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SCYTHIAN EPICS AND CATABASIS: ISSUES OF ICONOLOGIZATION

This work examines the dense connection between Scythian art in the Black Sea region (and beyond) with the heroic epic of the Narts, the Ossetian people of the Northern Caucasus. Frequently, scholars confine themselves to comparative studies of Scythian iconology with ancient historiography or at most, with Persian (Avestan) heritage. However, the author of this article primarily emphasizes the Scythian iconography in epic rather than in the "pantheon mythology." Epic consciousness tends to deviate from cyclicity and etiology in favor of the feats of the heroic ancestors. The Ossetian "Nart Saga" demonstrates the vast array of potential characters.

The focal point of this work revolves around the hero's journey to the Land of the Dead. The corresponding legend of the Nart Soslan's catabasis is compared with well-known compositions on Scythian artifacts. Parallel observations are made, and remarks are presented against prevalent outdated concepts, among other things.

Key words: archaeology, thanatology, catabasis, sacrifice, Scythians, nomads, epic, Narts, iconology, symbolism, afterlife, power.

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СКІФСЬКА ЕПІКА ТА КАТАБАСИС: ПРОБЛЕМИ ІКОНОЛОГІЗАЦІЇ

Робота розглядає щільний зв'язок скіфського мистецтва Причорномор'я (та не лише) з героїчним епосом про Нартів осетин Північного Кавказу. Надто часто дослідники обмежуються компаративістикою скіфської іконології з античною історіографією чи максимум з перською (авестійською) спадщиною. Автор статті своєю чергою обстоює передовсім акцент скіфської іконографії на епосі, а не на «пантеонній міфології». Адже представникам епічної свідомості властивий відхід від циклічності та етіології на користь подвигів героїв-першопредків, а осетинська «Нартіада» демонструє, наскільки широким є вибір потенційних персонажів.

Ключовим сюжетом у роботі є подорож героя до країни Померлих. Відповідна легенда про катабасис нарта Сослана порівнюється з відомими композиціями на скіфських пам'ятках. Робляться паралельні спостереження, виносяться зауваження до поширених застарілих концептів тощо.

Ключові слова: археологія, танатологія, катабасис, жертвопринесення, скіфи, кочовики, епос, Нарті, іконологія, символізм, посмертя, влада.

Since the consecutive systematic study of Scythian antiquities, there have been numerous attempts at the parallel interpretation of compositional imagery in nomadic artistry and the world of images and myths that permeated the nomadic population of the Northern Black Sea, at least according to the accounts of classical antiquity. Choosing not to burden these pages with historiographical descriptions, let us refer to the substantial work of Hanna Vertiienko *“Iconography of Scythian Eschatology”* (2015), which offers a comprehensive historiography on the matter.

We would further add that the structural-semiotic trend in the last third of the 20th century directed scholars into the vast realm of the Iranian worldview, represented from the material remains of the Eurasian steppe of the Bronze Age to the folklore-mythological narratives of Zoroastrian “Avesta” and the *“Ardā Wirāz nāmag”*, and even to parallels found in Firdousi's *“Shahnameh”* and in the folklore of Tajiks and Ossetians. Moreover, within the vector of iconological semiotics, Dmitry Rayevsky achieved a remarkably insightful interpretation of zoomorphic images, part of the ‘animal style’, as an illustration of the worldview of Iranian-speaking steppe nomads (Rayevsky 1985), although at times, these images are still often interpreted purely ‘allegorically’, as certain allusions to ‘totemic mysticism’, and nothing more. Therefore, the contemporary relevance of understanding the language of animal images as the visualization of mental models of steppe populations and their neighbors remains evident. Attempts to link Scythian ‘Animal style’ with Nart Sagas are made successfully (see: Mysyckaty 2021).

On the other hand, there remain narrative compositions and certain individual characters, occasionally associated with the problematic of the pantheon, with the ‘divine icon’. Whether from the text of the fourth book of Herodotus or from Avestan hymns (including Vedic parallels). Without excluding such lofty metaphorical foundations of these respective images, we aim to draw attention to the significance of the epic consciousness of the Scythians, Saka, Sarmatians, and Alanians (Besolova & Zangieva 2019). Drawing parallels with ancient Celts, Germans, and their descendants in the Viking era, or even Pacific Maori or Tlingit, we see that a lion's share of their creativity – both iconographic, poetic, and theatrical, which encompassed all of this – was

dedicated not to gods-demiurges but to the ancestors and heroes of their epics.

Many researchers enthusiastically support this thesis, while, at the same time, confining themselves to the texts of Herodotus or the ‘Avesta’. According to such a position, whenever we see Targitaos, then it is Ōraētaona / Fereydun; if we meet the death of a hero motive, then it should clearly depict Kolaksaīs perishing from his brothers hands, and each depicted “Rite of Brotherhood” should mark just the Lipaksaīs and Arpaksaīs, oathing to implement their plan (Boychuk 2011; Rayevsky 1977, p. 81-118; Vertiienko 2015, p. 85-87, 151-152). Indeed, such a plot finds numerous parallels in the folklore narratives of the world, but ultimately, what grounds such certainty? Why, on the crest from the Haiman's Mound, where one clearly not young hero challenges a monster, and a warrior resembling him perishes nearby, should we interpret this as a reminiscence of Targitaos / Ōraētaona's vengeance upon the dragon-king Azhi Dahāka for the death of his father – the first ruler Yima / Jamshīd? (see Vertiienko 2015, p. 30-33)

Experts repeatedly acknowledge that the North Caucasus offers the most fruitful Scytho-Alano-Ossetian comparative studies (Dumézil 1990, p. 6-11; Ivanenko 1999, p. 30-39). We would like to draw additional attention to the Ossetian version of the Narts' epics. The most celebrated heroes-Narts are usually descendants of patriarchs, as either the brothers Axsar and Axsartag or the twins Hamits and Uryzmag (*Tales of the Narts 2021*, p. 79-97). Legends remain about their joint exploits, and even about the mortality of one of them, which has parallels in the heritage of the Indo-Europeans, and beyond.

Therefore, even if we equate the characters of the composition from Haiman's Mound to the Avestan legend of the First Death from the cosmic dragon and the corresponding first vengeance of the first ancestor king (for Avestian origin see Humbach 2002), it would not be superfluous to assume that *these* nomadic versions of 'Ōraētaona' and 'Yima' should had been brothers for Scythian audience. In other words, both of them were born of Heaven and Earth, as mentioned by Herodotus.

Meanwhile, some of the male images in Scythian art may represent a hero – the son of the deceased patriarch ('Yima') – is not necessarily Kolaksaīs. In Ossetian epics, most celebrated heroes Batradz

and Soslan are precisely the children of the two mentioned twin-patriarchs Hamits and Uryzmag, and although their exploits sometimes duplicate each other, they are not identical to one another.

The search for the enigmatic 'Batradz' is a separate theme. However, it is worth remembering that this hero is a metallic shape-shifter who often transformed into the giant sword. His very soul and life resided in his own magical blade, which was eventually thrown from the Caucasus Mountains into the Black Sea. Therefore, the accounts of ancient authors about the enigmatic 'Scythian Ares' in the form of acinaces-sword with the blood sacrifices dedicated to him on the mounds gain somewhat new illumination (Korol 2021a).

For now, we are more intrigued by the frequently depicted scene across numerous nomadic sites of a female character in warrior-equestrian ceremonial attire (*the Pazyryk Carpet from Burial Mound No. 5; the rhyton from Merdzhany; the two-tiered funerary stele from Kerch; the Anthesterian Tomb in Kerch, etc.*) [fig. 2a-d], or a young-looking unmounted character with a cup (*golden plates from Kuhl-Oba, Nosaki, Chortomlyk, etc.*) [fig. 2e-f] (see Klochko 2021). Caucasian scholars tend to compare these compositions to motifs of the visitation by the Nart hero – most often Sosruquo / Soslan – to his named mother Shatana. This matriarch of the Narts indeed embodies echoes of ancient beliefs in the Great Goddess (Shaub 1999). However, the Ossetian epic does not limit itself solely to this woman.



Fig. 1

The comparison between the leading Scythian hero-king Kolaksaïs and the Nart Soslan is consistent and highly justified (Gippert & Fritz 2004). His fate prompts a closer examination of the mentioned

scene of the rider's visit to the maiden on the throne. Compositional and semantic parallels of scenes from Merdzhany and Pazyryk have been established repeatedly (Rudenko 1968, Raevsky 1977). This includes the identification of the mysterious plant with the legendary tree Az in the "Nart Saga", which the hero Soslan was supposed to obtain in the Kingdom of the Dead (Tsutsiev 2013). The Pazyryk lady holds a bush in her hand, while the female figure of Merdzhany rhyton and in the Anthesteria tomb has an entire tree nearby (to the left of the throne) [fig. 1a-b-c]. Interestingly, there is a quiver with a bow and arrows hanging from that tree on the Kerch composition. Drawing a direct parallel to the memetic compositions of the 18th-19th century 'Cossack Mamai' would be bold. However, this series of folk meanings surrounding the afterlife and the cult of the heroic ancestor is definitely not accidental and deserves particular attention.

The multifigure scenes of the Sakhnivka plate and the headgear from Karagodeuashkh are characterized by the maiden appearing as the central figure in both compositions, surrounded by seemingly two versions of the same character. Indeed, this is the main message conveyed by Hanna Vertienko regarding the motif of the old king's rebirth as young Kolaksaïs, akin to the described souls of the deceased in the Avestan paradise in their "eternal-fifteen" (Vertienko 2015, p. 138, 146). However, we want to emphasize once again that such multifigure compositions may denote numerous lesser-known characters of the Scythian heroic epic, which are not limited to the aforementioned first ancestors in the 'Scythian genealogical legend' but are equally important for the burial memorial mysteries of the Scythian population [fig. 2c-d].



Fig. 2

Separately, it is worth recalling the specific parallelism between Scythian and Bosporan compositions of the mentioned greeting and the composition with a rider and a woman with a drinking horn on the burial stones of the Gotland on the eve of the Viking Age. Some time ago we made a thematic study (Korol 2005). Regarding the seemingly peculiar combination of Iranian-speaking nomads of the ancient period with German-speaking northerners of the early Middle Ages, once again, we emphasize the specific phenomenon of the Ukrainian territory known as the 'Ermanaric's kingdom'. Following V. Zubar, many arguments suggest the inappropriateness of such a monarchical designation for the Chernyakhov culture. Conversely, evidence suggests significant social stratification within this society and the density of its informational connections (here one might refer to the studies of B. Magomedov and M. Shchukin; however, delving into details at this point doesn't seem necessary).

The most significant aspect, in reality, is the fact that on the shared territory of the Black Sea coast and the middle Dnieper region, for a considerable time (effectively 250 years), elites of the military aristocracy of nomadic Iranian-speaking and incoming Germanic-speaking populations coexisted. As a result, they formed a certain hybrid consciousness where motifs and images from two distant epics about the exploits of ancestral heroes organically intersected (Korol 2005, p. 341-342). Further mutual parallelism between the 'Nartiad' and the 'Eddas' was noted by both Georges Dumézil and many other experts. This parallelism doesn't stem solely from an Indo-European common roots.

What's the crux here? Presently, we want to emphasize the specificity of the female figure welcoming the arriving hero. In the case of Scandinavian compositions, the identification with *Valkyries* is almost unanimous. The Valkyrie, as a postmortem companion of the fallen and a supernatural guardian of the hero during life (see Korol 2021b), shares many parallels with the myths of Iranians in general and the *Avesta* in particular. Specifically, the concept of female-like heavenly warriors-'angels' *Fravashi*, on one hand, and the image of the posthumous confidante Daena, who meets the soul of the deceased at the Chinvat Bridge and is often equated with a sort of human

counterpart, a 'mirror of conscience', which inquires about life's deeds.

H. Vertiienko sees an analogy in the female figure with a mirror precisely to Avestian Daena (see Vertiienko 2012; 2015, p. 130-148). However, in our case, we seek analogies in the Nart epics. And it's not just about the Gatekeeper-maiden of World of the Dead, who exists in 'Nart Sagas' under name Aminon (transforming into a male in later renditions). In the mentioned context of Sosruquo / Soslan's portrayal, three female characters are closely intertwined with him, apart from Shatana. Courtship motive is associated with all three in Nartiad, thus could be seen in the ceremonial approach of a rider with a goblet to a throned lady (as a part of hero adventuring).

In the context of the Valkyrie-Daena-like guardian maiden, it's hard not to recall Soslan's second wife – the Sun Princess Atsirukhs, raised by seven giant brothers, being assisted her husband in his feats by sending him luck and illuminating his return path with a magical finger-ray (Dumézil 1990, pp. 106-109). But more intriguing is the first wife of the widower Soslan – the deceased Bedukha / Vedukha, one of the rulers of the Land of the Dead, who assisted him in subsequent courtship, for which he undertakes a corresponding descent (*Tales of the Narts* 2016, pp. 268-287).

It's worth noting that following commentators of ancient mythology, the term *κατάβασις* denotes in various mythological systems the hero's descent alive into the land of death. It can be applied to the adventures of Odysseus, Orpheus, or Aeneas, but at the same time to Mesopotamian Gilgamesh, Persian Viraf, Mayan brothers Hunakhpu and Xbalanque, and so forth (Bernabé 2015).

Bedukha confesses to the hero that she regularly watches over him from the other world, protects, and ensures his victory (*Tales of the Narts* 2016, pp. 285-286). Thus, besides the magical horse that embodies the soul and vulnerability of Soslan, his treasure, representing the supernatural power of the hero, consists of his two wives. And their guardianship is somewhat detrimental. This brings us back to the Scandinavian understanding of the Valkyries' guardianship and the associated concept of *hamingja*, signifying personal luck among the Vikings upon which personal successes and achievements depended (as opposed to cosmic destiny, which could be measured unfairly) (Korol 2015, p. 91-93).

All this strongly resonates with the *Khvarenah* / *xwarra(h)* concept of the common Iranian tradition – an embodiment of the magical power of the sacred ruler (see Lubotsky 1998).

It is possible to assume that the *Tree of Aza*, for the sake of which Soslan descends to the Land of the Dead, was already present in Scythian mysteries and in Sarmatian-Alanian epic tales, which was then depicted in the mentioned compositional images [fig. 1a-b-c]. On the other hand, it is equally likely that both these images and their reinterpretation in Ossetian legends of the modern era convey a somewhat different meaning, based on the sacred power of *Khvarenah* (around which the Avestan epic about the Kayanian dynasties revolves).

We should acknowledge that the spherical object in the hand of the female figure appears almost exclusively on the Merdzhany rhyton and on the Sakhnivka plate. If this were a key element of the myth, one would logically expect its wider prevalence. On the other hand, the mirror in her other hand regularly appears, but it gives the impression of being less of a key element of the mythologem and more of an attribute.

Precisely so: the *mirror with a handle* as an attribute of the Mistress of the Underworld is a consistent reconstruction at least according to Ariel Golan. This researcher also considers simplified “labyrinth” icons as images of the Underworld: legged circle and omega-like petroglyphs, corresponding to material artifacts: handled discs (Golan 1991, p. 21-26; 178-188; Korol 2015, p. 112). The surface of such objects is not always polished to have a reflection, while true metal mirror discs appear quite late. They could contain liquid; similar to the mirrored bottles of nomads like the Kelermes mirror – here, it's relevant to mention *Arvayden* – the magical “water mirror” of the Narts’ Satanaya / Satana. According to ancient beliefs, water can reflect reality, displaying a “double” – “the other world,” which was vividly represented in the symbolism of wells. Accordingly, the well itself might have been imagined as a portal to the Underworld (Korol 2015, p. 108-110), and a passage – between worlds and social status levels (Vertiienko 2015, p. 133) (which deserves on a separate investigation).

Regarding the mentioned enigmatic round object, we allow ourselves to disagree with numerous experts who claim it to be a vessel. We believe it could be a *pomegranate fruit* – a common

symbol of rebirth in the East, particularly associated with female deities (Langley 2000, p. 1153-1154; Lazongas 2017, p. 108; Stepanyan 2008, p. 224-226). In ancient mysteries, it could have represented a ritualistic pomegranate-shaped container, symbolizing the connection of pomegranate juice, its form, and seeds with blood, death, and rebirth, among other things. Therefore, it's not surprising that such an object appears as an attribute in the iconography of ancient Eastern female characters (Albenda 1985, p. 2-8), like as on the neo-Hittite basalt reliefs in Karamanmaraşu (Yazici 2015, p. 58-63).

We would also draw attention to the depiction of Kubaba in Karkhemish, holding both a *mirror* and a *pomegranate fruit* (Yazici 2015, p. 139). Thus, we consider just these items to be held by the female figure on the Merdzhany rhyton and the Sakhnivka plate. Therefore, we see a connection between the mysterious Underworld plant, the drink-vessel, and the pomegranate fruit in the iconography of nomadic descent to the Underworld. The emphasis often falls on the greeting of the rider by the seated lady. However, there are instances where the young hero drinks from the rhyton before her being unmounted. We might entertain a version of gaining the enchantments of *ruler sacredness*, analogous to the Avestan *Khvarenah*, and which required the Scythian ruler to descend into the Underworld realm. Besides H. Vertiienko's logical reconstruction of the magical rejuvenation of the hero-king through tasting the *elixir of immortality*.

Could it be that the myth of the hero Soslan / Sosruquo's fatal guardian wives is actually connected to Herodotus' account of the sacrificial death of a Scythian who supposedly fell asleep at the Fires' celebration? This individual, bestowed with royal honors and territories for rule, was executed within a year. According to D. Raievskiy, it was a ritualistic concept of sacrificing the sacred ruler, suggesting that ancient Scythian kings were indeed sacrificed. Later, an experienced ruler, a military leader, and a charismatic figure were to remain alive, hence a 'substitute' was chosen to carry out the ritual marriage with the 'fiery lady Tabiti' – that fatal sleep at the Fires' celebration (Raievskiy 1977, p. 92-105). We would like to note the theses by H. Vertiienko, who connects this ritual dream exactly with Soslan's Nartic myth (Vertiienko 2015, p. 151-162).

However, all mentioned details might imply a time span of *decades*. Thus, the heir to the ruler would had needed to visit the Land of the Netherworld at least twice: first as a young person to partake of the 'elixir of Khvarenah', after which they were not meant to live into old age, but rather to become the husband of their patroness whom they would revisit the years later. This signaled the impending arrival of the next young heir. The cycle repeated itself.

This sounds speculative enough. And it may possibly turn out that the 'horseman' and the 'young drinker' were actually the different characters of ancient Scythian epics, which over time was reinterpreted by the Alanians, passing on to their descendants – the Ossetians of North Caucasus (Besolova & Zangieva 2019). However, what we have no doubt about, is that the existing mosaic of Scythian catabatic iconology should be considered only within the context of epic Alanian-Ossetian 'Nart Saga' legacy.

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