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INSCRIPTIONS IN UYGHUR WRITING AND RUNIC CHARACTERS FROM THE URKOSH AREA (CENTRAL ALTAI)*

The authors interpret and introduce for scientific use two previously unknown Runic inscriptions and one inscription in the Uyghur writing found on the rocks of the Urkosh area in Central Altai. The Uyghur writing in black paint is the only find of such a kind in the whole region. It was created not earlier than the 10th century. The Runic characters could be dated back to the 8th–9th centuries. The supreme power-holders or tribal leaders are mentioned in the Urkosh inscriptions, which is quite rare in the collection of the early medieval runic manuscripts of the Altai.

Keywords: *Central Altai, Runic inscriptions, Uyghur writing, erkin, tengriken.*

Introduction

In the 2013 field season, the Chuisky team of the IAE SB RAS North Asian Joint Expedition continued systematic archaeological exploration of the Chuya River valley on the territory of the Altai Republic. Petroglyphs of Bolshoi Yaloman III sanctuary were one of the objects under exploration. This sanctuary is located in the Urkosh area close to the confluence of the rivers of Bolshoi Yaloman and Katun (Ongudai District of the Altai Republic). The sanctuary has been known since the 1980s. O.V. Larin shared his information about it with A.S. Surazakov; and in the mid-1990s, the latter dug a test pit under the rock outcrop with petroglyphs, and copied and reported some of the rock paintings (Surazakov, 1996: 82, Fig. 1). In 2004–2005, the Yalomanskaya expedition from the Altai University explored both the Urkosh area (Tishkin, Matryonin, Gorbunov, 2006: 156–157; Tishkin, Seryogin, 2013) and the Bolshoi Yaloman III sanctuary. The inscription in black paint, to be described further, was discovered at that time (Tishkin, Matryonin, Gorbunov, 2006: 157; Tishkin, 2006: 6; 2009).

When the authors examined this site, they discovered two new runic inscriptions missed by the previous expeditions. The runic characters are located on the same rock outcrop as the above-mentioned inscription in black paint. The surface of the vertical slate rock with runic signs is about 110 × 70 cm. The rock surface has a

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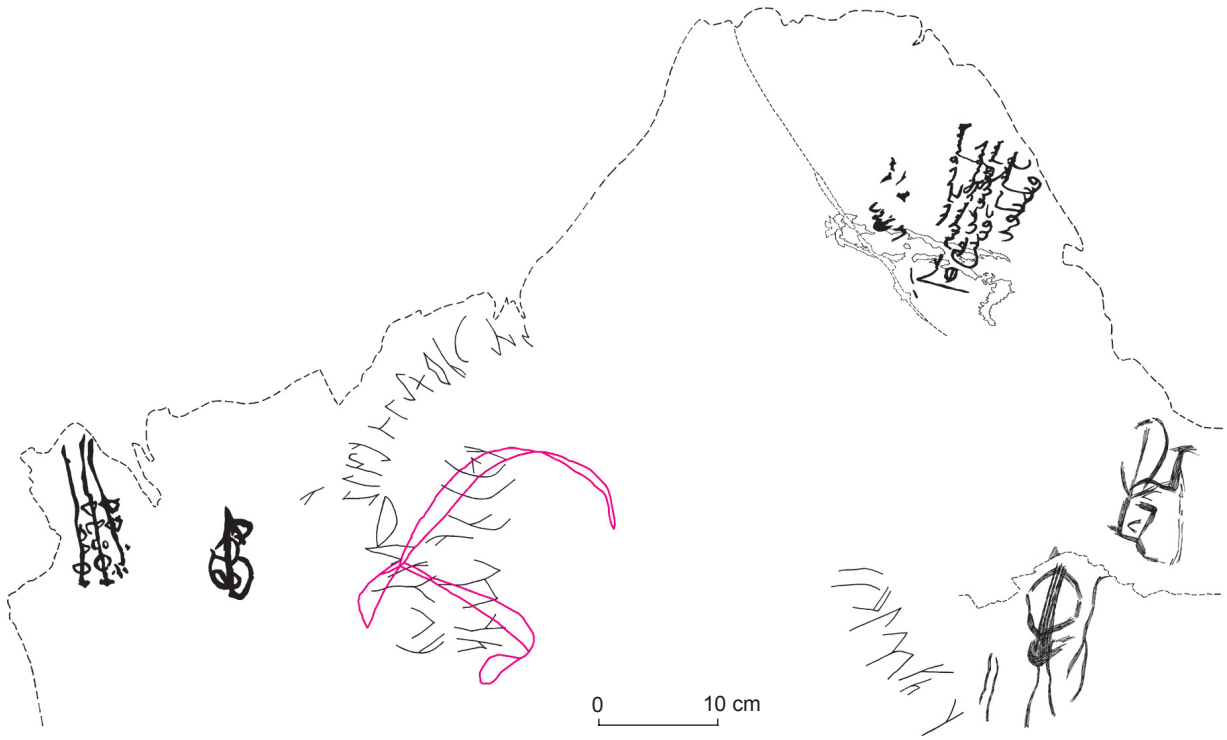


Fig. 1. Drawings of inscriptons and images in black and white paint on the rock surface at the Urkosh area.



Fig. 2. Drawings of the runic inscriptions.

slight negative tilt and forms a kind of canopy. 4–5 cm runic characters are thinly carved. The first inscription is located in the upper part of the rock face, and consists of two nearly vertical lines (Fig. 1, 2). Some of the signs are not quite clearcut, partly owing to an uneven surface of the stone. The second inscription is placed to the right, approximately 25 cm lower than the first one.

A hardly-noticeable big schematic figure of a goat (?) with long horns (Fig. 1) is drawn over the first line of the upper inscription and over the bottom part of the second one. The animal contour is outlined with narrow strokes of red-yellow paint. This image is painted on top of the runic inscriptions and therefore is more recent, but it's difficult to estimate the exact time lag.

The inscriptions in Uyghur writing and images in black paint frame runic characters on both sides and on the top. They were made later, and their author definitely saw the runic signs. Previously discovered by the archaeologists from Barnaul (Tishkin, 2006: 6; Tishkin, Matryonin, Gorbunov, 2006: 157), the inscription in Uyghur writing (Fig. 1, 3) is located higher to the right, close to the very edge of the rock. The lower part of this inscription covers the unfinished chiseled contours of some animal. Vertical copies (?) and a separate sign (Fig. 1, 4) can be seen to the left of the runic inscriptions, and a few of poorly distinguishable signs are located to the right (Fig. 1, 5). The latter are painted with wide lines looking more like tentative brush strokes, with clearly visible traces of uneven paint bundles.



Fig. 3. Inscription in Uyghur writing in black paint, and its drawing.

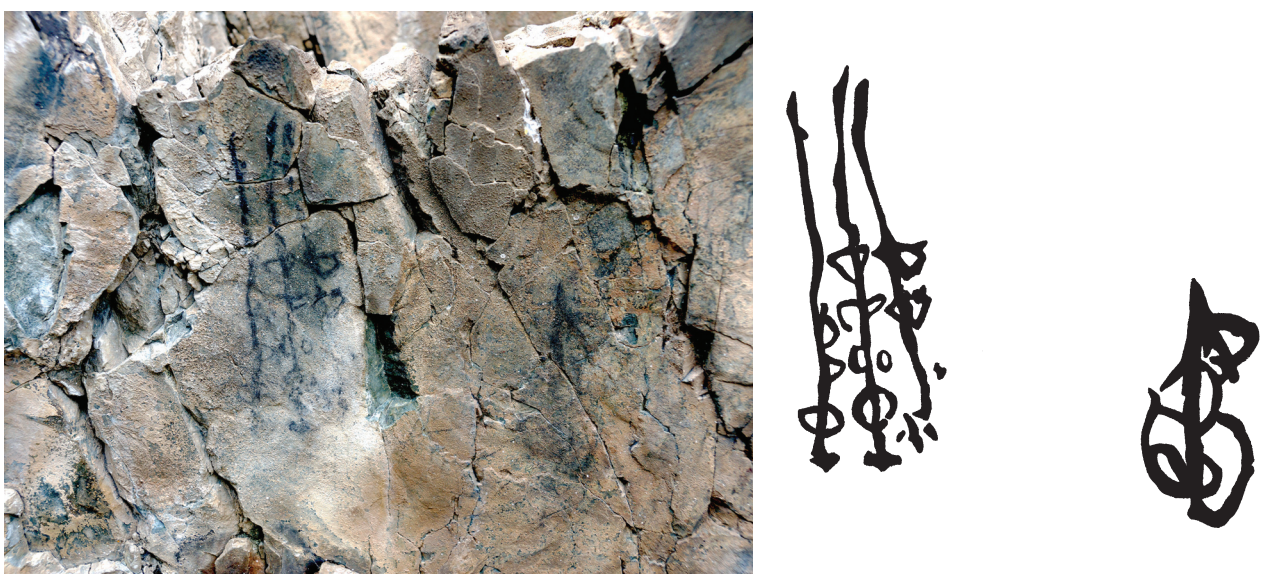


Fig. 4. Images of copies (?) and a separate sign in black paint, and their drawings.

More images and signs in black paint can be found higher, behind the ledge, on a different rock surface (Fig. 6). The dimensions of this surface are 50 × 70 cm. Few of the signs resemble tamgas, and the central figure looks like a deer (?).

All inscriptions, signs, and other images in black and red paint were protected from rain and snow with some kind of canopy formed by the negative tilt of the rock surface, and have survived to the present day.

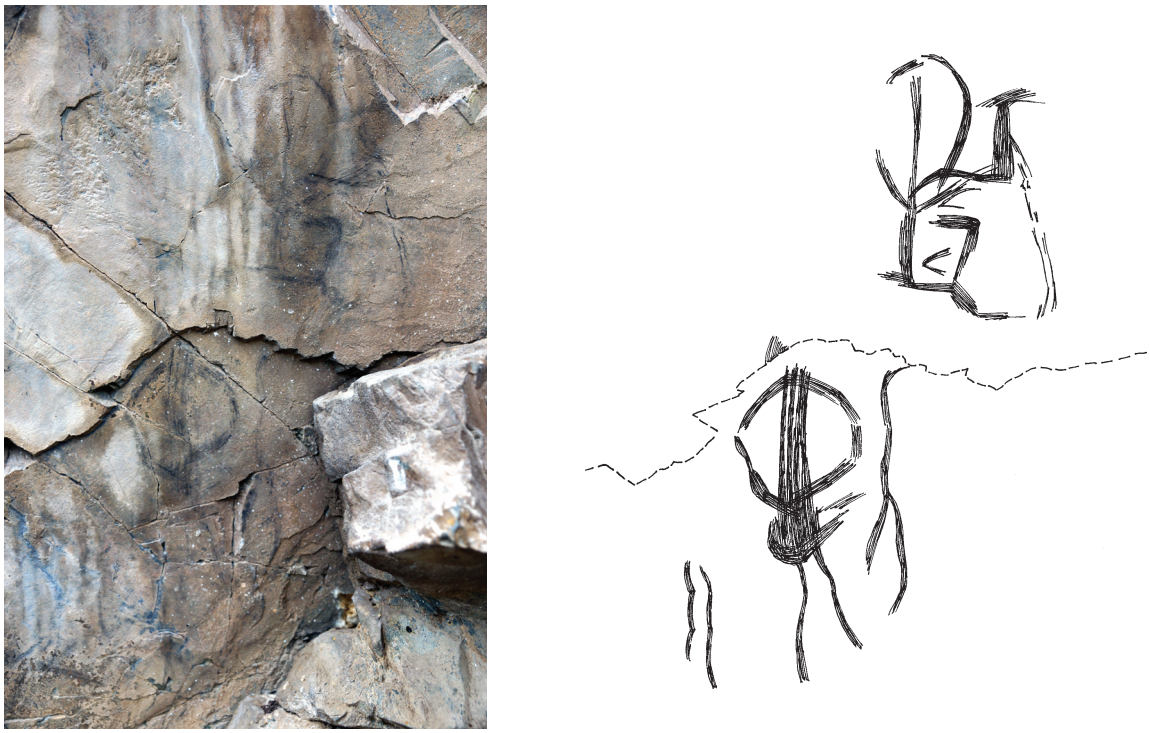


Fig. 5. Tentative brush strokes (?) and their drawings.



Fig. 6. Drawings of images and inscriptions in black paint on the second rock surface.

Transcription, translation, and interpretation of the inscription in Uyghur writing*

The inscription in Uyghur writing is compact and consists of clearly visible signs arranged in five vertical lines (Fig. 1, 3). There is an impression that some signs of the inscription were erased later.

Transcription:

1 q(a)gan birläki
2 yaguqï-da érkin
3 öz bildgärip ö(z?)
4 élingä y(a)na bićig
5 bićidi

Translation: Erkin, as he and khagan were on their way to el and came close (~approached) to tell about themselves, made (*literally*, wrote) the inscription.

Spelling of this inscription complies with the rules of the early medieval manuscripts in Uyghur writing from East Turkestan. According to the existing classification (Moriyasu, 2004), characters can be attributed to a variation of early italic, which can be found in the East Turkestan manuscripts composed in the pre-Mongolian period, but not earlier than the 10th century.

*L.Y. Tugusheva performed the transcription, translation, and interpretation of the inscription in Uyghur writing and S.G. Klyashtorny worked with the runic characters.

As stated in this inscription, erkin accompanied by khagan was going back to his el and wrote this message not far from their destination point. The title of *erkin* can be seen in the early medieval Turkic manuscripts pretty often. In the manuscript in honour of Kyul-tegin (hereinafter KT), the Turkic army led by Kyul-tegin fought with Ulug-erkin's army from the Bairyku tribe near the lake Tyurgy Yargun: *(a)nta kisrä y(é)r b(a)y(ï)rqu ul((u)g erk(i)n y(a)gï boltï y(a)ñ(ï)p türgi y(a)rgun költä buzd(ï)m(ï)z*—"After that, Ulug-erkin from Yer-Bairyku became (our) enemy. Having come back, we defeated him (his army) near the lake Tyurgy Yargun" (KT, B, line 47). It is also known that the Karluk tribe leaders (chieftains) bore a title of *köl érkin* (Mahmûd Qašγarî, p. 67). These examples definitely indicate that the title of *erkin* was born by the Turkic tribe leaders subordinate to the khagan.

According to the sources, in the 9th–10th centuries, the Altai territory was ruled by the Kyrgyz khagan. As stated in the Turkic Runic manuscripts, Kyul-tegin, whose residence was located in Khangai, got over the Sayan Mountains with his troop and went into a battle with the khagan's army: *kögm(ä)n y(ï)š(ï)γ toγa yorïp qïrq(ï)z bod(u)n(ï)g uda basd(ï)m(ï)z*—"We got over the Kogmen Mountains* and suddenly (*literally* while they were asleep) attacked the Kyrgyz (KT, B, line 48). It is also known that after the break of the Uyghur Khaganate in mid-10th century (Hamilton, 1955: 6), in the area of the Khangai and the Sayan-Altai Mountains, only the ruler of Kyrgyz political entity had the title of khagan. Therefore, we can assume that most likely the inscription refers to one of the Kyrgyz khagans.

One of the linguistic features of the inscription is the use of a verbal stem *biti-*—"write" and a derivative noun *bitig*—"letter, inscription" in the phonetic form *bić-i-, bićig*, which are typical for the early medieval Turkic manuscripts. This verbal stem originates from the Chinese word *pi* < *piet*—"writing brush", and therefore we can assume that its primary phonetic form is *biti-*. Variation of the Urkosh inscription could have been formed later under the influence of local Sayan-Altai dialects of the Turkic languages family. Phonetically similar form still exists in some of those dialects (cf. Tuvan *bizhi-*—"write" (Tuvinsko-russkiy slovar, 1968: 101)). Such a change took a certain time, and it confirms our estimate that the Urkosh inscription was made no earlier than the 10th century.

According to erkin, the purpose of the inscription was to announce his arrival. Seemingly, the inscription was meant for those who could have visited the area, read and taken note of the message in it. Consequently, the Urkosh inscription can indicate that in the early Middle Ages the Uyghur writing formed and widely spread in East Turkestan was already in use in the Turkic-speaking environment far beyond this region.

*Kögmen, *geogr.*—the Sayan Mountains (Radloff, 1889: 50; Bartold, 1968: 316).

Transcription, translation, and interpretation of the Old Turkic Runic inscriptions

One of the newly found runic inscriptions is short and consists of a single line, while the other is represented by two lines. Most likely, the inscription was created by the same person using one and the same method (light scratches on the stone) and the same variation of the Old Turkic Runic writing typical for the North-Western Mongolia. Unfortunately, these lightly scratched signs are not well-preserved and are hardly visible. Hence, some of them cannot be identified and a few could be understood only hypothetically.

One-line inscription consists of eight characters of which the first (rightmost) one is slightly separated from the others. Two characters at the end are not fully documented and the last one is unidentifiable.

Transliteration: $l^2\ t^2ŋr^2ikn(m?)$

Transcription: *el teŋrikenim*

Translation: (my) el, my tengriken

The first (right) line of the two-line inscription consists of eight characters, the last one of which is not fully documented. The second (left) line includes 18 (19?) characters, only nine of which could be identified. That makes reading of the main part of this line rather uncertain. Hereafter, we used dots instead of unidentified signs in our transliteration.

Transliteration of the first line: $t^2ŋriknm$.

Transcription: *teŋrikenim*

Translation: my tengriken

Transliteration of the second line: $kš/sl^2…a\ l^1…\ l^1ad^2..\ n'r^2$.

Thus, both inscriptions are dedicated to the same person, referred to as "my tengriken". The title of *tengriken* can also be seen in Runic writing of the Turkic Khaganate (the Ongin inscription, line 5, 6, 8) and more often in the Manichean and Buddhist manuscripts from East Turkestan. In any case, this term is either included in the titulary of the supreme power holders or is the only definition of the sovereign; see, e.g., the Manichaean texts: *bögü xan teŋriken, bögü teŋrikenimiz* (cited after (Clauson, 1972: 525), s.v. *teŋriken*); cf. also *baγa teŋriken* as a supreme ruler mentioned in the Ongin inscription.

However, this term is ambiguous. S.E. Malov in his translation of the Ongin inscription suggests the meaning "divine, august" (1959: 9–10). L.Y. Tugusheva quotes Mahmud Al-Kashgari and his interpretation "wise, pious (person)" and notes that "this term often has the meaning of ruler's title" (2008: 91). In the Old Turkic Dictionary, *täŋriken* is denoted as "divine" (Drevnetyurkskiy slovar**,**

1969: 544). On the contrary, G. Clauson perhaps had in mind Mahmud Al-Kashgari and his explanation when wrote that this word did not include the connotation of "sacred, divine" and should be translated as "devout, pious" (Clauson, 1972: 525). In the Ongin inscription (line 5), this term is used in a collocation *bayа teŋriken* (Drevnetyurkskiy slovar, 1969: 77 (s.v. *bayа*)) which can be considered as an expression with both words having the similar meaning, where the Sogdian *bayа* adopted in the Old Turkic language means, namely, "divine". Therefore, authors consider S.E. Malov's interpretation "divine, august" as the most appropriate for the 8th century texts, which term was later reinterpreted in the Muslim community (Mahmud Al-Kashgari, 9th century). The Runic inscriptions interpreted here could be dated back to the 8th–9th century.

Conclusions

Judging by the paleographic features of the Urkosh inscriptions, the runic ones were created prior to the Uyghur inscription. The author of the latter should have noticed the earlier scratched characters. This is indirectly confirmed by the observation that the Uyghur inscription, as well as other signs and images in black paint, were drawn by the same person, not on top of the runic inscription but seemingly framing these runes on all sides.

Every new find of runic inscriptions in the Altai is a significant scientific discovery. The inscription in Uyghur writing made in black paint on the rock is the unique finding in the whole region. It's noteworthy that all three Urkosh inscriptions contain the titles of supreme power holders or tribal leaders. Judging by the collection of Altai runic inscriptions involving about 90 laconic texts and lines (Tybykova, Nevskaya, Erdal, 2012: 16), early medieval runic inscriptions mentioning ruler titles or certain political events occur in the Altai not that often.

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