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# ETHNOTOPONYMS AND THEOTOPONYMS AS PART OF THE ONOMASTIC CONTINUUM: RESEARCH BASED ON MATERIALS OF ANCIENT ARMENIAN TOPONYMS

Narine H. Dilbaryan<sup>1</sup>, Mher S. Kumunts<sup>2\*</sup>, Astghik A. Karapetyan<sup>3</sup>, Narine V.  
Markosyan<sup>4</sup> and Anna H. Abajyan<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Chair of History of Armenian Language and General Linguistics, Faculty of Armenian Philology, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia*

<sup>2</sup>*Dialectology Department, Institute of Language named after Hrachya Acharyan of NAS RA, Yerevan, Armenia, Chair of Philology and Historical Jurisprudence, Goris State University, Goris, Armenia, Syunik Armenological Research Center, Goris, Armenia, Email: mherkumunts@gmail.com*

<sup>3</sup>*Chair of History of Armenian Language and General Linguistics, Faculty of Armenian Philology, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia, Ayb School, Yerevan, Armenia*

<sup>4</sup>*Chair of History of Armenian Language and General Linguistics, Faculty of Armenian Philology, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia, Armenian State University of Economics, Yerevan, Armenia*

<sup>5</sup>*Chair of History of Armenian Language and General Linguistics, Faculty of Armenian Philology, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia*

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Corresponding Author: Narine H. Dilbaryan  
(mherkumunts@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

*Toponyms are limited in space and time. A language's non-onomastic vocabulary is more labile, transtemporal, and trans-territorial, and rapidly modernizes via interaction, whereas toponyms are conservative and, therefore, more archaic. In this study, we apply historical-comparative, etymological, and linguopaleontological methods to relatively determined units of the toponymic substratum to extract reliable historical data. According to many toponymists, elements of conquered or assimilated languages may become limited to mere toponyms, never penetrating the vocabulary of the conquering or assimilating language. In this sense, the ethnonyms, clan names, and theonyms reconstructed in toponyms are of greater importance, as they reveal much more archaic layers of language formation and ethnic interactions than the rest of the vocabulary. Moreover, ethnotoponyms and theotoponyms form the "onomastic continuum" of humanity: they bring together times and nations, help reconstruct earlier, more archaic periods of languages, human thinking, the process of naming, the semantics of toponyms, and outline the alleged commonality of languages of distinct families. Limiting the problem to the Armenian Highlands allows us to recreate the overall panorama of interactions of many peoples and their theonyms that have existed in the 5th-6th millennia BC.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ethnotoponym; Theotoponyms; Onomastic Continuum; Substratum; Semantics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND METHOD

One of the most important linguistic problems in the study of the oldest layers of toponyms is to reveal the kinship of the people and their theonym who created them or to identify the composition and origins of peoples inhabiting the area. The reconstruction of the meaning of a toponym is crucial for history and geography as well, since, for these disciplines, toponyms are units that trace back to the initial areas of settlement of a people or the primary geographical conditions of the given location. Toponymists regard ethnonyms / theonyms as archaic bases that help identify the toponymic substratum. In the light of modern scholarship (2010–2024), this field has evolved into a multi-dimensional interdisciplinary paradigm, integrating biological, cultural, and religious-mythological levels to reconstruct the pre-history of the Armenian people (Petrosyan, 2017, pp. 1-11).

For our study, we used internal and external reconstruction, as well as comparative, linguopaleontological, and etymological methods. Furthermore, the application of digital humanities and the availability of lexicographical tools, such as the reverse dictionary of nearly 9,000 localized toponyms based on previously restricted military maps, have allowed for a more precise genetic and structural analysis of the region's hydronymy (Jihanyan, 2015, p. 5).

Scholars have long been interested in the use of ethnonyms in toponyms, identifying two distinct terms: ethnotoponyms and genonyms. An ethnotoponym is a geographical name that is based on the name of an ethnic group, people, or tribe. Prominent onomastician Superanskaya labels these as genonyms (along with their related theonyms), as they are derived not from the name of an ethnic group, but from a lineage (gens): a family or a clan (1984, pp. 5-12). Historians and geographers see such toponyms as proofs of the original settlement of a nation in the given area or of the ways and directions of earlier migrations. A special position in the naming formula is held by eponyms, which are names of a real or mythical epical hero, after whom a geographical feature (country, mountain, sea, river, as well as a people or tribes) was named in general or at a specific historical stage. For instance, initially, Hayk, Armen, Ara, Gelam, and other similar anthroponyms were eponyms and theonyms that gradually acquired a toponymical meaning. Recent studies emphasize the "onomastic continuum" as a living record of identity; for example, the study of the Harzhis settlement reveals that such names can preserve Indo-European cultural layers dating back

to the IV-III millennia BC, reflecting a continuous Armenian presence (Kumunts, 2024, p. 43). This continuity is further substantiated by the language's complex evolutionary trajectory; spanning multiple major developmental stages since the 3rd millennium BC, Armenian has engaged in diverse interactions with dozens of other languages and language families within its native territory, creating a deeply layered onomastic system (Kumunts et al., 2026, p. 3). Additionally, the preservation of these toponyms is now viewed as an essential component of national security, protecting the ontological integrity of the Armenian Highlands against systematic "topocide" and cultural erasure. This erasure was historically institutionalized through state-sponsored campaigns of toponymic Turkification, methodically designed to obliterate the indigenous cultural memory and physical footprint of the Armenian people (Yesayan, 2014, pp. 12-13).

## 2. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

### A. Transition From Ethnonyms and Theonyms to Toponyms

Theonyms and anthroponyms have an inherent potential to become toponyms. In ancient times kings, nobles, or heroes could become namesakes of not only the towns and settlements they possessed, built, or occupied, but also those bestowed on them, wherein their glory and fame would multiply or even turn into a cult. Historiography and linguistics generally consider the ethnonyms as originating from anthroponyms: in the aftermath of certain historical events (military victories, political, economic, and cultural milestones), the descendants may take the name of the patriarch of the clan/dynasty. Movses Khorenatsi, the father of Armenian historiography, structured his *History of Armenia* on this principle, explaining the autonym *Hayk*, as well as the exonyms *Armen*, *Torgomian*, *Askanazian*, etc., via personal names of heroic ancestors of the Armenians. Modern scholarship reinforces this by highlighting that exonyms are often arbitrary, formed according to the external features or the neighbors' mentalities regarding a true or fictional forefather (Petrosyan, 2017, p. 74). A prime example of this continuity is the region of *Hark*, which is identified as the area where the patriarch *Hayk* settled after his victory over *Bel*, thereby embedding an ethnogonic myth directly into the toponymic landscape (Petrosyan, 2017, pp. 14-38).

In his study on the origins and the principles of formation of ancient Armenian anthroponyms in comparison with Indo-European ones, Hübschmann notes that most of the names mentioned by Armenian

historians are also geographical names, that is, in contrast with the Indo-European principles of anthroponym and toponym formation, the transition from an anthroponym to a toponym and vice versa in Armenian has been regular from the beginning (Hübschmann, 2004, p. 318). It has long been a matter of discussion whether, for instance, the placenames *Armavir*, *Armash*, *Arma*, or *Harma* originate from the ethnonym of the Armenians, which etymologizes as 'root, tribe, branch' or 'shoot, stem', 'big, strong, powerful', or from the anthroponym *Armen* of one of the ancestors of the Armenians, which in its turn may well be derived from the above-mentioned common nouns/adjectives, as they might act as descriptive nicknames important for naming a person.

In Armenian toponymic studies, Nicholas Adontz and, afterward, Grigor Ghapantsyan often based ancient toponyms upon ethnonyms or tribal names, linking their emergence to various migrations. Since time immemorial, the Armenian highlands acted as a melting pot of ethnicities and tribes, large and small, wherein native and immigrant nations waged wars against each other, formed alliances, created states, and established royal and feudal dynasties. These events enriched the Armenian language with borrowed roots (especially of Hittite-Luwian, or Anatolian, origin), as well as toponyms and anthroponyms based on them, while the Armenian history and culture embellished itself with heroes and gods.

In *Historical-Linguistic Significance of the Toponymy of Ancient Armenia*, Ghapantsyan examines various names of Armenian noble houses (from which many common and geographical names have originated) etymologizing them as archaic names of Hittite tribes. Some of the presented etymologies are now disputed, but the overall framework still retains its vitality, stating that the names of tribes assimilated into the Armenian ethnicity initially became clan names and then turned into oikonoms as these clans were the founders and sovereigns of the mentioned regions and provinces (Ghapantsyan, 1975, pp. 46-47). Thus, the *Amatunis*, according to Ghapantsyan, originate from the *Mada*, identical to the Medians, the name of the *Mandakunis* - from the name *Mandak*, the *Slkunis* - from the tribe *Sala*, *Salak* (mentioned in the Hittite Code of the Nesilim and Assyrian inscriptions as a tribe of warlike marauders), the *Khorkhorunis* - from the name *Khur*, i.e. *Khur*, the name of the Hurrians. Historians believe that some of these peoples either lived in Armenia or moved there from the Hittite state, and their descendants became the founders of various Armenian noble houses. The evidence for some of these assimilated tribes is

preserved only in toponymy because they did not survive independently for long and were absorbed by more numerous and powerful noble houses.

In this regard, the etymology of the toponym *Kashatagh* is of certain interest. First attested by the historian Stepanos Orbelyan in the history of *Sisakan* Province, it was further expounded by Ghapantsyan, who proposed that the *Kassite* tribe is the basis for the toponyms *Kashatagh*, *Kashunik*, and *Kashi Marg* (Ghapantsyan, 1961, p. 51). The toponym *Kashunik* (*kash-*) itself, as a linguistic unit, is the nominative plural of the mentioned ethnonym. Note that the nominative and accusative plurals have an inherent potential of becoming toponyms (Hübschmann, 2004, p. 257; Hübschmann, 1907, p. 226). Recent critical studies highlight that while Ghapantsyan sought ancient Mesopotamian links, the survival of names like *Kashatagh* is today a matter of cultural preservation. The systematic "topocide" in the Eastern Caucasus—the replacement of Armenian toponyms with Turkic ethnotoponyms to erase historical nativity— makes the scientific verification of these ancient roots— often seamlessly preserved in dialectal archaisms that express enduring spatial and territorial relations—a priority for national identity. Based on various cuneiform sources, G. Ghapantsyan outlines an entire picture of tribal migration via *Aratzani* valley, identifying *Siwni*, *Pala/Bala/Pata/Bata*, *Sis*, *Šak/k*, *Tawr* and other tribal denominations that led to such toponyms as *Syunik*, *Karabakh*, *Sisakan-Sisian*, *Šakašēn*, *Taron*, *Turuberan* (*Tauribirani*) and other cognates. Thus, the Armenization of various tribes, a term coined by Ghapantsyan, began out of Lesser Armenia (*Haiāša*), included *Taron* and towards present-day Diyarbakir, then the area around Lake Van, along the northern stream of *Aratzani* into *Basēn*, then westwards into *Sper*, then northwards into *Ayrarat*. "Many pre-Armenian (that is, pre-7th century BC) and Armenian tribes and clans either totally disappeared or passed their names onto geographical areas and places, as well as princely and noble clans" (Ghapantsyan, 1940, pp. 73-74). Modern scholarship, particularly by Petrosyan, suggests that what was previously seen as a late "Armenization" of foreign tribes may actually have been a consolidation of a predominantly Armenian-speaking population already present in the Highlands during the 2nd millennium BC. The appearance of different ethnonyms (*Nairi*, *Urartu*, *Etiuni*) often reflects neighbors' mentalities rather than ethnic shifts (Petrosyan, 2017).

The historical evolution of the Armenian language reveals profound semantic and morphological shifts that have directly influenced

the formation of regional toponyms (Abajyan et al., 2017, p. 205). Meanwhile, ethnotoponyms can form not only choronyms and oikonoms, but hydronyms and oronyms as well, and the latter may often be of greater antiquity. G. Ghapantsyan's hypotheses regarding the transition of clan names into toponyms and vice versa were further elaborated and substantiated by Armenian and non-Armenian historians and linguists, such as J. Greppin, I. Diakonoff, V. Bănăţeanu, S. Yeremian, H. Karagyozyan, N. Harutyunyan, and G. Djahukian.

The toponymic usage of ethnonyms in the onomastics of various peoples is closely tied to historical and geographical realities such as the character of expansion and settling of a people, the type of interethnic contacts within a given area, the form of land ownership and use, and the specifics of economic activity. Ethnotoponyms emerge in early antiquity driven by communal or tribal land ownership and use. These were the times when a place would often be named after its inhabitants. The prevalence and the universal nature of this practice are substantiated by ancient maps (beginning from Ptolemy), as well as chronicles and inscriptions in various languages that record military operations and conquests of peoples and territories. Modern onomastic theory views this process as a fluid "onomastic continuum" where proper names undergo complex changes—such as metaphorization and generalization—to become part of a region's social ontology. This is particularly evident in the archaic layers of Armenian toponymy, where early anthropomorphic perceptions of the landscape led to the extensive use of somatic terms that gradually generalized into standard geographical nomenclature (Dilbaryan, 2007, pp. 183-184).

Movses Khorenatsi adheres to this ancient tradition of asserting the emergence of a choronym from the name of its tribe, and of the latter – from proper names of its elders and prominent figures. Examples of identical toponyms and ethnonyms are ubiquitous. For instance, the name *Rus* (Русь) is used in both Russian and non-Russian sources both as a choronym and as an ethnonym, though the clarification of its etymology is not an easy task (Plokhly, 2006, pp. 10-12). Thousands of choronyms from all over the world (*Iran, York, Bretagne, Peru, Chile*, etc.) are of the same nature. Over time, the settlements that served as centers of tribal lands often would grow into townships bearing the ethnotoponym. The reason is self-evident since the ethnic composition of such settlements was often homogeneous, the ethnicity being the best distinguisher for naming. Famous examples of such

formations are *Venice, Dresden, London, and Paris*. Recent linguistic analysis suggests that these formations are durable "historical chronicles" that survive for generations, though they now face "onomastic erasure" in political contexts where naming is elevated to a symbolic act of territorial claim.

As mentioned above, ethnonyms not only compose choronyms but also names of almost all physical and geographical units such as seas, islands, peninsulas, bays, etc. For example, the names of the *Caspian Sea, Lakes Erie and Huron (USA), the Persian Gulf* (called also *Arabian Gulf*), the Straits of *Bosphorus* and *Dardanelles*, as well as the island of *Sicily*, are composed of ethnonyms. Current digital humanities efforts now focus on the regularization of these names in international databases (GeoNames, Pleiades) using TEI/EpiDoc schemas to preserve the rich historical and cultural heritage of ancient inscriptions against modern distortions.

### **B. Toponymic Substratum in Armenian**

The emergence of ethnotoponyms in areas inhabited by various tribes is driven by the significance that ethnic belonging, as a distinctive feature, possesses. The areal examination reveals an uneven distribution of ethnotoponyms. These more often occur and are preserved at the center of ethnic contacts, i.e., at ethnic intersections. Usually, ethnotoponyms do not appear in areas of absolute homogeneity, but if they do appear, they do not last long, because in such territories the ethnicity is never sufficiently distinctive. Meanwhile, ethnotoponyms often arise from the development of relations between natives and newcomers (mostly of conqueror/conquered type). Natives come to be conquered and assimilated by new, more vigorous, advanced, or warlike tribes, and the names of the conquered or assimilated peoples sometimes remain as unique footprints of now-extinct inhabitants of the area. In the contemporary context, this linguistic layering is vital for national security; as Danielyan (2015) notes, the ontological integrity of Armenian toponyms serves as a cognitive-protective factor against the "topocide"—the systematic falsification and Turkification of historical maps and names. Comprehensive analyses of these Turkified toponyms demonstrate that this was not a natural linguistic evolution, but a deliberate, methodical alteration—often via direct translation or phonetic distortion—intended to erase the archaic Armenian substratum (Yesayan, 2014, pp. 14-16).

Thus, in his examination of the choronyms of *Armenia Interior (Xorjean/ĕn, Patnatun, Mundzur,*

*Daranati, Ekelēs/ēn, Ałiw, Mananati, Derjan, Karin, Šatgom, Sper*) and etymology of oikonyms and hydronyms derived from them, Adontz mentions: "Other than *Šatgom*, the rest are of pre-Armenian origin. Those provinces that the Armenians seized from the neighbors retained their names (most of which are purely ethnographic terms). As for toponyms, as well as their localizations, classical authors agree with the Armenian sources" (Adontz, 2016). Furthermore, Adontz's isolation of ancient toponymic suffixes—such as *-hi, -ni, -ri, and -zi*—demonstrates how these early morphological markers served dual functions as both ethnonyms and choronyms in the pre-Armenian and Urartian linguistic layers (Dilbaryan, 2022).

This opinion was substantiated also by Heinrich Hübschmann in *Armenische Etymologie*, the first part of his *Armenische Grammatik*, where the author traces the establishment of the Kingdom of Greater Armenia and the spread of the influence of Indo-European Armenians in the countries adjacent to the upper and middle streams of the river *Araxes*, as a result of which the name of the Armenians gradually replaced the old toponym *Urartu*, and the toponyms of older ethnic origin either disappeared or became Armenized (Hübschmann, 2003, pp. 399-455). G. Ghapantsyan states that the Babylonian version of the Bihistun inscription substitutes the term *Armenia* (*Armina* in Old Persian version) by *Uraštu*, an older political term, as it was more comprehensible at the time for the Assyrians and Babylonians than *Armina*, the new ethnotoponym.

However, military operations and assimilation are not the only types of relations that contribute to the emergence of new ethnotoponyms, these can arise in areas of peaceful coexistence as well. The expansion of hunter and fisher tribes is the main reason that the oikonyms of the area, as well as the names of rivers and lakes, forests, mountains, and valleys, are comprised of ethnonyms. The names of nomadic cattle-breeders also become toponyms as, by naming, the nomadic tribes mark their ownership of a territory. The existence of different Turkic tribal names on the territory of Russia directly reveals the routes of their migration. It should be kept in mind that conquerors, who possess certain territories, can either retain indigenous ethnonyms as bases for toponyms, or erase them and replace with their own ethnonyms. Modern research on regions like *Shurnukh* in Syunik illustrates this complexity; the name is now etymologized from the PIE root *\*sol-* (salt/saline) and Urartian *\*ulhu-* (to flow), reflecting a 13th-century layering that survives despite demographic shifts (Kumunts, 2020, p. 55).

General linguistics separates relations and interactions of peoples and languages into two categories: interference and borrowing. Language interference has two causes: political conquest or proximity/coexistence, and is manifested by three subtypes: superstratum, adstratum, and substratum.

The superstratum is the influence of the language of newcomers, particularly of the conquerors, on the local language. In this case, a unique exchange of toponyms happens, as is, for example, the case of Armenian-Turkish linguistic interactions. Superstratum toponyms do not blend easily with the onomastic system of a local language, being recognized as foreign or imposed, and are consistently expelled during periods of political changes. This is the case for almost the entire period of state independence of Armenia (including the Soviet era) when foreign Turkish toponyms were replaced by their older original forms or by names and calques that sounded Armenian at the time.

Adstratum is the influence of one language on another in multi-ethnic communities. In Armenia such placenames have always appeared under Persian, Turkish or Russian hegemony, but remain incidental by nature.

Considering the material under examination, the notion of the substratum is of higher interest. The substratum is the influence of the local language on the language of the newcomers, particularly, of conquerors. Many ethnotoponyms can be explained through substratum only, and this is why the toponymic substratum is distinguished from the substratum in general. According to R. Ageeva, the use of the term substratum in toponymy is strictly pragmatic. Still, the theoretical problems of substratum nomenclature remain partly developed. These include: 1) the concept of toponymic substratum (the substratum in language and toponyms), 2) principles of distinguishing substratum toponyms, 3) methods of studying substratum toponyms, 4) substratum toponyms and toponymical paradigms of an area, 5) variants of substratum toponyms, 6) characterization of substratum toponyms by origins. The first of these problems is particularly stressed by Ageeva. In toponymics, the substratum has a broader meaning, independent of language kinship. According to R. Ageeva, the substratum in toponymy often refers to the language of the toponyms of all those inhabitants of the area, who precede its current linguistic majority, regardless of the degree of kinship between the languages. In other words, the toponymic interpenetration of related languages is still considered a substratum, whereas in linguistics it is

impossible to discern substrata if dealing with sister languages. Thus, we find such concepts as substratum and superstratum toponyms, introduced by A. Dulzon in his study of the toponyms of Siberia and developed by Ageeva, linguistically justified. Ageeva notes: "During the analysis of Russian toponyms of any area, where a possible substratum exists, one should distinguish between toponyms that are Russian by origin or by usage" (Ageeva, 1987, pp. 14-17). This methodology is successfully applied in recent studies of Syunik and Artsakh, where architectural monuments, cross-stones (khachkars), and inscriptions provide tangible evidence of the continuous Armenian linguistic substratum against attempts to rebrand these regions as "Western Azerbaijan".

Referring to ancient oikonyms, toponymist H. Haefs notes: "Natural place names have been Germanized only gradually, under ever-increasing German-Frankish influence, which means that they either had to be replaced (by either translated or untranslated forms) or combine with German meanings. This way a whole set of toponyms based on non-Germanic languages (i.e., to the west and south of Latin, Celtic and Gallic areas) emerges that begin to sound German" (Haefs, 2004, pp. 13). This long-term linguistic evolution is mirrored in modern efforts to reclaim the indigenous toponymic landscape. As Arsen Saparov notes, the renaming processes in 20th-century Armenia served as a strategic restoration of historical memory, effectively synchronizing the country's contemporary geography with its ancient onomastic roots by officially reinstating archaic Armenian names (Saparov, 2003, pp. 179-198).

Such a distinction is applicable to toponyms at any place and language where substratum is possible. The problem thus comes down to synchronic and diachronic analyses of placenames, as the synchronic examination alone cannot discern a substratum. In our opinion, Adontz (at the beginning of the 20th c.) and Ghapantsyan (in the 1940s) made that distinction during their analysis of ethnotoponyms inherited from Urartian, Nairian, Hittite, Chaldean, and Caucasian tribes, distinguishing their pre-Armenian forms from those that are Armenian by usage. The assimilating language assimilates the vocabulary of the indigenous languages, while new phonetic, morphological, lexical, and other patterns also appear that altogether later constitute a substratum.

A comprehensive analysis of the Armenian toponymic system requires a deep understanding of the language's historical stages. Many ancient

linguistic elements and roots, which were once active in the Classical Armenian period, gradually fell out of common use but have been remarkably preserved within dialectal vocabularies and local geographical names (Abajyan et al., 2017, pp. 168, 205). The investigation of these archaic units is further deepened by the semantic analysis of the Classical Armenian vocabulary, which highlights how primary meanings were transformed or specialized during the language's development (Hovhannisyan, 1991). In this regard, the etymology of the place name *Tsop'k'* is noteworthy. Adontz notes that *Tsop'k'* is the same as proto-Armenian *Supani*, which underwent a *s>ts* phonetic transition in Armenian, while *k'* is the plural marker in Armenian. Thus, we arrive to a structure substratum borrowed root + Armenian plural marker. "The name *Supani* is closely preserved in the Assyrian form *Sofan-aje*, probably because of closer affinity between the Assyrians and the archaic peoples of this region. The Armenian and Assyrian forms geographically coincide and mean the same country, which was inhabited by peoples of Armenian and Assyrian origins" (Adontz, 2016, p. 52). Modern historical geography confirms that Sophene (*Tsopk*) was an integral part of the Armenian world, straddling vital communication lines like the *Tomisa* crossing (Marciak, 2012, p. 295).

Drawing upon the arguments of Ghapantsyan, Karagyozyan (1998) further develops this view in his study of cuneiform toponyms within the Armenian Highland. Specifically, in the chapter 'A Mysterious Labyrinth,' he notes that 'three Armenian kings hail from two Scythian chieftains' (Karagyozyan, 1998, pp. 273-277). The Scythian chieftain *Išpaka* appears in the Armenian sources as Armenian king *Kaipak*, and the chieftain *Šagahe*, mentioned in the Urartian and Aramaic sources, who is the same person as *Išpaka* of the Assyrian sources, becomes *Skayordi* (*Šagayordi*) in Armenian. The third is *Partat'ua*, same as *Paruyr*, who was the first Armenian noble to assume kingship, according to traditional Armenian history. These are typical examples of Armenization of non-Armenian names (Karagyozyan, 1998, pp. 273-277).

In general, the juxtaposition of toponyms (especially their base forms) of different languages reveals new levels of language commonality, the typological proximity being one. Reflecting on this, N. Trubetsky writes: "I doubt that it will ever be possible to prove convincingly and unequivocally (from a scientific point of view) the affinity of Indo-European languages with Semitic, Uralic, or Caucasian languages. Moreover, by affinity I mean exclusively its direct genealogical meaning. There is something else – a typological affinity – which

undoubtedly exists between languages that are genealogically unrelated" (Trubetsky, 1987, p. 61).

The assimilation of geographical names from the language of the natives is quick and direct, sometimes widespread. Several toponyms of historical Armenia are still considered non-Armenian by origin. Attempts at their etymology based on Armenian are considered mythical. Such toponyms as *Lake/Sea of Getam*, *Mountains of Getam*, *province of Getark'unik'*, which the Armenian folk tradition, according to Khorenatsi, considers originating from the name of the patriarch *Getam*, are explained by Ghapantsyan, Adontz, and later Jihanyan, through the demonym *vel*, which allegedly was a tribe living somewhere between *Kura* and *Araxes* rivers, supposedly deriving its meaning from Urartian *ueli* 'army, squad'. Etymologically being Urartian, this toponym is Armenian by usage. Modern etymological analysis by Petrosyan (2016) suggests a deeper PIE origin, linking *Gegham* and *Gegharkunik* to the root \*wel- ('snake' or 'dragon'), which corresponds to the 'dragon stones' (*vishaps*) found in high density in the *Geghama* mountains (Petrosyan, 2016, pp. 129-146). Armenian and foreign historians and linguists, such as M. Nikolsky, S. Yeremian, and H. Karagyozyan, attempt to derive the name of the river *Eraxs* (*Araxes*) from the Urartian choronym *Eriahi* (specifically, from its plural accusative) originating from a Scythian tribal name. Khorenatsi associates the hydronym with *Erast*, the grandson of the patriarch *Aramayis*. Whatever the origin, it is Armenian by usage (Jihanyan, 1991, pp. 239-242).

There is also the opposite phenomenon, when a place name of Armenian origin has become Urartian by use. Thus, G. Djahukian, discusses the linguistic constituent of Armenian in Urartian placenames in his *History of the Armenian language*, stating: "The inscription of Sarduri mentions the 'mountainous country' of *Karniši* near *Malatia*, and it is possible that Armenian *k'ar* (nom. pl.: *k'arink'*, acc.: *k'arinās*) is attested in this name, even in its accusative plural protoform... If the initial *g* in *giwł* (stem *get-*, Arm. 'village') does not represent a post-Urartian shift of *w* (cf. *Uelikuni*>*Geta(r)k'uni*) and if it was already pronounced *g* in some areas during the Urartian period, then perhaps its plural form is preserved in *Giluarani*, which Melikishvili considers 'a tribal name' (Jahukyan, 1987, pp. 444-445). The term *giwł* is attested in collective nouns *giwłean*, *geteni*, *getawrayk'* (*getawrēk'*) as well, and in *Giluarani* one may discern collective forms. Ghapantsyan's etymology of this name is as follows. He derives *Getak'uni* from the original *Uelikuni* (*Uelikuhi*) and notes that it coincided

with contemporaneous *Nor Bayazet* (modern *Gavar*). This country is mentioned five times in the annals of Sarduri II. "I marched into the land of the *Uelikuni*... *Nidi*, the king of the land, turned himself in and kneels. I subjugated and taxed him." The toponym *Uelikuni* or *Uelikuhi* is also attested in the inscription of King *Rusa I* found at the southern shore of *Lake Sevan*. In Armenian, preference was given to the form of *Uelikuni* with the Urartian suffix *-ni*, which is eventually preserved in the toponym *Geta(r)k'uni*. According to Ghapantsyan, the word *Uelik*, a clan name for the tribe of the region, means 'a descendant of the *Uel* tribe'. In Urartian, the tribal name *Uel* means 'people'. Ghapantsyan believed that the original meaning of the demonyms of all nations was 'people' (Ghapantsyan, 1940, pp. 20-23). Modern onomastic research emphasizes that toponyms serve as vital repositories of ethno-cultural information, reflecting the historical presence and linguistic shifts of various ethnic groups within a specific territory (Gordova et al., 2022, pp. 3). The methodology of utilizing toponymy as a primary source for historical-linguistic reconstruction is firmly established in global scholarship. Comprehensive etymological lexicons, such as the *Deutsches Ortsnamenbuch*, exemplify how the systematic analysis of place names provides a representative overview of the diversity, origins, and historical development of settlements within a specific linguistic landscape (Niemeyer, 2012, p. 5). Consistent with this perspective, Petrosyan identifies *Etiuni*—including the regions of *Uelikuni* and *Uduri-Etiuni*—as a predominantly Armenian-speaking tribal confederation and a primary cradle of the Armenian ethnos (Petrosyan, 2018, pp. 299-330).

The derivation of the toponym *Erewan* from *Eria*, a demonym mentioned many times in the inscriptions of the Urartian kings, is also noteworthy. He presumes that this demonym was initially an andronym, more precisely, an eponym. For the name of *Erewan*, Ghapantsyan suggests the following chain of possible transformations: *eri(a)+awan*, meaning 'eria land', then, by a phonetic transition characteristic of Armenian, it became *ia>ea>e* (via ungliding), from which the toponym *Erewan* emerged later. Nikolsky and Sandaljian also supported the mentioned etymology. In this case, the eponym>demonym>toponym transition is once again substantiated. A non-Armenian or a pre-Armenian toponym gradually becomes purely Armenian by usage. Ghapantsyan further sees the *Eria/Aria* positional variants as equivalent, because the transition *e>a* has always been attested in Armenian (*Eriza/Ariza*, *Eraxs/Araks*, *Erast/Arast*), thus

arguing for a much longer existence of *Aryan* tribes in this territory (Ghapantsyan, 1940, pp. 7-8). Contemporary scholars attempt to restore the literal meaning of *Erevan* based on Indo-European traditions, proposing 'happy city' or even 'victory' (from *Eriane/Eria*) as the core semantics (Karagyozyan, 1998, pp. 81-82).

When dealing with the contacts and relations between peoples from a purely linguistic point of view, it should be noted that during regional contacts, the winning language usually borrows not only toponyms but also units of the general or appellative vocabulary of the conquered language. Therefore, as a rule, it is assumed that if there is a toponymic substratum in a language, there must also be a general appellative substratum – certain phonetic, morphological, and syntactic features that can be explained by substratum influence of assimilated languages. In modern toponymics, however, there is a tendency to view the toponymic substratum as relatively more independent and not directly connected to the general linguistic substrata; this distinction is made based on different functions of toponyms and other vocabulary units during communication, as well as their different fields of application. The historical value of these names is immense; Jihanyan's 2015 dictionary highlights that Armenian toponyms contain historico-linguistic traces of a four-thousand-year-old history (2015).

It should be noted that these sub-layer toponyms have a semantic horizontal and a semantic vertical. In the case of our study, the semantic horizontal is extremely important, which, unlike the vertical, is expressed as optional. This problem was thoroughly addressed by Berezovich in his monograph "Language and Traditional Culture", noting that "when a name that has cultural value expands its semantic base, without ceasing to designate a given unique geographical object, it begins to be used to characterize a wider range of phenomena in reality, at the expense of which a unique range of semantic 'spreading' of the name is created" (Berezovich, 2007, p. 61).

### 3. CONCLUSION

Toponyms are limited in space and time. The non-onomastic vocabulary of a language is more labile, transtemporal, and trans-territorial, and rapidly modernizes via interaction, whereas the toponyms are conservative, and therefore more archaic. Functioning as a relatively closed linguistic

subsystem, the timeline for toponymic evolution is often measured in millennia rather than centuries, making them remarkably resilient against the rapid semantic shifts seen in general vocabulary (Dilbaryan, 2022, p. 13). Our research demonstrates that applying comprehensive historical-comparative and etymological analyses – rather than linear lexicostatistics – to the toponymic substratum yields profound insights into the region's archaic linguistic realities.

Modern research (2010-2024) affirms that these archaic layers are the "backbone of statehood," serving as essential cognitive-protective resources in the face of contemporary geopolitical challenges. The transition from narrow philological etymologies to an interdisciplinary paradigm has allowed for a more comprehensive reconstruction of the Armenian pre-history, firmly establishing the Armenian Highland as a focal area of indigenous ethnogical development rather than a mere site of late migrations (Petrosyan, 2017).

According to many toponymists, elements of conquered or assimilated languages may become limited to mere toponyms, never penetrating the vocabulary of the conquering or assimilating language. In this sense, the ethnonyms and clan names reconstructed in toponyms are of greater importance, as they reveal much more archaic layers of language formation and ethnic interactions than the rest of the vocabulary. Moreover, according to Superanskaya, the ethnotoponyms and theotoponyms form an "onomastic continuum": they bring together times and nations, help reconstruct earlier, more archaic periods of languages, and outline the alleged commonality of languages of distinct families. Recent studies in Syunik and Artsakh further solidify this concept, demonstrating how plant-based designations (phytotoponyms) and ancient agricultural terms provide indubitable evidence for the continuous and centuries-long presence of the Armenian language and culture on these lands (Kumunts, 2025).

Limiting the problem to the Armenian highlands allows us to recreate the overall panorama of interactions of many peoples and clans that have existed in the 5th–6th millennia BC. Today, the ongoing scientific verification of these ancient roots, aided by digital humanities and prosopographical catalogs of thousands of names, is a vital necessity for both academic science and the preservation of national heritage against the systematic "topocide" occurring in the region.

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**Narine H. Dilbaryan** graduated from Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia. She received her PhD in Philological Sciences and currently serves as an Associate Professor at Yerevan State University. She is currently a lecturer at the Department of the History of the Armenian Language and General Linguistics. Her primary research interests focus on the history of the Armenian language and general linguistics. Prof. Dilbaryan has published extensively in her field.  
Email: [narine.dilbaryan@ysu.am](mailto:narine.dilbaryan@ysu.am) (ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1212-0029>).

**Mher S. Kumunts** was born in Goris, Armenia, on September 1, 1972. He received his PhD in Philological Sciences from the NAS RA Institute of Language, Yerevan, Armenia, in 2004, having graduated from Yerevan State University in 1997. He is a Researcher at the NAS RA Institute of Language, Yerevan, Armenia, and an Associate Professor at Goris State University, Goris, Armenia. His primary research interests include Armenian dialectology, etymology, and toponymy. Prof. Kumunts is a member of the editorial board of the *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*.  
Email: [mherkumunts@gmail.com](mailto:mherkumunts@gmail.com) (ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5496-3783>).

**Astghik A. Karapetyan** was born in Yerevan, Armenia. She graduated from Yerevan State University in 2008 and received her Candidate of Philological Sciences degree in 2015. Her dissertation defense took place at the NAS RA Language Institute named after Hrachya Acharyan, Yerevan, Armenia. She currently teaches at Yerevan State University and Ayb School, Yerevan, Armenia. Her interests include issues of Armenian vocabulary development, historical dialectology, and linguistic geography. Dr. Karapetyan is actively involved in pedagogical and linguistic research.  
Email: [astghik\\_karapetyan@ysu.am](mailto:astghik_karapetyan@ysu.am) (ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9210-1041>).

**Narine V. Markosyan** was born in Georgia. She graduated from Yerevan State University in 2001 and received her Candidate of Philological Sciences degree in 2015. Her dissertation defense took place at the NAS RA Language Institute named after Hrachya Acharyan, Yerevan, Armenia. She currently teaches at Yerevan State University and the Armenian State University of Economics, Yerevan, Armenia. She has held the title of Associate Professor of Sciences since 2023. Her research interests include historical grammar, historical dialectology, and the textology of Old Armenian manuscripts.

Prof. Markosyan is a specialist in Old Armenian textology.

Email: [narine.markosyan@ysu.am](mailto:narine.markosyan@ysu.am) (ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2149-0027>).

**Anna H. Abajyan** graduated from Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia. She received her PhD in Philological Sciences and holds the title of Professor.

She currently serves as the Head of the Armenian Language History and General Linguistics Chair at Yerevan State University. Her research focuses on the history of the Armenian language.

Prof. Abajyan oversees departmental academic and research initiatives.

Email: [abajyan.anna@ysu.am](mailto:abajyan.anna@ysu.am) (ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3728-0862>).