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Ethnic manipulations with ancient Veneti and Illyrians

A few introductory remarks

The Veneti and the Illyrians — in particular the latter — have a long and heterogeneous history, which has, interestingly, even been exploited in the modern age for pseudo-historical and political purposes. It is not the scope of this contribution to present a systematic bibliography concerning these two problems and illustrating the abuse of ancient sources and their data for the ethnogenesis of the Slovenians and Albanians, let alone to list other similar examples of "false identities", since the two cases under examination are not the only ones. Various explanations are offered to explain, for example, the ethnogenesis of the Croats, from "autochthonistic" to Iranian. But I would like to briefly draw attention to two salient cases, a northern Adriatic and a southern one, mainly to point out the generally untenable basis of various groundless "autochthonistic" theories, before they gain the upper hand even in the official scientific circles, although they had been refuted several times with valid arguments already in the past and have recently, too, been convincingly discredited. The ancient Veneti were settled along the upper Adriatic area and in the northern Italian regions (Venerum angulus: Livy V 33, 9-11), where prior to the coming of the Carni they had been the only inhabitants. Este and Patavium (Padova) were two of their centres, while Aquileia was founded outside their territory and Tergeste was known to have been a Carnic village (Strabo VII 5, 2 C 314); it may have belonged to the Histri earlier. Some of their influences, such as e.g. the Venetic script, may have reached as far as the Soča/Isonzo valley, where Most na Soči (Santa Lucia) and earlier Tolmin must have been two of the major prehistoric settlements of the local population. These tribes had close contacts with northeastern Italy, southern Carinthia, and the Bohinj region. There had been no ancient Veneti ever settled in present-day Slovenia. The Illyrians were anciently settled along southeastern Adriatic coast and in the immediate hinterland of Macedonia, giving their name to various new kingdoms, which supplanted that of the Enchelei. The history of both is closely related to the legend of Cadmus and Harmonia, the royal pair from Thebes who had to leave their country for the regions of the Enchelei where they ruled. Under their guidance the Enchelei were for a short time successful against the invading Illyrians, who eventually defeated them and founded their own kingdom. Their eponymous ancestor was the son of Cadmus and Harmonia, Illyrius.

The Illyrians in the north

There were several Illyrian kingdoms, which played a prominent role along the eastern Adriatic, better known are those of the Taulantii under Glacius, the Ardiaean dynasty of Pleuratus, Agron, Teuta, and Pinnes, as well as the kingdom...
of the Labeates under Scerdilaidas, Pleuratus, and Genthius. The Illyrians are first mentioned in Hecateus (FGrHist I frs. 98–101; cf. 93-97) and Herodotus (I 196; IV 49, see also VIII 137 and IX 43). In the first passage, Herodotus referred to the Illyrian Veneti, who cannot be regarded as the northern Adriatic Veneti. At such an early date (fifth century BC), it would be historically impossible that any people to the north of the Titius River (Krka) or even the Naro River (Neretva) could be counted among the “Illyrian” peoples, since before the First Illyrian War in 228 BC, the concept of a large Illyricum had not even existed, and only those peoples and tribes were regarded as Illyrian who belonged to various Illyrian kingdoms, mainly known to the Greek writers through their wars with the Macedonian kings, as, for example, the dynasties of Bardylis and Glauций. Also, the Veneti were never considered to have been Illyrians; Herodotus’ Illyrian Veneti must therefore necessarily be sought somewhere in the hinterland of the southern Adriatic coast. The name “Illyrian” spread alongside new conquests by the Romans and their gradually increasing power, until the last Illyrian king, Genthius, was conquered by them in 168 BC. In the late Roman period, Illyricum extended as far north as to include most of present-day Slovenia and even some parts of Austria. The Veneti were not in the foreground at the time. On the contrary, it was the Illyrians who influenced the administrative history of these southeastern Alpine countries at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Under Napoleon I the Illyrian Provinces were established in 1809, comprising Carinthia, Carniola, the regions of Gorizia (Gorica) and Trieste (Trst), Istria, civil and military Croatia, as well as Dalmatia; the administrative centre of the Illyrian Provinces was at Ljubljana.

For the time being, the Austrian Empire was deprived of its exit into the Adriatic coast. These regions remained under French rule until 1813, having a great significance for the Slovenian lands, in particular because the Slovenian language was introduced into most of the primary and even certain other schools.

When with the fall of Napoleon the Illyrian provinces disintegrated, the Austrian government founded in its turn an “Illyrian” kingdom, which existed in its entirety only six years (1816–1822); it lingered on for a few years in a reduced form, since it lost its strategic position when, in 1822, Hungary gained possession of Rijeka and civil Croatia. After this last attempt to revive the name “Illyria” it was never again attached – as a political name – to any country in this part of Europe. However, it was greatly exploited for other purposes, linguistic (based on the onomastic and toponomastic data) – mainly known under the name “the School of Krha” – and archaeological: an attempt to relate the archaeological Urnfield cultural group, which spread across most of central Europe and the Balkans, to the Illyrians.

The Veneti, ancient forebears of the Slovenians
In the course of the spring of 2004, the Institute of Musicology of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts organized the conference Musical Identity of Central Europe, at which one of the introductory lectures was devoted to the ethnic identity of the Slovenians, which, allegedly, would have been Venetic.
It was just in time that the lecture was prevented from being published in the forthcoming academic publication. Alas, all too many works of dubious scientific value do come to light from time to time, while some of them are even destined for an international public. Far too much is being published uncritically and without being reviewed, spreading false information among people who have no means to judge on these matters by themselves, and who are all too eager to believe strange tales about their own past.

We live in the time of great specialization of single scientific branches, both in terms of natural and technical sciences, as well as humanities. “Interdisciplinary” means professional collaboration among different but related sciences, while it is most dangerous if a non-expert makes use of research results of an expert, or even worse, of the unprofessional work of another non-expert. History cannot be written by everybody – not even if the author has a PhD in another subject – and linguistics, too, as any other science, requires a great amount of expert knowledge. Non-historians seemingly draw on historical, linguistic, onomastic, toponomastic, and archaeological data, but actually – possessing no elementary knowledge in these fields – confuse basic categories and draw incorrect conclusions. Their texts are usually written in the form of an essay – equipped with meaningless footnotes – incoherently stringing up various “opinions” concerning the ancient Veneti and the Slovenians. In this way, by disseminating false truths, they are misleading the credulous audience who for various reasons likes to hear that the true origin of the Slovenians is not Slavic but Venetic. These ideas were definitely refuted some years ago with valid arguments by several Slovenian historians, archaeologists, and ethnologists, and published in a volume dedicated specifically to the subject. Most recently, too, it was shown again how groundless is the “Venetic ideology” among the Slovenians. However, false theses were not eradicated since they are extremely deeply rooted, cropping up all the time, and are even manipulated by certain politicians. The “Venetic confusion” is due to the fact that many ancient peoples were called Veneti, although they were not mutually related. Veneti/Veneti was also the oldest name for the Slavs, which has always caused additional perplexity. As has just been noted, already Herodotus knew of two peoples called Veneti, one northern Adriatic the other somewhere in the southern Balkans. There were, further, the seafaring Gallic Veneti who inhabited regions near the Atlantic, modern Morbihan (Bretagne), and who resisted Caesar and Roman rule in general; however, they were eventually defeated in the naval battle by D. Iunius Brutus Albinus. Two other Veneti/Veneti remained far outside the Roman Empire, one group of tribes with this name was settled, according to Pliny the Elder (N. h. IV 97) and Ptolemy (III 5, 1), to the east of the Vistula River (and perhaps also to the west of it, probably the future Balti), while Tacitus mentions a people with this name, perhaps the future Slavs, in central Europe, in the regions of present-day Belarus and Ukraine (Germ. 46). Tabula Peutingeriana, too, knows of two peoples with this name (VII 1, VII 4).

15. Of which there is no doubt on the linguistic grounds, see Poposka-Taborška 2005.
The southern Illyrians

As in many other countries, in modern Albania, too – in particular under the former communist regime – history, philology, and archaeology were exploited for political purposes. According to a very popular thesis, which may be entirely erroneous, but is at least extremely simplified and in any case as yet unproven, the Albanians would have been more or less direct descendants of the Illyrians.²⁰ True, the core of the earlier Illyrian kingdoms was indeed located in the Albanian regions, and the Illyrians are first attested precisely in the present-day Albanian lands and in southern Dalmatia. On the other hand, however, the Epirote peoples and tribes are known to have been settled both in northern Greece and in southern Albania. If the Illyrians are regarded as ancestors of the modern nation of the Albanians, what about the Epirotes? There is hardly any doubt that northern Epirus (in present-day Albania) and southern Epirus (in present-day Greece) were a part of the Greek world, but possessing their own ethnic identity.²¹ Nonetheless, their existence as an independent people was denied by some of the Albanian scholars who viewed them as Illyrian.²² However, there is no basis for such a thesis, as the two peoples are well distinguished by the classical writers. According to Strabo, the Ceraunian Mountains should be regarded as the frontier between the two, the boundary further extending along the line connecting these mountains with the mines of Damastium in the region of the Dassaretas near Lake Lycnindus, present-day Lake Ohrid/Ohridsko jezero (VII 7, 8 C 326). Strabo’s outline of their territories has been generally accepted.²³ Interestingly, in the late Republican period the name Epirus was increasingly applied to the southern Illyrian coastal regions, while the name Illyricum became more and more restricted to the regions north of Lissus.²⁴ If on the one hand Thucydides regarded the Epirote Chaones, Molossi, Thesproti, as well as the Illyrian Atintanes all as “barbarians” (II 80, 5–6; cf. Pseudo-Scylax, c. 26), they were even more often viewed as the most ancient Hellenic peoples, so to say the cradle of Greece.²⁵ Although they were of a Greek stock – in a like manner as were the Macedonians – the way of life of the Epirotes differed greatly from that of most of other Greeks, and even if they spoke a Greek dialect it was no doubt hard for other Greeks to understand them. But differences originated in the fact that they were living according to the old traditions in the mountainous regions close to the Illyrian and Macedonian peoples and tribes;²⁶ we cannot speak of an urban culture, typical of so many other Greek peoples. In terms of language, the Epirotes were quite close to the Macedonian tribes.²⁷ The next problem concerning the ethnic identity of the Albanians is represented by the existence of the Dardanians, who were settled in present-day Kosovo. In the Kosovo regions the Albanians are currently living, some of whom claim their descent from the Dardanians.²⁸ The latter may or may not have belonged to the Illyrian peoples, yet they are indeed

²⁴ Papazoglu 1976.
²⁵ Malkin 2001: particularly 198 ff.
²⁶ See, on these problems, also Cabanes 1988b.
reckoned among the latter by some classical writers, e.g. by Strabo, who listed among the Illyrian peoples three large central Balkan tribes, the Autariatae, the Dardanians and the Ardiaeans (VII 5, 6 C 315). However, it should be remarked that in Polybius, the Dardani are referred to as being different from the Illyrians, and as having their own kingdom, which is also reflected in Livy, who drew his material from the History of Polybius as well as from other historical works of Polybius’ contemporaries. According to him, Mt. Scordus (Sar planina) is “the highest mountain of that region, east of which the Dardanian lands are situated, while Macedonia lies to the south and Illyricum to the west” (XLIV 31, 5). Also considered different from the Illyrians were the Dassarates in Livy, since in the context of the Third Illyrian War the historian referred separately to the fortresses of the Dassarates and the Illyrians (XLII 36, 9), which indicates that originally the Illyrians were a rather restricted group of peoples and tribes.

F. Papazoglu, too, who attentively analysed the differences between the Illyrians and the Dardani, came to the conclusion that the Dardani were different from the Illyrians in terms of ethnicity. Moreover, they were politically organized as a separate state and had their own kings, and often they were at war with the neighbouring Illyrians. Also, their names differ to a great extent from those of the Illyrians, since they are partly Thracian.

Recently, alternative hypotheses have been proposed, attempting to explain satisfactorily the complex problem of the Albanian ethnogenesis. New significance has been given to the roles of the Dacian Carpi and Thracians and their settlement in the future Albanian territories; most notably the role of the Thracian Bessi was emphasized. These or similar hypotheses are not entirely new, they had been put forward earlier; however, in the opinion of R. Katičić, they were insufficiently argued and the arguments in favour of them must be regarded as inconclusive. There is probably little doubt that the Thracians played an important part in the process of the formation of the modern Albanian nation; however, the reality – as is often the case – is more complex, and must be appraised more broadly, in terms of the entire paleo-Balkan historical development, in which Slav migrations played an important role. In conclusion it may be said that the ethnogenesis of most nations – and particularly also in the case of Balkan nations – is an extremely complex development.

34. Schramm 1994.

35. Katičić 1976; 184–188.
that cannot be studied in a simplified way. It must be approached from different angles, taking into account the fate of indigenous populations before Romanization and in the late antiquity, migrations on a large and small scale, constant mixing of peoples and tribes, their assimilation, as well as various ways of resistance to the dominance of different groups of populations.

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The valley of the Aous River where the Atintani were settled. They were regarded variously as Epirotes and Illyrians in the ancient sources (photo Peter Kos).

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