

## History of Seljuk Turks

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*Widest borders of the Seljuks*

**T**he Seljuk Turkish history spanned the period from 1060 to around 1307. The Seljuks were a tribe of Tartars from Central Asia who established a powerful empire in Persia in the 11th century. They captured Baghdad in 1055. The Caliph of Baghdad was so impressed with their strength and skill that he made their leader, Tugrul Bey his deputy and conferred on him the title of "King of East and West". The Seljuks however assumed they were the rightful owners of all land conquered during the time of Prophet Mohammed and were keen to extend their kingdom. So a contingent of around 5000 moved into eastern Anatolia and left their mark there for some time.

The Seljuk Turkish history is significant in that they are regarded as the ancestors of the Western Turks - the modern Turks of today. The Seljuk Turks were the first people to invade Anatolia completely. With the establishment of the Anatolian Seljuk State as part of the Great Seljuk Empire began the Islamic period in Turkey. The Seljuks played a major role in the Middle Ages in defending the Islamic world against the Crusaders, and conquering large parts of the Byzantine Empire. They also did a service to Europe by providing a barrier between them and the raiding Mongols. Finally their importance lay in the fact that they paved the way for the Ottoman Turks.

### Beginning of the Seljuks

**I**n their attempt to consolidate the Islamic Empire, the Seljuks entered into negotiations with the Byzantine emperors of Constantinople, or Istanbul, but border relations between the two were never congenial. Both Seljuks and Byzantines were enrolled as private troops for the Armenian-Byzantine landowners and there was constant dispute between them.

Towards the latter part of the 11th century, when matters had reached a critical stage, the Byzantines under Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes tried to suppress the Seljuks and re-conquer Armenia. He confronted the Seljuk army in the field of Manzikert north of Lake Van in 1071, but underestimated their military prowess. The light riding Turks overpowered his army and captured Diogenes himself. After that with no Byzantine army to stop them, the Seljuk`s entry into Anatolia was easy. They took control of Central and Eastern Anatolia with Konya as their capital. The Seljuk Sultanate of Rum was thus formed as a part of the Great Seljuk Empire, with other major cities like Alanya, Erzurum and Sivas under its control.

## **Contributions of Seljuks to Turkish History**

**T**he Seljuk Turks were an enlightened lot under whom a great culture flourished. They formed a tolerant government and contrary to popular belief, were not instigated to persecute Christians by their Islamic policies. The Seljuks were tolerant of race, religion and gender and ruled over a population comprising of Greek speaking Christians and a few Jews.

The Seljuk period in Turkish history also saw great progress in literature, architecture and religion. Poets and scholars found patronage and flourished under them. You will find a blend of Central Asian, Islamic Middle East and Anatolian influence in Seljuk art and culture.

Arabic was the language of the scholars; Persian was the official state language while the common man in the street spoke Turkish. The great mathematician and poet Omar Khayyam belonged to this period. Another prominent figure of this time was Jelaleddin Rumi - the Muslim mystic, theologian and poet. His spiritual leadership was noteworthy and he had a large following. He was known as the Rumi Mevlana. He graced the court of Alaadin Keykubat I, the Sultan of Rum from 1220-1237, and initiated the Sufi order of "whirling dervishes".

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Seljuks to Turkish history has been towards Turkish architecture. Because of a tolerant government and their inclination towards religious and cultural development, huge mosques, theological seminaries, hospitals and caravanserais were built during this period.

The Central Asian tradition of mummifying the dead and keeping them in a tent for six months gave rise to the construction of domed tombs and turbe, which you find scattered in Anatolia. Seljuk architecture is characterized by its use of brickwork. The buildings were decorated with relief work, which created a beautiful interplay of light and shade in the sunlight. So beautiful was the effect that Seljuk architecture is often described as 'poetry in stone'. The famous Seljuk tiles were the most significant product of the times. When the Seljuks inter-married they made small Christian states their vassals and small Muslim states thrived all over east and central Anatolia. That is why you will find plenty of Seljuk architecture in Turkey even today - especially in Erzurum, Divrigi, Sivas and Konya.

The common motifs in Seljuk artwork were lions, bulls, double-headed eagles, dragons and astrological motifs like planets or the tree of life.

During the Seljuk period, cities prospered in wealth and population. The Seljuks had a well-organized system of international trade and for the first time introduced insurances for the losses of traders. Realizing the importance of transit trade, they developed caravanserais for the needs of the tradesmen on the account of the state.

## Decline of the Seljuks

**T**he Seljuk Empire in Persia was at its peak during the reign of Alp Arslan and his son Malik Shah. With the death of Malik Shah, began the decline of this great empire. The borders of the Seljuk Sultanate were under constant pressure from the Crusaders in the west, the Arabs in the south and the Mongols in the east. A quarrelling and faction-ridden Seljuk dynasty was unable to withstand the onslaught and by 1192, it ended in obscurity.

Once the decline of the great Seljuks began, the lesser Seljuk clans established their own principalities throughout Anatolia. But on June 26th, 1243, the Seljuk army was defeated at Kose Dagi, outside the city of Siva by the Mongol descendants of Cengiz Khan. Subsequently, the remaining Turkish clans were reduced to the role of vassals. The Mongols however, withdrew just as suddenly as they came leaving behind many small states led by obscure chieftains. One among them - Osman was to later found an extensive empire that came to be known as the Ottoman Empire.