

# Northern Caucasus Literatures –Ancient Period

Contents (Poetry – Essay – Fiction)

## POETRY

From the beginning of recorded history, the Caucasus has been situated at the crossroads of empires. The name itself is an exonym, applied by outsiders. Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Persians, and many other peoples have all represented the Caucasus in various ways: as the land where Prometheus was enchained, according to the ancient Greeks, where Noah's ark landed, according to the Book of Genesis (8:4), to which Jason and the Argonauts travelled, and where Medea murdered her children in revenge for his betrayal. Early literary sources on the northern Caucasus are mostly exogeneous: composed by outsiders and written in Greek, Latin, and other languages of antiquity. Yet there is also an indigenous and multilingual northern Caucasus literature of antiquity, explored throughout this study guide.

In the present context, antiquity refers to the period before Islamicization radically altered the Caucasus' literary landscape by introducing a new language of literary culture as well as a unifying religion. Prior to Islamicization, Christianity was widespread but it co-existed with other religious such as Zoroastrianism and pagan belief systems. Long before Islamicization, however, there is ample evidence of writing among northern Caucasus peoples, especially those who had converted to Christianity as a result of contacts with Christian Georgians to the south. While the best known ancient written cultures of the Caucasus are Georgian and Armenian, Chechen and Ingush inscriptions that used the Georgian script have been found on churches near the Georgian-Ingush border. An inscription in Georgian has also survived from Tkhaba-Yerdy Church in Ingushetia's Assin Gorge, which dates back to the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century. Ingush communities formed part of the Christian Kingdom of Queen Tamar (1184-1213).

### *Epic Poetry*

Poetry in the ancient northern Caucasus is comprised primarily of oral ballads and other folkloric genres. Among the oral epics of Caucasus peoples, the Nart sagas and the Chechen *illi* are the most significant. These sagas span the languages of the peoples of the northern Caucasus (Adyghe, Ossetians, Chechens, Balkars, Ingush) as well as certain peoples of Daghestan and Georgia. They exist both in the form of prose tales and epic songs in verse, as well as in hybrid prosimetric (combining prose and poetic) forms. In the latter case, as noted by David Hunt in his collection of these stories, "prose is used to move the action along" with "poetry (song) providing descriptions of scenes and of people's thoughts and feelings." The sagas have also been compared with Norse Vikings epics, which deal with historical and mythical subjects. Just as these tales served as the basis for modern iterations of the German *Nibelungenlied*, including Wagner's famous opera, so were the Nart sagas used and transformed by modern North Caucasus authors to revitalize their local literatures. The discussion here focuses on the Nart sagas as poetry, while a discussion of their prosaic dimensions and their narrative content is reserved for the section on prose fiction. However, the significant overlap in terms of theme, character, and plot between the poetic and prosaic aspects of the Nart sagas should not be forgotten.

Like other ancient verse epics, including Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Nart sagas abound in similes. Nart sagas also share in common with other ancient epics a reliance on epithets, such as "Nart's evil genius" and "indomitable." Epithets are used to form similes, involving comparisons to iron or gold, such as "golden hair" and "golden sun." Color symbology is also significant, and the literary devices of parable and allegory are frequently used. Hyperbole is another literary device that permeates the sagas. Rhythms are innovative and variable, and a variety of techniques are used to bring balance to asymmetric stanzas. Mixed rhythm, in which the final syllable of a line recurs in the next line, also features in these works. Many of these rhythms are built on consonants patterns, since Caucasus languages abound in consonants.

One feature of the Nart sagas that makes them particularly relevant to the study of northern Caucasus literatures is that they span multiple languages and have been integrated into the oral and

literary heritage of numerous Caucasus peoples. It is impossible to claim the Nart sagas as uniquely Vainakh (Chechen, Ingush), Circassian, or Ossetian, for example, since they are found in each of these cultures. Different heroes arise in each group's version of the Nart sagas but they share in common the same origin, identities, and often also names. Importantly, the Nart sagas also testify to the lifeworlds of peoples who are currently extinct, such as the Ubykh. The Ubykh's Nart sagas were recorded by French linguist Georges Dumézil during his visits to Turkey during the 1930s, where the Ubykh people had been exiled following the Russian conquest of the 1860s.

Another major corpus of texts that belong to the repertoire of ancient north Caucasus literatures is *illi* (plural *illesh*), ballads that are extant only in the Chechen and Ingush languages. Although *illesh* appear to be as ancient as the Nart Chechen, they are distinguished from the Nart sagas by virtue of their close relationship to historical events. Among the most ancient of these ballads are the ones dedicated to Pkharmat, the Chechen-Ingush version of Prometheus, and the ones bearing the (modern) titles 'Regarding the Earth's Cataclysm' and 'How God Punished Mankind.' *Illesh* continued to be composed throughout the postclassical and modern Chechnya and Ingushetia; these will be discussed in the next sections.

### Further Reading

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Walter May, John Colarusso, and Tamirlan Salbiev, *Tales of the Narts: ancient myths and legends of the Ossetians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)

David Hunt, *Legends of the Caucasus* (London: Saqi Books, 2012).

### Discussion Question:

What are the major genres of poetry in the ancient North Caucasus? How are they different and similar from each other?

### ESSAY - DOCUMENTARY PROSE

The Caucasus has an abundance of written monuments dating back to antiquity. Often these took the form of inscriptions on physical monuments, which were etched onto buildings, tombstones, and other monuments through the medium of epigraphy. The inscriptions are by and large political in nature, often commemorating the death of a famous or revered person, who is often a ruler or warrior. However, many inscriptions are anonymous and do not reference any specific individual by name. Masons and other builders marked their work and use inscriptional techniques to organize their labor.

#### *Derbent*

Although inscriptions have been found in many parts of the northern Caucasus, there is one specific location in which much of the most ancient literary culture was concentrated. In Russian and many Turkic languages this city is called Derbent, and in Persian is called Darband; it came to be known as Bab al-Abwab (the gate of gates) in Arabic sources, following the Arab conquest of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Given the city's overwhelming significance for subsequent development of literary culture across the Caucasus, most of this article will be concerned with mapping out Derbent's early history.

The first settlements in the area around Derbent date back to the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE (during the Bronze Age). The first recorded reference to Derbent—under the name “Caspian Gates”—occurs in the writings of the ancient Greek geographer Hecateus of Miletus in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The Greek historian Herodotus also referred to Caspian as a sea bounded by the Caucasus in his *Histories* (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE). The Caspian Gates were located on the Silk Road, and, like the Caucasus generally, it served as a civilizational and mercantile crossroads. The city itself was founded in 438 CE, with the construction by the Sassanians of a fortress, consisting of a citadel called Naryn Qala, which was connected to the Caspian Sea by double stone walls which blocked a narrow passage, three kilometers long, between the sea and the Caucasus mountains, so as to fence off the city from the water and to protect the borders of the Sassanian state. In scale and scope, these towering walls

merit comparison with the Great Wall of China, the Wall of Alexander the Great, and Hadrian's Wall in Britain. They are by and large intact to this day, and are designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.

At the time of its founding, the fortress of Derbent was the northernmost edge of the Sasanian empire. The Sasanian shah Anushirvan (531-579) is believed to have done the most to give Derbent the infrastructure by which it is best known today. According to Arabic chroniclers such as al-Baladhuri, Anushirvan, wished to fortify his domains and protect his empire from nomadic invasions. So he offered the Khaqan (King) of the Turks of Khazaria, at that time the empire that bordered Sasanian domains, "peace, friendship, and co-existence," and asked him to give his daughter, Istami-Khan, to him in marriage as proof of their compact. The Khaqan was delighted by the opportunity to align with the throne of the ruler of the vast Iranian empire. He sent his daughter to marry the shah, and agreed to put aside their rivalry in the interest of peace. Anushirvan used this peaceful interregnum to erect a wall made of iron stretching from the Caspian Sea to the mountain. As soon as the construction was complete, however, Anushirvan returned his new wife to her deceived father.

A few centuries later, the 10<sup>th</sup> century Armenian chronicler Movses Dasxuranci would recount in colorful detail the construction of Derbent's "wondrous walls" for the sake of which "the Persian kings exhausted our country, recruiting architects and collecting building materials with a view of constructing a great edifice stretching between the Caucasus Mountains and the Great Eastern Sea" (p. 83). Similarly to Herodotus' account of the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, such narratives shine a light on the unacknowledged labor that made these monuments possible. Although the precise names and identities of the builders are unknown, archeological scholarship has revealed a great deal about the mason marks that are visible on many of Derbent's fortifications. These marks, some of which have the apotropaic function of protecting the builder and the building he has constructed, include religious signs such as crosses, which were also inscribed by Iranian Christians on buildings constructed in Sassanian Iran. The fact that the city of Derbent served as the residence of heads of the Christian church of Albania, the Catholicoi, until 552 CE meant that there was a sizable Christian population at the time of the construction of Anushirvan's wall.

### *Persian Influence*

There are more Zoroastrian than Christian symbols among the mason marks left by the builders of Derbent's fortifications, which can be explained by the fact that Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the Sasanian state. For example, the sign showing three discs which has been found on the defense walls of Derbent has been interpreted as a visual representation of the divine triad of the Zoroastrian faith: Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mithra. Some mason's marks found on the walls of Derbent have also been found in ancient Iranian archeological sites such as Taq-i Bustan and Persepolis. Many of the signs found in Derbent have also been located in Azerbaijan on monumental architectural constructions dating to the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Another set of signs that have been found on the walls and fortifications of Derbent resemble letters of various alphabets: including Caucasian Albanian, Armenian, Georgian, Middle Persian, Greek alphabets, and various Syrian scripts. The presence of signs resembling the Syrian script is particularly suggestive, given the close ties between the Caucasian Albanian empire and Syrian Christians monks who preached Nestorian Christianity throughout that empire. Also of interest is the abundance of signs resembling Middle Persian scripts. Amid these Middle Persian signs, the names of three architects have been preserved: Adurgushnaps, Rashn, and Moshi. The first two of these names, which appear repeatedly on the Derbent walls, are Iranian in origin. Their placement and recurrence suggests that the names belong to high-ranking supervisors rather than to everyday laborers.

Overall, the general profile of the mason's marks on the walls and fortifications of Derbent proves the accuracy of Dasxuranci's claim: the majority of the manual laborers who constructed Derbent were natives of the region, from the empire of Caucasian Albania, and they used this script when making inscriptions on their buildings they constructed, even when these buildings were commissioned by a Sassanian king. Further, the organization of the mason's marking on different buildings and fortifications suggests the complexity of the ancient social structures in this region. Archeologists have documented divisions of labor among stone-cutters, porters who transported the building materials to the construction site, makers of lime mortar, as well as architects. In their chronicles, ancient Armenian historians such as Favstos of Byzantium, Movses Dasxuranci, and Ghevond Vartabed described how professional stone-cutters and layers contributed to the construction of cities and palaces in the region of Derbent, to the repair of Derbent's defensive walls, and to the erection of churches.

### Further Reading:

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Ghevond, Vartabed (1856). *Histoire des guerres et des conquêtes des Arabes en Arménie*. trans. by G.v. Ghahnazarian (Paris: Librairie de Meyrueis et Compagnie, 1856).

Movses Dasxuranci (Movses Kaghankatvatsi), *History of the Caucasian Albanians* trans. by C.J.F. Dowsett (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

A. A. Kudriavtsev, *Derbent - drevneishii gorod Rossii* (Makhachkala: Dagestanskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2018).

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Eberhard Sauer et al, *Dariali: The 'Caspian Gates' in the Caucasus from Antiquity to the Age of the Huns and the Middle Ages: The Joint Georgian-British Dariali Gorge Excavations and Surveys of 2013–2016* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2020).

#### Discussion Questions:

What role has Derbent played in the literary history of the northern Caucasus?

What role has epigraphy played in shaping literary culture?

### **FICTION, LEGENDS, MYTHS**

#### *Greek Perspectives*

For the Caucasus in antiquity, the space of fiction was filled by legends and myths. Strabo, Herodotus, and Plutarch all testified to the rich folkloric traditions of the northern Caucasus, but these only began to be formally and systematically transcribed during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Even when these traditions and belief systems pertain by and large to the domain of oral culture and were not immediately expressed as written texts, they were foundational for subsequent literary works across the centuries. Hence it is necessary to be attentive to the ancient myths and belief systems of the Caucasus in order to understand and appreciate its modern literature.

#### *Indigenous Gods*

Although Islam took root early throughout much of the Caucasus, the pantheons of pre-Islamic and pre-Christian pagan traditions heavily shaped the extant folklore and legends. Among the Chechens and Ingush, it was believed that life was created by the appearance of a giant white bird. Water and plants were believed to have evolved from the excrement of this bird. In the Chechen pantheon, Deela is the supreme god, comparable to the Greek Zeus, and the Sun and Moon are half-brothers. Erd and Tusholi are the gods of agriculture, fertility, and harvest. Far from being mere relics of antiquity, these deities often figure into modern 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, including in particular the fiction of Idris Bazorkin (see the final article in this section).

Daghestan's pagan pantheons developed in response to the mountaineers' immediate geography. Daghestanis worshipped sacred mountains, caves, groves, trees, stones, and rivers. In southern Daghestan and northern Azerbaijan, shrines (calls *pirs*) were dedicated to local saints. Unsurprisingly, in areas where Islam had penetrated deeply, pagan demonology intermingled with Islamic beliefs. The spirit world (of *djinn*s and others) included creatures who were small in size, with the heels of their feet turned forward, who could become people, animals, monsters, or become invisible. As evidence of the influence of Persian traditions on Daghestani folk beliefs, there is a

dragon-like creature named Azhdeha (Persian for dragon), with multiple heads that projects fire from its mouth. Azhdeha resides near springs, and demands human sacrifices, mostly young women whom it eats alive, in exchange for access to water. Tabasarani demons are particularly multifaceted, and many of them specialize in tormenting women in labor, impersonating diseases, and haunting cemetery grounds.

### *A Pan-Caucasus Cosmology*

Scholars past and present have considered whether it is possible to situate the legends of the northern Caucasus (and of the Caucasus generally) within a single cosmology. Abkhaz scholar Viacheslav Chirikba has suggested that if there is such a thing as a pan-Caucasus pagan belief system, it would include the following features, many of which can be found in other belief systems as well : 1) the world is separated into three horizontal realms (celestial, inhabited by gods; middle, inhabited by humans; lower, inhabited by demons); 2) a tree connects these three worlds to each other; 3) a supreme god is assisted by other gods; 4) certain groves, trees, woods, and mountains are deemed sacred; 5) the moon is a male god and the Sun is a female god; 6) a dragon (Azhdeha) or demon causes eclipses by eating the sun and moon; 7) a mermaid seduces lonely travellers; 8) there is a forest man and a forest woman; 9) a sacred animal, usually a cow or bull, is sacrificed to the gods; 10) there is an incubus (a house-dwelling creature which has only one or no nostrils and which smothers sleepers during the night by closing their nostrils); 12) snakes act as spirits, protecting the home; 13) there are vampires; 14) a hero is born from a rock or stone (this motif recurs in Bazorkin's novel *From the Darkness of Ages*, described below); 14) a hero whose biography resembles that of the Greek Prometheus is punished by the gods and chained within a cave or on a rock, high in the mountains.

### *Prometheus*

This last-mentioned feature is widely attested under different names, each of which have been the subject of poems and stories in their respective traditions. In Chechen, the Prometheus-like figure is called Pxarmat; in Georgian, Amirani; in Lak, Amir; and in Ossetian, Amran. (Prometheus also appears much later, as a pivotal figure in inspiring modern literary movements, such as the young writers association in 1970s Chechnya, which called itself "Prometheus," as well as in Dzarkho Gatuev's versified *Amran, An Ossetian Epic*, published in 1932) Chirikba also posits the following gods as elements of a pan-Caucasus system: a thunder god, a hunting god, a god of cattle and procreation, a god of rain who is summoned using a doll that resembles a human, a god of blacksmiths, and a god or goddess of harvest and agriculture.

Although many Nart sagas are recorded in verse, there are also many extant stories are also in prose, and concern historical events, such as wars between the Circassians and invading Goths, and the invasion of Attila and the Huns during the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Yet another historical invading people discussed in the Circassian Nart sagas are the Avars, not to be confused with the Avars of Daghestan.

### *Impact of Modernity*

Our access to legends of the ancient north Caucasus is necessarily refracted through the lens of modernity. Our most detailed sources on ancient Caucasus legends were transcribed by people who operated within frameworks that were quite different from the frameworks within which these legends originated. These include colonial officials working in the service of the Russian tsar, such as the linguist P.K. Uslar, and local ethnographers such as Bashir Dalgat, who pioneered the documentation of their traditions according to the standards of modern scholarship. In the latter group should also be included the members the Institute of History, Archeology, and Ethnography of the Daghestan Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IIAE), created in 1924 by Ali Alibekovich Takho-Godi, and many similar institutions across the republics of the North Caucasus, who have uncovered numerous new sources on the literatures of the North Caucasus during the past several decades.

### Further Reading:

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Discussion Question:

What features do the pagan belief systems and folkloric traditions of the northern Caucasus share in common?