

A KHITAN WORD FOR ‘MARMOT’

ANDRÁS RÓNA-TAS*
(Szeged – Budapest)¹

The article is dealing with the Khitan word *pili* and suggests its Tibetan origin.

Key words: Khitan, marmot.

Two Chinese-Khitan so-called “macaronic” poems have survived from the early Song times. It was first Shiratori Kurakichi who published in 1912 a paper on the Khitan glosses in these poems. He was followed by Matsuo Otagi in 1961. Herbert Franke (1976) published an excellent paper on the philological and linguistic problems of the two texts in 1976. Recently Alexander Vovin returned to the question in the 2003 volume of *Acta Orientalia* dedicated to Professor Barnabás Csongor. In the following I would like to suggest that one of the hitherto unidentified words may be of Tibetan origin, or at least the same word is present in Tibetan. The word in question is transcribed with the Chinese characters: *pí* 貔 (153:10 ‘fabulous bear-like animal’) and *lí* 狸 (153:7 ‘wild cat, racoon dog’ etc.). Both Franke (1976, p. 179) and Vovin agree that there can be no doubt that the word denoted ‘marmot’. Neither of them was, however, able to find the origin of the Khitan word. Vovin wrote: “To the best of my knowledge, the etymology of this Khitan word remains obscure. Many Inner Asian languages use the Mongolian word *tarbagan* ‘steppe marmot’, and as far as I know the word **bili* or **biri* is not attested anywhere except Khitan”.

First we have to mention, that the Chinese characters used in the transcription of the Khitan word contain such semantic elements which are somehow in connection with the foreign word: ‘fabulous animal’, ‘kind of cat’ etc., a usage which is very frequent in Chinese transcriptions. Franke reconstructed *p’i-li* while Vovin reconstructed *bili* because there is a voiced aspiration in the first Chinese word (see Pulleyblank 1991, p. 236) after the Late Middle Chinese unvoiced stop *p-*. It is of impor-

* András Róna-Tas, H-1123 Budapest, Csörsz u. 1, Hungary, e-mail: aronatas2@axelero.hu

¹ This work is a part of a greater research carried out in the Research Group for Turkic Linguistic History, University of Szeged – Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and helped by the research fund OTKA No. T 034955

tance that this Chinese initial is yodicised that means that we have *phji* which has been recognised by Vovin in his transcription of the Chinese character, but not taken in account in his reconstruction. The reconstructed form should be: **phyili* or **byili*.

Now the Tibetan name of the ‘marmot’ is *’phyi*, with the nominalising particle: *’phyi-ba*. In the Tibetan–Mongolian dictionary of Sumatiratna (1959) on page 154 of the second volume we find: *’phyi-ba* ‘tarbagan-a’ that is ‘marmot’. In the Tibetan–English Dictionary of Jäschke (repr. 1968, p. 350) *phyi-ba*, *’phyi-ba* ‘the large marmot of the highlands of Asia, *Arctomys Boibak*’. In Lhasa Tibetan we find *chīwəə* ‘marmot’ (Goldstein 1975, p. 740) and *chīwəə* ‘mouse, rat’ (Written Tibetan *byi-ba*) (Goldstein 1975, p. 766). The Tibetan word is present in the North Eastern dialects, where we find: Amdowa *šē*, Golok *fšⁱo*, *pⁱo* ‘marmotte, Ardomus [read *Arctomus*] ardeus’ (Roerich 1958, p. 152), *šē* ‘marmot’ (Sun 1986, p. 206). The initial of the second Golok form is very archaic, its initial is just the same *phj-* as that of the Chinese transcription of the Khitan word. The *-o-* is the continuation of the Tibetan particle *-ba*, that means that the nominal stem is *phji*, as e.g. in *č’o* ‘chien’ from **kyi-ba*.

The second part of the word is Tibetan *lī*. This is a diminutive suffix used in NE Tibetan e.g. *č’o-lī* ‘petit chien, chiot’ from *č’o* ‘chien’ or *rdo-lī* ‘petit cailloux’ from *rdo* ‘pierre’ (Roerich 1958, p. 148).

On the strength of the above we have to reconstruct East Old Tibetan **’phyi-li* ‘marmot’ and this is reflected by the Khitan word.

In his famous “Loan-words in Tibetan” B. Laufer (1916) mentioned the Tibetan word *byi-ru* ‘coral’ which he derived from a vernacular form of Sanskrit *vidruma*. In the same paragraph he quoted “Kitan *širu* and *šuru*”. I did find in Khitan only *shū shān* 屬. 珊 (Wittfogel – Fêng Chia-sheng 1949, p. 143, note 149).

The second syllable is the first in the Chinese word *shānhú* 珊瑚 ‘coral’, and *shū* had a final *-k* in Middle Chinese, thus cannot be connected with the Tibetan word. But the Tibetan word is present in all Mongolian languages, see Literary Mongolian *sirü*, *šürü*, *bšürü* ‘coral, pierced coral’, Khalkha *šür*, Buriat *šüre*, Kalmück *šür*, *šur*, Ordos *šürü*, see also Manchu *šuru*. In this case a later form after the change of the post-labial *ya-btags*: *by-* > *fš-* > *š-* has been borrowed by the Mongolian languages, on the details see Róna-Tas (1966, pp. 97, 115–119).

Though we could fix for Central Tibet *’phyi-ba* and reconstruct for NE Tibet **’phyi-lī* ‘marmot’ and this is surely identical with the Khitan word *byili* ‘marmot’, I do not claim that the word is of ultimately Tibetan origin. It could come from a third language into Tibetan. More interesting is, that instead of the word *tarbagana* present in all Mongolian sources and languages, Khitan had another Central Asiatic word denoting the same animal ‘marmot’.

References

- Franke, H. (1976): Two Chinese–Khitan Macaronic Poems. In: *Tracta Altaica, Denis Sinor sexagenario optime de rebus altaicis merito dedicata*. Wiesbaden 1978. pp. 175–180.
 Goldstein, M. C. (1975): *Tibetan–English Dictionary of Modern Tibetan*.
 Laufer, B. (1916): Loan-words in Tibetan. *T’oung Pao* Vol. 17, p. 467.

- Pulleyblank, E. G. (1991): *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin*. Vancouver.
- Roerich, G. (1958): *Le parler de l'Amdo*.
- Róna-Tas, A. (1966): *Tibeto-Mongolica*. The Hague.
- Sumatiratna (1959): *Bod-Hor-kyi brda' ming-cig don-gsum gsal-bar byed-pa Mun-sel skron-me*. Ed. by Rintchen. Ulanbaatar.
- Sun, J. T.-S. (1986): *Aspects of the phonology of Amdo Tibetan*. Tokyo (Monumenta Serica No 16).
- Wittfogel, K. A. – Fêng Chia-sheng (1949): *History of the Chinese society Liao (907–1125)*. Philadelphia.