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THE AVARS IN THE NART EPOS OF THE OSSETS

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The question of the relationships between the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of the steppe and the settled population engaged in agriculture is an actual problem in the northern Caucasus, just as in other regions with similar natural and social conditions. This holds true for all the ancient peoples of the steppe who spoke Iranian languages, including the Cimmerians, Scythians, Sarmomatas, Sarmatas and the Alani. They inhabited the lowlands surrounding the Caucasus in fairly large groups and came into contact with the natives. After the Hunnish attack, the old Iranian nomads of the steppes of Ciscaucasia were replaced by Turkic nomads, such as the Huns, Avars, Bulgarians, Khazars and the Kipchaks. From that time on, the Iranian-speaking Alani (the ethnic ancestors of the Ossets) who settled in the central Caucasus in pre-Hunnish times, came into contact with the above-mentioned Turkic peoples. The indigenity of Alan-Turkic linguistic contacts is confirmed by the fact that “the most outstanding and largest group of Old Ossetic lexis after the Iranian and Caucasian elements consists of Turkic ones”.¹ Starting from the concrete historical-linguistic situation, it is to be expected that the Alan-Turkic relationships should also be reflected in the Nartic epos.

After the Mongol invasion, the Ossets lived in an isolated situation for a long time in the huge gorges of the central Caucasus. The steppe motifs of their Nartic epos are easily identifiable. The scene of various Ossetic legends is based either in the thorny steppes of Sukhs and Khiza, or in the lowlands of Zilahar and Khazma. It is beyond doubt that the author of the epos had a thorough knowledge of the flat country of Ciscaucasia, a fact confirmed by the large number of steppes mentioned in the poem². Not only does the epos accurately describe the Caucasian steppes, but it also maintained the medieval Turkic ethnonyms that are known to us from written sources. The topic here is the Turkic-speaking Avarish people who lived in Pannonia before the Hungarian

conquest³. Our knowledge of the Avars dates back to the Digor texts of the epos that were recorded in writing by Mikhail Gardanti before the October Revolution (one of the ethnic groups of Ossets, the western Ossets were called Digors). Primarily it is the legend of Bolat-Hamits.

The two wives of Bolat-Hamits make a felt cloak for their husband, while singing the following song: “This felt cloak will bring happiness, for our dear husband will set out for the land of the Avars and he will come back with his satchels full of red calico, and he will choose an Avarish girl to be his third wife”. The idea of a third wife caught the fancy of Bolat-Hamits and he went to Avaria and found the Avarish beauty. One year later, his insidious wives killed Bolat-Hamitz’s Avarish wife, but with the help of a magic pearl he succeeded in raising her from the dead, and punished the plotting wives⁴.

The name of Hamits’ wife, the Avarish beauty, can also be found in the legend of “The Birth of Batraz”: she is called Agunda⁵. This female character frequently occurs both in the Iron (eastern Ossetic) and Digor texts⁶, as in the southern Ossetic versions⁷. In the legend about “Atsamaz and Agunda”, Agunda marries Atsamaz, who has a wonderful flute. One of the Narts (Hamits or Atsamaz) marries Agunda, the Avarish beauty, who is a stranger and comes from a non-Nart tribe⁸.

The epos tells us the name of Agunda’s father: Saynag-aldar⁹, who is either at peace or at war with the Narts, and lives somewhere not far from the land of the Narts. Independent and strong, Saynag-aldar marries-off his only daughter to Atsamaz, with the following words: “I give my daughter to the Narts, to a family of my own level. She weds the son of Atsa-Atsamaz”¹⁰.

Due to the kind assistance of the philologist T. A. Khamitsayeva, I learnt of another Nartic epic poem which mentions the Avars. The Digor legend of “Soslan and Telberdi’s Three Sons” recorded by Gubady Dzagurov, mentions that “one of the Narts called Uarkhag decided to meet the khan of the Avars’ land which is beyond the mountains”¹¹.

What kind of Avaria and Avars are mentioned in the Nartic epos of the Ossetes? At first sight it appears that it is easy to answer this question: the epos tells us about the Avars and Avaria in Dagestan. Today the most densely populated inhabitants of Dagestan are the Avars¹². Ossetia, though it does not neighbour Dagestan, is not far from it, and the Ossets had known of the Avars for a long time. However, the identification of Avaria mentioned in the Nartic epos with the Dagestanian Avaria is rather doubtful, since the Ossetic ethnonyms for Dagestanian Avars are “Soly” or “Soliag”,¹³ and neither the terms “Avar” nor “Avaria” refer to them. This alone is sufficient for us to arrive at the conclusion that the Avaria of the Nartic epos is not equivalent to Dagestanian Avaria. There is neither direct nor indirect confirmation in the epos of the

relationships between Avaria and Dagestan, on the contrary all its geographical references concern the north-western regions of the Caucasus: Agunda's father, Saynag-aldar lives by the Uarp river (today the Urup, a western affluent of the river Kuban);¹⁴ Agunda's castle (in some versions of the epos she is called Akola) is situated between the Akdengiz and Karadengiz seas (between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea), on the Taman plain called "Tamani bydyr".¹⁵ All these geographical references of the epos echo the popular belief about the whereabouts of Avaria, and they bear no relation to Dagestan.

It must be assumed that the Avaria mentioned in the Nartic epos of the Ossetes is the northern Caucasus, which was under the domination of those Avar nomads of the steppe that later migrated to Pannonia. As K. Czeglédy, M. I. Artamonov, and V. G. Gadzhiev have proved in their studies, the early medieval Turkic-speaking Avars have nothing to do with the Avars of Dagestan, who belong to the Dagestan-Vainakhian group of the Ibero-Caucasian languages.¹⁶ This is of assistance in solving the problem of the identification of Avaria mentioned in the Ossetic Nartic epos and we can proceed to the problem of Alan-Avar relations.

As mentioned earlier, due to the geographical references of the Ossetic Nart epos, the Avars lived in the north-western part of the Caucasus. This hypothesis is supported by the folklore of the Adyghian peoples living there. There is a legend about the war the Avars waged against Baikan khan in "*The History of the Adyghian People*" compiled by the Kabardian scholar Shora Nogmov in the first half of the 19th century.¹⁷ This author also recorded legends about the bloody battles in the region of Anan and Tseme, as well as the victory of the Avars over the Adyghians near the river Abin.¹⁸ At the same time, Adyghian folklore material acts as a kind of control for the data on the Avars mentioned in the Ossetic epos and informs us of their one-time abode in the north-western Caucasus.

Here it should be mentioned that the Taman peninsula is also cited as the Avar home in the 7th century in archeological material: in the cultural layer of the Taman nomads, ceramics made from long rolls of clay coiled in a circle were found.¹⁹ It is possible that the fact that the Avars were in the north-western Caucasus can somehow be connected with Great Bulgaria in the same place (this is mentioned by Theophanes and Nikithor, Byzantine historians).²⁰

As it is known, the Avars appeared in Ciscaucasia in the fifties of the 6th century, under the pressure of Istemi-kagan's hordes. Here they came into contact with the Alani that dominated the Kuban land and were "Byzantium's one-time faithful ally".²¹ For the year 558, Menander wrote as follows: "After long wanderings, the Avars came to the Alani and begged their chief to introduce them to the Romans (i.e. Byzantians – the author). Sarosya informed Justin,

Geranov's son, who was at the same time the regular commander of the troops garrisoned at Lazik. Justin informed Justinian the Emperor of the Avar's request. Justinian ordered the commander to tell the Avars to send an ambassador to him".²²

As a result of the diplomatic relations established through the Alani mediation in 558, an alliance was concluded between the Avars and Byzantium against Persia. Opinions about the length of time of the Avars' stay in Ciscaucasia differ: according to L. N. Gumilev and G. V. Haussig they crossed the Don as far back as 558 and attacked the Slavonic Antae tribes,²³ while M. I. Artamonov remarks that all these events already happened in 560-561.²⁴ The sojourn of the Avars in the northern Caucasus may well have been short, for, after defeating the Gepidae in alliance with the Lombards in 567, they already lived in Pannonia. The longest period of Avarian history is connected with the Middle Danube, although in the 9th century Ibn Hordadbeh did not know of the Avars living in Djerbi (the northern countries) in the neighbourhood of the Slavs and the Alani.²⁵

Could the Avars have got into the epos, if their contacts with the ancestors of the Ossetes were of so short a duration? The reflection of a historical event or a historical personality is subordinated to those inner regularities that are determined by the social importance of the object described. Chanson de Roland of France tells of Charlemagne's military expedition of 778 to Spain and the heroic death of his nephew, Count Roland, in a hyperbolic way.²⁶ This transient event, which seems to be of minor importance for the French history (and even of less importance for the history of all Europe) became the subject of an epos. In the German Nibelungenlied, we come across the character of Bleda, brother to the King Attila Hun and (according to N. Greguaru) Goar, the King of the Alani, who bears the kagan's rank.²⁷ Bleda and Goar got into the Nibelungenlied, although historically their relationships with the Germanic tribes were limited in time.

It seems that the encounter of the Alani with the Avars was followed by great and important events that were of major social importance for the Alani, so the Ossetes conception of the Avarish people and their country Avaria was included in the Nart epos and has survived for centuries.

The sections mentioning the Avars and Avaria²⁸ in the Nartic epos of the Ossetes are not numerous. This makes their scholarly value more important, because this is a unique historical source about Avarish history and Alan-Avar relationships.

NOTES

- ¹ В. И. АБАЕВ, *Осетинский язык и фольклор*, часть I, Москва-Ленинград 1949, р. 34.
- ² В. А. КУЗНЕЦОВ, *Нартский эпос и некоторые вопросы истории осетинского народа*. Орджоникидзе 1980, р. 96.
- ³ Ю. НЕМЕТ, К вопросу об аварях. *Turcologica. К семидесятилетию акад. А. Н. Кононова*, Ленинград 1976, pp. 298-304.
- ⁴ *Памятники народного творчества осетин*, вып. II. Владикавказ, 1927, pp. 6-7.
- ⁵ *Памятники*, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.
- ⁶ *Осетинские нартские сказания*. Дзауджикау 1948, pp. 352-363.
- ⁷ *Нарты. Эпос осетинского народа*. Москва 1957, pp. 195-198, 204.
- ⁸ Wherein exogamic marriage is reflected, which used to be very popular in ancient times.
- ⁹ *Aldar* is an old Alan-Ossetic social term meaning “master”, “lord”, “chief” Cf. В. И. Абаев, Осетинский социальный термин алдар. *Известия Северо-Осетинского научно-исследовательского института*, т. XXVII, Орджоникидзе 1968, р. 23. This social term was borrowed into Hungarian from Alan.
- ¹⁰ *Осетинские нартские сказания*, ... р. 362.
- ¹¹ *Архив Северо-Осетинского научно-исследовательского института*, фонд 351, папка 145, р. 260.
- ¹² *Народы Дагестана. Сборник статей*. Москва 1955, р. 24.
- ¹³ *Русско-осетинский словарь*. Составил В. И. Абаев, Москва 1970, р. 18.
- ¹⁴ В. А. КУЗНЕЦОВ, *Нартский эпос и некоторые вопросы истории осетинского народа*, pp. 83-85.
- ¹⁵ *Памятники народного творчества осетин*, вып. II. р. 22.
- ¹⁶ К. CZEGLÉDY, *Kaukázusi hunok, kaukázusi avarok*. (Caucasian Huns, Caucasian Avars) *Antik Tanulmányok* II, Budapest 1956, pp. 139-140. М. И. АРТАМОНОВ, *История хазар*. Ленинград 1962, р. 227, note III; В. Г. ГАДЖИЕВ, *Сочинение И. Гербера «Описание стран и народов между Астраханью и рекой Курой находящихся» как исторический источник по истории народов Кавказа*. Москва 1979, р. 162.
- ¹⁷ Ш. Б. НОГМОВ, *История адыгейского народа, составленная по преданиям кабардинцев*. Нальчик 1959, pp. 99-103.
- ¹⁸ *Очерки истории Адыгеи*, т. I, Майкоп 1957, р. 69.
- ¹⁹ С. А. Плетнева, Средневековая керамика Таманского городища in: *Керамика и стекло древней Тмутаракани*. Москва 1963, р. 64.
- ²⁰ Никифора патриарха Константинопольского краткая история со времени после царствования Маврикия. *ВВ* т. III, 1950, р. 363.
- ²¹ Л. Н. ГУМИЛЕВ, *Древние турки*. Москва 1967, р. 36.
- ²² МЕНАНДР ВИЗАНТИЕЦ, Продолжение истории Агафиевой. *Византийские истории*. Санкт Петербург 1866, pp. 321-322.

²³ Л. Н. ГУМИЛЕВ, *Древние тюрки...*, р. 37, 438; Г. В. ХАУССИГ, К вопросу о происхождении гуннов. *ВВ*, т. 38, 1977, р. 66.

²⁴ М. И. АРТАМОНОВ, *История хазар...*, р. 464.

²⁵ ИБН-ХОРДАДБЕХ, *Книга путей и царств*. И. А. КАРАУЛОВ, Сведения арабских писателей о Кавказе, Армении и Азербайджане. *Сборник материалов для описания местностей и племен Кавказа*, вып. XXXII, Тифлис 1903, р. 5.

²⁶ *Песнь о Роланде. Старофранцузский героический эпос*, Москва-Ленинград 1964. Н. GREGOIRE, *Ou en est la question des Niebelungen? Byzantion*, t. X, Bruxelles 1935, pp. 227-229.

²⁷ Н. GREGOIRE, *Ou en est la question des Nibelungen? Byzantion*, t. X. Bruxelles 1935, с. 227-229.

²⁸ It is interesting to note that the name of Avaria in the Ossetic epos is “Auari”, one of the transcriptions of the Avar ethnonym; cf. А. Н. НЕРНШТАМ, *Очерк истории гуннов*. Ленинград 1951, р. 180.

Е. Б. БЕСОЛОВА

**О ФОРМЕ МИРОВОСПРИЯТИЯ НАРТОВ
(на материале сказания «Гибель семьи Сырдона»)**

В статье, исходя из древнейших мифопоэтических представлений, предпринята попытка воссоздать языческую символику предметов, культовых действий, обрядов и показать отражение этой символики в языке, ибо «символические знаки языка существуют не для того, чтобы обозначать что-либо, существующее помимо них. Напротив, бытие выводится из значения этих символов» [1, 42].

Магическая ментальность особенно ярко проявляется в эволюции значения. Переходы значений слов в полной мере отражают обычаи, верования и способы мышления древнего слова, которое на наиболее ранних этапах его существования отождествляло все живое и неживое, придавало огромное значение аналогии, оперировало разного рода магическими образами и символами. И это вполне объяснимо: первобытное мировосприятие не знало отвлеченных понятий, ему была свойственна очень условная система пониманий объективной действительности, хотя уже тогда и в то же время человек отождествлял вещь и процесс, вещь и ее свойство [2, 19–91].

Анализ мифов, как известно, есть средство выявления первичных структур сознания, и с этих позиций мы попытаемся «прочитать» отрывок из нартских сказаний о создании фандыра – двенадцатиструнной арфы осетин.

Несмотря на множество посвященных этому отрывку работ, его интерпретация остается, по нашему разумению, концептуально неясной: не использовано прочтение текста сказания «Гибель семьи Сырдона» в соответствии с той формой мировосприятия, которая по ряду параметров близка к поэтическому мировосприятию, наблюдающемуся в народном творчестве. Основание для подобного рассмотрения дает наличие большого количества неосознанных, эмоционально-волевых элементов, типичных для мифопоэтического восприятия. Единство эмоционально-