

# TURKIC SOCIAL STRUCTURE

## Early Postclassical (Pre-Islamic) Period

### GÖK TÜRK

**Overview** The organization of the Gök Türk imperial government in many ways parallels the differences between the classes in Gök Türk society. However, some important distinctions within each social level are not reflected in the structure of their government.

**Nobility** Noble status in Gök Türk society was the result of being either a member of the dynastic clan, the Ashina, from which all *kaghans* and other high-ranking leaders who were generally related to the *kaghan*, or by being a *beg*, a member of hereditary, aristocratic families within an individual tribe. In both cases, the right of the dynastic tribe to lead a tribal group, or the right of the *begler* to rule their tribe was unquestioned and sanctioned by tradition. While all members of the nobility clearly possessed a privileged position in their society, the *kaghans* were accorded a semi-divine status with numerous rituals and taboos associated with his position.

**Common People** Below the aristocracy were the common people, called the *igil qara bodun* in the Orkhon inscriptions. This class could be further subdivided into two groups, those who owned horses and had the means to live as pastoralists and fight in the armies, and those who were too poor to do so. This latter group was either settled in small villages where they practiced agriculture, or entered the service of wealthy noblemen working as servants or bodyguards.

**Status across Class** Certain indicators of status in Gök Türk society cut across class lines and could be found among both the nobility and the common people. The first was the status of being an *er* (plural *erler*), a term that can mean both “man” and “warrior”. Any young man, noble or common, who was a full member of a family and tribe could become an *er* after reaching a designated age, passing some form of initiation that was generally some act of valor in the hunt or in battle, and then being given a new name called an *er adi*. While becoming an *er* provided a man with a certain degree of social status, the actual status of an *er* in both his tribe and larger society were dependent on two other factors – the young man’s original social class (i.e. an *er* from a noble family had a higher status than one from a common family), and wealth.

Wealth was the second factor that affected an *er*’s position in society. Wealth brought with it great social prestige, and the status of the wealthy man (*bay*) is often contrasted very unfavorably with that of the poor man (*chighay*) in the Orkhon inscriptions. Rather than evoke sympathy, poverty was regarded with utter contempt, since an *er* was considered to have the means – a horse, weapons, and daring – to go out and gain wealth.

**Slaves** The lowest class in Gök Türk society was occupied by slaves. Like most contemporary societies, slaves among the Gök Türk were generally war captives, but predominantly female since men were considered too dangerous to take as captives and frequently killed instead. These female captives had an important function in Gök Türk society because the work they performed (as well as that of free Gök Türk women) left many more men free to pursue military activities.

**Summary** The Gök Türks’ social hierarchy, from the *kaghan* and his nobles at the top to the slaves at the bottom, combined with the attitudes of both the nobility and the common people towards martial prowess and material wealth created a society that was based on and sustained by raiding and warfare. Courage demonstrated in war earned prestige, and victories provided both the wealth that brought additional status and power, and more captives. In addition, as the Orkhon inscriptions show, the Gök Türk believed that maintaining this hierarchical society would preserve their people’s virtues and prevent them from being corrupted by Chinese luxuries and influence.

## UIGHUR

**Overview** Many aspects of the ancient Uighur states' social structure were very similar that of the previous Gök Türk states. However, because Uighur society was more settled and urban than Gök Türk society, and had members who were followers of major world religions, some new social classes emerged and new social divisions developed, giving Uighur society distinctive characteristics.

**Nobility** As in the Gök Türk Empire, nobility in the Uighur Empire was a matter of being a member of the *kaghan's* clan, the Yaghlakar (followed by the Ädiz around 809), or one of the other tribes of the Tokuz Oghuz. Lack of records makes it more difficult to fully reconstruct the social classes in the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho, but it is logical to assume that the *idiqu*t as well as his top officials and ministers made up the nobility in Qocho. Whether the middle and lower rank officials were considered members of the nobility or ranked among the common people is unclear.

**Common People** In the period of the Uighur Empire, the Uighur appear to have remained predominantly pastoral, and it is likely that the divisions found among the free members of the tribes in the Gök Türk state were also present in the Uighur Empire. However, as the Uighur became an increasingly settled society documents make mention of craftsmen and merchants, as well as landlords whose lands were worked by poor farmers or tenant farmers.

In addition to larger settled classes, urban and rural, another difference in Uighur social structure began during the period of the Uighur Empire and became quite distinctive in the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho, namely the appearance of a religious class. While the tradition Turkic shamans were important figures in early Turkic societies, they did not form a distinctive social class in the same sense that the much more highly organized Manichaeans, Buddhists, and, to a much lesser extent, Nestorian Christians did. All three religions had a division between ordinary believers and a formal clergy – the Manichaean “elect”, Buddhist monks, and Christian monks and priests. These groups not only constituted a distinct social class, but were also conduits for a variety of outside influences.

**Non-Turkic Peoples** The Uighur states included two significant minorities, the Sogdians and the Chinese. Of the two the Sogdians were the more influential in many aspects of Uighur government and society. The Sogdians, an Iranian people, were the most important merchants in the region between China and the borders of Persia, with trade networks across Sinkiang, northern China and Mongolia. Sogdians were the intermediaries in the Uighurs' silk-horse trade with the T'ang and played an important role in the transition of the Uighur Empire from a tribal-based state to a more urban, settled one by providing administrative experience and cultural models. In order to protect and promote their trade, Sogdians acted as advisors and officials to the Uighur, roles that they had played in Gök Türk Empire. When Bögü *kaghan* converted to Manichaeism, widespread among the Sogdians, around 762 Sogdian influence became even more pervasive in the Uighur Empire. One of the most dramatic examples of Sogdian influence in this period is the abandonment of the Old Turkic runic script in favor of a modified version of the Sogdian alphabet for writing the Uighur language.

The second most important minority in Uighur territory was the Chinese. In addition to royal marriages between Uighur *kaghans* and Chinese princesses, there were also groups of Chinese who were permanent residents of the Uighur states. Nonetheless, Chinese influence among the Uighur was negligible in comparison to the Sogdians. Although the demand for Chinese luxury goods among the Uighur was high and the Uighur were sometime military allies of the T'ang, almost all political and cultural borrowing was from the Sogdians.

**Slaves** Slavery continued to exist among the Uighur, as evidenced by civil documents originating from the Kingdom of Qocho. However, how widespread slavery was and what duties slaves performed in Uighur society is not clear from these sources. However, because the Uighur states were more settled, it is plausible that slaves could have been used as agricultural laborers.

**Urban vs. Pastoral** Although it is possible to see some traces of the social division between pastoralists and urban ruling elites in the Gök Türk Empire, this division became increasingly sharp in the Uighur Empire and the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho. While the ordinary pastoralists remained closer to traditional beliefs, pastimes, diet and lifestyle, the urban elites who ruled the pastoralists and settled population adopted foreign religions and were more open to foreign cultural influences; spent time in activities centered on the home rather than riding and hunting; ate agricultural products and duck instead of the nomads' horsemeat and *kumys*; and lived in permanent structures rather than felt yurts. As these

two groups grew apart, there was the danger that the ruler's influence would grow weaker beyond the capital and allow tribal leaders to take political advantage of the nomads' discontent. This division between the urban ruling elite and the majority nomadic population may have first become significant among the Uighur, but it would reappear in many later Eurasian states established by nomadic pastoralist peoples.

**Summary** Gök Türk society, in general, reflected the Turkic culture from which it emerged with only limited borrowings from the more settled civilizations it encountered. Although the Uighur Empire was in many ways (language, organization, culture etc.) a "Third Gök Türk Empire", it more fully developed trends that had begun to emerge among the Gök Türk, such as urbanization and long-distance trade and made far-reaching borrowings from neighboring cultures, particularly in the field of religion. It also witnessed emergence of a deep division between the settled and nomadic populations in Uighur society.

### Readings

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### Discussion Questions

1. What were the differences between the social structure of the Gök Türk and the Uighur, and why did these differences develop?
2. What was the status and role of the Sogdians in both the Gök Türk Empire and the Uighur Empire?