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Georg Huth's Attempts to Decipher the "Runic"-Turkic Inscriptions

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Abstract: The article deals with an episode of attempts to decipher the "Runic"-Turkic inscriptions – those by the Turkologist, Indologist, Tibetologist and Tungusologist Georg Huth (1867-1906). While most of the unsuccessful attempts of deciphering the Old Turkic inscriptions from Orkhon and Yenisei remained unpublished or the authors restricted themselves to pure speculation, Huth's attempt, which is of interest from a scientific-historical perspective, has been printed as manuscript. At this time (1892) the number of the inscriptions' characters was already known, as well as the reading direction and the suffix-agglutinating character of the language that was hidden behind these documents. Since it was still impossible to read the inscriptions, Huth erroneously made assumptions that it was probably material of an early or extinct Yeniseian language.

Key Words: Georg Huth (1867-1906), history of science, "Runic" Turkic inscriptions, Yeniseian language, history of Old Turkic research.

Georg Huth'un "Runik"-Türk Yazıtlarını Deşifre Etme Denemeleri

Öz: Bu makale; Türkolog, Hindolog, Tibetolog ve Tunguzist Georg Huth'un (1867-1906) "Runik"-Türkçe yazıtları deşifre etme girişimlerinin bir bölümünü ele almaktadır. Orhun ve Yenisey'deki Eski Türkçe yazıtları deşifre etmeye yönelik başarısız girişimlerin çoğu yayımlanmadan kalırken ya da yazarlar kendilerini salt spekülasyonlarla sınırlandırırken, Huth'un bilimsel-tarihsel açıdan ilginç olan girişimi el yazması olarak basılmıştır. Bu dönemde (1892) yazıt karakterlerinin sayısı, metinleri okuma yönü ve bu belgelerin arkasına gizlenmiş olan dilin sondan eklemeli karakteri zaten biliniyordu. O dönemde yazıtları okumanın henüz imkansız olması nedeniyle, Huth, hatalı olarak, yazıtların muhtemelen erken veya nesli tükenmiş bir Yenisey dilinin malzemesi olduğu varsayımında bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Georg Huth (1867-1906), bilim tarihi, "Runik" Türk yazıtları, Yenisey dili, Eski Türkçe araştırmaları tarihi.

In the context of the discussion of the Old Turkic bibliography by E. Aydın (2010; 2017) and beyond, the author has for several times now dealt with the "pre-history" of the "deciphering" of the Old Turkic inscriptions from the Orkhon and the Yenisei

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– or more precisely: the so-called “Runic”-Turkic inscriptions.¹ However, in these contributions there were no references to any interesting (albeit ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to decipher these inscriptions, also listed in Aydın’s work:² the one undertaken by the Buddhologist, Mongolist, Tibetologist, Tungusologist etc. Georg Huth³ in his work *Die Inschrift von Karakorum. Eine Untersuchung über ihre Sprache und die Methode ihrer Entzifferung* (Huth, 1892: 25). An undertaking that deserves to be examined in greater detail.

In the small work, printed as a facsimile, we have one of the very few published, unsuccessful attempts to decipher the Old Turkic “Runic” script.⁴ An attempt from which we can see by way of example how the right knowledge can nevertheless lead a brilliant scholar in the wrong direction. In fact, G. Huth had otherwise shown himself to be an extraordinarily skilled epigraphist, who knew how to handle very confidently with material that had hitherto only been inadequately researched (just think of his contribution to the Žürčen language, or more precisely the stele of Yántái [宴臺] (1896: 375-378), his adaptation of the Tibetan-Mong. inscription of Tümenken čoytu qong tayiji (1894) or the later contributions to the Mahaban inscriptions (1901a; 1901b; 1901c; 1905; 1906)).

G. Huth, who was aware of the previous results of the research on the “Runic” Turkic written documents (at least he cites a preliminary work by Jadrincev (1890) and also the extensive collection of material by O. Donner and A. O. Heikel [et al.] (1892)), suspected in his work that these were early written monuments from one of the Yenissei languages. He had come to this conclusion because he had interpreted some of the repeating sequences of graphemes as prefixes and infixes – elements that we do not find in the suffix-agglutinating Uralic and Altaic languages:

“Erscheinungen wie das Vorkommen von Prae- und Infixen und Veränderungen im Innern des Stammes sind so durchaus un-uralaltaisch, dass wir uns nach einer anderen Sprachgruppe umsehen müssen, welche die bezeichneten Eigentümlichkeiten aufweist, und der wir daher die in der Karakorum-Inschrift vorliegende Sprache zuweisen können. Unter allen

¹ Knüppel, M. (2014). Eine Bibliographie zum “Runentürkischen”. *Journal of Oriental and African Studies*, 23, 416-419 [also review of Aydın, E. (2010). *Türk Runik Bibliyografyası* (2nd ed.). İstanbul: Türk Dilleri Araştırmaları Dizisi, 61]; Knüppel, M. (2017a). Weitere Bemerkungen und Ergänzungen zur “Runentürkischen” Bibliographie. *Journal of Oriental and African Studies*, 26, 382-385; Knüppel, M. (2018). Weitere Bemerkungen und Ergänzungen zur “Runentürkischen” Bibliographie (II). *Journal of Oriental and African Studies*, 27, 312-323; Knüppel, M. (2017b). [Rev. of] Aydın, Erhan: *Türk Runik Bibliyografyası*. 3. Auflage. İstanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat, 2017. 301 S. (Bilge Kültür Sanat Yayın No. 842). *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, 113(6), 487-488; Knüppel, M. (2017c). Noch einmal zur “runen”-türkischen Bibliographie. *SibStud*, 12(2), 129-144; Knüppel, M. (2020a). Weitere Nachträge zur “runen”-türkischen Bibliographie E. Aydıns. *Journal of Oriental and African Studies*, 29, 499-505.

² no. 65 (Aydın, 2017: 39).

³ On G. Huth (25.2.1867-1.6.1906) cf. also the obituary written by B. Laufer and the biographical sketch of C. Vogels (Laufer, B. (1906). Dr. Georg Huth. †. *T'oung Pao*, 7(5), 702-706; Vogel, C. (1974). Huth, Georg. *Neue Deutsche Biographie* in (Band 10, 94. p.). Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.), in addition the description in Knüppel, M. (2021a). *Georg Huth (1867-1906) als Tungusologe. Eine Materialsammlung*. Ulm (in print).

⁴ Cf. on this below.

Sprachgruppen dieses Charakters kann aber aus geographischen Rücksichten wohl nur die der von Klaproth so genannten „Yenisseier“-Sprachen in Betracht kommen” (Huth, 1892: 10-11).

[“Phenomena such as the occurrence of pre- and infixes and changes in the interior of the stem are so thoroughly un-Ural-Altaiic that we have to look around for another language group that shows the peculiarities described, and therefore we have those in the Karakoram inscription be able to assign the language in question. Of all the language groups of this character, however, for geographical reasons only those of the languages called by Klaproth "Yenisseier" languages can come into consideration”].

As an example he gave the grapheme sequence 𐰃𐰄 [aNDA; Dem.-Pron., 3rd Sg., Lok.-Abl.]. Huth understood this in KT 38 (for him according to Heikel / Donner et al. I: 3) as a prefix to the following 𐰃𐰄 [YaNA], since this also appears in other lines (KT 40), without “preceding” 𐰃𐰄 . In fact, the two grapheme sequences at the relevant point are separated by a colon (𐰃𐰄:𐰃𐰄) and 𐰃𐰄 is also not a suffix to the “preceding” one, as is the case with the one he also cited as an example 𐰃𐰄𐰅𐰆:𐰃𐰄 (KT 39; Heikel / Donner et al. I: 2).

𐰄 is even interpreted as a prefix (e.g. 𐰄𐰅𐰆𐰇𐰈𐰉 [KT 38; Heikel / Donner et al. I: 3]), as well as an infix (𐰄𐰅𐰆𐰇𐰈𐰉𐰄 [KT 34; Heikel / Donner et al. I: 7]) to a suspected strain 𐰅𐰆 . The series of examples could of course be continued here.

Huth’s explanations about the “position” of the graphemes and the direction of writing appear a little superfluous. In 1892, the number of graphemes and the course of the writing were already known and it also seemed clear in which “position” the writing was to be read. In addition, J. R. Aspelin had already expressed the assumption that these are monuments of a suffixing language.⁵ An assumption that Huth did not comment on – since he was probably not familiar with the corresponding lines from Aspelin. All further conclusions regarding the possibilities of future deciphering of the old Turkic “Runic” script in Huth’s work (the possibility that it must have been an early stage of the Yenisseian languages and that the Chinese inscription, which is also present on the stele, is an equivalent of the supposed Yenisseian text [the size of the text does already not match with regard to the number of lines]) are based on this “Yenisseian misinterpretation” and do not need to be retraced here.

Regardless of the basically wrong assumption regarding the language, which was hidden behind the still puzzling characters at the time, Huth was absolutely correct with a number of rather marginal statements. For example, the time of the inscription (8th century), which he had determined on the basis of the Chinese text and W. Radloff’s remarks on the history of the Uyghurs,⁶ as well as the function of the same

⁵ Aspelin, J. R. (1887). Fels- und Stein-Inschriften am oberen Jenisei. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 19, 529-531, esp. p. 529. Cf. on the importance of the work of O. Donner, A. O. Heikel and J. R. Aspelin see also the contribution of the author (Knüppel, M. (2021b). Zur Bedeutung Johann Reinhold Aspelins und Axel (Olai) Heikels für die Entzifferung der alttürkischen “Runen”schrift [in print]).

⁶ Radloff, W. (1891). *Das Kudatku Bilik des Jusuf Chass-Hadschib aus Bälasagun. Theil 1*. St. Petersburg, see here the introduction.

(1892: 22 ff.) (memorial inscription for the prince Kül Tegin [in Huth (1892: 18)ʼs work *Küe Tegin*, most likely from Chin. 闕特勤, *Què Tèqín*]) – even if the latter was already clarified due to the preparatory work by Heikel / Donner et al. Also of interest are Huthʼs considerations (based on the statements made by M. A. Castrén) with regard to a settlement area that once stretched much further south along the upper reaches of the Yenissei and the Turkicization of the Yenisseians – a process about which we have only recently become more aware of.

However, Huthʼs work is also significant insofar as we can see from this how a scholar in deciphering known facts – here the generally correct realization that prefixes in a language are on average less numerous than suffixes (which also applies to the Yenisseian languages)⁷ – can be led astray. While the Göttingen scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries already knew in principle, or at least could have known, that it probably is a Turkic language that is hidden behind the Asian “Runic” script (Knüppel, 2020b) (although the assumptions were based on speculation and assumptions made by chance) and J. R. Aspelin had recognized that this is probably a suffix-agglutinating language, no attempts were made to “decipher” it from any side (the rich collection of material by O. Heikel et al. strictly speaking, did not constitute such an attempt).

G. Huth not only undertook this, but also left us his attempt in published form, which gives us an almost unique insight into the “prehistory” of Old Turkological research. An episode in the history of research that has still not been dealt with, or at least not dealt with adequately. This is of course due to the fact that “failed” scientific undertakings rarely find the interest of the representatives of the relevant discipline, even though they are often much more meaningful than some supposedly “positive” results.

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⁷ “Dass aber jene Zeichenkomplexe Praefixe, diese Suffixe sind, nicht umgekehrt, darf man wohl daraus schliessen, dass die ersteren hinter den letzteren an Zahl zurückstehen, in den jenseischen Sprachen aber – wenigstens wenn man nach dem Beispiel der von Castrén bearbeiteten Grammatiken des Jenissei-Ostjakischen und Kottischen schliessen darf – wie wohl überhaupt in einer beträchtlichen Anzahl der Sprachen, welche zugleich Prae- und Suffixe besitzen – das gleiche numerische Verhältnis besteht” (Huth, 1892: 21-22). [“However, the fact that this combination of characters are prefixes, and the others are suffixes, and not the opposite case, can probably be inferred from the fact that the first ones are lesser in number, but in the Yeniseian languages – at least we can conclude from the example of Castrénʼs grammars of the Yenissei-Ostyak and Kott – as probably in the most languages which have prefixes and suffixes at the same time – the same numerical relationship exists.”].

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