

GOKTURK HISTORY

Contents

Political History (Government – Military)
Social History (Class – Gender Relations)
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Cultural History (Religion – Art – Literature)

GOVERNMENT

Political Structure

The Gök Türks Although many details about the internal structure and titles of the Türk state remain unclear, contemporary Chinese sources and the Orkhon inscriptions from the Second Türk Empire do provide a general picture of how the state was ruled. Within its territory the Gök Türk state was a union (or confederation) of ethnically related tribes and tribal groups that were hierarchically grouped. The tribes and tribal groups were culturally linked by common beliefs, legal practices and commonly accepted genealogies. Politically, their tribal structure (*bodun*) and their unified political and military structure (*el*) was under the control of the *kaghan* (also *khan*).

At the center of the empire were twelve main Gök Türk tribes, the most important of which was the Ashina; the *kaghan* was always a member of this tribe. Next in order of precedence were the Tokuz Oghuz, who were numerically superior to the Gök Türk, but less united until the early 7th century. At that point the Uighurs, a tribal grouping of ten tribes led by the Yaghlakar tribe, were able to unite the Tokuz Oghuz under them. In addition to the Tokuz Oghuz, the Basmil and Karluk were two other important tribal groups in the Gök Türk Empire. Every tribal group was led by an *elteber*, and below him each tribe was headed by an *irkin*, officials whose titles frequently appear in the Orkhon inscriptions.

While the *kaghan* was the supreme power in the Gök Türk state, his closest relations were also part of the top tier of the empire. They held the titles of *yabghu* or *shad*; in the First Gök Türk Empire the *kaghan* ruled the eastern territories while a *yabghu* administered the western territories in the name of the *kaghan*. Below them were the *kaghan*'s counsellors, designated by the titles *chor*, *tarkhan* and *tudun*, who were responsible for administrative, diplomatic, military and legal matters. To make the administration of this large state more effective, the tribes were divided territorially into two groups, east (the Tölish) and west (the Tardush). Soldiers mustered from each of these groups constituted the right and left wings of the *kaghan*'s army, and were commanded by the most influential tribal leaders from each section as well as *shads*.

This dual structure of administration can be regarded as a natural development based on the societal structure of the Türk tribes. Tribal groups were led by dynastic tribes, such as the Ashina among the Gök Türk and the Yaghlakar among the Uighur, whose traditional ruling status was unquestioned. Each individual tribe, in turn, was ruled by a hereditary aristocracy whose members had the title of *beg* (also written *bek* and *bey*; plural *begler*). The political structure of the empire remained stable as long as relations between the *begler* and the common people, and the dynastic tribes and the other tribes remained harmonious, and all remained loyal to the *kaghan*.

According to both Chinese and Byzantine sources, administratively the First Gök Türk Empire was divided into four districts. These were the Central, Eastern, Western and Western Frontier regions. The *kaghan* ruled from the Central region which contained all of the sacred sites associated with the origin of the Türks. As previously mentioned, after 603 the empire was effectively divided with the Central and Eastern regions forming the Eastern Gök Türk Empire and the remaining two regions making up the Western Gök Türk

Empire. The relatively short-lived Second Gök Türk Empire emerged in the territory of the former Eastern Gök Türk Empire and does not seem to have been divided for administrative purposes.

Policy

The Gök Türk In both the First and Second Gök Türk Empires territorial expansion and defense of existing imperial territory were obvious policies of the *kaghan* and his officials. Peoples in the conquered territories became subject to the *kaghan's* rule and were required to provide regular tribute. However, relations between the Gök Türk and the powerful states to the east and west were extremely important for the survival of their state.

Like the earlier Hsiung-nu, the Gök Türks wanted (and needed) access to Chinese silk and other luxury goods, but without being dominated by their more populous neighbor. The First Gök Türk Empire emerged during a period of Chinese history referred to as the Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝, 420-589 CE) when several successive dynasties ruled the regions bordering the Gök Türks. At the time that Bumin established his state in 553 the Western Wei dynasty (西魏, 535-557) and the Northern Ch'i (pinyin Qi, 北齊, 550-577) ruled the regions bordering the Gök Türk. Shortly into the reign of Bumin's successor Muhan (r.553-572) the Western Wei were replaced by the Northern Chou (pinyin Zhou, 北周, 557-581). For almost 30 years both Muhan and his successor Taghpar (r. 572-581) were able to keep the Chinese divided by playing off one dynasty against the other and the judicious use of raids for booty. In the process they were able to conduct highly advantageous trade for Chinese luxury goods and silk. These goods were essential for maintaining the system of alliances that held the Gök Türk Empire together, and could also be used for both commercial or diplomatic purposes in their dealings with the Byzantines and the Persians.

Nonetheless, the nature of the relationship between the Gök Türk and the Chinese began to change in 581 when the Sui dynasty (隋朝, 581-618) came to power. The Sui united the Northern and Southern Dynasties, creating a wealthy, powerful state at the point when the First Gök Türk Empire was beginning to suffer from internal divisions and strife. It was during the Sui period that the two halves of the empire became independent and came under Chinese authority in 603. However, it was under the Sui's successors, the Tang dynasty (唐朝, 618-907) that the First Gök Türk Empire collapsed in 630 and that the Second Gök Türk Empire arose in 682. The rulers of the Second Gök Türk Empire pursued a policy of relations with China that was almost identical to that of the First Gök Türk Empire until its collapse in 744.

Although relations with China were a major concern for both the First and Second Gök Türk Empires, China was not the only powerful state that the First Gök Türk Empire was in contact with. To the west, between 557 and 561 the Gök Türk state cooperated with the Sasanians to destroy the Hephthalite Empire, with the result that the two empires became neighbors. Although the Sasanian king Khusrau I Anushirvan married one of the *kaghan's* daughters, relations between the Persians and the Gök Türk were often problematic, most often in relation to trade, and the silk trade in particular.

To bypass Persian interference in their long-distance trade the Gök Türk opened relations with the Byzantine Empire. Although by the mid-6th century the Byzantines could produce their own silk, commercial links along the northern Silk Roads were established between the two empires, and the Byzantines were keen to establish a military alliance with the Gök Türk against the Persians. As a result, a number of embassies were sent between 558 and 568.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. How was the Gök Türk state organized and why was organized in the way that it was?
2. Why were relations with China both necessary and dangerous for the Gök Türk?
3. What are our sources for the history of the First Gök Türk Empire and the Second Gök Türk Empire?

MILITARY

Overview Although much of what is known about the military organization, weapons and tactics of the Gök Türk and the Uighur indicates that they closely resembled those of other pastoral peoples of the Eurasian steppes. Nonetheless, there are some features of these peoples' militaries that are unique.

Gök Türk Contemporary historical sources almost always refer to cavalry and/or mounted archery in reference to Turkic military strength, and describe the use of typical tactics of the steppe – hit-and-run attacks to wear down the enemy; feigned retreats that were turned into an assault after drawing part of an enemy force away from the main body of the army, or led the pursuing force into an ambush; and swarming. These tactics all made the best use of the lightly armed mounted nomads' mobility (Gök Türk riders traveled with three or four extra mounts allowing them to ride for long periods with few stops) and flexibility, and were intended to reduce the enemy's strength to the point that the cavalry was certain that it could close with and destroy the enemy force. This regular cavalry was made up free tribesmen referred to as *erler* (singular *er*, 'man, warrior'). However, there are indications that the Gök Türk armies were more complex than simply a force consisting of large numbers of mounted archers.

First, there are mentions of heavy, armored cavalry units similar to the Sarmatian cataphracts. These units, called "wolves", wore armor and were mounted on larger horses than the regular cavalry. Presumably the "wolves" performed the same functions as cataphracts and later European mounted knights, acting as shock troops that broke enemy formations allowing the regular cavalry to more easily destroy the enemy.

Finally, the Tonyuquq inscription from the period of the Second Gök Türk Empire describes their army as consisting of two-thirds cavalry and one-third infantry. Unfortunately, the inscription does not provide any further information such as the ethnic composition of the infantry, or whether this military organization was a recent development or had been in use for a long period of time.

As for weapons, the main weapon was the compact, powerful compound bow with its distinctive recurved shape and made from wood, bone, horn and sometimes other materials. In addition, swords and spears were used to finish off an enemy at close quarters. The heavy cavalry presumably carried lances in their function as shock troops, and other weapons for close combat. As for the infantry described in the Gök Türk inscriptions, there is no information about their weapons or whether they wore any type of armor.

Functions of the Gök Türk and Uighur Armies The armies of both the Gök Türks and the Uighurs were used in all the expected roles for armies of their time – territorial expansion, subjugation of neighboring peoples, maintaining control over the conquered territories and peoples, as a threat in diplomatic relations with other states, and border defense. However, in addition to all of these functions the Turkic armies were important element in their states' commercial relations *vis a vis* China. Like the earlier Hsiung-nu, both the Gök Türk and the Uighur sought to maintain the flow of Chinese luxury goods, and silk in particular, into their empires either for redistribution as gifts for the higher levels of society, or for foreign trade. The use of military force in varying degrees from cross border booty raids to large scale invasions, or sometimes the mere threat of military force, was one way to guarantee access to these highly-desired Chinese products.

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Discussion Questions

1. What were the unique features of the Gök Türk and Uighur militaries in comparison to other steppe peoples?
2. Why did both the Gök Türk and the Uighur need the threat of credible military force in their dealings with China?

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Overview The organization of the Gök Türk imperial government in many ways parallels the differences between the classes in Gök Türk society. However, some important distinctions within each social level are not reflected in the structure of their government.

Nobility Noble status in Gök Türk society was the result of being either a member of the dynastic clan, the Ashina, from which all *kaghans* and other high-ranking leaders who were generally related to the *kaghan*, or by being a *beg*, a member of hereditary, aristocratic families within an individual tribe. In both cases, the right of the dynastic tribe to lead a tribal group, or the right of the *begler* to rule their tribe was unquestioned and sanctioned by tradition. While all members of the nobility clearly possessed a privileged position in their society, the *kaghans* were accorded a semi-divine status with numerous rituals and taboos associated with his position.

Common People Below the aristocracy were the common people, called the *igil qara bodun* in the Orkhon inscriptions. This class could be further subdivided into two groups, those who owned horses and had the means to live as pastoralists and fight in the armies, and those who were too poor to do so. This latter group was either settled in small villages where they practiced agriculture, or entered the service of wealthy noblemen working as servants or bodyguards.

Status across Class Certain indicators of status in Gök Türk society cut across class lines and could be found among both the nobility and the common people. The first was the status of being an *er* (plural *erler*), a term that can mean both "man" and "warrior". Any young man, noble or common, who was a full member of a family and tribe could become an *er* after reaching a designated age, passing some form of initiation that was generally some act of valor in the hunt or in battle, and then being given a new name called an *er adi*. While becoming an *er* provided a man with a certain degree of social status, the actual status of an *er* in both his tribe and larger society were dependent on two other factors – the young man's original social class (i.e. an *er* from a noble family had a higher status than one from a common family), and wealth.

Wealth was the second factor that affected an *er's* position in society. Wealth brought with it great social prestige, and the status of the wealthy man (*bay*) is often contrasted very unfavorably with that of the poor man (*chighay*) in the Orkhon inscriptions. Rather than evoke sympathy, poverty was regarded with utter contempt, since an *er* was considered to have the means – a horse, weapons, and daring – to go out and gain wealth.

Slaves The lowest class in Gök Türk society was occupied by slaves. Like most contemporary societies, slaves among the Gök Türk were generally war captives, but predominantly female since men were considered too dangerous to take as captives and frequently killed instead. These female captives had an

important function in Gök Türk society because the work they performed (as well as that of free Gök Türk women) left many more men free to pursue military activities.

Summary The Gök Türks' social hierarchy, from the *kaghan* and his nobles at the top to the slaves at the bottom, combined with the attitudes of both the nobility and the common people towards martial prowess and material wealth created a society that was based on and sustained by raiding and warfare. Courage demonstrated in war earned prestige, and victories provided both the wealth that brought additional status and power, and more captives. In addition, as the Orkhon inscriptions show, the Gök Türk believed that maintaining this hierarchical society would preserve their people's virtues and prevent them from being corrupted by Chinese luxuries and influence.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. What were the differences between the social structure of the Gök Türk and the Uighur, and why did these differences develop?
2. What was the status and role of the Sogdians in both the Gök Türk Empire and the Uighur Empire?

GENDER RELATIONS

Women in Gök Türk Society

Practically no information on the roles and status of women, other than the mention of female slaves, is available for either the First or Second Gök Türk Empires.

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INNOVATIONS

Overview In comparison to other world empires and states the First and Second Gök Türk Empires, the Uighur Empire and the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho were all relatively short-lived. Despite this, each of these states had an influence on world history and culture that far exceeded their short existence.

Gök Türks The First Gök Türk Empire played a major role in the history of Eurasia due to the territorial extent of their state. By expanding westward beyond the bounds of the earlier Hsiung-nu Empire, the

predominantly nomadic Gök Türk became the link between the settled states of the Byzantine Empire and Sasanian Iran in the west, and China to the east. Once linked through the Gök Türk state, long distance overland trade between China and the west revived, and where trade goes ideas, religions, and information generally follow.

It can be argued that the greatest historical contribution of Second Gök Türk Empire was leaving a written record of their leaders and the events of their time. The Old Turkic inscriptions from the Second Gök Türk Empire are the oldest evidence of the Turkic languages and are the only written records from any nomadic people in Inner Asia in the early medieval period. With these inscriptions historians who research Inner Asia are able to understand events from the perspective of a steppe people, rather than having to rely solely on the accounts of their often hostile neighbors.

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Chernykh, Evgenij N. "A Second Wave from the East: The Turks", *Nomadic Cultures in the Mega-Structure of the Eurasian World*. Brighton, MA, 2017; pp. 367-379.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why are the Old Turkic inscriptions from the Second Gök Türk Empire historically significant?

TRADE

Overview Trade was an extremely important element of both Gök Türk and Uighur society and politics. Trade not only provided essential goods that these societies could not produce themselves, but also luxury goods that could be traded profitably to other peoples or distributed to nobles as prestige gifts. However, the trade networks controlled by the Gök Türk and the Uighur brought more than wealth and exotic goods; they also were conduits for new ideas, art and culture.

Gök Türk Trade

The Gök Türk's earliest known external trade was with China, and despite the later expansion of the Gök Türk Empire to the west and the new trade opportunities it created, trade with China would remain vital to the Gök Türk state throughout its existence. Gök Türk trade was multi-faceted in that it was an important activity not only for purely economic reasons, but was also an essential part of both their internal as well as their external political relations. While cross-border trade between China and the Gök Türk had probably existed before its first mention in the historical sources, by the time it is described it has assumed a fairly well established form. The Gök Türk sought to obtain Chinese luxury goods, the most important among them being silk, in exchange for the produce of the steppe, especially horses that could be used by the Chinese military. If China appeared to be unwilling to trade in the items or the quantities that the Gök Türk wanted, booty raids or lending support to rival dynasties were used to pressure the Chinese to change their trade practices. Initially, before the westward expansion of the Gök Türk Empire many of these Chinese goods were used as prestige gifts for both Gök Türk nobility and for the leaders of the tribes allied with the Gök Türk. So important was this trade with China that some scholars have regarded it as the 'glue' that held the Gök Türk Empire together.

While in the east the Chinese could be directly pressured to trade on terms favorable to the Gök Türk, in the west the Gök Türk could influence and manipulate trade through control of the major trade routes that passed through Gök Türk territory or by extracting tribute from small, local rulers. However, like the trade with China, trade in the western regions of the Gök Türk Empire was intertwined with politics, and was strongly influenced by the Sogdians who now lived under Gök Türk rule. At some point before 568 a Gök Türk commercial mission led by Sogdians traveled to the Sasanids in the hope of obtaining permission to trade in silk in Sasanid territory. Persian officials bought the silk and then burned it, an indication that they were not inclined to grant permission. A second mission comprised entirely of Türks was sent to the Persians, but all died under somewhat suspicious circumstances. Following this event, the Gök Türk decided to revive the northern Silk Roads that circumvented Persian territory and extended to the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine officials, as it turned out, were less interested in trade than in an alliance against the Sasanians. Although political relations between the Gök Türk Empire and the Byzantines were often tense, trade flourished, enriching the Sogdians and their capital Samarkand. In addition, these trade networks that were established and supported by the Gök Türks stimulated the development of new trade routes and linked China, Central Asia, India, Persia, the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Summary

For all the Turkic states under consideration trade was a vital part of the economies and political arrangements. Chinese luxury goods in general, and silk in particular, were a major element in maintaining internal loyalties among the tribes within these states, as well as generating wealth from trade with peoples outside their borders. In all of these states, the Sogdians were extremely active in trade directly, and in influencing trade policy in general.

The reopening of the northern silk roads during the First Gök Empire had a profound impact not only on trade between China, Central Asia and the Mediterranean, but also helped to stimulate the development of other trade routes to Khwarezm and other regions.

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Discussion Questions

1. What was distinctive about trade under the First Gök Türk Empire in contrast to trade under the Second Gök Türk Empire and the Uighur states?
2. What was the effect of the Persians' reluctance to conduct trade with the Gök Türks and the Sogdians?
3. How and why did foreign trade create internal divisions in Gök Türk and Uighur society?
4. What was the role of the Sogdians in foreign trade in the Gök Türk and Uighur states? What were the risks to these states from Sogdian involvement in foreign trade?

RELIGION

Overview The GökTürk and Uighur states were characterized by religious diversity and played an important role in the history and development of religions in central Eurasia. In addition, the discovery of numerous religious texts in Old Turkic and artwork with religious subject matter has contributed greatly to modern scholars' understanding of the history, development, beliefs and practices of Central Asian religions in general and Buddhism and Manichaeism in particular.

Religion among the Gök Türk

In general, the Gök Türk seem to have followed their ancestral spiritual beliefs. These included the worship of several deities, among them the sky god *Tengri*, to whom sacrifices of horses and sheep were offered during the fifth month of the year; a goddess associated with the household and fertility, *Umay*; and a god of the road, or possibly fate, *Yol Tengri*. In addition to these major divinities, there were rituals related to cults of fire, earth and water, sacred forests and sacred mountains, as well as elements of ancestor worship and indications of belief in totemic animals, particularly the wolf. Another link between this world and the spirit world was the shaman, who journeyed to the spirit world in a trance in order to cure illness or foretell the future.

However, it is clear that as the Gök Türk state grew and came into greater contact with other peoples they were influenced by other religious systems. One clear example of this is the Gök Türk *kaghan* Taghpar (or Taspar, r. 572-581) who became a Buddhist and sponsored the building of temples and translation of Buddhist scriptures. Although none of the following kaghans followed Taghpar's example, Buddhism, as well as Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Manichaeism to much lesser degrees, were tolerated in the Gök Türk lands. Despite this tolerant attitude, during the time of the Second Gök Türk Empire, Tonyuqaq warned the Gök Türk to neither build Buddhist or Taoist temples, nor adopt these creeds, since they threatened the Gök Türk's military strength which was derived from their nomadic lifestyle.

Summary

The religious beliefs of Gök Türk and the Uighur show a fascinating mix of traditional, indigenous beliefs and adaptations of foreign religious traditions. The Uighur adoption of Manichaeism was not only a unique event in world history, but also led to the preservation of most of the Manichaean art and writings that we have today. Later, when Buddhism became the predominant religion, the Uighur left a rich legacy of sophisticated art and religious literature in their own language.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why were the Gök Türk concerned about the adoption of foreign religions by their people?

ART

The surviving art of the Gök Türk is almost entirely from the period of the Second Gök Türk Empire, and consists primarily of sculpture in various forms. Perhaps the best-known examples of Gök Türk art are the stelae containing the Orkhon Inscriptions. While the inscriptions in Chinese and the Old Turkic script themselves have artistic merit,

both the Bilge Kaghan and Kül Tigin stelae contain sculptural elements. Both were originally erected on stone turtles and depict a twisted dragon and ibex at the top of the stela. In addition, the funerary complexes in which these monuments were originally situated included a number of smaller sculptures that are more crudely carved than the stelae. Some of these figures may depict the deceased ruler and his spouse, while others may represent those who will serve the ruler in the afterlife. One of the most finely rendered sculptures is the head of Kül Tigin, brother of Bilge Kaghan. He is shown wearing an elaborate headdress which has a bird, possibly a raven, with outspread wings on the front.

However, sculpture may not have been the only art produced by or for the Gök Türk. The Bilge Kaghan inscription states not only that the stelae were carved by Chinese artists, but also indicates that some Chinese artists were commissioned to produce paintings as well. Unfortunately for modern scholars, the text does not mention the subjects of these paintings and no Gök Türk painting appears to have survived to the present day.

The only other examples of Gök Türk artistic tastes are found in some of the grave goods that have been discovered in archaeological excavations. These consist primarily of gold and silver drinking vessels, animal figurines and jewelry. The quality of workmanship is quite high for all of these objects, but whether they were domestically produced or were imported prestige goods is not clear.

Readings

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LITERATURE

Overview The period of the Gök Türk empires and the Uighur states witnessed the birth of Turkic literature, although much the earliest stages of Turkic literature remains a mystery. Nonetheless, from the earliest examples dating from the Second Gök Türk Empire through the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho, a wide variety of works were written using several scripts in the Old Turkic and closely related Old Uighur languages.

Gök Türk Literature

The vast majority of writings that have survived from the period of the Second Gök Türk Empire are inscriptions, the most famous of which are the Orkhon inscriptions, discovered in the Orkhon Valley in the late 19th century. These inscriptions were carved on two large stone monuments in the 8th century in honor of two rulers, Kul Tigin and Bilge Kaghan. Other long, important inscriptions were found further east, the Tonyukuk (or Bain Tsokto) inscriptions on two stelae. These monuments were erected by Tonyukuk, advisor to four different *kaghans*, himself in the early 8th century and pre-date the Orkhon inscriptions. A number of other shorter, less complete inscriptions, as well as graffiti and some short inscriptions on pottery have also been found not only in the Orkhon region, but also in the Yenisei region, the Altai Mountains, and in the vicinity of Talas.

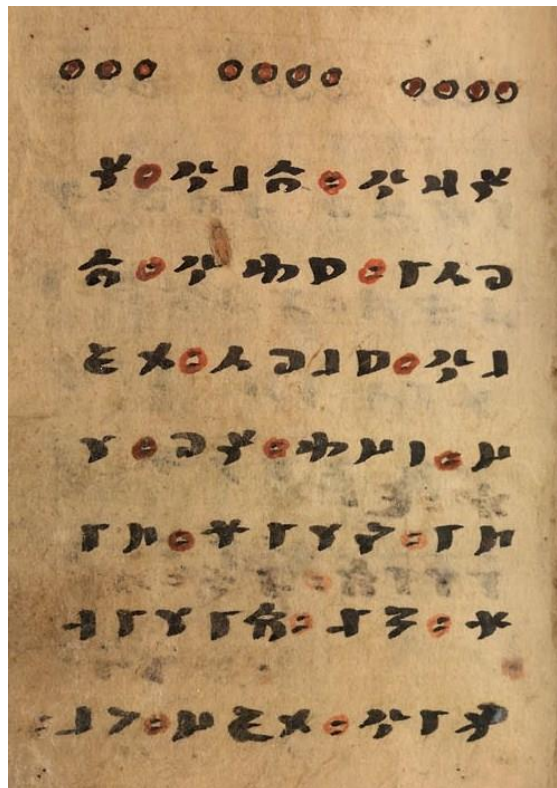
These monuments contain a variety of information - the early history of the Gök Türks, the deeds of those who had the monuments made, information on relations with other states, and advice to future rulers. The phrasing of the inscriptions has led some scholars to believe that they are a reflection of a long tradition of oral epics, and one renowned scholar of Central Asia, Christopher I. Beckwith said in regard to these inscriptions that "...the Turkic texts are sometimes nearly as moving as the poetry of *Beowulf*."

These Old Turkic inscriptions are extremely significant for several reasons. First, they provide accurate information on both events and significant figures in Central Asia in the early medieval period. Second, they are the only records in this era that were produced by one of the Central Asian steppe peoples rather than

the settled civilizations that bordered on the steppes. Finally, they are the earliest examples of any Turkic language and have contributed greatly to understanding the development of the Turkic languages.

All of the Old Turkic inscriptions are written in the Old Turkic alphabet (also called the Orkhon alphabet/script, the Gök Türk alphabet/script, or the Orkhon-Yenisei alphabet/script).

There have also been a limited number of manuscripts written in the Old Turkic script discovered in Xinjiang. The most famous of these was discovered at Tun-huang, a book of divination titled *Irk Bitig* (𐰽𐰺𐰍:𐰺𐰏𐰤), *The Book of Omens* or *The Book of Divination*.



Page from the Irk Bitig (Wikicommons)

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Discussion Questions

1. Why are the Old Turkic inscriptions from the Second Gök Türk Empire important both historically and linguistically?