

Karakhanid Khanate

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The Karakhanid Khanate was the first Muslim Turkic dynasty that ruled in Central Asia, c.955–1213. The designations Karakhanids (Qarakhanids; Chinese: Halahan, the black or prestigious khans) or Ilak-khanid (prince-khans) are modern constructions derived from the titlature on the dynasty's coins. Contemporaneous literary sources usually refer to the Karakhanids as *al-Khaqaniya* (the Khaqan, or supreme ruler, house), *al-muluk al-khaniyya al-atrak* (the khal kings of the Turks) or *Al-i Afrasiyab* (the house of Afrāsiyāb, the king of Turan in the Persian epos, the Shahnama), and as Heihan or Dashi in Chinese.

Historical information on the Karakhanids is extremely sketchy due to the lack or non-survival of internal sources. It is mainly culled from chronicles of the khanate's neighbors, augmented by the abundance of Karakhanid coins, and a few documents and monuments.

The early history of the Karakhanids is still a matter for conjecture. They began as a loose confederation of Qarluq, Uighur, Cigil, and Yaghma elements; the identity of its leader (Qarluq, Uighur, or other) is still debated. Satuq Bughra Khan, the first Karakhanid to embrace Islam, allegedly died in 955, near Kashgar (in Xinjiang, China), and from this point on, we can talk of a Karakhanid dynasty. The Khanate's historical record comes into focus over the last decades of the 10th century, when it was immersed in a two-front war against the Muslim Samanids in Transoxania and the Buddhist Khotan kingdom in the Tarim basin. The

Karakhanids took over Transoxania in 999 and completed their conquest of Khotan seven years later. Being orthodox Sunni Hanafi Muslims, the Karakhanids met with little opposition in Transoxania, and they stressed their loyalty to the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad as a major component in their legitimacy. From the outset, however, the empire was bifurcated, and the western khan, entitled Boghra (camel) Kara Khaqan and ruling from Samarqand, was answerable to his eastern counterpart, who bore the title Arslan (lion) Kara Khaqan, and ruled from Balasaghun (in Kirgizstan) and Kashgar. Various other members of the ruling clan held lesser titles and appanages. The Karakhanid hierarchy was akin to a game of "musical chairs," as aspirants moved up the ranks while changing their honorifics and sometimes even their fiefs. In consequence, tracking the careers of the dynasty's rulers is a rather daunting task.

In 1040, the Karakhanids' realm was officially divided into eastern and western khanates. By the end of the century, first the western and then the eastern polity became a vassal of the rising Seljuqs (c.1055–1194). Within the next fifty years, both khanates – the eastern followed by the western – fell under Kara Khitan rule (1124–1218). The decline of the latter coincided with the demise of the Karakhanids. Owing to an unsuccessful mutiny in Khotan and Kashgar against the Kara Khitan, the eastern khanate was rendered toothless in 1204. After the western Karakhanids switched allegiances from the Kara Khitan to the Khwarazm Shah, another rebellious vassal of the former, the Khwarazm Shah Muhammad had the last Karakhanid ruler, his son-in-law 'Uthman, executed in 1213, thereby extinguishing the dynasty.

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The Karakhanid age was a time of economic growth and relative prosperity in Central Asia, despite the decentralization of Karakhanid rule. Archaeological records attest to growing urbanization, craftsmanship, and trade especially in Semirechye and south Kazakhstan. Trade with the Sinitic states, especially the Northern Song (960–1127) and the Liao (907–1125), flourished, especially in Khotan, and in the 12th century Transoxanian merchants reached even to Mongolia. While their nomadic subjects often challenged the dynasty, the Karakhanids retained certain nomadic characteristics, as attested by the story of the khan who ordered his troops to camp outside of Bukhara in their tents, and the allocation of special royal hunting grounds. Yet their era was generally one of intense sedentarization which resulted in urban and agricultural growth.

The Karakhanids certainly assimilated into the Arabo-Persian Muslim culture of their realm: under their rule Transoxania and Farghana became a stronghold of Hanafi law and theology, producing works that became standard in the whole Islamic world. They are also famous for their monumental building, especially minarets (surviving examples are in Bukhara, Uzgand, and Balasaghun), and left palaces in Samarqand and Ribat al-Mulk (between Bukhara and Samarqand). The Karakhanids also retained many aspects of their Turkishness. Their age was famous for producing the first Turkish Islamic literature. Notable works include the *Diwan Lughat al-Turk* (Compendium of Turkic dialects) of Mahmud Kashghari, compiled in 1074 at Baghdad, which is a mine of information on tribal, folk, and court traditions of the Karakhanids; and the *Qutadgu Bilig* (Wisdom of royal glory), a mirror of princes compiled by Yusuf Khass Hajib in Balasaghun in 1069–1070. Karakhanid rule saw the beginning of the Turkification of the Iranian

population in Transoxania, Semirechye, and the Tarim basin and a major expansion of Islam eastwards. The Khanate also had a special connection to China, its rulers often titled as Tamghaj Khan (Turkic: the Khan of China) or Malik al-Mashriq wa-l'Sin (Arabic: the king of the east and China), and taking pride in the prestige enjoyed by China in Central Asia.

Today the Karakhanids are considered a Chinese dynasty and the Uighurs' forefathers in Xinjiang, and are fondly remembered in Muslim Central Asia, especially Kirghizstan.

SEE ALSO: China, imperial: 5. Song dynasty period 960–1279; Kara-Khitans Khanate (Western Liao); Khitan (Liao) Empire; Khwarazmian Empire; Seljuk Empire, Great

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