

OGHUZ POLITICAL HISTORY - 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* (Ούζοι) 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 8th-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 8th century. In the 13th 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 9th 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 12th-early 13th 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 been a number of westward movements of Turkic groups referred to as Oghuz between the 8th and 10th 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 9th 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 10th 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 10th – early 11th 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 11th 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

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