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STATE FORMATION AND THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE TÜRK QAGANATE

Ph.D. THESIS

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(SUMMARY OF THESIS)

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Introduction

The Türk Qaganate belongs to the great Eurasian Steppe empires which had a basic influence on the medieval world. From the middle of the sixth century for about 200 years it was the major power of Eurasia connecting China, Persia, India, and Byzantium. The history of the Türk Qaganate is essential basically from three aspects.

First of all, it was the first nomadic empire whose borders reached from Manchuria to the Black Sea, almost the whole Eurasian steppes. For the first time in history, a nomadic empire bordered simultaneously on three major sedentary civilizations: those of China, Iran, and the Western world represented by Byzantium.

Secondly, they were the first Turkic speaking people to leave behind documents written in the Turkic language. So, it is important for Altaic studies too. The Türks were the earliest Inner Asian people whose language is well known and precisely datable. Their language has been preserved in the Orkhon runic inscriptions. Besides its historical significance, it was the first Turkic language monuments in Turkic language history.

Thirdly, the history and civilization of the Türks can be studied through a variety of written sources, including Chinese, Persian, Armenian, Greek, Latin texts, and Sogdian inscriptions, in addition to the indigenous Türk sources.

The political history of the Türk Qaganate consists of three periods. The first one is the period from the foundation of the empire to the period of interregnum (552-630 AD). Then the period begins when the Tang emperor Tai Zong took rule over the Türks for almost half a century. However, during this period, the Türks continued their existence as a political power. And the last one is that the Eastern Türk tribes were resettled, and found the Second Türk Empire (681-744 AD). Even though the Türk empire collapsed in 744 the ethnic name Türk survived and thus it became widespread among the other Turkic speaking peoples.

Although there are many works written about the political history of Türk Qaganate, no general study has been done on state formation. The dissertation mainly focuses on a brief political history, state structure by different aspects including economy, military, hierarchical order within the state, the social structure, political organization, finally inner and transboundary relations of the Türk Qaganate. Thus, our study aims that the mentioned political power was not only composed of an irregular union of nomad tribes, as many experts claim. They established a regular state system in all aspects so that they became a significant power similarly to their agrarian neighbours.

The structure of the thesis

The study starts with an overview of the main sources on the history of the Türk Qaganate and the secondary literature about our subject. Then the review of the political history of Türk Qaganate is described in the introduction. The thesis consists of five main chapters.

The first chapter deals with the geography, climate, and economic structure of the Türk Qaganate. Undoubtedly, the economic system was fragile and depended on the environment. Cold winters with strong winds, heat, and droughts in summer rendered. Large pastures caused them to base their economy on animal husbandry. Türks used pastures to sustain flocks, normally consisting of a combination of five grazing animals: sheep, goats, cattle, camels, and horses, whose products supply them with food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and fuel. Nomads migrate with their livestock along fixed seasonal, round-trip routes timed to provide the animals continuously with fresh supplies of grass. The nomadic steppes were practically unsuitable for agriculture. Yet some alternatives of ecological and political adaptations of pastoralists in arid areas were possible. However, based on the Chinese sources, we know that although rare, Türks were engaged in agriculture in some regions. Also, there were some Türk garrisons where Chinese people produced grains for the Türks. Silk was another important trade commodity for the Türks. The Türks obtained silk from China either with horse-silk exchange or with tributes. The elites of the Türks used a small fraction of a large amount of silk from China and surplus raw silks were sold to the western markets such as Byzantine, Iran through the Sogdian traders. Apart from these, Türks also had economic income thanks to their marriage strategies, taxation, and tributes from China. Briefly, in chapter one, I discussed the problem of the complexity of economic structure emphasizing that the Türks had an economic structure was far from one-sided nomad economy.

The second chapter is about the military organization and the warfare of the Türk Qaganate. The innovations of the Türks in the military field were also be taken into consideration. Its power was based on military strength, creating a vast empire from China to Byzantium. The most important factor of building an empire was successful conquests in general and this was true for nomad Türks. Even the Türk runic inscriptions from the first half of the 8th century emphasized the importance of creating a new army to be successful in building a new empire. The peoples of a nomadic empire were organized according to the decimal system that was called *tümen*, which was well known among them from the time of the Xiongnu era. The Qagan was the commander in chief. Under his rule, four lower Qagans were his brothers or sons, and they were called *Šad* and

Yabgu. There were right and left *Šads* and right and left *Yabgus* leading the army. The army was trained with battue organizations. The success of a great ring hunt, like success in a military confrontation, depended on discipline, an effective chain of command, and the ability to deploy and control armed formations. The Türks had their distinctive battle organizations and tactics to cope with large armies of China. As for the basic and the most important weapons of the Türks, were bow and arrow, mace, armored vest, long cavalry spears, and sabers; they also carried daggers. Revolutionary inventions on the warfare were made in the Türk era. Metal stirrups, and wooden framed saddles as military devices, were widely used in the early Türk Qaganate times. After the usage of these inventions, the warriors on horseback improved their skills in combat maneuvers. Stirrups and saddles triggered the invention of long and curved sabers.

In Chapter 3 the titles of the state hierarchy among the nomads are studied. The Türks had a systematic hierarchical order, just like the other great empires of the era. The Türk titles were mentioned in the Turkic runic inscriptions and Chinese sources. However, these sources do not provide detailed information about the duties of each title. However, we can still see it in general that they had a chain of command. The qagan was at the head of the state organization having supreme power over the nomadic peoples. Türk qagan regulated the domestic and foreign politics; decided to make war and to conclude peace; commanded the armies in wars and raids; sent ambassadors; appointed or dismissed officials at all levels of the state organization. He used his authority and sanctioned power over the officials of the state. The ruler of the Türks had a divine source as the qagan's mandate was given by the sky God (*Tengri*). Qagan was the only supreme power to make decisions and rule. After qagan, the wife qatun had the most important place in the administration. The qatun, in the Turkic inscriptions, was pointed as a holy figure just as Goddess. Following these two titles, thirteen high ranked titles are examined: *Yabgu*, *Šad*, *Tegin*, *Küli Čor*, *Apa*, *Elteber*, *Tudun*, *Erkin*, *Šadapıt*, *Tarqan*, *Buyruq*, *Tutuq*, and *Beg*. After these most important titles, military and administrative titles were discussed. The majority of the military ranks and titles are of Turkic origin. However, there are several titles from Iranian languages such as Sogdian, and a number of titles from Chinese. There are political, cultural, bureaucratic, and commercial reasons for the excess of titles borrowed from different languages in the hierarchical system of the Türks. In addition, the Türks had Sogdian and Chinese civil servants under their rule. The Türks borrowed many titles from other languages adapting them into their state system.

In Chapter 4, the social strata and the general political characteristics of the Qaganate are discussed. The Turkic terminology is applied for the terms of social strata and the state. The social structure was shaped from a smaller unit: *oγuś-eb* ‘family-house’, *urug* ‘lineage’, *bod* ‘tribe’, *bodun* ‘people/tribal confederation’. *Bodun* is divided into *ak bodun* ‘aristocracy’ and *kara bodun* ‘common people’. The combination of these in a wider sense formed the *el* ‘state’. The legal system and the order of the state were provided via customary law that was called *törü*. As far as we know those rules were not written except for some examples from the Chinese sources.

Türks did not have a settled life. They had mobile shelters that could be moved if needed. Yurt was a shelter for a nomad family, furthermore, it was the shelter and decision center for the state issues of qagan, the supreme ruler of the state. As herds are permanently in need of new pastures, nomads are to move from one place to another several time a year.

The political center of the state is a central question. The refugium and probably the cultic center of the Türk state was the *Ötüken* according to their internal sources. However, it was just political propaganda of the rulers of the era, as it was shown on the inscriptions. Indeed, the political center of the Türks (last years of the first qaganate and revolt era of the second qaganate) was Ordos/Yinshan in Inner Mongolia. The uprisings for the establishment of the second Türk Qaganate started in this region too.

Additionally, in the chapter, the general structure of the Türk Qaghanate is mentioned. They had two-winged administration. In the east the qagan was the supreme power, on the other hand in the west *yabgu* ruled the state on behalf of the qagan. And the last topic of the chapter is the postal service of the Türks. The message system was very vital for nomads, especially those living in the vast steppes. The survival of the states was possible with the good functioning of the postal organization. Thanks to their horsemen, they provided a fast exchange of information. Türks set up mobile postal stations from *yurts*. The postal system of the Türk Qaganate was rather a military institution. This was also necessary for the safety of the steppe postal routes.

In the last chapter, the foreign relations of the Türks and their relations with nomad peoples were discussed. As a powerful state, Türk Qaganate extended its relations with several empires such as China, Byzantine, and Iran. But the most frequent contact was made with China in many different aspects including war and trade. It seems clear that the Türks never intended, nor attempted, to conquer and hold Chinese lands beyond the contested regions of the frontier. Their attacks typically had economic purposes. Another point on the political contacts is the internal

relations with nomadic tribes. The Türk Qaganate was the first state established by Turkic speaking tribes. The various Turkic speaking tribal confederations, under different names and organizations, played a dominant role in the history of the Türk Qaganate. Most of these tribal confederations survived the fall of the Türk Qaganate and formed new empires and states which played the main role in the migrations of the Eurasian Steppe. In summary, the eastern and western Turkic tribes, which are thirty in total. Those are the eleven tribes of the Eastern Türks, nine tribes of the *Toquz Oguz*, and the ten tribes of the Western Türks (*On Oq*). Generally, during the Türk sovereignty, the leading tribes, under names such as *Töles*, *Tarduš*, *Türgish*, *Qarluq*, *Kirgiz*, and *Toquz Oguz* appeared on the historical scene and they played a very important role. Different policies were applied to the nomadic tribes that were used to be rebellious most of the time. They were mostly controlled via military campaigns and ruled by the governors appointed by the *qagan*. Another main part and also the last part of the chapter deals with some policies applied to inner and outer relations. The ambassadors and interpreters played a very important role in the political relations between the Türks and their settled neighbours. Marriage strategy was one of the main policies applied by the Türks to make political bounds both with settled empires and nomadic tribes. The marriages might reinforce existing political ties or signal new strategic relationship.

Conclusions

The Türks appeared in the medieval nomad history with important innovations and a proper systematic state formation. The Türk Qaganate belongs to one of the strongest Eurasian Steppe empires which had basic influence on the medieval world. It was the major strength of Eurasia connecting China, Persia, India, and Byzantium from the middle of the 6th century for approximately two hundred years. Türks, with various legends of origin, appeared as the first steppe empire that used the name Türk.

The economy, which is thought to be based only on animal husbandry, is a very general prejudice, and as we have already mentioned, it turned out that it is much more complicated. It is evident that Türks developed very different economic income methods. Such as border trades with China, trade through Silk Road, collecting taxes from the subordinated tribes and obtaining a dowry due to the brides bought from China and other empires. They created a versatile economic system that didn't depend solely on nomad living conditions. The Türk Qaganate made a difference with their features and inventions in nomadic and world history. For the first time in history, a nomad

state developed a unique writing system and left behind monuments that survived to the present day. They established regular armies using the traditional decimal system. Metal stirrups as war equipment were on the rise in this period of history. Firmly connected to this invention, they developed new weapons such as long and curved swords and long lances. For the first time in history, a nomad state that reached such wide borders in the Eurasian steppes was ruled from yurt. They established a social order where the yurt was the center.

Two more issues external dependence and analogy theories are mentioned in our work. The adherents of the theory of external dependence think that nomadism depends on the environment and the neighbouring agricultural-urban societies. There is no doubt - as many historians have pointed out - that, the relation with China was of great significance in the formation of steppe empires. The underlying idea of this approach is that the extensive pastoral economies, the low population density, and the absence of a settled way of life did not create the necessity to develop some form of institutionalized hierarchy. Therefore, it was a theory that the nomads had no need for creating a state. But Tang China had no effect when Türks established their state. On the contrary, China had inner conflicts. As for the decline of the Türk Qaghanate, not China but the nomadic tribes played the main role. Nomads could independently establish a rudimentary state and that their society had been divided into the classes of the aristocracy and common people.

Another, more subtle, and therefore more resilient problem is caused by reasoning in terms of historical analogy. According to the theory the nomadic states sustained the state formation of their predecessors. An extensive investigation of nomadic sites from the Black Sea to Mongolia demolished the myth of a cohesive cultural complex. The steppe peoples to the north of China likewise exhibit great cultural diversity, not only in terms of burial practices, technology, and art but in socio-economic terms as well. Some were more dependent on pastoral nomadism as their main economic activity than others, some were more warlike than others, and some were able to build large states while others were not. Therefore, we asked that whether it is legitimate to draw analogies in the ways in which Xiongnu, Türks, and Mongols created their empires and interacted with other empires simply because they belonged to the same ethnographic or anthropological category of “steppe nomads”. We considered that the socio-economic circumstances of these nomads varied over time and from community to community that surely affected their political choices.

This study aimed to show that, the Türks established a systematic nomadic state in all aspects like economical system, well-organized military, education system, hierarchical order, social strata, transboundary relations etc. and formed an important political power for nearly two centuries against the mighty settled empires of their time.

Papers related to the topic of the Ph.D. thesis

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2. “Üzengi ve Eyerin Savaş Tarihindeki Önemi (Importance of Stirrups and Saddle in the History of War)”, *Uluslararası Savaş ve Kültür Sempozyumu Bildiri Kitabı*, Aralık 2017, Ankara.
3. “Military Organization and the Warfare of the Türk Qaghanate”, *Chronica* 18(2018), 137-152.
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5. Skaff J.K., Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power and Connections, 580-800, Oxford 2012, *Karadeniz Arařtırmaları Balkan, Kafkas, Doęu Avrupa ve Anadolu İncelemeleri Dergisi*, Bahar-Spring 2021, Sayı 69, Ankara, forthcoming.

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1. *Military Organization and the Warfare of the Türk Qaghanate* - Sixth International Conference on the Medieval History of the Eurasian Steppe, Szeged, Hungary, November 23–25, 2016.
2. *Üzengi ve Eyerin Savaş Tarihindeki Önemi* - Uluslararası Savaş ve Kültür Sempozyumu, Amasya, Turkey, November 17-19, 2017.