

QARAKHANID SOCIAL HISTORY – Innovation

Overview

As peoples who had only recently converted to Islam and were in the process of assimilating not only a new religion, but also the cultural legacy of the Islamic world at a time when the New Persian language was beginning to supplant Arabic as the language of administration and literature in the eastern regions, the Qarakhanids, Oghuz and Seljuqs were perhaps not yet in the best position to make their contributions to this culture. Nevertheless, the Qarakhanids and the Seljuqs of Rum did make their own unique contributions to Islamic civilization and culture.

The most notable innovation of the Qarakhanids was their attempt to create a Muslim literature in the Qarakhanid Turkic language that could take its place next to the existing corpus of Arabic literature and the rapidly growing number of works composed in Persian. This effort to create a Turkic Muslim literature may have been motivated not only by the desire to make the language of the recently converted Qarakhanids as prestigious as Arabic and Persian, but also to compete with the large number of mostly Buddhist and Manichaean works that had been written in the closely related Uighur Turkic language. What ever the reason, the two surviving works written in Qarakhanid, Mahmud al-Kashgari'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, attest to the quality of literature that could have been created had this effort continued. Almost four centuries would pass before the composition of literary works in a Turkic language would reappear under the Ottomans and the Timurids.

Readings

Davidovich, E.A. "The Karakhanids", 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 were the Ottomans and Timurids able to make Ottoman and Chaghatay Turkish literary languages that were into the 20th century, while the Qarakhanid attempt to create a Turkic literature in their Turkic language was short-lived?