

## QARAKHANID CULTURAL HISTORY – Religion

### Tengrism

Whatever religion they ultimately accepted, almost all of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia initially followed Tengrism. Tengrism is the name given to the worship of *Kök* (also *Gök*) *Tengri* (𐰽𐰺𐰍:𐰇𐰏 / “blue heaven”), or simply *Tengri* (𐰽𐰺𐰍), the chief deity in the traditional religion of many of the steppe peoples of Eurasia, among them the Xiongnu, the Turkic peoples, Mongols, and early Magyars. While Tengri is the sky god and creator, Umay (𐰽𐰏𐰝) or Eje, is the earth-mother and goddess of fertility. Below these two deities there are a number of minor deities. In addition to its polytheism, Tengrism was characterized by animism, totemism, veneration of ancestors, and shamanism.

The earliest reference to Tengri is found in Chinese sources from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE that discuss the Xiongnu. More information is found in the later Orkhon inscriptions of the Gök Türk Empire, where it is clear that the Gök Türk rulers believed that they had a mandate from Tengri to rule. In a 9<sup>th</sup> century, the *Irak Bitig*, a book on divination written in Old Turkic, Tengri is described as *Türük tängri*, “god of the Turks”. A linking of Tengri (written *tngri* in classical Mongolian) and a ruler, similar to that in the Orkhon inscriptions, can be found in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, written in 1240. In it, Genghis Khan’s unification of the Mongols and right to rule them is frequently attributed to Tengri.

Tengrism was the state religion of the Gök Türk Empire, both the Eastern and Western Gök Türk states, the various Bulgar states, and the Mongols until the 14<sup>th</sup> century when some began to convert to Islam. Although Tengrism is still followed by some Turkic and Mongol groups, it declined among the Turkic peoples when various groups began to adopt foreign faiths such as Manichaeism, Buddhism, Judaism (in the case of at least some of the Khazars), Nestorian Christianity, and Islam. However, elements of Tengrism have often survived among the Turkic peoples, particularly in the popular practices of these religions.

### Qarakhanid Religion

Prior to their conversion to Islam, the Qarakhanids, like the Qarluqs before them, appear to have followed a mix of native beliefs (Tengrism, shamanism) and Buddhism, both long familiar to many of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. However, when the Qarakhanids became Muslims they began a process that would change the religion, culture, and history of Central Asia.

Exactly how, when and why the Qarakhanids converted to Islam is unclear. One plausible account links this event to the Qarakhanids’ early rival to the west, the Iranian, Muslim Samanids. As a result of dynastic infighting, the brother of the Samanid ruler fled to Kashgar in Qarakhanid territory. There, he asked the local ruler from the Bughra branch of the Qarakhanid ruling dynasty, Oghulchaq, for asylum. Pleased to have such an illustrious Samanid “guest”, the Qarakhanids appointed him as governor of Artush (also written Artuj, Artuch or Artish), an important commercial center near Kashgar. One of the new governor’s early acts was to have a mosque built in Artush.

At some point after this mosque was built, Oghulchaq’s nephew Satuq was sent to inspect caravan goods in Artush. During his inspection the muezzin in the mosque recited the call to prayer, and Satuq was deeply impressed by the sight of the Muslim merchants stopping their commercial activities in order to pray. Satuq is said to have begun studying the Quran after this, and at some point in the 930s he publicly became a Muslim.

After his conversion, some sources claim that Satuq attempted to persuade his uncle to become a Muslim, but the uncle resisted, leading to a clash between the two. When Satuq was eventually able to depose his

uncle and take Kashgar, he took the title Satuq Bughra Khan and proclaimed Sunni Islam as the official religion of the Western Qarakhanids.

Satuq's motives for converting are unknown, but there are a number of possible reasons. First, it could have been a sincere conversion and Satuq was genuinely convinced of the truth of Islamic teachings. However, in light of Satuq's actions after his conversion, it appears that, no matter how sincere Satuq's personal beliefs were, there were also very practical benefits for both the Qarakhanids and for Satuq, that came with the new faith.

As a Muslim, Satuq would gain greater trust and respect from the apparently influential Samanid refugee, increasing the likelihood that he would help Satuq against the Samanid state. In addition, Satuq would have enhanced influence among the numerous Qarakhanid ghulams in the Samanid armies who had converted to Islam before him. Islam was also a means to unite the Qarakhanids and give them a distinct identity, both assets in the program of conquest and expansion that Satuq intended to carry out.

Whatever his motives, it is clear that Satuq Bughra Khan actively promoted Islam among his own people and among Turks who came under Qarakhanid rule. Five years after Satuq's death in 955, one source claims that "200,000 tents of the Turks" became Muslim. While this number is probably exaggerated, it nonetheless indicates that Islam was spreading quickly among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia.

The Qarakhanids rapidly assumed the characteristics of Muslim rulers, and became known for their individual piety, respect for religious scholars, establishment of *waqfs* (وقف, pious foundations), and construction of mosques and *madradas* (مدرسة, theological schools). In addition, as Sunni Muslims and adherents of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, the Qarakhanids were accepted as legitimate rulers by the inhabitants of the former Samanid territories they took control of after the fall of the Samanids.

Although the Qarakhanids were clearly devout Muslims, and the sources indicate that they strongly urged non-Muslim Turks in the lands that they controlled to convert to Islam, the Qarakhanids displayed a very tolerant attitude to the non-Muslims in their lands. For example, the Nestorian church had a metropolitan in Samarkand throughout the entire period of Qarakhanid rule there, and was able to create an entirely new metropolitanate in Kashgar in 1137. Similarly, Buddhists in the Qarakhanid domains appear to have suffered no restrictions or persecutions.

The Qarakhanid conversion to Islam had a major impact on the history and culture of both the regions of Transoxiana and Khorasan in particular, and the wider Islamic world in general. The Qarakhanids and their rivals the Ghaznavids were the starting point for the development of Turco-Persian Islamic culture that combined Turkic rule (and language to some degree) with Persian as the language of letters (and often administration), in predominantly Muslim lands where Arabic remained the language of religion and religious studies. Outside of those regions where Arabic was the primary language of daily speech, Turco-Persian Islamic culture would predominate and would be the Islamic culture taken into the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia.

## Readings

Davidovich, E.A. "The Kharakhanids", in Asimov, M. S. and Bosworth, C. E. (eds.). *History of civilizations of Central Asia*. Vol. 4, Part One. Paris, 1998.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Qarakhanids decide to become Muslims?
2. What changes did the Qarakhanid conversion to Islam bring to their culture, economy and political situation?