

Navigating the labyrinth of Proto-Albanian: evidence from an isolated dialect region

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The reconstruction of Proto-Albanian is based on evidence from the two main dialects of Gheg and Tosk Albanian. This includes texts from the earliest written phase of Albanian known as Old Albanian (16th-18th centuries). Standard Albanian (since the 1950's) is based on the Tosk variety. However, evidence from the historically most isolated Albanian dialect region, known as *Malësia e Madhe* (Malsia), part of the Northwestern Gheg dialect region and stretching across the political borders of northwestern Albanian and southwestern Montenegro provides evidence for an alternative reconstruction of the Proto-Albanian stop consonants. Many forms from Malsia with initial stops /p-, b-, t-, d-, k-, g-/ are etymologically reflected in other Indo-European branches, but contrast with initial nasal consonants /m-, n-, ɲ-/ in Gheg Albanian and initial nasal-stop clusters /mb-, nd-, ɲg-/ in Tosk Albanian, e.g. Malsia *pyt* ~ Gheg *myt* ~ Tosk *mbyt* 'to drown'; Malsia *bush* ~ Gheg *mush* ~ Tosk *mbush* 'to fill' (Table 1).

Proto-Indo-European root	Indo-European cognates	Malsia Madhe	Tosk
* <i>peh₂</i> - 'to protect, shepherd'	Vedic <i>pāti</i> 'watch, keep, preserve'; Latin <i>pāstor</i> 'shepherd'	<i>paj</i> 'to keep, hold'	<i>mbaj</i> 'to hold, carry'
* <i>b^her</i> - 'to bear, carry'	Vedic <i>bhārati</i> 'to bear, carry'	<i>baj</i> 'to carry'	<i>mbaj</i> 'to hold, carry'
* <i>ten</i> - 'to stretch'	Vedic <i>tanóti</i> , Greek <i>τείνω</i>	<i>tēn</i> 'push, press, spread'	<i>nde(n)j</i> 'stretch, spread'
* <i>deh₂</i> - 'share, divide'	Homeric Greek <i>δαιτρός</i> 'carver (of meat)'	<i>da-</i> 'split, cut, divide' (also Gheg)	<i>nda-</i> 'id.'

Table 1: Indo-European cognate set with the Malsia and Tosk Albanian dialectal forms

If Malsia preserves the voiceless/voiced stop contrast from Proto-Indo-European (PIE) and all Albanian dialects are derived from Proto-Albanian (4th-7th centuries), then the Gheg initial nasals and Tosk nasal-stop clusters cannot be traced back to Proto-Albanian, implying that Malsia is the most conservative dialect with respect to the preservation of the voiceless/voiced stop contrast. Previous reconstructions fail to account for the forms found in Malsia. For example, Tosk *mbusha* /mbusa/ 'fill' is reconstructed back to Proto-Alb. **en-busa* (Orel 1998: 253). While the Gheg reduced forms with /m/, /n/, /ɲ/ (e.g. *mush* 'fill') are cited as reductions from the clusters /mb/, /nd/, and /ɲg/ (S. Demiraj 2013: 321). Malsia *bush* has an initial voiced stop /b-/, also reflected in the Ancient Greek cognate *βυνέω* 'to fill up' from a root **βυσ-* (see Orel 1998: 252; Beekes 2010: 248).

The initial /n-/ in Tosk is from Proto-Alb. **en* 'in' by way of PIE **h₁en*- 'in'. In Malsia, the preposition *en* 'in' is still preserved, whereas in the other Albanian dialects **en* had a different fate, namely having become a prefix /n-/ and fusing with the verb stems. This change however did not occur in Proto-Albanian, but rather in the period of Old Albanian, where the oldest author Buzuku (1555) began to use the preposition *en* as a preverb: *en + bush = embush* (with apheresis in Tosk, *mbush*). Thus, the dialect of Malsia provides an avenue to navigate and accurately assess this and other diachronic and synchronic changes in Albanian.