



BEG

BEG (Pers. also *beyg*) and **BEGOM**. *Beg* is a Turkish title meaning “lord” or “chief,” later “prince,” equivalent to the Arabic-Persian *amīr*. The feminine form of *beg* is *begom* (in Mughal India *begam*) from Turkish *begim* “lady, princess.”

The origin of *beg* is still disputed, though it is mostly agreed that it is a loanword. Two principal etymologies have been proposed: 1. from a Middle-Iranian form of OIr. *baga*; though the meaning would fit since the Middle Persian forms of the word often mean “lord,” used of the king or others, the main objection to this derivation is a phonological one: in Middle Iranian the word was *bay* or *βay*, which one would expect to be borrowed as *bay/bey* (Doerfer, pp. 403-04); 2. from Chinese *po* “eldest (brother), (feudal) lord” (no. 4977 in Mathews’ dictionary), the earlier form of which had a final *k* (Karlgren *pak*, Pulleyblank *p e 'jk*). See Doerfer, pp. 402-06 for a critical review of the evidence; Doerfer himself seriously considers the possibility that the word is genuinely Turkish. Whatever the truth may be, there is no connection with Turkish *berk*, Mongolian *berke* “strong” or Turkish *bögü*, Mongolian *böge* “wizard, shaman.”

1. *Beg*. This title is first encountered in the Orkhon inscriptions of the 7th-century Turkish empire and in Chinese transcription in texts relating to the same period. Attempts have been made to assign to the begs a particular rank, between the higher nobility and the common people, but it is unlikely that any such rank existed prior to the Safavid period. In the earlier period the word acquired a specific connotation only when employed in compound, as in



atabeg “father-beg,” hence “guardian,” or *yüzbegī* “commander of a hundred.” From the 5th/11th century onwards it appears frequently as part of a proper name, used by rulers of the Saljuq dynasty (Ṭoġrel Beg, Čaġrī Beg) and of minor dynasties like the shahs of Armenia (Begtemür) and the Turkman states of the Qara Qoyunlū and the Āq Qoyunlū which arose on the ruins of the Ilkhanid empire in western Iran and eastern Anatolia (Qara Yoluq ‘Otmān Beg, ‘Alī Beg); it also occurs in the names of rulers of the Golden Horde (Janibeg, Berdibeg). In early Safavid Iran, the title continued to be appended to the names of leaders, such as the various Qezelbāš chiefs. Subsequently it seems to have acquired a more specific meaning, since the 11th/17th-century dictionary *Borhān-e qāṭe’* (ed. Mo‘īn, I, p. 339) defines *beg* as “an amir of a small tribe,” in contrast with a *kāqān* or *kān* (khan), who headed a larger one. Certainly by this stage the beg occupied a place in a genuine hierarchy, above *āqā*, a simple noble, and below *solṭān* and khan.

There existed also variant forms: *bi*, which was common among the Kirghiz and among the Uzbeks of Kīva and Transoxiana, and *bey*, employed in the Ottoman dominions.

2. *Begom*. This title occurs as the style of royal ladies in the dynasties of the Āq Qoyunlū, the Timurids and their descendants the Mughal emperors in India, and the Safavids. The equivalent in use among the Kirghiz, the Manghyt, and other related peoples in northern Central Asia is *bim*, the feminine form of *bi*. In Persian the word is sometimes added to a girl’s name (e.g., Fāṭema Begom) or is itself used as a name.

See also [beglerbegĭ](#).

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