

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Richard Dietrich, Ph.D.

SELJUQS SOCIAL HISTORY – Social Structure

The Great Seljuks

In the lands that came under the rule of the Great Seljuqs, society came to be divided along both ethnic lines and by social status, and evolved over time. At the top was the Turkic, military class consisting of the the ruling Seljuq clan and their Türkmen tribal supporters whose support was maintained through a combination of military power and consultation. Initially, authority over both conquered territories and over the Türkmen was regarded as the privilege of the ruling Seljuq clan, with the most senior member being the Sultan, and lesser members holding the title of *malik* (king). However, as the Seljuqs moved from being tribal leaders to imperial rulers, the Sultan became more and more of an absolute ruler. Similarly, the Türkmen remained an important part of the Seljuqs' military might, but their dominant position in the Seljuq armies was taken by a standing army made up of slaves and freemen.

Below the ruling military class came the members of the royal bureaucracy. Positions in the bureaucracy were generally filled by educated members of the local population able to read, speak and write Arabic and/or Persian. Although bureaucrats were almost never able to enter the ranks of the ruling classes, high-ranking officials enjoyed great wealth and influence.

Religious scholars, the *ulama'* (علماء), and religious judges, *qadis* (قاضي) were another influential sector of the overwhelmingly Muslim society that the Great Seljuqs ruled. While such religious officials did not generally hold as prominent a place in society as royal officials and bureaucrats, they were a respected part of society.

The mass of ordinary citizens were craftsmen, merchants and farmers whose taxes supported the rulers and their officials. Although they were predominantly Muslim, there were communities of Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians in various parts of the Great Seljuqs' territory.

The Seljuks of Rum

Although the society and social classes that developed in the Sultanate of Rum shared many similarities with those in the territories of the Great Seljuqs, there were a number of features that made it distinctive. The ruling, Turkic military class consisted of the Seljuq clan, emirs and various Türkmen beys. As in the Great Seljuq lands the Türkmen tribes remained an important component of the Rum Seljuqs' military might, despite their relative autonomy. However, there was a military class in Rum whose status appears to have been just below that of the emirs, the *ikdish* (اكديش, Turkish *ikdiş*). The *ikdish*, referred to in the Byzantine sources as *mixobarbaroi* (μῆσοβάρβαροι, "mixed/half-barbarians"), were the children of Turkish (or other Muslim) fathers and local (generally Greek) mothers. In the Byzantine sources, due to their knowledge of both Greek and Turkish, Seljuq *mixobarbaroi* often appear in the role of translators and negotiators between the Seljuqs and the Byzantines. In Muslim sources, the *ikdish* appear as a military class who often carried out local military operations, or were involved urban administration, both roles that could be more efficiently carried out by people able to communicate with the predominantly non-Muslim, non-Turkic population.

Below the ruling military class came the bureaucrats responsible for administrative and financial functions. As in the Great Seljuq territories, the bureaucracy of the Sultanate of Rum was staffed almost entirely by non-Turkish officials, but the source of these bureaucrats in Rum differed from those in the Great Seljuq lands. The languages of administration in both states were Persian and, to a lesser degree, Arabic. Since these were the languages spoken and written by the peoples living in the Great Seljuq state, finding qualified people to staff the bureaucracy was relatively easy. However, in the newly conquered lands of the Sultanate of Rum, the majority of the population spoke Greek or Armenian. As a result, many bureaucratic posts were filled by immigrants, many from Khorasan, whose native languages were Persian or Arabic. To correspond with the non-Muslim powers in the region, a number of Greek-speaking officials worked in the royal chancellery.

Below these groups came the merchants, and then the artisans/craftsmen, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Very little is known about their organization in the towns of cities of Seljuq Rum, but considering that Iranian Muslims who had emigrated to the lands of Rum filled many of the posts in the Seljuq administration, it is likely that artisans and craftsmen were organized in accordance with this group's ideas and traditions.

Brief mention should be made here about the non-Muslims in the Seljuq Sultanate of Rum. Although the Seljuqs of Rum were Muslim and worked to establish Islamic institutions in their lands, their relations with their non-Muslim subjects (who were likely still the majority) appear to have been quite good once the initial conquests were over and Seljuq rule established. The Seljuqs, having no interest in Christian sects, treated all Christian churches equally, although the Greek Orthodox Church may have initially had a more difficult time with their new rulers due to its close connection with the Byzantine state.

Relations with the non-Muslim population were close even in higher levels of Seljuq society. The mothers of the sultans Kay Khusraw I and Kay Khusraw II were both Greek, and the latter sultan's Greek uncles were said to have a great deal of influence with him. In addition, Greek aristocrats were frequently found in the sultans' entourage. Some held permanent positions, but others were Byzantine nobles who were out of favor and had taken refuge among the Seljuqs. Seljuq and other Turkish rulers in Anatolia also frequently sought refuge with the Byzantines when they were in difficulty.

The lowest free class was the peasantry. While sources of information on the state of the peasantry are limited, the picture that emerges from the surviving sources is one of grinding poverty in the regions through which the Byzantine, Seljuq and other Turkic armies passed. In these areas the destruction of crops and irrigation canals frequently left the peasants destitute. However, in more secure locations, such as in the vicinity of Konya, the high yields and variety of crops grown there stood in sharp contrast to the low yields and misery of the outlying territories.

At the bottom of society were the slaves. As with the peasantry, sources of information on the lives and conditions of slave in the Sultanate of Rum. Slaves fell into two broad categories, those who served as soldiers in the Sultan's army and domestic slaves. As in many contemporary Islamic armies, much of the armies' forces were made up of slaves (غلام *ghulam*, or مملوك *mamluk*) who were considered to be more loyal to the sovereign. In Rum, most of these slave-soldiers were captives of Greek origin. Domestic slaves, both male and female, served in a number of roles in the palaces and homes of their wealthy owners.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. In the lands of the Great Seljuqs, what was the relationship between the ruling Seljuq dynasty and the settled Arab and Iranian populations?
2. What factors made the society ruled by the Seljuq Sultans of Rum noticeably different from the societies ruled by the Great Seljuqs?