



UACILLA

UACILLA (UACELLA, UACELIA), popular patron of thunderstorms and crops in the Ossetian religious-mythological system, in honor of whom important celebrations were conducted during the year and to whom many shrines were devoted.

The main celebration devoted to Uacilla, accompanied by sacrificial rituals (often of a goat or a bull, but sometimes of a sheep), was agricultural in its nature and was conducted in summer. This festival was connected to the summer solstice. The most important of the shrines to Uacilla is situated in a cave in the Tagaur gorge on the slopes of Tbau mountain. In the oral tradition, one of his epithets is *Xor-dättäg* '(one) who gives grain'. One of the important attributes of his cult was a holy cup, which was filled with beer and left in the cave for a whole year until the next celebration, conducted at the same time of year. Judging by the beer that was left, the priest would predict the future for the forthcoming year, including whether it would be peaceful, prosperous, and safe for the community. In spring, before peasants started to plow the land, they used to arrange collective prayers, called *Xori bon*, *Xori Sär*, or *Rämon bon*, asking for his benevolence. When someone was struck by lightning, there was also a special ceremony, accompanied by dancing, playing music, and singing hymns, performed in honor of Uacilla. Despite the person's death, the participants of the ceremony were not supposed to grieve. Instead, they were expected to show how joyful they were that Uacilla had chosen him. The first day of the week, i.e., Monday, was devoted to him, and it was usually forbidden to work that day, in order not to make Uacilla angry (Kaloiev, pp.



351-354).

Uacilla's name is a composite, consisting of two elements. The first one is *Uac-* 'divus, divinus' from *vāč- (IE base *wek_o- 'to speak'). This root occurs in many Iranian languages and is used in cult terminology. The second element of his name, *Elia*, is a medieval adaptation of the name of the Old Testament prophet Elias (with assimilation of *li* > *ll*). In folk Christianity, Elias regularly acquired the function of the thunderstorm patron in the existing religious-mythological system (Abaev, pp. 27, 31-32, 215). It is very likely that the process of his adoption was eased by the imagery of the prophet's attire as a mantle made of sheep skin, which served as a symbol of his status as chief priest. Its appearance is similar to the fur coat put on topsy-turvy by some of the participants in the Ossetian ritual spring prayers devoted to Uacilla. In fact, Scythian tradition included this type of miraculous fur coat, attested by Herodotus, which was made of the scalps of their defeated enemies (Salbiev, pp. 129).

Neighboring peoples borrowed the Ossetian celebrations in honor of Uacilla. These traditions were embraced by Georgians—Mokhevi—in the form of *vačiloba*, conducted in July and accompanied by goat sacrifice. The Laks of Dagestan also embraced these practices in the form of *vac'ilu*, conducted in June near the village of Kumukh (Abaev, pp. 31-32). The Chechen-Ingush Soli, one of the most powerful and respected deities in their religious tradition, exhibits many similarities when compared to the Ossetian Uacilla (Dalgat, p. 127).

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