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Traces of Proto-Turkic Culture in the Rock Carvings of Nakhchivan and Western Azerbaijan

Nahçıvan ve Batı Azerbaycan Kaya Resimlerinde Proto-Türk Kültürünün İzleri

Abstract

Rock carvings constitute some of the earliest manifestations of material culture, reflecting the artistic expression, religious–ideological frameworks, and everyday practices of ancient societies. Beyond their aesthetic value, they serve as primary sources for reconstructing subsistence strategies, belief systems, and the material and spiritual dimensions of early communities. The rock carvings identified in Western Azerbaijan—one of the historically rich regions of Azerbaijan—are of particular importance for the study of early Turkic cultural history. Examined through a comparative methodological approach, these materials reveal consistent stylistic and thematic features that extend beyond a local context. From this perspective, the rock carvings of Western Azerbaijan represent significant evidence for tracing elements of Proto-Turkic culture. Rather than isolated artistic expressions, they should be understood as part of a broader cultural continuum characterized by shared motifs and symbolic structures. These depictions provide valuable insights into the worldview, religious–philosophical concepts, and social life of early Turkic communities. The recurrence of analogous motifs across a wide geographical area further supports interpretations of cultural continuity and interaction within Proto-Turkic traditions.

Keywords: Western Azerbaijan, Karabakh, Nakhchivan, rock carvings, Proto-Turkic culture

Öz

Kaya resimleri, insanlık tarihinin en erken maddi kültür unsurları arasında yer almakta olup, eski toplumların sanatsal üretimlerini, dini–ideolojik düşünce yapılarını ve gündelik yaşam pratiklerini yansıtan temel veriler sunar. Estetik niteliklerinin ötesinde bu buluntular, geçim stratejileri, inanç sistemleri ile maddi ve manevi kültür unsurlarının yeniden inşasında birincil kaynak işlevi görür. Batı Azerbaycan'da tespit edilen kaya resimleri, bölgenin köklü tarihsel geçmişiyle birlikte değerlendirildiğinde, erken Türk kültür tarihinin incelenmesi açısından özel bir önem taşımaktadır. Karşılaştırmalı yöntemle ele alınan bu veriler, yalnızca yerel bir üretimi değil, daha geniş bir kültürel bağlamı işaret eden ortak üslup ve tematik özellikler ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çerçevede söz konusu kaya resimleri, Proto-Türk kültürüne ilişkin izlerin takip edilebildiği önemli göstergeler olarak değerlendirilmelidir. Bu betimlemeler, bağımsız ve izole sanatsal ürünler olmaktan ziyade, ortak semboller ve anlam sistemleri etrafında şekillenen geniş bir kültürel sürekliliğin parçasıdır. Sunulan veriler, erken Türk topluluklarının dünya görüşü, dini–felsefi düşünceleri ve toplumsal yapıları hakkında dikkate değer ipuçları sağlamaktadır.

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Geniş bir coğrafyaya yayılan benzer motiflerin varlığı ise Proto-Türk kültürel alanı içinde süreklilik ve etkileşimin varlığını desteklemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Batı Azerbaycan, Karabağ, Nahçıvan, kaya resimleri, Proto-Türk kültürü*

Introduction

Rock carvings constitute some of the earliest manifestations of material culture, embodying not only the aesthetic impulses of prehistoric communities but also their cognitive frameworks, symbolic systems, and religious–ideological orientations. As components of the archaeological record, these engravings function as durable repositories of meaning, encoding information about subsistence practices, social organization, and the interaction between human groups and their natural environment. Their interpretive value extends beyond mere visual representation; they provide a critical lens through which the evolution of symbolic thought and collective memory can be examined in early societies.

Within the broader corpus of prehistoric material remains, rock art occupies a particularly distinguished position due to its capacity to preserve both tangible and intangible cultural elements. These images, often executed in challenging environmental contexts, reflect deliberate choices in subject matter, spatial organization, and technique, thereby offering insight into patterns of communication and shared cultural codes. Consequently, rock carvings should be understood not as isolated artistic expressions but as integral components of a wider cultural system that bridges the material and the conceptual dimensions of early human life.

The global distribution of rock art underscores its universality as a form of human expression. Significant concentrations have been documented across diverse geographical zones, including the Pamir and Tien Shan mountain systems, the Iberian Peninsula and Scandinavia, Karelia and Siberia, Central Asia, the Altai region, the Sahara Desert, Anatolia, and the South Caucasus. This wide spatial diffusion suggests both independent development and potential cultural interactions, making comparative analysis an essential methodological approach in rock art studies.

In Azerbaijan, systematic attention to rock carvings began prior to the Second World War, with foundational discoveries in the Gobustan region. In the spring of 1939, I. M. Jafarzade recorded a series of engravings on the rock surfaces of Yazılitepe, situated at the foothills of Jingirdag to the southwest of Baku. These depictions—featuring animals such as goats, gazelles, deer, horses, and dogs—represent some of the earliest documented examples of rock art in the region and have since played a central role in the study of Azerbaijan’s prehistoric cultural landscape (Ferecova, 2009).

Among the historically and culturally significant regions of Azerbaijan, Western Azerbaijan holds a particularly prominent place in discussions concerning early Turkic cultural formations.

The rock carvings identified in this area constitute an essential body of evidence for reconstructing aspects of ancient Turkic cultural heritage, especially in relation to symbolic representation, mobility patterns, and environmental adaptation. Their analytical potential lies not only in their local significance but also in their capacity to contribute to broader Eurasian comparative frameworks.

Building upon this foundation, the present study adopts a comparative and integrative approach, situating the rock carvings of Western Azerbaijan within a wider archaeological and cultural context. By engaging these materials through a systematic analytical lens, the study aims to elucidate their place within early cultural processes and to establish meaningful connections with parallel traditions across neighboring regions. In doing so, it seeks to refine current interpretations and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the cultural dynamics reflected in prehistoric rock art.

Archaeological Documentation and Regional Distribution of Rock Carvings in Azerbaijan

Under the leadership of I. M. Jafarzadeh, archaeological expeditions aimed at the investigation of monuments in this area were organized in 1940–1941. During these expeditions, numerous new rock carvings were recorded on each occasion. Although research activities were suspended during the years of the Great Patriotic War, they were resumed in the post-war period. I. M. Jafarzadeh conducted extensive studies on the archaeological monuments of Gobustan. The study of Gobustan rock carvings was also carried out by J. Rustamov, who led archaeological expeditions in this field from 1965 to 1968. As a result of these investigations, approximately 300 stones bearing around 2,500 images were documented. During this period, in 1948, I. M. Jafarzadeh discovered stones with goat depictions near the settlement of Zira on the Absheron Peninsula (Ferecova, 2009).

In 1970, archaeologist G. İsmayılzadeh conducted research in the alpine pastures of Kalbajar, located in the Karabakh region, and identified more than 4,000 rock carvings with various thematic compositions along the shores of Alagol, Zalxagol, and Qaragol lakes, as well as in the areas of Pariçinqıl, Ayıçinqıl, Lülper, Galinqaya, Yazyurdu, Taxta, and Sarımsaqdağ (Abibullaev, 1982). During archaeological investigations carried out in Kalbajar in 1976, numerous new rock carvings were recorded and incorporated into scientific research (İsmailov, 1987). Most of the newly identified images were found along the shores of Zalxagol and Qaragol, located at elevations exceeding 2,000–3,000 meters above sea level. Initial studies also confirmed the presence of such carvings in the areas known as Ayıçinqıl, Pariçinqıl, and Taxta. In the pebble field near Qaragol alone, approximately 800 images were documented (İsmayılzade, 2009).

The main part of the Kalbajar region consists of Quaternary volcanic highlands. Rock carvings were predominantly recorded along the shores of mountain lakes formed in the craters of extinct volcanoes. The coastal zones of these lakes are rich in obsidian, flint, marble deposits, and various types of rocks. The availability of these natural resources constituted one of the primary factors facilitating human presence and repeated occupation of this area since early periods.

A significant number of rock carvings have also been identified at the Gamigaya monument located within the territory of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. Initial studies of the site were conducted in the 1970s, followed by continued research in subsequent periods. These investigations documented numerous rock carvings dating to the 4th–1st millennia BCE. It was determined that within an area of 136.58 hectares, a total of 7,432 images were carved on 2,040 basalt stones of volcanic origin (Aliyev, 2020). The Gemikaya monument is located in the territory of the Ordubad district of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, at an altitude of 3,906 meters above sea level. Numerous rock carvings have been identified on volcanic basalt surfaces, produced through techniques such as hammering, drilling, and grinding using stone or metal tools. These carvings display variation in form and stylistic features while collectively reflecting the material and spiritual dimensions of ancient lifeways.

During the 2008 research period, newly identified rock carvings in the Karankuş and Nebi Yurdu highlands surrounding Gamikaya, documented by our research team, were produced using hammering and engraving techniques comparable to those observed in Gobustan and Kalbajar traditions (Xelilov, 2018; Halilov, 2017). Many of these images exhibit features associated with the cultural spheres of the South Caucasus and the Near East. The presence of such elements indicates patterns of cultural interaction and shared symbolic frameworks across these regions (Halilov, 2011).

Numerous rock carvings with diverse thematic compositions are found across the territories of Western Azerbaijan, including Göyça, Zangezür, Daralayaz, Basarkechar, and adjacent regions. These depictions encompass human figures, animals, hunting scenes, astronomical symbols, and a wide range of geometric motifs. Beyond their visual qualities, such carvings encode information related to religious beliefs, mythological constructs, and patterns of social organization, thereby functioning as complex cultural sign systems rather than merely decorative elements.

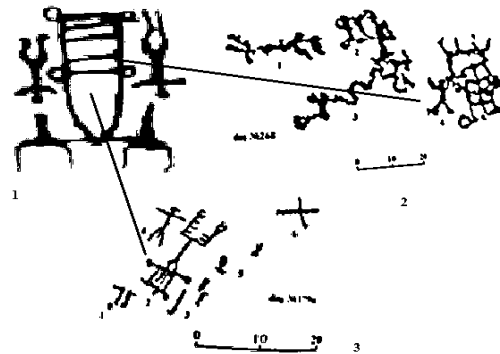
The rock carvings documented within the territory of the Qarakilsa district can be chronologically divided into two principal groups. The earlier phase dates to the 5th–4th millennia BCE, while the later phase corresponds to the 3rd–2nd millennia BCE. The Soyuqbulaq rock carvings are located near the village bearing the same name, specifically within the Armudlu and Qaçaqırılan valleys (Elekberli, 2007). Comparable to the rock carvings identified in Kalbajar, these

representations reflect the faunal diversity of the period—including deer, aurochs, horses, tigers, dogs, wolves, and bears—alongside scenes associated with subsistence practices, daily life, and symbolic expression. In addition, they provide insight into artistic perception as well as the ideological frameworks of the communities that produced them.

The stylistic and thematic correspondences observed between the rock carvings of Western Azerbaijan and analogous examples identified in Altai, Tuva, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Nakhchivan, and Anatolia point to their inclusion within a broader cultural horizon commonly associated with Proto-Turkic traditions. These parallels suggest the existence of shared symbolic conventions and interconnected cultural processes across a vast Eurasian landscape. Within this context, particular attention should be directed toward cart (wagon) representations, which constitute one of the most distinctive categories of rock imagery.

At the Qarakilsa site in Western Azerbaijan, cart depictions form a notable component of the visual repertoire, a pattern similarly observed at the Gamigaya monument in Nakhchivan. In many cases, these vehicles are represented in association with human figures and animals characteristic of early steppe cultural traditions. More than forty cart depictions have been identified at Gamigaya, rendered as both four-wheeled and two-wheeled vehicles (Müseyibli, 2004). A close compositional correspondence between the rock carvings of Qarakilsa and those of Gamigaya is particularly evident in the depiction of four-wheeled carts accompanied by human figures and draft animals, executed in a strikingly similar manner across both sites (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Comparative examples of rock carvings from Western Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan: (1) Qarakilsa (Elekberli, 2007); (2–3) Gamigaya (Müseyibli, 2004).



In addition to reflecting aspects of human lifestyle, these depictions are of considerable scientific importance for reconstructing the history of cart (wagon) use and associated transport traditions. A review of the available scholarship reveals that divergent and, at times, conflicting interpretations have been proposed regarding their origin and cultural affiliation. Certain researchers have interpreted these depictions within the framework of a “single-animal draft culture” (Baheddin, 2000), while others have associated them with an “equestrian cart culture”

(Şayan, 2005). Scholars including B. Tuncay, F. Ağasıoğlu, N. Müseyibli, V. G. Childe, T. S. Piggott, Y. A. Shervda, A. Speiser, J. Gawrad, and L. Woolley have each contributed to this debate, offering distinct perspectives grounded in archaeological and comparative data.

Drawing on clay wheel models identified at Eneolithic sites in Azerbaijan—such as Leylatəpə, Böyük Kəsik, Qalayeri, II Poylu, and Polutəpə—N. Müseyibli has argued that hypotheses positing the diffusion of cart-use culture into the Caucasus from an Indo-European cultural sphere lack a firm empirical basis (Müseyibli, 2014). In contrast, A. Speiser and J. Gawrad, based on archaeological materials obtained during their investigations, have suggested that both the wheel and the cart were first developed in Mesopotamia, the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, around 5000 BCE. L. Woolley's research aligns with these interpretations, and according to these scholars, carts were initially constructed as two-wheeled vehicles before evolving into four-wheeled forms.

The Sumerians referred to the cart as *kagm* and appear to have used it primarily for the transport of goods by approximately 3500 BCE. By around 2800 BCE, two-wheeled vehicles began to be employed in warfare, and by approximately 2500 BCE, four-wheeled variants became more widespread. Early cart wheels were solid and lacked spokes; spoked wheels emerged only around 2000 BCE (Holamon.cat, n.d.). The Chinese historian Sui Beihayi observed that carts identified in archaeological contexts across the Tian Shan and Altai regions, Mongolia, and Eastern and Western Turkestan are associated with the Hun cultural sphere, noting that such vehicles were widely used among Turkic populations between 2000 and 800 BCE (İsmailov, 1987).

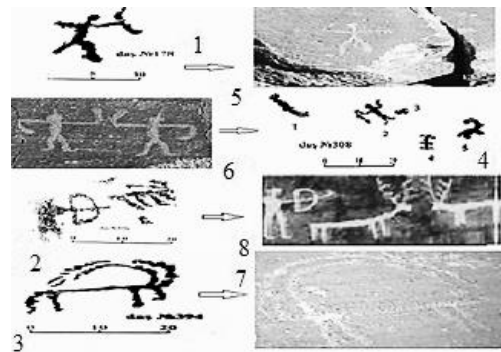
Comparable information is preserved in historical and literary traditions. In *Oğuzname*, attributed to Reşideddin, the emergence of cart use is linked to practical necessity, as communities developed wheeled transport systems to move accumulated goods and spoils in conditions where pack animals were insufficient (Reşideddin, 2003). This narrative, while partly legendary in character, reflects a broader cultural memory associated with technological adaptation and mobility.

Further evidence is provided by the Göktürk inscriptions, which indicate that, alongside the Huns, early Turkic groups such as the Gaoju (Kaoche), inhabiting regions between the Tian Shan and Altai Mountains, extensively utilized two-wheeled carts with covered superstructures (İsmayılov, 1990). E. Emel also emphasized that the Huns constructed wheeled vehicles adapted to their mobile lifeways, highlighting the functional advantages of tent-like cart structures in steppe environments (Emel, 2002).

A comparative evaluation of these sources and interpretations suggests that the cart depictions identified in the rock carvings of Western Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan were not produced arbitrarily. Rather, they appear to be embedded within a coherent cultural framework

that may be associated with early Turkic transport traditions. This interpretation is further supported by stylistic and thematic parallels observed not only in cart representations but also in associated human and animal figures. These images collectively illustrate aspects of daily life, mobility patterns, and religious–ideological perceptions, reinforcing their value as indicators of broader cultural continuity (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Selected rock carvings illustrating thematic continuity across sites: (1, 4) Gamigaya (Müseiyibli, 2004); (6) Soyuqbulaq (Elekberli, 2007); (5, 7) Qarakilsa (Elekberli, 2007).

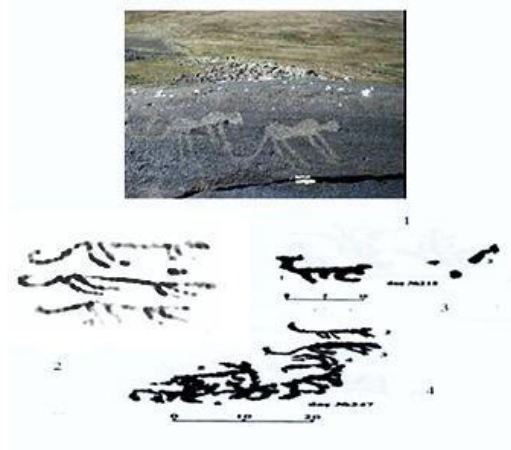


One of the most noteworthy examples among these rock carvings is the depiction of dogs (Fig. 3). As with other rock carvings, these images were executed in various thematic compositions. Some of the earless dog depictions are rendered in a simplified manner, illustrating the animal's ordinary behavior, such as barking. Other representations, however, display a more complex compositional structure. A particularly striking feature is the deliberate portrayal of dogs without ears. This specific iconographic choice is significant for interpreting their domesticated status, their identification as shepherd dogs, and the functional roles they fulfilled within human communities.

An examination of this issue suggests that the prominent role of dogs in subsistence and economic activities also extended into the realm of religious and ideological beliefs. Archaeological evidence from multiple sites indicates that dogs were sometimes interred together with humans, reflecting a symbolic or ritual dimension of their relationship. Such findings have been documented in the Eneolithic layer of I Kültepe in Nakhchivan and in the Sardere necropolis dating to the Late Bronze–Early Iron Age (Abibullaev, 1982), as well as in the Yoncatepe necropolis in Eastern Anatolia (Belli & Konyar, 2001).

The dog skeletons uncovered in Graves No. 4, 5, and 6 at the Yoncatepe necropolis were examined by Altan Amurtak, Vedat Onar, and E. Konyar. These analyses identified the remains as belonging to shepherd dogs. E. Konyar further emphasized that the placement of dog skeletons alongside human burials was not incidental but followed a deliberate and structured funerary practice, suggesting a culturally embedded perception of dogs as both functional and symbolic companions in human life (Belli & Konyar, 2001).

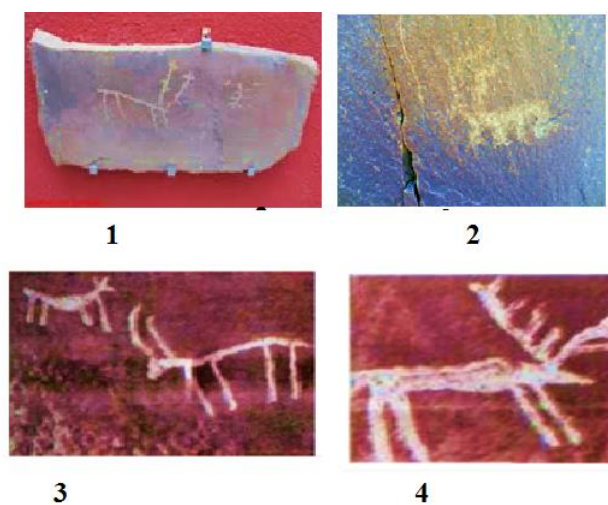
Figure 3. Selected rock carvings: (1) Qarakilsa (Elekberli, 2007); (2) **Kalbajar** (İsmayılzade, 2009); (3–4) **Gamigaya** (Müseybli, 2004).



Among the rock carvings of Western Azerbaijan, depictions of goats occupy a distinctive place. A notable similarity among certain representations is the depiction of the animals' horns in a semicircular form, curved backward. This stylistic feature is widely attested within the Khojaly–Gadabay cultural complex (Quseynova, 1989). Like other categories of rock carvings, these images hold considerable scientific value for reconstructing aspects of the material and spiritual culture of ancient societies.

Comparative analysis suggests that, much like dog depictions, representations of goats were not produced arbitrarily. Rather, they reflect structured symbolic choices and convey information related not only to subsistence strategies and pastoral practices but also to religious and ideological frameworks. The recurrence of specific morphological features and compositional patterns indicates a shared visual language that likely carried culturally embedded meanings (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Selected rock carvings depicting goats: (2) Gamigaya (Müseybli, 2004); (3–4) **Soyuqbulaq** (Elekberli, 2007).



The goat occupies a distinctive position in Turkic cultural traditions, appearing not only in mythological narratives but also in the tamga system of Oghuz tribes, where it is associated with

the “elik” symbol. The recurrence of the mountain goat motif in the Orkhon–Yenisei inscriptions, in epigraphic materials across Eurasia, and in rock carvings has led some scholars to propose that this motif diffused westward alongside the movements of Turkic populations originating from regions such as Mongolia and Siberia. Within this interpretive framework, the persistence of goat imagery is understood not merely as a reflection of economic or environmental factors, but as part of a broader system of beliefs and symbolic expressions transmitted through migratory processes. As a result, the goat motif became widespread, extending from Central Asia into parts of the Near East and Europe. In addition to Azerbaijan, similar representations are documented in Kazakhstan, China, the Altai region, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Anatolia, indicating a broad cultural distribution.

Alongside these depictions, certain rock carvings illustrate ritualized scenes, including motifs interpreted as the “binding of the wolf’s mouth,” which are associated with the symbolic significance of the wolf in early Turkic belief systems. Within this cultural context, the wolf functioned as a protective and ancestral figure, often linked to themes of origin, guidance, and renewal. Such representations find parallels in mythological narratives, including the *Oğuzname*, as well as in early written traditions.

A number of symbolic elements observed in the rock carvings—such as eight-pointed stars, spirals, angular geometric forms, solar motifs, and both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures—display notable correspondences with patterns known from Proto-Turkic symbolic systems and tamgas associated with the Orkhon–Yenisei inscriptions. Spiral motifs are frequently interpreted as representations of continuity, cyclical time, or regeneration, while horse figures are commonly associated with mobility, prestige, and martial identity. These symbolic forms are often discussed in relation to the broader cultural spheres of early steppe societies, including those associated with Göktürk and Hun traditions, and they reflect complex cosmological conceptions embedded within material culture.

Within this framework, particular attention may be drawn to rock carvings that bear close resemblance to tamga-like signs attributed to Oghuz tribal groups, as well as to recurring celestial motifs such as the sun, moon, and stars. These elements held central significance within early belief systems and are indicative of a structured symbolic vocabulary. The observed parallels between such motifs in rock carvings and those documented in epigraphic sources further support interpretations emphasizing continuity in symbolic expression across different media and chronological contexts.

Conclusion

Comparative analysis demonstrates that rock carvings constitute a crucial branch of prehistoric art, serving as primary sources for reconstructing the spiritual, social, and cultural dynamics of early communities. The rock carvings of Western Azerbaijan, in particular, represent an exceptionally valuable corpus for identifying and interpreting traces of Proto-Turkic cultural formations. These materials should not be approached merely as localized artistic productions; rather, they must be understood within a broader Eurasian cultural continuum in which shared symbolic systems, motifs, and visual conventions reveal patterns of long-term cultural interaction and continuity.

The thematic and stylistic features observed in these carvings—ranging from animal representations and cart imagery to geometric and cosmological symbols—indicate a structured and meaningful visual language. This language reflects not only subsistence practices and environmental adaptation but also deeply rooted belief systems and cognitive frameworks. In this respect, the rock carvings function as a form of non-written cultural transmission, preserving elements of collective memory and identity across generations.

Moreover, the recurrence of comparable motifs across geographically distant regions associated with Proto-Turkic populations suggests the existence of interconnected cultural networks rather than isolated developments. Such parallels reinforce the argument that these visual traditions were embedded within a shared symbolic repertoire, shaped by mobility, interaction, and continuity over extended temporal spans. The rock carvings of Western Azerbaijan, therefore, occupy a significant position within this wider cultural matrix, offering critical data for understanding both regional developments and transregional cultural processes.

Taken together, these observations indicate that the rock carvings are not only important archaeological artifacts but also key testimonies to the formation and dissemination of early cultural identities. They provide a multidimensional perspective on the worldview, religious–philosophical concepts, social organization, and aesthetic sensibilities of early Turkic communities. In this sense, they stand as enduring expressions of cultural memory and should be evaluated as integral components of the broader Proto-Turkic cultural heritage.

Author Contributions

The author is solely responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, analysis, and writing of the study.

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