TRACES OF THE QALAM ON THE WINDS OF THE QAZAQ STEPPE: ISLAMIC TRADITION AND WRITTEN MEMORY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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Abstract

This article analyzes the impact of Arabic script (Arabography) on Qazaq literary and intellectual culture across history, especially during the Middle Ages. The Arabic script was initially employed during the dissemination of Islam and quickly acquired the status of a critical medium for the recording of religious, legal, and poetic texts in both Turkic and Arabic languages. Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, Mahmud al-Kashgari, and Yusuf Balasaguni's seminal works emphasize their contributions to the development of an Islamic-Turkic literary amalgamation in the Qazaq Steppe. Throughout the era of the Qazaq Khanate, Arabic script maintained its role in historical and cultural contexts, while oral traditions like zhyrau poetry and the Qazaq Khanate's legal system remained intricately linked to Islamic written culture. The study asserts that the development of Arabography in Qazaqstan evolved naturally, serving both as a tool for modernization and as a means of cultural connectivity, thereby impacting access to national memory and identity.

Keywords: Arabic script, Central Asia, Qazaq Steppe, Islam, Qazaq literature, Qazaq legal code, zhyrau poetry.

Introduction

Historical Context of Arabic Writing in the Qazaq Steppe

This article examines the transformations that occurred in the Turkic world of Central Asia during the Middle Ages in Qazaqstan. The Qazaq Steppe,[1] a region spanning numerous cultural spheres, has been a hub for cultural and civilizational exchanges throughout the millennia. The spread of Islam from the early Hijri centuries introduced the development of the Arabic script, which has played a significant role in the region's written culture. Initially used for religious purposes, the Arabic script evolved into a universal tool for documenting knowledge, poetry, and legal and administrative texts. The adaptation of Arabic script to Turkic phonetic features, such as the Oghuz-Kipchak and Kipchak dialects,[2] played a crucial role in the development of the regional writing tradition. Arabic script also held symbolic significance, embodying spiritual identity and cultural self-identification within the broader Islamic *ummah*.

Throughout the Middle Ages and up to the 20th century, the Qazaq Steppe developed a unique literary practice where Turkic and Arabic languages intertwined. Arabic remained the language of theology, philosophy, and the scholarly elite, while Qazaq was the language of folk forms like oral poetry, epic tales, and *zhyrau*.[3] Arabic script allowed for a synthesis of Turkic texts in Arabic script, allowing literati to freely switch between languages, forming a multicultural literary corpus. The Central Asian and Qazaq region scholars created texts that combined elements of both languages, fostering a unique form of cultural bilingualism based on a single writing system.

Active cultural ties with the Islamic world became the cause of a profound and gradual transformation of the entire traditional Turkic culture, including its norms, customs, and stereotypes. However, elements of the previous Tengrian[4] beliefs were preserved, and over time led to the formation of syncretic forms of religiosity. As a result, a special type of folk Islam emerged in Central Asia, expressed in local forms of Sufism, representing unique interpretations of Muslim teachings that absorbed local spiritual traditions.

The Crimean Peninsula, the Volga area, Dagestan, Central Asia, and the Qazaq Steppe, through the interplay of several civilizations, fostered a new, advanced culture characterized by the Arabic language and rooted in Islamic ideology. This Islamic culture

shaped the developmental trajectories of Muslim populations for millennia, influencing their lives to the present day. Although the Qazaq Steppe was not included in the Arab Caliphate, the territory was significantly integrated into Islamic culture, notably via the assimilation of Arabic language, literature, and philosophy in their original form.

Operational Definition of Arabic Script

Arabic graphic literature refers to literature composed in Arabic script, namely the Arabic alphabet, irrespective of the language used in the piece. This definition does not imply that the text is definitively composed in Arabic *per se*. Numerous Turkic, Iranian, and other Muslim ethnic groups (such as Qazaqs, Uzbeks, Tatars, Persians, etc.) used Arabic script for their languages until the 20th century. Consequently, Arabic graphic literature may encompass: a) texts in Arabic (religious writings, philosophy, theology); b) in Turkic languages (e.g., Qazaq poetry, chronicles, scholarly works).

Original Arabic Texts Produced in the Qazaq Steppe

Qur'anic Manuscripts

N. I. Konrad noted that two channels carry out cultural interaction: translation and perceptions of original texts.[5] At the early stage of the spread of Arabic writing in the Qazaq Steppe, copies of the Holy Qur'ān appeared, obviously for spiritual and liturgical use. The oriental manuscripts and "round books" of the National Library of the Republic of Qazaqstan (Kazakhstan) contain a collection of more than two thousand publications covering the topics of philosophy, religion, history, art, literature and poetry, linguistics, geography, medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. Of particular value is the collection of the Holy Qur'ān, including more than 50 copies of manuscripts, distinguished by the variety of letters, time of creation, page design, and bindings. For example, the earliest Holy Qur'ān in this museum is a manuscript written in Kufic script (770 pages, 39.6 x 32 x 12.5 cm, weight 5400 g), dating to the 12th century.

Copies of the Holy Qur'ān in Kufic script are a great rarity, and the oldest manuscripts and books stored in Qazaqstan are national treasures, inscribed in pencil in black, burgundy, red, and royal colors, with 17 lines per page. Medallion illuminations adorn each leaf, ranging from one to eight per page. Books in the collection have been rebound at later dates, featuring green cardboard covers with embossed medallions. The physical condition of the spine and pages indicates

fairly active use of these books. Subsequent restorations using laid paper confirm the careful attitude taken toward the sacred manuscripts. It is believed that this copy of the Holy Qur'ān was previously kept in the library of the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in the city of Turkestan (in Qazaqstan). In 1936, the library received the manuscript. The cover bears two engraved seals, each bearing the name of Mullah Khoja Gabdurakhman. According to the note in the margins of the last pages, it has been established that this Holy Qur'ān was copied for the sister of Sultan Sanjar Seljuk (reigned 1118–1157), the last ruler of the Seljuk Empire. The name and location of the copyist are unknown.[6]

In the Middle Ages, workshops began to operate in Qazaq cities in mosques and *madāris*, where specialists—copyists, bookbinders, and artists—created handwritten books. They copied the *sūrahs* of the Holy Qur'ān, *Sharī'ah* texts, and works on grammar, logic, and dictionaries. Over time, a unique tradition of book art emerged. The history of handwritten copies of the Holy Qur'ān is of interest to scientists and specialists. However, during the Soviet period, authorities prohibited the study and distribution of religious literature for nearly 80 years. The Soviet ideology systematically sought to destroy Islamic spirituality, and suppressed and ignored these books. Only Soviet-approved books could be printed, owned, distributed, and studied, and religious books in the Qazaq language, written in Arabic script, were read underground and in secret. Nevertheless, many manuscripts, especially the Holy Qur'ān, were preserved, and have reached our days thanks to the efforts of museum and library workers, as well as collectors.[7]

Al-Farabi (870–950)

Aside from Quranic manuscripts, the oldest original works in Arabic in medieval Qazaqstan and Central Asia are those of Abu Nasr al-Farabi (full name Abu-Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Tarkhan ibn Uzlag al-Farabi at-Turki). He was born in the Qazaqstan city of Farab (modern Otyrar)[8] on the Syr Darya, at the confluence of the Arys River, in 870. Al-Farabi, was a great philosopher and a native of the city of Farab, recognized as the "second teacher" after Aristotle. His works influenced Muslim, Christian, and Jewish philosophical traditions, inspiring such thinkers as Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides. [9] Originating from a distinguished military-Turkic lineage, Farabi acquired his foundational education in the Turkic language, perhaps in the Kipchak dialect. [10] Subsequently, he journeyed to the preeminent scientific hubs of the Islamic world—from Merv to Baghdad—where he actualized his intellectual

potential.[11] His intellectual legacy encompasses logic, metaphysics, politics, music, and epistemology.[12]

Farabi's writings emphasize political theory. In the works "The Virtuous City" and "The Political Regime," he consciously expands on Platonic philosophy, delineating the concept of an ideal society ruled by a sagacious philosopher, wherein concord prevails between heavenly order and social justice.[13] His theory tries to amalgamate rational classical philosophy, namely that of Aristotle and Plato, with the Islamic perspective.[14] In his writings, Farabi examines the interplay between philosophy and religion, advocating for the supremacy of reason while acknowledging religion as an essential medium for disseminating knowledge to a broader populace.[15] In the "List of Sciences," he categorizes the knowledge of his day, aiming for scientific organization and the acknowledgment of philosophy as a comprehensive type of knowledge.[16]

Farabi also contributed to the elucidation and propagation of the ancient legacy. In several publications, he underscores the coherence of the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle, endeavouring to construct a comprehensive philosophical framework.[17] Notwithstanding several historical and philological flaws, his writings served as the foundation for intellectual synthesis within Islamic civilization. Consequently, al-Farabi established the foundations of philosophy inside the Islamic realm and was also an originator of unique Arabic literature, hailing from contemporary Qazaqstan. Moreover, he became a symbol of multicultural engagement. His work demonstrates that a constructive synthesis of local traditions and global knowledge is achievable in a multiethnic and multilingual environment.[18]

Arabic Script in the Turkic Language of Qazaqstan

In the 11th–12thCenturies

This section presents a brief overview of Arabic literature or Arabic script in the Turkic language of Qazaqstanin the 11th–12th centuries, based on the manuscripts of Yusuf Balasaguni, Mahmud Kashgari, Suleimen Bakyrgani, and Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. We can classify them as the pioneers of Qazaq literature due to their use of the Chagatai or Oghuz-Kipchak dialect in their writing.

Mahmud Kashgari (1029-1101), a prominent 11th-century scholar, is best known for his "*Divān lugat at-turk*" (Dictionary of Turkic Languages), a monumental work that spans over 700 pages.

Compiling in 1083, the book provides a comprehensive overview of the Turkic peoples' language, culture, geography, and way of life, including their tribes, religious views, and political structure. Kashgari, who may have belonged to the ruling dynasty, traveled to various Turkic regions due to political circumstances. His work, which includes oral folklore and information about the history, culture, geography, and life of the Turks of Central Asia, East Turkestan, the Volga region, and the Urals, is considered the first comparative dictionary of Turkic languages with elements of philological analysis.[19]

The Dictionary contains about 6800 Turkic words, 40 tribes,[20] 110 geographical names, and numerous proverbs, sayings, and poems. It is considered the first comparative dictionary of Turkic languages with elements of philological analysis and remains a valuable source for linguists, folklorists, and historians. The book is not only a linguistic work but also an encyclopedic one, covering ethnographic, historical, and cultural information.[21]

Translated into various languages, including Turkish, English, Russian, Qazaq, Uzbek, and Uyghur, it has had a significant influence on linguistics and Turkology. Mahmud Kashgari is considered an outstanding representative of all Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia and a common cultural heritage of the region.[22] The manuscript has survived in a single copy from 1226 and is located in the National Library of Istanbul.[23]

Yusuf Balasaguni (1015\16-1069\70), an 11th-century scholar and thinker in Turkic, Arabic, and Persian, was born in the city of Balasaguni, a cultural and commercial center of the "Karakhanid"[24] state. Born in the Chui Valley near modern Tokmak, Balasaguni was close to the Turkic peoples, especially the Qazaqs and Kyrgyz.[25] He received his education in Farab, Taraz, Bukhara, and Kashgar, and other centers of Islamic Wisdom. Balasaguni studied philosophy, literature, and sciences of his time and wrote his main poem in Kashgar, dedicating it to the ruler of the "Karakhanid" dynasty.[26]

"Kutadgu Bilik"[27] (Wisdom of Royal Glory), Balasaguni's first encyclopedic work written in the Turkic language, was not in official Arabic. Balasaguni's main goal was to instruct "Karakhanid" rulers[28] in governing settled regions using a language they understood. The work covers a wide range of topics, from philosophy and politics to ethics and aesthetics. Through allegorical characters - Justice (Kun Togdy), Happiness (Ay Toldi), Reason (Ogdulmysh) and Humility (Odumysh) - the author reveals models of ideal governance and

personal behaviour, indicating that fair governance is possible only under forms of moral excellence of the ruler.[29] Balasaguni's worldview was influenced by philosophy, shamanism, and Islam. He is associated with the Eastern Renaissance tradition dating back to Aristotle, al-Farabi, and Ibn Sina.[30]

Balasaguni's poetry was philosophical in nature, combining rationality and Sufism symbolism. The work also reflects pre-Islamic beliefs such as shamanism, Tengrism, and Zoroastrianism. Balasaguni remains primarily a poet and thinker, with the "Muslim element" dominant in its philosophical foundations.[31] The poem "Kutadgu Bilik" became known in the West thanks to the Austrian orientalist von Hammer-Purgsthal, G. Vambery, V.V. Radlov, S.E. Malov, N. Grebnev, K. Kerimov, R. Arat, S.N. Ivanov, and A. Egeubaev. His work combines Turkic and Persian poetic traditions, making it a cultural and philosophical heritage necessary for studying the history of ideas and literature of the Turkic peoples of the Middle Ages.[32]

Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (1093-1166)

The next great scholar of the Arabic script style in the Turkic language is Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. He was born in Ispidzhab (modern Sairam in Qazaqstan) and began his studies with his father, Sheikh Ibrahim. Then his mentor was the scholar Baha ad-Din Ispidzhabi, and later Arystan Bab in Otyrar (Qazaqstan). After the death of the latter, Yasawi continued his studies with the famous Sufi Sheikh Khoja Yusuf Hamadani in Bukhara.[33] Sufism as a spiritual and ascetic movement spread in Central Asia from the 9th century, forming various orders, including Yassawiyya. In this context, Yassawi played an important role in unifying the Turkic peoples on the basis of Islamic and Sufi values.[34]

Yasawi was not only a religious figure, but also a poet and philosopher whose works (mainly poems and treatises) had a widespread influence. Yassawi called for spiritual purity, tolerance, and love for one's neighbour. It is believed that he spent the last years of his life in an underground ascetic cell in Yassy (Turkestan-Qazaqstan), where he was buried in 1166/67. Later, by order of Amir Timur (1320-1405), the founder of the eponymous Timurid Empire, a majestic mausoleum was built on the site of his burial. And the memorial complex that arose at the grave became a historical site and one of the most popular places for tourism and worship in all of Central Asia.[35]

His main work, "*Dīwān-i Ḥikmet*" became an important monument of Sufi and Turkic literature, having a significant impact on the spread of Islam among the Turkic peoples. It was written in the Arabic script style in the Turkic language (Oghuz-Kipchak dialect), contrary to the tradition of that time to write in Arabic and Farsi. "*Dīwān-i Ḥikmet*" translated from Arabic, means a "Divine Wisdom."[36] In addition to being a religious work, it is one of the most ancient monuments of Turkic literature, associated with the "Karakhanid" literary tradition. Its roots go back to the shamanic chants of the Turkic nomads, and the language contains Kipchak elements.

These poems, passed down orally from generation to generation, taught honesty, justice, and patience. And also, in "*Dīwān-i Ḥikmet*" the key ideas of the Yassawi *tarīqah* [37] are reflected. Yasawi's poems spread Islam and strengthened the Muslim faith among the Turks. The book was called "The Qur'ān of the Turks," since it was through it that the Turkic-speaking peoples perceived the foundations of Islam. For this, Yassawi was called "*Ḥaḍret Sulṭān*"[38] and Turkestan was called "the second Mecca."[39] "Hikmets"[40] not only spread religion, but also served as a call for the spiritual unity and independence of the Turkic peoples, forming the foundations of their spiritual and cultural unity. People perceived "Hikmet Yassawi" as a popular form of Islam, advocating for honesty, kindness, and spiritual unity. [41] "Hikmet Yassawi" Turkestan became the spiritual and educational center of the region.[42]

Suleimen Bakyrgani (d. 1186)

The next outstanding Turkic scholar, poet, religious figure, preacher of the Islamic religion, and user of the Arabic script in the Turkic language in the Qazaq Steppe, is Suleimen Bakyrgani. He was a follower of the teachings of Akhmet Yassawi, born in Turkestan (Qazaqstan). Bakyrgani was educated in Samarkand, Bukhara, Khorezm, and Sham and was known among the people as *"Ḥakīm 'Aṭa*."[43] His main work, "The Book of Bakyrgani," is a valuable monument of Turkic Sufi literature of the 12th century. In it, the author calls for spiritual purification, goodness, love, and knowledge of God. The main idea of the book is that a person can approach God through love, purity of heart, and the path of Sufism, passing through the stages of spiritual development under mentorship. Bakyrgani taught that true beauty is of three types: eternal (God), reflected in creation, and spiritual, accessible through self-understanding. He believed that only by getting rid of envy, pride, and quarrels can a person achieve spiritual freedom.

Amanzhol Kuzembayuly, Z. S. Akhmetova, A. Amanzholov, DeWeese Devin, and other Turkologists contributed to the comprehensive studies of his work and contribution to the development of Sufi poetry. Continuing the traditions of Akhmet Yassawi, he developed his teachings by writing tales on religious subjects that influenced the Turkic literature of the 13th-14th centuries. Suleimen Bakyrgani died at the age of 82, and his "Book of Bakyrgani" was used for a long time as a teaching aid in *madrasahs*. To sum up, it can be noted that in early medieval Qazaqstan of the 10th–12th centuries, Arabic writing was spread both in the form of original texts and in conditions of bilingualism. They used the Arabic script in the Turkic (Oghuz-Kipchak) language.[44]

In the 13th-17thCenturies

One of the paramount works of Qazaq historical literature during the evolution of Arabic script in late medieval Qazaqstan (13th-17th centuries) was the "*Jami at-taurih*" ("Collection of Chronicles") by Qadyrgali Zhalairi (full name Kadyr Ali-Bek Ibn KhoshumbekJalairi, 1555-1607), composed during his imprisonment in Moscow between 1600 and 1602 and dedicated to Tsar Boris Godunov. The book, published in Kazan in 1854, provides significant insights on the history of the Qazaq Khanate, with its language and culture at that period. He was a distinguished Qazaq scientist, notable diplomat, and exceptional political figure of the 16th century. Qadyrgali Zhalairi was notable for his extensive expertise in Arabic, Persian, and eastern sciences, enabling him to serve as an advisor to Khan Kuchumand a *biy*[45] to the Siberian prince Seidek.[46]

Later, having spoken out against Kuchum, he became close to Seidek and Oraz-Muhammad, strengthening their influence. In 1588, Zhalairy was captured and sent to Moscow, where he lived until 1598. For his participation in military campaigns, Oraz-Muhammad received lands, and in 1600 he became the Khan of Kasymov. He appointed Zhalairy as one of his viziers. His main work is "Zhami at-tauarih" ("Collection of Chronicles"). The author covers the history of the Turkic tribes, the Karakhanids, the Oghuz, and the dynasty of Genghis Khan, relying on sources, including the work of Rashid ad-Din. Of particular value is the section describing the events of the 13th-16th centuries on Qazaq soil, including the political situation and the formation of tribes and classes. For example, Qadyrgali Zhalair remarked on the Qazaq khanates, particularly focusing on Qasym Khan :

> *"The most famous of them (the sons of Zhanibek Khan) was Qasym Khan. He ruled his grandfather's ulus (state) for a long time and extended his authority over the surrounding provinces. His stories are found everywhere; they are widely known."*[47]

Qasym Khan was a key figure in oral historical Islamic studies, related to his Qazaq legal code. The chronicle became the first historical work written in the early Qazaq language. Scientists highly appreciated Zhalairi's work, comparing it with historians of Central Asia and Mongolia, and also recognizing its significance by Russian and Qazaq researchers. On this matter, prominent Qazaq scholar M. Koigeldiyev asserts that:

> *"Kadyrgali Zhalairi's contributions hold significant importance in the examination of the emergence of the Qazaq people and the Qazaq Khanate, and historians will revisit this work repeatedly while elucidating these matters."*

However, he noted that he considered the title of Qadyrgali Zhalairi's work to be confusing:

> *"regrettably, the subsequently discovered copy in St. Petersburg likewise omitted the title originally provided by the author. Consequently, the manuscript's title was retained as "Jami at-tavarikh." This situation impeded historians from providing an impartial evaluation of K. Zhalairi's original knowledge, leading them to see this book just as a Turkic rendition of Rashid ad-Din's work."*[48]

Qazaq literature is rich in historical texts, also written in Arabic script in the 1540s, such as "Ta'rikh-i Abulkhair Khani" by Masud ibn Usman Kukhistani and "Chingiz-nama" by Utemish-haji. Ta'rikh-i Abulkhair Khani provides a detailed account of the reign of Abu-l-Khair Khan,[49] the khan of the nomadic Uzbeks, revealing military operations, political events, and the internal organization of his kingdom. The book also includes lists of the Khan's associates, revealing tribal connections and defining the ethnonyms associated with these tribes.[50] "Chingis-nama by Utemish-haji, a work of an aristocratic family, covers the era from Chingis Khan to Tokhtamysh, describing in detail the khans of the Golden Horde, tribal configurations, social strife, the spread of Islam, and the cultural life of the steppe peoples of Eastern Desht-i Kipchak (Qazaq Steppe). The book is based on oral stories, chronicles, and "daftars" and is a significant source on the history of Qazaqstan and the Golden Horde

in the13th and 14th centuries.[51] V. P. Yudin contributed to the study of this monument, referring to it as "steppe oral historiography."[52]

The historical evolution of Qazaqstan and Central Asia from the 13th to 16th century is portrayed in the Arabic alphabet in Persian, with works by Ibn Ruzbikhan (1457-1521) and Mirza Muhammad Haydar Dulati (1541-1546). Ruzbikhan's "Notes of a Bukhara Guest"[53] (1509) offers details about the political landscape, ethnic diversity, and leadership of Maverannahr, including the Qazaq and Uzbek khans. Dulati's "Suluk al-muluk" [54] addresses public administration challenges in Hanafi and Shafi'i jurisprudence, exemplifying legal and political writing rooted in the Islamic legal system. Dulati's "Ta'rikh-i Rashidi" [55] provides a comprehensive narrative of events in Moghulistan and surrounding areas, including *Dasht-i Kipchak* (Qazaq Steppe). The book contains original information about the Qazaqs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Uighurs, and Kalmaks, their culture, and their relationships. The author, educated at the court of Babur(1483-1530), was one of the most informed chroniclers of his time. Dulati, a knowledgeable chronicler, laid a foundation for Eastern historiography in later decades.

The Legal Regulations of the Qazaq Khanate as an Islamic State

The Qazaq legal code is steeped in historical significance; however, these laws are not recorded in Arabic script. The first published version available in Russian was incomplete and did not encompass the entirety of this legal framework. As an Islamic state, the Qazaq Khanate based its legal regulations on *Sharī'ah*, leading to a new political and legal reality that emerged from parts of the statehood (ulus) of Dzhuchi (Golden Horde) and Chagatai. The Qazaq khans were knowledgeable about the norms of Qazaq nomadic law and Islamic law. One significant set of laws was drafted by Qasym Khan (1445-1521), referred to as '*Qasym salganqasqazhol*' ('Shining Path of Qasym Khan'). This legal framework comprised five core sections: 1. Property Law, 2. Criminal Law, 3. Military Law, 4. Ambassadorial Customs, and 5. The Law of Community ('Zhurtshylyk').[56]

During the rule of Yesim Khan (1568-1628), improvements were made to the legal code, referred to as 'Esimkhannynyeskizholy' ('Ancient Path of Yesim Khan'). Taukekel Khan (Tawakkul Muhammad Bahadur Qazi Khan, Qazaq: توكل محمد بهادرقاضى خان, Tauekel-Muhammad Bahadur Qazikhan) (1635-1715), known as the "Head of the Islamic State," introduced a new set of laws called "Jety Jargy" (Seven Charters). This compilation included civil law,

administrative and criminal regulations, and marital relationships, as well as sections addressing taxes and religion.[57]

Additionally, it is known that the "Seven Charters" published 11 fragments of the "Seven Charters" in the pages of the "Sibirsky Vestnik" press in 1820 by the Russian scholar G. Spassky, based on the information of the headman of the Zhapas clan, Kubek Shukiraliev. A. Levshin's research offers the second version of the "Seven Charters" (34 extracts). These versions were published 100 years after the birth of the "Seven Charters," based on "folk oral literature" during the Russian Empire period. During the Soviet era, the "Seven Charters" were dismissed as "the scum of feudal relations" and received no examination. These charters remained in use among the Qazaq people until the mid-1800s. Some laws were used until the Bolshevik Revolution (1917). As a result, it is known that we have not yet received the complete version of this set of laws.[58]

Zhyrau Poetry and Qazaq Oral Heritage

As previously mentioned, traditional Muslim literature written in Arabic script and in the Arabic, Turkic, and Farsi languages originated in Turkestan and present-day Qazaqstan, playing a crucial role in the Turkic literary legacy. These works established aesthetic and intellectual benchmarks and were extensively translated into Turkic and European languages. The 15th century saw a period of literary prosperity in the Chagatai language,[59]with the poetry of Navoi (1441-1501), Babur (1483-1530) and others profoundly influenced by the Arab-Persian heritage. These compositions used the Arabic script, included Persian lexicon, and utilized poetic structures, so guaranteeing aesthetic and thematic coherence with Persian classics. A. Bombachi, the Italian Turkologist, highlighted that Muslim Turkic literature maintained the essence of a "translation" from Persian.[60] At the same time, in *Dasht-i-Kipchak* (Qazaq Steppe), oral poetic culture evolved along with written literature, including a distinct sort of poet known as *zhyrau*.

Zhyrau poetry and oral heritage Qazaq scholar Yedige Tursunov asserts that the genesis of *zhyrau* traces back to ancient Turkic shamanic (Kama) activities.[61] Over time, the religious duties of the priest-reciters diverged from the magical ones, and *zhyrau* emerged as professional interpreters of the epic narrative, endowed with an "encyclopedic memory" and the talent for poetic improvisation. The ancient historian Priscus of Panium noted the presence of bards performing heroic songs in the court of the Hunnic monarch Attila.[62] These vocalists may be regarded as early forerunners of *zhyrau*.

Subsequently, particularly during the era of the Turkic Khaganate (552 CE-744 CE), the epic tradition attained a written format. The Orkhon inscriptions honoring "Kultegin and Bilge Khagan" (in old Turkic letters: 𐰚𐰇𐰠:𐱅𐰃𐰏𐰤)[63] exhibit characteristics of the heroic epic: a narrative detailing the hero's birth, his deeds, poetic parallelism, alliteration, and a fusion of prose with lyrical elements.

The word *zhyrau* originates from the word *zhyr,* which denotes a heroic song. *Zhyrau* recited poems accompanied by the musical instruments "qobyz," often using rhythmic repeats. During its zenith in the 15th to 17th centuries, *zhyrau* poetry significantly influenced the political and spiritual realms of the Nogai Horde (1440-1634) and the Qazaq Khanate (1465-1847),[64] which emerged following the disintegration of the Golden Horde (1236-1501, i.e., Ulus Jochi) and the conflicts among its heirs, wherein warrior poets emerged as key figures in historical events.[65]

Notable figures among *zhyraus* include Asan Qaigy, a 16th-century poet-scribe during Khan Zhangir's reign; Qaztugan, a 17th-century poet-storyteller; Dospambet (1490-1523), who lived during the formation of the Qazaq nation and participated in numerous military campaigns involving the Crimean, Nogai, and Kazan khanates; Shalkiiz (1465-1560), a key figure in the establishment of the Qazaq Khanate and the founder of a philosophical school in Qazaq poetry; Zhiembet (1570-1575), who took part in campaigns against the Kalmak-Oirats; Bukhar-Zhyrau, a poet during Khan Ablai's reign (1693-1797); and Shal-Aqyn (1748-1819). Their texts concurrently served lyrical, educational, and political purposes. The *zhyrau* guided the khans, motivated them to engage in battle, elucidated historical occurrences, and safeguarded ancestral heritage. Nogai-Qazaq *zhyrau* consistently referenced "Allah" or aspects of Islam in their *zhyrs*; for instance, Bukhar-Zhyrau in his *zhyr* "Tilek" (wish) articulated:

> *"Birinshitilektileniz (my first desire),*
>
> *Bir Allahqazhazbasqa (so that you do not die prematurely or return to your Creator early)."*[66]

The *zhyrau* poetry forms—*tolgau* (reflection, teaching) and *zhoktau* (lament for the deceased)—represent the zenith of Qazaq oral poetry, characterized by profound emotional and intellectual depth.[67]

Alongside *zhyrau* poetry, the Qazaqs had "heroic epics" that included mythical, ethnic, and historical components inherited from the eras of the Huns, Usuns, Kangly, Kipchaks, and other tribes. Early

mythical narratives— "Er-Tostik," "Edil," and "Zhaiyk"—exhibit archaic themes and shamanistic aspects. From the 13th to 14th centuries, gigantic heroic epics suchas "Koblandybatyr," "Er Sain," "Edigebatyr," and "Alpamys" emerged, celebrating the *batyr*(warriors, knights), who defended both clan and territory. The *batyr* serves as both a warrior and a charismatic leader, embodying ethical principles and spiritual ideals. The *zhyrau*, as the originators and custodians of the epic tradition, played a vital role in shaping historical self-awareness and national identity. The epic served not only entertaining but also educational, mobilizing, and spiritual purposes.[68]

In addition, in the Qazaq Steppe, alongside *zhyrau*, oral memory was the primary means of transmitting religious, ethical, and poetic knowledge, including the Holy Qur'ān. Quranic culture was deeply embedded in oral-poetic practices, with memory, recitation, and improvisation playing central roles. This oral tradition coexisted with written Islamic scholarship and was essential among nomadic populations with limited access to textual culture. [69] Islamic manuscript culture developed alongside oral transmission, closely tied to Sufi, scholastic, and didactic traditions.[70]

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, Arabographic history in Qazaqstan can be viewed in terms of "religion and language." The early and medieval stages of Arabic script reflect a natural process of cultural and linguistic development. The historical development of Arabic script in the Qazaq Steppe highlights its significant impact on the region's literary, religious, and intellectual traditions. Originally established as a holy writing system for conveying Islamic and Quranic knowledge, Arabic script progressively transformed into a multifaceted medium for documenting scientific, legal, lyrical, and historical narratives. Beginning in the 11th century, the writings of people such as Yusuf Balasaguni, Mahmud al-Kashgari, Suleiman Bakirgani, and Khoja Ahmed Yasawi exemplify the dual role of Arabic script in Turkic and Arabic literature.

These texts played a crucial role in the development of a unique Qazaq Islamic literary tradition, positioned at the convergence of Turkic vernacular culture and the Arab-Persian intellectual legacy. During the era of the Qazaq Khanate (16th–17th centuries), Arabic script became integral to the documentation of historical chronicles, including the writings of Qadyrgali Zhalayiri, Utemish-Haji, and Masud Kuhistani. At the same time, the Qazaq Khanate's legal system

developed an oral tradition based on Islamic principles, which led to the creation of a unique legal code that was improved over the years. Literature, reflecting both oral traditions such as *zhyrau* poetry and written works, flourished, shaping national identity and cultural continuity in Qazaq society. It integrated in Turkestan and the nearby steppe, sharing religious ideas, community history, and political advice in ways that were similar to but different from written Islamic culture.

According to the study, Arabic script development in the Qazaq Steppe developed organically during the Middle Ages, impacting access to national memory and identity by acting as a tool for modernization and cultural connectivity.

Notes and References

[1] The Qazaq Steppe is Desht-i Kipchak (Kypshak) (Persian: "Kipchak steppe") is the medieval name of this territory in Islamic and Persian sources, starting from the 11th century. The Kipchaks (Polovtsians) were Turkic nomads who inhabited these steppes in the 11th–13th centuries. In the Middle Ages, the Steppe served as an arena for clashes between nomadic tribes, trade (caravan) routes, and zones of influence of the Golden Horde. Later, it was the center of the formation of the Qazaq ethnic community and the Qazaq Khanate (c. 15th century).

[2]The Kipchak languages (also known as Kypchak, Qypchaq, or Northwestern Turkic) represent a major branch of the Turkic family, historically spoken across the Eurasian steppe, including the Kazakh (Qazaq) Steppe. See Gerard Clauson, An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish,(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

[3] *Zhyrau*is the oral traditional literature of Qazaqs and Noghais. See Ye. Tursunov, Estetikazhyrau (Almaty: Zhalyn), 1991.

[4]Tengrism (Tengriism, Tenriism, Tengerism, or Tengrianism) is an ancient monotheistic belief system that originated in the Eurasian steppes amongst Turkic, Hunnic and Mongolic tribes. Tengrism is centered around the acknowledgement of the sky god Tengri, while carrying elements of shamanism at the practical and social levels. Old Turkic: Kök Teŋri/Teŋiri ("Blue Heaven" or "Skygod" or "Sky-Blue God"); Middle Turkic; تآنغر. See Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004);Tengrists Society, "About," accessed September 18, 2025, https://tengristsociety.org/about/.

[5] A. T. Akamov, "Rol' Arabskogo Yazyka i Musul'manskoy Kul'tury v Stanovlenii i Razvitii Khudozhestvennykh Traditsiy Narodov Dagestana," *Gumanitarnyy Vektor* 4, no. 28 (2011).

[6] "T. V. Danilkin, "Istoriya i Kul'tura v Interpretatsii N. I. Konrada," *CyberLeninka*, accessed July 10, 2026, https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/istoriya-i-kultura-v-interpretatsii-n-i-konrada.

[7]Ibid.

[8] On the map of cultural development, Farab (Otyrar) is marked as the birthplace of a whole galaxy of outstanding scientists, poets, and thinkers designated as "al-Farabi," including Abu Ibrahim Iskhak, Isma'il al-Jawhari, Burhan ad-din Ahmad, Abu al-Qasim, Mahmud al-Husayn, Qavamad-din al-Itkani at-Turkistani, et alia. The city's library was considered akin to the famous ancient library of Alexandria. A number of well-known scholars also came from nearby cities, cinlduing Ahmad al-Isfizhabi and Abu'l-Hasan al-Isfizhabi, from modern Sairam, and Jamal ad-din Sa'id Turkistani and Sheikh Ahmet Turkistani from Turkistan. See Anar Rysmukhambetova, "The Russian Policy on Islam in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century: A Case of the Bukey Khanate," MA thesis, International Islamic University of Malaysia, 2018.

[9]Ibid; V.V.Bartold, Sochineniya, v. I,*(*Moscva: Izd-vo AN SSSR, 1963), 234-236; M.M, Khayrullayev, Abu Nasr al-Farabi (Moscva: Nauka, 1982), 41, A. KH. Kasymzhanov, Abu-Nasr al'-Farabi, (Moscva: Mysl', 1982), 7.

[10]"Nachaloarabskojpismennosti," Studentopedia."; Dimitri Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 7.

[11]Alparslan Açıkgenç, "Al-Fārābī and the Foundation of Islamic Philosophy," *Islamic Studies* 50, no. 3/4 (2011): 651–673.

[12]Ian Richard Netton, Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 45.

[13]Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 56.

[14]Richard *Walzer, Al-Farabi on the Perfect State (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 12–15.*

[15]Majid Fakhry, A History of Islamic Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 130–134.

[16]Al-Farabi, Enumeration of the Sciences*,* trans. and ed. by Muhsin Mahdi (Baghdad: UNESCO, 1968).

[17]F. E. Peters, Aristotle and the Arabs: The Aristotelian Tradition in Islam (New York: NYU Press, 1968)97–99.

[18]Açıkgenç, "Al-Fārābī and the Foundation."

[19]Makhmud Kashgari, Al-Divan lugat at-turk, trans. from Arabic, ed. A. Yefendiyeva (Almaty: Ana tili, 1997); Drevnetyurkskiy slovar (Dictionary), (Leningrad: Nauka, 1969).

[20]According to the map of Kashgari, they are located from Rum to the East: Begemen, Kyfgan, Oguz, Yemen, Bashgirt, Basmyl, Kai, Yabaku, Qatar, Khyrgyz; further along are Chigel, Tukhsi, Yagma, Ugrak, Charuk, Chomyl, Uighur, Khytai, Taigut, Tavgaty. See Kashgari, al'-Divan lugat at-turk.

[21] GerardClauson, An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Robert Dankoff, Mahmud al-Kashgari: Compendium of the Turkic Dialects (Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk), (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982–1985).

[22]"Nachaloarabskojpismennosti," Studentopedia.

[23]Ibid.

[24]The Karluk Turkic Khanate ruled Central Asia from the 9th to the early 13th century. The dynastic names of Karakhanids and IlekKhanids refer to royal titles, with Kara Khagan being the most important Turkic title up until the end

of the dynasty. See M. S. Asimov, History of Civilizations of Central Asia, vol. IV, The Age of Achievement: A.D. 750 to the End of the Fifteenth Century, part 1, The Historical, Social and Economic Setting (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1998).

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]QutadğuBilig (/kuːˈtɑːdguː ˈbılık/; Khaqani Turkic: [qʊtɑðˈɢʊbɪˈlɪg])

[28]Balasaguni's main goal was to instruct the Karakhanid rulers—still closely associated with the nomadic environment—in governing settled regions. Ibid; V. V. Bartold, Islam ikul'turamusul'manstva (Moscow: MGU, 1992).

[29]Yusuf Khass Hajib, Wisdom of Royal Glory (Kutadgu Bilig): A Turko-Islamic Mirror for Princes. Translated by Robert Dankoff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid;Bartold, Islam ikul'tura.

[32]Zh. Amrebaeva, "The World of Values of Yusuf Balasaguni in the Poem KutadguBilig," in History and Culture of Central Asia and Kazakhstan: Research of the Young, Materials of the Summer University on Political Science, History and Culture of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, August 4–24, 1997 (Almaty, 1998).

[33]Bartold, Islam ikul'tura.

[34]Devin DeWeese, "The Politics of Sacred Lineages in Nineteenth-Century Central Asia: Descent Groups Linked to Khwāja Aḥmad Yasawī in Shrine Documents and Genealogical Charters," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, no. 4 (1999): 507–530; Ahmed Yesevi, Divan-i Hikmet, critical edition with translation and commentary (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu, 1990).

[35]Devin DeWeese, Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tukles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition (University Park: Penn State Press, 1994);Bartold, Islam ikul'tura.

[36]Ibid.

[37]A tariqa (Arabic: طريقة, romanized: ṭarīqa) is a religious order of Sufism. The most widespread orders in Central Asia are Naqshbandiyya, Yassaviyya, and Kubrawiyya. SeeIbid.; Bartold, Islam ikul'tura.

[38]This means "Holy Sultan." Ibid.

[39]"Nachaloarabskojpismennosti," Studentopedia.

[40]Wisdom from Arabic

[41] DeWeese, Islamization and Native;K.R. Rakhimzhanova, Sufizmidukhovnyyetraditsii v Tsentral'noyAzii (Astana: YENU, 2016);T.Daniyalov, MisticheskoyenaslediyeKhodzhaAkhmedaYasavi (Turkestan: KazNU, 2007); Bartold, Islam ikul'tura.

[42]"Nachaloarabskojpismennosti," Studentopedia.

[43]ḤakimAtā was a Central Asian Sufi associated with the earliest phase of the Yassawi tradition. His full identity is not known for certain; he is usually named as a direct disciple of Aḥmad Yassawi. See DeWeese, Islamization and Native Religion.

[44]"Nachaloarabskojpismennosti," Studentopedia.

[45]Steppeor Qazaq "judges" (in Arabic, Kady (قَاضِي)). The *biys*were the main local judges in Qazaqstan during the 15th-18th centuries. Any freemen who had sufficient authority, knowledge of customary law and eloquence, legally

were able to be *biy*. In addition, the highest judicial authority possessed Khan, who had the right to review the decisions of the biys. See M.Tynyshpayev, History of Kazakh people (Almaty: Rauan, 1998), 114–115;S. Ibrayev, "Institute of Biys — the Source of the History of the Judicial Work in Kazakhstan," e-history.kz, accessed 02/02/2026, https://e-history.kz/en/history-of.

[46] The Siberian Khanate of the last Taibugid Prince Seidyak and Prince Seidyak's activity as that of one of the main opponents of the Siberian Khan Kuchum. SeeE. A. Ryabinina, D. N. Maslyuzhenko "Seidyak and Uraz-Muhammad in Siberian history" Golden Horde Review 11(2):380-396, June 2023 https://doi.org/10.22378/2313-6197.2023-11-2.380-396.

[47]Qasym Khan Turaly Qyzyqty Derekter," *Sputnik Kazakhstan*, November 29, 2023, accessed February 2, 2026, https://sputnik.kz/20231129/qasym-khan-turaly-qyzyqty-derekter-40650032.html.

[48]*Kazakhstan. National Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. Almaty: Qazaq Encyclopedia, 2004.

[49] The Turkic-Mongol tribes originated in northeastern Siberia and were named by the Uzbeks after the revered Muslim leader of the Golden Horde (Ulus of Jochi), Uzbek Khan, whose name translates from Qazaq as "ruler of oneself" (reigned 1312–41). At the age of 17, Abu'l-Khayr, a descendant of Genghis Khan, ascended to the Khanate of the Uzbek Confederation in Siberia in 1428. After the self-declared Qazaq Khanate was created due to the split between Sultans Kerei, Janibek (the descendants of the Genghisids – Uruskhan), and Abu'l-Khayr, a new political and legal situation emerged that included some features of the Jochi and Chagatai states (Ulus).T. See Akimbekov, Kazakhimezhdurevolyutsiyey. ;"The Early Uzbeks," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 02/02/2026, https://www.britannica.com/place/Uzbekistan/The-early-Uzbeks#ref599067.

[50]"Nachaloarabskojpismennosti," Studentopedia.

[51]DeWeese, Islamization and Native Religion.

[52]V. P. Yudin, *Izbrannye Proizvedeniya. Istoriya Kazakhstana v Arabskikh i Persidskikh Istochnikakh [Selected Works: History of Kazakhstan in Arabic and Persian Sources] (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2001).*

[53] B. A. *Akhmedov, Gosudarstvo Kochevykh Uzbekov* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965).

[54]Ruzbikhan Isfakhani, "Pravila Povedeniya Gosudarei (Suluk al-Muluk)," translated by V. P. Yudin, in *Kazakhstan v Epokhu Srednevekov'ya* (Alma-Ata: Nauka, 1988), 152–170.

[55]Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat, *The Tarikh-i-Rashidi: A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia*, translated and edited by N. Elias and E. Denison Ross (London: Curzon Press, 1895; repr., London: Curzon Press, 1973).

[56]"Qasym Khan turalyqyzyqtyderekter," Sputnik Kazakhstan.

[57] Kazakhstan: Nacionalnayaentsiklopediyavol. I (Almaty: Qazaq Encyclopedia, 2003).

[58] Kazakhstan: Nacionalnayaentsiklopediya, vol. III (Almaty: Qazaq Encyclopedia, 2004).

[59] The Chagatai language evolved from the Eastern Kipchak and Karluk dialects, using words and writing styles from Arabic and Persian. The support

of culture at Timur's court and that of his children and grandchildren, particularly Ulugbek and Babur, played a crucial role in its growth. Alisher Navoi, one of the most famous writers in Chagatai, made the language (called "Turki") into a standard for writing. The language had an effect on Qazaq: it changed the language's vocabulary, especially religious and moral words used in works by Abai, Shakarim, and others. See Csató, Éva Ágnes and Lars Johanson, edited by Lars Johanson and Éva Ágnes Csató (London: Routledge, 1998), 81–120.

[60]E. G. Browne, *Persidskaya Literatura*, vol. 4 (St. Petersburg, 1915).

[61]Ye. Tursunov, *Estetika Zhyrau* (Almaty: Zhalyn, 1991).

[62]Priscus writes, "*As evening drew near, the barbarians lit torches. Two barbarians stood in front of Attila and sang songs in which they praised his victories and the valor he had shown in battle. The other barbarians looked at them; some were amused by the singing, others were inflamed, recalling the battles, and those who were weak in body from old age but calm in spirit shed tears*." It is possible that these two "barbarians" were Zhyrau. Priscus of Panium. *Fragments. About the embassy to Attila*. See Priscus, "The Roman Embassy to Attila: An Excerpt from the Works of Priscus, a Writer of the 5th Century" / [Translated by: S. Destunis]. - [Saint Petersburg:[press],1842], 38,Russian State Library: https://viewer.rsl.ru/ru/rsl01003560520?page=19&rotate=0&theme=whiteht tps://search.rsl.ru/ru

[63]Qaghanof the Second Turkic Khaganate. Reign during February 717 – 25 November 734. See GumilevL.N.
Ancient Turks(Moscow: Nauka, 1967).

[64]A.Zhirenchin, Kazakhskayaliteratura XV–XVIII vv. (Alma-Ata: [press], 1965).

[65]Charles J. Halperin, Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 64–69.Beatrice Forbes Manz, The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 146–150.DeWeese, Islamization and Native Religion,312–315.

[66] Zhirenchin. Kazakhskayaliteratura XV–XVIII.; Z.Akhmetov, Poetikakazakhskoyustnoyliteratury (Almaty: Rauan, 1995).

[67] Zhirenchin, Kazakhskayaliteratura XV–XVIII.;S.Kuanyshev, Mifologiyakazakhskogoeposa (Almaty: Dayk-Press, 2004).

[68]Ibid.

[69]Allen J. Frank, "Muslim Education in the Russian Empire: A Historical Perspective," in Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States, ed. Michael Kemper and Stéphane A. Dudoignon (London: Routledge, 2010), 23–25.

[70] Devin DeWeese, "Hagiographical Writing and the Transmission of Knowledge in Muslim Central Asia," in The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo, ed. Jonathan Berkey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 106–110.