

GOKTURK GOVERNMENT

Political Structure

The Gök Türks Although many details about the internal structure and titles of the Türk state remain unclear, contemporary Chinese sources and the Orkhon inscriptions from the Second Türk Empire do provide a general picture of how the state was ruled. Within its territory the Gök Türk state was a union (or confederation) of ethnically related tribes and tribal groups that were hierarchically grouped. The tribes and tribal groups were culturally linked by common beliefs, legal practices and commonly accepted genealogies. Politically, their tribal structure (*bodun*) and their unified political and military structure (*e*) was under the control of the *kaghan* (also *khan*).

At the center of the empire were twelve main Gök Türk tribes, the most important of which was the Ashina; the *kaghan* was always a member of this tribe. Next in order of precedence were the Tokuz Oghuz, who were numerically superior to the Gök Türk, but less united until the early 7th century. At that point the Uighurs, a tribal grouping of ten tribes led by the Yaghlakar tribe, were able to unite the Tokuz Oghuz under them. In addition to the Tokuz Oghuz, the Basmil and Karluk were two other important tribal groups in the Gök Türk Empire. Every tribal group was led by an *elteber*, and below him each tribe was headed by an *irkin*, officials whose titles frequently appear in the Orkhon inscriptions.

While the *kaghan* was the supreme power in the Gök Türk state, his closest relations were also part of the top tier of the empire. They held the titles of *yabghu* or *shad*; in the First Gök Türk Empire the *kaghan* ruled the eastern territories while a *yabghu* administered the western territories in the name of the *kaghan*. Below them were the *kaghan's* counsellors, designated by the titles *chor*, *tarkhan* and *tudun*, who were responsible for administrative, diplomatic, military and legal matters. To make the administration of this large state more effective, the tribes were divided territorially into two groups, east (the Tölish) and west (the Tardush). Soldiers mustered from each of these groups constituted the right and left wings of the *kaghan's* army, and were commanded by the most influential tribal leaders from each section as well as *shads*.

This dual structure of administration can be regarded as a natural development based on the societal structure of the Türk tribes. Tribal groups were led by dynastic tribes, such as the Ashina among the Gök Türk and the Yaghlakar among the Uighur, whose traditional ruling status was unquestioned. Each individual tribe, in turn, was ruled by a hereditary aristocracy whose members had the title of *beg* (also written *bek* and *bey*; plural *begler*). The political structure of the empire remained stable as long as relations between the *begler* and the common people, and the dynastic tribes and the other tribes remained harmonious, and all remained loyal to the *kaghan*.

According to both Chinese and Byzantine sources, administratively the First Gök Türk Empire was divided into four districts. These were the Central, Eastern, Western and Western Frontier regions. The *kaghan* ruled from the Central region which contained all of the sacred sites associated with the origin of the Türks. As previously mentioned, after 603 the empire was effectively divided with the Central and Eastern regions forming the Eastern Gök Türk Empire and the remaining two regions making up the Western Gök Türk Empire. The relatively short-lived Second Gök Türk Empire emerged in the territory of the former Eastern Gök Türk Empire and does not seem to have been divided for administrative purposes.

Policy

The Gök Türk In both the First and Second Gök Türk Empires territorial expansion and defense of existing imperial territory were obvious policies of the *kaghan* and his officials. Peoples in the conquered territories became subject to the *kaghan's* rule and were required to provide regular tribute. However, relations between the Gök Türk and the powerful states to the east and west were extremely important for the survival of their state.

Like the earlier Hsiung-nu, the Gök Türks wanted (and needed) access to Chinese silk and other luxury goods, but without being dominated by their more populous neighbor. The First Gök Türk Empire emerged during a period of Chinese history referred to as the Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝, 420-589 CE) when several successive dynasties ruled the regions bordering the Gök Türks. At the time that Bumin established his state in 553 the Western Wei dynasty (西魏, 535-557) and the Northern Ch'i (pinyin Qi, 北齊, 550-577) ruled the regions bordering the Gök Türk. Shortly into the reign of Bumin's successor Muhan (r.553-572) the Western Wei were replaced by the Northern Zhou (pinyin Zhou, 北周, 557-581). For almost 30 years both Muhan and his successor Taghpar (r. 572-581) were able to keep the Chinese divided by playing off one dynasty against the other and the judicious use of raids for booty. In the process they were able to conduct highly advantageous trade for Chinese luxury goods and silk. These goods were essential for maintaining the system of alliances that held the Gök Türk Empire together, and could also be used for both commercial or diplomatic purposes in their dealings with the Byzantines and the Persians.

Nonetheless, the nature of the relationship between the Gök Türk and the Chinese began to change in 581 when the Sui dynasty (隋朝, 581-618) came to power. The Sui united the Northern and Southern Dynasties, creating a wealthy, powerful state at the point when the First Gök Türk Empire was beginning to suffer from internal divisions and strife. It was during the Sui period that the two halves of the empire became independent and came under Chinese authority in 603. However, it was under the Sui's successors, the Tang dynasty (唐朝, 618-907) that the First Gök Türk Empire collapsed in 630 and that the Second Gök Türk Empire arose in 682. The rulers of the Second Gök Türk Empire pursued a policy of relations with China that was almost identical to that of the First Gök Türk Empire until its collapse in 744.

Although relations with China were a major concern for both the First and Second Gök Türk Empires, China was not the only powerful state that the First Gök Türk Empire was in contact with. To the west, between 557 and 561 the Gök Türk state cooperated with the Sasanians to destroy the Hephthalite Empire, with the result that the two empires became neighbors. Although the Sasanian king Khusrau I Anushirvan married one of the *kaghan's* daughters, relations between the Persians and the Gök Türk were often problematic, most often in relation to trade, and the silk trade in particular.

To bypass Persian interference in their long-distance trade the Gök Türk opened relations with the Byzantine Empire. Although by the mid-6th century the Byzantines could produce their own silk, commercial links along the northern Silk Roads were established between the two empires, and the Byzantines were keen to establish a military alliance with the Gök Türk against the Persians. As a result, a number of embassies were sent between 558 and 568.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. How was the Gök Türk state organized and why was organized in the way that it was?
2. Why were relations with China both necessary and dangerous for the Gök Türk?

3. What are our sources for the history of the First Gök Türk Empire and the Second Gök Türk Empire?