

## **Script, language, and narration in Old Turkic texts**

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During the late 1960s, the structuralist theory of literature, established in Prague during the period between the two world wars, went through an intense but short revival in Czechoslovakia. However, the period of the so-called «normalisation» starting in 1969 was soon to put an abrupt end to it. At the Oriental Institute in Prague a team of orientalists specialised in literature started a project whose aim was to outline a systematic picture of Asian literatures according to structuralist principles. Different stages of the literary developments in different literatures would be classified in a way which would make possible a comparison between them, and establish a process of change and continuity. Needless to say, this project, though promising, was—unfortunately—stopped at an early stage as it was considered to be non-compatible with the Marxist literary theory, which was once more enforced upon literary scholars during the early 1970s. The members of the team were to be dispersed shortly after that.

My part in this project concerned Turkic literatures. I got as far as the early Islamic period. As the whole project was planned to be an integral entity, valid only together with the other contributions, I never attempted to publish my contribution. I do not know if any of the other team members did. At this point, after so many years, I thought that it might be of interest to get a glimpse of this chapter of Czech literary scholarship, even though I am aware of the preliminary character of my contribution: it should be seen as a kind of experiment, a fragment of an unfinished team work. I have not worked on this subject since then, and I am not sure whether I would present the material in the same way if I wrote it now. Due to the limitations of space, I shall only take up the section concerning the earliest period of written Turkic literatures (classified as I A, comprising the time up to the 9th century AD). I have shortened the text without, however, making any substantial changes in it or adding any new material. The Table (the scheme for the period I A) is adapted directly from the Czech original.

At that time we all worked according to given patterns which we had established prior to setting out with the concrete investigations. These

patterns—rather theoretical—were to be applied to all the literatures studied, and they served as a common framework for the project. They constitute the skeleton of the Table, which was to be filled out for every period in the given literary history. Within these patterns, each member of the team was free to take the specific features of the given literature into consideration. I have to admit that after all that time I have some difficulties to see through some of these theoretical concepts, but at that time, in the given context, they made perfect sense. As far as I remember, the chief theoreticians and leaders of the project were Karel Petráček and Dušan Zbavitel, but all the members took part in the setting up of the theoretical framework of the project.

As stages of literary history we treated not periods synchronous in time but periods at corresponding levels of development. One of the basic principles in our work was to see the driving force of literary development primarily in intrinsic literary processes and literary contacts. We also worked with the concept of each literature consisting of three basic layers: (1) folk literature, (2) the so-called high literature and (3) an intermediate layer. At the early stage of Turkic literatures these layers are not yet clearly differentiated.

My particular task was to describe briefly, within the given patterns, the development of Turkic literatures, mainly those existing in the Islamic cultural sphere, and especially the Ottoman-Turkish literature. The beginnings of these literatures must be traced back to Inner Asia, where the nomadic Turkic tribes lived long before the beginning of our era. In the 2nd millennium BC Chinese sources mention the poetry of the Hsiung-nu (Huns?) together with a poetry fragment translated into Chinese (Köprülü 1964.252). It is probable that the Hsiung-nu confederation consisted at least partly of Proto-Turkic tribes. The term «Türk» appears in the 5th century AD in connection with the formation of the Turkic Kaghanate and the Empire of the Kök Türks (Tu-Kiue). These tribal confederations probably consisted at least partly of tribes belonging to the Oghuz family, to which the ancestors of the Ottoman Turks also belonged. Other Turkic tribes forming different tribal confederations—such as those of the Khazars and Bulgars—undoubtedly possessed oral literature, but they did not leave any traces of written literature. However, three confederations in Inner Asia—the Kök Türk, Kirghiz and Uighur—left behind a significant number of samples of written literature dating back as far as to the 6th century AD.

Still, even among these ethnic groups, the dominating literary form was oral literature. On the basis of the clear analogies which exist between the epics of some modern Turkic peoples and the texts of the inscriptions

dating from the period under investigation, we can conclude that the epic tradition of the early Turks must have been both ancient and rich. It must have included mythological and heroic legends and tales. The extant epitaph inscriptions, especially the extensive ones, which depict the lives of men of great importance, must have been inspired by heroic epics. The similarity between their style and that of the heroic epics of the various Turkic peoples confirms this assumption—I will give a short characterisation of this epic style later. We can also assume the existence of lyrical songs, funeral elegies, magic shamanist formulas, proverbs, and several other genres.

Already at that time, a certain *awareness of linguistic and ethnic affiliation* most likely existed. However, Turkic people themselves used the term «Türk» only for the members of the Turkic Kaghanate and the Kök Türk tribal confederation. In the inscriptions, the idea of the unity of the Turks in the empire is repeatedly stressed. It may be noted that, even in recent times, not all of the Turkic-speaking peoples have developed the concept of belonging to a «Turkic community».

Little is known about the *reproduction* of literature during the period studied. Doubtlessly it was the bards, story-tellers and probably shamans who carried out the oral reproduction. We can assume that shamanistic literary genres were performed in a distributive manner—accompanied by music, dance, rites and magic acts. The beginnings of secondary reproduction—translations of Buddhist and Manichaean religious works—can also be traced to this period. Cultural contacts existed chiefly with China, but also with the Iranian areas.

The *language* of the preserved texts and inscriptions has not been fully analysed. For our purposes it may be treated as a common Old Turkic language with certain dialectal variants—Yenisei, Orkhon and Uighur, in particular. Maybe it was a kind of supertribal *koiné* used also in oral epics and universal for various tribes (Bombaci 1964.XII). It probably existed in parallel with the tribal vernacular dialects. The literature of this period can be treated as essentially monolingual. However, some of the epitaphs dedicated to important personages have a parallel Chinese text, stylised as if written by a Chinese emperor (Bazin 1964.192–211).

The existence of oral *fixation* is confirmed indirectly. Written texts have been preserved on erected stone stelae, on paper or, in some instances, on parchment. The number of inscriptions on stone is considerable, while the number of books or book fragments is limited. The so-called runic script, which prevailed in this period, was used both on stones and on paper. It may have been of Aramaic origin, conveyed through the Iranian contacts, but it was well adapted to the Turkic

language. The Uighur script, consisting of 14 letters, was certainly of Aramaic origin, and was transmitted to the Turks by the Iranian Sogdians. The existence of a script consisting of 14 letters among the Turks was recorded in Chinese sources as early as in the 5th century AD (Köprülüzade 1920–1922.32).

The *Old-Turkic inscriptions* are mainly preserved in Mongolia, the Upper Yenisei area, and the Talas basin. The majority of them are epitaphs, while only a few of them have a magic, astronomic or religious (especially Manichaeic) content (Bazin 1964.208). The epitaph texts are not necessarily grave inscriptions, for the burial places are often located elsewhere, and some of them have even not been found (Jísl 1970). The inscriptions are either brief and emotional, stylised as if the deceased briefly talked about his life and lamented his death (here belong particularly the older Yenisei inscriptions left by the Kirghiz), or they are extensive, comprising historiographic, legendary, rhetoric, epic and heroic elements (here belong the Orkhon-inscriptions in Mongolia from the epoch of the Kök Türks from the first decades of the 8th century, the Uighur inscriptions of a somewhat later date being more concise). The inscriptions are usually written in the first person singular, with the stone personifying the deceased, but sometimes also in the third person in the name of a family member. Religious and magic elements are not particularly stressed. Generally, the style of the inscriptions is simple, even rudimentary, sometimes stiff, but rather expressive and effective. In some cases the diction is rich in imagery.

At this stage of development it is difficult to make a *distinction between poetry and prose*. The texts of the inscriptions may be treated as considerably rhythmicized prose. They include elements typical for archaic Turkic poetry, as known from later Turkic peoples—such as initial or inner alliteration, different types of parallelism in combination with repetitions, as well as grammatical rhymes and assonances deriving from the recurring principle of parallelism and the agglutinative character of the Turkic languages. In some cases we can observe a tendency towards an isosyllabic structure of the type that later stabilises among the majority of the Turkic peoples as a syllabic metric system. Typical features are a poorly-developed capacity of abstraction, dynamic narration concentrated on action, and, consequently, an abundance of verbs.

The relatively high degree of elaboration and fixation in the style and imagery of these texts suggests an earlier tradition, which most likely comprised oral funeral elegies and epics, not unlike the inscriptions in the formal respect. The structure of the inscriptions displays features characteristic for all archaic Turkic epics. For instance, verses consisting

of a fluctuating number of syllables are loosely linked together in passages of varying length. Stanzaic patterns became consolidated only later, but certain tendencies to couplets and quatrains can be seen from the very beginning. End rhymes arising from parallelisms are of secondary importance in joining together verses; more significant is the initial or internal alliteration. On the basis of later written records we can postulate the existence of a form composed of alternating passages of prose and poetry. Nothing is known about the character of the lyric songs of the period studied.

In the preserved inscriptions there is a considerable *degree of obligatory character*. Some of the shorter inscriptions are almost formulaic: the deceased states his name, speaks about his life, lists those closest to him, and in some cases mentions the possessions he leaves behind. Extensive inscriptions show a whole set of features typical also of the so-called epic or heroic style known from the later periods of Turkic oral epics—and even from the epic traditions of various non-Turkic peoples. These include, for instance, recurrent epic formulas, stock situations, static epithets, hyperboles, the emphasis on the role of the hero's horse, and the three-fold recurrency of certain motives. This degree of convention may be classified as unequivocal. However, canonised religious and magic formulas are rather rare.

The *continuity* in the oral folk literature is undisputable. The epitaph as a literary genre disappears in the following period, but the features it has in common with the oral tradition—motives, subjects, formal features, and the above-outlined characteristics of the epic style—persist to a greater or lesser degree among all the Turkic peoples, especially among those who retain the heroic epic in its pure form. All the main features of the archaic Turkic poetics, as described above, and as preserved in the inscriptions, can still be found almost unchanged—or, in some cases, even in more elaborate forms—among the Altai Turks, Tuvinians, Khakas, Yakuts, and other Turkic peoples. In some other Turkic oral literatures these archaic features have undergone further developments and external influences. Even so, the main patterns of all Turkic literatures derive from this ancient period.

As far as the formal and linguistic aspects are concerned, the following period (I B)—the Uighur period—displays a clear continuity with the previous tradition. This is also true of the high (written) literature, which now begins to differentiate from the folk (oral) literature. *Discontinuity* in the contents, and, later, even in the formal structure, is due to changes in the cultural environment under external influences. Most importantly, these changes were connected with the Islamic Arabo-Persian impact.

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**Table. Scheme for the period I A (up to the 9th century AD)**

**1. The area of concepts on the border of literary and social structures**

**The self-reflexion of the literary ontology**

- a certain awareness of ethnic and linguistic affiliation
- the notion of «Türk» restricted to the Kök Türk confederation

**Reproduction**

- primary
- beginnings of secondary reproduction: translations
- distributive: with magic, music, and dance connected with ceremonies

**2. The area of the inner literary structure on the synchronic axis**

**The choice of language**

- own language
- monolingualism
- some local variations and occasional tendencies to use external languages

**Fixation**

- oral
- written in the runic and Uighur scripts, of foreign origin but adapted
- exceptional use of other scripts: Brahmi, Manichaeian, Sogdian, Tibetan
- writing on stone, paper, parchment, leather

**Normalization of the structural ingredients**

**Forms**

- poetry and prose cannot yet be distinctly separated
- strongly rhythmicized prose with many elements typical for poetry
- inscriptions on stones mostly of epitaph character
- translated religious literature: only fragments preserved

**3. The area of the qualitative definition of the inner literary structure on the diachronic axis**

- the measure of obligatory character: unequivocal
- considerable continuity into the next period in the field of forms
- partial continuity even of genres
- discontinuity connected with the change in the character of the culture

