

## OGHUZ SOCIAL HISTORY – 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 *sü 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 *oghlān*. 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 Kipchak”, 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?