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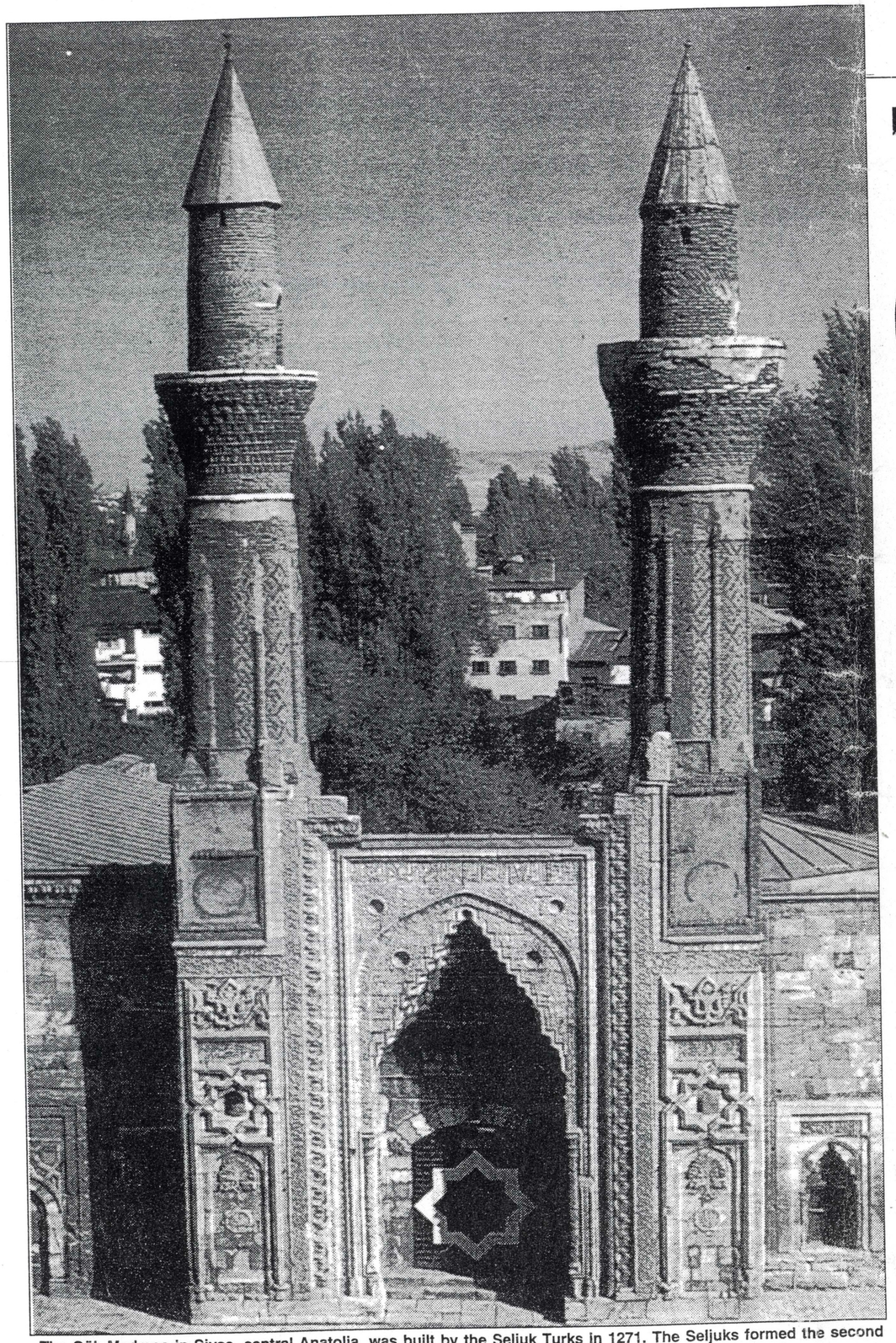
The fountainhead of Occidental Civilizations and the Turks



The Gök Medrese in Sivas, central Anatolia, was built by the Seljuk Turks in 1271. The Seljuks formed the second major Muslim Turkish state, after the Qarakhanite kingdom which was founded in 870.

By Teoman Durali
TDN Guest Writer

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So who were they, these relatively late-coming Turks, eventually arriving at the clear blue waters of the White Sea? In his work "An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples," Peter B. Golden asks: "integrating the linguistic and archaeological data, what can be said regarding the ancient habitat of Turkic peoples?" Researchers into ancient Turkish history, like Golden himself and Menge, located the primordial territory of the Turks (of the Mongoloid somatic type) in the Altai zone, with Indo-European peoples to their west, Samodian and Paleo-Siberian (Yeniseic) groupings to their northwest, Mongols to their east and south and Tungusic peoples to their north and east. The Altai, in all likelihood, was an important zone of contact. But if the identification of the Turks with the Mongolian population that entered the Altai region at various times is correct (as the archaeological materials of the historically attested population of the Türk Qaganage suggest), then we should probably place the early Turkic-speaking people at least in the Hsiung-nu era, or thereabouts, in the Trans-Baikal. Proto-Turkic unity came to an end during the 1st millennium B.C., and the ancestors of the Turkic peoples advanced to East Asia and thence to Western and Eastern Turkistan.

So, we can trace back the past of the Turks up to the first millennium B.C., the period of their primeval ancestors, the Huns — or, as the Chinese called them, Hiong-nu. Nevertheless, their history as a state-constituting entity did not begin until around the 3rd century B.C. when the mythical leader of the Huns Teoman (T'eu-man in Chinese) gathered the scattered tribes under the roof of a federation.

A state with the appellation "Türk" first appeared in the 6th century A.D., which is also the period in which we find the oldest existing Turkish-written texts (to be precise, in 581).

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The East and West Celestial Turkish States were succeeded by the Uighur Turks who adopted a myriad of beliefs: to begin with their own traditional one, the faith in a certain divinity, Tengri (in latter-day Ottoman Turkish, "Tanri"), Manicheism, Buddhism, Taoism and the Nestorian version of Christianity. In the course of time other Turkish states and communities were converted to Orthodox and Catholic Christianity as well as, to a minor extent, Judaism.

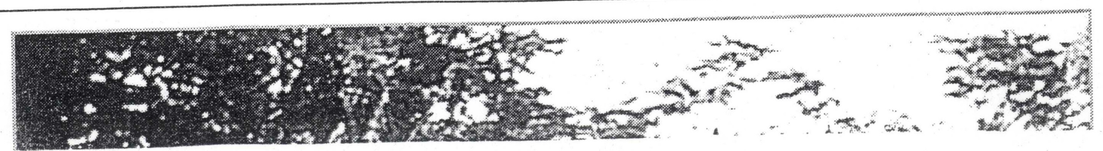
This utter heterogeneity ceased to be the case when almost all Turkish tribes and communities began to embrace Islam in the 9th century. The first officially Muslim Turkish state was the Qarakhanite kingdom (founded in 870). The second major Muslim Turkish state was that of the Seljuks in the 11th century.

The movement of the Seljuks into the heartland of Islam, the Islamization of a large block of Turks and thereby the adoption of a unitary writing system (with Arabic letters) comprehensible throughout an immense area extending from East Turkistan to the Balkans, the swift conquests, the Turkification of Transoxiania, the Southern Caucasus, Northern Mesopotamia, and last but not least Anatolia, and the legitimization of Seljuk rule by the Caliph enabled the Turks to settle across a wide area, from the ancestral lands of north-eastern and Central Asia to Anatolia and later, with the oncoming of the third power in — and indeed the pinnacle of — Turkish history, the Ottoman state, to the Balkans. Eventually, in the early 20th century, the Ottoman state was superseded by the Turkish Republic, the second state in history after the Celestial Turkish Republic to bear the name "Turkish"; all the others carried a dynastic name.

By joining the fold of Muslim societies, settling once and for all in western Asia and south-eastern Europe and on the eastern fringes of the Mediterranean basin, and establishing states within a brand-new context, Turkish history changed its track from the Oriental to the Occidental set of civilizations. Turkish culture, the product of tremendously rich past acquisitions, still displays many vestiges of archaic elements dating back to pre-Islamic times.

After all, as the eminent French scholar and specialist on ancient Turkish history Jean-Paul Roux claims, "the Turks represent two thousand years of history extending from the Pacific to the Mediterranean, from Peking to Vienna, Algiers and Troy; they merged their fortune with that of all the peoples of the world."

It would not be an overstatement to assert that a so-called unshattered "backbone" stands firmly behind Turkish history; or, to use a Hegelian term, a spirit exists deep inside it.

A keen and careful observer will certainly not fail to discern within this spirit age-old and worldwide-valid components, skills and wisdom, mainly to constitute and run a state as well as wield authority of law and order over the ruled people.

Besides this, particularly in architecture, calligraphy, music and poetry, Turkish history is a showcase of the finest works of artistry.