides evidence that the translation was crafted within a Rabbanite community, and differentiating it from the Karaite Jewish tradition.

Dan Shapira's paper on the Jewish community of the Golden Horde engages in a form of textual archaeology, drawing attention to the intersection of religious, linguistic, and cultural identities. This paper effectively broadens the scope of Jewish diaspora studies which situates it within the matrix of Central Asian history.

In conclusion, Shapira's work is significant in its contribution to the understanding of the Jewish communities in the Golden Horde. Her work is a well-documented and thoroughly researched that provides valuable historical and linguistic insights, particularly in tracing the roots of Judeo-Turkic languages, and their connection to both Rabbanite and Karaite traditions. This paper opens up new perspectives for further research and paints a more comprehensive picture of the diversity of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe during this time period.

Jonathan Karam Skaff's paper, "The Tomb of Pugu Yitu (635–678) in Mongolia: Tang-Turkic Diplomacy and Ritual," offers a quite detailed and interesting research on an less studied aspect of Tang Dynasty's foreign relations with Inner Asia. The focus points of paper are the diplomatic communications and cultural exchanges between China and Mongolia. The article sheds light on the relatively peaceful interactions with the Tiele Confederation, and particularly the Pugu tribe led by Pugu Yitu. The discovery of Pugu Yitu's tomb and a Chinese-language epitaph within it provides a rare glimpse into this historical period.

Skaff's paper is significant in its revelation of a 7th century textual source in Mongolia, a historical region often neglected in Western scholarship. The epitaph provides historical context for the Tang Dynasty's influence in Mongolia, and challenges the notion of a one-sided relationship, highlighting cultural compromises and mutual benefits in 7th century. This study highlights the importance of epitaphs alongside tomb artefacts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the deceased's identity and beliefs.

The conclusion of the paper emphasizes the role of rituals of diplomacy in Tang imperial expansion and cultural exchanges, tells us that how ceremonial meetings and rituals solidified elite connections vital to the empire. Pugu Yitu's participation in these rituals, including Tang Emperor Gaozong's Feng and Shang Rites, reflects the depth of these political ties. Furthermore, Skaff's interdisciplinary approach, combining historical, archaeological, and art historical perspectives, offers a holistic view of Tang and Tiele relations.

Jonathan Karam Skaff's paper and its focus on Tang-Turkic diplomacy is indicative of a burgeoning interest in what may be termed "diplomatic archaeology," wherein material culture serves as an avenue for understanding geopolitics. This approach aligns well with your focus on grand strategy and political hegemony.

This research enriches our knowledge of a lesser-known period in the history of Inner Asia and Tang foreign relations, illustrating the importance of considering both textual and material evidence in such studies.

István Zimonyi's article, "The Eastern Magyars of the Muslim Sources in the 10th Century," provides a detailed and intriguing exploration of historical accounts regarding the geographical location of the early Magyars or Hungarians.

The paper looks into the narratives that provided by various Muslim geographers. These are especially al-Jayhānī, Ibn Rusta, Gardīzī, and al-Bakrī, and their descriptions of the Magyar territory in the 10th century. Zimonyi highlights the complexity of these accounts and the challenges in understanding the precise location and history of the Magyars during this period. The focal point of the paper is the discussion of whether these accounts refer to two separate Magyar territories or a continuous single one as well as how to interpret the chronology and relationships between these areas. The author critically examines a multitude of historical interpretations and source materials. Resources such as maps from the Balkhī tradition, to solve this complex historical question are encompassed in the work. By offering different perspectives on the geographical descriptions of the Magyars in Muslim sources, readers are invited by author to review these accounts, and consider the context in which they were written.

István Zimonyi's work introduces a geographical and cartographic dimension to study of this field, essentially serving as a form of historiographical cartography for early Hungarian people.

In summary, Zimonyi's article provides a thought-provoking analysis of the early Magyar history based on Muslim sources, adding depth and nuance to our understanding of the complex historical and geographical factors that influenced these accounts. His research offers valuable insights for scholars of Central Asian and Eastern European history, as well as those interested in the interactions between different cultures and regions during this period.

In addition to the articles discussed in more detail above, let us briefly mention the other articles in the book;

Bruno Genito significantly advances our understanding of nomadic archaeology in "An Archaeology of the Nomadic Groups of the Eurasian Steppes between Europe and Asia." His work bridges traditional viewpoints with new research perspectives, creating a comprehensive overview of archaeological findings. While this article is a valuable resource, some readers might find the technical details challenging to digest without prior knowledge in archaeology.

A central theme throughout the book is the analysis of ethnonyms and linguistic shifts in the Sino-Mongol bilingual glossaries, from the Yuan to the Qing Era. Ákos Bertalan Apatóczky, in "Changes of Ethnonyms in the Sino-Mongol Bilingual Glossaries," presents an intriguing examination of how ethnic identities evolve and transform over time, a reflection of the intricate cultural exchanges between the nomads and their sedentary neighbours.

Zsolt Hunyadi's "Military-religious Orders and the Mongols around the Mid-13th Century" is an in-depth analysis of the complex relationship between the Mongols and military-religious orders in the 13th century. This article demonstrates how political and religious forces intertwined in the Eurasian Steppe.

The book is rich in diversity and does not confine itself to a specific era or group of nomads. Nikolay N. Kradin's "Some Aspects of Xiongnu History in Archaeological Perspective" provides insights into the Xiongnu, offering a refreshing view of a lesser-known nomadic group. Kradin's work invites further exploration of the Xiongnu in the context of the Eurasian Steppe's history.

Social stratification among nomadic societies is explored in Valéria Kulcsár and Eszter Istvánovits' article "New Results in the Research on the Hun Age in the Great Hungarian Plain." Their examination on the structure of Hun society challenges stereotypical and simplistic views of so-called barbarian groups, and uncovers a more complex reality.

Ma Xiaolin’s article which is titled as “The Mongols’ *tuq* ‘standard’ in Eurasia, 13th–14th Centuries” presents a captivating investigation into the Mongols’ military standards, and showcasing how visual symbols carried cultural and political significance.

“Images of Eurasian Nomads in European Cultural Imaginary in the Middle Ages” by Mirko Sardelić reveals how the idea of the nomad persisted far beyond their historical existence, showing their influence in European cultural imaginings of the Middle Ages.

The volume concludes with studies exploring geographical perceptions, such as Richárd Szántó’s “Central Asia in the Cosmography of Anonymous of Ravenna” and Katalin Tolnai and András Harmath’s “Khitan Landscapes from a New Perspective,” which provide insight into how medieval Europeans and nomadic groups perceived and conceptualized the geography of the Eurasian Steppe.

Finally, the book extends its reach beyond the Turkic and Mongol peoples, as Kürşat Yıldırım’s “Some Opinions on the Role of the Mohe 靺鞨 People” scrutinizes the cultural and ethnic connections between various nomadic groups.

Thematic Coherence and Contributions to the Field

The overall organizational schema of the book manifests an admirable coherence, effectively illuminating the interconnections among the various articles. Recurrent themes surface, including the dynamic symbiosis between nomadic and sedentary societies, the semiotics of ethnonyms, the intricacies of religious praxis, and the utilization of military strategies in delineating the narratives specific to the Eurasian Steppe.

The book's collective contributions constitute a substantial advancement in the field of medieval history, particularly by elucidating the complex interplay among nomadic and sedentary cultures, historiographical narratives, and constructed identities. For scholars and students, the volume serves as an invaluable compendium, presenting an expansive spectrum of topics and methodological approaches that invite further exploration into this dynamic and multifaceted historical landscape.

This publication is optimally tailored for scholars, students, and researchers with a focus on medieval history, the Eurasian Steppe, and the nomadic-sedentary cultural interface. To augment its user-friendliness, the inclusion of a more comprehensive introduction or synopsis for each article could further guide the reader through the intricate tapestry of Eurasian Steppe history.

Conclusion

“Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours” stands as an indispensable scholarly resource for those engaged in the study of Eurasian history. The volume's eclectic array of articles penetrates the multifarious aspects of the Eurasian Steppe, thereby shedding light on the complex relational dynamics between nomadic and sedentary communities. The compilation thus accentuates the exigency for an interdisciplinary paradigm and an epistemologically pluralistic approach in the scholarly investigation of the history and culture of Eurasian nomadic societies.

In summation, Chen Hao’s edited compendium is a laudable assemblage of essays that proffers novel scholarly perspectives on the Eurasian Steppe's history. By conducting a multifaceted examination of the interactions between nomadic and sedentary cultures, the

volume merits recognition as a seminal resource for seasoned academics and emerging scholars alike.

References

Hao, Chen. (ed). (2019). *Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours*, Szeged. University of Szeged