On the etymology of the word Alatyr and the origin of the Alatyr stone

Yelena Kolesnikova
independent scholar; Saint Petersburg, Russia
e-mail: lena_kolesnikova@gengo-chan.com

Abstract

The Alatyr is a stone mentioned in Russian folklore; it is described as the navel of the earth, endowed with sacral and healing properties. The word Alatyr has no Indo-European etymology, but can be explained through Yeniseian languages. The component ala correlates with Ket al “in the wood” and Pumpokol dla “field”. The component tur correlates with Ket and Yugh tı́ [tı́] “navel”, and Proto-Yenisseian *tir [tuur]. Thus, alatyr means “taiga navel”. One of the main activities of Neolithic people was hunting, and it was important for them to mark the boundaries of hunting grounds of different local groups. Initially notches on trees were used as boundary markers, but stones with natural and artificial dimples were more stable markers. The word alatyr initially denoted notches on a tree (in Ket there is the word látí [latul] “depressions in tree trunks”) and later it also began to denote dimples on stones.

Keywords: sacral stones; Alatyr; mythology; folklore; etymology; Neolithic period

1. Introduction to the problem

The Alatyr or Latyr is a stone mentioned in Russian medieval legends and folklore, the stone is “the father of all stones” and the navel of the earth, endowed with sacral and healing properties. In the Dove Book and in Russian spells Alatyr is mentioned as “the white combustible stone” and is associated with the altar located in the center of the world, in the center of the Ocean, on the island of Buyan. On it stands the world tree, or a throne, saints, or sits a maiden that healing wounds. Healing rivers flow from under it all over the world and so on. (Mifologicheskii slovar’ 1990: 33)

The etymology of the word Alatyr is an enigma.

Vasmer points out that it is phonetically difficult to derive the word Alatyr from the Latin altare “altar” or from the Old Icelandic altaristeinn “altar stone”. Also Vasmer says that the assumption about the origin of the word Alatyr from the adjective *latygor (Russian: латыгор) “Latvian” is unconvincing. And also the explanations of the word Alatyr from the Greek word ἥλεκτρον “amber” as well as from the Old Icelandic leíðarsteinn “magnet” are unsatisfactory (Fasmer 1986: 69).

There is a version that the word Alatyr originated from the name of Alatyr town located in the Chuvash Republic (see Fig. 1), however, this version doesn’t resolve the problem since this

1 The etymology of the name of the Alatyr town itself is also very unclear. The current Chuvash form of the place name is Улатӑр. According to Vasmer, this toponym originated from Turkic ala “motley”, “spotted” and tura
town isn’t located on the old Russian territory and is away from the areas where Russian folklore originally was spread (see Fasmer 1986: 69).

Fig. 1. Map showing the location of the town of Alatyr (map has been made after a Google Maps screenshot)

According to Trubachev, the word Alatyr is of Slavic origin and is related to the Russian word янтарь [ˈjtərʲ] “amber” (see Wikipedia 2022). According to Martynov, the word Alatyr originated from *al-atar of an Iranian language that literally means “white combustible” and so the epithet of the stone “while-combustible”, according to this version, is a direct calque of this name (see Wikipedia 2022). Meletinskii suggests that the legends about the Alatyr stone can be traced back to the legends about amber as an apotropaic item (Mifologicheskii slovar’ 1990: 33).

I suppose that all the versions which suggest that the word Alatyr originated from the name of amber or another gem seriously contradict the context in which the Alatyr stone is mentioned in Russian folklore. In verses and in spells Alatyr is mentioned not as a bijou with certain sacral/magic properties: Alatyr stone is located on Buyan Island (or in some other place), and rivers flow from under it, that is, Alatyr stone is a kind of rock, a boulder, but certainly not a “house”, “dwelling”, and “city” (Fasmer 1986: 68). According to another version, the toponym Alatyr originated from the river Alatyr, however, this issue is unclear.
bijou, not a gem, and so any attempt to explain the word Alatyr through a certain word meaning “amber”/“gem” should be considered as off base.

2. The etymology of the word Alatyr and real prefigurations of the Alatyr stone

I suppose that any attempts to explain the word Alatyr through Indo-European languages are completely futile, since this word is not of Indo-European origin at all.

The word Alatyr can be explained through Yeniseian languages.

The word Alatyr [alatɯ́r] is a compound of ala and tɯ́r.

The component ala can be correlated with Ket al and Yugh a:hr “in the wood”, “in the wilderness”, also with Arin eol “field”, and Pumpokol ála “field” (Yenisseian etymology database 2022c). The component tɯ́r can be correlated with Ket t̲íl [tuul], and Yugh til “navel”, and it is supposed that in Proto-Yenisseian this word existed in the form of *t̲ir [tuur] (Yenisseian etymology database 2022b). Here should be taken into account the fact that in Yenisseian languages the [r] sound can become [l] and vice versa.

And thus, alatɯ́r means “taiga navel” or “field navel”.

The word Alatyr could come from the languages of the people who lived on the East European plain in the Neolithic period. It is possible to state that they 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, 2021a, 2022).

One of the main activities of these Neolithic people was hunting, and it was important for these people to mark somehow boundaries between hunting grounds belonging to different local groups.

Initially notches on trees could be used as boundary markers, but noticeable stones could be much more convenient and stable markers of boundaries between different hunting grounds. It is possible to suppose that the most noticeable stones were the stones with natural dimples. At present, the phrase navel of the earth is understood allegorically, it means “the center of the world”, but initially the collocations of taiga navel or field navel could have literal meaning, i.e.: they could denote certain items having something alike navels and located in the forest (it is noteworthy that the Ket word “navel” tuul is the same as the Ket word for “cavity”/"depression”/"hollow” that is tîl [tuul], see Yenisseian etymology database 2022a).

As far as stones with natural dimples are quite rare, so these Neolithic people could intentionally make dimples on the stones (see Fig. 2) that were intended to be used as markers of boundaries.

Stones with natural and with artificial dimples are quite widely spread sacral objects in the East European Plain, especially in the Northwest part of Russia.
Usually the origin of ritual practices existing around these stones is connected with pre-Christian beliefs of the people who spoke Uralic languages. However, it is possible to conclude that ritual practices around these stones with dimples have a more ancient origin; these practices could be formed by the Neolithic people yet.

Fig. 2. A stone with artificially made dimples (image source – Akulov 2021b: 4)

The stones with dimples could be considered as locations where tutelary spirits dwelled, or such stones could be considered as tutelary deities themselves. To ensure good luck in hunting, the Neolithic people definitely could perform certain rituals of feeding of tutelary deities on such stones. The prosperous existence of a local group was closely connected with success in hunting, and success in hunting was, according to the ideas of the Neolithic people, connected with goodwill of forest deities, and so good communication with these deities was a matter of vital importance. As far as stones with dimples were a means of communication with spirits, they were definitely considered as a kind of guarantee of success in hunting and a prosperous existence, as a kind of guarantee of an inexhaustible source of food. And thus, the subject that healing and feeding rivers flow from under the Alatyr stone is rooted in these practices and the corresponding myths of the Neolithic hunters.

When in the very end of the Neolithic period people speaking Uralic languages came to the East European plain, they met the Neolithic people and had contacts with them for at least

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2 It is possible to speak about the presence of people speaking Uralic languages in the east European plain only after the disintegration of the Proto-Uralic language that took place about 3000 BCE (see Janhunen 2009).
several centuries. Some of the Neolithic people assimilated with the people speaking Uralic languages and Uralic people borrowed the ritual practices existed around the stones with dimples, but created their own mythology around these stones and the corresponding rituals. (It should be noted that not only ritual practices could be borrowed, but also the actual practice of making dimples on stones.) In the middle of the first millennium AD Slavs stared to spread on the East European plain (Gimbutas 1971). The Slavs assimilated the people who spoke Uralic languages, borrowed the rituals existed around the stones with dimples, and in their turn created their own mythology around these rituals. With the spread of Christianity, the mythology that was created around these stones started to be filled with Christian images and reinterpreted in Christian terms; the ritual practices around such stones became a part of the so-called Folk Orthodoxy.

It can be said that in the case of stones with dimples ritual practices were transmitted from one culture to another in an almost unchanged form, but each culture created its own narratives/mythology around them, that poorly correlated with the mythology of the culture from that these practices were borrowed. Performing a certain ritual on a stone with dimples Neolithic people established contact with tutelary spirits in order to ensure successful hunting, Russian peasants performing almost the same ritual, but in order to celebrate the memory of a certain Christian saint, to heal an illness, to get a good harvest and so on: the rituals remained the same, the aim of rituals is quite similar in general, but narratives, of course, were very different.

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