

OGHUZ CULTURAL HISTORY – Religion

Almost all that is known about the Oghuz Turks' religious beliefs and practices, like most aspects of their society and culture, is found in sources written by outsiders, primarily Syriac and Arabic. Taken together, these sources provide a complex picture of Oghuz religion.

The earliest first-hand account of the Oghuz Turks is in the *Risalat Ibn Fadlan*, by Ahmad ibn Fadlan, an Abbasi ambassador sent to the Volga Bulgars in 921. In the section about the Oghuz Turks that he encountered on the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea Ibn Fadlan provides some brief observations on their religious practices. He relates that the Oghuz would recite the Muslim *shahada* if they encountered a Muslim, even though they themselves did not believe it. He then goes on to describe how in difficult or unpleasant situations the Oghuz would look up to the sky and say in their language “*bir Tengri*”, which he translates as “God the one”, an indication of their Kök Tengri beliefs. In a later passage, Ibn Fadlan mentions that Little Yinal, the first Oghuz ruler that he met, had converted to Islam but later returned to his ancestral beliefs when his Oghuz tribesmen told him that they would not accept him as ruler if he were a Muslim. These passages demonstrate that the Oghuz Turks that Ibn Fadlan encountered in the first half of the 10th century had at least a passing acquaintance with some Muslim practices, and there may have even been a few conversions, but the majority of the Oghuz still maintained their ancestral religious practices and belief in the Turkic sky god Tengri.

While most Oghuz may have followed their ancestral religion until their later acceptance of Islam, some early Arabic sources indicate that not all of the Oghuz did so. One of them is a work by the 13th century geographer al-Qazwini (d. 1283) which has a section devoted to the Oghuz. He begins the section by describing the Oghuz as follows: “*A great people of the Turks who are Christians; they were in obedience to the Seljuq sultans to the time of Sanjar bin Malikshah (r. 1118-1153)*”. Later in the same section al-Qazwini relays a report that the Oghuz “have a house of worship”. Unfortunately, al-Qazwini provides no details about the Oghuz conversion to Christianity.

These accounts of Christian Oghuz are more credible when considered in the light of what is known about the expansion of the Church of the East (or Nestorian Church) into Central Asia, its missionary activity among the Turkic peoples in Transoxiana. According to 7th century Nestorian sources written in Syriac, a local ruler in Transoxiana and his people had converted to Christianity in 644, and the ruler and his people are clearly identified as Turks. Other details in the text indicate that they were likely Oghuz Turks, in particular.

There is more documentation for the extensive expansion and organization of the Church of the East in Central Asia during the Abbasi period, particularly during the time of the Nestorian Patriarch Timotheos I (780-823). In one of his letters Timotheos claimed that the *khagan* of the Turks had requested missionaries. When the missionaries were sent, the *khagan*, together with his people, converted, and Timotheos then appointed a metropolitan for “Beth Turkaye”, an ethnic designation.

Later Arabic sources claim that the Oghuz migrated to Transoxiana in the late 8th century, and then converted to Islam. While this passage indicates that at least some Oghuz accepted Islam at this time, not all Oghuz in this region did so since there are also accounts of pagan (*kuffar*) Oghuz in the Mangishlaq Peninsula on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea in the 12th century. This indicates that the question of the Oghuz's religion is a more complex issue than the historical sources indicate. Nonetheless, it is clear that beginning in 8th century as the Oghuz moved westward out of Transoxiana and into the historical region of Khorasan, the general trend was a steadily increasing conversion to Islam.

Readings

Agajanov, S. G. "The States of the Oghuz, the Kimek and the Kïpchak", in Asimov, M. S. and Bosworth, C. E. (eds.). *History of civilizations of Central Asia*. Vol. 4, Part One. Paris, 1998.

Golden, Peter. "The Migrations of the Oğuz", *Archivum Ottomanicum* 4 (1972), pp. 45-84.

Discussion Question

1. For what reasons would the Oghuz decide to accept a foreign religion?