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**THE OSSETES:
SCYTHIANS OF THE 21st CENTURY**

The Scythian people did not disappear from the face of the earth without leaving a trace. If we look at an ethnographic map of the Caucasus, which is a patchwork of more than forty different nationalities, we find in the central part a small group of people, known as the Ossetes.

It was established long ago that the Ossetes are in no way related to their Caucasian neighbours. Immigrants from the steppes of South Russia, they are descendants of the Alani (Alans) who, according to Josephus - a Jewish scholar and historian of the first century A. D. - were a Scythian tribe living in the vicinity of the Don and the Sea of Azov.

During the great migrations of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., some of the Alans moved across Europe as far as France and Spain. The French name *Alain* and the English *Alan* date from that period.

The remaining Alans made their way from Eastern Europe to the foothills of the Caucasus, where they established what was for the times a powerful feudal state. They were converted to Christianity in the tenth century, and during the Middle Ages they maintained active relations with Byzantium, Georgia and Russia.

The Mongol invasion and the campaigns of Tamerlane were a disaster for the Alans: one part of the population was annihilated in the incessant wars; another fled to Hungary, where they were known as the "As" and retained their ethnic individuality for another several hundred years. A third part joined in the expeditions of the marauding Mongolians and was dispersed in foreign lands.

The Alans who remained in the Caucasus took refuge in the narrow passes of the central regions.

One cannot help comparing the vast territory between the Altai in the east and the Danube in the west, which had been the home of the Scytho-Sarmatian tribes during the last millennium of the pre-Christian period, with the handful of narrow ravines which was all that was left to the Ossetes in the 18th century A.D.

Here, indeed is food for thought about the reverses of fortune! At Pitsunda, on the Black Sea coast, a little grove of pine trees is all that remains of a once-enormous forest. Fate dealt similarly with the ancient Scythian world, which is now reduced to a tiny group of Ossetes, lost in the Caucasian mountains.

Two priceless treasures of their remote past have, nevertheless, survived - their language and their folklore.

The Scythians themselves left no written texts. But Greek epigraphic inscriptions dating from the period when the Scythians occupied the lands north of the Black Sea contain hundreds of Scythian and Sarmatian common nouns.

As eminent an authority as the Russian philologist Vsevolod Miller and also specialists from other countries have convincingly demonstrated that knowledge of the Ossetic tongue makes interpretation of these inscriptions easier and that they can in fact be considered as examples of the language of the ancient Ossetes.

A number of words still used by the Ossetes, such as *farn* 'prosperity', *æxsar* 'military prowess', *ændon* 'steel', *ældar* or *ærdar* 'lord, master', *limæn* 'friend', *furt* 'son', *fidæ* 'father', *sag* 'stag', *sær* 'head', *stur* 'big', are easily recognized in these inscriptions.

Modern Ossetic also provides the key to the meaning of many names on the map of the region between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The names of the

Don, the Dnieper and the Dniester are easier to understand, for example, when we know that in Ossetic - and in this language alone - the word for 'river' is *don*.

Traces of the Scythian world as evident as those found in the language of the Ossetes are also to be found in their folklore, and more particularly in the heroic epics which, like other peoples of the Caucasus, they still relate. The heroes of these epics are a race of warriors known as the *Nartæ* (Narts).

OSSETIC NARTÆ TALES

I. Cycles, Subjects, Heroes.

In epic and mythological studies it is established that the epic poem passes through several stages in its formation. To begin with we have an incomplete collection of stories with no connections between them, arising in various centers, at various times, for various reasons. That is the first stage in the formation of the epic. We cannot as yet name it such. But material is in the process of preparation, which, given favourable conditions, begins to take on the outlines of an epic poem. From the mass of heroes and subjects a few favourite names, events and motives stand out, and stories begin to crystallize round them, as centers of gravity. A few epic centers or cycles are formed. The epic enters the stage of cyclic formation.

In a few instances, not all by any means, it may then attain a third stage. Cycles so far unconnected it may be, more or less artificially are united in one thematic thread, and are brought together in one consistent story, forming one epic poem. A hyper-cyclic formation, if one can use such a term, takes place. It may appear as the result of not only uniting several cycles, but as the expansion of one favourite cycle, at the expense of others, less popular. This is the concluding epic phase.

The transfer to that phase is frequently the result of individual creative efforts. For instance, the creation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from previously scattered epic cycles of the Greek tradition are attributed to the blind poet Homer. Karelo-Finnish runes were taken up in the second, multi-cyclic phase, and Lönnrot alone gave them the finished aspect of the poem *Kalevala*.

In the last century, at the dawn of the collecting of the Tales of the *Nartæ*, it seemed that only unconnected tales were preserved in the memory of the people. But during the gathering together of material, the outlines of a monumental, multi-thematic, but complete epic, with clear features of genealogical cyclic formation began to emerge more clearly.

It appeared that the main heroes consisted of family relatives, covering four consecutive generations; that they were united in three families; that they bore the common name of the *Nartæ*, and what is specially important, this term «*Nartæ*» was in turn formed as Ossete family names, and must therefore place the heroes in the relationship of members of one family, one heroic stock.

The dividing of the Tales of the *Nartæ* into cycles presented no difficulties.

They simply asked themselves to be so divided. The stories, with no constraint, easily grouped themselves round a few of the main heroes and events.

However, if on the one hand in the Tales of the *Nartæ* we have a clear example of the cyclic stage, with epic features, on the other hand they contain many survivals of the beginning stages of the epic: the development of the subject within each separate cycle is not entirely free from contradictions and inconsistencies, and one clearly feels that the threaded-together episodes and motives, grouped around one hero or event, had previously a separate and independent existence, and that the story-teller found no compulsive need to remove these contradictions, and maintain a strict story plot.

In the Tales of the *Nartæ* four central cycles take shape:

1. The origin of the *Nartæ* (*Wærxcæg*, his sons *Æxsar* and *Æxsærtæg*).
2. *Wyryzmæg* and *Satána*.
3. *Soslan*
4. *Batrax*.

Also of importance, if not in scale, then in significance, appear the cycles dealing with cunning *Syrdon*, and magical *Acæmæx*.

But besides these fundamental cycles, we have three-quarters of a score of independent plots, and independent heroes: *Totrax*, *Aræxcaw*, *Sæwai*, *Sybalc*, *Ajsana*, and others. One cannot always ascertain whether the «little cycles» are fragments of previously existing larger ones, or whether, on the other hand, we find before us the scattered stories, on the way to the formation of another cycle.

Taken as a whole, The Tales of the *Nartæ* astound us with their richness and variety of subject material. If one does not count classic mythology and epics, then one will scarcely find anywhere else such riches.

The plots of the tales are extremely varied, but certain of them one may count typical: the struggle against giants, the campaigns for plundering cattle, the hunting adventures, the struggle between *Nartæ* family members and separate heroes, usually on the basis of blood feuds; the competition among the heroes for a woman's favour, and the winning of a bride, the travels in the Underworld beyond the grave (in the *Soslan* cycle) and the struggle against the gods dwelling in the heavens (in the *Batrax* cycle).

According to variants written down from the best story-tellers, the founder of the *Nartæ* was *Wærxcæg*. He had two sons - *Æxsar* and *Æxsærtæg*. In my article «An attempt of a comparative analysis of the legends about the origin of the Narts and the Romans» I tried to show that fundamentally behind the story of the twins *Æxsar* and *Æxsærtæg* lies the totemic myth of the origin of the tribe as a wolf, entirely analogous to the legend of *Romulus* and *Remus*.

The name of the progenitor of the *Nartæ* - *Wærxcæg* is none other than the ancient Ossete word meaning «wolf» (from the Ancient Iranian **varka*-). The legend of the descent of the *Nartæ* from a wolf leads to the circle of wide-spread totemic myths, characteristic of one of the earlier stages in the development of human society.

The *Nartæ* descended from the daughter of the water-god - *Dzerassæ*. This connection of the *Nartæ* with the water element, and its overlords, the *Donbetyrtæ*, passes persistently through the whole epic. *Batraz*, through his mother, and *Syrdon*, through his father, are also children of the water. It is indubitable, that in the epoch of the creation of the epic, the Alans lived in the neighborhood of the sea, or some great rivers, since in the small mountain rivers of modern Ossetia it is decidedly impossible to find a place for the *Donbetyrtæ*, with their wide kingdoms, and luxurious palaces. There are constant reminders of this in the tales about the sea.

The *Nartæ* were divided, according to most variants, into three families: *Æxsærtæggatæ*, *Borætæ* and *Alægatæ*. In the attribution of separate heroes to this or that family, we observe a great muddle on the part of the story-tellers, but by comparing and analyzing the variants we can establish that the famous heroes *Wyryzmæg*, *Satána*, *Xæmyc*, *Soslan* and *Batraz* were descendants of *Æxsærtæg*, and therefore must have belonged to the *Æxsærtæggatæ* family. Representatives of the *Borætæ* family are found in *Buræfærnyg* and his seven sons. About the heroes of the *Alægatæ* family there is no firm tradition in the epic. The division of the *Nartæ* into separate and often mutually hostile families seems an obvious pointer to their tribal structure, and so strongly reminds one of the division of ancient Scandinavian epic heroes into three famous tribes, fated to great glory and suffering.

The twins motive, repeated twice in the cycle (*Æxsar* - *Æxsærtæg*, and *Wyryzmæg* - *Xæmyc*) has the widest distribution in folk-lore.

In certain variants of the Tales of the *Nartæ*, *Dzerassæ* marries her husband's father, *Wærxæg*. From this episode wafts the archaic breeze. That simply is an undoubted echo of group marriage, where all the men of the group have access to all the women of another. Survivals of early forms of marital relationships are found in other cycles of the Tales of the *Nartæ*, headed by the *Satána* - *Wyryzmæg* cycle to which we now turn our attention.

If anyone asked me what is the most remarkable thing in the *Nartæ* epic, I would answer without a moment's thought: the image of *Satána*. Women figure in many epics, but we would search in vain in any other kind of epic for a woman's image of such power, of such significance, of such a sweeping scale, of such vitality as the Nart *Satána*. In many epics women are also given a great role. But in spite of all that, they remain for the most part the bearers of purely feminine or family principles, which in the final account limit their sphere of activity. Therefore, in other epics one heroine could easily take the place of another, without damage to the psychological and artistic truth. The Nart *Satána*, however, could not possibly be replaced at any time by anybody, and it would be equally impossible to remove her from the epic without feeling the yawning gap left behind.

The sphere of her activities is not the narrow circle of love and family relationships, but the life of the folk as a whole. One could imagine the *Nartæ* without any one of its heroes, even the greatest, but one couldn't imagine them without *Satána*. Does this not explain the fact that nowhere in the epic do we find mention

of the death of *Satána*? She is immortal, or, more precisely, she is alive until this day, while the whole *Nartæ* people survive.

Satána is the mother of her people, the center of attention of the *Nartæ* world. All thread lead to her, without her participation and advice no one significant event could take place. She it was who brought up the most famous heroes - *Soslan* and *Batraz*, not being their natural mother. She it was, wise and knowing the future, who rescued them at the most difficult moments. She it was who opened the hospitable doors of her home, when the *Nartæ* were overtaken by famine and hunger. Her generosity, and the abundance of her board have passed into the proverb «Our hostess is a real *Satána!*», and that is the highest praise for a woman in the mouth of Ossetes.

Satána is a powerful sorceress. She can summon up blizzards, storms and sunshine, understand the language of the birds and beasts, and can, if she so wishes, take on the form of an old hag, or a seductive young woman, and glancing in her «heavenly mirror» she can see all that is happening on the earth around.

To show that *Satána's* image comes straight from the matriarchal epoch is merely to batter at the open door. The obvious features of the matriarchal order are sown abundantly in all ancient epics - in the *Kalevala*, the Irish sagas, and the *Edda*. But the existence of such a monumental figure as *Satána* in the *Nartæ* epic itself has special historical significance.

The fact is that the Alani (Alans), were one of the Sarmatian tribes. Sarmatians, according to the evidence of ancient authors, were distinguished among other tribes by the marked features of the matriarchy, and a high social situation of their womenfolk. Pseudo-Skilak names them «*gynaikokratumenoi*» - that is to say «governing by women». We shall make no mistake if we say that, from the point of view of social typology, the Alan *Satána* is the blood-sister of the Sarmatian queen *Amaga*, the Scythian *Tomiris*, or the Massagetian *Zarina*.

Rationality, endurance, resourcefulness in moment of danger - such are the distinguishing features of the oldest of the *Nartæ*, *Wyryzmæg*. In generosity and hospitality he is the fitting partner for his wife *Satána*. Their mutual relationships are imbued with unchanging love and care.

As in the case with *Wyryzmæg*, so especially his wife *Satána* appears episodically through whole cycles of stories. Every such episode brings out a new line in their characteristics, and forms an image of high artistic power, integrity and fullness. In one theme after another *Satána* and *Wyryzmæg* appear as the central figures, and this gives us the right to speak of a special cycle dealing with this famous married pair.

The stories of *Wyryzmæg* and *Satána* are deeply shaded, and overgrown with much later accretions about the first human or heavenly couples. The myth about *Wyryzmæg* and *Satána* leads us into the circle of primitive myths about the origin of the gods, of mankind, and of human tribes. This is supported by the fact that the birth of *Satána* is tied up with the birth of the first horse, and the first dog. Indeed,

the expressions «eldest horse» and «eldest dog» are not to be understood otherwise than as «progenitor of horses» and «progenitor of dogs».

For mythological presentation it is usual and in the order of things, that the first earthly horse sprang from the heavenly one, and likewise the first earthly dog - from one in heaven. A people of horse and sheep-breeders, shepherds, hunters and warriors, as we know the ancient Alans and *Nartæ* to have been, must have valued and loved their horses and dogs above all other domestic creatures. It is no wonder that they introduced precisely these into their myth of the origin of mankind, for they belong together.

With the person of first and best of women, *Satána*, is coupled the appearance of the first and best of drinks - beer, the favourite beverage of the Ossetes. Ethnographical and linguistic data point to the antiquity and exceptionally widespread nature of the culture of beer among Ossetes. The Ossete word *æluton* for fabulous food or drink, originally meant 'beer of special brew', and is related to the North German word for beer *alut*, and can be compared with the English *ale*, and the Finnish *olut*.

Therefore we shall hardly be mistaken if we express the conviction that the *Satána* and *Wyryzmæg* cycle, behind its everyday themes, conceals old mythological seeds of legends about the origins of human tribes, and of the gods. Going further, the image of *Satána*, and the part which she plays through the whole epic, allows us to assert that this legend arose under the conditions of a not then out-lived matriarchal world-outlook. This last circumstance may serve as a certain starting point for the dating of the given cycle. Many researchers note the existence of undoubted ties between totemism and the matriarchy. In any case the latter is not younger than the former. If we attribute the *Wærxæg* cycle, with its totemic nucleus to the first half of the first millennium before our era, then we can scarcely count the primitive mythological nucleus of the *Wyryzmæg* and *Satána* cycle as later than that.

Did there exist some kind of ancient tie between the first and second cycle? That is not clearly apparent to us. The succession of the generations *Wærxæg-Æxsærtæg-Wyryzmæg* seems to speak of such a connection, but that succession may have been attached later, in the form of a "genealogical cyclic formation".

In the course of its long existence in the mouths and memories of the people, the *Nartæ* tales and their themes underwent, it stands to reason, not a few changes and variations, of which many are lost irredeemably. If the ancient Alans had a written literature which would have fixed the Tales of the *Nartæ* in various stages of their history, we should have had extremely interesting material for assessment of the evolution of their epic motives and subjects. But now we unfortunately have no such material available.

Sometimes it happens, nonetheless, that versions not preserved by the given folk themselves, are found among their neighboring tribes, where they in their time were known through the usual migration of folk-lore themes. Fortunately in

the *Satána* cycle, we have such an occasion. Just as Herodotus preserved for us many themes of the *Nartæ* epic in Scythian customs and traditions of the fifth century before our era, so the Armenian historian Movsēs Xorenac'i in the legends which he recorded about the Alan queen Sat'inik, fixed a few themes in which one may recognize the modification of *Nartæ* themes from the *Satána* cycle.

In this same cycle there are also a few subjects and motives which we can touch on only in passing. The theme of a hero who died in his youth, and returns from the world beyond the grave to his father, to perform with him wonderful exploits, and then go back to the kingdom of death, belongs to a number of the most popular in our epic. It is met with also in *Totraz* cycle.

The adventure of *Wyryzmæg* in the Cyclops's cave relates to a now well-known migratory subject with the widest circulation. The antiquity of this theme is evidenced by Homer's story of *Odysseus* and *Polyphemus*. Similarly the myths about *Prometheus*, and the *Argonauts*, in their subject matter, closely connect ancient Greece with the Caucasus.

The story of the Cyclops, apart from Ossetes, is in evidence among Megreles, Kabardians, Daghestanis and Chechens. Moreover, the Polyphemus motive is known among European peoples. The Caucasian variants stand incomparably closer to the Greek than European ones do. V. Miller's work "Caucasian stories about Cyclops" is devoted to a comparative study of a selection of these tales.

The invention of beer served as the subject of an epic song not only among Ossetes. The twentieth rune of the *Kalevala* is devoted almost entirely to that remarkable event. *Osmotar* appears as the first woman who brewed beer from barley, and added honey to it.

However little in common, at first glance, there may be between the profoundly human and real image of the Nart *Satána* and the misty-mythical figure of the Finnish *Osmotar*, they nonetheless come from one source - from the most ancient myths about the origin of the natural elements, peoples, and gods. Such is the cycle of *Satána* and *Wyryzmæg*, outstanding in the Tales of the *Nartæ*.

Satána appears as mother and mistress of the home - not only in the narrow family circle, but among the whole tribe. When famine and hunger overtake the *Nartæ*, *Satána* opens her hospitable doors, and feeds the folk, young and old, from her prepared reserves. The woman's managerial role shown here, as the keeper and distributor of the tribe's resources is interesting in the highest degree, and important for the portrayal of early forms of society of the matriarchal type.

The third cycle about *Soslan*, is distinguished by the richness of its subject matter, and the popularity of its central hero. On Ossetian soil, the name *Soslan* is in evidence from the XIII century on: the Ossete chief David *Soslan* was the husband of the famous Georgian queen Tamara.

In the *Nartæ* epic *Soslan* (*Sozrygo*) occupies a most prominent place, and appears as one of the favourite heroes. In *Soslan* and *Batraz* cycles, more than in others, there appear truly heroic super-human, warrior motives. But in distinction

from *Batraz*, a hero of unconquerable strength, and honest straightforward action, *Soslan* in battle against most powerful enemies, readily resorts to all kinds of trickery and cunning, while with the weakest and defeated enemy he is stern and pitiless. He is portrayed in a specially unseemly light in the episode of his fight with *Totraz*, son of *Albeg*.

In Digor variants his usual epithet was *næramon*, which means 'stormy, indomitable'. Evidence of his popularity and deeply national character is found not only in the epic itself, but in many local tales connected with his name, especially in Digoria. Many ancient tombs there are spoken of as his. They also have stones upon which he is supposed to have sat. One of their summer festivals is named after *Soslan*. The rainbow in Digor is called «*Soslan's* bow», as in Persian it is called «*Rustam's* bow». In one story everyone is recommended to take steps to ensure that his deceased relatives receive a comfortable place to watch the final fight between *Soslan* and *Totraz*, which occurs in the after-world beyond the grave.

The figure of *Soslan* served as the subject of a special mythological study by G. Dumézil, entitled «*Myths of the Sun*».

«Of course,» says Dumézil, «not every feature, not every deed performed by *Soslan* bears a sunny character. Like all kinds of gods, who in time become heroes of a story, he united about his person many legends of various origins. But his cycle alone among the circle of Nartæ tales gives a whole row of themes, and fundamental ones at that, in which the sun-like nature of the hero appears in full glory».

First of all - his birth. Being born from a stone is a feature readily attributed to sun-gods. From the rock was born the sun-god *Mithra*. He also is called «born-of-stone».

Soslan's sun-like nature is further shown by his marriage to a daughter of the Sun.

In a range of themes, telling of the struggle of *Soslan* with his enemies, it says that he achieved victory at mid-day: again a feature of a sun-god, since he attains the zenith of sunny power at midday.

The theme of his struggle against *Mukara*, son of *Tar*, especially in some variants, strikingly reminds one of the wide-spread myth about «the stealing of the Sun».

An evil being, concealed beneath the ice is an obvious symbol of the cold winter. The hero, wrestling with this evil being becomes a symbol of the Sun. In the *Nartæ* epic these two are *Mukara* and *Soslan*.

Even more obviously and directly «*The Wheel of Balsæg*» leads us into the circle of Sun-myths. It comes to its end in water, in a few variants - the Black Sea, which means in the West. There are some variants where *Balsæg's* Wheel acts in accordance with the bidding of the daughter of the Sun, offended by *Soslan*.

In the Digor version of this story, the Wheel is named after *Oinon*. This name is a corruption of John (Johan), and St. John is associated successively with the Sun cult, and his festival falls in with the midsummer solstice of the Sun. In Digoria, at the place of the supposed grave of *Soslan*, near the village *Nar*, there was celebrated every summer, around the day of St. John the Baptist, «the festival

of *Soslam*, when rams were slaughtered in honour of the hero, and they preyed to him to send down good weather. The connection of our hero with the Sun cult is thus firmly supported.

The fact that the Sun-hero is slain in the struggle against the Wheel, a symbol of the Sun, does not surprise anyone who knows with what twists and turns, and along what unexpected lines themes develop in folk-poetry, and how often is affirmed there the dialectic law of the unity of opposites.

Many similar examples could be brought, for folk myth creation fears contradiction less than anything. In the complicated image of *Soslan* are united various different features, and most often, maybe, contradictory ones. But if in that image there are features with a clear mythological meaning, then they are those of a sun-hero.

Soslan, the old «heathen» sun-god, battles with *Oinon's* Wheel, i.e. St. John's Wheel, the new Christian «god» of the Sun, and dies fighting.

Exactly likewise the heathen god of thunder *Batraz* struggles with the Christian god of thunder *Wacillatæ* (Elias) by whom he also is slain. In both cases the victory rests with the new Christian god. Thus when *Soslan* compels the Wheel to name itself after him, and not after *Oinon* (or *Balsæg*) we see through that transparent symbolism, that we are fighting to decide who shall remain master of the Sun.

Among the most interesting episodes of the *Soslan* cycle we find the journey of our hero to the kingdom of the dead. This, as we know, is one of the most ancient epic themes, as is witnessed by the monuments of world literature.

The *Narte* description is distinguished by the great concreteness and liveliness in the telling of the fates of people who in their earthly lives performed good or evil deeds. In this, as always, the scenes of torment and deprivation stand out much more variedly and vividly than the scenes of blessedness. While in the Greek myths we find descriptions of the torments of two or three sinners, here before us pass a whole procession of pictures portraying rewards for good, and more especially, punishments for evil deeds of every kind.

The moralizing tendency with which these descriptions are imbued is very touching in its naivety. We see here which benefactors are accounted specially praiseworthy, and which defects are most condemned. Generosity, hospitableness, justice and marital and maternal love - these bring blessedness in the other world. On the other hand a burdensome fate awaits the mean, the quarrelsome, the thievish and the lustful and lascivious.

The description of the world beyond the grave, with all its wonders, is repeated in the same exact way in the ceremonial formula devoted to the deceased one's horse.

The bride-price paid by *Soslan* for the daughter of the Sun represents a variation of a very wide-spread motive concerning marriages, which depended on the fulfillment of difficult assignments by the bridegroom.

Special mention must be made of *Soslan's* coat made out of scalps. Vs. Miller had already shown that this theme comes from Scythian times, and reflects the Scythian custom described by Herodotus: «Scythians cut off the heads of

those they slay in battle, and bring them to their chieftain; only those warriors who bring an enemy's head have a right to share in the booty. Afterwards they scalp the heads in the following fashion: they make a circular incision above the ears, and tear off the skin, by shaking the skull vigorously by the hair. With the aid of a bull's rib they scrape off surplus scraps of remaining fat and later soften the dried skin by crumpling it between their hands. When this is done, they use it as a wiping cloth for their hands, and hang it in their horse's bridle. In this way they win praise, for the greater number of such wipers a Scythian had, the greater was his honour and glory. Many of them made themselves cloaks of these human scalps, sewn together in the style of a shepherd's coat».

The Alans carried on this tradition of the Scythians. «These Alans boast of nothing so much as the slaughter of someone or other, and in the form of war-trophies, instead of decorations, hang the scalps cut from the heads of the slain on their war-horses» (Ammianus Marcellinus).

We see in this example something which was once a living custom, an everyday occurrence, which in succession goes over into folk-lore, and is preserved as a folk-lore motive.

In the *Soslan* cycle we can show yet once more a clear example of such a transformation: thus that which with the Scythians was a living custom becomes with the Ossetes a theme for their *Nartæ* epic. We have in mind *Soslan's* horse at his funeral - slain, and stuffed with straw. G. Dumézil points to the great similarity of the horse sacrifices among the Scythians and the Ossetes, and particularly when comparing them brings in a story by Herodotus, how they stood the stuffed corpses of horses around the grave of a Scythian chieftain, intended to accompany him in the world beyond. They slit them open, remove their internal organs, and then stuffed them with straw, and sewed them up again. In this manner they stood them, with supports, around the grave. Can one then, Dumézil asks, separate these funeral horses of the Scythians, on which the chieftain would travel in the other world, and the funeral horse of *Soslan*, on which he returns to the world beyond the grave?

So these ancient customs, long since gone out of use, get woven into folk-lore themes and motives, and live on through millennia.

Parallels between themes in the *Soslan* cycle and Scythian habits can serve in the absence of other data for the approximate dating of a few existing parts of that cycle; obviously the origin of those parts must relate to a time not later than 5th century B.C.

The dawn of the Iron Age, with its metallurgy, put in man's hands new instruments of labour, and new weapons of war. The man of those times is imbued with belief in his own strength, in the might of his armaments, in the irrepressible oreole of military glory. Then in exchange for the hero-wizard and sorcerer, we get the hero-warrior-knight.

But the ancient ideology of sorcery and magic does not die out all at once. It tries to maintain its position under the new conditions. As a result we get a type of

hero in whom warrior-like qualities are allied to cunning - that type of cunning which to ancient understanding meant sorcery. In the Ossetic language the word *xin* means 'cunning' and 'sorcery', hence we get the expression *xin æmæ kælæn* which means 'cunning and sorcery'.

Soslan personifies just this traditional stage. He is shown already clothed in the qualities of a hero-warrior, but along with them goes the image of a clearly defined hero-sorcerer. These features remain throughout his whole life. *Soslan* and *Batraž* both pass through a tempering procedure, but *Batraž* is tempered in the furnace of a smith - the normal «technology» of the Iron Age. *Soslan*, however, is tempered in wolf's milk - a clear totemic piece of magic. The important feats achieved by *Soslan* fall under one scheme: he begins as a hero-warrior, and ends as a warrior-magician.

The hero-warrior with outlived features of a hero-sorcerer, is presented as if it were a transitional stage from the purely shamanistic form to the purely knightly. According to Engels, when war becomes the normal function of social life, and military leaders give tone to the formation of social ideology, then a new type of epic hero is born: a hero of unconquerable strength, crushing his enemies with his knightly power, with no admixture of cunning or magical craft. Such a hero in the Tales of the *Nartæ* is *Batraž*, the son of *Xæmyc*.

Along with the heavy hyperbolism, in the description of his person and his deeds, he is often led beyond earthly bounds, beyond what is humanly achievable, and is carried up beyond the world of the *Nartæ*, as a being of special order - a super-man, a demi-god. Along with *Soslan*, and to a greater degree than he, *Batraž* bears within himself a mythological form, where primitive cosmic powers still gather, for which the usual outer shell of the ordinary, though epic hero is too frail and ephemeral. The impress of the miraculous, the super-human, is noticed throughout his whole life - his birth, his feats, his death. The final battle of *Batraž* with the heavenly powers places him the host of titanic warrior-gods, besides the Greek Prometheus, and the Caucasian Amiran.

In the *Batraž* cycle, as in others, we must distinguish a few independent theme-lines, which later in the process of cycle formation are united round one name. Among the most ancient elements of the *Batraž* cycle we must include mythological elements. The mythological nucleus of this series, as has been successfully shown by G. Dumézil, presents the image of thunder-god. Superhuman, mythical features so strongly stand out in *Batraž* image, that there is no reason to doubt its mythological foundation. Around this mythological nucleus have grown up a series of epic-hero themes and subjects of another origin, out of which the most popular has become the favourite one of tribal life, namely feuds and blood-revenge.

Fierceness is a characteristic feature of all gods of thunder, and this is a personal trait of *Batraž* to a high degree. He not only has the features of lightning, but of storm. Let us remember how he blew off the ashes from the burnt garments of the *Nartæ* women, or how from the breath of his dead body tens of heavenly powers perish.

It may appear to be a contradiction, that the thunder-god *Batraž* should struggle against the thunder-gods of the Christian era, among whom was counted St. Elijah (*Wacilla*). But that contradiction is of the same type as the struggle of *Soslan*, the Sun-god, with the Sun symbol - The Wheel of *Balsæg*. It in no way refutes, but rather supports the mythical thunder-god nature of *Batraž*, because the fight goes on, as we think, between gods of two epochs, the heathen one represented by *Batraž*, and the Christian one by *Wacilla* (St. Elijah).

The struggle of Christianity with pre-Christian cults left its mark on many folk-epics of Christian peoples: on the Russian folk-tales (*Dobrynjya* and the Snake, etc.), the German sagas («Twilight of the Gods» etc.) and the Irish sagas.

The *Nartæ* epic in the main is pre-Christian, but in the dramatic episodes of the death of *Batraž* and *Soslan* is reflected, so we think, the struggle between old heathenism and new Christianity. The heathen demi-god *Batraž* perishes in the struggle with the Christian God, with Christian angels, and St. Elijah (*Wacilla*). Especially interesting is the episode of the installing of *Batraž*'s corpse in the crypt of St. Sophia, that is the chief shrine of Byzantium, from which the Christian belief came to the Alans. We shall scarcely make anything out of this episode, if we do not admit that it symbolizes the capitulation of the heathen world before the new religion, while the resistance which the already lifeless *Batraž* put up to this, is merely an indication of the stubbornness of the previous struggle.

The connection between *Batraž* and the heathen cults of the Scythians and ancient Aryans is supported by several direct parallels drawn by G. Dumézil. The ceremony of the casting of *Batraž*'s sword into the sea compares with the cult of the sword among the Scythians and the Alans. The bonfire of «a hundred wagon-loads of coals» into the middle of which *Batraž* goes to become tempered before the trembling *Nartæ*, recalls the grandiose annual construction of a fire of «a hundred and fifty cart-loads of logs», which served the Scythians as a pedestal for their sword-god, round which were slaughtered their trembling war-captives.

In one tale recorded by G. Šanayev, *Batraž*'s sword acts itself as a thunder-god. «The story» says Šanayev, «asserts that *Batraž*'s sword was cast into the Black Sea». He adds that «when the lightning flashes from the west, Ossetes regard it as the gleam of *Batraž*'s sword, hurling itself out of the sea, against the heavens to destroy evil powers and devils.»

Behind the deduction of traits characterizing *Batraž* as a mythical symbol of thunder-god, there still remain in his cycle many motives which in their turn have wide parallels in world folk-lore. The clear parallel from Scythian customs to which Vs. Miller has drawn our attention, has great importance for the explanation of the motive of the miraculous cup *Wacamongæ* or *Nartamongæ* in the *Nartæ* epic. This cup raised itself to the lips of real heroes, telling of their campaigns, but remained motionless before braggers and boasters.

Here is what Herodotus tells us about the Scythians: «Once a year each regional chief at the festival ordered a glass of wine mixed with water, and all the

Scythians who had killed an enemy drank from this goblet. Only those who had not performed this service had not the right to touch it. They sat aside in shame; that was for them a great dishonour. As for those who killed a large number of foes, they drank from two goblets united together.»

Aristotle also mentions this : «The Scythians at one of their festivals do not allow those who had not killed one single enemy to partake of the cup going round.»

The closeness of the Tales of the *Nartæ* and the stories of Herodotus are striking. Both among the *Nartæ* and the Scythians the wine-cup served as an honorary reward for feats of battle, and to «distinguish real heroes». In connection with this G.Dumézil notes the role which the goblet plays in Scythian mythology. Four things, all made of gold, which according to Scythian belief fell from heaven, were the plough, the yoke, the axe and the goblet. It is also well-known what role holy drinks and goblets played in Indo-Iranian cults.

One of the central episodes of the *Batraḡ* cycle is where *Batraḡ* takes blood-revenge for his father's death. The classical motive of patriarchal-tribal custom, the blood-feud, not by chance occupied a leading place in the *Nartæ* epic. Speaking earlier about the specially lively aspects of this epic, we showed that one of the reasons for this likeness to life must be seen in the way that the social conditions which gave birth to this epic continued to exist for a long time, and to further nourish it, thus saving it from ossification, degradation and oblivion. The blood-feud motive entered the epic under the conditions of a patriarchal-tribal relationship, and, judging by other elements of the *Batraḡ* cycle, of extremely distant times. But those patriarchal-tribal relations, including the blood-feud, continued to exist and flourish in Ossete customs through many centuries. This is the reason why the story of how *Batraḡ* took revenge for the death of his father was, and remained one of the favourite and most popular episodes of the epic. Here is the reason why a whole series of *Nartæ* heroes besides *Batraḡ* also appear as avengers of their father's blood: *Totraz*, son of *Albeg*, *Acæmæz*, son of *Acæ*, *Qaitar* and *Bitar*, sons of *Soslan*. It is not by chance that the well-known folk epic, named «*Æfxcærdty Xæsanæ*» among the Ossetes, also has blood-revenge as its theme.

The severe, persistent and pitiless manner in which *Batraḡ* fulfills his filial duty as blood-avenger might appear repulsive to the modern reader, but one must take into account the fact, that this epic was composed in very cruel times, with very cruel and severe customs. *Batraḡ*'s actions are dictated not by mere caprice, but by the idea of duty. His revenge is the victory of justice, as it was understood in tribal conditions. It contains less of the arbitrary elements, and unjustifiable cruelty than, say, the revenge of *Kriemhild* in «Songs of the Nibelungen». Moreover, in it are found individual features of knightly nobility and magnanimity. Thus, when *Batraḡ* brings the hewn-off arm of the slain Lord *Sainæz* to *Satána* as a war-trophy, she then suggests that he should return it to his relatives, so that they may make an interment with due honours, which without the missing arm would be impossible, according to their customs. *Batraḡ* does so, without one word of protest.

Does not the cutting off of the Lord *Sainæg's* right arm contain the echo of an ancient custom? G.Dumézil shows the following parallel from Herodotus: «The Scythians bring to their war-god sacrifices not only of beasts, but of human beings. Human sacrifice is carried out in this way: from the number of prisoners they choose each hundredth one, and cut off his right shoulder including the arm. The hewn-off limb is then hurled in the air, and left to rest wherever it falls, the body being left in another place.»

This hacking off of the right arm appeared evidently among the Scythians, and among Ossetes, as a symbol of shameful dishonour for the enemy, depriving him of the right for honourable burial. The Ossetes' near neighbours from Georgia, the mountain-tribe Khevsur, had a custom of cutting off the right hand of the defeated enemy as a war-trophy. The number of hands hanging on the wall served as a measure of the prowess of the Khevsur warriors.

Numerous parallels between the *Batraž* cycle and Scytho-Alanic realities, as well as ancient customs, give us the right to assert that this cycle is quite original, and extremely old.

Let us now pass over from *Batraž* to *Syrdon* - a hero of an entirely different type. *Syrdon* is one of the favourite heroes of the epic. His popularity is no less than that of the most famous: *Satána*, *Wyryžmæg*, *Batraž*, *Soslan*. His name is in common use, signifying a cunning and skilful old fox, capable of all kinds of tricks, but in moments of difficulty able to rescue himself and others by means of his inventiveness and resourcefulness.

The Tales of the *Nartæ* are remarkable, by the way, for the great place which humour occupies in it. As the bearer of an essentially humorous character, do we see for the most part the Nart *Syrdon*.

He figures in all the cycles of the epic, preserving everywhere his unique individuality. In him there is nothing of the heroic power and spirit of *Soslan* and *Batraž*. His chief weapon is his tongue - sharp, poisonous and pitiless, bearing discord and dissension in all places. This weapon appears at times more dangerous and destructive than the swords and arrows of the strongest *Nartæ*. He chances to do the *Nartæ* some not unimportant services, but in most cases his evil turn of spirit prompts him to all kinds of crafty tricks, from which the *Nartæ* suffer sadly. Not without reason does the permanent epithet - *Narty fydbylyž* 'the *Nartæ's* evil genius' stick to him.

Syrdon is a were-wolf. He can, by merely wishing, change himself into an old man or a young girl. On one occasion he even changes into a hat. The red thread of hostility between him and *Soslan* runs through the epic, first to last.

Syrdon's father was a water-spirit, *Bæteğ*, or *Gæteğ*. By using his power as master of the waters for evil purposes, he was able to close the springs and cut off the *Nartæ* women from their water supply. In this way he compelled one *Nartæ* beauty to live with him, and from these compulsory relationships *Syrdon* was born. According to several variants the *Nartæ* for a long time did not recognize him as a member of their tribe, and

did not allow him in their villages. Only when he invented the twelve-stringed lap-harp, and presented it to the *Nartæ*, and captivated them with the sound of this wonderful instrument, did they take him into their midst.

Syrdon first hears of *Satána's* birth from *Džerassæ*, and uses this knowledge to put both *Wyryzmæg* and *Xæmyc* to shame. He began to shout about in the presence of the *Nartæ*, that *Xæmyc* had brought his wife with him to a feast of the *Nartæ*, hid in his pocket in the shape of a frog. As a result of this the daughter of *Bycentæ* left her husband, and *Batraz* was compelled to grow up with no mother.

At the tempering of *Soslan* in wolf's milk, *Syrdon* persuaded them to shorten the trough where *Soslan* was to lie, as a result of which his knees stuck up out of the magical milk, and were not tempered, which later on was to serve as the reason for his death.

When the *Nartæ* send their herd of horses into the kingdom of the powerful *Mukara*, *Syrdon* arranged things so that the fate of driving the herd there fell to *Soslan*, in the hope that in this way his old enemy will be killed. He also took the form of an old man, an old woman, and so on, to dissuade *Soslan* from saving the life of his old friend *Džex*, wounded during the siege of the *Xyž* fortress.

Having turned into a hat, *Syrdon* listened to the conversation between *Soslan* and his horse, and learned what it was that would lead them both to their deaths. This information he put to ill use in order to kill them. *Balsæg's* Wheel, defeated in the first struggle with *Soslan*, refused further fight, and even consented to destroy its master. But *Syrdon* stepped in again. Adopting the form of an old man, then an old woman, then a young girl, he persistently advised the Wheel not to kill *Balsæg*, but to battle against *Soslan* once more. Finally *Soslan* dies beneath an attack by the Wheel, and *Syrdon* cannot deny himself the pleasure of taunting his dying enemy.

According to a few variants, it was none else but *Syrdon* who poisoned *Batraz*, on the fatal day of his fight with the heavenly powers.

In the struggle between the *Boræta* and *Æxsærtæggatæ* families he also, in a few variants, played the role of instigator.

When the *Nartæ*, tormented by hunger, are completely exhausted, *Syrdon*, having eaten well, with especial satisfaction strolls among the starving, with bits of *fizonæg* and fatty sheep entrails sticking to his whiskers.

Among the domestic animals, *Syrdon's* famous bitch stand out, in habit and in style well worthy of her master. *Syrdon* lives in a secret place, where it is difficult to find him. The entrance to his home is like a maze, a real labyrinth. Only by tying a thread to the bitch's leg and following it, like *Ariadne's* thread, could *Xæmyc* find his way to *Syrdon's* dwelling-place.

Major tales in which *Syrdon* plays the main role are few. Best-known as the story about his stealing of *Xæmyc's* cow. In one hungry year, when the *Nartæ* were compelled to slay their last cattle, *Syrdon* stole *Xæmyc's* well-fed cow. While the meat of the slaughtered cow was boiling in the cauldron at home, *Syrdon* appeared at the *Nartæ* meeting place and chaffed *Xæmyc* over his

loss. *Xæmyc* began to feel suspicious. He decided to make his way to *Syrdon's* home and see whether his cow was not there. With great difficulty, following the thread tied to the leg of *Syrdon's* bitch, he finds his dwelling. In the cauldron meat is boiling. Sitting round waiting are *Syrdon's* seven sons. On the floor lies the head of *Xæmyc's* favorite cow. Infuriated *Xæmyc* slays *Syrdon's* sons, chops them up, and throws them into cauldron instead. After he has left, *Syrdon* returns home, takes the meat from the cauldron, and with horror sees that it consists of the limbs of his sons. His grief is unbounded. Such great sorrow sublimates and ennobles the feelings of even an evildoer, or at least, of a mischief-maker, and we see that in the moment of terror *Syrdon* grows before us into a tragic figure, compelling our unwilling respect.

From the bones of the bent arm of his eldest son he forms the frame of a small harp, and adds to it twelve strings from the heart fibers of his other sons, and to the sound of this plucked chords, he pours out his paternal woe. Thus, for the first time there appears among the *Nartæ* the twelve-stringed *fendyr* or hand-harp.

Music is born on tragedy - such is evidently the thought behind this remarkable episode. The plaint of *Syrdon*, played on his harp, shook the hearts of even the sternest of *Nartæ*. They forgave him his past actions against them, and took him among their number, to live with them openly, on an equal footing.

When we try to trace the origin of *Syrdon's* image, there come to mind first of all well-known mythological types from many folk-stories - those hero-rogues or tricksters. Such a trickster or deceiver is a kind of anti-hero. His behaviour is often unsocial, even harmful to the community as a whole. This, as quite easily we see, is characteristic of many of *Syrdon's* actions. Along with this deceptive side, the trickster may have certain traits of a cultural hero, which again were not lacking in *Syrdon*; thus he was the first to prepare the lap-harp for the *Nartæ*.

Syrdon has brothers in the epics of European peoples - the Irish *Briekriu*, and the Scandinavian *Loki*.

From this hero-trickster it is pleasant to pass on to such a radiant hero as *Acemæx*. Several themes and subjects in the epic are connected with his name.

The most interesting of these is the story of the wooing of *Agwyndæ*, and her marriage to *Acemæx*. In this tale *Acemæx* appears as a wonderful singer and musician, charming the whole of Nature with his flute-music.

This tale is found in several variants. Of these, one written down by Tujyanti Maxarbeg shows itself as a high creation of art. This was the variant we had in view when we wrote «The song of *Acemæx* occupies a special place in the epic. In it there are no scenes of cruelty or blood-letting which one meets in the other tales. It is foreign to the bitterest ideas of fate, the suffering which throws its shade upon the most important episodes in the history of the *Nartæ*. From start to finish it is imbued with sunshine, happiness and song, and is distinguished - disregarding its mythological character - by a brilliance and high relief of a psychological type, by the loveliness of its domestic scenes, by its abundant imagery, content,

and perfection of form, this Song of *Acæmæx* may rightly be regarded as one of the pearls of Ossetic folk poetry.»

Looking at this story, we may place *Acæmæx* in the ranks of famous spell-binding singers: in Greek mythology, in the Finnish *Kalevala*, in the «*Song of Gudrum*» from Scandinavia. Reading the description of the effect which *Acæmæx*'s music has on surrounding nature, we see that we are not dealing merely with a wonderful magical spell-binding song, but with a melody which has the very nature of the Sun. Truly, as a result of this sing, the eternal glaciers begin to melt, the rivers overflow their bounds, the bared slopes are covered with a carpet of grass, blooms appear in the meadows, bees swarm among them and butterflies too, bears wake up from winter sleep in their lairs and welcome the Sun. In short, before us lies a masterful portrayal of the coming of the Spring. The song welcomes the Sun and shares its power and activity.

Such a brilliant unity of micro- and macrocosmic elements in the motive of the marvelous singer are not found, as far as we are aware, in European Orpheus-type themes. *Acæmæx* appears as a Sun-hero, and his marriage to *Agwyndæ* seems nothing less than a myth of the coming of Spring.

Beside the heroes we have numbered, in the Tales of the *Nartæ* there appear in some episodes a series of personages, remarkable in many ways, but not standing as the central figures in epic cycles. Such are *Totrax*, the son of *Albeg*, *Aræxcaw*, the son of *Bedzenæg*, *Sæwai*, the son of *K'andx* and *Sybalc*, *Mærywydx* and others.

There are a few tales which cannot be related to one definite cycle, since there all the most notable *Nartæ* take an equal rightful share. Such, for instance, is the story of the struggle between *Æxsærtæggatæ* and the *Borætæ* families, and the Tale of the Black or Gold fox.

The *Nartæ* epic concludes with an interesting account of the extinction of the *Nartæ*. They left this life, in order to live eternally in songs. The rejection of eternal life in favour of eternal fame is the fundamental ethical idea of the *Nartæ* epic.

II. *Myths and History in the Tales of the Nartæ*

A folk epic, as a special form of expression, and as a poetic transformation of objective reality needs interpretation. The *Nartæ* epic too requires such clarification. What is hidden behind its images, subjects and themes? In the XIX century a dispute arose between two trends in the study of folk-epic creations, especially Russian folk-tales, both mythological and historical. Echoes of that dispute are heard until this day. The disputed point was this: whether folk-epics contained mainly expressions of the myths, that is some poetic imagery or «explanation» of the phenomena of nature and the life of the people, or on the other hand, real historical facts, events and personages. In another place, in an article concerning

Ancient Iranian religion and mythology, we have tried to show that it is not a matter of alternatives - either myth or history. Both one and the other exist side by side in religious systems, and also in folk epics.

This combination of the mythical and the historical in an epic is not mere chance or eventuality. It is normal and unavoidable. It appears as a result of the fact that the composers of the epic - folk-singers and tale-tellers - have at their disposal on the one hand, a rich inventory of traditional, mythological folk-lore images, subjects and motives, and on the other hand are children of their times, and of their natural and social environment, with its concrete historical experiences, events, customs and psychological circumstances. This reality strongly invades the mythological area, and thus every folk-epic is not only a collection of myths and fairy-tales, but a valuable historical source. Of course, it is not always easy to separate myth from history. One may sometimes take the historical as a myth, and the myth as historical. This is where disputes and differences of opinion are possible. But these will not be major and fundamental differences and disagreements on principle between schools of thought, but minor deviations in the interpretation of separate elements of the memorial folk-epic.

The Tales of the *Nartæ* give ample material for this twin-aspect complex attitude in studying it. Therein one finds forms diverse, and wonderful combinations of interwoven myths and history.

In examining separate cycles we already remarked that the origins of each of them consisted of this, that, or the other mythological factor: totemic attributes, and the myth about twin-brothers in the *Æxsar* and *Æxsærtæg* cycle, the myth about the first human couple in the *Wyryzmæg* and *Satána* cycle, the myth about the Sun-hero and Sun-worshipper in the *Soslan* cycle, the myth about the Sun and the coming of Spring in the *Acamæz* cycle, and the myth about the thunder in the *Batraz* cycle. Comparison with the mythology of other nations, especially Indo-Iranian, Scandinavian, Celtic and Italian, enables us to reveal a mythological substrata in those places where it was veiled from sight by much later emendations and accretions.

A good example of this is the incestuous marriage of *Wyryzmæg* and *Satána*. One might perceive here an echo of the endogamic customs which once existed among certain peoples, including the Ancient Iranians. However, the influence of comparative mythological material convinces us that such a solution would be premature. In the most ancient religious and mythological epic of the Indo-Iranian peoples, the Rigveda, brother and sister Yama and Yami become progenitors of a people. They themselves were born from the union of the god Gandhavra and a «water-woman» or mermaid. We should remember that *Wyryzmæg* and *Satána* were also born of such a «water-woman», the daughter of the sovereign of the sea, *Donbettyr*. In all the variants of the tale about *Wyryzmæg* and *Satána* one motive is repeated: *Satána* actively pursues her marriage, while *Wyryzmæg* resists her. The same thing occurs in the episode with Yama and Yami.

If the mythological foundation of the *Nartæ* epic does not raise any doubts among us, then just as unquestionable is its historical basis. We see at every step, how through the mythological schemes, their modes and motives, appear traces of history, concrete historical events, a concrete people.

This historical basis of our epic consists, first of all, in the fact that in the majority of the tales a well-defined social set-up is reflected. *Nartæ* society does not yet know a state system. Among them we see the signs of the tribal lay-out, the family organization, with noticeable survivals of the matriarchy, in the figure of *Satána*, for instance. The passion for campaigning and cattle-raiding makes itself felt at that stage of the development of the tribal system, which Engels names military democracy. We know that such a system was typical of the Sarmatian tribes.

From concrete events of Alan history in the epic, most clearly and dramatically is reflected the struggle between heathen beliefs and Christianity. In essence and content our epic is heathen, pre-Christian. Although there figures in it the name of *Wastyrdži* - St. George, and *Wacilla* - St. Eliah, and other Christian persons, the Christianity in it remains only in the names, while the images come from the heathen world. As we have tried to show, along with these names goes the struggle between Christianity and heathenism. *Soslan* and *Batraž* are the heroes of the heathen world, dying in the struggle with a new god and his servants. The capitulation of *Batraž* before St. Sophia is the capitulation of the heathen Alans before the Byzantium Christianity. Historically that all took place, as we know, between the fifth and tenth centuries. In the 10th century Christianity, at least nominally, has conquered the whole Alans domain, and the Alanian episcopate had been established. In the episodes of the death of *Batraž* and *Soslan* the epic appears as one of the «passing away of paganism».

Speaking of the historical character of the Tales of the *Nartæ* we can't remain silent about one other specific feature - its great realism. Realism in the portrayal of social and everyday circumstances, and in the outlining of characters. It may seem strange to speak of realism where we do not leave the realm of inventive fantasy, but nevertheless, the *Nartæ* epic is deeply realistic. It is difficult to convince a simple mountain man that the *Nartæ* did not exist and perform great feats. He is ready to admit that many of these deeds and adventures of the Nart heroes are mere inventions, but that the people themselves, so life-like, in such high relief, as if carved out of a mountain cliff, could be a mere idea of somebody's head - that he could never allow.

The picture of the life and customs and society of the *Nartæ* is painted in such lively, realistic colours.

Originating in the totemistic plan for the wolf, and in the Cosmic plan from the Sun, the *Nartæ* remain faithful to their dual nature: as children of the wolf, they love hunting and fighting, cattle-raids and campaigns, and as children of the Sun they love the rollocking radiance, gaiety, and happiness of feasts, games and dances.

If we try on the basis of these stories to determine what main occupations the *Nartæ* had, and how they spent their time, then we come to the conclusion that there were two: on the one hand hunting, and cattle-riding, and plundering expeditions, and on the other - noisy and abundant feasts, with dozens of slaughtered beasts, and with enormous cauldrons full of *rong* and mead, and inevitably at such celebrations the lively and noisy songs and dances. Such dances are brought to notice time and again, not as a chance feature, but as a leading motive, a real element of Nart life, as a serious and important occupation, to which the *Nartæ* gave themselves up whole-heartedly. It is quite possible that these dances had ritual significance. Otherwise it is difficult to explain why the *Nartæ* should perform their dances, for instance, when outside the enemy *Agnyr* had besieged them, and were ready to break into their village.

As far as their cattle raids (*balc*) and plundering expeditions (*xætæn*) are concerned, we need make no mistakes: they were purely «wolfish» exploits for the sole purpose of seizing sheep and cattle, and driving them off, and especially important, to obtain horses in this way.

We frequently see the leading *Nartæ* troubled by the thought that maybe somewhere, there is a place they haven't plundered. The fact that such a place existed was a sufficient motive to send them seeking more spoils of attack.

This peculiar style of life, and its accompanying psychology, reflected in the most ancient strata of the Tales of the *Nartæ*, is not in itself a matter of chance. This is the life and psychology in which our epic was born. It is necessary to transfer oneself into that society with its warrior-band organization, with its constantly restless and rollicking style of life, with its perpetual clashes and conflicts between families and tribes, with its cult of boldness and daring, and with its plundering exploits, in order to relate oneself to it with the necessary objectivity, and to determine its place in the history of the development of early forms of society. It stands to reason that neither the Homeric society, nor the society of the Nibelungen, nor the society of the Russian folk-tale, where in all places the state appears as a settled institution, can be placed in one historic range with *Nartæ* family and tribal society. Of all the European epics, only the ancient Irish sagas give us a picture typologically similar to the society of the *Nartæ*.

As enemies of the *Nartæ*, and the objectives of this valour of theirs, we see on the one hand the giants - *waignyta*, and on the other the *aldærtæ* and *malikta* - that is the princes and feudal lords. If the giants come from folk-lore, and symbolize, evidently, the crude untamable forces of Nature, with which the cultural and creative man has to battle, then the others, and the struggle against them, are reflections of certain real historical events. The opposition of the *Nartæ* to the *aldærtæ* is the opposition of the warrior democracy to the already forming feudal system among their neighbors.

If we take not separate instances here and there, but the general impression left by the *Nartæ*'s world in the most ancient parts of the epic, then before us,

without a doubt, stands a family-tribal society, and furthermore with clear remnants of the matriarchy.

The people in general form a warrior-group organization, of which it may be said that a certain kind of hierarchy is found there, but that is only the hierarchy of the elders and those with war glory. From this purely warrior-group organization comes yet another peculiarity of life among the *Nartæ*: the scorn for old and ailing *Nartæ* warriors, who can no longer take part in feuds and cattle-raids. This contempt for the aged arose from the conviction that the normal death for a fighting-man is death in battle, or from wounds.

The material culture of the *Nartæ* warriors corresponds with that epoch signalized by their social everyday life. Here we have the Early Iron Age, in its romantic period. The profession of smith is surrounded by a shining aureole, as it was in Homeric Greece, in Scandinavian mythology, and in the Finnish *Kalevala*. Like all which appeared beautiful and sacred, it is transferred from earth to the sky. The heavenly smith *Kwyrdalægön* is the blood-brother of Hephaestus and Vulcanus and appears as one of the central figures in the epic. He not only forges weapons for the heroes, but even tempers them in his furnace as well. His relations with mortals - and here the great antiquity of the epic speaks - was incomparably more intimate, simple and patriarchal, than any smith-god in the West. He was, for instance, a frequent participant in their feasts. The most outstanding *Nartæ* heroes - *Batraz*, *Aisana*, the son of *Wyryzmæg*, and others, remained with him for long periods on high as guests.

Iron and steel are met with in the epic at every step. Iron appears not only in weapons and armour. We meet iron-winged wolves, and hawks with iron beaks. Iron gates are quite usual, and there is even a whole castle made of iron, built by *Soslan* for his wife, the daughter of the Sun. Finally a few heroes themselves are made of iron: *Batraz* in all variants, and *Xæmyc* and *Soslan* in some.

Alongside iron, gold is very popular. It figures both as a decorative epithet - golden hair, golden Sun, etc. - and as a material attribute - golden apples, golden goblets, golden cones.

Bronze went on cauldrons, and as well as this, as some of the stories assure us, was used to patch up skulls broken in battle, when being repaired in *Kwyrdalægön's* heavenly smithy. Silver is not popular in the epic. A few times ivory is mentioned, and also mother-of-pearl and glass.

The weapons of the *Nartæ* consisted of swords (*kard*), battle-axe, pole-axe or halberd (*cirq*), spear (*arç*), bow (*ærdyn*) and arrow (*fat*), shield (*wart*), chain-mail (*çyær*) and helmet (*taqa*). The mention in a few variants of guns and cannons lies entirely on the conscience of a few of the latest tale-telling modernizers! Weapons are sometimes thought of as animated. Thirsting for battle, they give forth flame or blue haze. The famous «*Cerek* armour», on hearing the word «battle», itself jumps up in place on the hero warrior.

All other materials, not connected with ear feats, hunting or feasting, are

mentioned in the epic very vaguely, and only in passing. Sometimes *Nartæ* appear as shepherds, sometimes as farmers. But in the description of that side of the domestic life of the *Nartæ*, there is not that brilliance and reality as shown in military things. The *Nartæ* breed sheep, goats, and horned cattle, but they specially prize herds of horses.

Concerning agriculture among the *Nartæ* there is even less material. In one story the young *Soslan*, feasting with the gods, is presented with an iron plough, water to turn the mill, and wind for winnowing the grain. Here we have obviously a mythological interpretation of the source of agriculture.

Bread is scarcely mentioned in the tales, only the three scones, made with honey, which *Satána* brings as an offering to the gods on the sacred hill *Wask'wypp*, when she goes to pray to them. But since the *Nartæ* were great lovers of beer, then they must, one supposes, if only for that purpose, have produced barley. Another favourite drink among the *Nartæ* was *rong*, prepared with honey, like mead. That does not mean that they occupied themselves with bee-keeping. They could have obtained honey by bartering with neighbours, maybe Slavic tribes who went inter-trading.

Many everyday features are scattered around in the description and explanation of the fates of deceased people in the world beyond the grave (see the story of *Soslan* in the Kingdom of the Dead), but to relate them all to the *Nartæ's* early epoch is quite risky, since in this picture is included, pretty obviously, the experience of people of a much later age.

If we hear little about the working activities of the *Nartæ*, we hear all the more clearly and colourfully the rich descriptions of their amusements. The leisure time of the Sons of the Sun, judging by the stories recorded, was full of feasts, dancing, singing and games. As it says in one of the tales: «God created the *Nartæ* for a merry and carefree life.» Contempt for death somehow is naturally and simply coupled with love of life and its joys. After the strain of battle, of distant cattle-raids and hunting, they gave themselves up heart and soul to carousing and merriment. Having seized rich spoils, the *Nartæ* never «put something away for a rainy day». The plundered cattle were immediately put in the pot to entertain the whole tribe at the feast. To arrange such bountiful and generous carousals for all was obviously a matter of honour for the most distinguished *Nartæ*, and they did so on every possible occasion. The inability and unwillingness of the *Nartæ* to lay in stores for an emergency resulted in their rapid swinging over from one extreme to another - after excessive feasting frequently followed a period of hunger, leading these children of the Sun to exhaustion and even emaciation. Stories describing these sumptuous feasts and merriment stand in contrast to others, no less in number, portraying the times of common hunger and want. There are no signs, however, that these *Nartæ* in times of depression and need lost heart, or changed their habits. At the first possibility, after the next successful cattle-raid, these irrepressible people gave themselves up to unrestrained enjoyment and merriment again.

Of the scale of the forthcoming feast one can judge by the formula of the village-crier. Not a single soul could refuse to attend after hearing the invitation: «All who can walk - come yourselves», cried the herald, «and who can't walk - then carry them!» Feeding mothers were recommended to bring their babies with them in their cradles. The tables were set out to the full extent of a bow-shot. The abundance of eatables was truly Gargantuan, the festive boards bent and broke beneath the weight of the meat dishes. Beer and mead flowed over the brims of enormous cauldrons.

The culmination of the feasting came when the famous Nart folk-dance - the *Simd* - began. This ancient original and stylish ring-dance in which all participated, even when performed today, produces an imposing impression. Multiplied in its effect by the superhuman powers and temperament of those *Nartæ* titans, this dance, the stories tell us, shook the very mountains, and was an outstanding spectacle. Even the gods above looked down on the *Simd* dance of the *Nartæ* in amazement, mixed even with a goodly portion of fear!

Apart from the mass ring-dance, solo dances are also described, demanding the greatest artistic skill and virtuosity from the performer. He had to dance on the very edge of a small, low round three-legged table (*fjng*), set out at feasts with food and dishes and goblets, without disturbing a single crumb. He also had to dance tip-toe on the brim of the great cauldrons filled with beer, without shaking or upsetting them, or finally with a goblet of mead on his head, without spilling a single drop. The irreproachable performance of such feats was possible only for the best dancers, and competitions between them was one of the *Nartæ's* favourite spectacles. Such a competition between two famous dancers *Soslan*, and the son of *Xyʒ*, serves to tie up the famous story of the besieging of the *Xyʒ* fortress, and the subsequent marriage of *Soslan*.

Along with the dances, the *Nartæ* loved what we today would call sporting events. The character of these competitions was, of course, warrior-like, and their scale - simply Nartlike in scope. Archery and the testing-out of swords were the most usual of these contests. The stamina of steeds was tested in the glorious Nart horse-races, in which even the heavenly god *Wastjrdʒi* took part. There is also mention of the game of knucklebones, usually among children.

In general, one of the characteristic features of the *Nartæ* heroes was a persistent and restless spirit of rivalry. To be the best always, and in everything, that was the fixed idea of the most eminent *Nartæ*. A few *Nartæ* tales have as their plot one and the same question: it agitates all - «Who is the best among the *Nartæ*?» From this question arises, in a range of variants, the story of *Wyryzmæg* and the Cyclops. This same point stands at the center of attention when the beauty *Akula*, or *Agwyndæ*, or *Wadzæftawæ* or others are going to choose a husband for themselves, and scrupulously compare each of the pretendants with the others, finding in everyone some small fault, until they make the final choice of *Acemæʒ* or *Batraz*. Then there is a passionate outburst about the same question, when the *Nartæ*

are deciding who shall keep the sacred cup of *Nartamongæ* (or *Wacamongæ*). Finally this same question is set in the well-known tale about the elder *Nartæ* who bring out three most sacred treasures, to award them only to the most worthy.

In this last story the palm goes to *Batraŕ*. It is very interesting, in judging the ideal of human perfection among the people, to see what qualities gain for *Batraŕ* first place among the *Nartæ*. They were three: valour in battle, restraint in eating, and respect for women. Other stories and variants add a further range of qualities which taken together give a good idea of the *Nartæ* ideals. Through the whole epic run the threads of generosity, hospitality and friendliness. Every successful raid results in a festive board for all. The aureole which surrounds the married couple *Wyryzmæg* and *Satána* is to a significant degree explained by their unbounded hospitality.

Among the *Nartæ* the feeling of family solidarity and comradeship is highly developed. These features are connected in the closest way with the warrior-group organization of society, and flow naturally from it. In such conditions, when the tribe means also comradeship of the group, a natural feeling of blood-relationship between them grows many times over, thanks to common participation in battles, and on hunting expeditions, with their attendant dangers. A row of stories have as their theme the saving of one Nart by the others in moments of mortal danger.

The thirst for adventurous feats, and the scorning of death are the inseparable qualities of the real Nart. When a god presented the *Nartæ* with the choice of eternal life or eternal glory, they choose without hesitation death and eternal glory, rather than an existence without fame or honour.

Recreating in the epic about the *Nartæ* a certain ideal epoch in their own past, the folk counted as one of its special features the intimacy, simplicity and closeness of relationships between the people and the world of the gods. Truly, these relationships distinguished in the epic by an exceptional kind of patriarchy and directness. The tales not only describe occasions of meetings between gods and the people, but underline the fact that such contacts were in the nature of things, and that they were of frequent occurrence. «The *Nartæ* were fellow-dinners with the gods», is said in many stories. One of them about the end of the *Nartæ* begins so: «When the *Nartæ* were still full of strength, and when the pathway to the heavens was still open to them...». The open road to the heavens - here is the dream of the golden age, incarnated in the Tales of the *Nartæ*. Their gods were people like themselves, with the same psychology, and the same weaknesses. They frequently and easily communicated with the *Nartæ*, and distinguished *Nartæ* dwelt with them for lengthy periods.

If, on the one hand, *Nartæ* were friends of the gods, then on the other hand they also appear as friends of Nature, of birds and beasts and flowers. The world of the gods, the world of the people, and world of nature - these three worlds in *Nartæ* times breathe still as one life, and understand each other's tongue. We re-

member what a wonderful effect the music of *Acemæz* had on all nature: the beasts began to dance, the birds sang, the grass and flowers bloomed in all their beauty, the glaciers melted, the rivers overflowed their banks. In following *Balsæg's* Wheel, *Soslan* keeps up a conversation with all trees, and blesses the birch and hops for their services to him. When he lies dying, the beasts run to him, the birds fly to him, and he speaks kindly to them, and offers his corpse to them as food. With touching nobility even such predators as wolves and ravens just refuse his proposition. Swallows, the great favourites of the *Nartæ*, serve as a perpetual go-between for earthly mortals and the gods dwelling in the heavens. In some variants a swallow flies to *Soslan* as a messenger, bearing a warning of danger threatening his mother, and in this same way also brings the *Nartæ* news of *Soslan's* death. Many other sketches, showing the intimacy and mutual understanding between *Nartæ* and Nature are scattered everywhere in the epic.

In general, when we set on one side the later accretions in our many-centuried epic, then resurrected in its oldest parts we see *Nartæ* society, whose everyday life, world-outlook, ideals and ideas produces an undiluted impression, whose completeness is overwhelming.

As if living, there stands before us the *Nartæ's* world - a world of severe warriors, and carefree dancers, offspring of the Wolf, and Sons of the Sun, mighty as titans, and naive as children, fierce and cruel to enemies, boundlessly kind and generous and extravagant at home, friends of the gods, and friends of Nature. However original and far from us that world may be, on entering it we cannot avoid the impression of reality and liveliness which the folk's imagination has given to this fairy-tale, mythical world.

The Tales of the *Nartæ* - that is an image of a wonderful legendary world created with such powerful simplicity and plastic power, that it becomes near and dear to us, and we involuntarily feel that we must pay due tribute to the poetic genius of the folk who long ago composed and created it.