

# TURKIC GOVERNMENT

## Early Postclassical (Pre-Islamic) Period

### Political Structure

**The Gök Türks** Although many details about the internal structure and titles of the Türk state remain unclear, contemporary Chinese sources and the Orkhon inscriptions from the Second Türk Empire do provide a general picture of how the state was ruled. Within its territory the Gök Türk state was a union (or confederation) of ethnically related tribes and tribal groups that were hierarchically grouped. The tribes and tribal groups were culturally linked by common beliefs, legal practices and commonly accepted genealogies. Politically, their tribal structure (*bodun*) and their unified political and military structure (*e*) was under the control of the *kaghan* (also *khan*).

At the center of the empire were twelve main Gök Türk tribes, the most important of which was the Ashina; the *kaghan* was always a member of this tribe. Next in order of precedence were the Tokuz Oghuz, who were numerically superior to the Gök Türk, but less united until the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. At that point the Uighurs, a tribal grouping of ten tribes led by the Yaghlakar tribe, were able to unite the Tokuz Oghuz under them. In addition to the Tokuz Oghuz, the Basmil and Karluk were two other important tribal groups in the Gök Türk Empire. Every tribal group was led by an *elteber*, and below him each tribe was headed by an *irkin*, officials whose titles frequently appear in the Orkhon inscriptions.

While the *kaghan* was the supreme power in the Gök Türk state, his closest relations were also part of the top tier of the empire. They held the titles of *yabghu* or *shad*; in the First Gök Türk Empire the *kaghan* ruled the eastern territories while a *yabghu* administered the western territories in the name of the *kaghan*. Below them were the *kaghan's* counsellors, designated by the titles *chor*, *tarkhan* and *tudun*, who were responsible for administrative, diplomatic, military and legal matters. To make the administration of this large state more effective, the tribes were divided territorially into two groups, east (the Tölsh) and west (the Tardush). Soldiers mustered from each of these groups constituted the right and left wings of the *kaghan's* army, and were commanded by the most influential tribal leaders from each section as well as *shads*.

This dual structure of administration can be regarded as a natural development based on the societal structure of the Türk tribes. Tribal groups were led by dynastic tribes, such as the Ashina among the Gök Türk and the Yaghlakar among the Uighur, whose traditional ruling status was unquestioned. Each individual tribe, in turn, was ruled by a hereditary aristocracy whose members had the title of *beg* (also written *bek* and *bey*; plural *begler*). The political structure of the empire remained stable as long as relations between the *begler* and the common people, and the dynastic tribes and the other tribes remained harmonious, and all remained loyal to the *kaghan*.

According to both Chinese and Byzantine sources, administratively the First Gök Türk Empire was divided into four districts. These were the Central, Eastern, Western and Western Frontier regions. The *kaghan* ruled from the Central region which contained all of the sacred sites associated with the origin of the Türks. As previously mentioned, after 603 the empire was effectively divided with the Central and Eastern regions forming the Eastern Gök Türk Empire and the remaining two regions making up the Western Gök Türk Empire. The relatively short-lived Second Gök Türk Empire emerged in the territory of the former Eastern Gök Türk Empire and does not seem to have been divided for administrative purposes.

**The Uighur** Much of the Uighur Empire's political structure was modelled on that of the Gök Türk state. However, there are few records from the time of the Uighur Empire itself which provide detailed information about the structure of their government. What is clear is that like the Gök Türk, the Uighur *kaghan* was the supreme ruler of all the tribes, and was initially from the dynastic clan of the Yaghlakar. Together with the other tribes of the Tokuz Oghuz, they formed the core of the empire. Since the Uighur state ruled over lands

that roughly corresponded with the former Eastern Gök Türk state, there was no east-west division of the empire for administrative purposes.

One distinctive official among the Uighur was the *tutuk*, leaders of the eleven major tribes in the Uighur empire – the nine tribes of the Tokuz Oghuz, the Basmil, and the Karluk. The *tutuk* of the Uighur was generally a close relative of the *kaghan*, and all were considered the political leaders of their respective tribes and responsible for tax collection.

The Uighur Kingdom of Qocho established after the collapse of the Uighur Empire in 840 is far better documented, with the result that its political structure is better understood. The Uighur ruler of Qocho abandoned the title *kaghan*, and used the title *idiqu*, a contraction of the words *idug qut*, “holy majesty/glory/wealth”. This title may have been adopted from the Basmil tribe that inhabited the region of Beshbalik prior to the Uighur’s arrival there. Below the *idiqu* were the ruler’s ministers and other high-ranking officials, some of whose titles are known – *sängün*, *ülchi*, *tutuq*, *tarqan* – for example. Next came a variety of other officials from the middle and lower ranks, among them the *bägi* and *älchi*. However, while many titles have been recorded, the exact duties and responsibilities of some of these officials is not always clear.

## Policy

**The Gök Türk** In both the First and Second Gök Türk Empires territorial expansion and defense of existing imperial territory were obvious policies of the *kaghan* and his officials. Peoples in the conquered territories became subject to the *kaghan*’s rule and were required to provide regular tribute. However, relations between the Gök Türk and the powerful states to the east and west were extremely important for the survival of their state.

Like the earlier Hsiung-nu, the Gök Türks wanted (and needed) access to Chinese silk and other luxury goods, but without being dominated by their more populous neighbor. The First Gök Türk Empire emerged during a period of Chinese history referred to as the Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝, 420-589 CE) when several successive dynasties ruled the regions bordering the Gök Türks. At the time that Bumin established his state in 553 the Western Wei dynasty (西魏, 535-557) and the Northern Ch’i (pinyin Qi, 北齊, 550-577) ruled the regions bordering the Gök Türk. Shortly into the reign of Bumin’s successor Muhan (r. 553-572) the Western Wei were replaced by the Northern Chou (pinyin Zhou, 北周, 557-581). For almost 30 years both Muhan and his successor Taghpar (r. 572-581) were able to keep the Chinese divided by playing off one dynasty against the other and the judicious use of raids for booty. In the process they were able to conduct highly advantageous trade for Chinese luxury goods and silk. These goods were essential for maintaining the system of alliances that held the Gök Türk Empire together, and could also be used for both commercial or diplomatic purposes in their dealings with the Byzantines and the Persians.

Nonetheless, the nature of the relationship between the Gök Türk and the Chinese began to change in 581 when the Sui dynasty (隋朝, 581-618) came to power. The Sui united the Northern and Southern Dynasties, creating a wealthy, powerful state at the point when the First Gök Türk Empire was beginning to suffer from internal divisions and strife. It was during the Sui period that the two halves of the empire became independent and came under Chinese authority in 603. However, it was under the Sui’s successors, the Tang dynasty (唐朝, 618-907) that the First Gök Türk Empire collapsed in 630 and that the Second Gök Türk Empire arose in 682. The rulers of the Second Gök Türk Empire pursued a policy of relations with China that was almost identical to that of the First Gök Türk Empire until its collapse in 744.

Although relations with China were a major concern for both the First and Second Gök Türk Empires, China was not the only powerful state that the First Gök Türk Empire was in contact with. To the west, between 557 and 561 the Gök Türk state cooperated with the Sasanians to destroy the Hephthalite Empire, with the result that the two empires became neighbors. Although the Sasanian king Khusrau I Anushirvan married one of the *kaghan*’s daughters, relations between the Persians and the Gök Türk were often problematic, most often in relation to trade, and the silk trade in particular.

To bypass Persian interference in their long-distance trade the Gök Türk opened relations with the Byzantine Empire. Although by the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century the Byzantines could produce their own silk, commercial links along the northern Silk Roads were established between the two empires, and the Byzantines were keen to establish a military alliance with the Gök Türk against the Persians. As a result, a number of embassies were sent between 558 and 568.

**The Uighur** By establishing their state on some of the same territories of the former Gök Türk Empire, the Uighur Empire and the later Uighur Kingdom of Qocho inherited many of the same opportunities, challenges and threats that the Gök Türk had confronted. In the period of the Uighur Empire (744-840) relations with three powers dominated the Uighur's political policy – T'ang China, Tibet, and the Sogdians.

Relations with China were designed to maintain access to Chinese luxury goods, generally through the exchange of horses for silk, and to prevent Chinese meddling in the Uighur's internal affairs. The Uighur were fortunate in that the T'ang began to suffer serious internal disturbances, the An Lu-Shan rebellion (755-763) being one of the most serious. The rebellion gave the Uighur the opportunity to make politically and commercially advantageous agreements with the Chinese in exchange for Uighur military assistance. The relations between the two only began to turn in China's favor around the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century when it was the Uighur's turn to suffer internal divisions and eventually be overthrown in 840.

Uighur policy towards Tibet was generally one of either containment or expansion at Tibet's cost. The Tibetans had begun to create their own empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and in the course of the 8<sup>th</sup> century it went through several periods of expansion and decline. Although the Tibetans had suffered a number of military setbacks around the time that the Uighur Empire was established, they were able to take advantage of developments following the Chinese defeat in the Battle of Talas (751) and the An Lu-Shan rebellion, putting them in conflict with the Uighur whose territory the Tibetans bordered on. The two sides fought one another several times through the late 8<sup>th</sup> century with the Uighur; eventually the border between the two states stabilized in the area of Qocho. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century both the Tibetans and Uighur began to suffer the effects of internal instability a both empires came to an end around the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Relations with the Sogdians were unique in a number of respects. While there were small Sogdian states around the cities of Samarkand, Bokhara, and in the Zeravshan River valley, there were also Sogdian communities living in both Uighur territory and in China. However, the significance of the Sogdians was not their political power, but their commercial and, to some degree, cultural power. When many of the most important trade routes between China and the west came under Uighur control, the literate Sogdians moved quickly become advisors and officials of the Uighur in order to protect and further their trade. While this was generally to both parties benefit, Sogdian influence was resented by some sections of Uighur society. This was particularly true after Bögü Kaghan's conversion to Manichaeism in 762.

For the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho policy towards China had the same commercial and political goals as that of the Uighur Empire, but with new dynasties, the Liao (遼朝, 907-1125) and the Sung (or Song 宋朝, 960-1279), until it came under the domination of the Western Liao at the start of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Kingdom of Qocho was faced with a new rival, the Turkic khanate of the Karakhanids. Despite their linguistic and ethnic links, the Muslim Karakhanids and the Buddhist Uighurs were bitter rivals, with the Uighur successfully resisting Karakhanid expansion into the territories around Qocho.

## Readings

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. How was the Gök Türk state organized and why was organized in the way that it was?
2. Why were relations with China both necessary and dangerous for the Gök Türk?
3. What are our sources for the history of the First Gök Türk Empire and the Second Gök Türk Empire?
4. In what ways was the Uighur Empire different from the Gök Türk Empire?