

Obituarium / Obituary

In memoriam Alexander Vovin (1961–2022)

Alexander Vovin (Aleksander Vladimirovich Vovin) was born in Saint Petersburg (then Leningrad) on 27 January 1961. His way to high education and scholarly career was not an easy one. Raised by his mother and her family without a father, he could enrol in the university after a few trials because of his background marked by partial Jewish origin and his maternal grandfather's past in a labour camp. He finally became a student of the Department of Structural and Applied Linguistics at Saint Petersburg (then Leningrad) University where he could study Japanese and met some renowned professors such as Leonard Herzenberg (Gertsenberg) and Sergey Yakhontov. After graduating from the university in 1983, he started working at the Institute of Oriental Studies, the Leningrad Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, now the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts. He began a doctoral programme at this institute and completed it defending his PhD thesis devoted to Classical Japanese in 1987. Despite the policy of *perestroika* 'reconstruction' and *glasnost* 'openness' declared after 1985 in the Soviet Union, he did not get permission to visit Japan and other countries of his interest in East Asia. Therefore, he decided to escape from the Soviet Union to the USA which took place in 1990. First he obtained the position of assistant professor at the University of Michigan (1990–1994), then Miami University (1994–1995), and lastly the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (1995–1997). Subsequently, he held the position of professor at this university until 2014. The American period of his scholarly career, interrupted by trips to East Asia and Western Europe, ended in 2014 when he moved to France to take the position of professor at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) and the director of the Centre de Recherches Linguistiques sur l'Asie Orientale, a centre based on two research institutes and the EHESS where he worked till his untimely death.



Alexander Vovin's main professional interest was Japanese, but he also worked on many other languages such as Korean, Ainu, Tibetan, Mongolic, Tungusic and Turkic. He was interested in many other languages which he started learning at school and the university. His books and articles focused on such matters as historical linguistics, comparative linguistics, etymology, grammar, and writing systems. Initially, he was a supporter of the Altaic hypothesis, but from the 2000s on, he broke with it and published several studies against this hypothesis. However, even after this had happened, he sometimes referred to Altaic, e.g. calling the language deciphered on the Khüis Tolgoi inscription "the first 'Altaic'-type language attested in the steppe" (Vovin 2018: 312). Among his important works there are editions and translations of Classical Japanese literature and the following monographs: *A reconstruction of Proto-Ainu* (1993), *A reference grammar of Classical Japanese prose* (2003), *A descriptive and comparative grammar of Western Old Japanese* in two volumes (2005, 2009, second edition 2011), and *Koreo-Japonica: A re-evaluation of a common genetic origin* (2010).

According to some researchers and the author himself, one of his most important achievements was the reading and interpretation of the texts in Brāhmī script of the Khüis Tolgoi and the Bugut stelae in Mongolia: *An interpretation of the Khüis Tolgoi inscription* (2018) and *Groping in the dark: The first attempt to interpret the Bugut Brāhmī inscription* (2019), respectively. A further article by Vovin is *A sketch of the earliest Mongolic language: The Brāhmī Bugut and Khüis Tolgoi inscriptions* (2019). Initially, Vovin called this language Para-Mongolic and then, following Étienne de la Vaissière, Ruan-ruan. This discovery was possible due to the advanced 3D-photography, Pieter Maue's transliteration of the Brāhmī texts, and Vovin's collaboration with Étienne de la Vaissière and Mehmet Ölmez. Thanks to this achievement, we have now Mongolic texts dated to the 6th and 7th centuries from the territory of the first Türk Kaghanate which are a century older than Turkic runic inscriptions and older by more than six hundred years than the earliest Mongol text from the 13th century hitherto known.

Another interesting attempt at the interpretation of an old Xiong-nu title in Chinese texts is *Two newly found Xiōng-nú inscriptions and their significance for the early linguistic history of Central Asia* (2020). In this paper, Vovin argues that the reading *chányú* of a Xiong-nu leader is wrong and it should be *darhwa* 'supreme ruler', as compared to Mongolic *darqan* and Turkic *tarqan*.

Alexander Vovin did a lot of editorial work. He was the editor-in-chief of the series *Languages of Asia* at Brill in which twenty-five volumes appeared between 2007 and 2021. In 2019, he founded an *International Journal of Eurasian Linguistics*, also at Brill.

His bibliography in Kupchik (2021: xv–xxix) includes nineteen monographs, one hundred and fourteen articles and reports in journals and edited volumes, and fourteen reviews. Alexander Vovin's first articles were published in Russian in Russia where he lived and worked. From 1992 onwards, he published mostly in English.

In 2021, Alexander Vovin celebrated his 60th birthday. His colleagues paid homage to him with a Festschrift called *Studies in Asian historical linguistics, philology and*

beyond, edited by John Kupchik, José Andrés Alonso de la Fuente and Marc Hideo Miyake, and published by Brill.

From 2018 on, Alexander Vovin headed an ERC project “An Etymological Dictionary of the Japonic Languages” which was planned to be completed by 30 June 2025. Hopefully, this dictionary will be finished by the remaining project participants, among whom there is a Polish researcher from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

Alexander Vovin was elected as a member of the Academia Europaea, the Section of the Classic and Oriental Studies, and a member of the Centre de Recherches sur le Japon (CRJ). In 2015, he was awarded the fifth National Institute for Humanities prize for Japanese Studies in Japan.

Alexander Vovin passed away on 8 April 2022. Shortly before his death, he said farewell to his friends. Here is a citation from his letter: “It looks like it is time to say goodbye. Please accept my utmost gratitude for your help, support, and friendship you have provided me and my family. I was diagnosed with cancer last spring, and since then we have tried our best to fight it, but nature brings an end to everyone, and mine is close.”

Alexander Vovin was very competent in many East and Central Asian languages, linguistics, and all aspects of philology. For his friends he was Sasha, always helpful and cheerful, although – as some of his reviews demonstrate – he could be very critical. Alexander Vovin esteemed senior colleagues, but believed and trusted in young scholars and tried to encourage them to various initiatives. He had friends in many countries and he also collaborated with some scholars at Polish universities in Kraków, Toruń and Poznań. His premature death is a great loss to Oriental studies.

References

- Kupchik John, ‘Biography of Alexander Vovin’, in: *Studies in Asian historical linguistics, philology and beyond*, eds. John Kupchik, José Andrés Alonso de la Fuente and Marc Hideo Miyake, Brill, Leiden 2021, pp. xv–xxix.
- Vovin Alexander, ‘An interpretation of the Khüis Tolgoi inscription’, *Journal Asiatique* 306/2 (2018), pp. 303–313.

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