The etymology of the toponyms of Murino and Murom

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Abstract

Near Saint Petersburg there is a town named Murino. The toponym has no reliable etymology but seems to be connected with Murom. Murom also has no reliable etymology. Folklore says that in Murino and in Murom there were dense forests where different criminals and devilry dwelled. Thus, both toponyms seem to be connected with forest. In Kildin Sami there is the word murr “tree” that has no Uralic etymology, but can be explained through Proto-Nakh *murqa “alder-tree” and Proto-West Caucasian mazv “pine-tree”. Sami had direct contacts with the Neolithic people, and it is supposed that these toponyms came from the language of Neolithic people who spoke a language that was a juncture between Yeniseian and Caucasian languages. Toponyms Murino and Murom mean probably the forest that was used as a place of residence by the relict groups of Neolithic people who maintained their culture in the Metal age.

Keywords: Pre-Uralic toponyms; substrate toponyms; Murino; Murom; Muri Deʾŋ

1. Introduction

In the immediate neighborhood of Saint Petersburg there is a town named Murino (fig. 1). There are several versions of the etymology of the toponym. According to one version, the place name comes from the Finnish Muurola – "settlement of bricklayers". According to another, this is an inaccurate Swedish rendering of the Finnish Muurola (in Finland there are several places with such names), where muuri is “a stone for construction”, and -la is a suffix meaning “place”, that is, “the place where the stone is” (see Мурино). Actually, none of these versions is reliable enough and both of them look like folk etymologies since there is no evidence that construction stone has ever been mined in Murino, or that bricklayers lived there.

There is also a version that in the 17th century migrants from the Murom district of the Vladimir province settled here, which gave the name to the settlement. At the first sight, this last version also looks like folk etymology; however, the supposition about connection with the Murom district leads to the right track.

2. Toponyms Murino and Murom are connected with forests

In Juhani Konkka's novel “Lights of St. Petersburg” there is an episode describing the terrible Murinsky forest, where lived robbers who robbed passing peasants.
Despite now there is no forest in Murino: the Murinsky park that is located near Murino (fig. 1) doesn’t look like a forest at all (fig. 2), the park isn’t a remnant of old forest, but is a park that was artificially created in 2000s (see: Муринский парк). However, yet at the beginning of the 20th century there was a pretty large forest in Murino, and now the only remnant of this old forest of Murino is the park of Sosnovka (fig. 1) that looks much like a true forest (fig. 3).

Fig. 1. Location of Murino, Murinsky park, and Sosnovka park (map drawn by the author after Google maps screenshot)

The territories around Murom (fig. 4) are also well known by dense forests where according to Russian folklore/legends lived different criminals and devilry.

Of course, folklore can’t be considered as a source about real events that took place in the past, but mythology/folklore conveys certain key points of ancient events, albeit in a distorted form. For instance, Iliad can’t be used as a source about real events that took place in the period of the Late Bronze Age collapse, but the epic poem definitely can be a source telling about a certain ancient city.
Fig. 2. A view in the Murinsky park (photo by Alexander Akulov)

Fig. 3. A walkway in the Sosnovka park (photo by Yelena Kolesnikova)
It is a noteworthy fact that the toponym Murom also has no reliable etymology. According to the most reliable version the toponym originates from the name of a Finno-Ugric tribe *Muroma* (see Mypom). However, this version also looks like a folk etymology.

Thus, we can see that both toponyms (Murino and Murom) sound very similar, both have no reliable etymologies, and both are associated with forests.

In Kildin Sami there is the word *murr* meaning “tree” (in Northern Sami this word has the form of *muorra*). This word has no Uralic etymology, but can be explained through Caucasian roots: *murr/muorra* correlates with Proto-Nakh *murqa* “alder-tree” (Akulov 2021a: 18) and also with Proto-West Caucasian *mažV* “pine-tree” (Akulov 2020b: 3).

In ancient times (in the late Neolithic period and in the Metal age) Sami lived on much more southward territories than in modern history. For instance, yet in the 12th – 13th centuries there was a compact Sami population on the southern shore of Lake Ladoga (for more details see: Kirpichnikov 1988: 74, Akulov 2021b: 11 – 12). And for at least several centuries Sami had immediate contacts with people who lived in the territory of the East European plain in the Neolithic period. It is possible to state that these Neolithic people spoke a language that was a juncture between Yeniseian languages on one hand and Caucasian and Hattic languages on the other hand, but it seems that the language was closer to Caucasian and Hattic than to Yeniseian (Akulov 2020a, 2020b, 2021a).
Thus, it is possible to say that in toponyms Murino and Murom there is the root meaning “tree” originating from the language of Neolithic people. The toponyms Murino and Murom most probably denote something associated with forest, probably a special type of forest, i.e.: thicket/dense forest. These toponyms were first borrowed by Sami from the language of Neolithic people, and then through Finno-Volgaic languages were borrowed by Slavic people.

3. Muri Deŋ – The People of Forest

The above-proposed etymologies of Murino and Murom require some explanation. It is pretty obvious that in the late Neolithic period and in the Metal age whole territory of the East European plain was covered by forests, and so it would be unnatural to suppose that people who lived there in those periods would single out certain places and denote them simply as “forest” or even “dense forest”.

The conclusion suggests itself that place names Murino and Murom mean not just a forest, but a special forest, probably the forest that was used as a place of residence by the relict groups of Neolithic people who maintained their culture in the Metal age when most of the territory of East European plain was already occupied by people speaking Uralic languages and most of the Neolithic people were assimilated by the people speaking Uralic languages.

I suppose it is possible to name these relic groups with a conventional name created from reconstructed words of their language: *Muri Deŋ – “The People of Forest” where muri means “dense forest” and deŋ means “people”, “people belonging to the same local group”\(^1\).

(\(\text{It is noteworthy that Murom is located in the region where traditions of Neolithic pottery were maintained in the Metal age see Akulov 2019).}\)

Of course, these Muri Deŋ could not lead a calm and unhurried lifestyle, as in the Neolithic period, that is: most likely, they no longer had summer and winter settlements, and the territories in which they could freely exist were limited by the densest forests. It was rather difficult to maintain winter and summer settlements and to move from winter to summer settlements without meeting strangers, and, in general, the whole concept of seasonal settlements evidently was seriously deformed/transformed.

Also these Forest People already knew the metal industry and knew what war is, and also it is possible to state that there was a certain formal hierarchy inside their groups.

Whether these Muri Deŋ could meet with Slavs is an open question and a potential material for a future research, but Muri Deŋ could survive until the epoch when Slavs started to spread on the East European Plain.

It was the Muri Deŋ that could potentially serve as the basis for some folklore stories about evil spirits living in the forests. Muri Deŋ differed seriously from both the Finno-Ugrians and the Slavs, and, probably, the infrequent meetings of the Slavs and Finno-Ugrians with the Muri Deŋ did not always end well for the Finno-Ugrians and Slavs.

The mythology of forest creatures that are hostile to people may have very real grounds: Muri Deŋ could use special masks and costumes for intimidation, as well as unusual frightening sounds (for example, they could use instruments like the Australian didgeridoo)…

\(^1\) For more details about the possibility of such reconstructions see Akulov 2020a
References


Мурино (Murino) [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мурино](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мурино) – accessed September 2021

