

# Karakhanids

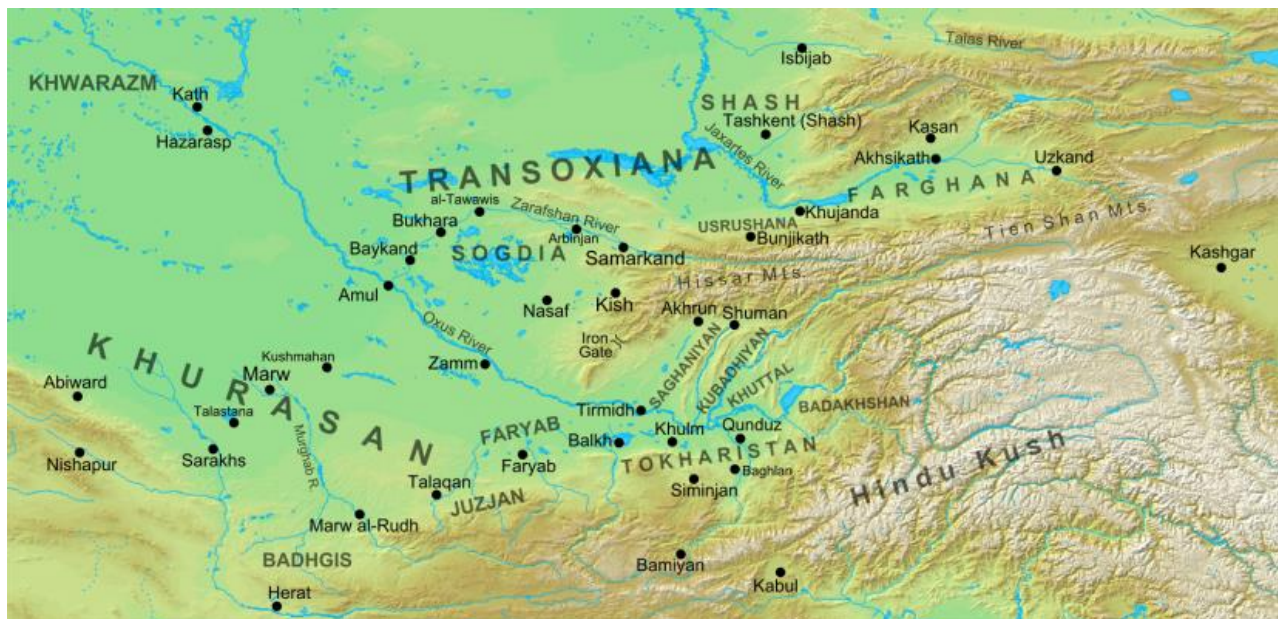
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The **Kara Khanid-Khanate** was a Turkic dynasty that ruled in **Transoxania** in Central Asia, ruled by a dynasty known in literature as the **Karakhanids**, a royal title with **Kara Kağan** being the most important Turkish title up till the end of the dynasty.

By assimilating Islam in their original Turkic nomadic culture, the Kara-Khanid is left the most enduring cultural heritage among coexisting cultures in Central Asia from the 9th to the 13th centuries.

The Karluk-Uyghur dialect spoken by the nomadic tribes and turkified sedentary populations under Kara-Khanid rule formed two major branches of the Turkic language family, the **Chagatay** and the **Kypchak**. The Kara-Khanid cultural model that combined nomadic Turkic culture with Islamic, sedentary institutions spread east, west and south as far as, Afghanistan, Northern Iran), Tataristan), and Turkey. The **Chagatay**, **Timurid**, and **Uzbek** states and societies inherited most of the cultures of the Kara-Khanids and the Khwarezmians without much interruption.

The Kara-Khanid Khanate was a confederation formed sometime in the 9th century by **Karluks**, **Yagmas**, **Chigils**, and other peoples living in **Zhetysu**, Western [Tian Shan](#) and Western [Xinjiang](#). Their capitals included [Kashgar](#), [Balasagun](#), [Uzgen](#) and [Samarkand](#).



The Khanate conquered Transoxania and ruled it between 999–1211. Their arrival in Transoxania signaled a definitive shift from Iranian to Turkic predominance, yet the Karakhanids gradually assimilated the Perso-Arab Muslim culture, while retaining some of their native Turkish culture.

The takeover by the Karakhanids did not change the essentially Iranian character of Central Asia, though it set into motion a demographic and ethnolinguistic shift. During the Karakhanid era, the local population adopted the Turkic language. While Central Asia became Turkicized over the centuries, culturally the Turks came close to being Persianized or, in certain respects, Arabicized.

The official or court language used in Kashgar and other Karakhanid centers, referred to as “Khaqani” (royal), remained Turkic. The language was based on dialects spoken by the Turkic tribes that made up the Karakhanids. Turkic script was also used for all documents and correspondence of the khaqans

Karakhanid writer **Yusuf Balasaghuni**, wrote ***Kutadgu Bilig*** (The Wisdom of Felicity), the only known literary work written in Turkic from the Karakhanid period. *Kutadgu Bilig* is a form of advice literature known as **mirrors for princes**. The Turkic identity is evident in both of these pieces of work, but they also showed the influences of Persian and Islamic culture. However, the court culture of the Karakhanids remained almost entirely Persian. and two last western khaqans wrote poetry in Persian

The Khanate eventually split into two – the Eastern and Western Khanates. They then came under the suzerainty of the **Seljuks**, followed by the **Kara-Khitans**, before the dynasty was extinguished by the **Khwarezmians**. Their history is reconstructed from fragmentary and often contradictory written sources, as well as studies on their coinage.

## Karahanid Names

The name of the royal clan is not actually known and the term **Karakhanid** in English is artificial — it was derived from Old Turkic **Qara Khan** the word “Kara” means “black” and also “courageous” from Old Turkic which was the foremost title of the rulers of the dynasty, and was devised by European Orientalists in the 19th century.

Arabic Muslim sources called this dynasty **al-Khaqaniya** (“That of the Khaqans”) or *al Muluk al-Khaniyya al-Atrak* (The Khanal kings of the Turks),

Persian sources often preferred the term **Al-i Afrasiyab** (on the basis of the legendary kings of pre-Islamic Transoxania although they are also referred to as Ilak Khanids or Ilak Khanids

Chinese sources refer to them as **Halahan** (literally “Black Khan”) or **Dashi** a term for Arabs that extends to Muslims in general).

# History

The **Karluks** were a nomadic people from the western **Altai Mountains** who moved to **Zhetysu**, southeastern part of modern **Kazakhstan**. It owes its name, meaning “seven rivers”



(literally “seven waters”)

In 742, the Karluks were part of an alliance led by the **Basmyl** and **Uyghurs** that rebelled against the **Göktürks**. In the realignment of power that followed, the Karluks were elevated from a tribe led by an *el teber* to one led by a **yabghu**, which was one of the highest Turkic dignitaries and also implies membership in the **Ashina clan** in whom the “heaven-mandated” right to rule resided.

The Karluks and Uyghurs later allied themselves against the Basmyl, and within two years they toppled the Basmyl khagan. The Uyghur yabghu became khagan and the Karluk leader yabghu. This arrangement lasted less than a year. Hostilities between the Uyghur and Karluk forced the Karluk to migrate westward into the western **Turgesh** lands.

By 766 the Karluks had forced the submission of the Turgesh and they established their capital at **Suyab** on the **Chu River**. By the mid-9th century, the Karluk confederation had gained control of the sacred lands of the Western Türks after the destruction of the **Uyghur Khaganate** by the **Ancient Krygyz**. Control of sacred lands, together with their affiliation with the Ashina clan, allowed the Khaganate to be passed on to the Karluks along with domination of the steppes after the previous Khagan was killed in a revolt.

During the 9th century southern Central Asia was under the rule of the **Samanids**, while the Central Asian steppe was dominated by Turkic nomads such as the **Pechenegs**, the **Oghuz Turks**, and the Karluks. The domain of the Karluks reached as far north as the **Irtys** and the **Kimek** confederation, with encampments extending to the Chi and Ili rivers, where the **Chigil** and **Tukshi** tribes lived, and east to the **Ferghana Valley** and beyond.

The Karluk center in the 9th and 10th centuries appears to have been at **Balasagun** on the Chu River. In the late 9th century the Samanids marched into the steppes and captured **Taraz**

(Talas today), one of the headquarters of the Karluk khagan, and a large church was transformed into a mosque.

In the mid-10th century the Kara-Khanids converted to Islam and adopted Muslim names and honorifics, but retained Turkic regnal titles such as Khan, Khagan, Ilek (Ilig) and Tegin. Later they adopted Arab titles sultan and *sultān al-salātīn* (sultan of sultans).

The Karakhanid state was divided into appanages, as was common of Turkic and Mongol nomads.



The Karakhanid appanages were associated with four principal urban centers, **Balasagun** (then the capital of the Karakhanid state) in Zhetysu, **Kashgar** in Xinjiang, **Uzgen** in Fergana, and **Samarkand** in Transoxiana. The dynasty's original domains of Zhetysu and Kashgar and their khans retained an implicit seniority over those who ruled in Transoxiana and Fergana.

The four sons of Ali (Ahmad, Nasr, Mansur, Muhammad) each held their own independent appanage within the Karakhanid state. Nasr, the conqueror of Transoxiana, held the large central area of Transoxiana (Samarkand and Bukhara), Fergana (Uzgen) and other areas, although after his death his appanage was further divided. Ahmad held Zhetysu and Chach and became the head of the dynasty after the death of Ali. The brothers Ahmad and Nasr conducted different policies towards the Ghaznavids in the south – while Ahmad tried to form alliance with **Mahmud of Ghazna**, Nasr attempted to expand unsuccessfully into the territory of the Ghaznavids

Ahmad was succeeded by Mansur, and after the death of Mansur, the Hasan Bughra Khan branch of the Karakhanids became dominant. Hasan's sons Muhammad Toghan Khan II, and Yusuf Kadir Khan who held Kashgar, became in turn the head of the Karakhanid dynasty. The

two families, i.e. the descendents of Ali Arslan Khan and Hasan Bughra Khan, would eventually split the Karakhanid Khanate in two.

Early in the 11th century the unity of the Karakhanid dynasty was fractured by frequent internal warfare that eventually resulted in the formation of two independent Karakhanid states.

The Karakhanids, developed serious conflicts with the religious classes (the *ulama*), and the *ulama* of Transoxiana

In 1089, the **Seljuks** entered and took control of Samarkand, together with the domains belonging to the Western Khanate. The Western Karakhanids Khanate became a vassal of the Seljuks for half a century, and the rulers of the Western Khanate were largely whomever the Seljuks chose to place on the throne. Ahmad b. Khidr was returned to power by the Seljuks, but in 1095, the *ulama* accused Ahmad of heresy and managed to secure his execution.

The Karakhanids of Kashgar also declared their submission following a Seljuk campaign into Talas and Zhetysu, but the Eastern Khanate was a Seljuk vassal for only a short time. At the beginning of the 12th century they invaded Transoxiana and even occupied the Seljuk town of Termez for a time.

The **Qara Khitai** host invaded Central Asia and defeated the Western Karakhanids in **Khujand** in 1137. In 1141 Qara Khitai became the dominant force in the region after they dealt a devastating blow to Seljuk Sultan Ahmad Sanjar at the [Battle of Qatwan](#) near Samarkand.

Despite losing to the Qara Khitai, the Karakhanid dynasty remained in power as their vassals. The Qara Khitai themselves stayed at Zhetysu near Balasagun, and allowed some of the Karakhanids to continue to rule as their tax collectors in Samarkand and Kashgar. Under the Qara Khitai the Karakhanids functioned as administrators for sedentary Muslim populations.

While the Qara Khitai were Buddhists ruling over a largely Muslim population, they were considered fair-minded rulers whose reign was marked by religious tolerance. Islamic religious life continued uninterrupted and Islamic authority persevered under the Qara Khitai. Kashgar became a **Nestorian** metropolitan see and Christian gravestones in the Chu valley appeared beginning in this period. However, **Kuchlug**, a **Naiman** who usurped the throne of the Qara Khitai Dynasty, instituted anti-Islamic policies on the local populations under his rule.

## Karahanid Legacy

Islam and its civilization flourished under the Karakhanids. The earliest example of *madrasas* in Central Asia was founded in Samarkand by Ibrahim Tamghach Khan. Ibrahim also founded a hospital to care for the sick as well as providing shelter for the poor. His son Nasr Shams al-Mulk built **ribats** for the **caravanserais** on the route between Bukhara and Samarkand, as well as a palace near Bukhara.

The early Karakhanid rulers, as nomads, lived not in the city but in an army encampment outside the capital, and while by the time the end of their dynasty, the Karakhanids still maintained a nomadic tradition, their extensive religious and civil constructions showed that they had assimilated the culture and traditions of the settled population of Transoxiana.

Some of the buildings constructed by the Karakhanids still survive today:

### **Bukhara**

the [Kalyan minaret](#) built by Mohammad Aslan Khan beside the main mosque in Bukhara,

### **Uzgen**

Three mausolea

### **Balasagun,**

Ruins

### **Talas**

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### **Suyab**

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