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Runic scripts: Orkhon and Yenissei

apollinaria avrutina

'When the Blue Sky appeared above, and the Fulvous Earth below, human kind was born in between. My primogenitors reigned over them – ***Bumin Kağan*** and ***İstemi Kağan***. When they ascended to the throne, they founded ***El'*** – the State and established ***Törü*** – the Law of ***Göktürks***. They made their enemies bow their heads and bend their knees. Their people settled in the East and in the West…'

These are the first words of the Large Inscription at the ***Kül Tigin*** monument.

According to the ancient Turkic legend, which was written in the 6th century by Chinese historians, the Turk's ancestors 'lived near the big swamp and were wiped out by warriors of the neighbouring tribe'. Only a little boy, maimed by their enemies (they cut off his arms and legs), survived. A she-wolf suckled him and then became his wife. Later the enemies found the boy and killed him, but the she-wolf escaped and hid herself in the Eastern Tien Shan. There, in a cave, she gave birth to ten sons whose father was the boy she had saved. The Wolf's sons married Turfan women. One of the wolf's grandsons became the chieftain of a tribe and gave it his name – ***Aşına***. Later the ***Aşına*** tribe moved their kin to Altay, where they led local tribes and took another name '***Türk***'. The name ***Aşına*** is of Iranian origin and means 'blue, dark blue'. Later, the people of the new empire are named ***Göktürks*** or '***Blue Turks***' as seen in large Orkhon inscriptions. However, the first word 'blue' is only a calque, a kin-name of the first Turkic dynasty, and this name should be translated as 'Göks and Türks', i.e. '***Aşına and Türks***'.[1]

Ancient Turkic Runic scripts, had conceivably appeared by the 7th century, and were widespread in the territories which now comprise such modern countries as Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, and Russia. Being the first written documents of Turkic tribes, they shed light on the early history of Asia, describing colourfully the first Turkic states, which developed in the 6th-7th centuries, mostly the First (552-603 AD) and the Second Turkic (Göktürk) (679-744) Khaganates.

The ancient Turkic and, perhaps, Runic inscriptions are often mentioned by medieval authors, as seen in Mahmud Kaşgari's *Divan-ı Lügat-it Türk* (11th century). Slabs with inscriptions are also depicted in the narrative written by Moğol historian Alaaddin Ata Melik Cüveyni *Tarih-i Cihan Güşa* (13th century) as part of his description of ruins in the ancient Uyghur town of Ordu-Balık.

The first exact evidence of Turkic Runiform Scripts appeared only in the third decade of the 18th century. In 1721, a botanist D. Messerschmidt, who was sent to Siberia for seven years (1720-1727) by Peter the Great to study Siberia's nature, and a Swedish captive officer Philip Strahlenberg (captured after the greatest battle of the Northern War between Russia and Sweden – the Poltava Battle), who was exiled to Siberia and given to Messerschmidt as a guide, found several headstones in the valley of Yenissei. A year later, Strahlenberg's imprisonment had finished, he returned to Sweden and published his and Messershmidt's memoirs of those discoveries. These two authors noticed similarities between the newly found script and Scandinavian runic script.

After these publications, numerous discussions were held in scientific literary circles to try and identify the origin of the script. For example, in 1882 Finnish scientists prepared a map of Yenissei scripts which they ascribed to Finno-Ugric tribes. The Russian scientist Spasskiy supported their Slavic origin. In the middle of the 19th century, the German academician Schiffner first assumed their connection with ***tamga***s, special signs of clan or property, mostly used by nomadic peoples in Asia. Disputes finished when the deciphering was completed.

In 1889, at the bank of the Kokshin-Orkhon (confluent of the Orkhon River), the expedition headed by a Russian scientist Yadrintsev found two big obelisks (those of ***Kül Tigin*** and ***Mogilan***, who was mentioned with the title '***Bilge Kagan***'), which had been written in two scripts, Runic script and Chinese script; the latter – Chinese script – was severely damaged. Two years later, monuments of the same type were found by a Russian expedition headed by the famous turkologist Radloff; the bilingualism made it possible to decipher the script, a task which was completed on November 25, 1893 by the Danish Turkologist V. Thomsen. He noticed that some signs appeared only in certain positions; this fact was treated as a manifestation of the front / back vowel harmony, which is peculiar to all Turkic languages. Thomsen informed Radloff, who also worked in Russia overseeing the deciphering of the Orkhon-Yenissei scripts, about the discovery. On January 19th, 1894, Radloff, referring to Thomsen's earlier work, presented his translation of the ***Kül Tigin*** obelisk at the Russian Academy of Science.

~

The Orkhon monuments are essentially large texts created by the order of rulers and high officials, basically at the time of the ***Second Turkic (Göktürk) Khaganate*** (679-744). Therefore, they may be considered as a manifestation of some spelling rules that had been established by that time.

As for the Yenissei monuments, they contain more archaic grammatical forms. Some researchers suppose that the runiform script could have been adopted from the basin of the Yenissei in Northern Mongolia, and then developed in both districts concurrently, with local distinctions. At this time, the Orkhon Script was also gradually excluding archaic forms, while the Yenissei script preserved them.

The geographical remoteness of the Orkhon from the Yenissei makes it possible to notice their evident language distinctions at the dialect level. The Yenissei monuments are considered to be related to a period earlier than those of the Orkhon; they are mostly represented by short standard epitaphs, which included the name, titles, and the age of a decedent. Thereby, they demonstrate limited vocabulary, and also the usage of limited grammatical forms, which recur on every monument. Most of the monuments can be dated back to the 6th–8th century AD.

No spelling rules can be observed in the early monuments (i.e. mostly in the Yenissey ones); consequently, there must have been no firm rules to prevent the writer from conveying his 'sound notions' in writing. It is a common fact for all writing systems that they convey the sounds of the language less correctly with the passage of time. Therefore, the earliest scripts are the most favourable for studying the sound aspect of a language. At the same time, neither the alphabet nor the syllabary can be considered as transcriptional systems.

Elements of the **Old Oghuz Language** can be found in many modern Turkic languages widely distributed in different areas, but among modern Turkic languages, the closest to the Old Oghuz Language are the Tuvinian, the Tofalarian, and the Yakut languages.

As for the problem of the origin of Turkic Runic Scripts, in publications dedicated to this problem the most popular theory is that of the foreign origin of the 'runic alphabet'.[2] Most researchers usually analyze signs, which they call 'letters' representing ***phonemes*** of the language, and compare them with the writing systems of the Türks' neighbours, whose writing and spelling rules could have influenced the writing system created by the Türks.

However, there is another point of view. According to this theory, the Old Turkic Runic script is an indigenous writing system,[3] which was **wordy-syllabic**, though at the border of the 6th-7th centuries it was in the process of intense alphabetization. This means that firstly it was a wordy writing system, which then began to change to the wordy-syllabic writing system; later, it became more syllabic, while at the border of 6th-7th centuries it demonstrated indications of intense alphabetization.
The evolution of writing systems all over the world includes three stages of natural development from

Other monuments were discovered by Russian archaeologists in the Orkhon and Yenissei valleys between 1889 and 1893. Generally, they can all be divided into several groups:

1) The Baikal-Lena runic-like inscriptions. Not all inscriptions of that region can be considered to be runic; identification of some signs is controversial.
2) The monuments of Mongolia, among which are the greatest monuments of the Turkic written language, the monuments of the Orkhon River valley:
    1. ***The Kül Tigin***'s monument, presumably created in 732.
    2. ***The Tonyukuk***'s monument conceivably created between 712 and 716. Its language differs from that of ***Kül Tigin***'s.
    3. ***The Mogilan-khan***'s (***Bilge Kagan***'s) monument (735). Its content is close to that of ***Kül Tigin's***.
    4. The Ongin Inscription, an epitaph written in honour of ***Ilteres-Khan*** and his wife, who were the parents of ***Mogilan-khan*** and ***Kül Tigin***. Conceivably created between 690-706 or 700-716.
    5. The inscriptions of the Ikhe-Khushotu area, written in honour of Küli-Çur (presumably 721). Küli-Çur's battles with neighbouring tribes described here are portrayed in greater detail on the monuments of Mogilan-khan and Kül Tigin.
    6. Moyun-Çur's monument, situated at the basin of the Selenga River (conceivably 744-759). It is formed using the Uyghur language, which differs (for example, in verbal forms) from the Old Oghuz language of the other monuments, and is written with Uyghur rather than with runiform script.
    7. Monuments from the bank of the Khoito-Tamir and from Ikhe Ashete area (several small fragmentary epitaphs).
3) The monuments of the basin of the Yenissei River. Contrary to the dominant point of view, not the most ancient. These small epitaphs, translated by Radloff, can be dated back to 8th-10th centuries. In total, there are approximately about 140 Yenissei monuments. The Yenissei script has some distinctions from the Orkhon script. For example, some signs exist only in the Yenissei script: the sign 𐰇 indicates the vowel /e/. In the Yenissey script, this vowel is reproduced by the sign 𐰚, which in the Orkhon script reproduces only the syllable /äb/ or consonant /b/. Some researchers suppose that the appearance of this Yenissei sign results from the splitting of the syllable /äb/ and the detachment of its vocal part.[4] Some other signs also exist only in the Yenissei script, such as the sign 𐰴, which reproduces a back syllable /at/ or consonant /t/ and the sign 𐰾 reproducing the syllables /aş/- / äş/. There are some other, less substantial graphical distinctions.

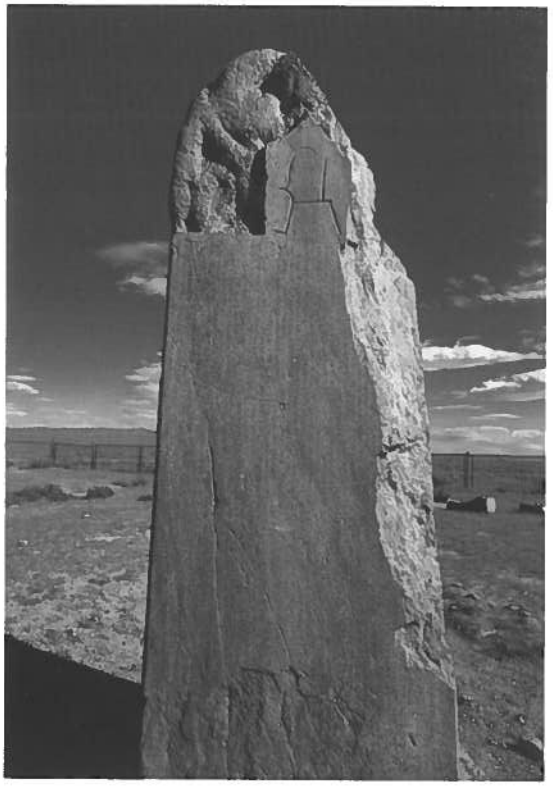
pictures to the alphabet, which is thereby a summit of the evolution of the world's writing process. At the same time, there is no writing system that has passed all the stages of development from pictures to the alphabet, and became purely alphabetical. Even so, at the very beginning of the development, when only ***pre-writing*** (another word for ***semasiography***) could be at issue, only two methods were used for direct (omitting the language) information transfer: (1) describing-graphic, i.e. the information was transferred by a picture, and (2) mnemonic, i.e. reminding.

According to the researchers whose opinion is shared here, the Turkic Runiform Script descended from the Turkic tribal signs, ***tamga***s. This idea can be corroborated by the fact that most of runic signs and most of the ***tamga***s coincide.[5] The simplicity of ***tamga***s' inscription and the material on which these signs were depicted caused the simplicity of runic signs. ***Tamga***s may well have been the pictorial foundation that yielded the first signs reproducing words, or ***logograms***.

~

In Turkic Runiform Script there are a lot of signs whose function depends on their pictorial qualities. There is no doubt that the signs 𐰃 -/ay/, 𐰴-/ok/ и 𐰀-/äb/ meaning 'the Moon', 'an arrow' and 'a house, jurt', respectively. Perhaps the sign 𐰉-/är/ also means 'a man'. It is possible to list more or less probable 'pictograms': 𐰇-/äl/ - 'a hand', 𐰚-/at/ - 'a horse', 𐰋-/än/, probably, en (in) - 'a slope', 𐰍-/ag/ - 'fishing net', 𐰇-/iç/ - the picture symbolizing the act of drinking, 𐰆-/ı/ could be a picture of a tree, 𐰽-/ık/ a picture of a spindle, 𐰖-/as/ a picture of a /saç/ 'hair'. The sign 𐰢-/äş/~/aş/ was presumably used for a syllable /äş/ and was a picture of a door, threshold, reproducing the word /äşik/, but this sign is used only in the Yenissei scripts. The sign 𐰓-/ant/, probably, symbolizes a kind of a magical circle, therefore, it could be connected with the word 'ant' - 'oath', existing in several modern Turkic languages.[6]

A significant distinguishing feature of the runiform script is the existence of eleven pairs of back and front signs; obviously, they initially were words or syllables: (𐰴 /ab/, 𐰀 /äb/, 𐰔 /ad/, 𐰼 /äd/, 𐰍 /ag/, 𐰏 /äg/, 𐰃 /ay/, 𐰾 /äy/, 𐰆 /ak/, 𐰈 /äk/, 𐰴 /ok/~/uk/, 𐰖 /ök/~/ük/, 𐰉 /al/, 𐰇 /äl/, 𐰓 /an/, 𐰋 /än/, 𐰆 /ar/, 𐰉 /är/, 𐰖 /as/, 𐰇 /äs/, 𐰚 /at/, 𐰘 /ät/), and two signs without pairs: 𐰽 /ık/ can be used only in 'back' words, while 𐰇 /iç/ only in 'front' words.[7] The rule governing the usage of 'back' words is that only the signs reproducing 'back' syllables can be included while in 'front' words only the signs for 'front' syllables can be used. This rule was almost never broken by authors of runic texts.



Above, Kül Tigin's Monument - Orkhon Valley Mongolia, 2006, photo by Servet Somuncuoğlu.

At the same time, there are some words that consist both of 'front' and 'back' signs, whose interpretation depends on their environment. If the runiform script is interpreted as a **wordy-syllabic** system, the usage of different types of signs is the evidence for the reproduction of two types of syllables, which are delivered, contrary to the context of all of the systems, by only one sign – one ***grapheme***.

Another specific feature of the runic script is the constant use of five /k/-signs. This fact was usually explained in a different way; for example A. Rona-Tas and O. Pritsak related this abundance to the frequency of its usage in speech.[8] However, the history of writing systems does not include connections such as these between the high frequency of the usage of a phoneme and the number of signs representing it. Furthermore, in the history of writing there are some

examples where several signs, which, at first glance, represent one consonant, in fact appear to be syllabic signs, representing syllables with different vocals. Such examples can be found in Assyrian-Babylonian and Etruscan scripts. Thus, the five signs presumably represent five syllables: 𐰴-/äk/, 𐰸 - /ak/, 𐰚 - /ök-ük/, 𐰾 - /ık/, 𐰽 - /ok-uk/.

Another specific trait for the runic script is so-called ***global signs*** – four signs that conceivably represented combinations of consonants. At the same time, one of the prevalent syllabic types of all Turkic languages is the 'Vowel + Consonant + Consonant' type, which makes it possible to interpret these runic signs as 𐰃 /ant/, 𐰋 /alt/, 𐰇 /art/, 𐰍 /anç/.

The system position of the sign 𐰇 /art/ is somewhat unclear. It appears only on several monuments – on ***Tonyukuk***'s monument and on some Yenissei monuments. Different researchers have different points of view concerning this sign: for example, V. Thomsen and A.V. Gaben never mention it, while other researchers sometimes interpret it as /baş/ or /art/; others suppose it to be a pictorial, representing a picture of a mountain pass. Probably, this sign remained a picture, but one seldom used.
Vowels in the runiform script are represented by several signs; however, this fact does not contradict the statements of the syllabic character of this script, since vowels are syllable-forming elements. Only two signs represent the Turkic vowel harmony: 𐰆 /o/-/u/ and 𐰖 /ö/-/ü/. Each of the other two signs is considered to represent two phonemes: 𐰀 /a/, /ä/ and 𐰉 /ı/, /i/. Their interpretation depends on their environment, as usual. Researchers traditionally distinguish runic vocal signs as 4+1, with the fifth sign, peculiar only to Yenissei monuments - 𐰏 /e/.

~

The perfect description of the runic script was first made by Thomsen (*Thomsen Vilh.* Orhon ve Yenisey yazıtlarının çözümü, İlk bildiri, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, [The Deciphering of the Orkhon and the Yenissey Scripts, The First Announcement] 1993); his book is the first and the oldest. Translated into all main European languages, it has influenced all the later studies. The Russian scientist S. Malov made a great contribution to the problem in the 1950s, but his three academic monographs with original translations of the runic monuments (Малов С.Е. Памятники древнетюркской письменности. - М.-Л.: Изд-во АНСССР, 1951 [Malov S.E., The Monuments of Old Turkic Script, Moscow-Leningrad, Academy of Science]; Малов С.Е. Енисейская письменность тюрков. Тексты и переводы. - М.- Л.: Изд-во АНСССР, 1952 [Malov S.E., Turks' Yennisey Script, Texts and translations, Moscow-Leningrad, Academy of Science]; Малов С.Е. Памятники древнетюркской письменности Монголии и Киргизии. - М.-Л.: Изд-во АНСССР, 1959 [Malov S.E., Old Turkic Scripts from Mongolia and Kirghizia, Moscow-Leningrad, Academy of Science]) have unfortunately never been translated into other languages. Probably, these works inspired a number of perfect studies made in the 80s and 90s, particularly in Turkey (Orkun H.N., Eski Türk Yazıtları, [Old Turkic Scripts] Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1986; Tekin T., Orhon yazıtları, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1988); however in the 90s, especially after the decay of the Soviet Union, the problem of the origin and interpretation of the Turkic Runic script received another, sometimes nationalistic attitude, which resulted in the publication of various works (sometimes albums



Above, Sonkolağzı Monument - Tuva Rebuplic Russia, 2007, photo by Servet Somuncuoğlu.

The entire system consists of approximately 40 syllable signs, which, as a resume, can be divided into four groups:

1. Signs that present syllables of VC- type (Vowel+Consonant)

Front Syllables	**Back Syllables**
-/äb/	-/ab/
-/äd/	-/ad/
-/ät/	-/at /
-/äk/	-/ak/
-/ök-ük/	-/ok-uk/
	-/ık/
-/äg/	-/ag/
-/iç/	
-/äs/	-/as/
-/än/	-/an/
-/äl/	-/al/
-/är/	-/ar/
-/äy/	-/ay/

2. Signs that present syllables of VC-type (Vowel + Consonant) indifferent to using with front or back vowels

-/äm/~/am/	-/äç/~/aç/
-/äň/~/aň/	-/äş/~/aş/
-/äŋ/~/aŋ/	-/äz/~/az/
-/äp/~/ap/	

3. Signs that present syllables of VCC-type (Vowel + Consonant + Consonant)

-/alt/ (○ (◡)-/ant/ -/anç/ -/art/ (?)

4. Signs that present syllables of V-type (Vowel)

-/a/, /ä/	-/e/ (Yenissei)	-/ı/, /i/
-/o/,/u/		-/ö/, /ü/

and atlases) with far-fetched data. Even so, any insight into the history and the inner structure of the Turkic runic script requires, like any scientific problem, detailed familiarization with the subject, taking into account all existing points of view. □

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