

## THE DECIPHERMENT OF THE TURKISH RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS AND ITS EFFECTS ON TURKOLOGY IN EAST AND WEST

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### *Introduction*

The term “Runes” for the letters of the Old Turkish alphabet, used mainly for inscriptions but also a few manuscripts, has lately been criticized by some Turkish scientists for its misleading meaning. As “Runes” is originally the term of the old Germanic alphabet, this term could suggest a Germanic origin of the Turkish alphabet. Indeed the term indicates nothing more than a similarity of shape that these alphabets have in common, which has also created the term “runiform” letters. As such nationalist hair-splitting does not contribute to scientific discussion, we will in the following use the term “Turkish runes” with a good conscience.

This contribution aims at showing similarities and differences between the ways that research into this alphabet and the texts written in it, went among Turkish scientists on the one side and Non-Turkish scientists on the other side. We will also see how these differences came into existence. In order to have a sound basis for our investigation we will first deal with the question how the Turkish runes were deciphered. We will then see how the research into the inscriptions continued among Western scholars, before we finally come to the effects that this research had on scientists in Turkey, or to be more precise, in the Ottoman Empire and then in the Republic of Turkey.

### *In the 19<sup>th</sup> century*

Several expeditions were sent out in order to collect material concerning the stone inscriptions in Central Asia. Two Finnish expeditions under J.R. Aspelin in 1888 and O. Heikel in 1889, as well as a Russian expedition under N.M. Yadrintsef of the Geographical society of Irkoutsk not only discovered many more inscriptions but brought also graphical reproductions with them, which laid the

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base for research and finally their decipherment. We shall return to the inscriptions, but first we will hear a few words about the Danish linguist Vilhelm Thomsen and some of the merits he gained in linguistics in general.

*Vilhelm Thomsen*

He was born in the capital of Denmark, Copenhagen 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1842. Already in school he had shown great interest in languages and after a short study of Christian theology he studied linguistics which was at that time comparative, as theoretical linguistics had not developed yet. In 1869 he was given his doctor degree for the thesis about “The influence of the Gothic (i.e. Germanic) language class on Finnish”.

After travelling to several European countries, among them Finland, he worked, upon his return to Denmark as a school teacher in Copenhagen, but was soon given the post as a university teacher. The post what would today call “full professor” was given to him only in 1887 and had it until 1913. He died on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1927.

Already with the aforementioned doctor dissertation he gained an international reputation. In 1871 it was translated into German. In this work he proved that Finnish and Lappic (Samic) had not only recently, but already many years in the past taken over many words from Germanic languages. Apart from its significance for cultural history, his research also gave important information about the phonetic and morphological shape of those old words, as the receiver languages had preserved their quality.

For about four decades Thomsen had been interested in the Lycian language of old Asia Minor, of which only some inscriptions remain. Finally in 1899 he published several inscriptions in transcription and translation, discussing thoroughly the results and pointing at the Indo-European traces and the characteristics of Caucasian languages in it.

Of perhaps even bigger importance are his “Remarques sur la parenté de la langue étrusque” (Remarks on the relationships of the Etruscan language), which appeared in the same year. In this work he points out some similarities with Caucasian languages, an observation that has kept its relevance until today.

Thus he became well acquainted with the work on inscriptions. We will now concentrate on his most important contribution to the study of Turkic languages, which mainly means his research into the Runic inscriptions.

*The inscriptions*

The inscriptions - so far known to us - are grouped according to the geographical site where they were found, although they might be quite far away from each other. The longest inscriptions are the aforementioned Orkhon

inscriptions from nowadays Mongolia. The inscriptions along the Upper Yenisey are bigger in number, but their inscriptions are much shorter and often not easy to understand. Another group with shorter inscriptions is found in the Talas mountains.

The longest text is the one on the monument which was erected for Köl Tegin. From the Chinese inscription, which is engraved on the west-side, we learn that the stele was erected in August 732. The long and rather well preserved Turkish text was the one that helped Thomsen most in deciphering the alphabet. A bit later we will hear how this became possible.

The inscription of the emperor Bilge Kagan was erected in 735. It also has a Chinese text, but this one as well as the Turkish inscription are not as well preserved as these on the Köl Tegin stone.

The third important monument is about 300 kilometers East of these two Orkhon inscriptions at the upper Tola river, near a place called Bain Tsokto, after which it had been named by some scientists. Because of its similarity with the other two stones it is now usually regarded to be one of the Orkhon inscriptions. It consists of one larger and one smaller stone and was erected probably 720 for a man called Tonyukuk who - as was mentioned before – had been a counsellor to several emperors.

These three inscriptions are the longest of all Old Turkish Runic inscriptions, being also the best preserved they are also the most thoroughly studied ones. There are two shorter ones, the Küli Chor and the Ongin inscriptions, which are counted to the same group.

Very similar to these inscriptions are those from the era of the Uyghurs. The two longest Uyghur inscriptions refer to the first emperor of the Uyghur – steppe empire, Eletmis Bilge Kagan, reigning from 747-759. Another inscription is dedicated to Bögü Kagan, who was enthroned in 759 and gained special importance when he was called for help by the Chinese T'ang Dynasty against the rebellion of An-lu-shan. During his stay, after having successfully fought the rebellion, Bogu was converted to manichaeism played a decisive role in Turkish history.

The inscriptions of the Yenisey are of a very different character. They also contain some biographical data of a deceased person but in no comparable length to those in the other texts. It is usually a small part of the inscriptions while the rest exists of lamentations and calls for those who had to be left behind in this world.

There are many more short inscriptions and also manuscripts, which are usually regarded as being remains of the manichaist culture. The longest text on paper is the Irk Bitig, a manual for predicting the future.

*The decipherment*

The importance of these texts for Turkish cultural history was revealed as soon as Vilhelm Thomsen had deciphered the alphabet and was able to make some first remarks on the contents of the text. Thus it is of great interest to know how Thomsen proceeded in this difficult task.

According to his own, rather short description, the decipherment was done by the following steps. The most important information concerning the language which he had to expect being written by this writing system was given by another, comprehensible inscription: of the four sides of the Köl Tegin stone one side had an inscription in Chinese. We now know that the Chinese emperor used to send diplomatic missions to the burial ceremony of an important aristocrat of the Turkish Empire and that this mission brought with it - besides other presents - inscriptions written by the Chinese emperor himself. These inscriptions mentioned names and titles of the deceased person saying as well that he was a member of the Turkish aristocracy.

Thus the longest and best preserved inscription mentioned the name - in reconstructed Middle Chinese pronunciation K'ieuh-ti(k) - K'in, which was first interpreted as being the Chinese equivalent of the Turkish Kök Tegin, i.e. the blue or heavenly prince. But as the Chinese inscription is not a parallel version to the Turkish one, of course Thomsen could not identify one form with the other without having some clues as to where in the runic inscription this name would be found.

Two more facts helped Thomsen from the very start: first the punctuation of the Runic texts, by separating every word from the text (although we know that this is not always the case); secondly, by knowing modern Turkish as well as classical Uyghur, it was known at that time that morphology, phonology and morphonology of these both were rather similar and thus one could expect that a Turkish idiom, being not much older, would also have more or less the same structural characteristics as classical Uyghur.

As the number of signs was rather restricted in number - 39 (not taking into regard the many different shapes) - it was almost clear to Thomsen that he had to do with an alphabet script, neither with pictograms like Chinese, nor with writing systems using signs for syllables. In order to find out, whether there were special signs for vowels, he paid attention to the combination of each of the signs with others. He was helped by statistics in so far as the most common vowel in the end of a Turkish word is either i or ı. From this and from its position in the context he came to suppose that the word "tengri", god and heaven, meaning the same concept as in Chinese ideology, behind a certain group of signs.

The second word was the aforementioned name (or rather title) Köl Tegin, which included the sign for the sound i. Although not every sign in these two words was clear, especially not one for ı, which he, according to the Chinese

pronunciation read k. Thomsen had a small number of signs, about which he was sure, and which were the basis for comparing their combination with other signs. On this basis and on the reconstruction of the Chinese signs, he came next to the word *bilge*, wise, and *turc*.

Being sure that he had to do with an alphabet script, Thomsen first had no explanation for the high number of different letters. By carefully paying attention to the combination of all existing signs, he noticed that certain letters were never found in the neighbourhood of certain letters, at least hardly ever within two dots functioning as a kind of punctuation. Taking the vowel harmony into regard, which was typical for Old Uyghur, he found the solution in the correct explanation that certain signs were used for the velar or back sound and others only for palatal or the front variant of the respective consonant. This insight allowed him to identify some more words.

The next problem that arose nevertheless caused deep doubts in Thomsen and brought him to the brink of giving up, as he came to the conclusion that the language in question could simply not be a Turkic language. This problem was the following: Turkic languages have - as all languages do - certain restrictions concerning the position of certain sounds in a word. In Turkic only a small number of sounds are allowed in anlaut position, i.e. being the first sound in a word, while all sounds appear in inlaut position, i.e. within a word. Seeing that all signs, also those which Thomsen read now as certain consonants, appeared clearly in the first position in a word, there was no explanation for that. For example the sound *r* or *l*, which are only found in anlaut position in loanwords, were found in too many words as Thomsen could accept for a Turkic language.

It took him about one month until he found the key, starting from the few words he was rather sure about, like *tangri* for heaven and *kagan* for emperor. As in these words the sounds *a* and *ä* are not indicated by any letter, the only possibility was that these two vowels are included in one of the consonant signs. Putting either *a* or *ä* in front of those signs which should not be expected in the first position of a word, he had the sound for which this sign stood in second position and had thus found a word making perfect sense.

The first short publication of Thomsen about his success appeared in 1993 entitled "Déchiffrement des inscriptions de l'Orkhon et de l'Jénissei. Notice préliminaire" caused immediately great interest and started research of the Old Turkish inscriptions among linguists and especially turcologists on an international level. It is a remarkable fact, that most of Thomsens' readings could be accepted by later researchers and even his transcription and differentiation between velaric and palatal consonants has been used until today.

*Further works about the “runes”*

It should not remain unmentioned that at the same time as Thomsen worked on the inscriptions, Wilhelm Radloff in Saint Petersburg also tried to decipher them. Thomsen was a bit faster, but later accusations from the Danish side, that Radloff only copied from Thomsen, are not correct. As it is used in science, Radloff had to accept corrections of his version, made by Thomsen, but also Radloff was right in some points where Thomsen's had been erroneous. Furthermore, Radloff did not conceal that he relied in some points on Thomsen's work, as he says it explicitly in the preface of his excellent book “Die alttürkischen Inschriften in der Mongolei” (St. Petersburg 1897): “I was lucky enough to be able to make also use of detailed studies on the inscription of the professors Vilhelm Thomsen and Bang.”

During the following years Thomsen devoted much of his work to the Runic inscriptions. In 1894 he published a booklet “L'alphabet runiforme turc” (The Turkish Runiform Alphabet), which had been planned as the first part of his transcription and translation of the two longest inscriptions, which appeared two years later in Helsinki.

In the booklet which can be regarded as a preface to the transcriptions, Thomsen gives a list of the letters, including variant forms as they are found in different inscriptions. He then explains their phonetic values and the orthographical rules according to which they are used. We can state that there are only few instances which had to be corrected later and that most of those problems which Thomsen could not solve have not been solved by now.

In 1916 Thomsen published a study concerning the interpretation of some difficult readings and problems of the contents. Besides these publications about the inscriptions, he also treated several manuscripts written in the runic alphabet. These were part of the many Old Turkish manuscripts that had been brought to Europe by various expeditions. It is on the basis of the manuscripts and blockprints, mainly brought from Kansu by the English explorer Sir Aurel Stein and by the four German expeditions to Eastern Turkestan between 1902 and 1912, that Thomsen even turns his interest to Turkish history. In a long article entitled “Fra Ost Turkestans Fortid” (About the past of Eastern Turkestan), published in 1914/15 he gives a very scholarly overview of historical and cultural aspects of the Turkish and Iranian population of Eastern Turkestan in Pre-Islamic times.

His last great publication about the early Turks is his Danish translation of the Köl Tegin, Bilgä Kagan and Tonyukuk inscriptions, which appeared in his Collected Works in 1922.

The effect is that Vilhelm Thomsen's successful work in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has lasted until today without losing anything of its high significance.

*More “runologists”*

The runiform inscription along the Yenisey and in Mongolia had aroused the interest of scientists long time before the decipherment by V. Thomsen. Two books each in Helsinki and two in St. Petersburg had been published about them, illustrating their forms and trying some explanations.

Following their decipherment almost a boom in publication set in. It was mainly Thomsen himself who delivered several editions of the inscriptions, including also discussions of unclear passages of the texts. But also his competitor Wilhelm Radloff from St. Petersburg published his own first two editions already in 1894 and 1895.

It would take too much space to mention all the works and authors who in the following years came with new proposals for a better understanding of some difficult passages and with new suggestions as to how to interpret the contents in the framework of Turkish history and social life. These works included research into singular letters and their phonetic and phonological value, like the one of Nemeth about the closed /e/ in Turkish, but also whose grammars including at least one of the inscriptions, like “Die alttürkische Grammatik” of Annemarie von Gabain, which was much later translated into Turkish by the “Türk Dil Kurumu”.

Among Russian scholars P.M. Melioranskiy edited the text of the Köl Tegin inscription as early as 1897. But most of the publications in Russian appeared in the 50ies and 60ies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most closely connected with the names S.E. Malov, who also did research in and published on other Old Turkish texts, like Classical Uyghur and Old Ottoman, as well as S.V. Kiselev who turned especially towards the Yenisey inscriptions.

In 1960 and 1961 the French turcologist R. Giraud published editions of the two big texts of Mongolia and of the Tonyukuk inscriptions. Although neglecting the useful proposals that P. Aalto had made in the meanwhile, Giraud’s works gain special value because of his thorough discussions of linguistic problems and the insight into old Turkish culture that the inscriptions allow us. This concerns also the Old Turkish religion and especially the cult of “Tängri”.

The cult of “tängri” was also discussed by Scharlipp 1992, based on the results that can be drawn from the inscriptions themselves. The same authors devoted also two short articles to the Yenisey inscriptions, arguing that they express rather the background of a shamanistic culture, while the Orkhon inscriptions use influences by Chinese and Iranian memorial texts. Among the most recent works about the Old Turkish inscriptions we find for example the articles and especially a new edition of the Tonyukuk inscription by the German-Finnish altaicist V. Rybatzki. While M. Erdal devotes most of his work to research into the lexicon of Old Turkish, but has also edited the “Irk Bitig” and several inscriptions.

As was said before, there is not enough place in such a survey to mention even

the most important names. In this context we would like to draw the readers' interest to an older survey article by the Polish Turcologist E. Tryjarski, which is despite its age still a useful information. Tryjarski himself has also contributed to this field of study by the edition of several inscriptions.

We hope, we could demonstrate with this chapter the internationality and almost world-wide interest into the Old Turkish runic inscription and the wide scope of problems which work has been devoted to.

#### *Research in Turkey*

The investigation into the Central Asian Runic inscriptions by European Scholars did not remain unnoticed among intellectuals in the Ottoman Empire, but instigated their own activities. Not long after the decipherment an article was published in the Ottoman newspaper *İkdam* in 1895. Its author is unknown, but it is most probable that it is Necip Asım, who shortly after published the first Turkish monograph about the Turkish Runic inscriptions.

It appeared in 1899 under the title "En eski Türk yazısı". The book appearing four years later under the title "Pek eski Türk yazısı" might be a reprint, its title perhaps a misprint for "En eski...". Necip Asım was the son of a rich influential family in the Syrian part of the Ottoman Empire. He had achieved the military rank of a "mir-i ālāy" after completing the education at the Military Academy in Istanbul. Being one of the main authors of the journal "İkdam" he contributed considerably to the development of nationalist ideas in the Ottoman Empire.

In order to work against the uprising nationalist movements among the non-Turkish ethnic groups which threatened the existence of the Empire, the ideal of "Osmancılık" (Ottomanism) had been introduced as a remedy against those destructive forces. Being little effective, the idea of Türkçülük, developing quickly to Turkish nationalism gained ground – a political concept new in the long imperial history of the Turks.

Building a state on a mainly ethnic fundament, instead of a multiethnic, imperial and religious one, asked for a new value and reputation of the word "Türk" which had up to then referred to people being ethnic and linguistic Turks, but of low social status and esteem.

The title of Şemseddin Samis (1850 – 1904) famous dictionary "Kamus-i Türki" can thus be seen as a programmatic expression for what was to come. Şemseddin Sami is said to have written an article about the Runic inscription which remained unpublished. But published was the book of his companion Necip Asım.

The publication of his article in *İkdam* one year before the publication of Thomsen's book is obviously due to the fact that Thomsen had read a paper about his decipherment on the Tenth Congress of Orientalists in Geneva in September 1894. This paper was also distributed and sent by Thomsen to various colleagues



and thus became quickly known among scientists.

For the intellectual pioneers of Turkish nationalism, the decipherment of the Old Turkish inscriptions from the Orhon and Yenisey was a precious support. While before it had been rather difficult to present Turkish literary language with an old tradition, with which Turks could really identify themselves, one could now draw attention to a written language that was much older than Ottoman and widely uninfluenced by other languages.

How important language was as a factor during the process of constructing a national identity is clearly demonstrated by the chapters of Ziya Gökalp's important programmatic book "Türkçülüğün esasları". The chapter on "Lisanî Türkçülük" is the first chapter of the book, followed by "Bedi Türkçülük" and "Ahlakî Türkçülük". Gökalp suggest to give up the "Ottoman Esperanto", as he calls it, existing of Arabic, Persian and Turkish and to introduce colloquial Turkish as literary language. What the Ottoman language, being several hundreds of years old, could not be used for, to serve as a factor constructing a new identity, the language of the Runic inscriptions offered the best preconditions.

Thus Necip Asım introduces the preface to his book by saying, that with the Orhon inscriptions we have the proof of the old age of Turkish literature and of the fact that the Turks already had a literary culture when Europe remained still in the darkness of ignorance. At a time when European scholars began discussing the origin of the Turkish Runic alphabet, it was clear for Necip Asım that this alphabet was a purely Turkish creation, not influenced by any other system of writing. In the light of the search for a national identity one should not understand such ideas as an exaggerated chauvinism. The underlining of outstanding cultural achievements belonging to a common history is one aspect of universal method of creating socio-political identity.

But despite all these nationalistic overtones Necip Asım does not forget to appreciate the effects of Vilhelm Thomsen, his scholarliness and his merits for the Turkish community in an elegant, decorated Ottoman language (Medeniyet-i kadimiye-yi milliyetimizing bir şahid-fennen-i napaziri olan şu abide hututını keşf ü hall eden meşahir-i müellimin ve müsteşkından monsieur V. Thomsen cenablarına terakkiyat-i ilmiye ve hususiyle mensubiyet-i ile mübahi olduğumuz milliyet-i Türkiye namına olarak arz-i ihtiram eyler ve işte ilk defa olarak o yazı ile maalfitihar "Necip" imzasını şu mukkadımaya vazi eder...) . Necip Asım's book is rather witness of his own fascination he felt for his object than by a fanatic nationalism. A sign of this is also the almost child-like joy of writing his name in Runic letters on the first page of the book – never mind that it is contradicting the orthographical rules of this alphabet.

A personal fascination of his object of research can also be noticed in the works of Hüseyin Namık Orkun. In his work, which appeared in four volumes

between 1936 and 1941 he tries to collect and edit all Turkish – or supposedly Turkish – inscriptions and manuscripts in runiform letters known up to his time, adding a mixture of transcription and transliteration, translation, commentary and glossary. It is an admirably scientific achievement, useful until today. The scientific commentary in the four volumes concentrates strictly on the topic without getting emotional or speculative.

The appearance of Orkun's books falls into the last years of consolidation of kemalist politics. The Arabic alphabet was given up in the meanwhile and replaced by the Latin alphabet which was from the start, for propaganda reasons, called the "Turkish alphabet" (later also "Gazi alfabeti" etc.). The language reform, systematically introduced in 1932, had turned into a "language purification", being partly based on the results of research into Old Turkish.

After a long break in the research into the Turkish Runic inscriptions the Turkish scholar Talat Tekin published his thesis "A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic" in Bloomington, USA. This book caused great attention among Turcologists and became a standard work at Turcological institutes worldwide. Some weaknesses of this book have been corrected in later editions and articles by the author. What makes the book useful on an international level is not only the fact that it was written in English, but also its scientific objectivity.

An edition of some Runic inscription of a very different kind was published two years later by Muharrem Ergin. In a sharp contrast to Tekin's book, Ergin uses the Orkhon inscriptions as a clear political, i.e. nationalist message. To make this point clear, it is enough to quote the first passages of his preface: "The first Turkish text, in which the name Türk, the name of the Turkish state is mentioned...the first work of Turkish historiography, historiography written in stone...the most important document of Turkish order, Turkish tradition, Turkish civilisation, of the high Turkish culture...the basics of Turkish military genius (askerî deha), of the Turkish art of war..." and thus the text continues. Words used and the style do not necessarily reflect a personal interest in the scientific object, but clearly reflect ideological tendencies of political chauvinism.

We find these tendencies also in other publications of him, for example in the "Türk Dünyası El Kitabı" where we find the information that the Turkish Runes were already in use several centuries before our time. Everybody who seriously works about Turkish runes knows that such a statement lacks any scientific sincerity.

Several Turkish scientists have devoted articles to special problems of the inscription. One of the names that should be mentioned here is Osman Sertkaya who partly proposed new readings of some difficult passages and gave new interpretations to some older translations.

Coming to the end of our survey we can state the following: While non-

Turkish scientists devoted their efforts to the decipherment and correct reading of the old Turkish Runic inscription, resulting into a better knowledge of historical facts, as they were partly known by Chinese sources, Turkish scientists working with these inscriptions were partly guided by emotional tendencies. The differences in the historical background of the researchers give reasonable explanations. Thus has the use of the early inscriptions in nation building a legitimate function, whereas a chauvinistic misuse can only be interpreted as a discrimination of other ethnic groups.

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بر باقشده اوخون حروفاتی کوسترمک اوزره اشکال ومقابللری  
اشاغیده کوسترلشدر:

## حروف مصوته

ⱱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ
(او)	(او)	(ائی)	(آئه)
(u'eu)	(o'ou)	(i'y)	(a'ê)

## حروف مصوته

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ТРУДЫ ОРХОНСКОЙ ЭКСПЕДИЦИИ.  
АТЛАСЪ  
ДРЕВНОСТЕЙ МОНГОЛИИ.

ИЗДАНО ПО ПОРУЧЕНИЮ ИМПЕРАТОРСКОЙ АКАДЕМИИ НАУКЪ

*В. В. Радловымъ.*

ВЫПУСКЪ ЧЕТВЕРТЫЙ.

Томъ CV—CXIII.



ARBEITEN DER ORCHON-EXPEDITION.  
ATLAS  
DER  
ALTERTHÜMER DER MONGOLEI.

IM AUFTRAGE DER KAISERLICHEN AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN

HERAUSGEBEN VON

*Dr. W. Radloff.*

VIERTE LIEFERUNG.

Tomъ CV—CXIII.

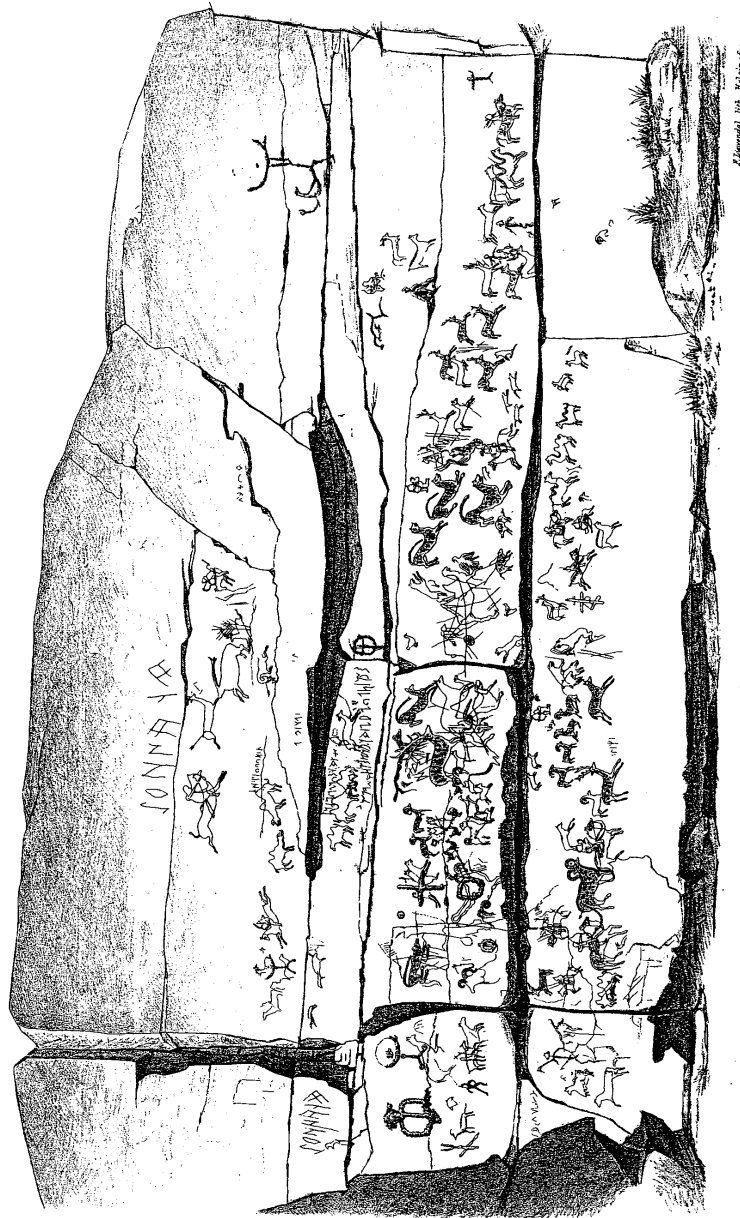


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