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Napoli 22-26 November 2022



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Bruno Genito and Lucia Cerullo

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Synopsis Historiarum, Kalavryai Battle, 9th-10th cent. CE

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The Alans and the Dissolution of the Iranian Element in Europe

Paolo Ognibene
Università “Alma Mater” Bologna

Abstract

Classical sources through onomastics and hydronyms attest to the presence in the territory north of the Black Sea of nomadic Iranian populations. The Alans represent the last Iranian people to have inhabited this region for a very long time. Part of this population moved to the Roman Empire where the assimilation process was unusually rapid. They effectively represent the last European Iranian population and their history coincides with the dissolution of the Iranian element in Europe.

Keywords

Alans, Ossetians, Iranian Peoples, Ancient and Medieval Europe

If we consider Europe within what are traditionally defined as its eastern and south-eastern boundaries, namely the Ural Mountains and the Caucasus Mountain range, it is easy to observe that from a linguistic perspective, the Iranian languages currently play an insignificant role. In fact, in today's Europe, only one Iranian language, Ossetic, is spoken in a region of the central Caucasus, with its two varieties: Iron and Digoron (Isaev 1966, 237-256; Thordarson 1989, 456-479; Thordarson 2009). Iron and Digoron are as closely related to each other as Latvian and Lithuanian are. Just as in the

Baltic region, where Lithuanian shows more conservative and archaic traits compared to Latvian, in Ossetia, between Digoron and Iron, the same phenomenon can be observed.

However, while in Europe the Iranian linguistic and ethnic element is almost non-existent today, the situation was profoundly different in the past. It can be said that Ossetic is the last remaining testimony of populations speaking Iranian languages in Europe. This, of course, makes it even more interesting to study, especially when considering that it is surrounded by languages from very different linguistic groups that have deeply influenced it, even affecting its phonological and morphological levels.

If we go back two and a half millennia, the populations living in the region around the Black Sea largely do not coincide with the current ones. There were no Slavs on its northern and western coasts, no Romanians to the west, and no Turks on the southern coast. Only the eastern side shows more stability with the populations speaking languages of the Caucasian group, although they did not always occupy exactly the same spaces as today.

North of the Black Sea, there were populations that had a common trait that would persist for a long time: they were nomadic populations. They did not build cities, and they did not have a writing system. When we set out to study them, we face very different challenges compared to those studying the ancient Near East or ancient Iran. We do not have cities to excavate, and we do not have texts or inscriptions to read. Archaeology can only help us through the study of tombs, the famous *kurgany* that are abundant throughout the region. To study these populations, we often rely on the accounts of peoples who already wrote and described them. Thus, we always rely on external sources. These sources are often quite accurate, but they leave some relevant aspects untouched, such as the language spoken by the nomads.

The Greeks were the first to describe the region. The Greeks liked to move towards the West, Esperia, the land where the sun sets, and towards Anatolia, the land where the sun rises. They

quickly ventured into the Black Sea as well. Their interest in this region is evident from the expedition of Jason and the Argonauts, who set off for Colchis (A.R.), and Aeschylus even chained Prometheus to the Caucasus (A. *Pr.*). In the Meotian marshes, Herodotus placed the Amazons (Her. IV, 110) to preserve a myth dear to the Greeks at a time when their knowledge of Anatolia was so good that it ruled out the possibility of Amazons living there, as Homer attested in the *Iliad* through the words of Priam (*Il.* III, 184-190).

The Greeks began to build colonies on the northern coast, probably in places where points of exchange for goods and trade routes already existed (Jurgevič 1872, 7). It was in these places that they came into contact with the nomads of the region. They gave them a collective name, the Scythians (Σκύθαι), which corresponds perfectly to the term *Sakā* that the Achaemenids used to define all the nomadic populations living north of their borders, including the Scythians of the Black Sea (Kent 1953, 209; Ognibene 2012, 417-429).

The Greeks had many misconceptions about the Scythian world. Initially, they thought that the Scythians were a gentle people, in tune with nature, and without slaves (Ognibene 2018, 11-19). In a way, they idealized these nomads and laid the foundations for the idea of the extreme freedom of nomadic populations, an idea that has partly persisted to this day (Khazanov 1981, 141-153). It is one of the most enduring myths of nomadism and has also been preserved when it became clear that the degree of freedom of nomads compared to sedentary people mainly implies the absence of the bureaucratic apparatus that the latter progressively developed from antiquity onwards to regulate more or less every sedentary society.

For the Greeks, these nomads lived in desolate spaces, and the characteristic of the region was precisely its low population density¹.

¹ A. *Prom.*: 'Χθονὸς μὲν ἐς τηλουργὸν ἤκομεν πέδον, Σκύθην ἐς οἶμον, ἄβροτον εἰς ἐρημίαν'; Cf. anche Ar. *Ach.* 704: '... τῇ Σκυθῶν ἐρημίᾳ'; Hp. *Aer.* 18.5-7: 'ἡ δὲ

This idea, found in Aeschylus and Hesiod, persisted and was transmitted by contemporary literature as well, for example, in the novel *Die letzte Welt* by the Austrian writer Ransmayr (Ransmayr 1987).

Herodotus was the first Greek writer to attempt to systematize the region and define what was truly Scythian and what was not. Herodotus is the first ancient historian to describe in fairly detailed terms the customs and practices of a nomadic society. However, he could not completely rid himself of some of the ideas that the Greek world had already formed about the Scythians. In fact, in the speech of the Scythians to the Ionians left by Darius to defend the bridge over the Danube, Herodotus made the Scythians say, «O Ionians, we have come to bring you freedom if you will only listen to us»². However, Herodotus is far from naive; he knows well that Scythian society is not egalitarian, that there are slaves, and that the nomads are not peaceful, even though they drink mare's milk (Biondi 2020). The Greek judgment on the Scythians assigns them a considerably higher degree of freedom than that of the Persians, who were considered by the Greeks all servants of the Great King.

Herodotus is well aware that the region north of the Black Sea is ethnically complex, with numerous populations inhabiting it, some of which simply have Scythian customs but are not properly Scythians. He directly testifies to this through a passage in which he says that to reach the territory of the bald men one needs interpreters who know seven languages³. Nevertheless, Herodotus outlines what will be called the Scythian Quadrilateral, which will remain a model for determining the ethnic composition north of

Σκυθέων ἐρημὴ καλυμμένη πεδιάς ἐστι καὶ λειμακώδης καὶ ψιλὴ καὶ ἔνυδρος μετρίῳ'.

² Her. IV,133: 'ἄνδρες Ἴωνες, ἐλευθερίην ἤκομεν ὑμῖν φέροντες, ἣν πέρ γε ἐθέλητε ἐσακούειν'.

³ Her. IV,24: 'Σκυθέων δὲ οἱ ἂν ἔλθωσι ἐς αὐτούς, δι' ἐπτὰ ἐρμηνέων καὶ δι' ἐπτὰ γλωσσέων διαπρήσσονται'.

the Pontus Euxine. However, the Greek writer remains extremely vague about the language spoken by the Scythians, and in doing so, he is in perfect line with the entire ancient world, which even in moments of close contact between peoples did not pay much attention to the similarity or dissimilarity of languages. We cannot blame Herodotus for this, considering that even in the following millennium, attention to linguistic factors would be decidedly lacking, and historical linguistics would only emerge towards the end of the 18th century.

The problem of language and later the idea that the label “Scythian”, as well as ‘Sarmatian’ or ‘Alanian’, was not properly ethnic but had a ‘geographic’ value, led in the 19th century to the birth of the Scythian question. Two views of the Scythian world were opposed: one leaned towards the Iranian nature of the Scythians, the other towards their belonging to the Altaic world. The supporters of the Altaic hypothesis primarily relied on certain physical characteristics of the population reported by classical authors and on their way of life (Vasmer 1971, 123-124; Ognibene 2019a). The supporters of the Iranian hypothesis, on the other hand, relied mainly on Scythian personal names found in inscriptions of Greek cities on the northern coast of the Black Sea and in ancient sources (Vasmer 1971, 123; Ognibene 2019a). Both sides encountered difficulties: the former showed little objectivity and relied on elements of dubious interpretation, while the latter faced the fact that about a quarter of the barbarian names in Greek inscriptions and those reported by classical authors could not be interpreted through the Iranian languages (Ognibene 2023, 29-36; Ognibene 2019b, 587-601).

Today, the prevailing idea is that the Scythians and the peoples who succeeded them in the region until the beginning of our era were Iranian. But this does not imply linguistic homogeneity in the region. This can be explained through a phenomenon well known to those interested in nomadic peoples. Nomads do not understand the concept of ethnic cleansing; instead, they absorb

pre-existing populations in the places they arrive. This is clearly attested for the Alans by Ammianus Marcellinus, who in Book 31 of his *Histories* clearly states that ‘the Alans extend their name to all conquered populations’⁴. This phenomenon is also found in the 13th century among the Mongols: conquered populations are assimilated, and men from the subjugated populations are recruited into the Mongol army. This explains the dual name of the Mongols (Mongols / Tartars) in Europe: the front lines of the Mongol army were indeed composed of Tartar soldiers. In the region north of the Black Sea, at least since the 1st mill. BCE, we have Iranian military elites that overlaid pre-existing populations of uncertain ethnicity. We do not know whether the Scythians had always been there or whether, in accordance with the third hypothesis mentioned by Herodotus about their origin, they arrived from the east, driven by the Massageties (Her. IV, 11). We do not have enough evidence to assess this. It is certain that this region, if we follow Marija Gimbutas’ hypothesis, could be the cradle from which the Indo-European populations moved in antiquity: horseback warriors who would have moved on one side towards Europe and on the other towards Iran and India (Gimbutas 1993, 205-222). This hypothesis is in stark contrast to that of Renfrew, which sees the farmers moving from Anatolia to Europe as the basis for the Indo-European peoples (Renfrew 1987). Perhaps genetics will tell us which of these two hypotheses, both with strong points, may be the right one.

For us, it is enough to note that north of the Black Sea, at least since the first millennium BCE, Iranian populations were present, and these populations remained in the region until the end of the 1st millennium CE. So, it remains to be asked how the Iranian

⁴ Amm. Marc. XXXI, 2: ‘Hi biperti per utramque mundi plagam Halani, quorum gentes varias nunc recensere non refert, licet dirempti spatiis longis, per pagos ut Nomades vagantur immensos, aevi tamen progressu, ad unum concessere vocabulum, et summatim omnes Halani cognominantur, ob mores et modum efferatum vivendi, eandemque armaturam’.

element completely disappeared in the subsequent centuries. Populations, of course, move over time, often redrawing the ethnic and political map of continents. If we look at the current situation in Central Asia, we notice a strong prevalence of the Turkic linguistic element. Still, we know well that this is not an ancient phenomenon: it is the result of a slow movement that brought Turkic peoples westward and culminated in the current distribution that reaches south-eastern Europe and areas of the northern Caucasus. The last representatives of Iranian populations in Europe are the Alans. Can they be partly held responsible for the dissolution of the Iranian element, or are external factors solely responsible? If we accept the idea that north of the Black Sea, on a vague foundation, successive Scythian, Sarmatian, and Alanian layers were sedimenting, by the beginning of our era, there was a prevalence of the Iranian element in the region.

However, the same principle that leads to superimposition without elimination, which was a strength in the spread of Iranian languages in the Pontic region, works against the Iranians from the beginning of our era when peoples from the east of different ethnicities and languages arrived north of the Black Sea. The Huns passed through the region in the 4th century, dragging a large number of Alans with them towards the Roman Empire⁵. Subsequently, various Turkic populations, well-documented in Russian chronicles, arrived, such as the Torks, Pechenegs, and Cumans. The Turkic element overlaid the Iranian one without erasing it. According to Russian chronicles, in the 10th century,

⁵ Amm. Marc. XXXI, 3: 'Igitur Huni pervasis Halanorum regionibus, quos Greuthungis confines Tanaitas consuetudo cognominavit, interfectisque multis et spoliatis, reliquos sibi concordandi fide pacta iunxerunt, eisque adhibitis confidentius Ermenrichi late patentes et uberes pagos repentino impetus perruperunt, bellicosissimi regis, et per multa variaque fortiter facta, vicinis nationibus formidati'.

Alans and Cumans lived peacefully in a Cuman village⁶. The next movement was made by Slavic populations pushing south and numerically overwhelming the previous layers, which gradually adopted Slavic languages. The same phenomenon occurred with the political-military élite of the Bulgars (of Turkic origin), who were quickly overwhelmed by the vast majority of the Slavic-speaking population⁷, and perhaps, although the issue is more complex, with the Scandinavian elite in Russia, which rapidly became Slavic⁸. If this is the principle, the Alans cannot be held “responsible” for the disappearance of the Iranian element in Europe. However, another aspect should be considered: Alans, dragged by the Huns to the west, settled in numerous territories of the Roman Empire and later established an Alanian-Vandal kingdom in North Africa (Ognibene 2011, 97-110; Ognibene 2015a, 51-58; Gaggero 1996, 1637-1642). If we look at the presence of Alanian words in Western European languages today, we can easily see that it is almost non-existent⁹. One possible explanation could be found in a sentence by Claudian: *in latios ritus transistis Halani* (Claud. *Carm.* 8, 487), which means the Alans seem to have been very prone to assimilation. It would not simply be a matter of linguistic dominance by a majority element that gradually erases the original one, but also a propensity for assimilation and

⁶ PSRL t. 1 1846, 128: ‘В лѣто 6624 Ярополкъ Владимировичъ... ходи на Половѣцкую землю, к рѣчѣ зовомъй Донѣ, и ту вся полонѣ многѣ, и 3 города вся Половечскимъ Галинѣ, Чешюевѣ и Сугровѣ, и приведе с собою Ясы, и жену полони ясыню»; PSRL t. 2 1843, 7-8: «Въ се же лѣто посла Володимеръ сына своего Ярополка, и Давыдъ сына своего Всеволода на Донѣ, и всяша три грады Сугровѣ, Шаруканѣ, Балинѣ. Тогда же Ярополкъ приведе собѣ жену, красну вельми, Ясыскаго князя дщерь, полонивъ’.

⁷ The Bulgars were a Turkic-speaking population, cf. Bulgars and Balkars, the latter being Turkic-speaking and settled in the northern Caucasus.

⁸ Consider the names of the signatories of the first and second agreements with Byzantium in the *Povest' vremennykh let*.

⁹ One of the rare examples is the Hungarian word for ‘bridge’, which is ‘híd’ (MOSz 1987, 303), cf. Ossetic ‘xīd | xed’ [хид | хед] meaning ‘мост’ (bridge) (Abaev 1989, 199).

the loss of their language. Indirectly, there is another element that seems to confirm this: if linguistically, the Alans who arrived in the West quickly abandoned their language, they seem to have been very conservative regarding their legends. The numerous connections between the Arthurian cycle and the Nart epic (the sword of Batradz and Arthur, the Grail and the Nartamongæ, perhaps even the name of Lancelot) seem to demonstrate this (Littleton, Thomas 1978, 512-527; Littleton 1979, 326-333; Littleton, Malcor 2000; Ognibene 2015b, 9-19). We have, therefore, a population, the last to represent the Iranian stratum in Europe, that abandons its language when moving to the West but manages to preserve it when isolated in the mountains of the central Caucasus after the Mongol conquest of the region.

It seems that several factors contributed to the de-Iranization of the region north of the Black Sea: numerical factors combined with temporal factors on the one hand and a propensity of the Alans to assimilate on the other. Only in an isolated space in the central Caucasus did they manage to preserve their language, which was strongly influenced at all levels by the surrounding languages, making Ossetic vocabulary one of the most complex, layered, and interesting in Europe.



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