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# A comparative onomastic analysis of Kudara (百濟) and the “Kök” Türk Empire (commonly referred to as *Tujue* 突厥 in Chinese sources): A preliminary survey of lexical parallels in Eastern Eurasian imperial nomenclature

*Kudara (百濟) ile “Kök” Türk Kağanlığı’nın (Çin Kaynaklarında Yaygın Olarak Tujue 突厥 Şeklinde Anılan) Karşılaştırmalı Adbilimsel Analizi: Doğu Avrasya İmparatorluk Adlandırmalarında Sözcüksel Paralelliklere Dair Ön İnceleme*

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This preliminary survey presents the first systematic comparative onomastic analysis of the ethnonyms Kudara (百濟, *Baekje*) and the “Kök” Türk Empire (commonly referred to as *Tujue* 突厥 in Chinese sources), two briefly contemporaneous Eastern Eurasian polities whose nomenclature remains semantically opaque despite extensive philological attention. While both empires overlapped in lasting Han and Xiongnu cultural-linguistic influence spheres, preceding both empires, no previous scholarship has examined potential structural or semantic parallels between their names. Employing a comparative philological methodology, this study analyzes sources alongside modern etymological proposals, with a particular focus on the initial morphemes. Preliminary findings suggest that both ethnonyms may share a component with a common semantic domain, implying the “greatness” concept. These parallels, while tentative given current evidential limitations, indicate that comparative onomastic approaches for Kudara and “Kök” Türk may illuminate broader patterns of political nomenclature in Eastern Eurasian state formation to address persistent lacunae in linguistics and anthropology.

Key Words: onomastics, comparative linguistics, Kudara (百濟, *Baekje*), “Kök” Türk, *Tujue* 突厥.

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故教授百濟康義先生の御霊に捧ぐ（昭和20年～平成16年）

*In humble dedication to the noble spirit of the late Professor Kudara Kōgi Sensei (1945-2004)*

## Introduction

The study of political nomenclature in ancient Eastern Eurasia presents unique challenges and opportunities for comparative linguistics. Among the numerous polities that emerged during the first millennium CE, two ethnonyms stand out for their persistent opacity despite centuries of scholarly attention: Kudara (百濟), the Japanese spelling for Empire of Baekje, and “Kök” Türk (突厥), commonly used to designate the Türk Khaganate. In the vast Inner Asian steppe, the “Kök” Türk Khaganate (c. 552–744 CE) emerged as a dominant nomadic power (Golden 2006). Founded by Bumin Qağan, the Kök Türks succeeded the Rouran Khaganate, uniting various Turkic peoples and establishing a transcontinental empire that stretched from Manchuria to the Caspian Sea. Their political and cultural influence was immense, shaping the trajectory of future Turkic states and engaging in complex diplomatic and military relations with the great sedentary powers of China, Persia, and Byzantium. The legacy of the “Kök” Türks is foundational to the identity of modern Turkic peoples and pivotal in the study of nomadic-sedentary interactions. Contemporaneously, on the Korean peninsula and in the maritime sphere of East Asia, the Empire of Baekje (백제, 百濟, c. 18 BCE–660 CE) flourished. Emerging from the Mahan confederacy in the southwestern peninsula, Baekje developed into a sophisticated and powerful state. It was a significant sea power, controlling territories that at its height included much of the western Korean peninsula. Baekje maintained exceptionally close cultural, religious, and political ties with the Yamato (オホヤマト, 大和) court of Japan, serving as a primary conduit for the transmission of continental culture, including Buddhism, writing systems, and advanced artisanship, to the Japanese archipelago (Lee & Ramsey 2011; Sakamoto et al. 1967). These two polities existed in proximate geographical spheres and their names share intriguing structural and possibly semantic features that have not been subjected to systematic comparative analysis, prompting an inquiry as Beckwith (2004) has demonstrated, the linguistic landscape of ancient Eastern Eurasia was far more interconnected than previously assumed.

While historical scholarship has extensively studied these two polities within their respective geographical and cultural spheres, little attention has been paid to potential connections between them. This paper addresses a specific, and thus far unexamined, onomastic puzzle: the striking similarity between the name “*Kök*” *Türk* (突厥), the endonym of the Turkic Khaganate, and *Kudara* (百濟), name used in Japan to refer to the Empire of Baekje. At first glance, the initial morphemes of these imperial names—*kök* and *ku*—exhibit a notable phonological resemblance and, as this study will argue, a profound semantic convergence. This paper poses the central research question: Is this parallel a mere coincidence, or does it point to a deeper, shared stratum of linguistic and ideological material used in the construction of imperial identity in early medieval Eastern Eurasia?

Hence, this preliminary survey aims to examine potential parallels between the initial morphemes of these two ethnonyms —*ku* in *Kudara* and *kök* in “*Kök*” *Türk*— with particular attention to their possible connection to concepts of “greatness” or “magnitude” across Transeurasian languages. Through careful philological analysis of primary sources and critical evaluation of existing etymological proposals, this study seeks to illuminate broader patterns of political nomenclature in ancient Eastern Eurasia.

### *Ku* of *Kudara*

The Japanese appellation *Kudara* (くだら) for the Empire of *Baekje* (百濟, 18 BCE–660 CE) has long puzzled historians and linguists. Unlike other polities known in Japanese through Sinitic *on’yomi* (音読み) readings (e.g., *Shiragi* for *Silla* 新羅), *Kudara* represents a unique *kun’yomi* (訓読み) that appears to preserve non-Chinese linguistic information about this important Empire.



Fig. 1: Material heritage of crown adornments, goat statues, magatama (勾玉), metalware, and patterns on display at Gongju National Museum (국립공주박물관), situated in once capital city of *Kudara*, and Seoul Baekje Museum (한성백제박물관). Photographed in 2024 by Mehmet Oguz Derin, CC0-1.0

License.

The earliest attestations of the polity appear in the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀, 720 CE), however without phonetic markers (Sakamoto et al. 1967). As Inoue (1988) notes, the compilers of Japan's official history had access to now-lost Baekje sources, including the “Three Books of Baekje” (百濟三書), suggesting that later recorded reading may reflect authentic Baekje self-designation or at least contemporary pronunciation. The 居陀羅 for Kudara is a typical phonetic transcription, analogous to the use of the second character 陀 (tuó) in *Shātuó* Turks (沙陀突厥), who were influential in later periods of the Great Tang Empire, where the modern Japanese syllable is likewise rendered as *da*, as in *Sada Chō* (沙陀調), a musical heritage that survives in Japan today as part of *gagaku* (雅樂) (日本国語大辞典 [Nihon Kokugo Daijiten] 2001).

The *Shōjiroku* (姓氏録, 815 CE) records numerous Kudara-derived clan names, including *Kudara no Konikishi* (百濟王), demonstrating the term's entrenchment in Japanese administrative nomenclature well after Baekje's fall. Archaeological evidence from *Kudara-gun* (百濟郡) in Osaka (Lee, 2015) further attests to the geographical distribution of this appellation (Hong 2006).



Fig. 2: Location and entrance of Kudara kurgans in Gongju city (공주 무령왕릉과 왕릉원).  
Photographed in 2024 by Mehmet Oguz Derin (CC0-1.0 License).

Three major etymological theories have emerged regarding *Ku* of Kudara:

1. The Mahan Theory: Suggests derivation from a Mahan 馬韓 place name 居陁. This theory proposes a compound of *ku* ‘great’ and ‘village/settlement’ yielding ‘great settlement’ (Ayukai, 1937).

2. The Keun Nara Theory: This theory derives *Kudara* from Korean *keun nara* (큰 나라) ‘great country’.

3. The Gudeurae Theory: This theory connects *Kudara* to *Gudeurae* (구드래), a ferry terminal near Baekje's capital Sabi, and also interprets *Ku* component as implying great or big.

There are other theories (Kim 2021) including ones linking to Buddhist terminology. However, there is a prevalence or de-facto agreement on treating Ku as a preceding element in a compound-like construction, and its meaning overall to imply concepts of big or great. This agreement suggests that the ku element in Kudara may indeed reflect an ancient morpheme meaning ‘great’ or ‘large’ preserved in the Japanese rendering of a Baekje place name.

When it comes to Chinese histories, there is no recording of Kudara with a preceding 大 *Dà* ‘big, great’ as 大百濟.

### Kök of “Kök” Türk

The ethnonym “Kök” Türk (突厥), commonly used to designate the Türk Khaganate (552–745 CE), presents a different set of philological challenges. As Tezcan (1990) has demonstrated, the popular interpretation as ‘Blue’ (and indirectly ‘East’ due to color-direction association culture within Turkic peoples) or “Celestial” Turks rests on a philological misunderstanding propagated by Willy Bang and lacks support in primary sources, which has become entrenched in both scholarly and popular discourse.

The compound *Kök Türk* appears only once in the Khaganate inscriptions, specifically in Kül Tegin East 3 and Bilge Qağan East 4: *ekin ara : idi oqsuz : kök : türk : anča : olurur ärmiš*. According to Tezcan, in this context, *kök* clearly means a ‘great’ clan or lineage rather than the previous interpretation.

Within Chinese, histories, there are multiple occasions of recording “Kök” Türk with a preceding 大 *Dà*, oftentimes signifying independence or strength within context of empires by acknowledging greatness, on multiple occasions as quoted text as 大突厥 *Dà Tūjué* in 隋書 (Suí Shū “Book of Sui” during the time of the Great Tang Empire 大唐) and 通典 (Tōng Diǎn “Comprehensive Instructions” of Dù Yòu, also during the time of the Great Tang Empire 大唐), yet it is not as frequent as only writing 突厥 *Tūjué*. This disparity in frequency reflects well within Old Turkic inscriptions, potentially supporting the “big” or “great” interpretation of *kök* as the corresponding element to the well-attested Chinese form.

## Ku and Kök in Unison

*The Oxford Guide to the Transeurasian Languages* (Robbeets & Savelyev 2020) and the groundbreaking study “Triangulation supports agricultural spread of the Transeurasian languages” (Robbeets et al. 2021) provide crucial evidence for understanding these lexical parallels. As noted in *The Oxford Handbook of Archaeology and Language* (2025), “The classification of the Transeurasian languages as a family consisting of Japonic, Koreanic, Tungusic, Mongolic, and Turkic languages is gradually gaining acceptance in linguistic literature.”

The Transeurasian etymological database (Robbeets et al. 2021, Supplementary Data File 2) lists, cognate set #32 “BIG” with the following correspondences:

Language Family	Proto-form and Meaning	Modern Reflexes
Proto-Japonic	* <i>kiki</i> - ‘to be many’	OJ <i>kokoda</i> ‘very much, plenty’
Proto-Koreanic	* <i>kiki</i> - ‘to be big’	K <i>khu</i> -, MK <i>khu</i> -
Proto-Turkic	* <i>kök</i> ‘big, healthy, thick’	Tk. <i>kök</i> , Az. <i>kök</i> , Khalaj <i>kök</i>

Following Ramsey (1993, 1997), the Korean form likely derives from \**kīhi*- < \**kiki*- through velar lenition. The sparse distribution in Turkic suggests possible borrowing, as evidenced by Khalkha Mongolian *xöx* ‘massive (of muscles, flesh etc.)’ (Robbeets & Savelyev 2020: 648).

*The Etymological Dictionary of the Altaic Languages* reconstructs Proto-Altaic \**k’òké* ‘plenty’ with systematic correspondences across all five branches:

Proto-Altaic: *k’òké*; meaning: plenty (много, множество); Proto-Tungus-Manchu: *xugdi*; Meaning: wide, capacious (1 широкий 2 емкий, вместительный); Ulchi: *xugdi* (1), Orok: *xugži* (1), Nanai: *xugži* (1, 2); Proto-Mongolian: *kog-si*-, Meaning: to become rich, wealthy (богатеть), Written Mongolian: *qoysi*- (L 952), Khalkha: *xogši*-, Buriat: *xogšol* “property”, *xogšol*- “to become rich”, Ordos: *xoysi*-, *goysi*--; Proto-Turkic: *kök*, Meaning: healthy, big, thick (здоровый, большой, толстый), Turkish (dial.): *kök*, Azerbaijani: *kök*, Khalaj: *kök*, Middle Turkic: *kök*, Proto-Japanese: *kàkà-ta*-, Meaning: plenty, much (много, множество), Old Japanese: *kokoda*, Middle Japanese: *kòkòta*, Proto-Korean: *kih*-, Meaning: big (большой), Middle Korean: *khí*-, Modern Korean: *khi*-. (Starostin et al. 2003: 832)

Vovin (2000) contests the Korean-Japanese connection, attempting to link Korean *hiki*- with Proto-Japonic \**sùkùnà*- ‘few’. However, the morphological evidence supports the traditional comparison: compounds of the type adjective+na are not attested in Old Japanese, while noun+na compounds are

regular. The semantic development of ‘plentiful’ > ‘big’ in Korean is typologically common (Starostin et al. 2003: 832).

The convergence of *ku* (in *Kudara*) and *kök* (in *Turkic*) around concepts of ‘greatness’ ‘plenty’ or ‘magnitude’ suggests several possibilities:

1. Genetic Relationship: These forms may reflect a common inherited lexeme with semantic shifts in individual branches.
2. Areal Convergence: Extended contact in the Eastern Eurasian linguistic area may have led to convergent semantic developments of originally distinct forms.
3. Wanderwort: The concept ‘great’ as applied to political entities may have spread as a prestige term across language boundaries.

### Discussion

The analysis reveals intriguing parallels between the onomastic strategies employed in the ethnonyms *Kudara* and “*Kök*” *Türk*, despite their emergence from distinct linguistic and cultural contexts. Both names appear to incorporate morphemes (*ku*, *kök*) that belong to a widespread Transeurasian lexical set associated with concepts of greatness, plenty, or magnitude. The presence of semantically related morphemes in these ethnonyms suggests that Eastern Eurasian polities may have drawn from a shared conceptual vocabulary when constructing political identities. The Japanese preservation of *Kudara* as a *kun’yomi* reading is particularly significant. The compilers’ choice to maintain this reading, despite their knowledge of Classical Chinese, indicates its established status in Japanese political discourse. Otherwise, the scarcity of contemporary native-script sources for these polities necessitates heavy reliance on Chinese transcriptions and later traditional accounts, introducing multiple layers of phonological and semantic uncertainty. The study of Japanese forms and recordings provides significant phonetic clues due to their pristine preservation through centuries. The name *Türk* (突厥) has been recorded in Japanese histories, offering valuable insights into diachronical pronunciation. In a preserved later copy of the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀) with *kunten* (訓点), the reading of genitive form for *Türk* (突厥) appears as トツケツノ, where the noun can be approximated to *jōdai* (上代) reading とつくゑつ (*totsukuwetsu*):

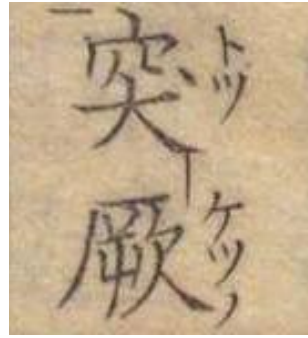


Fig. 3: Attestation of Türk in Nihon Shoki (日本書紀 卷 27-28, first page of the text). Retrieved in August 2025 from Digital Archive of National Archives of Japan with CC0-1.0 license at [www.digital.archives.go.jp/file/1257501.html](http://www.digital.archives.go.jp/file/1257501.html)

### Limitations

As a preliminary survey, this study has certain limitations. Certain etymologies rest on the contested theory of a Puyo-Koguryoic presence in Baekje, a hypothesis that is not universally accepted. The linguistic material from Baekje remains exceptionally sparse, making any conclusion tentative. Likewise, while the ‘celestial/great’ interpretation of *Kök* is prevalent, the meaning is not definitively settled. These limitations, however, point toward clear avenues for future research. First, a broader, systematic search should be conducted for other similarly prefixed polity names in related language families, such as Mongolic and Tungusic, as well as in the records of other regional peoples like the Khitan and Rouran. The discovery of further examples would substantially strengthen the hypothesis of a widespread onomastic template, and might provide further insights. As an example, 匈奴 *Xiōngnú*, which predates both *Kudara* and “*Kök*” *Türk*, had a title 單于 *Chányú*, assumed to be precedent of *Tarqan* in Turkic and *Darga* in Mongolic, and can be reconstructed as *dar-ŋʷa* (Baxter–Sagart 2014) which has a particularly low edit distance with *Dara* of *Kudara*. Second, a more detailed phonological investigation is needed to assess the plausibility of a regular sound correspondence between the Baekje/Goguryeic vowel \*/u/~\*/i/ and the Old Turkic front rounded vowels \*/ö/~\*/ü/. This would require a larger set of potential cognates from the Puyo-Koguryoic data. Third, archaeological research could explore potential correlations in the material culture of power. A comparative study of royal regalia, tomb construction, and cosmological symbols between the *Baekje* and “*Kök*” *Türk* spheres of influence might reveal shared concepts of sovereignty.



## Conclusion

This preliminary comparative analysis of *Kudara* and “*Kök*” *Türk* has revealed suggestive parallels in their onomastic structures, particularly in the use of morphemes (*ku-*, *kök*) associated with concepts of ‘greatness’ or ‘magnitude’ across Transeurasian languages. It has argued that despite the vast geographical distance and distinct cultural contexts separating the two polities, their names exhibit a compelling structural and semantic parallel. The evidence, though fragmentary, suggests that both names were constructed by prefixing a morpheme signifying ‘greatness’, ‘centrality’, or ‘divinity’— *Ku-* in the case of Baekje and *Kök* in the case of the *Türks*. The core finding is that these two powerful, briefly contemporaneous empires appear to have employed an identical ideological template for the fundamental political act of naming themselves. This parallel is unlikely to be coincidental. While definitive conclusions await further research, several key findings emerge:

1. Both ethnonyms appear to incorporate elements from a widespread Eastern Eurasian lexical set related to size, plenty, or importance, suggesting shared onomastic strategies in political nomenclature.
2. The preservation of these terms in Japanese sources (*Kudara* as *kun’yomi*, *Türk* in phonetic transcription) provides valuable evidence for their historical pronunciation and semantic associations.
3. The Transeurasian framework offers new possibilities for understanding these parallels, though distinguishing genetic relationship from areal convergence remains challenging.

Future research should expand this preliminary survey to include other Eastern Eurasian ethnonyms. Systematic comparison of onomastic strategies across the region may reveal whether the patterns identified here represent broader tendencies in how ancient Eastern Eurasian polities conceptualized and projected political power through nomenclature.

The intersection of historical linguistics, philology, and political history demonstrated in this study underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding ancient Eastern Eurasia. Whether it is the product of a shared linguistic inheritance from a deep Proto-Transeurasian stratum or

the result of intense cultural contact and the borrowing from each other or an earlier entity such, it points to a deeply interconnected political and ideological world in early Eastern Eurasia. While the conclusions must remain preliminary pending further evidence, this onomastic parallel opens a new and promising line of inquiry. It encourages a shift in focus within Transeurasian studies, from relying solely on broad lexical comparisons to including targeted analyses of socio-linguistically salient domains. By examining how the peoples of ancient Eastern Eurasia named their worlds and their power, we may gain a more nuanced understanding of their shared history.

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