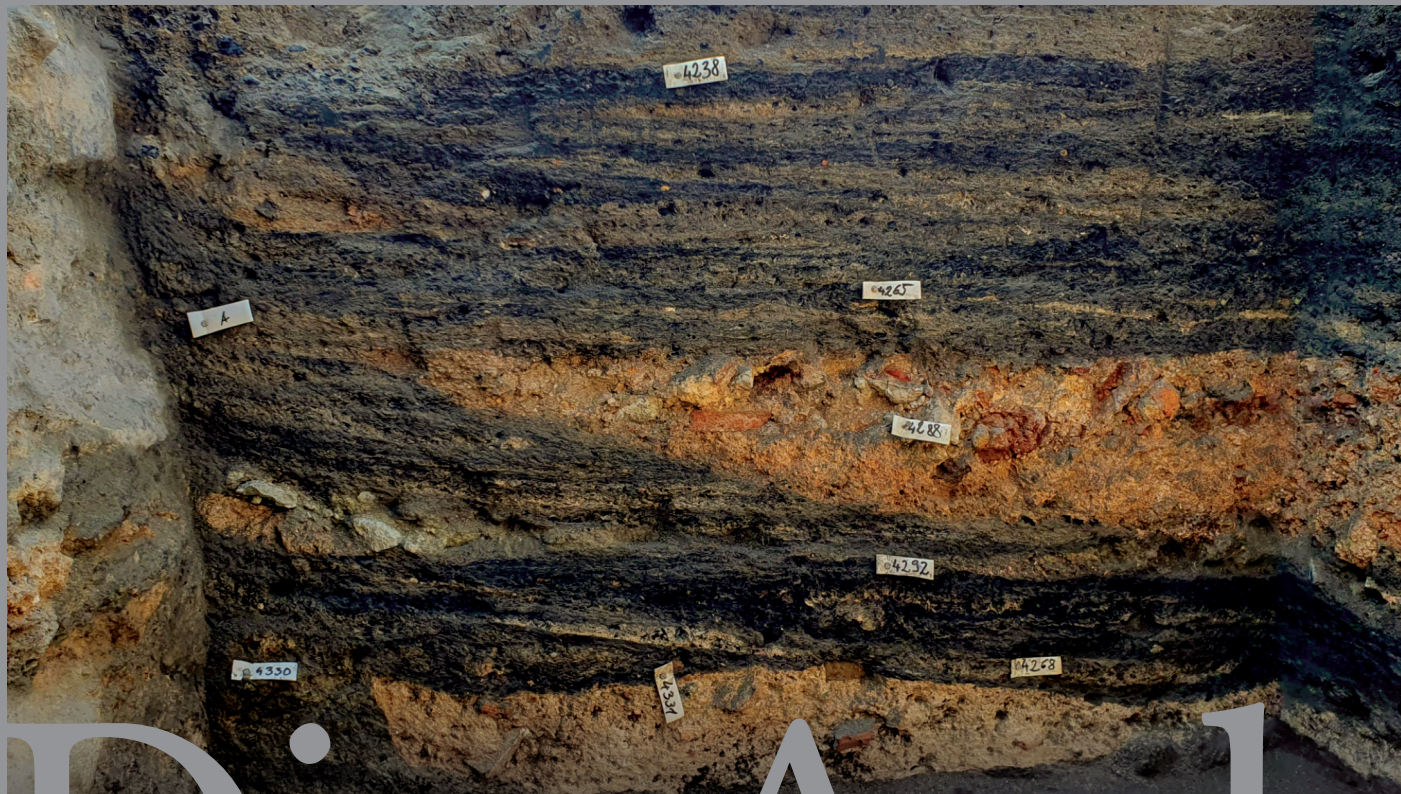


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THESIS REVIEW ARTICLES

The concept of the ancient homeland of the Fenno-Ugric-speaking peoples
in light of complex research

The concept of the ancient homeland of the Fenno-Ugric-speaking peoples in light of complex research

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Abstract: Extended, completed review of the theses of the PhD dissertation completed under the supervision of László Klima and submitted to the Uralic Linguistics and Languages Programme, Doctoral School of Linguistics, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, in 2023.

The dissertation's primary objective was to investigate, applying an interdisciplinary approach, the prehistory and location of the ancient homeland of the Uralic-speaking peoples. This study was needed due to the decreasing tendency in research in Hungary on the Uralic prehistory compared to Finland. In the past three decades, some attempts have been made to integrate new results, but the old theory of the Uralic homeland being in Western Siberia could not be challenged. The research presented in the dissertation is based on reassessing previous results of linguistic palaeontology, archaeology, and archaeogenetics.

Keywords: Uralic language family, Uralic homeland, linguistic palaeontology, historical genetics, Seima-Turbino transcultural phenomenon

Introduction: Choice of subject and the aims of the dissertation

Under the supervision of László Klima, I started collecting publications related to the archaeological research of the Uralic-speaking peoples published in Hungary in February 2008. Most works revolved around the prehistory of the Uralic-speaking peoples, allowing me to delve into this topic. The list was complete until 2010; thus, only the studies published since must have been added.

The title of the dissertation seems somewhat outdated from the perspective of the research of the past six years, but it describes the actual state of research in Hungary. The term 'Fenno-Ugric' is more popular than 'Uralic'; they can be used as synonyms, but the meaning of 'Uralic' is broader. At this point, I must add that the traditional binary taxonomy of the Uralic language family has been seriously questioned during the past three decades (Fig. 1).¹ According to these studies, the *raison d'être* of the 'Fenno-Ugric' subgroup has been questioned, bringing about the widespread use of the 'Uralic' term. If it were possible to change the title of the dissertation, the new one would be

1 For earlier attempts, see HELIMSKIY 1982 and HÄKKINEN 1984. Jaakko Häkkinen (HÄKKINEN 2009) and János Pusztay (PUSZTAY 1995; PUSZTAY 1997; PUSZTAY 2011) have come to a similar conclusion that the Proto-Uralic has diverged into western, middle and eastern groups. The theory of Tapani Salminen (SALMINEN 1984; SALMINEN 1999) deals with the absence of major intermediary branches, so after the divergence of the Proto-Uralic, the main languages developed.

‘Parallels and paradoxes in the research of the prehistory of Uralic-speaking peoples’² because it describes the actual understanding and state of research better than the current one.

This dissertation is a direct sequel to my previous studies, also based on an interdisciplinary approach relying mainly on linguistics and archaeology, and now completed with results of historical genetics. The results of this discipline cannot be excluded from research in the future; the study of Indo-European prehistory has already integrated them, and hopefully, our field will also benefit greatly from archaeogenetical results.

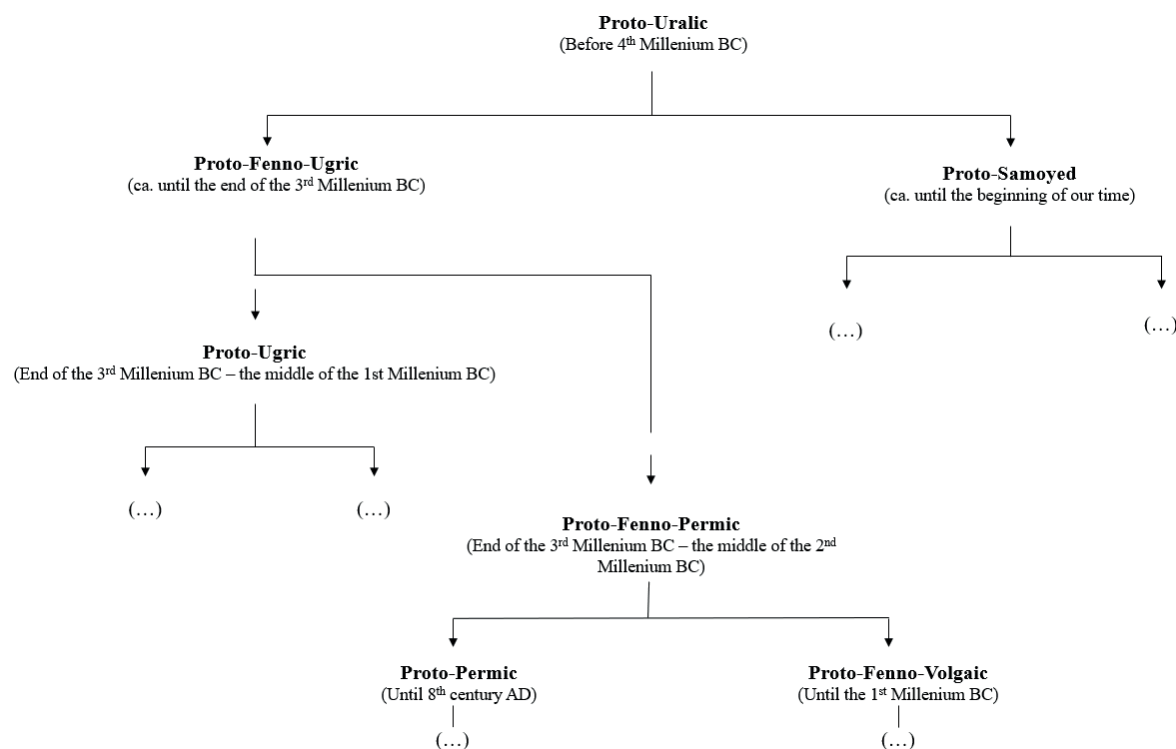


Fig. 1. Traditional binary taxonomy of the Uralic language family (after Hajdú 1989, 14).

One of the main goals was to overview the works published in the last more than ten years, of which no summary has been published yet. A critical review of the results of linguistic palaeontology was a main element of the dissertation, as this is the only field where linguistics is represented in the Hungarian research on the prehistory of Uralic-speaking peoples. Palaeoecology provided further evidence to be weighed; as the widely accepted theory of the Uralic homeland being in Western Siberia by Péter Hajdú and István Fodor was based on more than fifty-year-old palynological data, a reassessing in light of new results was timely. Palaeoecology has greatly changed in the past decades: the volume of available data has increased, and research methods have evolved considerably. Indo-European research was cited as an example because linguistic palaeontology is a quite controversial method, requiring a highly critical approach.

Research on the Indo-European prehistory provides a valuable example from a historical-genetical point of view. I believe this discipline is utterly important, and I have applied its results to develop a modern methodology that closes the gap between research on the prehistory of the Indo-European and that of Uralic-speaking peoples.

2 Inspired by the title of NÉMETH – VIGH 2021.

Previous research on the prehistory of Uralic-speaking peoples

The research methodology on Uralic prehistory was developed after the Second World War. Péter Hajdú, integrating linguistic and archaeological data in his studies, had a key role in that. In a paper published in 1953, he located the Uralic homeland based on the joint distribution of fir, Siberian pine, and oak (the natural habitats of which in prehistory were northern than today). Although the Siberian pine is a typical Siberian species, it can be found in the area of the Upper Pechora and Upper Kama rivers. Péter Hajdú located the ancient homeland of the Fenno-Ugric-speaking peoples in Europe based on the distribution of elm (Fig. 2).³

In another paper published in 1962, Hajdú presented a slightly different theory, still locating the ancient homeland of the Uralic and Fenno-Ugric-speaking people in the Volga–Kama region based on the reconstructed joint distribution of fir, Siberian pine, elm, honeybee, hedgehog, and mink. He also included in the supposed evidence a reindeer species that was previously omitted, salmon, partridge, flying squirrel, ermine, goblin, and marten. Due to the outdated approach of his study, the etymology and origin of the reconstructed words were not presented in detail.⁴

In 1961, Gyula László published a widely debated book about the Uralic prehistory. His theory was based on linguistic palaeontological results, and he was the first to involve palynology in research. He relied on the joint distribution of birch, pine, and alder in locating the ancient homeland of the Uralians; these species were indigenous from Riga to the Oka River at the time of the Uralic protolanguage. He found that this region was home to the Swiderian archaeological culture, connected with speakers of the Uralic protolanguage (Fig. 3).⁵ As a result of László's work, Péter Hajdú changed his views and located the Uralic homeland in Western Siberia and the European side of the Northern Urals based on the joint presence of spruce, Siberian pine, and fir. He believed that the joint presence of larch and elm marks the ancient homeland of the speakers of the Fenno-Ugric protolanguage.⁶

The new linguistic palaeontological findings have been examined by István Fodor, who combined Péter Hajdú's work with the archaeological results of V. N. Chernetsov and located the Uralic homeland between the Urals and the Lower Ob River (Fig. 4).⁷ The region of the Kama River was

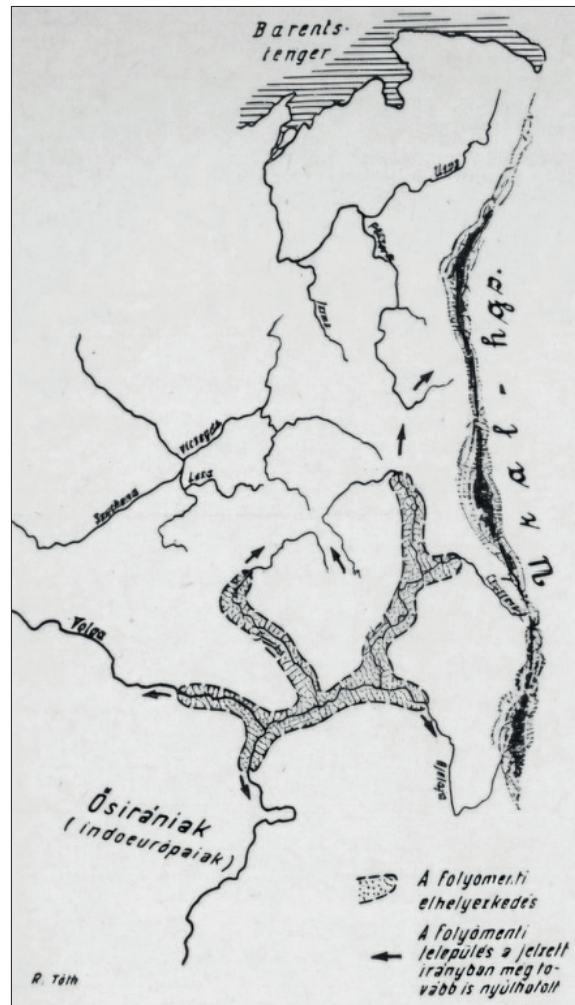


Fig. 2. Uralic homeland in Eastern Europe (after Hajdú 1953, 23, Map 2).

3 Hajdú 1953, 17–18.

4 Hajdú 1962, 35–37.

5 László 1961, 63–68.

6 Hajdú 1964.

7 Fodor 1980, 39.

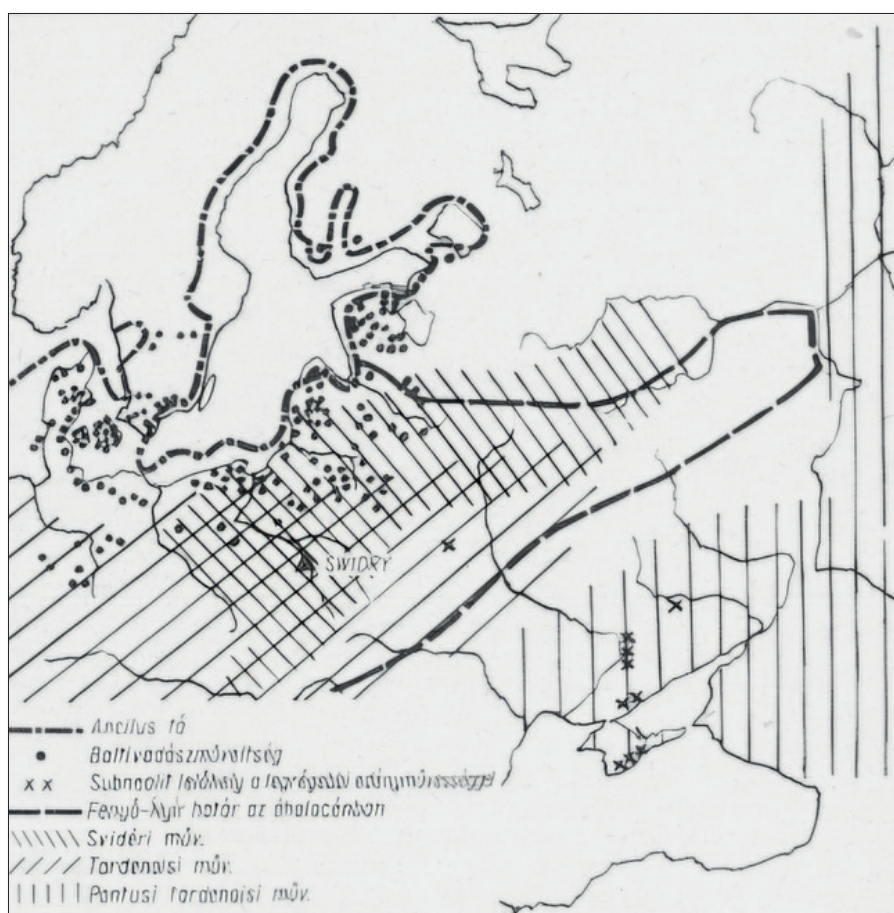


Fig. 3. Uralic homeland according to Gyula László (after LÁSZLÓ 1961, 123, Fig. 25).

only populated first in the 3rd millennium BC.⁸ The Uralic populations started to expand east- and westward in the 4th millennium BC; the ancestors of the Samoyedic tribes got as far as the region of Angara, while in the West, the ancestors of the Saami people reached Scandinavia. Based on these population movements, the speakers of the Fenno-Ugric protolanguage also appeared in the region of the Kama River.⁹

Péter Veres joined the academic conversation in the 1970s. His concept was based on the results of Soviet archaeology, with a focus on linguistic palaeontology and palynology. The new palynological results showed that elm appeared in the Southern Urals and the middle course of the Ob River at the beginning of the middle Holocene and grew there for several thousand years, disappearing only in the Subboreal and Subatlantic periods when it retreated to the eastern slopes of the Southern Urals. This meant that the territory of the Fenno-Ugric ancient homeland should be extended to the south and east (Fig. 5).¹⁰

Meantime, in the 1980s, research on the prehistory of Uralic-speaking peoples in Finland branched off, taking diverse directions. The interdisciplinary conference held at the Tvärminne research station in 1984 was a milestone;¹¹ a new theory was formed there about the indigenous Uralic people (Hungarians excluded). The archaeological background was studied by Pavel M. Doluhanov and

8 FODOR 1980, 42.

9 FODOR 1973, 5; FODOR 1980, 55.

10 VERES 1987, 50–55.

11 See the articles in *Suomen väestön esihistorialliset juuret*.

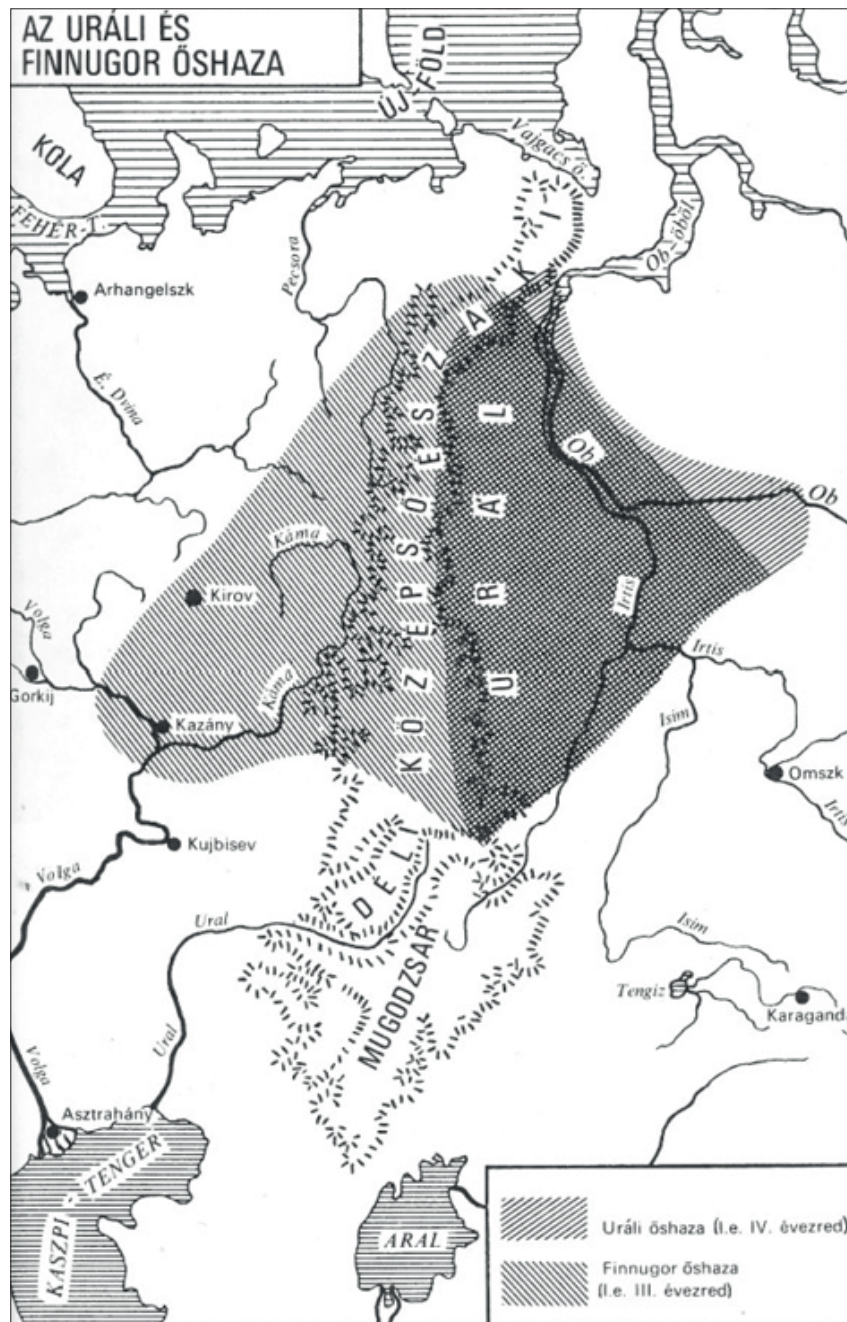


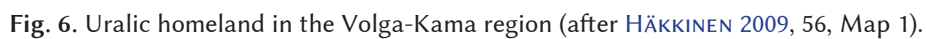
Fig. 4. Uralic and Fenno-Ugric homeland (after FODOR 1973, 45).

Milton G. Nuñez.¹² This theory was widely debated in the 1990s and 2000s, and in the mid-2000s, Finnish research turned back to the ‘small homeland’ concept in light of some new results provided by Jaakko Häkkinen and Petri Kallio. According to the old-new theory, the Uralic homeland was located in the Volga–Kama region and the divergence of the Uralic protolanguage can be dated to 2000 BC (Fig. 6).¹³ The emergence of the Seima-Turbino transcultural phenomenon played an important role in the spread of Uralic-speaking groups.¹⁴ Although the newest theories locate the

12 DOLUHANOV 1986; NUÑEZ 1987.

13 HÄKKINEN 2009; KALLIO 2006.

14 NÉMETH – VIGH 2021.



Uralic homeland in the southern part of Western Siberia,¹⁵ the Volga–Kama homeland theory was supported by Asko Parpola.¹⁶

In 2022, Riho Grünthal and his colleagues published a broad-stroke theory, the result of their latest research,¹⁷ locating the Uralic homeland in the southern part of Western Siberia and discussing the topic in a wider context. About 4,200 years ago, a major climate change brought about extreme drought in the steppe zone in Eastern Europe, followed by necessary changes in the subsistence strategies of the pastoral communities living there.¹⁸ In parallel, a bronze trade network formed in the vast region from Scandinavia through the Urals to the Altai-Sayan Mountains, and the Seima-Turbino transcultural phenomenon emerged (Fig. 7), facilitating the spread of tin and bronze artefacts (e.g., weapons) from the Altai region to Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. Shortly after that, Uralic people got in contact with Indo-Iranians, who practically ran this waterborne trade network, while Uralic tribes managed the practical part of the trade. The dispersal of Uralic-speaking groups to the East and West caused the Uralic protolanguage to diverge.¹⁹

As recent historical genetical research supports this theory, a new consensus has emerged;²⁰ said field can provide further details to enhance the image outlined in this and previous episodes in the prehistory of Uralic-speaking peoples.

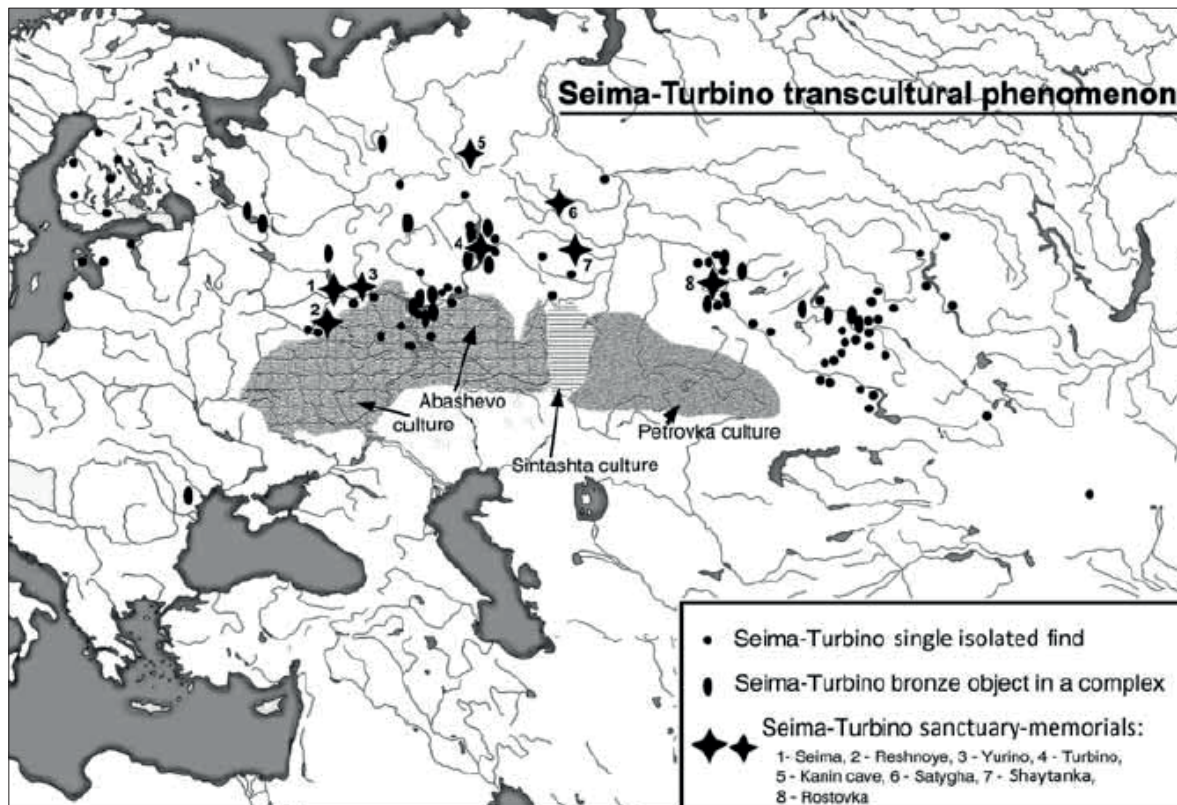


Fig. 7. Distribution of the artefacts of the Seima-Turbino transcultural phenomenon (after [CHERNYKH 2012](#), 115, Fig. 5).

15 [GRÜNTAL *et al.* 2022](#).

16 [PARPOLA 2012](#); [PARPOLA 2022](#).

17 [GRÜNTAL *et al.* 2022](#).

18 [GRÜNTAL *et al.* 2022](#), 498.

19 [GRÜNTAL *et al.* 2022](#), 498–500.

20 E.g., [NÉMETH – VIGH 2021](#).

Results of the dissertation

Research on the prehistory of Uralic-speaking peoples has evolved a lot; this tendency has become more and more significant in the past few years. When I started to work on my dissertation, one of my main intents was to build fundamentally on linguistic palaeontology, as I wanted to test this method using palaeoecological data. Linguistic palaeontology and its methods have faced constant scepticism in the past seventeen years.²¹ Péter Hajdú used etymological reconstructions of the spruce, the fir, and the Siberian pine to outline the geographic position of the Uralic homeland, as well as these with larch and elm to locate the following Fenno-Ugric homeland.²² As new etymological research has revealed, only the Siberian pine and the bird cherry can be used to narrow down the location of the Uralic homeland to the southern parts of Western Siberia.²³ Previously, I agreed with applying this method, but based on current investigations, I had to realise that it is unsuitable for research on the prehistory of Uralic-speaking peoples²⁴ because a survey of the palaeoecological data from northern Eurasia from the Late Glacial to the end of the Atlantic period has revealed that the above-mentioned tree species cannot determine the place of the Uralic and Fenno-Ugric homeland. Hopefully, a new approach will emerge, making linguistic palaeontology useful again for this research. The method cannot be used to determine the chronological framework of the Proto-Uralic culture either. The part related to material culture in the reconstructed vocabulary points to before the Proto-Uralic period, i.e. before the time marked by the Indo-Iranian loanwords in the Proto-Uralic vocabulary. Without linguistic palaeontology, only the characteristics of the Uralic languages can provide useful information about the origins of the Uralic language family, the cradle of which was certainly somewhere in Asia but cannot be located more precisely.

In the meantime, historical genetics provided valuable information about the origin of the Uralic language family. It is well known that the Uralic-speaking peoples are connected with haplogroup N,²⁵ also present in several populations (Yukaghirs, Chukches, and Altaic-speaking peoples) in Middle and Eastern Siberia.²⁶ In contrast, matrilinear lineages are connected to neighbouring peoples and cannot tell anything about the genetic origins of Uralic-speaking peoples. Recent genetic results indicate that the disintegration of the Proto-Uralic language into subgroups happened ca. 4,200 years ago, parallel to the ‘4.2 ka event’ and the emergence of the Seima-Turbino transcultural phenomenon (Fig. 8).²⁷ The Indo-Iranian loanwords in Uralic languages also support this hypothesis.²⁸ Trade was financed by Indo-Iranian-speaking groups, while Uralic-speaking groups managed the practical side (mining, trading, etc.).²⁹ By the chain model by Tapani Salminen about the taxonomy of the Uralic language family, the expansion of the trade network was perfectly in sync with the spread of the Uralic languages in Northern Eurasia (Fig. 9).

Even historical linguistics provided new and interesting details about the Uralic homeland, and historical genetics is becoming an increasingly important part of research. I might highlight the linguistic

21 See e.g., GRÜNTAL *et al.* 2022 for a small-scale case study.

22 HAJDÚ 1964, 123.

23 AIKIO 2022, 23; GRÜNTAL *et al.* 2022, 497.

24 VIGH 2019; VIGH 2021.

25 Currently, the proportion of haplogroup N is quite low in Hungarians and in Selkups, but for a historical reason; see ROOTSI *et al.* 2007; PAMJAV *et al.* 2016, 147–163; TAMBETS *et al.* 2018; NÉMETH – VIGH 2021, 23 for details.

26 PAMJAV *et al.* 2016, 82; NÉMETH – VIGH 2021, 38.

27 NÉMETH – VIGH 2021, 42, Tab. 2.

28 For the question of the Indo-Iranian loanwords, see HOLOPAINEN 2019.

29 GRÜNTAL *et al.* 2022, 500.

Marker – Marker	M _k	TMRCa	Feltételezett nyelvi kapcsolat – Assumed linguistic affiliation
P43	8,7	4,6	Paleoszibériai – Paleosiberian
Z4863	8,1	7,6	Uráli – uralic
Z4863>>Y9022	7,6	4,0	Permi – Permic, Mari, Mordvin – Mordva
Z4863>>Z1974	6,6	6,3	Balti-finn, Ugor – Ugric, Szamojéd – Samoyed, Altaji, Csukcs – Chukchi, Jukagír – Yukaghir, Mari, Mordvin – Mordva
P43>>VL67>>B478	4,6	3,4	Szamojéd – Samoyed, Altaji Türk – Turk, Tunguz, ongol
Z4863>>Z1974>>L1026	5,1	4,7	Balti-finn, Ugor – Ugric, Mari, Mordvin – Mordva, Altaji, Csukcs – Chukchi, Eszkimó – Eskimo, Korják – Koryak
Z4863>>Z1974>>L1026>>B197>>B202	4,8	2,6	Csukcs, Eszkimó – Eskimo, Korják – Koryak
Z4863>>Z1974>>L1026>>B197>>F4205	4,6	2,3	Burját – Buryat, avar, Mongol, Türk – Turk
Z4863>>Z1974>>L1026>>VL29	4,1	3,6	Balti-finn, Mari, Szamojéd – Samoyed
Z4863>>Z1974>>L1026>>Z1936	4,7	4,2	Ugor – Ugric, Balti-finn
Z4863>>Z1974>>L1026>>Z1936>>Z1934	4,2	4,1	Karél – Karél, Finn, Számi – Sami, Szamojéd – Samoyed Vepsze – Veps, Karél – Karel,
Z4863>>Z1974>>L1026>>Z1936>>Z1936>>B539	4,1	4,1	Ugor – Ugric
Z4863>>Z1974>>L1026>>Z1936>>B539>>B540>>Y28538	4,1	3,6	Obi-ugor – Ob-Ugric
Z4863>>Z1974>>L1026>>Z1936>>B539>>B540>>L1442	4,1	2,8	Magyar – Hungarian
Z4863>>Z1974>>L1026>>Z1936>>B539>>B545	4,1	2,8	Magyar – Hungarian

M_k: Marker keletkezése (1000 év) – Marker formation (1000 years), TMRCa: legközelebbi közös ús
múltbeli ideje (1000 év) – time to most recent common ancestry (1000 years)

Fig. 8. Formation of N subhaplogroups important in the evolution of Uralic-speaking peoples (after NÉMETH – VIGH 2021, 42, Tab. 2).

theory of Juha Janhunen, whose results correlate with genetic data.³⁰ In the Uralic prehistory, linguistic and genetic data are connected. We can identify the Seima-Turbino transcultural phenomenon as the dispersal of the Uralic languages. By examining the genetic subgroups, one may also reveal connections with other populations. The results provide information about the Asian origin and close connections with other Asian populations of Uralic-speaking peoples. Historical genetics is a means to investigate periods inaccessible for historical-comparative linguistics (e.g., pre-Uralic).

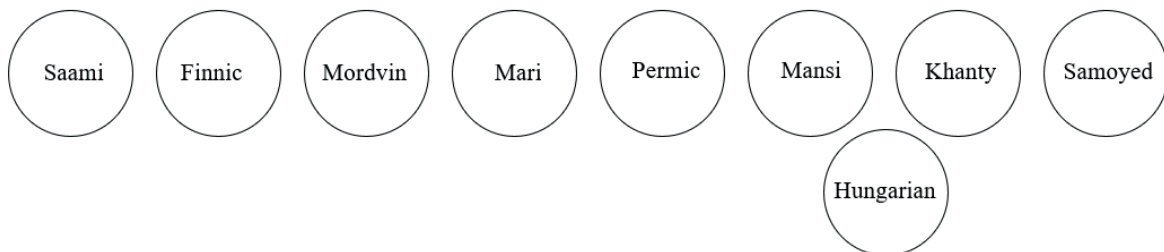


Fig. 9. Taxonomy of the Uralic language family according to Tapani Salminen (after SALMINEN 1999, 20).

30 JANHUNEN 2014a; JANHUNEN 2014b; JANHUNEN 2014c.

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