Slavonic and Greek Traces in the Toponymy of the Region of Vlora, Southern Albania

Dr. Artan Xhaferaj
Lecturer, Department of Albanian Language and Literature,
Faculty of Humanities, “Ismail Qemali” University of Vlora

Abstract

As toponyms reflect the life of an area, they deserve special attention while studying the history of that area. The region of Vlora, particularly the area called Labëria, because of its highly varied terrain, is extremely rich in place names, which possess multifaceted values with respect to naming, word formation and lexicology at large. The present study on the Vlora region toponyms focuses on the place names that contain Slavic and Greek elements in their structure. The study material is, basically, from the research of various authors, mostly Albanian. The bulk of the toponyms used here have been collected in field studies, while working with elderly local people and shepherds of the respective zones, who provided us with material of great interest in this domain. The study has cognitive and scientific values and bears witness to the early contacts between peoples. It attempts to further complete and enrich the toponomy of the Vlora region. The collection and systematization of the toponomy of different areas of the region would also be of interest in compiling a toponomastic dictionary in this field of study.

Keywords: toponymy, Vlora, Slavonic toponyms, Greek toponyms, contact.

1. Introduction

Historical relations between the Albanians and the Slavs, according to Sh. Demiraj (1988: 119), started relatively early, in any way after the IV century AD. Traces of such relations must have become more obvious especially during the invasion of Albanian territories by the Slavonic states (the Bulgarian state, 851-1018 AD and the Serbian state, 1331-1355). Numerous researchers, historians and linguists (See: Çabej, 2008: 131; Ylli, 2012: 534-535), have have conducted studies on the Albanian-Slavonic historic and linguistic connections. Concerning Slavonic toponomy in Albania, A. Buda (1980: 171) notes that part of it is connected to the state apparatus. According to Šufflay (2009: 157), during the IV century Slav occupation, written texts in Slavonic continued to spread from north to south, reaching the regions of Durrës and even Vlora, bearing a tough competition on Latin as the language of state documents (see also Omari, 2015: 45). There was a Slav chancellery in Vlora (Dhrimo, 1982: 138), which goes to show that Slavonic macro-toponyms in Labëria could not have escaped the administration’s attention, whereas micro-toponyms mainly appear outside the villages and they tend to name other locations suitable for pastureland, some of which used as arable land later. It is also worth noting that Ruginë Balsha, daughter of Balsha II and Komnena (Komita) Muzaka (of medieval Albanian principalities) was married to Merksha Zharkovich “rè di Servia” in 1391, most probably in order to reinforce the connections of the noble rulers of Vlora with those of Zeta (Xhufi, 2009: 324).

As to the relations between Albanians and Greeks, they go far back in time. Çabej (2008: 99) emphasizes that the Albanians and the Greeks have been neighbours in this part of Europe for over 3,000 years. These have been multiple-level relations, and beyond doubt, they have left marks on the Albanian language and toponomastics.

Taking into consideration the richness and variety of toponymy in the region of Vlora, we should note that, with the occasional exception of a few research articles,¹ there is no systematic collection of data or an all-inclusive scientific study.

of the issue in question. The present study sets out to explain, or even lay to discussion, some toponyms whose meaning cannot be gathered as of yet. The semantic and structural analysis has to be made on scientific criteria rather than by applying stale humour to language, as Murati (2008: 11) would refer to those dilettantes who try to explain everything by using anything. Such motivations of toponyms in the region of Vlora, arising from mere phonemic similarities - for example, Maja e Vrakutit (Vrakuli Peak) presumably meaning “the peak where the puppy was killed” [since “vra-kul” appear in the verb “vras” (kill) and “kulish” (puppy)]; Zhirava presumably deriving from “zhiva” (mercury/poison); Spithani [s’pi-thar coinciding to “not-drink-dried”) to mean “I do not drink water because it has dried out”; or Fiteci as originated from the Turkish root “fit” (wedge/intrigue) and the Slavonic suffix “-ec” etc. - were all called “fruitful blunders” by the early student of Albanian, E. H. Tunman. Çabei (2008: 12) stated that, for the history of a people and language, toponyms have almost the same importance as fossils in paleontology. That is why their study requires extensive knowledge of not just linguistics but also history and sociology.

2. Semantic and structural analysis of toponyms

We will attempt below to break down a few toponyms semantically and structurally. We start with placenames of Slavonic origin.

Bilanicë, -a (Gu.) – is land with depressions, with arable plots of flatland, with orchards and water. It probably relates to the Bulgarian šnaro [blato] “swamp” + the Slavonic suffix –nicë, that is, ground with stagnant water and mud, i.e. marshy land; Blatnicë > Bilanicë (through assimilation tn > n). P. Skok (1971, 168) also supports this etymology from the Slavonic word blato “swamp, marshy land”.

Gërdilla, -ë (Ve.) – crop fields, springs (Burimet e Gërdillave – the Gërdillas Springs), plane trees (Rrapet e Gërdillave – the Gërdillas Planetrees) and cave (Shpella e Gërdillave – the Gërdillas Cave). We believe this to be a toponym of mythologic basis, reflecting the Serbian gridilo “monster, giant, dragon”. (Compare with: Guri i Lugati (Bo.) – “Ghost’s Rock”, Burimi i Vragoqit – [similar to] Dragon’s Spring”, Sheshi i Vragoit – [similar to] Dragon’s Plateau”, (Ve.), Qeqa e Dhrakulit (Du.) “Dragon’s Crag”; Guva e Zërave (Du.) – “the Cave of Voices”; Gurit e Divit (Krajë) – “Giant’s Rock” etc.) Placenames like these, containing names of some typically Albanian mythological creatures, some of which reaching from the distant past Yllirian-Albanian beliefs and cults, are of high interest, especially when endeavouring to prove the native roots of the Albanians in the present regions from ancient times (Shkurtaj, 2015: 92). Such toponoms as Burinet e Gërdillave, Shpella e Gërdillave etc. could well be Slavonic translations of earlier native placenames based on the word dragua “dragon”.

Izvor,-i (Tr., between Gjo. and Gu., Mat.), and Zvor,-ë/Zvuvar,-i (Ve., Bo.) – permanent spring; relates to the Macedonian/Bulgarian извор [izvor] “spring” (Dhrimo, 2008: 412).

Sadovinë, -a (Ve.) – grain fields and pastureland; vast plateau. It is a Slavonic toponym derived from the root sad “plantation, cultivation” and the Slavic origin suffix –ovinë, so these are arable lands, or nurseries; semantically the same as the Greek πυρεία [fitia]. Serbian also contains the verb saditi “plant” and the noun sadnica “sapiing; shoot; graft”. Similarly, the word bukovina “grove of beech trees” from the root bukva “beech” or bukov (adj.) “of beech wood” is a Serbian formation. According to Xhuvani and Çabei (1980: 533), the suffix –ovina forms feminine gender nouns that indicate a quality of the primitive word, or the location where the concrete thing it designates is to be found, for example, балтовинë – “muddy ground”. In Serbo-Croatian, this suffix forms nouns from nouns, for instance, dubovina – (oak tree; [oak tree grove]: dubov from dub), or nouns from verbs, such as kupovina (thing bought, [purchase; trade] from kupiti “buy”).

Radotinë, -a (Ve.) – arable fields, is also a Slavonic toponym. We believe that it is more plausible to relate this placename with the name of some person of Slav origin, such as Rad or Rado, since Slavonic persons’ names such as Petko, Rad (or Rado) etc. as well as some micro-tononyms like Pylli i Radir “Radi’s Wood”, Qafa e Radës “Radi’s Pass” (Memushaj, 2004:127), Burimi i Petkos (Ve.) “Petko’s Spring” can be found in the Kurveleshia area. The suffix -tinë (< -inë) is of Slavic origin too.

Zhallovtinë, -a (Ve.) – crop fields; pastureland, is found as the name of a grove and a spring. Serbian language contains the word žal [zhall] designating pebbly riverted or riverbank. The suffix -tinë (- -inë) is as well of Slavonic origin. The location is named after the material it consists of, as pebbly ground.

Zhirava (Ve.) – crop fields; pastureland. Another designation has been given, as “acorn forest tree for livestock” (Nuraj, 2003). Based of this fact, we think that it relates to the Serbian word žir [zhir] “oaktree acorn”. The location named Zhirava might be motivated as the place where acorn corns can be collected for livestock feed, the same way as the noun dubrava is formed in Serbian from the nominative root dub “oak”. This naming after the plants (white oak, red oak etc.) growing in a particular place, and whose acorns used to serve as feed for livestock or wildlife species, is acceptable in toponymy.

Lugu i Vrulit (Br.) - “Vrali Valley” We hold the opinion that the word vral relates to the Serbian vrlja “spring; source”. Another toponym, Pusi i Vrulles (Dh.) - “Vruli Well”, might as well be connected to this word. Albanian placenames like these also commonly appear in Kurveleshí: Lugjet e Gurërës “Spring Valleys”, Sheshet e Gurërës “Spring Flatlans”, Lugu i Buronjës “Source Valley” (Dhrimo, 2008).

Vragua (Ve.) – fields, alluvium: (Ledhi i Vragoit “Alluvium of Vragoi”), flatland (Lëmi i Vragoit “Flat of Vragoi”, plane-tree (Rapi i Vragoit) “Plane-tree of Vragoi”. In Mesaplik, this appears as vrankul (Meja e Vrkulit “Vrkuli Peak”); (Jahaj, 2010), whereas in Dukati, as drhakul (Qeja e Drhakulit “Dragon’s Crag”; Capo, 2009). This is a toponym on a mythological basis, which relates to the word dragua “dragon”. According to Çabej (1987: 300), dragua is a word of the entire language, and discussion on its source is open to discussion as either from the Lat. draconem or the It. dragone, whereas the forms in /dh/ “dhragonj” are combinations of dragoi with the new Gr. δράκος [drekos] or drakos, a sort of giant in the folk beliefs of Chameria, depicted by Haxhihasani (DS II, 43). According to A. Dhrimo, (2008: 415), the toponym Dhrakule-ja in Çorraj of Kurveleshí is derived from the new Gr. δρακούλης, a diminutive of δράκος plus the suffix -o-likë (ulës). As to the forms in /v/ vragua or vrakul, we believe they are combinations of dragua or drakul with Slavonic (compare in Serbian vrag “devil, demon”).

The following are placenames of Greek origins.

Fite, -ja (Ve., Gu., M.) – orchard; Burimet e Fitecë (Ve.) “Springs of Fite”; Fitec, -i/Fitjic, -i, (between Gjo. and Gu.) – a thicket (Përroi e Fitecit “Brook of Fitec”, Kroi i Fitecit “Spring of Fitec”); Fitjic (Ma.) – arable land. We believe that these words relate to the Greek φυτεία [fitia] ‘plantation; planting’. The plural form φυτείες [fities] “arable lands” also phonetically resembles the name Fitec, excluding in this case the likelihood for the suffix –ec to be Slavic. We must observe that Greek contains the word φυτό [fito] ‘a plant’; φυτεύo [fitévo] ‘to plant’, as well as numerous compounds containing as a first part the word φυτό- [fito] in the sense ‘plant / relating to plant’ (about 26 compounds; see: Ndreca, 2007:194). It is also obvious that the configuration of these placenames is the same: arable land with springs or streams nearby.

Pigadhie (Ve., Dh.) – springs, arable lands, and brook. (Burimi i Aj Pigadhit “Pigadhi Spring”; Pérrő i Aj Pigadhit “Pigadhi Brook”). This is related to the Greek πηγάδι [pigádi] “well” (and πηγή [pigí] “spring, stream”). The toponym Pigadhit (with no clues as to its word formation) appears in the village Brataj. Another micro-toponym viz Aspropigadhie (Ve.) – a spring in a limestone area, is formed from the Gr. áspro [aspro] “white” + πηγάδι [pigádi] “well”, that is, a white well or spring, because of the nature of the terrain. It is undoubtedly of a Greek source, from βρύση [vrisi] “spring, drinking fountain, tap”.

Spithar, -i (Tr., Bo., Mat.)/ Cpithar, -i (Ve., Du., Qe.) – holes of water, generally in rock. According to Çabej (SE VII, 2006, 19), this is a word of the Tosk (southern Albania) dialect and means: “a small hole in the mountains rock, full of water, from which men and livestock drink”. It is a borrowing, adding the prefix sp- from the Gr. πηθάρι [pithári] “tub, pitcher”, and the extension of meaning has happened because of the similarity of such small holes to tubs and pitchers (Ibid, p. 19).

1 As elsewhere around the country, bilingual toponymy is not lacking in the region of Vlora, which, according to Shkurtaj (2015:70), bears witness to the Albanian resistance to assimination. In way of illustration, we bring the Springs of Pigadhie, the Spring of Aspropigadhie (Ve.); the Springs of Vriti (Ve.), as well as the Spring of Vrizi – a TV commercial of the bottled oligomineral water Spring, from the Spring of Nepravishta, Gjórastra; the Spring of Izvor (between Gu. and Gjo.), the Spring of Zvuar (Ve.), the Spithar Hollow (Tr.) etc.
Sirotkashtë (Gu.) – a mountain slope with straw-like grass, Sirokêmbë (M.) – steep arable land that does not hold rainwater and Sirogule (M.) - arable land on the bank of the River Shushica. We believe that the first part of these toponyms relates to the Gr. word ξηρός [ksiros] "dry". The second part (-gule) of the toponym Sirogule is connected with the word kule, meaning "a thorny thicket". The word form in /ɡ/ is connected with the sonorization of /k/ in intervocalic position.

3. On the origin of a few oikonyms

Bolenë, -a, according to A. Dhimo, is derived from polenen, which, in its turn, according to Seliščev too, is derived from poljana “a small meadow amid a forest”. Thus: Poljana>Polenë>Bolenë (2008:408).

Babicë, -a, the name of a village is, according to Seliščev, connected with the word babë from old clerical Slavonic baba “old woman, grandmother” (Çabej, SE II, 1976: 120). Identical to this is also babo (also in modern Gr. μπάμπου), fem. “old woman”, in some dialects also “midwife” (Ibid, p. 120-121); also in Bulgarian (Macedonian) баба “old woman”, but also “hilly terrain” + -и-ц-a (Ylli, 2000: 85). In Serbian as well, babica has the meanings “midwife” and “wet nurse”. We are of the opinion that this placename has entered the area through the Bulgarians. The naming of this palce of inhabitation might be related to the land configuration, as it is located on a hilly terrain.

Cerkovinë, -a is related to the Slavonic word црква “church” and the suffix –овинë, also Slavonic, which designates the place where the concrete thing is located, that is, land belonging to the church, or where the church stands. According to Seliščev, Bulgarian has църква/ цриев “church” + -ов-ин-а (Ylli, 2000: 98).

Drashovicë, -a is, according to Seliščev, connected with the name of a certain person Драша/ Драшо [Drasha/ Drasho] + -ов-ин-а (Ylli, 2000: 107).

Gumenicë, -a. We hold that the source stem of this toponym is derived from the Gr. πιστός [igúmenos] “an orthodox chief monk”, extended by the Slavonic suffix –ицë in the time of the Slav invasions. There used to be an orthodox monastery in Gumenica, which was the permanent seat of the monks’ chief. (Xhaferaj, 2015: 20). The placename might have remained from the Bulgarians, because they too have borrowed the word ιγιμεν “chief monk” from Greek.

Mavrovë, -a. We hold that the source stem of this toponym is derived from the Gr. μαύρος [mávros] “black”, extended by the Slavonic suffix –ов, perhaps because of the ground colour of this place. In the “Defter of Vlora Sandjac”, an official document of the Ottoman Empire (1583), we also come across the placename Mavrovica.

Novoselë, -a is beyond doubt of Slavonic origin; perhaps it relates to the Serbian novo “new” and selo “village, hamlet”, that is, a new hamlet. According to Stojan Novakovich, “in the first half of the XV century, the [Albanian] katun-s (villages) started to disappear, and the Slav selo-s began to appear in their stead” (Doçi, 2009: 193).

Ploçë, -a is, in our opinion, connected with the Serbian word ploča “plateau, slab”. In serbian, Slovenian and old religious Slavonic, ploča appears in the sense of “slab”, whereas in Weigand, ploci means “slates, flat pieces of stone used for covering roofs of houses”. (Meyer, 2007: 395). In this village, the ruins of the ancient Illyrian city Amantia have been uncovered, a city that was founded around the late 5th century BC, and which, by the 3rd century BC, was the main economic, political and cultural center of the community of the Amants’ Koinon, stretching between the (River) Aoos and the Akrokeran-s (mountain range) (FESh, 2008: 62-63). The name was probably given by the Slavs because of its geographic features.

Sevaster/i, is according to Çabej (2008: 105), a toponym from the Greek of the Byzantine church, whose counterpart in the North is the name of the village Sebaste. The etymology of this toponym is connected to the Gr. adjective σεβαστός [sebastós/ sebastos] “venerable, respeted”. In the Greek-speaking provinces of the Roman Empire, Σεβαστός was used as an equivalent the honorific Roman title Augustus (Lat. the honourable), which was given to the first Roman emperor, Oktavius, and later on, his successors.

Smokthinë, -a is, in our view, connected with the Serbian word smokva “fig”. The suffix -инë appears in almost all of the Balkans languages, as: Alb. Ballinë “façade”, Srb-Cr. bistrina “clarity”, Bulg. dolina “valley”, Rom. tulipina “trunk” and in modern Gr. provatina “sheep” (Xhuvani-Çabej, 1980). In this case, there is an extension of the suffix with a Ь: -ин- (< -инë). The characteristics of the location too tend to justify the placename “a place of fig-trees” or “fig-tree orchard” for “Smokhtinëc (the placename of a hill) was reknown for the cultivation of figs” (Jahaj, 2010: 61). Placenames after the flora - names of plants (trees, shrubs, brambles, coms etc.) that once used to grow, or still grow, in that place are common in
that area (Dhrimo, 2008). We have come across the Albanian placename Fiqëza “a place of figs” in Tragjas (also Gropa e Fikut “the Fig Cliff”) (Gjomemo, 2009: 158); in Brataj, Lugiu i Fiqve “the Figs Valley”; in Dukat there are about twenty placenames containing the word fig as a word group constituent; (See also: Čapo, 2009: 109.); in Qeparo, Fiqishqë (Sotiri, 2001: 110) etc.

Vllahinë, -a must relate to the noun Vlach. Sh. Demiraj (2008: 105) states that the early presence of the Vlachs or Aromanians in Albanian-speaking territories is shown, among other things, by the toponymic traces, such as the name of the village Armen in the vicinity of Vlora, the village name Rëmaj in the region of Pogradeci, as well as the name of the zone of Kolonja in the region of Korça or the village Kolonja near Lushnja, which is a name from the Romance -Latin colonia. The noun Vlach, today used in the sense “Aromanian”, according to Mihăescu, entered the Balkans territories in the time of the Byzantine Empire through the Slavs and the Germans (Ibid, p. 106); however, it must have come into Albanian through the Slavs. The naming vllah, according to R. Doçi (2009: 228), can be met today as the name of some villages and other etnonyms wherever Albanians live in the Balkans and there are about twenty etnonyms wherever Albanians live in the Balkans through the Slavs. The naming vllah, vlahinja - “Vlach” (m. and f.). The present inhabited location is relatively new, but this could be explained by the fact that Vlach shepherds used to live in the area. The placename of likatund in the vicinity of Vlora is also related to the noun Vlach, though it originated in the time of the Ottoman Empire. Eflik-katune, or “Eflak village”, like the village Filakë in the area of Durrësi, inhabited by Vlachs, is related, according to K. Luka (SF, 1976/1, 150), with the word filakë, the Turkish eflak for Vlachs.

4. Word formation

Concerning the word formation of these toponyms, we will only analyze the way through suffixation. The most common Slavic suffixes for the toponyms of this area, as in all Albanian, are -ovë (< -ov), -icë (< -içë) dhe -inë (< -inë), and less widespread, the Greek -aq (< -aksi). These suffixes form names of places of inhabitation, crop fields, hills, pastures, streams etc. following are a few toponyms with these suffixes.

Toponyms with the Slavic suffix -ovë: Bestrovë, Buburovë (M.), Çipovë (Ve.), Drubovë (Mat.), Gjirovë (Ma.), Kërkovë, Kocovë (Ve.), Kuçubovë (Ve.), Kunjovë (Bo.), Kushovë (Gu.), Leskovë (Bo.), Lugovë (Vë.), Markovë (Bo.), Mavrovë, Penkovë, Shajnovë (Gj.), Sherbovë (La.), Strohovë (Vë.), Tërbovë (Vë.), Treblovë, Xjogovë (Tr.) etc.

Toponyms with the Slavic suffix -icë: Amonicë, Azvenicë (Ra.), Babicë, Bilanicë (Gu.), Bushkavicë (Gu.), Çeçenicë (Vë.), Ćravnicë (Gu.), Buhavicë (Ve.), Bushkavicë (Gu.), Drashovicë, Driveshnicë (Vë.), Gericë (Vë.), Greminicë (Gu.), Gumenicë, Gjimoçicë (Mat.), Këndrevicë (Bo.), Košticë (Br.), Krechtovë (Ve.), Kremenicë (Br.), Kurpicë (Ve., Bo.), Lepenicë, Lepotenicë (Vë.), Maricë (Bo.), Markovicë (Bo.), Mavrovicë, Pazanicë (Ve.), Pleshovicë (Bo., Vë.), Plocicë (Gj.), Polanicë (Ve.), Policë (Br.), Qynanicë (Ve.), Ramicë, Shashicë (Ka.), Shushicë (Bo.), Siroticë (Tr.), Stogovicë (Br.), Vodicë etc.

Toponyms with the Slavic suffixes -inë, -tinë¹ and -ovinë: Cerkovinë, Radotinë (Ve.), Smokthinë, Sadovinë (Ve.), Skrofotinë, Vilahinë, Zhallovtinë (Ve.) etc.

We have also met a toponym formed with the Bulgarian diminutive suffix -ko: Kanelko (Gu.) – a brooklet and spring. In the “Defter of Vlora Sandjac” (February 1583), this suffix appears in Gumenica, as well as other localities of the Vlora region, in antroponyms of Slavonic origin, like: Petko, Tajko, Stajko, Tetko, Qirkë and Menko; at present, however, it occasionally appears as an affectionate ending in certain persons’ names like: Lesko, Zelko, Hasko, Saliko etc. (See also: Xhuvani; Çabej, 1980: 511).

Toponyms with the Greek suffix -aq; Gullaq (Gu.), Hanđaqa (Gu.), Kokoplqaq (Ve.), Livaq (Ve.), Llupaq (Ma.), Sollaq (Ve.), Shushulaq (Pe.), Vathilaq (Ve.) etc. This suffix is highly productive in Greek, and it is used to form diminutive or affectionate names, such as: ψιωμάκι (<ψιωμι “bread”), νεράκι (<νέρο “water”), ποτηράκι (<ποτηρί “glass”), παιδάκι (<παιδί “child”) etc.

¹ These suffixes are generally used to form names designating location, indicating a kind of land, plant, etc. the suffix –tinë is derived from -t-inë: ligatë + i-në = legatine, meaning ‘marshland’. Such placenames helped form a suffix –tinë, which later on generalized (Xhuvani; Çabej, 1980).
5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we could say that the toponymy of the Vlora region is rich, various, and it has plenty of unknown things yet to explore. It is, in its bulk, of native Albanian sources, which goes to show its being inhabited from most ancient times by Albanian population, although there is also a not that large number of toponyms of Slavonic and Greek origins, and still fewer Latin or Turkish, all of which can reasonably be expalained by the recognized historic conditions (Dhrimo, 1982: 140).

Furthermore, in order that the etimology of a toponym be satisfactory, an indepth comparative tracing of the toponyms of the Vlora region should be made with those of northern Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, as well as it Albanian diaspora regions in Greece and Italy.

Meanwhile, the necessity arises for the initiation of a research project to collect, systematize according to specific realms and study institutionally the toponyms of this region. Systematic research, recording and scientific discussion would pave the way for a toponomastic dictionary of the Vlora region.

References

[10] Dhrimo, A. (1982). Të dhëna nga toponimia e Labërisë si dëshmi për lashtësinë dhe njësinë e popullit shqiptar (Data from the toponymy of Labëria as witnesses to antiquity and unity of the Albanian people), in “Philologic Studies 3”.
[19] Omari, A. (2015). Nga fillimet e shkrimt e shqiptarët te ideja e një gj rhe përbashkët letetare shqipe (From the beginnings of the Albanian writing to the idea of a common literary Albanian), in “Philologic Studies 1-2”.