

THE CONCEPT OF THE OGHUZ ALPHABET IN TURKMEN LITERATURE

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Abstract. There is no information about the Oghuz people having their own script. However, three Turkmen classical poets have written poems, two of them in the form of elegies about their three-thousand-year-old alphabet, which was replaced by the Arabic alphabet. The XVIII century Turkmen classical poet Şeydayî (Sheydayi), in a poem with the refrain *gözel yigrimbâş* meaning ‘the beautiful twenty-five,’ talks about twenty-five Türkmen or Oghuz letters. In one line, he says *Seven of them create voice* (vowels), and *eighteen of them are controlled by the seven*. Turkmen carpets give us an idea about Old Turkic scripts. Old Turkish Runic letters T, B, and the letter R are preserved in Turkmen carpets. In the Turkmen Sahra region of northern Iran, at the foot of the mountain called Gökçe Dağ, near the historic graveyard of Halid Nabi, there were watermelon-shaped tombstones with symbols on them. They seem to be inscriptions. These symbols are similar to some of the patterns seen on the Turkmen carpets. Similar tombstones were found in Mangyshlak in Kazakhstan, where once the Oghuz people and later their descendants, the Turkmens, lived, but the signs on the stones were erased.

Keywords: *Alphabet, poem, three thousand years, pattern.*

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1. Introduction

The Oghuz people, who were later called Turkmens, managed to set up the Ghaznavi and Seljuk dynasties and must have had some form of writing before becoming Muslims. After becoming Muslims, they must have forgotten their own script, as the Arabs were very strict about the use of their script, as they opened schools in Central Asia as soon as they conquered this region. Then they brought in thousands of Arabs and settled them around the town of Merv. Until the early 1960s, some people in this region spoke Arabic. Now they have forgotten the language, but there are people who claim to be Arabs. I was told that there are still Arabic speakers in Uzbekistan. Despite the intense educational activity ‘intended to instil the Arabic language in Turkmenistan, they could not transform the Turkmens into Arabs, and with time Arabs who were settled in the Merv region became Turkmens, and they formed Turkmen tribes like Ata, Hoja, Seyit, Şeykh, and others.

Turkmen is always associated with rugs and carpets, and horses. Carpets woven by nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkmen tribes have been the most admired, studied, and collected of all Oriental carpets over the centuries. Despite the interest in Turkmen carpets, little information about them was available until recently in the West because of language barriers. Most studies are about the artistic and technical aspects of carpets and rugs. This paper, to some extent, looks at these carpets from a linguistic point of view.

The art of carpet weaving developed thousands of years ago. Buddhist and Shamanistic elements that have for centuries been widely incorporated in Turkmen carpets have attracted the attention of researchers. The Turkmen have for centuries reflected their feelings, philosophy of life, and environment in the beauty of their carpets, and they have created innumerable designs and motifs in their own characteristic style and with their own technique. The symbolism of these designs reveals a typically Turkmen search for beauty and an aesthetic ideal. For example, from the composition of Turkmen carpets, which is based on a strict but complex set of rules, one can deduce the Turkmen's poetic perspective on their environment. The colour red has become well-established in the artistic consciousness of the Turkmen. It is the dominant colour in Turkmen art today. The dominant colour of Turkmen carpets is also red. The colour of the oldest Turkmen carpets is closer to orange. This is said to be related to the cult of the sun in Zoroastrianism. Today, carpets that are woven to meet particular needs, or are prepared in various shapes and sizes for ceremonial purposes, display through their patterns a number of typical Turkmen hallmarks.

The main design of the Turkmen carpet is called *göl*. Every Turkmen tribe has its own *göl*, which is different from others. For the Turkmen tribes, their *göls* are tantamount to their coat of arms. When two Turkmen tribes fought, the winner would impose their own *göl* on the other side. For detailed information about Turkmen carpets from the linguistic point of view, see "What We Learn from Turkmen Carpets" (Azmun, 2018; pp.36-73).

2. Turkmen classical poets' reaction to arabic script

For centuries administrative and legal documents were always written in Arabic script. Even tombstones were written either in Arabic script or in the Arabic language. The education of the Turkmen and other people of Central Asia in madrassas was carried out in the Arabic language. Literary works were written in either Arabic or Persian. Despite this fact, Arabic script, with its highly artistic properties, was not used in Turkmen carpets. The Turkmen, in their rugs and carpets, used their old alphabet, like the Runic alphabet, to which they were deeply attached.

Only after the XVII century did the Turkmen begin to produce literary works in their own language because previously, rulers of Turkic origin always attached more importance to the Persian and Arabic languages. The Seljuks especially helped Persian literature to develop and flourish. Under these circumstances, Mahmud Kashghari presented the books he had written about Turkic languages, not to the Seljuks but to the Arab rulers. The most productive period of the Turkmen language and literature was the XVII and XVIII centuries. During this period, Turkmen poets not only tried to avoid Persian and Arabic languages, but they also strove to bring the national language and literature closer to ordinary people. Only four poems by Şakendî (Shakendi), who is believed to be a XVII-century Turkmen poet, are known to us today. He wrote his poems in the form of a "Chîstân," meaning 'riddle,' to avoid the anger of fanatical Muslims who believed that Arabic letters were divine. The poet believes that the Arabic language is not structurally compatible with the Turkmen language. In a poem with the epistrophe/redif (the word repeated at the end of stanzas) of *yilan/ýilan* 'snake,' he expresses his protest by comparing the Arabic language with the hiss of snakes; the transcription of the poem is in Turkmen spelling:

*Bir agyzdan yigrim sekiz ses çykar,
Örän tutuk birbirinden pes çykar,
Gözi kördür ýene jahana bakar,
Sözläbilmän was was etdi ol ýylan.
Twenty-eight sounds come out of the mouth,
They are so muffled that each one is worse than the next.
It (snake/Arabic) is blind yet looks at the world,
It could not be uttered properly and hissed like **a snake**.*

The “twenty-eight sounds” in this poem denote the twenty-eight letters in Arabic script (Bekmyradov, 1987: p.57).

The mullahs at the time of this poet seemed to believe that the Arabic script descended from heaven. The poet expresses his bewilderment in another poem as follows:

*Bu görneti:n bize asmndan indi
Diyşip jedel edýär millet biz bilen
Saying, “It is obvious that this descended from heaven for us,”
People argue with us.*

In his book *Oguz-nāma* (Oghuz-nāme), the XVIII century Turkmen classical poet Anadlip remembers the alphabet that disappeared or stopped being used in Central Asia after this region was conquered by Arabs. The poet highly appreciates the service this alphabet has provided to people and feels sorry for what has happened to it. The distinguished Turkmen linguist Hydyrov writes the following about this subject:

*Although some writers have hesitated to write about the alphabet that disappeared because of Arabs, they have expressed this disappearance in different ways. We notice this in the following lines in *Oguz-nāma*.*

Hydyrov then quotes the following lines from *Oguz-nāma*:

<i>Bir asmany bela inip nehandan, Ýuwutdy ol dürli gymmat bahany. Tiriklikde zerdir ol bizge jandan, Oguz owladyňň ruhy-rowany.</i>	A heavenly catastrophe descended suddenly, And devoured our various values. It had been like gold in our lives, And embodied the soul of the descendants of Oghuz.
<i>Ýaşyň üç müňden aşyp dörtge mindi, Bu ýaşda çekmediň renji, yzany.</i>	Your age had surpassed 3000 and entered 4000, But you never suffered ill-treatment or cruelty at this age.
<i>Oguz owladydan aýryldyň indi, Ke bizlerge goýup matem gazany. Seni asman aždahasy ýuwutdy, Sen anyň karnyda tutdyň mekany. Jemalyňdan jahan köňlün sowutdy, Men oldym Andalyp waspyň ýazany.</i>	And now you have left the descendants of Oghuz, Leaving us with our destiny of mourning. The heavenly dragon swallowed you, And you settled in his stomach. The world found peace in your beauty, And I, Andalip, became the recorder of your quality.

(Hydyrov, 1962: p.16)

In the first stanza of another poem, in the form of a puzzle that became a folk song, the poet writes:

*Atasy akyl, enesi nakyl,
Bir gyz dogulmyş yigrimi dört şekil.
Şu ýaňlyg gözel milletiň yary,
Bul bizden owal bolsa-da zary.*

Her father is wisdom, and her mother is a proverb,
A girl is born in twenty-four shapes.
She is so beautiful and the beloved of the nation,
Although she had suffered cruelty
before us.

In this poem, “the girl with twenty-four shapes” seems to mean 24 letters. The XVIII century Turkmen classical poet Şeydayî (Sheydayi) not only protested against the Arabic alphabet and language, but he also wrote an elegy to the “Twenty-Five,” which is obviously the name of 25 letters that had disappeared. In this elegy, the *Twenty-Five* is used as an epistrophe/ ‘ Like Shakendi, Sheydayi too wrote this poem in the form of a Chîstân or riddle, as the Arabic alphabet was sacred to the Turkmen community at that time. Here we present parts of this poem that are more expressive:

*Şeýle gulaga ýakymly,
Sözledim gözel yigrim baş.
Niçe owazy çekimli
Ýzladym gözel yigrim baş*

It was so pleasant to my ear,
I enjoyed uttering it, O beautiful Twenty-Five,
So harmonious they sound
I followed (you) O beautiful Twenty-Five

*Ýedisinden owaz çykar,
On sekizin tartar çekip,
Üç müň ýaşda ömrün ýakyp,
Bozladym gözel yigrim baş
Matem, mersiýe Şakendi,
Ýazyp geçmiş niçe bendi,
Okyp ýad ederler şindi,
Özledim, gözel yigrim baş.*

Seven of them produced a voice,
Pulling along the remaining **eighteen**,
When your life ended after three thousand years,
I cried as loudly as a camel, O beautiful Twenty-Five
Şakendi left behind a few stanzas
of lamentation and mourning he had written.
Now people read them and remember you,
And I miss you, O beautiful Twenty-Five.

(Meredov, 1978: p.12)

In another poem, the poet writes about the tragedy of the Turkmen language, blames the Persian and Arabic languages for interfering in other languages, and explains that his language, which had been harmonious and pleasantly in tune, had turned into a perplexed and dumb entity in the house of religion. He also expresses his anger, saying:

Arap dili boldy sözler güýesi.

Arabic became the moth of words.

(ibid: 13)

The Arabic language is compared to a moth that eats up the words of other languages.

From these poems, we understand that the Turkmen/Turkic people had an alphabet before the Muslims conquered Central Asia. It had seven vowels and 18 consonants. Şeydayi believed that this alphabet was three thousand years old, and Andalip says that it had existed for more than three thousand years. Both poets write that Arabic played an important role in the disappearance of that alphabet. Some Turkmen scholars believe that

the alphabet these poets describe might be related to the symbols of the 24 Oghuz tribes. The pre-Islamic tombstones in Central Asia should be studied. There is no text extant in the alphabet that the Turkmen poets mention. Broken pieces of old tombstones have been found in northern Iran, where the Turkmen live. Symbols on these stones perhaps signify the tribe of the deceased. Some of the symbols on the broken tombstones resemble some of the runic characters of the Kök Türk alphabet.



In the Turkmen Sahra region in northern Iran, at the foot of the mountain called Gökce Dağ, near the tomb of Halid Nebi, there were watermelon-shaped tombstones with various patterns or symbols on them. These stones have either been destroyed or have completely disappeared. Mahmud Paydar, an Iranian Turkmen, has been carrying out extensive research on such tombstones both in Iran and other places. The result of his studies was published in the journal *Yaprak in Turkmen Sahra, Iran* (Paydar, 2001: pp.11-16). Paydar has seen water melon-shaped stones in Mangistau, Kazakstan, similar to those in Gökce Dağ. However, there were no patterns on them; they might have been erased.

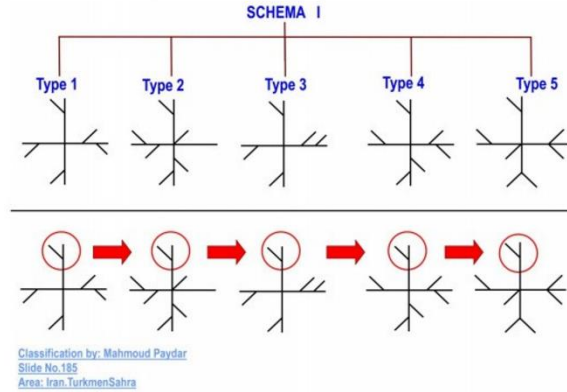
All of the ball-shaped tombstones were broken to pieces by religious fanatics. Paydar managed to find one tombstone with symbols on it. He classified the symbols into groups of symbols with slight differences. Below are shown the first and second groups of the symbols. Each group includes types of symbols slightly different from the others. The second group consisted of seven varied symbols, each of which could probably be a different form of vowels. This combination reminds us of the seven vowels Şeyda'î mentions in his poem about the “Beautiful Twenty -five” where he mentions that seven of them have voices.

Of course, we cannot call these signs letters before we find them used in a text. Unfortunately, hundreds of watermelon-shaped tombstones were destroyed, and Paydar, as mentioned before, found similar tombstones in Mangyshlak from centuries ago. The Oghuz people used to live there, and later it was the habitat of the Turkmen until the Kazakhs occupied that region. However, the symbols on the tombstones were erased.

If there were more such tombstones, or if someone had studied them earlier, we could probably have a better basis for the identity of these signs. Paydar, who is studying tombstones in Iran and other places where the Oghuz (Turkmen) people had lived, heard that someone had a complete watermelon-shaped tombstone he had taken from Halid Nabi graveyard. This person, thinking that he might find a treasure inside, had cut it in half, and when he failed, he stuck the two pieces together. We do not know if he put the pieces together correctly.

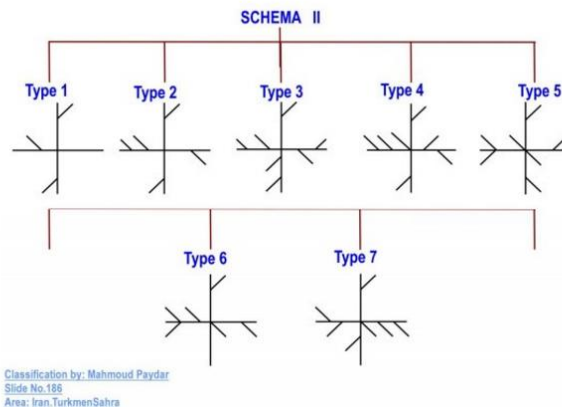
Paydar studied the symbols on the tombstone and classified them according to their similarities of the types of symbols to each other. There are six groups of types of

symbols. We show below the group one and group two of these symbols. The types of symbols in group two, as mentioned above, remind us of the seven vowels mentioned in Sheyday's elegy.



In Turkmenistan, some scholars believe that the above-mentioned concept of “the beautiful twenty-five” is related to the seals of Oghuz Khan and the twenty-four Oghuz tribes. In 2005 in Turkmenistan, I was told that someone from the town of Mary (Merv) had a one-metre-long book with deer skins on which there were writings with an alphabet similar to Runic. When I asked about it when I was in Turkmenistan, I was told that the book did not exist.

Russian Archeologist Viktor Sarianidis who had found the remains of a 4000-year-old civilization in Merv, talked at an international conference held in Ashgabat in 2008 on Turkmen carpets. He said that symbols used in that civilization resembled designs of Turkmen carpets, and he showed them on the screen. Turkmen scholar Begmyrat Gerey in a paper he presented to the conference on Oghuznameh held in Turkmenistan, pointed out that writing began with ideograms (in stamps) and quotes Russian scholar Vadim Masson who, in his book published in German in 1987, says that six ideograms that exist in Turkmenistan are a repetition of ideograms of Elam kingdom, Sumerians and the Harappa civilization in India.



Below we present the symbols from Masson's book.

Gruppe							
		I	II	III	IV	V	VI
1	Zeichen in Südturkmenien						
2	vorelamische Schriftzeichen						
3	frühsumerische Schriftzeichen						
4	Zeichen in Harappa/Indien						

Taken from the above-mentioned book of Masson, page 38.

1. Symbols found in Southern Turkmenistan
2. Those found in Elam.
3. Early Sumerian signs used in writing.
4. Those found in the Harappa civilization.

The symbols that are shown above, like the symbols on the above-mentioned tombstones, are also used in the Turkmen carpets. This reminds us of the Runic alphabet used as designs in Turkmen carpets. These symbols should be studied properly.

We cannot ignore the elegy of the Turkmen poet Sheydayi that he wrote about the three-thousand-year-old alphabet with seven vowels and eighteen consonants. Turkmen classic poets Şākendi (XVII century) and Andalip (XIII century) also are not happy with the disappearance of the Oghuz alphabet. They also complain about the harm the Arabic language had inflicted on the Turkmen language. This is a subject worth studying. I wrote about this subject in a long article I had written on Turkmen carpets both in Turkish and English. It seems to me that it went unnoticed. I hope that scholars in Azerbaijan will attach some importance to this subject and carry out scholarly research.



Portrait of the author on a Turkmen Yomut rug.

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