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## A short ethnographic and onomastic overview of Mallakastra

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### Abstract

Aiming to offer more data which contribute in completing the Albanian onomastic and ethnographic studies especially in the areas about which there are not any complete studies yet, this study will discuss about some issues which are related to the history of the toponym Mallakastër and some general elements of ethnography like the traditions, customs, clothes, songs, etc. Even though there are not any historical documented data about the first time when the toponym was used for the first time in Mallakastër there are certain hypothesis about it which will be presented in this article together with the data that we have collected during our research.

**Keywords:** Ethnographic, onomastic overview

### 1. Introduction

The researches in the dialectological and onomastic fields are of a special importance when used as facts aiming to throw light on other phenomena related to the general economical and social development of the population, his history, his historical linguistic and they are especially used as evidence of the population, its contacts with other neighbors during historical periods. The traditions of a certain area are a real help and support in this aspect. For people like Albanians who have open issues related to historical borders and settlements, these studies have got an even bigger value, urging researches in the field, either in the form of articles and monographies, or in the form of PhDs.

The importance of these studies increases when we talk about, certain areas about which there are not full studies in this field. One of these areas is that of Mallakastra, that is why in this short article, part of a bigger study, undertaken during my PhD qualifications, I will present data related to the name of the city of Mallakastra, and other elements of ethnography of this area.

### 2. Materials and Methods

A. Directed survey using specific questionnaires in order to collect the onomastic in the main settlements of the region (Floqi, S. "Questionnaires about the collections of the materials related to the dialects of Albania published in *Dialektologjia shqiptare 1*", Domi, M.; Shkurtaç, Gj. "Questionnaires about the collection of Albanian toponym+general instructions" published in *Dialektologjia shqiptare 5*, 1987) "Questionnaire of the dialectological atlas of Albanian language".

B. Free discussions with informers, monitoring data of the residents in the registers of Mallakatra's Municipality, and in those of administrative units and even the monitoring of the historical and genealogical books of the surrounding families and villages.

### 3. Some hypothesis about the backgrounds of Mallakastra and the explanation of the toponym "Mallakastra"

To through light about a toponym we can use the information coming from the archeology, language, ethnography, history, etc. Even though the origin, the explanation and the meaning of the toponym Mallakastër have been an object of discussion among researchers of these fields, due to the absence of data, we don't actually have a final explanation about it. Below we will show some of the most widespread hypothesis, but without concreting a lot on them.

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- A. The first hypothesis we will present about this toponym is that of N. Ceka (2006), who has related it with the castle of *Myli-Mylocastra*. But this hypothesis doesn't make clear the meaning of the word *myl/myll*, a word coming from the medieval Albania, century XIII, time when the name Mallakastër appears for the first time. The name is mentioned in the description of an uprising of this time, during which the castle located in the area of today Cakrani, was destroyed.

*Supporting the hypothesis: Myli's castle and Mallakastra* both appear in the same period when Myli's castle is burned and destroyed, which is thought to be during the XII-XIII century. The existence and the destruction of the castle are found from the archeological excavations. They show that during the Roman invasion this area was called Antitan, whereas in the late medieval time both terms are found, Mallakastër and Antitan. Ceka explains that Mallakastra's toponym is found many times in historical sources of the XIII-XIV century in the events that have happened in the nowadays Cameria, but even in the migration of people from Mallakastra towards the surroundings of Atica. People who moved from Mallakastra put the same names to the new settlements as their original villages used to have.

- B. The second hypothesis, which is contradicted by N. Ceka (2006). According to this hypothesis the name Mallakastra comes from the word *Malla*, which in Greek means *bad*, and *Kastrum* which in Latin means *castle*, that is *bad castle*, since the position of Mallakastra has made it a difficult place to be invaded. N. Ceka rejects this hypothesis. He calls this an unfounded hypothesis.
- C. Another thought about the origin of the toponym Mallakastra comes from the researcher David Luka (2003). He explains this name with the synonym of river *Argyas*, (the antic name of Gjanica): *Argyas=argos=argeos*, which in Greek means the white river.
- The support of the hypothesis:* D. Luka supports his idea on the medieval historical sources where Gjanica is identified with the name *Bellagnica*, (which in Slavic means the white river), that is Mallakastra as an area of the white river, since Gjanica is called like this because of the nuance it has got from the sulphurous sources.
- The against hypothesis.* It doesn't give any explanation on the word *kastër* (castle) which is part of the toponym.
- D. Another hypothesis is the one which explains the name with the word composed from *Malla* (commodity) and *kastër* (castle) that is the commodity or the property of the castles. Since in certain of its strategic points there have been castles and strongholds Mallakastra is otherwise called as the place of castles. (For more information related to other geographical explanations look at Sherifaj, M. 2015).
- E. Çabej has explained this toponym, using Illyrian language, because only with the usage of the rules of the Albanian language can be explained the changes that this label has undergone. There are other hypotheses too, including the popular one, that connects this name with Kastriots, but they don't rely on convincing and unquestionable historical language proofs. Taking this in consideration they can be

mentioned like hypothesis coming from popular sources.

#### 4. Ethnographic elements of Mallakastra

Clothing, traditions, and the songs of Mallakastra, distinguish inhabitants of this area from the people of other areas, but they even put them together. We will show below some of the most distinguished elements of clothing and customs of people who come from Mallakastra. They make Mallakastra a unique place with a unique identification.

##### A. Clothing

*A.1. Men's clothing.* Men wear a *qylaf* with antennas on their heads, like people coming from Vlora do. The shirt with loose sleeves is used as a inner clothing and over it men wear a black woolen doublet, embroidered on both sides with the eagle's motive and buttons. Above them was held the *mengore* with shaking sleeves. They wore *poture* to the length of the knee made of black felt. They had two pockets and were tied in the belt. Above the pants they wore a waist band with pockets where they kept their rosary. In their feet they wore leather tufted *opinga*.

*A.2. Women's clothing.* They kept a white kerchief lined around with rosary called *mantile*. They tied it in a tail on the side of their head. As an inside clothing the women wore a white shirt, lined in the chest, in the collar, and in the *cufflings*. Above it they wore the doublet ornamented with buttons. The skirt of Mallakastrian women was loose. Under the skirt they wore white underwear and woolen ornamented socks. They wore tufted shoes, the same as men.

##### B. Folk music

Mallakastra's folk music and its original features serve as one of its identifying elements. Epic lyric polyphony is the representative, which is sung at weddings, familiar parties and friends' meetings. In these kind of songs, like for example *Nuse hidhe vallen*, *Këngë për nënën*, etc, it is felt the kindness, joy, and wisdom. Also, there are some other songs in which is felt the sarcasm and humor such as *Vallja e piperit*<sup>8</sup>, or the song *Dhelpra* etc. One of the unique characteristics of Mallakastra's folk music is the emphasis it gives to the local characteristics.

##### C. The Toast

It is an element that is presented in every joy, party, engagement party, and weddings in Mallakastra's region. This is an element mostly practiced by men, and it is almost a lifestyle element for this region, as an indicator of manhood, together with the ability to drink alcohol.

Nowadays, because families are also members of other families from different regions of the country, or because of people's movements, this tradition has been changed and it is faded, like many other traditions.

*The fade of the toast tradition.* Even though it is one of the most important traditions of Mallakastër, nowadays it is not seen in the same way by the new generation, because of the fights, sometimes serious ones, as a result of the alcohol consequences. The toast turns or the cases when the toasters don't drink the whole glass of alcohol when their friend asks them, shows lack of respect etc. This behavior has sometimes brought anger, even marital breakups exactly on the wedding day. Considering the alcoholic side effects, we can also mention the men's health that is damaged by consuming too much amount of drinks, taking into

consideration the fact that *raki* is a drink with a high percentage of alcohol. All these reasons have faded this tradition, which is generally practiced only by the old generation.

Some traditions in cases of weddings. Taking into consideration what it is mostly noticed in the text below related to the fade of traditional aspects, we will shortly present some of the typical traditions of Mallakasta in cases of weddings.

*The boy's wedding.* When a boy is getting married, the wedding starts in the middle of the week, on Thursday, some people from the brotherhood go to take wood. Before the music starts the person who is getting married shoots in the air with a weapon, once or twice. During the marriage of the boy, it is sung and danced for two nights, while in a girl's wedding one night. People who are far away come on Saturday and they were called *ftorës*. They bring two woolen carpet bags, in one bag they put a desert called *revani*, in the other one they put a special kind of bread, and they also bring a lamb with them. On Saturday night the duties are assigned to everyone, how many people are going to the bride's house, including a 15-year boy, to lead the horse that is going to bring the bride. It is needed someone good at speaking, good at singing, and a brave one. These people should be part of the group of people who are going to bring the bride. The husband-to-be was not supposed to go and bring the bride, because the tradition requires that the bride has to come with a horse and with her face covered. People who were going to serve during the wedding were chosen, the man responsible for the meat and the women who would cook. The husband-to-be has to be ready early on Sunday morning. When he has his hair cut, other men sing. When the bride comes home, he has to shoot in the air with a weapon just once. Before the husband-to-be enters his room, others joke with him. Before he lays in his bed, firstly a young boy must lay there, so that the firstborn of the couple might be a boy.

*The girl's wedding.* When a girl is married, the preparations start on Thursday when henna is used, and the bride's clothes are sent to the husband's house. The wedding is held on Saturday night. The girl leaves her house while her relatives sing, and at the moment that she rides the horse a bottle of *raki* is broken in her feet, and her relatives throw rice and candies upon her. The road from the house to the horse is sparkled with *raki*. They throw rice and sugar upon the bride while when she leaves they throw corn upon her.

*Some traditions in case of the deaths.* When someone dies the relatives should not cry in the evening. Brotherhood takes their responsibilities and duties. In the old tradition the coffin was not used, instead the cerecloth or a white cloth were used together with a piece of oak. The imam used to sing to the dead body before 1976. The daughters of the family leave the house five or seven days after the person's death. The relatives organize a dinner on the eleventh day of his death, and the family organize a dinner on his honor 40 days after his death. After 40 days they also put a stone at the grave. The relatives and the family are dressed in black for 6 months or 1 year. The women don't cry for the victims of war.

## 5. Conclusion

This was a short overview of Mallakastër, and the people of this region. Traditions show the ancientness of this region, contacts with the regions nearby, and the evolution of the

society. Mallakastër is a pure ethnic region, referring to how it is called this leads to antiquity. Its special ethnic linguistic and cultural features make the difference between all the regions nearby.

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