

TURKIC POLITICAL HISTORY

Early Postclassical (Pre-Islamic) Period

Contents

- Part I : Overview
- Part II : Government
- Part III : Military

OVERVIEW

The First Türk Empire (552-630) The earliest mention of the Türks is found in 6th century Chinese sources in reference to the establishment of the first Türk empire. In Chinese sources they are called *T'u-chüeh* (突厥, pinyin *Tūjué*, and probably pronounced *tuot-küot* in Middle Chinese), but refer to themselves in the 7th - 8th century Orkhon inscriptions written in Old Turkic as *Türük* (𐰽𐰺𐰍) or *Kök Türük* (𐰽𐰺𐰍:𐰆𐰏𐰤). In 552 the Türks emerged as a political power on the eastern steppe when, under the leadership of Bumin (T'u-men in the Chinese sources) from the Ashina clan of the Gök Türks, they revolted against and overthrew the Juan-juan Empire (pinyin *Róurán*) that had been the most significant power in that region for the previous century and a half. After defeating the Juan-juan and taking their territories, Bumin took the title of *kaghan*, supreme leader, while his brother Istemi (also Istämi or Ishtemi, r. 552-576) became the *yabghu*, a title indicating his subordinate status. Bumin was the senior leader, ruling the eastern territories of the empire, while Istemi ruled the western territories. Bumin died in 553, was briefly followed by his son followed by his son Kuo-lo (Qara?), and then by another of his sons, Muhan (or Muqan, r. 553-572).

In the following decades Istemi and Muhan extended their rule over the Kitan in Manchuria, the Kirghiz tribes in the Yenisei region, and destroyed the Hephthalite Empire in a joint effort with the Sasanians. Now in control of many of the trade routes with the west and unsuccessful in making trade agreements with the Sasanians, the Türks (with Sogdian encouragement) decided to revive the northern Silk Roads to Byzantium. Embassies from the Türks visited Constantinople in 558, 563 and 568, while a Byzantine embassy visited the Türks in 569. Although official relations between the two states were sometimes strained, commerce along the northern trade routes was revived, much to the benefit of both the Sogdians and Khorezmians.

After Muhan's death in 572 his younger brother Taghpar (T'o-po in Chinese, r. 572-581), a Buddhist, became *kaghan* of the Gök Türks. Taghpar sponsored the translation of Buddhist scriptures and the building of Buddhist temples, a program that continued in the reign of his brother and successor, Nivar (581-587). In the west, Istemi was followed by his son Tardu (r. 576-603), who was regarded as being as strong and as capable as his father. However, it was during the reigns of Nivar and Tardu that events would occur that would permanently divide the Gök Türk empire and eventually lead to its collapse.

Although Nivar had become *kaghan* after his brother's death, Muhan's son, Apa *kaghan* (Ta-lo-pien in the Chinese sources) attempted to take the throne. He even received support from Tardu in the west, but failed to overthrow his uncle Nivar who was supported by his father-in-law, the Sui emperor. With Chinese instigation, the Gök Türk descended into a long series of civil wars and revolts. By 603 the eastern and western halves of the former Gök Türk empire were both independent and, nominally, Chinese vassals. However, neither state was able to halt the process of disintegration and both had ceased to exist by 630. Gök Türk authority in the east was replaced by a number of Turkic and non-Turkic tribal alliances that had all accepted Chinese suzerainty. In the west the Gök Türks lands fell to the On Ok ("ten arrows"), a grouping of ten Turkic tribes divided into two groups living on the opposite shores of Lake Issyk-Kul.

The Second Türk Empire (683-744) However, the year 630 did not mark the end of the Türk Empire. Following the collapse of first Türk Empire, the tribes of the Eastern Gök Türk had been resettled in Shansi and the northern Ordos region and pressed into the service of the T'ang Empire. Between 679-

681 some of these tribes rebelled unsuccessfully against the Chinese, forcing some of them under the leadership of Kutlugh (also known as Elterish/Ilterish *kaghan*) of the Ashina tribe to withdraw into the Mongolian steppes. Kutlugh with his chief advisor and general Tonyuquq established themselves in the Yin Shan. Together they defeated T'ang forces in the Shansi region between 682-687, and afterwards, between 687-691 Kutlugh and Tonyuquq set out to reconquer the territories of the first eastern kaghanate. By 691 Kutlugh and his forces had subjugated the Tokuz Oghuz ("nine Oghuz") tribes, the Uighurs and the Qarluqs, and regained the lost lands of the eastern kaghanate.

Kutlugh died in 691 and was followed by his brother Kapghan (Mo-ch'o, r. 691-716), who conducted numerous wars against other Turkic tribes but also sought amicable relations with the T'ang. In the wake of Kapghan's death in 716, a short, bloody struggle for the throne erupted that resulted in Kutlugh's two sons, Bilge *kaghan* (Bilgä /Mo-chi-lien, r. 716-734) and Köl Tegin taking the reins of power. When Bilge *kaghan* was poisoned in 734 the Second Türk Empire fragmented due to internal conflicts that provided subject tribes with an opportunity to revolt. In 744 a new steppe dynasty led by the Uighurs, one of the Tokuz Oghuz tribes, killed the last Türk kaghan and established their own state.

The Uighur Empire (744-840) Although the Uighur Empire was established in 744, Chinese sources provide some information about the Uighur prior to this. The earliest mention of the Uighur, referred to as the *Hui-ho* (回紇) or *Hui-hu* (回鶻), is found in a source from the early 7th century. The Uighur were a tribal grouping of ten tribes headed by the Yaghlakar (𐰽𐰺𐰍𐰏, Chinese 藥羅葛 *Yao-luo-ge*) clan, and became the dominant tribe of the Tokuz Oghuz ("the nine Oghuz"), called the *T'ieh-le* (鐵勒) in the Chinese sources. Although the Uighur at that time were under the domination of the Gök Türk and lived along the Selenga River, they were entrusted with the governance of the northern regions of the Gök Türk Empire.

When the Eastern and Western Gök Türk states collapsed in 630 the Uighurs became more independent actors under a leader whose name has only come down to us in its Chinese form, P'u-sa. Curiously, P'u-sa's name in its Chinese form (菩薩) is written with the same characters for the word 'bodhisattva' (in Mahayana Buddhism a being that postpones Nirvana and vows to help others attain enlightenment), there is no corroborating evidence that P'u-sa was a Buddhist. After P'u-sa's death, leadership of the Uighur passed to three of his descendants until they were defeated by the Chinese sometime around 663. Although the names of four Uighur leaders between 680-741 (the period of the Second Gök Türk Empire) have been recorded in the Chinese sources, no information on their activities or those of the Tokuz Oghuz tribes is given.

As the Second Gök Türk Empire was declining, the Uighur, together with the Karluk and Basmil tribes, allied against the Gök Türk. This successful alliance was initially led by a Basmil *kaghan*, but he was eliminated shortly after the overthrow of the Gök Türk by the other two groups in the alliance. Then it was the turn of the Karluk to be subdued by the Uighur under the leadership of their *kaghan* Kutlugh Bilge Kül Kaghan (r. 744-747). He was followed by his son El-Etmish Bilge Kaghan (r. 747-759), who sought to develop good relations with T'ang China. When the T'ang dynasty was faced with the threat of the An Lu-Shan rebellion (755-763), they sought Uighur military aid in 756. The Uighur decided to help the Chinese, seeing the rebellion as an opportunity to better exploit China commercially. With the assistance of Uighur troops, in 757 the T'ang were able to retake the capital Ch'ang-an and the important city of Lo-yang, which the Uighur sacked for three days. The following year El-Etmish Bilge Kaghan was rewarded with T'ang princess for his services, and the Uighur continued to help the Chinese in the coming years to put down the rebellion, a policy followed by the next Uighur ruler Bögü Kaghan (r. 759-779). In 762 Bögü Kaghan led Uighur troops in taking Lo-yang for a second time, subjecting the city to a brutal sack. However, it was in the following months in Lo-yang that Bögü Kaghan converted to Manichaeism, widespread among the Sogdians at that time.

Bögü Kaghan's conversion to Manichaeism, and his efforts to convert his people to the new religion, had two important results. First, the Sogdians who were already an important group in the Uighur state due to their commercial activities, became even more influential and urged the *kaghan* to adopt a more aggressive policy towards China. This increased Sogdian influence combined with opposition to both the Sogdians' China policy and the new religion led to discontent among some important groups in the Uighur nobility. This discontent led to the assassination of Bögü Kaghan by his uncle Tun Bagha Tarkan along with numerous other relatives and Sogdians. Tun Bagha Tarkan reigned under the name Alp Kutlugh Bilge Kaghan (r. 779-789), and despite his attempts to suppress Manichaeism and reduce Sogdian influence in the Uighur Empire, both would revive after his death.

The next two *kaghans* to follow Alp Kutlugh Bilge Kaghan were both murdered, and it was not until 790 that some degree of political stability was restored. In this period Uighur documents begin to mention an official with the title *il ögäsi*, who appears to have been some type of high level advisor or minister as well as regent for the young *kaghan*. When the *kaghan* died in 795 without a male heir, the *il ögäsi* took the throne, putting an end to the Yaghlakar dynasty. His rule as Ai Tängridä ülüg bolmish alp kutlugh ulugh bilgä Kaghan (r. 795-808) did much to restore the fortunes of the Uighur. However, after his reign the power and prestige of the Uighur began to decline. In the final two decades of the Uighur state court intrigues, as well as divisions between the urbanized ruling elite and the rural pastoralists, weakened it. This, combined with the growing power of the Kirghiz in the north and a harsh winter in 839 that was followed by disease and famine set the stage for the empire's fall. In 840, Kirghiz forces led by a rebel Uighur general sacked the capital city of Ordu Balik, putting an end to the Uighur Empire.

Following the destruction of Ordu Balik and the collapse of their empire the Uighur tribes fled in different directions, some heading east into Manchuria, and others moving into Kansu and Sinkiang (Xinjiang). The tribes in Kansu established the Uighur Kingdom of Ganzhou sometime after 866, and was conquered by the Tangut in 1026 leaving few records of its existence. However, the Uighur who migrated to Sinkiang founded a state some time between 850-860 with its winter capital at Beshbalik, but was named after its summer capital at Qocho (also known as Kocho, Qara-khoja, or Kao-cheng / Gaochang 高昌 in Chinese) in the Turfan basin. At the time that the Uighur began to settle in Qocho, the region was inhabited by a people who spoke an Indo-European language, Tocharian, but in the coming years the more numerous Uighur and their language would come to dominate as the two populations merged. The Uighur Kingdom of Qocho was fully independent until the 1130s when they came under the domination of the Western Liao dynasty, and in 1209 the Uighur voluntarily submitted to the Mongols. By the late 13th century the state effectively ceased to exist when its lands were incorporated into the Chagatai Khanate.

GOVERNMENT

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 (*el*) 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 7th 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 Tölüş) 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 *idikut*, a contraction of the words *iduuq 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 *idikut* 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-6th 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 9th 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 7th century, and in the course of the 8th 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 8th century with the Uighur; eventually the border between the two states stabilized in the area of Qocho. In the 9th 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 9th century.

Relations with the Sogdians were unique in a number of respects. While their 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 12th 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.

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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?