

Ho

Ho is a North Munda language, fairly closely related to Santali. It is less conservative in its vowel inventory than Santali, and has the standard areal five-vowel system (but, unlike Indo-Aryan or Dravidian, without vowel length). The Varang Kshiti script of Lako Bodra, the script to be described here, is a script for Ho Hayam—very roughly ‘hieratic Ho’—and the key question here has do with the difference between Ho Hayam and Ho Kaji ‘ordinary Ho’. The amount of overlap is unclear. The authority on the matter—and on all aspects of Lako Bodra’s script—is H.-J. Pinnow. Pinnow (1972) suggests three possibilities as to what HoH may be: (a) a (regional?) dialect of Ho; (b) an arbitrary mixture of Ho, Mundari, Santali, and other elements; or (c) an old, sacerdotal language kept secret until now. These alternatives are not mutually exclusive.

Pinnow writes that the script exhibits highly syncretistic features, many borrowings from a variety of older scripts (I suspect that he overestimates the degree of borrowing), and clear borrowings from Brahmi (he sees 14 of the Ho characters as fairly directly borrowed). Several of the letter shapes—the non-cursive forms in particular—resemble English. They are *not*—and this is no accident—similar to Devanagari characters. Lako Bodra was not unaware of the Brahmi similarities. According to Pinnow, Lako Bodra’s claim was that the script was “invented in the 13th Century by a certain Dhawan Turi and rediscovered in a shamanistic vision and modernized by Bodra himself.” My own conversations with followers of Lako Bodra in the late 1970s brought out further assertions of an even greater antiquity of the script, and the claim that the Ho script was the most ancient in the subcontinent and the (only?) survivor of an ancient flood. There is an Institute of Ancient Culture and Science Society concerned with promoting the Varang Kshiti script and related matters. Ho—any variety of Ho, presumably—must be written in its proper script, according to Bodra’s followers. The similarities between Varang Kshiti and other Indian scripts are the result of

TABLE 56.4: *The Consonants of Varang Kshiti with Transliterations*

𑄁	𑄂	⋮	𑄃	𑄄	⋮	𑄅	𑄆	𑄇	𑄈	𑄉	𑄊	𑄋	n̄	g	k
𑄌	𑄍	⋮	𑄎	𑄏	⋮	𑄐	𑄑	𑄒	𑄓	𑄔	𑄕	𑄖	n̄i	j	c
𑄗	𑄘	⋮	𑄙	𑄚	⋮	𑄛	𑄜	𑄝	𑄞	𑄟	𑄠	𑄡	n̄	d̄	t̄
𑄢	𑄣	⋮	𑄤	𑄥	⋮	𑄦	𑄧	𑄨	𑄩	𑄪	𑄫	𑄬	m	b	p
𑄭	𑄮	⋮	𑄯	𑄰	⋮	𑄱	𑄲	𑄳	𑄴	𑄵	𑄶	𑄷	h	l	r̄
𑄸	𑄹	⋮	𑄺	𑄻	⋮	𑄼	𑄽	𑄾	𑄿	𑅀	𑅁	𑅂	r	ʃ	s

TABLE 56.5: *The Vowels of Varang Kshiti with Transliterations*

V	v	:	∩	∩	:	F	f	:	L	l	:	∇	∇	:	Z	z
Y	y	:	∩	∩	:	E	7	:	∩	∩	:			:		
	m̄		a		i		u		e						o	
	˘		y		ī		ū									

borrowing *from*, not *by*, Ho, according to Bodra's followers and probably Lako Bodra himself; but according to outside observers, the script is his in that he invented it, not rediscovered it.

Varang Kshiti is written from left to right, with the vowel characters in the order they are spoken; the complications of vowel placement and variant forms found in Brahmi-derived scripts are eschewed. The characters are now given in a standard tabular form (TABLE 56.4, from Lako Bodra 1963), the consonants being ranged in rows of three, the first five of these triads having systematic phonetic properties of a kind familiar from the standard arrangement of the Devanagari characters. The last two rows are—again largely on the Devanagari pattern—miscellaneous.

Lako Bodra has created certain extra characters—there is no call in Ho for *ṣ* distinct from *s*—apparently because he wants an archaic, Sanskrit-like cast to Varang Kshiti. The letter *h* after a vowel indicates vowel lengthening. The sequence *hb* represents *w*, whose interpretation ([v]? [w]?) is unclear. There is a special symbol for the mystical syllable *om̄*.

Varang Kshiti has ten vowel characters: simple vowels, mixed vowels, and ligatures (TABLE 56.5, from Lako Bodra 1963). The four simple vowels (*īpan bor(o)ṇi*) are *a*, *i*, *u*, and *m̄* (nasalization, cf. Hindi *candrabindu* and *anusvara*), plus the inherent vowel as in Devanagari and other Indic scripts. The inherent vowel is not always to be pronounced [a], but sometimes [o] or [e]. The two mixed vowels (*sell ip(a)ṇi bor(o)ṇi*) are *e* and *o*, presumably following Sanskrit notions according to which these are not “simple.” The ligatures (*dobri bor(o)ṇi*), neither vowels nor consonants, are four; the characters are composite.

TABLE 56.6: *The Numerals of the Munda Scripts*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
Sorang Sompeng	↑	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩
Oi Cemet'	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩	∩
Varang Kshiti (Pinnow 1972)	δ 1	∩ 2	∩ 3	∩ 4	∩ 4	∩ 5	∩ 6	∩ 7	∩ 8	∩ 9
	∩ 10	∩ 20	∩ 30	∩ 40	∩ 50	∩ 60	∩ 70	∩ 80	∩ 90	
	δ δ	∩ 11	∩ 12	∩ 13	∩ 23		∩ 27	∩ 28	∩ 37	

Bibliography

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