

UIGHUR GENDER RELATIONS

Women in Uighur Society

The information about women in the Uighur Empire and the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho is more readily available from both written sources and art work.

In addition to their traditional roles as wives and mothers (roles that often went unrecorded in the historical sources), there are two distinctive groups of women known from the time of the Uighur Empire. The first is the *katun*, or principal wife of the *kaghan*, who was very often of Chinese origin. In fact, of the thirteen *kaghans* who ruled the Uighur Empire, seven had Chinese *katuns*, and three of these women the daughters of the Tang emperor. These *katuns* were often involved in court politics both during and after their husbands' deaths; the Chinese *katun* of the last Uighur *kaghan* upon her return the Tang capital of Ch'ang-an in 843 apologized for failing in her duty to "pacify" the Uighurs.

One surprising role that some Uighur women filled was that of being a warrior. At least one historical source mentions female mounted archers as part of the *kaghan's* army and among the soldiers the *kaghan* provided to the Tang.

Finally, religion provided some Uighur women with the opportunity to exert some influence within their society. Both the Manichaeans and Buddhists accepted women as nuns, and the supervision of nuns administration of convents was in the hands of women. In addition, the murals from the Buddhist shrines at Bezeklik depict a number of aristocratic Uighur women who were important donors for the construction of these cave shrines. This would indicate that these women had considerable wealth that they were able to use as they saw fit.

Summary

Despite the limited sources that provide information on the status and roles of women among the Gök Türk and the Uighur, it appears that women had more options among the Uighur than the earlier Gök Türk. This would seem to be the result of both the greater complexity of the more urban Uighur's society, and the roles that were available for women in Manichaean and Buddhist religious institutions.

Readings

Christian, David. "Turkic Empires of the East", in *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, Vol. 1. Malden, MA, 1998, pp. 247-276.

Drompp, Michael R. *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire: A Documentary History*, Leiden, 2005.

Golden, Peter. *Central Asia in World History*, Oxford, 2011.

Sinor, Denis and Klyashtorny, S. G. "The Turk Empire", in Harmatta, János et al. *History of civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol 3. Paris, 1994, pp. 327-347.

Discussion Questions

1. Why were there apparently more opportunities for women in Uighur society than in Gök Türk society?
2. How did religion affect the status of women in Uighur society?