

## The beginning of Runic studies in Turkey

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Studies of ancient Turkic letters and alphabets began in Turkey with the reading of the Orkhon monuments. On December 15th, 1893, Vilhelm Thomsen presented in Copenhagen his paper titled «The reading of the Orkhon and Yenisei monuments». In the following year Thomsen's paper was published by the Copenhagen palace printer Bianco Luna. This paper created great enthusiasm in the scientific world and greatly accelerated studies in this field. This period was characterized, in particular, by a competition between the turkologist Wilhelm Radloff and the linguist Vilhelm Thomsen.

In Turkey the first study about the Orkhon monuments was carried out by Necip Asım. Necip Asım was a well-known linguist, who lived between 1861 and 1935. He was a graduate of the Military Academy and taught Turkish, French and history in the same institution. After his retirement from military service as a colonel, he was appointed during the Second Revolution by the University of Istanbul as a professor of Turkish history and language. During this time he translated some French works into Turkish. He also introduced to the scholarly world two new Uighur copies of Atabetül Hakayık. His other scientific contributions include studies on Ural-Altaic linguistics and Turkish history. He was the first specialist on Orkhon and Uighur letters in Turkey.<sup>1</sup>

There was a long article titled «The ancient Turkish letters» in issue 200 of the newspaper *Ikdam*.<sup>2</sup> *Ikdam* was a daily newspaper which was published in Turkey between 1894 and 1925. The article was published without indicating the author's name on Sunday, February 17th, 1895. According to the Rumi calendar the publication date was the 5th of February, 1310, while according to the Hicri calendar it was the 22nd Şaban, 1312. In fact, *Ikdam* prints are dated according to three different calendars: Miladi, Hicri and Rumi. From a careful examination of Necip Asım's later publications it is possible to establish that the *Ikdam* article was, indeed, written by him. This is the first article published in Turkey about the Orkhon monuments, and it contains voluminous information about the characteristics and origin of the Orkhon alphabet. The contents of the article may be summarized as follows:

There exists a kind of writing which was used in the northeastern part of Europe and is called *run* (Runes). It has been brought forward that this word comes from the Scandinavian word *runa*, meaning 'secrets, mysteries'. According to another theory the word is derived from the verb *runes* which means 'to draw'. This Scandinavian writing has been used on various inscriptions throughout history. In the mid-sixteenth century some Swedish scholars tried to solve the reading of this writing, but they did not succeed. However, significant portions were solved and read sixty years ago.

Some newly-discovered inscriptions are called «Orkhon» or «Orkund». The location of these inscriptions is near the Orkhon river in Mongolia. The reading of these inscriptions was solved by Thomsen, a comparative linguist at the University of Copenhagen.

Furthermore, with the help of the alphabet deciphered by Thomsen, Radloff could read the writings of two columns in Kosho-Saydam, and he wrote a dictionary which contains 1,400 words. The origin of twelve words in this dictionary could not be identified. A few of them are derived from Chinese surnames and titles, but the rest of the words, which happen to be the majority, are originally Turkish. These words are still used in various Turkish dialects, especially in Uighur, Altay (Altundag), Chaghatay and Ottoman. Radloff published his book titled «The translation and dictionary of the Orkhon inscriptions» in St. Petersburg in 1894.

However, this book needed some corrections. Thomsen, who solved the reading of the alphabet, attempted to publish a book in French on this subject. The first volume of Thomsen's work consisted of 54 pages. On these pages Thomsen gave many examples of how to read the Orkhon alphabet, and he also introduced some new theories about the origin of this alphabet. The writings on the stones that can be found in the valley of the river Orkhon, in Kosho-Saydam, and in the valley of the Yenisei in Siberia, have strange shapes. According to one view they look like the Runic writings of Europe. For this reason these writings may for the time being be called «Runic style».

What is the origin of these writings? To which alphabet are they related to? One by one, Thomsen presented the views of famous scholars on this subject. Later he rejected the idea that the alphabet could have originated from the Runic writing of Northern Europe and Scandinavia. He claimed that these writings have a relationship with the Aramaic script, which was used by the grandsons of Aram descended from the Prophets Nuh and Sam.

We now have to ask how and when this script was adopted by the Turks. According to Thomsen this adoption took place in Iran. The French Orientalist Edmund de Ruine claimed, however, that the adoption took place in the country of Turan, that is, Mavarannahr or Tokharistan. Our historical studies confirm this view. Mr. Ruine supported his view by studies of coins discovered between Lake Aral and the Sind. Many letters of Semitic origin can be found on these coins. Although they are not similar to each other in shape, they reveal their origin. However, it was not possible

to derive any meaning from these letters, as they were used to write only the names of kings or kingdoms.

To solve the problem of the script there was a need for longer texts. Thus, the discovery of the columns of Koshō-Saydam helped to determine the variants of script on the coins. In addition, with the help of numismatics, it could be understood how this script has changed over time. In fact, this script originally belongs to the Semitic languages, and it is not convenient for the writing of the the Turanic Turkish language.

The letters are originally Aramaic, but there have been a number of additions, and the shapes of the letters have changed. The Turkish alphabet, found in the Orkhon valley, contains 38 letters. Of these, only ten or twelve letters derive from Semitic, while the others have been invented for sounds of the Turkish language by the Turks themselves. There is also other evidence showing that the Turkish alphabet is derived from Semitic characters. However, one has to remember, that it is possible to have similar letters in the alphabets of different languages. This situation may lead someone to conclude mistakenly that the source of such letters is identical.

If the ancient Turkish alphabet is compared with the ancient Aramaic alphabet, it can be seen that only some letters resemble each other. But this similarity does not mean that they derive from the same source. In this situation, historical evidence can provide help. Thomsen puts an emphasis on the Pehlevi writing on page 49 of his work, and he mentions that these letters were passed on to the Turks from Iran. The Pehlevi script was used in the 8th to 9th centuries, and in the course of time different versions, such as Keldani, Pehlevi and Sasanidian Pehlevi emerged. The Turkish writing has to be compared with the Sasanidian Pehlevi writing. Even in this case only the letters *b*, *d* and *m* are suitable for comparison.

Briefly, if the Turkish letters derive from Aramaic, it must be assumed that the script had been first adopted to some alphabets in Mavarannahr, and that the shapes of the letters had deteriorated with time. These alphabets have been recently found in various calligraphies on coins from Balkh, Khwarazm and Mavarannahr. Originating from this source, the Turkish calligraphy moved forward north to the Orkhon in Mongolia. Since the most ancient writings had existed on the Yenisei, the transition of the letters had begun there. This is the opinion of European scholars about the ancient Turkish alphabet which has been recently discovered. Future works may shed some more light on this issue.

The important point is that Necip Asım's article was written *before* Thomsen's book was printed. The article appeared already on February 17th, 1895, while Thomsen's book was published only in 1896. I would like to explain this as follows: Thomsen says that the first chapter of his book had been edited for printing and the second chapter was about to be printed in the beginning of the summer of 1894. He also says that the «first edition» copies of the first chapter had been presented at the Tenth

Congress of Orientalists in Geneva in September of the same year, while other copies had been personally sent to some scholars. At that time, however, Thomsen became ill, so that the printing of his book was delayed. During that time of his article Necip Asım has seen the «first edition» of the first chapter. Therefore, the article summarized above contains information from the first chapter of Thomsen's book. It may be noted that Necip Asım gives the page numbers of Thomsen's book. Although studies of Turkology had not yet begun in Turkey, it was interesting for him to follow the progress made in the study of the Orkhon monuments. This proves that Necip Asım was extremely sensitive and conscious about this subject.

«تورک درزنی، نشریاتی

صافی ۲

پک اکی تورک یازسی

مؤلفی

«تورک درزنی» و «تاریخ عثمانی انجمنی» اعضاسندن

میر آلائی

نجیب عاصم

Fig. 1. The title text of *Pek eski türk yazısı* by Necip Asım.

In 1897, Necip Asım published a booklet titled «The oldest Turkish writing». It appeared as an *İkdam* publication, but a second edition was published by the Turkish Association (*Türk Derneği*) in 1909.<sup>3</sup> This booklet of 38 pages contains the following chapters: (1) Preface, (2) The Orkhon inscriptions and the ancient Turks, (3) The Orkhon monuments, (4) The Orkhon alphabet, (5) The rise of the Orkhon letters, and (6) Conclusions (Fig. 1).

In the preface Necip Asım states briefly as follows: «This book is about the alphabet used in those monuments which were made by Eastern Turks who had a strong government in the Orkhon valley one thousand three hundred years ago. Although the letters of this alphabet appear very strange to us, the events referred to in the monuments are described in a

literary style demonstrating that Turkish literature was already at an advanced stage.» Under the preface the name «Necip» is written with Orkhon letters (Fig. 2).

In the chapter on «The Orkhon inscriptions and the ancient Turks», the exploration of the Orkhon and Yenisei monuments and the voyages to Siberia of the relevant scholars are mentioned. The chapter gives information about the recent studies of Heikel, Radloff and Thomsen. It is indicated that Thomsen has published a book of 224 pages in 1896.<sup>4</sup> The history of the Göktürk is also summarized, based on the information provided by Thomsen: their ways of living, clothes, habits, social life, and weapons; their relations and wars with the Chinese, Byzantines, and other Turks; their settlements in the Orkhon valley, as well as the engraving of the Orkhon monuments.



Fig. 2. The Runic name of Necip Asım.

In the chapter on «The Orkhon Monuments», the complexity of the Orkhon monuments is explained and their measures in length and height are given.

In the chapter on «The Orkhon alphabet», each Runic letter is presented. The letters are classified into vowels and consonants. The values of the letters in terms of the Arabic and Latin alphabets are given according to the sounds of Turkish and French. The occurrences and frequencies of the letters in words are analyzed. The characteristics of the orthography of the Orkhon alphabet are also explained. At the same time, the main rules of the Turkish grammar are described. At the end of this chapter, the entire Orkhon alphabet is listed (Fig. 3).

In the chapter on «The rise of the Orkhon letters», the early alphabets of the Turks are listed and evaluated. The author points out that the use of the Orkhon and Uighur alphabets by the Eastern and Western Turks implies a high level of civilization and intellectual development. He also discusses the problem concerning the origin of the Orkhon letters and quotes the views of Western scholars on this subject. He mentions that while the letters of the alphabet may derive from Western Asia or Scandinavia, the alphabet is arranged in correspondence with the Turkish system of sounds. He also expresses the view that letters taken directly from the alphabet of a foreign language are generally unsuitable to express the sounds of the Turkish language. In this context he mentions

the difficulties connected with the use of the Arabic letters for writing Turkish words.

### حروف مصوتة

N	و	ا	آ
(او)	(او)	(ائی)	(آه)
(u'eu)	(o'ou)	(i'y)	(a'é)

### حروف مصمتة

ح	ك	ط	ك	ك	ك	غ	ق	ق	ق
ن	ن	ك	بي	ي	ي	ب	ب	ب	د
ز	ش	ش(س)	س	س	س	چ	ل	ر	ر
:	M	ن	ند						

Fig. 3. The Runic alphabet as presented by Necip Asım.

In his «Conclusions» Necip Asım establishes that the Turks are a civilized nation, carrying civilization wherever they go. In this way they provide service to humanity. According to him, the main task that remained to be carried out was to introduce the capabilities of the Turks to the rest of the world. Necip Asım summarized this view as: «to study and to let the world know about us».

On the back cover of the book, the list of the Orkhon alphabet is given once more.

The information provided above illustrates the first reflections on the Orkhon alphabet in Turkey. Necip Asım published his book titled «The

Orkhon alphabet» only in 1925.<sup>5</sup> This was the first academic study on the Orkhon monuments in Turkey. The late publication date of the book raises the question why he waited from 1897 to 1925 to print it. Necip Asım was a person who was aware of the value and importance of the Orkhon monuments not only for the Turks but also for academic world. It seems that he first followed closely the progress made in the study of the Orkhon monuments before he published his own work. However, this may not be the only explanation. The matter requires to be studied and clarified in more detail in the future.<sup>6</sup>

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