The etymology of the hydronym Okhta

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Abstract

Okhta [ohta] is a river in the southern part of the Karelian Isthmus. This hydronym is generally supposed to have originated from Uralic languages, however, really it has no trustworthy Uralic etymology. The hydronym 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. The component oh of ohta can be correlated with Proto-Yeniseain *ʔoq “to smear”, and the component ta can be correlated with Pumpokol tet “river”. Also, ohta can be correlated simply with Ket word-form ɔqtij “to smear (with clay)”. And, thus, ohta most probably was originally oq-ta and meant “smearing river”. The water of Okhta is quite muddy, with notable impurities of silt and peat.

Keywords: Okhta; substrate hydronymy; Leningrad oblast; Neolithic period; Paja Ul Deŋ

1. Introduction to the problem

Okhta [ohta] is a river that flows in the southern part of the Karelian Isthmus (see Fig. 1), now it flows into Neva, but previously, before the formation of the Neva river, it flows directly into the Baltic Sea/Littorina Sea (see Fig. 3).

Okhta is a relatively large river in this territory, its length is 90 km, and its drainage basin is 768 km² (see Voda Rossii 2023).

There are different versions of the origin of the hydronym Okhta from Uralic languages. According to one version, the name of the river is presumably of Izhorian or ancient Sami origin and means “river of the western direction”, “bear river”, or “guiding river” (Voda Rossii 2023).

The supposition that Okhta can mean “river of the western direction” is completely off base since the river flows from North to South and not in the Western direction (see Fig. 1). Izhorian words for “west” or “bear” don’t look like ohta, but among Izhorian words that mean “to lead” there are such forms as johtaa and ohjata (see Glosbe 2023b), these words look somehow alike ohta. However, the name Guiding River seems completely meaningless for people who live close to nature and regularly practice hunting and fishing, since any river can actually be a guiding river. Sami words for “west”, “bear” and “to lead” are not similar to the word ohta at all.

According to another version, the word ohta originated from Finnish and Karelian ohto “bear” or from Finnish and Karelian oksa “branch”, “inflow” or Sami oakse¹ “branch”, “inflow”, and later the form of oakse transformed into ohta (Pospelov 2008).

In Finnish there is a dialectal word ohto, an alternative form of otso “bear” (Wiktionary 2023).

However, the supposition that people who live close to nature and regularly practice hunting could name a river "bear river" is entirely off base. For people, who practice hunting as one of the main activities, bears are quite important/dangerous beings, and naming a river or any

¹ Really in Sami there is word oaksi (Glosbe 2023a).
other geographic object after bears is taboo as well as singing songs about bears or chatting about bears. The supposition that *ohta* can mean “branch”, or “inflow” at first sight looks pretty realistic, but there are two serious obstacles: 1) the transformation of *oksa* or *oaksi* into *ohta* is very improbable, 2) the place name meaning “tributary” doesn’t describe any characteristic features of the river; and also Neva has several tributaries, and it is unclear why only one of them would be named “tributary”. Thus, it is possible to state that the hydronym of Okhta has no trustworthy Uralic etymology.

![Map showing river Okhta](image)

Fig. 1. Map showing river Okhta

Among scholars studying the toponymy of the Russian Northwest, there is a presupposition that the most ancient population of the Russian Northwest were people who spoke Uralic languages. And this assumption is never seriously questioned. When scholars meet difficult place names they offer some explanations which from their point of view are plausible explanations. Usually, such explanations poorly correlate with the cultural-historical and geographical context, but they are always accompanied by ’magic’ words: “this place name has Finno-Ugric origin”. In this aspect scholars turn out to be no better than amateurs. The people speaking Uralic languages definitely aren’t the most ancient population of the East European Plain. 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). It is possible to speak about the presence of some people speaking Uralic languages in the North-West of the East European Plain only after 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.

2. Paja Ul De’ŋ

The Neolithic people who lived in the East European plain spoke a language (or languages) that was a juncture between Yeniseian languages on the one hand, and Caucasian languages, Hattic, and Sumerian on the other (Akulov 2020a, 2020b, 2021b, 2022d). The Neolithic people who lived between the Littorina Sea\(^2\) 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 [padʒauldeŋ] (Akulov 2020a.)

Thus, the keys to the most ancient place names of the Russian Northwest should be sought in Yeniseian languages, Caucasian languages, Hattic, and Sumerian. Some place names of the Russian Northwest have been successfully decoded through the roots of Yeniseian languages (Akulov 2023, 2022b, 2021a, 2021c).

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

The Okhta river was actively used by the Neolithic people. In the estuary of Okhta was discovered a relatively large site (Okhta 1) that is dated to the 4th – 3rd millennia BCE (Gusentsova, Sorokin 2011). In the Neolithic period the territory of the site was a shallow bay of the Littorina sea (Nikitin 2010: 163; Akulov 2022c), Fig. 3, and the site was used as a fishing place by the Neolithic people (Bazarova et al. 2010: 173–174).

The site of Hepojarvi is dated to 5314 cal BC – 2342 cal BC (Akulov 2019a) and the site of Toksovo existed in the 4th millennium – the beginning of the 3rd millennium BCE (Akulov 2022a).

Fig. 3. The landscape of the Okhta 1 site in the Neolithic period superimposed on the map representing the modern landscape of the area; Paleo-Tosna flowed along the future bed of Neva

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3 Neva didn’t exist yet in the Neolithic period, Neva formed about the end of the 2nd millennium BCE.
Neolithic ceramics of Okhta 1 and those of Hepojarvi and Toksovo demonstrate noteworthy resemblance, so it is possible to conclude that all these sites belonged to the same local group (Akulov 2019b).

4. The origin of the hydronym of Okhta

Names that are given to rivers by the people that regularly practice fishing and hunting as main activities usually always describe certain specific characteristic features of rivers. The component oh of ohta can be correlated with Proto-Yeniseain *ʔoq “to smear” (Yenisseian etymology database 2023) and the component ta can be correlated with Pumpokol tet “river” (Werner 1997: 170). Also, the word ohta can be correlated simply with Ket word-form ɔqtij “to smear (with clay)” (Yenisseian etymology database 2023). And, thus, ohta most probably was originally oq-tat and meant “smearing river”. The water of Okhta is quite muddy, and it isn’t a result of later human activities, even in the upper reaches of the river one can see that the water has notorious impurities of silt and peat (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. A view of Okhta in its upper reaches photo by the author)
When people speaking Uralic languages came to the basin of Okhta they definitely had some contacts with Paja Ul Deˀŋ and borrowed the hydronym *Oq-tat, but the meaning of this name was unclear for them, and thus this word-form was converted into Balto-Finnic ohto “bear”.

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