

INTRODUCTION

THE OSSETIAN EPIC “TALES OF THE NARTS”



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1 • CYCLES, SUBJECTS, HEROES

In literary studies it is established that the epic poem passes through several stages in its formation. To begin we have an incomplete collection of stories with no connections between them, arising in various centers, at various times, for various reasons. That is the first stage in the formation of the epic. We cannot as yet name it such. But material is in the process of preparation that, given favorable conditions, begins to take on the outlines of an epic poem. From the mass of heroes and subjects a few favorite names, events, and motifs stand out, and stories begin to crystallize around them, as centers of gravity. A few epic centers or cycles are formed. The epic enters the second stage of cycle formation.

In a few instances, not all by any means, it may then attain a third stage. Cycles up to now unconnected may be, more or less artificially, united in one thematic thread, and are brought together in one consistent story, forming one epic poem. A hyper-cyclic formation, if one can use such a term, takes place. It may appear as the result of not only uniting several cycles, but as the expansion of one favorite cycle, at the expense of others less popular. This is the concluding epic phase.

The transformation to this phase is frequently the result of individual creative efforts. For instance, the creation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*

Opposite page: A beehive tomb from the highlands of North Ossetia.

from previously scattered epic cycles of the Greek tradition are attributed to the blind poet Homer. Karelo-Finnish runes were taken up in the second, multi-cyclic phase, and Lönnrot alone gave them the finished aspect of the poem "Kalevala."

In the last century, at the dawn of the collecting of the Tales of the Narts, it seemed that only unconnected tales were preserved in the memory of the people. But during the gathering together of materials, there began to emerge more clearly the outlines of a monumental, multi-thematic, but complete epic, with clear features of genealogical cyclic formation.

It appeared that the main heroes consisted of family relatives, covering four consecutive generations; that they were united in three families; that they bore the common name of the Narts; and what is especially important, that this term "Nartae" was in turn formed from Ossetian family names, and must therefore place the heroes in the relationship of members of one family, one heroic stock.

The dividing of the Tales of the Narts into cycles presented no difficulties. They simply asked themselves to be divided. The stories, with no constraint, easily grouped themselves around a few of the main heroes and events.

However, on the one hand in the Tales of the Narts we have a clear example of the cyclic stage with epic features. On the other hand they contain many survivals of the beginning stages of the epic: the development of the subject within each separate cycle is not entirely free from contradictions, and one clearly feels that the episodes threaded together and grouped around one hero or event had an earlier separate and independent existence, and that the storyteller found no compulsive need to remove these contradictions and maintain a strict story plot.

In the Tales of the Narts, four central cycles take shape:

- ♦ The origin of the Narts (Warkhag, his sons Akhshar and Akhshartag)
- ♦ Uruzhmag (Urizhmag) and Shatana
- ♦ Shoshlan (Sozruko)
- ♦ Batradz (Batraz)

Also of importance, if not in scale then in significance, are those cycles dealing with cunning Shirdon, and magical Asamazh.

But besides these fundamental cycles, we have fifteen independent plots and independent heroes: Totraz, Arakhzau, Shauai, Shibals, Aishana, and others. One cannot always ascertain whether the "little cycles" are fragments of previously existing larger ones, or whether, on the other hand, we find before us the scattered stories, on the way to the formation of another cycle.

Taken as a whole, the Tales of the Narts astound us with their richness and variety of subject material. If one does not count ancient mythology and epics, then one will scarcely find anywhere else such riches.

The plots of the tales are extremely varied, but certain of them one may count as typical: the struggle against giants; the campaigns for plundering cattle; the hunting adventures; the struggle between Nart family members and separate heroes, usually on the basis of blood feuds; the competition among the heroes for a woman's favor, and the winning of a bride; the travels in the underworld beyond the grave (in the Shoshlan cycle); and the struggle against the gods dwelling in the heavens (in the Batraz cycle).

According to variants written down from the best storytellers, the founder of the Narts was Warkhag. He had two sons, Akhshar and Akhshartag. I have argued that fundamentally behind the story of the twins Akhshar and Akhshartag lies the totemistic myth of the origin of the tribe as a wolf, entirely analogous to the legend of Romulus and Remus (Abaev 1989, vol. 4, pp. 96–97; 1990).

The name of the progenitor of the Narts, Warkhag (in Ossetian, Wærxæg) is none other than the ancient Ossetian word meaning “wolf” (from the ancient Persian *varka* [from Proto-Indo-European **wolkʷos*, **wolpos*, English *wolf*; Latin *lupus*]). The legend of the descent of the Narts from a wolf leads to the cycle of widespread totemistic myths, characteristic of one of the earlier stages in the development of human society.

The Narts descended from the daughter of the water-god Zerashsha. This connection of the Narts with the water element, and its overlords, the Donbettirs, passes persistently through the whole epic. Batraz, through his mother, and Shirdon, through his father, are also children of the water. It is indubitable that in the epoch of the creation of the epic, the Ossetian-Alans lived in the neighborhood of the sea, or some great rivers, since in the small mountain rivers of modern Ossetia it is decidedly impossible to find a place for the Donbettirs, with their wide kingdoms, and luxurious palaces. There are constant reminders of this in the tales about the sea.

The Narts were divided, according to most variants, into three families: Akhshartagketta, Borata [compare Sanskrit *Bhārata*, which is a direct match to Ossetian *Borætæ*, usually miss-cited as *Boratæ*] and Alagata [from Indo-Iranian **ārya-ka-ta* Aryan-adjective-collective, “the Aryan ones”]. In the attribution of separate heroes to this or that family, we observe a great muddle on the part of the storytellers, but by comparing and analyzing the variants we can establish that the famous heroes Urizhmag, Shatana, Khamis, Shoshlan, and Batraz were descendants of Akhshartag, and therefore must have belonged to the Akhshartagketta family. Representatives

of the Borata family are found in Burafarnig and his seven sons. About the heroes of the Alagata family there is no firm tradition in the epic. The division of the Narts into separate and often mutually hostile families seems an obvious pointer to their tribal structure, and so strongly reminds one of the division of ancient Scandinavian epic heroes into three famous tribes, fated to great glory and suffering: Valzungi, Niflungi, and Budlungi.

The twins motif, repeated twice in the cycle (Akhshar-Akhshartag, and Urizhmag-Khamis) has the widest distribution in folklore. The Roman twins, Romulus and Remus, the Greek Castor and Pollux, and the Indian Ashvins, which served as a subject of special investigation by Vsevolod Miller (1881–87), appear as the best known of that special motif.

In certain variants of the Tales of the Narts, Zerashsha marries her husband's father, Warkhag. From this episode wafts the archaic breeze. That simply is an undoubted echo of group marriage, where all the men of the group have access to all the women of another. Survivals of early forms of marital relationships are found in other cycles of the Tales of the Narts, headed by the Shatana-Urizhmag cycle to which we now turn our attention.

If anyone asked me to specify the most remarkable element in the Nart epic, I would answer without a moment's thought: the image of Shatana. Women figure in many epics, but we would search in vain in any other kind of epic for a woman's image of such power, of such significance, of such a sweeping scale, of such vitality as the Nart Shatana. In many epics women are also given a great role. But in spite of all that, they remain for the most part the bearers of purely feminine or family principles, which in the final account limit their sphere of activity. Therefore, in other epics one heroine could easily take the place of another, without damage to the psychological and artistic truth. The Nart Shatana, however, could not possibly be replaced at any time by anybody, and it would be equally impossible to remove her from the epic without feeling the yawning gap left behind.

The sphere of her activities is not the narrow circle of love and family relationships, but the life of the folk as a whole. One could imagine the Narts without any one of its heroes, even the greatest, but one couldn't imagine them without Shatana. Does this not explain the fact that nowhere in the epic do we find mention of the death of Shatana? She is immortal, or, more precisely, she is alive until this day, while the whole Nart people survive.

Shatana is the mother of her people, the center of attention of the Nart world. All threads lead to her—without her participation and advice not one significant event could take place. She it was who brought up the most famous heroes, Shoshlan and Batraz, not being their natural

mother. She it was, wise and knowing the future, who rescued them at the most difficult moments. She it was who opened the hospitable doors of her home, when the Narts were overtaken by famine and hunger. Her generosity and the abundance of her table have passed into the proverb “Our hostess is a real Shatana!” That is the highest praise for a woman in the mouth of Ossetians.

Shatana is a powerful sorceress. She can summon up blizzards, storms, and sunshine; understand the language of the birds and beasts; if she so wishes, take on the form of an old hag, or a seductive young woman; and glancing in her “heavenly mirror” see all that is happening on the earth around.

To show that Shatana’s image comes straight from a matriarchal epoch¹ is merely to batter at the open door. The obvious features of the matriarchal order are sown abundantly in all ancient epics, in the Kalevala, the Irish sagas, and the Edda. But the existence of such a monumental figure as Shatana in the Nart epic itself has special historical significance.

The fact is that one of the Ossetian forebears, the Alans (a name perhaps preserved in the Alagata, since both words derive from Indo-Iranian **á-ryā-nā-m*, “of the Aryans,” with /*ry*/ giving /*l*/, whereas they yield /*r*/ in Ossetian, as in their self-designation *Iron*), were one of the Sarmatian tribes. The Sarmatii, according to the evidence of ancient authors, were distinguished among other tribes by the marked features of the matriarchy, and a high social situation of their womenfolk. Pseudo-Skilaks names them *gunai kokratumenoī*, that is to say “governing woman.” We shall make no mistake if we say that, from the point of view of social typology, the Alan Shatana is the blood-sister (ritually adopted sister) of the Sarmatian queen Amagi (Polien), the Scythian Tomiris (Herodotus), or the Messagetian Zarina (Ktesii).

Rationality, endurance, resourcefulness in moments of danger—such are the distinguishing features of the oldest of the Narts, Urizhmag. In generosity and hospitality he is the fitting partner for his wife, Shatana. Their relationship is imbued with unchanging love and care.

As in the case with Urizhmag, so especially his wife Shatana appears episodically through whole cycles of stories. Every such episode brings out a new feature in their characteristics, and forms an image of high artistic power, integrity, and fullness. In one theme after another Shatana and Urizhmag appear as the central figures, and this gives us the right to speak of a special cycle dealing with this famous married pair.

The stories of Urizhmag and Shatana are deeply shaded, and overgrown with much later accretions about the first human or heavenly couples. The myth about Urizhmag and Shatana leads us into the circle of primitive myths about the origin of the gods, of mankind, and of human tribes. This

is supported by the fact that the birth of Shatana is tied up with the birth of the first horse, and the first dog. Indeed, the expressions “eldest horse” and “eldest dog” are not to be understood otherwise than as “progenitor of horses” and “progenitor of dogs.”

For mythological presentation it is usual and in the order of things that the first earthly horse sprang from the heavenly one, and likewise the first earthly dog from one in heaven. A people of horse- and sheep-breeders, shepherds, hunters, and warriors, as we know the ancient Alans and the mythical Narts to have been, must have valued and loved their horses and dogs above all other domestic creatures. It is no wonder that they introduced precisely these into their myth of the origin of mankind, for they belong together.

With the person of first and best of women—Shatana—is coupled the appearance of the first and best of drinks—beer, the favorite beverage of the Ossetians. Ethnographical and linguistic data point to the antiquity and exceptionally widespread nature of the culture of beer among Ossetians. The Ossetian word *æluton* for “fabulous food or drink,” originally meant “beer of a special brew,” and is related to the North German word for “beer,” *alut*, and can be compared with the English “ale,” and the Finnish *lut*.

Therefore we shall hardly be mistaken if we express the conviction that the Shatana and Urizhmag cycle, behind its everyday themes, conceals old mythological seeds of legends about the origins of human tribes, and of the gods. Going further, the image of Shatana and the part that she plays through the whole epic allow us to assert that this legend arises under the conditions of a surviving matriarchal world-outlook. This last circumstance may serve as a certain starting point for the dating of the given cycle. Many researchers note the existence of undoubted ties between totemism and the matriarchy. In any case the latter is not younger than the former. If we attribute the Warkhag cycle, with its totemistic nucleus to the first half of the first millennium before our era, then we can scarcely count the primitive mythological nucleus of the Urizhmag and Shatana cycle as later than that.

Did there exist some kind of ancient tie between the first and second cycle? That is not clearly apparent to us. The succession of the generations Warkhag-Akhshartag-Urizhmag seems to speak of such a connection, but that succession may have been attached later, in the form of a “genealogical cyclic formation.”

In the course of its long existence in the mouths and memories of the people, the Nart tales and their themes underwent, it stands to reason, not a few changes and variations, of which many are lost irretrievably. If the ancient Ossetian-Alans had had a written literature that would have

fixed the Tales of the Narts in various stages of their history, we should have had extremely interesting material for assessment of the evolution of their epic motifs and subjects. Now, however, we unfortunately have no such material available.

Sometimes it happens, nonetheless, that versions not preserved by the given folk themselves are found among their neighboring tribes, where they in their time were known through the usual migration of folklore themes. Fortunately in the Shatana cycle, we have such an occasion. Just as Herodotus preserved for us many themes of the Nart epic in Scythian customs and traditions of the fifth century before our era, so the Armenian historian Moisei Khorenski in the legends that he recorded about the Alan queen Satenik fixed a few themes in which one may recognize the modification of Nart themes from the Shatana cycle.

In this same cycle there are also a few subjects and motifs that we can touch on only in passing. The theme of a hero who died in his youth, and returns from the world beyond the grave to his father, to perform with him wonderful exploits, and then go back to the kingdom of death, belongs to a number of the most popular in our epic. It is met with also in the Totraz cycle.

The adventure of Urizhmag in the Cyclops's cave relates to a now well-known migratory subject with the widest circulation. The antiquity of this theme is evidenced by Homer's story of Odysseus and Polyphemus. Similarly the myths about Prometheus, and the Argonauts, in their subject matter, closely connect ancient Greece with the Caucasus. [Colchis, Jason and the Golden Fleece, obviously.—WM]

The story of the Cyclops, apart from the Ossetians, is in evidence among the Mingrelians (of western Georgia), the Kabardians (and other Circassians; see Colarusso 2002), the Daghestanis, and the Chechens. Moreover, the Polyphemus motif is known among European peoples. The Caucasian variants stand incomparably closer to the Greek than the European ones do. Vsevolod Miller's book *Caucasian Stories about the Cyclops* (see Miller 1885) is devoted to a comparative study of a selection of these tales.

The invention of beer served as the subject of an epic song not only among the Ossetians. The twentieth rune of the Kalevala is devoted almost entirely to that remarkable event. Kapo (or Osmotar), the daughter of Kaleva, the progenitor of Finnish heroes, appears as the first woman who brewed beer from barley, and added honey to it.

However little in common there may be, at first glance, between the profoundly human and real image of the Nart Shatana and the misty and mythical figure of the Finnish Kapo, they nonetheless come from the same source, from the most ancient myths about the origin of the natural

elements, peoples, and gods. Such is the cycle of Shatana and Urizhmag, outstanding in the Tales of the Narts.

Shatana appears as mother and mistress of the home, not only in the narrow family circle but also among the whole tribe. When famine and hunger overtake the Narts, Shatana opens her hospitable doors, and feeds the folk, young and old, from her prepared reserves. The woman's managerial role shown here, as the keeper and distributor of the tribe's resources, is interesting in the highest degree, and important for the portrayal of early forms of society of the matriarchal type.

All this gives us the right to see in the image of Shatana and the motifs and subjects associated with her one of the most original phenomena, not only of Ossetian, but also of worldwide folklore traditions known to us.

The third cycle about Shoshlan is distinguished by the richness of the subject matter, and the popularity of its central hero. Shoshlan (Sozruko) is evidently a name of Turkish origin. We may compare it with the Nogai *suslan* ("put on a threatening look") from the root *susle*, "a frown, threatening, severe" (see note 15). The form Sozruko is an adaptation into the Adyghey (Circassian) language of the name Shoshlan. In the ancient Adyghey language there was no letter "l," and so it became "Sosran." To this form was added later the diminutive pet-name element *ko* (this is actually the Circassian word for son, /q^we/, forming patronymics). The form Sosranuko thus received (and preserved in the Abkhazian tongue) was later simplified to Sosruko, and in that form was adopted from the Adyghey (Kabardinian) tongue back into Ossetian. Such "shuttle" words and names, passing from one language to another, and back again, are not an infrequent phenomenon.

On Ossetian soil, the name Shoshlan is in evidence from the thirteenth century on: the Ossetian chief David Shoshlan, was the husband of the famous Georgian queen Tamara. In the Digoron variants the name Sosruko is absent. They know only Shoshlan.

In the Nart epic Shoshlan (Sosruko) occupies a most prominent place, and appears as one of the favorite heroes, not only in the Ossetian but also in Kabardian (as well as other Circassians, Abaza, Ubykh), Balkar, Chechen, and other variants. In Shoshlan and Batraz cycles, more than in others, there appear truly heroic superhuman, warrior motifs. But in distinction from Batraz, a hero of unconquerable strength, and honest straightforward action, Shoshlan in battle against the most powerful enemies readily resorts to all kinds of trickery and cunning, while with the weakest and defeated enemy he is stern and pitiless. He is portrayed in an especially unseemly light in the episode of his fight with Totraz, son of Albeg.

In the Digoron variant his usual epithet was *nærcæmon*, which means “stormy, indomitable.” Evidence of his popularity and deep national character is found not only in the epic itself but also in many local tales connected with his name, especially in Digoria.⁽¹⁾ Many ancient tombs there are spoken of as his. They also have stones upon which he is supposed to have sat. One of their summer festivals is named after Shoshlan. The rainbow in Digoron is called “Shoshlan’s bow,” as in Persian it is called “Rustam’s bow.” In one story everyone is recommended to take steps to ensure that their deceased relatives receive a comfortable place to watch the fight between Shoshlan and Totraz, which occurs in the afterworld beyond the grave.

The figure of Shoshlan served as the subject of a special mythological study by Dumézil, titled *Myths of the Sun*.²

“Of course,” says Dumézil, “not every figure, not every deed performed by Shoshlan bears a sunny character. Like all kinds of gods, who in time become heroes of a story, he united about his person many legends of various origin. But his cycle alone among the circle of Nart tales gives a whole row of themes, and fundamental ones at that, in which the sun-like nature of the hero appears in full glory.”

First of all, his birth: Being born from a stone is a feature readily attributed to sun-gods. From the rocks was born the sun-god Mithra, of Asia Minor. He also is called “born-of-stone.”

Shoshlan’s sun-like nature is further shown by his marriage to a daughter of the sun.

In a range of themes telling of the struggle of Shoshlan with his enemies, it is said that he achieved victory at mid-day: again a feature of a sun-god, since he attains the zenith of sunny power at midday.

The theme of his struggle against Mukara, son of Tar, especially in some variants, strikingly reminds one of the widespread myths about “the stealing of the sun.”

An evil being concealed beneath the ice is an obvious symbol of the cold winter. The hero wrestling with this evil being becomes a symbol of the sun. In the Nart epic these two are Mukara and Shoshlan.

Even more obviously and directly, the Wheel of Balshag (tale 37) leads us into the circle of sun myths. It comes to its end in water, in a few variants, the Black Sea, which means in the West. There are some variants where Balshag’s Wheel acts in accordance with the bidding of the daughter of the sun, offended by Shoshlan.

In the Digoron version of this story, the Wheel is named after Oinon. This name is a corruption of John (Johan), and St. John is associated

successively with the sun cult. His festival falls in with the midsummer solstice of the sun [June 21—WM]. In Digoria, at the place of the supposed grave of Shoshlan near the village Nar, there was celebrated every summer, around the day of St. John the Baptist, “the festival of Shoshlan,” when rams were slaughtered in honor of the hero, and folk prayed to him to send down good weather. The connection of our hero with the sun cult is thus firmly supported.

The fact that the sun-hero is slain in the struggle against the Wheel, a symbol of the sun, does not surprise anyone who knows with what twists and turns and along what unexpected lines themes develop in folk-poetry, and how often is affirmed there the dialectic law of the unity of opposites.

Many similar examples could be brought, for folk myth creation fears contradiction least of all. In the complicated image of Shoshlan are united various different features, and perhaps most often contradictory ones. But if in that image there are features with a clear mythological meaning, then they are those of a sun-hero.

Shoshlan, the old “heathen” sun-god, battles with Oinon’s Wheel, that is, St. John’s Wheel, the new Christian god of the sun, and dies fighting.

Exactly likewise the heathen god of thunder Batraz struggles with the Christian god of thunder (Elias), by whom he also is slain. In both cases the victory rests with the new Christian god.³ Thus when Shoshlan compels the Wheel to name itself after him, and not after Oinon (or Balshag), we see through that transparent symbolism, that we are fighting to decide who shall remain master of the sun.

Among the most interesting episodes of the Shoshlan cycle we find the journey of our hero to the kingdom of the dead. This was, we know, one of the most ancient epic themes, as is witnessed by the monuments of world literature: Osiris in Egypt; Gilgamesh in Babylon; Odysseus, Hercules, and Orpheus in Greece; Väinämöinen in the Finnish Kalevala; Cúchulainn in the Irish sagas; Odin in Scandinavian mythology. These are the best-known names of heroes or gods, who, like the Nart Shoshlan, visited the land of the shade beyond the grave.

The Nart description is distinguished by the great concreteness and liveliness in the telling of the fates of people who in their earthly lives performed good or evil deeds. In this, as always, the scenes of torment and deprivation stand out much more variously and vividly than the scenes of blessedness. While in the Greek myths we find descriptions of the torments of two or three sinners (Tantalus, Sisyphus, the Danaides), here before us pass a whole procession of pictures portraying rewards for good, and, more especially, punishments for evil deeds of every kind.

The moralizing tendency with which these descriptions are imbued is very touching in its naïveté. We see here which virtues are accounted especially praiseworthy, and which defects are most condemned. Generosity, hospitality, justice, and marital and maternal love—these bring blessedness in the other world. On the other hand a burdensome fate awaits the mean, the quarrelsome, the thievish, and the lustful and lascivious.

The description of the world beyond the grave, with all its wonders, is repeated in the same exact way in the ceremonial formula devoted to the deceased one's horse.

The bride-price paid by Shoshlan for the daughter of the sun represents a variation of a very widespread motif concerning marriages, which depended on the fulfillment of difficult assignments by the bridegroom.

Special mention must be made of Shoshlan's coat made of scalps. Vsevolod Miller had already shown that this theme comes from Scythian times (Miller 1881–87), and reflects the Scythian custom described by Herodotus:

Scythians cut off the heads of those they slay in battle, and bring them to their chieftain; only those warriors who bring an enemy's head have a right to share in the booty. Afterward they scalp the heads in the following fashion: they make a circular incision above the ears, and tear off the skin, by shaking the skull vigorously by the hair. With the aid of a bull's rib they scrape off surplus scraps of remaining fat and later soften the dried skin by crumpling it between their hands. When this is done, they use it as a wiping cloth for their hands, and hang it in their horse's bridle. In this way they win praise, for the greater number of such wipers a Scythian had, the greater was his honor and glory. Many of them made themselves cloaks of these human scalps, sewn together in the style of a shepherd's coat.⁽²⁾

"The Alans carried on this tradition of the Scythians. These Alans boast of nothing so much as the slaughter of someone or other, and in the form of war-trophies, instead of decorations, hang the scalps cut from the heads of the slain on their war-horses" (Ammianus Marcellinus). We see in this example something that was once a living custom, an everyday occurrence, which in succession goes over into folklore, and is preserved as a folklore motif.

In the Shoshlan cycle we can show yet once more a clear example of such a transformation—thus that which with the Scythians was a living custom becomes with the Ossetians a theme for their Nart epic. We have in mind Shoshlan's horse at his funeral, slain, and stuffed with straw. G. Dumézil

points to the great similarity of the horse sacrifices among the Scythians and the Ossetians,⁴ and particularly when comparing them brings in a story by Herodotus, how they stood the stuffed corpses of horses around the grave of a Scythian chieftain, intended to accompany him in the world beyond. They slit them open, removed their internal organs, stuffed them with straw, and then sewed them up again. In this manner they stood them, with supports, around the grave. Can one then, Dumézil asks, separate these funeral horses of the Scythians, on which the chieftain would travel in the other world, and the funeral horse of Shoshlan, on which he returns to the world beyond the grave?

So these ancient customs, long since gone out of use, get woven into folklore themes and motifs, and live on through millennia.

Parallels between themes in the Shoshlan cycle and Scythian habits can serve in the absence of other data for the approximate dating of a few existing parts of that cycle; obviously the origin of those parts must relate to a time not later than fifth century BC.

The dawn of the Iron Age, with its metallurgy, put in man's hands new instruments of labor and new weapons of war. The man of those times is imbued with belief in his own strength, in the might of his armaments, in the irrepressible aura of military glory. Then in exchange for the hero-wizard and sorcerer, we get the hero-warrior-knight.

But the ancient ideology of sorcery and magic does not die out all at once. It tries to maintain its position under the new conditions. As a result we get a type of hero in whom warrior-like qualities are allied to cunning, that type of cunning that to ancient understanding meant sorcery. In the Ossetian language, the word *khin* means "cunning" and "sorcery"; hence we get the expression *khin æmæ kælaen*, which means "cunning and sorcery."

Shoshlan personifies just this traditional stage. He is shown already clothed in the qualities of a hero-warrior, but along with them goes the image of a clearly defined hero-sorcerer. These features remain throughout his whole life. Shoshlan and Batraz both pass through a tempering procedure, but Batraz is tempered in the furnace of a smith, the normal "technology" of the Iron Age. Shoshlan, however, is tempered by quenching in wolf's milk, a clear totemistic piece of magic. The important feats achieved by Shoshlan fall under one scheme: he begins as a hero-warrior, and ends as a warrior-magician.

The hero-warrior with the atavistic features of a hero-sorcerer is presented as if it were a transitional stage from the purely shamanistic form to the purely knightly. According to Engels,⁵ when war becomes the normal function of social life, and military leaders give tone to the formation of

social ideology, and then a new type of epic hero is born—a hero of unconquerable strength, crushing his enemies with his knightly power, with no admixture of cunning or magical craft. Such a hero in the Tales of the Narts is Batraz, the son of Khamis.

Along with the heavy hyperbole, in the description of his person and his deeds, he is often led beyond earthly bounds, beyond what is humanly achievable, and is carried up beyond the world of the Narts, as a being of special order, a superman, a demi-god. Along with Shoshlan, and to a greater degree than him, Batraz bears within himself a mythological form where primitive cosmic powers still gather, for which the usual outer shell of the ordinary (albeit epic) hero is too frail and ephemeral. The hallmark of the miraculous, the superhuman is evident throughout his whole life, his birth, his feats, and his death. The final battle of Batraz with heavenly powers places him among the host of Titan warrior-gods, besides the Greek Prometheus and the Caucasian Amiran.

What was the origin of the Batraz cycle? We have found in our times that the names of Khamis and Batraz are of Mongolian origin, and that these two Narts are evidently a splitting of the Mongolian name Khabichi-Batir.⁶ May we on that foundation assert that the whole of the Batraz cycle comes from the Mongolian? No, of course, that is not permissible. The process of cycle formation in epic tales leads us to this: that around one name may be united subjects and themes of most varied origin. In the Batraz cycle one may, if you please, find one or two subjects having parallels in the Mongolian epic. But, on the other hand, there are features to be seen belonging to the Scythian epoch, that is to say at least the fifth century before our era. In this manner, even if there existed an epic Khabichi-Batir on Mongolian soil, the Alan cycle Khamis and Batraz owes only their personal names to it, and maybe a couple of motifs. In all the rest it remains independent and original.

So, in the Batraz cycle, as in others, we must distinguish a few independent themes, which later in the process of cycle formation are united around one name. Among the most ancient elements of the Batraz cycle we must include mythological elements. The mythological nucleus of this series, as has been successfully shown by Georges Dumézil, presents the image of thunder-god.⁷ Superman, mythical features so strongly stand out in Batraz image that there is no reason to doubt its mythological foundation. Around the mythological nucleus have grown up a series of epic-hero themes and subjects of another origin, out of which the most popular has become the favorite one of tribal life, namely feuds and blood-revenge.

Fierceness is a characteristic feature of all gods of thunder, and this is a personal trait Batraz exhibits to a high degree. He has the features not only of lightning but also of storm. Let us note how he blew off the ashes from the burnt garments of the Nart women, or how from the breath of his dead body tens of heavenly powers perish.

It may appear to be a contradiction, that the thunder-god Batraz should struggle against the thunder-gods of the Christian era, among whom was counted St. Elijah (Watsilla). But that contradiction is of the same type as the struggle of Shoshlan, the sun-god, with the sun symbol, the Wheel of Balshag. It in no way refutes, but rather supports the mythical thunder-god nature of Batraz, because the fight goes on, as we think, between gods of the two epochs, the heathen one represented by Batraz, and the Christian one by Watsilla (St. Elijah).

Elsewhere the struggle of Christianity with pre-Christian cults left its mark on many folk-epics of Christian peoples: on the Russian folk-epics (Dobrynya and the Snake, and so on); the German sagas ("Twilight of the Gods" and so on); and the Irish sagas.

The Nart epic in the main is pre-Christian, but in the dramatic episodes of the death of Batraz and Shoshlan is reflected, so we think, the struggle between old heathenism and new Christianity. The heathen demi-god Batraz perishes in the struggle with the Christian god, with Christian angels, and with St. Elijah (Wasilla). Especially interesting is the episode of the entombment of Batraz's corpse in the crypt of St. Sophia, that is, the chief shrine of Byzantium, from which the Christian faith came to the Alans. We shall scarcely make anything out of this episode if we do not admit that it symbolizes the capitulation of the heathen world before the new religion, while the resistance that the already lifeless Batraz offers to this is merely an indication of the stubbornness of the previous struggle.

The connection between Batraz and the heathen cults of the Scythians and the ancient Aryans is supported by several direct parallels drawn by Dumézil.⁸ The ceremony of casting Batraz's sword into the sea compares with the cult of the sword among the Scythians and Alans. The bonfire of "a hundred wagonloads of coal," into which Batraz strides to become tempered before the trembling Narts, recalls the grandiose annual construction of a fire of "a hundred and fifty cartloads of logs," which served the Scythians as a pedestal for their sword god, around which were slaughtered their trembling war captives.

In one tale recorded by Dzhanthemir Shanaev, Batraz's sword itself acts as a thunder-god. "The story," says Shanaev, "asserts that Batraz's sword was cast into the Black Sea." He adds that "when the lightning flashes

from the west Ossetians regard it as the gleam of Batraz's sword, hurling itself out of the sea against the heavens to destroy evil powers and devils" (from Shanaev 1871).

Beside the array of traits characterizing Batraz as a mythical symbol of a thunder-god, there still remain in his cycle many motifs that in their turn have wide parallels in world folklore. The clear parallel from Scythian customs, to which Miller (1881–87) has drawn our attention, has great importance for the explanation of the motif of the miraculous cup Watsamonga in the Nart epic. This cup raised itself to the lips of real heroes, telling of their campaigns, but remained motionless before braggarts and the boastful.

Here is what Herodotus tells us about the Scythians: "Once a year each regional chief at the festival ordered a glass of wine mixed with water, and all the Scythians who had killed an enemy drank from this goblet. Only those who had not performed this service had not the right to touch it. They sat aside in a state of shame that was for them a great dishonor. As for those who killed a large number of foes, they drank from two goblets united together."

Aristotle also mentions this in his *Politics*: "The Scythians at one of their festivals do not allow those who had not killed one single enemy to partake of the cup going round."

The closeness of the Tales of the Narts and the stories of Herodotus are striking. Both among the Narts and the Scythians the wine-cup served as an honorary reward for feats of battle, and to "distinguish real heroes." In connection with this Dumézil notes the role that the goblet plays in Scythian mythology.⁹ Four things, all made of gold, which according to Scythian belief fell from heaven, were the plow, the yoke, the axe, and the goblet. It is also well-known what role holy wine and goblets played in Indo-Iranian cults.

One of the central episodes of the Batraz cycle is where Batraz takes blood-revenge for his father's death. The classical motif of patriarchal-tribal custom, the blood-feud, occupied a leading place in the Nart epic not by chance alone. Speaking earlier about the specially lively aspects of this epic, we showed that one of the reasons for this fidelity to life must be seen in the way that the social conditions that gave birth to this epic continued to exist for a long time, and to further nourish it, thus saving it from ossification, degradation, and oblivion. The blood-feud motif entered the epic under the conditions of a patriarchal-tribal relationship and, judging by other elements of the Batraz cycle, at extremely distant times. But those patriarchal-tribal relations, including the blood-feud, continued to exist and flourish in Ossetian customs through many centuries. This is the reason why the story of how

Batraz took revenge for the death of his father was, and remained, one of the favorite and most popular episodes of the epic. Here is the reason why a whole series of Nart heroes besides Batraz also appear as avengers of their father's blood: Totraz, son of Albeg; Atsamazh,¹⁰ son of Atsa; Kaitar and Bitar, sons of Shoshlan. It is not by chance that the well-known folk epic, named "Avkhardtī Khasanah" among Ossetians, also has blood-revenge as its theme.

The severe, persistent, and pitiless manner in which Batraz fulfills his filial duty as blood-avenger might appear repulsive to the modern reader, but one must take into account the fact that this epic was composed in very cruel times with very cruel and severe customs. Batraz's actions are dictated not by mere caprice, but by the idea of duty. His revenge is the victory of justice, as it was understood in tribal conditions. It contains fewer arbitrary elements and less unjustifiable cruelty than, say, the revenge of Krumhilda in "The Song of the Niebelungen." Moreover, in it are found individual features of knightly nobility and magnanimity. Thus, when Batraz brings the hewn-off arm of the slain Lord Shainag to Shatana as a war-trophy, she then suggests that he should return it to his relatives so that they may make an interment with due honors, which without the missing arm would be impossible according to their customs. Batraz does so without one word of protest.

Does not the cutting off of Lord Shainag's right arm contain the echo of an ancient custom? Herodotus (book 4) cites: "The Scythians bring to their war-god sacrifices not only of beasts, but of human beings. Human sacrifice is carried out in this way: from the number of prisoners they chose each hundredth one, and cut off his right shoulder including the arm. The hewn-off limb is then hurled in the air, and left to rest wherever it falls, the body being left in another place." This hacking off of the right arm appeared evidently among the Scythians, and among Ossetians, as a symbol of shameful dishonor for the enemy, depriving him of the right for honorable burial. The Ossetians' near-neighbors from Georgia, the Khevsur mountain-tribe, had a custom of cutting off the right hand of the defeated enemy as a war-trophy. The number of hands hanging on the wall served as a measure of the prowess of the Khevsur warriors.

Numerous parallels between the Batraz cycle and Scythian-Alan realities, as well as ancient customs, give us the right to assert that this cycle is quite original, and extremely old. On the other hand, however, there can be but little doubt that the names 'Khamis' and 'Batraz' are Mongolian in character, and taken with other facts show that the Alan epic came under the influence of the Mongols (but see English-language editor's note 5). There are doubts as to whether that influence was limited to personal

names. Subjects and motifs may have also been borrowed. This question of Mongolian-Turkish elements in the Tales of the Narts deserves a good deal more work and attention.

The analysis of the themes and subjects of the Batraz cycle lead one to the conclusion that it was a long time in its formative period. Its most ancient elements derive from ancient history. It brings to us through the centuries the motifs of Scytho-Alan existence, and of Iranian mythology. The presence of Mongolian influence can only be dated to around the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. Between these two extremes we see not only the development of the Batraz cycle but also of the Nart epic as a whole.

Let us now pass over from Batraz to Shirdon, a hero of an entirely different type. Shirdon is one of the favorite heroes of the epic. His popularity is no less than that of the most famous: Shatana, Urizhmag, Batraz, Shoshlan. His name is in common use, signifying a cunning and skillful old fox, capable of all kinds of tricks, but in moments of difficulty able to rescue himself and others by means of his inventiveness and resourcefulness.

The Tales of the Narts are remarkable, by the way, for the great place that humor occupies in them. We see for the most part the Nart Shirdon as the bearer of an essentially humorous character.

He figures in all the cycles of the epic, preserving everywhere his unique individuality. Shirdon has brothers in the epics of European peoples, the Irish Bricriu, and the Scandinavian Loki. In him there is nothing of the heroic power and spirit of Shoshlan and Batraz. His chief weapon is his tongue—sharp, poisonous, and pitiless, bearing discord and dissension in all places. This weapon appears at times more dangerous and destructive than the swords and arrows of the strongest Narts. He chances to do the Narts some important services, but in most cases his evil turn of spirit prompts him to all kinds of crafty tricks, from which the Narts suffer sadly. Not without reason does the permanent epithet *Narti fidbilizh*, the “Nart’s evil genius,” stick to him.

Shirdon is a shape-changer. He can, by merely wishing, change himself into a werewolf, an old man, or a young girl. On one occasion he even changes into a hat. The red thread of hostility between him and Shoshlan runs through the epic, first to last.

Shirdon’s father was a water-spirit, Batag, or Gatag.¹¹ By using his power as master of the waters for evil purposes, he was able to close the springs and cut off the Nart women from their water supply. In this way he compelled one Nart beauty to live with him, and from these compulsory relationships Shirdon was born. According to several variants the Narts for a long time did not recognize him as a member of their tribe, and did not allow him

into their villages. Only when he invented the twelve-string lap-harp, and presented it to the Narts, and captivated them with the sound of this wonderful instrument, did they take him into their midst.

Shirdon first hears of Shatana's birth from Zerashsha, and uses this knowledge to put both Urizhmag and Khamis to shame. He began to shout in the presence of the Narts that Khamis had brought his wife with him to a feast of the Narts, hidden in his pocket in the shape of a frog. As a result of this the daughter of Bisenta left her husband, and Batraz was compelled to grow up with no mother.

At the tempering of Shoshlan in wolf's milk, Shirdon persuaded them to shorten the trough where Shoshlan was to lie, as a result of which his knees stuck up out of the magical milk, and were not tempered, which later on was to serve as the reason for his death.

When the Narts sent their herd of horses into the kingdom of the powerful Mukara, Shirdon arranged things so that the fate of driving the herd there fell to Shoshlan, in the hope that in this way his old enemy would be killed. He also took the form of an old man, an old woman, and so on, to dissuade Shoshlan from saving the life of his old friend Zekh, wounded during the siege of the Khizh fortress.¹²

Having turned into a hat, Shirdon listened to the conversation between Shoshlan and his horse, and learned what it was that would lead them both to their deaths. This information he put to ill use in order to kill them. Balshag's Wheel, defeated in the first struggle with Shoshlan, refused further fight, and even consented to destroy its master. But Shirdon stepped in again. Adopting the form of an old man, then an old woman, then a young girl, he persistently advised the Wheel not to kill Balshag, but to battle against Shoshlan once more. Finally Shoshlan dies beneath an attack by the Wheel, and Shirdon cannot deny himself the pleasure of taunting his dying enemy.

According to a few variants, it was none other than Shirdon who poisoned Batraz, on the fatal day of his fight with the heavenly powers.

In the struggles between the Borata and Akhshartagketta families he also, in a few variants, played the role of instigator.

When the Narts, tormented by hunger, are completely exhausted, Shirdon, having eaten well, with especial satisfaction strolls among the starving, with bits of shashlik and fatty sheep entrails sticking to his whiskers.

Among the domestic animals, Shirdon's famous bitch stands out, in habit and in style well worthy of her master. Shirdon lives in a secret place, where it is difficult to find him. The entrance to his home is like a maze, a real labyrinth. Only by tying a thread to the bitch's leg and

following it, like Ariadne's thread, could Khamis find his way to Shirdon's dwelling place.

Major sagas in which Shirdon plays the main role are few. Best known is the story about his stealing of Khamis's cow. In one hungry year, when the Narts were compelled to slay their last cattle, Shirdon stole Khamis's well-fed cow. While the meat of the slaughtered cow was boiling in the cauldron at home, Shirdon appeared at the Nart meeting place and chided Khamis over his loss. Khamis began to feel suspicious. He decided to make his way to Shirdon's home and see whether his cow was there. With great difficulty, following the thread tied to the leg of Shirdon's bitch, he found Shirdon's dwelling. In the cauldron meat was boiling. Sitting round waiting were Shirdon's seven sons. On the floor lay the head of Khamis's favorite cow. Infuriated, Khamis slew Shirdon's sons, chopped them up, and threw them into the cauldron. After Khamis had left, Shirdon returned home, took the meat from the cauldron, and with horror saw that it consisted of the limbs of his sons. His grief was unbounded. Such great sorrow sublimates and ennobles the feelings of even an evil-doer, or at least, of a mischief-maker, and we see that in the moment of terror Shirdon grows before us into a tragic figure, compelling our unwilling respect.

From the bones of the bent arm of his eldest son he forms the frame of a small harp, and adds to it twelve strings from the heart fibers of his other sons, and to the sound of this plucked chords, he pours out his paternal sorrow. Thus, for the first time there appears among the Narts the twelve-stringed *fandir* or "hand-harp."

Music is born of tragedy; such evidently is the thought behind this remarkable episode. The lament of Shirdon, played on his harp, shook the hearts of even the sternest of Narts. They forgave him his past actions against them, and took him among their number, to live with them openly, on an equal footing.

The remaining stories about Shirdon bear, in the main, the character of anecdotes, reminding us of popular tales among Caucasian and Turkish tribes, about Khoja Nasr-Eddin, frequently falling in with the theme, word for word.¹³

When we try to trace the origin of Shirdon's image, there comes to mind first of all well-known mythological types from many folk-stories, those hero-rogues or tricksters. Such a trickster or deceiver is a kind of anti-hero. His behavior is often unsocial, even harmful to the community as a whole. This, as quite easily we see, is characteristic of many of Shirdon's actions. Along with this deceptive side, the trickster may have certain traits of a

cultural hero, which again were not lacking in Shirdon; thus he was the first to prepare the lap-harp for the Narts.

From the hero-trickster it is pleasant to pass on to such a radiant hero as Asamazh. Several themes and subjects in the epic are connected with his name.

The most interesting of these is the story of the wooing of Agunda, and her marriage to Asamazh. In this tale Asamazh appears as a wonderful singer and musician, charming the whole of nature with his flute-music.

This tale is found in several variants. Of these, one written down by Makharbeg Tuganov shows itself as a high creation of art. The song of Asamazh occupies a special place in the epic. In it there are no scenes of cruelty or blood-letting that one meets in the other tales. The bitterest ideas of fate are foreign to it, the suffering that throws its shade upon the most important episodes in the history of the Narts. From start to finish it is imbued with sunshine and song, and is distinguished, disregarding its mythological character, by a brilliance and high relief of a psychological type, by the loveliness of its domestic scenes, by its abundant imagery, content, and perfection of form, this "Song of Asamazh" may rightly be regarded as one of the pearls of Ossetian folk-poetry.

Looking at this story, we may place Asamazh in the ranks of famous spell-binding singers: Orpheus in Greek mythology, Väinämöinen in the Finnish Kalevala, Giranta in the "Song of Gudrun" from Scandinavia, and Sadko in the Russian folk-tale. There exist, however, in this story certain features that lead one to think that this Ossetian Orpheus is typologically distinguished from his European brethren, and may be more ancient in origin than they. Reading the description of the effect which Asamazh's music has on surrounding nature, we see that we are dealing not merely with a wonderful, magical spell-binding song but also with a melody that has the very nature of the sun. Truly, as a result of this song, the eternal glaciers begin to melt, the rivers overflow their bounds, the bared slopes are covered with a carpet of grass, blooms appear in the meadows, bees swarm among them and butterflies too, bears awaken from winter sleep in their lairs and welcome the sun. In short, before us lies a masterful portrayal of the coming of the spring. The song welcomes the sun and shares its power and activity.

Such a brilliant unity of micro- and macrocosmic elements in the motif of the marvelous singer is not found, as far as we are aware, in European Orpheus-type themes. Asamazh appears as a sun-hero, and his marriage to Agunda seems nothing less than a myth of the coming of spring.

Beside the heroes we have numbered in the Tales of the Narts there appear in some episodes a series of personages, remarkable in many ways, but not standing as the central figures in epic cycles. Such are Totraz, the son of Albeg; Arakhzau, the son of Bezenag; Shauwai, the son of Kanz; and Shibals, Marguz, and others.

There are a few tales that cannot be related to one definite cycle, since in these all the most notable Narts play an equal role. Such, for instance, is the story of the struggle between Akhshartagketta and the Borata family, and the tale of the black or gold fox.

The Nart epic concludes with an interesting account of the extinction of the Narts. They left this life in order to live eternally in songs. The rejection of eternal life in favor of eternal fame is the fundamental ethical idea of the Nart epic.

The motif of the struggle against the gods, with which the episode of the death of the Narts is full, appears in the epic more than once. It is expressed with greatest power in the Batraz cycle, in his final fight with the dwellers in heaven. The struggle of Shoshlan with Balshag's Wheel is also, in essence, a struggle against the heavenly powers. The root of such motifs is found in the ancient Prometheus-Amiran complex, wherein is reflected the first attempts by man to free himself from the power of the natural elements, and to subject nature to his will (as in the stealing of the heavenly fire, and so on). However, the persistence with which these motifs are repeated cannot be fully explained if one does not suppose that in the latest historical fates of the Ossetians-Alans there were factors that nourished and supported their existence. Such a factor was, in our opinion, the introduction of Christianity among the Alans. The struggle and death of Batraz, likewise of Shoshlan, and the final extinction of the Narts, was, perhaps, a poetical expression of the struggle of the old primitive heathen naturalism with the new Christian cult.

We remember that the titan Prometheus also was a representative of the older generation of gods defeated in the struggle against the new ones—Zeus in this case. In confirmation of this idea we direct attention to the fact that there is not a single instance of the struggle of the Narts against the purely heathen gods—Kurdalagon, the smith-god; Afshati, the god of the forest and its wildlife; and so on. For the Narts, these were on their side, “their people.” The Narts battled only against the Christianized god, Wasilla (St. Elijah), Washtirji (St. George), Oinon (St. John), and Zhedta (angels).

2 ♦ GENETIC AND SURROUNDING TIES

Vsevolod Miller (1881–87) and Georges Dumézil (1930, 1943, 1948, 1952, 1956, 1958a, 1960a, 1965, 1976, 1978a) showed that genetic ties of the Ossetian epic lead to north Iranian Scythian-Sarmatian tribes, occupying Southern Russia in the first millennium before our era. The brilliant comparative analysis carried out by these learned professors opened up such clear parallels between motifs and subjects in the sagas of the Narts and the legends and realities of the Scythian, Sarmatians, and Alans¹⁴ that they could not in any way be sheer coincidence. They are explained by the fact that the Scythian-Sarmatian-Alan world, disappearing into the past, continued to live in artistic transformations in this Nart epic. This view is supported by the fact that the names of the older generation of Narts bear a clearly Iranic character—Warkhag, Akhshar, Akhshartag, Urizhmag, Shirdon.

But this ancient nucleus, coming up to the times about which Herodotus tells, was never a closed world, never untouchable by outside impulses and influences. Just the opposite—it was wide open to the effects of other mythologies and folk-epics, with whose bearers these Scythians and Alans had combat in the course of their long history. To fully establish the scale of these surrounding ties is scarcely possible. The spread and transmigration of the northern Iranian peoples was too wide, and the number of peoples with whom the ancestors of the Ossetians had contacts was too great. Of their folklore and mythology we also know too little. But all the same, contacts with certain Indo-European, Turko-Mongolian, and Caucasian peoples left their traces sufficiently clearly in the epic poem of the Ossetian people.

The most ancient contacts were in the area of Eastern Europe, with the forebears of the Scandinavians, Slavs, Celts, and Italians (and Greeks).

A noticeable trace was left in the Ossetian epic (as also in Russian folk-tales) by contacts with the Turko-Mongolian tribes. In the Nart system of names the Turko-Mongolian stratum, both in its size and significance, comes immediately after Iranian. From the Turkish and Mongolian we get clarification of such names as Batraz, Khamis, Shoshlan, Eltagan, Shainag, Marguz, and others.¹⁵ There also exists a coincidence of subjects and themes. A few of them we have noted earlier.

The derivation of the term “Nart,” the common name of the heroes of the Ossetian epic, is of special importance in this relation. Many explanations of this term have been proposed. For the most part it is thought that the name is connected, one way or another, with the Iranian *nar-*, meaning “male, man.” Such is the opinion of Lopatinsky, Bleichsteiner, Trubetskoy,

Rkhlitsky, Meyer, Dumézil, Bailey, Benveniste, and so on. Such an explanation, however, is not acceptable (see Abaev 1996 for at least some of these references).¹⁶ The Iranian word *nar* is reflected in the Ossetian word *næl*, “male,” and there is no reason to think that there existed a parallel (Ossetian) form *nar*.¹⁷ It is also most improbable that an epic (where the central figure is a woman, Shatana, a matriarchal figure) should bear the common name “men,” to say nothing of the colorless nature of such a term. The form and use of the term *Nartae* leaves no doubt that it is formed in the manner of Ossetian family names, with the usual Ossetian indication of the plural [collective] for *tæ*, and therefore means “children of” or “descendants of” Nar. Then what can the term “Nar” mean here? Or to put it another way, whose descendants were they, those “Narts?” The answer to this question we find in the recordings of Caucasian specialist and ethnographer G. F. Chursin, taken down from an Ossetian storyteller. “Once upon a time the sun had children, the Nart warriors.” The word *nar(a)* really means “sun,” not in Ossetian, but in Mongolian. But there is nothing surprising in this. Alan-Mongolian relations were very close indeed. Among the Alans there could have been bilingual singers, in command of both languages. For them *nar(a)* was a special mythological name of the sun, in distinction from the common term in use *khur*,¹⁸ just as, say, in Greek there existed such a parallel, Apollo-Phoebos and Helios, that is, the sun. Is it necessary to point out that the name “children of the sun” [*Nar(a)-tæ*] fits these Nart heroes precisely? Would it be possible to find a better name?

We have stated earlier that the Tales of the Narts in their fundamental form, subject, and themes were considerably more ancient than the Alan-Mongol relations. How, then, to explain that this epic with its various songs went around among the people a millennia or more, when the general term for its heroes “Nart” was not in existence? That is also quite in the order of things. The development of an epic is fulfilled in such a manner, that only at the end, in the concluding stages of the process, do the common factors appear. Before that there exist separate songs or story-cycles, which cannot be attached to any common whole or to a special hero. The appearance of the term “Nart” as a common name for all these epic heroes signifies the final stage of the process of development of the Alanic epic. It reflects and shows the need and efforts to bind the various tales together more closely in one whole and all-encompassing cycle. The Mongol influence has served as a spur to this end. In this there was something in common between the fates of both Alan and Russian epics. In Russian folk-stories, as you know, the heroes were called *bogatirs*, which is also a word borrowed from the

Mongols, and appeared only in the Mongolian epoch. Nonetheless the old folk-songs were sung many centuries before the Mongol invasion.¹⁹

Why was it that Mongolian influence was fated to play such a role in the concluding stages of both the Alan and the Russian epics? Here, most likely, a whole range of reasons were active, but it will be sufficient to show the following three factors: (1) The Mongols were the people with extremely rich epic poems. (2) The relations between Alans and Mongols were of a lengthy and intensive character. (3) The clash with the Mongols, and also participation in Mongol campaigns, served as a spur to the livening of mutual tribal relations, and in part to the closing of the gap between the previously disunited groups of a military and of a family nature among the Alan people, which must undoubtedly have given a new sweep to epic creations, and have stimulated singers to attempts of uniting the separate and scattered military-family stories in a somewhat fuller and more complete form.

A special kind of international regional society formed the environment of the Nart epic in the Caucasus among the peoples dwelling there: Ossetians, Circassians (also known as Adygheys), Kabardians, Abadzekhs, and others (Colarusso 2002; Gadagat' 1994; Hadaghatl'a 1967, 1968–71); Abkhazians (Inal-Ipa 1962, 1988; Meremkulov and Salakaja 1975); Balkarians, Karachays (Aliev 1994); Chechens, Ingush (Dalgat 1972); and Svans (Dzidziguri 1971). Here we refer not merely to a similarity between a few odd motifs or subjects, but to a general foundation of the epic's inventory, to the identity of chief heroes, and the general naming of them as Narts.

If we turn to the general content of the tales, then here we find a significant similarity, a unity of fundamental themes, and a likeness in composition between Ossetian, Circassian, Balkarian, and other variants. One can easily be convicted of this by Dumézil in his book *Legends of the Narts* (1930) where parallel French and various national variations are given.

One gets the impression that before us lie fragments of one single epic cycle. Among the Caucasian folklorists a dispute has sprung up as to which of the Caucasian people the Tales of the Narts really belong. The answer to this question is very simple: the epic belongs to the people among whom it circulates. That means that the Ossetian version belongs to the Ossetians, the Circassian one to the Circassians, the Abkhazian one to the Abkhazians, and so on.

Peoples derive their songs and legends not from the outside, but from the treasury of their souls, from their own historic experience, from their style of life. It is easy to become convinced that these nationalities of the Caucasus have the sagas of the Narts in variations that reflect their own

everyday experience and circumstances, and that reflect the form, poetic style, and manner of recitation, as well as bearing traces of local national folklore traditions and national coloring.

The question of the origin of the internal inventory of tales, of personal names, and so on is another matter. It is impossible to say that the name “Nart” or the names of main heroes appeared independently among each of the nationalities. Here it is quite in place to raise the question about the overall epic’s origin.

For the solution of this question the following facts are basic:

1. The term “Nart” includes the Ossetian plural indicator *t*, and is formed in the same way as other family names. Therefore it has passed to other nationalities of the Caucasus in Ossetian form (see note 17).
2. Certain Nart subjects, as has been shown by Miller and Dumézil, bear full analogy to the life and customs of the distant forebears of the Ossetians, the Scythian-Sarmatian tribes.
3. The names Warkhag, Akhshar, Akhshartag, Urizhmag, and female name Asirukhsh, and the name of the magical goblet Wasamonga, are quite undeniably of Iranian origin.²⁰
4. The main heroine of the sagas, Shatana, although not so fully clear as to origin, is nonetheless inseparable from the Alan princess Satenik, preserved in Armenian rhapsodies concerned with events of the second century AD (the campaign of the Alans beyond the Caucasus), thus pointing to an Ossetian basis.²¹
5. The name Shoshlan, being to all appearances of Turkish (Nogai) origin, is seen on Ossetian soil from the twelfth century onward (see note 16). (The husband of the Georgian queen Tamar, David Shoshlan, was its Ossetian bearer.) The name Sozruko presents itself as the Adyghey version of Shoshlan, with the local normal changing of the letter “l” to the letter “r.”
6. The name Batraz, formed from *Batir-as*, means As (Alas) warrior (see note 6).

All these leave no doubt that the material nucleus of the epic was the ancient Alan cycle, arising in certain of its elements already in the Scythian epoch, and unceasingly enriching itself thanks to contacts with other nationalities, and especially those of the Caucasus. The wide circulation that the name Sozruko received in Alan Ossetian variations speaks eloquently to the reverse influence of the Adygheys on the Ossetians. The necessary

objective and unprejudiced analysis of the whole material leads on to such assessments. To such a conclusion specifically comes Dumézil, a modern and outstanding mythologist and Caucasian specialist.

Summing up this short historical survey of the fate of the Nart epic, we may assert that a comparative analysis and study of the Tales of the Narts has led to these well-founded conclusions:

- The origin of the epic is found in the legends of northern Iranian tribes, Scythians, Sarmatians, and Alans.
- In the epic we come to recognize meetings with surrounding peoples, contacts leading to the mutual influence of the folk-epics of other nations: European (Scandinavian, Slavic, Celtic, and early Italian tribes), Turko-Mongolian, and Caucasian.

3 • MYTHS AND HISTORY IN THE SAGAS OF THE NARTS

A folk-epic, as a special form of expression and as a poetic transformation of objective reality, needs interpretation. The Nart epic too requires such classification. What is hidden behind its images, subjects, and times? In the past century a dispute arose between two trends in the study of folk-epic creations, especially Russian folk-tales, both mythological and historical. Echoes of that dispute are heard today. The disputed point was this: whether on the one hand folk-epics contain mainly expressions of the myths, that is some poetic imagery or “explanation” of the phenomena of nature and the life of the people, or on the other hand, real historical facts, events, and personages. In another place, in an article concerning ancient Iranian religion and mythology,²² we have tried to show that it is not a matter of alternatives, either myth or history. Both one and the other exist side by side in religious systems, and also in folk epics.

This combination of the mythical and the historical in an epic is not mere chance or eventuality. It is normal and unavoidable. It appears as a result of the fact that the composers of the epic, folk-singers and tale-tellers, have at their disposal a rich inventory of traditional, mythological folklore images, subjects, and motifs, while at the same time they are children of their times, and of their natural and social environment, with its concrete historical experiences, events, customs, and psychological circumstances. This reality strongly invades the mythological area, and thus every folk-epic is not only a collection of myths and fairy-tales but also a valuable historical source. Of course, it is not always easy to separate myth from history. One

may sometimes take the historical as myth, and the myth as historical. This is where disputes and differences of opinion are possible. But these will not be major and fundamental differences and disagreements on principle between schools of thought but minor deviations in the interpretation of separate elements of the memorial folk-epic.

The Tales of the Narts provide ample evidence for this complex twinned perspective. Therein one finds diverse and wonderful combinations of interwoven myths and history.

In examining separate cycles we already remarked that the origins of each of them consisted of this, that, or the other mythological factor: totemistic attributes, and the myth about twin-brothers in the Akhshar and Akhshartag cycle, the myth about the first human couple in the Urizhmag and Shatana cycle, the myth about the sun-hero and sun-worshipper in the Shoshlan cycle, the myth about the sun and the coming of spring in the Asamazh cycle, and the myth about the thunder in the Batraz cycle. Comparison with the mythology of other nations—especially Indo-Iranian, Scandinavian, Celtic, and Italian—enables us to reveal a mythological substratum in these places where it was veiled from sight by much later emendations and accretions.

A good example of this is the incestuous marriage of Urizhmag and Shatana. One might perceive here an echo of the endogamous customs that once existed among certain peoples, including the ancient Iranians. However, the influence of comparative mythological material convinces us that such a solution would be premature. In the most ancient religious and mythological epic of the Indo-Iranian peoples, the *Rig Veda*, brother and sister Lama and Lami become progenitors of a people. They themselves were born from the union of the god Gandarva and a “water-woman” or mermaid (*apya yosa*). We should remember that Urizhmag and Shatana were also born of such a “water-woman,” the daughter of the sovereign of the sea, Donbettir. In all the variants of the tale about Urizhmag and Shatana one motif is repeated: Shatana actively pursues her marriage, while Urizhmag resists her. The same thing occurs in the episode with Lama and Lami.

If the mythological foundation of the Nart epic does not raise any doubts among us, then just as unquestionable is its historical basis. We see at every step how, through the mythological schemes, their modes and motifs, appear traces of history, concrete historical events, a concrete people.

This historical basis of our epic consists, first of all, in the fact that in the majority of the tales a well-defined social setup is reflected. Nart society does not yet know a state system. Among them we see the signs of tribal organization, the family organization, with noticeable survivals

of the matriarchy, in the figure of Shatana, for instance. The passion for campaigning cattle-raiding makes itself felt at that stage of the development of the tribal system, which Engels named military democracy. We know that such a system was typical of the Sarmatian tribes.

From concrete events of Alanic history in the epic, most clearly and dramatically is reflected the struggle between heathen beliefs and Christianity. In essence and content our epic is heathen, pre-Christian. Although the names of Washtirji, St. George, and Wasilla, St. Elijah, and other Christian persons figure in it, the Christianity remains only in the names, while the images come from the heathen world.²³ As we have tried to show, along with these names goes the struggle between Christianity and heathenism. Shoshlan and Batraz are the heroes of the heathen world, dying in the struggle with a new god and his servants. The capitulation of Batraz before St. Sophia is the capitulation of the heathen Alans before Byzantine Christianity. Historically that all took place, as we know, between the fifth and tenth centuries. By the tenth century Christianity, at least nominally, had conquered the whole Alanic domain, and the Alanic episcopate had been established. In the episodes of the death of Batraz and Shoshlan the epic appears as one of the "passing away of paganism."

Clear traces are found in the Tales of the Narts of Alan-Mongol relations. Do they contain any memories of any concrete historical personages? The name Batraz, *Batir-as*, meaning "warrior-Alan," shows itself as the Mongolian variant of the Georgian *Os-Bagatar*, "warrior-Os" (Ossetian) (see notes 6 and 14). Thus is named in the Georgian chronicles the warrior-chief who in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries fought with the Georgians against the Mongols, and in particular took the fortress of Gori, which in some Nart stories is attributed to Batraz in particular. As we may infer from other Ossetian stories, his real name was Alghuz. Then why has the epic preserved the hero's name in its Mongolian form? Most probably for the same reason as the Serbs named their national hero Black George in the Turkish fashion, Karageorgi, and the Spanish named their hero Ruy Diaz, Count of Bivar, in the fight against the Moors, the Sid, in the Spanish manner, meaning "a prince of a commander."

If we pass from the Nart heroes to their enemies, we shall recognize a few historical figures. About Shainag-aldar, under which name is revealed the Mongolian Sain-Khan, that is Bati, we have already spoken. In the name of the Agur people, hostile to the Narts, we recognize the Turkish ethnological term Ogur.

Speaking of the historical character of the Tales of the Narts we cannot remain silent about one other specific feature, its great realism. Realism in

the portrayal of social and everyday circumstances, and in the outlining of characters. It may seem strange to speak of realism where we do not leave the realm of inventive fantasy, but nevertheless, the Nart epic is deeply realistic. It is difficult to convince a simple mountain man that the Narts did not exist and perform great feats. He is ready to admit that many of these deeds and adventures of the Nart heroes are mere inventions, but that the people themselves, so life-like, in such high relief, as if carved out of a mountain cliff, could be a mere idea of somebody's head, that he could never allow.

The picture of the life and customs and society of the Narts is painted in such lively, realistic colors.

Originating in the totemistic plane from the wolf, and in the cosmic plane from the sun, the Narts remain faithful to their dual nature: as children of the wolf they love hunting and fighting, cattle-raids, and campaigns, and as children of the sun they love the rollicking radiance, gaiety, and happiness of feasts, games, and dances.

If we try on the basis of these stories to determine what main occupations the Narts had, and how they spent their time, we come to the conclusion that there were two: on the one hand hunting, cattle-raiding, and plundering expeditions, and on the other, noisy and abundant feasts, with dozens of slaughtered beasts, and with enormous cauldrons full of *rong* and mead, and inevitably at such celebrations the lively and noisy songs and dances. Such dances are brought to notice time and again, not as a chance feature, but as a leading motif, a real element of Nart life, as a serious and important occupation, to which the Narts gave themselves up whole-heartedly. It is quite possible that these dances had ritual significance. Otherwise it is difficult to explain why the Narts should perform their dances, for instance, when outside the enemy Agurs had besieged them and were ready to break into their village.

As far as their cattle raids and plundering expeditions are concerned, we need make no mistakes: they were purely "wolfish" exploits for the sole purpose of seizing sheep and cattle, and driving them off, and especially important, obtaining horses in this way.

We frequently see the leading Narts troubled by the thought that maybe somewhere there is a place they haven't plundered. The fact that such a place existed was a sufficient motive to send them seeking more spoils.

This peculiar style of life, and its accompanying psychology, reflected in the most ancient strata of the Tales of the Narts, is not in itself a matter of chance. This is the life and psychology in which our epic was born. It is necessary to transfer oneself into that society with its warrior-band

organization, with its constantly restless and rollicking style of life, with its perpetual clashes and conflicts between families and tribes, with its cult of boldness and daring, and with its plundering exploits in order to relate oneself to it with the necessary objectivity, and to determine its place in the history of the development of early forms of society. It stands to reason that neither the society depicted in Homer, nor the society of the *Nibelungen*, nor the society of the Russian folk-tale, where in all the state appears as a settled institution, can be placed in our historic range with Nart family and tribal society. Of all the European epics, only the ancient Irish sagas give us a picture typologically similar to the society of the Narts.

As enemies of the Narts, and the objectives of this valor of theirs, we see on the one hand the giants, *waiuguta*, and on the other the *aldarta* and *malikta*, that is the princes and feudal lords.²⁴ If the giants come from folklore, and symbolize, evidently, the crude untamable forces of nature, with which the cultural and creative man has to battle, then the others, and the struggle against them, are reflections of certain real historical events. The opposition of the Narts to the *aldarta* is the opposition of the warrior democracy to the already forming feudal system among their neighbors.

Devastating the domains of these feudal lords, and driving off their cattle, the Narts act, to use modern terminology, as expropriators of the exploiters.

Traces of divisions into class groups that one can recognize in Nart society in a few of the variants, one must relate to the very latest accretions of the epic, since they fit in very badly with the whole structure of life in the most ancient part of the tales. In a few cases misunderstandings can obviously occur. For instance, two or three mentions of slaves are absolutely without foundation if presented as evidence of class division among the Narts. Slavery as a social institution we do not see in the epic, but what we do see are a few isolated slaves among the captives taken in warfare, and quite compatible with the tribal structure. There are many witnesses historically to the fact that in the purely tribal society of the Ossetians, Ingush, and Chechens, captives were often made slaves when there was no possibility of selling them.

If we take not separate instances here and there but the general impression left by the Nart's world in the most ancient parts of the epic, then before us, without a doubt, stands a family-tribal society, and furthermore with clear remnants of matriarchy.

The people in general form a warrior-group organization, of which it may be said that a certain kind of hierarchy is found there, but that is

only the hierarchy of the elders and those with war glory. From this purely warrior-group organization comes yet another peculiarity of life among the Narts: the scorn for old and ailing Nart warriors, who can no longer take part in feuds and cattle-raids. This contempt for the aged arose from the conviction that the normal death for a fighting-man is death in battle or from wounds.

The material culture of the Nart warriors corresponds with that epoch depicted by their everyday social life. Here we have the Early Iron Age, in its romantic period. The profession of smith is surrounded by a shining aura, as it was in Homeric Greece, in Scandinavian mythology, and in the Finnish Kalevala. Like all that appeared beautiful and sacred, it is transferred from earth to the sky. The heavenly smith Kurdalagon is the blood-brother of Hephaestus and Vulcan and appears as one of the central figures in the epic. He not only forges weapons for the heroes, but even tempers them in his furnace as well. His relations with mortals, and here the great antiquity of the epic speaks, was incomparably more intimate, simple, and patriarchal than any smith-god in the West. He was, for instance, a frequent participant in their feasts. The most outstanding Nart heroes, Batraz, Aishana, the son of Urizhmag, and others, remained with him for long periods on high as guests.

Iron and steel are met with in the epic at every step. Iron appears not only in weapons and armor. We meet iron-winged wolves, and hawks with iron beaks. Iron gates are quite usual, and there is even a whole castle made of iron, built by Shoshlan for his wife, the daughter of the sun. Finally a few heroes themselves are made of iron: Batraz in all variants, and Khamis and Shoshlan in some.

Alongside iron, gold is very popular. It figures both as a decorative epithet—golden hair, golden sun, and so on—and as a material attribute—golden apples, golden goblets, golden cones. Bronze went into cauldrons, and as some of the stories assure us was also used to patch up skulls broken in battle, when being repaired in Kurdalagon's heavenly smithy. Silver is not popular in the epic. A few times ivory is mentioned, and also mother-of-pearl and glass.

The weapons of the Narts consisted of swords (*kard*), battle-axe, pole-axe or halberd (*sirk*), spear (*arts*), bow (*ærdin*) and arrow (*fat*), shield (*wart*), chain-mail (*zhghær*) and helmet (*taka*). The mention in a few variants of guns and cannons rests entirely on the conscience of a few of the latest tale-telling modernizers! Weapons are sometimes thought of as animated. Thirsting for battle, they give forth flame or blue haze. The

famous “Tserek armor,” on hearing the word “battle,” itself jumps up in place on the warrior hero.

All other materials, not connected with war feats, hunting, or feasting, are mentioned in the epic very vaguely, and only in passing. Sometimes Narts appear as shepherds, sometimes as farmers. But in the description of that side of the domestic life of the Narts, there is not that brilliance and reality as shown in military things. The Narts breed sheep, goats, and horned cattle, but they especially prize herds of horses.

Concerning agriculture among the Narts there is even less material. In one story (tale 20), the young Shoshlan, feasting with the gods, is presented with an iron plow, water to turn the mill, and wind for winnowing the grain. Here we have obviously a mythological interpretation of the source of agriculture.

Bread is scarcely mentioned in the tales—only the three scones made with honey that Shatana brings as an offering to the gods on the sacred hill, Waskupp, when she goes to pray to them. But since the Narts were great lovers of beer, then they must, one supposes if only for that purpose, have produced barley. Another favorite drink among the Narts was *rong*, prepared with honey, like mead. That does not mean that they occupied themselves with beekeeping. They could have obtained honey by bartering with neighbors, maybe Slavic tribes that went trading.

Many everyday features are scattered around in the description and explanation of the fates of deceased people in the world beyond the grave (see “Shoshlan in the Land of the Dead” [tale 36]), but to relate them all to the Narts’ early epoch is quite risky, since in this picture is included, pretty obviously, the experience of people of a much later age.

If we hear little about the working activities of the Narts, we hear all the more clearly and colorfully the rich description of their amusements. The leisure time of the sons of the sun,²⁵ judging by the stories recorded, was full of feasts, dancing, singing, and games. As is said in one of the tales: “God created the Narts for the merry and carefree life.” Contempt for death somehow is naturally and simply coupled with love for life and its joys. After the strain of battle, of distant cattle-raids and hunting, they gave themselves up heart and soul to carousing and merriment. Having seized rich spoils, the Narts never “put something away for a rainy day.” The plundered cattle were immediately put in the pot to entertain the whole tribe at the feast. To arrange such bountiful and generous carousals for all was obviously a matter of honor for the most distinguished Narts, and they did so on every possible occasion. The inability and unwillingness of the Narts to lay in supplies for an emergency resulted in their rapid swinging over from one

extreme to another, after excessive feasting frequently followed a period of hunger, leading these children of the sun to exhaustion and even emaciation. Stories describing these sumptuous feasts and merriment stand in contrast to others, no less in number, portraying the times of common hunger and want. There are no signs, however, that these Narts in times of depression and need lost heart, or changed their habits. At the first possibility, after the next successful cattle-raid, these irrepressible people gave themselves up to unrestrained enjoyment and merriment again.

Of the scale of the forthcoming feast one can judge by the formula of the village-crier. Not a single soul could refuse to attend after hearing the invitation: "All who can walk, bring yourselves," cried the herald, "and those who cannot walk, then carry them!" Feeding mothers were recommended to bring their babies with them in their cradles. The tables were set out to a full extent of a bow-shot. The abundance of eatables was truly gargantuan; the festive boards bent and broke beneath the weight of the meat dishes. Beer and mead flowed over the brims of enormous cauldrons. The talented Ossetian artist Makharbeg Tuganov, in his remarkable work *A Nart Feast*, with its fine knowledge of the realities of those days, has given us a picture of how the Narts, those gourmands of the Iron Age, feasted and enjoyed themselves dancing.

The culmination of the feasting came when the famous Nart folk-dance, the Shimd, began (tale 67). This ancient, original and stylish round-dance in which all participate, even when performed today, produces an imposing impression. Multiplied in its effect by the superhuman powers and temperament of those Nart titans, this dance, the stories tell us, shook the very mountains, and was an outstanding spectacle. Even the gods above looked down on the Shimd dance of the Narts in amazement, mixed even with a goodly portion of fear!

Apart from the mass round-dance, solo dances are also described, demanding the greatest artistic skill and virtuosity from the performer. He had to dance on the very edge of a small, low round three-legged table (*ting*), set out at feasts with food and dishes and goblets, without disturbing a single crumb. He also had to dance tip-toe on the brim of the great cauldrons filled with beer, without shaking or upsetting them, or finally with a goblet of mead on his head, without spilling a single drop. The irreproachable performance of such feats was possible only for the best dancers, and competitions between them were one of the Narts' favorite spectacles. Such a competition between two famous dancers, Shoshlan and the son of Khizh, serves to tie up the famous story of the besieging of the Khizh fortress, and the subsequent marriage of Shoshlan.

Along with the dances, the Narts loved what we today would call sporting events. The character of these competitions was, of course, warrior-like, and their scale, simply Nart-like in scope. Archery and the testing of swords were the most usual of these contests. The stamina of steeds was tested in the glorious Nart horse races, in which even the heavenly god Wastirji took part. There is also mention of the game of knuckle-bones, usually among children.²⁶

In general, one of the characteristic features of the Nart heroes was a persistent and restless spirit of rivalry. To be the best always, and in everything, that was the fixed idea of the most eminent Narts. A few Nart tales have as their plot one and the same question that preoccupied all: "Who is the best among the Narts?" From this question arises, in a range of variants, the story of "Urizmag and the One-Eyed Giant" (tale 11). This same point stands at the center of attention when the beauty Akola, or Agunda, or Wazaftawa, or others are going to choose a husband for themselves, and scrupulously compare each of the suitors with the others, finding in everyone some small fault, until they make the final choice of Asamazh or Batraz. Then there is a passionate outburst about the same question, when the Narts are deciding who shall keep the sacred bowl of Wasamonga (tale 66). Finally this same question is set in the well-known tale about the elder Narts who bring out three most sacred treasures, to award them only to the most worthy.

In this last story, "Who Is Best among the Narts" (tale 69), the laurel wreath goes to Batraz. It is very interesting, in judging the ideal of human perfection among the people, to see what qualities gain for Batraz first place among the Narts. They were three: valor in battle, restraint in eating, and respect for women. Other stories and variants add a further range of qualities that, taken together, give a good idea of the Nart ideals. Through the whole epic run the threads of generosity, hospitality, and friendliness. Every successful raid results in a festive board for all. The aura that surrounds the married couple Urizhmag and Shatana is to a significant degree explained by their unbounded hospitality. Until today on Ossetian lips the names of Urizhmag and Shatana are synonyms for hospitality and generous kindness. There is no greater compliment than to name one's host Urizhmag and one's hostess Shatana.

Among the Narts the feeling of family solidarity and comradeship is highly developed. These features are connected in the closest way with the warrior-group organization of society, and flow naturally from it. In such conditions, when the tribe means also comradeship of the group, a natural feeling of blood-relationship between them grows many times over, thanks

to common participation in battles and in hunting expeditions with their attendant dangers. Many stories have as their theme the saving of one Nart by the others in moments of mortal danger.

The thirst for adventurous feats and the scorning of death are the inseparable qualities of the real Nart. When a god presented the Narts with the choice of eternal life or eternal glory, they choose without hesitation death and eternal glory, rather than an existence without fame or honor ("The Downfall of the Narts," tale 89).

Re-creating in the epic of the Narts a certain ideal epoch in their own past, the folk counted as one of its special features the intimacy, simplicity, and closeness of relationships between the people and the world of the gods. Truly, these relationships are distinguished in the epic by an exceptional kind of patriarchy and directness. The tales not only describe occasions of meetings between gods and the people but also underline the fact that such contacts were in the nature of things, and that they were of frequent occurrence. "The Narts were fellow diners with the gods," is said in many stories. One of them about the end of the Narts begins so: "When the Narts were still full of strength, and when the pathway to the heavens was still open to them . . ." The open road to the heavens, here is the dream of the golden age, incarnated in the Tales of the Narts. Their gods were people like themselves, with the same psychology, and the same weaknesses. They frequently and easily communicated with the Narts, and distinguished Narts dwelt with them for lengthy periods.

If, on the one hand, Narts were friends of the gods, then on the other hand they also appear as friends of nature, of birds and beasts and flowers. The world of the gods, the world of the people, and world of nature, these three worlds in Nart times breathe still as one life, and understand each other's tongue. We remember what a wonderful effect the music of Asamazh had on all nature: the beasts began to dance, the birds to sing, the grass and flowers to bloom in all their beauty, the glaciers to melt, and the rivers to overflow their banks. In following Balshag's Wheel, Shoshlan keeps up a conversation with all trees, and blesses the birch and hopes for their services to him. When he lies dying, the beasts run to him, the birds fly to him, and he speaks kindly to them, and offers his corpse to them as food. With touching nobility even such predators as wolves and ravens simply refuse his proposition. Swallows, the great favorites of the Narts, serve as a perpetual go-between for earthly mortals and the gods dwelling in the heavens. In some variants a swallow flies to Shoshlan as a messenger, bearing a warning of danger threatening his mother (tale 34), and in this same way also brings the Narts news of

Shoshlan's death (tale 37). Many other sketches, showing the intimacy and mutual understanding between Narts and nature are scattered everywhere in the epic.

In general when we set on one side the later accretions in our many-layered epic, we see resurrected in its oldest parts Nart society, whose everyday life, world-outlook, ideals, and ideas produce an undiluted impression, whose completeness is overwhelming.

As if living, there stands before us the Narts' world, a world of severe warriors, and carefree dancers, offspring of the wolf, and sons of the sun, mighty as titans, and naïve as children, fierce and cruel to enemies, boundlessly kind and generous and extravagant at home, friends of the gods, and friends of nature. However original and far from us that world may be, on entering it we cannot avoid the impression of reality and liveliness that the folk's imagination has given to this fairy-tale mythical world.

The Tales of the Narts is an image of a wonderful legendary world created with such simplicity and power that it becomes near and dear to us, and we involuntarily feel that we must pay due tribute to the poetic genius of the folk who long ago composed and created it.

NOTES OF THE TRANSLATOR

(1) District of Ossetia, where their own local dialect is spoken.—WM

(2) The three tufts of hair on the Scottish sporran, are a relic of [a Celtic form of] this custom.—WM

NOTES OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDITOR

1 The notion that the Caucasus, if not most of Eurasia, went through an era of matriarchal culture was popular during the early decades of the Soviet Union, in Abaev's youth. Such notions appear even among Western thinkers, such as Robert Graves and his thoughts on pre-Classical Greece, as in his *The White Goddess*.

2 Abaev is probably referring to a Russian version of Dumézil's 1943 article, "Légendes sur les Nartes: nouveaux documents relatifs au héros Sozryko," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 125: 97–128. Kevin Tuite informs me that such translations often appeared under special titles, as with Dumézil 1976. A more recent discussion of the same theme can be found in Dumézil 1978a, pp. 91–122.

3 The Iron and Tuallæg (Southern) Ossetians are Orthodox Christians. Only the Digoron are Muslim (Sunnis).

4 Dumézil 1978a, pp. 249–61.

5 This is one of a number of ideological allusions to Engels herein that Abaev made to be in compliance with the Communist system under which he lived most of his life. I have not bothered to track down the bibliographical data that underlies them.

6 The origin of the names of the Narts cannot be determined without consideration of their forms in the other Caucasian traditions. The Ossetian */xæmec/* corresponds to */xəməšʷ/* in West Circassian, while Batraz, earlier Ossetian */batradz/*, is taken from East Circassian (Kabardian) */bet(e)reʒ/*. West Circassian shows */pʼeterez/* and the rarer */feterez/*, the latter probably from Ubykh, where **/pʼ/ → /f/*, but the East Circassian form shows that this has been distorted from an earlier **/patʼaraz/*, because in East Circassian **/p/ → /b/*. The forms of these names therefore suggest the originals **/xaməšʷ/* and **/patʼaraz/* with */e/ ← */a/*. If we turn to the East Caucasus to Ingush (close to Chechen), we find */xamč/* and */pataraz/*, */patiraz/*, or */patriž/*, suggesting the Vainakh (Ingush-Chechen-Batsbi) originals **/xamčʷ/* and **/patʼraz/* or **/patʼriž/*. I would therefore posit originals **/xəmčʷ/* and **/patʼ(e)raz/*. The first is not far from Abaev's Mongolian *Khabichi*, but one should have expected something like **/xəbəčʷ/* in the various Caucasian forms if this were the source name. The second proto-form, however, seems less close to *Batir*, which itself is a borrowing of Iranian *bahādur*, also found in Russian as *bogatyr*. The origin of these names is foreign to Ossetian and even to Iranian, as Benveniste also suggested (1959, p. 129), but it is probably local (Colarusso 2002, saga 33, n. 2). One might conceivably see for the first a Circassian **/xə-m-čʷ-/*, “haste, frenzy-not-bend, tend” — “Don't be hasty, frenzied,” as Khamis so often is, to his own detriment (note */xəze-/*, “to hurry; to be bold, decisive, frenzied” [Kuipers 1975, p. 66]; */tʰətʰə/*, “to hurry” [ibid., p. 68]. For the second one might see Circassian **/patʼa-ra-z/* “damage, destroy-locative-army” — “One who was an army's destruction,” as Batraz is (note West Circassian */ye-pʼet'e-/*, “cause-be.worn.out, damaged” (ibid., p. 10), reshaped from earlier **/patʼa/* through the influence of the preverb */pʼa-/*, used with a sense of severing or breaking.

7 It is not clear to me [JC] what work of Dumézil's Abaev is referring to here. Dumézil saw *Batra(d)z* as a trifunctional hero (Dumézil 1978a, pp. 50–66, and earlier references cited therein).

8 Dumézil 1978a, pp. 19–90.

9 Dumézil 1978a, pp. 169–224 ; 1960a.

10 The suffix **/-mæž/* in Iron, until recently **/-mæz/*, may be an Indo-Iranian reflex of Indo-European **megʷ-* ‘great, large’, or **makʷo* ‘son of’ as in Irish *mac*, Welsh *map*, and old Germanic names *mag*, usually considered as restricted to northwestern Europe. The older forms of these names still found in Digoron are *Atsæ* and *Atsæmæz* (see appendix of names).

11 *Gætæg* is assimilated from *Bætæg*, which itself comes from Iranian **bartak-*, with a root *bart-* that occurs also in the name of a hero found in the Ubykh Nart sagas, *Bartinuquo* (Colarusso 2002, saga 86) and may also occur in that of a witch found in the Circassian Nart sagas, *B(y)aramupkh* */b(y)are-m-ə-pʰə/* *Byara-oblique.case-his-daughter* (ibid., sagas 10, 50, and 60). Such gender switching would suite *Shirdon* (as well as Norse *Loki*).

12 This is the widespread Indo-European theme of withholding a cure from a son or comrade. For example, Irish Finn Mac Cumhail brings about the death of *Diarmaid*, his valiant younger follower, while Iranian *Rustam* unwittingly slays his son *Sohrab* (Puhvel 1987, p. 118).

13 In Arabic /naṣr al-din/ means Help(er) [of] the-faith, suggesting that this later figure is a moral inversion of the trickster Shirdon. See guide to the names.

14 These were nomadic tribes that roamed from the plains of Hungary to those of western China from roughly 1000 BC until the coming of the Huns with the fall of Rome in the fifth century AD. They are assumed to have spoken Indo-European languages of the Iranian branch of which Ossetian, Persian, and Pashto are modern survivors. See Rolle's archaeological discussion (1980), Reeder (1999), and Rice (1957) for discussions of their golden art, and my own general account (Colarusso 1994c). The Scythians called themselves *Skolotai* and what few words we have of their language from Herodotus, such as *oior pata* 'man slayer,' suggest that it was not Iranian and perhaps not even Indo-European. A link to a "Macro-Armenian," that is, to a language cognate with Armenian, is possible, in which case the name would refer to "Little Dogs," a youthful warband (← PIE */kʷon-lo-to/, "dog-diminutive-collective," cf. Armenian *skund*, "puppy"; Colarusso 2004). The name of the As, from which Asia takes its name, is directly continued with an old collective suffix in *Ose-ti*. The Sarmatians seem to have been the 'free ones,' Ossetian /sarma-tə/ free-collective (Miller 1885). The Ossetians call themselves *Iron*, the same name as *Iran*, which shows a reflex (descendant form) of the original genitive plural */āry-ānām/, "of the Aryans." This precludes direct linguistic links between the Ossetian self-designation and the group of dialects where original /-ry-/ yielded /-l-/ as with the Alans or the Roxalani (/ruxš-alani/, 'white, western-Alans'). Ossetian does, however, show the shift of */-ry-/ → /-l-/ (Benveniste 1959, p. 29) for most of its vocabulary. A part of the name *Alan* is preserved in the name of one of the Nart families, the *Alægatae*, which is from a collective built upon an old adjective: */ārya-kā-ta/. This name can only be from an l-dialect of Iranian.

Thus, the Nart sagas seem to contain an array of old Iranian nomads. Ossetian itself seems to have descended from the old Iranian l-dialect cluster, but to preserve a self-designation from the r-dialect group, and to be known to outsiders by one of the oldest Iranian names, that of the As.

15 Shoshlan (earlier Soslan) is probably from Indo-Iranian */šwas-āryānām/ breath-of-the.Aryans, through Alanic */sos-alan/. For */šwas-/, compare English "wheeze". Eltagan (/eltayan/) is from either a Turkic language or Mongol, and is based on the verb /yāltā-, "to excite, rouse" (Abaev 1996, vol. 1, p. 411), and is found on an Old Turkic inscription from the Yennisey in the form *eltoyan* (Benveniste 1959, p. 146). *Shainag* is taken from Mongol *sain*, "glorious" (ibid., vol. 3, p. 22).

16 Abaev 1996, vol. 2, pp. 158–60.

17 There is little reason to muddy the waters here. The root is /nart-/, as in /nart-xor/, "Nart-food", "maize" (Benveniste 1959, p. 116) and not /nar-/ and the derivation from Indo-Iranian */nř-tama/, "man-superlative," for the former (ibid., p. 37; Bailey 1980), and from */nār-ya-, "man-one.of", "male" for the latter (Benveniste 1959, p. 29) is about as clear a set of etymologies as one could wish for. Mongol /nara/ would have yielded **Narata* in Ossetian. Any links with Mongol /nara/, 'sun' (Abaev 1996, vol. 2, pp. 158–60), must be seen as later folk etymologies.

18 This is the Iranian reflex of Indo-European */s₂-w-l-(n-)/, 'sun', as found in Gothic *sauil*, English *sun*, Latin *sōl*-, Greek *ἄελιος*, *hēlios*, Old Church Slavonic *slunice*, Russian *solnce*, Lithuanian *saulė*, Sanskrit *sívar*, *súrya*, Avestan *hvarə* (Pisani 1947, p. 151, §335).

19 The Turkic and Mongol influences on the Nart sagas must be late if their origins are among the Iranian nomads of the steppes of Classical antiquity. There is little in

either Russian or Caucasian traditions that reflects the Altaic era that does not overtly deal with Tatars, Turks, or Mongols. Russian *bogatyr* is in fact cognate with Persian *bahādur*, both terms referring to a knight. The Persian may itself be taken from Sanskrit or a related Indic language. The Russian and Indo-Iranian terms are likely built on one of the Indo-European roots for 'god,' */bhogh-/ , so that the title originally would have meant a pious person.

20 These names likely have the following etymologies: Warkhag /wærxæg/ ← Proto-Iranian */warxa-ka-/ wolf-adjective ← Indo-European */wolkʰ-/ English wolf, Russian volk, and so on (Abaev 1996, vol. 4, p. 93); Akhshar, earlier /(æ)xsær/ ← Proto-Indo-Iranian */ksar-/ , "brave", and his dioscuric twin (Colarusso 2002, saga 3) Akhshartag, earlier /(æ)xsærtæg/ ← Proto-Indo-Iranian */ksatr(i)ya-ka-/ 'kingly, warrior.caste-adjective' (Abaev 1996, vol. 4, pp. 229–30), "kingly, knightly" ; Urizhmag, earlier /urizxmæg/ ← Proto-Indo-Iranian */warza-māka-/ , with */warza-/ from a substrate loan into Indo-Iranian meaning "wild boar," and Proto-Indo-European */makʰo-/ 'son,' "son of the wild boar"; and Asirukhsh, earlier /aci-rūxs/ ← */wacə-ruxs/ , "holy-light" (Abaev 1996, vol. 1, p. 27), from an Iranian language that lost, the initial */w/.

21 This name is of mixed Iranian and Circassian origin: /sata-na-ya/ , "hundred-mother-one.of," "mother of a hundred," with /sata-/ being Iranian and /-na-ya/ being Circassian. The Armenian name is clearly a borrowing from farther north in the Caucasus.

22 Abaev 1990c, pp. 302–25.

23 These names are based on the Ossetian prefix for "saint" or "holy," /wac-/ (German *weiḥ-*, Sanskrit *Viś(nu)*, and the names "Elijah" /illa/, Digoron /ileal/, and "George" /ǰærǰi/ with /c-ǰ/ → /s-t/ because of the original coronal (tongue blade) cluster behind /wastərǰi/. Perhaps the most interesting shift due to Christianity is that of *Nartamongæ* to *Watsamongæ*, /nart-amon-gæ/ → /wæc-amon-gæ/, 'Nart-to.signify, indicate-diminutive,' shifted to 'holy-to.signify, indicate-diminutive.' This is a sort of Holy Grail found in the Nart sagas (Littleton and Malcor 1994).

24 This paragraph and the next were clearly written by Abaev so as to make the Nart sagas agree with Marxism-Leninism and to permit him to defend the Ossetians in the totalitarian environment of the late Stalin era.

What is remarkable about the Nart sagas across the entire North Caucasus, the Ossetian no more than the others, is the almost total absence of political information concerning Nart society. The society is clan based and not even tribal. Although other ethnic groups are occasionally mentioned, as Abaev states, they almost always serve merely as enemies or traditional rivals. Distant kingdoms with a lord or an emperor do sometimes play a role, but such sagas are usually outside the main stream of Nart life (64). The occasional rich man or lord is mentioned, but usually to serve merely as fools before the heroism of the truly valiant warrior Nart. In short, one cannot envisage more clearly a society that stands outside of traditional Marxism than that of the Narts.

Abaev's third paragraph suggests this impossibility by noting that any traces of canonical class structure are late accretions. In this paragraph he more or less repudiates what he has written in the preceding two. As he says, Nart society is an archetypal mythic society that serves as a stage for the warrior raiding ethic and the almost chivalric heroism used to ennoble it. It may reflect an ancient clan-based social order that might have typified the Eurasian steppes at a remote era and to some extent typifies the Caucasus even today. To have seen it as a cog in the Marxist machine of history, as Soviet censors would have been intent on doing, was to have missed the point altogether, but Abaev's career and the

welfare of the Ossetian and other Caucasians depended on the sort of Marxist apology he has written here.

25 Here Abaev is invoking his preceding etymology of *Nar(t)-tæ* as based upon Mongolian *nara* 'sun.' See note 17.

26 Knuckle-bones is the original form of the game of jacks, using five astragulus bones from the hock of a ruminant.