

Reassessing the Ilandag Rock Inscription from Nakhchivan: A Comparative Analysis Through the Azerturk Linguistic Remodeling Method

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ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines the Ilandag rock inscription discovered in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan, and previously interpreted within a conventional Urartian framework. Using the Azerturk Linguistic Remodeling Method, the study proposes an alternative reconstruction based on structural, morphological, and semantic correspondences observed in Turkic linguistic patterns. The article compares earlier transliterations and translations with a remodeled reading of the inscription and discusses the implications of different methodological approaches to the interpretation of ancient cuneiform texts. Rather than focusing on historical conclusions alone, the study highlights the role of linguistic modeling in the reconstruction of fragmentary inscriptions and contributes to ongoing discussions concerning the decipherment of ancient written records

KEYWORDS: Ilandag Inscription; Nakhchivan; Cuneiform; Historical Linguistics; Decipherment; Turkic Languages; Linguistic Remodeling; Ancient Text Reconstruction.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1988, the hydrogeologist Dr. V. A. Igumnov from Yerevan accidentally discovered a cuneiform inscription on Mount Ilandag in the Julfa district of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan. During a subsequent visit in 1989, he photographed the inscription, documented its location, recorded its coordinates, and described the physical characteristics of the monument.

The inscription is carved on Mount Ilandag (also known locally as Haçadağ), one of the most prominent landmarks of the Nakhchivan region. The mountain occupies a significant place not only in the geography of Azerbaijan but also in local historical traditions and folklore.

In 1999, a detailed study of the monument was published in SMEA (Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici) under the title “An Urartian Cuneiform Inscription from Ojasar-Ilandagh, Nakhichevan” by S. G. Hmayakyan and colleagues. The authors classified the inscription as



Map 1. Azerbaijan Republic and Nakhchivan Mountain Ilandag shown in black circle.

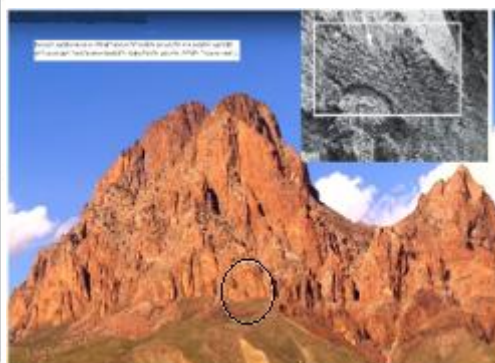


Figure 1. Mountain Ilandag And Rock Inscription

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Urtian and presented a transliteration and translation based on the conventional methods of Urartian philology.

The publication represented an important contribution to the study of the monument. At the same time, the inscription remains relatively brief, partially weathered, and difficult to interpret with complete certainty. As a result, alternative approaches to its reconstruction deserve consideration, particularly when they may illuminate linguistic structures that have remained unresolved.

The present study does not seek to challenge the archaeological significance of previous research. Rather, it aims to re-examine the inscription through a different methodological framework—the Azerturk Linguistic Remodeling Method—which has been developed for the reconstruction of fragmentary syllabic texts lacking word divisions and punctuation.

Before addressing the inscription itself, it is useful to consider the toponymy of the mountain on which it was discovered. The site is known today by several names, including Ilandag, Haçadağ, and Ucasar (Ojasar). These names have long existed in local tradition and continue to be used by the population of Nakhchivan. Regardless of their precise historical origins, they form an important linguistic context for understanding the cultural landscape in which the inscription was preserved.

Mount Ilandag rises to approximately 2,415 meters and dominates the surrounding terrain. Its distinctive split summit has inspired numerous local legends and traditions, making it one of the most recognizable natural monuments of the South Caucasus.

According to Igumnov's description, the inscription is oriented from north to south and extends approximately one meter in length. It was engraved on the surface of a rock outcrop, portions of which have suffered erosion and fracturing over time. The text consists of five lines separated by incised horizontal guides. Due to weathering, several signs remain difficult to identify, and some portions of the text are incomplete.

For many years, the inscription remained inaccessible for renewed documentation. However, on June 1, 2026, Azerbaijani teacher of History in High School Huseyn Jafarov reported that he had successfully relocated the monument and produced a new copy of the inscription. This new documentation provides an opportunity to compare earlier readings with the present study and to reassess the linguistic interpretation of the text.

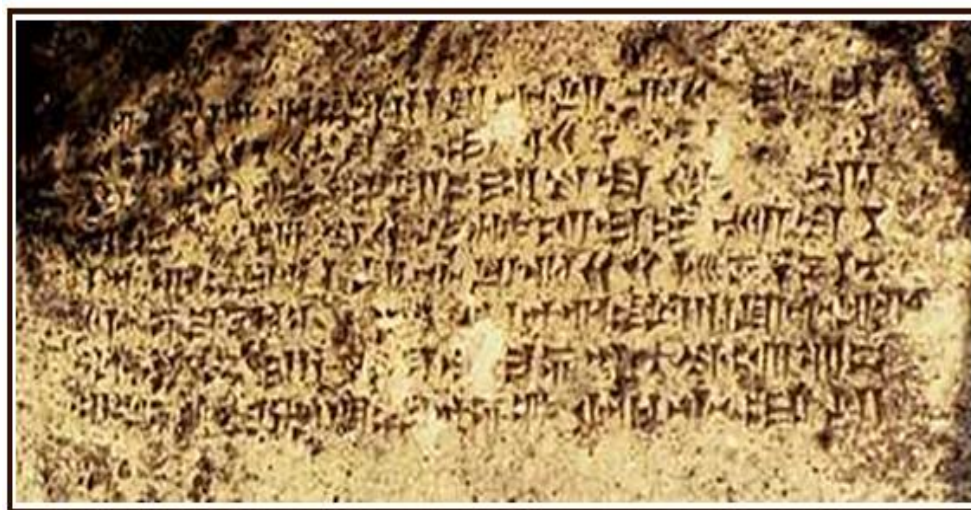


Figure 2. Copy of the Ilandag inscription alongside the earlier documentation prepared by V. A. Igumnov.

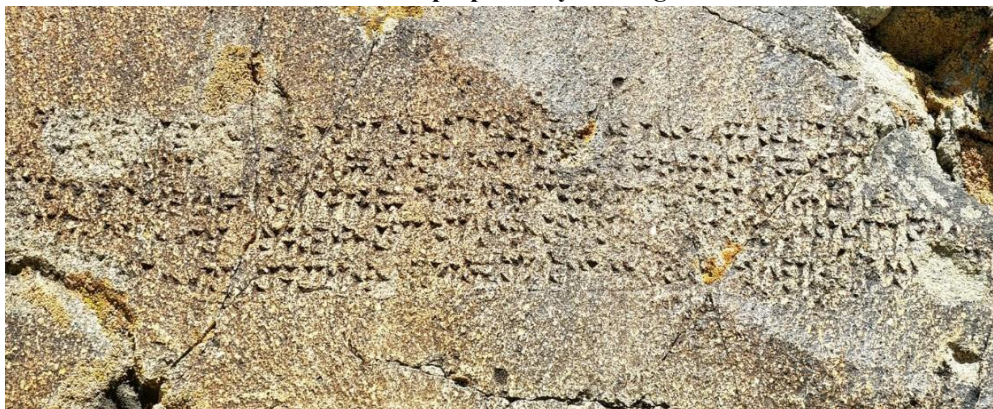


Figure 3 presents the newly documented photocopy of the inscription after Husain Jafarov
Transliteration of inscription by Hmayakyan S.G. and others:

1. ^[D]Hal-di-ni-n[e] ush-ma-[sh]i-[ne] ^IIsh-pu-u-i-ne-she ^{IDXV}Sar-dur₈ hi-[ne-she] [KA](?)

2. ¹Mi-nu-a-she ¹Ish-pu-u-[i]-[ne]-hi-ni-she ^{URU}Ar-si-[ne] [KU]R-ne ha-u-ne ^{URU}Ish(?)...
3. ^{[U]RU}Ar-shi-qu(?)=me(?)=i KUR-ne ^{URU}A-a-ni-a-ne KUR-ne-e ha-u-l-ne za-ash'-gu-ne ku-l[u-ar-shu-ne](?)
4. GI₄-a-she t[e]-ru-ne ^DHal-de-e-i pu-lu-se ^{GEN}Bu-lu-u-l-[a]-d(e)-e te-ru-ne a[r]-[di-she]
5. NIG. [GA] [i]-[ne]-[le] ^DHal-de-e ur-bu-li-ne GU₄.AB ^DHal-de-[e] EN MAH-e ^{GEN}B[u]-[lu]-[a]-[de]

The authors apparently voice the text “in Urartian” (our version):

1. ^[D]Haldinine ushmaschine ¹Ishpuineshe ^{1D.XV}Sardurhineshe [KA]? (=ale):
2. ¹Minuashe ¹Ishpuinehineshe ^{URU}Arshine KUR-ne (=ebane) ¹haune, ^{URU}Ish(?)...
3. ^{URU}Arshiqueme (?) KUR-ne (=ebane), ^{URU}Ajaniane KUR-ne-e (=ebane) haune, zashgune, kuluarshune(?)
4. GI₄-ashe (=bidujashe) terune ^Daldei puluse ^{GEN}Buluade terune ardishe:
5. NIG.GA inele ^Dhaldeje urbuline, GU₄ AB – ^Daldeje EN (=eureje) MAH- e(=alsuineje) ^{GEN}Buluade.

Let's comment again at list part of them:

«Haldinine, ushmaschine, Ishpuineshe, Sardurhineshe, Minuashe, Ishpuinehineshe, Arşine, haune, Ajaniane, KUR-ne-e, zashgune, kuluarshune, Buluade, terune» и т.д.

However, Yerevan authors translate the text as follows:

1. To Haldean power Ishpuine son of Sardure speaks:
2. Minua son of Ishpuine the land (of the city) Arşine conquered. [The land (of the city) Ish... [conquered].
3. The land of the city Arşiqueme(?) (conquered) the land of the city Ajaniane conquered. (The people) killed, drove.
4. At the return erected a Haldean stele on (mount) Bulua. Established the canon:
5. Things these to (the god) Halde be sacrificed. (One) calf (be sacrificed) to (god Halde (lord) of himself most high on (mount) Bulua.

2. COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC REASSESSMENT

The interpretation proposed by Hmayakyan et al. (1999) follows the conventional Urartian paradigm and reconstructs the inscription as a royal military record describing conquests, territorial expansion, and ritual offerings to the deity Haldi. While this interpretation reflects established assumptions within Urartian studies, several linguistic and structural difficulties remain unresolved.

One issue concerns the extensive use of reconstructed grammatical endings and inferred lexical values that are not directly preserved in the inscription itself. As noted by Salvini (1998), several readings proposed in the original publication require substantial restoration of damaged signs and the introduction of hypothetical elements in order to produce a coherent historical narrative.

The present study approaches the text from a different perspective. Rather than beginning with predefined historical expectations, the Azerturk Linguistic Remodeling Method seeks to identify potential lexical, morphological, and syntactic relationships directly from the sequence of preserved syllabic signs.

1. Haldinini[[n]] ushma¹shi¹ [ni¹!] Ishpu uinise Serduri BAD hinişe
2. Minu ashe Ishpu uy¹ni¹ hinişe Arshini elanu xaun karuni[[n]]
3. Arshini eyi Kur ne Aani ani KUR nie hauni zaash guni [gu[[d]]
4. (May¹anu¹ ter[[h]]uni Haldi[[e]] ei Pulu uyadi nie ter[[h]]uni
5. Erdi se[[bahsi]] gu[n] Haldie ur pulini CUAB (cuab) Haldii sil aie pu[[luni]]

In Azerbaijani:

1. Haldini uzması (yaxud Haldini sazişi) nə işpu öynisə (oynusa), Sərduri bəd hinişə (hıncıxa, bəd qəzəblənə, qızışa),
2. Minü aşə, işpu öyni hinişə (qızışa), arşını ələnü (əyənü-T.A.) hain Karunin.
3. Arşini əyi, gör nə əyani Ani kürniyə! Haini cayış günü güd.
4. Mayanu terhuni Haldiyə ey pulu; uyadi niyə terhuni?
5. Ərdi səbahsı gün Haldiyə, ur (ver) puluni cuvab Haldiyə, sil aya puluni.

Glossary

Remodeled Form	** Propsed Turkic Equivalent **	Meanning
Haldini	Haldini or Kef Kalesi	ancient citadel in modern Turkey
ushması	uzması from uzma	contract
ni	nə	pro. what?
ishpu	ishbu	this
uinishe	oynusa from oyun	game, a tricky game

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Serdur hinishe	Serdar verb hinishmek, qezeblemek, hinc	king of unknown local country to became agitated, enraged, hatred, malice, thirst for revenge
minu	numeral min	thousand
ashe.....	asha from ashmaq	to exceed, surpass
arshini	arshin	a unite of length measurement & meter, but here fate, destiny
elanu	əlani from ələnək	be sifted, pour, will fall down
xaun	xain	traitor
Karunin	from Qarun	Croesus was a King of Lydia emperor (560 to 546 BC).k
kur	v. gör from görmək	see, to see
aiani	əyan, zadəgan	aristocracy nobles
Ani	Ani	ancient city in eastside of Turkey
ne	nə, necə	how
kurnie	coşub-daşa	be in a state of rage or extreme agitation
zaash	cayma-sözündən imtina etmək	change one's mind, refuse, slip away
guni	güni from gün	day or time
gu[d]	güd	to pursue, watch, here catch
mayanu	maya	fig. foundation, finance basic exclusively for beginning of business
terhuni	terhin, girov qoymaq	invest as collateral
erdi	ərđi from ərmək, gəlmək	to arrive
sebahsı gün	sabahsı gün	next day
ur	ver from vermək	give, here to pay of a tribute
sil	sil from silmək	take it off, proofread it, make a donation here, give it as a tribute
cuvab should be	suvab, savab	God willing
aya	aya, müqəddəs, müqəddəslik	for the shrines (of Haldini)
puluni	pulunu from pul	money

Applying this method to Salvini's revised transliteration produces a series of correspondences that can be compared with lexical forms preserved in modern Turkic languages, particularly Azerbaijani. Several verbal stems reconstructed through the remodeling process exhibit remarkable structural continuity:

Interpretive Translation

1. The Haldini contract appears to have been a cunning arrangement that provoked Sarduri's great anger and frustration.
2. Should the amount exceed a thousand and the matter degenerate into a game of trickery, the downfall of the treacherous Karun is inevitable.
3. If fortune abandons him, one will witness the nobles of Ani celebrating his misfortune. Indeed, it is rightly said that a traitor is revealed at the very moment he breaks his pledged word.
4. Sarduri committed his entire deposit to Haldini as collateral. Why did he place all of his wealth in pledge?
5. On the following day Sarduri came to Haldini to reclaim the deposit. If that was his intention, then let him act with piety: make an offering at Haldini and render tribute in recognition of its sacred status.

The significance of these correspondences does not necessarily lie in any single lexical match. Rather, it lies in the cumulative presence of grammatical patterns consistent with Turkic agglutinative structure, vowel harmony, and derivational morphology. From this perspective, the inscription appears less like a royal victory text and more like a record concerning an agreement, dispute, pledge, or contractual obligation involving individuals identified as Sarduri, Karun, and Haldi. Within the remodeled interpretation, Haldi is not necessarily understood as a deity but may instead designate a sacred locality, fortress, or pilgrimage center. This alternative reading remains hypothetical and requires further verification. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that the preserved syllabic sequence may support interpretations other than those traditionally accepted within Urartian scholarship.

3. DISCUSSION

Reassessing the Ilandag Rock Inscription from Nakhchivan: A Comparative Analysis Through the Azerturk Linguistic Remodeling Method

The purpose of this study is not to claim a definitive solution to the Ilandag inscription. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate how different methodological assumptions can generate substantially different interpretations from the same corpus of signs.

The conventional Urartian reading assumes that the inscription belongs to the political and religious sphere of the Urartian kingdom and therefore reconstructs royal names, conquered territories, and sacrificial formulas. The remodeling approach, by contrast, attempts to reconstruct lexical units according to Turkic phonological and morphological principles before assigning historical meaning.

The comparison highlights an important methodological question in ancient-text studies: to what extent do preconceive historical frameworks influence the reconstruction of fragmentary inscriptions?

The Ilandag inscription provides a useful case study because its weathered condition and limited length leave considerable room for alternative readings. Future discoveries, improved documentation, and additional comparative studies may help determine which interpretation better reflects the original text.

4. CONCLUSION

The Ilandag rock inscription remains one of the most intriguing cuneiform monuments discovered in the South Caucasus. Since its publication by Hmayakyan et al. and subsequent reassessment by Salvini, the inscription has continued to raise questions concerning its linguistic affiliation and historical significance.

Using the Azerturk Linguistic Remodeling Method, the present study has proposed an alternative reconstruction based on Turkic lexical and grammatical correspondences. Although the proposed reading differs substantially from conventional Urartian interpretations, it illustrates the potential value of structural linguistic remodeling when dealing with fragmentary syllabic texts lacking word divisions and punctuation.

Whether one accepts or rejects the conclusions presented here, the comparison demonstrates that the Ilandag inscription remains open to further investigation. The monument therefore deserves renewed scholarly attention as an important source for the linguistic and cultural history of the South Caucasus.

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