

## ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF BELJAK\*

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Professor France Bezlaj's Etymological Dictionary of the Slovene Language<sup>1</sup> is without doubt one of the most serious contributions produced by Slovene Slavic philology since the publication of Rajko Nahtigal's Slovanski jeziki (Ljubljana, 1938). Being a lifelong search into the roots of the Slovene language,<sup>2</sup> this dictionary is obviously more than an inventory of etymologies and references; its real value is in the premises, one would be tempted to say in the system, vulnerable as such a system may be, from which a great scholar analyzes his data and draws his conclusions. It is not our intention to challenge these premises. Far from it; what we would like to do in this short note is to bring a small detail and an alternative solution to one of Bezlaj's etymologies.

Beljak (German Villach, Friulan Vilac), the name of an important industrial and transportation center in Carinthia, is mentioned for the first time, in the Middle Ages, in 878 as Villach.<sup>3</sup> This form corresponds to the modern German /fillax/. Since German speakers arrived in this region not earlier than the ninth century, it is correctly assumed that the German form of the name derives from the Slavic form.<sup>4</sup> In absence of factual arguments to the contrary, it would be also possible to argue that the Slovene Beljak (earlier Biljak, today dialectally Bil'ak, gen. sg. "du Bláqa" [Rož] loc. sg. "v Biláci") was reshaped under the influence of the German and Latin medieval forms, which, themselves, were derived from an early medieval Slavic form, just as a number of modern Slovene toponyms seem to have been reshaped under the impact of late medieval German and Latin forms, which were derived from early medieval Slavic forms. For example, Koroško was shaped under the impact of Carantania.<sup>5</sup>

Professor Bezlaj says that Villach derives from Slavic \*bbl'akb, which in turn derives from Latin Bilachinium. He compares this oldest attested form with a Celtic anthroponym \*Bil(1)ius. The meaning of the root \*bilo- in Celtic is "happy, lively, healthy."<sup>6</sup> Although this etymology seems to

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be both plausible and elegant, still, we would like to propose a solution which, in our opinion, makes allowance for the presence of Celts as well as speakers of other Indo-European languages. We know that from around the middle of the seventh century the classical, presumably Celtic, ethnonyms *Carni* and *Norici* were used to denote Slavic peoples living on the territory of their ancient homonymic relatives.<sup>7</sup> Also, Professor Bezljaj's solution does not account for the -ach in the German name and belj- in the Slovene.

We start with Bezljaj's division of the name into the root *bbl'* and the suffix -akb. There is a problem with this suffix, for its German shape, -ach, does not seem to derive from the Slavic -akb. It could be argued that -akb became -ach in German mouths under the impact of an enormous number of German Norican and Raetian toponyms and hydronyms that end in -ach (*Toblach/Dobbiaco, Salzach, Biberach, Wertach, etc.*). However, we suggest that both the German and Slavic suffixes were -ach and -achb, respectively, rather than -akb, on the strength of the form *Fillah* which appears once and the form *Billah* which appears four times in *Idrisi*, a twelfth century Arab geographer.<sup>8</sup> It is possible that in this Arabic text we have the oldest attested Slovene form of the name; it could have been pronounced /*bě̌lax*/ by native speakers. Do these two forms reflect two sources, German and Slavic, respectively? The Friulan form, *Vilàc*, could derive from the German form, or directly from Latin. The modern Slovene form may have been shaped under the impact of other, not too numerous though, toponyms that end in -ak or -ljak.<sup>9</sup> We should compare the medieval Slavic form *Billah*, attested in this Arabic text, with the oldest attested form. This is "enkrat na rimskem kamnu izpričano antično ime st(ationis) Bilachinie(n)s(is) za bližnje Beljaške Toplice."<sup>10</sup>

It is quite possible that the Roman form is merely a graphic rendering of the native name of the town. We have no evidence that this place-name is Celtic, and we must not exclude the possibility that it could have been given to the settlement by a people who preceded the Celts in this region, about whom we know even less than we do about the Celts. Also, the name is attested only once, which should make us more cautious in giving ethnic identity to the name-givers. Rather than comparing *Beljak* with some ancient and far-away places, we propose to cast it against its more immediate background.

*Beljak* is situated at the conflux of the *Zilja/Gail* and the *Drava*. The name *Zilja* comes from *Gellia*, attested in *Paulus Diaconus*, a medieval author.<sup>11</sup> The river has not been

mentioned directly in antiquity, but it has been proposed that a portion of its course, at least, was called \*Licus, because its banks were inhabited by the Ambilici.<sup>12</sup> Although Licus/Lycus is a common river name attested from the Sea of Azov to Bavaria,<sup>13</sup> we should not so readily assume that it was a name of a portion of the course of the Zilja. Namely, it is possible that the ethnonym had been subjected to haplology, Ambilici < Ambibilici, and that the river's name was \*Bilicus or some such in Latin. From this name we can derive both Roman Bilachinium and Idrīsī's Billah and the name of the people, Ambilici, whereas from the name \*Licus we can only derive the name of the people. The Latin ch could stand for a native /x/ as well as for /k/. If we follow this reasoning and reject the suggestion that the modern Slovene form Beljak derives from analogy with beljak, we have to account for i > e. However, it is possible that the name we reconstructed as \*Bilicus had always been pronounced as belax by the natives and that the Latin names, Ambilici and Bilachium, were only graphic renderings of native names; e might have been recorded as i and x as ch. (For example, Greek xaos is rendered chaos in Latin, Slavic Xorutane as Carantani, Germanic and Slavic Harvadja, the mountains of the Harvati, and Horvati as Carpati and Croati.<sup>14</sup> One of the Celtic roots for "white," \*vind-, is attested both as vind-, in Vindobona, Vindelici,<sup>15</sup> and as venet-, in Veneti and Venelli in Gallia, and the Slavic Venedae.)<sup>16</sup>

If we start with the form \*Belah as the Urform, we could break it into the root bel- and the suffix -ah. The root bel- is Celtic, and it derives from the Indo-European \*bhel- just as does the Slavic běl-.<sup>17</sup> The root běl- in river names is rather common in Slavic areas. In the immediate vicinity is Bela/Fella. It is possible that the Zilja was called Bela, as well, and that the name Gellia > Zilja was brought by Lombard and Bavarian immigrants from the west. If we assume this we still have to explain the suffix -ah < -ah̄ in the name of the town attested in Idrisi as Billah. This suffix, presumable pre-Slavic, is one of the most poorly studied, or we should say completely ignored, aspects of Eastern Alpine Slavic hydronymy. It has been suggested that the element -ah̄ derives from the word ab "water" in Indo-European.<sup>18</sup> It seems that this suffix began to be attached around the beginning of the Christian era to some river names which, apparently, did not have it before. We find this element in river names from Transoxania to Bavaria. Thus, the Margus in Transoxania is known today as Murg-ab;<sup>19</sup> the Margus in Serbia as Morava < \*Marg-ab; the Virdo in Bavaria as Wertach,<sup>20</sup> and so on. This ab is also attested as -av, -uv, ub, -ah, -ach, -ap, -uf.<sup>21</sup> In the Slavic languages -ab almost regularly became -av, while in German the most common form is -ach; thus the \*Mar-ab, known in the Middle Ages as Maraha,<sup>22</sup>

became Morava in Slavic and March in German. In some river names the element -ab has been distorted beyond recognition, and in others it has been reduced or completely dropped. Thus, the Bela/Fella mentioned above was recorded as Welach and Velach in the eleventh century, which means that this element had since been dropped, for this river is known today as Bela.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, -ab has been preserved in the Danube's "white" tributary in Lower Austria, the Pielach, recorded in the ninth century as Bielaha.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is possible that the name Zilja/Gail replaced \*Belaha \*Bel-ab, just as the name Danube replaced the name Ister all along the course of that mighty river. And just as the name Ister continued to live for a long time in the name of the city of Hister at one of the mouths of the Danube/Ister, so, perhaps, the name of the river \*Belaha continues to this day in the name Villach/Beljak, although the name of the river which flows past Beljak had changed long ago to Zilja/Gail.

If these arguments are convincing we would suggest that the names Bilachinium/Villach/Billaḥ/Fillaḥ/Beljak/Vilac mean: "The Town on the White Water," or "The White Town," because in this graphic variety we may recognize two or three Indo-European roots: \*bhel- "white" in its Celtic shape belo-, attested as bil- in Latin, and in its Slavic form běl- attested perhaps in the modern Slovene form of the name; and the root word ab "water" and/or \*akuḥ "water."<sup>25</sup> This etymology is quite normal in the natural and man-made and man-named environment of Beljak.

Beljak, a White City, should be compared with Vienna < Vindobona, a White City, Sekeszfehervar/Stolni Biograd/Istoni Belgrad/Stuhlweissenburg, Beograd, Biograd na Moru, the capital of medieval Croatia, Alba Julia/Gyula Fehervar, the capital of Transylvania, and Berat < Belat/Belgrad/Albanopolis, in Albania, from which the name of the country and the people seem to be derived.<sup>26</sup> In fact, one of the oldest and commonest ways the Indo-Europeans, and above all the Slavs, used to differentiate directionally opposed natural features and man-made features and peoples was to name those situated east of the observer and name-giver "red" or "black," and those west of him "white." Thus, the Pielach's eastern or "black" counterpart is the Schwarza. A cursory examination of a general map of Central Europe yielded the following directionally related, black-white, or red-white, pairs of rivers: the Beli and Crni Drin, the Beli and Crni Timok, Criḡul Negru and Alb, the Belyj and Čornyj Čeremoš, the Biały and Czarny Dunajec, and the Roter and Weisser Main. If we accept the name \*Belaha as the older name of the Zilja, we may be able to state that the Drava, just as the Drin, Timok, Criḡul/KÖrs,

Čeremoš, Dunajec, Main and many other European rivers, was formed by two streams called "Black Water" and "White Water." We are strengthened in this belief by the fact that one of the Zilja's tributaries is called Weissbach, and the village of Weissbriach is situated close to its source. North of this "White Stream" and "White Village" is a lake whose modern name is Weisser See. Therefore, it is quite possible that the Zilja too had once been called "White Water." Its "black" counterpart in antiquity may have been the whole course of the Drava from its source to its confluence with the Zilja or \*Belaha at modern Beljak. Are we permitted to see in the name Schwarzach, a stream that flows into the Isel, which meets the Drava at Lienz, a remnant of the once lengthier directional counterpart of the \*Belaha?

This suggestion of an etymology for the name Beljak is made with a hope that further discussion will make it possible for us to propose a more definitive solution to this and other problems.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>France Bezljaj, Etimološki slovar slovenskega jezika. Vol. I, A-J (Ljubljana: SAZU, 1976); hereafter ESSJ.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. F. Bezljaj, "Opyt raboty nad slovenskim ètimologi-èskim slovarem," Voprosy jazykoznanija, No. 4, 1967, 46-54.

<sup>3</sup>Bogo Grafenauer, "Beljak," in Enciklopedija Jugoslavije. Vol. 1. (Zagreb, 1955).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Fran Ramovš, Kratka zgodovina slovenskega jezika. (Ljubljana, 1936), 27, 39, 50.

<sup>6</sup>ESSJ, s.v. "Beljak."

<sup>7</sup>Anonymous Ravennas, Cosmographia, et Guidonis Geographica (eds. M. Pinder and G. Parthey) (1860 [reprinted Aalen, 1962]; see Index s.v. "Carnech"; Povest' vremennyx let (eds. D. S. Lixačev and B. P. Adrianova-Perec), Vol. I, 11; Vol. II, 213.

<sup>8</sup>In T. Lewicki, Polska i kraje sąsiednie w świetle 'Księgi Rogera' (Warsaw, 1954), 125.

<sup>9</sup>Krajevni leksikon Slovenije (ed. R. Savnik), Vols. I-II (Ljubljana, 1968-71), lists only: Bezuljak, Bezovljak, Hmeljak, Šumljak, Tuljaki and Mrzljaki.

<sup>10</sup>ESSJ, loc. cit.

<sup>11</sup>Paul the Deacon, History of the Langobards (transl. W. D. Foulkes) (Philadelphia, 1907).

<sup>12</sup>Tabula Imperii Romani L33 (Rome, 1969), s.v. "Ambilic" and "Licus."

<sup>13</sup>Pauly Wissowa Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft (PWRE), Vol. 26 (Stuttgart, 1927), s.v. "Lykos."

<sup>14</sup>It seems that the Xorutane of the Povest' vremennyx let, the Carendre of the Boc be man Orosius Nemned of King Alfred (see Źródła skandynawskie i anglosaskie do dziejów słowiańszczyzny [ed. G. Labuda] [Warsaw, 1961], 95) derive their "ethnic" name from the ancient city of Carnuntum. On the interpretation of the Harvadja as the Croatian mountains see Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio (eds. Gy. Moravcsik and R. J. H. Jenkins), Vol. II: Commentary (London, 1962), 116.

<sup>15</sup>PWRE, s.v. "Vindobona," "Vindelici."

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. s.v. "Venedae," "Venelli," "Veneti (in Gallia)." Although no convincing etymology of the name of the Slavic Venedae has been proposed, many scholars believe that the name is Celtic and the root is the same on the strength of Breton gwen "white,"

<sup>17</sup>Julius Pokorny, Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch (Bern-Munich, 1959) s.v. "\*bhel-."

<sup>18</sup>Ernst Schwarz, Deutsche Namenforschung, Vol. II (Göttingen, 1950), 63.

<sup>19</sup>Strabo, Geography, 11.10.1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 7.5.12 on the Moravia; PWRE, Vol. 17 (Stuttgart, 1961), s.v. "Virido."

<sup>21</sup> Schwarz, op. cit., 58-64; see also E. Forstemann, Die deutschen Ortsnamen (Nordhausen, 1863), 30-31.

<sup>22</sup> For a Gothic explanation see Słownik starożytności słowiańskich (Wrocław-Warsaw-Cracow, 1961- ), s.v. "Morawa."

<sup>23</sup> ESSJ, s.v. "Bela."

<sup>24</sup> Magnae Moraviae fontes historici, Vol. III (Brno-Prague, 1971), 20-21, 29, et passim.

<sup>25</sup> Pokorny, op. cit., s.v. "ab," "\*akūā-" and "\*bhel-".

<sup>26</sup> Tabula Imperii Romani K34 (Ljubljana, 1976), s.v. "Albanopolis"; it is possible that the ethnonym Albanian/Arnavut derives from Albanopolis (l ~ r) of which Belgrad/Berat are the Slavic and Albanian translations.