

The Historical and Archaeological Background for a Possible Relation Between Hurro-Urartian and Altaic

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The idea of a possible relation between the Altaic languages and the Hurro-Urartian languages was inspired by the fact that important Altaic stocks such as the Huns (Hsiunu), the Turks and the Mongolians moved westwards from the northern frontier of China to the Near East and Europe. Data from different periods and sources will be used to address this question.

1. Chinese and Classical Sources – 1st Millennium B.C.

An important Chinese document is "The Annals of Emperor Mu", the account of a journey to the West by Emperor Mu (reign ca. 947-928 BC).¹ It is a well-recorded event. Many reliable historical documents mention this journey without details. "The Annals of Emperor Mu", however, gives a vivid picture and information about a vast area from modern Mongolia to the West.

According to the Annals, Emperor Mu visited Yang-yu Mountain, possibly the area of Ulan-Bator, and the Pazyryk valley ca. 2000 km westwards, where at least 14 great kurgans have been found with horses and chariots of Chinese model, as well as the fragment of a bronze Chinese mirror from ca. 350 B.C. Emperor Mu met a certain "King Mother of the West", Xi(west)-wang(king)-mu(mother), ca. 1,500 km further west, thus in modern Kazakhstan to the east of the Urals. Scholars are agreed that the prototype of the King Mother of the West must have been a chieftain of a matriarchal tribe.

In this area Soviet scholars have excavated many kurgans revealing that

¹ There are various editions and studies of "The Annals of Emperor MU". The most recently published work is of Zheng Jiewen, *Mu tianzi zhuan tongjie*, Jinan: Shandong-wenyi chubanshe, 1992. From the end of 19th century into the 1920s' there were many studies on the Annals outside of China that were collected in the bibliography of Gu Shi, *Mu tianzi xi zheng jiang shu*, Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1934. When Inner Asia became isolated as the result of the Soviet Union's control, the Chinese emperor's travel through this region was neglected by western scholars. There is only one translation of this classical Chinese book, i.e. R. Mathieu, *Le Mu tianzi zhuan*, Paris: Collège de France, Institut des hautes études chinoises, 1978. Unfortunately he treated the Annals more as a literary and mythological source.

women's burials were generally richer in accompanying objects.² Many women had weapons, arrow heads, and altars as funeral objects. These show that the women in this society held strong positions. According to the Russian scholars³, these kurgans belong to the Sauromatians, the descendants of Amazons and Scythian fathers born in the steppes between the Don and Volga rivers if we believe Herodotus. In this matriarchal tribe women used bows and arrows, rode horses and were required to kill an enemy before marrying. The resemblance of Sauromatians with the "West King Mother of the Annals", in a place where archaeological evidences suggest the higher position of women, can not be a pure coincidence. Moreover the finds include a Chinese article, a bronze belt buckle from northern China, as well as a set of hammered and chased gold plaques probably depicting snow leopards, which inhabit the Tian Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan and western China.⁴

One fascinating account in the Annals is the "feather world" Emperor Mu visited last, where mountains of feathers were found. He rented a hundred carts to transport feathers to China. Feathers were used for making arrows, decorating flags, fans, etc. In the Zhou dynasty the government had a special "Feather-officer". Feathers were also trade objects in Mesopotamia. There are some cuneiform tablets from Umma, each recording transactions of 18,000 feathers.⁵

Twice in his «History» Herodotus mentions "the feather tale" about the Scythians' homeland: "It is said to be impossible to travel the region which lies further north, or even to see it, because of falling feathers -

² B. Genito and M.G. Moškova (eds.), *Statistical Analyses of Burial C of the Sauro-matian Period in Asian (6th-4th Centuries B.C.)*, Napoli 1995.

³ The archaeological reports and studies are generally written in Russian, which often did not reach western scholars. The articles published in the journal *Archaeology* are useful: J. Davis-Kimball, "Warrior Women of the Eurasian Steppes", *Archaeology* 50.1 (1997) 44-48. Davis-Kimball, "Chieftain or Warrior Priestess", *Archaeology* 50.5 (1997) 40-41. A book of G. Frumkin, *Archaeology in Soviet Central Asia*, Leiden / Köln 1970, serves as a brief survey, the book mentioned in note 2 and the article mentioned in note 4 give more details.

⁴ M. Treister, "Sarmatian Treasures of South Russia", *Archaeology* 50.1 (1997) 49-51.

⁵ The source is kindly provided by Assyriologist R. de Maaijer. Texts of Ur III period dealing with transactions of feathers are found only in Umma. De Maaijer mentioned 12 texts to me. One of them: 18000 pa mušen kū-bi 10 gín / 18000 feather with an equivalent of 10 shekel silver (D.C. Snell, *Ledgers and Prices, Early Mesopotamian Merchant Accounts* (YNER 8), New Haven / London 1982, text number 14 rev. 5-6, see also p. 125).

both earth and air are thick with them and they shut out the view." (Book IV). According to Herodotus, Scythians came to the Black sea region from Asia, and their homeland was in the north. Emperor Mu arrived in the "feather land" after travelling about 950 km further north-west from the land of the "King Mother of the West". It is quite logical to think that the "featherland" of the Annals and Herodotus is the same place and that there was a route between the east and west during the first millennium B.C.

2. Old Chariots — 2nd half of 2nd Millennium B.C.

The report that Emperor Mu "rented" a hundred of carts in the "featherland" illustrates how quickly a new technique could spread in ancient time. The oldest specimens of Chinese chariots were found in the tombs of Shang Dynasty.⁶ An upper limit for dating is 1200 B.C. Western sinologists think that the chariots must have been introduced from somewhere else, very probably from the trans-Caucasus.⁷ Two very well preserved chariots, variously dated to 1250±100 B.C. or about 1500 B.C., were discovered in waterlogged barrows at Lchashen in Armenia on the shore of Lake Sevan, midway between the Caspian and Black Seas.⁸ The most remarkable features of these chariots are the twenty-eight spokes and mid-placed axles. "The striking similarities Chinese models bear to Near Eastern types"⁹ are the mid-placed axle and the high number of spokes. I am not as certain as these western scholars that these chariots must be the forerunners of Shang Chariots. But it is clear from the finds of the same type of chariots, that there must have been connections between northern China and the Caucasus in the 2nd millennium B.C.

We can conclude that the Altai and northern China had contacts with west Asia before the Huns, Turks and the Mongolians with the help of chariots and horseriding.

3. The Tocharian Languages — Early 2nd Millennium B.C.

The Tocharian languages (A and B) were discovered at the beginning of this century in the city states on the northern side of the Tarim Basin, Xinjiang of China. The forms of the word for "100" in Tocharian are *känt*

⁶ E.L. Shaughnessy: *Western cultural innovations in China, 1200 BC* (Sino-Platonic Papers 11), 1989.

⁷ E.L. Shaughnessy, "Historical Perspectives on the Introduction of the Chariot into China", *HJAS* 48 (1988) 189-237. D.W. Anthony and N.B. Vinogradov, "Birth of the Chariot", *Archaeology* 48.2 (1995) 36-41.

⁸ St. Piggott: "Chariots in the Caucasus and in China", *Antiquity* 48/189 (1974) 16-24.

⁹ E.L. Shaughnessy, *HJAS* 48 (1988) 189.

and *kante*, with the same initial *k-* found in Latin *centum*, in contrast to the fricative initials of Sanskrit *śatam*. Tocharian is then closely related to the western European branches, closer to Hittite language than to the Indo-Iranian. Hittitologists have made comparative studies of Hittite-Tocharian languages.¹⁰

Manuscripts in Tocharian were written late, between the 6th and 9th century A.D. Based on Chinese dynastic histories and diaries of Chinese travelers, the Tocharians were present in the area around Bactria from the latter part of the second century B.C., but about them little is known. Sinologists have discussed the possibility of identifying Tocharians with a nomadic tribe Da-rou-zhi (Yüeh-chih / Yuezhi / Ruzhi to western sinologists). If the relation could be confirmed, the time Tocharians have lived in north-western region of China can be traced back to the 5th century B.C.

New finds in Xinjiang area throw more light on the Tocharian problem. These are thousands of natural mummies with intact skin, flesh, hair, and internal organs extraordinarily well preserved by the particular circumstances.¹¹ Research indicates a genetic connection with Northwestern Europeans. The mummies in the Tarim Basin are taken now as the ancestors of Tocharians, since the Tocharians were the one and only western European speaking-people in this region. They lived in northwestern China since ca. 2000 B.C. because some mummies are 4000 years old.

4. The Hurrians as Migrants from the East

Based on onomastic materials in different archives in north Mesopotamia it is known that the Hurrians have been present in north Mesopotamia since the 3rd millennium B.C. Did they come from outside Mesopotamia or did they originate in northern Mesopotamia? From the linguistic links

¹⁰ S.W. Couvreur, "Les dérivés verbaux en *-ske/o* du Hittite et du Tocharien", *Revue des études indo-européennes* 1 (1938) 89-101, *idem*, "Les rapports entre le hittite et le tocharien", *ACIO* 20, Louvain 1940, 141-143, W. Krause, "Bemerkungen zu dem nominalen *at*-Suffix im Hethitischen und Tocharischen", in: MNHMHΣ XAPIN. *Gedenkschrift Paul Kretschmer I*, Wien 1956, 189-199, W. Petersen, "Hittite and Tocharian", *Language* 9 (1933) 12-34.

¹¹ V.H. Mair, "Mummies of the Tarim Basin", *Archaeology* 48.2 (1995) 28-35, K. Jettmar: "Trockenmumien in Sinkiang und die Geschichte der Tocharer", *Antike Welt* 29.2 (1998) 135-142, J.P. Mallory and V.H. Mair: *The Tarim Mummies. Ancient China and the Mystery of the Earliest Peoples from the West*, London 2000. This book fully describes the mummies of Tarim and gives a well-researched historical and linguistic account.

between Hurrian and Urartian languages it has been suggested that Transcaucasia or eastern Anatolia was the homeland of these people.¹² The question is whether the Caucasus was indeed the original homeland or only a transit place.

Scholars recognised a Hurrian-Aryan symbiosis in the Mitannian kingdom from the beginning of Hurrian studies.¹³ It is a historical fact that the Aryan partner of the Mitannians is Indic, the most eastern branch next to the Tocharians.

M. van Loon studied archaeological evidences of the movement of ancient Iranians and concluded: "They must have come from the east and the north."¹⁴ He rejected therefore the possibility of an eastwards Indic movement while the Iranians moved westwards.

In a review article Güterbock treated the linguistic problem of the Aryans clearly. He rejected the idea of "an undivided 'Primitive' Arian"; and the existence of the Arian element in north Mesopotamia before the fall of Babylon.¹⁵ This means the Aryans did not live in Mesopotamia before some of them arrived there together with the Mitannians.

If the Aryans did not become involved with the Hurrians in northern Mesopotamia, as both archaeological and linguistical evidences prove, the Hurrians must have met the Aryans in the east. Considering the positions of the ancient Iranians and Aryans of the second millennium B.C. it is reasonable to suggest that the Mitannian Hurrians came from the same region as the Huns, Turkic and Mongolians many centuries later.

5. Horse Training

The Mitannians are well known charioteers. The contribution of the Mitannians to the usage of light chariots, however, was not their knowledge of making chariots, but training the horses. In Tell Mozan/Urkish there are already indications of the domestication of equids.¹⁶ The

¹² About the relation between the Urartians and Hurrians see G. Wilhelm, *The Hurrians*, Warminster 1989, 4. M.N. van Loon, *Urartian Art*, Istanbul 1966, 3 ff.

¹³ In G. Wilhelm, *The Hurrians*, this question is thoroughly analyzed (p. 17 ff.). There are many studies in this field. Mallory and Mair discuss the question of Indo-Aryan and Iranian languages in their book mentioned in note 11, pp. 105, 117, 257 ff.

¹⁴ M. N. van Loon: "Mitanni: a Link between East and West?" *Persica* 10 (1982) 47-86.

¹⁵ H.G. Güterbock, Review of A. Kammenhuber, *Hippologia Hethitica*, in: *JAOS* 84 (1964) 267-273, esp. p. 269.

¹⁶ R. Hauser: "The Equids of Urkish: What the Figurines Say", in: G. Buccellati and M. Kelly-Buccellati (eds.): *Urkish and the Hurrians. Studies in Honor of Lloyd Cotsen* (BibMes 26 = Urkish/Mozan Studies 3), Malibu 1998, 63-74.

Mittanian man Kikkuli wrote a treatise on horse training. Their advanced knowledge and experience of horse breeding and horse training betrayed an original homeland in the steppes rather than the mountainous Caucasus, and their kinship with the nomads on horseback in the first millennium B.C.

6. Suggestions

In the steppes during the 3rd and 2nd millennium B.C. the Afanasievo culture was followed by the Andronovo Culture to the west and the Karasuk culture to the east.¹⁷ In the Afanasievo period there were various migrations. The Andronovo Culture is characterised as Indo-European, although some of them had a striking similarity to the Tungus peoples.¹⁸ The Karasuk Culture was Altaic and very closely related to the northern Chinese Culture.¹⁹ In all periods the Altai region was involved in the development of the steppes. The Hurrians could be one of the stocks in the steppes migrating gradually into northern Mesopotamia from the 3rd millennium on. The well-known Hurrian Mittanians absorbed Indic elements, moved into Mesopotamia and built up the Mitannian kingdom there. We do not have reports about the Hurrians after the fall of the Hittite empire. Centuries later, the Urartians came to the Near East. The time gap and the linguistic difference between the Hurrians and Urartians should be explained by the fact that the Urartians were not a direct continuation of the Hurrians, but a related stock. The nomadic tribes,²⁰ the Huns, the Turkic and the Mongolians one after another moved through the same route.

In the Hurrian "Amarna letter" Tušratta complained: "And for the horses(?) my brother did not reward(?) me with the gold the way my forefathers (were rewarded(?))." (iii 6-67), G. Wilhelm *apud* W.L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, Baltimore / London 1992, 68. The Hurrian horses must be as internationally well known and wanted as the Egyptian gold.

¹⁷ J. Davis-Kimball, *Nomads of the Eurasian Steppes in the Early Iron Age*, Berkeley 1995.

¹⁸ K. Jettmar, "The Altai before the Turks", *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 23 (1951) 135-223.

¹⁹ Cf. notes 16 and 17.

²⁰ The Alans, for example, are recorded in the Chinese chronicles during the 1st century AD, and afterwards their names were preserved in sources as Latin, Greek, Arabic, Armenian, Hebrew, Iranian, Syriac, etc. The Ossetic language spoken now in the Caucasus is believed to be the continuation of Alanic that would belong to the Iranian linguistic family. See A. Alemany, *Sources on the Alans*, Leiden / Boston / Köln 2000.

What about the linguistic connection between the Hurro-Urartian and the Altaic? Hurrian and Urartian should be excluded from any other known language families, however they share important features of the Altaic languages: they are agglutinative; have no prefixes; use postpositions but not prepositions; do not use grammatical gender; have no relative pronouns; and have an aversion to placing two consonants together at either the beginning or the end of a word.²¹ The historical links between the Altai region and Anatolia strengthen these possible ties.²²

7. An Additional Remark

Altaic studies often depend on materials recorded in Chinese. It is therefore sometimes difficult to identify a language as Sinitic or Altaic. For example the Huns are generally thought to be Turkic people and Turkic speaking, but a famous sinologist believes they were Chinese based on the language evidence scattered in various sources. According to historical records some ancient Tibeto-Chinese tribes moved westwards and became nomads.²³ Attempts have been made to show the triangular connection of the Sino-Tibetan languages and the Yeniseian and North-Caucasian languages.²⁴ The possibility that Hurrian and Urartian languages were related with the Sinitic can not be ruled out.

²¹ N. Poppe, *Introduction to Altaic Linguistics*, Wiesbaden 1965.

²² H.R. Roemer (ed.): *History of the Turkic Peoples in the Pre-Islamic Period*, Berlin 2000. V. Kubarev: "Der Altai als Verkehrsweg «der grossen Wanderer»", *Antike Welt* 32.2 (2001) 121-137.

²³ E.G. Pulleyblank: "Chinese and Indo-Europeans", *JRAS* 1966, 9-39.

²⁴ I.M. Diakonoff / S.A. Starostin: *Hurro-Urartian as an Eastern Caucasian Language* (MSS Beih. NF 12), München 1986. S. Starostin: "On the Hypothesis of a Connection between the Sino-Tibetan Languages and the Yeniseian and North-Caucasian Languages", in: V. Shevoroshkin (ed.): *Dene-Sino-Caucasian Languages. Materials from the First International Interdisciplinary Symposium on Language and Prehistory, Ann Arbor, 8-12. November 1988* (Bochum Publications in Evolutionary Cultural Semiotics 32), Bochum 1991.