



# On the Culture of Rouran Khanate

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The Rouran (Juan-juan) people established a great khaganate in the steppes of present-day Mongolia in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century. This state, which lived for about 150 years, continued the legacy of the Asian Huns. I have already done some studies on the political history and culture of the Rourans. In this work, I have brought together some of my notes on the process of the establishment of their state, writing, religion, lifestyle, and social structure, which I could not include in my book due to space and context. In addition, when researchers recently attributed the Khüis Tolgoi Inscription to the Rourans, I made some new notes.

(1) According to various Chinese sources, when the Tuoba (Tabgach) people were conducting a military campaign to subjugate the tribes in the barren lands behind the Gobi Desert, towards the end of the reign of the Tabgach ruler Liwei (r. 220-277), the mounted troops captured a strange person. He had very sparse hair or was bald and had forgotten his real name. The Tabgach ruler then wrote down his name and called him “Mugulü”. “Mugulü” means “bald-headed” in Tabgach. Mugulü became stronger as time passed under Tabgach rule; he was no longer a slave, but a soldier of the mounted troops. During the reign of the Tabgach ruler Yilu (r. 295-316), he was soon sentenced

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<sup>1</sup> This study was supported by Center for Scientific Researches Projects of İstanbul University (SBA-2023-39926).

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to death, fled to the great desert in the north, hid among the mountains and streams, and gathered around him more than a hundred men who were hiding as fugitives. The captive, the ancestor of the Rourans, lived in Tabgach society, rose to high positions in the state administration, and after a while, due to a crime he had committed, he fled and gathered various people around him and started a state organization. This is a rare precedent in steppe history. However, this should be considered an attempt to “go to the mountain” and establish a state. However, there are also researchers who consider Mugulü's movement a “movement of fugitives” and think that he gathered under his rule natives from various tribes who were basically excluded and wanted to move freely, which is impossible to agree with. Indeed, in the steppe, tribes would not easily follow a fugitive with extraordinary qualities and charismatic leadership.

(2) Did the Rourans use foreign scripts? Were there any writings in a foreign language that could be attributed to them? There is some information about this. Chinese sources about them say that “there was no written record keeping in the army organization. Generals and commanders used to count the number of soldiers in the army with sheep dung, and then they used to count them on a tree”. On the other hand, *Song Shu*, a dynastic history written by Shen Yue in 492-493, records that “They did not know writing; they used to record things on a tree, then they gradually learned writing, and today they have many literate (scholars)”. It is difficult to know from this record in the *Song Shu* what script they knew. However, it is highly probable that it was Chinese script.

It is suggested that another script used by the Rourans was the Sogdian script. L. Chuluunbaatar, one of the Mongolian researchers, argues that the spread of Sogdian script among the Mongols was observed during the Rouran Khaganate; Ts. Shagdarsüren, on the other hand, believes that the Mongols received their script not from the Uighurs, but from the Sogds along with the Uighurs in the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries and even met this script a hundred years before the Uighurs.

According to the Khüis Tolgoi Inscription, it may be suggested that Brahmi script was used during the Rouran period. Some researchers believe that the language of the inscription belongs to a Mongolian language family, but it is not clear whether it belongs to the state language of Rouran or Tuoba or to the language of a tribe that dominated the Tula valley at the time.

(3) What religion did the Rourans believe in? If the sources are silent on this issue, we can theorize it based on the details of their lifestyle, that they also belonged to the ancient steppe religion. They too worshipped the one God, revered their ancestors, believed in the forces of nature, and practiced shamanic practices.

Examples of ancestor veneration can be found in the Rouran faith. There are also some archaeological remains attributed to them. According to Mongolian archaeologist D. Bayar, the “Öngüt” monument site in the present-day Khustai Valley near Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia may belong to the Rourans.

There is a very clear record of shamanism among the Rourans. According to it, after Chounu became the Rouran Kagan, one of his sons named Zuhui suddenly disappeared. Kagan was very upset and went to great lengths to find him. There was a woman in her twenties named Shidouhundiwan. She was a shaman who healed diseases with magic and supernatural beings. At first, she had gained Chounu's trust, coming and going in and out of the tent. She told him that the child was above the sky. One night, the child, named Zuhui, suddenly appeared in the middle of the tent, and the kagan believed that he had come from above the sky. Chounu and his family all hugged the child, and everyone was very happy. Chounu gathered the Rourans and declared Shidouhundiwan a holy woman and took her as his wife, and made her Khatun. Again, Chinese sources about the Rourans mention people (Shamans?) who have extraordinary powers and rule the wind and snow.

The penetration of the Buddha religion into the Rouran “shaman country” occurred after the death of the above-mentioned shaman woman (she was killed in 520). After that, according to some researchers, new teachings from the city-states of Khoten, Karashar, Kashgar in the Tarim Basin spread among the Rourans. The Sanskrit language was popular in the steppes at that time.

There are signs that the Rourans, like their successors, the Turks, had some inclination towards the Buddhist religion. Traditional steppe states occasionally patronized Buddhist monks from China or those fleeing persecution. The clearest example of this can be seen during the reign of Taspar Kagan. If it is confirmed that the Khüis Tolgoi Inscription belongs to the Rourans, it will be seen that they had some Buddhist religious traditions through the Bodhisattva, rebirth, etc. elements in the inscription.

(4) What is recorded in Chinese sources about the lifestyle of the Rourans is similar to accounts of other steppe peoples.

- a. Living in felt tents, migrating according to water and grass resources.
- b. Admiration for China: Chinese sources write that steppe people have always admired China. Since the time of the Huns, statesmen in the steppe have been portrayed in this way. It may be an exaggeration of Chinese sources.
- c. Greed, immorality, filth: The Chinese always saw the steppe people as greedy, always taking things for themselves, and accused them of immorality, untruthfulness, etc. because they did not conform to Chinese values. The reason why the Rourans, like other steppe peoples, were called “greedy” was that they always wanted more and more from their plundering expeditions or the gifts (or taxes) they received from China. It is mainly modern scholars who have created the image of the nomads as marauding, parasitic steppe people. The idea that the lifestyle of the nomads impoverished them, that they could not meet their needs, and that for this reason they plundered the settled farmers and wealthy peoples and got everything they needed and wanted is related to the “predatory”, “greedy barbarian” model of the nomads ascribed to them by modern researchers.
- d. The accusation of immorality against the Rourans is related to the Chinese philosophical word “yi” (義). Yi means “ethical”, “proper”, “good” and “principle”. For the Chinese, their own practices qualify for these attributes, while those of the steppe people do not. For example, the Chinese envoy who arrived in 174 B.C. during the reign of Jiyu, the Chanyu of Huns, said in his speeches that the Huns had father and son living in the same tent, that when the father died, the sons married their mothers, that the Huns did not wear headdresses and sashes, that they did not know court rituals, and so on. According to the Chinese, those who did not behave in this way were not obeying the “yi”.
- e. Unlike other nomads, Chinese sources focus on “filth” in the culture of the Rourans. Due to the limited water resources, there are some records in the main sources on the cleanliness of the nomads.

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