

Addenda et corrigenda to S. Poulsen (2025)

“Loanwords and Linguistic Phylogenetics: **pelekū*- ‘axe’ and *(H)a(i)ḡ- ‘goat’”, *Transactions of the Philological Society* 123(1). 116-136.

(See also <https://zenodo.org/records/15075920> [zenodo.org])

1. Introduction

In the days following the initial publication of Poulsen (2025) I received valuable comments and extra information I wish I had known or realised earlier. These new insights on the difficulty of reconstructing PIr. **ajā*- ‘goat’ and the reconstruction of “hissing-hushing” affricates in Caucasian languages call for some adjustments to be made to the conclusions on the analyses of the word for ‘goat’ in the original article. The overall conclusions of the paper remain the same.

2. Iranian **ajā*- as a source of Tocharian **asə*

In an email on the date of the publication (January 27, 2025), Chams Benoît Bernard made me aware of Bernard 2024 (review of Carling & Pinault (2023)), in which he comments on the proposed Iranian origin of Proto-Tocharian **asə* ‘goat’, allegedly borrowed from Iranian **ajā*-. Bernard (2024: 293) notes that the attestations of Iranian *az*- ‘goat’ are all “difficult to find, rare, or *hapax legomena*”, and that they are not attested in any Middle Iranian language which was in contact with Tocharian. Had the simplex **ajā*- been borrowed into Tocharian, it would probably have been rendered as ***etse* (if from “Old Steppe Iranian” or ***āso* or the like if through Khotanese).

The attestations of **ajā*- are certainly rare or difficult. Nevertheless, Bailey (1979: 6) has suggested that it survives in the Khotanese compound *aysdām* ‘a commodity’ – if he is correct in tracing this back to PIr. **Haġa-dānā*- <PIr. **Haġa-d^haHnaH*- ‘goat + grain’ (Palmér 2024: 42). This is unlikely. Although PIr. *(H)*aj*- would yield Khot. *az*- <*ays*>, the etymology is doubtful: There is nothing forcing a semantic connection of Khot. *aysdām* and the unclear Tumshuqese *eźdana kalasta* ‘(leather?) vessel or bag for food (grain?)’ with the potentially non-existing PIr. **aj*- (Rastorgueva & Edel’man 2000: 293).

Although the Iranian reflexes of **(H)aj-* ‘goat’ are difficult, there is certainly basis for reconstructing **(H)ij-* ‘skin-, leather’ for Proto-Iranian on the basis of YAv. *īzaena-*, Khot. *häysa-* ‘skin, hide’, Balochi *hīz* ‘leather churn’ and Yidgha *īze, yiḡya* ‘goatskin-bag used for carrying sour milk’ (Bernard 2023: 63). I remain sceptical towards the connection between the stem **(H)ij-* denoting ‘leather’, ‘skin’, ‘hide’ and derived products and the zoonym **(H)aiḡ-* found in Greek and Armenian because **(H)aiḡ-* is otherwise never attested in the zero grade outside this Iranian etymon.

That said, it is difficult to avoid the Iranian cognates of Ved. *ajīna-* ‘fur of a black antelope or tiger’ (AV+), although there are few or no traces of the simplex **Haḡa-* ‘goat’. YAv. *azina-uuaṇt-* ‘wearing a hide’ and Wakhi *yazn* ‘inflated skin, mussuck (water bag made of leather)’ certainly point to the existence of this derivative denoting ‘hide’ in Proto-Iranian (Palmér 2024: 44, esp. n. 49). These forms are relevant to the discussion of the hypothesis that the ancestor of Lith. *ožinis* was borrowed from Iranian (ALEW²: 830). This loan can, as stated (Poulsen 2025: 12), only be considered valid if the etymon was preserved in the potential donor language. It seems likely that this derivative was preserved in Proto-Iranian. It remains peculiar that an Iranian loan would show Winter’s law in Balto-Slavic.

In conclusion, while the simplex **aja-* ‘goat’ cannot be reconstructed for Proto-Iranian on the basis of certain attestations, **ajina-* ‘leather, hide’ which seems to be a derivative of it can.

3. Caucasian corrections

In an email (January 30, 2025), Samopriya Basu pointed me to valuable publications and provided me with an excellent commentary on the Caucasian reconstructions. The Caucasian reconstructions could certainly have benefitted from more context. As briefly noted, Nikolayev & Starostin (1994) advocate for the existence of North-Caucasian, the proposed “macro-family” entailing Northeast Caucasian (Nakh-Daghestani) and Northwest Caucasian (West Caucasian or Abkhaz-Adyghe). It remains highly disputed. However, not only the theory, but the entire dictionary by Nikolayev & Starostin have been heavily criticised (e.g. Schulze 1997; Nichols 2003; but see also Bengtson & Leschber 2022). In Figure 1 below, I have given the main branches of the proposed “macro-family” for readers who – like myself – are not specialists in Caucasian linguistic history.

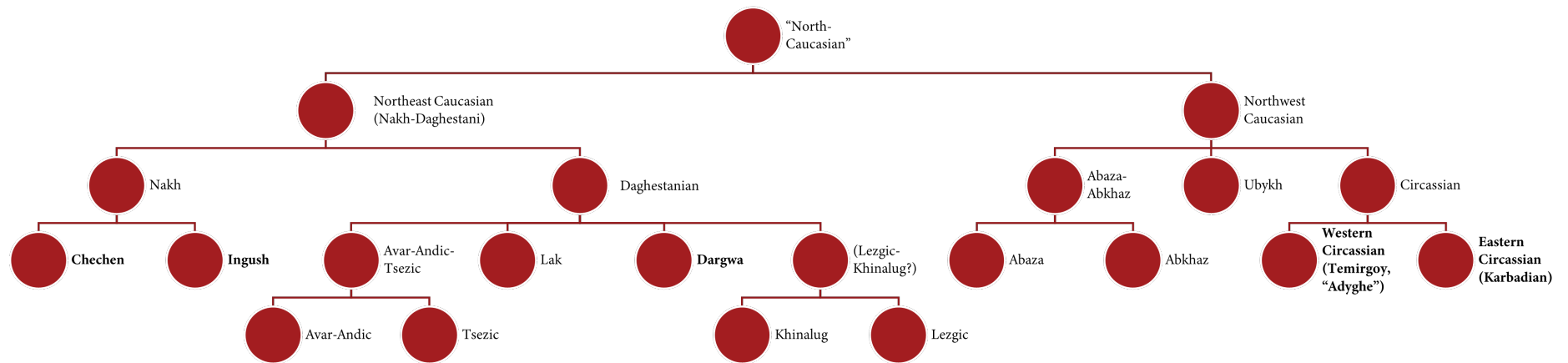


Figure 1. Family tree connecting the Northeast and Northwest Caucasian branches with their major descendants (Nichols 2003: 207; Ganenkov & Maisak 2021: 86; Arkadiev & Lander 2021: 368). The branches and languages from which there is evidence for the discussed cognate are marked bold.

3.1. North and Northeast Caucasian

The reconstruction $*ʔējźwē$ provided for Proto-North-Caucasian by Nikolayev & Starostin (1994: 245) is problematic beyond the fact that the protolanguage possibly never existed at all, because it rests on problematic assumptions. PNC $*ʔējźwē$ is defended by the following comment, but each point should be criticized:

Medial $*-j-$ is postulated to account for the development $*-ź- > *-st-$ in PN, while $*-w-$ is reflected as $*-b-$ in PN and as labialisation in PWC. (Nikolayev & Starostin 1994: 245)

First, no Nakh-Daghestani languages “preserve” the “hissing-hushing (= palatalized)” affricates, making the PND form $*HējźV$ problematic from an internally Nakh-Daghestani point of view. Basu further informs me that the peculiar “hissing-hushing” sibilants and affricates are, in fact, not palatalised in the West Caucasian languages where they belong. They are rather produced with a distinct tongue-shape whereby the apex rests against the alveoles of the lower teeth (like [z̥]), and the sides of the tongue are pressed against the upper molars (like [ʒ]), giving a lamino-postalveolar fricative with no sublingual space ([z̥]) (Ladefoged & Maddieson 1996: 191; Catford 1977: 290). This makes palatalisation impossible. They may, however, be slightly pharyngealised (Beguš 2021: 704).

Second, PNC $*ź$ does not even yield “hissing-hushing” affricates anywhere in the table of sound correspondences provided by the authors, and PNC (as well as PND) $*źw$ yield PN $*ź$, not $*st$ as in this cognate (Nikolayev & Starostin 1994: 50). Third, it is left unsaid why the medial $*j$ is relevant for the proposed change of PND $*źw > PN *st$. Fourth, the labial $*w$ is reconstructed on the basis of the $*b$ in Proto-Nakh $*ʔābst$ (Chechen *awst*, Ingush *ɔsti*), but as we have just established, PND $*źw$ is said to yield PN $*ź$ in one account, $*st$ in another, but somehow, it also yields $*bst$ in this reconstruction. Notably, the intermediate form, PND $*HējźV$, is reconstructed without the labial, which means it would have to reappear in Proto-Nakh by Nikolayev & Starostin’s own account.

To make matters worse, Schulze (2014: 260) argues that the entire *Wortsippe* of Dargwa $ʔeža$ (Itsari *ečʔa*, Kubachi *ičʔa*, Kaytak and Muiiri *ʔičʔa*) is borrowed from a Turkic form $*ička$. Azeri and Kipchak have *keči*, but Kumyk *ečki* and Nogai *eški* show the reverse order of the medial consonants which would be the order in the proposed donor language. However, further cognates than the ones given by Schulze in the Dargwa branch (e.g. Akusha *ʔeža*, *ʔežn-*; Urakhi *ʔidža*; Chirag *ʔàčʔa*) allow for a reconstruction of a Proto-Dargwa form $*ʔedźòm(nə)$ (Mudrak 2016: 234–5),¹ which means that the Turkic loan would have to be suspiciously early and before

¹ $*ežòm(nə) \sim *ežòm(nə)$ in the original spelling. According to Basu, the medial affricate is probably geminate $*dźz$, but neither palatalised, labialised nor “hissing-hushing”.

the break-up of the Dargwa branch. If it is a loan, the Daghestani comparanda are irrelevant for the reconstruction of Proto-Nakh-Daghestani.

It should further be noted that the division of the Nakh-Daghestani family into the two major branches, Nakh and Daghestanian, which is usually assumed (Nichols 2003: 207), is debated (Ganenkov & Maisak 2021: 86; Schulze 2017: 108).

3.2. Northwest Caucasian

In the comment above, Nikolayev & Starostin further claim that the **w* reconstructed for “PNC” is preserved as labialisation in Proto-West-Caucasian **ačˀˀwá*. However, the cognates quoted for this etymon do not show labialization: “Adyghe” *āča* and Kabardian *āža*. Basu informs me that “Adyghe” is more correctly referred to as the Temirgoy (literary West Circassian), and that the form *āča* should be rendered *ачӕэ* /äʔʃʰɛ/. Similarly, Kabardian (literary East Circassian) *āža* should be *ажэ* /äʔzɛ/. The Proto-Circassian form reconstructed from these cognates would look something like **/äʔʃɛ/* (or **āčˀˀa* in more traditional notation) – with no trace of labialization or palatalization, nor of “hissing-hushing” affricates.

If we really wanted to see a connection with Indo-European, this form *could* resemble Proto-Indo-Iranian **Hajá-* slightly, but it would probably be significantly younger than Proto-Indo-Iranian! The lack of comparanda in Ubykh and Abkhaz-Abaza, the two remaining branches making up Northwest Caucasian (Arkadiev & Lander 2021: 368) – make it even more difficult to project the form further back in time (Šagirov 1977: 58).

In conclusion, a lot more work has to be done on the reconstruction of the internal nodes in Northeast and Northwest Caucasian before any credible connection with Indo-European can be made.

4. Conclusion

The points presented above bring some emendations to the material and conclusions of Poulsen (2025):

- PT **asə* was probably not borrowed from Iranian **ajá-* – but the preform still entered the languages before the breakup of Proto-Tocharian.
- It is doubtful at best if PIr. **ajá-* ‘goat’ ever existed as there are only spurious traces of it in hapax legomena and philologically difficult attestations. However, the derivative **Hajina-* ‘(of) hide’ must be reconstructed for Proto-Iranian. It is still questionable if this form was borrowed into Proto-Balto-Slavic.
- Even if the existence of North-Caucasian should be proven, the reconstruction **ʔəjʃwē* is not compatible with the intermediate reconstructions based on the material.

- It is problematic to reconstruct a common form for Proto-Nakh-Daghestani: Proto-Nakh **ābst-* is hardly compatible with Proto-Dargwa **ʕed̪z̪òm(nə)*, which in turn might be a loan from a Turkic language.
- A Proto-West-Caucasian form is uncertain because of the lack of comparanda from Abkhaz-Abaza, but Proto-Circassian points to */ä·[ʂ̺]/ (**āč̺a*). Although this form superficially looks like Proto-Indo-Iranian **Hajá-*, it is thousands of years younger.

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