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LINGUACULTURAL ASPECTS OF PILGRIMAGE TOPONYMY

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Abstract. *This study explores the linguocultural dimensions of pilgrimage toponymy by analyzing how place names associated with sacred journeys encode religious, historical, and cultural meanings. Drawing from both English and Uzbek contexts, it investigates how toponyms like Canterbury and Bukhara function not merely as geographic markers but as symbols of collective memory and spiritual identity. These pilgrimage sites reveal complex layers of metaphor, narrative, and linguistic heritage shaped by historical events and religious traditions. The analysis employs etymological study, conceptual metaphor theory, and cultural semiotics to demonstrate how such toponyms evolve into “cultural texts.” English place names reflect Christian martyrdom and literary tradition, while Uzbek toponyms are infused with Islamic mysticism and Central Asian multilingual heritage. Ultimately, pilgrimage toponyms serve as semiotic bridges between the tangible landscape and intangible belief systems, preserving and perpetuating sacred worldviews through language*

Key words. *Pilgrimage toponymy, Sacred geography, Cultural semiotics, Conceptual metaphor, Religious identity, Etymology, Collective memory, Uzbek and English toponyms, Sufism, Christian pilgrimage Metaphorical place names*

Toponymy, the study of place names, has gained increasing interest across disciplines such as linguistics, geography, and cultural studies. One of the most nuanced areas of toponymic research lies in pilgrimage toponymy, where linguistic elements merge with deep cultural, religious, and historical layers of meaning. In this context, the study of pilgrimage place names from a linguocultural perspective reveals how language reflects cultural heritage, beliefs, and the conceptualization of sacred spaces. Pilgrimage sites often gain names that are more than geographic identifiers, they become carriers of symbolic and metaphorical meaning. This linguistic coding of cultural and spiritual experiences creates a toponymic landscape embedded with the collective memory and worldview of a community. The names of these sites encapsulate stories, values, and religious ideologies, functioning as “cultural texts.”

In English and Uzbek contexts, pilgrimage toponyms serve as linguistic relics that encapsulate religious devotion, historical continuity, and national identity. These place names transcend their geographic function, acting as cultural artifacts that preserve spiritual narratives and collective memory. By examining toponyms such as

Canterbury in England and Bukhara in Uzbekistan, we can uncover how linguistic structures intertwine with cultural and religious significance, reflecting the interplay of language, faith, and identity. This section explores these dynamics through etymological analysis, historical context, and cultural symbolism, drawing on reliable sources to illustrate the transformative power of pilgrimage toponyms.

The English toponym “*Canterbury*” synonymous with Christian pilgrimage, derives from the Old English “*Cantwareburh*,” meaning “fortress of the Kentish men.”¹⁵ The term combines “*Cantwara*” (people of Kent) and “*burh*” (fortified settlement), reflecting its pre-Christian origins as a regional stronghold. Following the martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket in 1170, Canterbury Cathedral became a major pilgrimage destination, transforming the toponym into a symbol of ecclesiastical authority and spiritual redemption. The cultural resonance of Canterbury was further amplified by Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (late 14th century), which immortalized the journey to Becket’s shrine as a literary and social phenomenon.¹⁶ Chaucer’s work not only popularized the toponym but also embedded it in the English cultural imagination as a site of communal storytelling and religious devotion.

Linguistically, “*Cantwareburh*” exemplifies Old English’s descriptive naming conventions, where toponyms often denoted geographic or social features. Over centuries, the name evolved phonologically into “*Canterbury*,” shedding its original militaristic connotation for a sacred identity. Culturally, the toponym embodies the transition from Anglo-Saxon tribalism to Christian hegemony, with Becket’s shrine serving as a focal point for medieval European pilgrims. This shift illustrates what linguaculturalogistic term a “cultureme”, a linguistic unit that carries profound cultural meaning.¹⁷ Today, Canterbury remains a living toponym, its name evoking both historical pilgrimage and contemporary Anglican identity.

In the Uzbek context, the toponym “*Bukhara*” represents a parallel fusion of linguistic heritage and religious significance, rooted in Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. The etymology of Bukhara is debated, with a plausible origin in the Sanskrit “*vihara*,” meaning “Buddhist monastery,” suggesting pre-Islamic cultural layers.¹⁸ By the Islamic era, Bukhara emerged as a major center of Sufi pilgrimage, particularly associated with the Naqshbandi order and the shrine of Bahauddin Naqshband (1318–1389). The toponym’s linguistic identity reflects a confluence of Sogdian, Persian, Arabic, and Turkic influences, mirroring Central Asia’s historical role as a cultural crossroads. Culturally, Bukhara’s name transcends its geographic designation, symbolizing spiritual enlightenment and Islamic scholarship. The city’s designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site underscores its global cultural significance, with

¹⁵ Bosworth, J., & Toller, T. N. (1898). *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

¹⁶ Chaucer, G. (2008). *The Canterbury Tales* (N. Coghill, Trans.). Penguin Classics

¹⁷ Abdullaeva, N. E. (2017). Semantic and linguacultural features of English and Uzbek proverbs with concept of friendship. *ResearchGate*.

¹⁸ Frye, R. N. (1997). *The Heritage of Central Asia*. Markus Wiener Publishers

pilgrimage sites like the Naqshbandi complex drawing devotees seeking spiritual renewal.¹⁹ Linguistically, the toponym's phonetic and morphological stability across centuries highlights its role as a cultural anchor, preserving Uzbekistan's Islamic heritage amidst political and social changes. The name Bukhara thus functions as a linguacultural bridge, connecting pre-Islamic Buddhist influences with the Islamic mysticism that defines its modern identity. Both Canterbury and Bukhara illustrate how pilgrimage toponyms evolve from functional place names to sacred symbols imbued with cultural and religious meaning. In Canterbury, the toponym's Christian connotations emerged from historical events (Becket's martyrdom) and literary reinforcement (*The Canterbury Tales*), reflecting a linear progression from secular to sacred identity. In contrast, Bukhara's toponym encapsulates a syncretic blend of Buddhist, Islamic, and Central Asian influences, showcasing a more layered linguistic and cultural evolution. These differences highlight distinct naming practices: English toponyms often draw on Anglo-Saxon roots tied to local geography, while Uzbek toponyms reflect multilingual contact zones shaped by trade and conquest. The linguacultural significance of these toponyms lies in their ability to preserve collective memory and spiritual values. As Victor Turner notes, pilgrimage sites foster "*communitas*", a sense of shared identity among pilgrims, which is encoded in the toponyms themselves.²⁰ For instance, Canterbury's name evokes a shared Christian heritage, while Bukhara's resonates with Sufi universalism. These toponyms also underscore national identity: Canterbury as a cornerstone of English Christianity, and Bukhara as a beacon of Uzbek Islamic culture. Their enduring relevance in modern pilgrimage practices demonstrates the resilience of linguacultural artifacts in shaping communal narratives. The relationship between the sacred and the linguistic is often mediated through collective memory and oral tradition. Pilgrimage toponyms are not only transmitted through written texts but are maintained in songs, stories, and prayers. In Uzbekistan, sites such as "Bibi-Khanym" (named after Timur's wife) are central to both spiritual practice and national folklore. The name embodies ideals of femininity, power, and piety.

Pilgrimage toponyms like Canterbury and Bukhara are more than linguistic labels. They are repositories of cultural, religious, and historical significance. Through their etymological roots and evolving meanings, these names reflect the dynamic interplay of language and culture in shaping sacred landscapes. By preserving the stories of martyrdom, devotion, and enlightenment, such toponyms serve as enduring symbols of national and spiritual identity, inviting further exploration into the linguacultural dimensions of pilgrimage. Both English and Uzbek examples show that pilgrimage toponyms function as semiotic bridges between the tangible and the intangible. They are linguistic expressions of sacred geographies. The interaction of

¹⁹ UNESCO. (2025). Historic Centre of Bukhara. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/602/>.

²⁰ Turner, V. (1974). *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Cornell University Press.

historical linguistics, folklore, and religious belief systems is crucial in shaping and preserving these names.

In conclusion, a linguocultural analysis of pilgrimage toponymy reveals the multidimensional role of language in encoding spiritual, historical, and cultural meanings. These place names are more than markers on a map, they are cultural artifacts that reflect and perpetuate the sacred values of a community. Through metaphor, narrative, and linguistic structure, they offer insights into how societies construct and preserve their sacred geographies.

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