

What Did the Earliest Central Asian Languages Sound Like?

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Abstract

For all but the most obscure modern spoken languages it is no longer much of a problem to get basic information on their phonology. We can find someone who speaks it and ask them to pronounce what we want, or we can find something on the internet. Even for medieval Central Eurasian languages we have a fairly good idea of their pronunciation once they begin to be written relatively widely and there are foreign transcriptions of the languages. But what about ancient and medieval languages that died many centuries ago, especially ones that do not have any known modern descendants? In fact, we often do not even know if they have any ancient relatives or modern descendants, partly because we are not sure what they sounded like.

This paper first briefly discusses the earliest known Central Eurasian steppe zone languages for which we have any linguistic data, namely Scythian, an Iranian language that has several descendants (including modern Ossetian) and Hsiung-nu, a language which has not been shown to be certainly related to any other language, though it is shown in a new article by Shimunek et al. (2015) that the brief 329 CE prophecy in Chinese transcription, which has been argued by some to be in Hsiung-nu, is actually in a slightly archaic, very interesting form of Turkic, while the people are actually referred to as Chieh (*Kir) by the Chinese (i.e., they do not call them Hsiung-nu) and as Xwn “Huns” by the Sogdians.

The main focus of the paper is the sound of Tokharian (or “Tocharian”)—actually two languages (Tokharian A or “East Tokharian”, and Tokharian B or “West Tokharian”), which are preserved in early medieval manuscripts from East Turkistan (now the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China), in eastern Central Asia. Unfortunately, when the Tokharians merged with the Uighurs late in the first millennium CE the Tokharian language became extinct. However, we luckily have many texts, some of them quite extensive, in Tokharian, which is written in an essentially alphabetic segmental script. Although some details of the pronunciation of the two languages remain uncertain, one of our most valuable sources for reconstructing Tokharian is its metrical system and music. Tokharian metrical patterns are now known, and it has been suggested by the Tokharianist G.J. Pinault and others that the patterns and their names are in fact tunes.

We know the metrical structure of the lone secular poem in Tokharian, the Anonymous Love Poem in Tokharian B, and we have some early medieval Tokharian orchestral music, known to the T’ang Chinese as the “music of Kucha” because its most famous practitioners came from Kucha, the capital of the Tokharian B-speaking people. Whole orchestras traveled to the Chinese capital, Ch’ang-an, where they performed their music for the T’ang court and completely reshaped Chinese music on Central Asian foundations. From China the new music made its way to Japan, where around a thousand years ago it was transcribed in a kind of tablature notation. It is still performed in Japan as part of the repertory known as gagaku (“Japanese Imperial Court Music”). The T’ang musical scores preserved in Japanese transcription, which have been studied by L. Picken and others, should give us a much better idea of how Tokharian verse sounded, including the Anonymous Love Poem in Tokharian B. If the Tokharianists and the musicologists reconstructing gagaku could only get together now, perhaps one day we might be able to sing the love poem in Tokharian, to the original Tokharian tune.