From Proto-Indo-European to Tocharian: Archaism and Innovation in the Nominal System

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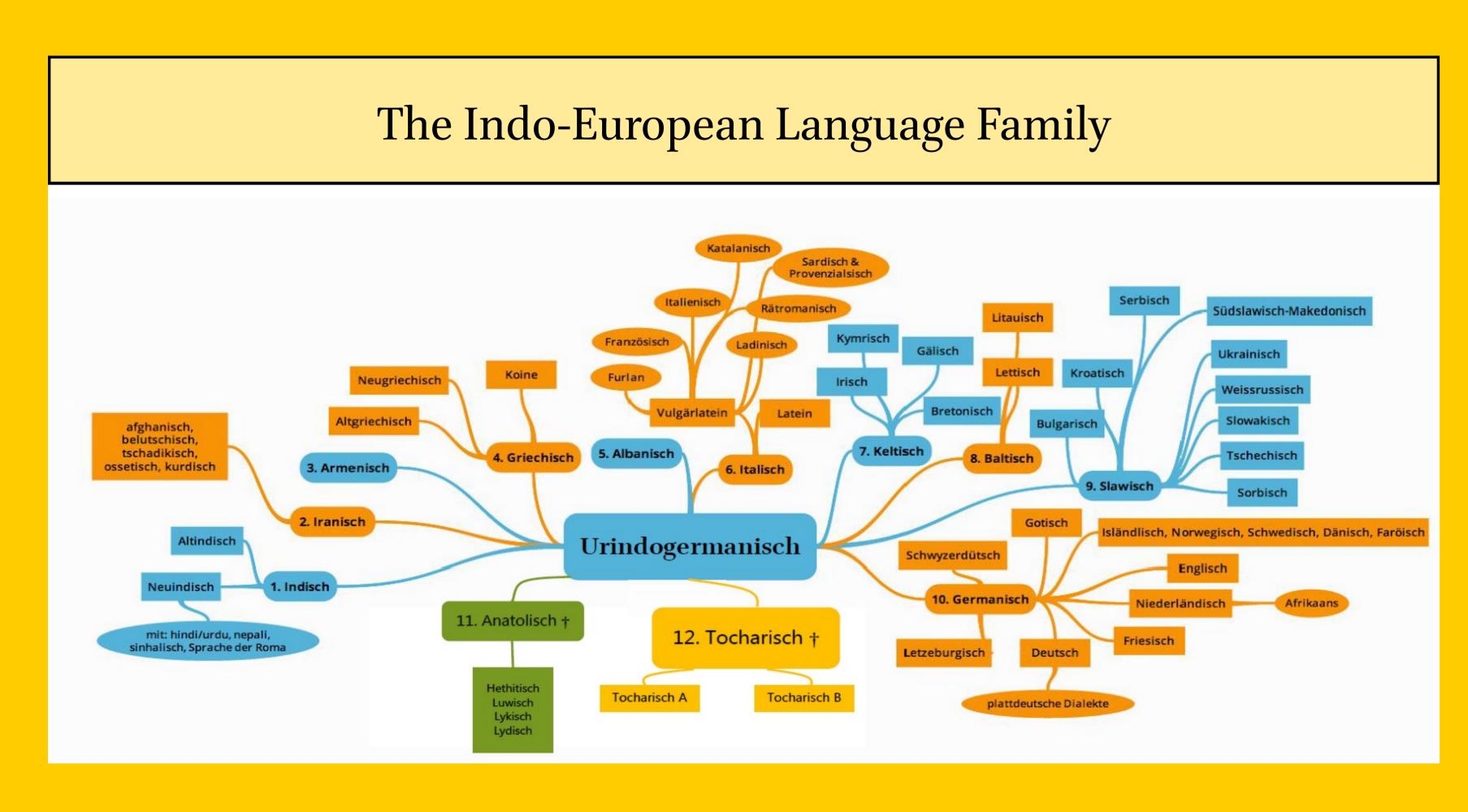
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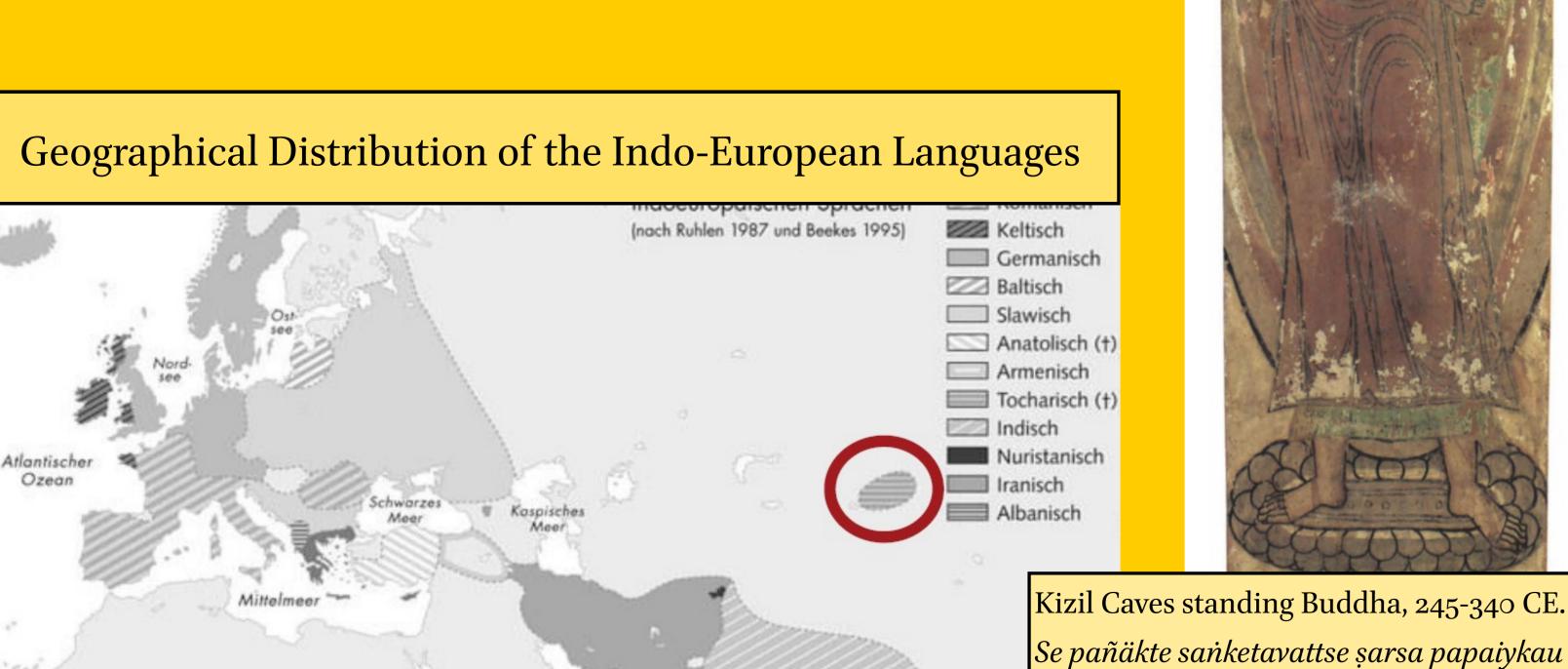

The Indo-European Language Family

Tocharian is the name of one of the 12 branches of the Indo-European language family. It consists of 2 closely related languages that we traditionally refer to as **Tocharian A and B**. Both languages were spoken in the **Tarim Basin** (in modern-day Xinjiang in northwest China) and died out some time after 840 CE. In fact, no one in the Western World knew about these idioms until the archaeological exploration of the Tarim Basin in the early 20th century brought to light fragments of manuscripts in an unknown language. It soon became clear that these **manuscripts date from the 5th to the 10th centuries CE** and were written in two distinct but related languages.

With the **first grammar of Tocharian being published in 1931**, this branch of the Indo-European language family is not only the last one to be exploited linguistically, it is also the one in which **research has developed the fastest**. Tocharian studies is 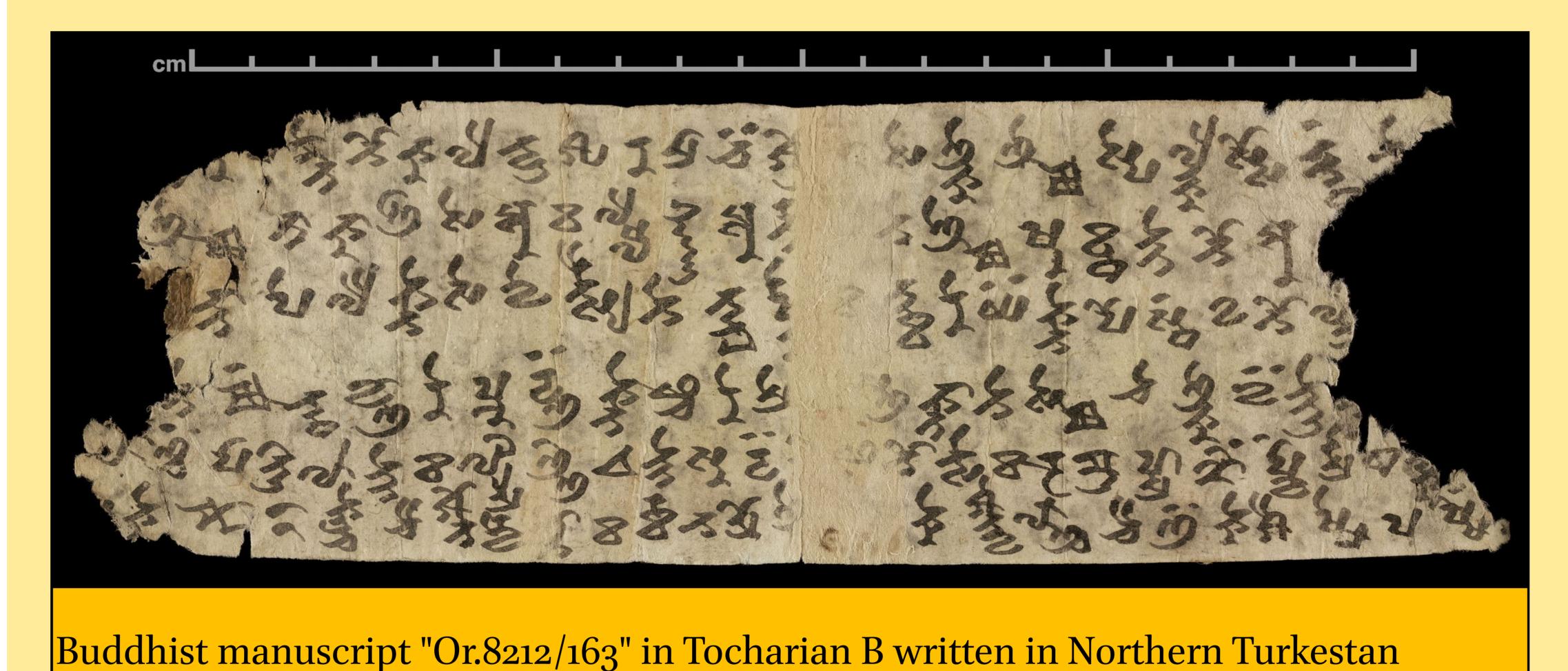a thriving field and the importance of Tocharian for the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European (PIE) finds greater and greater acknowledgment among Indo-Europeanists.

Geographical Distribution of the Indo-European Languages

Kizil Caves standing Buddha, 245-340 CE.
Se pañäkte saṅketavattse ṣarsa papaiykau
"This Buddha was painted by the hand of Sanketava"

The **nominal system** of the two languages has been met with restrained attention, not least because contrary to the verb, the **Tocharian noun seems much more innovative** at first glance. Accordingly, not a single monograph has been published recently devoted to the analysis of the Tocharian noun as a whole or to the comparison of the peculiar features of the Tocharian with the PIE nominal system. However, it is all but certain that the ever-growing knowledge of Tocharian and the progress in our understanding of its nominal system will have a great impact on our **reconstruction of the PIE noun**, which has long been based on the evidence of the more canonical languages like Ancient Greek and Vedic Sanskrit alone.

Buddhist manuscript "Or.8212/163" in Tocharian B written in Northern Turkestan

The aim of the project *From Proto-Indo-European to Tocharian – Archaism and Innovation in the Nominal System* **is to fill this gap and provide an assessment as to what the evidence of Tocharian changes in the traditional reconstruction of the PIE nominal system.**

Put differently, it seeks to give an answer to the question as to what repercussions the recent and ever-increasing knowledge about the Tocharian noun (including both inflection and derivation) has on **our understanding of nominal morphology in the proto-language**. Similarly to Tocharian studies, the investigation of the PIE nominal system has been evolving dramatically in recent years and many long-standing dogmas have slowly been overhauled, not least because of **new evidence provided by Tocharian**.

The project therefore seeks to **combine the new findings about Tocharian grammar and word formation with the current debate in PIE nominal morphology**, which is an innovative approach that has not yet been implemented in this form. In order for the project to be feasible within **four years**, the scope of the project proposal will be on five specific areas. The choice of these five topics is coordinated with some of the previous work of the researcher, in which the Tocharian evidence had not yet been duly incorporated. The five focal points are:

Indo-European Cognate Set						
	Toch. B	Latein	Altgr.	Sanskrit	Altirisch	Tschechisch	Uridg.
'drei'	*trai*	*trēs*	*treîs*	*tráyas*	*trí*	*tři*	*$tréyes$
'acht'	*okt*	*octō*	*oktṓ*	*aṣṭáu*	*ocht*	*osm*	*$h_3októh_1$
'Mutter'	*mācer*	*māter*	*mḗtēr*	*mātar-*	*máthair*	*máti*	*$máh_2tēr$
'Vater'	*pācer*	*pater*	*patḗr*	*pitár-*	*athair*	(*otec*)	*$ph_2tḗr$
'Bruder'	*procer*	*frāter*	*phrátēr*	*bhrátar-*	*bráthair*	*bratr*	*$bʰráh_2tēr$
'Kuh'	*keu*	*bōs*	*boûs*	*gaúṣ*	*bó*	*hov(ado)*	*$gʷóus$
'tragen' (*gebären*)	*pareṃ*	*ferunt*	*phérousi*	*bháranti*	*berait*	*berou*	*$bʰéronti$

(A) The potential PIE heritage of the secondary cases of Tocharian
(B) The *malkwer* **type in Tocharian and PIE**
(C) The original behavior of the substantivizing *n*-**stem suffix**
(D) Paradigmatic or derivational ablaut in thematic stems in PIE?
E) The origin of the PIE feminine gender in light of the Tocharian evidence

The results of the research project will certainly be an important milestone in the field of Tocharian and Indo-European studies. For Tocharian, it will contribute to **our understanding of the Tocharian nominal system and its peculiar features** and help to integrate the branch on the phylogenetic tree. For Indo-European studies, the project, covering some of the most pressing questions in the field of nominal morphology, will be an important contribution to the current debate and might lead to a **reassessment of the Proto-Indo-European nominal system**.

Tocharian B Manuscript Leaf THT 133