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AN OSSETIC MISCELLANY LEXICAL MARGINALIA

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§ 1. For the understanding of linguistic areal phenomena and of the way in which languages may influence each other the study of Ossetic is highly rewarding. Through the ages multilingualism has been widespread all over the Caucasus, and in many places it has been, and still is, a normal social situation. Since antiquity Ossetic (or its Alanic precursor) has developed in separation from its Iranian sister languages, surrounded on all sides by unrelated (or only distantly related) – Turkic, Caucasian and, more recently, Slavic – languages. In its grammatical structure it has tended towards a typology which on the whole is alien to the other modern Iranian languages. But it is controversial to which extent substratum (adstratum) influence has been instrumental in bringing about these developments. There are indeed some unmistakable Caucasian and (or) Turkic affinities in the phonetics, morphology and syntax of Ossetic. But in a large number of cases its individual features must be attributed to conservatism and historical continuity. This is, of course, no matter for surprise when we consider the isolated and peripheral position of the language in relation to Iranian as a whole. In general, Ossetic has been strikingly resistant to change, and has largely retained the character of an Eastern Middle Iranian language. This applies especially to the morphology and syntax of the verb, where the only structural innovation of profound significance is the formation of the gerund in *-gæ* (ultimately derived, as it seems, from the instrumental of a verbal noun in **-aka-*, i.e. **-akā́: cæŕ-în* ‘to live’, *cæŕ-gæ*, the gerund), the functions of which seem to have close analogies in Turkic and North Caucasian neighbour languages. (A detailed description of the syntactic functions in ABAEV 1964, pp. 48–50.) Subordination is, however, still carried out mainly by means of finite clauses. The noun has developed a series of local cases and a dative, and it seems natural to ascribe these innovations to interference (from Nakhian?). But these cases are evidently an enlargement of an older inflectional

system, consisting of the nominative-accusative, the genitive, the locative and the instrumental-ablative, all of which derive from Old Iranian case-forms.

The impact of adjacent languages on the vocabulary has been much more extensive than in the domains of morphology and syntax. As vocabulary seems in general to be less structured than the inflectional and syntactic systems of language, and thus more open to the intrusion of foreign elements, this is not surprising. The number of non-Iranian words of uncertain origin is comparatively great. A good deal of the words which in Abaev's Historical-Etymological Dictionary (IES) are explained as belonging to the 'Caucasian substratum' lack exact correspondences in neighbouring Caucasian languages. For that reason we are often ignorant of the immediate sources of a foreign lexical item, as well as of the chronology and the social and geographical circumstances of the borrowing. Accordingly, in a number of instances we cannot determine whether a certain loan-word belonged already to the lexical stock of ancient Alanic (or an earlier stage of the language) or has been introduced in more recent times.

§ 2. A close inspection of the Ossetic vocabulary will probably reveal a strong lexical influence of Turkic. The Turkic conquest of the Ponto-Caspian steppes in the early Middle Ages and the subsequent Turkification of a large part of this area no doubt resulted in extensive and varied bilingual relations between the invaders and the former Alanic population. Close commercial and political contacts must have existed between the Alans and their Khazar neighbours when the empire of the latter was the dominant power of the region. Turkic dialects seem to have acted as intermediaries between Alanic-Ossetic and the Uralic and Altaic languages in South Russia and Central Asia. A number of Ossetic plant names are apparently migratory words which have entered the Caucasus from the north and the east, partly at least by the medium of Turkic¹. Through the agency of Azeri, that has functioned as a lingua franca all over the North Caucasus and served as a link between this area and the Islamic countries of the south (cf. MENGES 1968, p. 176), numerous words of Persian and Arabic origin have penetrated the Ossetic vocabulary.

To the early Turkic loan-words belongs *čizg/kizgæ* 'girl, daughter' < Turk. (O. Turk., Noghay, Karachay-Balkar, Kumyk) *qiz* 'idem'+ Iran.* *-akā* (Alan. **-agā*), an oxytone (feminine) form in **-ā*. As a kinship term *čizg/kizgæ* has ousted Iran. *dīyd/duyd*, which is now only found in the compound *xo-dīyd* 'husband's sister', lit. 'sister-daughter'. It may also have encroached upon *činz/kinzæ* (< **kanīčī* (or **kanyačī*?), cf. MORGENSTIERNE 1973, pp. 103, 106, rather than **kantī-* (ABAEV in IES I, p. 607) in the general meaning 'girl'; the latter word is now confined to the meaning 'bride, daughter-in-law; doll', but the etymology and the cognate words in the other Iranian languages make it

probable that the older meaning was ‘girl’; in the Alanic text found in the Theogony of the Byzantine author Johannes Tzetzes (12th century) κίντζι means either ‘woman’ or ‘girl’ (Alan. κίντζι μέσφιλι is rendered as ἀὐθέντριά μου); cf. ABAEV 1949, pp. 254-259; HUNGER 1955. For further details I refer to IES, the respective entries.

Several inferences can be drawn from *čizg/kizgæ*, which must have been adapted at a time when Ossetic still had no *q* (cf. IES I, p. 614, where more examples of Turk. *q* > Oss. *k* will be found), and when the old Aryan rule of free accent was still operative, before the syncope of the pretonic short **-a* in **-agā́*; probably at a time, too, when the ancient two gender system (m., f.) had not yet been obliterated².

Presumably Turk. *qiz* has originally entered Ossetic as a pet word, carrying some affective connotation.

§ 3. It need not surprise us that longstanding symbiotic relations with contiguous peoples have resulted in extensive lexical borrowing. For the most part, however, the loan-words are linked with the geographical and cultural environments of the Caucasus area, i.e. the word has been borrowed with the referent. In general, Ossetic demonstrates a remarkable tenacity in its lexical composition. This appears clearly, i.a., from the study of Bielmeier (1977), where 291 (D. 296) words belonging to the ‘basic core lexicon’ (for the term s. o.c., pp. 48ff.) are thoroughly investigated.

Needless to say that although the word – *le signifiant* – is inherited from Old Iranian, it does not follow that the meaning – *le signifié* – is inherited too. In numerous instances words of Iranian derivation have undergone semantic changes that are apparently peculiar to Ossetic; yet, in some cases at least, better knowledge of Iranian etymology and word history will probably call for a modification of our notions of this matter. Benveniste (1959, pp. 117ff.) stresses the importance of specific semantic developments within the Ossetic vocabulary and the individual profile of the lexical material in general. This is especially interesting as regards social terms, as semantic interference from adjacent languages seems to be particularly likely in this field, either in the form of loan-words or of loan translations. A treatment of the Ossetic social terminology is outside the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the major part of the social terms is of Iranian origin, whatever semantic developments they may have undergone, a fact that testifies to a strong historical continuity.

In the majority of cases where an inherited term differs semantically from cognate words in the other Iranian languages we are probably right in assuming Ossetic innovations. But in part, at least, such semantic deviations can be explained as archaisms, due to the isolation of the language within the Iranian family. Thus the denotation ‘kinsman’ of *ærvad/ærvadæ* (<**brātar-*; for ‘con-

sanguineous brother' *ævsimær/ænsuvær* (<**æm-suvær* '(a fruit) of the same womb, couterinus') is the usual term) seems more likely to be an archaic feature, deriving directly from Indo-European, than a semantic extension of an older term for "consanguineous brother" that has taken place in Ossetic separately (cf. IES I, pp. 205-6; II, pp. 437ff. (with bibliography); BENVENISTE 1969, pp. 212ff.; POKORNY 1959, p. 163: "bhrāter- 'Angehöriger der Grossfamilie, Bruder, Blutsverwandter'.")

§ 4. In his book of 1977 (o.c., pp. 97ff.) Bielmeier treats 291 (D. 297) lexical items constituting a list of the 'basic core vocabulary' ('Grundwortschatz') of Ossetic³. Of these there are only 5 (D. 5) loan-words with a certain Caucasian etymology; in addition he registers 40 (D. 41) items without a clear etymology (Bielmeier is somewhat cautious in assigning Caucasian etymologies to his Ossetic words). In a reduced list ('Grundwortschatz-Kern') of 192 (D. 196) items only 2 (D. 2) Caucasian loan-words are found (besides 18 (D. 19) words the etymology of which is uncertain). The figures for the Iranian words in the two lists are 246 (D. 241) and 166 (D. 170) resp.; for the Turkic loan-words 8 (D. 8) and 4 (D. 3) resp. About half of the 166 (D. 170) Iranian words found in the reduced list have been semantically stable, i.e. *le signifié* has been inherited together with *le signifiant*. As far as the lexical material investigated in Bielmeier's study is concerned, Ossetic is shown to have been extremely resistant to the intrusion of foreign elements.

Most designations of the elementary activities of man are of Iranian derivation, and in the majority of cases the meaning has been inherited with the form:

'To come, go': (various preverbs +) *cæuïn*, cf. Av. *š(y)av-* 'to move'.

'To eat': *xærïn/xuærun*, cf. Av. *x^var-* 'to eat, drink'.

'To drink': *nuazïn/niuazun* - **ni-wāz-aya* 'to make something flow down, swallow' (caus.), cf. Av. *ni-vaz-* 'to flow'.

'To live': *cærïn*, cf. Av. *čar-* (*kar-*) 'to move (intr.), versari'.

'To die': *mælin*, cf. Av. *mar-* 'idem'.

'To hear': *qusïn/iγosun* < **vi-gauš-*, cf. Av. *gaoš-* 'idem'.

'To see': *uïnïn/uinun*, cf. Av. *vaēna-* 'idem'.

'To speak': *zurïn/zorun*, cf. Av. *gar-* 'to praise'? – the Oss. form points to **ǰaur-* < **ǰar-u-* (?), IE **g^uer(ə)-*; – or IE **ger-* 'to shout', Skt. *jarate* 'makes a noise, shouts'? If the latter etymology is accepted, we have to do with semantic change implying the loss of an expressive connotation: 'to shout, make noise' > 'to speak'.

'To stand': *I. læuuïn* < **ram-uïn* ('to be'), i.e. 'to stand still', cf. D. *ræmun* 'to wait, stand', Av. *ram-* 'to rest, stay'.

In D. mostly *istun* (I. *stīn*), cf. Av. *stā-* (*hišta-*), that must derive from the reduplicated stem.

‘To sit’: *badīn* < **upa-had-*, cf. Av. *had-* ‘idem’.

‘To lie’: *xuīssīn/xussun* < **huf-sa-* (inch.), cf. Av. *x^vap-*, *x^vaf-s-* (inch.) ‘to sleep’. From the IE point of view the zero degree of the root (**swep/sup-*) found in the Oss. verb is what we expect with the inchoative suffix *-sa-* < **ské/o-*. Neither in Av. nor in Oss. does *-sa-* express the inchoative aspect with this verb; as in other Iran. languages the main function of this suffix in Oss. is to express intransitivity. For the meaning ‘to lie down’ the Oss. verb needs a directional (and perfectivizing) preverb.

(For details s. IES and Biemeier, o.c., the respective entries.)

§ 5. Kinship terms are mostly Iranian:

The terms for ‘father’ and ‘mother’: *fīd/fidæ*, *mad/madæ* need no comments. As the designation of ‘son’ *fīrt/furt* (< **puθra-*) seems partly to compete with *læppu/læquæn* ‘boy’ in the modern language. In a similar way *duyḍ* ‘daughter’ has been superseded by *čīzg/kizgæ* ‘girl’ (cf. supra §2).

In I. the form of the word for ‘sister’, *xo*, reflects an old nominative (> **hwahā*, cf. Av. *x^vanha*), whereas the D. form *xuærxæ* must go back to **hwarā* (< **hwaharā*), an *-ā* formation (Alan. f.) based on an old oblique case (cf. Av. acc. sg. *x^vaṅharəm*). This doubleness seems to be exceptional; as a rule in both dialects the noun stem (nom.) derives ultimately from the same proto-form (nom. sg.).⁴ Cf. HÜBSCHMANN 1887, p. 70; BIELMEIER, o.c., p. 253.

As to the term for ‘brother’, s. supra §3.

The following terms denote the relations of the young wife (bride) with the family of the husband:

Xicau/xecau ‘master of the house, (the bride’s) father-in-law’ < **hwai-θyāwa-*, a derivation in **-tya-*+**-āwa-* from **hwai-* ‘suus, proprius’ (Av. *xvaē-*) that is also found elsewhere in social terms (Av. (Gath.) *x^vaētav-* ‘Hausstand’ (HUMBACH 1959, pp. 58-9), Oss. *xicon/xecon* ‘kinsman’ (< **hwai-θyāna-*; cf. BENVENISTE 1959, p. 124).

Æfsin/æfsinæ ‘mistress, (the bride’s) mother-in-law’ < **abišaiθnī-* ‘résidente, maitresse de la maison’, cf. Av. *aiwi.šaētan-* ‘Bewohner’ (Barth.), *aiwišay-* ‘bewohnen’, etc.; BENVENISTE, 1959, p. 19. The word appears possibly in the text of Tzetzes (s. supra §2), if Alan. μέσφιλι (bis) = Gr. ἀθέντα μου, ἀθέντριά μου represents *me’fsinæ* (*mæ æfsinæ*) ‘my lady’, cf. ABAEV 1949, p. 257. For the interesting history of this word I refer to IES I, pp. 110-11.

Tiu/teu ‘husband’s brother’ < **θaiwar-* < **daiwar-*, cf. Skt. *devar-* ‘idem’; as to Iran. *θ-* < *d-*, s. MORGENSTIERNE 1974, p. 83.

Xo-diyd ‘husband’s sister’, lit. ‘sister-daughter’ (or ‘sister-girl’) has already been commented upon (§2). The semantic narrowing of *č̣inʒ/kinʒæ*, formerly denoting ‘young woman’, now used as a designation of ‘daughter-in-law’, was treated *ibid.* In D. this meaning is expressed by *nostæ*, which seems to derive from **nauš-+t-* (?), cf. Skt. *snuṣā* (IE **snusó-s*), but a *guṇa*-form of this word is strange, and so is the *-t-*.⁵

The etymology of the terms denoting the relations of the husband with his wife’s family is less obvious.

Kaiis, *kais/kaies* ‘husband’s father-in-law, the wife’s kinsmen’ remains unexplained. Abaev’s derivation from *ka-is/es* ‘who is (it)’ needs sociological substantiation (IES I, p. 568).

Siaxs ‘son-in-law’ (designation used by the wife’s relatives about her husband), with the sandhi-variant *isiaxs* (*me siaxs* etc. < *mæ isiaxs*), is explained by Abaev (IES III, 101-2) as deriving from **visi-āxša-* ‘received, accepted by the family (**vis-*) of the bride’, cf. Av. *āxštay-* ‘Friede, Friedensvertrag’, *āxšta-* in nt. pl. ‘friedliche Zustände, Friede’ (Barth.), NPers. *āstī* ‘peace’, Oss. *axsʒiag/axsʒiag* ‘der beste, nächste, liebste’ (Miller-Freiman). This tempting even if unproved etymology implies a matriarchal (or at least matrilocal) social organization which is well attested in the tribal societies of ancient Sarmatia and the vestiges of which have survived until modern times in the wedding customs of the North Caucasus.⁶

Us/uosæ ‘wife, woman’ seems to be connected somehow with the Iran. root **wad-* (IE **wedh-*) ‘to lead, bring home, marry’, cf. Av. *vadū-* ‘Weib, Frau’ (Barth.) etc., but the formation is not clear. The plural *ustitæ ustæltæ/uostitæ*, *uostæltæ* may point to a form in *-t-*, perhaps an old participle in **-ta-* (fem. **-tā*): **wastā*. BIELMEIER (o.c., p. 233) derives the word from (**wasti- *wad-ti-*), with a suffix **-ti-*, and compares *idæʒ* ‘widow’, which ABÆV (IES I, p. 539) explains as **vidvati* (cf. Av. *vidavā-* ‘idem’ etc.). A more satisfactory explanation of the latter word is **wida(wa)čī*, a feminine in **-čī* (cf. MORGENSTIERNE 1973, pp. 102ff.; also the remarks on *č̣inʒ/kinʒæ* supra §2).

The etymology of *moi/moinæ* ‘husband’ < **man(u)-ya-* is in principle clear.

In formal speech, and even colloquially, the usual term for ‘wife’ is (*mæ*, *dæ* etc.) *binontæ*, lit. ‘(my, your etc.) family (or household)’. The wife refers to her husband as *mæ særī xicau*, lit. ‘the lord of my head’.

Already KOVALEWSKY (1893, p. 207) comments upon the poverty of the Ossetic kinship nomenclature. There are no particular words for grandfather, -mother, uncle, aunt, cousin, nephew nor niece. Such notions must be rendered by compounds: *f̣īdi-/madi-f̣īd/mad* ‘father’s/mother’s father/mother’, (*stīr-*

fɪd/mad lit. ‘grandfather/mother’ are also found); – *fɪdɪvsɪmæɾ*, *madɪvsɪmæɾ* ‘father’s, mother’s brother’ (*madɪrvad* is ‘Muttersbruder, Verwandter aus dem Geschlecht der Mutter’ (Miller-Freiman), cf. what was said about *ærvad* supra §3); *fɪdɪ-/madɪ-xo* ‘father’s/mother’s sister’; – *fɪdɪvsɪmæɾɪ*, *madɪvsɪmæɾɪ fɪrt/čɪzg* ‘father’s/mother’s brother’s son/ daughter’; and correspondingly *fɪdɪ/madɪ xoiɪ fɪrt/čɪzg* ‘father’s/ mother’s sister’s son/daughter’, i.e. ‘cousin’; *ævsɪmæɾɪ fɪrt/čɪzg* ‘brother’s son/daughter’; *xoiɪ fɪrt/čɪzg* ‘sister’s son, daughter’; *xæɾæ-fɪrt*, lit. ‘sister’s son’, is a general term denoting ‘sister’s, daughter’s child (son, daughter), offspring’.

The explanation of this scarcity of specialized kinship terms, if an explanation is needed, is possibly to be sought in the structure of the traditional tribal society, where the position of the individual is defined not so much in reference to his nearest relatives as to the tribal kinship as a whole.

§ 6. The conclusions that can be drawn from these remarks are neither surprising nor original. They have been confined to that part of the vocabulary where we à priori least expect the replacement of a lexical item through borrowing. Other lexical fields will no doubt show a much higher percentage of loan-words. But for the most part these words have entered the language on account of changes in social usages, beliefs and manners or an experience which an immigrant population have met with in their new settlements. It has become usual to stress the influence exerted upon Ossetic by the neighbour languages, and there is no denying that such influence is an important part of the history of the language. But it is equally true that in its lexical composition as well as in its grammatical structure Ossetic shows an almost prodigious persistency and has largely retained its character of an Iranian language.

In his *Études sur la langue ossète*, in the chapter dedicated to ‘le vocabulaire traditionnel’, BENVENISTE (1959, pp. 142-3) makes some comments on the two (prehistoric) cultural layers which he finds reflected in the vocabulary of Ossetic, one aristocratic, the other popular, the latter having its sources in a society of peasants and shepherds. This would agree with a view according to which Ossetic was brought into its present sites (and other areas of the Caucasus where it has been ousted by Turkic and North West Caucasian languages) by a comparatively small warrior caste who subjugated, and gradually merged with, a more numerous (North East Caucasian, Nakhian?) population, the latter adopting the language of their conquerors, probably because of its prestige. Actually, it is reasonable to assume that Ossetic at one time, before the Circassian expansion to the east in the late Middle Ages and the subsequent establishment of Kabardian feudal rule, held the position of a prestige language over wide areas in the North Caucasus, a fact that in part may explain its conservatism. In culture the modern Ossetes hardly differ essentially from their neigh-

bours. But whatever cultural impact the conquered population has made upon their conquerors, the language of the latter has been strikingly resistant to the importation of foreign elements. We have no traces of relexification in the history of Ossetic.

NOTES

1. F. L. Texov's book about Ossetic plant names (*Nazvanija rastenij v osetinskom jazyke*, Cxinval 1979, was not available to me at the time when this paper was written.

2. The voiceless uvular stop *q* has been introduced into the Ossetic phonological system by loan-words and through a 'Verschärfung' of initial *ɣ*- (a voiced spirant, Ar. *g*-). This sound change is of recent date (18th-19th century (cf. ABAEV 1949, p. 511) and confined to Iron: I. *qus* = D. *γos* 'ear'. Vestiges of the two gender system are still found in the two declensions of Digor: *-æ* (<**ā*) vs. *∅* (<**a*-); but as they don't entail grammatical agreement, the two types must be considered as inflectional classes. Questions regarding Ossetic vestiges of the ancient Aryan accent will be treated more fully by the writer in a forthcoming study. – Abaev's (IES 614; 1949, p. 85) derivation of *čizg/kizgæ* from Turk. *qiz* is preferable to Bailey's, by whom it is connected with Skt. *kiśorāh* 'colt; youth, lad' and Khot. *cista*- 'youthful', all three supposedly belonging to a hypothetical Aryan root **kai-/ci-* 'youth' (BAILEY 1979, p. 103, repeated from 1967, p. 85; MAYRHOFER 1956, p. 213, and 1976, p. 673). – On Turk. loan-words in Ossetic, s. BIELMEIER 1977, pp. 101ff, 74ff.

3. The lists were, of course, originally compiled for glottochronological studies, but are here used for quite different purposes.

4. I. *xæraæ* is found in the compound *xæraæ-fɪrt* 'sister's or daughter's offspring', cf. supra §5.

5. Or *nostæ*<*(s)*nauša-či*, a *-čī* feminine, with syncope of *-a-* and *-st-*< **sč*, cf. *fæstæ*< **pasčā* 'after, behind'? (I owe this thought to Dr. D. Weber, Goettingen (oral communication).)

6. It may be significant that the words referring to the relations of the wife with her husband's family (or clan) are clearly of native origin, whereas the words denoting the relations of the husband with the family (clan) of the wife lack an uncontested Iranian etymology. As matriarchal institutions were possibly an innovation in the ancient Scytho-Sarmatian society the question of borrowing should be seriously considered.

ABBREVIATIONS

Barth. = Chr. Bartholomae: Altiranisches Wörterbuch. Strassburg 1904. (Reimpression Berlin 1961.)

IES = V. I. Abaev: Istoriko-etimologičeskij slovar' osetinskogo jazyka. I-III. Moskva-Leningrad 1958-79.

Miller-Freiman = V. F. Miller: *Osetinsko-russko-nemeckij slovar'*. Pod redakcijej i s dopolnenijami A. A. Frejmana. Leningrad 1927-34. (Reimpression The Hague 1972.)

I = Iron. D = Digor. Where the oblique stroke (/) is used to distinguish between the two dialectal forms, the Iron form is placed before, the Digor form behind the stroke. When nothing is said, Iron is meant.

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