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Chapter

Perspective Chapter: Βάλτοι - The Reception of Western Asian Colors-Cardinal Points System along the Boundaries of the Hellenic Oikumene

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Abstract

This contribute delineates a “cultural history of language” along the boundaries of the Hellenic world from antiquity to the Byzantine period. The aim is to conceive an area where separate linguistic labels – Greek, Illyrian, Slavic, and so on. – cannot represent the complexity of a koine in which East and West mingled. Specifically, the *encyclopaedic meaning* of several toponyms carrying the *dictionary meaning* “white” – λευκός, βάλτος, ἄσπρον – is examined to confirm the hypothetical acquisition of the *accessory meaning* “western” or “northwestern” borrowed in Greek as a semantic calque following contacts with the Turkic-Slavo-Persian oikumene. In the region outstretched toward the Hindu Kush, the Little Altai, and the Sarmatic Plain, certain place names and ethnonyms signal a marked Western Asian influence on Greek perception of vast spaces, both linguistically and cognitively. Implementing the methodological principles of cognitive linguistics, this reflection about the cultural meaning of ethnonyms and choronyms as *Baltoi* and *Baltiyul*, *Lucania* and *Indike Leuke*, and *Leukosyroi* and *Leukosyria* offers a cultural and historical perspective alternative to the merely philological one and underscores the necessity to conceive the northeastern part of the Classical World as a place where faded boundaries connected, rather than being separate, with people belonging to distinct nations but part of a common *Sprachbund*.

Keywords: color-cardinal point system, Baltia, Baltoi, Baltiyul, Leukosyria, Indike Leuke

1. Introduction

‘Without the Asian Greece, land of fruitful experiences, the European Greece would not have been Greece’ [1]. When Gustave Glotz, formulated this intuition, he was probably referring to a cultural milieu broader than that of the Milesian thinkers: both water, as the creative principle, and the cosmogonic earth of Thales,

Anaximander, and Anaximenes were rooted in the cognoscitive frame that had produced the *Enūma eliš* of Akkad [2]. Thales’ water anticipated silt, then dust, and, finally, soil or earth as in the Babylonian creation myth. Likewise, the biblical *Elohim* fashioned *‘ādām* “man”, “earthling” by the means of a mixture of *‘ādama* “earth” and water. Most likely, as skillfully proven by Giovanni Semerano, this specific type of generative soil – *‘ādama* – of the semitic world coincides with the cosmogonic ἄπειρον of Anaximander, given the Semitic *‘apar* “dust” or “earth”, Akkadian *eperu*, and the biblical (*adam*) *afar* “(the man) [of] Earth” [2]. Furthermore, Anaximander could have conceived the animating breath – the biblical *rūah* – as the generative principle capable of giving life to earth only against this background of intellectual koine.

Despite the influence of nineteenth century German philosophers, who created the all-permeating idea of a Greece cradle of civilization, classical Greek sciences were characterized by a common element: a mutiny against the limitations imposed by the dominating local culture, either Western or Eastern. The beginning of the ancient science was an achievement of the Babylonians as well as of the Egyptians and the Greeks: ‘Science is an alliance of free spirits rising in rebellion against the local tyranny that every single culture imposes to its children’ [3]. The evidence of this assertion emerges from the above cogitation about the Milesian scientists’ cosmogonic theories, as well as in the complexion of the language they adopted to formulate those concepts.

The hybrid nature of both their science and their language was evident to the Asian Greeks, but even the “European Greek” Plato proved his awareness in this matter:

Hermogenes. *What do you say of πῦρ [“fire”] and ὕδωρ [“water”]?*

Socrates. *I am at a loss how to explain πῦρ; either the muse of Euthyphro has deserted me, or there is some very great difficulty in the word. Please, however, note the contrivance which I adopt whenever I am in a difficulty of this sort.*

Hermogenes. *What is it?*

Socrates. *I will tell you; but I like to know first whether you can tell me what is the meaning of πῦρ?*

Hermogenes. *Indeed, I cannot tell.*

Socrates. *Shall I tell you what I suspect to be the true explanation of this and several other words? My belief is that they are of foreign origin. For the Hellenes, especially those who were under the dominion of the barbarians, often borrowed from them.*

Hermogenes. *What is the inference?*

Socrates. *You know that anyone who seeks to demonstrate the fitness of these names according to the Hellenic language, and not according to the language from which the words are derived, is rather likely to be at fault.*

Hermogenes. *Yes, certainly.*

Socrates. Well then, consider whether this πῶρ is not foreign; for the word is not easily brought into relation with the Hellenic tongue, and the Phrygians may be observed to have the same word slightly changed, just as they have ὕδωρ and κόων [dog], and many other words [4].

Opting for a more modern terminology than that of Socrates, the character of Plato's dialog is discussing *lexical borrowings*, commenting examples of phonetically and morphologically *adapted* and *integrated loanwords*. However, the Hellene points at a cognitive issue when investigating the etymology of certain terms: the awareness of diatopic and diachronic semantic variations is largely precluded to speakers of whatever Greek language, for those meanings were devised in the lands 'under the dominion of the barbarians [4]'.

Vast coastal areas of the Pontic steppe fronting the Black Sea were the cradle of a Greek-Scythian community at least until third century CE, when the Sarmatians captured Crimea. The latter had been a region of great syncretism since the second millennium BCE, for the Scythians absorbed here much of the Assyrian advanced science and metallurgical knowledge, only to divulge them further to the north: 'think of the Balto-Slavic *knīga* "book", Old Hungarian *könyü*, Chinese *k'ün*, Old Babylonian *kanīku* "sealed document," and Old Assyrian *kunukku* "sealed wax tablet" [2].

Likewise, the Greek colonies in central Anatolia underwent an intense process of cultural and linguistic assimilation with the Phrygians after the 8th century BCE, as noted by Socrates in the fiction of Plato's dialog. His comparative effort recognizes a *cognate word* to the Homeric Greek ὕδωρ "water" in the Phrygian ΥΔΩΡ, though Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215 CE) – in the fifth book of *Stromata* – struggled to trace a relation between ὕδωρ and the Phrygian ΒΕΔΥ (also meaning "water"), due to the ignorance of Cappadocian Greek βουδόκκο "water jar", both obvious cognate to the Slavic *vodá* and Gothic *wato* [5]. However, in the Greek of the Athenian Philyllios (5th–4th c. BCE), the loanword βεδυ clearly underwent a *semantic shift*, being used to mean "air" [6].

In Anatolia and southern Levant, several regions of the oikumene had been under the rule of Assyrians and Medo-Persians well before Alexander feats, and the name of Sargon I of Akkad resonated from Elam to Cyprus across the Aegean islands and the whole Mediterranean from Lemnos to Tarquinia: Assyrian *Šarru-kīnu*, Etruscan *Tárchon*, and Latin *Tarquinius* [2]. Further to the east, the land corridors along the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea served as trading posts, where concepts, goods, peoples, and the terms to refer to them were borrowed and interpreted: the "eastern Greeks" called Κεφῆνες the Persians, thus borrowing the Aramaic *kēp* "rock", used to translate the ethnonym *Αρταῖοι*, to indicate the inhabitants either of the Bokovoy range, in the Caucasus, or of the Little Altai, assuming the quite common ρ > λ for Αλταῖοι [2, 7].

Coherently with this mosaic of people, words, and meanings, 'anyone who seeks to demonstrate the fitness of these names according to the Hellenic language, and not according to the language from which the words are derived, is rather likely to be at fault' [4]. The fictitious Socrates' words fittingly illustrate the problems emerging from philological studies in which languages and words are univocally attributed to clear-cut national identities. The consequence of such an approach is that certain Greek ethnonyms and toponyms – defined exclusively in the frame of the Greek *forma mentis* and language – remain 'unexplained' and 'unclear' as it is for the *Λευκόσυροι* "White Syrians" of Strabo's *Geography* [8] or for the 'ambiguous' thalassonym Ερυθρὰ Θάλασσα "Red Sea" [9].

Explicitly, in studying certain Greek terms, some studies fail to recognize that those words were possibly devised against a background of cultural and linguistic koine, in which people of distinct descent shared a common perception of the world but represented it by different linguistic means. That is to say, the investigation of Asian Greeks' *forma mentis* and language should consider that the speakers were part of a multilingual but culturally united *Sprachbund* (for terminology, see § 1.2.) that extended from the Pacific to northeastern Europe. Such an approach could facilitate the representation of a network of relations in a classical antiquity outstretched toward the Hindu Kush and the Little Altai, though the opposite image of a Western Asia and a Sarmatic Plain prolonged toward the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean could probably better represent certain historical dynamics.

As an example, consider the semantic shift observed in koine Greek *Ερυθρός*, which carries the undisputed *dictionary meaning* "red". The chronological and geographical distribution of the attestation of the accessory (*encyclopaedic*) meaning "southeastern" indicates a possible *semantic calque* from a lending *linguaculture*. Accordingly, this specific term for "red" was used in Greek to name places more often than to refer to reflections of light. Precisely, the toponymic use of *red* was not attested before the eighth century BCE; it emerged in Assyrian sources in the seventh century BCE; it was more frequent in Greek oeuvres of the fourth and early third centuries BCE, while it was extensively attested in the period between the third century BCE and the first century CE, especially in the Pontus [9]. Such a chronological and territorial spread permitted to formulate the hypothesis that it was the nomadic Scythian people of the Eurasian steppe who lend the cognitive nexus "red equal south" to the people of the eastern Mediterranean, especially considering the undisputed attestation of the color-cardinal points system in Turkic, Mongol, Slavic, and Chinese cultures, that is, in the territories inhabited by the Scythians (§ 2.).

This northern area, delineated by the activity of the prophets of the metempsychosis during the Axial Age, was a place where the concept of "northwest" was often expressed by terms whose *dictionary meaning* was "steppe" or "swamp". In a variety of languages, these terms incorporated the *accessory meaning* "white", which, in turn, was often conveyed by the same root *bal-* attested in the Balto-Slavic, Turkic, Illyrian, Thracian, Phrygian, and Greek languages [10]. I suggest that due to contacts and borrowings, or simply by imitation, other Greek stems meaning "white" acquired the accessory meaning "west" or "northwest" and were used in the formation of toponyms. The truthfulness of this assumption is the hypothesis investigated in the present study.

The analysis of the dynamics outlined above and of the resulting linguistic milieu could impact the understanding of ancient toponymy in regions quite distant from the Hellenic world and consequently the comprehension of the perception and conception of certain territories and their borders in classical antiquity. The correct understanding of the Greek ethnonym *White Syrians*, mentioned in Strabo's 12th book of *Geography*, could easily contribute to reconstrue a cognitive frame capable of explaining toponyms as disparate as: *Witland* "White Land" mentioned in the Old English Orosius to refer to the Prussian lands (and deemed etymologically obscure [11]); the name of the Baltic Sea (i.e., "White", cf. Lithuanian *baltas* "white", etymologically "swamp") [10]; the ethnonym *Bijeli Hrvati* "White Croats"; the name *Baltiyul* used to refer to the northwestern part of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistani Little Tibet, near the Karakoram mountain range (*Kara* meaning "black" in Turkic languages, cf. *Kara Deniz* "Black Sea" and Kara Sea in northwestern Russia); the choronym *Lucania* attributed to some territories in the Italic Peninsula; and so on.

Nonetheless, this hypothesis has not been systematically explored. Equally vague and poorly investigated are the boundaries of the *linguaculture* in which the nexus colors-cardinal points was intelligible and linguistically productive. Specifically, the studies about the cultural effects of substratum interactions between Greek, Turkic, Illyrian, and Balto-Slavic languages are insufficient. In particular, moving from the concrete to the general, this unawareness (1) led to strong criticism of theories relating the etymology of the name of the Baltic Sea to the Baltic term *baltas* in the specific sense of “white-west” due to an ancient Greek mention of that region named *Baltia*, thus by the means of an homophone term apparently unrelated with Baltic languages; (2) negatively affected the capability to contextualize in a common cognitive frame a plethora of toponyms – from the city of Bălți in modern Moldova to the Baltiyl region in the Little Tibet – while confining the academic research to a mosaic of supposedly unrelated, and thus unconvincing, etymologies; and (3) prevented the formulation of an historiographic model capable of explaining and representing a continuous and undivided classical oikumene outstretched from the Mediterranean toward the northeast.

1.1 Sources and method

A review of existing literature reflecting on the ancient Greek perception of boundaries was preliminarily necessary to reaffirm the concept that the conceiving and representation of vast spaces was not a purely Hellenic endeavor but rather the result of long-period and wide-range interactions with Western Asia. Namely, the *topos* of a civilized world surrounded by four seas – which is incompatible with the geographical position and borders of classical Greece – was explored by systematically surveying Greek *peripli* from a corpus that had been already defined in my previous studies on the topic [9].

These accounts of the circumnavigation of seas, or simply descriptions of portal cities around a sea – such as the anonymous *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, Arrian's *Periplus*, and other Hellenistic seafarers' firsthand or reported (Pytheas', as an example) descriptions – constituted the primary sources of this study. These oeuvres were compared with Greco-Latin geographical treatises attempting a representation of the entire globe: Strabo's *Geography*, Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, and Pomponius Mela's *De situ Orbis*. These primary sources were compared with Western Asia – i.e., Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Canaanite – geographical oeuvres such as the royal inscriptions of the Sargon dynasty, the so-called texts of the king Tiglath-Pileser III, and the annals of Shalmaneser [12].

For the toponymy of the northeastern regions of the Hellenic world in medieval times, the main references were the *Secret History of the Mongols*, written in the second decade of the thirteenth century CE, and Ahmad ibn Fadlan's *Risala* (921 CE) [13, 14]. The Byzantine toponymy is mainly represented by Stephanus of Byzantium's *Ethnica* (sixth century CE), a sort of dictionary of ancient place names. For ethnonyms, the reference is P. M. Fraser's Greek Ethnic Terminology [15].

Other secondary sources, surveyed for the sake of a systematic approach, include *The Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, *Brill's Companion to Ancient Geography*, W. Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography*, and Shamsiddin Kamoliddin's *Ancient Turkic Toponyms of the Middle Asia: Ancient Turkic Place-names in Ancient and Early Medieval Sources* [16–19]. The Slavic perspective is represented by L. M. Maksimovich's *A New and complete geographical dictionary of the Russian State*, which, despite several imaginative etymological explanations, was of great interest

since it listed place names as they appeared before the Soviet toponymic reform (which create numerous new "red" places) [20].

With reference to secondary sources, a review of modern literature about the perception and naming of the maritime space in ancient Western Asia served to reconstruct a geographical model shared by learned people belonging to a variety of nations. The chronological and geographic limits of this review are well represented by the study of K. Yamada about the development of seas names in Assyrian royal inscriptions [12] and the monographic study of J. Bacic, *Red Sea-Black Russia: Prolegomena to the History of North Central Eurasia in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* [21]. Of particular interest in the latter is the representation of Scythe people as a link between the Rus' people and the Byzantine world. 'In this book, the Red Sea to the south, the White Sea north-west of Black Russia and the Black Sea to the south-west delimit the civilization besieged by the barbarians of inner Asia, until the defeat of the Blue and Golden Hordes' [9].

The method of investigation selected to examine the sources was necessarily comparative on a large scale both chronologically and spatially. These chronological and spatial limits could be defined by four "ethnic cardinal points" – toponyms and ethnonyms that appear 'unclear' and 'without etymology' when studied as the linguistic products of a single culture but nonetheless fit the cognitive frame emerging from a cultural and linguistic koine: *a.* the Balti peoples (inhabiting the *Baltiyul* in the central Asiatic area of Baltistan and Little Tibet); *b.* The Baltic peoples (inhabiting the *Baltia* described by Pliny the Elder, supposedly to refer to the Baltic Sea); *c.* The *Lucania* of the Italian Magna Grecia, inhabited by *Lucani* (cf. Greek *leukos* "white"); and *d.* The *White Syrians* mentioned in Strabo as the Cappadocian Syrians.

The act of place-naming is cultural and linguistic at the same time; therefore, the analytical tools of cognitive semantics seemed appropriate to retrieve the ancient Greek-Illyrian-Slavic-Turkic *encyclopaedic meaning* of certain toponyms. This approach is mostly unrelated to the etymological investigation and the philological method: contrary to historical linguistics, cognitive linguistics is characterized by empirical approaches prioritizing the analysis of corpora to retrieve the meaning of lexical units as it emerges from the usage in the context, rather than from vocabulary definitions. Accordingly, in the present research, historical place names were not studied as isolated words but rather as recurring labels adopted to represent a common perception of the boundaries of the oikumene in an interrelated network of correspondences.

Explicitly, it is not a matter of listing place names because of assonances, orthographic coincidences, or a certain affinity with the meaning "white". The larger corpus of toponyms exhibiting the stems *balt-*, *aspro-*, and *leuko-* was refined basing precisely on the parameter of 'usage in context' central to cognitive linguistics methodology. Precisely, no terms were considered *per se* but only in relation to other toponyms expressing a chromatic and, supposedly, geographic opposition. Finally, whenever possible, a comparison with other historical manners of indicating relative cardinal directions in toponyms was used to confirm the hypothesis: classical *white/black* and *red* corresponding to modern *north(ern)* and *south(ern)* or to medieval *great(er)* and *little (or lesser)*. The overlapping of these terms in the naming of the same places was considered a further proof of the historical memory of a typically classical system of representation of the geographical space (see §2.1.). In passing, one should note that the abovementioned terminological transition probably occurred around the thirteenth or fourteenth century, since in Marco Polo, there are already mentions of the 'Grande Arminia' and 'Picciola Arminia' that are coherent with the

coeval reference to Grater and Little Tibet and with fifteenth and sixteenth centuries' tradition of place-naming in newly discovered lands, for example, Greater and Lesser Antilles.

1.2 Terminology

The specific interpretation of the terminology the author adopts in these pages deserves a preliminary clarification. The concept of *linguaculture* is borrowed from K. Risager [22], but in this study, it is used specifically to describe language as a meaning-making cultural practice peculiar to each sociocultural context. In other words, it is the environment that attributes a culture-specific (*encyclopaedic*) meaning to transcultural signifiers (i.e., words, e.g., *red* meaning “south” in certain cultures but not in others).

The expression *culture-specific meaning* and *encyclopaedic meaning* are used interchangeably to refer to semantics in the cognitive frame elaborated by R. Langacker: since language itself does not encode meaning, terms, and speech in general serve – in a manner very similar to the process, H. Bergson defined to explain the interaction between matter and memory – as connections to wider and subjective repositories of knowledge and experiences. That is, the meaning of a term could be formally defined (in a dictionary, as an example) to provide, at least, a common ground for communication – a *dictionary meaning*. However, in the memory and subjective knowledge of each individual, the same term carries one or more accessory meanings or serves as a connection to a ‘broader cognitive domain,’ which is named *encyclopaedic meaning* [23]. This expression is adopted to define the meaning as subjective, culturally related, dependent on personal knowledge, and variable in time [24].

The formal categories of *Sprachbund* and *Sprechbund* elaborated by S. Romaine are too strict to be of any utility in a diachronic study. Therefore, with the former label, the author refers to speech bonds that are both ‘shared ways of speaking going beyond language boundaries’ relating distinct languages (*Sprechbund*) and ‘similarities between linguistic forms in related languages’ (*Sprachbund*) [25]. Specifically, in this study, the term *Sprachbund* is used to refer to a community of speakers sharing common semantic means to refer to the four seas surrounding the inhabited world, such as the use of color names to mean cardinal directions, even though the lexical means used to name those colors were different in each linguistic group.

2. From Black Russia to the Red Sea. The colors-cardinal points system to name the four seas surrounding the world

The existence of an ancient, well-defined, and shared system to indicate cardinal directions using terms normally representing colors has been recognized and scientifically investigated in three areas: the historical Turkic lands (the southern part of central and western Asia), China, and North America [26]. The attestation of this same system in the historical regions of Persia and Indus Valley is poorly studied. In the Slavic world, it is often investigated as a specifically Russian system and usually only by historians, rather than by philologists. In the Baltic region, it is highly debated and often refused due to identity-related issues [10]. In the Hellenic world, several historians perceived the same color-cardinal points system was linguistically and cognitively productive, but – to my knowledge – there are no systematic studies beside my recent publication, which, however, focused specifically on the “red-south”

connection [9]. Summing up, this manner of naming cardinal directions by color names is generally considered in the “western world” a phenomenon related to inner Asia and inherited from Turkic people.

To exemplify, in a Turkish perspective, the Mediterranean is not the “sea between lands” but rather the western of the four seas surrounding the land and coherently named – in counterclockwise order – Black (*Kara Deniz*), White (*Ak Deniz*, the Mediterranean), Red (*Kizil Deniz*), and Celestial Blue (*Hazar Denizi*, the Caspian). While it is obvious to recognize this Turkic system in the Anatolian Peninsula, it emerges with the same clarity in China.

The Chinese recourse to the color-cardinal points system is usually traced back to the period of contact between Turkic peoples and pre-dynastic Khitai. Precisely, it was the Kara Khitai “Black Khitai” (cf. the Kara Sea in northern Russia and the abovementioned Turkish *Kara Deniz*, the Black Sea) that served as a cultural and linguistic bridge toward China where they were known as the Western Liao dynasty or, alternatively, Great Liao. It is evident, in these ethnonyms, the coincidence of different systems to name the same relative position with *black*, *great*, and *west*. This manner of naming cardinal directions is well attested in Chinese historiography and folklore since the mythical age of the *Three Augusts and Five Emperors*: the Yellow Emperor governing the central region of China, the Black Emperor of the north, the Blue one ruling the east, the White to the west, and the Red to the south. It is not only the oral tradition to preserve traces of this system.

In historical geography, the name *Shin hai* “four seas” used to roughly indicate modern China – cf. Italian *Cina* [tʃiˈna] and English *China* – is a direct reference to the idea of four seas surrounding the civilized world: the Yellow Sea, the Red Sea (i.e., the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea), the White Sea (i.e., *Xi Hai*, the Caspian – *xi* 西 meaning “west” but also “white”), and the Black Sea to the northwest. The latter was the name given to lake *Quinghai* “Black Sea”, which, however, in Mongolia is known as *Koko Nor*, literally “Blue Lake”.

Two elements emerge as particularly relevant from this survey. Firstly, the system of colors-cardinal points is well attested from Eastern to Western Asia, especially in its northernmost regions. Secondly, even though the relation between colors is apparently static, the color names used to indicate certain directions are subjective and change depending on the perspective chosen by the observer. The Yellow River of the Chinese language – *yellow* precisely because of its central position in China – becomes the *Xökh Mörön* “Celestial Blue River” for the Mongols, since from their observation point, it is an eastern river. Because of this subjective perspective, the Mongols referred to those Mongols living in the east – that is, in the territories of the Black Kithai – as *Köke Mongol* “Blue Mongols” or “Celestial Mongols”. Accordingly, in Russian historiography, the Mongols were divided in the Blue, White, and Golden Hordes.

In the historical territories of the Kievan and Muscovite Rus’, “black”, “white”, and “red” toponyms and choronyms are frequent. The already mentioned Kara Sea in the north – named with a non-adapted Turkic lexical borrowing – is flanked to the west by the White Sea, while the *Zolotoe More* “Golden Sea” (i.e., “Red”, to indicate the modern Black Sea) delimits the southern border. This maritime tripartition is specular to that of the Rus’ interland where Latin and Slavonic sources distinguished a *Ruthenia Nigra* (Muscovy) to the north, a *Ruthenia Rubra* (part of nowadays Ukraine) to the south, and a *Ruthenia Alba* (modern Byelorussia) to the west [26].

On the shores of the Baltic Sea, the system of colors-cardinal points seems attested, but – as mentioned above – there is a tendency in the academic world to

refuse this assumption mainly for ideological reasons (i.e., avoid the politically unfeasible idea of the existence of a Balto-Slavic-Illyrian *linguaculture*). Nonetheless, the mention of *Witland* “White Land” to refer to the Prussians in the medieval Orosius, the historical presence of the *Bieli Hrvati* “White Croats” south to the sea, the suspicious coincidence of Lithuanian *Baltas* “white” with the names *Baltija* and *Baltic* to refer to the sea west of Sarmats’ lands, the numerous water basins named alternatively black (*niger*) and white (*albus*) north of Bothnia in Olaus Magnus’ *Carta Marina* [26], and, lastly, the ‘innumerable data proving that the term *white* was used in the Baltic to refer to the west’, [27] all these facts strongly suggest the western limit of this colors-cardinal points *Sprachbund* reached, at least, the eastern Baltic Sea.

Notably, one of the strongest philological arguments in favor of the impossible relation between Greek *Baltia*, *Baltic*, and Lithuanian *baltas* in the specific sense of “white-western” is a mention of these remote regions of the north in Pliny’s *Natural History*, where the toponym *Baltia* is used. It is said that the term is phonetically and morphologically too reminiscent of *Baltia-Baltic* to deem it accidentally coincident. Accordingly, and since in Latin and Greek, the stem *balt-* is supposedly not related to the meaning “white” and certainly not to “white-western”, the etymology should be a different one [10]. Finally, it is claimed that classical Latin and Greek languages and culture were refractory to the Turkic system using colors’ names to indicate geographical directions [10]. While I believe I have already convincingly proved the existence of this manner of naming cardinal directions in the classical Greek world, the present study could demonstrate the Greek usage for place-naming of the stem *balt-* belonging to the common *linguaculture*, rather than to a specific nation or language.

2.1 The four seas in the Mediterranean tradition

The survey of secondary sources indicates a historiographic and cognitive context validating the notion that Greek, Hellenistic, and Byzantine civilizations perceived the boundaries of their *oikumene* as geographic limits, not as national borders. This thesis is coherent with the perception of a civilized world surrounded by four seas symbolically placed in the four cardinal directions theorized in the *Historical Library* of Diodorus the Sicilian and in Agatharchides of Cnidus’ *Peri ten Erythran Thalassan*.

As an example, Diodorus (first century BCE) affirms that ‘Αραβίας παρὰ τὴν Ἐρυθρὰν θάλατταν ἕως Ἰνδῶν καὶ τοῦ πέρατος τῆς οἰκουμένης’ (I, 19), observing that the sea lapping against Arabian and Indian coasts constituted ‘the limits [“border” or, better preserving the etymological sense, “perimeter”] of the *oikumene*’ [28]. Quite remarkably, this sea delimiting the southwestern part of India is named by Diodorus *Erythrán thálattan* “Red Sea”, thus distinguishing it from the *Arabios Kolpos* – the modern Red Sea. The identical distinction between the Indian Ocean, called *Mare Erythraeum*, literally Red Sea, and the *Sinus Arabicus* – the modern Red Sea – is constant in Roman cartography and historiography too.

In his oeuvre, Diodorus Siculus is frequently referring to a Northern Ocean and a Southern Sea opting for a “Mesopotamian-style” reminiscent of Assyrian and Sumerian annals. Not rarely the term *Great* is used apparently interchangeably with Mediterranean or Indian Ocean. In any case, those seas clearly indicate the limits of the civilized world, chiefly in the south, because especially India is defined by seas since it ‘is four-sided in shape and the side which faces east and that which faces south are embraced by the Great Sea’ (II 35) [28].

Similarly, to refer to other cardinal directions, Diodorus consistently mentions water bodies delimiting the perimeter of geographical spaces at the manner of Strabo.

However, in the Sicilian's perception, even political entities must be delimited by seas. Accordingly, the territory of the Scythians occupies an area between 'the Ocean and the *Lake Maeotis* [the Sea of Azov]' (II 43, 2). Then, when mentioning that the Scythians further extended their domains, he specifies that they did it 'on the one side as far as the ocean to the east, and on the other side to the Caspian Sea and Lake Maeotis' (II 43, 2) [28].

The idea of an oikumene surrounded by four seas was inherited by Roman historiographers through their Greek sources. Dionysius Periegetes' *De situ Orbis* (c. 115 CE) and *De situ orbis libri III* by Pomponius Mela (c. 43 CE) describe an inhabited world enclosed between two Oceans of which the Caspian Sea constitutes an inlet of the Northern one, while the Persian Sea and the Arabian Sea (i.e., modern Red Sea) belong to the southern one. The definition of boundaries in the two Latin geographers is certainly a remnant of the Greek *forma mentis* expressed by their sources, chiefly Eratosthenes and Hipparchus.

However, it was Strabo to provide an explicit formulation of the concept:

It is the sea more than anything else that defines the contours of the land and gives it its shape by forming gulfs, deep seas, straits, and likewise isthmuses, peninsulas, and promontories; but both the rivers and the mountains assist the seas herein. It is through such natural features that we gain a clear conception of continents, nations [...]. And since different places exhibit different good and bad attributes, as also the advantages and inconveniences that result therefrom, some due to nature and others resulting from human design, the geographer should mention those that are due to nature, for they are permanent, whereas the adventitious attributes undergo changes.

(Strabo II.5, 17) [29]

Despite some alternance between the Northern Ocean, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea as the bodies defining the northern limit, it is precisely the author's emphasis on symmetries and oppositions between the four seas that contributes to a better understanding of the whole cognitive frame: *Erythra-Red* is the sea opposite to those delimiting the northern border. As a matter of fact, in the whole *Geography*, the cardinal points coincide with the seas: the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea indicating northwest and northeast, the Mediterranean for due west, and *Erythra* for the south-east, while the Persian Gulf coincided precisely with the southern border.

[...] The Exterior Sea along the ocean many gulfs, of which four are very large. Of these four gulfs the northern one is called the Caspian Sea [...]; the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Gulf pour inland from the Southern Sea, the one about opposite the Caspian Sea and the other about opposite the Pontus; and the fourth, which far exceeds the others in size, is formed by the sea which is called the Interior Sea, or Our Sea; it takes its beginning in the west at the strait at the Pillars of Heracles.

(Strabo II.5, 18) [29]

Herodotus's terminology, resembling that of Diodorus Siculus, is reminiscent of a millenary Mesopotamian and Elamite tradition that was thoroughly summarized in Keiko Yamada's *From the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea: The Development of the Names of Seas in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* [12]. Admittedly, 'In ancient Mesopotamia, "the Upper Sea" and "the Lower Sea" were the common appellations for the Mediterranean

and the Persian Gulf respectively' [12]. The author then confirms these classical names 'were often used in a pair', that is, in the oppositive sense we are looking for. The researcher further specifies that this naming practice 'originated in Sumerian literature [...], was inherited into the Akkadian literary tradition at the time of the Sargon dynasty [...], and a half millennia later [...] was revived in full extent as is expressed in the inscriptions of the late Neo-Assyrian kings' [12]. The identity with the Greek tradition of sea-naming becomes even more evident when considering that the *thalassonyms* the Upper Sea and the Lower Sea were used 'to refer not only to the two major seas but also to other "seas" such as Lake Van and Lake Urmia north of Assyria' [12]. Finally, noticeable is the dynamicity of those toponyms, since they were attributed to different water basins demarcating the borders of newly conquered territories. Typically, in passages describing military expeditions from the times of Shamshi-Adad I (ca. 1813–1781 BC) up to Ashurbanipal (668-ca. 630 BC), the same name could be attributed to different water basins extending progressively in a northwestern direction to reflect the successes of military campaigns. To exemplify, The Upper Sea – i.e., *tamtu elenitu* – referred to Lake Van in the records of the Nairi campaign of Tukulti-Ninurta I, but it indicated the Mediterranean Sea several hundred years later in the texts of Sennacherib [30]. In passing, it should be noted that together with the army, the manner of naming seas and cardinal directions reached the shores of the Mediterranean where the Greek world was forming through contacts with its eastern partners.

Apparently, the expression "from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea", which is constantly used in Assyrian annals, must not be considered a reference to specific seas but rather a conventional formula to indicate 'the whole country'; thus, it possibly was a propagandistic or ideological expression meant to reaffirm a king's control on the entire "national" territory [12, 31].

The synonymic or alternate use of "Upper" and "Greater" in the Mesopotamian tradition has remarkable parallels in European cartography and Asian toponymy. In the reports narrating the Amurru campaign, *tamtu elenitu* "Upper" is used alternatively to *rabitu* "Great" [12]. The Pattern repeats to the east, where different lakes are indicated as the always-extending limits of the territory in a manner like that of Diodorus. As an example, in the annals account of the Zauma campaign, the border coincides with Lake Zeribor in western Iran called alternatively Great or Upper [32]. Regardless of the synonyms adopted, 'quite frequent was the reference to two or more seas to define the extension of a territory' as it would become standard in the Greek or Chinese traditions [12].

The Persian tradition makes no exceptions. In Persian historiography and cartography, the reference to the four seas delimiting the land is 'attested in more than 1200 maps and 200 historical accounts' [33]. However, differently from the Mesopotamian tradition, in the Persian one, usually two northern seas are mentioned in opposition to two southern seas. Frequently, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea defined the north; The Arabic Gulf and the Persian Gulf indicated the south. The historical names of the Caspian Sea, in particular, indicate an area of cultural and linguistic koine.

In a political discourse aimed at underlying the necessity to recognize and respect the cultural and linguistic variety of the different peoples inhabiting the shores of the Caspian Sea, while openly referring to the cultures mosaic, Seyyed Rasoul Mousavi indirectly, and possibly unconsciously, confirms their belonging to a common linguaculture. The idea that the numerous different names of the Caspian Sea reflect an equally large number of different communities serves the opposite concept, revealing a common approach to its naming:

Some names for the Caspian Sea include Absokoun, Agh Deniz (White Sea), Albany (Albanium Mareh), Arghania, Astarabad, Astrakhan, Baku, Babol Abvab, Caspi, Shirvan, Gozgun Deniz, Deylam, Akghoureh Darya, Hobban, Jeylan, Jorjan, Ghalzam, Ghez, Gorgan, Gilan, Hirkani, Caspius Zowa, Kharazm, Khazar, Khezran, Khorasan, Mazandaran, Mokhan Sala Darya, Khalinskoy Mureh, Sarabi, Xi Hai Tabarestan (Chinese), Zarayeh and Roukasha [34].

The reference to colors and cardinal directions emerges in most of the names. Dominant is the “white-west” reference explicit in the translation agh-/ak- with “white” for Turkic-related toponyms – *Agh Deniz*, *Akghoureh Darya* (cfr. Turkish *Ak Deniz*, the Mediterranean Sea). With reference to colors, it should be noted that the name Astrakhan was attributed to the sea by the Golden Horde, and the yellow color is embedded in the historical Persian name of this sea mentioned in the list above as *Astarabad* and in its modern form *Gorgan*, literally “yellow city”, because of the homonymous nearby city where the Great Wall of Gorgan passes.

Possible evidence of the interchangeability of color names and cardinal points in the limnonyms mentioned in the list unfolds in the Khazars-related names of the sea – *Khazar*, *Khezran* – in relation to the Chinese tradition naming the same sea – *Xi Hai*, *xi* meaning “west” but also “white” (西, cf. Shaanxi and Xi-an, the region in northwest China and its capital city). While the Chinese name undoubtedly indicates the Caspian as the White Sea because of its position relative to Golden China, the term *Khazars* is loosely related to the color blue, specifically “celestial blue”, in the Chinese naming tradition: Khazars were mentioned in Chinese historical sources as *Tūjué Kěsà*, with the specification *Tūjué* used in Chinese for naming Göktürks, unquestionably meaning “Blue Turks” or “Eastern Turks”, especially in the light of the name of the ruling dynasty, the Ashina “Deep Blue” (cf. Saka, i.e., Eastern Iranian, *ashina* “deep blue”).

While each singular etymological note discussed above is individually quite weak as evidence of the proposed hypothesis, nonetheless all these loose references to colors and directions contribute to the image of a multitude of people and tribes moving and interacting across large spaces and naming those spaces themselves. The Persian occupied the central stage in this area, but the Hellenic world interacted with the southeastern part of that territory, while Turkic tribes and Chinese people were crossing the oikumene from sea to sea. All of them were naming those seas with intersecting terms, clagues, loan-words, and semantic borrowings, not rarely misunderstanding foreign words when the physical and cultural distance between the interacting people was too great.

Possibly, this is the case of the Greek corruption of the abovementioned Eastern Iranian name for the Black Sea, *Ashina* “Deep Blue” and corresponding Persian *Akhshēna* “Black”. Due to the unintelligibility of the eastern colors-cardinal points system in the European Greece, the Persian exonyms for the Black Sea, *Akhshēna*, was assimilated for purely phonetical reasons to Greek *áxeinos*, from which the apparently antiphrastic *Póntos Áxeinos* “Inhospitable Sea” (Strabo I.2, 10) was later modified into *Póntos Éuxeinos*, “Hospitable Sea” [35].

Despite a certain lexical and toponymic incertitude, it seems this system of colors-cardinal points was integrated in western Greek toponymy, thus demonstrating it became gradually understandable and productive even in the central Mediterranean region.

2.2 White spaces at the boundaries of the Hellenic Oikumene

In Greece and in the Hellenistic kingdoms, there are proofs of the vitality of the color-cardinal points system. However, a certain degree of discernment is required to

distinguish the original Greek contribution from the passive adoption of preexisting traditions. As a matter of fact, several Greek toponyms make use of the Byzantine *aspron-*, meaning “white”, to reproduce ancient non-Greek place names. On the other hand, certain uses of the Greek *leukos*, also for “white”, apparently point at a progressive acquisition of an accessory shade of meaning, that is, a semantic calque. Finally, across the entirety of the northern boundary of the Greek oikumene, numerous toponyms display a conscious recourse to the colors-cardinal points system but name those places using the koine root *baltos*, which is at the same time Illyrian and Greek, Balto-Slavic, and Persian.

In Greek historiography, *leukos-white* is attested in remarkably opposite contexts to indicate northwestern India and the Syrians inhabiting territories northwest of Syria proper. *White India* is mentioned in Greek and Parthian sources of the first century CE to refer to the Indo-Iranian frontier, that is, Arachosia. This region of cultural and linguistic exchanges is mentioned in the 19th book of Isidore of Charax’s *Parthian stations*, a description of first century trade route from Antioch to India [36]. Some historians consider the mention of *Indikè Leuké* “White India” an attempt to underline that Arachosia was not a Persian Satrapy but rather part of an Indian kingdom where Greeks maintained a presence until quite late [37]. And indeed, the city of Alexandropolis mentioned in *The Parthian stations* (quite probably the city of Alexandria Arachosia) is described as a Greek trading post even at such a late time:

Beyond is Arachosia. And the Parthians call this White India; there are the city of Biyt and the city of Pharsana and the city of Chorochoad and the city of Demetriias; then Alexandropolis, the metropolis of Arachosia; it is Greek, and by it flows the river Arachotus. As far as this place the land is under the rule of the Parthians [36].

The quotation shows a structural calque of a Parthian expression. The lexical choices are purely Greek with both *Indika/-è* and *leukos/-é* well attested in geographical treatises. However, the technical meaning of the choronym must have been unintelligible to the Greek author since he refers the name as a Parthian toponym. However, it is specifically the relative position of White India compared to that of India proper that is revealing: the specification *White* is used to refer to a territory to the northwest, that is, toward the Iranian plateau and Western Afghanistan.

This kind of opposition between the mainland and a northwestern exclave is not occasional in Greek geographical treatises. Syria and White Syria – more precisely Syrians and White Syrians – are mentioned in Strabo in the same relative position and by the means of an identical lexical set:

As for the Paphlagonians, they are bounded on the east by the Halys River, which, according to Herodotus, ‘flows from the south between the Syrians and the Paphlagonians and empties into the Euxine Sea, as it is called’; by ‘Syrians’, however, it means the ‘Cappadocians’ and, in fact, today they are still called “White Syrians”, while those outside the Taurus are called “Syrians” (XII,3) [28].

Strabo, defining the lexical choices of Herodotus, distinguishes between two types of Syrians separated by a river that flows from the southeast to northwest and empties into the Black Sea. Then, the historian names the *Leukosyroi* “White Syrians” as the Syrians living in Cappadocia and Anatolia. These regions are located in the area northwest of those inhabited by the Syrians, and the specification *White* occurs in an undoubtedly geographical context.

In the defined period, "white" toponyms are common across the Hellenic world specially to name places at the western border. This is the case, as an example, of the city of Leukos on the westernmost promontory of the island of Karpathos. Likewise, the region of Acarnania was described already in Homer's *Odyssey*, but it was Strabo to call it *Leucas*, recurring to the root λευκ- "white". Similarly, in front of the coast of the Ionian Sea, the island of Λευκάδα (modern Greek Lefkada) reinforces the impression of a northwestern border of the Greek oikumene rich in "white toponyms" [9]. Furthermore, the same attribute appears in the naming of the western region of Λευκανία, the *Lucania* of modern southern Italy, a region part of the western colonies of the Magna Grecia founded during the fifth century BCE. The name *Leukania* was attributed in the period of conflict with the local population, which was named in Greek *Leukani* "whites" in a manner closely resembling the cognitive frame that generated the ethnonym *Leukosyroi* and the toponym *Leukosyria*.

The Greek-named Italian area of Lucania reveals other toponyms preserving Greek roots conveying the meaning "white". In the contexts of Diodorus, the Sicilian and Strabo's commentaries underlining that seas, rivers, and mountains should be considered to define the limits of the world, noticeable is the occurrence of Greek *aspron* – a Byzantine Greek term for "white" – to name the most evident morphological feature of Lucania's territory, the *Aspromonte*. This compound name was already attested in the archaic Grecanic dialect well before the area became part of the Roman state; therefore, the relatively recent Byzantine Greek ἄσπρου possibly reflects a previous, non-attested and more archaic term [38].

In any case, the reference to white mountains in historical western Greece stimulates the contrastive mention of the Black Mountain of *Montenegro* delimiting the territory north of Greece. In the context delineated in these pages, the fact that the historical Montenegro was inhabited by the population of *Nigri Latini* – certainly not a reference to the color of their skin – is quite suspicious. The *Nigri Latini* were called like that undoubtedly to distinguish them from other *Latini* in a manner reminiscent of the distinction Syrians-White Syrians. And the suspect of a color-cardinal points reference in the Balkan area is reinforced by the parallelism with the *Morlacchi* people of ex-Yugoslavia, that is, the *μαυρόβλαχοι* – "Black Vlachs" – of medieval Greek historiography (e.g., Hesychius of Alexandria's *Lexicon*). These herdsmen inhabiting the northeastern shores of the Adriatic Sea were named Black Vlachs to distinguish them from the *βλαχοι* of the south (modern Greece, Albania and Macedonia), making it feasible to suppose that black was used in Byzantine historiography to indicate a different relative geographical position [34].

The region between the Adriatic Sea and Thracia, that is, the northwestern border of the Hellenic world, is rich in toponyms connected by the opposite relation black-white. Nonetheless, in these northern areas, the Greek-Illyrian and Balto-Slavic term *baltos* "white" is more common. In Slavic languages, it is preserved in the historical toponym Ballanstra, a locality (near the present-day village of Jarlovtsi) situated on the shores of the *Bela Reka* "White River. North of it, not far from the border with Serbia, historical sources speak of the *Czarna Rieka*, the "Black River" [39]. Though difficult to identify with certitude, this opposition is reminiscent of a much more evident one just across the border in nowadays Serbia. The river Timachus, or Timok, preserves the Indo-European *tm-akwa* "black, dark water, river" (cf. Old Bulgarian ТЪМА "darkness"), but it is known in Serbian as Great Timok (*Veliki Timok*) with the same terminological coincidence Black-Great or Northern-Great already observed in the diachronic evolution of numerous toponyms. This eastern Serbian tributary of the Danube has its counterpart in the *Beli Timok* the "White Timok" in the northwest, almost parallel to the Serbian-Bulgarian border.

Despite these examples being related to the Slavic languages, relevant is that precisely along these faded boundaries between the northern plain and the center of the Hellenic world, the investigated system was used and adapted; it became intelligible and, occasionally, loanwords to express it were integrated in the Greek lexicon. Two foreign roots carrying the meaning “white” entered the Greek lexicon and became particularly well integrated and morphologically adapted in the Byzantine period: the stem *bel-*, just mentioned above in the context of Slavic languages of the Adriatic and Balkan regions, and the related Balto-Slavic-Illyrian *balt-*.

The root *bel-* is easily recognizable in the Thracian name of the Ορβέλος mountains and in the identical Greek form attested in many historical and geographical sources (e.g., Herodotus 5, 16). Even the modern name of this mountain range, *Belasitsa*, preserves the etymological meaning of White Mountains and the Greco-Thracian-Slavic root *bel-* (cf. Phrygian *βελον*, Bulgarian *бел* “white”, Slavic *bjal-* “white”) [40]. In other regional languages geographically close to the Hellenic world, the name of this mountain range was reinterpreted, but the – possibly Thracian – loanword carrying the accessory meaning “white-north-western” was preserved: ‘The Macedonian name of the *Ορβέλος* was *Βάλακρος*, which Georgiev sees as *Βάλ-άκρος* – White top’ [40]. Unfortunately, the revealing interlinguistic reflection elaborated by Serafimov did not consider the close relation these Slavic and Thracian terms had with the Greek language, because the only Greek stem appearing in the comparison is *leukos*:

<i>Thracian bal</i>	<i>Slavic bel</i>
<i>Latin alpus</i>	<i>Greek leukos</i>
<i>Lithuanian baltas</i>	<i>English white</i>

[40]

Nonetheless, the stem *balt-* with the meaning “white”, “swamp”, and accessory meaning “west” or “northwest” was attested in Greek, quite probably resulting from a borrowing. The Greek *balt-* etymologically cannot be related to Proto-Indo-European *b^helH- (“white”) ‘because the Greek reflex of PIE *bh is φ’ [41]; thus, it is considered an Illyrian substratum word, and its integration into the Greek lexicon is traced back to a Medieval reinforcement from Slavic *bel-* and *byal-* with the double meaning “swamp” and “white” (cf. Proto-Balto-Slavic *bál’tas with the same polysemy, cf. also Lithuanian *báltas* “white” and *balà*, etymologically “swamp”) [42, 43]. Notably, traces of a more archaic penetration of this koine word into Greek are preserved precisely in this mentioned ‘Greek reflex of PIE *bh φ’ that is displayed in the term *phalios* “having a white patch”, which points at Thracian and Phrygian *Balios*, the name of one of Achilles’ immortal horses with a white spot on the forehead (see e.g., Statius’ *Thebaid*). In this perspective, the Greek *baltos* could also be connected to the Dacian toponym *Βάλασσον* as in Procopius of Caesarea’s *De Aedificiis* (XLIV, 1), where it refers to a white castle. While in modern Greek *βάλτος* preserves exclusively the meaning “swamp”, the stem appears related to “white” in the name of Plutarco’s nymph *Βάλτη*. Moreover, the studies of M. Vasmer about Slavonic toponymy in Greece and the commentaries of his followers evidenced a common pattern of ‘geographical terms’ – among which *baltos* – systematically adopted by Slavic settlers in Greece to form place-names: ‘βιρός, βάλτος, λόγγος, παγανειά, πολιάνα, σοποτός [...]’ [44]. Finally, *βάλτ-* is attested in written form with its nominative and vocative

plural forms *βάλτοι* firstly to mean “swamp” and then, in the derived form *Byaltae*, to represent choronyms and ethnonyms in Ptolemy [45].

Further to the northeast, along the northern shores of the Black Sea, in the region between the Danube, the Dniester, and the Don rivers, close interaction with the Greek are demonstrated by borrowings or semantic calques as shown by the Greek name of the Dniester, *Τύρας*, with a loanword from Scythian *tūra* “rapid stream” possibly in the sense of “white waters” and loosely related to white (cf. Lithuania *tyras* “pure”, “transparent” especially of water, “candid” but also “swamp”). The homonymous city of Tyras, a major trade port founded in the 6th century BCE, was significantly built on the west shores of the Tyras (i.e., Dniester) river, and hence, in Byzantine Greek, it was known as *Ἀσπρόκαστρον* “White Castle”, with the root *aspro-* already recognized in the oronym *Aspromonte*. With a structural calque from Greek, it was named *Album Castrum* “White Castle” in Latin and consequently *Cetatea Albă* “White Citadel” in Romanian. In Ottoman Turkish, it was *Akkerman* “White Castle”. Furthermore, in the *Πρὸς τὸν ἴδιον υἱὸν Ρωμανόν* written by Constantine Porphyrogenitus (fourth emperor of the Byzantine Empire from 913 to 959), the fortress on the opposite side of the river, that is, on the eastern shores of the Dniester, is named *Μαυρόκαστρον* “Black Castle”, thus exhibiting the expected geographical position-colors opposition [46]. It should be noted, however, that in the anonymous *Toparcha Gothicus*, the whole settlement including eastern and western shores is named *Maurokastrom* from which the *Maurocastro* of the later Genoese traders settled in this city [47].

Further northeast along the Hellenic world boundaries, a “white” area is evidently opposed to Serica – the name Greeks used to refer to northwestern China (as an example in Stephanus of Byzantium’s *Ethnica*) – in classical and Byzantine historiography. This region roughly coincides with the Kara-Khanid Khanate and with the later possessions of the Qara Khitai or Western Liao dynasty, also known as Great Liao. Note the use of the Turkic term *kara* for “black” (attributed by 19th century historiographers) and the Chinese term *Kala-han* (喀喇汗) for “Black Khan”, an ethnonym attested since the time of the Western Zhou dynasty which in turn exhibits, in its Chinese transcription – 西周, the character *Xī* meaning “white” as already discussed above.

The connection between these remote lands and the Hellenic world is indeed Ptolemy’s recourse to the stem *βάλτ-* to name the Balti people of Baltiyul and Baltiyul or Little Tibet itself. This mention is truly paradigmatic of the cultural and linguistic milieu depicted in this chapter. The Greek term used to refer to this region is *Byaltae* with the stem *byal-* identical to the Slavic root for “white” appearing, as an example, in the Polish city name Białystok. This similarity in such a remote area might seem coincidental but revealing is the Balti people settled in the historical White India, along the upper reaches of the Indus River and precisely at the foot of the Karakoram mountain range, which shows the already familiar Turkic *kara* for “black-north” in the oronym. The apparently accidental use of the stem *balt-/byal-* is contextualized in an interconnected network of “colored” toponyms. Furthermore, to the north of Baltiyul, the Western Liao or Great Liao occupied the region north of both Great Urals and Ladak, a region ‘also known as Great Tibet or Mariyul “Red Country”’ [48, 49].

In this context of colors-cardinal points in which the familiar “Great” and “Little” appear systematically in connection with black ethnonyms and red toponyms, it is consequential to conclude that the encyclopaedic meaning of *Balti* and Greek *Byaltae* is “northwest”. The Balti settled in ‘Baltiyul, which is also known as Little Tibet, or The Northern Province [...] in the Little Urals, that is the *Annibi montes* of classical

geographers (τὰ Ἄννιβα ὄρη in Ptol. 6.16; *Anniva* in Amm. Marc. 23.6)' [50]. While the author of the Greek geographical dictionary reminds the reader that 'this area of the historical Northern Schytia, to a certain extent, corresponds to the land of the Balti people, not to be confused with the Balts inhabiting the shores of the Baltic Sea' [50], I would like to emphasize precisely the common lexical material, the same accessory meaning and the same cognitive approach to the representation of large spaces that connect the two ethnonyms.

After the Mughal annexation of Kashmir in 1586 Mughal possessions adjoined both Lesser Tibet and Greater Tibet. Lesser Tibet, called in Persian as Tibbat-i-Khwurd, was called "Baltistan" by the inhabitants. [...] Greater Tibet was called in Persian as Tibbat-i-Buzurg or Tibbat-i-Kalan, while by the natives it is called Lhata-Yul [49].

Lastly, it should be noted that the Greek themselves became a passive referent of this same system in the easternmost regions of their oikumene. In the Chinese historiographical oeuvres *Records of the Grand Historian* and *Book of Han* tell of the *Dayuan* "Great Yuan" [51, 52], people are mentioned as a constant counterpart of the Han dynasty who finally defeated them just before 100 BCE, during the Han-Dayuan War. The term *Yuan* used in the ethnonym was a Chinese rendition of Sanskrit *Yavana* meaning "Ionians", that is, Greeks. Indeed, the Chinese explorer Zhang Qian, in 130 BCE, indirectly refers to the Dayuan as the subjects of the Greek polis Alexandria Eschate (modern Khujand, Tajikistan). Accordingly, the proper rendition of Dayuan is "Great Yuan" or, literally, "Great Ionians". In the context outlined above, the appellation Great to name the Greeks inhabiting the Ferghana valley in Central Asia is an evident reference to the color black for "northwest", from a Chinese perspective, as it was for the Qara Khitai alternatively known in China as the Western Liao dynasty or Great Liao.

3. Conclusion

Summing up the argument, the cognitive investigation of several toponyms attested along the boundaries of the Hellenic world and carrying the dictionary meaning "white" confirmed the possibility that their encyclopaedic meaning was "western" or "northwestern". Λευκός is attested in the choronym *Indikè Leuké* "White India" in Isidore of Charax's *The Parthian stations*, where it is used to name the historical region of Arachosia positioned northwest of India. Similarly, the ethnonym *Leukosyroi* "White Syrians" is used in Strabo's *Geography* to describe the "White Syrians" as the Syrians living in Cappadocia and Anatolia – regions that are located to the northwest of those inhabited by the Syrians. Ἀσπρον appears, as an example, in the Byzantine Greek Ἀσπρόκαστρον "White Castle", to name the trade port of Tyras, on the west shores of the Dniester River. Illuminating is the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus mention of the fortress on the opposite side of the river, that is, on the eastern shores of the Dniester, as Μαυρόκαστρον "Black Castle", a toponym exhibiting the expected geographical position/colors opposition. The thesis of an accessory meaning "northwestern" for *white* is reinforced in territories where both *leukos* and *aspron* are used together to name the northwestern regions of Greece: in the Magna Grecia historical region of Lucania (**Leukania*), the most prominent mountain range is designated by the Grecanic term *Aspromonte*.

Challenging was the scrutiny of toponyms displaying the cognate stems *balt-* and *byal-* associated to Greek βάλτος, modern Greek “swamp”, Byzantine Greek “white”. Firstly, the Greek term is certainly a loanword from other languages; therefore, its primary and accessory meanings could have been borrowed together or separately. Furthermore, it was not possible to univocally identify the lending language, since the accessory meaning “white” was often conveyed by the same root *bal-* attested in the Balto-Slavic, Turkic, Illyrian, Thracian, and Phrygian languages, cf. Lithuanian *Baltas* “white” and etymologically “swamp”. Nonetheless, the toponymic use of *balt-* is attested in several place names across the northern boundaries of the Hellenic world. In Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*, the toponym *Baltia* is possibly an allusion to the Baltic Sea region, while Ptolemy’s chose *Byaltae* to name the Baltiyl region in the Little Tibet; the same stem with apparently the same northwestern reference appears in the oronyms Βάλακρος and Ορβέλος.

It is concluded that due to contacts and borrowings, or simply by imitation of the use of *Baltos* and *Baltoi* and generally of the transnational colors-cardinal points system, other Greek stems meaning “white” acquired the accessory meaning “northwest” and were used in the formation of toponyms. Statements like ‘Beyond is Arachosia. And the Parthians call this White India’, attested in Isidore of Charax, testify of the conscious adoption of a borrowed expression and a manner of representing spaces but also of the lexical choices to convey those meanings.

As a result of this brief “cultural history of a syncretic linguaculture”, this chapter depicted an area of the classical world where separate linguistic labels – Greek, Illyrian, Slavic, and so on – cannot represent the complexity of a koine in which East and West mingled. In this region, outstretched toward the Hindu Kush, the Little Altai, and the Sarmatic Plain, place names and ethnonyms are just one of the aspects signaling a marked Western Asian influence on Greek perception of vast spaces, both linguistically and cognitively. Furthermore, this research underscored the necessity to conceive the northeastern part of the Classical World as a place where faded boundaries connected, rather than being separated, with people belonging to distinct nations but part of a common *Sprachbund*.


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