

**TOPONYMIC ETYMOLOGIES BETWEEN DOCUMENTARY
SOURCES AND POPULAR BELIEFS.
ANALYSIS BASED ON MDTM₁₋₂**

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Abstract

Far from being accepted as etymological solutions in toponymy, folk etymologies, passed down from one generation to the next in the form of etiological legends and historical traditions, represent the manner in which collective consciousness provides explanations for the formation of place names in the absence of any scientific proof. Historical figures, whether attested or not, various characters created by folk imagination, entities endowed with beneficial or evil powers are often invoked to respond to people's natural curiosity as to who or what was behind an original name of place. These etiological legends and historical traditions have thus an explanatory function, yet their implausibility lies in the lack of knowledge or the ignorance of the correct etymon of place names, in the local community's attempt to decipher toponymic "enigmas" without being aware of the historical-geographical and linguistic context in which a certain place was named.

Keywords: *toponymy, toponymic etymology, folk etymology, etiological legend, historical tradition*

Résumé

Loin d'être des solutions étymologiques acceptées en toponymie, les étymologies populaires, transmises d'une génération à l'autre sous forme de légendes étymologiques et de traditions historiques, sont la manière dont l'esprit collectif explique la détermination des noms de lieux en l'absence de toute base scientifique. Personnages historiques attestés ou non, personnages façonnés par l'imaginaire populaire, entités aux pouvoirs bénéfiques ou maléfiques sont invoqués pour répondre à la curiosité naturelle des gens souhaitant savoir qui ou quoi a déterminé le nom originel du lieu. Ainsi, ces légendes étymologiques et traditions historiques ont une fonction explicative, néanmoins, leur improbabilité réside dans le fait de ne pas connaître ou d'ignorer l'étymologie correcte des toponymes, d'essayer de résoudre

les « énigmes » toponymiques, alors que la communauté locale ignore le contexte historico-géographique et linguistique de la dénomination d'un lieu.

Mots-clés: *toponymie, étymologie toponymique, étymologie populaire, légende étiologique, tradition historique.*

P. Skok's (1937) assertion that toponymy "is, in short, the etymological study of place names", implies that one of the essential conditions for exhaustive research on toponymy is the accurate establishment of toponymic etymology, in other words the identification, based on the principle of motivation, of the relationship established between the linguistic sign and the designated (socio-) geographical object (cf. Moldovanu, 1972: 75). Since place names have the mere function of individualizing the designated referent based on a marking figure of the place or of a physical-geographical characteristic that the denominator considers relevant in relation to other geographical objects of the same type it sometimes happens that the motivation behind the initial denomination does not pass the test of time. The corroboration by specialists of historical, geographical and linguistic data, which in most cases ensures the success of the accurate identification of toponymic etymologies, proves ineffective in the absence of documentary and historical links that could shed light on certain personal toponyms or in the case of certain semantically obscure names underlying descriptive toponyms¹.

Thus, the attempt to recover at least some etymological traces leaves some space for the circulation of popular historical traditions, as well as of countless etiological legends and folk etymologies, subsumed, as pointed out by M. Homorodean in study on the interdisciplinarity between toponymy, folklore and archaeology, to the explanatory direction through which people represent the elements of their physical-geographical environment in the absence of scientific grounds. Such explanations "characteristic of a remote, less evolved cultural stage

¹ From the material proposed for analysis, *Bobeica*, *Buhonca*, *Colacul* are just a few examples that prove that the meaning of the underlying names is not (anymore) known by the local people, so that popular toponymic etymologies refer to local characters based on a (quasi-)homonymy. Thus, in the case of *Bobeica*, the appellative denominating the geographical reality is not recognized as the origin of the oronym, the name of Bobeischii, the outlaw, the supposed founder of the village, being identified as the etymon instead (MDTM₂: 32). *Buhonca*, a toponym derived from the Ukrainian derivative *buhai* "bull" + the possessive-adjectival suffix *-in-* + the hydronymic suffix *-ka*, is related to Buhoancă, a village leader (MDTM₂: 40). *Colacul*, metaphorically designating a turn that the Moldova River takes upstream from the village of Fundul Moldovei, has led to two popular etymological hypotheses: "from the name of Transylvanian shepherd, Petrea Colac, or from the fact that the people in Borsa who founded the village « baked bread [= colac] there »" (MDTM₂: 60).

[...] consist, basically, of pseudo-scientific, mythical interpretations” (Homorodean, 1979: 34). In other words, given the exclusion in popular environment of any concern for a scientific, possibly diachronic perspective on toponyms, they are explained by local people in relation to various characters whose names have passed from one generation to the next or through the subjective observation of the geomorphological specificity of the area they denominate².

Generally focusing on characters attested by documents and thus aimed at personal toponymy, “historical tradition is intended to be real, constituting a historical document transmitted orally” (Brill, 2005: 9), which limits the sphere of the supernatural. As long as the basis anthroponym confirmed by historical sources is also familiar in the local denomination system, establishing the accurate toponymic etymology raises no doubts. However, the lack of historical documentation, often coupled with popular imagination and the circulation of erroneous information, might lead to only approximate or even erroneous identification of the historical figures whose names toponyms are based on. Here are some relevant examples extracted, as mentioned in the title, from MDTM₁:

- the oronym *Movila lui Burcel*³ / *Burcel's Hillock* is based on the name of the Purcel boyars, mentioned in the 16th -17th centuries as owning properties near the village of Codăești (Vaslui county), where the hillock is located. Historical tradition, however, speaks of Purcel, a poor man whom Stephen the Great caught ploughing near a hillock on a Sunday, because only then could he borrow the plough from his richer brother (MDTM₁: 70);

- the toponym *Corod*, derived from the name *Corod* of a Szekler feudal lord from the 14th-century, is attributed in popular explanations to the name *Corodea*, of one of Stephen the Great's captains, “who was rewarded with a piece of land by the Voivode for his military services” (MDTM₁: 99);

- the oikonym *Focșani*, which comes from the family name *Focșa*, common in the area, is related to a story whose hero, a Moldovan soldier, “at the end of a meal allegedly defeated a soldier from the neighbouring country in a drinking contest, at the behest of Stephen the Great, and the place was then named Focșani in his honour, as the soldier's name was Focșa” (MDTM₁: 173);

² The collective mentality of associating places that have peculiar physical and geographical features with spaces governed by both beneficial forces and evil spirits is well known. This tendency is particularly reflected by minor toponymy, according to which the names of God or other biblical and ecclesiastical figures are invoked for places considered auspicious, whereas places that are dangerous or difficult to access bear the stigma of the antagonistic forces represented by the devil, dragons, devils, giants, wicked fairies, etc.

³ In Vasile Alecsandri's poem, *Movila lui Burcel*, the anthroponym underwent a euphonious modification.

- the oikonym *Pogorăști* originates from the name of lieutenant Ștefan *Pogor*, attested as owner of the village in 1816, but among the local people there circulated the story of Dobândă, a brave soldier in Stephen the Great's army, "whose descendants began to be called *Pogor*, meaning *pogorători* [= descendants] of that family" (MDTM₁: 329);

- for the oronym *Dealul lui Dumnezeu / God's Hill*, the etymon represented by the yeoman's surname *Dumnezeu* remains unknown to the local community, which explains the name of the hill by a metaphor: "because of its height, people called it God" or by a legend: "a white vision would appear one morning, of which people said it was God" (MDTM₁: 126).

The fact that not even the experts can untangle the documentary-historical entanglements in the case of some toponyms does not seem to stop popular inventiveness, which continues to generate rather improbable toponymic hypotheses. For instance, in the case of the village of Scobiți, whose name is based on the Ukrainian anthroponym **Skuba*, the locals speak of the establishment of the village by Pan Scobie, a Polish nobleman who settled in the area, but who is not attested in documents (MDTM₁: 368). For the toponymic field developed around the appellation *Doamna*, historical tradition provides several hypotheses: it could be Elena, the wife of Petru Rareș, on whose orders Doamna Hermitage was built, or Ana, the second wife of Alexandru cel Bun [Alexander the Good], who lived for a while at the Bistrița Monastery, where she was also buried, or even Domnița Ruxanda [Princess Ruxanda], Alexandru Lăpușneanu's wife, "who is said to have built a bridge made of buffalo hide over the Bistrița River, from Bâta Doamnei to Mountain Cozla, which she used when she went with her retinue to the courts of Piatra" (MDTM₁: 133)⁴.

A historic event may in certain cases be enough to inspire a local legend to gain ground in the popular belief to the detriment of the correct etymon of the place name. The hydronym *Valea Albă / The White Valley*, referring to the limestone aspect of the stream it designates, was associated with the battle of Războieni when Stephen the Great's soldiers fought against the Turks, after which the valley was allegedly scattered with the bones of the fallen soldiers (MDTM₂: 355). Similarly, *Bilca* would also designate a battlefield, "where the bones of the dead made the fields look white". In fact, the hydronym, which comes from the Ukrainian derivative *bilij* "white" + the hydronymic suffix *-ka*, is motivated by the clarity of the water (MDTM₂: 21).

⁴ M. Homorodean includes *Bâta Doamnei* in the series of euphemistic place names, showing that in the folk mentality toponyms based on the appellative *doamna* (<Lat. *domina*) have a mythological dimension, reminding of evil, wicked fairies who govern rugged places or ruined buildings (cf. Homorodean, 1979: 36; id. 1971: 36–37).

Some of the characters and events that circulate in the sphere of popular belief are merely figments of the collective imagination, aimed at providing explanations for some toponyms based on formal similarities between names. One such example is the oikonym *Bălaia*, for which MDTM₁ (29) only indicates the origin of an appellation, being unable to validate the explanation provided by popular sources, which mention “a very beautiful blue-eyed, fair-haired girl, whom Stephen the Great met after the battle of Vaslui and called (as a caress) *Bălăioara* [*The fair-haired*]”. Even more suggestive is the legend woven around the name of the Prut River. Despite being a descriptive hydronym rooted in the primitive Indo-European base **pl̥tús* “full, wide” (MDTM₂: 253), according to the “folk explanation” (Brill, 2005: 7) is related to an imaginary hero with supernatural powers, namely *Porata*, the son of an old Dacian woman, who managed to kill with his mace a giant snake that came out of the Danube and ate people’s cattle and children. Wounded in the tail by the brave man’s arrows, the snake fled across the fields, chased by *Porata*, and the ditch made by its body became the riverbed of the Prut. Feeling her son in great danger, the old mother went in search of him, calling out incessantly “*Porata! Porata! Come back, Porata!*”, but she was swallowed by the waters. It is said that her wailing can still be heard from the depths: “*Prutu! Prutu! Prutu!*” (see also Agrigoroaiei, 1984: 9–11).

As proven by the example of the *Prut*, when the relation between the linguistic sign and the designated area is not known in the folk environment, the toponymic etymologies may no longer be rooted on a significant figure of the place or the physical-geographical nature of the referent, as would be natural, but on the toponym itself. The investigation thus shifts to the lexical level, challenging the collective imagination and generating popular etymologies based on paronym attractions, leading to the re-motivation of the toponymic sign. The following examples excerpted from MDTM₁ are eloquent in this respect:

- the toponym *Cârlibaba*, which comes from the German compound *Karlsbach* “Karl’s brook”, which passed, through a process of phonetic adaptation, to the Romanian forms *Cârlibah* and, later, *Cârlibab*, was metaphorically linked to the image of a hunchbacked old woman [= *babă cârligă*] living in the area. Another attempt at etymological approximation consisted in the proximity of the toponym either to the syntagm *Gârla Babei* / *Old Woman’s Creek* designating “a creek and a mill, where there lived an old woman. Where are you going? To the old woman’s creek, to grind a sack of corn” or to the name of a woman, namely *Chirilă Baba*, “an old Tartar woman, a great witch, to whom people came from Transylvania, from Galicia, who was married to a man called *Chiril*. And people said they went to *Chirilă’s* old woman [= *baba lui Chirilă*], because she had no name. And that’s how *Chirilă Baba* and *Cherélabàba* came to be” (MDTM1: 81);

- the oikonym *Pildești*, originating from the proper name *Cheldea*, among other explanations, was associated based on formal similarity to the appellative *pildă*: the locals “were exemplary [= de pildă], faithful, helpful people” (MDTM₁: 322);
- the name of the village of Boșteni, which is based on the name of the boyar Manuil *Bașotă*, is wrongly associated with the appellative *bușteni* [= logs], so that the oikonym could mean “from the logs left behind in the forest hat was in this place when the village was founded” (MDTM₁: 54);
- *Broscăuți*, an oikonym coming from an Old Ukrainian derivative of the proper name *Boris(ko)* with the collective suffix *-owci*, is explained “from the frogs [= broaște] that were in the ponds around” (MDTM₁: 65);
- for the oronym *Răiuț*, originating from the anthroponym *Răieț* (< Bg. *Raïo*), the paronym attraction to the diminutive of the appellative *rai* [= heaven] led to the hypothesis that the designated mountain, which was quite high, would be close to God or that on its western slope there would be a “heavenly place” because here, in harsher conditions, “there grow certain trees and shrubs [...], which are known to be more sensitive and frail” (MDTM₁: 343).

Such paronymic associations are quite common to the folk environment, where locals, eager to provide some sort of explanation for the names of the places they live in, often come up with the most simplistic etymological solutions. It is also worth mentioning examples such as *Bădărăi*, close to “bade rău” (MDTM₁: 27), *Gorovei*, close to “gura văii” (MDTM₁: 197), *Bahlui*, associated with “Bahna Uliului” (MDTM₂: 12), *Dobrovăț*, associated with the greeting formula “Dobro vecer!” (MDTM₂: 78), *Puțenii*, explained by the fact that in this village “one is paid very *little* [= puțin] for a day's work” (MDTM₂: 257).

Most of these instances are what experts call etiological legends, figments of the collective imagination that “explain creation, the origin of beings and things, their peculiarities, the names of everything that exists in the surrounding world” (Brill, 2005: 40), with no scientific support whatsoever. Therefore, depending on the imagination and creativity of local communities, the very same **place** name can become the subject of several toponymic hypotheses, some of them rather naive. For *Frătăuți*, for example, local people have invented the story of a woman, Uța from Volovăț, who had two brothers. They founded the “village of Uța’s brothers” [= satul Fraților Uței] or, in another version where they are separated by the Suceava River, they would have called out to each other from both sides: *frati-auz?* [*Do you hear me, brother?*]. In reality, this personal toponym is based on the appellation *Frate* [= Brother], plural* *Fraty*, “given to the sons of Dragomir Albu, namely Todor, Dimitrie, Petru, Mihail and Giurgiu, who received a village from Roman Vodă in 1393” (MDTM₁: 176). Rather childish is also the folk etymology of the oikonym *Tuluțești* (based on the anthroponym *Tuluc*): “frumușică, *tu lucești*” [beautiful girl,

you shine], as Petru Rareș is believed to have said to a lover he had in the area (MDTM₁: 423). Associated this time to the memory of Stephen the Great, the name of the village of Ceplenița is linked to Nița, the wife of a soldier who died in the battle of Războieni, to whom the ruler gave a house with cellars where she built a cellar with Cotnari wines. Every time the princely retinue passed by, he would exclaim: “Hai să scoatem un cep la Nița” [Let us open a barrel at Nița’s], being accompanied by those in his suite: “Cep la Nița!” [a da cep = to open a barrel, to drink]. In fact, this personal toponym has nothing to do with drinking, but is based on a Slavic anthroponym, namely *Cepel* (MDTM₁: 83; Agrigoroaiei, 1984: 42–43). Equally fanciful is the folk etymology from which the name of the city of Iași “benefited”, explained in MDTM₂ (140) from the Russian ethnonym *jasi* “Alans”, “designating the Iranian population settled here before the Mongol invasion of 1239”. Brill (2005: 572) speaks of a monk with a large apiary who lived in the area where the town is nowadays. Because his bees stung the people, they chased the monk away shouting “Ieși! Ieși!” [Get out! Get out!].

Many of these etiological legends are woven around female characters. *Năruja* (toponym derived from the Baltic-Slavic noun* *ner-* “valley; deepened (river)” with the Slavic suffix *-uža*) is believed to refer to *Ruja*, the daughter of the founder of the village of Podul Stoica, “who was as beautiful as a *rujă* [= rose]” and who ended up drowned in the Zăbala stream (MDTM₂: 200). About the Neagra stream, designated by a hydronym motivated by the dark grey, almost black gravels from the riverbed, it is said to have acquired its colour from the blood of Negrea Basarab’s daughter, named Neagra, “who, having been wounded in a battle, was washed into the stream” (MDTM₂: 202). It is said that since then, the clearing near the brook has also been called *Poiana Negrei / Neagra’s Clearing* (Brill, 2005: 527), although the phytonym is only one element of the field generated by the hydronymic nucleus *Neagra*. *Movila Răbâia / Răbâia Hill* has aroused the interest of many researchers and toponymy enthusiasts, hence the countless related etymological hypotheses: it is believed to have taken its name either from Rabie, a Scythian queen, or from Răbâia, a princess who ruled the place in the old times. According to other traditions, a Tartar innkeeper is said to have buried there his daughter named Răbuia, who was killed in a battle. It is said that “each soldier would empty a hopper of dust there until the hill was formed”. The etymon of the oronym, recorded in MDTM₁ (341), is the Old Ukrainian appellation coming from the appellative *rabynja* ‘wheelbarrow’. We conclude this series of examples with *Pojoarăta*, a toponym referring to a valley which was destroyed or burnt down, which folk tradition associates with a couple of thieves, *Pozor* and *Ritta*, who committed robberies in the area (MDTM₂: 245).

At the end of our approach we are hopeful that, in these few pages, we have revealed the implausibility of folk traditions and legends in establishing toponymic

etymologies accepted in scientific research. Although paronymic attractions leading to folk etymologies are generally justified by the fact that a toponym becomes semantically unrecognisable to the local population and seeks “additional support, in words still alive, phonetically similar to it, but different in meaning”⁵ (Jordan, 1963: 367), the examples excerpted from MDTM₁₋₂ refer to the so-called “folkloric explicative” meant to clarify, in the absence of all scientific grounds, “‘how’, ‘when’ and ‘why’ a certain historical or natural fact occurred” (Brill, 2005: 7). These etiological legends and historical traditions have thus an explanatory function, yet their implausibility lies in the lack of knowledge/ignorance regarding the accurate etymon of a toponym, in the attempt to respond to toponymic “curiosities” in the absence of knowledge by the local community of the context of the naming of a place. As shown above, the collective imagination is quite rich in terms of popular etymologies, especially etiological legends inspired by place names being directly proportional to the creativity of the denominators.

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⁵ We mention, for example, the toponymic syntagms *Dealul Oaselor* and *Pădina Osului*, which, as V. Ioniță points out, are not based on the appellative *os* [= *bone*], but on the geographical name *osoi* “shady place, back of a hill”, considered to have disappeared “due to loss of meaning in the local dialect” (Ioniță, 1982: 61).