

## ON PROBABLE TUNGUS-MANCHURIAN ORIGIN OF THE BUyla INSCRIPTION FROM NAGY-SZENTMIKLÓS\*

**1.1.** The famous treasure of Nagy-Szentmiklós was found exactly two hundred years ago, in 1799. It consists of 23 gold bowls, dishes, jars, and cups, and belongs now to the exposition of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. It was found in Banat, near the village of Nagy-Szentmiklós (today Sinnicolau Mare, to the north-west of Temesvár — Timișoara). The detailed description of the treasure and the history of studies is given in [László, Rácz 1983]; see also an ample bibliography compiled by Maria Ivanics (in [Göbl, Róna-Tas 1995: 59–77]).

There are no direct indications for dating and attribution of the objects. Most estimates place them in the period between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century being the most wide-spread (and still, rather likely than proven) dating, see [Róna-Tas 1990: 9]; in his more recent publication András Róna-Tas [1997: 110] gives however preference to the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. Therefore the treasure is usually referred to as «Avar» or «Late Avar», sometimes also as «Protobulgarian» (e. g. [Mavrodinov 1943] as well as later literature from Bulgaria). This, however, does not necessarily characterise its provenance: as far as analogues to goldsmiths' work, vessel forms, pictorial representations, and ornamental motives are concerned, references has been made to the Carpathian basin and to the entire Eurasian steppe zone, to Byzantium and to Southern Europe, to the Caucasus and to Iran.

**1.2.** The objects belonging to this treasure have inscriptions of three kinds which received recently a detailed palaeographic analysis in [Göbl, Róna-Tas 1995]. An inscription in Greek (the reading of which remains non-unproblematic, see [Vékony 1973]) is repeated twice on two paired bowls. The famous «Buyla inscription» (Inscr. 17 on buckled bowl [Schnallenschale] XXI) is written also with Greek letters, but in a non-Greek language. 13 objects have short inscriptions written with an unknown script of the «runiform» type.

It has been confirmed many times and by various study methods that the Nagy-Szentmiklós inscriptions differ not only in language and script, but also were not made by the same hand and therefore may originate from different (geographically as well as chronologically) artisan shops — as well as the gold objects themselves. «Die einzelnen Stücke des Schatzes stammen sicher aus verschiedenen Zeiten. [...] Die

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<sup>1</sup> A very late (not before the 12<sup>th</sup> century) dating of the treasure suggested by Hugo Mötefindt [1925] found no support in further research.

griechische Schrift des in griechischen Sprache geschriebenen Textes und die der Buyla-Inschrift sind paläographisch sehr weit voneinander entfernt» ([Róna-Tas 1990: 10]; see also [László, Rácz 1983: 176–180; Göbl, Róna-Tas 1995: 29, 33–35]). It is therefore permissible to restrict here the discourse to only one inscription, which always attracted more attention than the others.

2. The reading of the Buyla inscription causes no difficulties:

+ ΒΟΥΗΛΑ • ΖΟΑΠΑΝ • ΤΕΣΗ • ΔΥΓΕΤΟΙΓΗ •  
 ΒΟΥΤΑΟΥΛΑ • ΖΩΑΠΑΝ • ΤΑΓΡΟΓΗ • ΗΤΖΙΓΗ • ΤΑΙΣΗ

This text should be probably transliterated as follows:

*buila* (-jl-) • *zoapan* (ž-, ʒ-, ʒ-) • *tesī* (-ī) • *dügetügi* (*dügetüji*, *düjetüji*; -ī) • *butaul* •  
*zoapan* (ž-, ʒ-, ʒ-) • *tagrogi* (-roj-; -ī) • *icigi* (*iciji*; ī-; -č-; -ī) • *tesī* (-ī)

The variants of transliteration (shown in brackets) are determined partly by the impossibility to distinguish some sounds with the means of the Greek alphabet, partly by the instability and dialectal heterogeneity of the Byzantine Greek graphics. At least two problems deserve special mention:

2.1. The merger of *η* and *ι*, abundantly attested in post-classical Greek, has never been complete and universal (the archaic pronunciation of *η* as *ē* survives even in the Pontic dialects of Modern Greek). In the Byzantine period a trend can be observed — maybe due to learned efforts — to use in foreign names *η* for rendering a stressed (long) vowel, and *ι* for rendering an unstressed (short) one. See [Debrunner 1954: 103–104] («in nachchristlicher Zeit scheint *ī* die herrschende Aussprache [des *η*] geworden zu sein») and [Schwyzer 1939: 185–186], as well as the material in [Moravcsik 1958]. Therefore the presence of both symbols *η* and *ι* in the Buyla inscription may raise suspects that they rendered two quantitatively (or even qualitatively?) different vowels (cf. below 4.3.3). On the other hand, this may be a variation like that of *οα* and *ωα*, *ε* and *αι* in other words of the same inscription.

2.2. Another post-classical and especially Modern Greek feature, the pronunciation of *γ* as *j* before *ι η ε*, has been taken into consideration for the reading of the Buyla inscription by Marcel Erdal [1988] and András Róna-Tas [1990] though disregarded in other deciphering attempts. The issue seems to be controversial. Gyula Moravcsik [1958: 32] accepts the reading *γ = j* before palatal vowels for Turkic glosses in Byzantine sources (most of which are however younger than the Buyla inscription), but he also mentions very late examples where *γ* even in this position obviously stands for *g* (*Γεμήσι καπί = Γκεμί καπισί* 16<sup>th</sup> c. = Turkish *Gemi qarısı* ‘ship gate’, *ορταγή* 1453 = Turkish *ortayî* ‘his companion’<sup>2</sup> [Ibid.: 32, 114, 22]. Numerous other facts (e. g. the usual rendering of *γ* as *g* in Slavic words and proper names of Greek origin, as well as the onomastic materials collected in [Свод... 1995]) leave no doubt that the preservation of the non-palatal *γ* was, at least as a feature of learned pronunciation, absolutely possible throughout the Middle Greek times and that therefore the letter sequences *γε*, *γη* could be freely used for rendering foreign *ge* or *gi*. Additionally, there always existed an opportunity of rendering a foreign intervocalic *j* with *ι* (as in *Βαϊανός = Bulg. Bajan* [Ibid.: 228–229] etc.). Therefore the traditional reading of all *gamma*’s in the

<sup>2</sup> This example is especially important due to the likeness of spellings between *ορταγή* and *ταγορη* from the Buyla inscription.

Buyla inscription as «g's» (or aspirated «γ's») must be considered much more probable than the new suggestion.

3. The book by R. Göbl and A. Róna-Tas contains on pp. 18–19 a collection of 14 attempted decipherments of the Buyla inscriptions; some earlier attempts are mentioned on pp. 11–16. The vast majority of scholars started with the assumption that the text belongs to a Turkic language (or even took its Protobulgarian origin for granted). However, this common starting point produced most variegated results, as the comparison of selected translations (belonging to specialists whose Turkological knowledge stands beyond question) shows:

Le zoapan Bouila a achevé la coupe, (cette) coupe à boire qui par le zoapan Boutaul a été adaptée à être suspendue [Thomsen 1917: 24].

Der Zoapan Buila hat graviert den Kampf, der Zoapan Butaul hat das innere Kreuz graviert [Mladenov 1927: 335].

Die Schale des Boila Čaban, in seinem Auftrag wurde sie ausgeführt; Botaul Čaban hat ihr die Schnalle machen lassen, seine Trinkschale ist sie ([Németh 1932a: 1]; cf. also [1932b : 10, 1972: 13]).

(paraphrased) Der Buila čupan tayši hätte hiernach seinem älteren Bruder (*ičikä*), dem himmlischen erhabenen Prinzen (*tānrogi tayši*), diese Schale geweiht [Haussig 1985: 30].

It is Buyla Žoapan who carries the bowl. Drinking bowl, made by But Aul Žoapan [Erdal 1988: 233].

Die Burg des Buyla župan werde ich bauen lassen. (Ich,) Butaul župan, werde die innere Burg (zu bauen) anfangen [Róna-Tas 1990: 27].

Needless to say, each of these tentative interpretation demanded both introducing numerous conjectures and amendments in the text of the inscription itself<sup>3</sup> and constructing a Turkic idiom with otherwise unattested (and sometimes hardly imaginable) combination of phonetic, grammatical and lexical peculiarities. The detailed analysis of weak points in these interpretations is hardly necessary: they obviously contradict and dishabilitate each other, and the fact that A. Róna-Tas in his summary report from 1995 refrained from supporting any of the versions (including his own) is enough eloquent. The idea that the language of the Buyla inscription is Turkic remains natural and attractive (taking the history of the corresponding area into consideration), but it repeatedly leads the studies to a deadlock.

4. My search in another direction was prompted mainly by the following two observations:

4.1. The inscription includes three words with the same ending *-gi* preceded by a vowel: ΔΥΓΕΤΟΙΓΗ, ΤΑΓΡΟΓΗ, ΗΤΖΙΓΗ. It is natural to assume that all three words occur in the same grammatical form and fulfil the same syntactic function, most likely the predicative one; so one must think of languages which have this or a similar end-

<sup>3</sup> It is almost universally assumed that the engraver — poor devil! — knew neither the Turkic language nor the Greek script, and that nobody possessing this knowledge cared to control his work. The entire philological experience proves, however, that assumptions of that kind (and they occur, regrettably, too frequently) signalise only the inadequacy of interpretations — not of the texts in question.

ing. This observation is not new (cf. already [Keil 1888], referred to in [Göbl, Róna-Tas 1995: 14]). However, this circumstance could not be taken into consideration in the numerous attempts to decipher the text: the Turkic languages do not know an ending like *-Vgi* in systematic grammatical use.

It is Tungus-Manchurian that fits this demand: here one of the most frequent, widespread and archaic verbal forms of 3Sg is reconstructed as *\*-ra-gī* (with harmonic variants like *\*-re-gī* and with variants determined partly by the assimilation of the initial consonants and partly by the conjugation class like *\*-da-gī*, *\*-ta-gī*, *\*-sa-gī*, *\*-ca-gī*, *\*-la-gī*, resp. *\*-de-gī*, etc.), see [Menges 1943: 243; Benzing 1955: 128–133; Суник 1962: 215–228]. In modern Tungus-Manchurian languages this form underwent contraction<sup>4</sup> and appears as Manchu *-ra*, Nanai *-ri* (dial. *-raj*) after long and *-j* after short vowels, Ulcha *-ri*, Oroch *-j*, Udehe *-i*, Solon *-ri*, Negidal *-ji*, Evenki and Even *-rī* (with numerous variants which either go back to the above mentioned proto-language allophony — see e. g. [Janhunen 1991a: 79] — or result from later morphological changes). Like most finite and semi-finite verbal forms in the Altaic languages, this form seems to originate from a participle (or gerund) and combines at least in some languages non-finite and finite meanings: Nanai *xolaj naj* ‘the reading man’, *naj xolaj* ‘the man is reading / reads’ [Суник 1962: 223]; Evenki (dial.) *emerī* ‘coming, приход’, *emerīw* ‘I have come, я недавно пришел’ [Василевич 1958: 706]. It is qualified as nominal aorist form (Benzing), as present participle serving as the base for finite forms of the (immediate) past tense (Sunik), etc. Below it is referred to as (predicative) participial aorist or (attributive) aorist participle.

**4.2.** For one of the two proper names in the inscription, БОУТАОУА, a Turkic interpretation has been suggested by Gy. Németh [1932b: 8] and accepted in later research [Göbl, Róna-Tas 1995: 23]: *Butaul* = *Bota-ul* < *Bota-oγul* ‘Bota’s son’, cf. the Turkic name *Bota*. This explanation is not faultless because: a) the contraction *oγu* > *u* (*ū*, *ō*) in the word for ‘son’ is a relatively late development of Kipchak and Siberian Turkic unknown in Ancient Turkic and Bulgar Turkic; b) according to the dominant model of Ancient Turkic (as well as Modern Turkic) patronyms, one could expect the construction ‘Bota’s son’ to include the possessive form *oγli*, *oγlu* rather than the absolute form *oγul* (*ul*); this second model of patronyms (represented e. g. by the Tuvian names in *-ool*) is — according to Peter Zieme’s personal communication (March 1999) — either very scarcely attested or even totally absent from Ancient Turkic sources.

On the other hand, the name БОУТАОУА shows striking similarity to the typical masculine proper names in *-wul* which are wide spread in Evenki (*Guriwul*, *Berkewul*, etc., cf. [Василевич 1958: 748]). If the name in question sounded *Butawul*, the absence of a special letter for *-w-* before *-u-* in its rendering with Greek letters is expectable. One can naturally only guess about the meaning of the stem *Buta-*, but the Tungus-Manchurian languages provides us with at least one very likely explanation: *\*buta-* ‘to hunt, to fish’ [ТМС I: 108], attested in Juchen, Manchu, Nanai, Ulcha, Udehe, and Oroch, hence *Butawul* ‘Hunter, Fisher’.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, through the intermediary stage *\*-ra-jī* etc.; this contraction, which affected all Tungus-Manchurian languages, must have occurred quite early. This means that even the interpretation of all *-ГН* in the inscription as *-ji* or *-jī* (see 2.2) remains compatible with the Tungus-Manchurian reading suggested here.

**4.3.** The above considerations can be regarded only as indicative, but by no means decisive. The crucial moment consists, in my opinion, in the fact that after «extracting» the presumable endings of participial aorist from ΔΥΓΕΤΟΙΓΗ, ТАГРОГН, НТЗИГН one easily and immediately recognises three verbal stems which: (a) are attested throughout the Tungus-Manchurian family and occur in many sources dealing with the Proto-Tungus-Manchurian reconstruction; (b) form together a uniform and relatively transparent semantic context.

These three stems in question are \**žüge(t)*- ‘to change, to exchange, to replace’ ([ТМС I: 270]; [Старостин 1991: 225] as \**žugē-*), \**tāg-* ‘to recognise, to acknowledge, to learn’ ([ТМС II: 149]; [Janhunen 1991a: 79] as \**taag-*, with the aorist suffix \**taag-ra-*), and \**ič(e)-* ‘to see, to look, to observe’ (cf. [Цинциус 1949: 308]; [Benzing 1955: 22] as \**ičä-*; [ТМС I: 334–335]; [Старостин 1991: 214] as \**iče-*). Placing these verbs into the context of the inscriptions we obtain a text saying that two regional leaders (zhupans) replace, recognise and supervise somebody (or each other), or maybe are themselves being replaced, recognised and supervised — in other words, behave like regional leaders of all times and are indulged into normal political and administrative activities<sup>5</sup>.

#### 4.3.1. ΔΥΓΕΤΟΙΓΗ.

The TM stem \**žüge-* (perf.), \**žüget-* (imperf.) ‘to change, to exchange, to replace’ [ТМС I: 270] is well attested in most languages, e. g. as Evenki *žuket-*, Orok *du(w)e-li-*, etc. The form of 3Sg of participial aorist of the imperfective stem: \**žügettegī* or \**žügetegī* < \**žüget-regī*. In Manchu, where this stem is not preserved, the development \**žü-* > *dü-* (> Late Manchu *du-*) could be expected, as in the Orok form of this stem or in Manchu *duksi* ‘bilberry, whortleberry’ < ТМ \**žüxi-kte-* [Цинциус 1949: 211; Benzing 1955: 36, 42]. The phonetic development \**ž* > *d* occurs also in other TM languages (systematically, however, only in Orok). Another process that is not uncommon in TM is the weak labial attraction [Benzing 1955: 20], which could produce the effect \**ä* > *ö* (*ü*) after the labial vowel of the first syllable. Therefore the spelling ΔΥΓΕΤΟΙΓΗ may render not directly the proto-form like \**žüget(t)egī*<sup>6</sup>, but rather its dialectal developments like °*düget(t)egī*, °*düget(t)ögi*, °*düget(t)ügi* resp. (with shortened end vowel) °*düget(t)egi*, °*düget(t)ögi*, °*düget(t)ügi*, being transcriptionally exact.

#### 4.3.2. ТАГРОГН.

The reconstruction of ТМ \**tāgragī* ‘recognition, (has) recognised’ raises no doubts. One may perhaps speculate on the phonetic reasons of rendering the long *ā* in the first syllable with A, and of the short *a* in the second syllable with O (the first type of rendering occurs also in ВОУНЛА, ZOAPIAN ~ ZQAPIAN, BOYTAOYΛ). An explanation that lies close at hand consist in assuming that the Tungus-Manchurian language of the inscription was (partly) affected by the phonetic development which was in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries gradually spreading through the Proto-Slavic dialect continuum: the change of \**ā* to *a* and of \**ǎ* to *o*. The symbiosis with the Early Slavs (see the rich literature on the issues of the Avar-Slavic relationships) could in principle be responsible for the penetration of this phonetic innovation also in the language of the Buyla inscription.

<sup>5</sup> Rather than into producing, engraving, and buckling bowls (as it is suggested by most popular versions of reading the inscription in Turkic).

<sup>6</sup> In this case we were to assume the rendering of *žü* with ΔΥ (*dü*) — which looks by no means impossible.

## 4.3.3. HTZIFH.

The participial aorist of TM *\*iče-* ‘to see, to observe’ should be probably reconstructed as *\*ičeregī* or (if the stem belonged to the conjugation classes II or III, see [Benzing 1955: 123–128]) resp. *\*ičesegī* or *\*ičedegī*. However, the consonantal stem in Even *ič-* and Orok *it-*, as well as the variation of vowels in the second syllable in the derivatives of other TM languages (cf. Evenki *ičulī-* ‘to check, to investigate’, Nanai *ičučī-* ‘to show’, Solon *isō-* ‘to appear’, see [TMC II: 334–335]) may bear testimony to the archaicity of the corresponding stem without the final vowel. If so, the expected form of the participial aorist could have been (with assimilation) *°iččegī*, (after degemination) *°ičegī* and even (with attraction/assimilation of vowels) *°ičīgī*. It can be even assumed that the spelling HTZIFH correctly renders stressed character and length of the initial and final vowels as opposed to shortness of the medial vowel (cf. 2.1 on the usage of *η* and *ι*).

**5.1.** The proper names and titles in the Buyla inscriptions have always been more or less clear. My suggestion concerning the presumably Tungus-Manchurian origin of the name BOYTAOYA has been formulated above (4.2).

Perhaps it were possible to find a tentative TM etymology also for the name BOYHAA, but this is hardly necessary: on the one hand, it received a most persuasive treatment in [Göbl, Róna-Tas 1995: 22–23] and, on the other hand, it must not and cannot be expected that personal names belong either to the language of the name-bearers or to the language of the document mentioning these names (cf. [Ibid.: 23])<sup>7</sup>.

The title *zhupan* (in its different phonetic version) was in the last centuries of the 1<sup>st</sup> mill., and remained afterwards, so wide spread in the Carpathian basin and adjoining lands that additional comments to the word ZOAPIAN, ZΩAPIAN are also hardly necessary ([Ibid.: 24–25] as well as rich etymological literature devoted to this title, e. g. [Zett 1975]). The only striking circumstance consists in the Greek spelling with *-oa-*, *-ωα-*: one could rather expect this word to be spelled with *ov*, *ω*, or *o*, as in numerous other Greek renderings of the same title (see [Moravcsik 1958: 131–132]). As long as otherwise the Greek transliteration seems to be very exact, it can be suspected that this unique spelling renders the pronunciation of the title in the language of the inscription. And, if so, its first part can be tentatively compared with TM *\*ž(u)w(a)n* ‘ten’ [Benzing 1955: 26, 101; TMC I: 248], Nanai *žoā*, *žoa(n-)* id., Manchu *žuwanda* ‘foreman (in a group of ten units or persons)’. If a plausible Tungus-Manchurian source also for the second part *-pan* can be found (my search in this direction remained fruitless), this comparison may constitute a sound alternative to other suggested etymological treatments of *zhupan* (to Slavic *župa* ‘district’ — unless this word is not itself a back formation from the title, etc.). If not, this comparison may explain the folk-etymological phonetic change underwent by the foreign title *zhupan* in the language of the Buyla inscription.

**5.2.** ΤΕΣΗ, ΤΑΙΣΗ (the identification of both spellings is a commonplace of former studies, and I do not see any need to reject this tradition).

In the framework of the suggested interpretation *tesī* (*tesī*) remains the last lexical riddle of the inscription — and obviously must play the key role in its reading. There

<sup>7</sup> An additional consideration: at least one of the resulting interpretations of the text (see below, 6.3) suggests that it was Buta(w)ul, but not necessarily also Buyla, whose native language was a Tungus-Manchurian idiom.

seem to be no obvious «candidates» for direct (without conjectures, etc.) identification in the lexical material of contemporary Tungus-Manchurian languages. Still, I venture to suggest a solution which is by no means the sole one — but looks very probable.

The TM verbal stem *\*teg(e)-* ‘to sit down’ (Ev. *tege-* etc, see [Benzing 1955: 30] as *\*tägä-*; [TMC II: 226–228]; [Старостин 1991: 214] as *\*tege-*) is attested as Manchu *te-* with the meanings ‘to sit, to sit down; to sit enthroned; to hold a post, a seat’ (‘сидеть, садиться, восседать; занимать должность, место’). The «administrative» meaning of this stem is evidently archaic, perhaps even common TM, as evidenced by the following derivative of *\*teg(e)-*: Evenki *tegemēr*, Even *təḡəmer/təḡəməṛ/tegemēr*, Orok *teyemeri* ‘tsar’ [TMC II: 228]<sup>8</sup>.

In Manchu this (or a similar) derivative is, according to [TMC], not attested — a fact that can hardly be surprising, because all political terminology of this language consists of Chinese and Mongolian loan-words. However, the most commonly used suffix of nomina agentis in Manchu is *-si* (*adulasi* ‘herdsman’ from *adula-* ‘to graze’, *medesi* ‘messenger’ from *mede* ‘message’, *učulesi* ‘singer’ from *učule-* ‘to sing’, etc; s. [Болдырев 1987: 55]). That determines the semantic transparency and derivational plausibility of the non-attested *\*tesi* ‘king, monarch’ (or maybe only ‘seat-holder, high-ranked person’), semantically parallel to Evenki *teyemēr*, in a TM language relatively close to Manchu<sup>9</sup>.

The fact that, similar to the title *zhupan*, the word in question is repeated in the inscription twice strengthens the probability of treating it as another title.

6. Summing the above interpretational and etymological suggestions up, we receive the following word-for-word translation of the Buyla inscription:

**zhupan Buyla «king» replaced zhupan Butaul recognised supervised «king»**

(the quotation marks signalise that the «king» may be actually any privileged person, from a senior district official up to the Byzantine basileus, the emperor of the Franks, or the Avar khaghan).

The absence of grammatical markers (with the exception of the verbal/participial ones) makes the syntactic roles of individual words unclear. This is a most serious obstacle to understanding the text unequivocally.

6.1. One possibility consists in treating the text as composed of nominal predicative phrases with omitted copulae (existential verbs)<sup>10</sup> and with aorist participles used — in accordance with the syntactic rules of Tungus-Manchurian — in preposition to substantives:

<sup>8</sup> It is worth mention that the same semantic derivation is attested also in Selkup, a language with a long history of Tungus-Manchurian influences: Selkup (Taz) *ḡmtiḡ qoḡ* ‘tsar, king’, derived from *ḡmti-* ‘to sit’.

<sup>9</sup> I must mention, however, a phonetic problem that arises in connection with this explanation: one must assume the early loss of intervocalic (or stem-final) *-g-* in *\*teg(e)-*, while in other cases the language of the Buyla inscription seems to have preserved this consonant (see above). It can only be remarked that problems of that kind frequently accompany the attempts to give an accurate description of the reflexes of «weak» consonants in Tungus-Manchurian (and in other Altaic, as well as non-Altaic) languages. Just one example: TM *\*daga* ‘root’ is attested in Negidal as *dā*, though normally *-g-* is preserved there as *γ* (TM *\*daga* ‘near’ > Negidal *daya*).

<sup>10</sup> There are numerous examples of such syntactic constructions in Evenki [Колесникова 1966: 119], in Nanai [Авдорин 1981: 93ff.] and in other Tungus-Manchurian languages.

**Zhupan Buyla (is the) «king». (The) replacing zhupan Butaul (is the) recognising (and) supervising «king».** (Alias: Zhupan Buyla is and remains the king, but — during his absence or disease — his deputy zhupan Butaul fulfils the administrative duties.)

This reading is perhaps the simplest one. However, I can hardly imagine a situation when such a message should be engraved on a gold bowl (for whom?) rather than announced through horse-riding heralds, etc.

**6.2.** Another, and perhaps a better, reading, can be obtained by ascribing the passive meaning to aorist participles:

**Zhupan Buyla, (the) «king», (is) replaced. Zhupan Butaul (is the) recognised (and) supervised «king».**

I am, however, inclined to reject this version as long as the aorist participles in *\*-ra-gī* are normally employed in the Tungus-Manchurian languages as active participles (unless the verb itself is supplied with a passive marker).

**6.3.** A principally different, and more sensible, reading derives from the following considerations:

(A) Though all Tungus-Manchurian languages inherit the object (accusative) marker *\*ba*, its usage is in the Southern group non-obligatory, especially with indefinite objects [Benzing 1955: 79]. V. A. Avrorin in his book on Nanai syntax devoted a big chapter to nominative objects, indicating that in some texts they occur as frequently as the accusative ones [Аврорин 1981: 151–158].

(B) Though the canonical word order in the Tungus-Manchurian languages is SOV, all grammatical descriptions as well as texts indicate ample possibilities of deviating from this word order in emphatic construction. The text of the Buyla inscription can be expected to be declarative (with an emphasis) rather than narrative.

(C) If the Buyla inscription is a translation from some other language (e. g., from Greek, from Slavic), it can be expected to be a word-for-word rendering of the original text, with the non-Tungus-Manchurian (or untypical) syntax preserved.

These considerations permit me to suggest the following third version of interpreting the text (taking the employment of Greek letters into consideration, it is the basileus who can be considered the most probable candidate for ΤΕΣΗ / ΤΑΙΣΗ):

**The basileus has displaced (or: displaces) Buyla as zhupan. The basileus has recognised and supervised (or: recognises and supervises) Butaul as (the new) zhupan.**

or even (treating the text of inscription as a performative speech act):

**The basileus declares the displacement of Buyla as zhupan. The basileus declares his recognition and watch over Butaul as (the new) zhupan.**

Such a text may be authentic, though syntactically aberrant (from the viewpoint of dominating syntactic models in the contemporary Tungus-Manchurian languages). Even more likely, it can be a word-for-word translation from an Indo-European language with a free word order — for example, the translation of the text which corresponds syntactically to the following, syntactically adequate, Russian text: *Буйлу-жупана император сменяет. Бутаула-жупана признает и контролирует император.*

It is this last reading version that produces perhaps the most plausible scenario, explaining also the circumstances under which the Buyla inscription came into being: *After a political change in the southern part of the Avar khaghanate, which could have occurred even without any direct Byzantine participation, Constantinople seeks the ways to reaffirm its (formal rather than real) sovereignty over the region and strengthen the ties to the new zhupan Butaul. The latter is therefore presented with a gold bowl (and possibly other gold objects belonging to the treasure of Nagy-Szentmiklós). An inscription engraved on the bowl serves as the act of diplomatic recognition on the basileus' side. As a token of special respect, this inscription is translated into Butaul's native language.*

6.3.1. This last reading version (which seems to be more promising than those in 6.1 and 6.2) and the corresponding scenario lead to the following suggestions concerning the gold bowl XXI and perhaps also the other objects belonging to the treasure:

(a) they were produced in Byzantine artisan shops, so that e. g. the portrayal of a victorious nomad warrior on gold jar II [László, Rácz 1983: 53–55] and other engraved scenes can be viewed as the continuation of the tradition of the famous «Scythian» vases with the scenes from the Scythian life (which were produced in ancient Greece) and not as specimens of «steppe art»;

(b) they can be dated with the time when the Byzantine presence or even domination in (contemporary) Banat and in adjoining regions was possible, perhaps before the invasion of Danube Bulgarians (ca. 670–680) or, less likely, after the victories of Byzantium over Bulgaria (mid-10<sup>th</sup> century).

Both suggestions remain within the limits delineated by the previous studies on the treasure of Nagy-Szentmiklós.

**6.4.** It goes without saying that the above three versions do not exhaust the possibilities of interpreting the Tungus-Manchurian text, and especially of speculating on its possible historical connotations.

**7.** The assumption that a Tungus-Manchurian idiom was spoken in the Carpathian basin in the Avar times is naturally a much more serious claim. It must be stressed, however, that: (a) neither Turkic nor Mongolic origin of the Avars has been until now proven; (b) according to the wide-spread view, the Avar tribal confederation was not linguistically uniform<sup>11</sup>; (c) the Tungus-Manchurian affiliation of the language of the Buyla inscription certainly does not suggest that this was the only or the dominating language of the Avars.

Another, and extremely important, piece of evidence must necessarily be mentioned in this connection. István Futaky in two articles [1970, 1973] indicated some probable borrowings from Tungus-Manchurian into Hungarian, and at least four of his etymologies (for Hung. *beteg* 'ill', *oldal* 'side', *hamar* 'quickly', *kanál* 'spoon') appear to be faultless<sup>12</sup>. One can see here another trace of the Tungus-Manchurian presence in the Carpathian basin, or at least far enough in the West to reach the Proto-Hungarians.

<sup>11</sup> «It should hardly be surprising that the European Avars were an entirely mixed tribal confederation, with an Inner Asian core, in which a number of Altaic and non-Altaic languages were spoken» [Golden 1992: 111]. Cf. also [Ligeti 1986a; Gołab 1992: 394 ff.].

<sup>12</sup> The fact that they are not accepted in the contemporary Hungarian etymological lexicography is a problem of the latter — not of the quality of I. Futaky's comparisons.

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**7.1.** The language of the Buyla inscription appears to be relatively close to the Proto-Tungus-Manchurian — closer anyhow than to any of the later or contemporary daughter idioms, though some features can be viewed as Southern or even Early Manchu. This agrees with the relatively late dating of the dissolution of the Tungus-Manchurian unity (first half or middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> mill.) which the author assumed in some previous studies (see e. g. [Хелимский 1985б: 210]).

**7.2.** If the above assumptions concerning the Buyla inscription are correct, both the person who prepared the Greek transliteration and the goldsmith who engraved it deserve our gratitude: the text contains no misspellings and needs no amendments.