

Northern Caucasus Literatures Postclassical Period - Islamic Period

Contents (Poetry – Fiction – Essay)

POETRY

Alphabets

The composition of poetry in the postclassical northern Caucasus is inextricable from the region's Islamicization. As a result, much of this literature operated under the shadow of Arabic and was set to writing in the vernacular variation on Arabic script called *ajami*, a term derived from the Arabic root denoting "mute" (and later used to refer to Persian). *Ajami* scripts (which were also widely used in Islamic Africa) adapted the Arabic alphabet to the phonetic specificities of north Caucasus vernaculars, in order to produce vernacular literatures that paralleled and intersected with works produced in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic, often by the same writers. Although, as noted above, written culture in the northern Caucasus dates back to antiquity, it was in the postclassical period that the vernacular literatures of the northern Caucasus were first given written form, thanks to the development of *ajami* scripts and their adaptation to Caucasus vernaculars.

Islam

The northern Caucasus was Islamicized unevenly and in different stages, but the process well was underway by the Umayyad period (661–750). Since Islamicization was central to the development of postclassical literary culture in the northern Caucasus, it is not surprising that Daghestan, which was Islamicized before other parts of the northern Caucasus, became the center of north Caucasus literary production. Specifically, Derbent in southern Daghestan was an early center of Arabic literary culture, until Arabic culture began to spread elsewhere throughout Daghestan during the 12th century. Arab communities were established in the region of Derbent as early as the 7th century, concurrently with the Arab conquest of Iran. From the 13th century onward, the names of Daghestani Arabic writers begin to appear in other parts of Daghestan.

Social Structures

Further north in Daghestan in the 8th century, a group of Qumyqs named themselves the first Shamkhals, a title denoting ruler. The Shamkhals initially ruled from the town of Tarku to the Caspian Sea. Later, the Shamkhal capital was moved to Ghaziqumuq, a town inhabited by the Lak people (who were called *ghazi*, meaning "warrior," in recognition of their early conversion to Islam) as well as the Qumyq. Originally Christian and pagan, the people of Ghaziqumuq came under the influence of Islam in the 10th century. The Shamkhals were patrons of Arabic as well as indigenous literatures towards the end of the postclassical period. One interesting feature of their mode of governance is that they ruled by election rather than purely by descent, meaning that there would have been a forum for deliberation over who was the most qualified ruler. This method of governance was also practiced among the Chechens, who were governed by a council of elders called the *mexk-kxel*.

As the borders of the Islamic world expanded, Arab ruled-dynasties began to emerge across the northeastern Caucasus, in the Shirvan region which borders Daghestan and what is now Azerbaijan. The Arab ruler Haytham ibn Khalid broke with the Abbasid Caliphate in 861, thereby establishing the Mazyadid dynasty in Shirvan, which ruled as an Arab dynasty until the Kasranids initiated the Persianization of Shirvan in 1028, and the founding of the Shirvanshah dynasty, which presided over a renaissance of Persian poetry.

Although the early Arab rulers of Daghestan did not patronize literary languages in the vernacular, their reigns greatly contributed to the spread of Arabic and subsequently Persian across the

northern Caucasus. As a result of Arab migrations, Islamicization, and the overall proximity of the Caucasus to the Arab and Persianate world, both Arabic and later Persian became literary *lingua francae* throughout the region, often co-existing with Turkic dialects that were used in everyday discourse. Poetry during this period tended to be religious and didactic in orientation, and concerned with mystical themes. Ali of Qumuq (d. 1448) was a Daghestani poet of this period who wrote in Arabic.

Epic Poetry

Chechen *illesh* were widely performed during the postclassical period. Ballads from this period documented conflicts between everyday people and their rulers, and their performance helped to consolidate communities facing foreign invasions. The performances were highly public events, and *illesh* were recited to the accompaniment of the *dechig ponder*, one of the national instruments of the Chechen people. According to an anecdote, while traveling through Chechnya, the Turco-Mongol conqueror Tamerlane, founder of the Timurid Empire in 1370 CE, once asked his soldiers whether they had managed to wrest the *dechig ponder* from the Chechens they had conquered. On receiving a negative answer, Tamerlane concluded: "We defeated them, but we did not subdue them."

Further Reading:

Willem Floor, "Who were the Shamkhal and the Usmi?" *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 160.2 (2010): 341-381.

Rebecca Ruth Gould "Why Daghestan is Good to Think: Moshe Gammer, Daghestan, and Global Islamic History," *Written Culture in Daghestan*, ed. Moshe Gammer (Helsinki: Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, 2015), 17-40.

Vladimir Minorsky, *A history of Sharvan and Derbent in the 10th-11th centuries* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1958).

M. S. Saidov, "The Daghestan Arabic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," *Papers Presented by the USSR Delegation, XXV Congress of Orientalists* (Moscow: Oriental Literature Publishing House, 1960), 1-13.

Discussion Question:

What impact did Islamicization exert on poetry in the postclassical northern Caucasus?

FICTION, LEGENDS, MYTHS

Abu Muslim

The legends pertaining to Abu Muslim, who is regarded by Daghestanis and other peoples of the northern Caucasus as the most important spreader of Islam, is among the most widely circulating cycles of legends from the Islamic period. References to Abu Muslim permeate local historiographic sources as well as epigraphic inscriptions across the northern Caucasus. Across the Caucasus, many sacred sites of pilgrimages and shrines are named in Abu Muslim's honor and in honor of his associates. Abu Muslim is however more of a legendary than a historical figure. Although there is an historical Abu Muslim from Khorasan who helped the Abbasids seize power in the middle of the eighth century, yet who never actually visited the Caucasus, the Abu Muslim whose life and work are the stuff of legends in the northern Caucasus has a rather different profile. In the northern Caucasus, Abu Muslim came to embody the figure of the heroic preacher of Islam, and is a confluence of Arabic, Turkic, and Persian, and local legends that has circulated throughout the Caucasus from the medieval period onwards.

The earliest extant written record pertaining to the Abu Muslim of the Caucasus is an anonymous and untitled Arabic-language historical chronicle, which was discovered and published in the Arabic original and in French translation by the orientalist N. Khanikoff. This chronicle tells of a certain Shaykh Abu Muslim, who was born in Damascus as a *sayyid*, meaning that he was descended from the Prophet Muhammad. He became an orphan in early childhood, when his father was martyred in a battle against the Umayyad Caliph Marwan II. When Abu Muslim became an adult, he gathered together an army of fifty

thousand people and killed Marwan. After leading a number of invasions throughout the Near East as well as Central Asia, and according to some Daghestani sources, India, Abu Muslim embarked on a seven-year war for the propagation of Islam in the Caucasus. First, he conquered Shirvan, then Derbent and the mountainous regions of Daghestan. Finally, he conquered Circassian lands.

After the peoples of the north Caucasus converted to Islam, Abu Muslim built mosques throughout the region, including in Derbent, and especially in the difficult to access mountainous regions of Daghestan: Akty, Qala-Qureysh, Ghaziqumuq, Qubachi, and Khunzakh. He appointed other *sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet) as heads of these regional centers. These leaders in turn founded a number of powerful and significant dynasties within Daghestan, including the shamkhal of Ghaziqumuq, the *utsmi* of Qaitagh, and the *mausum* and *qadi* of Tabasaran. After he had Islamicized the Caucasus, Abu Muslim returned to Syria, where he died in 739. Although the primary source of information on Abu Muslim's biography is the untitled Arabic historical chronicle discovered by Khanikoff, Abu Muslim's Syrian origins are also affirmed in local epigraphy, including inscriptions on the mosques of Ghaziqumuq, Akty, and Richa, as Vladimir Bobrovnikov has shown. Arabic sources outside Daghestan refer to this Abu Muslim as Maslama bin Abdul Melik.

This however is just one among many versions of Abu Muslim's biography. Other versions, which are more commonly encountered in local histories such as the Avar-language *History of Daghestan* by Muhammad Rafi, describe Abu Muslim as a local hero and propagator of Islam. He was a descendent of one of the five shaykhs of Qureysh who had travelled to the Caucasus from Syria and settled there a few decades earlier. This Abu Muslim lived in the village of Khunzakh in mountainous Daghestan, and his grave in Khunzakh is a site of continuous and ongoing pilgrimage.

Many of the aforementioned legends pertaining to a Muslim saint contain admixtures of pagan and pre-Islamic belief systems, as well as of Christianity. The syncretism of the Sufism that was widespread through the northern Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Daghestan, facilitated an extraordinary cross-pollination of Muslim, Christian, and pagan traditions that shaped the ways in which figures such as Abu Muslim were remembered in local cultural memory.

Further Reading:

V.O. Bobrovnikov "Абу Муслим в культурной памяти мусульман Дагестана," *Ислам в современном мире* 15.3 (2019): 81-110. Available at: <https://islamjournal.idmedina.ru/jour/article/view/732/449>

Khanikoff. "Mémoire sur les inscriptions musulmanes du Caucase," *Journal asiatique* (1862): 82-155.

Discussion Question:

How did history and myth relate to each other in legends that developed in the early Islamic period.

ESSAY : DOCUMENTARY PROSE

Epigraphy

Although the Islamicization of the Caucasus dramatically transformed its literary culture, there were continuities with the pre-Islamic past as well. The epigraphic tradition, for example, continued, and indeed proliferated, once the Arabic script became the standard alphabet throughout the region. Written in verse as well as prose, epigraphy has been found in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic and indigenous languages of the Caucasus on mosques, funerary tombstones, and monuments of various kinds. In the early Islamic period, pre-Islamic Sassanian and other non-Muslim inscriptions were often overlaid by the new Arabic inscriptions. For example, on the walls of Derbent one can find signs cut into stone blocks depicting arches, which bear similarities with Parthian signs of ancient Iran, co-existing in proximity to inscriptions of the word Allah in the Kufi Arabic script (one of the most ancient Arabic scripts, often used for Quranic citations).

Harun al-Rashid

Among the earliest attested Arabic inscriptions in the Caucasus is a recently discovered inscription which sheds light on the activities of the Abbasid ruler Harun al-Rashid (786-809) in the region. Harun al-Rashid, whose epithet means "the just," is best known for establishing the legendary library Bayt

al-Hikma in Baghdad and for turning the city into a center of learning, culture, and trade. With regard to his state-building activities and patronage of culture, he is seen as a worthy successor to the Sasanian king Anushirvan. The inscription was discovered in the Muslim cemetery of the village Qala Kejer, through which the Derbent wall ran, on a rectangular slab originally belonging to the Derbent fortification, which was reused as a gravestone, and is dated 792/3 (176 according to the Islamic calendar). The discovery took place in 2001 during an archeological expedition organized by the Institute of History, Archeology, and Ethnography of the Daghestan Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Daghestan State University and headed by Daghestani scholar Murtazali Gadzhiev. According to Gadzhiev and Shikhsaidov (see “further reading”), this is the oldest dated official Arabic inscription in the Caucasus.

Harun al-Rashid is referenced in this newly discovered inscription, in a lineage that links him with Anushirvan (Kisra in Arabic), who is said to have built the wall, and (figuratively) to have commanded “servant of God Harun, commander of the faithful (*amir al-mu'minin*), on the appointment of al-Amin al-Muhammad, son of the commander of the faithful, as heir to the throne of the Muslims.” The inscription clearly refers to Harun al-Rashid’s appointment of his eldest son al-Amin as his successor. The claim corresponds with the historical record: al-Amin was indeed named successor to Harun al-Rashid in the year 792/3 (176). He became caliph immediately following his father’s death in 809 but only ruled for four years. He was deposed in 813, amid a civil war with his half-brother al-Ma'mun.

The content of the inscription is significant, not only for what it says about Harun al-Rashid and his family, but for what it says about their relationship to the Caucasus. Arab historians writing outside the Caucasus, such as al-Tabari, al-Ya'qubi, and al-Baladhuri, do not make any mention of Harun al-Rashid visiting Derbent. Yet multiple early modern and 19th-century Caucasus authors, including Derbent resident Alexander Kasimovich Kazembek (Mirza Kazem Bek, discussed in the next article) report that Harun al-Rashid’s son lies buried in a stone vault across from the Kyrhlar-kapu (“Gate of Forty Martyrs”), near the Derbent wall. Daghestani historian Muhammad Awwabi al-Aqtashi (discussed in the next article) offers a variant on the Caucasus narrative pertaining to Harun al-Rashid; he claims that the Abbasid caliph travelled all the way to Derbent to enhance the quality of life in the city, where he built mills, granaries, and mosques, and planted gardens. In the 19th century, Hasan al-Alqadari (discussed in the section on documentary prose in the Russian empire) reported in his *Vestiges of Daghestan* that, according to local tradition, Harun al-Rashid himself travelled to Derbent with his wife Zubayda, and that two of his sons died in the city of Derbent. The newly discovered inscription strengthens the plausibility of these local narratives, particularly as they pertain to Harun al-Rashid’s son al-Amin.

Local Historical Chronicles

Although pre-Islamic written culture did exist in the northern Caucasus, the spread of Islamic learning led to a new approach to written culture. Scholars travelled to Daghestan from across the Arab world, including especially Syria, and Daghestani scholars travelled throughout the Islamic world, to as far away as Yemen. As a result of these exchanges, the early Islamic period in the northern Caucasus is rich in historical chronicles translations, commentaries, and other paratextual materials, including legal documents and codices. Arguably the most important of these works is the *Darband-nama* of Shaikh Abu Ya'qub Yusuf Babi Lakzi Darbandi (d. before 1089), and historian of the Aghlabid dynasty that ruled Derbent (Darband) during the 11th century. He was a scholar of Lezgi origin who studied in Baghdad under Shafi'i jurists, including the Abu-l-Muzaffar al-Samani (d. 1096), grandfather of Abu Sad, author of the renowned *Kitab al-ansab* (Book of Genealogies).

Another famous scholar is Mammus ibn al-Hasan al-Lakzi (104-1100), author of the historical chronicle *History of Derbent and Shirvan* (*Tarikh Bab al-abwab wa-Shirvan*), which until recently was considered anonymous. Mammus al-Lakzi’s student Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Darbandi (1027-1110) went on to compose the extensive Sufi encyclopedic dictionary called the *Basilica of Verities and Garden of Delicacies* (*Rayhan al-haqa'iq va bustan al-daqa'iq*) in Arabic. This is the first comprehensive such work of this kind in the Caucasus, and it provides invaluable insight into the religious traditions and lives of Daghestani peoples. Al-Darbandi was also responsible for codifying Caucasus Sufism through a synthesis of local indigenous law (*'adat*) with Sufi teachings and Islamic theology.

Indigenous Law

As far as the written heritage of the northern Caucasus goes, the most important such corpus is arguably the *'adat* (indigenous or customary law) codices which bring the multiple sources of indigenous law into conversation with Islamic legal norms. Indeed, the word *'adat* itself is Arabic, and derived from

‘*ada*, meaning habit or custom. While ‘*adat* long preceded the arrival of Islam in the Caucasus, these indigenous laws were first codified by Muslim rulers, working within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence. Any effort to oppose ‘*adat* to *shari‘a* (Islamic law) should be mindful of their co-evolution and historical co-existence, as well as of the ways in which ‘*adat* was first given codified form in the Islamic period. ‘*Adat* codices exemplify the common strands of culture that run throughout Caucasus culture, since nearly all the peoples of the northern Caucasus have a version of ‘*adat*, which is variously denominated as *k’onaxalla* (among Chechens) *namus* (among some Daghestanis), *apsuara* (among the Abkhaz), and *adyghe khabze* (among Circassians).

Further Reading:

Alikber Alikberov, *Epokha klassicheskogo Islama na Kavkaze: Abu Bakr ad-Darbandi i ego sufiskaia entsiklopediia 'Raikhan al ha-qa'iq', XI–XII vv.* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2003).

Timirlan Aytberov and Shakhban Khapizov, “Kufic Inscriptions of the 10th–13th Centuries from Avaristan,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 23.4 (2019): 345–351.

M. S. Gadjiev and A. Shikhsaidov, A. “The Darband-Nama on Harun Al-Rashid and a newly discovered Arabic inscription from A. H. 176,” *Manuscripta Orientalia* 8.2 (2002): 3-10.

Robert G. Hoyland, ed. *From Albania to Arrān the East Caucasus between the Ancient and Islamic worlds: (ca 330 BCE - 1000 CE)* (Piscataway, NJ Gorgias Press 2020).

Alison Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam: Islamic Rule and Iranian Legitimacy in Armenia and Caucasian Albania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

L. I., Lavrov, *Epigraficheskie pamyatniki severnogo Kavkaza na arabskom, persidskom i turetskom yazikah*. Three volumes (Moscow: Akademii Nauk, 1966).

Discussion Question:

How do Daghestani and non-Daghestani historical chronicles differ on Harun al-Rashid’s relationship to the Caucasus?