



ŠAFA

ŠAFA, the patron of the fireplace and hearth chain in the traditional Ossetian religious-mythological system.

Because Šafa is believed to be the first one who forged a fireplace chain and who pulled it down from heaven to earth as a gift for the people, the fireplace chain bears his name and is called *Šafaji raxiř*. In some rituals and legends, he appears to be a heavenly blacksmith, as an alternate of Kuirdalägon (q.v.). His name can be directly derived from Greek *Σάββας* (Sabbas), a saint from Cappadocia, who died in Jerusalem in 532 CE and who was called Sabbas the Sanctified. This naming reflects a general trend of borrowing of the names of Orthodox Christian saints by the medieval Alans, after they officially converted into this faith at the beginning of the 10th century CE. Yet his cult itself is of ancient origin and goes back to archaic times, when the first artifacts made of iron appeared. It can be traced back to Scythian culture, where the fireplace was connected with the name of the most highly esteemed goddess—*Ταβιτί* (Tabiti), whom Herodotus (4.59) determines as a match of Old Greek *Ἑστία* (Hestia) (Abaev, pp. 9-10).

The fireplace chain is revered as a holy family treasure, and it is forbidden not only to touch it with unclean hands, for fear of getting them burnt (Kochiev, p. 41), but also even to speak loudly near it. To throw it away from the house is considered the gravest insult against the whole clan and is supposed to be avenged. An oath taken in honor of Šafa is considered sacred, and those who break it would become subject to public contempt. People who say solemn oaths, for example, bloody foes as a sign of reconciliation, would also hold on



to this chain. A mother would keep one hand on the chain as she puts a child to bed and entrusts him or her to Šafa's protection. During her departure from the parental home, a bride would go three times around the hearth, as a sign of farewell to the native home, and touch the chain and then go around it three times again, when entering the house of her would-be husband for the first time (Kaloiev, pp. 248-250). From a mythological point of view, this chain is treated as an axis mundi, which serves as a pillar between heaven and Earth. Judging by the ornament on its lower end, depicting twigs, it is also treated as a world tree, connected with a motif well-known in Indo-European religious-mythology, as its branches are up in heaven, while the roots are deep in the terrestrial world. From a cosmological point of view, being a firm element of the fireplace and forged of iron by the sacral blacksmith, it could have been struck from heavenly fire, i.e., of lightning, while the fireplace stone, round in form and fragile in structure, is directly related with the fire of the underworld. The sacred marriage of these two elements gives birth to the Sun, which is symbolized by the round hole in the roof of the house for the smoke to exit. It is through this hole, called in Ossetian *rudzɨŋ/rodzɨŋä*, that the Sun actually penetrates the main room of the household (Salbiev, pp. 28-29).

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