Tocharian A șurm, B șarm ‘cause’ and A șul, B șale ‘mountain’

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§1. As is well-known, the correspondence between Tocharian A u and B a / ā is generally due to the East Tocharian labialization of a reflex of a Proto-Tocharian (PT) ə by a labiovelar stop, kʷ, which is contiguous to the ə or separated from it by an n: PT ə > A u / ā (n)kʷ, kʷ. The PT kʷ may reflect an Indo-European labiovelar or go back to a combination of a palatovelar with w. The clearest examples of this labialization rule are:¹

A tuńk, B tańkw 'love' < PT *tənkʷ < PIE *tngʷ-;
A şuńk, B şańkw 'throat' < PT *šənkʷ < PIE *sengʷ-;
A yuk, B yakwe 'horse' < PT *yəkʷe < PIE *H₁ekyo-;
A puklā, B pikwala pl. 'year' < PT *p'əkʷola < PIE *pekʷ-;
A kumnäs, B kämmaşäm 3sg. 'to come' < PT *kʷəm- < PIE *gʷm-;
A pukmās impv.act. 'to come' < PT *pə-kʷəm-;
A kuryar, B karyor 'trade' < PT *kʷəryor < PIE *kʷrH₂-őr.

There are but two words with A u, B a/ā, where no labiovelar seems to be at stake: A șurm, B șarm 'cause' and A șul, B șale 'mountain'. The current analyses of these words cannot account for the vocalism of East Tocharian, so that șurm / șarm and șul / șale are considered exceptions (cf. Krause – Thomas 1960: 49). However, the similar anlaut of șurm / șarm and șul / șale suggests that the unusual vocalism has the same origin, which has somehow escaped the notion of scholars.

As a matter of fact, the initial ș- may reflect not only palatalized PIE *s-, but also the cluster *skʷ- in the position before *έ (for an example cf. Hilmarsson 1988: 37 on the etymology of B šewi, pl. šewauna 'pretext' < *skēy(H)-). The labialized cluster *skʷe- must regularly yield A șu-, B șa- through the intermediate stages *şsʷə- > PT *şşʷə- (for the details see below, §4). In the following I intend to show that for both words there are indeed etymologies which involve this initial cluster and which are preferable to the earlier ones.

¹ The less clear cases unmistakably involve a labiovelar, too, cf.:
A suk, B sakw 'happy, happiness' < PT *səkʷ- (+ Skt. sukha-) (Kortlandt 1988: 81);
A šuks-, B kwaś- / kšš- 'village' < PT *səkʷʊš < PIE *sekʷ-us-ı (Van Windekens 1976: 464f.);
A kursār, B kursar, kwarsā 'mile, vehicle', Skt. yojana- < PT *kʷorsor < PIE ?;
AB kur- 'to grow old, weak' < PT *kʷər- < PIE *(d)gʷer- (Hilmarsson 1986).
§2. A šurm, B šarm 'cause'.

From Thomas 1964 we can gather the following relevant information:

A šurm (šrum) a., Pl. III,1 šurmanṭ. The ablative šurmaṣṭ and the adj. šurmaṣṭi (+ a hapax šärmaṣṭi) serve as a postposition 'because of', 'for the sake of'.

B šarm (šārm) a., Pl. II,1 šarmana (šārmana) or II,2 šārmanma. The perlative of this word (šarṃtsa) is also used as a postposition in the meaning 'because of'.

These forms suggest that the Tocharian word reflects an IE neuter in *-mn, which is in agreement with the e-vocalism in the root.

The current etymology, going back to Pedersen 1941: 62, connects A šurm, B šarm with Lat. sermo 'conversation, discussion'. This etymology, leaving the vocalism of Toch. unexplained, is also semantically troublesome. Van Windekens' (1976: 466) link 'discours suivi, propos' → 'cause, motif, raison' does not substantially clarify the matter.

Consultation of Buck’s Dictionary of Selected Synonyms (p. 1242f.) shows that in Indo-European languages the word for 'cause' is either a secondary lexical development of words for 'fault' and 'legal strife, charge', or of words for 'matter, material', mostly derived from a root for 'to do, act', as in Slavic (Russ. pričīna from činīt' 'to do, cause'), Germanic (OIC. ēni 'stuff, material, subject, cause', OE intinga 'matter, affair, cause'), or Sanskrit (kāraṇa- 'cause' from the caus. to √kr- 'to do, make').

The Sanskrit parallel makes it probable that the Tocharian word is a derivative of the same root, PIE *√(s)kʷer- 'to do, make'. For the labiovelar in the root cf. MW. paraf 'to produce, procure', Lith. kuriu, kūti 'to create, found', Latv. (uguni) kūt 'to kindle (fire)', OPr. kūra 'baute'. I believe that the Tocharian words reflect *skʷer-mn and are thus identical (except for the movable s) with Skt. kārman- n. 'action, activity, result', with a typical semantic development to 'cause'. For the phonetics see below, §4.

§3. A šul, B šale 'mountain'.

Thomas 1964 provides the following grammatical information:

A šul m. (V,1), derivatives: šuliṅ adj. 'mountainous', šulyi adj. 'of the mountains'.

B šale m. (V,1), gen. šlentse, derivative šl(y)iye adj. 'of the mountains'.

Van Windekens (1976: 465) connects these words with Lat. silva 'forest', but in view of the vocalism he is forced to postulate two different pre-forms for the Tocharian words: A < *selu-, but B < *selo-, which is hardly attractive. Moreover, the u-stem for A does not account for the vocalism (cf. fn. 2) either. The same holds for the old etymology, deriving šul / šale from the root *suel- 'to swell', which is difficult from the semantic point of view, too.

2 Van Windekens (1976: 466) posits IE *sermu- and explains A u by the u-umlaut. However, all his other examples of the u-umlaut concern a labiovelar.
I believe that šul / šale must be derived from the IE root √skwel- ‘to cut’. Semantically, this fits perfectly, cf. OCS skala ‘rock, stone’ (< *sköl(H)o- with lengthened grade, as follows from the accentuation of Russ. skala, acc. skalû), and, probably, Mr. sceillec ‘rock’ and Goth. hallus ‘rock’ (< *kol-nu-), OIc. hallr ‘rock, stone’ (< *kol-no-), all derivatives of the same root.

However, it is difficult to demonstrate that the root in question has a labiovelar. It must be borne in mind that already in PIE palatovelars and labiovelars merged into a velar -k- after *s- (cf. Meillet 1894: 294ff. and Steensland 1973: 30ff.). Hence, the cluster *skw- is only possible if the labiovelar was reintroduced from forms where it was not preceded by an s. This could occur in roots with the so-called movable s (with the alternation *sk- : *kʷ-) or in zero grade of the root √šekw-. As to the root √skwel-, there are several traces of a labiovelar: Lith. kuli, kul’ ‘to thrash, thresh’ < *kʷIH- and, possibly, MW. chwalu ‘to disperse’, cf. MW. chwedl ‘tale, fable’ < *skwetlon (Morris Jones 1913: 159), Gr. σκῦκια ‘schinde, zerreibe’ (with the same irregular -u-as as in γυναικός). In Tocharian, this Indo-European root may be represented by AB kul- ‘to cease, diminish’ (inf. B kəlātsi, pr.III A kulatār, B kulētar < PT *kʷ(e)letr, etc.) < PIE *kʷIH-.

Prof. Winter recently told me that, in his opinion, the West Tocharian adverb os(sa)le ‘in the evening’ is derived from the word for ‘mountain’. This is corroborated by the context of several unpublished texts, where os(sa)le rather has the meaning ‘in the mountains, in the north’ which is likewise possible elsewhere (K.T. Schmidt, p.c.). This etymology is very attractive and provides strong confirmation of the proposed derivation of A šul, B šale from PIE *skwe-lo-, because it requires an initial cluster containing a labial sound in the word for ‘mountain’. For oššale we must then reconstruct PT *e(n)sšwəle ³ (< *(H₁)n-skweλom).

§4. The PIE *skwe- must have undergone palatalization in Proto-Tocharian: *sswə- > *sswə-, cf. the verbal suffix PIE *-skw- > PT *-ss- > A -s-, B -ss-. As to the labial element, one must assume that in East Tocharian it was preserved in šw, but lost in sʷ, as can be seen from A šam ‘wife’ < PT *s(w)na < PIE *gwenH₂, or A šamlune abstr. ‘to come’ < PT *s(w)em- < PIE *gwenm-, without labialization. This assumption is phonetically understandable because labialization is more easily retained with "back" consonants: velars, gutturals, etc. than with "front" consonants.

Note added in proof:


³ For the labialization of PT *e to B o cf. B okt ‘eight’ < PT *ekwirt < *ektu < PIE *oktō; B orkamo ‘dark’ < PT *erkwəm < *H₁rgʷ-mōn(ts), etc.
References

Meillet, A. 1894: De quelques difficultés de la théorie des gutturales indo-européennes, MSL 8, 277-304.