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Bolshoy-Yaloman III Inscription — A New Reading and Interpretation

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Abstract: Mountainous Altai inscriptions have a special place and importance among the Turkic Runic inscriptions. There are more than a hundred inscriptions in the territory of the Republic of Mountainous Altai of the Russian Federation. Work on these inscriptions continues. The Bolshoy-Yaloman III complex, discovered by A.A. Tishkin, contains one text in Old Uyghur script and three texts in Turkic Runic script. There is only one proposed reading and interpretation of the three Turkic runic texts, published by Tugusheva, Klyashorny and Kubarev. However, the authors were not able to read most of the inscription and only provided a transliteration. This article presents a new reading and interpretation of three rock inscriptions found in the Bolshoy-Yaloman III complex. After reading and interpretation, explanations were made about the words in the inscription.

Key words: Old Turkic, Old Turkic Inscriptions, Mountainous Altai Inscriptions, Bolshoy-Yaloman III Complex, Bolshoy-Yaloman III Inscription

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Introduction

As the first written documents of the Turkish language, the studies on the Old Turkic inscriptions with Turkic Runic letters are now expressed in thousands since the day they were first discovered and the letters were deciphered. On the one hand, reading and interpretation studies on the newly found inscriptions continue, on the other hand, new reading and interpretation suggestions are presented on the previous inscriptions. A significant part of these inscriptions, which are found in many different regions of Central and Inner Asia and number nearly six hundred today, are located

within the borders of the Republic of Mountainous Altai in the Russian Federation.

The studies on the Turkic Runic inscriptions found in the Republic of Mountainous Altai were published by G.I. Spasskiy, *Sibirskiy Vestnik, chast I: Drevnosti Sibiri*, published in 1818. In 1865, during the excavations of a grave near the village of Katanda, a silver flask was found with a Turkic Runic text, but V.V. Radlov did not pay attention to it, and it was later published by P.M. Melioranskiy.¹

Studies on the inscriptions of the Mountainous Altai are relatively few compared to the inscriptions of other regions. One of the main reasons for this is that most of the inscriptions were written on rocks. Most of the inscriptions are Qalbaq-Tash, Bichiktu-Boom and Tuekta texts. As in the Yenisei inscriptions, the lack of tombstone-shaped obelisks and similar monuments explains the scarcity of studies on the inscriptions of this region. In fact, it is difficult to clearly distinguish between the inscriptions of Mountainous Altai and those of Tuva and Khakassia. Archaeological data and written documents in the Altai Mountains, also known as the Mongolian Altai, which fall to the west and northwest of Mongolia, are considered within the same framework as the Mountainous Altai inscriptions.

In 2012, the Mountainous Altai Inscriptions project conducted by L.N. Tybykova, I.A. Nevskaya and Marcel Erdal, and the catalog containing the transliteration, transcription and translation of the inscriptions into Russian, led to an increase in studies on the Mountainous Altai inscriptions. Thanks to Gorno-Altaysk Gosudarstvennij Universitet publishing all the material in the form of a catalog² and Goethe Universität, also a stakeholder of the project, posting the inscription texts on its website along with high-resolution photographs, it was possible to access photographs of the inscriptions of the region.³ D.D. Vasil'ev's⁴ book on the goal of publishing the Mountainous Altai inscriptions in 2013 and also worth mentioning the work by Kadyrali Konkobaev, Nurdin Useev and Negizbek Shabdanaliev published in Astana in 2015.⁵

¹ NEVSKAYA 2011: 10; ERDAL & KUBAREV 2019: 230.

² TYBYKOVA et al. 2012.

³ <http://www.altay.uni-frankfurt.de>.

⁴ VASIL'EV 2013.

⁵ KONKOBAEV et al. 2015.

1. Bolshoy-Yaloman III Complex and Discovered Texts

The joint expedition of the Institute of Archaeology of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the State Research Institute of Linguistics of the Altai Mountains began work in 1989 to study archaeological monuments in Mountainous Altai and conduct research in the river basin. In the course of the work, a number of burial structures in the Bolshoy-Yaloman I and II cemeteries in the Urkosh region and rock paintings in the Bolshoy-Yaloman III complex were analyzed.⁶

According to the catalog of Tybykova et al.⁷ the inscription was discovered by A.A. Tishkin in 2004 in the archaeological site of Bolshoy-Yaloman III with petroglyphs. However, for some reason, the authors of the catalog did not provide information about the whereabouts of the text in Turkic Runic script. Therefore, there is no information in the catalog except that it was written in Turkic Runic script in the 8th or 9th cc. See also.⁸

The material from the Bolshoy-Yaloman III petroglyph complex has attracted the attention of researchers, and G.V. Kubarev of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences studied the Bolshoy-Yaloman III site during his work in the Altai Republic in 2013. According to A.A. Tishkin et al. the GPS coordinates of the Bolshoy-Yaloman III complex are: North-50°33.017'; East-086°34.162' and the altitude is 803 m.⁹

On one side of the rock is text in Old Uyghur script, written with black paint and brush, and on the other side are two texts in Turkic Runic script. Tishkin states that there is an animal figure in red paint on the Turkic Runic text on the left, but this animal figure is very difficult to make out. According to Tishkin et al.,¹⁰ the scribe of the Old Uyghur script, which is written in black paint, saw the Turkic Runic script and therefore took care not to confuse it with the Uyghur script. In addition, a few indistinguishable signs to the left and right of the Runic script can hardly be distinguished.

⁶ BORODOVSKIY et al. 2016: 22–23.

⁷ TYBYKOVA et al. 2012: 65.

⁸ KONKOBAEV et al. 2015: 268.

⁹ TISHKIN et al. 2016: 18–22.

¹⁰ TISHKIN et al. 2016: 25.



Pl. 1:
TUGUSHEVA et al. 2014: 78



Pl. 2:
TUGUSHEVA et al. 2014: 78

Tishkin et al.¹¹ state that upon the discovery of writing in the research area, the Turkic Runic and Uyghur texts were first sent to the St. Petersburg branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and presented to S.G. Klyashtorny and A.M. Sherbak. He states that the first impression was that the inscriptions may date from the 8th or 9th cc., and thus correspond to the period of the Uyghur Khaganate. There are also researchers who believe that the Mountainous Altai region did not fall within the borders of the Uyghur Khaganate. G.V. Kubarev,¹² for example, holds this view. Another important fact is that no text written with black paint and brushes has ever been found within the borders of the Altai Republic.¹³

V.A. Kocheev¹⁴ also states that it is the only example among the Mountainous Altai inscriptions written in paint without carving and that it can be dated to the 8th or 9th cc., but does not include any drawings showing the inscriptions.

The first publication on the texts was made in 2014 by L.Yu. Tugusheva, S.G. Klyashtorny and G.V. Kubarev. The first part of the article is devoted to the text in Old Uyghur script; the second part is devoted to the text in Turkic Runic script. Tugusheva read the text written in Old Uyghur script with black paint, which is claimed to be Old Uyghur, while Klyashtorny read the text in Turkic Runic script.¹⁵

1.1. Old Uyghur Written Text

The text in Old Uyghur script is not the subject of this article, but it is worth mentioning briefly because of the controversy over its language. Tugusheva, believing that the text is written in Old Uyghur script and that its language is Old Uyghur, reads and interprets it as follows:

1. *q(a)gan birläki*
2. *yaguqi-da éркиn*
3. *öz bildgärip ö[z?]*

¹¹ TISHKIN et al. 2016: 61.

¹² KUBAREV 2005: 143.

¹³ TISHKIN et al. 2016: 62.

¹⁴ KOCHEEV 2006: 14.

¹⁵ TUGUSHEVA et al. 2014: 80.

4. *élingä y(a)na bičig*

5. *bičidi*

“Эркин, когда они вместе с каганом, возвращаясь в свой эль, подошли близко (~ приблизились), чтобы известить о себе, сделал (букв. написал) надпись”.¹⁶

The authors note that the orthography of the Uyghur text is in the same form as its counterparts in East Turkestan (Xinjiang). They state that the text was written by a person with the name or title of *erkin*, that the title of *erkin* was frequently used in the period of the inscriptions, and also compares it with the name *Uluγ Erkin* in the Kōl Tegin Inscription.

The article discusses why the verb *biči-* exists. They suggest that the verb *biči-* emerged under the influence of the dialects of this region, which may have appeared as early as the 10th c. Another issue that the authors draw attention to is that Uyghur script has been used in many Turkic-speaking areas.¹⁷

Ts.B. Natsagdorj suggests that the language of the text written in Old Uyghur script is Mongolian, not Old Uyghur. Natsagdorj’s reading is as follows:¹⁸

1. *qayan-u ĵrlγ-iy[ar]*

2. *ĵarγal-du[r] iregsen [eĵen]*

3. *noyan bulteger ĵi ön-ü*

4. *ilčün an-e bičig*

5. *bičibei*

Natsagdorj gives the meaning and interpretation of the text word by word. States that he is certain that the text is in Mongolian, although there is some doubt about some of the words because it is very worn, and suggests that it can be dated between 1291 and the middle of the 15th c.¹⁹ The opinions of experts in Old Uyghur and Mongolian will be of great importance as to whether this issue will be discussed or not. It is fortunate that no one who wrote a text in Old Uyghur script saw the Turkic Runic script and wrote on it or very close to it because of the possibility of confusion.

¹⁶ TUGUSHEVA et al. 2014: 80.

¹⁷ TUGUSHEVA et al. 2014: 80–81.

¹⁸ NATSAGDORJ 2019: 18.

¹⁹ NATSAGDORJ 2019: 22.



Fig. 3:
TISHKIN et al. 2016: 128

1.2. Turkic Runic Text

The Turkic Runic text is written above and below the left side of the Old Uyghur script. Except for Tugusheva et al., no readings have been identified for Turkic Runic texts. The number of inscriptions, their reading and interpretation given by Tugusheva et al. are as follows:²⁰

Inscription I

el teŋrikenim “(мой) эль, мой тенгрикен”

Inscription II

1. *teŋrikenim* “мой тенгрикен”

2. *sl²...a l¹...l¹ad²..n'r².*

It is stated that the text was read and interpreted by Klyashtorny, that there is one line on one side and two lines on the other side, that it was probably written by the same person, but that it is difficult to identify the letters due to the lack of depth of the lines, that the first letter of the single-line inscription is written slightly outside, and that the last letter cannot be identified. The second text consists of two lines, with 8 characters in the first line and 18 or 19 characters in the second line, but the second line is difficult to read. The authors state that it is dedicated to a person called *täŋrikänim*, and that this name or title is frequently used in the Ongi Inscription and Buddhist and Manichaean manuscripts; as a result, he concludes that first the Runic script and then the Uyghur text were made with a brush.²¹

2. A New Reading and Interpretation of Turkic Runic Texts

The author of this article disagrees with the researchers who first published the number of texts in Turkic Runic script. There are three inscriptions on the rock, the first is a single line, the second is two lines and the third is also a single line. These three inscriptions are given below under separate headings:

Inscription I

täŋrikän¹ “blessed!, sainted!” or *täŋrikän¹im* “my blessed!, my saint!”

²⁰ TUGUSHEVA et al. 2014: 81.

²¹ TUGUSHEVA et al. 2014: 81–82.

Inscription II

1. *täñrikän*¹ “blessed!, sainted!” or *teñriken*¹*im* “my blessed!, my saint!”

2. *kišlig el*¹ “sable homeland”

Inscription III

*äl*¹*ik*¹*ig äñlädim kän*¹*<ç> är* “I hunted the gazelle (~ watching the gazelle hunt?) young man”

2.1. Notes

The character shapes in all three inscriptions are similar, but more evidence is needed to say that they were written by the same person. However, the fact that the word *täñrikän* is written with *n*¹ when it should be written with *n*² and that this is the same in all three inscriptions cannot be explained by coincidence. Either the same person wrote it, or we can speak of a writing culture in which the distinction between *n*¹ and *n*² is unknown. In such difficult-to-read texts, if there is a different spelling in one place, the same spelling is expected on the same rock or in the surrounding texts. In other words, if it is written differently in one place and differently in another, it is not a matter of a writing culture, but of a misidentified letter. It is therefore possible that it was written by the same person, and it is also possible that the letter was known in this way. Especially in the letters *n*¹, *n*², *n* and *z*, there are such writing culture artifacts. The writing system and letter culture of the Gurvan Mandal Inscription in Mongolia is a clear example of this issue. For a new reading of the inscription and notes on the letters *n* and *z* in particular, see.²²

In inscriptions I and II, it is possible that there is an *m* after the word *täñrikän*, since it is not clear whether there is an *m* or not. The title *täñrikän* is one of the most important issues to be emphasized. Because there are different opinions about the scarcity of the word and, more importantly, whether it has an identity belonging to the Old Uyghur dialect. This word is not found in multi-line inscriptions such as Köl Tegin, Bilge Qagan and Tonyuquq. Except for the Qarabalgasun Inscription I, it is not found in the khaganate inscriptions of the Uyghur Khaganate. W. Bang²³ states that it is *täñri qan* in his epistles. A. von Gabain²⁴ ‘göttlich, Majestät’; Clauson²⁵

²² AYDIN 2023.

²³ BANG 1980: 17.

²⁴ GABAIN 1950: § 48

²⁵ CLAUSON 1959: 185.

states that it is not a proper name but a title, meaning ‘His sacred majesty’. The view of S.G. Klyashtorny and E. Tryjarski²⁶ is somewhat different and interesting: After giving the meaning of ‘His sacred majesty’ for *täñrikän* in the Arkhanen Inscription, they point out that this word is a witness of Uyghur dialect; he argues that *täñrikän* is found in Uyghur inscriptions and *täñritäg* in the inscriptions of the Second Turkic khaganate. In addition, it is one of the words used by those who want to date the inscription, as it is found four times in the Ongi Inscription. For example, V. Rybatzki²⁷ argues that the inscription in the *täñrikän* testimony may have been erected close to or in the early years of the Uyghur khaganate, most likely in 744 or 756. The word is found only twice in the Yenisei inscriptions, in “An Inscription from the Adrianov Collection” see.²⁸

Mahmud Al-Kashgarî’s definition of *täñrikän* as *cālimu'n-nāsiku bilugati'l-kafarati* is given by Dankoff & Kelly²⁹ as ‘A wise man, a pious man. Dialect of the infidels’. See also³⁰. The author of this article disagrees with Klyashtorny and Tryjarski’s view on *täñrikän*. However, it is important that it is not detected twice in an inscription from the Adrianov Collection from the Yenisei region and in the inscriptions of the Mountainous Altai except in the Bolshoy-Yaloman III Inscription. The inscriptions where the title *täñrikän* has been identified are as follows: Ongi Inscription East 5, 6, 6, 8; Qarabalgasun I Inscription line 1; Hangiday Inscription line 3; Olon-Nuur Inscription 3; An Inscription from the Adrianov Collection line 2 and 4. Also for these witnesses used as personal names see.³¹ In conclusion, this title from the Mountainous Altai inscriptions has been identified only once so far and is therefore very important. However, as mentioned above, more evidence is needed to say that the word belongs to Uyghur dialectology. At least the Ongi Inscription seems to preclude this argument.

The word *kiš* in line 2 of the Inscription II also has not many witnesses. Known as ‘sable’, this animal’s fur coat is very valuable. It is possible to imagine that the area where the Bolshoy-Yaloman III complex is located is famous for its sable. The word was found in the following inscriptions in the Old Turkic inscriptions: *Qara kiš* ‘Black sable’ (Bilge Qagan Inscription North line 11 and South line 12); *kiš* Telee Inscription (E 46) line 3. The

²⁶ KLYASHTORNY & TRYJARSKI 1990: 66–67.

²⁷ RYBATZKI 2000: 209.

²⁸ ERDAL 1998: 92; AYDIN 2019: 244.

²⁹ DANKOFF & KELLY 1985: 185.

³⁰ AYDIN 2018: 178.

³¹ AYDIN 2024: 156.

total number of witnesses for the word is four, of which ‘Black sable’ in Bilge Qagan Inscription and ‘sable’ in Telee and Bolshoy-Yalomon III inscriptions. Clauson³² gives the meaning of ‘sable’ and states that both the animal itself and its fur coat are mentioned. G. Doerfer³³ refers to ‘Zobel’ and states that the animal is *Mustela zibellina*. He cites the view that the word is derived from the Uralic languages and mentions the connection between Turkic and Samoyed: *kil’i>Urtü.*kilvi>kiši>kiš; -i: possessive suffix. He also states that the word has a short vowel in Samoyedic but a long vowel in Turkic: Turkic>Samoyed. I. Hauenschild³⁴ Lat. *Martes zibellina*. See also cf.³⁵ The fact that the word *el* meaning ‘province, homeland’ in the line is written as *el* with *ä* and *l* is a characteristic feature of such rock inscriptions.

The 3rd inscription, as Klyashtorny notes, is very difficult to read. but Klyashtorny must have found it more difficult to read because he thought in single lines. However, the letter height of the top two lines is not the same as the letter height of the bottom line, and the line alignment is also different. The line below must therefore have been written by a different person. The main reason for the illegibility of the line is the confusion of consonants waiting for back and front vowels. When writing a word, writing front instead of back consonant and back instead of front consonant is a common orthographic feature in rock inscriptions. The spelling of the first word is strange and can be read as *älik*, suggesting that it must be a game animal. Apart from this inscription; the word is found three times in total, twice in line 4 of the Abakan Inscription (E 48) and once in the Bichiktu-Boom IV Inscription (A 54) from Mountainous Altai. Tybykova et al.³⁶ also believe that *älik* should be read in Inscription A 54. The author of this article agrees. Since it was found twice in Abakan Inscription (E 48) among the Yenisei inscriptions, the following views can be mentioned about the word. S.E. Malov³⁷ *ilki* ‘внутренней земли’; D.D. Vasil’ev³⁸ *l²k²i*; Barutçu Özönder³⁹ *älki* ‘the people’; I.V. Kormushin⁴⁰ *äliki* ‘косули’. In Old Uyghur texts it appears

³² CLAUSON 1972: 752b.

³³ DOERFER 1967: No. 1698.

³⁴ HAUENSCHILD 2006: 98.

³⁵ PELLIOT 1931: 562; HAUENSCHILD 2003: 111; AYDIN 2019: 154–155.

³⁶ TYBYKOVA et al. 2012: 60.

³⁷ MALOV 1952: 94–95.

³⁸ VASIL’EV 1983: 32.

³⁹ BARUTÇU ÖZÖNDER 1998: 179.

⁴⁰ KORMUSHIN 2008: 139–140.

in two forms as *älik* and *elik*⁴¹; In the 63rd omen of Irq Bitig⁴² and detected once in the 79th couplet of Qutadgu Bilig⁴³. Clauson⁴⁴ ‘roe-buck’; Räsänen⁴⁵ gives the meaning ‘wildziege’. This animal name is *Ehlyk* in Pallas’ *Zoographia* and *älik* in Pekarskiy. The Latin name of the animal was given as *Cervus capreolus* by Pallas, but L. Károly⁴⁶ corrected it to *Capreolus capreolus*. However, it is more likely to be *Capreolus pygargus*, known in English as ‘Siberian roe deer’, whose homeland is the Siberian steppes. Another interesting note is that the name of this subspecies of the animal, known as *Cervus elaphus canadensis* ‘elk’, is derived from the English *elk*, German *Elkh*, Swiss *älg*, Italian *alce*, Norwegian *elg*, Greek *álkes*.⁴⁷ See also cf.⁴⁸

The second word of third inscription is thought to be the verb *äñlä-*. The verb, of which only one witness is found in the 5th line of the Bay-Bulun I inscription (E 42), is given by Aydın⁴⁹ with the meaning ‘to hunt’. Wilkens,⁵⁰ on the other hand, gives the meaning of the verb ‘nach Beute Ausschau halten, (einer Sache) nachspüren’.

The third word of the third inscription is thought to be *känč*. The word is written with *n*^l and the letter *č* at the end of the word must have been forgotten. The reason for this reading is that the word *är*, meaning ‘man; male’, should be preceded by an adjective.

3. Evaluation and Conclusion

Four texts were identified in the Bolshoy-Yaloman III complex. One of them is a text written in Old Uyghur script, probably Middle Mongolian, and is not related to the three Turkic Runic texts. As for the Turkic Runic texts, the general opinion is that there are two texts. However, from approximately the middle of the letters designated as the second line of the 2nd text, it was revealed that it was not a continuation of the same line in terms of both letter

⁴¹ WILKENS 2021: 103 and 256.

⁴² YILDIRIM 2017: 48.

⁴³ ARAT 1979: 146.

⁴⁴ CLAUSON 1972: 142a.

⁴⁵ RÄSÄNEN 1969: 40.

⁴⁶ KÁROLY 2008: 311.

⁴⁷ AYDIN 2019: 158.

⁴⁸ HAUENSCHILD 2008: 13.

⁴⁹ AYDIN 2019: 257.

⁵⁰ WILKENS 2021: 110.

heights and line alignment. Accordingly, there are three texts in Turkic Runic script. The first is a single line, the second is two lines and the third is also a single line.

Once the doubt about whether the word *täñrikän* has a dialectal identity is removed, it will be possible to identify the influence of the Uyghur Khaganate period. By title, we mean an influential ruler in the region. The frequent mention of hunting animals in the inscriptions of the South Siberian region, and even the wish for their reproduction in a few inscriptions, should be considered normal due to a life dependent on the existence of hunting animals. In addition, although there is no definite information that they were consumed as food, the fact that animals such as sable, whose fur is valuable, are native to this geography, and that gazelles are hunted and therefore named after these animals is an important piece of evidence. Therefore, there is a more solid basis for the reading of the second and third texts of the Turkic Runic script.

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