DID THE ANCIENT FINNO-UGRIC LANGUAGE AND PEOPLE EXIST?
Short commentary on the debate about the new fifth-grade history textbook on Hungarian prehistory

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In 2020 a new history textbook was published by the Hungarian Bureau of Education in the spirit of the new National Curriculum for elementary school fifth graders. Chapter 14 of this textbook (titled "Stories on the origins of Hungarians") provoked emotionally charged public disputes. I do not wish to join in these debates, yet in the subchapter titled "Mythical tradition and linguistic analogies – contradiction or not?" the author of the textbook made statements concerning Uralistics and the archaeology of prehistory, which invite professional commentary regarding the terms of Finno-Ugric "ancient people", "ancient language" and "ancient homeland".

Keywords: Finno-Ugric prehistory, linguistics and archaeology, history textbook

"…THE TWO LANGUAGES AND PEOPLES HAD COMMON ROOTS…"[2]

The terms "ancient people" (in Hungarian, *ősnép*; in German, *Urvolk*) and "ancient language" (in Hungarian, *ősnyelv*; in German, *Ursprache*) are 19th-century terms that reflect the period's interest in the natural states of society and man, in the Rousseauian meaning of the word (VÁSÁRY 2008, 10). Early linguistics assumed that these were interrelated, both in the case of Indo-European (SCHLEICHER 1853), and Finno-Ugric languages (HUNFALVY 1876, 257–258), as well as the peoples speaking them. Instead of the Hungarian term *ősnyelv* (literally, "ancient language"), which is considered outdated in 2020, the author of the textbook should have used the Hungarian word *alapnyelv,* proto-language, as did Miklós Zsirai already in 1937 (ZSIRAI 1937, 10) and as done in a fundamental college textbook of Finno-Ugric studies (BERECZKI 2003). The use of the term proto-language is also expedient, because it is free from the romantic connotations of the prefix *ős-,* meaning "ancient, original". According to this college textbook on Finno-Ugristics, Proto-Uralic is a reconstructed language created by the means of comparative linguistics, through projecting present-day Uralic languages back to the time before they diverged (BERECZKI 2003, 32) and may have constituted one single language (LAAKSO 2018, 22). Descendant languages display a continuity with the proto-language, nonetheless several contested concepts arose concerning its nature. The hypothesis suggesting the presence of a linguistic area (*Sprachbund*) between neighbouring languages instead of a proto-language seems highly improbable; according to this theory, numerous similarities evolved amongst neighbouring, yet unrelated languages over time (RASMUSSEN 1991). At the moment, it is unclear whether linguistic convergence may form between distinct languages through interactions (BOWERN et al. 2011; DIXON 1997; FEJES 2016, footnote Nr. 4; LAAKSO 2018; SÁNDOR 2011, 77–78). The proto-language may have diverged into numerous languages (BERECZKI 2003, 32); "*it was not a unifacial and immobile formation, but a series of tribal languages with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility*" (HAJDÚ 1995, 131) and bilingualism may have had a defining role (LAAKSO 2014). The concept of "uniformity" in the proto-language originated from the simplifying means of comparative linguistics, as such a reconstructed language cannot reflect the character and complexity of the original proto-language.

The concept of the "ancient people" is also highly complex. The dating of the Proto-Uralic language to the 7th–4th millennia BC complicates things further. The basis for this dating is twofold; on the one hand,

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[2] Cited by Pál Hunfalvy reviewing the work of Antal Jalava (Antti Jalava) (HUNFALVY 1877).

it relies on historical linguistics, namely, that the vocabulary of the Proto-Uralic language corresponds to the lifestyle of a prehistoric hunter-gatherer community with knowledge of pottery-making and perhaps native copper or bog ore exploitation, but no agriculture (Zaicz 2019). On the other hand, the cross-dating of the relations between Proto-Uralic and Proto-Indo-European (and/or Proto-Indo-Iranian) (e.g. through loanwords) also defines the age of the proto-language.

In these early periods, and within the scope of prehistory in general, it is challenging or even impossible to tackle the problem of ethnicity and ethnic identity, simply because its tangible and intangible ways of expression show a wide variety in different regions and time periods, and these expressions are transient (Siklósi 2006). Ethnic identity should rather be interpreted as a political-sociological concept (Koncz & Szilágyi 2017, 202) and in this sense it is less applicable to hunter-gatherer communities. In case of these groups, the concept of group identity is more explicable, indicated by territorial separation observed through differences in Upper Paleolithic art or differences in the possession of resources (Barton et al. 1994). In the Upper Paleolithic (and amongst hunter-gatherers) one can hypothesize that there were alliances between these groups that were based on mutual benefits (Gamble 1982), exogamous relations (Zhilin 2003), the possession of resources (Layton 1986), trade, gift exchange (Hertell & Tallavaara 2011) and emissaries (Boas 1888, 462–470). Through these acts they secured biological sustenance, survival and social relations. In prehistoric times, the relationship between language and ethnicity was likely complex, as indicated by modern analogies from Papua New Guinea. These parallels suggest that individual groups did not necessarily show solidarity with neighbouring communities who may have been speaking the same language but maintained good relations with more distant populations that often belonged to a different language group. In this setting, language is a "commercial commodity": communities may even adopt a language if it benefits them (Foley 1986, 24). Linguistic data and ethnographic analogies suggest that the prehistory of Northern Eurasia was a lot more dynamic than previously thought, and the connections between ethnic identity and language were much less significant (Saarikivi & Lavento 2012, 212). It is worth noting that hunter-gatherer societies cannot be described using the terms of Western anthropology. As Zsolt Mester put it after Tim Ingold (1999): *"The horde is a social unit consisting of mutually non-dependant individuals who consider themselves part of it, and whose social network is based on sharing. Members of the horde share not only material goods (food, tools, objects), but territory, tasks, ideas, beliefs, stories, memories, and many other things (in fact, culture). Through sharing, the weave of trust forms, which enables members to accept each other's leadership and proposals and follow their guidance on occasion. This enables the group to function without a fixed structure, hierarchy, or power, as long as the individuals are satisfied. This resonates with what Vilmos Csányi described in human social behaviour as the ability for collective action, forming common constructs, synchronisation, and group fidelity. Speech, or rather conversations, play a prominent role in sharing culture"* (Mester 2011, 39).

"THERE IS SOMETHING UP NORTH"

The chapter of the textbook under review states that the *"ancient population [discussed in the previous paragraph] did not exist there up north."* This sentence is incomprehensible in the context of a textbook, since it does not address "how far" up north and "north of what". The metropolis of Yekaterinburg, located at latitude 56°N, is situated north of the Central Ural, a region with a significant bearing on Uralic languages and the history of peoples speaking Uralic languages; this is the same latitude as that of Ringkøbing, located in the middle of Denmark. The expression "up north" vaguely implies that due to poor living conditions, such cold climates were inappropriate for sustaining human communities. This is fairly easy do disprove, as Eskimos live on the Arctic tundra. This idea in the textbook may have originated from the 1961 "Swiderian theory" by Gyula László who suggested that during the early history of the Uralic "ancient people", the Ural Mountains were uninhabited, thus placing the Uralic homeland southwards, to the area between present-day Central Poland and the Oka River (László 1961). The suggested homeland area is geographically no more advantageous than e.g. the Central Ural, since the Oka River empties into the Volga at Nizhny

Novgorod, which is also located at latitude 56°N, and "Swiderian" hunter-gatherers likely led a characteristic Arctic tundra life, hunting reindeer (Zaliznjak 1999, 358). The "Swiderian theory" was thoroughly refuted by Péter Hajdú, amongst others (for related literature cf. Fodor 2017). It is true that due to the lack of Upper Paleolithic and Early Mesolithic sites, the belief that the eastern slopes of the Central Ural were uninhabitable in the Early Holocene due to disadvantageous environmental conditions was long upheld (Serikov 2000). Recent paleoecological and archaeological research revealed that hunter-gatherers inhabited the entire range of the Ural Mountains from the Upper Paleolithic and Early Holocene (Savchenko 2019). Archaeological data indicate human presence and hunter-gatherer land use in Northeastern Europe at the upper course of the Vychegda River (Volokityin 2006) and in the North Ural (Csairkin & Zsilin 2005) as early as in the Early Mesolithic (approximately 10 300 years ago), even if only sporadically.

According to the next sentence of the textbook, *"the similarity between the Hungarian language and the languages of the Ural region is likely due to the Hungarian language being a pivot language for those peoples who have subsequently migrated to the Ural region"*. This sentence is also difficult to interpret, beginning with the phrase "languages of the Ural region". In historic times, Indo-European languages, Uralic languages and Turkic languages were all spoken in the area of the Ural Mountains, just as today, and so it is unclear which language the author of the textbook had in mind. If the text refers to the Uralic languages, the sentence is all the more perplexing, because their relation to the Hungarian language would be accounted for by the use of Hungarian as a pivot language. This contradicts the facts of linguistic history, because the Hungarian language and Uralic languages are related by virtue of belonging to the same language family, which cannot be accounted for by the former being a mere intermediary, pivot language. Although the possibility of language change by proto-Hungarians was considered (for the history of scientific exchanges cf. Sándor 2014), yet no scholars of Hungarian prehistory consider now Hungarian as a pivot language. Nowadays, similar thoughts appear mostly in nonexpert literature. As an idea or "meditation", Gyula László drafted a similar concept, proposing that the "original language" of the "Swiderian culture" that migrated northwards between Central Poland and the Ural Mountain at the end of the glacial period, may have been the language of the emerging Hungarian ethnic group (!) and this language, after connecting with other communities, may have given rise to the other Uralic languages (László 1987, 43–44).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Against this backdrop, my answer to the question formulated in the title is yes, there was an "ancient Finno-Ugrian language and population". The community speaking this proto-language was plausibly a prehistoric hunter-gatherer group living in Northern Eurasia. This region started to be populated in the Late Pleistocene. However, in prehistoric times one cannot speak of nations or ethnic groups in present-day terms or in the medieval sense of the word, only of group identities. The community speaking the Proto-Uralic language was likely made up of dynamically changing groups with successful subsistence strategies, who succeeded in spreading their language in Northern Eurasia. The lifestyle of hunter-gatherer communities accounts for the spread of the proto-language completely, as these communities were highly mobile when their sustenance demanded so (Mester 2013, 10–11). As a result of the increasing efficiency of hunter-gatherer strategies, certain regions became overpopulated, and intergroup contacts may have caused even language exchanges (Güldemann et al. 2020, 14–23).

If it is indeed necessary to cover in an elementary school textbook such a complex topic with such an exceptionally vast literature as the question of proto-language and the ethnic groups who spoke it, then this controversial paragraph needs to be completely rewritten. The cited sentences fail to deliver any of the relevant scholarly discoveries, rather they convey a regress to outdated ideas. Its statements are inaccurate and are founded on misconceptions about the methodology and notions of the study of prehistory. I hope that through these comments and the literature listed below, I may assist in rectifying the listed shortcomings of this textbook.

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