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THREE DIGORON NOTES

In 1961 an extensive collection of Ossetic folklore was published in two volumes in Ordzhonikidze under the title *Ирон адæмы сфæлдыстад*. The collection includes both Iron and Digoron material and a large section of volume one is devoted to texts from the Ossetic Nart Epos. Among the Digoron Nart texts there is a large number of words and phrases which are difficult to interpret. Three such cases are discussed below.

(1) гæндзæхгин “stoat, ermine”

This word occurs in I.A.S. 1, p. 312, in the following context:

Мет нæуæг уард адтæй. Сæумæй фæсарæфтæмæ фæххадтæнцæ, фал гæндзæхгини фæд дæр не ссирдтонцæ.

“Snow was freshly fallen. They wandered from morning till afternoon but they did not find even the trail of an ermine.”

In the Miller-Freiman Dictionary, p. 389, гæндзæхгин is defined as “a kind of small animal in the Nart legends”. The same definition is given on p. 646 of the glossary of I.A.S. 2.

гæндзæхгин appears to be an adjective formed by the addition of the common Digoron adjective suffix -гин to the noun гæндзæх “convulsion”. The word гæндзæх “convulsion” is known in the plural in the phrase Dig. гæндзæхтæ цæгъдун Ir. гæндзæхтæ цæгъдын “to writhe in convulsions”.¹

The animal which could be described as “having a convulsion” is the stoat which, in its winter coat, is called the ermine, *Mustela erminea*. This animal is known to perform an unusual “dance”, the precise reasons for which are uncertain. The movements of the stoat are described in the 9th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as follows:

Although among the fiercest, it is also one of the most playful of creatures, gamboling on the turf, turning somersaults and performing the most grotesque antics, apparently without other purpose than its own amusement. In approaching its prey even it indulges in the same playful propensity, but it may then be done with the view of allaying suspicion in its intended victim².

The ermine is found in the Caucasus. It fits the above passage well since it is a small animal which can be found in the winter.

According to the Russian-Ossetic Dictionary, p. 114, the Iron name for “stoat” is сыбираг мыстулæг, literally “Siberian weasel”.³ The name мыстулæг “weasel” occurs in Iron only, its Digoron equivalent being æрврæ.⁴ The word гæндзæхгин is possibly an old name for the stoat from the hunters’ language.

(2) Æнсури мæйæ “the month of the Wild Boar”

This month name occurs on p. 95 of I.A.S. 1 in the following context:

Аци бонæ, хорхæтæни æнсури мæйи куд фæууй, уотæ ци сйех уа мæнæ аци уазт.

“Today may this dam here become as frozen as it becomes in the month of the Wild Boar at the winter solstice.”

Æнсури мæйæ occurs very rarely and only in Digoron as the name of a winter month, generally thought to correspond to January⁵ or December-January.⁶ In his article on the Ossetic month names, Abaev wrote:

“Dig. æнсур Ir. æссыр means ‘fang’. But how is the ‘month of the Fang’ to be understood? Does this name too, perhaps, contain a hint at a cruel, ‘biting’ cold?..”⁷

Here Abaev had in mind the Iron name of the month of January, тгæнджы мæй, “month of ringing (frost)”.

Munkácsi records Baiev’s idea that æнсур is shortened from анзи сæр.⁸ This is unlikely, however, since анзи сæр exists and means “New Year’s Day”.⁹

From the above passage it would appear that the time of æнсури мæйæ is at least partly in December, since it includes the winter solstice. In Ossetic the name of the wild boar is in Iron хъæддагхуы¹⁰ and in Digoron тускъа, which is related to English “tusk”.¹¹ It is therefore possible that æнсурæ “tusk, fang”

might have been used to refer to a wild boar, perhaps in the hunters' language. The wild boar, *Sus scrofa* ranges throughout Asia, through the Caucasus and into Southern Europe. Its mating season is from November till January, when the tusky males are at their most prominent, fighting ferocious battles with their rivals.¹² Hence a winter month, perhaps December or December-January might well have been known as the "month of the Wild Boar" among the hunting communities of Digoria.¹³

Another name for the winter month of January in Digoron is "St Basil's month", named after St Basil the Great of Caesarea. St Basil's Day is January 1st.¹⁴

(3) æхсæз уедагæ "six rows" (used of barley)

In I.A.S. 1, Story 81, one reads of some of the bloodthirsty feats of the Nart hero Batraz including his slaying of the son of the Chief of the Corn. The closing sentences of the story read as follows (p. 254):

Хуарелдар фæллæбурдта хъæбæр хуари æфсерæмæ, уæди уæнгæ ибæл задæй æхсæз æфсери, æма'й æ къохæй исхафта. Æфсерæ уадзунмæ ибæл нæбал гъавта æ фурти мастмæ. Уасгерги имæ дзоруй: – Адт, мæ бæхæн ма си уæддæр *сайæнваги фагæ фæууадзæ! – зæгъгæ, æма си е дæр еунæг æфсерæ фæууагъта. (Еци хуарæн ес нур дæр æхсæз уедаги.)

"The Chief of the Corn snatched a spike of barley; up to then six spikelets had grown upon it and he rubbed it with his hand. He intended to leave no spikelet any longer on it, in grief for his son. Wasgergi says to him, 'Hey! Leave, nevertheless, enough fodder¹⁵ out of them for my horse!' and so he left a single spikelet out of them. (This cereal now has six rows.)"

This passage is probably an aetiological explanation of the origin of the six-rowed barley (*Hordeum vulgare*), which is the most common type of barley. Barley is probably man's oldest cereal crop and has long been classified by the different types of fruiting head which have developed. In their 1967 book, L. and M. Milne describe the different types as follows:

Through selection, the form of the fruiting head was improved, to become more regular until each notch in the terminal spike came to contain on opposite sides either three spikelets with a single floret apiece ('six-rowed barley', *Hordeum vulgare*) or one spikelet ('two-rowed barley', *Hordeum distichum*)...¹⁶

Six-rowed barley is also known by the botanical name *Hordeum hexastichum* L.¹⁷ In addition to the two-rowed and six-rowed types mentioned above, a four-rowed variety also exists. Ossetic distinguishes between the different kinds of barley with the following names: Ir. сиск “six-rowed barley”,¹⁸ Ir. (and Dig.?) кæрвæдз “four-rowed barley”¹⁹ and Ir. хъуыдалы, Dig. хъудали “two-rowed barley”.²⁰

The passage above stresses the six spikelets that were growing on the spike of barley when the Chief of the Corn snatched it. Thanks to Wasgergi’s timely intervention, the cereal survived. The narrator then describes the barley as it has existed since then. The Ossetic word Dig. уедагæ, Ir. уидаг normally means “root”. Miller also lists the meaning “vein”.²¹ A specialised but related meaning “line, row” should be understood when the word is used in reference to barley.

NOTES

¹ Miller, p. 389; V. I. Abaev, *Dictionary*, vol. 1, pp. 513-14.

² *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed., vol. 8 (Edinburgh, 1879), p. 526.

³ The Siberian weasel, *Mustela sibirica*, is a species separate from the stoat. See Grzimek, *Animal Life*, vol. 12, p. 45.

⁴ Miller, pp. 195, 833; Abaev, *Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 183 and vol. 2, p. 143.

⁵ J. Klaproth, *Reise in den Kaukasus und nach Georgien*, vol. 2 (Halle, 1814), p. 599; Munkácsi, p. 210; Miller, p. 163; Abaev, *Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 189.

⁶ Abaev, *Months*, p. 1.

⁷ Abaev, *Months*, p. 2.

⁸ Munkácsi, p. 210, note 2.

⁹ Miller, p. 38; Abaev, *Dictionary*, vol. 3, p. 75.

¹⁰ Russian-Ossetic Dictionary p. 202.

¹¹ Miller, p. 1229; Abaev, *Dictionary*, vol. 3, p. 320.

¹² Grzimek, *Animal Life*, vol. 13, p. 87.

¹³ The “month of the Wild Boar” might have been so called because the animal was hunted during the winter. According to the *Shooting Times and Country Magazine*, Feb. 9-15, 1984, p. 29, today the boar is hunted in North Ossetia from September to December.

¹⁴ Abaev, *Dictionary*, vol. 1, pp. 239-40; Abaev, *Months*, p. 2; Munkácsi, p. 210.

¹⁵ “enough fodder” translates Ossetic *сайæнваги фæгæ, literally “enough of a fodder sufficiency”. I emend the form сайæйнаги, which occurs in the I.A.S. 1 passage, to сайæнваги in the light of сайæнвар “fodder sufficiency” from сайæн “fodder” and фæг, Dig. фæгæ “sufficient, enough”. This word occurs in the Iron version of this story on p. 230 of Нарты Кадджытæ (Dzæwdzhyqæw, 1946).

¹⁶ L. and M. Milne, *Living Plants of the World* (London, 1967), p. 304.

¹⁷ *Flora Europaea*, ed. T. G. Tutin et al. (Cambridge, 1964), vol. 5, p. 204 and index p. 107.

¹⁸ Miller, p. 1099; Abaev, *Dictionary*, vol. 3, p. 210 translates this word as “four-rowed barley”.

¹⁹ Miller, p. 676; Abaev, *Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 587.

²⁰ Miller, p. 458; Abaev, *Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 321.

²¹ Miller, p. 1304.

ABBREVIATIONS:

Abaev, <i>Dictionary</i>	V. I. Abaev, Историко-этимологический словарь осетинского языка, Leningrad, vol. 1, 1958, vol. 2, 1973, vol. 3, 1979.
Abaev, Months	“The names of the months in Ossetic”, pp. 1-7 in <i>W. B. Henning Memorial Volume</i> , ed. M. Boyce and I. Gershevitch (London, 1970).
Grzimek, <i>Animal Life</i>	B. Grzimek, <i>Animal Life Encyclopaedia</i> (New York, 1975).
I.A.S. 1-2	Ирон адæмы сфæлдыстад, 2 vols (Ordzhonikidze, 1961).
Miller	V. Miller and A. Freiman, <i>Ossetisch-russisch-deutsches Wörterbuch</i> , Leningrad; vol. 1, 1927, vol. 2, 1929, vol. 3, 1934.
Munkácsi	B. Munkácsi, <i>Blüten der ossetischen Volksdichtung</i> (Budapest, 1932).
Russian-Ossetic Dictionary	Русско-осетинский словарь, ed. 2, compiled by V. I. Abaev, edited by M. I. Isaev (Moscow, 1970).