

# UIGHUR GOVERNMENT

## Political Structure

Much of the Uighur Empire's political structure was modelled on that of the Gök Türk state. However, there are few records from the time of the Uighur Empire itself which provide detailed information about the structure of their government. What is clear is that like the Gök Türk, the Uighur *kaghan* was the supreme ruler of all the tribes, and was initially from the dynastic clan of the Yaghlakar. Together with the other tribes of the Tokuz Oghuz, they formed the core of the empire. Since the Uighur state ruled overlands that roughly corresponded with the former Eastern Gök Türk state, there was no east-west division of the empire for administrative purposes.

One distinctive official among the Uighur was the *tutuk*, leaders of the eleven major tribes in the Uighur empire – the nine tribes of the Tokuz Oghuz, the Basmil, and the Karluk. The *tutuk* of the Uighur was generally a close relative of the *kaghan*, and all were considered the political leaders of their respective tribes and responsible for tax collection.

The Uighur Kingdom of Qocho established after the collapse of the Uighur Empire in 840 is far better documented, with the result that its political structure is better understood. The Uighur ruler of Qocho abandoned the title *kaghan*, and used the title *idiqu*, a contraction of the words *iduq qut*, "holy majesty/glory/wealth". This title may have been adopted from the Basmil tribe that inhabited the region of Beshbalik prior to the Uighur's arrival there. Below the *idiqu* were the ruler's ministers and other high-ranking officials, some of whose titles are known – *sängün*, *ülchi*, *tutuq*, *tarqan* – for example. Next came a variety of other officials from the middle and lower ranks, among them the *bägi* and *älchi*. However, while many titles have been recorded, the exact duties and responsibilities of some of these officials is not always clear.

## Policy

By establishing their state on some of the same territories of the former Gök Türk Empire, the Uighur Empire and the later Uighur Kingdom of Qocho inherited many of the same opportunities, challenges and threats that the Gök Türk had confronted. In the period of the Uighur Empire (744-840) relations with three powers dominated the Uighur's political policy – Tang China, Tibet, and the Sogdians.

Relations with China were designed to maintain access to Chinese luxury goods, generally through the exchange of horses for silk, and to prevent Chinese meddling in the Uighur's internal affairs. The Uighur were fortunate in that the Tang began to suffer serious internal disturbances, the An Lu-Shan rebellion (755-763) being one of the most serious. The rebellion gave the Uighur the opportunity to make politically and commercially advantageous agreements with the Chinese in exchange for Uighur military assistance. The relations between the two only began to turn in China's favor around the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century when it was the Uighur's turn to suffer internal divisions and eventually be overthrown in 840.

Uighur policy towards Tibet was generally one of either containment or expansion at Tibet's cost. The Tibetans had begun to create their own empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and in the course of the 8<sup>th</sup> century it went through several periods of expansion and decline. Although the Tibetans had suffered a number of military setbacks around the time that the Uighur Empire was established, they were able to take advantage of developments following the Chinese defeat in the Battle of Talas (751) and the An Lu-Shan rebellion, putting them in conflict with the Uighur whose territory the Tibetans bordered on. The two sides fought one another several times through the late 8<sup>th</sup> century with the Uighur; eventually the border between the two states stabilized in the area of Qocho. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century both the Tibetans and Uighur began to suffer the effects of internal instability a both empires came to an end around the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Relations with the Sogdians were unique in a number of respects. While there were small Sogdian states around the cities of Samarkand, Bokhara, and in the Zeravshan River valley, there were also Sogdian communities living in both Uighur territory and in China. However, the significance of the Sogdians was not their political power, but their commercial and, to some degree, cultural power. When many of the most important trade routes between China and the west came under Uighur control, the literate Sogdians moved quickly to become advisors and officials of the Uighur in order to protect and further their trade. While this was generally to both parties' benefit, Sogdian influence was resented by some sections of Uighur society. This was particularly true after Böğü Kaghan's conversion to Manichaeism in 762.

For the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho policy towards China had the same commercial and political goals as that of the Uighur Empire, but with new dynasties, the Liao (遼朝, 907-1125) and the Sung (or Song 宋朝, 960-1279), until it came under the domination of the Western Liao at the start of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Kingdom of Qocho was faced with a new rival, the Turkic khanate of the Karakhanids. Despite their linguistic and ethnic links, the Muslim Karakhanids and the Buddhist Uighurs were bitter rivals, with the Uighur successfully resisting Karakhanid expansion into the territories around Qocho.

### Readings

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### Discussion Question

1. In what ways was the Uighur Empire different from the Gök Türk Empire?