

QARAKHANID GOVERNMENT

Overview

“Qarakhanid” is a name devised by 19th century European scholars and used for both the Turkic dynasty that ruled Transoxiana from the late 10th to the early 13th century, and the dynasty’s Turkic subjects. Muslim sources, however, use several different names for this dynasty; Arabic sources frequently use the name *al-Khāqāniya* (الخاقانية), “that of the Khaqans”) or *al-Khāniya* (الخانانية), “that of the Khans”), while Persian sources generally call them *Āl-i Afrāsiyāb* (آل افراسياب), “the family/house of Afrasiyab”), a reference to a line of legendary pre-Islamic kings who ruled in Transoxiana.

The origins of the Qarakhanids are still not completely understood as the surviving sources related to Qarakhanid history are not contemporary with the dynasty and, while quite informative concerning relations between the Qarakhanids and their neighbors, provide little information on internal events of the Qarakhanid state. Numismatics has been of some use in establishing the genealogy and chronology of Qarakhanid rulers, but like the written sources, Qarakhanid coinage presents its own challenges to researchers. Nevertheless, it appears that the Qarakhanid dynasty has its origins in the ruling clan of the Qarluq confederation who claimed descent from the Ashina, the ruling clan of the earlier Gök Türk state. Emerging at some time in the 9th century, the Qarakhanids imposed their rule over a confederation of tribes in the regions of the western Tarim Basin around Kashgar, the western Tien Shan, and Semireche (also, Zhetysu, Jetysu, or Jeti-su). At this point the Qarakhanids shared a number of characteristics with previous states in this region and with the eastern neighbors, the Uighur, namely language, religion and lifestyle. This was not the case with the Qarakhanids’ neighbors to the southwest, the Samanids. Established in the early 9th century in the regions of Khorasan and Transoxiana, the Samanids were Persian in speech and origin, Muslims and rulers of a settled urban and agricultural population.

In 893 the Samanids took the city of Talas (Taraz), driving the Qarakhanids west into the region of Kashgar. A few decades later a Qarakhanid prince in this region, Satuk Bughra Khan, converted to Islam. Exactly when, how and why Satuk Bughra Khan decided to become a Muslim is unclear; some sources credit a *faqīh* from Baghdad, others the efforts of dervishes for his conversion. Whatever the reason, Satuk Bughra Khan’s conversion was clearly voluntary and would eventually lead to the conversion of the Qarakhanids en masse. Shortly after his conversion Satuk Bughra Khan killed his father and took Kashgar. Following Satuk Bughra Khan’s death in 955 the Qarakhanids began to enlarge the territory under their control through expansion in the direction of the Samanids.

Qarakhanid expansion in the last decade of the 10th century was focused on Transoxiana and culminated with the conquest of the Samanid capital, Bukhara, in 992. Following the downfall of the Samanids and the establishment of Qarakhanid rule in Muslim Transoxiana, the Qarakhanids then expanded their holdings in the Tarim Basin by pushing east and conquering the Kingdom of Khotan in 1006.

Despite these successes, infighting remained a constant feature of the Qarakhanid state. This internal strife eventually resulted in a formal division of the Qarakhanid territories, a process that was complete by 1042-43. The result was an Eastern and Western Khanate with their capitals at Samarkand and Balasaghun (later Kashgar) respectively. The borders of the two khanates met in the Semireche and Fergana regions, but were not clearly designated and were frequently fought over.

The two Qarakhanid khanates were relatively stable politically and economically prosperous until the late 11th century when the Seljuqs became the dominant power in Transoxiana. Samarkand, capital of the Western Khanate, fell to the Seljuqs in 1089 and the khanate became a Seljuq vassal. The Eastern Khanate voluntarily submitted to the Seljuqs shortly afterwards. While the Eastern Khanate’s status as a Seljuq

vassal would be relatively short-lived, the Western Khanate would remain a Seljuq vassal until 1141 with the Seljuqs placing whomever they wished on the throne of the khanate.

After suffering a major defeat at the hands of the Qara Khitai in 1141, the Seljuqs were no longer the dominant power in Transoxiana and the Qarakhanid khanates became vassals of the Qara Khitai. Acting as administrators of the Muslim populations in the Qara Khitai territories around Samarkand and Kashgar, the Qarakhanids gained a reputation for tolerance and justice. Both the Eastern and Western Khanates came to an end in the early 13th century in the tumultuous events that also brought about the downfall of the Qara Khitai state. The Eastern Khanate ended with the death of the last Qarakhanid ruler in Kashgar in 1211, and in the following year, 1212, the last Qarakhanid ruler of the Western Khanate was executed in Samarkand by the Khwarazmshahs.

Government Structure

The Qarakhanids state had a bipartite division of authority, east and west, similar to that of the Gök Türk Empire. The eastern, supreme Qarakhanid khan was titled the *Arslan Qara Khaqan* (*arslan*, “lion”) while the western co-ruler bore the title *Bughra Qara Khaqan* (*bughra*, “male camel”). Animal names are found in many of the Turkic titles of Qarakhanid nobility; in addition to *arslan* and *bughra*, other titles include *böri* (“wolf”), *toghrul* (“bird of prey”) and *toghan* (“falcon”). Each khan had two sub-rulers, the *Arslan Ilig*, and *Arslan Tegin* in the east, and the *Bughra Ilig* and *Bughra Tegin* in the west. After the Qarakhanids converted to Islam, in addition to the Turkic titles, the khans began to use the Arabic titles *sultan* (سلطان) and *sultan al-salatin* (سلطان السلاطين, “sultan of sultans”).

The eastern and western halves of the Qarakhanid state were further divided into a system of appanages, or *iqta* (إقطاع), which gave members of the ruling clan the right to revenues generated from a land grant. These appanages did not have stable borders due to infighting, but were often associated with the urban centers of Kashgar in Xinjiang, Balasagun in Semereche, Samarkand in Transoxiana, and Uzgend in Fergana. A change in the appanage an individual held resulted in not only a change of title, but also a change in status and seniority within the ruling clan.

Below this, the Qarakhanids ruled over a mix of settled, agricultural territories, tribes and tribal unions that all recognized Qarakhanid suzerainty.

Policy

It is only in the late 10th century, following the Qarakhanids conversion to Islam in the mid-10th century, that the Qarakhanids began to pursue a clear policy of conquest to replace the Iranian Samanids as the Muslim rulers of Transoxiana. The first campaign was led by Hasan bin Sulayman Bughra Khan and between 990 and 992 he conquered Isfijab, Fergana and Bukhara, marking these victories by minting coins in his name. Between 996 and 999, Nasr bin Ali took Chach and Samarkand, and retook Bukhara for the Qarakhanids. The Samanids were completely eliminated by 1005, leaving the Qarakhanids masters of Transoxiana for the time.

However, the Samanids were not the Qarakhanids' only concern in the late 10th – early 11th century. To the east and north-east of their state the Qarakhanids were embroiled in a series of confrontations with other non-Muslim Turkic tribes. At one point these Turkic peoples almost reached the Qarakhanid capital at Balasaghun, until the Qarakhanid ruler Ahmad bin Ali appealed for help. Numerous *ghazi* (“fighter for the faith”) volunteers, some from other Muslim states answered his call, first driving out the invading forces and then defeating them.

The Qarakhanids were also involved with Ghaznavid state to their south and south-west. Qarakhanid relations with the Ghaznavids were more complex than those with the non-Muslim Turkic peoples to the north, and varied depending on the relative strength of the two sides, or the degree of internal strife within the Qarakhanid dynasty. In 1025, concerns over the growing strength of the western khan, Ali Tegin, led Mahmud of Ghazna to form an alliance with the eastern khan, Yusuf Qadir Khan, against Ali Tegin. Although Ali Tegin was only temporarily forced out of Bukhara and Samarkand, Mahmud's victory had left the two halves of the Qarakhanid state relatively equal in strength and unable to seriously threaten the Ghaznavids.

In 1040 the Qarakhanids became aware a new, rising power in Central Asia, the Seljuqs, when they defeated the Ghaznavids at Dandanqan and became the masters of Khorasan. In the following years, while the Seljuqs were involved with consolidating their hold on these new territories, the Qarakhanid state was formally divided into two independent khanates around 1042-43. For approximately the next four decades the energies of the two states were mostly directed either at territorial expansion at the other khanate's expense or internal affairs.

When the Seljuq sultan Malikshah took the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand in 1089 the western Qarakhanid Khanate became a Seljuq vassal; the eastern khanate would voluntarily submit shortly afterwards. From this point on, first as vassals of the Seljuqs and then, after 1141, as vassals of the Qara Khitai, Qarakhanid policy until the early 13th century was directed at the continuation of the state.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. What is the primary historical significance of the Qarakhanid state?
2. Why is the history of both the Oghuz and Qarakhanid states difficult to reconstruct?