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THE GEORGIAN FIGURE IN *DEDE KORKUT TALES*: HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND NARRATIVE CONTEXTS

Abstract

The Dede Korkut Tales are among the fundamental texts that should be regarded not only as literary heritage but also as historical, sociocultural, and ideological memory sites. With their multi-layered structure, these narratives provide significant insights into the value system, cultural codes, and identity construction processes of Turkish society. This study analyzes the figure of the Georgian in *Dede Korkut* tales from historical, cultural, and narratological perspectives, with particular attention to the contributions of the Turkmen Sahra Manuscript. The analysis focuses on three core tales — *The Sacking of the House*, *Uruz's Captivity*, and *Rescue* — to demonstrate how the Georgian figure is represented and transformed. Constructed not merely as an enemy, the Georgian is portrayed as a negotiable other who reshapes cultural boundaries.

Methodologically, the article combines postcolonial theory, intertextual analysis, and cultural narrative analysis to examine the role of the Georgian figure in the formation of Oghuz identity. Characters such as Şökli Melik and Baş-Açuk are interpreted not only as opponents in battle but also as agents of narrative transformation and cultural hybridization. The new variants in the Turkmen Sahra Manuscript reveal that this narrative universe is not static but continually expanding and open to transformation.

The study concludes that the enemy figure in *Dede Korkut Tales* is not fixed but dynamically reconstructed according to historical, religious, and cultural contexts. Thus, the tales function not only as epic traditions but also as dynamic and multi-layered texts where identity, otherness, and cultural boundaries are negotiated. By analyzing the Georgian figure, the article highlights two interrelated dimensions: the projection of Turkish-Georgian relations in cultural memory and the contribution of these narratives to contemporary identity debates. The thirteenth





tale is examined alongside the twelve canonical tales, demonstrating that Georgian figures and other border characters appear across the entire *Dede Korkut* corpus.

Keywords: *Dede Korkut Tales*, Georgia, Turkmen Sahara Manuscript, postcolonial theory, cultural transformation, Georgian figure

DEDE KORKUT HİKÂYELERİNDE GÜRCÜ FİĞÜRÜ: TARİHSEL, KÜLTÜREL VE ANLATISAL BAĞLAMLAR

Öz

Dede Korkut Hikâyeleri, yalnızca edebî bir miras değil; aynı zamanda tarihsel, sosyokültürel ve ideolojik bir hafıza mekânı olarak değerlendirilmesi gereken temel metinler arasında yer almaktadır. Çok katmanlı yapılarıyla bu anlatılar, Türk toplumunun değerler sistemi, kültürel kodları ve kimlik inşa süreçlerine ilişkin önemli ipuçları sunmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, *Dede Korkut* boylarında yer alan Gürcü figürü tarihsel, kültürel ve anlatıbilimsel yönleriyle ele alınmakta; özellikle Türkmen Sahra Nüshası'nın sunduğu katkılar doğrultusunda bu figürün nasıl yeniden üretildiği incelenmektedir. İnceleme, özellikle *Evin Yağmalanması*, *Uruz'un Tutsaklığı* ve *Kurtarma* boylarına odaklanarak, Gürcü karakterlerin işlevlerini ortaya koymaktadır. Gürcü figürü, yalnızca tipik bir düşman karakteri olarak değil; aynı zamanda dönüştürülebilir, müzakereye açık ve kültürel sınırların yeniden tanımlandığı bir öteki olarak kurgulanmaktadır.

Bu çalışma, postkolonyal kuram, metinlerarası çözümleme ve kültürel anlatı analizi gibi yöntemsel yaklaşımları bir arada kullanarak, Gürcü figürünün Oğuz kimliğinin inşasında üstlendiği rolü çözümlemektedir. Şekli Melik ve Başı-Açık gibi karakterler, yalnızca savaş karşıtları olarak değil; aynı zamanda anlatısal dönüşümün ve kültürel melezleşmenin temsilcileri olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, Türkmen Sahra Nüshası'nda yer alan yeni varyantlar, anlatı evreninin durağan değil; aksine sürekli genişleyen ve dönüşüme açık bir yapıya sahip olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Araştırmanın temel bulguları, düşman figürünün sabit bir yapıdan ziyade, tarihsel, dinî ve kültürel bağlamlara bağlı olarak yeniden biçimlenen dinamik bir karakter olarak sunulduğunu göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma *Dede Korkut Hikâyeleri*'ni yalnızca epik bir gelenek çerçevesinde değil; kimlik, ötekilik ve kültürel sınır müzakerelerinin yürütüldüğü canlı ve çok katmanlı metinler olarak değerlendirmektedir. Gürcü figürü üzerinden gerçekleştirilen çözümleme, hem Türk-Gürcü ilişkilerinin kültürel bellekteki izdüşümünü hem de bu anlatıların güncel kimlik tartışmalarına sunduğu katkıyı anlamamıza olanak tanımaktadır. Ayrıca bu makale, yalnızca on üçüncü boyu değil, aynı zamanda on iki kanonik boyu da dikkate alarak, Gürcü figürlerin ve sınır ötekilerinin bütün *Dede Korkut* külliyatına yayıldığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Dede Korkut Hikâyeleri*, Gürcistan, Türkmen Sahra Nüshası, postkolonyal kuram, kültürel dönüşüm, Gürcü figürü

Introduction





The *Book of Dede Korkut*, a preeminent example of the Turkish epic tradition, comprises a multifaceted narrative that incorporates the historical memory of oral culture into written literature. This text should be regarded not solely as a literary structure but also as a "cultural memory text" that chronicles the belief systems, social structure, heroic ideals, and cultural codes developed by Turkish society throughout its historical progression (Sepetçioğlu 1998: 16–17). In this context, the transition from oral tradition to written culture has had a transformative effect on both the narrative form and the ideological and cultural function of the work. Notably, it has facilitated the permanent transmission of epic memory between generations.

One of the most remarkable indicators of this transformation is the new manuscript discovered in 2019 in the Günbet (Turkmen Sahra) region of Turkmenistan, called the *Turkmen Sahra Manuscript*. This variant makes significant contributions to the *Dede Korkut* corpus, both in terms of content and form. It contains new narrative elements, characters, and thematic structures that differ from the classical texts. A notable example of this transformation is the narrative of *Salur Kazan's Killing of the Seven-Headed Dragon* in the thirteenth tale, where the epic structure is notably reshaped, and the cultural boundaries of the narrative universe undergo significant expansion (Ekici 2019b: 5-13).

A re-evaluation of the *Dede Korkut* tradition has been facilitated by recent scholarly endeavors, which have led to a re-examination from both narrative and theoretical standpoints. The initial evaluations of the text were conducted by Shahgoli, Yaghoobi, Behzad, and Aghatabai, followed by scholars such as Ahmed Bican Ercilasun and Mehmet Ölmez, who conducted a thorough analysis of the text at the philological and literary levels. The *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript* provides compelling evidence that the narrative tradition is not static but rather undergoes constant reproduction and expansion. In scope, the article considers all thirteen stories transmitted in the Dresden, Vatican, and Turkmen Sahra manuscripts. While the dragon episode anchors the discussion, other stories such as *Uruz's Captivity*, *Kan Turalı*, and *Begil Oğlu Emre* are also invoked to demonstrate that the Georgian figure belongs to a systemic repertoire of border and otherness.

The new narrative structures create both a horizontal and vertical expansion in the *Dede Korkut* universe, with scenes and characters that are not present in the classical versions. This reveals the cultural and ideological flexibility of the narrative within its historical continuity. This variant is notable for its depiction of the Georgian figure, which facilitates discourse on themes of otherness, border, and identity construction in a novel narrative context.

The three primary motifs in the narrative—the *sacking of the house*, the *captivity of the son*, and his subsequent rescue—symbolize not only the epic plot but also the reproduction of customary order, the continuation of the lineage, and social legitimacy. These motifs are indicative of the *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript's* role as a narrative laboratory for cultural





transformation and border negotiations. In this study, the structures will be analyzed through a multi-layered lens, considering their historical contexts and narrative functions.

Method

Prior to outlining the methodological frameworks, it is necessary to clarify the corpus and editions used. Citations to the canonical corpus follow Ergin (1971) and Tezcan & van den Boeschoten (2006); references to the *Turkmen Sahra Manuscript* follow Ekici (2019a, 2019b) and Shahgoli et al. (2019). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted, and original wording is given in brackets on first mention. This study employs intertextual analysis, close reading, and postcolonial criticism to examine the function and representational forms of the Georgian figure in *Dede Korkut* narratives. The primary objective of the methodological decisions is to assess the figure in question as "other" that is not confined to the identity of an "enemy" but is malleable, open to deliberation, and capable of reproducing cultural boundaries.

Through intertextual analysis, the fictional representation of the Georgian figure in the narratives is analyzed in comparison with historical sources and contemporary cultural texts; thus, the multilayered meaning fields of the figure are analyzed. In particular, the recurrent use of typological characters such as Şöklü Melik and the presence of new characters such as Baş-ı-Açuk in the *Turkmen Sahra Manuscript* provides important data on the processes of demarcation and identification of Oghuz identity.

Through close reading, the linguistic patterns, symbols, and narrative structures in the texts were analyzed in detail, and the narrative strategies through which otherness is constructed were tried to be identified. In this context, lines such as "If a man had a six-year-old son... a seven-year-old daughter... they would be worse than an enemy..." in the *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript* are evaluated as examples that make visible the traces of gender norms and cultural transformation in the epic narrative.

In the context of postcolonial criticism, this study draws upon the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Homi Bhabha's third space theories to analyze the dynamics of opposition and interaction between the Georgian figure and the Oghuz identity. This approach entails a comprehensive evaluation of the depiction of Georgian characters in the narratives. These characters are portrayed as both an "irreligious enemy" and a transformable other. This evaluation encompasses their ideological functions in identity negotiation, cultural hybridization, and narrative.

The present study employs a methodological approach that aims to unveil the manner in which the Georgian figure is constructed within the context of *Dede Korkut* narratives. This construction occurs as a narrative threshold, wherein the concept of Oghuz identity is subjected to testing, transformation, and reconstruction rather than being regarded as a fixed and unidirectional threat. Passages were coded according to three recurring motifs: (i) border





stressors (raids, abductions, espionage), (ii) incorporation strategies (tribute, marriage, conversion), and (iii) gendered mediation (foreign bride, female valor, or peril). This allowed comparison across the thirteen tales and across different manuscript traditions.

1. Dragon Figure and Expansion of Narrative Universe in Turkmen Sahara Manuscript

The third *Dede Korkut* manuscript, which was discovered in 2019 in the Günbet (*Turkmen Sahra*) region of Turkmenistan, is an important text that documents the transformations of the Turkish epic narrative during the transition from oral culture to written literature. The thirteenth tale in the new manuscript, titled *Salur Kazan's Killing of the Seven-Headed Dragon*, exhibits marked differences from classical texts with regard to structural originality and the diversity of characters and settings it features. The dragon motif, as the central figure, is constructed not only as a supernatural being but also as a multi-layered symbol that tests heroism, faith, and cultural boundaries.

While this narrative incorporates figures, locations, and conflict patterns that are not explicitly present in the classical versions, it presents a narrative plane in which elements related to Georgia and Georgians are more explicitly represented. Of particular note is the incorporation of characters from the Georgian ruling structure among the enemy figures that Salur Kazan confronts. This suggests that this variant presents an expanded structure in terms of both historical memory and narrative identities. In this regard, the Turkmen Sahra Manuscript is regarded not only as a recent epic fragment but also as a fictional space in which ethnic, religious, and cultural boundaries are reproduced within the narrative universe.

According to Ekici's (2019b: 5-13) analysis, the figure of the seven-headed dragon presents a hybrid narrative space that includes both shamanist and Islamic elements. Salur Kazan's encounter with the creature can be interpreted on multiple levels, including physical, psychological, and symbolic dimensions. The hero's process of overcoming his fear functions as an allegory of inner transformation in epic discourse. It is important to note the following lines in this regard:

"I reached the seven-headed dragon,
My left eye has shed tears from your majesty.
Hey my eye, my treacherous eye, my perfidious eye,
I said, why are you scared of a snake? (2019b: 5-13).

These lines show that heroic narratives are not limited to physical struggle; they contain psychological layers such as inner fear, honor, and conflict of will.

"I came against a hundred thousand infidels at the mouth of Alagöz, on the plain of Şerencana" (Ekici 2019a: 95-98).





These spatial markers function not as neutral geography but as ideological signposts, dramatizing the border as a site of threat and identity testing.

“From unknown foreign province, foreign place,

Oghuz, may a girl come into you and become a bride,

Before a month passes, that bride will start complaining from under her veil...”

(Ekici 2019a: 11; 96).

This “*foreign bride*” motif shows that cultural boundaries are crossed and renegotiated through marriage alliances.

With respect to the depiction of women, the motif of the bride from a foreign province in the narrative is intrinsically linked to the family structure and social production relations inherent to oral culture. In particular, the bride figure plays a symbolic role in the context of crossing cultural boundaries, moving inward, and re-establishing them. These lines demonstrate how concepts such as domestic order, productivity, and cultural harmony in Oghuz society are redefined through the female figure. In this context, the bride is not merely an individual but also a symbol that transcends, carries, and re-establishes cultural boundaries.

The spatial organization of the narrative is also striking. Phrases such as “I came against a hundred thousand infidels at the mouth of Alagöz, on the plain of Şerencana” not only determine a geographical location but also show that the narrative constructs cultural memory in space. In *Dede Korkut* narratives, space is more than a stage; it is a cultural text where meaning is produced.

The patterns of prayers and curses demonstrate the intertwining of epic narrative and folk discourse. As illustrated by the following lines, “May the tents be torn down, and may the tribe settle in one place; may the pavilions collapse, and may the nomads become villagers in one land...,” the socio-economic realities of the people are represented in the narrative poetics. The text’s linguistic variations and elements of vivid oral memory distinguish it from classical texts, producing a multicultural voice. The seven-headed dragon is a metaphor for the multifaceted and multilayered nature of the enemy, and the process of overcoming this enmity is both an external victory and an allegory of an internal transformation. The integration of shamanic symbols within an Islamic prayer framework serves to reinforce the hybrid nature of the narrative structure, as articulated by Buskivadze (2020: 91-92). Indeed, the war’s duration of seven days and seven nights can be interpreted as a temporal and spatial configuration, wherein the values of fate, faith, and heroism are evaluated in accordance with the epic time conception inherent in epic literature.

On the other hand, statements such as “If a man had a six-year-old son... a seven-year-old daughter... they would be worse than an enemy...” reveal the manifestation of the





patriarchal value system in epic texts. While tales are idealized, girls are constructed as potential carriers of external threat. This structure is important in terms of showing how gendered constructions are shaped in epic narratives.

Finally, Salur Kazan's declaration of his sons as bey by giving them tughra and nekkare at the conclusion of the narrative can be interpreted as a ritual representation of the heroism-social legitimacy relationship in the epic narrative (Ergin 1971: 134-135). This ritual is a manifestation of the pursuit of customary order and the transmission of collective identity.

In conclusion, *the Turkmen Sahra Manuscript* presents a new narrative episode and redefines the boundaries of epic narrative by expanding the narrative universe of the *Dede Korkut* corpus in terms of content and form. This variant incorporates novel figures, symbols, and spaces, thereby unveiling a dynamic, transformable, and multi-layered world of fiction within the Turkish epic tradition.

2. Oghuz Geography and Border Neighbors: Historical and Literary Reflections

The Dede Korkut Tales are not merely a compilation of epic narratives; they are also a multifaceted source that offers historical and literary data regarding the geography, border neighbors, and cultural interaction areas where Oghuz tribes resided. These narratives process the spatial framework that shapes the formation of Oghuz identity on both physical and symbolic levels. Consequently, the spatial elements in the *Dede Korkut* narratives function not merely as backgrounds; rather, they constitute narrative spaces in which identity, threat, and heroism are imbued with significance. The geographical framework in which the stories are formed encompasses a region extending from Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia to Azerbaijan. According to Gökyay (1973: 56-57), the historical borders of the Oghuz encompass a vast geographical area, extending from Jurjan in the east to Fârâb and Sayram in the central region of Sırderya. Steppes in the northern direction border this region. Conversely, Ergin (1971: 18) adopts a more expansive viewpoint, delineating these boundaries as a region extending from the Caucasus to Mardin, from Trabzon and Bayburt to the lower courses of the Aras and Kür rivers. The views of both researchers emphasize the potential of Oghuz geography to produce borders in both historical and cultural terms and provide important clues as to how these borders are associated with Oghuz identity.

Within this framework, the mythological, symbolic, and ideological functions of geographical references in the narrative become as significant as their historical meanings. (Ekici 2019a: 7-13) examines several city and region names in the *Dede Korkut* narratives, considering both their historical and mythological connotations. Among these, lesser-known names such as “Kiyan,” said to be the birthplace of the shining day, and “I can,” where the pale star is believed to rise, stand out alongside historically grounded names like 'Bayburt,' “Baghdad,” “Urumlu,” and “Uşani.” Additionally, regional names with cultural associations such as “Ebrul eli,” “Kahrûn eli,” and “Kurdish eli” attract attention. These geographical





names do not merely point to physical locations but rather construct a layered semantic space interwoven with cultural memory, enemy imagery, and representations of the border.

This field of meaning is the determiner of not only physical borders but also cultural, religious, and ideological borders. Within this paradigm, Georgia functions as a nexus, embodying both a geographical locale situated on the periphery and the conceptual domain of the "other" within the narrative cosmos. The majority of the enemy figures depicted in Oghuz narratives are situated within these border regions. Groups such as Georgians, Byzantines, Pechenegs, and Abkhazians play a role in both the physical and symbolic functioning of the border. In this context, the simultaneous presence of enmity and cultural contact indicates the multidimensional function of border geographies in the narrative.

While the violation of borders often triggers conflict or an act of heroism, the protection or retaking of the border brings to the fore concepts such as victory and legitimacy. Consequently, Oghuz geography functions not solely as an area of settlement but also as a contested narrative space to which sanctity is attributed and identity is produced.

In this context, the border spaces in *Dede Korkut* narratives are among the fundamental elements that establish the thematic integrity of the epic structure. The tension engendered by these borders exerts a profound influence on the formation of heroic fiction and serves to perpetuate the Oghuz identity through dynamic interactions with other groups. In the subsequent section, a thorough examination of the ideological underpinnings of this border phenomenon will be conducted, complemented by a comprehensive analysis of its spatial representations.

3. Oghuzs' Enemy Image: Ethnic and Religious Otherness in *Dede Korkut* Narratives

The Dede Korkut Tales are not merely heroic epic narratives; they are also texts of cultural memory in which antagonistic figures play a foundational role in the construction of Oghuz identity. In these narratives, the theme of enmity is explored through two lenses: war, belief systems, and cultural norms. The placement of rival figures within the narrative framework is identified as a significant discursive mechanism that contributes to the formation of the Oghuz identity.

In this context, otherness is predominantly grounded in religious identity. Expressions frequently encountered in the narratives—such as “infidel,” “godless,” and “unbeliever”—function as ideological markers that signify not only differences in belief but also cultural and moral opposition. Within this framework, the enemy is not merely a physical threat but a narrative device that challenges the religious and customary order of Oghuz society, provides a backdrop for heroic action, and reinforces collective legitimacy.





In the historical context, the migration of the Oghuzes from the region inhabited by the Uighurs to the Mâverâünnehir constitutes a significant turning point, exerting a profound influence on the development of enemy portrayals within the narratives. This migration, which occurred during the reign of Caliph Mahdi (775-785), involved the movement of tribes such as Bayındır, Bayat, Alayuntlu, and Eymür towards Anatolia, as reported in Ibn al-Asîr's *Al-Kâmil fi't-Târîh* (Agacanov 2004: 191). The literary representation of this historical process is evident in the narratives, with the "Khan of Khans" belonging to the Bayındır tribe (Özel 2015: 23-42).

The communities encountered in the new settlement areas are predominantly represented as "enemy figures" in the narratives. However, these enemies are not merely anti-war elements; they are also figures with opposing values that define the Oghuz identity. In the context of *Dede Korkut* narratives, various ethnic and religious groups—including the Greeks of Trabzon, Georgians, Armenians, Kipchaks, and Pechenegs—emerge as both physical threats and cultural others. These figures are associated with narrative strategies that delineate the boundaries of Oghuz culture and are functional in identity construction.

At this point, it is clear that the figures marked with the adjective "infidel" represent not only the difference of belief but also the opposition to civilization. The Kipchaks serve as a pertinent example of this phenomenon. Despite their Turkic origins, they are classified as "other" due to their religious and cultural marginalization. "Kipchak Melik with an Iron Bow" is a paradigmatic illustration of this transformable enemy figure. This observation indicates that the narratives possess a structural configuration that facilitates the recognition of hybrid identities, thereby circumventing the establishment of an unambiguous discourse of enmity.

Conflicts with the Pechenegs are frequently mentioned both in *Dede Korkut* and in historical sources. In Ebü'l-Gazi Bahadır Khan's *Şecere-i Terâkime*, the capture of Salur Kazan's mother Saçaklı by the Pechenegs is narrated together with the revenge narratives that follow (Ebü'l-Gazi, 1937: 57-85). This narrative motif is reproduced in *Dede Korkut's Sacking of the House* with figures connected to Şökli Melik, showing how historical continuity is reconstructed within the epic structure (Tezcan and van den Boeschoten 2006: 51).

The figure of Trabzon exhibits a bidirectional discursive structure, signifying both hostility and the potential for cultural exchange. The matrimony of Selcan Hatun, the daughter of the ruler of Trabzon, to the hero in the *Kan Turalı* narrative, while indicative of the transitivity of cultural boundaries, is also indicative of the conflictual nature of this relationship, as the ruler is presented as a cunning and unreliable figure. In a similar vein, the falcon that was bestowed upon Kazan Khan by the eleventh tribe functions as a symbolic element, reflecting the delicate diplomatic balance between enmity and friendship.

These examples demonstrate that enemy figures are not merely structures that engender conflict; they are also transitional spaces where cultural boundaries are negotiated.





In the context of *Dede Korkut* narratives, the figure of the other functions as a means of glorifying the hero and contributing to the preservation of social order. However, this figure can also be regarded as an indicator of the narrative's open structure to cultural pluralism.

In conclusion, the category of enmity in the *Dede Korkut Tales* is not dealt with in an absolute form of exclusion but rather in a transformable, hybridizable structure. As time progresses, the figure of the Other can be perceived as a Muslim, a relative, or a culturally internalized entity. This flexibility, in turn, reveals the structure of the epic narrative, which contains not only conflict but also the potential for cultural transformation. This narrative strategy highlights the fluidity of Oghuz identity by demonstrating that borders are not immutable but rather subject to negotiation, flexibility, and change.

4. Georgia and Georgians: Historical, Literary and Narratological Reflections

4.1. The Place of Georgia in *Dede Korkut* Narratives

The *Dede Korkut Tales* are not merely texts that convey the internal structure and value system of the Oghuz society; they are also a set of narratives that include the literary reflections of the historical and cultural relations established with the surrounding peoples. In this context, Georgia is represented in the Oghuz narratives not only as an adversary but also as a border "other," a cultural contact point, and the opposite face of identity construction. The multifaceted positioning of the Georgian figure is based on both historical reality and literary construction.

In the historical process, Turkish-Georgian relations have exhibited a multidimensional dynamic, encompassing various aspects such as warfare, political alliances, matrimonial unions between members of the two nations, and cultural interactions. These multi-layered relations are also reflected in the *Dede Korkut* narratives, in which the Georgian figure is sometimes portrayed as an enemy and sometimes as a transformable "other." The repeated mention of Georgia as an enemy territory in the narratives is indicative of the historical relationship reflected in literature. The border relations between the Turks and the Byzantine, Abbasid, and Caucasian peoples, especially during the periods when the narratives were formed, have been identified as a contributing factor to the development of narrative fiction.

From a geographical perspective, the settlement of the Oghuz in Eastern Anatolia, Azerbaijan, and the Aras-Kura basin resulted in direct proximity between their territory and the Georgian kingdoms. This physical proximity rendered border violations and, consequently, conflicts inevitable, thereby symbolizing Georgia as the "other" geography in literary narratives. These encounters were incorporated into the narratives not solely through battle scenes but also through structures in which cultural comparisons, moral superiority, and heroic ideals were evaluated.





The Georgian figure is constructed not only as an adversary but also as a symbolic element that tests the courage, faith, and social status of the protagonists. Georgia's strategic positioning within the border space effectively utilizes spatial otherness as a key instrument to generate dramatic tension. Consequently, the Georgian figure functions as a constitutive "counter-element" that transgresses and violates borders both spatially and culturally, thereby reinforcing the Oghuz identity through this transgression.

This narrative strategy not only depicts an external enemy but also provides an ideological structure through which Oghuz identity is tested, reproduced, and culturally legitimized. Within this paradigm, Georgia assumes significance within the epic universe, functioning not only as an external menacing force but also as a pivotal element in the process of identity construction.

4.2. The Georgian Border: Threat Perception and Narrative Tension

In the *Dede Korkut* narratives, border regions function not merely as geographical locations but as dramatic spaces where fundamental social values such as identity, faith, and security are put to the test. In this context, Georgia emerges as a significant figure of the border-“other,” particularly in relation to perceptions of religious and political threat. The words addressed by Aruz Koca to Kazan Beg in *the second tale*—“My Agha (Lord) Kazan, you dwell in the mouth of Georgia, whose faith is corrupt...” (Sepetçioğlu 1998: 51–52)—can be seen as a clear expression of this perception.

“O Lord Kazan, you dwell at the mouth of Georgia, a place where the faith is corrupt.” (Sepetçioğlu 1998: 51–52).

The diction here frames Georgia not only as a neighboring land but as a theological deviation and a zone of insecurity. This statement goes beyond a simple spatial designation, positioning Georgia as a theologically deviant and politically dangerous entity. In this respect, otherness in the narrative reflects not only religious differences but also a sense of legitimacy crisis and a heightened state of social alert.

This perception permeates even the routine elements of daily life. For instance, even an ordinary activity such as hunting is constructed as a potential danger due to the sense of insecurity engendered by living on the border. The events that transpired in the immediate aftermath of Kazan Beg's hunting expedition serve to substantiate the assertion that this threat perception is not merely a rhetorical device, but rather, it operates as a structural narrative. The Georgian adversaries, through the means of espionage, ascertain that the Oghuz homeland remains unoccupied. Utilizing this intelligence, they execute a strategic offensive. Consequently, the transgression of the border in the narrative functions as a pivotal moment that instigates the cycle of defense and retaliation within the epic narrative.





A particularly noteworthy figure within this structural pattern is Şökli Melik. This character is the embodiment of the direct threats emanating from Georgia. The raid on the Oghuz homeland and the enslavement of the bearers of the social order, such as women and children, is not only a physical destruction but also a narrative plane in which the Oghuz identity is tested and re-established. This threat also serves a fictional function in terms of the hero (Kazan Beg), reinforcing his legitimacy, regaining his position in society, and restoring the collective identity.

In conclusion, the Georgian border in *Dede Korkut* functions not only as a physical frontier but also as a narrative axis that sustains the dramatic tension of the narrative, challenges established religious and cultural values and reinforces the heroic narrative. Within this paradigm, Georgia is regarded as a site of "otherness" on the narrative plane, wherein the concept of border is intertwined with layers of cultural significance.

4.3. "Şökli Melik": Typological Enemy and Literary Symbol

"Şökli Melik" is a prominent figure in the *Dede Korkut* narratives. This figure corresponds not only to a specific character but also to a typological enemy figure. This figure is repeatedly vanquished by Oghuz beys from various tribes, suggesting that he embodies not an individual but rather a collective and representational antagonistic structure. In the context of contemporary literary theory, such characters are conceptualized as "recurrent archetypal antagonists," thereby signifying enduring images of enmity that persist in the collective cultural memory.

The figure of Şökli Melik, presented as the ruler of Bayburt Castle in the *Dede Korkut* narratives, is one of the important characters who embodies the enemy typology associated with the Georgians. Depicted as the leader of the "infidel army" that attacks the Oghuz homeland, especially when Kazan Beg goes hunting, this figure functions not only as a physical threat but also as an ideological counter-figure that tests the Oghuz identity. The construction of Şökli Melik as a typological enemy in this respect both strengthens the dramatic fiction of the narrative and constructs the recurrent forms of border otherness in the narrative.

Whether this figure is based on a historical figure or not is controversial.

"Kazan attacked the castle alone, seized Şökli Melik, struck him on the head with his sword, and Şökli Melik accepted Islam." (Ergin 1971: 160-163).

The repetition of his defeat and eventual conversion marks him as a typological enemy whose narrative function is to be perpetually overcome and transformed.

Although the name "Şökli Melik" is not directly mentioned in Georgian sources, some scholars associate this figure with the 11th-century Georgian king Giorgi V. Lia Çlaidze (2004), noting the phonetic similarity with the Georgian word შუკი (shuki), meaning "light", suggests





that the name “Şökli” may be a possible deformation of the name from oral to written culture. This view is noteworthy in that it shows that the character was shaped not only by historical but also mythological and narratological transformations. This etymological approach also shows how enemy figures in *Dede Korkut* narratives are reproduced through local mythologies, historical figures, and cultural memory. The construction of Şökli Melik as a “typological enemy” representing the Georgian aristocracy reveals that the narrative internalizes not only individual conflicts but also mechanisms of ethnic, religious, and cultural otherness.

In this context, Şökli Melik is not only a religious and political enemy but also a multi-layered figure through which legitimacy is reproduced, the notion of heroism is tested, and cultural memory is constructed in the Oghuz narrative universe. His defeat reinforces the ideological codes of the epic narrative.

In order to understand the function of these figures in the narrative more deeply, it is possible to refer to the theoretical tools offered by postcolonial theory. In his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said elucidates how the West has historically engaged in the process of exoticizing the East, effectively rendering it an “other.” According to Said, this discourse serves to reinforce the cultural and intellectual superiority of the West while presenting the East as irrational, weak, and uncivilized. Concomitant with this conceptual framework, the figure of Şökli Melik functions as a fixed other in defining the Oghuz identity. He is placed in the category of enmity on the level of faith and culture with adjectives such as “infidel” and “Godless.” This positioning serves to fortify the ideological substructure of the narrative.

Conversely, the concept of “third space”—developed by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994)—emphasizes that cultural identities are not static but rather hybrid and subject to negotiation. According to Bhabha, the formation of third spaces, which emerge as a consequence of cultural interactions, facilitates the dissolution of established identities and the emergence of novel forms of identity. In this framework, Şökli Melik functions not only as an absolute enemy but also as a space of transformation where Oghuz heroes construct and test their identities. The defeat or conversion of the subject to Islam is indicative of both a narrative victory and a theoretical discourse on the transformability of otherness.

This perspective, which combines the theoretical approaches of Said and Bhabha, allows us to grasp the function of Şökli Melik in the narrative in a multidimensional way. While Said's figure of the fixed other constructs the character's presence in the narrative on a historical and ideological ground of enmity, Bhabha's third space points to spaces where this fixity can be broken, transformed, and reproduced. Thus, Şökli Melik becomes not only a character representing enmity but also a narrative node through which Oghuz identity is tested, redefined, and transformed.





In this context, the figure of “Başı-Açuk” in the *Turkmen Sahra Manuscript* has a similar functionality. Başı-Açuk, who appears in the *Turkmen Sahra Manuscript* and is included in the narrative universe as a new enemy figure, should be considered not only as an individual character but also as a symbolic representation of the Georgian political structure. In the 13th story, *Salur Kazan’s Slaying of the Seven-Headed Dragon*, this figure is introduced as the ruler of the lands centered in Kuteys¹ (probably Kutaisi) on the Black Sea coast. Salur Kazan's capture of this character is not only an emphasis on heroism and martial superiority but also a narrative formulation of the process of ideological control of the border “other.”

Similar to Şökli Melik, Başı-Açuk carries a typological enemy form but also shows the expansion of the narrative on a cultural and geographical level. Through this figure, literary representations of Georgia are further diversified; new centers and character structures are introduced in the narrative map. Thus, both Şökli Melik and Başı-Açuk figures become symbolic carriers of the continuity of ethnic, religious, and cultural otherness in the Oghuz narratives.

As a result, these figures function not only as epic antagonists but also as constructs through which cultural identity is tested, transformed, and narratively reproduced. The central role of Şökli Melik in the *Dede Korkut* corpus, when considered alongside Başı-Açuk, can be seen as part of a comprehensive narrative strategy on typological antagonism, identity construction and the dynamic nature of cultural boundaries.

4.4. Başı-Açuk and Dadiani Palace: Narrative Representation of Georgian Political Space

“Başı-Açuk,” one of the figures in the *Dede Korkut* narratives, is particularly prominent in the variants of the *Turkmen Sahra Manuscript*. This figure can be considered not only as an individual enemy character but also as a symbolic representation of the Georgian aristocracy, especially the Dadiani dynasty centered in Kutays¹ on the Black Sea coast.

Salur Kazan’s conquest of the Aras and Kars fortresses and his capture of “Başı-Açuk” is not merely a narrative of military superiority; it also serves as a symbolic manifestation of the political and ideological subjugation of the borderland Other: “For seven days and seven nights, I struck the infidels with my sword... I took Başı Açuk captive.” (Ergin 1971: 160-163).

This scene demonstrates that Oghuz dominion is not confined to a mere physical conquest; rather, it offers a narrative form of power and cultural domination. The capture of Başı-Açuk signifies not only the defeat of an individual enemy but also the redefinition of the

¹ Kutays: The toponym is likely a deformation of “Kutaisi,” but the identification remains heuristic. In this article it is treated primarily as a narrative marker of Georgian geography.





Georgian political sphere through Oghuz-centered cultural codes. In this way, the victory is not limited to the battlefield – the boundaries of the narrative geography are also redrawn.

The spatial and cultural space represented by Başı-Açuk is identified with the sovereignty centers of Georgia, especially around Kutaisi. The incorporation of this figure within the narrative facilitates not only the diversification of enemy images within the Oghuz narrative universe but also the deepening of representations of Georgian geography. The political representational function of the character transcends the confines of typological enemy figures; he operates within a context where the border is violated and reconstructed not only on a physical but also on a symbolic and ideological level.

This phenomenon can be regarded as an extension of the strategy of "transforming the other," a common motif in *Dede Korkut* narratives. In the narratives, vanquishing the enemy physically is insufficient; it is imperative to subjugate him ideologically, to effect a transformation of his identity, and to incorporate him into one's own system. In the *Turkmen Sahra Manuscript*, this discourse functions on two levels: first, on a personal level through the figure of "Başı-Açuk"; and second, on a systemic level through the Georgian political structure.

In conclusion, "Başı-Açuk" is not only an enemy character but also a representative reflection of the Georgian political sphere, a symbolic carrier of the ideological functionality of the border geography in the narrative, and a multi-layered figure through which cultural otherness is reconstructed. Through this figure, both the place of Georgian aristocracy in epic memory and the flexible, reproducible, and ideologically malleable nature of the border concept in the *Dede Korkut* universe are clearly observed.

4.5. Tribute, Religious Conversion and Political Supremacy

In the *Dede Korkut* narratives, the final manifestation of otherness is not only characterized by physical defeat but also accompanied by a profound ideological and faith-based transformation. In this context, in *Begil Oğlu Emre*, Georgia is mentioned as "nine divisions" and becomes a tribute to Oghuz, indicating that the epic victory is carried to an economic and political dimension. Similarly, the defeat of Şökli Melik is not sufficient in and of itself; rather, his acceptance of Islam and subsequent inclusion in the belief system reveal the transformative power of the narrative.

"He raised his finger, recited the shahada, and became a Muslim. [...] Upon witnessing this, the infidels fled the battlefield in fear." (Sepetçioğlu 1998: 170).

Similarly, in *Begil Oğlu Emre*, Georgia appears as "nine divisions" paying tribute to the Oghuz, which functions as an incorporation script closing the border after its breach.





This transformation symbolizes not only the physical superiority of the hero but also his cultural and ideological domination. The hero not only defeats the enemy but also contributes to the reproduction of the social order by integrating him into his belief system.

However, it must be noted that such scenes of conversion and tribute do not correspond to the historical context. Georgians constituted a Christian community during the period in which these narratives were composed. Consequently, these conversion motifs should be regarded as a manifestation of narrative ideology rather than historical reality. In this context, religious conversion functions as a symbolic form of control over others, thereby reinforcing the ideological integrity of the epic narrative.

This transformation strategy is not confined to male figures. A similar mechanism of cultural internalization operates through the female characters in the narratives. The marital union between Christian or other ethnic women and Muslim Oghuz beys signifies more than just an individual marital bond; it also denotes the transgression and reconstruction of cultural boundaries. These unions serve as narrative strategies that facilitate the transformability of the other within the context of epic discourse, thereby conferring social legitimacy. In this regard, the cultural transformation achieved through tribute, conversion, and marriage in the *Dede Korkut* narratives demonstrates that otherness is not established as static but rather as a malleable and transformable structure. This multi-layered narrative order reinforces the theme of heroism not only through war but also through the re-establishment of ideological unity.

4.6. Physical and Cultural Representation of Georgian Women: The Feminine Face of the Border

The verses found in the *Türkmen Sahra Manuscript*—such as “the Georgian land of braided black hair...” and “when she placed her foot in the stirrup, she struck fear into nine divisions of Georgia...”—are among the rare and striking representations of the Georgian woman figure in the epic narrative. The image of “black hair” in these lines is not merely an aesthetic marker of beauty; it also signifies gender identity and cultural belonging. In the Turkic epic tradition, the notion of beauty extends beyond physical attractiveness and is intertwined with moral and social values.

The portrayal of the Georgian woman in this way suggests not only enmity but also a strategy of admiration and incorporation. In particular, the motif of the “foreign bride” implies that cultural boundaries are not only sites of threat but also of transformation and transition. This is reflected in the *Türkmen Sahra Manuscript* in the following lines:

"From a foreign province, from a foreign place, who does not know,
Oghuz, may a girl come into you and become a bride..." (Ekici 2019: 96).

The above lines clearly reveal the transformative role of the female figure in the narrative.





“The Georgian land, the land of braided black-haired girls...” (Ekici 2019a: 95–98).

Together with the *Kan Turalı* story, this imagery shows that women are positioned as mediators at the threshold where hostility becomes affinity.

The motif of the “foreign bride” here shows that the female figure coming from outside is not only a danger but also a carrier of new values and a transformative element for Oghuz society. The association of the bride figure with domestic production and family order points to a narrative plane where social norms, rituals, and cultural boundaries are reproduced.

In this regard, the portrayal of Georgian women serves to reinforce not only established gender norms but also ideological internalization mechanisms. In the *Dede Korkut* universe, although Georgians are generally positioned as the “other,” this otherness is not fixed. As in the case of Şöklü Melik, they are regarded as figures that can be transformed and legitimized. Women figures occupy a central position in the narrative, serving as the emotional and social foundation for this transformation.

The *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript* introduces new narrative elements, which further layers the structure. Representations of the border include the fortresses of Aras and Kars, the Dadiani palace, and the figure of the Georgian woman. These elements not only symbolize the physical traversal of the border but also serve as a cultural negotiation space. These narratives demonstrate that borders are not merely fortifications; rather, they are cultural spaces that are imbued with meaning, undergoing transformation and undergoing reconstruction. This process of internalization, particularly through the agency of female figures, functions as a symbolic plane that serves the ideological infrastructure of the narrative.

The incorporation of Georgian women into Oghuz society can be understood as an indication of social transformation and cultural adaptation that transcends political allegiances. From an anthropological perspective, this phenomenon can be understood through the lenses of hybridization, border crossing, and identity transformation. An analysis of the *Turkmen Sahra Manuscript* reveals that these variations serve to enrich the text at both the linguistic and thematic levels. This suggests that the representation of women in the manuscript is reconstructed with gender codes.

In summary, the analysis unmistakably demonstrates that the Georgian figure in the *Book of Dede Korkut* is situated not solely as an adversary but also as a malleable cultural element. The *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript* provides a compelling example of how borders can be conceptualized not only as physical boundaries but also as cultural, ideological, and narrative constructs. This multi-layered narrative structure demonstrates that themes of heroism and enmity, as well as themes of femininity, otherness, and transformation, play a pivotal role in the formation of identity. In this context, the discourse in the epic narrative, as illustrated by the following lines, unmistakably unveils the patriarchal structure inherent in





the epic narrative and the association of the girl child with the notion of the "foreign bride." While the male child is regarded as the guarantor of continuity and lineage, the female child is perceived as a potential point of cultural contact and, consequently, a source of threat.

"A seven-year-old daughter is worse than the enemy,
home wrecker, home ruiner, foreign bride." (Ekici 2019a: 97).

In conclusion, the Georgian female figure is not merely an aesthetic or romantic element; rather, it functions as an ideological, cultural, and narratological nodal point. The recent discovery of the *Turkmen Sahra Manuscript* has provided new insights into the multifaceted nature of these figures. The manuscript reveals that these figures are not merely antagonists or symbols of aesthetic appeal but also bearers of identity, boundaries, and cultural negotiations. This observation underscores the pivotal role that representations of femininity play in the construction of identity within the *Dede Korkut* narrative universe, where they are equally consequential as heroism and enmity.

4.7. Cross-references to the Twelve Tales

Other stories in the corpus also employ similar mechanisms of border and incorporation. *Uruz's Captivity* emphasizes espionage and abduction as border stressors; *Kan Turah* dramatizes marriage as a means of negotiating cultural difference; *Begil Oğlu Emre* frames Georgia as "nine divisions" under tribute; and *Bamsı Beyrek* highlights the ethics of pledge and exchange across enemy lines. These episodes confirm that the Georgian figure and analogous border others are systemic features of the *Dede Korkut* tradition.

5. Discussion

Rather than a fixed enemy, the Georgian figure embodies a flexible ecology of otherness—periodically threatening, often negotiable, and ultimately incorporable. The literary functions of these figures are analyzed through a multi-layered approach. The presentation of the Georgian figure as an "enemy" is evaluated not only as a historical reflection but also as a functional narrative strategy in the construction of Oghuz identity. These figures are frequently constructed not as an absolute threat but rather as a transformable and hybridizable "other." This finding suggests that epic narratives do not merely perpetuate fixed identities but also create identity spaces that are amenable to negotiation.

Edward Said's theory of *Orientalism* provides an important theoretical framework to explain this narrative strategy. According to Said, orientalist discourse not only renders the other as different but also shapes him as a counter-figure in order to construct his own identity. In the *Dede Korkut* narratives, the presentation of the Georgian figure as "infidel", "Godless" or "corrupt" functions as narrative patterns that reinforce this ideological distinction.





However, it is observed that this discourse does not remain constant; on the contrary, it is transformed from time to time.

At this point, Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory emphasizes that the other is not an absolute object of exclusion but a figure with the potential for transformation and negotiation. In the *Dede Korkut* narratives, the conversion of Georgian figures to Islam, the practice of paying tribute, and the integration of individuals into Oghuz society through marriage are manifestations of hybrid identity structures that are formed in this third space. Consequently, the narrative does not merely illustrate a structure in which identities are formed through opposition; it also demonstrates a cultural milieu in which otherness is internalized and legitimized. The motif of the "foreign bride" exemplifies this third-space dynamic: a military frontier is re-coded as a domestic threshold, transforming the enemy into kinship through cultural negotiation.

The new narrative figures in the *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript* reveal this potential for transformation more clearly. In this framework, Başı-Açuk is considered not only as an individual enemy figure but also as a symbolic representation of the Georgian political structure. His capture is not only a military victory but also the narrative equivalent of ideological control and cultural domination. Likewise, motifs such as Şöklı Melik's conversion to Islam or the Georgian nine-division tribute payments show that the narrative perpetuates the strategy of transforming the other.

This transformation is not limited to male figures. The internalization of otherness is also achieved through female characters. In this context, the "foreign bride" motif is a symbolic structure that shows that borders can be overcome not only physically but also culturally and socially. The verses in the *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript* emphasize that the bride figure becomes an instrument of social transformation. Here, female characters function not only as aesthetic representations but also as carriers of socio-cultural transition and identity negotiation.

"From a foreign province, from a foreign place, who does not know,
Oghuz, may a girl come into you and become a bride..." (Ekici, 2019a: 96).

This function of female figures also reveals the patriarchal structure of the epic discourse. For instance, expressions such as "If she had a seven-year-old daughter, she would be worse than an enemy..." demonstrate that the female figure is positioned as a threat on the one hand and as the bearer of transformation on the other. While the son is regarded as a symbol of lineage continuity, the daughter is often perceived as representing otherness, particularly in the context of potential matrimony with a foreign national. This phenomenon unveils the gendered and cultural boundary-building aspects inherent within the narrative.

The *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript*, which contains traces of oral culture, blends these narrative structures with local language, rhythm, and folk discourses, thereby demonstrating





the transformation of the narrative into a living cultural memory. Examples include the lines "When there are no more creeks and hills, there will be crops and gardens," which demonstrate the ability of the epic structure to convey folk reality in a poetic form. These verses, in addition to their pastoral elegance, also contain indications of economic, social, and belief systems.

In conclusion, Georgia and Georgian figures in *Dede Korkut* narratives are evaluated as multidimensional tools that shape the constructions of otherness, identity, and cultural boundaries of epic discourse. These figures serve a narrative function, oscillating between Said's discourse of the fixed other and Bhabha's hybrid identity approach. The *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript* has contributed to the enrichment of this structure, leading to the development of a narrative universe in which Oghuz identity is perpetually reproduced through the introduction of novel characters and spatial configurations.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Georgian figures in the *Book of Dede Korkut* are structural devices distributed across the corpus rather than episodic anomalies. Read comparatively across the *Dresden Manuscript*, *Vatican Manuscript*, and *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript*, these figures move through cycles of threat (raids, espionage), negotiation (border topographies, tribute), and incorporation (marriage, conversion). The *Turkmen Sahara* witness further expands this ecology by introducing new figures and geographies, while the gendered mediation of women shows that identity is continually negotiated and reconstituted.

A key contribution of the study is the analysis of female figures as mediators of cultural transition and ideological internalization. Motifs such as the "foreign bride," the "dark-haired woman," and the "girl who ruins houses" function not only as aesthetic depictions but also as sites where boundaries are redrawn at the social and cultural level. Through these figures, woman emerges simultaneously as rupture and reconstruction within the epic narrative.

In conclusion, the *Book of Dede Korkut* is not simply a set of historical tales but a dynamic field of representation where cultural memory, identity politics, and narrative ideologies are produced. The discovery of new characters, plots, and linguistic features in the *Turkmen Sahara Manuscript* confirms the corpus as a living system open to constant renewal. Future research should explore the dialectal features, poetic repetitions, and narrative structures of this variant within the framework of epic aesthetics and align its toponyms and ethnonyms with medieval Georgian historiography. Extending gender analysis to female agency beyond marriage would further enrich the comparative and interdisciplinary potential of the *Dede Korkut* corpus.

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