

On *Ragūsa* “Dubrovnik”

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This is an article about a place name: *Ragūsa* “Dubrovnik” in South Croatia. The name is of an unknown origin. Although over the time various etymologies have popped up, nothing definitive was ever reached. Ragusa remained a riddle. Recently it was proposed by a group of Albanian scholars that it came from Proto-Albanian **rāguša* “grape”, a substratum word of Mediterranean origin.

1 Introduction

Many a storm has raged over Ragusa, a longtime capital of land steeped in ancient history, myth and poetry. Not far off the Greeks had a famous oracle. Not far off is the part of Illyria whence Teuta and Genthios bade the Romans defiance in the III and the II c. BC. Their efforts unsuccessful: Illyria remained under the sway of Rome. When the Empire was divided, Illyria naturally fell together with the rest of Byzantium and during the Middle Ages it shared the shifting fortune of the Balkan peninsula. First came the Goths and then the Celts and it wasn't long until arrival of the Slavs and consequent foundation of Ragusa by Romans who had fled headlong from a nearby *oppidum* called Epidaurum.¹

At first the Romans named their new home *Lau* which according to Porphyrogenetos in the dialect of Epidaurum stood for L *lābes* “cliff”. Soon after it was naturally changed to *Ragūsa* by means of phonological decay. Incredible though it may seem, such is the Emperor's account.² Derived from it is one of the rare terms from Balkans which has penetrated the English language: *argosy* (<*ragusea sc. navis, nave*) is a “merchant ship” and a word often used by Shakespeare.³

Ever since Porphyrogenetos made a reference to *lābes* in relation to *Ragūsa*, a notion of Latin origin (in which folk etymology played an unforgivable part too) stuck closely with the natives. The people of Rome used to believe themselves to be of Trojan descent and likewise the people of Ragusa believed themselves to be of Roman descent.⁴

¹ Cf. Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, *De administrando imperio*, c. 29.

² *Ibidem*. He hinted that “the city of Ragusa is not called Ragusa in the tongue of the Romans, but, because it stands on cliffs, it is called in Roman speech *lau* ‘the cliff’.”

³ Cf. *King Henry VI* 3, 2, 6; *Merchant of Venice* 1, 3; *The Taming of the Shrew* 2, 1.

⁴ Cf. Ilija Crijević, *Ode in Ragusam*, vv. 1–4: *Ocelle mi Ragusa, ocelle mi patria / Soli marisque, quod solum omne circuit, / Propago vera, verior colonia, / Bis prolesque Quiritium.*

Investigators who speculated about the origin of the name were no less hypnotized by the idea. It took them a long while to reconsider the etymology which in spite all efforts could not be credited with certainty with respect to phonology. Their reconsideration only prolonged the uncertainty since its sole outcome was that Porphyrogenetos was wrong and that the name wasn't Latin after all. Petar Skok, a noted savant in the field of Romance etymology, assailed to solve the matter twice and twice came to the same conclusion epitomized in *Etimologijski rječnik* (1973:98): “Što znači Ragusa, to se danas još ne može znati“.

2 Albanian theory

Recently it was proposed by Bardhyl Demiraj (2008), Eric Hamp (2000) and Vladimir Orel (1998) that what is reflected in *Ragūsa* is PALb **rāguša* “grape”. The notion of “Grapeville” was first brought up by Eqrem Çabej⁵ for incidentally it happens that *Rrush*⁶ “Ragusa” and *rrush* “grapes” sound alike in modern Albanian.

PALb **rāguša* is clearly related to *rhāg-* of G *rháx*, *rhāgós* “grapes”. It in turn reminds of L *racēmus* and M *rhámata* and undoubtedly originates from a substratum stretching (at best) over Greece and consequently Asia Minor, Epirus and Italy. This language is supposed to have been spoken in the area before homecoming of the Proto-Greek speakers. After settling down the Greeks borrowed a significant number of words such as (*w*)*elaía* “olive”, *pýrgos* “tower” *thálassa* “sea” etc. Possible loanwords also cover terms relative to wine production and grape growing including (*w*)*oînos* “wine”, *ámpelos* “vine” and, of course, *rháx* “grapes”.

While undoubtedly traceable to a common source language, these words by no means make clear the structure of Mediterranean substratum. Efforts have been made, which aimed for elucidation of its characteristics, but these yielded no exact results most of the relevant information being still encircled in a perplexing nimbus of uncertainty.⁷

Regardless of the big picture, *Ragūsa*, as we have seen above, is said to come from PALb **rāguša*. A neat detail that fits this theory very well is a place called *Lòzica* just outside of Dubrovnik whose name echoes **rāguša* with reference to Cr *lòza* “vine”. Furthermore, given the fair resemblance of **rāguša* and *Ragūsa* there would seem to be no major issues. Though there are some trifles:

The gender PALb **rāguša* is masculine while *Rrush* “Ragusa” is feminine, This would require a change of PALb **rāguša* to **rāgušā*. The gender in Proto-Albanian does not generally shilly-shally about though there is some fluctuation such as Alb *lapë f.* “leaf” as compared with Lith *lāpas m.* “id.” and G *lopós m.* “shell”.

⁵ V. Çabej, E. 1976. *Studime etimologjike në fushë të shqipës.* I–III. Tiranë : Akademia e shkencve e RPS të Shqipërisë.

⁶ First mentioned by Pjetër Bogdani in *Cuneus prophetarum* II 1. 4, 6.

⁷ For a recent study cf. Beekes, R. S. P. 2007. *Pre-Greek : The Pre-Greek loans in Greek.* WWW : <http://www.indo-european.nl/>.

The number PALb **rāguša* is singular while Alb *rrush* “grapes” is *plurale tantum* and accordingly comes from PALb **rāgušai*. This is a most useful information as it indicates that the Romans who are supposed to have borrowed it would treat it like *Athēnae*, *Faesulae* etc. However *Ragūsae* is a no-show.

The accent Since zero ending of Alb *rrush* could only have come from unstressed *-ai*, Proto-Albanian form must have been a barytonon, more precisely a proparoxytonon. Yet as attested by Porphyrogenetos in the days of old *Raoýsē*, as he calls *Ragūsa*, is clearly not a pro- but a mere paroxytonon. Romans who, as we have said, are supposed to have borrowed it, would have left it a proparoxytonon since the paenultimate syllable of **rāgušā* is short.

There are still other trifles, *e. g.* the now-you-see-me-now-you-don’t *g* in *Ragusa* as opposed to *Raoýsē*. It would faithfully reflect the early Albanian loss of voiced intervocalic stops before the vowels contracted. But if that was the case, how would the Romans have restored it afterwards? And what about short stem vowel in *Ragūsa* as opposed to a long one in PALb **rāgušā*?

All things considered I can but dismiss the above-said theory.

3 Conclusions

A name should be interpreted within the system it belongs to, otherwise it’s all riddles in the dark. *Ragusa* belongs to a system which is made apparent by a strong lexical unity of loans and place names.⁸ It stretches over *Ragusa* and its immediate surroundings and does not contain names of Albanian origin. Looking for a possible cognate we find *Grāvōsa* “Grůž”.⁹ This place was for *Ragusa* what *Piraeus* was for *Athens* and *Ostia* for *Rome*.

Gravosa is not mentioned by Porphyrogenetos. *Ragusa*, as we have seen earlier, is. He calls it *Raoýsē*. Now, I believe there has been a fundamental mistake here: *Raoýsē* is quite obviously the name of *Grāvōsa*, not of *Ragusa*. Porphyrogenetos was no geographer. In the very same paragraph (*c.* 29) he confuses *Epidaurum* with *Salona*. The *-g-* from the middle of *Ragusa* was never lost and then resurrected because it is not the same word. And yet I believe that *Ragūsa* and *Grāvōsa* are essentially, in the origin, the same name.

It’s not a hunch. I suppose Porphyrogenetos learned of *Ragusa* via sailors or travelers from *Gravosa* but mistook it for *Ragusa*. On another occasion he might have inquired about the meaning of the name upon what he was told that actual *Ragusa* meant “cliff”. Writing years later he sought to explain the meaning and this is how he came up with the false etymology, namely *L lābes* “cliff” which made him speculate about *lau*.

⁸ Cf. Karaš, M. 1968. *Toponimia wysp elafickich na Adriatyku*. Warszawa: Ossolineum and Skok, P. 1950. *Slavenstvo i romanstvo na jadranskim otocima*. . Zagreb : JAZU.

⁹Petar Skok was the first to mention it in relation to *Ragūsa*, though vaguely, *cf.* 1931:477.

What we know for certain is this: *Ragūsa* “cliff” and *Grāvōsa* “?”. The matter is at hand: “cliff”, “stone” or “rock” in PIE is **g^wreHwo-*. I believe *Grāvōsa* is the same word, and so is *Ragūsa* though some of it got scrambled along the way. Both names have a peculiar suffix in common, perhaps to do with G -oys- [os] of uncertain provenience. Furthermore, both can be feminine (*Grāvōsa*, *Ragūsa*) and neuter (*Grāvōsium*, *Ragūsium*) which seems to be a regional trait of some kind, cf. *Pitaura* for *Epidaurum*.

Finally, an *encore* for the Albanian theory. It, as we have said, stems from the fact that *Rrush* “Ragusa” and *rrush* “grapes” sound alike in modern Albanian. There is a simple enough explanation: *Ragusa* was not borrowed *from* but *by* Albanians and *mutatis mutandis* fell together with an etymologically unrelated PALb **rāguša* “grape”.

A name should be interpreted within the system it belongs to even though it may be submerged beyond recognition for, when the riddle is solved, the submersion appears to be a clear case of *il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare*.



Slika 1: Map of Albania with Dubrovnik

4 Abbreviations

* stands for a form reconstructed. Alb stands for Albanian, Cr for Croatian, D for Dalmatian, G for Greek, L for Latin, Lith for Lithuanian, M for Macedonian, PAlb for Proto-Albanian, PIE for Proto-Indo-European. Other abbreviations are not used.

5 References

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