

THE ALANIC GLOSSES: BETWEEN CHRISTIANISM AND PAGANISM

A. Alemany

Цель предлагаемой статьи состоит в том, чтобы подчеркнуть важность некоторых аланских глосс в греческом литургическом манускрипте Q12 из собрания Библиотеки Акатемии наук в Санкт-Петербурге в изображении некоторых христианских реалий, которые позже стали частью осетинских языческих традиций.

Ключевые слова: аланские глоссы, христианство, язычество.

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In 1997, some months after submitting my PhD, I attended my first international conference in Erlangen and presented a paper to spread the results of my research on the Alans. When I came to mention the three monuments of the Alanic language known so far at the time (the Zelenčuk inscription, the two lines in the epilogue to Tzetzes' *Theogony*, and the so-called 'Jassische Wörterliste'), I ventured that it was just a matter of time before new evidence was found. And then, in the ensuing discussion, Alexander Lubotsky asserted that such an assumption was right, since Sysse Engberg had discovered in the library of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg a Greek liturgical manuscript (Q 12) containing what appeared to be some thirty Alanic glosses. In fact, the discovery dated back to 1992, but a thorough study of the document did not appear until much later [1], centering, as was predictable, on its linguistic analysis, which, surprisingly enough, showed some features of the Iron dialect –whereas Alanic has traditionally been regarded as closer to the more archaic Digor [1, 49-50]. However, after recently writing a paper on the remnants of Alanic pagan religion, when Vittorio Springfield Tomelleri kindly invited me to participate in a Seminar commemorating the 1100 years of the Christianization of Alania, I

wondered if, leaving aside its importance as a linguistic monument, Q 12 glosses could throw any light on the religiosity of medieval Alans.

Actually, I am rather sceptical as to the degree of success of early temptatives of conversion of the medieval Alans to Christianity –which must be dissociated from the proper Christianization of Ossetia after its incorporation into the Russian empire in 1774 – or, at a lesser scale, to other major religions like Judaism (under Khazar rule) or Islam (under the Golden Horde and in Mamluk service). Nevertheless, I deem worthy of consideration the fact that several Christian terms found in the glosses, on one side, were unknown in Alanic until the discovery of Q 12 and, on the other side, lie in the origin (or are a first attestation) of later *realia* linked to Ossetian paganism, often known through the Nart sagas; in this sense, Q 12 provides –so to say– a milestone between Byzantine missionary activities and the incorporation of some Christian traditions into Alanic pagan beliefs which have managed to survive up to the present day.

1. Some significant religious terms are attested in Alanic for the first time by Q 12 glosses, sometimes with special meanings in Ossetic close to pagan beliefs:

1.1. ἡστί → 104r σαρά βαράν ἡστίαν ~ *saræværaen ist (i) ban “Feast-day of the

Foundation” (Eve of Pentecost), where **ist* (*i*) *ban* reminds of Digor истбон “feast, holiday”, literally “oath day” (“праздник, праздничный день” [2, 305b]); cf. Digor (и) стæн, Iron стæн in oath formulas, like Iron хуыцауыстæн “I swear by god”, Digor (Nart epos) дæ фарн, дæ фарн, (де) ’зæдистæн “I swear by your farn, by your farn, by your god”, etc; not related to Hung. *isten* “God” (cf. [3, 628a]) nor to the Hittite sun god (dess) *Istanu* (cf. [4, I, 205-6 s.v.]; in fact, also known as *Astanu*, *Estan*, *Estanu*); maybe a trace of oath as a spoken contract between man and deity, as scenified in Ossetian communal ceremonies [1, 26-28; 5, III, 148].

1.2. τζουβάρ → 109v τζουβάρ οὐρηαγβαναι ~ **zuwar uriag-†vanai†* “...of the Jewish cross” (September 14, Elevation of the Precious Cross); first attestation of the Alanic term **zuwar*, cf. Digor дзиуарæ, Iron дзуар [6, 53] “cross; angel, saint, deity; sanctuary” < Georg. ჯვარო *jvari* “cross”; widespread toponymic evidence in Авд дзуары [6, 10] “seven gods”, name of different sanctuaries; Атагы дзуар [6, 18] patron of the Ataty family in Gæliat village, Digorskij Gorge; Æфцæджы дзуар [6, 32] fearsome spirit, lord of mountain passes and gorges (lit. “holy pass”); Дауджыты/Дзири дзуар [6, 45] deity of fertility and harvest with a sanctuary on mount Dziri; Джери дзуар [6, 51] healing spirit in Džeri village, South Ossetia; дзуар идауæг [6, 54] “sanctuary of the spirit”, in the vicinity of Stur-Digora; дзуары лæг [6, 54] “holy man, priest” in charge of performing sacrifices; Дзуары хуымтæ [6, 54] special plots of land harvested to arrange feasts in honor of rural and family deities; Дзывгъызы дзуар [6, 55] a revered sanctuary dedicated to Uastyrdži in Kuyrttaty gorge, etc, etc [1, 30-31; 5, I, 401-2].

1.3. χουτζάου → 100r πητζινάκ χουτζάου πάν ~ **bic’inag xucas ban* “Pecheneg Sunday” (Eve of Midpentecost), probably in reference to the “Pecheneg Festival” (Nic. Chon. ed. *CFHB* XI/11, p. 16¹²⁻¹³ τὴν τῶν Πετζινάκων λεγομένην ἐς ἡμᾶς τελετήν), established by

emperor John II Comnenus after the victory of Beroea over the Pechenegs (spring of 1122 or 1123), where **xucas ban* “Sunday” means literally “day of God”; first attestation of the Alanic term **xucas*, cf. Digor Хуцау/хуцаубон; Iron Хуыцау/хуыцаубон “God/Sunday”; Karaçai-Balkar хычаубан, хычаман “name of a spring month in the folk calendar” [1, 24-26; 7, 6, 185; 5, IV, 255-6].

2. Even if evidence is scarce, it is worth noting that Christian names borne by medieval Alans can be related to Saints commemorated in the feast days mentioned in the glosses (ἡλία, πασήλ, τημιτήρι, φητιβανη):

2.1. ἡλία → 130r ἡλία πάν **[h] ilia ban* “Elijah’s day” (July 20th, The Holy Prophet Elijah); thrice attested as Alanic PN: *Yelie Badur* 也烈拔都兒 (YS 132, p. 3208), a warrior who submitted himself and joined the Palace Guard under Tai Zong (Ögödei 1229-41); *Yeliya* 也里牙 (YS 123, p. 3037) a warrior who submitted himself to Xian Zong (Möngke 1251-59) together with Niegula 捏古刺; *Elias*, son of Ravars, an Alan who sold temporarily his son *Basilius* at Tana (July 6, 1360: [8, 932]) [1, 38; 9, s.v. §576 *Elias*, §577 *Elioz* [< Georg.], §796 *Ilas*, etc)].

2.2. πασήλ → 120r πασήλ πάν **basil ban* “Basil’s day” (January 1st, Eve of the Circumcision of Our Lord Jesus Christ and of our Holy father St. Basil); once attested as Alanic PN: *Basilius*, son of *Elias*, Alan slave sold at Tana (July 6th, 1360: [8, 932; 1, 34-35; 9, s.v. §227 *Basil*, §228 *Basyl*, §229 *Bašil*].

2.3. τημιτήρι → 111v τημιτήρι πάν **dimidiri ban* “Demetrius’ day” (October 26, Commemoration of the Great Earthquake), thrice attested as Alanic PN: *Demetre*, son of Alan princess Aldē (Αλδή) & Georgian king Giorgi I (1014-27); *Dimidir* 昀迷的兒 (YS 135, p. 3278), one of the Asud, promoted from Centurion to General under Shizu (Qubilai 1260-94) and his successors; *Demetrius*, one of the *Jazones fideles nostri* (1323) in the service of Charles Robert of Anjou [1, 32; 9, s.v. §440 *Dimitr*, §442 *Dmitri* [< Russ.]].

2.4. **φητί βανη** → 126v, **φητί βανη πάνη**, †137r [...] **ητίβα**/[...] **fidiwani bani* “at Father John’s day” (June 24th, Birthday & August 29th Beheading of St. John the Baptist); twice attested as Alanic PN: Ἰωάννης ὁ Ἀλανός (Ann. Comn. Alex. 1.16.3) in the service of the Byzantine court (maybe holding the rank of μάγιστρος) under Nicephorus III Botaneiates (r. 1078-81); *Joannes Jukoy/Juckoy/Yochoy*, Alan prince sending letters to Pope Benedict XII; it is uncertain whether the second name in *Fodim/Futim* (= Chin. *Fu Ding* 福定) *Joens/Jovens/Yovens* is also a variant form for John (1336-1338: [10, 249-257; 1, 36-37; 9, s.v. §824 *Ivan* [< Russ.], §226 *Iwane* [< Georg.] etc]).

3. Two feast-days mentioned in the glosses are linked to the Ossetian traditional calendar (ἀποστόλ, πασήλ):

3.1. **ἀποστόλ** → 128v ἀποστόλ πάν **abostol ban* “the Apostles’ day” (June 29th, The Holy and Exalted Apostles Peter and Paul); cf. Digor Амистол name of a summer month (June-July) in the Ossetian religious calendar; cf. Karačai-Balkar Абыстол ай “November”, maybe after St. Andrew [30th Nov.] [1, 37-38; 5, I, 51].

3.2. **πασήλ** (cf. § 2.2) → Dig. Басилтæ [6, 36, 106 s.v. нобон] “New Year feast”, cf. Караčai-Balkar Башил ай “January” [1, 34-35; 5, I, 239-40].

4. Some of the saints named in the glosses lie in the origin of gods of Ossetian folklore (ήλία, μιχαήλ, φητί βανη).

4.1. **ήλία** (cf. § 2.1) → Digor Уацелиа, Уацелла, Iron Уацилла [6, 151-2] god of thunder, patron of bread, cereals and crops; also pl. Уациллатæ, celestial beings in a state of enmity with Batraz in the Nart epos; cf. Georg. ვახოლვობა *vač’iloba* festival in Kazbegi region [1, 38; 5, IV, 31-32].

4.2. **μιχαήλ** → 113v μιχαήλ πάν **mixail ban* “Michael’s day” (November 8, Feast for the Archangel Michael); not attested among the Alans, but cf. Digor Микалгабуртæ, Iron Мыкалгабыртæ [6, 100] “Michael-Gabriel”, fertility deity, patron of the Tsarazontæ clan

in the Alagir gorge, celebrated four times a year, with a sanctuary in Kasar gorge [1, 32-33; 9, s.v. §1043 *Mixail* [< Russ.], §1045 *Mixal*, §1046 *Mixel*; 5, II, 138-9].

4.3. **φητί βανη** (cf. § 2.4) → Digor Фидиуани, Iron Фыдыуаны [6, 169] agrarian deity, with a holiday held in early-middle August by Digors and at the end of this month by Irons, on the eve of harvest [1, 36-37].

This is not the right place to deal in depth with the first attempts at christianization of the Alans, but some notes on this problem may prove useful to understand the scope of these connections¹. According to Nicholas Mysticus, great care was taken to achieve “the illumination of the prince of Alania and of all those who, with him, had been judged worthy of holy Baptism”²; patience was requested regarding those “who belong to the upper class of the nation and are not ruled, but have become rulers... who possess great power to oppose the salvation of the whole nation”³, etc. Therefore, christianization was probably centered on the ruling elite, as suggested by the testimony of Muslim authors like Ibn Rusta: “the king of the Alans is Christian at heart, but all the people who inhabit his kingdom are heathens worshipping idols”⁴. Nicholas’ letters to Peter, Archbishop of Alania, agree that “it is not easy to accept so sudden a conversion of a pagan life into the rigour of the Gospel”⁵ and inform us about issues like “unlawful marriage” (most probably polygamy), faced by missionaries themselves “tried by the weakness of the flesh”⁶. The truth is that the Arabic polymath al-Mas’ūdi reports that after the year 320 AH/AD 931 the Alans abjured the Christian religion and expelled the bishops and priests (*al-asāqifa wa’l-qusūs*) whom the Byzantine Emperor had sent to them⁷. In fact, the metropolis of Alania is mentioned for the first time in the *Notitia Episcopatum* 11 (date uncertain) and there seem to be no extant records for the 10th and 11th centuries in previous *Notitiae* until a manuscript colophon of 1105⁸.

Later reports are not optimistic when it comes to evaluate the success of the christianization of the Alans: on the occasion of Theodore of Alania's travel to his diocese during the patriarchate of Germanus II (1222-40), he asserts that "the Alans are only Christians in name"; besides, he seems to refer to pagan practices among them when saying that "they do not prostrate themselves before icons, but before some demons in high places"⁹. Some years later, Friar William of Rubruck, during his missionary journey to convert the Tartars, met some Alans in the Crimea and stated that "they were ignorant of all things concerning Christian worship, with the sole exception of Christ's name"; accordingly, although the encounter took place on the Eve of Pentecost (June 7th, 1253), one of the feasts for which a gloss is provided in Q 12, the Alans offered cooked meat to the friars, unaware of the prescription to abstain from consuming it on that day; "for they were ignorant of the days of fasting and could not keep them even if they did know them"¹⁰.

Despite all, now Q 12 clearly shows to what extent this first attempt at christianization did not completely fail, since several of the glossed items are related to feast days commemorating saints that became incorporated into earlier paganism and coalesced with it, as attested by the fact that those saints found in the *Prophetologion* often correspond with Christian anthroponymy usual among the medieval Alans and with godly beings of Ossetian folklore. Even if this connection is not new and was long and well known after the fieldwork carried out by Russian and Ossetian ethnographers and the popularization of the Nart epos in the West by Dumézil, the glosses in Q 12 can be labeled as a "missing link", midway between the first Christian missions in Alania and those remnants of Christian beliefs preserved by Ossetian (pagan) traditions preceding the definitive Christianization of the country under Russian rule.

Comments:

1. On this issue [11]; for the initial period until 932, see [12; 1912, 13, 1335-36] is still useful for a brief survey on the origins and history of the metropolitan see of Alania.

2. *Ep.* 51 (ed. Jenkins-Westerink *CFHB* VI, p. 278⁹⁻¹¹) εἰς τε τὸν φωτισμὸν τοῦ τῆς Ἀλανίας ἄρχοντος καὶ εἰς τοὺς ὅσοι σὺν αὐτῷ κατηξιώθησαν τοῦ ἁγίου βαπτίσματος.

3. *Ep.* 52 (ed. *CFHB* VI, p. 284⁸³⁻⁸⁴, 286⁸⁷⁻⁸⁸) τῆς ὑπελοτέρας τάξεως τοῦ ἔθνους ὑπαρχόντων καὶ οὐ τῶν ἀρχομένων ἀλλὰ τῶν ἄρχειν λαχόντων... τοὺς μέγα δυναμένους εἰς ἐναντίωσιν τῆς τοῦ παντὸς ἔθνους σωτερίας.

4. Ibn Rusta *Kitāb al-A'lāq al-nafīsa* ed. de Goeje *BGA* VII 1892, p. 148 *wa-malik al-Lān fī nafsa naṣrānī wa-'āmmat ahl mamlukathu kuffār ya 'budūna al-aṣnām*; similar reports in *Hodūd al-'ālam* 48 (ed. Sotūde, Tehrān 1340/1962, p. 191) and Gardīzī *Zayn al-aḥbār* (ed. Ḥabībī, Tehrān 1347/1968, p. 595), where the Alan king is presented as a Christian (*tarsā*), but the people of his kingdom as heathens (*kafir*) and idol worshippers (*bot parast*).

5. *Ep.* 52 (ed. *CFHB* VI, p. 284-86⁷⁷⁻⁷⁹) οὕτως ἀθρόον ἢ μετὰστασις τῆς ἐθνικῆς ζωῆς πρὸς τὴν ἀκρίβειαν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τὸ ῥάδιον οὐ καταδέχεται.

6. *Ep.* 133 (p. 434⁶¹) τοῦ ἀθέσμου γάμου, cf. *Ep.* 52 (p. 284⁷⁵⁻⁷⁶) τῶν τε κατὰ γάμον ἐναντιουμένων πραγμάτων τῇ καταστάσει τῆς ἐκκλησίας "matters respecting marriage which are opposed to the Church order"; *Ep.* 135 (p. 438²⁹) τῆς σαρκὸς ἐλέγχεται ἢ ἀσθένεια; as for polygamy, cf. the Ossetian "nominal wives" [6, 108 Iron номылуц, Digor номбæлуоцæ], similar to concubines but enjoying more personal freedom, current until the annexation to Russia and beyond.

7. Al-Mas'ūdī *Murūğ al-dahab* п 42-45 (ed. Pellat 1962-71, §§ 479-80). A. Vinogradov [12, 12] relates the expulsion of bishops and priests to the defeat of the Alans by the Khazars as recorded in the Cambridge document, which would have restored the former Khazar-Alan alliance and resulted in a rupture with Byzantium and a rejection of Christianity.

8. See: [14, 127, 343, 349 (*Notitia* 11⁶³, followed by 12⁶¹ under the Comneni, in both cases ξα' Ἀλανία)].

9. Theodore of Alania 23-24 (*PG* 140, c. 409) καὶ προσκυνοῦσι μὲν οὐ γλυπτοῖς, δαιμονίοις δὲ τισιν ἐν τοῖς ὑψηλοῖς, χριστιανοὶ δὲ μόνον ὀνόματι Ἀλανοί.

10. William of Rubruck xi.1-2 (ed. van den Wyngaert 1929, 191-2) *omnia ignorabant que spectant ad ritum christianum, solo nomine Christi excepto ... quia ignorabant tempora ieiunii: nec poterant custodire etiam si cognouissent.*

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Alemany, Agustí – Autonomous University of Barcelona (Barcelona, Spain);
agusti.alemanyarrobauab.cat

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The goal of this paper is to highlight the importance of some of the Alanic glosses in the Greek liturgical manuscript Q12 of the Library of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg in portraying some Christian realia which later became incorporated into Ossetian pagan traditions.

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