THE ALANIC GLOSSES: BETWEEN CHRISTIANISM AND PAGANISM

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

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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 Syssé 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. ἡστι → 104ρ σαρὰ βαρὰν ἡστιν ~ *sareveren ist (i) ban “Feast-day of the
Foundation" (Eve of Pentecost), where *ist (i) ban reminds of Digor ἱστόν "feast, holiday", literally "oath day" ("праздник, праздничный день") [2, 305b]; cf. Digor (и) ста̀н, Iron ста̀н in oath formulas, like Iron ἱερουργὸς ἱεροσ ας "I swear by god", Digor (Nart epo) дə фарн, дə фарн, (де) "заедиста̀н "I swear by your farm, by your farm, by your god", etc; not related to Hung. ists "God" (cf. [3, 628a]) nor to the Hittite sun god (dess) ἵσταν (cf. [4, I, 205-6 s.v.]; in fact, also known as Ἀστάνα, Εστάν, Ес탄а); 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. τισῳβαρ → 109v τισῳβαρ οὐρηγύβανα ~ *ziwar urig-+vanit “...of the Jewish cross” (September 14, Elevation of the Precious Cross); first attestation of the Alanic term *ziwar, cf. Digor дzhувараз, Iron дзюар [6, 53] “cross; angel, saint, deity; sanctuary” < Georg. χριστού γιάρ “cross”; widespread toponymic evidence in Адыг даузары [6, 10] "seven gods", name of different sanctuaries; Атагы дзюар [6, 18] patron of the Ataty family in Galiati village, Digorskij Gorge; ἕφωξεῖς даузар [6, 32] fearsome spirit, lord of mountain passes and gorges (lit. “holy pass”); Дауджыгы/Дзирин дзюар [6, 45] deity of fertility and harvest with a sanctuary on mount Dzirı; Дзирин дзюар [6, 51] healing spirit in Džeri village, South Ossetia; даузар идазар [6, 54] "sanctuary of the spirit", in the vicinity of Stur-Digora; даузары пак [6, 54] "holy man, priest" in charge of performing sacrifices; Даузары хуьмтаг [6, 54] special plots of land harvested to arrange various feasts in honor of rural and family deities; Дауьгыза даузар [6, 55] a revered sanctuary dedicated to Uastyrdzi in Kuryttaty gorge, etc, etc [1, 30-31; 5, I, 401-2].

1.3. χούτσου → 100r χούτσου χούτσου παγ ~ *bic’ingаuxcaw ban "Pecheneg Sunday" (Eve of Midpentecost), probably in reference to the “Pecheneg Festival” (Nic. Chron. ed. ΣΟΗΒ xi/11, p. 161-13 τήν τῶν Πετζნάκων λεγομένην ἐς ἡμᾶς τελετήν), established by emperor John II Comnenus after the victory of Beroea over the Pechenegs (spring of 1122 or 1123), where *xaucaw ban "Sunday" means literally "day of God"; first attestation of the Alanic term *xaucaw, cf. Digor Хуцав/хуцадьон; Iron Хуцав/хуцадьон "God/Sunday"; Karačаi-Balkar хычауган, хустан "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 medi- eval Alans can be related to Saints commemo- rated in the feast days mentioned in the glosses (ἡλία, πασχήλ, τιμητήρι, φητίβανη):

2.1. ἡλία → 130r ἡλία παγ ~ [h] ilia ban “Elijah’s day” (July 20th, The Holy Prophet Elijah); thrice attested as Alanic PN: Yelie Badur也拉拔笛蘇 (YS 132, p. 3208), a warrior who submitted himself and joined the Palace Guard under Tai Zong (Öğödei 1229-41); Yeliya 也里牙 (YS 123, p. 3073) a warrior who submitted himself to Xian Zong (Möngke 1251-59) together with Niegula 戚古剣; Elias, son of Ravars, an Alan who sold temporarily his son Basiliius at Tana (July 6, 1360: [8, 932]); once attested as Alanic PN: Basiliius, son of Elia, Alan slave sold at Tana (July 6th, 1360: [8, 932]; 1, 34-35; 9, s.v. §227 Basil, §228 Basyl, §229 Басил].

2.2. πασχήλ → 120r πασχήλ παγ ~ *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: Basiliius, son of Elia, Alan slave sold at Tana (July 6th, 1360: [8, 932]; 1, 34-35; 9, s.v. §227 Basil, §228 Basyl, §229 Басил].

2.3. τιμητήρι → 111v τιμητήρι παγ ~ *dimidiri ban “Demetrius’ day” (October 26, Commemoration of the Great Earthquake), thrice attested as Alanic PN: Dimir Dimir, son of Alan princess Alde (Αλδή) & Georgian king Giorgi I (1014-27); Dimidir的迷的兒 (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 fides nostri (1323) in the service of Charles Robert of Anjou [1, 32; 9, s.v. §440 Dmitir, §442 Dmitri []< Russ.>].
2.4. φητί βανή → 126v, φητί βανή πάν, †137r [.] ητίβ[...] *fidiwani ban* “at Father John’s day” (June 24th, Birthday & August 29th Beheading of St. John the Baptist); twice attested as Alanic PN: Ιωάννης ὁ Ἀλανός (Ann. Comm. Alex. 1,6,3) in the service of the Byzantine court (maybe holding the rank of μάγιστρος) under Nicephorus III Botaneiates (r. 1078-1105); Joannes Jukoy/Jukcyj/Yocloy, Alan prince sending letters to Pope Bene dict XII; it is uncertain whether the second name in Fodim/Futim (= Chin. Fu Ding 福定) Ιονές/Ιοβένς/Iovens 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 (άποστολ, παοήλ):

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

3.2. παοήλ (cf. § 2.2) → Digor Αποστολεία [6, 36, 106 s.v. ногбон] “New Year feast”; cf. Кaйкaйцaи‑Balkar Αβιςɨл ай “January” [1, 34-35; 5, I, 239-40] etc.

4. Some of the saints named in the glosses lie in the origin of gods of Ossetian folklore (ηλία, μιχαήλ, φητί βανή):  

4.1. ηλία (cf. § 2.1) → Digor Уасилия, Уасилиева, Iron Уасилиева [6, 151-2] god of thunder, patron of bread, cereals and crops; also pl. Уасилиаты, celestial beings in a state of enmity with Batraz in the Nart epics; cf. Georg. ξοδείων να είλοβα festival in Kabegi 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 Микелагабрътæ, Iron Микелагабрътæ [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 βανή (cf. § 2.4) → Digor Φητίβανή, Iron Федьбауна [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 connections. 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”; 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”, 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”. 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” and inform us about issues like “unlawful marriage” (most probably polygamy), faced by missionaries themselves “tried by the weakness of the flesh”. The truth is that the Arabic polymath al-Mas’ūdī reports that after the year 320 AH/AD 931 the Alans abjured the Christian religion and expelled the bishops and priests (al‑asāqifa waʾl‑qusûs) whom the Byzantine Emperor had sent to them. 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 1105.
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”. 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”.

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. 278) *εἴς τε τὸν φωτισμὸν τοῦ τῆς Ἀλανίας ἄρχοντος καὶ εἰς τοὺς ὁσίου σύν αὐτῷ κατηχήθησαν τοῦ ἁγίου βαπτίσματος."


4. Ibn Rusta *Kitāb al-'lāq al-nafīsa* ed. de Goeje *BGA* vii 1892, p. 148 *wa-malik al-Lān fi nafsī nafsīni wa-'āmmat ahl mamlukathu kuffār ya 'budūna al-asnām;* similar reports in *Ḥodūd al-'ālam* 48 (ed. Sotūde, Tehrān 1340/1626, 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*).


6. Ep. 133 (p. 434) *τοῦ άθρόου γάμου, cf. Ep. 52 (p. 284) τῶν τε κατὰ γάμον ἐναντιομενῶν πραγμάτων τῇ καταστάσει τῆς ἐκκλησίας “matters respecting marriage which are opposed to the Church order”; Ep. 135 (p. 438) τῆς σαρκὸς ἐλέγχεται ή ἄθενεια; as for polygamy, cf. the Ossetian “nominal wives” [6, 108 Iron *номылус, Digor номбæлуосæ*], similar to concubines but enjoying more personal freedom, current until the annexation to Russia and beyond.
7. Al-Masʿūdī Murūǧ al-dahab 11 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)].


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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.