

Were the Bessans ancestors of the Albanians?

A new opinion on the ethnogenesis of the Albanian nation

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Abstract: The origin of the Albanians is a long-standing and unsolved problem. All the hypotheses proposed so far seem to be tentative and highly conjectural, and there are reasons not to accept them. The author proposes a new solution on the basis of an underestimated fact that the tongue of the Bessans, a Palaeo-Balkan tribe or nation, was the only ancient language (except Greek and Balkanic Latin) that is documented by written sources to have survived the great invasion of the Slavs (6th century A.D.). From the historical point of view, it is highly probable that Albanian (documented by native written texts since the 15th century A.D.) is a direct continuation of the Bessan language, and the Albanians (present on historical scene since the 11th century A.D.) are descendants of the Bessan population. A possible ethnic continuity existing between the Bessans and the Albanians can be supported by additional (e.g. geographical, linguistic) observations.

1. *The linguistic criteria for the origin of the Albanians.*

In our days, the Albanians occupy the territories that in the Ancient times were the seat of Epirotes (in the south), Illyrians (in the north) and Phrygians (somewhere in the mountains beyond Dyrrachium¹). The Albanian people are the only Palaeo-Balkan ethnos (excluding the Greek one) that has kept its own native language since the ancient time. Due only to a trick of fortune, the Albanians as a nation did not appear on the historical stage until the 11th century A.D.; their earlier history is not known. In this situation the relationship of the origin of the Albanian nation and its language to the ancient tribes of the Balkan Peninsula and their languages is still open².

When looking at the question of the origin of the Albanians and their language, one should take into account the following methodological criteria,

formulated on the linguistic and historical basis:

(A) THE GEOGRAPHICAL CRITERION, which allows us to make a highly probable assumption that the original cradle of the Albanian nation was somewhere deep within the Balkan Peninsula. This hypothesis is supported by the following considerations³.

1. the almost complete lack of native maritime terminology in Albanian⁴;

2. the Latin toponymy of the present-day Albania whose phonetic form is not consistent with the linguistic development of Albanian (e.g. *Scodra* > Alb. *Shkodër*, although the original group **sk-* yields Alb. *h-*; similarly, *Aulon* > Alb. *Vlorë/Vlonë*, although the original **ō* produces Alb. *e*)⁵;

3. numerous structural and lexical similarities with Roumanian (about 80 words of pre-Latin origin shared by both languages)⁶.

(B) THE LEXICAL CRITERION: At the beginning of its development, Albanian got in touch with Greek, borrowing a few cultural and technical terms such as *lakër* 'cabbage' (<Gk. *λάχανον* n. 'garden-herb, vegetable') or *mokër* 'quern' (<Gk. *μηχανή* f. 'contrivance, esp. machine for lifting weights and the like, quern')⁷. Those borrowings indicate a comparatively close (but rather not direct) proximity of Greeks and Proto-Albanians in the ancient times. On the other hand, the Albanian vocabulary lacks native maritime terminology, while at the same time having terminology connected with the mountain physiography and mountain shepherding.

(C) THE CRITERION OF BELONGING TO THE CENTUM OR SATEM LANGUAGES: Albanian develops Indo-European palatal consonants **k̑* **g̑* **g̑h* into spirants *th* *dh*, and thus it belongs to the satem languages. For some time, Albanian kept the differentiation between guttural velar consonants (**k* **g* **gh*) and labiovelar stops (**kʷ* **gʷ* **ghʷ*)⁸, which is a proof that originally it must have been on the periphery

of the reach of spirantization of the palatal stops and it must have been in direct contact with centum languages of the Paleo-Balkan or central group.

2. *The Bessans as ancestors of the Albanian people*

Basing on these criteria, one can make the following reasoning concerning the ethnogenesis of the Albanian nation.

Firstly, one can doubt the Illyrian origin because of the allochthonism of the Albanians and the satm-quantity of their language⁹. Due to the same reason, one should also reject the Epirotic-Macedonian hypothesis¹⁰.

Secondly, there is no doubt that the centum-like Phrygian, plentifully documented thanks to glosses and inscriptions (namely the Old Phrygian ones from the Roman times), cannot be thought to have been an ancestor of Albanian.

Thirdly, one should rather doubt the Mysian connections of the Albanians as the Mysian were most closely connected with the Phrygian population (and thus were a people separate from the Dacians both in the linguistic and in cultural respect, which brings Georgiev's Daco-Mysian hypothesis in question¹¹).

Fourthly, the Dacian origin of the Albanian nation seems not to be very convincing for several reasons. The character of the doubts is geographical (Dacia was on the different side of the Danube in the relation to the present-day Albania), historical (the short time of the Dacian-Roman cohabitation; extermination of the Dacian people, etc.) and linguistic, especially lexical (the Dacian botanic terminology is to great extent different from the Albanian one, cf. e.g., Dac. *σέρβα*, *seva* f. 'elder' as against Alb. *ashë* 'Ilex aquifolium'; *Tussilago farfara*¹²).

Thus if we leave out some small tribes of obscure origin, e.g. Mygdonians¹³, Dardanians and Paeonians¹⁴, the only hypothesis left is the Thracian one, which to the smaller or larger extent satisfies all the identification criteria mentioned above. The range of possibilities can be effectively limited by taking into account an additional criterion:

(D) THE DISTANCE FROM THE SEA COAST (this criterion is fully justified by the lack of maritime terminology in Albanian).

After the seaside tribal connections of the Gets, Odryses and Krobyses have been ruled out in this way,

we come to the probable conclusion that the Albanians may be descendants either of the Triballians living near the Danube or the Bessans living in the Rhodope Mountains. The second possibility seems more acceptable because of the proximity of the Bessan tribal seat and the present-day Albania.

The conclusion about the Bessan origin of the Albanians can be supported by different reasoning, see below.

3. *The historical continuity: Bessan-Albanian*

The question of the ethnogenesis of the Albanians can be looked at also from the point of view of historical continuity. Let us notice that if we exclude Greek and Balkanic Latin, Albanian was the only one among all the ancient languages of the Balkans to survive the Slavic invasion. This being so, one should ask if the historical sources mention, even very briefly, an ancient language (beside Greek and Latin) being used in the Balkans in the period of the great expansion of the Slavs.

The sources tell us unanimously that in the 6th century A.D. the language of the Bessans was used. The following are mentioned¹⁵:

1. a "Bessan monastery" in Constantinople;
2. three monks in a monastery on the Sinai who knew the language of the Bessans ("tres abbates, scientes linguas, hoc est Latinam, Bessam et Graecam, Syriacam et Aegyptiacam");
3. a chapel on the Jordan devoted to prayer in the language of the Bessans.

Bessan being the only language (except Greek and Balkanic Latin) that is known for sure to have survived the great invasion of the Slavs, it should be seen as possible that Albanian is a direct continuation of the language of the Bessans, and the Albanians are descendants of the Bessan people. From the view-point of methodology, such a possibility seems to be immaculate (historical continuity: Bessans - Albanians), and, what is more, it is consistent with the general conclusions drawn from different identification criteria.

4. *The Bessan-Albanian lexical similarity.*

The hypothesis of the origin of the Albanians presented here needs checking in the field of linguistics.

Unfortunately, nothing sure can be said on the language of the Bessans besides the general statement that it was perhaps a representative of the Thracian

tongue, and thus a satəm language. It was used in the closest vicinity of such centum languages as Macedonian, Phrygian, Illyrian, Paeonian, and also Greek and Epirotic, which is consistent with the observations made earlier (see Sect. 1c) that Proto-Albanian must have been spoken on the boundary of the centum-satəm division.

As far as I know, only one gloss, nominally described as belonging to the language of the Bessans, has survived in the ancient sources: ἀσᾶ (=ἄκροφυλλον, i.e. 'colt's foot, *Tussilago farfara*': Diosc.3, 112R [W.2, 124]¹⁶). This gloss has an evident relation to the Albanian term *ashë, -ja*, meaning 'colt's foot' on the one hand and '*Ilex aquifolium*' on the other¹⁷. This coincidence is striking both phonetically (Alb. *ë* is a middle vowel, not clearly articulated, resembling Roum. *ă* and Bulg. *ъ*) and semantically. Both terms, I suppose, continue the Indo-European arboreal term **ǵh₂dʰéwa* (f.) 'elder, *Sambucus nigra* L.¹⁸, cf. Gk. ἀκτέα (f.) and ἀκτέος (m.) 'elder', Attic ἀκτῆ (f.), borrowed into Latin *acte* (f) 'elder', Dacian σεβα, *seva* (f.) 'elder', Arm. *hac*'i (gen.sg. *hac'eac*) 'ash-tree' and Baltic **ševd* 9f.) '*Sambucus nigra*', documented by the Jatvingian *sjale* [s'eve] and Lithuanian *seivā-mėdis*, *sėiv-medis* (m.) 'elder-tree' (cf. Lith. *medis* 'tree').

If the proposed etymology were correct, the Bessan-Albanian similarity would be much bigger due to the common semantic change: '*Sambucus nigra*' > '*Ilex aquifolium*' > '*Tussilago farfara*'¹⁹. Stating a significant lexical similarity between the language of the Bessans and Albanian that seems to prove their genetic relationship, one cannot overlook the semantic and phonetic divergence between Dacian σεβα, *seva* f. 'elder' and the Bessan-Albanian term ἀσᾶ—*ashë* '*Ilex aquifolium*; *Tussilago farfara*' (both from IE. **ǵh₂dʰéwa* f. 'elder, *Sambucus nigra*', cf. Sect.2).

5. Summary and conclusions

In conclusion, it should be said that the possibility of the Albanian nation descending from the tribe of the Bessans, living in the Rhodope Mountains, suggested for the first time in this paper, promises now the best research prospects. It is definitely much better founded than the ephemeral Daco-Mysian hypothesis or the 'nationalist' Illyrian one; therefore, at the present state of research, it seems to be particularly worth noting and working on if not totally accepted. Having presented here my point of view, I am looking forward

to hearing opinions of the researchers dealing with the topics connected with Albanian, historians as well as archeologists and linguists.

NOTES

1. See W.Pajakowski, "Frygowie na półwyspie Bałkańskim" [The Phrygians in the Balkan Peninsula], *Eos* 68, 1980, pp.189-215 (in Polish). Compare also R.Ködderitzsch, "Brygisch, Päonisch, Makedonisch", *LingBalk* 28, fasc.4, pp.17-41.

2. Cf. R.Ködderitzsch, "Gedanken zur Ethnogenese der Albaner(aus sprachlicher Sicht)", *LingBalk* 31, No.3-4, 1988, pp.105-116 (henceforth: Gedanken), and P.di Giovine, "Tracio, dacio ed albanese nella prospettiva genealogica", *RAI, Serie VIII*, vol.34, fasc.7-12, 1979, pp.397-411 (both with literature). See also W.Cimochowski, "Język albański" [The Albanian Language], *Acta BaltSlav* 17, 1986 (publ.1987), pp.17-68, esp.17-20 (in Polish).

3. See L.Bednarczuk, "Indoeuropejskie języki Bałkańców" [The Indo-European Languages of the Balkans], in: Bednarczuk, L., ed., *Języki indoeuropejskie* [The Indo-European Languages], t.I, Warszawa 1986, pp.469-513, esp.486-487 (in Polish), who generally follows G.Weigand, "Sind die Albaner Nachkommen der Illyrier oder der Thraker?", *Balkan Archiv* 3, 1927, pp.227-251.

4. G.Stadt Müller, *Forschungen zur albanischen Frühgeschichte*, Wiesbaden 1966, p.168, points out that "die albanische Sprache alle Ausdrücke für Fischfang und Schifffahrt aus fremden Sprachen, aus dem Lateinischen, Slavischen und Türkischen entlehnt hat". See R.Katičić, *Ancient Languages of the Balkans*, The Hague - Paris 1976, p.186.

5. See most recently Ködderitzsch, *Gedanken*, p.114.

6. Although this problem was discussed in many books and articles (see a very full and up-to-date review by A.Vraciu, "Sovremennoe sostojanie voprosa o substratnykh elementakh rumynskogo jazyka" [The contemporary state of the question on the substratal elements of the Roumanian language], *LingBalk* 11, fasc.1, 1966, pp.71-107 and 11, fasc.2, 1967, pp.21-56, with abundant citation of the literature), the question of Albanian-Roumanian language relation remains to be explained, see Cimochowski, *op.cit.*, p.22-24.

7. As regards Greek loans in Albanian, A.Thumb's article "Altgriechische Elemente des Albanischen", *IF* 26, 1909, pp.1-20, remains the classic treatment for the ancient period. For recent literature, see E.Çabej, "Einige Grundprobleme der älteren albanischen Sprachgeschichte", *StudAlb*, 1, 1964, pp.69-89, esp.83-87; the same, "Griechisch-albanische Sprachbeziehungen", *StudAlb* 1981, fasc.1, pp.51-61; G.Uhlich, *Neugriechische Lehnwörter im Albanischen*, Berlin, 1964; the same, "Die griechischen Lehnwörter im Albanischen. Ein Überblick", *Das Altertum* 15, 1969, fasc.3, pp.169-175; H.Ölberg, "Griechisch-albanische Sprachbeziehungen", *IBK, Band II*, Innsbruck 1972, pp.33-64; X.Lioshi, *Greek-Albanian lexical contacts*, *Studies in Greek Linguistics. Proceedings of the 11th Annual Meeting of the*

Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Philosophy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 26-28 April 1990, Thessaloniki 1991, pp.23-36.

8. So recently E.P.Hamp, "The Indo-European obstruent features and phonotactic constraints", in: Vennemann Th., ed., *The New Sound of Indo-European. Essays in Phonological Reconstruction*, Berlin - New York 1989, pp.209-214, who follows H.Pedersen, "Die Gutturale in Albanesischen", *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 36, 1900, pp.277-340. Cf. also Katičić, *op.cit.*, p.63.

9. I cannot agree with the ambiguous arguments by W.Cimochowski and others, who are adherents of the Illyrian hypothesis. In his posthumous article, W. Cimochowski, *op.cit.*, pp.22, thinks that "from the linguistic point of view [...] the Illyrian origin of the Albanian language is doubtful" ("Z punktu widzenia językoznawczego [...] pochodzenie iliryskie języka albańskiego jest wątpliwe").

10. M.Kokoszko and K.T.Witzczak, "Ancient Epirus and its inhabitants", *LingBalk* 34, No.1-2, 1991, pp.41-49 (with references).

11. The hypothesis of the Daco-Mysian affiliation of Albanian is based on comparative phonology of the two languages, cf. V.Georgiev, "Albanisch, Dakisch-Mysisch und Rumänisch - Die Herkunft der Albaner", *LingBalk* 2, 1960, pp.1-19; the same, *Trakite i texnijat ezik* [The Thracians and their language], Sofia 1977, pp.193ff. (in Bulgarian); the same, *Introduction to the History of Indo-European Languages*, Sofia 1981, pp.120ff. But I must agree with Katičić, *op.cit.*, p.187, that "the comparative phonology of Daco-Mysian is so conjectural that no far-reaching conclusions should be drawn from it". See a critical review of the Daco-Mysian hypothesis by E.P.Hamp, "The position of Albanian", *Ancient Indo-European Languages*, Berkeley 1966, pp.97-121, esp.107. See also E.P.Hamp, "Albanian", in: *Current Trends in Linguistics*, ed. by Thomas A.Sebeok, vol.9: *Linguistics in Western Europe*, The Hague - Paris 1972, pp.1626-1692, esp.1653ff.

12. K.T.Witzczak, "Indo-European *d₂k₂ptwa 'elder, *Sambucus nigra* L.' and its Baltic descendants", *Linguistica Baltica* 1, 1992, pp.201-211, esp.208. see also below, Sect.4.

13. I.Duridanov, "Die Vorgeschichte Mygdoniens im Lichte der Sprache", *StudBalc* 5, 1971, pp.199-205.

14. I.Duridanov, "Die Stellung des Pöonischen", in: Graur, A. *et alii*, eds., *Actes du Xe Congres International des Linguistes*. Bucarest, 28 août - 2 septembre 1967, Bucarest 1970, pp.759-764; Katičić, *op.cit.*, pp.116-120; W.Pajakowski, "Die Herkunft der Pöoner. Geschichte und Forschungsstand. Forschungsperspektiven", *Eos* 72, 1984, pp.59-74.

15. See Katičić, *op.cit.*, p.136, n.229, and Bednarczuk, *op.cit.*, p.477. Compare also L.Bednarczuk, "Starożytnie języki Bałkanów" [The Ancient Languages of the Balkans], *Balkanica Posnaniensia* 1, 1984, pp.21-37 (in Polish).

16. See G.Sotiroff, "A tentative glossary of Thracian words", *The Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 8, 1963, pp.97-110, esp.105, and V.P.Neroznak, *Paleobalkanskie jazyki* [The Palaeo-Balkan Languages], Moskva 1978, p.41 (In Russian).

17. Cf. Witzczak, *op.cit.*, p.41.

18. Witzczak, *op.cit.*, p.208. For discussion on the semantical problems, see especially I.R.Danka and K.T.Witzczak, "Some Remarks on the Albanian Vocabulary in the Palaeo-Balkan and Indo-European View", to appear in: *Analecta Indoeuropaea Cracoviensia Ioannis Safarewicz memoriae dicata, edenda curavit W.Smoczynski*, Kraków 1955.

19. Probably the Bessan term *doā* (<**dośa*) meant not only 'colt's foot, *Tussilago farfara*' but also '*Ulex aquifolium*'; the lack of confirmation of the latter meaning is easily explained by the incompleteness of the data and by the accidental character of the bequeathed vocabulary.