

THE WORDS OF ANCESTORS

ALTAY AMANJOLOV*

The history of the emergence of alphabetic writing, and the origin of its appearance, is both very complex and full of unresolved riddles. Even so, alphabetic writing —as the very great success achieved by world culture, and adding to this cultural legacy our ancestors own share— is the inheritance left to the coming generations. One branch of the first letter writing is found to be the ancient Turkic runic alphabet. The monuments written with this alphabet are the indications of the high language culture and level of knowledge of the ancient Turkic people, and are worth mentioning more fully.

The territories where these monuments are presently known are: the Yenisei and Lena river valleys in Siberia, and the river basins of the Orkhon, Ongin, and Selenga in Mongolia. The fact of their existence in Central Asia and Kazakhstan along the Talas and the Syr, and in the canyons of the Irtish and Ili rivers, is becoming more and more evident. Scientists called the script of these inscriptions “Orkhon-Yenisei script” by the names of the rivers where they were first found. Or, because from the point of view of external appearance they were somewhat similar to the runes of Scandinavia, and comparing them to their “secret” signatures, they called them “runic”.

Below we offer for your view the material of Doctor of philological science, professor Altai Amanzholov who is carrying out research in the area of this issue, in connection with the first reading of the Orkhon-Yenisei script ninety years ago, concerning questions of the reading public, related to this matter.

Along with the many different conjectures proposed by those pursuing the solution to the mystery of the Orkhon-Yenisei script, the actual key to resolving it became known just 90 years ago, that is, at the end of the year 1893. The one who made the new discovery, who correctly classi-

* Professor, Turcologist, Alma Ata, Kazakhstan. This article was published in the journal *Bilim Jâne Engbek* published in Alma Ata in 1982.

fied the sound values of the Orkhon-Yenisei symbols, was the Danish scholar, professor Wilhelm Tomsen.

W. Tomsen dispatched his materials and his hypothesis about this script by means of a letter to the noted Turcologist V.V. Radloff. The experienced master of Turkic languages, Academician V.V. Radloff carefully weighed the previous researches and the thoughts of his contemporary scholars, and, as the result of a long search, in January 1894 made his first translation of the runic writing found on the monument to Kultegin which was written in the ancient Turkic language. Thus, it was known that one of the monuments found by Russian researcher N.M. Iudrintsev along the Orkhon river in 1889 was placed for Bilge Qaghan (735 a.d.), and the second for Kultegin (732 a.d.), and their contents were made completely clear. This news, when it was revealed to the field of science defined the historical comparative direction of linguistics, and became a lasting guide post in the realization of the science of Turcology. Beginning there, the basis of the science of Turcology was established, and a new stage in its dissemination began.

The fact has also become quite evident that the runic writings found in the ancient Turkic language were written not only by means of chiseling into stones, but also were engraved into household goods and various other manufactured articles. Several runic writings which were displayed on vessels, dishes, and pots made from clay were found in Ferghana and by the mouth of the Don River. During the excavation of old grave barrows in Altai and Khakasia the archeologists were witnesses to the runic writing engraved into Large gold and silver dishes, pitchers, small bow, and even into one silver belt buckle. While we say that the archeological expeditions which were organized at the beginning of the Twentieth century brought to light widespread samples of runic writing from East Turkistan written on paper in the 8th and 9th centuries, a sample of it was found in the Talas river basin in the southern environs of Alatau which was carved into a small wooden stick.

In the composition of the ancient Turkic runic alphabet there are 35 letters. In addition to these, four special written signs (*lt*, *nt*, *nch*, *rt*) were made use of to give some voiceless combinations. The script is read from right to left. This alphabet is found in the graphical system in which it was consolidated, and corresponds fundamentally to the phonetic system of the ancient Turkic language. Eight voiced phonemes (*a*, *e*, *ı* with *i*, *o*,

u, ö and ü)¹ with just four polyphonic letters, sixteen voiceless phonemes (and phoneme variants) were represented with 31 letters. Eleven voiceless phonemes (*b, d, g, k, l, n, r, s, t, y, ok/ök*)² are distinguished along with the symbols of their thick and thin (back and front) variants. But sometimes the thin (front) letter is used in place of the thick (back) letter. Beyond these, five phonemes (*¹q, iç, ç, m, n̄, ŷ, ş, z*)³ are denoted with just five signs.

The origin of the runic alphabet, which was the first alphabetic writing of the Turkic speaking peoples, is a riddle which will remain unresolved until a day yet to come. Professor W. Tomsen who found the key to this writing suggested a hypothesis which says that the ancient Turkic alphabet emerged from the influence of Aramaic (Perso-Aramaic and Aramaic-Sogdian) lettered script. A few of the Turcologists support this opinion. But a second group of scholars (V. Aristov, A.T. Emre, I. A. Batmanov) supposed that it was created independently without any influence of foreign alphabets at all, that the subsequent script was born from Turkic brand signs. Only just in the most recent times are we encountering unexpectedly facts which supplement the opinion of U. Klaproth half a century ago which states that the runic alphabet is based on ancient Greek (and Phoenician) writing. The result of our search in this field has been published.

Investigating all of this we lean heavily on the following questions: "At which time did the ancient Turkic script appear?, and, "What is the length of the life of the tradition of this writing?" In reality, is the hypothesis, which was current up until the latest times and which states that the appearance of the Turkic alphabet came in the Vth century, correct? The written evidence found in the last twenty years is able to give a complete answer.

¹ The items *e, i, u, ö and ü* within these parentheses were lacunas in the copy of the English text given to us; they have been filled in conformity with the Turkish translation of Mr. Mehmet Ölmez.

² The items *b, d, g, k, l, n, r, s, t, y, ok, ök* within these parantheses were lacunas in the copy of the English text given to us; they have been filled in conformity with the Turkish translation of Mr. Mehmet Ölmez.

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F.K. Arslanova, one of the archeologists who decided to make public the mystery of the ancient barrows on the left bank of the Irtysh river, began the work of digging in 1960. While researching all of the marks and signs of the barrow near the village of Bobrovoye of the Pavlodar oblast', which all of the archeologists had been talking about, she attributed the grave to the fifth to Fourth centuries (previous to our era), to the Saka period. Various manufactured items which have the mystery of the age folded inside such as the remains of a hero and his steed, his armaments, and a bone amulet which was attached to the bridle strap, were found at this site. The bone amulet was carved in the shape of a deer (Maral). This we read from right to left :”

— “White Maral”.

The runic writing on the amulet shows the fact that it was the script of the distant ancestors of the early Turkic speaking peoples, the alphabetic script of the Sakas. This script proves the apparent incorrectness of the previous conjecture to the effect that the runic script only appeared in the Fifth century in South Siberia and Kazakhstan and demonstrates that alphabetic writing had been in use one thousand years before that. In 1970 a large barrow, put down in the Saka period (in the Vth-IVth centuries before our era), was dug up near the city of Esik at the foot of the mountains in the environs of the Ili river. The one who led the excavation work was K.A. Aghyshev. Inside the tomb were found the remains of a warrior clothed in gold, a helmet, a gold dagger and scimitar, various dishes, and a small silver bowl having cryptic writing resembling runes.

The 26 rune-like symbols engraved on the outside of the small silver bowl had been written in two ways. These signs on the silver bowl, first, are like the ancient Turkic runic signs, and second, correspond to the alphabetic signs of the Mediterranean Sea region (especially to the ancient Greek and Aramaic letters). With that, in the ancient Turkic language we read this writing from right to left like so:

Aga, sana ocuq! Bez cök! Buqun icrä azuq i.

The translation of this is:

“Brother, may you have a hearth! May the foreigner submit! Among the people may provisions be abundant!”

While this ancient Turkic writing of the Saka period first expresses the belief that when a man goes out into the world and lives, he needs provisions; secondly it shows the resolution of the people to be victorious over enemies; and third expresses the wish of the people who strived for prosperity and well-being.

The great value of this writing is that it once again concretely proves that the language of the Saka peoples, who settled in the territory of Kazakhstan in early times, was the ancient Turkic language. Furthermore, it makes clear the baselessness of the traditional opinion that among the first nomads in the land of Kazakhstan there was no form of writing, and it testifies to the fact that Turkic speaking peoples of 2,500 years ago knew alphabetic writing and made use of it widely.

In conclusion, of the fact that ancient Turkic runic script was the descendent writing of our distant forefathers, and was used through 1,500 years there is no doubt. The facts now in our hands are able to classify such a lifespan of this alphabet (from the middle of the first millennium before our era until the end of the first millennium of our era), and are able to fully satisfy us. With this, we came to the conclusion that in the early age in the land of South Siberia and Zhetisu, that is, the middle period of the first millennium B.C.E., the ancient Turkic alphabet was consolidated. Not just taking into account the new archeological facts, the results of paleographical analysis also proves this. It causes us to observe the fact that this ancient alphabet is genetically related to the first alphabets of the Mediterranean Sea region. Thus, we fully observe the fact that it is closely related originally to the local types of the ancient Greek alphabet, and secondly with the Phoenician and its sequel the early Aramaic alphabet, and furthermore with the ancient alphabets of Arabia. (More indepth information has been given about this in the journal "Voprosy Iazykoznaniiia" 1978, 2).

The origin of the appearance of ancient Turkic runic signs is rooted with the history of the appearance of other ancient alphabets. The ultimate basis of this source of the runic writing is possibly that of unknown ideographic or alphabetic writing in the III-II millennia before our era, but the resemblances specifically with other ancient alphabets show that their distant origin was the same, what is more the problem of the emergence of the ancient Turkic alphabet most likely is unified with the problem of the original emergence of general alphabetic writing.

Enticing so many scholars, the still great pertinence of this valuable heritage with its inherent mysteries is indisputable. We know that the ancient Turkic runic writing, unified with world culture, is a remarkable and valuable treasury whose roots lie deep.