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Prometheus among the Circassians

A modern oral tale from a little known people of the Caucasus shows striking parallels with myths from Ancient Greece, Ancient India and the pagan Germanic world.

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In the southwest of the Soviet Union, bordering upon Turkey and Iran, lies one of the most ethnographically complex areas in all Eurasia, the Caucasus. The Caucasus mountains, which dominate this area nearly the size of Spain, are home to a bewildering variety of ethnic groups, some of which seem to be survivors from earlier eras. These groups speak roughly fifty languages, the majority of which are unrelated to any other languages on earth, and show complex and exotic features that set them apart from the other languages of Eurasia. In this one area there are three distinct language families: the Southern or Kartvelian, the Northeastern or Daghestanian, and the Northwestern. The Northwestern languages are perhaps the most complex of any in the region and are spoken by the Abkhazians, the Abazas, the Ubykhs, the Kabardians and the Adygheans. The last two peoples are often grouped together as Circassians.

The Circassians originated in the northwestern quarter of the Caucasus, bounded on the north by the Kuban river. They practiced a mixed economy. Those in the higher vallies and montane forests practiced small scale agriculture and hunting, and often preserved old Christian or pagan customs. Those in the foothills and plains practiced horse-breeding, farming and trade, and usually espoused Sunni Islam, though in their towns Christian and Jewish Circassians could be found. The Circassians were famed throughout the Middle East for the beauty of their women and the courage of their men. Physically most Circassians are European in appearance with perhaps a slight oriental cast to their features. Many Circassians are blond and blue-eyed, while others show a common feature of the Caucasus: very light skin coupled with black or extremely dark hair. A lithe and erect physique were favored, both for the men and the woman, and many villages even today have large numbers of healthy elderly people, many over a hundred years of age.

Their culture was and still is strongly dominated by a warrior ethic. The battle garb of the men, the Cherkesska, is a fitted caftan-like coat with cartridges sewn across the chest, a sheepskin hat and soft-soled knee-high boots of fine leather. It has been borrowed by many neighboring peoples, most notably the slavic Cossacks, so that this costume is often thought of as being Russian. Until recently the eight tribes into which they were divided showed varying degrees of a caste system similar to that surviving in modern India. There were priest-kings, nobles who formed the warriors, freemen who carried on trade, large scale farming and manufacture, and lastly peasants, former prisoners of war who were either small farmers or who acted as retainers to the princes and nobles. In 1864, five years after their defeat at the hands of the Tsarist armies, most of the freemen and peasants emigrated and settled in the Ottoman Empire. Thus today the majority of the world's one million or so Circassians now live scattered throughout the Middle East and in cities in Europe and the U. S. A.

During the Soviet period a body of written literature and poetry has emerged in two Circassian languages, Kabardian and the Chemgwi dialect of Adyghean. Nevertheless, all the tribes have maintained lively and vigorous oral traditions, both within and without the Soviet Union. The most

archaic oral tradition seems to be that of the "Nart Sagas." These are a large corpus of oral tales involving the Narts, a race of heroes. While traditionally termed sagas, they are actually short myths or tales. The Nart Sagas are spread across the northern Caucasus among the Circassians and their kin as well as among other peoples. The Circassians, however, seem to have preserved one of the most elaborate corpora of this tradition. Over a forty year period the Soviet Circassian scholar Asker Hadaghat'la has collected more than two-thousand pages of these sagas as told by bards in the native dialects. These tales are of great interest, not only for their drama and stark tone, but also for the numerous remarkable parallels that they exhibit with other traditions within Eurasia.

The following saga is taken from Hadaghat'la's collection. Despite the exotic source of this tale the reader will undoubtedly find many familiar elements. This unique combination of the familiar and the alien makes this body of oral literature a compelling and remarkable experience for the Western reader.

How Pataraz Rescued Bearded Nasren Who was Chained to the High Mountain

Nart Nasren was a man worthy of praise. He had a keen mind and a kindly heart. Whenever the Nart people were in need he was always ready to help.

But there was another man who lived in these lands who was a misery to mankind. Paqua claimed to be the true god and was always struggling against God. He was always in a fury and would say, "I am god!"

Years had passed and Paqua paid little heed to the needs of the Narts. In hate and in bad temper he continually brought disaster upon them. In the Nart realm Paqua was considered very dangerous: he could bend oaks as though they were supple twigs. He destroyed the houses of the Narts. He made waves as high as the sky. He made the millet and barely rot in the fields. He split the ground and brought drought to the land of the Narts.

"What are you doing?" cried the Narts. "Why do you do us such harm? Why have you brought such misery into our beloved land?"

When Paqua heard the Narts complaining he grew furious and unleashed a bitter cold wind, which swept away their ashes and coals, destroying their ovens and leaving them without fire.

In desperation the Narts sought out Nasren and said " Nasren, our blessed leader, we have neither fire nor light and death awaits us. What should we do?"

"Do not worry!," said long-bearded Nasren, "I shall take fire back from that Paqua."

Nasren saddled his horse, making sure the girths were tight, and journeyed far until he reached the mountain, Exalted Peak.

Nasren was fearless and without hesitation sought a way to ascend the mighty summit. Suddenly a voice, resounding from the summit like thunder, seemed to split the sky in two.

The voice was Paqua. "You, little man!" he cried. "What have you come here to do? If you do not go back, you shall perish at my hands."

Nasren held his ground and replied, "You stand in God's place and they say you are benevolent, but how can that be when you have taken away our fire and left us to suffer bitter cold? We will surely perish."

"If you intend to go back to your people, then go now and stop giving me a headache! Otherwise," said Paqua, "I shall not spare that empty, dull-witted head of yours. You Narts don't know what a god is like! You have forgotten me. When you brought in an abundant harvest and were sitting around your tables I was not among you. You did not offer any of that bountiful harvest to God. When you returned from your battles laden with booty you all thought yourselves to be mighty heroes, but no one shared his gain with me. And now you are looking for a means of ascending this mountain. You oppose god, but today you have come against one whom you will not vanquish. I shall bind you to the highest peak, and hold you prisoner until you die."

Paqua bound Nasren's body in chains, and then staked him to the summit of the Exalted Peak.

Paqua had an enormous eagle, which was greedy for human flesh. This ravening beast's wingspan was so great that it could not fly down into the valleys, and its outstretched wings blocked the sun so that the earth became enshrouded in darkness. In his rage the wicked Paqua set loose this eagle, which flew onto the chest of the mighty Nart. Its powerful beak tore open his chest with razor sharpness. The eagle pecked at his lungs and drank his heart's blood.

There are many seas and rivers flowing over this world, but there was not a drop of water for Nasren. There are many loudly resounding freshets cascading down these mountain valleys, but Nasren was wrapped in chains and could only thrash from side to side. Unable to get even a glassful of water he was dying of thirst. He was covered in the ice of the high mountains and his arms and legs were squeezed in the vice-like grip of the chains. Nasren would roar and moan, his cries being carried by the winds down from the Summit of the Exalted Peak to the Narts where his suffering distressed them greatly.

The Narts held council to discuss how they could bring Nasren safely home again. They thought back to past times, trying to remember who had performed heroic and valorous feats. Their bravest men, Yimis, Arish, and Sawseruquo, were summoned before the council, but they were now old and were afraid of the mighty and dangerous Paqua. "What could we possibly do?" they asked. "It is not possible to overcome him."

So the Narts set a new plan "To whomever brings Nasren back we shall give in marriage his daughter and much treasure."

A long time passed and no one volunteered to go on that dangerous path. No one stepped forth and said "I shall go."

Finally the Narts decided to set off together. When they reached the Exalted Peak they saw the suffering Nasren nailed to the summit that was sparkling with ice. But the mountain was fortified, affording no access to Nasren.

When Paqua saw the Narts, he unleashed his guardian eagles. They swooped down from the peak, their wings making a great noise, and darted overhead like dancing flames. The wings of the wicked

birds covered the sky as they flew, blocking the light of day and bringing on a gloom as dark as midnight.

In this great battle many Narts died and many others lost their horses. The survivors retreated with their heads hanging in despair. "What should we do?" said the Narts. "Our leader is dying in chains. How will we find shelter? We cannot bring back our fire, nor can we bring back Nasren. What will we do? What plan should we devise? How can we go on living?"

But brave Pataraz stepped forward and said, "I shall go. I shall bring back your fire and your joy once more. I shall find our leader Nasren as well and if I find him alive, I shall bring him back. I swear this in the name of the blue sky that stands over us."

Pataraz placed the golden saddle on his horse, Little Black, and in full armor set off for battle, as he had done many times before.

Pataraz stopped in the foothills of the Exalted Peak. He was not afraid and taunted Paqua, "Hey, you who bear god's name, who disgraces the name of god! Why do you always hide in the valley, trembling? It isn't a pretty sight to see you cowering so. Come out if you want to fight! You have taken away the fire and joy from the Narts. You have taken Nasren and imprisoned him in steel chains. I, Pataraz, have come from the Narts. If you are not afraid, do exactly as I say! Call your blood-thirsty eagle from the mountain and send it down here to me!"

The sky grew very dark. The eagle had arisen from the mountain and was bearing down upon Pataraz. Its mighty wings brought not only darkness, but also stirred up a great blizzard. Pataraz could feel his horse's legs begin to buckle in fear. "What's happening, Little Black? Are you afraid?" asked Pataraz. "You were always my true friend and companion. Don't abandon me now! Don't be a coward!"

Pataraz laid three lashes on Little Black's flank. With a snort the horse leapt into the sky and began to fight the monster eagle. The battle raged on to the mountain's icy top.

The battle was long and hard, but with great courage Pataraz shot an arrow through the eagle's wing. Suddenly, the sun shone upon the fields and the mountains, as though a window had been opened, and the whole world became light once again. With a second arrow Pataraz severed a wing and the mighty bird fell to the ground.

Pataraz ran his lance through the eagle's breast and carried the beast to the foot of the mountain. He drew out his shining sword, and cut off its head.

Paqua had heard the faltering death cry of his eagle and summoned the Evil Black Brigand. The Evil Black Brigand went down from the mountain to do battle with the Nart horseman. They fought mightily, but Pataraz beheaded him and with a moan the Evil Black Brigand fell to the ground.

The Soul Snatcher confronted him, but Pataraz was not afraid for the Old Nart Woman still lived and her powers would help protect him. In the third battle Pataraz sent the head of the Soul Snatcher flying. His deafening roar shook the mountains as he fell to the ground.

In his last test of courage Pataraz was confronted by the one who smashed all before him, the Destroyer. But again Pataraz was unafraid, and drew forth his sword and cut off the demon's head.

Pataraz, astride Little Black, galloped up the mountain side. Paqua flung all aside, fleeing from the path of Pataraz, and vanished.

On that day, when Pataraz wrought many great deeds, a raven flew over his head, casting a shadow upon him.

Pataraz rode up to the bound Nasren and with the head of his lance he broke the chains. He set him free and they returned to the land of the Narts together.

On that day the good fortune and happiness of the Narts returned, and there was great joy over all Nart land. In preparation for a great celebration they slaughtered sheep and invited the shepherds to partake thereof. Everyone from far and near came and drank sana together. To praise Pataraz the skilled Nart horsemen sang while they performed a round dance astride their horses. They greeted Pataraz in happiness and honor, wishing him a long life. Everyone was filled with joy as they ate, drank and played together. Some amused themselves by letting a great wheel, called "Jaman", roll down the Eternal Mountain and then rolling it back up again.

Pataraz's mother looked proudly upon her son and said to the Narts, "I reared my son for your sakes."

Pataraz was the best man among all the Narts and was honored with the first drinking horn of the magical brew, sana. With pleasure Pataraz drank the horn of sana and said,

"Now we shall have fire all our lives."

Significance

This tale has numerous, striking parallels with the Prometheus myth of Ancient Greece. Prometheus was a Titan, a race antedating that of the Hellenic Olympian gods, who sided with the Olympians in an epic battle against his own kinsmen. He created mankind. He stole fire from Zeus and gave it to his creation after Zeus had taken it away from mankind for their failure to make adequate sacrifices to him. As punishment, Zeus chained Prometheus to "Mount Caucasus" where by day an eagle would devour his liver and by night he would suffer frost and cold while his liver regenerated. Eventually Prometheus was freed by the hero Herakles (the Roman "Hercules").

The battle between Paqua and the Narts recalls the confrontation between the Titans and the rival Olympian pantheon. Paqua himself seems to be an old, discredited god at the head of a pantheon of demons. Paqua has taken fire from the Narts because they failed to honor him with sacrifices. Nasren is a mortal rather than a Titan or god, but his sufferings at the hands of Paqua offer a striking parallel with those of Prometheus at the hands of Zeus. Nasren, however, fails to bring back fire, this being accomplished by the herculean Pataraz. Nevertheless, Nasren is freed by Pataraz as Prometheus was freed by Herakles.

One can imagine Ancient Greek traders in their posts on the Black Sea coast adopting this tale from the native Circassians, but the parallels do not stop here. Paqua means 'docked or stub nosed' in Circassian. Herakles bore the epithet 'Nose-Docker', because, in a separate tale, he cut off the noses of two impudent heralds. In the Circassian 'paqua' means 'docked nose', perhaps originally an

epithet but now the name of the villain. One can also show that the Circassian forms would originally have been pronounced like 'puqua' in Adyghean and 'pugwa' in Kabardian. In vocatives (forms of address) these would have reduced to 'puk' and 'pug', respectively. These are exactly the forms of the English terms 'Puck', from Shakespeare, and 'pug', both connoting one with a snub nose. The terms are totally unexplained in English. They can now be seen to be ancient borrowings from the various Circassian languages into an early Germanic language, probably Gothic when the latter was spoken by the Germanic overlords of an empire in what is now the Ukraine between 250 and 450 A.D. From Gothic these terms must have made their way into the West Germanic dialects that gave rise to English.

Another Germanic parallel between Pataraz and the return of fire can be seen in Wodan or Odin and the stealing of the Mead of Inspiration from the mountain stronghold of a giant. In some Circassian tales Pataraz brings back wine instead of fire. Wodan performs this theft in the form of an eagle and one should note here the raven which flies over Pataraz. This borrowing may involve contacts with the same Goths, but it may also go back to a period when the ancestors of the Germanic peoples, the Indo-Europeans themselves, may have dwelt in the steppes north of the ancestors of the Circassians.

That these parallels are extremely old is suggested by yet another parallel between this tale and the oldest literature of India, the *Rig Veda*, which may be nearly four thousand years old in its original oral forms. In the *Rig Veda* Vrtra, 'The Strangler' (usually taken to be a demonic snake), has hoarded all the world's water in his mountaintop stronghold. The hero Indra initiates his battle with Vrtra by leaping up into the air while astride his horse, just as Pataraz does. Again in part of the battle the hero either turns into a bird, an eagle, or is aided by one. Here too the hero unleashes an element essential for man's survival and returns to great acclaim and rejoicing. Indra's mother says of him before the gathered people, "This is why I bore you." The mother of Pataraz says virtually the same thing under the same circumstances.

The Greek, Germanic and Indic parallels suggest a very ancient period of contact between the ancestors of the Circassians and the Indo-Europeans, a contact that may have gone back to 3,000 B.C. or earlier. This complex of tales is clearly centered about the Caucasus and perhaps may even be of Caucasian origin. Clearly, the notion of man or a champion of mankind liberating crucial elements, fire, water or wine, from the clutches of an evil or whimsical godhead is one that has played an important role in Eurasia since a remote epoch. The embodiment of evil, the forces that rank themselves over against mankind, are seen to inhabit high mountain zones, a zone which at an early era in technological development must have seemed the natural seat of destructive and hostile natural forces, perhaps the seat of evil itself. This tale, therefore, depicts an ancient view of the world as dichotomized into benevolent and hostile forces, much as in the later Zoroastrianism, with the benevolent ones living in man's midst and the hostile ones removed to dangerous, uninhabitable zones. It is the supreme role of the hero, whether Titan or mortal, to assert control and possession over the necessary benevolent powers.

What is remarkable is that this myth has survived as a living and elaborate tale among the Circassians down to the present day, more than two thousand years after it was codified by the peoples of Ancient Greece and India and one thousand years after it was written down by Norsemen, who had recently been converted to Christianity from their paganism. This is only one tale showing parallels with other mythic traditions of Eurasia. The Circassian Nart Sagas show many more. Further work on this invaluable oral treasure should shed light upon many aspects of Eurasian mythology and history.

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