

The development of writing systems during the Mongol Empire: Historical, cultural, and social aspects

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Abstract: The Mongol Empire's expansion in the thirteenth century catalyzed a profound transformation in the administrative and cultural structures of Eurasia. A central element of this transformation was the strategic implementation of diverse writing systems, which functioned as instruments of governance, markers of cultural identity, and tools for political consolidation. This article analyzes the evolution of Mongol scriptural culture from its origins in the Sogdian-based Uyghur script to the creation of the imperial Phags-pa alphabet and later national scripts such as Soyombo and Todo. By examining these systems through historical, social, and linguistic lenses, the study demonstrates that the transition from oral traditions to a multi-script bureaucracy was a deliberate political strategy to manage a diverse, transcontinental domain. The analysis demonstrates that these writing systems were not merely communicative tools but were vital in maintaining social order, facilitating intercultural exchange, and preserving the empire's administrative legacy across diverse ethnic groups.

Keywords: writing systems, Sogdian script, Uyghur script, Khitan script, Phags-pa script, Galik script, Mongol Empire, intercultural exchange

Introduction

The Mongol Empire, as one of the most expansive political entities in human history, serves as a unique laboratory for studying the intersection of nomadic statehood and bureaucratic institutionalization. While traditional historiography often emphasizes the military prowess of the Mongols, the transition from an oral-based steppe society to a complex administrative state required a sophisticated approach to written communication. The strategic adoption and development of

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various writing systems—ranging from the Sogdian-based Uyghur script to the imperially commissioned Phags-pa alphabet—reflect the ideological and pragmatic needs of a multi-ethnic empire.

In the early stages of state-building, the Mongols encountered established literate civilizations, leading to the strategic adoption of existing scripts to meet immediate governance needs. This was exemplified by the integration of the Uyghur script, which provided the linguistic framework for Mongol law and diplomacy. However, as the empire expanded into sedentary regions across the Near East and East Asia, the need for a universal, “international” alphabet became paramount. This led to the creation of the Phags-pa script under Kublai Khan, intended to serve as a unified medium for the empire’s diverse subjects.

Despite the wealth of individual studies on specific scripts, there remains a need for a comprehensive socio-historical analysis that bridges the gap between the ancient Turkic runic traditions and the modern scriptural transitions in Mongolia. This article aims to analyze the historical development of these diverse writing systems—ranging from the Sogdian and Uyghur alphabets to the Phags-pa, Soyombo, and Cyrillic scripts—examining their role in state formation, legal standardization, and the preservation of cultural identity.

Methodology

This research employs a multi-disciplinary approach, integrating methods from historical linguistics, socio-political history, and diplomatics to provide a comprehensive analysis of the writing systems used during and after the Mongol Empire. The study utilizes the comparative-historical method to trace the evolution of scripts from their Sogdian and Aramaic roots to the classical Mongol alphabet, specifically focusing on the structural and phonetic adaptations of the Uyghur script. Central to the research is source criticism (heuristics), which involves the cross-referencing of primary materials—such as the Bugut inscription, the Secret History of the Mongols, and the Chinese chronicle Yuan shi—with secondary scholarly literature to validate script adoption chronologies. Furthermore, a socio-historical analysis is applied to examine the Phags-pa script as a political instrument of the Yuan Dynasty, investigating how social assimilation and shifting political loyalties led to the decline of certain writing systems. Finally, through descriptive and qualitative analysis, the study highlights the phonetic innovations and socio-religious roles of post-imperial scripts

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like Todo, Soyombo, and Vagindra. The synthesis of these methodological frameworks allows for a holistic understanding of how writing functioned as a catalyst for state consolidation and cultural synthesis in the Mongol world.

The Mongol script: Historical development and cultural influences

The available information concerning the Mongol script is limited, and it is generally assumed that prior to the time of Chinggis Khan the Mongols did not possess a writing system of their own. However, as the vast empire established by Chinggis Khan expanded across a wide geographical area, diverse administrative and communicative needs emerged. In this context, the Mongols began to learn and employ written language.

Chinggis Khan drew upon the statecraft experience of the Turks, particularly adopting the administrative structures developed by them. Among the Turks, the Uighurs possessed a highly developed and extensive written culture. As the first civilized people encountered by the Mongols, the Uighurs quickly became the teachers and scribes of the Mongols (Quliyev 2021, 26). According to sources, taking into account the illiteracy of the Tatar tribes, Chinggis Khan instructed the Uighurs to teach reading and writing to Tatar children (Juvaini 1958). This measure played a significant role in the development of the Mongols' statecraft and administrative systems. The adoption of the Uighur script facilitated the establishment of more organized and robust state structures by the Mongols.

Chinese sources also support this view, noting that letters and decrees issued by the Mongols were written in Uighur, with the Uighur script being employed as their official writing system. The influence of the Uighur alphabet on the Mongol script is clearly evident, and it is noted that this alphabet consisted of 21 characters. One of the oldest extant materials related to the Mongol script is a monument erected in 1225 in the name of Chinggis Khan's nephew, which was inscribed using Uighur characters.

Some researchers, including the Mongolian historian T. Damdinsuren, report that the Mongols used the Uighur alphabet during the 12th–13th centuries (Dalai 1983, 150). According to the Russian Mongolist B.Y. Vladimirtsov (1929), the Naimans, who neighbored the Mongols, also adopted and employed the Uighur script. There is, however, scholarly debate regarding the precise date when the Mongols officially adopted the Uighur alphabet. According to the

Chinese chronicle “Yuan shi”, this process took place in the early 13th century. These sources indicate that, to promote the spread of the Uighur script, Chinggis Khan captured Tata-Tonga, the vizier of Naiman Khan Tayan, and instructed him to teach the alphabet to his children.

The Mongolian scholar Danzan, however, argues that the Mongols had adopted the Uighur script before the 10th century (Choymaa 2003, 212). This represents a significant example of cultural interaction in Central Asia. The advanced writing system of the Uighurs in the 8th–9th centuries enabled the Mongols to establish connections among the literary cultures of Central Asia. Other researchers, including Shagdarsuren, assert that both the Mongols and the Uighurs derived their writing systems from the Sogdian script. The Sogdian script was widely used in Central Asia during the 6th–7th centuries, and the transmission of religious terminology into the Mongol and Uighur languages via Sogdian supports this view (Ersoy 2007, 393–404).

Chinese chronicles indicate that the Mongols used a script similar to Uighur, yet there are differing views regarding the precise date of the formation of the Mongol script (Shagdarsuren 2001, 34–35). According to Xiu Ting, prior to establishing a state, the Mongols employed three different types of writing: simple strokes on wooden boards for recording numbers, the Uighur script, and Chinese characters. This suggests that the Mongols initially did not possess their own writing system and instead adopted the writing systems of various peoples (Budak 2020, 243).

Between the 15th and 17th centuries, the Mongol script developed into a classical language and orthographic system. Significant contributions in this field were made by scholars such as Gungacaltsan, Choymaa-Odser, R. Danzandagva, and A. D. Lhaaramba. The main writing systems used by the Mongols were as follows:

Sogdian Script: The Sogdian script, considered one of the earliest writing systems used by the Mongols, is believed to have influenced the development of Mongol written culture. The preservation of monuments inscribed in the Sogdian alphabet in Mongolian museums attests to this influence. For example, the Bugut inscription, discovered by the Mongolian archaeologist S. Dorjsuren in the valley of the Khanuygol River, a right tributary of the Selenge River, is currently housed in a museum in Seseleg, Mongolia (Qipchaq 2012, 8). The Bugut inscription is regarded as one of the earliest examples of Mongol written culture. Such monuments assist historians and

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archaeologists in understanding the evolution of the Mongols' writing system and language.

Uyghur Alphabet: In terms of form, the Uyghur alphabet resembles the Sogdian script. However, precise information regarding the origin and development of the Sogdian script is lacking. Some researchers claim that this writing system was derived from Aramaic (ancient Hebrew) script, while others argue that it was created from Estrangela, distinct from Sogdian. It is generally assumed that this script represents a variant of the Syriac script, with its ultimate origin in Aramaic. Among these ancient scripts, only the Uyghur alphabet became highly developed, widely disseminated, and significant for civilizations throughout history. The Uighurs adopted this alphabet from the Sogdians. Historically known as the Uighur script, Mahmud al-Kashgari referred to it as the "Turkic script." Unlike the Sogdians, who wrote from right to left horizontally, the Uyghurs wrote vertically from left to right, as attested in the Turfan catalog documents. Initially, the Mongols also utilized this script; however, as it did not fully represent Mongol phonetics, they gradually introduced new letters into the writing system (Sechkin 2012, 6).

Hyatan Script: Only a few fragments written in this script have survived. The Hyatan script is divided into two parts: the Greater Script and the Lesser Script. The Greater Script is thought to consist of several thousand characters and is considered similar to Chinese writing. No documents written in this script are extant. The Greater Script was created in 920, while the Lesser Script was developed in 925 to improve upon the Greater Script. To date, 378 characters from the Lesser Script have been identified. Both scripts played a significant role in the transcription of the Mongolian language and the development of culture. The study of the Hyatan script contributes to the understanding of ancient Mongolian literature and history (Namazova 2025, 182).

Phags-pa or Square Script: This script was created in 1269 under the directive of the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan. Kublai Khan was an educated and highly worldly individual, distinguished among Mongol rulers for his intelligence, wisdom, and capabilities. During his reign, all of southern China was under Mongol control.

After bringing China under his rule, Kublai Khan decided to adopt a new writing system, taking into account the difficulties posed by Chinese ideograms. In this transition, Kublai Khan's political interests were paramount. By moving the capital of his empire to Khanbaliq

(present-day Beijing), he aimed to create an international alphabet that would allow representatives of various peoples—Mongols, Chinese, Turks, Tibetans, and others—to write in their own languages (Vladimirtsov 1929, 22). During Kublai Khan's reign, the square script was invented. In 1260, Kublai Khan commissioned the Paqba Lama to develop a new alphabet for the Mongol Empire. The process of creating the alphabet lasted nine years, culminating in 1269. The extended duration of this work was due to the challenges of adapting the alphabet to the phonetic structures of both the Mongolian and Chinese languages. At the same time, Kublai Khan issued a decree mandating the study of the newly created script—the “square script”—and its use throughout the entire territory of the Mongol Empire.

The creator of the new alphabet was the Paqba Lama Lodaycontsan from the Sanya Monastery in Tibet. He was born in Tibet in 1235. Recognizing Paqba Lama's literacy and abilities, Kublai Khan presented him to Khagan Munke. In 1258, Khagan Munke invited Paqba Lama to the court and tasked him with translating Buddhist texts into the Mongolian language. Paqba Lama passed away in 1279. In 1321, by the order of Khagan Gegeen, a magnificent temple was built in honor of Paqba Lama.

The script invented by Paqba Lama was employed in official documents. Vladimirtsov referred to this writing system as the “13th-century international alphabet”. According to Shen Si-Min's “Fan-Shu-Kao”, the script consisted of 43 characters. However, the Chinese chronicle “Yuan shi” records that it comprised 41 characters. Of these 41 characters, 23 were used for Mongolian words, while the remaining characters were employed for foreign words. The form of the script was compared to the Tibetan script, and its writing direction, like Mongolian, was from top to bottom. Thus, the script's form resembled Tibetan, while its rules were adapted to Mongolian (Choymaa 2003, 218). The Mongols referred to this script as “Dörbeldiskin”, while the Tibetans called it “Horyik” or “Sop” (Faulmann 2001, 129). During Paqba Lama's lifetime, the Passe-pa script was the only writing system used by officials throughout the Mongol Empire. This script was also reflected on coins issued in the name of the Mongol emperors. However, after Paqba Lama's death, the use of the square script he had invented began to decline. The period during which this alphabet was most extensively used in the Mongol imperial chancery spanned 1272–1310. Overall, the last known document written in this alphabet is

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considered to be a decree issued in 1321 by the widow of the Mongol Khagan Darmabala.

The sources in which this script appears are as follows:

- a. Various decrees issued by Khagans and other individuals.
- b. Certain documents known as “Payz”.
- c. Various works, some of which have survived to the present day; among them is the work entitled “Subashid”. One page of this work has been discovered. Ramstedt claimed that it was a page from a book on Buddhism, but Aalto later demonstrated that it was part of “Subashid”.
- d. Traces of this script are also found on seals and coins, as well as on various inscriptions in temples (Choymaa 2003, 220–221).

Despite the introduction of the square script, various populations within the Mongol Empire continued to use the Uyghur script alongside it. This is evidenced by the discovery in 1930 of a birch bark manuscript from the Golden Horde period in the Lower Volga region. Its fragments were written in both Uyghur and Mongolian languages, using Uyghur and square characters, respectively. After the fall of the Yuan dynasty, the use of the square script declined significantly. For a long time, it was employed mainly as a mark on seals (even appearing on the seal of Dalay Lama in square characters). Such seals were used especially on ceremonial occasions.

There are several reasons for the decline and eventual disappearance of the Passe-pa script. First, learning this alphabet was extremely complex, and the difficulty of its written form added to the challenge. When the alphabet was created, it was based not on the spoken language of the Mongol people but on the elevated courtly style used by the aristocracy. For these reasons, despite governmental pressure, the majority of Mongols continued to use the Uyghur script as they had before. Other factors also contributed to the abandonment of the Passe-pa script. Like all nomadic peoples (such as the Huns and the Göktürks), the fate of the Mongols in China was not favorable. When the Mongols transitioned from horseback nomadism to a sedentary lifestyle, they were assimilated by the Chinese. In a country where each Mongol was outnumbered by three hundred Chinese, the situation could hardly have been different. The state language at the imperial court began to be Chinese rather than Mongolian. The Mongol emperors and aristocracy had to adapt to Chinese norms in order to maintain their power. As a result, the Chinese script gradually replaced the Passe-pa script.

Texts written in the Passe-pa script are rare. Therefore, it is not possible to provide extensive information about them. The Turkish texts composed in the Passe-pa script represent only a small part of Turkish cultural heritage. Consequently, the publication and scholarly study of these texts could shed light on certain aspects of the history of the Turkish languages.

There is no concrete evidence of the use of the Passe-pa script in Azerbaijan. During the Ilkhanid period — the second half of the 13th century —, the Mongols in Azerbaijan wrote in Mongolian using the Uyghur script. This is confirmed by the inscriptions on coins minted in various cities of Azerbaijan, such as Tabriz, Ardabil, Ganja, and Shamakhi. Some of these coins also contain individual characters of the Passe-pa script.

Galik Script. In 1587, Ayuush produced a transcription system for the Mongolian language. This new writing form not only made it easier to distinguish the letters j and y, but also allowed sounds absent from the Uyghur script—such as p, f, ts, k, and lh—to be represented. According to Rinchen, after the introduction of this script, a large number of books was written and many translations undertaken (Rinchen 1959, 1-4). This signified an important stage in the scholarly and written codification of Mongolian, marking the start of a new period. Following 1587, translations from other languages began to emerge. In 1648, drawing on this model, the Todo script was devised. Choymaa notes that the development of this script laid the foundation for the Classical Mongolian written language, which served as the literary standard in the Mongolian Republic until the late twentieth century and is still used today. In its appearance, the Galik script resembles the Uyghur script:

GALIK											
Gost.	Deger	Gost.	Deger	Gost.	Deger	Gost.	Deger	Gost.	Deger	Gost.	Deger
ᠠ	a	ᠠᠤ	au	ᠭ	ga	ᠬ	tha	ᠮ	pa	ᠰ	sa
ᠡ	ā	ᠡᠤ	ā	ᠭᠠ	gha	ᠳ	da	ᠮᠠ	pha	ᠱ	ša
ᠢ	i	ᠢᠤ	aḥ	ᠨ	ria	ᠳᠠ	dha	ᠮᠡ	ba	ᠱᠠ	śa
ᠣ	ī	ᠣᠤ	ṛ, ri	ᠳᠰ	tša	ᠳᠠ	na	ᠮᠢ	bha	ᠱᠢ	ha
ᠤ	u	ᠤᠤ	ṛ, rī	ᠳᠱ	tsha	ᠳᠡ	ta	ᠮᠠ	ma	ᠱᠡ	ksa
ᠥ	ū	ᠥᠤ	l, li	ᠳᠵ	dza	ᠳᠢ	tha	ᠮᠡ	ra	ᠱᠢ	<i>durak-lama</i>
ᠦ	e	ᠦᠤ	l, lī	ᠳᠵᠠ	dzha	ᠳᠤ	da	ᠮᠢ	la	ᠱᠢ	<i>nokta</i>
ᠠᠢ	ai	ᠠᠢᠤ	ka	ᠳᠠ	ña	ᠳᠤ	dha	ᠮᠡ	ya		
ᠠᠤ	o	ᠠᠤᠤ	kha	ᠳᠡ	ta	ᠳᠢ	na	ᠮᠢ	wa		

Todo Script. Drawing upon the model of the Classical Mongolian script, the Oirat monk and scholar Zaya Pandita Namkhajamts (1599–1662) devised a new alphabet in 1648. This writing system became known as the Todo script, a name that literally translates as “clear” or “distinct.” Zaya Pandita’s aim was to refine and regularize the Mongolian orthography so that it would be more precise and could serve as a unified script for all Mongol groups. To achieve this, he introduced modifications to the traditional script in order to represent a wider range of sounds more accurately and to make distinctions between similar phonemes clearer. For example, whereas the Classical Mongolian script employed the same sign for different vowel sounds—such as “u” and “ö”—the Todo script provided separate symbols, thereby eliminating such ambiguities. This reform not only improved the readability and consistency of Mongolian writing but also facilitated translation, education, and religious literature among the Oirat and other Mongol communities.

Soyombo Script. Approximately four decades after the creation of the Todo script, in 1686, Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar, the first spiritual leader (Bogdo) of the Khalkha Mongols, designed a new script which he named “Soyombo”. Inspired in part by the Indian Lantsa (Ranjana) alphabet, this system’s name derives from the Sanskrit word “soyombo”, meaning “spontaneous light”. Zanabazar developed the script with two principal objectives. The first was to provide a symbol of freedom for the Mongols under Manchu domination; the second was to create a versatile writing system capable of rendering Mongolian, Tibetan, and Sanskrit texts accurately.

The Soyombo script is a genuinely multi-functional writing system. It contains about ninety characters that could be used to transcribe not only the Mongolian language but also various dialects of Tibetan and Sanskrit. Because of its originality and historical symbolism, it came to be regarded as an emblem of independence and appeared for centuries on the national flag of Mongolia. This symbolic role demonstrates that the script functioned not merely as a tool of communication but also as a marker of cultural and political identity.

Among the notable works written in Soyombo is “Itgel” (Faith), which preserves important information about Mongolian culture and its writing traditions. By presenting this text to European audiences, Rinchen contributed significantly to the international scholarly understanding of the Soyombo script and Mongolian heritage. His

collaborative studies with D. Kara offered a detailed examination of both the script itself and the contents of “Itgel”. In places such as the Erdene Zuu Monastery and other temples, numerous books, alphabets, inscriptions, and even graffiti in Soyombo have been discovered, attesting to its historical spread and use.

Following Mongolia’s separation from Manchu rule in 1911, the Soyombo script experienced a revival and wider dissemination. This period marked a turning point in both the history and the cultural significance of the script. Its renewed use and public visibility reflected the Mongolian people’s commitment to safeguarding their cultural identity and historical legacy (Shagdarsüren 2001, 49–50). Thus, the Soyombo script stands today not only as a unique writing system but also as a lasting symbol of Mongolia’s cultural resilience and identity.

Vagindra Script. Known in Mongolian as “Agvandorc”, “Agvaan”, or “Agvaanhamba”, Vagindra Script was developed in 1905 by the scholar Agvandorc as a new writing system for the Buryat people. Although its initial creation is often cited as 1905, Rinchen notes that the script was fully established by 1907. The main goal behind its development was to create a writing system capable of capturing both Buryat linguistic traits and Russian influences within the same textual framework. By doing so, Agvandorc sought to provide a more precise and versatile method for representing the spoken and written language of the Buryat community.

The Vagindra script is notable for its ability to incorporate phonetic elements from multiple languages and to reflect the sociolinguistic context of the time. Its design demonstrates an effort to balance tradition with the practical needs of bilingual or multilingual communication. The principal characteristics and structural features of the Vagindra script can be summarized as follows (Choymaa 2003, 233):

1. It was developed with the Classical Mongolian and Todo scripts serving as primary models.
2. The design of the script was influenced by characters from the Cyrillic alphabet.
3. One of its objectives was to represent all letters of the Cyrillic system accurately.
4. The script was based on the Buryat dialect. Since Buryat is a variety of Mongolian, it reflects the specific phonetic and sound patterns of that dialect.

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5. The script employed new symbols, which made it less suited to rapid writing than the traditional Mongolian script.

Cyrillic Alphabet in Mongolia. The adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet in Mongolia traces back to the 1930s. During the 8th Congress of the Mongolian Communist Party in 1930, a decision was made emphasizing the necessity of prioritizing the Latin script. Following this decision, for about a decade, the Latin script was used alongside traditional Mongolian writing. On February 21st, 1941, a joint decree by the Central Communist Party and the Council of Ministers confirmed the continued use of the 29-letter Latin alphabet. However, on March 25th, 1941, it was decided to transition to the Cyrillic script. Subsequently, on May 9th, 1941, the Central Committee of the Communist Party officially adopted a 35-letter Cyrillic alphabet.

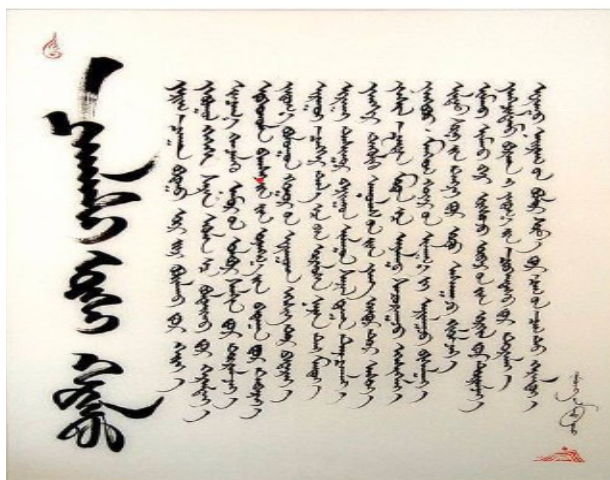
The Cyrillic script was specifically designed to represent all the sounds of the Mongolian language. Its introduction marked the end of the Latin script's official use, and from January 1st, 1946, all publications, official documents, and correspondence were required to be produced using Cyrillic (Shagdarsüren 2001, 53). This transition not only standardized written communication but also facilitated literacy campaigns and educational reforms throughout the country.

Katzner identifies 1941 as the year when Mongolia officially adopted the Cyrillic alphabet. His evaluations regarding this transition are presented in his works published in 2005. In these studies, he discusses the adoption of the Cyrillic script in detail and confirms that the transition indeed took place in 1941. Katzner's works serve as an important source for understanding the changes in language and writing systems during this historical period (Katzner 2005, 203). Poppe, on the other hand, notes that the traditional Mongolian script continued to be used until 1944. According to him, Mongols began to use the Cyrillic alphabet consistently from that year onward. The Buryat population had abandoned their previous script earlier, in 1931 (Poppe 1965, 15).

In the process of adopting the Cyrillic alphabet in Mongolia and establishing the rules of the new writing system, Sh. Damdinsuren played a key role. He made significant contributions to the organization and implementation of the new Cyrillic script. The 35-letter Cyrillic alphabet, officially adopted in 1941, was designed to more accurately reflect the phonetic characteristics of the Mongolian language. To represent the language's unique sounds, additional

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An example of elegantly written Mongolian script



نمونه متن خوشنویسی شاددی مغولی

On the history of research into the ancient alphabetic scripts of the Turkic world (Runic Scripts)

The creation of writing is a complex process closely connected with a people's culture, history, moral values, and mentality. Ancient peoples of the Eurasian Steppe recorded non-verbal written information through petroglyphs and symbolic signs engraved on rocks, stone slabs, and in caves. These signs provide rich data on the lifestyle, history, and ethnic culture of nomadic communities. Historical sources and scholarly studies indicate that the ancient Turks maintained a long-standing tradition of state organization and written culture. The original homeland and centers of civilization of the Turks are generally considered to be Central Asia, Mongolia, the Altai region, and Siberia. In these areas, the Huns and their successors—the ancient Turks—established vast and powerful state formations. The influence of Chinese, Iranian, Indian, Byzantine, and other ancient cultures is clearly reflected in these civilizations.

Throughout history, the Turks have employed various writing systems to record their language. Historical sources indicate that the written Turkish language can only be traced back to the 7th century CE. Among the scripts used during this period were the Old Turkic, Sogdian, Uyghur, Manichaean, Brahmi, Tibetan, Assyrian, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Cyrillic, and Latin alphabets. Each writing system developed in response to the needs of its time and the prevailing

cultural influences. The frequent changes in scripts among the Turks can be explained by their wide geographical expansion, incorporation into diverse civilizations, and adoption of various religions.

The ancient Turks mastered the Sogdian, Manichaean, and Brahmi scripts in depth. In the early period, the Sogdian script was even elevated to the level of the official state script of the Turkic Khaganate. Brahmi, which emerged in the 8th century BCE, is considered the oldest syllabic Indian script. The ancient Turks made certain modifications when using this alphabet (von Gabain 1986, 180–182). Buddhist texts based on the Brahmi script, such as individual manuscripts and missionary literature, were widely circulated.

The Manichaean script, as its name suggests, was widely used among the followers of this religion. From 763 CE, Manichaeism was declared the official religion of the Uyghur Khaganate, though it was later replaced by Buddhism. The “Book of Omens” (in Old Turkic, “Irk bitig”), compiled in 930 CE, was written in runic script on Chinese paper (Stebleva 1970).

The ancient Turkic runic alphabet mainly consisted of consonants, with some characters representing multiple sounds. During the reign of Khagan Istemi, this alphabet was taught to officials and soon spread among the general population. The runic script fully corresponded to the norms of the Old Turkic spoken language and was regarded as a major cultural achievement of the Turkic peoples (Shukurlu 1993).

Runic scripts were widely used in Central Asia from the 8th to the 10th centuries and served the language of the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions. Through these writings, detailed information about the phonetic system and historical development of the Turkic languages can be obtained. Ancient Turkic inscriptions were primarily created in various regions of Central and Middle Asia, as well as Siberia, and have been found in the territories of present-day Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, and Mongolia.

Overall, the ancient Turkic runic writings were not merely a means of communication but also emerged as a factor shaping the development of human culture.

Conclusion

The evolution of writing systems within the Mongol Empire and its successor states represents a unique historical trajectory from nomadic oral traditions to a sophisticated, multi-script bureaucratic apparatus. As this study has demonstrated, the adoption and development of various scripts—ranging from the Uyghur and Phags-pa to the Soyombo and Cyrillic—were not merely linguistic transitions but strategic responses to the exigencies of imperial governance and cultural preservation. The Mongol leadership's pragmatic approach to literacy facilitated the integration of diverse ethnic groups and enhanced significant intercultural exchange across Eurasia.

The research highlights that the Uyghur script served as the foundational pillar for Mongol statehood, providing the necessary framework for the codification of the “Yassa” and the institutionalization of diplomacy. Furthermore, the creation of the Phags-pa script under Kublai Khan illustrates an early attempt at “universal literacy,” aimed at bridging the phonetic and administrative gaps between the nomadic elite and the sedentary subjects of East Asia and the Near East. The numismatic evidence from Ilkhanid Azerbaijan, particularly from centers like Tabriz and Ganja, further confirms that these writing systems were vital instruments of economic and political legitimacy.

Beyond the imperial era, the emergence of scripts such as the Todo, Galik, and Soyombo reflects the resilience of Mongol cultural identity and the continuous effort to refine linguistic tools in response to shifting geopolitical realities. The 20th century transition to the Cyrillic alphabet marks the final stage of this evolutionary process, aligning Mongolia's rich scriptural heritage with the requirements of modern global integration. In conclusion, the history of Mongol writing systems is a testament to the empire's role as a cultural bridge, where the written word functioned as the essential fabric for maintaining social order and fostering intellectual continuity in the Turkic and Mongolic worlds.

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