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The Ossetes

Modern-Day Scythians of the Caucasus

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Preface

As a lifelong lover of spectacular mountain scenery, I always dreamed of visiting the Caucasus. My impression, however, apparently shared by many, was that their northern slope was a no-go region, plagued by war and terrorism. The government websites of Canada, the United States and the UK all warn against traveling to this part of Russia, and the Canadian site instructs its citizens in no uncertain terms that "If you are there, you should leave." When several years ago I first consulted with a colleague who had spent considerable time in the area, he said that in his opinion it is reasonably safe if you have some local contacts who will look out for you. My experience confirms this—but, I regret to say, it has confirmed the opposite case as well.

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991 many of its constituent areas fell into violent conflict, particularly in the Caucasus. North Ossetians fought with the neighboring Ingush, who claimed the eastern part of Ossetia for themselves, and attacks by Ingush and allied Chechen terrorists continued for years thereafter. These included the infamous takeover of a school in Beslan in 2004, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocent children, and later the bombing of Vladikavkaz's central bazaar in 2010. In the South, a declaration of independence in 1991 led to eighteen months of war with Georgia. A fragile peace was disrupted when Georgia invaded again in 2008, at which point the Russian army moved in and have guaranteed South Ossetia's borders ever since.

Over the past decade Ossetia has suffered no major outbreaks of violence, and for two years—until running afoul of local government authorities—I felt completely safe there. I often wonder why people who are put off by occasional reports of shootouts between police and terrorists in faraway lands think nothing of visiting places like Chicago or New Orleans, where their chances of falling victim to violence are much higher. Ossetia hasn't seen any terrorist acts since 2010, in contrast to places like England, France, and Germany, which nevertheless continue to receive tourists in droves, or at least they did until the 2020 pandemic hit.

I first traveled to Ossetia in February 2018 as part of a long wished-for visit to the North Caucasus. I immediately fell in love with the place and returned for a more extended stay in June 2019, during which I met Fatima who would soon become my wife. Following her unsuccessful initial attempt to obtain a visa for Canada, I took a leave of absence from my university to come and live in Ossetia for what I intended to be an eighteen-month stay. I felt badly that this extraordinary part of the world was so little known, and I hoped that my research there would be a start toward filling in the gaps of information that currently exist regarding what had quickly become one of my all-time favorite places.

Unfortunately, several unforeseen events altered our plans. First was the Covid-19 pandemic, which shut down much of human activity across the globe beginning in March 2020. A few months later we were dealt another unpleasant surprise, when the immigration officials in Vladikavkaz—sensing a rare opportunity to flex their muscles in the face of a resented Westerner—quite gratuitously denied the application for a temporary residence permit to which I was legally entitled as the spouse of a Russian citizen. By that point Fatima was four months pregnant, which added an additional dimension to our difficulties since she was not yet eligible for health coverage in Canada. Forced to leave Ossetia a year earlier than we had planned, amid all the lockdowns and border closures we spent weeks crossing the globe in a frantic search for a country that would allow us both in and where we could have our baby without being subjected to financial ruin. Such conditions are hardly conducive to writing a book.

Needless to say, my project of introducing the Ossetes to Western readers has come out differently from what it would have been if I had been allowed to stay and experience life in Ossetia for a year and a half instead of a mere seven months (much of which I spent shuttling back and forth between various government offices in a vain attempt to have my residency rejection overturned). I regret deeply that my immersive education in Ossetian society was cut short, and that it was so heavily dominated by dealings with malicious bureaucrats. I hope that my bitter experience of Ossetian officialdom has not overly biased my presentation.

The plight of a foreign scholar and his pregnant Ossetian wife, which was widely (and mostly sympathetically) publicized in the local media at the time as the Scandal of the Week, was rather quickly forgotten by most Ossetes. This is probably because they spend their entire lives suffering from exactly the

kinds of nastiness that we had the luxury of being able to escape, as many of our supporters emphatically urged us to do. Outrageous injustices are a fact of life in Ossetia, and the dismal circumstances under which most Ossetes live today, entailing all manner of government abuses including but not limited to extortion, embezzlement, cronyism, nepotism, and regular humiliations at the hands of a thuggish ruling elite, are truly cause for despair. Given this unpleasant and inescapable reality, it is hardly surprising that so many Ossetes seek refuge in a richly embellished past that may be to a large extent invented. Uncovering what elements of truth may lie behind the prevailing Ossetian historical narrative is one of the aims of this book, and one hopes that a more sober portrayal will ultimately serve as a better tribute than one that has been romanticized.

La Malbaie, Québec
April 14, 2021

Acknowledgments

I owe this book to my lovely, level-headed wife Fatima, without whose constant encouragement I would have abandoned it. That I have managed to complete the project despite being thrown so many discouraging roadblocks comes from a persistent desire to honor the culture that made her what she is—atypical of it though she may be—and to leave a written testament to answer the possible future curiosity of our children. If the result means anything to them, then it will have been worth the effort.

John Colarusso, Fatima Foltz, Ruth Foltz, George Hewitt, Doug Hitch, and Kevin Tuite all patiently went through the entire manuscript and provided many helpful suggestions. I would also like to express my appreciation to Agustí Alemany for his comments on Chapter 2. Needless to say, I alone am responsible for any lingering mistakes or misinterpretations. Falko Daim, Peter Frankopan, and Rustam Shukurov kindly invited me to try out some of my ideas on Alan Christianity before audiences at Mainz, Oxford, and Moscow respectively; I am indebted to them for their confidence.

This is where the author would normally thank all the wonderful and helpful local colleagues without whom the fieldwork could never have been completed, etc., etc. Regrettably in my case, apart from a few individuals—who, tellingly, asked that I not mention them by name—I received very little if any assistance or support from Ossetian scholars or academic institutions. Although over the course of four stays in the country I was invited to give a half a dozen or so lectures at various venues in both Vladikavkaz and Tskhinval, no academic body in either North or South Ossetia was willing to assume the responsibility of offering me a formal affiliation as an unpaid visiting researcher, or even secure me a library card. I managed to have a few helpful discussions here and there with a handful of Ossetian scholars, but in the end so much of my time was wasted in fighting with the local bureaucracy that any kind of serious sit-down documentary research was all but impossible. One can understand the fear of too closely associating with a suspicious foreigner (is there any other

kind?) while living and working in a police state, and perhaps they really had no choice. But had I been able to benefit from some level of local institutional assistance and cooperation, the result would certainly have been a better book.

Thankfully I was able to stay in Ossetia long enough to experience something of the life there and soak up a sense of the culture (and not only its bureaucratic hell!). My greatest assets in this regard were my in-laws, who have unreservedly welcomed me into their lives as one of their own ever since that first surprise dinner at Dendrarium where they were ambushed with the eldest daughter's foreign fiancé.

As has been the case throughout most of my academic career, the fieldwork for this project was self-funded. I neither sought nor received financial support from any other source, and most of my time in Ossetia was spent during an unsalaried leave from my university rather than as part of a paid sabbatical. In a world that seems to know no other measure of value than dollars, university administrators these days tend to accord more recognition to the securing of grants than to the publication of research. So be it—at least I have tenure.

Historical Timeline

1800–1000 BCE	Andronovo culture: Migrating Aryan tribes come to dominate the vast Eurasian steppe from Europe to China
c. 600–*c*. 300 CE	Greek interactions with "Scythians" along the northern coast of the Black Sea
530 BCE	Massagetæ under Queen Tomyris defeat Persian army and kill Cyrus the Great
Third century BCE	Sarmatians replace or absorb Scythians as dominant group of the north Pontic steppe
Second century CE	Sarmatians come to be referred to as Alans in Classical sources
c. 375 CE	Goth-Alan confederacy defeated and absorbed by Huns
406 CE	Goth-Alan-Vandal army crosses Rhine and launches raids in Roman Gaul
c. 500–700 CE	Alans reemerge as dominant power across the Pontic-North Caspian steppe
c. 720–980 CE	Alans under domination of Turkic Khazars
916 CE	Alan elite formally adopt Byzantine Christianity
1230s CE	Alans dispersed by Mongol invasion; some retreat into Caucasus Mountains, others (Jasz) relocate to Hungary; still others (Asud) join Mongols and go to China
1390s	Turkic army of Tamerlane devastates Caucasus
1774	Ossetian delegation travels to St. Petersburg to request protectorate status from Russia

1784	Vladikavkaz constructed as Russian garrison
1798	First ever book in Ossetian language—a short catechism—published in Moscow
1807–8	German orientalist Julius Klaproth visits Ossetia, is first to connect Ossetes with Alans
1829	Russian writer Alexander Pushkin travels through Ossetia
1835–37	Finnish linguist Andreas Sjögren spends time in Ossetia, later compiles first dictionary of Ossetian
1840–80	Nart tales collected and put into written form
1860–64	Ossetian Muslims deported to Ottoman Anatolia
1881–87	Publication of V. F. Miller's *Ossetian Studies*
1899	Publication of Kosta Khetagurov's *Ossetian Lyre*
1918–20	First Georgian-South Ossetian conflict; over 5,000 Ossetes perish
1922	Soviets create South Ossetian Autonomous District for the protection of Ossetes within the Georgian SSR
1924	North Ossetia made Autonomous Oblast within North Caucasus Krai of the Russian SSR
November 1942	German Nazi advance halted at Gizel village west of Vladikavkaz
1944	Prigorodny district transferred by Stalin from Ingushetia to Ossetia as punishment for alleged Nazi sympathies
1956	First conference on "Nartology" held in Vladikavkaz
1958–95	Ossetian linguist V.I. Abaev publishes his *Historical-Etymological Dictionary of the Ossetian Language* in five volumes

September 20, 1990	South Ossetia declares independence from Georgia
1990–2	Second Georgian-South Ossetian conflict; 100,000 Ossetes flee Georgia
Summer 1992	Ossetian wrestlers Makharbek Khadartsev and Leri Khabelov each win gold medals at Olympic Games in Barcelona
October 1992	Ingush launch invasion of North Ossetia in unsuccessful attempt to retake Prigorodny district
September 2004	Chechen-led terrorist attack on school in Beslan, North Ossetia, results in deaths of 333 victims, including 186 children
August 2008	Third Georgian-South Ossetian conflict; Russia officially recognizes South Ossetian independence
Summer 2008	Ossetian fencer Aida Shanaeva wins gold medal at Beijing Olympics
Summer 2016	Ossetian wrestler Soslan Ramonov wins gold medal at Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro
Summer 2021	Ossetian athletes win four medals at Tokyo Olympics, including one gold, one silver and two bronze

A Note on Transcriptions

In the English-speaking world there are very few specialists in Ossetian language studies, so it seemed to make little sense to tailor my transcriptions for them. Instead, since the book is intended first and foremost for the general reader, I have rendered the English spellings in a way that I hope will make them readily pronounceable if not completely accurate, since the northern and southern dialects of Iron have diverged since the language was first committed to writing in the late eighteenth century and a uniform pronunciation scheme is now impossible.

The Ossetian "æ" is a short vowel, pronounced as in "cat," as opposed to "a," which is long. I have used "y" to represent the Ossetian short "i" (ы), pronounced as in "it" but not gutturally as it is in Russian, and "i" for the Ossetian long "ï" (и), as in "eat." Ossetian has absorbed from neighboring Caucasian languages several glottalized consonants, which are unfamiliar and sometimes completely indistinguishable to the ear of an English-speaker. I have rendered the Ossetian гъ as "gh" and хъ as "q"; for the sake of readability I have left out the apostrophe usually employed when transliterating the consonants къ, пъ, тъ, цъ, and чъ.

Introduction

The Ossetes: Caucasians, Iranians, or Both?

Who are the Ossetes? The question can be answered in a number of ways, none of which is entirely straightforward. Linguistically speaking they are the descendants of the medieval Alans (< "Aryans"), a warlike, Iranophone pastoral-nomadic people who introduced equestrian culture to Europe from the Roman period onward. The Alans, themselves descended from the ancient Sarmatians and Scythians known from Greek and Latin sources, dominated the Pontic steppes and adjacent regions for over a thousand years, before fading from history after the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century.

The two Ossetian dialects, Iron (pronounced "ee-rone") and Digor, are modern forms of the medieval Alan language, a northeast Iranian idiom attested through only a tiny handful of written sources. The Ossetes have preserved numerous aspects of the Alans' cultural legacy as well, particularly within the realm of mythology and popular religion. Yet DNA studies have shown little genetic connection between the Ossetes and the various peoples speaking related Iranic tongues, including the historical Scythians, Sarmatians, and Sogdians as well as modern-day groups such as the Pamiris of Tajikistan and the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan. (Most Ossetes belong to the G2a1a-P18 haplogroup, which is found almost exclusively in the Caucasus.) Rather, the Ossetes seem to be largely a Caucasian population that became Alanized during the Middle Ages, and whose original language is unknown.[1]

Despite their unique spoken idioms, the Ossetes share much culturally with their Caucasian neighbors. These include the Vainakh peoples (Ingush and Chechen), the Adyghe (Kabardians, Circassians, Abkhazians), the Kartvelian (Georgians, Svan, Mingrelians, Laz), and others. This is particularly evident when one looks at the Nart epic, a body of oral literature that is ultimately Iranic in origin but to which all these ethnicities lay equally vociferous claims. Like Homer for the Greeks, the Nart stories evoke a legendary world of heroes

whose attributes, values, and lifestyle continue to be held up as a glorious model by contemporary Caucasians of all stripes, despite its almost complete disconnection from the reality lived by most of them today.

Ossetia is a region of the central Caucasus that is currently divided between two political entities: North Ossetia-Alania, which is a republic within the Russian Federation, and the Republic of South Ossetia-State of Alania, which is a de facto independent state that declared its independence from Georgia in 1990 and—due to geopolitical factors that will be discussed later in this book—is currently recognized by only five UN member states. North Ossetia (capital: Vladikavkaz) has an area of 8,000km^2 and a population of about 700,000, some 65 percent of whom are ethnic Ossetes. South Ossetia (capital: Tskhinval; also known as Chreba or Stalinir) covers around 3,900km^2, with a population of about 53,000, 90 percent of whom are Ossetian.

The Iranic element is a much neglected, though hugely important aspect of Eurasian history. It is most often reduced to the Persian, but this is merely one of its many aspects, just as English-ness is just one of the many facets of being Germanic. The Ossetes' linguistic and cultural connection with the peoples of modern Iran is remote—considerably more distant, for example, than that which relates Icelanders to the English. And yet, similar to how modern Icelandic cultural identity clings to the centrality of the sagas and is now even attempting to revive old Norse religion,[2] in Ossetia the language, oral literature, and some popular customs reflect a uniquely direct link back to the earliest identifiably "Iranian" cultures of ancient history: the Sarmatians, the Scythians, and before them the Andronovo and Sintashta/Arkhaim civilizations of western Siberia, in contrast to the heavily Arabized Persian language or the deeply Islamicized societies of Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. One might therefore be tempted to see Ossetian culture as our clearest window back to the "original" Iranians of the remote past. Ossetian traditions, unlike those of the Persians, Kurds, Tajiks, or any of the many other Iranian-speaking peoples of today, did not experience the huge historical transformations brought about by Zoroastrianism and Islam. Even so, they have evolved over time through interactions with a range of other influences, such that their contemporary form is only partially "Iranian."

Conflating language and culture with race is of course a trap, which all too often leads to pointless conflicts and unnecessary bloodshed. My own German ancestry, already heavily diluted after a mere one hundred fifty years, neither

entitles me to a German identity nor diminishes the reality of my North American upbringing. The average Ossete may in fact possess very little if any Scythian DNA, but he or she nevertheless holds unique membership in the only contemporary society to have kept alive some form of Scythian language (even if its future survival seems now to be in doubt).[3] At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that others may share in some measure of the Scythian cultural legacy. This includes not just the Ossetes' Caucasian neighbors, but also the Ukrainians, Russians, and Poles, as well as Turkic groups such as the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tuvans, whose presence superseded that of the Scythians across the Eurasian steppe. In the summer of 2020 a pseudo-historical film drama, "Tomyris," about the ancient Massagetæ queen whose army defeated and killed Cyrus the Great in 530 BCE, was produced in Kazakhstan; the reaction of some Ossetes on social media was that "[t]he Kazakhs have made a film about us!"

A posthumously published essay by the late Ossetian linguist V. I. Abaev was given the English heading "The Ossetes: Scythians of the 21st Century."[4] I have chosen a variation of this as the title for my book, but more as a provocation than an affirmation. To what extent, or in what respects, can the Ossetes claim to be the primary, or even the sole authentic inheritors of the Scythian legacy, vis-à-vis the claims of so many others? That they speak a form of the language used by Scythians in ancient times is a fact, demonstrable through historical linguistics, but does doubt over whether their genetic ancestors spoke it as well or merely adopted it as a foreign tongue at some unknown point in history diminish their entitlement? And what of the Nart sagas? Their underlying strata have been shown through the techniques of comparative mythology to derive from an Iranian core, but does this point exclude the non-Iranian peoples of the Caucasus, who have added many layers to the Nart stories over the centuries, from any share of ownership? Given the ongoing inter-communal tensions that continue to plague the Caucasus, these are not idle questions.

The State of Ossetian Studies Today

The most appropriate research framework from which to approach Ossetia is Iranology, given that the Ossetes speak an Iranian language and share many cultural traits and inheritances with other Iranian peoples. However, these

connections were only identified during the nineteenth century, and since that time very few scholars have devoted their attention to them. Only a tiny handful have learned the Ossetian language or spent any time in Ossetia.

Due largely to issues of access, most scholarly work on Ossetian language and culture has been conducted by scholars living in Russia or Ossetia, and their work has been published almost exclusively in Russian. Unfortunately Iranologists—both in the West and in Iran itself—typically do not count Russian among their research languages, which means that a century and a half of Ossetian Studies going back to the foundational work of Vsevelod Miller is largely inaccessible to most of them. The result is that while Iranologists are generally aware that Ossetia is a part of the broader Iranian world, very few have ever ventured to study it closely or seriously. Those that have are almost exclusively linguists (Harold Bailey, Émile Benveniste, Ilya Gershevitch, Fridrik Thordarson, Alain Christol, Sonia Gippert-Fritz, and more recently Alexander Lubotsky and Johnny Cheung), and while some have produced substantial linguistic studies of Ossetian their interest appears to have been mainly for purposes of comparing it with other Iranian languages; none made it the focus of their career such that they could be identified primarily as "Ossetologists."

With the notable exception of the eminent French scholar Georges Dumézil during the mid-twentieth century there has been almost no attention to Ossetian mythology or other aspects of its cultural history, apart from occasional mentions in the work of comparativists such as John Colarusso, Paolo Ognibene, James Russell, and Martin Schwartz. In such cases Ossetian language and culture are used as part of a broader data set but almost never serve as the principal focus of a study. Apart from the linguists mentioned above, one of the few Western researchers to have mastered Ossetian is Anna Chaudhri, a student of Gershevitch at Cambridge during the 1980s who has written on Ossetian mythology and folklore.[5] Other European scholars who have worked directly on Ossetian include Laurent Alibert who has published a study in French comparing the Nart epic to the Occitan Arthurian Romance of Jaufré,[6] and Vittorio Tomelleri and Michele Salvatori who have proposed to undertake a translation of the nineteenth-century Ossetian writer Kosta Khetagurov's poems into Italian.[7]

To date not a single scholarly monograph or popular book in English has been devoted specifically to Ossetia. There are, however, several books in

French dealing with Ossetian topics. Lora Arys-Djanaïeva, an Ossete who teaches Ossetian at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) in Paris, has published several books in French including *Parlons ossète*, *Contes populaires ossètes* and, in collaboration with the historian Iaroslav Lebedynsky, French translations of the Nart epic[8] and Kosta Khetagurov's 1884 ethnographic study *Osoba*.[9] In Vladikavkaz, meanwhile, a French translation of Khetagurov's celebrated collection of poetry, *Iron fændyr* (The Ossetian Lyre), was published in conjunction with the poet's 160th anniversary, although it has not been distributed abroad (or anywhere, for that matter).[10] An excellent scholarly history of the Ossetes' direct linguistic ancestors, the Alans, has also appeared in French,[11] and readers interested in Ossetian origins can also benefit from Lebedynsky's many French-language works on the Scythians, the Sarmatians, and the history of Ukraine. A recent book in English by two Hungarian archaeologists provides a wealth of material about the Sarmatians,[12] and older works on the Scythians such as those by Renata Rolle and Michael Rostovtzeff are still valuable.[13] The Scythians have now been the subject of a popular history by Barry Cunliffe, who, laudably, gives somewhat more attention to their Central Asian aspect than most earlier Western writers.[14] Also recently, John Latham-Sprinkle has begun to publish innovative new research on the medieval Alans.[15]

Most specialists would agree that Vaso (Vasily) Ivanovich Abaev (Oss. Abaity Ivany fyrt Vaso, 1900–2001) is the greatest figure that the field of Ossetian Studies has produced so far. Abaev enjoyed an international reputation among Iranologists, as evidenced by the publication of a 540-page festschrift in his honor by the Istituto italiano per l'Africa e L'Oriente in Rome in 1998.[16] But to what extent was this reputation based on his Western colleagues actually having read his work? Abaev produced a vast corpus of material during his long life, virtually all of it in Russian. Only a handful of articles and one grammar book were ever published in any Western language, and these exist in a tiny number of copies hidden away in a few university or state libraries. Given the immensity of Abaev's contribution to scholarship, it is regrettable that the majority of Iranologists outside of the former Soviet Union should have such restricted access to his work.

Out of more than three hundred scholarly works published by Abaev, all but twenty have appeared in Russian alone.[17] Abaev's *A Grammatical Sketch*

of Ossetic is a composite English version of two works originally published in 1952 and 1959. Even in this combined form the grammar amounts to a brief study of no more than 133 pages, admittedly a rather modest sample of Abaev's enormous lifetime output. It was published by Indiana University in 1964 and can be found in about two hundred libraries around the world today according to WorldCat.

Even Abaev's Russian works are not easy for a Western scholar to access. For example, his *Skifo-evropeiskie izoglossy na styke Vostoka i Zapada* (1965) can be found in only fifty-four libraries outside of Russia; his *Izbrannye trudy* ("Selected works," 1995) exists in but eighteen non-Russian libraries, his *Russko-osetinskiĭ slovar'* (1970) in fourteen, and his five-volume *Istoriko-etimologicheskiĭ slovar' osetinskogo iazyka* (1958–95) in just two. (At an official ceremony in Moscow in December 2020 commemorating the 120th anniversary of Abaev's birth the publication of an English translation was announced, in a paltry printing of only fifty copies. The press release provided no details, however, and where these precious relics are destined to go and how they will get there were not revealed.[18]) It may be noted that reference works are generally not available through interlibrary loan, meaning that one must physically travel to a holding library in order to consult them. On the positive side, Russia's lax copyright enforcement means that pirated PDFs of many of Abaev's Russian works can be found on the internet.

As for Abaev's scholarly articles, his seminal 22-page paper on "The Pre-Christian Religion of the Alans,"[19] presented at the 25th International Conference of Orientalists in Moscow in 1960, turns up in the catalogues of a mere three libraries at universities in the United States. Apart from this example, Abaev's work is represented in English, French, and German through only a tiny handful of edited conference volumes published in limited numbers over the decades and scattered throughout various university collections around the world.

For the nonspecialist perhaps the most useful of Abaev's writings to appear in English is a 25-page essay entitled "The Ossetes: Scythians of the 21st Century," excerpted and translated from the introduction to his 1982 Russian edition of the Nart epic, which was published in the inaugural issue of the journal *Nartamongæ* in 2002. Unfortunately, while the multilingual *Nartamongæ* is a unique, and, one might even say, indispensable resource for

anyone interested in Ossetian studies, it remains very little known even after eighteen years of publication, having so far managed to enter the catalogues of only four European libraries (in London, Bern, Halle, and Berlin) as well as the Library of Congress in the United States (but not a single North American university). Articles from *Nartamongæ*, many of which are themselves reprints, are available as free online downloads to those who know about it. But because the journal is not registered with academic databases such as JSTOR or Project MUSE, these articles do not typically turn up in online searches. One has to know in advance that they exist and what the download link is for the journal, since online search engines will not provide this information.[20]

Ossetian Studies in the West face a significant language barrier. The unfortunate reality is that when Ossetia is acknowledged at all in Western scholarship it is usually in the works of researchers trained in Sovietology and/or Russian studies, whose backgrounds and methodologies do not equip them to properly analyze and understand the very different culture, history, and language of the Ossetes. Ossetia appears as a footnote or as an oppositional foil in studies of other Caucasus peoples such as the Georgians, but almost never as a subject in its own right.

There are of course a few Iranologists in the West who are fluent in Russian, and numerous others (myself included) with at least a basic reading knowledge of it. But as a general rule the field of Iranian Studies has been woefully lax in acknowledging Russian as an essential language of scholarship. In Europe it continues to be assumed that graduate students will be able to read secondary literature in English, French, German, and even Italian, whereas there is little or no pressure to learn Russian. In North America these days even the European languages are often no longer deemed to be truly necessary for scholarly research, the assumption being that anything worth publishing is worth publishing in English. However justifiable or not such attitudes may be, they have a real-life result, which manifests itself in an ongoing divide between the Soviet/Russian and Western academic traditions.

Similarly unhelpful prejudices have been mirrored on the Russophone side as well. During the Soviet period there was little incentive for scholars to publish in any language other than Russian, and this tendency has endured up to the present day. Even though there is perhaps more enthusiasm now among scholars across the post-Soviet world (especially younger ones—though

not in Ossetia) for engaging with their colleagues in the West, this is limited by the fact that most are still not comfortable writing or speaking in Western languages (most urgently, English). Not only linguistic but also economic factors impede the ability of post-Soviet scholars to participate in international conferences where their work could be more widely introduced and circulated. Membership in scholarly associations, conference registration fees, and travel costs are all prohibitive for many, whose academic salaries are insufficient and whose institutions are rarely able to offer financial support. In consequence, one almost never sees Ossetian topics or scholars on the conference programs of such Iranological organizations as the North American-based Association for Iranian Studies and the Societas Iranologica Europea in Europe, or post-Soviet studies ones such as Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, and the Central Eurasian Studies Society.

Of course, even during Soviet times there were a few rare individuals on both sides who managed to break through this cultural-linguistic Iron Curtain—Abaev being one of them—but they were the exceptions that proved the rule. The eminent Cambridge linguist Sir Harold Bailey was hosted by Abaev during a visit to Tskhinval in October 1966, having traveled to Georgia for the 800th anniversary celebrations for Shota Rustaveli. On this occasion Abaev presented Bailey with a copy of his 1962 Ossetian-Russian dictionary, inscribed with a dedication in Ossetian; it is now in the possession of retired SOAS professor George Hewitt. According to Hewitt, "Ossetian was Bailey's favourite language, especially the Digor dialect,"[21] which is saying a lot given that he knew so many. Bailey's private library—housed in the Ancient India and Iran Trust, founded in 1978 by Bailey and four colleagues and which became his final home in Cambridge—contains many books in Ossetian. In the garden is a sculpture by Ulf Hegewald, upon which is inscribed Kosta Khetagurov's poem "Mardy uælqus" (Beside the Coffin)—a fitting tribute to Bailey and his love for Ossetian.

At present, academics in Ossetia for the most part do not seem overly concerned with getting their research published in the West. Any who did possess such an interest would face serious obstacles in getting their work to appear in forums that could properly introduce it to their Western colleagues. The academic journal *Iranian Studies*, which can claim to be the premier publication in the field of Iranology, accepts submissions only in English

(and sometimes Persian, in exceptional cases). A lesser-known English-language journal, *Iran and the Caucasus*, is published in the Netherlands by the prestigious Brill but edited in Yerevan by the Armenian scholar Garnik Asatrian. Although these journals would seem to be excellent channels for Ossetian academics to present their research, none has taken advantage of this promising opportunity. The monumental *Encyclopædia Iranica* is likewise an English-language enterprise, and although the editors will accept entries written in Russian (undertaking responsibility for the translations themselves), their online submission process can be daunting for non-Western scholars who are not used to such a system, and to date there have been virtually no entries submitted by Ossetian scholars. Abaev provided only one, on "Alans," which was published in the encyclopedia's very first volume back in 1985, long before the present submission system was in place.[22]

Since Ossetian is an Iranian language and Ossetia can be considered a part of the Iranian world culturally speaking, one might expect Ossetian Studies to be a vibrant field in Iran, but such is not the case. During the twentieth century Iranian academic institutions were largely developed according the American model, and, geography notwithstanding, more closely resemble Western ones than they do those of Europe or the post-Soviet states. Until quite recently there were no researchers in Iran engaged in studying Ossetia or Ossetian in any sustained manner, although the late linguist Mohsen Abo'l-Ghasemi did write a book on the Ossetian language.[23]

Russian is not a popular field of study in Iran, to the extent that the great works of Russian literature are usually translated second hand via English, and at present there are no living Iranian specialists in Ossetian. There is an Institute for Caucasian Studies in Tehran, but it is mainly oriented toward political science and international relations and does not have any experts specifically working on Ossetia. One Iranian academic, Morteza Rezvanfar of the Cultural Heritage Research Institute, spent three months doing fieldwork in Ossetia on nineteenth-century Iranian migrants to the region. Hamed Kazemzadeh, an Iranian who teaches at Warsaw University, has published on Iran's cultural influence in the Caucasus, including at least three articles in Persian specifically devoted to Ossetia.

In what may be a sign of increasing Iranian interest in Ossetia, since 2017 there have been three academic conferences jointly organized by institutes in

Tehran and Vladikavkaz. On the Iranian side the participants were primarily from the fields of political science, international relations, and Russian studies, but the Ossetes were mainly folklorists, Ossetian language specialists and historians. Several Ossetian scholars were also invited to attend a one-month Persian language course in Iran and collaborate with their Iranian colleague Maryam Shafaghi (an instructor of Russian) on a project aimed at producing a Persian translation of the Nart epic.

Two of these conferences on Iran-North Caucasus/Ossetia relations were hosted in 2019 (one in June and one in December) by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran. A number of Ossetian scholars were invited, with all expenses paid by the Iranian government. Yet one of the invitees remarked that "in general, [the Iranians] had difficulties with understanding the Ossetian place in the Iranian world. In many ways our existence was a revelation for them."[24] The conference proceedings have now been published in Iran, in Persian and in Russian.[25] Perhaps not coincidentally, around the same time a Persian translation of T. T. Kambolov's cursory overview of Ossetian history, *Osetiny: Vekhi istorii* appeared in Iran under the title *Oset-hā dar gozar-e tārīkh*.[26] The long-awaited Persian edition of the Nart epic was finally published in 2020,[27] although since due to some suspicious machinations the place of publication was moved to Ossetia it is not clear whether or to what extent it will ever become available to readers in Iran.

This apparent awakening of interest in Ossetia among scholars in Iran is a welcome step. The field of Iranian Studies cannot be considered complete without the inclusion of the Ossetian element, but for now it remains the case that those seriously involved in the subfield of Ossetian Studies are almost exclusively ethnic Ossetes who are not able to participate actively or adequately in academic activities outside of Russia. Likewise, even for Westerners seriously interested in Ossetian Studies the obstructionist bureaucratic nightmare of trying to spend time or conduct research in Russian-controlled North Ossetia-Alania can be an overwhelming deterrent, as I can roundly attest from painful personal experience. The situation in the nominally independent Republic of South Ossetia-State of Alania, which apparently cannot take any significant decisions without Russian approval, is hardly better.

What can be done to rectify the situation, so that Ossetian scholars and Western (and Iranian) Iranologists are able to engage with each other in

greater mutual collaboration? Most important, the language barrier needs to be overcome, with efforts on both sides. Iranologists in the West (and in Iran) should make more efforts to reach out to scholars in Ossetia, inviting them to international conferences—seeking out financial assistance for them where possible—and soliciting their articles for journals and edited books. As a language of scholarship Russian should be taken at least as seriously as French, German, and Italian in Western universities, and not just for Russian Studies—although, given the homogenizing tendencies of globalization, one frankly wonders about the long-term survival of any scholarly language other than English. Ossetian researchers, for their part, should accept that the language of international scholarship today is English, and venture out of the Russian linguistic ghetto they have been content to occupy for the past one hundred and fifty years.

During one of my visits to North Ossetia State University in late 2019, on hearing that I was writing a book about Ossetia the Head of the History Department told me that I should be sure to consult with Ossetian historians as much as possible so as to "not make any mistakes." Although I found this presumption of incompetence rather insulting, I do acknowledge that growing up within a culture provides certain insights and advantages that will forever elude the non-native. On the other hand, one need not accept the notion expressed by some commentators on social media that "Ossetian history can and should only be written by an Ossete." History and nationalism are a dangerous mix, and hardly constitute a guarantee of scholarly objectivity. A number of Ossetes have written histories of their nation, but until now, no non-Ossetes have. The reader is left to judge whether or not the present effort has borne fruit.

1

The Scythians: Mounted Archers of the Steppes

> *Having neither cities nor forts, and carrying their dwellings with them wherever they go; accustomed, moreover, one and all of them, to shoot from horseback; and living not by husbandry but on their cattle, their wagons the only houses that they possess, how can they fail of being unconquerable, and unassailable even?*
>
> Herodotus, *The Histories*, IV. 46

Pastoral-nomadic peoples occupied the vast Eurasian steppe region, stretching some 8,000 kilometers from the Balkans in the West to Mongolia in the East, for well over four thousand years. Their presence continued right up into the mid-twentieth century, and nomadic traditions have not completely died out even today. By the very nature of tribal nomadism these societies were diffuse and, in some ways, diverse. This diversity likely even had an ethno-linguistic dimension, in the sense that the tribal groups of the steppes readily absorbed "foreign" blood, either through ephemeral alliances or by the enslavement of defeated enemies. They were in most cases largely independent of each other, with no civic institutions or overarching governing structures.

Still, these tribes had much in common culturally, economically, and linguistically, despite the vast physical distances that often separated them from each other. Notwithstanding the complexities that surely must have existed, the dominant speech and customs across the entire Eurasian steppe from about 2000 BCE to 1200 CE were, broadly speaking, "Aryan"—that is, Iranian—in nature.

Because the steppe nomads had no written culture, most of our information about them comes from the recorded accounts of neighboring civilizations—Akkadian, Greek, Chinese—with whom their relations were often hostile and who saw them as barbarians. The archaeological record can offer certain

details as well, telling us something about what sorts of things they produced and the kinds of conditions in which they lived.

A prehistoric culture emerged from around 2200 BCE in the area southeast of the Ural Mountains in what is now Russia. The archaeological remains they left at sites comprising what Soviet scholars labeled the Sintashta/Arkaim complex provide the earliest evidence that can be associated with a specifically "Aryan" people,[1] as distinguished from the larger mass of Indo-European speakers. They performed horse burials according to a procedure that closely resembles the *asvamedha* or horse sacrifice ritual set down in the Indic Rig Veda centuries later,[2] and a linguistic analysis of Indo-Iranian terms situates the Aryans, as these people seem to have called themselves, in roughly that geographical location at that point in time. The Iranian and Indic myths likewise preserve some elements that can be tied to them.

The archaeological record shows that these Aryans had moved into the southern Urals from further west. The region was already inhabited, presumably by proto-Uralic peoples and perhaps by Indo-European proto-Tokharians who preceded the Aryans in their eastward migrations. A dramatic increase in the prevalence of weapons and the appearance of fortified villages dating to the period suggest that the Aryans' arrival was accompanied by an upsurge in violence. The Rig Veda expresses the Aryans' notion that they alone were deserving of wealth, which they measured in cattle, so that "liberating" this wealth from people who didn't merit it was seen by them as a moral right. These early Aryans were masters in forging superior weapons such as arrowheads and swords, which together with their exceptional equestrian skills gave them an advantage when it came to asserting their dominance over "inferior" peoples. Horses and swords would become central features of Aryan culture, passed on to the Scythians, the Sarmatians, the Alans, and still cherished by many Ossetes today.

Throughout the millennium that followed (2000–1000 BCE), Aryan tribes fanned out to the east and to the south across central Eurasia, a process that brought them into contact with the sedentary agricultural civilizations of Mesopotamia, the Oxus basin, the Indus Valley, and even China. The Aryans alternately raided and traded with all of them. Certain groups of Aryans ultimately chose to settle and join urban society, thereby creating a new cultural mix. This kind of synthesis occurred notably between the Persians

and the Elamites, the Sogdians and the Oxus peoples, and the Indo-Aryans among the Harappans.

Other Aryan tribes remained tied to the steppes, coming to be known as Scythians (*Skuthai*, or "shooters/archers") to the Greeks and *Saka*s ("wanderers"?[3]) to their erstwhile cousins, the Persians. Herodotus (VII, 64) gives us an indication of the generalized, non-specific usage when he relates that "Sacae is the name the Persians give to all Scythian tribes." The many other names associated with these ancient Aryans—Cimmerians, Dahæ, Massagetæ—most likely referred either to individual tribes or to tribal confederations, while in a general sense the self-designation "Aryan" remained remarkably persistent across the culture. (The Greeks knew of a Central Asian region they called "Ariana," which has survived till today as the name of Afghanistan's national airline.)

Among the many Aryan tribal names preserved in the ancient written sources, two are especially pertinent to our study of the Ossetes. The first is "As," which may even have given its name to the world's largest continent: *As-ia*, the "land of the As." While this particular etymology is admittedly speculative, "As" continues to appear and reappear throughout history in connection with Iranic steppe nomads.[4] Medieval Georgians coined the term "Ovs-eti," which decidedly *does* mean "land of the As" and was subsequently transformed by the Russians into Oseti-ia, which is the exonym for the country today. "As" is also preserved in Hungary as "Jasz," an ethnic group descended from Alans who settled there following the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century, and as the name of Romania's second-largest city, Iaşi in the northeastern region of Moldavia (not to be confused with Moldova which is now an independent country). Far to the east, at the other end of the Eurasian steppe in Mongolia, the Asud are a recognized ethnic group, descended, like Hungary's Jasz, from Alan regiments in the medieval Mongol army.

The other ancient designation of special relevance to the Ossetes is none other than the term "Aryan" itself, of which the name "Alan" is merely a phonetic transformation, with "ry" regularly becoming "l" in the Sarmatian dialect from the third century BCE. The indigenous name Ossetes use for themselves, "Ir," must derive from the same root, although through a different channel than that which gives "Alan."[5]

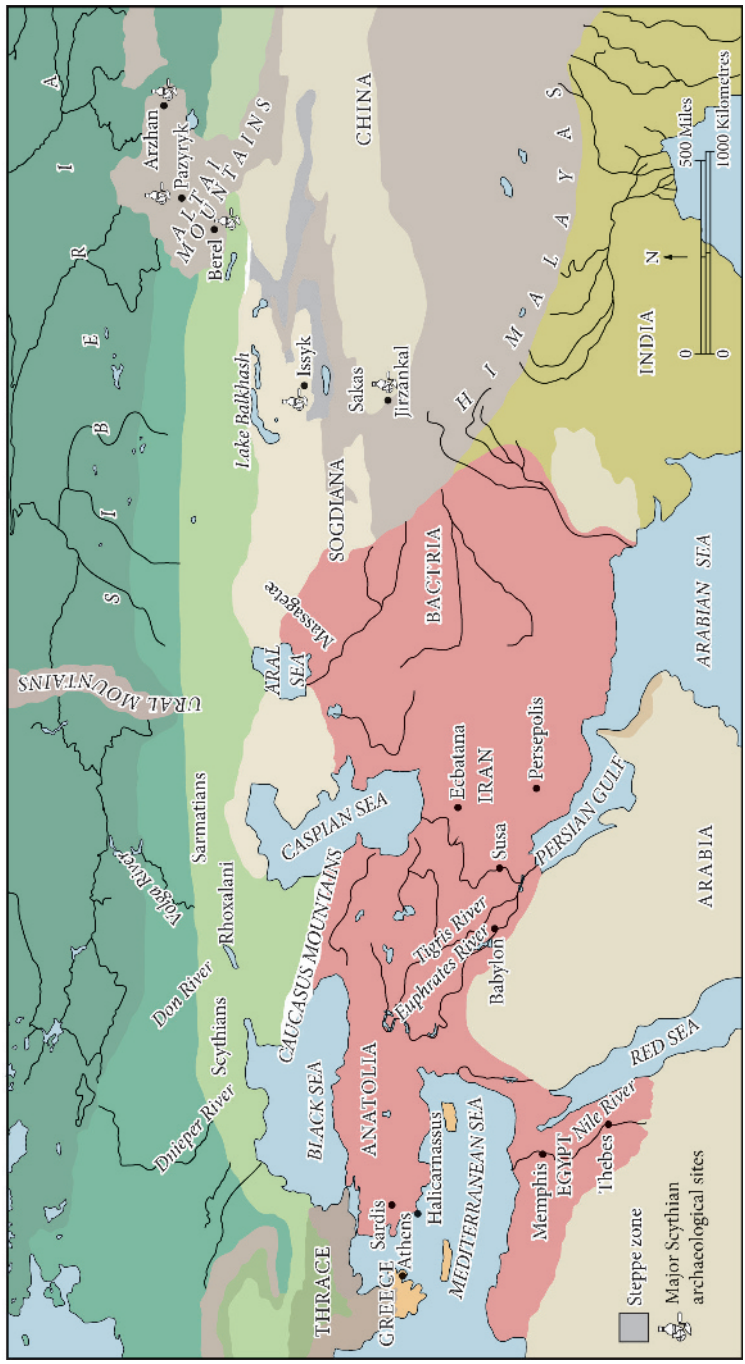
So in an onomastic as well as linguistic sense, the Ossetes might seem justified in referring to themselves as "Scythians of the 21st century." What, if

anything, of Scythian culture have they also preserved? To answer this question one must gain a sense of what Scythian culture consisted of. Since they left no written record of their own and the sources we do have are mostly hostile and often poorly informed, one is forced to do a lot of reading between the lines. The archaeological record helps somewhat, but while finding an object is one thing, interpreting how it was used or what it meant is quite another. Our best guesses might well, in many cases, be wide of the mark or simply altogether wrong.

In a broader sense, Ossetian language and mythology both fall into the category of "Iranian," but what does that mean in modern terms? Since most people today identify the word with a large Muslim country in the Middle East that is best known for defying the West, employing the designation "Iranian" in its more expansive historical sense is bound to give most readers the wrong idea, at least in the absence of some explanation and clarification.

The adjective "Iranian" derives ultimately from the self-designation of an ancient, preliterate, pastoral-nomadic Indo-European-speaking people of the west Eurasian steppe, reconstructed through the methods of historical linguistics as **aryo*, meaning "noble," as in "[We, the] Noble [ones]" (from PIE **heryos*, "a member of our group"). The country names "Iran" and "Iryston" (as Ossetia is known in Ossetian) go back to the same root. The modern English form, "Aryan," unfortunately suffers from its perverse appropriation by German nationalists beginning in the nineteenth century. One should try to set this fact aside when using the word for purposes of the present discussion. In a purely linguistic sense, it ought to be possible to use "Iranian" and "Aryan" interchangeably as synonyms.

In the field of linguistics "Iranian" refers to a language family, an important branch of Indo-European that includes such contemporary languages as Persian/Tojiki, Kurdish, Pashtu, Baluch, and Ossetian, among others. The genetic relationship among these languages shows that they are all descended from a common ancestor language, referred to by linguists as "proto-Iranian," which itself shared a common ancestor with Sanskrit and its later derivatives such as Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, and so on. Parallel to historical linguistics we have the field of comparative mythology, which shows a similar genetic relationship among the various myths of Indo-European speaking peoples, through commonalities discernible among such relics of oral literature as



Map 1 Aryan Tribes of the Steppes *c.* 500 BCE

have been preserved by Homer, Ovid, Ferdowsi, Valmiki, Sturluson, and so on. There is sufficient convergence between the myths of the various Indo-European peoples and the languages they speak that we may postulate a common original culture, dating back some six thousand years or so.

What Is a "Scythian"?

"Scythian," like its Persian equivalent, "Saka," is an elusive term that could signify different things to different people.[6] In some instances it is used to refer to a specific group, distinct from the broader mass of north Iranian steppe tribes, while in others it is applied as a general appellation for any and all of them. Contemporary writers typically follow the ancient Greeks in focusing the term on those nomads who dominated the region north of the Black Sea from the seventh to the third centuries BCE, but sometimes use it in a more general sense.

Lebedynsky, in his book *Les Scythes*, distinguishes between "Scythian" and "Scythic"—that is, in his words, between "true" Scythians who are "those of the European steppes" and "their diverse cousins … the other Scythic peoples."[7] This distinction is arbitrary, however, and the normative bias of European writers, ancient and modern, toward the "Scythians of Europe" is unwarranted. Since all agree that the "European" Scythians originated in Central Asia, why should they be considered more "true" than "other Scythic peoples" who remained closer to the homeland? Shouldn't it be rather the opposite?

Given that this bias is so pervasive, it seems ironic that a major exhibition of "Scythian" artifacts loaned by the Hermitage in St. Petersburg to the British Museum in London in 2017 should have featured almost exclusively items from the Altai region in eastern Siberia! (The exhibition was called "Scythians: Warriors of ancient Siberia.") Since the formative environment for the various Aryan nomadic peoples is agreed to have been Central Asia, we should perhaps rely more on etymology than on the habitual usage of Western writers, and henceforth accept a more generalized usage for the term "Scythian." We shall then view those who migrated to the West and came to be best known to the Greeks as the outliers they were, instead of as the standard by which all related Aryan-dominated groups are measured.

The steppe nomads in general were known and feared by the settled populations of the ancient world for their unrivalled skills at horsemanship and archery. Herodotus (IV, 46) may have coined a term for them when he calls them "*hippotozótai,*" "those who fight on horseback with bows and arrows." It is not unusual that any gang of mounted archers should be lumped together in the minds of their enemies with every other. The Scythian tribes mentioned by Herodotus are said to have referred to themselves as "Skolotai" (IV, 6), after a chieftain whose name can be reconstructed as *Skula (with the plural suffix "-tæ," which is still used in modern Ossetian). This name most likely derives from an earlier form, **skuda*, which indicates that the appellation of "shooters/archers" originated as a self-designation. If, as Szemerényi argues, the Central Asian ethnonym "Sogdian" derives from the same root, then it would seem that both eastern and western nomadic Aryans called themselves "[The] Archers."[8]

When the classical sources do provide specific tribal names, it is usually in the context of a particular historical situation or period. This can lead to confusion as well, because tribal groupings were not necessarily stable over time. They could grow or shrink according to shifting alliances, and might identify themselves differently according to changing contexts. And once again, because they left no written sources of their own, we have only the vaguest notions of how they referred to themselves as opposed to how others identified them. In some cases we can detect indigenous names beneath the surface of their foreign versions—for example, the Greek "Rhoxalani" is fairly transparently the Iranic "Rukhsh-Alani," "Bright Aryans," and the "Saudarates" would seem to be "those (*tæ*) who wear (*dar*) black (*sau*)"—while in others it is difficult, if not impossible, to even speculate on what the underlying form might be.

What we can say is that the modern Ossetian language is definitely descended from the language of the Alans ("Aryans"), and that the classical sources leave no doubt that the group they refer to as "Alani" from the first century CE onward is identical with those whom they called "Sarmatians" in the centuries immediately preceding. But since these same sources treat the Sarmatians and the Scythians as distinct groups, one may perhaps trace Ossetian culture back to the latter only in a general sense, rather than according to the more restrictive usage of some ancient Greek writers. Nevertheless, a number of

cultural practices still exist among the Ossetes that can be attributed to the Scythians, and not just to the Sarmatians and Alans from whom Ossetian language and traditions are more directly descended.

Scythians are first mentioned in the annals of the Akkadian king Esarhaddon, describing invasions to the northeast of Assyria which took place between 680 and 677 BCE.[9] This would have involved crossing the Caucasus range from the north, most likely by following the west Caspian coast. A number of burial sites and artifacts dating to this period ranging from the area of modern-day Stavropol in the west all the way to Derbent in Daghestan have been identified with the Scythian culture, which may be taken as evidence of an early Aryan presence in the North Caucasus. Residue from fires and other such evidence of destruction attests to repeated attacks by the incoming nomads against the local sedentary populations of the North Caucasus. Burial pits from the Stavropol region and dating to the sixth to fourth century BCE contain bodies pierced by Scythian-type arrowheads.[10] However, over the subsequent centuries the archaeological record also shows a progressive mixing of the material culture of the nomads with that of the Koban and other settled peoples, indicating trade and possibly a degree of social assimilation.

Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, states the Scythians had moved into the Pontic steppe region from somewhere to the east during the eighth century, overrunning the existing inhabitants, the Cimmerians.[11] The Cimmerians were themselves one of the composite tribal groupings of the greater Aryan world, and therefore closely related to the Scythians. Greeks establishing colonies along the shores of the Black Sea first encountered Cimmerians during the early seventh century and came into contact with Scythians several decades later. While the dominant language and culture of the Cimmerians, like their Scythian successors, appears to have been Aryan, the fluid, sometimes amorphous, nature of tribal nomadic societies leaves open the possibility that these groups may have included people from other ethnic backgrounds, whether Thracian, Caucasian, or other. The race of giants known as *Guymirytæ* in the Nart epic, the prototypical Georgian heroic figure Gmiri, and also the toponym "Crimea," may all reflect ancient memories of the Cimmerians.

Several types of artifacts first appear in the archaeological record attributed to the Scythians, falling into three general categories. The so-called Scythic

triad comprises (1) a highly developed artistic tradition featuring both real and fantastic animal figures, (2) advances in weaponry such as bronze arrowheads and the short sword called *akinakes* by the Greeks, and (3) improved horse harnesses. Most archaeologists believe these innovations originated among the Aryan nomads in Central Asia around the beginning of the first millennium BCE before being brought by the Cimmerians and the Scythians to the West.[12]

Scythians used strong composite bows, made of wood tied and glued together with bone for reinforcement and strung with horsehair. These bows averaged 60 to 80 cm in length and could be fired accurately at a range of 200 to 300 m. (Homer's Odysseus is said to have obtained his bow from "a horse-breeder from the north"—i.e., a Scythian.) The Scythians attached thorns to their arrowheads and applied snake poison fermented in human blood. Scythian cavalry were known for shooting hails of arrows so thick that they could block out the sun, with each mounted archer able to fire an average of ten to twelve arrows per minute. Other weapons used in battle included lances, spears, swords, axes, and whips. Some Scythian fighters wore armor made of bronze or iron scales on leather. Helmets were rare.

A Scythian would ritually mark the killing of his first opponent by drinking his blood.[13] Following a victorious battle Scythians would typically cut off the heads of their vanquished opponents and bring them before their chieftain. The number of heads one brought determined one's share in the spoils. Scythians also made drinking cups out of their enemies' skulls, a tradition that continued among the Turks up into early modern times. They would use the scalps of their dead adversaries as towels or handkerchiefs. In some cases they would sew them together to make a coat, as attested by Herodotus and also in the Ossetian Nart legends. Tattooing with elaborate animal motifs was apparently widespread, which meant that in some cases these skins could be quite decorative. Since scalping was intended to shame the victim, those who were fortunate enough to have their bodies retrieved and buried by their own people typically had a scalp (their own or someone else's) sewn back on before being sent to the next world.[14]

Scythians also disgraced their defeated foes by dismembering them. The right arm, in particular, was seen as a most degrading loss and deprived one of a proper burial.[15] It may also have been intended to prevent the defunct from returning from the dead to exact revenge. This custom is found in the

Ossetian Nart epic, where the hero Batradz slices off the right arm of his slain enemy Lord Sainag and brings it to the matriarch of the Narts, Satana. She magnanimously suggests that he return the arm to Sainag's family so that they may bury him with the honors he deserves, and Batradz, with a chivalrous respect for his defeated foe, agrees to do so.

The Scythians valued fighting above all else and regarded other occupations with disdain.[16] Warriors' achievements were recognized at an annual ceremony where wine—imported from the Greeks—would be drunk from a large chalice. In Ossetian legend such a vessel, called the *Uatsamongæ*, would rise magically to the lips of a great warrior but flee from anyone making idle boasts. Herodotus states in his description of the Scythian ceremony that anyone who had not killed any foes in the previous year had to sit to the side in shame and was not allowed to drink.[17] Littleton and Malcor suggest in their provocative book *From Scythia to Camelot* that the Holy Grail of the King Arthur legends may share with the *Uatsamongæ* a common origin in Scythian tradition.[18]

Apart from raiding, Scythian life consisted mainly of pasturing their livestock. Most important were horses—they preferred reddish-colored ones—and cattle, which were hornless and relatively small. They also kept lesser numbers of sheep and goats, as well as dogs, and supplemented their diet through hunting. While the steppe landscape may strike many as dull and monotonous, to the eyes of a pastoralist nothing could be more appealing than endless stretches of grazing land. Seasonal weather variations, however, were extreme. Feeding one's flocks was easy enough in the spring and autumn, but summer could bring heat and drought, while winters tended to be bitter cold with biting winds. Periodic changes in climate could render some areas no longer livable and have been proposed as an explanation for some of the great migrations of steppe peoples at different times in history.

The Scythian pastoralists survived mainly on animal products. Their diet consisted mostly of meat and dairy, including something the Greeks called *hippake* which may have been either cheese or yogurt, butter, and the fermented mare's milk known today as koumiss. They boiled their meat in large bronze cauldrons, just as the modern Ossetes do at their traditional feasts. Scythian attire consisted mainly of leather and was distinguished from that of other ancient peoples by the wearing of trousers—necessary for riding on horseback—and pointed hats. They lived in four- or six-wheeled wagons,

which, in the absence of proper roads, can hardly have been a comfortable means of travel. These ox-drawn vehicles were fully furnished, however, rather like the RV's of today, some having up to three separate chambers. According to Pseudo-Hippocrates, they were "impenetrable to snow, rain, and wind."[19] Women and children traveled in these well-equipped wagons, while the men rode on horseback. An interesting detail in connection with Scythian horse-breeding is that, unlike the Sarmatians and Alans who branded their horses with *tamgha*s, the Scythians marked ownership rather by making notches on the animal's ears. The pre-modern Ossetes branded their horses, yet they preserved a funerary ritual, the *bæxfældisyn*, wherein the horse of the deceased would have its ears notched in the Scythian manner.[20]

For entertainment the Scythians engaged in archery competitions and other sports related to combat, including hunting. A unique Scythian pastime was spearing hares from horseback. This activity was so absorbing that it could even distract warriors from battle. Herodotus relates that when a Scythian contingent was about to face off against the army of Darius I of Persia a hare suddenly darted out from somewhere, causing the Scythian cavalry to break ranks and chase after it; a disgusted and demoralized Darius is said to have given up and left the field.[21] The Scythians also apparently had a kind of board game, played on a square knotted carpet containing rows of animal figures, though how the game was actually played is not known.[22] Miniature wagon models have been found at many Scythian sites, indicating that they were a favorite toy among Scythian children.

The interrelated art forms of music, poetry, and dance may be assumed to have played an important role in Scythian society, celebrating and transmitting their cultural identity and traditions in the absence of books or institutional education. The Ossetian Nart epic likely contains reflections of this, and its legendary accounts of the origins of such things as the Ossetian lyre (*fændyr*) and the *simd* dance may preserve memories going back as far into the past as the Scythian period. We know from depictions in Scythian art that singing bards with lyres existed at that time, though we have no way of knowing how much of the actual sound and content of their performances survives today in those of the modern Ossetian *kædæg-gænæg*.

The Sintashta/Arkaim peoples had practiced some forms of agriculture, but their descendants, perhaps constrained by climate change, turned to pure

pastoralism during the second millennium BCE as a strategy for colonizing the grassy steppes. The Massagetæ—who may be the Scythian tribe from whom the Alans were most directly descended—ate fish, presumably from the Oxus River, which flowed through their territory. Later, some Aryan groups re-integrated agricultural activity into their economy after coming into contact with settled peoples, for example, in southern Central Asia (the Sogdians) or along the frontier forest zones of eastern Europe (the western Scythians). The only Aryan word for cereal still preserved in Ossetian, *jæw*, refers to millet (cf. Persian *jō*, barley), which formed part of the diet of the Sarmatians.[23]

Throughout the sixth to third centuries BCE Greek merchants in the Pontic colonies traded regularly with the nomadic Scythians, giving them some acquaintance with Scythian culture. The Greeks had a particular appreciation for Scythian goldwork, especially jewelry, which was often based on animal motifs and for which the Scythians are famous among art historians even today. They also constituted a market for domestic animals and animal products such as leather, honey, and beeswax, as well as wheat grown by steppe agriculturalists—"worker Scythians," as Herodotus calls them, perhaps proto-Slavs—who cultivated the grain for export only, not consuming it themselves.[24] Finally, the Greeks bought slaves, who were mainly used by them as soldiers.

The Scythians, for their part, were great consumers of Greek wine, which they called *sana* (the modern Ossetian word for wine is *sæn*). From the Greeks they also obtained ceramic, terracotta, or metal vessels, along with other manufactured objects such as mirrors and plaques. The Scythians traded with non-Aryan peoples to the northeast as well, including the "bald" (shaven-headed?) Argippaeans of the Greek sources, whom they reached via a long journey that required them to use "seven different interpreters."[25]

Scythian Religion: Beliefs and Practices

The pantheon of the ancient Scythians, like that of the best known of the Iranian religions, Zoroastrianism, consisted of seven gods or divine figures, each of which was connected to some natural phenomenon. Herodotus (4.59) listed them as follows, reflecting in the first five cases a Greek pronunciation of the original Scythian names, which are not otherwise known to us:

1. Tabiti: The goddess of the hearth, equated by Herodotus with the Greek goddess Hestia. Her name would appear to be connected with the Indo-Iranian **tāpati*, meaning "to heat" (cognate with Latin "tepidus," English "tepid"). The hearth is the focal point of religious rituals performed in Ossetian households today, presided over by the deity called Safa, while the goddess figure herself has been assimilated to the Christian Virgin Mary, called Mady Maïram in Ossetian.
2. Papai: Equated by Herodotus with Zeus, both likely being reflections of the ancient Indo-European "Father Sky."
3. Api: The wife of Papai. Herodotus equates her with the Greek goddess of the Earth, Gaia, but this is likely a misunderstanding on his part since "Āp" in Iranian means "water" and the water goddess (Anahita in Zoroastrianism, for example) is known to have held a major position in the religions of other Iranian peoples. Some linguists have attempted to resolve the discrepancy by suggesting that Api could have been the goddess of wetlands, which are a common feature in the Pontic steppe.
4. (G)Oitosyros: Equated by Herodotus with Apollo. Herodotus states elsewhere that the Scythians worshipped the sun (as did other Iranian peoples), which may be why he makes the association with Apollo. The second part of his name may derive from *sura*, "strong," an epithet applied in Zoroastrianism to both Mithra—who also has solar connections—and to the water goddess Anahita.
5. Artimpasa (or Argimpasa; Greek "Γ" and "Τ" being sometimes difficult to distinguish): Equated by Herodotus with Aphrodite Ourania, and thus possibly a fertility goddess. If the first spelling is correct, the name could mean "she who watches over the fire" (**ārt*, Oss. *art*).

And the last two, for whom he gives only Greek equivalents without providing the Scythian names:

- "Herakles": Herodotus does not specify his function. For the Greeks he was a symbol of masculinity, but the Scythian deity may have been connected with the Indo-Iranian wind god, *Vayu*, who like Herakles was associated with brute strength. Under the Parthians, another Iranian tribe

of steppe nomadic origin who ruled western Asia from 247 BCE to 224 CE, the cult of Herakles became widespread in Iran.

- "Ares": The god of war. For the Scythians, whose economy depended heavily on raiding, one would naturally assume that the cult of a martial deity was central. Herodotus confirms this, stating that "Ares" was the only god to whom the Scythians constructed "altars." These consisted of piles of wood upon which was set a platform with a "very old iron *akinakes*" planted in the center, symbolizing the deity. Once a year they make an offering of cattle and horses, "in much greater number than to other deities." In addition to this they sacrifice one out of every hundred prisoners of war, "but with different ceremonies from those used for the animals": They begin by pouring libations of wine over the heads of the victims, then cut their throats over a basin that they then take up onto the platform, and pour over the sword as an offering. Finally, they go back down and cut off the right arms of their dead victims and throw them into the air to fall where they may.[26]

In fact in describing this ritual Herodotus is referring to the well-attested Scythian cult of the sword, which would be planted into a pile of stones (or brushwood, according to Herodotus' account) and then offered the blood of sacrificed enemies. Littleton and Malcor have suggested that this structure may be reflected in the Arthurian legend of the sword in the stone, which they believe could have been brought to Britain by Sarmatian regiments settled there by the Romans during the second century.[27] The sword cult is attested among the Alans as late as the fourth century CE.

The modern Uastyrdzhi, who is the most prominent deity for the Ossetes today, may descend in part from this war god, whose Scythian name is unknown to us (perhaps because it was subject to a taboo). An exclusively male figure who is the patron of soldiers and other travelers as well as the guardian of spoken contracts, Uastyrdzhi would seem to be the Ossetian parallel to the Zoroastrian god Mithra, whose name originally meant "spoken contract" or "oath," and who may have been the principal deity of the pre-Zoroastrian Aryans.[28] According to Lucian of Samosata (second century CE) the Scythians swore "by the wind and by the sword"[29]—in other words, apparently, by the two unnamed gods of Herodotus" list.

It is interesting to note in regard to this divine heptad that the city on the Black Sea coast known to the Greeks as Theodosia was called in Scythian Ardavda, which signifies "Seven Oaths/Deities." A modern reflection of the same notion is seen in the name of an important shrine in the Digor region of western Ossetia, Avd dzaury, which also means "Seven Deities."[30] Formerly in Ossetian the days of the week were named for seven deities, and in the Digor dialect Monday is still Avdisar, "Head of the Seven," a title which refers to Uatsilla (the deity of thunderstorms) as the eldest of the gods.

To date it has not been possible to draw clear correspondences between the gods of the Scythian pantheon and those of the Ossetes, and they may not in all cases be equivalent. More likely, the Ossetian deities worshipped today evolved in connection with the socio-cultural realities of the Ossetes themselves (or their Alan forebears), while retaining the overall structure of a seven-figure pantheon as was also the case with Zoroastrianism. Herodotus states that the tribe known as the "Royal Scythians" also worshipped a deity named Thagimasidas, whom he equates with Poseidon and which has a modern-day reflection in the Ossetian god of the waters, Donbettyr, but this eight-figure pantheon is an exception both among the Scythians and among Iranian peoples in general.

The principal ritual act for the Scythians was a shared feast originating with a blood sacrifice, using either human or animal victims.[31] Such gatherings, as in the Ossetian *kuyvd* ceremony today, involved a considerable amount of drinking, either from a shared chalice or from individual horns. The Scythians obtained wine through trade with the Greeks, but unlike the latter, they drank it undiluted. Warriors would establish blood brotherhood by drinking wine mixed with their own blood from the same horn simultaneously, a rite that is illustrated in some works of Scythian art. Similarly, oaths between individuals or groups would involve mixing the blood of the participants with wine in a large vessel; they would first dip their weapons into it, then, pronouncing their spoken formulas, drink in turn.

The central role of sworn friendship in Scythian culture is reflected in the modern Ossetian *kuyvd*, which consists of endless toasts: first to the deities, then to the host, to ancestors, to living relatives, children, and so on. There is a strong sense, sometimes spoken and sometimes not, of establishing bonds of mutual obligation among the participants—an Ossetian word

for "friend," *ærdxord*, literally means "one who has consumed the oath." The preferred drinking vessel is a Scythian-style horn ("so you can't put it down until it's empty!"). The *kuyvd* remains the most basic form of social interaction among Ossetian males, such that any gathering from massive public rituals to private dinner parties must be carried out using its established procedure and spoken formulas. It takes little stretch of the imagination to feel the atmosphere of a *kuyvd* as being very similar to how it was in Scythian times.

Apart from alcohol, hallucinogenic substances also played a role in the ritual life of the Aryan tribes. Both Zoroastrianism and Hinduism preserve forms of an ancient ceremony involving the preparation and consumption of a substance known as *haoma* in the Avesta and *soma* in the Vedas, although in both of these religions today a non-hallucinogenic substitute is used. Abaev proposed that the Ossetian word for "hops," *khumællæg*, as well as its cognates in various other European languages, may derive from **hauma-aryaka*, "Aryan *haoma,*" its meaning having shifted at some point in history when beer came to prevail as the beverage most often imbibed in ceremonies.[32]

The practice of consuming mind-altering substances for purposes of transcendence is found in the religious rituals of many societies, and some of the "shamanistic" procedures still observable in Central Asia likely date back thousands of years. The Scythians had a practice of sitting in specially constructed tents where they inhaled the smoke of hemp seeds tossed onto heated rocks. While this may have been done in certain ritual contexts such as preparing for battle or the hunt, the prevalence of inhalation tents and associated paraphernalia found in Scythian tombs suggests that it had a broader, recreational function as well.[33] The Greek word "cannabis," called "Scythian incense" by Hesychius (fifth century CE), derives from proto-Iranian **kanab* (Oss. *gæn*, Eng. "hemp").[34] Bronze Age burial sites in the western part of China's Tarim Basin where cannabis residues have been found can most likely be attributed to Scythians.[35]

Like most ancient societies the Scythians had specialists in divination. Their soothsayers used bundles of sticks made from willow, which they would untie and line up on the ground in order to inform their predictions. The fourth-century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus describes the Alans

as engaging in a similar practice,[36] as did the Ossetes as late as the nineteenth century. A form of divination was also performed by the Scythian transvestites known as **anarya* ("non-males," Gk. *enárees*), but this category of "shaman" is unknown among the Alans or the Ossetes.

Death and the afterlife were at the very center of the Scythian worldview, as attested by the fact that contents of their tombs—housed beneath large earthen burial mounds known as *kurgan*s—are the principal vestiges that remain of their culture (see Figure 1.1). The bulk of Scythian artifacts found in museums around the world today were taken from these burial sites. Elite Scythians were interred in these kurgans along with their weapons, jewelry, horses, and sometimes with their wives, concubines, and servants. The burial chambers contained all the accoutrements considered necessary for the comfort of the deceased, including furs, cushions, pillows, mattresses, carpets and wall-hangings, as well as kitchenware, stoves, food, and amphoras filled with wine.[37] Kurgans can be seen today scattered across the whole of the Eurasian steppe, from Ukraine all the way to Mongolia and beyond. Burial mounds of the Silla kingdom in South Korea (first millennium CE) bear a striking resemblance

Figure 1.1 Issyk kurgan, southeastern Kazakhstan, *c.* fourth century BCE.

to Scythian kurgans and may point to the dynasty's foreign origin from the steppes. Similar speculations have been made regarding the burial mounds of the earliest emperors of Japan.

The size and extent of a burial reflected the power and wealth of the one who was buried there (see Figure 1.2). One of the so-called Arzhan kurgans in the Siberian region of Tuva near the Mongolian border, dating to around the eighth century BCE, contained no less than 150 slaughtered horses and a retinue of 15 sacrificed humans. According to Thracian sources, upon the death of a Scythian warrior his wives would fight among themselves for the "honor" of being killed and buried along with him.[38] As late as the nineteenth century the Ossetes practiced self-flagellation as part of ritual mourning at funerals.[39] This practice is attested both in the Nart epic and by Herodotus among the Scythians.[40]

The Indo-European peoples believed that the soul remained hovering over the body for a period of forty days before finally departing for the land of the dead. When an elite Scythian died, his body was embalmed in wax and then paraded by wagon around his territory throughout this forty-day period so that he could "participate" in feasts held in his honor.[41] The funeral feast remains an important tradition in Ossetia today. It is held on the street in front of the deceased's house, with a tent set up where the family provides a banquet to feed the large crowd of guests. At the end of forty days a second, private feast is held by members the immediate family.

Until the Soviet period Ossetes buried their dead in house-like beehive structures facing their village with an open window so that the deceased might continue to observe the lives of the living. The best known such necropolis is at Dargavs in North Ossetia, but examples can be seen all across the region. One was required to show respect when passing in front of these buildings and not to do so was considered an insult that called for blood vengeance by the living descendants of the deceased.

According to nineteenth-century accounts, ruinous sums of money were spent by Ossetes on ceremonies honoring their forebears. Khetagurov reports that for a memorial feast it was not uncommon for families to slaughter as many as thirty cattle and one hundred fifty sheep, to brew five hundred buckets of beer and a hundred of *arak*, and to bake three thousand loaves of bread, all in a single day.[42]

Resituating the Scythians

The Greek accounts of Scythian religion and culture are most detailed when they speak of the tribes with which they were in closest contact, that is to say those who lived along the northern shores of the Black Sea. It is not clear how much of this information also applied to other Scythian tribes. Some of it surely did, but there were variations among the different Scythian groups as well. For example, the Massagetæ are said by Herodotus to "worship only

Figure 1.2 "Golden man," National Museum, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, *c.* fourth century BCE.

the sun, to whom they sacrifice horses."[43] Men who survived to old age were ritually killed, as was also the case among some other Scythian peoples, and then eaten, a practice not attested elsewhere in Iranian contexts but found in many primitive cultures as a way of "reintegrating" the deceased into the family. Massagetæ men took only one wife, but wives were shared among them, a practice seen later in Iranian communities following the teachings of the socioreligious leaders Mazdak (sixth century), Muqanna' (eighth century), and Babak (ninth century).

Old Persian texts such as the Behistun (Bisotun) inscription of Darius I (r. 522–486 BCE) use the term "Saka" in a similar generic sense to the Greek "Skuthai." Specific Saka groups are designated by qualifiers: *Sakā paradraya*—"Sakas beyond the sea," *Sakā tigraxaudā*—"Sakas with pointed caps," *Sakā haumavargā*—"Sakas who drink *haoma,*" *Sakā para Sugdam*—"Sakas beyond Sogdiana." Sakas from these various groups are visually depicted in friezes at Behistun and Persepolis.

Bands of Sakas were settled in eastern Iran (Sakastan > Seistan, homeland of the *Book of Kings* hero Rustam) by the Parthian ruler Mithradates II during the late second century BCE as a means of deterring their raids into Parthian territory. Instead they raided northwestern India and the Tarim Basin, where they established kingdoms. The Saka city of Khotan became a major center of Buddhism from the third to the eleventh centuries CE. Buddhist texts in the Khotanese dialect are the most extensive written legacy of the Saka/Scythian language. A mysterious set of black-and-white lines on a plain north of the town of Tashkurgan near the Tajik-Chinese border has been shown by Chinese paleoclimatologist Zihua Tang to have been a sophisticated fifth-century BCE calendar.[44] Since Sakas were most likely dominant in the area by that time, the site may be considered a kind of "Scythian Stonehenge."[45]

The inhabitants of the Pamir Mountains of eastern Tajikistan and adjacent areas of Afghanistan and China speak east Iranian languages related to Scythian. Some Ossetian linguists claim that they can "easily understand" Pamiri dialects such as Shughni, but such assertions should be taken with a grain of salt. Possible similarities between Ossetian and Pamiri customs and myths deserve to be investigated. The Pashto language of Pakistan and Afghanistan is also a member of the eastern Iranian group. Pashto and the various Pamiri tongues

are most likely legacies of migrations into their respective areas during the second millennium BCE by some of the Andronovo peoples out of Siberia.

Some of the richest finds of Scythian material culture are from the eastern extreme of the Aryan world, in the Altai Mountains of southern Siberia. The best-known site is at Pazyryk, where a number of "kurgan" burial mounds dating to around the fourth century BCE have, thanks to their preservation in permafrost, yielded a wide range of objects including not just the usual weapons, jewelry and equestrian paraphernalia but also textiles such as felt, Chinese silk, and the world's oldest known pile carpet (probably produced in Iran). The human remains from Pazyryk show the beginnings of genetic intermixing between Europoid and Mongoloid peoples, which most likely represent a mingling of Iranian- and Turkic-speakers—a process that continues in Central Asia up to the present day.

When one takes in the full extent of Scythian culture during the first millennium BCE, it becomes clear that the tendency over twenty-five centuries of Western historiography to use the Scythians of Europe as the standard by which all other Scythian tribes are measured is due to nothing more than the nature of the Greek and Roman written sources, which provide the greatest amount of detail about the nomads who happened to be living closest to them. Indeed, a literary bias is one of the most prevalent pitfalls to which historians everywhere are prone. Archaeology tells a different story, showing a vast cultural continuum stretching from the Carpathian Basin to Mongolia. Its center of gravity was not the Pontic Steppe, but Central Asia.

2

From Sarmatians to Alans: An Iranian Element in the History of Europe

> *[T]he Alans are almost all tall and handsome, with hair tending towards blond. They are fearsome even by the moderate ferocity of their regard, and quick in handling weapons … they take pleasure in danger and war. He is considered fortunate who perishes in battle; the elderly and those who die in some accident are ridiculed as degenerate and cowardly. There is nothing they praise other than killing a man; as glorious trophies, scalps ripped from the heads cut from their victims are used by the warriors as phaleræ for their horses.*
>
> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* (*c.* 375 CE)

The lands associated by Herodotus with the Sarmatians lay directly to the east of those he assigns to the Scythians, specifically the area between the Don (Gk. Tanais) and Volga rivers north of the Caspian Sea. The two groups, both of which were tribal confederations rather than distinct nations, would seem to have simply been part of a continuum of closely related populations stretching all the way to Mongolia, with some minor differences. The Sarmatians (sometimes called Sauromatians, likely reflecting an earlier pronunciation) spoke "the Scythian language," Herodotus tells us, "but badly."[1] In other words, the two spoke slightly different dialects of the same language. Having less direct contact with the Greeks, the Sarmatians were not as influenced by Hellenism and seem to have preserved ancient Aryan traditions (such as fire worship) to a somewhat greater degree than the European Scythians.

The Greeks also differentiated between the two groups—while at the same time considering them to be a part of a single, broader "Scythian" culture—by emphasizing the role of women in Sarmatian society. Herodotus recounts a legend according to which the Sarmatians came into being as a result of

marriages between a class of warrior women—the original "Amazons"—and Scythian men. Later Greek writers such as Pseudo-Scylax (fourth century BCE) refer to the Sarmatians, with dubious accuracy, as being "woman-ruled" (*gynaikokratoúmenoi*).[2] According to Hippocrates (d. *c.* 370 BCE), Sarmatian women lived as warriors until marriage and could not take a husband until they had killed at least three enemies in battle. He states that they had their right breast cauterized as children "so that its growth is arrested, and all its strength and bulk are diverted to the right shoulder and right arm."[3] Hippocrates also attributes to Sarmatian women a priestly function, which has been borne out by the discovery of ritual objects such as vessels and small altars in female burials from the southern Urals and further east.[4] The practice of cranial deformation—creating elongated skulls by tightly wrapping a child's head during its developmental growth phase—was prevalent among the Alans beginning in the second century CE and may have first been adopted by Sarmatians living in proximity to proto-Huns in Central Asia before their migrations westward.[5]

Classical sources provide the names of a number of "Sarmatian" tribes, including the Aorsi, the Iazyges, the Siraces, the Limigantes, the Agragantes, the Rhoxolani, and the Alani. The Serboi and Horoati, ancestors of modern Serbs and Croats, may have been originally Iranian-speaking Sarmatian tribes as well. By the second century the term "Alan" displaces "Sarmatian" in the Graeco-Roman texts, but here we are likely dealing with the results of a shift in inter-tribal power relations rather than an actual replacement of one people by another. In this respect, the characterization of Istvánovits and Kulcsár that "the Alans seized the leadership of the Sarmatian tribal alliance during the 1st century"[6] seems a good way of putting it. Ptolemy (second century) refers to the Alans as Scythians[7] (reflecting the broader use of the term), and Ammianus (fourth century) states that they are descended from the Central Asian Massagetæ[8]—which is likely also true—but in the most immediate sense the Alans can be considered to be identical with their Sarmatian forebears.

One should bear in mind when sifting through all these names that they did not necessarily reflect any kind of static reality, since tribal alliances were in more or less constant flux and names could expand, contract, or drift in signification over time. Also, the nature of written historiography is that it tends to project the frameworks of settled civilization onto that of the nomads, which can lead to distortions or exaggerations. We should recall

that, in general, nomadic societies did not build fixed physical structures or civic institutions, so that a person referred to in the sources as a "king" may have been no more than the chief (**aldār*, Oss. *ældar*) of a particularly powerful tribe, his "capital" no more than a few buildings or even just a gathering of wagons or tents, and so on. Power as such consisted largely of how much grazing land was under one's control, the capacity to exact tribute from settled populations, and to tax or raid passing merchants involved in long-distance trade.

The dynamics of mass migrations across the steppe have followed a recurring pattern throughout history. The steppe is a harsh environment, and even slight changes in population or climate could threaten the survival of the nomads and their livestock. At various points some event—a severe drought, or the rallying of large numbers of tribes behind a single charismatic leader—would trigger a domino effect whereby the incursions of one group would push their neighbors into the territory of the next, and so on. These wave-like movements would eventually bring the nomads into contact with settled populations.

The third century BCE appears to have been one such turbulent period. It was during this time that repeated invasions by proto-Hunnic tribes originating from eastern Siberia motivated the Chinese to build the Great Wall. Repercussions were felt in Central Asia among the Saka tribes of the Massagetæ confederation, some of whom reacted by moving southward to invade Bactria and northwestern India. The Huns seem to have prevailed over the Aryan nomads thanks to a new kind of bow, larger and stronger than those used by the Aryans and capable of piercing armor.[9] Thus began a long process by which Altaic peoples slowly displaced Iranian-speakers from Central Asia, a transformation that has in recent times—but for the survival of the Tajiks and the Pamiris—nearly been completed.

Other Massagetæ tribes retreated westwards into the area of the Volga basin stretching from the Urals down to the Caspian Sea, introducing new cultural elements among the Sarmatian peoples already living there. One assumes, especially given the commonalities between the two peoples, that the Massagetæ had little difficulty integrating into Sarmatian society and that, beneath the ever-shifting power relations among their tribal chiefs and clan heads, many ordinary folk did just that. We may recall that the nomads lived largely free from any institutionalized authority, so that large numbers of them

might come together under a charismatic leader for purposes of raiding and pillaging and then afterward go their separate ways. Nomadic allegiances tended to shift according to which way the political winds were blowing, so that changes in the outward face of a tribal confederation might mask a high degree of underlying social continuity.

Among the nomads immigrating from Central Asia the dominant tribe was known to the Greeks as the Aorsi, from an Iranian word meaning "white" (cf. Oss. *urs*) signifying that they had lived in the West (that is, relative to the other Central Asian tribes). They appear to be identical with the Yancai of the Chinese sources, a nomadic group living north of the Caspian Sea, "who are also called Alan."[10] (A number of place names between the Aral Sea and the Caspian have preserved the memory of Alans up to the present day, including Alan-Kala, Kyzyl-Alan, and Kyrk-Alan.) A subgroup of these "Western Alans," known as the "Bright Alans," the Rukhsh-Alani (Gk. Rhoxalani), eventually moved into the lower Dnieper region where they displaced or absorbed the Scythian groups living there. With territories linking Asia with Europe and the Middle East now under their control, the Aorsi were able to enrich themselves by levying taxes on passing traders.

The imposition of Aorsi hegemony over trade routes had a detrimental effect on the economy of the nearby Graeco-Scythian Bosporan Kingdom (*c*. 438 BCE–*c*. 370 CE), which was situated along the eastern and western shores of the Sea of Azov. Following several decades of internal power struggles during the first century CE this state, originally founded by Greek merchants, came to be ruled by a mixed Thracian-Sarmatian dynasty for the next three centuries as a client state to the Roman Empire, which considered it a vital outpost against incursions by steppe nomads. Greek remained the official language of the Bosporan Kingdom, but its customs and culture—notably styles of dress—became increasingly Sarmatian.

It is here that the mysterious religio-magical symbols known as *tamgha*s first make their appearance. Their meaning and purpose are still poorly understood, although until recent times they were popular throughout the Caucasus as a means of marking property. In the early modern era the Polish nobility incorporated *tamgha*s into their coats-of-arms as an assertion of their supposed Sarmatian ancestry, but such claims are no longer generally considered to have much substance.

Directly to the southeast of the Aorsi, the Sarmatian tribe known as the Siraces (Gk. Sirakoi) occupied the steppelands between the Don River and the northern Caucasus. They were, according to Sulimirski, "the most Hellenized of the Sarmatians, while at the same time contributing largely to the Sarmatization of the Bosporan Kingdom" as attested by the items included in Bosporan burials.[11] Atypically for peoples of nomadic background, the Siraces built settlements and practiced agriculture, growing wheat, barley, and millet. They also produced wheel-turned pottery, especially jugs with animal-shaped handles. Barrow graves such as those at Ust-Labinsk near the confluence of the Kuban and Laba rivers east of Krasnodar have yielded a rich trove of Siracian material culture, including weapons, jewelry, vessels, and animals—though, strangely, not horses. The Siraces are not mentioned after the second century CE, but one assumes they were assimilated by the Alans who were based in the same region during the centuries that followed.

During the middle of the first century CE some of the Rhoxalani reached Wallachia on the borders of the Roman Empire proper. They attacked the Roman province of Moesia south of the Danube several times, before being defeated by Trajan's forces in 107. For ten years after this the Romans paid the Rhoxalani to stay away. As soon as the bribe was discontinued, however, the Rhoxalani resumed their raids. In 118 the Romans tried a new approach, making the Rhoxalani their vassals. This would be a recurrent Roman strategy: paying off the nomads, hiring them as mercenary cavalry, or formally incorporating them into the imperial administrative system.

From Sarmatians to Alans

Around this time the Aorsi cease to be mentioned in the Classical sources. Instead we find the term "Alani," but since we know that among the nomads the Aorsi were called "Western Alans" it seems likely that these "new" Alans were simply an eastern branch of the same original group—perhaps descended from the Massagetæ—who were the last to abandon their Central Asian homeland in the face of pressure from Hunnic tribes. These newly arrived eastern Aryans would have absorbed the Aorsi, the Siraces, and perhaps some local Caucasian peoples as well, laying the groundwork for the genetic and cultural mix one finds across the region today.

From this point onward, the Alans would be an integral part of the complex mosaic of cultures inhabiting the Caucasus region. Ammianus Marcellus, writing in the fourth century, affirms the fluid, organic pattern by which nomadic tribal identities were continually evolving, when he says of the Alans that they "have incorporated bordering peoples, gradually weakened by their repeated victories, *under their own national name*" (emphasis mine).[12] This observation ought to serve as a starting point for any discussion of the modern-day Ossetes and their relationship to other Caucasus nations who lay competing claims to Alan ancestry.

The Iazyges (the "Pious Ones," from the Iranian root *yaz-*, "to worship") were the first Sarmatian group to establish themselves definitively in central Europe, settling in the Hungarian plain—which resembles the Central Asian steppes in many ways—during the first century CE. They alternately raided Roman territories and joined up to fight alongside the Roman army, periodically taking in additional waves of Sarmatians fleeing conflicts further to the east. The Iazyges maintained their Sarmatian identity in central Europe until 430, when they were overrun by the Huns.

In 169 CE Sarmatian raiders invaded the Roman province of Pannonia west of the Danube, but were repulsed by imperial troops under the command of Marcus Aurelius. For the Roman army to achieve complete victory took no less than six years, however. The Sarmatians were forbidden from living near the Danube and were required to commit 8,000 cavalry to Roman service. Of this number, 5,500 were sent to Britain to guard the northern border along Hadrian's wall against the native Caledonians. This event has been taken by some contemporary scholars—starting with Joël Grisward in 1969 and developed by Scott Littleton and Linda Malcor in their 1994 book *From Scythia to Camelot*—as the vector by which some popular Sarmatian heroic tales may have entered Britain where they began to circulate among the local population, eventually serving as a basis for the King Arthur legends.[13]

The Alans in Western Europe and Beyond

During the third century Germanic Goths moved south into the western Pontic region from the area of modern Poland. These newcomers must have posed a challenge to the Alans, but over time the two ethnicities came to merge

into an allied force, which lasted for several centuries. Around 370 CE the Huns invaded from central Asia and forced the Alans westward into the Goth-dominated territories. Defeated by the Huns, Alan and Gothic tribes alike joined the Hunnic army, which must have already been made up of numerous ethnicities. Some of the Alans, meanwhile, withdrew to the relative safety of the north Caucasus foothills.

After several decades Alans and Goths progressively broke their alliances with the Huns and launched their own joint attacks on central Europe. In 406 a combined force of Goths and Alans crossed the Rhine at Mainz, raising the alarm in Roman Gaul. The Romans responded to this threat by offering Gallic estates to a number of Alan leaders. This led to concentrations of Alan settlement, especially in the region of Orléans, where they served to defend the local population against their own erstwhile raiding partners. Alan chiefs, notably Eochar and Sangiban, served as local agents on behalf of the Roman Empire.[14] Other bands of Goths, Alans, and Vandals, meanwhile, continued their raids into northern Italy and Iberia (Catalonia < *Goth-Alania?). Some even crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and made their way back eastward along the North African coast as far as Carthage in modern-day Tunisia, where numerous Alan relics have been found.

Alan settlers in all of these lands eventually assimilated into the local language and culture, but Bachrach and others have suggested that dozens of place names—Allainville, Alaincourt, Alençon, and so on—have preserved a memory of their presence. In Brittany the Alans appear to have kept their language as late as the sixth century.[15] It should be acknowledged that Agustí Alemany, a noted authority on the Alans, challenges Bachrach's attribution of these toponyms to them. Alemany notes that most of these names are not attested before the ninth century, and that they might just as well derive from a Celtic tribe, the Alauni.[16]

If Bachrach's assessment is correct, however, the proper name "Alan" ("Alain") may be another largely unrecognized legacy of the Iranian role in the history of Western Europe. Similarly, few Westerners today would associate equestrian activities—including horse races, riding competitions, breeding, or polo matches—with Iranian influence. Yet in a general sense, one can say that the tactic of fighting on horseback was a specific characteristic of Central Asian nomads, and that the introduction of cavalry into the combat forces of various ancient Middle Eastern and medieval European societies came initially through them.

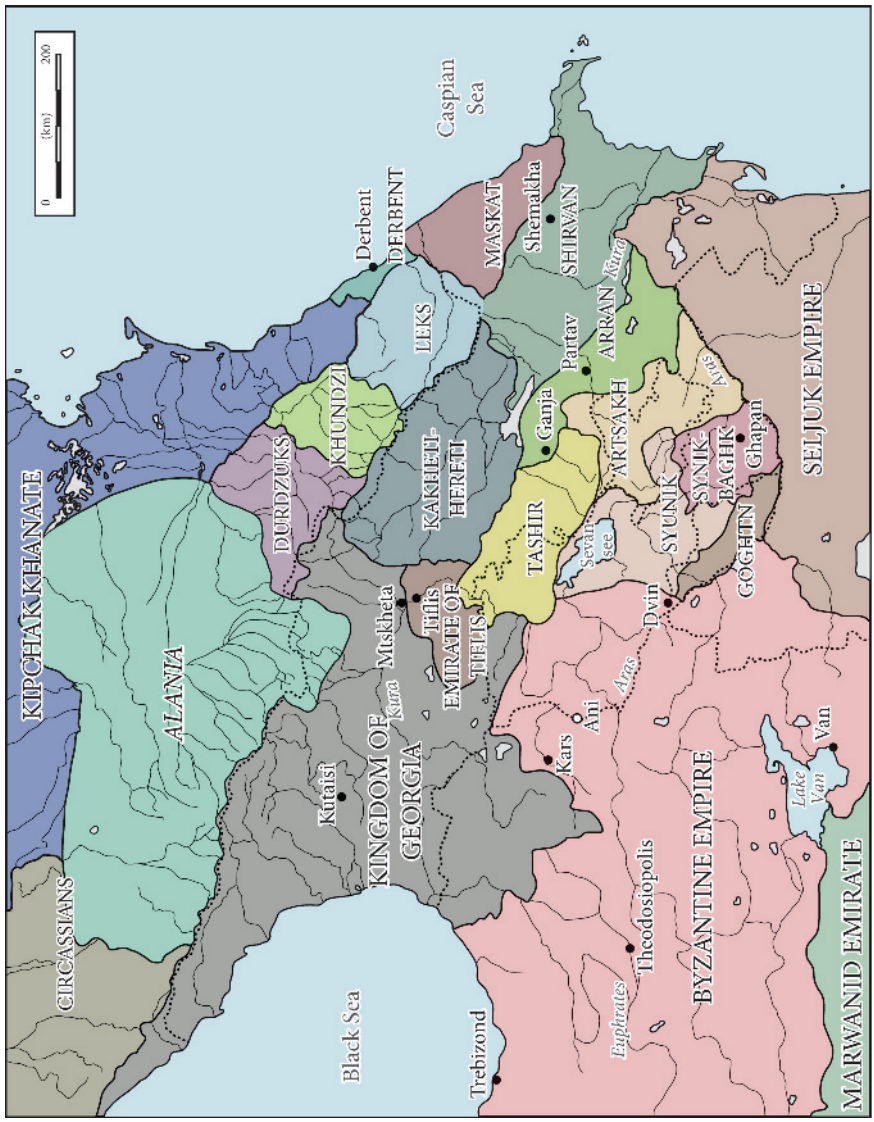
The Medes, Persians and Parthians were all descended from Aryan tribes originating in the steppes of Central Asia. As the Assyrians, and centuries later, the Romans came to recognize the advantages held by mounted archers over mere foot soldiers they hired Iranic nomads to serve as their cavalry. One long-term corollary of this hugely important innovation in European warfare was the eventual development of court chivalry during the Middle Ages. From the cultivation of equestrian hunting and fighting skills to the very notion of "knightly qualities," medieval Europe owed much to the influence of the steppe culture introduced by Aryan "barbarians" from the first century onward.

Alans in the Caucasus

The earliest written mention of the Alans in the Caucasus is by the Roman poet Lucan (39–65 CE) and refers to the Near Eastern campaigns of Pompey in 64 BCE, more than a century earlier. In Lucan's account the Roman general approached the Caspian Gates (the Daryal Pass in modern-day Ossetia) from the south and "pursued the rude Alans who are devotees of eternal Mars."[17] Kuznetsov and Lebedynsky, however, consider this designation to be anachronistic since the term "Alan" does not appear in any contemporary sources of the first century BCE.[18]

Lucan's reference does suggest at least that by the time of his writing in the mid-first century CE the Alans were a known presence in the region, even including the Caucasus' southern slope. Tacitus, writing at about the same time, makes reference to "Sarmatian" mercenaries fighting on both sides of the war between Iberia and Parthia in 35 CE.[19] Flavius Josephus, meanwhile, describing the same events, refers to the same people as "Alans."[20] Sarmatian-style burials dating to the first century have been found in the foothills of modern North Ossetia (Mozdok, Zamankul), including horse burials where the animal's lower jaw and tongue have been removed—a practice still seen at Ossetian ritual feasts in modern times where these parts are considered "the women's share" (although today it is cows or sheep that are consumed, not horses).[21] Catacomb-type graves associated with the Alans are found in the central Caucasus dating to the fourth century and possibly even as early as the second.[22]

While the Hunnic invasions of the late fourth century drove some Alan tribes into Europe, the larger mass took refuge closer to home by retreating



Map 2 The Alans and their neighbors *c.* 1100 CE.

into the piedmonts of the northern Caucasus. There, like the Sarmatian Siraces two centuries earlier, these Alans assimilated aspects of the native Adyghe and Vainakh populations—ancestors to the modern Circassians and Chechens, respectively—by incorporating agriculture into their pastoral-nomadic economy, even as they bolstered the Aryan component within the complex mix of ethnicities that had long inhabited the region. By the fifth century at the latest some Alan communities were present in the southern Caucasus, as attested by gravesites at Edys and Styrfaz in modern-day South Ossetia.[23]

Within a century of the Hunnic disruption the Alans reemerged as the masters of the North Caucasian steppe, bringing lands as far west as the Crimean Peninsula under their control. Their presence created a neutral zone between the rival empires of the Eastern Roman Byzantines and the Sasanians in Iran, the Alans allying themselves with whichever power seemed more favorable at the time (and more ready to pay).[24] A few individual Alans entered the Byzantine administration, most notably Ardabur Aspar, aka Flavius Ardaburius, who attained the rank of *magister utriusque militiæ* ("Master of the Soldiers") during the fifth century.

From the seventh century the geopolitical situation changed dramatically. To the south across the Caucasus and east to the Caspian Sea, the Persian empire of the Sasanians was overthrown by Muslim Arabs. The steppe region, meanwhile, from the Volga delta to the Crimea, fell increasingly under the control of the Turkic Khazars. During this time the Alans maintained contacts with both the Byzantines and their southern neighbors, the Georgians, but despite these Christian influences they retained their political independence and, to a large extent, their pagan religious traditions. They were not averse to mingling with other ethnicities, however. As the Muslim Iranian historian Muhammad Tabari wrote of the North Caucasus at the beginning of the tenth century, "The inhabitants of these countries are all infidels, of Khazar, Rus and Alan origin; they have mixed with the Turks and made mutual alliances through marriages."[25]

The "Christianization" of the Alans

The Arab conquest of Daghestan in the eastern Caucasus (*c.* 740), along with the rise of the Turkic-led Khazar khanate further north, brought new challenges to the Alan nomads who roamed the North Caucasian steppe. The Bulghars, a

Turkic-speaking group connected to the Khazars, moved into the west-central part of the northern Caucasus, provoking large numbers of Alans to migrate to the Don-Donets region to the northwest. This brought them into direct contact with the eastern Slavic tribes who would soon come under the rule of the Swedish adventurers known as the Varangians, founders of Kievan Rus. These Alans would eventually disappear through assimilation into the local Slavic population.

In the north Caucasus, meanwhile, the decline of Khazar power at the end of the ninth century allowed the remaining Alans to reassert themselves. This process was helped along through the strengthening of relations with the Byzantines, who saw the Alans as useful leverage against the Khazars. As the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenetos would write several decades later, the Alans had the unique capacity to "pillage and thus inflict upon the Khazars great damage and deprivation,"[26] because their lands lay adjacent to the productive territories—presumably the rich agricultural lands of modern Daghestan—upon which the Khazars' livelihood depended.

In 916 the Byzantines sent a mission to the Alans that apparently entailed the conversion of their leader to Orthodox Christianity as a seal upon their alliance. The door was thus opened to both Greek and Georgian missionary activity, resulting in the partial Christianization of some of the Alan population.[27] The proselytization of the Alans did not establish deep roots, however, and in hindsight it seems to have been largely superficial.

In fact it is likely that the "Christianization" of the Alans was a phenomenon largely restricted to a few elite families who were in contact—and sometimes intermarried—with those of Byzantium. The half-Alan Georgian princess Maria of Alania (1053–1118) wed two successive Byzantine emperors, Michael VII Doukas in 1065 and Nikephoros III Botaneiates in 1078. A century later, the Georgian queen Tamara (1184–1213)—who, like Maria, was Alan on her mother's side—married the Alan prince David Soslan in 1191. Later Muslim historians and geographers of the so-called Jayhānī tradition, including Ibn Rusta, Gardīzī, al-Bakrī, and the anonymous author of the *Ḥudūd al-ʿalam*, all echo the observation that while the Alan ruler was a Christian, most of the people were pagans.[28]

Three tenth-century churches attributed to the Alans have been excavated at Nizhny Arkhyz in the North Caucasus republic of Karachay-Cherkessia (see Figure 2.1). Many believe it to have been the site of the Alan "capital," Magas, but this is unconfirmed, and it may have been a Byzantine religious outpost rather than an Alan administrative center. Kuznetsov estimates the population

Figure 2.1 Alan church at Nizhny Arkhyz, Karachay-Cherkessia. Photo courtesy of Wikicommons.

at around 2,000,[29] which is hardly the kind of metropolis one would expect as the capital of a powerful nation. The Muslim geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi, writing around 1218, states that Alania had no important city.[30] Archaeological excavations in the North Caucasus have so far revealed no medieval cities, but they have identified many small fortified settlements (Rus. *gorodishche*).

Adding to the mystery, the name "Magas" is unknown in the Byzantine texts, being found only in a few Muslim and Chinese sources. This is very strange indeed, since the Byzantines were surely more familiar with their Alan allies than the Muslims were, to say nothing of the Chinese. If the Alans had a genuine administrative capital, wouldn't the Byzantine sources have known its name?

The Arab historian Al-Masʿudi, writing around 940 CE, is the first to mention Magas as the "court of the land of the Alans" (*dār mamlakat al-lān*), but he notes that the "master of the Alans" (*sāhib al-lān*) spends much of his time traveling about his territories.[31] This model of "peripatetic rulership" is attested in Kabardia as late as the nineteenth century and may indicate a kind of *primus inter pares* situation where a nominal sovereign must constantly touch base with the leaders of the various independent clan groups that make

up the multipolity he represents. As Latham-Sprinkle has argued in a recent doctoral thesis on the subject, in medieval Alania it was likely a given family's capacity to demonstrate important foreign connections—whether with the Byzantines or the Georgians—that enabled it to assert a leadership position among the various Alan clans.[32]

The Nizhny Arkhyz churches are not particularly large, and they may have served only a somewhat Byzantinized local elite or perhaps passing traders. A Byzantine document from 1337 states that "the Alan capital does not possess an episcopal seat of its own, because its people live a nomadic life."[33] To date no trace of anything resembling a royal palace has been found at Nizhny Arkhyz, and there are no signs of destruction corresponding to the period of the Mongol invasions. Latham-Sprinkle has recently proposed that an archaeological site further to the west, the Il'ichevsk fortification in the Upper Kuban Valley, may be a better candidate for the location of the elusive Alan "capital."[34]

There is no evidence to date that any Christian texts were translated into the Alan language, or that priests sent to the region from Byzantium learned the local tongue. The existence of a single thirteenth-century Greek text—an Old Testament lectionary—with marginal notes in Alanic[35] suggests a monk making notes to himself. A pair of Alanic phrases are preserved in a twelfth-century work by a Greek writer, but the content is not religious and Lubotsky has convincingly suggested that an obscene "translation" of one of the phrases was most likely inserted as a practical joke.[36] The only other putative example of written Alanic is a short inscription on a now disappeared tenth-century funeral stele beside the Zelenchuk River about 30 km from Nizhny Arkhyz, which appears to contain several proto-Ossetic words (though alternative readings in other languages have been proposed).[37] By their very uniqueness, these cases would seem to be the exceptions that prove the rule. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it would seem that Christianity remained largely inaccessible to the general population of Alans.

The various medieval sources that mention the Alans mostly concur in describing their understanding of Christianity as minimal and, from their point of view, unsatisfactory. Orthodox priests sent to spread the faith among the Alans were notably frustrated by their inability to extirpate polygamy or to suppress nature worship. The Orthodox Patriarch Nicholas wrote of the Alans in the tenth century that "regarding marriages conducted contrary to the decision of the Church … the complete passage from pagan life to the rigor

of the Gospel is not easy."[38] Three centuries later Theodore, Bishop of Alania, in a letter to his superiors in Constantinople, wrote—in reference to a passage in the Bible—that "[m]y flock [i.e., the Alans] prostitutes itself not just with the wood, as it is written [Jeremiah 3:9], but also with all stones and waters."

Bishop Theodore went on to complain that the Alans "do not prostrate themselves before carved images, but before some demons in high places." (Still today in Ossetia many holy shrines are situated on mountaintops.) They distinguished themselves, he wrote, "above all through murder and other kinds of death." In his assessment, they were "Christians only in name."[39] Three decades later, the Flemish monk William of Rubruck observed that the Alan mercenaries he met in Crimea, who he claimed had sought his religious guidance, were "ignorant of everything pertaining to the Christian rite, with the single exception of the name of Christ."[40]

Later evidence gleaned from among the Ossetes, from the late eighteenth century through the early twentieth, shows that the Alans of the Caucasus preserved much of the ancient Scythian divine pantheon and ritual practice beneath a veneer of Christian saint names and modified holidays—or rather, as Salbiev, following Napolsky, prefers, through "interaction" with them: "when the content of a high religion (Christianity or Islam) from generation to generation is translated into the language of the national tradition."[41]

Within this interpenetrating matrix of Christian and pre-Christian worldviews the cult of the dead remained paramount, showing a strong continuity stretching back to Scythian times. Magical amulets, animal figures, and ritually broken mirrors filled Ossetian graves just as they had done two thousand years before. Psychotropic drugs such as hashish were used to induce dreams and visions, recalling their use by the shamans of the steppes.

Living largely "off-the-grid" in remote regions of the Northern Caucasus, for the next five centuries the Ossetes enjoyed a substantial measure of independence from the normative influences of foreign religious institutions. What Christian influence there was came mainly from Georgian missionaries, although the religious life of the Ossetes' mountain-dwelling Georgian neighbors differed little from their own in its preservation of pagan traditions. The relative isolation of the Ossetes, like that of other Caucasian peoples, gave them the necessary space to preserve many traces of their ancient pantheon and ritual practices, melded together with Christian rites, myths, saint names, and holidays. Of course a similar phenomenon was present to varying degrees

among all the European peoples, but perhaps nowhere is the pre-Christian layer as enduringly evident as among the peoples of the Caucasus.

It is a recurring pattern in history that "barbarian" groups tend to adopt established official religions as part of the process of their assimilation into "civilized" societies, whether Christian Muslim, Buddhist—or, as in the case of the Khazars, Jewish. In most cases they retain some aspects of their prior religious outlook, including myths and rituals, which are adapted to conform with the new dominant religion.

The Alans—and their modern-day descendants, the Ossetes —present an unusual case in this regard. The nominal conversion of Alan elites to Byzantine Christianity during the tenth century would seem to fit the general pattern seen throughout the history of religions, whereby "barbarians," either conquered by or seeking alliances with powerful states, accept a new religion as a way of demonstrating that they have now become "civilized." However, it is clear in hindsight that Christianity did little to permeate or take root in the broader Alan society. Rather, its presence among the Ossetians today dates largely to the more recent efforts of the Russian church from the late eighteenth century onward and has not succeeded in displacing the traditional religion even today.

How does one account for this? The fact that the Alans were a nonurban, nonliterate society living at a considerable distance from ecclesiastical centers of power can go a long way toward answering the question. Unlike in most areas that were Christianized, among the Alans neither the Bible nor the Christian liturgy appears ever to have been translated into the local language. Pastors were sent to the Alan regions from Constantinople or Trebizond, and these emissaries of Christianity do not appear to have integrated themselves to any great degree into Alan society. There were small numbers of Alans living in the Byzantine capital and elsewhere throughout the Empire and it is not impossible that some might have returned to oversee churches in Alania, but such individuals would have been thoroughly Byzantinized and may have had little in common with the local population.

Moreover, after the Mongol conquests of the 1220s such missions ceased completely, and the ostensibly Christian Ossetes, as the Alans came to be known after the fourteenth century, were, apart from occasional visits by priests from Georgia, without any kind of Christian guidance or teaching. Indeed, having retreated into the remote valleys of the central Caucasus,

they were almost entirely cut off from outside influence of any kind. This situation persisted until the early twentieth century, when the Ossetes' absorption into the atheistic Soviet state precluded the possibility that Christianity would make any further inroads until after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. This is no doubt how the Ossetes, left to their own devices, proved to be Eurasia's most effective conservators of ancient Scythic religion, culture, and language.

The Alan Dispersal and the Eclipse of Alan Identity

The Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century affected the Alans in three different ways. Some Alan tribes, following the familiar domino effect that often resulted from new nomadic groups invading from the East, joined with the Turkic Cumans and retreated westward into central Europe. There, welcomed by the Magyar king Bela IV, they settled in the Hungarian plain. Known to their neighbors as the Jasz—a reflection of the oft-occurring tribal name "As" or one of its various attested derivatives—they maintained their language and ethnic identity into the sixteenth century before ultimately assimilating into Hungarian society. Several place names in modern Hungary preserve their memory. Modern Hungarians have thus inherited a double Sarmatian legacy: from the Iazyges who settled there in late antiquity, and from the Alan regiments who established themselves there a thousand years later. A short Latin-Jasz glossary from 1422 CE provides the most substantial written example of the Alan language in existence today, proving beyond doubt that it was the predecessor to modern Ossetian.[42] A number of Alan/Jasz loanwords were also absorbed into Hungarian.[43]

A second segment of the Alans retreated into the Caucasian mountains, where remote upland valleys—unappealing to the Mongols due to their lack of pasture—offered refuge from the attacking hordes. Their descendants survive today as the Ossetes of the central Caucasus, a much-reduced remnant of the fearsome Aryan tribes that once ranged across Eurasia.

A third group consisted of those Alans who gave their allegiance to the Mongols and joined their campaigns. Notable among these were the Alan clans referred to in the Chinese sources as Hanghusi and Yelie Baduer during

the time of Ögödei Khan from 1229 to 1241; other clans submitted during the reign of Mönke Khan between 1251 and 1259. These Alans were referred to by their Mongol masters as "Asud," again recalling the tribal name "As," combined with the Mongol plural suffix "-ud." (Chinese sources call them "Asu.") The Mongols, recognizing their value as skilled cavalry, relocated large numbers of Alans to Mongolia where they went on to serve the ruling Yuan dynasty for the next century. Several Alan military figures held high positions in the Mongol administration of China, including the Imperial Guards and later the Bureau of Military Affairs.

Kublai Khan established an office of "Agent of As Heroes" (*Asud baghatur darughachi*) in 1271 and formed an Alan guard of 3,000 soldiers, called in Chinese the Asu Zhengjun, soon thereafter, along with an imperial guard of 700 Asud. These Alan soldiers played a significant role in Kublai's subjugation of China between 1260 and 1294. By 1309, under Jayatu Khan, their number had grown tenfold to 30,000; Asud forces were divided into two wings, the "Right" and the "Left." The Yuan chronicles provide annalistic biographies of several important Alan families living in China, including the lineages of Aersilan, Atachi, and others.

It would seem that the Alans in Mongol service were not always quick to abandon their barbarian ways, however. The Asud warrior Yelie Baduer is reported to have once slain a tiger after having grabbed it by the tongue. In reward for this exploit, the emperor gave him fifty ounces of gold and the command of "one Asud army." Marco Polo mentions an incident when an Alan regiment sent by Kublai Khan to subdue a town "found good wine there. They drank until they were drunk, lay down and went to sleep like swine. As soon as night fell, the inhabitants fell upon them and killed them all, such that none escaped."[44]

The Alans of Mongolia, who were nominally Orthodox Christians, were eventually converted to Roman Catholicism by the Franciscan missionary Giovanni di Montecorvino, who established a church at the Mongol capital of Khanbaliq in 1299. After Montecorvino's death in 1308 the newly Catholic Alans were left without a spiritual leader, until finally in 1336 Jayatu Khan sent a letter to Pope Benoit XII in Avignon requesting a replacement, "for Us and for our faithful servants the Alans." The Pope's envoy, Giovanni de' Marignolli, arrived at Khanbaliq in 1342. In his reports back to Pope Benoit

he credited the Alans with basically running the Mongol Empire, calling them "the greatest and noblest people in the world, the most handsome and brave of whom are their men, thanks to whom the Tartars have been able to conquer an empire in the East, and without whom they could not have carried off a single glorious victory."[45]

Alan warriors were key players right up to the end of the Yuan period in 1368, when they accompanied the last Mongol Emperor of China, Toghon Temür, during his exile back to Mongolia. After the fall of the Yuan dynasty the Asud settled in the Yöngshiyebü district of Inner Mongolia. A few decades later, under the leadership of their chief, Aruqtaï, they lent a decisive hand to the emergence of the Oïrat Mahamu as head of the Mongol confederation which earned the recognition of the Ming emperor.

Later in the fifteenth century, the *Great Yellow Chronicle* lists the Asud, along with the Ordos and Tümed *tumen*s (legions), as being part of the Mongol "Right Wing" following the reorganization of the Mongol tribes under Dayan Khan (r. 1482–1532). In 1510 they took part in a rebellion, which was crushed by Dayan Khan; this event marked the end of Asud political power in Mongolia.

Today descendants of the various Asud clans—now thoroughly Mongolized but still considered as a distinct ethnic group—can be found in Dundgovi province south of Ulaan Baator, in the western Mongolian district of Ömnögovi, and in the Chinese region of Ar Horqin northeast of Beijing.[46] They are a lasting legacy of the Aryan warrior-nomads who played such a major role in the history of China's long relations with the peoples of the Eurasian steppe.

Was there an Alan "State"?

The "fall" of Alania is usually attributed to the Mongol invasions beginning in 1222, with the coup de grâce being delivered by Tamerlane a century and a half later. Actually the "decline" may have already been well underway before the Mongols appeared.[47] But what was "Alania" really, and what, if anything, was destroyed or lost? The absence of an indigenous written tradition means that the reconstruction of Alan history must of necessity be based on guesses and suppositions—and perhaps some wishful thinking as well—for which there may be little unambiguous

support. The Catalan scholar Agustí Alemany, who undertook the monumental twelve-year task of collecting every known written reference to the Alans, went so far as to opine that to write a history of the Alans is a task beyond the capacity "of any scholar who would wish to deal with the subject objectively."[48]

It may be somewhat romantic to describe Alania as a "state,"[49] since it had little formal organization, and even less as a "civilization" given that it left almost no distinctive monuments or enduring cultural legacy apart from the oral legends of the Narts. Its principal contribution to the world was fighters (an observation that could equally be made for modern-day Ossetia). As the Nart stories reflect and celebrate, the main activity of most Alan men in all periods of their history was fighting, whether on behalf of their clan or as mercenaries. Loyalty was highly valued, but beyond ephemeral oral agreements between clan leaders it did not extend beyond the circle of family and friends. When Alans were not engaged in raiding abroad, they might just as easily turn on each other. As a Hungarian monk relates during the early thirteenth century, "As many chiefs as villages, and none subject to another. Hence the war of chief against chief, village against village, goes on continuously … murder among them is accounted as nothing."[50] The situation reported by travelers six centuries later was not much different.

The natural relationship among Alan clans—as among Sarmatians and Scythians before them—was independence and self-reliance, which implied disunity. One may thus see the alliances they established among themselves or with outsiders throughout history as being deviations from this default condition, even when they endured for several generations. Such associations were mostly either forced or opportunistic, meant to maximize an individual clan's chances of survival in the face of a superior enemy or to foster material aims such as a successful raid for plunder. This explains why they often fought as mercenaries on opposite sides of the same battle, and why in the absence of external threats they would frequently attack each other.

If Alania is to be counted among the medieval "Christian" states of eastern Europe, then several anomalies must be accounted for. Why, unlike Bulgaria, Serbia, Kievan Rus', and even its close neighbors Georgia and Armenia, did it not develop a native written religious idiom? And if it was a state, then how does one account for the apparent absence of any of the familiar institutions of statehood? Latham-Sprinkle argues that

> Alania's rulers did not adopt the known technologies of the state because they found an alternative method of rulership, one which relied not on administrative techniques, but on their symbolic access to the power of Byzantium. This access placed them in a superior position in the formalised oral negotiations that were a long-term feature of North Caucasian political life. Consequently, they were able to exert a "gravitational pull" not only on Caucasian social hierarchies, but on states and empires far beyond their mountainous home.[51]

In other words, the main benefit accruing to Alan chiefs from their relations with Byzantium was the capacity to ensure and maintain a level of primacy within a disparate—and, most probably, multiethnic—confederation of clans and tribes, following a centuries-old tradition of opportunistic alliances among largely independent actors. Were the fortifications that appear to have been built to protect some of the settlements in Alan territory constructed through any kind of state initiative, or were they merely local efforts? And were they built by ethnic Alans or by other peoples native to the region? Whom exactly did the churches serve, given that they are Byzantine in style with only limited indigenous elements and have revealed no evidence of preaching in the local vernacular? Did the Alan leadership have an organized tax system, or did it merely rely on extracting tribute and raising corvées in accordance with ever-changing power relations between different clans and tribes?

Finally, given the undeniably mixed cultural environment of the medieval North Caucasus, what was the relationship of ethnic Alans to increases in agricultural activity and long-distance trade in lands they occupied? Were they central actors in these developments—that is, did significant numbers of Alans abandon their nomadic lifestyle for the kind of sedentary occupations their ancestors had always disdained—or did their role of military dominance merely enable them to profit from the efforts of farmers and tradesmen belonging to the various other ethnicities that had long been settled in the region?

In the complete absence of internal written records or even any detailed descriptions by outsiders of the workings of the Alan polity—in Latham-Sprinkle's words, "the profound indifference of the majority of our foreign textual sources to the internal affairs of the Alanic kingdom"[52]—it is impossible to determine to what extent it could be considered a "state." More

likely, the political realities of the medieval period of Alan history resembled in most respects those that pertained among the Sarmatians in ancient times and among the Ossetes prior to their incorporation into Russia.

Towers, Tombs and Cliff Forts: Haunting Relics of Ossetia's Violent Past

For centuries and possibly millennia the peoples of the high Caucasus have built stone towers to serve as refuges when under attack from invaders. Called *gænækh* in Ossetian and *bashnya* in Russian, these towers are typically four stories tall, with small window openings that were used as lookouts and for firing upon encroaching enemies (see Figure 2.2). Each family would have a tower of its own: they would keep their livestock on the ground floor and live on the upper levels, accessed by ladders through trap doors in the floors which were made of wood.

Figure 2.2 Galiat village, Digor region, North Ossetia.

These structures were highly effective for defense and ensured the survival of the mountain peoples for many hundreds of years, until the nineteenth century when Russian troops introduced cannons capable of blowing them to pieces. One can see the results of this destruction throughout the central Caucasus, hillsides dotted with the crumbling remains of hundreds of once magnificent edifices. A few have been restored by families able to afford such an undertaking, allowing the visitor to see them intact. Similar towers are also found among other Caucasian peoples such as the Ingush and the Svan, each with their own slightly differing characteristics.

North Ossetia is also particularly rich in a distinctive Caucasian form of funerary architecture, consisting of above-ground stone tombs constructed in the form of a beehive. The greatest concentration of these structures is the necropolis at Dargavs, an upland village about halfway between the Fiagdon and Karmadon canyons southwest of Vladikavkaz, but they can be found all across the region (see Figure 2.3). They are generally built facing the houses of the living, with the bones of the deceased exposed through an open window so that they may be able to continue to observe and "participate" in the life of the village.

Figure 2.3 Dargavs necropolis, North Ossetia.

Perhaps the most impressive of Ossetia's medieval architectural monuments are the stone fortresses built directly into the sides of cliffs. The most accessible of these is at Dzivgis on the road to Fiagdon. Visible from the highway, the Dzivgis fortress is nevertheless easy to miss as its masonry blends in perfectly with the vertical rock face onto which it was miraculously attached. Another such fortress can be reached by a short hike up the Ursdon ravine in Alagir canyon, and there are others scattered throughout the region as well. Together, these archeological remnants of Ossetia's past evoke a not-so-distant time of hardship, isolation, and insecurity that say much about the character of an indomitable people surviving over the centuries in a harsh and often hostile environment.

3

The Nart Epic: A Neglected Treasure of Indo-European Mythology

What do we need eternal life for? Would it be wonderful to live without end? But if our glory and our good name lived for ever on earth—that is what we should wish!

—The Narts

The Nart cycle of heroic legends is considered as the national epic tradition of the Ossetes, and as such it is key to understanding and appreciating their rich and ancient culture. And though less well known to modern Westerners than the Greek, Roman, Germanic, or Celtic literatures to which they are closely related, the Nart sagas have an important place in filling out our understanding of Indo-European cultures and their attendant mythologies.

The Greek, Indian, Persian, and Icelandic epics are part of a larger group of oral literature that is commonly referred to as "Indo-European," reflecting their genetic relationship in terms of both language and content. In other words, just as the Greek, Sanskrit, Persian, and Norse languages are descended from a common linguistic ancestor—the so-called Proto-Indo-European tongue spoken by tribes who occupied the Pontic steppe north of the Black Sea some five thousand years ago—the myths and legends preserved in those languages right up to the present day can be shown to have evolved from an ancestral body of oral literature common to all of them. The Nart legends of the Caucasus belong to this shared Indo-European literary tradition.

What is a "national epic tradition?" Oral—that is, preliterate—societies tend to preserve their cultural knowledge over the generations through the telling of tales, which are usually memorized in verse and related to the broader community through song by professional storytellers. Most such traditions

have been reduced to written form, which has the effect of fossilizing them since the process of writing down necessarily privileges one version among many and destroys the dynamic improvisation of spoken retelling. Homer played this role when selecting ancient Hellenic legends for inclusion into the Iliad and the Odyssey, as did Valmiki with the Sanskrit Ramayana, Ferdowsi with the Persian Book of Kings, and Snorri Sturluson with the Norse sagas. In the case of the Narts this process took place much later, only during the nineteenth century. There remain a few rare contexts around the world today where one can still experience traditional storytelling in something resembling its ancient form, but these are few and far between and in imminent danger of dying out.

The Nart tales are confusingly multilayered both chronologically and culturally, having absorbed many diverse influences over centuries of retelling. Their oldest strata are demonstrably Iranian, going back to Scythian times or even earlier, but in the form we have them today they are essentially expressions of postmedieval Alan culture. They contain numerous references to the Mongol and Turkic invasions, for example, and the introduction of firearms and other modern elements into some of the tales attests to their continuing evolution right up to the nineteenth century.

Most nations of the North Caucasus—with the exception of Daghestan but with the addition of Svaneti in the south—have their own versions of the Nart stories, and the presence of elements originating from all of these various ethnicities even in the Ossetian versions lends weight to the notion that Alan society was multiethnic and multilingual. The Narts provide strong testimony that not only the Ossetes but also the Circassians, Nakh, and North Caucasian Turkic groups can all to some extent be considered as descendants of the Alans, even if it is only the Ossetes who have preserved the Alan language. The Turkic-speaking Karachay-Balkars (linguistic descendants of the medieval Cumans and Pechenegs) still use *Alan* as a self-designation, and the Ossetes refer to their Balkar neighbors as *Asy*. These considerations, combined with the prevalence of Alanic place names found across the Karachay and Balkar regions, led the Icelandic linguist Fridrik Thordarson to assert that the Karachay-Balkars should be regarded as Turkicized Alans.[1]

As noted by the Harvard-based linguist and comparative mythologist Calvert Watkins, the pastoral-nomadic world that gave birth to the Indo-European epics

was one in which the bold exploits of the "hero"—whose principal achievement was to steal cattle from other tribes—were celebrated and memorialized by the "poet," who, recompensed in his turn by gifts of that same livestock, was "the highest-paid professional in his society."[2] The Nart stories preserve this value system more directly and obviously than any other Indo-European epic tradition: the most heroic thing a man can do is to rustle cattle to bring back home to his community.

The behavior, the values, and lifestyle details of the legendary Narts (Oss. *Nartæ*, a plural form most plausibly derived from the Iranian root **nar*-, meaning "virile") all correspond so comfortably to historical descriptions of the Scythians, Sarmatians, and Alans that the tales can be taken as accurate portrayals of how these peoples saw themselves, at least in an idealized form. In the Nart stories we can perceive not only the general ethos of the Scythians as the Greeks and others portrayed them, but also many details mentioned in those same sources—for example, wearing the scalps of vanquished enemies, the "cup of honour" (*Uatsamongæ*) from which only the genuine hero may drink, or the shame attached to growing old rather than dying in battle. Some of these elements, most notably the alcohol-fueled ritual feast known as *kwyvd*, are still central to Ossetian culture today.

Like mythical Indo-Europeans everywhere the Narts are highly patriarchal, and women exist mainly to serve their men (especially by preparing lavish feasts). And yet, just as one finds a goddess at the head of Herodotus' Scythian pantheon, perhaps the most remarkable character in the Ossetian epic is the "mother of the Narts," Satana, a shape-shifting sorceress who is the very embodiment of generosity, and whose stature in Nart society no man can rival.

The great Ossetian scholar V.I. Abaev has shown how the Narts' ultimate fate, including the tragic deaths of their greatest heroes Soslan and Batraz, mythologically reflects the vanquishing of their pagan world by Byzantine Christianity during the tenth century.[3] Characteristically, the remaining Narts, instructed by God to choose between an eternal but mundane existence and death with eternal fame, opt for the latter—a gesture that may preserve a distant memory of the collective suicide of the Cimmerian elites during the late seventh century BCE.[4] A more poignant expression of Indo-European heroic values could scarcely be imagined.

Nart Studies

The Nart stories were collected and committed to paper by scholars beginning only as recently as the nineteenth century. They were initially noted by the German polymath Julius von Klaproth during his travels to the region in 1807–8.[5] Versions from the Kabards—ethnically Circassian western neighbors of the Ossetes—were the first to be collected and translated into Russian beginning in 1841. Nart stories of the Chechen-Ingush and the Turkic Karachays and Balkars all appeared before the first publication of Ossetian versions in 1868. The Russian orientalist Adolf Berge published a German translation of some Nart tales in 1866, and Russian translations by the brothers G. and Dzh. Shanaev, V. Pfaf, and V.F. Miller came out during the course of the following decade.[6]

Miller, a professor at Moscow State University, was the first to make the Nart tales a central focus of his research, which he published in his three-volume *Osetinskie etiudy* (Ossetian Studies, 1881–7).[7] Assisted by a team of field researchers, Miller collected and collated a large number of tales heard from living storytellers. Beneath a surface layer of Caucasian personal and place names that fill the Nart stories, Miller was able to uncover many themes and motifs having parallels in Iranian and other Indo-European mythologies. In particular, he noted cultural similarities between the Nart characters and the Scythian culture described by Herodotus, for example, the "hero chalice" (*Uatsamongæ*; also called the *Nartamongæ*) from which only successful warriors can drink, or the making of garments from the scalps of slain enemies as is done by the Nart hero Batradz.

In the years immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution selected Nart stories were included in anthologies and made available in German and English translations. The collection *Pamiatniki narodnogo tvorchestva* (Monuments of Popular Creativity), published from 1925 to 1930, canonized the Nart tales as the official literary representation of Ossetian culture.

The most extensive work on the Narts outside of the Russian sphere was conducted by the French comparative mythologist Georges Dumézil (1898–1986). Best known for formulating the "trifunctional hypothesis" according to which Indo-European societies were characterized by a three-class structure of priests/rulers, warriors, and producers/husbandmen, Dumézil early in his career became interested in the Ossetian language and mythology while teaching at Istanbul University from 1925 to 1931. A brilliant linguist, he is said to have

taught himself Ossetian in one month. His first important work on the Narts, a translation of all extant Ossetian versions into French, was published in 1930.[8] His early studies of the Nart epic seem to have given seed to his "trifunctional hypothesis," and Ossetian examples were a major component of his comparative work throughout his long career. In 1965 he published a French translation of the Nart epic, entitled *Le Livre des héros*.[9] A new French edition prepared by Lora Arys-Djanaïeva, an Ossete living in Paris, was published in 2019.[10]

The first translation of Nart stories into English, based on Circassian, Abaza, Abkhaz, and Ubykh versions collected and translated by John Colarusso, would not appear until 2002.[11] An English translation of the Ossetian versions of the tales by Walter May (1912–2006), a British poet who emigrated to the Soviet Union during the late 1960s, finally found its way into print in 2016, again through the efforts of Colarusso but this time in tandem with an Ossetian colleague, Tamirlan Salbiev.[12] The late appearance of the Nart myths in English surely goes a long way in accounting for why they are so little-known in the English-speaking world. Surprisingly, given their importance to the field of Iranology, no Persian edition of the Narts was published until 2020. Moreover, both May's English translation and the recent Persian translation by Musa Abdollahi were done from Russian versions. The two French editions, on the other hand, by Dumézil (1965) and Arys-Djanaïeva (2019), are translations from the original Ossetian.

Unlike many of its sister epics in the Indo-European tradition, there exists no "canonical" recension of the Nart stories. To date, the most complete collection in Ossetian is the seven-volume *Narty kaddzhytæ*, published in Vladikavkaz between 2003 and 2012. The other existing editions of the epic, in whatever language, are merely representative samples of the total corpus and reflect the selective approaches of their individual editors.

From Stories to Cycles to Epic: Fossilizing a Living Tradition

To the extent that the Nart legends can be considered to constitute a poetic epic, its structure was not apparent—or, it would seem, even important—for the Caucasian peoples who were its cultural custodians, keeping them alive, embellishing and transforming them through countless retellings over many

successive generations. Rather, the various tales that make up the epic would have been related as stand-alone stories, for entertainment or for edification, and on a more subconscious level as repositories of cultural identity.

The epic structure of the Narts in the form we possess it today, in which various fragments have been organized into something approaching a coherent narrative whole, is the product of modern scholars, especially Georges Dumézil. Their role is analogous to that of Homer, Ovid, Sturluson, Ferdowsi, and other literate men of the past (including the authors of the Bible) who made deliberate choices about which tales and versions of tales to select from the vast repertoire of available oral tradition, then incorporated into the written form which would survive as the universally recognized standard.

The process of gathering, selecting, and committing stories to paper has the ambivalent result of fossilizing them. An oral tradition is dynamic: a story can evolve with every retelling, acquiring and discarding elements to fit the needs of the speaker and the audience. The written version, while guaranteeing a kind of preservation on the one hand, at the same time "kills" the tradition by turning it into a fixed relic that can no longer adapt and change. It freezes the material into a particular temporal and cultural context, reflecting the arbitrary choices of the editor and condemning much of it to obscurity by exclusion while saving only that part of the tradition that the editor considers worthwhile.

While many of the best-known epics underwent this process centuries or millennia ago, other oral traditions survived and remained vibrant up to modern times. The Harvard folklorists Milman Parry and Albert Lord studied those that still existed in the western Balkans during the mid-twentieth century, conceiving a theoretical model that has since been applied to the transformation of oral to written literature in contexts all over the world.[13] The Nart stories, being committed to written versions only starting in the nineteenth century, retained their dynamic character into the modern period, unlike many of the other Indo-European epics—Greek, Icelandic, Iranian—with which they share many parallels. They thus not only provide a unique window into the remote past of the Iranian, and by extension the Indo-European peoples, but also allow us to understand the processes of cultural interaction and mutual influence as reflected in oral literature in a context that modern ethnographers and folklorists were actually able to observe firsthand.

Extracting the Plot

Out of the vast repertoire of popular tales known throughout the Caucasus region, since the mid-nineteenth century a number of editors and translators have attempted to collate and organize material such that it constitutes an overall narrative. Such efforts have allowed us to discern that the Ossetian version is built upon the exploits of three legendary families living in what can be thought of as "mythological times"—what Mircea Eliade referred to as "*in illo tempore*."

Abaev identifies four major cycles at the heart of the Ossetian Nart stories. The first is a cycle of origins: the first Nart, Wærkhæg, and his sons, Ækhsær and Ækhsærtæg. The second cycle centers on the couple Uyryzmæg and Satana. The third focuses on the hero Soslan, and the fourth on Batradz. Alongside these four, Abaev notes the presence of several lesser cycles dealing with other characters as well as numerous independent plots.[14] Such themes as raiding for cattle, hunting, blood feuds, battling against giants, competition over a woman, challenging the gods, and even descent into the underworld—all familiar motifs across the corpus of Indo-European heroic literature—make up the drama and adventure of the Nart stories.

The Ossetian Narts (though not those in the traditions of neighboring Caucasus peoples) are composed of three families: the Alægatæ, the Ækhsærtægatæ, and the Borætæ. Dumézil identified in this division the foundational class structure of Indo-European societies, consisting of priests/rulers, warriors, and producers.[15] In Ossetian terms, the Alægatæ are "strong in intelligence" (*zundæi tukhdin*), the Ækhsærtægatæ are "brave" (*bæghatær*) and "full of strength" (*qarwægin*), while the Borætæ are "rich in livestock" (*fonsæi khæzdug*).[16] Their village consists of three separate levels built upon a hill: the Ækhsærtægatæ on top, the Alægatæ in the middle, and the Borætæ below.

The Alægatæ ("the Aryans"), having a largely ritual function, do not figure prominently in the Nart stories except as hosts for feasts and custodians of the sacred chalice, the *Uatsamongæ*. The Ækhsærtægatæ are the heroes (from **khshathra*, "dominion"; cf. Skt. Ksatriya, the warrior caste in Hinduism, and Pers. *shāh*, king). The Borætæ are the keepers of cattle, which are the principal measure of wealth. The heroic Ækhsærtægatæ and

the rich Borætæ are more often than not involved in conflict with each other. Nart society, as Colarusso notes, "is clan based and not even tribal,"[17] which reflects the reality in Ossetia during the centuries prior to Russian colonization.

The Narts come into being as follows. Wærkhæg, "the Wolf," is their totemic founding ancestor. He gives birth to twin sons, Ækhsær and Ækhsærtæg. (The motif of cosmic twins is a common trope in Indo-European mythology.) The latter marries Dzeræssæ, daughter of the water people (the Donbettyrtæ), who appears first in the form of a dove who is shot and wounded by Ækhsærtæg. He follows the trail of her blood to the shores of the sea, then dives in to discover her underwater home among the Donbettyrtæ, where he miraculously cures her of the wound he has himself inflicted. Later, back on land, the two brothers kill each other through a jealous misunderstanding over Dzeræssæ, who has tragically failed to tell them apart. She later gives birth to two boys, Uyryzmæg and Khæmyts.

After Dzeræssæ grows old and passes away, the divine Uastyrdzhi impregnates her corpse, from which is born Satana, the "mother of the Narts" (see Figure 3.1). Once grown, Satana, extraordinary woman that she is, cannot find a husband who is worthy of her. She therefore decides to sleep with her reluctant half-brother, Uyryzmæg, after which his unfortunate wife conveniently dies of humiliation. The incestuous couple is able to produce only one son; the boy is never named and meets an early, tragic end at the hands of his unwitting father.

Satana is a woman who gets what she wants and whom no man can control. One day while Uyryzmæg is out hunting, the spirit of the hearth chain, Safa, pays Satana a visit. He has a magnificent shawl, which Satana desires. Safa agrees to give it to her if she will sleep with him. She agrees. When Uyryzmæg returns home he finds an article of clothing left by Safa, and Satana confesses to her act of infidelity. Deeply offended, he leaves her. She follows him incognito, dressed as a man. They travel together for a while, and at mealtime she takes out the shawl. He wants it. Satana offers to give it to him if he will sleep with her. Uyryzmæg, thinking she is a man, is disgusted, but nevertheless agrees. As they begin to fondle each other, he is shocked to discover "that which he did not expect." Uyryzmæg realizes as a result of this encounter that he is no better than his wife, so they make up and return home together.

Figure 3.1 Satana, the "Mother of the Narts."

Satana is associated with the invention of beer, the national drink of the Ossetes and an integral part of all their ceremonies. The following popular song celebrates her contribution:

O beer, beer
Sacred beer of Uastyrdzhi!
A bird swooped down from the mountain
He descended to the plain
He landed on a fruit tree
He pecked the hop grains
The poor bird fell to the ground
A poor lumberjack found him

What a strange tale!
He took it to Satana
She warmed it by her fire, they say
The poor bird began to vomit
He vomited up the hops
What a strange tale!
And so, they say, she sent people to the mountain
And, from the land of golden Uastyrdzhi,
They brought back a harvest of grain
With it, they brewed beer.
O beer, beer
Thick beer, beer of happiness
Since then, we have known you.
Long life to that bird,
Longer still to Satana!

Satana is also credited with inventing *rong*, a sweet liqueur made with honey that tastes somewhat like the Italian Amaretto.

Uyryzmæg's brother Khæmyts, meanwhile, marries a miraculous creature, like Dzeræssæ a daughter of the aquatic Donbettyrs, who appears to him as a beautiful woman but as a frog to everyone else. Offended by the taunts of her husband's fellow Narts, she eventually leaves him in disgust and returns to her people in their underwater home, but not before placing an abscess between Khæmyts' shoulders. After some time Satana cuts it open, and out springs the young hero Batradz. Made entirely of steel, Batradz goes to spend his youth under the sea before returning to live with Satana. His need to "cool down" by immersing himself in water is a recurrent theme in his cycle and in the end leads to his death from overheating. As a youth he goes to the celestial blacksmith, Kurdælægon, to have himself "tempered." Batradz is thus the original "Man of Steel" who, as Dumézil notes, is himself a weapon, and may ultimately derive from the unnamed Scythian war god (the "Ares" of Herodotus) who was worshipped in the form of a sword.[18]

The Narts are a competitive bunch, always trying to see who can shoot an arrow further or kill more enemies. One day the Nart elders decide to determine once and for all who is the best of them. They establish three categories: wisdom, valor, and nobility. Khæmyts claims that his son Batradz excels in all three, so the elders devise tests for him. For the first, they send out a team to ambush Batradz while he is hunting. Upon perceiving their attack he makes as if to gallop away,

but once they are stretched out in pursuit he is able to turn and fight them off one by one—thus demonstrating his "wisdom." (This scene evokes the "false retreat" strategy for which the Aryan steppe warriors were infamous.)

For the second test Batradz is seated at the banquet table such that he cannot reach either food or drink. He neither asks for them nor complains, yet when the time comes he sings and dances better than anyone else present—thus showing his "valor." Finally, the elders test the hero's "nobility" by having his wife pretend to be having an affair with a young shepherd, arranging for Batradz to come home and find the two asleep in bed together. Careful not to disturb the slumbering couple, Batradz gently rearranges their arms and then retreats to the courtyard to sleep alone—showing his nobility. And thus, Batradz is proven to be the "best of the Narts."

The troublemaker Syrdon, however, will not let it go at that, and proposes yet another set of tests. The best Nart, he argues, should be able to ride his horse through the feasting hall and fly out a window, then have his horse plow a furrow through a great ravine, and finally cross the Field of God and kidnap His daughter. Batradz, naturally, cannot resist this challenge. The first two he accomplishes easily enough, but the route to the Field of God turns out to be filled with peril.

Helped along by advice from a one-eyed giant who has previously failed at exactly the same quest, Batradz and his horse manage to cross a desert, swim the sea, fend off an attack by an oversized vulture, and finally slip between two mountains that are repeatedly crashing into each other, before at last reaching the Field of God. Batradz decides to get a good night's sleep in the field before proceeding with the kidnap, but in the morning God's daughter observes him from atop her tower in the divine palace and comes down to invite him in. For several days they live there "as husband and wife"—apparently with God's approval—then return together to the land of the Narts.

Satana is often referred to as "the mother of the Narts," but for Batradz she is technically more of a foster mother. Her relationship to the other of the two greatest Nart heroes, Soslan, is even more confusing. One day Satana is washing Uyryzmæg's clothes in a river, when a groom comes to water his horses. The sight of the radiant Satana so excites him that he ejaculates onto a rock, from which is eventually born the hero Soslan. This event recalls the rock birth of another Iranian figure, the god Mithra. But in what sense, exactly, can Satana be considered Soslan's mother?

As a child Soslan is bathed in wolf's milk from which he acquires a permanent, impenetrable body armor. Except that (due to malign interference from Syrdon) the tub is too short, and having to bend his legs, Soslan's knees remain uncovered. It takes little imagination to guess what fate this portends for the future hero.

The very embodiment of essential Nart characteristics, Soslan avows that he "cannot live without hunting, fighting, and feasting" (see Figure 3.2). He is always looking for a brawl, but when he finds himself outmatched in

Figure 3.2 Statue of the Nart hero Soslan, Vladikavkaz.

strength he has no qualms about resorting to ruse and deception (often by pretending not to be who he is) in order to defeat his enemies. His victories over Totradz, the brothers Mukara and Bibyts, Eltagan and the giant Bizgwana all involve deceit. Soslan even manages to visit the world of the dead and then return again to the realm of the living, but only thanks to the cunning assistance of his deceased wife, Bedukhæ. She has the brilliant idea of putting his steed's horseshoes on backward, so that when the denizens of the underworld race after him to block his exit they see his horse's tracks and, stupidly, assume that he is entering rather than escaping and abandon the chase.

Of all the Narts the most ethically ambivalent character is Syrdon, a "trickster" who strongly reminds one of Loki from the Norse sagas—a connection explored in depth by Dumézil.[19] More recently, Laurent Alibert has detected echoes of the Syrdon character in the Occitan version of the Arthur legend, the Romance of Jaufré.[20]

The illegitimate half-brother of Uyryzmæg and Khæmyts, Syrdon is a marginal figure who lives somewhat outside of society and is constantly teased and taunted by the Narts even as he finds clever ways of being a nuisance. His tragic aspect reaches its apogee after he steals a prize cow belonging to Khæmyts. The half-brother manages to discover Syrdon's secret dwelling and, during the latter's absence, finds the remains of his cow cooking in a cauldron. In a fit of anger, Khæmyts kills Syrdon's sons (his own nephews!) and throws them into the cauldron to boil. Syrdon returns home and sees the body parts of his murdered offspring sticking out of the boiling water. Overcome with grief, he constructs a lyre out of their bones and tendons, thereby inventing the Ossetian national instrument, the *fændyr*.

Syrdon seems to live for the chance to cause problems for the other Narts, through all manner of duplicities and gossip-mongering. But he can act as one of them when it suits him, and on one occasion he actually saves the day. A group of Narts, including Syrdon, wind up captives in the house of a family of seven giants who have glued their behinds to a bench and plan to eat them for supper. The giants are discussing which of the Narts to kill first, when Syrdon interrupts with the question, "What is the most important part of a forge, the bellows, the anvil, the hammer or the file?" The easily distracted and none-too-bright giants begin to argue over this, finally coming to blows and killing each

other. Syrdon then pours boiling water onto the bench, which melts the glue but—no doubt intentionally—simultaneously scalds the buttocks of his own Nart companions.

The respective downfalls of the two greatest Nart heroes, Soslan and Batradz, are as bizarre as they are dramatic. In Soslan's case, he earns the wrath of a rival by the name of Balsæg by spurning the advances of his daughter. (Soslan: If I took as a wife all the wandering girls I meet, the whole Nart village wouldn't be enough for them! Girl: You will regret those words!)

It so happens that Balsæg is in possession of a miraculous wheel, which he can send spinning down from the sky with brutal force to destroy his enemies. The ill-intentioned, shape-shifting trickster Syrdon has previously—while disguised as a hat—overheard Soslan mention his vulnerable knees, which, one will recall, were left ungalvanized when he bathed in wolf's milk as a child. Balsæg therefore instructs his wheel to go for this weak spot when attacking Soslan. The wheel slices off Soslan's legs at the knee and leaves him lying on a hill to die. It falls upon Batradz, "the best of the Narts," to exact the necessary vengeance. Balsæg's wheel is frustratingly elusive, until Batradz hits upon the idea of enlisting the support of a tree to catch it as it flies past. His requests for help are spurned in succession by an elderberry, a hazelnut, and a plane tree, but the murderous wheel is finally snatched by the branches of a cooperative birch.

Vengeance is incumbent upon the hero, but it can just as well lead to his downfall. Batradz's demise comes about as a result of his avenging the murder of his father, Khæmyts, who has been killed at the instigation of the Borætæ family as punishment for seducing one of their wives. Batradz achieves his revenge by slaying a number of them, but he doesn't stop there. Enraged beyond control, he continues on his killing spree by targeting members of his own family that he considers to have been complicit in the plot, then moves on to the "genies and spirits" whom the mischievous Syrdon convinces him are ultimately responsible. Fearing for their lives, the "genies and spirits" beg God to protect them by putting an end to Batradz. God reluctantly agrees and heats up the earth for seven years, drying up the waters upon which the heat-prone Batradz depends.

Even in his weakened state Batradz manages to slay "seven Uastyrdzhis" (i.e., the family of St. George) and "seven Uatsillas" (those of St. Elias), a feat perhaps meant to portray the last gasp of paganism against the onslaught

of Christianity. Finally Batradz, being made entirely of steel and unable to quench his thirst, can no longer tolerate the heat and expires. Feeling badly that it has come to this, God sheds three divine tears: the locations where they fall become the sacred sites of Tarandzhelos, Mikælgæbyrtæ, and Rekom.

A variant of Batradz's death found in the oral tradition shows strong connections with the demise of King Arthur. In this version, Batradz refuses to die until his sword has been thrown into the sea. The Narts prove incapable of doing this, so instead they lie and simply tell Batradz that his request has been carried out. He doesn't believe them, however, and sends them back to the task. The Narts then muster all their collective force, and ultimately succeed in fulfilling Batradz's wish. Immediately upon receiving Batradz's sword, the sea begins to boil and turns blood red. This image reinforces the connection drawn by Dumézil between Batradz and the ancient Scythian cult of "Ares" mentioned by Herodotus, with its blood sacrifice offered to the planted sword.

Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Le Morte d'Arthur* ends with an almost identical scene, the dying king having to ask Sir Bedivere three times to cast the sword Excalibur into the lake before it is finally done—except that the Arthurian tale omits the part about the water boiling and turning red. Nicholas Higham, pointing to a number of Christian elements in the second Batradz story, considers this to be a late version, which cannot have been transmitted by the Sarmatians in second-century Britain as Littleton and Malcor suggest. Higham even proposes that the final immersion may symbolize the pagan Batradz's baptism, enabling him to die a Christian.[21]

Nartology in Ossetia

The Nart epic is the topic dearest to the heart of Ossetian scholars, and they have produced hundreds of articles—almost always in Russian, rarely in Ossetian—analyzing and celebrating it.[22] A State Committee on the Narts of Ossetia was established in 1940 under the joint directorship of V.I. Abaev and I.V. Dzhanaev, with the aim of producing a collection of all the available Nart tales. The resulting edition was published in Ossetian in 1946, with a Russian version appearing in 1948. The following year the North Ossetian Research

Institute published a bilingual edition, with commentary, that would become the standard reference work for future studies of the Narts. (Dumézil would produce his 1965 French translation using this recension of the Ossetian text.)

Ossetian scholars of the postwar period established the two questions that would remain central to the field of Nartology up to the present day. The first, posed by L.P. Semenov, was: "Which ethnic group can claim to be the originators of the Nart epic?" The second was formulated by B.V. Spitskii: "What information can the Narts provide about the actual history of the Ossetes?"[23] These questions would be taken up most notably by the Ossetian linguist V.I. Abaev throughout his long career spanning more than seven decades.

Abaev developed an interest in the Narts while a student under the controversial and ultimately discredited Nikolai Marr. In his first published article on the subject in 1945, Abaev affirmed the relevance of the Nart stories for uncovering the history of the Ossetes, but acknowledged that many of the personal and place names found in the tales were not of Ossetian origin—the troubling implication being that the Nart stories were not exclusively Ossetian.[24] To cite one example of this, Abaev argued that the Ossetian god of the hunt, Æfsati, could not be originally Iranian but was a late borrowing from the well-known Caucasian divinity Apsat.[25] Abaev's approach was thus more nuanced than that of Miller and Dumézil, who had emphasized the Scytho-Sarmatian—that is, essentially Indo-European—nature of the material. As Dumézil stated categorically in 1958, "the Nart epic is Ossetian."[26] Despite their sometimes differing conclusions, Dumézil and Abaev were lifelong friends and collaborators.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century the Iranocentric analysis, which had originally been put forth by M.S. Tuganov and was later reinforced by Dumézil and Abaev, was challenged by academics at institutions elsewhere in the North Caucasus who were committed to demonstrating that the Nart epic belonged to them. As a result, the principal emphasis of Ossetian Nartology shifted to "proving" the essentially Iranian origin and nature of the Nart material.[27]

In 1956 the first conference on "Nartology" was held in Vladikavkaz. Reflecting the ongoing contestation over the ethnic ownership of the Narts a second conference was conducted in Sukhumi, Abkhazia in 1963, where "the epic was considered not only as the phenomenon of the culture of a given people, but also as a system-forming factor of its essence and

history."[28] In other words, the stories were not merely created by a culture but also shaped it.

Throughout the 1960s–80s Nartology drew increasingly upon archaeology to support its arguments. Attempts were made to tie elements and episodes of the Nart tales to specific historical places and periods in the Caucasus. Rejecting the theory of a Scythian/Sarmatian origin, E.I. Krupnov argued that the Nart material was created by the indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus, specifically tied to the Koban culture (*c*. 1100 to 400 BC), who were later assimilated to the Sarmatian/Alans and adopted their language.[29]

Meanwhile, during the same period the Mongol influence already noted by Abaev in 1945 was explored in greater depth, notably by T.A. Guriev. As a result of contact between the Mongols and the Caucasian peoples during the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, Guriev argued, the Nart stories acquired new cycles and characters including Batradz and Khæmyts.[30] V.A. Kuznetsov acknowledged the presence of Turkic elements as well, but qualified that "at the same time we consider [the epic to be] the original creation of the Ossetian people and their ethnic ancestors, developed over a long period on the soil of local Caucasian mythology and in living communication with neighbouring cultures."[31]

It is interesting to note that the modern Ossetian language shows a much higher degree of loanwords from Turkic than from neighboring Caucasian languages (Nakh, Adyghe, Kartvelian).[32] One is also struck by the popularity of given names derived from Turkic—Timur, Tamerlan, Taymuraz, Aslanbek, Dzhambulat, and so on—in Ossetia. Predictably, the "internationalization" of Nart analysis provoked an Iranist backlash, most notably from Iu.S. Gagloity (b. 1934) who strongly insisted on the ethnographic connections between the Ossetes and the Scythians as reflected in the Narts material.[33]

The nature of the Nart epic and its meaning for Ossetian history and identity continue to be a major focus of the scholarly activity in Ossetia today. Ludwig Chibirov (b. 1932), an academic who also served as the first president of South Ossetia from 1993 to 2001, expresses the importance of the Narts as felt by the Ossetes:

> The Nart epic is a fictional autobiography of the Ossetian people, its priceless heritage. With great thanks to this epic material, we Ossetes discovered our ethnic history. The meaning of the Nart epic as a historical source for the

> ethnogenesis of the Ossetes is unbelievably great, because this heroic epic, more than any other folklore genre, is connected with the historical destiny of the people.[34]

Such eloquent exaggerations from an eminent Ossetian scholar feed and reinforce the sentimental nationalist fantasies of the general population, demonstrating how difficult it is to adopt a critical approach when discussing the Narts in their Caucasian context.

The Nart Epic in Comparative Iranian Studies

The world of the Narts bears strong resemblance to that of such Persian literary monuments as Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings* and Gorgani's romance *Vis and Ramin*, both of which were based on oral traditions that preceded their writing down in the tenth and eleventh centuries by at least a thousand years and whose cultural context is Scythian. Indeed, the archetypical hero of the Book of Kings, Rustam, is explicitly said to be a Saka (i.e., Scythian) warrior, and the name of his eastern homeland, Seistan (<Sakastān) means "Land of the Sakas."

The parallels between the Nart epic and the Book of Kings were first explored by V.F. Miller, who saw in the Nart hero Uyryzmæg's unintentional killing of his unnamed son a possible influence from the tragedy of Rustam and Sohrab in the Persian work.[35] Many other such parallels have been noted between the Ossetian and Persian epics. For example, a rainbow is called "Soslan's bow" in Digor Ossetian and "Rustam's bow" in Persian. The stereotypical observation made of Book of Kings heroes that they live only for *razm o bazm*—fighting and feasting—is equally true for the Narts. Rustam, like Soslan, sometimes denies his own identity when facing an enemy he may not be able to defeat. The Uatsamongæ can be compared with the Cup of Jamshid in Persian tradition. The heavenly blacksmith of Ossetian mythology, Kurdælægon, is reminiscent of the Persian Kaveh (known as Kawa among the Kurds).

Elbrus Satsaev has summarized the connections identified over a century of scholarship in his 2008 monograph entitled *Nartovskii epos i iranskaya poema Shakhname: skhodnye siuzhetnye motivy* (The Nart Epic and the Iranian Poem *Shahnameh*: similar plot motives). Another Ossetian scholar, Yuri Dzitstsoity, has added still more such parallels in his article "K osetino-persidskim

fol'klornym sviaziam" (On the Connections between Ossetian and Persian Folklore, 2017).[36] It should be noted that many of the parallels suggested by these authors are highly speculative and not always entirely convincing, but the general principle—that the Ossetian and Persian stories share a common cultural background—is unassailable.

Amazingly given their combination of uniqueness and their usefulness for understanding other Indo-European heroic epics, the Narts have rarely been researched by Iranologists outside of Russia and they were almost entirely unknown in Iran until quite recently. As has already been mentioned, the first Persian translation of the Nart epic was published only as recently as 2020. And since it was published in Vladikavkaz rather than in Tehran as originally had been intended, as of this writing it is not clear whether or how many of the five hundred copies printed will ever find their way to readers in Iran. Four hundred were said to have been gifted to the Iranian ambassador in Moscow as part of an initiative to increase cultural and commercial ties between the two Iranian nations. The remaining hundred copies were optimistically slated to be "distributed for free in Ossetia and sent out to centres of Iranian Studies at universities around the world."[37] One senses that this is unlikely to happen.

Just as modern Persians hold up the Book of Kings as the expression *par excellence* of Iranian cultural identity, many Ossetes look upon the Nart stories as their greatest source of national pride. The obvious point begs mentioning, however, that the world of these epics bears little resemblance to the one that Persians or Ossetes live in today. Yet it is quite common to hear Ossetian nationalists refer to the Nart characters—forgetting that they are legendary, not historical figures—as "our noble ancestors," even though the epic cycle ends with the bygone heroes choosing to render their race extinct!

There is danger in such thinking. The Iranic legends harken back to an age when primitive, fiercely independent tribes roamed the steppes on horseback, pasturing their cattle and ready to rustle any additional herds they happened to find in the possession of whomever they encountered along their way. As with the Amerindians of the Great Plains or the pre-Islamic Bedouin of the Arabian deserts, the hero of Indo-Iranian myth is fearless and proudly wild, ready to risk his life for the sake of plundering livestock for the enrichment

of his own group and aiming to kill or enslave anyone who stands in his way. Should we not perhaps think twice before romanticizing these primitive lifestyles, the closest contemporary parallels to which are found among pirates and terrorists?

Christopher Beckwith, in a majestic opus entitled *Empires of the Silk Road*, has attempted to rehabilitate the ancient steppe warriors for his modern readership. "They were not barbarians," he trumpets, "they were heroes!"[38] Such is the predominant attitude of the Ossetes toward their claimed Alan and Sarmatian ancestors. Some might take the opposite position, however. To be sure, in our modern world bullies still rule and are often revered, but this is hardly a sign of progress. Steppe society was not "politically correct"; it was the tyranny of the strong over the weak, resting on foundations of gender and class inequality. The rigid social hierarchy of the Aryans provided the basis for India's discredited caste system: in fact, prior to the Aryan migrations into the subcontinent during the second millennium BCE the Indus Valley had possessed a highly developed civilization marked by a level of social and gender egalitarianism unusual for the time, which one might argue it has never since recovered.

If patriarchy and brute force were accepted realities in many premodern societies, they hardly seem appropriate values to be promoting today. Romanticizing warrior ideals attributed to the ancient "Aryans" is not an innocuous enterprise, as the Nazis demonstrated all too clearly during the middle of the last century. The fundamental role of the historian, anthropologist, or folklorist may be to analyze and describe, and not to judge—for as it is often said, it gains us little to measure past societies by the standards of our own. But when modern-day individuals call for a "return" to the values of the past, as is so often heard today in Ossetia, it is perhaps incumbent upon those of us who study this past to speak up and do what we can to dispel such ideas as the misguided romanticisms that they are.

4

The Ossetes and Russia: A Special Relationship

It is not always possible to completely understand and explain the mutual gravity of two different peoples. While revealing a certain drive to the grafting of its territorial space, Russia has been "filling" it with ethnic diversity, instilling a balance between the two civilizations—West and East. It would not be an exaggeration to state that Ossetia's joining Russia to a certain extent was a result of the global evolution of Russian history.

Mark M. Bliev (1929–2011)

Ossetia's "Dark" Centuries

If the notion of Alan statehood was indeed largely a chimera as suggested in Chapter 2, then the disruptions brought to the steppes and adjacent regions by the Mongols in the thirteenth century and by the troops of Tamerlane near the end of the fourteenth need not be seen as having an entirely destructive impact on the Alan social order. Rather, the effect may have simply been that—by driving a portion of the Alans into mountainous regions beyond the reach of anyone's political, economic, or social control—they allowed the Caucasian Alans to live according to their natural, independent-minded inclinations, as well as providing excellent career opportunities for those Alans who joined the Mongol army.

The result in any case was a kind of stable anarchy: a simple, family-based village life that entailed the keeping of domestic animals, gardening, and going on periodic raids to procure livestock and women. By the turn of the fifteenth century the Caucasian Alans were living a largely sedentary existence in mountain hamlets where few traces remained of their ancient nomadic way of life. Their daily routine and ceremonial traditions differed little from those

of other Caucasian peoples. How to account for this dramatic departure from the nomadic ways of the steppes?

One explanation could be that most of the people concerned were not in fact descended from the original "Sarmatian" Alans at all, but rather from those members of Alan society that had joined up with them during the medieval period and become "Alanized," an effect that would have been most readily identifiable through the adoption of the Alan language. In other words, a large portion of the Caucasian Alans—and through them, the Ossetes—may have been originally Caucasian rather than Aryan by ethnicity. This would account both for their readiness to return to the "life of the mountains," which they may in some cases have left only for the purpose of joining in Alan campaigns, and also the results of DNA analysis mentioned in the Introduction. We may recall as well that some groups of Alans had already been mixing with the native peoples of the Caucasus ever since taking refuge there during the Hunnic invasions of the late fourth century.

An essential feature common to the ensemble of Caucasian cultures was the defending of family honor—especially one's ancestors—through the maintaining of blood vendettas. According to the commentary of the celebrated nineteenth-century Ossetian poet and artist Kosta Khetagurov, "it is not a case of being bloodthirsty, but [rather] duty, such that an Ossete prefers to perish or be killed rather than to allow his dead to be insulted."[1] The same was true for all the peoples of the Caucasus and reflects a norm seen in similarly isolated mountain regions around the world. (The Pashtuns of Afghanistan come to mind, but the Hatfields and McCoys of Appalachian folklore evoke much the same thing.) As Khetagurov observed, "To kill and to perish were synonyms for an Ossete … Killing today, he knew he would be killed as well, if not the next day, at least the day after or the following week. Before mourning the victim the Ossetes mourn the killer."[2]

Ossetian society consisted of four social classes. At the top were the "great families" (*styr myggag*), the village equivalent of aristocrats. Below them were the majority of the population, the "ordinary people" (*færsag læg*), free but mostly quite poor. Next were those born of the concubines of the *styr myggag*, called *kævdæsard* (lit., "cradle born"). Finally, there were small numbers of slaves, known as *ælkhæd*, *saulæg*, or *tsækhairag* (cf. Pers. *chāker*), who were usually non-Ossetians captured in battle.

Social norms in Ossetian society were governed by a code referred to as *æghdæu*. The system was absolutely patriarchal and women could not own property; divorce was vanishingly rare. *Æghdæu* required men to show women respect, however: a man would not enter another's house if only the wife was home, and a horseman would dismount on passing a woman along the road. Men were expected not to use bad language in a woman's presence. As Miller observed during the late nineteenth century:

> As desolate as a woman's life might be, even so it must be said in honour of these Ossetes that acts of vulgarity or violence towards her are extremely rare among them. To beat a woman is considered shameful.[3]

Women were not targeted in inter-family vendettas, and custom had it that if a woman were to throw her scarf between two men engaged in a fight, they would immediately cease their hostilities.[4] According to one especially strange custom, a man who became the subject of a vendetta by assassinating another would be reprieved if he could manage to penetrate the victim's household and suck at his mother's breast (symbolizing that the killer and the victim were now brothers).

A deep veneration toward the elderly was typical of the Caucasian environment, standing in marked contrast to the Scythian/Alan mentality, which scorned anyone who failed to die in battle. Community decisions were taken by village councils, called *nykhas*. Ossetian youth looked upon their elders as role models and wellsprings of knowledge, and would never dare to sit down in their presence.

The premodern Ossetes relied heavily on freely given mutual assistance, called *ziu*. This could entail lending a hand with a harvest or a construction project, or coming together to rebuild after a natural catastrophe such as a landslide or a destructive thunderstorm. Hospitality to the guest was another important obligation. This was expressed by the proverb, *Uæzæg—Khuytsauy uæzæg* (The guest is God's guest), and implied that the entire household was at the traveler's disposition for as long as he wished to remain. Like the law of honor and revenge, this principle was common throughout the Caucasus, as it is among the Pashtuns in Afghanistan or the Bedouin of Arabia.

Ossetia Joins Russia

The Ossetes finally began to emerge out of three centuries of almost complete isolation in 1774, when a delegation of clan elders made the journey to St. Petersburg to ask Empress Catherine the Great to incorporate their lands into the Russian Empire.[5] (A pair of Digors had made a similar request of a Russian official on his way to Georgia in 1651, but to no avail.[6]) Although such gestures could give the strange appearance of a people asking to be colonized, in fact they were completely understandable: the Ossetes (in fact merely a group of them) were simply seeking an alliance with a known alien power as protection against enemies closer to home. The signing of the 1774 treaty between the Ossetes and the Russians would mark the beginning of a unique and mostly positive relationship between the two peoples, which endures to the present day.

During this early period of contact Russian missionaries made efforts to "re-integrate" the Ossetes into formal Christendom, and needing religious texts in the local idiom, they produced the first printed books in Ossetian. Of all the Caucasian peoples, the predominantly Christian Ossetes developed the closest relationship with the Russians, and they were the principal local facilitators for the extension of Russian power throughout the region.

Russia's wars to subdue the Caucasus were fought mainly against local Muslim populations, and as allies of the Empire the Ossetes were largely spared their ravages. Meanwhile these conflicts were the major catalyst in the development of an Islamic identity among the Chechens, Ingush, Circassians, and some Abkhazians, upon whom the religion had previously sat rather lightly. Islam has continued to serve as a basis for anti-Russian resistance in the North Caucasus up to the present day, setting the largely Christian and pro-Russian Ossetes at odds with their neighbors and occasionally contributing to conflicts between them.

From the very beginning the relationship between the Ossetes and the Russians was built upon the basis of their ostensible "shared religion," eastern Orthodox Christianity. Russian missionaries were disappointed to find the Ossetes quite uninformed when it came to religious matters, but they worked hard to "return them to the faith." The first modern school in Ossetia, established in 1766 at Mozdok in the northern plains, offered

instruction in both Ossetian and Russian, although there were no Ossetian books at that time. An Ossetian priest, Paul Gentsaurov, adapted the Cyrillic alphabet for the writing of Ossetian, and a short catechism published in Moscow in 1798 was the first book to be printed in the Ossetian language. In 1835 the Georgian exarch Evgeny of Georgia ordered the opening of a school in Vladikavkaz for the children of Ossetian landowners and other members of the social elite. Its main purpose was to train priests for the staffing of Ossetian parishes with tuition expenses covered by the government, although students not preparing for the priesthood could also study there if their parents paid the fees.

By the mid-eighteenth century Russia had already begun to look toward the Caucasus with an eye for expansion, but it is important to remember that it was the Ossetes who invited them. It is no accident that the Russians chose Ossetian territory—specifically the village of Dzæudzhiqæu ("Dzæug's Village") by the banks of the Terek River—as the location for the construction in 1784 of their first and most important garrison in the Caucasus. Vladikavkaz, the "Ruler of the Caucasus," offered the Russians the dual advantages of proximity to the strategically important Daryal Pass and a sympathetic local population. In 1818 the Russians built their other major Caucasian garrison, which they called "Groznaya" ("Terrible," "Fearsome," later Grozny) some 100 km to the east for the opposite reason, which was to help them subjugate the defiant Chechens.

Georgia followed the Ossetes in becoming a Russian protectorate with the signing of the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783. Construction immediately began on the Georgian Military Highway, which was completed the following year, linking the new garrison at Vladikavkaz with the Georgian capital of Tbilisi 200 km to the south through the Daryal Pass, the only significant route through the Caucasus since ancient times.

In terms of their relationship with the Russians the Ossetes stand out markedly from their neighbors, the Circassians to the west and the Ingush/Chechens to the east. Even today, Ossetia is the only region of the North Caucasus where the memory of the Russian general Aleksei Ermolov (1777–1861)—commander-in-chief of the Caucasus campaigns who famously stated, "I desire that the terror of my name shall guard our frontiers more potently than chains of fortresses"—is not universally reviled.

And yet, the romanticizing Russian literature of the first half of the nineteenth century—exemplified in the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy—is strangely unappreciative of the Ossetes' uniquely cooperative role, instead emphasizing the "noble savagery" of the intractable Circassians and Chechens. Pushkin, who passed through Ossetia in 1829, describes the Ossetes as "the poorest tribe of the peoples inhabiting the Caucasus."[7] It would seem that the Russians' control of the Georgian Military Highway through the Daryal Pass, which lay firmly within Ossetian territory, did not bring much in the way of actual economic benefits to the Ossetes. Pushkin notes that Ossetian bandits would take pot shots at travelers making their way from Vladikavkaz to Tiflis (Tbilisi).

Lermontov's portrayal of the Ossetes in his most famous work, *A Hero of Our Time*, is particularly unflattering:

> The Ossetians had gathered volubly around me and were demanding tips; but the staff captain shouted at them so menacingly that they scattered instantly. "You see, what a nation," he said. "They can't say 'bread' in Russian, but they've learned 'Officer, give me a tip!' To my mind, the Tatars are better than this; at least they don't drink."

And again later, when the two are waiting out a blizzard as guests in an Ossetian home:

> "A pathetic lot!" I said to the captain, indicating our filthy hosts, who were looking at us silently, in a kind of stupor. "A very stupid nation," he replied. "Would you believe it? They don't know how to do anything, they're incapable of any kind of education! At least our Kabardians or Chechens, brigands though they are, and paupers, are daring devils, whereas these haven't even a mind for weaponry. You won't see a proper dagger on a one of them. Ossetians for certain!"[8]

Hardly a gracious representation of Russia's principal allies in a hostile region!

Europe Discovers the "Scythians of the Caucasus"

Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries an increasing Russian presence brought infrastructure, education, and public services to the Caucasus, along with a gradual integration into the modern European

world. Travelers such as the German orientalist Julius Klaproth (1783–1835) made adventurous voyages to this exotic region, in some cases producing detailed written accounts in their travelogues. Klaproth, working on behalf of the Russian Academy of Sciences, was the first to establish that the Ossetes were the linguistic descendants of the Alans and to situate the Ossetian language within the broader Iranian linguistic family. In the second volume of his Caucasian travelogue he included a number of sample phrases in Ossetian, along with a glossary of about two hundred words, which he compares with their equivalents in other Iranian languages.[9]

The unexpected discovery of a living "Scythian" language brought the attention of Andreas Sjögren (1794–1855), a Finnish linguist who was attached to the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. Inspired by his reading of Klaproth's travelogue, Sjögren traveled to the Caucasus in 1835 to begin a two-year research mission. After first spending several months in Tbilisi where he obtained copies of some religious books in Ossetian, he proceeded to Vladikavkaz, where he immersed himself in the study of the Ossetian language. During a second trip in 1837 he managed a three-week stay in the remote region of Digoria where he studied the Digor dialect.

Upon returning to St. Petersburg at the end of the year Sjögren began working on his *Ossetian Grammar with a Short Ossetian-Russian and Russian-Ossetian Dictionary*, which was published in 1844.[10] Sjögren's other major contribution was a reform of the Cyrillic-based Ossetian alphabet to better reflect the language's distinct sound system. (One can observe today that Ossetian pronunciation has shifted in a number of ways since that time, being generally more conservative in South Ossetia than in the north.) Sjögren himself noted that the Georgian alphabet was a more efficient choice for rendering the Ossetian sound system than the Cyrillic.[11] Sjögren's dictionary came to serve as a basic source for the teaching of Russian to Ossetian students during the second half of the nineteenth century, thus playing a significant role in the Russification of the Ossetes.

Sjögren's work was the basis for the subsequent research of Vsevelod F. Miller (1848–1913), a brilliant polymath from St. Petersburg. Having set himself the task of studying the various Ossetian dialects and recording works of popular oral literature such as the Nart tales, Miller's three-volume *Osetinskii etiudy* (1881–7) remains an important resource for Ossetian studies even today. Still

in print after nearly a century and a half, it is one of the few reputable scholarly works to be found in Vladikavkaz bookstores.[12]

Following Russia's definitive crushing of native resistance in 1864, more than 1.2 million Caucasian Muslims were deported to Ottoman Anatolia. This number included Ossetes from the remote and linguistically distinct western region of Digoria, who had become nominally Islamicized through the influence of their Kabardian overlords during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a result of this forced migration, Turkey today has a substantial population of Ossetian Muslims—numbering as many as 100,000—whose ancestors settled in villages in the central and eastern parts of the country, although many have now relocated to Istanbul and Ankara.[13] There are also small communities of Ossetian Muslims in Syria and Jordan, likewise descended from the deportees of 1860–4. The first Ossetian poet whose name is known to us, Mamsyraty Temyrbolat (1843–98), was among these exiles, and in his few surviving poems he expresses the hardships of emigration and life in an alien country. Another Ossetian poet, Qanyquaty Inal (1851–99), was also part of this group, but he returned to live in Russia and his surviving poems are all in Russian.[14]

From the 1860s the Russians began to develop a substantial metallurgical industry in Ossetia. This major addition to the local economy gave rise to a new class of Ossetian laborers. The same period also saw the emergence of an educated class of Ossetian intellectuals. By 1897 Ossetia had the highest rate of literacy and bilingualism (92 percent) in the North Caucasus.[15] Many Ossetes pursued their education in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and other Russian cities. Laurent Alibert has noted that in contrast to neighboring countries such as Georgia that have a long and established written tradition, the Ossetian language was committed to writing rather late—only by the end of the eighteenth century—and that it has remained since then largely restricted to the realm of national literature. This, he suggests, has allowed Russian to occupy and maintain its dominant role in many aspects of Ossetian life.[16]

Kosta: Unrivalled Hero of Ossetian Culture

Since the emergence of the Ossetes into the modern world no single cultural figure stands out to compare with Kosta Khetagurov (Khetægkaty K'osta, 1859–1906). Born and raised in the village of Nar high in the central Caucasus,

Kosta (as he is affectionately known to Ossetes) received a modern education in Russia. With a foot in both worlds, he truly embodies the transition from the past to the present.

An accomplished poet, Kosta is popularly considered to be the father of modern Ossetian literature. His magnum opus, entitled *Iron Fændyr* (The Ossetian Lyre), is the first major work of poetry to be written and published in Ossetian. Kosta was also a talented painter, whose best-known works are housed today in the Art Museum of the North Ossetian Republic in Vladikavkaz and in the National Museum of the Republic of South Ossetia in Tskhinval. He also made an important contribution to ethnography: his treatise *Osoba* ("Ossetian-ness"), which provides a rare and insightful documentation of a long-isolated traditional culture that his father's generation was the last to experience.[17]

Although Kosta's family belonged to the upper social class in his remote village, he nevertheless spent his life in poverty. Kosta's mother, Maria Gavrilovna Gubaeva, died soon after his birth, leaving him to be raised by distant relatives. His father, Levan Elizbarovich, was an officer in the Russian army, serving in Poland. He later distinguished himself by leading a group of 149 landless Ossetian families to establish a new village named Laba in Krasnodar District, where Kosta spent the last years of his life. For Kosta his father was a symbol of traditional Ossetia, and his principal informant for *Osoba*.

As a boy Kosta attended school first in Vladikavkaz and then in Stavropol, where one of his teachers, V.I. Smirnov, noted his artistic talent and helped him gain admission to the Academy of Art in St. Petersburg in 1881. Unfortunately, after four years Kosta was forced to abandon his studies due to an inability to pay his tuition fees. He spent his next period in Vladikavkaz and Stavropol, establishing his reputation as a painter and poet. During this time he survived by painting theater backdrops and writing essays for journals such as *Severny Kavkaz* ("North Caucasus") and *Kazbek*. His paintings included such diverse subjects as religious figures (Grieving Angel, Miraculous Saviour, St. Nino), Caucasian landscapes (The Zikara Pass, Teberdin Gorge, The Natural Bridge), depictions of rural life (Child Stonemasons, Mountain Woman Going for Water), and portraits (Mysyrbi Gutiev, Husin Baev, Anna Popova, Anna Tsalikova). Kosta suffered throughout his life from unrequited love, proposing unsuccessfully first to Anna Popova and then to Anna Tsalikova, both of whom had served as his models.[18]

Mæ khury khai,
Rashughd chyzgai,
Kuy næ dæ fedtain, bærgæ!
Dæ qazynmæ
Dæ zarynmæ
Kæm læuuy iunædzhy zærdæ!

My sunshine,
Beautiful lass,
Had I never seen you, it would be better …
With such playing
With such singing
How can a lonely heart resist?

Kosta's political views, influenced by his own experience of poverty, made him critical of the tsarist regime. This resulted in his expulsion from Vladikavkaz in 1891 and subsequently from the entire Caucasus region in 1899, the same year in which *Iron Fændyr* was first published in St. Petersburg. The book was well received by Ossetia's small circle of literati, and in December 1901 he was allowed to return to Vladikavkaz from his exile in Kherson on the northern coast of the Black Sea. He suffered from ill health, however, and the reputation of his success did not translate into an easing of his financial hardships. After years of illness, he passed away in 1906 at the age of forty-six.

Kosta is without question Ossetia's greatest cultural icon. (Joseph Stalin, with whom he is sometimes paired, is a distant second.) Schools, streets, parks, and cultural institutions are named in his honor, and like an Ossetian Che Guevara his image can be seen everywhere, on posters, T-shirts, even randomly spray-painted onto the walls of buildings. There is a museum devoted to him in his home village of Nar along the road to South Ossetia, although unfortunately it never seems to be open. The twentieth-century Ossetian artist and writer Makharbek Tuganov (1881–1952) wrote numerous articles about Kosta and painted several posthumous portraits depicting various stages of his life. If one single image can be said to symbolize Ossetia, it is Kosta's.

It is unfortunate that Kosta remains almost unknown in the West. He merited a short entry by the French linguist Alain Christol in the *Dictionnaire universel des littératures*,[19] but to date almost nothing of his work has yet been translated into any Western language apart from unobtainable English and French

editions of *Iron fændyr* published in Vladikavkaz, by T.A. Guriev (2009) and Rachid Kuliev (2019) respectively.[20] Vittorio Tomelleri and Michele Salvatori have announced the intention to prepare a complete critical translation of the same work, presumably in Italian.[21]

The following lines, from the poem "Mother," evoke Kosta's sensitivity to the poverty faced by most Ossetes in the nineteenth century:

Sidzærtæn qædurtæ
Se'khsævær khuydta,
Aftæmæi syn durtæ
Tsuainadzhy fykhtæ …

The orphans called beans their dinner
But in fact it was pebbles boiled in the pot …

And this verse, from the opening poem of *Ossetian Lyre*, perhaps does as good a job as any in summing up Kosta's lonely, frustrating life:

Æz dzyllæiæ kaddær kuy darin,
Kuy bafidin iskuy mæ khæs,
Uæd aftæ ænkardæi næ zarin,
Næ quysid mæ kæuyn qælæs.

If I owed my people less
If I could ever pay my debt
I wouldn't sing so sadly
My cry would not be heard.

Of Kosta's written works the one to have the greatest lasting impact was perhaps his poem "Fatima," which was originally published in *Severny Kavkaz* in 1889. Its popularity—mainly through a later incarnation as a feature film—is such that Fatima has become one of the most common girl's names in Ossetia. Set in the mid-nineteenth century, the story reflects the clash of modern Russian and traditional Ossetian culture through the story of a young village woman who is torn between two men and eventually loses her sanity as a result.

"Fatima" is best known today through its film version, produced in Georgia in 1958 to commemorate the 100th birth anniversary of the author. The script evolved out of a radio play broadcast in 1956, which was declared the "Year

of Kosta" marking the fifty-year anniversary of his death. It was then made into a stage production, which played to great success in Ordzhonikidze (as Vladikavkaz was then called), Tskhinval and Tbilisi. In 1959 it was restaged in Moscow. As was typically the case during the Soviet period, the film and the play on which was based were in Russian, but a film version dubbed into Ossetian is now available on YouTube. The actor Vladimir Tkhapsaev, who played Fatima's adoptive father in the film, was later invited to perform the lead role in an Ossetian-language production of Othello staged in London on the occasion of Shakespeare's 400th anniversary in 1964. Queen Elizabeth II is said to have praised Tkhapsaev's performance as the best she had seen.

Kosta belonged to a transitional generation, born in a traditional village but having a modern education. In a sense his contribution to Ossetian culture was made possible by his exposure to that of Russia. As Abaev observed, "Undoubtedly, in addition to having exceptional talent, he was helped by having a great familiarity with Russian literature, Russian classics. He learned through them."[22]

Kosta's stature as the unrivalled champion of Ossetian language and culture is well deserved. Tamirlan Salbiev states that he was "the true founder of the Ossetian national literature and indisputable creator of the Modern Ossetian literary language."[23] No Ossetian writer has so much as approached his achievement since. In Abaev's words, "The beginning of Ossetian literature was at the same time its unattainable peak."[24] After two thousand years of silence, Kosta was the first to give voice to his people. More than a century after his death his voice remains the strongest—and indeed virtually the only one to have any true resonance among the Ossetes.

A contemporary of Kosta, Seka Gadiev (Gædiaty Seka, *c.* 1855–1915), also wrote poetry but is better known as one of the earliest Ossetian writers of prose. His work highlights the hardships of peasant life in Ossetia's mountain villages. Following in Kosta's wake, during the early years of the twentieth century a number of other Ossetian writers of humble backgrounds were attracted by revolutionary ideas and social critique, forming a literary circle which was subsequently banned by the tsarist regime.

Figure 4.1 Ossetian men in national clothing, *c*. 1920. Fatima Foltz family collection.

Revolution and Integration

The Russian revolution, by bringing about the end of the Tsarist empire, allowed the peoples of the Caucasus to briefly experiment with independence. On the mountain range's southern flanks Georgia declared itself a Democratic Republic, while the various territories in the north were united as the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus (MRNC) with its capital at Vladikavkaz. Both were short-lived, as the Red Army quickly consolidated its control over all the former Russian imperial lands. In 1921 the MRNC was absorbed into the Soviet Union as the Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. The Georgian Socialist Republic became a Soviet republic in 1922, with South Ossetia accorded the status of Autonomous Oblast. The capital of the MASSR was, again, Vladikavkaz.

The multiethnic and multireligious MASSR quickly proved unmanageable, and by 1924 it had been partitioned up into smaller administrative units

and folded into the North Caucasus Krai with its capital at distant Rostov-on-Don. North Ossetia was given the status of Autonomous Oblast, the same as South Ossetia within the Georgian SSR. In 1931 the North Ossetian capital Vladikavkaz was renamed Ordzhonikidze in honor of the Georgian revolutionary and Soviet politician Sergo Ordzhonikidze (1886–1937), a name it kept until 1944 (when it briefly reverted to its Ossetian name, Dzæudzhyqæu) and carried again from 1954 to 1990.

Ossetian and Russian: An Ambivalent Bilingualism

By 1939 98 percent of Ossetes were fluent in Russian, and 19 percent could boast of a high school education—more than double the average for the rest of the Caucasus.[25] Stalin's Russification program during the 1930s thus worked to the benefit of Ossetes, as they were already more Russified than their neighbors and therefore further along the leader's intended path.

From the earliest years of the Soviet period there were, however, efforts on the part of some Ossetian intellectuals to valorize and promote the Ossetian language. Ossetian members of the Moscow-based Association of Proletarian Writers (ZIU) secured funding in order to produce the organization's journal in Ossetian. During the 1920s the same people were responsible for establishing writers' unions in both South (1927) and North (1931) Ossetia. A literary journal, *Fidiuæg* ("The Herald") was founded in 1927 and is still published today. The first congress of Ossetian writers took place in Tskhinval in 1930.[26] Among the Ossetian authors of this period may be mentioned Seka Gadiev's son Tsomaq (Gædiaty Tsomaq, 1882–1931), who was educated in tsarist Russia and later exiled to Siberia for his revolutionary activities; Chermen Bedzhyzaty (1898–1937), head of the South Ossetian Writer's Union, who perished in Stalin's purges; and Ivan Dzhanaev (Dzanaity Ivan, aka "Niger," 1896–1947), a social activist in his youth who went on to enjoy an illustrious academic career.

Improving the status of women was an important part of the Soviet social program, and from the 1920s onward some Ossetian women were able to penetrate into traditionally male spheres. A very small number of women writers succeeded in making names for themselves, despite Ossetia's intensely patriarchal culture. Prior to the Soviet period the most notable feminist

voice in Ossetia was the young playwright Roza Kochisova (1888–1910), who militated against the custom of paying the *kalym* (bride-price), which she argued relegated women to the status of cattle. "When the matchmaker comes," she wrote, "no one asks the bride what she wants. No one looks at the groom, only how much he will pay. No, girls, if we don't start fighting, no one will liberate us from the world of slavery."[27] Tragically, Kochisova died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-one.

The Ossetes Hold Off the Nazis

For Ossetes who grew up as Soviet citizens, no historical event gives greater pride than the fact that it was in North Ossetia that the Nazi campaign into the Caucasus was brought to a halt in November 1942. Soviet and Russian historiography credits the Ossetes with being among the USSR's greatest patriots during the Second World War, in contrast to the other (mostly Muslim) North Caucasus peoples who were seen as traitors and were punished as such. Some 95,000 Ossetes participated in defending the Motherland, and a lone Ossetian shepherd, Khadzhimurza Mildzikov, is said to have single-handedly killed 108 Germans. A large, Soviet-style military monument along the highway west of Vladikavkaz near the village of Gizel marks the spot where the Germans were forced to turn back. Near the village of Dzuariqau 16 km further west one can see a statue of a crying mother with seven geese taking flight, commemorating seven brothers of the Gazdanov family who all lost their lives fighting the Nazis. Every year on the occasion of the VE Day celebrations on May 9 the sacrifices of Ossetia's Second World War fallen are highlighted on billboards featuring their names and faces.

General I.A. Pliev (1903–79), head of the Soviet Fifth Cavalry Division who fought in many important battles against the Germans, is celebrated as one of Ossetia's greatest national heroes. A towering statue of him on horseback in traditional Ossetian garb stands in a riverfront park in Vladikavkaz, one of the capital's most recognizable monuments. Pliev later played a prominent role in the 1962–3 Cuban Missile Crisis as commander of the Soviet forces in Cuba. There is a monument to him in Havana. He is buried along the "walk of fame" beside the pleasant, park-like military cemetery in the southern part of Vladikavkaz.

Another notable Ossetian military figure is Yuri Kuchiev (1919–2005), who as a young man at the onset of the Second World War began a naval career in the Arctic that would go on to span more than three decades. In 1977 he made history as captain of the nuclear-powered icebreaker *Arktika*, which was the first surface ship to reach the North Pole. He is commemorated by a small statue between the national research library and the Terek River in central Vladikavkaz. Public school number 27 is also named after him.

Was Stalin an Ossete?

Every killing is a treat, for the barrel-chested Ossete.
Osip Mandelstam, 1933

For a Westerner raised during the Cold War the figure of Joseph Stalin is most often associated with state terror under a brutal dictatorship. It can therefore be somewhat jarring to see his image today all over Ossetia, both North and South, and even more so to learn that many consider him to be an Ossetian national hero. Most impressive is a huge portrait painted on a boulder by the side of the road through North Ossetia's Tsey Valley on the way to the Rekom shrine and beyond it, a ski resort. The opposite side of the boulder bears a monumental image of Kosta Khetagurov (see Figure 4.2).

In South Ossetia, the main street in Tskhinval is named for Stalin. His image can be seen all over the region, in the form of official statues and monuments as well as spray-painted onto walls and found on calendars, T-shirts, and stickers on the rear windows of cars. On April 27, 2020, South Ossetian president Anatoly Bibilov signed a declaration reviving the name Stalinir, by which Tskhinval was known from 1934 to 1961, as an officially accepted "alternative name" for the South Ossetian capital.

Joseph Stalin (born Ioseb Dhzughashvili in Gori, Georgia, in 1878 when it was a part of the Russian Empire) is usually described as having been an ethnic Georgian, and he seems to have grown up in a Georgian-speaking household. There is no clear evidence that he spoke Ossetian, although his native region had a mixed population in which Ossetes were present if not actually a majority so he certainly heard the language spoken and may have spoken it himself as well. DNA research has shown that he carried the

Figure 4.2 The Poet and the Hero: Rock Portraits of Kosta and Stalin, Tsey Valley, North Ossetia.

G2a-Z6653 gene, which is considered to be distinctive to the Ossetes. There is nothing to suggest that Stalin embraced an Ossetian identity on any level, and in fact his stated policy was that Ossetes should assimilate into Russia in the north and Georgia in the south. Does the claim that he was Ossetian have any basis in fact?

Identity is an elusive concept having many layers, and never more so than today when it is taken as a human right that one may construct one's identity however one wishes. The same may be said for projecting identities onto the past. The resulting claims are often contested, and one finds no lack of Stalin supporters today in Georgia as well as across the former USSR. But perhaps nowhere, even in Georgia, are feelings for Stalin as strong or as widespread as they are in Ossetia.

Even so, positive attitudes toward Stalin among today's Ossetes are not universal. In the words of a former member of the South Ossetian parliament, Roland Kelekhsaev, "Stalin is Ossetian, we consider him Ossetian, but he did nothing useful for Ossetia. We have witnessed the fact that South Ossetia was given to Georgia, and North Ossetia to Russia. The best representatives of the Ossetian intelligentsia were repressed. Ossetia was divided into northern and southern parts."[28]

Have pro-Stalin Ossetes whitewashed the dictator's treatment of their ancestors, many of whom died in the purges of the 1930s? Political analysts Gregory Shvedov and Alan Parastaev point to a selective memory of Stalin's across-the-board "justice," which has been mythologized by contemporary Ossetes. "Justice is understood as human equality before the law," they note, "expressed in equal punishment for violating the law, both for the peasant and for the minister, even if he just yesterday was the closest person to the leader himself."[29] For Ossetes today, the idea that their shamelessly corrupt elites could actually be punished for their misdeeds is a compelling fantasy that outweighs all other aspects of Stalin's legacy.

The Dzhugashvili family almost certainly had an Ossetian component, and it is widely repeated that "Stalin's paternal grandfather was an ethnic Ossete." Intermarriage among the many diverse communities of the Caucasus has always existed, despite the region's notorious tribalism, so the degree of importance one gives to any given ancestral element is to some extent at least a subjective affair. And as Italian scholar Vittorio Springfield Tomelleri reminds us, "whether Stalin was Ossetian or Georgian is absolutely irrelevant

to the evaluation of his work and his moral stature."[30] Perhaps in the end the matter of whether Stalin can be considered an Ossete or not is less a historical question than one of contemporary sociology and politics.

V.I. Abaev: A Scholar and a Gentleman

No Ossetian scholar has had an impact, whether in Ossetia or in the fields of linguistics and Iranology as a whole, to compare with that of V.I. Abaev. His monumental five-volume etymological dictionary, published between 1958 and 1995, is arguably the most significant reference work on any Iranian language ever produced. His vast linguistic knowledge enabled him to include comparisons not only among the various Iranian languages, but also with the Caucasian tongues and even Finno-Ugric. Over a career spanning seven-plus decades Abaev published more than 300 articles exploring various aspects of Iranian linguistics and mythology.

Abaev never completed his doctoral dissertation, and he left graduate school in 1928. Based on the quality of his subsequent publications, however, he was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1935. He spent the Second World War years in Ossetia engaged in the study of the Nart epic, publishing his conclusions in a 1945 article entitled "Nartovskii epos." In 1949 he published a collection of essays entitled *Osetinskii iazyk i fol'klor* (Ossetian language and Folklore), which included a pioneering investigation of the connections between Ossetian and the language presumed to have been spoken by the ancient Scythians. An article in the same collection explored the dialectic divergences between Iron and Digor, which was based on his own fieldwork in Digoria. Dissatisfied with the existing Russian-Ossetian dictionaries, he published his own in 1950.

Abaev was a Soviet scholar by training and historical necessity, although little political ideology shows through in his work. Starting from his time as a student in Leningrad during the 1920s he followed the approach of Nikolai Marr (1864–1934), whose pseudo-scientific "Japhetic Theory" of linguistics argued that all languages could be traced back to four primal exclamations. Marr was discredited and denounced by Stalin in 1950, but by that time Abaev had already begun to distance himself from Marr's methodology. Still,

Figure 4.3 Statue of Ossetian linguist V.I. Abaev, Tskhinval, South Ossetia.

he declined to denounce his former mentor and would have lost his career were it not for Stalin's personal intervention. Abaev's name figured on a list of Japhetist scholars due to be purged, but a marginal note in Stalin's handwriting says, "A good man, let him be."[31]

During the 1960s Abaev was harshly critical of the tendency among linguists to embrace structuralist forms of analysis. He felt that the formalists were "dehumanizing"; he criticized them for being anti-historical and for prioritizing

grammar over vocabulary.[32] Although he never held a teaching position, under the Soviet system he served as a mentor to a number of graduate students in the official capacity of being asked to review their work. He is said by those who met him to have had a kind and gentle disposition, unpretentious and willing to discuss his ideas with nonspecialists. Abaev remained active as a scholar throughout his long life and passed away on March 18, 2001, in St. Petersburg at the age of 100.

Conflict with the Ingush

In 1944 Stalin transferred the lands east of the Terek River—the so-called Prigorodnyi ("foothill") district—from Ingushetia to Ossetia as punishment for the alleged Ingush support of the Nazis during the Second World War. As a result of this, the Ingush and Chechen populations were deported in their entirety to Central Asia from 1944 to 1957, after which most returned home to the Caucasus. The Ingush have cried foul ever since, demanding that the lands be returned to them. By the late 1980s their claims were growing increasingly vocal, and when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 they finally saw their chance for retribution.

On October 30, 1992, an Ingush militia attempted to seize control of Prigorodnyi, a territory covering about 978 km^2. Forces from the Russian military, Interior Ministry (MVD) and state security (Omon) all united against the Ingush, although credit for ultimately securing the Ossetian victory is usually given to volunteer fighters from among the recently arrived refugees from South Ossetia. A Moscow-brokered peace agreement in 1995 allowed for the return of some 25,000 Ingush refugees to Prigorodnyi.

The conflict between the Ossetes and Ingush remains unresolved and tensions are high. It does not help that the Ingush—like the Ossetes but with rather less historical basis—have become obsessive about claiming the Alans as their ancestors. They have even gone so far as to build a new capital city, which they have named "Magas" after the supposed capital of the putative medieval "Alan Empire." Contestation over the ownership of the Alan legacy has come to symbolize the deeper conflict between the Ingush and the Ossetes, which is ultimately about land. Ingush militants have been implicated in several terrorist attacks on Ossetia, most recently the 2010 car bomb attack

on the Vladikavkaz bazaar, which killed seventeen and was attributed to an Ingush suicide bomber. Even more traumatic was the infamous takeover of a school in Beslan in 2004, which ended in the tragic deaths of hundreds of schoolchildren.

The Beslan Massacre

The taking over of Beslan School no. 1 on September 1, 2004, by a group of thirty-two or more mostly Chechen and Ingush Islamists has gone down as the worst terrorist attack in Russian history to date, and the seventh most deadly in the world. Resulting in the innocent deaths of 186 children, 111 parents and other adults, 17 teachers and staff, and 6 civilian volunteers, the tragedy had long-lasting negative repercussions for the government, police, and security services at both the local and federal levels. Both the rescue effort and subsequent investigation were widely seen as having been botched, and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) were believed by many to have allowed the attack as a means of capturing suspected militants.

The drama began at 9:11 a.m. on the first day of the school year, when the terrorists arrived driving a military truck and a police van. Within minutes they had taken over the school and rounded up 1,128 hostages.[33] After a two-day standoff during which the hostages were deprived of food and water and several hostages and terrorists were killed, Russian forces including members of the *militsia* (police), the army, *spetsnaz* (special forces), the FSB and Omon security services, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) stormed the school on the afternoon of September 3. The terrorists began to detonate bombs and to exchange fire with the various Russian contingents. The roof of the gymnasium where the hostages were being held caught fire and collapsed, killing about 160 people. Amid the chaos some of the hostages were able to escape, while others were killed in the crossfire.

Between three and nine rockets were fired at the school by Russian forces. Rocket-propelled grenades were also used by both sides, and Russian tanks brought in a 125 mm gun as part of their assault. Many locals joined in as well, bringing along their own weapons. After two hours of violence the Russian forces succeeded in controlling most of the school, but sporadic fighting

continued into the night. At least some of the terrorists are believed to have escaped during all the confusion. Thirty-one of the militants are claimed to have been killed, and one, Nur-Pashi Kulaev, was captured alive.

Kulaev's eyewitness testimony during his trial in 2005 provided many disturbing details about the preparation of the attack and how it played out. It also raised questions—as did subsequent investigations by federal prosecutors, Russian and North Ossetian parliamentary commissions, and the European Court of Human Rights—regarding who was behind the attack and what the involvement of the Russian FSB may have been. Over the summer the school had been undergoing renovations by a team of Ingush workers, who apparently hid weapons in preparation for the attack. Documents emerged that seemed to prove the FSB's prior awareness that the event was being planned, and even that several of the organizers had been deliberately released from prison beforehand.[34] More cynical observers noted that the incident provided Russian president Vladimir Putin with a pretext to consolidate his power and that of Russia's security services, seeing the event as a watershed in the erosion of Russian democracy.

Kulaev claimed during his trial that one of the aims of the attack was to provoke an all-out war between the Ossetes and the Ingush-Chechens, and indeed some days later a reported 3,000 Ossetes held an anti-Ingush demonstration in Vladikavkaz.[35] But a corollary effect of the Beslan attack—and perhaps to an even greater degree the subsequent investigations, which involved much in the way of mutual recriminations between the Russian and North Ossetian authorities—has been a lasting legacy of tensions and distrust between citizens of North Ossetia and the federal administration in Moscow, as well as their own local government and law enforcement organizations, which were seen as embarrassingly inept.

The 2004 tragedy, commemorated by a heart-wrenching monument in Beslan as well as memorials in Moscow, Florence, and San Marino, remains very much alive in the psyche of Ossetes today. In September 2019 Russian journalist Yuri Dud released a three-hour documentary, which laid the blame for the catastrophic death toll squarely at the feet of the Russian government. Available on YouTube with English subtitles, the film has received over 20 million views. It does not appear that the innocent victims of Beslan will be forgotten any time soon.

5

Religion and National Identity: The Uatsdin

> *Our ancestors did not have churches and mosques. The* fyng *[ritual table] was their most accessible holy place. Here the Ossetes prayed, talked, made important decisions. And therefore, do not forget to behave at the table as one should behave near holy places.*
>
> Bibo Vataev, Ossetian actor (1939–2000)

As has been previously mentioned, during the "dark" centuries following the Mongol conquests of the mid-thirteenth century many Alans retreated into the remote valleys of the central Caucasus and contact with centralized religious authority became virtually nonexistent. Shrines that had apparently been constructed in honor of Christian figures reverted to almost purely pagan use, retaining only the most superficial relationship to the Christian saints to whom they were nominally dedicated. In the words of Russian historian Sergei Shtyrkov:

> Left without its pastors, the flock found itself without nourishment for several centuries, that is, it was left to its own devices or, rather, to the care of local elite families. This deprived the Ossetians of more than just the "instructive word," the spiritual supervision by the institutional Church. In fact, for many years they ceased to be even nominal Christians, in that there was no one to baptize them or to conduct the Eucharist.[1]

The Russian imperialist drive into the northern Caucasus by the end of the eighteenth century brought attempts by Orthodox missionaries to "re-Christianize" the long-isolated Ossetes,[2] but this process had still seen only limited success by the time of the Bolshevik Revolution. This event abruptly catapulted the Caucasian peoples—Circassians, Ossetes, Chechens, Avars, and many others—from a medieval, tribal, preliterate way of life almost directly into the rapidly industrializing, post-Christian world of the Soviet Union.

Seven decades later, the incipient fall of the USSR by the late 1980s precipitated all manner of identity-building efforts among its many constituent nations.[3] In Ossetia, as in Ukraine, the Baltics, and elsewhere, for many this involved an attempt to recover and revive an authentic "national" religion hearkening back to pre-Christian times.[4] Ossetian popular religion was initially accorded the formal name of "Ætsæg Din" by a group of nationalist intellectuals, who formed a cultural steering group called the Styr Nykhas ("Great Council") during the early 1990s. "Ætsæg" means "truthful" in Ossetian, while "*dīn*" is the Arabic Islamic form of an old Iranian name for the divine embodiment of a person's moral qualities, *daēnā*, now having the general meaning of "religion." Fearing that the term "Ætsæg Din" implied claims to universal truth that might offend Christians and Muslims, in 2010 Ossetian linguist Tamerlan Kambolov (b. 1959) coined the alternate designation "Uatsdin," which is now the more commonly heard term. Daurbek Makeev (b. 1961), perhaps the most familiar face among those promoting the ancient traditions, has preferred to call the movement the "Æss Din,"[5] in an attempt to trace it back to the Scythian tribe known as the As (but with somewhat unfortunate connotations in English).

At the urging of the Styr Nykhas, in 1994 the government of North Ossetia-Alania set aside land beside the sacred grove named for the legendary Ossetian hero-saint Khetag, said to have found refuge there when fleeing his enemies. A massive festival is celebrated at Khetag grove during the month of July in honor of Uastyrdzhi, who is believed to have offered the hero his protection. It is the largest annual public gathering in Ossetia. The Rekomy Bærægbon, also in honor of Uastyrdzhi, is held at the Rekom shrine in the Tsey Valley (near the border with South Ossetia) in mid-June. Apart from these well-attended public ceremonies, the most widely celebrated traditional festival—again, in honor of Uastyrdhzi—is Dzhiorgwyba (cf. Georgian Giorgoba, the feast of St. George), observed for a week in November all over North and South Ossetia.

Based on a survey published in 2010, 29 percent of Ossetes agreed with the statement "I profess the religious traditions of my ancestors; I worship the gods and forces of nature" (*ispoveduiu traditsionnuiu religiiu svoikh predkov, pokloniaius' bogam i silam prirody*). Some have taken this as a basis for claiming that nearly one third of Ossetians follow the traditional pagan religion (although they strongly object to the term "pagan").[6] Daurbek Makeev has been a prominent figure in promoting these "religious traditions of the ancestors," seeking to extract what he believes to be the "essence" of the Ossetes'

pre-Christian religion through an often strained exegesis of material found in the heroic epic of the Narts.[7] In fact, Makeev rejects the term "revival," stating that the Ossetes "are not reviving anything. They are trying to preserve what has come down to our day from our forefathers: the culture, customs and morality that are based on traditional beliefs."[8]

Despite its claims to antiquity and a vigorous rejection of associations with paganism, from a scholarly point of view the Uatsdin can be comfortably analyzed within the framework of New Religious Movements (NRMs) similar to other neo-pagan revivals taking place around the world, especially in Western countries, such as Iceland—where the neo-pagan Ásatrú (lit., "Belief in the Gods") is accorded official status alongside Lutheranism[9]—but notably as well throughout the European parts of the former Soviet Union.[10] In the Ossetian case, as with many others elsewhere, the promotion of pre-Christian religion has been embraced by those seeking to advance the cause of national identity.[11] The movement has been strongly attacked by Ossetia's Christian and Muslim leaders as representing a backslide into paganism, which is why the term has become so politicized. At the same time, these attacks have largely backfired since most Ossetes perceive them as an assault on national traditions they do not see as being incompatible with mainstream religions. That has not stopped the more vocal adherents of the "national religion" from denouncing Christianity and Islam as foreign faiths—a battle of absolutes that leaves ordinary Ossetes caught in the middle.

In the almost complete absence of any written tradition prior to the nineteenth century, the extent to which Ossetian rituals and celebrations being practiced today preserve or resemble those of the past cannot be known. As Shtyrkov observes:

> The fact of the matter is that in Northern Ossetia there is no distinctness about what is the Ossetian national (or ethnic) religion or what it should be. Nor is there any public consensus on the existence of a specific Ossetian religion. The nature of phenomena ascribed to the area of Ossetian spiritual culture is a point at issue over which there are clashing interpretations.[12]

The main function of the "revived" religion, as noted by Shtyrkov, is not as an individual faith system, but rather a social means "to protect the ethnic culture and save the nation from assimilation and disappearance."[13]

Notwithstanding certain doubtful aspects of the Uatsdin's formal reconstruction, many popular Ossetian rituals and celebrations do in fact display

features that are likely to be very old, in some cases pre-Christian and possibly going back even to Scythian times. For example, Scythians were known to be great drinkers, and Ossetian ceremonies typically involve the generous consumption of alcohol through repeated toasts. Indeed, the Ossetian word *kuyvd* means both "toast" and "prayer,"[14] reflecting the fact that during such ceremonies prayers to the gods are made in the form of toasts raised up to the sky. Another practice that was historically central to Ossetian rituals is animal sacrifice, usually an ox or a ram. (A three-year-old bull is preferred: the bull sacrifice is reminiscent of Mithraism.) Ossetes do not sacrifice pigs, an avoidance that can be traced back to the Scythians, as noted by Herodotus (4.63). Many Ossetian rituals make use of a small, round, three-legged table, called a *fyng*, which is already attested in Scythian times. The ritual meal set upon this table is also called a *fyng*.

The historical evolution of Ossetian religion is generally considered to have followed a trajectory of (1) an original paganism of a Scythian—that is, archaic Iranian—type, > (2) Christianization under Byzantine (and Georgian) influence from the tenth to thirteenth centuries, > (3) a "re-paganization" during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries due to the disruption of contacts with Byzantium following the Mongol invasions, > (4) a partial "re-Christianization" during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through the activities of missionaries from Georgia, > (5) further re-Christianization by Russian missionaries beginning in the late eighteenth century, > (6) imposed atheism upon a still superficially Christianized population throughout the Soviet period from 1920 to 1991, > and finally, (7) a "resurgence" of "traditional Ossetian paganism" from the late 1980s up to the present.

This progression/regression narrative may be somewhat misleading, in that it implies a higher degree of periodic Christianization than may in fact be the case. On logical grounds, it is somewhat easier to believe that the religiosity of the general Ossetian population maintained a strong underlying continuity, absorbing and adapting Christian and other influences—including Islamic and neighboring Caucasian traditions—even while preserving its own distinct and essentially Iranian character. This is in fact the view of those currently promoting the Uatsdin as Ossetia's "national" religion, although their desire to strip it of these historical "accretions," in the absence of a clear understanding of history, shows much in common with so-called fundamentalist religious movements across the world which contemporary historians of religion tend to see as products of modernity rather than as genuine reflections of the past.[15]

The standard account is also slightly complicated, especially in the western, Digor-speaking parts of Ossetian territory, by the fact that a significant proportion of the population—representing perhaps 20 percent of the national total—came under the influence of Islam through contacts with neighboring Circassians (Adyghe) and Karachays (Turkic tribes who settled in the North Caucasus after the Mongol conquests). In contrast to the "Christianized" Ossetes who assimilated the identities of their traditional deities and ritual celebrations to those of Christian saints, "Muslim" Ossetes, lacking an Islamic "pantheon" to which these could be connected, retained the pagan-Christian framework of synthesis that had been developing since the tenth century. In fact—as may be noted for Abkhazia as well—the popular ritual life of "Muslim" and "Christian" Ossetes is essentially identical. As Charles King notes in the context of the early nineteenth century, "the lines between being obviously Christian or obviously Muslim could be indistinct. In the Caucasus people in both religious categories enjoyed alcohol, were far removed from clerical authority, and practiced a form of folk religion that bore only scant resemblance to the orthodox varieties found elsewhere."[16]

Many of the most prominent Ossetian deities bear names that are derived from those of Christian saints, and do not directly preserve their original Iranian appellations. Thus, the name of the most widely worshipped divine figure, Uastyrdzhi, stems from an Ossetian pronunciation of "St. George," attaching the prefix "Ua(t)-", meaning "holy" to "Giergi," even though he appears to be largely a manifestation of the ancient Iranian god of contracts and warriors known elsewhere as Mithra. Similarly, the widely attested Indo-European god of thunder, lightning, and rain is called Uatsilla by the Ossetians, his name being a form of "St. Elijah" (Ua(t)- + Ilyas). The name of Tutyr, the god of wolves (a perpetual source of worry for the pastoral Ossetians), derives from (St.) "Theodore," and that of his sometime opponent Fælværa, the protector of livestock, may be a conflation of the Christian saint names Florus and Laurus.

On the other hand, this is not the case for all Ossetian deities. The title of the supreme creator god, Khuytsauty Khuytsau ("God of all gods"), is entirely Iranian. Kurdalægon, the heavenly blacksmith (forging being a vital activity for the premodern Ossetes and their combative Alan ancestors), is also an easily recognizable Iranian figure. His name means "the Aryan Blacksmith, Wærgon (Wolf)," and his analog Kaveh/Kawa figures prominently in the Persian and Kurdish mythological traditions.

Other Ossetian divine names are constructed of combinations. For example, that of Donbettyr, the lord of the waters, is composed of the Ossetian word for water, "*don*" (an ancient Iranian term preserved in the names of many east European rivers including the Don, the Danube, the Dnieper, and the Dniester, as well as the Don River in England, which derives from a Celtic cognate), and "*bettyr,*" a corruption of (St.) Peter. The Christian archangels Michael and Gabriel are conflated in the Ossetian tradition into a single character, Mikaelgæbyrta, a figure associated with fertility and also with the underworld. For Æfsati, the god of the hunt, the etymology is unclear; his name may derive from the Abkhazian word *a.psaa.t*^{w}, meaning "bird," or it may be a corruption of (St.) Eustace, with whom he is associated.

The Ossetian annual calendar is filled with popular rituals and celebrations, some of which are carried out within the home among the immediate family, and others in sacred outdoor spaces by the larger community. Household rituals are typically centered on the hearth chain (*safa*), by which a cauldron hangs from the ceiling over a fire. (Recall that fire is one of the sacred elements in Indo-Iranian tradition, being hypostasized as a deity in Hinduism and Zoroastrianism.) Communal ceremonies, on the other hand, tend to be held in sacred groves or on exposed mountaintops where there is usually a shrine, generally constructed of wood but sometimes of stone. There are at least sixty such fixed celebrations held throughout the year.[17]

Ossetian rituals consist in the first instance of holding a feast, called a *kuyvd* (from the verb *kuvyn*, "to pray"[18]). Traditionally only men participate, although nowadays sometimes women sit separately as nonparticipants especially if the setting is a private home. The ceremony, held while sitting around a table (*fyng*), is led by the eldest man present who is called the *khishtær* (lit., "the eldest"). His role is to invoke the deity through the offering of a toast (*kuyvd*, which simultaneously refers to both the toast itself and the ceremonial gathering as a whole, e.g., "We're going to a *kuyvd* next Saturday"). In other words, for Ossetes, the essential form of prayer is that of raising a skyward toast to the deity being addressed.

Beer is the usual drink offered, although it may be substituted by different kinds of strong liquor. With all the men standing up, the *khishtær* offers the first toast to Khuystauty Khuystsau. All sit and begin to eat, drink, and talk. Then all arise once again and the *khishtær* offers the second toast, this time to

Uastyrdzhi. The cycle repeats, with the third toast being offered to the deity or the occasion (birth, marriage, funeral, etc.) in honor of which the ceremony is being held. The other men present, in order of seniority, may then begin to offer toasts, to honor the host, the departed ancestors, relatives, children, and so on. (The toast sequence in Ossetia is nearly identical to that seen among the Georgians, especially in the Svaneti region.) The toasts continue to be made throughout the ensuing feast, while three ceremonial pies (*chiritæ*; Rus. *pirogi*) are consumed along with meat from an animal sacrificed for the occasion.

It is interesting that Russian anthropologists noted as late as the early twentieth century that ritual animal sacrifices and auguries continued to be carried out on stone slabs adjacent to Christian churches, according to what are presumed to have been extremely archaic pre-Christian procedures.[19] (Such practices have been seen at Armenian and Georgian churches as well.) A major annual mountaintop ceremony held at the Usanet dzuar shrine in South Ossetia commemorates a tradition claiming that in former times once a year a deer would come to that place to offer itself as a sacrifice, but as people came to disregard the necessary rituals the deer stopped coming. Nowadays every spring thousands of people make the pilgrimage up to the exposed summit where one finds the ruined foundations of a stone shrine—most likely originally a Christian church in medieval times—and leave offerings of beer.

Communal ceremonies in Ossetia are also typically accompanied by a form of dance known as *simd*, which is held outdoors in a natural space cleared specifically for the purpose. Although this dance can take various forms, it is characteristically carried out in a circle. An especially distinctive version has one ring of dancers standing upon the shoulders of another, constituting a kind of double-decker dance troupe, which is impressive to witness. Legend has it that the *simd* was invented by the hero Soslan, a scene recounted in an episode of the Nart epic. A similar two-tiered dance is performed at some shrines in northeastern Georgia, Tusheti in particular.[20]

Ossetes who have absorbed Christian or Islamic tendencies generally refer to the members of the traditional pantheon as "saints" or "spirits," rather than as the deities they originally were. Most Ossetian divine figures are strongly associated with natural phenomena, and important ceremonies are typically held in natural settings. Church and mosque attendance in Ossetia is relatively

low. "Ossetians pray in nature," notes journalist Alan Mamiev. "Every family has its own shrine on their land."[21]

Slava Dzhanaity, a well-known Ossetian artist and architect, writes of the Ossetian preference for praying outdoors: "Gratefully appreciating the works of nature, the ancient sage did not build gigantic structures that stand out and argue with the environment created by the world's best architect mother nature, just as he did not try to restrict the presence of the Spirit within fixed boundaries."[22] Dzhanaity emphasizes that in the case of Ossetian sacred sites "the shrine is both the building itself and the land that surrounds it; the whole is in complete harmony with nature. Therefore, the shrine should not rise above nature or make it ugly; Ossetian shrines are constructed only of local natural materials, and the architectural lines are designed to mimic the surrounding natural features."[23] "It is these sacred places that give us our energy," concurs Ruslan Kuchiev, current president of the Styr Nykhas. "You have to be part of nature, that's what our ancestors thought. You have to live in harmony with the things that surround you."[24]

Such sentiments are not surprising when one considers that the Ossetes were an almost entirely rural/pastoral people until the Soviet period. Although today more than a fifth of all Ossetes live in the North Ossetian capital, Vladikavkaz (approximately 210,000, out of a total worldwide population of some 950,000) where they are highly Russified both linguistically and culturally, life in the nearby mountain villages remains quite traditional, and even urban Ossetes typically have family or other connections to rural areas. City-dwellers will often recall their childhood visits to grandparents still living in the family's ancestral villages, and many still return for annual ceremonies or other occasions.

Uatsdin advocate Daurbek Makeev emphasizes the importance of maintaining these connections with the older generation, who presumably remain more strongly rooted in the nature-based traditions. He sees the Æss Din, as he calls it, as representing "the worldview of the ancestors, which can be found in mythology."[25] "The problem," he argues, "is that ordinary people don't give any thought to what traditional heritage their rituals and customs actually belong to. I took on the responsibility of showing people the roots of their culture, which can be found in the Nart epic." Makeev's approach is essentialist and ahistorical, however; he ignores the process through which Ossetian traditions have evolved over the centuries and millennia including

their interactions with other peoples, claiming instead to have uncovered an everlasting truth. "The framework [i.e., of the rituals and stories] is changeable," he says, "but the meaning is eternal." Yet the Nart sagas are in fact a typical Indo-European heroic epic like the Greek Iliad or the Persian Book of Kings, not a religious text.

Nevertheless, the essentialist message of Makeev's interpretation emphasizes the tradition's connection to the natural world. "The ultimate divine reality is light," he explains, reflecting a notion that can be found in a range of Iranian religions stretching all the way back into prehistory. "Unlike in Christianity which separates God from his Creation, we take a collective approach where everything is interconnected."[26]

This is not to say that environmental concern is particularly central to Makeev's discourse. But when asked about the tendency of Ossetes to spoil their beautiful mountains by carelessly tossing away garbage, he blames the habit on Christian influence. "They think that only the specific plot of land on which a shrine sits is holy," he complains, pointing to the Christian distinction between sacred and profane space. "They go to Rekom and they treat it as if it were a church, separate from the surrounding area. No one would throw garbage at Rekom itself, but they don't realize that there is no division between sacred and non-sacred land; every place has its resident deity, who will be offended if anyone violates its sanctity."

Slava Dzhanaity became intrigued by the traditional beliefs and practices upon undertaking the restoration of the Rekom shrine after it was burned to the ground by a careless drunk in March 1995.[27] He has since published several books on Ossetian popular religious traditions, emphasizing their philosophical aspects in contrast to the practical focus taken by Makeev. Dzhanaity's paintings tend to feature folkloric subjects taken from the Nart sagas, or battle scenes recalling Alan and Scythian times. His work has become emblematic for Ossetian culture, and his paintings of heroic figures are reproduced everywhere. A Uatsdin symbol designed by Dzhanaity, somewhat resembling a triple *taijitu* (Taoist yin-yang symbol) with three crosses representing the "Three Tears of God" (*tri slezi Boga*—three holy shrines built upon sites where God is said to have shed tears upon the death of the Nart hero Batradz), is seen everywhere throughout North and South Ossetia on T-shirts, car stickers, and advertisements. When I asked Dzhanaity about the design he

denied any Taoist inspiration or even that he had come up with it himself. "I did not design the symbol," he insisted, "I merely perceived it."[28]

Estimating the actual number of those who practice the Ossetian popular religion is impossible, but clearly there are many thousands of sympathizers throughout North and South Ossetia and beyond. Many such individuals can be found within the military, and also among hunters and other sportsmen, no doubt attracted by the sort of values they see reflected in the heroic Narts. Some intellectuals also find it appealing, perhaps thanks to its valorization of national culture. A few Ossetian scholars, on the other hand, have dismissed the Uatsdin as an invented religion, bearing little connection to the original context of the premodern culture it purports to preserve. Even Slava Dzhanaity, who has played such an important role in sensitizing modern Ossetians to their ancient traditions, acknowledges that the Uatsdin is a modern invention. "They created it in order to save Ossetian culture," he says, "and that is good. But whether it will prove to have any enduring force, I don't know."[29]

Styr Nykhas president Ruslan Kuchiev prefers to avoid the mention of religion at all, claiming that what the Uatsdin's advocates are championing is nothing more than ancient Ossetian values and rituals, which are embodied in the social code known as *iron æghdæu* ("Ossetian traditions"). In this sense he considers that a majority of Ossetes can be considered "followers," since many practice and respect these rituals and values even while outwardly identifying as Christians or Muslims. He believes that Ossetian youth are showing an increasing interest in the principles and practices of *iron æghdæu*. "I was driving along the highway one day," he recalls,

> when I saw a group of young people throw a bag of garbage out of their car window. I passed them and forced them to pull over. "Are you Ossetians?" I asked them. "Is this your land? Why are you doing this?" "You are our elder", they answered me; "we made a mistake", Then they went and picked up their garbage. What would have moved them to do that if not our *iron æghdæu*?[30]

Precisely because the lines between Ossetian tradition and imported Abrahamic religions are often so fluid, the Uatsdin movement has triggered strong condemnations and official complaints from Ossetia's Christian and Muslim leaders. Even the Russian Orthodox archbishop Leonidas in Moscow has sought to silence it by trying to have Makeev's books banned as "extremist

literature." Himself a former general in the Russian internal security service, Leonidas has enlisted the help of his FSB contacts in an attempt to undermine Makeev's activities. Church leaders have also been lobbying for the construction of an official Orthodox church at the site of the Rekom shrine in hopes of drawing away its enthusiasts, but this effort has so far not met with success.

Such attacks do not appear to have diminished the attachment ordinary Ossetes seem to feel for their ancient nature-based traditions. Indeed, on the face of it, the level of popular participation in "folk rituals" in all parts of Ossetia vastly exceeds that to be seen in the country's churches and mosques. This would appear to suggest that Ossetian neo-paganism (even if its practitioners balk at calling it that) may be enjoying a level of success unrivalled by its analogues anywhere in the world today.

The Rekom Shrine

According to a legend preserved in the Nart epic, the Rekom shrine is one of the "Three Tears of God." (Mykalygabyrtæ is located high in the mountains to the southeast of Rekom, and Tarandzhelos is just south of Mt. Kazbek in Georgian territory.) The first written mention of Rekom is in a letter from the Orthodox priest Ioann Bolgarskii to Antonio, Bishop of Astrakhan and Stavropol in 1780: "In Tsey there is a wooden church named the Holy Trinity built of mahogany … In this church there is some wall writing and a few images that bear signatures in Georgian letters."[31]

Located in the eastern part of the breathtakingly scenic and heavily forested Tsey Valley about 80 km southwest of Vladikavkaz near the border with South Ossetia, Rekom is the most important traditional religious shrine in Ossetia. The site is accessed on foot by a short climb from the road crossing the valley, at a sharp bend a few kilometers past the rock portraits of Stalin and Kosta mentioned in Chapter 4 but before reaching the ski resort. A large sign is posted at the trailhead listing the things one must not do when approaching the shrine (wear shoes, drink alcohol, be a female, etc.).

Nestled within a clearing about 1 km from the road, the Rekom shrine resembles a log cabin with rows of animal skulls lined up across the front and

four stylized posts rising from each of the two sides of the building, each with a bird on top. (This latter detail was added only during the last renovation two decades ago.) The shrine is said to date back to 1382,[32] but, according to Slava Dzhanaity who oversaw its most recent restoration during the late 1990s there are four earlier archaeological strata, which have revealed items dating back to the second century BCE.[33] To date over 11,000 relics have been found at the site, suggesting a long history of use as a sacred space (see Figure 5.1).

In any case, being made of wood the shrine has been rebuilt numerous times over the centuries, with a formal restoration being carried out under the Soviets in 1972. During the course of this reconstruction it was determined that the structure had burned down several times during its history, most recently in 1995 after which it was painstakingly rebuilt through the efforts of a group led by Dzhanaity.[34]

The sacred territory stretched for 21 km along the Tsey River through lands historically belonging to the powerful Tsæræzontæ clan. Originally no one

Figure 5.1 Rekom shrine, North Ossetia.

was allowed to live there, and the nearest abode was the Tsæræzontæ residence in Nuzal some 12 km to the northeast. By the seventeenth century, however, people had begun to settle the once forbidden land. At the entrance to the Tsey gorge at Buron, where barefoot pilgrims formerly began the 10 km climb toward the shrine, stood a stone stele bearing the inscription "the sanctuary of the blessing of the path of Uastyrdzhi." Thus, the approach is itself considered to be an integral part of the shrine, providing the devotee with an opportunity for spiritual inspiration and reflection while passing through stunning natural scenery.

Along the way were erected numerous prayer altars, called *kuvandon*. These three-tiered structures consisted of an outer circle of stones surrounding a square platform upon which was placed a stone stele, which usually contained a niche for offerings. Such *kuvandon* can be seen today all across Ossetia, and the fact that the niches generally contain piles of coins attests to their continued use. According to Dzhanaity, the outer circle represents the universe, the platform, the Earth, and the stele, the spirit, which permeates it.[35]

In former times the sacred cabin at Rekom was filled with all manner of offerings, including war helmets, arrows and quivers, Christian icons and crosses, bowls, mortars, bells, jugs, and various other vessels.[36] Russian archaeologist V.A. Kuznetsov considers the shrine's character and use to have evolved in three stages: first, as a pagan sanctuary during the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries (he notes, e.g., that its foundations are not laid out in a way that would indicate the existence of an apse), then, perhaps under the influence of Georgian missionaries (as suggested by the Georgian inscriptions noted by Bolgarskii), into a Christian church, before finally reverting to pagan use by the late nineteenth century. In fact such a framework may belie a strong underlying continuity of pagan traditions, a possibility for which Kuznetsov allows.[37]

According to legend, it was Uastyrdzhi himself who built the original shrine. He is said to have done this without human assistance, using "eternal" wood brought by oxen from the forest behind the clearing where the shrine now stands. Uastyrdzhi is a god exclusively for men: women may not even pronounce his name, but simply refer to him as *lægty dzuar*, "the

Spirit (Patron) of Men." Women are, therefore, forbidden from approaching the temple, but they may ask the designated prayer leader, called the *Dzuary læg* ("Holy man"), to pray on their behalf. The female interdiction against pronouncing Uastyrdzhi's name recalls a more generalized ancient taboo on speaking the names of the Scythian, and later the Sarmatian and Alan warrior gods, figures from whom Uastyrdzhi is likely to some extent descended.

The Annual Ceremony (Rekomy Bærægbon)

During the period of enforced atheism under the Soviets public ceremonies connected with religion and local traditions were discouraged. While the Dzhiorgwyba festival is celebrated at home and continued to be practiced throughout Soviet times, public sites such as Rekom came to be largely abandoned. The renewed attention to such shrines, often involving their loving restoration through the efforts of enthusiastic volunteers, came about beginning in the final years of the USSR, as the country's various constituent nationalities began to assert their identities.

As a sacred space the Rekom shrine is subject to various taboos. Women, being forbidden from approaching the shrine, instead perform their rites at a smaller one devoted to Mady Maïræm ("Mother Mary"), which is located along the same path. Omnivorous animals, including pigs and chickens, must not be allowed to enter the shrine area, and they are not consumed as part of the ritual. Only herbivorous animals such as oxen or lamb may be sacrificed and consumed. (Fish are also permitted.) Devotees are supposed to remove their shoes before approaching the shrine and no belts may be worn, since these may be made from the leather of forbidden animals.[38] In practice not everyone observes these restrictions, however.

It is considered best not to talk when following the path through the woods to the shrine, since one is meant to be preparing oneself mentally for prayer. The group led by Slava Dzhanaity who restored the shrine in 1995 has sought to ban the drinking of alcohol, considering it to be incompatible with the spirit of performing the rituals with a clear mind. But local villagers, who prefer to

include drinking as part of the ritual, have taken to performing the Rekomy Bærægbon a week earlier so as to avoid conflict.

On the appointed day people begin to arrive early in the morning, trudging up the path bearing massive quantities of food—especially *chiritæ* pies—and plastic bottles of homemade Ossetian beer, a dark, weak brew called *bægæny*. The women, banned from the main shrine, separate off and gather a short distance away, gossiping among themselves and largely giving off the appearance of simply biding their time while the males (including boys) indulge in their ceremony. A small group of young men slaughter and butcher a sheep, then boil the meat in a huge cauldron over a wood fire. Men stand or sit at leisure all over the area, chatting, watching, and waiting, perhaps meditating upon the spectacular natural beauty of the place.

The main ceremony begins at about 1 p.m., when the Dzuary Læg approaches the shrine barefoot and bare-headed and holding white flags. It is he who makes the first prayer-toast, conducted with a bowl of *bægæny,* which has been prepared onsite by soaking wheat flour in water for a week. (A few people travel to Rekom the weekend before the ceremony in order to do this.) Any man can potentially serve as the Dzuary Læg, but, in accordance with *iron æghdæu*, he must prepare for this role by remaining clean and abstaining from sex, improper behavior, and bad thoughts throughout the two months preceding Rekomy Bærægbon. The lack of a specialized priestly class recalls the situation in Scythian society, where rituals were led by the tribal chief or by the head of the family. A similar situation pertains today in Abkhazia and among Christian Orthodox communities in mountain villages of Georgia that lack full-time priests.

As at other holy sites in Ossetia, visitors typically leave cash donations (*misainag*), whereas in the past they might leave bows, arrows, buttons, beads, or coins. Nowadays most people leave bills; the money is collected afterward and put toward the costs of organizing the ceremony. While today the Rekomy Bærægbon takes place on a single Saturday afternoon, in the past the ceremonies used to last a full week, so families would construct temporary lodgings nearby for use during their visit. They would spend their time singing, dancing, making beer, and slaughtering rams or oxen for festive meals they would offer to their neighbors. Storytellers would relate the deeds

of heroic ancestors for the entertainment and edification of the youth. Young men would engage in horse-racing and archery competitions, making the event, in the words of Ossetian folklorist Gastan Agnaev, "something like an Ossetian Olympic Games."[39] The horse-racing tradition was revived in 2014 at the Daudzhyti shrine (aka Dziri dzuar) about 14 km northeast of Vladikavkaz. It was won by a girl, which was highly significant given that Daudzhyti, like Rekom, is a male shrine where women are prohibited.[40]

Figure 5.2 Double-decker dance, Rekom shrine, North Ossetia.

A highlight of the Rekomy Bærægbon is the ancient ritual dance known as the *simd*. It is held within a space called the *simdy fæz*, an artificially cleared platform ringed by stones, which is found at all Ossetian holy sites. As at many other such locations, the dancing ground at Rekom—in fact, there were initially three of them—fell into disuse and was covered by mudslides and brush. In recent years volunteers have once again cleared a space for dancing, but it is much smaller than those which existed previously.

The *simd* dance is performed by men; women, who are banned from the sacred space, watch from a distance. A particularly impressive moment occurs when the dancers form a two-level ring: the lower circle consists of dancers with their arms on each other's shoulders, providing a support for the second circle who stand upon them (see Figure 5.2). The legendary origin of the *simd* is described in an episode from the Narts:

> Once the Nart youths gathered together on the plain of Zhilakhar, and there they began the great round-dance, their favourite dance, the Shimd, which lasts a long time, and in which all take part. Shoshlan distinguished himself at this dance, and none could perform it better than he. He danced well standing on the ground, and even better he danced standing on the shoulders of the younger Narts forming a circle below. Thus, the Shimd went in a two-tiered ring.[41]

According to T.K. Salbiev, the form is cosmological: the dancers form an intermediate layer between the earth and the heavens.[42] Afterward the young dancers relocate to a nearby "girl's dancing place," the *chyzdzhyty kafæn fæz*, beside the so-called Prayer Rock or *kuvæn dur*. It is believed that any couple getting engaged there will have a happy marriage.

The afternoon continues with eating, and speeches by community leaders that are often punctuated by loud collective cheers from the all male audience. A few of the more thoughtful men take food and drink over to the women who are gathered some distance away. After four or five hours the crowd starts to thin out as the men gather up their leftover food, rejoin the women and begin the trek back down to the highway where they will all simultaneously attempt to extract their haphazardly parked vehicles from the roadside fray before beginning the journey home.

The Uzunag Festival in Digoria

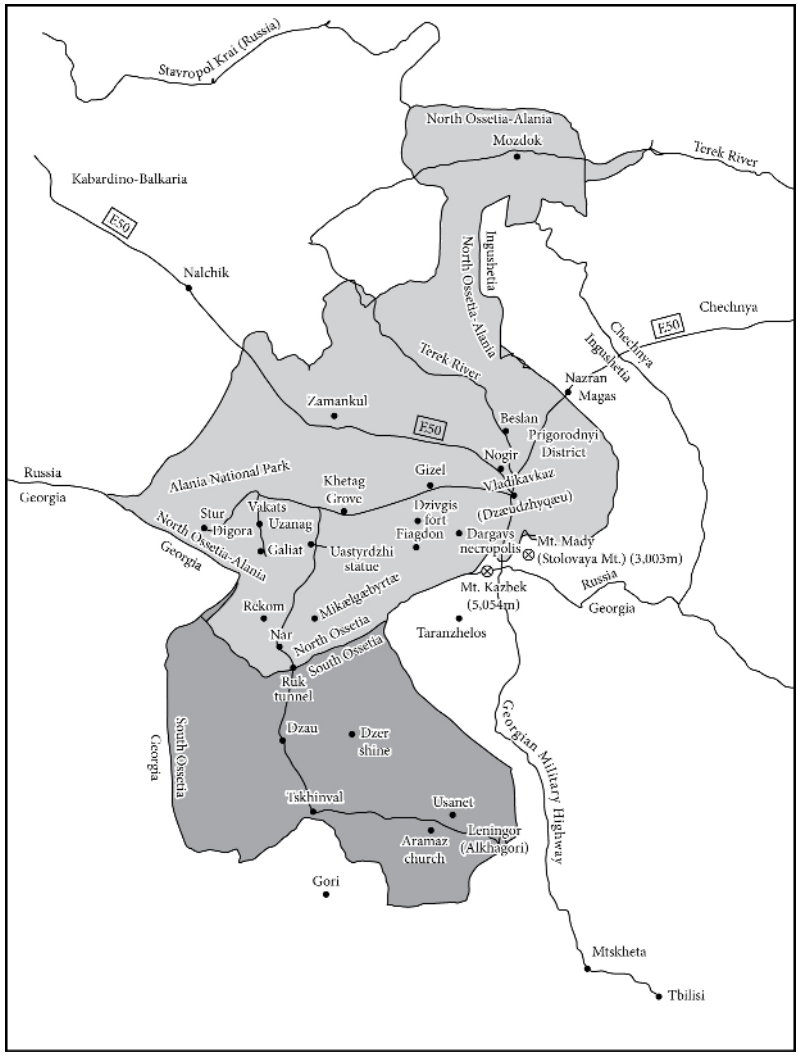
Every summer on the third Saturday in July Digorians—most of whom have migrated out of their native region to Vladikavkaz or other cities—return to their ancestral villages. On this occasion those with family connections to the village of Vakats (pop. 87) congregate in a clearing high in the mountains about 200 m below a shrine to Ossetia's most popular divine figure, Uastyrdzhi. Most arrive by car, navigating a steep and treacherous dirt track that zigzags up the slope from Vakats village far below. Families begin to arrive about midday, unloading food from the trunks of their cars and congregating in groups where they greet relatives and friends they may not have seen since the year before.

The men gather in one area and the women and children in another. Some of the women work to set the long banquet tables with fresh fruits and vegetables, while a few of them prepare *chiritæ* in a small covered kitchen area. Most of the men simply stand and chat, but those who have had some good fortune during the year—such as a marriage, a birth, or getting over an illness—sacrifice a bull or a ram. A sufficiently large individual is then entrusted with chopping the victims into rather large chunks, which are thrown into massive cauldrons to boil. The men go off a few at a time to make the short hike up to the shrine, which, like most traditional holy places in Ossetia, is forbidden to women.

The shrine itself, which is about 2 m high with walls of stone and a flat tin roof, is said to have been constructed during the nineteenth century by a young shepherd named Uzunag after receiving a miraculous visitation from Uastyrdzhi at the site. Nestled within a wooded incline on mountainside, the small building is filled with the skulls of slaughtered animals. There is a table with offerings of beer, and an altar set into the wall where visitors place cash offerings (called *nisainag* in the Digorian dialect).

The rest of the afternoon is given over to eating and drinking, the beverage of choice being traditional Ossetian *bægæny* beer. The ongoing meal is punctuated by toasts in accordance with the *kuyvd* ritual, which is the basis of all Ossetian social gatherings. There is singing, dancing, and sport competitions among the youths.

Similar get-togethers take place all over Ossetia throughout the summer months. For most Ossetes these are more social rituals than religious ones. Few know much about the stories or figures connected with individual shrines, and those that claim to do so often disagree with each other. Participation in traditional ceremonies is an affirmation of community and is not seen by the average Ossete as being incompatible with a nominal Christian or Muslim identity.



Map 3 North and South Ossetia Today

6

South Ossetia: A Fragile Independence

Get rid of Ossetians in responsible positions—police and teachers first. I authorise you to search their homes and confiscate any weapons, daggers, big knives or axes you find. There will be an end to South Ossetia.[1]

Zviad Gamsakhurdia, President of Georgia, 1991–2

Mentions of South Ossetia in the Western media—and in most cases in academia as well—nearly always parrot the Georgian narrative. South Ossetians are invariably labeled as "separatists" and their Russian protectors as "occupying forces." These labels reflect an unexamined and irrational bias that ignores many facts. Anyone who spends even one day in South Ossetia will immediately sense that most of what one has heard about the place is false, and wonder how in this day and age of ostensibly free and independent reporting the telling of its story has in Western countries been so one-sided.

Tiny, isolated, impoverished South Ossetia has even earned its place as a Hollywood villain in the Marvel Comics *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* series,[2] the setting for the development of a new "Overkill" bomb technology that crazed "separatists" are threatening to inflict upon the world. In order to steal this terrifying doomsday weapon, intrepid agents Grant Ward and Leo Fitz boldly and brilliantly manage to sneak across the border into this forbidding territory—a border which I can attest from personal experience is easily traversed by car. Hollywood similarly demonized South Ossetia in Renny Harlin's 2011 box-office flop *Five Days of War*. A very different version of the conflict is presented in the Russian feature film *Olympus Inferno* (dir. Igor Voloshin, 2009).

The more serious question is whether the Ossetes living on the southern flank of the Caucasus can rightly claim this territory as their own, or whether they are—as the Georgians would have it—merely "visitors" who have outstayed their welcome. The history of Ossetian/Alan presence south of the Daryal Pass is vigorously, sometimes bitterly contested through competing Georgian and Ossetian storylines, and remains extremely difficult to establish with any degree of certitude.

The more extreme claims on both sides are surely exaggerated, and in some cases are clearly spurious. For example, the suggestion often heard on the Georgian side that Ossetes, "ungrateful guests on Georgian land," have been present in South Ossetia only since the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries can easily be disproven, while the idea put forward by some Ossetian scholars that the Bronze/Iron Age Koban culture (*c.* 1100 to 400 BCE) was ethnically Iranic (and hence proto-Ossetian) is highly doubtful. The South Ossetian archaeologist Boris Tekhov long held that the Koban people were proto-Kartvelian—ancestral to today's Georgians—so his subsequent change of heart in coming around to advocating an Iranic identity may have been due more to political than scientific reasons.[3]

Sarmatian/Alan activities in the southern Caucasus are documented from the first century CE onward, but cases of actual settlement are less clear. Alan tombs dating to the fifth–seventh centuries have been found at Edys and Styrfaz in South Ossetia.[4] The tenth-century Persian geographer Ibn Rusta refers to the inhabitants of the Dvaleti region as "Tual-As," whom the Russian Orientalist Vladimir Minorsky quite reasonably identifies as "probably an Alan tribe."[5] The Georgian chronicles state that in the 1260s during the reign of David VII (1243–69) a large number of Alans fled south through the Daryal Pass to escape the Mongol Golden Horde led by Berke Khan. According to this account, the Georgian ruler welcomed a "multitude" of Alan "princes" who settled in Georgia along with their entourages. However, a mere few decades later in 1292 these same Alans—or "Os," as they are referred to in Georgian—took over the town of Gori and called in Mongol reinforcements against the Georgians. "The hostility between Georgians and Os dates from this period," the chronicler concludes.[6]

The chief of the Alans during this time is known to history as the "Os-Bagatyr," the "Hero of the Os[setes]." A small shrine in the village of Nuzal

in the Alagir Gorge of North Ossetia is dedicated to his memory and to that of his clan, the Tsæræzontæ, who continued to lord over the area until modern times. The Georgians saw him differently. According to the Georgian chronicles, this refugee-turned Mongol ally "ravaged Kartli and Trialeti, drive off the landlords, and the inhabitants of Kartli knew great suffering."[7]

While the Ossetes of the northern slope of the Caucasus willingly accepted Russian suzerainty from 1774, Georgia (more specifically the eastern part, Kartli-Kakheti) was not incorporated into the Russian Empire until more than a quarter century later in 1801. At that time the Georgian Machabeli and Eristavi families were acknowledged by Russia as being in charge of territories where Ossetes lived, but it does not appear that they exercised any real control over the Ossetian peasant population. The Russian imperial administration recognized "South Ossetia" as a distinct region within Georgia. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century Ossetes of the South Caucasus lived essentially independent of their nominal Georgian overlords.[8] The Ossetes lived mainly in rural areas, however. The population of Tskhinval in the nineteenth century was about half Jewish, with the remainder consisting almost entirely of ethnic Georgians and Armenians.

Ossetes in Georgia during the Twentieth Century

The argument over the Ossetian presence south of the Daryal Pass has today taken on an international dimension. South Ossetia, while considered by most of the world as a breakaway region of Georgia, has in fact functioned as an independent country (official name: Republic of South Ossetia-State of Alania) since 1991. No amount of pretending can change the fact that during this time it has never been a part of Georgia in any meaningful or operational sense. Nor has it become a de facto part of Russia, as is sometimes claimed, though its inhabitants would no doubt be better off if it did.

In the collective mind of the Ossetes, the overriding theme of twentieth century is what they refer to as the "three genocides" when Georgians attempted to seize control of South Ossetia and expel ethnic Ossetes from

the territory, which Georgians refer to alternately as Samachablo or northern Shida Kartli and consider their own. Having been on the receiving end of these three campaigns and the political ideology that instigated them, it is almost inconceivable that South Ossetians will ever accept to be a part of Georgia, whatever the world may say, think, or wish.

The first "genocide" took place from 1918 to 1920, during the brief period of Georgian independence after the fall of the Russian Empire until the country's absorption into the USSR in 1921. At that time Ossetes inhabiting the southern slopes of the Caucasus were mostly peasants living under the yoke of Georgian landlords who had increasingly consolidated their hold throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The Ossetes supported the Bolshevik movement, as it seemed to promise recognition of their rights to the land upon which they lived and worked. Beginning in 1918 there were several Ossetian uprisings against the nominal Georgian landowners. The fledgling government in Tbilisi, meanwhile, was Mensheviks who saw the Ossetes as fifth columnists and called for their expulsion.

Anywhere from 3,000 to 7,000 Ossetes were killed as part of Georgia's ethnic cleansing campaign or died while trying to cross over the mountains into Soviet-controlled North Ossetia. A further 50,000 were exiled into Soviet territory by the end of 1920, at which time South Ossetia already had lost two-thirds of its population.[9] Many of the refugees settled in Nogir ("New Ossetia") just north of Vladikavkaz, where the population still speaks the southern Kudar dialect today. The Georgian campaign to eliminate Ossetes from the southern Caucasus was halted only by the Soviet invasion, after which the Ossetes were granted an autonomous *oblast* within the newly created Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. This solution provided little respite, however, to the two-thirds of South Caucasus Ossetes who lived outside the formal boundaries of the South Ossetian district, in the Gori and Kazbegi regions, in the capital, Tbilisi, and in other areas of the Georgian SSR.

Under the Soviet system which called for a "fraternity of nations" these tensions were reduced or obscured. Even so, Robert Kulumbekov argues that "[t]he presence of South Ossetia in the Georgian SSR from 1922 to 1990 can be considered a de jure situation … this decision was not recognized by the population of South Ossetia, as evidenced by numerous protests in 1926, 1934,

1944, 1949, 1958, and the ensuing repression."[10] In fact Ossetes have long dreamed that their two regions would be united into a single political entity. In 1925 on two occasions delegations of North and South Ossetian leaders submitted petitions to Stalin asking to be unified into one administrative unit. Stalin's position was unambiguous: the petitions were rejected and the delegates were shot.[11]

The newly created Soviet identity—combined with an official downplaying of the violence that preceded it—allowed the cultural commonalities between the Georgians and Ossetes to shine through. Intermarriages became common, with the result that by the end of the Soviet period ethnic Ossetes were 66 percent of the population in their autonomous oblast with half of the remaining number being mixed Ossetian-Georgian families. An even greater number of Ossetes—around 100,000—lived outside the oblast in other parts of Georgia.[12]

At the same time, the Soviet period saw ongoing efforts by the Georgian government to promote the Georgianization of the republic's ethnic minorities, particularly in the realm of education. This provoked a reaction from South Ossetian intellectuals, who began actively promoting their own language and national identity. Both the South Ossetian Research Institute and the South Ossetian University were established as early as 1932, and the newly founded Iryston and Hussar Alania publishing houses made available works in Ossetian. The Roman alphabet was used for writing Ossetian starting in 1923, but in 1938 a new policy was brought into place whereby Cyrillic would be used in North Ossetia and the Georgian alphabet in the south, thus causing a literary rupture between the two Ossetias.

Inter-ethnic relations were nevertheless largely peaceful until the rise of Georgian nationalism during the late 1980s, which claimed the republic's territory for their own and relegated other ethnicities to the status of "visitors." The most vocal proponent of this attitude was the long-standing Georgian dissident, expert on American literature, and latterly politician Zviad Gamsakhurdia, beginning in 1989 as Soviet power was on its last legs. Gamsakhurdia publicly referred to Ossetes as "scum" and called for their extermination.

Alarmed by this threatening language, in November 1989 the South Ossetian district government took the unilateral decision to upgrade their region to the status of Autonomous Republic. The South Ossetian cultural

organization Adæmon Nykhas (People's Council), formed a year previously, went even further by asking Moscow to attach South Ossetia to North Ossetia and hence to Russia. In response to these initiatives Georgian gangs began to attack ethnic Ossetes, hoping to drive them from the area.

After months of tensions, on September 20, 1990, the South Ossetian leaders took an additional step and declared an independent republic within the USSR, separate from the Georgian SSR. While this move was not recognized by Georgia, from the South Ossetian perspective it meant that Georgia's subsequent declaration of independence from the USSR in 1991 did not apply to South Ossetia since (in their view) it was now a separate Soviet republic and not a part of Georgia. Hence, according to the Ossetes, the international recognition of Georgia as an independent state did not include South Ossetia since its territory was not a part of Georgia at the time of its independence.

Gamsakhurdia's party won the Georgian elections in November 1990 and immediately began to draw up plans to attack South Ossetia. Just prior to the invasion, which took place on the night of January 5, 1991, the day before Orthodox Christmas, Georgian civilians were quietly bussed out of Ossetian-majority areas to safety.

We spoke to a survivor of these events, an elderly woman living in Tskhinval. She told us of twelve Ossetian civilians, including a young boy whom Georgian thugs tied up to the legs of his grandfather, who were forced to dig their own graves and then buried alive. You could see the ground moving afterward where the soil had been piled upon their heads, our informant told us. She also related that a gang of Georgian youths took an Ossetian man and shoved him into the oven at a restaurant, where he was cooked alive.

On February 1 the Georgian authorities cut off South Ossetia from the electrical grid. As a result of this several dozen seniors froze to death in nursing homes, and newborn babies died in hospital. Tskhinval was blockaded by Georgian forces, who fired upon the city from the surrounding hills.[13]

Amid the ongoing armed conflict with Georgia, South Ossetians were victims of a major earthquake on April 29, 1991, the most powerful ever recorded in the Caucasus. The town of Dzau (Georgian: Dzhava) in the middle of the country, where much of the South Ossetian militia were based, was virtually flattened. One can still see the ruins today, especially since the

most heavily damaged area has not been rebuilt and the town has moved somewhat uphill.

The Soviet army, apparently on orders from Moscow, withdrew from the region and left the Ossetes to their fate, at which point the Georgian-Ossetian conflict degenerated into all-out war that went on for a total of eighteen months. With the USSR collapsing, South Ossetia declared itself an independent country on December 21, 1991. In January 1992 a referendum was held on whether to be joined to Russia; it passed with 90 percent of the vote but was not implemented. Intercommunal violence continued unabated until a fragile peace was imposed through a Russian-brokered ceasefire on June 14.

Georgian gangs and paramilitary forces had continued to commit atrocities throughout the first half of 1992, including the murder of an unarmed eighteen-year-old man by the name of Grigori Sanakoev who, after admitting his Ossetian identity to an armored personnel carrier full of Georgians, was crushed to death against a wall. His memory is preserved by a street named after him in Tskhinval and a school in Dzau. On May 20, 1992 Georgian paramilitaries stopped a bus of refugees attempting to flee to North Ossetia and systematically assassinated all the passengers—between thirty-three and thirty-six people, mainly women, children, and seniors—with shots to the head.

During the course of the hostilities more than 100,000 Ossetian refugees fled to North Ossetia (settling mainly, as in 1920, in the town of Nogir just north of Vladikavkaz), while an estimated 23,000 Georgians left South Ossetia for Georgia. The Truso and Ghubi gorges and the Kobi plateau—all in the Kazbegi district bisected by the Georgian Military highway near the Russian border—were formerly home to several thousand Ossetes; there have been repeated calls from the government in Tskhinval to attach the territory to South Ossetia and for Ossetes to be allowed to return.

While throughout the eighteen-month conflict atrocities were undoubtably committed on both sides, a report by Human Rights Watch/Helsinki firmly laid the blame on the Georgian government for starting it: "We conclude that the Georgian government allowed and indirectly encouraged paramilitary groups to pursue a guerilla war against the rebel defense forces of South Ossetia, in which both sides—Ossetian and Georgian—violated customary rules of war." The report further went on to state that:

> We hold the Georgian government responsible for human rights violations against Ossetians in other parts of Georgia outside the conflict zone of South Ossetia, where paramilitary groups systematically attacked, looted, and evicted Ossetian residents, and denied their freedom of movement. During the period covered in this report:
>
> — the Georgian militia took no measures to protect the Ossetian population and in some cases collaborated with the offenders by, for example, allowing hostages to be brought to police stations in Gori and Tbilisi;
> — the Georgian government allowed widespread job discrimination against Ossetians;
> — as a form of harassment against rebellious Ossetians in South Ossetia, the Georgian government implicitly sanctioned the blockading of South Ossetia, including the cutting of power and gas supplies as well as telephone connections.[14]

The HRW/H report documented numerous cases of looting, burning of villages, and the beating and murder of unarmed civilians including the elderly.

The iconic Ossetian scholar Vaso Abaev, a native of Tskhinval, expressed the shock and horror experienced by many among the more educated classes at his home region's descent into barbarism. Trying to make sense of the conflict, he sought to understand the Georgian position by noting that "if the Basque region of southwestern France wanted to secede and attach itself to Spain the French would never agree," and that like the Pyrenees, the Caucasus form a natural national border. At the same time, Abaev concluded that the treatment of Ossetes corresponded to the dictionary definition of genocide, and he acknowledged that Georgia's actions made it impossible for Ossetes to see a future for themselves within a united Georgia. Arguing that South Ossetians' dream of unification with North Ossetia is both geopolitically and geographically unrealistic, Abaev held forth the hope that some future Georgian regime would follow the French example and encourage South Ossetia to remain as a culturally and politically autonomous region within Georgia.[15]

Following a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement in the summer of 1992 and the establishment of a joint Russian-Georgian-South Ossetian peacekeeping force, South Ossetia was able to function as an independent, albeit

largely unrecognized, country. Many Georgians still lived in South Ossetian territory, however, and a string of Georgian villages just north of Tskhinval left the capital vulnerable. Ossetian residents had to bypass the Georgian villages via the unpaved, mountainous Zar road, which had been the site of the May 1992 massacre, and residents of Georgian villages had to do the same to reach Georgia proper. Still, the border remained open, with trade and transport links continuing to operate.

Simmering tensions grew stronger with the election of Mikhail Saakashvili as president of Georgia in January 2004. Saakashvili had come to power promising to "restore Georgia's territorial integrity," and once elected he made efforts to exert greater control over South Ossetia's internal affairs. Georgian police largely succeeded in closing down the region's black market in Russian food and petroleum products, which had a devastating effect on the South Ossetian economy. There were frequent skirmishes between Georgian and Ossetian irregulars, along with cases of hostage-taking and some bombings.

The fragile status quo was definitively shattered on the night of August 7, 2008, when Saakashvili, with the tacit support of Western powers, organized a surprise attack on Tskhinval—just hours after a televised address in which he duplicitously declared "I love Ossetians" and "Georgia has never been and will never be a monoethnic country."[16] We spoke with local residents who reported having seen and heard Americans present among the Georgian invading forces, apparently embedded advisors.

With this renewed flaring up of hostilities Georgian gangs resumed their atrocities, culminating in the massacre of thirty civilian refugees attempting to flee by car—families, including women and children, who were shelled by Georgians and burned alive in their vehicles. This brutal incident is commemorated by a gruesome monument outside of Tskhinval called "The Museum of Burnt Souls," where one can still see the vehicles' charred remains.

According to eyewitnesses we interviewed, Ossetian irregulars held off the Georgian assault for five days, at which point the Russian army finally stepped in to put an end to the fighting. This account contrasts with the Georgian version accepted uncritically in the West, according to which the Russians had been involved from the beginning. Either way, Russia claimed that it had a legal basis for intervention because Russian peacekeeping troops had come under

attack from Georgian forces.[17] In view of these considerations, the tendency among Western media and scholarship to characterize the incident as simply a "Russian invasion" would appear to be somewhat problematic. And yet, more than a dozen years after the events in question, a decision by the European Court of Human Rights continued to portray it as just that, stubbornly glossing over the fact that Georgia had been the clear aggressor.[18]

In the aftermath of Georgia's failed attack Russia formally recognized South Ossetian independence on August 26, 2008. Since that time the Russian army has guarded South Ossetia's 400 km border with Georgia, which remains completely closed except for a single crossing near the southeastern town of Leningor (Alkhagori) where ethnic Georgians are allowed to travel between the two countries. It must be emphasized that Russia is not seen by the Ossetes as an "occupying power," as is inaccurately repeated in the West, but rather as welcome protectors, much like the US forces in South Korea.

Following Russia, four other UN-member states recognized South Ossetia: Nicaragua, Venezuela, and the Pacific island-nations of Nauru and Tuvalu. Tuvalu subsequently withdrew its recognition in 2014, apparently under pressure from the United States. South Ossetia is also recognized by a number of non-UN countries, including Abkhazia, Transnistria, Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabagh), and the Sahrawi Republic. Syria recognized South Ossetia on May 29, 2018.

The Western media, when they mention South Ossetia at all, characterize Russia's intervention in 2008 as a land grab, a symptom of Russian expansionism. (Indeed, the usual narrative portrays it as a purely Russia-Georgia conflict, as if the Ossetian inhabitants were merely incidental bystanders.) In fact Russia has resisted formally annexing South Ossetia and shows no signs of doing so. Russian banks do not operate there—it is a cash economy—and Ossetian merchants complain endlessly of the duties imposed on them when bringing goods across the Russian border.

Among the Ossetes themselves, attitudes toward integration with Russia are ambivalent. Many cherish the idea of independence, but no one can deny that life is easier on the other side of the border in North Ossetia—itself one of the poorest regions in all of Russia. The economic situation for most South Ossetians is difficult in the extreme. There are few jobs, and almost no foreign

investors apart from Russians. South Ossetia produces fruits, vegetables, nuts and dairy, yet they are more expensive than in North Ossetia, since despite favorable government loans, local farmers are not able to produce at prices that are competitive with those of foreign products.[19] Surprisingly given the steady decline in population, finding accommodation in Tskhinval is actually quite problematic, since Russian soldiers and advisors have taken over the available apartments and driven up housing prices.

Cash subsidies from Russia, which represent most of the South Ossetian economy, are not fully accounted for. In 2018 the sum of 2.1 billion rubles was allotted to the national investment program but in the end only 1.4 billion was spent. Opposition parliamentarian David Sanakoev pointed this out in an interview with the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, asking, "Where did the 700 million rubles difference go?" In 2019 South Ossetian president Anatoly Bibilov spent 40 million rubles on new cars for government officials, including luxury vehicles for his ministers. "I don't see spending on the sick, the disabled, or children here," complained Alan Gagloev, leader of the opposition party Nykhas.[20] On the positive side, the fact that South Ossetian elected officials are able to voice such criticisms attests to a certain level of openness and debate that is not found in North Ossetia. As South Ossetian political scientist Dina Alborova notes, "Today the parliament has become a place for discussion. This is great and gives hope that the next parliament will be even more professional and we will live to see systemic reforms."[21]

Despite its many problems, life in South Ossetia goes on. Contrary to the images of soldiers, barbed wire and bombed-out buildings which are the only visual representations to be found in the Western media, the capital Tskhinval is actually a very peaceful, modern city with well-groomed parks, a few good restaurants, and high-quality cultural events, where people go about their daily lives just as anywhere else. Civic buildings such as the state theater and the university have been lovingly rebuilt after being nearly destroyed by Georgian forces during the five-day war in 2008. The South Ossetian State University (IuOGU) is modern, attractive, and relatively well equipped, but there is little future for its graduates. International recognition would certainly improve South Ossetia's economic prospects and would in fact be the best bulwark against the very "Russian expansionism" that, perversely, is the usual pretext used for denying it.

Figure 6.1 Stalin Street, Tskhinval, South Ossetia.

Relations between North and South Ossetians

The arrival of some 120,000 South Ossetian refugees in the wake of the 1990–2 war with Georgia posed logistical, economic, and to some extent social problems for North Ossetia. Many were settled in the Prigorodnyi district east of Vladikavkaz, formerly Ingush territory, which had been transferred by Stalin to North Ossetia to punish the Ingush for their alleged collaboration with the Nazis. Tensions were already high with the Ingush, who were clamoring for a return of their alienated lands, and by the autumn of 1992 armed conflict had broken out between the Ingush and the Ossetes. In the event, the arrival of battle-ready Ossetes from the south, where they had already been engaged in warfare with the Georgians for the past eighteen months, tipped the balance in favor of the Ossetes who succeeded in retaining control of the contested areas.

South Ossetians, referred to as "Kudars" by those in the North, speak essentially the same dialect as the northern Irons, but with some pronunciation

and vocabulary differences that make their origin readily distinguishable. Unlike North Ossetians who are often quick to point out lapses in dress or etiquette even to complete strangers, Southerners generally have less concern for *æghdæu*—traditional Ossetian customs—which makes them appear as either somewhat more liberal than North Ossetians or else as less authentically Ossetian, depending on one's point of view. South Ossetian weddings tend to be more modern, often dispensing with traditional dress and dances in favor of more Western styles.

Linguistically, on the other hand, Russification is certainly more pronounced among North Ossetians, especially in Vladikavkaz. Young Kudars, even refugees living in the north, are much more likely to converse in Ossetian with each other than are their northern counterparts. (This is also true of Digors living in the west.) South Ossetians have a reputation of being less uptight, braver, and more "free" than North Ossetians, hard-working, ready to start from scratch and living life to its fullest. As one southern war veteran explained to us, "We have learned to live like every day might be our last, so we try to enjoy it."

South Ossetia can appear to be somewhat more democratic than the north, insofar as the president is chosen through direct elections and faces genuine opposition within the parliament, although Moscow ultimately seems to pull the strings for anything that matters. The Russian FSB exercises a kind of extraterritorial control that raises serious questions about South Ossetia as an independent state, and as in North Ossetia, the police and security services regularly threaten, intimidate, beat, and sometimes kill ordinary civilians with total impunity.

Given the limited economic opportunities in South Ossetia many of its citizens—most of whom have also been granted Russian citizenship as well—depend on family and business connections in North Ossetia and elsewhere in the Russian Federation. Many North Ossetians, on the other hand, travel to Tskhinval to register their cars in order to pay lower fees. One sees many RSO (South Ossetian) plates on the streets in Vladikavkaz, and AM (Armenian) ones as well, but that does not necessarily imply that the owner is visiting from South Ossetia or Armenia. The Russian authorities began in 2020 to clamp down on these false registrations, to the consternation of many North Ossetians who feared having to re-register or even sell their cars.

South Ossetian Vacation, Anyone?

In our humble view, the best means by which South Ossetia could hope to establish its viability as a country would be to make itself more open to foreign visitors. Visas are not currently required, but one must obtain permission to visit from the South Ossetian office in Vladikavkaz and this requires an invitation from someone in South Ossetia.

Easing this procedure would arguably be in South Ossetia's interests. Foreign tourists pose no threat to South Ossetia's security. On the contrary, they are the country's greatest untapped public relations resource. South Ossetia's unrelentingly negative portrayal in the Western media—which is largely the result of Georgia's endless efforts to cultivate good relations with the West—is exacerbated by an almost complete lack of information about the realities of life in South Ossetia: who its people are, what they have experienced, and what they hope for in the future. The most effective remedy for this pervasive ignorance would be to open up the gates and welcome anyone and everyone to come and see for themselves. South Ossetia has nothing to lose and everything to gain by adopting such an open-door policy.

South Ossetia has much to entice the interested traveler. The main attraction is, of course, its spectacular nature, which offers unsurpassed opportunities for hiking, trekking, camping, horseback riding, and so on. Georgia has profited immensely from marketing its natural treasures, and South Ossetia has exactly the same to offer—indeed, Georgians often lament that their lost region of "Shida Kartli" is the most beautiful part of the southern Caucasus. Georgia has also successfully promoted its excellent wines, which are similar to those produced in South Ossetia, the difference being that in the latter case they are made at home by individual families. Indeed, the homemade wine in South Ossetia is so good that to buy commercial wine in shops is considered shameful. Fresh local meat and produce also make for excellent home cuisine. If homestays were to be promoted for tourists visiting South Ossetia, meals would be a big part of the attraction.

South Ossetia also has much in the way of little-known historical monuments. The eighteenth-century church of the Holy Virgin in the capital, Tskhinval, receives occasional mention, but there are also some interesting

buildings in Leningor (Alkhagori to the Georgians) in the southeast including an impressive medieval fortress and a beautiful former mansion, which now serves as an art museum. The National Museum in Tskhinval, which features artworks as well as archeological relics and natural history within its collection, is well worth a visit. There are a few galleries showing tableaux by local artists, and the newly restored home of V.I. Abaev was opened as a museum in early 2021. There are several decent hotels in Tskhinval, and construction on the new four-star Hotel Iryston off the main square is due for completion.

About 10 km shy of Leningor off on the south side of the main road there is a path leading up into the mountains to an abandoned monastery complex known as Aramaz, which includes a massive ninth-century church completely hidden in the undergrowth. The history of this fascinating complex has never properly been studied. The South Ossetian Department of Antiquities calls it an "Alan church," but this is highly unlikely. It is unusual in many ways and may have formerly been a Zoroastrian temple (Aramaz < Ahura Mazda? A nearby village is called Morbedan, perhaps related to the name for Zoroastrian priests, *mobedān*). One suspects that there are many such undiscovered treasures lying hidden amid South Ossetia's rugged landscape, if only scholars and travelers were permitted to give them the attention they deserve.

As noted in Chapter 5, Ossetian popular religion tends to center on ceremonies performed at mountaintop sanctuaries. In South Ossetia the best-known is Dzher in the central part of the country, dedicated to St. George/Uastyrdzhi. It was here that back in 1878 the infant Ioseb Dzhughashvili was brought by his grateful father who, in middle age, had come to despair of ever having children.

The Usanet shrine near Leningor, mentioned in the previous chapter, is another important pilgrimage site (see Figure 6.2). A few years ago a certain devotee tried to reach the shrine by driving up the mountainside track in his jeep. Being intoxicated, he lost control and the jeep fell into a ravine. Locals took that as a sign that one should not approach the shrine while drunk. Indeed, one should not approach it by vehicle at all, since Ossetian shrines are meant to be reached on foot.

One might hope that in future the South Ossetian authorities will become more open and welcoming to foreign tourists (and not just to Russians). The

result would be a win-win situation for South Ossetia and world travelers alike. Unfortunately there are no signs that this will happen. South Ossetia has a tourist office but it is hardly active, and virtually the only tourists visiting South Ossetia are Russians.

Figure 6.2 Usanet shrine with beer offerings, South Ossetia.

Anyone planning to travel within South Ossetia should be forewarned that maps and location services from Google and Apple are completely useless there. These applications use only Georgian place names, which cannot be seen on any sign anywhere in the country. Photos in Tskhinval will automatically be labeled as having been shot in Tbilisi, and "smart" phones will not tell you the correct time, since South Ossetia is one hour behind Georgia. The Chinese-produced video-upload app TikTok initially included South Ossetia and Abkhazia on its drop-down menu of countries from which users could register, but later removed them under heavy pressure from Georgia. Yandex maps of South Ossetia, meanwhile, are up-to-date and accurate.

The Effects of the Covid Crisis

At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 Russia closed its international borders. This left tiny South Ossetia completely cut off. While initially this isolation carried the benefit that the country remained free of Covid cases, the interruption of commerce cast a glaring light on the South Ossetians' utter dependence on Russian imports for their survival. When we were in Tskhinval a month earlier, the shop shelves were already growing empty because Russia had begun to clamp down on the collection of customs duties at the border. As Soslan Dzhussoev, a US-trained former advisor to the South Ossetian president, explained to the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*:

> [A]n ordinary consignment can contain up to 400 items in a small volume. Each item must be declared separately. Each declaration costs money. It takes time to complete these declarations. Not all freight carriers know how to do this correctly. If the declaration is incorrect, the car will not be admitted. Not all cars have refrigerators. Hence, the prices are high.[22]

The appearance of a small number of Covid cases in May led to panic. South Ossetia had neither the hospital beds nor the medicine to deal with even a small outbreak. The ill were quarantined and the virus contained—between May and the end of August only eighty-nine cases were reported—but by the end of the summer the population were growing restless and demanding that the border be reopened. Stocks of food and medicine were dangerously low,

and the elderly, who receive their pensions at banks in North Ossetia, were deprived of what little income they previously had.

Popular frustration at the economic crisis spilled over into anger at the political situation. South Ossetians had long resented that the leaders of the resistance against Georgian aggression in 1991–2 and 2008 had been marginalized and were not allowed to have a role in South Ossetia's leadership. Instead, the country was ruled by politicians who enjoyed the support of Moscow and were widely seen as corrupt, and the local FSB and MVD security services as agents of Russian control. In October 2019 video footage was leaked from South Ossetia's main prison showing prisoners being violently beaten by security officers. The images were widely shared on social media, causing public outrage. The government responded by bringing a libel case against the journalist responsible for sharing the images. Tensions increased in May 2020 after some twenty-five prisoners cut open their veins in protest against their harsh living conditions.

On August 17 a car carrying the South Ossetian Minister of the Interior, Igor Naniev, was fired upon in Tskhinval, although there were no casualties. During the following days some one hundred "suspects" were rounded up and imprisoned. One, Inal Dzhabiev, a 28-year-old father of three who had been awarded a Hero of Ossetia medal for participating in the defense against Georgia in 2008, was brutally beaten while being held as a "witness." During his courtroom appearance on August 28 he appeared faint, and afterward died on his way home. Images of his body, covered in bruises and burns from torture devices, were circulated on social media, causing widespread outrage.

Three days later 1,500 people demonstrated in Tskhinval, demanding an investigation into his death and calling upon President Bibilov to resign.[23] A visibly overwhelmed Bibilov told demonstrators, "If you want me to go, I will go." Moscow, however, apparently insisted that he stay, and there were rumors that he was personally reprimanded by Putin for demonstrating weakness.

On September 15, the border with Russia at the Ruk (Georgian: Roki) tunnel was finally reopened. South Ossetians were once again able to travel to North Ossetia, where many of them have financial interests and family, but predictably, the opening led to a rise in Covid cases as well. Social unrest over the Dzhabiev killing continued through the fall. A government "investigation" claimed that Dzhabiev had died from ingesting illegal drugs, a conclusion that convinced no one. In early December the South Ossetian MVD, citing Covid

restrictions, warned citizens not to protest or they would be imprisoned or fined, but protests took place nevertheless.

Dzhabiev's mother held a vigil in Tskhinval's Theatre Square, which began on December 4 and lasted through the winter, demanding an official investigation into her son's death, but no government official came out to meet her. Throughout this period President Bibilov claimed that she was acting on behalf of foreign powers, as if mere outrage at her son's wrongful death weren't sufficient motivation in and of itself.

The narrative of foreign involvement was further fed by vlogger Alan Mamiev's "discovery" that a member of the South Ossetian parliament, Murat Vaneev-Uaneti, is a practicing Mormon (a fact openly stated on Vaneev's personal website), and his assertion that this somehow implied that he was an agent working on behalf of George Soros's Open Society Foundation. The story was picked up in Russia by Sergei Kurginyan, founder of the ultra-nationalist movement "*Sut' vremeni*" (Essence of Time), who appeared on the Rossiya 1 television program *Vecher* to denounce the South Ossetian government for being run by Mormons working for the CIA.[24] The South Ossetian president felt obliged to respond with a televised denial, saying,

> We know that Vaneev is a Mormon, yes, but to say that the entire administration is run by Mormons is dishonourable to all those employees who are not Mormons. The CIA does not operate in South Ossetia and it is an insult to our security services to claim otherwise. Our historical connection with Russia, which dates back to 1774, will never allow such a thing to happen.[25]

Can South Ossetia Survive as an Independent State? Does It Want To?

Since 1992 the Republic of South Ossetia has existed as a de facto independent state. According to Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention (1933), in order to qualify for recognition a state must (1) have a resident population, (2) possess a definite territory, (3) have an operative government, and (4) be able to enter relations with other states. Technically it would appear that South

Ossetia meets all these legal requirements for international recognition. And yet, neither the South Ossetian nor the Russian government has made any serious effort to secure broader recognition for South Ossetia. This suggests that one or both of them do not actually want South Ossetia to join the world community of nations in any meaningful way.

Looking into the future South Ossetia faces a conundrum. Either the international community finally lets go of its delusions about "re-integrating" South Ossetia into a country (Georgia) that has done nothing but attempt to eliminate its people and accords it the recognition it deserves, or the world will force South Ossetia further into the arms of Russia, to all evidence the only nation of any consequence that has shown itself willing to ensure its survival.

In a 2010 Op-Ed in *The Guardian*, British specialist George Hewitt argued that "Georgia should accept the tide of history and abandon its fantasy re-integration strategy," suggesting that for Western nations to recognize South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) would be the best means to ensure regional stability.[26] And yet, while there is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of South Ossetians will not accept reintegration into Georgia, just how attached they are to the idea of independence is unclear. Statehood has brought them few benefits, and the lack of international recognition is not entirely to blame. Whatever Russia's ultimate intentions, they certainly have more to do with its own geopolitical interests than with the actual welfare of the South Ossetian people.

Most South Ossetians already have Russian citizenship, so staying on in South Ossetia when life there is so difficult is probably more an act of patriotism than anything else. But the country's independence seems a shallow victory when so little of the world recognizes it, and in reality the South Ossetian government cannot make any important decisions without Moscow's approval. Most Ossetes, northern and southern alike, dream of seeing their two states united, even though this would mean abandoning the notion of an independent Ossetia altogether. Independence from Russia, however, has never been an issue for the Ossetes as it has for other Caucasian peoples such as the Chechens. In the words of South Ossetian parliamentarian Oleg Teziev:

> The issue of joining South Ossetia to Russia is of secondary importance here. The reunification of the two Ossetians is important for the Ossetians. Today, there are only a few nations left in the world that are internally

> divided (for example, North and South Korea). Ossetia, divided into two territories due to certain historical circumstances, belongs to the same category. I would like with all my heart to wish for the unification to happen as quickly as possible.[27]

An independent South Ossetia would theoretically be better able to defend the Ossetian language by making it the official idiom of the state, in government as well as public education. The fact that it has not done so is telling. When I gave a lecture at the South Ossetian State University in May 2019, Soslan Dzhussoev, who was serving as my interpreter, insisted that the event be conducted in Ossetian, and on several occasions he had to interrupt questioners when they tried to speak in Russian. At the end of the program he said to the audience, "Do you see? It is possible to hold an academic event entirely in Ossetian!" Many of those present seemed surprised. This despite the fact that the South Ossetian government has taken steps to encourage writers publishing in Ossetian, such as the awarding of biennial "Kosta" prizes since 2009 in the fields of philology, literature, history, art and journalism and the annual "Bulæmærg" literary prize since 2016. Giving out awards is one thing, but writers require a readership as well.

For South Ossetia to enjoy any meaningful independence would require the freedom to interact with entities other than Russia. The Ruk tunnel is a fragile lifeline for such a small, underdeveloped nation. All other transport links went through Georgia, and since 2008 they have been cut. If South Ossetia had an airport, allowing for flights to, say, Turkey, that would open up many economic possibilities, but the country is entirely mountainous and there is simply no place where an airport could be built even if there were the funds to do so.

South Ossetia and Syria signed a trade agreement on August 31, 2019, to all appearances a significant step toward establishing South Ossetia's economic independence. In the first instance it was agreed that South Ossetia would send "supplies of ecologically clean and fresh mineral water, the demand for which in [Syria] is great." In exchange, according to the official announcement, "Surely the Syrian businessmen will find something to interest South Ossetia."[28] With the onset of the Covid epidemic in 2020 any such initiatives were put on hold.

Actually, were Georgia to give up on the pipedream of "reclaiming" South Ossetia and agree to normalize relations, both sides would benefit immensely. South Ossetia would no longer be subject to a single, precarious transport link with the rest of the world, and Georgia would instantly become the country's principal trading partner. Such a scenario would obviously displease Moscow, however, and it is vanishingly unlikely to happen.

Faced with the inescapable reality of its total dependence on Russia, South Ossetia's only alternative would seem to be incorporation into the Russian Federation. Given that the country now suffers the worst of both worlds—that is, all the problems and difficulties associated with independence without being able to enjoy any of its benefits—it is hard not to conclude that formal annexation would be an improvement over how things are now. Indeed if a legitimate referendum were to be held on the question, the vote would almost certainly go for annexation. The fact that it is not happening is because, for whatever reasons of their own, the Russians don't want it, and not because it is rejected by the Ossetes.

7

Life in Ossetia Today

We say that our government is actively fighting against corruption. What kind of fight is going on against corruption, if today corruption afflicts all of society? Day cares, schools, and power structures at all levels—there is no sphere today either within the government or within society that is not afflicted by corruption.

Akhsarbek Galazov, first president of
North Ossetia-Alania (1994–8), speaking in 2011[1]

"The Ossetes," write the editors of a recent official history of Ossetia, "are a nation with a difficult and dramatic fate."[2] Many Ossetes dream of escaping to live somewhere else, although few find the means to do so. Ossetia has not been spared the ravages of demodernization seen throughout the former USSR,[3] and most people who remember it will say that life was better during the Soviet period. This is no doubt true, except for the tiny elite who exercise a stranglehold over the politics and the economy of the two Ossetias.

Russian society is notoriously corrupt, but the situation in Ossetia is extreme even by Russian standards. Essentially nothing can be achieved without bribery, whether it be an appointment to a judgeship or the granting of a driver's license. There is basically no way to live a comfortable life in Ossetia, North or South, without engaging in some kind of illegal activity. Bribes are universal and no one really questions the necessity of paying them. The justice system largely serves to defend and protect those who are responsible for most of the crimes in the first place, so that for the ordinary citizen there is no security and no recourse when any kind of legal issue arises. Lawyers see their role not as exonerating their clients, but rather as facilitating negotiations and taking their cut of the payoff. To live in Ossetia, for most people, is a daily struggle to balance keeping one's head down and keeping it above water.

There is a saying in Russian that "the fish rots from the head" (*ryba gniot s golovy*), and the fact that Ossetes suffer from rotten leadership is no secret. In 2005 the office of President of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania was downgraded to that of "Head," which would no longer be chosen by direct election. Instead, Russian president Vladimir Putin has personally appointed the last four Republic Heads: Taymuraz Mamsurov (2005–15), Tamerlan Aguzarov (2015–16), Vyachislav Bitarov (2016–21), and Sergei Menyaylo (2021–), although such appointments are officially "provisional" and later ratified by the North Ossetian parliament.

Bitarov's sudden replacement by Menyaylo on April 9, 2021, took Ossetes by surprise. A vice admiral in the Russian navy, Menyaylo had previously been governor of Sevastopol following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and in October 2020 he was placed under sanctions by the European Union for allegedly having overseen the poisoning of dissident Alexey Navalny in Siberia. Moscow is also considered to be heavily involved in the politics of South Ossetia, where, as of this writing, current president Anatoly Bibilov remains in power despite repeated calls for his resignation.

The Unfulfilled Potential of a Rich and Beautiful Land

Ossetia is a country blessed with unlimited possibilities. The spectacular mountains of the Central Caucasus provide fresh water, hydroelectric power, and delicious local trout. The fertile northern plains produce an abundance of vegetables, grains, fruits, and dairy and meat products. I have personally never tasted tomatoes to rival those in North Ossetia, and the melons which arrive daily from nearby Daghestan are as sweet and juicy as those of Samarkand or Turfan. There is no question that one eats better in the Caucasus than anywhere else in the Russian Federation. South Ossetia as well is blessed with fertile soil and an even more favorable climate than in the north.

Vladikavkaz, which was the North Caucasus' window on the world from its very foundation in the late eighteenth century, has been the cultural capital of the entire region for nearly two hundred years. To some extent it retains this status even today, albeit much diminished from Imperial and Soviet times. The Vladikavkaz of a hundred years ago must have been one of the

most beautiful medium-sized cities in all of Russia, if not Europe, with its tree-lined boulevards, tastefully landscaped parks, and neoclassical architecture. Its charm is evident in photographs of the period, and traces of it can still be detected today if one looks beyond the crumbling façades everywhere in need of renovation.

During the Soviet period as well, the city must have been quite pleasant and attractive. The main 2-kilometer-long pedestrian mall, Prospekt Mira or just Prospekt as it is usually called, is still a delightful place for a stroll (see Figure 7.1)—although one could do without the piped-in music. In summer the terraces of its many restaurants and cafes, some of them offering quite good fare, are packed with customers soaking up the relaxing atmosphere. The eye is naturally guided down the boulevard toward the impressive Mady Khokh ("Mother Mountain," better known today by its Russian name, *Stolovaia gora*, or "Table Mountain"), which looms over the city to the south.

A few blocks to the west, peaceful riverside walks line both sides of the Terek, stretching for over 4 km along the right bank and twice that on the left. Here as well, one can sit in a cafe or restaurant and enjoy a cup of coffee or a meal while being lulled by the sound of the rapids. One need only turn a blind

Figure 7.1 Prospekt Mira, Vladikavkaz.

eye to the crumbling footbridges and the heaps of garbage accumulating in the river, stubborn reminders of official neglect.

Unfortunately it is impossible to ignore the worst eyesore of all, a massive, unfinished thirteen-story concrete skeleton of a building that was abandoned mid-construction back in 2005. Locals call it the "Suicide Tower" (*Bashnya samoubiits*). Perversely, it is the city's most noticeable landmark, being situated right beside the river in the central part of town. Built by a well-known businessman allegedly in violation of codes, it could not be completed because it sits on unstable, waterlogged ground. No one is willing to pay for its demolition so it continues to stand at the heart of the most beautiful part of the North Ossetian capital. The plot of land adjacent to it used to be a public swimming pond but has now been tarred over and left derelict, strewn with weeds and broken masonry. Because of their central location next to the riverwalk, the main city park and a popular children's amusement center, these monstrosities assault the eye most every day—constant reminders of a government that just doesn't care.[4]

Directly across the footbridge looms the hulking Hotel Vladikavkaz, a Soviet-era relic of the government Intourist network. Hugging the riverbank in the shadow of the hotel is the Egyptian-styled Mukhtarov mosque, named for a Baku-based Azeri oil millionaire who had it constructed during the first decade of the twentieth century to honor the city where he first met his wife. Serving a congregation mainly of Ossetes and Ingush, it is a Sunni mosque—Azeris are mostly Shi'ite—but there was a smaller nineteenth-century Shi'ite mosque as well about a kilometer north on the other side of the river which served the Azeri community living in Vladikavkaz at the time. With most all of them now gone, the building has been converted into a planetarium. A small inscription in Persian over the main doorway is the only indication of its former function.

For amateurs of Christian architecture Vladikavkaz boasts several impressive Russian Orthodox churches, including the Cathedral of St. George whose golden domes rise from the midst of a residential neighborhood in the western part of the city and the slightly less imposing Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin on the south side of town. Close to the riverbank past the southern end of the Khetagurov city park there is the Armenian Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator, and a few blocks away the Georgian Church of St. Nino, currently serving as a school. North of the city center the former Lutheran church, built by Germans who have long since departed, is now a concert hall.

Cultural events in Vladikavkaz are mostly limited to theater, dance, or musical productions by the official national ensembles. Holding onto the Soviet legacy, they tend to be of a high, if conservative standard. There are no nightclubs to speak of, but there are many bars, gambling salons (called "playbars") and the occasional performance by a DJ or rapper either local or from elsewhere in Russia. Visits by international artists are rare—back in 2013 there was a concert featuring the former drummer of the 1970s British rock band Uriah Heep, if that gives an idea.

Alternatives to a Compliant Media

Ossetian government officials will never admit to any mistakes or wrongdoing, or that there are any problems in society. Instead, following time-honored Russian tradition, they will simply dig in their heels and issue bald-face denials and explanations that nobody believes. The Russian- and Ossetian-language state-run media exist mainly as a mouthpiece for this. Any attempt by mainstream journalists to do any actual investigative reporting is quickly quashed. During his tenure as Republic Head, Vyachislav Bitarov brought two lawsuits against Madina Sageeva, editor of the newspaper *Svobodnyi vzgliad*, for exposing his alleged hidden business dealings. (Bitarov made his fortune as owner of the Bavaria brewery, but has since expanded into many other areas.) The court initially found in favor of the Head of the Republic, but after he was removed from power in April 2021 Sageeva, possibly through the backing of some of Bitarov's opponents, managed to have the decision reversed.

For independent reporting on local events Ossetes usually turn to internet sources, which are plentiful. One of the most thoughtful online commentators is Ruslan Totrov, whose no-nonsense observations regularly ruffle the feathers of Ossetia's rich and powerful. On February 21, 2021 he was attacked and beaten in his Vladikavkaz office by two assailants who told him to stop criticizing South Ossetian president Antoly Bibilov. Bibilov initially tried to characterize the attack as a false flag operation by the South Ossetian opposition, but it has subsequently been alleged that the attackers were employees of the South Ossetian government who also happened to be relatives of the president.

Kavkazkii Uzel (Caucasian Knot) is an independent news organization funded by Western human rights organizations with journalists all across the Caucasus who do serious investigative reporting, sometimes at a risk to their own safety. The Prague-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has a Caucasian service called *Ekho Kavkaza,* which covers the two Ossetias. Tbilisi-based *Jam News* provides a Georgian perspective on events in the Caucasus, with a special bitterness reserved for South Ossetia. All three of these Western-funded news outlets seem to be largely aimed at foreign audiences and have little following within Ossetia.

Most Ossetes prefer to get their information from social media, including public Instagram and Telegram groups (news_vladikavkaz, r15, northossetia) and, more popular among the older generation, Facebook (Osetiya, Ir, Nykhas). Some of these accounts are government-controlled, while others represent oppositional views. There are also quite a few independent vloggers using YouTube, some with significant followings. Alan Mamiev, a vlogger based in Vladikavkaz, is one of the more colorful, expressing his systematic outrage at each successive Scandal of the Week and promoting every conspiracy theory under the sun.

Zaur Farniev, a Caucasus correspondent for the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, is also active on social media. In December 2020 he posted an uncaptioned photo of a car in which an entire family of four had been killed after being struck by a speeding SUV driven by the brother of the Republic Head. In an apparent attempt to protect their standing with the regime, the Farniev family council published an open letter denouncing Zaur's posting of the photo as an unforgivable violation of *æghdæu*.

Ossetes love to get into heated discussions on internet forums, and the long comments sections beneath every blog post make for endlessly fascinating reading. Apart from politics, favored topics include Ossetian nationalism ("*We* are the true descendants of the Alans!") and perceived violations of *æghdæu* ("It is totally unacceptable for men to wear shorts in public!"). Humorous or sarcastic comments are quite common, although many others are sincere and heartfelt. Some are maddeningly idiotic. In any case, since ultimately in Ossetia problems are seldom addressed or resolved, these forums function mainly as valves for letting off steam. They are generally tolerated except when they actually seem to be having a mobilizing effect, in which case there are crackdowns from the local Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD).

One such case occurred in April 2020 when, following the lead of a well-known Ossetian opera singer by the name of Vadim Cheldiev, demonstrations were organized using social media in protest against the government's Covid-19 restrictions. Like most Russian citizens Ossetes are generally defeatist, and serious anti-government rallies are rare. That is no doubt why the authorities found the 2020 demonstrations so alarming. Then-Republic Head Bitarov made an uncharacteristic public appearance to address the protesters, making insincere promises that were met with well-deserved jeers from the crowd. In fact, despite Bitarov's assurances that demonstrators would not be arrested, over the next few days his police and security services hunted down no fewer than sixty-nine of them who were then shipped off to a prison in Rostov-on-Don (700 km away), where the North Ossetian government no doubt hoped they would simply disappear, out of reach of their families or any other kind of local sympathizers.

It's the Economy, Stupid!

Like most everywhere else, in Ossetia people tend to react to politics largely in terms of how it affects their pocketbook. The employment situation in North Ossetia is dismal, and in South Ossetia it is even worse. There are few opportunities for young people starting out in life, even for university graduates. Most unmarried Ossetes in their twenties continue to live with their parents. Weddings—which normally involve hundreds of invitees—are expensive affairs, but since guests usually offer money instead of gifts they can end up paying for themselves. Many parents will buy their newlywed children an apartment if they can afford to do so. In premodern times wives were sometimes acquired through kidnapping, and on rare occasions this option is still resorted to today as a means of avoiding wedding costs.

The most secure and highly paid jobs available to young Ossetian men are in the police or security services. (A downside of these professions is that one is banned from ever traveling abroad.) An FSB agent can expect to earn the ruble equivalent of US$1,100 per month and a police officer about $600–700, in addition to benefits such as housing assistance, free university education, and heavily discounted vacations. This is in contrast

to a surgeon who might make $200–300 or, God forbid, a teacher who could expect to pull in a measly $100 or less. Salaries for government office workers fall somewhere in between the two extremes. In general, any job worth having can only be had through nepotism, patronage networks, or bribery.

A man with the requisite skills can sometimes find employment as a car mechanic or construction worker. Low-paying unskilled jobs include food service, security, and retail sales. Those who own a car might work as a taxi driver for Yandex. Many young men try to survive by betting on sports events (hence the popularity of "playbars"). For young women, beauty salons are popular and profitable.

Indeed, the sheer quantity of betting rooms and beauty salons in Ossetia is quite striking to the eyes of an outsider. One is also impressed by the number of pharmacies, although pharmacists are very poorly paid. A few Ossetian girls are living the dream as "influencers" on social media. But when all is said and done, most young Ossetes are unemployed and financially dependent on their parents.

The official unemployment rate in North Ossetia prior to the 2020 pandemic was nearly 18 percent, the third highest in the Russian Federation. By August 2020 the figure had doubled.[5] Unofficially people make do however they can, scraping by with the help of relatives or through unregistered business activities such as buying and reselling consumer goods or offering off-the-books services. The steady decline of the ruble means that basic necessities are ever more costly.

And yet some people in Ossetia, at least in Vladikavkaz, appear to be doing very well. Ostentatious displays of wealth such as luxury vehicles and palatial mansions are everywhere to be seen. The best restaurants (which all seem to be owned by the same cabal) are quite affordable by Western standards, but they are well beyond the means of the average Ossete. Nevertheless, they do a bustling business. Who are these rich Ossetes, dining out and driving expensive cars? One can only assume that the owner of a new four-story gated home in the city center has not paid for it through any kind of reported salary, and that the sneering young hoodlum who sideswipes you in his shiny Range Rover thumping out rap music must be one of his sons.

Romanticizing Tradition and History

The first question any visiting historian will hear from Ossetes is, "So who do you think are the true descendants of the Alans?" (One assumes that the Ingush and Kabardians ask their visitors the same thing.) To an outsider the vicious competition of claims among the various peoples of the Caucasus over descent from the Alans and cultural ownership of the Nart epic can be baffling.

In respect to both of these questions—descent from the Alans and ownership of the Narts—scholarship tends generally toward the Ossetian position, albeit with certain caveats. But the romanticism and exaggeration with which these legacies are treated in Ossetia make any serious discussion of them all but impossible. The Alans—despite having left no written heritage, unique architectural style, or indeed any kind of distinctive cultural relics to the world other than certain types of sword—are held up by today's Ossetes as one of the greatest and most influential civilizations in human history, leaving their mark everywhere (even, the joke goes, on the moon!). The Vikings were actually Alans, it is claimed, and 40 percent of place names in England are alleged to derive from "Ossetian." A pair of Ossetian writers has even gone so far as to assert that the biblical Galileans were Iranian-speakers, and that Mother Mary was a Scythian.[6] One always wonders, when assaulted by the proponents of nationalistic pseudo-history, why the truth never seems to be an adequate source of national pride and must be embellished with fantasy and nonsense.

Many Ossetes today, principally males, are obsessed with the concept of *æghdæu*, a code of social norms that are presumed, without much evidence, to derive from the Alans and to preserve their noble legacy. Discussions on this topic tend to be heated and are often ridiculous. Patriarchal attitudes are rife, and women are blamed for all manner of social failings including those—most egregiously, domestic abuse and occasionally even honor killings—that are committed by men. Negative attitudes toward women are expressed in popular proverbs such as *usy'vzæg—khædzarkhalæg* ("a wife's tongue destroys the home"), or *silgoimag ghogæi dær ghæladær æi* ("a woman is more stupid than a cow").[7]

One of the most talked-about incidents while I was doing fieldwork in the summer of 2019 was when two students, an African male and an Ossetian female, playfully engaged in some "dirty dancing" in front of a small crowd

near the entrance to the North Ossetian State University in Vladikavkaz. Another student filmed them and posted it on Instagram, creating an instant scandal that incited a wave of hysterical condemnation from all across society. For the dancing couple's outrageous violation of *æghdæu*, the girl received the bulk of the public censure.

During the same period a young Ossetian divorced mother was brutally stabbed to death in cold blood on camera at her place of work by her jealous ex-husband, who was already awaiting trial for prior crimes but was on release from prison because his mother had paid a bribe to the presiding judge. We may recall that according to Khetagurov's ethnography of Ossetian society in the nineteenth century domestic violence was considered deeply shameful and was almost unheard of. The situation is very different today.

A more positive example of traditional Ossetian values coming into play was the response in 2019–20 to an appeal on social media by the parents of Arnella Persaeva, a toddler afflicted with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), a rare muscle-wasting disease that causes an early, painful death in its young victims. The only available treatment is a Swiss-made drug called Zolgensma, administered in a single shot that costs US$ 2m and is only effective if given before the age of two. The appeal drew donations from all across Ossetian society, from ordinary citizens to rappers and professional football players. Even so, with just a few months to go before the child's second birthday only about half the needed amount had been raised. Last-minute donations from two Ossetian businessmen, Vladimir Guriev and Tamerlan Dzgoev, saved the girl's life. The massive response in support of a young family's terrifying plight would seem to be a classic expression of the traditional Ossetian concept of *ziu*, pulling together to help a community member in need.

Literature and the Arts

Reading for pleasure is not widespread in Ossetia today, and there are no Ossetian writers of particular note (although the Writers' Union, a legacy of the Soviet period, has about seventy members). Perhaps the most significant writer in Ossetian of the postwar period was Nafi Dzhusoity (1925–2017). He achieved fame as the author of *Fydalty tug* ("Blood of the Ancestors") and

many other works, but his most productive years were during the 1960s–70s. While under the Soviet system the appreciation of literature was promoted as an important aspect of being a cultured person, nowadays young Ossetians are mostly content to share posts on social media. The small number of bookstores are not busy, and while there are a few shelves devoted to books written in Ossetian the vast majority are in Russian. One might draw a contrast with Iceland, a country with half the population of the combined Ossetias, where per capita readership in the national language is the highest in the world despite near universal bilingualism in English.

Tacitly acknowledging the problem of literacy in Ossetian, beginning in 2017 the government of North Ossetia-Alania implemented a program for cultural development with the preservation and promotion of the Ossetian language as a central component. Projects include the establishment of preschool, elementary, and adult language classes, as well as the translation and creation of cartoons in Ossetian. Joint book fairs with South Ossetia are planned.[8] It is too early to assess whether these initiatives will bear fruit, or will merely turn out to be self-congratulatory exercises by government officials who redirect the funds into their own pockets. One senses that as long as the ruling elite prefers to conduct its business in Russian, citizens will do the same.

Two national theaters established during the Soviet period, one devoted to performances in Iron and the other in Digor, both continue to stage productions several times a year. The national dance troupe "Alan" likewise holds occasional shows and perform worldwide as ambassadors of Ossetian culture, introducing spectators to such standard dances as the romantic *khongæ* ("invitation") and the acrobatic double-decker *simd*. Other favorites include the "abduction dance" (two men fighting over a girl) and the "dagger dance" where the dancer madly spins about while flinging daggers to the ground and tossing them into their air with his teeth. While the *khongæ* and *simd* are true traditional dances, the "abduction" and "dagger" dances would appear to be products of what anthropologist Kevin Tuite has labeled "Soviet-era faux-folk choreography,"[9] with similar versions being performed as "national dances" in other parts of the Caucasus.

A few aging musical masters—products of the Soviet period—continue to perform periodically, mostly drawing an older, nostalgic audience. Ossetian musical traditions are being kept alive, barely, by a small number of young, patriotic musicians. Among the most accomplished are members of Tamu

Berozty's sometime ensemble Kona ("Hearth"), whose videos on YouTube have received tens of thousands of views. These numbers pale in comparison to those of Ossetian rappers, some of whom have attained worldwide audiences. One such pair, who go by the stage names of Miyagi and Endspiel and rap in Russian, have had nearly five hundred million views on YouTube, undoubtedly making them the most famous Ossetes in the world today.

To judge from sheer public visibility, the most successful painter in Ossetia would seem to be Slava Dzhanaity. His somewhat cartoonish images of Nart heroes have become cultural icons throughout Ossetia and beyond. Indeed, if Dzhanaity were to receive royalties from everywhere his images are used, he would be a very rich man indeed, but such is not the case. The Soviet-era arts academy and artists' union in Vladikavkaz still exist, but in the absence of private galleries and wealthy customers it is difficult for Ossetian artists to thrive.

The North Caucasus Film Studio, which was located in Vladikavkaz, closed down after the fall of the Soviet Union due to lack of funds, essentially precluding the development of anything that could be considered "Ossetian" cinema. A rare exception is the work of filmmaker Murat Dzhusoity (b. 1959), a native of South Ossetia. During the Soviet period he worked mainly at the Odessa Film Studio in Ukraine, but in 1992 he made a film in Ossetian called *Khokhag* (Highlander) about a nineteenth-century outcast seeking revenge. It won the jury prize at the Ashgabat Film Festival the same year. In 2005 Dzhusoity released a second feature film in Ossetian, entitled *Farn* ("Honour," "Glory"; cf. Pers. *farr*), a battle-rich quest celebrating the premodern culture of the Alans. Dzhusoity released a third Ossetian-language feature, *Ærzæt* ("The Mine") in 2016, dealing with Ossetian-Russian relations in the nineteenth century. All three films can be seen on YouTube.

The internet has provided an outlet for the creativity and social critique of a few young Ossetian amateur videographers. One amusingly poignant clip posted in 2019 showed a couple of young louts lounging on a public bench. A pair of lovers pass by, locked in embrace; the boy is visibly non-native and the girl Ossetian. The louts loudly insult the girl (in Russian) for violating *æghdæu* by fraternizing with a foreigner. The boy turns and reprimands them in a tirade of fluent Ossetian, telling them to mind their own business. Uncomprehending, the louts look at each other and ask, "What is this idiot

talking about?" The foreigner scoffs and leaves with the girl, turning back to fire a sarcastic parting shot: "*dzæbækh u*" ("have a nice day").

The Xenophobic Echo Chamber of Ossetian Academia

Most academics in Ossetia seem to have eyes only for Moscow, and harbor no ambitions about getting their research published in the West. This is unfortunate, because in Russia there is very little interest in reading about Ossetian culture whereas within the international field of Iranology, the principal medium of which is English, Ossetian scholars would find a far more curious, welcoming, and open-minded audience. Journals such as *Iranian Studies* and *Iran and the Caucasus* would seem to be excellent forums for Ossetian academics to present their research to Iranist colleagues around the world, but regrettably none has taken advantage of this opportunity nor shown any inclination to do so.

Continuing the Soviet model, in Ossetia scholars are salaried civil servants whose research is expected to serve the aims of the state. Not surprisingly, the most prominent Ossetian academics—such as the linguist-turned-would-be historian T. T. Kambolov, whose *Osetiny: Vekhi istorii* (ninety-two pages, about half of which is given over to illustrations) is officially touted as the go-to authoritative book on Ossetia—are those who appear to have close ties to the government and who enjoy its promotion and protection. Ossetian academics typically read and write only in Russian, and do not publish in non-Russian journals or attend conferences outside the former Soviet sphere.

It is vanishingly rare for any Westerner to come to Ossetia to do research, and academic institutions there are largely unwilling or unable to take the necessary bureaucratic steps to formally host them.

Modern-Day Narts: Ossetian Athletes as Heroes and Role Models

A majority of Ossetia's celebrities are wrestlers, followed by football players. During the Soviet period some Ossetian writers, artists, actors, and scientists achieved reputations outside of the republic, but that is not the case today. The

Ossetian musician Valery Gergiev (b. 1953) is chief conductor of the Munich Philharmonic and the economist Sergei Guriev (b. 1971) is a highly respected professor at Sciences-Po in Paris, but that's about it.

Ossetian wrestlers, meanwhile, enjoy a worldwide reputation. Heavyweight freestyle wrestler Soslan Andiyev (1952–2018) won a gold medal at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montréal and again in 1980 in Moscow. He went on to coach the national team and later served as Minister of Sport in Ossetia. Makharbek Khadartsev (b. 1964) won gold medals at the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul and again in 1992 in Barcelona. Khadartsev is now CEO of Daryal brewery—the major local competitor to Bitarov's Bavaria brand—and has served both as a parliamentary deputy and as mayor of Vladikavkaz. Leri Khabelov (b. 1964) won gold in Barcelona as well, as did Soslan Ramonov (b. 1991) at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Many others have made names for themselves by winning international competitions of one kind or another, and often go on to careers in politics or business.

Several Ossetes have even achieved fame in Japan as sumo wrestlers. They include two brothers, Soslan (b. 1980) and Batradz (b. 1982) Boradzov, who are known in Japan as Rohō Yukio and Hakurozan Yūta. Other Ossetian wrestlers appreciated by the Japanese are Soslan Gagoev (b. 1988), aka Wakanohō Toshinori, and Alan Karaev (b. 1977), who is recognized for both sumo wrestling and mixed martial arts. Ossetian boxer Murat Gassiev (b. 1993) is an internationally known cruiserweight champion. Kickboxer Ruslan Karaev (b. 1983) won two world championships during the mid-2000s.

Among the best-known Ossetian footballers one may mention the goalkeeper Vladimir Gabulov (b. 1983) who played on Russia's national team and briefly for Belgium's Club Brugge. Stanislav Cherchesov (b. 1963) was a goalkeeper for the USSR and Russia and was head coach of the Russian national team from 2016–21. Valery Gazzaev (b. 1954) had a long career as a striker for various Russian clubs, competing in the Moscow Olympics in 1980 (where Russia won the bronze medal) before going on to work as a coach. He has been an elected member of the Russian Parliament (Duma) since 2016. Many other Ossetian football players have had professional careers playing for teams around Russia.

All of these men are looked upon today as national heroes and serve as role models for young Ossetian males. In February 2021 sports mania in Ossetia

took on a new dimension when the 27-year-old Ossetian-Israeli tennis player Aslan Karatsev made it to the semi-finals in the Australian Open, inspiring journalist Zaur Farniev to express the wish on his Facebook page that "after Karatsev's victory, 10–15-year-old boys will trade their wrestling shoes and tights for polo shirts and tennis racquets. Maybe then Ossetia will have a chance for a normal future. It's time to end the cult of power."

Ossetian athletes enjoyed unprecedented success at the 2021 summer Olympics in Tokyo. Of twelve Ossetes in competition, four came away with medals: Zaurbek Sidakov won gold in freestyle wrestling and his teammate Artur Naifonov, a childhood survivor of the 2004 Beslan massacre, took home a bronze. (Their coach, Dzhambolat Tedeev, is an Ossete from Tskhinval.) Aslan Karatsev and his Russian partner Elena Vesnina won silver in mixed doubles tennis, and Madina Taymazova won bronze in women's judo. She joins Aida Shanaeva, who won a gold medal in fencing at the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and silver at London in 2012, in challenging the notion of Ossetian sport as a uniquely male domain.

Gender Roles

Patriarchy remains a noticeable feature of Ossetian society. The Soviet legacy has provided women with educational and employment opportunities as well as a degree of sexual liberation, but it failed to eliminate sexist double-standards and glass ceilings. Girls are expected to remain chaste and boys to express their virility, but the reality is far from this ideal.

Ossetian girls tend to work harder than boys to achieve financial independence, and it is a common complaint that they end up supporting their unemployed partners. Working women are nevertheless expected to bear the weight of housework and child-rearing on top of their day jobs. Alcoholism and drug-abuse are rampant among Ossetian males, a factor that exacerbates the problem of domestic violence.

Homosexuality is not accepted in Ossetia and expressions of "gay pride" are nonexistent. Nevertheless, homosexual activity is widespread, even among individuals who would claim to be "straight." As in many traditional societies, to be the "active" partner in a homosexual act is not considered "gay."

The Immigrant Experience

It might seem surprising that the third poorest republic in the Russian Federation should attract immigrants, but it does. The universities, especially the medical school and the metallurgical institute, are a draw for foreign students from places such as India and several African countries. Presumably few would have even heard of Ossetia, but they simply apply to study in Russia and the Russian government distributes them throughout the country as it sees fit.

Despite Ossetia's depressed economy there are many guest workers, mainly from the Central Asian and South Caucasian republics of the former USSR. Uzbeks and Tajiks were brought to South Ossetia after 2008 to help with the reconstruction of buildings damaged in the war with Georgia. Most other immigrants survive by selling things—the Vladikavkaz bazaar is dominated by Azeris—or by engaging in menial labor. Some are involved in illegal activities such as trafficking drugs.

Ossetia is also home to a significant refugee population, especially from war-torn countries such as Syria. Refugees have a particularly difficult time because they generally cannot obtain work or residence permits without paying massive bribes to middlemen—as if being a refugee did not already imply serious financial hardship. Theoretically they are supposed to be entitled to some kind of government assistance, but as is so often the case in Russia this money somehow seems to get siphoned off before reaching the pockets of those for whom it is intended.

It is not easy to be a foreigner in Ossetia. Since immigrants are in most cases poor and vulnerable, they are looked down upon and distrusted by the local population. Obtaining legal residence from the immigration office is complicated, time-consuming, humiliating, and apparently cannot be achieved without paying substantial bribes. Beginning in 2019 Russian president Vladimir Putin began a series of legal reforms aimed at making it easier for foreigners to obtain residency in Russia. His directives have not been heard in Ossetia.

Tourism: An Untapped Resource

The Caucasus Mountains are home to some of the most magnificent scenery in the world, offering diverse landscapes, cultural heritage, and wildlife. While

Georgia has been successful in realizing its potential as an international tourist destination, the North Caucasus republics remain largely off-the-grid except for a handful of Western "adventure travelers" and tourists from other parts of Russia. The tourist infrastructure in North Ossetia is reasonably well developed, with decent hotels in many parts of the country and a few guide services to mountain areas, but information is almost exclusively in Russian. Public transport being sketchy or nonexistent for the more remote areas, in the absence of local contacts a visitor is usually constrained to hire a driver (who will most likely speak only Russian).

The Fiagdon Valley is a popular getaway for people in Vladikavkaz, being less than an hour's drive from the capital. The eponymous town offers nothing special apart from a few luxury hotels and rental villas, but one can visit the remains of a medieval cliffside fortress at Dzivgis along the way, and there are interesting ruined towers and some examples of the distinctive beehive burial structures perched upon the hill rising above Fiagdon. A winding, unpaved mountain road heading east leads to the famous necropolis at Dargavs, about 9 km away. An even more treacherous track farther south leads to the access point for three large waterfalls at Midagrabinskii, one of which, Zaigelan, is the highest in Europe. This is a border zone, so technically non-Russians are not supposed to go there without first obtaining official permits.

The next gorge to the west is Alagir. Soon after branching off southwards from the main east-west highway at Alagir town one comes upon a massive metallic statue of the popular divine figure Uastyrdzhi on his horse emerging from the side of a cliff overhead. This is one of Ossetia's best-known landmarks. Some 30 km further one arrives at the village of Nuzal, where a small thirteenth-century stone chapel famous for its unique Byzantine frescoes is located. Unfortunately the chapel is locked and there is no way for visitors to see inside. This was the territory of the powerful Tsæræzontæ clan, who claimed the medieval hero Os-Bagatyr as their ancestor. The lineage was commemorated in an inscription on the wall of the chapel, but the writing was effaced during the nineteenth century under circumstances that are unknown.

A further 12 km and one arrives at Buron, a derelict-looking former workers' village with unexpectedly massive Soviet-era apartment buildings. Here is the turnoff for the Tsey Valley, where the Rekom shrine and a once-popular ski resort are located. Continuing straight on to the south takes one to the village of Nar, birthplace of Kosta Khetagurov. The museum there never seems to be

open, which is perhaps not surprising since tourists rarely make it this far. An imposing statue of Kosta looks down from the hill above, and on the side of the bridge crossing the river one of his most famous lines, "*Ves' mir—moia khram/ liubov'—moia sviatynia/Vselennaia—otechestvo moe*" (The whole world is my shrine/Love is my sanctuary/The Universe is my fatherland), is painted in large letters. Beyond Nar is the Russian border post before entering South Ossetia.

Many people feel that the most beautiful part of North Ossetia-Alania is Digoria, the western region where the archaic Digor dialect of Ossetian is spoken. The mountainous Irafsky district is home to the spectacular Alania National Park (see Figure 7.2). The area is heavily forested yet boasts seven major glaciers. The remote Urukh Valley was long used by bandits as a hideaway. Road access is still poor, but just beyond the village of Stur Digora there are a few mountain resorts with modern facilities. These are popular with Russians as base camps for treks.

Figure 7.2 Alania National Park, Digoria, North Ossetia.

Within the park there are peaks reaching over 4,600 m, and Mt. Elbrus, Europe's highest mountain at 5,642 m, is just across the border in Kabardino-Balkaria. There are a number of breathtaking waterfalls, perhaps the most remarkable of which are the Tri Sestri (Three Sisters), which plunge side-by-side down the mountain face from the Karaugom Glacier above. Nearby is the Bairadi ("Happiness-bestowing") waterfall, approached by a treacherous path with the help of a chain nailed into the rock. Bears, wolves, and possibly a leopard roam the thickly forested mountainsides. There are also chamois goats, lynx, and the rare West Caucasian Tur, a large goat-antelope, which is found nowhere else in the world.

The next major valley to the east, fed by the Dargonkom River, has a more palpable human presence. Just off the main road, which serves the region from the more heavily populated agricultural plains to the north, the village of Zadalesk houses a small museum dedicated to the memory of the medieval heroine known as Zadaleski Nana. The "mother of the Ossetes," as she is sometimes called, is said to have saved the local Alan/Ossete nation from total annihilation during the ravages of Tamerlane in 1394–5 by hiding orphaned children in a cave. Her actual name has been forgotten, but her heroism is remembered in a well-known folk song that is still sung today. The cave high on the cliffside above the village is difficult to find, but one may hire a guide by asking at the museum.

The Dargonkom Valley is an excellent spot for hiking, and at the entrance to the village of Vakats a group of Russian students has conveniently posted a large trail map by the side of the road showing many possibilities for exploring the region. There is a guest house at Kamata a few hundred meters away. The villages here have a history stretching back millennia, and there are many interesting stone towers and other archaeological remains. The road ends at Galiat with its distinctive traditional architecture, just below the continental divide marking the border with Georgia.

Ossetia has the potential to be a tourist paradise, which could go a long way toward remedying its financial problems. But this would require a level of vision and an openness to the world that are clearly beyond the capacities of the two republics' current leadership.

Does Ossetian Have a Future? Does Ossetia?

While Ossetes have gained in many ways from their long association with Russia, the benefits have come at a cost. Most apparent is the steady decline of the Ossetian language. Vladikavkaz, by far the largest Ossetian city and home to over a fifth of the worldwide population of Ossetes, is thoroughly Russified. The only visible evidence of Ossetian is a few moralistic slogans on kitschy posters plastered onto kiosks and at bus stops. If one hears the language spoken on the street or in shops, it is usually an indication that the speakers are villagers and that they know each other. According to a survey conducted in 2015 in Vladikavkaz, 36 percent of ethnic Ossete respondents claimed to speak Ossetian "fluently," 32 percent to speak it "well," and 11 percent admitted to speaking it badly. However, even among those who claimed to be fluent, many of the respondents were unable to respond to a question in Ossetian.[10]

Ossetian is a required subject in school but doesn't seem to be taken very seriously, either by students or administrators. There are a small number of books published in Ossetian but hardly anyone reads them. Everyone has heard of the Narts, but few Ossetes today could relate the exploits of Soslan or Batradz in any detail. To all appearances, three hours of Ossetian class per week do not suffice to instill an appreciation for the language or its literature among the nation's youth.

Many older Ossetes, especially women, are still more comfortable speaking Ossetian than Russian. However, most young people raised in Vladikavkaz cannot speak the language and can barely understand it if at all. The situation elsewhere in the republic and in South Ossetia is not quite as extreme, but it is going in the same direction. Russian is the language of administration, education, business, and social interaction in both North and South Ossetia. Even the internet tirades of Ossetian nationalists are almost always carried on in Russian. Making the effort to learn Ossetian has no demonstrable benefits for the younger generation. Their elders often upbraid them for not knowing the national language, but such criticisms are an annoyance, not a motivation.

If a people loses its language, how long can it hope to hold onto its distinct identity? What is left today of *osoba*, Ossetian-ness? Social gatherings of Ossetian men still follow the time-honored structure of the *kuyvd* ceremony, consisting of endless, formulaic toasts. Most Ossetian weddings resemble those of the past, with huge guest lists, massive amounts of food, traditional dancing, and physical separation between the sexes. Is there nothing more to it than that? Are ritualized drinking sessions and ostentatious weddings sufficient to keep a culture alive?

Many Ossetes are ready to express their concern about the loss of traditional values. People shake their heads and say things were better during the Soviet Union. There was honor, morality, self-sacrifice, respect. Perhaps it is true. Unfortunately one sees little of these things in Ossetia today.

Ossetia is a beautiful land with a rich history and a unique, fascinating culture. It is also a maddening place full of brutal injustices and pointless cruelties. It has seen better days. If the current political and economic challenges can be surmounted, then perhaps it will see them again. At the present time, such a possibility appears to be vanishingly remote.

Appendix

A Popular Ossetian Love Song

O, mæ khury khai, rasughd chizgai
Dy dæ anusmæ, mæ tsard, mæ tsin
Dy dæ mæ bællits, rasughd chizgai
Fælmæn midbyl mæm fækhud

Færnæi fætsærai myn, mæ tsardy didinæg
Dy myn yssyghtai mæ riu
Dy dæ mæ bællits, rasughd chizgai
Fælmæn midbyl mæm fækhud

O, mæ dunye, færnæi tsærai,
Ækhsyzgon myn u dæ uynd, dæ kond
Dæu tsy bon fedton, mæ khury khai
Uædæi dyn mæ tsard nyvond

Færnæi fætsærai myn, mæ tsardy didinæg
Dy myn yssyghtai mæ riu
Dæu tsy bon fedton, mæ khury khai
Uædæi dyn mæ tsard nyvond

O, my sunshine, beautiful girl
You are my life, my joy forever
You are my dream, beautiful girl,
Smile at me gently

Live with my blessing, flower of my life
You fired up my breast
You are my dream, beautiful girl,
Smile at me gently

O, my world, live with blessing
Your appearance, your shape please me

That day I saw you, my sunshine,
Since then my life is entrusted to you

Live with my blessing, flower of my life
You fired up my breast
That day I saw you, my sunshine,
Since then my life is entrusted to you

Notes

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