

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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QARAKHANID CULTURAL HISTORY – Literature

The Qarakhanids and their neighbor and rival, the Ghaznavids, were the first Turkic Muslim states and exemplify two different approaches to how the Turkic peoples adapted to the traditions and culture of the eastern Muslim world. In general, the Ghaznavids embraced the Arabo-Persian Islamic culture and modes of administration of their time, and preserved little of their Turkic heritage. The language of administration and culture was predominantly Persian, Arabic the language of religion and religious studies, and Turkic remained the spoken language.

In both government and culture, the Qarakhanids took a different approach. From the titles of their rulers to the distribution of cities and lands among the ruling dynasty, many aspects of Qarakhanid ruler were a continuation of pre-Islamic steppe traditions. Their approach to culture was similar. Persian and Arabic were used in the same roles as among the Ghaznavids, but Qarakhanids also attempted to create the first Turkic literature based on Arabic and Persian models. Two Qarakhanid literary works of this type have survived to the present day: Mahmud al-Kashghari's *Diwan Lughat al-Turk* (ديوان لغات الترك, *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects*), composed around 1077, and the *Qutadgu Bilig* (قوتادغو بيليگ, *The Glory of Royal Wisdom*) by Yusuf Khass Hajib of Balasaghun, written in 1069.

The first, the *Diwan Lughat al-Turk*, was lexicon that attempted to explain the history and culture of the Turks to a Muslim audience beyond the Qarakhanid nobility. Therefore, it was written in Arabic, and the vocabulary entries cover everything from various aspects of daily life such as occupations, clothing and furnishings, to the tribal organization of the Turks, their history and their culture. Some entries even contain Turkish stories and poems as part of their explanations and definitions. As a Turk and philologist who was well versed in the Islamic culture and learning of his time, Kashgari was attempting to do for the Turks what the early Arab Muslim philologists had done for the Arabs, namely to compile and to explain history, language and culture of the Turks.

In contrast, the *Qutadgu Bilig*, a work whose subject matter and language clearly indicate that it was intended for a limited Qarakhanid audience. The work takes the form of a “mirror for princes”, a treatise advising a ruler how best to administer his state in the form of a dialogue between the sovereign and his advisors. In addition, it is written in Qarakhanid Turkish, with one of the three extant manuscripts even using the Uighur script, rather than the Arabic alphabet as in the other two.

The writing of the *Diwan Lughat al-Turk* and the *Qutadgu Bilig* have been interpreted by some scholars as an effort by the Qarakhanids to create an Islamic Turkic literature that could take its place next to works of Arabic and Persian literature. If so, despite the quality of these two works, the Qarakhanids were ultimately unsuccessful. It would not be until the time of the Ottomans and the Timurids, writing in Ottoman Turkish and Chaghatay Turkish respectively, that Turkish would finally take its place as the third major literary language in the Islamic world after Arabic and Persian.

As successors to the Samanids, the Qarakhanids were also patrons of Persian literature and learning. Contemporary sources state that a number of poets and writers were present in Qarakhanid royal court. Two well-known Persian poets in particular are known to have spent time at the Qarakhanid court in Samarqand: 'Am'aq Bokhara'i (عمق بخارائی), and Suzani Samarqandi (سوزنی سمرقندی). 'Am'aq began his career as a poet in Bokhara, which had developed its own unique school, and went to the Qarakhanid court in 1067. 'Am'aq became known for his knowledge or philosophy, sciences, and literature as well as his talent as a poet, and eventually was made the poet laureate of the Western Qarakhanid ruler Shams al-Mulk Nasr (r. 1067-1080). Suzani was also highly regarded as a poet, but is most remembered for his stinging satirical poetry lampooning well-known figures of his time as well as some of his colleagues. In addition to these professional poets, the last two Western Qarakhanid rulers, Ibrahim Arslan Khan (r.1178-1203) and Osman Ulugh Sultan (r.1202-1212) both composed poetry in Persian.

Readings

Davidovich, E.A. "The Kharakhanids", in Asimov, M. S. and Bosworth, C. E. (eds.). *History of civilizations of Central Asia*. Vol. 4, Part One. Paris, 1998.

Golden, Peter. "The Karakhanids and early Islam", in Sinor, Denis (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*. Cambridge, 2008.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Ottomans and Timurids succeed in making Ottoman and Chaghatay Turkish literary languages used for centuries, while the Qarakhanid attempt to create a Turkic literature was short-lived?
2. Why did the Qarakhanids patronize poets and writers who composed their works in Persian?