

# OGHUZ HISTORY

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## GOVERNMENT

### Overview

The history of the Oghuz Turks must be reconstructed from outside sources (primarily Arab and Byzantine) since, unlike the Gök Türks and Uighur, they left no records of their own known. In the Arab sources they are known as the *Ghuzz* or *Ghuzziyya* (غز / غزبية), and as the *Ouzoi* (Οὐζοί) in Byzantine sources. However, the term *oghuz* originally designated a tribal union rather than a specific group of people, and could be applied to a number of unrelated peoples. The earliest mention of the Oghuz is found in the 8<sup>th</sup>-century Orkhon River inscriptions from Mongolia. Oghuz groups also played an important role in the history of the Second Gök Türk Khanate, but their relationship to later Oghuz groupings is unknown. Arab historians note the presence of the *Ghuzz* on the borders of the Islamic world in Transoxiana beginning in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Ibn al-Athīr relates that according to some Khurāsānī historians the *Ghuzz* “migrated from the borderlands of the most distant parts of the Turks to Mā warā’ al-Nahr (*i.e.* Khorasan) in the days of al-Mahdī and converted to Islam.” Other Arab historians also mention the *Ghuzz* in the region of Transoxiana. Although these sources do not specifically mention the reason for the *Ghuzz*’s appearance in this region, it is possible that a series of wars between the Uyghurs and the Qarluqs, and then the Uyghurs and the Qirghiz in the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century may have been the impetus for their migration westward. As the Oghuz and other Turkic groups moved into western Central Asia they forced the Pechenegs, the Turkic group already residing there, further west. Writing in the late 12<sup>th</sup>-early 13<sup>th</sup> century a physician for the Seljūq ruler Malik Shāh, Sharaf al-Dīn Marvazī, appears to describe a second migration of the Oghuz, again in response to upheaval in the east, stating that “The Ghuzz Turks then moved to the territory of the Bajanāk [Pechenegs], near the shore of the [Black] Sea.”

What these sources suggest is that there may have a number of westward movements of Turkic groups referred to as Oghuz between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries that began in or near Mongolia and progressed into Central Asia and then to the region north of the Caspian Sea. As a result early Muslim sources place the homeland of the Oghuz in a number of regions stretching from the River Irtysh in the east to the western reaches of the Syr Darya River near where it enters the Aral Sea in the west. The eventual result of these movements was that by the 9<sup>th</sup> century an Oghuz state ruled by a *yabghu* had been established with its capital at Yangikent (“new city”) on the Syr Darya River east of the Aral Sea. Although the Oghuz *yabghu* state was based on an Oghuz tribal alliance, it included a number of other tribal and ethnic groups. Among these were the Pechenegs, Qarluqs and perhaps even local Iranian peoples who had inhabited the region prior to the arrival of the Oghuz.

The Oghuz state would come to play an important role in political and military events in the region during the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Among the most significant was the Oghuz - Kievan Rus alliance made in 965 against the Khazars which resulted in the destruction of the Khazar state. The second was another Oghuz alliance with the Russians in 985, this time for a campaign against the Volga Bulgars.

However, shortly afterwards, in the late 10<sup>th</sup> – early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries the power of the Oghuz state began to decline due to popular discontent over taxation that led to revolts. One Oghuz group that rebelled against

the *yabghu* in Yangikent was the Seljuqs, based around the city of Jand. Following the failure of their rebellion the Seljuqs moved into Transoxiana, and from there they proceeded to Khwarazm and Khorasan. Although the Oghuz *yabghu* was able to conquer Khwarazm in 1041, in 1043 the *yabghu* was captured by the Seljuqs in 1043 and executed. The combination of internal unrest and conflict with the Seljuqs fatally weakened the Oghuz state, which was unable to resist the onslaught of the Qipchak later in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently collapsed.

### Government Structure

The Oghuz *yabghu* state evolved out of the social organization of the Oghuz, who were made up of a number of tribes. Some sources claim that there were twenty-four Oghuz tribes, while others mention only twelve. This apparent discrepancy may be the result of the fact that the Oghuz were divided into two major groups – the *Buzuk* (the ‘elder’ tribes of the right wing) and the *Uchuk* (the ‘younger’ tribes of the left wing) – each of which contained twelve tribes. Each tribe, *boy*, had a number of clan divisions referred to as either *kök* or *oba*. Larger groupings of tribes and clans were called an *il*, which in later Islamic sources was translated as ‘a people’ or ‘political grouping’.

At the head of the Oghuz state was the *yabghu*, a title that among the royal titles of the earlier Gök Türk and Uighur states was just below that of *qaghan*. Why the Oghuz rulers took the title *yabghu* is unclear; it may indicate that at some point the Oghuz had been vassals of the Khazars, whose ruler bore the title *qaghan*. While the Oghuz *yabghu* was a hereditary supreme leader, who was elected and who ruled according to the customary unwritten of the Oghuz, the *töre*. In addition to the *yabghu*, there was also a council of nobles, the *känkäsh*, which played a role in the administration of the state. Below the *yabghu* was an official with the title *köl erkin* or *kül erkin*, who was either a co-ruler or a deputy of the *yabghu*. The *köl erkin* had significant authority, and had a particular role in the resolution of difficult disputes. Military affairs were in the hands of a supreme commander, the *sü bashi*, who headed his own military council, and occasionally became involved in tribal politics on his own.

The *yabghu*'s close family also bore distinctive titles and played a role in the state. His male heirs were given the title *inal*, and were appointed tutors, an *atabeg*, who were responsible for the education of the *inal*. The *yabghu*'s wives were referred to as *khatun*, and had a prominent role in life the *yabghu*'s court.

Below these high officials there were lesser officials, with the best known being the tax collectors. Charged with collecting the *yabghu*'s tribute from both the settled and nomadic populations, royal tax collectors were provided with their own cavalry units to ensure that tribute was collected even from the most unwilling subjects.

The tribes were governed by leaders with the titles of *khan* or *ilik*, who were entitled to their own personal guard generally made up of young slave soldiers referred to as *ghulām* or *oghlan*. The next level below this was that of the *beg*, hereditary leaders who fulfilled a number of roles in Oghuz society. The two most important *begs* were the *Ulug Beg* and the *Begler Beg*. The former was in charge of tribal and clan associations while the latter was the commander of both the right and left wings of the Oghuz army.

The official titles, officials, and institutions found in the Oghuz *yabghu* state seem to reflect those of the previous Gök Türk and Uighur states. However, despite these survivals the institutions and economy of the Oghuz state appears to have been significantly less developed state than those of the Gök Türk or Uighur.

### Policy

Since the sources that provide any information regarding the Oghuz *yabghu* state are limited, and there are none that originate from this state itself, it is difficult to know whether the Oghuz *yabghu* and his officials pursued a coherent state policy or not. What the sources do describe is a mix of raids into neighboring territories, among them Volga Bulgaria, Khwarazm, Khorasan and Transoxiana, and peaceful trade in products of the steppe for agricultural and crafted goods. However, the sources do not make it clear whether these raids were simply raids to acquire booty, or, as previous steppe peoples had done, raids intended both to acquire booty and to convince their victims to grant or maintain trade on conditions favorable to the Oghuz. Similarly, the numerous conflicts between the Oghuz and the Khazars, culminating in the Oghuz-

Rus alliance that destroyed the Khazar state in 965, may have had their origin in a desire by the Oghuz to gain control of the profitable trade routes between the Volga region and Central Asia that passed through Khazar territory.

### Readings

Asimov, M. S. and Bosworth, C. E. (eds.). *History of civilizations of Central Asia*. Vol. 4, Part One. Paris, 1998.

Barthold, W. *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*. Oxford, 1928.

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

### MILITARY

The limited surviving historical sources describe the Oghuz army as consisting entirely of cavalry and organized into right and left wings, and the commander with his forces in the center. Like other Eurasian nomadic armies, the strength of the Oghuz was mounted archery. Oghuz skill with the bow on horseback, combined with the inherent speed and mobility of cavalry forces, made the Oghuz a formidable foe.

Although the composite bow (made of wood, horn and sinew laminated together) and quiver carrying 80-90 arrows was the primary weapon of the Oghuz, swords and maces were also carried for close combat. In addition, for personal protection sources mention the Oghuz warriors having helmets, shields and upper body armor.

Typical tactics were hit-and-run attacks to harass and wear down an enemy, swarming (simultaneous attacks from numerous directions) that could be either sustained or hit-and-run, and the feigned retreat. Feigned retreats were primarily carried out to either draw part of an enemy force away from the main body of the army until the retreating cavalry could turn and destroy their pursuers, or to lead a large enemy force into a prepared ambush by the main Oghuz army.

### Readings

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

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### Discussion Question

1. Why did the Oghuz army not develop some of the shared characteristics of the armies of the Qarakhanids and the Seljuqs of Rum?

### SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Although there is some information about tribal structure of the Oghuz, little can be said with certainty about the society of the Oghuz Yabghu state. Their state evolved out of the social organization of the Oghuz, who were made up of either twelve or twenty-four tribes. These different numbers may stem from the fact that the Oghuz were divided into two major groups – the *Buzuk* (the 'elder' tribes of the right wing) and the *Uchuk* (the 'younger' tribes of the left wing) – each of which contained twelve tribes. Each tribe, *boy*, had a number of clans called a *kök* or *oba*, and larger groupings of tribes and clans were referred to as an *il*.

Certain noble clans formed the ruling elite. At the top of the Oghuz state was the *yabghu*, a title used by the earlier Gök Türk and Uighur states for a position just below that of *qaghan*. The reason the Oghuz rulers adopted the title *yabghu* is unknown, but some scholars have speculated that previously the Oghuz had been vassals of the Khazars, whose ruler bore the title *qaghan*. The Oghuz *yabghu* was the supreme leader, elected from the hereditary ruling clan, and ruled according to the unwritten traditional law of the

Oghuz, the *töre*. The *yabghu's* close family also bore distinctive titles and played a role in the state. His male heirs were given the title *inal*, and were appointed tutors, an *atabeg*, who were responsible for the education of the *inal*. The *yabghu's* wives were referred to as *khatun*, and had a prominent role in life the *yabghu's* court.

The *yabghu* ruled with the aid of a council of nobles, the *känkäsh*, which played a role in the administration of the state. Below the *yabghu* was an official with the title *köl erkin* or *kül erkin*, who was either a co-ruler or a deputy of the *yabghu*. The *köl erkin* had significant authority, and had a particular role in the resolution of difficult disputes. Military affairs were in the hands of a supreme commander, the *sū bashi*, who headed his own military council, and occasionally became involved in tribal politics on his own. Below these high officials there were lesser officials

The tribes were governed by leaders with the titles of *khan* or *ilik*, who were entitled to their own personal guard generally made up of young slave soldiers referred to as *ghulām* or *oghlan*. The next level below this was that of the *beg*, hereditary leaders who fulfilled a number of roles in Oghuz society. The two most important *begs* were the *Ulug Beg* and the *Begler Beg*. The former was in charge of tribal and clan associations while the latter was the commander of both the right and left wings of the Oghuz army.

Below the ruling Oghuz clans, the settled population of the Oghuz Yabghu State was likely to have been similar to that of other contemporary neighboring states. Craftsmen and merchants would have constituted the majority of the urban population while peasant farmers would have made up the rural population. The existence of Oghuz coinage is evidence that trade was an important activity, and traders were another class in Oghuz society.

## 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 Questions

1. Why is so little known about the make-up of the Oghuz Yabghu state and its society?

## GENDER RELATIONS

Because there are neither any surviving written sources nor any examples of architecture produced by the Oghuz, it is very difficult to reach any definitive conclusions about gender in Oghuz society. The limited information about the Oghuz and their society that does exist was written by outsiders (i.e. non-Oghuz) and, therefore, must be evaluated carefully.

Nonetheless, there is one 10<sup>th</sup> century source written Arabic that provides first-hand observations of Oghuz women. The work is the *Kitab Ahmad bin Fadlan* (كتاب احمد بن فضلان), a partial account of Ahmad bin Fadlan's journey from Baghdad to the court of the Volga Bulgars in the lands north of the Caspian Sea in 921-922. Ibn Fadlan was part of an embassy sent by the Abbasi caliph al-Muqtadir in response to the Bulgar Khan's request for someone to instruct his people on Islamic law and practices after their recent conversion. During the journey to the Volga Bulgars, Ibn Fadlan passed through the lands of the still pagan Oghuz Turks, giving him the opportunity to observe their society and customs.

In the most relevant section, Ibn Fadlan begins by stating that the Oghuz women never covered their heads or faces in the presence of men. He then goes on to relate a visit he and his party paid to an Oghuz tent. When they sat down and began to talk with the Oghuz man, his wife came and sat down with them. During the conversation, the woman pulled up her skirt to scratch, exposing her genitals. Shocked by her actions, Ibn Fadlan and his companions quickly looked away while saying "God forgive us!". To Ibn Fadlan's surprise, the woman's husband simply laughed at them and then, through the interpreter, explained why he laughed. He explained that while Oghuz women might expose their bodies in the presence of other men,

they were completely faithful to their husbands. Then, perhaps taking a dig at the Arabs, he added that he thought that this was a much better situation than having women who covered themselves but were unfaithful. Ibn Fadlan, did not record his reaction to this explanation, but he did go on to say that adultery was practically unknown among the Oghuz. While anecdotal, this incident is an indication that Oghuz women led lives that were less restricted than those of contemporary Muslim women in Baghdad.

### Readings

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

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### Discussion Question

1. What are the potential problems with historical sources that describe a people and society but are written by outsiders?

### TRADE

Almost nothing is known with any certainty about the economy of the Oghuz Yabghu State, nonetheless, it can be assumed that what is known about the economic life of other, similar contemporary states applies to the Oghuz state. Coins from the Oghuz Yabghu State have been found, indicating that monetary transactions were common enough to make minting their own coins attractive to Oghuz rulers as a statement of their power. In addition, since many of the Oghuz tribes remained nomadic pastoralists, livestock and products from their herds must have been a significant element in the Oghuz economy. Finally, the location of the Oghuz capital at Yengikent on the Syr Darya put the center of the Oghuz state in close proximity to developed agricultural regions in both Khwarazm and Transoxiana, as well as the lucrative trade routes that crossed the steppes north of the Aral Sea. Both of these regions could have provided the Oghuz state with important tax revenues.

### Readings

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

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### Discussion Questions

1. For what reasons did medieval rulers mint their own coins rather than use those of larger, neighboring states?

2. How can the economic activities of poorly documented states and peoples be reconstructed?

### 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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 Kipchak”, in Asimov, M. S. and Bosworth, C. E. (eds.). *History of civilizations of Central Asia*. Vol. 4, Part One. Paris, 1998.

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## Discussion Question

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

## LITERATURE

As a primarily nomadic people, the Oghuz did not produce literature in the sense that the Qarakhanids or the Seljuqs did, that is, written works of various genres produced in their territory, sometimes with official support, they did make an important contribution to Turkic literature in one particular genre, the epic (*destan*). The Oghuz had a rich oral literature of poetry and epics that were generally accounts of the early history and semi-legendary rulers and heroes of the Oghuz. These epics were later written down

and preserved. Among these were the K r-Oghlu and Oghuz Kaghan epics, but the earliest, and best known, is the *Book of Dede Korkut*, also known as the *Oghuz-nama*.

The epic consists of thirteen sections: twelve stories concerning the deeds of twelve different heroes, and a thirteenth section containing a collection of the wise sayings of Dede Korkut, a bard who serves as the common link of the stories. The earliest reference to this work is in an early 14<sup>th</sup> century work by the historian Ibn Aybek Dawadari, an ethnic Qipchak living in Cairo during the reign of the Mamluks. However, the earliest texts of Dede Korkut are were most likely composed in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The Oghuz epic tradition was clearly carried to Anatolia, where two epics written in Old Anatolian Turkish stand out: the *Danishmend-name* and the *Battalname*. The *Danishmend-name* recounts the exploits of Danishmend Gazi, an 11<sup>th</sup> century Seljuq general and founder of the Danishmend beylik in central and northern Anatolia. The work was probably composed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but the earliest texts date from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The *Battalname* details the life and deeds of Sayyid Battal Gazi, an 8<sup>th</sup> century Arab warrior who fought the Byzantines. This work was likely composed in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century, but the earliest text of the *Battalname* dates from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Readings**

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

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why were the Oghuz epics written down at relatively late dates in comparison to Qarakhanid and Seljuq literary works?
2. What information about the Oghuz can historians learn from their epics?