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Cross-border Turkic and Iranian language retention in the West and East Slavic lands and beyond: A tentative classification

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Scholars have long been aware of the migration of Iranian and Turkic groups into Eastern and Western Europe prior to the 11-12th centuries (see e.g. the Jas, Alans, Cumans, Croats, Serbs and Sorbs). All of these groups eventually assimilated to the local Slavic ethnic groups and adopted their languages. However, an examination of the Silk Roads trade between the Middle East (Iran) and China (and via China to Korea and Japan) prior to the 10th century A.D. suggests the need to ask new questions about Iranian and Turkic migrations into Eastern and Western Europe. It appears that Iranian-speaking traders were responsible not only for the spread of Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Islam, Nestorian Christianity and Judaism to China, but also for the spread of Judaism and Christianity to Europe (see a 9th-century Iranian text describing Jewish and Rus' traders on the Silk Roads).

The present paper has three goals:

I. To demonstrate the spread of religion and language from Iran to Europe.

II. To discuss the westward migration of 4 ethnic groups from the Middle East between the 8-14th centuries:

(a) the Volga Muslim Tatars and (b) Karaites (both resident since approximately the late 14th century primarily in the area of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania (the Karaites are also found in the Crimea);

(c) the Roma ("Gypsies"--of Indo-Iranian origin) and (d) Ashkenazic Jews (found throughout the Slavic lands, since approximately the 8th and 16th centuries, respectively).

While the native language of the Slavic Karaites is Turkic, the speakers themselves are very likely of Turkic and Iranian origin (the Judaic sect of Karaism was founded in Iran in the 8th century). Linguistic and ethnographic evidence shows convincingly that the Roma and the Ashkenazic Jews are originally of Iranian origin, with significant later Slavic and Turkic admixtures.

III. To propose a tentative classification of westward migration into 4 types:

(a) the speech community may retain its original language (e.g. Karaites);

(b) the group abandons its original language and merges with Slavs (Jas, Cumans, Alans, etc.);

(c) the group abandons its original language but seeks to "revive" it and to create a new dialect of Slavic ("Lithuanian" Tatars, Roma);

(d) the group abandons its original language but acquires a new unique language (Yiddish)--by means of a process known as "relexification", which allows the group to differentiate itself from the majority Slavic groups. In the case of Yiddish and its Jewish speakers, "pseudo-German" became the new linguistic identity in place of Eastern Slavic and Iranian, and the myth of migration from Roman Palestine to southern Italy and France, then to southwest Germany, and finally to the Slavic lands, was created. Neither the Roma nor the Ashkenazic Jews have any remembrance of their Indo-Iranian past. Yiddish was developed by Jewish Iranian merchants initially as a secret language of trade on the western half of the Silk Roads parallel to the Judeo-Iranian secret languages (called Lotera'i) created on the eastern half of the Silk Roads--used in Iran, Afghanistan and Tadjikistan.