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A NOTE ON THE TURKMEN NAME FOR DRAGON / MONSTER / SNAKE

Among words illustrating his theses, S. A. Starostin (1997: 332) gives also the following entry:


The very formulation raises doubts about the correctness of the reconstruction: if the question mark is justified, the Turkmén word does not belong here – are there then any other reflexes of the word in Turkic languages? (if there are not, the Tunguz *žə̈bdar is not enough to postulate the existence of a Proto-Altaic etymon); what is the historical status of *-r(-)? (it is absent from the Proto-Altaic and the Japanese etymon, but it turns up in Tunguz and Turkmén); what is the -(r)xă suffix in Turkic?; are there any other derivatives in -(r)xă?

However, the main goal of our study is not to evaluate the correctness of the Proto-Altaic etymon *žabda (cf. esp. Miller 2000:71) but, instead, to discuss the etymology of the Turkmén word.

First of all, we should complete the word material. It is not especially weighty that the Turkmén juvdarxă has also an adjectival meaning of ‘never surfeited, ravenous, greedy’ since it can be derived from the sense of ‘dragon’ (however, as the etymology presented below shows, the semantic connection between ‘dragon’ and ‘ravenous’ may have also played a role in the development of the Turkmén word).

It appears more important that the word juvdarxă has also another phonetic variant: aždarxă ~ aždar ‘1. snake; 2. dragon’. This not only shows that the word-final -xă probably is an independent segment but also makes it possible (or even inevitable) to equate the Turkmén words juvdarxă ~ aždar(xă) with Ottoman-Turkish 1603 āštărha, 1680 āždăr(hă), 1730 ažlăr,
1790 aždār ~ ažlār ‘dragon’ (Stachowski 1974: No 134) = Karaim aždaya
id. = New Uyghur ačtār id. and to etymologize them from the Persian word
aždār (Pl. aždarhā) ‘dragon’.

Now, the question arises, how the word-initial juv- came into being. The
fact that juv-, as it seems, does not occur in the equivalents of the Turkmen
word in other Turkic languages suggests the idea of an individual and spor-
adic change in Turkmen alone. We would like to explain it as a result of
two psychic processes: association and folk-etymology.

First, the word-initial až- of the Turkmen aždar(xā) has probably been
associated with Turkmen aš ‘food, meal’, so that the entire word could
have been interpreted as a designation of a being which is, this way or
another, connected with eating or devouring. All the more as the rest of the
word could then have been understood as a suffix composition: -dar
(< Persian dār ‘having; habend’, cf. Turkmen mäldär [-ll-] ‘cattle-breeder’
< mäl ‘cattle’, dükändär [-nn-] ‘shop-keeper’ < dükân ‘shop’ (Clark 1998:
521); Ottoman-Turkish veznedar ‘cashier’ < vezne ‘cash desk’, deşterdar
‘minister of finance’ < deşter ‘register, tax list/register, booklet, copy book’)
and -hā, Persian plural suffix.

This folk-etymology (partially correct, because the Turkmen segment
-xā actually is a reflex of the Persian plural suffix) made then possible a
contamination of the segment až(d)-, misunderstood as a variant of aš ‘food,
meal’, with juv(d)-, being a part of the Turkmen juvut- (~juvdV-) ‘to swal-
low, to gulp’, juvd-ul- ‘to be swallowed’, juvd-un- ‘to swallow the spit
(e.g. in fear)’, juvd-um ‘a gulp’. The result was a new word juvdarxā whose
word-initial syllable suggested a creature that swallows (its victims).

In the light of what has been said above there exists no possibility of
reconstructing a Proto-Altaic etymon of the Turkmen word juvdarxā.

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