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Tchantouria, Teimuraz; Gvantseladze, Revaz

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# Kartvelian substrate toponyms in Abkhazia

Teimuraz Gvantseladze and Revaz Tchantouria

In this paper we discuss a specific Kartvelian model of toponyms, using names of plants without any affixes as toponyms. This model is observed almost all over the Georgian territory. It has been noted on the Abkhazian territory as well, but is not found in the Abkhaz language. We suggest that *Sukhumi*, *Gagra* and *Tkvarcheli* follow this model.

Since the middle of the 19th century a number of toponyms of Greek, Russian, Armenian and other origins appeared in the territory of present-day Abkhazia. That was due to the compulsory migration of a major part of the Abkhaz population to Turkey and other countries of the Near East. Various ethnic groups settled in the mentioned territory and these processes were evidently forced by the government of the Russian Empire. According to several historical chronicles and documents, different ethnic and demographic situations can be distinguished in the territory of present-day Abkhazia, during different historical periods up to the time when it was fully occupied by the Russian Empire in 1878. Greek, Latin, Old Georgian, Arabian, Armenian, Turkish, Slavic and West European ancient documents and geographic maps show that before the 1st–2nd centuries AD, present-day Abkhazia was populated by Kolkhis (Megrel-Laz) and Svan tribes. Beginning from the 1st–2nd centuries AD, the first Abkhaz ancestors appear in this territory. The processes of occupation, assimilation, territorial extension and aboriginal migration were set off and gradually intensified, especially during the period of the complete demolishing of the Georgian statehood (at the end of the 15th century). At the end of the 18th century, the Abkhaz population and its language spread all over the territory of present-day Abkhazia, and the languages of the indigenous Megrel-Svan population fell under the influence of Abkhaz. Evidence of a Kartvelian (Kolkhis) substratum can be observed in the phonological and morphological system in almost every part of speech (especially noun and verb morphology), in the syntax, and in the lexicon of the Abkhaz dialects.

## Plant names as models for toponyms

The specific Kartvelian model of using plant names as toponyms without any affixes has been noted in the Abkhazian territory but is not found in the Abkhaz language. As illustrated by the following Georgian toponyms, this model is observed almost all over the Georgian territory:

*c'nori* (a small town in Kakheti, Signaghi region), *c'q'nori* (a village in Imereti, Tkibuli region) – compare both these toponyms with the Georgian word for ‘willow, *Salix alba*’, *c'nori*;

*č'andari* (some villages in Kartli and Kakheti, Gurjaani and Akhalgori regions) – cf. the word *č'andari* as the name of ‘plane-tree, *Populus gracilis*’ in the Kartlian, Pshavian, Meskhetian, Kakhetian and Javakhetian dialects of Georgian;

*q'vavili* (a village in Kartli, Dusheti region) – cf. Georgian *q'vavili* ‘a flower’;

*dgnali* (village in Kartli, Dusheti region) – cf. Georgian *(m)dgnali/ dgnari* ‘*Salix caprea*’;

*cxemna* (village in Achara, Keda region) – cf. Georgian *cxemna/cxemla/rcxmela* ‘Caucasian horn-beam, *Carpinus caucasica*’;

*cacxvi/cxacxu* (village in Samegrelo, Zugdidi region) – cf. Georgian *cacxvi*, Megrelian *cxacxu*, ‘lime-tree’;

*bia* (village in Samegrelo, Khobi region) – cf. Megrelian *bia* ‘quince, *Cydonia oblonga*’ (Georgian *k'omši*);

*ipx* (village in Svaneti, Mestia region) – cf. Svan *ipx* ‘*Pteridium tauricum* (fern)’.

As we have mentioned above, the same model of naming dwelling places is observed in the whole territory of present-day Abkhazia, e.g. *cxumi* (the Old Georgian name of *Soxumi*, the main town of Abkhazia), *gagra*, *genc'viši*, *merxeuli*, *k'amani*, *k'op'it'i*, *t'q'varčeli*, *merk'ula*.

## Sukhumi

The main town of Abkhazia which is nowadays called *Soxumi* has had different names in different historical periods. In ancient times, Greek and Roman authors knew it is *Dioskuria* or *Sebastopolis*. In Georgian it was first mentioned in the 30s of the 8th century by one of the Old Georgian chroniclers Žuansher Žuansheriani. In *Kartlis cxovreba* (Old Georgian Chronicles) he uses the Georgian word-form *cxumi* to name the town. This form was used until the middle of the 19th century. In the Arabian and Turkish sources the forms *suxumu* and *suxum*, respectively, can be observed

instead of *cxumi*. Russian *Suxumi* has been derived from Turkish *suxum* which in its turn became the source for the modern Georgian *soxumi*. The Abkhaz call this town *aq'°a*. This form is not mentioned anywhere in the old documents, and its etymology is still vague. The megrelized form of *aq'°a*, i.e. *aq'u-žixa* (cf. Megrelian *žixa*, Georgian *cixe* 'fortress') is first observed in the sources of the second part of the 18th century when the assimilation of the aboriginal Kartvelian and moved Abkhaz population was coming to its end.

There are different suggestions for the toponym *cxumi*. We support one of them which says that *cxum* is a Svan word denoting a plant (singular form), cf. Svan *cxum/cxəm/cxwim*, Georg. *cxem-la*, Megr.-*cxem-ur-i/cxim-ur-i*, Laz *cxem-ur-i/m-cxeb-r-i* (Ingoroq'va 1954:157; Č'umburize 1971:207; Fähnrich & Saržvelaze 1990:402-3). Each of these words denotes the Caucasian hornbeam. It must be noted that the same stem *cxum* with the plural suffix *-är* (in Svan) is acknowledged as the name of a village in Svaneti *cxum-är* (Mestia region). In the Old Georgian historical documents, the stem *cxum* has variants such as *cxom-i* and *cxem-i* (*Kartlis cxovreba* 2, 111, 156). The *cxom* variant is derived from the diphthong in Svan *cxwim*. As for *cxem*, it comes from Svan *cxəm* by changing *ə* into *e* (there is no *ə* in Georgian, and for this reason this sound is expressed in different ways). The *cxom* variant is also observed in some Georgian surnames such as *cxom-ar-ia*, *cxom-el-i(s)-ze*, which means 'a child of a citizen of Sukhumi'.

Thus it follows that the ancient *Dioscuria* or *Sebastopolis* alongside with Svan *cxum(i)* should be considered the old names of the town of Sukhumi, not the Abkhaz *aq'°a* which does not appear until the late middle ages.

## Gagra

Gagra is situated in the North-West of Georgia, at the Georgian-Russian frontier, on the Black Sea coast. The Abkhaz linguist Kh. Bgažba considers this toponym to be of Abkhaz origin. He separates the root *gag* and the toponym-producing suffix *-ra*, characteristic for Abkhaz (Bgažba 1964:258, 260). The same root has been separated by the Georgian scientist P. Ingoroq'va, but he considers it to be of Georgian origin and identifies it with other Georgian geographic names such as *gagi* (a town in the historical region Kvemo-Kartli), *gagvi* (a village in Samtskhe region), *gogareni/ gagareni* (a part of Kvemo Kartli). P. Ingoroq'va suggests *gagari* as the proto-form of *gagra* where the Georgian suffix *-ar* is evident, cf. *xid-i* > *xid-ar-i* 'bridge' (Ingoroq'va 1954:149). Another Georgian linguist Z. Č'umburize supposes that *gagra* is an Abkhaz toponym involving *gag* as a personal name or a tribe

name (Č'umburize 1971:156). None of these hypotheses seems well reasoned. Bgažba and Ingoroq'va separate the same root from quite different viewpoints, but they do not show its semantics. On the other hand, the suggestion by Č'umburize is insufficient as he separates the same root *gag*, but does not take into consideration that no such root has ever been acknowledged as a name of a person or a tribe in Abkhaz. A different hypothesis is suggested by the Georgian historiographer T. Mibčuanī who supposed that *gagra* is of Svan origin. *gak'-ra* in Svan means 'place where nut-trees grow', cf. Svan *gak'* 'nut' (Mibčuanī 1989:282). We think that this hypothesis is acceptable but still needs some elaboration.

First, *gak'-ra* means not only 'place where nut-trees grow' in Svan, but 'nut-tree' as well. The suffix *-ra* is observed in Svan in words denoting trees (*zesxv/zesx(v)-ra* 'lime-tree, *Tilia*'; *heb-ra* 'cherry-tree, *Cerasus avium*'; *žih-ra* 'oak, *Quercus*', etc.). It must, however, be noted that according to N. Marr the *-ra* suffix in Svan is borrowed from Abkhaz. We cannot support this idea, since the morphological inventory can be borrowed from one language to another only on the basis of strong influence. No signs of such Abkhaz influence can be observed in Svan, even in the lexicon, whereas Svan influence is evident in Abkhaz at least in the substrate toponyms. Accordingly, the origin of the *-ra* suffix must be defined in a different way. Here we accept the suggestion by H. Fähnrich about the Kartvelian (Georgian-Svan) origin of this suffix (Fähnrich 1985:73). Thus, *gagra* must be of the same toponym model as the toponyms discussed above.

From the Svan viewpoint, the toponym *gagra* can be discussed in another way as well. The well-known Georgian historiographers T. Žordania and E. Taq'aišvili have discovered a 14th century document in which an old variant of the toponym *gagra*, namely *gagari*, is noted (Žordania 1897:199; Taq'aišvili 1913-14:133). On Italian maps dating from the same century we meet *Cacari/Caccara* (Lavrov 1982:174). The presence of a postpositioned *-i* vowel obviously points to its Kartvelian origin (*-i* is the nominative marker in Kartvelian languages). Comparing the 14th century forms, we come to the question of which of them is older: the one with *g* or with *k'* (Ital. *c*). There are no Abkhaz literary sources for solving this question, because of lack of traditions and data from etymological studies on the root *gag*. On the other hand, Svan preserves very interesting data in this connection: a nut is named with a root involving *g* as well as *k'* in Svan. We have such variants as *gak'/gäk'* and moreover, *k'ak'*. For instance, the inhabitants of the Svan village Lakhamula often use this proverb in everyday speech: *molad k'ak'aš*

*naq'row eseri ž'olmärg* 'a nut-shell can also be useful' (Davitiani 1973:100), cf. Georgian *k'ak'-al-i*, Megr. *k'ak'-an-i* 'nut-tree; nut'. Obviously, there was a root *k'ak'* in Svan also, and then the variant *gak'* developed. The forms with the consonant *c* (< *k'*) on the Italian maps are older than the derived Georgian form *gagra* with the consonant *g*. Still, all those variants are observed in the same 14th century, which points to the fact that the process *k'>g* in Svan had not come to its end at that time. As for the element *-ar* in *k'ak'-ar* > *gak'-ar* > *gag-ar*, it may be either a Svan variant of the Georgian *-al* suffix in the form *k'ak'-al-i* or the plural suffix *-ar/-är* in Svan (cf. *cxum* > *cxum-är*). If this suggestion is correct, the derivation *gagar* > *gagra* must be based on the same Svan basis, the presence of the *-ra* suffix in the plant names supporting this suggestion (cf. Italian *Cacari* and *Caccara*).

## Tkvarcheli

We have a quite different suggestion on the etymology of the toponym Tkvarcheli. I. Q'ipšize considered the Megrelian variant *t'k'varčeli* to be the original one, explaining its meaning as 'white stair' (*t'k'va* 'stair', *če* 'white') (Q'ipšize 1914:329). This seems to be a false etymology so far as the element *-l* is not explained. In Ingoroq'va's (1954:172) opinion, *t'k'varčeli* means 'a stair laid down', this also being very close to a false etymology.

K. Lomtatzize has a quite different point of view. She separates the Georgian component *t'q'via* > *t'q'va* 'lead ore', and the second component *rčel*, which she considers to be the regular Megrelian correspondence of the Old Georgian root *rec* (the verb *da-rec-va*), in the meaning of 'lay, spread' (Lomtatzize 1994:9). It is true that in the surroundings of the town Tkvarcheli (*T'q'varčeli*) the coal ore has been exploited from the beginning of the 20th century, but before that nobody knew about the presence of that rich ore. Tkvarcheli was a small unknown village and the exploitation began only in 1935.

Therefore we suppose that the etymology of *t'q'varčeli* can be explained in the following way: it is a plant name in the singular in Megrelian, *t'q'varčelia/t'k'varčelia* 'cyclamen' (in Georgian *q'očivarda*, 'Cyclamen vernum'). The word *t'q'varčelia* is a compound. Its first component is the Old Georgian form of the Georgian stem *t'q'avi*: *t'q'avi* < *\*t'q'ov/\*t'k'ov* 'skin, peel', which is reconstructed by T. Gamq'relize and V. Ivanov (1984:908-9). The second component is *rec* (*da-rec-va* 'spread, lay') separated by K. Lomtatzize and its Megrelian correspondence *rčel*. As for the component *-ia*, it is often present in plant names (cf. Megrel. *k'op'eš-ia* 'pumpkin', *k'al-ia* 'a



kind of plant', *žampezi-ia* 'a kind of grass' and so on). The meaning of the plant name *t'q'varčelia* is then 'with spread, layed down skin', from *\*t'q'ov-rčel-ia*. This derivation is easy to explain by phonetic processes (sound complexes *t'q'ov* > *t'q'va*). This etymology is supported by the natural characteristics of the plant, which has thick, leather-like leaves laid down on the earth around its stem (*Georgian encyclopaedia* 10:660). We suppose that the form *\*t'q'ovrčelia* initially did not have the *-ia* suffix (cf. *k'vadaci/k'vadaci-ia*) and that the suffixed form became a toponym. As for the Abkhaz name *t'q'arčal* it is derived by the rules of adapting foreign forms characteristic for Abkhaz. The complex *t'q'/t'q'°* is not found in Abkhaz words, only in kartvelisms (Abkh. *a-t'q'°a* < Georg. *t'q've* 'slave, prisoner', Abkh. *a-t'q'°acra* < Megr. *t'q'vaci* 'thunder', etc.). The Megrelian stressed vowel *e* is regularly changed to *a* in Abkhaz. Moreover, the Abkhaz form *t'q'arčal* could not appear earlier than the 17th–18th centuries, because there was no Abkhaz population on the left bank of the river Kodori.

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