

## **THE FINAL PERIOD OF THE TURKIC KHAGANATES IN ENGLISH- LANGUAGE SCHOLARSHIP**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the final phase in the history of the Turkic Khaganates based on English-language scholarly research, focusing on the political, military, and diplomatic developments of the mid-8th century and beyond. The study addresses the fragmentation of the Eastern and Western Turkic Khaganates, dynastic struggles, and the complex interactions between nomadic and sedentary powers, as well as their relations with the Tang Empire, the Umayyad Caliphate, and Tibet. English-language sources portray this era not merely as a period of decline, but as one of political transition and the emergence of new powers. This analytical approach contributes to a broader understanding of the historical legacy of Turkic peoples and the place of Central Asia in global history.

**Keywords:** Turkic Khaganate, Tang Empire, 8th century, Tang-Turk relations, Umayyads, geopolitics, nomads, English-language research.

### **Introduction**

The history of the Turkic Khaganates holds a significant place in the study of Central Asia during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. The Eastern and Western Turkic Khaganates, which emerged as powerful nomadic empires across the Eurasian steppes, played a crucial role in shaping the political, military, and cultural landscape of the region during the 6th to 8th centuries. While the origins and rise of these khaganates have been widely examined in many studies, in recent years, increasing attention has been given in English-language academic literature to their decline and fragmentation.

In particular, by the mid-8th century, the centralized structure of Turkic political authority had entered a phase of decline. This was due to external pressures—from the Tang dynasty in the east and the Umayyad Caliphate in the west—as well as

internal conflicts among tribal factions. It was during this period that new political forces such as the Turgesh and the Karluks emerged, fundamentally altering the balance of power in Central Asia.

This article analyzes the final phase of the Turkic Khaganates through the lens of contemporary historical studies written in English. It explores how Western scholars interpret this period not merely as a collapse but as a process of political transformation. Furthermore, the article examines the methodological approaches and thematic directions used in English-language scholarship.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs principles of historicism, comparative analysis, systematization, classification, and problem-chronological methods to reveal how the key hypotheses presented in various academic works are supported within English-language research.

Although scholars from various countries have examined the final stages of the Turkic Khaganates, including their resistance to the Arab invasions of Central Asia, English-language studies provide valuable insights into this topic [1]. Foreign research on the early medieval history of Central Asia generally does not offer radically different interpretations; however, notable viewpoints on the issues under study can be found in scholarly works published in France, Russia, Europe, America, Turkey, China, and Central Asian countries.

Among foreign-language academic contributions, studies written in English hold a distinct position in the exploration of early medieval Central Asian history. Researchers such as I. Christopher Beckwith, A.R. Gibb, R.N. Frye, S. Whiting Marvin, G.R. Hawting, V.L. Novak, M.D. Luse, P.B. Golden, Sharon Moshe, D. Elton, A.H. Jangebe, B. Hoberman, G.R. Hoyland, B. Jonathan, and Hugh Kennedy have made significant contributions to the field through their scholarly investigations [2].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The struggle of the Turkic Khaganate against the Umayyad dynasty's invasion, as well as the issue of the local Central Asian rulers' resistance, has been reflected in many foreign studies. Notably, Jonathan Karam Skaff's book *"Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800"* stands

out for its extensive and important information about the Turgesh [5]. The work provides detailed historical data about the Turkic Khaganate during its period of decline [6]. The decline, which began during the Sui dynasty, is demonstrated with clear evidence. The Western Turks refused to recognize Ishbara and Anluo, which divided the empire into two parts. With the help of the Sui dynasty, Ishbara launched an attack against the Western Turks, but he was unable to reunify the empire. Despite his personal leadership, Ishbara could not overcome the jealousy of his relatives and their supporters. The ultimate result of these conflicts was a serious weakening of the Turkic Khaganate. The uncertainty of succession forced Turkic leaders to constantly seek loyal allies and remain vigilant against internal threats [7].

From this period onwards, the Khaganate weakened due to threats from the Umayyads on one side and the Chinese on the other. The book also contains interesting conclusions about the influence of the Turgesh Khaganate in Transoxiana. It is known, for example, that rulers of city-states who became vassals of Turkic rulers referred to themselves as “slaves.” For instance, the ruler of Samarkand voluntarily formed an alliance with the Turgesh Khagan Suluk and even joined the personal guards of the Khagan but still called himself a slave of Khagan Suluk [8].

Significant retrospective observations are also made about the geopolitical position of the Turgesh. Although the Turgesh, located in the Ili River region, were far from the main territories of China, they played an important role in Central Asian geopolitics. They bordered the Turks to the northeast, the Tang Empire to the east, Arabs to the west, and Tibet to the south. Although the Tang and the Turgesh clashed in 717, by 718 they had agreed to establish peaceful diplomatic relations. The Turgesh Khagan was honored with the title “duke” by the Tang Empire—one rank below the Khitan king [9]. The conflict between the Umayyads and the Turgesh is also visible in the 725 reception ceremony at the Tang capital, attended by envoys of Khagan Suluk, the Umayyad dynasty, and the Western Turks [10].

American scholar I. Christopher Beckwith holds a special place in the study of early medieval Central Asian history. His works include “*The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*,” “*Medieval Tibeto-Burman Languages*,” “*Koguryo, the Language of Japan’s Continental Relatives*,” “*Phoronyms: Classifiers, Class Nouns, and the Pseudopartitive Construction*,” “*Warriors of the Cloisters: The Central Asian*

*Origins of Science in the Medieval World,” “Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present,” and “Greek Buddha: Pyrrho’s Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia.”*

Being a linguist, Beckwith is proficient in Arabic-Persian, Chinese, Japanese, and Hindi, which enhances the scientific value of his works. In his writings, such as *“The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia: A History of the Struggle for Great Power among Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese during the Early Middle Ages”* and *“Empires of the Silk Road (A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present),”* he extensively uses sources in Arabic-Persian, Chinese, and Tibetan documents [14].

In Beckwith’s 1993 work *“The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia,”* the Turgesh Khaganate is also discussed. As their main rivals weakened, Khagan Suluk and the Turgesh rapidly regained geopolitical power. According to Chinese historian Ssuma Kuang, Suluk officially declared himself Khagan in late summer 716, marking a significant step toward restoring political dominance in Western Central Asia. By the summer of 717, the Turgesh had substantially restored their previously held military and political influence. Chinese sources from May of that year note that although the Turgesh still paid tribute to the Tang Empire, their diplomatic missions were likely used as a cover for reconnaissance and espionage activities near Tang borders [16]. Beckwith’s information is highly reliable due to his effective use of Arab, Chinese sources, and historical studies.

In his monograph *“Empires of the Silk Road,”* Beckwith also describes Central Asia, including Fergana, as a contested region where Arabs, Turgesh, Chinese, and Tibetans had conflicting interests. In 716, after Khagan Kapagan left the Turgesh tribes, he died on a campaign. He was succeeded by his nephew, Bilge Khagan, with significant support from his brother Kul Tegin. During this time, Suluk of the Black Bone clan was declared Khagan in the Western Turkic lands. Suluk quickly restored Turgesh power and expanded his territory beyond his predecessors. The Turgesh asserted their claim to the rule over Transoxiana and Tokharistan, previously controlled by the Western Turks. Thus, they became defenders of local peoples against Arabs and Islam and close allies of the Tibetans. The Chinese saw this Turgesh-Tibetan alliance as a dangerous north-south connection that could sever China from the West, dating back to the ancient Han dynasty. Tang emperors, inheriting the political legacy of the Han, sought to destroy this alliance. They

secretly allied with the Arabs and planned to overthrow the Turgesh and Tibetans [17].

The Turgesh, settled in Western Turkic lands, ruled the trade cities of Central Asia, which were economic centers of the Great Silk Road. Numerous clear indications in Arab and Chinese sources show that the Turgesh were patrons and protectors of trade relations across Dzungaria and much of Central Asia [18].

However, continuous military campaigns by the Tang dynasty and Arabs in the 730s were successful, and between 737 and 740, the Turgesh Khaganate was completely destroyed. This created a power vacuum in the region, leading to internecine conflict among tribes. This situation enabled Chinese and Arab forces to increase their influence over the trade cities of Central Asia [19].

The Issue of the Conquest of Transoxiana by the Caliphate and the Turk Khaganate's Response

European researchers were among the first to pay attention to the issue of the Arab Caliphate's conquest of Transoxiana and the Turk Khaganate's reaction to it. Notably, A.R. Gibb in his work [20] particularly focuses on the military campaigns of the Arab Caliphate in Transoxiana and the activities of the anti-Arab coalition. In Gibb's book, there is a separate section titled "The Turk Resistance Movement," which includes the following information: In 713, Qutayba crossed the Sayhun (Jaxartes) River for the first time with his troops, marking the beginning of a new phase of westward expansion in China, coinciding with Emperor Xuanzong (Xuan-tszun) ascending the throne. In 714, the Chinese intervened in the affairs of the Tiele tribes and quickly brought them under control. The following year, they restored the rule of the Fergana ruler. In 716, after the death of the Northern Turk Khan Me-chuo, the powerful Turkash tribes declared independence and, under the leadership of Sulu, with the help of China, established a new state in the Ili Valley. The local rulers of Transoxiana attempted to use these events to free themselves from Arab domination. In 718, the rulers of Tughsuda, Gurak, the king of Kumid Narayana, and the ruler of Chaganiyan sent joint diplomatic missions to China. Tughsuda requested the Chinese to order the Turkash to attack the Arabs, Gurak reported the capture of Samarkand and sought military assistance, while Narayana claimed that the Arabs had seized all his treasury and requested negotiations on tax relief with the Arabs. Interestingly, the ruler of Chaganiyan, as a vassal of the Tocharian Yabgu, did not join these demands and remained cautious. However,



despite “kind words,” the Chinese emperor (the son of heaven) took no real action, and no Chinese troops were sent from Sayhun to the western regions, even though the Transoxianian rulers repeatedly declared themselves voluntary vassals of China [20].

R.N. Fry studied the caliphate’s policy in Transoxiana based on numismatic material. Notably, Fry concludes that coins identified by numismatist Drouin likely belonged to the Turkash. These coins were probably minted by the Turkash to consolidate centralized governance, economic stability, and trade relations, reflecting their status as an independent political entity. The design, inscriptions, and metal composition of these coins offer deeper insight into the historical and geopolitical processes of that period and region [21].

Among late 20th-century English-language studies, Khalid Yahya Blankinship’s “The End of the Jihād State: The Reign of Hisham Ibn Abd Al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads” stands out. The work narrates the process, which began in 623 CE and continued until 750, described in scholarly literature as the “Jihad State”—the Arab conquests under the guise of Islamization, initially local and later international in scale [22]. Extensive military campaigns in Transoxiana occurred during the third expansion phase of the Caliphate. Between 73-99/692-718, we witness the conquest of North Africa, Spain, Transoxiana, and Sindh. This wave of Muslim expansion was halted not by internal conflict but by a defeat inflicted by the Byzantines at Constantinople in 98-99/717-18. The subsequent pause in 99-101/718-20, under Caliph Umar II, was a voluntary cessation of military campaigns, considering this defeat [23]. The study emphasizes that the Abbasids preserved local traditions in Transoxiana when establishing their authority, making the region a key front for caliphate military campaigns. However, the abundance of information about military actions here does not necessarily indicate it was the most dangerous front.

Nonetheless, the Transoxiana front posed a serious test for the Muslim forces led by Hisham. During Yazid II’s reign, attempts to reimpose jizya (poll tax) on new Muslims in Transoxiana angered the local population to the point of rebellion against the Muslim government. Although these uprisings were violently suppressed, the locals still appealed to the Turkash khagan for protection against the caliphate [23].



The book devotes a special section to the conflict between the Turkash Khaganate and the Umayyads. East of the Khazars, Muslims clashed with another Turkic state—the Turkash Khaganate. However, under Turkash rule, the lack of cities made it less of a sedentary state compared to the Khazars, and its army mainly consisted of highly mobile nomadic forces, lacking fixed targets for defense. Chinese sources claim the Turkash had 200,000 to 300,000 soldiers, although this is likely exaggerated; the Turkash's strength lay more in their mobility and military qualities than in sheer numbers [22]. Transoxianians effectively exploited Umayyad-Turkash conflicts in their resistance against the Arabs, as reflected in this study [22].

## **Conclusion**

Modern and classical English-language research portrays the late history of the Turkic Khaganates as a complex, multifaceted process. The late 7th and early 8th centuries witnessed significant shifts in the geopolitical balance of Central Asia. As heirs of the Western Turks, the Turkash emerged briefly but prominently as an imperial power, actively engaging in diplomatic and military rivalry with the Tang Empire, Umayyad Caliphate, and Tibet. Notably, under Khagan Suluk, the Turkash became the leading regional power resisting Arab expansion in Transoxiana and Tokharistan.

Research indicates that during this period, internal political fragmentation, succession disputes, and external pressures gradually weakened the Turkic Khaganates, and by the mid-8th century, they were replaced by the Karluks. Nevertheless, English-language historical literature regards these khaganates' political, cultural, and economic legacy as a significant stage in Central Asian history. Their resistance to Islamization, control over trade routes, and diplomatic activity have attracted considerable scholarly attention. This supports viewing the Turkic Khaganates not merely as military powers but as complex political systems and civilizational entities.

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