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AESTHETIC AND POLITICAL PRACTICES IN CENTRAL ASIAN TURKISH SOCIETIES: ART,
POWER AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the historical interplay between aesthetics and political practices in Central Asian Turkic societies. It particularly focuses on how the Huns, Gök Türks, and Uighur Turkic communities utilized art and aesthetics to symbolize political power and construct social identity. The findings illustrate that aesthetic practices were not solely expressions of artistic creativity but also served as representations of political authority and as strategic instruments for the consolidation of social order. In this context, the study examines the role of aesthetic elements such as stone inscriptions, architectural structures, and religious symbols in glorifying and legitimizing political power within Central Asian Turkic societies. The principal aim of this research is to elucidate how aesthetics and political practices co-evolved in these societies and to assess the implications of this co-evolution for social identity construction. The study also explores how art was employed as a political language, extending beyond its function as a mere vehicle for aesthetic expression. The impact of the nomadic lifestyle on art and aesthetics is further analyzed, with particular emphasis on the functional integration of artistic traditions, especially in metalworking and portable art. The research also evaluates the influence of religious beliefs such as Tengrism, Manichaeism, and Buddhism on aesthetic practices, with a specific focus on how aesthetic elements in Gök Türk and Uighur inscriptions reinforced political authority. These artistic works are interpreted as propaganda tools, consolidating rulers' power and authority while also serving as visual and symbolic narratives that shaped social identity. A qualitative research methodology was adopted, with document analysis as the primary method. Historical documents, including Gök Türk inscriptions, architectural structures, and other relevant artifacts, were meticulously examined to provide a comprehensive analysis of the development of aesthetic and political practices within their historical context. Conceptual analysis was employed to examine the relationships between key concepts such as aesthetics, power, and identity construction. The analysis particularly focused on the role of aesthetic practices in representing political authority and shaping social identity within the social, religious, and cultural frameworks of the time. To facilitate collective evaluation, the findings are presented in tabular form, concretizing the relationship between aesthetic elements, political authority, and social structure. This demonstrates that art functioned not merely as a form of aesthetic expression, but as a socio-political tool integral to the reinforcement of social structures and political order. In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of how aesthetic and political practices were interwoven in Central Asian Turkic societies and examines the impact of this integration on social structures. Aesthetic practices were employed as strategic tools for the consolidation of political power and the formation of social identities. The findings reveal that art and aesthetics in these societies were not merely processes of individual creation but functioned as mechanisms to strengthen social structures and reinforce political order.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Political Power, Social Identity, Central Asian Turkic Societies, Art.

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ORTA ASYA TÜRK TOPLUMLARINDA ESTETİK VE SİYASİ PRATİKLER: SANAT, İKTİDAR VE KİMLİK İNŞASI

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Orta Asya Türk toplumlarında estetik ve siyasi pratiklerin tarihsel süreçteki ilişkisini incelemektedir. Çalışmada Hun, Gök Türk ve Uygur Türk topluluklarının sanat ve estetiği, siyasi iktidarın temsili ve toplumsal kimlik inşasında nasıl kullandığına odaklanılmıştır. Çalışma, estetik pratiklerin yalnızca sanatsal birer ifade aracı olmayıp, aynı zamanda siyasi gücün bir temsili ve toplumsal düzenin pekiştirilmesi için kullanılan stratejik unsurlar olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu bağlamda, taş yazıtlar, mimari yapılar ve dini semboller gibi estetik öğelerin, Orta Asya Türk toplumlarının siyasi otoriteyi yüceltmek ve meşrulaştırmak amacıyla nasıl işlev gördüğü ele alınmıştır. Dolayısıyla çalışmanın temel amacı, Orta Asya Türk toplumlarında estetik ile siyasi pratiklerin nasıl bir arada geliştiğini ve bu süreçlerin toplumsal kimlik üzerindeki etkilerini ortaya koymaktır. Bu kapsamda, sanatın bir estetik ifade aracı olmanın ötesinde, siyasi bir dil olarak nasıl kullanıldığı incelenmiştir. Ayrıca Türk-göçebe yaşam tarzının sanat ve estetik üzerindeki etkisi de çalışmada ele alınmıştır; özellikle metal işçiliği ve taşınabilir sanatın, Orta Asya Türk toplumlarının estetik anlayışının işlevsellik ile nasıl iç içe geçtiği analiz edilmiştir. Çalışma kapsamında, Göktanrı inancı, Maniheizm ve Budizm gibi dini inançların estetik pratikler üzerindeki etkisi de değerlendirilmiştir. Özellikle Gök Türk ve Uygur Yazıtlarında, sanatsal ve estetik unsurların, siyasi otoriteyi pekiştiren araçlar olarak nasıl kullanıldığı incelenmiştir. Çünkü sanat eserleri, hükümdarların güç ve otoritesini halk üzerinde pekiştiren propaganda araçları olarak işlev görmüştür. Bu eserler, aynı zamanda toplumsal kimliği şekillendiren görsel ve sembolik anlatılar olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılarak tarihi olaylar ve estetik pratiklerin incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır. Çalışmada özellikle doküman analizi yöntemi tercih edilmiştir. Gök Türk Yazıtları, mimari yapılar, sanat eserleri ve döneme ait diğer tarihi belgeler incelenmiş; estetik ve siyasi pratiklerin tarihsel bağlamdaki gelişimi üzerine analiz yapılmıştır. Bulguların değerlendirilmesinde kavramsal çözümleme tekniği kullanılmış; estetik, iktidar ve kimlik inşası gibi kavramlar arasındaki ilişki ele alınmıştır. Özellikle estetik pratiklerin siyasi otoriteyi temsil etme ve toplumsal kimliği şekillendirme süreçlerindeki rolü, dönemin sosyal, dini ve kültürel yapıları ile ilişkilendirilerek analiz edilmiştir. Ulaşılan bulgular, toplu bir değerlendirme sunmak amacıyla tablo şeklinde düzenlenmiş; estetik unsurların siyasi otorite ve toplumsal yapı ile olan ilişkisi somutlaştırılmıştır. Bu şekilde, sanatın sadece estetik bir ifade biçimi değil, aynı zamanda toplumsal ve siyasi bir araç olarak işlev gördüğü ortaya konulmuştur. Sonuç olarak Orta Asya Türk toplumlarında estetik ve siyasi pratiklerin birbiriyle bütünleştiği ve bu bütünleşmenin toplumsal yapılar üzerinde etkileri olduğu söylenebilir. Estetik pratikler, bu toplumların siyasi gücünü ve toplumsal kimliklerini güçlendirmek için stratejik birer araç olarak kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları Orta Asya Türk toplumlarındaki estetik ve sanatın, yalnızca bireysel yaratım süreci olmadığını, aynı zamanda toplumsal yapıları ve siyasi düzeni pekiştiren bir işlev gördüğünü ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Estetik, Siyasi İktidar, Toplumsal Kimlik, Orta Asya Türk Toplumları, Sanat.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the historical process, Central Asian Turkic societies have attracted attention not only with their military and political achievements, but also with their cultural and artistic accumulation. From the Gök Türks to the Uighurs, from the Huns to the Oghuz, these societies have built a deep-rooted state tradition in a wide geography. Despite their nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyles, the political structures of the Turkic communities were highly organized and hierarchical. This political structure was not only limited to state administration and military power but was also closely associated with aesthetic practices. In these societies where art, culture and aesthetics functioned as a part of political power, aesthetic practices were often used as tools to reinforce political authority. In particular, elements such as stone inscriptions, architectural structures and religious symbols have been the forms of reflecting both the aesthetic understanding and political practices of these societies.¹

Aesthetic practices in Central Asian Turkic societies are not only artistic, but also have a deep philosophical and ideological basis. Ancient beliefs, such as the belief in the Sky God, had a great influence on aesthetic judgments and symbols. Especially in Gök Türk and Uighur inscriptions, these symbols, which function not only as aesthetic elements but also as a reflection of political authority and leadership power, clearly reveal the relationship between aesthetics and politics. The mobility brought about by the nomadic lifestyle also mobilized aesthetic understandings, and political messages were conveyed through portable art and symbols.²

¹Baurzhan Glaudivov et al., *The Artistic Culture of Central Asia and Azerbaijan in the 9th–15th Centuries: IV. Architecture*, International Institute for Central Asian Studies, 2013; G. Van Den Berg, *Turks, Texts and Territory: Imperial Ideology and Cultural Production in Central Eurasia*, Silk Road Cities, Leiden University 2021.

²Peter B. Golden, "Ethnogenesis in the Tribal Zone: The Shaping of the Turks." In Ed. C. Hriban, *Studies on the Peoples and Cultures of the Eurasian Steppes*, Editura Academiei Române – Muzeul Brăilei Editura Istros, 2011b, s. 17-63.

This close relationship between aesthetics and political practices shows that art is not only an individual creation, but also a tool that reflects the overall political structure of society.

Political practices in Central Asian Turkic societies include not only military power but also aesthetic representations. Architectural structures, monuments and works of art that symbolize the authority of rulers should be considered as part of the political and aesthetic practices of society. Especially the inscriptions erected during the Gök Türk period were aesthetically rendered to glorify the power of the rulers, while the inscriptions put political messages into an artistic form.³ These inscriptions not only informed the public but were also used as political and aesthetic tools to reinforce the idea that the ruler had divine authority. The fact that aesthetics gained such a political meaning reveals that art became an indicator of social structure rather than being purely decorative.

The literature on the relationship between aesthetics and political practices of Central Asian Turkic societies is limited. Existing studies have mostly focused on specific periods or individual works of art; the effects of aesthetics on political practices have not been addressed. For example, although there have been studies in Chinese sources, especially on Gök Türk and Uighur art, these studies have generally ignored how aesthetics represented political authority.⁴ In Arabic sources, studies on Turkish-Islamic aesthetics are limited to the impact of Islam on Turkish societies and political practices in the pre-Islamic period are overlooked.⁵ In other studies, the art of Central Asian Turkic societies is mostly dealt with through archaeological finds and the political meaning of these findings is not emphasized.⁶ When Western publications are analyzed, it is found that they generally interpret the nomadic cultures of the Turks through art and deal with the relationship between aesthetics and politics limited to sedentary cultures.⁷ On the other hand, it has been determined that the relationship between aesthetics and political practices in Central Asian Turkic societies has not been addressed in these studies. This article will attempt to fill this gap in the literature on the close relationship between aesthetics and political practices.

The aim of this study is to reveal how aesthetic and political practices developed together in Central Asian Turkic societies and how art and aesthetics functioned as a representation of political power. This study examines the role of art and aesthetic practices in the representation of political power and the construction of social identity in Central Asian Turkic societies, and analyzes how art functions as a language of political power beyond being a means of aesthetic expression. How art, aesthetics and political practices have developed together in the historical context and the impact of these processes on identity construction reveal the importance of the study. The results of the study will bring a new perspective not only to the history of Turkish art but also to its political history. In this context, the article is structured under five main headings, thus providing a comprehensive overview of the aesthetic and political practices of Central Asian Turkic societies. First, the political and cultural structure of Central Asian Turkic societies will be analyzed, and elements such as leadership structures and power distribution will be discussed. Then, the cultural structure will be emphasized and its relationship with aesthetic and political practices will be evaluated. Next, aesthetic practices will be analyzed and the role of art and aesthetics in the identity formation process of a society will be discussed. Following this, political practices will be analyzed and the impact of political organization on social structure

³ David Christian, "Turkic Empires of the East", in *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia*, 1, Malden, MA, 1998, s. 247-276.

⁴ Yamada Nobuo, "The Original Turkish Homeland", *Journal of Turkish Studies*, 9, 1985, s. 243-246; Erkin Ekrem, *Çin Kaynaklarına Göre Eski Türk Kavimleri (M.Ö. 2146-318)*, (Yayınlanmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi), Hacettepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 1995; İsenbige Togan, Gülınar Kara, Cahide Baysal, *Çin Kaynaklarında Türkler: Eski T'ang Tarihi (Chiu T'ang-shu)*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara 2005; Mau-Tsai Liu, *Çin Kaynaklarına Göre Doğu Türkleri*, çev. E. Kayaoğlu, D. Banoğlu, Selenge Yayınları, İstanbul, 2011; Ayşe Onat, *Çin Kaynaklarında Türkler: Han Hanedanı Tarihinde "Batı Bölgeleri"*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara, 2012; Gökçen Kapusuzoğlu, *Taiping Derlemesinde Türkler*, Gece Kitablığı, Ankara, 2017.

⁵ Yusuf Ziya Yörükhan, *Müslümanların Göziyle Orta Çağ'da Türkler*, Gelenek Yayıncılık, İstanbul 2004; M. K. İ. Al-Shammari, Mohammad Khalid Ibrahim, "The Arab-Islamic Dialogue with Eastern Europe and Its Impacts through the Journey of Abu Hamed Al-Garnaty", *Al-Ameed Journal*, 1/1-2, 2012, s. 439-466; A. B. Y. El-Belazuri, *Fütuhu'l Büldan*, Siyer Yayınları, Ankara, 2013; Şihabeddin B. F. Ömeri, *Mesaliku'l Ebsar: Türkler Hakkında Gördüklerim ve Duyduklarım*, çev. D. A. Batur, Selenge Yayınları, İstanbul, 2014; İ. Rüsteh, *el-A'laku'n-Nefise*, Ankara Okulu Yayınları, Ankara, 2018; Selçuk Kurt, "İslam Kaynaklarına Göre XIV. Yüzyıla Kadar Türkler", *Bayterek Uluslararası Akademik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 1/1, 2018, s. 77-93; El-Mesudi, *Mürücü'z-Zeheb ve Meadinü'l-Cevher*, Ankara Okulu Yayınları, Ankara, 2024.

⁶ Celal Esat Arseven, *Türk Sanatı Tarihi*, 1/3, Milli Eğitim Basımevi, Ankara 1955; Oktay Aslanapa, *Türk Sanatı: Başlangıcından Büyük Selçukluların Sonuna Kadar*, 1/2, Milli Eğitim Basımevi, Ankara 1972; Rüçhan Orhan Arık, *Orta Asya Mimarlık Mirasımızdan İzlenimler/Impressions from Our Architectural Heritage in Central Asia*, TİKA Yayını, Ankara 1994; Bilgehan Deniz, "Türk ve Türkistan (Orta Asya)-Türk Sanatına Dair Düşünceler", *Türkoloji*, 67, 2014, s. 66-75.

⁷ Vasily Vladimirovich Barthold, *Orta Asya Türk Tarihi Hakkında Dersler*, Ed. K. Y. Koprıman, A. İ. Aka, KB Yayınları, İstanbul 1975; Denis Sinor, "The Legendary Origins of the Turks", in Ed. E. V. Žygas, P. Voorheis, *Folklorica: Festschrift for Felix J. Oinas*, Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Studies, 1982, s. 223-257; Christopher I. Beckwith, "The Pronunciation, Origin, and Meaning of A-shih-na in Early Old Turkic", in Ed. O. Karatay, I. Zimonyi, *Central Eurasia in the Middle Ages: Studies in Honour of Peter B. Golden*, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016, s. 39-46; P. B. Golden, *Türk Halkları Tarihine Giriş: Ortaçağ ve Erken Yeniçağ'da Avrasya ve Ortadoğu'da Etnik Yapı ve Devlet Oluşumu*, çev. Osman Karatay, Ötügen Neşriyat, İstanbul, 2017.

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and its connection with aesthetic images will be examined. Finally, within the scope of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, how aesthetic values are intertwined with political processes will be discussed.

1. Political and Cultural Structure of Central Asian Turkic Societies

The political and cultural structure of Central Asian Turkic societies has been built on a strongly organized political system and a deep cultural richness throughout history. Nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle is one of the main characteristics of these societies. However, this does not mean that their political structures were complex and poorly organized. On the contrary, Central Asian Turkic communities developed a highly effective and hierarchical system in terms of leadership structures and power distribution. This system stabilized society by balancing the distribution of both military and political power.

1.1. Political Structure: Political Organization, Leadership Structures and Distribution of Power in Central Asian Turkic Societies

The political organization of Central Asian Turkic societies is generally shaped around a central leader and is characterized by a strong hierarchy. This leader, often referred to as the *kagan*, wielded absolute political authority. The kagan was recognized as the unifying force of society, not only as a military leader but also as a religious authority. This centralized character of the leadership structure allowed authority to be exercised by smaller rulers in different regions and tribes of the society. Lower level leaders such as *bey and tigin* were under the command of the Kagan, and these individuals were tasked with ensuring regional authority.⁸

The distribution of power in Central Asian Turkic societies is based on a structure in which military power is at the center of political power. The army functioned as one of the most important political instruments of the society, and therefore the military success of the leaders was a factor that reinforced their political legitimacy. Military power also played an important role in inter-clan relations. The distribution of power was generally based on military success, and successful commanders and warriors were promoted to higher positions.⁹ In addition, the political structure of the society was built on local leaders swearing allegiance to the kagan and showing loyalty to him. In this way, the kaghanate was able to maintain the power of the central authority while preserving the autonomy of lower-level leaders.¹⁰

The political structure was supported not only by military success and leadership skills, but also by an institutional system for maintaining social order. Central Asian Turkic societies developed legal rules and traditions to ensure justice and order. These rules functioned as a system of values that held the society together. In particular, the traditional legal rules called *Töre*, which provided the legitimacy of the state, shaped both the political and social structure. *Töre*, as a legal system that the kagan and lower-level leaders had to follow, prevented the arbitrary use of power and ensured social balance.¹¹

As a result, the political structures of Central Asian Turkic societies appear as a hierarchical and centralized system. This system was strengthened by a leadership model based on military success and supported by traditional rules of law called custom. The office of the kaghanate was the center not only of political and military power but also of religious authority. This structure made it possible for Central Asian Turkic societies to maintain their political stability for many years and to govern effectively over a wide geography.

1.2. Cultural and Religious Orientations: The Effects of Religions such as belief in God, Manichaeism, Buddhism on these Societies

The cultural structure of Central Asian Turkic societies was built on a strong foundation shaped by religious beliefs. In this context, first of all, the belief in Goktan God had a profound impact on the political and social structure of the society. In the belief in Goktan God, rulers were considered to be blessed with divine power, which reinforced the legitimacy of political authority. According to Chinese sources, the Gök Türks integrated this belief into their political organization.¹² This enabled the social hierarchy to be directly attributed to a divine order. Similarly, Turkish-Islamic sources indicate that the belief in God played a central role.¹³

In addition, Manichaeism created an important cultural transformation, especially among the Uighur Turks. The dualistic philosophy of Manichaeism based the struggle between good and evil on a sacred doctrine, and this was influential in shaping the understanding of social ethics.¹⁴ The religious and cultural practices of Manichaeism were also reflected in the artworks and aesthetic practices of Turkish societies. Especially the

⁸ Bahaeddin Ögel, *Dünden Bugüne Türk Kültürünün Gelişme Çağları*, Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı, İstanbul 2020.

⁹ Peter B. Golden, "The Great King of the Türks", *Turkic Languages*, 20, 2016, s. 26-59.

¹⁰ V. Rybatzki, "Titles of Türk and Uigur rulers in the Old Turkic inscriptions", *Central Asiatic Journal*, 44/2, 2000, s. 205-292.

¹¹ Beckwith, *age*, s. 36-46.

¹² Hayrettin İhsan Erkoç, "Çin ve Tibet Kaynaklarına Göre Gök Türk Mitleri", *Belleten*, 82/293, 2018, s. 51-82.

¹³ Saadetin Yağmur Gömeç, *Kök Türk Tarihi*, Berikan Yayınevi, Ankara 2016.

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Roux, *Türklerin ve Moğolların Eski Dini*, çev. A. Kazancıgil, Kabalıcı Yayınevi, İstanbul 2002.

symbolism and visual aesthetics in Manichaean texts show the cultural impact of this religion in Central Asia.¹⁵ The integration of Manichaean iconography into Turkish art led to the evolution of artistic production into new forms during this period.¹⁶

Buddhism was one of the religions that had the most widespread influence on Central Asian Turkic societies. According to Chinese sources, Buddhism had a strong cultural impact on the Uighurs and other Turkic communities, and Buddhist motifs became widespread, especially in art and architecture.¹⁷ This process shows that the religious practices of Turkic societies were not only limited to worship, but also intertwined with aesthetics and daily life. It has also been found that Buddhism had an impact on political structures, especially rulers adopted peaceful principles of governance based on Buddhist teachings.¹⁸

All these beliefs have brought about profound changes in the cultural and religious structure of Central Asian Turkic societies. The relationship of religions with aesthetic and political practices has profoundly shaped the social and cultural identities of these societies.

1.3. Nomadic and Sedentary Life: The Impact of Nomadic Lifestyle and the Transition to Sedentary Life on Cultural and Political Practices

Central Asian Turkic societies have historically maintained a dynamic balance between the nomadic lifestyle and the transition to sedentary life. The nomadic lifestyle deeply influenced the political and cultural structures of these societies. Nomadic life was strongly based on mobility and shaped the ways of organization and management strategies of the society. According to Arab sources, the nomadic lifestyle particularly increased the state's mobility and played a decisive role in military strategies.¹⁹ Nomadism supported flexible and fast decision-making mechanisms of the central authority.²⁰ This shows that political practices were shaped in accordance with nomadic living conditions.

The nomadic lifestyle has also had an impact on cultural practices. According to various studies, this way of life has led to the prominence of portable, practical and functional elements in artistic and aesthetic productions.²¹ The art forms used by nomads prioritized portability and durability, which led to the intertwining of aesthetic understanding with functionality. Chinese sources state that nomadic communities mastered fields such as weaving and metalworking, and that these products had both daily use and aesthetic value.²²

The nomads' understanding of art exhibited a structure that combined functionality and aesthetics, and these features became evident especially in works of art where portability was at the forefront. Their mastery in fields such as metalworking and weaving enabled them to produce products that appealed to both the practical needs of daily life and aesthetic values. In this context, the Scythian Golden Artifact stands out as a work that exemplifies the artistic and functional perfection achieved by nomads in metalworking, which reflects the artistic understanding of nomadic societies on both practical and aesthetic levels. In this context, the Scythian Gold Artifact is presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Scythian gold artifact²³

¹⁵ Özkan İzgi, *Uygurların Siyasî ve Kültürel Tarihi*, Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, Ankara 1987.

¹⁶ Roux, *age*, s. 35.

¹⁷ Togan, Kara, Baysal, *age*, s. 54; Liu, *age*, s. 34.

¹⁸ Kapusuzoğlu, *age*, s. 32.

¹⁹ Mohammad Khalid İbrahim Al-Shammari, "The Arab-Islamic Dialogue with Eastern Europe and Its Impacts through the Journey of Abu Hamed Al-Garnaty", *Al-Ameed Journal*, 1/1-2, 2012, s. 439-466; Kurt, *age*, s. 80.

²⁰ Peter B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, Oxford University Press, England, 2011a.

²¹ Golden, *age*, s. 40.

²² Nobuo, *age*, s. 244; Liu, *age*, s. 40.

²³ <https://arkeofili.com/gocebe-iskitler-geriye-ne-birakti/> accessed on 02/09/2024.

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In Figure 1, the Scythian Gold Artifact demonstrates the mastery of metalworking by nomadic societies. With its nature-inspired motifs and detailed craftsmanship, this piece is both functional and artistic. Used in nomadic life, such artifacts were both a part of daily life and an expression of the aesthetic understanding of nomadic communities. The intricate animal motifs on these artifacts are one of the most well-known aspects of Scythian and Altai art. Nomadic societies decorated even functional objects such as clothes and saddles by transforming them into an artistic expression. This emphasizes the aspect of nomadic art that combines functionality and aesthetics; it also proves the expertise of nomads in the production of portable art.²⁴

There is a close relationship between functionality and aesthetic elements in the artistic understanding of nomads; this has shaped their artistic productions in a way that intertwines both daily use and cultural expression.²⁵ In this context, the Pazyryk carpet from the Altai region is an example that best reflects this characteristic of nomadic art in terms of portability and functionality, as well as aesthetic and mythological elements.²⁶ For example, Figure 2 shows a Pazyryk carpet from the Altai region. As an important example of nomadic art, the carpet is decorated with intricate animal motifs and mythological figures. Known for being portable and functional, this carpet also reflects the relationship of nomadic culture with nature with its artistic and aesthetic value.



Figure 2. *Pazyryk carpet*²⁷

Figure 2 shows the details of a Pazyryk carpet from the Altai region. It is an example of the artistic and aesthetic production of nomadic Turkic societies combined with functionality. The rug's animal motifs and symbolic figures reflect strong ties with nature and animals. This proves that the nomadic lifestyle focused on portability and functionality in art. However, the transition to sedentary life created a radical change in the social, cultural and political structures of Turkish societies. In particular, Turkish societies, such as the Uyghur State, developed a more stable economic system based on agriculture and trade. This transition also led to more centralized and institutionalized political practices. At the same time, sedentary life allowed for the development of more complex bureaucratic systems and reinforced the notion that political authority should be supported by permanent Structures.²⁸

Culturally, sedentary life had a significant impact on art and architecture. Sedentary communities expressed their aesthetic production through more fixed and permanent forms by building religious buildings, palaces and permanent Monuments.²⁹ Furthermore, sedentary societies increased artistic diversity through trade and interaction with neighboring cultures, and engaged in aesthetic interactions with different cultures.³⁰ In sum,

²⁴ John Harvey, *Traditional Textiles of Central Asia*, Thames and Hudson, Londra 1997.

²⁵ Mehmet Mungan, Ahmet Salman, "Motif ve Desenlerin Yaşamımızdaki Yeri", *Ev Tekstili*, 10/36, 2003, s. 6.

²⁶ Yaşar Çoruhlu, *İç Asya Kurganlarından Çıkarılan Halı ve Dokuma Materyallerinin Anadolu Türk Halı ve Dokuma Sanatları Bakımından Önemi*, Lale Yayınları, İstanbul 2015.

²⁷ Sergei I. Rudenko, *Frozen Tombs of Siberia the Pazyryk Burials Iron Age Horsemen*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1970, s. 516.

²⁸ Beckwith, *age*, s. 39-46.

²⁹ Golden, *age*, s. 47.

³⁰ Ögel, *age*, s. 74.

nomadic and sedentary life has been a determining factor in the political and cultural practices of Central Asian Turkic societies.

1.4. Political and Aesthetic Practices in Central Asian Turkish Societies: From Art and Architecture to Identity Construction

The art and architecture of Central Asian Turkic societies play an important role in reflecting both the aesthetic understanding and the political and cultural structure of these societies. When the artistic and architectural works of Hun, Gök Türk and Uighur Turkic societies are analyzed, it is seen that their aesthetic understanding is intertwined with the religious, political and social structures of the time. These artifacts are considered not only as art objects but also as concrete expressions of the society's identity construction, power representation and cultural memory.

Hun art and architecture were mostly shaped in line with the needs of nomadic life. Hun societies expressed their aesthetic understanding through portable works of art and temporary architectural structures. It is seen that respect for nature and animal figures played a central role in the aesthetic understanding of this society.³¹ It has been determined that aesthetic elements were used as symbols of social status, power and authority in examples such as gold-plated artifacts, embroidery on leather and stone statuettes belonging to the Huns. In Hun art, gold-plated artifacts, embroidery on leather and stone statuettes were used as symbols of social status and power in Hun society as well as the aesthetic understanding of this society.

Gold has been accepted as a sign of wealth, status and authority in various cultures throughout history, and the Huns continued this tradition. In Chinese sources, the existence of gold-plated artifacts, especially of Hun leaders, is mentioned and it is stated that these artifacts were used to reinforce the authority of the leaders.³² In particular, gold-plated belt buckles and ornaments functioned as symbols of power for high-status individuals. These belt buckles were not only functional accessories, but also symbols of the social status and wealth of leaders and warriors. It is stated that such objects carried a political meaning both in Hun society and in mutual relations.³³ Embroidery on leather is also part of the Huns' habit of producing portable works of art in accordance with their nomadic lifestyle. These artifacts were used to express the identity and power of the warrior elite. In Hun art, leather embroideries were decorated with animal figures and symbols related to nature. These figures were used as an indicator of both warriorism and Leadership.³⁴ Stone statuettes also functioned as symbols of power and authority. Especially tombstones and stone figures were made to reflect the status and social position of the leaders even after their death. These figures were also associated with the Huns' belief in the afterlife; the stone figures in the tombs of the leaders symbolized that they would maintain their authority in the afterlife.³⁵ All of these aesthetic elements were considered as an important part of the symbols of social status and power in Hun art, and the authority of the leaders was embodied through these elements.

The Gök Türk Inscriptions constitute an important source for understanding the aesthetic and political practices of Central Asian Turkic societies. When these inscriptions are analyzed both linguistically and aesthetically, it is seen that the rulers tried to reflect their political power and authority through artistic expressions.³⁶ The motifs, ornaments and the form of the inscriptions were handled in an aesthetic integrity, and in this way, it was aimed to strengthen the connection of the people with both power and cultural heritage. The purpose of the inscriptions was not only to serve as written documents, but also as cultural and political symbols that kept the people together.³⁷

The Gök Türk Inscriptions provide important examples of the rulers' efforts to reflect their political power and authority through artistic expressions. The expressions in the content of the inscriptions clearly show the goal of representing political authority through aesthetics and binding the people to this authority. For example, the following expressions in the Bilge Kagan Inscription:³⁸

“When the root tengri asra was made fatiz yir, a person's son was made between the two. In the son of a person, my apam Bumin Khan, Istemi Khan would become. He was the one who kept the ceremony of the Turkic body, he was the one who pushed it.”³⁹ This quote implies that the Gök Türk Khagans were chosen by God and had special authority to rule their people. This was artistically expressed in order to legitimize the power of the rulers and to ensure that this authority was accepted by the people. In addition, the concept of *töre*

³¹ Gürhan Kırilen, *Gök Türklerden Önce Türkler*, Gece Kitaplığı, Ankara 2015.

³² Liu, *age*, s. 50.

³³ Ahmet Zeki Velidi Togan, *Umumi Türk Tarihine Giriş*, Türkiye İş Bankası Yayınları, Ankara 2019.

³⁴ Ekrem, *age*, s. 52.

³⁵ Onat, *age*, s. 54-56.

³⁶ İbrahim Kafesoğlu, *Türk Milli Kültürü*, Ötüken Neşriyat, İstanbul 2023.

³⁷ Hatice Şirin User, *Köktürk ve Ötüken Uygur Kağanlığı Yazıtları: Söz Varlığı İncelemesi*, Kömen Yayınları, Konya 2009, s. 59.

³⁸ <https://ogmmateryal.eba.gov.tr> accessed on 02/09/2024.

³⁹ Költigin, east side, lines 1-2.

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(tradition and laws), which is frequently found in the inscriptions, emphasizes that political power is based on a cultural foundation and that this power should be expressed through aesthetic elements.⁴⁰

Another important aesthetic element in the inscriptions is the depictions emphasizing the power and victories of the rulers. Bilge Kagan, while addressing his people in the inscriptions, aimed to make his political authority permanent through art and embodied this by erecting the inscriptions themselves:

“Üze kök tengri as[ra yagız yir kılıntukda ekin ara kişi oğlu kılınmışda] kişi oğlınla üze eçüm eçüm apam bumın kagan iştemi kagan olurmuş” (When the blue sky was created above and the greasy earth below, human sons were created between the two. On the sons of man (too) my ancestors, my grandfathers Bumin Khan (and) Ishtami Khan (sat on the throne as rulers).⁴¹ This expression aesthetically describes how the ruler protected his people, won victory over his enemies and glorified the power of the kaganate. Such descriptions show how art and writing were used as a means of political propaganda and aimed to keep the people together. In this context, the motifs, ornaments and the form of the inscriptions used in the Gök Türk Inscriptions were handled in an aesthetic integrity and aimed to strengthen the people's bond with both power and cultural heritage. The function of the inscriptions is not only as written documents, but also as political and cultural structures with aesthetic and symbolic meanings.⁴²

It is observed that a different aesthetic understanding developed in Uyghur art. Under the influence of religions such as Manichaeism and Buddhism, Uyghur art focused on religious and metaphysical themes, which gave art a more abstract and symbolic dimension.⁴³ Aesthetic practices such as temple frescoes, miniatures and stonework constructed both an aesthetic and religious narrative through celestial beings, God and mythological figures. These works are also considered as an indicator of how political power was supported by religious legitimacy.⁴⁴ The architecture of the Uighur period was also shaped around temples and religious buildings, and the symmetrical and geometric motifs used in these structures have a high aesthetic value.

In conclusion, the art and architecture of Central Asian Turkic societies show the use of aesthetic practices as a means of power and identity construction. These works also show how the religious and social structures of societies are reflected in artistic expressions. Hun stonework, Gök Türk Inscriptions and Uighur frescoes reveal that the aesthetics of these societies were not only elements of artistic value, but also political and cultural narratives and identity-building tools.

1.5. Aesthetic Symbols and Their Meanings: Symbolic Meanings of Aesthetic Practices such as Stonework, Decorations, Artworks

In the aesthetic practices of Central Asian Turkic societies, elements such as stonework, ornaments and artworks carry deep symbolic meanings. These elements were used as visual representations of social structure, religious beliefs and political power. Stonework, especially in monumental structures and tombstones, played an important role in the construction of people's identity and the expression of power relations. The stonework in the Gök Türk Inscriptions was considered as a symbol of political authority and religious belief, and the figures used in the inscriptions were seen as the embodiment of the cultural memory of the society.⁴⁵

Animal figures, which are frequently found in stonework, reflect the relationship of Central Asian Turkic societies with nature and their shamanic beliefs. For example, symbols such as dragons and eagles signify power and protection, while the wolf symbol was accepted as the representation of a mythological ancestor among the Gök Türks.⁴⁶ The wolf figure was frequently used in art to symbolize the identity and origins of the Gök Türks, based on mythological narratives linking their ancestry to the wolf. These symbolic meanings played a central role in the visual representation of social identity and authority.

The geometric motifs in the ornaments also carry aesthetic and symbolic meanings. As in the Gök Türk Inscriptions, these motifs were used to symbolize the power of the rulers and the order of society.⁴⁷ In Uighur art, aesthetic motifs combined with religious symbols enabled the visualization of religious teachings by reflecting the influences of Manichaeism and Buddhism. The symbols used in frescoes and miniatures functioned as an

⁴⁰ Talat Tekin, *Orhon Yazıtları*, TDK Yayınları, Ankara 2008.

⁴¹ Onur Mert, Fatih, Albayrak, “Köl Tigin ve Bilge Kağan Yazıtlarının Metinlerinde Ünlülerin Yazımıyla İlgili Karşılaşılan Farklılıklar”, *International Journal of Turkish Literature Culture Education*, 2/2, 2013, s. 96.

⁴² Tekin, *age*, s. 45.

⁴³ <https://sanattarihi.gen.tr/uygur-sanati/> accessed on 02/09/2024.

⁴⁴ Yeliz Berkli, “Uygur Resim Sanatının Üslup Özellikleri”, *Atatürk Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 10/45, 2010, s. 155-166.

⁴⁵ Kafesoğlu, *age*, s. 75.

⁴⁶ Yaşar Çoruhlu, *Türk Mitolojisinin Ana Hatları*, Ötüken Neşriyat, İstanbul 2020, s. 98.

⁴⁷ Tekin, *age*, s. 65.

aesthetic expression of the spiritual world and divine powers, and thus religion was inscribed into social memory through art.⁴⁸

Figurative symbols in works of art were also used as a visual expression of social order and hierarchy. In particular, the leader figures depicted in Uighur wall paintings show that rulers have a sacred status, while the depictions of servants and warriors next to these figures symbolize class differences and power relations within the society.⁴⁹ In short, stonework, ornamentation and artworks functioned not only as aesthetic practices but also as symbolic narratives of social structure, religious beliefs and political power in Central Asian Turkish societies. These symbols have played an important role in societies' identity construction, consolidation of power and preservation of cultural memory.

1.6. Nature and Aesthetic Perception: The Place of Nature in Aesthetic Understanding and Its Reflections on Art

Nature plays a central role in the aesthetic understanding of Central Asian Turkish societies. Nature has deeply influenced both the way of life and artistic production of these societies. Nomadic lifestyle and steppe geography show that nature is a primary source in the aesthetic perception of Central Asian Turkic societies. In particular, elements of nature - animal figures, plant motifs and various elements of nature - were used extensively in art, and these elements functioned not only with aesthetic concerns, but also as a reflection of social identity and cultural values.⁵⁰

The animal figures frequently encountered in the art of these societies are an indication of the deep relationship established with nature. The eagle, horse, wolf and other animal motifs seen in Gök Türk and Uighur art reveal that nature was perceived as a sacred power and protector.⁵¹ Especially animals such as eagles and wolves appear in every field of art as symbols of leadership, power and protection. These symbols seen in Uyghur wall paintings and Gök Türk inscriptions show that nature was used not only as an aesthetic element but also as a social and political symbol.⁵²

The symbolic use of natural elements in art is also related to the religious beliefs of the Central Asian Turks. The sanctity of nature in the belief in the Sky God was directly reflected in the aesthetic understanding and this sanctity was used as a symbolic language, especially in stonework and architectural works. Nature motifs such as mountains, rivers and trees seen in the Gök Türk Inscriptions and Hun tombstones were considered as the representation of the divine power on earth.⁵³ These elements were used to express both a spiritual meaning and the legitimacy of political authority. Moreover, the combination of nature and aesthetic perception manifested itself in the art of Turkish societies with organic forms and nature-specific rhythms. While plant motifs in Uyghur frescoes and Hun art expressed the aesthetic order of nature, these motifs also symbolized the cycle of life, death and rebirth.⁵⁴ Such symbolic expressions reveal that nature was not only a source of beauty in Central Asian art, but also an element with deep philosophical and cultural meanings. In sum, it is seen that nature has a central position in the aesthetic perception of Central Asian Turkish societies and this perception is deeply reflected in works of art. Animal figures, plant motifs and elements of nature were used as an artistic language in the construction of social identity and the legitimization of religious-political powers.

2. Aesthetics and Identity

The relationship between aesthetics and identity in Central Asian Turkic societies should be examined through how social identity was formed and shaped through artworks, symbols and inscriptions. In these societies, art and aesthetic practices functioned not only as individual means of expression, but also as the most powerful reflectors of collective identity and social belonging. The aesthetic values of the Hun, Gök Türk, and Uighur societies were used as representations of their political, religious and cultural identities. Symbols and inscriptions, in particular, stand out as the main elements that strengthen this identity and give the society a collective sense of belonging.⁵⁵ The Gök Türk Inscriptions constitute an important example in this context. These inscriptions are not only a historical record, but also one of the most important documents showing how Turkish identity is shaped by linguistic and aesthetic elements. While the Turkish language used in the Gök Türk Inscriptions makes the linguistic identity of the society clear, the aesthetic elements, stonework and symbols in

⁴⁸ Berkli, *age*, s. 160.

⁴⁹ <https://sanattarihi.gen.tr/uygur-sanati/> accessed on 02/09/2024.

⁵⁰ Ayten Sürür, *Türk İşleme Sanatı*, Ak Yayınları, İstanbul 1976; Kafiye Özlem Alp, "Anadolu ve Orta Asya Türk Kültüründe Bitki Sembolleri", *Sanat Sokağı Kültür ve Sanat Dergisi*, 1, 2006, s. 1-3.

⁵¹ Mircea Eliade, *İmgeler ve Simgeler*, çev. M. A. Kılıçbay, Doğu Batı Yayınları, Ankara 2022.

⁵² Tekin, *age*, s. 75.

⁵³ Kafesoğlu, *age*, s. 85.

⁵⁴ Federica Venturi, "An Old Tibetan Document on the Uighurs: A New Translation and Interpretation", *Journal of Asian History*, 42/1, 2008, s. 1-35.

⁵⁵ Eliade, *age*, s. 29.

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the inscriptions visually reflect the identity of the Turks.⁵⁶ The Gök Türk Inscriptions reinforced the identity perception of the people with the strong symbolic language in the inscriptions, and thanks to these aesthetic elements, the Turks formed not only a sovereignty but also a cultural identity.

Symbols have played an important role in the identity construction of Central Asian Turkic societies. Animal symbols such as wolves, eagles and dragons were used among the Turks and other Turkic communities to represent both political power and mythological origins. In particular, the wolf figure plays a central role in the origin mythos of the Turks, and in the Gök Türk Inscriptions this symbol represents both a mythological ancestor and collective values such as warriorism and independence.⁵⁷ While these symbols formed the identity of the society, they also functioned as visual representations of political and military power.

Works of art, especially Uighur frescoes and miniatures, help us understand how social identity was visually reflected. Uighur art was enriched by Buddhist and Manichaean influences, and these religious elements aesthetically reflected both the religious and cultural identity of the society. The leader and religious figures depicted in these frescoes emphasized the social hierarchy and the sanctity of leadership, reinforcing social identity in an aesthetic language.⁵⁸ Religious symbols in particular show how the religious beliefs of the society played a central role in the construction of identity.

In short, aesthetic values and art have assumed a fundamental function in the process of forming and reinforcing social identity in Central Asian Turkic societies. Symbols, inscriptions and works of art were used as tools that shaped and reflected the identities of these societies at both individual and collective levels. Through aesthetics and art, societies have expressed their cultural values, origins and political power in a visual and symbolic language.

2.1. The Relationship between Political Practices and Aesthetics

There is a strong relationship between political practices and aesthetics in Central Asian Turkic societies. Aesthetics was used not only as a means of artistic expression, but also as an important tool in the representation and legitimization of political authority. Especially the Gök Türk inscriptions and monumental architectural structures are among the most important examples of how political power was reflected through aesthetic elements. These inscriptions and structures both reinforced the authority of the rulers and instilled a sense of cultural belonging in the society.⁵⁹

2.2. Aesthetics Reflect Power: Aesthetic Representation of Political Authority in Gök Türk Inscriptions and Architectural Structures

The Gök Türk Inscriptions are one of the most concrete examples of the ways in which aesthetics reflects political authority. The inscriptions should be considered not only as a written text, but also as works of art that aesthetically embody the political authority and leadership claims of the rulers. The way the inscriptions were erected, their size and the stonework on them had a profound impact on the people and expressed the power of the rulers in an aesthetic language. Especially the praises and success narratives in the inscriptions were presented in an aesthetic language in order to glorify the power of the ruler.⁶⁰ The symbols used in the inscriptions are seen not only with artistic concerns, but also as symbols that unite the people and legitimize political power. In addition, the ways in which aesthetics reflects political authority are clearly seen in the Gök Türk mausoleums and temple structures. These structures were built to symbolize the power and immortality of the rulers. The size and architectural design of the monumental structures reinforced the rulers' influence over the people and reflected their power aesthetically to the society.⁶¹ Especially the figures seen on the tombstones of the Gök Türk and Uighur periods show that the ruler was regarded as a sacred leader. These figures were associated with both leadership and divine power and were reinforced with aesthetic elements.

2.3. The Combination of Art and Power: The Use of Art as a Propaganda Tool, Representations of Leadership and Authority

The use of art as a means of political propaganda is a common phenomenon in Central Asian Turkish societies. In particular, it is seen that leaders utilized works of art to consolidate their power and authority over the people. The depictions of leaders in Gök Türk and Uighur frescoes functioned as a propaganda tool

⁵⁶ Kafesoğlu, *age*, s. 99.

⁵⁷ Şerafettin Turan, *Türk Kültür Tarihi*, Bilgi Yayınevi, Ankara 2014.

⁵⁸ Çoruhlu, *age*, s. 101.

⁵⁹ Vilhelm Thomsen, *Çözölmüş Orhun Yazıtları*, çev. V. Köken, TDK Yayınları, Ankara 1993.

⁶⁰ Turan, *age*, s. 68.

⁶¹ Christian, *age*, s. 257.

emphasizing the power and sanctity of the ruler.⁶² In these depictions, the ruler was presented as a divine figure and his leadership was sanctified through artistic expressions.

The warrior figures seen in the Gök Türk Inscriptions and Uyghur art are important aesthetic elements that emphasize the military victories and power of the rulers. These figures were used to reinforce the ruler's power and leadership through his victories in wars. In addition, while the inscriptions praise the heroism and victories of the rulers, the expression of these achievements in an aesthetic language glorified both the political and military power of the ruler in the eyes of the people.

Another important function of aesthetic elements in the representation of leadership and authority is to increase the legitimacy of the ruler by combining with religious symbols. Religious elements such as the belief in God and Manichaeism were used in art as aesthetic elements emphasizing the divine power of the ruler. Religious symbols in Uyghur frescoes and Gök Türk Inscriptions show that the ruler was not only an earthly leader but also a representative of divine will.⁶³ Such aesthetic expressions legitimized the ruler's power and further strengthened his authority in the eyes of the people.

In conclusion, aesthetics in Central Asian Turkic societies played a critical role in reflecting political authority and reinforcing its legitimacy. The Gök Türk Inscriptions, architectural structures and works of art expressed the power and leadership of the rulers in an aesthetic language, leaving a lasting impression on the people and strengthening their political authority.

2.4. Aesthetic Presentation of Religious and Political Power

In Central Asian Turkic societies, aesthetics played a central role in bringing together religious and political power. Under the influence of religions such as the belief in the Sky God, Manichaeism and Buddhism, the aesthetics of these societies were enriched with religious symbols and used as elements that reinforced the legitimacy of political power. The combination of both religious and political authorities with aesthetic practices was a means of strengthening the rulers' influence over the people.

The belief in God has been a fundamental element in the combination of aesthetic and political power in Central Asian Turkic societies. Rulers were presented as divine leaders chosen by God and this belief was reinforced by aesthetic symbols. The symbols of Goktan God on Gök Türk Inscriptions and tombstones emphasize that the ruler has both earthly and divine authority. Such aesthetic elements strengthened the legitimacy of the ruler and his authority over the people.⁶⁴ Religious symbols, especially in stonework and tomb structures, reinforced the belief that the ruler's power continued even after his death.

Manichaeism and Buddhism also contributed to the merging of aesthetic and political forces in Uyghur art. Manichaean Uyghur leaders were recognized as religious leaders, and this religious status was supported by artistic expressions. The iconography of Manichaeism clearly revealed the combination of religious and political power in frescoes and miniatures.⁶⁵ Buddhist symbols were also frequently used in Uyghur art, through which rulers legitimized both their religious and political authority. The aesthetic expressions of these religions were used not only as artistic tools, but also as propaganda elements that reinforced the rulers' authority over the people. In this way, the combination of religious and political powers through aesthetics increased the influence of rulers on the people and aesthetically supported their claims of leadership.⁶⁶

2.5. The Evolution of Art and Politics in Different Periods

The aesthetic and political understandings of the Gök Türk, Uyghur and Hun societies changed over time. During the Gök Türk period, stone inscriptions and monumental tomb structures stood out as the most important structures where political power was combined with aesthetics. In addition to linguistic aesthetics, the Gök Türk inscriptions were also equipped with visual aesthetic elements and used to strengthen the people's loyalty to the rulers.⁶⁷ Through these inscriptions, the Gök Türk rulers emphasized both their political success and their religious authority.

In the Uyghur period, the aesthetic understanding of art and politics was further enriched by the influence of Buddhism and Manichaeism. Especially the depiction of rulers together with religious figures in Uyghur frescoes shows how aesthetics was used as a political tool.⁶⁸ In this period, the power of the rulers was combined with religious symbols and these aesthetic elements increased the loyalty of the people to the rulers. The

⁶² Ögel, *age*, s. 88.

⁶³ Venturi, *age*, s. 28.

⁶⁴ Harvey, *age*, s. 50.

⁶⁵ Venturi, *age*, s. 28.

⁶⁶ User, *age*, s. 90.

⁶⁷ Thomsen, *age*, s. 10.

⁶⁸ İzgi, *age*, s. 52.

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artworks and aesthetic understanding of the Hun period were mostly shaped around the themes of military power and warfare. The warrior figures and equestrian depictions seen in Hun art were recognized as one of the most important representations of leadership and military power. These works of art emphasized the warrior skills and military victories of the ruler and were used as an aesthetic propaganda tool on the public.⁶⁹

2.6. Leadership and Aesthetic Propaganda

The representation of political power by rulers through aesthetics is a common phenomenon in Central Asian Turkish societies. Rulers utilized aesthetic elements to show their authority to the people and gain their support through monumental structures and symbols. In this context, the Gök Türk Inscriptions are one of the most important tools emphasizing the power of the ruler. In these inscriptions, the heroism, victories and leadership skills of the rulers were glorified in an aesthetic language and reinforced their legitimacy in the eyes of the people.⁷⁰

Elements of leadership and aesthetic propaganda also appear frequently in Uighur frescoes and miniatures. Rulers are depicted as godlike figures in these works of art and their leadership is combined with religious sanctity. Such aesthetic expressions were used to increase the authority of the rulers over the people and legitimized leadership through aesthetic propaganda.⁷¹ In Hun art, the warrior identity and military victories of the rulers came to the fore. The monarch figures seen in Hun statues and reliefs were used to glorify their military achievements and leadership qualities. Such aesthetic elements functioned as tools that symbolized the power of the ruler and reinforced the legitimacy of the ruler in the eyes of the people.⁷²

2.7. The Importance of Aesthetic and Political Practices in Central Asian Turkish Societies: A General Evaluation

In the light of the results of the study, an evaluation was made on how aesthetics and political practices interacted with each other in Central Asian Turkish societies and how art and aesthetics reflected social identity, political authority and religious power. In this context, the results are placed in Table 1 in order to clarify the functions of aesthetic and political practices. The function of aesthetic elements to reinforce political and religious authority and the construction of identity through artistic symbols can be seen holistically in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of aesthetic and political practices in Central Asian Turkic societies: The relationship between aesthetic elements and political authority

| Monitored elements | Content areas | Special areas | Basic concepts |
|--|--|---|--|
| Gök Türk Inscriptions | Aesthetic Representation | Presentation of political authority through the visual aesthetics of inscriptions | The Relationship between Aesthetics and Political Authority |
| Monumental Architecture | The Political Power of Art | Symbolizing the power of rulers through monumental structures and inscriptions | Aesthetics and the Representation of Political Power |
| Manichaeian and Buddhist Symbols | Combination of Religious and Political Authority | Increasing the legitimacy of the ruler by combining religious and political symbols with aesthetics | Aesthetic Presentation of Religious and Political Authority |
| Stonework and Decorations | Social Meaning of Aesthetic Elements | The impact of aesthetic symbols on the public and the consolidation of social identity | Constructing Identity and Power through Art |
| Hun Art (Gold Coatings, Sculptures) | Symbols of Power and Authority | Aesthetic presentation of leadership, warriorism and military power in Hun artifacts | Aesthetics and Military Power |
| Uyghur Frescoes and Miniatures | The Use of Art as a Tool of Propaganda | Demonstration of the divine authority of the ruler through religious and political symbols | The Use of Art as a Tool of Propaganda and Leadership |
| Sky God, Manichaeism and Buddhism | Religious Aesthetic Symbols | The impact of religious beliefs on the public through aesthetics | The Merger of Aesthetics with Religious and Political Powers |
| Social Identity | Aesthetics and Identity | The role of aesthetic practices in shaping social identity | Constructing Social Identity through Art and |

⁶⁹ Gömeç, *age*, s. 55.

⁷⁰ Ögel, *age*, s. 69.

⁷¹ Turan, *age*, s. 78.

⁷² Kırilen, *age*, s. 69.

| | | | | Aesthetics |
|--|--|-----|---|--|
| Aesthetic Representation of Nature | Reflection of Nature in Art | of | Aesthetic perception of nature and integration of art with these elements | Aesthetic Perception of Nature and Its Reflection on Art |
| Leadership and Aesthetics | Aesthetic Legitimization of Political Power | and | The way rulers reflect their authority through aesthetic and artistic symbols | Leadership and Aesthetic Propaganda |
| Aesthetic and Political Evolution over Time | Periodic Change in Aesthetic and Political Understanding | and | Evolution of aesthetic and political understanding of societies such as Gök Türk, Uighur, Hun | The Transformation of Aesthetics and Politics in Different Periods |

Table 1 provides an in-depth look at how Central Asian Turkic societies integrated aesthetic practices and political authority. The results show that aesthetics were used as an important tool to legitimize the political power of rulers and their leadership. In this context, the Gök Türk Inscriptions show in the most concrete way how aesthetics reflected political authority, and this power was further reinforced by monumental structures and religious symbols.

CONCLUSION

This study comprehensively examines how aesthetic and political practices are intertwined in Central Asian Turkic societies and how these practices shape the social structure. The results of the study reveal the role of aesthetics and art in the social and political context and how they contribute to identity formation in these communities.

In Central Asian Turkic societies, aesthetic elements were strategically used by rulers and leaders to consolidate and legitimize their power. The Gök Türk Inscriptions and the aesthetic elements of monumental architecture show how they played an effective role in representing political authority and social order. The aesthetic details in the Gök Türk Inscriptions reveal that these inscriptions were not only intended to provide information, but also important symbols that reinforced political power and social order.⁷³

Gold-plated artifacts, stone statuettes and other art objects from the Hun period clearly reveal the relationship between aesthetic elements and social status and power. These artifacts were designed to emphasize the social position of leaders and military forces through aesthetics. The combination of religious symbols with aesthetics emphasizes the role of aesthetics in reinforcing religious and political authority in Central Asian Turkic societies. Under the influence of religions such as Manichaeism and Buddhism, religious symbols were used to demonstrate power and legitimacy through aesthetic language.⁷⁴ The combination of aesthetic elements with religious beliefs was used to emphasize the divine authority of leaders among the people.

Aesthetic practices played an important role in shaping social identity in Central Asian Turkish societies. Aesthetic elements such as stonework and ornaments were used to reinforce cultural heritage and identity. The impact of these elements on social identity contributes to the understanding of the cultural and social structure of these societies. The aesthetic representation of nature has an important place in the aesthetic understanding of Central Asian Turkish societies. How natural elements are reflected in art and how aesthetic perception is integrated with these elements reveals the artistic values and understanding of nature of these societies.

In general, the interaction of aesthetic and political practices in Central Asian Turkic societies makes an important contribution to our understanding of their cultural and social structures. The relationship between aesthetic elements and political power and social identity is a critical factor to be taken into account in the historical and cultural analysis of these societies. The results of the study comprehensively demonstrate how aesthetics and art function not only as a form of expression but also as a social and political tool.

In future research, the following suggestions can be taken into consideration to overcome the limitations of this study and to reach more comprehensive results:

- **Fieldwork and Archaeological Investigations:** Fieldwork and archaeological excavations in various regions of Central Asia can provide more direct and concrete data on aesthetic and political practices. This can especially deepen the understanding of local aesthetic practices and practices.

⁷³ Thomsen, *age*, s. 15; Tekin, *age*, s. 20; Gömeç, *age*, s. 45; Golden, *age*, s. 102; Erkoç, *age*, s. 60.

⁷⁴ Turan, *age*, s. 82; Kafesoğlu, *age*, s. 87.

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- Comprehensive Data Collection: In future research, it is recommended to use larger data sets covering different periods and societies. In particular, the completion of missing information on the Hun and Gök Türk periods may increase the accuracy of historical and cultural analyses.
- Multidisciplinary Approaches: Multidisciplinary approaches combining art history, archaeology, sociology and history can be used to understand aesthetic and political practices. This can lead to a better understanding of the social and political context of aesthetic elements.

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