

## On South Siberian Place-Name Reconstruction

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### Abstract

Within the theory of place-name reconstruction and its application to the indigenous languages of Siberia (the Russian Federation) that did not have a recorded history of their namehood till the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. I would suggest a number of interpretations that could be treated as evidence for the Tocharians' presence in the South of Siberia.

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The Mountain Altai Republic (formerly the Mountain Altai autonomous region) is a constituent part of the Russian Federal Republic. It is situated in the south of West Siberia bordering the Mongolian Republic and the Chinese People's Republic to the south-east, the Kazakh Republic to the south-west, adjoining the Kemerovo region and Khakasija to the north and Tyva to the east. The Altai people live throughout the region, constituting the majority (from 55 to 90% of the population) in the eastern and central parts. The Russians live throughout the territory, as well as being the largest group (from 60 to 90%) in the north, north-west and south-west. The Kazakhs live mostly in the south-east. For almost three hundred years Altai and Russian peoples have lived side by side and this intercourse has resulted in the adoption of numbers of Altai names by the Russian people and of many Russian names by the Altai. On the whole the naming of places in the Mountain Altai by the Russians is sufficiently recent for the circumstances to be part of well-recorded history

Of the 10,000 place-names of the Mountain Altai region I have at my disposal at present, slightly more than 7,000 correlate with the lexemes of the Altai (the language of the Altai people) and Russian languages and their dialects. Both languages spoken in the region have absorbed place-names of the former inhabitants, thus becoming receiving languages. At present the Altai and Russian place-names constitute the top stratum in the place-name continuum.

The problem is that no place-name in South Siberia was written down in Russian before the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the earliest complete written records of geographical names were made at least three centuries after that. As many names in Siberia have existed for centuries in the oral tradition, the common practice of place-name investigation is out of the question here. With European names, a scholar must first make as complete a collection as possible of the early forms of each name and only then can he/she deal with the specific problems confronting him/her in the light of a thorough knowledge of all languages involved in the formation of place-names in the region, from the earliest times to the present day. To go beyond the often misleading appearances and to make a careful analysis of the changes which have taken place in the evolution of a place-name, scholars also need a profound knowledge of history, geography and archeology.

The point to be made here is that many places on the Altai land were known to Russian cartographers in their original pronunciation; that is why place-names are often found in a bewildering variety of spellings, some undoubtedly erroneous but all of them attempting to

express the Altai people's pronunciation. The variation in the spelling of place-names on geographical maps and in historical and other documents is often a sign of ignorance of the Altai language and mispronunciation of native names on the part of the Russians. The better the Russian ear of the person in charge of writing down the Altai names, the closer these place-names were to the original forms. Philologists must work on material such as this. They have to interpret these spellings, eliminate errors and determine the original form of the name; then, and only then, can they attempt an explanation. The older the recorded forms and the greater their number, the more hope there is of success.

The landmarks that regularly have pre-Altai and, naturally, pre-Russian names are big rivers and mountains. As a rule these names are short, having arisen at an early date and established themselves in independent use, often superseding the longer compound names. Many of them are still mysterious and unintelligible and the location of the features to which they may refer is vague and indefinite, but place-name evidence has identified some and revealed traces of distant and otherwise unknown migrations.

As I have found, place-names in Altai have originated from different sources, the main ones in geographical nomenclature being respectively Russian, Altai, Mongolian, Samoyedic, Finno-Ugric, Yeniseian and possibly Tocharian. Although the first bit of evidence of Altai earliest settlers goes back hundreds and thousands of years, the problem of the depth and chronology of the strata in place-name reconstruction is one of the gaps in our knowledge and it requires the support of special techniques for its study. Also, the necessity of tracing the history of Siberian place-names in general and Mountain Altai names in particular is now generally recognized.

It is common knowledge that the place-name continuum in any region is multilingual and multilayered. Place-name language identification begins with the separation of toponyms that may find a reliable explanation in modern languages (Altai and Russian in my case). Then a considerable group of place-names remains in which one may notice items with identifiable final elements, in particular place-names ending in *-nur/-nor*, *-usun/uzun*, *-daba*, *-ejir*, *-khangai*, *-uul*, *-xür*, *-šil*, and others. Mapping them revealed their clear-cut and dense distributions over the area within certain isoglosses testifying to the fact that place-names constituting them have been left by a people speaking a Mongolian language who not only went through the region but settled and stayed in it for a fairly long period of time so that they could pass place-names to the succeeding generation. Areal distribution of final elements seen on the schematic map excluded any chance coincidence, and was supported by other Mongolian place-names found within the same areal boundaries. Conversely, the sparse distribution of foreign place-names in a particular territory can only indicate the routes of an ethnic group's migration (for example, sparse Mongolian toponyms along the Chujski tract in the Mountain Altai).

As a rule, while migrating people try to retain place-names of their motherland in a new place of habitation. A good example is English and Irish migrants who brought with themselves place-names of Great Britain to America, Australia, and New Zealand. With the building up of place-names on the same pattern the key to opaque toponyms and their deciphering should be searched for outside the boundaries of the region investigated. This is the case with the Mongol-Kalmyk stratum in the Mountain Altai. First, the number of distributed Mongol-Kalmyk geographical names exceeds 800. Second, many of them are based on similar patterns that have been employed in Mongolian place-names registered on medieval maps and compiled by M. Haltod. I compared the Mongolian place-names registered in the

Mountain Altai with those given in his book *Mongolische Ortsnamen* and found the corpus of 13,644 geographical names from the book most useful for my studies on Altai place-names as it helped me to find similar forms of place-names in the territory of the Mountain Altai. It is obvious that the system of geographical names of Mongolia serves as a key to decipher Mongol-Kalmyk place-names in the Mountain Altai and it turned out to be good proof for the Mongolian stratum. This stratum does not require both painstaking efforts on the part of a researcher and many years of search.

And now let me introduce some historical facts explaining the occurrence of Mongolian place-names in the territory of the Mountain Altai. For a very long period of time Altai and Mongol tribes have lived side by side in South Siberia and this intercourse has resulted in the adoption of a considerable number of Mongol names by the Altai and other peoples. I share the viewpoint according to which there is a manifold typological convergence between the Turkic and Mongolian languages. First, in both groups of languages most place-names are built up on a similar pattern, in which a noun is preceded by a modifying adjective or a dependent noun. Second, in approximately 70% of cases a place-name is marked by a generic element denoting a topographic feature. Third, approximately 30% of lexemes with high and medium frequencies occurring in the Turkic and Mongolian place-name thesauruses (especially in the domains COLOR, QUANTITY, SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION, SIZE, and SHAPE) are Turkic and Mongolian common words.

And now for some brief historical facts about Altai-Mongol contacts. They began in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. During the 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries the Kidan fought incessantly with the Turks, Uighurs and other tribes, as well as with the tribes of China. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century the Kidan empire had been finally established. At the height of its prosperity it included the south-eastern and central parts of Mongolia and a considerable part of north-eastern China. Altai legend has it that the Altai people were subjugated and taken away by the Kidan from their territory. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Chinggis Khaan's descendants controlled a vast territory from the Dnestr River in the west to the Korean peninsula in the east. It included the Mountain Altai as well. And finally the Altai people fell under the influence of the Oirad whose supremacy lasted till 1756.

Having collected the group of Mongolian place-names from the data given by their areal distribution it turned out to be necessary to apply reconstruction techniques in order to restore the original form of place-names in question lost with the passage of time. Here it is sufficient to note that there can be no doubt that people do not acquire foreign place-names by rote and then simply reproduce them in response to environmental stimuli, but adopt and assimilate them phonetically, semantically, morphologically and syntactically to their own speech habits. Due to reconstruction techniques applied I managed to single out around 800 place-names which the Mongolian tribes employed while staying in the territory of the Mountain Altai at different times of their peaceful contacts and war conflicts with the native peoples.

In Altai three strata (Altai, Russian and Mongolian) satisfy all criteria of place-name etymon reliability.

What is also important in stratum identification is the number of place-names included in it as their mass presentation strengthens the reliability of arguments. At the same time single examples in the majority of cases need more grounds for their language identification, nevertheless leaving a lot of doubts.

What can be said about strata that do not have dense place-name distributions? The process of place-name identification in the circumstances is brought to assumptions and suggestions often based on explanations taken from different languages. At the same time scholars who do their research on geographical names always remember that the place-name lexicon of any people is built up of units with specificity of their own and on certain patterns which are stable and repeated throughout the entire Turkic, Mongolian, Slavic, etc. worlds. Place-name patterns are canonical and prototypical. They reflect the universality of the human mind that does not allow the single word *both* for the Ob' river-name designation, *good day, fellow* or *farewell the boat* for other topographic features.

The universal feature of all geographical nomenclature is that the basis of big rivers' designation is a lexeme meaning 'water; river; flowing; running'. Names of big rivers have a tendency to be preserved for centuries and the sources of their origin should be searched for in ancient languages. In the Mountain Altai there are three sets of toponyms, the identification of which I shall try to make.

At this point I will start with history and terminology which I consider fairly confusing in their present state. No one denies the contacts between Indo-European peoples and the inhabitants of the Mountain Altai in that very remote past, although a number of questions arise in this connection: 1. Which of the Indo-European peoples? 2. Did any Indo-European tribe inhabit Altai or just make use of its permafrost as a burial place? 3. Do place-names collected in the territory of Altai and considered as traces of Indo-European peoples enter any other areal outside the region or did they exist on their own? 4. What were the tribes the Indo-Europeans coexisted with and who may be treated as place-name transmitters? All the questions posed have their emotional and political bias and require a cautious approach.

To find answers to all the questions is not an easy task. Let me start with the first one. Historians and archeologists from Russia have different names for those peoples who appeared on the Altai scene with the excavation of Pazyryk burial mounds in the 1950s by S. Rudenko. The archeologist called people found there the Scythians and with the passage of time he added other names from the North-Iranian languages: the Sarmatians, the Sakians, and the Yüeh-chih. Much later, even in the year 2000 Russian scholars (N. Polos'mak, T. Chikisheva, etc.) wrote about the Sakian people in the same territory. It goes without saying that the scholars engaged in Central Asia and South Siberia studies should check the Chinese sources of information in which ethnonyms for the Iranian peoples can be found. They are as follows: Ta-yüan (the Tocharians), Yüeh-chih (the Scythians), Sai/Sək (the Sakians).

With the help of Chinese chronicles the Canadian scholar E. Pulleyblank [2002, 15 (IX)] formed his own view on the history of ancient Indo-European peoples. He claims that the Tocharians spoke Indo-European languages less than 1,000 years ago. Chinese contacts with the Tocharian people were permanent and lasting. They ended in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries after the Uighur invasion which brought about the extinction of the Tocharians. E. Pulleyblank [2002, 16 (IX)] assumes that the easternmost people speaking Tocharian were Yüeh-chih who lived in Kansu, i.e. inside China proper. One may postulate that Ta-yüan (the Tocharians) had been occupying Sogdiana approximately since 124 A.D., subduing the lands lying to the north of the River Oxus that before belonged to Yüeh-chih [Pulleyblank 2002, 26 (IX)]. E. Pulleyblank agrees with Mallory who in 1989 suggested that the Proto-Tocharians could be identified with the Afanasjev culture flourishing in the upper reaches of the Yenisei River (the Minusinsk basin) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. Then around the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup>

millennium B.C. the Tocharians moved southwards to the Tarim basin. The Tocharians' arrival from the north around the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. may be compared to mummy datum identification. It also correlates with the appearance of Qijia culture in Gansu and Qinghai which had higher agricultural economy and metallurgy compared to the previous Neolithic Yangshao period. It is likely that the Proto-Turkic Tingling (later Tiele), Hiankun (Kyrghyz) and Xinli (Syr) peoples who settled in the place later inherited Afanasjev culture in the upper reaches of the Yenisei River. Finally, in the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. they were subdued by Hsiung-nu, a people considered by E. Pulleyblank to belong to the Yeniseian phylum [2002, 412 (IV); 416-417 (XII)].

And now for the three sets of place-names found in the Mountain Altai. The first one has the element *aba* in its composition. The distribution of the final *-ob*, *-ob'*, *-op*, *-op'*, *-ab*, *-aba*, *-ap* can be seen on the schematic map compiled on the database borrowed from the Siberian place-name catalogue which is stored at Tomsk Pedagogical University. The basis of all the schematic maps (more than 100) is card-indexes arranged both in direct and reverse alphabetical order. The card-indexes have been compiled on the basis of geographic coordinate system from different sources, primarily from geographical maps of West and East Siberia and the adjacent regions with a scale of 1:1,000,000. On each slip there is a place-name, the object it refers to, various spellings of the place-name and its coordinates (latitudes and longitudes). I think that for the place-names of indigenous origin on the vast expanses of Siberia the readings of schematic maps or charts should be considered one of the most convincing proofs in onomastics. A simple principle of isogloss counts, behind which lie years of close study and research, helped Siberian scholars to open up new avenues for the history of Siberia. None of the more recent theories have been worked out to the point where they can be evaluated as having done as much as isogloss counts, which have exerted a profound influence upon the development of onomastic evidence. Isogloss counts have come to be accepted by most of those in what we may think of as the mainstream of scholarship as the very basis not only of the onomastic method but of the whole discipline of historical onomastics.

Toponyms with the final elements given above (*-ob*, *-ob'*, *-op*, *-op'*, *-ab*, *-aba*, *-ap*) make up three well-formed isoglosses. One of them is the territory of Uzbekistan, where the place-names ending in *-ap*, *-ab*, and *-ob* are concentrated. The second embraces both banks of the River Kama in the European part of the Russian Federation from the settlement Butysh in the south-west to the settlement Cherdyn' in the north-east. Here the dense concentration of toponyms in *-ap*, *-ob*, *-op'* may be observed. And the third areal is located at a place stretching from the River Choja to the River Inja and its confluence with the River Ob', i.e. from Novosibirsk to Gorno-Altai, on the right bank of the River Katun', at a place between the two rivers, the Ob' and Chumysh, and further on to the River Inja. The third areal shows the distribution of the toponyms ending in *-op*, *-ap*, *-aba*. The maps of the same scale show a sparse distribution of the final part in question throughout Khakasija. The number of place-names in the third areal I am mostly interested in exceeds 20, to which one may add derivatives and come out with the total number of 30. All the languages of the Turkic, Mongolian, Samoyedic, Finno-Ugric, Tungusic, and Yeniseian families that people speak or spoke in Siberia cannot help in explaining these place-names. The links I managed to find are the following ones: Sogd.  $\bar{a}p_{(ph)}/\bar{a}\beta/p_{(ph)}$  – water,  $\bar{a}p\check{c}i/\bar{a}pn\bar{e}$  – waters [Gharib 1995, 8, 17]. Hit.  $a=m\bar{u}$  – water [Sturtevant 1936, 5]. Hit.  $abu=attas$  – father [Sturtevant 1936, 24]. Tch.  $\bar{a}p^*$  – water; river < PTch.  $*\bar{a}p$  < PIE.  $*h_2\bar{e}p-$  ~  $h_2ep-$  [Skt.  $\bar{a}p-$ , Avestan  $\bar{a}\check{s}$  – water, Gk.  $\bar{A}p\acute{\iota}a$  – Peloponnesus, OPruss.  $ape$  – water,  $apus$  – spring, Lith.  $\grave{u}p\acute{e}$  – water] [Adams 1999, 44]. Sumerian  $a$  – water [Woodard 2004, 30]. Turner [1966, 19] expands the limits of comparison

to *áp* – water, *ápah* – waters (Regweda), *āpō*, *āpa-ṇ* – (Pali), *āu-f* (Pracrits), *abō*, *ābu* (Ashkun), *āwə* (Kati or Katei), *āw* (Wajgali), *āwə* (Prasun), *āu* (Dameli), *aμ* (Gavar-bati). Cf. Turk. *áb* – 1) water; fluid; river; source; fountain; sap, juice; sap and soul of the universe; tears; sweat; urine; semen; broth; wine, drunkenness, 2) freshness, luxuriousness, vigor; grace, charm; radiance; dignified look; sense of honor; virtue; chastity; excellence, rank, dignity; glory, fame; value; prosperity; health; splendor; polish, shine (of metal); luster, glitter; temper (of steel); diamond; precious stone; pearl; crystal; glass; mirror; sword, knife, dagger; mercury, 3) mercy, compassion, pity, 4) way, road: fashion, mode, rule, habit; *Abi Ruknabad* – brook near Shiraz, *Abi Zenderud* – Zenderud (river of Ispahan) [NRTED 1968, 1-2].<sup>1</sup>

It is tempting to link all the forms given with E. *aquatic*, F. *aquatique*, L. *aqua* – water, it also occurs as a name of a river in the form *a*, *aa* [Etymologisch woordenboek <...> 1990, 64], L. *aquāticus* – in, or pertaining to water, watery, F. *aqua* – вода, that relates the lexeme with Goth. *afla* – river; waters, OHG *aha*, OFris. *ā*, *ē*, ON *ö*, OE *ēa* – water’ (Klein 1966, 97). And some other forms added: Goth. *aflawa* – river, OHG *ouwa* – watery meadow, ON *āēger* – sea, Skt. *āpas*, Gr. *hudōr* – water together with reconstructed IE forms *\*akw* (Partridge 1958, 22) or *\*ket’-/\*ut’-* (cf. Hit. *ḫitti* – in water, *ḫitaz* – out of water; Skt. *udā* – waters, waves [Gamkrelidze, Ivanov 1984, 671]).

### Abbreviations

E. – English  
 F. – French  
 Hit. – Hittite  
 Gk. – Greek  
 Goth. – Gothic  
 IE – Indo-European  
 L. – Latin  
 Lith. – Lithuanian  
 OE – Old English  
 OFris. – Old Frisian  
 OHG – Old High German  
 ON – Old North  
 OPruss. – Old Prussian  
 PIE – Proto-Indo-European  
 PTch. – Proto-Tocharian  
 Skt. – Sanskrit  
 Sogd. – Sogdian  
 Tch. – Tocharian  
 Turk. – Turkish

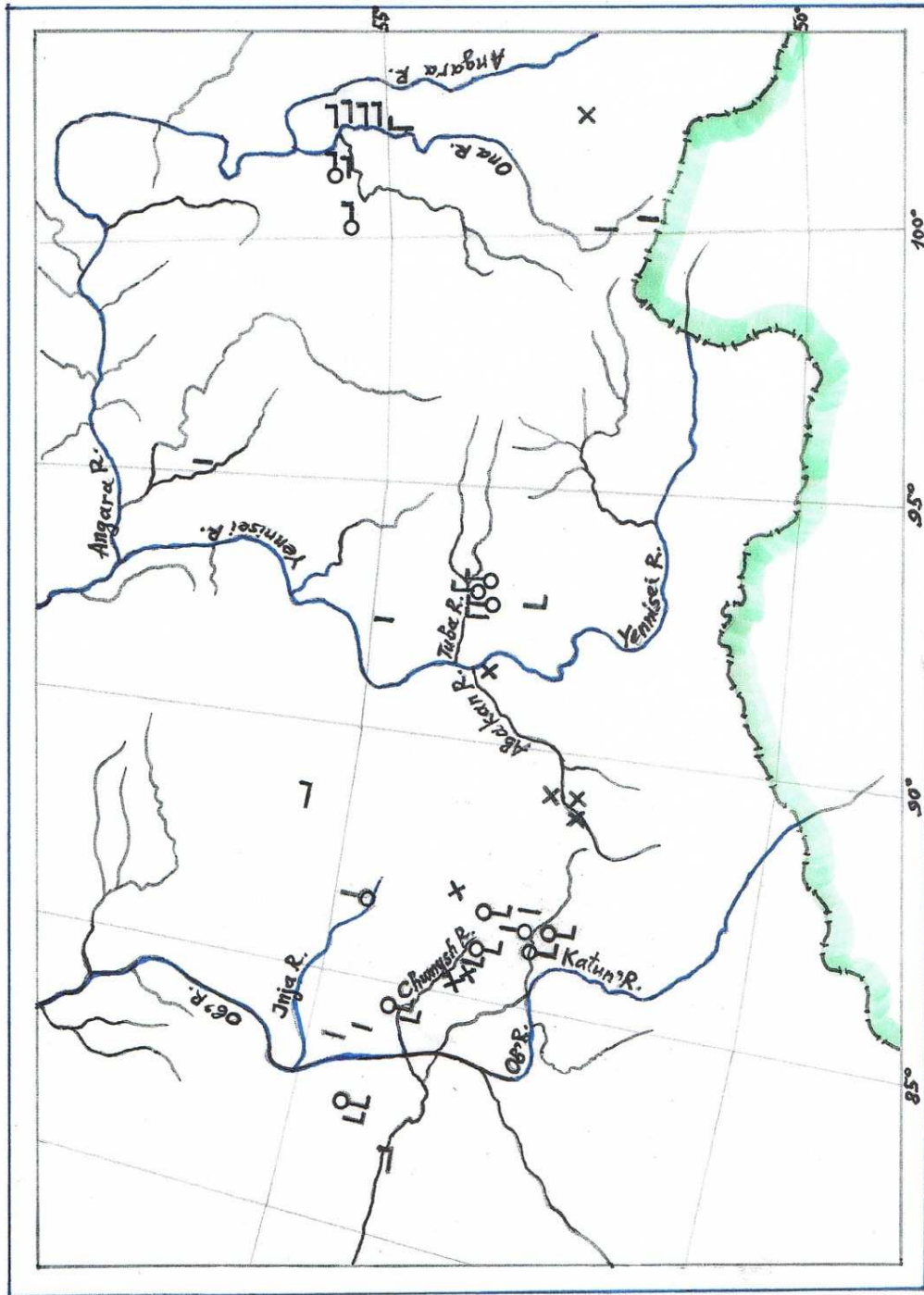
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<sup>1</sup> All of the lexeme meanings are given in one and the same dictionary entry.

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Distribution of ob, ob', op, op', ab, aba, ap place-names in the territory of West Siberia

	ob	ob'	op	op'	ab	aba	ap
Rivers	—	—	—	—	—	X	—
Settlements	○	○	○	○	○		○