

ETHNOTOPONYMY AND HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF ZANGEZUR: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ZANGI/ZANGILAR COMPONENT

Babayev N.G.^{1*}, Chandirli N.U.², Zulfugarova S.M.², Namazova F.K.³

¹*Institute of Geography, Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan*

117, H. Javid Ave., Baku, AZ1073

²*Baku State University, Azerbaijan*

23, Zahid Khalilov Street, Baku, AZ1148

³*Mingachevir State University, Azerbaijan*

21, D. Aliyeva Street, Mingachevir, AZ4500

*Corresponding author: natiq.babayev@geo.edu.az

Keywords: Zangezur, Turkic
ethnonym, Zangi/Zangilar,
ethnotoponymy, toponym,
South Caucasus

Summary. This study examines the origin of the toponym “Zangezur” within the Turkic onomastic tradition and the historical-geographical context of the South Caucasus, with particular emphasis on the Zangi/Zangilar ethnonym. Comparative-historical linguistic, structural-semantic, and historical-geographical methods are applied to evaluate the relationship between the ethnonym and the formation of the geographical name. Historical sources and regional toponymic evidence indicate that Zangi/Zangilar was recorded as an ethnonym and subsequently preserved in various geographical names, reflecting its continuity as a nominative element within the regional toponymic system. The findings support the interpretation of the Zangi/Zangilar component as the principal ethnonymic element underlying the formation of “Zangezur” and correspond to the widespread Turkic naming model in which ethnonyms develop into geographical names. Although the etymology of the second component, “-zur,” remains unresolved, this uncertainty does not invalidate the ethnonym-based interpretation. The study therefore considers the ethnotoponymic explanation of “Zangezur” to be one of the scientifically substantiated approaches to the origin of the toponym.

© 2026 Earth Science Division, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences. All rights reserved.

Problem definition

Zangezur is a historically and geographically significant region of the South Caucasus with a multilayered toponymic system reflecting long-term ethnic, linguistic, and cultural processes. Consequently, the origin of the toponym “Zangezur” is important not only from an etymological perspective but also for understanding the historical-geographical and ethnotoponymic development of the region. Among the existing hypotheses, one of the principal approaches associates the name with the Zangi/Zangilar ethnonym, while other interpretations propose hydronymic or alternative linguistic origins.

Within the Turkic onomastic tradition, the transformation of ethnonyms into geographical names is a widespread naming pattern. The preservation of ethnic and tribal names in settlements, hydronyms, and other geographical features may therefore reflect historical settlement and territorial continuity rather than accidental phonetic similarity (Aghasioglu, 2014). Accordingly, this study aims to evaluate the role of the Zangi/Zangilar ethnonym in the formation of “Zangezur” through comparative-historical linguistic, structural-semantic, and historical-geographical analysis, while also considering existing interpretations of the “-zur” formant.

Comparative-historical linguistic and phonetic analysis

The Zangi component of the toponym “Zangezur” can be examined within the comparative-historical framework of Turkic onomastics. Historical sources record Zangi/Zangilar as an ethnonym, while its occurrence in different geographical areas indicates its continuity within the regional naming system.

The historical development of Turkic languages has involved phonetic changes, dialectal variation, and regional differences in pronunciation, while lexical roots have often remained recognizable in different forms

(Johanson, 2009; Clauson, 1972; Radlov, 1893–1911). Accordingly, variants of the Zangi component occurring in geographical names may reflect a common historical-linguistic origin rather than accidental phonetic similarity. Its historical distribution and preservation in regional toponymy therefore provide an important basis for evaluating its ethnonymic origin.

Research methods. The analysis of the semantic and morphological characteristics of the Zangi component in the toponym "Zangezur" is of considerable importance for identifying its ethnonymic origin. Geographical names derived from ethnonyms not only serve to distinguish specific geographical features but also preserve the linguistic and historical memory of the ethnic communities that once inhabited or left their mark on a particular territory.

The occurrence of the Zangi component in the names of various settlements, hydronyms, and other geographical features demonstrates that it functions as a stable nominative element within the regional toponymic system. This distribution cannot be explained as a result of accidental naming; rather, it reflects a long-standing historical naming tradition.

In Turkic toponymy, the combination of ethnonyms with various lexical and morphological elements to create new geographical names represents one of the most productive naming patterns. Within this model, an ethnonym initially denotes a tribe or ethnic community and subsequently becomes associated with the territory inhabited by that community, eventually stabilizing as an oikonym, hydronym, or oronym. As a result of this transformation, the ethnonym does not lose its original ethnic meaning; instead, it preserves the historical and ethnic memory within the semantic structure of the geographical name.

From this perspective, the toponym "Zangezur" may be regarded as a multilayered nominative formation reflecting the transformation of an ethnonym into a geographical name. In this process, the Zangi component has retained its original function as an indicator of ethnic identity while gradually becoming established as the name of a specific geographical area.

Thus, the structural-semantic analysis provides a scientific basis for interpreting the Zangi component as a nominative unit that originated from a Turkic ethnonym and subsequently underwent the process of toponymization.

The main material

The historical-geographical approach constitutes one of the principal methodological frameworks for investigating the origin of the toponym "Zangezur." The formation of geographical names is determined not only by linguistic processes but also by the historical, ethnic, and social developments that have taken place within a particular territory. In this context, the analysis of the geographical distribution of the Zangi/Zangilar ethnonym and the geographical names derived from this component provides an important scientific basis for clarifying the etymology of the toponym.

Medieval sources, as well as later scholarly studies, record Zangi/Zangilar as an ethnonym in various historical and geographical contexts. In particular, the works of Yāqūt al-Hamavī, V. Minorsky, and V. V. Bartold contain valuable information on the ethnic and geographical characteristics of the region and constitute important sources for reconstructing the historical distribution of this ethnonym (Yāqūt al-Hamavī; Minorsky, 1953; Bartold, 1966).

The historical geography of the Caucasus demonstrates that the names of ethnic communities that inhabited the region in different periods were preserved in the system of geographical names during subsequent historical stages. This phenomenon is especially characteristic of ethnonyms of Turkic origin. The preservation of ethnic names in settlements, hydronyms, and other geographical features is regarded as an important indicator of the historical settlement patterns of these communities.

The presence of the Zangi component in various historical-geographical areas of the South Caucasus further demonstrates that it is not an incidental element within the regional toponymic system. Geographical names formed on the basis of this component reflect the continuity of both historical settlement processes and traditional naming practices (Geybullayev & Budagov, 1998).

Thus, the historical-geographical analysis indicates that the Zangi/Zangilar ethnonym represents one of the principal nominative components underlying the formation of the toponym "Zangezur."

The transformation of ethnonyms into geographical names within the historical settlement areas of the Turkic peoples represents one of the characteristic features of the Turkic toponymic tradition. This phenomenon constitutes one of the most widespread naming patterns in the Turkic onomastic system and is observed across different historical and geographical regions (Babayev, Imrani, & Zakirova, 2023).

The preservation of the Zangi/Zangilar ethnonym within the system of geographical names should likewise be interpreted within the framework of this broader historical process. The recurrence of the same component in different geographical names demonstrates that it functions as a stable nominative element associated with a particular historical and ethnic memory.

In Turkic toponymy, geographical names derived from ethnonyms do not represent isolated or accidental examples but rather reflect a typologically recurrent naming pattern. The structural characteristics observed in ethnonym-based toponyms such as Bayat, Kangarli, Gargar, Avshar, and Kipchak indicate that the toponym "Zangezur" was formed according to the same nominative principle. The defining feature of this model is the association of an ethnic name with a particular historical territory, where it becomes established and preserved as a geographical name over an extended period.

Such typological parallels make it possible to interpret the ethnonym-based explanation of the toponym "Zangezur" not as an isolated case but within the broader framework of the general principles governing Turkic toponymic formation.

As in the ethnonym-derived toponyms Gargar, Bayat, Kangarli, and others, the Zangi component likewise demonstrates the preservation of an ethnic name within the geographical memory of the region (Babayev, 2022). From this perspective, the ethnographic comparison supports the historical and ethnocultural foundations of the proposed model that explains the origin of the toponym "Zangezur" on the basis of a Turkic ethnonym.

One of the key issues in the etymological analysis of the toponym "Zangezur" is the identification of the origin and historical function of its Zangi/Zangilar component. Historical sources record this name as an ethnonym, which was subsequently preserved in the structure of various geographical names and became one of the stable elements of the regional toponymic system.

A comparative analysis of historical sources, regional toponymic evidence, and the Turkic onomastic tradition demonstrates that the Zangi/Zangilar component is not the result of an accidental lexical resemblance but rather a nominative unit of historical and ethnic origin. Its preservation in numerous toponyms indicates the continuity of the process through which ethnonyms are transformed into geographical names, a characteristic feature of the Turkic naming tradition.

From both a historical and an onomastic perspective, the Zangi/Zangilar component represents a persistent ethnonymic element that has retained its function within the regional toponymic system over an extended historical period. The continuity of its distribution across different geographical names provides additional evidence for its historical authenticity and nominative stability.

Thus, the Zangi/Zangilar component may be regarded as the principal nominative element supporting the ethnotoponymic interpretation of the toponym "Zangezur."

Toponymic evidence demonstrates that the Zangi component has been preserved in the structure of various geographical names throughout Zangezur and the adjacent historical-geographical region. This component occurs in oikonyms, hydronyms, microtoponyms, and other categories of geographical names, indicating its long-term continuity within the regional toponymic system (Geybullayev & Budagov, 1998).

The principal regional examples associated with this component include:

- **Zangilan** – an oikonym formed on the basis of the Zangi component and interpreted within the framework of the ethnotoponymic model.
- **Zangibasar** – an oikonym created through the combination of the Zangi component with a second lexical element denoting locality or territory.
- **Zangarli** – a toponym reflecting a phonetic variant of the Zangi component.
- **Zangishali**, Zangi Valley (Zangi Dərəsi), Zangi Spring (Zangi Bulağı), and other microtoponyms, which demonstrate the continued preservation of the component within the local toponymic system (Babayev, 2022).

The occurrence of these examples within the same historical-geographical area and across different categories of geographical names indicates that the Zangi component represents one of the stable and persistent elements of the regional ethnotoponymic system.

A comparative analysis of these regional examples demonstrates that the Zangi component is not merely a linguistic element preserved in individual place names, but rather an integral part of a nominative system reflecting the historical relationship between ethnic settlement and geographical naming. These relationships are summarized in the conceptual model presented below.

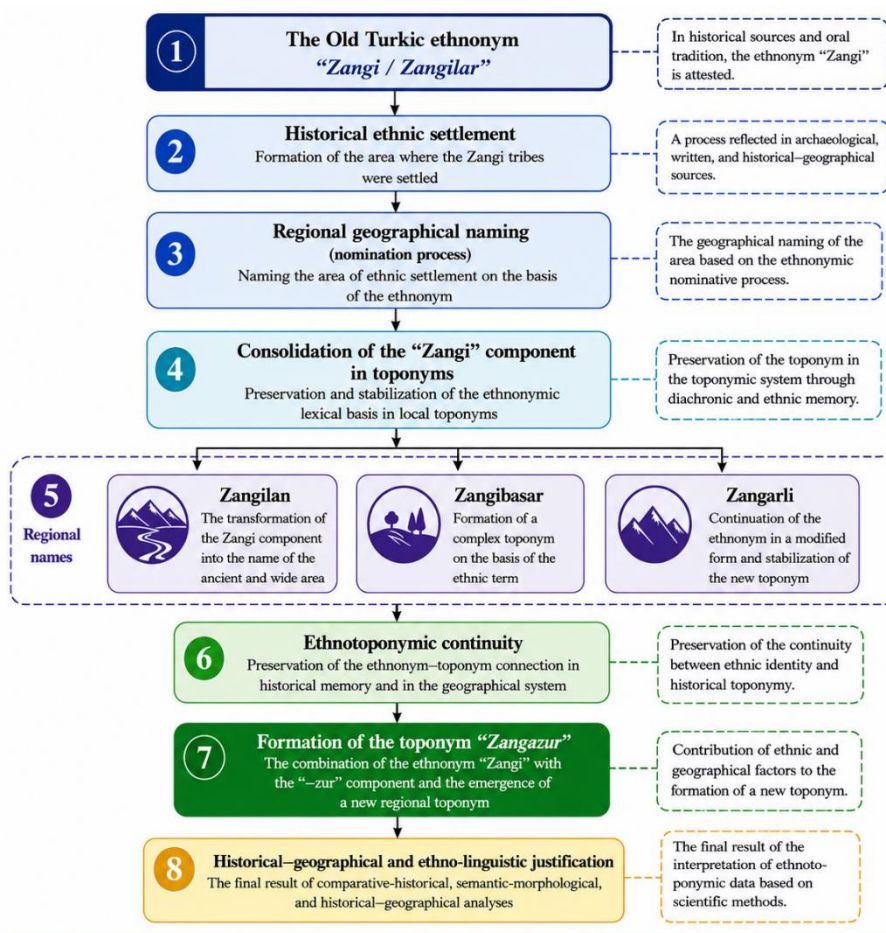


Fig. 1. Ethnotoponymic Formation Model of the Toponym "Zangezur"

Note: This conceptual model was developed based on comparative-historical, structural-semantic, historical-geographical, and ethnotoponymic analyses.

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 demonstrates that the formation of the toponym "Zangezur" cannot be interpreted as an isolated linguistic phenomenon. Rather, it represents the outcome of a historical process in which an ancient ethnonym became firmly established within the geographical naming system through successive stages of ethnic settlement, regional nomination, and toponymic formation.

Accordingly, the Zangi/Zangilar ethnonym functions as the primary nominative element underlying the formation of the toponym, while its preservation in a series of geographically related place names reflects the continuity of historical settlement patterns and the persistence of the Turkic naming tradition. The recurrence of this component across different categories of geographical names further supports its role as a stable element within the regional ethnotoponymic system.

The conceptual model therefore provides a visual synthesis of the principal findings obtained through the comparative-historical, structural-semantic, and historical-geographical analyses presented in this study (Babayev, Hadjiyeva, & Yusifova, 2024). It illustrates the historical relationship between ethnic identity, territorial continuity, and geographical naming, thereby reinforcing the interpretation of "Zangezur" as a toponym derived from the Zangi/Zangilar ethnonym.

The origin of the "-zur" formant, which constitutes the second component of the toponym "Zangezur," has been interpreted in different ways within the scholarly literature. However, the currently available historical and linguistic evidence does not permit a single, generally accepted conclusion regarding either its etymology or its semantic function.

On the basis of certain phonetic and semantic parallels observed in the Turkic languages, the "-zur" component may be compared with archaic elements such as *sur*, *shor/chor*, and *sar*. In the etymological analysis of toponyms, it is not always possible to explain every component with the same degree of certainty. In international toponymic research, once the principal nominative component of a complex geographical name has been reliably identified, the etymology of the remaining elements may legitimately remain unresolved. In such

cases, the etymological interpretation is primarily based on the historical, linguistic, and areal characteristics of the principal component (Babayev, 2026).

From this perspective, the identification of the Zangi/Zangilar component as an ethnonymic element underlying the toponym "Zangezur" remains scientifically well founded, even though the etymology of the "-zur" formant has not yet been conclusively established. Consequently, the unresolved origin of the second component does not diminish the validity of the ethnotoponymic model proposed in this study.

Conclusions

The comparative-historical linguistic, structural-semantic, and historical-geographical analyses conducted in this study demonstrate that the Zangi/Zangilar ethnonym constitutes the principal nominative component underlying the ethnotoponymic interpretation of the toponym "Zangezur."

The preservation of the Zangi component in numerous oikonyms, hydronyms, and microtoponyms indicates that it represents a persistent element within the historical toponymic system of the South Caucasus. This pattern is consistent with one of the productive naming models of the Turkic toponymic tradition, in which ethnonyms are transformed into geographical names while preserving their historical and ethnocultural associations.

The findings further demonstrate that historical sources, comparative linguistic evidence, and regional toponymic data collectively support the interpretation of "Zangezur" as a toponym derived from the Zangi/Zangilar ethnonym. Accordingly, the proposed ethnotoponymic explanation may be regarded as one of the scientifically well-substantiated approaches to the origin of this place name.

The results of the study show that historical sources, comparative linguistic materials, and regional toponymic facts allow us to evaluate the ethnotoponymic explanation of the toponym "Zangezur" associated with the ethnonym "Zangi/Zangilar" as one of the scientifically substantiated approaches.

REFERENCES

- Aghasioglu, F. (2014). *The pre-Islamic history of the Azerbaijani Turks: Book III. Ancient states established in Azerbaijan* [In Azerbaijani]. Agridag Publishing.
- Ahmadov, T. (1991). *Basics of the toponymy of Azerbaijan* [In Azerbaijani]. Baku University.
- Babayev, N. (2022). *A geographical, historical and linguistic study of the oikonyms of Eastern Zangezur* [In Azerbaijani].
- Babayev, N. G. (2026). Origin and area of use of Kamanlı ethnotoponym. *Journal of Geology, Geography and Geoecology*, 35(1).
- Babayev, N. G., Hadjiyeva, N. N., & Yusifova, Z. M. (2024). About the origin of the Ayurms. *Journal of Geology, Geography and Geoecology*, 33(1), 14–21.
- Babayev, N. G., Imrani, Z. T., & Zakirova, A. R. (2023). Ethnos with Turkish ancestry in the toponymic background of the territory of Azerbaijan. *Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental*, 17(7).
- Bakikhanov, A. (1951). *Gulustani-Iram* [In Azerbaijani]. Azerbaijan SSR Academy of Sciences.
- Bartold, V. V. (1966). *Works on archaeology, numismatics, epigraphy and ethnography* [In Russian]. Nauka.
- Chingizoglu, A. (2012). Gubadli–Ulashli village [In Azerbaijani]. *Soy*, (10).
- Clauson, G. (1972). *An etymological dictionary of pre-thirteenth-century Turkish*. Clarendon Press.
- Detailed notebook of Ganja-Karabakh province* (H. Mammadov [Karamanli], Trans.) [In Azerbaijani]. (2000). Shusha.
- Encyclopedic dictionary of Azerbaijani toponyms* (Vol. 1) [In Azerbaijani]. (2007). East-West.
- Explanatory dictionary of the Azerbaijani language* (Vol. 4) [In Azerbaijani]. (2006). Sharg-Garb.
- Fazlullah, R. (1992). *Oguzname* [In Azerbaijani]. Azernashr.
- Geybullayev, G. (1990). *On the ethnic and political history of Karabakh* [In Azerbaijani]. Science.
- Geybullayev, G. (1994). *From the history of the formation of Azerbaijani Turks* [In Azerbaijani]. Azernashr.
- Geybullayev, G., & Budagov, B. (1998). *An explanatory dictionary of toponyms of Azerbaijani origin in Armenia* [In Azerbaijani].
- Gumilyov, L. N. (1993). *Ancient Turks* [In Azerbaijani]. Ganjlik.
- Gurbanov, A. M. (1986). *Azerbaijani onomastics* [In Azerbaijani]. ASI.
- Gurbanov, E., & Rzayeva, A. (2025). Potential of *Juniperus communis* L. in degraded areas of forest ecosystems of Azerbaijan. *Acta Botanica Caucasica*, 4(3), 4–9. <https://doi.org/10.30546/abc.2025.001>
- Jafarov, S. (2024). Education Policy of 3rd Generation Universities. *Revista De Gestão Social E Ambiental*, 18(6), e05690. <https://doi.org/10.24857/rgsa.v18n6-007>
- Jafarov, S. (2024). Internationalisation and cultural aspects of online learning, training, and research. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 22(2), 6437–6452. <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2024-22.2.00486>
- Johanson, L. (2009). Turkic. In B. Comrie (Ed.), *The world's major languages* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Kaghankatvatsi, M. (1993). *History of Albania* [In Azerbaijani]. Azernashr.
- Kashgari, M. (n.d.). *Divanu lughat-it-Turk* (Vol. 4) [In Azerbaijani].
- Khudiyev, N. (2015). *The language of ancient Turkish written monuments* [In Azerbaijani]. Science and Education.
- Mammadov, N. G. (2007). *Toponymy* [In Azerbaijani]. Baku University.
- Minorsky, V. (1953). *Studies in Caucasian history*. Taylor's Foreign Press.
- Radloff, W. (1893–1911). *Versuch eines Wörterbuches der Türk-Dialecte* (Vols. 1–4). Imperial Academy of Sciences Press.
- Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī. (n.d.). *Mu'jam al-Buldān* [Arabic edition]. Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya.

ИСТОРИЧЕСКАЯ ГЕОГРАФИЯ И ЭТНОТОПОНИМИЯ ЗАНГЕЗУРА: ПРОИСХОЖДЕНИЕ И РАСПРОСТРАНЕНИЕ НАЗВАНИЙ «ЗАНГИ/ЗАНГИЛАР»

Бабаев Н.Г.^{1*}, Чандырли Н.У.², Зүльфугарова С.М.², Намазова Ф.К.³

¹Институт географии Министерства науки и образования Азербайджанской Республики, Азербайджан

AZ1073, Баку, пр. Г. Джавида, 117

²Бакинский государственный университет, Азербайджан

AZ1148, Баку, ул. Захида Халилова, 23

³Мингячевирский государственный университет, Азербайджан

AZ4500, Мингячевир, ул. Д. Алиевой, 21

*Автор, отвечающий за переписку: natiq.babayev@geo.edu.az

Резюме. В исследовании рассматривается происхождение топонима «Зангезур» в контексте тюркской ономастической традиции и историко-географических особенностей Южного Кавказа с особым акцентом на этнониме Занги/Зангилар. Для оценки взаимосвязи между этнонимом и формированием географического названия применяются сравнительно-исторический лингвистический, структурно-семантический и историко-географический методы. Исторические источники и региональные топонимические данные свидетельствуют о том, что название Занги/Зангилар было зафиксировано в качестве этнонима и впоследствии сохранилось в различных географических названиях, отражая его преемственность как номинативного элемента региональной топонимической системы. Результаты исследования подтверждают интерпретацию компонента Занги/Зангилар как основного этнонимического элемента, лежащего в основе формирования топонима «Зангезур», и соответствуют широко распространённой тюркской модели наименования, при которой этнонимы преобразуются в географические названия. Несмотря на то что этимология второго компонента «-зур» остаётся невыясненной, данная неопределённость не опровергает интерпретацию, основанную на этнониме. Таким образом, в исследовании этнотопонимическое объяснение названия «Зангезур» рассматривается как один из научно обоснованных подходов к установлению происхождения данного топонима.

Ключевые слова: Зангезур, тюркский этноним, Занги/Зангилар, этнотопонимия, топоним, Южный Кавказ

ZƏNGƏZURUN ETNOTOPONİMİYASI VƏ TARİXİ COĞRAFİYASI: ZƏNGİ/ZƏNGİLƏR KOMPONENTİNİN MÜQAYİSƏLİ TƏHLİLİ

Babayev N.Q.^{1*}, Çandırılı N.Ü.², Zülfüqarova S.M.², Namazova F.K.³

¹Azərbaycan Respublikası Elm və Təhsil Nazirliyi, Coğrafiya İnstitutu, Azərbaycan

AZ1073, Bakı, H. Cavid pr. 117

²Bakı Dövlət Universiteti, Azərbaycan

AZ1148, Bakı, Zəhid Xəlilov küç. 23

³Mingəçevir Dövlət Universiteti, Azərbaycan

AZ4500, Mingəçevir, D. Əliyeva küç. 21

*Məsul müəllif: natiq.babayev@geo.edu.az

Xülasə. Tədqiqatda “Zəngəzur” toponiminin mənşəyi türk onomastik ənənəsi və Cənubi Qafqazın tarixi-coğrafi konteksti çərçivəsində, xüsusilə Zəngi/Zəngilər etnoniminə diqqət yetirilməklə araşdırılır. Etnonimlə coğrafi adın formalaşması arasındakı əlaqəni qiymətləndirmək məqsədilə müqayisəli-tarixi linqvistik, struktur-semantik və tarixi-coğrafi metodlar tətbiq edilmişdir. Tarixi mənbələr və regional toponimik faktlar göstərir ki, Zəngi/Zəngilər adı etnonim kimi qeydə alınmış və sonradan müxtəlif coğrafi adlarda qorunub saxlanılmışdır. Bu iş həmin adın regional toponimik sistemdə adlandırma elementi kimi davamlılığını əks etdirir. Tədqiqatın nəticələri Zəngi/Zəngilər komponentinin “Zəngəzur” toponiminin formalaşmasının əsasında duran əsas etnonimik element kimi şərhini dəstəkləyir və etnonimlərin coğrafi adlara çevrildiyi geniş yayılmış türk adlandırma modelinə uyğun gəlir. İkinci komponent olan “-zur”un etimologiyası hələ də tam aydınlaşdırılmasa da, bu qeyri-müəyyənlik etnonimə əsaslanan izahın etibarlılığını aradan qaldırmır. Beləliklə, tədqiqatda “Zəngəzur” toponiminin etnotoponimik izahı onun mənşəyinə dair elmi cəhətdən əsaslandırılmış yanaşmalardan biri kimi qiymətləndirilir.

Açar sözlər: Zəngəzur, türk etnonimi, Zəngi/Zəngilər, etnotoponimiya, toponim, Cənubi Qafqaz