

## On the etymology of the hydronym Sestra

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### Abstract

In early recordings the river Sestra, which flows into Sestroretskii Razliv, is mentioned in the form of Sestreyā which originated from Finnish Siestar-oja. This hydronym has neither Balto-Finnic nor Slavic etymology. The Sestra is a relatively large river on the Karelian Isthmus, and at least 9 Neolithic sites were discovered near its mouth. The main summer activity of the Neolithic people who lived in the region was fishing, and those people definitely could consider the mouth zone of Sestra as a good location for fishing. Those people spoke a language that was a relative of the Yeniseian family: *sies* of *siestar* correlates with Yeniseian *ses* "river", *tar* correlates with Ket *tul* and Yugh *tar* "lower reaches of the river". Thus, *sies-tar/ses-tar* means "lower reaches of the river", this name refers not to the whole river, but to the part that was most important for the Neolithic people.

**Keywords:** Karelian Isthmus; Sestra river; hydronymy; etymology; Neolithic period; Paja Ul De'η

### 1. Introduction to the problem

The Sestra river flows in the western part of the Karelian isthmus. Now the flows into the lake of Sestroretskii Razliv, which was created in the 1720-s for the Sestroretsk arms factory by damming the Sestra and Chernaya rivers. Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century the rivers flew directly into the Gulf of Finland (Baltic Sea).

In early recordings, for instance, in the Treaty of Nöteborg the river Sestra is mentioned in the form of Sestreyā, this form is supposed to have originated from the Finnish form Siestar-oja (see Wikipedia 2022c).

According to Kiparsky, the name Sestra originated from Finnish Siestarjoki, and it is said that *siestar* means "blackcurrant" in Finnish (Kiparsky 1956: 137).

However, in the Finnish language there is no word *siestar* that would mean "blackcurrant" or "currant" in general. Finnish words for "currant" are *herukka*, *korinti* and *viinimarja* (Glosbe 2022b). The Finnish word for "blackcurrant" is *mustaherukka* (Glosbe 2022a). In the Karelian language also there is no word *siestar* with meaning "currant", the Karelian word for "currant" is *čihoi* (Glosbe 2022c). And in the Sami language also there is no word *siestar* meaning "currant", Sami words for "currant" are *jeritmuorji*, *viidnemuorji*, or *korinta* (see Glosbe 2022d). It should also be noted that it is quite unlikely that the ancient people of the region would name a river "Currant river", because currant grows in many places, and such a name does not reflect the characteristics of a particular river anyhow.

Thus, it is possible to state that the word *siestar* has no Balto-Finnic and Sami etymology.

There is also a version of the Slavic origin of the hydronym Sestra: here the key point is the fact that the word *sestra* means "sister" in Russian.

According to Vasmer the word *sestra* "sister" was used to mark a smaller river that is a tributary of another river (Fasmer 2006).

In the case of the Sestra river that flows into Sestroretskii Razliv, it was supposed that initially it was a tributary of the Chernaya river (see Fig. 1).

If we take a look at the ancient streambed of the Sestra river and the ancient streambed of the Chernaya river (Fig. 2), we can see that they meet almost at right angles, and looking at this map it is difficult to determine which river is the main one in this case, and which is the tributary. However, it should be taken into account that the Sestra river is much longer than the Chernaya river and the basin of Sestra is much bigger than that of Chernaya: the length of the Sestra is 74 km, and its basin is 399 km<sup>2</sup> (Wikipedia 2022c), and the length of the Chernaya is 35 km and its basin is 126 km<sup>2</sup> (see Wikipedia 2022a), so it's hardly possible that Sestra would be a tributary of Chernaya.



Fig. 1. The Sestra river and the Chernaya river

And in the case of possible Slavic etymology of the hydronym Sestra there is also another important objection that denies the whole version offered by Vasmer. The objection is very simple and brutal: there were no Slavic people in the region before at least the 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. By this time, the entire territory of the Karelian Isthmus had been inhabited by people speaking Balto-Finnic languages for at least several centuries. It would be quite incredible to assume that the Balto-Finnic people did not have any name for such a fairly large river and waited for the Slavs to come and name it.

Thus, the hydronym of Sestra has no Slavic etymology as well.

The version about Balto-Finnic etymology and the version about Slavic are completely naïve and do not stand up to scrutiny.

## 2. Explaining the origin of hydronym Sestra

The Sestra river is a relatively large river on the Karelian Isthmus, its length and its basin are comparable to those of the Okhta river (before the emergence of Neva about 1000 BCE Okhta was one of the largest rivers of the region. The length of Sestra is 74 km, its basin is 399 km<sup>2</sup> (Wikipedia 2022c), the length of Okhta is 90 km, and its basin is 768 km<sup>2</sup> (Wikipedia 2022b). At least 9 Neolithic sites were discovered near the mouth of Sestra, along the banks, and at the bottom of Sestroretskii Razliv (Gurina 1961: 415, 417, 422, 430, 432), all of them are located very close to each other (see Fig. 2).

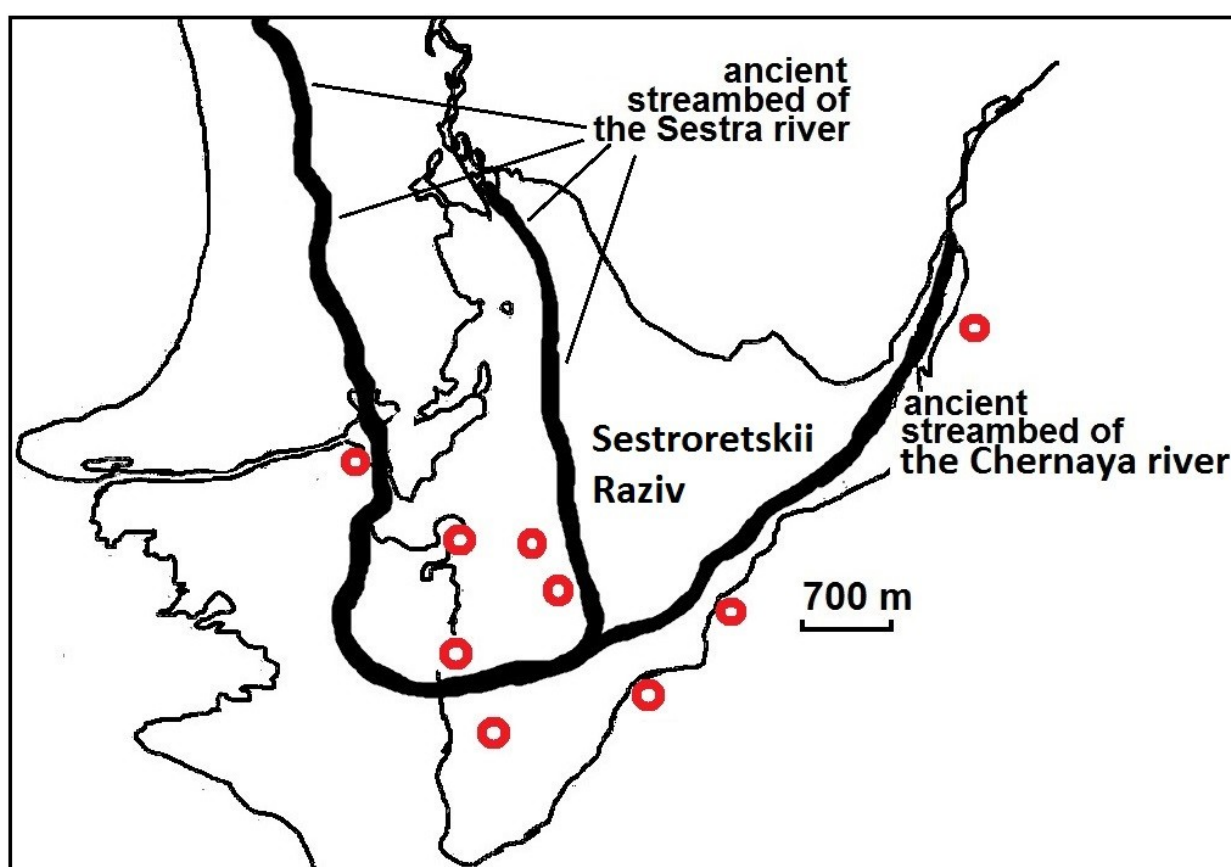


Fig.2. Map showing ancient streambeds of the Sestra river and the Chernaya river, and Neolithic sites of Sestroretskii Razliv, red circles mark approximate locations of sites (the map drawn by the author after map shown in Gurina 1961: 415)

The whole life of the Neolithic people who lived between the Littorina Sea<sup>1</sup> and Ladoga lake (they can be conventionally named the People of Big Water) was seasonally determined. The main summer activity was fishing and harvesting migratory fish for the winter. And taking into account the fact that the Sestra river is relatively large for the region, it is fairly logical to conclude that the river was considered by the People of Big Water as an especially

<sup>1</sup> Littorina Sea is a stage of the Baltic Sea that lasted from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> BCE).

convenient/good location for fishing. It is possible to state that all the Neolithic sites discovered along the banks of Sestroretskii Razliv and its bottom were summer settlements and were somehow connected with summer fishing.

Previously, it was shown that the People of Big Water spoke a language that was a juncture between the Yeniseian family on the one hand, and the Northwest Caucasian, Northeast Caucasian, Hattic, and Sumerian languages on the other hand (Akulov 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2022). In the language of the People of Big Water there are roots that can be correlated with Yeniseian and with Caucasian, Hattic, and Sumerian.

(In the hypothetical reconstructed language of these people the name “the People of Big Water” could be Paja Ul Deʔη [padʒaulʹdeʔη], for more details see Akulov 2020a.)

In the word-form of *siestar* can be singled out the component of *sies* that correlates well with the Yeniseian root *ses* “river” (Yeniseian etymology database 2022b).

And the rest part of the word-form namely *tar* correlates with the Ket word *тыль* [tul] which means “lower reaches of the river” (Verner 2002: 94).

At first sight, there is little in common here, however, it should be kept in mind, that in the Yeniseian languages, the [r] sound easily and often turns into [l], and vice versa, for example, in the names of rivers, the root “water” is presented in the form *ur*, and in the form *ul*, and the Ket form *tul* is closely related to the form of *tar* of the Yugh language: Ket *Íátí* [latulʹ] “depression on a tree trunk” corresponds to Yugh *latar* (see Yeniseian etymology database 2022a).

Thus, the name *sies-tar* / *ses-tar* definitely came from the language of the People of Big Water and means simply “lower reaches of the river”, i.e.: this name did not refer to the whole river, but to the part that was most important and interesting for the People of the Big Water.

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