On the etymology of the hydronym Oredezh

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Abstract

The hydronym Oredezh has neither Uralic nor Indo-European etymology, but can be explained through the language of the people who lived in the region in the Neolithic period. Those people spoke a language that was a juncture between Yeniseian languages, Caucasian languages, Hattic, and Sumerian. Oredezh/Uredezh originally was *ur-deʔG; it consists of Proto-Yeniseian roots: *ul/ur – “water” and *deʔG “lake”. And this name meant simply “river oxbows” or “river backwaters”. In the current context the root *ul/ur means “river”, but not just “water”. The Oredezh river is famous for its meanders and swampy oxbows. The level of the Littorina Sea was 5 to 7 meters higher than that of the present Baltic Sea, and therefore the level of water in rivers that flew into the sea also was higher than the present, so there were more oxbows in the Oredezh river, and they probably were larger than the modern.

Keywords: hydronymy; substrate hydronymy; Leningrad oblast; Neolithic period; Paja Ul Deƞ

1. Introduction to the problem

The Oredezh river (in Russian Оредеж [ˈorədəʐ]) flows not far from the city of Saint Petersburg (Fig. 1). The name of the river is also known in the following variants: Ор(е)деж [ˈœr(ə)dəʐ(ɨ)], Орыде [ˈoridə], Аредеж [ˈarədəʐ], Уредеж [ˈurədəʐ], Рядеж [ˈrædəʐ], Осередеш [osəˈredəʂ] (Wikipedia 2023a).

The origin of the hydronym Oredezh is unclear. However, there are several versions of the origin of the name Oredezh, according to which the place name comes from Balto-Finnic languages.

According to one version, the hydronym of Oredezh came from Votic and means “horse head”. According to this version, the line of the Oredezh river resembles the head of a horse. This version is completely improbable, absurd and harshly contradicts the context of any ancient culture. Ancient people who gave the name to the river had no opportunities to see the outline of the river from above, and had no maps to see the outline of the river. Such a name to the river could only be given by modern people who have geographical maps and have pretty abstract thought, while names given to rivers by ancient people were much more concrete and utilitarian. Also, I am to note that the outline of the Oredezh river doesn’t resemble a horse head in profile anyhow (see Fig. 1). And moreover, if we take a look at a Votic dictionary we can see that the word for “horse” is opōn (Glosbe 2023d), and that Votic word for “head” is pāâ (Glosbe 2023c). There is nothing even remotely resembling the word Oredezh.

According to another version, the name Oredezh came from Finnish and means “galloping horse” or “fast river”. However, in Finnish “galloping horse” is laukkaava hevonen (Glosbe 2023b), and “fast river” is nopea joki (Glosbe 2023a), there is nothing even remotely resembling the word Oredezh.
In general, it seems improbable that a river’s name could come from the word *horse*.

Also, there is a version that the hydronym Oredezh originated from the Old East Slavic word *редрый* [redrɨ] meaning “ginger”, or “red-yellow”. This version looks the most realistic since the Oredezh river is famous for its outcrops of red Devonian sandstone (Fig. 2).

![Map showing the location of the Oredezh river](image)

Fig.1. Map showing the location of the Oredezh river (drawn by the author)

The version about the Slavic origin of the hydronym could be considered at least somewhat seriously, if not for the fact that the Slavic population appears in the region very late, not earlier than the 9th – 10th centuries AD. By this time, the territory, where the Oredezh river flows, had been inhabited by people speaking Balto-Finnic languages for at least several centuries already. 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.

It is quite noteworthy that when scholars meet with really difficult toponyms of Russian Northwest, all of them turn out to be no better than local historians/amateurs who have no idea about history and linguistics and, in general, have a more than vague idea of how toponyms are formed. They always offer some nonsense as interpretations, and they never can answer the following questions: whether the word that is postulated to be the source of a certain toponym really exists in the corresponding language, and how likely, in general, is such a semantic transition that they suggest? When scholars face really difficult toponyms, a very thin layer of education, in fact, instantly flies off and remains only a dull desire to explain a
toponym somehow. Education is actually not just knowledge of a set of facts, but, above all, a solid knowledge of research procedures. Especially absurd and ridiculous nonsense is usually preceded by an assertion that a certain place name comes from Balto-Finnic languages, or that a certain place name can be explained through the Finnish language.

Fig. 2. Outcrops of red Devonian sandstone near Siversky (image source – Wikipedia 2023a)

Among scholars studying toponymy, there is a presupposition that the most ancient population of the Russian Northwest was the people who spoke Uralic languages, and that the most ancient place names of the Russian Northwest are of Uralic origin. Scholars who study toponyms of the Russian Northwest usually do not question this presupposition, although in fact it poorly corresponds with the facts. The people speaking Uralic languages definitely aren't the most ancient population of the Northwest of Russia and the East European Plain in general. These peoples started to spread on the East European Plain after the disintegration of the Proto-Uralic language that took place not earlier than the 3rd millennium BCE (Janhunen 2009). And it is possible to speak about the presence of some people speaking Uralic languages in the North-West of the East European Plain no earlier than the 2nd millennium BCE. The most ancient inhabitants of the East European plain spoke neither Uralic nor Indo-European languages, and the most ancient place names of the region came from the language of these people. The hydronym of Oredezh has no Uralic and no Slavic/Indo-European etymology.
2. The origin of the hydronym of Oredezh

It is possible to state that the people who lived in the Neolithic period on the East European plain spoke a language (or languages) that was a juncture between Yeniseian languages on the one hand, and Caucasian languages, also Hattic, and Sumerian on the other (Akulov 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2022).

The Neolithic people who lived between the Littorina Sea\(^1\) and Ladoga Lake are conventionally named the People of Big Water, in their hypothetical reconstructed language the name “the People of Big Water” could be Paja Ul De’ŋ [padʒaul’dedeŋ] (for more details see Akulov 2020a.) Thus, the keys to the most ancient place names of Russian Northwest should be sought in Yeniseian languages, in Caucasian languages, in Hattic, and in Sumerian.

Also, should be taken into account the fact that the Oredezh river is famous not only for its outcrops of red Devonian sandstones, but also for its meanders and swampy oxbows (Fig. 3).

![Fig. 3. An oxbow of Oredezh in Vyritsa (photo by the author)](image)

The name Oredezh/Uredezh can be correlated with the compound *ur-deʔG that consists of the following Proto-Yeniseian roots: *ul/*ur\(^2\) – “water” and *deʔG “lake” (Yeniseian etymology database 2023a).

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\(^1\) The Littorina Sea is a stage of the Baltic Sea that lasted from the 5\(^{th}\) to the 2\(^{nd}\) BCE.

\(^2\) I suppose that it is more correct to reconstruct the form *ul/*ur rather than *xur for the Proto-Yeniseain root “water”.
It is interesting to note that in the word Oredezh there are actually two stressed syllables: [ˈɔra,dez], that is an indirect evidence of the fact that this word originally was a compound of two stems, since usually three-syllable Russian words, in which there is only one root, have one stress. (And also the second vowel is often dropped, and the word is pronounced as [ˈor,dez].)

Thus, it is possible to say that the name Oredezh originally was something like ur-deʔG, and meant simply “river oxbows” or “river backwaters”. In the current context the root *ul/ur means “river”, but not simply “water”.

It is interesting to note that this word-form existed in historical Kottish: ol-tēg/ol-tēx/ol-tex “swamp” (Yenisseian etymology database 2023b) and ūr-tēg/ūr-tēx “lake” (Yenisseian etymology database 2023a). I suppose that the form ol-tēg/ol-tēx/ol-tex is just a variant or a distorted form of ūr-tēg/ūr-tēx.

The level of the Littorina Sea was 5 to 7 meters higher than the level of the present Baltic Sea (Mettinen 2004: 100), and therefore it’s possible to state that the level of water in rivers that flew into the sea also was higher than the present and so there were more oxbows in the Oredezh river, and they were larger than the modern.

The name ur-deʔG “river oxbows”, “river backwaters”, “lakes” or “swamp” correlates well with the landscape of the river and with the absence of Neolithic sites in the basin of Oredezh: no Neolithic sites have been discovered in the basin of Oredezh yet, and will hardly be discovered in future since The People of Big Water didn’t set their settlements in swampy areas. The Paja Ul Deŋ could visit the area of Oredezh, for instance, for hunting, but evidently didn’t dwell there. And also, it should be noted that the name ur-deʔG isn’t a hydronym in the proper sense, it isn’t a name of a river but is just a geographic term. When Paja Ul Deŋ spoke about this territory, they could call it simply "river oxbows", or "swamps", without specifying the actual name of the river. And later ancient Sami and Indo-European people who got in touch with Paja Ul Deŋ, accepted this designation as a proper name for the river.

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