

History of the Balkans: The Ancient Illyrians, Modern Day Albanians and Southern Slavs

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It is true that every story about the Balkan Peninsula begins with the ancient Illyrians.[1] Historians believe that these Indo-European people were one of the largest European populations to inhabit the western portion of the Balkans from the coasts of the Ionian Sea and the Adriatic Sea to the Alps about 1000 B.C. Their eastern neighbours were also Indo-European peoples – the Thracians. The demarcation line between their settlements and their cultural and political influence was the Morava river in present-day Serbia (in Latin Margus, located in the Roman province of Moesia Superior) and the Vardar river in present-day FYR of Macedonia.

On the north, on the shores of the Sava and the Danube rivers, their neighbours were the Celts, while on the south the Mt Pindus separated the Illyrians from the ancient Macedonians (who had nothing to do with today “Macedonians”) and the Greeks.[2] The Illyrians lived on the eastern littoral of the Adriatic Sea around 500 B.C. according to the Greek geographer Hecatei (Hecateus) from the city of Miletus in Asia Minor. According to the early Byzantine historian Pseudo-Scilac, who lived 150 years later, the Illyrian settlements in the Balkans in the south extended to the southern Albanian port of Valona (Vlorë).[3] Among the ancient and early medieval historians and geographers, the most reliable information on the geographic dispersion of the Illyrians and the demography of the Illyrian territory appears in the writings of Herodotus, Livy, Pliny, Ptolemy, Appianus, Strabo, Procopius of Caesarea, Syncedemos of Hierocles, Isidorus Hispaniensis, and Euagrius.

When the Celts came to the Balkans in the 3rd century B.C. some of the Illyrian tribes mixed with them. In the same century, the Illyrian King Agron from the Ardaei tribe organised the first Illyrian state. At the time of greatest expansion, its borders extended to the Neretva river in Dalmatia, to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Vjosë river in the Southern Albania and Lake Ohrid in Macedonia. Some of the 20th-century Albanian historians and national workers claimed with a pure ethnopolitical purpose that a proclamation of an independent state of Albania on November 28th, 1912 was based on the Albanian political-state inheritance which dated back to King Agron’s Illyrian Kingdom. Nevertheless, the Romans succeeded in defeating the Illyrians and abolishing their state organisation during the three Illyrian-Roman Wars between 229 and 168 B.C.



Second Illyrian War Map, 218 BC

The administratively-political concept of “Illyria”, or “Illyricum”, was used in subsequent

centuries by the Romans who after the new conquests in the Balkans established first the Province of Illyricum, and in the 4th century the Praefectura of Illyricum.[4] It stretched from the Istrian Peninsula in the north-west to Northern Albania on the south-east, and from the Adriatic littoral in the south to the Drava river in the north. However, the main portion of present-day Albania was not included in this “Illyrian” province and became part of the Roman Province of Macedonia. This was the result of the Roman conclusion that only the territory of Northern Albania had been settled by the Illyrian tribes, but not the Central and Southern Albania. The proponents of the Illyrian theory of the origins of the Albanians did not provide an answer to the question of why all of Albania was not absorbed into the Roman Province of Illyricum if it was entirely settled by the ancient Illyrians (who are wrongly but purposely claimed by the Albanians to be the Albanian progenitors)? The Romans finally brought under control all of the Illyrian tribes during a new war of 6–9 A.D.[5]

From that time the overwhelming and very successful process of Romanization of the whole Balkan Peninsula began.[6] Some protagonists of the Illyrian theory of the Albanian ethnic origin developed the hypothesis that the Roman Emperors Aurelian, Diocletian and Probus, who originated in the western part of the Balkans, which was settled by the Illyrian tribes, were the predecessors of the modern Albanian nation.[7]

During the reign of Diocletian (284–305), who was of the Illyrian origin, the whole Balkan Peninsula, except its eastern part, was administratively organised as the Praefectura Illyricum. Mainly due to such Roman administrative organisation of the Balkans the names Illyria and the Illyrians were preserved for a very long period of time as common names for the peoples who lived in the western and central parts of the Balkans, i.e. for the South Slavs[8] and the Albanians.[9] However, according to the 19th–21st-century official sciences of history, ethnology and philology (but not according to many relevant sources), the Illyrians and Slavs were not synonymous as the later came to the Balkans 1.500 years after the Illyrians.[10]



Europe in IX century

Clearly, the name Illyrians disappeared in the 7th century at the time of the Slavic migrations to the Balkans. After the 6th century, however, Byzantine texts do not record any accounts of Illyrians abandoning Balkan territories from the Dalmatian Alps to the Danube. The new Illyrian political and cultural centre became the region of Arbanum (in Greek, Αρβανον or Αλβανον, in Serbian, Рабан) in South Albania. The name “Albani” appeared in historical sources not earlier than the 9th century. Byzantine historians employed the name “Albani” for the Slavic inhabitants living around the sea-port of Durazzo (ancient Dyrrhachium) in North Albania. However, from the second half of the 11th century, the name “Albani” (in Latin, Arbanensis, or Albanenses, in Greek, Αλβανοι or Αρβανιται) was associated with all Albanian tribes who inhabited the Balkans in the 1040s.[11]

In the Middle Ages, the “Albanoi” lived in the area between the cities of Skadar (Scodra), Prizren, Ohrid and Valona. According to the champions of the Illyrian theory of the Albanian ethnogenesis, the Slavic raids and migrations to the Balkans in the early Middle Ages did not

affect the native inhabitants of the territory of present-day Albania. They continued to live there, preserving their own culture, habits and social organisation. The southern Illyrian provinces retained their earlier ethnic composition. And of course, this ethnic composition was identified, although without supporting evidence in the sources, as the Albanian regardless of historical evidence and facts that the original homeland of modern Balkan Albanians is ancient Caucasian Albania wherefrom, via Sicily, Albanians arrived to the Balkans only in 1043 according to several independent historical sources, among whom the most reliable is Byzantine chronographer Michael Ataliota.[12] This historical fact is recognized even by objective Albanian historians, who are not under the political pressure by the ruling regime in Tirana, like Stefano Pollo and Arben Puto[13] but, regrettably, not by Albanian nationalists who are falsifying the history of the Balkans.[14]

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Notes

This text is a critical contribution to the next updated and revised edition of the infamous book of pro-Albanian propaganda:

Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*, New York: New York University Press, 1999.

[1] Stipčević A. *Every Story About the Balkans Begins with the Illyrians*. Priština, 1985; Buda A. "The Southern Illyrians as a Problem of Historiography". *Historical Writings*. vol. 1. 13–15. During the last decades, many scholars have claimed that the Balkan Illyrians (and Thracians) were nothing else but ethnolinguistic Serbs [Бајић Ј. Блажени Јероним, Солинска црква и Србо-Далмати. Шабац, 2003; Деретић И. Ј., Антић П. Д., Јарчевић М. С. *Измишљено досељавање Срба*. Београд: Сардонија, 2009; Милановић М. *Историјско порекло Срба*. Београд: Admiral Books, 2011; Земљанички Б. *Срби староседеоци Балкана и Паноније у војним и цивилним догађајима са Римљанима и Хеленима од I до X века*. Београд: Стручна књига, 1999]. In other words, they claim, that the Serbs, but not the Albanians, are the only autochthonous people (nation) on the Balkan Peninsula, according to the historical sources of the time.

[2] Islami S., Anamali S., Korkuti M, Prendi F. *Les Illyriens*. Tirana, 1985. 5; Anamali S. "The Illyrians and the Albanians". Prifti K., Nasi L., Omari L., Xhufi P., Pulaha S., Pollo S., Shtylla Z. (eds.). *The Truth on Kosovo*. Tirana. 1993. 5; Cabanes P. *Les Illyriens de Bardylis à Genthios, IV-II siècles avant J.C*. Paris, 1988. 17. The borders of geographical distribution of the Illyrian population in Antique Balkans are primarily reconstructed according to the writings of the Greek historians Herodotus who lived in the 5th century B.C. and wrote *Historiae* and Appianus who lived in the 2nd century A.D. and wrote *Illyrica*.

[3] The most outstanding Illyrian tribes were: *Iapudes, Dalmatae, Autariatae, Docletae* and *Taulantii*.

[4] The Praefectura of Illyricum was subdivided into the following Provinces: Dacia Ripensis, Dacia Mediterranea, Moesia Superior Margensis, Dardania, Praevalis, Macedonia Prima, Macedonia Secunda, Epirus Nova, Epirus Vetus, Thessalia, Achaia and Creta.

[5] Ростовцев М. *Историја старог света: Грчка и Рим*. Нови Сад: Матица српска, 1990. 383–384.

[6] Regardless of the fact that the Latin language did not replace the Illyrian one in the territory of Albania during Roman rule, Latin did not become the language of the common people. The Illyrian language was Romanised to a certain degree and the Latin alphabet was later chosen by the Albanian national leaders as the national script of the Albanians (one of the reasons for such a decision was purely political). For sure, the Roman culture and Latin language participated in the process of the ethnogenesis of the Albanians. However, the proponents of the Illyrian theory of Albanian ethnogenesis refute this opinion emphasising that the number of Latin inscriptions found in Albania is small when compared with the number found in the other provinces of the Roman Empire. Their total number is 293. Half of these inscriptions are found in and around the Roman colony located in the ancient city of Dyrrhachium. Theodore Mommsen thought that people used exclusively the Illyrian language in the interior of Albania during the Roman occupation [Mommsen T. *The Provinces of the Roman Empire*. vol. 1, Chicago, MCMLXXIV. 202–203]. Dardania was one of the least Romanized Balkan regions and its native population preserved its ethnic individuality and consciousness. Subsequently, the Dardanians, who escaped Romanization and survived the South Slavic migrations to the Balkans, emerged in the Middle Ages with the name of the Albanians. Nevertheless, Latin terminology in modern Albanian and the place-names in Albania are evidence of the Illyrian-Albanian Romanization/Latinization.

[7] However, the proponents of the theory of Serbian Balkan origin claim that all Balkan-born Roman emperors (around 20) were ethnic Serbs. Diocletian and Constantine the Great are the most important among them.

[8] Among the South Slavs, and in part among the Poles and Russians, the Illyrian theory of Slavic origin was widespread from the early 16th century to the early 19th century. According to this theory, the South Slavs were the autochthonous population in the Balkans originating from the ancient Illyrians. Furthermore, all Slavs formerly lived in the Balkans and were known by the ancient authors as the Illyrians. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, they split into three groups: one group migrated to Central Europe (the Western Slavs), another group went to Eastern Europe (the Eastern Slavs) while the last group remained in the Balkans (the South Slavs). According to several medieval chronicles, the South Slavic ascendants were the ancient Illyrians, Thracians and Macedonians. Thus, Alexander the Great, Constantine the Great, Diocletian and St. Hieronymus were of South Slavic origin. In the time of Humanism, Renaissance, Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, a number of Dubrovnik (Ragusian) writers became the most prominent champions of this theory. They included Vinko Pribojević (*On Origin and History of the Slavs*, published in Venice in 1532), Mavro Orbini (*De Regno Sclavorum*, published in Pesaro in 1601) and Bartol Kašić (*Institutiones Linguae Illyricae*, published in 1604). Pribojević claimed that all Slavs spoke one common language, which originated in the Balkans. For him, the Russians spoke a Dalmatian dialect of the common Slavic language. This common Slavic language was named by Dubrovnik writers as “Our”, “Illyrian” or “Slavic” one. Subsequently, all Slavs who spoke “Our” language belonged to “Our” people. The influence of the Illyrian theory of (the South) Slavic origin can be seen in: 1) the work of Serbian noblemen from Transylvania, Count Đorđe Branković (1645–1711) who in 1688 wrote the first political program of the South Slavic unification into a free and independent state which he called the “Illyrian Kingdom”; in 2) the fact that Orbini’s *De Regno Sclavorum* was translated into Russian in 1722; and in 3) that the Croatian movement of national renewal from the time of the first half of the 19th century was officially called as the “Illyrian Movement”.

[9] Miridita Z. *Istorijska Albanaca* (“Iliri i etnogeneza Albanaca”). Beograd, 1969. 9–10; Qabej W. *Hyrje në historinë e gjuhës shipe*. Prishtinë, 1970. 29–32; Prifti K., Nasi L., Omari L., Xhufi P., Pulaha S., Pollo S., Shtylla Z. (eds.). *The Truth on Kosova*, Tirana, 1993. 5–73; Dobruna E. “On some ancient toponyms in Kosova”. *Onomastika eKosoves*. Prishtina, 1979; Anamali S. “The problem of the formation of the Albanian people in the light of archaeological information”. *The National Conference on the formation of the Albanian people, their language and cultu*

re. Tirana, 1988; Çabej E. "The problem of the autochthony of Albanians in the light of place-names". *Buletini i Universitetit Shtetëror të Tiranës*. № 2. 1958. 54–62. _

[10] For instance, see [Ђоровић В. *Историја Срба*. Београд: БИГЗ, 1993. 3–66; Ферјанчић Б. *Византија и Јужни Словени*. Београд: Завод за издавање уџбеника Социјалистичке Републике Србије, 1966. 20–26; Kont F. *Sloveni. Nastanak i razvoj slovenskih civilizacija u Evropi (VI–XIII vek)*. Београд: Zavod za izdavačku delatnost „Filip Višnjić“, 1989. 14–43; Пипер П. *Увод у славистику*. 1. Београд: Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства Београд, 1998. 81–96].

[11] The name for the Albanians – “Арбанаси” is derived from the Latin name for the Albanians as the “Arbanenses”.

[12] Michael Ataliota. *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantine*. Bonn: Weber, 1853. 18.

[13] Stefano Pollo, Arben Puto. *The History of Albania*. London, Boston, Hebley: Routledge & Kegan, 1981. 37.

[14] *Кавкаски Албанци – Лажни Илири*, Проширени текстови реферата изложених 21. јуна 2007. године на мултидисциплинарном столу САНУ „Методолошки проблем истраживања порекла Албанаца“, Београд: Пешић и синови, 2007.

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