

GOKTURK LITERATURE

Overview The period of the Gök Türk empires and the Uighur states witnessed the birth of Turkic literature, although much the earliest stages of Turkic literature remains a mystery. Nonetheless, from the earliest examples dating from the Second Gök Türk Empire through the Uighur Kingdom of Qocho, a wide variety of works were written using several scripts in the Old Turkic and closely related Old Uighur languages.

Gök Türk Literature

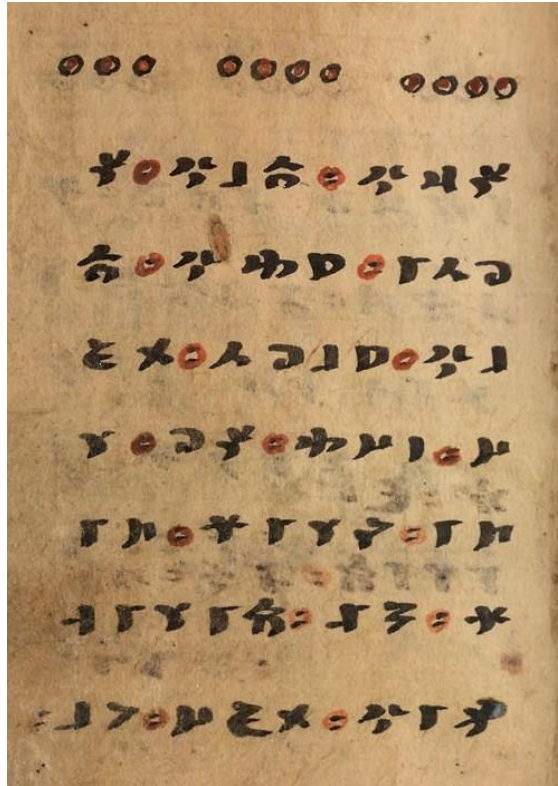
The vast majority of writings that have survived from the period of the Second Gök Türk Empire are inscriptions, the most famous of which are the Orkhon inscriptions, discovered in the Orkhon Valley in the late 19th century. These inscriptions were carved on two large stone monuments in the 8th century in honor of two rulers, Kul Tigin and Bilge Kaghan. Other long, important inscriptions were found further east, the Tonyukuk (or Bain Tsokto) inscriptions on two stelae. These monuments were erected by Tonyukuk, advisor to four different *kaghans*, himself in the early 8th century and pre-date the Orkhon inscriptions. A number of other shorter, less complete inscriptions, as well as graffiti and some short inscriptions on pottery have also been found not only in the Orkhon region, but also in the Yenisei region, the Altai Mountains, and in the vicinity of Talas.

These monuments contain a variety of information - the early history of the Gök Türks, the deeds of those who had the monuments made, information on relations with other states, and advice to future rulers. The phrasing of the inscriptions has led some scholars to believe that they are a reflection of a long tradition of oral epics, and one renowned scholar of Central Asia, Christopher I. Beckwith said in regard to these inscriptions that "...the Turkic texts are sometimes nearly as moving as the poetry of *Beowulf*."

These Old Turkic inscriptions are extremely significant for several reasons. First, they provide accurate information on both events and significant figures in Central Asia in the early medieval period. Second, they are the only records in this era that were produced by one of the Central Asian steppe peoples rather than the settled civilizations that bordered on the steppes. Finally, they are the earliest examples of any Turkic language and have contributed greatly to understanding the development of the Turkic languages.

All of the Old Turkic inscriptions are written in the Old Turkic alphabet (also called the Orkhon alphabet/script, the Gök Türk alphabet/script, or the Orkhon-Yenisei alphabet/script).

There have also been a limited number of manuscripts written in the Old Turkic script discovered in Xinjiang. The most famous of these was discovered at Tun-huang, a book of divination titled *Irk Bitig* (𐰽𐰺𐰍:𐰋𐰏𐰤𐰘), *The Book of Omens* or *The Book of Divination*.



Page from the Irk Bitig (Wikicommons)

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. Why are the Old Turkic inscriptions from the Second Gök Türk Empire important both historically and linguistically?