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THE EURASIAN AREAL ASPECT OF OLD TURKIC WRITTEN CULTURE

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The numerous stone inscriptions found lately in South Siberia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe have drawn the attention of students of Old Turkic literary culture to the question of how the Old Turkic monuments of the Orkhon and Yenisei type are related to the so-called 'runiform' inscriptions. This problem overshadows even the debate on the origins of the Old Turkic runic script, as many of the new materials, at least those found in South Siberia and Central Asia, obviously predate the runic texts hitherto known and subjected to ethno-historical analyses. In a similar fashion, serious corrections in terms of genesis, paleography and dating, can be made to previous studies, even to those that deal with well-studied variants of Turkic runic script. The problem is further complicated by the fact that the runic inscriptions spread all over Eurasia lack any convincing interpretation, and their deciphering is also at a very preliminary stage.

Key words: runic script, runiform script, Old Turkic culture.

Let us begin with a brief summary of the runiform texts found in Eurasia.

The Lena valley and the Baikal region

There are more than twenty stone inscriptions, two of which carved into menhirs. Unfortunately, the editions of the inscriptions of this region hitherto published in a very sketchy way, by no means meet scholarly expectations.

The Sayan-Altai region and the upper Yenisei valley

Over twenty stone inscriptions as well as inscriptions carved on small objects made of bone or metal. There is also an inscription on a stone sculpture. Scholars are almost unanimous in classifying the inscriptions on stone steles found in the region as belonging to the Yenisei type.

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East Turkistan

One inscription on a portrait sculpture; a graffito from Dunhuang.

South-western Siberia

A wooden rod from Achyq Tash; stone inscriptions from Koi-Sary and the valley of the river Ili.

Central Asia

Inscriptions on ceramic fragments from the Isfarin region of Ferghana; inscriptions on clay tablets from the Chimkent region; inscriptions from excavations carried out in the Eastern part of the Aral region; inscriptions on ceramic fragments from North Tokharistan; one stone inscription from the Kyzyl Qum.

Ural region

Inscriptions on import silverware from the valleys of the rivers Vyatka and Kama, and the territory of Perm (Permskaja oblast'); inscriptions on ceramics from Bulgar and Bilyar.

The lower reaches of the Volga, the Northern Caucasus, and the Northern Black Sea region

One inscription on a bull's skull; over ten inscriptions from Majackoe gorodishche by the river Don; over ten inscriptions from Khumarinskoe gorodishche in the Kara-chai region by the river Kuban; inscriptions on bone girths.

South-western Europe

Inscriptions from Murfatlar; inscriptions on vessels of the Nagyszentmiklós treasure; inscriptions on bone objects; the inscriptions of Szarvas and Kalocsa.

The epigraphic monuments listed above are examples of the so-called runiform literature. They share certain features with the Old Turkic inscriptions of the Second Türk Qaganate, but also differ from them in significant graphic characteristics. Some of the symbols used in the runiform scripts of these regions cannot be found among the Orkhon, Yenisei, Semirech'e and East Turkistan runes.

Let us try to compare the written monuments at our disposal with pieces of material culture in the corresponding ethno-historical contexts.

The Turkic-speaking tribes deriving from the Altaic group *Tiele* appeared in the Eastern European steppe zone in the 4th century, bringing from Central Asia a complex of spiritual traditions – rites as well as material culture. Their Eurasian weaponry, harness, belts, habitat, cuisine, etc. are attested by archaeology, while written

sources preserve mythological, pantheonic and epic analogies for their Eurasian spiritual culture and arts, such as the *tamga* type heraldry, ornaments and the topics depicted.

This archaic period of the history of the Turkic-speaking nomads in Eurasia is characterised by the existence of symbolic and communicational systems that are close to one another in formal features but at the same time differ in certain details. Petroglyphic pictures and family symbols could most easily become the prototype of these graphemes. Hardly can it be supposed that the graphics of these very short, primitive, ideogram-like inscriptions, most probably of an unreal, personal or tribal function, were worked out on the basis of another alphabetical system. Nowadays most such runiforms can be found in the Gorno-Altai region, i.e. where Turkic statehood came into being. In many of the stone complexes there, e.g. in the Yalbak-Tash II, Bichiktu-Bom, Besh-Ozek, petroglyphic and tamga symbols can be found in the company of runiforms, demonstrating that even a marginal period is illustrative of how information is conveyed in writing. This was the period that preceded the political integration of the Turkic tribes.

In the mid-6th century, after they had smashed their rivals on the steppe, a group of Turkic tribes of the Altai was able to create a tribal confederation, the first nomadic empire to span two continents. The emergence of the idea of a common state triggered the demand for more comprehensive communication. Apparently this is the time when the need for the unification of the imperfect alphabetical systems was first felt. This was given by modern scholars the name 'runiform script' as opposed to *runic* script, the most characteristic examples of the latter being the inscriptions of the Orkhon, Kosho Tsaidam and Yenisei valleys as well as East Turkistan and the Semirech'e. In this period, the political rivalry of the tribes constituting the empire came to be expressed in internal strife for cultural preeminence as well. Already the primitive written representation of personal or tribal affiliation in the age of the First Qaganate, shows ethno-regional variation that would afterwards constitute the different schools of Old Turkic writing culture all over the vast territory from the Baikal to the northern Pontic region.

However, these processes were blocked by the collapse of the First Türk Qaganate. For a time the cultural legacy of the Central Asian Türks was perpetuated by the Western Türk Qaganate, where the archaic variants of the runiform script continued to be used. Having spread to the Volga-Uralic region in the North and to Central Europe in the West, some remnants of the runiform script even survived the Western Türk Qaganate for some time.

With the birth of the Eastern Türk Qaganate in Central Asia, the idea to create a unified, pan-dialectal Old Turkic alphabetical system for the whole state emerged again. The reason for the sudden appearance of the Orkhon Inscriptions with an elaborate alphabetical system might be that the general reform of the different variants of the Old Turkic writing system had already begun in the First Qaganate. The need for a general script for the entire empire was perhaps first realised by Taspar Qagan, who ordered the translation of Buddhist works into Turkic and had a stone stele erected to commemorate his deeds in Sogdian. As pointed out by several scholars, the Sogdian

influence on the Orkhon Inscriptions can be explained by the practice of using Sogdian in Qaganate inscriptions and the participation of Sogdians in state affairs.

This was the period of practical search for a *lingua franca* appropriate for the rebirth of the state. It was realised by the leaders of this multiethnic polity that the differences between and the diversity of, the alphabetical "schools" of the time when the Second Qaganate had been established was ill-suited to the political doctrine of the state. The Orkhon Inscriptions are definitely the result of such a policy aimed at creating a uniform written language and alphabet. Based on tradition and at the same time improved with borrowings from foreign alphabetical systems, these inscriptions were created not only with commemorative purposes but were also intended as a model calling for the unity of the different foreign and Turkic tribal alphabets existing in the Qaganate.

As far as the interrelation of the runiform and runic scripts (inapt a terminology as it may be) used by early medieval Eurasian nomads is concerned, a debate has emerged recently, which, together with the discovery of further monuments, will probably have a profound impact on the study of Old Turkic written monuments and will probably constitute the subject of widespread debate in Turkic runic studies in the 21st century. It is thus high time to publish a facsimile edition of all the Eurasian runiform inscriptions without making any premature ethno-linguistic attributions.

The following are three examples of the so-called runiform inscriptions functionally close to one another: (1) inscriptions on the bone wrappings of a bow and quiver, both dating from the 7th–8th century from Kalocsa (Hungary) (Dienes 1994); (2) the inscription of the Türk shaman Aymïrlïg from Tuva (Овчинникова 1981, pp. 133–134; Васильев 1983, pp. 46, 61) dating from the 7th–8th century; and (3) the inscription of a Khazar grave from the river Manïch (a tributary of the Don) approximately from the mid-8th century (Семенов 1966, pp. 108–109).[1] Apart from their functional proximity, all these three inscriptions have certain correspondences in their symbols, graphic varieties as well as spatial orientation.

Despite their vast geographic distance from one another, according to their graphics, all of these inscriptions on the equipment of early medieval nomadic archers of the Eurasian steppes can be classified as belonging to the East European Old Turkic Runic Script (EERS).[2] As yet, the inscriptions of the EERS have neither convincing reading nor precise, indisputable ethno-linguistic interpretation. As to their chronology, scholars differ widely and give dates that range from the 6th to the 10th century (Щербак 2001, pp. 32–79). Another difficulty is that in terms of phonetics, most of the symbols of the EERS cannot be compared to the Central Asian Runic Script (CARS) from the Orkhon and Yenisei.

However, the term EERS looks increasingly unsuitable, due to the epigraphic runiforms recently discovered in Asia, whose symbols correspond not so much to the

[1] Mention is made in the literature on the subject about another inscription on the wrappings of a bow found in a kurgan on the Don. Cf. Кызласов (1986, p. 125); Семенов (1966, pp. 102–103) – Kirovo IV, kurgan 2, dating from the 8th–9th century.

[2] See Кляшторный (1979, p. 270); Савинов (1984, p. 129); Семенов (1966, table, pp. 102–103).

inscriptions of the Orkhon-Yenisei or the Semirech'e type as to the EERS. The first examples of this type are well known, i.e. the wooden stick from Talas and the small weight from the collection of the Minusinsk Museum, the graphics of which are often compared to those of the Eastern European runiforms (Малов 1959, pp. 63–68; Васильев 1978, pp. 96–98). It is traditional in publications to present new finds in charts where the phonetically uncertain but remarkably corresponding symbols of the EERS and the Talas wooden stick, despite the huge geographic distance between them, are presented in the same phonetic position. This is unproblematic as long as it is apparent for every scholar that the numerous symbols are identical. The number of the EERS and CARS symbols graphically corresponding to one another used to be considered quite low for several reasons. On the one hand only inscriptions on small objects are known, and on the other, there is the vast separating gap of Central Asia between Semirech'e and the Northern Caucasus – the two extreme locations of the EERS. Scholars have thus refrained from hypotheses intended to explain the similarities with genetic relatedness. There are more than twenty runiform inscriptions known in Asia that are graphically close to the EERS. It is also important that there are new loci where inscriptions of this type are found. These loci together form a chain that indicates the areal distribution and variation (more precisely, some variants) of the EERS. The new finds can give rise to new hypotheses on how the EERS spread and where it was in use, and may even facilitate its deciphering. Such new finds are stone inscriptions from the Yenisei, the Altai and the Kyzyl Kum, ceramic ones from the Aral region and inscriptions on objects from the Volga region (Васильев 1986, pp. 42–44; Кызласов 1986, pp. 106–144; Кляшторный – Левина 1989, pp. 87–96; Дэвлет 1982, p. 109; Васильев 1983, p. 47; Kljastornij – Vásáry 1987; Róna-Tas 1985; Vasziljev 1992). Here the chain conjoins with the monuments that traditionally constitute the EERS, with Szarvas and Kalocsa in the extreme west.

It is impossible, as yet, to come up with a creditable reading of the extant runiform monuments, which makes their graphic correspondences even more important for scholars. They emphasise that the EERS is not homogeneous but has internal variation. They have already created the defining criteria for the comparison of the graphics of the EERS, regrettably, however, without taking into account the typologically close finds from Asia. The basic arguments for the analogies in the comparative charts are usually a few of the most characteristic EERS symbols.

The most striking recent hypotheses in Russian Turkology about the interrelation of the Turkic runic and runiform systems were put forward by S. Klyashtorny and I. Kyzlasov. Klyashtorny argues that the formation of the runiform script took place under Sogdian influence in the oases of East Turkistan. During the First Türk Qaganate the runiform script enjoyed no state protection, and spread to the West with the proto-Bulgarian tribes *Tiele* as far as the Volga and Don region, and further to the Danube. Here some, in Klyashtorny's opinion, *six*, forms of it survived for a time. Kyzlasov, on the other hand, thinks that in the entire habitat of the Eurasian nomads, there were many different runic systems, which he classifies into three groups: Asian, Eurasian and European. He further breaks down the Asian group into the Orkhon, Yenisei, South Yenisei and Upper Yenisei subgroups, which he derives not from

Turkic but Samoyedic; while to the Eurasian group he attributes non-Aramaic Semitic roots. The East European runic script, in his opinion, has its own different writing systems and is not genetically related to the Asian Runic script. Moreover, he conjectures that in the Khazar Qaganate and other multiethnic states the runic script might have been used by non-Turkic ethnic groups as well.

My views on Old Turkic written culture from a Eurasian areal aspect can be summarised as follows:

- the Old Turkic Script in its archaic variants came into being among Turkic-speaking nomads on the steppes and had several ethno-regional graphic variants;
- the presence of most of the most archaic and primitive runiform inscriptions in the Altai, the fact that the Turks were first mentioned in connection with the Altai as well as the reflection of traditional symbols in the runiform inscriptions, all point to the Altai as the place where Old Turkic writing was born;
- the widespread literacy of the Turkic-speaking nomads and their efforts at improving their written culture derive from their civilisational achievements;
- the runiform script apparently spread in Eurasia during the First Türk Qaganate;
- in the successive polities, the runiform script was further developed in several ways: on the Orkhon it was reformed under intensive Sogdian influence, while in Eastern Europe, the archaic graphic basis brought by Turkic-speaking tribes from Central Asia developed in mutual relation with the local traditions (the latter conjecture, of course, does not imply that there were only two local variants of the runiform script);
- the runiform inscriptions of the Eastern European Turkic-speaking nomads seem to be the extreme western relics of the archaic runiform variants of the Türks of the Sayan and Altai;
- the runiforms of the North Caucasus, Lake Aral, Ferghana, Kazakhstan and the Irtysh, bridge the gap between the Eastern European and the Central Asian monuments;
- the Orkhon Inscriptions represent a unified pan-dialectal alphabet, the emergence of which lasted for a long time in the multi-tribal Turkic state; it was thus possible that the alphabet was learnt and became a tradition.

Regarding these views, I hasten to add that several extant South Siberian inscriptions await redating.

The archaic though undoubtedly original Old Turkic writing systems in Central Asia were reformed when the Second Türk Qaganate was established as a state. The process was influenced by the Sogdian graphico-alphabetic system well known and previously widely used in the eastern part of the Türk state. The result of this process controlled by the political elite was the creation of the Orkhon-Yenisei, Semierch'e, and at a later period the East-Turkistan, runic script, which was more unified and its graphics and orthography reflected several dialects. In the west, i.e. the European part of the Turkic-speaking territories, the use of runiform archaisms under-

went different changes. The archaic writing system together with the Turkic-speaking tribes spread to the west as far as the Volga and Don region, where it existed in the form of a few variants that had developed in different degrees. Later, with the consolidation of Khazaro-Bulgar statehood, this archaic graphic basis underwent another development that differed in the case of each Turkic-speaking tribe; it reflected tribal symbolism, the spread of runiform literacy, local historico-cultural characteristics and foreign influence. However, for different reasons, the pan-state program to reform and unify, on an imperial scale, the old alphabetical tradition that had been brought from afar, was not executed; here the archaic runiform script represents an already "vanishing"[3] alphabetical system. Its remnants among the diverse tribes acquired an increasing number of differences.

All these contributed to the emergence of different modifications but at the same time, in case of certain ethnic groups, also to the conservation in a relic form, for example, of the archaic variant of Central Asian runiform symbols together with their phonetic references (there is a gloss on a Khazar document in the so-called Cairo Genesis which is similar to the Szarvas and Kalocsa Inscriptions).

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[3] This phrase was used in relation to the so-called Székely runes, but it also seems adequate for the early pieces of the EERS as well. For the term, see Munkácsi (1913/1914, p. 229).

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