

# Chapter 1

## 1. Introduction

1.1. Ossetic is the last offshoot of the North East Iranian (Scytho-Sarmatian) dialects which in antiquity were spoken all over the Ponto-Caspian steppes of South Russia and the North Caucasus. The language has gradually been ousted or superseded through migrations within the Caucasus and through invasions from the north, and is now spoken but in a small area in the Central Caucasus, where it is surrounded on all sides by genetically unrelated languages. In the greater part of its former territory Slavonic, Turkic and Northwest Caucasian languages now prevail.<sup>1</sup> At one time Ossetic (or its Alanic precursor) was brought to the Caucasus area, probably in various waves, by immigrants and conquerors from the north. It did not enter a linguistic vacuum, although unfortunately, we have no precise knowledge of the indigenous languages which it must have supplanted. But by and large, we can take it for granted that there existed linguistic contacts between Ossetic (Alanic) and some North (-west, -east) Caucasian languages ever since the arrival of the former in the area. The first Turkic-speaking tribes certainly entered the North Caucasus later than the linguistic forefathers of the Ossetes. In their turn Turkic languages have little replaced Ossetic over a great part of the territory where it was formerly spoken.

It is generally acknowledged that the Ossetes descended from the Alans, a Scytho-Sarmatian tribe or tribal confederacy, who at the beginning of our era had gained the hegemony in the Ponto-Caspian steppes. From the words of Josephus Flavius (1st cent. A.D.), who mentions them as living in that area about 35 A. D., we can probably conclude that they had been residing in the Kuban Valley for some time (Jos. Flav., *Bell. Jud.* VII,7,4).<sup>2</sup> The difference between their language and that of the cognate Sarmatian tribes farther to the west or north was hardly significant. The Alanic inscription found by the Zelenčuk River in the Northwest Caucasus in 1888 dates to all appearances from the 11th–12th century (Zgusta 1987: 19; cf. also Abaev 1949: 260 ff.). At that time an Alanic-speaking population inhabited the country to the south of the Kuban River, and we have no reason to believe that they were newcomers. The Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus (first half of the 10th century) places

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<sup>1</sup> A survey of the languages of the Caucasus area is given by Geiger, Halasi-Kun, Kuipers & Menges 1959. For details I refer to the relevant chapters in Comrie 1981 and in Klimov 1994.

<sup>2</sup> According to Procopius (*History of the Wars*, VIII,3,4; 6th cent.), the eastern borders of the Alans were the Caspian gates. The Caspian Gates have variously been identified with Darband and Darial, the two principal passes of the Caucasus. Their name (Κάσπια Πύλαι, *Portae Caspiae*) is commonly used of the Darial Pass by Greek and Roman writers of the Imperial age (cf. Marquart 1901: 100; 1903: 489; Minorsky 1958: 87 (note); Gagloity Ju. 1966: 136 ff.). – According to al-Mas'ūdī (*Murūj al-dhahab*, ch. 17; 10th cent.), the kingdom of the Alans (*al-Lān*) borders on the kingdom of the *Sarīr* (Avaria, North Daghستان) in the east, and on the Kashak in the west (Circassians); the Alan capital, called *Maghas* (*Ma'as*), seems to be situated in the neighbourhood of Vladikavkaz (*Šauziqæu*), the present capital of North Ossetia, at the foot of the Darial Pass. The same location of the Alans is found in the geographical descriptions by other Arabian writers: *Hudūd al-'Ālam*: The Regions of the World, transl. Minorsky 1937: 160 ff.; late 10th cent.; Ibn-Rusta: *al A'lāq al-naḥḥīya*, apud Minorsky 1958: 166 ff.; early 10th cent.; the *Tārīkh al-Šāb wa-Sharwān*, ed. and transl. Minorsky 1958, passim; comments pp. 107 and 156 ff. – But it goes without saying that one should be on one's guard against identifying a political power with a language community.

the country of the Alans, Alania, in the Caucasian Mountains, beyond the land of the Circassians (Kasakhia), in the proximity of the Khazars.<sup>3</sup> Although it is difficult to establish the linguistic realities which correspond to the ethnic terms used by the historical sources of the surrounding peoples (Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Georgians, Armenians), it is not questionable that Alan (or, more generally, Sarmatian) tribes were a predominating power in the rich and fertile lands of the Kuban area in late antiquity and early mediaeval times, until they had to give way to, and were (at least linguistically) superseded, by Circassian tribes, who in the late Middle Ages started their expansion from the shores of the Sea of Azov towards the south and the east. In the 6th century at the latest the Alans entered into close relations with Turkic-speaking invaders from Central Asia, who constituted the core of the Khazar empire. During the ages Turkic languages have played a leading part all over the North Caucasus and served as a medium in the communication between the different peoples of the area: In its Azerbaijanian form Turkic has been used as a lingua franca both in Daghestan and the country to the northwest, thus acting as a link between these regions and the great Islamic nations of the south. It also seems likely that the mediaeval Alans had already established linguistic contacts with speakers of Northeast Caucasian languages (Nakh, Avar), whose territory appears to have previously extended farther to the north and the west than it does today.<sup>4</sup> To this patchwork of languages we must add Russian and Ukrainian, which, particularly since the middle of the 18th century, have gradually been encroaching upon the old indigenous languages of the North Caucasus.

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<sup>3</sup> (Const. Porph., De adm. imp. 42/102) The Alans are located (by Constantine Porphyrogenitus) to the east of the land of the Circassians (Κασαχία), in the Caucasus mountains (καὶ τῶν ὄρεων ἀνωθεν ἔστιν ἡ χώρα τῆς Ἀλανίας). The same writer locates the principality of Ἀζία (probably the land of the *Ās*) around the Caspian Gates: εἰς τοὺς ἄρχοντας Ἀζίας, ἐν ᾧ εἰσιν αἱ Κασπεῖαι Πύλαι (*De caerimoniis aulae Byzantinae*, II, 48).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Fähnrich 1983 and 1986; cf. also the discussion in the following (in particular, ch. 3.2. of the present book).