



The political and administrative governance model of the Western Turkic Khaganate in Tokharistan

Abdulakimova Dilzakhon Boltaevna

History teacher at the Academic Lyceum of Termez State University

Abstract

This study analyzes the nature of the administrative system and vassal relations of the Western Turkic Khaganate over Tokharistan and the adjacent oasis states. Particular attention is paid to the political, military, and administrative mechanisms employed by the Khaganate in governing local rulers, as well as to the control mechanisms of the central authority through the hierarchy of Turkic titles such as eltabar, tudun, tarqan, erkin, shad, and tegin.

Based on Chinese, Arabic, Sogdian, and Bactrian sources, the study examines the relationship between Tokharistan and the earlier Hephthalite state, the continuity of local dynasties, and the appointment of representatives of the Turkic elite. It also analyzes the relative autonomy of oasis polities, the taxation system (supervision through tuduns), and the forms of direct and indirect governance.

The findings suggest that the governance of the Western Turkic Khaganate was not a single rigidly centralized system but rather a flexible political model that evolved over different stages, in which local dynasties and the Turkic military-administrative elite operated jointly.

Keywords: Turkic Khaganate, Tokharistan, eltabar, tudun, yabghu, vassal system, oasis states, Central Asia.

G‘arbiy Turk xoqonligining Toxaristondagi siyosiy va ma‘muriy boshqaruv modeli

Абдулакимова Дилжахон Болтаевна

Термиз давлат университети академик лицейи тарих фани ўқитувчиси

Абдулакимова Дилжахон Болтаевна

Преподаватель истории Академического лицея Термезского государственного университета

Annotatsiya



Ushbu tadqiqotda G'arbiy turk xoqonligining Tokharistan va unga tutash voha davlatlari ustidan o'rnatgan boshqaruv tizimi hamda vassal munosabatlarining mohiyati tahlil qilinadi. Asosiy e'tibor xoqonlikning mahalliy hukmdorliklarni boshqarishda qo'llagan siyosiy, harbiy va ma'muriy usullariga qaratilgan bo'lib, eltabar, tudun, tarxon, erkin, shad va tegin kabi turkiy unvonlar ierarxiyasi orqali markaziy hokimiyatning hududlarni nazorat qilish mexanizmlari yoritiladi.

Tadqiqotda xitoy, arab, sug'd va baqtriy manbalariga tayanilgan holda, Toxaristonning avvalgi Eftalitlar davlati bilan bog'liqligi, mahalliy sulolalarning davomiyligi hamda turkiy elita vakillarining tayinlanishi masalalari ko'rib chiqiladi. Shuningdek, voha davlatlarining nisbiy mustaqilligi, soliq tizimi (tudunlar orqali nazorat), hamda bevosita va bilvosita boshqaruv shakllarining qo'llanilishi tahlil etiladi.

Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, G'arbiy Turk xoqonligi boshqaruvi yagona va qat'iy markazlashgan tizim emas, balki turli bosqichlarda o'zgarib borgan moslashuvchan siyosiy modelga asoslangan bo'lib, unda mahalliy sulolalar va turkiy harbiy-ma'muriy elita birgalikda faoliyat yuritgan.

Kalit so'zlar: Turk xoqonligi, Toxariston, eltabar, tudun, yabg'u, vassal tizimi, voha davlatlari, Markaziy Osiyo.

Политическая и административная модель управления Западно-Тюркского каганата в Тохаристане

Аннотация

В данном исследовании анализируется сущность системы управления и вассальных отношений Западно-Тюркского каганата над Тохаристаном и прилегающими оазисными государствами. Основное внимание уделяется политическим, военным и административным методам, применявшимся каганатом при управлении местными правителями, а также раскрытию механизмов контроля центральной власти над территориями через иерархию тюркских титулов, таких как эльтебар, tudun, тархан, эркин, шад и тегин.

В работе на основе китайских, арабских, согдийских и бактрийских источников рассматриваются вопросы связи Тохаристана с государством Эфталитов, преемственности местных династий и назначения представителей тюркской элиты. Также анализируются относительная автономия оазисных государств, система налогообложения (контроль через тудунов), а также формы прямого и косвенного управления.

Результаты исследования показывают, что управление Западно-Тюркского каганата не представляло собой единую строго централизованную систему, а основывалось на гибкой политической модели, изменявшейся на разных



этапах, в которой совместно функционировали местные династии и тюркская военно-административная элита.

Ключевые слова: Тюркский каганат, Тохаристан, эльтебар, тудун, ябгу, вассальная система, оазисные государства, Центральная Азия.

The period between the 6th and 8th centuries in Central Asian history is characterized by complex political transformations and the interaction of diverse state traditions. During this time, the Western Turkic Khaganate emerged as a major political power, extending its influence over vast territories, including Tokharistan and the surrounding oasis states. The governance of such a geographically extensive domain required the formation of a complex and multilayered administrative system.

These regions, particularly Tokharistan, had long-standing political traditions associated with the Hephthalite state, where local dynasties and semi-autonomous oasis principalities continued to function. Rather than establishing fully centralized rule, the Khaganate governed these territories through local elites and Turkic military-administrative representatives. In this process, a structured hierarchy of Turkic titles—such as eltabar, tudun, tarqan, erkin, shad, and tegin—was developed, serving as key instruments for maintaining central authority and regional control.

At the same time, analysis of Chinese, Arabic, Sogdian, and Bactrian sources indicates that the oasis states did not lose their internal autonomy entirely but instead functioned within the Khaganate system in a semi-independent status. This suggests that the Western Turkic Khaganate did not operate as a strictly centralized empire but rather as a flexible and multilayered imperial formation.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the vassal administrative system of the Western Turkic Khaganate in Tokharistan and adjacent regions, the hierarchy of titles, and the political relationship between the central authority and local governance, based on historical sources.

During the period of the Turkic Khaganate, the administrative system of Tokharistan in Central Asia developed as a distinctive semi-autonomous vassal model. Due to its strategic importance, the central authority governed the region not through direct rule, but rather indirectly through local elites.

The Western Turkic Khaganate, as a distinct imperial formation, incorporated the administrative structures of several dozen tribes and clans, as well as more than twenty oasis-based principalities. Therefore, examining the manner in which these entities were governed occupies a significant place in determining the essence of the Khaganate's state system.



At the height of its power, the socio-political condition of the territories under its control, as well as their geographical composition, is of particular importance. In this context, Tokharistan held a prominent and strategic position.

Tokharistan was particularly distinguished by its well-known *yabghu* administrative system.

The region was governed by a ruler holding the title of Yabghu, the most prominent being the *Yabghu of Tokharistan*. The yabghu was typically a member of the ruling khagan's lineage or a person closely associated with it. In internal affairs, he exercised a considerable degree of autonomy.

The incorporation of oasis principalities into the Khaganate took place within the framework of specific political processes. It is well known that after the Turkic Ashina tribe, which inhabited the southern foothills of the Altai Mountains, struck a decisive blow against its overlord, the Rouran Khaganate, the Turkic Khaganate was established in 552. Within a short period, it developed into a vast empire, uniting territories stretching from the Far East to the northern shores of the Black Sea, and from Southern Siberia to Northern India.

Already in the first decades after its foundation, the Khaganate, in accordance with the traditional political practices of ancient Central Asian nomads, divided its territory into two parts: the eastern wing, with its center in the Orkhon Valley (Mongolia), encompassing Southern Siberia, the Far East, Northern China, and the eastern regions of the Altai; and the western wing, centered in Yettisuv, extending from the western Altai to the northern Black Sea, and from the Volga–Ural region to Northern India.

Subsequently, on the basis of this western wing—formally subordinate to the eastern wing, which embodied the core of central authority—the Western Turkic Khaganate emerged. Throughout its history until the mid-eighth century, this polity, unlike its eastern counterpart, incorporated not only the nomadic tribes of Yettisuv and surrounding regions, but also, predominantly, the oasis principalities of Eastern Turkestan and the interfluvium of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, as well as, to a certain extent, a number of oasis polities in Khurasan and Northern India. As such, it functioned as a political entity that developed distinctive methods and mechanisms of governance over these territories.

In order to elucidate how the Khaganate governed its vassals—particularly the oasis principalities—it is first necessary to address the question of when and by what means these polities were transformed into vassals. According to Chinese dynastic chronicles, and to a lesser extent other sources (Byzantine, Arab, and Persian), the Turkic Khaganate, in the mid-550s, brought under its control the oasis principalities of Eastern Turkestan. In the 560s, it extended its authority



over the polities of the Amu Darya–Syr Darya interfluve, including Chach, Fergana, Ustrushana, Sogd, Bukhara, and Khwarazm, reaching as far as Tokharistan. By the 580s, it had also incorporated the oasis principalities of Tokharistan, Kabulistan, and a significant portion of Khurasan.¹

The process by which these regions were incorporated into the Khaganate is not described in detail in the sources written in these languages; rather, it is conveyed in brief statements of one or two sentences. In particular, Chinese chronicles, when recounting the early activities of the Khaganate, briefly note that the Turks defeated the Hephthalite Empire and subsequently took control of its western territories. In works such as *Bei Shi* and *Sui Shu*, even when individual oasis principalities are described in separate sections devoted to the Western Regions, their subordination to the Turks is only briefly mentioned.

Byzantine sources likewise report that in 568, envoys of the Khaganate who arrived in Byzantium emphasized the complete defeat of the Hephthalites and the transfer of their territories into Turkic control.²

It is evident that the processes by which the Khaganate transformed the oasis principalities into its vassals—or the extent to which the rulers of these oases perceived themselves as vassals—are only briefly reflected in the available sources. In other words, although these polities became vassals of the Khaganate, none of the extant sources provide a detailed account of this transformation. Consequently, it is rather difficult to fully elucidate the nature of the relationship between the Khaganate and its vassals.

This situation primarily pertains to the initial phase of relations between the suzerain (the Khaganate) and its vassals (the oasis principalities), namely the period between the 550s/560s and the 580s. The majority of scholars agree that during this time—indeed, as many argue, throughout the entire history of the Turkic Khaganate—relations between the Khaganate and its vassals were largely limited to the extraction of tribute, with minimal interference in their internal affairs, and that each oasis principality retained a semi-autonomous status.

However, such interpretations cannot be accepted uncritically, and the issue requires a more in-depth examination. Notably, sources record that in the 580s a *tegin* (a princely representative) was dispatched to Tokharistan,³ through whom adjacent territories were also brought under supervision. The precise objectives behind this policy of the Khaganate remain unclear. A similar pattern can be

¹ Бичурин Н. Я. Собрание сведений... I. – С. 229

² Феофилакт Симокатта. История... – С. 624.

³ Taşağıl A. *Gök-Türkler*. – Ankara, 1995. – S. 88.



observed in accounts related to Bukhara, where comparable developments are noted.

In Tokharistan, the declaration of Tardu Shad—the son of a ruler of the Western Turkic Khaganate—as the “Yabghu of Tokharistan,”⁴ together with the conferral of the title *eltabar* upon the rulers of each oasis principality on the eve of the 620s, the dispatch of *tuduns* to supervise them, and even the presence of *eltabars* at the head of some oasis principalities in the early 600s, represent events that occurred within a relatively close chronological framework. This raises the question of what underlying factors explain these developments.

First and foremost, one must ask whether the changes in the Khaganate’s relations with its vassals—namely, the replacement of local dynasties in certain principalities by representatives of the Khaganate, the granting of the distinctly Turkic title *eltabar* to local rulers, and the introduction of the *tudun* system for supervision—were driven by a specific political necessity.

On this issue, the following hypotheses may be proposed, namely that certain developments influenced the relations between the Khaganate and its vassals:

– The system of merely collecting tribute without interference in internal affairs appears to have generated certain problems, including misunderstandings regarding the proper and complete collection of taxes. For this reason, it is likely that the Khaganate dispatched a *tudun* to each vassal territory. It is known that the function of the *tudun* was to organize tax collection and to supervise the vassal. Even in a principality such as Chach, which was governed directly through a *tegin* appointed by the Khaganate, the *tudun* system was introduced. This may indicate that even ruling dynasties closely connected to the Khaganate acted in ways detrimental to its fiscal interests in matters of tax collection and dispatch, thereby necessitating direct supervision through such a system;

– The later transition, in many regions, from indirect to direct rule reflects a pattern characteristic of many imperial states. In the initial stages of conquest, in order to stabilize an initially unstable situation and facilitate control over subject populations, imperial powers typically relied on pre-existing local dynasties. At this early stage, the new rulers, operating in an unfamiliar environment, were not yet able to establish absolute authority over the subject population and therefore depended on compliant local dynasties. Over time, however, the external power adapted to the new environment and increasingly found intermediaries unnecessary. Consequently, under a pretext—often a minor misunderstanding

⁴ Тугушева Л. Ю. Уйгурская версия... – Б. 68, 202.



(since it would be unusual for a vassal with 5,000–10,000 troops to seriously challenge a suzerain fielding around 100,000 troops)—the old dynasty was removed, and a member of the ruling house was installed. In our view, a similar process occurred in Tokharistan.

However, in some regions where local dynasties fully satisfied their overlords and remained loyal, they may have been allowed to continue their rule.

In summary, the increasing control of the Western Turkic Khaganate over its vassals over time was not the result of the personal initiative of any single khagan, but rather the outcome of a set of broader structural factors. In this context, the question arises as to whether there were cases in which oasis principalities rebelled against their suzerain or struggled for independence during their subordination to the Khaganate. In particular, Chinese chronicles also record an account of a campaign in 605, approximately fifty years after Tokharistan had been incorporated into the Khaganate, in which it was reportedly conquered through a military attack.⁵

Now, turning to the question of how the Khaganate governed Tokharistan, what methods and instruments it used, and, more broadly, what the essence of relations between the Khaganate and its vassals actually consisted of, it is first necessary to address several issues directly related to this topic.

Even prior to the Khaganate, Central Asia had been successively dominated, over a period of more than a millennium—from the mid-first millennium BCE to the mid-first millennium CE—by a series of large and small political formations, including the Scythian-Saka, Yuezhi, Xiongnu, Kangju, Wusun, Kushan, Xionites, Kidarites, Hephthalites, and Rouran states. Most of these polities initially emerged in a nomadic milieu and later extended their authority over the sedentary oasis regions of the same area.

It should first be noted that most oasis polities in Central Asia were situated within river basins and were shaped by their geographical environment—valleys, oases, or other forms of natural isolation. At the time of their formation as states, they often underwent a transition from city-state structures to oasis-based polities. This was also the case with Tokharistan.

The researcher emphasizes that it would not be accurate to assume that the Khaganate established a single, standard, and continuous administrative system in governing Tokharistan from 552 to 744. Instead, at different times, the

⁵ Бичурин Н. Я. Собрание сведений... I. – С. 287.



Khaganate governed certain tribes and regions through officials bearing the titles *yabghu* and *shad*, who were predominantly members of the Ashina dynasty.

According to him, in some cases *shads* played a more prominent role in administering subject populations, while in other cases so-called “lesser khagans” (*small khagans*) were appointed over parts of the subordinate peoples. In yet other instances, *shads*, *tegin*s, and *tudun*s were dispatched to govern particular groups. The researcher further notes that in some cases one “lesser khagan” might have ruled over only a single tribe, whereas another “lesser khagan” could have exercised authority over multiple tribes at the same time.⁶

He also writes that officials bearing the titles *chor*, *eltabar*, *erkin*, *tudun*, and *to'yg'un* were appointed over subject peoples and governed these populations on behalf of the “Great Khagan.” According to him, *tudun*s sometimes acted directly as representatives of the central authority in administering subject populations, while in other cases they were primarily responsible—under central mandate—for fiscal and financial supervision, particularly in matters of taxation.⁷ This situation in the Khaganate’s administration cannot be characterized as lacking order or as disorganized. The observed variation in the governance of vassals corresponds to specific historical phases of the Khaganate. In the initial stage, during the process of subjugating various tribes and polities, members of the ruling house—*tegin*s and *shad*s—were predominantly dispatched to govern these territories. Later, when Khaganate authority over the vassals had been fully consolidated, non-dynastic officials such as *eltabars* and *tudun*s were appointed.

The assignment of *eltabar* titles to some subject tribes and *erkin* or *chor*-titled officials to others was also not arbitrary; rather, it reflected the relative status and importance of these groups. The presence of Khaganate representatives bearing titles such as *tarqan* or *tutuq* in the administration of certain vassals can be explained by the fact that these offices were primarily military rather than administrative in nature, indicating that the Khaganate maintained military personnel in key regions as circumstances required. Among the administrative practices applied by the Khaganate in Tokharistan, the systems of *eltabars* and *tudun*s were of particular importance.

Unlike the Qarakhanids and the Chinggisids, who generally appointed members of their own dynasty to govern conquered territories, most vassals under the Khaganate retained their local dynasties. However, in terms of the essence of

⁶ Erkoç H. İ. Eski Türklerde Devlet Teşkilatı... – S. 226.

⁷ Erkoç H. İ. Eski Türklerde Devlet Teşkilatı... – S. 227.



vassal relations, there was no fundamental difference among these polities. Indeed, while in its early period the Khaganate generally entrusted the administration of vassals to local dynasties and limited its control to supervision through *tuduns*, it later began appointing members of the Ashina to govern Tokharistan. In several other cases as well, Turkic dynasties closely or indirectly connected to the Khaganate began to exercise rule.

At this point, it is natural to raise questions such as: “Would it not have been more effective and efficient for the Western Turkic Khaganate to abolish the relative internal autonomy of all tribal administrations and oasis principalities, divide them into provinces, and appoint members of the Ashina dynasty to govern them?” or “Could the decline of the Khaganate have been partly influenced by the fact that its vassals retained their internal autonomy, i.e., the lack of strong centralization?”

First of all, it should be emphasized that the oasis principalities under the Khaganate were not politically strong enough to pose a serious threat to it. Written sources also do not provide evidence that any of them, apart from minor incidents, carried out large-scale actions capable of influencing the internal politics of the Khaganate.

Indeed, it can be stated—based on sources in various languages—that from the period when the Khaganate incorporated the oasis regions in the 560s–580s until the 650s, a span of approximately 70–80 years, and even during the subsequent period of roughly 30 years of Chinese domination, relations between the Khaganate and its vassals remained generally stable and cooperative. Furthermore, even during the period from the early 700s to the 740s—when the authority of the Western Turkic Khaganate had passed to the Turgesh Khaganate or when control over the oasis states was exercised by the Second Eastern Turkic Khaganate—such relations continued. This reflects the dependence of sedentary societies on nomadic empires as a source of strong military-political power.

In particular, from the 640s onward, several oasis states in Eastern Turkestan increasingly sought the support of the Khaganate in response to the growing Chinese threat. Similarly, in the late seventh and early eighth centuries,⁸ the rulers of Tokharistan appealed to the Khaganate for assistance against the Arab conquest. Underlying all these developments was the dependence of sedentary societies—whose economic life was based on agriculture, crafts, and trade—on nomadic political powers that had long ensured their security and stability. Conversely, the nomadic polities established in the north-eastern parts of Central

⁸ Согдийские документы... II. – С. 80–83.



Asia also depended on the agricultural and artisanal products supplied by sedentary populations for their survival as states, since the satisfaction of their material needs and even their military success were closely tied to this exchange.⁹

Before addressing the question of the methods and instruments used by the Western Turkic Khaganate in establishing relations with its vassals, it is necessary to first examine how earlier states approached this issue.

One of the characteristic features of the oasis polities of Central Asia was that, even when incorporated into a larger empire, most of them sought to preserve a degree of relative autonomy. Local rulers, whose primary objective was to safeguard the continuity of their dynastic rule, generally pursued a policy of accommodation with their new overlords.

Among the evidence indicating their relative, or at least partial, autonomy—particularly in internal administration—the most significant undoubtedly lies in coinage.

Tokharistan, consisting of several dozen oasis principalities in the upper basin of the Amu Darya, served as the core region of the Hephthalite Empire. It appears that even prior to the rise of the Khaganate, these territories were governed by local dynasties exercising internal administrative authority. However, since the origins of these ruling dynasties have not been sufficiently studied, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions in this regard. It is possible that many of these ruling houses were of Hephthalite origin.

This is because, unlike the oasis principalities of Eastern Turkestan (such as Kucha and Khotan) and those of the Amu Darya–Syr Darya interfluvium (including Chach, Fergana, Ustrushana, Sogd, Bukhara, and Khwarazm), which were largely governed indirectly through established local dynasties, Tokharistan (including Badakhshan) constituted the core territorial base of the Hephthalites. A similar situation appears to have existed in Khurasan and the Kabul Valley as well.

For instance, in oasis principalities such as Gurgan and Dehistan in Khurasan, dynasties bearing the titles *tegin* and *sul* (*chor*) are attested, and several scholars associate their origins with the Hephthalites.¹⁰

A similar situation can also be observed in the administration of the Kabul Valley. In particular, Kabul and its surrounding regions (Zabulistan and Kapisa), as well as Gandhara, were areas where Hephthalite authority had been deeply

⁹ Бичурин Н. Я. Собрание сведений... II. – С. 324; Шониёзов К. Ўзбек халқининг шаклланиш жараёни. – Т., 2001. – Б. 146, 186

¹⁰ История ат-Табари... – С. 165, 167.



established. These regions were governed by a dynasty bearing the title *tegin*, whose origins are likely traceable to the Hephthalites.¹¹

In summary, prior to the establishment of Khaganate authority in the region, Tokharistan appears to have been governed by dynasties directly associated with the Hephthalite Empire, over which a form of direct control was exercised.

In order to determine the methods and instruments employed by the Western Turkic Khaganate in governing its vassals, it is necessary to rely primarily on Chinese dynastic chronicles, which preserve relatively detailed information about the oasis polities. Before analyzing how the Khaganate governed these oasis principalities and the nature of its relations with its vassals, it is essential to consider several directly relevant factors.

From the mid-first millennium BCE to the mid-first millennium CE, over a long historical period preceding the Khaganate, Central Asia was successively dominated by a series of large and small political formations such as the Scythian-Saka, Yuezhi, Xiongnu, Kangju, Wusun, Kushan, Xionites, Kidarites, Hephthalites, and Rouran. Most of these polities initially emerged in a nomadic milieu and subsequently extended their authority over the sedentary oasis regions of the same territory. Although sources providing detailed accounts of their governance over oasis regions are scarce, certain written records, as well as the fact that many oasis principalities in Eastern Turkestan, the Amu Darya–Syr Darya interfluvium, and adjacent regions had been minting their own coinage since the early centuries CE, indicate that they possessed a certain degree of internal administrative autonomy.

It appears that this situation persisted even in the early years of Khaganate rule over the oasis principalities. Although Chinese and Greek sources report that in the 560s the Khaganate defeated the Hephthalite Empire and took control of its territories, there is no evidence that until the end of that century it interfered directly in the administration of any oasis principality or removed any local dynasty from power. In the early period, the Khaganate seems to have limited itself primarily to the collection of tribute without interfering in internal affairs.

Although the system of tribute collection is not described in detail in the sources, available information suggests that vassals sent annual tribute to their overlords, and that its collection was supervised by representatives sent from the center, known as *tuduns*. The *tuduns*, whose primary function was to supervise the rulers of subordinate territories and organize tax collection, were essentially

¹¹ Chavannes E. Çin yıllıklarına göre... – S. 287.



deputies appointed by the Khagan. The exact date of the introduction of this institution is not entirely clear. Nevertheless, based on Chinese chronicles stating that Tun Yabghu Khagan (618–630) granted the title *silifa (eltabar)* to his vassals and dispatched a *tudun* to supervise each of them, it can be inferred that a similar system was also applied in the administration of Tokharistan.¹²

The majority of researchers continue to repeat the view that “throughout its entire history, the Turkic Khaganate merely collected tribute from sedentary principalities and did not interfere in their internal administration.”¹³ In fact, this view appears to relate only to a certain phase of the Khaganate’s history, yet it seems to have been generalized as if it were characteristic of the entire period. With a few exceptions, most scholars continue to repeat this interpretation. In this context, given that representatives sent by the Khaganate to Tokharistan in the 590s are recorded as bearing the title *tegin*,¹⁴ a question arises as to whether the *ulus* system may also have been introduced in these regions. If one considers the information recorded in the Chinese chronicle Tang Shu, which states that “[the khagan’s] sons and brothers bearing the title *tegin*, as well as those *tegin*s who governed other tribes with troops under their command, were all referred to as *shad*,” the issue becomes considerably clearer. This suggests that the presence of officials bearing the title *tegin* in Tokharistan during roughly the same period may indicate an attempt by the Khaganate to introduce a form of *ulus* system in the oasis principalities.

If, as noted above, there were reliable sources confirming that in the final quarter of the seventh century the Khaganate sent a *tegin* or *shad* to each oasis region, similar to Tokharistan, the matter would be more conclusive. At present, however, it can only be stated that, regardless of whether oasis principalities were assigned as *uluses* to princes or not, most of them appear to have retained their local dynasties.

It is therefore possible that, in its early phase, the Khaganate attempted to apply to sedentary populations a governance model similar to that used among nomadic tribes—namely, retaining local leaders while simultaneously assigning them as *uluses* under the authority of a *tegin*.

¹² Бичурин Н. Я. Собрание сведений... II. – С. 283; Таşağıл А. Gök-Türkler. – Ankara, 1995. – S. 92.

¹³ Gibb H. Orta Asya“da... – S. 49; Массон В. М. Ромодин В. А. История Афганистана. Том I. С древнейших времен до начала XVI века. – М., Наука, 1964. – С. 218. Аскарлов А. Некоторые вопросы истории становления узбекской государственности // Общественные науки Узбекистана. – Ташкент, 1997. – № 34. – С. 65–76.

¹⁴ Таşağıл А. GökTürkler. – Ankara, 1995. – S. 88.



Furthermore, regarding another issue related to the administration of the Khaganate and its vassals, it has been suggested that “the presence of various Turkic titles in Transoxiana and Khurasan during the Khaganate period was not the result of a systematic administrative structure, but rather reflected a kind of ‘fashion of the time,’ whereby certain local rulers adopted Turkic titles.”¹⁵

If this were indeed the case, each subordinate ruler would have freely adopted whichever Khaganate-related title they preferred, and no clear hierarchical order would have been observable in this regard. On the contrary, it can be observed that the Turkic titles found in the administration of oasis principalities were used in accordance with a clearly defined hierarchy, reflecting the same order as in the Khaganate’s own internal administrative structure.

This is evident, for example, in Tokharistan, where titles characteristic of the Khaganate—such as *yabghu–shad/tegin–tudun/tarqan*—were employed, and in Chach, where the sequence *tegin–eltabar–tudun–tarqan* appears to have been used in accordance with hierarchical order.

According to another interpretation partly related to this issue, the highest title in the Khaganate administration, namely *khagan*, was allegedly also used in certain oasis principalities during the late seventh and early eighth centuries. However, written sources provide no evidence that any minor local ruler referred to himself as *khagan* either during this period or in earlier or later times.

This is particularly noteworthy given that, during this period, as the Arab conquest posed a serious threat to the Amu Darya–Syr Darya interfluve, Turkic khagans frequently visited nearly all oasis regions in the area. This is further supported by Arabic and Sogdian sources indicating that the khagans led coordinated resistance efforts alongside the rulers of Tokharistan against the Arab advance.¹⁶

Consequently, could it really be possible that, at a time when the khagans themselves were present in these regions, a minor local ruler would dare to proclaim himself a “khagan”? In fact, the identification of these coins as those minted in Chach by the Western Turkic Khagans may be considered to have resolved this issue.

It should be acknowledged that in recent years, new studies have emerged that approach this issue differently from earlier interpretations. In this regard, the

¹⁵ Gibb H. Orta Asya“da... – S. 5–7.

¹⁶ Согдийские документы... II. – С. 80–85.



views of the American scholar J. K. Skaff are particularly noteworthy. He argues that: “The Western Turks and their successor tribes, such as the Türgesh, governed the sedentary oasis regions of Turkestan from the sixth to the eighth centuries. Although these Turkic peoples were primarily steppe-dwelling pastoralists, they placed considerable emphasis on controlling the agricultural oasis regions of Turkestan. However, the reasons for their desire to rule over Turkestan and the administrative systems they established for this purpose have not yet been sufficiently clarified.”¹⁷

According to Skaff, the Khaganate governed the oasis regions of Turkestan through two principal methods: (1) direct rule, and (2) indirect rule. He suggests that direct governance is observed in cases where members of the ruling dynasty were appointed to administer specific oasis regions; Tokharistan may serve as an example. He further notes that such a form of governance was not a fixed rule but rather an exception. Indirect rule, in his interpretation, functioned as follows: “The most common arrangement was to allow local elites to retain their previous positions within their respective sedentary regions. These local rulers acted as intermediaries, responsible for collecting taxes and tribute from their sedentary populations and transferring them to the ruling nomadic elite. A clear example of such a system is found in the *Tang Shu*, which states in relation to the activities of Tun Yabghu Khagan that ‘he granted the title of eltabar to the rulers of the Western Regions and sent a separate tudun to each of them to supervise and verify tax collection.’”

Although this scholar provides several examples in support of his argument, he does not engage in a detailed analysis of them. Moreover, some of his views are not sufficiently substantiated. In particular, his suggestion that the establishment of Turkic dynasties associated with the Khaganate in Tokharistan was related to the availability of suitable pasturelands for nomads cannot be fully accepted.

Another oasis polity directly governed by the Khaganate was Tokharistan, which encompassed a considerably larger territory than others. Chinese dynastic chronicles state that Tokharistan (Tuholo) consisted of 27 small principalities, all subordinate to a ruler bearing the title *shehu* (Turkic: *yabghu*), based in Ho (Kunduz), who belonged to the Ashina lineage.¹⁸

Indeed, Arabic sources also repeatedly report that Tokharistan—comprising a number of semi-autonomous principalities such as Balkh, Termez,

¹⁷ Бабаяров Г. Древнетюркские монеты... С. 20, 35

¹⁸ Бичурин Н. Я. Собрание сведений... II. – С. 321.



Chaghaniyan, Khuttal, Kumed, Vakhon, Shughnon, Qubodiyon, Vakhsh, Shuman, Akharun, Karron, Rub, Samingan, Shuburgan, Guzman, Garchistan, and Badghis—was governed by Turkic *yabghus*.¹⁹ The incorporation of Tokharistan into the Khaganate occurred somewhat later than other regions, in the 580s, and the nature of its administration also differed significantly. In particular, for the Khaganate—whose political center was located far away in Yettisuv—it was necessary to establish a political structure in Tokharistan capable of uniting the numerous small principalities and keeping them under control.

In this way, the former political centers of the Hephthalites, namely Kunduz and Balkh, became key strongholds of the Khaganate, and from the earliest period the khagans began to station their deputies there. As noted above, around the 590s, Tardu Khagan (576–603) sent his son, bearing the title *tegin*, to Tokharistan, while in the 620s Tun Yabghu Khagan dispatched his son Tardu Shad.

From the 620s to the 750s, the rulers of Tokharistan included figures such as Tardu Shad (c. 620–630), Tegin-Shad (630–645), Ishbara Yabghu (645–650), Ashina Uchjebo (653–660), Gun Ishbara Yabghu (c. 670–680), Nadunili (700–720), Qutlug Tun Tardu (720–730), and Sulayman? Qara (Chinese: Shiliman Gyalo, 750). Most of these rulers bore Turkic names and titles and ruled under what is referred to as the “Yabghu dynasty,” which lasted for nearly 150 years.²⁰

Unlike Chach and Fergana, which were governed by dynasties directly tracing their lineage to the Ashina house, the fact that Tokharistan was ruled under the title *yabghu* indicates that this region held special importance for the Khaganate. The emergence of dynasties directly or indirectly connected to the Khaganate in most of Tokharistan’s smaller principalities is also likely related to this situation. In particular, Turkic dynasties appear to have held power in regions such as Termez, Chaghaniyan, Balkh, Badghis, Khuttal, Vakhon, Vakhsh, Shuman, Akharun, Kumed, Qubodiyon, and others.²¹

So, to what extent was the Khaganate’s practice of granting the title *eltabar* to local rulers and sending *tuduns* reflected in the administration of Tokharistan and its constituent principalities? Chinese dynastic chronicles record that *Shabolo gyelifa* (Turkic: Ishbara Eltabar), ruler of Vakhon, sent an embassy to China in

¹⁹ История ат-Табари... – С. 124.

²⁰ Бичурин Н. Я. Собрание сведений... II. – С. 321–322; Chavannes E. Documents sur les... – P. 155–158; Ekrem E. Hsüan-Tsang Seyahetnamesi’ne göre ... – S. 138–139.

²¹ Гафуров Б. Г. Таджики... – С. 227; Гоибов Г. Ранние походы... – С. 30–31; Бобоёров Ф. Турк хоқонлиги даврида Тохаристон // Мозийдан садо. – Т., 2002. – №4. – Б. 10–11.



the years 656–660, while another *gyelifa* (eltabar), identified as the ruler of Khuttal, is likewise recorded as having sent an envoy to China in the 730s.²² Furthermore, both Shuman and Akharun were also governed by Turkic dynasties. Xuanzang notes that they belonged to the Turkic *xisu* tribe.

Furthermore, both Shuman and Akharun were also governed by Turkic dynasties, and Xuanzang notes that they belonged to the Turkic *Xisu* tribe²³, moreover, based on the mention in several Mug Mountain Sogdian documents (dated to the 720s) of an official bearing the titles *Lyttpyr/δyttpyr* (*eltabar*) or *Xisu Eltabar*, scholars F. Grenet and E. de la Vaissière associate this evidence with the aforementioned regions.²⁴

In addition, in one of the minor principalities in the southern part of Tokharistan—namely Rub—the Bactrian-language documents composed between 639 and 757 CE contain the title *νηητοβερο* (*eltabar*). In particular, in several Bactrian documents dated to different years such as 639, 678, and 682 (Docs. N, R, Q), the expression *χαγανο ταποαηηγο νηητοβερο* appears, which may be interpreted as “*eltabar, servant (tapughlig) of the Khagan” (Bactrian–Turkic).

Similarly, in a Bactrian document concerning a gift dated to 710 CE (Doc. T), the expression *χοτοιογο γηηηο βηηγανο σαβοουο* is used in reference to a Turkic noblewoman, which may be rendered as “Qutlug Tapughlig Bilga-Sebük/Sebig” in Turkic terms. The term *tapughlig* in these contexts literally denotes “servant, attendant, or one who renders service.”²⁵

From the content of the documents, it becomes evident that the ruler of Rub—namely the *eltabar*—was regarded as a “servant” (*xizmatchi*) of the Khagan. The title *tudun* appears in a document dated to 702 CE from a region near Kunduz, the administrative center of Tokharistan. In this document, the expressions *σεροτορθο* (“ruler of the Turks”) and *γαδο ταδονο* (“Gaz tudun”) occur side by side.

Furthermore, Bactrian-inscribed Turkic coins dated to the 7th–8th centuries contain the title *ταδονο ταρχανο* (*tudun-tarqan*), while Al-Tabari also mentions a ruler of Khuttal named Tudun Tarqan (737 CE), originally from the Bamiyan region.²⁶

²² Бичурин Н. Я. Собрание сведений... II. – С. 324, 326.

²³ Гоибов Г. Ранние походы... – С. 30–31.

²⁴ Grenet F., de la Vaissiere E. The last days... – P. 177.

²⁵ Древнетюркский словарь... – С. 535.

²⁶ История ат-Табари... – С. 256



Based on this information, it can be concluded that the Yabghu state of Tokharistan was, in essence, to some extent similar to the Western Turkic Khaganate. Titles characteristic of the khaganate, such as yabghu, shad, and tegin, were used in its central administration, while lower-ranking titles within the khaganate hierarchy—such as eltabar, tudun, tarqan, and erkin—were applied in the governance of subordinate minor principalities under its control. At the same time, locally used Iranian-origin titles, including xudat, shah, and sher, continued to be employed within their administrative system.

Another noteworthy aspect related to the governance of this region is that the rulers of several minor principalities of the area belonged to prominent Turkic tribes of the khaganate, such as the Tardush, Karluk, and Khalaj. In particular, according to the *Tang Shu* chronicle, the ruler of Kumed in 642–643 belonged to the Yantu Turks. Moreover,²⁷ Bactrian-language documents mention the Khalaj Turks as a ruling group in several parts of Tokharistan. It is also suggested that the Xisu Turks, mentioned in Chinese historical records as rulers of Shuman and Akharun, may have been Oghuz Turks.

Furthermore, Arab and Persian sources report that Arab military forces attacking Sistan and its surrounding regions encountered rulers belonging to the Ghuz (Oghuz) and Khalaj (or Karluk) Turks. The migration of the Karluk tribe into Tokharistan and Badakhshan is also dated to the 7th–8th centuries.²⁸

These pieces of evidence provide a basis for the conclusion that the khaganate also involved other Turkic tribes and clans in the governance of subordinate minor polities.

At the same time, it can be observed that Tokharistan, being a relatively less mixed region in terms of its origins and directly connected to the Turkic Khaganate through its ruling dynasties, organized its administrative system in a manner characteristic of the khaganate itself. In particular, within the Yabghu state of Tokharistan, there existed a continuous hierarchy of titles such as yabghu–shad–tegin–tudun–tarqan, alongside Turkic personal names and epithets like Tardu, Ishbara, Qutlugh, Tun, and Böghra. In this respect, both political entities embodied administrative traditions typical of the khaganate.

Sources indicate that rulers of vassal principalities of the Western Turkic Khaganate—such as Marv, Samarkand, Gaochang, Kucha, Kashgar, and

²⁷ Бичурин Н. Я. Собрание сведений... II. – С. 324.

²⁸ Шониёзов К. Ўзбек халқининг шаклланиш жараёни... – Б. 146, 186.



Karashahr—married daughters of the khagans. However, no such information is found regarding the rulers of Tokharistan. This raises the question of how this situation can be explained. In our view, this may be related to the difference between indirect and direct forms of governance over dependent polities.

While the Turkic Khaganate maintained control over local dynasties of non-khaganate origin through matrimonial alliances (by making them sons-in-law of the khagan), such a practice does not appear to have been necessary in Tokharistan. This is likely because these territories were governed by dynasties already linked to the khaganate by origin. In this context, it can be argued that, rather than endogamy, exogamous marriage practices characteristic of early Turkic traditions were predominant. Thus, these data suggest that marital relations played an important role not only in the khaganate's foreign policy but also in its administrative system.

In the region of Tokharistan—located close to the Sasanian Empire, the khaganate's southwestern neighbor and long-standing rival—the situation was somewhat similar to that of Eastern Turkestan. However, unlike China, the Sasanian Empire initially (around 580–600) attempted to cross the Amu Darya and posed a significant threat to its rival during the early period of the khaganate's formation. Nevertheless, from the first quarter of the 7th century onward, the balance of power shifted, and the Sasanian Empire gradually began to decline.

By the 620s, during the reign of Tun Yabghu Qaghan (618–630), the establishment of khaganate dominance over the Sasanian Empire likely significantly reduced the threat from the southwest. Nevertheless, unlike other oasis principalities, the establishment of the Yabghu dynasty (620–750)—a branch of the khaganate ruling house—in Tokharistan was probably not coincidental.

Similarly, the fact that in frontier regions of the khaganate, such as Dehistan—previously under Sasanian control—governors bearing the title *tegin* were appointed indicates that these areas were of strategic importance in the khaganate's political vision. In other words, it can be argued that the khaganate appointed princely figures with the title *tegin* as trusted representatives to administer these regions. Thus, members of the ruling house in Tokharistan appear to have functioned, in a sense, as a garrison force for the khaganate.

Moreover, the discovery of wall paintings from a 7th–8th century fortress (Tavkatapa) in the Amu Darya basin, depicting Turkic soldiers, provides further evidence supporting the interpretation that this site served a garrison function during the period of the khaganate.



The geographical location of oasis principalities, including their strategic importance, appears to have been one of the reasons why the Khaganate resorted to different forms of governance. In particular, during the process of establishing dynasties directly connected to the khaganate, there is no evidence that any local ruling family in Tokharistan was completely abolished. It can be argued that the appointment of princes belonging to the Ashina dynasty in a region such as Tokharistan—situated on the southwestern frontier and bordering the Sasanian Empire, the Khaganate’s constant rival—was dictated by strategic necessity.

A similar situation can be observed in Kapisa (Kobulistan), another region adjacent to Sasanian Iran, which was also governed by princes (tegin) from the Ashina ruling house. One of the factors indicating the strategic importance of both principalities for the Khaganate is that, unlike other oasis polities, each of them maintained large military forces composed of Turkic soldiers. According to the *Tang Shu* and the accounts of Xuan Zang, in some provinces of Tokharistan such as Khuttal, approximately half of the population consisted of sedentary (Hu) people and half of Turks (Tujue), while in regions like Zabulistan and Gandhara the population was mainly local, but the rulers and military forces were predominantly Turkic.²⁹

Indeed, unlike smaller principalities such as Karashahr, Kashgar, Kushaniya, and Kabudan, which maintained armies of only about 2,000–3,000 soldiers, Tokharistan is reported to have had a military force of approximately 50,000–100,000 warriors, which further confirms its exceptional strategic and military significance.³⁰

Unlike Eastern Turkestan, the transfer of governance over much of the Amu Darya–Syr Darya interfluvium and adjacent regions into the hands of Ashina dynasties can be explained by the presence of relatively extensive oasis zones rich in additional natural resources. For instance, in Chach there was the Ilak (Ohangaron) area; in the Fergana Valley, Northern Fergana; and in Tokharistan, the broad pasturelands extending from the southwestern Hisar Mountains and the western foothills of the Hindu Kush. These conditions likely created favorable circumstances for the establishment of Ashina rule in these regions.

It is worth noting that Xuan Zang records in his memoirs that the ruler of Tokharistan “did not stay in one place permanently and had no fixed residence.”³¹

²⁹ Бернштам А.Н. Тюрки и Средняя Азия... – С. 189–191.

³⁰ Ekrem E. Hsüan-Tsang Seyahetnamesi'ne göre ... – S. 140

³¹ Александрова Н.В. Путь и текст: китайские паломники в Индии. – М., 2008. – С. 238



This information suggests that around Kunduz, Turkic military groups associated with the ruling elite of Tokharistan may have resided in pastoral grazing areas.

The analysis demonstrates that the Western Turkic Khaganate established a flexible and multilayered system of governance over Tokharistan and the surrounding oasis principalities. Rather than relying on a uniformly centralized administrative structure, the Khaganate employed a combination of direct and indirect rule depending on political conditions, regional importance, and local power dynamics.

The evidence shows that high-ranking Turkic titles such as yabghu, shad, and tegin were primarily used in regions under direct or semi-direct control, while lower-ranking titles including eltabar, tudun, tarqan, and erkin were integrated into the administration of subordinate polities. At the same time, pre-existing local Iranian titles such as khudat, shah, and sher continued to function, indicating administrative continuity and pragmatic governance.

Sources from Chinese, Arabic, Sogdian, and Bactrian traditions further confirm that Tokharistan retained a significant degree of internal autonomy while remaining politically integrated into the Khaganate system. The presence of tuduns highlights the importance of fiscal supervision, whereas eltabars and other appointed officials reflect efforts to maintain centralized oversight without fully dismantling local dynastic structures.

Overall, the findings suggest that the Western Turkic Khaganate should not be viewed as a rigidly centralized empire, but rather as a dynamic imperial formation that combined nomadic political traditions with the established administrative practices of the oasis regions. This hybrid system allowed the Khaganate to sustain control over a vast and culturally diverse territory for an extended period.

References :

1. **Бичурин Н. Я.** *Собрание сведений о народах, обитавших в Средней Азии в древние времена.* Том I. — Санкт-Петербург: Императорская Академия наук, 1851.
2. **Феофилакт Симокатта.** *История.* — Санкт-Петербург: Издание Императорской Академии наук, 1887.
3. Таşağıl А. *Gök-Türkler.* – Ankara, 1995.
4. **Тугушева Л. Ю.** *Уйгурская версия биографии Сюань-цзана. «Биография Сюань-цзана».* — Москва: Наука, 1991.



5. Erkoç N. İ. *Eski Türklerde Devlet Teşkilatı*. — Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2011.
6. Согдийские документы с горы Муг. Часть II. — Москва: Восточная литература, 1963.
7. ат-Табари, Мухаммад ибн Джарир. *История пророков и царей (Ta'riх ар-русул ва-л-мулук)*. — Лейден: E. J. Brill, 1879–1901.
8. Chavannes, Édouard. *Documents sur les Tou-Kiue (Turcs) occidentaux d'après les sources chinoises*. — Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1903.
9. Gibb, H. A. R. *Orta Asya'da Arap-Fars-Türk Münasebetleri (Orta Asya'da İslam Medeniyeti)*. — London: Luzac & Co., 1923.
- 10.10.Массон В. М. Ромодин В. А. История Афганистана. Том I. С древнейших времен до начала XVI века. — М., Наука, 1964. —
- 11.11.Аскарлов А. Некоторые вопросы истории становления узбекской государственности // *Общественные науки Узбекистана*. — Ташкент, 1997. — № 34. —
12. Древнетюркский словарь. — Ленинград: Наука, 1969.
13. Шониёзов К. *Ўзбек халқининг шаклланиш жараёни*. — Тошкент: Фан, 2001.
14. Бернштам А. Н. *Тюрки и Средняя Азия в раннем Средневековье*. — Москва–Ленинград: Издательство АН СССР, 1949.
15. Ekrem, E. *Hsüan-Tsang Seyahatnamesi'ne Göre Orta Asya ve Türkistan*. — Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1987.—
16. **Александрова Н. В.** *Путь и текст: китайские паломники в Индии*. — Москва: Восточная литература, 2008.