

## THE BELLIFORTIS TEXT AND EARLY ALBANIAN

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Franz Bopp first recognized the Indo-European character of Albanian in 1854. The substantial change which has taken place in the phonology and morphology of the language since the Indo-European period is however difficult to trace due to the lack of texts predating the fifteenth century. From a reference made in 1332, we know that Albanian was written in Latin characters in the fourteenth century, but no records from that period have come to light as yet. Fifteenth century texts are listed in my article on the Albanian lexicon of Arnold von Harff, 1497.

A text which has been interpreted as early Albanian and if so, would be the earliest record of the language of all, is the so-called Bellifortis text in ms. 663, f. 153v, preserved at the Musée Condé of the Château de Chantilly north of Paris. The manuscript itself, dated 1405 AD, is a work in Latin for the most part, dealing with military engineering and arms by the German pyrotechnician Conrad Kyeser (1366-1405).

The text with which we are concerned consists of a total of eight lines interspersed in a somewhat mysterious Latin text on the last page of the manuscript. It was interpreted as Albanian, and indeed translated by the Romanian engineer Dumitru Todericiu with the collaboration of Professor Dumitru Polena (Bucharest) in 1967 and referred to as an early Albanian text in Götz Quarg's edition of the Bellifortis manuscript in the same year. The text is also mentioned briefly by Dhimitër Shuteriqi in his work on Albanian sources from 1332 to 1850. The following reading may be regarded as definitive:

- 1 est hoc lucibulum signorum duodecim pulchrum
- 2 puseo virgineus aptetur die solari
- 3 hora mane prima tenens circulare sinistra
- 4 corporis dyaphoni sed dextra facculam sumat
- 5 et circumscriptum duodecies pronuncciando
- 6 intervallo deposito postea require petitum
- 7 preascriptum presens est hoc subtile probatum
- 8 noscit qui intelligit sufficit expressio simplex
- 9 prescriptosque ligant duodecim altitudines celi
- 10 nec non et virtutes queque continentur in ipsis
- 11 *due racha yze inbeme zabel chmielfet dayce dayci*
- 12 *dayze yan yon yan*
  
- 13 pusionis dextram *ragam* aurem sed sinistram
- 14 *echem* pronunccies totiens sit reiterando
- 15 donec compleveris corporis dyaphoni normam
- 16 postea ligabunt enoch et helias prophete
- 17 nec non magisterium summum invocatum prescriptos
- 18 *ragam ragma mathy zagma concuti perbra*
- 19 *ista aus auskar auskary ausckarye zyma bomchity*
- 20 *wasram electen eleat adolecten zor dorchedine*
- 21 *zebestmus lisne zehanar zehanara zensa*

22 *echem biliat adolecten zeth dorchene zehat stochis*  
23 *lisne zehanar zehanara zehayssa*  
24 *strictum quod est supra recludes virginea cera*  
25 *similiter policem unguis dextri pusionis*  
26 *manu quoque dextra teneatur rotundum ut supra*  
27 *quod si gravatur super eque sinistram*  
28 *sit et unda fluens de qua complebis quesitum*  
29 *deo gracias*

Possible variant readings:

11 *ch.. elfet*  
19 *bonichity*  
20 *dorchediye*  
21 *zebestinns, zebestinus*

*Translation of the Latin text*

1 This is the beauty of the twelve shining signs.  
2 The virgin boy should be initiated on a sunny day in the  
3 first hour in the morning, holding the round thing in the left hand  
4 of (his) disharmonious body, but in the right hand may he take up a torch,  
5 pronouncing twelve times that which is paraphrased.  
6 After an interval, look for what is being sought after,  
7 ascribed earlier. Present is the subtle thing which is being tried.  
8 He who understands, knows it. A simple expression is sufficient.  
9 And may the twelve heights of heaven, and also the virtues which  
10 are contained in them, bind the prescribed things.

13 Pronounce (in) the right ear of the boy ‘*ragam*,’ but (in) the left  
14 ‘*echem*’ as often as it should be repeated,  
15 until you fulfil the norm of the disharmonious body.  
16 Thereafter the prophets Enoch and Elijah and the high priesthood  
17 which has been called upon, will bind the prescribed things.

24 The stiff thing which is above, you should enclose in virgin wax,  
25 in the same way the thumb of the boy’s right claw.  
26 Also in the right hand may the round thing be held as above,  
27 and if it gets heavy, in the same way over the left hand.  
28 May there be a flowing wave at which you will fulfil the requested.  
29 *deo gracias*

From the Latin Text it is apparent that we are dealing with initiation rites involving some sort of phallic ceremony. The passage has nothing to do with the rest of the Bellifortis manuscript and is one of a number of mysterious additions to it. The reference to the twelve signs is no doubt astrological.

The Todericiu/Polena Romanian translation of the non-Latin lines, although it may offer

some clues if the text is indeed Albanian, is fanciful and based, among other things, on a false reading of the manuscript, including the exclusion of a whole line. It can be translated as follows:

- 11 A star has fallen in a place in the woods, distinguish the star, distinguish it.  
 12 Distinguish the star from the others, they are ours, they are.  
 18 Do you see where the great voice has resounded? Stand beside it  
 19 That thunder. It did not fall. It did not fall for you, the one which would do it.  
 20 ...  
 21 Like the ears, you should not believe ... that the moon fell when ...  
 22 Try to encompass that which spurts far ...  
 23 Call the light when the moon falls and no longer exists ...

It must be made clear from the outset that the non-Latin text is a type of magical jargon involving formulaic incantations with repetitions and was probably not understood by those using it. It cannot, therefore, be translated as if it were the prose of a normal language. The repetitions become evident when we recast the text as follows:

- (a) *due racha yze inbeme zabel chmielfet,*  
 (b) *dayce dayci dayze,*  
 (c) *yan yon yan,*  
 (d) *ragam ragma mathy zagma,*  
 (e) *concuti perbra ista,*  
 (f) *aus auskar auskary ausckarye,*  
 (g) *zyrna bomchity,*  
 (h) *wasram electen eleat adolecten zor dorchedine zebestmus lisne zehanar zehanara zensa,*  
 (i) *echem biliat adolecten zeth dorchedine zehat stochis lisne zehanar zehanara zehayssa*

It can be seen from the above that line (i) is an almost word for word repetition of line (h) and that the text involves a number of word transformations, perhaps for taboo reasons. Evident also, aside from the incantation character of the text, are words reminiscent of Latin: *concuti*, *electen* and *adolecten*.

Albeit not in a normal language, the incantations are more than simple ‘monkey on a typewriter’ gibberish and are no doubt the highly mutilated form of some language of the period - possibly early Albanian.

Although there is no conclusive evidence that the text is indeed based on Albanian, several things support this assumption. Linguistically, a number of words could be Albanian:

<i>uze</i>	OAlb. <i>izë</i>	= star
<i>zabel</i>	Alb. <i>zabel</i>	= grove, forest
<i>yan</i>	Alb. <i>janë</i>	= are (3pp)
<i>yon</i>	Alb. <i>jonë</i>	= ours
<i>ragam</i>	Alb. <i>rragam</i>	= rock
<i>mathy</i>	Alb. <i>i madh</i>	= big
<i>perbra</i>	Alb. <i>përbri</i>	= nearby
<i>aus</i>	Alb. <i>afsh</i>	= ardour
<i>wasram</i>	Alb. <i>vashëri</i>	= group of girls
<i>echem</i>	Alb. <i>ehem</i>	= I sharpen, prick (fuck?)
<i>biliat</i>	OAlb. <i>biliat</i>	= the girls

Given the phallic nature of the text, an interpretation of the words *ragam* as ‘hard’ (as a rock) and *echem* as ‘fuck,’ both of which according to lines 13 and 14 are to be pronounced in the boy’s ears as often as need be, would seem convincing. The incantational nature of the rest of the text, however, precludes a word by word translation.

History and the manuscript tradition, too, may offer certain clues for an Albanian connection. The Bellifortis work was widely read in the fifteenth century and had a strong impact on other books on the martial arts. One such work is the *Engineering arts and wonder book* preserved in Weimar, GDR (Ms. fol. 328), which contains indisputable copies of drawings from the Bellifortis work. This manuscript, which was bought in Warsaw in 1590, was said to have belonged to the Albanian national hero, Scanderbeg (ca. 1405-1468) who acquired it as a present from King Ferdinand of Aragon and Naples.

Although this may be purely a coincidence, it is eminently possible that Albanian speakers were to be found in fourteenth and fifteenth century France, where our text is preserved. In 1269, Charles of Anjou landed in Vlora and three years later proclaimed himself *rex Albaniae*. Angevin rule in Albania lasted until the middle of the 14th century and resulted in the conversion of parts of northern Albania to Catholicism. Some of these Catholics, or at least French clerics with a command of Albanian, must have fled the country for France when the Franks departed.

A reference in the Latin text to *helias*, the prophet Elijah, is further evidence pointing to the Balkans. Stadtmüller, in his study on heathen beliefs and the Christianization of Albania, notes that the Old Testament prophet had taken over from the ancient Mithras as sun-god in Albania (due no doubt to the homophone *helios* ‘sun’ in Greek). This, according to Stadtmüller, explains the prevalence of the many churches and chapels of St. Elias on hills and mountains in Albania.

## SUMMARY

Certain evidence, both linguistic and non-linguistic, supports an Albanian origin for the Bellifortis text under study. The incantation and taboo character of such a passage involving initiation rites, however, precludes an interlinear translation. If the Bellifortis text is indeed Albanian, which remains to be proved conclusively, it would be the oldest datable text in that language.

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