

# The Tribal System of the Turk Khaganate

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The Turk Khaganate was the first state established by Turk tribes and it is regarded as the starting point of Turkic history. The Turk Khaganate existed for two hundred years and during its history the state was built on the nomadic tribal system. The various Turkic tribal confederations, under different names and organizations, played a dominant role in the history of the Turk Khaganate. Most of these tribal confederations survived the fall of the Turk Khaganate and formed new empires and states which played the main role in the migrations of the Eurasian steppe. Some of them have remained until the present day, forming national states in modern times.

According to the ethnogenetic legends, the Turks originated from the A-shih-na tribe.<sup>1</sup> The state was ruled by the Begs (prince) of the tribe after independence was achieved and the state was established, until it vanished from the historical scene in 741.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, there was another famous tribe called A-shih-te, to which the famous chief minister Tonyukuk was related. This tribe appeared in the history of the Turk Khaganate in the 620s, and contributed to the establishment of the Second Turk Khaganate. After the death of Tonyukuk (725) there is no further information about them. The A-shih-na tribe was thus the sole ruling dynasty in the history of the Turk Khaganate. They are recorded as a charismatic clan in their origins and as having properly obtained leadership.<sup>3</sup> The Turks definitely appeared in 542, and were officially recognized by the Western Wei State in China in 545. They were a vassal tribe of the Juan-juans and they were specialists in mining iron in the southern foothills of the Altai Mountains. The impor-

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese sources regarding the subject are Chou Shu 50, 907 ac.; Swei Shu 84, 1864; Pei Shih 99, 3285; T'ung Tien 197, 1067c; Ts'e-fu Yüan-kuei 958, 23a; T'ung Chih 636, 1c; Wen-hsien T'ung-k'ao 343, 2687a; Hsin T'ang Shu 215A, 6028. Also, see A. Tasagil, *Turkler*. Ankara 1995, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Hsin Wu-tai-shih, 74, 913. See also Tasagil, *Turkler III*. Ankara 2004, 62.

<sup>3</sup> Chou Shu 50, 909, 910.

tance of the Turks increased after they prevented the Töles attacking the Juan-juans, and thence affiliated with fifty thousand families from these tribes (the sources differ over whether it was fifty thousand people or fifty thousand families). They could attain the necessary power in order to achieve independence only after they aligned with the Töles tribes. Who are these Töles, or T'ie-le, tribes?

The first reference to the Töles in the sources is a list prefaced, "the general name of all the tribes"<sup>4</sup>. If we examine the earlier periods, the Ting-ling in the period of the Hsiung-nu Empire, and after them, the followers of Kao-ch'ê (third century CE), were the precursors of, or the same as, the Töles. The general name of the tribes inhabiting the Central Asian steppes was Ting-ling, which transformed into Kao-ch'ê (Kangli) in the Juan-juan to Tabgach (T'o-pa/Wei) periods, and then became Töles around the same time as the Turks first appeared. In fact, the sections in the *Sui Shu* and *Pei Shih* contain the most information about this point. The position of Töles and their historical role is described in detail in these sources.<sup>5</sup>

The Töles tribes are mentioned as living in six different regions. Their geographical distribution seems to have been as follows:

The north of the Tola River was considered as the first region, and the P'u-ku (Bugu/Bugut), Tongra (T'ung-lo), Wei-ho, Bayırku (Pa-ye-ku), Fu-lo tribes lived there. These five tribes were organized into a single power, and they were great in number. There were some small tribes, such as the Meng-ch'ên, T'u-jo-ho, Ssuschie (Izgil), Hun, and Hu-hsie, in the same region. They had twenty thousand well-trained soldiers in total.

The second region is to the west of Hami (Î-wu), the north of Karashar (Yench'î), and the Akdag (Pai-shan) foothills. Here, the Ch'î-pi, P'u-lo-chih, Î-shih, Sup'ô, Na-ho, Wu-kuan, Ye-shih, Yü-ni-huan and other small tribes lived. They also had twenty thousand well-trained soldiers. Some of these tribes engaged in the cultivation of fruit and vegetables and similar production. This information opens up a new horizon, with knowledge about the start of agriculture among the Turks.<sup>6</sup>

The third region was more to the north, in the south-west of the Altai Mountains. There, the Syr Tardush (Hsie-yen-t'uo), Shih-p'an, Ta-ch'î and others had more than ten thousand soldiers.

The fourth group is around the Syr Darya and Aris (A-te) River in the north of Samarkand, more precisely Transoxiana. Tribes such as the Ho-shih, Ho-chie, Pohu, Pi-kan, Chü-hai, Ho-pi-hsi, Ho-ts'o-su, and Pa-ye-wei ve Ho-ta were living there. They also had a huge military power of thirty thousand soldiers.

<sup>4</sup> This is the heading of the separate section on the Töles in *Suei Shu* 84; *Pei Shih* 99.

<sup>5</sup> A. Tasagil, *Çin Kaynaklarına göre Eski Türk Boyları*. Ankara 2004, 41–48.

<sup>6</sup> A. Tasagil, "552–627 yılları arasında Töles Boylarının Coğrafi Dağılımına Bir Bakış," *Mimar Sinan Üniversitesi Fen-Ed.Fak.Dergisi*, Vol. 1, İstanbul 1992, 33 ac.

The fifth group of Töles tribes was living to the east of the Caspian Sea (Te-i Hai). Though tribes such as the San-suo-yen, Mie-ts'u, Lung-hu were there, it is not correct to consider them as Töles because some Ogur tribes also lived there.<sup>7</sup>

The sixth group of Töles tribes, the En-chü, A-lan, Pei-ju-Chiou-li, Fu-wen-hun and others, were in the east of Byzantium (Fu-lin), probably in the Caucasus. Their number was about twenty thousand. Though it cannot be said that all of them were Turks (for instance, the Alans originated in Iran), most of them were Turkic tribes who constituted the basis of the Sabar and Khazars.

As shown above, the distribution of tribes was realized from the east to the west. Kerulen, east of the Tola River, is referred to as the farthest region in the east and the farthest region in west is the north of the Caucasus. An area north of the Black Sea can also be mentioned. It seems that the knowledge of the Chinese historians on this issue was insufficient. It is interesting that some, mainly Kyr-gyz, people who lived in the south of Siberia, and the tribes of the Kurikan, Tupo, To-lan-ko etc. are not mentioned. Besides the lack of sources, it should be taken to account that Siberia was always considered to be a different region.

The Töles tribes were dependent on the Turks before 551. After that time, no further data is available about them, but there is a record showing that the Töles tribes disintegrated after the khagan of the Western Turk State, Tardu, was defeated and abdicated in 603.<sup>8</sup> It is known that, after that time, the khagan of the Western Turks, Ch'u-lo, imposed heavy taxes on his people's property and, especially since he feared the Syr Tardush tribe would rebel, he allowed more than one hundred of their chiefs to be killed. The Ch'i-pi, who could not endure the taxes and pressures he imposed, rebelled and routed Ch'u-lo. The Syr Tardush people also joined them. Thus the Ch'i-pi and Syr Tardush achieved their independence as a result of events that occurred suddenly, but they could not maintain this situation for long. They were dependent on the Western Turk State, which recovered under the leadership of She-kuei. The six tribes in the east, including the Uyghurs, depended on the khagan of the Eastern Turks, Shih-pi. All those in the west absolutely obeyed T'ung Yabgu after 621.<sup>9</sup>

The year 627 is climacteric for the Eastern Turk State. In that year the administration of the State failed, and some tribes, mainly the Syr Tardush, Bayrku, and Uyghur, rebelled. After that, the concept of the Töles tribes was not used again in known history. The tribes named in the list above started to be independently mentioned with the same names, or by various other names. The Töles name remained only as the name of a small tribe which lived to the west of Lake Baikal into the Mongol period (Tooles),<sup>10</sup> and survives even in the name of the Doolos tribe among the Kyrgyz people and in Siberia to the present day.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> K. Czeplédy, *Turan Kavimlerinin Göçü*. tr. G. Karaağaç, İstanbul 1999, 57 ac.

<sup>8</sup> Swei Shu 84, 1876; Pei Shih 99, 3300

<sup>9</sup> Hsin T'ang Shu 217B, 6134.

<sup>10</sup> A. Temir, *Moğolların Gizli Tarihi*. Ankara 1986, 139, 160.

<sup>11</sup> O. Karataev, *Kırğız Etnonimder Sözdüğü*. Bişkek 2003, 63.

The Syr Tardush was in fact the most powerful of the Töles tribes in the first half of the seventh century and played a very significant historical role.<sup>12</sup> The Syr Tardush living in the south of the Altai Mountains, which had a force of ten thousand soldiers according to the account of the geographical distribution of the Töles tribes above, had increased their number later, and had become a people of seventy thousand tents. When the Eastern Turk State lost power, we see them suddenly as the leader of the east wing of this state (Dokuz-Oghuz).

The Syr Tardush who tried to act independently after 628 were the same tribe that had routed Ch'u-lo, who had permitted several hundred of their leading chiefs to be executed and collected heavy taxes unjustly, just a short time before, in 603. When the Western Turk State, under the control of T'ung Yabgu Kaghan, fell into confusion, namely in 628, the leader of the Syr Tardush, I-nan (grandson of I-shih-po, their chief who triumphed in 603) declared his loyalty, with his people of seventy thousand tents, to the Eastern Turk ruler, Il Kaghan (Chie-li/Hsie-li). After a short time, however, this state fell into confusion too. The Syr Tardush filled the political vacuum by becoming the leading tribe. Actually, all the the Dokuz-Oghuz tribes had previously insisted on I-nan being their ruler. When the T'ang dynasty in China, wanting to take political advantage against the Western Turk State, also joined them, the Syr Tardush announced their khaganate. Their independence continued until 641. During the return of the Turks, who went China after destroying of the Eastern Turk State in 630, the Syr Tardush fought with both the Turks and the Chinese. The Syr Tardush, whose power faltered upon the death of their ruler, had been quite successful in the battlefield. Since the two sons of the ruler could not agree among themselves, they were defeated by the Chinese armies. They disappeared from the historical scene after being absolutely destroyed in 646.

A large number of tribes - Bugu, Tongra, Tu-po, Bayırku, To-lan-ko, Hu-hsie, A-tie (Ediz), Ch'i-pi, Basmul, Kurikan, Kyrgyz, Huns, Karluks, Uyghur - made contact with the empire of the T'ang dynasty in China in the years 646 to 648. Their leaders were ranked with Chinese appellations and each was offered the title of military governor. After that time, Chinese sovereignty was hardly felt in Central Asia.

The Turgish was a tribe which had been appeared in the historical scene during new tribal organizations as a result of the different political situation in the Western Turk State after 635. It is understood from later developments that they were from the Western Turk Dynasty. Ishbara, who became khagan in 634, divided his country into ten tribes, and each tribe was given an arrow. Subsequently they came to be mentioned as "On Shad" and "On Ok" (Ten Tribes, Ten Arrows). Following that, the name "the five Tuo-lu" was given to five tribes and the name "Nu-shih-pi" was given to the other five tribes. The "Five Tuo-lus" were organized in the form of chorships and started to inhabit the area east of

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<sup>12</sup> For further information, see B. Ögel, "Uygur Devletinin Teşekkülü ve Yükselişi," *Belle-ten*, 75 (1955), 337; M. Mori, "On the Chi-li-fa (Elteber) and Chi-chin of T'ie-le Tribes," *Acta Asiatica*, 9 (1966), 32-40; A. Tasagil, *Gök-Türkler II*. Ankara 1999, 32-39.

Tokmak (Suei-ye). The Nu-shih-pi, the tribes forming a group inhabited the area west of Tokmak after they were organized in the form of free potentates. The tribes which occurred after that organization were mentioned with the name "On Og" (Ten Tribes). The name of the Turgish was mentioned among the five Tuo-lu tribes, so that later this name was generalized as the name of all the "On Og" tribes.<sup>13</sup>

When the Karluks first appeared in the historical scene, they were living near the Pu-ku-chen stream in the west of the Altai Mountains. This may not have been their first homeland, but this record gives us an idea about the region that the Karluks inhabited before 630.<sup>14</sup>

As is well known, following the year 627, a large tribal movement occurred in the East Turk country. The Syr Tardush people, who were dependent on T'ung Yabgu, the ruler of the Western Turk country in that time, were the most powerful tribe. Rebelling against T'ung Yabgu, they instead became dependent on Il Kagan by migrating to the Eastern Turk country. The northern part of the Tien-Shan Mountains was depopulated as a result. Probably, the Karluk, who lived to the north of there, in the southern foothills of the Altai Mountains, became powerful by taking advantage of this opportunity.<sup>15</sup> The Karluk are not shown in the list of the Töles tribes. It was expressed that the tribe was close to the dynasty of Turk. In 627, the Karluk also rebelled against T'ung Yabgu. It can even be said that they caused the Western Turk State to break down and be destroyed, although that time was a glorious period for them.

The term Dokuz-Oghuz ("Nine Oghuz") was the written form used in the sources for the group of Töles tribes who lived around the Tola River and Kerulen, namely in the east part of the Eastern Turk State, after 626. In general, the Dokuz-Oghuz tribes were known by the following names; P'u-ku, Hun, Bayırku, Tonra (T'ung-lo), Ssu-chie (İzgil), Ch'i-pi, A-pu-sse, Ku-lun-wu-ku, Ediz (A-tie).<sup>16</sup>

It is clear that the Turk independence movement against the Chinese started in 679, and also continued against the Dokuz-Oghuz tribes. Battles between the Dokuz-Oghuz and the Turks, which occurred very frequently, were often mentioned on the Orkhon inscriptions.

Generally, during the Turk sovereignty, the leading tribes, under names such as Töles, Syr Tardush, Turgish, Karluk, Kyrgyz, Dokuz-Oghuz and Oghuz, appeared on the historical scene. All of them, also, played important roles in Turkic history. After the concept of the Töles tribes was terminated in 603, the occur-

<sup>13</sup> Chiou T'ang Shu 194B, 5182vd; Hsin T'ang Shu 215B, 6058 ac.

<sup>14</sup> Hsin T'ang Shu 217B, s.6143; see also H. Salman, VII. Ve X. Asırlar arasında Önemli Türk Boylarından Karluklar ve Karluk Devleti, *Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları*, 15, aralık 1981, 170.

<sup>15</sup> Wen-hsien T'ung-k'ao, 2725b; E. Chavannes, *Documents sur les Tou-kieou Occidentaux*. Paris 1941, 33, 62.

<sup>16</sup> J. Hamilton, "Toquz Oguz et On Ouighur," *Journal Asiatique* 250:1 (1962), 23-63; Masao Mori, same article, 32-40; Ö. İzgi, *Uygurların Siyasi ve Kültürel Tarihi*, Ankara 1987, 13; Taşağıl, *Gök-Türkler II*, 41-47.

rence of numerous small tribes is a point at issue. It is clearly seen that the tribes became the most significant base of the state in the developing conditions such as war, political relations, and social events etc. The founder, Bumïn, took important steps on the way of independence by relying on his power, when he aligned a part of the fifty thousand families of the Töles tribes to himself, already, before the establishment of the State. The tribes formed the most important base point of the state at times when the central control of the state was very strong, they were affected instantly by the political disintegrations, and caused the instabilities to be increased. Succession disputes, increasing taxes, and hostilities which were started unjustly, especially caused the rebellion of the tribes. On the other side, we see that the tribes caused trouble by being affected by the Chinese intrigues. They also caused the state to be destroyed in some periods, for instance, the Turk State was destroyed as a result of the common action of the Uyghur, Basmil and Karluk tribes.

The name "Töles" was not just the name of a tribe. This subject has been the source of much confusion in the historical research. It was the general name of a group of tribes, as is expressed clearly in the sources. The "the general name of all the tribes" record takes us back to former times. Some tribal names such as Ting-ling, Ke-k'un (Kyrgyz) and Ho-chie, which were dependent on the state during the Great Hun Empire are mentioned. The Ting-ling, who were living in the wide steppes covering the region from the Altai Mountains to the Ural Mountains were a boy tribe separated into many sub-groups. The Kao-ch'es (Kanglis) took their place after the second century CE. The Kao-ch'e, namely "Ones with High Carts", was the name of a group of various tribes, like Ting-ling. After the Kao-ch'e name disappeared from the historical scene, Töles took its place. The name Töles performed the same function until the year 603.

Both the Western and the Eastern Turk States were faltering as a result of the political and social crises of those days. This affected the tribes too. After that time, it was no longer the tribe groups, but one by one the individual tribes started to become important. The first, and one of the most important of them, was the Syr Tardush. The On Ok ("Ten Arrow") organization occurred in the Western Turk Country, namely in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, after 634. That organization then took the Turgis name and formed the substructure of the Oghuz Turks. They were called the western Oghuz Turks after 766. Those who were founders of the Seljuk Empire and the Ottoman Empire were thus the Oghuz Turks.

After the Karluk found themselves between the Turk State and the Uyghur State, they started to act independently. Finally, they played their most significant historical role in the Kara-Khanid State.<sup>17</sup> At the present day, they are living mainly in the Fergana Valley (between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) and in northern Afghanistan. Since the Dokuz-Oghuz group inhabited the easternmost

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<sup>17</sup> For more detailed information on the geographical distribution and historical development of the Turkic Tribes of the pre-Islamic period, see A. Tasagil, *Çin Kaynaklarına Göre Eski Türk Boyları*. Ankara 2004.

part of the region, they constituted the main part of the Uyghur State. When the large Uyghur Khaganate was destroyed in 840, some of them went to China. Equally, some of them went around Turfan and joined the Kara-Khanid State. The Kyrgyz people were already living in the Yenisei region. This situation continued until the eighteenth century, when they reached the boundaries which they have today. The Uyghurs were from the eastern Töles group. They established their state upon the Dokuz-Oghuz group. After their state was destroyed, some of them went to China, the others, also, went to Turfan.