

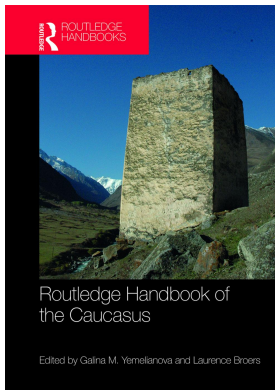
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3

PEOPLES, LANGUAGES AND LORE

John Colarusso

Introduction

Between the Black and Caspian Seas lies a region dominated by a chain of mountains, the Caucasus. The name is what is termed an exonym, one given to the area by those outside of it. The locals themselves, curiously, lack one for the region as a whole. The name is taken from Greek and may be based upon an old Indo-European word for ‘high, lofty’ (Proto-Indo-European **kówko-*, Gothic *hauhs*, English *high*; (Kroonen 2013: 215). Outside of Russia, the region did not occupy a significant place in the make-up of Europe, although geographers traditionally considered it part of that continent. Since the collapse of the USSR, however, the southern part has emerged on the world stage in the form of three sovereign nations. These states and the North Caucasus have become known largely for the wars that erupted in them in the 1990s. The region harbours the highest mountains in Europe and has one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse populations known, with fifty or more languages being spoken in an area the size of Spain.

Ancient peoples and cultures

The oldest ethnographic and linguistic identities linked to the Caucasus belong to the Bronze Age (fourth millennium BCE). The Maykop (Maikop) culture, named for the city in the north-western Caucasus republic of Adygheya (Adygea), expanded north into the steppe to form the Yamnaya complex (fourth to third millennia BCE), which was the Bronze Age basis of Proto-Indo-European culture (Reich 2018:107–10). Both cultures buried their dead under large grave mounds, lending to both the name *Kurgan Culture*, from a Turkic word meaning artificial mound. ‘Kurgan’ also referred to a group of early nomads which expanded across most of Eurasia and bequeathed their language, in various forms, from Ireland to India. Their mother language, also termed Proto-Indo-European, may have been an offshoot of a Caucasian language family (Colarusso 2003, 1997; Colarusso and Markey 2018), the North-West Caucasian family, to which Circassian and Abkhazian belong, the latter perhaps being ‘cousins’ that stayed behind in the homeland. One of the clearest linguistic links is the autonym (self-designation), Proto-Indo-European **ari-*, **aryo-* (Greek *aristos*, Indo-Iranian **arya-*) and Proto-North-West Caucasian **a-r-ǵe-* the-indefinite.

person-collective, ‘people’, as in Circassian *adāġe*, Ubykh *a-dāġe* (with /d/ from */r/) ‘the-people’, Abkhazian *-r9a* tribal suffix, ‘people’ (with /9/ standing for a voiced pharyngeal fricative), from */r-ġa. This hypothesis is called ‘Pontic’. It is controversial, requiring typological modification of the ‘standard’ Proto-Indo-European. For example, sounds such as *d must be reinterpreted as *t’, the so-called glottalic theory, and *dh as *d. The emergence of the typologically bizarre *dh (series) [open vocal cords, laxed vocal cords] can then be seen as a dissimilation from *t’ [closed vocal cords, tensed vocal cords] (series). Also, the North-West Caucasian languages are rich in fricative sounds. These offer tangible candidates for the otherwise abstract sonorant or fricative-like sounds of Proto-Indo-European termed ‘laryngeals’. So, for example, Proto-Indo-European *péh₂ur ‘fire’, (/h₂/ is the ‘A-colouring laryngeal’), Hittite *pah₂hur*, English *fire* (Mallory and Adams 2006:122–3) is cognate with Proto-North-West Caucasian *p^ha-xuə-r ‘to.ignite.by.lightning-to.drop.down-absolutive.case’, where /x/ is a voiceless, palatal fricative (Colarusso 1997).

Furthermore, Pontic has recently gained some traction because of convergent lines of research in genetics and archaeology (Reich 2018), and from work by Bomhard (2019; see also Mallory 2019). If further research supports this link, it would be a major achievement both in terms of our understanding of prehistory and of our refinement of the techniques of long range comparison. Hitherto the question of Indo-European homeland has been a contentious issue. A link to the Caucasus would not only help locate the homeland, the Yamnaya culture, but also render it part of a regional complex, that is, give the homeland a realistic status in that it would have a neighbouring culture, the Maykop culture. Our prior abstract understanding of this important linguistic family promises to become far more detailed and precise.

The authors of classical antiquity, descendants themselves of these Proto-Indo-Europeans, speak of the numerous ethnic groups to be found in the Caucasus. Some are identifiable, such as the Kerketai (the same root as in ‘Kirke’ (Circe), the enchantress from the *Odyssey*), an early Circassian exonym. Others remain obscure, such as the Heniochi. Classical sources give us the first remnants of some languages of the Caucasus. These are found as ‘nonsense’ inscriptions on Greek vases depicting figures speaking, who are wearing pants and jackets, thought to be Scythian clothing (Mayor et al. 2014). These inscriptions are in early forms of Circassian and Abkhazian, with one in Ubykh, two in Georgian, and one in an Indo-Aryan language, perhaps Sindian (Turbachov 1999). The Sindians, of the district of Sindica, show the same onomastics as Sindh, Sanskrit *Sindhuka* ‘of Sindh’, an Indo-European river name also seen in Gaelic *Sionainne* ‘Shannon’. Since a defining feature that sets Iranian apart from Indo-Aryan is the shift of */s/ to /h/, this name can be seen to represent a relic Indo-Aryan speaking group. These antedate the seventeenth-century specimens collected by the Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi, hitherto the earliest examples, by more than two millennia.¹

The earliest factual history of the region goes back to the Georgian adoption of Christianity as a state religion in the fourth century CE, in the eastern portion, then called Iberia. It is possible that the Byzantine Empire established or promoted Abkhazia, Georgia, and Alwanian (Caucasian Albania) as buffers against the Sasanian (Sassanid) Empire (see Chapters 4 and 6).

The roots of Abkhazia go back to Colchis of the Classical period. While generally taken to be a Georgian name, in fact it is early Circassian or even Abkhazian, *quo-λhi(s)*, ‘sloping-mountains’ (with < λ > a voiceless or hissed-l and < ħ > a pharyngeal). The roots of Georgian go back to Classical Caucasian Iberia, an exonym used by the Greeks and Romans for Kartli, which formed the core of Georgia (autonym *sakartvelo*). Alwanian, also called Caucasian Albania, succumbed as a language no later than the eleventh century to the Seljuq (Seljuk)

Turkic invasion, and is now the Turkic-speaking nation of Azerbaijan (see Chapter 6). The Albanian language is continued by the Udi language of Azerbaijan, southern Daghestan (Daghestan), south-eastern Georgia, and north-eastern Armenia. Apart from references to Daghestan as a region, Albanian is the only North-East Caucasian language that is attested from the pre-modern period. Armenian itself, originally an Indo-European language of eastern Anatolia and the northern Middle East has been gradually pushed up into the southern Caucasus, which came under Russian control in the early nineteenth century (see Chapter 7).

Although there is some evidence (place names with /sa-/, the Georgian locative toponym prefix, as in *Sasun* in Turkey) that Georgian may have been spoken farther to the west in Anatolia (Kevin Tuite, pers. comm.), the three Caucasian language families, North-West Caucasian, North-East Caucasian and Kartvelian or South Caucasian, seem to be indigenous to the Caucasus. Languages from Indo-European, and Altaic families have all been introduced to the region (providing, of course, that Indo-European's possible Caucasian roots in the Maykop culture are ignored).

One of the first peoples to seek refuge from expanding Hunnish power were the Iranian speakers of the steppes. The war-like Alans, one of these groups of the steppes, sought refuge in the northern Caucasus in the first millennium CE. There they founded the Alanic Kingdom, the precursor to present day North Ossetia-Alania (see Chapter 14). Under pressure from the Mongols they retreated once again into the mountainous reaches. This led to them spilling over into Georgia, forming the base of what would now be termed South Ossetia. It should be noted that while the Ossetians consider themselves to be direct descendants of the Alans, their self-designation (autonym) is 'Iron'. Both *Iron* and *Alani* derive from earlier Iranian *aryānām* 'of the Aryans'. So, their autonym does not continue *Alani*, but gives the same autonym as Persia, 'Iran'. Rather their folklore refers to a tribe, *Alæ-g-ket-tæ* 'Alan-adjective-tribe-collective', so the Alans did enter into their make-up as one component (Abaev and Bailey 1985). The other Iranian-speaking groups are the Tati and Talyshi. The former wandered as far as Daghestan from Iran sometime in the first millennium CE, many of them being Jews, while the later extended from their homeland in north-western Iran up into what is now Azerbaijan at a later date.

From 650 CE to 969 the Caucasus was the seat of the Khazar Empire. This seems to have been an Altaic-speaking polity (Hunnic or Turkic is not clear) formed from the break-up of the Western Turkic Khaganate, a steppe empire (Golden 1980). Most remarkably it adopted Judaism as a state religion, in that way fending off proselytising pressure from Orthodox Christian Byzantium, and the Muslim Umayyad Caliphate. It served as a buffer between Byzantium and the Caliphate, on the one hand, and as a buffer between these two and the steppes to the north, where the Rus' (precursors to the Russians) were beginning to emerge (see Chapter 6).

One group that broke off from the Khazar Empire in the ninth century was the Magyars (Hungarians). Before they moved into the Carpathian Basin they had prolonged contact with the northern Caucasus peoples, as attested by Circassian loans into Hungarian. Most of these have yet to undergo scholarly scrutiny. Another group that emerged from this empire was the Hunnic speaking Kabars. These settled in the north-western Caucasus, where they assimilated into the local Circassians. Their name persists to this day as that of the East Circassian speaking *Kabardians* (West Circassian *Qabar-ta* 'Kabar-collective', that is 'Kabardians') (see Chapter 14).

One might note here that two other Circassian names may reflect remote ethnic origins. That of the *Hatiquoya* or *Hatuquoya* reflects *Hati-quo-ya* 'Hatti-son-ones.of', alluding to the ancient Bronze Age Hatti of pre-Hittite Anatolia. That of the Chemgwi, formerly *Kimergoy*, reflects *Kimer-go-y(a)* 'Kimer-region-ones.of', and may reflect that of the ancient *Kimmerians* of Greek accounts, Georgian *gimiri*.

The Turkic-speaking Kipchaks (Qipchaqs) succeeded the Khazars. From them arose the Karachai-Balkars (also *Malkars*), of the high meadows of the north-west region, and the Kumyks of lowland Daghestan. The Nogais (also Kipchak speaking, as are the Kazakhs and Kirghiz (Kyrgyz) of Central Asia), persisted as a horde with a varied history until settled by Catherine the Great in the northern Caucasus (see Chapter 14).

In the sixteenth century Russia's relations with the northern Caucasus, at least with the Kabardians, were good to the point that Ivan IV (popularly known as Ivan the Terrible, in Russian Ivan Groznyi 'Ivan the Fearsome'), took a Circassian as a wife, Maria Temryukovna, from 1561 until her death in 1569. His second son, Ivan Ivanovich (1554–81), who was accidentally killed by his father during an argument, was married to Yelena Sheremeteva. The noble family of the Sheremetovs was also of Circassian origin, their name being a 'public' nickname based on a saying: *wikheremet, wisheremet* '(if) you do not (want to) be involved, don't stand around'. The Circassians have two names, a private or intimate one, and a public one. It is likely that from this period various groups of Russian frontier people, usually termed *Cossacks*, settled in the Caucasus, where they are now known as *Kafkázets* (singular) and still speak Russian.²

In the eighteenth century the Kingdom of Georgia became a Russian protectorate (1783). It then became apparent that the easiest way to access Georgia from the north was through the Ossetian territory. St. Petersburg's favourite in the region then shifted to the Ossetians, preparing the way for the war to come with the Circassians, which began in 1801 (see Chapter 7).

Indigenous languages, areal features

The first-century Roman geographer, Pliny the Elder, speaks of the Romans requiring 130 interpreters to do business in the trading centre of Dioscurias, on the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus. The tenth-century Arab traveller and writer, al-Mas'udi, called the Caucasus the 'Mountain of Tongues' and spoke of 72 nations residing there (Mauk 2019). A modern Turkish tale told to the present writer tells of a Caliph who wished to know what the languages of the mountain infidels were like, and so sent his court scholar to find out. Some time passed and the scholar returned and stood before his lord. When the Caliph asked him what the languages were like, the scholar drew out from behind his back a sack of pebbles, rattled them at the Caliph and replied, 'This, O Caliph, is what those languages are like'.

Today there are at least fifty languages belonging to the three Caucasian language families, North-West Caucasian, North-East Caucasian and Kartvelian/South Caucasian, that were originally spoken nowhere else except in the Caucasus. Despite their enormous diversity and complexity they share some common features, these being termed *areal* features by linguists.

To start with the sound systems, all three families show glottal ejective stops, made with closure of the vocal cords to yield a sort of amplified, almost popping sound. This is marked with a raised comma or single quote, as with /t'/. (To these Circassian uniquely adds ejective fricatives.) All also have a contrast between velar and uvular stops, that is between [k]-like sounds and ones made farther back in the mouth, usually written with < q > by linguists. Ossetian, an Indo-European language that has moved into the Caucasus, has acquired such a contrast, but rarely uses it. In the front of the mouth all Caucasian languages have numerous affricates ('ts', and 'ch' sounds) and corresponding fricatives ('s', and 'sh' sounds). The North-West Caucasian languages, and the North-East Caucasian language Udi add a third intermediate series to these. The North-West Caucasian languages also distinguish 'ch' and 'sh' sounds made with the flat surface of the tongue blade, as in *shed*, and those made with the tip raised

to the roof of the mouth, so-called retroflexed sounds, as in *shred*. The North-West and North-East Caucasian languages also have pharyngeal sounds made in the throat or at the epiglottis, where they are rendered almost with a growl. In addition, rounded and palatalised consonants are common, as well as emphatical sounds made with the throat or epiglottis constricted. The North-West Caucasian languages permit initial consonant clusters, whereas the North-East Caucasian languages lack clusters except for the Vai Nakh branch, Chechen, Ingush, and Batsby, which permit some clusters of labial stop plus a pharyngeal (Nichols 2011).

The Kartvelian (South Caucasian) language family lacks these rounded consonants, but has series of velarised and uvularised sounds, that is sounds made with simultaneous velar closure or uvular closure, as with *Tbilisi*, the capital of Georgia, versus *t'k'bili* 'sweet', where /t'k'/ is a 'single' consonant (also with glottal closure). Also, note, for a uvularised example, the Georgian town of Mtskheta that begins with only two consonants, the /tskh/ being a uvularised alveolar affricate. Such complex consonants are usually termed 'harmonic clusters' in most grammars of Georgian. Georgian also permits large initial clusters without harmonic clusters consonants, as with *mts'vrtneli* 'trainer'. As this last example suggests, if there are rounded consonants in Georgian, the rounding is realised as /v/.

The North-West Caucasian languages are typologically aberrant. Kabardian has 48 consonants and Ubykh had 81. These languages are famous for their vertical vowel systems of two or three vowels that show only a contrast of height, specifically a neutral vowel opposed to an open vowel (in some languages divided into front and back variants, /æ ~ a/). The colour of the syllable is left to the consonants, very much the mirror system to how most languages interpret speech, where the vowel colours the consonants of the syllable. In effect they work like this: 'Say /t^h!/'. One then says [t^hə]. This 'schwa' is the neutral vowel, having historically given up all its features to the surrounding consonants. 'Say /t^ha!/'. One then says [t^ha], with this open vowel having retained its openness, because opening the mouth is incompatible with a consonantal articulation. So, as unusual as they are, these languages make perfect phonological sense (Kuipers 1960). The North-East Caucasian languages also have large consonantal inventories, but retain normal vowel systems, although /o/ is frequently absent. In contrast to the North-West languages these now seem unusual. Many of these latter languages have sustained consonants that themselves can sometimes be doubled. Most also have numerous l-like sounds, some made in the back of the mouth, as though one were about to swallow something.

The morphology of all these languages is what is called agglutinative. This means that a word is composed of a root plus simple morphemes (affixes), on the front (prefixes), the end (suffixes) or inserted (infixes), each of which has a simple meaning, as in West Circassian /λ'ə-ha-m-a/ man-plural-ergative-plural 'the men' as a subject or possessor. This is in contrast to an inflectional language where an affix may carry several senses at once, as in Russian *stol-óv* (сто́л-о́в) table-possessive.plural 'of the tables'.

One consequence of the transparency of agglutinative languages is that words can become quite complex, particularly verbs. Take, for example, the title of a Nart tale (Colarusso 2002: 49–50) 'Why the Sun Pauses on the Horizon at Sunset', which in the original Bzhedukh dialect of West Circassian is rendered: /təγa-r pš^yəħa-m ə-qə-z-fa-z-a-t^h-y-a--wəć^wa-γa-g^wara-ra-r/ sun-absolutive evening-oblique it-change.of.state-what-for-self-at-surface-direction-toward-halt-past-specific-gerund-abs(olutive) ('the specific reason why [the sun] pauses (on itself)'). Such long verbs (here shifted to a noun by /-ra-/) are readily understood and produced.

As to syntax, most languages are subject – object – verb order (SOV order), although Chechen and Ingush can have highly scrambled orders, and the Kartvelian languages are often subject-verb-object (SVO order). The verb in the North-West Caucasian languages is ‘poly-personal’, that is, it inflects for every person in the sentence as well as for spatial location, movement, and so on. The verb recapitulates almost all of the information in the sentence. The Kartvelian languages also have a polypersonal verb with prefixal first and second persons, but suffixal third person inflection. These languages also exhibit ‘version’, a prefixal vowel that determines the subject’s attitude or subjectivity to the action. Alternatively, it may refer to an indirect object, which in reflexive forms may be the subject as well. In addition, there are spatial and movement prefixes. As in the history of Russian, many of the spatial prefixes have come to denote aspectual nuances in the verb, continuous as opposed to punctual action or habitual as opposed to unusual action. In contrast to these verbs, the North-East Caucasian languages inflect their verbs for the grammatical class of the subject or object (this is an ergative pattern, as explained in the next paragraph) and not for person directly. These languages have what one might call ‘super gender’ systems, marking masculine, feminine, round, countable, etc. nouns, up to eleven or more categories. They also tend to mark their verbs for evidentiality, that is whether the speaker can vouch for the action or not.

All of the Caucasian languages are what is termed ‘ergative’. They use cases or affixes to mark the subject of an intransitive and the direct object of a transitive as the same. To give an example using English, Caucasian languages say *He sleeps*, but *Him she sees* for ‘He sees her’. To give an example in West Circassian (Adygheyan):

λ' ə-r ɔ-čəya-γ(a) man-abs he-falls.asleep-past

‘The man fell asleep’.

λ' ə-m s^wəz-r ɔ-y- λāγ^wa-γ(a) man-ergative woman-abs her-he-see-past

‘The man saw the woman’.

This may seem backwards, but what these languages are doing is marking the noun that receives or undergoes the verbal action in some fulfilled way (with a case termed *absolutive*). This is shown by the so-called ‘anti-passive’ construction (actually ‘anti-ergative’, since these languages also have passive constructions), where the action is on-going or unfulfilled: *Her (ergative case) the shirt (absolutive) sewed*, ‘She completed sewing the shirt’ versus the anti-ergative *She (absolutive) (at) the shirt(indirect object case) sewed* ‘She tried to sew the shirt’ or ‘She was sewing at the shirt’. Again, a West Circassian example:

s^wəz-m ž^yāna-r ɔ-y-də-γ(a) woman-ergative shirt-abs it-she-sew-past

‘The woman sewed the shirt’.

s^wəz-r ž^yāna-m ɔ-y-a-d-a-γ(a) woman-abs shirt-oblique she-it-at-sew-at-past

‘The woman sewed at the shirt’. (It was not completed.)

These systems with ergative – absolutive as well as nominative/absolutive – oblique for incomplete action are called ‘split ergative’ systems.

In addition, there are psychological verbs where the subject is in a dative or verbs of possession, with subjects in the dative or even the genitive. Verbs of motion or direction can even have objects in the dative or oblique inflexion, literally *He to.her hit* or *She to.it reads*.

λ' ə-r ḥa-m ɔ-y-a-w-a-γ(a) man-abs dog-obl he-it-to-hit-to-past

‘The man hit the dog’.

s^wəz-r txəλ-m ɔ-y-a-ž^ya-a-γ(a) woman-abs book-oblique she-it-at-read-at-past

‘The woman read the book’.

The syntax of all of these languages is accordingly very rich.

Indigenous language families

The actual languages are listed by family and sub-family or branch³ (see Table 3.1).

Ubykh, now moribund, was transitional between the Circassian languages and the Abkhaz dialects. The two ends of the Circassian dialect spectrum, Natukhay (plus Shapsugh and Bzhedukh) and Kabardian (Colarusso 2006a, 1992), form distinct languages. Ubykh was distinct as well. Nevertheless, all speakers considered themselves to be *Adyghey*. Some would consider Abaza (the T'ap'anta dialect) a distinct language from the other Abkhazian dialects

Table 3.1 The indigenous Caucasian language families

North-West Caucasian languages

Circassian

Adyghe

Natukhay	Zhaney	Shapsug(h)/Shapsegh	
Bzhedukh	Mamkheg	Mequash	Ab(a)dzakh Hakuchi
Chemgwi/T'emirgoy/K'imirgoy		Hatiquoy	Yegeruqay

Besleney

East Circassian (Kabardian)

Ubykh (moribund)

Abkhaz

Abzhwi	Bzyb	Sadz	Ahchips	Ashqarawa	Abaza (T'ap'anta)
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North-East Caucasian languages

Vai Nakh/Vainakh

Chechen,	Ingush,	Batsby
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Avar-Andic

Avar	Andic	Andi	Akhvakh	Karata	Botlikh
Godoberi	Chamalal	Bagvalal	Tindi	Tsezic	Tsez
Hinukh	Bezhta	Hunzib	Khwarshi		

Lak(k)

Dargwa

Dargwa/Dargin Kaytak	Kubachi	Itsari – Chirag
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Samurian sub-group

East: Lezghian/Lezgin	Tabasaran	Aghul/Agul	Udi	Alwanian
South: Kryz	Budukh			
West: Rutul	Tsakhur			

South Caucasian/Kartvelian languages

Georgian

Zan	
Mingrelian	Laz
Svan	

(Colarusso 2015: 164–97). Again, all consider themselves *Apšwa* (roughly, ‘mortals’). They are commonly referred to as Cherkess both inside Russia and Turkey. The term derives from Italian contacts, where an older pronunciation of *[kirkas] was automatically rendered by Italian with a ‘ch’ for the [k] before an [i]. Ninety per cent of the speakers of these languages live outside the Caucasus now as a diaspora, so it is difficult to estimate how many speak them. Perhaps half a million speak some form of Circassian in their original homeland. The number of Abkhaz speakers cannot exceed 200,000 (Hewitt and Khiba 1989; Yanagisawa 2013).

The Ubykh language is effectively extinct. Its fate serves as an emblem for fears for the survival of the other languages. One benefit of Russian rule was the introduction of Cyrillic-based scripts, grammars and dictionaries using these, and the emergence of literary cultures in the various Caucasian languages. Circassian in Cyrillic is taught at Düzce University in Turkey, a university in a city where a third of the population is Circassian. Unfortunately, the Cyrillic script is not consistent with its representation of sounds between dialects. There is some effort now to establish consistency.

Despite the existence of this language base, there is a movement in Turkey to establish a Latin-based alphabet for Circassian. The idea is to make their language more familiar and accessible to Circassians from Turkey, where Turkish is written in a Latin-based script. While linguists use a Latin-based transcription for Circassian without difficulty, this is felt to be too technical for common use. No obvious solution exists, however, since even the simplest Circassian, Kabardian, is far richer in sounds than is Turkish, so that many diacritics will have to be invented to supplement Turkish conventions. The survival of Circassian hinges to a limited extent on the resolution of this dispute.

With regard to the North-East Caucasian languages (Forker and Maisak 2018; Nichols 2011), speakers range from 1.7 million for Chechen down to a mere one hundred for Godoberi. Unlike the North-West Caucasian languages, the dialects of North-East Caucasian define distinct ethnic groups, many residing in separate highland valleys (see Chapter 13). All of these languages face uncertain futures due to modernisation and recent changes in minority language policies imposed by the Kremlin. One should note that these languages seem to be quite ancient, so much so that even the genetics of their speakers tend to align with them (Karafet et al. 2016), a rare feature in linguistics.

Speakers of the South Caucasian/Kartvelian language family (Aronson 1990; Hewitt 1995) range from roughly 3.7 million for the nation of Georgia to another eight million in eastern Turkey. ‘Zan’ denotes the dialect spectrum running along the Black Sea coast from Georgia proper (Mingrelian) down into north-eastern Turkey (Laz). Svan is a highly deviant member of the family. Georgian has its own alphabet, dating back centuries with earlier forms, for example, საქართველო sakartvelo ‘Georgia’. Georgian has numerous consonant clusters, and seven cases that, as with all Caucasian languages, show agglutinative inflection. For example: *k’ats-i* man-nominative ~ *k’ats-eb-i* man-plural-nominative. Present tense sentences show a nominative – accusative inflection while past tense ones show an ergative – nominative one. Perfect tense has the subject in a dative of possession pattern (Harris 1981: 1–22). Verbs are marked for ‘version’, a sort of indirect object prefix. For example: *v-ts’er* I-write ‘I write (it)’ ~ *v-u-ts’er* I-to-write ‘I write (it) to him/her’ ~ *v-a-ts’er* I-on-write ‘I write (it) on it’ ~ *v-i-ts’er* I-for.self-write ‘I write (it) for myself’. There can be as many as eight suffixes that modify or inflect the verb, including tenses and moods. There is a sort of inflection competition between the prefixes, so that first and second person object prefixes replace those of the subject. Georgian is

typologically unusual in many ways, but perhaps its oddest feature is simply its word for ‘father’. This is *mama*, *deda* being the word for mother. The only other language known to have *mama* for ‘father’ is Arrernte or Aranda of northern Australia.

External language families that have wandered into the Caucasus

Members of other language families have wandered into the region. From the Indo-European family Russian and Ukrainian are late arrivals. Somewhat older are Armenian, Kurdish, and Tati, the latter two ‘West’ Iranian dialects. The oldest immigrant language is Greek, going back as much as three millennia. Also old are members from the Altaic family: Azeri, Karachai – Balkar (in the north-western Caucasus, in the mountain pastures) and Kumyk/Kumuk (in Daghestan, along the Caspian littoral), plus Nogai in the north-eastern part of Daghestan (all of the Kipchak sub-family).

The Armenian dialect spoken in the Caucasus is the Eastern one. Armenian forms a separate branch of Indo-European (Dum-Tragut 2009; Fortson 2004: 382–99), with many unusual cognate matches. For example, where most Indo-European languages show *dwo* or some such for ‘two’ (with /t/ in English for /d/ in other languages), Armenian has *yerku*, from an apparent history from Proto-Indo-European: **dwō* > **twu* > **tḡ^wu* > **tḡu* > **tku* > **etku* > **erku* > *yerku*. There are three other words that show this complex history (Fortson 2010: 387, §16.19). Another shift is that of Proto-Indo-European **t* to Armenian *y*, note *mayr* ‘mother’ from Proto-Indo-European **mater*. The autonym for Armenian is *Hay*. One could take this /y/ back to a **t/* to arrive at *Hatti*, the name of the pre-Indo-European inhabitants of eastern Anatolia and what is now Armenia, as an example of ethnic persistence despite language change. Armenian has its own alphabet, itself going back centuries with earlier forms. For example, **դաշտ** *tašd* ‘field’ (nominative). Under Turkish and Caucasian influence Armenian has also become an agglutinative language, with separate affixes for case endings and the plural, despite retaining the original seven Indo-European case functions. For example: *tašd-e* field-ablative ‘from the field’ ~ *tašd-er-e* field-plural-ablative ‘from the fields’. Like Georgian it also exhibits numerous consonant clusters, as in *ksksi* ‘he did it’. Armenian is also typologically unusual in having three r-sounds, an alveolar ‘tap’ /r/, a trilled or retroflex (like English) /r̄/, and a uvular (like French) trill /ḡ/ (Vaux 1998), in origin a dark-l, as in English. Sentence order is SOV.

Russian belongs to the East Slavic sub-branch of the Slavic branch of Indo-European (Timberlake 2004). It had been penetrating the Caucasus long before the Russian tsarist conquest of the region. Unlike Armenian or Ossetian, Russian has retained its inflectional morphology. It retains reflexes of the original six Proto-Indo-European cases, and in the adjective it exhibits a seventh for animate nouns. The rich complexity of the nominal-adjectival-pronominal system stands in contrast to a comparatively simple verb system with two basic sorts of inflection. Geometric and directional prefixes to the verbs have largely shifted over to yield aspectual nuances of repetition or habitual activity as opposed to singular or unusual actions. In this Russian verbal semantics and morphology align with the verbs of Georgian and Ossetian. The syntax is nominative – accusative, with SVO sentence order.

Distinctive to Russian are the palatalised consonants, otherwise alien to the languages of the area. Nonetheless, Russian shares a three-way contrast in its ‘s’-like and ‘sh’-like sounds, with the last category split into ‘sh’-like sounds made with the tongue blade (in Cyrillic ш, transliterated into Latin as < shch >), and ‘sh’-like sounds made with the tip of the tongue near to the roof of the mouth, that is retroflexed (in Cyrillic щ, transliterated into Latin as < sh >). This contrast extends into most of the other members of the Slavic branch and ties

this branch of Indo-European into an areal pattern with the North-West Caucasian languages, Circassian, Ubykh, and Abkhaz (Fortson 2010: 414–45). Russian also permits large initial consonant clusters, as with *vzgl'ad* 'look, glance, gaze, stare'.

Deserving of passing mention is the Cossack dialect, Balachka, based on Ukrainian, which entered the Kuban region of the northern Caucasus in 1792 and has largely been replaced by standard Russian in the course of the twentieth century.

Ossetian is a descendant of the Iranian languages of the steppe nomads, the so-called Scythians and Sarmatians (Abaev 1964). *Sarma* in Ossetian meant 'free man'. There are two dialects, Iron and the more conservative Digoron. A third dialect, Jassic, was spoken in Hungary until the end of the nineteenth century. The names are transparent: *Osse-tæ* is from the *As* horde mentioned by the Greeks and from which Asia takes its origin. The /-tæ/ is an old collective ending. *Iron* is from Indo-Iranian **ary-ānām* 'Ayra-of.plural', 'of the Aryans' and is the same as *Iran*. *Digor-on* is other-human.plural, 'the others'. *Jassi* (yas-) is from the Indo-Iranian root for 'to sacrifice, worship, be pious', and is seen in *Yezidi*, the city of *Yazd*, the name of the Sasanian shah, *Yazdigerd*, and the Sarmatian *Iazyges* who were stationed by the Romans as mercenaries along the border with the Dacians.

Under Caucasian influence Ossetian has become agglutinating, even though it has nine cases, the most of any Indo-European language. For example: *læg-aen* man-dative 'to the man' ~ *læg-t-aen* man-plural-dative 'to the men'. In the absence of articles, definiteness is expressed by stress shift to first syllable. Under Slavic influence and much as with Georgian it has in many cases re-interpreted the prepositions on its verbs as aspectual nuances. It is written in Cyrillic, with the addition of < æ >. The syntax is nominative – accusative. Sentence order is SOV.

Ossetian is classified as an Eastern Iranian language, linking it to modern Pashto and such small languages as Yaghnobi of Tajikistan, and the Pamir dialects. Its historical relatives were more numerous and far-flung, such as the Saka and Soghdhians (Sogdians), who dominated the Silk Road in antiquity.

The remaining four Iranian languages belong to the Western Iranian branch to which Persian (Farsi) belongs. Tati and Talyshi are the other Iranian languages that have wandered into the Caucasus. The Tats are largely confined to Azerbaijan. There is an effort to write the language in a Latin-based script similar to that used for Azeri. Interestingly in the Khalkhali dialect from north-western Iran in the present tense of verbs the syntax is nominative – accusative (as with English, German, Russian, Greek, Latin, etc.), but in the past it is ergative – absolutive, with the action apparently considered to be complete as opposed to the ongoing present. This would seem to be a bit of Caucasian areal influence creeping south. Judeo-Tat, now primarily spoken in Israel, was a Persian dialect with numerous Hebrew loans. It was spoken not only in Azerbaijan, but also in Daghestan. Talyshi spills over into Azerbaijan from north-western Iran. It resembles the Iranian dialects that rim the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. Finally, the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish is spoken in a few villages in Armenia and Azerbaijan. It belongs to the north western sub-branch of Western Iranian. Like Pashto, it is conservative in retaining cases and gender.

The Greeks of classical antiquity had trading posts along the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus up to the Maeotis kingdom (Circassian /mə-wət'a/ not-(possible to)dam.up) at the Sea of Azov and the mouth of the Don (Tanais) (Circassian /t^hana/). Sometimes termed Pontic Greek or Romeyka, this dialect persists in a number of villages, especially in Georgia. One point of origin is the Black Sea coast of north-eastern Turkey, whence the name Pontic Greek. Despite its long presence in the region, it has only just begun to be studied (Berikashvili 2017). It seems to have shifted to agglutinative morphology, at least in its genitive

(possessive) forms. It has numerous loan words from Turkish, Armenian, Georgian, and Russian. It has been written in the Greek alphabet, but also in the Turkish variant of Latin script as well as in Cyrillic.

There are four members of the Altaic family spoken in the Caucasus. Azeri belongs to the Oghuz branch, while the remainder all belong to the Kipchak branch of the family, aligning them with Tatar, Kazak (Kazakh) and Kirghiz (Kyrgyz) and distinguishing them from Turkish, Azeri, and Turkmen.

Azeri falls midway in a dialect spectrum starting with Turkish in the west and ending with Turkmen in the east. It is descended from the language spoken by the Seljuks, who came into Iran starting in the eleventh century CE and where the majority of Azeris still live, and reached up into what is now Azerbaijan, replacing Caucasian Albanian (Albanian) (see Chapter 6). Azerbaijani Azeri is a distinct dialect from that spoken in Iran. Azeri is a variant of the Turkish of Anatolia, with vowel harmony and agglutinative morphology. There are some differences in phonology: the voiced velar fricative written < ğ > is pronounced, whereas in Turkey it is often silent. Some words differ in the voicing of their consonants, such as Turkish *taş* ~ Azeri *daş* both 'stone'. Azeri is written in Latin script, the Cyrillic having been replaced after the dissolution of the USSR. Earlier it was written in the Persian variety of the Arabic script.

The Karachai-Balkar, divided as two ethnic groups under Soviet rule, inhabit the high pastures of the north-western area, where they still pursue nomadism to some extent, the Circassians and Abazas (T'ap'anta) occupying the lowlands. Karachai is spoken in Karachai-Cherkessia, and Balkar is spoken a bit farther east in Kabardino-Balkaria (see Chapter 14). As with most Altaic languages these two dialects exhibit vowel harmony, that is all the vowels of a word must be either front or back (Seegmiller 1996). Typical as well of Altaic morphology is agglutinating. The noun has six cases. Syntax is nominative – accusative, betraying the fact that these dialects have only come into the Caucasus 'recently', that is since the collapse of the Kipchak Khanate in the thirteenth century. The Cyrillic alphabet is the base for both.

The Kumyk dwell in the lowlands of Daghestan, along the western Caspian littoral. The language is thought to have been spoken by a component of the Khazar Empire and to have survived in the Caucasus after the passing of that nation (Golden 1980). It is written in a Cyrillic-based script.

The Nogai are the last to have entered the Caucasus, having been located there by Catherine the Great near the end of the eighteenth century. Within the course of the twentieth century Nogai went from being written in an Arabic-based script, to a Latin-based one, finally to being written in Cyrillic. The Nogai people are scattered across the northern Caucasus, from Karachaevo-Cherkessia (west or white or *Aq* Nogai) to northern Daghestan (north or black or *Kara* Nogai) (see Chapter 14). The language has vowel harmony and agglutinative morphology. The Nogais derive from the Golden Horde when led by the grandson of Chinggis (Genghiz) Khan, Nogai ('war dog' in Mongol), from whom they took their name, but their language is not Mongolic, suggesting yet an earlier origin as a Turkic vassal to Mongol suzerainty.

Linguae francae

By the tenth century CE Daghestan largely adopted Islam (see Chapter 5). Arabic became a lingua franca for most of the Daghestanis with the exception of the Vai Nakh peoples. Arabic persisted despite the spread of Kumyk as an alternate lingua franca. The Vai Nakh

people stand apart socially and politically from the rest of the Daghestanis because they resisted Islam until the late eighteenth century, more than a thousand years after the rest of Daghestan, and so also failed to use Arabic.

Kumyk enjoyed the status of a lingua franca from Daghestan westward to Kabardian territory. Some regional cohesion was reflected in this. Arabic and Kumyk together certainly seem to have represented a propensity of the eastern Caucasus to view Moscow with some suspicion and hostility, whereas the central portion of the northern Caucasus was more open to ties with Russia.

Azeri was a lingua franca across the southern Caucasus from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries when this region was ruled by Iranian dynasties. Its chief influence was on the Alwanian (Caucasian Albanian) kingdom, which vanished and whose language, now called Udi, became restricted to a handful of villages.

Starting with the Russian conquests of the mid-nineteenth century, Russian emerged as the new lingua franca, not only for local communication, but also for modern culture and science. It should be noted, however, that most Caucasians are multi-lingual, knowing a mother language and that of several surrounding peoples. This is particularly true of Daghestanis.

Folklore

The richest source of folklore in the northern Caucasus is the Nart tales (Colarusso 2002; May et al. 2016). The Nart lore is a body of heroic tales of imaginary people, often endowed with fantastic capabilities. Because of their fantastical tone, these tales are transitional between epic (exaggerated accounts of actual battles) and myth (tales of gods and magical, fictional people). In my own work I have termed them ‘tales’ (May et al. 2016) or ‘sagas’ (Colarusso 2002), the latter being a traditionally applied term for them. They are rich and characterised by a dark tone (especially the Ossetian), with much strife and antagonism but also with traces of chivalric conduct reminiscent of the romances of medieval Europe. They began to be recorded after the tsarist conquest of the Caucasus in the middle of the nineteenth century and are still an active oral tradition to this day. The name itself is of ‘steppe’ Iranian origin, that is from the Iranian languages once spoken along the Silk Road in Central Asia in Classical times, Scythian, Sarmatian, Alanic, etc. It is from a proto-Iranian *(h)nr-tama ‘man-superlative’, note Roman *Nero*, Greek *ane:r* ‘man’, *andros* (possessive form), and Gaelic *ner* ‘brave’ (the source of *nerd* by moral inversion).

The Nart lore is found across the northern Caucasus, among the North-West Caucasian-speaking peoples (Circassians, Ubykhs, Abazas), the Turkic Karachai-Balkars (Khadjieva et al. 1994), the Iranian-speaking Ossetians, and the North-East Caucasians (Ingush and Chechens). Tales are also found south of the Caucasian massif among the (North-West Caucasian) Abkhaz of the Black Sea coast and the Svans of the Georgian highlands. The Svan corpus is small and the tales peter out as one leaves the Georgian highlands.

Many people from the Circassian and Ossetian communities with whom I discussed the Nart material at the outset of my career tended to view them as children’s stories, or at least as something bordering on the juvenile. The attention accorded to them by Western scholars, such as myself, seems to have raised their status so that now they are viewed as crucial parts of cultural heritage. Their obvious antiquity, as attested by their content and by the elaborate and archaic bardic language in which many have been composed, makes them useful to nationalists who always seek as great a time depth as possible for their claims on territory and the authenticity of their culture. I was told that in the late 1960s

a local conference on the Narts, held in the Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz, degenerated into a mass brawl that had to be broken up by the police. In 2012 a conference entitled ‘The Narts’ was convened at Kabardino-Balkaria State University and decorum prevailed. Currently therefore there seems to be an ‘armistice’ in the Nart saga ‘war’, perhaps due to a dawning sense of common history among many people of the northern Caucasus.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Nart corpus is the prominent and important role of women characters. Among these the figure of Satanaya (Ossetian Satana) is paramount (Colarusso 1989). She is radiantly beautiful, wise, and the source of guidance to the heroes. She is the fictive mother of the warband, a band of one hundred Narts, hence her name /sata-/ hundred (Steppe Iranian) and /-na(-ya)/ mother(-one.who.is) (Circassian). She is the wife of the Nart leader, Warzameg (/warza-meg/ wild.boar-son.of) (Ossetia Urizmæg). Their domestic life, with its banter, is a source of humour. She also saves him from the treachery of the other Narts. Other notable women are Dzerassa (Ossetian), who gives birth to twin heroes, Ækhsær (‘brave’) and Ækhsærtæg (‘like brave’). Her correlate in Circassian is Megazash, also the mother of twin heroes, Pizighash (he who severs) and Pigyi (he who spears). Psatina (/psa-ti-na/ life-giving-mother), is rescued by a young Warzameg from a reptile man who rules over the land of the dead. In an act of bravery and wisdom typical of female portrayals in this lore Psatina has to explain to Warzameg how to defeat his adversary.

Confined to a few tales but of great interest are three other women all from the Circassian corpus. Amazan, head of a female warband, is the source of the Greek word, *Amazon*. Lady Tree is the embodiment of the Eurasian world tree. Last is Adif, the crescent moon woman whose glowing elbow helps to guide warriors on nocturnal raids. She may be an old embodiment of the warrior’s moon.

First, Lady Amazan, whence the Greek *Amazon*, is also called Lady Nart Sana, Lady January, and Little Golden Knees, in the last case because she is said to have worn britches and boots, but to have left her knees exposed so that they were tanned. She is a warrior woman who leads a warband of women. They dwell in the forest, hence one of her names, Circassian /a-mez-a-n(e)/ the-forest-intimate.prefix-mother. In the heat of battle against a male warband she mistakenly slays her male lover and dies of a broken heart. A healing spring arises from the spot where their bloods mingled on the earth. Here we see an alternate account of the Amazons made famous by Greek tradition, one to which the original name is native.

The Nart sagas also offer perhaps the best account of the ancient concept of the world tree, an old Eurasian idea exemplified by the Christmas tree, the Indra Tree, and its close correlate the Maypole. This sole account of Lady Tree is in the Circassian corpus. The god of the forge, Tlepsh, seeks things vital for the life of the Narts and intends to reach the edge of the earth. Eventually he is taken by a group of women that he has encountered dancing upon a sea shore to their mistress, Lady Tree. Her hair reaches into the heavens and her roots reach deep beneath the earth. She falls in love with him and tells him to cease his quest, that he cannot reach the end of the earth because the earth has no edge. The earth is round. Stubborn Tlepsh wanders off anyway, but returns chastened and empty-handed. In his absence Lady Tree has borne to him a ‘baby sun’, the ‘Milky Way’. He takes the infant and gives him over to the care of seven women (the Pleiades). They watch over him, but eventually lose him. In despair Tlepsh returns to Lady Tree for advice. She tells him that the baby sun may occasionally return to act as a guidance on night raids, that is, if he and the Narts are lucky.

Another tale that links to nocturnal raids is that of Adif, 'Lady White Elbow' (West Circassian /'a-di-f/ arm-joint-white). She dwells in a tower and gives light to guide her husband on raids by sticking her elbow out of a window. Her husband, however, is brutish and ungrateful, and treats her with contempt. In response she withdraws her light and he plunges to his death from a bridge into a gorge. She is the female embodiment of the crescent moon. She seems to be a surviving animated form of the 'warrior's moon', a mark found in Celtic (Diarmed), Norse (Thor), Abaza, on petroglyphs in the north-west of Mongolia (David Kortum, pers. comm.), and on Japanese samurai helmets, with their crescent moon above the visor. It is a symbol that therefore spans all of Eurasia, ranging from Ireland to Japan.

The men in the tales are more like heroes found widely throughout folklore. Some of their exploits, however, show echoes of tales from other traditions. I shall focus largely on such parallels, because the Nart sagas by virtue of their intermediate location in Eurasia seem to attest to figures and details of plot that have carried down elsewhere into Celtic, Slavic, Norse, Greek, Indic, and Iranian, preserving material going back to the Indo-European originals. One might note that the corpus is a mix of local Caucasian and Indo-European Iranian lore from the steppes of Classical Central Asia. It is an example of a tradition which has jumped linguistic barriers and thereby been preserved.

The Nart corpus offers the most detailed depiction of the old Indo-European warband (Kershaw 2000). This consisted of one hundred fictive brothers, presided over by a 'mother', Satana(ya). In the Abaza corpus the band is characterised as 'Sasruquo and his ninety-nine brothers'. Parallels may be seen in the Wild Hunt of Norse, with Odin leading his army from Valhalla across the sky, and in Vedic Indra with his Maruts, the warband that follows him. In this warrior band we find the theme of the resurrected hero, who emerges from the grave mound. The parallel with Christianity is striking.

She Bartinuquo, the Hunter Bartinuquo (son of Bartin), is perhaps the oldest of the male figures. He might be a manifestation of what Georges Dumézil (1978: 204–211) would term the third function, a caste-like component of Indo-European society that was devoted to fertility and economic activity, of which hunting would have been one (Colarusso 2006b). He is restricted to a few tales in Circassian. He is raised in a grave mound, along with a hound and an eagle, canonical hunting animals often associated with the Irish hero, Cú Chulainn, and with Indic Indra. He is gigantic when grown. He emerges to marvel at the earth and the heavens. His purpose is to save the elderly Nart leader, Warzameg, from poisoning at a treacherous feast, a setting found also in Russian and Irish lore. Curiously She Bartinuquo's relationship to Warzameg is left indeterminate until Warzameg is saved and himself allowed by Satanaya to choose that relationship. He takes She Bartinuquo to be his son. This may be an echo of the old Indo-European and North-West Caucasian custom of fosterage, where a child's kinship link had to be negotiated.

Sosruquo (North-West Caucasian) is the most widespread hero in the corpora. Being able to change shape, he is a trickster figure as well as a warrior. He has a voice of thunder and can strike his enemies when he is a fog or mist. These features suggest that he is a degraded storm god with links to figures such as Norse Thor, Vedic Indra, and Russian Volkh Vseslavevich. Such links would place him in Dumézil's second function, that of warriors and nobles. He is conceived through a rape, and so is considered a bastard by the warband brotherhood. He is born aflame from a rock and tempered by the god of the forge, Circassian *Tlepsh*, Abkhazian *Aynar*, with the latter, /a-yn-ra/ the-(be.)great-gerund, the source of Indo-European **inra*, Indo-Iranian **Indra*, Hittite *In(a)ra* (Hoffner 1991: 10–14). In his association with smiths he shows links to Irish Cú

Chulainn. Having been quenched, he is dark, like tempered steel, a feature sometimes also said of Cú Chulainn. In an Abaza tale he even says 'I am steel alloy!' He is vulnerable in his knees or thighs, where he was held by the smith's tongs, and in this localised soft spot he shows a close parallel with Greek Achilles and Norse Sigurd. He can use the Nart wheel (discus) as a weapon. He vanquishes an enemy who is a one-eyed giant, like the Greek cyclops. He too forces his way into a troubled feast. In an Abaza tale he attends a feast of the gods, where he is awarded *sana*, the magical drink with parallels to Indian *soma* and Iranian *haoma*. In one tale he brings fire to humans, linking him closely to Greek Prometheus.

The most interesting aspect of Sosruquo, however, is his storm god battle. It has numerous ancient parallels. He fights with Totrash (also Sotrash). In a tale from the living bardic tradition, Totrash himself fights a storm serpent, taking its forked tongue as a battle prize, whence all Narts use forked lances (Paul Goble, pers. comm., see Jaimoukha 2010). This serpent hints at a herptomorphic cousin or father, as found with Vedic Indra, Russian Volkh Vseslavevich, and Norse Odin with the giant, Suttung's, daughter Gunlod.

The most complete instance of the storm serpent is the old account of the storm god fighting the storm serpent all alone, abandoned by his warband and the other gods (Indra vs. Vrtra, Thor vs. Jormungand, in Hittite Tarhunas fighting Illuyanka (Hoffner 1991; Watkins 1995). Totrash is a monstrous Nart depicted as a darkness with glowing eyes, offering an explanation for the enigmatic line in the Rig Veda (3.31) (Doniger 1981), 'Indra feigned friendship with the darkness', because Sosruquo will beg him for mercy in a chivalric tone. Totrash makes Sosruquo plough the sky like a cotton ball, a degraded image of a storm cloud moving across the sky. He then forces Sosruquo to plough the earth with his shoulder, so that it hurts. This is paralleled by the ancient Hurrian storm god myth (Güterbock 1961: 170–1), where Kumarbi, rival to the storm god Teshub, creates upon Ubelluri, a substrate from which heaven and earth arise, a chthonic monster, Ullikumi. When the god Ea severs this monster from Ubelluri the latter complains of his shoulder hurting. Totrash makes Sosrusuquo vomit up all of his mother's milk that he has ever drunk. This symbolises abandoning kinship. We see this, though with a shift in characters, in the Hittite myth: Tarhunas's son must renounce his kinship ties in order to wed the daughter of the dragon, Illuyanka. Totrash messes up Sosruquo's moustache, a distant echo of the jaw wound inflicted by the serpent Vrtra upon Indra (Rig Veda, 4.18.9). In an Ubykh tale Totrash himself is visible from afar by the glint of his golden moustache. This alludes to Indra's golden prosthetic jaws that he receives so that he can continue to fight (Rig Veda, 4.18.9). Sosruquo begs for a halt to the battle, and Totrash grants it, a gesture of chivalry. Sosruquo returns to his mother, Satanaya, who tells him that Totrash is one of nine brothers, eight of whom have already been killed, and that Totrash must follow them into death. She advises him on a ruse to defeat Totrash. He is to cover his horse with bells. This is reminiscent of Hittite Tarhunas being aided by a lowly woman, Inara. The second battle is held on Harama Hill (in Iranian the same name as Indra's hound *saramā*). By attacking from a fog and making his horse sound the bells, Sosruruquo treacherously overcomes Totrash in the second battle. Totrash's horse panics at the clamour. In an attempt to regain control of his mount Totrash rips out its jaws, Vedic Indra's injury shifted millennia later to a horse. Totrash asks for a chivalric halt, but Sosruquo mocks him, 'you ask for a reprieve, then I ask for a reprieve. We could go on forever this way', and cuts off his head. He then brings it to Satanaya. Inexplicably she flies into a rage. This is an echo of

the most ancient parallel. In Sumerian the gods fly into a rage when Bilgames (Akkadian Gilgamesh) brings the head of the monstrous Huwawa, whom the storm god has told him to kill (George 2003: 149–65).

A figure restricted to the Ossetian corpus is that of Syrdon, ‘beast, wild one’ (Abaev 1996, vol. 3: 207–8) a trickster figure similar to Norse Loki. As Loki resents the gods for their glory and loftiness, so Syrdon is maddened by the fame and arrogance of the Narts. While one of Loki’s sons is killed to make bindings for Loki’s punishment, in an inversion Syrdon’s sons are killed to motivate his hatred. The Narts tolerate Syrdon’s mischief up to a point, just as the Norse gods tolerate Loki’s, up to a point.

The Nart who is tempered in the Ossetian corpus is not Soslan, the correlate to Sosruquo, but rather Batradz. Ossetian *Batradz* is a borrowing from proto-Circassian *pat^haradz. He is born aflame from a blister left on his father’s (Khæmyts’s) back by his water sprite mother, Bise-non, and is raised beneath the sea by the aqueous Donbettirs. When he first enters the sea, he is so hot that he makes it boil. He is lured onto land to play with other children. Eventually he climbs up to heaven to be tempered by *Kurdalægon* (/kurd-alæ-g-on/ smith-Alan-adjective-name.suffix), the Ossetian smith god. Thenceforth he dwells in heaven, sometimes being a help to the Narts, sometimes a bane. Even god cannot kill Batradz who eventually starts to run amok. When Batradz decides to die, he has the Narts light a funeral pyre for him, much as with Greek Hercules. He dances upon the pyre until he turns white hot. He then asks the Narts to cast his sword into the sea, much as a dying King Arthur asked Sir Bedivere to do with Excalibur. The sea boils when the sword enters it and Batradz dies.

If there is a first function in the corpora, then Circassian Pataraz must qualify as its example. He is the purest of the Narts, the best of the Narts. His father, Khimish (Ossetian Khæmyts) is murdered while Pataraz is still in the womb of his water sprite mother, Lady Isp. Pataraz swears vengeance while still in the womb. When born, Pataraz is kidnapped as a surety against blood feud. The Narts place him in a basket and then set it into a mountain torrent. Pataraz is spared by the torrent and washes up onto a plain. This offers an explanation for the enigmatic lines in the Rig Veda, ‘the waters spared Indra ...’ (Rig Veda 4.18.6–8). At another level, however, Pataraz seems to have died because he is placed in a kurgan, a burial mound, where he is raised by the Little Old Man and the Little Old Woman, the Keepers of Souls. Pataraz grows prodigiously and stands up to seize weapons hung from the central tree of the mound. Here this tale explains what the line ‘Indra stood up’ means in the Rig Veda. These weapons parallel the great sword stuck into or hung from the central pillar in Valhalla by Norse Odin. Pataraz emerges and sets off to the Nart feast (Cú Chulainn and Lug in Irish do this, as does Dobrynya Nikitich in Russian). On his way he encounters and defeats Prince Maruquo (/mar-u-quo/ death, murder-his-son). Upon arriving the Narts set dangerous feats for him, assuming that he will be killed. Pataraz survives, but returns with bad skin and bad hair, a phrase used for a rotting corpse. This is a close parallel to the resurrection of Jesus when he returned unrecognisable. Jesus brought salvation upon his return from the dead, but Pataraz brings doom upon the Narts by demanding impossible feats as blood price for his father. Pataraz’s identity and exploits are confirmed by the Cauldron of White Sana, or in Ossetian by the *Wats-amon-gæ* (holy-reveal, indicate-diminutive) cauldron (May et al. 2016: 430), which closely resembles the Holy Grail of Arthurian Romance.

The most intriguing male figure is one that is preserved in the Circassian corpus in only two tales. It is that of Wardana, or Wadan (in the westernmost dialect, Shapsugh). His name is transparently Iranian and is a variant of the Indic *Vrddhana* (/vrd-dha-na/ wealth-give-name.suffix), an epithet of the god Shiva (/vrd-/ is cognate with English *wealth*). The dialect variant, Wadan, is pronounced [wodan], and in fact this figure shows striking parallels with

the Germanic god Wodan, (Norse Odin) (Gaiman 2017). Taking the Germanic standard from Norse, Odin had two ravens as brothers, Hugin and Munin, while Wardana has one brother, but he too is a corvine bird, a rook. Odin is blind in one eye, while Wardana's brother is blind in both, but will have his sight restored at the end of the tale. Odin rides the fastest horse, Sleipnir, while Wardana pursues and overtakes his nephews by seizing the fastest horse. Devotees of Odin were cautioned that 'Odin kills his own', while Wardana kills his nephews in a blind rage. Odin presides over Valhalla, Hall of the Dead, which has a large central pillar in it like a grave mound, while Wardana builds a burial mound over his slain nephews. One should note that in the early centuries of the Christian era the Goths were in the steppes and the Crimea, near the Circassians, who preserve a ballad of a war with the 'Ghwant'. The Goths also claimed that Wodan was their god. These two precious tales strongly suggest that this war god, a hallmark of Germanic paganism, actually has roots in the Iranian-speaking steppe, as the late Hilda Ellis Davidson suspected (1964) based solely on internal Germanic evidence. He would have come from a late form in Steppe Iranian, into Gothic through the Shapsugh dialect of Circassian, imparting a form Wadan [wodan], that is, Wodan, to their Gothic neighbours.

In sum, these tales have proven to be crucial, as the above discussion indicates, for comparison with more familiar Indo-European traditions, such as Slavic, Norse, Greek, Indo-Iranian, and Celtic. Numerous figures have close parallels outside the Caucasus. A sort of Prometheus (Colarusso 2002, sagas 34–37: 158–70) was probably originally a Caucasian tale borrowed into Greek. Although it is rarely mentioned (but see Colarusso 2002, saga 37) the giants in the Nart tales have only one eye, setting a standard for the Greek Cyclopes. While not a Nart tale there is a Polyphemus correlate wherein the hero is caught in hollow tree rather than cave, as befell Odysseus. The giant in both accounts is one-eyed. The Nart hero, notably She Bartinuquo, must gain access to a troubled feast, where a plot is being fashioned to murder the Nart leader. Similar episodes occur in Russian lore with the hero Dobrynya and in Celtic with Lug. In addition to a Norse Thor-like figure (Sosruquo), there is a Nart Wodan, earlier Wardana, meaning 'Giver of Wealth' in a Middle Iranian steppe dialect or Ossetian. He resembles the Germanic god of war, Wodan, Norse Odin, and he may in fact have reached northern Europe through early Gothic contacts with the Circassians. The lively representation of the Eurasian theme of the World Tree, Lady Tree links to the cosmic tree of Norse, Yggdrasil. She is also portrayed on the Pazyryk tapestry as a woman holding a fruit-bearing tree in front of a mounted warrior (Kuzmina 2007: 101–6). As already mentioned resurrection is a theme, suggesting old influences between the North Caucasus and early Christianity. Many tales also have flying and talking horses, a reptile man, and a hidden death factor. 'My death lies under a certain rock,' etc., which is a peculiar folkloric motif.

South Caucasian lore has been strongly influenced by Iranian Zoroastrianism. These are the Georgian tales of Amirani,⁴ who, like Greek Prometheus with a slight twist, brings metal to humankind, and is chained to the Caucasus mountains as punishment. His name is thought to be a distortion of that of the Zoroastrian devil, Angra Mainyu. Once a year all the smiths in Georgia would beat their hammers in unison to ensure that his chains would hold fast, somewhat like the anvil chorus of Verdi. The founding literary work of Georgia is the Medieval romance, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, by Shota Rustaveli. This is a fanciful tale of far-away lands and romance.

Armenia's core work of folklore is the great epic, usually translated as 'The Daredevils of Sasun', in Armenian *Sasna C'her* (with < c > for [ts]) (Der Mugrdchian 2013). This depicts at least three (some claim four) generations of heroes who resist Arab rule. The three all bear the name *Mher*, usually taken to derive from Indo-Iranian *Mitra*.

Conclusion

The complexity of the Caucasus, ethnically and linguistically, is without parallel in Eurasia. The indigenous languages show some shared areal features, but also diverge radically in their grammars. Many show extraordinary complexity at all levels of grammar, from phonetics to syntax. These languages serve as rich sources of data for linguistic theory and typology (Colarusso 1988, 2015). These languages have also often defined ethnic groups, especially in Daghestan. In the north-western Caucasus and within the borders of modern Georgia, one can find ethnic groups that speak more than one language, but still have a sense of unity that may be either traditional, as among the Circassians and Ubykhs, or political, as among the Georgians, Mingrelians, Laz, and Svans of Georgia.

In addition to three indigenous linguistic families, the Caucasus has offered a refuge to numerous peoples throughout history. These ‘immigrants’, so to speak, have brought with them their languages as well as their lore (Hunt 2004). The resulting mix of indigenous themes and newly arrived ones has produced a rich set of traditions. Because of its crucial position at the boundary of Europe, the Central Asian steppes and the Middle East, this lore has preserved details and themes that in many cases have striking parallels with more familiar traditions, running from Ireland, through Russia, down into India. The Nart tales in particular offer major insights into the history and origins of much of the ancient lore of Eurasia, particularly that of the Indo-European speaking peoples.

Notes

- 1 Evliya Çelebi was an Ottoman traveler who wrote *Seyâhatnâme* (‘Book of Travel’) in which he described his travels across the Ottoman Empire and beyond (Dankoff 2004).
- 2 The late Yevgeny Primakov (1929–2015), who served as Prime Minister of Russia between 1998 and 1999, was one of these, as was Yuri Voronov (1941–95), an influential Abkhazian politician, whose roots in the region went back over 300 years.
- 3 See the map shown at <<https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/ethnocaucasus.jpg>>, which is also discussed in Chapter 1.
- 4 Amiran is the culture hero of a Georgian epic which resembles the Classical Prometheus.

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