

THE TÜRK EMPIRE*

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THE FIRST TÜRK EMPIRE (553–682)	327
Ethnogenesis	327
The economy	331
Political history	332
THE SECOND TÜRK EMPIRE (682–745)	335
Resurgence of the Türk Empire	335
Political and social structure	336
Relations with China	338
The empire in crisis	339
The last war with T'ang China	340
The final decade	341
Epigraphic memorials of the Türks	342
The Türgesh state	346
The Uighurs and the Karluks	347

* See [Map 7](#).

Part One

THE FIRST TÜRK EMPIRE (553–682)

(*D. Sinor*)

The two centuries during which the Türks were the dominant power in Inner Asia would seem to mark a turning point since, for the first time in recorded history, an essentially nomad empire bordered simultaneously on three major sedentary civilizations: those of China, Iran, and the Western world as represented by Byzantium. A more or less permanent link was established between these three civilizations, allowing the free flow of trade and with it, one must presume, a range of ideas and information.

There are other reasons for attaching great importance to the emergence of the Türks: not only were they the first Altaic people to leave behind indigenous historical documents; they were also the first Altaic people to leave behind documents written in an Altaic language, namely Turkic – these constitute the earliest textual evidence of any Altaic language. It follows from these two points that the Türks were the first people to form a major nomad empire centred on present-day Mongolia whose language can be established with absolute certainty. The attribution of a given language to any of the earlier great nomad empires (such as, for instance, that of the Hsiung-nu or the Juan-juan) remains highly speculative. Finally, the Türks became the eponymous people of all the Turks who followed them throughout history. We are particularly fortunate in that the history and civilization of the Türks can be studied through a variety of written sources, including Chinese, Persian, Armenian, Greek and Latin texts, in addition to the indigenous Türk or Sogdian inscriptions.

Ethnogenesis

In terms of political history, the Türks entered the scene in 552 with the revolt of the Türk *kaghan* (chief) Bumin, who overthrew the Juan-juan Empire of which his people had, up

to then, formed an integral part. For the period preceding this fateful event, we must rely on the (often self-contradictory) testimony of Chinese sources.

According to the *Chou shu*, ‘No doubt the Türks are a detached branch of the Hsiung-nu,’ an opinion taken over verbatim by the *Pei-shih*. But the *Chou shu* also relates ‘another tradition’ according to which the Türks ‘originated in the country of So, located north of the Hsiung-nu’. Since the location of So cannot be established, the information is of little use and simply shows that, according to this ‘other tradition’, the Türks were not a part of the Hsiungnu confederation. Moreover, Chinese sources are wont to attribute Hsiung-nu origin to any people belonging to the vast group of Northern or Western Barbarians. Indeed, such an indication may almost be considered a simple stylistic device, just as Greek sources would attribute Scythian origins to any nomad people appearing on the steppe.

More importantly, Chinese sources record at least three different legends concerning the origin of the Türks. The first of these, which we may call that of ‘The Abandoned Child Brought up by a Wolf’, is related with slight variations by both the *Chou shu* and the *Pei-shih*. It tells the story of a young boy mutilated by the enemy and thrown into a marsh where he has intercourse with a she-wolf. The wolf and the boy subsequently take refuge in a cavern, where the wolf gives birth to ten boys. Several generations later the Türks emerge from the cavern and become the blacksmiths of the Juan-juan. There is another legend, also related in the *Chou shu*, which, in the words of this source, ‘differs from the other [legend], nevertheless it shows that [the Türks] descended from a wolf’.

A third legend is preserved only in a collection of anecdotes, curious and miraculous histories probably compiled in 860 and entitled the *Yu-yang tsa-tsu*. According to this legend, which we may call that of ‘The Spirit of the Lake’, the ancestor of the Türks, who is called Shê-mo-shê-li and lives in a cavern, has a liaison with the daughter of the lake spirit. One day, as the Türks are preparing for a great hunt, the girl says to Shê-mo: ‘Tomorrow during the hunt a white deer with golden horns will come out from *the cavern where your ancestors were born* [author’s emphasis]. If your arrow hits the deer we will keep in touch as long as you live, but if you miss it our relationship will end.’ In the course of the hunt, a follower of Shê-mo kills the deer. Shê-mo angrily decapitates the culprit and orders that a human sacrifice be established in which a man of that follower’s tribe be beheaded. According to the *Yu-yang tsa-tsu*, the sacrifice remained in practice ‘to this day’.

There is no reason to impugn the authenticity of these legendary traditions, which clearly reveal the composite ethnic character of the Türks. The three legends differ in so many essential points (which cannot be examined here in detail) that they cannot possibly represent a single tradition.

The theme of the ‘wolf’ in two of the three Türk legends is shared with the Wu-sun, who preceded the Türk Empire by many centuries. Also shared with the Wu-sun is the theme of the mutilated child abandoned in the wilderness by the enemy. According to the *Shih-chi*, the Wu-sun ruler K’un-mo was cast out to die when still a baby, but was nourished by birds that brought him meat and by a wolf that suckled him. The story is also related in the *Han shu* and its close relationship with one of the Türk origin myths is obvious. There is, however, the significant difference that, whereas in the Wu-sun myth the wolf saves the ancestor of the tribe, it is not – as in the case of the Türks – the ancestor of the people. (The connections with Mongol myths, though undeniable, should not concern us here.)

The theme of the ‘cavern’ that appears in two of the three Türk ancestral legends has its parallels in later Mongol mythology. More importantly, it establishes a link between the Türks and the Kyrgyz, whose ancestor, according to the *Yu-yang tsa-tsu*, ‘lived in a cavern to the north of the Kögmän mountain’. According to the same source, however, ‘the Kyrgyz do not belong to the race of the wolf’.

There is convincing evidence to show that Türk ceremonial practices took into account the existence of these two themes, namely those of the cavern and the wolf. For example, the *Pei-shih* clearly states that, ‘In front of the gate to the camp [the Türks] placed a standard with a wolf’s head on it, so as to show that they had not forgotten their origins.’ This is confirmed by the *Chou shu*: ‘[The Türks] put golden wolves’ head on their standards. . . The Türks descended from a wolf and did not want to forget their origin.’ A basrelief on the Sogdian Bugut inscription erected by Türk rulers represents a she-wolf with a small human figure under her belly and thus supports the evidence of written sources. The present author ventures the hypothesis that the ‘wolf theme’ represents an Indo-European, perhaps Iranian, element in the Türk system of beliefs linking at least some sections of the Türk ruling class to the Sogdians and, beyond them, to the Wu-sun who – for all we know – may have been Iranians. At the same time, it must be emphatically stated that the widely accepted view according to which the Wu-sun had blue eyes and blond hair rests on a textual misunderstanding, as was shown by Otto Franke as early as 1904.

Nor is the theme of the cavern a literary invention: it was a belief actively held by the Türks. The *Yu-yang tsa-tsu* even gives the name of the cavern (A-shih-tê), which is that of a Türk clan of great importance, a perennial antagonist of the A-shih-na clan, whose claim to rule the Türks is clearly implied by the other two legends. The legend of ‘The Spirit of the Lake’ speaks of a ‘birth cavern’ and the existence of such an ‘ancestral cavern’ is demonstrated by the *Chou shu*’s statement that every year the Türk *kaghan* leads the notables of his people ‘to the ancestral cavern to offer a sacrifice’. The *Tung tien* (193,

14a) cites from a work (now, alas, lost) entitled *On the Origin and Development of the Türks* in which the caverns of the Türks were also mentioned.

Of the various themes which can be identified in the Türk ancestral legends, those of the wolf and the cavern appear together only in one, namely, ‘The Abandoned Child Brought up by a Wolf’, which justifies the rule of the A-shih-na clan. The theme of the cavern also appears in ‘The Spirit of the Lake’, though this story differs so fundamentally from the other two legends that it cannot be ascribed to the same clan. It is just possible – and the suggestion is made with the utmost caution – that this theme indicates some links with the Kyrgyz.

The composite character of the Türk nation, as revealed by an examination of their ancestral legends, is supported by evidence of a different nature. Türk civilization as we know it from the written sources contained a number of specific elements which are atypical for Turkic peoples. Among them were, first, a system of orientation facing east; and, second, an unusual system of numerals where, in double-digit numbers, the tens are indicated by the next highest multiple of ten, e.g. *bir otuz* ‘21’ (= one thirty), and which cannot be of Turkic origin.

It has been established beyond doubt that the population of the Türk Empire was multilingual – the existence of the Bugut inscription, written in Sogdian, would in itself prove this point. It has also been shown that Türk – as used in the inscriptions of the Orkhon – contains a number of Samoyed or Ugric loan words which are specific to this language and form no part of the common Turkic vocabulary. Even in the solemn, funerary style of these inscriptions, Ugric or Samoyed words appear, expressing concepts as common as ‘word’ (*ay, sab*) or, indeed, ‘horse’ (*yunt*). Their occurrence in Türk indicates the presence of Ugric or Samoyed elements in that stratum of Türk society which had some cultural influence on the ruling class. It can be taken for granted that the language of the funerary inscriptions (be it Sogdian as in Bugut, or Turkic as on the Orkhon) was that of the contemporary ruling class. Reference in the Orkhon inscriptions to a feminine deity, Umay, of clearly Mongol origin, attests to the presence of some Mongol element within the fabric of early Türk civilization.

Türk personal names appear in a great variety of sources and scripts which, apart from Türk itself, include Chinese, Sogdian and Greek. No methodical, comprehensive study of these names has been undertaken, but even a cursory examination of Türk anthroponyms reveals a substantial number which cannot be explained from Turkic. It is seldom easy to reconstruct the original form of a proper name that is attested only in Chinese transcription. Nevertheless there have been several successful attempts, particularly in instances where the language to which the name belongs is known – as, for example, with Chinese

transcriptions of Buddhist technical terms. However, the original Turkic forms of many Türk proper names have not yet been established. Such is the case, for example, of the clan names A-shih-na or A-shih-tê (attempts to see in the former a Mongol (?) word meaning ‘wolf’ lack proper phonetic foundations). Nor has a satisfactory Turkic form been established for the Türk personal name that is written as Silziboulos in Greek characters.

In several instances (for example, Nivar *kaghan*; see page 333) the personal names of Türk dignitaries are clearly non-Turkic – with the exception of a few, clearly specified cases, the initial *n-* does not occur in Old Turkic. It is well known that a Turkic word cannot begin with a consonant cluster, yet the names of two Türk chiefs appear in Greek sources as Spartseugoun and Stembis. The latter name is known also in Chinese transcription and occurs in the Orkhon inscriptions either with or without the initial *i-*: *shtmi* or *ishtmi*, to be read Ishtemi. There is no reason why the Greek transcription would have ignored an initial *i-* had the name had one in its original form. There are, however, very good linguistic reasons for the Türks to attach a prosthetic *i-* to an initial *st-*consonant cluster. Clearly, the name Ishtemi, though borne by a Türk ruler (see page 332), was not Turkic. Although a detailed examination of Türk proper names is beyond the scope of the present chapter, it is clear that many of the personal and tribal names and dignitary titles used by the Türks are neither Turkic, nor Mongol, nor Iranian.

The economy

In 552, as previously mentioned, a successful Türk uprising overthrew the Juan-juan ruler A-na-kui and effectively ended the Juan-juan Empire which, for the previous century and a half, had been the dominant power on the eastern steppe. Bumin, the leader of the coup, is said to have been angered by A-na-kui’s refusal to grant him the hand of one of his daughters on the grounds that the suitor was merely a ‘blacksmith slave’ and thus unworthy of such an honour. There is overwhelming evidence that the Türks – the people of Bumin – were originally a group of metallurgists engaged in the mining or processing of iron, or possibly both. The above-mentioned ‘caverns’ of the Türks were, in fact, underground mines where they laboured for the principal benefit of the Juan-juan.

Thus the overthrow of Juan-juan rule was not the result of an invasion by an external enemy but was brought about by an internal upheaval, the revolt of a discontented faction which, ethnically or linguistically, may not have been different from the dominant group. (There is as yet no conclusive evidence as to the language of the Juan-juan – it might even have been Turkic.) The only distinction between the Juan-juan and the Türks which can be established with any degree of certainty relates to occupation. To put it in simple terms,

through Bumin's action the reins of power were seized by the metallurgists of the Juan-juan Empire.

Although (if for no other reason than military necessity) pastoral nomadism was the dominant economic activity of the ruling stratum of the newly created Türk state, it did not involve the whole population. Besides metallurgy – which, at some time, the Türks seem to have left to the Kyrgyz – important sections of the population must have continued to provide for themselves through hunting and fishing, the traditional economic activities of the forest region where pastoral nomadism could not be practised and where many Türks continued to live. That the leaders were preoccupied with the necessities of daily life is evident from the words on Bilge *kaghan's* funeral stele: 'I [Bilge] did not reign over a people that was rich; I reigned over a people weak and frightened, a people that had no food in their bellies and no cloth on their backs.' In some campaigns the Türks were even short of horses. The inscription of Tonyuquq (see below) reveals that at least on one occasion 'two parts [of the Türk army] were mounted, one part was on foot'. The very precariousness of their existence made the Türks, or at least their leaders, vulnerable to the lure of those 'Chinese riches' mentioned in the inscriptions.

Political history

Bumin died shortly after he had deposed A-na-kui. He was followed by his son Kuo-lo (Qara?), who ruled for only a few months. On his death, the government of the newly created Türk Empire was divided between Bumin's other son Muhan (553–572) and Ishtemi (553– ?), Muhan's uncle, and brother of the late Bumin. Muhan ruled over the eastern part of the empire, centred on Mongolia, while Ishtemi was in charge of the western areas. The heart of the empire – where the 'ancestral cavern' and Mount Ötükän, the sacred forest of the Türks, were located – was the eastern part. Thus it can be said that almost from the moment of its inception, the Türk Empire was bicephalous.

Uncle and nephew embarked on a series of military campaigns. In the east, this brought victory over the Kitans and the incorporation of the Kyrgyz into the Türk state. In the west, between 557 and 561, the Hephthalite Empire was crushed through a joint action of the Türks (probably led by Ishtemi) and the Sasanian king, Khusrau I Anushirvan, resulting in the establishment of a common border between the two empires. Through their conquests the Türks now controlled large sections of the trade routes to the West and, edged by their Sogdian subjects, they wished to take advantage of the lucrative silk trade formerly dominated by the Hephthalites. After their attempts to establish commercial footholds in Persia met with failure, they aimed to bypass Persia altogether and establish direct links with Byzantium, the principal consumer of silk.

The first Türk delegation known to us arrived in Constantinople in 563. It had been sent by Askel, head of the first tribe of the Nu-shih-pi tribal federation of the Western Türks. It was followed five years later by a more substantial trade delegation headed by a Sogdian called Maniakh. He was received by Emperor Justin II, who was more interested in securing an ally to the rear of the Sasanians (with whom, since 527, Byzantium had been in almost permanent conflict) than in the importation of silk. According to the Byzantine historian Menander, the Türk ruler on whose behalf Maniakh negotiated was Silziboulos (who is usually wrongly identified with Ishtemi, even though this name is rendered Stem-bis in Greek sources; see above). Silziboulos and his son Turxath were minor rulers in the westernmost parts of the Türk Empire, perhaps on the same level of authority as the previously mentioned Askel. Menander clearly states that Turxath was but one of the eight chiefs among whom rule over the Türks was divided.

On his return journey, Maniakh was accompanied by a Byzantine counter-embassy led by the *strategos* Zemarkhos, who was, in his turn, very well received by Silziboulos. Other diplomatic exchanges followed until 572 when, on his second mission to the Türks, the Byzantine envoy Valentine was received by Turxath (perhaps Türk *shad*), son of the just deceased Silziboulos. In sign of mourning, members of the Byzantine delegation were not only requested to lacerate their faces, but were given a bitterly hostile reception by Turxath, who accused the Byzantine emperor of treason for having given asylum to the Avars (considered by him to be fugitive subjects of the Türks: see [Chapter 13](#)). At that time the principal ruler of the Western Frontier Region of the Türk Empire was Tardu, a son of Ishtemi, whose year of accession is unknown, although it cannot have been later than 572 since it was to him that the irate Turxath sent Valentine.

The principal Türk ruler Muhan (553–572) was followed on the throne by his younger brother Taghpar (572–581).¹ Having converted to Buddhism, Taghpar embarked on an ambitious programme of building monasteries and sponsoring the translation of Buddhist canonical works, presumably from Chinese into Sogdian and Turkic. These activities continued under Taghpar's brother, Nivar (581–587) (his name is read Jibü by Harmatta), whose court became an important centre of Buddhist learning. It was at the time of Nivar that the rift separating Eastern and Western Türks occurred, an event which has long been thought to have taken place immediately following the death of Bumin.

At Taghpar's death Muhan's son, Apa *kaghan* (known as Ta-lo-pien in Chinese sources), had not taken kindly to his uncle Nivar occupying the throne. He enlisted the help of Tardu but failed to oust Nivar, who received support from his father-in-law, the Sui emperor Kao-tsu. Obsessed with the desire to have a state of his own, Apa *kaghan* then turned against

¹ Harmatta's reading instead of the currently used Taspar.

his former ally Tardu, chased him from his domain and established the state of the Western Türks opposed to that of the eastern parts controlled by Nivar. In 585 Tardu fled to the Sui court; nothing further is known of his activities until 594, when he reappeared in a conflict with the Eastern Türk *kaghan*, Yung-yü-lü (588–599). It seems likely that the Türk *kaghan* who, in 598, wrote a letter to the Byzantine emperor Maurice describing himself as ‘lord of the seven races, master of the seven climes’ was Tardu, once again riding high, ruling over an ill-determined part of Türk territory. The destiny of this extraordinary man remains unknown; chased by a revolt in 603, he fled and we lose his traces for ever.

Apa *kaghan* did not live to enjoy the fruits of his treacherous victory over Tardu. After being taken prisoner by Nivar’s successor Ch’u-lo-hu (587–588), he disappeared from the stage of history. His place was taken by Ni-li (587–604?), a somewhat shadowy figure; he may have been the ‘Great King of the Türks’ who, according to the Armenian historian Sebeos, was killed in battle in 589 by the Sasanian general, Bahram Chobin, while fighting Hormizd IV in Persia. Türk involvement in Iranian affairs continued under T’ungyabghu (619–630), *kaghan* of the Western Türks, an ally of Emperor Heraclius against Khusrau II. T’ungyabghu received the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang, who was duly impressed by the magnificence of the Türk court. However, pride and unbridled ambition caused T’ungyabghu’s downfall. In the words of the *T’ang shu*, he was no longer ‘good to his people and the tribes hated him’ and he fell victim to a revolt led by the Karluks.

The Chinese, past masters in the art of fighting Barbarians with Barbarians, exploited the Türks’ endemic internal dissensions to the full. In the words of the *Sui shu*, ‘The Türks prefer to destroy each other rather than to live side-by-side. They have 1,000, nay 10,000 clans who are hostile and kill one another.’ Because, owing to their location, the Eastern Türks presented the greater danger, the short-lived Chinese dynasties of the period attempted to keep them at bay with trade concessions which were tantamount to the paying of tribute. Thus, for example, both Muhan and Taghpar received 100,000 pieces of silk per year from the Northern Chou, a gift barely compensated for by the horses sent to China by Taghpar.

Both Kao-tsu, founder of the T’ang dynasty, and his son T’ai-tsung skilfully played off one Türk ruler against another. Constant attempts were made to persuade T’ungyabghu and other Western Türk rulers to keep the Eastern Türk *kaghans* Shih-pi (609–619) and Hsieh-li (619–634) at bay, but final defeat came through direct Chinese victory. T’ai-tsung’s troops routed those of Hsieh-li who, taken prisoner, died in China. With his death, darkness would descend on the Eastern Türk Empire for half a century.

The Western Türk Empire, which was less bothersome for the Chinese, was left to its own devices of self-destruction. Always a confederation of tribes acting more or less

independently, the Western Türk state was swiftly falling apart. The Ten Arrows (*On oq*) or, as the Chinese called them, the Ten Clans were rent by the murderous conflicts of their leaders. The Orkhon inscriptions give the reasons for the internal decay:

Because of discord between the nobles and the commoners, because of the cunning and deceitfulness of the Chinese who set against each other younger and elder brothers, nobles and commoners, the Türk people caused the disintegration of the empire that had been their own, [and] caused the ruin of the *kaghan* who had been their *kaghan*.

Ho-lu, the last *de facto* ruler of the Western Türks, was captured by the Chinese in 657 and died two years later, to be buried beside Hsieh-li. Thus the two rulers of fratricidal Türk Empire were put to rest, side-by-side and in Chinese soil.

Part Two

THE SECOND TÜRK EMPIRE (682–745)

(S. G. Klyashtorny)

Resurgence of the Türk Empire

After the First Türk Empire had been defeated by the emperor T'ai-tsung in 630, the Eastern Türk tribes were resettled north of the Ordos and Shansi. T'ai-tsung drafted his new subjects into the service of the T'ang Empire, but the existing tribal and administrative system was not altered and measures were taken to attract the Türk aristocracy to the imperial service. The author of the ancient Türk inscriptions in honour of Kül-tegin (732) notes with disapproval, when speaking of those times, that 'The Türk *begs* abandoned their Türk titles. The *begs* who went to China held Chinese titles, obeyed the Chinese emperor; they served him for fifty years' (KT, E 7–8). For most of the Türk people, forcibly resettled in strictly defined regions, life was hard. The Türk historian recalls those five decades as a time of shame, degradation and humiliation; the heaviest burden was the 'blood tribute', the obligation to fight in the imperial wars: 'Your blood flowed like a river; your bones were heaped up like a mountain; your *beg*-like sons became slaves; your lady-like daughters became servants' (KT, E 23).

The Türk uprising in 679–681 was at first unsuccessful, although it led, in 682, to the withdrawal of Kutlug-chor, one of the Türk leaders of the *kaghan* tribe of the A-shih-na, into the Gobi desert. Once they had established themselves in the Yin Shan mountains (*Čuğay quzi* in ancient Turkic), Kutlugchor and his closest comrade-in-arms, Tonyuquq, succeeded in winning the support of most of the Türks and conducted successful military operations against the imperial forces in Shansi between 682 and 687. Kutlug-chor proclaimed himself Ilterish *kaghan*, and in so doing ushered in the resurgent Türk Empire.

In 687 Ilterish *kaghan* left the Yin Shan mountains and turned his united and battle-hardened army to the conquest of the Türk heartlands in central and northern Mongolia. Between 687 and 691 the Tokuz-Oghuz tribes and the Uighurs, who had occupied these territories, were routed and subjugated; their chief, Abuz *kaghan*, fell in battle. The centre of the Second Türk Empire shifted to the Ötükän mountains (now called the Khangai mountains), on the rivers Orkhon, Selenga and Tola. Having united two powerful tribal groups under his command – the Türks and the Tokuz-Oghuz – Ilterish *kaghan* was now a dangerous menace to the T'ang Empire.²

Political and social structure

Under Ilterish *kaghan* the traditional structure of the Türk state was restored. The empire created by Ilterish and his successors was a territorial union of ethnically related and hierarchically co-ordinated tribes and tribal groups; they were ideologically linked by common beliefs and accepted genealogies, and politically united by a single military and administrative organization (*el*) and by general legal norms (*törüis*). The tribal organization (*bodun*) and the political structure (*el*) complemented one another, defining the strength and durability of social ties; in the words of the Türk inscriptions, the *khan* (*kaghan*) '*el tutup bodunim başladim*' (controlled the state and was head of the tribal group).

The principal group in the empire was composed of twelve Türk tribes headed by the dynastic tribe of the Ashina.³ Next in political importance was the Tokuz-Oghuz tribal group of 'nine Oghuz [tribes]'.⁴ The Tokuz-Oghuz were more numerous than the Türk tribes themselves, but were politically less united; however, at the beginning of the seventh century, they were united under the Uighurs, themselves a group of ten tribes led by the dynastic tribe of the Yaghlakar. Two further confederations of tribes played an active role in the political life of the empire – the Karluks and the Basmils. Each individual tribe had its leader, the *irkin*, and each tribal group was headed by an *elteber*. Türk monuments

² Klyashtorny, 1964, pp. 25–32.

³ Czeglédy, 1972, pp. 275–81.

⁴ Czeglédy, 1982, pp. 89–93.

frequently mention these important representatives of the tribal aristocracy – the *elteber* of the Uighurs, the great *irkin* of the Bayirku, and others.

The administrative structure of the empire, which incorporated the tribal leaders, was more complex. At the head of the administration stood the *kaghan* and his closest kinsmen, who held the titles of *shad* and *yabghu*. The *kaghan* was surrounded by his counsellors (*buyur*), who discharged military, administrative, diplomatic and legal functions and bore titles such as *tarkhan*, *chor* and *tudun*. In order to facilitate the administration, the tribes were divided into two territorial groups, the Tardush (western) and the Tölish (eastern). The soldiery of these two groups composed the right and left wings of the army's battle order, and they were led by the close kinsmen of the *kaghan* (the *shads*) and the most influential tribal leaders of each wing.

With its dual system of tribal and political principles, the administrative structure was a natural reflection of the social structure of the ancient Türk community. Its highest stratum consisted of *begs* (*begler* in Türk), a hereditary aristocracy; it was composed of members of families whose special status in the management of the affairs of the tribe was considered unchallengeable and hallowed by tradition. The dynastic families and tribes (the A-shih-na, the A-shih-tê and the Yaghlakar) formed the élite of this hereditary aristocracy. Another stratum of that same community was the *igil qara bodun* (the 'common people'). Any deterioration of relations between strata or tribes represented a grave threat to the political organization of the empire. The *kaghan*, who personified the unity of the community and exploited its military and economic potential to the full, clearly had a vested interest in minimizing all opposition. As the manifestos recorded in inscriptions dating from the *kaghanate* show, there were frequent appeals for unity between the *begs* and the people and for obedience to the *kaghan*.

Whereas the *kaghan* was the personification and supreme power of the community, its base was the fraternity of full male members of the family and tribe, who were designated *er* (man-warrior). Any youth could become an *er* when he reached a certain age and had accomplished an initiation rite (some exploit in battle or the hunt), receiving his *er aty* (man's or hero's name) whether he was one of the hundreds of common soldiers or a prince of the royal line. In practice, however, the situation of an *er* in the tribe and in the state depended on his rank and riches.

Epigraphic and archaeological records show that there was a considerable degree of social and material discrimination within the Türk tribes. Wealth became a subject of pride and praise for the Türk aristocracy. Rich men (*bays*) are contrasted in Türk inscriptions with the poor (*Čyğay*), who are described as 'pitiful, insignificant and base'. Far from arousing sympathy, poverty was despised. A real *er* would obtain riches by force of arms.

The inscriptions often list the spoils of war – gold, silver and slaves, both male and female. The Türks' principal wealth and most coveted booty, however, was livestock, especially herds of horses. 'The Türk people were hungry. I took the cattle and fed them,' says Bilge *kaghan* in his account of one of his campaigns (BK, E 38).

The burial mounds of the common soldiers, where the saddled warhorse lay next to its fully armed master, pale into insignificance when compared to the burial chambers of the higher aristocracy. In the graves of the poorest peasants, however, neither costly weapons nor horses were to be found. Impoverished nomads who had lost their livestock were settled in winter quarters and in small, permanent settlements (*baliqs*), where they engaged in a primitive form of agriculture. They mainly sowed millet and built small forts (*qurgans* or *kurgans*) in which to store their grain.

Some impoverished members of a tribe would maintain their nomadic way of life with the help of rich relations. Free *ers* of slender means inevitably became dependent on the *begs*, whose bodyguard and servants were drawn from their ranks. But no matter what quarrels soured relations between poor and rich *ers*, and between *begs* and the 'common people', the community as a whole was quite distinct from another sector of the population – the slaves (*qul kün*, male and female slaves), who were entirely dependent on the *ers*, enjoyed no rights and formed the periphery of ancient Türk society.

The basis of the economy of the Türk tribes was nomadic cattle-raising. The organized hunt in the steppes and mountains was of military as well as economic significance: it was during such hunts that warriors were trained and the various detachments were co-ordinated. A Chinese chronicler describes the economy and way of life of the Türks thus: 'They live in felt tents and wander following the water and the grass.' Horses were of vital importance to the Türks. Although the economy rested on cattle-raising, winter feed for livestock was not stored. The advantage of the horse was that it could be at grass all the year round, feeding even under a light cover of snow. Sheep and goats followed the horses, eating the grass that they themselves would have been unable to clear of snow. Bulls, yaks and camels are also frequently mentioned in Türk texts as valuable items of livestock.

Relations with China

In 691 Ilterish *kaghan* died and was succeeded by his younger brother, who assumed the title Kapagan *kaghan* ('Conquering *kaghan*'; Mo-ch'o in Chinese sources). His reign (691–716) marked the apogee of the military and political might of the Second Türk Empire – and the beginning of its decline.

Between 693 and 706 Kapagan's army forced a crossing of the Huang He (Yellow River) six times and made deep inroads into northern China against which the Chinese forces could offer no effective resistance. The empress Wu paid vast indemnities to Kapagan and sent him gifts, which were in effect thinly disguised tributes. In 696–697 Kapagan subjugated the Kitan tribes and sealed an alliance with the Khi (*tataby* in Turkic texts), which stemmed the advance of the Chinese armies to the north-east, into the foot-hills of the Khingan, and secured the empire's eastern frontier. Between 698 and 701 the northern and western frontiers of Kapagan's state were defined by the Tannu Ola, Altai and Tarbagatai mountain ranges. After defeating the Bayirku tribe in 706–707, the Türks occupied lands extending from the upper reaches of the Kerulen to Lake Baikal. In 709–710 the Türk forces subjugated the Az and the Chik (tribes living in Tannu Tuva), crossed the Sayan mountains (the *Kögmen yış* in Turkic texts), and inflicted a crushing defeat on the Yenisey Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz ruler, Bars *beg*, fell in battle; his descendants were to remain vassals of the 'kaghan of the Ötükan mountains' for several generations.

In 711 the Türk forces, led by Tonyuquq, crossed the Mongolian Altai, clashed with the Türgesh army in Dzungaria, on the River Boluchu, and won an outright victory. Tonyuquq forced a crossing over the Syr Darya in pursuit of the retreating Türgesh, leading his troops to the border of Tokharistan. However, in battles with the Arabs near Samarkand the Türk forces were cut off from their rear services and suffered considerable losses; they had difficulty in returning to the Altai in 713–714. There they reinforced the army that was preparing to besiege Beshbalyk (Pei-t'ing). The siege was unsuccessful and, after losing in six skirmishes, the Türks raised it.⁵

The empire in crisis

These military defeats changed the situation drastically, serving as a signal for formerly submissive tribes to revolt. The Kitans and the Khi seceded; and first the Karluks then all the Tokuz-Oghuz tribes revolted, the latter representing a particularly serious threat to the Türk Empire. The Toguz-Oghuz were defeated in five battles in 715, but the revolt was not crushed. The following year, the great *irkin* of the Bayirku tribes fell on Kapagan's headquarters on the Tola river. Although the attack was repulsed, Kapagan himself was ambushed and killed.

Kapagan had tried to change the existing order of succession, according to which he would be succeeded by the elder son of Ilterish, known as 'the *shad* of the Tardush' since 698, who in turn would be followed by his younger brother Kül-tegin. At the time of

⁵ Klyashtorny, 1964, pp. 35–40.

Kapagan's death, both were renowned generals. Nevertheless, with the help of Kapagan's retainers, his son Bögü came to power. After this flagrant breaking of the law, Kül-tegin, who was the hero of many battles and very popular with the forces, and enjoyed the support of all the influential Türk families, attacked the headquarters. He killed Bögü *kaghan* and many of Kapagan's retainers, and then set on the throne his elder brother, known as Bilge *kaghan* ('Wise *kaghan*'), who ruled from 716 to 734.

Bilge *kaghan* mounted the throne at a time when the empire founded by his father was on the verge of collapse. The western lands seceded for good; and immediately after the death of Kapagan, the Türgesh leader Suluk proclaimed himself *kaghan*. The Kitan and Tatabi tribes refused to pay tribute; the Oghuz revolt continued; and the Türk tribes themselves began to rebel. Feeling unable to control the situation, Bilge *kaghan* offered the throne to his brother, Kül-tegin. The latter, however, would not go against the legal order of succession. Then, at last, Bilge decided to act. Kül-tegin was put at the head of the army, and the septuagenarian Tonyuquq, who enjoyed great authority among the tribes, became the *kaghan*'s closest adviser. Bilge and Kül-tegin now attacked the Uighurs; the rout of the Uighurs broke the resistance of the Tokuz-Oghuz tribes and the rich spoils heartened the Türk forces. In the summer of 718 Bilge crushed the Tatabi and the Kitans and regained possession of the Khingän. The detachment led by Tudun Yamtar, one of Bilge's captains, attacked the Karluk tribes, forced them to submit and took vast herds of horses, which were distributed among the tribes loyal to Bilge.

In 718 those Türk and Oghuz tribes which had fled to China during the time of internecine strife in 716 returned to Bilge's empire. The *kaghan*'s army became so strong that he decided to resume the war with China, his southern neighbour, which had offered help and protection to his adversaries. In the face of determined opposition from his chief counsellor, Tonyuquq, however, Bilge sent an embassy to Ch'ang-an instead, proposing a peace treaty. The emperor Hsüan-tsung, who had pacified his border with Tibet, refused to negotiate with the Türks in the hope of destroying their state, which had nevertheless been weakened by the internecine strife.

The last war with T'ang China

In 720 the Chinese army, whose main attacking force was the cavalry of its confederates – the Basmil, Kitan and Tatabi tribes – advanced on the Ötükän mountains in two directions. Tonyuquq's army met the Basmils and defeated them, taking Beshbalyk as they pursued the defeated tribe. The Türks then swiftly invaded Gansu and annihilated the Chinese garrison in the vicinity of Liang chou. The army of Bilge *kaghan*, which had participated in the

victory over the Basmils and in the Gansu campaign, wheeled east and inflicted further severe defeats on the Kitans and Tatabi. In 721 Hsüan-tsung immediately accepted the new peace proposals.

The war of 720–721 was the last between the Second Türk Empire and China. The Chinese emperor no longer dared to disturb the peace, and Bilge *kaghan* broke with the policy of his predecessor, Kapagan. He strove consistently to expand trade with China and to establish family ties with the imperial House of Li, conserving the territorial status quo and the policy of non-interference in each other's internal affairs. It should be noted that Hsüan-tsung paid dearly for peace on his northern frontier, a fact that Bilge *kaghan* does not fail to mention in Kül-tegin's epitaph: 'I made peace with the Chinese people; they gave us gold, silver and silk in abundance' (KT, S 4–5). In the year 727 alone, the Chinese emperor gave Bilge *kaghan* a 'present' of 100,000 pieces of silk in return for a symbolic 'tribute' of 30 horses. And it was not until 734 that the Chinese participated in a war between the Kitans and the Tatabi, siding with the latter; Bilge *kaghan*, fearing for his eastern frontier, fought against the Tatabi and defeated them. There were no direct confrontations between Chinese and Türk forces.

The winter of 723–724 was a hard one for the Türks: they lost most of their cattle because of the icy conditions. In spring the war with the Oghuz and the Tatars broke out afresh, imperilling the gains of previous years. It took a supreme effort to defeat the rebels and ensure political stability within the *kaghanate*. In 727 Bilge *kaghan* refused to ally himself with the Tibetans against China; he was rewarded with concessions from the imperial government in Ch'ang-an, allowing an expansion of the frontier trade between the nomads and Chinese merchants. From then on, gifts of huge amounts of silk arrived annually.

In 732 Bilge *kaghan* entered the sixteenth year of his reign. 'By the grace of Heaven and because of good fortune and propitious circumstances, I brought back to life the dying people, the naked people I clothed, and I made the few many' (KT, E 29).⁶

The final decade

Kül-tegin died in 731. Bilge *kaghan* did not long outlive his brother – in 734 he was poisoned by one of his retainers. Near the River Orkhon, in the Koshotsaidam basin between the mountains, monuments were erected to both brothers with inscriptions that chronicled the turbulent history of the Second Türk Empire (see below).

Bilge's successors, his short-lived sons Izhan *kaghan* (734–739) and Tengri *kaghan* (740–741), did not depart from their father's policies, but with Tengri *kaghan*'s death, in

⁶ English translation: Sinor, 1990, p. 313.

741, the empire began to disintegrate. Apanaged rulers of the *kaghan's* House of Ashina were less and less able to cope with central power. The young Tengri *kaghan* was killed by his uncle, Kutlug *yabghu*, who seized power. War broke out with the tribal groups of the Uighurs, the Basmils and the Karluks, and Kutlug *yabghu* and his followers perished in the fighting. In 745 the Second Türk Empire ceased to exist. The Türk tribes, who retained part of their lands, played no significant role in succeeding events. The last reference to them in Chinese sources relates to the year 941.⁷

Epigraphic memorials of the Türks

Türk stone inscriptions date back to the second half of the sixth century, when a stele in honour of the Türk *kaghan* Taspar (Taghpar in Harmatta's reading) was erected, with inscriptions in Sogdian and Sanskrit (the Bugut inscription, 582) (Figs. 1 and 2).⁸ However, the heyday of ancient Türk epigraphy – in the original runic script, which was invented no



FIG. 1. Mongolia. Stele with the Bugut inscription. (Photo: © S. G. Klyashtorny.)

⁷ Klyashtorny, 1964, pp. 41–3.

⁸ Klyashtorny and Livshits, 1972, pp. 69–102.



FIG. 2. Mongolia. Stele with the Bugut inscription. (Photo: © S. G. Klyashtorny.)



FIG. 3. Mongolia. Bulgan *aimak*. Obverse of the stele. (Photo: © S. G. Klyashtorny.)



FIG. 4. Mongolia. Bulgan *aimak*. Reverse of the stele. (Photo: © S. G. Klyashtorny.)



FIG. 5. Mongolia. Gobi-Altai *aimak*. (Photo: © S. G. Klyashtorny.)



FIG. 6. Mongolia. Gobi-Altai *aimak*. (Photo: © S. G. Klyashtorny.)

later than the middle of the seventh century, and in the Türk language – was the era of the Second Türk Empire. The earliest example appears to be the memorial from Choiren, which dates from between 687 and 691; the inscription tells of the Türks' return to their lands in northern Mongolia and of their victory over the Tokuz-Oghuz. The largest and most significant memorials are the Koshotsaidam steles (monuments in honour of Kül-tegin and Bilge *kaghan*, who died in 731 and 734 respectively), written on behalf of Bilge *kaghan* by his nephew Yollyg-tegin; and the memorial written by Tonyuquq after 716 and subsequently incorporated in his burial mound.

Further inscriptions of this kind are known to us; these historical and biographical texts are memorials or eulogies for the living, and they tell of the deeds of Türk *kaghans* and their retainers. They combine descriptions of events that involved the hero of the inscription (or his ancestors) with an exposition of the political beliefs and ideas of the author of the text;

they may be seen as ‘declarations of intent’ and to some extent were used as propaganda (Figs. 3 and 4). Even more common were memorial inscriptions on rock faces, some of which proclaimed the author’s right to use the adjacent pasture or site (Figs. 5 and 6).⁹

The Türgesh state

At the end of the seventh century Wu-chih-lê (699–706), leader of the Türgesh tribes that lived in the western T’ien Shan mountains, had driven the T’ang protégé Böri-*shad* out of Semirechye and established his own power over the territory from Chach (present-day Tashkent) to Dzungaria. ‘Major’ and ‘minor’ headquarters for the *kaghan* were established in Nevaket on the rivers Chu and Ili, and the country was divided into 20 districts ruled by the *kaghan*’s stewards (*tutuk*), each of whom was able to muster between 5,000 and 7,000 warriors. Wu-chih-lê assumed the traditional title of the Western Türk states, ‘*kaghan* of the People of Ten Arrows’; and also the new title, ‘Türgesh*kaghan*’ – copper coins were now minted in Nevaket bearing this legend in Sogdian. Wu-chih-lê’s successor, Sakal *kaghan* (706–711), met with opposition from tribal leaders who supported his younger brother’s claim to the throne. The Eastern Türk leader, Kapagan *kaghan*, intervened in the civil unrest, and after the defeat of the Türgesh forces in a battle on the River Boluchu in 711 both brothers were killed. What was left of the Türgesh army was rallied by the commander, Suluk Chabish-chor (Su-lu in Chinese sources), and retreated beyond the Syr Darya into Tokharistan. It was not until 715 that Suluk, having proclaimed himself Türgesh *kaghan*, was able to return and restore the independence of his state.

Throughout his reign (715–738) Suluk Chabish-chor had to fight on two fronts. From East Turkestan he was threatened by pretenders to the throne who belonged to the family of the Western Türk *kaghans* and were supported by Chinese troops. Suluk obviated this danger by means of diplomacy (marriage to the daughter of one of the pretenders) and military action (laying siege to the capital of the T’ang governor of Kucha in 726–727). By marrying the daughters of the Eastern Türk leader Bilge *kaghan* and the king of Tibet, the Türgesh *kaghan* firmly consolidated his eastern flank.

From the west the Türgesh were threatened by the conquering Arab armies, who crossed the Syr Darya (Jaxartes) several times in 714–715. This compelled Suluk to join battle with the Arabs, along with other Central Asian states striving to retain their independence. In 720–721 Suluk’s general, Küli-chor (Kursul in Arab sources), led successful military actions against the Arabs in Sogdiana. In 728–729 Suluk supported the anti-Arab revolts of the citizenry of Samarkand and Bukhara, and drove the Arabs from Sogdiana. It was not

⁹ Klyashtorny, 1975, pp. 119–28.

until 732 that the Arab governor defeated the Türgesh, near Tavavis, and entered Bukhara. In 737 the Türgesh crushed the Arabs in Tokharistan, but were subsequently defeated. When Suluk returned to Nevaket the following year, he was killed by one of his retainers; and in 739 the Arabs captured and executed Küli-chor.

The death of Suluk and the brief reign of his son, Kut-chor *kaghan* (T'uhohsien in Chinese sources) (738–739), marked the beginning of a 20-year struggle for power between the leading members of the 'yellow' and 'black' tribes, which polarized the Türgesh tribal group. Taking advantage of the internecine strife in 748, the T'ang governor of Kucha led an invasion force into Semirechye, capturing Suyab, one of its most important towns. In 751, however, the Chinese forces were defeated by the Arabs and the Türks near Talas, and they fled Semirechye. The *kaghans* of the 'black' Türgesh seized power (749–753) but they were unable to end the internal conflicts. In 766 the Karluks, who had consolidated their hold on Semirechye after being driven from Mongolia in 746–747 by the Uighurs, killed the warring Türgesh *kaghans*, and the Karluk *yabghu* became the founder of a new state in the T'ien Shan mountains.¹⁰

The Uighurs and the Karluks

The fall of the Second Türk Empire and the revolt of the Uighur, Basmil and Karluk tribes had created a political vacuum in the steppe. The struggle to obtain power and the title of *kaghan*, and to set up a new state, intensified between the Basmils (whose leader was proclaimed *khan*) and the Uighurs. The Uighurs emerged victorious. Their allies, the Karluks, who had gained no advantage from their participation in the war with the Türks, then allied themselves with the Türgesh, but, failing to defeat the Uighurs in battle, fled to the T'ien Shan mountains in 746. The following year, the Karluks, with the support of the Tatar tribes living in eastern Mongolia, attacked the Uighurs once again, but without success. In 744, with the Uighur tribes' proclamation of Kül-bilge *kaghan* as their leader, the Yagh-lakar dynasty came to power in the steppe. Meanwhile in Central Asia a powerful state of Turkic-speaking nomads – that of the Uighurs – came into being.¹¹

¹⁰ Chavannes, 1903, pp. 279–303.

¹¹ Klyashtorny, 1982, pp. 335–66.