

# Ashina (clan)

**Ashina** (*Asen, Asena*, etc.) was a tribe and the ruling dynasty of the ancient Turks who rose to prominence in the mid-6th century when their leader, **Bumin Khan**, revolted against the Rouran. The two main branches of the family, one descended from **Bumin** and the other from his brother **Istemi**, ruled over the eastern and western parts of the Göktürk empire, respectively.

- **Origins and legends**
- **History**

## Origins and legends

According to the *New Book of Tang*, the Ashina were related to the northern tribes of the Xiongnu. As early as the 7th century, four theories about their mythical origins were recorded by the *Book of Zhou*, *Book of Sui* and *Youyang Zazu*

- Ashina was one of ten sons born to a grey she-wolf (see Asena) in the north of Gaochang
- The ancestor of the Ashina was a man from the Suo nation, north of Xiongnu, whose mother was a wolf, and a season goddess
- The Ashina were mixture stocks from the Pingliang commandery of eastern Gansu
- The Ashina descended from a skilled archer named Shemo, who had once fallen in love with a sea goddess west of Ashide cave

These stories were sometimes pieced together to form a chronologically narrative of early Ashina history. However, as the *Book of Zhou*, *the Book of Sui*, and *the Youyang Zazu* were all written around the same time, during early Tang Dynasty, whether they could truly be considered chronological or rather should be considered competing versions of the Ashina's origin is debatable.<sup>1</sup> These stories also have parallels to folktales and legends of other Turkic peoples, for instance, the Wusun and Kazakhs.

## History

The name Ashina first appeared in the Chinese records of the 6th century, and prior to that no other sources had related their history at all. The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia infers that between the years 265 and 460 the Ashina had been part of various late Xiongnu confederations. About 460 they were subjugated by the Rouran, who ousted them from Xinjiang into the Altay Mountains, where the Ashina gradually emerged as the leaders of the early Turkic confederation, known as the Göktürks. By the 550s, Bumin Khan felt strong enough to throw off the yoke of the Rouran domination and established

the Göktürk Empire, which flourished until the 630s and from 680s until 740s. The Orkhon Valley was the centre of the Ashina power.

After the collapse of the Göktürk Empire under pressure from the resurgent Uyghurs, branches of the Ashina clan moved westward to Europe, where they became the kaghans of the Khazars and possibly other nomadic peoples with Turkic roots. According to **Marquart**, the Ashina clan constituted a noble caste throughout the steppes. Similarly, the Tatar historian **Zeki Validi Togan** described them as a "desert aristocracy" that provided rulers for a number of Eurasian nomadic empires. Accounts of the Göktürk and Khazar khaganates suggest that the Ashina clan was accorded sacred, perhaps quasi-divine status in the shamanic religion practiced by the steppe nomads of the first millennium CE.