

On the etymology of Bičvinta (Pitsunda)

It is commonplace to find Kartvelian authors taking for granted in their writings that the variant toponyms Bičvinta, Bičvin'a, Pitsunda, P'it'iunt(a), all attested forms referring to the beautiful resort on the Black Sea coast in northern Abkhazia, are ultimately etymologisable in terms of Georgian. For example in **Literary Georgia** (10th Nov 1989, p.10) archaeologist Temur Todua wrote as follows, «(the forms) **p'it'ius-p'it'iunt'-i**, attested in ancient Graeco-Roman written sources, are a translation of the Georgian word **pičvi** (*p'it'ius* is Greek for pine) and not of the Abkhazian title for Bičvinta, namely Ldzaa.» I think it is time for a re-assessment of this assumption.

Firstly Todua's sloppy wording should be corrected. I assume that his Georgian *p'it'ius* is meant to capture Greek **πιτυουσις**, since in Modern Greek the first upsilon would be pronounced as the short, high, front, *unrounded* vowel [i]. If this equation is correct, then Todua's assignment of the meaning 'pine' to this word is nonsense -- this Greek word was the actual toponym for Bičvinta, deriving from the common noun **πιτυς** 'pine' (cf. **πιτυοεισις** 'abounding in pines'), and in classical times it would have been pronounced [pityu:s], since upsilon had the value of the high, front, *rounded* vowel [y] probably until c.1,000 A.D. (Allen 1968.65). The Greek toponym will thus have literally meant something akin to 'place of pines', and it declined thus: Accusative pityount-a, Genitive pityount-os, Dative pityount-i. Now, in saying that the Graeco-Roman terms are a 'translation' of the Georgian common noun for 'pine', is Todua really just making a clumsy attempt to repeat the views of people like Ingoroq'va (1954.148), Q'auxchishvili (1952.321) and Apakidze (1975.15), who maintain that the Georgian *toponym* bičvinta is the source of the Graeco-Roman forms? -- for a commendable review of Ingoroq'va see Lomtadze (1956). The fullest account of this alleged etymology is offered by Q'auxchishvili (l.c.): «The representation of the Georgian letter b by Greek pi is brought about for the same reasons as in the surname bagrat' (in Greek pagkr...): the affricate č' is rendered by Greek tau, which is somewhat palatalised by the following iota. As for representing the ending (-nt'a), Greek here behaved as follows: in the oblique cases it preserved the -nt- ... but created the Nominative Pitious to the oblique Pitiountos on the model of the proper names Selinous - Selinountos, Phlious - Phliountos.»

The first problem relates to the initial voiced bilabial plosive in the most common form of the Georgian toponym, whereas the common noun in Georgian for 'pine' begins with the bilabial *voiceless aspirate* plosive. This, of course, presented no difficulty for Ingoroq'va, by whose fiat the voiced variant was simply declared to have been the original! This is clearly unsatisfactory and will remain so until a specific Kartvelian dialect possessed of the form *bičvi and known to have been spoken in the area concerned can be cited as local source for the toponym -- I know of no Kartvelian language or dialect *anywhere* shewing initial b- for this word.

Putting aside this objection for the moment, can we accept Q'auxchishvili's drawing parallels with the Greek rendition of the surname bagrat' as some sort of 'explanation' for Georgian b- becoming Greek pi in the toponym? I think not. The Greek phoneme represented by beta was a voiced plosive in the classical period, whereas today it has the value of the voiced labio-dental fricative. It is not possible to establish the precise time of the switch in pronunciation, though it must have ante-dated the creation of the Cyrillic script in the 9th century (Allen 1968.30). If the surname bagrat' went into Greek only with the appearance of the first ruler of this dynasty in Georgia, then we are talking of the 8th century. If at that time, as seems reasonable, there was already no voiced

bilabial plosive in the Greek language, then the phoneme represented by pi would clearly have been the nearest equivalent for rendering the Georgian b-. But the Greek toponym of interest to us was already present in the language many centuries before this -- certainly around the time of Christ (it appears in Strabo). Only if it can be proven that the phoneme represented by Greek beta was already a fricative at the time the toponym first entered (if indeed that is the correct verb!) the language, could the use of pi in place of beta be accepted without hesitation.

Particularly perplexing is Q'auxchishvili's belief that the Georgian citation-form should have been borrowed into Greek as base of its *oblique* declension, specifically as the accusative case-form, which then had to be provided with a completely new nominative, the formation of which new citation-form necessitated a radical re-casting of the hypothesised original toponym. This is all the stranger when we consider that Greek possessed an a-declension for nouns, in which a borrowed bič'vinta could have been perfectly well accommodated as nominative case (i.e. citation-form) and declined just like t^halassa 'sea'.

Surely the initial pi of the Greek toponym is exactly what one would have expected when one accepts the most glaringly obvious explanation of the word in question as an *internal* Greek derivative, as stated above, based on the language's common noun pitys (Genitive pityos) 'pine'. Once this derivative had been assigned the nominative pityous, it naturally then followed the paradigm of nouns like P^hlious - P^hliountos. The Indo-European pedigree of the Greek root here is beyond doubt, as cognate forms abound in the related languages (cf. Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1984.631-633), such that Kartvelian pič'vi itself must be a loan from some neighbouring IE tongue «with -v- from Iranian -u-, as in magu- 'Magian' (Georgian mogv-i), from *pik-iu-» (Sir Harold Bailey -- personal communication).

With the Greek toponym as source we now proceed to explain borrowed variants as follows: the form by which the place is known in Russian and English, Pitsunda, has initial p- from Greek pi, medial -ts- from Greek tau followed by palatalising high front vowel (rounded or not), and -d- from Greek tau following the nasal -- in Modern Greek this sequence has the phonetic value [d]. The variant p'it'iunt'a is a direct (literary) borrowing into Georgian of Greek's accusative case as citation-form in the borrowing language -- such adoption of a foreign language's oblique case as a new nominative-base is quite a common phenomenon in instances of borrowing (e.g. Georgian nominative krist'e 'Christ' is simply the vocative of Greek k^hristos) and is explained by the need to fit the loan-word into a suitable paradigm of the receiving language. The form p'it'iunt'-i produces a more common consonant-stem variant from the above a-stem noun. The borrowing is described as 'literary' as Greek pi and tau are automatically rendered by bilabial and dental ejectives respectively in Georgian.

As for the commonest Georgian form bič'vinta, I suggest that this too derives from the accusative case-form of Greek, though the immediate source will this time have been the original language's spoken rather than written form. The phonemes represented by Greek pi and tau were originally *unaspirated* voiceless plosives (contrasting with those represented by phi and theta, which were the equivalent aspirated plosives). Speakers of languages lacking this distinction, such as Georgian, often perceive an unaspirated voiceless plosive as voiced. Assuming the phoneme represented by pi to have still possessed its classical value at the time the toponym was borrowed, we can thus straightforwardly explain the initial b-. This line of reasoning would lead us to expect the (actually unattested) variant *bič'vinda, with Georgian -d- reflecting

unaspirated, voiceless tau. If the variant bič'vint'a is actually the older one, perhaps the phoneme represented by tau when following the nasal was perceived as having some special quality that made its rendering into Georgian by the ejective more natural. This could then have given way to bič'vinta on analogy with other Kartvelian toponyms -- perhaps it might also be relevant to point out that -ta is a very common element in Abkhazian toponyms, for in Abkhaz -ta means 'place of ...'. This leaves the medial sequence -č'v-, which could hardly derive directly from Greek -ti- or -ty-. I suggest contamination from the native Kartvelian term for 'pine' pič'v-i, given its overall likeness to the Greek root, perhaps from an earlier (unattested) *bijvint(')a, which in turn could derive from either *bidiunt(')a or *bidyunt(')a.

The regular term in Abkhaz for referring to the resort Pitsunda is not Ldzaa, as stated by Todua, but a-mza-ra 'pine-plantation' (cf. Georgian pič'v-nar-i 'id') from a-mza 'pine', which could be a calque on the Ancient Greek toponym, or, of course, the Greek could possibly have been calqued on this!

The final argument against Georgian being the ultimate source of the relevant place-name is that modern-day Pitsunda was not the only locality known to the ancient Greeks as πιτσουσσ. Indeed, modern-day Pitsunda was regularly referred to as ho meγaσ πιτσουσσ 'the great Pitsunda'. As far as I know, no-one has claimed that any such '(Lesser) Pitsunda' was ever known to, let alone named by, the Georgians as bi≈vinta!

References

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