ANONYMITY, ADAPTATION AND DIFFUSION OF THE ASIAN AND EUROPEAN RUNIC SCRIPTS

by.

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In V. Thomsen and W. Radloff's time the problem was relatively clear: along with the Turkic Runic script, found in the basin of the rivers Orkhon and Selenga and successfully decyphered, there existed specimens of a slightly different script from the basin of the river Yenisei, which being, as it was believed, only a little more ancient than the first, could be read in a similar way. It it true that, owing to its few special signs, the script from the treasure of Nagyszentmiklós, which had been revealed at the end of the 18th century, was rather embarrasing. It was, how ever, readable to a certain degree, and could be surely included to the heritage of the Altaic, in particular Turkic peoples. Besides it was pretty easy to include the inscriptions found in Tuva, Khakasia and some other regions to the same Yenisei-Orkhon kind of writing. A real shock for scholars was, in 1932, a find of a queer inscription on the wooden rod from the Talas valey but even in that case there was talk of a certain variety of the same type of a Turkic Runic script which no doubt developed from the early Sogdian, Aramaic or Greek alphabet in its Hephthalite or Byzantine shape. Quite troublesome was the problem of a possible existence of the Hunnish and Avar scripts as well as that of curious signs unearthed in Bulgaria and in its limitrophe regions. The last were, however, not seriously treated in the context of their possibly appurtenance to the Runic writing system and regarded as property, family or artisanal signs[1]. The mention made by the celebrated chronicler,

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[1] O. Donner, "Sur l'origine de l'alphabet turc du nord de l'Asie", *JSFOu.*, XIV, pp. 1-71; S. G. Klyaştornıy, *Drevnetyurksie runiçeskie pamyatniki kak istoçnik po istorii Sredney Azii,* Moskova 1964, pp.44-54; Sir Gerard Clauson, The Origin of the Turkish "Runic" Alphabet, *AO,* XXXII, 1970, pp. 51-76; A. Róna-Tas, On the development and origin of the East-Turkic "Runic" Script, *AOH,* XLI, 1, 1987, pp. 7-14; the same, *An Introduction to Turkology,* Szeged 1991, pp. 55-62.

Chernorizets Khrabr, who characterized the writing of the pagan population as composed of lines, dashes or hatches[2], aroused no interest.

The next period of research, lasting some fifty years, had many real achievements and also many false tracks, so it brought no solution to the burning questions left by the earlier generations. The usage of distinguishing between the East or Asian Runes and estern or Europen Runes became consolidated. All short inscriptions were rather neglected as "philologically unimportant"[3]. A new wave of interest and a series of important studies appeared as result of new materials still increasing. Especially stimulating were new editions and theoretical analyses offered by S. J. Bajcorov. H. W. Haussing, S. G. Kljaštornyj, I. V. Kormušin, I. L. Kyzlasov, O. Pritsak, A. Róna-Tas, D. D. Vasil'ev and others.

In the study on the origin of the Runic scrip quite exasperating is a special discretion, or rather a full anonymity, which had accompanied that important fact or a longer process. A complete silence kept by written sources may have, of course, many reasons the simplest being that the fact in question has remained unregistered at all, that the pertinent documents have been destroyed or not revealed so far.

Nowadays, it seems quite probable that there was not a single act of invention and reception of the script in question, borrowed directly from, let us admit, the Sogdians, as it is usually supposed, but a number of similar successive acts expressing, at various moments and on various areas, the will and decision of tribal chiefs or rulers. The last were besides not only Turks and Turkic speakers like the Türkü, Kirgiz, Karluks, Uighurs, Chiks, Bulghars, maybe also Avars, but also of Iranian stock like the Alans or others.

It has been generally admitted that the borrowed scripts of the Runic type had to be fitted to phonological requirements of a given language or dialect and that new signs, mainly pictographs, have been introduced. Such an adjustment could only be the result of a wise, intelligent and highly educated man or a group of experts selected from a circle of polyglottes - translators or interpreters[4]. They must have

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[2] Cf. L. Donçeva-Petkova, *Znatsi v'rhu arheologiçeski pamyetniki ot srednovekovna Bılgariya VII-X vek,* Sofya 1980, p. 18.

[3] Sir Gerard Clauson, *Turkish and Mongolian Studies,* London 1962, p. 68.

[4] "За каждой письменной системой [...] стоит конкретная личность её создателя, который по заранее намеченному плану оформляет на основе определенного письменного прототипа новую письменность для своего языка. Не следует представлять себе процесс создания письменности в виде некоторого коллективного творчества, т.е. таким образом, будто одним лицом в определенный момент создается какое-то количество письменных знаков, далее кто-то добавляет ещё какое-то число знаков, позднее появляются ещё определенные знаки и т. д., пока не возникнет графическая система, достаточная для выражения основных звуковых единиц языка. [...] В дальнейшем, в процессе сволюции созданной таким образом (т. е. в результате единого творческого акта её создателя) письменной системы, письменндсть может претерпевать определенные системные и

been charged with such an important task by the ruler himself or by one of his high officers or courtiers. We know well that a written word was at that epoch considered to have possessed a magic influence on people[5]. Inventing or borrowing of such a script, an event no doubt admired and envied by other groups and their chiefs, was an important manifestation of cultural and political progress. It gave a real chance for founding the ruler's chancellery, exchanging state correspondance, documenting matters of great moment etc. No wonder, therefore, that many nations have treasured in their memory the names of personages merited in creating or reforming their writing system to cite Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius, Saint Mesrob Mashtots, Ulfilas (Wulfila), hP'ags-pa Lama ("Honorable") etc. Why then, in the case of Runic alphabets, we know nothing about the conditions in which its creating took place? This is all the more puzzling since, as we know, all matters related to writing, even creating a single text, were among the Türkü of great importance, for instance, Prince Yolluy, who had prepared his inscription in memory of Köl Tegin, thought it to fit the situation to place his name on the memorial stone[6].

Anyhow, anonymity is in the history of writing a well know fact. I. J. Gelb writes in this connection:

"In the history of writing, as in the case of all great cultural achievements, one must reckon with the decisive intervention of men of genius who were able either to break away from sacred tradition or to transfer into practical form something on which others could only speculate or experiment. Unfortunately, the names of the great men who were involved in the most important innovations in the history of writing [...] are lost forever in the dimness of antiquity"[7].

If the facts are lacking, the only possibility for a researcher is to look for analogies and make hypotheses. Thus we may surmise that some local customs did not allow to mention names of such merited persons (which is rather hard to believe), that the ruler did not want to propagate their names in fear of their venality or other rulers becoming jealous etc. My guess is that the main reason was the foreign ethnic status of the expert or experts. As a matter of fact, especially

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графические преобразования с целью её усовершенствования и болое полного и адекбатного выражения звуковых противопоставлений [...]", Thomas V. Gamkrelidze, "Alphabetic Writing and the Old Georgian Script", *A Typology and Provenience of Alphabetic Writing Systems*, by .... [title and the main text in Georgian], with a Preface by Akaki Shanidze, Tbilisi 1989, p. 259, a footnote.

[5] Annemarie von Gabain, "Inhalt und magische Bedeutung der alttürkischen Inschriften", *Anthropos*, 48, 1953, p. 544.

[6] "The one who has inscribed all inscriptions - I, Prince Yolluy, the nephew of Prince Kül, have inscribed (all these inscriptions) [...] on this stone and this wall", Talat Tekin, *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic*, The Hague 1968. Ural and Altaic Series, Vol 69, p. 272.

[7] I. J. Gebl, "Forms of writing", art. in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 30 Volumes, Macropaedia, Vol. 19, p. 1039.

important seem to be two circumstances. The first is the relation between the ruler and the expert or reformer. He could be a slave or a free man a countryman (less probably) or a foreigner (more probably). In the second case, excluding all acts of violence, so frequent in the epoch, the question was of a transaction of the type "do, ut des". In particular, the chosen candidate could be obliged to select a fitting writing model, to adapt it to the phonetical status or the language or dialect, used by the ruler or his circle, by supplementing it with additional signs, to teach the court officers or members of the khan's family to read and write, to keep chancellery etc. All these important duties, requiring special qualifications and provided for a longer time, had to be worthy paid either in gold or in privileges. The last could have a manifold character like approbation of the ruler shown to the religion confessed by the expert or his compatriots, permission for staying at the court for a longer time to exert lucrative occupations, and so on. The second circumstance is that the knowledge of writing was in that epoch represented mainly by officers of various cults, wandering monks etc. Their personel modesty, their keeping themselves out of sight could explain the anonymity of their activity as propagators of writing. We shall see, however, that in case of Runic alphabets still more probable is the participation of other social groups as learned politicians or merchants.

The only reasonable analogy which can be found with regard to the Turks and their national alphabet is probably that of the Mongols, firstly adduced by O. Donner and then by Sir Gerard Clauson who writes what follows:

"When Chinggis Khan discovered the value of writing as an aid to administration he ordered the captured Chancellor of the Naiman Khan he had just defeated, an Uyĝur called T"a-t'a T"ung-a in the Chinese histories, to device a method of writing Mongolian in the Uyĝur script, and also to organize a Chancery"[8].

Of course, "comparaison n'est pas raison" and all events should be examined in their chronological, political and social contexts. So it is easy to observe that the "invention" or reception of the Runic script by the Turks and the introduction of the writing system in the Mongol Empire are separated one from the other by a span of circa 650 years. However, they seem to have at least one point in common: in both cases the religious matters were most probably not the main motives. It is true that, as it has already been menioned above, the Türkü who made use of the Runic script believed in its magic power and that the same script was used for writing down fortune-telling and Manichaean texts but there is no reason to suppose that religious factors could be a starting point of the action. On the contrary, we are allowed to suppose that the new script was created mainly for political and maybe also commercial purposes in a proportion difficult to define. Here are again Sir Gerard Clauson's logical and transchant arguments:

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[8] Clauson, "The Origin...", p. 56.

"The early Turks were not noticeably religious [...] they never had an indigenous priesthood of their own who would have required an alphabet. The alphabet cannot, therefore, have been invented for religious purposes. Neither were the early Turks a nation of traders. There were no doubt traders in the dominions which they ruled, but these were not Turks. They were mostly Sogdians or Chinese who had their own system of writing and would not have felt any need to write Turkish. The alphabet cannot therefore have been invented for commercial reasons. We are therefore driven to the conclusion that it was invented on the orders of some Turkish ruler for governmental purposes, and probably more specifically for purposes of communication rather than record"[9].

The above argumentation seems to be not only clear but also valid provided that we imagine one act of inventing the alphabet only. The situation becomes, however, much more complicated, and should be reexamined in every aspect, if we suppose, as we probably should, the existence of many alphabets of the Runic type posessing their own histories. As a matter of fact, I. L. Kyzlasov, in a series of paleographic studies makes an attempt at persuading us that we have to do with separate items and that their list was quite long. He specifies namely two groups of alphabets of the Runic type the Asian group which comprises the alphabets of the Orkhon, Yenisei and Talas rivers and the Eurasian group which includes the alphabets of the rivers Don, Kuban, Southern Yenisei, Achiktash (the second Talas) and of Isfara (Fergana)[10]. Besides he thinks that the scripts from NagyszentMiklóse and Szarvas belong to none of the above groups[11] and that the alphabet of Murfatlar - Pliska and that of Kiev (Cairo) should be treated separetely.

Starting from the analysis of the structure of the East Turkic Runic script and some orthographical rules, A. Róna-Tas proposes to distinguish four phases of the development of the script in question. He maintains that "In the first phase a Turkic group took over an alphabet of the Northern Aramaic type, which was near to Ancient Sogdian, Armazic and Pahlavi but not identical with either. [...] In the second phase the Turks developed new letters to meet the special needs of the Turkic language [...] In the third phase the script was forwarded to a people which spoke a

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[9] Clauson, "The Origin...", p. 52-53.

[10] "[...] необходимо признать существование двух палеографически отличных групп рунических алфавитов. Первая [...] объединяет основным народом знаков три самостоятелных алфавита: енисейский, орхонский и таласский. Вторая [...] состоит из пяти описанных здесь алфавитов" [...] "Материаля позволяют выдвинуть гипотезу о существовании особой, ранее не вычленяемой востоковедами группе рунических алфавитов. К ней относятся донской, кубанский, ачикташский, исфаринский и южноенисейский алфавиты", I. L. Kızlasov, *Drevnetyurkskaya runiçeskaya pismennost' Evrazii*, Moskova 1990, pp. 153-154 and 149.

[11] I. [L.] Kızlasov, "Novie dannie o proishodjenii i rasprostranenii drevnetyurkskoy runiçeskoy pismennosti Evrazii", *Problemi na prabılgarskata istorii i kultura*, 2, Sofya, 1991, p. 17.

comman Turkic language [...] In the [fourth] phase local variants emerged, among them the Yenisei inscriptions with some new letters [...]"[12].

A. Róna-Tas's hypothesis, based mainly on his keen linguistic observations, should be seriously debated, notwithstanding its certain sophistication. Immediately, however, there arise new big questions, viz. if and to what extent his proposals could be coordinated with the above mentioned classifications scheme presented by I. L. Kyzlasov and based on palaeographical evidence. This seems a priori to be a difficult task since A. Róna-Tas makes use of such general notions as "the Turks" or "a people which spoke a common Turkic language" and, except one for Yenisei, gives no geographical, ethnical or hictorical connotation. On the other hand, it seems obvious that the analysis of Eurasian script cannot be excluded from the general debate.

It is general knowledge that, broadly speaking, there exist two ways in which writing diffuses and that, consequently, there are scholars representing two groups of opinions: the adherents of the "theory of spontaneity" and those of the "theory of an organized adaptation". The first believe that the new writing system knows no frontiers and that peoples become "infected" with it that the very process of its diffusion has a spontanous character and is accomplished by simple imitation, while the others, on the contrary, think that the reception or invention of a new script is the result of some centralized actions performed by experts under the auspices of secular or ecclesiastical authorities[13]. There arise the question whether in the history of a single script the above ways, related to time and area, can run parallel to each other. So far as the Runic script is concerned, I am rather inclined to imagine as mentioned above, a number of succeeding adaptation acts under the patronage of tribal chiefs along with good offices of some foreign experts who knew well the local idioms. Probably we may imagine something like a sequence of the first main act of "invention" of the alphabet on a scale of the whole state or confederation and in accordance with the requirements of the language spoken by the ruler and his court, and then some later particular receptions performed by the chiefs of subdued or independant tribes or clans. So far as that main act among the Turks is concerned, Otto Donner and then Sir Gerard Clauson have even indicated a candidate for the chief hero. Their guess namely was that the kaghan Estemi/Istemi (known also as Sindibu or Dizaboulos) could be an initiator or patron of that enterprise. Both scholars supposed that it had been just that celebrated Khagan who, often being engaged in diplomatic and commercial negotiations with the Byzantines and the Sassanids and sending ambassadors with the clever Sogdian politician, Maniakh, in

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[12] Róna-Tas, *An Introduction...*, pp. 57-58.

[13] "Personnellement, en matière d'histoire de l'écriture, nous ne sommes pas «spontanéiste»; nous croyons que la transmission de l'alphabet ne se fait point par imitation populaire diffuse, mais résulte d'entreprises concertées, menées par des experts sous le patronage des pouvoirs locaux (civils et religieux), M. Lejeune, *A-t-il existé un syllabaire tyrhénien*, REG, LXXX, 1967, p. 41.

the first place, might have invented a Runic alphabet in the third quarter of the 6th century[14]. This hypothesis is quite tempting although it cannot be supported by a scrap of historical avidence. It should be observed that in this connection Otto Donner himself declared a serious reservation which made his hypothesis less probable or even improbable.

"En cas qu'un nouveau système d'écriture eût été créé par ordre du victorieux Khagan turc, cet événement aurait sans doute été mentionné par un des nombreux historiens de ce temps, qui nous ont donné des renseignements sur des choses beaucoup plus insignifiantes[15]". The above remark must have seemed to Sir Gerard Clauson of no importance and he disregarded it. Thus the problem has remained unsolved.

The second part of Sir Gerard Clauson's hypothesis that after the invention of the alphabet writing spread spontanously among Turkic speaking peoples seems to be in contradiction with the action of the first, "official" stage of adapting. As a matter of fact, Sir Gerard Clauson writes with no regard to all difficulties which could arise when the new alphabet had to be adapted to the requirements of other dialects:

"There is nothing really surprising about the fact that this alphabet should quickly have spread all over the Turkish speaking world of that period. Once such an alphabet was available any Turkish speaker who wished to write would have used it. Indeed it is the alphabet used [...] also in the early monuments of the first Uyğur Empire [...]"[16].

The menioned case of the Uighurs is significant since we really know nothing about possible innovations introduced by them into that alphabet. But this may mean only that the dialectal differences between the idioms spoken by the Türkü and the Uighur upper class were insignificant. Sir Gerard Clauson's opinion that "[...] any Turkish speaker who wished to write would have used it" seems to be doubtful. Was it equally easy for, let us say, the Chik people, living in Tuva, to which I. L. Kyzlasov is also ready to ascribe the knowledge of the same script?[17]

Here we return to a much debated but still unanswered question, viz. for what real reason several differently shaped Runic signs were used to render one and the same phoneme? Do they reflect factually existing dialectal divergencies among the ethnic gorups or originate from other reasons as, for instance, the quality of the material on which the inscriptions were placed, writing a good or bad hand etc. It

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[14] Clauson, "The Origin...", pp. 55-56.

[15] Donner, op. cit., p. 17.

[16] Clauson, op. cit., p. 55.

[17] I. L. Kızlasov, Paleografiçeskoe issledovanie aziatskiḫ runiçeskiḫ alfavitov", *Sovyetskoye Etnografiya*, 1991/4, p. 69.

seems to me that nothwithstanding the most competent studies on this problem undertaken by O. Pritsak, A. Róna-Tas, E. Hovdhaugen and others it is still too early to give a decisive answer to this question. The usage of same doublets, triplets etc. seems to be in certain cases naturally conditioned by inner orthographical or grammatical rules while in the others seems to be the trace of rather unsuccessful endeavours to render phonetical values of a given dialect. At the same time, some small divergencies in the shapes of signs, visible almost at the first glance, are obviously irrelevant. It makes no difference if one sign has a greater curve of its arc than the other, or if the obtuseness of one angle is in one sign a bit smaller than in the other: in both cases the question is of one and the same sign. It seems therefore like a nonsense to register and analyse such "ghost shapes" to paraphrase Sir Gerard Clauson's well-known term. No doubt, palaeographic studies should have reasonable proportions and a clear phonological base.

Before concluding let me make two additional remarks. The first is of a psychological character and probably has never been discussed before. Is it not probable that the ambition of the rulers and their spirit of competition played a special role in modelling of the writing system? The motto: "The same, but better and different at any price" seems to have been well known also in the steppes. The second remark concerns the activity of such experts who, on the ruler's recommendation or on their own initiative, could help to introduce the writing system in several countries. Consequently, we cannot exclude the possibility that the same expert preparing a writing system for various dialects could also have devised several different signs for factually one phoneme.