

THE KURDISH ELM

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Dedicated to Dr. Bruno Schindler
on the occasion of his 80th birthday*

Anyone who has ever taken an interest in the prehistory of the Indo-European nations is sure to have come across the Great Beech Argument: the Indo-Europeans (so it runs) possessed a common word for *Fagus silvatica* L., *bhāgo-, and therefore lived where that tree grew in its wild state, hence to the west of a line from the south-eastern corner of the Baltic to the Crimea. Critics have invariably been disturbed by the fact that the beech is found also beyond the *Buchengrenze*, in north-eastern Turkey, in the Caucasus, and in the mountains fringing the north of Persia.¹ The assumption that it grew once also in some of the valleys joining the mountainous localities where it now subsists is a reasonable one, and is supported by the knowledge that over large parts of Western Asia all wild trees of any size have been exterminated as far as man could reach, sacrificed to the need for fuel and the activities of the charcoal-burner.

The chief criticism has been directed against the postulate of *bhāgo- as a common Indo-European word; for if (as seemed to be the case) it belonged merely to the European branches of the Indo-European family of nations, its history would be of little or no concern to those who seek to determine the Indo-European *Urheimat*.² That postulate was essentially

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¹ See A. Parsa, *Flore de l'Iran*, iv, p. 1332; H. Sabeti, *Diraxtān-i jangālī-i Irān* [The native trees of Persia], p. 104. These authors quote a number of local names of the beech, among them *rāf* (Gilan, etc.), *ālās*, *ālās* (Tālīs, etc.), *šihar*, *šilar* (Nūr), *mirs* (Mazenderan); none of them even faintly resembles *bhāgo-. The Gilani *rāf*, which has now been adopted as standard Persian, presumably derives from *raḫš* "red" (as does *ālās* which Wollaston gave as the Persian name of the beech in the large edition of his English-Persian dictionary, 1889), cf. *qizilayaj* "red tree" used in Kar-gānrūd, Germ. *Rotbuche*; the variation *r/l*, indicating original *l-*, supports the connection with Skt. *lākṣā*, etc.—Mazenderani *mi(r)s* was mentioned long ago by Melgounof, *ZDMG.*, xxii, 209, but with vague definition.

² The whole card-house would collapse if the Indo-Europeans had failed to distinguish between *Rotbuche* and *Weissbuche* verbally. In relying on the Persian botanists (see preceding annotation) we are guarding against any such confusion. For the hornbeam Sabeti, p. 88, gives three lots of local names: for (a) *Carpinus betulus* L., (b) *Carpinus orientalis* Mill., and (c) *Carpinus* generally (for such dialects as do not possess specific names for the various species). In the third group the Gilani term

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grounded on a Kurdish word, *būz* "elm". Since its vowel plainly failed to agree with that of *bhāgo-, that form was conveniently altered to *bhāuḡo- (with *ablaut* *bhūḡ-), in a spirit of accommodation that militates against conviction. A second defect: that the Kurdish word was the name of the *elm*, was easily smoothed out: in a country devoid of beeches the Kurds are supposed to have transferred the inherited name to some other large tree; one wonders uneasily why they should have dropped the inherited name of the elm simultaneously.³

A curious circumstance is that no one has recorded the Kurdish word either before or after Houtum-Schindler (a military man) noticed it. The numerous professional linguists who have studied the various forms of Kurdish have uniformly passed it by, and it is not listed in any dictionary (including those published by native speakers). This is not said in order to cast doubt on Houtum-Schindler's report; but rather to praise that gifted amateur's power of observation and eye for the important. His entry in full reads:—

būz, M[ukri], eine Art Ulme ohne Früchte; sehr hartes Holz; Schmuck der kurd. Friedhöfe; G[urani], L[uri], Z[angana] *wiz*; der im np. *qarahâyâc* genannte Baum (russ. *wjaz*, J[usti]).

One sees that he noticed the word in as many as four different dialects.

The relationship of *būz* and *wiz* is plain, except for the vowels: original Iranian initial *b-* does not become *w-* in those three dialects; but original *w-* is preserved in them and regularly turns into *b-* in Mukri. Therefore, this word began with *w-* originally and thus cannot be connected with an Indo-European term whose initial was *bh-*. This argument, which is conclusive, has been well put by Nehring,⁴ and one would have thought it unnecessary to resume it, if *būz* did not continue to play its old rôle in the quest for the *Urheimat*.⁵

A proposal to separate *būz* from *wiz* etymologically cannot be seriously entertained in any case. These words are used in adjoining villages for the selfsame species of tree, the rare large tree gracing the local cemeteries and supplying material for the turner's craft. That the tree is an elm is ensured by Houtum-Schindler's expressions. In speaking of an "*Ulme ohne Früchte*"

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deserves notice: *faqjfiy* (Sabeti actually wrote *faqjfiq*, but presumably did not distinguish *q* from *γ*). Since I.-E. *bh* does sometimes appear as *f* in Iranian, and *-g(o)-* (not, of course, *-ḡ(o)-*) normally results in *-γ-* in Persian dialects, it is not impossible that Gilani here continues a form ultimately related to *bhāgo-.—M. Sotoodeh, *Farhang-i Gilaki*, p. 170, has the word (with vague definition), spells it *faq* in Roman, but with *γ* in Persian letters.

³ The situation is thus not parallel to that of *φηγός* in which a previously unknown tree (similar to the beech in having an edible fruit) is involved.

⁴ Schrader-Nehring, *Realexikon*, i, 171 (with full references, here not repeated).

⁵ Cf. P. Thieme, *Die Heimat der indogermanischen Gemeinsprache*, 1953, pp. 15 (with reference to a work by Wissmann, *Name der Buche*, which I have not seen), 30, 32.

he did not mean to announce the discovery of a botanical unicum, but simply echoed the villagers who may have told him *bār nā-dāra* (in Persian), i.e., "it has no fruit (useful to man)". His phrase *eine Art Ulme* suggests that it was not the elm that must have been familiar to him from his home-country; were it otherwise he would just have said *Ulme* or *die Ulme*. This might be taken as indicating that the tree in question was *Ulmus montana* Smith rather than *Ulmus procera* Salisb. (the two principal species of elm in Persia), the *wych elm* rather than the *common elm*; the Persian equivalent supplied by Houtum-Schindler, *qara-ayaf* "black tree",⁶ may denote either (more often the common elm, see Sabeti, pp. 150-52).

There is plentiful information about the elm in the Middle East and many names are recorded for it in many languages. Unlike the beech, it figured as an item in the pharmacopoeia, a circumstance that ensured frequent mention. In literary Persian one reads often of the tree, not because its beauty stimulated the imagination but because its classical name, *nārvan*, provoked the pun-loving poets; for to the casual eye this seems composed of *nār* "pomegranate" and *van* "tree"?—what Persian poet could pass up such a heaven-sent gift? The following verse by Farrukhi is typical:—

tā na-buvaḍ bār-i sipīdār sīb
tā na-buvaḍ nār bar-i nārvan
Tilf poplars bear apples
Till elms bear pomegranates.⁸

We have now cleared the decks to enable us to tackle the central problem posed by *būz*: its long vowel. To account for it is a prime necessity; without a satisfactory answer we cannot be sure that the claimed etymological identity of *būz* with *wiz* is true, and thus cannot remove *būz* from the Great Beech Argument in a conclusive fashion. On the face of it no way leads from *ū* to *ī*, and none from *ī* to *ū*;⁹ nor is there an obvious derivation of both from a third entity. If only Houtum-Schindler had produced the word without the circumflex, there would have been no difficulty; but to attribute negligence or incapacity to him now would be churlish and facile

⁶ This name, as I learned from Dr. MacKenzie, is used also in various Kurdish dialects, partly (*qaradār*) or wholly translated (Soane: *faṣadār*; Sul. *dārafaṣ*; Kurd. *faṣ*=black).

⁷ Western scholars have on occasion been deceived by the seemingly obvious. E.g., Wetzstein, in his edition of Zamakhshari's *Muqaddimatu 'l-Adab*, translated Arab. *dauḥah* as *punica granatum*, because it was glossed *diraxt-i nārvan*; even E. G. Browne, in the translation of the *Tārix-i Tabaristān* p. 16, rendered *biṣe-i nārvan* "elm jungle" by "wild pomegranates". Radloff's remarkable "*Tempel des Lichtes*" should not be forgotten (see F. W. K. Müller, *Uigurica* [i], 52).

⁸ P. Horn, normally so well-instructed, in a singular lapse translated the second half as "*so lange die Orange nicht auf dem Sauerkirschenbaum wächst*" (see his edition of Asadi, preface p. 36).

⁹ The alternation *ū* : *ī* is, of course, common; and so is *ū* : *ī*.

as well. We have to abide by *būz* : *wiz* and to admit that with our present means there is no accounting for the difference: we need additional evidence.

It was only a few years ago that I actually produced that needed new evidence myself, without realizing its relevance to the *būz*-problem. In writing on plant-names that al-Biruni, in his book on drugs, had quoted from unknown or little-known Iranian languages,¹⁰ I chose as an example his names for the elm, and added various related forms to them, gaining this series:—

<i>yuzbe</i> :	Zābulistān
<i>guzm</i> :	eastern Persian, ¹¹ also Samarkand, Sistān
<i>visim</i> :	Talish, Āstārā
<i>vizmodo</i> :	Talishi dialect
<i>vizm</i> :	Ṭārom

to which we add now:—

<i>wiz</i> (= <i>viz</i>):	Gurani, etc.
<i>būz</i> :	Mukri (Central Kurdish).

Evidently, there was an element that followed upon *z* in the word, disappeared in some languages, but in disappearing could leave a lengthened first vowel as a trace of its former existence. That element which could become *m* or *b* or disappear or lengthen a vowel can have been only a consonantic *u*; *būz* thus represents earlier **uizū*, developing through **bizū* and **buzū*.

The word thus contained the rare cluster Ir. *zū*=IE. *ǵū* (or *ǵ'ū*). For that we have a splendid case in the word for "tongue", the Iranian examples of which have been elucidated by E. Benveniste, in a brilliant note devoted to Old Persian *hizānam*.¹² It provides an even wider range of clusters (sometimes split by intrusive vowels), from *zb* (as in Parthian '*zb'n*') and *zm* (Kurd. *zimān*, *azmān*) through *zv* (Sogd., Khvar. *zβ'k*) and *zy* (MPers. '*zw'n*', cf. Zaza *zuwān*)¹³ to *vz* (Oss. *āvzag*), perhaps also *yz* (Gazi etc. *uzūn*), and finally plain *z* (OP. *hizānam*) and *z̄* (Khot. *biṣāa*).

¹⁰ *Mitteliramsch* (= *Handbuch der Orientalistik: Iranistik*), pp. 84-6.

¹¹ *Lexica guzm* (prob. wrongly).

¹² *BSL.*, xvii (1951), 22 sq.; cf. *Asiatica (Festschrift F. Weller)*, 30 sq.

¹³ To explain MPers. '*zw'n*' (supported by Pahlavi '*uzw'n*') as reflecting an antecedent **hizbān* is in my opinion impossible (whether Zāzā *zuwān* Gurani *zūān*, etc. can be so explained it is difficult to say). Yet it would be unnatural to claim differing original forms for '*zw'n*' and e.g. Parth. '*zb'n*', **hizuyānam* here and **hizyānam* there. Why then should we assume that Ir. *zy* (and *sy*) should necessarily become either *zβ* (*sp*) or *z* Khot. *z̄* (s Khot. *f* Wakhi *f*) and exclude the possibility of other developments? Even Sogdian *zβ* is not accountable to previous *zb*, because that would have resulted in *zp*. Parthian '*zw'n*' "iron" is a case in point. The modern Persian *sf*=*sp* seems to be confined to words with original *sy*: *safid*, *sifand*, *isfarūd*, *isfarāyin*, etc. (barring a few arabicized forms) and could be attributed to the influence of a dialect in which *sy* resulted directly in *sf* (parallel with *zβ* from *zy*).

If we can say with some assurance that the word for "elm" began with **uizy-* in Old Iranian, we cannot safely determine its final: it may have been **uizya-* (or **uizyā-*), or **uizy-* may have been the antesonantic form of **uizu-* (or **uizū-*). Who can doubt now that Justi recognized the truth when at first sight he compared Houtum-Schindler's Kurdish words with Russian *v'az* (ваз) "elm"? Further related words from various Indo-European languages are listed by Pokorny, *Etym. Wb.*, 1177 under 'uīng- und ueig- (uig-?) Ulme'.¹⁴ In short, the English relative of Mukri *būx* "elm" (perhaps "wych elm") is *wych* (elm), not *beech*; which is not very surprising.

ADDENDUM. A student of mine at Berkeley tells me that she has learned from her husband, who hails from *Khunsār* (in Central Persia), that the tree known to Persians as *nārvan* is called *vizvā* in his dialect. This new form is perfectly consonant with the derivation proposed above.

¹⁴ Iranian would tolerate the assumption of a nasal in the first syllable; the word for "tongue" should be compared once again.