

PIONEERS OF UZBEK RENAISSANCE: FROM YUSUF KHAASS HAJIB TO AHMAD AL-FARGHANI



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Abstract: *Uzbekistan is striving to develop its Third Renaissance, aiming to become the cradle of science and literature in the Turkic-Muslim world, just as it was in the past. Indeed, the first and second scientific renaissance of the Muslim world took place in Uzbek lands. This article seeks to highlight the key figures of the First Renaissance of the Muslim world, which occurred in the Turkic Karluk territories—modern Uzbekistan. Among the most significant figures are Yunus Has Hajib, Mahmud al-Kashgari (fathers of Turkic philosophy and literature), and Ahmad al-Fergani, a great Turkic astronomer from Turkestan. These Uzbek scholars transformed Bukhara, Fergana, and Samarkand into major scientific centers, serving as examples for Uzbekistan's Third Renaissance.*

Özet: *Özbekistan, geçmişte olduğu gibi Türk-İslam dünyasında bilimin ve edebiyatın beşiği olmayı hedefleyerek Üçüncü Rönesans'ını geliştirmeye çalışıyor. Gerçekten de, İslam dünyasının birinci ve ikinci bilimsel rönesansı Özbek topraklarında gerçekleşti. Bu makale, modern Özbekistan olan Türk Karluk topraklarında gerçekleşen İslam dünyasının Birinci Rönesans'ının önemli figürlerini vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. En önemli figürler arasında Türk felsefesi ve edebiyatının babaları Yunus Has Hacib, Kaşgarlı Mahmud ve Türkistanlı büyük Türk astronomu Ahmed el-Fergani bulunmaktadır. Bu Özbek bilginler, Buhara, Fergana ve Semerkand'ı büyük bilim merkezlerine dönüştürdüler ve Özbekistan'ın Üçüncü Rönesans'ı için örnek teşkil ettiler.*

Keywords: *Uzbekistan, First Renaissance, Yunus Has Hajib, Mahmud al-Kashgari, Ahmad al-Fergani*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Özbekistan, Birinci Rönesans, Yunus Has Hajib, Kaşgarlı Mahmud, Fergani Ahmed*

Introduction

Modern Uzbekistan aims to develop its Third Renaissance. According to the renowned journal Euronews, Uzbekistan is initiating its “renaissance” through culture and education. In a series of conferences and exhibitions organized in Tashkent, experts and officials highlighted the country's cultural and educational potential (Euronews, July 10, 2023).

Uzbekistan has been the most dynamically developing economy in Central Asia over the past five years, particularly in the nine years since Mirziyoyev came

to power, according to the well-known European journal Euractiv (Gotev, G., 2021).

Since taking office, President Mirziyoyev has introduced the concept of a “New Uzbekistan” (Yangi O‘zbekiston) and referred to the next phase of development as the “Third Renaissance.” Historically, Uzbeks have experienced two major renaissances: (1) The First Uzbek Renaissance (9th–12th centuries)—also called the “Oriental Renaissance”—with notable figures such as Yusuf Khas Hajib; (2) The Second Renaissance—initiated by the Timurids in the 16th century, which was as prestigious as the Renaissance in Florence.

This article explores the First Renaissance, during which art, science, literature, and philosophy flourished under state patronage. This period produced hundreds of prominent scholars and thinkers, creating the necessary conditions for the advancement of society. The study focuses on how science and philosophy, particularly through literature, developed among the ancestors of the Uzbeks, especially through the Kutadgu Bilig, a seminal work in Turkic intellectual history. This article will analyze how the first renaissance can be an example for the current one in Uzbekistan based on great figures who advanced philosophy and science in Uzbek lands from the 9th to the 12th century.

1. Uzbekistan: A Land of Renaissance Since the Qarakhanids

The Qarakhanids were a Turkic dynasty ruling Transoxiana from 840 to 1212. They are considered the ancestors of the Uzbeks (Davidovich, 1998). This dynasty fostered a renaissance in the Turkic world, reviving science and philosophy and rescuing the Muslim world from intellectual decline.

The crisis in the Islamic world during the 9th and 10th centuries ended with the Turks’ entry into Islam. By the 11th century, Arab-Islamic empires such as the Umayyads and Abbasids had given way to Turkic-Islamic empires. The internal crisis of Islam was largely resolved, and the religion expanded—spreading from the Great Steppe in the north to Afghanistan and India in the south, and from Turkestan in the east to Anatolia in the west. This marked the beginning of a second period of conquest and expansion in Islamic history.

The Qarakhanids ruled a vast territory, covering the Tian Shan region, Transoxiana, and lands stretching from Kansu to the western shores of the Aral Sea. They were the first Muslim Turkic state where both the ruling dynasty and the general population were Turkic (Kanar, 2019: 23).

The fusion of fresh Turkic energy with the grand heritage of Islamic civilization led to the formation of an advanced administrative structure and a well-organized military. As a result, vibrant intellectual and artistic activity emerged in cultural centers such as Kashgar, Balasagun, Samarkand, and Bukhara. According to Banarlı (1971:218), “*Rulers patronized scholars and poets, granting them high positions at court and supporting the establishment of libraries and madrasas where continuous intellectual and literary work took place.*”

According to the historian İbrahim Kafesoğlu (1980:3), this period was not only a time of great political and military expansion but also a crucial era for the

cultural history of the Turks. During the Qarakhanid era, a distinct Turkic culture developed within the framework of Islamic civilization. The three most important intellectual figures of this period were Yusuf Khas Hajib, author of *Kutadgu Bilig*, Mahmud al-Kashgari, author of *Divanü Lügati't-Türk*, and Ahmad al-Farghani.

2. The Development of Literature and Philosophy (9th–12th Centuries)

While Yusuf Khas Hajib (1018–1069) and Mahmud al-Kashgari are the most prominent figures of the First Turkic Renaissance, the Karluks also produced great writers such as Singku Seli Tutung, Silig Tigin, and Aprinchur Tigin between the late 8th and 9th centuries. From the earliest periods of Turkic history, poets and oral storytellers played a vital role in preserving culture.

2.1. Literary Contributions of Yusuf Khas Hajib (1018-1069)

Yusuf Khas Hajib is the first author of Islamic Turkic literature. He was born in the early 11th century in Balasaghun, Turkistan into a noble family, distinguished by his knowledge, virtue, asceticism, and piety. In 1069-1070, the center of government of the Eastern Karakhanid state was Kashgar. He presented his work to the Karakhanid ruler Süleyman Arslan Hakan oğlu Tavgaç Uluğ Buğra Han. Appreciating the poet's talent, the ruler appointed him to the position of "Has Hâcib" (Chief Chamberlain). Yusuf Has Hâcib's work, along with Mahmud al-Kashgari, constituted a significant intellectual duo that shaped the century.

2.1.1. *Kutadgu Bilig*: Philosophical Advances

Kutadgu Bilig, the first Islamic work written in Turkic language, was composed as a masterpiece of cultural history and presents a powerful philosophy of state and society through four symbolic figures representing four fundamental concepts. Although formally resembling an epic, *Kutadgu Bilig* also fits into the category of drama, which further clarifies its literary nature. Among the Karluks, poetry was the primary literary form to develop. The Orkhon Inscriptions themselves were written in a poetic style (Ötkür & Yasin, 2016: 170). The Karluk literary tradition reached its peak during the time of Yusuf Has Hacib (Ötkür & Yasin, 2016: 169).

The concept of *dünya* (the world) was first introduced into Turkish by Yusuf Has Hacib and remains widely used today. In *Kutadgu Bilig*, he introduced this concept to provide a political direction for the newly emerging Turkic-Islamic empires of the 11th century. He borrowed the Arabic term *al-dunya* but refined its meaning by first juxtaposing it with similar words and later using it independently. This development of conceptual meaning is a major contribution to Turkic intellectual history (Kocaoğlu, 2024: 327).

Kutadgu Bilig serves as an encyclopedia encapsulating the social ideology of an entire historical period, covering the Karakhanid political and social order, legal and moral principles, philosophy and religion, science and education, literature and the arts and it is considered a precious gem of world cultural heritage.

Particularly significant is that, in an era when Arabic and Persian dominated the fields of science and art under the Karakhanids, Yusuf Has Hacib managed to write on complex subjects in his native Turkic language, using a refined and

simple style. The minimal use of Arabic and Persian terms in Kutadgu Bilig is a striking example of its emphasis on the mother tongue (Turkic). Philosophically, this linguistic nationalism aligns with the patriotic spirit later promoted by Ali Shir Navayi during the Chagatai literary era. This deep sense of linguistic patriotism contributed to the strengthening of the native language and the flourishing of Karluk literature. Today, this message can serve as inspiration for fostering a Third Renaissance in Uzbekistan.

Kutadgu Bilig not only provides a detailed account of the social and administrative structure of the Turks but also conveys a profound moral philosophy where Altaic (Turkic) ideals coexist with Islamic principles.

The literal meaning of the title Kutadgu Bilig has been interpreted in various ways. Some scholars translate it as “Wisdom of Happiness,” while others see it as “Wisdom that Brings Happiness.” The work aims to guide individuals toward happiness both in this world and the hereafter. It provides the intellectual and moral foundations necessary for organizing the lives of individuals, communities, and the state in an ideal way. *“With this work, Yusuf created a philosophical system that analyzes the meaning of human life and defines the role of individuals within society and the state”* (Elçioğlu & Özden, 2004). Kutadgu Bilig introduces many ethical concepts, including biliglik (wisdom), kutluluk (happiness), könilik (justice), xrdem (virtue), xdgü (kindness), asiglig (helpfulness), love, loyalty, generosity, bravery, patience, and humility, which are classified as positive ethical values. In contrast, falsehood, ignorance, meanness, and greed are considered negative ethical traits.

Yusuf Khas Hajib believes that our primary duty is to seek wisdom. Kutadgu Bilig contains the following statements on this subject: *“No matter how much wisdom you possess, always seek to acquire more, for a wise man attains his desires through the pursuit of wisdom.”* (Elcioglu & Ozden, 2004: 22-23)

Through his work, Yusuf Khas Hajib sought to encourage his people to become wiser and to develop virtues such as patience, bravery, and moral excellence—the tendency to always act ethically and engage in just actions. In this way, his philosophy remains a remarkable example for the Uzbek people today. The statements in Kutadgu Bilig clearly express that wisdom brings individuals closer to perfection and guides their souls toward beneficial actions.

2.2. Literary Contributions : Mahmud al-Kashgari

Mahmud al-Kashgari's interests were not limited to linguistics. He also provided valuable historical information about the Turkic nation and its lands. Having traveled extensively across the Turkic world, he observed the way of life of various Turkic peoples and gathered information about tribes and regions he could not visit himself. He compiled his findings into a map that pinpointed the locations of Turkic tribes and examined their interrelations. The literary pieces he included in his work were not merely for reference but were likely drawn from sources he had access to and consulted regularly (Ülkütaşır, 1942).

Mahmud al-Kashgari composed his work, *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*, to teach Arabic speakers the Turkic language (Maralbek & Koçak, 2018). This shows how much he was a predecessor of Ali-Shir Nava'i and raised the Turkic language to a high level of recognition. In the introductory section of his work, after praising God and Prophet Muhammad, Mahmud al-Kashgari speaks highly of the Turks. In the subsequent pages of *Dīvānu Lugāti't-Türk*, he praises Turkishness and the Turks at every opportunity. In his dictionary, Mahmud al-Kashgari defines the name 'Turk' as follows:

"Turk, may God's peace be upon him, is the name of the son of Prophet Noah. Just as in the verse 'Has there not been over man a long period of time when he was not a thing worth mentioning?' the name of Prophet Adam is referred to with the word 'man,' God uses this name when addressing the children of Noah's son Turk" (Türk Dil Kurumu).

The importance he placed on the use of his language helped develop a national identity and literature in his language. Therefore, today, Uzbekistan needs to use this rich past to combat everything that was erased during the Soviet era.

3. The Development of Science Between with Ahmad al-Farghani

Like Mahmud al-Kashgari and Yusuf Khass Hajib, Ahmad al-Farghani—a Turkic astronomer—shone as a beacon of knowledge in Central Asia, turning Turkestan into a scientific hub (Kahya, 2002:171).

Kahya (2002:170) writes that: *"Farghani worked on the construction of an astronomical instrument called the new Nilometer, also known as al-Mikyās al-Kabīr (the Great Nilometer)."*

Farghani explained the movements of the Sun, Moon, and other celestial bodies, significantly advancing astronomy. His *Compendium of Astronomy* was considered a model textbook in Europe until the 15th century and was repeatedly translated. His work contributed to correcting the astronomical values of Claudius Ptolemy, the Greek astronomer of the 1st century. For example, he challenged Ptolemy's claim that the solar ecliptic was fixed and argued that the solar apogee moved along with the fixed stars (Abgrall, 2013: 14). In his honor, a lunar crater was named Alfraganus.

Another key figure from this era was Al-Biruni, a polymath who made significant contributions to astronomy, mathematics, geography, and natural sciences. He is best known for works such as *Kitab al-Hind* and *Tahdid Nihayat al-Amakin*. Influenced by Greek philosophers like Aristotle, Archimedes, and Democritus, Al-Biruni began his scientific studies at the age of 17. He calculated the height of the Sun and the longitude of cities, determined the onset of seasons based on solar movements, and measured the Earth's circumference with remarkable accuracy. Considered the founder of geodesy, he argued that trigonometry should be treated as a separate field from astronomy and proposed using the radius as a unit in trigonometric functions. Al-Biruni also developed numerous instruments for astronomical and geographical measurements (Özcan, 2013: 20).

Discussions and Conclusion

The first revival, including Yusuf Khas Hajib, Mahmud al-Kashgari, Ahmad al-Farghani, emerged as a key figure who, thanks to their intellectual talent, opened a new chapter in the history of Karluk and, more broadly, in Turkic history. Their commitment to linguistic development joins the efforts of Emir Timur, Alisher Navoi and others who elevated Jaghatai to the status of an official and literary language. Even today, the Uzbek government recognizes its literary heritage and organizes national and international conferences to celebrate and promote its past.

Yusuf Khas Hajib and Mahmud al-Kashgari's philosophical legacy plays a crucial role in the spiritual and cultural rebirth of New Uzbekistan. This heritage can significantly contribute to Uzbekistan's future cultural and intellectual development. During the country's "Third Renaissance" era, it has the potential to become a center of Turkic-Islamic civilization through its ongoing and future projects.

For a nation's spiritual and cultural revival, it is essential to look back at history. Without understanding history, shaping the future becomes more challenging. Integrating Yusuf Khas Hajib, Mahmud al-Kashgari, Ahmad al-Farghani's teachings into Uzbekistan's educational and cultural policies would have a positive societal impact.

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