The Brāhmī inscriptions of Mongolia: Whose decipherment?

This short note serves the purpose of setting the record of the decipherment of the Mongolian Khūis Tolgoi and Bugut inscriptions straight.

Until recently, the Brāhmī inscriptions on the Khūis Tolgoi and Bugut steleae in Mongolia remained undeciphered, and any knowledge concerning the language in which they were written had been lost centuries ago. Finally, in the 2000s, Dieter Maue, an epigraphist and a leading specialist on the Brāhmī script, made a new reading of the inscriptions, allowing, for the first time, the question concerning the underlying language to be approached in a meaningful way. Then, the French historian Étienne de La Vaissière invited Alexander Vovin, during the latter's visit to Paris, to have a look at Maue's reading of the Khūis Tolgoi inscription. Vovin recognized the language as Mongolic, but there were still too many unidentifiable words and grammatical forms to allow for a complete translation. In 2014, an international team consisting of Dieter Maue (Germany), Alexander Vovin (USA, then already permanently working in France), Mehmet Ölmез (Turkey), and Étienne de La Vaissière (France) was formed, and the group travelled to Mongolia, accompanied by two specialists in 3D photography with the relevant instruments for taking 3D pictures. The principal objective was to document the inscriptions as completely as possible.

The team surveyed the inscriptions and took 3D pictures of the Khūis Tolgoi I and Brāhmī Bugut inscriptions, but could not do the same with Khūis Tolgoi II due to circumstances beyond the team's control. For more details on the team's travel to Mongolia, see Ölmез (2018). After the survey, Dieter Maue revised his epigraphic analysis and Alexander Vovin offered a first linguistic analysis and interpretation of the texts. The results were reported at the 60th Permanent International Altaistic Conference (PIAC) at Székesfehérvár, Hungary, on August 31 – September 1, 2017. Then, draft versions were placed on the internet (Maue & Ölmез 2017, Vovin 2017). After receiving the feedback from many internationally renowned Mongolists, the results of this discovery were published in the Journal Asiatique in 2018 (Ölmез 2018, Maue 2018, Vovin 2018, de La Vaissière 2018). The team's results on the Brāhmī Bugut inscription were published in the next issue of the Journal Asiatique (Ölmез 2019, Maue 2019, Vovin 2019a), followed by a more detailed description of the phonology,
grammar, and lexicon of the underlying language, including a tentative translation of the Brāhmī Bugut, Khūis Tolgoi and two very short Keregentas inscriptions in the same language from eastern Kazakhstan (Vovin 2019b).

Sometime in late 2017 or early 2018, L. Qurčabaγatur Solongγod (Hurcabaatar Solonggod), a German citizen originally from Ordos, Inner Mongolia, but currently engaged in hotel business in Cologne, Germany, who got his PhD degree from the University of Tübingen with a thesis on the cult of Chinggis Khan (published in Japan in 2001), asked Alexander Vovin for access to his data, which was not granted. Even so, in July 2019 – after all the articles by the original team members had been published – Qurčabaγatur came out with a book (in Mongolian) where he claimed to have “deciphered” all the three Brāhmī inscriptions: Khūis Tolgoi I and II, and Brāhmī Bugut. For an ethnographer with no background in palaeography or historical linguistics this would have been an unlikely achievement without access to the publications of Maue and Vovin. However, in his bibliography he refers only to the team’s initial presentations at the 60th PIAC without mentioning their work on the actual decipherment of the inscriptions. His discussion of Khūis Tolgoi II is based on older estampages, and he is apparently unaware of the two Keregentas inscriptions. In his “analysis”, Qurčabaγatur also underestimates the fact that the inscriptions were written in the context of the First Turkic Khaganate and, as a result, contain many Turkic elements. Although much still remains to be done until a full understanding of the inscriptions is obtained, time will show that his independent contribution to their interpretation is minimal. Most importantly, his claim of having been the “first” to decipher these inscriptions is false.

The most discouraging consequence of this sequence of events is that, on August 5, 2021, the Government of Mongolia awarded Qurčabaγatur the high Order of the Polar Star. While the gesture of rewarding a scholar with an Inner Mongolian background should be welcomed in these days, when the People’s Republic of China is increasing its pressure on the Mongols, the Mongolian Government clearly picked the wrong person – perhaps out of sheer ignorance. The international community of Mongolists cannot stay silent about this blatant violation of the standard rules concerning the proper recognition of research results.

José Andrés Alonso de la Fuente, Co-editor of JEAL
Institute of Linguistics, Translation Studies and Hungarian Studies
Jagellonian University, Kraków, Poland
jose.delafuente@uj.edu.pl
András Róna-Tas, Academician, Professor Emeritus of Altaic Studies
University of Szeged, Hungary
aronatas3@t-online.hu

William Rozycki, Outreach Coordinator
East Asian Studies Center
Indiana University
roz34zz@gmail.com

Pavel Rykin, Senior Research Fellow, Mongolian Studies
Institute for Linguistic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg
pavryk@yandex.ru

Zayabaatar Dalai, Professor, Dean, Director
School of Arts and Sciences, Institute for Mongol Studies National University of Mongolia
zayabaatar@num.edu.mn/zayabaatard@gmail.com

References


