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“The Ossetic Studies in 17th and 18th Centuries. From the Travel Notes to the First Ossetic Grammars”

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PAOLO OGNIBENE Ravenna

The Ossetic Studies in 17th and 18th Centuries: from the Travel Notes to the First Ossetic Grammars.

Marcus Annaeus Lucanus in the *Bellum civile* wrote: *duros aeterni Martis Alanos* and you can hardly find, in ancient authors, more appropriate words to describe the Alans' "way of life."¹

There are a lot of written indications asserting the existence of Alans in ancient authors, as well as in the sources of the late antiquity and in several sources in oriental languages.²

The problem about the *Urheimat* of the Alans cannot be considered solved yet – many pages have already been written on this matter and many pages will be written in the near future – but nowadays we

are at least able to outline the history of Alans from I century AD up to the Mongol invasion.

Many evidences of Alan tribes living in Northern Caucasus are conserved and a region in Northern Caucasus is still called in Vaxušti Bagratiwni's *Geography Alanet'i* (ალანეთი),³ moreover, the "state" called by the Soviet historiography "Medieval Alania" flourished here.⁴

However, even if not all the scholars agree with the hypothesis of the existence of an Alan state in Northern Caucasus in 13th century – and it is very likely that Alania at that time was only a conglomeration of tribes – some events like

¹ Luc. *Civ.* 8, 223.

² In the Latin sources they are named *Alānī*, in late authors *Halānī*, Ancient Greeks called them *Ἀλανοί*, in Arabic we find *الان* (*Alān*), in Middle Persian we can read *'l'n'n BBA* and in Parthic *'l'nn TROA* to point out the Dar'jal Pass (*dar-i Alānān* = Alan's gate), in Syriac *Alanāyē*, in Hebrew *אלן* (*Alan*), in Catalan *los alans*, in Georgian (ალანეთი) *Alanet'i* – that is a region situated in the NE of Svanetia, in Armenian *Ալանք* (*Alank'*), in Chinese *Alan* (阿蘭). They are also called *As*: see Georgian (ოსეტი) *oset'i*, Mongolian *Asud*, Chinese *Asu*, Arabic and Persian *Ās*, Hungarian *Jász*, Medieval Latin *As*, *Assi*, *Azzi* etc. The problem of the ethnic name *al[ī]ān is well discussed in: Alemany 2000: 1-10. About the Alans in the ancient authors see also Kulakovskij 1899; for a history of the Alans in the West see Bachrach 1973. We can find sources indicating the presence of Alans in many languages: Latin, Greek, Arabic, Armenian, Catalan, Georgian, Hebrew, Parthic, Middle Persian, Bactrian, Persian, Mongolian, Russian, Syriac, Chinese, Čagatay etc.

³ Vaxušti 1842.

⁴ According to ancient authors, but also to toponymy

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and hydronymy (cf. river's names Don, Dnepr, Dnestr etc.), in ancient times Iranian peoples lived in Southern Russia and Ukraine's plains. Numerous personal names found in the inscriptions of the Greek colonies located in the northern coast of the Black Sea can be explained from Iranian and in particular from Ossetic forms. The Iranian element in Southern Russia has been studied particularly by Max Vasmer and Ladislav Zgusta. Cf. Zgusta 1956 and Vasmer 1923. It is necessary to remember that up to the 12th century, when Southern Russia was a territory inhabited by nomadic peoples speaking Turkish languages (Pečenegi and then Polovcy), the village of Sugrov is remembered in Cuman territory. The name *sugrov* can be explained from Ossetic (Digor) *surx-qæw* (red village): cf. Miller 1887: 67; in this village the Russian princes captured Jasyňa and many Alans. About the position of the Sovietic historiography on Medieval Alania see: Vaneev 1959; information about the Alans who lived in Northern Caucasus can be found in several sources by Arabic authors, but especially these Arabic evidences gave an opening to a lot of enquiries about the value of the term "alans."

Ĵābā and Sūbā'ātāi's military expedition in 1222,⁵ the other Mongolian incursions in this region and the deportation of part of the Alan people to China, substantially contributed to the disappearance of the Alans from the scene of history.⁶ Russian chronicles mentioned them for the last time before the year 1277-1278⁷ and their name disappeared around the same time from Georgian chronicles too.

Only in 19th century, works by J. Klaproth and V.F. Miller showed clearly the relation between Alans and Ossetians⁸ but unfortunately these works also opened the way to the so called "Alan question," i.e. an endless discussion about the cultural heritage of the Alans.⁹

The 20th century contributed enormously to the development of the Ossetic studies: every researcher approaching such a field of studies knows perfectly well that nowadays the bibliography is quite wide. Nevertheless, it is not useless

to try to follow the first stages of these studies and try to outline their development from the end of 17th century up to the second half of 19th century especially because several of these first works, though very important and interesting, have been forgotten and it is not possible to find them quoted in any recent bibliography.

In a work dedicated to V.I. Abaev in occasion of his 80th birthday, M.I. Isaev wrote: "the first stage, prescientific, in Ossetic studies is based on the information about Ossetians and their language in many travellers' notes dated 17th-19th century."¹⁰ No doubt can arise about the fact that these travellers' notes have a prescientific character, but in any case they contain several interesting features which are useful to the history of Ossetic studies too. The nature and utility of these works are, in fact, heterogeneous: some of these writings confine them-

⁵ Ĵābā and Sūbā'ātāi's expedition through Caucasus has been examined in my report "Pochod Džebe i Subedeja na zapad: istočniki pervogo alano-mongol'skogo sraženiija" read at the XXXV ICANAS, Budapest 1997 (to be published in 2004 on *Nartamonga*, Vladikavkaz); numerous written indications about this expedition can be found in Arabic, Persian, Armenian, Georgian, Russian, Chinese, Mongolian and Čagatay sources.

⁶ A part of the Alans was deported to China. About 30.000 Alans entered the Chinese imperial guard during the Yuan dynasty. This fact is reported by Peregrinus from Castello: ".../ item quidam christiani boni qui dicuntur Alani XXX milibus a Rege maximo stipendio accipientes ipsi et familie eorum ad fr. Iohannem recurrunt. Et ipse eos confortat et predicat": Peregrinus from Castello, *Ep.* // Wyngaert 1929: 365-368. Toyān Temur's (cin. Shūn Di) letter to the Pope speaks about these Alans too: ".../ Nos mittimus nuntium nostrum Andreā Francum cum quindecim sociis ad Papam, Dominum christianorum in Franchiam ultra septem maria, ubi sol occidit, ad aperendam viam nunciis saepe mittendis per nos ad Papam et per Papam ad nos, et ad rogandum ipsum Papam, ut mittat nobis suam benedictionem et in orationibus sanctis semper memoriam faciat de nobis. Et quod Alanos servitores nostros, filios suos christianos, habeat recommendatos. Item quod adducant nobis ab

occasu solis equos et alia mirabilia. Scripta in Cambalec in anno Rati, mense sexto, tertia die lunationis." The Alans say: ".../ Hoc autem Sanctitate Vestrae sit notum, quod longo tempore fuimus informati in fide catholica, et salubriter gubernati, et consolati plurimum per legatum vestrum fratrem Iohannem, valentem, sanctum, et sufficientem virum, qui tamen mortus est ante octo annos /.../ Quare supplicamus sapientiae vestrae, quod mittatis nobis bonum, sufficientem ac sapientem legatum, qui curam habeat de animabus nostris et quod cito veniat /.../ et ideo recomendatis nos sibi, filios vestros, et fratres, et fideles alios, qui sunt in imperio eius": Wadding 1733: 209-214; see also: Didebulidze 1981 and *HAMM* 1962.

⁷ *Летопись по воскресенскому списку* [*Voskresenskaja letopis'*] (6785 = 1277 A.D.): "князи же вси со царем Менгутеремъ поидоша въ войну на Ясы, и приступиша Рустии князи ко Ясскому городу ко славному Дедакову..." A very short mention of the Alans can be found under the year 6827 = 1319 and under the year 6888 = 1380; Cf. *ПСРЛ* [PSRL] 1856: 173; Cf. Ognibene 2001: 31-32.

⁸ Klaproth 1822; Miller 1887.

⁹ In particular the main question is about the role of the Alans in the ethnogenesis of the Balkarian people: Cf. *PON* 1967.

¹⁰ Isaev 1980: 14.

selves to a short mention of Alan population; others give a detailed description of the places where they lived, of their traditions and customs. Sometimes we can find complete sentences the Alans pronounced in particular cases of life. It is necessary to remember that in this region, unlike Southern Caucasus, writing systems were not a widespread phenomenon and for many languages of the area a writing system was created, usually on the basis of the Cyrillic alphabet, only during the 19th century and this was the case of Ossetic too. Ossetic was written for the first time at the end of 18th century using the Cyrillic alphabet adapted to the specific requirements of an Iranian language deeply influenced by the Caucasian substratum¹¹ also in the phonemic system. In Southern Ossetia at the beginning of 19th century Georgian alphabet was used to write Ossetic: this alphabet was in any case closer to the needs of Ossetic at least for the possibility to express the Caucasian glottals by means of a single letter.¹² A more suitable new alphabet – though a variant of Cyrillic and graphically still quite complex, was elaborated in the 40s of 19th century and it is known as “old Sjögren-Miller writing system.”¹³

In 17th-century works we can still meet the term “alans.” It is clear that at that time the name “alan” has not any ethnic value, but just a geographic one.

This is, for example, the case of Arcangelo Lamberti¹⁴ and Nicolaas Witsen’s writings; Witsen travelled from Moscow to Northern and Southern Caucasus and crossed Little Kabarda, Ossetia and Georgia. In 1692 he published a book in Amsterdam in which he gave precious information about Caucasian peoples. Moreover the book included a little dictionary of about 90-s words in different languages of the region.¹⁵ The Alans are mentioned in the “Notice to the Grand Duke of Tuscany Cosimus the 3rd about the Moscovia.” Here we can read that Alans are a population strictly related to the Circassians.¹⁶ In P. Chardin’s travel work on Persia the smaller tribe near the Colchis is called Alans.¹⁷ We have to wait for the last decades of 18th century to find more precise notices. We are still working with travel notes, but some of them are very detailed. Städler’s work is chronologically the first we meet and it is also among the most detailed ones. It speaks widely about the Ossetians and especially about the Digors.¹⁸ Unfortunately it has been neglected for a long time, in spite of its importance for the history of Ossetic studies. In the works of that period we cannot find yet any reference to the Alans, but we begin to meet information about the Irons and Digors. At that time when an author spoke about the Alans it was only to wonder what had

¹¹ Cf. the first book written in Ossetic using Cyrillic alphabet: *NU* 1798.

¹² Cyrillic uses two letters to express these phonemes: кь, пь, ть, хь, ць, чь while in Georgian we find: კ, პ, ტ, ლ, ჳ; for the first printed book with Georgian letters see: Molitvennik 1820.

¹³ For a table with the various writing systems adopted for the Ossetic language and his transliteration see: Christol 1989: 80.

¹⁴ Lamberti 1654

¹⁵ Witsen 1692.

¹⁶ *OGRIP* 1967: 22.

¹⁷ Chardin 1686.

¹⁸ Städler, *Dnevnik*, unpublished; the parts of this

work related to the Ossetians have been published for the first time in Russian in: *OGRIP* 1967: 27-69. Digoria is the most western region of Northern Ossetia. It is a mountain region, quite poor and it distinguishes itself from the rest of Ossetia for religious beliefs too. The greater part of its inhabitants are Muslims. Islam penetrated this region from Kabarda. The language of the region, called Digoron, is one of the main dialects of Ossetic and it is well known for its very archaic and conservative features. Digors have probably to be identified with the Aš-Tigor that we can find asserted in an Armenian geography of VII century attributed to Ananias Širakac’i.

happened to this population and where they are now. This is, for example, the case of Jan Potocki's writings. Städér's travel notes are written in German and they are conserved in the archives of the Asiatic Institute at St. Petersburg's Academy of Sciences. This work has been only partially translated into Russian and published in Moscow. A detailed description of the Ossetic ritual which is celebrated when a man is struck by lightning is conserved as well as the exact words pronounced by the people who formed a circle around the victim.¹⁹ Fate decided in a different way with I.A. Güldenstädt's work which was written after seven years of wandering in the region of Astrachan and in Caucasus²⁰ and it became quite popular when it was edited by J. Klaproth. Güldenstädt also compiled a glossary of at least 320 Ossetic words. He was entrusted with the Ossetic section of the so-called *Comparative dictionaries of all the languages and idioms*, a four tomes edition published in St. Petersburg in 1786.²¹ In 1796, in St. Petersburg a work written in German by J. Reineggs was published. It included among other things many Ossetic words and also a dictionary with Ossetic numerals.²² Some years later this

work was followed by a monography by Pallas.²³ It is however sure that the most important and well-known work of this period is Klaproth's *Reise*.²⁴ It is interesting to remember that in the Soviet Union Jan Potocki's work has been completely neglected.²⁵ The linguistic material reported by Klaproth includes at least 200 words in a little Ossetic dictionary besides what can be considered a very elementary attempt of Ossetic grammar.²⁶ In 1822, in his *Memoire*, he hypothesized that Ossetians must be identified with the Alans of the Middle Ages.²⁷

The first attempt to draw up an Ossetic grammar, undertaken by Klaproth, is an insubstantial one (for dimensions too), the first Ossetic grammar was in fact published only 30 years later. Sjögren's Ossetic grammar was published in 1844 in St. Petersburg.²⁸ During the period of time between Sjögren's grammar and V.F. Miller's *Osetinskie étjudy* a considerable number of studies was published. Beside the studies on Ossetic grammar many scholars began to collect the so-called Narts epos and in general a new field of studies related to Ossetic traditions (festivals, calendars, religion) was created.²⁹

Real studies about Ossetic appeared at

¹⁹ The words pronounced in this occasion are: "О Елаи! Ельдер чоппай" [O Elai! el'dær čoppaj]. They have been difficult to be interpreted until now. This formula is also reported by Gatiev as: "ой алай, ой алдары цоппай" [Oj alaj, oj aldary coppaj] and by Čursin "ой цоппай, хуцау цоппай" [oj coppaj, xucaw coppaj], in these last two cases these words are pronounced in occasion of the *čuppūrs'* holiday. See: Gatiev 1876, Čursin 1925, but also Abaev 1958 and Alborov 1979.

²⁰ Güldenstädt 1787-1791. This edition did not include part of the material collected during the travels. A new edition with a commentary was assembled by J. Klaproth at the beginning of the 19th century, while a Russian translation was published in St. Petersburg in 1809: Güldenstädt 1809. Some inedited parts were published for the first time in: *OGRIP* 1967: 70-88.

²¹ Pallas 1786-1789; *SSVJa* 1786-1789.

²² Reineggs 1796.

²³ Pallas 1799-1801.

²⁴ Klaproth 1812-1814.

²⁵ Potocki 1829.

²⁶ Klaproth 1814; the material used for this Ossetic grammar was taken from the first Ossetic book printed in Moscow in 1798; it is, of course, a first attempt, and it has a very modest value, as it was already underlined by Sjögren 1844: IX

²⁷ Klaproth 1822.

²⁸ Sjögren 1844.

²⁹ Studies about Ossetic language: Rosen 1846; Schleicher 1848; Müller 1861; Iosif 1862; Müller 1863; Iosif 1864; Müller 1864; Lerch 1864; OT 1868; Stackelberg 1886; Stackelberg 1888; Hübschmann 1879; Miller 1881; Miller 1882, Miller 1887; Hübschmann 1887; Hübschmann 1887²; studies

the beginning of 19th century and they moved along three main directives: 1. Studies about Ossetic language (grammars and problems concerning the settlement of Ossetic grammar: phonemic system, noun, verb, syntax; identification of Ossetic as a North-Eastern Iranian language and its importance for the Iranic and Indo-European studies); 2. Relation between Alans and Ossetians (including the problem of the settlement of Alan tribes in Northern Caucasus and the way they followed to reach Caucasus)³⁰; 3. Epos of the Narts (transcription, analysis and comparison of the different traditions conserved in Ossetia and among the other ethnic groups of Caucasus).

The contribution of 19th century to the development of Ossetic studies cannot be in any case considered insignificant, though many of the works published in the first seventy years of the century are nowadays ignored or neglected. A good example of this is given by the case of V.F. Miller's *Ossetic Studies*: the book has never been translated from Russian into any other western european language during the last 120 years. It is not difficult to understand that the roots of many of 20th century discoveries in the Ossetic studies go back to a recent past and that in many cases we are just facing a rediscovery or a reinterpretation of something that had already been found out.

about traditions, feasts, calendars, religion: Beridze 1850; Berzenov 1850; Berzenov 1850²; Berzenov 1850³; Berzenov 1852; Berzenov 1852²; Berzenov 1852³; Čočišvili 1884; Gassiev 1868; Gassiev 1868²; Gatiev 1872; Gatiev 1876; K 1885; Janovskij 1830; Kovalevskij 1886; Kučerevskij 1848; Lavrov 1874; Lavrov 1875; Miller 1882²; Perevalenko 1853; Pfaf 1871; Pfaf 1871²; Pfaf 1872; Šanaev 1870, Šanaev 1870²; Šanaev 1876; Saint Martin 1850; Sjögren 1843, Sjögren 1846; Tchostov 1868; Tolstov 1875; TV 1870; Žuskaev 1855; Žuskaev 1855².

³⁰ For a long time the main discussion concerned the way followed by the Alans to reach the Northern Caucasus: did they come from south – that means that the Alans crossed the Caucasus – or from a northern way? In the third part of *Ossetic Studies* V.F. Miller, analysing Ossetic lexicon, showed that they came from north. The presence of numerous borrowings from the Ural-Altai languages, that is an evidence of a quite long contact with these peoples, makes Miller's hypothesis very probable: Miller 1887: 12-13.

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