

OGHUZ SOCIAL HISTORY – Gender

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 10th 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 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 Question

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