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## THE RECEPTION OF TURKIC EPICS IN THE WEST

*Abstract.* This contribution aims at presenting an overview of the sources for the study of Turkic epics published in the West. This serves the double aim of offering to the colleagues' bibliographical data on publications that are often difficult accessible, while at the same time opening up an access to the field to students who as yet lack sufficient knowledge of the source language and of Russian needed for deeper study. Topics addressed are: the difficulties with the definition of the genre, review the academic works written by turkologists and generalists, the role of performance in the reception of the epic, possible connections of the content with historiographically tangible happenings in the past, translations and the global place of Turkic epics, as well as relationship between oral and written epics. One of the conclusions emerging from this survey is that in the West most studies are executed not by turkologists, but by medievalists, students of the general theory of epics, or even by anthropologists. As texts the epics are clearly of great importance for turkology. Editions together with translations are important tools for us to get students acquainted with and interested in the fascinating world of epics.

*Keywords:* epics, epic genre, epic theory, Turkic, nationality, translation, historiography, orality, performance, textualization.

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## Восприятие тюркских эпосов на Западе

*Аннотация.* Эта статья направлена на представление обзора источников для изучения тюркских эпосов, опубликованных на Западе. Она преследует двойную цель: предлагать коллегам библиографические данные о публикациях, которые часто труднодоступны, и в то же время открывать доступ к этой области для студентов, которые еще не имеют достаточных знаний исходного языка и русского языка, необходимых для более глубокого изучения. Рассматриваются следующие темы: трудности с определением жанра, обзор академических работ, написанных тюркологами и универсалами, роль исполнения в восприятии эпоса, возможные связи содержания с историографически осязаемыми событиями в прошлом, переводы и глобальное место тюркских эпосов, а также связь между устной и письменной эпосами. Один из выводов исследования состоит в том, что на Западе большинство исследований проводятся не тюркологами, а специалистами по средневековой литературе, изучающими общую теорию эпосов или даже антропологами. Как тексты, эпосы явно имеют большое значение для тюркологии. Издания вместе с переводами являются важными инструментами для того, чтобы мы познакомили студентов с интересным миром эпоса и заинтересовались им.

*Ключевые слова:* эпос, эпический жанр, эпическая теория, тюркология, национальность, перевод, историография, устные традиции, исполнение, текстуализация.

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### Definition of Genre

My contribution is about the reception of Turkic epics in the West. As those familiar with the field of epic studies will realize, it first must be clarified what precisely an epic is. Narrow definitions go at least partly back to Aristotle: An epic has to be in verse, has to be long and episodic (implying “heroic moments” associated with the plot of every episode). Besides, it has to be lofty in spirit – read, it has to address something like an aristocratic environment. Indeed, the matter of the social context of the story is one of the most difficult ones to address. The hero may act in the interests just of his family (the normal case in Siberia), of a larger unit – a clan, a tribe –, or the context of feudal obligations. So what are the criteria for “loftiness”, “grandeur”, “weight”, or whatever we call the requested quality? Not without reason Hatto [1], in a sketch of his views on a general theory of epics, points out that the type of hero we are dealing with is an essential feature of any heroic story.

A concrete example for the difficulties of the genre definition is the discussion about the widespread cycle with stories about Koroğlu/Goroğlu, continued lately by Wilks [2]. Mainly discussing Karl Reichl’s struggle with the terms *epos* and *dastān* reflected in several of his works (the latest one being Reichl [3]). Although the issue is basically confined to the Anatolian/Central Asian sphere, it is of general relevance. The story of Koroğlu is a special case for several reasons; I will not repeat all of them here. The debate is for once about the prosimetric nature of most of the versions – with the exception apparently of the ones in Tajik and Pashtu. Another point is the person of the hero: more of a brigand in the Western versions, more aristocratic in the East. Does this mean that the Eastern versions are more of an epic? For a case like this Wilks [2, p. 344] remarks: “Using this epic yardstick for non-European traditions does not always succeed”. The question arises whether these problems are confined to this realm; in my opinion they are not. Is the Irish Táin Bó Cúailnge not to be considered an epic because it is primarily written in prose? And what about the Icelandic sagas? Wilks also points out the tendency to declare certain works to be a “national epos”, even if from the point of view of genre this might be debatable. In the Sakha case, at least, not one epos is “national”, the whole *oloxo* tradition is!

### The contribution of Turkologists and of generalists

As is well known to all, modern turkology started with a bang, namely with the work of Wilhelm Radloff. His texts and especially his dictionary are still being widely used. But, although for many of the languages with Radloff heroic tales form an important section, in Western turkology the epics from the Turkic world play a minor role in research and academic teaching. The reason for this is evident: In our parts turkology is naturally focused on Turkey, be it the Ottoman Empire or the Republic, and epic tradition in Anatolia is extinct since many centuries. The one text that has therefore received much attention is the *Book of Dede Korkut*, written down in Anatolia around 1500 AD; there exist several editions and translation in many languages, including Persian, Lithuanian and Portuguese Boeschoten [4]. But this is a collection of heroic stories rather than an epic cycle. Apart from this, there is one more medieval work that is as isolated in its literary context as the *Book of Dede Korkut*: the *Legend of Oghuz Khan*. This work, written in Uighur script, betrays a background in the Golden Horde, but with its archaic character it is outside the Islamic fold. It has been edited and translated into German by Bang & Rahmati Arat [5] followed by the Russian version by Ščerbak [6]. Bálasz Danka [7] is preparing a new edition with an English translation. The work contains an aetiological legend about Turkic tribes, esp. the Oghuz. It appears to be in prosometric form and is certainly not very long (there we are again; cf. also Reichl [8, 33 ff.]). The other Anatolian epos – or not – is represented by the local variants of the Koroğlu cycle. These stories, first mentioned in the 17th century, have survived until this day (see above).

For the rest most of the work in the West has been done by non-turkologists. The reason is the urge felt by mediaevalists to study living epic traditions, as these traditions have been extinct in our parts since centuries, and to clarify the oral background of ancient and medieval epics; the first scholar in this fold was actually Viktor Žirmunskij. The inspiration to do this stems ultimately from the “Homeric question” about a supposed oral background of Homer’s epics that was raised as early as in the end of the 18th century. From the beginning the study of Turkic epics has been crucial for the general theoretical debate about orality; Milman Parry from the beginning was influenced by Radloff’s work see Hatto [9, X-XI]. At the same time Radloff’s texts remain essential for the study of Turkic epics

because of the dynamics of epics as an oral genre per se (see below). Radloff's texts from the Manas cycle has been thoroughly re-edited and commented upon by (Hatto, *op. cit.*). Hatto [10] goes back even further: It is an edition of Velikhanov's transcription of the episode about the memorial feast for Kōkötöy. Another medievalist and anglicist, Karl Reichl, has also been active in producing editions. Apart from the Uzbek version of the in Central Asia widespread epos of *Alpamiš* (Reichl [11]), he has delivered an exemplary edition and analysis of a Karakalpak version of *Edige* [12]. Reichl offers, besides text and translation, besides an analysis of the practice of epic singing in the context and a description of the historical context, a comprehensive musicological exposé on the performance of the bard, and on his performance as a whole. A CD goes with the edition.

### Performance

Indeed, in the case of medieval and earlier epics basically we have only the text; aspects of historical practices of performance can only be gathered supplementary. In the case of transcripts from a living tradition, adding just a translation leaves the job unfinished. It is no wonder the texts are usually translated in prose, because the conception of anything like a translation taking rhyme and rhythm into account in a sensible way is even more difficult than is the case in the translation of "normal" poetry, because the metrics are directly connected to the exigencies of the performance and the suspension created during it.

### Epics as sediments of historical facts

The Edige cycle is by the way also important because in this case the connection with historiographically tangible facts from the period of the breakdown of the Golden Horde in the 15th and 16th centuries. This connection makes it possible to gain insight of the way a "Heroic Age" is constructed (on this, see also Schmitz [13]), a concept so important for any kind of epos. The latest attempt to link the contents of an epic to historical facts is the publication by Gariboghlu [14] in which the author attempts to link Kōroğlu's name of birth Rovshan to an historical figure mentioned by Chinese sources as the leader in a rebellion.<sup>1</sup>

### Other editions and translations

As important as their editions are the many books and articles they have produced in which they discuss Turkic epics in a comperatistic way, be it in an inner-Turkic context (e.g., Reichl [8, 15]), or as part of a general theory of epos (in the two volumes edited by Hatto as proceedings of seminars held in London = Hatto & Hainsworth [16, 17]) – besides a number of articles that can be found in the bibliographies of these works. The main point of the work of these two scholars is the emphasis they lay on the performance as the creative moment; as the genre of epos is considered to be alive in close-knitted communities in which the works are known, the contribution of the public is considered to be important as well.

There are other more or less scholarly editions to be found here and there. An early translation is the one into French of a Kirghiz variant of *Er Töštük* made by Boratav [18]. Very competent from a philological point of view are the translations of South-Siberian epics by Ugo Marazzi: An Altay-Turkic variant of *Maaday Kara* recorded in 1964 performed by Kalkin (recorded and translated by Surazakov [19]; Marazzi [20]), the Khakas epos about the heroin<sup>2</sup> *Altin Arig* presumably after the edition by Maynogaševa [21], Marazzi [22] and a Tuvan heroic tale (Marazzi [23]). The same variant of *Maaday Kara* has been translated later into German by Efremova & Gilg-Ludwig [24], but from the Russian translation and without commentary, such as is offered by Marazzi.

I accidentally found a French translation by the Slavist Jacques Karro [25] of episodes from the version of *N'urgun Baator* on the basis of the Russian translation in Ergis [26] (an edition based on Pekarskij's transcript from the *olonxosut* K. Orosin – cf. also Hatto [27, 143 ff.]). Later translations into French and English are mentioned in Razumovskaya [28].

There are some translations made in Eastern European countries in Soviet times, also in Eastern Germany, for instance Balázs [29], that includes a text about *Qiz Žibek*. Notice also the Slovak translation of *N'urgun Baator* (Krno [30]), about which I have no further information. There may be more translations I am not aware of that are intended for the general public. There is a certain amount

<sup>1</sup> An Azerbaijani version of the book had been published in 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Women perform heroic roles in Turkic epics, but they are seldom announced as main heroes.

of people who are interested in epic literature, but still these works are difficult to sell. An important occasion in this respect was the translation by May of the Manas cycle (version Oruzbakov), sponsored by the UNESCO [31]. However, May attempted a versified translation that was severely criticized by a number of readers. Besides, by now it is considered a rarity and only available at a high price.

The UNESCO also has played a role in the revitalization of the *olonxo* tradition by declaring it a “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” in 2005. The dynamics of this revitalization process that involves a redefinition of the functions of the epics, is described by Harris [32]. Clearly *olonxo* is important for Sakha nation building, but also for the revitalization of the language. Of course, in the post-Soviet world the national importance of all epic traditions are stressed. As remarked before, Hatto [9] had already stressed the changed conditions in the Soviet period as compared to the 19th century.

### **Textualization**

Finally, as should have become clear from the foregoing, it is important to study the way in which oral epics are written down (“textualization”). This is not only essential for defining standards for the living traditions, but also for applying the results to the interpretation of the relationship between a written epos that has come down to us from history and (possible) oral sources. On this matter I refer to Honko [33], with contributions of (again) Arthur Hatto [27] and Karl Reichl [34] for the Turkic field.

### **Concluding remarks**

An important topic is of course the interaction of native traditions with those of surrounding peoples. I am not prepared here to go into this, but I would like to point out the good situation with regard to Mongolian epics. In the first place there exists a whole lot of translations into German by or with the collaboration of Nikolaus Poppe (*Mongolische Epen I-XI*, all edited in the short period from 1975 until 1985 in the series *Asiatische Studien* with Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden; unfortunately, most of these are hard to obtain nowadays). Besides, Walther Heissig from the University of Bonn between 1981 and 1991 has edited the proceeding of several workshops under the title *Fragen der mongolischen Heldendichtung I-V* (also in *Asiatische Studien*); some problems connected with Turkish epics are also discussed there. To get an idea of the immense work done by Heissig in his lifetime, see for instance [35, 36].

I have been excluding a discussion of the epics programme of the Turkish Language Society TDK, providing texts and translations (see the TDK website sub *destan*), and the work done generally in Turkey; it is important to notice however that a discussion of *olonxo* with one example (*Er Sogotoh*) included (Ergun [37]).

As texts the epics are clearly of great importance for turkology. The ethnographic and musicological aspects on the other hand are difficult to integrate in the teaching programmes. But to concentrate just on modern literature that is attuned to Western taste would be wrong. Editions together with translations are important tools for us to get students acquainted with and interested in the fascinating world of epics.

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