



ALANS

ALANS, an ancient Iranian tribe of the northern (Scythian, Saka, Sarmatian, Massagete) group, known to classical writers from the first centuries A.D. (see, e.g., Seneca, *Thyestes* 630; Annaeus Lucan, *Pharsalia* 8.223, 10.454; Lucian, *Toxaris* 51, 54, 55, 60; Ptolemy, *Geographia* 6.14.3, 9, 11; and other sources below). Their name appears in Greek as Alanoi, in Latin as Alani or Halani. The same tribes, or affiliated ones, are mentioned as the Asaioi (Ptolemy 5.9.16), Rhoxolanoi, Aorsoi, Sirakoi, and Iazyges (Strabo 2.5.7, 7.2.4; 11.2.1, 11.5.8; 7.2.4). In early times the main mass of the Alans was settled north of the Caspian and Black seas. Later they also occupied the Crimea and considerable territory in the northern Caucasus.

The history of the Alans can be divided into three periods: (1) from the beginning of the Christian era to the great migration of peoples; (2) from that period to the Mongol invasion; (3) subsequent to the Mongol invasion. During the first period, the Alans appear as a nomadic, warlike, pastoral people who were professional warriors and took service, at various times, with the Romans, Parthians, and Sasanians. Their cavalry was particularly renowned. They participated in Mithridates' wars with Rome (chronicled by Lucan), as well as in Roman campaigns in Armenia, Media, and Parthia in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. (see Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 7.244-51, *Antiquities* 18.97; cf. accounts in Moses of Khoren, *History of the Armenians* [Langlois, *Historiens* II, pp. 105-06, 125] and the *Georgian Chronicle* [*Kartlis tskhovreba*, in M. F. Brosset and D. I. Chubinov, *Histoire de la Georgie* I, St. Petersburg, 1849]). Ammianus Marcellinus (31.2) describes the Alans' nomadic economy and warlike



customs.

The invasion of the Huns split the Alans into two parts, the European and the Caucasian. Some of the European Alans were drawn into the migration of peoples from eastern into western Europe. With the Germanic tribes of Visigoths and Vandals they passed into Gaul and Spain, some even reaching North Africa. The Alans fought on the side of the Romans in the battle of the Catalaunian Fields (A.D. 451), when Aetius defeated Attila, chief of the Huns. In 461 and 464 they made incursions into Italy. After Attila's death they struggled, together with the Germanic tribes, to free themselves from Hun domination. Large Alan hordes settled along the middle course of the Loire in Gaul under King Sangiban and on the lower Danube with King Candac (the historian Jordanes sprang from the latter group). Another settlement is indicated by the name of the Spanish province Catalonia, which is but a slight deformation of Goth-Alania, "province of the Goths and Alans." The French proper name "Alain" and English "Alan" are an inheritance from the tribe. The Alans also left an imprint on Celtic folk-poetry, e.g., the cycle of legends concerning King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table (see M. Hesse, "Iranisches Sagengut im Christlichen Epos," *Atlantis* 1937, pp. 621-28; J. H. Grisward, "Le motif de l'épée jetée au lac: la mort d'Arthur et la mort de Batradz," *Romania* 90, 1969, pp. 289-340). Part of the European Alans remained in the lands bordering the Black Sea, including the Crimea.

The Caucasian Alans occupied part of the Caucasian plain and the foothills of the main mountain chain from the headwaters of the Kuban river and its tributary, the Zelenchuk (in the west), to the Daryal gorge (in the east). They became sedentary and took to cattle-breeding and agriculture. Towns developed, elements of state organization appeared, and political and cultural ties were established with Byzantium, Georgia, Abkhazia [see [Abk̄āz](#)], the Khazars, and Russia. Dynastic marriages were concluded with these countries. From the 5th century on, Christian propaganda was conducted, first by Byzantine, later also by Georgian, missionaries. The Alans adopted Christianity in the 10th century, and an Alan episcopal see was created.

In 244/857 Boḡā, a general of the caliph of Baghdad, invaded Transcaucasia and the northern Caucasus, devastating Georgia, Abkhazia, the Alan country, and the Khazar lands. The Alans soon recovered, however, and restored their state. They are often mentioned by medieval writers, both western (Procopius of Caesarea, Menander, Theophanes of Byzantium, Constantine Porphyrogenitus) and Arab and Persian. The latter use the name "Alān" or



“Ās”; and in Russian chronicles and Hungarian sources the form “Yas” is found. In the 4th/10th century the Arab historian Mas‘ūdī indicates that the Alan kingdom stretched from Daghestan to Abkhazia. He describes its prosperity: “The Alan king (can) muster 30,000 horsemen. He is powerful, very strong and influential (among?) the kings. The kingdom consists of an uninterrupted series of settlements; when the cock crows (in one of them), the answer comes from the other parts of the kingdom, because the villages are intermingled and close together” (trans. V. Minorsky, *A History of Sharvan and Darband*, Cambridge, 1958, pp. 156-60). The anonymous *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam* (trans. Minorsky, pp. 83, 161, 318, 445) describes Alania as a vast country with 1,000 settlements; the people included both Christians and idol-worshippers, mountaineers and plain-dwellers. The text makes the important statement that, in the north, the Alans bordered on the Hungarians and the Bulgars (the ancestors of the Chuvash). In the east they gave their name to the Daryal gorge, called “Gate of the Alans” (Arabic Bāb al-Lān, Persian Dar-e Alān, hence Daryal).

The Mongol invasion of the 7th/13th century and Tamerlane’s wars in the 8th/14th proved fatal to the Alan state. Its organization was destroyed, and the population suffered heavy loss. Ebn al-Aṭīr reports: “The Tatars attacked the Alans; they massacred them, committed many outrages, plundered and seized prisoners, and marched on against the Qipchaqs” (XII, p. 252; for the events of 1221 A.D., see *Camb. Hist. Iran* V, p. 311). The remnants of the Alans broke up into three groups. One retreated into the foothills and gorges of the central Caucasus and lives there up to the present [see Ossetes], numbering some 400,000. The people of their eastern branch call themselves “Ir”, those of the western branch “Digor.” The name “Alan” survives among them, in the form “Allon”, only in folklore. (Russian “Osetiny” is from Georgian Oseti, “Alania.” The Georgians had long called the Alans Os- or Ovs- and their country Oset-.) A second group of Alans migrated with the Qipchaqs (Comani) into Europe, settling in Hungary. The territory they occupied is to this day called Jászág, “province of the Yas;” and its capital is Jászberény. They preserved their language and ethnic identity until the 15th century, but gradually adopted the Hungarian language and became assimilated. The third group took service under the Mongol khans. According to the Chinese chronicle *Yuan-shi*, these “Asu” played an important role in further Mongol expansion. The Catholic missionary John de Marignolli, who spent five years in China, states that there were up to 30,000 Ās there (H. Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither* III [Hakluyt Society, second ser., no. 37], London, 1914, pp. 180ff.). In the course of time



they perished in warfare or were absorbed into the local population.

The name “Alan” is derived from Old Iranian *arya-, “Aryan,” and so is cognate with “Īrān” (from the gen. plur. *aryānām). The ancient Alan language may, to some extent, be reconstructed on the basis of modern Ossetic (after excluding the latter’s Turkic and Caucasian additions). The Alans created no writing, and no texts survive in their language except an inscription in Greek letters on a tombstone from the headwaters of the Kuban (*Grund. Iran. Phil.* I, Anhang, p. 31). A few sentences are recorded by the Byzantine author Tzetzēs (Gerhardt, “Alanen und Osseten,” pp. 37-51). Various personal, ethnic, and place names are also known (see M. Vasmer, *Die Iranier in Südrussland*, Leipzig, 1923, pp. 25-29). This material at least indicates clearly the Iranian character of the Alan language.

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(V. I. Abaev)

Additional notes. An inscription of A.D. 238-44 was set up in Ribchester, Lancashire, England, by the local Sarmatian veterans who had been sent to Britannia in 175 by Marcus Aurelius (161-80). He had defeated Sarmatians in 175, taken some of them into the Roman army, and adopted, as victor, the name Sarmaticus. The inscription reads "numerus equitum Sarmatarum Bremetennacensium Gordianus" (N. EQQ. SARM. BREMETENN. GIORDANI). It is published with a commentary by I. A. Richmond, "The Sarmatae, Bremetennacum veteranorum, and the Regio Bremetennacensis," *Journal of Roman Studies* 1945, pp. 15-29. The road through Rheims was called the Via Sarmatarum. The Poles at one time meditated calling their country Sarmatia. T. Sulimirski published *The Sarmatians* in London in 1970. The earliest reference to the Sarmatians is in the Avesta, Sairima-, which is in the later epic Slm *Sarm and Salm.

Tamar (r. 1184-1212), queen of Georgia in its golden age, was daughter of King Georgi III and his consort Burdukan, the daughter of the Ossetic prince Kuddan. Tamar's consort, Soslan, was an Ossete.

Konstantinos VII Porphyrogenetos entitled the ruler of Alania *exousiokratōr* (*De administrando imperio* 11.11, ed. Moravcsik and Jenkins, 1949), and *exousiastēs* (*Book of Ceremonies* 2.48).

The Gate of the Alans (not Albanians) is named in the inscription of Šāpūr I, Parthian 2 (the Persian and Greek are lacking) *TROA l'nn*, and in the Kartir inscription *BBA l'n'n*, that is Dar Alānān (with the two Aramaic words *TROA* and *BBA* "gate").

The Archbishop of the Alans in the 13th century was named Theodoros (Kulakovskii, *Alany*, p. 58).



Mas'ūdī's *ʿrsyh* *arsiyah is discussed by T. Lewicki, “Un peuple iranien peu connu: les *Arsīya ou *Orsīya,” *Hungaro-Turcica, Studies in Honour of Julius Németh*, Budapest, 1976. The *Ās*, *Āš* are cited by Minorsky, *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam*, pp. 445, 481. The modern Ossetes use *Āsi*, with the adjective *āsiāg*, of the neighboring Balkar (who speak Turkish). Similarly the Megrel (Mingrelians) call the Karačai, who speak Turkish, Alani. In Megrel also *alani k'oči* is “heroic man” and *alanuroba* is “tournament.”

The Mongols used *As*, plural *Asut*, adjective *Asutai*, of the *Ās* of the Caucasus, of whom they took part to act as Qubilai Khan's Imperial bodyguard in Khan-baliq, Ta-tu “Great City” (the later Peking). From there these *As* (Alans) wrote letters to Rome for Christian teachers (see A. C. Moule, *Christians in China before the year 1550*, London, 1930, pp. 196, 253-54, 260-63).

The Alans in the West are well documented by B. S. Bachrach, *The History of the Alans in the West*, Minnesota, 1973.

The name *Ās* was changed in Slavonic and Hungarian to *Iās* (*Yās*, *Jász*). The Iaskiy Torg “*Iās* Market” is the modern Jassy. In Hungary the *Jász* settled east of Budapest in the *Jászsag* district, with their chief city *Jász-berény*, and other places with the name *Jász*. A manuscript of A.D. 1422 contains a short vocabulary *Jász-Latin* in which the words are clearly near to modern Ossetic. There is a facsimile and full study by J. Nemeth, *Eine Wortliste der Jassen, der ungarländischen Alanen*, Berlin, 1959; see further R.-P. Ritter, *Acta orientalia hungarica* 30, 1976, pp. 245-50.

The *Jász* loan-words in Hungarian were treated by H. Sköld *Die ossetischen Lehnwörter im Ungarischen*, Lunds Universitets Årsskrift 20, 1925.

The region *Alanet'i* is briefly cited by the Prince Vakhušt, *Geograp'iuli ayc'era, Description géographique*, 1842, p. 413.

Iohannēs Tzetzēs (ca. 1110-1180) wrote of himself as of a pure Hellenic father and of an Abasgian mother. Among citations of foreign phrases he had one in Alanic. This reads *tapanchas* (glossed *kalē hēmera sou*), *mesphili* (*authentia mou*), *chsina* (*archontissa*), *korthin . . . (pothen eisai)*, *to pharnetzi kintzi* (*ouk aischinesai*), *mesphili* (*authentria mou*), *kaiterfoua(sm)ougg* (not glossed). Earlier interpretations are in D. Gerhardt, *ZDMG* 93, 1939, pp. 33-51. It may be explained thus: *dā bon xuarzme'fsinäi* (vocative singular); *äxsinäku . . .* (not clear); *du farnād'in kindä äi* “you have been made happy;” for the final



unglossed phrase possibly: *käi de 'rfua *äm uingä* “that your blessing is fully felt.”