



## **Georgian-Alan (Ossetian) Dynastic And Military Ties In The Medieval Period**

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### **Abstract**

The last cycle of Georgian-Ossetian ethnic conflict in the 1990's-2000's badly damaged relations between the two distinct groups. Hostility was provoked by a flood of publications in both countries claiming that the roots of such hatred reached deep into the past. A malignant form of ethnocentric nationalism deliberately distorted the truth of the medieval past. An objective analysis of the evidence from Georgian, Byzantine, Armenian, Russian, Greek and Latin primary sources reveals a completely different situation of intensive cultural exchange affecting all spheres of life. Indeed, close and usually friendly dynastic and military ties throughout the medieval period in the Caucasus rather than conflict characterized the relations between the two peoples.

**Isaenko, A. & Jessee, W.** "Georgian-Alanian (Ossetian) Ties in the Medieval Period," *Medieval Perspectives*, vol. 30 (2015): 117-126.

## Georgian-Alan (Ossetian) Dynastic and Military Ties in Medieval Period

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The last cycle of Georgian-Ossetian ethnic conflict in the 1990's-2000's badly damaged relations between the two distinct groups. Hostility was provoked by a flood of publications in both countries claiming that the roots of such hatred reached deep into the past (ISAENKO 2014, chap. 4). A malignant form of ethnocentric nationalism deliberately distorted the truth of the medieval past. An objective analysis of the evidence from Georgian, Byzantine, Armenian, Russian, Greek and Latin primary sources reveals a completely different situation of intensive cultural exchange affecting all spheres of life. Indeed, close and usually friendly dynastic and military ties throughout the medieval period in the Caucasus rather than conflict characterized the relations between the two peoples.

The Caucasus Mountains have been a cauldron of intense mixing of peoples, cultures and religions since ancient times. It is a place of such extraordinary linguistic diversity the tenth century Arab geographer Al-Mas`udi (CATFORD 1977; 284) called them "The Mountain of Languages" (*jabal al-aslun*). As the Greek geographer Strabo put it:

At this place [Dioscuria, modern Sukhumi in Abkhazia] *seventy different peoples* meet who live above it and in the vicinity [i.e. on the slopes of the Central Caucasus]. All of them speak different languages, because they live sparse and scattered. . . . The greater part of them belong to the *Sarmatian* people, but all of them are called Caucasians. (STRABO XI, 1, 16)<sup>1</sup>

North Iranian (Scythian and later Sarmatian) penetration into the area had greatly influenced local cultures (EDWARDS 1966: 60–1). The Alans, one of the most powerful Sarmatian tribes, have left a single living remnant today in the Caucasus: the Ossetians (ISAENKO 2014: chapt. 1; KUZNETSOV 1992). Like many later con-

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<sup>1</sup> Translated and Italics added by Anatoly Isaenko. Compare Horace Leonard Jones, *The Geography of Strabo*, vol. 5 (New York: Lock Classical Library, 1928) 211.

querors, the Alans mixed with the native population and became one of the principal powers in the Caucasus until well into the thirteenth century when they suffered disastrous defeat at the hands of Mongols.

The Alans first appear in the historical record in the first century AD on the plains between the Aral Sea, the Danube, and the Caucasus as a militarily powerful political amalgamation of North Iranian tribes such as the Sarmatians and Scythians. Now collectively known as *Alans*, the Roman writer Lucan characterized them as a “hardy” people on the Pontus and in the Caucasus, “who have no rest amid continuous wars” (ALEMANY 2000: 13). For the next millennium and a half, they would appear in historical records from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Narrative sources and archaeological data testify that during the first four centuries AD, the Sarmato-Alans established their political domination in the vast territory from the southern area of Dagestan in the east to Asov Sea and Lower Danube in the west, and to the Lower Volga and Northern Kazakhstan. The most important passes to Georgia and the entire Transcaucasia were also in their hands (KUZNETSOV 1992: 56).

In the fourth century Hunnic invasions seriously undermined the Alans’ absolute domination although control over the strategic passes to Transcaucasia remained under Alanic control. Indeed, the pass leading directly to Georgia from the north still carries their name *Dar-i-alan* = *Daryal*, “The Gates of the Alans,” in Alano-Ossetian. Nevertheless, the Huns ended the long domination by Iranian speakers in Central Asia and the Caspian, North Caucasian and Pontic steppes. Thus the so-called Great Steppe Belt fell into the possession of Turkic speaking nomads.

Pockets of North Iranian power survived, however, on the periphery of this now Turkic area, in the forest-steppe zone of the pre-Volga area, southern Crimea, the Lower Danube, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Some of the Alans moved into Western Europe where their armored cavalry and chivalric customs and traditions helped lay the foundation of Western European chivalric and aristocratic culture (BACHRACH 1973: 83). Many prominent families of France and Britain were the descendants of the Sarmato-Alanic warriors (ALLEN 1957: 25–7, 78; ISAENKO 1995, 72–75). American scholars C. Scott Littleton and Linda Malcor (2000) even contend that Sarmato-Alans were the real originators of key aspects of the legends surrounding King Arthur and his knights.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the Huns, however, the main body of the Alans remained in the Caucasus where they played an equally important role in the formative ethnogenetic and ethnocultural process. Large groups of warriors from the local mountain

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<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, *Arsurs*, or in Anglo-Saxon transliteration “Arthur,” in Alano-Ossetian means “white bear,” (ISAENKO and Jessee 2009: 9–10).



communities regularly participated in their military forays and naturally emulated the advanced armament of Alans, as well as their military tactics, methods of combat along with their mores, traditions, and epic folklore. The process is best exemplified by the famous *Legends of the Narts* for which nearly all Caucasian ethnic groups have their own variants. The leading Russian expert on the cycle, Vasilii Abaev, showed that the *Legends of the Narts* is a multilayered epic cycle with a nucleus of originally Scythian and Alanic tales. While comparing the legends with historical evidence, he came to the conclusion that many legendary expeditions ascribed to the Narts are the poetic reflection of the real military raids of Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, and their Caucasian neighbors (ABAEV, 1949). The renowned French Indo-Europeanist Georges Dumézil shared this opinion and proved further that “the entire group of Nartian tales, as well as many images of the Narts, came from Alanic sources. That is from Sarmato-Scythian, European-Iranian, and hence, in the final analysis, from Ossetian sources,” (1930: 171; 1965: 10). Thus, all the peoples of the Caucasus have inherited many customs and traditions from their powerful neighbors, the Alans.

The medieval Alans, like their ancient ancestors the Scythians, developed especially close ties with their immediate neighbors the Georgians as archaeological evidence eloquently reveals typified by the rich finds in the burial ground near Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Georgia. A stone monument found at the site from the second century AD has an inscription in two languages: Greek and Aramaic: “I, Serafita, daughter of Zevakh, junior *pitiakhsb* of King Farsman, wife of Yodmangan—the victor of many glorious victories—the first courtier of King Khsefarnug—son of Agrippa—the first courtier of Farsman...” (KUZETZOV 1992: 176). According to Abaev, an expert on North Iranian dialects, the names of Farsman, Zevakh, and Khsefarnug have Iranian (Alano-Ossetian) etymologies. “Zevakh” means “lazy”, “Khsefarnug”— “one who has abundance” (“Abundant”, “Beneficial”). “Asparuk, a name found in another grave near Mtskheta, also has an Alano-Ossetian origin” (APAKIDZE et al. 1958). In the sixth century this was the name of a Bulgarian khan. In Alano-Ossetian “aspa” means “horse”, and “rukhs” means “light”; thus the entire name can be interpreted as “a man on the light horse” or perhaps simply “Shining Horse” (KUZNETSOV 1992: 176).

The Georgian historian, Georgii Melikishvili, concluded from a detailed reading of Georgian chronicles that “marriages between members of the Georgian royal dynasty and the highest aristocracy of Kartli [i.e. Georgia] on one hand, and representatives of the military elite of the Alano-Sarmatian confederations on the other, had occurred constantly.” Numerous Sarmato-Alanic names among representatives of the Georgian feudal elite back up this conclusion, a logical result of intensive contacts between medieval Georgia and the North-Iranian world of the Sarmato-Alans. In the Georgian historical sources we can find names of

Georgian feudal lords that have clear Sarmato-Alanic origin such as Saurmag, Kartam, Yodmangan, Sharagas, Karpan, and others (MELIKISHVILI 1959: 355–6).<sup>3</sup>

Our own study of medieval Georgian sources also shows that in the second-third centuries AD Georgian tsars were hiring Alan warriors in large numbers. At this time Georgian chronicles begin calling the Alans “Ovsi” or “Osi,” giving rise to the modern name of the Ossetians. This is simply the Georgian transliteration of the old Alanic self-appellation “As” (VOLKOVA 1973: 106–7). Henceforth the Alans would appear as elite military contingents in Georgian armies. Georgian monarchs as well as Roman Emperors and other rulers were greatly impressed by the skills and qualities of Alan fighters, especially their heavily armored cavalry. Georgian rulers, in particular, witnessed these warriors in action during massive Alan incursions into Transcaucasia in AD 72 and 135. Vladimir Kuznetsov even spoke of the emergence of a “military-political union between ancient Iberia and her neighbors—the Alans from the North Caucasus” (1992:177).

In addition to this, we can point to an interesting passage from the eleventh century Georgian source “The Deeds of Vahtang Gorgasal” compiled by Djuansher Djuansheriani. After a long period of Persian domination, Vahtang Gorgasal king of Kartli (d. 502) began an arduous struggle for the liberation of Kartli (Eastern Georgia). This struggle required an army with a completely new structure: a professional military force, well-disciplined, loyal directly to the king, in effect, his personal guard since he could not rely on the detachments of capricious and treacherous feudal lords called *tavads*. The professional Alan cavalry, consisting of warriors free from any vassalage to the Georgian feudal lords and whose fame as hard fighters was already widely known were perfect candidates for the backbone of Vahtang's personal guard. Djuansher testifies that after his initial victories “King Vahtang generously rewarded his people and granted noble rank to many experienced horsemen, who valorously fought among the Ovses (*omas shina ovstasa*)” (1980: 67). These Alan knights would become an indispensable and highly privileged part of the Georgian military elite. We can even see this as the origin of an Alanic nobility within the Georgian elite. This tradition of recruiting Alan horsemen into the Georgian nobility extended throughout the medieval era.

This picture agrees with Vladimir Kuznetsov who carefully collected the archaeological evidence and concluded that if before the sixth-century there were

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<sup>3</sup> See also TEKHOV 1980.



only scattered cases of military cooperation, starting in the sixth century archaeological material reveals frequent settlements of Alanic “confederates” in Eastern Georgia (1992: 181).

In the mid-seventh century a long period of warfare began between Arabs and Khazars over control of Transcaucasia, now an “apple of quarrels”. The Muslim Arabs dominated Georgia from 652 on. The Alans consistently allied with the Khazars so that the relentless struggle between Khazars and Caliphate temporarily interrupted close ties between Ovisi (Alans) and Kartli (Georgia) (ARTAMONOV 1962: 466). This sometimes led to direct confrontations between Alans and local Georgian rulers under Arab domination in which Alans who were captured even became slaves of Georgian rulers. According to the Georgian chronicle of Vakhushti the Georgian King Kvirike (ruler of East Georgia 1010-1039)<sup>4</sup>, was killed while hunting “by a slave, an Ovs, because Kvirike had killed the king of the Ovisi named Urdure” (VAKHUSHTI 1976: 48). This deed reflects the absolute loyalty of Alans to their suzerain and blood revenge as an indispensable part of their traditional code of honor, and of the Ossetian *adats* (laws of the mountains) of modern times (ISAENKO and JESSEE 2013: 107–133).

Close Alan-Georgian ties, however, were renewed in the tenth–eleventh centuries when Alania again became completely independent from the Khazars and reached the zenith of its military and political power. Alania again became a desirable ally for feudal Georgia which itself was entering a period of strong statehood and centralization. Thus, Georgian primary sources testify to a rapprochement between the Alanic and Georgian elites resulting in dynastic marriages and alliances.

The Georgian King Georgii I (1014-1027) set an early example: his second marriage was to the daughter of the Alan (“Ovisi”) king—Princess Al’da. After the death of her husband Al’da in 1033 gave an important fortress, Anakopia in Abkhazia, to the Byzantines. Alans had been Byzantine allies for centuries and had been converted to Orthodox Christianity from Byzantine Empire and Georgia.<sup>5</sup> Georgii's son from his first marriage, Bagrat IV (1027–1072), also married an Alanic Princess, Borena—“daughter of the king of the Alans (Ovisi), sister of Dorgoleli” (VAKHUSHTI 1976: 47). Kuznetsov concluded that Borena and “Dorgoleli” (Alanic—Durgulel’) were the children of the above mentioned Alanic king Urdur (Georgian “Urdure”) and surmised that this marriage reflected the desire of Bagrat IV to end the blood feud among the Alans for the murder of Urdur by the Georgian king Kvirike (1992: 186). The Georgian certainly acted wisely and got not only a highly educated, beautiful Alanic princess, who as a

<sup>4</sup> Vakhushti ruled in Eastern Georgia, producing the chronicle *Kartli Tskhovreba*.

<sup>5</sup> For diplomatic and matrimonial ties between the Comneni Byzantines and the Alans, see also (MALAKHOV 1995: 378–89).

poet would greatly influence Georgian poetry, but received a strong ally in the person of his son-in-law, the powerful Alan king Durgulel'.

The choice soon proved invaluable. Bagrat IV had long carried on a difficult fight with the Muslim Emir Padlon of Arran (modern Azerbaijan) (VAKHUSHTI 1976: 47). In 1062 and 1065 the Alans led by Durgulel' invaded Arran, both times shattering Padlon's forces and plundering Arran. It is said that Durgulel' commanded 40,000 well armored Alans. In fact, Durgulel' enjoyed the full support of the Byzantines because, while he was a relative and ally of Bagrat IV, he was also related to the Byzantine Emperor (KUZNETSOV 1992: 186). According to *Matiane Kartlisa*, after these victories Durgulel', accompanied by richly clad officers with lavish gifts, came via Abkhazia to Kutais in Georgia where he met his sister Queen Borena and her son *kuropalat* (crown prince) Georgii. Then the Alanic delegation proceeded to Kartli where Bagrat IV met it "with great honors" in Nadarbazevi' (near Gori) and "gave a knightly feast" that continued for twelve days (KUSNETSOV 1986: 58).

Military and political cooperation between Georgia and Alania continued throughout the eleventh-thirteenth centuries. The constant menace of Muslim forces on its east and west encouraged the Georgian state further in strengthening ties with their powerful co-religionists in the North by maintaining detachments of Alan mercenaries in their armies. Georgian diplomacy and the Georgian Orthodox Church made great efforts to deepen religious ties with Alania by encouraging the further conversions of pagan mountaineers of the North Caucasus to Christianity. They also continued to practice matrimonial alliances with the Alans. Georgii III (1156–1184) married Burduhan, daughter of the Alan ("Ovsi") king Huddan and future mother of Queen Tamara. The Georgian chronicle *Kartlis Tskhovreba* relates that "Burduhan out shadowed all ladies by her kindness, wisdom, wit, and beauty; never before did Georgia have such an exceptional bride. . . and only such a woman could give birth to such a Queen like Tamara," (DJANASHVILI 1897: 38). Burduhan's aunt, a widow of the Alan Prince Djadaron, also lived in the court of Georgii III together with Alan crown prince Soslan, whose Christian name was David-Soslan. Queen Tamara, herself half-Alanic, married David-Soslan in 1189 after her first marriage with a Russian prince ended (GAGLOITY 1969: 120–7). With the help of its Alan allies and relatives, Georgia had managed to overcome its fragmentation and feuds in the eleventh and twelfth centuries during the reigns of two able rulers, King David and Queen Tamara. Bagrat V (1027–1072) was the first to unite the western and eastern parts of Georgia, and David IV the Builder (1089–1125) led Georgia to a sort of golden age by driving, with Alan assistance, the Seljuk Turks from the country and expanding Georgian cultural and political influence in the Caucasus. This period saw a real renaissance; great cathedrals were built by Georgia in Alania



too and romantic poetry and literature reached its peak in masterpieces such as Shota Rustaveli's *The Knight in Panther's Skin* (SUNY 1988: 31–7).

Queen Tamara and her crowned consort David-Soslan were able to continue the consolidation policy of Tamara's great predecessors by which the Georgian monarchy dominated the Caucasus until its collapse under Mongol assaults two decades after Tamara's death in 1213. The result of the Mongolian devastation was the disappearance of a united Georgia. Her northern allies the Alans suffered an even greater disaster at Mongol hands. Alania's ultimate crushing came in 1395–1396 and in 1400 when the hordes of the great Central Asian conqueror Timur (d. 1405) sacked the last Alan settlements in the territory of modern Kabardino-Balkaria and penetrated deep into Caucasian Alania. Plundering and an unprecedented massacre of the Alan population resulted in the loss of a state system, cities, and even a written language. From more than two million inhabitants in the thirteenth century by the fifteenth century Alania was reduced to 200,000 (ISAENKO 2014: 28–9). Contacts between their descendants and their Georgian kinsmen were renewed only in the eighteenth century.

This brief sketch indicates that the Alans and Georgians had close ties on almost every level, including royal intermarriage and military cooperation that led to the implantation of Alan cavalymen as Georgian nobles. This is reflected in the highly symbolic and spiritually meaningful realm of the Alans' totemic animal, the wolf. The Georgian historian Djuansher tells us how the great King Vahtang got his nickname of “Gorgasal” (“wolf's head”). During heavy combat with the Persians “Vahtang wore a golden helmet with the image of a wolf on the front, and that of a lion on the back.” When he turned to attack the Persians exclaimed: “Dur a Gorgasal!”, which means: “Beware the Wolf's Head!” (DJUANSHER 1980: 81). Abaev reconstructed his first name Vahtang as “Warhtanag” from the Aryan “Varka-tana” meaning “one with a wolf's body” (1949: 87).

The wolf was an important totemic animal among the ancestors of the Ossetians; first the Scythians, then the Sarmatians and finally the Alans. Ossetian epic tales have survived concerning great heroes, the Narts, some of whom are called “Warhtanag”—“having a wolf's body”. The ancestor of the Narts was Warhag, a name associated with the wolf (ABAEV 1949: 87, 187).

Soslan, one of the most popular heroes among the Narts, became invincible after he had been forged in wolf's milk, and in some versions of this saga she-wolves for this purpose were led by “the original mother of the dogs” Silam (MILLER 1887: I: 147, III: 118–20). In this connection one notes that according to Strabo Scythians who lived to the east of Caspian Sea carried the name *baoi*, i.e. “wolves” (KRETSCHMER 1896: 214f). To this we can add that the Assyrian chronicles of Asarhaddon for the year 679 BC mention the defeat of the Scythian troops led by the Scythian Gorgasal. This was a title nick-name of the Scythian



King Partatua which means “Dog—the leader of the wolves” (ISAENKO 1993: 48–9). The Scythians and Sarmatians sometimes had real wolves’ heads attached to their saddles to terrorize the enemy.

In light of all this it is likely that the Georgian King Vahtang recruited and led into the battle against the Persians an elite detachment of Alans, exploiting their ancient image of themselves as werewolves: warriors who must be led into the battle by the “wolf’s head,” the “one who has a wolf’s body.” To this we can also add that the Georgian crown prince of the eighteenth century, Vahushti Bagrationi compiled a coat of arms from medieval Ossetia with images of a wolf and of a snow leopard. Both are among the most ancient totems of elite clans of the North Iranians, the Scythians, Sarmatians and Alans (BLIEV and BZAROV 2005: ch.1).

This linguistic etymology of wolves and werewolves points to a deeper, more personal and spiritual connection between the medieval Georgians and the Alans. The two peoples clearly cooperated closely and productively in the past. Whatever hostility they evince towards each other in the twenty-first century is the result of modern politics.

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