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### REMNANTS OF ALANIC RELIGION\*

The goal of this paper is to gather evidence on the religious practices of the Alans, disregarding possible connections with Scythian or Ossetian facts and parallels unless expressly attested for the Alans by literary or material sources.

**Key words:** Alanic religion, cult of the seven gods, sword cult, rhabdomancy, ancestors cult, idolatry, Zoroastrianism, Trifunctionalism.

Originally a heterogeneous tribal confederation which emerged around a Sarmatian core group in the Pontic-Caspian steppes, the Alans (< OIran. \**aryāna*-“Aryan”), whose ethnicon soon became a general designation for late North Iranian nomads, are attested for some fifteen centuries in a variety of literary traditions scattered throughout Eurasia, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Yellow Sea. Nevertheless, this broad spatial and temporal spectrum should not mislead us, since most of what we know about their lifestyle and customs is uncertain and subject to discussion, their religion being no exception to this rule. The reasons are the scarcity of written sources and the difficulty of properly identifying

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Alanic archaeological sites before their sedentarization north of the Caucasus, a shortcoming which has traditionally been solved by recurring to the much better known cultures of their ancestors and heirs; but in the same way that facts of Alanic religion can be compared to — and explained with the help of— their Scythian and Ossetic parallels and counterparts, in my view it would be an oversimplification to assume that the Alans shared every practice and belief of these peoples if not explicitly stated by any written or material source. Besides, due to the large time span covered, this lack of information probably hides a complex reality with several different stages and developments, from the nomadic environment of the first centuries to their settling on the slopes of the Caucasus, often subject to mostly failed attempts of conversion to Christianity, Islam or even Judaism.<sup>1</sup> These remarks are important insofar as the last decades have seen the rise of Scythian Neo-Paganism (Oss. Уацдин, Æцæг Дин “True/Holy Religion”) among the Ossetes, also called Assianism (Oss. Æсс Дин “As/Alan Religion”, Russ. Ассианство), associated to the Post-Soviet Alanic revival and seeing an unbroken chain from Scythian traditions to the *Weltanschauung* of the Nart sagas.<sup>2</sup> However, if our knowledge were not so limited, we should at least differentiate between the beliefs of the early Alans who migrated throughout the steppes keeping close to their ancient customs — though often interacting with other peoples — and of those who became sedentarized and came under the influence of both the great religions and a not negligible Caucasian substratum. In this sense, the pagan beliefs of present-day Ossetes — whether preserved or artificially restored — are only the last stage of a millenary history, most of which is probably lost for ever. That is why in these lines I will restrict myself to a selection of *realia* of the Alanic Pre-Christian religion, since no systematic exposition on the subject has survived excepting Ammian’s brief ethnographic notes, commenting besides on some broadly accepted hypotheses, often more based on intuitive insights than on direct evidence.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Alleged traces of Zoroastrianism.* Darius clearly states in his Bīsūtūn inscription that the Scythians (at least, those conquered by him) were unfaithful

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<sup>1</sup> On the Christianization of the Alans see [ARZHANTSEVA I., 2002; FOLTZ R., 2019; KUZNECOV V. A., 2020]. References to Judaism (Benjamin of Tudela, Cambridge Document; cf. [ABAEV V.I., 1949, 331–2; TUALLAGOV A.A., 2020]) or Islam (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa) among the Alans are scanty.

<sup>2</sup> On Scythian Neo-Paganism see [FOLTZ R., 2020; 2022, 103–121]. I am grateful to the author for having provided me with the proofs of his forthcoming book.

<sup>3</sup> In this sense, I have tried to avoid presenting materials from Ossetian tradition as Alanic religion if there was no direct evidence in other sources; for this — otherwise legitimate — approach see [SALBIEV T. K., 2017].

(OP *arīkā*) and Ahuramazdā was not worshipped by them.<sup>4</sup> Even if eventual conversions under the Achaemenid and Sasanian empires or at least a certain influence in contact areas cannot be discarded, it seems that the religions of Scythians, Sarmatians and Alans remained alien to Zoroastrianism.<sup>5</sup> However, it is worth mentioning that several passages in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions mention the *Sakā Haumavargā* “Scythians laying *hauma* (instead of grass) around (the sacred fire)”, the deified plant from which the Indo-Iranians produced an intoxicating beverage (Av. *Haoma*-, Skt. *Soma*-).<sup>6</sup> Besides, the word “sun” in some East Iranian languages (like e.g. Khotan Saka *urmaysde*) is derived from the name of the god *Ahura- Mazdāh*-, but this is not the case of Ossetic (cf. I. хур, D. хор “sun” < OIran. \**hwar*-).<sup>7</sup> Gershevitch supposed that “it would not be surprising if the Alans had absorbed a few Zoroastrian notions”, like [1] the Ossetian epithet of Christian saints Уац / Уас < OIran. \**vāč*- “word”, originally in the meaning of “spirit” such as MPers. *waxš*,<sup>8</sup> or [2] the name of the mythical dreamland Курьс of Iron folklore, a meadow belonging to the dead, maybe related to the mountain *Kaoirisa*- of Avestan tradition (Yt 19.6);<sup>9</sup> however, these conjectures were based on his assumption that the name of the Alans reflected their connection with former inhabitants of *Airiianəm Vaējō*, the mythical

<sup>4</sup> DB V 31-32 *avaṣ Sakā arikā āha utā nai Auramazdāsām ayadiya* (cf. ed. [SCHMITT R., 1991, 48, 76]; on the meaning of OP *arīkā*, [1991, 50] = commentary to DB I 22).

<sup>5</sup> Thus [АБАЕВ V. I., 1990, 102].

<sup>6</sup> DNa 25, XPh 26, A3Pb 14; restored in DSe 24; cf. Hdt. vii.64.2 Ἀμυργίους Σάκας; cf. [SCHMITT R., 2004, 63-64]: “laying *hauma* around” is an hypothesis by Karl Hoffmann, better than the former “drinking *hauma*”.

<sup>7</sup> [АБАЕВ V. I., 1990, 103; 1958-89, iv. 246-48 s.v. *xur* / *xor*; Bailey H. W., 1979, 40a s.v. *urmaysde*].

<sup>8</sup> [GERSHEVITCH I., 1955; АБАЕВ V. I., 1958-89, iv.26-28 s.v. *wac* / *wac*, *wacæ*]; found in names like I. Уастырджы, D. Уаскерги “St. George”, I. Уацилла (D. Елиа) “St. Elias”, D. Уац Никколæ “St. Nicholas”, I. Уас Тутыр, D. Уас Тотур “St. Theodor”, etc (but cf. the numerous remarks of Benveniste [1959, 133-37]); maybe already in an amulet from Kuban with the Greek legend ΘΕΩ ΟΥΑΤΑΦΑΡΝΩ “to the god Uatapharnos” (2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> c. BC; cf. [MILLER V. F., 1891; АБАЕВ V. I., 1958-89, iv.30-31 s.v. \**Wacæfarnæ*]).

<sup>9</sup> [GERSHEVITCH I., 1955, 486; MILLER V. F., 1881-87, ii. 271-2; АБАЕВ V. I., 1958-89, i.612-13 s.v. *к̆ ўrys*]; in Digor its name is Бурку ([АБАЕВ V. I., 1958-89, i. 273 s.v. *burku*]), of unknown origin; cf. MP *kw̆dyl's* / *Kōirās*/, a mountain in Ērānwēz, often misread *kw̆ndl's* / *Kōndrās*/ (*GBd* 9.3, 9.28; *IBd* 12.2, 12.25; ed. Anklesaria, Bombay 1908, p. 79<sup>11</sup>). Cf. [KOWALEWSKY M., 1893, 57] “a l'exemple des âmes défuntes, elles [= les âmes des vivants] sont emportées, les unes sur des chevaux, les autres sur des bancs dans la prairie consacrée aux trépassés et connue sous le nom de Kourisse”.

homeland of early Iranians mentioned in the *Avesta*.<sup>10</sup> On the other side, fire temples of late age (7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> c. AD) built according to the classical Zoroastrian canons have been identified in Humara and Nižnyj Arhyz (Karačaev-Čerkessija, presumably former Western Alania) and have favoured the hypothesis that Zoroastrianism was adopted as state religion by the Alans of that period,<sup>11</sup> but in my view, should their identification as fire temples be clearly proven, they would more probably be the result of the sporadic activity of Zoroastrian (Sogdian?) merchants in the Ciscaucasian Silk Road or émigrées fleeing from Islamic expansion. All in all, in the present state of our knowledge no real piece of evidence exists in favour of a Zoroastrian layer in the religion of the Alans.

2. *Ardabda and the seven gods*. According to the anonymous *Periplus Ponti Euxini* (4<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> c. AD), “now the city of Theodosia (present-day Feodosija) is called Ardabda in Alanic or Tauric language, that is, having seven gods”.<sup>12</sup> The toponym *Ardabda* was explained by Abaev as from Alanic \*ard “god” and \*avda “seven” (OIran. \*rta-hafta-),<sup>13</sup> an etymology which recalls the seven Scythian gods enumerated by Herodotus: Hestia ~ Tabiti, Zeus ~ Papaeus, Earth ~ Api, Apollo ~ Goetosyrus, the Heavenly Aphrodite ~ Argimpasa, Heracles and, last but not least, Ares, the only one for whom a cult is attested among the Alans (see § 3).<sup>14</sup> A supernatural being I. æвдиу, D. æвдеу “demon, evil spirit” survives in Ossetian, whose name has been interpreted as OIran. \*hafta-dajva- “seven demons/gods”; in fact, a shrine of the seven gods (Авд Дзуары) was already

<sup>10</sup> In this sense, as already pointed by Abaev [1990, 91], the Scythian-Alanic cult of the seven gods (cf. § 2) has nothing to do with the seven *Aməša- Spənta-* of Zoroastrianism. Other associations like those of Уастырджы ([CORNILLOT F., 2002, 67–68]) or Сæуaccæ / Сосæг Æлдар ([GUSALOV V. M., 2005]) with Av. *Sraoša-* “Obedience” should be approached with the greatest caution. Pirart [1995, 59 n. 5] explained the name of the *Rhoxolāni* “radiant Alans” (cf. Av. *raoxšna-*, I. ρυx, D. ροx “light”) as related to ritual practices (“ceux dont le culte est purement diurne”); however, nothing but etymology allows to arrive at such a conclusion.

<sup>11</sup> [KUZNETSOV V. A., 1996; RUDNICKIJ R. R., 2001] (both *status quaestionis*). Let it be noticed that the fire temple in Humara has also been explained as a Bulgarian temple of god Tengri or as a sanctuary associated with agricultural cults. Besides, Zarina Albegova [personal communication 14/12/2021] has made me note that recent research points to the fact that Humara fortress was built after the Alans disappeared from the zone.

<sup>12</sup> *Periplus Ponti Euxini* 51 (ed. [MÜLLER 1855–61, I.415]) νῦν δὲ λέγεται ἡ Θεοδοσία τῆ Ἀλανικῆ ἤτοι τῆ Ταυρικῆ διαλέκτῳ Ἀρδάβδα, τουτέστιν ἐπτάθεος; cf. [ABAEV V. I., 1990, 107–110].

<sup>13</sup> [ABAEV V. I., 1949, 155–6 s.v. *arta*, 167–8 s.v. *hapta*; 1958–89, 1.60–62 s.v. *ard*, 82–3 s.v. *avd*; 1990, 107–8].

<sup>14</sup> Hdt. IV.59.1-2 Ἴστίη ~ Ταβίτι, Ζεὺς ~ Παππαῖος, Γῆ ~ Ἀπί, Ἀπόλλων ~ Γοιτόσυρος, οὐρανίη Ἀφροδίτη ~ Ἀργίμπασα, Ἡρακλῆης, Ἄρης.

noticed by Miller in the Ossetian *aul* of Galiat and is still extant to this day.<sup>15</sup> However, several objections can be raised against the evidence for this sevenfold pantheon and the presumed Alanic *\*ard* “god”:

— an eighth god Poseidon ~ Thagimasadas was offered sacrifices by the Royal Scythians; thus maybe the number of Scythian gods was not restricted to seven after all.<sup>16</sup>

— Oss. ард (< Old Iranian *\*rta-* “cosmic order, truth”, a principle rather than a divinity, even if it became divinized, cf. e.g. Avestan *Aša-*) does not mean “god”, but “oath”, even if diverse semantic shifts from the original meaning are possible (cf. the name of god *Miθra-*, originally meaning “contract”—a deification of this concept).<sup>17</sup>

— æвдиу was explained in a different way as *\*āp-dajiva-* “water-demon” by Miller<sup>18</sup> (now superseded) or, more recently, as *\*apa-dajiva-* “idol, Abgott” by Cheung, who noted that *\*hafta-dajiva-* would have evolved otherwise into a geminated form *\*æвддиу*.<sup>19</sup> Besides, we should ask ourselves about the difference between ард < *\*rta-* and -диу < *\*dajiva-* (not attested so far in Alanic and never in Ossetic excepting the aforesaid æвдиу), if they both had the meaning “god”.

— I. дзуар, D. дзиуарæ “cross, angel, saint, god, sanctuary” in Авд Дзуары is a loanword from Georg. ჯვარო *ǰvari* “cross”;<sup>20</sup> there are other words for divine beings in Ossetic, namely I. зæд, D. изæд “angel” < OIran. *\*yazata-* “god”, lit. “one worthy of worship”,<sup>21</sup> and I. дауæг, D. идауæг “angel, guardian spirit” < OIran. *\*vi-tāvaka-* “power”.<sup>22</sup> Abaev translated the Digor formula

<sup>15</sup> [MILLER V. F., 1881–87, II.259] “Узи-дз̄уар или авд дз̄уар”.

<sup>16</sup> Hdt. IV.59.1 οἱ δὲ καλεόμενοι βασιλῆιοι Σκύθαι καὶ τῷ Ποσειδέωνι θύουσι / 2 Ποσειδέων δὲ Θαγίμασάδας.

<sup>17</sup> The term appears in the name of the famous *magister utriusque militiae* of Alanic-Gothic descent Flavius Ardabur (Ἀρδαβούριος) Aspar and of both his father and son, as well as in Greek inscriptions of the Roman period from the Northern Black Sea; cf. [Zgusta L., 1955, § 55 Ἀρδαγδακος (225), § 56 Ἀρδαρος, Ἀρδαρακος, Ἀρδαρισκος (2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> c.), § 314 Οδισαρδος (3<sup>rd</sup> c.)] — all dates AD.

<sup>18</sup> [MILLER V. F., 1881–87, III.157; 1903, 6 s.v. Ἀβ-νώζος], giving it as *aw-deu* “Wassergeist”.

<sup>19</sup> [CHEUNG J., 2002, 165–6 s.v. *ævdiw / ævdew*]; cf. however the scepticism of Benveniste [1959, 130–31] “à propos d’une étymologie avestique”.

<sup>20</sup> [ABAEV V. I., 1958–89, I.401–2 s.v. *ǰwar / ziwaræ*; cf. THORDARSON F., 2000, 219].

<sup>21</sup> [ABAEV V. I., 1958–89, IV.290–1 s.v. *zæd / izæd*]; BENVENISTE [1959, 132], however, considered it a loanword from Persian because the root *yaz-* is not attested in Ossetic.

<sup>22</sup> [ABAEV V. I., 1958–89, I.348–9 s.v. *dawæg / idawæg*]; but otherwise [GERSHEVITCH I., 1955, 484]: a popular mutilation of Middle Ossetic *\*ærdauæg* (derived from *\*rta-*, cf. our § 2); [BENVENISTE É., 1959, 132–33] *\*vi-dāvaka-* “qui détourne, qui écarte (la maladie / le malheur)”; cf. [CHEUNG J., 2002, 178].

изæдтæ æмæ идаугутæ as “gods and powers”, considering it “an heritage of the pre-Christian religion of the Alans”, but this is highly conjectural.<sup>23</sup>

— thanks to the recent discovery of some marginal notes in a Greek liturgical manuscript, дзуар is the only one of these three words attested so far in Alanic τζουβάρ “cross”, whereas the (Christian) Ossetic word for “god” (I. хуыцау, D. хуцау < OIran. \*hva-tāv(y)a- “autocrator”)<sup>24</sup> is preserved in Alanic χουτζάου πάν “day of god, Sunday” (cf. D. хуцаубон id.).<sup>25</sup>

3. *Sword cult*. As stated by Ammian, “among the Alans no temple nor sanctuary is to be seen, not even a straw-roofed hut is visible anywhere; but according to a Barbarian custom, a naked sword is fixed in the ground and they respectfully worship it as god of war (*Martem*) and protector of the regions through which they travel”.<sup>26</sup> The passage is reminiscent of Herodotus when the latter tells that on a sacred precinct, consisting of a pile of bundles of sticks with a square flat surface on the top, an ancient scimitar (ἀκινάκης) of iron –an image of Ares– was set for each Scythian district;<sup>27</sup> but in the case of the Alans Ammian says nothing about sacrifices of cattle, horses or captured enemies, as Herodotus does for the Scythians. Hicesius’ only fragment, preserved by Clement of Alexandria, states that the Sauromatians worshipped an *akinákēs* as well.<sup>28</sup> This practice was compared by Dumézil with Priscus’ episode on the sword of Attila, a sacred relic of the Scythian kings believed to give superiority

<sup>23</sup> [АБАЕВ V. I., 1990, 105] “наследие дохристианской религии алан”.

<sup>24</sup> [АБАЕВ 1958–89, IV.255–6 s.v. х уцау / хуцау] rejected this etymology because of phonetic problems and preferred Georg. б џ џ б о хuc ‘esi (< \*хuc ‘i) “old man, priest”, but the Ossetian word is very similar to Sogd. xwt’w /xutāw/, Chor. xwθ’w /xuθāw/ “god” (cf. MP xwadāy, Bactr. χοαδο “lord”) and the shift \*t > c could be explained as a contamination with I. хицау, D. хецау “chief”. Besides, maybe the formula Хуыцаутты Хуыцау “god of gods” was “the name of the chief deity of the pagan religion”, cf. [THORDARSON F., 2000, 219].

<sup>25</sup> [LUBOTSKY A., 2015, 24–25] χουτζάου πάν, 30–31 τζουβάρ, 46.

<sup>26</sup> Amm. XXXI.2.23 *nec templum apud eos visitur aut delubrum, ne tugurium quidem culmo tectum cerni usquam potest, sed gladius barbarico ritu humi figitur nudus eumque ut Martem regionum, quas circumcircant, praesulem verecundius colunt.*

<sup>27</sup> Hdt. IV.62.2 ἐπὶ τούτου δὴ τοῦ σηκοῦ ἀκινάκης σιδήρεος ἴδρυται ἀρχαῖος ἐκάστοισι [sc. νομοῖσι], καὶ τοῦτ’ ἐστὶ τοῦ Ἄρεος τὸ ἄγαλμα; cf. IV.59.2 ἀγάλματα δὲ καὶ βωμοὺς καὶ νηοὺς οὐ νομίζουσι ποιεῖν πλὴν Ἄρεϊ “it is not customary for the Scythians to make images and altars and shrines for any god but Ares”.

<sup>28</sup> Clem. Alex. Prot. v.64 (= Hicesius fr. 1, ed. [Müller 1841–73, IV.429]) Σκυθῶν δὲ οἱ Σαυρομάται, ὧς φησιν Ἰκέσιος ἐν τῷ περὶ μυστηρίων, ἀκινάκην σέβουσιν. Hicesius’ passage also recalls this practice among the Scythians, quoting Eudoxus of Cnidus (fr. 303 ed. [LASSERRE 1966, III, 257]).

in war,<sup>29</sup> and with the Ossetian Nart epic cycle of Batraz, a hero who was unable to die until his sword was thrown into the sea.<sup>30</sup> The similarities of this episode with the theme of Excalibur (Geoffrey of Monmouth *Caliburnus gladius*) being thrown to the lake has led several scholars to look for the origin of the motif among Alans settled in Armorica in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. AD or the Iazygian *auxilia* stationed close to Hadrian's Wall with the *Legio VI Victrix* – a suggestive hypothesis in the best of cases which, however, has become very popular in the last decades.<sup>31</sup>

4. *Rhabdomancy*. Besides, Ammian tells that the Alans “divine the future in a surprising way; for they gather very straight osier twigs and separate them while casting certain secret magic spells at an appointed time, and so they can find out what is to be”.<sup>32</sup> In a similar way, Herodotus records that “among the Scythians there are many diviners, who divine by means of many willow wands in the following way: after bringing large bundles of wands, they lay and unfasten them on the ground and, as they lay the wands down one by one, they foretell the fate; and while they speak, they pile up the wands once more and place them together again one by one. This manner of divination is hereditary among them”.<sup>33</sup> Bachrach explained such oracular practices as a result of contacts of the Alans with Chinese civilization and, more specifically, with traditions such as those contained in the “Book of Changes” (*Yi Jīng* 易經), a mere conjecture without further foundation.<sup>34</sup> In fact, various kinds of rhabdomancy are well attested among several ancient peoples, like Medes,

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<sup>29</sup> Jord. *Get.* xxxv.183 (= Priscus fr. 12.2, ed. [BLOCKLEY 1981–83, 280–83]) *gladius Martis ... sacer apud Scytharum reges semper habitus*; cf. DUMÉZIL 1978: 78–83 “Attila et l'épée de Mars”.

<sup>30</sup> [DUMÉZIL G., 1978, 21–49, esp. 30–32] “Batraz, l'épée et le bûcher”. The Scythian name of Ares is unknown.

<sup>31</sup> Thus [BACHRACH B. S., 1973, 110–116; LITTLETON C.S.–MALCOR L. A., 2000, 61–71]. Otherwise, GRISWARD [1969, 476] suggested a Scythian influence on Eastern Celts.

<sup>32</sup> Amm. xxxi.2.24 *futura miro praesagiunt modo. nam rectiores virgas vimineas colligentes easque cum incantamentis quibusdam secretis praestituto tempore discernentes aperte, quid portenditur, norunt*

<sup>33</sup> Hdt. iv.67.1 μάντιες δὲ Σκυθῶων εἰσὶ πολλοί, οἳ μαντεύονται ῥάβδοισι ἰτεῖνησι πολλῆσι ᾧδε· ἐπεὰν φακέλους ῥάβδων μεγάλους ἐνεῖκωνται, θέντες χαμαὶ διεξελίσσουσι αὐτούς, καὶ ἐπὶ μίαν ἐκάστην ῥάβδον τιθέντες θεσπίζουσι, ἅμα τε λέγοντες ταῦτα συνειλέουσι τὰς ῥάβδους ὀπίσω καὶ αὐτὶς κατὰ μίαν συντιθεῖσι. αὕτη μὲν σφί ἡ μαντικὴ πατρῴη ἐστὶ. On the problems presented by this text cf. [CORCELLA A.–MEDAGLIA S.M.–FRASCHETTI A., 1993, 287]; on its religious context [MINNS E.H., 1913, 86–7]; source study in [ALEMANY A., 2014, 445–49].

<sup>34</sup> [BACHRACH B.S., 1973, 22–23, n. 53] “it is known that some Alan groups had contact with the Chinese before moving west”; better [SULIMIRSKI T., 1970, 35–36].

Germans and Baltic Slavs.<sup>35</sup> Giving the testimony of Boris Gatiev, in 1882 Vsevolod Miller still described a similar practice among the Ossetes where a healer or witch doctor (Russ. знахарь) attending a patient made use of wands to prescribe a propitious sacrifice.<sup>36</sup>

5. *Cult of the ancestors & burial rites.* A passage from the *Alethia* by Claudius Marius Victor (early 5<sup>th</sup> c. AD) dealing with the cult of the dead states that “at once all peoples embraced this endless iniquity, making funeral offerings to the spirits of the deceased, as now the Alans give testimony to, and each of them venerated their ancestors instead of their own gods”,<sup>37</sup> maybe an eyewitness account, since such a practice is not mentioned anywhere else and the author was a contemporary of Alan bands marauding in Southern Gaul. Possible parallels are the description of Scythian burial rites for both kings and commoners given by Herodotus and the burdensome funeral ceremonies carried out by 19<sup>th</sup> century Ossetes, which could cause the ruin of a family.<sup>38</sup> The Ossetian ritual of the “consecrator of the horse” (I. бæхфæлдисæг, D. бæхфæлдесæг), an old man giving a speech at a funeral to supply the deceased with a horse in the afterworld, recalls the sacrifice of horses to the Scythian kings.<sup>39</sup> Even if no source mentions similar practices among the Alans, Late Sarmatian and Alanic burials (mostly catacombs) occasionally contain horse skin depositions, horse harness items and — in the case of elite plots — sacrificial depositions of entire horses.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Dinon of Colophon fr. 3 ed. Jacoby *FGrH* 690 = *Schol. in Nic. Ther.* 613 (Medes); Tac. *Germ.* 10 (Germans); Saxo Gram. *Hist. Dan.* XIV ed. [HOLDER 1886, 567] (Slavic *Rugiani*).

<sup>36</sup> [MILLER V. F., 1882, 201]; other relevant reports in [DUMÉZIL G., 1978, 212 n. 3]. Fortune-telling by using divination sticks still seems to be a current practice in Ossetia; cf. [DZADZITY A. B.–DZUCCATY X. V.–X<sup>ARATY</sup> S.M., 1994, 163 s.v. фæрсæх фат].

<sup>37</sup> Mar. Vict. *Aleth.* III.190-92 (ed. [HOVINGH 1955, 173]) *nam protinus omnes / amplexae gentes scelus hoc sine fine litantes / manibus inferias, uti nunc testantur Alani / pro dis quaeque suis caros habuere parentes.* On mourning 13<sup>th</sup> century Crimean Alans, cf. William of Rubruck XI.1 (ed. [WYNGAERT 1929, 192]) *detulerunt nobis carnes coctas, rogantes ut comederemus de cibo eorum et oraremus pro quodam defuncto eorum* “and they brought us cooked meat, begging us to eat of their food and to pray for one of them who had died” ([KOWALEWSKY M., 1893, 52] “repas funèbres?”).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Hdt. IV.71-73; [BACHRACH B.S., 1973, 22 n. 52; DUMÉZIL G., 1978, 249-61]; also [KOWALEWSKY M., 1893, 49-63, esp. 59] “dans quelques contrées de l’Ossétie, celui des parents morts qui a été le plus connu par ses actes de piété devient l’objet d’un culte spécial”.

<sup>39</sup> [KALOEV B. A., 1964; DZADZITY A. B.–DZUCCATY X. V.–X<sup>ARATY</sup> S.M. 1994, 38-39 s.v. бæхфæлдисæг, бæх фæлдисын]; cf. Hdt. IV.71-72.

<sup>40</sup> [KOUZNETSOV V.–LEBEDYNSKY I., 2005, 80-86]; cf. e.g. HÄRKE [2018] for the case of Klin Yar, an archaeological site near Kislovodsk in Stavropol’skij Kraj. Alan catacombs contain other

6. *Idolatry*. Eochar, a king of the Alans sent by Aetius to deal with the Armorican Bacaudae ca. 447/8, is characterized as an idol worshipper (*idolorum ministro*) by Constantius of Lyons in his life of Saint Germanus of Auxerre.<sup>41</sup> Although this hagiographic source must be approached with caution, later reports from different traditions insist in the same idea. Thus Ibn Rusta informs us that “the king of the Alans is Christian at heart, but all the people who inhabit his kingdom are heathens worshipping idols (*kuffār ya ‘budūna al-aṣnām*)”.<sup>42</sup> According to the Persian anonymous geography *Hudūd al-‘ālam*, “their king is a Christian ... but among them there are both Christians and idol worshippers (*but parast*)”,<sup>43</sup> a statement similar to that given by Gardīzī, who nevertheless keeps closer to Ibn Rusta when asserting that “all the people of his kingdom are heathens and idol worshippers”.<sup>44</sup> Curiously enough, in the report left by bishop Theodore of his journey to the metropolitan see of Alania (ca. 1222/40) it is said that “they do not prostrate themselves before carved images, but before some demons in high places. The Alans are only Christians in name”.<sup>45</sup> The Greek term γλυπτός has often the meaning “idol” in the *Septuaginta*,<sup>46</sup> but here it probably refers to Byzantine icons, given the Orthodox aversion to statuary, since the context suggests that the “demons” (δαίμονια) are an alternative to objects like metal artefacts, pottery vessels or –exceptionally– iron long swords, probably indicating elite status.

<sup>41</sup> Const. Lugd. *Vita S. Germ.* 28 (ed. [KRUSCH-LEVISON 1920, 271–2]) *Gochari ferocissimo Alanorum regi ... idolorum ministro*.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Rusta *Kitāb al-A‘lāq al-nafīsa* (ed. [de GOEJE 1892, 148])  
 وملك اللان في نفسه نصراني و عامة اهل مملكته كُفَّار يعبدون الاصنام  
*wa-malik al-Lān fī nafsa naṣrānī wa-‘āmmat ahl mamlukathu kuffār ya ‘budūna al-aṣnām*.

<sup>43</sup> *Hudūd al-‘ālam* (ed. [Sotūde 1340/1962, 191])  
 وملك شان ترساست ... و اندر میان ایشان مردمانی اند ترسا و مردمانی بت پرستند  
*va-malikišān tarsāst ... va-andar miyān-i tīšān mardumānī and tarsā va-mardumānī but parastand*.

<sup>44</sup> Gardīzī *Zayn al-aḥbār* (ed. Ḥabībī 1347/1968, 595]).  
 ملك اللان ترساست و همه اهل مملکت او کافراند، بت پرستند  
*malik-i al-Lān tarsāst va-hama-yi ahl-i mamlukat-i ū kāfirand, but parastand*.

<sup>45</sup> Theod. *Alan.* 24 (ed. *PG* 140, c. 409) καὶ προσκυνοῦσι μὲν οὐ γλυπτοῖς, δαιμονίοις δὲ τισιν ἐν τοῖς ὑψηλοῖς. χριστιανοὶ δὲ μόνον ὀνόματι Ἀλανοί; cf. William of Rubruck xi.1 (ed. [WYNGAERT 1929, 192] cf. n. 36)) *omnia ignorabant que spectant ad ritum christianum, solo nomine Christi excepto* “they were ignorant of all things concerning Christian worship, with the sole exception of Christ’s name”.

<sup>46</sup> *Ex* 34.13, *Deut* 7.5 τὰ γλυπτὰ τῶν θεῶν; *Deut* 4.16 γλυπτὸν ὁμοίωμα; cf. *Lev* 26.1; *Iud* 17.3; *Sap* 14.16.

Christian cult. This worship of idols recalls the numerous amulets found at the Mokraja Balka burial ground near Kislovodsk (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c. AD), representing solar wheels, men or different animals.<sup>47</sup>

7. *Some religious terms.* These three Ossetian sacred concepts have often been related to the Alans in one way or another:

— I. фарн, D. фарнæ “blessing, prosperity, luck”, Med. \**farnah*- “royal glory”, Av. x<sup>n</sup>*arənah*- “fortune”,<sup>48</sup> a complex notion turned into a widespread Iranian institution, is often attested in the Greek inscriptions of the Northern Black Sea colonies during the Roman imperial period in compound names containing a φαρν- element, though never in the few Alanic names known so far.<sup>49</sup>

— I. кувын, D. ковун “to pray”, of uncertain etymology,<sup>50</sup> lies in the origin of I. куывд, D. кувд “prayer, offering meal, banquet”, I. кувæггаг “first drink offered by the eldest to the youngest at table after making a toast” and I. кувæндон “sanctuary”, a religious vocabulary related to Ossetian communal banquets, characterized by ritual toasting to [1] the God of Gods (I. Хуыцæутты Хуыцау) and [2] St. George (I. Уастырджи), which reminds me of Theodore’s complaining about the fake bishop who ordained priests among the Alans “at table, while masticating and holding a cup in his hand”.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> [AFANAS’EV G. E., 1976]; cf. [KOUZNETSOV V.-LEBEDYNSKY I., 2005, 176-177] for similars amulets –including horsemen– from Zilgi, Zmejskaja (North Ossetia) and Čegem (Kabardino-Balkarija). As remarked by Heinrich Härke [personal communication 8/12/2021] the identification of such objects as ‘amulets’ remains purely conjectural.

<sup>48</sup> [ABAEV V. I., 1958–89, I.421-22 s.v. *farn* : *farnæ*; BENVENISTE É., 1959, 127; CHEUNG J., 2002, 182]. Lubotsky [1998] considered \**farnah*- a term of Scythian origin, cognate with Ved. *pārīṇas*- “fullness, abundance”; besides, ABAEV [1949, 258] and LUBOTSKY [2015, 58–9] have tried to recognize the Ossetic word in Alan. τὸ φάρνετς ~ Gr. οὐκ αἰσχύνεσαι; “aren’t you ashamed?” in the epilogue of Tzetzes’ *Theogonia*, but the element -ετς still poses problems (Lubotsky D. *dæw farnæ (j)es* “yours is the *farn*” does not correspond to the Greek).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. [ABAEV V. I., 1949, 163–4; ZGUSTA L., 1955, § 141 Μαιφαρνος (2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> c.), § 184 Πιφит(ο)φαρνακῆς (100/250), § 237 Φαρναρνος (200/250), § 238 Φαρνης (4<sup>th</sup> c.?), § 239 Φαρνοξαρθος (220/240), § 259 Χοφαρνος (100/279), etc] –all dates AD–, as well as the theonym Ουαταφαρνος in our n. 6. The widely attested name Φαρνακῆς and its variants [ZGUSTA L., 1955, § 236], however, could be due to Persian or Pontic (under Mithridates VI Eupator) influence.

<sup>50</sup> Monographic study in [CHRISTOL A., 1998], who explains it from OIran. \**gaub*- “to speak, proclaim, praise”; other solutions in [ABAEV V. I., 1958–89, I.603–4 s.v. *kūvyn* : *k yvd* / *kovun* : *kuvd*; BENVENISTE É., 1959, 12–13; THORDARSON F., 2000, 220–21].

<sup>51</sup> Theod. *Alan.* 16 (ed. PG 140, c. 404) διαμασσώμενος ἐπὶ τραπέζης, καὶ τῆ χειρὶ κυλικοφορῶν.

— I. сьгьдæg, D. сугьдæg “pure, holy” < OIran. \**suxta-ka-* “burnt” has been adduced to explain Σουγδαῖα, the Greek name of the Crimean town of Sudak, often regarded as an Alan foundation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD without any other proof than this etymology.<sup>52</sup>

8. *Trifunctionalism*. The French scholar Georges Dumézil deserves acknowledgement for having championed the study of Ossetian mythology, folklore and language in the West, but lack of sufficient evidence prevented him from applying the trifunctional pattern to Alan religion, the only exception being maybe the Scythian and Alanic sword cult associated with the Nart hero Batraz (cf. § 3). The real problem lies in the validity of the Three Functions Theory — not universally accepted — and in the presumed Ossetian (Alanic) origin of the Caucasian Nart sagas, a hypothesis which is closely related to their trifunctional analysis — an issue exceeding the limits of the present study.<sup>53</sup> Dumézil’s disciple Georges Charachidzé suggested that the Caucasian Svans had borrowed from the Alans a variant of the Indo-European trifunctional system similar to that attested in the ‘Prayer of the Ossetian Women’ and preserved in the hierarchy of toasts to the gods in Svan communal feasts: [1] the supreme god *Xoša yermet / yērbāt*, regarded as the Lord of the skies (*upal deceš*) and his vizier *Taringzel / Targlezer* “Archangel”,<sup>54</sup> [2] the moon god *Žgæræg* “St. George”, protector of men, and [3] *Lamaria* “St. Mary”, goddess associated to fertility, cereals and the hearth.<sup>55</sup> However, until further evidence becomes available nothing other than the absence of a better candidate allows an association of the Alans to the origins of this Svan pantheon.

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<sup>52</sup> [ABAЕV V. I., 1958–89, *III*.188–9 s.v. *syğdæg* : *suğdæg*; THORDARSON F. 2000, 220]; nevertheless, the Alanic etymology is as inconclusive as the Sogdian one; cf. my treatment of the problem in [ALEMANY A., 2019].

<sup>53</sup> According to [DUMÉZIL G., 1968–73, *I*.453], “c’est chez les Ossètes, et sans doute déjà en partie chez leurs lointains ancêtres, que le noyau de l’épopée [narte], ses principaux personnages, se sont formés ... Elle a été adoptée chez plusieurs peuples voisins, transformée de différentes manières”.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Oss. Тарангелоз < Georg. *მთავარანგელოზი* *mt’avar-angeloz* “Archangel” [ABAЕV V. I., 1958–89, *III*.231–2 s.v. *Tarangeloz*].

<sup>55</sup> [CHARACHIDZÉ G., 1987, 83–91, 121–27]; the ‘Prayer of the Ossetian Women’ (I. УСТЫТЫ КУЫВД, cf. DZADZITY A.B.–DZUCCATY X.V.–X”ARATY S.M., 1994, 156–7), transcribed by Gatiev [1876, 41–43], was analysed by DUMÉZIL [1983, 114–119]; on the Svan traditional cults cf. [CHIRIKBA V., 2015, 176–78].

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**Fig. 1.** Aerial view of the eastern section of Humara hillfort (Хумаринское городище), Karačaevo-Čerkessija; below, remains of the square stone building often identified as a fire temple. Photo: M.O. Zhukovskij / U.Ju. Kochkarov.

→ 1. *Alleged traces of Zoroastrianism*



**Fig. 2.** Silver *missorium* of Flavius Ardabur Aspar (434 AD), bearing on the outer edge the inscription *Fl(avius) Ardabur Aspar Vir Inlustris Com(es) et Mag(ister) Militum et Consul Ordinarius*; above left, his father *Ardabur*; center right, his son *Ardabur Junior Pretor*. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.  
→ 2. *Ardabda and the seven gods* (note 17)



**Fig. 3.** Iron long sword, Alanic 'princely grave' 360, Klin-Yar (mid 7<sup>th</sup> cent. AD). Photo: H. Härke.  
→ 3. *Sword cult*



**Fig. 4.** Complete horse deposition in the dromos of Alanic 'princely grave' 360, Klin-Yar (mid 7<sup>th</sup> cent. AD). Photo: H. Härke.

→ 5. *Cult of the ancestors & burial rites*



**Fig. 5.** Three presumed Alanic 'amulets', ring-shaped or in the form of horsemen, Terek oblast', Vladikavkaz okrug (different dates, 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> cent. AD). Photos: T. Gabuev.

→ 6. *Idolatry*



**Fig. 6.** The person name Φαρνοξαρθος –framed in white– in a Greek inscription from Tanais (*CIRB* 1245, 15; Bosporan Era 517 = 220 AD). Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

→ 7. *Some religious terms* (note 49)

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**ПЕРЕЖИТКИ АЛАНСКОЙ РЕЛИГИИ**

Целью данной статьи является сбор свидетельств о религиозных практиках алан, не принимая во внимание возможные связи со скифскими или осетинскими фактами и параллелями, если только это прямо не засвидетельствовано для алан литературными или материальными источниками.

**К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а:** аланская религия, культ семи богов, культ меча, рабдомантия, культ предков, идолопоклонство, зороастризм, трифункционализм.

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