

The Morpheme *xēl* Composing Toponyms and Tribal Names

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The reciprocal relation between toponyms and tribal names is known from long ago; sometimes toponyms become tribal names, but more often tribal names form toponyms.

In connection with this the morpheme *xēl* (*xayl*) is showing an interesting and multilateral picture in the iranophone areas, appearing either in toponyms or tribal names. In fact, *xēl* can serve as an exemplary sample of toponym-tribal name syncretism.

In the south-Caspian territories of Iran, especially in the provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran, and more to the west, in Kermanshah, and rarely in the province of Khuzestan, we meet toponyms formed with *-xēl/-xeyl* (خیل). By the way, the morpheme has anyway the significance of “locality, village”. We can find its specific use more to the north, on the territories populated with Talishes of the Republic of Azerbaijan, for instance in the regions of Masali, in the form of *Xēl* (or more probably *Xəl*)¹. By the way, it is also possible that the locality of *Xayl* in the surroundings of Ghazvin, mentioned in the work *Mu‘aǰam ul-buldān* (see Dehxodā, s. v.), may be related with the word unit under discussion.

Now, may this so-called near-Caspian *xēl/xayl* morpheme creating toponyms be in relation with the Afghan *xēl* which is used in this language as nominated by the tribe and in words composed with the name of the tribe chief: *Ismā‘īl-xēl*, *‘Alī-xēl*, *Mūsā-xēl*, *Ahmad-xēl*, etc.?

In fact, the Afghan *xēl* is the synonym of the Persian form *x^vēš(ān)* which means “members of the family, parents”, and this is seen the best in the Afghan expression *qawm ū xēl* which is the true mirror reflection of the Persian *qawm ū x^vēš*. Compare also Afghan *padarxēl* “the wife’s father family”, *xēlxāna* “family, clan”, *xēl o xatek* “tribe”.

¹ This local pronunciation *Xəl* and its meaning “mud” in Talish language put nevertheless under suspicion this rural relation with the morpheme *xēl/xeyl* under study.

The word *xēl* is a stable social term in Pashto and has a pan-Afghani use in the meaning of “tribe, clan”. Usually, each *xēl* “tribe” lives in one village (while it is not excluded that it may occupy a larger territory) and the village is called after it, thus *xēl* becoming a toponym creating morpheme with the meaning “place, locality”.

It is quite sure that *xēl*, with its principal meaning of “tribe” (in the social sense) and the toponym creating function, derived from it, is related with Kurdish and Pashto, in which it also became a unit expressing “tribal territory”. In Persian *xeyl* means “group, army, and detachment”, cf. *xeyl-xeyl* “group by group”, *xeylbāš* “commander of cavalry”, etc. However, in Arabic, from which the Persian word is considered to be borrowed, it has only the meaning of “horse” (plural *xuyūl*, *axyāl* “horses”) and has no social meaning.

Such semantic developments of this Arabic word in the Iranian languages provide also Iranian etymology, especially given by F. Andreas, which is noted in the *Etymological Vocabulary of Pashto* by Morgenstierne (1927:96).² This paper, taking into account the version of the Iranian origin, shows that the unit *xēl* is considered to be one of the Arabic loanwords via Turkish of the Iranian lexicon. Thus, it has already entered the Persian from Turkish with the meanings “comrade-in-arms, messenger, army”.

On the frame of this article we discussed a wide range of Iranian and Armenian toponyms, composed by *xēl*. By the way, the transition of this unit to the Armenian toponyms via Kurdish is also analyzed in the scope of our paper.

² In the publication of 2003 of this book (Wiesbaden, p. 95) the editors J. Elfenbein, D. N. Mackenzie, Nicholas Sims-Williams have abridged the note made by the author about the etymology presented by Andreas. Moreover, they consider that the word under discussion as an Arabic/Persian borrowing in Pashto and they refute its Iranian origin.