

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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QARAKHANID SOCIAL HISTORY – Social Structure

Qarakhanid society was broadly divided into a ruling nobility, settle artisans and peasants, nomads and slaves. Beginning with the ruling class, like many nomadic and Turkic dynasties, the Qarakhanids came to power as the dominant clan of a tribal confederation whose members recognized Qarakhanid leadership. In addition, as was common among Turkic groups, the dominant clan regarded the territories they ruled as a family possession. The result was that while there was recognized supreme leader, other members of the ruling clan had varying degrees of authority and territory under their control.

Under the Qarakhanids, this division of power and territory took the form of 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, most likely totemic animals originally, 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* (or *Ilik*), and *Arslan Tegin* (or *Tigin*) 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 Qarakhanid rulers maintained many of their nomadic practices, among them living in tents much of the time. However, recent archaeological work has shown that the Qarakhanid rulers did have some urban residences, as in Samarkand for example, and that they actively established towns that may have played a role in the trade between nomads and settled populations.

Nomadic Turkic groups made up the bulk of the Qarakhanid tribal confederation. They constituted the main force of the Qarakhanid armies, although regular forces were beginning to be established, and they produced products such as leather, meat, and wool that were exchanged for the manufactured and agricultural products of the settled population. There were also cases of nomadic groups settling and becoming agriculturalists.

Below the ruling clan were the settled urban craftsmen, and traders and rural peasants. Many were of Iranian, or Tocharian origin, but under Turkic rule they were gradually becoming Turkic in speech and culture. The craftsmen of the towns and cities were primarily potters and glassmakers, while the traders, especially Silk Road traders, were often Sogdians. Rural peasants fell into two broad categories – free peasants and sharecroppers. Free peasants worked their own lands and were independent, while sharecroppers lived and worked the lands of wealthy owners and paid for it with a share of their crops.

At the bottom of Qarakhanid society were slaves. While slaves do not seem to have formed a large class on their own in Qarakhanid lands, there was a very active slave trade. Large numbers of Turkic slaves, primarily from pagan Turkic groups were taken and sent west to be sold and serve as soldiers in the *mamluk* or *ghulam* armies of the Abbasids and others.

Readings

Barthold, W. *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*. Oxford, 1928.

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.

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Discussion Questions

1. How is the mix of Turkic and Islamic elements that made up Qarakhanid society reflected in their social structure?
2. Why are the relations between settled and nomadic populations often described as a symbiotic relationship?