

# A bridge too far – A Uralic perspective on Volga Bulgarian

AGYAGÁSI, KLÁRA. 2019. *Chuvash historical phonetics: An areal linguistic study. With an appendix on the role of Proto-Mari in the history of Chuvash vocalism* (Turcologica 17). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. XII + 334 pp.

## 1. Introduction

Klára Agyagási's monograph is a multifaceted contribution to the historical phonology of the Chuvash language as well as to the ethno-history of the Chuvash and neighbouring peoples of the Volga-Kama region. Agyagási is a specialist in Turkic and Slavic historical linguistics, working in the Slavic department of the University of Debrecen, and since the end of 1970s she has published widely on contacts between Turkic, Uralic and Slavic languages, and especially on the areal linguistics of the Volga-Kama area. She was also one of the co-editors of *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Tscheremissischen (Mari)* (Bereczki et al. 2013). As is stated in the preface of *Chuvash historical phonetics*, the book is a culmination of many decades of research work.

The present monograph surveys the reconstructed development of

the Chuvash sound system from Proto-Turkic to modern Chuvash, taking into account contacts between Chuvash and its neighbouring languages, Mari, Permic, Kipchak Turkic and Old Russian, mainly in the form of loanwords. Uralic data (such as Turkic loanwords in Hungarian, Permic and Mari) is discussed throughout the book. Due to its scope and abundant content, the book will certainly spark a great deal of discussion among Turkologists, Uralicists and other specialists in historical linguistics. In this review, we present a short overview of the book and then proceed to discuss some of its claims in further detail.

The book starts with a chapter entitled *The predecessors of Chuvash in the Volga region* (pp. 1–34), which presents the most important sources of Chuvash historical linguistics: the Proto-Turkic, Bulgar Turkic and Chuvash loanword layers in various Uralic languages (and vice versa) as well as in Slavic, Tocharian loans in Proto-Turkic, early loans in Middle Mongolian and later loans between Kipchak and Bulgar Turkic in the Volga region, along with possible substrate words. It also presents the relevant written sources, such as

Volga Bulgar glosses and epitaphs, Khazar sources, and later, modern era written sources of Chuvash. This chapter also includes a discussion of methodology.

This first chapter is informative and gives the reader a good overview of the research situation in Chuvash and Turkic historical linguistics, but it would have been even more informative if examples from all of the loanword layers had been provided. Without any examples, it is difficult to assess the accuracy or relevance of the information at a glance. Especially regarding such important loanword layers as various Iranian loanwords into Turkic or loanwords into and from Mongolian, some examples would have been illustrative.

The second chapter is called *Oppositions in the Oguric consonant system* (pp. 35–91), and it discusses the history of sound changes leading from Proto-Turkic to Volga Bulgarian, listing the main developments that set the Oguric languages apart from the rest of the Turkic languages, such as rhotacism and lambdacism. The discussion also addresses Volga Bulgarian loanwords into Uralic, especially into Hungarian.

The third chapter, *Oppositions in the WOT/VB vowel system* (pp. 97–183), deals with the development of Volga Bulgar and Chuvash

vocalism. Agyagási argues in favour of different Volga Bulgar dialects, backing up her claims with evidence from Volga Bulgar epitaphs and loanwords into Old Russian, Hungarian, Permic and Mari. Some of the views expressed in this chapter are explored in more detail below.

The discussion of vowel developments in the mediaeval and early modern period continues in the last main chapter of the book, *Changes in the Middle Chuvash period* (pp. 185–243). This is followed by a two-page summary listing the main findings of the monograph. The summary is rather short, and it largely repeats the conclusions made earlier in the book. For such a lengthy book with a great deal of details and data from different languages, a longer and more comprehensive summary of the results, or rather a chapter of conclusions, would have served the reader better.

In the end of the book, a lengthy *Appendix* (pp. 247–298) discusses the role of Mari evidence in the vowel history of Chuvash. The Appendix explores the various suggestions for Proto-Mari vowel reconstructions, loanwords and ethno-history of the Volga region, arguing that the Cheremis people mentioned in the mediaeval sources are not the same people as the modern Mari. Agyagási also attempts to

reconstruct the language of this lost ethnic group, which she calls *Low Cheremis*, and argues that linguistic traces of this language can be found in the vocabulary of Mari and Chuvash. New West Baltic etymologies for Mari and Chuvash words are also presented, and it is argued that they were borrowed through this Low Cheremis language.

## 2. General remarks about the book

Some general remarks regarding the ways the data is presented in the work are in order here. The bibliographical entries after each chapter make it easier for the reader to go back to the original sources. However, it would have been a great help to have tables summarizing different phonological developments; in particular, a side-by-side comparison of the various Volga Bulgarian dialects and Chuvash would have probably served the reader well.

It is an interesting approach to combine purely linguistic data with philological evidence, to try to trace the Chuvash phonological developments through known historical sources and to track down the movements of the Chuvash (and Mari) speakers during the tumultuous Middle Ages. That said, it seems that sometimes Agyagási mixes up linguistic and ethnic evidence. Her

remarks about the incompatibility of the linguistic family tree model (p. 92) with the prehistorical movements of the Turkic-speaking populations are unintelligible. As is too often done in linguistics, it seems that here the usability of the family tree as a theoretical model is rejected too hastily. Nor is it clear what exactly the author means by “pedigree theory” (p. 201) as this, to our knowledge, is not a standard term employed in historical linguistics.

There are some inconsistencies in the way the book refers to Mari dialects. Hill Mari forms are referred to as ‘Mountain Cheremis’ in one sentence and as the ‘mountain dialect of Mari’ in the next. This is not so much a problem for scholars in the field, but it may be misleading for those unfamiliar with these languages. This terminological ambiguity is especially troubling as Agyagási also discusses the Low Cheremis language, which she assumes is completely unrelated to Mari. Subscript numbers are used widely. Referring to the three different Volga Bulgarian dialects as VB<sub>1</sub>, VB<sub>2</sub> and VB<sub>3</sub> may be justified, but it is difficult to see why Late Proto-Mari is referred to as PM<sub>2</sub> when there is no PM<sub>1</sub>. Applying subscript numbers when there is neither a dialectal nor chronological distinction to be made seems unnecessarily confusing.

Regarding Hungarian etymology, Agyagási follows the most up-to-date views on Turkic loanwords, which are found in the work of Róna-Tas & Berta (2011). Here we would only like to remark that using the Ancient Hungarian reconstructions and not modern Hungarian words makes it a bit difficult for anyone not familiar with these reconstructions to follow. Using modern Hungarian forms (maybe alongside the reconstructed forms) would have been a reader-friendly choice.

Agyagási is clearly familiar with the most important sources and research results on the ethnic history and archaeology of the Volga region, citing recent sources such as Zimonyi (2014), but some recent sources are missing here. For the history of the Uralic peoples of the region, Rahkonen's (2013) results about the substrates in the languages of the Volga region might have also provided interesting insights into the problems that Agyagási discusses.

### **3. General notes on the Uralic material**

As Turkic-Uralic contacts play a significant role in Agyagási's argumentation, some remarks about her use of the Uralic data are in order. While Agyagási refers to several

key sources on Uralic historical linguistics and knows the material rather well, there are some unfortunate gaps that have consequences for the results of the book.

Agyagási's views on Uralic vocalism are based on a limited selection of sources, and many important details from recent works have been ignored. Agyagási states that the Proto-Uralic/Proto-Finno-Ugric vowel reconstruction in UEW is the widely accepted one in Uralic linguistics, but this statement is not entirely correct and may be a bit misleading for someone not keeping up with the developments in Uralic historical linguistics. Agyagási presents the two possible vowel reconstructions found in UEW (which differ mostly with regard to vowel length) but ignores notable developments in the field, such as Janhunen (1981), Sammal-lahti (1988) or Aikio (2012, 2015). While Proto-Uralic vocalism is obviously not the main concern of this book, taking into account the modern views on Proto-Uralic vocalism would have probably resulted in a more balanced view.

Unfortunately, similar problems can be seen in Agyagási's views on the taxonomy of the Uralic language family. Here again, references to relevant modern sources are missing, and the single reference to Honti's (2010–2011) very traditional view of

the taxonomy on page 289 gives the reader a distorted picture about the state of the art of the field. References to the alternative views of Salminen (2002) and Häkkinen (2009) might have been in order, even if one does not completely agree with them. Especially as the position of Mari among the Uralic languages is uncertain, it would have been desirable to pay more attention to this problem: Agyagási does comment on Mari's position and the problem of the Volgaic node on pages 248 and 252–256, but it remains uncertain to the reader what conclusion she reaches about this.

It would be impossible to go through every claim made by Agyagási in the book, but some more detailed remarks on the use of Uralic evidence and on the conclusions derived from it seem to be in order and are thus discussed below.

#### **4. Volga Bulgarian dialects based on Permian**

Agyagási weaves an intricate web of Volga Bulgarian dialects. The different Volga Bulgarian dialects and Agyagási's evidence for them are discussed in Section 3.2 of the book (p. 160 onwards). The first Volga Bulgarian dialect (VB<sub>1</sub>), is postulated based on loanwords in Old Russian, Permian (both Proto-Permian and "Ancient Votyak") and

Proto-Mari (Late Proto-Mari and Proto-West-Mari). Interdialectal borrowing constitutes the second source of evidence. According to Agyagási, around 20 words were borrowed from an extinct Volga Bulgarian dialect (VB<sub>1</sub>) into a dialect that would eventually become Chuvash (Early Middle Chuvash, abbreviated as MČ<sub>1</sub>).

Agyagási's evidence for Volga Bulgarian loanwords in Permian relies mainly on two articles by Károly Rédei and András Róna-Tas (1972, 1983). In these articles, Volga Bulgarian loanwords are divided into two layers, Proto-Permian and Proto-Udmurt (Proto-Votyak). According to Agyagási, this chronological division is unfounded (pp. 110–112) and both the Proto-Permian and Proto-Udmurt loans originate from a specific Volga Bulgarian dialect (VB<sub>1</sub>) that corresponds phonologically to the Late Old Bulgarian of Rédei and Róna-Tas. For example, Proto-Udmurt (Proto-Votyak/Ancient Votyak) \*olma 'apple' (> *ulmo*), which is thought to be a borrowing from either Late Old Bulgarian \*álma or Middle Bulgarian \*olma (Rédei & Róna-Tas 1983: 31), is in Agyagási's view a loan from VB<sub>1</sub> \*álma (p. 165). Phonologically, there is no obvious reason to prefer LOB/VB<sub>1</sub> \*álma over Middle Bulgarian (Proto-Chuvash) \*olma as the source for Proto-Udmurt \*olma.

Agyagási postulates four Volga Bulgarian dialects based on how Proto-Turkic \*o is reflected in Mari, Permic and Old Russian loanwords of Volga Bulgarian origin (pp. 122–126). In one of these supposed dialects, PT \*o closed to VB \*u, with examples including WOT \*komdī ‘basket made of bark’ > VB \*χundī → PP \*kundi ‘id.’, WOT \*bora ‘home-made beer’ > VB \*bura → Proto-East-Mari \*pura ‘beer, homemade beer’ > E<sup>1</sup> *pura*, Proto-West-Mari \*pura > NW *pūra*, VB \*būray ‘domestic beer’ → Old Russian *bŕraga*. The evidence is very fragmentary and there is a significant chronological difference between the postulated recipient languages, which makes it hard to believe that these examples constitute a chronologically uniform loanword layer. Even by conservative estimates, Proto-Permic probably predates Proto-Mari by several centuries. As the number of Volga Bulgarian loans is lower in Komi-Zyrian than in Komi-Permyak and Udmurt, it is quite clear that Proto-Permic had begun to disperse or had already significantly dispersed geographically by

the time of these contacts around the 9th and 10th century AD (Rédei & Róna-Tas 1983: 3–4). Phonologically speaking, Volga Bulgarian loanwords were adopted into a level of Proto-Permic that one might call Late Proto-Permic, as it had already undergone all of the major sound changes typical of the Permic languages. For some of the loans, even parallel borrowing into Proto-Komi and Proto-Udmurt is a possibility. Intensive contacts between Mari and Volga Bulgars cannot have occurred earlier than the 13th century (Bereczki 1994: 16). As some of the earlier Volga Bulgarian/Chuvash loanwords display sound changes common to all Mari dialects, it can be assumed with some certainty that they were borrowed into a unified proto-language at some point after the 13th century. Interpreting these words as reflecting VB \*u also ignores the fact that Mari and perhaps also Proto-Permic were also subject to the \*o > \*u change (in some reconstructions of Proto-Permic vowel correspondence, Udm. *u* and Komi *u* are reconstructed as Proto-Permic \*o instead of \*u

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1. For the most part, Agyagási’s abbreviations for the different Mari dialects are congruent with those used by Beke (1997–2001). This, although faithful to the original source, makes for laborious reading. For this reason, this article uses a simplified system of abbreviations that corresponds to the abbreviations used by Agyagási as follows: E = East (proper) = P B BJ Bjp. M MK MM UP US USj.; M = Meadow/Central = CŪ UJ; NW = Northwest = JO V; Vo = Volga subdialect = CK Č ČN; W = West = K.

(Zhivlov 2014: 123–124)). The closing of \*o to \*u could then easily be explained as an internal change in both of these languages.

The preferred *modus operandi* throughout the book is to attribute phonological variation of any kind to different Volga Bulgarian dialects. This is not to say that some variation could not be interpreted as having resulted from dialectal variation within Volga Bulgarian, but competing ideas are not generally entertained.

### 5. No first-syllable reduced vowels in Proto-Mari?

There are different views concerning the reconstruction of the Proto-Mari vowel system. The most relevant point of contention for Agyagási is whether or not reduced vowels can be reconstructed for Proto-Mari. There are those who argue in favour of reconstructing an opposition between first-syllable full (\*i, \*ü, and \*u) and reduced close vowels (\*ĩ, \*ũ, \*ũ) (Itkonen 1954; Aikio 2014). No such opposition between full and reduced vowels is assumed by Berezcki (1994), who argues that first-syllable reduced vowels are a later, contact-induced phenomenon. Agyagási follows Berezcki in not reconstructing first-syllable reduced vowels for Proto-Mari. According to her, reduced

labial vowels only emerged in the Volga, North-Western and Joškar-Ola dialect as a result of contacts with Middle Chuvash (pp. 293–298).

There are several reasons for reconstructing an opposition between full and reduced close vowels in Proto-Mari. First of all, minimal pairs or semi-minimal pairs indicate that there was such an opposition: E M Vo NW W *šur* (< PM \*šur ‘horn’) vs. E M *šur*, Vo *šür*, NW *šör*, W *šâr* (< PM \*šür ‘shit’), W *tul* (< PM \*tul ‘storm, stormwind’) vs. E M *tul*, Vo *tül*, NW *töl*, W *tâl* (< PM \*tül ‘fire’) (Aikio 2014: 126–127). Second, the Proto-Mari full and reduced vowels have different origins: PM \*ü is a reflex of PU \*u (although the opposition between PU \*u and \*o has been neutralized adjacent to labial consonants), whereas PM \*u is a reflex of PU \*o (Aikio 2014: 130), PM \*tül ‘fire’ < PU \*tulə ‘id.’ Vs. PM \*tul ‘storm, stormwind’ < PU \*towlə ‘wind’. If one reconstructs invariably \*u for both PM \*u and \*ü, one should have a good explanation for how the reduction process has systematically managed to avoid those instances of PM \*u that reflect PU \*o even if one does consider reduction to be a secondary phenomenon. The examples here are of PM \*u and \*ü, but *mutatis mutandis* the same is true for other close vowels.

Agyagási does not address these shortcomings of reconstructing

only full close vowels in detail, but she does seek to demonstrate that Proto-Mari lacked reduced vowels in the first syllable by listing a number of East Mari words of Volga Bulgarian origin where no reduced vowels appear in the first syllable (pp. 202–203). Examples include: VB<sub>3</sub> \*kürük ‘fur’ → PM \*kürük ~ \*kürək ‘id.’, VB<sub>3</sub> \*külčün ‘loan’ → PM \*küšün ~ küšän ‘id.’, VB<sub>3</sub> \*puruś ‘pepper’ → PM \*puruś ~ purâś ‘id.’, VB<sub>3</sub> \*pus ‘misty, foggy’ → PM \*pus ‘id.’, VB<sub>3</sub> \*sul- ‘ransom, buy out’ → PM \*sul- ‘id.’, VB<sub>3</sub> \*sür- ‘sift, filter’ → PM \*sür- ‘id.’, VB<sub>3</sub> \*tulux ‘orphan; widow’ → PM \*tuluk ~ \*tuläk ‘id.’, VB<sub>3</sub> \*χir ‘plain’ → PM \*ir ‘id.’, VB<sub>3</sub> \*χis- ‘press’ → PM \*is- ‘id.’, VB<sub>3</sub> \*χuntur ‘beaver’ → PM \*unður ~ \*undâr ~ umdâr ‘id.’

It is not clear what Agyagási’s criteria are for Proto-Mari. There are phonological reasons to assume that many of the examples were borrowed only after the dispersal of Proto-Mari. The Proto-Mari full front vowels \*i and \*ü were lowered to the mid-vowels \*e and \*ö before \*r (Aikio 2014: 135–136), e.g. PU \*närä > PM \*nir ‘nose’ > E W *ner*. On top of this, there has been a tendency for Proto-Mari \*i to change to *e* before sonorants in the eastern Mari varieties (Itkonen 1954: 219–221). As East Mari *ir* ‘wild (terrain); steppe, un-forested area’ lacks both the Proto-Mari and eastern Mari lowering, it

cannot reflect Proto-Mari \*ir and must have been borrowed into Mari only after these changes. The words that Agyagási reconstructs as PM \*kürək ‘fur’ and \*sür- ‘filter’ also lack lowering. If East Mari forms such as *kürək* or *šüre-* actually reflected PM \*ü, one would expect to find \*\*körək and \*\*šöre- instead.

Proto-Mari had two sibilants: \*š (< PU \*ś and \*š) and \*s (< PU \*s). Proto-Mari \*s changed to \*š in all other dialects except for a number of eastern dialects, which seems to suggest that the sound change was and is still ongoing (Beke 1934: 90–92). The opposition between PM \*š and \*s is observed most consistently in the Malmyž area, where PM \*s is reflected as *s* (adjacent to back vowels) and *ś* (adjacent to front vowels). The lack of PM \*s > š (ž intervocalically) in most eastern varieties, however, is indicative of post-Proto-Mari origin. For this reason, words such as Birsik *küšün* ‘loan’ or *süle-* ‘ransom, buy out’ could have been borrowed only after PM \*s > š, and the idea of this borrowing having taken place after the dispersal of Proto-Mari is all the more obvious when forms from other Mari varieties are included, i.e. Vo *küšön*, W *küšän* ‘loan’ (TschWb: 311), Vo *süle-*, NW *söle-*, W *sêle-* ‘ransom, buy out’ (TschWb: 642).

A Proto-Mari form can be reconstructed for a few of the words, but based on the vowel correspond-



ences there is no reason to reconstruct a Proto-Mari full vowel. Examples of such words are PM \*pūs > E M *puš*, Malmyž *pus*, Vo *pūš*, NW *pōš*, W *pāš* ‘steam, vapour’ (TschWb: 564), PM \*šüre- ‘sift, filter’ E M *šüre-*, Malmyž *šüre-*, Vo *šüre-*, NW W *šäre-* (TschWb: 751) and PM \*tüläk ‘orphan; widow’ > E M *tulāk*, Vo *tülük*, NW *tölök*, W *tälāk* (TschWb: 825). How eastern Mari varieties that lack first-syllable reduced labial vowels altogether constitutes evidence against Proto-Mari reduced vowels in the first place is also unclear. All and all, the evidence is rather unconvincing as most of the examples can be shown to have been borrowed only after the dispersal of Proto-Mari.

It seems that the main reason Agyagási is so keen to reject Proto-Mari first-syllable reduced vowels, and maintains that the prominent syllabic structure in Proto-Mari was a first-syllable full vowel followed by a reduced vowel in the second syllable (V- $\check{V}$ ), is that she seeks to explain the appearance of second-syllable vowel reduction in Chuvash as partial code-copying from Mari (pp. 203–205). As this premise was shown to be untenable, the conclusions derived from it are untenable as well, and thus code-copying does not provide a solution for Chuvash vowel reduction in the way Agyagási envisioned.

## **6. West Baltic loans in Mari and Chuvash and the role of the Low Cheremis language?**

One of the most interesting and thought-provoking parts of the book is the treatment of possible Baltic loanwords in Chuvash and Mari (pp. 265–288). Agyagási suggests several new etymologies that she considers loanwords from a form of West Baltic, the branch that included Old Prussian and probably the poorly attested languages of Yotvingian, Galindian, whose existence is known from tribal names in Russian chronicles and hydronyms, and Curonian, which was spoken in Northern Latvia. Yotvingian and Galindian are thought to have been spoken in Central parts of European Russia. It is these languages that Agyagási considers the source of a group of words in Mari and Chuvash, and this is the reason she is determined that the loanwords are from West Baltic. However, Derksen (2015: 2–3) has noted that the knowledge of these only fragmentarily attested Baltic languages is very poor, as it is based on tribal names and loanwords alone, and that their classification as West Baltic is only tentative. Moreover, it seems that Agyagási’s etymologies do not show any actual West Baltic features, and her reconstructions are mostly based on Lithuanian,

as she herself admits (p. 268). The loanwords from Mari and Chuvash thus offer no further evidence for the classification of Yotvingian and Galindian as West Baltic.

Agyagási assumes that the words were borrowed into Mari and Chuvash through the unattested Low Cheremis language, with the borrowing taking place quite late (not earlier than the 16th century). Some forms in Mari and Chuvash contain elements that Agyagási regards as Low Cheremis derivational suffixes. As this alleged loanword layer is rather significant for Agyagási's ethnohistorical claims, it is important to comment on it here in some detail.

Unfortunately, many of Agyagási's etymological suggestions are very complicated and involve various problems. Agyagási postulates some sound substitutions that are difficult to accept: in the Baltic etymologies \*lĕk- 'fly' (Lithuanian *lĕkti*) → Mari E *lĕye*, *liye* etc., Chuvash *lĕkĕ* (pp. 276–278) and \*lĕpš- 'wither' (Lithuanian *lĕpti*) → Mari *lĕwĕžyem*, *liwĕžyem*, etc., Chuvash *lĕpešken-* (pp. 278–279), Agyagási assumes that the \*i she reconstructs for the Mari and Chuvash forms is a substitution of Baltic \*e, but she does not account for why this sound substitution was used. Note that the Mari words reflect Proto-Mari \*i in Aikio's (2014) reconstruction.

This vowel could reflect Pre-Mari \*e, so if the borrowing into Mari was old enough, the vowel substitution could be explained. But this does not fit with Agyagási's ideas of the very late West Baltic influence in the Volga region and the late borrowing of the words into Mari through the hypothetical Low Cheremis idiom. A similar problem is the relation of Baltic \*ú in \*púćio- 'blow up' (Lithuanian *púćioti*) with \*i (in Agyagási's reconstruction) in Mari E *pić*, M *piť*, Vo *pĕć*, NW W *pĕc* 'thick, dark; airless, stuffy, stifling' and Chuvash *pĕčĕ* 'stuffy' (pp. 280–283). Agyagási notes that because of Baltic accentuation, the realization of the vowels might have led to these substitutions, but more substance would be needed to validate this argument.

The semantic side of the etymologies is in some cases rather unconvincing: the connection between \*lĕk- 'fly' with Mari *lĕye*, etc. and the meaning 'dandruff, membrane' is difficult to grasp (Agyagási assumes that the semantic connection is that dandruff flies off easily), Baltic \*púćio- 'blow up' would have produced 'stiffness, stuffy, dark' on the Mari and Chuvash side (pp. 280–283), and the Baltic verb \*su-stó- 'stop' would have given rise to the nouns *sustĕk*, *süstĕk*, etc. 'stammering' in Mari (eastern dialects), and *söstök*

‘one whose speech is incoherent’ in Chuvash (Viryal) (pp. 283–285). If one wishes to argue in favour of these etymologies, semantic parallels should be provided. At present, the semantic developments remain quite hypothetical.

Agyagási’s etymologies also feature non-existent derivational suffixes; it is easy to explain something as a loan if part of the donor or recipient form is explained *ad hoc* as a derivational suffix in an unattested language. According to Agyagási, Baltic \*dub- (Lithuanian *dub-ti* ‘grow, become hollow, sunken, sink’) yields a derivative *dubka-* in the Low Cheremis language, which then is borrowed onwards into Mari as M *tupka* ‘a loose sheaf of hemp or flax’, W *tâpka*, etc. ‘combed wool; human hair’ and Chuvash as *tâpka*, *topka* ‘tuft, shred, splinter [пучок, клочок]’ (pp. 272–273; note that here the semantic difference is once again quite problematic). The borrowing from the Baltic verb \*juos- ‘gird’ (> Lith. *juósti*) to Mari → E *üstö*, Vo *üstü*, W *əštə* etc. ‘belt’ proceeds through a Low Cheremis form where, according to Agyagási (p. 274), *-t-* is a derivational suffix. In this case, would a better source for *-t-* not be Baltic \*juosta > Lithuanian *juosta* ‘woven sash; tape, band’? This form is also listed by Agyagási as one of the reflexes of the verbal root \*juos- (the word is

an old verbal adjective; see Derksen 2015 s.v. *juosta*). Another example of the dubious use of obscure suffixes is \*kuñp- ‘bend’ (Lithuanian *kuñpti*) → Mari M *kuptârye*, W *kâptârye* ‘(walk) slowly and crookedly [langsam und gekrümmt (gehen)]’ *kâptâryem* ‘become bent, bowed’, etc. and Chuvash *kâptârka-* ‘grow old and weak’ (pp. 275–276), where only the stem \*kup- would have been borrowed and the suffix \*-tur- could be a possible Low Cheremis suffix. (Note that we do not consider the last etymology impossible, but the suffixal elements would require further investigation before the etymology could be accepted.)

Some of the etymologies also involve various phonological difficulties. Baltic \*juos- ‘gird’ → Mari *üstö* ‘Gürtel’ involves an *ad hoc* loss of \*j- in Mari. In her treatment of the etymology \*kump- → Mari *kâptârye*, Chuvash *kâptârka* (pp. 275–276), Agyagási discusses Mari denasalization and notes that the loss of *m* must have happened in the hypothetical intermediary language, as Mari retains clusters of a nasal and a stop. This is only partly correct: Aikio (2014: 83) has noted that Uralic/Pre-Mari \*mp regularly develops into \*w, and Metsäranta (2018: 123, footnote 3) further argues that in Uralic \*-i-stems (= e-stems in UEW’s reconstruction), the

regular reflex of \*mp is Mari *p* at least in word-final position.

The etymology of Baltic \*popliaũ- ‘chat, gossip’ (Lithuanian *pliaũkšti*) → Mari W *popaš* ‘speak’, E *popâldatem* ‘chat, gossip’, Vo *popem* ‘babble; speak [plap-pern; sprechen]’, Chuvash *puple-*, (Viryal) *pople-* ‘talk’ (pp. 281–283) seems unconvincing to us because it presumes that only the first part of the Baltic word (including the prefix \*po-) was borrowed in an arbitrary way. The donor form is also entirely hypothetical, as a prefixed form \*popliaũ- is not attested anywhere in Baltic.

It is also difficult to understand why many modern sources of Baltic etymology are not referenced, as the recent years have seen the publication of several etymological dictionaries of the Baltic languages (Smoczyński 2005, 2007; ALEW; Derksen 2015), as well as Indo-European etymological dictionaries that would have been useful here (especially LIV). In some cases, these works would have supported Agyagási’s arguments.

Although the etymologies cannot be treated here in more detail, we hope this illustrates that Agyagási’s conclusions about a West Baltic loanword layer in Mari and Chuvash are far from certain. While the existence of Baltic loanwords in Mari (and possibly

in Chuvash too) remains an open-ended question, more research is certainly needed. It also seems that Agyagási’s remarks about the taxonomy of the Baltic languages and their relationship with Slavic (p. 268) do not reflect the most recent findings of research: Agyagási notes that Baltic separated from the “Old European language”, which is a misleading term, as “Old European” is usually used as the name of the hypothetical substrate language that produced various hydronyms in Europe (see Krahe 1963; Schmid 1968). Agyagási also argues that Proto-Slavic diverged from West Baltic, which is also a statement that does not reflect the *communis opinio* in Baltic historical linguistics (for recent discussions of the taxonomy of Baltic and its relationship to Slavic, see Petit (2010: 3–51) and Hill (2017)).

Since there are various problems and uncertainties in the Baltic loanwords, it goes without saying that Agyagási’s (p. 287) reconstruction of Low Cheremis derivational morphology rests on shaky grounds. She claims to have reconstructed several derivational suffixes based on evidence from loanwords, but these results remain highly inconclusive at this point, as does the entire existence of the Low Cheremis language, or at least the argument that Low Cheremis was

the mediator of Baltic loanwords. (Note that we do not wish to take a stance on whether Agyagási's conclusions regarding the differences in Mari and the Cheremis of mediæval chronicles are correct, but we leave this to specialists in the mediæval history of the region to judge).

## 7. Concluding remarks

One might consider this amount of criticism unfair, but we are not saying that there are no good sides to Agyagási's book. As already mentioned, the author discusses the problems of Chuvash historical phonology from many points of view in a cross-scientific perspective, and she presents the sources clearly. Agyagási's extra-linguistic ideas about the Mari ethnogenesis will also certainly give future researchers of Central Russian history a great deal of food for thought. As noted above, the book has shortcomings that make the conclusions uncertain. Nevertheless, the book is an interesting addition to Chuvash historical linguistics and the ethnic history of the Volga-Kama region, a field where modern, comprehensive contributions are few and far between.

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