

## A RUNIC INSCRIPTION IN THE KUJBYŠEV REGION

BY

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In a short paper published 1927 in Hungarian in the journal *Magyar Nyelv*<sup>1</sup> Professor Ligeti called the attention to the work of Fakhru'd-Dīn Mubārakh Shāh written about A.D. 1206 where besides reporting on the Sogdian and East Turkish runic script the author also refers to the script of the Khazars. Unfortunately the late copyist of this work left out the Khazar letters and so all that we know is that it was different from that of the Eastern Turks. Allegedly it originated from the Rus and ran from the left to right. This led Sir Denison Ross to the tentative conclusion that we might have to do here with the Cyrillic script. However the presence of two kinds of *k*, the interdental spirant *ç* (beside the normal stop *d*) raised some doubts about this hypothesis. In any case Professor Ligeti recognized that we are here confronted with a possible link between the East Turkish and the Hungarian runic scripts.

Since 1927 a few runic inscriptions have been found in the territory of the former Khazar Khaganate, with letters different from the Orkhon-type.

Professor Németh in his last paper on the runiform script<sup>2</sup> of Eastern Europe pointed out that the territory from which runic inscriptions are known in East Europe seems to be expanding. The easternmost find is the wooden stick of Talas<sup>3</sup> having different letters from the other Talas inscriptions. The southernmost occurrence of this script is known from Khumara<sup>4</sup> near the Elbrus Mountain. The westernmost territory is Hungary where as many as

<sup>1</sup> *A kazár írás és a magyar rovásírás* [The Khazar Script and the Hungarian Runiform Script]: *MNy* XXIII (1927), pp. 473—476.

<sup>2</sup> *The Runiform Inscriptions from Nagy-Szent-Miklós and the Runiform Scripts of Eastern Europe*: *Acta Linguist. Hung.* XXI (1971), pp. 1—52.

<sup>3</sup> See S. E. Malov, *Pamjatniki drevnetjurkskoj pismennosti Mongolii i Kirgizii*, M.-L. 1959, pp. 63—68 with an excellent photo: Fig. 14.

<sup>4</sup> A. M. Ščerbak, *Les inscriptions inconnues sur les pierres de Khoumar (au Caucase du Nord) et le problème de l'alphabet runique des turcs occidentaux*: *Acta Orient. Hung.* XV (1962), pp. 283—290.

three different types of runic letters have been found, the runiform signs on Avar objects,<sup>5</sup> the treasure of Nagy Szent Miklós<sup>6</sup> and the runiform script of the Hungarian Seklers.<sup>7</sup> On the shores of the Black sea the inscriptions of Mutaflar (Roumania) offer new material. The northernmost line of the finds has hitherto been marked by the inscriptions of Sharkel, Novočerškask<sup>8</sup> and Elista.<sup>9</sup> It would be of great importance if the frontiers of this territory could be pushed out still further.

During my last visit to Cheboksary in 1973 I collected Volga Bulgarian inscriptions. Many of my Chuvash colleagues and friends gave me valuable information about inscriptions known to them. Among these there was one which was not Volga Bulgarian or Kazan Tatar in Arabic script. G. F. Yumart (Trofimov), a member of the Chuvash Scientific Institute, handed over to me a record of an inscription of Boljšoe Mikuškino. I quote his record *verbatim* in English translation:

«The stone of Mikuškino»

In the neighbourhood of the village Boljšoe Mikuškino (Isaklinskij rayon, Kujbyševskij oblastj, former Buguruslanskij uezd, Province of Samara) on a mountain called *Kartlā tu* there was a big stone with inscription. It had the following form:



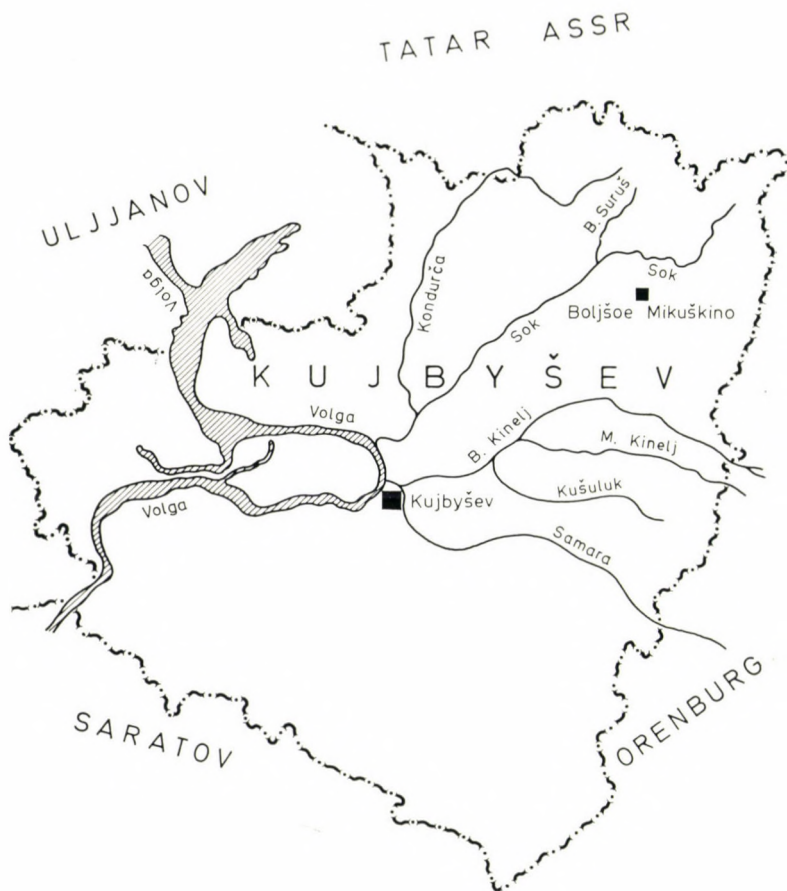
<sup>5</sup> I. Vásáry, *Runiform Signs on Objects of the Avar Period (6th—8th cc. A. D.)*: *Acta Orient. Hung.* XXV (1972), pp. 335—347. I quote here Vásáry: «The runiform script of Turkish origin could have been known only in a very narrow circle of the Avar society . . . What seems to be strange is that certain letters of the Avar script display a resemblance to the western runiform alphabets of Turkish origin (Khazar and Székely-Hungarian script). And that is all we can say about them.» (p. 344).

<sup>6</sup> See the paper of Németh cited above with further bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> For more details see the paper of Németh cited and a paper of I. Vásáry published in Hungarian in the journal *Keletkutatás* 1974 [1975], pp. 159—172.








<sup>8</sup> M. I. Artamonov, *Nadpisi na baklažkach novočerškasskogo muzeja i na kamnjach Majackogo gorodišča*: *SovArch* XIX (1954), pp. 263—268. A. M. Ščerbak, *Neskoljko slov o priemach čtenija runičeskich nadpisej, najdennych na Donu*: *SovArch* XIX (1954), pp. 269—282. G. F. Turčaninov, *O jazyke nadpisej na kamnjach majackogo gorodišča i flagach Novočerškasskogo muzeja*: *SovArch* 1964: 1, pp. 72—87. A. M. Ščerbak, *Znaki na keramike i kirpičach iz Sarkela-Beloj Veži (K voprosu o jazyke i pisjmennosti pečenegov)*: *MIA* No. 75 1960, pp. 386—388, A. M. Ščerbak, *Znaki na keramike iz Sarkela: Ėp. Vost.* XII (1958), pp. 52—58.

<sup>9</sup> The text written on a bull's skull has not yet been published. S. G. Klaštornyj and I. Vásáry are working on its publication.



Its height above the earth was cca 1.5 m, its length about 4–5 meters and its breadth no less than 3 meters. According to the remembrances of Anna Ignatjevna Mikeeva (born 1911) they danced roundelays (on the stone) and sung songs. The letters had a breadth about one *arshin*. How many letters there were we do not remember. But they say that there were two lines. There were also dots into which one could place a fist. The stone lay in the earth. After the Great Patriotic War [World War II] they split the stone into parts and with the help of a tractor the stone [in parts] was dragged to the building constructions of the farm. Above, on the borders there were small carvings spaced tightly. According to A. I. Mikeeva no legends were connected with the stone. The village is Chuvash, it seems that [the settlement] occurred in the beginnings of the 18th century. Now there are about 1.000 yards [i.e. houses]. The mountain is about two kilometres away on the SW side of the village. According to Mikeeva there were [also] letters like ☉ and ✱. In both lines there were about 5–6 letters».

Since according to the record the stone was destroyed and it is unlikely that we shall ever get a better description of it, I considered it worth for publication.

We have enough experience with inscriptions copied by hand to know that such copies made by people not knowing the script are in most cases unreliable.<sup>10</sup> It is also a risky task to try to decipher so short an inscription, or rather fragment. In any case we have seven letters: 1.  2.  3.  4.  5.  6.  7. . It cannot be a mere chance that all of them are similar to signs found on the flask-inscriptions of Novočerkask. The fact that there were 5–6 letters in either line seems to exclude the possibility that we have to do with simple tamgas.<sup>11</sup> The slight differences between the letters of Mikuškino and those of Novočerkask seem also to exclude the probability that we have to do here with a late falsification. Some other facts also speak against it.

The village is situated not very far from the river Suk, an affluent of the Kundurča, about 180 kms NE from Kujbyšev. The river Suk is mentioned already by Ibn Fadlan who crossed it on his way to the Volga Bulgars.<sup>12</sup> According to Ibn Fadlan this territory was then inhabited by the Bashkirs. If the Mikuškino inscription was a runic one, it had not been written necessarily before the introduction of Islam into this region, i.e. the early 10th century. The case of the Hungarian runiform script shows that in spite of Christianity and the domination of the Latin alphabet, an earlier script could survive and be preserved for long a time in remote areas. But even in the case of a relatively late date of the inscription itself it has to be connected with the pre-Islamic period and if not itself prior to the 10th century, it was a continuation of a pre-10th century tradition.

G. F. Yumart is certainly right when he points out that the Chuvash inhabitants of the village Boljšoe Mikuškino are settlers of the 18th century.

<sup>10</sup> This is the case with most of the Volga Bulgarian inscriptions. In the Archives of the Institut Vostokovedenija, Leningrad, I found a copy of a Volga Bulgarian inscription made by somebody who did not know Arabic script. The copy is practically illegible, though beautifully drawn. As is known both the Finnish and the Russian expeditions were sent to the Orkhon inscriptions because the first copies made by Jadrincev were unreliable.

<sup>11</sup> When we have one or two signs on an object, we have always to bear in mind that they can be tamgas. V. F. Kachovskij has collected a series of Chuvash runiform-like tamgas (unfortunately without giving his sources or a more detailed study): *O runičeskoj pisjmnosti drevnyh čuvašej: 100 let novoj čuvašskoj pisjmnosti*, Čeboksary 1972, pp. 23–34.

<sup>12</sup> In the text we find *Sūh* which is the regular Volga Bulgarian form and not Bashkir.

This is backed by facts known from historical sources and the dialect of the village.<sup>13</sup> Therefore we cannot speak about the continuity of the inhabitants in this region.

In this connection the name of the mountain is of special importance. *Kartlä tu* is a purely Chuvash composition. *Kart* means in Chuvash «zarubka, narez, metka; notch, cut, mark» and pertains to the verb *kart-* «to cut notch, to gash» < PT *kärt-*. The composition *kart patakki* is now the term for the notched tally stick. If the Chuvash had a runiform script it is very likely that they used the term *kart-* «to incise runic letters», but this has been forgotten with the disappearance of the script. The new Chuvash settlers coming to Boljšoe Mikuškino named the mountain after the «incised stone» dominating the landscape whether they had or had not any idea about the fact that this was an «inscribed» stone. The name of the mountain shows clearly that the stone is earlier than the 18th century and thus we can discount falsification with great probability. If so, we are confronted with the northernmost runic inscription pertaining to the Khazar group of the East European runiform scripts. The geographical distribution of these inscriptions will help us to connect them with the people who used them.

<sup>13</sup> See R. I. Caplina, *Osobennosti nekotorych čuvašskich govorov Tatarskoj ASSR i Kužbyševskoj oblasti: Materialy po čuvašskoj dialektologii II*, Čeboksary 1963, pp. 180–206. Caplina worked with eight informants from the village Boljšoe Mikuškino, who all spoke a dialect of Anatri-type.