

## GOKTURK SOCIAL STRUCTURE

**Overview** The organization of the Gök Türk imperial government in many ways parallels the differences between the classes in Gök Türk society. However, some important distinctions within each social level are not reflected in the structure of their government.

**Nobility** Noble status in Gök Türk society was the result of being either a member of the dynastic clan, the Ashina, from which all *kaghans* and other high-ranking leaders who were generally related to the *kaghan*, or by being a *beg*, a member of hereditary, aristocratic families within an individual tribe. In both cases, the right of the dynastic tribe to lead a tribal group, or the right of the *begler* to rule their tribe was unquestioned and sanctioned by tradition. While all members of the nobility clearly possessed a privileged position in their society, the *kaghans* were accorded a semi-divine status with numerous rituals and taboos associated with his position.

**Common People** Below the aristocracy were the common people, called the *igil qara bodun* in the Orkhon inscriptions. This class could be further subdivided into two groups, those who owned horses and had the means to live as pastoralists and fight in the armies, and those who were too poor to do so. This latter group was either settled in small villages where they practiced agriculture, or entered the service of wealthy noblemen working as servants or bodyguards.

**Status across Class** Certain indicators of status in Gök Türk society cut across class lines and could be found among both the nobility and the common people. The first was the status of being an *er* (plural *erler*), a term that can mean both “man” and “warrior”. Any young man, noble or common, who was a full member of a family and tribe could become an *er* after reaching a designated age, passing some form of initiation that was generally some act of valor in the hunt or in battle, and then being given a new name called an *er adi*. While becoming an *er* provided a man with a certain degree of social status, the actual status of an *er* in both his tribe and larger society were dependent on two other factors – the young man’s original social class (i.e. an *er* from a noble family had a higher status than one from a common family), and wealth.

Wealth was the second factor that affected an *er*’s position in society. Wealth brought with it great social prestige, and the status of the wealthy man (*bay*) is often contrasted very unfavorably with that of the poor man (*chighay*) in the Orkhon inscriptions. Rather than evoke sympathy, poverty was regarded with utter contempt, since an *er* was considered to have the means – a horse, weapons, and daring – to go out and gain wealth.

**Slaves** The lowest class in Gök Türk society was occupied by slaves. Like most contemporary societies, slaves among the Gök Türk were generally war captives, but predominantly female since men were considered too dangerous to take as captives and frequently killed instead. These female captives had an important function in Gök Türk society because the work they performed (as well as that of free Gök Türk women) left many more men free to pursue military activities.

**Summary** The Gök Türks’ social hierarchy, from the *kaghan* and his nobles at the top to the slaves at the bottom, combined with the attitudes of both the nobility and the common people towards martial prowess and material wealth created a society that was based on and sustained by raiding and warfare. Courage demonstrated in war earned prestige, and victories provided both the wealth that brought additional status and power, and more captives. In addition, as the Orkhon inscriptions show, the Gök Türk believed that maintaining this hierarchical society would preserve their people’s virtues and prevent them from being corrupted by Chinese luxuries and influence.

## Readings

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## Discussion Questions

1. What were the differences between the social structure of the Gök Türk and the Uighur, and why did these differences develop?
2. What was the status and role of the Sogdians in both the Gök Türk Empire and the Uighur Empire?