

ĜAT, VAR: ARCHAIC ELEMENTS IN OSSETIC TOPONYMY

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Thanks to A. Dz. CAGAEVA's work *Топонимия Северной Осетии* (A. Ğ. CAĜATY, *Cægat Irystony toponimi*,¹ *North Ossetic Toponymy*), part 1, Orjonikidze, 1971, we have a throughout and wide survey of contemporary place-names of Northern Ossetia. They are classified on the basis of the internal structure, language strata and semantics. The second part of the work, which contains a list of North Ossetic place-names, arranged alphabetically, was published in 1975 (*non vidi*). Some similar work on Southern Ossetic toponymics still remains a *desideratum*. The book in question is of premium value for Iranologists as a chief source on Ossetic toponymics, although some etymological details can be added.

In the following paper I examine two formative elements, found in the place-names of Northern Ossetia, but extinct in the modern Ossetic language.

1. CAGAEVA (op. cit., p. 66) lists following place-names, ending in *ĝat*: *Al-ĝat*, *Gomĝaty kom* (-y – Gen. Sg. ending; *kom* “gorge”), *Pusalĝaty kom*, *C'arĝat*, *C'isalĝat*, *Ĉarĝaty xwymtæ* (*xwym* ‘ploughed field’; -tæ – Plur. ending). All of these are found in the Alagir valley and Tual(lag) in Northern piedmonts of Caucasus, between Digora and Vladikavkaz. She mentions that in *Gomĝat*- one can seek Osset. *gom* “open” and in *C'arĝat* – *c'ar* “bark, rind, skin”. I am inclined to interpret the first part of *Alĝat* as *Al*, *Allon* “Alani tribe”, or Ingush *alæ* “prince”², cf. also *Daryal* pass; in *Pusalĝat*-, one finds Iron

¹ From here below all Ossetic glosses are given according to ABAEV's system of Roman rendering. The author thanks Agnes KORN (Frankfurt am Main), Ivan BOGDANOV (Saint Petersburg), Ilya YAKUBOVICH (Chicago), David ERSHLER (Moscow) for finding difficult to access literature used here and discussing various problems related to this paper. The responsibility for final decisions, however, lies exclusively on myself.

² ABAEV, V. I., 1958. *Историко-этимологический словарь осетинского языка*. Vol. I, pp. 47-48.

pūcal, *cūpal*, Digor *copalæ* “bunch”³? Apart from these place-names, another source, *Das ossische Siedlungsgebiet* by Theodor KLUGE,⁴ gives certain *B..gat* and *Rugatkau* in the “Kreis 2, Bergossetien”,⁵ and *Dongat* (p. 43), a river-name without exact location;⁶ in the second name one can search for Ossetic *ryg/rugæ* “dust”⁷ or *ræw*, *ræwæg*, *rog* “light”⁸ (in Plural); *don* is of course “river”.

It seems strange to admit (with CAGAEVA) that a place-name on Ossetian territory could contain an Ossetic word furnished with non-Ossetic marker or suffix (an opposite situation, non-Ossetic base-word + Ossetic marker would be quite understandable). Thus, one can suppose that the suffix *ġat* is of Ossetic, most probably, Iranian origin.

Its Iranian etymon is no enigma – with all probability it must be of the kin of OInd. *gātú-* “motion, way, space”, Av. *gātau-*, OP *gāθu-* “place” (from the root **gam-* “to go”), a word that can freely serve as toponymical formative element. Iranian forms show variations of *θ/t* in the protoform,

³ АБАЕВ, *Словарь*, p. 316; Vol. II, 1973, p. 243. Note that normative Ossetic *c* (spelt *y*) is articulated as /s/-like phoneme in most North Ossetic Iron dialects.

⁴ Berlin, 1940; the typescript copy of this research was transmitted to Institute of Iranian Studies, Austrian Academy of Sciences, with Olaf HANSEN’s library. I was not able to find any information whether this work was published, even partially. An 80 pages manuscript, accompanied with two maps, contains a list of Ossetic place-names found in the 18th century Georgian geography of VAKHUSHTI and on the Russian maps, available to the author. Although KLUGE claimed that he visited Ossetia and penetrated the Georgian Military Highway (“Военно-грузинская дорога”) by foot, the data collected there seem to have remained unused in this work. KLUGE gives explanations of Georgian, Russian and Ossetic place-names (using W. MILLER’s *Ossetisch-russisch-deutsches Wörterbuch*, Leningrad, 1927-1934 for the latter). Needless to say, this pioneering work today is outdated in many respects.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-25. The names here are given as in KLUGE’s text; and one has to take into consideration that no diacritics were used in his material. The two dots in *B..gat* surely indicate illegible letters on a map; the second *округ* of *Горская Осетия* indicates the present-day upper stream of Liakhvi, above Tskhinvali, Southern Ossetia.

⁶ A mountain *Dongat* is located on the Upper Chegem in Balkaria, to the West of Nalchik. However, Ossetic *don* (OIran. **dānu-*) is usually reflected as more archaic *dan* in the Balkar toponymy, see V. I. АБАЕВ, *Осетинский язык и фольклор*, I, Moskva – Leningrad, 1949, p. 284; *Словарь*, I, pp. 366-367; but cf. pairs *Dargom* (< *Darġ kom* “long valley”) and *Šaukam* (< *Šaw kom* “black valley”) in Balkaria, see DZH. N. КОКОВ, *Адыгская (черкесская) топонимия*. Nalchik, 1974, p. 94.

⁷ АБАЕВ, *Словарь*, II, pp. 443-444.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

reflecting direct-case base **gātu-* and oblique-case **gaθw-*.⁹ Pashto *γólai* “court-yard” and several compounds, e.g. *dar-γól* “gap in the bank of a water-course”, *ōr-γālay* “fireplace”,¹⁰ Wakhi **gbit*,¹¹ Old Vanči **god*¹² are opposed to Old Persian *gāθu-*, Middle Persian, New Persian, Parthian *gāh*, Sogdian *γ’δwk(’)*, all meaning “place, throne”, “*bema*” in Manichaean texts.

In Ossetic usually non-initial OIran. **t > d*, **θ > t*, thus a form **gāθu-* is preferable etymon for our *ĝat*; OIran. **g* gives Ossetic *ĝ* in postvocalic position, long **ā* is realized normally in Ossetic as *a*.

2. Another element, recognized in toponymy, but not attested in the common language, is *-var*. CAGAEVA (op. cit., p. 65) gives two place-names with this final element: *Jexsyvar* and *Sawvar*; the first is located in the Dargavs valley, the second – in the Kurtata valley (both – left tributaries of Terek, in the direction of Ingushetia, in the South-East corner of the North Ossetia). Similarly to the case with *-ĝat*, the first parts of the both names are evident: Ossetic Iron *yæxs/yexs* (Digor *æxsæ*, in CAGAEVA’s transcription strangely *yexs*) “lash, knout”¹³ and *saw* “black”. A place-name *Ursuar* (so transcribed!) was recorded by KLUGE (p. 22) on the Upper Liakhvi; the first part, opposing *Sawvar*, is Oss. *ūrs* “white”, as already KLUGE, p. 25.¹⁴

⁹ See M. MAYRHOFER, *Kurzgefaßtes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*, Bd. I, 1956, p. 333; Differently MAYRHOFER, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindiarischen*, Bd. I, pp. 483-484.

¹⁰ G. MORGENSTIERNE, *An Etymological Vocabulary of Pashto*, Oslo, 1927, p. 25; G. MORGENSTIERNE, *New Etymological Vocabulary of Pashto*, Wiesbaden, 2003, p. 31; MORGENSTIERNE adds NP *γāl, tiγāl* “den of a beast”, coming from East Iranian.

¹¹ In toponyms, see I. M. STEBLIN-KAMENSKIJ, *Иранское языкознание*, 1976, pp. 181-185.

¹² Also in toponymy, see A. Z. ROZENFEL’D. *Ванджские говоры таджикского языка*, Leningrad, 1964, pp. 143f. None of Pamiri languages, as far as I know, preserves reflects of OIran. **gāt/θu-* in its active vocabulary. Initial *g-* (not **γ-, γ’*) in the forms given above raises some problems, but they are still surmountable, cf. Wakhi *gi* “faeces (humanum)” < **gūθa-* (STEBLIN-KAMENSKIJ, *Этимологический словарь ваханского языка*, St.-Peterburg, 1999, p. 177, cf. p. 24). A protoform **ham-gātu-* would give Wakhi *gbit* regularly.

¹³ ABAEV, op. cit., I, p. 564, gives only *yæxs*, but *yexs* (the form provided here by CAGAEVA) is also attested and *yexs* seems to be an even more widespread variant. I am grateful to David ERSHLER for informing me about the existence of this form and checking it with native speakers of Iron Ossetic;

¹⁴ The same name is given in brackets to Urjvari in the list of settlements of Chinval department in 1886.

I am inclined to understand *-var* as a reflect of Old Iranian **vāra-* “defence, enclosure”, although here we meet with several difficulties. This word is a *vṛddhi*-noun from the root **vṛ-* “to defend, enclose”, OInd. *vṛṇóti-*, and means “fortified place, fortification”, as Avestan *¹vāra* “Deckung, Wehr”, Manichean Middle Persian, Parthian *bārag* “wall”, New Persian *bāra*, *bārū* “fortification wall”. The latter became a widely used technical term, and entered, alongside with Georgian *bera*, Chechen *burug*, Balkar *buru* etc., into Ossetic lexicon in the form *byru*, Dig. *buru*, *buræw* “fence, fortification wall, ditch”.¹⁵

No Ossetic indigenous cognate of this lexeme is known so far, but it is expected to exist because of one indirect witness – Hung. *vár* “fortress” (hence, as commonly known, *város* “town”, originally the corresponding adjective). This word, as it is generally believed, is derived from Iranian **vāra-*.¹⁶ Since no other Finno-Ugric cognates are attested, it seems extremely likely that *vár* was borrowed from Alanic, or Jassic language, an almost unknown Iranian vernacular, forerunner of modern Ossetic. The Proto-Hungarians first came in contact with Alans on their way from Ural region via North Caucasian steppes to Hungary at the end of 9th century; Jasses are recorded to live on the territory of Hungary until 16th century, some 50 Alanic borrowings are recorded in Hungarian, and most of them have direct Ossetic parallels.¹⁷

The main problem that one meets in accepting this etymology lies in the fact that one should definitely expect *war* (with bilabial *w*, *u*, Cyrillic *y*), not *var*, in the Ossetic reflect of OIran. **vāra-*, regarding the first two names, *Sawvar* and *Yæxsyvar*. This curiosity, however, has several possibilities for explanation. Labiodental *v* cannot be initial consonant in inherited Ossetic word, but is a post- or intervocalic allophone of *f* or *b*. There is, however, a small series of indigenous Iranian words, that demonstrate a development of

¹⁵ ABAEV, op. cit., I, p. 282.

¹⁶ *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Ungarischen*, Herausgegeben von LORÁND BENKŐ, II. Bd., Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1995, pp. 1606, 1609; A. J. JOKI. *Uralier und Indogermanen. Die älteren Berührungen zwischen den uralischen und indogermanischen Sprachen*. Helsinki, 1973, p. 336.

¹⁷ See B. MUNKÁCSI, Alanische Sprachdenkmäler im ungarischen Wortschatze, *Keleti Szemle. Közlemények az Ural-Altaji nép-és Nyelvtudomány Köréből*. V, 3, Budapest – Leipzig, 1904, pp. 304-329; H. SKÖLD, Die Ossetischen Lehnwörter im Ungarischen. *Lunds Universitets Årsskrift*. N. F., Avd. 1, Bd. 20 Nr. 4, Lund – Leipzig, 1925. For Old Iranian **ā*, Oss. *a* rendered as *á* in Hungarian (usually, *é*), cf. Oss. *aeldar* – Hung. *aladár*, see SKÖLD, op. cit., p. 45.

OIran. *v- into b-: Oss. Iron *bar*, Digor *baræ* “will, right”, from OIran. *vāra* “will”, *bællyn*, Dig. *bællun* “to long for, want sth.”, from **varya-* “having to choose”, *byjyn*, Dig. *biyun* “to wind, braid, twist”, from **vi-* “id”, maybe, also *bīræġ*, Dig. *beræġ* “wolf”, and Oss. *cæviddon* “as if, for example” from **haca-ava-*, Sogdian *cywyð*¹⁸; Roland BIELMEIER adds here *bælas*, Dig. *bælasæ* “tree”, if from **varaša-*.¹⁹

Johnny CHEUNG²⁰ doubts the whole set of these words. For *bællyn* he proposes (following ABAEV²¹) Armenian *baġjam*, *baġjanam* “to wish, desire, long for passionately” (p. 172); for *bar* (p. 170) – Arm. *bark* “character, behavior” (following BENVENISTE²²).

A most complex interpretation is proposed for Ossetic *byjyn* “to wind” (p. 174). CHEUNG follows MAYRHOFER in separating OInd. *o-*, *váyanti* “to weave” (IE **h₂eu*, Lit. *áusti-*) from *vyā-*, *vyayati* “to cover, wrap” (IE **ueġh₁*, Lat. *uiēre*, Lit. *výti*, OSlav. *po-vi-ti*)²³. The relation of Sogdian *ptw’y* (< **pati-vaya-*) “to wind, to roll” to any of these IE roots is doubted by CHEUNG; so, he finally supposes that since Oss. *byjyn* is at closest to Slav. *po-viti* (Russ. *вуть*), and it is a Slavic borrowing, Oss. *b-* from OIran. **b-*, in his opinion, once passed through a fricative articulation **β* in the course of Ossetic phonological development, the latter is similar to Slavic labiovelar *v*.²⁴

CHEUNG, however, does not take into account various East Iranian words from the same root: Khotanese *auvya* “woven stuff”, Wakhi *z(ə)wəy* “to twist, to wind, to roll” (**uz-vaya-*), Sariqoli *parwey* (**pari-vaya-*) “to cover”,

¹⁸ АБАЕВ, *Словарь*, I, pp. 235-236, 248-249, 277, 262-263, 306.

¹⁹ R. BIELMEIER, *Historische Untersuchung zum Erb- und Lehnwortschatzanteil im Ossetischen Grundwortschatz*. Frankfurt am Main, Bern, Las Vegas, 1977, pp. 127-128; although BIELMEIER interprets vocalic peculiarities of this etymology, Oss. *l* on the place of IE/OIran. **r* remains unexplained. АБАЕВ (*Словарь*, I, 247) proposes OInd. *palāša* “leaves” or Kabardinian *bala* “bush”.

²⁰ J. CHEUNG, *Studies in the Historical Development of Ossetic Vocalism*. Wiesbaden, 2002, p. 170ff.

²¹ *Словарь, V, указатель*, p. 7.

²² É. BENVENISTE, *Études sur la langue ossète*. Paris, 1959, p. 139.

²³ M. MAYRHOFER, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen*, I. Bd., 4. Lief., Heidelberg, 1988, pp. 275-276; II. Bd., 18. Lief., 1995, pp. 592-593.

²⁴ CHEUNG, op. cit., p. 19; another argument for this development is completely putative: Old Iranian initial **b-* would not remain as *b-* in the East Iranian, cf. D. I. ÉDEL’MAN, *Сравнительная грамматика восточноиранских языков. Фонология*. Moskva, 1986, pp. 188-189. One wonders, however, how to put Khotanese *b-* from **b-* into this framework.

Yazghulami *zərway-* “to reel, to wind”, *baway* “to cover, veil”, etc.²⁵ These forms show that the scope of OIran. **vay-* (maybe, a contamination of Indo-Iranian **vay-* and **vyay-* at a rather early stage) is wider and the Ossetic form completely falls within its semantics.

Only for *bīræg* (p. 173) CHEUNG admits Khotanese borrowing, but from historical and comparative point of view, this word (attested in similar forms in Finno-Ugric, Turkish and East Iranian languages) appears to refer rather to a hare’s path than to a wolf’s one.

To sum up, the assumption that OIran. **v-* gives sporadically *b-* in Ossetic, helps us to propose reliable etymologies of a number of words, and *-var* in toponymy could be one of these dialectal glosses.²⁶

This historical explanation, however, is not a single, *ad hoc* way to interpret *-var*. Note, that in the place-name *Ursuar* we have a bilabial *u* (*w*), at least, thus recorded on the Russian map used by KLUGE and in the list of 1887. In the case of *Sawvar* one can suppose that the “hardening” of *w* took place in order to avoid contamination with Oss. *swar*, Dig. *sawær* “mineral well, water”, which is also widely used in toponymy.²⁷ So, a sole exception remains *Jexsyvar*.

Another unclear point in this etymology lies in the nature of designated places. If *ġat* “place” can serve for virtually every type of geographical object, **vāra-* would mean, originally, only ‘fortified settlement’. *Ursuar* is named in the list of villages by KLUGE, but CAGAEVA, unfortunately, gives no indications on the types of listed objects.

Both *ġat* and *var* are now ‘dead’ words in Ossetic; nevertheless, they were probably in active use for some time after the Alanic migration to the North Caucasus.

²⁵ See H. W. BAILEY, *Dictionary of Khotan Saka*, Cambridge, 1979, p. 48; I. M. STEBLIN-KAMENSKIĪ, *Этимологический словарь*, p. 441; J. CHEUNG, *Etymological Dictionary of the Iranian Verb*, Leiden – Boston, 2007, pp. 434-435, under **ũāF-*; the author explicitly states here that Oss. *byjn* is not Iranian, but Slavic loan.

²⁶ BIELMEIER, op. cit., pp. 127-128 supposes that this dialect form is related to Khotanese, where OIran. **v-* gives *b-*; in this connection, it seems interesting to note that Pth *b’rg* is not a autochthonous form (one supposes **w’rg*), but rather a borrowing, either from Middle Persian, or from elsewhere. K. T. VIČNAK (= Witzak, “Скифский язык: опыт описания”, in: *Вопросы языкознания*, 1992, No. 5, с. 58, ex. VII.4 – VII.6) gives three examples of **w* giving *b, β* in the Scythian language.

²⁷ On the etymology, see J. CHEUNG, *Studies*, p. 227; *Sawær* (transcribed in Russian *Саяр*) in Digoria, an archeological site of the Koban culture, obviously belongs here, too.