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**WHERE ARE THE MONUMENTS OF THE
«ALANIC» LANGUAGE?**

Some ten years ago I was given a grant to study the Alans. At that time I had just finished my first degree in Classical Philology, and I chose this subject because I was interested in the Iranian world, but I also looked for an open topic allowing me to take a glance at a broad range of disciplines I wasn't acquainted with. This inquiry bore fruit in my doctoral dissertation, an English translation of which, entitled "Sources on the Alans: a Critical Compilation", is forthcoming. My aim was to collect as much evidence as possible, with the intention of providing a first step for further research, and today I would like to draw some conclusions from my work, which I hope may be useful.

1. In the last two years I have tried to spread my results in two papers presented in Erlangen and Bonn; therefore, I think it isn't inappropriate to introduce previously some remarks held on those occasions before going into depth. First of all, as far as it can be stated, the Alans seem to have been an heterogeneous tribal confederation, which emerged around a people of Sarmatian stock and was named after the ancient appellation **aryana-* "Aryan", probably owing to a prestige purpose. It is unknown how much time this coalition lasted for, but there is no room for doubt that it was survived by its name, which was used for many centuries, mainly by Western sources, to designate the Northern Iranian nomads inhabiting the steppes of South Russia. Towards the beginning of the second millennium, this ethnic name coexisted with and was finally superseded by a new one, that of the present-day Ossetes, a change which must be in some way related to the zenith of the medieval kingdom of Alania -as it is called by the archaizing Byzantine authors. However, it makes no sense to look for the breakpoint between Alans and Ossetes, since their historical evolution has received scant attention from the sources, and both names, known to us only when given to them by foreigners, are nothing but two consecutive stages of one and the same process. I have suggested to establish as a deadline for the Alanic period

their withdrawal into the Caucasus after the Mongol invasions, an event which marks the end of their Eurasian migrations; but I am aware, of course, that this is a convention rather than a fact.

Therefore, what is to be understood as “Alanic language”? Given that it is possible to be on the track of these so-called “Alans” for some fifteen centuries and that their area of expansion reaches even the shores of both the Atlantic Ocean and the Yellow Sea, it would be more correct to think about a wide variety of North-East Middle Iranian dialects – or even different languages – spoken in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages by human groups who were in some way akin to those speaking Ossetic nowadays. Unfortunately, our knowledge on this matter is almost lacking in any exact detail on diachronic changes, dialectal division or even the mere survival of the language after their moving out to faraway lands. For this reason, it still seems suitable to maintain the “Alanic language” label as a necessary simplification until a more reliable grouping could be laid down from new data.

2. There is no need to say that writing is the key, and we must wonder if it has ever been known to the Alans. The evidence is meager: while the Arabic compiler al-Nadīm denied it in the 10th century, two later sources, an anonymous Syriac chronicle and the Flemish Franciscan friar William of Rubruck, both dating from the 13th, stated that writing and letters were common among the Alans, and the latter even recorded that the script used by them was the Greek one. This statement has proved to be right, since three of the four extant monuments of Alanic are written in Greek script. Two of them, the inscription from the river Zelenčuk and the lines in the epilogue of Tzetzes’ *Theogony*, are widely known, while the third one was kindly communicated to me by Prof. A. Lubotsky two years ago in Erlangen, after I declared that it was just a matter of time to discover new Alanic documents. I am talking about a 13th century Byzantine liturgical manuscript, discovered in 1992 and containing some 30 Alanic glosses, an edition of which, together with a survey on these glosses by Prof. Lubotsky, is forthcoming. It must be said that, although it won’t probably fill the smallest part of our gaps, at least it shows that this search is in no way a fruitless one or a waste of time.

So that no one can claim to have been deceived, I have to admit that the nature of these monuments is clearly sporadic, if not extraordinary. Far from being the product of a widespread tradition, they have been devised by foreigners or at the very best by native speakers who had acquired some learning, which seems evident from the fact that all of them are bilingual texts – or even trilingual, as is the case of the Jassic word list. However, if the last century has provided us with four pieces, it isn’t unlikely to think that there may be other ones

awaiting to be brought to light. Our following observations are willing to elucidate which geographical areas and which historical periods are suitable for this quest.

3. From the available proofs the Byzantine world appears to be the most auspicious field of research. The fall of the Khazar Empire and the ensuing rise of the Kingdom of Alania, on one side, and the Mongol storming of the Caucasus region, on the other, are the milestones of the richest epoch in the relations between Constantinople and the Alans, ranging from the 10th to the 13th centuries. Mostly under the Comneni dynasty, many sources tell us about political marriages with Alan princesses, large Alan mercenary units settled in strategic garrisons throughout the Empire, a quite extensive trade with Alania and even high rank Alan dignitaries serving at Court. It mustn't be forgotten that the same Tzetzes was of Caucasian descent, for his great-grandmother was an Abkhazian lady-in-waiting in the entourage of a princess named Mary of Alania; and, presumably, he didn't find it difficult to get an informant for the Alanic lines in his polyglot poem at home. But our foremost objective must be the search for ecclesiastic documents, as the first aim of the Byzantine state, though an unsuccessful one, was to convert the Alans: a mission was first sent around 910, evolving later into the metropolitan see of Alania, which seems to have existed ever since the 11th century and lasted through ups and downs for some five hundred years. If you take into account the fact that our monuments in Greek script are just a Christian funerary stele, some glosses in a liturgical manuscript and even a phrase-book specimen trying to protect priests from ardent Alan girls, I believe you will agree with me that this is the right direction.

As the only Alan document in Latin script and outside the boundaries of Byzantium was found in Hungary, this country – and mainly the Jászság region – must be ranked second among those befitting for new discoveries. In fact, sixteenth century sources often state that the *Jazyges*, as these Alans were called, still had by that time their own “ancient and peculiar” language, which suggests that the latter was spoken there for a minimum period of some three centuries. A good omen for our quest are some lesser-known Latin documents concerning these Alans, like the so-called “Jassic Carte Blanche”, dating from 1323, in which King Charles Robert of Anjou authorized them to fight under his banner and where some twenty-five Alan person names are to be read.

4. Up to here, we have dealt with what I believe to be reliable domains, but now it is time for speculation and especially for criticism. If you have already looked at the table in the first page of my handout, maybe you have felt astonished that so few remnants have come down to us despite of so prolonged a his-

tory, mainly in what we may call the Alanic homeland, on the borderline between the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia. Several scripts seem to have been in use in this area and other adjoining ones between the 6th and the 10th centuries, the so-called East European Scripts, which resemble for the most part the East Old Turkic Runic script and, as for myself, still remain undeciphered. This last point isn't unwarranted, for there have been some attempts to decipher them; and, without doubt, a leading one was made by the late Georgij Fëdorovič Turčaninov, although his results are, so to say, somewhat controversial, as we are going to see.

Turčaninov, a close collaborator of the Academic Nikolaj Marr and a follower of his Japhetic theory, specialized in Caucasian languages and taught Kabardian in Leningrad University in the early and late forties. After Marr's ideas were dismissed by Stalin in 1950, he was excluded from his position and spent some years in silence, restarting work again only in 1958; from then on, he seems to have devoted his scientific life to epigraphy. Dr. Vitali M. Gusalov, the Director of the Ossetic National Foundation for Scytho-Alanic Studies, has been kind enough to send me a bibliography of Turčaninov's works up to 1981, some one hundred between 1958 and the aforesaid year, which bears witness to his tireless dedication to the study of all sorts of inscriptions from the Northern Caucasus, Transcaucasia and Eastern Europe.

Although most of his articles weren't available to me – and otherwise I wonder if they are worth the effort to get them – , for my recension I have had two major books at my disposal, which collect the vast majority of his deciphered “Alanic” inscriptions: the first, entitled “Памятники письма и языка народов Кавказа и Восточной Европы (Monuments of the Script and Language of the Caucasian and East European Peoples)”, was published in 1971 in Leningrad; and the other one, “Древние и средневековые памятники осетинского письма и языка (Old and Medieval Monuments of the Ossetic script and language)”, came out in 1990 in Vladikavkaz, clearly paying homage, I think, to his being the supreme champion of the earliest stages of Ossetic Philology.

5. In the second page of my handout you can see a comparative table of the contents in both books relating to presumed Alanic monuments. As they don't match up, because the later work includes more items and forgets some of those contained in the former, I have tried to classify them according to some of the subregions established by Prof. András Róna-Tas for the East European Scripts, but I have marked with a cross those which aren't mentioned by him or don't seem to fit in with his geographical distribution.

At the moment, I have to admit that I am lacking in the necessary knowledge to reprove Turčaninov in every detail, for he resorts to a plenty of languag-

es and scripts which I am far from mastering or simply I don't know. But as his works are always quoted in Western literature in passing references like those gathered in the first page of the handout, often involving unfavourable but not specific criticism, insofar as my Russian allows it to me I would like to make some remarks about them, basically appealing to common sense, so that you could judge for yourselves. Moreover, as a sample case of his methods, you can look at the last page of the handout, where I have tried to summarize his report on the runiform inscriptions found on five stones in the walls of Majackoe Gorodišče, the first Alanic monument claimed to have been deciphered by him in 1964.

First of all, and always according to Turčaninov, the so-called «Alanic script» was a mixed writing system arisen from an earlier Old Ossetic alphabet of Aramaic origin on one side, and an unknown East European syllabic script on the other, from which some signs read by him as vocal plus consonant clusters would have been borrowed. This script had two *ductus*, an earlier, Aramaic one, and a later one, labeled as сирийско-несторианское, and was adopted by some neighbouring peoples like Circassians, East Slavs or Khazars. These hypotheses seem to be indebted in some way to those by the German scholar Franz Altheim, who linked the spread of the East Old Turkic Runic Script and the East European Scripts with Huns and Avars, and explained them as dating back to the Aramaic alphabet and, more precisely, to its Armazic variant, which would have been used, before Altaic peoples arrived, by several Northern Iranian groups, the Alans among them.

However, leaving aside the reliability of these unverifiable theories, we may have as many reservations as we like about formal aspects: the strange alphabetic and at the same time syllabic nature of the script, the full vocalic value of the ancient *matres lectionis* or the fact that sometimes up to two, three or even four different signs are said to be used for a single phoneme or cluster. Likewise, although all the inscriptions are said to be written in variants of the same script, each one has its own таблица to justify its readings and all signs are dealt with one by one to try to relate them to each other; but no general palaeographic table of the “Alanic script” and no survey on the way this decipherment was achieved are available anywhere. Let us add that the edition of the monuments is not always reliable, and sometimes we are faced with useless photographs or even only with drawings like those of Majackoe Gorodišče, which I have scanned in the handout; and you can compare them with Nemeth's idealized view of the same inscriptions, standing below, so as to see how important is the scholar's skill in discerning the exact signs and how easy is to come to opposite results. Nevertheless, Turčaninov has been able to read everything without any problems: he clears up inscriptions written in what is assumed to be the same script

by having recourse to different languages which were under an otherwise unknown Alanic cultural hegemony; ethnic and person names, usually hapax or loanwords, are found among some often conjectural Ossetic words of indistinct Iron or Digor origin, or even mixed with what he thinks to be numbers. A good example of this is one of the so-called Prechristian Russian inscriptions found in the vicinity of Rjazan (not quoted in the handout), where he reads the word “year” twice, both in Russian and Ossetic, as well as two dates following different time reckonings which, I think, were hardly known to potters, whether Alan or Russian. Or a Greek inscription on an intaglio from somewhere in Abkhazia, in the third page of the handout, which he dates in the fourth century and considers to be the oldest inscription ever written in Iron dialect. Needless to say, that the scarce monuments of Alanic seem to fit better with the more archaizing Digor dialect, and that instead of his somewhat fabulous interpretation it seems easier and more proper to see here three person names, one for each portrait, Νίνας, Ουηζανης and Ουληρηουης. The second one could be perhaps a grecized form of the Middle Iranian *Vezan*. In a similar way of doing, I have not resisted the temptation to include above an inscription found in Hungary and not deciphered, but simply read with no hesitation by Altheim as Alanic; according to him, the Germanic runic writing and the Armazic alphabet coexisted, so to say, on the same pot, as a result of the acquaintances made by the Alans in the lands they had passed through. One may wonder how, if they were able to master both scripts, they didn’t leave anything more in one or the other.

To sum up: it is certain that some monuments in East European Scripts have been found in the Northern Caucasus, mainly in Karačaj-Čerkessija and the Stavropol’skij Kraj, sometimes close to the site where the Zelenčuk inscription was discovered and lost, or in the same Nižnij Arkhyz, which Vladimir Kuznečov deems to be the medieval Alanic capital **Magas*, quoted by many Oriental literary sources. But the inscriptions in East European Scripts, which extend from Hungary to Kirgizija, aren’t reliably published in a corpus, as far as I know, belong hardly to a single writing and, I dare to say, weren’t devised by the Alans, in spite of Turčaninov’s efforts to prove it, leaving aside to read the longest inscriptions, such as the bull skull from Elista. And you can believe me, I would like it, but it has no basis in facts. However, as these scripts were probably used by Turkic-speaking peoples, perhaps to write some of the languages spoken in the Khazar Empire, as it has been suggested, here a concession can be made, for the Alans, who submitted to Khazarian rule for some three centuries, could have used this script in one way or another. But that’s all.

6. Last but not least, I would like to say some words on the Alans hired by the Mongols to serve in the Imperial Guards in Yuan China. The Franciscan friar

Peregrine of Castello affirms that there were some thirty thousand Alans in the service of the Khan at the beginning of the fourteenth century. As Chinese civilization is reluctant to outer influences and has been able to assimilate all kinds of foreigners, perhaps we have nothing to do here; but the Mongol Empire was an international and polyglot one, and great importance was attached to Western and Central Asiatic peoples, as they were necessary collaborators to subdue and keep down the always distrusted Chinese. When these Alans entered the Mongol armies in mid twelfth century, it is beyond doubt that interpreters were extensively used, and I don't believe that they were all easily sinicized in the hundred years they spent in China. The *Yuanshi*, the Annals of the Yuan dynasty, give biographical data on forty-two individuals, belonging to nine households. Their names are written with eighty different Chinese signs, a seventy-five per cent of which are equal to those used to transcribe Mongol words in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, a Mongol literary work which has come down to us in Chinese characters. Maybe it could be an evidence that at least an Alanic word list for interpreters was written in China at any time ... or maybe not.