



ÄFŠATI

ÄFŠATI, patron of wild animals, especially of deer, mountain goats, and hogs, in the Ossetian religious-mythological system, to whom the hunters prayed for his benevolence.

Though there are many songs devoted to Äfšati in Ossetian folklore, in contrast to other heavenly patrons he had neither sanctuaries, nor special celebrations. The oral tradition depicts him as a very old man with a long white beard, sitting somewhere on the top of a high mountain, where he contemplates his herds of wild animals. He is also the owner of a magic flute, which he presented to the famous epic musician Acämäž. The hunting ground is believed to be his realm, entering into which hunters switched to a secret language in order not to reveal their true intentions. From a social point of view, he takes the side of poor hunters, to whom he grants his favor, and is not as generous when rich hunters are concerned (Abaev, p. 109; Kaloev, pp. 358-359).

The most convincing etymology of Äfšati's name is that it derives from Saint Eustace, who was called Placidus before he was baptized and who was a Roman military leader under Titus (r. 79-81 CE) and Trajan (r. 98-117 CE). The "hunters' magic stone" with numerous images of stags and hunters found at Kiafar archaeological site —the probable residence of the ruler of Western Alania from the 10th to the 13th centuries— testifies to his connection to the royal cult. Saint Eustace is depicted on the murals of Nuzal church in the Alagir Gorge, hunting for deer with a bow and a characteristic arrow with forked head. This settlement at Nuzal lies in the domain of the Alanic royal



clan of Cärazontä, for whom he is supposed to be their heavenly patron (Kuznetsov, pp. 66-67, 70-71). There is also another wall-painting depicting Eustace on the south wall of the church of St. Mary (Mady Majräm) from the first half of the 11th century, found in Xoziti qäw of North Ossetia. Judging from the distribution of this cult, known to Balkarian-Karachai as Apsaty and Svanetians as Apsati/Avsati, it spread across the Caucasus from Western Alania, where it had arrived from Byzantium, adopted and reinterpreted by the Alans (Arzhantseva, pp. 241-245). Äfsati's adoption in Ossetia (*cf.* Tuite, pp. 142-145) was enabled and facilitated by the already existing local cult of the hunters' patron, dating back to Bronze age (Chshiev, pp. 281-289). The Indo-European origin of this cult seems very probable (*cf.* Fomin, p. 74). The arrows with forked heads play an important role in the Nart epic (see NARTI KADDZITÄ), where they are used by prominent heroes to sow ripe stems of corn. Otherwise, if touched by the human hand, the ripe ears would rot and the grains would fall to the ground, according to God's curse. This use by warriors—as common peasants—of their mortal weapons in general and forked arrows, in particular, for agricultural purposes, symbolizes the social chaos and inevitable downfall of the whole society in the epic (Salbiev, p. 15-16).

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