

The Nameless Son of Wryzmæg

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Abstract. In the Nart sagas, the story “The Nameless Son of Wryzmæg” holds a unique position. In this tale, Barastyr, the lord of the dead, allows Wryzmæg’s son to briefly leave his realm to persuade his father to make a yearly funerary offering in his name, following Ossetian tradition. The father, who unintentionally caused his son’s death, has completely repressed the tragic event to overcome grief and continue living as if it never happened. The opportunity to leave the Land of the Dead is a singular occurrence in the entire Nart cycle and stands in stark contrast to the story “Soslan in the Land of the Dead,” in which an Ossetian hero enters the afterlife while still alive and manages to return among the living.”

Keywords: Nart sagas, Ossetic, Wryzmæg, Satàna, Afterlife.

The Russian conquest of the Caucasus in the late 18th and 19th centuries brought many scholars to the region, along with military personnel (Ognibene 2023, 205-209). This was the first time these scholars had the opportunity to approach territories considered mysterious and largely unknown in Europe. In fact, very little was known about the Caucasus in Europe. Classical sources described it as a place inhabited by dozens of different peoples, who spoke a multitude of different languages. This description was confirmed by Arab geographers, who referred to Mount Elbrus, and by extension the entire Caucasus, as “the mountain of languages (Danylenko 2021, §4). The almost impassable barrier that crosses the isthmus between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea from northwest to southeast has always attracted the attention of neighboring peoples. Jason and the Argonauts set out for Colchis (A.R.), Herodotus placed the Ama-

zons to the north of the Maeotis swamp (Hdt. IV, 110-117), and Aeschylus placed Prometheus in chains on the Caucasus (A. Pr.).

The scholars who followed the military during the conquest operations described the places, the customs of the inhabitants, and the languages they spoke, while also hunting for butterflies and flowers. The Russian czarist government soon realized that sharing values was the best guarantee for governing the region, and effectively encouraged the spread of Christianity and the creation of alphabets for local languages. It was thought that Russian culture would be spread through translations into the languages of the Caucasus and that the sacred texts would be translated. It was not thought that there was anything of value in the local languages that deserved to be transcribed. To the surprise of many, in the early decades of the 19th century, as they moved among the villages north and south of the ridge, many scholars discovered that different peoples shared stories that had more or less the same protagonists called Narts (Nartæ / Нартæ; Abaev 1973, 158-160). The transcription of the Narts' stories took several decades, as it soon became clear that there were often several variations of the same story. In high mountain villages, often isolated for many months of the year, the stories were reworked, and each storyteller ended up adding some detail or episode, but without altering the basic structure. From the examination of the stories, it was seen that, in general, they could be grouped according to the character who played the protagonist role. Some groups of stories were thus defined, centered on a character, and it was easier at this point to compare them in the different linguistic traditions that involved them. What struck everyone immediately was the particular character of these protagonists.

The Narts do not fit our concept of heroes, even though they often perform heroic deeds (Ognibene 2019a, 113-128). The basic element of the stories themselves is unique: the world of the Narts is a fantastical world, in which the magical element is rarely inserted. The inability of most of the characters in the stories to perform magic does not affect the fantastical structure of the stories, which remains unchanged and is even more highlighted by this fact (Ognibene 2018, 149-157). No one knows exactly how old these stories are, but some elements make us lean towards a transmission that took place over a very long period of time. The disappearance of the female element in key roles, which nonetheless fails to eliminate the figure of Satana (Satana / Сатана; Abaev 1979, 39-40), leads us to think that there was a rethinking of roles and a deliberate elimination of female characters in the post-Mongol period, during which Caucasian society became increasingly male-centered and a particular hierarchical order was created, primarily linked to age. This hierarchy was also

reflected in the small things, such as the order in which people sat at the table in high mountain villages not so long ago.

Among the Narts stories, one in particular strikes the reader for the numerous psychological aspects treated and for the very unique story. This is the “Nameless son of Wryzmæg” (Wryzmægý ænænom læppu / Урызъмæджы æнæном læппу)¹. The protagonists of the story are the Nart Wryzmæg (Wryzmæg | Uruzmæg, Oræzmæg / Уырызъмæг | Урузъмæг, Орæзмæг; Abaev 1989, 127-128), his wife Satana, their unnamed son, the Dombettyrtæ (Donbetyr | Donbettær / Донбеттыр | Донбеттær; Abaev 1958, 367-368), water genies and Satana’s relatives who live at the bottom of the sea, and the lord of the dead Barastyr (Barstyr | Barastær / Барастыр | Барастær; Abaev 1958, 236). Other characters play decisive roles although they do not often occur in the story. The story seems to be constructed with the technique of the flashback, in fact, we find out about some circumstances after the events have taken place. Satana discovers that she is expecting a child from Wryzmæg after her husband has left for a *balc* (balc | balci / балц | балци; Abaev 1958, 233-234). With this Ossetic word in the Nart epic, a war or more often a raid that the Narts carried out periodically in neighboring territories was indicated. The *balc* could last for a year. After giving birth, Satana entrusts her child to her relatives the Donbetyrtæ, water genies who live under the sea. Because life for a child in the home of a Nart hero is dangerous due to the presence of various weapons, Satana conceals the existence of the child from Wryzmæg upon his return and entrusts him to her relatives. So Wryzmæg does not know he is a father and does not know that his son has been entrusted to the Donbetyrtæ. The reader also ignores this part at the beginning of the story. The story opens instead with a famine that has struck the country of the Narts, many of whom are dying from lack of food². Wryzmæg, who on the other hand has many supplies, after con-

¹ Dumézil 1969, 29-45; Dumézil 1930, 32-34; NK 1975, 35-51; IANK 1948, 48-60.

² Dumézil 1969, 29; NK 1975, 35; IANK 1948, 48; NT 2016, 114-115: «A year of famine came to the land of the Narts. The grain did not sprout, the grass did not grow, but withered away. The Narts were dying of hunger. They grew despondent, and lost faith in their own powers. The famous young Narts, so brave previously, grew so powerless that they lay day and night dazed in the meeting place in the square, and if they woke up, all they spoke about were the glorious feats they had performed, the dangers they had overcome when they had driven off the fat cattle from their enemies’ pastures. About their good swords and glorious bows and arrows, they said not a word. Shirdon had an impudent dog, a bitch, and it so happened that all that time she ran about in the village square and jumped above the heads of the sleeping Narts, licked some of their mouths, gnawed some of their sandals, and bit through some of their belts. It was simply pitiful to see all that! Once Urizhmæg came to the square, and there he saw how it looked more like a battlefield than the village center. There lay the brave and famous youths, lean and hungry looking, while Shirdon’s insolent bitch played all her dirty and loathsome tricks on them».

sulting with his wife decides to offer all the Narts a banquet so that they can recover³. So, we are in the midst of a feast where people eat and drink to excess the *rong* (*rong* / ронг; Abaev 1973, 421-422), a strongly alcoholic fermented drink typical of the Narts. At a certain point, the fire goes out and Wryryzmæg goes to the woodshed to get some wood. However, before reaching it, Wryryzmæg is lifted by the black eagle of the black mountain and deposited on an island in the middle of the sea⁴. The eagle is a powerful bird, this one in particular is capable of lifting a man high up. Even in the Babylonian epic, an eagle lifts Etana and carries him towards the sky of Anu⁵. The reader does not understand why this happens and neither does the protagonist. In a desperate situation on an island in the middle of the sea, Wryryzmæg glimpses a light on the seabed. He dives and arrives at the home of the Donbetyrtæ⁶. He is welcomed and sees a child who never stays still⁷. The Dobetyrtæ prepare food for the guest, who, wanting to do a good thing, says to the little one: «Come on little one, taste my sun!» (Dumézil 1969, 33; NK 1975, 39; IANK 1948, 51; NT 2016, 118), but while the child approaches he stumbles, falls on Wryryzmæg's sword and dies on the spot⁸. Everyone is very disturbed by what has happened and Wryryzmæg leaves the house and returns to the island, where the eagle immediately reappears and lifts him and deposits him in front of

³ Dumézil 1969, 30; NK 1975, 36; IANK 1948, 49; NT 2016, 115: «Don't be despondent! replied Shatana. Go and call them all! Our storeroom is full of all of food and drink. I shall feed them all, as though they were but one man!».

⁴ Dumézil 1969, 31; NK 1975, 37; IANK 1948, 50; NT 2016, 116: «Just as he was bending to pick the chopped pieces up, a huge shaggy-feathered eagle flew out from the Black Mountain, seized him in its talons, and flew off with him in its clutches to finally place him on a single pillar of rock amid the sea – no mountains, no trees, naught living to be seen around».

⁵ Saporetti 1990, 100: «15. TE8 mušen ana šá-šu-ma dE-ta-na [*zkr]... 17. al-ka lu-uš-ši-ka-ma a-na ANe [ša Anim] 18. ina UGU GAB-ja šu-kun [irtāka]. 19. ina UGU na-aš kap-pi-ja šu-kun [kappika] 20. ina UGU i-di-ja šu-kun [idika]»; Saporetti 1990, 11: «31. ib-ri nap-lis-ma ma-at[am] ^(k)i-[i mīni *bšī] 32. šá ma-a-ti i-ḥa-am-mu[š...] 33. ù tam-tu DAGALtum ma-la tar-ba-ši... 38. šal-šá [ana] DANNA [ú-ša-q]i-šu-ma 39. ib-ri nap-li-is ma-a-tu ki-i mī-ḥ[i] ^(l)ba-áš-ši 40. appal-saam-ma ma-a-tu u[ll] a-na-tal 41. ù tam-tum DAGALtum ul i-šibba-a ^(l)na-a-a»; Saporetti 1990, 115: «42. ib-ri ul e-li ANe: šu-kun kib-su lu-ut-[t]al-lak a-na URU-ja».

⁶ Dumézil 1969, 31; NK 1975, 37; IANK 1948, 50; NT 2016, 117: «Evening came, darkness began to gather, when suddenly he saw that from beneath the water, from beneath a submerged rock, somehow light was breaking through».

⁷ Dumézil 1969, 32; NK 1975, 38; IANK 1948, 51; NT 2016, 117: «Then Urizhmag noticed a little boy who was running around, so light and swift he ran, that Urizhmag could not follow him. He loved to look at this little fellow, and happiness filled his old heart. "Happy is the man who has you for a son!" he thought to himself».

⁸ Dumézil 1969, 33; NK 1975, 39; IANK 1948, 51; NT 2016, 117: «He came running quickly to take it, then stumbled and fell right on the point of the dagger. The sharp blade penetrated his little heart, and like a beautiful cut mountain lily, he fell. He trembled a time or two, and then his young spirit flew away».

his home woodshed⁹. So, it seems that the eagle performs a specific function: it represents fate that ensures that what Satana feared and wanted to avoid happens anyway. Disturbed, Wryzmæg returns and tells the Narts who are still celebrating at his home what happened to him¹⁰. But upon hearing this story, Satana «tore his cheeks, pulled his braids, and began mourning» (Dumézil 1969, 34; NK 1975, 40; IANK 1948, 52; NT 2016, 119). The misfortune has a tremendous effect on Wryzmæg: «He no longer laughed, he no longer answered. He wandered, his head down between his raised shoulders. He went to the Great Square, where the blue stone that makes you forget the misfortunes was, and lay down on it, his face towards the ground. He spent a long period of his life like this» (Dumézil 1969, 34-35; NK 1975, 40; IANK 1948, 52-53; NT 2016, 120). Wryzmæg therefore loses the desire to live and only wants to forget having caused the death of the son by leaning on the stone that removes misfortunes. In the fantastic world of the Narts there is indeed this miraculous stone. But the stone only removes the memory as long as you are in contact with it, returning home in the evening the pain reappears with the same force. It is the Narts' elders who comfort him and tell him that he cannot live like

⁹ Dumézil 1969, 33; NK 1975, 39; IANK 1948, 51; NT 2016, «No sooner had Urizhmag climbed back onto his lonely pillar than the enormous black eagle appeared in the sky, swooped down, once more took him in its talons, and carried him back all the long way to his home».

¹⁰ Dumézil 1969, 33-34; NK 1975, 40; IANK 1948, 52; NT 2016, 118-119: «Does anybody remember how I went out? he asked. When the fire began to get low on the hearth, I arose from my chair and went into the yard to chop some logs. Just as I was bending to pick up the pieces, a huge shaggy-feathered eagle from the Black Mountain seized me in its talons, and flew off with me in its clutches. For a long time he bore me over the sea, far from the shore, and finally placed me on a single pillar of rock. There were no other cliffs nearby, only sea all round—no mountains, no trees, nothing living to be seen, and the only moving thing was blue water below. Evening came, darkness began to gather, when suddenly I saw that from beneath the water, from beneath a submerged rock, somehow light was breaking through. Come what may, I must know what kind of a wonder that is, I said to myself and slipped down from the pillar, slid into the water, moved the huge rock aside, and saw a door there before me. I opened this door, and there stood three maidens, each one more beautiful and slender than the other, who came running to greet me. Come in and be our guest! said the maidens to me. There were also a respectful old lady and a young boy there. I looked around and saw that the floor was of blue glass and the walls were studded with mother-of-pearl, and that the morning star was shining from the ceiling. They served a table for me and according to the Narts' custom I raised a piece of meat on the point of my dagger, and said a prayer. When I had finished, I then, once more in accordance with custom, turned toward the little boy, and asked him to come to me and taste the meat offering. He came running quickly to take it, then stumbled and fell right on the point of the dagger. Deep sorrow seized the host family and me myself. I did not touch the food. I arose, bid them farewell, and returned by the way I had come. Then the enormous black eagle appeared in the sky, swooped down, once more took me in its talons, and carried me back all the long way to my home».

this forever: it was a misfortune and it must be left behind¹¹. Finally, that's what Wryryzmæg will do. But the memory generates such a strong pain that Wryryzmæg decides to remove it, as if the event had never happened. By removing the episode, Wryryzmæg will never even make the annual offering for the deceased. The Ossetes are particularly attentive to this circumstance: after a death for an entire year, all Saturday evenings the people closest to the deceased gather at his tomb for a banquet in memory of the dead, and after once a year an offering of food is made to the dead (Abaev 1979, 6; Miller 1882, 287). The greatest offense that can be done to an Ossete today is to tell him that his dead are hungry.

The son of Wryryzmæg in the afterlife does not receive an offering like the other dead, and he turns to the Lord of the Dead, named Barastyr, to request to be allowed to leave the afterlife and visit his father to receive the annual offering¹². In the Ossetian epic, there is a case of a hero who enters the afterlife alive, named Nart Soslan (Dumézil 1969, 107-131), who tells us about how the Ossetian afterlife works, a tale that follows the path of many journeys into the afterlife such as those of Odysseus, Aeneas, Ardā Virāz, and Dante, but here the situation is distinctly different: it is a dead person who returns among the living. One of the most feared situations in the Iranian world, which has always been afraid of the revenge of the dead, and in order to avoid it, they prevent funerals from being held at dusk so that the dead can enter the afterlife before sunset (Ognibene 2019b, 1-9; Ognibene 2022, 201-216). Note that the Scythians also feared the revenge of the dead, and for this reason, they cut off the right shoulder of enemies sacrificed to Ares and threw it far from the body so that even if they returned, they could not strike with their right hand¹³. Barastyr cannot grant the child's request to leave, and tells him: «As soon as the dead know of your departure, not one of them will remain here: I am already

¹¹ Dumézil 1969, 35; NK 1975, 40-41; IANK 1948, 53; NT 2016, 120: «Then the elders would come to him and say, Nart Urizhmag, glorious among the glorious! You must not be so sad and waste away with grief. Could such a grievous thing happen to anybody but you? Upon hearing these words, he would be comforted, and soon he became his former self».

¹² Dumézil 1969, 35; NK 1975, 41; IANK 1948, 53; NT 2016, 120: «Many years have passed since I came to the Land of the Dead, and my father Urizhmag, who finds time to bother about others, even about strangers, has no times to pay me tribute, and I am completely forgotten. He has not given a funeral feast, and not raised a memorial stone for me, and I am lonely and lost here among the dead. I beg you, Barashtir, release me for a little while from this Land of the Dead. I only want to prepare with my own hands all that is necessary for the annual funeral feast that should be held in memory of me each year on the date of my death, and I give my word that I shall return at once».

¹³ Hdt. IV, 62: «ἄνω μὲν δὴ φορέουσι τοῦτο, κάτω δὲ παρὰ τὸ ἱρὸν ποιεῦσι τάδε· τῶν ἀποσφαγέντων ἀνδρῶν τοὺς δεξιούς ὤμους πάντας ἀποταμόντες σὺν τῆσι χερσὶ ἐς τὸν ἥρα ἰεῖσι καὶ ἔπειτα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἀπέρξαντες ἱρήα ἀπαλλάσσονται· χεῖρε δέ, τῇ ἄν πέση, κέεται καὶ χωρὶς ὁ νεκρός».

struggling to keep them» (Dumézil 1969, 35; NK 1975, 41; IANK 1948, 53; NT 2016, 120-121). This statement clearly shows us that the Ossetian after-life is not particularly well-organized and that Barastyr's power is partially limited. However, the child will propose a stratagem that will be approved and allow him to leave: to shoe his horse backwards so that the dead, seeing the footprints facing inward, do not think that someone has left¹⁴.

Once returned to the world, the son searches for his father and invites him hunting, without revealing his identity. Satana seems unwilling for Wryzmæg to accompany the child, and prays to God to unleash a snow-storm during the night¹⁵. However, this does not stop Wryzmæg, who sets out the following morning despite the snow. During the hunt, the child captures all the prey, causing some embarrassment to Wryzmæg when it comes time to divide the spoils¹⁶. The child gives everything to Wryzmæg, and asks him to sacrifice a white bull in his memory¹⁷. It is only at this point that the son reveals his identity to the father. Wryzmæg rushes home to tell his wife, who chases the child to see him one last time, but she reaches him just as he is about to enter the kingdom of the dead¹⁸. She asks him to turn one last time, but is told: «I don't have any more time, the sun is setting» (Dumézil 1969, 43; NK 1975, 50; IANK 1948, 59; NT 2016, 128). When Satana realizes that he won't turn back, he prays to God, saying:

¹⁴ Dumézil 1969, 35; NK 1975, 41-42; IANK 1948, 53-54; NT 2016, 121: «I can help you there, said the youngster. I shall turn the shoes on my horse Gee-gee around the opposite way, and when the dead ones miss me, and rush to the gates of the Land of the Dead, then you can tell them, just look at these horse tracks! If he has gone out of these gates, then I have no power to hold you, but if the tracks lead back into this land, there is no way out for you!».

¹⁵ Dumézil 1969, 36-37; NK 1975, 43; IANK 1948, 54; NT 2016, 122: «O God of gods, my God! If you have created me for some reason, then I ask you to show me your favor! Send down this night on earth all the snow and rain that you have prepared for the next seven years, and whip up some whirlwinds and hurricanes».

¹⁶ Dumézil 1969, 42; NK 1975, 49; IANK 1948, 59; NT 2016, 127: «Urizhmag and the youngster successfully drove their booty home to the Nart's village, and stopped at the place where spoils were divided. Then the youngster said to Urizhmag, You are the eldest, therefore it falls to you to divide the spoils between us! But why should I divide the spoils that you have won? replied Urizhmag».

¹⁷ Dumézil 1969, 42-43; NK 1975, 49-50; IANK 1948, 59; NT 2016, 127: «Then the youngster chose a white bull and set it aside, tied with a silken cord. All the emaining booty he divided into three lots, and addressed Urizhmag thus. The first lot goes to Urizhmag, Urizhmag, as the eldest. The second, as my companion on the quest, to you also. The third is my lot, which I present to you with respect. The white bull remains. Take it and arrange for me a yearly memorial feast. To all the dead you pay your respects, but to me, your nameless son, whom you placed in the home of the Donbettirs, and with your own hands sent to the Land of the Dead, only to me have you never given a funeral feast, nor celebrated my memory!».

¹⁸ Dumézil 1969, 43; NK 1975, 50; IANK 1948, 59; NT 2016, 128: «For a long time she rode and rode, and gradually began to overtake him, and cried, O you, who were my joy and delight on earth, you whom I could not see enough of when you were alive. Look back I beg you, just one glance, just once, son, look at me!».

«God of gods, my God, if you can see into the heart of a mother, prolong the oblique, on the mountains, the last rays of the sun! And on the mountains, the dying sun lingered» (Dumézil 1969, 43; NK 1975, 50; IANK 1948, 60; NT 2016, 128). The last ray of the sun before sunset is exactly what the Ossetes call *mærdty xur* / *мердты хур*, “the sun of the dead” (Abaev 1989, 246). Satana is able to see his son’s face one last time, and throw him a ring¹⁹, just as Odin throws the ring onto the pyre of his son Baldr.

The narrative allows us to gain a better understanding of the world of the Narts and to observe numerous parallels with other traditions. Firstly, the role of destiny, to which rebellion is useless: Satana’s attempt to protect his son causes the opposite effect. One cannot oppose destiny or what is wanted by the spirits. If a house burned down in an Ossetian village due to lightning, one should not even try to extinguish the fire because it was the will of Wacilla (Wacilla | Wacelia, Wacella / Уацилла | Уацелиа, Уацелла; Abaev 1989, 31-32), which one could not and should not oppose. It was also useless to take care of oneself: illness is a punishment for transgression, so taking care of oneself serves no purpose and the illness, which has no natural causes, cannot be transmitted: there was no concept of contagion for the Ossetes (Ognibene 2021, 268-277). Wryzmæg is kidnapped by an eagle, the strongest bird that always appears at a specific moment, and thus sent because something that has already been established will happen. After the incident, Wryzmæg loses his will to live and spends the whole day on the stone that removes the pain: a pain that is not physical, but psychological. He can only return to life when he removes the past, as if the incident related to his son had never happened. But this causes a particular condition in the afterlife: earthly life and the afterlife are closely linked: the dead can interfere with the lives of the living and the living determine the condition of the dead in the afterlife. The narrative therefore provides us with a glimpse of life in the afterlife and the ingenuity with which one can escape the realm of the dead for a brief period. The episode in which Satana, distrusting the child, tries to prevent Wryzmæg from leaving with him, seems to once again evoke the idea of an adverse destiny. There is also the episode of the hunt, during which the child captures all the prey but “gives” them to the father in exchange for the annual offering: a clearly embarrassing situation in which the adult warrior is outperformed by a child. In a sense, parallel to the defeat of Soslan when he first measures himself against Totyradz’s son, still a child (Dumézil 1930, 92-96). Finally, the pursuit by the mother, the request to

¹⁹ Dumézil 1969, 44; NK 1975, 51; IANK 1948, 60; NT 2016, 128: «But she hastened forward, and threw her gold ring after him, which itself bounced up and fell straight upon her son’s finger».

God, called here the god of gods, highlights the degree of penetration of Christianity among the Ossetes, sufficient to modify the names of some deities by transforming them into the names of Christian saints, but unable to truly establish itself in the lives of a population that, as Theodore already testified for the Alans, will remain Christian only in name²⁰. Finally, the ring shows a similarity with the episode of Odin and Baldr. There are many contacts between the Nart epic and other traditions: from the story of the two brothers, which parallels the Egyptian papyrus d'Orbinay, to the story of Tuxost (Тухост / ТУХОСТ; Abaev 1979, 346-347), which has a perfect parallel in the Čimbulat ceremissian (Corradi 1981, 86-87; Krohn 1908, 285-286), to the many elements in common with the Arthurian cycle: from the sword of Batradz (Batraz, Batraz, Batyraz / Батраз, Батрадз, Батырадз; Abaev 1958, 240-241) and Arthur, to the Graal and Nartamongæ, perhaps even to the name of Lancelot (Littleton, Malcor 2000; Littleton, Thomas 1978, 512-527; Littleton 1979, 326-333).

A single narrative of indeterminate era can thus provide us with a glimpse into the society of the Narts and open the doors to a world in which the fantastic, the magical, and the actual life of the high-mountain villages of Central Caucasus interpenetrate, creating an epic full of unconventional heroes, fearsome figures both good and evil, in which however, emotions surface with all their uncontainable strength.

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²⁰ Theodorus, SE, 409: «ἰσχυροὶ δὲ μόνον ὀνόματι Ἀλανοί».

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