The etymology of the hydronym Syas

Alexander Akulov
independent scholar; Saint Petersburg, Russia; e-mail: aynu@inbox.ru

Abstract

The hydronym of Syas has no well-proved etymology. It is supposed that the hydronym originated from Finnic roots: *sääski* (or *sääksi*) that means "osprey" or "mosquito". Both versions look like folk etymologies: in the territory of the Leningrad region any river can be named "Mosquito river"; the second version looks too poetic to be realistic. The hydronym Syas correlates well with Southern Ket *śaś* "rivers" and Arin *sat* "river", and thus the hydronym could have originated from the language of so-called Paja Ul De'ŋ. The hydronym could be borrowed through the Sami language: in Kildin Sami there is the word *čad'z'* – "water" that has no Uralic etymology, but can be correlated with Southern Ket *śaś* "rivers". Yet in the 13th century there was a compact Sami population on the southern shore of Lake Ladoga not far from the Syas river.

Keywords: Syas river; Paja Ul De'ŋ; Sami language; substrate hydronyms

1. Introduction to the problem

Not far from Saint Petersburg on the southern shore of Lake Ladoga there is a river named Syas (see fig. 1).
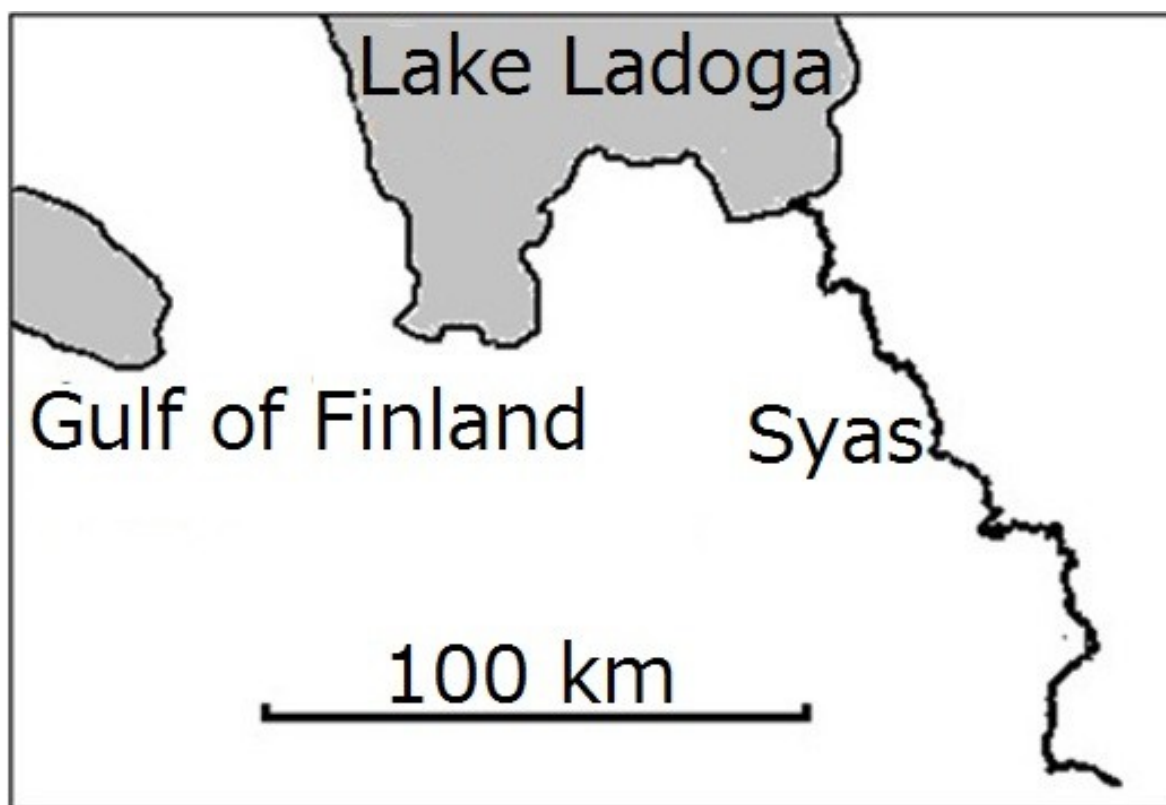

Fig. 1. Location of Syas river (map drawn by the author)

The hydronym of Syas has no well-proved etymology. However, there are two versions of origin this word from Finnic roots.

According to the first version Syas originated from Karelian-Finnish root *sääski* (or *sääksi*) that means "osprey". According to another version in some Finnic languages *sääski/sääksi* means "mosquito" (Popov 1981: 68).

And thus, it is possible to say that Syas river means "Osprey river" or "Mosquito river".

However, I am to note that both these versions look like folk etymologies. In the territory of the Leningrad region any river can be named "Mosquito river" actually.

As for the second version "Osprey river", it looks too much poetic to be realistic, i.e.: ethnic group practicing fishing as one of the main activities usually gave rivers much more utilitarian names (names describing characteristic features of rivers), for instance: "Big river", "Fast river" and so on.

And another critical point is about the fact that there is a presupposition to trace almost all vague toponyms of the North-West of Russia to some roots of Finnic languages by default. Linguists and historians usually suppose that Finno-Ugric people have lived upon the East European plain from ~~Mesozoic~~ Mesolithic period. Actually, Finno-Ugric people were not the earliest modern-type inhabitants of the East European plain. It is possible to speak about Finno-Ugric people on the East-European plain only after the decay of Proto-Uralic that took place about 3000 BCE (Janhunen 2009), the Pit-Comb ware had already existed for a long time before the decay of the Proto-Uralic language (it existed in $6^{th} – 2^{nd}$ millennia BCE).

2. An interpretation of the hydronym Syas through the language of Paja Ul De'ŋ

The hydronym Syas looks much like Southern Ket *śaś* "rivers" and Arin *sat* "river" (see Yenisseian etymology "river"). And thus, it is possible to say that Syas means simply "river" since it is a relatively large river in this area (see fig. 2).

And it is possible to say that this hydronym Syas originated from the language of so-called Paja Ul De'ŋ [padʒaul'de'ŋ].

Paja Ul De'ŋ – "The People of Big Water" is a conventional name of people who lived in the Neolithic period on the shores of the Littorina Sea[1] and Lake Ladoga. As far as the whole of their life was closely connected with the Littorina Sea and Lake Ladoga, they can be named "The People of Big water" in their hypothetical reconstructed language this name could sound like the following: Paja Ul De'ŋ (Akulov 2020a).

It is possible to say that these people spoke a language that was pretty close to Yeniseian languages, but also had many Hattic and Northwest Caucasian features; it is possible to say that the language of Paja Ul De'ŋ was a juncture between Yeniseian languages on one hand and Northwest Caucasian and Hattic languages on the other hand (Akulov 2020b).

However, it is possible to suppose that the hydronyms Syas was borrowed not directly from the language of Paja Ul De'ŋ, but through a certain Sami dialect.

Sami were the first Finno-Ugrian people who came to the east European plain at the end of the Neolithic period. And it is supposed that at the end of the Neolithic period ancient Sami had

---

[1] Littorina Sea is a geological stage of Baltic Sea that existed in 5500 – 2000 BCE.

direct and long contacts with people who lived in the Neolithic period on the shores of the Littorina Sea and Lake Ladoga.

And also it is important to note that in ancient times Sami occupied much larger territories than in modern history.

Yet in 12th – 13th centuries there was a compact Sami population on the southern shore of Lake Ladoga around Lopskii pogost[2] (see fig. 3); Sami were named *Lop'* in medieval Russia, so Lopskii pogost means "Sami pogost" (for more details see Kirpichnikov 1988: 74).

Fig. 2. A view of Syas river near its estuary (photo taken by the author)

In the Kildin dialect of Sami there are some words that are supposed to have originated from the language of Paja Ul De'ŋ, i.e.: these words have no trustworthy Uralic etymologies and any other etymologies at all, but can be interpreted through languages belonging to the Western branch of Ainu-Minoan stock, i.e.: through Yeniseian languages, West Caucasian languages, and Hattic language (Akulov 2020b). And one of such words in Kildin Sami is the word *čad'z'* – "water" that correlates with Southern Ket *śaś* "rivers" and Arin *sat* "river" (Akulov 2020a: 24) and can be connected with this hydronym Syas.

---

[2] *Pogosts* were special settlements in medieval Russia: initially *pogosts* were created for collecting tribute from depending tribes, later *pogosts* converted into administrative centers for the ruling of depending territories.

The fact that the area of compact Sami population in the southern shore of Lake Ladoga is relatively close to the river Syas leads to the conclusion that in the early medieval period and in preceding periods Sami could live on the river Syas also and could contact there with the Paja Ul Deʾŋ and could borrow from them the name of the river.
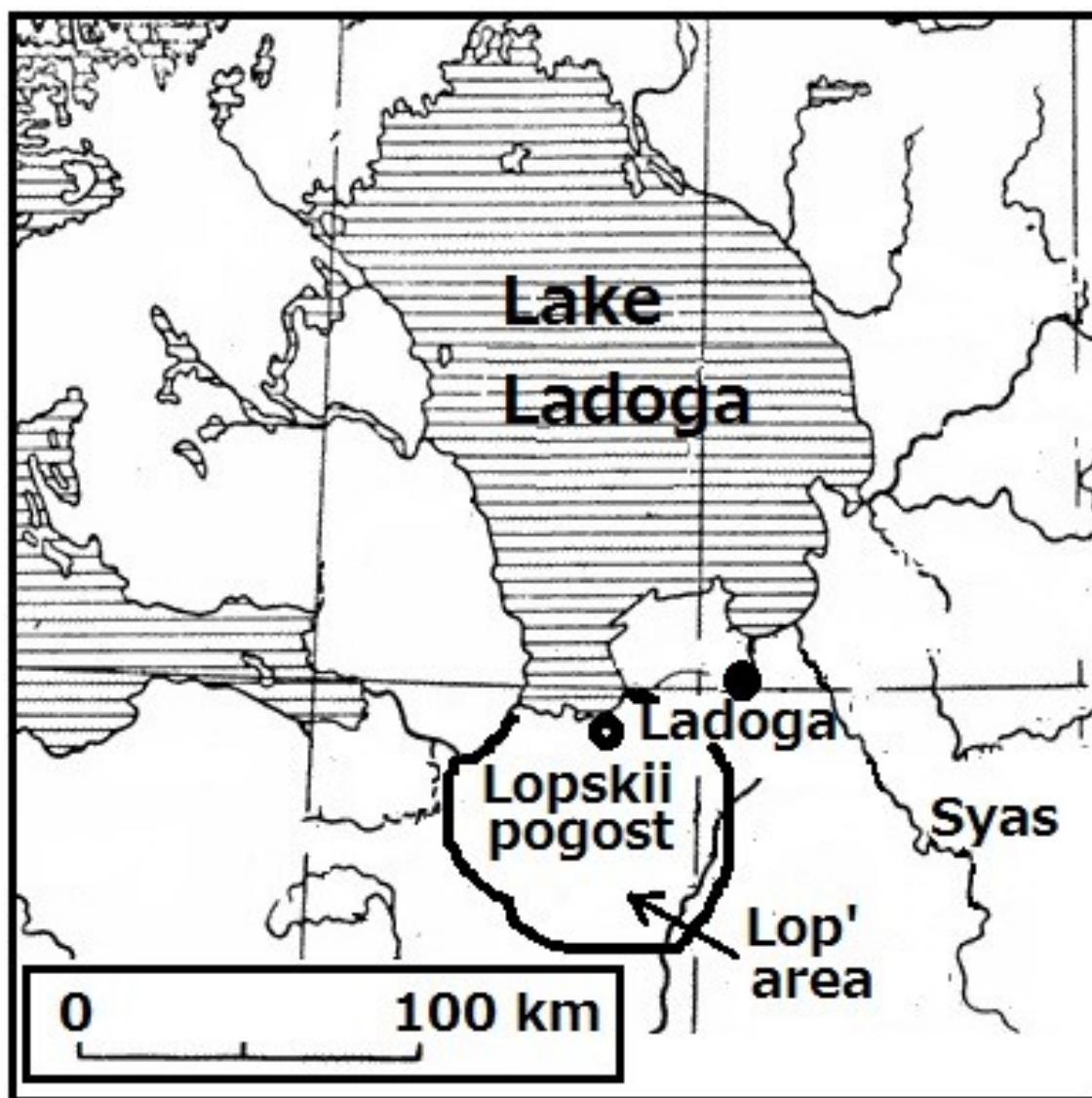

Fig. 3. The territory of compact Sami population on the southern shore of Lake Ladoga (Lopʾ area) according to Kirpichinikov (original image source – Kirpichnikov 1988: 68)

References

Akulov A. 2020a. Paja ul deʾŋ. *Cultural Anthropology and Ethnosemiotics*, Vol. 6, N 2; pp.: 17 – 29

Akulov A. 2020b. Substrate lexis of Kildin Sami interpreted through languages belonging to the Western branch of the Ainu-Minoan stock: some notes on the language of Paja ul deʾŋ. *Cultural Anthropology and Ethnosemiotics*, Vol. 6, N 3; pp.: 1 – 7

Janhunen J. 2009. Proto-Uralic – what, where, and when? *Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 258; pp.: 57 – 78

Kirpichnikov A. N. 1988. Ladoga i Ladozhskaya zemlya VIII – XIII vv. (Ladoga and Ladoga region of VIII – XIII centuries), in Dubov I. V. (ed.) *Istoriko-arkheologicheskoe izuechenie Drevnei Rusi: Itogi I problem. Slavyano-russkie drevnosti. Vypusk I* (Historical-archaeological studies of Ancient Rus: results and problems. Slavic-Russian antiquities. Issue I). Leningrad State University Publishing, Leningrad; pp.: 38 – 79

Popov A. I. 1981. *Sledy vremen minuvshikh. Iz istorii geograficheskikh nazvanii Lelingradskoi, Pskovskoi I Novgorodskoi oblastei* (The traces of bygone times. From the history of place names of Leningrad, Pskov and Novgorod regions). Nauka, Leningrad

Yenisseian etymology "river" https://starling.rinet.ru/cgi-bin/response.cgi?root=config&morpho=0&basename=%5Cdata%5Cyenisey%5Cyenet&first=1&off=&text_proto=&method_proto=substring&ic_proto=on&text_meaning=river&method_meaning=substring&ic_meaning=on&text_ket=&method_ket=substring&ic_ket=on&text_sym=&method_sym=substring&ic_sym=on&text_kot=&method_kot=substring&ic_kot=on&text_ari=&method_ari=substring&ic_ari=on&text_pum=&method_pum=substring&ic_pum=on&text_notes=&method_notes=substring&ic_notes=on&text_any=&method_any=substring&sort=proto&ic_any=on – accessed February 2021