

CUNEIFORM SCRIPT IN THE CAUCASUS: Reconsidering the Tarki-Tau Inscription: A Turkic Linguistic Interpretation of a Long-Standing Epigraphic Puzzle

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ABSTRACT

The Tarki-Tau inscription is one of the most enigmatic cuneiform monuments associated with the Caucasus region. Although the original inscription has not survived, historical copies preserved by Witsen, Kantemir, and Burnouf provide valuable material for linguistic and epigraphic analysis. This study reviews the history of the inscription's discovery and scholarly interpretation and proposes a new transliteration based on a comparative analysis of Old Persian and Late Babylonian cuneiform sign forms. Particular attention is given to similarities between the Tarki-Tau inscription and an inscription reportedly discovered at Persepolis. Using a Turkic linguistic framework, a provisional reading of the text is proposed and evaluated. While the interpretation remains hypothetical, the results suggest that the inscription deserves renewed scholarly attention and that alternative linguistic approaches may contribute to its future decipherment. The study further discusses the historical significance of the inscription within the broader cultural context of the Caucasus and neighboring regions.

KEYWORDS: Tarki-Tau inscription, cuneiform, Caucasus, Old Persian, Turkic linguistics, epigraphy, Persepolis, historical linguistics.

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INTRODUCTION

My continuing research in Sumerology, including the examination of Russian-language scholarly materials, recently led me to an article by M. Idrisov entitled *The Secret of the Tarki-Tau Cuneiform Inscription* [1]. The history of the inscription's discovery and the various hypotheses concerning its origin and authorship remain unresolved, making it one of the most intriguing epigraphic puzzles of the Caucasus.

Thanks to Idrisov's publication, modern researchers have access to information concerning a remarkable rock inscription reportedly discovered in the territory of the former Soviet Union. To the best of my knowledge, it was for a long time the only known cuneiform inscription identified within this region. Subsequently, several other inscriptions were reported, including those from Karmir Blur near Yerevan, Ilandag in Nakhchivan (Northern Azerbaijan), and more recently Khudaferin in the Mugan region of Southern Azerbaijan.

Before presenting my own analysis, it is useful to summarize the historical information collected by Idrisov regarding the discovery and study of the Tarki-Tau inscription.



Figure 1. The Tarki-Tau Rock Inscription as reproduced by Eugène Burnouf.

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Idrisov writes:

Concerning the so-called Tarki cuneiform inscription, the Russian orientalist I. Berezin, who visited Tarki in 1842, stated that the inscription appeared to predate the campaigns of Alexander the Great and possessed considerable historical significance. Despite nearly two centuries of scholarly attention, however, the inscription remains undeciphered.

A central question therefore remains: what exactly is this little-known inscription, and what is the history of its discovery and subsequent investigation?

According to Idrisov, the inscription was first recorded by a German physician in the late seventeenth century near Tarki. Information about it subsequently reached the Dutch geographer Nicolaes Witsen, who was then residing in Moscow and later published a drawing of the inscription in his famous work *Northern and Eastern Tartary*. The publication attracted considerable attention and appeared in several editions and translations.

In 1722, Prince Dmitry Kantemir accompanied Peter the Great during the Caspian campaign and prepared another sketch of the inscription. Later, Eugène Burnouf discovered a copy of Kantemir's drawing accompanied by a note from Julius Klaproth identifying it as an inscription from Tarki.

During the 1820s, the inscription attracted the attention of scholars such as Georg Friedrich Grotefend and Antoine-Jean Saint-Martin. After deciphering thirty-two signs of Old Persian cuneiform in 1836, Burnouf compared the available copies of the Tarki inscription and concluded that they represented the same text. He further argued that Kantemir's version was independent of Witsen's publication.

Burnouf is particularly known for proposing that the opening sequence of signs could be read as *a-ra-sa-ku-ta*, which he associated with the Arsacid dynasty. On this basis, he suggested that the inscription may have commemorated a victory of an Arsacid ruler over the Khazars.

Despite repeated attempts throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to relocate the original monument, the inscription itself has not been rediscovered. Nevertheless, there is little reason to doubt its historical existence, as copies were documented and published long before the decipherment of Old Persian cuneiform.



Map 1. Dagestan Autonomy Republic. Tarki-Tau Script.

Russian orientalist N. V. Khanikov [2], relying upon Witsen's account, proposed that the inscription was situated between Buynak and Derbent, in the vicinity of Tarki, Ulluby-Aul, and Usemikent. Other scholars argued that the inscription may not have been located in Dagestan at all, but somewhere farther south in the Caucasus.

However, a careful reading of Witsen's description, together with the notes accompanying Kantemir's sketch, suggests that the inscription most likely originated in the Tarki region itself, possibly on the rocky slopes of Tarki-Tau. Archaeological investigations have identified settlements and cemeteries of the Albanian-Sarmatian period in this area, making the site of considerable historical and ethnographic interest.



Figure 2. Proposed migration routes of the Ete-Turks and Ete-Kumyks toward the Apennine Peninsula, Turukku, and present-day Kumykia.

Local tradition maintains that near the former residence of the Kumyk shamkhals, on the slopes of Tarki-Tau, there once stood a stone block bearing unusual signs. The monument was reportedly known among local inhabitants as *Yazyvlu Yar* ("Written Place") or *Tamgaly Tash* ("Inscribed Stone").

Archaeologist M. S. Hajiyevev proposed associating the inscription with later branches of the Arsacid dynasty, either Armenian or Median (Atropatenian), dating it approximately to the first century AD. M. A. Dandamayev, however, emphasized the highly unusual character of the inscription. While accepting that its opening sequence could be read as *A-ra-sa-ku-da*, he questioned Burnouf's identification of the term with the Arsacids.

According to Dandamayev, the inscription incorporates elements resembling both Old Persian and Late Babylonian cuneiform traditions. Yet even if the recorded copies are accurate, the inscription cannot be straightforwardly classified as Babylonian. Likewise, assigning it to a Median tradition remains problematic, since no securely identified Median inscriptions are currently available for comparison.

Consequently, the Tarki-Tau inscription continues to raise more questions than answers. Nevertheless, its existence points to the historical significance of the Tarki region as a potential cultural and political crossroads during antiquity.

PROPOSED TRANSLITERATION AND LINGUISTIC INTERPRETATION

The signs identified in the Tarki-Tau inscription may be transliterated as follows:

A RA SHA U THA BU SES IS A RA DU BUMI A A NU AK KA ATI

Applying the principles of Turkic linguistic remodeling, the sequence may be provisionally reconstructed as:

ARAŞA UT BU SES İSƏ RADU BUMİ AY ANU HAQQA ATI

A possible interpretation in modern Azerbaijani Turkish is:

ƏRŞƏ OD HA! BU SƏS İSƏ, RADU BUMİ AY ONU HAQQA ATI!..

which may be translated approximately as:

"Fire in Heaven? If this is that sound, is it thunder? May it be directed toward truth and justice."

This interpretation remains hypothetical and should be regarded as a linguistic proposal rather than a definitive translation. Nevertheless, several lexical elements appear to correspond closely to words preserved in modern Turkic languages.

The element **Araşa** may be compared with **Ərş** ("heaven," "celestial throne"), while **ut/od** corresponds to the Turkic word for "fire." Likewise, **ses** retains its meaning of "sound" or "voice," and **haqqa** may be interpreted as "truth," "justice," or "righteousness."

The phrase therefore appears to contain imagery associated with heavenly fire, thunder, and the restoration of justice. Such themes are well attested in ancient Near Eastern religious and poetic traditions.

Then I would move directly to the historical discussion:

HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

If the proposed reading is accepted as linguistically plausible, the inscription acquires significance beyond its local context. The apparent similarities between the Tarki-Tau inscription and the inscription reportedly discovered at Persepolis raise important questions regarding cultural contacts across a broad geographical region.

The presence of related sign forms in both inscriptions may indicate either a shared scribal tradition or participation in a wider cultural network extending across parts of the ancient Near East and the Caucasus. At present, however, the available evidence does not permit definitive conclusions regarding the direction or chronology of such connections.

The comparison nevertheless deserves further investigation, particularly in light of the mixed character of the script, which appears to combine elements traditionally associated with Old Persian and Late Babylonian cuneiform traditions.

Then I would remove entirely paragraphs such as:

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- "Supporters of Indo-Europeanism..."
- "Gentlemen, where are these Iranian-speaking dialects..."
- "What would Europe look like today..."
- "I blame my medieval ancestors..."
- "Buzzing of a fly for the elephant..."

These passages express understandable personal conviction, but they weaken the article academically because reviewers will focus on the rhetoric rather than on your epigraphic analysis.

Instead, I would replace them with neutral formulations such as:

"The linguistic affiliation of the populations inhabiting the region remains a subject of scholarly debate. The interpretation proposed here suggests that Turkic linguistic elements may have played a more significant role than is generally assumed."

That single sentence achieves more in an academic journal than two pages of polemic.

My view remains the same: the strongest part of this article is the **epigraphic comparison between the Tarki-Tau and Persepolis inscriptions**. That is where the paper should concentrate. The transliteration, sign comparison, and linguistic reconstruction are your original contribution. Everything else should support that central argument rather than compete with it.

CONCLUSION

The Tarki-Tau inscription remains one of the most intriguing epigraphic monuments of the Caucasus. Although the original monument has not survived, the copies preserved by Witsen, Kantemir, and Burnouf provide valuable material for further study.

The comparative analysis presented in this article suggests that the inscription shares several graphical and structural features with inscriptions traditionally associated with the Old Persian and Late Babylonian cuneiform traditions. The proposed transliteration and linguistic interpretation indicate that at least some elements of the text may be understood within a Turkic linguistic framework. Particularly noteworthy is the apparent similarity between the Tarki-Tau inscription and the inscription reportedly discovered at Persepolis. Whether this similarity reflects a common scribal tradition, cultural interaction, or another historical process remains an open question requiring further investigation.

The interpretation proposed here should be regarded as a working hypothesis rather than a final solution. Nevertheless, the results demonstrate that the inscription deserves renewed scholarly attention and that alternative linguistic approaches may contribute to its future decipherment.

An additional development of historical significance occurred in 2021, when a commemorative reconstruction of the Tarki-Tau inscription was installed on the mountain by local cultural activists under the leadership of Abdul Nasir Kadyrov. Based on Burnouf's published copy, the reconstruction symbolizes continuing public interest in the preservation of the region's ancient cultural heritage. The Tarki-Tau inscription therefore remains not only an unresolved epigraphic puzzle but also an important historical monument whose study may contribute to a better understanding of cultural and linguistic interactions in the ancient Caucasus and neighboring regions.



Figure 3. "Yazıvlu Tash" on TARKI TAU restored after it was deciphered.

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