

BOOK REVIEW

DANKA, Balázs 2019. *The ‘Pagan’ Oyuz-nāmā. A Philological and Linguistic Analysis.* (Turcologica 113.) Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag. ISBN: 978-3-447-11003-7. 377 pages.

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The publication under review is a revised version of a doctoral thesis defended at the University of Szeged in November 2016. It investigates the Middle Turkic text in Uyghur script variously referred to as *Oyuz-nāmā in Uyghur script*, *Oğuz Kağan Destanı*, or, as the author of the present study labels it, *Pagan Oyuz-nāmā*, where the label pays tribute to the fact that the text represents a narrative tradition more or less unaffected by Islam. Although the text has been dealt with by several scholars before, with the editions by Bang & Rahmeti (1932/1936)¹ and Ščerbak (1959)² being the most prominent ones, it preserves numerous secrets and unsettled questions, both concerning the reading and interpretation of individual word forms and passages and, more importantly, regarding the dating of the text and its affiliation within the Turkic language family. The text is of a particular importance for the research of the Turkic languages as it represents a unique linguistic variety, a fact which is one of the reasons why this text has so stubbornly resisted classification.

After several decades of relative silence about this text in the Turcology community, two studies have become available recently and almost synchronically: besides Danka's study, which will be the focus of this review, an edition and investigation by Ferruh Ağca (2016, second print in 2019),³ which will occasionally be consulted for the sake of comparison. Both scholars are aware of each other's work, as becomes clear from the lists of references and brief remarks in the text (Danka 2019: 16, Ağca 2019: 11–12), but do not seem to have scrutinized it in detail.

Danka's book consists of nine chapters: an introduction (Chapter 1), a highly detailed chapter on paleography (Chapter 2), a text edition, which presents the facsimile, a transliteration, tran-

¹ BANG, W. & RAHMETI, G. R. 1936. *Oğuz Kağan destanı*. (İstanbul Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Türk Dili Semineri Neşriyatı.) İstanbul: Burhaneddin Basımevi.

² Ščerbak, A. M. [Александр Михайлович Щербак] 1959. *Огуз-наме. Мухаббат-наме: памятники древне-уйгурской и староузбекской письменности*. Москва: Издательство восточной литературы.

³ Ağca, Ferruh 2019. *Uygur Harfli Oğuz Kağan Destanı. Metin-Aktarma-Notlar-Dizin-Tipkibasım*. (Dil Araştırmaları Dizisi 16.) Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü Yayınları.

scription and translation side by side (Chapter 3), notes on the text, which address some concrete and immediate problems in the text (Chapter 4), chapters on phonology (Chapter 5), word formation (Chapter 6), and morphosyntax (Chapter 7), a motif analysis of different versions of the *Oyuz-nāmā* genre with the aim to identify their mutual relationship (Chapter 8), and a summary of the main findings and conclusions (Chapter 9). Appendices register the complete vocabulary with all occurrences, and all identifiable suffixes.

At first sight, Aġca's book appears to be strikingly similar: It also starts with an introduction, a description of the inventory of graphemes and allographs as well as striking linguistic features, the text with facsimile, transcription, transliteration, and translation (also presented side by side), a chapter with notes on the text, and a vocabulary. It differs in that it discusses most of the linguistic issues, including lexical and etymological ones, in the notes chapter, while Danka has own chapters with a systematic investigation of various linguistic categories. Concerning the concrete reading and interpretation (translation) of the actual text as well as the linguistic findings, both studies differ in several respects, and both will have to be considered in potential follow-up studies on the *Oyuz-nāmā*.

Given that the text has been treated by scholars such as Radloff, Bang, and Ščerbak, it is clear that shedding light on the unsolved mysteries of the *Oyuz-nāmā* is not an easy task: It requires the application of sound philological methods, the astute scrutiny of linguistic features, a careful selection of those features with critical relevance for classification issues, and a sound argument how seemingly contradictory phenomena can be accounted for in an overall appraisal of the position of the text in the Turkic language history. The book under review is an important step towards a better understanding both of the general genealogical and chronological affiliation of the text, and of individual unresolved passages.

On the basis of linguistic and content evidence, Danka dates the text to the 15th century and situates it in the Golden Horde. He assumes that the speaker and the scribe of the text were two different persons – a claim which has been proposed earlier – where the speaker used a Kipchak variety, and the scribe was trained in written Mongolian. He furthermore assumes that the text was dictated by the speaker to the scribe (pp. 176–177, 280). If these assumptions are correct, it would mean that this text represents a variety close to spoken language, an idea with consequences for the evaluation of the variation within the text (see below).

The paleographic study that precedes the text edition as a preliminary is highly valuable as it lists all graphemes with their most typical variants, describes the distinctive features of the graphemes and allographs in a very comprehensive and thorough way, and analyses combinational issues and problems of distinguishing similar signs. In general, the paleographic analysis of any written monument poses numerous challenges to the researcher. Among the problems, the affiliation of diacritics, the borders between graphs, graphic variation as a result of the natural writing flow, damages of the writing material, spots and lines that are difficult to classify, and insecurity about the actual presence or absence of distinctive features can be mentioned as examples. In the *Oyuz-nāmā*, matters are further complicated by specific difficulties of the Uyghur script, where certain graphemes and grapheme combinations are hardly distinguishable, or not at all: For example, the fortis-lenis distinction, which is partly represented in the Old Uyghur script, is not reflected at all in the present text, some graphemes (<k>, <s>, <š>) may have a surplus <'> as part of the letter (i.e., not in order to encode a subsequent vowel), and there are instances where <y> and <w> are hardly distinguishable from, or even identical in form to, <'>. The chapter on paleography treats every aspect of the topic one could think of, including the writing variants of



the mysterious unicorn-like being, read as *qīat*, *qīyand* etc., in various sources (p. 40). The striking variation of representations is given as represented in the facsimile and classified typologically. While a definite solution how to read this item is not proposed, every scholar attempting to solve the riddle is provided with the empirical data available in the text. Here, Aġca chooses a completely different approach: He standardizes most occurrences (including instances transliterated by him as <d^mk> or <ndynnk>) as *kīyat* (with the variants *kīyand* and *kīykat*). Sure enough, comments on reading and translation proposals are supplied (Aġca 2019: 174–176), but ultimately the glossary laconically registers *kīyat* ‘canavar, gergedan’ (p. 275): a more than insecure reading and a potential source of misunderstanding for collectors of lexical items who do not consider the explanations in the body of the text.

The text edition presents the facsimile on the left side and transliteration, transcription and translation on the right side, with the readings by previous editions given in footnotes on the same page. This mode of presentation makes the findings transparent and verifiable for the reader. As a result of the limited distinctiveness of the script system, some interpretative input has been implemented even in the transliteration, which distinguishes, e.g., <’> and <n> on the one hand and final <-’>, <-n> and <-z>, on the other. A more rigorous solution, which would represent identical graphic forms by uniform transliteration symbols, would have made the transliteration unwieldy, so the choice made in this study is reasonable. Generally speaking, the transliteration is quite accurate and marks even instances where <’> and <y> are hard to distinguish, by a different symbol.

Occasionally, however, the transliteration is too liberal and seems to be influenced by desired readings. For example, the transliteration of line (4) on page (1) contains <kw’d’y> where the facsimile clearly displays <bwd’d’y>. Here, the transliteration should be faithful to the original, and a correction of a presumable spelling mistake should be introduced on the transcription level only (cf. the notes on p. 137).

In the transcription, some solutions are debatable as well. Most of these have to do with the fact that while the text is from the Middle Turkic era, Old Turkic has been selected as the underlying system of reference for comparison, and the empirical findings are sometimes not easily reconcilable with expectations towards an abstract and not even contemporary ‘standard’. For instance, <čwbwq> (4/3) is transcribed as *čibiq* (with a diacritic added to <i> to indicate that ‘something is wrong with the spelling’), a choice that seems unnecessary given that the form *čubūq* is actually widely attested in Turkic languages. In an instance like this, slavish adherence to the Old Turkic form seems out of place. And is the representation of the verb meaning ‘to say’ as *tā-* rather than *dā-* really the most convincing choice for a Middle Turkic text from the 15th century?

Expectations on some underlying ‘standard’, which are not satisfied by the text, can be traced in the translations as well, compare, e.g., *üč erkäk oyulni tuyurdi* ‘she gave birth to (certain) three male children’ (8/3), *bir qara qoyunni bayladı* ‘he tied a (certain) black sheep [to its base]’ (41/6) with *erkäk oyul tuyurdi* ‘she gave birth to a male child’ (1/4) and *bir aq qoyun bayladı* ‘he tied a white sheep [to its base]’ (41/3). The English word *certain* is intended to translate the alleged specificity indicated by the accusative at the direct object in immediate pre-verbal position (cf. pp. 218–219). What the empirical data actually shows, though, is that the specificity opposition, certainly a feature of many Turkic languages, is not observed, or not observed consistently, in this specific variety.

Some issues like these notwithstanding, the reviewer thinks that the present edition is in many respects very successful and a clear step forward in the research history of the *Oyuz-nāmā*. Con-



troversial issues, like the interpretation of certain grapheme sequences and the exact translation of text passages, are unavoidable in a text with such a complex profile.

A highly interesting and original part of the study is the chapter on phonology (Chapter 5). In this chapter, the author discusses selected phonetic and phonological features of the language variety underlying the *Oyuz-nāmā* that can be inferred from the orthographic properties of the text. The difficulty in the assessment of the phonetic properties of the linguistic variety of the *Oyuz-nāmā* has already been mentioned: It lies in the fact that the Old Uyghur script is, generally speaking, significantly underspecified regarding the coding of phonetic features, and not very suitable for the record of the Turkic sound inventory. In the usage observed in the *Oyuz-nāmā*, the limited informative value is further reduced by the cancellation of oppositions available in Old Uyghur. In spite of these problems, the author's endeavour to reconstruct phonetic properties of the spoken variety underlying the *Oyuz-nāmā* from the use of the script and the variation in the orthographic realization of items yields some remarkable results.

The discussion departs from unconventional usages of vowel symbols, especially usages of Aleph <'> for supposed /i/ and /i/ (as <q'l'č> for *qilič* and <b'd'> for *biti-*) and, more rarely, for supposed or attested round vowels (as <d'l'y> besides <d'lwy> for *taluy* and <'ld'n> besides <'ldwn> for *altun*). The author motivates the instability of representation of (reconstructed) /i/ in the *Oyuz-nāmā* with an alleged underspecified quality of /i/ in the vowel system of its language (p. 164, cf. p. 156), and ultimately links the representation of /i/ in this text to phonological oppositions in the Semitic vowel system (p. 159, 155), an approach which the reviewer finds debatable. In order to explain the remarkable representation of the Turkic vowels in the grapheme system of the *Oyuz-nāmā*, an approach would be more convincing that reflects on the text-internal evidence of the grapheme distribution (the relevant empirical data is provided on pp. 159–163) rather than on the phonological quality of Semitic vowels, presumably stored in the 'memory' of the Middle Turkic orthographic system.

A possible and quite simple approach would be to interpret <'> as a neutral vowel sign, principally capable of representing any vowel of the spoken variety underlying the *Oyuz-nāmā*. Should this be true, it would imply that <y> and <w>, in turn, should be taken seriously as graphemes representing illabial high vowels and labial vowels, respectively: This would exclude readings such as *ađiy* for <d'wq>, *ayuz* for <wq wz>, *böri* for <bwrw> or *čibiq* for <čwbwq>, with consequences for the transcription part of the study. The fact that this approach would result in variants such as <bwry> *böri* vs. <bwrw> *börü* and <q'mYz> *qimiz* (?) vs. <qwmwz> *qumuz* must not irritate us: After all, the present text is said to represent a spoken idiolect, and spoken language is especially susceptible to variation.

Chapter 6 gives a comprehensive account of derivational morphology in the *Oyuz-nāmā* and of the attested possibilities of compounding. Chapter 7 systematically registers all inflectional categories that occur in the text and deals with numerals, pronouns, and various types of subordinate clauses. This grammar conspectus does not only catalogue all relevant phenomena in the text but is also highly instructive in terms of analysis. The reader finds a wealth of valuable information, e.g. regarding the presence and absence of the pronominal N (pp. 222–223), the functional overlap of Locative and Ablative on the one hand and Locative and Dative on the other (pp. 224–225), government properties of postpositions (pp. 231–232), noteworthy peculiarities in the Voluntative-Imperative inventory (pp. 247–248) and in the aspect system (pp. 237–245), etc. The author attempts to arrange the attested items into paradigms and to identify the semantic values and the oppositions as completely and thoroughly as the data allows.



As a whole, this book constitutes the most comprehensive and accurate study of the *Pagan Oyuz-nāmā* to this date. Compared to the classical editions by Bang & Rahmeti as well as by Ščerbak, it is a great leap forward in the research of this interesting text, which still contains many unresolved problems. In terms of scrutiny, accuracy and the critical discussion of details, the reviewer ranks it superior to Aġca's edition (which in turn outperforms the older editions), although Aġca's edition also offers convincing solutions in many cases. In terms of intelligibility and easy access to the text, Danka's study is the less easy read, and it necessitates much cross-reading and tracing of arguments scattered throughout the work for the reader to collect the full information. Some parts of the phonological analysis must be taken with caution, especially in regard to theory. Those readers who seek a fast and easy access to the *Oyuz-nāmā* will probably prefer Aġca's more readable edition, but for scholars in search of the most comprehensive picture, Danka's study will be the primary reference work. Apart from the edition, the linguistic investigation contains a wealth of valuable information with relevance beyond the scope of this particular text.

