

Unveiling Messapic Funerary Discourse

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Abstract. Messapic, an ancient language from the 6th to the 2nd century BC in Southern Italy, remains a linguistically enigmatic and poorly understood entity, has been traditionally classified as an *extinct* language. Current scholarship predominantly views Messapic epigraphy as primarily consisting of personal names, anthroponyms, and theonyms. However, attempts to linguistically classify and interpret it within the broader framework of Greek, Latin, or other ancient languages have yielded limited insights. This article investigates Messapic epigraphy as a potential descendant of Proto-Albanian and reveals intriguing parallels with classical Albanian. The chosen exemplars challenge the prevailing assumption that Messapic is an extinct language, presenting it in a new light and underscoring its enduring linguistic and cultural legacy. This is notably exemplified through a distinctive funerary discourse that serves as a hallmark of the Messapic language.

Keywords: Messapic epigraphy; reconstruction; funerary discourse; (Proto)Albanian.

Introduction

The Messapians, an Illyrian tribe identified with the Sallentinians and Iapyges, inhabited the ancient regions of Apulia and Calabria. Despite their language, Messapic, being often associated with the Illyrian language (Herodotus, 2009; Krahe, 1955; West, 2007), it remains a linguistic enigma. Messapic appears as a palimpsest, seemingly having “lost” its architextual and paratextual imaginaries within its *scriptio continua*.

The intertwining of *Illyromania* and the interpretation of Messapic epigraphy has simultaneously spawned a counter discourse that paradoxically fosters an *Illyrofobian* perspective on Messapic interpretations. Consequently, different discourses have been tinged with diverse ideological syndromes, somewhat neglecting the dimensions of the text that could align it with the hermeneutics of *mute* languages.

Undoubtedly, the funerary discourse prevails in Messapic epigraphy. It serves not only as the discursive key for understanding Messapic but, more significantly, represents a hermeneutical *master key* applicable to various *unconceivable* text situations. This is why

the funerary discourse assumes the role of the methodological focal point in interpreting Messapic inscriptions, aiding in reconstruction by unlocking the *sealed* doors of the corpora, always accompanied by an internal-comparative approach.

Funerary discourse highlights the intrinsic semantic content of the Messapic texture, elucidating depictions of rituals, votive processions, offerings, and succinct narrative *stories* through both direct and indirect discursive modalities. Frequently, inscriptions adopt the guise of a dialogue with the deceased person during their journey to the underworld (Saunders, 2021), strategically employing funerary social practices as discursively shaped entities (Fairclough, 1989). This implies the nuanced exploration of *black* vocabulary and tonality associated with death, the deceased, grief, mourning, belief, and offering, encompassing rituals, myths, and votive practices. The article aims to underscore specific funerary discursive elements inherent in these inscriptions, leveraging this discourse to enhance comprehension of the Messapian world.

1. Revealing Messapic Corpora

Unveiling the mystery of Messapic and its profound historical narrative, an indispensable gateway lies at the heart of our investigation. This gateway is woven into the inherent connections among segmentation, reading, and interpretation. It is crucial to decode these inscriptions not merely as a compilation of texts but with a keen understanding of their structural subtleties and interpretative importance. This decoding encompasses detailed description, thorough analysis, and the construction of a grammar and dictionary, with a specific emphasis on their funerary discourse.

In tracing the evolutionary trajectory of Messapic, a comprehensive internal-comparative perspective is necessitated, responding to the call of historical linguistics and linguistic anthropology. This study endeavours to unveil the linguistic, grammatical, and cultural underpinnings of Messapic, drawing profound insights from the extensive Messapian epigraphic corpora. This undertaking exemplifies the challenges inherent in interdisciplinary research on ancient, undeciphered languages.

The Messapic language, considered an offshoot of the Illyrian language culture in Southern Italy (Haarmann, 2010, p. 62), has predominantly been positioned within the Indo-European family (cf. Hamp, 1957; Milewski, 1965; De Simone, 1981, 2017; Radulescu, 1994). Simultaneously, an archaeological perspective has classified Messapian culture as having Illyrian origins (D'Andria, 1990; Lombardo, 1991, 1994; Lamboley, 1996, 2002). However, doubts persist about the connections within the Illyrian-Messapic-Albanian triangle.

Hundreds of funerary inscriptions, both *intra muros* and *extra muros* (Lombardo, 1994; Lomas, 2015), remain unseen until the graves are opened in *Grotta della Poesia*, hundreds of Messapic texts, along with Latin and Greek inscriptions, are engraved on the cave walls (De Simone, 2017, p. 1842). Additionally, inscriptions on pottery and coins enrich the mosaic of Messapic epigraphy.

To unravel the Messapic world would seem impossible without delving into Messapic studies encompassing fragmentation, transliterations, and linguistic investigations conducted by classical scholars, including Hahn (1854), Deecke (1881), Bugge (1892), Pedersen (1895), Ribezzo (1907; 1938), Jokl (1911), and followed by another generation of scholars such as Whatmough (1927), Krahe (1929, 1955), Parlàngeli (1960), Hamp (1957), Pisani (1976), and more recent authors like De Simone (1988, 2017), Marchesini (2020), Matzinger (2005, 2019), among others. This also encompasses historical, archaeological, and cultural arguments presented by D’Andria (1988, 1990), Lombardo (1991, 1992), Burger (1998), Lamboley (1996, 2002), Aigner-Foresti (2004), Graham (1982), Yntema (2008), Herring (2007), and Lomas (2015, 2018). The suggestions of Albanian linguist Çabej (1986) regarding the Messapic language as an Illyrian or Ancient Albanian dialect are also paramount.

The foundation for exploring the connections between Proto-Albanian, Messapic (as an Illyrian variety), and Albanian words and worlds relies on numerous linguistic and social convergences. Primarily, it is essential to contextualise the provided votive and funerary inscriptions, which parallel the internal-comparative linguistic situation, within a framework that reflects both the situation and the broader social context of remembrance and cultural memory (Assmann, 2006). This can be seen as a small but important step toward a new horizon of expectation, as declared by D’Andria regarding an “archaeology of inscriptions” (2022).

Given that these inscriptions were written in *scriptio continua*, the main keys to their readings involve finding an appropriate method of segmentation. The approach to fragmentation should first encompass the complex use of the interjection *ihi* and the verb *jam* meaning “to be” in its protoforms *as~a*, *os~o*, and “*st*”. This includes noting the repetition of the same lemmas across various inscriptions.

2. (Re)segmenting and Interpreting Inscriptions

Below are new readings presented as “reconstructing translations” of four votive inscriptions as they appear in the *Monumenta Linguae Messapicae* (= MLM), edited by De Simone & Marchesini, published in Wiesbaden in 2002. It is important to note that the re-segmentation of Messapic not only reflects its vocabulary but also its phonemic-morphemic structure, to a certain extent, encompassing aspects like tone and rhythm. This historical linguistic arch can be observed as Proto-Albanian > Early Albanian transitioned into Classical Albanian.

2.1 MLM 36 Cae: Reading & Reconstruction

MLM 36 Cae	century VI-V BC	(p. 166)
Item	damikihinonaimo	
Segmentation	da miki <i>hi</i> nona imo	

Mes. > CALb.	da miku-<i>ihi</i>, nona ime
Stand. Alb.	u nda miku- <i>ihi</i> , nëna ime
English	/my/ friend passed a way- <i>ihi</i> /oh/ my mother

da (v.) > *u* (*n*)*da*; *vdiq* ‘to die; deceased’. From PALb **en-danja* etymologically related to Skt. *dáyate*, *dáte id*, ‘to cut, to divide’. It is obvious that the verbal prefix **en* continues IE **en(i)* ‘in.’ Also, *dazima* might be *vdekja* ‘death’ < *daj* ‘to divide’; often used with prefix *n-* as *ndaj* in late Alb. It goes back to PALb **danja*, transformed from **daja* under the influence of other verbs in *-nja*. Cognates: Gk. *δαίωμα* ‘to divide,’ Skt. *dáyate*, Lat. *dividere*, Avest. *dvaidi* ‘to kill,’ Phryg. *addaket* ‘do, put,’ Goth. *daups* ‘i vdekur,’ *daupus* ‘death’; OIsl. *deyja* ‘vdes’ < PIE **dhau* ‘stifle.’ *Dazima* might be an anthroponym, as suggested by some scholars, and also an isoglosse. Three stages of the word: PALb: **en-danja* > Mes: *dazi(m)~nda~dazi* Alb: *da~i ndarë~ndarje*.

mik/i (n.) *mik* ‘friend’. This constitutes evidence that *mik* is not influenced by Lat. *amīcus*, as previously believed (considering its appearance around the 6th to 5th century BC). All three elements, *m:i:k*, have roots in PIE. Cognates: Skt. *mitrá-* ‘friend,’ Hitt. *mīu-* ‘smooth, gentle,’ Av. *miθra-* ‘friend,’ OPers. *MiBra-* ‘name of god,’ Goth. *mēgs*, OHG. *mūg* ‘kinsman, relative,’ and Rom. *amic*. This likely stems from PIE **mei-* ‘to bind’ or **mēgh-* ‘friendly’ (Pokorny), evolving into **ámeikā*. Three stages of the word: PALb: **meik* > Mes: *mik* > Alb: *mik*.

i/hi (interj.) > *ihi* ‘ihi’. A mourning interjection and an element of Illyrian iso-singing, evidently inherited by the Albanian world; at times evokes reminiscences of the Gen. or another case. It might also function as a verbal ending, akin to Hittite. This aligns with the possibility of associating *hi/r* with both ‘grace’ and ‘remains,’ while acknowledging a divine grace as the root of the word *hia~hija*, signifying ‘shadow’. Three stages of the word: PALb: **ihi?* > Mes: *ihi* > Alb: *ihi*.

nona (n.) *nona~nana*, *ama~ëma*, *nëna* ‘mother’. Derived from PALb **na(n)nā?*, it relates to Skt. *nanā* and Hitt. *anna-* ‘mother, sister, deity’. It is also associated with Hitt. *annaaš* ‘mother,’ *ḫaannaaš* ‘grandmother,’ Lyc. *χῆνα* ‘mother’ < PANat. **honno-* ‘moon, mother’ < PIE **-ótn-o* or **h₁neun* ‘nine,’ as suggested by Pokorny. Other cognates encompass: Pruss. *ane* ‘old mother,’ Arm. *han* ‘grandmother,’ Lith. *anūta* ‘mother-in-law,’ Lat. *anna* ‘nursing mother,’ and Rom. *nana* ‘mother’.

Three stages of the word: PALb: **na(n)nā?* > Mes: *nona* > Alb: *nona~nana~nëna*.

imo (pr.) > *ime* ‘my’. From PALb **mei* < IE **meios*. This possessive pronoun is well preserved, both in terms of its form and function. It originates from PALb **i eme*, where *eme* reflects the old accusative form **eme*. Cognates: Gk. *ἐμέ*, Lat. *meus*, OPrus. *mais*, Slav. *mojъ*.

Three stages of the word: PALb: **mei* > Mes: *imo* > Alb: *imi~(j)emi*.

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For words in PALb/Alb, please refer to the explanations and sources provided in the relevant word entries in Orel, 1998; 2000.

For a bibliography of words in Messapic, please refer to De Simone & Marchesini, 2002; Matzinger, 2019.

Others: Pokorny, 1955 [2007]; Lubotsky, 2021.

Commentary

This inscription, engraved on a skyphos, embodies a mourning character, serving as a specific lament for a departed friend. This form of lamentation distinguishes itself in the funerary discourse, occasionally expanding into more narrative inscriptions but always conveying the tone of grief for the deceased.

Regarding *i/hi*, although it has often been considered primarily as a genitive ending (Deecke, 1881; Frank, 1933; De Simone, 1992; Prosdocimi, 2006), it appears to be more versatile, functioning beyond a genitive role in certain cases. *Ihi* emerges as a paradigm of melismatic mourning interjection, representing the phenomenon of iso singing-mourning, later qualified into “iso-polyphony”. Consequently, *ihi* is indicative of the bereavement genre and is still found in the modern Albanian tradition, known as *iso*, marking a distinctive feature of iso-polyphony.

One might hypothesise that *i/hi*, initially, had its own meaning as a root, possibly akin to Lubotsky’s interpretation. He explains the Sanskrit root *hi-* as “to impel, hurl; to injure, harm”, and *hīd-* as “to make somebody angry” (2021, pp. 227–235).

2.2 MLM 5 Bal: Reading & Reconstruction

MLM 5 Bal	century III BC	(p. 94)
Item	traohanθihi	
Segmentation	trahan/θi/hi	
Mes. > CALb.	trahanē ty-hi	
Stand. Alb.	trahanē ty-hi	
English	<i>trahana</i> /sort of food/ for you- <i>hi</i>	

traohan/ti~trohan/θes (n.) > *trahana*; *trohana* ‘sort of food’. It seems to generate its PALb form as a composite *tro-ha-* ‘a meal made from crumbs.’ Anatol. cognates: CLuw. *tarhuntiti-* and Hitt. ‘*tar-ḫu-un-ti-ti-a-aš* ‘a kind of food.’ Conversely, establishing semantic correspondences between *trohan/ti* and HLuw. *Tarhunt-*, *Tarhunza-* ‘Storm-god’ and Skt. *turḥati* ‘to overcome, to overpower,’ Av. *tauruuaiieiti* ‘to overcome,’ and PIE **terh₂-u-ti*, **trh₂-u-enti* proves challenging. Three stages of the word: PALb **troha-*? M: *trahan-* > Alb: *trahanē~trohanē*.

θi (pr.) > *ty*; *ti* ‘to you; you’. From PALb **tū* < PIE **tū*. The proto form has been rebuilt as **tei* or **tuei*. The first element of the diphthong is lost and PALb **yi* gave Alb. *i*. Cognates: Skt. *tū* Av. *tū*, Gk. *σύ*, Lat. *tū*, OIr. *tú*, OHG. *tū*, Slav. **ti* ‘you’.

The old attested form *tinē* has developed from the 1st pers. sing. *unē* ‘I,’ while the dative-accusative form *ty* comes from PALb **t(u)wā* < PIE *tuēm*. Huld reconstructs **ti* in PALb as a clear reflex of PIE **tu*.

Three stages of the word: PALb: **tū* > Mes: *ti~te* > Alb: *ti*.

Bibliography

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For a bibliography of words in Messapic, please refer to De Simone & Marchesini, 2002; Matzinger, 2019.

Others: Miklosich, 1870; Meyer, 1891; Huld, 1984; Tischler, 2016.

Commentary

The term appears familiar in Messapic > Early Albanian but its first recorded written usage dates back to the end of the XIXth century, documented by H. Z. Kamberi. Although it seems homophonic to the word *tershane* “oats” and reminds us of cereal needing three months to ripen (Meyer, 1891), it is much more a word that refers directly to the products of grain, as the sepulchral context of the inscriptions will show. Although some have suggested that this food originated from the Ottoman Empire, Messapian evidence sheds light on its earlier existence. Derived from the word *trohë* “crumb,” *trahana* has a cognate in Bulg. **troxa* (Miklosich, 1870, p. 35; Meyer, 1891, p. 437), but not in other modern languages of the region. It appears that Albanian has preserved its early meaning, similar to Hitt and Luw.

Trahana, *trohana* or *terhana*, is likely the oldest known food or dish in Albanian cuisine (a ground meal made from grain or flour), and it is mentioned several times in inscriptions. *Trahana* is commonly considered a staple food, a grain product that can be prepared quickly, often by boiling flour in butter or meat sauce. It remains popular in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia.

While the word appears to be familiar in Messapic and Early Albanian, its first recorded written form dates back to the end of the 19th century, credited to H. Z. Kamberi. Despite its homophony with the word *tërshana* “oats” and evoking the idea of cereal needing three months to ripen (Meyer, 1891), *trahana* is more directly associated with grain products, as indicated by the sepulchral context of the inscriptions.

2.3 MLM 8 Car: Reading & Reconstruction

MLM 8 Car	century III BC	(p. 185)
Item	valdoaosakello	
Segmentation	val do aosa kel lo	
Mes. > CALb.	val to Aosa kel lo	
Stand. Alb.	valë /të/ Vjose ke lënë	
English	waves of Vjosa/Aosa/ you’ve left	

val (n.) > *valë* ‘waves’. From PALb **walā* < PIE **uel-* ‘wave’. The word *valle* ‘dance’ is also etymologically linked to the root of the word *valë* ‘wave’. Typically, PALb **l* > Mes & Alb *ll*. Also, consider a possible IE root **bal-*, **balbal-* ‘flow/stream, sway’. Cognates: ON *alda* ‘wave’, OHG *wella* ‘flow, stream’, Lith. *vilnis* ‘wave’; Hitt. *ṽalliyatar*, *ṽalliyann-* ‘chant, song or dance accompanying prayer, ritual’, Skr. *balbalīti* ‘to move around’, Gk. βαλλίζω ‘to dance’, Lat. *ballāre* ‘to dance’. Regarding the connection with ‘wave’ see PIE **wallijō-* ‘flow, source, well’.

Three stages of the word: PALb: **walā* > Mes: *val* > Alb: *walë*.

do (prep.) > *të*, *te* ‘of; to’. Also related to archaic Alb *tek dhe tek* < PALb **tai ku* < IE **toi* ‘to’. The old form *deri* < PALb **deur(e)i* is also possible. Cognates: Lith. *aure*, Av. *avara*, Slav. **dori* ‘to’.

Three stages of the word: PALb: **deur* > Mes: *do* > Alb: *te~të*.

aosa (n.) > the ancient name of Vjosa, river in Albania.

ke (v.) > *ke* ‘(you) have’. From PALb **kapmi*, which is an athematic verb based on IE **kap-* ‘to seize, to grasp’. Unvoiced IE **k~kh* gave PALb **k* > Alb *k*. Also, all clusters consisting of an occlusive followed by PALb **m* developed into Alb *m*. Cognates: Lat. *capiō*, Got. *haban* ‘to have’.

Three stages of the word: PALb: **kapmi* > Mes: *ke* > Alb: *ka? ke*.

lo~la (v.) > *la~lë* ‘to let; to leave’. It appears also in the forms: *las*; *laono*; *lasb*; *lazes*. In these forms, aside from graphic alternation, the shift between *s:z* indicates variations in verb tenses. Originating from PALb **laidna*, which supersedes the more archaic form **laida*; the evolution of IE **l* resulted in PALb **l*, while *-a* originated from the PALb diphthong *ai*, with occasional loss of **n*. Cognates: Hitt. *lā-i* ‘to let; to leave’, Lith. *lėisti*, Latv. *laīst*, Goth. *letan* ‘to let’ < IE **leid-*. Additionally, it traces back to PALb **laide*, aligning with the Baltic particle of optative and permissive: Lith. *laī*, Latv. *lāi*, OPrus *lai*.

Three stages of the word: PALb: **laida* > Mes: *la-* > Alb: *la~lë*.

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For a bibliography of words in Messapic, please refer to De Simone & Marchesini, 2002; Matzinger, 2019.

Commentary

The inscription’s tone embodies lofty and reverential vocabulary, The inscription’s tone embodies a lofty and reverential vocabulary, characteristic of the solemnity found in funerary discourse. It is crafted with a hymnal quality, serving as a poignant tribute to the departed. The metaphorical use of *val* “waves” to symbolise significant accomplishments resonates harmoniously within the sepulchral context.

Vjosa (Gk: Αώος, Aoös) meanders through the region of Epirus, likely traversing territories once inhabited by the early Messapians. Originating in close proximity to

Ioannina, Greece, this river gracefully courses its way to Vlora, Albania. It is crafted with a hymnal quality, serving as a poignant tribute to the departed. The metaphorical use of *val* “waves” to symbolise significant accomplishments resonates harmoniously within the sepulchral context.

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2.4 MLM 4 Ur: Reading & Reconstruction

MLM 4 Ur	century III BC (442)	(p. 185)
Item	diθehaihi	
Segmentation	diθe haihi	
Mes. > CALb.	ditë haji	
Stand. Alb.	ditë hajeje /dita e hajes/	
English	day of food /day of offerings/	

diθ/e (n.) > ditë ‘day’. From PALb. **dītā*. The *i*-root exemplifies a situation where **ī* had remained unchanged in PALb and was also retained in Alb., akin to the persistent unvoiced PIE **t*, preserved in PALb **t* > Alb. *t*. Cognates: Skt. *dīti* ‘shining, brightness,’ Gmc. **īdiz* ‘time,’ OHG *zīt*, OE *tīd*.

Three stages of the word: PALb: **dītā* > Mes: *dite/a* > Alb: *dita*.

e > *e*; ‘ending; article’. It can serve as the ending of *diθ/e* or as a genitive article of *hai-* ‘of food,’ as evidenced by its appearance in Messapic.

haihi > *e* *hajit~e hajes* ‘of food/eating; to eat’. It originates from PALb **ed-(sk)a* derived from PIE **ed-*. Albanian exhibits accentual archaism with a stressed thematic vowel in 1 sg. **edd* < PIE **edam*. Additionally, the regular transformations include pretonic **-d-* > *-h-*, *-θ-*, as well as apheresis. Cognates: Gk. *xaivo* ‘to yawn, to gape,’ Skt. *khddati* ‘to eat, to devour,’ *ghas-* ‘to eat,’ *aiś / iśś-* ‘mouth,’ Arm. *eker* ‘ate,’ Lat. *avere* ‘to enjoy, to be well,’ Tokh A, B *s’wa-* ‘to eat’ < from IE **(s)khed-*. At the same time, the *nti*-participle *ngrënë/ngranë* is derived from PIE **eer(a)-* ‘to swallow’; Cf. with PIE cognates: Skt. *as-*, Av. *āh-*, Lat. *ös*, OIr. *á* ‘mouth’; IE **h₁ed-* ‘eat’ and PIE **h₁eh₃-es-*.

Three stages of the word: PALb: **ed-(sk)a* > Mes: *ha-* > Alb: *ha*.

Bibliography

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For a bibliography of words in Messapic, please refer to De Simone & Marchesini, 2002; Matzinger, 2019.

Commentary

This inscription is a typical votive example, conveyed through ritualistic discourse, and details deeds linked to offerings made on a significant day (possibly an anniversary) in memory of the deceased.

The interjection/ending *i/hi* in the inscriptions of *Ur* (Uria/Oria) is notably uncommon. In this specific instance, *i/hi* can indeed be considered a genitive ending, as often emphasised, even though the form of the lemma *hai* “to eat; food” may contain *-hi* within its thematic or inflective structure beyond a specific connection to the genitive.

Conclusion

The four inscriptions discussed exemplify the typical length of Messapic inscriptions, with three notably longer than average length. Nevertheless, all maintain a consistent funerary tone, incorporating specific narrative elements.

Unfolding as typical *sepulchral stories*, these inscriptions maintain their votive essence within the ritualistic context at the grave of the deceased. They convey details about offerings, food, rituals, and the characters of the deceased individuals, incorporating mini-storytelling elements – all within the sepulchral context.

Extending beyond typical funerary inscriptions in the Greco-Roman world, these inscriptions showcase a rich vocabulary imbued with a lamenting tone, illustrating the formation of the funerary discourse, exemplified best by *gjama* “lamenting, mourning,” a characteristic that will also be prevalent in Albanian tradition (Kondi, 2012). They encompass integral components of a votive discourse, preserving their poetic essence within the syncretic discursive context of life and death. Situated between mourning and admiration, rooted in sepulchral, votive, and procession culture, these inscriptions serve as *evidence* of the worldviews of the buried and the grief of their living loved ones. An essential aspect of the funerary character of these inscriptions is the dialogic form that pervades almost the entire discourse.

Contrasting with earlier assumptions that these inscriptions primarily listed names with few verbs, the examples here demonstrate a substantial use of verbs. The longer inscriptions amplify the number of verbs, indicating that, in Messapic inscriptions, the verbal system competes with the nominal system in both vocabulary and morpho-syntactic function. Consequently, the Messapian language, concealed for centuries by the challenges of *scriptio continua* text, reveals its complexity in vocabulary and grammar.

The evident Indo-European language background, coupled with its Proto-Albanian/Illyrian derivatives, are profoundly represented in Messapic inscriptions, suggesting a kind of *black discourse*. This linguistic richness underscores Messapic’s endurance in the hinterland of Illyricum, preserved for millennia primarily as an oral culture. Challenging the notion of Messapic as an *extinct* language, it aligns remarkably with classical Albanian. This alignment, within the context, opens a new horizon for the interpretation of Messapic epigraphy and its genuine character as a *black* funerary discourse.

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