

OBITUARY

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**NORTH IRANIC PEOPLES
IN THE *ENCYCLOPÆDIA IRANICA***

In memoriam Ehsan Yarshater (1920–2018)

My first meeting with Ehsan Yarshater was in September 1986, when I took one of his courses, the Ancient History of Persia, as an elective course while I was a postgraduate student majoring in structural mechanics at Columbia University. As was his manner, Professor Yarshater would pose many questions to assess the average level of the heterogeneous background of his students. When I answered a few questions of some complexity, and he realized that I had consulted the article on the Achaemenids in the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, he invited me to a private conversation in his office that afternoon.

There in the office he encouraged me not to drop the course even if I found it trivial, and in exchange we would have extra sessions after each class. From that day I also recall the lengthy conversation we had about the *Encyclopædia Iranica*. He showed me the two published volumes of the encyclopaedia on the shelves behind his desk and explained with a sense of pride that the number of volumes might run up to ten by the time the project was completed. This was obviously a gross underestimate given that, after nearly thirty-two years, the sixteen published volumes of the encyclopaedia cover only half of the letters of the English alphabet.

That meeting was the beginning of my involvement with the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, a process that continues up to the present day. First, I was commissioned to edit individual articles on history and geography and ethnology. Soon I was invited to contribute articles as an author, mostly on Central Asia, as I had developed an interest in the historical geography and languages of Eastern Iran. Later I was invited to write on other subjects, especially Iranian languages. Eventually, upon the invitation of Prof. Yarshater, I joined the editorial board of



Ehsan Yarshater
(1920–2018)

the *Encyclopædia Iranica* in 2010. Since then, I have been involved with the Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University as an editor, as well as identifying future entries for the encyclopaedia.

The idea of compiling a comprehensive and authoritative reference work on Iran was cultivated in the second half of the twentieth century, with the purpose of facilitating the whole range of Iranian studies. Two centuries of intensive scholarly work on history, culture, ethnography, and languages of Iran — written in various European languages and dispersed in numerous journals and books — was to be brought to some order in an encyclopaedia. Two editions were envisioned at the outset. One was the Persian language *Dānešnāma-ye Irān o Eslām*, constituting translations of articles from the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* and new entries written by Iranists. Only a dozen fascicles of the *Dānesnāma* were published before the project was dashed to the ground by the Islamist regime that took over the country in 1979.

The English edition, which survived thanks to generous donations in the United States, was housed at the Center for Iranian Studies at Columbia University in the city of New York. The Center employed a few editors supervised by Prof. Yarshater. The articles were commissioned from various Iranists from various countries. After a long preparatory period, which amounted to nearly a decade, the first fascicle of the *Encyclopædia Iranica* was released in 1982. Over the past thirty-five years, 105 fascicles, 112 pages each, have been published in fifteen complete volumes, plus four fascicles of Volume XVI, covering the entries up to the middle of the letter K, only halfway through the alphabet. The online version of the encyclopaedia, launched in the early twenty-first century, offers digital versions of the printed articles plus entries out of the alphabetic order, making it nearly twenty percent larger than the print version.

The English-language project was conceived as the *Encyclopædia Persica*, a name that has survived in the letterhead used in early written communications. Prof. Yarshater preferred the term “Persia” over “Iran” as the English name of the country, using a name that had been known from ancient times down to the mid-twentieth century. “Persia” in English and its equivalents in the other languages of Europe are reflexes of the Greek Περσίς, which in fact was the exonym employed in nearly all languages, from Armenian *Parsastan* to Chinese *Bōsī*. Moreover, the use of *Persica* reconstituted the Persianate cultural sphere that once encompassed the Indian Subcontinent, the Caucasus, and Anatolia.

Nevertheless, the term *Iranica* eventually prevailed. Prof. Yarshater once explained in a private meeting that he eventually settled on the term *Iranica* because of its broader semantic inclusiveness — to embrace all Iranian-speaking peoples within and without the political domain of Persia or the Persian cultural

domain. This included Transoxiana, which was seldom ruled by Persia proper, while remaining a significant part of Iranian civilization from prehistory down to medieval era, and, as a result, it is commonly referred to as Eastern Irān by the scholars of Iranian studies. Even farther away, a truly remote nation is the Khotan kingdom, hosting Khotanese Saka, an East Iranian language known solely from Buddhist manuscripts unearthed in southern Xinjiang. The kingdom of Khotan was ruled without any overt attachment to the Persian political and cultural sphere that thrived on the Iranian Plateau. Accordingly, the *Encyclopædia Iranica* was designed to include all Iranian-speaking peoples, from those who spoke the Avestan language somewhere in the far northeast to the historical Chorasmians, Sogdians, Bactrians, Medes, and Parthians, down to the present-day Pamiris, Pashtuns, Baloch, Caspians, Kurds, Tats, Garmsiris, among others. This scheme mirrors the gradual geographical expansion of the Iranic peoples from northern Central Asia onto the Iranian Plateau, where they formed their mighty empires, and their spread further westward in more recent periods.

A whole different branch of Iranian-speaking peoples envisioned by the term *Iranica* was the North Iranic peoples — the Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, and Ossetians. They constitute a separate category not only because of their relative detachment, in terms of geography and history and culture, from the Iranic peoples of the south, but also the different discipline in which they are studied by modern scholars: Classical Greco-Roman scholarship in premodern era and Slavonic scholarship in modern times (rather than Iranian studies). This required *Encyclopædia Iranica* to reach out to scholars beyond the traditional orientalists.

The Scytho-Sarmatian era, which constitutes the ancient period of the Eurasian Steppes, is represented in the *Encyclopædia Iranica* in three ways: within the history of Persia, in an adversarial light; under general rubrics, such as horses, armour, or clothing, divided into sub-articles; and in specific entries such as those on the Scythians and Alans.

The millennium of the dominance of the North Iranians over the entire Eurasian Steppes parallels the formation of the Persian civilization in the south. Contacts between these two branches of Iranic peoples are reflected in various entries on the Median, Achaemenid, and Arsacid dynastic rules. The interaction between North and South Iranians has its beginning at the very dawn of the history of both, as the Cimmerians of the Pontic Steppes and the Medes of the Iranian Plateau made alliances to bring down the invincible Assyrian rule (as related in the entry “Assyria,” by M. DANDAMAYEV and È. GRANTOVSKIĬ, 1987). This was followed by such historic events as Cyrus the Great’s defeat and death in a battle with the Scythians of Central Asia, the immense campaigns of Darius I against the

Scythians beyond the Danube river, and recurrent encounters of the Arsacid emperors with the Sakas beyond the Oxus river. The interaction with Steppe Iranians is covered in numerous entries of the encyclopaedia on ancient Iran, constituting a reliable source available to academic research worldwide.

There are entries in *Encyclopædia Iranica* with a sub-entry specific to North Iranian peoples. The horse among the Steppe Iranians is covered under “Asb ii. Among the Scythians” (F. THORDARSON, 1987), that is, the second part of the general heading *asb*, which is “horse” in Persian. Likewise, the outfits of the Scythians and Sarmatians of Ukraine and Kuban are described in the sub-heading “Clothing vii. Of the Iranian tribes on the Pontic Steppes and the Caucasus” (S. A. YATSENKO, 1992). The sub-entry “Carpets vi. Pre-Islamic carpets” (KAREN S. RUBINSON, 1990) addresses the celebrated Pazyryk carpets found in the Altai mountains of southern Siberia. The art of war among the Central Asian Sakas are discussed in “Armor ii. In Eastern Iran” (BORIS A. LITVINSKY, 2000), “Shield in Eastern Iran” (idem, 2010), “Helmet i. In pre-Islamic Iran” (idem, 2003), among other articles.

Individual North Iranian groups are subject to specific entries. These include “Cimmerians” (SERGEI R. TOKHTAS’EV, 1991), “Scythians” (ASKOLD IVANTCHIK, 2018), and “Haumavargā” (RÜDIGER SCHMITT, 2003). The latter is Sakā haumavargā, who formed, together with Sakā tigraxaudā and Sakā tayai paradraya, the three groups of Saka tribes in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions. A comprehensive article on the Sarmatians is yet to appear. The article “Amazons” (A. SH. SHAHBAZI, 1989), brief as was the norm in the first volume of the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, was augmented twenty-eight years later by the online entry “Amazons in the Iranian World” (ADRIENNE MAYOR, 2017), expounding on the Scythian origins of the name given not only to the largest river on earth, but also one of the most powerful multinational technology companies in the twenty-first century.

The nomadic tribes of the Central Asian Steppes constitute the entries “Massagetae” (RÜDIGER SCHMITT, 2018), “Dahae” (FRANÇOIS de BLOIS and WILLEM VOGELSANG, 1993), “Aparna” (PIERRE LECOQ, 1996), “Apasiacae” (R. SCHMITT, 1986), as well as “Amorges” (A. SH. SHAHBAZI, 1989), the Saka king conquered by Darius the Great. The offshoots of the Eastern Scythians formed the “Sakas in Afghanistan” (PIERFRANCESCO CALLIERI, 2016) and “Indo-Scythian Dynasty” (R. C. SENIOR, 2005).

The Alanic period marks the medieval period of the North Iranian peoples, when their realm shrunk to the Caucasus. The encyclopaedia was keen to have entries on the Alans since their history in their homeland was little understood outside Russian scholarship (while their invasions in Europe and Africa were well-known from Classical sources). By going through the archives of the Center for

Iranian Studies, one sees the confusion among the terms Alān, Arān and Albania/Arrān; it took some years of correspondence (1974–78) to overcome the initial ambiguities. The best-known specialist was then the renowned Ossetian scholar Academician Vasily Abaev (1900–2001). A letter dated 2 October 1974 (Fig. 1) invites Abaev to write the article “Arrān (Alān, Albania).” Confused by the proposed title, Abaev declined in a postcard, and responding to a follow-up letter, Abaev stated, in a letter from Moscow dated 12 January 1975 (Fig. 2), that he could deliver the articles “Alans” and “Ossetia” but with a long delay, and suggested Yuri Gagloīti of Cxinval, South Ossetia, who had published the ethnogenesis of the Alans, as an equally qualified scholar on the subject. He further introduced Igrar Aliev of Baku as a competent scholar to contribute on Azerbaīdzhan and Arrān.

Eventually Abaev submitted the article “Alans,” which was prompted by a letter dated 6 July 1976, in which Yarshater asked for a longer article. This was obviously not delivered by Abaev. There exists in the archives another letter of 23 February 1978 (Fig. 3) requesting that Abaev write a longer piece on the Alans and another one on Albania. His submission on the Alans was translated into Persian and published in the first fascicle of *Dānesnāma-ye Irān o Eslām* (1977); its English version constitutes the first part of “Alans” in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, extended by the Additional Notes of H. W. Bailey (vol. I, fascicle 8, 1985, pp. 801–803). The painstaking process of selection, invitation, submission, translation, and editing of this entry demonstrates the laborious journey taken by the *Encyclopædia Iranica* in its formative years.

The enigmatic heading “Arān” survives, but is cross-referenced to “Alans,” “Albania,” and “Arrān.” The entries “Albania” (M. L. CHAUMONT, 1985) and “Arrān” (C. E. BOSWORTH, 1986) respectively correspond to the pre-Islamic and Islamic history of the present territory ruled from Baku. Belonging to the Alanic era is the nomadic group “Asii” (F. THORDARSON, 1987) of Central Asia. Another group, the Jász, and their province Jászság in modern Hungary, is not yet an entry. A noteworthy entry would be “Magas,” the capital city of the Alanic kingdom in the medieval times. The Darial pass deserves a separate entry for its significant role in human contacts between the two sides of the Great Caucasus range.

The modern North Iranian period is confined to the Ossetian people, and our knowledge of this period is largely confined to Russian-language studies to date. In 2012, which marked the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Prof. Yarshater asked me to write a report on the coverage of the Ossetians in the encyclopaedia. The objective was to avoid redundancy, give proper cross references, and compile rubrics as the work advanced. The following is an updated version of that report.



FARHAVI FOUNDATION

ENCYCLOPEDIA PERSICA

P. O. Box 1932

Tehran

Iran

Iran Center

604 Kent Hall

Columbia University

New York, N.Y. 10027

October 2, 1974

Dear Prof. Abaev,

The Encyclopaedia Persica is conceived as a research tool to respond primarily to the need of scholars, specialists and students in the field of Iranian and related studies. It will draw on the skills of an international body of scholars in order to provide an accurate and up-to-date presentation of the field. Items of geographical, anthropological, ethnographic, historical, social, economic, religious, linguistic, literary, and scientific significance, as well as biography and toponymy, will be treated. In format, the Encyclopaedia Persica will consist of scholarly, fully-documented and alphabetically arranged articles, each followed by a detailed bibliography.

The Encyclopaedia Persica will appear in successive fascicles in both an English and a Persian edition.

An honorarium of \$60.00 per thousand words will be paid to all contributors.

I should greatly appreciate it if you would contribute the following articles.

Title: Arrān (Alān, Albania) - outlining the geography and history of the region, indicating especially its significance for Iran

Number of words: 3,000

Delivery date: Jan. 1, 1975

I should be grateful if you would return the enclosed postcard and let me know if I may count on your cooperation.

Sincerely yours,

E. Yarshater

Ehsan Yarshater
Editor

Fig. 1.

Courtesy of Yarshater Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University

125252 Москва
ул.В.Ульбрихта 21, кв.2

12 января 1975

Дорогой коллега,

Прошу извинить, что с опозданием отвечаю на Ваше любезное письмо от 11 ноября 1974 г.

Статьи об Азербайджане и Арране для *Encyclopedia Persica* мог бы написать азербайджанский ученый профессор Иггар АЛИЕВ, автор книги "История Мидии", Баку, 1960. Адрес проф. Алиева:

Баку 5
ул.Малыгина 16, кв.28

Статьи "Аланы" и "Осетия" находятся в пределах моей компетенции, но сейчас я сильно загружен срочными работами и мог бы представить их только в 1976 году. Если этот срок слишком долгий, то рекомендую обратиться к доценту Д.ГАГЛОЙТИ, автору книги "Аланы и вопросы этногенеза осетин", Тбилиси, 1966. Адрес доцента Гаглойти:

383570 Гор.Цхинвали, Грузия
ул.Ленина 3
Юго-Осетинский Институт.

С уважением и лучшими пожеланиями

 (В.И.Абаев)

Fig. 2.

Courtesy of Yarshater Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University



ENCYCLOPEDIA PERSICA

710 Hamilton Hall
Columbia University
New York, N.Y. 10027

February 23, 1978

Dr. V.I. Abaev
125252 Moscow
ul. V. Ulbricht, 21, kv.2
U.S.S.R.

Dear Dr. Abaev:

I would like to invite you to contribute the following
articles for the Encyclopaedia Persica:

Title: (1) Alans
(2) Albania (Political and cultural relations with
Iran)

Number
of Words: (1) c.6000 words
(2) c.4000 words

Date of
Delivery: (1) October 1, 1978
(2) October 1, 1978

I should appreciate it if you would let me know if I may
count on your cooperation. You may, of course, submit your
articles in Russian for translation into English.

Yours sincerely,

David A. Utz
Assistant Editor

P.S. I should like to emphasize that articles should be
detailed and include full bibliographical references.

Fig. 3.

Courtesy of Yarshater Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University

Ossetians hold a singular place among modern Iranian-speaking peoples, on account of not being under the direct influence of Persian language and literature and their exclusion from the otherwise common Persianate traditions such as the calendar and Nowruz.

The ethnonym is not yet stabilized in English orthography: Ossetians and Ossetes or Ossets, and adjectives Ossetian and Ossetic, are equally encountered in the Internet, and the Russianized form Osetiny still endures from the Soviet period. Self-designations are *Iron adām* for the people and *Iryston* for the republic.

The published materials in the Encyclopaedia Iranica on the Ossetian people are uneven and by and large random. For instance, while there is the entry “Digor” (F. THORDARSON, 1995), the other major Ossetic group, “Iron”, has been overlooked. The funeral rite of horse dedication practiced until recent times in Ossetia is described under “Bāx fāldisīn” (idem, 1988), but little else is found on Ossetian customs. One finds a brief treatment of Ossetic calendar under “Calendars iv” (ANTONIO PANAINO, 1990) and Bible translations into Ossetian in “Bible viii” (KENNETH J. THOMAS, 1989), but under rubrics such as economy, education, flags, demography, where subentries are typically devoted to Persia, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania is excluded, arguably because Ossetia is not a sovereign nation.

Much of the published entries related to the Ossetians are the contribution of the late Islandic scholar Fridrik Thordarson (1928–2005), a professor of philology at Universitetet i Oslo. He wrote entries, habitually short, on several Ossetic men of letters: Kocoytī Biboytī fīrt Arsen (Arsen Kotsoev), Gappo Bayatī (Georgi Baiev), Bedžizatī Dauītī fīrt Čermen (Chermen Begizov), Brīt’iatī Copanī fīrt Elbīzdīqo (Elbyzdyko Britaev), Gādiatī Sekaytī fīrt Comaq (Comak Gadiev), and Mamsiratī Xaviytī fīrt Dābe (Dabe Mamsurov). See Fig. 4. The invitation for Xetāgkatī Leuanī fīrt Kōsta (Konstantin Levanovich Khetagurov) remained unfulfilled due to Thordarson’s demise in 2005. The headword in each entry is the Ossetic name followed by the Russian version in parentheses. The Ossetic personal names follow the Caucasian onomastic tradition, which consists the name of the gens or tribe in the genitive plural (-ty), the name of the father in the genitive, *fīrt* “son of,” and the given name. Thus, the great Ossetic philologist Vasily Abaev, Russianized Vasilij Ivanovič Abaev, was born Абайты Иванны фырт Вачо “Vaso, son of Ivan, of the gens of Abay.”

There remain many entries to compile. Articles are needed on the natural geography of both northern and southern Ossetia and their flora and fauna. Ossetia’s landscape is only briefly covered under “Caucasus and Iran i. Physical geography, population, and economy” (PIERRE THOREZ, 2000). Entries specific to Ossetia’s topography should include Vladikavkaz (Dzäudžiqäü) and other major towns, namely, Alagir, Äridon (Ardon), Beslän, Digorä, Mäzdäg (Mozdok), and Cxinval.



UNIVERSITETET
I OSLO

Encyclopædia Iranica
c/o Dr. M. Kasheff.

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N-0315 Oslo

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DET HISTORISK-FILOSOFISKE
FAKULTET

7th March 1997

Dear Dr. Kasheff,

I return my proofs of the article on Gādiatī Comaq, where I have added the information you asked for.

Ckhinval (Georgian Cxinvali) is to all appearances the proper way of writing the name of the capital of South Ossetia. Or: Tskhinval!

My article was evidently written before 1985. Since that time a new edition of the works of Gādiatī Comaq has appeared: Gādiatī Comaq: Ravzərgā uacmistə, Ckhinval 1986 ("Selected Works").

A new history of Ossetic literature is in preparation. Two volumes have appeared. Gādiatī Comaq is treated in vol. II. The author is N.G.Dzhusoyt; the title in Russian: Istoriya osetinskoy literatury, II, pp. 222-267 (on Gādiatī Comaq), Tbilisi 1985.

References to these two works should be added.

Gādiatī Comaq was the son of Gādiatī Sek'a, who was also a writer. The reason why his biography was not included in the same volume as his son's must be that I was originally instructed by Prof. Emmerick^{to} use the first name of Ossetic writers in my references (Yek'a not Gādiatī Sek'a). This has resulted in some inconsistency. If you want me to write Sek'a's biography now, please let me know. Otherwise I will wait until S. In Ossetic literature Sek'a is always referred to with his first name, not his tribal name.

On p. 403 in my article on Digor (vol. VII) there are two ugly misprints: (Iron) cār-žin-ān, (Digor) cār-žān-ān for cār-žin-ān, cār-žān-ān. The spelling was correct in my last proof. Note the 3.

With best wishes.

Department of Classical and Romance Studies
University of Oslo

Fridrik Phoderov

Fig. 4.

Courtesy of Yarshater Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University

Ossetia's major rivers are Terek (Terk-don) and its tributaries Ārāf/Irāf (Urukḥ), Ārīdon (Ardon), Xwīmāllāji-don (Kambileyevka), Ĵizāldon (Gizeldon), Fiyyagdon (Fiagdon) — all carrying the component *don*, an endurance of Old Iranian *dānu- which also survives in hydronymy of East Europe. The nearby Mount Sāna (Kazbek) and Mount Elbrus, a reflex of Avestan *Harā Bərəzaitī*, as is Mount Alborz, warrant individual entries for their repercussions in Ossetic traditions.

The most interesting of all aspects of Ossetic culture probably lies in its rich mythology and folklore, which remains quite obscure outside Russian scholarship. First and foremost are the Nart sagas. Their chief characters merit individual entries: the heroes and warriors Soslan, Batīradz (Batraz), Āxsārtāg and his wife Dzerassā, the matriarch Satana, the blacksmith K^wīrdalāgon (Tlepsh), the trickster Sīrdon, the hunting deity Āfsati, to name just a few. A murky aspect of contemporary Ossetians is spiritual beliefs: venerated monuments, towers, and sanctuaries blended with the Abrahamic religions, and more recently, in the post-Soviet period, the spread of neo-pagan Ācāg dīn. This situation has emerged out of the decades-long Soviet lacuna, underlain by the complex Ossetic society as described to some extent by the Western travellers and orientalisks of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. A proper history of the Ossetians should span several centuries temporally and the entire North Caucasus spatially. The Alanic-Ossetic connection would draw upon the linguistic evidence.

The Ossetic language and its ancestors are dealt with under various entries, with some redundancy as well as hiatus: “Iran vi. Iranian languages and scripts” (PRODS OKTOR SKJÆRVØ, 2006); “Eastern Iranian Languages” (NICHOLAS SIMS-WILLIAMS, 1996); “Scythian Language” (RÜDIGER SCHMITT, 2018); “Central Asia xiii. Iranian languages” (IVAN M. STEBLIN-KAMENSKIJ, 1990); “Caucasus ii. Language contact” (F. THORDARSON, 1990); “Georgia v. Linguistic contacts with Iranian languages” (THEA CHKEIDZE, 2001); and the online articles “Ossetic language i. History and description” (F. THORDARSON, 2009) and “Ossetic language ii. Ossetic Loanwords in Hungarian” (J. T. L. CHEUNG, 2013).

Lastly, a word about transliteration. *Encyclopædia Iranica* established from the onset its transliteration rules for Persian, Arabic, and Russian and provided guidelines for Avestan, Middle Persian, and Ottoman Turkish. For the less widely known Iranian languages, such as Pashto, Kurdish, Balochi, and Ossetic, no specific set of rules was anticipated. This has led to varying spelling of proper names from some languages in the encyclopaedia. As to Ossetic, the transliterations have been fairly uniform: the symbol *ā* for the orthographic letter <æ>, *ǧ* for <гъ>[ɣ], *q* for <хъ>, and *ı* for <ы> are observed in most articles. The transliteration of affricates is asymmetric regarding voice: in accord with Ossetic orthography, a single letter represents the voiceless *c* <ц> and *č* <ч> versus double-letter for the voiced *dz* <дз> and *dž* <дж> (not *j* and *ĵ*).