

*The institutional and vernacular cults of the military saints in the western Caucasus:
Image-mediated diffusion and body shift in the cult of St Eustace.*
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0. Introduction. The Caucasus kingdoms of Armenia and Iberia (now Eastern Georgia) were among the earliest states to adopt Christianity (Braund 1994: 238-259; Rapp 2007). By the 7th century, before the Arab invasion and Iconoclasm, images of saints are attested in the region, including the military saints George and Eustace (Eustathius). As representatives of the canonical male activities of combat and hunting, both saints were adopted as patrons by the elite, and their icons and frescoes spread throughout the Christian Caucasus (Kuznecov 1990: 70). The figures of George and Eustace were also incorporated into local belief systems, albeit with distinct, nearly complementary, functions: Among the Svans and Ossetes of the western Caucasus highlands, George (Sv. Jgəræg, Oss. Wastyrdji) is the patron of men engaged in outdoor activities, such as warfare, travel and hunting; whereas Eustace (Oss. Æfsati, Sv. Aphsaat) is the divine protector of the animals they hunt. The case of Eustace/Æfsati is of special interest, both with respect to the positioning of this figure vis-à-vis an already-existing female patron of game animals; and the “body shift” that this figure underwent at the interface of institutional and vernacular religion in the West Caucasus.

1. The cults of George and Eustace in the Caucasus. According to their hagiographies, Sts George and Eustace were both officers in the Roman army who suffered martyr's deaths for their refusal to renounce Christianity. The oldest versions of the vita of St George — attested as early as the 5th century — emphasize the numerous and ingenious torments to which he was subjected. Somewhat later, images begin to appear of St George as a horseman spearing a dragon or a man. The celebrated motif of George rescuing a princess from a dragon emerged in the 11th century in the Caucasus, and slightly later elsewhere in Europe (Volsk'aia 1969; Privalova 1977). As for Eustace, the best-known incident from his biography is the vision he saw of a cross (or the face of Christ) in the antlers of a stag he was hunting, which led to his conversion to Christianity. Along with other military saints, such as Theodore and Demetrius, the cults of Sts George and Eustace spread across Christendom during the Middle Ages. The oldest attestations of the two saints in the Caucasus go back to the 6th and 7th centuries, including a fresco of St George in the Armenian church at Lmbatavank, and the Brdadzori stele in Georgia; and depictions of Eustace on the Davit-Garedja stele from southeastern Georgia, and the Mart'vili monastery complex (Aladašvili 1977: 49; N. Thierry 1985, 1991; J.-M. Thierry 1987, 2000, 2005; Iamanidze 2014, 2016; Gladkova et al. 2009).

With respect to the iconography of Eustace, George and the other warrior saints in the Christian Caucasus, there is somewhat of a discontinuity before and after the 8th century. This hiatus corresponds roughly to the outbreak of Iconoclasm in Byzantium, although the relevant factors were more likely to have been the expansion of Arab Islamic domination into Armenia and the eastern Caucasus in the later 7th and early 8th centuries, as well as Khazar raids from the north. Later in the 8th century, Abkhazia and T'ao-K'larjeti (now in northeast Turkey) emerged as centers of Christian power in western Transcaucasia. Among the key players toward the end of this turbulent period were the princes of the Bagratid dynasty, who subsequently came to rule both Georgia and Armenia. As noted by Stephen Rapp (2009) the rise of the Bagratid house to political dominance was accompanied by a distinctive shift in historiographic style, away from the Iranian-inspired representations of kingship characteristic of the oldest Georgian chronicles, toward representations aligned with Byzantine Christianity. Saint George — from the 9th century onward almost exclusively depicted as a mounted warrior spearing a dragon or the Roman emperor — became a favorite of the Bagratid royals and of the Georgian elite in general (Abakelia 2009). As with the royal house of England, placed under the patronage of St George at the time of the Crusades, more Bagratid monarchs bore the name of George than that of any other saint. According to a database which I compiled of over 2000 church names in Georgia, nearly 30% are dedicated to St George, a proportion only approached by Mary, the Mother of God.

Whereas St George achieved extraordinary popularity among the elites who sponsored and dedicated churches, and ordered the production of icons and frescoes, St Eustace appears to have been overshadowed in the Bagratid era. Only a handful of churches bear his name, most of them in the central and western Caucasus, where the scene of Eustace taking aim at a deer with the image of Christ or a cross in its antlers continued to adorn churches in Svaneti, Abkhazia, Ossetia and Shida Kartli throughout the Middle Ages (N. Thierry 1991; Arzhantseva & Albegova 1999; Gladkova et al 2009; Beleckij 2014). This same image appears on the coat of arms of the Tarxnišvili princely family, who were based in central Georgia. At several sites where Eustace is depicted or mentioned in inscriptions, St George is also attested (e.g. the C'k'elik'ari church in Abkhazia, 11-14th c.). Inside the tiny medieval chapel at Nuzal in North Ossetia (Kuznecov 1990: 70-71), images of the two saints are juxtaposed, appearing on frescoes on facing walls [Figures 1 & 2].

2. From elite iconography to vernacular religion. In the context of this paper, the term “vernacular religion” designates those systems of beliefs and practices which emerged over time in the absence of control by religious institutions, such as the Georgian Orthodox Church, and their clergy. In most of Georgia and adjoining areas, the local manifestations of vernacular religion could more be more precisely labeled as “vernacular Orthodoxy”, to the

extent that the rituals, invocations, festivals and names of supernatural beings were derived from the Orthodox liturgy and calendar. Terms such as “divine”, “supernatural” or “deity” are applied to the invisible addressees to whom prayers and offerings are directed in the hopes of obtaining aid, health or protection.

Much has been written about the popularity and significance of divine figures based on St George in the vernacular religious systems of the Caucasus (Charachidzé 1968; Tuite 2016). From the eastern Georgian highlands to Abkhazia, George is invoked as the patron of men who leave the domesticated space of their communities for the sake of profit, as hunters, warriors, seekers of trade and tribute. Among the Svans and Abkhazians, figures derived from St George (*Jgəræg* and *Airg´*, respectively), in their roles as patrons of hunters, are juxtaposed to female supernatural protectors of game animals. The Abkhazian counterpart of *Airg´* was *Až^Weipšaa*, depicted as an old man, deaf and blind, with numerous beautiful daughters (Gulia 1928; Salakaia 1991). The hunter’s success depended not only on *Airg´*, but also on *Až^Weipšaa* and his daughters, who must grant him an animal from their herds to kill. The seductive, golden-haired Svan deity *Dæl* bestows hunting success on the men she favors, but should they provoke her jealousy or slaughter too many animals, she can cause their ruin or even death (Tuite 2006). Svan folklore commonly represents the relation between *Jgəræg* and *Dæl* as one of rivalry rather than collaboration (Virsaladze 1976: 138-140).

The cult of St Eustace in the Caucasus has received far less attention from scholars. Recently, however, Zarina Albegova & Irina Arzhantseva, specialists in the archaeology of the medieval state of Alania, have shed new light on the relation of this saint with West Caucasus vernacular religion. In a series of publications, Albegova and Arzhantseva present evidence that both the name and the iconography of Eustace penetrated into the cultures of the communities living within or next to the territory of ancient Alania (Arzhantseva & Albegova 1999; Albegova 2001; Arzhantseva 2012; [Figure 3]). Petroglyphic representations of deer with crosses in their antlers have been located in the vicinity of Kyafar, the site of what was once a principal city of western Alania. A similar image, with an icon of Christ rather than a cross, adorns the façade of the St George church in Nak’ipari, in Svaneti.¹ What is notable in these images is the foregrounding of the “sacralized” deer, marked by a cross or the image of Christ, whereas the figure of the hunter (i.e. St Eustace in the original imagery) faded in prominence, or even disappeared altogether [Figures 4 & 5].²

¹ The Nak’ipari church is decorated with reliefs of animals sculpted onto one of the outer walls. The image of Christ was painted between the antlers of the deer (see Fig 5). N. Thierry considers it a later addition, dating to the 12th or 13th c. (Thierry 1991: 86).

² Iconographic evidence of the relative prominence of the deer and hunter images is also attested in Anatolia. In an Iconoclast-era fresco from Cappadocia, the hunter is replaced by a lion, but the deer with the cross between its antlers suffices to identify the portrait (Thierry 1991).

Arzhantseva & Albegova (1999: 190-1) offer an intriguing cue toward an explanation of this iconographic shift, by postulating that the name of St Eustace is continued in the designation of a West Caucasian supernatural patron of game animals: Ossetic *Æfsátī*, Karachai and Balkar *Apsatə*, and Svan *Apsāt*. As represented in folk tales, hunting lore and epic ballads featuring the clan of superheroes known as Narts, *Æfsati* is the divine guardian of wild animals, especially the horned game that hunters prize the most. Hunters may only kill animals that *Æfsati* has allowed them to take; in return, the divinity receives offerings, including a portion of the meat. *Æfsati* is depicted as an old man with beautiful daughters; other accounts portray him as a man with deer antlers on his head, or in the form of a white-coated animal (Kaloiev 1991; 2004: 83; Arzhantseva & Albegova 1999: 188; Nakusova 2009; Plaeva 2016; Sokaeva 2009: 65-71). The Karachai-Balkar figure *Apsatə* shares many of these features, including the ability to appear as a white mountain goat (Kaloiev 1972; Afanaseva 1991). As for the Svan *Apsat*, his function as patron of wild animals is limited, according to certain sources, to birds and game fish (trout in particular; Charachidze 1981: 457; 1986: 285).³ Other sources, however, mention the invocation of *Apsat* when hunting ibex and mountain goats, as in this text from the village Laxmul (Šanidze et al 1978 #198)

<p><i>Metxwær mære Apsats amži xeqral:</i> <i>"Ha didæbow ajqeda, mældow ajqeda, mæžri</i> <i>Apzats didæbow ajqeda, didæbow ajqeda,</i> <i>mældow ajqeda, sewiš i hajæš muhwdi ɣermat</i> <i>didab! Ha, mældjæn Apzat! k'ačxw jirdes ejis,</i> <i>mældjæn Apzat, nišgeštelisga oxmec'win, mædil</i> <i>si jeri mældjæn!"</i> [Kekew Kobalia, Laxmul, 1951]</p>	<p>A hunter thus invokes <i>Apsat</i>: "Ha, may glory come to you, may grace come to you, merciful <i>Apsat</i>; may glory come to you, may grace come to you; glory to the god who gives good luck and force! Ha, gracious <i>Apsat</i>! May you have its [the animal's] heel in towards us when I will aim at it;⁴ thanks be to you, gracious one!"</p>
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The transformation of Greek /εὔστατῆος/ into Alanic (Old Ossetic) /æfsátḥī/, and thence Karachai-Balkar /apḥsatḥə/ and Svan /apḥsātḥ/, is relatively straightforward in terms of loan phonology. Before examining the semantic shift undergone by the figure of Eustace at the interface of institutional Christianity and vernacular religion, it should be noted that other attempts have been made to account for the name of *Æfsátī*, *Apsāt*, etc. The best-known, albeit weakest, hypothesis was proposed by Marr (1912), who linked it to the Phrygian and Thracian theonym Sabazios, and Armenian *astwats* "God"; this etymology is repeated in Abaev 1958 I: 109. A more promising proposal was published by Guriev (1985), according to which Ossetic *Æfsátī* continues the name of an Indo-Iranian divine patron of animals, the source of Sanskrit *Paśupáti* (see also Trubačev 1999). The Arzhantseva & Albegova

³ One Lower Svan text characterizes *Apsāt* as "king of the birds", and describes him as resembling a giant owl (Šanidze et al. 1978: 240).

⁴ "May you have its heel in towards us" = May the animal be looking away from me when I take aim at it.

etymology has the merit of postulating a lexical source which is already well-attested in the Alania region from the Middle Ages onward, associated with an iconography foregrounding key attributes of the West Caucasus animal patron. Furthermore, the pantheons of the vernacular religious systems of this regions abound in names derived from Christian saints, such as George, Theodore, the Virgin Mary, the prophet Elijah and the archangels Michael and Gabriel.

3. Imagery and body-shift at the interface between elite and vernacular religion. The Christian figure of St George, with his canonically masculine imagery as mounted warrior, was merged with the divine patron of men travelling in search of resources, and was partnered with female patronesses of the resources they sought (Tuite 2016). The case of Eustace is less straightforward. The Kyafar petroglyphs and Nak'ipari façade indicate that the image of a deer with a cross or icon between its antlers especially captured the attention of the medieval Alanians and Svans, to the extent that the image of the hunter almost entirely faded from the scene.⁵ The game animal with some kind of sacred symbol in its horns does in fact figure in West-Caucasian oral literature as a creature that is either under the special protection of the game patron, or even a transfiguration of the divinity him- or herself. These animals are set aside from the others by the special appearance of their horns. In the Ossetic legends of the Narts, Atsyrûxs, the Daughter of the Sun, makes her first appearance in the guise of an eighteen-horned deer. In Svan ballads, ibex under the protection of the game patroness Dæl have horns of gold, and woe betide the hunter who dares take aim at them:

The Ballad of the Hunter Mepsay (dénouement); Tuite 1994

<p><i>ka loχgene čχara q'wil γwaš,</i> <i>ešχu wokwreš lumič'w loχwnæčde.</i> <i>metχwyær wokre lumič'ws otnæšne,</i> <i>ejnem pindiχ mama ædχin,</i> <i>metχwyærs laχt'ix nebgwaisga,</i> <i>metχwyær mepsæy ži laygurne.</i></p>	<p>She (Dæl) brought out nine head of ibex, She included a gold-horn among them. The hunter took aim at the gold-horned one, But his bullet did not hit it, It rebounded toward his forehead, It brought down the hunter Mepsay</p>
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As was briefly mentioned above, Ossetic Æfsati and Karachai-Balkar Apsatə are also said to take on the appearance of animals. In a story from the Nart corpus, Æfsati appears to a hunter in the guise of a white bear (*Oset. nartsk. skaz.*). He can also transform humans into animal shape: in one Ossetic folktale, Æfsati turns a hunter into a golden-horned deer, to punish him for killing a deer under Æfsati's protection (Sokaeva 2009: 67-68). The shape-

⁵ One is reminded of other Ossetic animal patrons derived from saints whose hagiographies and — more importantly, iconography — feature animals: Tutyr, patron of wolves < St Theodore of Sykeon (an ascetic who fed wolves from his hands); Fælværa, patron of livestock < Sts Flor & Laur, patron saints of horses.

changing power of the West Caucasian animal patron is, I believe, a key factor motivating the adoption of the name of St Eustace. The saint’s iconography, featuring a sacralized deer, marked by a cross or an icon, provided imagistic affordances enabling linkage to local beliefs about divine game patrons who adopted the shape of specially-marked animals. The linkage was, however, accompanied by a representational body-shift: the name of Eustathius/Æfsati came to be associated with the image of the deer rather than the hunter.

It was noted previously that some Svans invoke Apsat for success in fishing and bird-hunting, and not for other game animals. This last-named function is attributed to Dæl, the divine patroness of high-mountain caprids, who was characterized above as the counterpart, and sometimes rival, of St George (Tuite 2006). Female guardians of wild animals appear in the folk traditions of other peoples of the western Caucasus as well. Like Dæl, these supernatural women are attributed golden-blond hair and exceptional beauty. Whereas their relation to George is one of complementarity, they share the function of game patronage with the figure based on St Eustace, albeit with a partitioning of roles. Among the Svans, Apsat and Dæl protect different categories of animals; among the Ossetians, Karachais and Balkars, the beautiful guardians of animals are said to be the daughters of the white-bearded Æfsati/Apsat figure (Nakusova 2009; Plaeva 2016).⁶ The distribution of roles between Æfsati/Apsat and his female colleagues appear to be the consequences of the appropriation of a male-gendered figure into a belief system in which female game patrons already existed.⁷

<i>region</i>	<i>patron of hunters (St George)</i>	<i>patronage of wild animals</i>	
		<i>male patron</i>	<i>female patron(s)</i>
Ossetia	Wastyrji	Æfsátī	Æfsátī’s beautiful daughters
Karachai-Balkaria	Wasgeri, Ašgergi	Apsatə, Afsatə	Apsatə’s beautiful daughters
Svaneti	Jgəræg	Apsāt, patron of fish & birds	Dæl, patroness of horned game (especially ibex)

4. Conclusion. The richly decorated churches of Svaneti attest to the abundance of imagery that a worshipper would have experienced in the medieval Christian Caucasus (Aladašvili et al 1983; Privalova 1977; see also Amiranašvili 1987, Privalova 1980, Xetaguri & Paplinksi 1984). The subjects portrayed in the frescoes and icons, although constrained by

⁶ In one Svan ballad from Laxamula, Apsat is portrayed addressing Dæl as ‘mother’ (*dede*), so the kinship-based partitioning of roles was known in at least some parts of Svaneti, albeit with the generations reversed (Shanidze et al 1939: 274).

⁷ Soviet ethnographers tended to ascribe greater time-depth to female supernaturals such as Dæl than to male figures of similar function (Čartolani 1991). While this may in fact be true in the case of Æfsati/Apsat, I leave open the question of whether the name of St Eustace was attached to a pre-existing male supernatural, or rather led to the insertion of a male figure into a hitherto all-female cohort of game patrons.

ecclesiastical norms and traditions, would to some extent have reflected the interests of the donors and their social milieu. This would seem to account for the frequency of military saints, as patrons of the medieval aristocracy, in Caucasian church art, as well as their importance in vernacular religion; but the matter is not so straightforward. Although church-goers would have been surrounded by portraits of the saints, and scenes from the lives of Jesus and Mary, only a small number of these subjects spawned doublets in folk literature and non-institutional ritual practice. The most glaring omission is that of Christ himself, along with the core doctrines associated with him: the Incarnation, the redemption of humanity through the cross, the Resurrection. Christ, if mentioned at all, is either a superhuman strongman, or the deity presiding over the world of the dead (Charachidzé 1986: 226-227).

Those saints who achieved the greatest popularity are those whose attributes and imagery were most compatible with a Vernacular Orthodoxy which served principally as a system of exchange and patronage between human society and the supernatural forces believed to affect key domains of human activity, such as fertility and childbirth, the health of people and livestock, food production, war, protection and mobility. For the most part, these are saints whose iconography prominently features an image associated with the domains mentioned above: Mary the Mother of God, depicted with the Christ child; St George as mounted warrior; Elijah and the flaming chariot; and of course, Eustace and the god-possessed deer.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. The initial version of this paper was presented at the 2015 meeting of the Canadian Anthropological Society (CASCA), as part of the panel “On the Road to Paradise: Peripheral Visions, Unorthodox Iconographies”. Many thanks to those whose comments on the earlier text encouraged me to rework it into its current form: Simona Bealcovschi, Melanie Dean, Luke Fleming, Jost Gippert, Agnes Korn and Guy Lanoue. May Æfsati grant them good luck and force!

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ILLUSTRATIONS

The Caucasus and adjacent territories

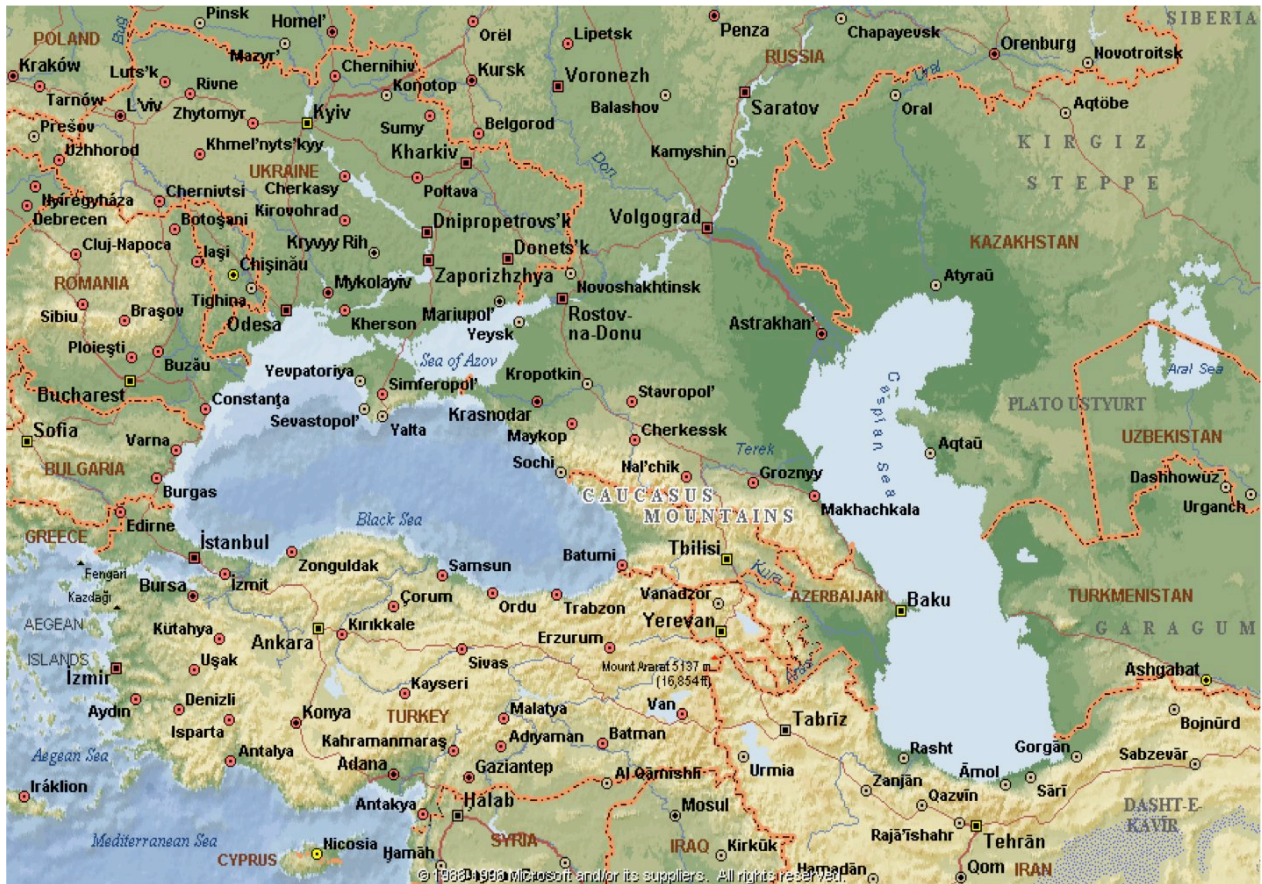
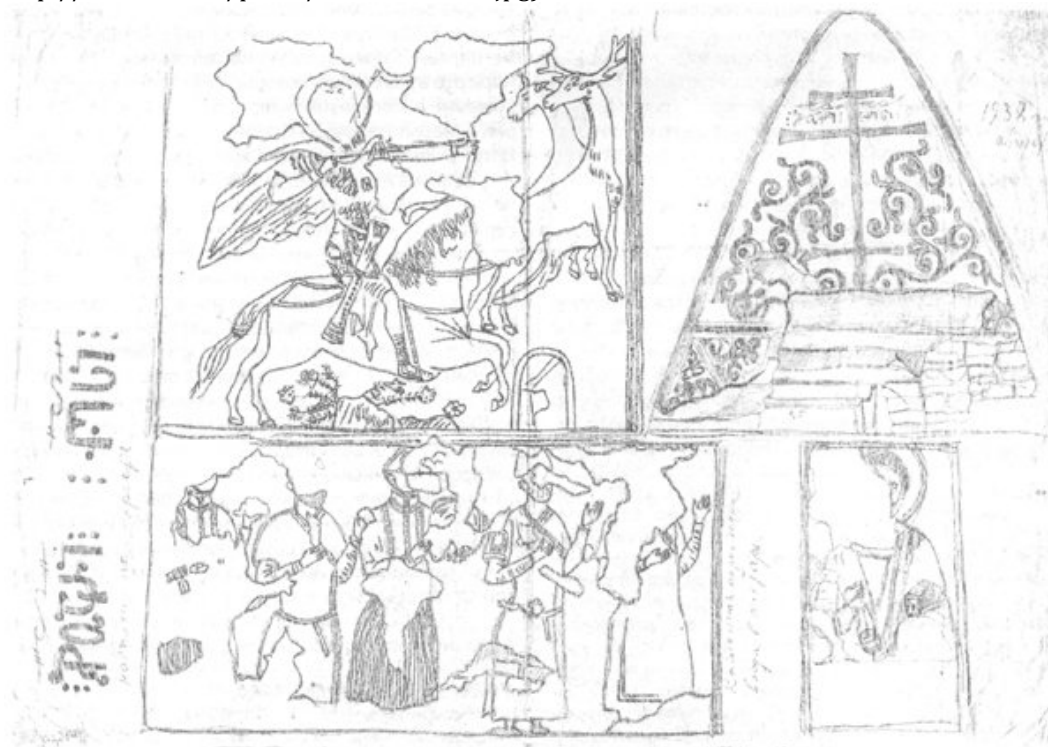


Figure 1. Fresco depicting St Eustace on the northern wall of the Nuzal chapel (source: http://lostosetia.ru/photo/29_414141_xxl.jpg)



Илл. 6. Изображения северной и западной стен. Рисунок из архива К. А. Берладиной.

LostOsetia.ru

Figure 2. Fresco depicting St George on the southern wall of the Nuzal chapel (source: http://lostosetia.ru/photo/29_434343_xxl.jpg)



Илл. 4. Схема росписи нузальской церкви. Восточная и южная стены.

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Figure 3. Map of Alania, 10th century.

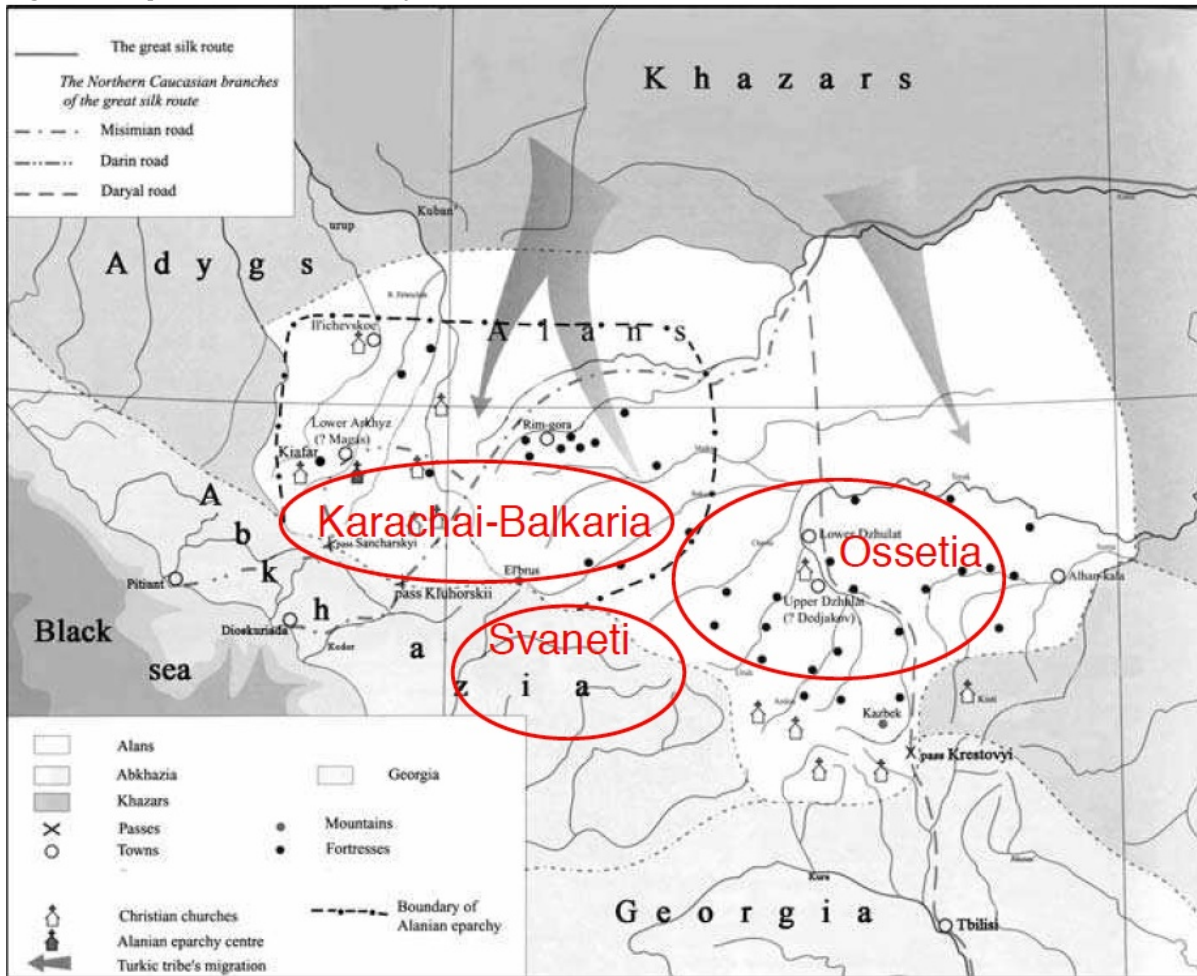


Fig. 1. Alania Xth century A.D. (R. Bzarov, *Istoricheskij Atlas Osetii*, Vladikavkaz 2002, p. 20)

Figure 4. The Kyafar petroglyph (Arzhantseva 2012); note the crosses on the deer's antler

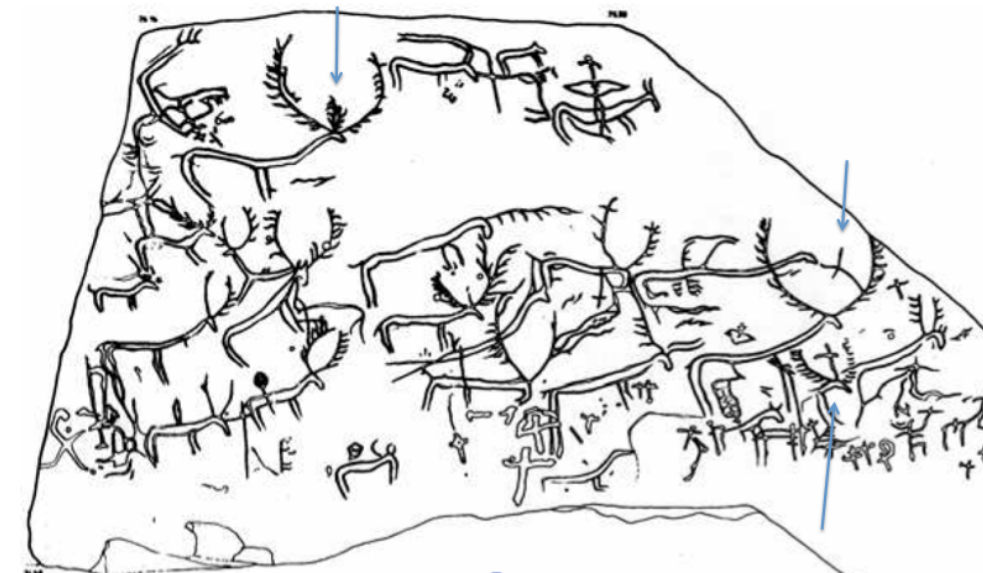


Figure 5. Deer head and icon of Christ on the outer wall of the St George at Nak'ipari, Upper Svaneti

