

LA VAISSIÈRE Étienne (de) (éd.),
Islamisation de l'Asie centrale.
Processus locaux d'acculturation
du VII^e au XI^e siècle.

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The study of Central Asia's Islamization has made great strides forward since the days when most scholarly conversations revolved around "religious syncretism" or the officially sanctioned reports on alleged individual or collective conversion acts. Particularly since the publication of Devin DeWeese's influential *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* (Penn State University Press, 1994), more and more studies have been moving away from simplistic top-down models – whereby the masses readily embraced a new religion following the ruler's own (often heroic, divinely inspired) *conversion* – and away from questioning a conversion's "authenticity" toward understanding what conversion and adaptation actually meant for different Central Asian communities. This kind of analysis considers the role of conversion – or the narrative cycles that became associated with the conversion – in the formation and reorganization of Said communities. One of the singular achievements of this approach has been the legitimation of the historical exploration of Islamization in a much larger variety of sources than had been accepted previously.

Nevertheless, for the early stages of Muslim presence in Central Asia "Islamization" remains particularly nebulous. Literary sources for the period are limited in scope and need to be complemented by rigorous studies of material culture whose interpretation can be challenging, the pioneering work by Bartold and others notwithstanding. In addition – and this is one of the major strengths of the volume under consideration here – "Islamization" does not concern only human identities, beliefs, rituals, and daily practices, but also the transformation of language, the environment, and the urban and rural landscapes.

Islamisation de l'Asie centrale seeks to fill some of the gaps in our construction of the early processes of Islamization in Central Asia. The written product of a conference on the subject that was held in Paris in November, 2007, this volume presents seventeen contributions by experienced scholars from different backgrounds and disciplines. Readers are invited to discover the processes of Islamization from a variety of approaches, ranging from the study of material

culture by archeologists, art historians and numismatists to the study of textual records by historians and philologists. The period covered in the book begins, more or less, in the middle of the seventh century, corresponding to the early incursions into the region of the Arab armies, and ends, for the most part, in the middle of the eleventh century, roughly marked by the composition of al-Kāshgharī's renowned *Diwān lughāt al-turk* (*Compendium of Turkic Dialects*).

The division of the book's four parts is a little unusual. The first three are arranged geographically, according to regions within Central Asia, including Soghdiana, Bactriana, and "the North" (which consists here of Chach, Ustrushana and Khorezm). The fourth and final part of the book is simply labeled "the Turks", and seems to engage the entire region, presumably pointing to a profound change in patterns of Islamization across Central Asia, a change that inspired a more overarching categorization. Within each part or section, the articles are arranged more or less chronologically. Although such a division may have some merit, perhaps a more thematic grouping would have made better sense and allowed for a more immediate comparative analysis. A more thematic division would have been especially useful since many of the contributors interpret evidence of the Islamization processes in a relatively localized and restricted manner, while avoiding – responsibly, I think – any far-reaching conclusions that would be applicable beyond their confined sphere.

A thematic division of "Islamization" could be accomplished along linguistic lines, including, for example, Pavel Lurje's piece on Arabic words in Soghdian texts or Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst's work on the state of Khorezmian under early Muslim rule. Interestingly, both local languages showed noticeable resistance to change.

A related field, also in light of the limited influence of Arabic on Soghdian and Khorezmian, are the inter-cultural influences (or lack thereof?) in other spheres, such as Živa Vessel's essay on astrological iconography, Genadi Bogomolov on burial rites in the Tashkent oasis, or Deborah Klimburg-Salter on Buddhist wall paintings and the assumption that certain Buddhist communities actually flourished during the first three centuries of Islam. Institutional and architectural issues, as discussed, for example, by Frantz Grenet (on Nasr ibn Sayyār's palace in Samarqand), or Étienne de la Vaissière (on the institution of the *ribāt*), deserve a distinct segment. Military and political encounters with Buddhists, Hephtalites and other groups such as C. E. Bosworth describes in his contribution about the Muslim military raids into Khurasan and Afghanistan, or addressed through a very different prism by Nicholas

Sims-Williams (on early Muslim coinage) display a different type of Islamization. Conversely, case studies of a geo-political nature – like Sören Stark on the “Highlands” of Ustrushana, or Alexandr Gricina on the significance of the river-crossing settlement of Khushket – or on regional economic activities (Juri Burjakov on mining and Djamal Mirzaaxmedov on earthenware production) point to situational circumstances in select locations or trades in an age of Islamization, but do not concern Islamization directly.

The final section, about “the Turks”, features four essays that rely on the reading and interpretation of textual records, mostly geographical and travel literature, as well as local histories and biographical dictionaries. The first two essays address the Turks’ conversion to Islam and attempt to find out who was responsible for the conversion (or rather, who was not). They reinforce the conclusion, reached several decades ago (1971, to be exact) by Wilfred Madelung, that Sufis did not act as the Islamizers of the Turks in the pre-Mongol era. Reuven Amitai supports this conclusion in his re-reading of Ibn Fadlan’s *riḥla*; Jürgen Paul analyzes passages by al-Sam’ānī, the Arabic *Qandīya* and the *faḍā’il-i Balkh*, and also dispels the notion that Saqīq al-Balkhi, an eighth-century *zāhid* (ascetic) was a kind of a Sufi convertor. In the third essay, Andreas Kaplony attempts a classification of the Turkic conversion as noted in Arabic and Persian geographical literature. The fourth essay, by Hua Tao, suggests that Qarakhanid self-identification as the descendants of Afrasiyab – the legendary hero of Turan in Firdowsi’s *Shah-nama* – was actually rooted in their response to or imitation of similar Seljuq practices around the same time (the 1040s and 50s) in Baghdad. The evidence is circumstantial at best, but the hypothesis is nonetheless interesting.

These scholarly presentations are, by and large, valuable and original and merit further scholarly attention. At the same time, many of the authors do not place their contributions in the framework of ‘Islamization’ or attempt to identify what is even meant by the concept. For instance, what are the potential ramifications for the Islamization process of having a mosque built on the ruins of an old palace (that was also commissioned by a Muslim and had served as an Islamic institution)? For that reason, the volume would have benefited from a concluding

article that weaves together the many useful, albeit somewhat disjointed threads into a coherent attempt to create a paradigm for the study of Islamization in Central Asia in the early period and also recommend avenues for further exploration. In the absence of a more detailed Introduction that sets the tone and also attempts to contextualize “Islamization” in Central Asia, a conclusion would have been both helpful and practical. Of course, these suggestions to not diminish the quality of contributions by the volume’s many participants.

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