

THE VALORIZATION OF DAMASTION TOPONYM IN MONTENEGRO AND KOSOVO WITHIN THE BALKAN CONTEXT: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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Abstract: The aim of the research is a critical analysis and interpretation of the functional role of Damastion and its derivatives, Dimosti and Dimiskin most as bearers of cultural memory and their potential as cultural resources in the context of the international cultural environment and sustainable tourism development. The study considers the multilingual context, including Albanian and South Slavic linguistic influences, which shape the interpretation and valorization of the Damastion toponym. The methodology of this study is based on an interdisciplinary approach, combining qualitative analyses of linguistic, archaeological, historical, and cultural sources with quantitative surveys carried out in the Rozaje (Montenegro) and surrounding localities, drawing on qualitative data from the neighbouring country of Kosovo. The data collected in this study were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods, such as chi-square tests, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and t-tests, to comprehensively evaluate the relationship between respondents' attitudes and demographic characteristics. The analysis shows that the toponyms examined go beyond mere linguistic artifacts and constitute a powerful tool for preserving cultural memory and creating collective identity. In this context, it becomes a bridge between the cultural and economic landscapes – a means of reaffirming local and regional identities, but also serves as the basis for developing sustainable models of tourism, cultural economy, and territorial branding. Thus, geographical names not only preserve memory but also stimulate contemporary processes of economic and cultural revitalization of the space. Their valorization opens up new opportunities for the development of international cultural relations, diplomacy, and tourism, as well as for the promotion of sustainable socio-economic development in Montenegro, Kosovo, and the wider Balkan region. The research highlights the need for further empirical evaluation of toponyms in the context of cultural marketing and the development of international tourism, particularly in the Balkans, where the spatial and symbolic dimensions of heritage hold high strategic value.

Keywords: Toponymy, Damastion, Montenegro, Kosovo, Balkan, cultural heritage, cultural tourism, transnational cultural context, cultural diplomacy

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INTRODUCTION

Toponymy, the science of place names, is based on the study of their etymology, meaning, and evolution over the centuries. This branch of onomastics allows the study of names of inhabited places - cities, villages, hamlets, and remote areas – called macrotoponyms, as well as names of places associated with relief, forests, and communication routes – called microtoponyms. However, although place names are linguistic in nature, recent research has shown that they are deeply rooted in the work of semioticians and linguists (Azaryahu, 1996; Kadmon, 2000). They reflect processes of historical memorialization, symbolic power, and cultural appropriation, which makes toponyms go beyond a mere cartographic function and become semiotic resources of crucial importance for the analysis of the cultural landscape.

Within this analytical framework, geoheritage and geotourism studies further highlight the importance of spatially grounded approaches to landscape interpretation, particularly through geosite assessment and mapping methodologies applied in regional development contexts (Zhyrnov et al., 2023). This underscores the broader relevance of toponyms as culturally embedded spatial markers with implications for socio-economic development and spatial processes.

In regions such as the Balkan Peninsula – a geopolitically and culturally multilayered space marked by a long continuum of migrations, conquest policies, and linguistic contacts – toponymy reveals important layers of collective memory and cultural transformations (Paasi, 2003). This area, where various civilizational influences have changed over the centuries, is fertile ground for the analysis of linguistic stratification in toponymy, where ancient, Slavic, oriental, and modern elements intertwine into complex identity matrices. In this context, the location of the ancient city of *Damastion*

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becomes a relevant research case. According to Sokolovska, although archaeological and historiographical literature attests to *Damastion* as an important mining and numismatic center since classical antiquity (2007), its precise location remains a subject of scientific controversy. Questions such as the linguistic meaning of place names, their significance to the peoples of the Balkans, and their economic impact on the development of the region are the subject of much debate.

In the absence of physical evidence, linguistic and onomastic interpretations are considered the best means of identifying historical locations, with toponymy as the most important source of information. This interpretation is often based on detailed studies of modern place names, which also retain phonetic, morphological, and semantic features of archaeological remains. Recent research on digital gazetteer-based toponymic datasets indicates that spatial data derived from OpenStreetMap and comparable platforms may exhibit variability in representational accuracy in multilingual contexts, affecting the reliability of spatial reconstruction (Ursini & Samo, 2025).

For example, *Dimosti* and *Dimiskin most* are frequently cited as names given to Damastion, as they are considered to be closely related to this place (Džogović, 2008). Another interpretation is that the mentioned names are not only phonetically preserved versions of the original place names but also links to the surrounding natural and cultural environment, thereby revealing the past, providing knowledge of the topography, and clarifying the place's cultural significance. Contemporary geospatial and geotourism-oriented approaches further demonstrate that geosite identification and spatial modeling techniques can help evaluate potential cultural and geographical markers in historically ambiguous landscapes, particularly in regional development and tourism contexts (Naimi et al., 2024). In this regard, such spatial methodologies provide a foundational analytical framework that is further extended through cultural and policy-oriented interpretations of toponyms within broader valorization processes.

Within cultural tourism and spatial valorization frameworks, toponyms are understood not only as linguistic traces of the past but also as strategic elements of cultural capital that can be used in the development of identity-based tourism practices, cultural diplomacy, and cross-border cooperation (Anholt, 2007; Richards, 2018; Hosagrahar, 2017; Parowicz, 2025). Through this prism, toponyms are seen as symbolic bridges between the past and the present, between local narratives and global development policies. According to Bianchini & Parkinson (1993) and UNESCO (2003), this leads to research on toponyms in the discourse on international tourism as a tool for cultural valorization and economic development, in line with approaches that emphasize the importance of intangible heritage for sustainable models of regional branding and participatory cultural policy. This study, therefore, seeks to integrate linguistic, cultural, and developmental approaches in order to reconstruct the role of toponyms as dynamic cultural resources at the intersection of language, identity, and the international visibility of territorial space. This paper applies an interdisciplinary methodological approach that combines linguistic analysis, historical-archaeological methods, and field survey research.

The use of qualitative and quantitative methods enables the synthesis of theoretical and empirical insights, providing a broader basis for understanding the potential of valorizing toponyms as cultural and developmental-economic resources, with an emphasis on their importance in international cultural cooperation and cross-border networking.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The primary objective of this research is to critically and interdisciplinarily examine the role of the ancient toponym Damastion and its contemporary reflections (*Dimosti* and *Dimiskin most*) as carriers of cultural memory, identity, and economic potential, and to evaluate their applicability as strategic resources for sustainable regional development and international cultural diplomacy. In particular, the study focuses on the onomastic-linguistic interpretation of these toponyms, which illustrate the continuity and transformation of space through linguistic and cultural practices.

Specific research objectives:

- Studying the feasibility of functionalizing local toponyms in the formation of cultural policy and international strategies for promoting tourist destinations.
- Analyzing the potential for valorizing toponyms within sustainable models of cultural tourism and strengthening international cultural cooperation;
- Considering the role of toponyms as a source of cultural identity, symbolic capital, and elements of territorial branding in the global cultural and economic context.
- Developing guidelines for integrating linguistic and cultural knowledge into development and communication strategies for cultural marketing and regional planning.

This interdisciplinary approach seeks to provide a multidimensional and scientifically grounded view of the potential of toponyms as drivers of cultural, social, and economic development, with an emphasis on their role in the sustainable development of the region and the strengthening of tourism and international cultural diplomacy.

Situating *Damastion* and its contemporary reflections, *Dimosti* and *Dimiskin most*, within this discourse allows for a critical interdisciplinary approach combining linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic perspectives, offering guidelines for sustainable regional development and the enhancement of international cultural diplomacy.

Recent research emphasizes the strategic role of toponyms as carriers of cultural memory, identity, and economic potential in tourism development. Studies published from 2018 to 2025 (Richards, 2018; Zhou et al., 2025; Nasritdinov, 2025; Geçikli et al., 2024; Vuksanović et al., 2025) show that integrating local place names into regional branding and sustainable cultural tourism can create symbolic capital and reinforce territorial identity.

At the same time, the literature highlights limitations such as insufficient community engagement, inconsistent documentation of local heritage, and challenges in translating linguistic and cultural significance into concrete economic strategies. Most existing studies predominantly address macro-level frameworks of cultural tourism and place branding,

while comparatively little attention is paid to micro-regional, historically layered toponyms as active agents of cultural continuity and spatial identity – an analytical gap this research seeks to address.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Using an interdisciplinary approach that integrates insights from onomastics, linguistics, cultural studies, tourism, and business communication, this paper analyzes toponyms as cultural products and place-making strategies in international tourism. The primary research method involves a comparative onomastic-linguistic analysis of the toponyms *Damastion*, *Dimosti*, and *Dimiskin most* based on relevant linguistic, historiographical, archaeological, and numismatic sources (Džogović, 2008; Sokolovska, 2007). This study uses methods designed to explain the cultural value of specific place names, including etymological and morphological deconstruction, identification of linguistic interference, and contextualization of place names within regional identity. By systematically comparing historical and contemporary sources, these methods reveal the semantic evolution and structural changes of place names, thereby demonstrating their diachronic development. This analysis, grounded in a theoretical framework, further integrates models of cultural geography, spatial branding, and sustainable development and considers the potential of cultural valorization of toponyms in international promotion and cross-border cooperation strategies (Hosagrahar, 2017; UNESCO, 2003).

To obtain a better understanding of the region, more than 200 people, consisting of residents, tourists, and other visitors, participated in the survey conducted in *Rozaje* during June and July 2025. The main aim was to get an idea of the respondents' perceptions in regard to the significance and worth of place names and their contribution to the establishment of cultural identity and cultural tourism development.

The survey included structured questions that focused on the language usage patterns of place names, their links to identity, and perceptions of the cultural value of place names and their potential for integration into tourism.

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including the χ^2 test, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and t-test. This allowed for a systematic and detailed examination of the relationship between perceptions and demographic variables.

This integrated methodological approach provides comprehensive insight into the semantic, symbolic, and developmental value of toponyms as a key cultural and development-economic resource, with special emphasis on their role in international cultural diplomacy and regional cross-border cooperation.

Although the generalizability of the findings may be limited due to the size and composition of the sample, this study provides insight into local stories and perspectives. It is recommended to carry out further research to expand the sample to multilingual communities, and to include participatory and digital methods in the analysis of toponyms.

Historical-Geographical and Cultural Context of Damastion And Surroundings

Ancient sources mention *Damastion* as an important silver and lead mining center in the Illyrian area, serving a clear economic function. The area around *Rozaje* and the western part of Kosovo is included in the spatial framework of *Damastion*, where mining was focused on areas with rich deposits of valuable minerals. Numerous archaeological discoveries and coin studies confirm this (Sokolovska, 2007). *Damastion's* link to the Balkan trade network, which reached as far as the Adriatic Sea, allowed for a lively exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural elements. This evidence shows how complex the economic and cultural ties were in this region. These trade routes were essential for the growth of the area during ancient times, and *Damastion* played a significant role as a key location in this process. Archaeological research indicates a continuous process of settlement and cultural change in this area during different historical periods. The preservation of local traditions and cultural patterns contributes to understanding the complexity of the cultural heritage, combining influences from different civilizations, including Illyrian, Greek, and Roman layers.

Toponyms such as *Damastion* and *Dimosti* hold a strong cultural meaning and act as keepers of the shared memories of local communities. They indicate a feeling of connection to a place and a link to the past, acting as important stories that help communities share their history and values, as manifested through oral tradition, legends, and rituals related to particular localities, confirming the importance of toponymy as a complex cultural phenomenon (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011; Connerton, 1989). Numismatic research once again confirms the importance of *Damastion* in the Kopaonik area and its surroundings. Analysis of the silver coin scatter shows intensive mining and commercial activity in the 4th century BC, confirming the economic influence of the region in antiquity and its connection to important trade routes (Sokolowska, 2007). This layered approach to the historical, geographical, and cultural context of *Damastion* enables a deeper understanding of its role as a significant factor in regional development, as well as a cultural symbol that reflects the identity narratives and social memory of local communities.

Linguistic and Cultural Dimension of Toponymy in the Constitution of Collective Identity in the Balkans

Place names are not simply points on Earth. They are rich in meaning, symbolizing different human thoughts, social interactions, historical events, and cultural practices. From a geographical perspective, toponymy is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that necessarily includes linguistic, historical, cultural, and political dimensions. In the Balkans, with its complex and turbulent history, place names of local communities play a dual role: they indicate a geographical location and at the same time connote important aspects of the community's identity and culture.

The linguistic dimension of place names is clearly visible in the languages in which they are created and passed down, reflecting the complex history and undercurrents of cultural exchange in the Balkans. In this context, historical linguistics reveal that place names in the region bear the imprint of Illyrian, Greek, Latin, Slavic, and Turkish, demonstrating the interaction and evolution of languages over a long period of history. Each place name has a multi-

layered semantic structure, and its meaning and pronunciation have changed over time due to political domination, migration, and acculturation (Kadmon, 2000). In the Balkans, where identities are often constructed politically and in tension with other identities, place names play an important role in the ethnolinguistic definition of space.

The change and standardization of place names reflect national politics and cultural diplomacy and aim to express or reinterpret a sense of belonging to a particular people or nation. For example, many places changed their names in the years following the dissolution of Yugoslavia to capture new political and cultural narratives. Toponymy reflects the diversity of human-nature relationships, encompassing and conveying important cultural information. The toponymic cultural landscape (TCL) fully embodies the cultural connotations and landscape meanings of place names reflecting diverse factors such as regional culture, historical memory, and social values (Zhou et al., 2025). Myths, stories, and actual events are usually linked to the past, and the latter evokes a sense of belonging and shared identity (Azaryahu & Kook, 2002). Therefore, toponymies are a kind of cultural relic created by people, their memories, and culture. In the Balkans, place names are deeply connected to identity due to the region's chaotic history and ethnic diversity. Nora wrote in 1989 that place names are often recognized as "places of memory," places of great significance where the collective memory of a community is preserved over time and passed down from generation to generation. A good example of a place name that shows how identity is formed in complex ways is *Damastion*. This name is used as a case study in this work and represents the ancient cultural influences connected to the Illyrians and traditional Balkan cultures.

The political dimension of toponymy is also reflected in the fact that place names serve as instruments in defining borders, affirming statehood, and promoting cultural diplomacy (Rose-Redwood et al., 2009). Historically, toponyms in the Balkans have been changed or adapted in accordance with ethnic and national interests to consolidate the territorial sovereignty and cultural identity of communities (Vuolteenaho & Berg, 2009).

The modern international tourism landscape considers the valorization of place names as an element of cultural marketing and regional development, with a new and important dimension. In addition to their authenticity and branding, place names are inseparable from history and culture, thus becoming a strategic resource for tourism and international cooperation (Harrison, 2013; Hosagrahar, 2017). The case of *Damastion* illustrates the interaction between linguistic and cultural narratives, leading to the formation of regional identities and the production of similar cultural goods. Therefore, the study of Balkan languages represents not only a means of historical localization, but also a path to cultural sustainability, regional and international cultural cooperation.

Case Study Damastion: Linguistic, Identity and Developmental Aspects

Our knowledge of the toponym *Damastion* comes from the writings of classical authors, but its interpretation is by no means simple. Rather, this presents a highly complex situation, with a complex web of meanings, including the linguistic, the identity-related, and the developmental. The layered valorization of the toponym, comprising not only archaeological and numismatic value but also cultural-historical and symbolic significance, makes it an excellent case study for analyzing the contribution of place names in the shaping of collective memory and the identification of people with certain spaces.

Among other ancient writers, Strabo and Pseudo-Skymnos noted that *Damastion* was an important silver mining area whose output was the best in the world. However, the exact location of the mine is still not determined, and Wilkes (1996) confirms this view. Evidence from coinage, especially silver coins bearing the inscription ΔΑΜΑΣΤΙΝΩΝ, shows that the city was economically important and had its own currency system, which also reflects a high level of social and administrative organization. Research by Sokolovska (2007) suggests a possible location of *Damastion* in the area of present-day southern Serbia, specifically in the wider Kopaonik region, based on the distribution of numismatic finds and evidence of ancient mining activities. The linguistic aspect of the *Damastion* toponym further deepens the complexity of the case. In the works of Džogović (2008), an interdisciplinary approach is applied, which includes a morphological, phonetic, and etymological analysis of the toponym *Damastion* and its possible reflexes in local toponyms such as *Dimosti* and *Dimiskin most* in the area of *Rozaje*. The author suggests that phonetic and semantic transformations can be interpreted as the result of linguistic adaptation and substitution within the Slavic and Romance language layers, whereby the space is reflected through the linguistic sign. Particularly relevant to the present paper is his interpretation of the toponym *Dimiskin most* as a possible adaptation from the Greek phrase *di mixis* ("mixing, joining"), which reflects the natural confluence of the Ibar and Zupanica rivers, as well as the symbolism of cultural convergences.

In this sense, place names not only aid people's mobility but also serve as important indicators of collective memory. The theories and research findings of scholars such as Assmann (2011), Halbwachs (1992), and Connerton (1989) demonstrate that place names have an important influence in transmitting cultural meanings and passing on stories of identity to future generations. In the case of *Damastion*, local names carry symbolic meaning, helping the community express their origins, their position in the world today, and their emotional connection to their land. They are included in the narrative geography of space, where they become "places of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) in the sense expressed by Nora (1989), according to which specific spaces, symbols, or practices become bearers of collective memory and identity.

However, it is important to note certain methodological challenges and debates. The location of *Damastion*, while supported by coin findings, is still unclear because there has been no thorough archaeological evidence to confirm it definitively. Many sites in the Balkans have been suggested as potential places for this city, ranging from Albania and Macedonia to Sandzak [Eng. *Sanjak*] and Kopaonik – reflecting the fragmentation of archaeological and historical approaches (Papazoglu, 1978). On the other hand, linguistic links between *Damastion* and toponyms such as *Dimiskin most* and *Dimosti* remain for now in the domain of philologically informed hypotheses that call for further field, phonological and dialectological confirmation. Despite its limitations, the study of *Damastion* remains important for

studies of toponyms and culture, demonstrating that place names are not mere labels but active symbols laden with meaning. These place names gradually reveal the complex and sometimes confusing conditions under which people claim, lose, or change their identities, and in which cultural memories are preserved or forgotten. In this sense, *Damastion* is simultaneously a linguistic artifact, a cultural symbol, and a potential tourism development resource.

In development and political contexts, the valorization of toponyms like *Damastion* opens the way for integrating local cultural heritage into contemporary strategies of sustainable tourism and cultural diplomacy. As Hosagrahar (2017) argues, environmental indicators, such as place names, can form the basis for authentic tourism initiatives that encourage local development without compromising cultural diversity. Considering the transversal symbolism of *Damastion* – between archaeological fact and mythical identity – its valorization has the potential to unite scientific, educational, and economic interests. Therefore, *Damastion* is not only an object of scientific reconstruction, but also a representative example of how a toponym can function as a multi-layered symbol of the cultural topography of the Balkans. Its analysis contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of space as a discursively formed entity in which history, language, collective memory, and developmental aspirations are intertwined. Todorova (1997) suggests that Balkan spaces are often shaped by symbolic geography and narratives of identity, where space functions as a sign (Balkanism) that reflects and produces cultural understandings of the region. In this context, toponyms such as *Damastion* can be interpreted as cultural markers that link local spaces with universal symbolic meanings. Such toponyms become resources for legitimizing territorial identity, but also instruments within local strategies of cultural development (Kohl et al., 2013).

Synergy of Linguistic and Economic Approaches in the Valorization of Toponyms

Place names are linguistic units with high semiotic density, and they work at various levels of meaning – phonological, semantic, etymological, and developmental – simultaneously. Their linguistic aspect makes it possible to examine the historicity of space through the study of linguistic layers and phonological changes (Kadmon, 2000; Tent & Blair, 2011). Conversely, the economic viewpoint underlines the importance of place names in local development and policy frameworks.

Different phonetic and grammatical forms of *Damastion* – like *Dimosti* and *Dimiskin most* – reveal not just linguistic diversity, but also the processes of identity and the cultural narratives that are told through these forms.

At the same time, such diversity can cause confusion and incorrect interpretations, which are the difficulties for the development and execution of cultural projects and place-branding tactics. In an economic sense, toponyms like *Damastion* can be used in cultural practices, place branding, and the creation of so-called memory spaces, which are especially important in regions with a rich, layered history and limited material resources. The authors emphasize that integrating linguistic knowledge into contemporary economic development models has several effects. In particular, it preserves linguistic and cultural diversity, strengthens local and regional identities, encourages cultural tourism, and positions localities on the European cultural map. Moreover, this approach avoids reducing place names to commodities and contextualizes them as valuable resources for opportunities such as sustainable cultural heritage and tourism.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH RESULTS

Sample structure

Among 200 participants, the survey was distributed to 120 residents of *Rozaje* and nearby areas, and the other 80 were categorized as tourists or visitors. Four age groups were represented: 18–29 years, 30–44 years, 45–60 years, and 60 years and older, and the most populous age group was 30–44 years old (Table 1). The gender structure was balanced (Table 2), while the educational profiles covered all levels of education, from primary to postgraduate (Table 3). To make sure that the key socio-demographic groups were represented, the sample was chosen via a stratified random sampling method. But the spatial concentration of the sample in *Rozaje* might cause the sample to have limited representativeness for the whole Balkan area. As a result, it is necessary to be very careful when making inferences based on the results and when planning future comparative studies. Also, the viewpoints of the locals and the visitors, which were considered only to an extent, are important factors in a more detailed segmented analysis. In fact, this arises because different associations with a location can significantly alter the comprehension of cultural meanings. In addition, future research should consider not only socio-demographic aspects but also others, such as economic status and duration of stay, in order to provide a more thorough and elaborate analysis.

Table 1. Age distribution of respondents

Age group	Number of respondents
18–29	40
30–44	60
45–60	50
60+	50

Table 2. Gender structure of respondents

Gender	Number of respondents
Male	100
Female	100

Source: Data analysis by the authors, 2025)

Table 3. Educational profile of respondents

Education level	Number of respondents
Elementary	20
Secondary	90
Higher	60
Postgraduate	30

Perception of the cultural value of toponyms

The survey results show that 80% of the respondents believe that local place names are important carriers of cultural values, and another 12% of the respondents partially agree with this statement. A neutral or negative attitude is expressed by 8% of respondents (Figure 1). Toponyms such as "*Demosti*" and "*Dimiskin most*" are used by 65% of the respondents in everyday conversations, while 20% use them sometimes (Figure 2). In addition, 70% believe that toponyms contribute to the preservation of community identity (Figure 3).

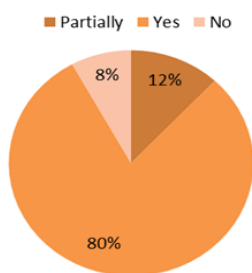


Figure 1. Perception of the cultural value of toponyms (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

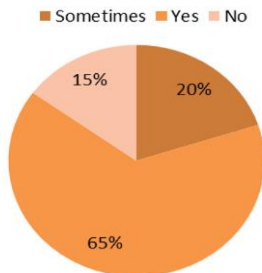


Figure 2. Everyday use of toponyms in speech (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

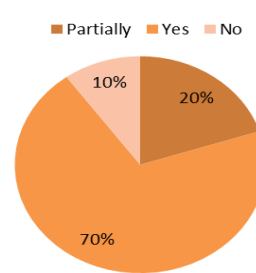


Figure 3. The role of toponyms in preserving identity (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

The conclusion is backed by the findings that toponyms are the most prominent signs of both the intangible cultural heritage and the identity of people as a whole. The opinions indicated through the neutral and negative comments are a reflection of the dynamics that are shaped by various factors such as education, participation in society, and the position of the local or tourist competitors. It is through this lens that the work of Basso (1996) is to be seen, which calls for a very detailed analysis of the data in order to not only detect but also understand the exact social and linguistic transformations occurring in the regions affected by development and migration, and the way they shape local identities. The irregular toponym use may reflect changes in linguistic customs and social association with traditional names, which merits further interpretive attention. Similar patterns of linguistic and symbolic transformation have been confirmed in regional research on toponymic practice and narrative space (Džogović, 2008; Sokolovska, 2007; Simunović, 2013), which additionally confirms the analytical relevance of the observed phenomena.

Toponyms and cultural tourism

A high proportion of participants (75%) believe in the functional integration of toponyms in the development of cultural tourism. In comparison, 68% recognize their potential in international cultural projects and cross-border cooperation (Figures 4 and 5). The connection of toponyms with local history was highlighted as "very important" by 82% of respondents (Table 4). The interrelationships identified by the authors are largely consistent with Richards' (2018) argument that places are not just points on the Earth's surface, but also places that politically and culturally represent entire regions. Yet, this approach's solid theoretical foundation can have unintended side effects in practice. When tourism is used as a lever for cultural diplomacy, it can lead to tourist dissatisfaction and social conflict.

When local stories are commercialized or reinterpreted according to market needs, the authenticity of cultural expressions can diminish, leading to what Timothy (2011) describes as the erosion of local representation in the tourism system. Furthermore, this process can contribute to cultural homogenization, where specific place identities are replaced by general, tourist-oriented forms of "local culture".

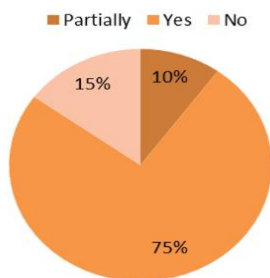


Figure 4. Toponyms and cultural tourism

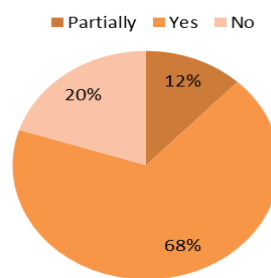


Figure 5. Toponyms and cross-border projects

(Source: Authors' own elaboration)

In this way, sustainable solutions should not only consider the verbal engagement of local communities, but also the implementation of a fully integrated community-based cultural tourism model embedded in a community-based approach. The latter includes not only transparent governance structures, but also benefit sharing and ongoing dialogue between cultural preservation and economic development. Only through these means can tourism function as both a driver of regional identity and a facilitator of cultural diplomacy – without compromising the integrity or autonomy of local communities.

Table 4. The bond between toponyms and local history (Source: Data analysis by the authors, 2025)

The bond between toponyms and local history	Percentage
Very important	82
Important	12
Less important	6

Valorization and development potentials

Toponyms are recognized as key elements of regional branding – 78% of participants consider that they contribute to the recognition of the destination. In comparison, 85% emphasize the need for more intensive promotion of narratives

and meanings related to place names (Figures 6 and 7). Furthermore, 80% support their integration into the development strategies of cultural tourism and the strengthening of local identity (Figure 8).

This position is in line with theories of "place branding" that emphasize cultural capital as the basis of destination competitiveness (Anholt, 2010). Nevertheless, it is very important to point out that using local culture for instrumental purposes, and thereby losing its real significance, can also lead to social exclusion (Bourdieu, 1986). At the same time, in the case of place name promotion, these principles should always be followed: involvement, ethical awareness, and fairness, requiring that local communities are actually part of the creation of cultural policies and tourism plans. This will be the only way to win long-term sustainability for the cultural and economic benefits. It is recommended to establish formal platforms for the involvement of communities in the development and promotion of cultural routes based on toponyms, as well as educational programs that raise awareness of intangible heritage among young people.

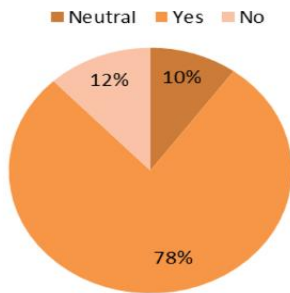


Figure 6. Toponyms and regional branding (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

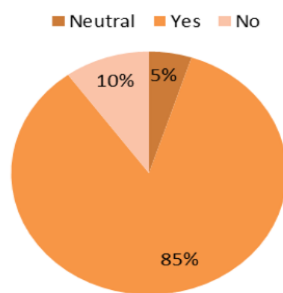


Figure 7. Promotion of the meaning of toponyms (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

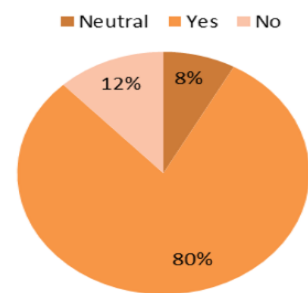


Figure 8. The role of toponyms in development strategies (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

Intangible heritage and participation

Open questions showed that 60% of participants took part in sharing personal stories and legends related to toponyms (Table 5). Regarding involvement in the thematic tours, 55% of the respondents answered affirmatively, and 25% more showed their willingness to participate (Figure 9). These results underline the importance of intangible heritage in promoting social cohesion and the construction of collective identity (Smith, 2006; Putnam, 2000). A critical stance requires examining the various forms of participation in terms of their inclusiveness and institutionalization, and also verifying whether cultural content is available to all social groups, without discrimination. Furthermore, the growing popularity of themed tours is a sign of current developments in experiential and participatory tourism, while also raising the question of access and the long-term sustainability of these initiatives.

Table 5. Engagement in story and legend sharing (Source: Data analysis by the authors, 2025)

Engagement in story and legend sharing	%
Yes	60
No	40

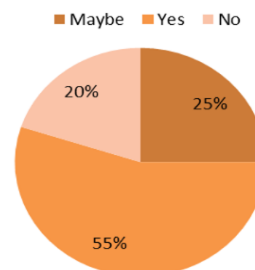


Figure 9. Eagerness to take part in tours (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

Concluding reflection

The way people see the cultural importance of place names is closely linked to their positive views on how these names play a role in tourism and in the planning of regional growth. But these connections are not simple – they are multifaceted and complex, needing a careful, thoughtful, and multi-disciplinary approach that considers the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of how these names are valued. It is critical to understand the special potential of the toponyms *Damastion*, *Dimosti*, and *Dimiskin most* as important parts of cultural heritage.

By properly valuing these names, they can greatly help build regional identity, support economic growth, and improve international cultural relations. Sustainable growth needs to be driven by a smooth integration of economic interests, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the active involvement of local communities through transparent governance mechanisms and participatory processes. In addition, research should become a constant, uninterrupted process that by its very nature signals the changing patterns and developments of perceptions, introducing new social, cultural, and economic factors. This is to say that the cultural appreciation of toponymy would be linked to broader diplomatic and development strategies, which would in turn support the sustainable economic growth and the international cultural cooperation in the Balkans through more global cooperation in the future.

Inferential statistics: Demographic patterns of perception and valorization of cultural toponyms

This section uses inferential statistical methods to gain a more accurate understanding of respondents' perceptions regarding the cultural significance of place names and their contribution to the cultural tourism sector. The goal was to

find out if there were any statistically significant links between the respondents' opinions and crucial demographic factors, like age and gender, and their role in motivating willingness to be actively involved in cultural activities.

The χ^2 -test, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and t-test were used for the analysis, in order to quantify the relationships between the variables and enable their rigorous interpretation in the context of the valorization of cultural heritage and sustainable development of the region.

Chi-square analysis: The relationship between the perception of the cultural value of toponyms and the willingness to participate in thematic tours

The χ^2 -test was used to examine the relationship between the perception of the cultural significance of local toponyms and readiness to participate in thematic cultural tourism. Otherwise, non-parametric methods are usually the best choice for examining the connection between two nominal variables. The results indicate a statistically significant correlation ($\chi^2 = 16.3$; $df = 4$; $p = 0.003$), which shows that participants with a higher degree of appreciation for the cultural aspect of place names are significantly more likely to express their willingness to participate in the mentioned activities.

These findings confirm the role of cultural identity as a strong driver of participation in cultural tourism programs, which has important implications for the strategic planning of toponym valorization within cultural tourism.

Table 6. Chi-square analysis - Association between perception and willingness to participate (Source: Data analysis by the authors, 2025)

Willingness to participate	Yes	Partially	No / Uncertain	Total
Yes	120	15	5	140
Maybe	25	5	5	35
No	10	5	0	15
Total	155	25	10	190

ANOVA analysis: Age differences in the perception of the importance of the connection of toponyms with local history

To determine whether or not the association of place names with local history was viewed differently by the different age groups represented in the survey, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied. The outcome of the analysis revealed a difference among the groups that was statistically significant ($F(3,196) = 5.8$; $p = 0.001$). The difference was such that the older age groups gave a significantly higher value to this connection.

This outcome suggests that older generations possess a deeper understanding of toponymy as part of cultural heritage, which is crucial for creating cultural tourism initiatives that cater to various groups within the population.

Table 7. ANOVA analysis – Age group and perception of historical connection (Source: Data analysis by the authors, 2025)

Age group	N	Grade point average (1–4)	SD
18–29	40	3.4	0.6
30–44	60	3.7	0.5
45–60	50	3.8	0.4
60+	50	3.9	0.3

Table 8. T-test – Attitudes by gender on the promotion of the meaning of toponyms (Source: Data analysis by the authors, 2025)

Gender	Da (%)	Partially (%)	No (%)	Uncertain (%)
Male	65	20	10	5
Female	75	18	5	2

T-test: Gender differences in attitudes towards the promotion of meaning by toponyms

Using an independent samples t-test, attitude differences between men and women regarding the need for more intensive promotion of the meaning of toponyms were analyzed. The results indicate a significant difference ($t = -2.1$; $p = 0.037$), with women expressing significantly greater support for the cultural value of toponyms.

The findings of this research emphasize the importance of adopting a gender perspective in cultural and marketing strategies, as the combination of these two aspects results in the formation of a more inclusive and delicate framework for the protection and enjoyment of cultural heritage. Inferential statistical methods have demonstrated that the value of place names as culture differs a lot among different demographic groups. Women's perceptions are more distinct, showing that the cultural and tourist sectors need to come up with new adaptable strategies to the needs of these separated groups.

The results direct attention to a necessity for policy-making that sees the intersection of gender, culture, and tourism as powerful factors in determining local people's attitudes to, and participation in, that heritage. The findings also present a more profound demographic analytical insight into determinants of cultural perception, thus giving a solid empirical foundation for the establishment of toponym valorization tactics. These tactics could, in return, help to consolidate a region's cultural identity, keep tourism sustainable, and create a favorable environment for economic growth through new jobs as well as the establishment of local enterprises. Hence, the promotion of place names goes beyond their linguistic or symbolic meanings, being turned into a strategic instrument of sustainable development support. The process of toponymic valorization, when viewed from a broader perspective, is considered cultural diplomacy and a mechanism for global recognition. Furthermore, it serves to promote cultural exchange, strengthen diplomatic relations, and enhance the region's international presence. Therefore, integrating these advances into development planning is a significant step.

Toponymy in Contemporary Strategies of Cultural Diplomacy and Regional Development

International efforts and cultural policies today have begun to consider the study and use of place names or toponyms as very important factors in both symbolic and developmental assets. Marking spaces through language and culture, the promotion and standardization of toponyms are not only linguistic efforts but also forms of political communication that help support cultural diversity, mutual understanding between cultures, and the shared history of communities. In today's development schemes, toponyms are often regarded as a natural resource for projecting the identity of a region, mainly in the case of cultural tourism and experience-based economy areas. Symbolically, their value is based on their ability to convey complex narratives about space – including historical meanings, mythological lore, and cultural practices – thus increasing the attractiveness of destinations for domestic and foreign visitors (Richards, 2018).

Authentic and locally rooted toponyms thus become key elements of cultural marketing, contributing not only to tourist visibility but also to the cultural sustainability of the communities that inherit them.

The presence of toponymy in development and tourism strategies forms a bond between the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and economic growth. In Europe and the Balkans, this tactic is a means of uniting communities, enhancing their skills in local resource management, and nurturing cultural practices that are both sustainable and inclusive (UNESCO, 2003). Toponyms, therefore, act as tools that help maintain cultural identity while also bringing economic advantages, all while following the values of sustainability, diversity, and inclusiveness.

Looking more closely at toponymy, it functions as a center where ideas about belonging, ongoing traditions, and strength in the face of challenges come together. The places named by toponyms are not just simple locations on a map, but are built with meaning through language, carrying complex layers of significance (Azaryahu, 1996; Tuan, 1977; Massey, 1994). These meanings can show dominant social structures, but toponymy can also be used to tell new stories about identity and to show resistance against ruling powers (Rose-Redwood et al., 2009). New concepts regarding cultural diplomacy and development place the emphasis on the necessity of local community participation in the design of their environments and the impact of that participation. Authentic toponyms help legitimize local cultural voices, thus increasing the credibility of the cultural offer and encouraging the creation of inclusive tourism models that integrate local knowledge and cultural diversity (Dwyer et al., 2009). Such a participatory practice enables the simultaneous preservation of identity specificities and the building of bridges of cultural understanding between different social and ethnic groups.

Thus, toponymy has ceased being just an issue of academic linguistic scrutiny or map-making standardization, and it is now a major instrument for cultural policy, international cultural exchange, and strategy building as well.

Cultural Marketing and Narrative Understandings of Toponyms: Damastion as an Example of Cross-Border Collaboration

Toponyms, apart from being just place names, represent through their existence the identities of the areas and the creators of the symbolic meanings. They intermingle collective memories, cultural identities, and symbolic importance; hence, they can be seen as communication intermediaries and at the same time, are directly influencing the formation of cultural policies and boosting heritage tourism (Ashworth, 2005; Richards, 2018). This role is particularly evident in the case of *Damastion*, where archaeological evidence, numismatic finds, and the linguistic layers of local toponymy pave the way for its reinterpretation and positioning as a cultural destination. It is precisely its multiple historical and semantic meanings that make this toponym suitable for integration into contemporary cultural marketing models and cross-border development strategies. The spatial indeterminacy of *Damastion*, far from being a weakness, presents an opportunity to design cultural tourism itineraries that connect different localities in the region. Such an approach not only helps avoid national appropriations but also encourages transregional cooperation (Anholt, 2010).

The inclusion of *Damastion* in cross-border projects promoting intangible heritage can therefore serve as a tool for building trust and overcoming ethnic tensions. Such projects succeed because they draw on the power of narrative. Linguistic and cultural layers, particularly in regions characterized by a complex and plural history such as the Balkans, play a fundamental role in the symbolic production of territorial meaning (Massey, 1994; Lefebvre, 1991).

Field interpretation – through local memories, oral tradition, and microhistorical sources – makes it possible to integrate this knowledge into development policies. Thus, participatory mapping and narrative spatial management transform place names from static labels to dynamic units of meaning that build a sense of place (Relph, 1976).

Examples such as the toponym *Dimiskin most* confirm this approach: they are not only indicators of the ancient past, but also active topographical landmarks in the construction of cultural and tourist experiences. Their value lies precisely in their ability to connect local narratives to contemporary development frameworks. Therefore, the narrative methodology of interpretation opens up the development potential of the territory, which is not based solely on material resources but also on the semiotic capital resulting from the dialogue of history, language, and community. In this framework, *Damastion* emerges as a model of cultural adaptability, varied interpretations, and collaboration between different cultures, shifting it from a subject of archaeological curiosity to a focus of sustainable cultural and tourism growth.

CONCLUSION

Based on the case study of the toponym *Damastion* and its related names, the analysis demonstrates that using an interdisciplinary approach to study place names opens up multiple opportunities for building inclusive cultural policies, strengthening regional unity, and forming sustainable development models. For this reason, *Damastion* should not be viewed only as an ancient site, but as a rich symbol connected to language changes, archaeological context, storytelling, and the shaping of spatial growth. The functionalization of toponymy as a marker of identity and cultural memory requires,

in fact, the study of toponyms from the perspective of discursive constructions, semiotic shifts and political use. There is no doubt that the recognition of toponyms in the context of cultural advertising, territorial administration, and international partnerships facilitates the transformation of symbolic meanings into concrete development models.

The economic aspect of the valorization of place names is essential, as their integration into development policies will contribute to the creation of new cultural and tourist products, the attraction of investments, and the development of the local and the regional economy. In this way, place names move from the status of simple symbols to that of concrete economic assets contributing to employment, infrastructure development, and overall long-term economic growth.

Thus, *Damastion* serves as a clear example of a "forgotten toponym," whose significance is being rediscovered as a key part of cultural resistance, scientific research, and regional unity. The transformation of archaeological mystery into a modern development resource demonstrates the need to apply methods that integrate complex knowledge, intersectoral collaboration, and cultural sensitivity for the understanding of territory, communication, and identity in the Balkans. This comprehensive perspective not only helps to protect heritage but also actively involves it in current cultural and economic activities, supporting long-term sustainability and regional growth.

Suggestions For Future Research

Toponymy is recognized as an interdisciplinary tool with linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic implications, which are particularly important in the Balkans, where communication is complex.

The following priorities currently define the development agenda:

- Research into the origins of place names and languages in specific regions
- Inclusion of toponyms in cultural economy models
- Inclusion of toponyms in territorial and cultural tourism policies
- Promotion of local identity and strengthening soft power
- Development of participatory research

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