

TO: Unicode Technical Committee
FROM: Nicholas Kontovas
SUBJECT: Endorsement of the Old Uyghur encoding proposal L2/20-191
DATE: Wed, 29 Jul 2020

Hello,

(First off, please forgive my lack of knowledge of official Unicode jargon.)

My name is Nicholas Kontovas. I am currently a doctoral candidate at Leiden University, the Netherlands, and former lecturer in Turkish Language and Literature at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul.

I am writing to submit an official endorsement of the current encoding proposal for the Old Uyghur script compiled by Anshuman Pandey. I am part of a small but dedicated group of scholars who work on languages which employ the Old Uyghur script. We consist of historians, linguists, philologists, and archaeologists interested in the Uyghur Kingdoms, the Mongol Empire, and the post-Mongol Turkic world, and each of us – regardless of geographical, temporal, or disciplinary expertise – is immensely excited for Anshu’s proposal to come to fruition.

For a very long time, my colleagues and I have bemoaned our inability to properly typeset original excerpts from our primary sources in their original script. The surface similarity of the Old Uyghur script to the Classical Mongol script has led many to attempt to employ the latter for the writing of the former, but the fact that the Mongol system encodes as allographs letters which in the Old Uyghur script represent different graphemes makes this an unsatisfactory alternative, not only for Old Uyghur but also for some pre-Classical or conservative religious Mongol documents, and for many Middle Turkic documents.

Dissatisfied with the “hacky” methods employed, out of necessity, by other scholars (such as hand drawing or cutting and pasting from copies of old Soviet print editions) I created a font that was capable of rendering the Old Uyghur script; however, for want of an encoding set for Old Uyghur, I assigned the glyphs to the Arabic character set. This creates significant issues of compatibility and requires considerably more effort to produce the appropriate ligatures than if there were a dedicated Old Uyghur character set.

Out of frustration and curiosity, I wrote the Unicode Consortium several months back in order to enquire as to whether there was a project to develop an Old Uyghur encoding, and/or how it might be possible to propose one. The Consortium immediately put me in touch with Anshu and sent me a copy of his proposal.

I was struck by the level of attention to detail which Anshu’s proposal displayed. Despite not being a dedicated expert on the Old Uyghur or Mongol languages specifically, he displayed a depth of knowledge about the script exceeding that of many of us in the field. This is in part due to his relentless attention to detail, but also a product of his enthusiastic inclusion of expert consultants. Anshu’s consultants on this project are among the top names in the field of Old Uyghur studies, and though I am a junior scholar, Anshu was eager to hear what I had to say about the oft-overlooked post-Mongol Middle Turkic documents in the transitional Old Uyghur/Mongol version of the script which form a large part of my dissertation research.

Having looked over the final version of his proposal, I can state with confidence that it exceeds any expectations I and my colleagues might have had in terms of predicted useability. Anshu has taken great pains not only to consider the needs of the prospective user community as communicated by its representative members, but has also paved the way for the expansion of the character set without the need to overhaul fundamental aspects of the basic set put forth by the proposal.

Old Uyghur studies is a rapidly developing field; the International Journal of Old Uyghur Studies, for example, is only on its third edition (<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/ijous>) but it has already proven its value by publishing articles from the best names among the established and upcoming experts on all things Old Uyghur-related.

I would like to express my gratitude to Anshu for his work on this outstanding proposal, and to the Consortium for considering it. On behalf of our community of researchers, I sincerely hope that the proposal progresses through the approval process as quickly as possible so that we can finally promote it, develop fonts for it, and make use of it in our publications and other projects.

Thank you very much for your time.

All the best,

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