

Werk

Titel: The rise of Runiform Turkic as the first Turkic vernacula literary language

Autor: Schamiloglu, Uli

Ort: Wiesbaden

Jahr: 2017

PURL: https://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?666048797_0021 | LOG_0023

Kontakt/Contact

[Digizeitschriften e.V.](#)
SUB Göttingen
Platz der Göttinger Sieben 1
37073 Göttingen

✉ info@digizeitschriften.de

The rise of Runiform Turkic as the first Turkic vernacular literary language

Uli Schamiloglu

Schamiloglu, Uli 2017. The rise of Runiform Turkic as the first Turkic vernacular literary language. *Turkic Languages* 21, 161–177.

This paper draws upon the earlier work of the author on the Black Death as the main factor leading to the sudden demise of Syriac Turkic, Volga Bolgharian, and the language of the Golden Horde in the 14th century C.E. to argue that the Plague in the Time of Justinian (6th–8th centuries C.E.) was the main factor leading to the decline in the use of Soghdian among the Türk, the rise of Runiform Turkic as a vernacular-based literary language to take its place, and Runiform Turkic's subsequent demise.

Key words: Bubonic plague, Türk Empire, Soghdian, Runiform Turkic, Old Turkic

Uli Schamiloglu, Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic, 818 Van Hise Hall, University of Wisconsin, 1220 Linden Drive, Madison WI 53706 USA. Department of Kazakh Language and Turkic Studies, Nazarbayev University, Kabanbay Batyr Avenue, 53, Astana, Kazakhstan 010000. E-mail: uschamil@wisc.edu; uli.schamiloglu@nu.edu.kz

Introduction

The study of the history of the Turkic languages faces a rather complex set of issues and obstacles.¹ Ideally one should consider approaching this topic strictly as a question of the historical development of specific linguistic features. As Lars Johanson has noted in his standard treatment of the history of Turkic, however:

It is impossible to find linguistically meaningful criteria for a periodization of the development of the Turkic group as a whole... The periodization of the Turkic literary idioms which have emerged in different cultural centers is rather controversial. The reason is that it mostly depends not only on linguistic criteria, but also on extralinguistic—political and cultural—ones (Johanson 1998: 84).

In his classification of the historical periods of Turkic Johanson first identifies an *Older Period*, with a so-called “Old Turkic” consisting of 1. East Old Turkic proper, 2. Old Uyghur, and 3. Karakhanid. Following this, he identifies a controversial *Middle Period* divided into “East Middle Turkic”, consisting of 1. Khorezmian Turkic

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Workshop on “Turkic Linguistics: The State of the Art. On the occasion of Lars Johanson’s 80th Birthday”, Institut für Slavistik, Turkologie und zirkumbaltische Studien, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Mainz, Germany, March 19, 2016).

and 2. Early Chaghatay Turkic, and “West Middle Turkic” consisting of 1. Kipchak Turkic and 2. Oghuz Turkic. This is followed by the *Pre-modern Period* and the *Modern Period* (Johanson 1998: 85–87). Many other Turkologists have also proposed various periodizations, sometimes featuring numerous periods and sub-periods for the history of recorded Turkic languages and their antecedents (see, e.g. Róna-Tas 1982).

Working backwards chronologically, I would say that in the case of the modern period, it is clear that the state plays a role in shaping literary languages, with the case of modern Turkish serving as a classic and well-studied example (Lewis 1999); to this one should certainly add all the Turkic literary languages of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as well as the present-day People’s Republic of China. For just one aspect of this for the Turkic languages of the former U.S.S.R., see Baldauf (1993). But there were major transformations in literary languages in the pre-modern period, too. In some of my work I have attempted to demonstrate that we must consider extra-linguistic factors in the study of the history of the Turkic languages, especially the sudden end of writing systems for specific historical Turkic written languages in the 14th century.² As some of my readers may know, I attribute these major instances of the “death” of an epigraphical or literary language in the pre-modern period to outbreaks of epidemic disease in the Old World, in particular of bubonic plague (Schamiloglu 1993, 2016a). The question of the relationship between literary languages and sudden large-scale outbreaks of epidemic disease (or “pandemics”) is not, however, a question which has been central to the classic narrative in Turcology with regards to the history of the development of the Turkic literary languages. Nonetheless, I am now convinced that we cannot offer a periodization of the history of the written Turkic languages without it.

In this paper I would like to draw upon this same framework to offer a brief outline of the rise in an earlier period of Runiform Turkic (or Orkhon Turkic)—which falls under Johanson’s East “Old Turkic proper”—as the first Turkic vernacular-based literary language.

Bubonic plague and its impact on languages

In order to present my argument, I should first begin with a brief introduction to the role of bubonic plague in recorded human history. This disease, which has resulted in the sudden death of large segments of societies in certain periods, is caused by the bacillus *Yersinia pestis*. See most recently the essays in Green (2014). Recent research is also focusing on the relationship between variations in climate and outbreaks of disease (Campbell 2016). The bacillus spreads from rodents (and other animals, too) to humans via fleas and infects the lymph nodes (or buboes, hence the name), or else it can be spread as droplets through the air, which leads to pneumonic plague. Before the discovery of penicillin bubonic plague was associated with a very

2 See the references in the final concluding section at the end of this paper.

high rate of mortality. As a result of this high rate of mortality we see sharp short-term declines in local populations as well as longer-term demographic decline over decades and even centuries, abandonment of some towns and settlements, social disruption, inability to bury the dead properly, labor shortages, inflation, technological regression, increased religiosity, morbidity, and many other phenomena, including the decline in non-vernacular languages which have been acquired through a religious education, as well as many other phenomena which I cannot describe here. One additional factor to consider is that epidemics affect sedentary populations—especially densely-inhabited urban centers—much more readily than nomadic populations.

However much I am fascinated endlessly by the political, social, economic, and cultural consequences of the “Black Death” of the 14th–16th centuries and later (see most recently Schamiloglu 2017), in this paper I would like to focus on the philological and/or linguistic impact of outbreaks of this disease. As the Black Death has been studied in such great detail for Western Europe, it should be a prime region for considering the impact of the Black Death on literary languages.

As is well known, Latin was the dominant literary language in Europe in the medieval period. It would not be accurate to state that the Black Death caused the decline of classical literary languages in medieval Western Europe, because the decline of Latin and the beginnings of Romance vernacular languages far predate the 14th century;³ there are also counter-examples such as the case of Hungarian. What is striking, however, is how many significant figures in the rise of English vernacular literature lived in the second half of the 14th century, the half century following the initial arrival of the Black Death. This period includes Geoffrey Chaucer (circa 1343–1400), the author of the *Canterbury Tales*, who is widely considered the father of English literature. Other major figures in English literature in this period include the poet John Gower (circa 1330–1408) and William Langland (circa 1332–circa 1386), author of *Piers Plowman* (Horobin 2010: 182).

The situation is far different for the vernacular literatures which are descended from Latin. Even so there is a different, equally illustrative example to be found in the history of Italian literature. Of the three major figures of this era, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) lived and died before the Black Death and Petrarch (1304–1374) began his career before the arrival of the Black Death. The third major founding figure of Italian literature in this period, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), wrote his *Decameron* in 1350–1353. What is so interesting about the *Decameron*, a major work in the canon of Italian literature, is that it is devoted to the stories told by a group of individuals who have fled the plague in Florence, which establishes a clear link between plague and Italian vernacular literature (Highet 1949: 181–195). Petrarch also influenced Chaucer, see Highet (1949: 93–103).

3 A bibliographic treatment of the topic is available in Tremblay (1989). For a different perspective on the rise of vernacular languages in Europe and Asia, see Cohen (2011).

I would argue that it is not a coincidence that one can see the second half of the 14th century as an important period in the development of vernacular literatures in medieval Europe; I have only considered two examples. The death of large numbers of individuals in densely populated urban centers as well as in monasteries would have resulted in the decimation of the educated religious class who would have been the bearers of Latin as a literary tradition. Although the Black Death did not initiate the decline of Latin, it surely must have speeded up the rise of new vernacular-based literatures. As I have argued elsewhere, I see a similar relationship between the Black Death and medieval Turkic literary languages in this period. If anything, the relationship between plague and the fate of literary languages is much clearer for medieval Turkic languages. In my view, there is a close correlation between the documented waves of plague in the mid-14th century and the sudden spike in the number of Syriac Turkic and Volga Bolgharian funerary inscriptions—followed by a near or total absence of further funerary inscriptions. It also coincides with the end of the literary language of the Golden Horde (Schamiloglu 1993, 2016a).

Yet the Black Death is only the second of three major outbreaks of bubonic plague in recorded human history caused by the bacillus *Yersinia pestis*. The third is “modern plague”, which broke out in the late 19th century (Little 2011).⁴ There was also the first recorded outbreak of bubonic plague, to which I will turn my attention now.

Overview of the plague in the time of Justinian

The first historically-recorded outbreak of bubonic plague, and the subject of a contribution of mine to the recent Festschrift for Professor Peter B. Golden, is the “Plague in the Time of Justinian” (Schamiloglu 2016b). This original outbreak of bubonic plague, which lasted from the mid-6th to the mid-8th century C.E., is often considered to have been the most severe of the three major outbreaks of bubonic plague in recorded human history. In the present paper, I would like to try to make the case that the Plague in the Time of Justinian should be seen as an important factor in the rise of Runiform Turkic as the first Turkic vernacular-based literary language.

As I argued in that paper, we now know based on genetic analysis that the origin of the outbreak of the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* in the 6th century is traced back to the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau, the intersection of the Silk Road and the Horse-Tea Road.⁵ According to Procopius (Book I, xxii–xxiii and xxiv: 8, 12), the outbreak began in 541 C.E. in Pelusium in Egypt, arriving from Ethiopia, but how it got there we do

- 4 For those of my readers who are wondering, I have not discerned any philological or linguistic impact of the modern outbreak of bubonic plague, though it would be useful for Turcologists to be aware that there are many contemporary publications in Tatar, Kazakh, and other languages reporting outbreaks of the disease and how to treat it.
- 5 I refer the reader to the discussion and citations in that article rather than repeating them here.

not know. One possibility is that it spread via the Indian Ocean region to the Red Sea, but how? We are not sure, but we can be certain that it did not arrive via the route Lake *İsīk-köl*, Central Asia, the Crimea, and Constantinople to Alexandria and Sicily. In other words, it must have followed a path which was very different from the path which the Black Death followed in the mid-14th century.

The plague in the time of Justinian and the Türk Empire

The “Plague in the Time of Justinian” coincides with the era of the Türk Empire. The First Türk Empire, which was established in 552 C.E., expanded very quickly across Central Asia to as far as the Black Sea region, but it collapsed suddenly in 581.⁶ As a result of civil war in the 580s, the First Türk Empire split into an eastern half and a western half. The Eastern Türk Kaghanate managed to survive until it was absorbed by T’ang China in 630, and the Western Türk Kaghanate was defeated by T’ang China in 657. It is out of the chaos in the west that the Khazar and Bolghar states emerge. The Second Türk Empire emerged with the revolt of A-ših-na *Çutluğ* (Elteriš Kaghan) and his brother *Çapayan* Kaghan against T’ang China in 679. The inscriptions dedicated to *Kül Tëgin* (who died in 731 due to an illness), *Bilgä* Kaghan (683/684–734, who died by poisoning), and the other Runiform Turkic inscriptions relate events which took place in the early 8th century. The Second Türk Empire was finally replaced by the Uyghur Kaghanate in 744.

The question of what relationship the Plague in the Time of Justinian might have had with respect to the population of the Türk Empire is, in my view, critical to understanding the history of the rise and fall of both the First and Second Türk Empires. As I have argued, if we look for direct and especially indirect evidence of the impact of the Plague in the Time of Justinian on the ancient Türk, we can actually find both kinds of evidence (Schamiloglu 2016b). At the same time, the reluctance of Sinologists to accept that references to outbreaks of disease in this period could have been bubonic plague has been an obstacle to progress in the historiography on this period.

Clearly the Türk Empire was established in a region approximately 2000–3000 km away from Tibet, not immediately next door, but still much closer than Ethiopia. The fact that the Plague in the Time of Justinian arrives in Egypt in 541 suggests that it could have emerged in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau as late as 541, but more likely prior to that year. I have suggested that the sudden departure of the Avars for Eastern Europe after their defeat by the Türk in 552 could be related to the fact that Eastern Europe was already suffering from depopulation by that time; the depopulation of Eastern Europe by this time is a point which is accepted by historians of this pandemic. It might also be possible that the departure of the Avars could have some

6 For standard treatments of the history of the Türk Empire, see Sinor (1990), Golden (1992: 12–141); and Beckwith (2011: 112–118). See most recently the encyclopedic work by Ercilasun (2016).

relationship to the outbreak of disease in that region in the east, but I am not certain about that.

According to Theophanes, in 588–589 the Türk claim that there had been a plague many years earlier in “Turkey” (Theophanes 1997: 389). Theophylactus Simocatta (d. ca. 630–640) also informs us in his *History* that some Türks who had fallen prisoner to Chosroes were marked on the forehead by their mothers with the sign of the cross. This was upon the advice of Christians in order to escape the effects of a strong plague (Theophylactus Simocatta 1985: 154–155, n. 739). On the other hand, the same author also notes in connection with the Western Türk embassy to the Emperor Maurice (598) that the Türk are said to boast that they had never seen the occurrence of contagious disease since the earliest times (Theophylactus Simocatta 1985: 188).

According to Twitchett, the earliest mention of bubonic plague in a Chinese encyclopedia is from 610 (Twitchett 1979: 35–69, especially 42ff.) Yet he considers it only “conjecture” that the epidemics described in the sources for the period 636–655, 682, 707, and 762 might have been caused by bubonic plague. As I have argued elsewhere, the fact that this pandemic of bubonic plague originated in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau suggests that we should have great confidence in identifying bubonic plague as the cause of most and more likely all of these major outbreaks of disease. Let us recall that Kül Tëgin died in 731 of an illness, too.⁷

The languages in the Türk Empire before the time of plague

It is well known that Soghdian, an Iranian language, served as a *lingua franca* in early medieval Central Asia.⁸ We may consider the Bugut inscription, an inscription included in a Türk Kaghan’s burial complex, the most important piece of evidence for this. This inscription, which was written in Soghdian but includes Turkic names, titles, and other words, is believed to date from the last quarter of the 6th century. It may be considered direct or indirect evidence that the Türk used Soghdian as a written language in this period, or at least that Soghdian was used as a *lingua franca* among them (Kljaštornyj & Livšits 1971, 1972). As noted by Erdal, Turkic names are also found in Bactrian manuscripts from Afghanistan (Sims-Williams 2000, Erdal 2004). These facts support the notion that there was a period of time when the Türk (or other Turkic-speaking peoples) did not yet write in their own language. De la Vaissière considers that the Soghdian alphabet was used to write Turkic texts throughout the history of the Türk and Uyghur Empires. In an aside which can only be greeted with amusement by Turcologists, however, he adds that this was except for “a rather brief period of national xenophobic reaction within the elites” in the

7 Whether one can ever find any evidence for what illness or disease he might have died from, I do not know. Perhaps nobody has thought it worthy of investigation until now.

8 On the Soghdians see de la Vaissière (2005). For an overview of the Soghdian language, see Yoshida (2016).

early 8th century during which period they used the “runic” alphabet instead of the Soghdian alphabet (de la Vaissière 2005: 202).

When and why did the runiform alphabet begin to be used? In the words of Erdal, the “earliest readable, understandable and datable Turkic texts are the official inscriptions of the second Turk kaghanate, the Orkhon inscriptions, the first of which appears to have been from slightly before 720 A.D.” (Erdal 2004: 4). This is part of a larger corpus of about 200 inscriptions, which Erdal presumes date from the 7th–10th centuries (Erdal 2004: 6–7). These inscriptions are found mostly in present-day Mongolia (the territory covered by the Second Türk Empire and the Uyghur Kaghanate which succeeded it) and in the upper Yenisey basin.

The origins of the runiform alphabet remain shrouded in a veil of mystery.⁹ It is clear that this alphabet shares many of the characteristic features of an alphabet going back ultimately to the Aramaic alphabet, though with additional letters whose origins are not entirely clear. What is also not clear is why the élite of the Second Türk Empire and then the Uyghur Kaghanate would suddenly adopt the runiform alphabet. Also not clear is why, after a period of use as the official language of the Second Türk Empire and then the Uyghur Kaghanate, the official use of this alphabet suddenly ceases.

Of course, we cannot be sure of the dates of the other inscriptions in runiform alphabet, and certainly the interpretation of many of them remains controversial, too. A separate issue is the fact that the same alphabet has also been used to write a well-known book of divination, the *İrk bitig* (9th–10th centuries?) and other purposes. As has been noted, however, this work might have been a later copy from an original in Uyghur alphabet (Tekin 1993: 6). Nevertheless, this begs the question of why the runiform alphabet was used to copy this work and to write the other (later?) texts in Turfan and neighboring regions.

The languages in the Türk Empire during the time of plague

I would like to turn next to the fate of Soghdian, which was once used as a *lingua franca* in the region inhabited by the ancient Türk. I would like to propose that the decline of the Soghdian language among the Türk and the sudden rise of Runiform Turkic can be explained through a complex set of phenomena which are consequences of the Plague in the Time of Justinian. I draw upon my earlier and continuing research on the impact of the Black Death for the model on which to base this conclusion. As we will see later, the history of Runiform Turkic fits a pattern which, significantly, is replicated in a number of identical ways in the 14th century.

It is clear from the sources for medieval Europe and the Middle East that the Plague in the Time of Justinian brought massive demographic decline upon those regions it struck. I am not aware of direct evidence for the demographic history of

9 See the discussion and references in Erdal (2004: 28–29 and 38ff.). For a detailed background discussion of the runiform alphabet tradition in Eurasia, see Kyzlasov (1994), though the author’s approach is very different from the one offered here.

Mongolia and the eastern steppe region in this period, but we can look for parallel examples in the region. Mariko Namba Walter, to cite one example, writes about the decline of Soghdian colonies in Dunhuang by the mid-8th century and their disappearance by the end of the 9th century “due to political and economic instability” (Walter 2006: 21). Remarkably there are census figures for the Dunhuang district (*chün*)—which is of course some distance away from Mongolia—showing that the number of households in that district declined by over 45 percent from 609 C.E. to 740 C.E. (Giles 1915):

Year	2 C.E.	140 C.E.	280 C.E.	609 C.E.	740 C.E.
Households	11,200	7,748	6,300	7,779	4,265
Persons	38,335	29,170	N/A	N/A	16,250

I am well aware that such population figures can be quite controversial and are subject to various interpretations.¹⁰ On the other hand, traditional scholarship usually does not even consider the history of epidemic disease as a factor in discussions of the population history of Inner Asia.¹¹

Assuming that this method and the comparison to Dunhuang are valid—I think this is a reasonable assumption but there might be those who disagree—we can posit a parallel demographic decline in the Second Türk Empire, too, since the Plague in the Time of Justinian was, as far as we know, a universal phenomenon in the Old World. This would suggest that, in all likelihood, a large number of the people knowing Soghdian language (who probably were not a large percentage of the population) and/or a large number of the people who knew the Soghdian alphabet and were able to carve an inscription in Soghdian would have died. (There could be other possible economic factors which I will not consider here, see Schamiloglu 2016c.) I am not suggesting that Soghdian died out completely; after all, it survived in Central Asia and would serve as the basis for the rise of a New Persian literary language, nor did the use of Soghdian by Turkic speakers end completely.¹² But I am suggesting that the number of speakers of Soghdian present among the Türk in the seat of the Second Türk Empire must have declined suddenly to a critically low mass such that Soghdian (especially Soghdian as a second language acquired by non-natives as a learned literary language) temporarily ceased to be used in the Second Türk Empire by ca. 720 C.E.

10 See, for instance, the discussion in Twitchett (1979: 35ff).

11 For a recent example, see Étienne de la Vaissière (2017).

12 For late “Turko-Soghdian” letters, see Yoshida (2017).

What we see next is the creation of a series of inscriptions in what we call the “runiform” alphabet from the Second Türk Empire.¹³ The most important of these major inscriptions have been well known to Turcologists for well over a century, including the Kül Tëgin inscription, the Bilgä Kaghan inscription, the Tonyuquq inscription, and the Ongin inscription, to which we should add the Šine-Usu and Küli Čor inscriptions from the Uyghur Kaghanate. Additional inscriptions such as the Terh inscription have been found in the 20th century (Kljaštornyj 1982). Beyond this corpus of major monuments in the Runiform Turkic language—to which new inscriptions are being added as a result of continuing archeological excavations—there is, of course, the large number of undated and/or difficult to read inscriptions as well as articles from daily life, coins, etc. which also bear texts in the runiform alphabet.¹⁴

Runiform Turkic as a vernacular language

Next I would like to make the case that Runiform Turkic was a written version of a living language in the 8th century. More precisely, I think it was the language of the Turkic oral literature of that period. In other words, it was a very specific kind of language and a very special kind of language. It was not a primitive or a simple language, it was a highly developed language of oral literature, similar in most respects to the language(s) of Turkic epics of the 19th–20th centuries.

Alessio Bombaci’s classic introduction to the second volume of *Philologiae Turcicae Fundamenta* offers a wonderful, succinct overview of the language of the Runiform Turkic inscriptions (Bombaci 1965: xi–lxxi, especially ii–iv). He describes a series of literary features and devices used in the language of these inscriptions whose main points I would like to offer in an abbreviated summary here. These include:

The use of historical narration which underlines the difficulty of the action, as in “snow as high ‘as a lance’”.

The drawing of attention to the figure of the hero, including the horse of the hero (a point to which I will return below), the wounds received, and the enemies killed.

The use of concrete descriptions to express abstract concepts, as in *erür barur* ‘who comes and goes’ to represent the concept of “liberty”, or *adaq kamšattı* ‘shook their feet’ to express “rebellion”.

The use of similes, as in *otča bortča keldi* ‘he arrived like fire and storm’.

13 For an overview see Tekin (1968: 9ff.), and the works cited in Erdal (2004: 6–10). Erdal takes a more expansive definition of Old Turkic as the basis for his work. See also most recently Ercilasun (2016).

14 A useful catalog of such texts is to be found at the “Türk Bitig” website run in English, Kazakh, and Russian by the Language Committee of the Ministry of Culture and Information of Republic of Kazakhstan: <http://bitig.org/>. Accessed: 10 April 2017.

The use of synonymic tautologies with both nouns, as in *iş/küç* ‘work’, and verbs, as in *öl-/yit-* ‘to perish’.

Parallelism with repetition of a smaller or larger part of the sentence with the variation of only a few words:

Synonymic parallelism: *ädgüti ešid, katırdı tıñla* ‘listen well!’.

Antithetic parallelism: *üzä kök täñri, asra yayız yer* ‘above the blue sky, below the gray earth’.

Enumerative parallelism: *inisini içisintäg kılınmaduğ erinç/oylı kañintäg kılınmaduğ erinç* ‘the younger brothers had not been created like the older brothers, the sons had not been created like the fathers’.

Parallelism with variation: *sabı sücüg/ayısı yımşaq ermiş* ‘his words were sweet, his presents were nice’.

One can add many other literary points such as alliteration, even the 4 + 3 meter which continues to be well known in later periods.

Let me return to the image of the horse. In the Kül Tegin inscription we see the following:

(E32) ...When he [i.e., Prince Kül] was twenty-one years old, we fought against (the army of) General Čača. First he (mounted) Tadiğ Čor’s gray horse (and attacked. There that horse) (E33) was killed. Secondly, he mounted Išbara Yamtar’s gray horse and attacked. That horse, (too), was killed there. Thirdly, he mounted Yégän Silig Bég’s dressed bay horse and attacked. That horse, (too), was killed there. They hit (him) with more than one hundred arrows on his armor and caftan; (but he did not let the enemy hit him) even once on his face or head. (Tekin 1968: 268–270)¹⁵

The same inscription later includes multiple references to Kül Tegin’s horse, including:

(E35) ...Prince Kül mounted Bayırku’s (white stallion) (E36) and attacked...

(E37) ...Prince Kül mounted the white-headed horse and attacked. This white-headed gray (horse)...

(E40) ...He [i.e., Prince Kül] fought a great battle, we were told. He mounted the white horse of Alp Šalči and attacked. There he killed and subjugated the common Türgis people. ...

I would ask whether the horses mounted by Prince Kül Tegin are really any different from Rustam’s great horse Rakhsh in Firdawsī’s *Shāhnāme*, or Kōkötöy Khan’s

15 I am simply citing Tekin’s English translation in order not to distract the reader, but I have adopted the same transcription for names as elsewhere in this paper.

famous steed Maniker in the *Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan* from the *Manas* cycle. They are all widespread literary motifs not limited just to Central Asian oral literatures. The conclusion—which I am certainly not the first to reach—is that we must consider the language of the Runiform Turkic inscriptions to be a highly-developed language of oral literature.

Thus, I would argue that Runiform Turkic is derived from the language used for oral poetry, and as such it was probably more or less identical with the language of the oral literature of the Türk. Yet, at the same time, the great issue which remains unsolved in my mind is the question of whether the language of the Runiform Turkic inscriptions represented just one single specific living dialect or not.¹⁶ Is it possible that it represented a literary dialect of oral literature rather than representing features specific to exclusively one dialect of Turkic?

For exploring this idea further, I would suggest a comparison of the language of oral literature among the Turkic speakers of this period with the Arabic Jāhiliya poetry of the pre-Islamic period, which emerged out of nowhere as a highly-developed language of oral poetry. As Loya (1974) writes regarding this period:

These were a host of poets erupting all over northern Arabia, from Syria to Yemen and from the fringes of Iraq to the borders of Egypt, masterfully reciting highly developed *qasīdas* (odes) in one and the same language, betraying little of the dialects of their region. Above all, their poetry, vigorous and vivid as it was in general, was cast in the same, steel structure of a set of complex metrical schemes.

The authors writing for the New Edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* state flatly regarding the Arabic language of Jāhiliya poetry:

It is beyond doubt, however, that in the late 6th cent. A.D. it was a purely literary dialect, distinct from all spoken idioms and super-tribal. It is today often referred to as the “poetical *koinē*”. (Rabin et al. 1960–2007)

I suspect the same argument can be made for the language of pre-modern Turkic epic poetry. In other words, the language of pre-modern Turkic epic poetry may have actually been an inter-dialect language of oral literature, at least in the central regions where the specific dialects were mutually intelligible. Whether this was the case for the Runiform Turkic language is a matter worthy of further consideration. (It would also be a relevant issue to consider in the debate over the branch of the Turkic languages to which the language of the Runiform Turkic inscriptions belonged.)

The further back we go in time, the more plausible this could be, but since the oldest transcription of Turkic epic poetry by Chokan Valikhanov is from the mid-

16 For a discussion of this issue see Erdal (2004: 14), and most recently Aydin (2016).

19th century,¹⁷ we will probably never have the data we need to study this question in depth. Of course, in the 20th century nation-states have established formal literary languages (emphasizing and reinforcing, of course, the differences between modern dialects) in which epic poetry is now sung.

The end of Runiform Turkic

While we cannot, of course, say that Runiform Turkic ceased to exist completely, we can at least observe that Runiform Turkic was no longer used as an official language following a brief career of perhaps just a few decades in the Second Türk Empire and the Uyghur Kaghanate. The disruption caused by the Plague in the Time of Justinian led not only to the political disarray which allowed the Uyghur Kaghanate to replace the Second Türk Empire, but to cultural and technological regression as well, just as it would in the 14th century. This interpretation is consistent with the notion that there were outbreaks of plague in the 8th century. Whether the death of Kül Tëgin in 731 is due to plague, we do not know, but the use of the runiform alphabet for writing Turkic seems to have suffered a setback by the second half of the 8th century. If it was an acquired skill shared only by a relatively small number of educated individuals, this specialized knowledge was at risk in the event of a sudden outbreak of epidemic disease. Is it possible to argue that so large a percentage of the community of speakers of the spoken or literary dialect of Runiform Turkic died that it led to the demise of the community speaking this language? I am not sure, but if so, this would also have a bearing on the discussion of to which branch of the modern Turkic languages Runiform Turkic was closest.

After the 8th century Runiform Turkic seems not to have served an official function, but the fact that it continued at all (or had perhaps even a resurgence?) may be attributed to the demographic and therefore cultural and technological rebound following the end of the waves of plague in the second half of the 8th century.

After Runiform Turkic

After the sudden cessation in the use of Runiform Turkic, we once again see a return of the Soghdian script as well as its new incarnation as the Uyghur script plus an assortment of other related and unrelated scripts (Manichaean, Tibetan, Brahmi, etc.) to write Turkic.¹⁸ This time, however, these scripts are used to write multiple dialects of Old Turkic (Erdal 2004: 7–8 and elsewhere). I cannot go into this topic in great detail, since it would require a great amount of additional research beyond the scope of this paper. I would say, however, that the rise of Old Turkic in various derivatives of Aramaic and other alphabets, even the Tibetan alphabet, needs to be contextualized. First of all, in the 9th–10 century we see the result of the great rise in religiosity associated with the onslaught of waves of plague (and perhaps gratitude

17 This has been published by Hatto (1977).

18 See the treatment of this topic in Clauson (1962), and Róna-Tas (1991).

at the end of waves of plague after 762?); this results in the beginning of a large-scale translation of canonical religious texts. We also see multiple alphabets being used, perhaps suggesting the end of the hegemony of one tradition or another, or perhaps multiple attempts to create new traditions, which probably also reflect different religious traditions. Finally, this comes at a time of rebounding population, which helps to improve economic and therefore cultural conditions for investing in religious education (and therefore language education) and knowledge production. Eventually we see the development of a more standardized language.¹⁹

While some of these texts probably use a stilted language, perhaps the result of mechanical translation from one or more canonical languages into a new variety of canonical Turkic for one or another religious tradition, others seem to be refreshingly modern. I am not sure that I would consider the language of the Runiform Turkic inscriptions to be the same dialect as the language of some works in Old Uyghur. In particular, when I consider the language of the “Tale of the Good Prince and the Bad Prince” in Old Uyghur (Hamilton 1971), I think of its language as representing the spoken vernacular.²⁰ I am struck by how close the language is to, say, modern Uzbek. In this regard, differentiating between the various Turkic vernaculars of this early period remains a matter worthy of further investigation.

Conclusion

I have tried in some of my writings to underscore the importance of the Black Death of the mid-14th century for understanding the turbulent history of Turkic literary languages in this period. We can only understand the sudden disappearance of the Syriac Turkic and Volga Bolgharian epigraphical languages as well as the literary language of the Golden Horde through an awareness of this world-historical phenomenon.²¹ After the disappearance of Volga Bolgharian we can observe quite clearly the Kipchakization of the Middle Volga region.²² I have also proposed that the transformation from the orthographic system of Old Anatolian Turkish to that of Ottoman Turkish reflects the loss of the learned Central Asian orthographic tradition and a shift to the Arabo-Persian system more common in the Middle East.²³ In a similar vein I would argue that Chaghatay Turkic, whose rise is most closely associated with the career of ʿAli Šir Nāvai (1441–1501), can be seen as a language closer

19 See the comment on an Old Uyghur *koine* in Erdal (2004: 7–8).

20 Reference was made to this work and its “vernacular language” by a participant at the First International Conference on the Role of Religions in the Turkic Culture (Budapest, Hungary, September 9–11, 2015), which I attended. Unfortunately I have not been able to identify who that person was. Nevertheless I have reached this conclusion independently through reading this text with graduate students.

21 See Schamiloglu (1991) and (2012).

22 See Schamiloglu (2016a) and (2016c).

23 See Schamiloglu (2004: 255–279, especially 268–269).

to the spoken vernacular in Central Asia; indeed Babur says exactly this.²⁴ We also see the otherwise inexplicable renaissance of the Uyghur alphabet in Central Asia in this era, including one of the manuscripts of the *Ḳutadyu bilig*.

In the sphere of literature and religiosity, I have also suggested that the Black Death is the cause of the disruption of the Islamic Turkic literary tradition in the Golden Horde after the creation of the *Nähj ül-färadis*. I have suggested that Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Xusräv äl-Xorezmi (or Kärdäri, according to one manuscript described in the 19th century by Šihabäddin Märjani) wrote the *Nähc ül-färadis*, whose subtitle is *Uštmaḡlarniñ açuḡ yoli* (“The Clear Path to Heaven”), as a pious act during the time of plague. I have also argued that Süleyman Çelebi’s poem honoring the birth (*mevlid*) of the Prophet Muhammad is a similar work of Islamic piety inspired by death in this period, with even the Arabic name, *Vesilet ün-nejat* (“The Path of Salvation”), suggesting a parallel to the *Nähj ül-färadis*.²⁵

I do not pretend that this is a topic which I have exhausted, as I am still reflecting upon the impact of the Black Death upon Turkic languages and cultures in the 14th–16th centuries. I believe I still have at least a few additional historical languages whose demise, transformation, or rise out of the ashes of Middle Turkic I have yet to describe. But, as I would like to remind my readers through this contribution, the Black Death was only the second pandemic of bubonic plague to afflict the Old World and that we have a solid basis for exploring the same range of phenomena for the pandemic of bubonic plague in the 6th–8th centuries.

I hope that I have been able to make a convincing case for the need to expand our vision of the linguistic and philological history of Turkic to embrace an interdisciplinary vision of the past while rewriting the history of the Turkic epigraphical and literary languages. Returning once again to the era of Old Turkic and the Plague in the Time of Justinian, perhaps it is not a coincidence, after all, that the Old Turkic runiform inscriptions belong to roughly the same period as the oldest dated text in English, *Cædmon’s Hymn*, a religious poem composed between 658 and 680, or as texts parallel to the next major landmark in the history of English literature, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, written in the late 1380s during the era of the Black Death.

References

- Aydın, Erhan 2016. Dialectal elements in the vocabulary of the Uyghur Khanate Inscriptions. *Acta Orientalia Hungarica* 69:3, 285–300.
- Baldauf, Ingeborg 1993. *Schriftreform und Schriftwechsel bei den muslimischen Russland-Sowjettürken (1850–1937): Ein Symptom ideengeschichtlicher und kulturpolitischer Entwicklungen* [Alphabet reform and alphabet change among the Muslim Turks of Russia and the Soviet Union (1850–1937): A symptom of intellectual historical and cultural political developments]. (Bibliotheca orientalis Hungarica 40.) Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.

²⁴ See Schamiloglu (2012: 506).

²⁵ I hope to publish this in one or more papers on the Muslim Turkic *mevlid* tradition (in preparation).

- Beckwith, Christopher I. 2011. *Empires of the Silk Road. A history of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bombaci, Alessio 1965. The Turkic literatures. Introductory notes on the history and style. In: Boratov, Pertev Naili (ed.) *Philologiae turcicae fundamenta 2*. Wiesbaden: Steiner. xi–lxxi.
- Campbell, Bruce M. S. 2016. *The great transition: Climate, disease and society in the Late-Medieval world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clauson sir, Gerard 1962. *Turkish and Mongolian studies*. London: The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.
- Cohen, Walter 2011. The rise of the written vernacular: Europe and Eurasia. *Publications of Modern Language Association* 126: 3, 719–729.
- Ercilasun, Ahmet Bican 2016. *Türk Kağanlığı ve Türk Bengü taşları* [The Türk Kaghanate and the Türk inscriptions]. Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları.
- Erdal, Marcel 2004. *A grammar of Old Turkic*. (Handbuch der Orientalistik 8: Central Asia 3.) Leiden: Brill.
- Giles, Lionel 1915. A census of Tun-huang. *T'oung Pao. Second series* 16: 4, 468–488; <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/cities/china/dh/sochist.html>. Accessed: 8 April 2017.
- Golden, Peter B. 1992. *An introduction to the history of the Turkic peoples. Ethnogenesis and state-formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East*. (Turcologica 9.) Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz.
- Green, Monica (ed.) 2014. Pandemic disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death. *The Medieval Globe* 1: 1.
- Hamilton, James Russell 1971. *Le conte bouddhique du bon et du mauvais prince en version ouïgoure. Manuscrits ouïgours de Touen-Houang, Mission Paul Pelliot* [The Buddhist tale of the Good and the Bad Prince in Uyghur version. Uyghur manuscripts from Dunhuang, Mission Paul Pelliot]. (Documents conservés à la Bibliothèque nationale 3.) Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique.
- Hatto, Arthur T. 1977. *The memorial feast for Kōkötöy Khan (Kōkötöydün aši). A Kirghiz epic poem*. (London Oriental Series 33.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Highet, Gilbert 1949. *The classical tradition: Greek and Roman influences on Western literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Horobin, Simon 2010. Middle English language and poetry. In: Saunders, Corinne (ed.) *A companion to Medieval poetry*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 181–195.
- Johanson, Lars 1998. The history of Turkic. In: Johanson, Lars & Csató, Éva Á. (eds.) *The Turkic languages*. London & New York: Routledge. 81–125.
- Kljaštornyj, Sergej G. 1982. The Terkhin inscription. *Acta Orientalia Hungarica* 36: 1, 335–366.
- Kljaštornyj, Sergej G. & Livšits, Vladimir A. 1971. Sogdijskaja nadpis' iz Buguta [Soghdian inscription from Buguta]. *Strany i narody vostoka* 10. Moscow: Nauka. 121–146.
- Kljaštornyj, S. G. & Livšits, Vladimir A. 1972. The Soghdian inscription of Bugut revisited. *Acta Orientalia Hungarica* 16, 69–102.
- Kyzlasov, I. L. 1994. *Runičeskie pis'mennosti Evrazijskix stepej* [Runic writing systems of the Eurasian steppes]. Moscow: “Vostočnaya Literatura” RAN.
- Lewis, Geoffrey 1999. *The Turkish language reform: A catastrophic success*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Little Lester K. 2011. Plague historians in lab coats. *Past and Present*, 213:1, 267–290.

- Loya, Arieh 1974. The detribalization of Arabic poetry. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5: 2, 202–215.
- Rabin, Chaim et al. 1960–2007. 'Arabiyya. In: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, et al. Leiden: Brill. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0061. Accessed on: 9 April 2017.
- Róna-Tas, András 1982. The periodization and sources of Chuvash linguistic history. In: Róna-Tas, András (ed.) *Chuvash studies*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. 113–169.
- Róna-Tas, András 1991. *An introduction to Turkology*. Szeged: University of Szeged.
- Schamiloglu, Uli 1991. The end of Volga Bulgarian. *Varia Eurasistica. Festschrift für Professor András Róna Tas*. Szeged: University of Szeged. 157–163.
- Schamiloglu, Uli 1993. Preliminary remarks on the role of disease in the history of the Golden Horde. *Central Asian Survey* 12: 4, 447–457.
- Schamiloglu, Uli 2004. The rise of the Ottoman Empire: The Black Death in Medieval Anatolia and its impact on Turkish civilization. In: Yavari, Neguin & Potter, Lawrence G. & Oppenheim, Jean-Marc (eds.) *Views from the edge: Essays in honor of Richard W. Bulliet*. New York: Columbia University Press. 255–279.
- Schamiloglu, Uli 2012. Ortaçağ dillerinden modern dillere: Avrupa ve Türk dünyasında yeni edebi dillerin varlığa gelmesi [From Medieval Languages to Modern Languages: The Rise of New Literary Languages in Europe and the Turkic World]. In: Önal, Mehmet Naci (ed.) *IV. Dünya Dili Türkçe Sempozyumu Bildirileri. 22–24 Aralık 2011, Muğla* 1. Ankara. 501–507.
- Schamiloglu, Uli 2016a. Chapter IX. Prirodnyj i social'no-ekonomičeskij krizisy. 2: Vlijanie Černoj smerti na Zolotuju Ordu: Politika, ekonomika, obščestvo, civilizacija [Natural and socio-economic crises. 2: The impact of the Black Death on the Golden Horde: Politics, economics, society, civilization]. In: *Zolotaja Orda v mirovoj istorii / The Golden Horde in world history. Kollektivnaja monografija*. Kazan: Institut istorii im. Sh. Mardzhani AN RT. 679–694.
- Schamiloglu, Uli 2016b. The plague in the time of Justinian and Central Eurasian history: An agenda for research. Karatay, Osman & Zimonyi, István (eds.) *Central Eurasia in the Middle Ages. Studies in honour of Peter B. Golden*. (Turcologica 104.) Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. 293–311.
- Schamiloglu, Uli 2016c. Gravestones and the history of Medieval Tatar civilization: A brief overview. In: *Islam i tjurkskij mir: Problemy obrazovanija, jazyka, literatury, istorii i religii. Materialy VIII. meždunarodnoj tjurkologičeskoj konferencii* [Islam and Turkic world: Problems of education, language, literature, history and religion. Materials of the VIII. International Turkic Conference]. Kazan: Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University & Abay Kazakh National Pedagogical University. 76–80.
- Schamiloglu, Uli 2017. The impact of the Black Death on the Golden Horde: Politics, economy, society, and civilization. *Golden Horde Review (Zolotoordynskoe obozrenie)* 5: 2, 325–343.
- Sims-Williams, Nicholas 2000. *Bactrian documents from Northern Afghanistan*. 1. *Legal and economic documents*. (Studies in the Khalili Collection 3, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum 2: Inscriptions of the Seleucid and Parthian periods and of Eastern Iran and Central Asia 6: Bactrian). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sinor, Denis 1990. The establishment and dissolution of the Türk Empire. In: Sinor, Denis (ed.) *The Cambridge history of Early Inner Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 285–326.

- Tekin, Talât 1968. *A grammar of Orkhon Turkic*. (Indiana University Publications, Uralic Altaic Series 69.) Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Tekin, Talât 1997. *Irk bitig: The Book of Omens*. (Turcologica 18.) Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Theophanes 1997. *The chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern history, AD 284–813*. Translated by Cyril Mango et al. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Theophylactus Simocatta 1985. *Geschichte*. Translated by Peter Schreiner. (Bibliothek der griechischen Literatur. Abteilung Byzantinistik 20.) Stuttgart: Hiersemann.
- Tremblay, Florent A. 1989. *Rise of vernacular languages/L'émergence des langues vernaculaires*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Twitchett, Denis 1979. Population and pestilence in T'ang China. In: Bauer, Wolfgang (ed.) *Studia Sino-Mongolica. Festschrift für Herbert Franke*. (Münchener ostasiatische Studien 25.) Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag. 35–69.
- de la Vaissière, Étienne 2005. *Soghdian traders: A history*. Translated by James Ward. (Handbuch der Orientalistik 8: Central Asia 10.) Leiden: Brill.
- de la Vaissière, Étienne 2017. Early Medieval Central Asian population estimates. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/29974601/Early_medieval_Central_Asian_population_estimates. Accessed: 8 April 2017.
- Walter, Mariko Namba 2006. Soghdian Buddhism. *Sino-Platonic Papers* 174, 21. Available at: http://sino-platonic.org/complete/spp174_soghdian_buddhism.pdf. Accessed: 8 April 2017.
- Yoshida, Yutaka 2016. Soghdian language. 1. Description. *Encyclopædia Iranica*. Online edition, 2016, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/Soghdian-language-01>. Accessed: 8 April 2017.
- Yoshida, Yutaka 2017. Turko-Soghdian letters. http://www.persee.fr/doc/ephe_0000-0002_2000_num_113_109_11784. Accessed: 8 April 2017.