

***yarsko, yärskö, yarasa and yar(ig) kanat***  
**Turkic ‘bat’ revisited**

Hans Nugteren\*

**Abstract:** The recently discovered Old Uyghur word Y’RSQW ‘bat’ fills a gap in our data. It is now probably the oldest word for ‘bat’ recorded in Turkic languages. It sheds some new light on terms for ‘bat’ in other modern and historical Turkic languages. It seems useful to have another look at these words. Previous etymological proposals will be discussed, of which some are based on Turkic roots, while others assume a foreign origin.

**Keywords:** Old Turkic, Old Uyghur, Maitrisimit, Turkic languages, etymology, animal names, bat, yarasa.

**Özet: *yarsko, yärskö, yarasa ve yar(ig) kanat. Yarasa Anlamındaki Adlara Yeniden bir Bakış***

Yakın zamanda keşfedilen Eski Uygurca Y’RSQW ‘yarasa’ kelimesi verilerimizdeki bir boşluğu doldurmaktadır. Bu kelime muhtemelen Türk dillerinde ‘yarasa’ için kayda geçmiş en eski addır. Diğer çağdaş ve tarihi Türk dillerindeki ‘yarasa’ terimlerine de yeni bir ışık tutmaktadır. Bu kelimelere bir kez daha bakmakta fayda var gibi görünüyor. Bu makalede, daha önce ortaya atılan ve bir kısmı sözcüğün kökünün Türkçe olduğunu, bir kısmı ise yabancı bir dilden ödünçlendiğini savunan etimoloji önerilerinden bazıları tartışılacaktır.

**Key Words:** Eski Türkçe, Eski Uygurca, Maitrisimit, Türk dilleri, etimoloji, hayvan adları, yarasa sözü.

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## Introduction

Bats, mysterious animals which in premodern times were hard to observe and classify due to their nocturnal lifestyle, in many languages lack a primary name and are often described as ‘flying mice’, ‘night birds’ or ‘leatherwings’. Alternatively, they share names with other flying creatures such as owls, swallows, butterflies or moths. Other naming motives refer to the sound of flapping wings or to the bats’ poor eyesight.<sup>1</sup>

In Turkic languages we also find such new descriptive names as well as loanwords from neighbouring languages. However, there are a couple of ‘bat’ terms in older Turkic sources that are not transparent descriptions. These words survive in modern languages and at first sight look like native formations.

Nearly all etymological aspects of the Turkic words for ‘bat’ have been discussed by Stachowski (1999), who ultimately explained *yarasa* and other documented forms as a compound of the words ‘leather’ and ‘wing’ borrowed from the Samoyedic language Mator which went extinct in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The ‘bat’ terms were included in the etymological dictionaries by Clauson, Räsänen, and Levickaja (ĖSTJa IV) and have also been mentioned or discussed by other colleagues such as Doerfer, Poppe, Helimski, Hauenschild, Starostin et al., Ščerbak, Tekin, Ünal and Aksu. Many of these colleagues gave useful overviews and reasonable opinions about its etymology and divergent developments in the modern languages. This paper will discuss the Turkic terms for ‘bat’ and review some of the published ideas about their origin.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Old Turkic names for ‘bat’

The motivation to pick up this topic again is the appearance of one new data point. The Old Uyghur form Y’RSQW was recently published for the first time in a manuscript of the *Maitrisimit* discussed by Laut and Semet (2021: 316, leaf 10 v.). The word

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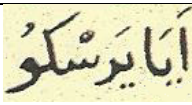
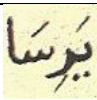
<sup>1</sup> For a survey of naming motives in Western and Northern Eurasia see Lina (2016: 7–9), who views the Turkish form as unexplained, and Kabakova (2023), where the etymological remarks are unfortunately not that helpful.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Jens Wilkens for discussing the materials with me and for making suggestions and corrections. I also thank the anonymous reviewers.

occurs in an enumeration of ominous winged creatures in an apocalyptic vision.

The passage – skipping some problematic (parts of) words – is as follows: *ütlärintä yaroklarınta ... täglügänlär tañanlar ... k(a)rığačlar yarsGWlar kirü ünä kănt üzä konmuş b(ä)lgürtir* “[Maitreya] makes appear [in a vision] how ... kites, jackdaws ... swallows and bats go in and out of the holes and crevices and descend upon the town”.<sup>3</sup>

Y’RSQW in the *Maitrisimit* is now probably the oldest recorded Turkic word for ‘bat’, predating the two words recorded in Kāšgārī’s eleventh-century *Dīwān luġāt al-Turk* (DLT).<sup>4</sup> This changes the perspective on some of the previously recorded Turkic words for ‘bat’ and the connections between them. We now have the following terms:

1.	<i>y’rsqw</i>		in Uyghur script in the <i>Maitrisimit</i> (Laut/Semet 2021)
2.	<i>’ay<sup>a</sup>’ y<sup>a</sup>rskw<sup>u</sup></i> = <i>’ayā yarskū</i>		in Arabic script in DLT (Čigil dialect)
3.	<i>y<sup>a</sup>r<sup>s</sup>a<sup>a</sup></i> = <i>yarisā</i>		in Arabic script in DLT (probably Oghuz but not marked as such, attributed to ‘some other [tribes]’)
4.	<i>yar(ig) kanat</i>		in Arabic script from the 14 <sup>th</sup> century onwards (see Boeschoten 2022)

The spelling in the original scripts allow for several readings. Unlike in many other cases of ambiguous notation, the reading of this lexical item cannot immediately be established by comparing the surviving cognates in modern languages. One’s choice of transcription cannot

<sup>3</sup> Before the kites there should be another creature of which only the plural suffix remains. Before the swallows (or perhaps swifts) there is another creature, provisionally read *kurı anlar* by Laut & Semet. They do not provide a translation or detailed commentary.

<sup>4</sup> The Hami manuscript of the *Maitrisimit* stems from the 11<sup>th</sup> century and is thus roughly contemporary with the time the DLT was written, although the only known copy of Kāšgārī’s compendium is from 1266 (Dankoff & Kelly 1982–1985, I, 1). The *Maitrisimit* may have been translated from Tocharian as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

be separated from one's views on the morphological structure and the likelihood of certain semantic changes.

The Uyghur spelling *y'rsqw* could be read *yarsku*, *yarsko*, *yarsgu* or *yarsgo*. As this is the only attestation of the word, there is no particular reason to assume the presence of unwritten vowels, although of course defective spellings are not uncommon in native and foreign words.

If we assume that the word is a native Turkic (or nativized foreign) item and subjected to vowel harmony, and consider Kāšgārī's spelling habits, his Arabic spelling *y<sup>a</sup>rskw<sup>u</sup>* could be read *yārskū*, *yārskō*, *yārsgū* or *yārsgō*. Further vowels need not and should not be added. The *s* (س) is specifically marked with the *sukūn* (◌ْ) sign and thus should not be followed by a vowel. Therefore Clauson's trisyllabic reading *yersigū* can be rejected. It should also be noted that the full form in DLT is *aya yārskō*. *aya* may be the Turkic word for 'palm of the hand', as is generally assumed, because a bat's wing consists of skin extended between the fingers. However, if the word is of foreign origin, the element *aya* may also be a representation of (part of) a non-Turkic word. In the case of a loanword considerations about vowel harmony need not apply.

Kāšgārī's Arabic spelling *y<sup>a</sup>r<sup>i</sup>s<sup>a</sup>* indicates *yarisa*, although modern forms suggest *yarasa*, with several deviations. The spelling allows for a front-vocalic reading *yārisā*, but the only argument for that would be to make it more similar to *yārskō*.

The Uyghur notation with undotted *q* favours a reading with -g- rather than -k-. Phonetically a form with -g- would be easier to connect to the modern Oghuz *yarasa*. Morphologically, the reading -gu would be preferable if the word were a (de)verbal noun. However, the required verb *yars-* is not attested, although the disyllabic verb *yarsı-* 'to be disgusted, to feel aversion' is attested both in Old Uyghur and in Middle Turkic.<sup>5</sup>

The provisional readings *yarsko* and *yārskō* are inspired by Clauson's practice to read *o/ö* in Old Turkic or Proto-Turkic to indicate that some languages have *U* and others *A*. Clauson applies this shorthand or 'trick' in native words like *orto* 'middle' (*ortu* in Tuva, *orta* in Turkish). This practice, which bears no relation to the actual instances of Old Uyghur *o/ö* as indicated in the Brāhmī script

<sup>5</sup> In *yarsok* 'disgusting' the final vowel of the stem was elided before the deverbal noun suffix *-Ok*.

such as *oron* ‘place’, is not recommended in general, but we will apply it here for the sake of convenience to avoid a proliferation of tildes every time the form is mentioned. We will in the etymological considerations below stick to the notations *yarsko* and *yärskö* without constantly repeating all of the alternative possible readings.

The forms *yarsko* and *yärskö* must be variants of a single etymon. Their syllable structure is rare but permissible in Turkic, but this set of variants may in fact represent two interpretations of a single foreign etymon, even though there is no obvious source language. The vowels of these two forms are reconstructed differently on the basis of the *-q-* and *-k-*. However, vowel harmony does not necessarily apply if we are dealing with a loanword, and perhaps a single pronunciation underlies both the Uyghur and Arabic spelling.

The readings *yarsko* and *yärskö* facilitate the connection to *yarisa* > *yarasa*, which will here be taken to be a descendant of the same etymon, as was already assumed by several authors including Clauson (1972: 972a) and Hauenschild (2003: 40, 239–240).

The loss of postconsonantal *-g/k-* is of course known from native Turkic words, most systematically in Oghuz. Kāšgarī gives *tamak* ‘palate’ and *yorinča* ‘clover’ as Oghuz equivalents for *tamgak* and *yorinčga* in other dialects. In western Oghuz languages, postconsonantal *-g-* is lost in apparently unsegmented words like *älgä-* ‘to sieve’, *bürgä* ‘flea’, *inčgä* ‘fine’ and *yalgan* ‘lie’, and also when *-g-* is a suffix-initial consonant as in *ädgü* ‘good’, *sıčgan* ‘mouse’ and *orgak* ‘sickle’.<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon is also often encountered in Kipchak and Chaghatay languages including Tatar and Modern Uyghur, apparently due to intra-Turkic exchanges.

## 2. Later forms of *yarsko*, *yärskö* and *yarasa*

Descendants of *yarsko* survive with back vowels. They feature different treatments of the consonant sequence *-rsg-/rsk-*, which is

<sup>6</sup> In Turkish: *ele-*, *pire*, *ince*, *yalan*, *iyi*, *sıçan*, *orak*. It is debatable whether after a voiceless consonant, as in *inčgä* and *sıčgan*, the *-g-* had become assimilated to *-k-* before being elided. There is not as much evidence for the elision of original postconsonantal *-k-*, as in Kāšgarī’s Oghuz *arka-* ‘to search’ vs. modern Oghuz *ara-*. Two special early cases of elision of postconsonantal *g/k* are *kārgäk* ~ *kāräk* ‘necessary’ and *kulgak/kulkak/kulxak* ~ *kulak* ‘ear’.

permissible on a syllable boundary but uncommon in Turkic, and was broken up or simplified in later languages.<sup>7</sup>

*yarsko* is the parent form of several (previously orphaned) modern forms. Baraba (Siberian Tatar) *yarisqı* added a vowel between *r* and *s*. This is a close relative of the oldest recorded form. A similar Turkic form *یرسقی* is recorded in Steingass' Persian dictionary (1892: 1530a), mistranscribed as *yarsaqı̄*. Doerfer discusses this item, more plausibly transcribed *yarisqı* (although *yarsqı* would also be possible), in TMEN 1836 (IV:143). Gandjei (1977: 628) points out that this is not a loanword in Persian but a 'Turkish' (i.e., Azeri) word from the 15<sup>th</sup> century *Farhang-i Ibrāhīmī* that ended up in the Persian dictionaries. Of course this deviates from the standard Azeri and other typical modern Oghuz forms.

Tuva *ča''ski* lost the *r* and *časqa* in closely related Soyot changed the final vowel.<sup>8</sup> The loss of *-r-* in Tuva suggests that *ča''ski* goes back to an earlier *\*ča''rski*; the loss of *-r-* would be unexpected if it were intervocalic.<sup>9</sup>

Chaghatay *yarasiq* (Pavet de Courteille 1870: 520) apparently broke up the cluster and then lost the final vowel.<sup>10</sup> The same can be

<sup>7</sup> The sequences *-rsg-* and *-rsk-* are rare in Old Uyghur stems, but do occur, as in *tārsǵū* 'pine tree' and *kumursga* 'ant'; on the morpheme boundary they may appear as follows: the dative *bars-ka* 'to the tiger', the petrified directive *tārs-gārū* 'contrary', or the participle *sars-gu* 'scolding'.

<sup>8</sup> The Kangat form *čas kış* may be from an earlier *\*časki* with an altered last syllable, as if the suffix *-gU* (which it in fact did not contain) was replaced by *-gUč*. The altered Tofa form *ča''pqış* on the surface looks like a deverbal noun in *-gUč* from *ča''p-* (< *\*yap-*) 'to stick, glue', which reminds us of the Bulgarian 'bat' designation *prilep*, related to the Slavic verb for 'to stick, glue, cling', referring to the bats' roosting habits. For the analysis of *ča''pqış* as *\*yap kuš* lit. 'fluff bird' see Stachowski (1999: 132).

<sup>9</sup> Stachowski (1999: 131) mentions the loss of preconsonantal *-r-* in Tuva *kımiskayak* 'ant' from *\*kumursga*. The loss of the middle syllable after the loss of an intervocalic consonant is more commonly seen in *-k-*, as in *te* < *\*teke* 'Siberian roebuck', *ses* < *\*sākiz* 'eight', *ten* < *\*tikän* 'thorn', *šan-ı* < *čikan* 'cousin', and occasionally with *-l-* as in *dorzuk* < *tolarsuk* 'lower thigh' (Tenišev 1968: 174a).

<sup>10</sup> Pavet de Courteille's entry *yarasa*, *yarasiq* 'chauve-souris; qui plaît, qui charme' is somewhat conspicuous, as the meaning 'qui plaît, qui charme' seems to belong to the following entry *yaraşıq*, so that perhaps only *yarasa* should be interpreted as 'bat'.

seen in *yarasıġ* ‘bat’ in the *Qışaş al-Anbiyā*’ (Boeschoten 2022: 400b).

The front-vocalic variant *yärskö* does not seem to have any descendants. Phonetically the second element of Chuvash *śara śerśi* ‘bat’ (Skvorcov 398c) might have gone back to *yärskö* if Clauson’s emendation *yersigü* (see below) had been correct, but it is more likely that it is the transparent ‘bald sparrow’, with the second element coming from *\*särčä* ‘sparrow, small bird’. This has an equivalent in neighbouring Mountain Mari *cäragek* lit. ‘bald bird’ (Vasil’jev, Savatkova & Učaev 1991: 381b). Mari *cära* is the same word as Chuvash *śara*, which because of the vocalism cannot be related to *\*yarıġ* discussed below.<sup>11</sup>

Oghuz (Turkish, Gagauz, Azeri, Turkmen dialect) suggest *\*yarasa*. As shown by Boeschoten (2022: 400b), *yarasa* was not restricted to Oghuz in Middle Turkic. The motivation for the added -v- in dialectal Turkmen *yarva:za* is unclear. An inexplicable -n appears in Salar *yarasan*, and is also found, with other phonetic irregularities, in the Azeri dialect form *yaraxsan* (Axundov, Kazımov & Behbudov 2007: 541b) and the Turkish dialect form *yelesen* (DS 4233b). The rare *yavsun* (DS 4206b) may also be an irregular development of the same word.

By means of such changes, etymologically opaque word stems can be made more transparent or be provided with meaning. Foreign words can be nativized in pronunciation and provided with a meaning (‘folk etymology’). In the case of the terms for ‘bat’, only some of the phonetic and morphological alterations have resulted in more transparent or understandable forms for the native speakers.

Unexpected word shapes may be tabooistic deformations, a consequence of a prohibition against using the correct name of certain creatures or objects. This often happens in the case of animal names, not only those denoting animals hunted by people or predators that pose a risk to humans and livestock. Animals whose original names are avoided in several Turkic languages include ‘bear’, ‘wolf’, ‘weasel’, ‘snake’ and ‘elk’ but also ‘squirrel’ and ‘mosquito’. The words for ‘butterfly’ and ‘spider’ were preserved in most Turkic subgroups; rather than being replaced by different

<sup>11</sup> Meadow Mari *čara*; Tatar and Bashkir *šärä* ‘bald, bare’ may be borrowings from Chuvash. I would like to thank Ane H. Nauta for a discussion on the Chuvash form.

words, their pronunciation and morphological structure was, apparently intentionally, altered.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Proposed Turkic Etymologies for *yarsko*, *yärskö* and *yarasa*

The old Turkic words for ‘bat’ are hard to explain with the normal etymological and morphological methods. The word is unlikely to be an unsegmented native word stem, but there is neither an established shorter root nor a morphologically and semantically plausible derivation. This situation inspired several, often speculative explanation attempts.

Before discussing Stachowski’s explanation as a compound consisting of two Samoyedic words, some other opinions will be presented here.

Clauson attempted to derive Kāšgārī’s Čigil form *uya yersigü* (vocalisation of both components thus ‘emended’ by Clauson) from an otherwise unattested verb *yer-si-* ‘to make a nest’, which should be rejected. He does not present a separate solution for *yarisa*. Dankoff & Kelly (1982–1985) do not suggest an etymology for either form.

Nişanyan (2021: 956a) considers the Turkish *yarasa* to be related to the Old Turkic forms. He reads the DLT form as *aya yarısgu* (replacing *g* with *ġ* and changing the vowels accordingly, as if *ġ* were written), which in his opinion goes back to ‘Old Turkic *yarsıgu/yarasa*’. He derives this (with question mark) from the verb *yarsı-* ‘to be disgusted’.

Tekin (2013: 176) views *yarisa* as *yarı-sa*, a denominal formation based on *yarı* ‘hide’ but with an unexplained suffix.<sup>13</sup> He explains Tuva *ča”ski* as *\*yar-sgu*, also with an unexplained and otherwise unknown suffix. He views both *yarı* and *yar* as cognates of Mongolic *arasun* ‘skin’.

Starostin et al. (2003: 478) derive *yarasa* from a Proto-Altaic root *\*dġari* ‘a small animal’, although they note the problem with the element *-sa* and do not attempt to explain Kāšgārī’s *yärskö* and Tuva

<sup>12</sup> Compare the development of ‘spider’, ‘butterfly’ and ‘fly’ in South Siberian Turkic in Sumačakova et al. (2013). For ‘spider’ see also Hauenschield (2003: 173) and Nugteren & Roos (1996: 46). For ‘butterfly’ see Hauenschield (2003: 103) and Nugteren & Roos (1996: 44).

<sup>13</sup> Gülensoy (2007: 1071-1072) also derives *yarisa* from ‘hide’ with a suffix *-sa*.



ča”ski; they also view the first element of the later form *yarkanat* discussed below as related to the same Altaic root.

Eyuboğlu (1991: 730b) fancifully explains the western form *yarasa* as *yari-sağ* ‘half sound’ in the sense of ‘underdeveloped’.

Poppe (1978: 140) already proposes that *yarasa* goes back to an earlier *yarasqa*. However, the pathway is dubious. He suggests that the stem is (Tatar) *yari* ‘membrane’ to which a suffix *-sqa* was added. He quotes Turkic *kumursga* ‘ant’ as a parallel formation, although it is not obvious what the stem of that word would be. Although numerous animal and plant names end in *+gA* (see Erdal 1991: 83)<sup>14</sup>, this proposal should probably be rejected, as it does not account for the *-s-*. It is not problematic that the stem *yari* goes back to an earlier *\*yariḡ*, which will be encountered again below in the discussion of *yarkanat*.

Poppe’s idea was perhaps inspired by the Mongolic suffix *-skA* that makes (mostly skin-related) nouns from nominal and verbal stems as well as from stems/roots of indeterminate character that do not occur independently. Examples include *\*ada-ska*, *\*hüke-ske*, and *\*kuri-ska*, for which the original meanings ‘skin of a dead horse’, ‘skin of dead cattle’, and ‘skin of a dead lamb’, can be assumed.<sup>15</sup> These words are related to *\*adaun/\*adaasun* ‘horse herd/livestock’, *\*hüker* ‘bovine’, and *\*kurigan* ‘lamb’. A deverbal *-skA* form is *\*turuska* from *tur-* ‘to be emaciated’.

There is some marginal evidence for a suffix *+skA* ~ *+sA* in Southwestern Kipchak languages, but this lacks the specific semantics of the Mongolic suffix. The most striking example is a

<sup>14</sup> Erdal (1991: 84) considers it possible that *kumursga* ‘ant’ may have an Indo-European base (related to Sanskrit *kṛmiḥ* ‘worm’) with the Turkic element *+gA*.

<sup>15</sup> LM *adasqa* ‘worn-out horse, jade; raw hide used as a mat or rug’ (Lessing 1960: 11a), Kalmyk *adşxv* ‘dry, shriveled-up skin, old hide’ (Ramstedt 1935: 2a), Khalkha *adsaga* Hangin 1986: 10b; Middle Mongolian (Muqaddimat al-Adab) *ük(e)ske* ‘rawhide’ (Poppe 1938: 292b), Kalmyk *ük<sup>#</sup>skə* ‘(old) cow hide’ (Ramstedt 1935: 456b) (derivation from the verb *\*ükü-* ‘to die’ cannot be entirely excluded, as *h-* would have been expected in the Middle Mongolian form if it derives from *\*hüker*); Kalmyk *χürsxp* ~ *χursxp* ‘prepared lambskin’ (Ramstedt 1935: 203a), Eastern Yugur *ğurāsğa* ‘lambskin’ (Bolčuluu 1984: 80); LM *turasqa* ‘skin of a dead animal’ (Lessing 1960: 843b), Kalmyk *turusxp* (Ramstedt s.v. *adşxv*), Khalkha *tursaga* (Hangin 1986: 516a). Further examples include *\*hani-ska* ‘eyelid’ from *\*hani-* ‘to shut the eyes’, *\*kondaska* ‘skin of the rump’ related to *\*kondasun*, *\*kondalai* ‘rump’, and *\*kömeske* ‘eyebrow’ of unknown affinity.

word derived from *\*boyun* ‘neck’: Karachay *boyunsxa*, Balkar *boyunsa* ‘yoke’ (Tenišev & Suyunčev 1989: 163b)<sup>16</sup>, Kumyk *boyunsa* ‘yoke’ (Bammatov 1969: 82b), Karaim *boyunsa* (all dialects) ‘yoke; headstall; scarf’ (Baskakov & Zajončkovskij & Šapšal 1974: 127b), Crimean Tatar *boyınsa* ~ *boyunsa* ‘yoke; horse collar’ (Aqtay & Jankowski 2015: 93ab). Nogay of Stavropol *moysa* ‘yoke’ (Khalilov 10.780). Note also the deviant form Nogay *boyuskan* ‘rope, woollen leash (to tie up the calves when the cow is milked)’ (Baskakov & Kalmykova 1963: 1983b).<sup>17</sup> However, none of this elucidates the origin of the ‘bat’ terms.

#### 4. Non-Turkic Etymologies for *yarsko*, *yärskö* and *yarasa*

Clauson (1972: 972a) already concluded that “the wide range of forms suggests that they are all different representations of a l[oa]n[w[ord]]”. Unfortunately, it was not possible to find a suitable donor form or donor language.

Doerfer (TMEN [IV] 1836) also considered the word impossible to analyse and assumed it was of foreign origin or a taboo form.

Tietze (2019: 306) omits the standard Turkish *yarasa* but incorrectly considers *yelese/yelemse* to be a Persian loanword in Turkish.<sup>18</sup>

Stachowski (1999) proposed to explain *yarisa/yarasa* as *\*ñarV* + *sa*, a compound of two words from Mator, a now extinct Samoyedic language. As *ñarV* means ‘thin skin, leather’ and *sa* ‘wing’, the correspondence is semantically excellent and phonetically sound.<sup>19</sup> The idea is generally plausible as ‘leather wing’ is a common naming motive; some of the weak or unsupported aspects of the etymology were already indicated by Stachowski. The compound is not attested in the source language and *sa* ‘wing’ is itself of unclear origin. Moreover, another Mator word for ‘bat’ is actually attested as

<sup>16</sup> Mudrak (2023: 1707) proposes a different etymology for *boyunsxa*: Turkic *boyun* ‘neck’ plus Ossetic (Digoron) *æfcoj* ~ *æfcoijnæ* ‘yoke’.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also dialectal Turkish *boyunsalık* ‘rope that passes under the neck of an animal and is attached to the bit and halter; scarf; headstall’ (DS 748a).

<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, the old form Pelliott *يلاسه* (1931: 574) could also be read *yäläsä* and be viewed as an alteration influenced by ‘wind’.

<sup>19</sup> As Stachowski explains, *\*ñarV* is not attested in the limited Mator materials but well supported elsewhere, whereas *sa* is documented but etymologically unclear.

*čabkəpso(n)*. Stachowski considers this to be a probable Turkic loanword (cf. the abovementioned Tofa *ča”pqiš*).<sup>20</sup>

One may consider *yarisa* or *yarasa* to be opaque and insufficiently Turkic in structure but, given that *yarsko* and *yärskö* are as old as the *yarasa*-type forms, *yarsko* and *yärskö* cannot simply be explained as later morphological alterations of *yarasa* to make the word more Turkic-looking or more etymologically transparent.

The present distribution suggests that *yarasa* is a western or even Oghuz form. It would be unexpected if the very Turkic varieties that were geographically closer to the Samoyedic languages had felt the need to alter the phonetic shape.

If one does not accept the Samoyedic etymology, *yarsko*, *yärskö* and *yarasa* can still be of non-Turkic origin.

The foreign source form of the Old Turkic terms may have been close to the phonetic shape *yarsko* or, if *aya* in the DLT does not represent *aya* ‘palm of the hand’, *ayayarsko*. Unfortunately, no such form has been found in any of the usual donor languages. Somewhat similar is the Tocharian B *arśakärśa* ‘bat’, perhaps similar enough to assume a connection. *arśakärśa*, which appears instead of the rat in the twelve animal calendar, was deemed etymologically unclear by Adams (2013: 26). Pinault (2014: 208 ff.), thinks it is unlikely to be a calque of one of the many recorded Sanskrit ‘bat’ terms and views it as a Tocharian compound, with the first element meaning ‘night’, and the second element denoting some kind of small animal or bird, perhaps with the original form *\*kurkya*.<sup>21</sup>

### 5. *yar... kanat*

*\*ka:nat* is obviously the old and widespread Turkic word for ‘wing’. There is some disagreement about the first element, but generally this is viewed as a reduced form of *\*yarıg* ‘membrane, thin skin’ or

<sup>20</sup> Stachowski (1999: 132). According to Helinski (1995), the element *-pson* is a well-known Mator formans.

<sup>21</sup> See Pinault for the phonetic details. Vasmer (1986 II 389) rejects the comparison of the second element of the Tocharian form to Russian *krysa* ‘rat’. Perhaps an Indic compound cannot be entirely excluded as the source of *yarsko* c.s. (and even the Tocharian form); Mayrhofer (1992: 248) mentions an Indic root *ṛkṣa-* ‘bald’, which would be a typical first member of a compound meaning ‘bat’.

(perhaps its diminutive) *\*yargak*.<sup>22</sup> The naming motive ‘skin wing’ is an obvious one with parallels in many languages both in Turkic (Turkish *deri kanat*, Yakut *tirii kınat*, Khakas *xırna xanat*) and elsewhere. The analysis as *\*yarıg kanat* was already proposed by Budagov (1871: 327a; see also *yarasa* 325a), as well as recently endorsed by Károly (2015: 3411).

*\*yarıg* itself is not attested in Old Turkic, but the distribution in Middle Turkic and modern languages confirms its age. The word *yarıg* ‘membrane’ survives as an independent word in many languages and displays the usual sound changes as in similarly-structured words (*arıg* ‘clean’, *sarıg* ‘yellow’, *tarıg* ‘crop’, etc). In the name for ‘bat’ it is generally shortened to *yar-*, but disyllabic forms are recorded in Middle Turkic and survive until this day.

It seems less likely that *yar-* as an element of bat names represents a shortening of *yargak*. This was suggested in Sanglax, as referred to by Hauenschield (2003: 240) and Boeschoten (2002: 400b).<sup>23</sup>

*\*yargak* is not attested in Old Turkic either, but it is found several times in the Khotanese corpus<sup>24</sup> and survives in several modern Turkic languages.

The full form *\*yarıg* survives in the Yakut form *saru kınat* ‘bat’.<sup>25</sup>

Stachowski (1999) has proposed alternative etymologies for Yakut *saru*. He connects it to the verb *saar-* ‘to moult’, which he views as a foreign item related to the Samoyedic root *\*harV* mentioned above.

A selection of modern cognates of *\*yarıg kanat* is listed in the following table:

<sup>22</sup> It is unlikely that the element *yar* represents ‘ravine, cliff, cleft, river bank’, although it seems acceptable as a place where bats may be encountered; *yar* ‘saliva’ does not provide any semantic connection. Vámbéry (1878: 134) saw *yarkanat* as ‘shiny wing’ (‘Glanzflügel’) based on an assumed connection with *yaru-* ‘to be or become bright’, *yaruk* ‘light, brightness’. As Stachowski indicates, this suggestion can be rejected as well.

<sup>23</sup> Afghan Uzbek has a form *yarkanat* (*yargagkanat*) according to Sayed Mahmud (2012: 199b). It is unclear whether *yargagkanat* represents an ‘authentic’ form or a post-hoc etymological explanation of *yarkanat*.

<sup>24</sup> Bailey (1979) s.v. *aurmaka*, *khauska*, *pveca*, *mūşaka-*.

<sup>25</sup> Note that Stachowski (1998: 122) derives Dolgan *hiru* ‘whore’ from *\*yarıg* < *\*yar-* ‘to split’. This is the same word as Yakut *sıru* ‘(...) philanderer, adulterer, swindler’ (Pekarski 1907–1930: 2486), ‘(...) wanton, depraved’ (Slepcev 1972: 362a).

Turkmen	<i>yarga:nat</i>
Uzbek	<i>yârqanât</i> (dial.)
Kirghiz	<i>ǰarganat ~ ǰarkanat</i>
Altai	<i>d'arganat</i>
Teleut	<i>d'arganat ~ d'arkanat</i>
Kazakh	<i>ǰarganat</i>
Tatar	<i>yarkanat</i>
Bashkir	<i>yaryanat</i>
Nogay	<i>yarganat</i>
Crimean Tatar	<i>ǰaryana</i>
Khakas	<i>čarxanat</i>
Shor	<i>čaryanat</i>
Yakut	<i>saru kınat</i>

It is unclear whether *\*ya(:)rig* derives from the verb *\*ya:r-* ‘to split’. The verb does not seem to be attested in the narrow context of skinning, tanning or leatherworking, but it is conceivable that the semantic spectrum of the verb *\*ya:r-* included the removal of fur from the outside of the hide or scraping off the impurities (blood, fat, glands) from its inside, as the first step in the tanning process.<sup>26</sup> An argument against such a connection could be that the vowel length of the verb is not confirmed by the Turkmen word for ‘bat’.<sup>27</sup> Turkmen does not have long *a* in *yarı* and *yargak* either, but does have long *a:* in several of the obvious derivations of the verb *ya:r-* (*ya:rı* ‘half’, *ya:rim* ‘half’, *ya:rma* ‘groats’, *ya:rik* ‘crevice’; Baskakov et al. 1968: 819-820). *yarig* may instead derive from an unrelated verb *\*yar-*.

Alternatively, *yarig* may be a polysyllabic but – with our present knowledge – unanalyzable word like *elig* ‘hand’, *adak* ‘foot’, *yilik* ‘marrow’, etc. At any rate, the existence of a lexeme *yarig* does not depend on our ability to derive it from a shorter stem.

Aberrant forms abound. Some forms preserve the second syllable of *\*yarig* ‘membrane’ in some form, such as Bashkir dialect form *yariqanat* (Yaŋauıl and Boray districts; Xisamitdinova 2008: 203), Baraba (Siberian) Tatar *yaruqanat* (Tumaševa 1992: 71a). That this is not a recent secondary development is demonstrated by Middle Turkic *yari qanat* (Boeschoten 2022: 400b).

<sup>26</sup> DLT *yarındaq* ‘strap [sliced from a hide]’ (Clauson 1972: 971a) and Middle Turkic *yarındaq* ‘rawhide’ (Boeschoten 2022: 400b) may be a deverbal derivation, although Clauson derives it from *yarin* ‘shoulder’.

<sup>27</sup> However, Tekin et al. (1995: 680a) do have *yaargaanat*.

Shor developed a reduced form *čarnat* (recorded by Radloff 1893–1911: 1867).

Inexplicable replacement of the initial consonant took place in Kumyk *varqanat* and Khakas *parxanat*. Crimean Tatar *jarɣana* lost its final consonant.<sup>28</sup> Crimean Tatar *čangarata* (Garkavec & Useinov 2002: 229b) may be another alteration of the same etymon, but the *č*- is peculiar, giving it a spooky resemblance to Iranian terms such as Pashto *camgaal*, Punjabi *camagidaṛa* ‘bat’ related to Sanskrit *carman*- ‘skin, leather’ (Turner No. 4700 ff).<sup>29</sup>

Frembgen (2006: 243) assumes that the name *yer-qanat* (lit. ‘earth-wing’) he found in the language of the Yomut Turkmen of Iran can be explained from “the earth-like color of the wings”. However, this could also be a mere phonetic development or an attempt to make sense of an opaque word. Similar forms are found in Balkar *jerqanat* (Tenišev & Suyunčev 1989: 243b) and in Oghuz of Uzbekistan *yerqanat* (Eker 2006: 121). Another adaptation is Crimean Tatar *yelqanat* (lit. ‘wind-wing’) Garkavec & Useinov (2002: 229b).

The Bashkir dialect form *yarqanatu* (both in Yaŋaül and Boray districts; Xisamitdinova 2008: 203) and the Troki Karaim form *yäri-kanatı* are compounds with a possessive suffix on the second element<sup>30</sup>, while the suffix *+lXg* was added to the Halicz form *yarikanath*.

## 6. Other naming motives

Most other ‘bat’ terms involve the Turkic elements ‘bird’ and ‘wing’. Dialectal Turkish *derikanat*, literally ‘leather wing’ (DS 1434a), with an equivalent in ‘Middle Turkic’ *täri qanat* (*at-Tuhfa az-zakiyya*; Boeschoten 2022: 332b).<sup>31</sup>

Western Yugur (Yellow Uyghur) uses the Mongolic-Turkic compound *sarsın qanaht* as well as *sudan qanat*, whose first member

<sup>28</sup> This is reminiscent of the ‘Mongolic’ form *yalaqana* mentioned by Poppe (1925: 207), which may be the Turkic word remodeled after other animal and plant names in *+GAnA*. The resemblance to Zakataly Avar *čerxeni* ‘bat’ (in Northern Azerbaijan) is also striking but likely to be coincidental (Khalilov 3.591).

<sup>29</sup> Sattarova & Kurtseitova (2021) are of the opinion that this is a word of Greek origin.

<sup>30</sup> Note the older Western Karaim form *yari qanatı* (Németh 2021: 1032).

<sup>31</sup> Dialectal Yakut *tirii knat* is ‘flying squirrel’ (Afanas’ev, Voronkin & Alekseev 1976: 240a).

is also recorded as *sagdan*, *saldan*, *sodan*, and *sedan*. It also occurs in *sagdan teri* ‘sheepskin of which the hair has been pulled out’ (Lei 1992: 318b); it does not seem to occur independently. It is of unknown origin, but it possibly represents a distorted form of Persian *saxtiyān* ‘morocco leather’.<sup>32</sup>

Dahe dialect of Western Yugur features an alternative ‘bat’ term *guro<sup>h</sup>qpa* (Lei 1992: 159a). It is tempting to interpret this as ‘blind flyer’, but Persian *kūr* ‘blind’ (known from Turkish *kör* and also seen in the Uzbek *kor šapalak* ‘bat’) is in fact not attested in Western Yugur; the verb ‘to fly’ is historically front-vocalic *\*örü-k-* and, with the verbal noun *-mA*, should have resulted in *u<sup>h</sup>kpe*.

Turkish *etkanat*, literally ‘flesh-wing’ (Ayverdi online) has an equivalent in Chaghatay (Pavet de Courteille 1870: 94).

Turkish *gecekuşu* (~ dialectal *geceguşu*) ‘night bird’, is also found elsewhere including Kumyk *gečequš* (Bammatov 1969: 99a). Turkish dialect forms based on the same idea are *karanlıkkuşu* ‘darkness bird’, *akşam kuşu* and *akşamcık kuşu* ‘evening bird’ (DS 2651b; 162a). Kabakova (2023) quotes a Karachay-Balkar *soqur keçe çıpçıq*, literally ‘blind night sparrow’.

Dialectal Turkish *çıplak kuş* lit. ‘naked bird’ is documented once (DS 1184a). In Turkish dialects we also find *kayış kanat* ‘bat’ (DS 2701b), with Turkic *\*kadiš* ‘(leather) strap, thong’.<sup>33</sup>

Ayverdi’s Turkish dictionary (consulted online) has both *şeytan kuşu* lit. ‘devil bird’ and the fully Persian *mürg-ı İsâ* lit. ‘Jesus bird’.

As mentioned above, terms for owls can also be used for bats, as in Siberian Tatar *ögö* lit. ‘owl’, *tön yabalaq* lit. ‘night owl’ (Tumaševa 1992: 163b, 215a). Le Coq (1911: 99c) records *yûpulaq* with the meaning ‘butterfly’ and *sačqán yûpulaq* (lit. ‘mouse-owl’) for ‘bat’.

## 7. Mongolic connection?

The Turkic words for bat have been connected to Mongolic in a number of ways. These can be viewed in the framework of Altaic

<sup>32</sup> The phonetic variants are puzzling. It should be noted that Persian and Arabic words are quite rare in Western Yugur. These forms are also reminiscent of Aramaic *šltā*, *šltā<sup>2</sup>* ‘bat’ (?) (variants: *šultana*, *ašlutina*, *šulutana*, *šlutana*; see Kaufman et al., consulted 6 June 2025), Mandaic *sultana*, Akkadian *š/suttinnu* ‘bat’, but these can hardly be connected to the Western Yugur word which only means ‘hairless skin’.

<sup>33</sup> This has an equivalent in the Russian dialect of Novgorod *remenuxa* ‘bat’ related to *remen* ‘strap’ (Levickin & Myznikov 2010: 1029a).

etymology but they do not necessarily deepen our knowledge about the history of the Turkic terms.

Tekin (2013: 176) proposed a connection between the part *yar-* seen in the Turkic ‘bat’ terms and Mongolic *\*ara.sun ~ \*ari.sun* ‘skin’, inspired by the *y- ~ Ø-* alternation more typically seen in words with high vowel in the first syllable. Ünal (2023: 119) connects the Turkic words with Mongolic *\*sari.sun* ‘thin skin, membrane’.<sup>34</sup> Both of these ideas aim to achieve greater time depth in etymology but neither of them enlightens us about the internal Turkic developments of the ‘bat’ terms.

The most common Central Mongolic word for bat has itself no connection to the Turkic words under discussion, but *\*sari.sun* ‘membrane’ plays a role in many Mongolic ‘bat’ terms. LM (*sarisun*) *baybayai* ‘bat’ (Lessing 1960: 69a, 676a), Khalkha (*sar’san*) *bagvaaxay* (Hangin 1986: 43b, 442a), Ordos (*sarisū*) *bāgwaaxā* (*bagbaaxā*) (Mostaert 1968: 45a, 563a), Kalmyk *bawxā*: etc. (Ramstedt 1935: 37a), perhaps originating from an imitation of the flapping sound. It seems to contain the formans *-kAI* that is found in several animal names such as *\*gakai* ‘pig’, *\*menekei* ‘frog’, and *\*nokai* ‘dog’.<sup>35</sup> This is also used in combination with *\*herbeekei* ‘butterfly’, Buryat *har’han erbeexey* ‘bat’ (Čeremisov 1973: 679a), Bargu *xar’u: ərβaxi*: ‘bat’ (Uuda 1983: 100), Khamnigan *sarisan erbeekey* (Damdinov & Sundueva 2015: 249b). Eastern Yugur has *sarəsən xanat* ‘bat’ (Bolčuluu 1984: 99), which combines Mongolic *\*sari.sun* ‘membrane’ with Turkic *\*ka:nat* ‘wing’. Mongghul *sorosə buldu*: (Khasbaatar et al. 1985: 136) is literally ‘membrane bird’<sup>36</sup>. Dongxiang (Santa) *sarisun* ‘bat’ (Bökh 1983: 115) perhaps developed elliptically from a similar compound ‘membrane bird’.

<sup>34</sup> He thereby abandoned an earlier comparison to Khalkha *jirx*, Buryat *jerxi* (via *\*jirsge*), which typically denotes the Siberian chipmunk, but has a recorded Middle Mongolian equivalent meaning ‘bat’. For details see Tenišev (1997: 168), Ünal (2019: 561).

<sup>35</sup> *\*ga-* ‘pig’, *\*mene-* ‘frog’, and *\*no-* ‘dog’ are not attested, but in some cases, *-kAI* is added to known stems, as in *\*čarčaa-kai* ‘locust’, whose first part is related to Turkic *saričga*. A similarly-structured modern Khalkha term for bat is *sarmaaxay*, perhaps a new coinage inspired by *\*sari.sun* ‘membrane’, for which cf. also Buryat *har’may* ‘sheep’s or goat’s skin without the wool’ (Čeremisov 1973: 679b).

<sup>36</sup> The word *sorosə* as a separate word apparently only survives in Mongghul as ‘flowers of wild onion’ from the unrelated *\*sori.sun*.



At first sight, the second element of Mangghuer *ami sara* ‘bat’, *urmen sara* (Nugteren 2011: 483) is the Mongolic ‘moon’, but perhaps it here represents a reduced form of *\*sari.sun* ‘membrane’. *ami* is the Mongolic word for ‘life, soul’ (in Mangghuer ‘fate’), reflecting the association of butterflies and bats with the souls of the departed; *urmen* is ‘cream’, reminiscent of *butterfly* and Yakut *ürümäčči*, derived from the Mongolic word for ‘cream, skin on milk’ and normally used for ‘butterfly’, but used dialectally in *abaahu ürümäččitā* ‘bat’, lit. ‘evil spirit-butterfly’ (Afanas’ev, Voronkin & Alekseev 1976: 39a).

### 8. Non-Altaic Loanwords

Foreign words for ‘bat’ found in Central Asian Turkic include the Arabic *waṭwāṭ* and *xuffāš* and the Persian *šabpara(k)* in several altered forms including Modern Uyghur *šäpäräñ*. Karachay uses *bittir(koč)* of Ossetic origin, cf. (*xælyn*)*byttir* (*xælyn* = membrane; Bigulaev 2011: 381a).

In the Amdo area several Mongolic languages use Chinese or Tibetan words, such as Kangjia *ibexu* (Sečenčogt 1999: 279b) from dialectal Chinese 夜蝙蝠 *yebianfu* and Eastern Yugur (Nggar) *pəyəŋ* related to Tibetan *pha-waṅ*. Dagur *əlirdə:n* ‘bat’ (Enkhbat 1984: 24) is from the neighbouring Tungusic language Solon *əligdā*: (see Cincius II 446b).

### Closing remarks

The Old Turkic forms *yarsko* (with surviving cognates in South Siberia) and *yärskö* are variants of the same etymon and the western/Oghuz form *yarasa* seems to represent a secondary development of the same word. If *yarasa* is a development of *yarsko*, etymologies should attempt to explain both forms. The loss of postconsonantal *g/k* is seen elsewhere in native words, but here it may have occurred in a word of foreign origin.

In Turkic, polysyllabic stems are generally assumed to be segmented. Their morphological analysis involves determining the stem and derivational suffix(es). It is important that the resulting stem has a suitable meaning and that form and function of the suffixes are appropriate. Both the suffixes and the stem should be otherwise known and not be reconstructed for the occasion. Most of

the published proposals do not meet these criteria, and involve otherwise unknown stems such as *yar* ‘small animal’, and unknown suffixes such as Tekin’s *-sgu*. If we accept that the word derives from a word *yarıg* ‘hairless skin’, the suffixes remain unclear.

Phonetically, the development of *yarsko*, *yärskö* and *yarasa* exhibits numerous irregularities. Both irregular phonetic developments and morphological reanalysis may be due to folk etymology or due to a desire to adapt words that are subject to a linguistic taboo. Similar irregularities can be seen in Turkic words for ‘spider’, ‘butterfly’ and ‘fly’.

Stachowski proposed that the form *yarısa/yarasa* may be explained as a compound of two Mator (Samoyedic) words *\*ñarV* ‘leather’ + *sa* ‘wing’, which is semantically and phonetically reasonable. Unfortunately the compound is not attested in Mator itself, while *čabkəpso(n)*, a Mator word for ‘bat’ that is recorded, appears to be a loanword from Turkic. However, the main argument against the Mator etymology is the fact that *yärskö* and *yarsko* would have to be viewed either as secondary alterations of *yarısa/yarasa* or as similar-looking but unrelated lexemes. Given the borrowing scenario, it seems peculiar that *yarasa* survives in Oghuz rather than in Siberia.

*Yarsko* and *yärskö* may be different representations of the same foreign word. In *yarsko*, the vowels of the donor form may have moved the pronunciation of the *-k-* to the uvular area, whereas in *yärskö*, the *-k-* was probably perceived as palatal and fronted the vowels.

The exact shape in the donor language may have been close to *yarsko*. The Tocharian B form *arśakārśa* is not the source of the Old Uyghur word but can be considered similar enough to allow for the possibility that both forms are somehow connected, perhaps through the intermediation of a third language. The first element of the longer form *aya yärskö* recorded by Kāšgarī may be the Turkic *aya* ‘palm of the hand’, but it seems strange to prefix a loanword with an explicative Turkic attribute. Alternatively there may have been a foreign source form *ayayarsko*.

The Middle Turkic and modern *yarıg kanat* ~ *yarkanat* etc. seems to be adequately explained as ‘leather wing’, also in view of the typical naming motives of bats in other languages. It is possible, but not necessary, that *yarıg kanat* was conceived to make sense of or replace the foreign word, by using two established elements, *yarıg*

‘(thin) skin, leather’ (specifically ‘hairless skin’) and *kanat* ‘wing’. They are native Turkic words which also make semantic sense in the context. *yarig* is not attested in Old Turkic, but *yargak* (perhaps a diminutive *yarig-ak*) is found as a Turkic loanword in Khotanese, and well-attested in modern Turkic.

It remains unclear whether *yarig* derives from the well-known verb *ya(:)r-* ‘to split, sever’, from a verb *\*ya:r-* that may be the source of Yakut *saar-* ‘to moult (of birds)’, or from yet another verb; it may also be a non-derived stem.

It seems improbable and unnecessary to assume a root *\*yar-* that itself means ‘bat’ or ‘small animal’. The potential Mongolic cognates discussed in the literature are of interest on an ‘Altaic’ level, but do not seem to elucidate the internal Turkic developments of the ‘bat’ terms. The sound laws of various languages offer many opportunities for analogy and irregularities, leading to confusion between originally unrelated lexemes in Turkic and Mongolic languages. Looking at some examples from the lexical field ‘skin, leather’ we find that the Mongolic *\*ara.sun* ‘skin’ has developed a variant *\*ari.sun* ‘skin’ perhaps under the influence of *\*sari.sun* ‘thin skin’, which made *\*saari* (cf. Turkic *sagri*) ‘thick skin from the croup’ shorten its vowel in Buryat. Phonetically, Yakut *saari* should have the meaning of Turkic *\*yagri* ‘saddle-gall (skin abrasions or sores caused by faulty placement of the saddle)’ but in fact suits *\*saari* semantically, pointing at a Mongolic loanword. Kalmyk *äärsn* ‘callus’ may be a hybrid of *\*ara.sun* ‘skin’ and *\*kair.sun* ‘scales’.

Geographically and taxonomically, the extant forms are today not neatly distributed. One may summarize a likely scenario as follows: *yarsko* and *yärskö* are the original attempts to nativize a foreign word. A form *yarisa* with elided postconsonantal guttural already arose in the Old Turkic period and became the ancestor of the Oghuz *yarasa*. Front-vocalic *yärskö* did not leave any descendants, but *yarsko* survived in South Siberia in two altered forms as *\*yariskı* (as in Baraba Tatar, with added middle syllable to break up the consonant sequence and as *\*jaskı* (as in Tuva *ča”skı*, with loss of *-r-* to simplify the cluster). Both developments lost the rounding in the final vowel. *yarig kanat* lit. ‘membrane wing’ is documented from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards but perhaps arose much earlier, as it is not limited to Kipchak languages but also found in Yakut in North Siberia. It

may have coexisted with the older terms in several regions and subgroups.

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