

Piquancies from the history of the Old Hungarian language

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Response to Tamás Keszi's study

Tamás Keszi, in his paper entitled *Notes on the latest reading of the inscription of the Jánoshida-Tótkéripusztá needle case*¹ published in the Yearbook of the Intercisa Museum, challenges my reading of the inscription in 2020. I was delighted to read his detailed and objective assessment, but as he disputes many of my findings, I disagree with much of the paper. In any case, it obliges me and also gives me the opportunity to shed more light on my assumptions in the form of a response article, and I believe that to some extent it also offers the possibility of a convergence of our positions. To this end, this article seeks to respond to Tamás Keszi's observations one by one.

As for his *general comments*, I can agree with a large part of them myself. Even today, it is almost impossible to form a scientific opinion on an inscribed object without an autopsy (the smaller the more so), and of course it is equally impossible to have a scientific debate with people who declare their interpretation, or even the indecipherability of the text, without having seen the object in physical reality. At present, perhaps the main obstacle to research on the Avar-period texts is precisely this attitude. From this point of view, Tamás Keszi's article is exemplary in that it seeks, with marked caution, to express an opinion only on what is possible on the basis of the available knowledge. Obviously, I would also find it useful if the results of microscopic studies were also available. However, I would not wish to absolutize the help of photographs and instruments: in my opinion, the most important measuring instrument in researching inscriptions is still the most ancient of all, our two good eyes. In many cases, new data are revealed by instrumental examination, but in my

1 Keszi 2021.

practice the opposite has also happened: e.g. I first saw high-resolution layer photographs of the supposed Iron Age writing (one of the famous and infamous ‘Venetic inscriptions’ published by János Harmatta that I refuted under KMRE *021b) a long time ago, and was convinced that it was a genuine inscription; but when I held the object in my hands in 2018, I was able to decide immediately and definitively that the ‘marks’ were only caused by a manufacturing anomaly. And let’s not forget that a text so small that the eye cannot see it clearly, is certainly not a text at all, because the maker did not have any instrument at his disposal. But of course, the human eye is often inadequate to assess non-writing damage, fracture surfaces, etc., and in this case, instrumental examination is indeed the most appropriate.

Of course, this also affects the assessment of the Jánoshida-Tótkéripuszta needle case, as the surface is somewhat damaged, but I must note that the damage is least around the written characters, and I sighed with relief when I took the object in my hand, as it is still in better and more intact condition than the majority of typical Avar-period objects with suspected inscriptions.

Let me add a subjective comment, which is of course part of the research story: the fact that I am quite convinced of the correct identification of the needle case’s markings is largely due to the way in which the identification process was carried out. Prior to my autopsy (January 2019), I had of course formed a preliminary picture based on descriptions, drawings and photographs in literature, and on the overall picture, I thought it likely that the published drawings were incorrect in certain respects – the most significant of which was that the last mark on the left edge was a suspected remnant of a fracture ligature. Perhaps I need not demonstrate what a confirmation it was for me when, on holding the object in my hand, all the deviations from the drawings proved to be as I had previously supposed.

It is also a response to the criticism of the reading of the last ligature. For my part, I am fairly certain that the sharp bevelled edge is the remnant of a Runic symbol – this is entirely consistent with the regularity that surface flaking usually follows the line of prior damage (including engravings), and I believe that traces of engraving can already be identified in the photographs published so far. But since only instrumental examination can obviously give 100% proof of this, scientific caution requires me to introduce my new reading with the comment “If we accept...” for the time being.

As for the third sign, here I consider the ligature to be exactly as Gábor Vékony already interprets it, the only difference being in the resolution into the sign elements – and in addition in the fact that I think that the roughly round carving on the two edges of the horizontal stem is identifiable, where the maker intended to finish the letter. Of course, Tamás Keszi’s question is a valid one: is it not possible to speak of unique graphemes that we do not yet know? It cannot be ruled out (but at least in the case of the last sign it makes it unlikely that we are talking about more complex, more complicated signs than all the previous examples), but in my own interpretation of the inscription I try to stick to the principle of the simplest possible reading, Occam’s razor if you like, and only assume an unknown new shape if no other possibility is given. This is, of course, a difference of ap-

proach: one approach is to consider every conceivable possibility, and until we have statistical data (the paucity of the Avar-period *corpus* means that this will be the case for a long time), with equal probability – the other approach is to consider that it makes, unfortunately, impossible to make a positive hypothesis; its necessary condition should rather be that the simplest possibilities should lead to a gap-free solution, and that if the gap-free solution requires the consideration of a rarer/complicated possibility, we can justify this sufficiently.

There is also the danger of ‘pen errors’, individual use of signs, font substitution, of course, all of which would require a more complex solution, and we have no idea what proportion of these would be expected in the texts. In my analysis of Roman inscriptions (which is of course a completely different literate culture and a different illiteracy rate), I have come to the conclusion that we can expect spelling errors in a maximum of 20% of the inscriptions.² It is impossible to say at present what this percentage might be in the Avar-period inscriptions. Since the characters on the needle case at Jánoshida-Tótkéripuszta are engraved with roughly equal force, and there is no sign of any re-engraving or double strokes on any but one (and questionable) stem, nor is it typical that the engraving tool slipped at the end of the letter, our best starting assumption is that the engraver was relatively well skilled in the art of writing.

Let us then see Tamás Keszi’s arguments on the interpretation of the inscription.

1. Basz(ik)

The question of whether the verb is used in the text in the sense of ‘press down, subdue’ or ‘copulate’ is not really relevant to the interpretation of the meaning. I have already stressed that the text is meaningful and situationally appropriate with both meanings. The (I think phallic) appearance of the shape does not make the ‘copulate’ interpretation obligatory, only possible. On the basis of the Udvard/Dvory nad Žitavou needle case, I juxtapose the depiction with the image of a bull charging with its head down, but this does not make the meaning ‘copulate’ obligatory either, although the bull makes it even easier to associate with it. The fact that this meaning is more commonly used in scientific discourse is mostly a matter of scientific psychology: since in our 21st-century eyes it has a very obscene connotation, it is the one that everyone focuses on.

However, I do not agree with Tamás Keszi’s view that the word was originally introduced into the Hungarian language in the sense of ‘copulate’. The first Latin-letter occurrences are more or less neutral in this respect³, but the verb is still used quite frequently in the sense

² Fehér 2007, 322.

³ The first commonly known record (Váradi Regestrom 381, cf. TESz I 256) is a personal name,

of ‘press, strike, push, throw’. Virtually all of its phrasal verb forms have such a meaning, and the vast majority of them are synonymous with a verb with such a meaning: *kibaszi(ik) ~ kitol ~ kilök⁴, lebaszi(ik) ~ letol, elbaszi(ik) ~ eltol, odabasz ~ odaüt, átbasz ~ átvág*, fixed phrasemes: *hátba basz, fejbe basz, pofán basz*, etc.⁵ All of these have a relatively late documented usage⁶, but it is hard to believe that they all emerged through secondary development, just returning to the original meaning of the verb. And the most common *megbasz* compound (today mostly in a sexual connotation) has long been documented to mean ‘strike’.⁷ It is true that this meaning has since become very rare in written language, but this is perhaps due to the crudeness of the term: those who do not understand it in a sexual context usually have no reason to use the most drastic synonym in written language. It is also not clear that there is no derivative of the verb that does not retain the meaning ‘copulate’ (though I agree that in the case of *boszorkány* it is a direct borrowing from Turkish). The range of verbal derivatives is quite wide (*baszogat, basztat, baszarint, baszakszik/baszakodik/baszakodik/baszakódik* – in the last case it should be pointed out that it was formed with a nowadays almost unproductive suffix, so one can assume that it is a rather old form –, and even in the dialects *baszigál* and *basszint*⁸, and all of them (with a more or less diminutive connotation)

whose common-noun meaning we cannot determine, but it is not very likely that a person of no common origin would have borne an obscene name. The first record in which the meaning ‘copulate’ is specifically mentioned is the *Bozol* data of 1247/1483 (Pais 1960), dating from not much later (although its phonetic picture contradicts this; it is likely that it was modernized in the 1483 transcription), but this, if it is genuine, indicates the use of the word as a technical term rather than an obscene one. There is no doubt that the more frequent occurrences from the 15th century onwards are generally obscene.

- 4 Also in a very concrete sense, i.e. ‘to throw/throw to the side, out of the given space’; MFnySz 1870: ‘kiver, kiüt, kitör’ (1930).
- 5 Keszi 2021, 53, j. 12. claims just the opposite; however, he does not deal with the problem of the supposed “detours” of the semantic change. To a certain extent, his example also goes against his own argument: an occurrence in the first half of the 17th century is not exactly new, considering that our alternative obscene verbs are usually documented in sexual meaning from the 19th century onwards, so this is a significantly older example of the combined use of the sexual/neutral meaning pair. Nevertheless, the chronology is quite complicated by the fact that the meaning is still productive in the 20th century, since it is also used in completely new expressions, such as *megbasz az áram* ‘to get an electric shock’.
- 6 This is difficult to trace, because most of our dictionaries do not include these verbs in their material, with the exception of the MFnySz and *A magyar nyelv nagyszótára* [Comprehensive Dictionary of the Hungarian Language], but the latter usually cites data from the second half of the 20th century on any topic. The MFnySz knows the form *elbasz* from the oldest time (MFnySz 853: 1900) completely in its present meaning. It is worth noting that there is no data at all on the synonymous forms used today (*elcsesz, elkúr*), so it is certain that the meaning developed with this verb and was transferred to the synonymous forms only recently. In the Transtibiscan dialectal data, *elcsesz* consistently has the meaning ‘véletlen elvág [cut accidentally]’ (ÚMTsz II 70, Kálnási 2005, 186).
- 7 EMSzT VIII 338: *igen meg baszad az fejemet* (1638); the first example in the sexual meaning is from 1630.
- 8 ÚMTsz I 356, II 280.

refer back to the meaning ‘keep *pushing*, harass⁹, oppress¹⁰, which is more derivable from an original meaning of ‘press, push’ than from ‘copulate’.¹¹ The fact that some Turkish languages also have the meaning ‘copulate’ may at most raise the suspicion that both meanings could have been taken over at the same time, but does not in itself indicate a transposition that narrows the meaning.

Tamás Keszi’s thesis that the *baszik* verb was originally introduced into the Hungarian language for euphemistic reasons in place of our original sexual verb is an old topos in Hungarian linguistics¹², but everyone just asserts it without justification. It would be difficult to give a logical explanation why a sexual expression taken over from a foreign language should be considered euphemistic in principle (although certainly such borrowings occur), and there are at least counter-examples from the recent development of the Hungarian language: the most coarse synonym currently in use is also the most recent¹³ takeover: the verb *kúr(ál)* of Lovari origin (*kürel*). For this reason, and also on the basis of the arguments presented so far, I find it more logical that the sexual meaning of the verb *baszik* has become dominant in Hungarian, of course displacing a previous verb, but this is hardly the verb *fék* suggested by him. Indeed, the latter is probably the later loanword, since it has clear Western European parallels – cf. the well-known German verb *ficken*. This does not mean that we can consider it to be of German origin, but not for phonetic reasons¹⁴, but because of the

9 This in principle allows for an alternative interpretation, that this meaning evolved as an analogy of the verb *csesz(ik)* ‘cut, touch, poke → copulate’ from *basz(ik)*, however (apart from the fact that the secondary meaning of *csesz(ik)* is relatively late documented: TESz I 513: 1838 – this could be a coincidence) the analogous formation occurs only with the verbs *csesztet-basztat*, *cseszeget-baszogat* and there are no verb forms ***cseszert* and ***cseszekszik*. Due to the aforementioned archaic character of the latter formation, the probability is that the analogous secondary meaning was transferred to the verb *csesz(ik)* only in the period when the *baszakszik*-type formation was considered obsolete.

10 In addition, of course, diminutive or iterative variants of the meaning ‘copulate’ have long been known: *baszkodik* EMSzT I 602 (1597), *baszogat* TESz I 256 (1782). The two meanings coexisted at least in parallel.

11 A separate problem is the verb *baszkurál*, which is certainly a twin word, and apparently a late formation, since it seems to be a compound of *basz(ik)* + Lovari *kürel* → *kúrál*. This is contradicted, however, by the fact that the first data is definitely earlier than in the case of the verb *kúr(ál)*: MTSz I 105 (i.e. before 1893), and in the form of *baszгурál*. However, its twin word status is attested by its derivative suffixed on both parts: *baszгурda* ‘which causes great excitement’. In my opinion, the second member may have been an older verb (perhaps *gór* ‘throw’ or the root of *kurkász/kurkál* ‘rake, rummage’?), and its present form was taken over secondarily by the beginning of the 20th century, under the influence of the Romani loanword. This also means that this verb also has a secondary sexual meaning.

12 Moór 1956, 299; Bárczi 1960, 240; TESz I 256.

13 In fact, we cannot date it exactly, as none of our etymological dictionaries deals with it, nor do the dialect dictionaries. MFnySz 2215: documented from 1911.

14 TESz I 866 also derives it from the verb *ficken*, but notes that “the agreement has phonetic and alphabetic difficulties”. However, the early occurrences of the verb *fék* do not exclude the vocalization *i* in addition to *é* (?) (see the *Vieggá* transliteration cited by Keszi). It is also known in the “golden age” of the 16th century (EMSzT III 826: 1568), and among the late forms that have

etymological and especially chronological problems of the German verb. There are widely differing views on the etymology of *ficken*¹⁵, but most of them, in line with the fact that the earliest records of the word are late Middle German and the sexual meaning is documented only from 1558¹⁶, assume a later origin than the Hungarian data. The striking similarity, however, is well explained by Mollay's explanation¹⁷ that the Hungarian verb is a transposition of the well-documented Italian *ficcare* 'transfix, penetrate' from the 13th to 14th centuries. It is not clear, however, that it came directly from Old Italian, since it was also adopted in Italian Middle Latin as *ficare*¹⁸, which explains the parallel forms *fik-* and *fikk-* (although it is also known in Italian dialects in both forms)¹⁹. It is perfectly conceivable that the same verb could have been adopted into German²⁰, in both languages at roughly the same period, at the latest in the fourteenth century (but not much earlier); nor is it quite impossible that it was introduced into German by Hungarian mediation. It also has, though rarely, a 'copulate' meaning in Italian²¹; in any case, in Hungarian it is used in the early 15th century already in its later meaning and in a very coarse register, as Tamás Keszi rightly observes²²; in German it is then only known in a neutral sense, at least it is probable that it is only considered coarse there from the 16th century.

So, it is true that almost all occurrences of the verb *fék* fall into the 'crude, violent' linguistic register, but the said origin makes the opposite conclusion as that of Tamás Keszi likely: it was introduced into the language alongside the existing Hungarian equivalent in order to form a cruder synonym.

The logical conclusion is that the more neutral sexual meaning of the verb *basz(ik)* until the 16th century is rather a consequence of the fact that this verb had already been part of the general vocabulary earlier, sometime between the 5th and the 14th centuries – in any case before *fék* was acquired in the 15th century, as Keszi convincingly demonstrates – from where

survived in the dialect in addition to *fék* there are also *fík*, *fíki* (CzF II 845-846), and even *fíkom*, *fíkkom*, *fikkom* (ÚMTSz II 331). It is hard to decide which of these is the original, but in German there is also a dialectal (Saxon) *fäcken* form besides the literary *ficken* form.

- 15 It can be derived from the well-known common Germanic verb (Eng. *fuck*, Dutch *fokken*, Sv. *focka*, Norv. *fukka*) only with great phonetic difficulty, nevertheless this idea is advocated (KlugeEW) – in which case the verb would indeed be ancient. It is more common that the word had the primary meaning 'rub', as attested in MHG (GDWb III 1412: *fegen* 1412), and parallel variants have the sense 'hit, flap' (*fäcken* 1229, *fickfacken*), but in this case no more distant origin can be found. Possibly a Germanic etymology can be found for a primary meaning 'fidget' (EWD I 431: Eng. *fidge*, Dutch *figgelen*; however, the conclusion is "Die Etymologie ist ungeklärt"). A huge problem with all explanations is that there is simply no Old High German data to which any of them could be linked.
- 16 Weigand–Hirt 1910.
- 17 Mollay 1982, 260–261.
- 18 Du Cange III 462c.
- 19 ÚESz: *ficar* (Bolognese). ÚMTSz accepts Mollay's etymology without reservation.
- 20 Although GDWb loc.cit. explicitly denies this.
- 21 ÚESz: *ficcare* (Calabrian).
- 22 Keszi 2021, 55.

it was (temporarily) overshadowed by *fék* in the crude register. Still it had pushed back an even earlier verb, compared to which it was originally more aggressive. At present we do not know for certain about this verb; it seems that the two oldest recorded sexual verbs are the two loanwords, and in verbs of ancient or possibly ancient origin this meaning appears much later.

In principle, this could be the case, for example, of *gyak*, which according to the existing data became a sexual verb only after the 15th century, and the etymology of which is Finno-Ugric (EWUng 489, TESz I 1117, MSzFE I 228, UEW 66²³) – but here I agree with Tamás Keszi²⁴ that this is a late and euphemistic development, and it is much less likely that it is difficult to determine the old meanings only because the data are relatively late. On the other hand, it is obvious to consider the verb *ívik*, which is also certainly of Finno-Ugric origin (TESz II 249, EWUng 632 – recorded since 1538); the only problem here is that both in Old Hungarian and in dialect (MTsz I 967) the meaning is clearly restricted to animal (fish) mating. This suggests that if the verbs *baszik* and *fék* displaced this verb, it must have been in very ancient times (thus, since the terminus post quem of *fék* is more or less definable, it indirectly supports the very ancient origin of *baszik*).

The verb *tosz(ik)* can also be considered, which is of unknown origin according to the authoritative dictionaries²⁵ (TESz III 951²⁶, EWUng 1535) – but most simply with a meaning split from the verb *tesz* ‘do/put’²⁷. In any case, at the time when the -sz ending of the imperfect was already a stable part of the verb stem, but before our participle, morphologically connected to the stem of the aoristos, had supplanted the forms connected to the imperfect stem, as it is proven by our twin word, *teszetosza* of participial origin, derived from two verbs.²⁸ However, our adjectives of similar form with a participial origin seem to be largely unproductive formations throughout the entire written language history, so a pre-Conquest origin is definitely probable. The problem here is that the word is, despite this, late record-

23 He considers its Finno-Ugric origin doubtful, preferring an Ugric origin.

24 Keszi 2021, 55–56.

25 Mollay 1982, 539: his proposed German etymology (from the verb *stoßen*) is rather unrealistic – actually the adoption of the idea of CzF VI 378.

26 The etymological link with the verb *tol* suggested here is questionable, to say the least.

27 The sexual use of a verb with the meaning ‘do, put’ is not unprecedented either, since the verb *megcsinál* has been spreading in this meaning since the end of the 20th century, for the time being in the lowest language registers; on the other hand, we must also attribute the verb with the meaning ‘press, push’, since this is how it could become the root of the derivative *taszít~taszajt~toszajt*.

28 It is totally incomprehensible that, except for the dialect dictionaries (MTsz II 720, ÚMTsz V 370, 393), *teszetosza* does not appear in almost any collection (except CzF VI 274); however, there it shows a very rich variety of forms (*teszetusza*, *teszetuszi*, *teszefosza*, *tiszetosza*, *tiszetuszi*, *teszemu-sza*, *teszlefoszla*), which also suggests its very long-standing widespread use. Thus, no ‘first occurrence’ can be identified (MTsz i.h. mentions a form *tesze-fosza* from 1839, but that is already a highly distorted form). The only known etymology is that of Czuczor–Fogarasi, which seems to be correct: ‘kit ide-oda tenni, tuszkolni lehet’ [one who is prone to be pushed to and fro] – NB. according to it, the term has a passive sense, which would be unique for this participial form (and obviously very old), but there is no need for it, the same meaning can be derived from an active sense (one who puts/pushes [*tesz-tosz*] sg to and fro).

ed, the first occurrence with at least a suggestive meaning being in 1548²⁹, but it becomes more common only from the 17th century with the meaning ‘push’. In these circumstances, the fact that the sexual meaning is known only from the 19th century makes it difficult to assume an ancient sexual verb, but does not completely exclude it. It is also worth noting that the forms of *tosz* and its prefixed or conjugated forms are always sexual in the present-day dialectal data³⁰, while the majority of the data for the other sexual verbs simply express some kind of physical force (i.e. the original set of meanings).

But these are not necessarily the only three possibilities, since sexual verbs are characterised by a great abundance of synonyms, and their historical record is mostly poorly documented³¹, so defining a term that had become obsolete by the 14th century is a very difficult task.

In fact, however, there are many blank spots in the history of our verbs with the meaning ‘copulate’, since it is difficult to say why the verb *fék* essentially disappeared after the 17th century, leaving – in my opinion – the verb *basz(ik)* to regain its former semantic field.

On the basis of all this, it does not seem improbable that in the 8th century the *basz* verb was used in the Hungarian language in the original sense of ‘press down’, and it is at least not impossible that it could have been used in the figurative sense of ‘copulate’, but with a more pronounced meaning than the ancient verbs that refer to it. I do not claim that it belonged to the ‘coarse’ register, nor do I consider it necessary to include it in an apotropaic sentence, especially if it is taken simply in the sense ‘subdue, press down’. Tamás Keszi explores at length the parallels of the text with the “*baszom a lelkedet*” type of curse/swearing,³² but beyond the semantic affinity of the two nouns – distant rather than close – there is in fact no parallel, neither functionally, since we can think of a protective rather than a curse-type text, nor expressively, since what reason would there be to speak rudely to a protective force. But there is also a significant syntactic difference; this curse type would require the use of the first-person Singular, and there is no sign at the end of the first hypothetical word, or indeed at any point in the whole text, which would give rise to the slightest suspicion that it could be the equivalent of a Hungarian first-person Singular verbal suffix (-*m* or -*k*).³³

29 Tinódi Lantos 1877, 268.

30 ÚMTsz III 1187, V 426

31 Thus, e.g. for the sake of a hypothetical experiment, it is worth taking into account the verb *prütyköl/prücsköl*, which is obviously not ancient, since it is a derived verb and is known from rather recent data (being outside the standard language, it is discussed only in MFnySz 3080: 1900, 1908, 1911 occurrences in the sense of ‘copulate’, 1930 in the sense of ‘harass, badger’), and is apparently identical in origin with *tocskol/ticskol/töcsköl* ‘squeeze’ (MFnySz 3885, ÚMTsz V 434, MTsz II 775). Behind it a root ³⁴*ψüč* (or maybe ³⁵*ψiit*) is suggested, and the very rare and long obsolete sound at the beginning of the word suggests that this was an old onomatopoeic verb; the only question is which of the three modern meanings was close to the meaning of this reconstructed old verb, or whether it already then encompassed several of them.

32 Keszi 2021, 60–61.

33 Of course, one could argue that the alphabet could differ considerably from the one known later, and that these two letters may have changed completely – but in this case we would be talking about wild hypotheses which are unverifiable pro and con. Moreover, this is not even true of the

On the basis of all of the foregoing, I maintain that the verb *basz(ik)* could have been suitable in an apotropaic sentence of the time – more easily in a non-sexual sense, but the sexual sense should also not be excluded completely.

2. Íz/isz

The reading and interpretation of the word *íz/isz* is definitely a more difficult task, since the data available on the linguistic history of the word is much poorer than that of the word *basz(ik)*, so we can even less dare to come to a definite conclusion. It is not only that the first occurrences date back to the 16th century, but also that the word did not enter the emerging literary language then or since, and most of the data on it are ethnographic collections from the 19th and 20th centuries³⁴, which is certainly scarce compared to other ancient words. There is no doubt, however, that *íz/isz* is a very ancient word of ours, but Paasonen's Ugric (or more precisely Finno-Ugric) etymology³⁵ – which is also supported by Keszi (fully in line with the linguistics of recent decades)³⁶ – is not necessarily indisputable. Its major drawback is the very large difference between the meanings, which can only be overcome in several steps. This is why I (also) noted in my original analysis³⁷ that Bernát Munkácsi's³⁸ etymology should be considered.³⁹ If this etymology proves to be correct, the debate is moot from both a semantic⁴⁰ and a phonetic point of view.⁴¹

<k²> symbol, which is known from the 10th century (KMRE 117, Alsóbű) and was then already in modern form.

34 Cf. ÚMTsz II 1124–25.

35 Paasonen 1909, 346.

36 See. TESz II 151, UEW i.h., EWUng 632–633.

37 Fehér 2020, 131, note 58.

38 Munkácsi 1894, 138. This is the earlier of Munkácsi's two etymologies, which unfortunately I failed to emphasize in my original article, thus giving rise to misunderstanding.

39 The laconic remark of the TESz that the Iranian origin is unacceptable is certainly based on the otherwise completely correct argument of Paasonen (1909), but it refers to the different and much worse etymology given later by Bernát Munkácsi (1901, 380). It seems that the original suggestion (borrowing from Avestan and Sanskrit *jātu* 'evil spirit') has been overlooked so far, although it is phonetically excellent, and only needs to be modernized in that we obviously cannot assume a direct descent from the classical languages (with the naivety typical of the late 19th century), but rather an Eastern Iranian type dialect close to them.

40 In addition to the meaning 'demon', the meaning 'sourcerer' could also be considered, cf. Orelli 1913, II 165.

41 The only question that needs explanation is why in this case the vowel of *iz* turned into palatal at least by the Middle Hungarian period. However, such a change of vowel harmony is quite common.

Tamás Keszi's criticism⁴² is undoubtedly justified on one point: the <z> grapheme of the 16th century occurrences cannot necessarily be resolved as a /z/ phoneme. In normative writing, the z/sz opposition was more or less established by the end of the century, but we should not expect this in manuscript, non-literary data. I have to admit that the phonetic realisation of the first data from the 16th and 17th centuries is ambiguous.⁴³ However, if we want to determine the date of the sz>z sound change, we are in total darkness – in general, dating a sporadic sound change that probably took place by analogy is very difficult. As far as I know, Keszi is the first to try to explain and *date* the supposed sound change (the impact of the written z), but the flaw in this is precisely that the word falls largely outside literacy, and could in no way have been written so often as to affect a significant proportion of speakers. The parallel examples he cites are mostly proper names, where written propagation has long been as important as the oral one.

To me, it seems more plausible that the change is caused either by the effect of an analogous word to *íz/isz* (including folk etymology, which may indeed be one of the causes of the change), or by a morphological analogy: the generalisation of assimilation in a conjugation. The latter is perhaps easier to find in the z>sz direction, with the effect of the pronounced *iszt* form of the Accusative, which of course dates from after the 13th/14th century, with the loss of the pre-suffix vowel. For the former, the word *íz* 'sapor' suggested by Keszi in note could be suitable, but this is almost undatable, since we are talking about a word with a very stable form; in my opinion nothing excludes a dating to the pre-Conquest period. At the same time, it is reasonable to think of the words in a similar conceptual range, such as *íz/penéz* (*penész*), which he mentions in the same passage, or the more modern *íz/frász* pair, which tend to point in the z>sz direction, but it is certainly possible to find a pair of words suggesting the sz>z direction without too much difficulty. It is undeniable that these words are constantly exposed to the analogy in both directions, and I have found evidence from the second half of the 20th century that *frász* was formed by the influence of *íz*.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, therefore, reconstructing the old form of the word, especially in a dated form, is still problematic, and therefore I have to agree with Tamás Keszi that we should keep open the possibility that we might have to look for a new reading of the second word. In terms of content, however, I remain of the opinion that this is the best option, and I disagree with the semantic concerns expressed. As I have already mentioned – and let us now unreservedly accept the established etymology – the change in meaning is frighteningly large, the evolution from 'shadow soul' > 'mouth disease' must necessarily have taken a very long time. To me, it is implausible that this would have taken place in the time from

42 Keszi 2021, 59.

43 The example specifically given by TESz, however, suggests a /z/ sound, since it is immediately adjacent to the form *eβi* (MOK +119 – TESz gives an incorrect page number), but the majority of /sz/ sounds in the whole manuscript are indeed marked with the 3 grapheme (including the example quoted by Keszi in another part of the same page); β is much rarer.

44 "Ízzel etették, frázszal törették". Sarud (Heves vm.), kindly provided orally by Dr Csilla Sebestyén.

the Árpáadian era onwards, a pre-Conquest development whereby the soul became a natural demon (independent of man) is more plausible (this is exactly the level corresponding to the Jánoshida reading). In fact, this also seems to be a multi-step process, first with a reduction in value: the soul first becomes a malevolent spirit, a ghost,⁴⁵ then a demon, and of course the simplest explanation is that it would have been reduced from a demon to an objective manifestation of disease already in the age of (compulsory) Christianity. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the latter change could have started in the 11th century, or if we accept that the word was in use in the Avar period, in the Transdanubia region as early as the 9th century! However, contrary to the view of Tamás Keszi, I consider the time elapsed since then to be short, so I would not expect the word *íz/isz* to have a meaning of ‘shadow soul’ in the 8th century.

As I have already written, I see no possibility of the text being in the 1st-person Singular; if it is an imperative, all the probabilities are in favour of 2nd-person Singular. But who could this ‘you’ be? If we accept Keszi’s argument, the needle itself is the most likely candidate, just as he refers to Gábor Vékony, who interpreted it in this way. Except that Vékony⁴⁶ also mistakenly saw the needle named in the text⁴⁷ – the ladyfinger-shaped drawing on the separate side can only be interpreted as a letter, especially three letters, with a very broad imagination, as it is quite clearly a symbolic sign. *If my reasoning is to be accepted, “you” is the creature depicted.* I shall discuss its masculinity below. Whether the other, smaller figure is a male is an open question, in principle it could also be the object of the sentence (if the meaning of the verb is ‘press down’, it is indifferent, but if it is ‘copulate’, it must obviously be a woman), but the bull figure of the Udvard/Dvory nad Žitavou parallel (KMRE °109) is an argument for its masculine nature.

However, if one of the depictions is male and the other is female, then Keszi’s proposition that the text should be interpreted in the context of love is not necessarily a possibility to be rejected – if the arguments against the reading of *iz* are serious enough to exclude it from the interpretation of the second word, then this is in fact the only realistic possibility. In this case, one could look for the object in the **ozu/ezü* demonstrative pronouns, and of course in the smaller human form. From a technical and Hungarian-language point of view, this reading is also flawless, but such a deictic sentence would make less clear sense: in fact, without the figures (on different sides, so not visible at the same glance) it would be essentially unintelligible. For this reason, but especially for the reasons described above, I see this possibility as less likely for the time being.

45 TESz loc. cit.: frightening spirit, but already Paasonen 1909 explains it this way.

46 Vékony 1987, 74–80.

47 Vékony 1985, 166–168 not yet!

3. Posture of the hand and phallus

Finally, a comment on the posture of the creature depicted. Tamás Keszi sees two things as unclear: the hand posture, in which he believes the downward bending at the elbow is merely an interpretation, and the existence of the penis, since the figure is not ithyphallic. I don't claim the latter either, but the creature still carries a pronounced member between its legs, so the fact that it is male is hardly negligible. And the former is indeed difficult to see (this part of the surface is the most damaged on the needle case), but I claim its existence on the basis of my own experience (by the way, I think it can also be seen in the available photographs), and more importantly, another parallel has since emerged that suggests this. In addition to the depiction of Udvard/Dvory nad Žitavou (KMRE °109), which was already cited as a parallel in the original publication and which is perfectly clear, a similar figure with a similar hand posture has since been found on a needle case from Tolna-Mözs⁴⁸ (unfortunately it is also very difficult to evaluate, as it is damaged, and in this case sloppily and superficially scratched) – this object, however, does not contain any inscription, but the cemetery in question contained a strikingly high proportion of written material, the reading of which, although not clear, points more towards the set of letters from the Jánoshida-Tótkéripusza needle case than towards the set of letters from Nagyszentmiklós.⁴⁹

My original theory is therefore confirmed rather than weakened by the new data that have come to light since then – albeit I write this with caution, because this kind of argument was systematically used by my predecessors dealing with Avar writing, János Harmatta, Gábor Vékony, Dezső Csallány, and in their case it unfortunately proved to be a mistake. However, there is no reason for such a reservation regarding the hand posture, the new data certainly confirm it.

If there is anything in the body parts of the figure that is uncertain and needs further interpretation, it is not this, but the question of the eyes: do the two creatures from Jánoshida-Tótkéripusza have eyes, and if so, where? Is my assumption correct that the depth of the two lateral lesions next to the head of the larger figure are the two original eye markings, and if so, what does it suggest that at least two needle-case-men (needle-case-spirits) are wearing their eyes outside their heads? I confess that I do not know the answer to this question at the moment, and perhaps a clarification of this might add something new to the meaning of the portrayal.

48 Novotnik–Fehér 2021, 70.

49 By the way, figurines with similar hand posture do not only exist on needle cases: thanks to Máttyás Harag I was able to see a specimen on a (still unpublished) bobbin button. However, it is of course not possible to decide whether it expresses the same or a completely different conceptual content.

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