

Uralic spread, Seima-Turbino and flower pots

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The seminal paper by Grünthal et al. (2022) advances a new scenario of Proto-Uralic disintegration and spread. They suggest a rapid spread of Uralic languages through Common Uralic, a dialect continuum whose breakup formed the Finno-Ugric language families. They suggest that the vector for Uralic spread was the Seima-Turbino trading network (ST), within which the Uralic languages were used as lingua franca. The key hypothesis in the Seima-Turbino scenario is that the trade network would have consisted of representatives of different Eurasian cultural groups, for whom a common language would have been necessary. Timing of the disintegration of Proto-Uralic would have taken place during the ST, which was an intensive but short-lasting period about 4200-3800 years ago.

The scenario entails multiple testable hypotheses, e.g. 1) Do studies replicating the dating of the Uralic family support the idea of rapid spread and division of a dialect continuum about 4000 years ago? 2) Would genetical studies support the idea that the participants of ST trading network were from different origins - so that they would have needed to acquire a common language? 3) What kind of legacy we assume to see in the language structure in the case that it spread as lingua franca, as a language spoken by adult learners or as L2 language?

In this presentation I summarise a review paper by Vesakoski, Salmela and Piezonka (2025) and a phylolinguistic paper by Vesakoski, Tresoldi, de Heer, Soosaar, Syrjänen & Dunn (submitted ms), in order to comment on the above mentioned questions from archaeological, archaeogenetic and linguistic points of view. In short, phylogenetic studies support the rapid spread about 4000 years ago and hint for de-complexification of the language structure. The hypothesis of Uralic languages as this lingua franca is supported by the fact that the ancient DNA results of individuals buried near the Altai Mountains in the Seima-Turbino context show a very diverse genetic background - individuals or families from different regions would have specifically needed a common language.

We putatively identified a new communication space that can be visualized based on the archaeological material of the Altai and Saian mountains, the common characteristic of which can be considered "flower pot-shaped" pottery (Piezonka et al. 2024). This network could be called the "flowerpot complex". However, existence of such complex necessitates further archaeological studies.

In our scenario the characteristic Seima-Turbino bronze objects would have originated in the south of the area of this flowerpot complex, and that it was this flowerpot complex that would have been the intermediary matrix of Seima-Turbino in general. This scenario supports the suggestion that the original homeland of the Uralic languages would have been in the foothills of the Sayan Mountains (Peyrot 2019, Bjørn 2022), in which case the Samoyedic languages would have remained there (Janhunen 2022), whereas Common Uralic would have spread westward within the Seima-Turbino contact network. The region of Western Siberia would instead have been a secondary homeland for the Finno-Ugric languages, while the "bend of the Volga" would have been a tertiary homeland for the "Western Uralic languages". Each angle of this scenario – and coupling is with any genetic ancestries – can and should be further tested within respective disciplines.

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