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**OSSETE – CENTRAL ASIAN CONNECTIONS**

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Much, if not all, of what is presented here is well known and has been suggested by others, but old viewpoints are not wrong because they are old any more than new ideas are true only because they are new. It may be worthwhile to reemphasize accepted theories, especially if new suggestions threaten to displace them. Perhaps new approaches to accepted positions, or simply reviewing work of the past, may have a value for the reconstruction of the past.

The first question to be asked in regard to the subject above is that of the origin of the Ossetes, and it generally seems agreed that they are principally descended from the Alans, who in turn were a group of the Sarmatians. The latter, we believe, were the last Iranian nomads of Eurasia before the expansion of the Altaic speaking peoples. If there are no objections to this general point of view then the next question to be asked is, if the North Caucasus was not the homeland of the Alans from whence came these ancestors of the Ossetes? Here again we find most scholars in accord that they came from Central Asia, but the exact homeland is uncertain. Let us systematically examine any evidence suggesting relationships of the Alans with other peoples, primarily through archaeology since reliance solely on linguistics may not be able to pinpoint specifically the place of the ancient Alanic tongue among the east Iranian languages, hence their place of origin and relation to other peoples in history<sup>1</sup>.

In archaeology, of course, one looks for rare or unique features found in one or two places or among one or two peoples which are not found elsewhere and then may be considered as characteristic of the one or two places or peoples under investigation. At once a telltale feature of the deformation of male skulls, presumably from infancy, comes to mind. This feature has been found on skulls of Alan corpses from the North Caucasus dating from the middle of the first millennium of our era. As we know, this same feature is found among the Hephthalites and possibly on a lesser scale among their predecessors the Kushans. Inasmuch as the elongated skulls, as far as we know, have not

been found elsewhere in Eurasia, except among the Huns who almost certainly borrowed the practice from their Iranian neighbours, it seems logical to propose that this unique practice indicates a connection between the Alans and the Hephthalites. Was this relationship a close ethnic one or did the Alans simply copy a practice for some political or similar reason as did the Huns? If one can find other items of identity or similarity between the two peoples, then the identity or close relationship of the two peoples would be more probable than a simple borrowing. Unfortunately we know very little, either from written sources or from archaeological remains about both the early Alans and the Hephthalites. As mentioned, it seems that both were the last Iranian peoples to migrate from Inner Asia, Alans to the west and Hephthalites to the south, before the expansion of the Altaic speakers – the Huns. Therefore, as a working hypothesis one might expect common features among the Alans and the Hephthalites.

One possible domain in which connections might exist would be in the arts. The art of the early Alans, as we know from excavations of sites in the North Caucasus, may be characterized as part of the widespread “Animal Style” which extended across Eurasia from the plains of Hungary to the Ordos region of north China<sup>2</sup>. Consequently it is very difficult, if not impossible, by means of art styles alone to connect the Alans with any particular group of nomads in Eurasia since they all produced objects in that style. Although we cannot be sure, objects in the animal style from excavations in Bactria (Tajikistan and southern Uzbekistan) and Sogdiana from the middle of the millennium may well belong to the Hephthalites.<sup>3</sup> But again where are the objects which are distinctively peculiar to only the Alans and the Hephthalites? So far I have been unable to discover them although they well might exist.

Let us consider another line of approach – social characteristics, which we garner from Chinese and Classical sources. From them we infer that the Hephthalites were noted for their polyandry, their communal way of life, and their kurgan burials in which followers of a leader were immolated<sup>4</sup>. Did the ancestors of the Ossetes practice such features? Although, as far as I know, polyandry is not attested among the Alans, women had an important role in early Ossetic society, as one may guess from the word *æxsin*, which Abaev has analyzed as related to the root ‘to rule’ (p. 64). One also should not forget the legends of the Amazons and the important role of Satana in the Nart epic. The communal way of life surely is paralleled between the two peoples; again witness the word *ældar*, or chief, really *primus inter pares* among the Alans. Edvard Rtveldze claims to have found this word on an inscribed gem from Central Asia<sup>5</sup>. But is this communal or democratic way of life merely a common characteristic of most if not all nomadic peoples? The same may be said for the

kurgan burials with sacrifices. Be that as it may, I wonder if the Digor word for 'slave' *cağar* may not have the same origin as the Sogdian practice of the *čākar*, Arabic *shākarriya*, 'the guards' of the rich Sogdian merchants who left them at home when they went far on trading expeditions? This well may have been an original Hephthalite institution. Later practices of the Samanids, Mamlukes (from the North Caucasus like the Ossetes), may derive from this special pre-Islamic practice<sup>6</sup>.

Another possible connection between the North Caucasus and Central Asia is the very name of the Ossetes, which has been traced back to the As people, either a group of the Alans or a parallel tribe of the Sarmatians. At once the Asioi or Asiani of Classical sources may be recalled. These were one of the tribe of nomads who invaded Bactria at the end of the second century B.C. They have been identified with the Wu-sun of Chinese sources who were probably located in the Ili valley, the area most likely to have served as a homeland or basis of power of nomads seeking to expand to the west. Because of the Altai mountains in the north and the T'ien Shan in the south this fertile valley has been sheltered from the fierce Siberian winters and has served as a rich settled center for nomadic states or empires, from the early Turks to the Chagatay *ulus* or Galdan's Oirat hegemony. The Ili valley badly needs extensive archaeological investigation.

I have dwelled on the Ili valley because I suspect it to have been the last homeland of the Iranian nomads who under pressure of the Huns moved away. Geographically speaking it is the logical area of nomadic political power. The oases of the south are conducive to concentrations of nomads, rather they are centers of settled irrigation cultures. The Ili valley, on the contrary, blends into steppe lands and would attract nomads seeking a basis of agricultural wealth and power for expansion. It is possible that it was the homeland of both Hephthalites and Alans before their migrations.

#### NOTES

1. Obviously connections between North Iranian languages, of which Ossetic is the living survivor, can be found; cf. H.W. BAILEY, "Saka and Alan", in GABARAEV, N. Ya., ed. *Vo-prosi Iranskoi i Obshchei filologii*, (Tbilisi, 1977), 39-42.

2. The style continued into later periods in the north Caucasus; cf. Krupnov, E. I., ed. *Arkheologicheskie raskopki v raione Zmeiskoi Severnoi Osetii*, (Ordzhonikidze, 1961), 74-5. By this time, of course, the Alans-Ossetes had developed a distinctive art of their own, but ancient forms and styles persisted.

3. For a general survey of the art and archaeology relating to the Hephthalites, cf. E. Rtveladze i A. Sagdullaev, *Pamyatniki minuvshikh vekov*, (Tashkent, 1986), 133 pp.

4. V. I. ABAEV, *Osetinskii Yazyk i Folklor* (Moscow 1949), 64.

5. E. Rtveladze, “Slovo *ÆLDAR* na gemme”, to be published soon.

6. Language connections of course are important, but we have little data on which to base an Ossetic-Central Asian connections especially since the Iranian languages in CA were either absorbed by Persian-Tajiki or by Turkic languages. The Khwarezmian language has many features in common with Ossetic, perhaps more than other east Iranian languages. For example: Khwar. *c'k*, Ossetic *dzag* ‘full’, Khwar. *nwk*, Ossetic *næwæg*, *nog* ‘new’, Khwar. *pnd'k*, Ossetic *fændag* ‘way’, and many others.