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The Unity or Multiplicity of Runic Scripts. An Account of the Attempt to Isolate a South Yenisei Alphabet

Present-day research on the general character, origin and chronology of the runic system of writing in Asia and southeastern Europe has been confronted with certain recurring questions that cannot be left unanswered. One of them is the following: are we dealing with the development of one system which originated in a given location and evolved throughout the ages or with that of several more or less similar alphabets which, although cognate in one way or another, have sufficiently long histories to be treated as independent units?

The notion that the Turkic runic alphabet is homogeneous took shape during the last two centuries and became a kind of dogma, especially when great discoveries were being made in Mongolia and in East Turkestan, during the first attempts at deciphering the unknown script. Some less impressive and shorter inscriptions but for scholars almost as important were discovered in the Yenisei Basin by D. G. Messerschmidt's expedition in 1721-1722. Notwithstanding the existence of a number of different signs, there was no serious doubt about the presumption that the scripts from Mongolia, the Yenisei Basin and the Talas area basically formed one alphabetical system with two or three variants. The notion that they are genetically related seemed evident to the majority of scholars. Soon after a new group of texts had been revealed in Semirechie, W. Radloff emphasized the existence of two alphabets: the Orkhon alphabet and the Yenisei alphabet.¹ After some time, S. E. Malov declared his support for the existence of the Talas alphabet. Then as now the term Orkhon-Yenisei alphabet was commonly used to denote this whole system of writing. Consequently, the newly revealed different signs, the number of which had increased as a result of further expeditions, were regarded as local variants or as individual innovations of the inscriptions' scribes.

¹ Cf. I. L. Kyzlasov, *Runičeskie pis'mennosti evrazijskikh stepej*. Moskva, 1994:8.

This theoretical attitude had important practical consequences since, in the course of time, the phonetic values of the classical signs from Orkhon, Ongin and Yenisei were for no real reason applied to certain, seemingly identical, characters of the inscriptions later discovered in central Asia and Europe. This method of deciphering did not always bring satisfactory results.

The problem of deciphering the texts gave rise to certain other important questions, one of them being: Is Orkhon script older than that of Yenisei, or vice versa? The question was debated for a century, mainly in favour of Yenisei script which, having more irregular shapes in its characters, was considered to be more ancient. Therefore, it was supposed that Yenisei script had undergone a deep transformation and become Orkhon script. Only in 1960 did L. R. Kyzlasov declare that, unlike W. Radloff, P. M. Melioranskij and S. E. Malov, he believed Yenisei script to be later than Orkhon script.² More recently, A. Róna-Tas has made an attempt to be more precise: “[...] the Yenisei inscriptions are simultaneous with or later than those of Mongolia”, he writes.³ Several generations of Turkologists believed that Orkhon-Yenisei script had developed from Iranian, which was of Semitic and probably of Aramaic origin and that its variants were substantially due to the material or instruments used for writing. In particular, cursive script was considered to be the result of writing on the parchment with a brush. However, no Turkologists were able to explain the existence of double signs used to denote the same phonemes. A simple examination of the list of characters indicates the existence of different signs for *t'*, *q*, *m*, *nt* and some others, a phenomenon that could not be explained by either the alphabetic or syllabic nature of this script. The situation was especially unclear due to several specific complementary signs revealed in some new inscriptions originating mainly from Kirghizstan and Europe. We need only remember an embarrassing “Pecheneg ladder” that was detected on the wooden stick from Ačyq-Taš. S. E. Malov much hesitated to determine that inscription as belonging to the

² L. R. Kyzlasov, “Novaja datirovka pamjatnikov enisejskoj pis'mennosti” *Sovetskaja Arkheologija*, 4 (1960), 3:93-120; the same, “O datirovke pamjatnikov enisejskoj pis'mennosti” *Sovetskaja Arkheologija*, 9 (1965), 3:38-49; the same, “Kogda izčezla enisejskaja runičeskaja pis'mennost' južnosibirskikh tjurkov” *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta*, ser. 8, Istorija, 1992, 6:29-36. Cf. G. Clauson, “The Origin of the Turkish “Runic” Alphabet” *AO XXXII*, 1970:53.

³ A. Róna-Tas, *An Introduction to Turkology*, Szeged, 1991:56-57.

Turkic culture.⁴ Also A. M. Ščerbak was of the opinion that the signs of the inscription do not belong to the Turkic alphabet. S. G. Kljaštornyj suggested, in 1987, the existence of two systems of runic script: a central Asiatic and an eastern European.⁵ This notwithstanding the old practical terms: “European runes” and “Asiatic runes” are still in general use.

In the meantime, the problem of the runic alphabet of the European zone became increasingly complicated. In their edition of short inscriptions on the bull skull from Elista, S. G. Kljaštornyj and I. Vásáry wrote in 1987:

“The inscription was written with a variant of the East-European runic script (in the following EER). The area where this EER was in use comprises the steppe zone of South-East Europe between the Volga (Lower and Middle Volga Region) and the Danube Basin (territories of present-day Roumania, Bulgaria and Hungary).”⁶

In another passage, the same authors attempted to organize the new epigraphic material and our knowledge of it:

“The first documents of the EER that has become known to the scholarly world, are the inscriptions [...] of Nagy-Szent-Miklós found in 1799. [...] Recently, a new inscription has been discovered on the amphora from Majaki, where the alphabet is identical with that of Nagy-Szent-Miklós. Another type of the EER is represented by what is known as the Khazar script. The documents of this script have become known from the 1930s. This type of the EER, though evidently similar to the Nagy-Szent-Miklós type, represents an independent alphabet.”⁷

As specimens of this type of writing the following inscriptions have been indicated by these authors: 1) two inscriptions on flasks from the Museum of Novočerkassk; 2) five stone inscriptions from Majatskoe gorodišče; 3) rock

⁴ S. E. Malov, *Pamjatniki drevnetjurskoj pis'mennosti Mongolii i Kirgizii*, Moskva-Leningrad, 1959:68.

⁵ “[...] suščestvovanie dvukh sistem tjurkskoj runiki [...]”, S. G. Kljaštornyj, “Drevnetjurkskaja civilizacija: diakhroničeskie svjazi i sinkhroničeskie aspekty” *ST* 1987, 3:59.

⁶ S. G. Kljaštornyj and I. Vásáry, “A Runic Inscription on a Bull Skull from the Volga Region” in: *Between the Danube and the Caucasus. A Collection of Papers Concerning Oriental Sources on the History of Central and South-Eastern Europe*, Budapest, 1987:171.

⁷ Kljaštornyj – Vásáry, op.cit.:172.

inscriptions from the ruins of Khumara (North Caucasus); 4) inscriptions from Karakent (North Caucasus); 5) inscriptions on the Talas (Ačyq-Taš) stick; 6) a big inscription from Majatskoe gorodišče; 7) the inscription on the bull skull being precisely the subject of their edition. They added that along with these groups of the EER there still exist three other types of the script in question, viz. 1) inscriptions from Murfatlar along with inscriptions from the caves in the Crimea; 2) Avar inscriptions from the Carpathian Basin; 3) the Székely script, "a late descendant of a local type of one of the EERs."⁸ Quite remarkable is the authors' following observation:

"Because of the lack of bilingual inscriptions and the insufficient number and often fragmentary character of the documents, all attempts at their reading are tentative, and for the most part improbable."⁹

Since the year in which these lines were printed archaeological finds and other investigations have resulted in new observations and more or less substantial conclusions. It has become clear that the general situation in terms of geography, chronology and ethnic policy is more sophisticated than had been assumed, that some newly revealed writing systems were used by other, mainly Iranian, peoples and that their anticipated Turkic appurtenance might appear problematic. It has been supposed that the very repartition into Asian and European runes might appear unserviceable, and even false, since both groups might have possessed some deeper connections.

In recent decades, many new ideas on the runic scripts have been formulated by G. Clauson, G. Doerfer, M. Erdal, V. G. Guzev, J. Harmatta, H. W. Haussig, S. G. Kljaštornyj, I. V. Kormušin, L. R. Kyzlasov, Gy. Németh, O. Pritsak, A. Róna-Tas, O. F. Sertkaya, A. M. Ščerbak, D. D. Vasil'ev and others. Quite original, and perplexing at the same time, have been observations and proposals made by I. L. Kyzlasov. With a solid grounding in archaeology and palaeography he was well-prepared to take a new look at old problems. This should be emphasized since as soon as the golden age of Turkology, marked by such names as W. Thomsen, W. Radloff, O. Donner, P. Melioranskij or S. E. Malov, had come to an end, palaeographic studies on the Turkic runes aroused no special interest. Only some time ago they were

⁸ Op.cit.:173.

⁹ L.c.

again taken up by I. V. Kormušin,¹⁰ O. N. Tuna¹¹ and D. D. Vasil'ev.¹² Lately, I. L. Kyzlasov has devoted much of his efforts to fundamental problems of the runic script. Sometimes one has the impression that his palaeographic pedantry goes too far and becomes a kind of *l'art pour l'art*¹³ but it should also be remembered that the present state of research, characterized by a richness and diversity of new materials on the one hand, and the fact of our helplessness in the face of certain new finds on the other, simply demands the creation of a dependable palaeographic base and the formulation of bold new ideas. It has soon appeared that purely palaeographic observations have served I. L. Kyzlasov to formulate far-fetched hypotheses.

I. L. Kyzlasov started anew discussing some terminological questions which threw his colleagues into confusion, as evidenced by a lack of any broader acceptance of his proposals. He declared, for example, the traditional term "Turkic runes" to be misleading and proposed to replace it by a "steppe runic script" or "steppe runes". He named the script of five inscriptions of the Ferghana Valley (viz. from the ruins of Kaladj-Kafir, Kaladj-Bolo, Kizil-Piljau, Oš-khona and Kuva) the "script of the Isphara" and the script of the Nagy-Szent-Miklós treasure along with the inscription on the spindle from Szarvas – the "script of the Tisza". In addition, he made a hypothesis – which in most of his studies is presented as a proven fact – saying that in the basin of the Middle and Upper Yenisei there had existed along with the generally known "Yenisei alphabet" some other runic scripts, viz. a "South Yenisei script" which up to the present day has been left unnoticed, and probably also an "Upper Yenisei script," some traces of which have been observed by him

¹⁰ I. V. Kormušin, "K osnovnym ponjatijam tjurkskoj runičeskoj paleografii" *ST* 1975, 2: 25-47.

¹¹ O. N. Tuna, "On the Phonetic Values of the Symbols , and . Used in Some of the Texts in Kök-Turkish Script" *CAJ* 9, 1966, 4:241-263.

¹² D. D. Vasil'ev, *Korpus tjurkskikh runičeskikh pamjatnikov bassejna Eniseja*, Leningrad 1983.

¹³ "[...] these faults are not vital, there is enough reliable material to show what letters the alphabets of these inscriptions contained, but no account should be taken of letters of dubious shapes, particularly when they are parts of words which do not seem to make sense, and it is sad that a good scholar like O. N. Tuna should have spent so much time trying to find phonetic values for letters which probably never existed," Sir Gerard Clauson, *Op. cit.*:64.

and which can be tentatively ascribed to the Chik people.¹⁴ The supposed "South Yenisei script" must be related not only to the "Yenisei script" but also, more closely, to the "Don script" and "Kuban script" as well.¹⁵ In this connection I. L. Kyzlasov proposes a new repartition and elimination of two groups: an "Asian group" consisting of the alphabets of the Orkhon, the Yenisei and the Talas, and "Eurasian group" embracing the "Don alphabet," the "Kuban alphabet," the "Isphara alphabet," "the alphabet of Ačyq-Taš" and the "South Yenisei alphabet." It should be understood that the old classification is rendered groundless and unnecessary.

It is interesting to know how I. L. Kyzlasov clears the way for his repartition. He cuts namely himself off all other runic type scripts the relation of which to the Turkic world seems to him dubious, so not only off the Sekler script but also off the inscriptions from the Black Sea shore, those of the North-East Anatolia, those of the Balkan countries like the shamanic inscription from Monastira near Ravna (tentatively but rather reasonably deciphered by M. Moskov just as a specimen of an Asian runic script)¹⁶, that of the Issyk Kurgan (resembling so much the Turkic runes that A. S. Amandjolov did not hesitate to read it as a Turkic text)¹⁷ along with similar texts from Afghanistan.¹⁸ I. L. Kyzlasov contends that the relation of those texts to the "steppe runes" has not been proved. He writes in this connection what follows:

"Notwithstanding a widespread opinion concerning the affiliation of the northeastern zone of the Black Sea to the Turkic runic script this cannot be really proved. Studies by I. Dončeva, E. Tryjarski, T. I. Makarova, S. A. Pletneva and other scholars have demonstrated that the bulk of those inscriptions has a tamga-like

¹⁴ I.L. Kyzlasov, *Drevnetjurkskaja runičeskaja pis'mennost Evrazii (Opyt paleografičeskogo analiza)*, Moskva, 1990:117-128; the same, *Runičeskie pis'mennosti stepnoj zony Evrazii. Problemy istočnikovedenija*. Avtoreferat, Akademija Nauk SSSR. Instytut Arkheologii, Moskva, 1990:12-14; the same, *Runičeskie pis'mennosti evrazijskikh stepej*:42-56, 289-320.

¹⁵ I. L. Kyzlasov, *Runičeskie pis'mennosti evrazijskikh stepej*:54.

¹⁶ M. Moskov, "Prabŭlgarski runičeski nadpis" *Palaeobulgarica – Starobŭlgaristika*, 1983:35-46.

¹⁷ A. S. Amandjolov, *Tjurkskaja runičeskaja grafika III (nagljadnyj material – irtyšskie, ilijskie i syrdarinskie nadpisi)*, Alma-Ata, 1985:31-39.

¹⁸ A. A. Motamedi, "Discovery of an Inscription in an Unknown Language at Ai-Khanum" *Afghanistan*, June 1980:45-48.

character. In spite of a certain external similarity of a number of those signs to the runes [...] neither single tamgas nor combinations of them appear to be actual texts. [...] The published materials do not allow us to identify them with any runic alphabet. The same problem applies to the inscription found in the village of Ravna.”¹⁹

One gets impression that I. L. Kyzlasov has not been sufficiently informed about all proposals lately made to explain the inscriptions from Murfatlar and Pliska.²⁰ He seems also not to have seriously assumed his attitude with regard to the Caucasian materials and proposals made by S. J. Bajčorov in his book published in 1989.²¹

His opinion on the well-know Kievan Khazar document is as follows:

“According to Pritsak, these are runes of the Orkhon type. His proposed decipherment has been the result of some interpretations which are strained. [...] It is clear that the inscription can be neither related to the Orkhon script, as proposed by Pritsak, nor ascribed to any of the known alphabets. The signs number 1, 4, and 5 from the right make this impossible.”²²

The above remarks have seemed necessary to draw your attention to the scope and methods of I. L. Kyzlasov's research and, in particular, to his proposals concerning the existence of the “South Yenisei alphabet”. According to him, first specimens of that alphabet were disclosed already in 1888, and

¹⁹ Cf. I. L. Kyzlasov, *Runičeskie pis'mennosti evrazijskikh stepej*:38.

²⁰ Cf. E. Tryjarski, “Has a Key Been Found to Decipher the Eurasian Script of the Runic Type?” in: *Laut- und Wortgeschichte der Türksprachen. Beiträge des Internationalen Symposiums Berlin, 7.-10. Juli 1992*. Herausgeg. v. B. Kellner-Heinkele und M. Stachowski, Wiesbaden, 1995:191, notes 13, 14, 194, note 30; the same, “Kritische Bemerkungen über die neuen Versuche der Entzifferung der protobulgarischen Inschriften” in: *Turfan, Khotan und Dunhuang Vorträge der Tagung “Annemarie v. Gabain und die Turfanforschung”*, veranstaltet von der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin (9-12. 12. 1994.) Herausgeg. von R. E. Emmerick, W. Sundermann, I. Warnke und P. Zieme, /Berlin/ 1996:343-352.

²¹ S. J. Bajčorov, *Drevnetjurkskie runičeskie pamjatniki Evropy. Otnošenje severokavkazskogo areala drevnetjurkskoj runičeskoj pis'mennosti k volgo-donskomu i dunajskomu arealom*, Stavropol', 1989.

²² I. L. Kyzlasov, *Runičeskie pis'mennosti evrazijskikh stepej*:34, 48.

from that year on 17 or 18 inscriptions in that script were brought to light and published. They are as follows:

- 4 inscriptions from Sulek,
- inscription on a whorl of a spindle from the Minusinsk Museum,
- inscriptions on a vessel from Ujbat čaatas,
- inscription from Sargol,
- 2 inscriptions on two horn-plates of the arc from Ajmyrlyq,
- inscription on the Ozernaja Mountain,
- 5 inscriptions on steles from Elegej,
- inscription on a stele from the cemetery of Turan,
- inscription from the Činge River,
- inscription on a small arrowhead from Karban.

The list should be supplemented by another inscription from Turan lately brought to light.²³

All of these inscriptions are short and represent (the Karban inscription excluded) 43 signs. A remarkable feature of the "South Yenisei" inscriptions should be a great heterogeneity of the variants of letters and word dividers. One is allowed to suppose that those inscriptions do not present a palaeographic entity but belong to different specimens. The present state of South-Siberian sources does not permit a well argued analysis of the problem and we must still await new materials.²⁴

According to I. L. Kyzlasov, 14 "South Yenisei signs" have no counterparts in the "Yenisei alphabet". In the case they have, I. L. Kyzlasov often perceives a formal resemblance only.²⁵ Since the area of the "South Yenisei script" must be located within the zone of the "Yenisei alphabet", the possibility of the influence exerted by the latter on the former, or vice versa, cannot be excluded. I. L. Kyzlasov's conclusion is that the proximity of both scripts is, however, limited (to 11-12 signs), and he is rather unwilling to speak about their genetic relationship.²⁶

His guess is that the "Yenisei script" and the "South Yenisei" script coexisted for a certain time. Archaeological analysis regarding the "South

²³ Op.cit.:289-320.

²⁴ Op.cit.:43, 48-56 and Table XV.

²⁵ Op.cit.:48.

²⁶ Op.cit.:48-49.

Yenisei" script allow to date its existence back to the second half of the 8th century A.D. up to the 10th century A.D. This coexistence should be among others evidenced by the text of Edegej I which is of mixed character, viz. is written with the "Yenisei characters" but also contains three "South Yenisei signs".²⁷

In connection with I. L. Kyzlasov's attempt at explaining the mixed character of some texts a brief remark can be made. It is reasonable to suppose that the authors of those inscriptions had knowledge of both writing systems. Certainly, they did not belong to broader social circles since knowledge of reading and writing among the nomads of the epoch can hardly be supposed. The question can rather be of skilled workmen, or experienced amateurs, who were invited by neighbouring clans or tribes. In such circumstances a substitution of one sign for another can be easily understood. On the other hand, it would be interesting to dwell on some psychological reasons for the phenomenon. We are allowed to suppose that they could be instilled in human ambition, in a desire to mark one's individuality or ability. Such feelings could be a feature of the engraver, of the ruler, of his kinsmen or representatives. All of them would be happy to possess a useful, slightly cryptographic means of communication of their own.

An interesting and useful hypothesis regarding the existence of the "South Yenisei" script demands, of course, the approbation of other specialists. An attempt at verifying it is, however, rather difficult. The main reason is that not all inscriptions forming a base for this hypothesis are accessible in the form of photographs. This is the case of 11 or 12 inscriptions presented neither by earlier researchers like Malov, Batmanov, Kiselev, Orkun, Vasil'ev, Kljaštornyj, nor by Kyzlasov himself. With regard to all analysed inscriptions the lecturer has at his disposal only copies handwritten by I. L. Kyzlasov or by his predecessors. In some cases the situation is delicate since the discoverer of the inscription, its copyist and its editor are one and the same person, viz. I. L. Kyzlasov himself.

It is natural that editions of epigraphic monuments contain doubtful points and misreadings; it is no wonder therefore that they also occur in the texts studied by I. L. Kyzlasov. To provide a few examples, we might indicate the inscription on a spindle in the Minusinsk Museum. D. D. Vasil'ev (*Korpus tjurkskikh runičeskikh pamjatnikov bassejna Eniseja*,

²⁷ Op.cit.:51.

1983:74, E 87) gives ꝛ, while the same sign is rendered by I. L. Kyzlasov (*Runičeskie pis'mennosti evrazijskikh stepej*, 1994:299, Ju 5) as ꝛ (a sign which supports I. L. Kyzlasov's hypothesis). In the case of Sulak VI, Kara Jüz, H. N. Orkun gives the signs which seem to be retouched while I. L. Kyzlasov most probably reproduces the present-day state of the monument which lately has seriously deteriorated (the sign ꝛ' (ꝛ'), reproduced by Orkun, does not figure in Kyzlasov's edition at all). As concerns the Karban inscription, I. L. Kyzlasov reproduces two foreign drawings, viz. one by V. N. Jelin, and the other by E. P. Matočkin. It is easy to perceive serious differences in the proposed readings (J and ꝛ versus ꝛ and ꝛ').

These cursory observations, the list of which could probably be lengthened after a more detailed analysis, suggest that we should accept the new proposals with caution. On the other hand, the existence of clearly written signs such as ꝛ, ꝛ', ꝛ, ꝛ, ꝛ, ꝛ and ꝛ seems to speak in favour of I. L. Kyzlasov's hypothesis.

The problem of the genesis of runic scripts, their mutual relation and repartition demands further intensive research.