

# Altaic Religious Beliefs and Practices

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Edited by  
Géza Bethlenfalvy  
Ágnes Birtalan  
Alice Sárközi  
Judit Vinkovics



Research Group for Altaic Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences  
Department of Inner Asiatic Studies, Eötvös Loránd University

SOME GRAPHOTACTICAL CORRESPONDENCES OF THE SZÉKELY  
AND  
EASTERN TURKIC RUNIC SCRIPTS

Klára SÁNDOR (Szeged)

In spite of all the remarkable attempts of several scholars, the systems of the runic inscriptions found in Eastern Europe are still undeciphered. Among them, there is only one system we know satisfactorily because its usage survived – even if in a deformed way – until our time. This is the script called *Hungarian* and also *Székely* (in German *Sekler*) *runic script*.

This script has been referred to from the 13th century in various Hungarian chronicles as a way of writing carved in wood and used especially by the Hungarian speaking Székelys in Transylvania. Relatively few monuments of this script survived from the time before the 17th century, the oldest of them dates from the middle of the 15th century. Most of the early relics originate from Transylvania, at least in such a way that their authors were certainly of Székely origin. This fact and the records in the chronicles make one believe that this carved script was known only among the Székelys who are a part of the Hungarian ethnicity but their culture in several aspects is different from that of the other groups of Hungarian people. The monuments of this script had been written without exception in Hungarian.

Most of the early relics are inscriptions in churches usually indicating the names of the masters who had rebuilt the churches. The longest monument of the Székely runic script is a calendar from the end of the 15th century.

This type of runic script spread in a wide range from Transylvania from the beginning of the 17th century, after the book *The elements of the old language of the Huns* by Joannis Telegdi had been published. It was meant to be a "schoolbook" to make the Székely runic script well-known and popular. This date coincides with the disappearance of the traditional usage of the script. From that time on the Székely runic script survived just as a curiosity, e.g. as a system of cryptography. Cf. Table No.1.

According to the widely held view of the 19th and the previous centuries, the Székelys were the descendants of the Huns and they had inherited their script from them. As compared to these early scholarly views, it was a major step forward that, in a lecture, Géza Nagy related the Székely script with the Orkhon and Yenisei systems. It happened in 1890, at the time when the Eastern Turkic runic script was still undeciphered. After the deciphering, Nagy published a paper on the origin of the Székely script in which he tried to derive 17 of its letters from the Turkic runic script (1895). Julius Németh, turning against the contemporary unscholarly ideas which flourished in Hungary in the first decades of this century, renewed and developed the theory of Géza Nagy. Németh accepted the relating only of 13 letters (1917-20), later he added 3 more (1972). Louis Ligeti did not discuss the opinions of Nagy and Németh, he just added one new derivation to the previous ones. He suggested, that the letter of the closed *e* phoneme originates from the Yenisei system (1925).

The derivations of the Székely letters marked in Table 1, apart from a few exceptions, are problematic, even if they are not impossible. Examining the relationship of the two systems of runic script, however, one has to acknowledge that in the

past few decades so far unknown systems of script have been discovered in Eastern Europe and these make it most probable that the Székely and Eastern Turkic runic scripts are not immediate relatives. The "missing links" between them will likely be found among these Eastern European systems. If we disregard this possibility, it will be difficult to decide about the time and place of borrowing. Before comparing the letter-stocks of the two scripts, we must clarify the inherent history of the two alphabets because the systems of graphemes had changed in each before gaining their presently known forms. It is a well-known fact that the Székely script has elements of Glagolic and ultimately Greek origin (Hódoly 1884; Németh 1917-20, 1934; Melich 1925; Király 1971a, 1971b), cf. **Table No. 2**. Besides, there are characters which were designed from other existing characters in order to signify special Hungarian phonemes. Some examples of them can be seen in **Table No. 3**. The present system cannot be younger than the end of the 13th century, by which time the system of Hungarian phonemes fully developed, and this is mirrored in the Hungarian runic script.

Beyond the few certainly identical characters there are several graphotactical correspondences between the two systems. A very few of these were already mentioned by scholars but almost everybody puts the stress on character correspondences. To me it seems more profitable to pay attention to the correlations of the whole systems which appear to be less of a coincidence.

The graphotactical characteristics of the Eastern Turkic script are well-known (see e.g. Tekin 1968, Hovdhaugen 1974, Kononov 1980, Vasil'ev 1983, Róna-Tas 1990), consequently I try to concentrate on the Székely script. There are some obvious similarities between the two systems, such as that both are carved scripts and run from right to left. A more specific feature is the way of word boundary indication which is done in both systems with separating dots.

Other similarities can be found between the regularities of the plene writing of vowels. In the surviving Székely monuments we do not find any coherent law. We can, however, deduce a rule, based mainly on the mentioned long, 15th century runic calendar. This rule is the following (cf. **Table No. 4**): In the earliest period only long vowels and vowels in final position were marked, later the short labials too, except the <o>; when already the short <o>s and <i>s were written plene, the short <a>s and <e>s were still unmarked. It was the <e> that longest remained unmarked due to the fact that only the *e* can be anaptyctic vowel in the Székely script and from after the 17th century it was thought to be part of the character, as an inherent *e*.

Another common feature is that neither system duplicates the consonant characters in the case of geminate consonants.

As we know from the alphabet fragment written in Manichaean and runic letters (Le Coq 1972, 532-537, XVII), a characteristics of Eastern Turkic runic script was that in spelling the anaptyctic vowel had always to be read before the consonant. The Székely system had the same feature, and it used with only one exception *e* vowels because – in opposition to the Turkic script – there was no back-front opposition among the consonant graphemes in it. The lack of this opposition can be explained

by the thesis, according to which this feature of the Turkic script does not belong to the most ancient layer of the system (Róna-Tas 1987).

Actually, there is one element of the Hungarian alphabet, which, according to some scholars, suggests that once the Székely script also had back and front paradigms of graphemes (e.g. Németh 1934, 28; 1917-20, 26). Beside the letter <k> read with the anaptyctic *e* and used for /k/ phoneme in all positions existed an other letter which signified in all monuments only the phonemes sequence /ak/, that is a *k*, but it never stood for "generally back vocalic *k*". This shows that the anaptyctic *a* vowel very early became an inherent part of the letter. The letter <ak> appears indeed the remnant of a back-front grapheme opposition, mirroring a palatal-velar phoneme opposition. This opposition ceased to exist because there was no other opposition of this kind in the system. The phoneme and grapheme opposition in the case of back-front *k* is well known in the Aramaic writing – which is thought to be the ultimate ancestor of the Székely script. As in the Székely writing there is no other argument for the back-front grapheme opposition but the *k*-opposition, I do not think that the claim that a system of front-back letters existed, is well enough founded.

There are two letters in the Székely script which mark consonant-combinations (they can be seen in Table No. 5), but the relation of these to the similar combinations of the Eastern Turkic script – if there is at all any connection. – is unclear. As for the form of characters and the exact phonemic value, the Székely characters cannot be derived from the Turkic letters.

The Székely script has one characteristic feature which is alien to the Turkic scripts: this is the frequent tying of letters (ligatures), but this feature is undoubtedly a later development. Ligatures originally were the inventions of the individual scribes, as it can be seen from the fact that there are ligatures in every Székely alphabet-monument but they are never the same. It means that only the rule of ligature making was inherent in the Székely script, the actual ligatures not. When creating a ligature one could use all the lines of the preceding character which made possible the recognition of the next letter: not only fully identical lines were interchangeable, as it is obvious from the handout, Table No. 6.

To sum up, the analysis of the graphotactics show that the Székely runic script cannot be directly derived from the Eastern Turkic script because of historical reasons as well as because of the history of the writing. On the other hand, because of the identical characters (<n>, <s>, <š>, closed <ë>) and the graphotactical similarities we can presume that both systems go back to a common ancestor. It is unlikely that any of the two directly developed from this common original script, the "missing links" should be looked for among the runic scripts recently found in Eastern Europe, especially the ones found in the Carpathian Basin.

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TABLE I

	Alphabets			Related by	
	Székely	Orkhon	Yenisei	G. Nagy	Németh
a	4	⌒	⌒		
b	X	∂;∂	∂;∂	• (b <sup>2</sup> )	• (b <sup>2</sup> )
c	↑	-	-		
č	H	λ	λ		
d	†	⊗;X	⊗;X	• < r <sup>1</sup>	• (d <sup>2</sup> )
d'	†	-	-		
ä	⌒	⌒	⌒		
e	⊗, I	-	⊗		•
f	⊙	-	-		
g	Λ	γ;ϕ	γ;ϕ	• < k <sup>2</sup>	• (g <sup>2</sup> )
h	⊗, I	-	-		
i	1	†	†	•	•
y	1, †	D;9	D;9	• (y <sup>2</sup> )	• < i
k	◊	7;4;8	7;8;4;8	• < ik	• < ik
nk	⌒	H	H	• (k <sup>1</sup> )	• (k <sup>1</sup> )
l	Λ	∂;Y	∂;Y		
l'	⊙	-	-		
m	⊗	⊗	⊗		
n	)	) ; H	) ; H	• (n <sup>1</sup> )	• (n <sup>1</sup> )

	Alphabets			Related by	
	Székely	Orkhon	Yenisei	G. Nagy	Németh
n'	⊙	⊗	-		
ŋ	-	γ	γ		
o	⊙	>	>	•	
ó	⊗	γ	γ		
p	1	1	1	•	•
r	H, √	γ;γ	γ;γ	• (r <sup>1</sup> )	• (r <sup>1</sup> )
s	1	γ;1	γ;1	• (s <sup>2</sup> )	• (s <sup>2</sup> )
š	Λ	γ;-	γ;Λ	• < š	• (š <sup>2</sup> )
t	γ	∂;h	∂;h	• (t <sup>2</sup> )	
t'	⊗, ⊗	-	-	• < d <sup>2</sup>	
u	⊗	>	>		
ü	⌒	γ	γ	•	•
v	M	-	-		
z	⊗	4	4		
ž	γ	-	-	• < ž	• < ž <sup>1</sup>
ll	-	M	-		
mb	⊗	-	-		• < Yen. ⊗ < m >
nč	-	3	3		
nt	†	⊙	⊙		

TABLE II

Székely letters of Glagolic origin

	Székely	Glagolic
a	4	† < a
e	z	3
o	o	9
r	θ	φ
h	℥	Ƴ < x
l	Λ	ℒ < λ

TABLE V

Letters for consonant combinations

	Székely	IL Turkic
ll	.	M
mb	ℒ	.
nč	.	z
nt	5	⊙

TABLE III

Letters designed from an already existed character

† < d' >	<	† < d >
D < n' >	<	) < n >
† < y >	<	1 < i >

TABLE IV

Vowels written plene

1. long vowels and the ones in final position
2. (1+) ä, ü, u
3. (2+) a, i
4. (3+) a
5. every vowel

TABLE VI

Examples of tying letters (ligatures)

	ligature	components
/nc/	5	† + )
/u/	∧	γ + Λ
/oo/	℥	o + x
/u/	ℒ	4 + Λ

TABLE VII

The corresponding graphotactical features of the Székely and Eastern Turkic runic script

1. the type of writing (carved)
2. the way of writing (right to left)
3. similarities in plene writing of vowels
4. no letter duplication in signifying of geminates
5. in the names of consonants, the anaptyctic vowels are prefixed to the letters, when read