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Evidence for Indo-Iranian lexemes and phraseology in Armenian onomastic transmission: Part 1 (Ritual formulae and ritual pragmatics in the Veda and Avesta, V)

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1. Introduction: Iranian personal names in Armenian and the *Iranisches Personennamenbuch*

Armenian personal names play a key role for the reconstruction of Old and Middle Iranian lexicon. Scholars of Iranian and Indo-Iranian onomastics and lexicology have always been aware of the importance of the large amount of (Indo-)Iranian lexical material transmitted to us especially in the form of proper names in non-(Indo-)Iranian or even non-Indo-European written traditions.

In the course of several years, our *Institut für Iranistik* at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) hosted a special project under the title *Armenian personal names of Iranian origin* with me as principal investigator and Dr. Hrach MARTIROSYAN (Leiden) as researcher, generously sponsored by FWF, the Austrian Science Foundation (project no. P27029–G23). After two triennial work phases (2014–2016 and 2017–2020), the results appeared in a volume comprising 872 Iranian names attested in Armenian sources from the earliest period up to the beginning of the 14th century (MARTIROSYAN 2021).

The monograph – designated in what follows as IPNB V/3 – makes part of the multi-volume project *Iranisches Personennamenbuch: This Dictionary of Iranian Personal names*, founded by Manfred MAYRHOFER in 1969, continued by MAYRHOFER and Rüdiger SCHMITT since 1979, is edited since 2005 by Rüdiger SCHMITT, Heiner EICHNER († 2024), Bert G.

FRAGNER († 2022) and myself at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. More than one hundred and twenty years after August POTT published the first comparative works on Iranian onomastics, in 1969 at the Academy in Vienna the Austrian linguist Manfred MAYRHOFER founded the ‘Commission for the elaboration of a Dictionary of Iranian names’. Originally run by two scholars, Prof. MAYRHOFER himself (University of Vienna) and his successor as Professor of Indo-European Linguistics in Saarbrücken and former pupil, Prof. Rüdiger SCHMITT (University of Saarbrücken), in 2003 this Commission was enlarged to an Institute for Iranian Studies – and the work at the ‘Namenbuch’ took completely new dimensions. In the course of the years, our Academy institute built up the centre of a network of competence concerning Iranian Onomastics and Linguistics that is unique in an international perspective.¹

The *Iranisches Personennamenbuch* considers the research into Iranian names not only as a linguistic discipline but also as a highly important source of Cultural and Social History. Linguistic monuments of Old and Middle Iranian contain only a little part of the Iranian lexicon. A huge number of Iranian lexemes are to be found *only* thanks to personal names attested in non-Iranian languages of peoples that had cultural relations with Iranians. Names show linguistic contacts and mirror the variety of peoples, religions and heterogeneous social systems in the areas concerned.

Quite of course, Armenians had such contacts with *Iran Maior* for many centuries. We also possess important sources for *Old Iranian* names in Elamite, Assyro-Babylonian, Hebrew, Egyptian, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit traditions. For *Middle Iranian*, besides Armenian, we have Middle Indic, Tocharian, Chinese, Syriac, Arabic, Byzantine Greek sources. Therefore, when exploring Iranian onomastics (and lexicology in general), we have to study not only primary Iranian language traditions but also more than 30 different collateral traditions (“*Nebenüberlieferungen*”).

Thanks to more than two and a half millennia of language contact, Armenian plays a key role for the reconstruction of Iranian lexicon.² Thus, apart for Indic, the genealogically closest *Schwestersprache* of Iranian, Armenian is no less valuable in comparative and historical perspective than Elamite, which exhibits the largest quantity of attested borrowed names³ (limited, however, only on Old Iranian), or than Greek that shows the lon-

¹ On the history of the studies of the Iranian lexical heritage in various onomastic traditions, see, more recently, SCHMITT 2000a, SCHMITT 2005, TAVERNIER 2007, SADOVSKI 2012b, on Armenian MARTIROSYAN 2021.

² See, e.g., SCHMITT 1972 (1974), SCHMITT 1975, SCHMITT 1984; more recently, MARTIROSYAN 2021: 5–10, 13ff. et passim, with refs.

³ Cf. the conclusions of MAYRHOFER 1973, TAVERNIER 2007.

gest tradition of contact with Iranian languages in different phases of their development⁴ over the course of more than two and a half millennia.

The Armenian material is of crucial importance not only due to a substantial number of commonly inherited lexemes but especially because of the extensive borrowings including, archaic appellatives and names, in particular: nominal compounds.

What has now become an urgent desideratum, is to see how archaic Indo-Iranian lexemes gained from non-Iranian sources like Armenian appear in such compounds and correspond to phrasemes attested within the attested Ancient Iranian and Indic texts. A closer look at vol. V/3 of the *Namenbuch* that comprises *almost nine hundred Iranian names in Armenian* sources shows that such (onomastic) compounds correspond to rich phraseological collocations in Iranian and Indic and nominalize formulaic syntactic expressions with ritual, mytho-religious and social relevance.

2. A follow-up project: phraseological and compositional backgrounds of Iranian names in Armenian

Therefore, after printing Martirosyan's onomastic material, now my part of the research goes beyond the pure lexicography: It aims to analyse the word-formation backgrounds of the Iranian names in Armenian, from the viewpoint of their correspondences in the *phraseology* and *language of poetry* of Old Iranian and Indo-Iranian times.

The approach taken in the *Namenbuch* is to explore systematic correspondences between appellatives or proper names, on the one hand, and elements of free syntax, on the other, in particular phraseological entities, esp. formulae of the language of (ritual) poetry (cf. SCHMITT 2000a: *passim*, SADOVSKI 2007 and 2013). For Indo-Iranian, studies in this area have so far been restricted to Avestan and Rigvedic material and some processes of lexicalization of epithets to theonyms and personal names in Iranian.

In order to broaden this horizon, my research over the last two decades has focused on the word-formation of compound adjectives and nouns, appellatives and anthroponyms corresponding on formal-and-semantic levels between Avestan and Vedic as well as on the systematic comparison of the joint use of their constituents in phraseological and formulaic collocations, in particular in the texts of ritual poetry and in the contexts of ritual pragmatics. These themes include a number of common denominators from the lexical and phraseological material of four

⁴ For Iranian names in pre-Hellenistic Old Greek sources, see the fundamental monograph SCHMITT 2011.

major projects that have been running since several years: the *Iranisches Personennamenbuch* at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the *Etymological Dictionary of the Iranian Noun* for the *Leiden Indo-European Dictionary Series* (Brill Publishers)⁵ as well as my volumes on *Indo-European Nominal Derivation* and *Indo-European Stylistics* for the *Indogermanische Grammatik* series at Heidelberg (Carl-Winter-Verlag).

This concerns entire semantic classes – e.g. that of ‘powers and forces’, a category of high importance for both the lexical history and the history of transfer of religious ideas, since the central deities of Indians and Iranians represent personifications of abstract forces: Social Contract (Iran. *Miθra-* / Ved. *Mitra-*), Rightness (Av. *Aša-* / OPers. *Arta-* / Ved. *Ṛta-*), Obstruction-Smashing Force (Av. *Vərəθrayna-* / Ved. *Vṛtrahán-*).⁶ Some of them are discovered in non-Iranian *Nebenüberlieferungen* – and reemerge in new findings in the rich Armenian corpus:

3. Indo-Iran. **HamHa-* as a second term of Armenian compounds

We find a series of archaic Armenian male names with the word IIr. **HamHa-* ‘attacking force’ as a first term: Thus, Arm. *Amat*^o goes back to Proto-Iran. *(*H*)*am(H)a-tanū-(ka)-* (< **o-uH-ka-*) ‘whose body has attacking onslaught’ (on which see further in the present article, §5.); there are traces of *(*H*)*am(H)a-pāda-* ‘whose feet (OIran. *pād(a)-*) have Ama’ (§6.), of *(*H*)*am(H)a-ḍasta-* ‘whose hands have Ama’ (§7.) as well as of other formations (§8ff.).

The common compositional term, Proto-Iran. *(*H*)*am(H)a-* < IIr. **HamHa-*,⁷ occurs in Young Avestan as *ama-*, Old Avestan *āma-*, traditionally rendered as ‘impetuous or attacking force’. In Old Indic, we find Ved. *āma-* of the same meaning.

The name *Aršam* (gen. *Aršam-ay*) is well attested in Armenian as a name of several noble persons (see IPNB-Arm 115f., Nr. 94): Thus, *Aršam* Arcruni was successor of Marod and predecessor of *Aršawir*. Arsames, son of Sames was king of Sophhēnē (*Cop’k’*) and, later, of Armenia; founder of Arsamosata (*Aršamašat*) in the third c. BC. A homonymous Armenian king *Aršam* was son of Artasēs (brother of Tigran II) and father of Abgar. It occurs (A.) in Neobabylonian, as *Ar-šá-am-ma-*², m,⁸ as well as in Greek

⁵ More about this ongoing project in SADOVSKI 2017: 567.

⁶ Cf. SADOVSKI 2009: 158f., 2020: 559ff.

⁷ I have dedicated a study to epithets and formulae containing this Indo-Iranian word; for more details with rich primary sources, see SADOVSKI 2020, to which I shall be referring specifically throughout the present article.

⁸ Cf. ZADOK 2009: 86, #45a (cf. #45/46/56/58), with further references.

Ἀρσάμης (B.), at Herodot, Aischylos, Xenophon, in several fragments of Ktesias. Outputs of OIran. **(H)r̥ša-(H)am(H)a-* are well attested in later Greek authors but also in Elamite, Aramaic, Demotic, Lycian and Syriac transmissions. The underlying compound Ir. **Hr̥ša-HamHa-* means ‘having the force of a man / male (animal)’.⁹

A further personal name that belongs to the family of this compound is Arm. *Ašmut* (IPNB-Arm 90, Nr. 32), from OIran. **R̥šāma-*, as in *Aršam*, and the suffix *-ut*. Armenian **Aršamut* regularly develops to **Aršmut* through shortening of the medial unstressed vowel and then, with cluster simplification, to *Ašmut*.¹⁰

As I have shown in SADOVSKI 2020: 560f., the most important accounts of the simplex after the *Petersburger Wörterbücher* and GRASSMANN are to be found in NEISSER 1924: s.v., and in KIM 2010: 57f. (a dossier of the rendering variants circulating in the later literature¹¹) – to which we may now also add ‘onslaught’, notably used by JAMISON / BRERETON 2014 as the default translation, in an invariable manner for virtually all the attestations. Consequently, the sphere of common semantic features of the Iranian and Indic words revolves around the meaning of ‘stress and storm’ / ‘*Sturm und Drang*’, viz. ‘rush(ing force/power), surge, onslaught; uncontrollable impetus, aggressive attack, excessive force’, largely in the sphere of ‘POWER’ words.¹²

4. **HamHa-* in Old Indic and Old Iranian

The second term of the compound OIran. **(H)r̥ša-(H)am(H)a-* consists of the Indo-Iran. simplex **HamHa-*, attested as *āma-* both in the Iranian Avesta, with ca. 60 instances, and especially in the oldest Vedic *Samhitās*: the number of attestations decreases in time (in the RV. 14 times, in the AV only once). The derivative Vedic *āma-vant-* ‘having (impetuous) force’ fully corresponds to Avestan *ama-uuant-*, MPers. *amāwand* ‘impetuous’ (cf. SADOVSKI 2020: 561–563, §1.1ff.).

⁹ For the reconstruction and the entire material see SADOVSKI 2020: 568, §1.7.

¹⁰ The same development can be observed in two toponyms based on *Aršam*, as follows (MARTIROSYAN 2020: 90): “*Aršamunik*’ > *Ašmunik*’ (SOUKRY 1881: 31 line 5 [facsimile reproduction of the manuscript; HEWSEN 1994: 48 line 8]; MOVSXORENMAT 1865: 607; ABRAHAMYAN 1944: 349; cf. ANASYAN 1967: 281); *Aršamašat* > *Ašmušat* (PETOYAN 1965: 26; ADONTZ 1970: 387 fn. 12, 388–389 Nrs. 16–17; HAYTELBAR 1, 1986: 293)”

¹¹ Summarized as follows: „*āma-* (m.) “wuchtige Kraft, Wucht, Heftigkeit” [LUBOTSKY 1988, 65: “violence, fright”; HAJNAL 1994, 200: “Andrang, Betäubung” (aav. *āma-* “Angriffskraft”); EWAia I, 97: (m.) “Angriffskraft”; KATSIKADELI in KRISCH 2006, s.v. *ama*¹: ‘ANGRIFFSKRAFT; PANIK]’“. The latter semanteme (‘panic’) is a mere contextual variant of the former and has arisen in the expression ‘to set into stress / massive attack’ > ‘to set in panic’.

¹² SADOVSKI 2020: 561, §1.3.

Both in Old Iranian and in Old Indic, **(H)am(H)a-*, however, is not a general term for ‘force’: It designates the aggressive ‘onslaught’, ‘rush’, ‘attacking violence’ and refers, above all, to the *unbridled* onslaught of *young male animals, human males*, the armed troops of *ephebes and warriors* and their protective deities. An Indo-Iran. comparandum is Av. *auui. ama-* / Ved. *abhyama-* ‘whose *áma-* is directed against (sb.)’ or ‘whose *áma-* is round around = in surplus’, a bahuvrīhi- compound of the Enthos type, with Ilr. **Hab^hi* as first term displaying the two basic possible meanings of this adverb (ibidem, 563–565, esp. §1.4.0.).

(A.) Young Avestan *ama-* and its derivatives refer to a number of Ilr. deities of war and competition (for reasons of brevity, here I refer to the relevant subdivisions of §1.6. of my study from 2020, p. 566f.): The notion of *Ama-* is often (§1.6.2) connected with *Miθra-*, in his aspect of warrior-leader, as well as with *Sraoša-* and *Rašnu-* as his concomitants. *Ama* as attacking force characterizes *Tištriia-* (§1.6.3) as both a *warrior-god* – shape-shifting between a *horse*, a *bull* and a *warrior* – and a *heavenly star* deity who brings *water*.

(B.) The main presentation of *ama-* as a *deified, personified force* (§1.6.1) is in the Av. Yašt 14, as a couple with *Vərəθrayna-*, the Armenian *Vahang*, whose name is traditionally rendered as ‘Power of victory’. Etymologically, it means ‘the (god) who has/accomplishes *Obstruction-Smashing*’, as a factitive bahuvrīhi compound. Thus, the first half of Yt. 14 describes ten different avatars of *Vərəθrayna*: (a) as a (stormy) *wind* (*vāta-*), (b) as a *bull*, (c) as a *horse*, (d) as a *male camel*, (e) as a *boar*, (f) as a *young man*, in the age of 15 years, (g) as the rapacious *bird Vārəngan*, (h) as a *ram*, (i) as a *he-goat*, (j) to finally arrive to the end of transformation and appear as a *warrior of perfect body*.¹³

In this manner, the development of *Vərəθrayna* is presented in two lines of gradation, metaphorized by the motif of *shape-shifting as symbol of transformation* (meaning of course not only the allegory of the avatars of the deity but also the personal and social transformation of his worshippers): first, from an *uncontrollable* natural force like the Storm (in the RV., *vāta-* [often trisyllabic, < **uaHata-*] predominantly means ‘violent

¹³ This is the same age and shape in which *Tištriia* and *Haoma* appear, the other two male deities connected to the term of *ama-*, as well as *Anāhitā* (§1.6.7.), the River goddess (corresponding to the Vedic *Sarasvatī-*), the only female deity related to derivatives of *ama-*, whose avatar is a 15-years old girl of perfect body. — Also *Apam Napāt* (§1.6.4.) as aquatic deity possesses *áma-*, being protector of sacred royalty. *Haoma-/Soma-* (§1.6.5.) is as both plant and king of waters (s. below, Part III), and *Vaiiu-*, Ved. *Vāyú-* (§1.6.6.), as (military) leader of the Aryan young-men hosts, *ma’riiaka-* (compare *mar-ūt-*). The notion of *ama-uuañt-* includes *Anāhitā* (again §1.6.7), the heavenly-and-earthly river, and the *frauuaši-* (§1.6.8.), in their aspect as a *host of protectors* of the Mazdean community, who *bring water* to the mortals.

wind, storm', as different from *Vāyú-* as a deity of the largely positively perceived Wind, but corresponding to the negative aspect of the dualistically perceived [Young] Avestan deity *Vaiiu*, a leader of the young male gang of the *ma'riiaka-* via a climactic chain of *increasingly stronger male animals* as representatives of overwhelming masculinity – the *bull*, the *horse*, the *he-camel*, the *boar* – up to the *young man* at the age of 15 (a topos, on which see below), a leader and person of reference of a paramilitary host of *same-age young male fighters*, traditionally designated as *Jungmannschaft*, *Männerbund* or *Wild Host*.

One cannot ignore the comparison between this sequence and the (decreasing) gradations between *he-camel* – *horse* – *bull* – *cow*.¹⁴ In the case quoted above, however, the gradation is increasing; moreover, the entire sequence ends not with the *stallion* but with the *boar* as the most feared, irrational and violent animal among these exponents of exaggerated masculinity. The role of the *boar* as a representative of unbridled male behaviour is well-known both in the Indic (Ved. *varāhá-*) and the Iranian cultural sphere (YAv. *varāza-*, also in proper names, YAv. *Varāza-*, cf. IPNB I, 91f., EWAia. II/514, and Parth. /Warāz/, not only a personal name but name of a house/clan, on which SCHMITT 2016: *passim*, esp. s.v. /Warāz/, 226, Nr. 546, with deriv. /Warāzak/, 227, Nr. 548 as well as compounded /Warāzduxt/, 227, Nr. 548 and /Warāzframān/, 238, Nr. 548) but also beyond, cf. the names of Germanic berserker with the first term *Eber-* 'boar'¹⁵ that I thematize in the forthcoming issue VII of the present mini-series *Ritual formulae and ritual pragmatics in the Veda and Avesta* (issues I, IV and V correspond to the studies SADOVSKI 2009, 2020 and the present article, VI to Sadovski 2024).

The second chain – rapacious *bird*, *ram*, *he-goat* – is not exactly anti-climactic, even if it corresponds to various decreasing gradations of the kind *horse*, *bull*, *goat*, *sheep*,¹⁶ but rather shows how strong masculinity is becoming more and more mature, disciplined and controlled. At its end, we find the *warrior* after the fulfilment of the *rite de passage*, as a meanwhile completely grown-up person, who is becoming an established member of *society* and the *regular army*.

(C.) So in Vedic, *áma-* refers to the *warrior-god* Indra *Vṛtrahán-* who is designated as a *vṛṣan-* 'male (animal)', an image that in Ilr. unites the concept of *animalistic* sexuality and the metaphor of the force of *waters*,

¹⁴ Presented in SADOVSKI 2012a: 168f., §1.3.2.3, with Indic parallels from AVŚ. 9,25,(10) and TB. 3,8,5,2–3 ~ BaudhŚS 15,5,209, ĀpŚS 20,4,3, ibidem 159–161, §1.1.1.–1.1.3.

¹⁵ Apart from classical studies like SCHRAMM 1957, two later monographs – BECK 1965 and MÜLLER 1970 – dedicate a special attention to the symbol of the boar in Germanic mythology and onomastics.

¹⁶ They have been thematized in SADOVSKI 2018: 83–85, with fn. 4.

cf. RV. 4,22,2–3 (to Indra): ‘*The bull*, hurling with his arms the four-edged weapon, which is the repository of *bullish* strength—the powerful, *most manly*. [...] The god who, *being born* as the best of gods, is great by reason of his prizes and his great *explosive powers*, having taken the eager mace in his arms, he makes heaven tremble by his *onslaught*, as well as earth.’

(D.) In the preponderant number of occurrences, *ama-* has strongly physical dimensions and is mainly related to the physical depiction of young, *ephebic* warriors, members of the well-known Indo-Iranian institution of the *Männerbund*. They correspond to rituals and myths about the *Maruts*, the gods of the Old Indic (*Jung-*)*Männerbund*, the Rigvedic *mārya-*s par excellence (cf. below, §9), protectors of the ephebes and counterpart of the Iranian *ma’riiakas*¹⁷. As a counterpart to the *zoomorphic* avatars of the warrior-god *Vərəθraϋna* as *strong male*, sexually hyperactive *animals*, the same *comparantia* occur in similes concerning the *ama-* of the Marut in the Veda:

RV. 5,56,3cd:
 ṛkṣo ná vo marutaḥ śimīvām ámo,
 dudhró gáur iva bhīmayúḥ ||

Euer Andrang, ihr Marut, ist wütig wie ein Bär,
 furchtbar wie ein störriger Stier (GELDNER, ad loc.).

Like a bear is your strenuous onslaught, o Maruts,
 fearsome like a headstrong ox. (JAMISON / BRERETON, ad loc.)

5. *Amat*^o

The Armenian name *Amat*^o is attested in the patronymic *Amat-uni* (IPNB-Arm 83, Nr. 14):

“The Amatuni house was a senior *naxarar* family, whose domain was in Artaz in the province of Vaspurakan. The Amatuni were known to most Armenian medieval sources [...]. Note also the modern family-names *Amatuni* and *Amatunean(c’)* [...]”¹⁸ — *Amatuni* is a patronymic built with the suffix *-uni* to *Amat-* from OIran. **(H)am(H)a-t^o*.

The best etymological interpretation is as a two-stem short name to OIran. **(H)am(H)a-tanu(H)-* > **Ama-tanū-* ‘having onslaught in (one’s) body’: It is reflected in the Parthian personal name *Amtan*, also with

¹⁷ Cf. the previous note and, generally on the notion of Iran. *ma’riiaka-*, WIDENGREN 1969 (basing on the results achieved but also essentially correcting speculative issues proposed by WIKANDER 1938, 1941).

¹⁸ See MARTIROSYAN 2021: 83.

k-extension: *Amtanūk*. The first compound is attested in Parthian /*Amtan*/ in inscriptions from Nisa¹⁹. For the same component **(H)am(H)a-*, cf. Sogdian male personal names *Ammō* and *Maw* (IPNB-Arm, l. cit.), from a transponate Iran. **(H)am(H)āṣan(t)-* ‘full of onslaught, impetuous’. So, the bahuvrihi Ilr. **HamHa-tanū-* (< *^o-uH-) means ‘whose body is characterized with *Sturm-und-Drang*’, i.e. ‘having onslaught/rush(ing force) in (one’s) body’

An enlargement of the same stem is attested by Parth. /*Amtanūk*/²⁰ that goes back to a transponate **(H)am(H)a-tanu(H)-ka-*.

Regarding the underlying phraseology, I would like to refer to the Avestan Yašt 9 (studied in SADOVSKI 2009: 159, §4.3., and 2020: 574f., §3.6.2., together with its Indic parallels from the AVŚ 7,81,3):

haoma nmānō.paite vīspaitē
 zaṇtupaite daijūhupaite
 spanaṇḥa vaēdiiā.paite ◊
amāica θβā vərəθraynāica
 māuuōiia upa.mruuiē tanuiiē

‘O [*stem of*] *Haoma*, lord of the house! lord of the village!
 lord of the clan! lord of the country!
 lord of the knowledge of holiness.
 For the *Attacking Force* and the *Obstruction-Smashing Force*
 I call you, for my *body*!’

In Indic, note RV. 8,20,6:

āmāya vo *maruto* yātave dyaúr,
 jihīta úttarā bṛhát |
 yátrā **náro** DÉDÍŚATE TANŪŚV Ā,
 TVÁKŚĀMSI **bāhvōjasah** ||

To allow your *onslaught* to drive by, o *Maruts*,
 heaven raises itself *higher aloft*,
 when the **men**, **strong in arm**, KEEP PUTTING
 THEIR ENERGIES ON DISPLAY ON THEIR OWN *BODIES*.

For what concerns its combinatorics with theonyms and its phraseological context, Ved. *áma-* refers to Indra and the Maruts at the peak of their (*Jung-*)*Manneskraft*, also representing the potency of *stormy waters*,²¹ *humidity* and *fertility* (SADOVSKI 2020: 565f., §1.5.1.):

¹⁹ For this Parthian name, see SCHMITT 2016: 38f., Nr. 20, SADOVSKI 2020: 572, §3.1.1.

²⁰ Cf. SCHMITT 2016: 39, Nr. 21, and see SADOVSKI 2020: 572, §3.1.2.

²¹ Metaphorical developments include the compound name of **Spitāma-* ‘the one who has *swelling, abundant, overflowing ama-force*’ (cf. MAYRHOFER 1977: Annex; MAYRHOFER 1979:

Thus, the Rigvedic hymns 5,58 and 5,59 celebrate the Maruts as emanation of rushing masculinity, ‘superior men’, a concept which in 5,58,8d is specified as ‘youths, belonging to the lofty mountains, loftily growing’:

RV. 5,58,8: hayé **náro māruto** mṛṣātā nas,
túvimaghāso ámr̥tā řtajñāḥ |
sátyaśrutah kāvayo yúvāno,
bṛhadgirayo bṛhád ukśámānāḥ ||

– Hail, *Maruts*, (**superior**) **men!** Be merciful to us –
o you of great bounty, immortal, knowing the (immanent) truth,
hearing the realized (truth) [=poetic formulations], sage poets, youths,
belonging to the lofty mountains, loftily growing.

These two hymns contain classical depictions of the gang of Maruts as a host of vagabond young men, the ‘Jung-Männerbund’ *par excellence*, lead by Indra *Vṛtrahán*.²²

Particularly frequently, Ved. *áma-* is used in the context of such hymns and stanzas and characterizes both the group and the leader:

RV. 9,90,5:
mátsi *soma váruṇam* mátsi *mitrám*,
mátsi *índram* indo pavamāna *viṣṇum* |
mátsi *sárdho mārutam* mátsi *deván*,
mátsi *mahám índram* indo mādāya ||

JAMISON – BRERETON:

Exhilarate *Varuṇa*, o *Soma*; exhilarate *Mitra*.

Exhilarate *Indra*, o self-purifying drop, and *Viṣṇu*.

Exhilarate the *troop of Maruts*; exhilarate the *gods*.

Exhilarate *great Indra*, o drop, for his exhilaration.

I/77, Nr. 291; SCHMITT 2011: 346f., Nr. 316, SADOVSKI 2020: 572, § 2.4.). Its first term **spita-* corresponds to Ved. *spīta-* ‘swelling, abundant, overflowing, inexhaustible’ and depicts Waters not only metaphorically but also literally.

²² The terms ‘Sturm und Drang’ or ‘(rush-and-)onslaught’, of course, are profoundly ambivalent and by far not only as positive as they occur in the above-mentioned examples of epithets that have become proper names: Thus, Ved. *abhyama-*, attested in the new-found fragments of the Paippalāda-Atharvaveda (hymn AVP 6,14), occurs in a magical *sūkta* aiming at “smashing” a series of *hostile* male forces, to which not only mythical demons but completely real *juvenile male gangs* organizing raids against Vedic Aryans, are meant to belong. They are presented with the characteristic features of *Jung-Männerbund* members about whose provenance (from the same kin or from other ethnic/social circles) nothing is specified but who are characterized with surplus of *violent* (and therefore socially *hostile*) virile force. In the same hymn 6,14, these juvenile delinquents are characterized by additional features of *vṛātya*-like groups cf. stanza 3: ‘The one whose *áma-* is in surplus, who eats what must be groped for, / the Grop-er with a horrible hand, / the Shuddering-eyed one with soft fingers (and so on): these do we cause to vanish from here’ (cf. SADOVSKI 2020: 564f.).

Employing the technical term *ama-*, the introductory verses 2ab of the hymn 5,59 say about the host of the Maruts:

RV. 5,59,2ab:

ámād eṣām bhīyāsā bhūmir ejati,
náur ná pūrṇā kṣarati vyáthir yatí | [...]

In fear of their *onslaught* the Earth trembles.

Like a loaded boat she *streams*, going a wayward course. [...]

A related idea underlies the compound Proto-Iran. **(H)am(H)a-tavijah-* ‘stronger by means of / thanks to Ama’: This compound is continued in Parthian / Amtāw /²³, the personal name of a corn supplier (Sadovski 2020: 574, § 3.4.).

Since its second term starts with ^o*t-*, theoretically it, too, might be reflected by the Armenian name *Amat^o*, thus pointing to an additional (or alternative) etymological source.

6. *Amiad*

We find the Armenian male name *Amiad* (IPNB-Arm. 84, Nr. 15) in a colophon from 1607, designating *a* recipient of a Gospel in Van.

MARTIROSYAN 2020: 84 tentatively derives this name from SWIran. **Amyāt/d* < OIran. **(H)am(H)a-dāta-* ‘Given by *Ama-*’, as a short name based on names with OIran. **(H)am(H)a-*. For the development of SWIran. **-yāt/d* (vs. NWIran. **-dāt*) from OIran. **-dāta-* ‘given’, he rightly quotes *Spandiat* vs. *Spandarāt*.

However, names of the structure ‘given by X’ are so-called calendric names,²⁴ dedicated to the deity protecting the specific day on which a person was born. Not any divine name can be employed in names in **-dāta-*. And *Ama* is no genius of a day of the Zoroastrian calendar! Thus, an alternative etymology has to start from a shortening of the name **(H)am(H)a-dāsta-*.

Proto-Iran. **(H)am(H)a-dāsta-* means ‘having a hand that has onslaught/rush(ing force)’, a wishful name for a future warrior. It is attested in Aramaic *ʾmdst* [instead of *ʾmdsm*], discovered by LIVŠIĆ at BOWMAN 1970, 111, no. 41, 2, cf. SCHMITT 2016: 38, sub Nr. 17. This *bahuvrīhi* compound corresponds to the ancient type of *īṣu-hasta-* ‘having a hand

²³ Cf. SCHMITT 2016: 39, Nr. 23.

²⁴ This type has been identified and discussed in extenso in the study SCHMITT 2000b.

(*hāsta-*) that has arrows (*iṣumant-*) > ‘having arrows in his/her hand’.²⁵ In Vedic, we find the same type *vájra-hasta-* ‘with a hand that is with *vájra-*’, ‘having *vájra-* in the hand’, as an epithet of Indra *Vṛtrahán*. In the Avesta, we have the very same characterization of *Miθra-* in his aspect of warrior-leader: *vazrəm zastaiia draž°* ‘he holds the Vazra with his hand’, a collocation corresponding precisely to Ved. *vájra-hasta-* (SADOVSKI 2020: 573, §3.2.3.).

To make the parallel complete, we must include the presentation of the *manly vigours* of Indra in the Rigveda by using both the notion of ‘*having the manly powers in the hand*’ and the concept of *áma-*:

RV. 1,67,3

háste dádhāno nṛmṇā víśvāni-,
áme devān dhād gúhā niśīdan |

Taking in his hand all manly powers, sitting down in secret,
he sets the gods in (the path of) his ***onslaught***.

The Vedic evidence is delivered by the stanza from RV. 8,20,6 already quoted above:

ámāya vo ***maruto*** yátave dyaúr,
jihīta úttarā ***bṛhát*** |
yátrā ***náro*** dédiśate tanúšv á,
tvákšāmsi ***bāhvōjasah*** ||

To allow your ***onslaught*** to drive by, o ***Maruts***,
heaven raises itself higher aloft,
when the ***men, strong in arm***, keep putting
their energies on display on their own bodies.

The complete phraseological parallel would be Av. *amauuant- zasta-* ‘a hand full of onslaught’.

7. *Ampak*

In early sources, the name *Ampak* refers to an Armen. *nahapet*, successor of Haykak; “they say that he lived in the time of Belok‘os and that he caused senseless riots and perished therein”.

²⁵ SADOVSKI 2020: 573, §3.2.; on the Iranian word for ‘hand’ cf. Sadovski 2017: 579, §5.1.2. — On this type of “double possessive” compounds discovered by Wilhelm SCHULZE see SCHINDLER 1986 (cf. also SCHMITT 1967: 177–181).

This name reflects MIran. **Ampak(a)-* from OIran. *(H)*am(H)a-p-aka-*, hypocoristic to a shortened form of Parthian *Āmpād* from *(H)*am(H)a-pāda-* ‘having *onslaught* in (one’s) feet’, cf. OIran. *(H)*am(H)a-ḏasta-* ‘having *onslaught* in (one’s) hands’, attested in Aramaic.²⁶

The compound *(H)*am(H)a-pāda-* means ‘whose feet (OPers. *pāda-*) have Ama’. Its main transmission is the Parthian /*Ampād*/, from O.Nisa (81 BC).²⁷

8. *Argam*

Notable in this regard, too, is the male name *Argam* (IPNB-Arm. 108f., Nr. 79):

It is attested in the nominative *Argam*, the gen. *Argamay*, as well as in the abl. *i Murac'enēn Argamay*, at multiple places in Movsēs Xorenac'i. In Book 2,51, the name *Argam* is identified with another form, *Argawan*. From prosopographical viewpoint, at Movsēs this *Argam* was a ‘master of the house’ of the *Murac'ean* family considered to be descendants of *Azdahak*.

The Armenian name is of Iranian origin and probably contains OIran. **arga-* ‘worth, value’ and *(H)*am(H)a-* ‘onslaught, attacking force’:

When analyzing the first term, we should start from an Iran. *(H)*árga-* identical with Ved. *arghá-* ‘worth, value’ < **Harg^ha-*. Thus, the Indo-Iran. compound IIr. **Harg^ha-HamHa-* means ‘whose onslaught / attacking force is worthy / valuable / (full) of “value”/valor’.

Old Iranian **arg^o* ‘worth, value’ is rarely attested. Still, we find a good parallel among Iranian personal names in Neo-Assyrian sources²⁸: The male name *Ūargi* exhibits two decisive forms, both in inscriptions of Sargon II as old as 716 BC. This is the *eponym* of the town of *Bit-U(m)argi* (in the far Western Media) that has not been reached by any of the Assyrian kings before Sargon II: He defeated the town, integrated it into this province and made it pay tribute to Assyria. The name is “no doubt Iranian”.²⁹ Thus, ZADOK 1976a, 214b; 1976c, 387b plausibly reconstructs the compound as Iran. **hu-u-arga-* ‘of good worth/value; valuable’, connecting it with Iran. **arga-* = ved. *arghá-* ‘value, price’ < IIr. **Harg^ha-* (cf. SCHMITT 2007: 163, Nr. 148). The compound formation as a whole thus goes back to Indo-Iranian **Hsu-Harg^ha-*.

²⁶ See above, §6.

²⁷ SCHMITT 2016: 39, Nr. 17.

²⁸ SCHMITT 2007: 163, Nr. 148, following ZADOK 1976a, 214b; 1976c, 387b.

²⁹ The discovery of the form *Ū-ar-gi* in Najafehabad is of decisive value, since it proves that **m^o* of *Umargi* is just a graphematic convention expressing an intervocalic glide; cf. SCHMITT 2007: 163, Nr. 148.

With regard to the *phraseological backgrounds* and external syntactic co-occurrences of the two terms of the compound, the small-corpus Old Persian and the middle-corpus Avestan languages do not provide us with examples of the simultaneous appearance of the verb *arj* or the noun *arga-* with *ama-*. Here, the well-known “Vedic key” of interpretation (or, as Karl Hoffmann used to call it, the *vedisierende Methode*) helps again:

It is to be discovered in one of its central hymns to the Maruts, the gods and protectors of the Old Indic *Männerbund*, the Rigvedic *mārya-*s by antonomasia. We already quoted – twice! – its first part that contains the notion of *āma-*, RV. 8,20,6:

āmāya vo *maruto* yātave dyaúr,
jihīta úttarā bṛhāt |
yātrā **náro** DÉDÍŠATE TANŪŠV Ā,
TVÁKŠĀMSI **bāhvōjasah** ||

To allow your **onslaught** to drive by, o **Maruts**,
heaven raises itself higher aloft,
when the **men**, **strong in arm**, KEEP PUTTING
THEIR ENERGIES ON DISPLAY ON THEIR OWN BODIES.

Within the same hymn, the noun *ama-* ‘onslaught’, appearing above in RV. 8,20,6, corresponds to verb *ARH* ‘to be (full) of “value”/“valor”’ (basis of *argha-*) in RV. 8,20,18:

yé **cārhanti marútaḥ** sudānavah,
smán mīlhúśasá **cáranti** yé |
átaś cid á na úpa vásyasā hṛdā,
yúvāna á vavṛdhvam ||

The **Maruts** of good drops who **are worthy** (of the soma-drink)
and who **go about** practicing generosity all together.
With a better heart even than this [=usual generosity],
o youths, turn yourselves hither toward us.

9. *Meroyr (gen. Merur-i)

A hapax name *Meroyr (gen. Merur-i) is attested in the form Meruri-n on a cross-stone from Hin Ĵula from 1550 AD (IPNB-Arm 254, Nr. 471):

MARTIROSYAN’s tentative interpretation of the formation is as a reflex of Parth. PN *Mēr(āy)ōδ: Its first term is *mēr- < OIran. *marya- ‘young man, young warrior’ (cf. MPers. Mērag-būd m., Arm. Merak-but). In West Middle Iranian, beside the MPers. tradition, Parthian, too, possesses per-

sonal names with the participation of the element **marīa-ka-*: thus, /Ardmarīg/, m., goes back to Proto-Iran. **(H)ṛta-marīaka-*, which rather than simply a ‘Diener des R̥ta’ (SCHMITT 2016: 48, Nr. 46) designates a ‘young man/champion of Rightness’, so to say a ‘Jüngling des Rechtseins’, a metaphor in which the deity Aša (as son of Ahura Mazdā) is represented as a prince accompanied by a *Jungmännerbund* (as the prince in Ancient Iran, cf. the historical accounts in WIDENGREN 1969), to whose representatives the holder of this wishful name should belong, too.

The second term is OIran. **(H)īayuda-*, the counterpart of Skt. *yodhā-* ‘warrior, fighter’, attested in Armenian collateral tradition and directly in a series of (Middle) Iranian male names like Parthian *Razmayōd* (SCHMITT 2016: 188f.). In Armenian, cf. *Řazmiozan* (IPNB-Arm. 306, Nr. 634), *Paroyr* (IPNB-Arm. 299, Nr. 612) < Parth. **Par-(āy)ōd* < OIran. **Para-(H)īayuda-* ‘the one who fights in front’; cf. the *Paradebeispiel* of OIran. **(H)aspā-(H)īayuda-* ‘fighting on horseback’ transmitted by Elam. *Aš-ba-ya-u-da*, YAv. *Aspāiaoda-*, m. (BENVENISTE 1966: 78; MAYRHOFER 1973: 130, 1977b: 22; HINZ 1975: 46, MARTIROSYAN 2021: 299, ad Nr. 612).

From the point of view of word-formation and semantic development, the underlying Indo-Iran. compounded adjective **marīa-Hīayud^ha-* is clearly to be interpreted as an original bahuvrīhi ‘the one whose fight is against young warriors’, developed to a compound of (active) verbal government [*upapada-samāsa-*] ‘the one who fights young warriors’. Here we have a perfect structural and semasiological match with Indo-Iran. **UīHra-Hīayuda-* ‘the one who fights men/warriors’, attested in Elamite *Mi-ra-ia-u-da*³⁰ and containing the word for ‘man, hero’.

A further – and even closer – compositional parallel appears in the name OIran. **(H)īayuda-martīja-* (BACK 1978: 231, 275) – not an “inversed compound” but a bahuvrīhi of the factitive type meaning ‘the one who “has”/provides humans with battle’, that is, ‘the one who fights men’.

If we turn to the *phraseology* underlying the old adjectival epithet crystallized in the personal name, we should search for a collocation of the noun *yúdh-*, f. ‘fight’ (the abstract and not *yúdh-*, m., the *nomen agentis* ‘warrior’) + *mārya-*, m. ‘young man; *Männerbund* member’ in Indic. I recently found one syntagmatic example from Vedic phraseology, in the Sāmavedic tradition. It’s attested in the Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa, in a context characterized by clear *vr̥tīya-* references, as so often in this ritual-exegetic text:

PB. 7,5,15: *yudhā maryā* ajaiṣmeti tasmād yaudhājayam ||

‘In **battle** (*yudhā*), o **young men**, we have won (*ajaiṣma*)’ (thus Indra thought): therefore the *yaudhājaya-* sāman/melody [exists / is called like this].

³⁰ Cf. TAVERNIER 2007: 350 and IPNB-Arm., l. cit.

A beautiful semantic parallel concerning the notion of ‘overwhelming the combatants’ is delivered by RV. 10,103,2:

saṃkrāndanenānimiṣēna jīṣṇunā,
yutkāreṇa duścyavanēna dhṛṣṇunā |
 tād *indreṇa* jayata tāt **sahadhvaṃ**,
yúdhō nara ísuhastena vṛṣṇā ||

With him, who makes (them) cry out together, who is unwinking, conquering,
combat-creating, difficult to shake, bold –
 with *Indra* now conquer, now **overwhelm**
the combatants, o **men** – with the *bull* with arrows in his hand.

10. The discussion of the distribution and phraseological combinatorics of the term for ‘onslaught, attacking force’ in Armenian names of Indo-Iranian origin shows that the Iranian compounds attested in Armenian sources contain whole *bundles of intrinsic parallels* between the Old Iranian and Old Indian traditions. Moreover, the newly investigated Armenian personal names show hidden rests of underlying syntactic structures and idiomatic collocations, which correspond to *common (Indo-Iranian) phraseological features* revealed by the comparative evidence of Avestan and Vedic in formulaic expressions attested in hymnal and magical poetry. Thus, the study of personal names can not only enhance our understanding of the Armeno-Iranian cultural interrelations, but also contribute to our comparative research on Indo-Iranian studies in a significant manner.

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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 ἥερα ἴεισι 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: «χριστιανοί δε μόνον ονόματι Αλανοί».

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La Caucasia e i nomadi delle steppe euroasiatiche. L'epoca delle popolazioni iraniche, dagli sciti ai sarmati

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Abstract. Caucasia is an exceptional region, distinguished by two majestic mountain ranges nestled between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Its distinctiveness lies in its role as a meeting point between diverse cultural horizons, such as the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes, the sedentary civilizations of the Near and Middle East, and the Mediterranean world connected through its expansive Black Sea coastline. Throughout the 1st millennium BC, a unique relationship developed between sedentary and pastoral cultures. The ancient communities of Caucasia found themselves in close proximity to nomadic populations from the steppes and plateaus of Siberia and Central Asia, as well as settlers and merchants from Greece. Additionally, the Achaemenid Empire from the Iranian Plateau brought with it new influences and expansionist aims. This convergence of diverse groups led to remarkable interactions in the realms of economics, culture, and the arts. The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive overview of the exchanges between nomadic communities and sedentary societies, with a specific focus on the Iranian populations during the period spanning from the 8th century BC to the 4th-5th century AD. This era marks the definitive replacement of the Iranian and Indo-European groups in the steppes by the Hunnic and later Turkic populations.

Keyword: Caucasia, nomads, Scythians, Sarmatians, Greek colonies.

1. Introduzione

Le origini del nomadismo euroasiatico, che per più di due millenni caratterizzerà le steppe dall'Europa orientale fino alla Cina occidentale,

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si fanno oggi giorno risalire alla zona montuosa della Siberia meridionale. In una favorevole nicchia ecologica, ricca di risorse minerarie e pastorali, a partire dalle fasi finali del II millennio le culture di Karasuk prima e Tagar poi (Legrand 2006; Bokovenko 2006) possono essere considerate gli embrioni da cui si svilupperanno quei caratteri specifici che caratterizzeranno il mondo dei nomadi nei secoli a venire¹.

Petroglifi, sepolture a kurgan, produzione metallurgica e stile animalistico sono le evidenze maggiormente caratterizzanti le prime società nomadiche. A questi nuovi elementi archeologici e artistici, si associa un nuovo stile di vita basato sulla mobilità e la gestione di mandrie sempre più numerose e diversificate. Si riorganizza anche la struttura sociale e politica, ormai basata su un assetto clan/tribù, fortemente militarizzata, al cui vertice si trovano leader riconosciuti e capaci di mobilitare ampi gruppi di armati. L'autorità politica di questi leader – che sarebbe improprio e anacronistico definire “re” o “khan” – si riflette nelle loro sepolture monumentali a tumulo, realizzate con enormi sforzi di manodopera e risorse, come il famoso tumulo di Arzhan-1 nei monti Altai (Gryaznov 1984).

Benché la ricerca archeologica abbia fatto molti passi in avanti negli ultimi decenni, permangono tuttora diversi aspetti critici nell'inquadrare correttamente il fenomeno nomadico nei suoi primi secoli di sviluppo. Uno degli aspetti più controversi riguarda la paternità culturale o etnica delle evidenze archeologiche ritrovate. L'abbondante letteratura a riguardo rivela una vasta serie di etnonimi affibbiati all'altrettanto diversificata cultura materiale datata al primo millennio, dall'Ungheria alla Siberia più orientale. Sono pertanto numerosi i tentativi di abbinare tombe e manufatti ai nomi storici di nomadi menzionati nelle fonti classiche e altomedievali, come quelli di Cimмери, Massageti, Saci, Sciti, Sauromati, Sarmati, Alani, Unni, ecc. Un utilizzo eccessivo di nomenclature rischia di portare ad attribuzioni contrastanti e confuse, soprattutto per le evidenze della Siberia e dell'Asia centrale, per le quali le stesse fonti sono ben più scarse e imprecise. Più delineata la situazione nelle steppe dell'Europa orientale e della Caucasia, dove l'abbondanza di resoconti mesopotamici e, soprattutto, di autori greci e romani permette attribuzioni generalmente più attendibili.

Dalle sue origini nelle lontane montagne siberiane, i caratteri del nomadismo euroasiatico si diffondono velocemente in tutta l'Asia centrale e oltre: intorno al X secolo sono già ampiamente attestati lungo il bacino degli Urali e del Volga (Koryakova and Epimakhov 2007, 220-250), arrivando infine nella Caucasia settentrionale e nel bacino Don-Dnepr intor-

¹ In generale, sui caratteri del nomadismo, soprattutto euroasiatico, vedere Khazanov 1994 e Chernykh 2017.



Figura 1. Mappa della Caucasia settentrionale tra VII – IV secolo a.C. Colonie greche in grigio. Kurgan meoti/sciti in rosso: 1. Kul’Oba; 2. Bol’shaja Bliznica; 3. “Sette Fratelli”; 4. Karagodeuašč; 5. Elizavetinskoj; 6. Voronezh; 7. Ust’Labinsk; 8. Fars; 9. Kurdžip; 10. Ul’; 11. Kelermes; 12. Kostromskaja; 13. Stavropol’; 14. Krasone Znamja; 15. Novozavedennoe; 16. Nartan.

no all’VIII secolo. La superiorità militare, garantita ormai da una totale padronanza del cavallo montato, li porterà ad occupare nicchie ecologiche attigue a quelle delle comunità sedentarie locali.

All’arrivo nella Caucasia settentrionale, caratterizzata da tre regioni geografiche distinte, i gruppi nomadici trovarono un ambiente favorevole per i loro armenti. Predominanti nella parte occidentale sono le praterie steppiche con il fertile terriccio nero irrigato dal fiume Kuban e dai suoi numerosi affluenti. Nella regione centrale si trovano colline con valli coperte di grandi boschi di latifoglie. Nella zona orientale la pianura ha un clima più secco e caldo, con una vegetazione semidesertica. Il ricco sistema tributario, le abbondanti e ben distribuite precipitazioni e la sostanziale diversità ecologica sono fattori che hanno contribuito ad un intenso sviluppo agricolo, specialmente nel bacino del Kuban; inoltre, la vicinanza tra pascoli estivi e invernali offrì agli allevatori l’opportunità di far pascolare le mandrie tutto l’anno, senza le asperità climatiche che caratterizzano l’ambiente transuralico.

L'abbondanza di risorse economiche e commerciali favorì il rapido sviluppo dei gruppi nomadici, i quali diverranno rapidamente il principale soggetto politico e militare nei territori delle attuali Ucraina e Russia europea. La ricchezza raggiunta dalle loro élite si riflette nell'enorme quantità di oggetti in oro depositi nei tumuli monumentali, che per ricchezza e dimensioni non troveranno più analogie nei secoli a venire.

Lo studio delle antichità nomadiche nella Caucasia venne avviato già nel XIX secolo, soprattutto da parte di cacciatori di tesori e amatori che agivano però sotto l'autorità delle istituzioni culturali dell'Impero russo, come la Commissione Archeologica Imperiale². Numerosi grandi tumuli furono scavati, con ricchissimi rinvenimenti, ma spesso la maniera approssimativa e non scientifica con cui furono indagati portò inevitabilmente alla perdita di un gran numero di dati. A complicare ancor di più una corretta interpretazione dei resti, si aggiunge il fatto che la stragrande maggioranza dei kurgan elitari è stata saccheggiata già in antico, alterando quindi il contesto originario. Inoltre, diversi tumuli sono stati usati per sepolture successive, anche per due secoli, rendendo quindi difficile una corretta suddivisione cronologica dei resti rinvenuti.

La prima fase delle scoperte archeologiche nelle terre dell'allora Impero russo³ non fu particolarmente notata in Occidente, sia per un chiaro divario linguistico, sia per un ambiente totalmente immerso nella fresca scoperta delle antichità classiche, mesopotamiche ed egizie. Fu solo nei primi nel Novecento che le antichità del Mar Nero furono finalmente presentate anche in Occidente, grazie anche all'emigrazione di diversi studiosi dopo la guerra civile russa del '17-'22. Si segnalano gli importantissimi studi di M. Rostovtsev ed E. Minns (Rostovtsev 1922; Minns 1913), ormai vecchi di un secolo ma tuttora validi.

Con la successiva epoca sovietica ci fu un grande impulso agli scavi e agli studi in campo storico e artistico delle antichità nomadiche nella Caucasia, con notevoli ritrovamenti e importanti esibizioni nei principali musei in Occidente⁴.

Benché sia stata un periodo sicuramente prolifico, la maggior parte degli studi si è essenzialmente concentrata sulle evidenze più significa-

² Particolarmente significativa (e in parte pure distruttiva) è stata l'attività di Nikolaj I. Veselovskij, professore di archeologia a San Pietroburgo e artefice della maggior parte degli scavi nel Kuban, compiuti in maniera approssimativa e con scarsa documentazione. Brevi report delle attività di scavo per conto della Commissione si trovano nei loro bollettini annuali (OAK).

³ Per un'interessante panoramica sulla storia dell'archeologia in Russia vedere Tikhonov 2013.

⁴ Due importanti mostre si tennero anche in Italia, nel 1977 a Venezia e tra fine 1990 e inizio '91 a Roma. Le pubblicazioni dei cataloghi rappresentano ancora oggi alcuni dei pochissimi studi in lingua italiana sugli Sciti (AA VV 1977 e 1990). Oltre ai due cataloghi si menziona anche Schiltz 1994.

tive, ossia i grandi kurgan dell'aristocrazia e l'oggettistica in oro e bronzo, tralasciando aspetti altrettanto importanti, ma apparentemente meno significativi, come la ceramica, l'oggettistica di uso comune, le sepolture dei soggetti non elitari. La direzione degli studi negli ultimi decenni si è fortunatamente concertata anche su queste tematiche.

Nonostante la ricca e continua produzione scientifica, purtroppo quasi esclusivamente in lingua russa⁵, permangono diversi aspetti ancora poco studiati, come, ad esempio, le fasi più antiche e le interazioni tra mondo nomadico e culture sedentarie native.

Al loro arrivo, infatti, le tribù nomadi non occuparono certamente un territorio disabitato, bensì si dovettero confrontare con un ambiente intensamente antropizzato, espressione di due orizzonti culturali principali: la cultura meotica nella zona più occidentale e lungo il bacino del Kuban⁶ e la cultura Koban diffusa nella zona centrale. Infine, nella zona più orientale, nell'attuale Daghestan, è presente la cultura Mugergan⁷.

La cultura meotiana si estendeva lungo la costa del Mar Nero orientale e le sue zone più interne; comincia a delinarsi nell'VIII a.C. (Erlich 2007, 12) e perdura, senza notevoli cambiamenti, fino al III secolo d.C. (Kamenetskij 2011, 7). Le comunità meotiche occupavano un areale economicamente importante: non solo il bacino del Kuban e il suo ricco sistema agricolo, ma anche l'entroterra delle colonie greche di Gorgippia, Fanagoria, Hermonassa⁸, nonché la strada principale che connetteva i mercati del Regno del Bosforo, soprattutto Tanais sul Don, e il Caucaso meridionale, come Dioskurias, che sappiamo essere stata uno dei centri principali del commercio nella Caucasia (Strabone Geo. 11.2.16).

I siti meotiani sono costituiti da complessi funerari e da insediamenti. Le necropoli sono formate sia da kurgan raggruppati in cluster o isolati, sia da vasti cimiteri di tombe a fossa. Migliaia di tombe meotiche sono state indagate (Erlich 2007, 11; Kamenetskij 2011, 201). La tipica sepoltura consisteva in una deposizione singola, dove l'orientamento del defunto spesso varia all'interno di un singolo sito, così come il corredo d'accompagnamento: le sepolture più povere contengono principalmente poca ceramica, mentre le sepolture elitarie sono accompagnate da ricchi corredi di gioielli – anche di metallo prezioso – armi, cavalli sacrificati e resti di carri (Fig. 2). Come evidenziato dalle ricche necropoli di Uašchitu (Erlich 1994, 134-

⁵ Dove possibile, si cercherà di fornire riferimenti bibliografici almeno in lingua inglese.

⁶ Oltre ai dettagliati studi in lingua russa (Erlich 2007; Leskov et al. 2005; Kamenetskij 2011), si segnala anche una panoramica in lingua inglese (Chandrasekaran 2013).

⁷ Essendo poco studiata e con minori relazioni con il mondo nomadico, non verrà trattata in questa sede.

⁸ C'è un'enorme letteratura riguardante la colonizzazione greca nel Mar Nero. In questa sede si rimanda solo a Kozlovskaya 2017.

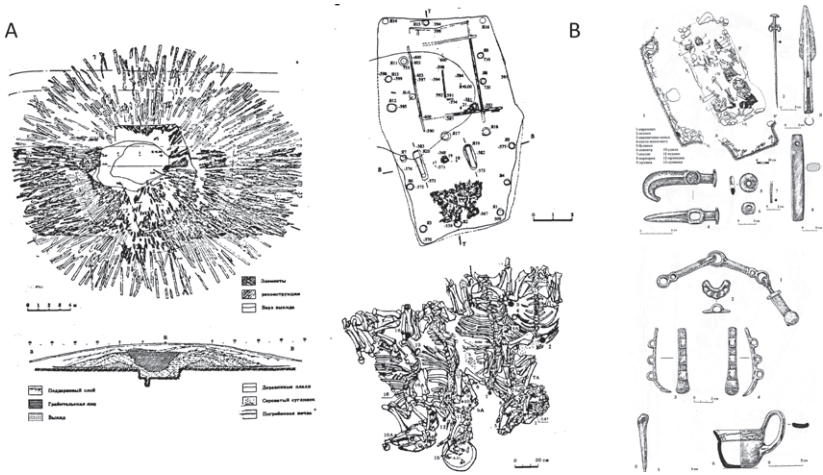


Figura 2. Esempi di tombe meotiche, Uašchitu e Fars (da Erlich 1994, tav. 1-2; Leskov and Erlich 1999, tav. 29-30).

150; Erlich et al. 2009), Ulka (Erlich 2019) e Fars (Leskov, Erlich 1999), già nell’VIII secolo si fanno evidenti le iterazioni tra le élite meotiche e quelle nomadiche, con la compresenza di oggettistica comune, che si ritroverà successivamente anche nel Caucaso meridionale, portate verosimilmente dalle incursioni cimmere prime e scite e poi. A partire dal V secolo a.C. aumentano anche le importazioni di oggettistica greca, soprattutto ceramica.

Meno delineata è la situazione insediamentale, dato che i siti abitati sono stati identificati principalmente sulla base di ricognizioni (Kamenetskij 2011, 237).

La cultura Koban, diffusa soprattutto nelle zone collinare e montuose a sud del fiume Terek, è principalmente espressione di piccole comunità sedentarie dedite all’allevamento, all’agricoltura terrazzata e, soprattutto, alla produzione metallurgica⁹.

La presenza scita nella Caucasia può essere suddivisa grossomodo in tre fasi principali: la fase formativa, tra fine VIII e inizio VI secolo; una fase centrale tra VI e V, e un’ultima fase, tra fine V e IV secolo a.C.¹⁰

⁹ Esiste una vasta bibliografia sulla cultura Koban, principalmente prodotta dalla sua più importante studiosa, Valentina Kozenkova. Nel volume a lei dedicato (Malyšev and Skakov 2021) e nello studio di Sabine Reinhold (2007) si possono trovare dettagliate descrizioni e riferimenti su questa importante cultura.

¹⁰ Esiste una ricchissima letteratura in lingua russa. Si segnalano solo gli studi più importanti: Terenožkin 1980; Il’inskaja and Terenožkin 1983; Machortych 1991; Jablonskij 1999; Guliaev and Ol’chovskij 2000; Kovalevskaja 2005; Prokopenko 2014.

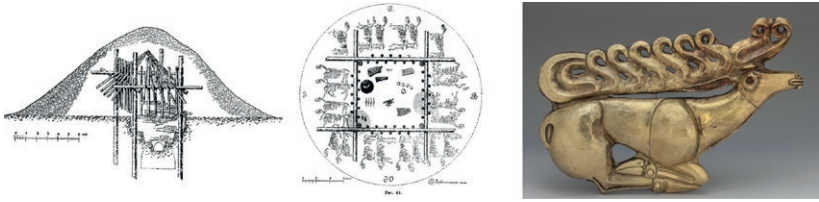


Figura 3. Kurgan di Kostromskaja (OAK 1897, fig. 42, 44) e la famosa placca in oro (31,7x19 cm; ©The State Hermitage Museum).

Benché già verso la fine dell’VIII secolo comincino a delinearsi evidenze di presenze nomadiche nella Caucasia (Erlich 2007), è solo nel VII secolo che il numero di kurgan aumenta notevolmente, soprattutto nella zona del medio e basso Kuban, in stretta connessione con la cultura protoeolica¹¹.

L’evidenza archeologica conosciuta proviene principalmente da sepolture elitarie, le quali presentano caratteri abbastanza uniformi: grandi tumuli coprivano una fossa centrale, all’interno della quale era costruita una struttura lignea a tendone, dove era posizionato il defunto insieme al suo corredo, mentre cavalli sacrificati potevano essere posizionati in prossimità della fossa. Nelle fasi più antiche, la struttura lignea veniva spesso bruciata.

Le più importanti e famose evidenze del periodo proto-scita provengono da due siti scavati già tra fine ’800 e inizio ’900. Il primo, Kostromskaja, è un kurgan singolo costruito sopra un piccolo tumulo dell’età del bronzo (OAK 1897, 11-12). Una grande fossa racchiudeva una struttura lignea a tendone, poi bruciata, con associati 22 cavalli (Fig. 3). Benché già saccheggiate in antico, sono stati recuperati frammenti di un’armatura in bronzo, punte di freccia, uno scudo di ferro, e la famosa e massiccia placca d’oro con la tipica forma del “cervo volante”.

A Kelermes, in una necropoli in uso sin dall’Età del Bronzo, sono stati indagati sei grandi tumuli appartenenti all’aristocrazia scita (Fig. 4). Sebbene già saccheggiate nell’antichità e infine indagate in maniera approssimativa da Shultz e Veselovskij a inizio ’900, hanno comunque fornito il più ricco repertorio di oggettistica di pregio del periodo arcaico (Galanina 1997).

Ulteriori kurgan del periodo più antico sono stati indagati a Krasnoe Znamja (Petrenko 2006), Novozavedennoe (Petrenko 1989), Nartan (Batačev 1985), Stenoi (Vinogradov 1974), e altri nei pressi di Stavropol

¹¹ Definita in questo modo in quanto la prima menzione dei Meoti nelle fonti classiche risale al VI sec. a.C.



Figura 4. Kurgan di Kelermes e dettagli della spada e ascia in oro (Galanina 1997, fig. 16 e tav. 8-11).

(Okhon'ko and Petrenko 1992). Tutte queste necropoli risalgono alla prima metà del VII secolo a.C.

A Nartan sono stati scavati 24 kurgan, suddivisi in tre periodi: fine del VII (tumuli 12-14, 16, 19-22); VI secolo (6, 7, 9-11, 15, 17, 18, 23); tardo VI e V secolo (1-5, 8, 24). Le tombe appartengono principalmente ad individui ordinari, spesso sepolture bisome, generalmente con corredi privi di elementi elitari (Fig. 5). I cambiamenti nelle tradizioni funerarie nelle varie fasi includevano principalmente la diminuzione delle dimensioni della camera funeraria e l'apparente abbandono della tradizione di incendiare la struttura lignea.

Un ulteriore cimitero attiguo, Nartan II, data dal VI al IV secolo (Kerefov and Karmov 2009). Le sepolture si trovano sotto tumuli non più alti di 2 m. I morti sono sepolti in fosse che non superano i 10 m², oppure sono collocati sull'antico piano di calpestio, solitamente in strutture lignee. Un altro cimitero con evidenze simili è Novozavedennoe-II (Petrenko, Maslov, Kantorovich 2000; Maslov and Petrenko 1998).

I manufatti di accompagnamento delle sepolture maschili del periodo includevano solitamente un ricco repertorio bellico: spade, lance, asce, archi con frecce, elmi e armature metalliche. Numerosi oggetti erano inoltre riccamente decorati con raffigurazioni in stile animalistico. Nel periodo più arcaico ci sono inoltre evidenze di contatti, influenze e importazioni dal Vicino Oriente.

Caucasia meridionale

Benché il presente lavoro si concentri sulla Caucasia settentrionale, è necessario fare almeno una piccola presentazione delle evidenze storiche e archeologiche delle regioni a sud del Caucaso, tra VIII e VI secolo a.C.

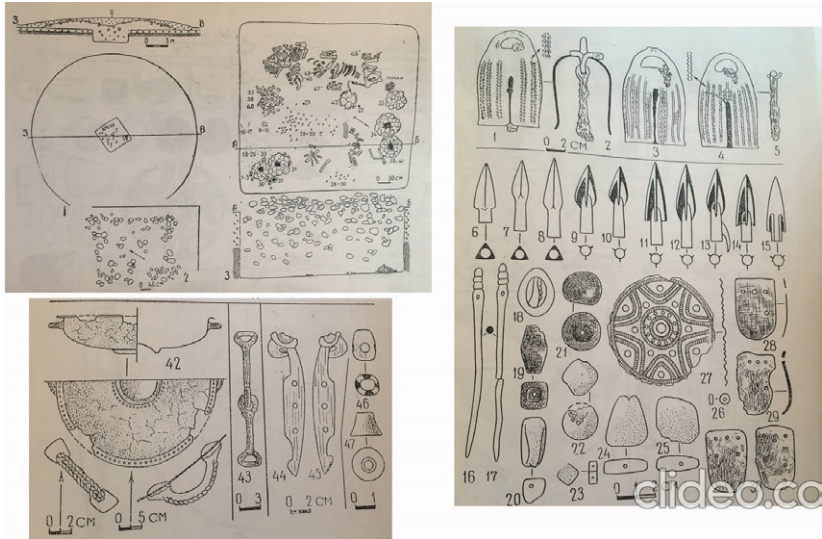


Figura 5. Kurgan 15 di Nartan con corredo (Batačev 1985, tav. 38-39).

A partire dalla metà dell'VIII secolo le fonti mesopotamiche registrano le incursioni di popolazioni nomadiche da nord, alle quali danno inizialmente il nome di Gimir/Gamir, più comunemente noti come Cimneri, a cui seguiranno un secolo dopo gli Ašguza/Iškuza, ossia gli Sciti¹². Entrambi i gruppi, in momenti e aree differenti, interagiscono, anche violentemente, con i principali attori politici dell'epoca: il Regno di Urartu, l'Impero assiro, i potentati della Mannea e Media, i regni di Lidia e Frigia.

A differenza degli Sciti, i Cimneri sono una popolazione ancora difficile da definire correttamente. Benché ampiamente descritti da fonti mesopotamiche, bibliche e greche, archeologicamente sono piuttosto sfuggenti, e solo poche evidenze provenienti dall'Anatolia possono ad essi essere collegate (Makhortykh 2022). La difficoltà principale risiede nel definire caratteri propri a questa popolazione e separarli dall'evidenza scita. Bisogna inoltre considerare la tendenza delle fonti mesopotamiche, le quali probabilmente usavano globalmente il termine Gamir per definire superficialmente anche gli Sciti. Esempi di tali approssimazioni storiche non mancano: i bizantini si riferivano a Unni, Slavi e vari altri popoli con il nome di Sciti

¹² Per un'analisi dettagliata su Cimneri e Sciti vedere Ivantchik 2001. Panoramiche generali, con bibliografia essenziale, sono anche disponibili sul sito dell'Enciclopedia Iranica: <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/scythians#prettyPhoto>; <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cimmerians-nomads>.

molti secoli dopo la scomparsa. Discorso simile vale per le fonti medievali e l'uso generalizzato del termine "tartari" per definire anche i mongoli. Sembra quindi probabile che il nome Cimмери/Gamir iniziò ad essere usato in modo generalizzato per designare i nomadi alla fine del VII o nel VI secolo a.C. Ci troviamo verosimilmente di fronte a due gruppi molto vicini tra loro sia dal punto di vista culturale sia, probabilmente, anche da quello linguistico ed etnico. Le differenze nella cultura materiale tra i due gruppi, se mai esistono, sono molto difficili da individuare.

La presenza nomadica a sud del Caucaso è stata tracciata principalmente seguendo i rinvenimenti delle tipiche frecce bilobate e trilobate in uso nel mondo scita, oltre ad altre tipologie di armi, briglie equine ed elementi decorativi in stile animalistico.

Sebbene le evidenze nomadiche nel Vicino Oriente e Caucasia meridionale siano state ben studiate¹³, sono in verità pochissimi i resti funerari ad essi associabili. In Azerbaijan, oltre al tumulo Mali Kurgan, a Mingechavir sono state scoperte tombe con sepolture singole, per lo più saccheggiate, in posizione accovacciata, accompagnate da un gran numero di oggetti. In totale, sono stati trovati fino a 30 cavalli, molti dei quali deposti con le briglie (Arslanov, Vaidov, Ione 1959). In Anatolia sono stati rinvenuti delle sepolture di cavalli a Norşuntepe (Hauptmann 1983) e altri rinvenimenti casuali da sepolture, non sempre ben documentati, ad Amasia e Imirler (Ünal 1983). In Iran settentrionale, recentemente è stata portata alla luce una necropoli con chiare evidenze cimmero/scite (Rezalou and Airmlo 2017).

L'attività degli Sciti nel Vicino Oriente cessò sul finire del VII – inizio VI secolo con lo stabilizzarsi della situazione politica grazie al consolidamento dell'autorità del regno neobabilonense in Mesopotamia e l'espansionismo dei Medi tra Iran e Anatolia.

La fase centrale e tarda: VI-IV secolo a.C.

A partire dal VI secolo il baricentro della potenza e ricchezza dei gruppi nomadici sciti si sposta gradualmente dal Caucaso alla costa settentrionale del Mar Nero, dove, tra VI al IV secolo a.C., si registra una crescita degli insediamenti e delle evidenze funerarie. È dalla zona del bacino del Don e del Dnepr, dalla Crimea e dall'area di Kerch da dove provengono i ricchissimi corredi con abbondanza di oggettistica in oro,

¹³ Vista l'ampia bibliografia a riguardo, si segnalano solo gli studi più significativi: Pogrebova 1984; Esajan and Pogrebova 1984; Pogrebova and Raevskij 1992; Ivantchik 2001; Mehnert 2008, Hasanov 2019; Crescioli 2019.

spesso realizzata da maestranze greche. Questo periodo coincide all'inizio con l'espansionismo mercantile di Atene, e, dal V secolo in poi, con l'emergente Regno del Bosforo, il quale esercitò una notevole influenza anche sulla vicina regione del fiume Kuban.

In questo periodo si registra un generale aumento della celebrazione del rituale funerario: aumentano i cavalli deposti, la presenza di sacrifici umani e le dimensioni delle strutture. Tra VI e inizio V secolo continuano ad essere erette strutture lineari all'interno della fossa. Significativo del periodo sono i kurgan del villaggio di Voronezh: in un tumulo la sepoltura era posizionata in una struttura lignea, mentre numerosi cavalli erano deposti ad anello intorno ad essa.

I monumenti tra V-IV secolo sono generalmente piuttosto scarsi. Anche i tumuli ordinari di questo periodo sono concentrati nella parte settentrionale e occidentale del Kuban. I morti venivano seppelliti in piccole fosse ricavate in kurgan dei periodi precedenti. I manufatti di accompagnamento non sono numerosi ed includono ceramica varia, soprattutto di produzione meotica, punte di freccia, e altre armi. Una delle principali evidenze proviene dal cimitero di Novozavedennoe-III (Kantorovich and Maslov 2017), il quale permette di tracciare la continuità culturale dei gruppi sciti nella Caucasia. Sono state scoperte costruzioni ipogee con una struttura in legno (saccheggiate nell'antichità), nelle quali erano stati deposti membri dell'aristocrazia scita, adagiati su divani di legno o su stuoie, accompagnati da armi, cavalli, ceramica, gioielleria, manufatti in stile animalistico, e infine importazioni greche e transcaucasiche.

L'evidenza più significativa del periodo proviene dai nove tumuli di Ul', scavati principalmente a inizio '900 ma oggetto di una dettagliata pubblicazione recente (Ivantchik and Leskov 2015). Solo uno dei kurgan, occupato all'epoca da un cimitero circasso, fu scavato più di 70 anni dopo da A. Leskov, mentre un altro piccolo tumulo (kurgan 11) fu distrutto durante la costruzione di una strada.

I tumuli di Ul' hanno datazioni differenti: il Kurgan 1/1908 è datato alla prima metà del VI secolo grazie alla presenza di due vasi ionici. Il secondo orizzonte, metà del VI secolo, include i kurgan 2 e 3/1908, 1 e 2/1909, insieme al tumulo scavato da Leskov nel 1982. Il terzo orizzonte comprende il kurgan 1/1898 (definito anche Grande Kurgan) e 2/1898, il quale ha fornito importazioni attiche di fine VI e inizio V secolo. Il kurgan 11 sembrerebbe essere di poco successivo, ossia al V secolo.

Tra i tumuli di Ul' spicca ovviamente il Grande Kurgan, con la sua enorme struttura e i circa 400 cavalli in essa sacrificati (Fig. 6a).

Per molto tempo, i tumuli di Ul' sono stati considerati come classici monumenti funerari. Eppure, il dettagliato scavo del kurgan 10 ha dimostrato come non fosse in verità una sepoltura, bensì un santuario. Una

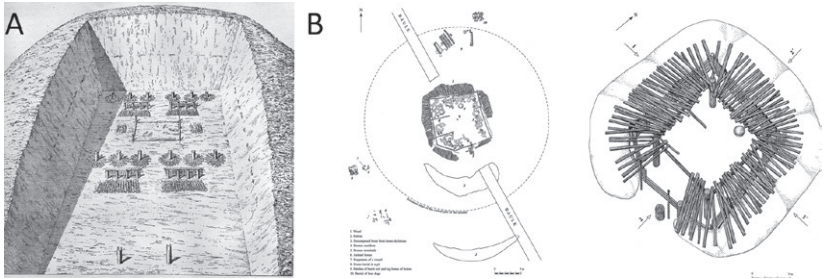


Figura 6. Disegno di Veselovskij del Grande Kurgan di Ul' (OAK 1898, 30) e kurgan 10 (Ivantchik and Leskov 2015, fig. 9, 13).

piattaforma di terra alta circa 1 m è stata scoperta sotto il riempimento del kurgan. La sua superficie piana aveva un diametro di 20 m e vi si accedeva da sud da una rampa livellata. Al centro della struttura è stata scoperta un'intelaiatura lignea, dentro la quale sono stati ritrovati 29 cavalli sacrificati (Fig. 6b). Lo stesso Veselovskij non riportò il rinvenimento di ossa umane in nessuno dei tumuli da lui scavati. Probabilmente anche le restanti monumentali strutture avevano una funzione più culturale che funeraria.

Tra V e IV secolo a.C. le evidenze sono maggiori, specialmente in prossimità delle colonie greche, dove è più forte l'interazione tra mondo meotico, nomadico ed ellenico. Su influenze greca si diffonde progressivamente l'uso della pietra all'interno delle sepolture. Anche la gamma di manufatti è molto più ampia e comprende ceramiche greche, ampia oggettistica in oro, spesso con decorazioni sia in stile animalistico che ellenico.

Evidenze del medesimo periodo provengono anche dai vicini kurgan di Ulyap, dove sono state anche portate alla luce sepolture a fossa del periodo scita in cui è forte la cultura meotica (Leskov et al. 2005), ulteriori tumuli delle élite meotico/scite del IV secolo provengono da Kurdžip (Galanina 1980), "Sette Fratelli" (Gorončarovskij 2014) e Karagodeuašč (MAR 1894). Altrettanto significativo è uno dei kurgan della necropoli di Elizavetinskij, scavata da Veselovskij (Fig. 7). La tomba è una struttura quadrangolare realizzata in pietra, a cui si accedeva tramite un corridoio, nel quale sono stati trovati i resti di almeno un carro con tre paia di cavalli e due aurighi, verosimilmente sacrificati. Ulteriori dieci cavalli posizionati a sinistra del corridoio, mentre quattro scheletri, forse femminili, a destra. Nel muro settentrionale, in una nicchia, era posizionato un singolo scheletro maschile con un corredo di armi.

Dalla metà del IV secolo si assiste a un generale calo delle evidenze funerarie elitarie, probabile sinonimo della perdita di potere dei gruppi sciti. Questa sostanziale diminuzione di autorità, ricchezza e celebrazione

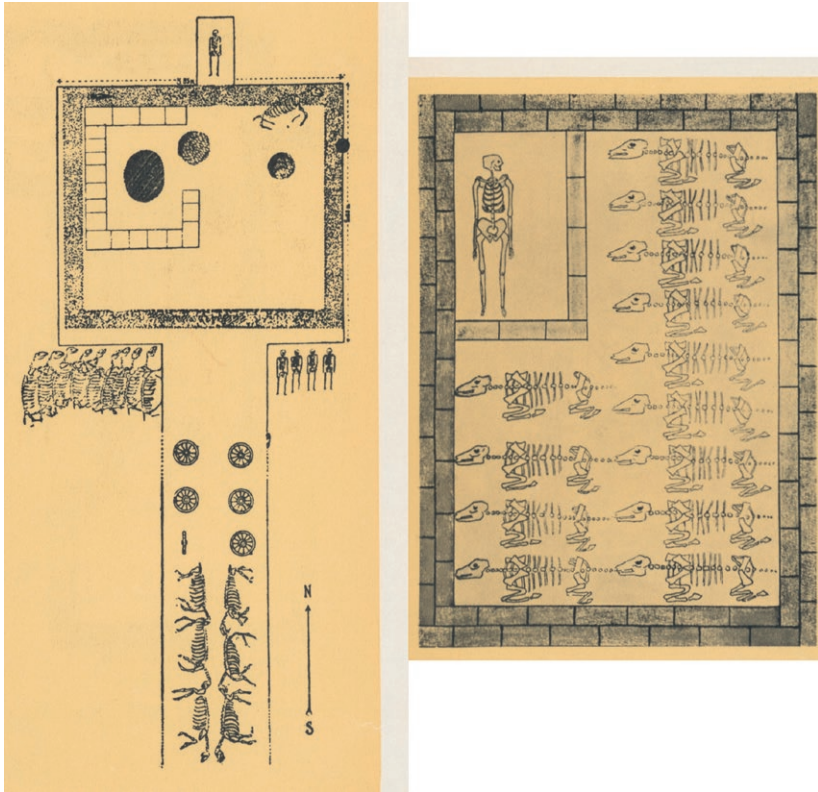


Figura 7. Kurgan “Sette Fratelli” ed “Elizavetinskij” (Artamonov 1966, tav. 7-8).

funeraria ha verosimilmente varie ragioni. Da un lato, la nuova situazione politica ed economica: con le campagne di Alessandro il Grande e l’apertura degli enormi mercati asiatici (anche cerealicoli, come l’Egitto), il commercio del Mar Nero subisce un declino, accentuato dalle varie fasi di conflittualità tra macedoni, sciti e città del Bosforo. Inoltre, una parte delle élite scite, vivendo a stretto contatto con le comunità greche, subisce un forte processo di ellenizzazione, chiaramente manifestato dai kurgan monumentali nella zona dello stretto di Kerch, come, ad esempio, Kul’Oba e Bol’saja Bliznica (Artamonov 1966, 62-73), realizzati da maestranze greche seguendo l’esempio delle tombe macedoni e con ambia oggettistica ellenica. Infine, tribù ancora chiaramente nomadiche, identificate come sarmate, si muovono dal bacino Ural-Volga verso occidente andando a conquistare, sconfiggendo i gruppi sciti, la Caucasia settentrionale e le zone tra i fiumi Don e Dnepr. I resti di questi gruppi si rifugeranno in

Crimea dove, nel corso di un secolo circa, finiranno per essere assorbiti completamente dalle comunità locali.

I Sarmati

All'inizio del IV secolo la Caucasia settentrionale appare scarsamente popolata, con poche evidenze funerarie conosciute. Permangono però gli importanti nuclei meotici lungo la costa e una serie di insediamenti nella zona di Stavropol' (Abramova 1995, 165).

Ci sono alcune difficoltà nell'identificare i siti sarmati nella fase antica (IV-III secolo), ma la presenza di evidenze attestata nelle antichità sincrone della regione del Volga-Urali è piuttosto evidente (Mirošina 1986, 173, 174). Nuove tipologie si registrano soprattutto nell'ambito funerario (Marčenko 1996, 95), segno della penetrazione di nuovi gruppi di popolazioni nomadiche provenienti dal bacino del Volga, generalmente identificate come tribù sarmate. A questa fase transitoria si fa risalire la distruzione dell'insediamento fortificato di Grushevskoye, vicino a Stavropol, indice forse di una conquista *manu militari* della zona (Abramova 1995, 166).

Il grosso dell'evidenza sarmata si trova nelle zone adiacenti al Mar d'Azov e lungo la riva destra del fiume Kuban inferiore, dove sono noti oltre 400 cimiteri¹⁴. Il numero di sepolture conosciute nel Caucaso centrale è invece di gran lunga inferiore.

Le regioni del Caucaso centrale, specialmente quelle più interne e montagnose, sono meno influenzate dalle culture nomadiche. Permane fondamentalmente una simbiosi culturale tra l'elemento della cultura Koban e le formazioni prima scite e sarmate poi, senza però il prevalere di queste ultime (Prokopenko 2014).

Le sepolture sarmate hanno caratteristiche abbastanza uniformi: spesso sono posizionate nei kurgan dell'età del bronzo, hanno una struttura a catacomba, ingressi lunghi e stretti, e la camera posta sullo stesso asse della fossa d'ingresso (Fig. 8a). Anche nelle tombe sarmate spesso sono sopravvissute strutture in legno. Le sepolture sono generalmente singole, con i defunti solitamente supini, spesso posizionati diagonalmente all'interno della fossa.

Le armi sono abbondanti nei corredi: comuni sono le punte di freccia, più scarse le spade (Fig. 8b). Queste ultime comprendono due gruppi principali sulla base dei pomelli, a mezzaluna o circolari (Marčenko 1996,

¹⁴ Molti studi, anche recenti, si sono dedicati all'evidenza sarmata nella Caucasia, ma si tratta praticamente solo di letteratura in lingua russa. Si segnalano comunque: Marčenko 1996; Skripkin 2010; Prokopenko 2014.

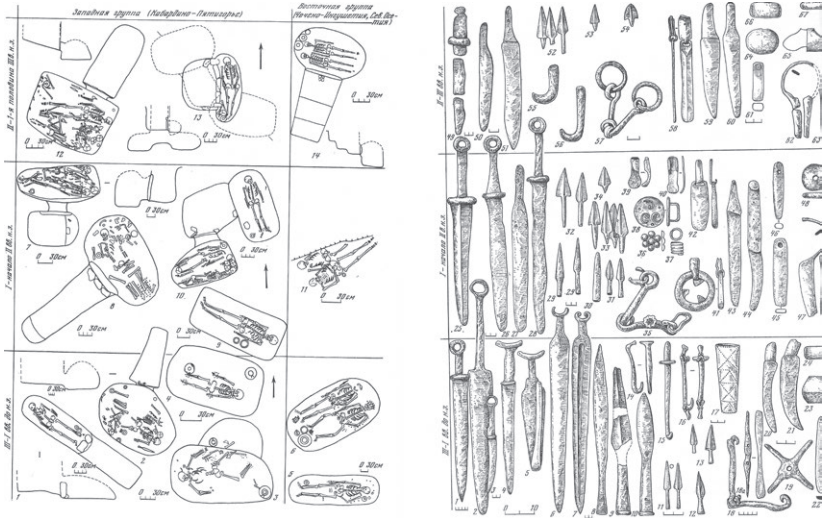


Figura 8. Esempi di sepolture e armamentario del periodo sarmata (Abramova 1989, tav. 108. 110).

48-50, fig. 12). Molto caratteristici sono gli specchi in bronzo, ritrovati spesso anche in sepolture meotiche. L'influenza meotica è più forte tra i corredi sarmati del III-I secolo a.C., con il rinvenimento di numerosa gioielleria e ceramica meotica realizzata al tornio. Oltre all'oggettistica, i corredi hanno fornito anche tracce di cibi e bevande deposti all'interno di vasi.

Nel Caucaso centrale numerose evidenze (Kerefov 1988) mostrano una ripresa degli insediamenti e cimiteri a partire dal III-II secolo a.C. Le necropoli sono caratterizzate da una grande diversità tipologica nelle sepolture, segno della natura mista della popolazione. I cimiteri principali sono Nižne-Džulatskij e Chegemskii (Abramova 1972; Kerefov 1985), che però non contengono ricchi corredi. Un'eccezione sono le ricche tombe trovate sulla riva sinistra del fiume Terek vicino a Mozdok: nel kurgan 24 una donna di 55-60 anni era accompagnata da un ricco corredo in oggetti in oro, bronzo e perline semipreziose (Gidžrati, Nagler 1985).

Il grosso delle evidenze sarmate data alla fine del I millennio, periodo in cui è forte l'interazione con il vicino Regno del Bosforo. Tra I secolo avanti e II secolo d.C. sono anche numerose le evidenze di scambi commerciali, non solo con il mondo romano, ma anche con l'Asia centrale, la Battriana e la Cina. Particolarmente significativa è la necropoli elitaria del "Cimitero d'oro" (Gušina, Zaseckja 1994), nei pressi di Ust'-Labinsk, con oltre cento tumuli a catacombe indagati. Dei resti identificabili, la maggior

parte dei defunti sono di sesso maschile (57), mentre solo una decina è riferibile a soggetti femminili. La tomba è costituita dal pozzo d'ingresso, un corridoio lungo e stretto e la camera funeraria chiusa con un'ostruzione di mattoni o tronchi. Vista la ricca presenza di armi sarmate accanto a numerose importazioni romane è stato proposto di considerare il cimitero parte di una comunità di guerrieri sarmata impiegata come truppa mercenaria dai Romani (Gušina, Zaseckja 1994, 36-40).

Nelle fasi cronologiche successive i cambiamenti più significativi riguardano la presenza preponderante di piccoli tumuli singoli, principalmente con fosse quadrangolari e l'orientamento delle teste dei defunti verso nord. Una caratteristica specifica della tarda cultura sarmata è un'alta percentuale di deformazione artificiale dei crani, che si riscontra soprattutto nella zona dei bassi Urali.

Conclusioni: Alani, Unni e oltre

L'arrivo degli Alani nella Caucasia si fa generalmente risalire alla metà del III secolo d.C., come attestato da rinvenimenti con evidenze funerarie nuove nella zona caspica e nell'attuale Daghestan (Malašev 2016). La sepoltura tipica del periodo è uno dei principali segni etnomarcatori degli Alani (Gabuev and Malašev 2009, 144-147, 161-162) è la catacomba con camera funeraria a forma di T con nicchie, ossia tombe a camera oblunghe a cui si accede da un pozzo verticale o obliquo o da un lungo passaggio (a dromos), lungo e largo abbastanza, in alcuni casi, da contenere sepolture di cavalli (Fig. 9). La maggior parte delle sepolture elitarie sono state saccheggiate già in antico, mentre quelle ordinarie hanno fornito corredi non particolarmente ricchi. Ci sono nuove tipologie di armi ed elementi decorativi ma l'aspetto più significativo è sicuramente la definitiva scomparsa dello stile animalistico, già scarsamente attestato a partire dalle fasi finali del I millennio a.C.

Le similitudini tra mondo tardo-sarmata e alano sono comunque numerose, soprattutto nella tipologia funeraria. Alcune differenze, evidenziate ad esempio nella necropoli di Klin Yar, riguardano la tendenza nella fase alana di inserire nelle camere funerarie sepolture multiple (Belinskij and Härke 2018).

Le evidenze più numerose degli Alani si trovano nella zona centrale della Caucasia settentrionale, dove il paesaggio urbano è caratterizzato da un fitto sistema di insediamenti fortificati associati a necropoli con tumuli a catacomba e tombe a fossa (Korobov 2017).

L'epoca delle popolazioni iraniche termina in concomitanza dei grandi movimenti migratori del IV-V secolo d.C., periodo nel quale anche le

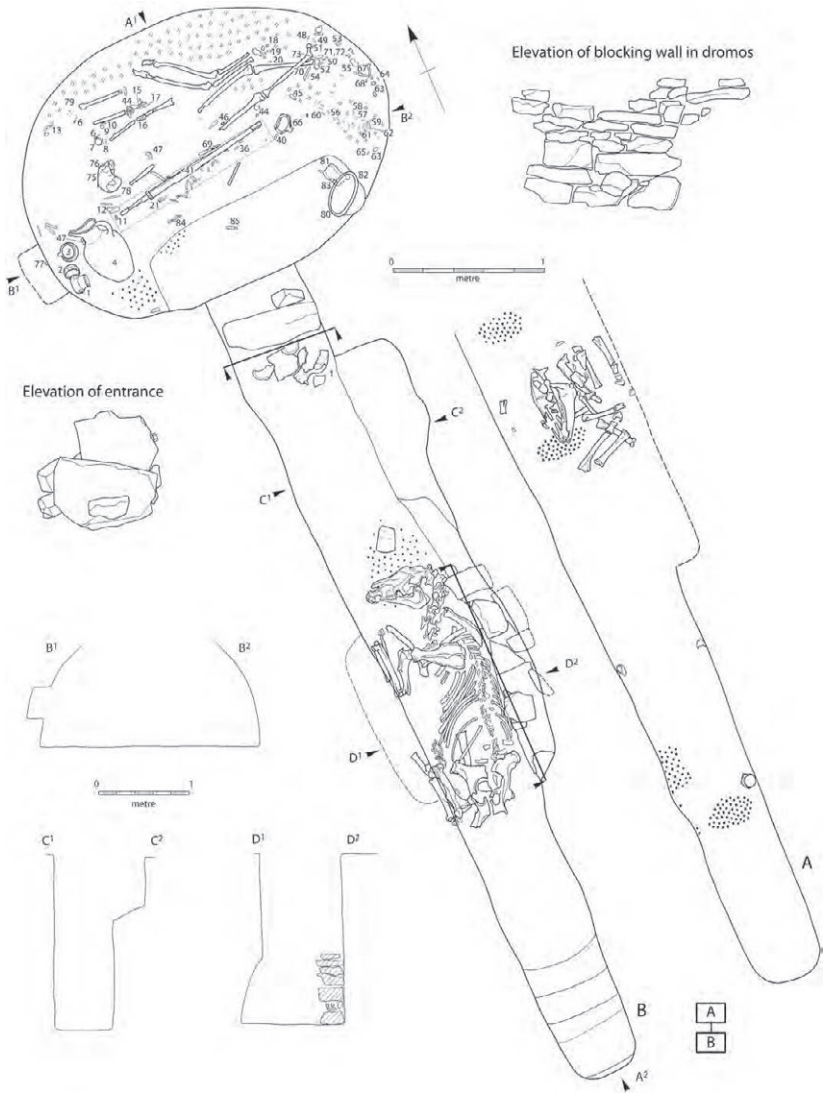


Figura 9. Tomba sarmato/alana da Klin Yar III (Belinskij and Härke 2018, 307).

steppe della Caucasia settentrionale sono interessate dal movimento degli Unni. Tutto il periodo è caratterizzato da una sostanziale diminuzione dell'evidenza archeologica, che non riguarda solo il Caucaso centrale ma anche la zona del Mar Nero, dove la cultura meotica era già essenzialmen-

te scomparsa da oltre un secolo. Alcune evidenze elitarie permangono in ogni caso anche nel V secolo. Significativa è la necropoli di Brut, in Ossezia settentrionale, che ha fornito importanti evidenze del passaggio dalla fase alana a quella unna senza nette cesure (Gabuev 2014).

Successivamente, anche nel Caucaso inizia la fase medievale antica (V-X secolo d.C.), caratterizzata da lunghi periodi di instabilità politica e ripetute ondate di nuove popolazioni nomadiche, principalmente di ceppo turcico. Alle incursioni dei Bulgari seguirà la formazione del khaganato khazaro, alla cui caduta ulteriori ondate nomadiche (Peceneghi, Cumani/Polovzi) investiranno la Caucasia.

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La centralità dei nomadi nel commercio della Caucasia settentrionale. Rapporti diplomatici fra i Mongoli e Venezia sul Mar d'Azov nel XIV secolo

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Abstract. This paper examines the significant role of nomadic populations in shaping trade networks in Northern Caucasia in the 14th century. Focusing on the diplomatic relations between the Mongol elite of the Ulus Jochi (Golden Horde) and the Venetian authorities, the paper explores how nomads' idea of juridical spaces and attitude towards commerce dictated the pace of European presence in the Northern Black Sea basin, sometimes favoring, sometimes halting mobility, economic practices, and cultural exchanges in the region. By analyzing historical sources and accounts, this study aims to show the active role of the Mongols in regulating the European commercial expansion in Northern Caucasia during the *difficult* 14th century.

Keywords: Mongol history, history of Venice, Medieval trade, Azov Sea Region, 14th-century crisis, history of Tana.

Sin dalle sue origini il nomadismo è stata una forma di reperimento delle risorse adattabile, ma insufficiente. Pertanto, il rapporto dei nomadi con le comunità di agricoltori e di produttori è sempre stato una necessità irrinunciabile. E tale esigenza si è esplicitata soprattutto attraverso gli scambi. Le relazioni fra nomadi e sedentari, attraverso rapporti pacifici (commercio, diplomazia) o conflittuali (raid, razzie, guerra), non significa che presso alcune società nomadi non siano esistite pratiche agricole. Lad-

dove l'ambiente lo permetteva i nomadi coltivavano la terra (Di Cosmo 1994; Eisma 2012). Di più, comunità di pastori nomadi hanno convissuto per secoli in prossimità di aree sedentarizzate, e nel corso della storia la netta divisione fra nomadi e agricoltori sedentari è stata meno netta di quanto una storiografia dominante ha tradizionalmente presentato (Lattimore 1979; Barfield 1989; Khazanov 1994) in quanto troppo schiacciata su fonti di tipo narrativo, le quali presentano inevitabilmente un punto di vista tutto a svantaggio dei nomadi, descritti come una calamità da cui difendersi; basti pensare, ad esempio ai casi dell'impero bizantino coi Peceneghi e della Rus' coi Polovcy/Cumani (Pubblici 2021, 17-22). Solo il ricorso a un insieme il più completo possibile di fonti può aiutare a ridimensionare il rapporto fra nomadi e sedentari in contesti di interazione coerente. Certo, ciò è possibile solo laddove si hanno a disposizione, fra gli altri, indagini archeologiche, analisi linguistiche e scritture documentarie. È il caso degli *emporia* costruiti dalle città italiane sul Mar Nero, all'interno del territorio conquistato e governato dai Mongoli in seguito alle spettacolari campagne militari del XIII secolo (Saunders 2001; Bernardini-Guida 2012; May 2013 e May-Hope 2022; Pubblici 2023).

La presenza organizzata degli italiani sul Mar Nero settentrionale dominato dai Mongoli ebbe origine dal 1261, ovvero dalla stipula del trattato del Ninfeo, con cui l'imperatore bizantino Michele VIII Paleologo concesse a Genova il diritto esclusivo di navigazione e commercio con la capitale del ricostituito impero (Di Cosmo 2009; Balard 2012; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 67-72). L'accordo permise a Genova di passare il Bosforo e frequentare le coste interne del Mar Nero, creando le premesse per la costruzione di un sistema commerciale imponente il quale, nel giro di un secolo, si estese dalla Crimea all'Anatolia e dai Balcani al Caucaso. Dal 1268 anche Venezia si accordò coi Comneni, ma ci vollero anni prima che la Serenissima recuperasse lo svantaggio maturato nei confronti della rivale. Seppur in tempi diversi le due repubbliche italiane raggiunsero la foce del Don e si insediarono nella grande città di Azak, dove costruirono un loro abitato che chiamarono Tana. Proprio questa esperienza, la più lontana dalla madrepatria, è esemplificativa di un atteggiamento che era generale nell'Italia del XIII secolo e che fu in gran parte una conseguenza dalla drammatica Quarta Crociata del 1203-4.

L'invasione mongola e la creazione di una *pax*, di un sistema politico coerente che garantiva vie più sicure e una costante manutenzione delle stesse (Kramarovskij 2017; Kalra 2020; Cristea-Pilat 2020; Favereau-Počekaev 2023), completò il quadro aprendo di fatto l'Asia all'Europa, il cui ceto mercantile in quegli anni stava attraversando una fase di profonda trasformazione (Lopez 1976, 50-58 e Spufford 1988, 238-242). Le vie che connettevano il bacino del Mar Nero all'Asia Orientale vennero

battute con crescente intensità; in particolare divenne sempre più strategica quella che l'agente fiorentino del banco Bardi Francesco di Balduccio Pegolotti chiama la *via de la Tana per il Gattaio* (Pegolotti 1936, 24). Si trattava di una carovaniere che partiva dalla foce del Don, passava a nord e proseguiva fino al deserto del Gobi per poi scendere verso Pechino. Era una strada lunga, ma sostanzialmente sicura, rispetto alle altre due che molti anni addietro Roberto Lopez definì "centrale e meridionale" (Lopez 1951, 92-93). La via meridionale era in gran parte tutta marittima: dal Mar Rosso al Golfo Persico e poi dall'Oceano Indiano fino in Cina. Era un viaggio la cui durata non era inferiore ai due anni e risultava pertanto costosissimo. Il più breve era l'itinerario, per così dire, centrale: giunti in Persia via mare, si proseguiva per terra da Tabriz fino a Mashhad, nell'Iran nord-orientale, poi si saliva a Merv e si proseguiva per Samarcanda; la via passava per i monti del Pamir e si dirigeva verso il deserto del Gobi dopo il quale si arrivava in Cina. Anche questa via presentava rischi enormi a causa dell'ostile morfologia territoriale e della grande distanza fra un'oasi e l'altra, tale da rendere più difficile riposarsi e far riposare gli animali. Inoltre, in spazi vasti e disabitati la presenza delle forze di sicurezza garantite dai Mongoli era più rarefatta. A onor del vero va detto che tutte queste traiettorie, pur percorribili, richiedevano l'assunzione di rischi molto alti legati alla lunghezza del viaggio – almeno nove mesi – e agli ingenti investimenti che un'impresa del genere richiedeva. Per questo a viaggiare fra l'Europa e il bacino del Mar Nero furono sì merci e uomini, ma oltre la Caucasia a muoversi furono soprattutto le merci, trasportate per segmenti successivi da mercanti locali esperti e profondi conoscitori delle regioni centroasiatiche.

In ogni caso questo sistema di collegamento fra il bacino del Mar Nero e l'Asia resistette in efficienza anche quando le condizioni politiche generali cambiarono. Le traiettorie dei mercanti però ne risentirono. Nella seconda metà del XIII secolo il contesto politico della Caucasia settentrionale e dell'Asia centrale (la Transoxiana in particolare) subì uno scossone che modificò gli itinerari commerciali diretti al cuore dell'Asia. La situazione difficile che vige nei porti del Mediterraneo orientale e determinata dalla guerra fra l'Ilkhanato e l'Egitto dei Mamelucchi da una parte e l'Orda d'Oro dall'altra, fu aggravata dal divieto imposto dal papa, nei primi anni del Trecento, di commerciare coi musulmani e dal conseguente boicottaggio degli scambi con Alessandria (Ortalli 1995; Ortalli 2012; Praziniak 2013). Quindi, sia la via meridionale sia quella centrale si irrigidirono sempre di più. Anche la situazione in Asia centrale non era migliore, dato il perdurante stato di conflitto fra il khanato chagadaide e i due vicini: l'impero degli Yuan e l'Ilkhanato (Biran 2013; Kim 2000). A questo va aggiunta la necessità di trovare mercati alternativi, tutti fattori che pos-

sono aver spinto Genova e, in seguito anche Venezia, a investire sul Mar d'Azov come snodo commerciale per i prodotti che giungevano da Oriente. La via settentrionale acquisì pertanto sempre maggiore importanza.

Nella regione delle steppe ponto-caspiche, dove un coacervo etnico viveva a stretto contatto, la concezione utilitaristica del mercante, elemento predominante dell'emigrazione occidentale in Oriente, si trovò dinanzi a un insieme di popolazioni il cui retroterra culturale era estremamente frammentato. L'elemento nomade conviveva col mercante musulmano del Turkestan, il minorita e il domenicano vivevano in conventi posti nel cuore dell'Orda d'Oro, il mercante europeo si trovò a dover utilizzare strutture di accoglienza create dai Mongoli etc. A emigrare in Oriente fu soprattutto quella borghesia urbana emergente, accanto a famiglie di antica origine nobiliare, che niente aveva in comune col mondo della steppa e il suo radicamento tradizionale. In Levante arrivarono i cittadini e con loro il modello associativo urbano. Gli insediamenti latini d'Oltremare, spesso di modeste dimensioni, non esportarono il mondo rurale e furono impossibilitate a costituirsi uno nuovo, vincolate da necessità impellenti e intrinseche oltre che da pressioni esterne (Balard 1978).

La solidarietà nomade, basata sul clan, si trovò davanti a un principio associativo nuovo, basato sull'appartenenza cittadina originaria. I mercanti occidentali rappresentanti della crescita urbana europea di fine Duecento si stringevano attorno alla figura del console (o del bailo) in quanto rappresentante di quel potere collettivo nel quale essi stessi si riconoscevano e dal quale traevano la sintesi del loro status di *cives*. A confronto c'era un tessuto sociale eterogeneo in cui l'elemento 'instabile', dinamico, era strettamente legato a quello del vincolo atavico della discendenza; in entrambi i casi si trattava di un modello costruito, saldato da interessi comuni in cui quello commerciale era dominante, soprattutto nel Caucaso settentrionale, dove la partecipazione dei nomadi al commercio fu regolare e attiva.

La Caucasia ha risentito sin dai secoli precedenti all'era cristiana di quello che potremmo definire il "fattore settentrionale", cioè un processo di subordinazione al mondo delle steppe eurasiatiche (Tosi 1995, 257). Nella regione dell'Azov, immersa nella morfologia della steppa, l'immigrazione occidentale non ebbe un impatto significativo sull'equilibrio ambientale preesistente. Gli insediamenti costruiti rimasero di modeste dimensioni e l'elemento naturale restò dominante insieme a una struttura economica basata sull'allevamento. Le due realtà da questo punto di vista rimasero distanti e raramente dettero vita a fenomeni di sintesi di qualsiasi intensità. L'ingresso del modello 'nuovo' di tipo mercantile fu prerogativa di quelle comunità che vi si riconoscevano in quanto a esse era legata la propria appartenenza sociale e che entrarono in contatto con popo-

lazioni avvezze a modelli simili. Pur tuttavia il volume d'affari messo in piedi dalle comunità mercantili *in loco* richiedeva uno sfruttamento delle risorse naturali che per la regione non fu un evento del tutto nuovo e che i Mongoli seppero sfruttare appieno. La foce del Kuban e tutta l'area attorno allo stretto di Kerč ha costituito sin dai tempi delle colonie greche un granaio di fondamentale importanza per i poteri che ne potevano disporre (Karpov 1993). La Rus' ha per secoli sfruttato le arterie fluviali (Dnepr, Dnestr e Don) per il commercio internazionale, con Bisanzio a sud e con i mercati baltici a nord (Martin 2004). Per il regno di Georgia lo sbocco sul Mar Nero è stato, insieme alle vie terrestri verso la Persia, un formidabile strumento di sviluppo commerciale (Karpov 1986; Pubblici 2022a). In generale tutta la fascia a sud delle steppe dell'Orda d'Oro era un'area in cui si praticava l'agricoltura e in particolare quella cerealicola: miglio, segale, orzo, grano (Nedaškovskij 2014). I principi russi hanno per secoli utilizzato le risorse della foresta ricavandone prodotti richiesti dai principali mercati internazionali (cera, pellicce, cuoio, legno) e i nomadi della steppa, sin dai primi insediamenti, hanno potuto beneficiare delle ampie distese di prateria sulle quali pascolare la loro più grande ricchezza: il bestiame, che vendevano agli agricoltori delle comunità vicine. È in questo contesto che mercanti occidentali e nomadi che abitavano in quelle regioni si trovarono a confronto e interagirono.

Venezia insediò una sua rappresentanza formale nell'impero mongolo durante il khanato di Uzbek (r. 1313-1341). Nel 1332, dopo lunghe trattative, si giunse ad un accordo in base al quale il khan concedeva alle autorità venete il diritto di far entrare le proprie galee a Tana e praticarvi il commercio. Uzbek concesse inoltre a Venezia un terreno su cui insediarsi, costruire case e abitare. Impose infine sulle transazioni commerciali una tassa del 3% (Thomas 1880, 243; Tafel-Thomas 2012, 243sgg; Heyd 1913, 751). I trattati con cui i Mongoli dell'Orda d'Oro concedevano diritti e privilegi ai Veneziani – e agli altri stranieri che risiedevano e lavoravano nell'impero – erano concessioni verticali; i khan si riservavano un ampio spazio giuridico e lasciavano alle autorità straniere operanti sul loro territorio un ambito di manovra ristretto. Nel trattato del 1333 con cui si rinnovano le concessioni dell'anno precedente sono dettagliatamente indicate le percentuali di tassazione, le merci esentate, quelle commerciabili a peso. Vengono inoltre indicate le procedure per risolvere le liti, laddove la giurisdizione mongola sovrasta quella del console veneziano in tutte le questioni che coinvolgono cittadini non "Franchi". I Mongoli si mostrano così come soggetti attivi in tutte le attività che si svolgono sul loro territorio e nel commercio in particolare, data la natura stessa dell'attività mercantile che coinvolgeva genti di ogni provenienza, compresi cittadini mongoli, e costituiva una delle voci principali delle entrate del tesoro dell'Orda.

Per Venezia, l'insediamento alla foce del Mar d'Azov rappresentava un investimento strategico in un contesto politico in continua trasformazione. Negli anni Trenta del XIV secolo, si verificarono alcuni passaggi fondamentali nella configurazione politica dell'intero quadrante del Mediterraneo orientale. I rapporti tra le città italiane e i Mamelucchi si stavano facendo sempre più tesi, e i divieti papali contro il commercio con l'Egitto diventavano sempre più stringenti (Ortalli 1995, 244-45). Nel 1337, il sultanato aveva conquistato Laiazzo, capitale del Regno della Piccola Armenia e importante porto strategico nel Mediterraneo orientale, nonché snodo commerciale che collegava la Penisola Anatolica a Tabriz (Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 102-104). Nel 1335, era morto l'ilkhan Abu Said e il regno mongolo di Persia era entrato in una fase politicamente critica, che aveva portato alla frammentazione dello stato in potentati regionali. Questi territori finirono spesso in mano a dinastie mongole in conflitto fra loro. Per i mercanti occidentali, frequentare i mercati persiani e i porti del Mar Nero meridionale divenne sempre più difficile e rischioso, soprattutto perché Uzbek desiderava avere una presenza straniera accanto ai Genovesi sul suo territorio. Anche in questo caso sembra che i Mongoli si adoperassero per mantenere i mercati sotto il loro controllo in un regime di concorrenza.

Da anni, la città ligure con la sua roccaforte di Caffa aveva raggiunto una quasi totale indipendenza dal khan e i suoi mercanti esercitavano un'influenza predominante in tutta la Crimea. Attraendo Venezia, non solo si sarebbero aumentate le entrate potenziali per le casse imperiali, ma si sarebbe anche riequilibrato il peso esercitato dai mercanti genovesi sui mercati dell'Orda d'Oro. È importante ricordare che nel 1307, il khan Toqta (r. 1291-1312) aveva ordinato l'arresto di tutti i Genovesi presenti a Saraj, la capitale mongola sul Volga, e aveva posto l'assedio a Caffa, che cedette solo dopo ben otto mesi, nel maggio 1308 (Heyd 1913, 739-40; Balard 1978, 152; Ciociltan 2012, 164-65; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 89). L'espulsione dei Genovesi da Caffa aveva inflitto un enorme danno alla città ligure, che poté fare ritorno in Crimea solo dopo la morte di Toqta nel 1313. Al contempo l'espansione mamelucca in Asia Minore aveva messo pressione anche all'impero di Trebisonda dei Comneni, l'altro snodo commerciale della regione frequentato dai Veneziani. Fu quindi in questo quadro in costante evoluzione che Venezia decise di investire sul Mar Nero settentrionale e insediarsi a Tana in pianta stabile. L'organizzazione dell'emporio alla foce del Don fu in gran parte affidata proprio al bailo di Trebisonda, rappresentanza diplomatica primaria della Serenissima nella regione del Mar Nero. Nel documento di acquisizione del terreno concesso a Uzbek, il Senato stabilì la durata dell'ufficio di console a Tana, il suo salario (40 lire di grossi) e il seguito su cui poteva contare: un prete-notaio, sei *famuli*, quattro cavalli, un interprete (*turcimanno*), due banditori

e due consiglieri “al modo di quelli di Trebisonda” (*et fiant eo modo quo fiunt consiliarii Trapessonde*: Thomas 1880, 250), ovvero incaricati di coadiuvare il console in tutte le decisioni relative all’allestimento del quartiere veneziano. Dovevano decidere dove costruire le abitazioni, dove collocare le attività commerciali, quali edifici già esistenti affittare e a chi ecc. Per il loro lavoro riceverono come compenso una casa ciascuno. Se a Tana non si fossero trovati due cittadini nobili da incaricare come consiglieri, allora il console avrebbe dovuto agire da solo, come quello di Trebisonda.

Tutte le clausole del trattato mostrano come anche in questo caso sia la cancelleria mongola a dettare le condizioni dell’insediamento veneziano e come sia importante per le autorità della Serenissima assicurarsi che i mercanti rispettino le regole. Nel documento citato si fa espressamente riferimento all’attenzione che il console deve prestare alla pesatura delle merci e per evitare che si verifichino frodi. Uzbek concesse ai Veneziani la facoltà di nominare un pesatore di loro fiducia e il Senato ordinò al console di provvedere con la massima cautela affinché il funzionario fosse competente e al di sopra di ogni sospetto (Thomas 1880, 252-53). Le frodi erano un rischio sempre presente e potevano danneggiare i rapporti fra le autorità venete e quelle mongole. Se si fosse reso necessario, il console avrebbe dovuto recarsi personalmente a Saraj (*in Lordo*) per risolvere la controversia direttamente con gli ufficiali mongoli (Thomas 1880, 253). Il trattato firmato con Uzbek sembrava garantire confini giuridici ben definiti e chiari e costituirà la base normativa per tutti gli accordi successivi. Per anni la comunità veneziana a Tana visse e operò in pace.

Nel 1341 Uzbek morì e gli successe il figlio Janibeg (r. 1342-1357). Venezia si adoperò per ottenere dal nuovo khan dell’Orda d’Oro la conferma dei privilegi di cui godeva a Tana. Il documento firmato con Janibeg nel 1342 presenta un impianto normativo simile al precedente. Anche stavolta è il khan, *in virtute eterni Dei et sua magna pietate miserante*, a concedere agli ambasciatori veneziani Giovanni Quirini e Pietro Giustiniani la conferma del terreno, il diritto di permanenza nel territorio dell’impero e una serie di privilegi commerciali (Thomas 1880, 261). Per la prima volta nel documento compaiono i nomi di nobili mongoli. La nobiltà territoriale, i *noyon*, rappresentava sul territorio l’autorità centrale, quella del khan, che risiedeva a Saraj. I *noyon* erano responsabili della sicurezza degli insediamenti e della raccolta dei tributi. Ma soprattutto dovevano far osservare rigorosamente le sfere giuridiche di competenza, il cui mancato rispetto poteva portare a conseguenze gravi, come accadde nel 1343.

Nell’autunno di quell’anno esplose una rissa fra Andreolo Civran, cittadino veneziano, e Khodja Omar, un alto funzionario mongolo (*daruga*). I fatti sono noti e ben studiati (per una sintesi e la bibliografia si veda Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 113-15). Per motivi non chiari Omar colpì Civran,

forse con un pugno. In tutta risposta Civran raccolse un gruppo di conazionali, la sera stessa si introdusse in casa del rivale e lo uccise insieme alla sua famiglia. Secondo la versione riportata dalle fonti i cittadini mongoli residenti a Tana e nei dintorni si radunarono in cerca del Civran, ma non lo trovarono. Seguirono scontri anche violenti fra la comunità locale e gli Italiani. Sia i Genovesi sia i Veneziani subirono danni alle cose e ci furono molti feriti. Civran riuscì a scappare e a tornare a Venezia dove fu processato e condannato, in modo lieve a dire il vero.

Ciò che sorprende qua non è tanto la reazione violenta di Civran o quella dei concittadini di Omar, quanto la reazione delle autorità veneziane. Il trattato stipulato fra le autorità venete e Janibeg, che rinnovava l'accordo concluso con Uzbek nel 1332, era chiaro riguardo alle sfere giuridiche dei funzionari presenti a Tana. L'area abitata dagli Italiani era interna alla città di Azak, la quale era sottoposta all'autorità del governatore mongolo di Crimea (con ogni probabilità nel 1343 era un certo Ramadan) che risiedeva a Solgat. Quell'autorità era dominante su quella di chiunque altro.

Nel documento si dice espressamente che se si fosse verificata una lite fra un cittadino veneziano e un cittadino di qualsiasi provenienza residente a Tana (*cum aliquibus hominibus contrate*) sarebbe toccato al console e al governatore di Crimea insieme esaminare e giudicare la questione (*dominus consul una cum domino terre, simul sedentes*). Ma, come abbiamo visto, ciò non accadde e la reazione mongola fu rabbiosa, ai massimi livelli. Janibeg in persona ordinò che tutti gli occidentali residenti a Tana fossero espulsi e i loro averi confiscati. Il danno subito da Venezia e da Genova fu enorme (Karpov 1997; Karpov 2021a), al punto che anche il cronista fiorentino Giovanni Villani ne scrive nella sua *Nuova Cronica*, quantificando le perdite delle due città in oltre mezzo milione di fiorini d'oro. Villani aggiunge inoltre che a causa del conflitto i prezzi delle merci, soprattutto spezie e seta, aumentarono in tutta Italia (Villani 1991, 368-69; si veda anche Marin 2020).

Ma Janibeg non si fermò, e come Toqta trent'anni prima assediò Caffa mettendo a dura prova la resistenza della città genovese in Crimea. L'assedio durò più di due anni e alla fine fallì. La tenacia con cui Janibeg cercò di piegare la resistenza dei Latini asserragliati dietro le mura di Caffa dimostra una volta in più quanto fosse importante per i Mongoli affermare la loro autorità sul territorio e quanto fosse impensabile per il khan lasciare impunito un fatto di sangue di quella gravità contro un cittadino mongolo. In ogni caso l'assedio fu duro e mise in seria difficoltà le autorità genovesi, che non solo si trovarono nell'impossibilità di esercitare il commercio, l'attività costitutiva di un insediamento come Caffa, ma dovettero iniziare anche a razionare le risorse primarie per la sopravvivenza della popolazione. In questa sede non ci soffermeremo sulle con-

seguenze del conflitto che vide i Mongoli opposti all'inedita alleanza veneto-genovese. Si tratta di un argomento assai ben studiato, anche perché fu fra le cause della diffusione dell'epidemia di peste, che quasi certamente raggiunse l'Europa occidentale proprio sulle navi genovesi provenienti da Caffa ed attraccate nel porto di Messina all'inizio del 1347 (Barker 2016; Green 2020; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022). Il fatto è che dopo i falliti tentativi di prendere la città, Janibeg accettò di ricevere gli ambasciatori delle due repubbliche italiane e avviare i negoziati per la pace, che da parte veneziana si conclusero col trattato firmato fra il khan e gli ambasciatori veneziani nel febbraio 1347 (Thomas 1880, 311-312; Venezia Senato XXII, 184). Nel documento Janibeg si rivolge espressamente al popolo dei Mongoli e ai nobili responsabili delle circoscrizioni, dalle più grandi (i *tümen*) alle più piccole (le *decine*)¹ ordinando che i mercanti veneziani vengano protetti e ricevano *tutti li servisij e luoghi, che li va over la che li andasse* (Thomas 1880, 312). In cambio i Veneziani avrebbero garantito lo stesso trattamento ai cittadini mongoli che abitavano o facevano commercio a Tana. Venne inoltre ribadita la giurisdizione congiunta fra il console veneziano di Tana e il governatore di Crimea sulle liti. La tassa sul transito delle merci – quella che le fonti latine chiamano *commerchium* – venne aumentata dal 3 al 5%, mentre restarono in vigore tutte le vecchie esenzioni così come era stato pattuito ai tempi di Uzbek.

Durante il conflitto coi Mongoli, fra il 1344 e il 1346, le due repubbliche italiane avevano deciso per l'embargo di tutti i porti dell'Orda d'Oro ad eccezione di Caffa, dove Genova aveva accettato di ospitare i mercanti veneziani in attesa che i rapporti coi Mongoli venissero riallacciati (Ciociltan 2012, 138 e n. 342; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 117-18). Dopo il ritorno a Tana le tensioni fra le due comunità rimasero forti e, insieme a un quadro politico che si stava aggravando nel quadrante orientale del Mediterraneo, dove Genova stava espandendo progressivamente la propria influenza a svantaggio di Venezia, esplosero nella guerra degli anni Cinquanta che coinvolse altre potenze, fra cui l'impero bizantino e il regno d'Ungheria. La guerra durò anni e la pace fu firmata a Milano solo il primo giugno del 1355. Le due città decisero di sigillarla con il divieto reciproco di torna-

¹ I Mongoli avevano suddiviso il territorio dell'Orda d'Oro in circoscrizioni militari. L'esercito nomade era organizzato sin dai tempi di Chinggis Khan secondo un ordine decimale: l'unità più grande era formata da 10.000 uomini ed era chiamata *tümen*; il *tümen* era diviso in dieci migliaia le quali erano a loro volta divise in dieci centinaia. Infine, queste erano divise in dieci decine. Era un sistema in uso presso i popoli turchi ben prima dell'affermazione mongola, ma dall'inizio dell'espansione chinggiside di inizio Duecento era stato formalizzato. Quando Batu khan e i suoi generali avevano completato la conquista della Rus' e delle steppe della Siberia avevano diviso il territorio e l'avevano distribuito agli ufficiali militari in base al loro rango. Il *tümen* era pertanto una circoscrizione capace di fornire diecimila uomini per la guerra e il nobile che la governava era di fatto un generale.

re a Tana per tre anni. Il *devetum Tane* era però oneroso e Venezia provò a riallacciare i rapporti coi Mongoli già nella primavera del 1356, quando un'ambasciata arrivò a Saraj e incontrò il governatore mongolo della Crimea (Predelli 1889, 24-25). Alle richieste dei Veneziani di poter tornare a navigare il Mar d'Azov il *noyon* mongolo rispose con una concessione minore, accettando di dare il porto di Provato, non distante da Caffa. L'accordo prevedeva di nuove clausole relative alla giurisdizione in caso di liti e stavolta il console e il governatore mongolo avrebbero giudicato in base alla nazionalità dell'accusato. Alla partenza, le navi veneziane dovevano essere ispezionate da funzionari sia veneziani sia mongoli per assicurarsi che non ci fossero schiavi fuggitivi a bordo (Predelli 1889, 25; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 129).

Dopo la morte di Janibeg nel 1357, l'Orda d'Oro entrò in un periodo di instabilità politica e di lotte interne. A succedergli fu il figlio Berdibeg (r. 1357-59) che si mostrò subito disponibile a confermare i privilegi veneziani sui mercati dell'Orda. Scaduto il *devetum* Venezia si impegnò per tornare in fretta a Tana e nel settembre del 1358 gli ambasciatori Giovanni Quirini e Francesco Bon stipularono un nuovo trattato con Berdibeg. Anche in questo caso il khan si rivolge *a tuti quelli che se son sotomessi* (Predelli 1889, 48). Appare chiaro dal testo del documento che il khan concede ai Veneziani i privilegi e stabilisce il quadro normativo entro il quale i mercanti stranieri possono abitare a Tana e farvi commercio. Il trono dell'Orda d'Oro aveva ancora potere e autorità sulle cellule nobiliari e militari locali. Gli ambasciatori menzionano i fatti del 1343 e Andreolo Civran, quell'*homo insido* [...] *lo qual a fato mal* e che le autorità hanno adeguatamente punito (*quelo rio homo* [...] *lo avemo spaventado*). In realtà, come abbiamo accennato sopra, il tribunale incaricato di giudicare Civran – rifugiatosi a Venezia dopo gli scontri a Tana – era stato piuttosto mite nel comminare la pena. Civran era stato scacciato da Venezia per cinque anni e aveva subito l'interdizione a vita dai mercati mongoli (Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 114). Non per niente poco più avanti gli ambasciatori si impegnano a consegnare alle autorità mongole chiunque fosse accusato di aver recato danni a un cittadino non veneziano in aree di pertinenza di Venezia (*lo debiemo atrovar e darlo*: Predelli 1889, 49). Pochi giorni dopo i due ambasciatori veneziani ricevono un privilegio simile dal governatore della Crimea Qutlugh Timur. Venezia deve pagare il dazio di ingresso nei porti indicati nel documento – Provato, Calitra e Soldaia – così come lo pagava a Ramadan, suo predecessore e il governatore si impegna a proteggere tutti i cittadini veneziani e coloro che viaggiano sulle loro navi (Predelli 1889, 51).

I fatti del 1343 avevano creato un precedente e i Mongoli si erano assicurati di aver tracciato un perimetro sicuro alla giurisdizione della pro-

pria nobiltà sui cittadini stranieri che vivevano e operavano in territorio mongolo. Così nel settembre del 1358 Berdibeg in persona intervenne per richiedere formalmente al console veneziano di risarcire quattro suoi sudditi che erano stati derubati dalla flotta veneta. Forse per velocizzare il ritorno dei mercanti veneziani a Tana, fu l'imperatrice Taydula Khatun, già moglie di Uzbek, a coprire le spese con le sue sostanze personali (Predelli 1889, 52-53; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 132).

Ma nel 1359 Berdibeg morì e si aprì uno scenario incerto per gli stranieri che vivevano nell'impero mongolo. Dagli anni Sessanta del XIV secolo si succedettero al potere dell'Orda d'oro regni brevi e instabili. Fu un periodo caratterizzato da lotte politiche tra diverse fazioni e clan all'interno dell'Orda d'Oro, che indebolirono l'autorità centrale e portarono alla frammentazione territoriale dell'impero. Il potere si regionalizzò sempre di più e si consolidarono i potentati locali guidati dai *noyon*, a volte veri e propri signori della guerra a capo di territori anche poco estesi ma strategici per il controllo delle vie commerciali.

Inoltre, anche le pressioni esterne degli Stati e delle potenze vicine contribuirono al declino dell'Orda d'Oro. I principati russi e il Granducato di Mosca in crescita da una parte e la Lituania dall'altra, approfittarono dell'indebolimento dell'Orda d'Oro per affermare la propria indipendenza ed espandere i propri territori (Mirgaleev 2003; Pubblici 2005; Garzaniti 2016; Azbelev 2018; Pubblici 2022b, 260). Il mutamento delle condizioni politiche nell'Orda d'Oro e la diminuita sicurezza, non tanto dei mercanti che operavano a Tana ma delle vie carovaniere che permettevano alle merci di origine asiatica di affluire alla foce del Don, spinsero Venezia a investire sempre di più nei porti mamelucchi. Negli anni Sessanta, caratterizzati anche da una recrudescenza dell'epidemia di peste in tutta la regione del Mar Nero, le galee veneziane ripresero a frequentare l'Egitto con sempre maggiore intensità e i prezzi degli incanti per le mude Beirut-Alessandria aumentarono in misura esponenziale (Fuess 2015; Di Cosmo-Pubblici 2022, 141 e note 24 e 25). Sforzi analoghi furono diretti verso l'impero di Trebisonda di Alessio III Comneno (r. 1349-1390) col quale fu siglato un trattato commerciale nel settembre 1367 (Predelli 1889, 126-29).

La conflittualità crescente cui andò incontro l'Orda d'Oro dopo la morte di Berdibeg provocò una progressiva rarefazione politica territoriale per cui Venezia si trovò impossibilitata a trovare nel khan un interlocutore affidabile come era stato in passato con Uzbek e Janibeg. Non è forse un caso che dal 1358 non possediamo più alcun trattato o accordo scritto fra la repubblica veneta e i Mongoli. Per trovare un accenno ai rapporti coi Mongoli nelle carte ufficiali dobbiamo andare al 1387, il 18 giugno, quando giunse a Venezia una lettera del doge genovese Antoniotto Adorno (1384-1390) con la quale questi si impegnavano a far sì che i suoi con-

nazionali si comportassero bene coi Veneziani a Caffa e in tutto l'impero mongolo per non danneggiarsi a vicenda e mantenere buone relazioni con *hostes nobis Tartaros* (Predelli 1889, 209). L'iniziativa del doge si ripeté nel 1390 (Predelli 1889, 221) e forse l'atteggiamento delle autorità genovesi e veneziane fu anche dettato dalla consapevolezza che dal Caucaso meridionale stava avanzando una minaccia nuova, quel Timur (Tamerlano) che avrebbe tentato di riunificare l'impero mongolo e presto avrebbe attaccato anche nel bacino del Mar d'Azov (su Tamerlano si vedano Manz 1999; Bernardini 2022). Infine, fra la primavera del 1390 e i primi mesi del 1391, Venezia si affrettò a consolidare i rapporti con tutte le potenze regionali. Nel maggio 1390 firmò un trattato commerciale con il sultano ottomano Bayazid (1389-1402); a giugno rinnovò gli accordi con l'impero bizantino e ad aprile del 1391 firmò il rinnovo dei privilegi di cui godeva nell'impero di Trebisonda.

Il consolidamento delle posizioni acquisite nel Mediterraneo orientale e sul Mar Nero fece da preludio a un periodo difficile causato, come abbiamo detto sopra, dall'avanzata timuride nel Caucaso settentrionale. Nel 1394 il Senato di Venezia inviò una lettera *secreta* al console di Tana Ludovico Contarini raccomandandogli di controllare attentamente che i capitani delle galee non trasportassero schiavi tartari in Asia Minore (*de partibus Gazarie et maris Tane ad oppositas partes Turchie*) ed eventualmente sanzionare i colpevoli, perché la tratta degli schiavi mongoli esponeva l'intera comunità alla foce del Don a rischi altissimi di ritorsione da parte dei beg locali. È forse per questa ragione che dalla fine del Trecento la quantità di schiavi tartari comprati a Tana ed esportati in Europa diminuisce progressivamente a vantaggio di schiavi russi e circassi (Origo 1955; Gioffré 1971; Pubblici 2017).

L'avanzata di Tamerlano e i pericoli derivanti dalle lotte politiche interne al clan mongolo non impedirono la navigazione occidentale verso il bacino di Azov. Le galee viaggiarono regolarmente verso il Mar Nero tra il 1387 e il 1394. Il 29 dicembre 1393, il Senato veneziano ordinò l'allestimento di dieci navi per la difesa del Golfo, sei delle quali dovevano essere posizionate immediatamente. Le notizie che arrivavano a Venezia da Tana e le testimonianze dei mercanti che erano tornati da lì mostravano un grave deterioramento della casa del console al punto che il Senato decise di stanziare 80 sommi e di inviare legname per restaurarla (Thiriet 1958, I, n. 839). Nel giugno dell'anno successivo, al capitano delle galee dirette verso il Mar Nero fu consigliato di essere prudente e, in caso di difficoltà, di evitare il viaggio a Tana, deviando verso Caffa (Thiriet 1958, I, n. 840). Nel 1394, il Senato concesse al capitano delle navi la totale libertà di approdare a Tana solo se la situazione lo avesse permesso. Il 23 luglio 1395, al capitano delle navi della Romania fu esplicitamente raccomandato di non

entrare nel porto di Tana prima di essere stato informato direttamente dal console dell'insediamento. In quel periodo, Timur era vicino e probabilmente stava per attaccare la città (Thiriet 1958, I, nn. 853 e 881). Nel 1395 giunsero da Tana notizie drammatiche: il capitano dovette scortare le galee della Romania fino allo stretto. Le navi non erano in grado di entrare nel canale fluviale che conduceva al porto quindi il capitano si sarebbe dovuto informare sulla situazione dal console.

A causa dell'attacco di Timur, molti Genovesi e Veneziani lasciarono Tana, ma non si trattò di un'espulsione sistematica come nelle occasioni precedenti. L'invasione di Timur fu distruttiva ma rapida, e subito dopo l'esercito centroasiatico si ritirò. Il danno più significativo provocato da Timur al sistema commerciale occidentale fu indiretto. Gli ingenti danni prodotti dai Mongoli a Urgench e nella regione del Volga (in particolare a Saraj e ad Astrakhan) avevano profondamente debilitato la via settentrionale verso la Cina e, di conseguenza, rallentato la circolazione delle merci – soprattutto seta e spezie – provenienti dall'Oriente. Le incursioni timuridi non comportarono quindi la rottura delle relazioni sulla via mongola, ma ne ridimensionarono fortemente il potenziale (Berindei-Veinstein 1976, 124-126; Pubblici 2005, 481-483; Karpov 2022b, 171-178).

Tuttavia, dopo l'attacco all'insediamento di Azak, le autorità veneziane in loco si adoperarono per proteggere l'abitato. Il 22 febbraio 1396, il Senato ordinò al console veneziano designato a Tana, Blanco de Ripa, di incontrare il governatore mongolo per chiedere il permesso di fortificare l'area, danneggiata dalle rapine e dagli incendi provocati da Tamerlano. Lo stesso anno, il 13 luglio, i patroni delle galee dirette in Romania furono avvisati di essere estremamente vigili durante il viaggio verso il Mar Nero (Thiriet 1958, I, n. 913). La notizia dei danni prodotti da Tamerlano arrivò rapidamente a Venezia e le conseguenze concrete furono immediate. Nella primavera del 1396, le autorità veneziane ridussero gli incanti delle galee dirette in Romania-Mar Nero a 20 lire di grossi, rispetto alla media di 100 dell'anno precedente. Nel frattempo, il costo della navigazione verso Alessandria e Beirut aumentava costantemente (Berindei-Veinstein 1976, 127; Stöckly 1995, 378-386).

Nonostante le numerose difficoltà politiche che caratterizzavano la regione, l'avamposto sul Mar d'Azov rimaneva fondamentale per la Serenissima e il Senato decise di inviare Andrea Giustiniani come ambasciatore a Tana subito dopo il ritiro degli eserciti timuridi, nel 1397. Anche in questo caso e nonostante la confusa situazione politica, le autorità veneziane si rivolsero al governatore mongolo per chiedere la riattivazione di tutti i privilegi in vigore, poiché le devastazioni causate dall'esercito di Timur avevano distrutto documenti che provavano tali privilegi. Ad Andrea Giustiniani fu chiesto di convocare il consiglio dei mercanti veneziani a Tana

e di designare un console che sostituisse il collega durante la sua missione; inoltre, Giustiniani ebbe l'ordine di chiedere ulteriori agevolazioni commerciali a causa degli ingenti danni subiti dai veneziani e la possibilità di fortificare il loro insediamento (Thiriet 1958, I, n. 930). Nel febbraio 1397, con l'ambasciata del Giustiniani pronta a partire, il Senato lamentò la mancanza di notizie precise sulla situazione a Tana. Come di consueto, all'ambasciatore fu detto di informarsi sull'opportunità di superare lo stretto di Kerch. Evidentemente Giustiniani ebbe successo, poiché già nel giugno 1397 gli incanti per le galee della Romania-Mar Nero erano onerosi, e le fonti indicano espressamente che i viaggi effettivamente partirono (Thiriet 1958, I, n. 934).

Negli anni successivi alla distruzione della città, il commercio con Tana si riprese, anche se lentamente. Nel gennaio 1399, il Senato inviò due cocche a Tana. L'elevata capacità della cocca – più di 500 barili – fa pensare che il commercio fosse ripreso regolare. Le navi potevano rimanere a Tana per diverse settimane a condizione di partire entro il 15 settembre. Il console veneziano a Tana in questo periodo era Maffeo Barbarico. Nel giugno dello stesso anno, gli incanti per le galee della Romania furono leggermente più alti. Le fonti indicano che il Mar d'Azov era di nuovo una destinazione primaria per il commercio internazionale e questo periodo costituisce il preludio della pur timida ripresa del XV secolo, periodo in cui Tana attraversò oltre un decennio di tranquillità politica ed economica. Tuttavia, l'insediamento non conobbe mai più l'ampia ricchezza e lo sviluppo raggiunti nel secolo precedente.

In questi anni, le imbarcazioni di alto tonnellaggio sembrano essere le preferite; l'uso di navi tonde più grandi e meglio armate fu la conseguenza di molti fattori concomitanti: una mutata congiuntura economica a Venezia e la precaria situazione politica tra il Bosforo e il Mar Nero. L'industria navale veneziana, gestita a livello statale, era stata schiacciata alla fine del XIV secolo, soprattutto a causa della concorrenza straniera, e le autorità statali affittavano le cocche ai privati per stimolare la navigazione privata (Lane 1982; Stöckly 1995, 324; Lane 2020, 3-24). Al crescente ricorso agli armatori privati corrispose un calo dell'uso delle galee di linea allestite dalla Repubblica di Venezia (Dumerç 1988, 374-75). Le cocche fecero rotta verso Tana nel 1400, 1401 e 1402. Se consideriamo il carico di ogni cocca, possiamo capire le possibilità di guadagno per gli armatori. Le tre navi salpate da Venezia nel 1400 avevano una capacità rispettivamente di 900, 700 e 700 barili. Un barile corrispondeva a circa 0,754 tonnellate di carico. Un totale impressionante per l'epoca. La ripresa economica della regione, seppur timida, è confermata dalle proteste del nuovo console di Tana Bianco de Ripa al governatore mongolo di Crimea contro la divisione del *commerchium*, che era per metà sulle merci caricate e per metà su

quelle vendute. Venezia chiedeva che la tassazione fosse imposta solo sugli scambi e non sul carico; il console era disposto ad accorpare le percentuali in una del 3% (Thiriet 1958, II, n. 1009). In ogni caso, in questi anni, la navigazione appariva pericolosa; nel gennaio 1402, il Senato acconsentì ad assumere 20 balestrieri sulle tre cocche dirette a Tana. I capitani delle navi dovevano prendere il carico a Tana e scaricarlo a Costantinopoli, ma dovevano passare lo stretto ed entrare nel Mar Nero solo se, dopo aver raccolto informazioni a Chio, avessero saputo che la situazione lo avrebbe permesso. Nello stesso anno, il Senato annunciò che nessuna nave sarebbe stata armata (Thiriet 1958, II, 1038 e 1062). Il viaggio verso Tana, con navi pubbliche, fu riproposto solo nel 1406, e il prezzo d'asta fu aggiudicato per una media di 145 grossi. Per l'occasione furono allestite due galee.

Fino al 1410, la situazione politica nella regione di Azov cambiò rapidamente di anno in anno. I primi anni del secolo furono caratterizzati dalla guerra tra Genova e l'impero di Trebisonda e per tutto il decennio i pirati turchi, baschi e catalani infestarono le acque del Peloponneso, impedendo alle navi veneziane di navigare oltre lo stretto (sulla guerra di corsa nell'Egeo in questi anni si vedano Sassi 1929; Mollat 1972; Ahrweiler 1975; Snisarenko 1990 e Talyzina 1995). Inoltre, nel 1409, il Senato ordinò al capitano del Golfo, Niccolò Foscolo, di convogliare le galee di Tana fino all'isola di Tenedo, nell'Egeo. Nel 1410, un nuovo attacco, da parte di Pulag Beg Noyon, si abbatté su Tana; l'esercito mongolo riuscì ad impadronirsi dell'insediamento veneziano, ma nel 1418 il nuovo governatore mongolo, Kerimberi, si avventò su Tana, causando distruzione e morte. Nello stesso anno, il Senato ordinò al capitano delle galee di informarli immediatamente e accuratamente sulla situazione del luogo: *sequi diligenter et plenarie informare de novis et conditionibus partium Tane* (ASV, Senato Misti, LII, f. 110; Thiriet 1958, II n. 1704). Poteva procedere verso Tana solo se le condizioni lo avessero permesso. Non si sarebbe fermato lì per più di otto giorni, non sarebbe potuto andare a Trebisonda, né a Costantinopoli. In ogni caso, sarebbe stato opportuno che le galee continuassero il loro viaggio *cum illo minori dano et maiori comodo* (ASV, Senato Misti, LII, f. 112v).

Gli eventi del 1418 non scoraggiarono le autorità veneziane, che l'anno successivo decisero di ripristinare i viaggi e riparare le fortificazioni in loco (ASV, Senato Misti, LII, f. 143v), anche perché *est omnibus manifestum progenitores nostri apertissime cognoscentes quantum erat fructuosum et utile hac civitati et omnibus mercatoribus viagium Tane* (ASV, Senato Misti, LII, f. 113v). I danni causati dall'invasione mongola del 1418 ammontavano a circa 400.000 ducati, una somma ingente (ASV, Senato Misti, LII, f. 143v: *Est notum ab aliquo tempore [...] dictus locus Tane fuerit derobatus cum maximo danno mercatorum nostrorum tamen in personis que in have-*

re ultra quantitate ducatos quadrigentorum millium). Si trattò evidentemente di una sessione piuttosto dibattuta, dato che terminò con 39 voti a favore, 11 contrari e 12 astenuti. Venne eletto un nuovo console, Andrea Contarini, che restò in carica per due anni. Dopo aver terminato i lavori di restauro nel 1429 (ASV, Senato Misti, LVI, f. 107r; ASV, Senato Misti, LVII, f. 20v e 134r), l'insediamento del Mar d'Azov raggiunse una buona efficienza strutturale, anche se presto si deteriorò a causa delle tensioni con Genova, che si aggravarono nuovamente nel 1430. A quel punto l'Orda d'Oro, di fatto, non esisteva più e questa precaria condizione politica che coinvolgeva l'intera regione non favorì la ripresa economica. Tuttavia, nel 1458, a Tana era ancora presente un viceconsole veneziano, che chiedeva aiuti finanziari e militari alla madrepatria, ma il console, designato nel 1460, non si recò mai a Tana. Ci saranno altri tre consolati veneziani a Tana (Karpov 2021b, 303), ma il destino dell'insediamento più orientale di tutto il sistema commerciale latino era ormai segnato.

Tana attraversò il XIV secolo vivendo fasi alterne e solo in parte coincidenti con il contesto politico ed economico di cui era parte integrante. Beneficiò della pace fra gli stati mongoli di inizio secolo e delle chiusure imposte ai mercati del Mar Nero meridionale da conflitti e divieti; soffrì degli scontri fra italiani e Mongoli e della conflittualità interna all'orda d'Oro, ma resistette alle crisi politiche più acute che nella seconda metà del Trecento portarono alla fine del potere mongolo nelle steppe ponto-caspiche. Pur in una condizione di crescente precarietà e pericolo i mercanti veneziani continuarono a navigare nel Mar d'Azov e ad attraccare le loro navi a Tana. Facevano commercio e realizzavano alti profitti. Anche nel XV secolo Tana resistette agli scossoni di cui fu oggetto tutta la regione. I Veneziani avevano da tempo perso un interlocutore certo, ma forti dei trattati antichi mantennero una rappresentanza formale e una loro comunità dialogando coi poteri territoriali e, quando fu inevitabile, scontrandocisi.

In conclusione, possiamo affermare che i Mongoli svolsero un ruolo significativo nel plasmare le reti commerciali nella Caucasia settentrionale dalla seconda metà del XIII secolo e per tutto il XIV. Le relazioni diplomatiche tra l'élite mongola dell'Ulus Jochi e le autorità veneziane si fondavano su spazi giuridici definiti in seguito a negoziati e discussioni, ma infine imposti agli stranieri che vivevano e operavano sul territorio dell'impero. Le azioni dei nomadi, che nell'Orda d'Oro rimasero tali anche dopo le conquiste, hanno a volte facilitato e a volte ostacolato la mobilità, le pratiche economiche e gli scambi culturali nella regione. Fino a quando il governo di Saraj rimase saldo Venezia trovò un interlocutore certo con cui dialogare e a cui chiedere privilegi e concessioni. In questo periodo anche i conflitti esplosero e si risolsero nell'ambito di un rapporto politico e diplomatico chiaro, definito, come nel caso delle due

crisi più gravi del 1307 e 1343. La crisi politica dell'Orda d'Oro e la rarefazione dell'autorità centrale, iniziata dopo la morte di Berdibeg nel 1359, costrinse Venezia ad arretrare il baricentro della propria politica estera verso la nobiltà territoriale, che non sempre si mostrò in grado di garantire sicurezza e rispetto dei trattati grazie a cui gli occidentali vivevano e operavano a Tana.

L'insediamento alla foce del Don si arrese solo agli Ottomani nel 1475, e con esso decadde il sistema commerciale che i mercanti occidentali avevano impiantato in Caucasia. Tuttavia, i legami degli occidentali con quel mondo, ormai meno lontano, non cessarono anzi, furono la premessa di nuove aperture e di nuove scoperte, forse realizzate anche grazie a chi si era spinto ai confini del mondo di allora, svelando una volta per tutte la via per l'Asia.

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Linguaggi urbani e istituzioni nelle tre capitali del sud Caucaso

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Abstract. Interpreting the development trajectories of Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Baku requires a careful understanding of the urban policies that have shaped them from the post-Soviet period to the present. The neoliberal approach has shaped their growth, encouraging the emergence of private, including international, entrepreneurial groups and the formation of a new urban market. Still, the resulting construction of infrastructure and living spaces has followed very different paths linked to specific socio-economic contexts. The article aims to explore the similarities and differences between the cities, trying to explain the incidence of political events and economic programmes in urban regeneration and the contentious and poorly managed dialogue with residents.

Keywords: Tbilisi, Yerevan, Baku, urban regeneration, symbolic space.

A Tbilisi e Baku il rinnovamento urbano è sostenuto da un'economia in forte ripresa, soprattutto nel territorio azero e si contraddistingue per una carenza di pianificazione e l'esplosione di stili architettonici occidentali e medio orientali, che privilegiano forti densità concentrate in altezza e cancellano programmaticamente le molte tracce del passato, soprattutto di epoca sovietica. A Yerevan la proposizione di un linguaggio autoctono procede per ricostruzioni in stile che celebrano un passato architettonico in forme mimetiche, ma non autentiche.

1. Perché leggere insieme le trasformazioni urbane nel sud Caucaso? Un'introduzione

Quale vantaggio cognitivo possiamo attenderci dal leggere insieme, accostando l'una alle altre, le trasformazioni urbane delle capitali dei tre stati indipendenti del sud Caucaso nel periodo post-sovietico? Possiamo ipotizzare che siano legate da un' traiettorie di sviluppo comuni oppure che il loro accostamento, per il grado di disomogeneità che le caratterizza, sia sostanzialmente inutile e non produca aumento di conoscenza?

In effetti il sud-Caucaso è un territorio che articola in modo peculiare omogeneità e differenze. Da un lato presenta una sua riconoscibilità geografica evidente e una delimitazione oggettiva creata dalle due catene montuose del Grande e del Piccolo Caucaso (Ferrari 2007, 15) ma dall'altro può apparire niente affatto omogeneo, solcato da collaborazioni e ibridazioni ma soprattutto da storie contrastanti e conflitti. In alcuni casi le differenze si spingono fino al punto da farlo considerare come poco più di un costruito analitico¹.

Possiamo forse ipotizzare che letture delle trasformazioni urbane che appiattiscano le differenze e delineino a priori percorsi unitari e destini comuni mal si adattino al contesto e renderebbero in ultima analisi inutile un confronto interpretativo dei tre casi. Se invece cerchiamo di delineare uno sfondo di questioni rilevanti, che in qualche misura accomunano i tre casi potremmo partire da lì, da questo nucleo di temi comuni, per seguire almeno alcune tracce di un sistema di analogie e differenze, di destini comuni e divaricazioni e cogliere meglio le specificità di ogni realtà urbana, apprendendo dalle altre.²

Possiamo quindi nominare gli strati che immaginiamo costituiscano un quadro interpretativo rilevante che ci possa guidare alla comprensione delle tre capitali, muovendoci dalle questioni che attengono agli spazi più concreti dell'esperienza quotidiana fino ad arrivare a quelle più astratte degli spazi di relazione.

La prima ipotesi che potremmo avanzare è che le trasformazioni urbane messe in atto rispondono a una domanda proveniente dalla popo-

¹ "The South Caucasus is in many ways a constructed region. Some will say that it exists only in the mind". Tuttavia osservando i forti legami culturali, la storia comune e i pattern di collaborazione economica lo stesso De Waal conclude "I do believe that the South Caucasus does make sense as a region and the future of its peoples will be better served by them thinking as one". (De Waal 2010, 5)

² Un tentativo analogo di articolare similitudini e differenze è quello condotto da Salukvadze e Van Assche (2023, 2) che analizzano le trasformazioni di Tbilisi attraverso il concetto di "trasformazioni multiple": "a general framework for interpreting the process of urban change in post-socialist cities, emphasizing a common logic producing diverse pathways".

lazione di una nuova qualità dello spazio abitativo e dello spazio urbano. Questo sarebbe l'aspetto più ovvio: è di per sé piuttosto scontato ipotizzare che un sistema politico si attivi per dar risposta alle domande della popolazione. A ben guardare, tuttavia, la cosa non appare così pacifica. All'uscita del periodo sovietico sono evidenti nuove esigenze (la manutenzione degli edifici e degli alloggi ormai privatizzati soprattutto) non tutte facilmente trattabili dal sistema politico anche per gli elevati costi che comportano. Forse per questo, in un contesto dove anche il reddito medio pro-capite non è elevato o decisamente basso, la ricerca di soluzioni ai problemi urbani e delle abitazioni avviene più con la mobilitazione individuale che con una domanda di politiche urbane. E forse gli esiti della mobilitazione individuale, caratterizzata anche da un elevato grado di creatività (per esempio le *kamikaze loggias* di Tbilisi) mantiene un carattere fragile e temporaneo e ha in molti casi impatti non positivi sull'insieme della città (per esempio a Yerevan con l'appropriazione, privatistica e disordinata, degli spazi pubblici – parchi e marciapiedi soprattutto – da parte di chioschi, caffè e varie attività commerciali) (Petrosyan, 2016).

Ad un secondo livello, le trasformazioni urbane hanno a che fare con l'economia, rispondono a un'opportunità di crescita per i tre paesi che escono dal periodo Sovietico e si affacciano all'economia internazionale e di mercato. Per alcuni anni, che possiamo far coincidere con quella che viene di solito definita come "fase di transizione", con gli sconvolgimenti ma anche con la riorganizzazione che lentamente produce, la ricostruzione della città capitale non sembra avere un posto di rilievo nell'agenda dei decisori. Tuttavia, a partire dai primi anni 2000, anche in coincidenza con vicende politiche significative che interessano i diversi paesi, lo sviluppo del settore delle costruzioni appare un'opportunità non trascurabile per la crescita del Prodotto Interno Lordo. Per liberare il potenziale economico delle trasformazioni urbane è essenziale il ruolo dello Stato. I tre stati articolano, ciascuno a suo modo, diversi tipi di iniziative. Talvolta agiscono direttamente; talvolta si alleano con le élite estrattive che si organizzano intorno al settore immobiliare. Talvolta focalizzano la propria missione nella costruzione di istituzioni che rendano possibili una serie di attività di trasformazione, ridefinendo senso e strumenti del fare urbanistico. In modi diversi i tre stati nazionali contribuiscono a operare una *commodification* della città in coerenza con il clima economico prevalente dettato dall'approccio neoliberista, scontrandosi con l'opposizione e la resistenza della popolazione residente che talvolta si mobilita contro la sostituzione di parti di città e contro gli sfratti forzosi.

Ad un ulteriore livello, le trasformazioni urbane, intense e concentrate in un periodo limitato, caricano lo spazio urbano delle capitali di un elevato valore simbolico. Le letture che potremmo fare dei nuovi ogget-

ti architettonici e dei nuovi tipi di spazio immessi nelle tre capitali sono molteplici. Uno, ovvio e forse per questo meno interessante, è che le nuove architetture sembrano celebrare l'élite ed avere l'obiettivo di rafforzare il gruppo politico e di potere al governo in quella fase. Un altro, molto più interessante, è che le trasformazioni urbane veicolano numerose narrazioni e tra queste, quelle più significative, riguardano la narrazione della nazione. Possiamo convenire con Suny che parte del lavoro delle élite consiste nella costruzione e nello sviluppo del senso della nazione (Suny 2001) e con Billig che lo sviluppo del senso della nazione avviene anche attraverso la diffusione di simboli della nazionalità in rappresentazioni quotidiane (Billig 2018). È comunque un fatto che all'uscita dall'esperienza sovietica le città capitali diventano più nazionali e meno complesse; semplificazione e separazione dominano a scapito della complessità e della compresenza di storie, memorie e popolazioni. ed anche le trasformazioni urbane in quanto narrazioni sembrano rivolgersi a un uditorio-cittadinanza divenuto più omogeneo e nazionale.

Le trasformazioni urbane delle capitali del sud Caucaso, in coincidenza con l'uscita dal contenitore sovranazionale sovietico e con la creazione di nuove identità nazionali a ben guardare, narrano la collocazione di una nazione in uno spazio di relazioni, in qualche misura, per così dire, riassumono una politica estera. Gli stati del sud Caucaso a volte consapevolmente, per un progetto politico, a volte per l'inerzia della storia, sembrano collocarsi in diversi spazi di relazione ora guardando alla Russia, ora all'Unione Europea e alla Nato. Questo sistema di relazioni che già influenza la provenienza degli investimenti stranieri (i cosiddetti FDI *Foreign Direct Investments*) è evidente in parte nei linguaggi e nelle caratteristiche architettoniche ma anche, a ben guardare, nella selezione degli operatori che si attivano nelle diverse realtà (il gruppo cinese Hualing attivo a Tbilisi; gli operatori della diaspora armena in Russia che almeno per alcuni anni svolgono un ruolo attivo nella modificazione di Yerevan e così via).

Cercare di individuare un percorso in questo insieme denso di questioni, un sentiero che guidi al confronto delle trasformazioni urbane delle tre capitali è il senso dei paragrafi che seguono.

2. Tbilisi: mercato urbano e spazi simbolici

Possiamo interpretare le trasformazioni urbane di Tbilisi come il prodotto, nella cornice di una ricostruzione neoliberista dello stato, di due progetti, di due intenzionalità, che orientano le decisioni dei soggetti politici.

Questa doppia intenzionalità è più evidentemente riconoscibile nelle azioni del presidente Saakashvili, in carica dalla Rose Revolution del 2004



Il nuovo paesaggio urbano (foto di Vincenzo Zenobi).

e fino alle elezioni del 2013, ma non è del tutto estranea alle azioni dei governi successivi.

La prima intenzionalità ha l'obiettivo di alimentare lo sviluppo della Georgia attraverso il settore delle costruzioni e del real estate. In poche parole, attraverso la costruzione di un mercato urbano.

Il presidente Saakashvilli, che guarda al mondo occidentale (tipicamente l'Europa ma con forte interesse per gli USA e, sul piano strategico, per la Nato) affronta una serie di problemi con una logica di riforma profonda, tra cui una radicale semplificazione del settore delle costruzioni e della regolazione urbana. Fatto questo che contribuisce al buon collocamento della Georgia nell'Ease Doing Business (la classifica redatta dalla World Bank che premia la limitatezza della regolazione nel campo dell'economia e a cui in generale pongono attenzione in quegli anni i paesi dell'area post-sovietica) e che porta inoltre qualche successo anche nella lotta alla micro corruzione nel settore delle costruzioni.

La pianificazione urbanistica, che viene incardinata nelle competenze del Ministero dell'Economia, non è formalmente negata e tuttavia viene attenuato il valore cogente del sistema di regolazione dei piani e della zonizzazione ammettendo la possibilità di una serie di deroghe. In particolare, viene introdotto il sistema (di matrice tipicamente liberista che potremmo ascrivere all'alveo dell'urbanistica contrattata) del commer-

cio degli indici edilizi. Secondo questo principio, attraverso un permesso speciale (Special Zonal Permit, SZP) e dietro il pagamento di una tassa, la volumetria realizzabile su ogni singolo lotto può essere aumentata rispetto a quanto previsto dal piano. Questa pratica, introdotta peraltro nell'ambito di una legge sulla tassazione locale nel 2007, da un lato produce un'elevata quantità di variazioni dello strumento urbanistico e diviene, d'altro canto, una rilevante fonte di finanziamento per il budget municipale di Tbilisi tanto da essere mantenuta, fino al 2016 quando è abolita da una direttiva della Municipalità³.

Dal punto di vista del paesaggio urbano questo sistema di regolazione contribuisce alla variazione dell'immagine complessiva della città modificandone lo skyline con l'aggiunta di alti edifici a torre, resi possibili dal Permesso Speciale, connotati da un linguaggio architettonico internazionale e realizzati da studi di progettazione spesso di ambiente anglosassone, costruiti tipicamente in vetro che cercano di distinguersi l'uno dagli altri attraverso forme fortemente riconoscibili.

Le modalità decentrate di decisione per la realizzazione di questi interventi che si attivano, come detto, con procedimenti puntuali di incremento delle volumetrie, nonché la caratteristica morfologica di Tbilisi fatta di un insieme di quartieri compatti e riconoscibili fanno sì che le torri non siano concentrate in un luogo specifico come nei Business District di tante città globali ma siano disperse nei vari quartieri residenziali della città (come esempio Vako, Saburtalo ecc) con preferenza ovvia per quelli più centrali. La relazione degli edifici con il contesto è scarsa o nulla, sia in termini visivi sia talvolta in termini di inserimento funzionale in aree già congestionate e l'effetto complessivo è quello di una certa confusione.

La semplificazione delle procedure e l'introduzione di eccezioni si scontra con un limite quando l'erosione di beni pubblici, prodotta da queste pratiche, solleva l'opposizione della cittadinanza (Zenobi 2020). È il caso della prospettata trasformazione di piazza Gudiashvili, nel cuore del centro storico dove un primo progetto di sostituzione edilizia viene ritirato a favore di un'operazione di trasformazione più rispettosa del contesto⁴. È poi il caso di Vake Park dove l'erosione, dell'area verde avviata negli anni '90 raggiunge un livello non più tollerabile dalla popolazione quando, attraverso una variazione del piano urbanistico nel 2011 e uno specifico decreto nel 2013 viene permessa la realizzazione di un hotel dalle

³ Nel 2018 viene emanata una legge sul settore delle costruzioni che introduce maggiori controlli, dalla verifica dei materiali alla sicurezza nei cantieri, anche su impulso dell'Unione Europea.

⁴ Non può essere affrontato per limiti di spazio il progetto di riqualificazione di David Agmashenebeli Avenue che pure meriterebbe un approfondimento.

consistenti dimensioni nel cuore stesso del parco con evidente danno al patrimonio verde e alla fruizione pubblica (Zvanhia 2020).

Tutte questioni che, con la modifica del quadro politico, indurranno alla definizione di un nuovo strumento urbanistico, all'attenzione da parte del sindaco Kaladze per la manutenzione del verde e la realizzazione di nuovi parchi, fino ad una maggiore attenzione da parte di operatori immobiliari per operazione areali che riguardino interi quartieri.

Una seconda intenzionalità presente nella trasformazione urbana emerge se si osservano altri progetti, realizzati direttamente dallo Stato.

Infatti il ritirarsi dello Stato a favore del mercato si arresta quando si tratta di realizzare di spazi pubblici e parti di città sottratte alla logica del profitto e principalmente deputate ad una narrazione politica. In una democrazia fortemente polarizzata come quella georgiana, individuare spazi destinati alla narrazione di un progetto politico e a un'idea della nazione, appare un'operazione connaturata all'esercizio del governo, sia pure venata di sfumature autoritarie.

È con tutta evidenza ancora una volta la presidenza Saakashvili, che inaugura questo uso narrativo delle trasformazioni urbane. Per una presidenza che si presenta come soggetto di una cosmogonia (Shatirishvili 2009), che cita Singapore e Svizzera come contesti di riferimento, una narrazione del futuro anticipata attraverso l'ostensione di oggetti fisici appare operazione indispensabile: "An absolutely new brand for a new country emerging with absolutely new architecture". Un balzo verso il futuro slegato dai vincoli del passato che provoca non poche inquietudini e senso di spaesamento tra i cittadini della Capitale (Neuburg et al. 2018).

Se osserviamo l'area di Ryke Park il ponte della Libertà, l'auditorium, la stessa sistemazione del verde con la statua di Ronald Reagan, il Palazzo Presidenziale e così via, alcuni limiti di questa progettualità sono evidenti. Tuttavia è ugualmente evidente che alcune critiche pure motivate ai progetti come per esempio la velocità della decisione (Kurtishvili and Cachola Schmal 2018) a scapito dell'approfondimento progettuale di alcune scelte e della partecipazione di esperti e cittadini comuni, la selezione a volte casuale dei progettisti, la volontà di ripetere soluzioni di successo viste altrove, una scarsa attenzione all'inserimento nella morfologia urbana e perfino i metodi non sempre trasparenti per l'acquisizione delle aree e l'individuazione delle risorse possono essere comprese solo comprendendo il vero obiettivo, tutto comunicativo e politico, dei progetti e il loro carattere programmatico e "dimostrativo".

È interessante il destino di questi progetti al termine della presidenza Saakashvili quando il governo del Movimento Nazionale (UNM) è sostituito da quello del Sogno Georgiano (GD). Mentre alcuni sono ampiamente utilizzati e divenuti parte dell'immagine della città, come il Ponte della



L'area di Ryke Park (foto di Vincenzo Zenobi).

Pace o il Public Service Hall, il palazzo presidenziale viene invece abbandonato e la presidente Zurabishvili si insedia in una sede meno imponente a piazza Orbeliani; il teatro dalle forme discusse, progettato dallo studio Fuksas, seppure giunto ad un elevato grado di realizzazione e divenuto quindi parte del capitale urbano della città, dapprima non viene completato e lasciato sostanzialmente in uno stato di abbandono finché non viene destinato ad altri usi, genericamente culturali, e privatizzato.

D'altra parte non corrisponderebbe forse al vero pensare il carattere dimostrativo e narrativo dei progetti dell'architettura come una fase ormai terminata dello sviluppo di Tbilisi. Seppure in particolare dalle politiche del sindaco Kaladze, sembra emergere un *Revisionist Urbanism* (Salukvadze and Van Assche 2022, 11) che lima gli aspetti più controversi dell'approccio liberista con l'approvazione di un nuovo piano urbanistico ponendo al centro dell'agenda le aree verdi, i trasporti urbani e i temi più vicini alle domande della popolazione, l'ex presidente Ivanishvili, leader del partito Georgian Dream, avversario politico e successore di Saakashvili adotta un atteggiamento comparabile ai precedenti nei confronti dello spazio urbano. Da un lato iscrive la sua presenza nello spazio simbolico di Tbilisi con la sua abitazione ben riconoscibile, realizzata dall'architetto giapponese Shin Takamatsu ubicata sulle colline che circondano la capitale ad una quota comparabile con quella di altri edifici pubblici e del pote-

re (la Cattedrale, l'ex palazzo presidenziale, la Statua della Madre Georgia). Inoltre, promuove il progetto *Panorama* un progetto ibrido collocato a metà strada tra l'operazione commerciale e l'operazione simbolica, che mira alla costruzione di tre importanti volumi (poi ridotti a due) in aree delicate del centro della città e delle colline, collegandoli con un sistema di funivie. Un progetto che impone la sua architettura di vetri neri accorciando la catena decisionale e forzando le procedure, come avveniva per i progetti promossi nella fase politica precedente (Zvanhia 2016).

Senza dimenticare che la chiesa georgiana, un soggetto attivo nella politica dello Stato, domina lo skyline di Tbilisi con l'imponente volume della Cattedrale di Sameba, edificata in un'area appartenuta in precedenza alla chiesa armena e collocata in posizione dominante anche rispetto all'ex palazzo presidenziale.

3. Yerevan: la retorica della continuità

Osservando Yerevan, possiamo immediatamente notare, come esito delle trasformazioni urbane più recenti, l'inserimento di edifici volumetricamente consistenti sullo schema della città-giardino progettata da Alexander Tamanyan. Edifici incongrui per il volume che sviluppano in relazione allo schema urbano, di grande valore e però pensato per edifici di dimensione minore; d'altra parte edifici in apparente continuità con l'architettura tradizionale che adottano il tufo come materiale prevalente e un linguaggio architettonico di matrice storicista che riprende, semplificandoli, alcuni stilemi della tradizione. Edifici, in breve, molto differenti da quelli delle città capitali all'epoca della globalizzazione.

Se vogliamo comprendere i motivi e i modi di questa peculiare strategia di trasformazione urbana attuata a Yerevan dobbiamo rivolgere l'attenzione al primo dei progetti realizzati agli inizi degli anni 2000, quello per Northern Avenue, che costituirà un modello, sia pure controverso, anche per le realizzazioni successive (Zenobi 2019).

La costruzione dell'Ararian Avenue, l'arteria prevista dal piano Tamanyan, che partendo dal teatro dell'Opera avrebbe dovuto aprire la visuale della città sul Monte Ararat, collegandolo ancora più intimamente alla comunità urbana della Capitale, aveva occupato per molti anni l'attenzione del dibattito politico-architettonico dell'Armenia sovietica, oggetto di proposte e di concorsi di progettazione.

Difficili da attuare, perché l'area era stata occupata a seguito di alcune decisioni degli anni del dopoguerra da edifici che avevano formato una sorta di periferia interna (Ter-Minassian 2007), i concorsi di progettazione avevano solo permesso di individuare l'ampiezza delle soluzioni possibili



Linguaggio storicista nelle nuove trasformazioni urbane (foto di Vincenzo Zenobi).

per l'area, da quelle più orientate alla prevalenza degli spazi aperti a quelle più concentrate sull'inserimento di volumetrie consistenti.

Nei primi anni 2000, in coincidenza con la presidenza di Robert Kocharyan e su impulso dell'allora architetto capo della città (una figura di rilievo e peculiare nell'amministrazione dell'urbanistica della città) viene assunta dal Governo la decisione di costruire un'importante opera urbana che prenderà poi il nome di Northern Avenue.

Northern Avenue è un progetto di riqualificazione urbana di circa 10 ettari strutturato da un asse pedonale lungo 450 metri e largo circa 25 (che si allarga in alcuni casi a formare una sorta di piazze), al di sotto del quale trovano collocazione un piano di galleria commerciale e un piano di parcheggi e che organizza lungo il suo percorso 11 blocchi edilizi, di 9 piani o più, destinati a residenza, uffici, alberghi, negozi (Petrosyan, Topalyan 2015).

Come già anticipato, per linguaggio architettonico adottato e per le pratiche legali e amministrative che la rendono possibile, Northern Avenue costituirà un modello, un tipo-ideale della trasformazione urbana della Yerevan post-sovietica che sarà poi ripetuto, con poche variazioni nel corso degli anni, in altri contesti della città.

In estrema sintesi questo approccio alla trasformazione urbana è definito da alcuni passaggi fondamentali, che possono poi essere ulteriormente articolati o complicati nella pratica. Dapprima una dichiarazione stabilisce la realizzazione del progetto di riqualificazione di un'area del centro di volta in volta individuata, come esigenza di Stato; viene di conseguenza stabilita la possibilità di sfrattare ed espropriare i residenti per ragioni di Stato, previo indennizzo; viene quindi data facoltà al soggetto pubblico di abbattere gli edifici ormai sgombrati, unendo poi le porzioni di terreno così liberato per formare dei lotti più ampi; viene svolta una gara o, talvolta, una trattativa privata sui lotti così ridefiniti che vengono infine assegnati a operatori privati per una ricostruzione intensiva.

Per rendere questo schema operativo funzionante, a monte erano state attuate alcune operazioni politico-amministrative.

Il primo passo compiuto era stato quello di liberarsi del tradizionale sistema di zonizzazione del territorio, attribuito a un'eredità sovietica e ritenuto non più adeguato alle esigenze di governo della città. Nel 2000 cessano di avere vigore i piani urbanistici approvati nel 1984 (il Masterplan per la città e il piano di zonizzazione del centro) (Mamyán 2014) che lasciano quindi spazio a gestioni più libere e aperte alla negoziazione con i privati del governo urbano che saranno sancite nel Masterplan 2005-2015 e nella sua revisione del 2011.

Nello stesso anno smette di essere vigente l'elenco degli edifici tutelati per il loro valore storico. Una lista di edifici meritevoli di tutela era stata proposta nel 1991 dal comitato esecutivo della municipalità ma mai registrata presso il Ministero della Giustizia. Viene formalmente annullata dalla Municipalità il 30 agosto del 2000, momento dal quale nessuna norma di tutela per gli edifici storici fino al 2004 quando un nuovo, più limitato, elenco viene approvato dal Governo dopo che numerosi edifici precedentemente ritenuti di valore storico erano ormai scomparsi.

Anche successivamente al 2004, comunque, alcuni edifici sono stati smantellati sulla base delle nuove regole. Le proteste contro l'abbattimento di edifici storici portano infatti a elaborare questa peculiare soluzione di compromesso che prevede la possibilità di smantellare gli edifici purché ne vengano conservate le pietre per una loro ricostruzione in altra sede, operazione che si rivelerà utile per ulteriori progetti e per altre operazioni immobiliari.

Il terzo e più importante elemento del modello di sviluppo urbano di Yerevan è contenuto in due atti del governo del 2001 e del 2002, che generalizzano il modello di redevelopment messo a punto per Northern Avenue rendendolo modalità ordinaria della trasformazione degli altri settori del Kentron.

Un modello di trasformazione urbana, come è evidente, provoca uno stravolgimento del paesaggio urbano, e la sostituzione degli edifici e degli

abitanti attraverso la costruzione di istituzioni estrattive, che consentono la concentrazione del potere di decisione e della ricchezza. Il superamento della pianificazione tradizionale non avviene a favore di un modello aperto alla partecipazione né a favore di un modello orientato al mercato poiché lo Stato mantiene uno stretto controllo delle operazioni urbanistiche, con livelli di discrezionalità che avvantaggiano l'oligarchia o comunque i soggetti dotati di un elevato capitale sociale. La scarsa trasparenza degli apparati politico-amministrativi fa sì che alcuni dei soggetti impegnati nella trasformazione della città, soprattutto appartenenti all'oligarchia, affronteranno procedimenti penali al mutamento di regime a seguito della "Rivoluzione di velluto".

La maggior parte dei soggetti sfrattati, i cittadini che subiscono le operazioni di trasformazione, organizza la propria protesta in comitati e in alcuni casi si oppone alle decisioni del governo fino alla Corte Europea dei Diritti dell'Uomo (ECHR) che, con alcune sentenze, riconoscerà la fondatezza del loro appello (che si oppone tanto all'esproprio in sé quanto all'ammontare degli indennizzi).

Quello che è interessante sottolineare e che rende peculiare il caso di Yerevan, è una celebrazione della continuità e della nazione attraverso il linguaggio architettonico a fronte di una libertà di abbattimento di edifici di carattere storico. La mancanza di forme di tutela per oltre quattro anni rende possibile, secondo una stima di alcuni gruppi attivi per la protezione del patrimonio, l'abbattimento di circa 25 edifici storici. Tuttavia, in Northern Avenue viene esplicitamente esclusa un'architettura cosmopolita collegando invece il linguaggio architettonico alla tradizione armena: uso di materiali locali (diversi tipi di pietra quali basalto, granito, travertino e tufo); archi a tutta parete; reintroduzione della decorazione delle pareti esterne. Questa narrazione del passato e della storia della nazione attraverso simboli quotidiani che legittima il progetto assume la forma paradossale di produzione di copie a fronte dello smantellamento degli originali. Una prevalenza della copia che sembra produrre una simulacrazione della vecchia Yerevan.

Nel corso del tempo, questa affermazione di un'architettura pubblica ufficiale e per così dire omologata sembra un passo nella direzione di costruire una tradizione architettonica legittima che espunge dal solco dell'ammissibilità esperienze non congruenti anche se locali, soprattutto di tipo modernista. Anche la Chiesa armena partecipa di fatto a quello che appare come la costruzione di un canone. La chiesa armena promuove infatti un restauro dell'area del Katoghike che circonda la chiesa realizzando un altro edificio religioso, in sostituzione di quello di epoca sovietica, progettato da Anna Ter-Avetikian che aveva di fatto costituito un involucro protettivo del Katoghike per molti anni. La stessa chiesa arme-



L'attuale area del Katoghike (foto Vincenzo Zenobi).

na propone la demolizione del cinema Mosca, un'interessante architettura modernista costruita però sul sito della storica chiesa di San Pietro e Paolo, demolita in periodo sovietico, per riedificare al suo posto un edificio religioso (l'operazione viene poi bloccata) e iscrive altri luoghi nella realtà di Yerevan come la nuova chiesa di San Gregorio l'Illuminatore caratterizzati dal linguaggio della tradizione.

4. Baku città in transizione

La veloce trasformazione di istituzioni e città in Azerbaijan dopo l'indipendenza dall'URSS si è distinta per una pressante insistenza, alimentata dallo stesso governo nazionale⁵, a ricercare modalità di sviluppo dell'economia nel settore non petrolifero (Guliyev 2018a). La diversificazione strategica dell'economia è maturata in due settori principali, il mercato immobiliare e il turismo, non trascurando però di rafforzare il ruolo della capitale anche come centro nevralgico per le reti commerciali lungo la via della Seta.

Nel corso degli anni questo processo ha subito alcune variazioni che gli studiosi attribuiscono all'andamento del valore del petrolio e di alcune condizioni politiche di scala sovranazionale. Nel periodo iniziale (fino alla prima metà degli anni 2010) il boom petrolifero ha garantito un accumulo di ricchezza nelle casse nazionali e nelle proprietà di alcuni gruppi consolidati di potere, analogamente a quanto si era già verificato alla fine del XIX secolo (Blau and Rupnik 2018). Le immense rendite petrolifere sono state reinvestite con continuità principalmente a Baku e nel settore immobiliare, la cui redditività, molto elevata, ha tratto vantaggio da realizzazioni infrastrutturali di ampio respiro (autostrade, strade, e, più recentemente, linea metropolitana), da una visibilità internazionale alimentata dai progetti delle *archistar* (Spita 2018) e da prezzi mantenuti artificialmente alti. Stime ufficiali⁶ riportano investimenti pari a 25 mld di dollari dal 2003 al 2016 per il miglioramento delle reti di trasporto, soprattutto nell'area metropolitana di Baku, gravata da fenomeni di immigrazione dalle campagne e pesante crescita insediativa nella regione estesa (Jafarli 2018). Per quanto riguarda i grandi progetti, una serie impressionante di interventi, pubblici e privati, hanno pesantemente inciso il volto della capitale in pochi anni, anche a seguito di eventi internazionali, come l'Eurovision Contest 2012, il Gran Premio di F1 e alcune iniziative collaterali. I progetti realizzati più significativi concernono centri sportivi (tra cui Olympic Stadium, Aquatic Palace, Shooting Center, European Games Park, Athletes e Media Village), musei e centri espositivi (tra cui Heydar Aliyev Center, Azerbaijan Carpet Museum), terminal di trasporti (new Airways Terminal, new Terminal of new Baku International Sea Trade Port), cui si sono affiancati centri congressi, centri direzionali e commerciali, oltre a nuove strutture ricettive e residenziali per segmenti alti di mercato, come le Flame Towers.

⁵ Azerbaijan 2030: National priorities on Socio-Economic Development strategic plan <https://president.az/en/articles/view/50474/>

⁶ AzerNews available at: <https://www.azernews.az/business/97789.html>



Prospettiva urbana dal centro storico alle Flame Towers (foto di Andrea Rebecchi).

Nella seconda metà degli anni 2010, il fenomeno urbanizzativo esplosivo (Valiyev 2012, 2016) e l'ammontare di ingenti investimenti ha subito un progressivo rallentamento a causa della riduzione di costi del petrolio, della ricerca di diversificazione delle fonti energetiche a scala mondiale e di una



I nuovi insediamenti attorno all'Heydar Aliyev Center (foto di Laura Pogliani).

più generale instabilità geopolitica dell'area sud caucasica (Valigi, Natalizia and Frappi 2018). La contrazione nel settore immobiliare è stata evidente, soprattutto considerando la ridotta partecipazione di capitali esteri.

Dopo l'emergenza Covid, e più recentemente a seguito della conclusione della guerra con l'Armenia nelle regioni del Karabakh, l'economia ha ripreso a correre e il settore edilizio, che ha un peso economico consistente (7,6 mld dollari), ritorna al suo ruolo determinante.

Parallelamente ai fattori economici, i modelli di sviluppo della città si sono succeduti nel tempo lasciando ampie modificazioni nel tessuto urbano e in quello sociale. Baku è la città che, nel periodo post-sovietico, ha maggiormente evidenziato la spinta verso l'emulazione di modelli di sviluppo occidentali o mediorientali. Nel corso degli anni 2000, l'aspirazione alla trasformazione di Baku in una megacity di stampo arabo⁷ è testimoniata dalla larga presenza di investimenti su larga scala, inizialmente sostenuti dallo Stato e poi ampiamente partecipati da capitale straniero, destinati a

⁷ "Baku will become a Dubai-like hub in Eurasia", Euroactiv, November 10, 2016. <https://www.euractiv.com/sectio/azerbaijan/interview/ziyadov-baku-will-become-adubai-like-hub-in-eurasia/>

finanziare sia estese trasformazioni urbane che una crescente infrastrutturazione di base al loro servizio. La ricchezza di materie prime e la potenza degli investimenti statali e internazionali hanno rappresentato e tuttora costituiscono un motore determinante delle trasformazioni, incurante dei rischi sia di stravolgere i caratteri urbani e architettonici tradizionali, attraverso espropri di massa e allontanamenti degli abitanti tradizionali⁸ che di cancellare il patrimonio storico e urbanistico (Crosnier 2013; Valiyev and Wallwork 2019). Sono vittime di queste demolizioni e abbandoni al degrado il vasto patrimonio di architettura costruttivista, eredità degli anni '20, nonché larga parte delle tracce storiche più antiche, come moschee, palazzi, spazi urbani tradizionali⁹. L'ambizione estesa di rifondare il 'paesaggio culturale nazionale' (Fauve and Gintrac 2009) si è andata materializzando nella tendenza locale a ricoprire gli edifici costruttivisti con facciate nello 'stile tradizionale azero' lungo i principali assi urbani.

Le modificazioni strutturali intervenute nella prima fase di sviluppo immobiliare hanno sostenuto la creazione e rapida evoluzione caotica del mercato edilizio nella capitale, accompagnata da vasti fenomeni di costruzioni informali, resisi spesso necessari per sopperire alla forte domanda di abitazioni a basso costo (Valiyev 2014). L'insieme di questi interventi, privi di un coordinamento e di una pianificazione (Guliyev 2018b), è risultato a sua volta motivo di impatti urbanistici socioeconomici e ambientali di grande rilevanza, la cui percezione è cresciuta a seguito della contrazione economica e di alcune difficoltà politiche interne intervenute a partire dal 2014. Le critiche nei confronti del modello di sviluppo inizialmente intrapreso sono esplose in occasione del fallimento di alcuni progetti faraonici insostenibili, seppure ampiamente pubblicizzati, come le operazioni di Zira Island o Khazar Island¹⁰ sul mar Caspio. Queste vicende clamorose evidenziano, tra l'altro, un carattere rilevante dei processi trasformativi locali, e anche un fenomeno di natura anomala rispetto a quanto è avve-

⁸ <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Azerbaijan/Distruggi-e-abbellisci-la-nuova-Baku-101575/>

⁹ <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-baku-basks-in-architectural-attention>

¹⁰ Zira Island intendeva anticipare un modello di insediamento ricettivo e residenziale a emissioni zero. Il progetto (curato per gli aspetti paesistici dallo studio danese BIG) interveniva su un'area di oltre 100 ha, altamente inquinata, occupata nel periodo sovietico da un campo prigionia e da una stazione navale e successivamente destinata all'estrazione del gas naturale. Il developer era una società immobiliare azera (Avrositi Holding) fallita per difficoltà politiche. Khazar Island prefigurava un arcipelago artificiale di oltre quaranta isole, 25 km a sud di Baku, esteso su 31 km². Organizzato in 19 quartieri connessi da 150 ponti, era destinato ad ospitare fino a un milione di abitanti, servizi commerciali e turistici, attrezzature pubbliche, nuove aree verdi e sportive. Avrebbe inoltre accolto la Az Tower, pubblicizzata come l'edificio più alto nel mondo (186 piani) e perfino un aeroporto. L'operazione immobiliare, finanziata da una società azera (Avesta Concern), è fallita dopo l'arresto, nel 2015, del suo fondatore miliardario.

nuto nelle altre città ex sovietiche. Infatti, a Baku si è andata consolidando la presenza di una proprietà immobiliare privata molto consistente, riferita a grandi gruppi commerciali, operatori e developers internazionali, oltre che società di costruzione, solidamente connesse con il potere politico nazionale (Grant 2014).

Attualmente gli investimenti immobiliari principali si concentrano prevalentemente nel progetto di Baku White City, collocato lungo la direttrice orientale ove si sono addensati, nel periodo del boom, gli interventi di riqualificazione del lungomare. Il progetto della White City, ancora in fase di realizzazione, copre 221 ha, di cui 39 ha di aree verdi e sistemazioni paesistiche ed è connesso alla realizzazione di una nuova linea tranviaria e al prolungamento della linea metropolitana. Il complesso immobiliare, firmato da una coppia di studi di architettura internazionali – Foster and Partners (UK) e F+A Architects (US) – e realizzato dalla società britannica Atkins con il supporto di molte ditte locali, potrà allocare a regime 50.000 residenti, 48.000 addetti e il centro commerciale più ingente della regione. L'intervento si compone di 10 quartieri attraversati da un lungo viale attrezzato di 1,3 km e restituisce fedelmente l'immagine di una città europea della seconda metà del secolo XIX, sia nell'assetto urbano che nelle tipologie edilizie e persino negli elementi decorativi¹¹. Destinato ad una classe medio alta, registra però una condizione di stallo, in ragione dei costi elevati delle abitazioni e di un'evidente sotto dotazione di servizi alla scala locale (dalle scuole agli esercizi al dettaglio, assorbiti dalla prevista realizzazione del più grande centro commerciale del paese) che ne riduce l'appetibilità. Baku White City risulta così una copia inquietante della città borghese europea ottocentesca, senza tuttavia garantirne la qualità pubblica che la contraddistingueva.

La mancata pianificazione urbanistica dei decenni passati, un paradosso in un Paese che è stato partecipe dello Stato sovietico e che soffre di enormi problemi di inquinamento ambientale, ha suscitato alcuni contraccolpi nel sistema amministrativo nazionale e locale, ora decisamente più attenti ad attivare politiche e progetti calibrati sulla riqualificazione della città attraverso strumenti di piano e una regolamentazione meno episodica. A seguito dell'approvazione di un nuovo General Plan (il Greater Baku Regional Development Plan che sostituisce l'esistente, in vigore dal 1986), l'amministrazione locale pianifica un'ipotesi di sviluppo insediativo su larga scala¹². L'obiettivo consiste nel contenere l'attuale urbanizzazione e densificazione della città centrale, che tra l'altro causa

¹¹ <https://www.bakuwhitecity.com>

¹² "Urban Planning for Baku takes a new turn", Caspian News, April 16, 2019. <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/urban-panning-for-baku-takes-a-new-turn-2019-4-16-18/>

la gestione del traffico veicolare privato, per garantire spazio abitativo nella regione metropolitana ad una popolazione la cui crescita fino al 2030 è stimata in oltre 1 milione di abitanti con relativa domanda di abitazioni¹³.

Gli indirizzi generali, che riprendono molti degli obiettivi ormai condivisi dalle pratiche internazionali in tema di sviluppo sostenibile e centralità dello spazio pubblico anche in ambiti periferici, accennano anche ad una questione rimasta finora ignorata, relativa alla costruzione di una capacità di ascolto della domanda locale e all'avvio di un processo di discussione attorno ai nuovi progetti. Sembra così di intravedere una prospettiva di transizione verso politiche di maggiore trasparenza, pur in un regime ancora ricco di pesanti contraddizioni sociali e politiche.

5. Conclusioni

La ricostruzione neoliberalista che contraddistingue le prassi operative nelle tre capitali, o almeno la loro territorializzazione in forme ampiamente rispondenti alle esigenze degli investimenti stranieri e degli operatori privati, restituisce un quadro articolato e complesso, ricco di sfumature, ma riconducibile ad alcuni tratti ricorrenti, che meriterebbero ulteriori esplorazioni.

In primo luogo, in tutti e tre i casi emerge un approccio tendenzialmente avulso da una logica di piano e facilmente predisposto a modalità speculative. Si riconoscono forme e linguaggi, che si connotano, seppure a intensità diversa, per un accumulamento caotico di volumi, indifferenti alla matrice storica e al contesto insediativo.

In secondo luogo, appare problematica la rispondenza tra trasformazioni urbane e territoriali e domanda insorgente di qualità ambientali e servizi a scala locale, anche in relazione alle difficoltà di infrastrutturazione, accessibilità e distribuzione di aree verdi dovute all'esplosione insediativa degli ultimi decenni.

Infine, i linguaggi urbani di Tbilisi, Yerevan e Baku sembrano esprimere una diversa geografia di relazioni internazionali, estremamente mobili, in un contesto di continuo riassetto sia nelle istituzioni locali che nei rapporti di forza continentali.

¹³ L'attuale popolazione consiste in circa 2,3 milioni di abitanti nel perimetro comunale e di circa 4 milioni in quello metropolitano. Per le stime della domanda abitativa cfr: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/285561617602569676/Azerbaijan-Rapid-Housing-Needs-and-Demand-Assessment-Baku-Pilot>

Attribuzioni

L'impostazione del saggio e le conclusioni sono comuni (par. 1 e 5). La stesura dei paragrafi 2 e 3 va attribuita a Vincenzo Zenobi, quella del paragrafo 4 a Laura Pogliani.

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Fashioning the Armenian City in Lebanon: Anjar as a Microcosm of Lebanese-Armenian Identity

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Abstract. The town of Anjar in Lebanon is a microcosm of Armenian-Lebanese identity. This article analyzes how the politics of space in Anjar reflects a double necessity: on the one hand, the preservation of a traumatic memory of the 1939 displacement from Musa Dagh, forced resettlement and resilience; on the other hand, the adaptation to the highly volatile political environment of the Bekaa Valley, which requires fluid alliances and negotiations with multiple local actors. The article provides a brief history of the urban development of the town with its unique design, as well as the lengthy processes of identity-building, affective investment, and memorial practices that remain relevant to this day.

Keywords: Armenian diaspora, Lebanon, Musa Dagh, Bekaa, urban planning.

1. Introduction

The “spatial turn” in geography and political studies at the end of the twentieth century emphasized the analysis and understanding of geographical spaces as a social construction, a product of political relationships, and as a representation that morphs over time. According to this theoretical frame, power balances and political processes should be considered in their spatial dimension, looking at the forms and tools of the actual control of a place, and at the construction of meanings that are connected with identity and the definition of the Self and the Other (Di Peri and Meier 2023).

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This approach has significant heuristic relevance in Lebanon, where the political system is defined as a form of power-sharing based on the allocation of parliamentary seats and senior offices in the public administration along confessional quotas. Throughout the twentieth century, the consolidation of this system has been predicated upon a complex pattern of social practices, including the appropriation and segmentation of space by sectarian actors that either fought or sought in multiple ways to create and maintain physical borders and symbolical boundaries among the different groups that make up the Lebanese mosaic (Meier 2013).

As noted in previous works (Mazzucotelli 2020; Mercadanti 2022), the peculiar case of the Armenian public sphere in Lebanon is defined by the combination of a diasporic condition, which is interlaced with nostalgia and tension towards the idea of a dual homeland, and the concomitant status as one of the constituent groups of Lebanon's institutionalized sectarian system and social fabric.

Through a history of vicissitudes, contentious politics and civil conflict, the Armenians of Lebanon were engaged in the construction of their own distinct urban spaces (Nalbantian 2013; Nucho 2016), showing a political agency that defies reductionist representations of them as powerless refugees or simply as a marginal minority group (Nalbantian 2018).

In this article, we consider the history of the settlement of Anjar, in the Bekaa valley of East Lebanon, from its foundation in 1939 to our days.¹ It is our intention to show how the planning and subsequent developments of the town can be fully understood only in connection with the (ongoing) debate over the construction of the hyphenated Armenian-Lebanese identity and its position within the country's sectarian landscape. Despite its quite small resident population, Anjar is particularly important in the imaginary of the Armenians of Lebanon because it is still seen as the beacon of Armenianness and a living symbol of steadfastness that preserves the memory of the 1915 armed resistance against the Ottoman deportation ordinances.² However, the location of Anjar also presents numerous political and security-related challenges that have a profound impact on representations and self-perceptions.

¹ In this article we use a simplified transliteration form for placenames and personal names in Armenian and Arabic. For the sake of consistency, we use the name Musa Dagh (Musa Dağ in Turkish) rather than the Armenian Musa Ler; Bekaa in lieu of Biqā'; and Haouch Mousa instead of Hawsh Musa. Lebanese names are written according to the most widely used French-based phonetic transliteration. Armenian names are written according to the Western Armenian standard.

² This article is also based on field trips carried out in January 2017, and on interviews and video messages collected on 22/23 April 2023. We heartfully thank Arpi Mangassarian for the precious help and indefatigable civic commitment.

The aim of this article is to show how the politics of space in Anjar reflects a double necessity: on the one hand, the preservation of the cumbersome load of a traumatic memory of displacement, forced resettlement and resilience; on the other hand, the adaptation to a highly volatile political environment that requires fluid alliances and negotiations with multiple local actors.

In order to prove our point, we first provide a brief history of the urban development of the town and the rationale behind its foundation. We then proceed to explore the affective investment in Anjar that was carried out by Armenian political and religious actors through the second half of the twentieth century. In particular, we stress the importance of the politics of memory and memorial practices that remain relevant to this day. We later compare these narratives with the uneasy neighborhood relations that connect Anjar with its unstable environs, prompting a constant redefinition of what it means to be Armenian in the borderlands of Lebanon. Finally, we want to point out how the management and conceptualization of space in Anjar helps to understand some political and cultural dynamics within the Armenian public sphere in Lebanon.

2. From the “mountain of Moses” to the “enclosure of Moses”

The town of Anjar was founded in September 1939 over a cluster of pasture and grazing lands known as Haouch Moussa (literally “the enclosure of Moses”), in the eastern Bekaa valley, at close distance to the main road between Beirut and Damascus. The site chosen for the new settlement lies in the foothills of the arid slopes of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range, but very close to the fertile central section of the Bekaa. As one of the major agricultural areas in the entire Levant, the Bekaa was annexed in 1920 to the French Mandate of the “Greater Lebanon” in order to ensure the food security of Beirut and its coastal region after the devastating famine that occurred during World War I (Traboulsi 2012, 75–87).³

The attachment of the Bekaa to the new mandatory administration was fiercely contested and open to negotiations as late as of 1926. Focusing on the nearby area of Rashaya, Bailony (2018) shows how the entire valley was in a condition of administrative and military instability during the first years of the Mandate, and how the spillover of the 1925 Syrian uprising (generally known as the “Great Syrian Revolt”) transformed the volatile borderlands of the Bekaa into “a crucial site for the making of the Lebanese nation”.

³ On the causes, effects, and aftermath of the wartime famine see Tanielian (2012).

The consolidation of the French mandatory rule resulted in a profound political and social upheaval in the region. The late Ottoman elites, which included a cartel of the seven most influential families in the nearby city of Zahlé and some absentee landlords who owned large tracts of arable land, were sidelined. A new, pro-French elite gained political prominence through the establishment of patronage schemes and bought agricultural property in order to make it profitable and connected to the main entrepôt of Beirut (Chaoul 2012).⁴

The genesis of the settlement in Anjar should therefore be seen through the prism of French colonial anxieties: on the one hand, the securitization of the porous demarcation between Lebanon and Syria and the political and economic integration of the Bekaa within the French Mandate of Lebanon; on the other hand, a growing concern about the concentration of Armenian refugees in the working-class neighborhoods of Beirut, where many of them had played a crucial role in the rise and consolidation of the Communist Party (Madoyan 1986).

The new town of Anjar was founded in order to settle in the countryside a few thousand Armenians that fled the Musa Dagh (literally “the mountain of Moses”) after it was ceded from France to Turkey in 1939. Earlier in 1936, the Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence had foreshadowed the recognition of a Syrian sovereign state, and ignited tensions over the status of the district of Alexandretta, which had been granted an autonomous status according to the 1921 Treaty of Ankara between France and the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Although the French mandatory authorities had previously made it clear that the district (which included the Musa Dagh area) was part of Syria, the Turkish government exerted increasing pressure on France in order to obtain a “distinct status” that was theoretically motivated on ethnic grounds. Turkish claims were bolstered by the worsening security situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the French need to appease the Turkish government (Sanjian 1956).

The increased autonomy of the district of Alexandretta was actually a process of annexation-in-the-making, predicated on pseudo-historical justifications (such as the reference to the Hittite civilization) and conflicting reports on the ethnic composition of the district (Yérasimos 1988).⁵ On 2 September 1938, an elected assembly proclaimed the independence of the

⁴ As in other parts of the Levant, including Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine, the acquisition of arable lands was regulated by the 1858 Ottoman Land Law, which had tried to clarify property rights and increase agricultural productivity. The intentions of the legislation were hindered by the severe shortcomings in land registration, cadastral surveys, and grant of land deeds.

⁵ The 1936 French census data showed that Turks and Arabs (divided among Sunni, Alawites, and Christians) were almost similar in numbers, while the slightly less than 25,000 Armenians accounted for 11% of the total population.

ephemeral State of Hatay, which, in the lead-up to World War II, was formally incorporated into the Republic of Turkey on 23 June 1939 (Yilmaz 2006).

The Armenian inhabitants of the Musa Dagh villages had led an armed resistance against the Ottoman troops in the summer of 1915,⁶ and had lived for four years in the tent camp of Port Said, in Egypt, before having the chance to return to their villages under French military protection, reconstruct their homes and resume their activities. In anticipation of the eventual annexation of the region to Turkey in the summer of 1939, and prompted by the deterioration of the political and economic conditions after the proclamation of independence of the State of Hatay, religious and political Armenian leaders pleaded with the French authorities to help the population leave the Musa Dagh and relocate to areas under French rule. Although several hundreds decided to remain, most notably in the village of Vakef (today known as Vakıflı), slightly less than 8,000 fled between 15 and 20 July 1939 to the beach of Ras al-Bassit, right beyond the border with Syria (Shemassian 2012).

One of the demands of the Turkish government was to avoid the settlement of the Musa Dagh refugees near the border, where the town of Kassab remained an Armenian ethnic pocket on the Syrian side. The French mandatory administration considered several options in different parts of Lebanon. All of them had in common a geographical location in the foothills of mountains and on the edge between arable lands and pastures used by semi-nomadic tribes. Most importantly, all the options considered were located on the fault line between Christian-majority and Muslim-majority areas, as apparently the resettlement of Armenians was seen as a potential factor of stabilization and conflict mitigation. Ultimately, however, the French authorities negotiated with a former Ottoman officer the purchase of a land estate called Haoouch Moussa.⁷ The relocation from Ras al-Bassit to Tripoli on ships, then to Riyaq by train, and finally by trucks took place in the first half of September 1939. According to the official data, at the end of the year the refugees amounted to slightly above 4,500 (Shemassian 2015).

Memories of the arrival in Anjar are shrouded in survivalist narratives that describe the conditions of bare life in makeshift tents as an ordeal, and the place as “a desert” or “barren plains”.⁸ In fact, the most

⁶ The events were fictionalized in the novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* by Franz Werfel, published in Berlin in 1933.

⁷ Different secondary sources describe the size of the purchased estate as 1,540 or 1,800 hectares. These numbers seem unlikely given the real extension of the settlement. It might be possible that the land was actually measured in dunums.

⁸ This narrative is clearly outlined in the website Mousaler-Anjar, managed by the nationalist Armenian Revolutionary Federation. See <https://mousaleranjar.org/en/foundation/83-survival-the-first-years>. Accessed on June 4, 2023.

severe problem was not the scarcity of water, but the poor drainage that turned the flat sections of the valley into a swamp: malaria, typhus, and insect-borne diseases decimated the population in the first two years of the resettlement (Edwards 2023).

The original plan, devised by the French High Commission department for public works, consisted of an eagle-shaped urban layout with six distinct neighborhoods that reproduced the six main villages of Musa Dagh: Khodr Bek, Bitias, Haji Habibli, Kabusiye, Yoghun Oluk, Vakef (Paboudjian 2006, 277–279; Aprahamian 1989, 41–43).⁹ The plan had to be downsized because of the shortage of funds and commodities caused by the outbreak of World War II, as well as the limited manpower available. Women, children, and the elderly were lodged in the nearby villages (both Christian and Muslim) for the winter, while the construction works proceeded under the guidance of master civil engineer Hagop Keshishian and lieutenant Movses Der Kaloustian.¹⁰ A few hundred houses (significantly smaller than in the original master plan) were ready by May 1940, and the remaining were finished in March 1941. Different sources provide slightly different figures, but it is plausible to estimate that a population of a little above 4,500 was eventually hosted in 1,068 new buildings (Shemassian 2015; Shemassian 2017, 128; Koushadjian, Madourian 1970, 502; Paboudjian 2006, 283).

The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), the Apostolic Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, and several other Armenian and non-Armenian charities and philanthropic organizations in Middle East, Europe and North America generously contributed to provide money, food, and other basic goods. This financial and organizational support helped to speed up the construction of houses, schools, and churches belonging to all three Armenian religious denominations: Apostolic, Catholic, and Evangelical (Shemassian 2017, 142).¹¹

⁹ See Սանճագի հայոց համար *Sanjagi hayots' hamar* [For the Armenians of the Sanjak]. *Zartonk*, 17 September 1939; Նոր Մուսա Լեր *Nor Musa Ler* [New Musa Ler]. *Zartonk*, 23 January 1940.

¹⁰ A native of Yoghun Oluk and a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, Der Kaloustian had played an important role in the uprising of Musa Dagh in 1915 and in the establishment of the Armenian Legion that supported the French army in the 1918–1920 Cilicia campaign. He then was a member of the Syrian parliament between 1927 and 1937. After the independence of Lebanon, Der Kaloustian was a member of the Lebanese parliament between 1943 and 1972 (Migliorino 2008, 94–95; Peltekian 2017, 203).

¹¹ The Armenian Apostolic community originally held its liturgical services in a large tent that also served as school. A new dedicated building was opened in 1941. In 1960, Catholicos Zareh Payaslian inaugurated the St. Boghos church. The “Haratch” school was later flanked by a kindergarten and the Gulbenkian College. The Armenian Catholic community inaugurated in 1940 a school for boys, another for girls, and a kindergarten, as well as a communal building. The church building was inaugurated in 1954 in the presence of Patriarch Krikor Bedros

Throughout the entire process of displacement and resettlement, village-based and kinship relations, political party membership, and religious affiliation had been preserved. The master plan for the new town actually supported village-based clusters, replicating in the new geography of Anjar the same communal institutions and lifestyles that defined life in Musa Dagh (Greenshields 1981).

According to Verdeil (2010, 31–49), the housing policy towards the Armenian refugees is one of the forgotten achievements of the French Mandate in Lebanon. Most histories of Mandate-era urbanism focus on the urban development plans in the metropolitan area of Beirut and their ultimate failures. In Lebanon, the French imprint was far from remarkable, unlike what happened in Syria and in North Africa, where the control of urban spaces for security reasons was a critical factor in planning and zoning. The resettlement of the Armenian refugees, on the other hand, benefited from the combination of the political interest of the High Commission, the pressure of local religious and secular actors, and the financial support from the diaspora. This “emergency urban planning” was defined by a clear sectarian dimension and a marked operational pragmatism, which however was less than linear.

In the next section, we show how the end of the construction works, and the resumption of religious and educational activities in proper buildings, did not translate into a seamless life in Anjar.

3. Building the identity of Anjar

The identity of Anjar was far from being settled in the early years after its foundation. The political rivalry between the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Tashnag*) and the Social Democratic Party of the Bell (*Hnchak*) was intense in the interwar years in Musa Dagh and was transposed in Anjar at the end of the resettlement. According to Shemassian (2015), at least forty families affiliated with the Hnchak left the camp of Anjar as early as of April 1940, unwilling to live under the domination of the Tashnag, and moved to Rashidieh and al-Buss, two other refugee camps that had been created in the southern city of Tyre between 1936 and 1937.¹² French

XV Aghajanian. The Armenian Evangelical community established its school in 1940 and its church in 1941, with further educational venues being added after 1955.

¹² Following the 1948 *nakba*, the remaining Armenians in the camps around Tyre were relocated again to Anjar, while Rashidieh and al-Buss accommodated the Palestinian refugees that had flown from the region of Acre in Galilee. See <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon/rashidieh-camp> and <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon/el-buss-camp>. Accessed on June 11, 2023.

authorities were particularly concerned by the spread of Communist propaganda, and expelled some alleged ringleaders as of October 1939.

The clash between opposed political views was at the heart of the “repatriation” (*nerkaght*) project that was devised by the Soviet Union after the end of World War II (Yousefian 2011).¹³ The idea of a relocation to Soviet Armenia, redefined as the promised land, the mother of the diaspora, and the very cradle of Armenian culture (Ter Minasian 2007, 92–93; Nalbantian 2020, 71–74), entailed an acute confrontation among different notions of homeland, patriotism, and definitions of Armenianness. According to the figures reported by Armenian sources, more than five hundred families from Anjar enrolled in the lists of those who left Lebanon towards Soviet Armenia between 1946 and 1947, more than those who actually remained in the newly-founded town (Sanjian 2003, 295).¹⁴ The movement of population opened the question of who should occupy the houses and plots of land vacated by those who had left (Koushakhdjian, Madourian 1970, 507). Rumors of vacant houses attracted several Palestinian refugees who tried to settle there in the summer of 1948, prompting significant clashes with the Armenian population. In the end, the intervention of the Lebanese army drove the Palestinian refugees away from Anjar. The latter ended up in the former French army barracks known as Wavel camp, at the entrance of the nearby city of Baalbek (Sciocchet 2022, 65–66; Sayigh 2005, 23).¹⁵

According to Katchadourian (2016, 240), further tension arose during the political unrest of 1958, when the Lebanese authorities tried again unsuccessfully to settle other Palestinian refugees in Anjar.

In her comprehensive doctoral dissertation, Arahamian (1989, 110–133) argues that the inhabitants of Anjar initially embarked upon a project of collectivization of agriculture that was meant to abolish the traditional unequal social system. Fed by ideas of peasant emancipation and pioneer socialism, the Tashnag envisaged in 1939 a complete transformation of the political, social, and economic structures of the resettled population through the collectivization of irrigation, cultivation, and stock rearing, under the direct supervision of a town management committee that was by all means monopolized by the Tashnag.

According to Arahamian (1989, 135–143) the collectivization of farming and agriculture in Anjar was undertaken for both ideological

¹³ On 21 November 1945, the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR issued Decree No. 2947, allowing the Council of People’s Commissars of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia to coordinate the repatriation of Armenians residing abroad.

¹⁴ See <https://tinyurl.com/kuyzx4wx> (shortened URL created and accessed on June 11, 2023).

¹⁵ See also <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon/wavel-camp>. Accessed on June 11, 2023.

and practical motivations, and bore a striking resemblance to the *kibbutz* system, as both were forms of small-scale planned economy that operated in a competing and non-socialist environment, while aimed at building a new egalitarian society.¹⁶

Personal rivalries inside the Tashnag proved detrimental, as well as the paucity of provisions for collective land-holding rights in the Lebanese legal system. As early as of 1943, all land and property were privatized through a fixed criterion based on the number of family members. Most parcels were turned into lots for small-holding cultivators who partook in a system of petty commodity production within a broader context of marginal capitalism. By 1947, the management committee was replaced by an elected municipal council, with one member for each of the original villages of Musa Dagh. De facto, power remained steadily in the hands of the Tashnag (Arahamian 1989, 150–155, 177–185, 195–199).

The aspiration to a classless, egalitarian community, defined by the absence of labor exploitation, was combined with the project of a homogenized Armenian national consciousness that was based (among other factors) on the adoption of Standard Western Armenian as a common language that was meant to supplant other commonly used languages (first and foremost, Turkish) and local Armenian dialects. This language policy was supported by all religious and political actors, and was seen as a necessary measure in order to rally the Armenians of Lebanon and consolidate their specific identity, which was otherwise at risk of assimilation (Nucho 2013).

The “Dialect in Refuge” project by Narod Seroujian and Cynthia Nahhas, based on oral interviews,¹⁷ shows that the dialect (*parpaṛ*) of Musa Dagh and Anjar, called *Kistinik*, is today in a “moribund” (*mahamerc*) state, as a result of decades of priority being given to instruction in Standard Western Armenian as part of a wider education project aimed at the formation of a solid and consistent Armenian identity. Sources quoted in the documentary by Seroujian and Nahhas recognized the positive nature of the construction of Armenianness through the preference given to the standardized language, but deplored the loss of the Musa Dagh dialect as “a heartaching and painful reality”, where the standard language gradually occupied the public space of Anjar and ultimately entered the domestic spaces of everyday familial interaction, threatening the very survival of the particular Musa Dagh linguistic heritage.

¹⁶ As one of the most influential figures in the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in Syria and Palestine since 1924, Rouben Ter Minassian played a prominent role in sponsoring the kibbutz model and urging for its application among the Armenian diaspora in the Middle East.

¹⁷ See <https://sites.google.com/view/dialect-in-refuge/home>. Accessed on June 11, 2023.

All through the 1950s and 1960s, the Tashnag strengthened its hegemonic position in Anjar through the establishment of clubs (*agump*) and saturated the urban space with party references. However, the general decline of the economic conditions in the Lebanese rural contexts, especially in the Bekaa, pushed even more inhabitants to move to the suburbs of Beirut in search of better opportunities.

These remarks help to understand how meticulous urban planning did not automatically translate into a comprehensive, harmonious pattern of social relations, and how the representation of Anjar as a monolithic entity is actually misleading. In the next section, we want to highlight how the politics of commemoration was a crucial part in the process of identity-building and homogenization in Anjar.

4. Anjar as a *lieu de mémoire*

Since the early 1960s, the narrative promoted by the Armenian circles in Lebanon, and not necessarily only those affiliated with the Tashnag, has painted Anjar as a beacon of Armenianness. The patriotic mission of the town has overshadowed the political affiliations and conflicts that we described above. On the one hand, newspaper articles and booklets insist on the national significance of the historical events of the uprising in Musa Dagh, and therefore depict Anjar as a living monument to that act of resistance. On the other hand, these publications emphasize the unique planning and management of Anjar, praising the secluded and (allegedly) self-sufficient nature of the town.

“Compatriotic unions” were, and still are, an important part of the system of Armenian associations in the Middle East. They are usually named after the cities or district of origin in the former Ottoman Empire, and definitely played a central role in the resettlement of the Armenian refugees in Syria and Lebanon after the genocide (Nucho 2016, 16; Migliorino 2008, 57). Since their establishment in the 1920s, these compatriotic unions published several memorial books that gather individual and family-based remembrances of the just-lived and more distant past; rural folklore; heroic legends and tales; traditional music, dance, and food recipes; embroidery and village dress patterns. These books aim at tracing and preserving the Armenian heritage of the native villages and passing it down to the future generations.

According to Tachjian, these memorial books are examples of a way of writing history that pays much attention to acts of brave resistance, usually revolving around the 1915 genocide. History is therefore periodized as

before, during, and after the catastrophe.¹⁸

The “Memorial Book of Musa Ler” (Koushakhdjian and Madourian 1970), published by the Compatriotic Association of Musa Dagh, focusses on village traditions and the preservation of heritage. Significant attention is given to episodes of self-defense and battles, as well as the endeavors and challenges that the people from Musa Dagh had to overcome in the foundation of Anjar.

A sense of continuity between past and present is at the core of the periodicals edited by the schools in Anjar. *Shiraz*, the magazine of the Armenian Evangelical College, and *Musa Ler*, the magazine of the Armenian Catholic College, are a case in point. Even though these are not scientific journals with a scholarly standard, such publications are indeed interesting because of the connection they establish between local history and the construction of an Armenian identity. The main focus of the articles, mostly written by students or teaching staff, is the celebration of the heroic past, the preservation of an idea of communal bravery, and the debate in classroom about the transmission of the daring ethos of the fighters of Musa Dagh.

These contents and feelings also transpire in the documentary film *Anjar: Flowers, Goats and Heroes* by Noura Kevorkian, where the entire exercise in oral history is explicitly defined by the intention of transmitting the memories of the last survivors to the future generations, so that the latter will be able to show gratitude and proceed “in the path of the martyrs of Musa Dagh” and of the pioneers of Anjar in its early years.¹⁹

Beirut-based Armenian newspapers, on the other hand, emphasize the transnational relevance of the events of Musa Dagh as a beacon for the Armenian diaspora, and therefore turn Anjar into a *lieu de mémoire* of those events. A cursory glance at the Armenian press reveals how themes of agency and action, in opposition to passivity and fatalistic submission, were recurrent tropes. This approach was already evident in September 1965, when the fiftieth anniversary of the Musa Dagh resistance was commemorated in connection with the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide.²⁰ *Aztag*, the newspaper affiliated with the Tashnag, proposed a foundational epos that relied heavily on issues of identity and continuity. The city of

¹⁸ See <https://tinyurl.com/5e5nmh2k> (shortened URL created and accessed on June 12, 2023).

¹⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fU8-Fzipovo>. Accessed on June 12, 2023.

²⁰ It is noteworthy that, as well as the anniversary of the genocide, also the anniversary of the Musa Dagh resistance was an occasion for a cautious rapprochement between the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the government of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Following a proposal of the Musaler Compatriotic Union, a village in the Armavir Province of the Armenian SSR was renamed Musaler in 1972 (Koushakhdjian and Madourian 1970, 847).

Anjar, in particular, was presented as a cradle of heroes and future leaders who, having been bred from the spirit of the heroes that had fought the Ottoman troops and overcome all kind of adversities, would be able to awaken the Armenian consciousness.²¹

This sense of continuity is clearly shown in the memorial complex dedicated to the eighteen fighters who died during the Musa Dagh uprising. The complex was inaugurated in 1995 and is an eloquent proof of the connection between memorialization, identity, architecture and space, as it stands next to the Armenian Apostolic church of Saint Paul, which in itself is the most prominent building of Anjar and the focal point of the urban grid. According to the Tashnag-affiliated Mousaler–Anjar website, “the monument was completed when the bust of Movses Der Kaloustian stood next to it in 1998”.²² As noted above, Der Kaloustian had a prominent role in the foundation of Anjar, but he was also one of the military leaders in Musa Dagh and, more importantly, a member of the Lebanese parliament and a Tashnag leader who shaped the relation between the Armenian constituency and the rest of the fractious Lebanese political arena. The memorial complex therefore encapsulates the representation of the heroic past of Musa Dagh and the hegemonic aspiration of the Tashnag party, both in the urban space of Anjar and in the political representation of Lebanon’s Armenian public sphere. The image of the ancestral homeland, coupled with a narrative of brave resistance, reinforces the construction of the idea of communal membership and its projection within and outside the borders of the town.

The tropes of heroism, resistance and resilience are also deployed in the depiction of the relationship between Anjar and its surrounding environment.²³

Insistence on the challenges posed by the original landscape (climate, irrigation, lack of resources, health hazards) and the transformation of the barren land into lush greenery and cultivated fields reinforces a sense of communal pride and achievement that can occasionally be used for gate-keeping and marking the difference with neighboring villages and communities. A pamphlet published for the sixtieth anniversary of the foundation of Anjar was dedicated to the consolidation and mobilization of this memory. Through texts and old photographs, the brochure empha-

²¹ See Հրաշքը Այնճարի մէջ *Hrašk'ē Ainjari mech* [Miracle in Anjar]. *Aztag*, 10 August 1963.

²² See <https://mousaleranjar.org/en/remembering-mousaler> (last accessed on 12 June 2023).

²³ This narrative can be found, among others, in a 2013 article posted by Boghos Ghukasian on the website of the Arab Forum for Environment and Development. The title reads *Hikāyah 'Anḡar* [The tale of Anjar], while the subheading reads *Baladah lubnāniyyah ḥaḍra' bināhā al-arman fi'l-ṣaḥra'* [The green Lebanese town the Armenians built in the desert]. See <https://tinyurl.com/3ym3vvtc> (shortened URL created and accessed on June 16, 2023).

sized the suffering and destitution of the refugees, their dogged determination, their heroic struggle in “a land exaggeratedly described as hostile and deserted”, but also their desire to resume a “civilized” lifestyle as soon as possible (Bennafla 2009, 99–100; Nucho 2016, 32).²⁴

In the next and final section, we compare this self-perception with the actual reality of the everyday interaction of Anjar with its unstable surroundings, and how its Armenian identity must be constantly renegotiated in politically challenging circumstances.

5. Positive neutrality under stress

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) was fraught with consequences for Anjar, just like the rest of Lebanon. As a prolonged political strife descended into mass armed violence across the country, the nearby city of Zahlé fell under the control of the Christian right-wing Phalanges, while the villages in the central Bekaa were variously contended for by different Palestinian militias, Islamist factions, and the splinter Arab Lebanon Army, led by Ahmad al-Khatib. The Armenian community of Anjar managed to maintain its “positive neutrality” (Geukjian 2007) when the region fell under the control of Palestinian and Arab nationalist groups, and most importantly when most of the central Bekaa was occupied by the Syrian army in 1976. In the summer of 1978, the Syrian troops and intelligence services strengthened their position in Anjar, namely next to the Umayyad archaeological site, and by all means transformed the garrison into the major military headquarter in Lebanon (Arahamian 1989, 227–229). The relative calm granted by the Syrian military presence pushed thousands of Armenians from Beirut and Burj Hammoud to find shelter among relatives and friends in Anjar (Varžapetean 1983, 353), as also shown in Kevorkian’s documentary.

The destructive cycles of violence in the metropolitan area of Beirut, as a result of the Israeli invasion in 1982 and of generalized infighting later on, prompted a real estate frenzy in the Bekaa, particularly along the main highways leading to Syria. The uncontrolled urban sprawl was facilitated by the huge influx of capitals from Syria and the drug cartels in the northern part of the valley. At the same time, the war years were marked by the emergence of a transit economy defined by legitimate cross-border trade, informal economy, and plain smuggling. The eradication of canna-

²⁴ See also Հերոսական Սուլեյիան (Ապստամբություն 51րդ տարեդարձին) *Herosakan Suedian (Abadampwot'ean 51rt daretardzin)* [Heroic Svedian Armenians (On the 51st Anniversary of the Uprising)]. *Aztag*, 17 September 1966.

bis fields by the Syrian army was not matched by a proper rural development project. On the one hand, a growing mechanization proved beneficial to the agro-food sector (in particular, vineries and dairy farms). On the other hand, the growing liberalization of regional and international trade widened the gap between larger actors who were able to improve their competitiveness (through investments in technology and increased productivity) and small-scale farmers who were literally pushed out of the market (Bennafla 2006).

The combination of these factors wrought havoc on a rural settlement based on small-scale production like Anjar as much as the developments in the security field.

All through the 1980s the Bekaa was a backline in the Syrian strategic concept, especially vis-à-vis Israel. The area underwent a visible process of Syrianization in the public sphere and the labor market in the 1990s. The extensive network of the Syrian intelligence (*muḥābarāt*) was ramified enough to instill fear, but could not curtail periodical outbursts of protest, fueled by Islamist radical factions and drug cartels. Local instability worsened when the Syrian troops and security services eventually withdrew from the Bekaa in April 2005, after having being redeployed there from other parts of Lebanon in 2002. Between 15,000 and 30,000 soldiers and officers vacated the barracks, checkpoints and headquarters that had been built in the previous three decades, signaling their full control of the place (Bennafla 2007).

The Syrian hasty withdrawal was prompted by the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri and the ensuing wave of protests that took place in Beirut in March 2005. Political polarization between the pro- and anti-Syrian camps often took a sectarian turn, with the dominant Shi'i parties (Hezbollah and Amal) backing the Syrian government, and most of the Sunni constituency espousing a vehement anti-Syrian line. In the Bekaa, however, the conflict map was shaped by a more complex intersection of actors, issues, and dynamics. Firstly, the presence, albeit residual, of pro-Ba'th Sunni and leftist Shi'i Muslims countered simplistic sectarian schemes. Secondly, although the influence of the traditional landowning families was seen as declining, patronage networks based on aid provision in exchange for unwavering loyalty remained a main asset in local politics. Thirdly, tribal allegiance remained very strong and hardly controlled by national actors.²⁵

Signs of an increased sectarianization of spaces, mainly through the construction of religious shrines or the display of insignia and banners,

²⁵ See the 2015 UNDP Conflict Analysis Report at <https://www.undp.org/lebanon/publications/undp-conflict-analysis-report>. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

were noticed in several parts of the Bekaa, where borderization processes took place between areas with different sectarian and political leanings (Aubin-Boltanski 2022, 87). However, the typology and topology of conflict was often related more to highway access, water scarcity, long-standing clan feuds, and land property (or a combination of these factors) than to confessional affiliation *per se*.²⁶

A case in point is the controversy that erupted after 1998 between the municipality of Anjar and some Islamic committees based in the neighboring town of Bar Elias over the property of the scanty ruins of an old mosque placed on the top of a hill that overlooks the entrance road to Anjar. The conflict was fueled by the botched condition of the Lebanese cadastral system and the haphazard distribution of proper land deeds by the French mandatory administration to the Anjar residents who obtained parcels of agricultural land in the 1940s. The legal mess allowed the Islamic actors in Bar Elias to increase the scope of their claims, which were originally limited to the place of worship, but soon expanded to the orchards and water sources around the hill. The controversy quickly escalated into acts of harassment, intimidation, and altercation that prompted the Syrian troops to set up roadblocks and checkpoints. According to Bennafla (2009), this situation of low-intensity conflict was preserved by the Syrian authorities in order to position themselves as arbitrators, while at the same time igniting both sides. The Armenian constituency, in particular, found itself in the very uneasy position of not being able to criticize the Syrian troops, from which it relied for its own security.

Lebanese institutions were even more ambiguous and weak in the management of the ongoing crisis. The Future Movement, which has aimed since 2005 at monopolizing the political representation of the Sunni constituency, and the Dar al-Fatwa, as the Sunni religious authority over personal status issues and religious education, tried to assert their own role and discourse, but were too often trapped in the entanglements of Lebanese political schisms.²⁷ The fragility of the official Sunni establishment paved the way for the rise of extremist Salafi groups, with the nearby town of Majdel Anjar becoming one of the hotbeds for such radicalized actors, as well as a recruitment spot for jihadist fighters.²⁸

Since 2012, the spillover of the ongoing Syrian Civil War and the influx of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in the Bekaa valley

²⁶ See <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-risk-conflict-bekaa-valley>. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

²⁷ See <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/burden-scarce-opportunities-social-stability-context-central-and-west-bekaa-conflict>. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

²⁸ See the 2022 Lebanon Conflict Analysis at <https://coar-global.org/2022/02/17/lebanon-conflict-analysis-central-bekaa/>. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

further escalated tensions and posed new challenges to Anjar, where the officially registered population hovers around 8,000, but where the actual residents are estimated to be less than 5,000 because of unemployment and lack of opportunities (Bennafla 2009).

In connection with the soaring economic woes and the deteriorating political stalemate, anti-Syrian and anti-migrant sentiments grew rampant across Lebanon, and particularly in the less affluent areas like Burj Hammoud, where local Armenian residents repeatedly clashed with Syrian, Kurdish, other Asian and African refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants. Sadly, it was Anjar who had to bear the brunt of the climate of rising hostility. After protesters in Burj Hammoud called for the expulsion of Syrian and Kurdish workers from the area, several articles and social media comments deplored the attitude of the Armenians, described as ungrateful, isolationist, and oblivious of the hospitality they received when they were refugees. These comments were mostly framed in a very sectarian language, ridden with references to the claim that Anjar was built on land that previously belonged to the Sunni charitable endowment (*waqf*) in the Bekaa and therefore legally inalienable, and even asked what the reaction would be if someone had called for the expulsion of the Armenians from the *waqf* lands.²⁹

In this context, the majority of the Armenian public sphere adopted a conservative stance in its relation with both the politics of Armenia and the politics of Lebanon, where the Tashnag was affiliated with the Free Patriotic Movement, Amal, and Hezbollah, while maintaining a patronage network and a mostly utilitarian and opportunistic relation with state institutions (Pikulicka-Wilczewska 2018).

In the 2018 Lebanese parliamentary election, held with a new system based on sectarian quotas and proportional representation at the district level, 22 Armenian candidates (17 Apostolic and 5 Catholic) ran for 6 seats (5 Apostolic, 1 Armenian Catholic) out of 128 (Aynilian 2018).³⁰ The Bekaa I electoral district, of which Anjar is a part, was arguably the most competitive and mixed in the entire country, therefore deciding the final result of the election.³¹

²⁹ An example of this narrative can be found in a 2014 article posted on the London-based and allegedly liberal *Elaph* online newspaper. See <https://elaph.com/Web/opinion/2014/5/908133.html>. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

³⁰ In the Beirut I district, the Tashnag and Hnchak aligned with the Free Patriotic Movement and won two Apostolic seats, while the Ramgavar aligned with the right-wing Lebanese Forces and the Phalanges and won the Armenian Catholic seat. The remaining Apostolic seat was won by the anti-establishment independent Paula Yacoubian. In the Metn district, the Tashnag candidate, supported by the Free Patriotic Movement, was easily re-elected.

³¹ Seven seats were at stake: two Greek-Catholic, one Maronite, one Greek-Orthodox, one Armenian Apostolic, one Sunni, one Shi'i. Registered Armenian voters accounted for 6% of the total in the district.

Because of the very complicated mechanism of seat allocation, the most-voted Armenian candidate, Marie-Jeanne Bilezikjian, supported by the Free Patriotic Movement and the Future Movement, was not elected. It was instead Eddy Demerjian, supported by Hezbollah and the (pro-Damascus) Syrian Social National Party, who obtained the Armenian seat, despite having received only 77 preferential votes. In an even more bizarre twist, Bilezikjian obtained most of her preferential votes in the Sunni-majority areas of the district as a result of being aligned with the (mostly Sunni) Future Movement. The very low turnout in Anjar was an indicator of disaffection with the status quo and the electoral mechanism in particular, as the winner of the Armenian seat was going to be eventually determined by non-Armenian voters (Dagher 2021).

An unexpected development happened in September 2021, when George Boujikian³², the president of the Development Council of Anjar, was selected by the Tashnag as the new minister of industry in the “national unity” caretaker cabinet led by Najib Mikati.³³ Supported by a new coalition between the Tashnag, the Free Patriotic Movement, and Hezbollah, Boujikian easily won the Armenian seat for the Bekaa district in the latest election, held on 15 May 2022.³⁴

6. Conclusions

The history of Anjar encapsulates all the elements that have defined the Armenian public sphere in Lebanon during the last ninety years: forced displacement, survival, resettlement, and the rebuilding of communal life in a diasporic condition. The foundation of Anjar as a planned town, initially based on an idealistic aspiration towards an egalitarian society of pioneers and then turned into small-scale property fit for petty commodity agricultural production, consolidated a sense of vibrant communal identity. The construction of a hyphenated Lebanese–Armenian identity, which was a major issue for all the political, religious, and cultural actors within the Armenian public sphere in Lebanon, coexisted with the preservation of a particular local identity, rooted in the specific history and dialect of the Musa Dagh villages. Even more than in other parts of Lebanon, this process of identity-building was never sorted out once and for all, and definitions of nationhood and homeland remained fluid and nuanced until today (Edwards 2023).

³² Also spelled as “Georges” and/or “Bouchikian”.

³³ See <https://www.the961.com/who-is-george-boujikian-lebanons-new-minister-of-industry/> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

³⁴ See <https://www.lorientlejour.com/elections/circonscription/10-bekaa-i>. Accessed on June 14, 2023.

As a place that is strongly and directly connected with the armed resistance of Musa Dagh in 1915, Anjar was the object of narratives and practices of commemoration that praised its significance for the Armenian diaspora and emphasized the values of resilience and steadfastness. However, heroic accounts of brave resistance and patriotic cohesiveness also coexisted with party factionalism and internal divisions in relation to national (Lebanese), regional, and international positioning.

In Anjar, the fluid landscape of alliances and realignments testifies to the continuous attempt, made by community leaders and mass associations, to constantly renegotiate the position and leverage of the Armenian constituency vis-à-vis a highly unstable political environment defined by a multiplicity of actors, security risks, and swinging coalitions based on opportunistic politics.

Despite the signs of normalization of the relations with Syria, the general situation remains bleak: the political crisis that has engulfed Lebanon since 2019, and the abysmal economic and financial crisis prompted by the March 2020 government default, which was made more devastating by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port blast in August 2020, dealt a frightening blow to the Armenian middle class, triggered a severe brain drain, shrunk the size of the Armenian constituency, and therefore had a direct impact on the effectiveness of its religious and political institutions.

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The Postnuclear Ecosystem of Central Asia: Hamid Ismailov's *Vunderkind Erzhan*

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Abstract. The core of this article consists in an ecocritical reading of a Russian language work from Central Asia: *Vunderkind Yerzhan* (2011) by Hamid Ismailov (b.1954). Based on the recognition that the Anthropocene calls for an emphasis on the complex interrelationships of ecological systems, the article underscores the urgency of an ecocritical reading in understanding the impact of human agency on the environment, particularly in relation to the history of Central Asia. The article traces the origins of environmental problems in Central Asia, including the Aral Sea crisis and nuclear testing in Semipalatinsk, illustrating the contradictions in Soviet ecological policies that simultaneously advanced and degraded the environment. *Vunderkind Erzhan* unfolds in a post-nuclear wasteland, where the protagonist, Erzhan, encapsulates the ecological legacy of Stalinist times. The article focuses on the interconnectedness of Erzhan's life with the environmental abuses perpetrated during the implementation of nuclear power. Ismailov conveys the environmental sadness provoked by the region's ecological degradation; his povest' is an outcry against the Soviet myth of progress and sheds light on the environmental consequences that developmentalist policies had in Kazakhstan. Ismailov's work becomes a lens through which the article examines the environmental challenges in the region, providing a nuanced understanding of the intersections between literature, culture, and the environment. *Vunderkind Erzhan* emerges as an exemplary ecological tale, illustrating the profound interconnection between all earthly beings, all affected by the far-reaching consequences of human agency.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocene, Nuclear Testing, Kazakhstan.

Whether or not we can use the theoretical lens of postcolonialism to examine the countries of the former Soviet Union has been hotly debated.

And whether or not the ‘postcolonial label’ can be applied to the peculiarities of Central Asia and, consequently, to the literatures produced by authors living there, are also contentious questions that are beyond the scope of this article¹. Nevertheless, it is worth reiterating that postcolonial discourse assumes “a natural prioritization of humans and human interests over those of other species on earth [...] both generating and repeating the racist ideologies of imperialism on a planetary scale” (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 6). This is one of the key reasons why I will instead analyze Hamid Ismailov’s povest’ *Vunderkind Erzhan* (2011; eng. tr. *The Dead Lake* 2014) following the lead of ecocriticism, or environmentalism², which “has tended as a whole to prioritize extra-human concerns over the interests of [the] disadvantaged human groups” (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 17) of postcolonial discourse. Despite such apparent contrast, the two approaches are interconnected; according to Timothy Clark all ecocriticism must be rendered “‘postcolonial’ in a broad sense, as the economic systems and lifestyle of any ‘developed’ country necessarily impinge on the material contexts of all other parts of the world” (2019, 138). Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the environment, taking “as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xix). The aim of the ecocritical reader – because ecocriticism is first of all “a particular way of reading, rather than a specific corpus of literary and other cultural texts” (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 13) – is to think broadly in terms of globalism and universalism; this perspective seems inconceivable in postcolonialism’s narrow “space of the subaltern, [...] the space of the subproletariat” (Spivak 2009, 54).

As Brookers and Fratto observe, “[a]lthough ecocriticism as an area of inquiry was formalized with the establishment of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in 1992, it has been slow in catching on within Russian studies” (2020, 5); nevertheless, the urgency of using an ecocritical approach in the reading Russian literature is becoming increasingly popular as several studies from the last few decades show.³ Without doubt the Russophone literature of Central Asia especially

¹ On postcolonialism and postcolonial literature in the Soviet context see for example: Shafranskaya 2020; Annus 2018; Puleri 2018; Tlostanova 2012, 2017; Smola and Uffelmann 2016, 2017; Abashin 2016; Pucherova and Gafrik 2015; Etkind 2011; Spivak 2006; Kandiyoti 2002; Moore 2001.

² I have discussed the importance to adopt an ecological approach to literature and ecocriticism’s common traits with postcolonial studies in “Animals – human and non – in Aitmatov’s *Kogda padaiut gory* and Volos’s *Palang*” in *L’immagine Riflessa* (forthcoming 2023). For a detailed approach to the matter see Huggan and Tiffin 2015.

³ See for example Brooks and Fratto 2020 and Foster 2015.

lends itself to an ecocritical reading; indeed, the ideas that constitute the fundamental bases of the concept of the age of Anthropocene⁴ are deeply rooted in early and late Soviet ecological culture (Foster 2015), and, moreover, important ecological values can be traced back to the approach to the ecosystem that characterized some of the peoples of Central Asia, as entwined in philosophical and religious animistic practices. Indeed, opting for a method of reading literary texts that focuses on the complexity of the relationships within the ecosystem seems inevitable in the geological era of the Anthropocene, when human agency has irretrievably encroached upon and altered every corner of the planet. Central Asia offers an extremely relevant and significant case study for understanding the complex interactions between human activities and environmental changes, due to its recent history. Land use and abuse, from overgrazing and other unsustainable agricultural practices to nuclear testing have contributed to desertification, soil erosion, and loss of biodiversity.

By adopting an ecocritical approach to the literature of Central Asia, we can shed new light on a major issue in the age of globalization, namely the impact of human agency on the environment, considered in a broad and global sense. Accordingly, it seems especially necessary when exploring literatures produced in Central Asia to adopt a multidisciplinary approach, combining the study of literature with that of the environmental, social, and cultural context. Since “[r]eading in the Anthropocene is an invariably polyglot, salvage practice in which we employ all of our tools to discover meaning amid the ruins” (Menely and Oak Taylor 2017, 34), this article will address how the developmentalist policies that were fostered in Soviet times resulted in environmental catastrophes in Central Asia, specifically underlining the impact of nuclear testing. The inevitable repercussions of this situation in literature will be explored with reference to Ismailov’s *Vunderkind Erzhan*.

As early as the second half of the 19th century, the lifestyle of the inhabitants of Central Asia began to move along a path of radical transformation: economic, social, cultural, and political modernization. During the 20th century, the policies implemented by the Soviet government were responsible for an increasingly rapid transition to modernity. While the

⁴ “Any definition of the Anthropocene identifies a point of entanglement between the Earth system and social systems, wherein varied forms of causality, from the imperatives of capital accumulation to the manner in which CO₂ absorbs infrared radiation, intersect. The Anthropocene Earth system, to put this another way, includes not just the hydrosphere, atmosphere, biosphere, and lithosphere, but also diverse economies and energy systems, societies and symbolic orders.” (Menely and Oak Taylor 2017, 11). On the Anthropocene see also, among others, Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, Latour 2014, Lewis and Maslin 2015, Davies 2016.

successes of some of these policies remain indisputable⁵ – i.e., the provision of infrastructure, including libraries, housing, schools, and hospitals; the emancipation of women; and universal literacy – there was also extensive damage to the region in a number of spheres, particularly the ecological one. As John Bellamy Foster observes, what has been called ‘ecocide’ and often seen to have been provoked by the anti-ecological politics of the USSR, which brought about some iconic catastrophes – Chernobyl and the Aral Sea among others – can be traced back to Stalin’s political decisions of the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, both early Soviet and late Soviet ecological policies were incredibly dynamic, and scientific ecological criticism “enormously advanced ecological science and thinking, and pointed to the need for a rapid ecological restructuring of human society throughout the globe” (Foster 2015). The Soviet approach to ecology is thus certainly characterized by several contradictions that we need to bear in mind in approaching the events that constitute the backdrop of our analysis. The majority of the brilliant ecological thinkers that were highly influential in the 1920s were purged, entailing largescale consequences that led to the degradation of the entire environment. One of these consequences was certainly the program of nuclear experimentation implemented in Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan, from 1949 until 1989.

One of the key words in the Soviet idea of progress is ‘development’ (*razvitiie*). The word tends to carry a positive meaning; deeply rooted in the consciousness of 21st-century humans is the idea that ‘development’ is somehow a salvific, noble mission. Nevertheless, the term is: “generally recognized to be a strategically ambiguous term, adapted to the different needs of those who use it [and] at best a form of strategic altruism” (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 29-30). According to Escobar, development was an invention of the post-war period, a historically produced discourse whose structure of representation reinforces the political authority of the dominant power (Escobar 1995). The dichotomous relationship between the ‘central’ or ‘developed’ pole and the ‘peripheral’ and ‘undeveloped’ one permits the former to dominate the latter, institutionalizing a comparative mechanism based on the center’s notion of ‘progress’. According to the even more radical viewpoint of Gustavo Esteva, development can be seen as a colonizing force:

⁵ Among others, see for example Abashin 2016 “The Soviet ideology and political system offered all citizens of the USSR not only more or less equal opportunities to use the available institutions and rules, but also invited them to participate actively in the functioning of the latter and encouraged them to pursue activist careers. There were special programs of support and leveling of status for various kinds of minorities and peripheral areas; great attention, of course, not without self-interest and costs, was paid to the emancipation of women” (36-37). Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.

[the] positive meaning of the word development—profoundly rooted after two centuries of social construction—is a reminder of what [underdeveloped countries] are not. It is a reminder of an undesirable, undignified condition. To escape from it, they need to be enslaved to others' experiences and dreams (Esteva 2013, 8).

While 'development' is an important term in Soviet policy and rhetoric, is easy to see it through a Saidian or postcolonial lens as part of an oppressive political arrangement, whose policies also justify the appropriation of natural resources from the so-called 'undeveloped' countries to benefit those who are 'developed'.

In the context of Soviet Central Asia, authorities were shortsighted in assessing the consequences that their developmentalist policies would have, and as a result were responsible for irreversible ecological damage. Several areas of Central Asia have suffered from serious environmental problems: the Aral Sea has dried up; moreover, droughts, water contamination, and air pollution are just a few of the ecological dramas the region faces today.

В 1949–1989 годах на территории Семипалатинского испытательно-го ядерного полигона (СИЯП) было проведено в общей сложности 468 ядерных взрывов, в том числе 125 атмосферных, 343 под землей. Суммарная мощность ядерных зарядов, испытанных в атмосфере и над землей СИЯП (в населенной местности), в 2,5 тысячи раз превышает мощность бомбы, сброшенной американцами на Хиросиму в 1945 году (Ismailov 2011).

Between 1949 and 1989 at the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site (SNTS) a total of 468 nuclear explosions were carried out, comprising 125 atmospheric and 343 underground blasts. The aggregate yield of the nuclear devices tested in the atmosphere and underground at the SNTS (in a populated region) exceeded by a factor of 2,500 the power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima by the Americans in 1945 (Ismailov 2014, 4).

This paragraph, constituting the epigraph of Hamid Ismailov's *Vunderkind Erzhan*, makes a clear statement and the story that follows denounces the catastrophic environmental destruction caused by governmental policies favoring technological development. The region was chosen to become a test site because of its geophysical characteristics: the boundless and sparsely inhabited plains were deemed to lend themselves perfectly to nuclear testing. After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the 'Polygon' at the Semipalatinsk test site was closed, and the inhabitants of the surrounding areas migrated en masse. Soviet policy enormously implemented nuclear power: by 1991, there were 1400 nuclear warheads in

Kazakhstan, making it one of the most important atomic powers in the world (Fatland 2019, 209).

It is in this post-nuclear Kazakhstan wasteland that *Vunderkind Erzhan* takes place. Written in Russian and originally published in the magazine *Druzhba Narodov* in 2011, this *povest'* denounces the ecological legacy of Stalinist times and stands as a statement of the author's willingness – born in Kyrgyzstan, raised in Uzbekistan and resident in London – to immerse himself in the history of Kazakh peoples and territories and to face the sadness this will provoke:

For Kazakhs, the road is everything. They never look back. [...] Kazakh people, I think, still have a nomadic mentality: they are always looking to the future, to new pastures. They don't want to think about the pastures of the past, because these pastures have been eaten. So maybe Kazakh people don't want to remember, but I do. That's why this sad story had to be retold in all its sadness. (Ismailov 2018)

Vunderkind Erzhan is told from the point of view of an anonymous traveler, on a train through the steppes of Kazakhstan. The narrator closely resembles Ismailov himself, who recently established the genesis of his tale: it was inspired by an event that occurred in 1989, while Ismailov was travelling from Tashkent to Novosibirsk. During this trip, he recalled meeting a Kazakh boy, who would become the future protagonist Erzhan: a twenty-seven-year-old man condemned to live in the body of a boy (2022).

In the *povest'*, Erzhan's youth goes by accompanied by the legends of Kazakh tradition and the music of the *dombra* and the violin, which he learns to play divinely, against the backdrop of the wide steppe. As the narrative unfolds, a growing sense of the importance of autochthonous tradition emerges together with a connection between honoring ancestral customs and respecting the animal world and environment. During a fox hunt, for example, Grandad Daulet captures the fox alive and then follows Kazakh tradition and decides to set it free in the steppe. In contrast with such 'traditional' and ecological behavior, we have the egregious hubris of Shaken, who chooses to take a fox cub away from its mother as a new pet for his daughter. The fox cub will die that same evening, mauled by the family dog Kapy in the courtyard, an event in the narrative that accompanies the plot like an ominous shadow.

Erzhan's contamination and his condemnation – imprisonment in a child's body – result directly from the abuses against humanity perpetrated in the implementation of nuclear power in this region. That nuclear power has interfered in the child's life soon becomes apparent, first in the familial sphere, where it repeatedly comes up in heated evening discus-

sions that Erzhan silently witnesses. Support for policies fostering atomic power comes from uncle Shaken, who represents the values of modernity and foresees improvements in future technology.

Шакен, на которого была возложена роль ответчика за все, загорался, как сама степь во время взрыва, и поучал остальных: “атомная бомба – это наш, советский ответ на гонку вооружений, но взрывы нужны и для мирных целей, чтобы строить коммунизм!” (2011).

Shaken, who was blamed for everything that was happening, lit up like the steppe itself when there was a blast. He preached to the others that it was more than just an atom bomb. It was our Soviet response to the arms race, without which we would all have been gone a long time ago. But the blasts were necessary for peaceful purposes too. In order to build communism! (2014, 35).

These values of modernity are strongly criticized in the *povest'* and diminished through comparison with the spiritual world of Kazakh tradition, embodied by grandfather Daulet, who argues: “Нет на свете ничего, из-за чего стоило бы воевать! Я понимаю – железная дорога: и людей возит, и товары – всем польза! А какая польза от твоего атома-патома?! Всю степь сделали нежилой! Ни песчанки, ни лисы уже не встретишь!” “There’s nothing in the world worth fighting a war for! I understand the railway, it transports people and cargo – that’s good for everyone! But what good does your atom-schmatom do? You’ve turned the entire steppe into a desert! You never see a gerbil or a fox [anymore]!” (2014, 35).

In Central Asia, the railway is the quintessential symbol of Russian imperial expansion, a means of controlling the vast territories conquered over the course of the 19th century (Sahadeo 2007, 120).⁶ The railway represents “the advent of modernity, man’s conquest of nature, danger and catastrophe” (Djagalov 2020, 125). In this respect, it can be seen as similar to nuclear power: The railroad and nuclear power embody technological progress achieved at two different historical moments, each of which creates new and specific dimensions of space and time. Nuclear power represents a still more evolved stage of technological development, whose

⁶ Ismailov explores the various relationships established between Central Asians and the railway, from its construction, to his presence and fruition, in his earlier work *Zheleznaia Doroga* (1997; *The Railway* 2007). In his lecture *Between the Lines – From the Railway to the www.* (Ismailov 2017), Ismailov maintains that the railway, in the eyes of the Central Asians, was not merely a technological innovation in the field of transportation, but a dual symbol: on the one hand, it represented the means by which people could reach Mecca, and therefore God; on the other hand, it is a symbol of global catastrophe.

potentially annihilating force can engulf and destroy everything. It represents the last step on the path of a developmentalism that has taken on increasingly dehumanizing characteristics in its progression. It is precisely the dehumanizing cost of development that is the subject of Ismailov's *povest'*. The narrative does not revolve around an individual character, but rather focuses on the general context; nature is not merely an unchanging backdrop against which characters develop over time, but is, on the contrary, itself a changing and evolving character. The vicissitudes of the protagonist Erzhan do not lose value, however, but they acquire profound meaning when reinterpreted within the complex framework of collective events and its network of correspondences, as is typical of ecological literary representations (Scaffai 2023, 35).

As the narration progresses, the contrast between the unnaturalness of the detonations and the peaceful environment of the steppe comes into focus more and more intensely. The steppe landscape, in the boy's memory, is not desolate and deserts, but extremely beautiful, as he lyrically recalls:

те, кто живёт здесь веками, знают, как изменчива и богата степь, как текуче и разноцветно небо над ней, как переменчив и подвижен воздух вокруг, как разнообразна и неисчислима степная растительность, как много кругом всякой живности и зверья. То пыльная буря возьмётся ниоткуда, то жёлтый смерч завертит воздух издалека, как женщины вертят в верёвки верблюжью шерсть, то огромное и тяжёлое небо нависнет всем своим весом над притихшей и покорной землёй. (Ismailov 2011).

For anyone who has never lived in the steppe, it is hard to understand how it is possible to exist surrounded by this wilderness on all sides. But those who have lived here since time out of mind know how rich and variable the steppe is. How multicoloured the sky above. How fluid the air all around. How varied the plants. How innumerable the animals in it and above it. A dust storm can spring up out of nowhere. A yellow whirlwind can suddenly start twirling round the air in the distance in the same way that women spin camel wool into twine. The entire, imponderable weight of that immense, heavy sky can suddenly whistle across the becalmed, submissive land... (Ismailov 2014, 34).

The encroachment of irresponsible and violent technologies is rendered all the more caustic through Ismailov's sharp binary opposition of the natural environment, frequently described in association with the harmonic music that Erzhan plays, to the nefarious world of man-made inventions, manifested in the sudden cacophony of nuclear explosions. Such blasts occur at all hours of the day, without any regularity or notice.

Erzhan recounts that occasionally, on the radio, a word foretells the explosion: “Взрыв, Толигон” (explosion, Toligon); a fictionalized name that recalls that of Polygon 2, the nuclear testing center in Semipalatinsk. The consequences of these detonations are devastating, and Ismailov describes their destructive power first on a human level: “Моча их покраснела, словно бы от стыда, особенно у Ержана” (Ismailov 2011); “Their urine – and especially Yerzhan’s – turned red, as if from shame” (2014, 21). The protagonist is tormented by nightmares of mushroom clouds, in which the soil trembles and the windows break when he is at school.

The narrative achieves its highest level of pathos in the close encounter of humans with the highly radioactive surroundings. Erzhan’s class is taken on a field trip to the restricted area where nuclear detonations occur: the Zone. After a tour of the nuclear station, the children are briefly left unchaperoned in front of the ‘Dead Lake’ (*Mértvoe Ozero*), whose crystal-clear waters attract their attention. Erzhan decides to dive in, inexorably leading him to tragedy: once contaminated by radioactive water, his body will never develop⁷. With time, when Erzhan realizes that everything around him is constantly changing (including his beloved Aisulu, who surpasses him in height), he abandons school and music, falling into utter depression. Although the inhabitants of Kara-Shagan try to help him in many ways, Erzhan eventually realizes that he has no escape and becomes withdrawn, lonely, and resentful of everyone around him.

As the dramatic force of the *povest*’ reaches its climax, the perspective on what is happening gradually widens and we see that no victim finds shelter, and that even the steppe is unrecognizable after the explosions. Erzhan is impressed by the ruthless transformation undergone by the surroundings as they are, unnaturally transformed:

Он обнаруживал гигантские кратеры в развороченной степи [...]. Он видел остатки каких-то сооружений, торчавших из расплавленной земли, как культы неведомых существ. А как-то он увидел торчащую из земли наискосок бетонную стену, в которую был впечатан обугленный степной карагач с черными птицами. (Ismailov 2011).

⁷ In *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave up the Bomb* Togzhan Kassenova explains that such ‘dead lakes’ actually existed in Central Asia: “Soviet innovators explored how large craters, created as a result of nuclear detonations, could be turned into bodies of water-canal and reservoirs. [...On] January 15, 1965, a 140-kiloton underground nuclear explosion expelled 4 million cubic meters of soil from the ground. The resulting crater measured 400 meters (1,300 feet) wide and 100 meters (330 feet) deep. Nearby rivers filled this newly created reservoir with more than a million cubic yards of water. [...] Local Kazakhs called it “dead lake” but continued to graze their cattle nearby. More than fifty years later, the lake remains contaminated” (Kassenova 2022, 47-48).

He discovered gigantic craters of churned-up steppe [...]. He saw strange structures jutting out of the fused earth like limbs of uncanny beings. And still deeper inside the Zone, a concrete wall stood in the middle of the wide expanse, a charred elm tree and black birds imprinted on it. Were they drawings? Or a real tree and real birds stamped into the wall? (2014, 70).

After the explosions, nature itself displays the “traumas of pastoral disruption” and the “gothicized environmental squalor” that often accompanies traumatic accounts of ‘contaminated communities’ in a world once incomparably beautiful but now irreversibly post-pastoral (Buell 2001, 42-43, 36 quoted in Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 58). The ecological space depicted in *Vunderkind Erzhan* goes beyond the traditionally depicted landscape, limited by a subjective perception: the environment is perceived from a universal perspective, where human and animal, organic and inorganic, are inextricably interwoven. The experience of the individual, in fact, acquires significance precisely because it is intertwined in this network of correspondences connecting each individual living and non-living being.

The following passage shows how everything is affected by the terrific atomic wave caused by a particularly violent explosion:

[Н]ебо стало не жёлтым и пыльным, как при степных смерчах, а совершенно чёрным. [...] Мальчишка был один на весь чёрный свет, если не считать бешено вопящего ишака. Но и голос ишака уже не был слышен. Его поглотили гул и завывание степного ветра. Земля начала трястись, раздалась громовые раскаты. [...] Скрипка хрустнула, издала последний визг, и свирепый вихрь воздуха с оглушительным гиком пронёсся, сбывая все над ними, чтобы серый, пепельный свет встал над миром... А потом пошёл горячий слепой дождь... Ержан валялся на дне, в грязи, крови и слезах, – ослик его мгновенно облез. [...] Остались два развороченных, оплавленных трактора и развезанный по степи чёрный пепел вагончиков... Где-то одиноко выл умирающий волк... Когда он вернулся на свой полустанок, первое, что увидел – с Капты слезла вся шерсть, и везде – от железной дороги и до дома – трава за какой-то один день выросла густой и высокой... (Ismailov 2011).

[T]he sky above him, all of a sudden and without any forewarning, turned dark. [...] Yerzhan was all alone in the immense, wide world – if you didn’t count his frenziedly wailing donkey. But not for long and soon even the wailing of the donkey was lost in the roaring and howling of the wind. The ground shook and thunder roared. [...] The violin crunched and gave a final squeal, and a ferocious, swirling vortex of air hurtled past, whooping deafeningly as it shaved off everything above them, making way for a grey, dusty light to rise over the world. Then a hot drizzle fell. Yerzhan lay sprawled in

the pit, mingled with the mud, blood and tears. His donkey had instantly gone bald. [...] Two shattered and melted tractors and the black ashes of the trailers scattered across the steppe. He could hear a solitary wolf howling somewhere as it died, leaving no trace. Upon his return to the way station, he immediately noticed that [his dog] Kapty's fur had come off and everywhere – from the railway tracks as far as the house – the grass had grown thick and tall in just a day... He alone hadn't grown... (2014, 83-84).

As the narration proceeds, we realize that the nuclear 'curse' has not spared Erzhan's beloved either: Aisulu keeps growing extravagantly tall "on the outside and on the inside too, like the wild grass after the blasts, pregnant with her own incurable sickness" (Ismailov 2014, 90)⁸. And she later lies dying in a hospital, condemned as is Erzhan. At this juncture her thoughts go back to Erzhan, but also to the steppe, to the road and the donkey that used to accompany them along it, to the wolf they encountered, to the fox cub and to their dog Kapty.

Снова степь. Ишачок. Спина Ержана. [...] Степь, степь. Редкие точки могил на горизонте. Одна начинает шевелиться. Ну да, это волк. Тот самый. Они тогда от него убежали. Вернее, заставили его убежать от них. А он, оказывается, все эти годы прятался и вот теперь проник к ней вовнутрь и грызет ее душу и тело, такое длинное, что не умещается уже на кровати. [...] Откуда вдруг появился Капты, их верный пес? Он тогда загрыз лисенка, а потом, учув лисицу-мать, начинал скулить, как перед взрывом. Вот и сейчас скулит. Скулит... (2011).

Again the steppe. The little donkey. Yerzhan has turned his back. [...] Steppe, steppe. A few dots on the horizon indicate graves. One starts to move. Okay, that's a wolf. The same one. That time they had run away from him. Or rather, they had made him run from them. But he, it turns out, has been hiding all these years, and now he has pierced inside her and is gnawing at her soul and body, so long that it no longer fits on the bed. [...] Where did Kapty, their faithful dog, come from all of a sudden? He had bit the fox cub, and then, upon smelling the mother fox, he began to whine as if before an explosion. He's whining now, and whining...⁹

⁸ In the Russian version we find a slightly different passage: "Так, стало быть, Айсулу, его неудержимо растущая, как дикая трава под окнами, его бедная и несчастная Айсулу..." (2011). Indeed, the two versions present several differences.

⁹ This specific passage is not present in the English translation, edited by Bromfield (2014). Nevertheless, the following version, equally significant, is found: "Aisulu looked up again at the ceiling, which was turning bluish just as the last yellow ray of sunlight fell across it like a fox's tail, and the fox cub that had brought her so much joy appeared before her eyes, the one that had crept out of their house unnoticed so many years ago. And Kapty bit it to death. How much weeping and wailing there had been that evening while Kepek buried the fluffy little body, only the size of a kitten. And each night that the mother fox could be heard howling for

Niccolò Scaffai points out that narratives about the environment tend to have a specific nonfiction component. The fact that these narratives focus on the entire ecosystem rather than on individual events requires that the narrator – as well as the reader, in my view – possess “a vocation for investigation”. In fact, narratives about the environment seem to track characters and events that mutually influence one another over long periods of time, beginning from distant situations and premises. Ecological narratives thus allow us to understand a variety of concomitant factors that have determined the nature of the reality at the center of the tale. In short, they express a complex concatenation of events in a logic of ‘hypercausality’, which represents the mutual connection between the interacting elements in the ecosystem (2021, 36). From this perspective, Ismailov’s *Vunderkind Erzhan* is a sterling example of such an ecological narrative. And, as the above passage further demonstrates, the power of the *povest’* in underlining the unescapable interconnectedness of all earthly beings, human and non-, in a sequence of events ‘hypercausally’ triggered by human meddling in the ecosystem. *Erzhan*, the steppe, the donkey, the wolf, the fox cub, and the dog Kapy are symbols of this profound connection among all earthly beings, who, tied to the same destiny and equally suffering the effects of human-caused environmental catastrophe, eventually reunite, their echoes resounding in the dying body of Aisulu.

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her dead baby, Kapy howled too, like he did before an atomic explosion. And now Kapy had started howling in her immense, empty body (90-91).

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Chinese Smartphones: China's Image Boosting Tools in Central Asia

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Abstract. Despite Chinese smartphone vendors' track record in successfully developing and selling communication technologies to the Global South, the potential of Chinese communication technologies to boost the China's image remains under-explored in academic literature. Drawing on the responses from focus groups and individual interviews conducted with the wider public in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent in 2022, this article will contribute to our understanding of China's image in Central Asia and the role of Chinese smartphones in this regard. I find that competitive pricing, localised marketing, and corporate social responsibility have so far helped Chinese smartphone vendors to improve the Central Asian public's attitudes towards Chinese technologies and China more broadly.

Keywords: China, image making, smartphone vendors, Xiaomi, Central Asia.

On a sunny afternoon in May 2022, Gulnaz and I were sipping tea in the backyard of her family's house in the outskirts of Almaty. During the course of my PhD field research in Kazakhstan in 2019, we had grown very close. So, when the country reopened its borders in Spring 2022, I could not wait to see her again to learn more about how people's lives had changed since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Little did I know that the virus had not only changed people's daily habits and as such their use of technology, but that it had also altered their attitudes towards China. Whereas, during my last stay in the country in 2019, anti-Chinese sentiments seemed to be widespread among *Almatinzi* (Russian term for

'Almaty citizens') (Dall'Agnola 2020), in spring 2022, people's opinions about China had improved thanks to their use of Chinese smartphones. Hearing my slight bewilderment about peoples' sudden enthusiasm for China, Gulnaz explained:

You must understand us, Chinese people are very smart. They are not only good in copying any kind of technology, but some Chinese companies, like Xiaomi and OPPO even have the necessary knowhow to produce high-quality smartphones for a much lower price than Apple or Samsung. So, of course, Chinese smartphones and as such China are more popular these days in Kazakhstan and its neighbouring countries.

Gulnaz' explanation seemed convincing to me. Who would not opt for a smartphone that offers the same quality as an iPhone or Samsung but for a more affordable price? In contrast to the situation in the USA and other European countries where the integration of Chinese telecom companies such as Huawei, OPPO and Vivo into critical infrastructure is banned due to security concerns,¹ Chinese smartphones are widely sold and used in Central Asia. The latest data by Global Stats suggest that, while Apple dominates the smartphone markets in Europe and North America, Chinese smartphone vendors outnumber Apple's market shares in Central Asia. Despite that there is little research on the growing popularity of Chinese smartphones in the region. Even less is known about whether Chinese smartphones work to improve China's image in Central Asia.

Guided by the argument that Chinese smartphone vendors can help China to boost its image in the Central Asia, this study seeks to address this gap with regard to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It asks the following questions: Why are Chinese smartphones so popular among Central Asian consumers? And do Chinese smartphones help to improve China's image in the region? By investigating Central Asian citizens' attitudes towards Chinese smartphones in four out of five Central Asian countries,² this article contributes to our understanding of China's image in Central Asia and the role of Chinese smartphones in this regard. Methodologically, the study uses an interpretative qualitative framework that features analysis of empirical data arising from 109 individual interviews (SI) and 37 focus groups (FG) conducted with respondents from the wider urban public in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent in 2022.

¹ As of September 2023, the US, UK, Australia and more than 10 European countries have adopted measures to restrict or ban Chinese telecom companies from their critical technological infrastructure (Browne 2023; Reuters 2024).

² Turkmenistan had to be excluded from this research because it was impossible for the author to enter the country, not to mention conduct field research there.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Following a brief review of the academic literature on China's soft power tools and the growing popularity of Chinese smartphones in the Global South, I critically assess the Internet and smartphone landscape of the four Central Asian states under study to understand and contextualize the role and impact of Chinese smartphones in shaping public perception of China. I then discuss the methodological approach used in this study before I present the main narratives with regard to Central Asians' perceptions of Chinese mobile phones and the potential of these phones to improve China's image in the region.

ICTs, China's Soft Power Tools

Several concepts can be helpful when studying China's image internationally, with 'soft power' being the most famous and commonly used. The term 'soft power' was coined by Nye (1990) and describes a country's ability to influence people and states through attraction or persuasion (rather than through coercion via military means). Soft power involves leading by example, and consists primarily of three resources: culture, political institutions and a country's foreign/domestic policy (Nye 1990). Domestic and foreign policies that conflict with the values or policies of other nations can harm the impact of soft power, just as policies that are in-line with other nations' ways of thinking can strengthen it (Nye 2004, 12-14).

For a country to persuade other states and improve its image, its messages and moral values have to be showcased in the right channels. In this context, soft power theory pays particular attention to the role that information and communication technology play. According to Nye (1990), with the rise of an information-based economy, power is passing from actors who are 'capital rich' to those who are 'information rich'. Thus, the "capacity for timely response to new information" (Nye 1990, 164; Nye 2023, 10), meaning the capacity for effective communication, becomes a critical resource for soft power. As such, it is those countries "with the most access to multiple channels of communication and those with more influence over how issues are framed" that are likely to gain soft power in the information age (Nye 2002, 70). Today, more than five billion people use their smartphones to access information online (Data Reportal 2024). In such a world, information communication technologies can help to attract and persuade others.

China is aware of the potential of information communication technologies (ICTs hereafter) to enhance its soft power, and thus its ability to attract the interest and trust of other states (Dai 2022). Chinese telecom

companies are seen by the Chinese leadership as key to increasing the country's influence in technology, industry, standards and legal frameworks (Mochinaga 2020). According to previous scholarship (Shen 2018) Chinese IT companies do not operate in isolation but in tandem with Chinese leadership's geostrategic objectives. Since the leadership in Beijing views the technological sphere, including telecom infrastructure, as the only sector where China can engage in direct competition with the United States without creating direct confrontation, including possible military confrontation (Cheney 2019; Hillman 2021), the country has invested heavily in the development of mobile phone technologies that meet the needs of the growing consumer markets in the low- and low-middle income countries of the Global South. As a result, as of February 2024, home-grown Chinese smartphone brands such as Xiaomi, OPPO, VIVO and Huawei made up four of the top six global smartphone brands (Global Stats February 2024). While Samsung and Apple continue to outnumber Chinese mobile phone companies in terms of market share in North America and Western Europe, Chinese smartphones dominate the markets in Asia and Africa.

Chinese telecoms equipment manufacturers —through competitive pricing, low production costs, cost-effective equipment and solutions, and access to Chinese state-subsidized funding and support—have penetrated and dominated Africa's and Southeast Asia's telecom sectors, wresting market share from major non-Chinese firms, such as Samsung, Apple and Nokia. For example, Chinese smartphone makers occupy almost 80 percent of India's and 70 percent of Indonesia's mobile phone market (Mallik and Malvania 2023; Yee 2023). In Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, Chinese smartphones account for around 80 percent of the smartphone market (Gerro 2023). Nigeria, Indonesia and India are not only among the world's most populous countries, but they are also home to the largest 'unconnected' populations worldwide, with 730 million people in India, 97 million people in Nigeria and 63 million people in Indonesia still not using the Internet in 2023 (Kemp 2023). As such the potential for growth of these smartphone markets is huge, offering immense opportunities and financial gain for Chinese smartphone companies in the coming years.

Similar to Africa and Southeast Asia, the demand for mobile devices in Central Asia is expected to rise, providing Chinese telecommunications companies with new innovative tools to 'better communicate the country's [peaceful] message' (Zheng 2022) and as such to improve China's image in the region. Information communication technologies seem crucial to improve China's image in the region, because so far, the country's attempts to promote its soft power and image through economic investments, cultural diplomacy, exchange/scholarship programs and Con-

fucius institutes, has been less successful (Aliyev 2019; Yau 2021). Rather than improving the country's image, previous soft power instruments have been found to fuel sinophobic sentiments among the wider Central Asian public (Karibayeva 2020; Arynov 2022). As such, Chinese smartphone vendors could be useful advocates to enhance China's image if the message that they promote is attractive to Central Asian people and serves their interests. Thus far, we know neither what messages Chinese telecom companies are promoting, nor if those ideas resonate well among the Central Asian public. The potential of Chinese smartphones to improve China's image in Central Asia remains underexplored in the existing literature. In using the case study of the four Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, this article seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Internet Access and Chinese Smartphone Vendors in Central Asia

For mobile phone vendors to influence China-related attitudes and as such improve China's image in the region, Central Asians must have access to smartphones. Several factors, including telecommunications infrastructure and Central Asians' attitudes towards Chinese technologies, all affect the degree to which Chinese mobile phone devices are popular in Central Asia.

The speed at which telecommunications infrastructure and mobile Internet penetration have expanded in Central Asia is so remarkable that scholarship on Internet culture in the region published prior to the Covid-19 pandemic barely reflects the current situation. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, mobile Internet access has skyrocketed in Central Asia. Internet penetration in Kyrgyzstan has increased from 40 percent in 2019 to almost 80 percent in 2024 (Data Reportal 2024). The most recent data on Uzbekistan suggests that the rate of Internet users has increased from 47 percent in 2019 to more than 83 percent in 2024 (Data Reportal 2024). In the same period, Internet access rose in Kazakhstan from 74 percent of the population in 2019 to 92.3 percent in January 2024 (Data Reportal 2024). Even Tajikistan, the poorest state in Central Asia, reports that almost 42 percent of the population enjoys daily access to the Internet in 2024 (Data Reportal 2024). The pandemic has also led to an increased use of digital payment tools in Central Asia. For example, by the end of 2022, 22 million people were using digital payment tools in Uzbekistan (Dobrynin 2022). In the same period, the volume of cash-less transactions increased by 85 percent in Kyrgyzstan and by 50 percent in Tajikistan (Akchabar 2022; Zhorshanbaev 2022). Similar to its neighbouring countries, Kazakhstan's vol-

ume of cashless transactions has skyrocketed from a mere of US 5 billion in 2017 to US 158 billion in 2022 (Fintech in Kazakhstan report 2023).

According to the Central Asia Barometer Survey Wave 8 (2020) the device most frequently used by Central Asians to access the Internet and to carry out cashless payments continues to be their mobile phone. More than 70 percent of respondents in Uzbekistan, almost 60 percent of respondents in Tajikistan, and more than 81 percent of respondents in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan indicated that they use their mobile phones to access the Internet rather than desktop or tablet computers. This is due to the fact that many people cannot afford computers and because mobile internet in the rural areas is often more accessible to users than home lines (Dall'Agnola and Wood 2022). Mobile Internet also allows for quicker access to constantly changing virtual private networks (VPNs) in Central Asia. A stable access to VPN is a must for Central Asians. Regimes across the region are known for using various high-tech tools such as smart filtering and hacking spyware (e.g., Pegasus and UK FinFisher) to monitor their citizens' activities online (Dall'Agnola 2023).

Alongside growing mobile Internet and electronic payment use, Central Asians' support for the use of Chinese technologies in their country seems to have increased. According to the Central Asia Barometer Wave 11 (2022), as of 2022, more than 60 percent of respondents in Kazakhstan and more than 70 percent of respondents in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan approved of the use of Chinese technologies in their country. For more details, please see Figure 1 on the next page.

Unfortunately, the Central Asia Barometer did not survey people's attitudes towards Chinese technologies in Tajikistan. However, previous research found that Tajikistanis display more favourable attitudes towards China in general because Tajikistan has fewer economic partners to rely on than its neighbours (Laruelle and Royce 2020; Dall'Agnola *forthcoming*). As such, it seems safe to assume that the wider public in Tajikistan welcomes the use of Chinese technologies in their country.

The latest data by Global Stats (2024) on mobile phone vendors in Central Asia for the year of 2022 confirms the trends identified by the Central Asia Barometer Wave 11 in as much as it shows that Chinese smartphone companies' market shares have skyrocketed in the region since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Figure 2 on the following page illustrates various smartphone vendors' market shares in Central Asia from 2018 to 2022.

While Huawei was the first Chinese telecom company to enter the Central Asian smartphone market in the early 2010s (Hashimova 2020), Huawei is no longer among the leading four vendors in the four Central Asian countries. In the span of just a few years since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese smartphone maker Xiaomi has

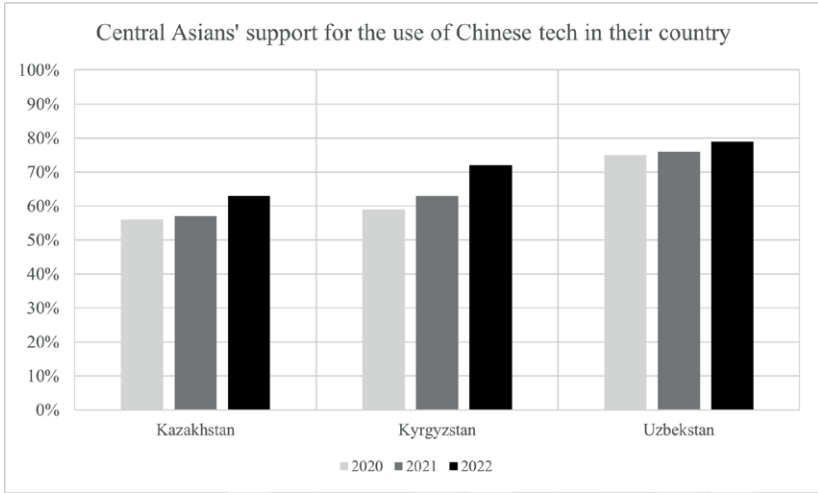


Figure 1. Central Asians’ support for the use of Chinese technologies in their country. Source: Central Asia Barometer (2020-2022).

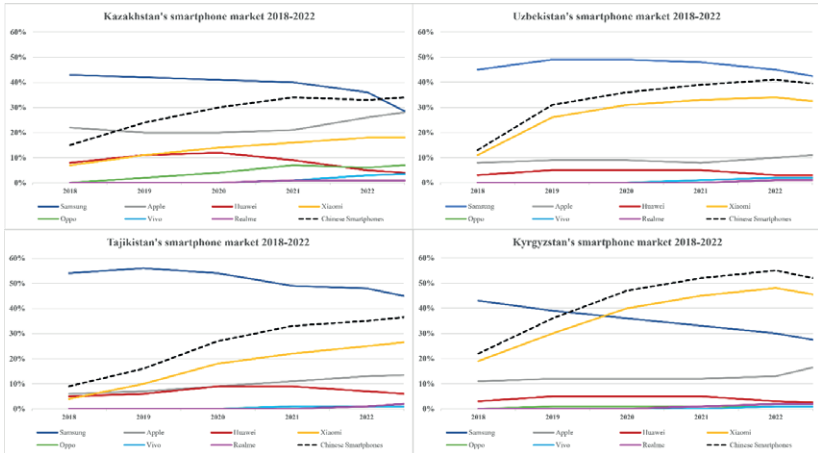


Figure 2. Smartphone vendors’ market shares in Central Asia from 2018 to 2022. Source: Global Stats (2024).

overtaken Huawei’s market share and is now the most popular Chinese smartphone brand in Central Asia. By the end of 2022, all Chinese smartphone vendors combined controlled 55 percent of Kyrgyzstan’s mobile phone market (see the black dotted line for Kyrgyzstan in Fig-

ure 2). Whereby the Chinese telecom company Xiaomi had the largest market share in smartphones with almost 50 percent. While Samsung continues to be the most popular smartphone brand in Uzbekistan (45 percent) and Tajikistan (48 percent), the company lost substantial market share to its Chinese rival Xiaomi amidst the pandemic. Xiaomi increased its market share in Uzbekistan from 11 percent in 2018 to 34 percent in 2022. In the same period, the tech company managed to increase its popularity sixfold in Tajikistan, from 4 percent in 2018 to 25 percent in 2022. In contrast to its neighbouring countries, Kazakhstan's smartphone market continues to be dominated by Samsung and Apple. As of 2022, all Chinese smartphone vendors combined (see black dotted line in Figure 2) only occupied 33 percent of Kazakhstan's mobile phone market, where Xiaomi held 18 percent.

In short, as the Covid-19 pandemic increased Central Asians' demand for mobile devices, the expansion of Chinese smartphones accelerated and public attitudes towards Chinese technologies improved. The recent growth of communication technologies and the growing popularity of Chinese mobile devices all raise important questions about China's image in the region. Why are Chinese smartphones so popular among Central Asian consumers? And do Chinese smartphones help to improve China's image in the region? To answer these questions, this study uses interview data, as the following section shows.

Methodology

To my knowledge there is so far no academic research on the question of what impact the popularization of Chinese smartphones has on China's image in Central Asia. This study seeks to address this gap with regard to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It uses an interpretative qualitative frame that features analysis of empirical data arising from individual interviews and focus groups conducted with respondents from the wider urban public in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent between May and October in 2022. The group and individual interviews were initially conducted as part of the data collection process for my postdoctoral project on the implication of the Covid-19 pandemic on smart city technologies in Central Asia. To measure individuals' attitudes towards Chinese smartphones, the following question was asked during the interviews: "Please tell me what smartphone brand you use and why?" Following previous scholarship (Voon and Xu 2020), I therefore measure China's image based on Central Asians' public perception of China, in my case their attitudes towards Chinese smartphones.

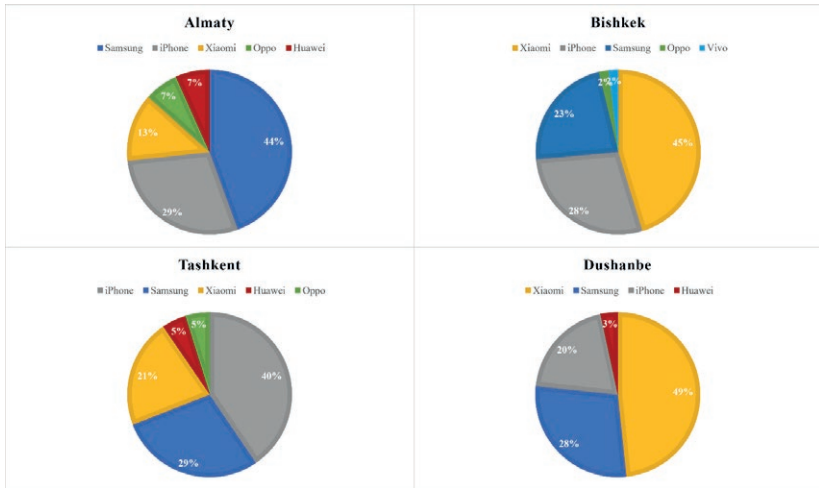


Figure 3. Respondents' smartphone preferences in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent in 2022.

Interview participants were successfully recruited through existing and associated contacts and through so-called "insider" recruiting (Krueger and Casey 2015, 85). Insiders recruited their relatives, friends, and working colleagues. Using pre-existing social groups allowed for the incorporation of participants from diverse educational and social backgrounds (students, professionals, entrepreneurs, office workers, receptionists, cleaning ladies, taxi drivers, market salespersons, nurses, etc.) and facilitated a generally relaxed atmosphere during the interviews. Overall, I conducted 37 focus groups (consisting of six or fewer people) and 109 individual interviews that yielded a stratified sample of 210 individuals ranging in age from 18 to 71 years old.

Figure 3 above illustrates respondents' smartphone preferences in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent respectively. The descriptive results in Figure 3 support the latest figures by Global Stats (2024) presented in Figure 2 in as much as they show that Xiaomi was identified by my respondents to be the most popular Chinese mobile phone provider in Central Asia in 2022. While 49 percent of my interview partners in Dushanbe and 45 percent of my respondents in Bishkek reported using a Xiaomi smartphone, Samsung and Apple phones were more popular among my interviewees in Almaty and Tashkent. Apple and Samsung's popularity can be explained by the fact that the urban population in these two cities is more economically well-off and more tech-savvy than their

counterparts in Bishkek and Dushanbe. Despite this, almost 30 percent of respondents in Almaty and Tashkent reported that they use a Chinese smartphone in 2022. So how comes that Chinese smartphones are more and more popular in Central Asia? Drawing on the interview data that I collected in the region in 2022, the following two sections seek to discuss this question in more detail.

China, the Friendly Tech Power

As previously discussed, Chinese IT companies only help to improve China's image in a given country if the message that they promote is attractive to the citizens of this country. I found that Chinese smartphone companies' missions "to empower and evaluate society through technology" (OPPO 2023), "technology 4 all" (Huawei 2023) and "to let everyone in the world enjoy the beautiful life brought by technology" (Xiaomi, see Xu 2021) seem to resonate with Central Asian consumers. Indeed, China was often described by my respondents as a "friendly tech power"³ that provides Central Asian consumers with affordable high-end communication technologies that enable them to make a decent living.

"There is no doubt that Chinese technology firms offer people like us a lifeline in sustaining our businesses," Thamina a 31-year-old IT Developer from Dushanbe explained. According to Thamina and other Tech professionals, the high uptake of e-commerce and social media content creation in Central Asia is largely driven by the availability of high-quality smartphones that are affordable to the masses. Similar to Gulnaz in the introduction, my urban dwellers were convinced that Chinese smartphones are gaining in popularity among consumers in Central Asia, because they are "smart and cheap."⁴ VIVO, Realme, and Xiaomi dominate the market for low-end devices that cost less than USD 200, and OPPO leads in mid-range models between USD 200 and USD 400. In contrast, an iPhone 13 Pro Max (market price USD 1200) costs more than double the average salary in Kazakhstan and over three times of the monthly average salary in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Uzreport 2022). Many Central Asians need to borrow money from the bank to buy a smartphone, making competitors like Samsung and Apple too expensive for most. Under these conditions, even youngsters who work in the tech sector, like Amir, a 27-year-old programmer from Tashkent, opt for a Chinese device because of its reasonable price:

³ Barber aged 42 from Almaty, May 5, 2022.

⁴ PC mechanic aged 47 from Dushanbe, July 7, 2022.

Instead of paying more than 1000 USD for an iPhone, I can buy a Xiaomi which offers me the same user experience as an iPhone but for a more reasonable price.⁵

Chinese smartphones are more popular among Central Asian consumers not only because of their competitive prices, but also because they give access to the same if not more apps and functions than the pricier alternatives offered by Samsung and iPhone. For example, Aynura, a 54-year-old language teacher from Bishkek, argued that certain mobile phone apps have more functions on a Xiaomi than on an Apple smartphone. During the interview, Aynura voiced her frustration about the fact that some of the apps that she needs for her work as teacher are either limited or do not exist on her new iPhone 13. Since she urgently needs these apps for her work, she had to buy herself a second phone, a Redmi 8 from Xiaomi's budget smartphone line. Indeed, as we can see in Figure 4, Aynura's favourite translation app provides her with twice as many editing options and functions on her Xiaomi smartphone (on the left) than on her iPhone 13 (on the right).

Another possible explanation for why people purchase Chinese smartphones, is Central Asian parents' fear that their toddler may accidentally break their Samsung or iPhone. According to them, Apple and Samsung phones are "so perishable these days"⁶ especially in a child's hands. In this context, some parents, like Serik, a 43-year-old taxi driver and father from Almaty, describe Chinese smartphones as a great indestructible and waterproofed alternative to Samsung and Apple (see his quote below).

I have tried many different smartphones in my life. However, at the end Xiaomi convinced me the most, not only because of its slow price, but also due to its performance and indestructibility. What I mean by indestructibility? For example, my daughter accidentally dropped her Xiaomi Redmi 6 twice in the water. And guess what, it still works fine! I only once split a little bit of water over my former Samsung Galaxy and I had to buy a new one. This is what I mean by indestructibility.

As we can see from the quote above, Serik had tried many different smartphone brands, but in the end Xiaomi convinced him the most because of its low price, performance ratio and durability. While the Xiaomi Redmi 6 phone of his four-year-old daughter seemed to be indestructible even after his daughter had accidentally dropped it twice in the water, Serik was forced to replace his Samsung Galaxy after he had accidentally spilt a bit of water over it.

⁵ IT Programmer aged 27 from Tashkent, June 14, 2022.

⁶ Accountant and mother, aged 35, of a six-month-old boy from Dushanbe, July 18, 2022.

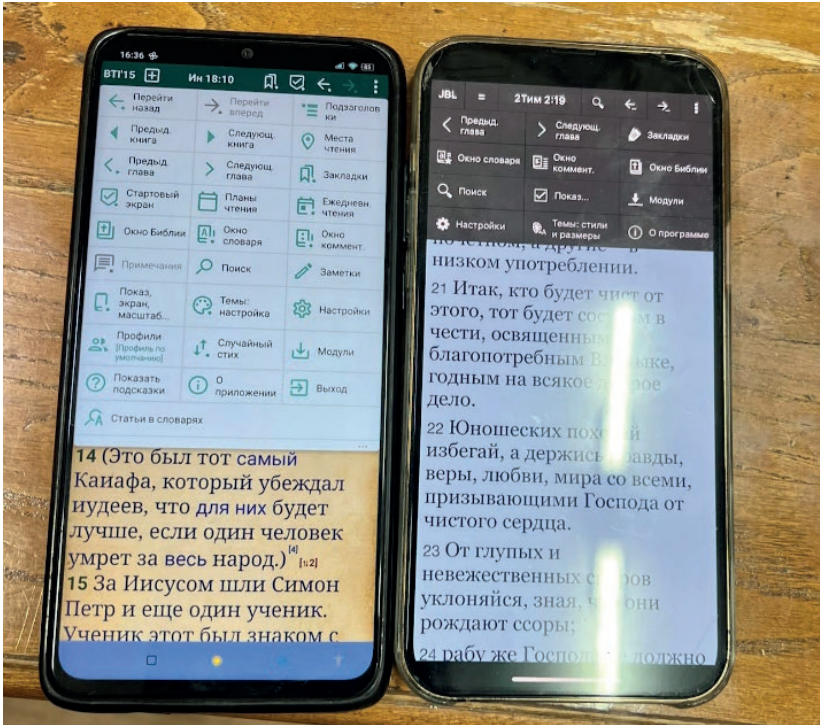


Figure 4. Photo of Aynura's favourite translation app on her Redmi 8 (left) and iPhone 13 (right).

So while once viewed by many Central Asians as low-quality knock-offs, Chinese mobile devices, and as such Chinese technology firms, are no longer perceived as subpar counterfeits to US and Korean technology companies. According to my respondents, the label 'Made in China' no longer equates to "low quality but rather affordable and high-end technology."⁷ As such, Chinese smartphone vendors have not only seemed to alter Central Asians' views about Chinese technologies, but also about Chinese companies and as such China more broadly.

Localised Branding and Marketing Strategy

For a country to persuade other states, its message and products have to be showcased in the right channels. Chinese smartphone companies

⁷ Housewife aged 39 from Tashkent, June 17, 2022.

seem to comprehend this and have master this strategy in Central Asia. With around half of Central Asia's population now under 30 years old (Khashimov et al. 2020), Chinese telecom companies have tailored their products and marketing strategy to meet the needs of the increasingly young smartphone user base in Central Asia. Since Instagram is the region's most popular social media tool among people under 30 (Dall'Agnoia 2022), Chinese smartphone companies actively curate and promote their products on Instagram. For example, a scroll through the 163,000 followers on OPPO's Kazakhstan account reveals many of the key players in Kazakhstan's pop culture and entertainment industries – from Ulutay, a popular Kazakh folk metal-trio, to the Kazakh national singer Dimash Kudaibergen (Krylova 2023). Both act as brand ambassadors for OPPO in a country where celebrity and blogger ambassadors yield significant influence. In Uzbekistan, the Chinese smartphone company VIVO has partnered with the famous Uzbek singer Shahlo Ahmedova (@shahloahmedova), who has almost 3 million followers on her Instagram account.

Chinese tech vendors' strategies to hire local celebrities seems to attract Central Asian youth. Many young people I interviewed, like Rustem, a 28-year-old journalist from Almaty, argued that they had purchased a Chinese smartphone because their idol, in his case Dimash Kudaibergen, had recommended it to their fans and followers on social media. In honour of the Central Asian new year celebration Nowruz in March 2023, the Chinese smartphone company OPPO launched a competition for OPPO customers to win a photo session with Kudaibergen. Figure 5 shows Dimash Kudaibergen's paid-Instagram post in which he advertises the competition for OPPO customers to win a meet-and-greet with him. Kudaibergen's collaboration with the Chinese mobile phone company OPPO seems to be no coincidence. Dimash Kudaibergen is a well-known celebrity in China and even performed a Kazakh folk song "Oh, Zhailau" (Kazakh for 'My Steppe') at China Central Television's Chinese New Year Gala in January 2023 (The Astana Times 2023).

In addition to their collaboration with local celebrities and bloggers, Chinese smartphone companies celebrate Central Asian languages, culture, traditions and food in their social media campaigns. For example, VIVO showcases its newest smartphone V27 in front of Uzbek embroidery or food (@vivo_Uzbekistan) and Xiaomi and OPPO publish all their marketing posts in local languages as well as in Russian. In the spirit of decentring the study of Central Asia from Russia (Marat and Kassymbekova 2023), Chinese smartphone vendors also do no longer use Russian as the main language of communication in their social media marketing campaigns in the region.

In the same vein, Chinese smartphone vendors have also invested resources in local communities. Since 2016 the Chinese telecom compa-



Figure 5. Paid-Instagram post by Dimash Kudaibergen: ‘Hello folk! Would you like to spend Nowruz together with me?’ Source: @Kudaibergenov.dimash, March 16, 2023.

ny Huawei and the Tashkent University of Information Technology have been working together to run a special program, called “1000 Talents” that seeks to educate Uzbek educators and students in IT technologies (Hashimova 2020; Huawei Tech 4 Good 2024). Furthermore, as part of its “Seeds for the Future” programme, Huawei has offered more than 300 STEM students from Central Asia the opportunity to visit and study in China since the company first launched the program in the region in the early 2010s (Huawei Seeds for the Future 2024). In addition to its global corporate social responsibility flagship program, in July 2023, Huawei announced the launch of a new Instructor Enablement camp that seeks to promote and empower Central Asia’s ICT talent ecosystem (Zawya 2023). As of today, 230 Huawei ICT academies have been established in the Middle East and Central Asia regions, while over 46,000 trainees have passed Huawei exams.

Moreover, Chinese technology manufacturers are also creating employment opportunities for young professionals, like Loiq, who used to work as an IT expert for Xiaomi in Dushanbe. “I used to work for Xiaomi and this was an eye-opening experience for me.” While working for Xiaomi, Loiq realised how much time and money his employer spent on localising its workforce and researching Central Asian consumers’ needs. According to Loiq, “all this really changed my way of thinking about Chinese companies and China more generally.”

In short, Chinese mobile phone companies' investments in local communities and their localised marketing strategies have helped them to win over the hearts and wallets of Central Asian youth.

Conclusion

The narratives arising from the individual and group interviews with the wider urban public in Tashkent, Almaty, Bishkek and Dushanbe support the recent data by Global Stats (2024) in as much as they suggest that Chinese mobile phone providers such as Xiaomi have become more popular among Central Asian consumers since the outbreak of Covid-19. In some countries, like Kyrgyzstan, the Chinese smartphone company Xiaomi already has the largest market share in mobile phones. However, as I have tried to show in this essay, the recent popularity of Chinese mobile devices cannot solely be credited to the fact that they are more affordable to the wider public than other smartphone brands. Rather, this is also due to Chinese vendors' efforts to localise their branding strategies and workforces. Competitive pricing, localised marketing, and corporate social responsibility have so far helped Chinese smartphone companies to sell their smartphones and to improve their image to a certain extent. Until rivals like Apple and Samsung begin devising more effective marketing strategies, it seems unlikely that China's growing dominance over the Central Asian smartphone market will be challenged anytime soon.

Moreover, the results presented here for Central Asia also seem to suggest that Chinese smartphone vendors are helpful advocates in China's struggle to address Sinophobia. While my interview data mainly featured Central Asians from urban areas, previous public opinion polls show that pro-Chinese attitudes are more common among Central Asians than we would expect. The Central Asia Barometer Wave 12 public opinion data on China (see Figure 6 on the next page), support my observations presented here. More than 55 percent of Central Asians who participated in the Central Asia Barometer Wave 12 in autumn 2022 described China to be very friendly or somewhat friendly toward their country. As such, both my narratives arising from focus groups and individual interviews with the urban Central Asian public somehow challenge previous scholars' assumption that Sinophobia continues to be wide-spread in Central Asia.

Finally, similar to Central Asia with almost one-third of the population still not having stable access to mobile internet in 2024, the demand for smartphones in the Global South is expected to rise, offering immense opportunities for Chinese telecommunications companies. As a point for future research, it would be important to address whether or not the

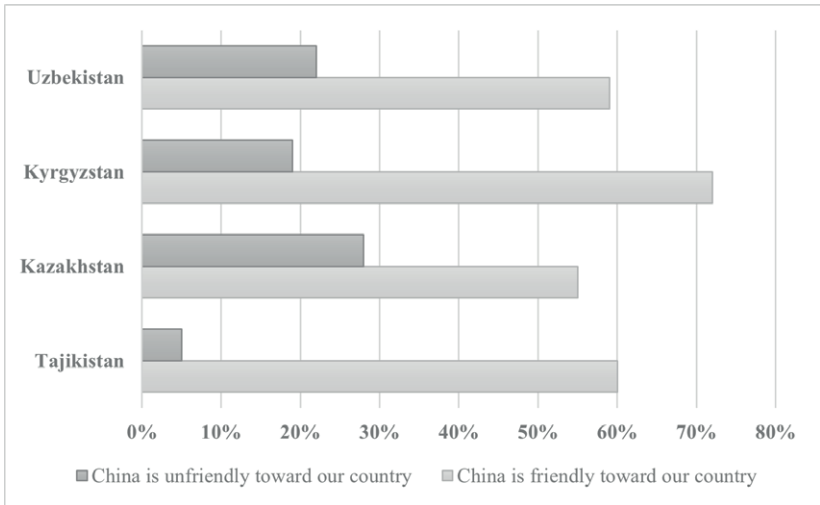


Figure 6. Central Asians' perception of China as a friendly or unfriendly country. Source: Central Asia Barometer Wave 12 (2022).

growing popularity of Chinese technologies in the populous Global South will result in the replacement of the US by China as the driver for technological change.

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Distinguishing Ontological Security from Security of Identity: The Case of Russian “Relokanty” in Tbilisi in the Aftermath of the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract. This article seeks to contribute to the burgeoning debate on ontological security (OS) in International Relations (IR), and sides with that part of OS scholarship that emphasizes the distinction between “security of identity” and “security of the self”. We empirically show the need for separating these two concepts by discussing the case of Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi in aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Also due to the history of conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi, Russian *relokanty* in Georgia have found themselves in a strongly pro-Ukraine environment, and have thus faced various shaming attempts by some locals. This, combined with the existential crisis they already felt due to their country’s invasion of Ukraine, has ignited personal reflections regarding their sense of self and their identity. We thus conducted fifty semi-structured interviews with Russian *relokanty* in Georgia, and methodologically traced ontological insecurity as manifested by its “symptoms” of anxiety and feeling of limbo. We highlight the difference between the security of identity and security of the self by: (1) discussing how a majority of respondents displayed symptoms of ontological insecurity, but only a minority of them also experienced an identity crisis; (2) and showing how those respondents who did shift identity as a result of an identity crisis, ultimately failed to re-establish security of the self.

Keywords: Russia, Georgia, Ontological Security, Identity, Anxiety.

Introduction

The growing body of research on ontological security (OS), meant as the ability of a social actor “to uphold a stable view of its environment and thereby ‘go on’ with everyday life” (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 31), has yielded valuable insights into the actions and behaviours of individuals, groups, and states within the realm of international relations (IR). However, despite the diverse and rich scholarship, there persists a prevalent ambiguity regarding the significance and interrelation of the fundamental principles of “self” and “identity”, especially due to the prevalently “state-centric” approach employed by a large part of IR scholars. We contend that concentrating on this differentiation will not only help address criticisms of OS scholarship, but also provide a better understanding of how individuals seek to mitigate their existential anxiety in traumatising and conflicting situations.

Therefore, we contribute to the existing literature that emphasises the significance of maintaining analytical distinctions between these two concepts and, particularly, characterises identity security as an aspect of OS, by analysing the case study of the Russian *relokanty*¹ community in Georgia after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Opting for Georgia as their destination was a controversial choice for Russians, considering the history of conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as the Kremlin’s military support to the two separatist republics since the early 90s.

Indeed, many Georgians harbour resentment towards Russia, and it is not surprising that Russian *relokanty* in Georgia found themselves immersed in a politically and emotionally pro-Ukraine environment. In this context, they faced numerous instances of Russophobia, expressed through hateful graffiti, verbal harassment, and ethnic discrimination.

These shaming attempts by Georgians, combined with the fact that many Russian *relokanty* were already dealing with deep shame over their country’s invasion of Ukraine, became a catalyst for personal reflections and debates within the Russian community in Tbilisi regarding their sense of self and their identity.

By employing discourse analysis (DA) of fifty semi-structured interviews with “first-wave” Russians living in Georgia, mostly in Tbilisi, we highlight the difference between OS, meant as security of the self in the body, and identity security. We also analyse the connection between OS and identity shift as a (failed) mechanism to re-establish OS. Finally, we

¹ The Russian word “relokanty” was adopted by Russian émigré community itself to identify their status.

aim to contribute to the methodology used for OS studies by empirically pinning down potential symptoms of ontological insecurity in individuals.

Following this introduction, the rest of this paper is organised as follows. The first section introduces the concept of OS and discusses the challenges in the existing literature, particularly the lack of a distinct differentiation between self and identity. The second section provides the reader with a brief historical context of Russian-Georgian relations in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The third section discusses the data and methodology employed for this research. Finally, the fourth section presents the empirical results.

Ontological security vs identity security

In recent years, the concept of OS has gained prominence in academic discussions on security, and some suggest that it has become a distinct area of focus in critical security studies (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2021). Often referred to as “security of the self”, OS blends insights from existentialist philosophy, psychoanalysis, and critical security studies, operating at the intersection of identity and emotions within the framework of securitisation theory (Krickel-Choi 2024). It can be defined as the desire of an individual or any social actor to have a “sense of order and continuity in events” (Giddens 1991, 243).

This concept, initially developed by Scottish psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing in the 1950s, was subsequently introduced to the field of social sciences in the 1990s by English sociologist Anthony Giddens. Laing and Giddens are united by a fundamental belief in the ontology of the individual self, recognising its inherent entanglement with social connections (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2021). They both contend that, in their quest for OS, it is crucial for individuals to uphold a coherent self-narrative, even though it can prove to be delicate and susceptible to occasional disruption. Consequently, Laing and Giddens emphasise the pivotal role of relegating profound anxieties about existence to the background, in favour of actively engaging in daily routines and nurturing a fundamental sense of trust. Thus, most of the literature assumes that social actors prioritise stability and avoid change due to the anxiety it generates and, as a result, they tend to maintain established behaviours, routines, and identities to preserve a stable self-concept (Browning and Joenniemi 2017).

Given the increasing relevance of OS in conceptualising responses to the challenges of an uncertain world order marked by trauma, ethnic conflict, internal threats, migration, and discourses of terror (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018), scholarship on OS has significantly advanced our under-

standing of how individuals (Kinnvall 2004; Krolkowski 2008; Browning 2018), groups (Kay 2012, Rumelili and Çelik 2017, Della Sala 2020), and nations (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Subotić 2016; Zarakol 2017; Ejodus 2020) engage within the domain of international politics. Especially because of OS's capacity to provide alternative insights into the underlying factors that contribute to security dilemmas in world politics (Browning and Joenniemi 2017), the literature has also managed to cover a diverse range of theoretical and empirical issues, such as conflicts (Mitzen 2006; Rumelili 2014; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018), foreign policy (Subotić 2016; Mitzen and Larson 2017; Narozhna 2018), migration (Huysmans 2000; Mitzen 2018; Gellwitzki and Houde 2023), nationalism (Kinnvall 2004; Krolkowski 2008; Lupovici 2012), and many more.

However, the field of OS scholarship has not been without its fair share of criticisms (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020). One of the primary concerns is that, while Giddens aimed to extend Laing's concepts and ideas from the individual to the broader context of modern societies, a significant branch of OS scholarship has, in a similar manner, adapted the Laing-Giddens paradigm by enlarging the notion of OS from the individual level to that of the state (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2021). This approach was justified by these authors on the premise that most models of IR are typically rooted in individual human needs and then extended to encompass the collective entity (Steele 2008).

The state-centric approach in the literature has in turn given rise to another significant concern. Within discussions about IR, the concept of OS has frequently been conflated with that of identity, resulting in an oversimplified interpretation that reduces the pursuit of OS to a mere pre-occupation with preserving one's identity (Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Krickel-Choi 2024). Innes and Steele (2014) assert that traumas or substantial ontological crises arise when external events challenge the state's internal or external identity, disrupting the orderly incorporation of these events within the OS narrative. Also in their empirical analyses, well established IR accounts of OS have often blurred the distinction between the self and identity (Browning and Joenniemi 2017).

As an example, in her 2006 work titled "Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security," Catarina Kinnvall examines the identities of Sikhs and Hindus in the context of globalising trends. Kinnvall's empirical approach, based on interviews conducted between 1996 and 2002, utilises the OS framework to demonstrate how Sikh and Hindu nationalist individuals in India have endeavoured to offer a sense of OS in response to globalisation by presenting ideas related to a sense of belonging or home. Thus, as illustrated in Gustafsson's work (2014), which examines the role of collective memory and historical repre-

sentations in shaping Sino-Japanese relations, OS is at times narrowly perceived as nothing more than “identity security.”

Nevertheless, according to Flockhart (2016), OS can serve as a tool to emphasise the analytical distinction between “self” and “identity.” She suggests that being ontologically secure does not necessarily imply possessing a stable identity. Although it is true that these two concepts develop through social interaction (Millward and Kelly 2003), “it is only the self that needs to maintain continuity while identity takes on a changeable quality” (Krickel-Choi 2022, 9). These claims also respond to a primary criticism of OS scholarship, as pointed out by Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi (2020). This criticism centres on the excessive emphasis placed on the relationship between OS and continuity, again with a predominant focus on how states and other entities strive to safeguard their identity (Browning and Joenniemi 2017).

The concept of “anxiety”, particularly in the context of traumatic or conflict-ridden situations, comes to our aid in helping us better understand the difference between “self” and “identity”, as well as their interaction throughout those moments characterised by moments of radical change. Despite its prominence in contemporary society, anxiety remains somewhat overlooked within the realm of IR (Rumelili 2022). In line with ideas found in existentialist and psychoanalytic theories, OS scholarship refers to anxiety as an inner sense of discomfort triggered by uncertainty, potential outcomes, and alterations (Rumelili 2022). The overarching anxiety experienced by all social actors serves as a driving force, compelling them to protect and strengthen their sense of self (Steele 2008). At the same time, Krickel-Choi (2022) argues that threats to an actor’s identity may trigger varying degrees of anxiety, depending on whether the threat is related to their core self or a less fundamental aspect. Anxiety encompasses a wide array of emotions, including guilt, shame, and inferiority. Steele (2008), for example, explores how individuals engage in self-reflection and often experience shame when their behaviour deviates from their self-image.

Importantly for our case study, individuals’ sense of shame and anxiety can influence their OS, regardless of their sense of identity. Of course, identity-related issues can also instigate ontological insecurity, given that one’s identity is a substantial component of their self. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that an eventual transformation of an individual’s identity, while significant, may not necessarily ameliorate their sense of ontological security. For example, even before encountering a traumatic situation or engaging in a conflict-ridden interaction that challenges their identity, the individual may have already diminished the significance of identity in shaping their sense of self. Hence, solely re-elaborating one’s identity may be insufficient to re-establish OS.

To substantiate these assertions, we turn our attention to the experiences of Russian *relokanty* in Georgia. Triggered by the shock and collective shame they felt for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, some Russian *relokanty* started feeling a deep sense of anxiety², a feeling often associated with ontological insecurity in the OS scholarship. This is particularly true for Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi, who additionally faced shaming attempts by Georgians, including Russophobic graffiti and verbal harassment. For the same reasons, some of them also underwent a transformative process of identity³. But then to what extent did this process of identity transformation help, at least after the initial existential crisis, reestablish their secure sense of self? In practical terms, after the shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the shaming attempts by Georgians put into question both their identity and their sense of self, did new identities help Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi ameliorate their sense of ontological security?

This examination enriches the empirics of the existing literature that distinguishes between “security of the self” and “security of identity”. It also contributes to the methodology of the scholarship on OS by tracing ontological insecurity through its possible discursive symptoms. Finally, by shifting the perspective from the state level to the individual or community level, it addresses some of the noteworthy gaps in the literature on OS and helps better understand the relation between security of the self and changes in identity.

Situating the case

To fully comprehend the case, we need to briefly contextualise Russian-Georgian relations and tensions with reference to their near past. Georgia obtained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but this period was also characterised by separatist demands by the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and eventually conflict. Indeed, the 1991 Georgian-Ossetian clashes resulted in around 1'000 casualties and South Ossetia's de facto independence (Zürcher 2007). And Georgia's attempt to restore its sovereignty in Abkhazia by military means in 1992 resulted in a two-year war, which led to up to 20'000 casualties, 200'000-250'000 Georgian internally displaced people (IDPs), and Abkhazian de facto independence (Shesterinina 2021).

² Miriam Jordan. 2022. “I Don't Want to Be Called Russian Anymore': Anxious Soviet Diaspora Rethinks Identity”. *New York Times*, 4 March 2022. Soviet Bloc Immigrants Rethink Their Identity Amid Russia-Ukraine War – The New York Times (nytimes.com). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/us/immigrant-identity-russia-ukraine.html>. Accessed on November 3, 2023.

³ Ibid.

While these two conflicts saw Ossetians and Abkhazians as the main separatist actors, Russia aided both ethnic groups (Suleimanov 2013; Kaufman 2001). However, Georgians blamed mostly Russia, arguing that it was Moscow that manoeuvred Ossetians and Abkhazians into separatism through divide-and-conquer tactics (Jones 2013; Chervonnaya 1994). Indeed, many Georgians today talk about “Russia’s occupation of Georgia”⁴.

During the Georgian presidency of Mikhail Saakashvili, tensions between Georgia and Russia began increasing again. On the 7th of August 2008, the Georgian army began military operations against South Ossetia. However, Russia came to South Ossetia’s defence, and then invaded Georgia proper. A ceasefire was finally negotiated on the 12th of August 2008. The war resulted in around 850 casualties and 35,000 permanently displaced people, mostly Georgians (Suleimanov 2013; Gerrits & Bader 2016; Gurashi & Gabelia 2017).

Importantly for our case, Georgian-Russian tensions spiked again in June 2019, when member of the Russian Duma, Sergey Gavrillov, made a speech in Russian from the parliamentary speaker’s chair of Georgia, to address an international gathering of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. Many Georgians were angry at the fact that the Russian language had been used from the parliamentary speaker’s chair. Thousands of Georgians began vehemently protesting and chanting anti-Russia slogans in the streets of Tbilisi⁵. Some Russians we interviewed mention this incident as the first real spike in Russophobia.

The situation worsened again in February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. Most Georgians enthusiastically showed support to Ukraine, as the war reminded them of Russia’s “occupation of Georgia”. Walls in Tbilisi began being drawn with anti-Putin, anti-Russia, and anti-Russian graffiti. Moreover, the Ukrainian flag was hung or painted all around the capital. Inevitably, Russophobia also spiked.

Counterintuitively, thousands of mostly anti-war liberal Russians fled Russia to Georgia⁶, where they did not find a welcoming environment⁷. In

⁴ Figari Barberis, Cesare. 2022. “‘We Have the Enemy at Home’: How Georgian Leadership Avoided Russian-Georgian Clashes (So Far)”. *Civil War Paths*, October 26, 2022. <https://www.civilwarpaths.org/georgia-russia/>. Accessed on April 09, 2024.

⁵ Giorgi Lomsadze. 2019. “Violent Crackdown Throws Georgian Ruling Party’s Survival into Question”. *Eurasianet*, June 19, 2019. <https://eurasianet.org/violent-crackdown-throws-georgian-ruling-partys-survival-into-question>. Accessed on August 13, 2023.

⁶ Providing an exact estimate of how many Russians fled to Georgia and stayed there is difficult, but possibly more than 100’000 Russians now live in the country: Kakachia, Kornely & Kandelak, Salome. 2022 “The Russian Migration to Georgia: Threats or Opportunities?”. *PONARS Eurasia*, December 19, 2022. Kornely Kakachia – PONARS Eurasia. Accessed on August 13, 2023.

⁷ Gabritchidze, Nini. 2022. “Georgia Struggles to Cope with Another Wave of Russian Emigres”. *Eurasianet*, October 4, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-struggles-to-cope-with-another-wave-of-russian-emigres>. Accessed on August 13, 2023.

addition to the Russophobic graffiti, we were told by interviewees of verbal and/or gendered harassment, banking discrimination, being fired from the workplace, and being refused to be served in commercial activities because of their nationality. In certain cases, banks or even co-working places asked Russians to sign a document where they acknowledged Russia's occupation of Georgia, and professed themselves against the war and against Russian president Vladimir Putin. Overall, the emotional environment and instances of harassment were conducive to stimulating shame in the Russian *relokanty*, who were pushed to carry the collective guilt of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and occupation of Georgia.

Whether or not the cause was the shame-inducing atmosphere of Tbilisi, some Russian *relokanty* indeed started feeling shame for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As described by our interviewees, some of them attached shame to their identity as Russians, and began questioning and/or going through a process of identity transformation. They also expressed feelings of anxiety and a sense of limbo, which are typical of ontological insecurity.

Hence, the presence of both identity insecurity and symptoms of ontological insecurity makes the case interesting to analyse within the framework of the OS studies that distinguish between security of identity and security of the self. It allows us to analyse how the two concepts interrelate, but are empirically distinguishable. Moreover, it also contributes to the theory of OS by discussing if and how identity transformations can reestablish a secure self. Therefore, we analyse whether the Russian respondents who showed symptoms of ontological insecurity, were indeed able to re-establish a secure self through an identity transformation.

Data and methodology

For this research, we conducted 50 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Russians who either relocated to Georgia after Russia's invasion of Ukraine but before the general mobilisation of September 2022 – so-called “first wave Russians” – or where already in Georgia when the war started. Therefore, we excluded so-called “second-wave Russians”, namely those who moved to Georgia from Russia after the September 2022 mobilisation. This choice was made because the latter group may include people who left Russia simply to avoid being drafted, not for moral-existential considerations. Hence, we found first wave Russians, who arguably moved for more moral-existential reasons, to be more fit for this type of research on OS. Indeed, even Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi started distinguishing the two groups, with first wave Russians considering themselves more morally-principled and self-reflective than second wave Russians.

Most of our respondents were relatively young, falling in the 23-37 age category, and relatively well-educated. In terms of gender, the sample was quite balanced as it includes 23 men and 27 women. As mentioned earlier, most of the respondents were living in Tbilisi, where the majority of anti-Russia/Russians graffiti are located and where the pro-Ukraine/anti-Russia emotional environment is strongest. Hence, the capital was the best suited location where to conduct most of our research on OS, as Russians arguably would have felt more anxiety and shame.

For sampling, we adopted the snowball sampling technique, as stratified random sampling was simply not possible given the context. We used a number of different channels for finding people, including social media like Instagram and LinkedIn, writing on Russian Telegram groups, word of mouth, and personal contacts of acquaintances of ours.

The interviews were conducted either in Russian or in English, depending also on the preference of the interviewee. Most interviews were done in-person in Tbilisi café, but a few were also done online. Most people were interviewed alone, but three married couples preferred being interviewed together.

Fieldwork was conducted in three separate times, with each time having its own peculiar emotional environment, which partly influenced the responses we received. In particular, 12 interviews were conducted between May and early June 2022, 28 interviews between late August and early September 2022, and 10 interviews in March 2023. The sample is by no means representative of the population of Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi, but aims at analysing a phenomenon taking place within a sample of that population.

Empirically, we looked at potential “symptoms” of ontological insecurity. In particular, we tried to retrospectively think of how OS could manifest itself symptomatically in the interviews we conducted. Specifically, we considered potential symptoms of ontological insecurity:

- 1) **Anxiety.** As discussed in the theory, anxiety has been associated with ontological insecurity by scholars. In our interviews, this feeling was often expressed explicitly. But it could also be conveyed implicitly through expressions like “a feeling of constant tremble” or through the description of psychologically tense moments like “I found myself in the middle of Freedom Square crying. Why can’t I have a normal life, what do they know about my suffering?”.
- 2) **Feeling of limbo.** This feeling has been addressed less by OS scholars, but it is a useful concept. Indeed, it conveys the idea of an interruption of continuity, and the absence of a new direction or reference point in the future to start a new process of continuity creation. In our interviews, this feeling was expressed explicitly relatively less often than anxiety.

But it could also be conveyed implicitly through expressions like “I am not welcome in Russia, but I am not welcome here either” or through the description of psychologically tense moments like “How am I supposed to explain to my children that they are outcasts?!”.

These symptoms are not mutually exclusive, and they may very well correlate with each other. Importantly, they do not necessarily pertain to identity, which is at the basis of our distinction between security of the self and security of identity. While questioning oneself can lead to re-imagining one’s identity, the two phenomena are kept analytically distinct. Moreover, we did not include “shame” as a symptom, as we view this emotion more as a “mechanism” for crises of identity and of the self, not per se as a symptom of the latter. Finally, we discussed them as “potential” symptoms as, for example, anxiety can be caused or related to a variety of personal issues, some of which may have nothing to do with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and/or the shaming attempt by Georgians. Hence, it is important to situate these symptoms within the stories being told by the respondents.

Far from being all-encompassing and conclusive, we believe that this effort at empirically pinning down symptoms of ontological insecurity can help better structure further research on the topic, and eventually further develop the theoretical scholarship on OS.

Empirics

We start the analysis by empirically tracing in our interviews the symptoms of ontological insecurity we had selected – anxiety and feeling of limbo. This is done, first, to demonstrate that indeed some respondents arguably did suffer from ontological insecurity, and, second, to show how this symptom-tracing process can be conducted in practice. In light of this, we then discuss if identity transformation of the respondents was at least partly capable of restoring their security of the self.

Feeling of limbo

First of all, we noticed the feeling of limbo symptom in respondents who mentioned finding themselves in a state of shock and disbelief when, on the morning of the 24th of February, they heard the news that war had started. While a few interviewees said they had expected Russia to invade Ukraine, the majority were caught off guard, and had difficulties coming to terms with their new reality. The general mood can be synthesised in

the words of one respondent “Lucky those who are still sleeping, as they still have not woken up to this horrific news”. The event of war indeed generated a feeling of limbo for many respondents. It was an interruption of the normalcy and sense of continuity of their lives, and opened up many unknown future scenarios for them. It placed them in an imagined limbo space where continuity with the past had been cut, but the future was too murky and difficult to imagine. The sense of shock and interruption with the past can, for example, be clearly noticed in the words of one respondent who mentioned how “The day the war started I was in utter disbelief. I felt powerless, I felt that the Russia I had known was gone, finished”.

We noticed the feeling of limbo symptom also when respondents discussed the uncertainty of mobility, and hence of their future. In particular, the impossibility of moving to Europe after the European Union (EU) countries strongly restricted travel possibilities to Russians solely based on their citizenship. This caused stress to many respondents as they had always seen the EU as the liberal and democratic alternative to illiberal and autocratic Russia. However, that Europe they craved for now discriminated them based on their citizenship. This was also an interruption of their sense of reality, as their idealised democratic and liberal EU had turned its back on them. It also placed them in a situation of great uncertainty. For example, one respondent mentioned how “The recent announcements by European leaders on freedom of movement had a psychological impact on me. I was already continuously thinking about how people hate me, and now these European leaders throw alcohol on the fire”. Indeed, many respondents mentioned how they felt unwelcome in Russia, but were unable to claim a new home, as they are unwelcome also in Georgia and in Europe. They are “outcasts”. In the words of one mother, “These visa restrictions outrage me. I cannot go back to Russia, but I cannot go to Europe either. How will explain to my kids that they are ‘outcasts’? That Europeans are discriminating against them just because of their citizenship?”.

Moreover, uncertainty and the feeling to limbo was also due to the policies of the Georgian authorities, who very rarely grant residence permits to Russians. A visa is not required for Russians to enter the country, but they can stay only up to one continuous year. After that, if they want to stay another year, they need to exit and re-enter the country. However, Georgian authorities can arbitrarily reject their re-entry into the country, even if they have all their belongings in Georgia and are paying rent there. They have no guarantees that they come back to Georgia. They need to exit having in mind an emergency plan B, in case they are refused re-entry. The apparent arbitrariness of this (rare) event produced anxiety, but also a feeling of limbo. For example, one respondent mentioned “Ah, and

the biggest discrimination is this: the (Georgian) migration regulation. We are always considered ‘tourists’ here! We can only stay 1 year. They don’t allow us to register as residents because we are a threat to their national security. This is a huge problem for us (Russians)”.

In essence, we noticed how many respondents felt they were “stuck” or “frozen”. They had lost their old home (Russia), but were incapable of finding a new place to call home (Georgia or the EU). They were unwelcome in Russia, but also unwelcome in Georgia and the EU. We can analytically understand these states of being as “feeling of limbo”, a symptom of ontological insecurity.

Anxiety

First of all, we noticed the anxiety symptom when respondents, who were already in Tbilisi or arrived very early, discussed the difficulties and fear they felt the first three-four weeks after the start of the war. Indeed, there is consensus among our interviewees that the first three-four weeks in Georgia were by far the worst in terms of Russophobia and the emotional impact of it. The first Russophobic graffiti were drawn, open discrimination against Russians commenced, and Georgians on social media began writing hateful content against Russians. Not surprisingly, most respondents those days preferred staying at home and never speaking Russian, as even speaking one’s native language caused anxiety. In the words of one respondent: “Many Georgians, hearing me speak in Russian on the streets, came to me and asked me where I was from, and if I knew that Russia occupies Abkhazia and South Ossetia... So, especially at the beginning of the war, I started going to Russian-speaking cafés. Even now, I want to be able to speak my language in peace”. Another respondent mentioned how “Georgians did not want to speak Russian with me, which is OK. But I was also afraid of speaking Russian! My uncle told me to stay at home and not exit it for two weeks, and so I did”. So overall, we noticed the anxiety symptom, linked to speaking Russian, in many respondents in the first three-four weeks in Georgia.

Moreover, we noticed the anxiety symptom also in some respondents when discussing the Russophobic graffiti in the streets of Tbilisi. These graffiti ranged from the more general “Fuck Putin” or “Fuck Russia” to the more personal “No Russian is welcome, good or bad”, “Fuck Russians” and “Ruzzkis go home!”.⁸ About half of our respondents mentioned being

⁸ The “z” being used on purpose as a reminder of the “Z” used by the Russian army during its invasion of Ukraine.

emotionally affected by these messages, especially the more personal ones, as they made them feel unwelcome, and at times even anxious. For example, one respondent expressed mentioned: “The fact is that you always see them. You go to work, go back home, and you see them. I was afraid”. Another respondent similarly said: “I understand them (Georgians), but in the end it’s a constant reminder that you are not welcome, that they don’t like you, and you will never be allowed to feel safe. We are not welcome in Russia because we are considered traitors there, but these graffiti remind us that we are not welcome here either”. Finally, one respondent also had an emotional outburst due to these hateful graffiti. In her words, “After some time, the negativity of these graffiti started accumulating... So three weeks ago, I found myself crying loudly in the middle of Liberty Square. Why can I not a normal life? What do they know about my suffering?”.

So overall, we noticed both feeling of limbo and anxiety symptoms in a majority of our respondents, which we consider to be potential symptoms of ontological insecurity. Of course, the two symptoms are not mutually exclusive, and often co-occurred. What is analytically relevant to notice here is that these symptoms all pertained to the shock of war and the difficulties faced during relocation, which generated an interruption of their normalcy and sense of continuity of their lives. They do not, however, necessarily relate to an identity crisis. Clearly, identity is connected with our respondents’ experience of shock and the problems faced in Georgia, but their identity is for the most part not in crisis. Yet, our respondents discursively displayed symptoms of ontological insecurity. This highlights empirically how the concepts of security of identity and security are and should be kept distinct.

Identity shift and ontological security

As mentioned earlier, while a majority of our respondents showed at least some symptoms of ontological insecurity, only some of them showed signs of identity insecurity, and went through a process of identity transformation. But to what extent did this process of identity shift help, at least after the initial existential crisis, re-establish their secure sense of self? To find an answer to this question, we now focus on an exemplary sub-sample of five respondents, who showed both symptoms of ontological insecurity and went through a process of identity transformation.

For example, one respondent, who showed various forms of the anxiety symptom, started by thanking us for the interview, as it would have functioned as his “absolution” for the crimes of Russia. Indeed, he mentioned feeling great shame for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. However, he

also said: “I feel emotionally detached from Russia. Russians are no longer my people”. As a sign of this, he mentioned: “I refuse to speak Russian, even with Russian people. It’s an orkish language”. So, essentially, he stopped identifying as Russian and feeling a connection to Russia. But this identity transformation runs in contrast with feeling the need for absolution for “Russia’s crimes”. Either we need to question the truthfulness of his claim of “not identifying anymore as Russian”, or the process of identity transformation was not able to solve his feeling of ontological insecurity. While the symptoms of ontological insecurity were also linked to his previous identity as Russian, they ultimately went deeper than that. Indeed, the new “non-Russian identity” was not able to stop him from the need of an “absolution” in the form of an interview with us, nor was it able to resolve his anxieties.

Another respondent demonstrated symptoms of ontological insecurity when discussing uncertainty of mobility, in particular how she would never go back to Russia, but was still stuck in a limbo as Europe and the US were inaccessible to her. She also discussed her identity shift with us. For example, she said: “I have a Russian passport and Russian surname, but I want to change my passport, and maybe I will even change my surname. Maybe into an American sounding one”. Moreover, she also stressed that the graffiti like “Fuck Russians” did not bother her, because she “did not feel a connection with Russia anymore”, and she now identified as a “human being, not as Russian”. Nonetheless, paradoxically, she kept feeling responsibility for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Hence, again, either we question the truthfulness of her claim of “identifying as a human being, not Russian”, or her identity shift failed to resolve her existential crisis. While her symptoms of ontological insecurity, in particular the feeling of limbo, were linked to her previous identity as Russian, they ultimately went deeper than that. Indeed, the rejection of that identity and her new identification were not able to restore her secure sense of self.

One couple discussed all their problems in terms of relocation, and showed various symptoms of ontological insecurity. In particular, the feeling of limbo for the uncertain mobility, the anxiety of speaking in Russian, and the anxiety of having “outcast” children. They also went through a process of identity transformation, as the husband mentioned “I don’t feel personally attacked by these graffiti, because I don’t feel ‘Russkiy’ anymore. I feel like ‘a citizen of the Russian Federation’”, and then the wife also mentioned “I also don’t feel ‘Russkiy’ anymore, but a ‘citizen of the Russian Federation’”⁹. However, even if they now identified only as “citizens of the

⁹ Here it is necessary to make a fundamental premise for understanding the answers of our interviewees. In the Russian language, the word “Russian” can be translated in different ways

Russian Federation”, they kept feeling shame for Russia’s war in Ukraine, and showed all of the symptoms of ontological insecurity discussed above. Their detachment from Russianness as an ethnicity and process of identity transformation had been incapable of restoring their secure sense of self.

Finally, one respondent showed many anxiety symptoms, in particular when discussing the fear of speaking Russian in public and the shock of war. When discussing hateful graffiti, he said: “They actually make me laugh, I don’t take it personally. I don’t even know what it means to be Russian anymore. I associate Russian history with Stalin’s purges, as even some members of my family were deported and killed. I now feel more ‘an inhabitant of the Karelian Republic’ than ‘Russian’”. Nonetheless, he also mentioned feeling shame for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and thus did volunteering work to help Ukrainians. Hence, yet again, we have a case of identity transformation that was not able to restore a secure sense of self in the respondent. The previous identity of the respondent was linked with the existential crisis caused by the war, but ultimately this existential crisis went deeper than identity. The shift in identity ultimately failed to resolve the existential crisis, it failed to restore ontological security.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the decision to relocate, choosing Georgia as their destination was a controversial choice for Russians, considering the history of conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Indeed, many *relokanty* faced shaming attempts by Georgians, which, combined with the existential crisis they felt for their country’s invasion of Ukraine, became a catalyst for personal reflections regarding their sense of self and their identity. This co-occurrence of reflections about the sense of self and identity can be analysed within the OS scholarship, in particular that relating to IR, that emphasizes the analytical distinctions between ontological security and identity security at a theoretical level.

and each of these terms has its own facet, depending on the multi-ethnic nature of the Russian state. We have the word “Rossiyanin”, which is used to indicate a citizen of the Russian Federation and holder of Russian citizenship. The corresponding adjective is Rossiyskiy, which denotes that something belongs to or was made in Russia. Finally, we have Russkiy, which is instead related to the concept of Russian ethnicity and thus extendable also to countries with considerable Russian minorities within their borders, such as, for example, Ukraine. The creation and the preservation of the so-called Russkiy Mir (the Russian world) has been one of the cornerstones of Putin’s foreign policy and main motivations for the launch of the war in Ukraine. This is why some respondents answered that they consider themselves “Russians not by choice”, “Russians for documents” or simply “Rossiyanin”, and not Russkiy.

Going beyond theory, with this research on Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi, we highlighted the difference between the two concepts also at an empirical level. We were able to do so first by pinning down “symptoms” of ontological security, expressed as “anxiety” and “feeling of limbo”, from our sample of fifty respondents; and then by emphasising how these symptoms were mostly related to the shock of war and the problems faced during relocation, but were for the most part not related to insecurity of identity. Indeed, a majority of our Russian *relokanty* respondents showed symptoms of ontological insecurity, but only a minority of them expressed going through an identity crisis.

Moreover, we made an effort to contribute to the methodology of OS, especially at a non-state level, through this symptoms-tracing method. Indeed, arguing that an individual, let alone a state, suffers from ontological insecurity is a tricky and difficult task. Therefore, we proposed and applied a method that identifies what, according to the theory, can be considered symptoms of ontological insecurity. In particular, we looked for expressions of anxiety and feeling of limbo. We then looked for explicit and implicit discursive traces of these symptoms in our interviews. Looking specifically for symptoms of ontological insecurity, instead of broadly claiming the presence of ontological insecurity, can help better structure methodologically the empirical research on OS.

Finally, we made an effort to contribute to the theory of OS by discussing how identity shifts may not be able to restore ontological security. We demonstrated this empirically, through a sub-sample of five respondents, by showing how symptoms of ontological insecurity can co-occur with identity transformations, but this identity shift is ultimately incapable of restoring security of the self. Indeed, those respondents who did go through an identity transformation, usually detaching themselves from their previous Russian identity and re-inventing a new identity, were ultimately not able to solve their ontological insecurity expressed through symptoms of anxiety and feeling of limbo. Admittedly, the previous Russian identities of the respondents were linked with the existential crisis caused by the war and the difficulties of relocation, but ultimately this existential crisis went deeper than identity. In conclusion, although they may interrelate, this also highlights the need to distinguish ontological security from security of identity.

Overall, while our study primarily examines the analytical distinction between self and identity at the individual level, our aspiration is to stimulate scholars to explore broader implications of this distinction and its relevance in addressing ontological (in)security concerns among various social actors.

Critiques of OS scholarship have emerged due to its disproportionate emphasis on continuity, often overlooking or dismissing change. Notably,

this critique targets the prevalent state-centric approach in the literature, which prioritizes maintaining a stable identity over time. While our work encourages scholars to embrace the examination of change, it does not seek to invalidate the state-centric perspective on OS. Instead, we claim that a deeper focus on understanding the impact of pivotal moments and events, on both individuals and states' sense of self, would benefit the scholarship on OS. Our study shows how, at the individual level, identity constitutes just one facet of the complete self. And there is no reason why this perspective cannot be extended also to the state level.

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The Localisation of Italian Multilateralism: the Italy-Central Asia 5+1 Format in a Comparative Analysis with China and the United States

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Abstract. This study explores the adoption by external powers, namely Italy, the US and China, of the 5+1 format for engaging Central Asian republics. Made possible by the relaxation of regional conflicts between Central Asian leaders, this inclusive format facilitates semi-institutionalized discussions to identify strategic goals, balance political ambitions, and foster comprehensive regional dialogue. Italy, a forerunner in the European Union, used the forum to successfully extend its engagement beyond bilateral energy and trade agreements, strengthening diplomatic ties with smaller states like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and promoting cultural and scientific collaborations. This established Italy as a dependable partner for Central Asia, eager to cooperate on common agendas. Despite the potential of the format, limited literature exists on this approach, and current works tend to emphasize power imbalances, overlooking the impact of joint partnerships on sensitive issues. The authors assert that the adoption of the 5+1 framework showcases the localisation and cross-contamination of external powers' foreign policies in the region. The study uses document analysis, and semi-structured interviews conducted during fieldwork in the United States and Central Asia.

Keywords: 5+1 format, Central Asia, multilateralism, Italy, localisation.

Introduction

The adoption of the 5+1 format as a framework to develop cooperation with the Central Asian republics has gradually become a promising option for external powers that have political and economic interests in the region, such as the People's Republic of China and the United States. The opportunity to promote an enhanced and comprehensive regional dialogue via such format has mainly emerged following the results of the proactive foreign policy undertaken by Uzbekistan's president Shavkat Mirziyoyev but also reflects the new priorities of Central Asian governments in their attempt to deal with external powers giving priority to regional issues. The 5+1 format allows the creation of flexible semi-institutionalised discussion forums, within which participating governments can identify and discuss their strategic priorities and interests as well as balancing reciprocal political ambitions.

In this evolving scenario, Italy has taken the initiative, becoming the first country of the European Union to adopt the 5+1 format, implementing a wider framework of cooperation compared with previous bilateral relations mainly based on energy and trade issues. Even if Italy has organised only two meetings (see table 1 below), concrete goals have been reached, expanding diplomatic relations, in particular with the smaller states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and cooperation in the scientific and cultural field. The main result is that Italy has been gradually legitimised to play the role of reliable partner in Central Asia, recognised as a "middle power" with no large-scale political interests to claim but interested on working together with local governments on a common agenda (Indeo, 2021). A role that was supported by the institutionalisation of an evolving EU Central Asia Strategy since 2007, which for instance allowed Italy to play a role in the so-called water diplomacy, with several attempts to promote a forum of dialogue among Central Asian countries to discuss the sensitive issue.

Despite the relevance of the 5+1 approach and the promising results that it is achieving, we can observe a lack of literature on this subject. Moreover, much of the literature on Central Asian external relations has prevalently stressed the unbalanced relations between the powerful '1' and the weaker '5', downplaying or ignoring the effects that a shared partnership on some sensitive issues (i.e., water management, vaccine diplomacy, political dialogue) could trigger in influencing actions and policies of foreign powers. We claim that the adoption of 5+1 frameworks, whose characteristics are those of an Asian-style instrument, is a central example of localisation and cross-contamination of foreign policies of external powers in the region.

The main aim of our article is to analyse the development and the use of the 5+1 format in relations between Central Asian and external powers. For this purpose, we developed a comparative study including the United States and China – respectively a Western and an Asian actor capable of building two of the most institutionalised 5+1 forums – and Italy, which has been the first EU country to launch its own 5+1 mechanism with Central Asia in 2019, as the result of concrete Italian political engagement in the region. Another objective is to develop the scarce academic literature on the growing Italian role in Central Asia and its creative diplomacy in the region, inside and outside EU frameworks.

The data that supports our analysis comes from a document analysis of 5+1 declarations released after the relevant meetings, semi-structured interviews during fieldwork, and participation to said formats by one of the authors. The interviews were conducted with American, Central Asian, and Chinese stakeholders (officials, diplomats, businesspeople, and experts) in the United States and Central Asia. For the purpose of this paper and for ethical reasons, the interviewees will remain anonymous.

We will start by providing a detailed overview of Italy-Central Asia relations. The section will function as a review of the limited literature on Italy-Central Asia relations and will give the context for the creation of the 5+1 forum. The second section will zoom out and describe the events that led to the development of similar forums in the American and Chinese cases respectively, also focussing on the institutional development of their multilateral presence in the region. The following two sections will analyse the institutional setting and content of the Italian 5+1 to then compare it with the Chinese and American examples. Finally, we will provide some conclusions.

Italy in Central Asia: historical context of the development of the 5+1 format

Since the independence of Central Asian states, Italy has cultivated bilateral ties with the five republics developing political and diplomatic relations. However, in 1992 Italy opened full embassies only in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, whose work covered also Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan respectively. In Turkmenistan an honorary consulate was established in Ashgabat that was linked to the Italian embassy in Moscow. Other European Union countries, such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom took the decision to develop political and diplomatic relations with all Central Asian countries. Italy privileged instead the development of political relations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, identified as key actors, aimed at enhancing energy and trade cooperation as well as to bolster

geopolitical security in the region after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Capisani 2000, Hyman 1994).

In the Italian strategy, trade and energy represented a privileged field of cooperation with the new Central Asian independent states. Trade relations between Italy and Central Asia mainly reflected the complementarity of their economies, because Italy was interested in importing raw materials, hydrocarbons, crude oil and refined products, while exporting to the region mechanical and electronic equipment (Italian Government, 2023).

Starting from the energy sector, since 1992, Eni, the largest Italian petroleum firm, was able to successfully enhance its strategic presence in Kazakhstan, offering its know-how, experience, and investments to develop the country's promising energy sector. Eni's engagement alongside other American and European energy companies supported Kazakhstan's ambitions to erode the monopoly of Russian energy companies, which also controlled the oil export routes, with the purpose of building an independent national energy sector (Ebel and Menon 2000). Eni holds a 29.25% share in the Karachaganak Petroleum Operating BV international consortium to exploit Karachaganak's oil and gas field and a 16.81% working interest in the North Caspian Sea Production Sharing Agreement to exploit the offshore oil field of Kashagan (Eni 2023).

Aside of energy cooperation, in the 1990s Italy and the Central Asian republics were slow in developing a comprehensive political and diplomatic dialogue. Soon after independence, Uzbekistan's former President Islam Karimov and Kazakhstan's former President Nursultan Nazarbayev exchanged visits with other European countries. The first visit by a Central Asian leader to Italy happened only in 2009, when Nazarbayev visited the country, 18 years after Kazakhstan's national independence (Pujol 2005, Jalcin 2002).

Moving to security, potential instability in Central Asia, linked to political and ethnic tensions between nations or provoked by social and political consequences of authoritarian regimes, could have represented a serious threat to Italian trade and energy interests in the region. Nevertheless, historically, Italy has not been directly involved in security cooperation in Central Asia, limiting its involvement to the NATO missions in Afghanistan. Between 2002 and 2021 Italy has been an important partner of the ISAF and Resolute Support missions, deploying the fourth largest contingent (approximately 4000 troops), mainly located in the Western region of Herat and involved in both hard and soft security initiatives under the NATO umbrella (Indeo 2012).

Hence, Italian perception of security in Central Asia has been connected to the stabilisation of Afghanistan and focused on defence cooperation programs and arms sales. In 1999 Italy and Uzbekistan signed

an intergovernmental agreement on defence cooperation, which included periodical bilateral meetings, but Italy did not replicate the agreement with the four remaining Central Asian countries. Yet, due to the shared border with Afghanistan, cooperation with Tajikistan is also relevant to Italy's security strategy. Italy was one of the major donors in the creation of the Agency for Drug Control under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan (DCA) in 1999, aimed at fighting against organized crime and drug trafficking (Tajikistan's MFA, 2022).

The launch of the first comprehensive European Union Strategy towards Central Asia in 2007, the first time in which the EU produced a document discussing cooperation with Central Asia beyond aid and assistance (Cornell and Starr 2019), was a game changer in terms of Italy-Central Asia relations. In 2007 the then Italian Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Gianni Vernetti toured all five Central Asian republics, and the Italian MFA organised an international conference aimed at developing Italian-Central Asian relations both bilaterally and in the perspective of the new EU Strategy. These initiatives represented the first sign of concrete Italian political attention towards the region, with the aim of involving Central Asian republics in a wider dialogue, not limited to energy and regional security issues but also extended to political values and humanitarian issues.

In cooperation with the European Commission, Italy coordinated the "EU regional initiative on environment and water in Central Asia", one of the three main regional EU initiatives for Central Asia as part of the EU Strategy, launched on 3 December 2008 in Ashgabat. Following the Third High Level EU-Central Asia Conference organized in Rome in November 2009, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs worked on implementing the European Union Water Initiative focused on the exploitation and management of regional water resources, promoting the cooperation and the dialogue among Central Asian states in water management.

The launch of the EU strategy also paved the way to the intensification of high-level visits and meetings. In November 2009, Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev met Italian government representatives in Rome, where a Strategic Partnership Treaty was signed, which included cooperation on issues such as democratisation and rule of law. During this period, Italy also developed political relations with gas-rich Turkmenistan. In 2009 President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov paid an official visit to Rome, in the context of Italian involvement in the use of the Turkmenistan's gas reserves. Following the purchase of the British company Burren in 2008, Eni had also consolidated its presence in the Turkmen oil field. In 2009 Eni signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Turkmenistan becoming the second foreign company, after the Chinese

National Petroleum Company, to have an onshore contract to develop Turkmen energy fields.

From energy cooperation Italy and Turkmenistan have moved to develop diplomatic cooperation. After an official visit of the former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, Italy opened its embassy in Ashgabat in 2014, while Turkmenistan's embassy in Rome was opened a year later. Another focus of cooperation has been in the defence sector. In addition to the export of military hardware, Italy represents an important partner for Turkmenistan in the area of technology. In 2015 Thales Alenia Space, a joint venture between Thales (67%) and Leonardo (33%), built and launched Ashgabat's first telecommunication satellite (Thales 2015).

In July 2016, Tajikistan's government signed a cooperation agreement (3.9 billion US dollars) with the Italian company Salini Impregilo for the construction of a dam for hydroelectric power plant at the site of Rogun, on the Vakhsh river, which would double Tajikistan's current power production (Sorbello 2019). Also, Italy aimed at enhancing economic cooperation with Uzbekistan, the most populous country and the potential largest market in the region. In October 2011 the official visit of the Italian Undersecretary of State Catia Polidori to the Tashkent Business Forum had the objective of involving Italian Small and Medium Sized businesses in Uzbekistan's economy (Indeo 2012). During the meeting Polidori highlighted that "Italy has a great interest to development of cooperation with Uzbekistan," while "the promising areas of cooperation are trade, energy, textile, construction and many others" (Uzbekistan Embassy in Italy, 2011).

These steps show that the 2010s represented a period of expansion of Italian presence in the region that led to the institutionalisation of Italian diplomatic regional presence, also through the 5+1 forum after nearly a decade.

The US, China and multilateral cooperation in Central Asia

This section contextualises the development of the Italian 5+1 initiative through a comparative analysis of contextual characteristics in similar multilateral forums with a focus on the American C5+1 mechanism and the Chinese C+C5. The first countries to establish a 5+1 mechanisms were Japan in 2004 and South Korea in 2007. In the following years the same multilateral diplomatic tool has been used by the United States, India, China, Italy, and most recently the Russian Federation. We chose to focus on the United States and China as they present two of the most institutionalised 5+1 forums, and they are respectively a Western and an Asian actor, which provides an opportunity to look at differences and sim-

ilarities in Western and Asian use of the 5+1 framework. Also, the choice was guided by the authors' expertise on China-US-Central Asia relations, as well as availability of data.

Starting from the American C5+1 framework, at its inauguration in 2015, similarly to Italy and unlike Russia and China, the United States had not established any previous institution that went beyond bilateral mechanisms and did not participate to any regional grouping involving Central Asian countries (Rakhimov 2018). As for American political relations at bilateral level, the US had just left its last remaining military base at the Manas Airport in Kyrgyzstan in 2014, which was established in 2001 soon after 9/11 to support the US-led alliance in its invasion of Afghanistan. Another base was established in 2001 in Uzbekistan, and was abandoned in 2005, in the larger context of American political support to the Colour Revolutions sweeping Asia and Eastern Europe during the G.W. Bush administration (Sullivan 2019, Maracchione 2023a).

The focus on the 'freedom agenda' and the link between security, stability and democratic reform that characterised the late Bush administration was partially abandoned during the first Obama administration¹. Important tools of this new season of US-Central Asia relations were the development of America's own (failed) idea of a New Silk Road connecting economically Central Asia and Europe through the Caucasus, supported by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Kim and Indeo 2013). The second mandate of the Obama administration started in the context of a reconfiguration of American presence in the region connected with the end of operations Enduring Freedom and ISAF in 2014, substituted by non-combatant missions (UN 2014). At the same time, the Middle East was once again unstable due to the expansion of the self-proclaimed Islamic State since 2014. Farhod Tolipov (2015) underlines how actions in Syria directly impacted US views on Central Asia due to disagreements with Russia over its role in the region. This occurred in the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The regional context in Central Asia was also quite turbulent, as countries were recovering from the ethnic clashes in Southern Kyrgyzstan that had caused numerous deaths. This in a more general context of enmity added to regional incommunicability and disunity. Hence, it can be said that differently from the Italian case, the development of the American 5+1 framework happened at a time of crisis of American presence in Central Asia, where US regional security priorities were being impacted by tepid relationships with Central Asia leaders, tense relations with other regional powers (see Russia) and regional enmity and tensions between Central Asian countries.

¹ Interviews with American diplomats in Washington DC in early 2022.

In contrast, China is a protagonist in the Central Asian political context, whose role in the region is that of an insider/outsider. Hence, the context behind the development of a 5+1 system by China in 2020 is quite different from that of the United States or the Italian Republic. Firstly, both the US and Italy have struggled in terms of political legitimacy due to ideological differences with local leaders. For example, both engaged in democracy promotion and related warfare in the Middle East, which led to lukewarm ties with Central Asian leaders in the early 2000s.² China did not support these types of normative frameworks (Kavalski 2007) and has maintained stable relations with the regional leadership throughout the three decades after independence, at least at the elite level. Secondly, China's multilateral footprint in the region was and still is much more stable and institutionalised. When China's version of the 5+1, usually referred to as C+C5, was established, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a regional multilateral organisation promoted by China and founded in 2001, was already 19 years old. However, the SCO did not involve Turkmenistan and was founded in tandem with the Russian Federation, whose presence shaped its development and priorities (Šćepanović 2022). Staying in the region, at the eve of the establishment of the Chinese C+C5, the U.S. had just announced their intention to leave Afghanistan (April 2020), an action that will lead to a new takeover of Kabul's government by the Taliban. At the same time, the two biggest and more stable countries and economies in Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, were going through some changes due to the retirement or death of respective leaders Nursultan Nazarbayev and Islam Karimov that had governed over the two countries since independence (Blackmon 2020; Maracchione 2023a). This level of change although potentially destabilising was providing interesting opportunities for the PRC particularly in the liberalising Uzbekistani economy, whose new leadership showed a renewed interest in foreign investment, an opportunity the Chinese leadership seemed ready to take (Dadabaev 2019). In this context, Russian conflictual global behaviour, particularly in the second part of the 2010s and related economic sanctions, was already pushing local partners to try to balance Russian presence, often through collaboration with Chinese companies and investors. These balancing policies thus favoured alternative partners.

Zooming out, the establishment of the C+C5 took place during the second global wave of the Covid-19 epidemic. This was a time in which most countries, particularly in the West, were struggling to contain the virus. Differently, in the PRC, the zero-Covid policy was still holding, and citizens enjoyed many freedoms that were still denied abroad due to

² Interviews with American experts, diplomats, and officials in Washington DC in early 2022.

emergency measures. The PRC's leadership was using this comparative advantage in its foreign public relations in what was described as health diplomacy (later vaccine diplomacy, Kobierecka 2022, Maracchione 2020). At the same time, Xi Jinping was in his second mandate and well into the second phase of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is Xi Jinping's signature global investment and connectivity policy, whose first phase was characterised by large energy and infrastructure investments (a total \$40 billion up to 2020, most of it in Kazakhstan, the region's largest economy, that grew to \$70 billion in 2022, Standish 2023), to then also include and often prioritise smaller projects more focused on local needs in a second phase (Van der Kley and Yau 2021, Maracchione 2023b). However, this more positive outlook in the South and East of the world was overshadowed by the start of the trade wars started by Donald Trump's US government against China, also followed by strong Western criticism of human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, which led the country's image in the West to a decline.

The evolution of China's multilateral behaviour in Central Asia towards an independent path speaks to all these contextual developments such as enmity with the U.S. paralleled by weaker American regional presence, Russian rogue behaviour in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and subsequent need for credible alternative partners in the region, and new possibilities coming from the global health crisis and political developments in Central Asia. Yet, it also needs to be collocated in a natural evolution of China's enormous political and economic capital dedicated to the region between the independence and nowadays, in particular through the SCO, the BRI and intense bilateral relations (Reeves 2018; Dave and Kobayashi 2018).

To summarise, both the American and the Chinese 5+1 formats arose from complicated situations in their external policies. Yet, while the American format represented an instrument to promote American presence in the region after a period of tepid relations, and with the prospect of military retreat from Afghanistan, China's format had the purpose to move Sino-Central Asian cooperation to a further qualitative level. The latter rests on three decades of political and economic dedication from the PRC, its government and companies to build ties with the region.

The Italy-Central Asia 5+1: themes of discussion and results

The Italian political decision to institutionalise relations with Central Asian states within a 5+1 format has represented an evolution of the growing commitment of the national government in the region in the

later 2000s. In twelve months, between November 2018 and November 2019, the former Italian Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Manlio Di Stefano visited all five Central Asian states, with the purpose to enhance political and diplomatic relations in the region (Italian MFA, 2019). Moreover, Turkmenistan's President Berdimuhamedov paid an official visit in Italy at the beginning of November 2019. This in the occasion of the Italy-Turkmenistan Business Forum that was organised in Milan, where political and business representatives discussed new opportunities of cooperation beyond the traditional energy sector. Berdimuhamedov had talks with Italian President Sergio Mattarella and with then Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte signing bilateral documents to enhance cooperation in the security-military field, in the energy sphere, culture and transports.

On 13 December 2019 the Italian Government organized the first 5+1 forum in Rome, the international conference "Italy and Central Asia: Strengthening Mutual Understanding, Cooperation and Partnership", involving high-representatives and political delegations from the five Central Asian republics. Italy has become the first EU country to adopt this multilateral format, attended by the Foreign Ministers of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan together with the Deputy Foreign Ministers of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and involved officials from international financial institutions, the business community, academia, and culture.

For the Italian government, this meeting was significant in order to increase trade cooperation and investment opportunities in Central Asia as well as to enhance its political weight in the relations with Central Asia not only in bilateral terms but in the wider framework represented by the new EU Strategy for Central Asia. The leading aim of the Italian government is to further develop relations with the region, given its geostrategic relevance and centrality for the implementation of the Euro-Asian connectivity, one of the EU flagship projects. The first result of the new political dialogue within the 5+1 format was to allow Italy to fill the gap in terms of bilateral relations with Kyrgyzstan. Bishkek opened its first embassy in Rome in August 2020, while in November 2021 Kyrgyzstan's

Table 1. Meetings of the Italy-Central Asia 5+1 format at ministerial level.

Date	Place	Most senior participant from Italy
13 December 2019	Rome, Italy	Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Luigi di Maio
8 December 2021	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Luigi di Maio

Foreign Minister paid an official visit to Italy for the first time in the history of their diplomatic relations.

On 8 December 2021, Uzbekistan's capital city Tashkent hosted the 2nd Italy-Central Asia Conference. Then Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio and the Deputy Minister Manlio Di Stefano chaired the event, also attended by the Foreign Ministers of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, together with the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Ambassador Terhi Hakala. Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister was not able to reach Tashkent but sent a video message. Afghanistan was one of the key topics discussed during the most recent conference, because according to the Italian and the European perception Central Asian republics appear dangerously exposed and vulnerable in the case of destabilizing threats (namely jihadist terrorist attacks) coming from Afghanistan as well as to manage a potential rising flux of refugees and migrants which could be reallocated in their countries. Italian and Central Asian representatives also agreed on the further development of economic and trade cooperation and to enhance healthcare cooperation in the field of pandemic control (see Table 2 for a full list of discussion topics).

Italy's renewed interest on environment and water cooperation in Central Asia represents one of the dimensions of the Italian 5+1 format, which could be profitably implemented within the wider EU Strategy for the region. In February 2023, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted the seventh EU-Central Asia High Level Conference, organised under

Table 2. Topics of cooperation in the Italy-Central Asia 5+1 forums.

Theme	2019	2021
Connectivity	X	
Sustainability/ environment	X	
Transboundary threats	X	X
Afghanistan		X
Humanitarian issues		X
Covid 19		X
War in Ukraine (and related)		X
Economic growth	X	X
Investment	X	X
Trade	X	X
Energy	X	X
Regional security		X
Education	X	X
Border security		X

the EU–Central Asia Platform for Environment and Water Cooperation. Representatives of all five Central Asian countries and EU diplomats attended the meeting, which was co-chaired by the Italian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Edmondo Cirielli, and European Special Representative for Central Asia, Ambassador Hakala (WECOOP 2023).

Comparative analysis of Italian, Chinese and American 5+1 formats

This section will provide a comparison between the Italian 5+1 framework and the American and Chinese versions. We will focus on the institutional setting, the type of participants, the results and the themes of discussion during the forums. Starting from timing, a significant difference between the Italian 5+1 and the other two is time commitment. Since their foundation both the American C5+1 and the Chinese C+C5 were held once or twice a year (see Tables 3 and 4). Since 2019, when Mike Pompeo took control of American foreign policy, meetings of the C5+1 forum became more frequent, a trend that continued under Secretary Blinken in the Biden administration. While 10 ministerial meetings were organised under the framework, only 3 happened in person in Central Asia (2017, 2020, 2023), which means that only three times the US Secretary of State took the time to travel to the region to participate in the format. In September 2023, the Biden administration elevated the format to the Presidential level for the first time in what President Biden described as “a historic moment, building on years of close cooperation.” (Powell 2023).

Table 3. Meetings of the US-Central Asia C5+1 at ministerial and presidential level.

Date	Place	Most senior participant from USA
1 November 2015	Samarkand, Uzbekistan	Secretary of State, John Kerry
3 August 2016	Washington, D.C., USA	Secretary of State, John Kerry
22 September 2017	New York City, USA	Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson
22 September 2019	New York City, USA	Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo
3 February 2020	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo
30 June 2020	Online	Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo
23 April 2021	Online	Secretary of State, Antony Blinken
22 September 2021	New York City, USA	Secretary of State, Antony Blinken
22 September 2022	New York City, USA	Secretary of State, Antony Blinken
28 February 2023	Astana, Kazakhstan	Secretary of State, Antony Blinken
19 September 2023	New York City, USA	President, Joe Biden

Table 4. Meetings of the China-Central Asia C+C5 at ministerial and heads of state level¹.

Date	Place	Most senior participant from PRC side
16 July 2020	Online	Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi
3 August 2021	Xi'an, People's Republic of China	Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi
8 June 2022	Astana, Kazakhstan	Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi
19 May 2023	Xi'an, People's Republic of China	President, Xi Jinping

¹ The multilateral meeting at Heads of State level in January 2022 for 30th Anniversary of relations between China and Central Asia, was deliberately excluded as it was a celebratory regional meeting that was not in the framework of the C+C5.

In the Chinese case, four forums since 2020 took place of which three in-person and only one in Central Asia. China was the first to develop the framework to the Heads of State level, with President Xi Jinping inviting the five Central Asian leaders to a meeting in 2023 in Xi'an. The sumptuous inauguration ceremony of the Heads of State meeting in Xi'an, full of civilisational symbolism referred to the common Silk Road heritage, is a sign of the centrality of the new exclusive Sino-Central Asian forum in the minds of China's foreign policy establishment. Both the forums are also developing a secretariat, which was already inaugurated in an online format in the American case.

Italy positions itself somehow in the middle between the two. While the meetings of the framework are less frequent and regular, they are limited to the ministerial level, and do not present institutional developments, diplomatically Italy has shown sign of greater engagement with the region, as an Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, has visited Central Asia in-person, a very uncommon decision for Western leaders. While President Xi Jinping visits Central Asia on a regular basis, no US President has ever set foot in the region up to the time in which we are writing. As of now only two multilateral 5+1 forums have been organised by Italy, but the third is in preparation in the coming months.

Both the American and Chinese formats include numerous annual meetings of thematic working groups that meet separately from the ministerial/head of state level. Working groups usually discuss the most relevant themes of cooperation in the respective forums, for example climate, security and connectivity in the American case, and environment, digital cooperation, Afghanistan and security, and regional connectivity for China. Other significant topics contained in the declarations are more specific. For example, the situation in Afghanistan is a common specific theme of discussion in the C5+1, following American priorities. Other related topics are China's role in Central Asia, Covid-19, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Notwithstanding the shorter history, the thematic content of discussions in the new PRC-Central Asia C+C5 format is wider than in the case of the American and Italian 5+1, as can be seen comparing tables 2, 5 and 6. Some core topics are common to the two formats. For example, security issues related to Afghanistan, transnational threats, energy or trade. Yet, economic cooperation has a different connotation as compared with the Western 5+1 forums. While macro themes such as trade, connectivity, investment, energy, are important topics, the format also moved to include discussions on economic integration such as legislative exchanges, industrial cooperation, employment, visa, and workers' exchange.

This set of themes is central for understanding the different level of PRC involvement in the region, as compared to other partners. It also signifies a shift in the importance of issues such as energy security – a central theme of China's cooperation with Central Asia in the later 1990s and 2000s – in dictating China's policy in the region. This is also the limit of Italian engagement in the region, while macroeconomic cooperation is strong in the trade and energy sectors, the lack of proximity and

Table 5. Topics of cooperation in the American C5+1 meetings.

Theme	2015	2016	2017	2019	2020	2020	2021	2021	2022	2023	2023
Connectivity	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X
Environment and Sust.	X	X		X	X		X		X	X	X
Transboundary threats	X	X		X	X		X		X	X	X
Afghanistan	X		X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Humanitarian issues	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X	X
China					X						
Covid-19						X		X			
War in Ukraine										X	
Economic growth	X	X			X		X		X	X	
Investment	X	X		X			X		X	X	X
Trade	X	X		X	X	X				X	X
Energy	X	X		X			X		X	X	X
Regional security	X	X			X	X	X			X	X
Human rights / Democr.	X			X	X		X			X	X
Education	X			X		X			X		X
Border security										X	X
Law enforcement											X
Mineral resources											X
Supply chains											X
Employment											X

Table 6. Topics of cooperation in the Chinese C+C5 meetings.

Theme	2020	2021	2022	2023
Covid-19 epidemic and health	X	X	X	X
Trade	X	X	X	X
Agriculture	X	X	X	X
Afghanistan	X	X	X	X
Economic development	X	X	X	X
Global governance and values	X	X	X	X
Security and stability	X	X	X	X
Transnational security threats	X	X	X	X
Connectivity and infrastructures	X	X	X	X
Digital and technological innovation	X	X	X	X
Environment and sustainability	X	X	X	X
Tourism	X	X	X	X
Humanitarian and cultural issues		X	X	X
Education		X	X	X
Regional Cooperation		X	X	X
Institutional development of C+C5		X	X	X
Investment	X		X	X
Energy			X	X
War in Ukraine			X	
Financial innovation			X	
Local-to-local diplomacy		X		
Legislative exchange				X
Industrial cooperation and value chains				X
Employment, visa and workers exchange				X

involvement on people's day-to-day economic life makes Italian role in the region, similarly to that of the US, qualitatively different as compared to China's. Yet, the EU-backed involvement in Central Asian environmental cooperation could become a driver of Italian inclusion in the lives and economies of Central Asian people.

In term of practical outcomes, 5+1 meetings generally involve few pledges for investment, which is quite usual in terms of US-Central Asian relations. The lack of practical outcomes or agreements that often characterises these formats makes the comparison with other Asian multilateral forums quite attractive. For example, the SCO has often been described as a "talk shop" (reference), whose role was more that of developing bilateral understanding than to produce real multilateral outcomes.

Yet, the institution of a virtual secretariat in the American case, which met for the first time in June 2023, and the discussion of a similar outcome for the Chinese forum, might imply an enhancement in terms of political significance of the two 5+1 formats. Furthermore, the declaration of the American C5+1 released in February 2023 after the Astana meeting seems to cover a longer list of aspects of cooperation, particularly in terms of military, political and economic security, as compared to previous declarations. The war in Ukraine has boosted the relevance of the region due to its proximity and connections with the Russian Federation. Hence, a stronger Western attention from Western actors is not surprising. This is also exemplified by the elevation of the C5+1 format to presidential level in September 2023 and connected widening of the discussion topics (see table 5), as well as the establishment in March 2024 of the first US-Central Asia Private Business Forum, the B5+1. A similar upgrade can be seen with the C+C5 forum. The sumptuous inauguration ceremony of the Heads of State meeting in Xi'an, full of civilisation symbolism referred to the common Silk Road heritage, is a sign of the centrality of the new exclusive Sino-Central Asian forum in the minds of China's foreign policy establishment.

Italy's own 5+1 might follow a similar growing trend in terms of political importance in the coming months. The current Italian government appears engaged to preserve and implement cooperation with Central Asia, strategically focusing the efforts on Uzbekistan, the most-interested promoter of a regional approach. Recently Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev visited Italy, paving the way to further enhance bilateral relations, upgrading these to a strategic partnership (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Conclusions

Data and results reported in the article clearly confirm the strong potential of the 5+1 format of cooperation, which appears as the privileged forum of dialogue in foreign policies towards Central Asia due to its inclusive dimension and wider thematic content. The format usually involves all five Central Asian countries, and dialogue is comprehensive, going beyond traditional focus on energy and trade. The development of many versions of this type of format is the first step for the localisation of regional cooperation practices that reflects the needs of Central Asian states. However, the main precondition for a durable partnership is the commitment of the parties to build and cultivate a political dialogue based on reciprocal trust and respect, as well as respect the commitments written in the final declarations through tangible political and economic engagement in the region.

The similar characteristics of the SCO and the 5+1 forum, in all the variants we analysed, the Italian, the American, and the Chinese versions, characterise these 5+1 formats as a typically Asian instrument, as the SCO was often described in our interviews.³ Although the PRC has been amongst the latest the players to use this instrument, it can be argued that it perfectly fits its multilateral tradition made up of flexible and symbolic cooperation frameworks paralleled by strong bilateral work, defining features of the SCO and now of the C+C5. Yet, the adoption of such multilateral framework by Western powers such as the United States or Italy are probably signs of an adaptation of Western diplomatic behaviour to fit local preferences.

Focusing on Italy, this comprehensive initiative strengthened the Italian position in the region as a political partner for Central Asian countries and opened new business opportunities for Italian companies. Even if the magnitude is still not comparable to stronger players such as China or Russia, Italy has the potential to become a reliable and alternative partner which would allow Central Asian countries to diversify their external relations, also in the framework of the EU Central Asia strategy. One of the main driving factors will be the allocation of future investments into specific sectors, such as renewable energy and green development, and to work on the promotion of Italian exports to Central Asian markets, especially to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Indeo 2021).

Finally, these positive developments happen in the context of Russian invasion of Ukraine and its repercussions on the region, where Central Asian countries are recalibrating their relations with Moscow. Italy could be identified as a key actor not only thanks to the 5+1 format but also using these improved relations with the framework of the EU Strategy towards Central Asia, supporting a more incisive role of Italy in some dimensions of cooperation. However, we should also consider that Italy's commitment needs to go beyond the two 5+1 summits and proceed in the institutionalisation and routinisation of the format, similarly to what China and US have done by organising a summit every year and by developing a secretariat and several working groups. The lack of time commitment represents an evident weakness in the Italian 5+1 framework, delaying the efforts to increase Italian political visibility and presence in the region. In order to better evaluate the intentions of the present Italian government in Central Asia, we should wait to see whether another 5+1 summit will be organised, as the third summit is in discussion, but not yet scheduled.

³ Interviews with Uzbekistani officials and foreign policy experts in Tashkent, Spring 2022.

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