



**Common Religious-Epic Sagas of the Oghuz Turks
(A Historical and Geographical Perspective on the Subject)**

**Oğuz Türklerinin Ortak Dinî- Epik Destanları
(Konuya Tarihî ve Coğrafi Yönünden Bir Bakış)**

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ABSTRACT

An epic (epos) is an idealized artistic memory created by a people about their own history. From the mid-first millennium BCE, Turks appeared on the historical stage, spreading across a vast geography from the Sayan Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, from the Aral Sea to the Caspian Sea. These lands later became known as Turkestan. The Turks' rich worldview and traditions of statehood are reflected in ancient epics such as "Grey Wolf", "Oghuz Khagan," and "Alp Er Tonga." Among Turkic peoples, the Oghuz stand out, particularly for their strong state traditions. Scholars divide their history into three periods: ancient, medieval, and modern. Sources such as Rashid al-Din mention that the Oghuz were divided into 24 tribes. Today, the term "Oghuz" primarily refers to the Turks of Turkey and Azerbaijan, the Turkmens, and the Gagauz. Their differentiation intensified after adopting Islam, which also contributed to geographic stabilization. From the 10th century, with their conversion to Islam, the term "Turkman" emerged, and under the Seljuk alliance, Islam and Oghuz culture spread throughout the Middle East.

Religious leaders, alongside Seljuk forces, helped spread Islam in newly conquered lands. During this period, religious-heroic epics such as "Battal Gazi," "Danishmend Gazi," and "Saltukname" became widespread. These epics were considered both ideologically and politically significant and were supported by the state. The "Book of Dede Qorqud," transcribed in the 16th century, combines elements of heroism and religious heroism. It stands as a cultural memory of the Oghuz who spread Islam and shows thematic parallels with other similar epics.

Keywords: epic, epos, Turk, Oghuz, Azerbaijan, Anatolia

ÖZET

Epos, halkın kendi tarihi hakkında yarattığı idealleştirilmiş sanatsal hafızadır. MÖ 1. binyılın ortalarından itibaren tarih sahnesine çıkan Türkler, Sayan Dağları'ndan Pasifik Okyanusu'na, Aral Gölü'nden Hazar Denizi'ne kadar geniş bir coğrafyaya yayılmış, bu topraklar sonraları Türkistan adıyla anılmıştır. Türklerin zengin dünya görüşü ve devletçilik gelenekleri "Bozkurt", "Oğuz Kağan", "Alp Er Tonga" gibi eski destanlarda yansımaları bulmuştur. Türk halkları arasında Oğuzlar, özellikle devletçilik gelenekleri açısından öne çıkmıştır. Oğuz tarihi üç döneme ayrılır: eski, orta ve yeni dönemler. Reşideddin gibi kaynaklarda Oğuzların 24 boydan oluştuğu belirtilir. Günümüzdeki Oğuzlar denildiğinde başlıca Türkiye, Azerbaycan Türkleri, Türkmenler ve Gagavuzlar kastedilir. Oğuzların farklılaşması İslam'ın kabulüyle artmış, bu din onların coğrafi istikrarına da etki etmiştir. X. yüzyılda İslam'ı kabul eden Oğuzlar için "Türkmen" etnonimi kullanılmaya başlanmış ve Selçuklu ittifakıyla birlikte İslam ve Oğuz kültürü Yakın Doğu'ya yayılmıştır.

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Selçuklularla birlikte dini liderler de yeni topraklara İslam'ı taşımıştır. Bu dönemde "Battal Gazi", "Danışmend Gazi", "Saltukname" gibi dini-epik temalı destanlar yaygınlaşmıştır. Bu destanlar hem ideolojik hem de siyasi bakımdan önemli kabul edilmiş ve devlet tarafından desteklenmiştir. XVI. yüzyılda yazıya geçirilen "Kitab-ı Dede Korkut" ise hem kahramanlık hem dini-epik özellikler taşıyan, İslam'ı yayan Oğuzların kültürel hafızası olarak öne çıkar ve diğer destanlarla benzerlikler gösterir.

Anahtar kelimeler: epos, destan, Türk, Oğuz, Azerbaycan, Anadolu

INTRODUCTION

The history of a people is reflected in epic creativity and in epics, in artistic and mythologized form. Viktor Zhirmunsky, a prominent scholar of the epic traditions of various world nations, including Turkic peoples, justly stated: "The epic is the living past of a people, expressed through the idealization of heroism. Its scholarly-historical value, as well as its social and cultural-educational significance, stems from this" (Azərbaycan ədəbiyyatı tarixi, 2004).

Beyond their narrative and poetic qualities, epics function as fundamental carriers of collective memory. As Jan Assmann argues, cultural memory is constructed through symbolic forms such as myths, rituals, and epic narratives, which enable societies to preserve and transmit their foundational values across generations. In this sense, Turkic epics should be regarded not merely as literary texts but as mnemonic frameworks through which historical experience, religious transformation, and political ideology are encoded. The Oghuz epics, in particular, reflect a multilayered memory structure in which pre-Islamic mythological elements coexist with Islamic values, creating a continuous epic tradition rather than a rupture between belief systems. (Assmann, 2011, and Lord, 2000)

The epic literature of the Oghuz Turks, who initially lived in Central Asia and later settled in the Caucasus-Azerbaijan, Iran, and Asia Minor, and who established the magnificent Seljuk Empire, vividly reflects their heroic and honorable past. Particularly, their religious-heroic epics clearly express the ideological foundation of the Oghuz who spread Islam in new regions.

It should also be noted that recent studies have demonstrated that Turkic peoples inhabited the Caucasus and Anatolia long before the rise of the Seljuks. For instance, researcher Chingiz Garashkarly argues that Turks were among the earliest inhabitants not only of Anatolia but even of Greece, predating the Greeks themselves. He points to numerous pieces of evidence for the presence of the Pelasgian-Scythian civilization extending from ancient Greece (Relasgia) to Italy. One such piece of evidence is the assertion in 7th-8th century European sources that the Trojans – who shared a common origin with the Pelasgians – were identified as Turks (Cəfərov, 2004). Thus, the Oghuz Turks, who had earlier settled in Transoxiana and Central Asia, adopted Islam during this period and subsequently migrated to new territories. The ethnonym "Turkman" emerged in reference to the Islamized Oghuz Turks. This period marked the beginning of a broad process in which the Oghuz adopted Islam in large numbers.

Following the decisive defeat of the Ghaznavid army by the Seljuk alliance of Oghuz tribes at Dandanakan on May 28, 1040, the foundation of the Great Seljuk Empire was laid. Due to a scarcity of pastures in Central Asia, the Seljuks (comprising Oghuz and Turkmens) migrated en masse toward Iran, the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Anatolia, and northeastern Arabia. After the renowned Battle of Manzikert (1071) between the Seljuks and the Byzantine Empire, most of Anatolia came under Seljuk control. This migration into the region continued into the 13th century.

During the reigns of Alp Arslan (1063-1072) and Malik Shah (1072-1092), the Seljuk Empire extended from Afghanistan and China in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. However, struggles for political control persisted in these territories for a long time. In both Anatolia and the Caucasus – including Azerbaijan – conflicts arose between Muslim Oghuz and Christians (including Turkic Christians). This confrontation is vividly reflected in the surviving Dresden and Vatican manuscripts of the *Kitabi Dede Qorqud* epic.



The Seljuks engaged in prolonged wars against the Byzantine Empire and Crusaders, with control over certain regions repeatedly changing hands. Alongside Seljuk military forces, Islamic clerics and missionaries entered newly conquered lands, where segments of the local population converted to Islam. Following the rise of the Komnenos dynasty in Byzantium (from 1081), regions of Asia Minor such as Cilicia, Cappadocia, Phrygia, and Bithynia fell under Oghuz control. After the disintegration of the Great Seljuk Empire, another Turkic-Oghuz state, the Danishmendids, was established in southeastern Asia Minor and existed there for over a century (1067-1180). In central Anatolia, the Sultanate of Rum was founded and maintained power for a long period (1077-1307).

In the newly conquered territories, consolidating political authority required a strong ideological foundation. One such ideological basis was the promotion of heroic Islamic narratives that glorified the conquests, the raising of the Islamic banner in new lands, and the valor of Turkic-Oghuz warriors who fought to spread Islam. These religious-heroic epics, with their historical and ideological content, played a crucial role in legitimizing the political order and inspiring loyalty among the population.

Main part

It should be noted that the epic tradition of the Oghuz Turks dates back to much earlier periods, even before the Common Era. Their pre-Islamic epics – such as *Boz Gurd (Grey Wolf)*, *Oghuz Khagan*, *Xiongnu (Siyenpi)*, *Alp Er Tunga*, *Shu*, and *Ergenekon* – were widespread during the era of Tengriism. The influence of these ancient epics is evident in later Oghuz literature, particularly in their religious-heroic epics. It is also important to recall that the ancient Turkic belief system – Tengriism – shared essential similarities with Islam, particularly the concept of monotheism. This theological closeness is one of the reasons why the Turks embraced Islam relatively easily.

Several scholars emphasize that the relatively smooth Islamization of the Turks was not merely a political or military process, but also a theological one. Tengriism, the ancient belief system of the Turks, was characterized by a strict monotheistic worldview centered on the supreme Sky God (Tengri), a concept that closely parallels Islamic tawhid. As İbrahim Kafesoğlu and Jean-Paul Roux point out, this shared emphasis on divine unity facilitated the reinterpretation of earlier religious concepts within an Islamic framework. Consequently, rather than abandoning their former worldview entirely, the Turks resemanticized their religious symbols and epic motifs, allowing them to integrate Islam into their existing cultural and epic consciousness. (Kafesoğlu, 1984 & Roux, 1994)

According to researchers, there is a logical continuity between the literature of the Turks who transitioned from Tengriism to Islam, particularly in their epic tradition. As a widespread legend from Turkestan suggests, on the night of Mi'raj (the Prophet Muhammad's ascension to the heavens), the Prophet saw an unknown figure among the other prophets and inquired about his identity. The angel Jibril responded that the figure was not a prophet, but rather the spirit of Bugra Khan, who, 333 years later, would convert Turkestan to Islam. Upon returning to earth, the Prophet prayed for Bugra Khan and, at the request of his companions, met with the spirit of Bugra Khan and his forty disciples.

It should be emphasized that such narratives belong to the genre of menkıbe (hagiographical legend) rather than verifiable historical accounts. As Ahmet Yaşar Ocak notes, menkıbevî narratives played a crucial role in legitimizing religious and political transformations by embedding them within sacred time and prophetic authority. In the context of Turkic Islamization, legends such as the encounter between the Prophet Muhammad and Bugra Khan functioned as symbolic narratives that retrospectively sanctified historical processes and reinforced the Islamic identity of Turkic rulers and communities. (Ocak, 1992 & Köprülü, 1981)

In the context of epic thinking, the concept of one God parallels the idea of one ruler or one hero. Therefore, in ancient Turkic epics – preserved in various forms and sources – the epic heroes are essentially sovereign heroes who represent transformations of the "Tengri" (God) figure. Their will is viewed as a direct reflection of the epic consciousness that created these tales – whether it be the will of the people, the ethnic group, or the broader ethno-cultural system (İslam Ansiklopedisi, 2007).

Thus, the Oghuz Turks, throughout their historical development, replaced Tengriism with Islam precisely because of their shared monotheism. In the medieval period, the religious-heroic epics they created continued the traditions of the ancient Turkic epic worldview.

From the earliest periods, the epic literature of the Oghuz Turks reflected the worldview and distinct cultural characteristics of the people. These elements continued to manifest in the epics that emerged during the medieval period, particularly in the religious-heroic narratives. In these later works, Islam became the unifying force for the Oghuz, and the promotion of the faith, especially through armed struggle (jihad), served as a central theme. The valor of the warriors (ghazis) who fought in the name of Islam was glorified and became a defining feature of such epic texts.

In our view, the observation made by academician Nizami Jafarov about ancient Turkic epics also applies to the Islamic-era Oghuz epics. As he states: "Certainly, the epic (and particularly the ancient Turkic epic) is not merely a narrative or a tale; it is a monumental reservoir of mythic content that, under the influence of a dominant ethno-national idea, conveys a variety of plots and motifs while fully reflecting the core and subtle nuances of a nation's socio-aesthetic worldview. It cannot be restored in its entirety; it can only be imagined based on existing sources, and such imagination requires an organic unity of ideological-aesthetic, poetic-technological, and other components" (Koroğlu, 1999).

The religious-heroic epics created by the Oghuz Turks in the regions of the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and Anatolia were initially transmitted orally among the people as popular tales and legends. Over time, these narratives were collected and written down. Among the prominent examples of this epic tradition are *Battal Gazi*, *Danışmend Gazi*, *Saltuk Gazi*, *Khavarnama*, *Abu Muslimnama*, *Hamzanama*, *Khaybarnama*, *Museyyibnama*, and others.

It is also worth noting that the Oghuz Turks followed a distinct historical path of development and that their language exhibits unique lexical and grammatical features. As Professor Farhad Zeynalov states: "The Oghuz possess an ancient history and have undergone a complex path of development. The name 'Oghuz' is already attested in the Old Turkic epic of the Göktürks. Almost all researchers who study the Oghuz refer to their ancient, medieval, and modern phases of history" (Qaraşarlı, 2021). Today, the contemporary Oghuz peoples include the Turks, Azerbaijanis, Turkmens, and Gagauz.

It has been noted that many Balkan Turks also speak a variant of Oghuz Turkic. The languages of the aforementioned contemporary peoples are considered the modern continuation of the Old Oghuz tongue. In particular, the majority of the population residing in Eastern Anatolia, in eastern regions of present-day Turkey, speaks Azerbaijani Turkic [Təhmasib, 1972]. The strong influence of Azerbaijani Turkic in the aforementioned religious-heroic epics further confirms that these works are the joint creative product of the Oghuz peoples – namely the Turks and Azerbaijanis – who lived in these regions.

Composed and recorded in the same geographical zone, *The Book of Dede Qorqud* – like *The Epic of Battal Gazi*, *The Epic of Danışmend Gazi*, *Saltuknama*, and similar works – is a collective cultural product of the Oghuz. The events' settings, the core themes, the depiction of Islamic-Christian confrontations, and the linguistic features all demonstrate the closeness of *Dede Qorqud* to the aforementioned heroic-religious epics.

From a comparative perspective, the epics of Battal Gazi, Danışmend Gazi, and the Book of Dede Qorqud form a coherent epic cycle rather than isolated narratives. As Faruk Sümer and Osman Turan underline, these works collectively articulate the ideological foundations of the Turkification and Islamization of Anatolia. The repetition of motifs such as ghaza, martyrdom, divine assistance, and the transformation of conquered spaces into Islamic centers reveals a shared epic grammar that served both religious instruction and political legitimation. (Sümer, 1999 & Turan, 2017)



As the scholar Faruk Sümer writes: "The *Dede Qorqud* epics contain accounts of internal wars and warriors among the Oghuz, struggles against non-Muslim Kipchaks, and the adventures of various beys. After these stories were epicized, they were transcribed in verse form at the beginning of the 14th century under the title *Oghuzname*. However, this version has since been lost. The epics performed by the Oghuz with the accompaniment of the *qopuz* were later written down in the second half of the 16th century, as recited by a minstrel in the Erzurum-Bayburt region" (Təhmasib, 1972).

One important point in Sümer's statement deserves emphasis: the region in which the work was recorded – Erzurum and Bayburt – is predominantly Azerbaijani-speaking. The scholar likely reached this conclusion based on the text's linguistic features.

A review of the geographical locations described in the epic suggests that it was transcribed in the Caucasus region – specifically, in Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that the monument also references places located in Anatolia.

It is worth noting that the first religious-heroic epic recounting the settlement of the Oghuz Turks in Anatolia and their struggle to spread Islam is the *Epic of Battal Gazi*. This work, which became widespread not only among the Anatolian Turks but also among the Turks of Azerbaijan and Central Asia, is known under various titles such as *Menâkıbu Battal Gazi*, *Seyyid Battal Gazi*, *Hikâyet-i Seyyid Battal Gazi*, *Battalname*, and *Kitab-i Battal Gazi*. The epic centers on a historical figure, Battal Gazi [Hijri 122 – ca. 740 CE], who is renowned for his military campaigns during the Umayyad period against Byzantium in the propagation of Islam.

Over time, historical facts about him were blended with legends. According to some accounts, he lived near Malatya during the reign of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid. Although ethnically Arab, he was later transformed in the Anatolian Turkish legend and epic into a heroic Oghuz warrior. The epic of Battal Gazi, as preserved in the Oghuz tradition, took shape between the 11th and 13th centuries, became highly popular among the people, and was first recorded in writing in the 13th century.

While older sources indicate that Battal was active in Kayseri, Afyon, Eskişehir, and Syria, Turkish authors such as Evliya Çelebi, Gelibolulu Mustafa Âlî, and Müneccimbaşı refer to his battles in the Malatya region. He is portrayed as a fearsome figure in the Christian world, a warrior who conquered enemy cities and fortresses through both martial prowess and intelligence. In the Turkish *Battalname*, Battal Gazi is not depicted as an Arab commander, but rather as a classical Turkish *alp* or *eren* – a spiritual warrior fighting in the name of Islam.

Battal Gazi is portrayed as a hero and military commander endowed with extraordinary strength. He fights for his people, homeland, and faith – he is a *ghazi*, a warrior engaged in *jihad*. At the end of the epic, he attains martyrdom. However, the tradition of Oghuz Turkic religious-heroic epics does not end with him. The *Epic of Danishmend Gazi*, composed later, continues this tradition, focusing on the life and struggles of the historical figure Danishmend Gazi and his companions. The narrative primarily recounts their battles against the Byzantines and their efforts to spread Islam and Turkic identity in the region.

Historically, Danishmend Gazi, of the Çepni branch of the Oghuz Turks, established the Danishmendid dynasty in 1071. This polity ruled significant parts of Central Anatolia, including Sivas, Amasya, Tokat, Zamanlı, Elbistan, and surrounding areas. The epic covers events from the 11th to the 13th centuries, blending real historical incidents with legends about the hero in a unique narrative style. Some scholars consider the *Epic of Danishmend Gazi* a continuation of the *Epic of Battal Gazi*.

In later periods, the *Epic of Saltuk Gazi* emerged, in which the hero continues the struggle for Islamization and Turkification, this time starting from Sinop. The events are set in central and southern Anatolia and narrated in a fluent, vivid language. Unlike earlier religious-heroic epics, *The Epic of Saltuk Gazi* contains fewer mythological elements – there are no encounters with legendary places or battles with supernatural beings. Instead, it presents a more grounded, historically rooted narrative structure.

As noted, the conquest, Islamization, and Turkification of Anatolia were ideologically and spiritually supported, which is why great attention was paid to the widespread dissemination of works about the Oghuz rulers. It is no coincidence that after the Danishmendids were defeated by the Seljuks, the Seljuk ruler Izz al-Din Kaykavus ordered his secretary Ibn al-Ayyash to transcribe the *Danishmend Qazi Epic*, which recounts the heroic deeds of his former rival Malik Danishmend. The *Saltuk Qazi Epic* was copied in the 15th century by the order of Sultan Cem, son of Mehmed the Conqueror of the Ottoman Empire. The author Abulkhair Rumi collected various narratives about Sarı Saltuk from different regions and composed the *Saltuk Qazi Epic* in three volumes.

It should be noted that during the medieval period, numerous works shared similar themes and espoused the same ideology. Common features can be observed in the plotlines, language, and characters of these epics. Particularly interesting is that these works resonate with the version of the Book of Dede Korkut (Kitabi-Ded Qorqud) transcribed in the second half of the 16th century. Although the *Book of Dede Korkut* reflects some pre-Islamic beliefs, its final version is distinctly Islamic.

Dede Korkut is portrayed both as a shaman and a sorcerer, while also possessing qualities associated with Muslim saints. The Turkish scholar Osman Turan writes about the inclusion of the *Book of Dede Korkut* in the series of Islamic epics: "The Turks experienced a long period of struggle and epic tradition to make Anatolia a homeland of Turkishness and Islam. The epics of Battal Ghazi, Danishmend Ghazi, and Dede Korkut, along with many other *menkabe* (hagiographical) works, have bequeathed to history the spirit of heroism and the ideology of jihad of that era" (Turan, 2017).

At the beginning of the epic, it is stated that Dede Korkut was a close friend of the Prophet Muhammad, his disciple, a companion who lived for three hundred years after him, and a revered sultan among the people of Shirvan. He was appointed as a "sheikh" by Salman al-Farsi, whom Muhammad had sent to Demirkapi Darband (Turan, 2017).

Throughout the epic, the Oghuz people's words, desires, and wishes, their wise sayings, and even their praises and curses clearly reflect their Muslim faith and their turning to the One God. In eight out of the twelve chapters of the epic, the Oghuz beys fight against infidels, primarily Christians. The heroes of the epic address God with names and titles such as "Allah is upon us," "Al-Qadir," "Al-Qahhar," "Al-Haqq Ta'ala," "Yaradan Qadir Tanrı" (The Creator, Powerful God), "Yaradan Allah" (The Creator Allah), "Ucalardan uca" (The Most High), "He who creates from nothing", "Allah", "King of Kings", "Aziz" (The Mighty), "Jabbar" (The Compeller), "Sattar" (The Veiler), "Ahad" (The One), "Samed" (The Eternal), "Ulu" (The Great), "The Most Generous of the generous" and others.

The Oghuz begin all their deeds by honoring God and, after Him, the Islamic Prophet Muhammad Mustafa (peace be upon him) with great respect. In their prayers, they say phrases such as "May Muhammad Mustafa forgive our sins with the water of his face." Before battles against the infidels, the Oghuz warriors perform prayers, turn to God and the Prophet, and recite blessings (salawat).

In the epic, the Oghuz warriors fight most of their battles in the path of Allah, for the cause of religion. They are truly *ghazis* and *erens* who wage jihad for Islam. The Oghuz, who raise their swords out of love for Muhammad's religion, achieve victory over the infidels by the end of the epic's episodes. After praying to Allah and the Prophet, their strength multiplies manifold. If the defeated enemy pleads for mercy, the Oghuz heroes forgive them. This characteristic of the Oghuz is also reflected in their other Islamic epics. When the Oghuz heroes defeat the infidels, capture their fortresses, and destroy their churches, they build mosques in their place. The people's tradition also notes the Shi'ism of the heroes in the *Koroğlu* epic: "Dede Korkut and thus the entire Oghuz people are presented as followers of the Shi'a sect. This is evidenced by the praise of Ali and his sons Husayn and Hasan" (Jirmunski, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Until recent times, researchers generally classified our epics into two main categories: heroic epics and love epics. However, the Oghuz peoples have created several shared medieval epics that should be regarded as religious-heroic epics. Although these works remained largely unexplored during the Soviet era, it is now time to include these epics – alongside those of other Oghuz peoples – into the history of



Azerbaijani literature. Epics such as *Battal Gazi*, *Danishmend Gazi*, and *Khavarnama* praise the Oghuz ghazis who spread Islam and Turkic identity across Anatolia. A close study of the most famous monument of the Oghuz Turks, *Kitabi-Dede Qorqud*, reveals that this work is not only a heroic epic but also a religious-heroic epic. Its central idea, narrative structure, the individual qualities of its heroes, language, and other features resonate with the aforementioned Islamic epics.

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