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# THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION OF KARAKALPAK SOCIETY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

***Abstract***: *This article examines the social structure of Karakalpak society in the eighteenth century, focusing on its principal social categories and the mechanisms of social differentiation. Drawing on written accounts by European travellers, Russian researchers, and archival and documentary sources, the study explores the social status and roles of töre (aristocratic elites), khojas, sheikhs, biys (customary-law judges and community leaders), batyrs (warriors distinguished by military prowess), clan elders, bais (wealthy individuals), and dependent groups, including enslaved persons. Particular attention is paid to the interplay of lineage, religious authority, political influence, military achievements, and material wealth in determining social status. The article also examines the categories aq süyek ("white bone") and qara süyek ("black bone"), their significance within the social hierarchy, and the functioning of traditional governance institutions. The findings demonstrate that social differentiation in Karakalpak society was shaped by a combination of kinship and tribal affiliations, political relations, religious factors, and economic conditions. The study concludes that the social organisation of the Karakalpaks in the eighteenth century was multilayered and complex, with material wealth constituting only one of several criteria determining an individual's position in society.*

***Key words***: *Karakalpaks, eighteenth century, social structure, social differentiation, social hierarchy, aq süyek, qara süyek, töre, khojas, sheikhs, biys, batyrs, bais, clan elders, enslaved persons, European travellers, historical sources.*

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## Introduction

As the German traveler, naturalist, and explorer Alfred Edmund Brehm observed when describing the natural environment of Central Asia: "However rich the Central Asian steppe may be, however strikingly vivid its colours become in spring, and however much fertile land it contains, permanent settlement and life in one and the same place are possible only in its exceptionally favourable areas" [1, p. 131].

The natural and geographical environment was one of the significant factors shaping the historical development of the population of Central Asia. In the eighteenth century, the social and economic life of the Karakalpaks developed within a natural environment directly associated with the availability of water resources, the condition of pastures, seasonal landscape changes, and other ecological circumstances. These conditions had a considerable influence on the direction of economic activities while also necessitating diverse forms of adaptation to a changing environment.

Over a long historical period, the Karakalpaks accumulated considerable experience in exploiting their natural surroundings for economic purposes and adapted to the specific conditions of their environment. The natural, climatic, and landscape characteristics of the Aral Sea region contributed to the development of a diversified economic system combining agriculture, livestock breeding, fishing, hunting, and other activities. This diversity of

economic practices helped reduce the population's dependence on seasonal fluctuations and ensured a relative degree of stability in economic life.

Natural and economic conditions affected not only the economic sphere but also the social organization of Karakalpak society. The combination of agriculture with various forms of pastoralism, together with the need for the collective use of water, pastureland, and other resources, contributed to the formation of stable social relationships. The social structure of the Karakalpaks consisted of interconnected kinship-based, territorial, economic, and status-based groups. These forms of organization facilitated the regulation of internal relations, the distribution of resources, the maintenance of social solidarity, and the reproduction of collective life.

Thus, the natural environment was not merely a factor shaping economic activity but also one of the conditions underlying the formation of corresponding forms of social organization. Nevertheless, the influence of the natural and geographical environment should not be regarded as the sole cause of social differentiation. The social structure of Karakalpak society was also shaped by political, economic, religious, and kinship-based and tribal relations.

In the eighteenth century, the increasing complexity of social and economic relations was accompanied by the development of social institutions and hierarchies reflecting differences in the functions, status, and social roles of various population groups. An individual's social position was not necessarily determined directly by material wealth. In the society under consideration, high status could be associated primarily with lineage, religious authority, political influence, membership in particular kinship-based groups, or the performance of socially significant functions.

The position of sheikhs and khojas is particularly illustrative in this respect. In eighteenth-century Karakalpak society, they were regarded as representatives of Dervishism [6, p. 29], were associated with the religious sphere, and enjoyed considerable social authority. However, the high social standing of religious figures did not necessarily imply substantial material wealth. Sources describing Dervish communities note the prevalence of ascetic lifestyles and material deprivation. The observations of Ármin Vámbéry, a Hungarian Orientalist, Turkologist, and traveler [2, p. 7], provide grounds for taking this characteristic into account when examining the relationship between material circumstances and social status. Khojas and sheikhs were not confined to religious functions; they frequently also acted as political figures [7, p. 54]. They participated in negotiations with the Russian administration and could serve as signatories to official documents. Sources dating from the 1730s and 1740s mention Murad-Sheikh, whom Dmitry Gladyshev, a traveler and researcher of Central Asia, described as the head of the Jabin clan [12, p. 20], as well as his son, Khalvet-Sheikh. Both enjoyed considerable respect among the Karakalpaks [10, pp. 325–346].

Khojas enjoyed high social esteem not only among the Karakalpaks but also in other Central Asian societies. In describing their position, Vámbéry emphasized that "in Central Asia, the hajji enjoys incomparably greater respect than in other Muslim countries and is fully recompensed for the hardships he has endured. Protected by the respect and support of society, he is more secure than anyone else from arbitrariness and tyranny; the title he has acquired serves as his patent of nobility, which he bears on his seal during his lifetime and which adorns his tomb after his death" [2, p. 19]. This testimony is important for understanding how religious prestige could function as an independent source of social status rather than being directly reducible to an individual's material circumstances.

Pyotr Ivanovich Rychkov, a Russian official, traveler, economist, historian, and regional scholar, described the religious life of the Karakalpaks in comparison with that of other peoples of the region. He observed that the Karakalpaks "differ neither in law nor in language from the Kirghiz and other peoples of that region, except that they have more learned and literate people in the Mohammedan faith; consequently, they know the Mohammedan law and observe it more strictly than the Kirghiz. Therefore, a considerable number of khojas are found among them, whom Muslims regard as descendants of the Prophet and his disciples" [10, p. 175]. This testimony indicates the prominent role played by khojas in the religious and social life of eighteenth-century Karakalpak society. At the same time, it demonstrates that religious literacy and knowledge of Islamic tradition were regarded as significant components of social status.

Representatives of the Chinggisid nobility occupied a distinctive position within the social hierarchy. According to the available evidence, there were relatively few Karakalpaks who claimed descent from Genghis Khan. They constituted several families and referred to themselves as "people of the bone of Chinggis" [4, pp. 98–99]. Their lineage provided an important basis for their elevated social and political status. Within the Turco-Muslim political tradition, descendants of Genghis Khan were generally regarded as a distinct elite category, a perception reflected in the norms governing political and legal conduct.

In this connection, particular attention should be paid to the contrast between the categories *aq süyek* ("white bone") and *qara süyek* ("black bone"), which became established in the social terminology of the Turkic societies of the region. In the material examined here, the category *aq süyek* was associated primarily with notions of lineage and the distinctive social status of the *töre* and khojas. Members of these categories enjoyed a number of special social and

legal privileges. In particular, they were exempt from the jurisdiction of the *biys'* courts and from corporal punishment for offences they committed. Outward expressions of deference toward them included addressing a sultan not by personal name but by the honorific title *taqsyr* ("sir" or "my lord"), the requirement to kneel before him, and compliance with other established forms and symbols expressing authority and social status [13, p. 190].

The category *aq süyek* constituted a closed, privileged social group comprising primarily the *töre* and khojas. The *töre* (sultans) represented one of the highest-status categories within semi-nomadic society and played a significant role in its political organization. Their membership in the *aq süyek* category was based above all on claims of Chinggisid descent and the rights associated with it, particularly the right to participate in the exercise and legitimation of political authority.

Sources relating to eighteenth-century Karakalpak history contain references to members of the *töre* category who occupied significant political positions, including positions associated with khanal authority in the Khanate of Khiva [14, pp. 73–74]. Nevertheless, the specific forms and mechanisms through which the *töre* exercised political representation within different Karakalpak groupings require further source-critical investigation and clarification.

The recorded testimonies of the English traveler and researcher Reynold Hoag (also rendered as Reynold Hough) contain the names of several Karakalpak khans, including Khoja Khan, Raskul Khan, Kaiyp Khan, and Sultan Murat Khan [5, pp. 209–210]. These accounts add to our understanding of the political elite of eighteenth-century Karakalpak society and require comparison with other documentary and narrative sources.

As for the category *qara süyek*, in our view, it developed as the social and hierarchical antithesis of *aq süyek*. The privileged category *aq süyek* was contrasted with the general population, referred to by the term *qarasha* ("the common people" or "the masses"). Thus, *qara süyek* denoted the broader population that did not belong to privileged social categories. These concepts should not, however, be interpreted as rigidly defined estates in the modern sense. Rather, they represented historically formed categories associated with social status, lineage, and public prestige.

The *biys* occupied a particularly important position among the high-status social groups. The Russian military officer and researcher of Kazakhstan and Central Asia Yakov Petrovich Gaverdovsky explained the term *biy* as referring to "eloquent, wealthy, and resourceful people" [3, p. 73]. According to Dmitry Gladyshev, a *biy* was one of the key figures in the kinship-based organization, functioning either as its head or as an influential representative. The range of responsibilities associated with this position was extensive. It included participation in economic and political decision-making, regulation of relations within the clan and with neighboring groups, allocation of pastures and other economic lands, organization of communal work, and the settlement of disputes and legal claims. The institution of the *biys* therefore combined administrative, judicial and mediatory, and economic-regulatory functions [7, p. 53].

*Batyrs* also commanded considerable political and military authority. Baron Georg Wolter Konrad Freiherr von Meyendorff, a natural scientist and topographer, characterized *batyrs* as courageous, just, and enterprising individuals who distinguished themselves above all in times of war [8, p. 41]. The title *batyr* was not inherited through lineage; rather, it was earned through individual martial prowess. The presence of *batyrs* among influential members of society therefore demonstrates the considerable importance of military and political authority in the social organization of eighteenth-century Karakalpak society.

Clan elders (*starshinas*) also occupied a prominent position within the political system of governance, exercising leadership and representing particular kinship-based or territorial groups. The Swedish and Russian traveler and naturalist Johan Peter Falck observed that "these chiefs, or princes, are the wealthiest, highly respected, and the oracles of the aimaks; therefore, the khan can exercise considerable influence over these territories through them, notwithstanding their limited authority" [11, p. 191]. Among the Karakalpaks, comparable functions could be associated with the title or designation *aqsaqal* (literally, "white-bearded elder"). The sources suggest that the authority of a clan elder depended on a combination of factors, including lineage, life experience, personal qualities, material circumstances, and public recognition.

Texts associated with Reynold Hoag also mention several elders and influential figures who allegedly exerted a certain degree of influence over Karakalpak political and social life: Urazak-Batyr, Alimbay-Batyr, Klaubet-Biy, and Temirbek-Bay [5, pp. 209–210]. These names illustrate the multilayered nature of social and political organization, in which different statuses – those of clan elders, *biys*, *batyrs*, and *bays* – could overlap and coexist within an individual's social position.

Slaves and other forms of unfree dependents constituted a distinct population category. According to the sources cited in this article, a substantial proportion of enslaved persons consisted of prisoners of war, including Russians, Kalmyks, Persians, and members of other groups captured during military conflicts and subsequently held by individual leaders. Enslaved persons could also be acquired through buying and selling [7, p. 56]. Documents dating from

1722 provide evidence of variations in their circumstances. In some cases, Russian captives were granted freedom by their owners, while others entered into marital relationships with Karakalpak women [9, p. 779]. These accounts indicate that the status of enslaved persons was not uniform and that an analysis of this population category must take account of the specific forms of dependency involved.

Thus, the social structure of eighteenth-century Karakalpak society was multilayered and encompassed population groups distinguished by lineage, religious standing, political authority, military achievements, economic circumstances, and degrees of social dependency. The most prominent high-status categories included the *töre* and khojas, while the *biys*, *batyrs*, and clan elders played significant roles in the social and political organization of society. Alongside these groups existed various categories of ordinary people and dependent individuals, including enslaved persons. Social status, however, was not determined exclusively by material wealth. Lineage, religious authority, personal achievements, and the performance of important social functions could secure an individual a high position irrespective of their level of material prosperity. Taken together, the evidence examined here makes it possible to characterize eighteenth-century Karakalpak society as a socially differentiated system in which kinship-based, political, religious, military, and economic relations were closely interconnected.

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