



BÄX FÄLDISÏN

BÄX FÄLDISÏN “horse dedication” (from *bäx* “horse” and *fäldisÏn* “to dedicate or consecrate to the dead”), a funeral rite practiced by the Ossetes until recent times.

At the burial of a chieftain or other prominent man a horse was dedicated to the soul of the dead as a means of conveyance to paradise (*dzänät*). Before the interment a kind of funeral sermon was declaimed, where a detailed description of the journey through the land of the dead (*märdtÏ bästä*) was given. The ceremony included also dedication of the widow to the needs of the deceased in the other world. On its way, the soul has to cross a narrow bridge, consisting of a single beam or hair. At either side of the bridge the soul is usually met by Aminon, the judge (or doorkeeper) of the netherworld, who questions it about its good and evil deeds; in some texts the meeting with Aminon is omitted. Having crossed the bridge, the soul encounters a parade of people who either suffer punishment or receive reward for their actions in life. There is no distinction between heaven and hell; the good and the bad get their deserts indiscriminately in the same place. A common means of punishment is ice; thus the unrighteous judges sit on ice chairs, at ice tables, with sticks of ice in their hands. In the end the soul arrives at paradise, where it is received by BarastÏr, the lord of the netherworld. In some texts the bridge is placed immediately before the arrival in paradise.

After the funeral a horse race (*dug*) was arranged; sometimes this took place at a commemorative festival that was celebrated at some fixed date (e.g., seven or forty days, or one year) after the funeral itself. Great importance was



attached to the funeral banquet, where it was usual to entertain hundreds of people for days, often with disastrous financial consequences for the family of the deceased.

Bäx fäldisÏn sermons were first recorded about the middle of the 19th century, and a number of texts have since been published. There is some variation regarding details, but in all essentials both the structure of the texts and the eschatological notions they reflect are the same. The archaic language, characterized by conventional formulas and set phrases that recur practically unaltered in the various texts, testifies to an old tradition that has been orally transmitted from generation to generation. In the eschatology, Christian and Islamic notions mingle with each other and with autochthonous Ossetic and north Caucasian beliefs, and it is therefore often difficult to distinguish between ancient Iranian (Scytho-Sarmatian) elements and later accretions. However, the Iranian origin of both the ceremonies and the basic ideas behind them is indisputable.

Similar ceremonies were found all over the north Caucasus and among the east Georgian mountain tribes (the Khevsurs, Pshavs, Tushes). Funeral sermons of the *bäx fäldisÏn* type are, however, recorded only among the Ossetes.

The eschatological notions of the *bäx fäldisÏn* sermons recur in the legends about the *katabasis* of Soslan, the Nart hero. In order to win the heart of AcÏruxs, the Sun's daughter, Soslan needs the help of his dead wife, Beduxa, and must therefore descend to the netherworld, a deed that is normally beyond human power. On his way he meets the same visions, examples of rewards and punishments, as the soul of the *bäx fäldisÏn* sermons. These visions are explained to him by Beduxa. It is reasonable to believe that both in the sermons and in the Soslan legend some orally transmitted visionary traditions are reflected, and that they are somehow related to shamanistic practices (shamanism has been widespread in the north Caucasus and among the east Georgian highlanders until modern times).

The symbolic dedication of the horse (and the widow) has no doubt replaced an older custom of bloody sacrifice. This is borne out by the testimony of ancient Greek authors (see especially Herodotus, 4.71-73), as well as by the finds made in the barrows of southern Russia and the Ponto-Caspian steppes, where both human and equine sacrifices are well attested. The change in funeral customs, which must have taken place in the early Middle Ages, can



probably be ascribed to Christian (and perhaps Islamic) influence; the gradual concentration of the Ossetes (Alans) in the mountainous area of the central Caucasus, where horse pastures are relatively poor, may also have contributed to the development.

See also [asb iii](#).

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