

Azerbaijani Ethnonyms In Ancient Greek Sources

Ulkar Mirzayeva ¹

¹ *Azerbaijan National Academy of Science, Institute of Linguistics named after Nasimi*

115 H. Cavid Avenu, Baku, Azerbaijan

DOI: [10.22178/pos.115-18](https://doi.org/10.22178/pos.115-18)

LCC Subject Category: PE1001-1693

Received 25.02.2025

Accepted 25.03.2025

Published online 31.03.2025

Corresponding Author:

ulker.mirzeyeva.2016@gmail.com

© 2025 The Author. This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0

License 

Abstract. Ethnonyms are one of the main and active branches of the toponymic layer of Azerbaijan. Ancient Greek sources are valuable for studying the ancient Azerbaijani ethnonyms and the names of historically existing tribes and generations. The study of ethnonyms in this direction shows that ethnonyms trace their origins to times earlier than those of other word groups. The names of some of the Turkic tribes that actively participated in the genealogy of Azerbaijani Turks have been preserved in the toponyms of the territory. Many ethnos that retain their names in toponyms are mentioned in the works of ancient Greek authors and have been exposed to phonetical and grammatical change.

Keywords: Ancient Greek; ethnonyms; toponyms; lexical units; comparison.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnonyms, which constitute one of the ancient and rich branches of the Azerbaijani onomastic lexicon, are a special layer of the lexical composition of the language. The study of ethnonyms based on ancient Greek sources provides inexhaustible material that helps to shed light on important periods and events in the history of the development of the people. The study of ethnotoponyms, which are an onomastic unit, is very valuable in terms of determining the ancient settlement of the people, as well as the diversity and identity of the tribes and clans that are at the root of our people. In ancient sources, ethnonyms of Turkic origin were used, such as Scythian, Sakas, Cimmerian, Pecheneg, Dondar, Muk, Sabir, Katak, Sirak, Massaget, Caspian, Mamek and others. However, these names have come down to us in a distorted form due to the influence of ancient Greek dialects. In particular, the identification of Turkic proper names based on ancient Greek sources, the identification of extralinguistic factors that played a role in their formation, and the analysis of their structural-semantic features, lexical-semantic, and etymological aspects are valuable as concrete material, evidence, and facts for revealing the truth. Since the grammatical rules of this language wrote the onomastic units preserved in the ancient source, that is, the addition of case suffixes to the end of names, the gemina-

tion of consonants, the different spelling of vowels in proper names according to the requirements of the dialects of this language, the use of Turkic onomastic units with the definite article and gender indicator following the rules of the ancient language, the rearrangement of sounds or letters, and the different pronunciation of diphthongs and paired consonants used in onomastic units following the rules of that language have affected the spelling and pronunciation forms of Turkic onomastic units. Although these names have undergone certain phonetic changes, they provide rich facts to clarify the necessary issues of the history of the Azerbaijani language. The Cimmerians, Scythians, and Sakas are the first representatives of our national and Turkish cultural history. One of the oldest ethnicities that lived in the territory of Azerbaijan was the Scythians. The Cimmerians, Scythians and Sakas were the first representatives of our national and Turkish cultures' histories. It should be noted that extensive information about the Scythians was provided in the works of ancient Greek authors. The historical information written by Herodotus, Strabo, Homer, Claudius Ptolomaeus and other scholars of the ancient world provided extensive information about the Scythians and the ancient tribes related to them.

Scientists such as E. Grantovsky, V. Abayev, B. Miller characterized the Scythian tribe as an

ethnos of Iranian origin. For example, V. Abayev claimed that the present-day Ossetians are the heirs of the Scythians [1, p. 169]. However, this idea is not justified because the Scythians, who were at the root of the Azerbaijani people, formed a unified nation on the country's territory and contributed to the history of our statehood.

Nevertheless, recent linguistic, historical, and archaeological studies offer a broader perspective, allowing scholars to reconsider earlier hypotheses regarding the ethnolinguistic identity of the Scythians and related tribes. In contrast to the Iranic hypothesis supported by scholars like V. Abayev, there is growing support among Turkological researchers for the theory that the Scythians, Sakas, and Cimmerians were of Turkic origin. This argument is based on phonetic and morphological features observed in the reconstructed forms of their ethnonyms, which align more closely with early Turkic linguistic patterns than with Iranian ones. Furthermore, Turkic lexical parallels, ethnocultural traits, and historical continuity on present-day Azerbaijan territory reinforce this alternative perspective's validity.

In this context, it becomes especially important to re-examine the ethnonyms recorded in ancient Greek sources from a linguistic angle and in light of extralinguistic factors such as migration, cultural exchange, and transliteration practices. The process by which ancient Greek authors adapted foreign names to fit their language's phonological and grammatical structures often led to semantic shifts and phonetic distortions. Understanding these shifts enables researchers to reconstruct the original forms of Turkic ethnonyms more accurately. Thus, the systematic analysis of ethnonyms and ethnotoponyms mentioned in the works of Herodotus, Strabo, Ptolemy, and other classical authors allows us to trace important stages in the early ethnogenetic processes of the Azerbaijani people while also contributing to broader discussions within historical Turkology and onomastics.

METHODS

The methodology of this study is based on a comparative-historical and philological analysis of ancient Greek and Turkic linguistic sources. The research applies etymological analysis, onomastic comparison, and phonetic-grammatical reconstruction techniques to trace the evolution and transformation of Azerbaijani ethnonyms as

reflected in classical Greek texts. A central methodological approach involves identifying the linguistic distortions (e.g., apheresis, gemination, and suffixation) that occurred when Turkic ethnonyms were transcribed into Greek and the semantic shifts accompanying these phonological and morphological changes. Special attention is paid to the structure of case endings, article usage, and gender indicators in ancient Greece, which influenced how Turkic names were recorded and perceived.

The material base for the study consists of a wide array of primary historical texts written by ancient Greek historians and geographers such as Herodotus, Strabo, Homer, Claudius Ptolemy, and others, in which ethnonyms like *Scythians*, *Sakas*, *Issedonians*, and *Cimmerians* are examined. In addition, the study draws from ancient Turkic sources – notably Mahmud al-Kashgari's *Divanü Lügat-it-Türk*—to trace the origins and meanings of ethnonyms preserved in Azerbaijani toponyms. Scholarly works by modern linguists and historians (e.g., V. Abayev, I. Dyakonov, Z. Hasanov) further enrich the comparative analysis. Including philological evidence and archaeologically supported historical narratives allows a nuanced exploration of how Turkic-origin ethnonyms were adapted in ancient Greek sources, ultimately contributing to the historical-linguistic reconstruction of Azerbaijan's ethnogenetic past.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first information about the Scythian tribe was found in Herodotus's "History". The section in the work where the Scythian tribe was mentioned was called "Μελοπομένη" [melpomene]. The section in the work where the Scythian tribe was mentioned is called "Μελοπομένη" [melpomene], for the Scythians ruled upper Asia for twenty-eight years. The Greeks named Scythians to this tribe, who lived in the northern steppes of the Black Sea, but they called themselves Skolotus.

In this word, which was mentioned in Herodotus' work as "οἱ Σκύθαι". In ancient Greek, "οἱ" is the article, and the suffix "-αι" added to the end of the word is the nominative plural of the first declension of the noun. In ancient Greek, the letter "θ" was pronounced as [t]. This consonant is now pronounced as a dental [s] in modern Greek. Also, in the early Attic dialect, around the 6th-4th century BC, the letter υ was pronounced as [u],

and in classical Greek, at least until 1030, it was pronounced as [ü] [4, p.11]. As can be seen, the pronunciation of these letters has changed over time. From this, it is clear that the ancient Greek pronunciation of the word "ὁ Σκύθης" was [ho skutes]. I.M. Dyakonov pointed out that the name of this tribe, which was mentioned in ancient Greek sources as "ὁ Σκύθης", was formed based on the Assyrian words Ashquzai, Ishquzai, the vowels the Assyrians added a and me at the beginning of these proper names, and the [z] sound in the words Ashquzai, Ishquzai changed to [t] sound in the Greek language [7, p. 315]. In our opinion, the first vowel of this tribe's name was dropped due to the influence of the ancient Greek language. Because in this language, according to the apheresis rule, one or more letters are dropped from the beginning of the word. For example, ἀστεροπη-στεροπη [asterope]- [sterope], εορτη-ορτη [eorte]-[orte] [2, p.7]. Z. Hasanov, however, associated this ethnonym, which was mentioned in the ancient source as "ὁ Σκύθης", with the word Oghuz and suggested that it consists of the root quz/kuz (ancient Turkic - the side of the mountain where the sun does not set) and the component "aş" (to run, to run) [7, p. 316].

At the same time, Herodotus noted that among the fifteen tribes belonging to the Scythians, there were tribes that worshipped the wolf totem. It is known that this totem was considered sacred among the ancient Turks. The Scythians and the Turks are brought together by analogous images reflected in the finds obtained during archaeological excavations and linguistic facts. The arrival of these tribes occasionally had a special impact on the formation of the Turkic ethnos in Azerbaijan.

Herodotus and Claudius Ptolemy called one of the Scythian tribes the Issedonians, in Greek Ἴσσηδόνες [issedones]. This name was used in Herodotus's "History" as οἱ Ἴσσηδόνες [hoi issedones], τῶν Ἴσσηδόνων [ton issedonon], τοῖς Ἴσσηδόσι / Ἴσσηδόσιν [tois issedosi(n)], τοὺς Ἴσσηδόνᾶς [tus issedonas]. This onomastic unit was used in the Ionian dialect of ancient Greek with case suffixes used in the plural in the third declension of a noun.

In our opinion, the reason for the double consonant in the name of this tribe is due to the phenomenon of the gemination of consonants in the Ionian dialect of this language as "pp, ll, mm, ss". Doubled consonants usually only occur between

vowels in ancient Greek. In the work "Divanu lugat-it-turk", the verb "isig" meaning heat, as well as the verb "isi" meaning to warm up, were mentioned [6, p.121]. Also, on the north face of the Taryat monument, "isig" was shown as the name of a Turkic tribe: "*Tanrim kanim ogli: bilga tardus ulug bilga yabgu kutlugi isig yir kutlugi*" [10, p. 234].

Based on the above facts, it can be concluded that the first component of the tribe's name mentioned in the ancient source is related to the word "isi", which means to warm up in the ancient Turkic language.

One of the tribes that played an important role in the ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijani people was the Sakas. Some of the Sakas lived northeast of Caucasian Albania at the beginning of our era. Herodotus' "History", Xenophon's "Anabasis", Strabo's "Geography", and Claudius Ptolemy's "Geography" contain rich information about this tribe. The ancient Greek geographer and historian Strabo mentioned the area where this tribe settled in his work: "*Ἀραξηνὸν πεδῖον, δι' οὗ ὁ Ἀράξης ποταμὸς ῥέων εἰς τὰ ἄκρα τῆς Ἀλβανίας καὶ τὴν Κασπίαν ἐκπίπτει θάλατταν, καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα ἡ Σακασηνή καὶ αὐτὴ τῇ Ἀλβανίᾳ πρόσχωρος καὶ τῷ Κύρῳ ποταμῷ, εἴθ' ἡ Γωγαρηνή*" [9, p. 321]. *The Araxes Plain this river extends to Albania and flows into the Caspian Sea. Then comes the land of the Saka; this area borders Albania and the Kura River, and then comes the land of Gogarene.* Some authors noted that the "σηνή" at the end of the "ἡ Σακασηνή" was derived from the Persian word Shauna "earth" [10, p. 337]. However, as a Greek author wrote, the suffixes added to the end of this proper name are not of Persian origin. First, it should be noted that in ancient Greek, between root (or stem) and suffix "σ" is often found, and in some cases, it has become attached to the suffix. This "σ" appears before many suffixes and is usually where the perfect middle has acquired it. For example, in ancient Greek, "σπασμα" [spasma] consists of the word σπαω [spao] (to break, tear) and the suffix μα [ma], and the letter sigma was added between the root of this word and the suffix added to it. For example, δυ-σ-με [dusme] (δυο [duo]-build)-device, ορχη-σ-της [orkestes]-dancer, ορχε-σ-τρα [orquestra] - ορχεομαι [orkeomai] - (to dance), δυνα-σ-της [dunastes] - ruler (δυναμαι [dunamai]-to be able), πλη-σ-μονη [plesmone]-abundance, ρυ-σ-μος [rusmos]-rhythm, ο-σ-με [osme]-smell [8, p.229]. In our opinion, "ἡ Σακασηνή" [he sakasene], the "σ" was added be-

tween the word Σακα [saka] and the suffix ηνή [ene], and joined to the suffix. At the same time, the suffixes "vo-ς" [no-s], νη [ne], which are added to the beginning with α or η, are in the form of "ηνός" [enos] in the masculine gender, "-ηνή" [ene] in the feminine gender, and "-ηνόν" [enon] in the neuter gender in the first and second declensions. These suffixes indicate belonging to a particular country, nation or city or coming from there. Gentiles are denominative nouns denoting belonging to or coming from a particular country, nation, or city. From this, it is clear that to the end of this proper name, following the rules of the ancient language, both the "σ"- sigma and the suffix "-ηνή" [ene] were added in the nominative case of the first declension of noun. As a result, the meaning of the word "ἡ Σακασηνή" [he sakasene] used in Greek sources is the land of the Saka.

Another Greek author, Herodotus, noted that after the Sakas drove the Cimmerians into Asia Minor, the Cimmerians moved along the western coast of the Caucasus and the Sakas along the eastern coast [5, p.198]. This ethnonym, which was used as "Σάκαι" in ancient Greek, is translated as "Sakas". Some toponyms in Azerbaijan's territory preserve the traces of the Scythian/Saka ethnonym. Mahmud Kashgari wrote that in ancient times, one of the Turkic tribes was called "Kenchek". The Kenchek Sangir mentioned in the work was the name of a city near Talas. The second component of the ethnonym Gencek, "cek", due to the substitution of "c"- "s" in Turkic languages, in our opinion, reflects the ethnonym Sak. The word Ganja is historically connected with the word Ganjak. Musa Kalakatuklu's Albanian historical work indicated that Ganja was founded in Shakashen [3, p.90]. In our opinion, the name Ganja is connected with the name of the Kenjek tribe, a division of the Turks mentioned by Mahmud Kashgari. This ethnonym has left its traces in the villages of Ganja in the Khanlar region, Ganja in the Ismayilli region, Ganja in the Ordubad region, and Ganjabad, Ganja, and Ganjarud in Southern Azerbaijan. There are many toponyms related to the name of the Sak

tribe in Azerbaijan: Arsag in Karabakh means "Saka mountainous area", Sisakan-si Sakas in Zengezur, Sakan, Sakani, Sakane, Shagali, Shakabad villages in South Azerbaijan, Balasakan in the Mughan plain means "Sak plain", Sakashon, Sakshon, Zakandere-Sak valley in the Zagatala, Sheki, Astara areas.

As can be seen, traces of the name of the Scythian/Saka tribe have been preserved in our toponyms and oronyms. Thus, from the research conducted based on ancient Greek sources, it is clear that the history and origin of Turkic ethnonyms are based on the periods before our era. The distorted presentation of the names of Turkic tribes mentioned in the works of ancient Greek authors, the changes in the dialects of the ancient Greek language in different periods of history, and the phonetic and grammatical development of the ancient language over time were reflected in ethnotoponyms. From the analysis, it is clear that the majority of ethnonyms used in Greek sources are of Turkic origin, and the Turkic-speaking ethnoses were residents who lived in this area much earlier than our era.

CONCLUSIONS

This article is about appeal onomastic units used in ancient Greece. Since the Turkic onomastic units preserved in ancient sources were written by the grammatical rules of the dialects of this language, that is, the addition of case suffixes to the end of proper names, their use with the definite article and gender indicators, and other changes have affected the spelling and pronunciation forms of Turkic onomastic units. Historical facts show that the toponyms of our country belonging to the ancient period were formed mostly based on the names of the powerful, influential, knightly rulers, khagans, and commanders of the Turkic world and the names of the tribes and clans they led. The vast majority of place names were formed based on the names of tribes and clans of Turkic origin used in the works of Greek authors.

REFERENCES

1. Abaev, V. (1949). *Osetinskiy yazyk i fol'klor* [Ossetian Language and Folklore]. Moscow–Leningrad: Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (in Russian).
2. Bullions, P. (1847). *Greek Grammar*. New York: Pratt, Woodford and Company.
3. Fazullah, R. (2003). *Oğuznamə*. [Oguznama]. Baku: Azərbaycan Milli Ensiklopediyası (in Azerbaijani).

4. Goodwin, W.(1900). *Greek Grammar*. Boston: Ginn company.
5. Herodotus. (1928). *History, with an English translation by A. D. Godley* (Vol. 2). London: William Heinemann.
6. Kaşğarlı, M. (1986). *Divanü Lügat-it-Türk Dizini "Endeks"* [Index of Divanü Lügat-it-Türk]. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi (in Turkey).
7. Kazimov, Q. (2003). *Azərbaycan dilinin tarixi. Ən qədim dövrlərdən XIII əsrə qədər* [The History of the Azerbaijani Language: From the Earliest Periods to the 13th Century]. Baku: Tahsil (in Azerbaijani).
8. Smyth, H. W. (1920). *A Greek Grammar for colleges*. New York: American Book Company.
9. Strabo. (2001). *The geography of Strabo. With an English translation by Horace Leonard Jones* (Vol. V). London: William Heinemann.
10. Şirin, H. (2016). *Eski Türk yazıtları söz varlığı incelemesi* [Vocabulary analysis of old Turkish inscriptions]. Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu (in Turkey).