



REKOM

REKOM is the most important traditional religious shrine in Ossetia, a region in North Caucasia divided between Russia and Georgia. It is dedicated to the principal Ossetian deity, Uastyrdzhi (q.v.). The shrine is located in the eastern part of the heavily forested Tsey Valley about 80 km southwest of Vladikavkaz, near the border with South Ossetia. The site is accessed on foot by a short climb from the road crossing the valley, a few kilometers before reaching a popular ski resort.

Nestled within a clearing about 1 km from the road and accessed by a stony path climbing through the forest, the Rekom shrine resembles a log cabin, with rows of animal skulls lined up across the front and four stylized posts rising from the two sides of the building resembling horseheads, each with a bird on top. (This latter detail was added only during the last renovation, which took place during the mid-1990s). The shrine is said to date back to 1382 (Kuznetsov, p. 8), but according to Ossetian architect Slava Dzhanaiŕy, who oversaw its most recent restoration after it was burned to the ground in March 1995, there are four earlier archaeological strata, which have revealed items dating back to the 2nd century BCE (Dzhanaiŕy). To date over 11,000 relics have been found at the site, suggesting a long history of use as a sacred space (Foltz, pp. 44-45).

According to a legend preserved in the Nart epic, the Rekom shrine is one of the “Three Tears of God” (*Tri slezy Boga*), which are sacred sites that came into being when God shed three tears upon the death of the Nart hero Batradz, which then fell upon the earth. (The other two sites are



Mykalygabyrtæ/Mikalgabirtä to the southeast of Rekom, and Tarandzhelos just south of Mt. Kazbek in Georgian territory.) Its first written mention is in a letter from the Orthodox priest Ioann Bolgarskii to Antonio, Bishop of Astrakhan and Stavropol in 1780: “In Tsey there is a wooden church named the Holy Trinity built of mahogany... In this church there is some wall writing and a few images that bear signatures in Georgian letters” (Kuznetsov, p. 5).

The name may derive from *Ivard Rekom*, meaning “Forbidden River,” although other etymologies have also been proposed (Kuznetsov, pp. 9-10). The sacred territory stretched for 21 km along the Tsey River through lands historically belonging to the powerful Tsarazonta clan. Originally no one was allowed to live there, and the nearest abode was the Tsarazonta residence in Nuzal some 12 km to the northeast; by the 17th century, however, some people had begun to settle the once forbidden land. At the entrance to the Tsey gorge at Buron, where barefoot pilgrims formerly began the ten-kilometer climb towards the shrine, stood a stone stele bearing the inscription “the sanctuary of the blessing of the path of Uastyrdzhi.” Thus, the path is itself considered to be an integral part of the shrine, providing the devotee with an opportunity for spiritual inspiration and reflection while passing through breathtaking natural scenery.

Along this path were erected numerous prayer altars called *kuvandon*. These three-tiered structures consisted of an outer circle of stones surrounding a square platform upon which was placed a stone stele which usually contained a niche for offerings. Such *kuvandon* can be seen today all across Ossetia, and the fact that the niches generally contain piles of coins attests to their continued use. According to Dzanaïty (p. 10) the outer circle represents the universe, the platform the Earth, and the stele the spirit which penetrates it.

In former times the shrine was filled with all manner of offerings, including soldiers’ helmets, arrows and quivers, Christian icons and crosses, bowls, mortars, bells, jugs, and various other vessels (Darchiev). Kuznetsov considers the shrine’s character and use to have evolved in three stages: first, as a pagan sanctuary during the 14th-15th centuries (he notes, for example, that its foundations are not laid out in a way that would indicate the existence of an apse); then, perhaps under the influence of Georgian missionaries (as suggested by the Georgian inscriptions noted by Bolgarskii), into a Christian church; before finally reverting to pagan use by the late 19th century (Kuznetsov, pp. 22-28). In fact, such a framework may belie a strong underlying continuity of pagan traditions, a possibility for which Kuznetsov

allows.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- L.A. Chibirov, *Narodnyi zemledel'cheskii kalendar' osetin*, Iriston, Russia, 1976.
- A.V. Darchiev, *O nekotorykh relikviiakh iz sviatilishcha Rekom*, Vladikavkaz, 2011.
- Slava Kh. Dzhanaiṭy, *Tri slezy Boga*, Vladikavkaz, 2007.
- Richard Foltz, "The Rekom Shrine in North Ossetia-Alania and its Annual Ceremony," *Iran and the Caucasus* 24/1, 2020, pp. 38-52.
- V.A. Kuznetsov, *Rekom, Nuzal, Tsarazonta: istoriia Osetii XIII-XV vv.*, Vladikavkaz, 1990.