Linguistics

Urartian Sibilants in Armenian

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ABSTRACT. It is long known that Urartian has left certain loan words in Classical Armenian. Recent linguistic evidence points to the likelihood that the Urartians came westward from Central Asia after the Hurrians, passing south of the Caspian Sea but north of the area influenced by the Assyrians, and settled in the Sub-Caucasus; later, driven out in the mid first millennium by the Armenians and perhaps the Persians, the Urartians moved north to the South Caucasus, where their language now remains, becoming Proto-Lezgian, from which the modern Lezgian languages have evolved. This is the same as the change of Latin to Proto-Romance. Evidence showing that Urartian (and Hurrian) are related to the languages of the North-East Caucasus might be overstated. But the supposition that we can re-construct Proto-Lezgian and from there posit genetic parallels with Urartian remains an appealing consideration. © 2010 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

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According to the Akkadian-based Urartian syllabary, there are three classes of sibilant-like sounds in Urartian: Urartian /s/, a simple sibilant of which Urartian has twenty-four examples in word-initial position; Urartian /š/, a palatalized sibilant of which there are thirty-eight in initial position, and /ş/, a rare emphatic sibilant of which there are only six known examples in initial position and less than ten medially or finally. They are reflected in Armenian loan words without exception in only two ways: as a simple sibilant /s/, and as an emphatic /ş/. Urartian /š/ is thus written in Armenian as /s/ and only as /s/; Urartian /ş/ appears as Arm. /c/ = [ts]. In addition, I have not found a single Armenian correspondence for Urartian /ş/. There is no Arm./ş/ derived from Urartian.

I will show below three etymologies linking actual Urartian words with /š/ to Armenian /s/ by loan and two from Assyrian via Urartian to Armenian. I will also give five more loan etymologies from a reconstructed Urartian (Starostin and Nikolayev 20194; reprint 2007) which equals proto-Lezgian. It is doubtful that any loans came directly into Armenian from Hurrian, a second millennium culture and language; rather, the source would be solely Urartian, the speakers of which shared much vocabulary with the Hurrians. Other suggestions for initial š- can be found in Diakonoff and Starostin 1986:35-41. The following are Urartians (or Hurrian words not known parallelly in Urartian) with /š/- which actually came into Armenian through Urartian.

* I must give thanks to my colleagues from Yerevan, Margarita Khachikyan and Amalya Khachaturian.

1 A summary of this loan phenomenon is in Greppin 1991, which includes earlier documentation by Ghapantsyan 1948 and Diakonoff 1971.

2 This methodology, though still somewhat controversial, has been demonstrated in Greppin 1996 for the letter /b/-, and Greppin 2006, 2008, for the letter /k/-.

The Lord of the Flesh, having cast the hammer, was beaten by its wooden part. (Nikolayev 1994:960).

The following five Urartian terms are reconstructed from Proto-Lezgian. After the Urartians were driven out of the Armenian areas around Lakes Urmia, Sevan, and Van, they seemed to have migrated, the Persians and the Armenians at their back, into the area where we now find the North-East Caucasian languages. This late Urartian movement bequeathed the Proto-Lezgian language which survives in a dozen or so extant languages, e.g., Udi, Tabasaran, Rutul, Lezgi itself, etc. For methodology, see Greppin 2008.

The term is not ancient and its appearance in the Galen Dictionary might be the result of later scribal contamination. It seems rather unlikely that earliest Armenian received direct loans from Assyrian.

The name for this malaceous tree was brought into Urartian probably through Assyrian.

The Assyrian term *šallúru ‘arms’ arrived in Armenian via Urartian


A somewhat uncommon word, Bible vacat, first appearing in the Galen Dictionary (6th C.) = Gk. μόσχος ‘mushroom’ (Greppin 1985:77). The term is not ancient and its appearance in the Galen Dictionary might be the result of later scribal contamination. It is solidly attested first in the *Girk ’Vastakoc’ (13th C.) Mushrooms, a forest plant, appear to be a late addition to the Armenian table. As noted in footnote 20 below, plant names could hibernate, appearing only later in the literary language.

Bible (Job 6:16) = Gk. κρόσιός ‘ice.’


1. Armenian *baš’ ‘woman, wife.’
3. Arm. *sant ‘hammer.’
5. Arm. *šarkapil ‘id.’
6. Arm. *šallúru ‘medlar.’
7. Arm. *sunk ‘mushroom.’
9. Arm. *šúri ‘kettle, vessel, pot’;
10. Arm. *šgor ‘pounding mortar, pestle.’
11. Arm. *šallúru ‘medlar.’
12. Arm. *šarkapil ‘id.’
15. Arm. *šallúru ‘medlar.’
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There are two Armenian words that support a relationship between Urartian emphatic /š-/ and Arm. c- = [ts]. Those Urartian words are not found in the North-East Caucasian lexicon nor specifically in Proto-Lezgian, and remain solely Urartian-Armenian isoglosses.


10. Arm. *selan ‘table, stall.’ PLezgian *s:el ‘shed, stall.’

I could find no Armenian reflexes of PLezgian *š. Glossed by Starostin (1994:20) as a voiceless hissing-hushing (= palatalized) fricative There are only fourteen examples in initial position extant, compared to thirty-five for the simple sibilant /s/.

This word is better attested in Avar-Andi: *so/V- ‘hoar-frost,’ Avar sawá ‘id.’ But Lezgian *s:()V-rV ‘cold’; (Starostin and Nikolayev 1994:967) seems further related to PLezgian *sirul, Rutul sirsil ‘hoar-frost,’ Tsakhur šuršul ‘icicle.’ Also Dargwa *siris ‘hoarfrost,’ which has two dialect forms, both as siris ‘hoarfrost’ (Starostin and Nikolayev 1964:964).

The suffix in -an regularly forms noun, adjectives, and adverbs (Greppin 1975:38, #134), on a stem solr-. otherwise the –r- could be the regular noun forming suffix as in mełu ‘bee,’ mełr ‘honey.’


For the noun-forming suffix -an see note nineteen above.

Common since the 5th century; Bible passim = Gk. ὅλαςπον ‘tree.’

A common word, known sixteen times in Urartian texts, The root is not found in surviving Lezgian languages; the Urartian word is found in the inscriptions of Rusa III. 421:10-11, with the Sumerogram GIŠ, marking it as ‘wood’: i-e-še-i-ni / te-ru-ǔ-bi GÁN GIŠÁMIŠE GIŠa-ri. “(And thus) I destroyed this vineyard, the sewn fields, the fruit-orchard” (Harutyunyan 2001:344-45). First noted in Ghapantsyan 1940:45. #18

Common since the 5th century; Bible passim = Gk. θάλαττα ‘sea.’

Known twenty times in Urartian texts, but not surviving into the Lezgian languages. The Urartian term is found in the inscriptions of Sarduri II: 241E.50-51 (Harutyunyan 2001:241.50-51). . . . URI Ha-al-pa -ni / URI LUGAL-nu-si-šu-in-i-ši-ni ma-un ha-ú-b[i] “the city of Khapani, a royal city (which was) on the sea, I destroyed.”
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