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Structure and Linguistic Features of Turkic Tafsirs From The 10th to 15th Centuries

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive examination of Qur'anic commentaries (tafsirs) written in Turkic languages between the 10th and 15th centuries, a crucial period in the history of Islamic scholarship among Turkic-speaking communities. The study traces the chronological development of these tafsirs, highlighting the historical, cultural, and linguistic evolution that took place over five centuries. By identifying the earliest known examples of Turkic-language tafsirs, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the emergence and maturation of Islamic exegesis in the Turkic intellectual tradition. The article investigates not only the dating of these commentaries but also their structural characteristics, linguistic features, and the theological and interpretative methods employed by their authors. It places particular emphasis on well-known tafsir manuscripts, analyzing their content, format, and style, and shedding light on how Qur'anic concepts were explained and transmitted to Turkic-speaking Muslim audiences. Furthermore, the study explores the current locations and preservation status of these manuscripts, revealing where they are housed and how accessible they are to contemporary researchers. In addition, the article reviews existing academic research conducted on Turkic-language tafsirs, offering a critical perspective on the scope, methodology, and limitations of previous studies. By synthesizing historical, philological, and theological approaches, the article aims to fill significant gaps in the field of Qur'anic studies and Turkic philology. Ultimately, it seeks to provide scholarly answers to questions concerning the origins, development, and influence of these commentaries, while also encouraging further investigation into this underexplored area of Islamic and Turkic intellectual history.

Keywords: Tafsir, Translation, Turkic Tafsirs, Persian Tafsirs, Karakhanids, Chagatai Language, Khwarezmian Turkic

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1. Introduction

Starting from the early centuries, the translation and interpretation (tafsir) of the Holy Qur'an into Persian began for the first time in our region of Movarounnahr. This was made possible because, as early as the Samanid era, scholars of Movarounnahr issued legal rulings (fatwas) permitting the use of Persian interpretations of the Qur'an. Between the years 961 and 976, the first translation of "Tafsir al-Tabari" into the Persian-Tajik language was carried out in Bukhara. Shams al-A'imma al-Sarakhsi, one of the renowned jurists (faqih) of his time, also stated in his work "Sharh al-Jāmi'al-Ṣaghīr" that it is permissible to translate and interpret the Qur'an into another language under certain conditions [1]. In the year 1126, the exegete 'Abdullāh Anṣārī wrote a tafsīr in Persian, in which he

emphasized that he had made use of 107 earlier Persian tafsīr works. In the sources, the work of the Mu'tazilite scholar Abū Alī Muḥammad al-Jubbā'ī al-Khūzistānī is mentioned as the earliest Turkic tafsīr written in Arabic script; however, this tafsīr has not yet been found [2]. Turkish scholars Professor Muhammad Hamudulloḥ and Majid Yasharoğlu identify the Turkic tafsīr preserved under number 73 at the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Manuscripts in Turkey as the oldest existing Turkic translation of the Qur'an. The manuscript measures 36 × 27 cm and comprises 451 folios, each containing 9 lines of text. The Qur'anic Arabic text is inscribed in bold Thuluth script, while the Turkic translation is written word-for-word in red ink between the lines beneath the verses. The pages on which Sūrat al-Fātiḥa is written are gilded. The binding is wrapped in green cloth [3]. The date of the translation is not recorded in the manuscript. On the last folio, the copyist who transcribed and gilded this copy in the year 1333 is named as Muhammad, the son of Ḥajī Davlatshāh of Shiraz. Naturally, the translation must have been completed before that date. In his article *The Linguistic Analysis of Qur'an Translations*, Turkish scholar A. Erto'g'on advanced the hypothesis that this translation belongs to the 10th century". Another of the oldest Turkic tafsirs dates from the 12th–13th centuries; it was discovered in the city of Qarshi in 1914 and taken to Saint Petersburg in 1920. Currently, this manuscript is cataloged as No. 197 in the holdings of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg. The manuscript comprises 147 folios and preserves the translation and tafsir of 69 surahs [4]. In the first hundred pages of the work, the translation of each word in the verses is written underneath in Turkic, using small nasta'liq script. Some verses, however, are elaborated in great detail—with more than 30 lines of Turkic commentary. This manuscript was studied from a linguistic perspective in Uzbekistan by Professor Q. Mahmudov, and its facsimile edition was also published in Tashkent in the year 2000. Based on this facsimile, a portion of the Turkic translation of Sūrat al-Kahf was published in modern Uzbek in the scholarly collection *Sources of Islamic Sufism*. S.E. Malov, A.K. Borovkov, and Abdulqodir Inon also conducted research on this manuscript [5]. Among Uzbek scholars, special mention must be made of Qozoqboy Mahmudov, who devoted himself wholeheartedly to addressing this topic. Qozoqboy Mahmudov translated this tafsir into modern Uzbek and prepared it for publication with an introduction that holds the value of a major scholarly study. It should be noted that this work was carried out during a time when speaking about the Qur'an was prohibited. V. V. Bartold presumed that this tafsir was written earlier than the 11th century, even before the Qutadghu Bilig. According to Fuad Köprülü as well, this tafsir was composed in Western Turkestan at the end of the 10th century or the beginning of the 11th century [6]. Q. Mahmudov also believes that the tafsir, "based on its phonetic, grammatical, and lexical features, was created in the 11th century, though certain changes were introduced during its transcription." This Turkic tafsir serves as an example in studying the roots of the Uzbek language and in understanding how the meanings of the Qur'an have been interpreted through centuries in Turkic literature. It is considered that the languages of Turkic tribes such as the Karluks, Chigils, Yarmas, Oghuz, Kipchaks, and others who lived in the regions of Central Asia and Kazakhstan participated in the creation of this tafsir [7].

2. Materials and Methods

The unique manuscript known as the "Turkic Tafsir of Central Asia" has attracted the interest of many Turkologists. The Turkish scholar A. Erto'g'on, after studying nine Turkic tafsirs and translations preserved in the Museum of Turkic and Islamic Manuscripts, as well as the "Turkic Tafsir of Central Asia", identifies the three oldest among them. All of these works emerged in the 13th–14th centuries and were composed using the interlinear (literal) translation method [8]. They are as follows:

- a. TIEM Manuscript: Dates back to the 13th–14th centuries. It is written in the language of the Karakhanids.

- b. Rylands Manuscript: Dates back to the 14th century (stored in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, UK, under the Mingana Collection, Arabic MS 25-38). Its language is closely related to Old Turkic/Chagatai.
- c. Leningrad Manuscript: This is the work commonly known as the “Turkic Tafsir of Central Asia”, and it was discovered in Qarshi.

One of these, without a doubt, is identified as the “Turkic Tafsir of Central Asia”. A. Ertoğon concludes that the language of these tafsirs was the literary language used among the Turkic people during the final years of the Karakhanid rule. He argues that the “Qutadg’u Bilig” from the 11th century and the “Hibat al-haqayiq” from the 12th–13th centuries were also written in this same language [9]. V. Bartold, on the other hand, noted that the language of the tafsir is similar to that of the 14th-century work “Qisas al-Rabghuzi”. Based on the information above, we can conclude that the tradition of Turkic tafsir writing has a much older history.

3. Results and Discussion

In the Naqshbandi order, the tafsir of Charxiy is not unique. For instance, the Arabic-Persian tafsirs of Khwaja Muhammad Parsa, Abdurrahman Jami, Husayn Voiz Koshifi, and others are preserved in manuscripts to this day [10]. The Turkic translation of Tafsiri Charxiy, which is kept as the only copy in the manuscript collection of the Institute of Oriental Studies named after Abu Rayhan Biruni, can be considered one of the first Turkic translations of tafsir within the Naqshbandi order. This is because, until now, no other Turkic tafsir translations made within the order have been identified [11]. Below, we present a table with some of the most famous Turkic tafsirs written between the 10th and 15th centuries.

This table presents five of the most notable Turkic-language Qur’anic commentaries (tafsirs) produced from the 10th to 15th centuries, detailing their manuscript name or copy, the century of composition, the language they were written in, the type of translation (interpretive or interlinear), and the geographic origin or known author. The listed tafsirs include:

- a. The Leningrad Manuscript (Central Asian Turkic Commentary) (12th–13th centuries, Qarakhanid Turkic),
- b. The TIEM Copy (13th–14th centuries, Qarakhanid Turkic),
- c. The Rylands Copy (14th century, Eastern Turkic),
- d. The Suleymaniye (Hekimoglu Ali Pasha) Copy (14th century, Khwarezmian Turkic), and
- e. Cevahiru’l-Asdaf (15th century, Old Uzbek or Eastern Turkic).

The table is significant because it organizes the scattered historical records into a clear comparative structure, helping scholars trace the historical development, regional variations, and linguistic shifts in Turkic tafsir traditions over five centuries. It also highlights the interconnectedness between different Turkic linguistic branches (like Qarakhanid Turkic, Khwarezmian Turkic, and Chagatai) and the textual traditions they carried, offering insight into how Islamic religious knowledge was transmitted in local languages across Central Asia and beyond.

Table 1. Overview of the Most Famous Turkic Tafsirs (10th–15th Centuries)

No	Title/Copy	Century	Language	Type	Location/Author
1	Leningrad Manuscript (Central Asian Turkic Commentary)	12th–13th	Qarakhanid Turkic	Interpretive translation	Movarounnahr, Unknown author

2	TIEM Copy	13th–14th	Qarakhanid Turkic	Interpretive translation	Eastern Turkestan or Movarounnahr, Unknown author
3	Rylands Copy	14th	Eastern Turkic	Interpretive translation	Khwarezm or Movarounnahr. Unknown author
4.	Suleymaniye (Hekimoglu Ali Pasha) copy	14th	Khwarezmian Turkic	Interpretive translation	Khwarezm or Movarounnahr. Unknown author
5	Cevahiru' I- Asdaf	15th	Old Uzbek (close to Eastern Turkic)	Interpretive translation	Anatolia (present-day Turkey). Unknown author

Source: Compiled by the author based on scholarly research and manuscript records

The Uzbek language, during its long historical development, has passed through several stages. The earliest stage of its history includes the period from the most ancient times up to the 5th century AD. This stage is conditionally referred to as the earliest Turkic language. In scholarly works, the first phase of this period is called "Oltoy," and the following phase is known as the "Xun period." From the 6th century, the period of the ancient Turkic literary language begins [12]. This era marks the first stage in the history of literary, or written, language, as the Turkic written literary language emerged during this time. When discussing this period, it is preferable to use the term "written literary language." It is widely accepted that the period of the "ancient Turkic written literary language" spans the 6th to 10th centuries. The earliest written monuments of the Turkic language date back to this time. The history of the Turkic language, particularly the Uzbek literary language, also begins with the language of these written monuments. Bu davr quyidagi bosqichlarga bo'linadi:

- a. The language of the Ko'k Turk inscriptions (This group includes the language of the Ko'k Turk inscriptions created during the periods of the First and Second Turkic Khaganates, such as the Orkhon and Yenisei inscriptions, as well as those from Tuva, Talas, and Fergana);
- b. The language of written monuments in the Ko'k Turk, Uighur, Mani, Brahmi, and Sogdian scripts created during the Uighur Khaganate and states (in Turkic studies, it is also referred to as the "Old Uighur language"). From the 11th century, the period of the ancient Turkic literary language begins. This stage continued until the early 14th century [13]. Importantly, in the early stages of this period, particularly during the Qarakhanid period, the language of the written monuments created was very close to the language of the inscriptions from the "Old Turkic" period, maintaining the traditions of the ancient written language. One example: The Turkic oral literature samples presented in Mahmud al-Kashgari's *Devonu lug'atit turk* both linguistically and artistically trace their roots back to much earlier times. Similarly, the language of the famous *Qutadgu Bilig* epic, except for a few Arabic and Persian words in the lexicon, is very much aligned with the language of the Ko'k Turk inscriptions. The period of ancient Turkic literary language encompasses the following stages:
 - The language of the Qarakhanid period (the language of the written monuments created during the Qarakhanid period);

- Chagatai Turkic;
- Old Khwarezmian Turkic (the literary language used in the Golden Horde and Khwarezm regions);
- Old Kipchak language (the language of grammatical works and dictionaries written in Egypt, as well as the works created by the Kipchaks in the western Turkic lands);
- Old Anatolian Turkish (This was the written literary language used by the Oghuz Turks in the 13th to 15th centuries. Later, based on this, the literary language that came to be known as Ottoman Turkish emerged).

Old Uzbek Literary Language (from the 14th century to the early 20th century). During this period, "Chagatai Turkic" continued. The literary language of the 13th to 16th centuries is referred to as "Chagatai Turkic." This period is the most flourishing stage of the old Uzbek literary language. The influence and traditions of this rise persisted until the early 20th century [14]. The present-day Uzbek literary language. This period continues from the early 20th century to the present day. Like other fields of study, the history of the language also has its boundaries, with sources that serve as a foundation for research. The history of the language, based on written monuments, investigates the emergence of a particular language, its historical development, the changes it underwent until it reached its current form, and the laws governing these changes. The history of Turkic, particularly Uzbek, is studied based on the following key sources:

- a. Written monuments passed down from the past. In the study of the history of language, the most reliable source is the written monuments that have survived to the present day. Religious-philosophical works, examples of literary works, historical books, epigraphic texts, inscriptions on gravestones, records related to legal and economic matters, and other written artifacts created in Turkic languages are considered the most important sources for studying the history of Turkic languages. Importantly, in the early and medieval periods, not only in Turkic, but also in Chinese, Sogdian, Persian, and Arabic, works, dictionaries, and grammar books were created that provided information about Turkic languages [15]. These works can also serve as foundational sources in the study of the history of Turkic languages.
- b. Oral folk literature (folklore) materials. Some folk legends and epics, tales and stories, songs, proverbs, and expressions trace their roots back to very ancient times. Folklore materials consistently preserve the traditional patterns of artistic and linguistic thought. These creative works, formed over centuries, retain many features of the old language. Therefore, the language of oral folk literature can also be used as a source material in the study of language history.
- c. Contemporary Turkic languages and their dialects. The modern forms of Turkic languages and regional dialects are the result of centuries of phonetic, lexical-semantic, grammatical, and stylistic changes and developments of the Old Turkic language, shaped in accordance with the social, political, and cultural life of Turkic peoples. In particular, the popular (spoken) language preserves the traditions of the past especially well..
- d. Place names (toponyms), geographical terms, and names of peoples (ethnonyms). Names of cities and villages, names of bodies of water (hydronyms), and other geographical terms, as well as ethnonyms, often reflect remnants of the old language. Therefore, they can serve as important sources in the study of language history.

4. Conclusion

Between the 10th and 15th centuries, we can observe that the Qur'anic commentaries (tafsirs) written in Turkic were not complete exegeses; some consisted only of partial or interlinear translations. During these periods, even if not in the formal structure of a tafsir, interpretations and analyses of verses were presented in the form of narratives, ghazals, and similar styles. For instance, the 14th-century work *Qissai Rabg'uziy* can be taken as an example. Given that the people of Transoxiana (Movarounnahr) had a strong command of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic, it is understandable that tafsirs in Turkic were relatively few in number. However, even though they were not widespread, Turkic-language tafsirs continued to develop to some extent in the following centuries.

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