

The etymology of the Scandinavian theonym Fjörgyn and the Indo-European theonym *Perk^wūnos

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Abstract

The etymology of the Indo-European theonym Perk^wūnos is unclear, as well as that of the Scandinavian theonym Fjörgyn. In the Yeniseian mythology there is a being named *fuurgun^í* “forest spirit / witch” (*fuurgun^í* ← *pə(ʔ)r-qVn ← *pə(ʔ)r “woody hill” + qVm “woman”). The name *Fjörgyn* and the word *fuurgun^í* look much alike, but *Fjörgyn* has no evident inner structure, while *fuurgun^í* has. The name *Fjörgyn* seems to be nothing else, but the Yeniseian word *fuurgun^í* in its Scandinavian form. The form *pə(ʔ)r-qVn is present in the word *Perk^wūnos, the only difference is the ending -os. The Indo-Europeans borrowed the theonym *pə(ʔ)r-qVn from the Yeniseians, in Proto-Indo-European this theonym became *Perk^wun. And the name of the spouse of *Perk^wun was just an Indo-European genitive of the name *Perk^wun (the ending -os is a standard Proto-Indo-European genitive marker), so *Perk^wūnos initially meant “of Perk^wun”.

Keywords: Proto-Indo-European language; Yeniseian languages; Perk^wūnos; Fjörgyn; fuurgun^í

1. Introduction to the problem

In the Scandinavian mythology, there is such a deity as Fjörgyn, the mother of the god Thor. The name Fjörgyn was used as a poetic synonym for “earth” in skaldic poems (Lindow 2002: 117).

The Old Norse name Fjörgyn is used as a poetic synonym for “land” or “the earth” in skaldic poems. It stems from Proto-Germanic *fergunja, meaning “mountain”, perhaps “mountainous forest”, which may ultimately derive from Proto-Indo-European *per-kwun-iyā “the realm of Perkunos”; i.e., the wooden mountains (Kroonen 2013: 136; West 2007: 241).

Cognates of the name Fjörgyn are Gothic *fairguni* “mountain” and Old English *firgen* “mountain” (Kroonen 2013: 136).

On the one hand, everything seems to be transparent in the etymology of the theonym Fjörgyn, on the other hand there is some ambiguity and uncertainty, as indicated by the phrase may ultimately derive from the Proto-Indo-European *perkwun-iyā “the realm of Perkunos”. On the other hand, it is unclear why the “realm of Perkunos” is *perkwun-iyā*, but not *perkwunos-iyā, if the original name of the deity is Perk^wūnos. In the Proto-Indo-European language there were no special markers of the nominative case (Forston 2010: 102) that could be omitted when composing a compound word took place, i.e., the ending -os in the name Perk^wūnos is the same integral part of the name as, for instance, its initial part – Perk-. It is unclear why in this

case the entire name of *Perk^wūnos* was not used, and, in general, there are some serious doubts that the name Fjörgyn can be derived from the compound **per-kwun-iyā*.

The etymology of the theonym *Perk^wūnos* also is unclear; there are two versions of etymology of this theonym. According to one, this theonym comes from the Proto-Indo-European root **per-* “to strike” (Mallory, Adams 1997: 410, 433); according to another the theonym comes from the Proto-Indo-European words **pérk^wus* – “oak”¹, and **-nos* – “master”, “lord”². The fact that there are such different versions of the etymology means that the etymology of this theonym is actually unclear.

Thus, the etymology of the theonym *Perk^wūnos* is unclear, as well as that of Fjörgyn.

2. The Scandinavian theonym Fjörgyn and the Yeniseian word *furgun^í*

It is noteworthy that in Yeniseian (Yugh³) mythology and folklore there is such a being as *furgun^í* – a forest spirit (“forest devil”)⁴ or a forest witch⁵ (in the modern Cyrillic orthography used for the Ket language this word is written as *фургынь* [furgun^í]).

The word *furgun^í* evidently consists of two components/roots: *fur* and *gun^í*.

The component *fur* definitely derived from the Proto-Yeniseian form **pə(ʔ)r* meaning “woody hill”, “wood”⁶, and the component *gun^í* is the distorted Proto-Yeniseian root **qVm* – “woman”⁷. The final [m] in **qVm* definitely could turn into [n] under the influence of the preceding syllable that ends with [r]. Thus, *furgun^í* ← **pə(ʔ)rqn* ← *pə(ʔ)r-qVm* means “forest woman”.

The name Fjörgyn and the word *furgun^í* look very much alike. Taking into account the fact that the name Fjörgyn has no clearly seen inner structure while the word *furgun^í* can be easily decomposed into morphemes which are meaningful Yeniseian roots, it is possible to say that the word *furgun^í* appeared first and the name Fjörgyn is a derivation of *furgun^í*.

It is quite interesting that H. K. Werner suggests that the Yugh word *furgun^í* was derived from the Proto-Indo-European name of the thunder god – **p^[h]er(k^[h])u-no-*, and also points that the Scandinavian theonym Fjörgyn was derived from this Proto-Indo-European form (see Verner 2011: 152). Werner points out the connection between the two names, and this is reasonable, however, the derivation of the Yeniseian form *furgun^í* from the Proto-Indo-European form **p^[h]er(k^[h])u-no* is actually very doubtful. We suppose that the process of borrowing went in the completely opposite direction, i.e.: the name Fjörgyn originated from the word *furgun^í*, but not from **per-kwun-iyā* or **p^[h]er(k^[h])u-no*. The idea that the word *furgun^í* could be derived from a Proto-Indo-European form is generally based on the presupposition that the Indo-Europeans could influence on the other ethnic groups more than the others on the Indo-Europeans.

Thus, it is possible to state that the theonym Fjörgyn is nothing else, but the Yeniseian word *furgun^í* in its Scandinavian form.

¹ Mallory, Adams 1997: 582 – 583.

² West 2007: 240.

³ The Yugh people is a group of the Yeniseian people that is closely related to the Ket.

⁴ Alekseenko 2001: 51

⁵ Verner 2011: 150.

⁶ Starostin 2005a.

⁷ Starostin 2005b.

3. The Yeniseian word **pə(?)r-qVn* and the Indo-European theonym **Perk^wūnos*

If we compare the Proto-Indo-European theonym **Perk^wūnos* and the Proto-Yeniseian word **pə(?)r-qVn*, we can see that they are almost identical, the form **pə(?)r-qVn* is completely present in the word **Perk^wūnos*, the only difference is the ending *-os*.

The Indo-Europeans borrowed the theonym **Pə(?)r-qVn* “forest woman” (the Mistress of forests) from the ancient Yeniseians. In Proto-Indo-European this theonym became **Perk^wun*. It seems that the spouse of the Lady of forests had not his own name and therefore his name was simply Indo-European genitive from the name **Perk^wun*, i.e., the ending *-os* is a standard genitive marker in Proto-Indo-European⁸, and the initial meaning of the theonym **Perk^wūnos* is simply “of Perk^wun”.

According to the Kurgan hypothesis, the people who created the so-called Yamnaya technocomplex (existed in about 3300 – 2600 BCE) spoke the Proto-Indo-European language. And not far from the east end of the region of the Yamnaya technocomplex existed the so-called Botai technocomplex (3700 – 3100), whose creators are supposed to speak a Yeniseian language⁹, and were the first people who domesticated horses¹⁰.



Fig. 1. The territory of the Yamnaya technocomplex is marked by purple, and the territory of Botai technocomplex is marked by red (the map has been drawn by Kolesnikova)

⁸ Wikipedia 2024.

⁹ Blažek 2019.

¹⁰ Outram et al. 2009.

These Yeniseian people had quite regular contacts with the ancient Indo-Europeans and had a certain influence on them, in particular, for example, the Proto-Indo-European word for domesticated horse – *H₁eḱwos comes from the Yeniseian *ʔiʔχ-kuʔs “stallion”¹¹.

And the theonym of *Pə(ʔ)r-qVn could have been borrowed in this period.

After the word *pə(ʔ)r-qVn was borrowed, it was rethought and re-decomposed into components, because the internal structure of the name was completely incomprehensible for the Indo-Europeans. Were emerged the explanations that the theonym *Perk^wunos comes from the word *pérk^wus – “oak” and means the Master of oak trees, or that it comes from the verb *per – “to strike”.

The figure of the Mistress of the Forests – *Perk^wun faded into the background in Indo-European mythology. In the mythology of the ancient Yeniseians, *Pə(ʔ)r-qVn may have had no husband or could have had many husbands, and in the mythology of the ancient Indo-Europeans, it is the husband of *Perk^wun that becomes the central deity. All this is completely logical and natural, given that in the society of the ancient Indo-Europeans was mainly patriarchal, while the society of the ancient Yeniseians was mainly matriarchal, which is reflected in mythology: in the Yeniseian mythologies, goddesses dominate, while in the mythology of Indo-Europeans goddesses are relegated to the background.

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¹¹ Blažek 1999.

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