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Reinterpretation of Ötükän Yiř Expression in Orkhon Inscriptions

Orhon Yazıtları'ndaki Ötükän Yiř İbaresinin Yeni Yorumu

Fatih ŐENGÜL*

Kocaeli/Turkey

E-mail: sengulf@gmail.com

The name Ötükän is mentioned as the geographical place name in the Orkhon inscriptions and the Terhin (Taryat) and Őinä Usu Inscriptions. Apart from this, it is seen that the same place name is also mentioned in the form of Ötükän Yiř in the Orkhon Inscriptions. Until today, different ideas have been put forward about what the word Ötükän and Yiř mean. In this study, the word Ötükän will be handled and explained in a different way, on the other hand, it will be shown for the first time that the word Yiř has a different meaning over its Chuvash equivalent.

Key Words: Old Turkic inscriptions, Ötükän Yiř, Old Turkic, Chuvash, Finno-Ugric, Scythians, Huns.

* ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0111-3579.

In Old Turkic, especially in Orkhon inscriptions, Terhin (Taryat) and Šinä Usu inscriptions *Ötükän* is mentioned as geographical place name. (Klyashtorny, 1982: 339, 340, 341, 343; Tekin, 1983: 47; Klyashtornyj, 2008: 169, 171, 175; Aydın, 2007: 59). In addition to this, in Orkhon inscriptions, the expression of *Ötükän Yiš* 𐰉𐰺𐰽 𐰺𐰸𐰸𐰽 is also mentioned.

I think it would be useful to look at the explanation of the word *Ötükän* before going into the explanation of the word *Yiš*. Because the explanation of the word *Ötükän* will facilitate the explanation of the word *Yiš*.

Since the Orkhon Inscriptions were deciphered by the Danish linguist Thomsen, until now, all linguists have translated the word *Yiš* as ‘forest, forested mountain’. In my personal opinion, all of them, including Thomsen, read this word incompletely and gave the same word an incomplete meaning. The word *Yiš* was used with this meaning in the Old Turkic inscriptions, and it is also used in the form of *Ötükän Yiš* together with the word *Ötükän*. The same linguists interpreted the meaning of this phrase as ‘*Ötükän* forest and mountain’ and it is claimed that the mountain mentioned is the Khangai Mountain range (Barat, 2007: 17), as well as the Otgon Tenger Mountain in Mongolia (Aydın, 2007: 1262-70). In *Divân-ı Lûgati't-Türk*, the same *Ötükän* (اوتوكان) is mentioned as “the name of a place close to the Uyghur province and in the Tatar deserts” (Kaşgarlı Mahmut, 1998/I:138).

Ötükän Yişda yeg idi yok ärmiş il tutsik yer Ötükän Yiş ärmiş. El tutsik yer Ötükän Yiş ärmiş “There has never been a better (place) than the *Ötükän* (forested) mountain. The place which will be settled in is the *Ötükän* (forested) mountain”; *[T]ürük [kag]an Ötükän [y]iş olursar eltä [bu] yok* ‘If the Turkish khan sits on the *Ötükän* (forest) mountain, there will be no trouble in the country”; *Ötükän Yiş olursar bängü el tuta olurtaçı sän* “If you live in the *Ötükän* mountains, you will live forever as a state owner.” (Malov, 1951: 27-28)

Above, I have included only three sentences in which the phrase *Ötükän Yiš* is used in old Turkish inscriptions. I do not find it necessary to write the other sentences in inscription where the same expression is mentioned, one by one.

Although Hüseyin Namık Orkun accepts that *Ötükän* means ‘forest’, he says that this word is the government centre of the Köktürks, which is considered sacred by the Turks and where the Turkish khan sits (1994: 735). Gabain also

believes that the name *Ötükän* is the name of a plateau and the state centre of the Köktürks (2007: 291). Pelliot associated the same nomenclature with the Mongolian word *Itügän* or *Ätügän*, meaning ‘earth god’ (1929: 219). It is also necessary to mention the name *Yütügen*, which the Yakuts use to name the world in their religious poems and which is related to the word *Ötükän* (Ksenefentov, 2011: 166).

Ötü, the first syllable of the word *Ötükän*, is none other than the word *ötü* meaning ‘old’, which seems to derive from the word *öd* which means ‘time’ in Old Turkic and entered Hungarian as a loanword with the form *idő* ‘time’ (Zolton, 1912: 85; Benkő, 1993: 600; Róna-Tas & Berta, 2011: 437-40). The scholars who prepared the *Etymological Dictionary of Altaic Languages* showed the word *ötükän* to be related to the *ötü* and interpreted it with the meaning of ‘Old Country’. (Starostin etc., 2003/II: 1068).

In fact, the preparers of the mentioned dictionary unconsciously provided the most logical explanation, but did not give any explanation as to what the syllable *kän* meant.

It is true that the syllable *kän*, which constitutes the second element of the *Ötükän* expression, means city (Aydemir, 2010: 214). The person who puts forward this view claims that the remaining first syllable *ötü* means ‘prayer, request, supplication’ (2010: 214). Unfortunately, it is impossible to accept this. Apart from this, it has also been claimed that the word *Ötükän* means ‘gates’ (Sebzecioğlu, 2015: 44-52) in terms of etymology. Such a view is away from being convincing.

In my opinion, *Ötükän* is a combination of the words *ötü* and *kän* and it means ‘old, ancient city’ and it is a name given by the Turks based on their ancestors’ residence in *Ötükän* and its geography since the earliest times. This argument is corroborated by the fact that the word *kän* has been used since the era of the Huns, long before the Turks appeared on the stage of history with the name Turk, was shown in a paper (Şengül, 2020a: 95-96).

According to Chinese annuals, Hunnic word 龍城 *lungcheng* was the place where the Huns offered sacrifice to their ancestors and meant ‘Dragon City’ (Bemmann, 2011: 443; Durand-Guédy, 2013:7; Ssu-ma Ch’ien, 2011: 191, 264).

龍 *lung*, the first component of the mentioned Hunnic word, is preserved in the forms of *Lu*, *Liu* and *Louin* in Turkic mythology, and all three have the meaning of ‘dragon’ (Korkmaz, 2008: 107; Uno, 2014: 169;). It is in the form *Ulu* ‘dragon’ in the Altai dialect (Naskali & Duranlı, 1999: 193). The words *Lu* and *Luu* mean also ‘dragon’ (Kara, 2009: 170) in Mongolian and Mongolian dialects.

The form 城 *cheng*, the second component of the word *Lungcheng*, is the equivalent of the word *kän*, which means the city in Old Turkic (Uzunkaya, 2014: 51), in the Huns’ language. In the Kaşgarî’s dictionary, this word is referred to as the name given to ‘each city in the eastern countries’ (Kaşgarlı Mahmut, 1998/I: 339-340).

There is another linguistic evidence to confirm the fact that the word *Cheng* means ‘city’. When the Chinese source speaks of the Huns, he uses the term 城郭 *Ch’engguo* which means ‘inner and outer city walls or permanent residences’ (Ssu-ma Ch’ien 2011: 240) in their language elsewhere. The same Hunnic word is also interpreted as the cities with rampart wall (Onat et al., 2004: 1).

Here, *Ch’eng* is clearly used in the sense of the city. The term 郭 *guo*, which seems to carry meanings of house or settlement and etc, matches *hu* ‘vineyard and garden shed’ (DS: 2441), *huğ* ‘guard shack’ (DS: 2441), *huğu* ‘guard shack’ (DS: 2441), *hüğ* ‘arbor, storehouse’ (DS: 2448), Kyrgyz *kui* ‘tent’ (Radloff, 1899/II: 888) and *küğ* ‘vineyard and garden shed’ (DS: 3026) and etc.

There is no the letter <r> in Chinese. So the original form of Hunnic word can be related to Uighur *kirao* ‘nomadic accommodation’ (Shaw, 2014: 159), *kïrö* ‘temple in Burkhanism faith’ (Naskali et al., 2007: 246), Kyrgyz *küärkö* ‘some kind of tent’ (Radloff, 1899/II: 1458) and Chagatai *kurya* ‘building built badly, shack and barrack’ (Radloff, 1899/II: 941) and etc.

Contrary to popular belief, Turks have used the word *kän* since the Hun era. Linguists attribute the origin of this word in Turkic to Sogdian *knδh* (Clauson, 1972: 728; Levitskaya et al., 1997: 44; Nadalyayev et al., 1969: 290; Räsänen, 1969: 252). I will not argue here whether the Turkic word is of Sogdian origin. However, there is another fact that I can state about this subject, which is that the word

kän also means ‘uncultivated field’ (DS: 2741) in Turkish apart from the meaning of city. The relationship between the Finnish word *kenttä*, which means ‘land, area, etc.’ and the Turkish words ‘city and field’ is clear. Adverbs of place used in Turkic dialects for example, Uighur *käni* ‘where’, its Turkish equivalent, *hani* ‘where’. Again, Old Turkic *kani* ‘where’ and *kanta* ‘where’, are related to the word *kän*. Again, as in the words *kurgan* ‘kale, kurgan’ and *kurukan* ‘tent’, the suffix {-kAn}, which gives the meaning of place to the word to which it is added in Turkic, is also related to the word *kän*, which means city. Therefore, more arguments are needed to confirm that the Finnish and Turkic words are of Sogdian origin.

It is true that the word *Yış* means something like ‘forest, forested mountain’, but the phrase *Ötükän Yış* in the example sentences above never means such a meaning. The main reason why the true meaning of the term *Ötükän Yış* has not been revealed until today is that the equivalence of the word *Yış* in the Chuvash dialect, which is the only surviving branch of the oldest Turkic today, has not been seen.

This equivalence was first mentioned in a study and the word *Yış* was associated with the word *hyla* recorded as ‘forested area’ in the language of the Scythians by Herodotus in the 5th century BC and it was shown that this wooded area, mentioned by the Greek writer, was the point where the Vorskla River joins the Dnieper River (Şengül, 2020b: 40, 46, 47).

The word *hyla* ‘woodland, forest’ in the language of the Scythians has been the most perfectly preserved in Turkic dialects. New Uygur *hola* ‘tree’ (Öztunçer, 2006: 146), Azerbaijani *kollu* ‘bush, forested’, *kol* ‘bush’, *kula* ‘wood’ (Akdoğan, 1999: 537), *kol* ‘forest’ (DS: 2906), *kol* ‘brushwood’ (DS: 2907), *hola* ‘sheltered parts of forest and wooded places’ (1974:2396), Kyrgyz *kolo* ‘fir timber’ (Yudahin, 1998: 480), *yula* (*gula* < *yula* in Bashkir dialect) ‘elm’ (İnan, 1998: 443) and etc. The words above are the current equivalents of the Scythian word.

The word used for forest in Orkhon monuments is *Yış* (Ergin, 2002: 123; Tekin, 2016: 60). It has been identified with Sumerian word *giş* ‘wood, tree’ (Tuna, 1997: 7; Gerey, 2005: 202) The name given to the beech tree, which has an important place in Turkic Mythology, is *huş* (İnan, 1998: 415).

The first Turkic was an Oghuric dialect. Today, Chuvash dialect is the only representative of this language. All other Turkic communities are in Common Turkic dialect.

One of the most distinctive differences that distinguish this dialect from the remaining Turkic dialects is that the letter /ʃ/ in other dialects is replaced by the letter /l/ and the letter /z/ in place of the letter /r/. This linguistic transition between the words *hul* [< *huʃ*, seems to be the original form of *Yiʃ* > *Gıʃ*] and *Hyla*, namely the /ʃ/~l/ transition, can be easily seen.

The Scythian word has been preserved as *hulă* ‘stick, thin branch (tree, bush, etc), twig, sprout’ (Bayram, 2002: 273) in Chuvash. Chuvash *hulă* is identical with *Yiʃ* in the Orkhon Inscriptions (Şengül, 2020b: 47). Now let’s move on to the actual connection. If *Yiʃ* in the Orkhon inscriptions is equivalent to the Chuvash word *хулă*, this word is also equivalent to the Chuvash word *хула/hula* (Benzing, 1943: 24; Bayram 2002: 273) which means city. For this reason, the actual meaning of *Ötükän Yiʃ* is not ‘Ötükän Forest’ but *Ötükän City*. This is what linguists have not seen until now.

Collinder shows the Vogul equivalent of Finnish *kylä* ‘village’ as *kül*, *kwäl* ‘house, dwelling’ (1977: 109) and he associates Finnish *kylä* ‘house, dwelling, village’ with Volga Turkish *kül*, *kil* ‘hof, gasthof’, the Ottoman *gil* ‘home’, Yakut *kulä* ‘entrance hall, vestibule, place in front of the house’ and Tungusic *külö* ‘hut’ (1977: 157). The words *hula* ‘stoned or wooded shack built in order to keep milk in tablelands’ (1974: 2441), *hullä* ‘shack built in tablelands temporarily’ (1974: 2442) and Taranchi *hōla* ‘yard, garth’ (Radloff, 1899/II: 1794) must also be added to this list.

Collinder could not sense or see the connection between the Chuvash word *хула* meaning ‘city’ and the Finnish and Vogul words. Finnish and Vogul words are other equivalents of *Yiʃ* in Orkhon Inscriptions.

Now, in the light of what has been written so far, let's re-read the above statements in the Orkhon Inscriptions: *Ötükän Yiʃda yeg idi yok ärmiş. El tutsık yer Ötükän Yiʃ ärmiş* “There was never a better (place) than the city/province of Ötükän. The place which will be settled in is the city/province of Ötükän”; *[T]ürük [kag]an Ötükän [y]iʃ olursar iltä [bu] yok* “If the Turkish khan lives in the city/province of Ötükän, there will be no trouble in the country”; *Ötükän Yiʃ*

olursar bängü el tuta olurtaçı sän “If you live in *Ötükän* city/province, you will live forever as a state owner”.

Ötükän nomenclature in *Ötükän Yiş* pattern is a name given mainly because the ancestors of the Turks have inhabited *Ötükän* and its surroundings since the earliest times. Our view that the component *Yiş* in the *Ötükän Yiş* pattern means ‘city’ is also proved by the fact that the *kän* syllable at the end of the word *Ötükän* means city. Due to the fact that the ancestors of the Turks residing in the *Ötükän* geography have inhabited that area since ancient times, they named it *Ötükän*, which means ‘Old, Ancient City’ and this name has turned into *Ötükän* as a naming and a special name representing a geography with certain borders over time. Turks used the term *Yiş* at the end of the word in order to give the meaning of province to this special nomenclature.

Today, we find an example that fits the *Ötükän Yiş* pattern exactly in the name of Eskişehir, one of the main cities of Turkey. Eskişehir, which is used as a proper name, means ‘Old City’, but when we want to give Eskişehir the meaning of province or city, we say Eskişehir province or Eskişehir City. Here, *Yiş* in the *Ötükän Yiş* pattern was a term used for the province and the city.

Sum up, *Yiş* in Orkhun inscriptions, which means ‘forest and mountain’ and is identical with Chuvash hula ‘city’, is the exact equivalent of the Scythian *hyla* ‘woodland’ and also carries a meaning such as city/province.

Herodotus in his story about the origin of the Scythians mentions an incident of the kind where Heracles came to *Hyla* ‘Woodland while searching for mares (Herodotos, 2004: IV-9). It is both interesting and thought-provoking that the Father of History uses the term ‘Woodland’ for a single field in a geography like Ukraine, which has a very forested area. He also relates a story about life of Anacharsis, a Scythian philosopher and adds that he was killed while he performs religious ritual in ‘woodland’ in Scythia (Herodotos, 2004: IV-76).

I think the word *Hyla* in the Scythian language meant not only ‘Woodland’ but also ‘city and settlement centre’, but the Greek writer recorded only a forest-like meaning here.

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