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THE CAUCASIAN ALANS BETWEEN BYZANTINE CHRISTIANITY AND TRADITIONAL PAGANISM

The Iranian-speaking steppe nomads known in medieval European sources as the Alans — a term derived from their self-designation, "*arya*", meaning "(we, the) noble (ones)" — were descended from early tribal groups of Scythians referred to in ancient texts as "Sauromatians" (in Greek) or "Sarmatians" (in Latin). Among the many tribal or clan names attached to the various Scythian groups one finds "Asii", "Asiani", or "As"; the latter form is preserved in the name of the modern Caucasus nation the Ossetians (from Georgian "Os-eti", "land of the As", who are direct descendants of the Alans. Once a powerful nomadic confederation who played an important role in the formation of medieval Europe, the Alans became allies of the Byzantines who recognized them as the legitimate masters of the western Eurasian steppes.

Caught between the competing powers of Christian Byzantium, the Islamic Caliphate, and the Jewish Khazar state north of the Caspian, the Alan leaders — like those of the Russians further north — eventually opted to align themselves with the Byzantines during the first part of the 10th century and undergo the formal conversion to Christianity that this entailed. In hindsight, however, this "conversion" proved to be rather superficial in many respects. Christian rites and beliefs do not appear to have penetrated Alan society very deeply even during the period of closest contact with Byzantium, and from the 13th century onwards this contact was greatly reduced allowing for a "reversion" of the Alans — who came to be referred to as "Ossetes" in the post-medieval period — to their earlier pagan practices, though one assumes that these had never really disappeared in the first place.

Living largely "off-the-grid" in remote regions of the Northern Caucasus, for the next five centuries the Ossetes enjoyed a substantial measure of independence from the corrective influences of foreign religious institutions, notwithstanding occasional contacts with their Christian neighbours, the Georgians. This relative isolation enabled them the necessary space to preserve

many traces of the ancient Scythian divine pantheon and ritual practice which were melded together with Christian rites, myths, saint names and holidays. Of course a similar phenomenon was present to varying degrees amongst all the European peoples, but rarely is the pre-Christian layer as enduringly evident as among today's Ossetes.

Throughout the entirety of the first millennium before the Common Era, the vast Eurasian steppe region from the Carpathian mountains in the West to the Altai in the East was dominated by ever-shifting confederations of warlike Iranian-speaking tribes known and feared by Romans, Persians and Chinese alike for their skills as mounted archers. Ancient writers refer to them at times by a collective term — Skuthoi (i.e., Scythians, lit., "shooters") in the Greek sources, and by the parallel designation of Saka in the Persian — while in other cases more specific names are used to refer to particular tribes, clans, or groupings, with varying degrees of accuracy. The periodic relocations and constantly changing alliances within the expansive and largely amorphous society of the steppes meant that attempts by outside observers to identify and label discrete branches were doomed to be imprecise at best.

The Romans paid special attention to those nomadic bands occupying the lands of the Pontic and North Caucasian steppe adjacent to their own territories — what is now Ukraine and southern Russia — for the obvious reason that these were the "Scythians" with whom they were in most direct contact and frequent conflict. They called these dangerous neighbours "Sauromatians" in Greek and "Sarmatians" in Latin, noting their redoubtable martial skills with a mixture of fear and admiration.

The nomadic peoples had a general name for themselves, however, dating back to before the previous millennium when some of their tribes migrated southwards and settled amongst the native populations of the Iranian plateau and the Indian subcontinent. They called themselves "*arya*," or Aryan, meaning "the Noble Ones," which is the etymological root of today's "Iran". Amongst those tribes who remained nomadic and more closely preserved their ancient way of life, a phonetic shift (ry > l) in the old Iranian dialect spoken by the steppe nomads transformed "Aryan" into "Alan" — which, for unknown reasons, the Greek and Latin sources begin to substitute for "Sarmatian" during the second century of the Common Era when the latter term disappears from the historical record. To all evidence, the Alans mentioned in subsequent writings are identical with the Sarmatians mentioned in the earlier texts. Han Chinese sources name a group of western nomads as the "Alan-liao" — these may be identical with the group known to the Chinese as the Yancai (Alemany 2000, 401).

The Alans themselves had no written literature, so descriptions of their culture and way of life have come down to us only through the accounts of their

enemies. Echoes of their own rich oral tradition, however, survive in the legends of ancient heroes called the Narts, preserved by today's Ossetes and their neighbours in the Caucasus and finally collated and written down during the 19th century during the Russian colonial period (Colarusso 2016). The Ossetes are direct descendants of the Alans, and hence of the Sarmatians. Their language is a living version of that spoken by the Alans, and their culture sustained many archaic Scythian traditions and values right up into the early 20th century. Hence, a study of the modern Ossetes and the stories of the Nart cycle can shed considerable light on the society of their Alan predecessors, and more broadly that of the many related nomadic peoples that roamed the Eurasian steppes before them.

The Aryan nomads were deeply proud of their rough existence, which was based on the pasturing of livestock, hunting wild game, and conducting raids against their enemies. Ancient writers and the Nart sagas alike agree that Alan men found their greatest happiness in fighting, hunting, and feasting. They aspired to die in battle, and those who survived to old age were scorned as cowards. The Alans spent their lives on horseback or traveling with their families in covered wagons which sheltered them in the absence of fixed abodes, subsisting on a diet of meat and dairy products. Their moral code placed personal and family honour above all else; they venerated their ancestors, and duty compelled them to kill anyone who dared to insult them. In addition to a pervasive cult of the dead, the Alans worshipped the god of war in the form of a sword planted in the ground (giving the shape of a cross!), to which they would offer the blood of sacrificed enemies captured in battle. Like all steppe-dwellers they feared the god of thunder and rain — highly understandable to anyone who has found themselves in a raging storm without any form of natural protection such as buildings, caves or trees.

The elusive fighting tactics of the highly-mobile steppe warriors were the bane of the Roman army, which relied on its infantry. The nomads, rather than meeting the enemy's phalanx column in pitched battle, would instead harry it from all sides with arrows shot from horseback, then run away in a feinted retreat while continuing to fire volleys over their shoulder. The Parthians — who, like the Medes and Persians before them had migrated southwards from Central Asia to control the Iranian plateau but remained closer to their nomadic origins — blocked Roman attempts to expand their empire eastwards. Exasperated Roman writers complained of their "unfair" fighting techniques, memorializing the expression "Parthian shot" which evoked the notion of a dishonourable, back-handed gesture.

In the face of such insurmountable opponents, the Romans adopted a strategy of trying to stave off nomadic raids into settled territories by offering

the mounted archers employment in the Roman army. This approach could not be taken with the Parthians, who had settled in Iran and formed a rival empire of their own, but in the steppes to the north any kind of state structure or permanent civil institutions were absent, leaving individual tribes or clans to join up with whomever they chose, for a long or as briefly as they pleased. The Romans thus supplemented their infantry with cavalry consisting mainly of nomadic mercenaries. These were highly effective in battle, but ultimately unreliable, since they tended to disappear at a gallop if things started to go badly. A contingent of Sarmatian soldiers was stationed by the Romans as far away as northern England in the year 170; this early Iranian presence in Britain was likely one of the sources for the Arthurian legends of the Middle Ages (Littleton and Malcor 1994).

During the second half of the 4th century a non-Iranian group, the Huns, began migrating southwards from their original Siberian homeland and began to sweep westward across the steppes, violently subjugating all those they found in their way. Many Alans joined the Hunnic army, while others allied themselves with the Germanic Ostrogoths and moved on to invade Europe. In 406 the combined Goth and Alan forces crossed the Rhine at Mainz, raising the alarm in Roman Gaul. The Romans responded to this threat by offering Gallic estates to a number of Alan leaders, resulting in concentrations of Alan settlement especially in the region of Orléans, where they served to defend the local population against their own erstwhile raiding partners.

Notwithstanding the defection of some of their numbers, joint forays by Goths, Alans and Vandals continued into northern Italy, Iberia, and from there as far as Carthage in North Africa, usually with the result that some of the invaders would settle in the subjugated territories. These settlers eventually assimilated into the local language and culture, although they left dozens of place names such as Allainville, Alaincourt, Alençon as a testimony to their presence. In northwestern France, at least, they appear to have kept their language as late as the 6th century (Bachrach 1973). A more significant lasting impact of the Alans in Europe can be seen in the emergence of court chivalry during the Middle Ages — from the cultivation of equestrian hunting and fighting skills to the notion knightly "nobility" — which likely owes much to the influence of steppe culture. Even more visible is the prominence of the proper name "Alan" in England and "Alain" in France.

While the Hunnic invasions of the 4th century drove many Alan tribes into Europe, others took refuge closer to home by moving into the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. There, they adopted aspects of the native Adyghe and Vainakh populations (ancestors to the modern Circassians and Chechens, respectively), incorporating agriculture into their pastoral-nomadic economy

and adding a new cultural component to the complex mix of ethnicities that had long inhabited the region. Over time the Alans re-emerged as the masters of the North Caucasian steppe, controlling lands as far west as the Crimean peninsula. This brought them into contact with the Eastern Roman Empire of the Byzantines (Kouznetsov and Lebedynsky 2005, 142–8). The Alans were exposed to Christianity through contacts with both the Byzantines and the Georgians of the southern Caucasus, but they retained their independence and their pagan religious traditions.

The Arab conquest of the eastern Caucasus brought new challenges to the Alans by the 8th century, as did the rise of the Turkic Khazar khanate north of the Caspian Sea in the ninth. Caught between competing Christian, Muslim, and Jewish states, the Alans, like the Russians further north, eventually opted to align themselves with Christian Byzantium during the first part of the 10th century. This opened the door to both Greek and Georgian missionary activity and resulted in the partial Christianization of parts of the Alan population (Kouznetsov and Lebedynsky 2005, 175–82).

This process was never very successful, however, and ultimately the Christianization of the Alans proved largely superficial. Priests sent to spread the faith were especially frustrated by their inability to stamp out polygamy. In the early 13th century Theodore, Bishop of Alania, in a letter to his superiors in Constantinople, wrote — in reference to a passage in the Bible — that "My flock [i.e., the Alans] prostitutes itself not just with the wood, as it is written (Jeremiah 3:9), but also with all stones and waters." (In other words, they made love outdoors.) He went on to complain that "they do not prostrate themselves before carved images, but before some demons in high places. The Alans," concluded the Bishop, "are Christians only in name" (Alemany 2000, 238–9). Three decades later, the Flemish monk William of Rubruck observed that the Alan mercenaries he met in Mongolia, who he claimed had sought his religious guidance, were "ignorant of everything pertaining to the Christian rite, with the single exception of the name of Christ" (Jackson and Morgan 1990, 102).

In fact it is likely that the "Christianisation" of the Alans was a phenomenon largely restricted to the ruling elites who were in contact — and sometimes intermarried — with those of Byzantium. The half-Alan Georgian princess Maria of Alania (1053–1118) married two successive Byzantine emperors, Michael VII Doukas in 1065 and Nikephoros III Botaneiates in 1078. A century later, the Georgian queen Tamara (1184–1213) — who, like Maria, was Alan on her mother's side — married the Alan prince David Soslan in 1191. Several churches have been excavated at Nizhny Arkhiz in the North Caucasus republic of Karachay-Cherkessia, which is believed to have been the site of the medieval

Alan capital, Magas. However, there is no evidence that any Christian texts were translated into the Alan language, or that priests sent to the region from Byzantium learned the local tongue. These facts suggest that Christianity remained largely inaccessible to the general population of Alans.

On the other hand, later evidence gleaned from the Ossetes from the late 18th century through the early 20th shows that the Alans of the Caucasus preserved much of the ancient Scythian divine pantheon and ritual practice, beneath a veneer of Christian saint names and modified holidays — or rather, as Salbiev, following Napolsky, prefers, through "interaction" with them: "when the content of a high religion (Christianity or Islam) from generation to generation is translated into the language of the national tradition" (Salbiev 2018, 6).

Within this interpenetrating matrix of Christian and pre-Christian worldviews the cult of the dead remained paramount, showing a strong continuity stretching back to Scythian times. Magical amulets, animal figures, and ritually-broken mirrors filled Ossetian graves just as they had two thousand years before. Psychotropic drugs were used to induce dreams and visions, recalling their use by the shamans of the steppes. Although the Russians began a concerted missionary effort to "re-Christianize" the Ossetes as part of their incursions into the Caucasus during the late 18th century, to this day pre-Christian elements remain deeply rooted in Ossetian popular culture. Since the fall of the Soviet Union Ossetia has even seen a deliberate attempt on the part of some individuals to "revive" a putative "original" Ossetian religion — dubbed the "Uatsdin" or "True Religion" — based on a particular reading of the Nart sagas, an effort that has received some government support (Schnirelman 2002, 205).

The modern Ossetian term for the Supreme Being is Xwytsauty Xwytsau, literally "God of Gods," an ancient Iranian type of construction mirrored in the royal term *Shāhenshāh* or "King of Kings". Apart from the fact that the name itself reflects a polytheistic understanding, Xwytsauty Xwytsau is perceived as a remote entity not directly concerned with human affairs (similar to the pre-Islamic Iranian Zurvan). In real terms the most important Ossetian deity is Uastyrdzhi, the god of warriors, travellers, and oaths. A solar figure concerned exclusively with men — indeed, women are forbidden from uttering his name — Uastyrdzhi is associated with St. George; he is portrayed as a powerful but venerable figure sitting astride a horse, with long grey hair and all dressed in white. He is the subject of a large annual week-long festival held in November, called Djiorgwyba, which culminates in a bull sacrifice. In this and other respects Uastyrdzhi resembles the ancient Indo-Iranian deity Mithra, with whom he may share a common origin (Cornillot 2002).

Also much feared, worshipped and invoked by Ossetians is Wacilla, the god of thunder and storms who is identified with St. Elijah. His descendance from the corresponding deity of the ancient Scythians is clear. Another important Ossetian god having obvious ancient roots is Æfsati, the patron of hunters, who is associated with St. Eustace. Kosta Khetagurov (1859–1906), considered the father of modern Ossete literature and the first to conduct anthropological studies on the Ossetes, believed Æfsati to be the most ancient deity of the Ossete pantheon (Khetagurov 1939, 63). Tutyr, connected with St. Theodore, is the god of wolves, to whom Ossetian shepherds address their prayers and blood sacrifices to keep his canine packs away from their sheep. Donbettyr, the god of the waters, is the Ossetian analog to St Peter. ("Don" means "river" in proto-Indo-European, surviving as such in the names of numerous European rivers — the Don, the Dnieper, the Dniester, and the Danube among others — and as the generic term for "river" in modern Ossetian.)

Other Ossetian deities include Fælværa, the protector of sheep; Safa, the spirit of the hearth chain which is the centre of rituals within the home; and Alardy, the god of smallpox, who, like Tutyr, is a negative deity to whom one prays in order to beseech him to stay away. Women are largely excluded from the traditional Ossetian religion, having only Mady Mayræm — the Virgin Mary — as protector of their interests. To her they pray for children — or, interestingly, if they already have too many, they ask her to not give them any further pregnancies.

The Ossete oral tradition known as the Nart cycle preserves a number of myths evoking the assimilation of pagan heroes and deities to their Christian counterparts. The hero Soslan, who bears features of a solar deity, is defeated (i.e., mythologically subsumed) by the wheel of Balsæg, who is his Christian counterpart, St. John. Similarly, the hero Batraz, associated with thunder, is killed by the thunder god in his Christian form known as Wacilla, or St. Elijah (Abaev 2002, xx, xxiii). As noted by the Ossete scholar V. I. Abaev, these mythological conflations reflect "the struggle between heathen beliefs and Christianity" (Abaev 2002, xxx). They likely entered the oral tradition sometime around the 10th century or shortly after, representing in the popular imagination the victory of Christian deities over pagan ones whom the former then assimilated.

Ossetes maintained their close connection with the dead, entombing them in sepulchre villages directly facing their own — the aim being to keep their ancestors connected with the activities of the living. The best known example is the tombs at Dargavs, but the distinctive Ossetian funerary architecture is found all across the region. As late as the 19th century if one should pass by a tomb without showing the proper signs of respect, a living descendent of the deceased would take it upon himself to avenge the insult by

hunting down and murdering the offender; he would then return to stand before the grave and announce to his offended forebear: "I have restored your honour!" (KHETAGUROV 2005).

The Ossetian calendar is marked by a number of annual festivals dedicated to the various deities just mentioned and bearing little or no connection to any found in Christianity. Most are celebrated by making treks to remote shrines high in the mountains, where blood sacrifices to the gods were still being made in the 20th century. Such shrines are often located in sacred groves, such as Rekom in the Tsey Valley or Khetag's Grove near Alagir. (Both are accessed on foot by means of a moderately strenuous hike.) Today these festivals are mainly occasions for feasting and drinking, traditionally focusing on the consumption of three cheese or meat pies and sacred beer served on a round, three-legged table. Interestingly, in Ossetian the word *kwyvd* means both "prayer" and "toast" — in other words, prayers are offered in the form of a toast to the deity. Such toasts are still made at Ossete gatherings today. Traditional Ossetian religion has no priesthood, but the prayer may be led by any man who has kept himself pure for two months prior to the event.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union traditional Ossetian religion has become tied with nation-building. The Ossetian national anthem includes the line, "Reject not our devotional feast, O Xwytsauty Xwytsau! Look upon us, Uastyrdzhi, praise to thee!" In 1994 the government of North Ossetia-Alania declared St. Khetag's Day, held on the first Sunday of July, the principal national holiday, and established a foundation for the preservation of Khetag's Grove and the restoration of its shrine to Uastyrdzhi. The festival now draws hundreds of thousands of participants every year, as well as the ire of Ossetia's Christian and Muslim leaders.

It is a recurring pattern in history that "barbarian" groups tend to adopt established official religions as part of the process of their assimilation into "civilized" societies, whether Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist. In most cases they do retain aspects of their prior religious outlook, including myths and rituals which are adapted to conform with the new dominant religion. The Alans — and their modern-day descendants, the Ossetes —present an unusual case in this regard. The nominal conversion of the Alans elites to Byzantine Christianity during the 10th century would seem to fit the general pattern seen throughout the history of religions, whereby "barbarians" either conquered by or seeking alliances with powerful states accept a new religion as a way of demonstrating that they have now become "civilized".

However, it is clear in hindsight that Christianity did very little to permeate or take root in the broader Alan society, and that its presence among the Ossetians today dates largely to the more recent efforts of the Russian church from the late

18th century onward and has not succeeded in entirely displacing the traditional religion even now. How does one account for this? The fact that the Alans were a non-urban, non-literate society living at a considerable distance from ecclesiastical centres of power can go a long way towards answering the question. To date no evidence has come to light that the Bible or the Christian liturgy were ever translated into the Alan language. During the period of greatest contact with Byzantium they do not appear to have had any indigenous religious leadership. Pastors were sent to the Alan regions from Constantinople or Trabizond, and these emissaries of Christianity do not appear to have integrated themselves to any great degree into Alan society.

Moreover, after the Mongol conquests such missions ceased completely and the nominally Christian Ossetes, as the Alans came to be known, were, apart from occasional visits by priests from Georgia, without any kind of Christian guidance or teaching. Having retreated into the remote valleys of the central Caucasus, the Ossetes were almost entirely cut off from outside influence. This situation persisted until the early 20th century, when the Ossetes' absorption into the atheistic Soviet state precluded the possibility that Christianity would make any further inroads. The Ossetes, left to their own devices, proved to be Eurasia's most effective conservators of ancient Scythian religion, culture, and language.

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