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### The inscription on a wooden stick from the basin of the River Talas

The original connection between the Siberian and the East-European variants of Turkic “runic” alphabet is not quite clear and this problem raises many questions.<sup>1</sup> There is, for example, some difficulty with the identification of several signs. Then, it is hard to say how the so-called runic alphabet spread over very wide areas in rather short time. Some chronological discrepancies also complicate the picture. At last, there is no evidence of any outside source that the Turks in the Eastern Europe used a special script. Nevertheless, I think there is nothing to suggest that the East-European Turkic “runic” script was invented independently. There are at least three arguments to prove its connection with the Siberian “runic” alphabet. The existence of identical or similar signs is one of them. The second argument is the impossibility of parallel invention of two or three identical alphabets used by the same people. The third is the existence of the inscriptions which can be regarded as representing an intermediate stage. The inscription on a wooden stick from Talas belongs to this group. The signs  occurring in this inscription are not known outside Eastern Europe, while the signs  were used chiefly in Siberia.

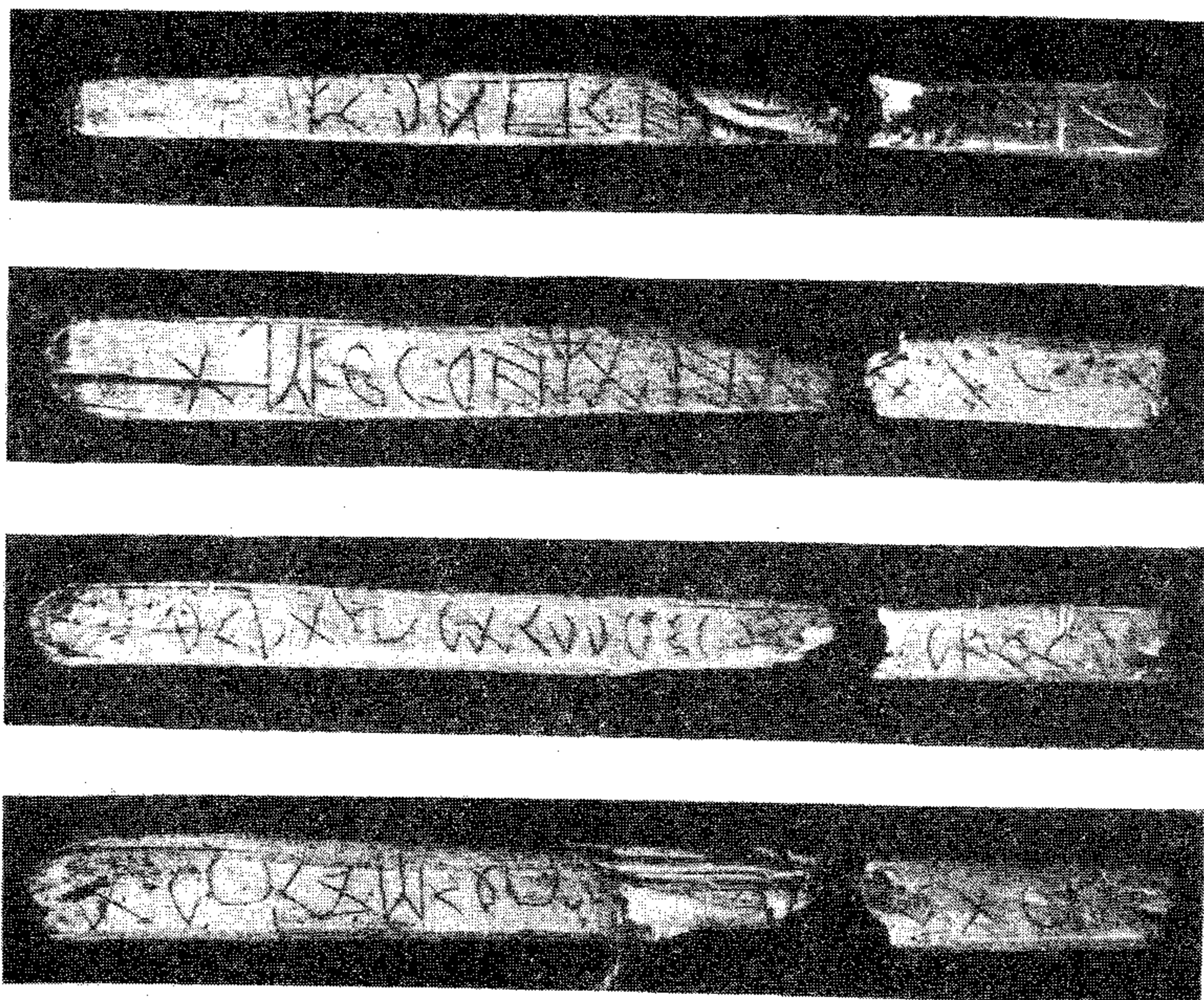
All the mentioned above provides sufficient evidence for the hypothesis that the Turkic “runic” alphabet was originally invented and came to being used in one place which had been the territory of the Eastern Turkic Khağanat.

<sup>1</sup> See И.Л. Кызласов, *Древнетюркская руническая письменность Восточной Европы (Новые аспекты изучения)*, “Проблеми на прабългарската история и култура”, София 1989, сс. 257–260; он же, *Древнетюркская руническая письменность Евразии*, Москва 1990, сс. 161–164.

The geographical location of Talas deserves special attention. The valley of the River Talas seems to have been on the way of "runic" migration going from the East to the West. This means that the inscription may be of special interest for the future "runologic" investigations.

The find was discovered in 1932 in course of excavations carried out by geologists on the southern slope of the Kirghiz mountains, in the direction of the Talas valley, at a point which is north-west of Dmitriyevskoye. At present, the wooden stick is preserved in the Hermitage in Sankt-Petersburg.

We do not know whether the wooden stick was used accidentally, not for any particular purpose, or had some destination. According to S.E. Malov this is a guiding rod, though he would like to see in it something of magic significance.<sup>2</sup>



The photograph of the Talas inscription was taken in infra-red rays in 1959 (Leningrad)

The length of the stick is about 14 cm., the width of the largest side is 1.2 cm. The inscription contains four lines of which everyone occupies one side. One or two letters in every line are missing because of breakage of stick, a part of which is left in the earth. Almost all the signs are carved clearly and appear to be in a good state of preservation.

<sup>2</sup> С.Е. Малов, *Таласские эпиграфические памятники*, "Материалы Узкомстариса", 6-7, Москва-Ленинград 1936, с. 30.



S.E. Malov was the first to publish the text with a commentary and photographs.<sup>3</sup> His transcription<sup>4</sup> is given below:

- I  $a_{\gamma}y_p a_{\dot{s}}u \sum (= ba\dot{s}) a_{\dot{t}t}y_m \ddot{a}b \ddot{a}_{\dot{s}}i_g \dots a_m i_d i_{\dot{s}} a_{\dot{c}}u \dots$   
 II  $\ddot{a}_g op^a \sum (= ba\dot{s}) a_{\dot{c}}y_{\dot{s}}y_p a_{\gamma}u ig^i_p y_{n\dot{c}}y_p gn_{cup} sqmug_{\dot{c}}$   
 III  $a_{\gamma}y_{\dot{t}t}y_m n^a j^a z^y i_{\dot{c}} a_{\gamma}y_{z^y}y_{\gamma} a_{\dot{s}}a a_{\gamma}y_{\dot{s}} \ddot{a}_d \dots$   
 IV  $a_{\dot{c}}u \ddot{a}_g i_z a_{\dot{s}}u a_z \dots$

The Malov's Russian translation is hardly satisfactory, and it is no use to translate it into English. It should be noted here that he realized the difficulty of reading the text and did not consider his edition as absolutely final. The new edition of it by S.E. Malov with slightly changed translation appeared in 1959, two years after his death.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, in 1940 the inscription was published by H.N. Orkun who refrained from any essential revision of S.E. Malov's edition.<sup>6</sup>

When in the late fifties I started to study the Talas stick inscription, I approached it differently. Frankly speaking, my results were not satisfactory, but they seemed to be giving hopes of success in the near future, that is why I decided to publish them.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, there was no positive reaction to this attempt.

Returning to the problem of reading the text, I want to explain my method of approach to the matter. The starting points of course may be various. In any case, two things at least must be taken into account. One of them is the possibility of attributing the text to a certain language. Another is the destination of the stick. The character of the alphabet and the geographical location of Talas valley make no doubt that the inscription is Turkic. As to the destination of the stick, suffice it to say that we have to do with an object used for a certain purpose.

First of all the distribution and frequency of the occurrence of the signs should be examined. The main question is whether the signs represent vowels. It is well known that the number of such signs is very limited. They are used, therefore, more often than those representing consonants. A comparison between the different variants of Turkic "runic" alphabet shows that the signs  $\succ \cap$  which very often occur in the Talas stick inscription have their analogy in the Don "runic" inscriptions. The absence of the sign  $\sqrt{\phantom{x}}$  noted in fact in both variants is particularly


<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 28–38.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> С.Е. Малов, *Памятники древнетюркской письменности Монголии и Киргизии*, Москва-Ленинград 1959, сс. 63–68.

<sup>6</sup> In detail see H. N. Orkun, *Eski Türk yazıtları*, III, İstanbul 1940, pp. 209–214 (*Ağaç üzerindeki yazıt*).

<sup>7</sup> А. М. Щербак, *Знаки на керамике и кирпичах из Саркела Белой Вежи. (К вопросу о языке и письменности печенегов)*, "Материалы и исследования по археологии СССР", No 75, Москва-Ленинград 1959, сс. 387–388.

remarkable. Further more, the existence of similar signs representing consonants, for example , is to be emphasized. Thus, the similarity of the script systems is obvious. Cf.:

## Don inscriptions

## Talas stick inscription

&gt;

 $a(\ddot{a})$ 

&gt;

∩

 $o(\ddot{o}), u(\ddot{u})$ 

∩

y

 $y(i)$ 

?



?

 $q(\gamma)$ 

X

 $z$ 

Real progress in reading the inscription from Talas could be obtained even if only one word could be identified. There are good reasons to consider the com-

bination  as one word. The character of the object, its possible destination, the fourfold repeating the same sign and our statements for the script system of the text lead us to suppose that the aforementioned combination can be very likely *qazγuq* (*qazquq*); the ancient Turkic variants of this word are *qazγuq*, *qazunquq*, *qazuq*, the normal Uigur spelling is , with the accusative suffix. The signs representing consonants require no additional commentary. The distribution of vowel signs appears to be typical, the orthographic rules are observed more or less strictly. Though in the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions labial vowels in the non-first syllables as usual are not designed, in the inscription from Kēžeelig Khovu they are represented by special vowel signs in all the positions.<sup>8</sup>

The *qazγuquγ* (*qazququq*) must play a key role in reading the other words of the line and be a background for solving the problem as a whole. It should be remembered that S. E. Malov had attached particular importance to the wooden sticks used by Uigurs (*qasquq*, *qazquγ*).<sup>9</sup> Such sticks with the Uigur and Tibetan letters from Qocho described by F. W. K. Müller are believed to have magic destination.<sup>10</sup> The inscriptions on the wooden sticks from the Sogdian collection are considered as special texts or agricultural notes.<sup>11</sup> According to the

<sup>8</sup> А. М. Щербак, *Памятники рунического письма енисейских тюрок*, "Народы Азии и Африки" 4, Москва 1964, с. 150.




<sup>9</sup> С. Е. Малов, *Таласские эпиграфические памятники*, с. 30.

<sup>10</sup> F. W. K. Müller, *Uigurica II*, Berlin 1911, s. 102; Idem, *Zwei Pfahlschriften aus den Turfanfunden*, Berlin 1915.

<sup>11</sup> Согдийский сборник, Ленинград 1934, сс. 14, 15, 47–51.

information given in the Chinese sources, wooden sticks and pieces of wood had been used by the ancient Turks for attesting the number of recruited soldiers.<sup>12</sup>

It seems reasonable to suggest that the words preceding *qazγuquγ* (*qazququq*) are closely connected with it. Having taken into account the accusative form, the signs and the context, I came to the conclusion that those would be something like *q(a)ltyr (a)n j(a)z(y)t*. The first word is a verb meaning "to leave", the second resembles one of the demonstrative pronouns. The former is usual one, the latter presents some difficulty. In this connection we can refer to several modern languages, for instance to Khirgiz: *ansyz* "without him", *an üčün* ~ *anyn üčün* "therefore", but the Khirgiz *an* appears to be reduced variant of the possessive case. The third word probably means "written", "covered with writing". Here it is quite to the point to put forward the question whether the use of the verb *jaz-* "write" was possible in "runic" texts? As a matter of fact, it is difficult to answer this question decidedly. No one knows when and where this verb began to be used. Sir G. Clauson states the existence of it in the eleventh century Turkic and points out that *jaz-* is of Oguz origin (*ol bitig jazdy* "he wrote a book", MK III 59).<sup>13</sup> However it may be, there is hardly any doubt about the existence of such a verb in pre-eleventh century period.

The reading of the third line of the Talas stick inscription makes it possible to identify some other words:  (*ä*)*büg* "house" (with the accusative suffix),  (*a*)*mγuta* "in Amğu", "from Amğu",  (*ä*)*ltä* "in the confederation of tribes". Now, I venture to suggest the following reading the first line: *q(a)p(a)va bašlyγ(?) (ä)ltä (ä)büg ... (a)mγuta ...* Several words remain beyond explanation.

In conclusion, it should be remarked that the inscription from Talas has not yet received the attention it deserves. The present attempt of reading it appears to be successful in the sense that the text agrees with the character of the object and does not contradict its supposed destination. But this does not mean that the problem is solved. I consider this reading as one of the points of departure for the future studies. It is a very suitable occasion to remember that at the present time we have at our disposal the interesting finds from various regions of Eastern Europe. Of course, texts from the Caucasus,<sup>14</sup> the

<sup>12</sup> See Liu Mau-Tsai, *Die chinesischen Nachrichten zur Geschichte der Ost-Türken (T'u-küe)*, I, Texte, "Göttinger Asiatische Forschungen" 10, Wiesbaden 1958, S. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Sir G. Clauson, *An etymological dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish*, Oxford 1972, p. 984.

<sup>14</sup> А. М. Шербак, *Несколько слов о приемах чтения рунических надписей, найденных на Дону*, "Советская Археология" XIX, Москва 1954, сс. 264–282.



Don<sup>15</sup> and the Volga regions<sup>16</sup> and the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions can hardly be united into one group, but they seem to be connected with each other, though the connection is not obvious. In these circumstances, we need texts which would occupy intermediate position between those which are well known and little known or unknown ones. The inscription on a wooden stick from the basin of the River Talas, as it has already been noted, is just that very one.<sup>17</sup> That was the main reason for discussing more than once the problem of its explanation and for the writing the present paper.

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<sup>15</sup> A. M. Ščerbak, *Les inscriptions inconnues sur les pierres de Khoumara (au Caucase du Nord) et le problème de l'alphabet runique des Turcs occidentaux*, "Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae" XV, 1-3, 1962, pp. 283-290.

<sup>16</sup> S. G. Kljaštornyj and I. Vásáry, *A runic inscription on a bullscull from the Volga region*, "Between the Danube and the Caucasus. Oriental sources on the history of the peoples of South-Eastern and Central Europe", Budapest 1987, pp. 171-179.

<sup>17</sup> According to O. Pritsak, it is the oldest monument in the Turkic «runic» script. See O. Pritsak, *Turcology and the comparative study of Altaic languages: The system of the Old Turkic runic script*, "Journal of Turkish Studies", 4, 1980, p. 85.