# THE PROBLEM OF SLAVIC *VLACHЪ* AND MEDIEVAL LATIN *BLACHUS,* WHICH ETHNIC GROUP(S) DO THESE FORMS REFER TO?

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Autorul reia cu noi date un studiu recent (Paliga 2015), pornind de la mult citatul fragment din Anonymus, *Gesta Hungarorum*; într-adevăr, muitl citat dar, din păcate, eronat tradus de mulţi autori, români şi maghiari. Numele etnic *Vlachъ*, în latina postclasică şi medievală *Blachus*, pl. *Blachi*, de asemenea *Blasi* a avut conotaţii variabile. Sensul de bază a fost „(orice) grup etnic romanizat", ulterior s-a referit, cel mai adesea, fie la italieni, fie la români. În textul lui Anonymus însă, în cazul menționat, se referă – fără doar şi poate – la populaţia romanizată din Pannonia (cultura arheologică Keszthely). În alte părţi, textul se referă într-adevăr la români (*pastores Romanorum* and *Blasi*).

**Cuvinte cheie**: Blachus, Sclavi, Sclaveni, Rutheni, grupe etnice, grupuri romanizate, slavi.

## In general

In the spirit suggested by the title of this brief paper, I shall try to clarify the initial meaning of the ethnic name *Vlachъ*, used by the Slavs with reference to ANY Romanised group. This form was later used in postclassical and Medieval Latin documents as *Blachus*, with its graphical variants like *Blasi*, gen. pl. *(terra) Blachorum*, etc. Even if more and more used with reference to the Romanians, including contemporary documents written in English wherein *Vlachs, Vlakhs* regularly refer to the Balkan Romanians (and in order to avoid the use of *Romanian* as ethnic name), the ethnic name *Blachi* in the Medieval documents does NOT necessarily refer to Romanians, even if it often does. There exists, in fact, a multi-stratified issue. I shall try to clarify this in this brief study, as a part of a more ample work dedicated to ethnicity in general. *Blachus* may be a very instructive case-study.

## Origins and evolutions

As with most Celtic groups of Central and Western Europe, the Central European Celtic group *Volcae* was, at a given moment, Romanised. Their ethnic name was borrowed as **walχaz* by the Germanic groups; hence, as *Vlachъ* by the

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neighbouring, more eastern Slavic groups, with the expected metathesis of liquid [l]: **valch- > vlach-*. The story does not stop here: the Slavic form was borrowed in Post Classical Latin as *Blachus*, with several variants, reflecting the local versions in circulation, for example, *Blasi*. As I shall try to show below, such spectacular 'ethnic shifts' were common in those remote times, when the former ethnic names ceased to exist and/or were used with their geographical associated meanings rather than ethnic meanings proper.

If we look at the initial meaning of this form, in fact at its postclassical meaning, we see that it referred to ANY ROMANISED GROUP, and from a given moment on any Romanised group was labelled *Vlachъ* by the Slavs, in a move which took place at that time, that is, the beginning of the 6th century onwards. As time went on, this form was applied to those ethnic groups with which the Slavs had intense contacts: for the Eastern (later Orthodox) Slavs, *Vlachъ* referred to the precursors of the Romanians; for the Western (later Catholic) Slavs, the term referred to the Italians, rarely (as I will try to show below) to other Central European Romanised groups.

This explains why, over the centuries, this meaning has consolidated in the modern and contemporary Slavic languages with these two basic meanings: for the Bulgarians and Serbs, the *Vlasi* refer to the Romanians; in Polish, on the other hand, *Włochy* is the usual term for 'Italy', and in Old Czech *Vlašský dvůr* means 'the Italian Court'; yet a region of north-east Moravia, north of Brno that reminds us of a Romanian immigration from Transylvania in the 17th century, is named *Valašsko*. The meaning 'Italy' for Slavic *Vlachъ* was usual in Slavonic documents of the 9th–10th centuries (see Pleter, Lambru and Puiu 2001: 60, text XVII, *The Life of Method*):

**[...] въ ны въшьли оучитєлє мнози крьстиѭни <u>из Влахъ</u> и из Грькъ и из Нѣмьць [...]**

[...] and came there [in Moravia] many Christian teachers [priests] <u>from Italy</u>, from Greece and from Germany.

In Slovene, the personal family name *Lah* means 'Italian', and shows that the precursors of that person had Italian origins. An ethnic origin of some personal family names is usual, for example, Romanian *Ungurean(u), Rus(u), Sârbu, Neamțu*, etc. point to the original ethnic origin of that family. This typology is widespread in personal names, that is, showing the initial origin of that family as seen or imagined by others.



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This is why the 'translation' of the Late Latin term *Blachus* must be carefully analysed in the context intended by the author of a given text, and not automatically as 'Romanian', as situations may vary. This may be in contradiction with OUR view on ethnicity, as we may see and analyse the ethnic groups in a different way. From the point of a Medieval writer, such a detail was not so relevant. From the perspective of an author in the Middle Ages—naming ANY Romanised ethnic group offered sufficient identification details and information. Let it be noted again that, in those times, ethnic names were in continuous change, and their connotation far from being stabilised. In fact, the first millennium C.E. witnessed many radical changes in former ethnic names, along with the emergence of new names, initially those of tribes.

The problem has been highly politicised in modern times. The English term *Vlakh*, pl. *Vlakhs* or *Vlach*, pl. *Vlachs* is mainly used now with reference to the Romanians living outside Romania, specifically in the Balkans (see a recent study on this topic, Madgearu 2015; the author analyses the situation of the 'Vlachs' in the Byzantine sources)[1]. The term is not used in the official documents of the European Union, but it has a large, more or less 'official' use in English language documents concerning the Balkan countries. According to ethnologue.com (http://www.ethnologue.com/ language/ron), *Romanian* is now alternatively used together with *Daco-Romanian*, *Moldavian* ('limba moldovenească') and (in English) *Rumanian* or *Roumanian*. In its English version, wikipedia.org, uses the term *Vlachs* with exclusive reference to 'Romanians', even if the definition is 'several Latin peoples', but practically speaking with direct reference to the Romanians only (including the 'Moldavians', of course, and the other Romance groups of the Balkans).

The contemporary use of the term *Vlachs, Vlakhs* in documents written in English has, of course, a political influence, trying to suggest that these Balkan Romanians would not be 'pure Romanians' (echt-Rumänen), but a different Neo-Latin group, vaguely connected to the Romanians proper (living in Romania).

The confusing use of several ethnic names referring to the same ethnic reality defined as *Romanian(s)*, reflects a tortuous political terminology, with its Medieval

1. The Balkans proper, i.e. south of the Danube. The geographical name *Balkans* has been often used inappropriately, with various cultural, political and linguistic connotations. As this is a complex issue which I approached on an earlier occasion, it shall not be discussed here.



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roots and indeed with its confusing use of ethnic names from Late Latin and the Early Middle Ages. Ethnicity was and still is, to a large—but variable—extent a political issue, too. Illyrian, for example, was already extinct in the 2nd century C.E., for which reason the use of terms like *Illyria, Illyri* in the documents of Post Classical antiquity gradually took on geographical connotations, even if some may be tempted to read them 'as is', that is, with ethnic connotations.

In an attempt to clarify the meanings and evolution of the ethnic name *Vlakh, Vlach* a minimal survey has shown that:

1. In late antiquity, approximately at the beginning of our Common Era, the Celtic group of the Volcae was Romanised, like most of the Celtic groups in fact, which were in a gradual the process of being Romanised. Surviving communities, now in Ireland, Wales and some other isolated Celtic linguistic 'islands' of north-west Europe are indeed rare.

2. This ethnic name was borrowed by the Germanic groups as **walχaz* and, not very late, by the Slavic groups in full expansion from the 6th century C.E. The Slavs adapted the form as *Vlachъ*, with the expected metathesis of the group *–al-* to *–la-*. The initial meaning in Early Slavic was evidently, as we may surmise, 'Romanised group' and was applied to ANY ethnic group speaking Latin, then a Romance language.

3. In the evolution of ethnicity in the Early and Mid Middle Ages, Slavic *Vlachъ* was used with two basic meanings: 'Romanian' for the east Orthodox Slavs; 'Italian' for the west Catholic Slavs. This use is reflected in traditional terminology in Serbian and Bulgarian, where this ethnic name refers to the Romanians; and to 'Italian' in modern Polish, also—obsolete—in Czech and Slovene.

## *Sclavi, Bulgari, Blachi ac pastores Romanorum*. A case study

I recently analysed the famous, widely quoted and, I am afraid, rarely read fragment in the *Gesta Hungarorum* attributed to Anonymus, where he refers to FOUR ethnic groups (ch. IX, end): *Sclavi, Bulgari, Blachi ac pastores Romanorum*. For Romanian readers the best known translation is by Popa-Lisseanu in *Fontes Historiae Dacoromaniae*. Here, the translator turns the four ethnic names into THREE by astonishingly changing the meaning of Lat. *ac*, an intensive of 'and', into 'that is, for example.', changing the whole meaning of the text in Romanian:



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*slavii, bulgarii, românii ADICĂ păstorii romanilor*,

or, by translating the Romanian translation into English:

*The Slavs, the Bulgarians, the Romanians, THAT IS, the shepherds of the Romans*.

A further step has recently been achieved by Madgearu, who turns the FOUR ethnic groups into TWO by an 'ingenious' method: ignoring the original text and modifying the meaning under the pretext that the author, the notary of one of the kings known as Béla, was ignorant and did not know what he was wring about! In his interpretation, the translation should be:

*The Bulgarian Slavs and the Romanian shepherds*.

A Hungarian historian has recently published a translation into English of the same text, where he writes:

*The Slavs, the Bulgarians, the Vlakhs and the shepherds of the Romans*.

The advantage of this translation, also incorrect (see below), is that it at least preserves the original meaning intended by the author, mentioning FOUR ethnic names. There is no doubt that Anonymus did know what he was writing about, as I shall try to prove below.

What was the meaning of *Blachi* in Anonymus? Did he really refer to 'the Romanians' in that very part of the text? And who were the *pastores Romanorum*? The Romanians too? And what about *ac*? Should this conjunction be translated as an explanatory 'id est'? The Anonymus' text is, despite its numerous interpretations and 'translations', limpid clear, if we abstain from re-interpreting its basic meaning. The Latin text is the following:

*Dicebant enim, quod ibi confluerent nobilissimi fontes aquarum Danubius et Tuscia et alii nobilissimi fontes bonis piscibus habundantes, quam terram habitarent Sclavi, Bulgari et Blachii ac pastores Romanorum.*



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(Anonymus, ch. 9: *de pace inter ducem et ruthenos*, final part).

The part of ethnographic interest is: […] *Sclavi, Bulgari, Blachi ac pastores Romanorum*. How many ethnic names are found here? Four, as the author obviously notes? Three, as Popa-Lisseanu translates? or two, in Madgearu's interpretation? And who are the *Blachs*? and the *pastores Romanorum*?

1. *Sclavi*. This is the Post-Classical Byzantine and Medieval Latin term referring to Slavs in general. Any Slavic group was generically named *Sclavi*. Anonymus can only refer to the Slavs living in Pannonia and the neighbouring area, that is, to the precursors of the Slovaks and Slovenes of modern times. Therefore, the *Sclavi* in this very paragraph means 'the Central European Slavs' or 'our Slavs', if you wish, that is, those Slavs neighbouring the Magyars.

2. *Bulgari*. Anonymus carefully distinguishes the Slavs discussed under #1, that is, the Central European Slavs, from the Balkan Slavs, the Bulgarians. Therefore, *Bulgari* refers to the Slavs originating from the Balkans, and settled in more northern areas.

3. *Blachi*. This seems the most difficult place in this paragraph. Nevertheless, Anonymus refers to the Romanised population living there, in Pannonia, known from a very small number of inscriptions. It is indeed difficult to find a modern or contemporary equivalent, because that population has been meanwhile assimilated. The Pannonian Romance population is yet a historical fact. In a recent translation into English, Martyn Rady used the term 'Vlakhs' entirely incorrectly, because in contemporary English this has been used (incorrectly) to denote those Romanians living in the Balkans. A back-projection to those times is of course incorrect. Those *Blachi* should be named, in good contemporary English, albeit too descriptive, as 'the Pannonian Romanised population'. This Romanised group has not survived, but—in those times—represented the natural link between East Romance (the precursors of the Romanians) and the Central European Romanised groups, now represented by the Romansh or Rumansh (*Romantsch, Romansch*) and Friulan as the main representatives of Rhaeto-Romance. At the end of the first millennium C.E., these groups were more numerous, and did represent an ethnic reality.

4. *as pastores Romanorum*. It is also limpid clear that *ac* means 'as well as'. The author clearly refers to FOUR ethnic groups, distinguishing the Central European Slavs (*Sclavi*) from the Balkan Slavs (*Bulgari*), and also distinguishing the Central European Romanised population (*Blachi*) from the *pastores Romanorum* 'the



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shepherds of the Romans', who are, without any reasonable doubt, the transhumant shepherds, the precursors of the Romanian transhumant shepherds living east of Pannonia, in the Western Carpathians and the neighbouring area.

Anonymus therefore builds his description on a dual dichotomy: a. the Central European Slavs ~ the Balkan Slavs; b. the Central European Romanised groups ~ the (more eastern) Romanised groups represented by the transhumant shepherds. Entirely clear, logical, beautifully presented and absolutely correct from the historical point of view. All in all, following the general version of Martyn Rady, but with our corrections, the paragraph would run:

For they said that there flowed the most noble spring waters, the Danube and Tisa [Hungarian spelling Tisza, in Anonymus Tyscia] and other most noble springs, abounding in good fish, in which land there lived the [Central European] Slavs [Lat. *Sclavi*], Bulgarians [*Bulgari*, that is, Balkan Slavs] and the Central European Romanised groups [*Blachii*, obviously not the Vlachs, as Martyn Rady says, as this would indicate the Balkan Romanised groups], and [as well as] the shepherds of the Romans [= *pastores Romanorum*, that is, the transhumant shepherds, the precursors of the Romanian transhumant shepherds, well attested in the Middle Ages].

***Gelou quidam Blacus***

In the 24th chapter, Anonymus refers to a certain *Blacus* named *Gelou* (Gelu). It is again clear that this *Blacus* is just a variant of *Blachus*, this time with reference to the more eastern groups of *Blachi*. And, several lines below, in the 25th chapter, we read again of *Blasii et Sclavi* 'about the *Blasii* and the Slavs'. Here, again, *Blasii* is a graphic variant of *Blachi*. This time the author clearly refers to the Romanians, more exactly to their Medieval precursors, because the location is more eastern than that in ch. IX.

And the story ends with the death of Gelu (Gelous) in ch. XXVII (*de morte Gelu*).

***Blachi, Blasi***

The text in Anonymus is, in our interpretation, entirely coherent, presenting a



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beautiful story of the long and dangerous exodus of the early, pre-Christian Magyars from their initial homeland to the North Pontic area, inhabited by the Scythians (*Scithi, Scithia*); then how they moved towards the north-west where they met the Kiev Slavs (*Rutheni*), and where they were defeated; and how they finally settled in Pannonia, where the prosperous land and rivers abundant with fish offered them good living conditions. There, the Hungarians met the local, Central European Slavs (*Sclavi*), some other Slavic groups originating in the Balkans (*Bulgari*); and also the local, Central European Romanised groups (*Blachi*) and, from a more eastern area, the shepherds of the Romans (*pastores Romanorum*). Further east, the Magyars later met the *Blasi(i)* and their leader Gelu. Here, *Blasi* refers, beyond any doubt, to the Romanians living in the Carpathian mountainous area.

**How, then, must we translate *Blachi, Blasi*?**

The answer is very brief: depending on the context! As long as the Slavic form *Vlachъ*, later adopted in the Medieval Latin texts as *Blachus*, pl. *Blachi* and *Blasi*, gen. pl. *(terra) Blachorum*, referred to ANY Romanised group it is obvious that the translation must consider these local differences. For the authors of the early and mid Middle Ages, when the ethnic names had not yet been stabilised, *Blachi* and *Blasi* referred to a vast area of Romanised population. The translation cannot be unique therefore, as our understanding of ethnicity does not correspond to that specific of the historical period when Anonymus wrote his chronicle.

The variable connotation of *Blachus* occurs obviously in the modern Slavic languages, where the derived forms from *Vlachъ* refer to either the Italians (in the west Catholic Slavic countries) or to the Romanians (in the eastern Orthodox Slavic countries). The Central European Romanised groups still exist in very isolated, scattered areas, like the Friulani in north-east Italy and the Romansh groups in Switzerland. The *Blachi* of Pannonia and the neighbouring area, whom Anonymus mentions in his text, do not exist any more, but those less important, mentioned last, *pastores Romanorum*. have had a persistent role and have survived down to our times.

History is 'as is', it does not need making-ups and does not need wrong translations. History is as good as we are and as we interpret it. For a recent view of the period around the year 1,000 see Curta 2001; and for the long evolution of *Blachus* see Skok 1971–1974, 3: 606–608 (s.v. *Vlah*).



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## Instead of a conclusion: the long way from *Volcae* to *Blachi*

The evolution of a Celtic ethnonym to be later adapted to the Romanised groups reflects the changes of Late Antiquity and the first millennium in general. Etymologically, Slavic *Vlachъ* is related to *Welsh* and *Wales*, and in their turn related to their more southern 'brethren' the *Volcae* of Central Europe. Such spectacular relationships and changes were common in those times. Other examples:

– The Germanic group of the Franks conquered the Romanised area of western Europe and transferred their name onto that group, later known as *Français*, the French.

– The Turkic group *Bulgari*, sometimes (incorrectly) labelled Proto-Bulgars transferred their names to the Slavic groups they dominated for approximately two centuries. When Anonymus wrote his Chronicle, the Proto-Bulgars had been completely assimilated, therefore the *Bulgari* in Anonymus did not refer to the Turkic groups, but to the Balkan Slavs.

Given the limited scope of this paper, the analysis must stop here. A continuation would require a wider horizon to be analysed in a volume. But the purpose has been hopefully achieved: to explain the meaning and connotation of Slavic *Vlachъ* and postclassical Latin *Blachi* and *Blasi*.

## Acknowledgments

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