



## UASTYRDŽI

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### **i. In Mythology**

Uaštirdži is unmistakably identified in Ossetian solar myth by his specific epithets such as “golden” or “golden winged.” His central role in this myth is key to understanding both his ritual functions and attributes on a synchronic level, as well as solving the main diachronic problems of his origin and transformations when two traditions, endogenous—Iranian/Indo-European—and exogenous—Byzantine Christian, were interacting during the Middle Ages. From a historical point of view, he is the Christian St. George, adopted into the Ossetian religious-mythological system (Abaev, 1989, pp. 55-56), as was a common practice in the Northern Caucasus (Tuite, pp. 1-3). However, in Ossetia, his transformations bear the features of both a universal and a specific character, determined by existing local mythological traditions. He became the patron of men, warriors, and travelers. Women are not supposed to even mention his name but call him *Lägti dzuar* (‘Patron of the men’). Holy sites devoted to him are widespread across Ossetia. One of several celebrations in his honor that takes place during the year is solemnly conducted in the last week of November. Participants of every traditional ritual prayer necessarily appeal to him for his benevolence. Together with other heavenly spirits, he participates in agricultural activities. According to the legends, he rides among the people, unknown to them, helping the poor, rewarding kind deeds, and punishing the evil ones. As the central hero of the solar myth, he rides on a white three-legged winged horse that can be treated as a solar symbol. The first two legs are used to ride over a solid earthly



surface, as the sun does when it rises at dawn. Its wings are needed to fly upwards into the sky and to reach the height of the midday. After the sun sinks into the depths of the world ocean in the evening, this wondrous horse makes use of his single back leg that is similar to a fish tail. Thus, from a mythological point of view, we see a complete version of the so-called hippocamp.

Archeological evidence has preserved the image of Uaštirdži's three-legged horse from the 4th century BCE, depicted on a Graeco-Scythian golden plaque (4.7 x 5.1 cm.) from Kul-Oba barrow near Kerch in Crimea, embodying a hippocamp (Piotrovsky, Galnanina, and Grach, fig. 207). He also appears on a scabbard blade (Alekseev, pp. 178-79) from the same excavation site. There are also golden sewn-on textile 1st-century BCE Sarmatian plaques (2.5 x 2.5 cm.) shaped like clockwise-facing swastikas with the semi-sphere in their center and three legs on the periphery (Bliev et al., p. 111, fig. 116), which can be regarded as solar symbols, as well. Moving each day from the earth up into the heaven and then down into the sea, Uaštirdži acquired his epithet of God's ambassador, proclaiming His holy will to the people.

In Ossetian tradition, this ancient hippocamp is most probably called *käf-quindar*, which literally means "fish bearing wool" (Abaev, 1958, p. 576). The wool of this monster, vanquished and tamed by the solar hero, is used for his other two specific magic attributes. It can be used as a miraculous felt whip, generally held in the right, or lucky, hand to make a dead man alive or to introduce someone into an animal body. It may also appear as a white fleece burka—as a mantle, symbolizing the hide of the vanquished beast and serving as a trophy of the triumphant hero. The traditional songs sung by women while preparing this attire mention the ability of its owner "to smash fortresses with his heel," thus presenting him as an invincible and mighty warrior, and also claiming that he "is choosing girls with his whip's end," implying his attractiveness to females and his fertile potential (*Pamyatniki*, pp. 28-29).

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## ii. In Ossetian Popular Culture

UASTYRDŽI is a popular Ossetian cultic figure, the patron of men—particularly in the sense of masculine activities such as war, raiding, and travelling—and the overseer of oaths. In both these respects Uastyrdži greatly resembles the Indo-Iranian deity Mithra (q.v., [MITHRA i. MITRA IN OLD INDIAN AND MITHRA IN OLD IRANIAN](#)), with whom he likely shares a common origin.

Within Ossetia’s Christian framework Uastyrdži is associated with St. George, from whom his name is derived through a combination of the prefix *uac-* ‘holy’ with *styr* ‘great’ and *Giergi* ‘George’. Typically depicted astride a three-legged horse and sporting a long white beard and cloak, Uastyrdži is portrayed in a number of large modern statues throughout the Ossetian lands, most impressively in one where he emerges high out of a rock cliff astride his horse, towering over the main highway connecting North and South Ossetia. The



Ossetian national anthem includes the following invocation to him: *Uastyrdži, rafælgæes, tabu—Dæxitsæen!* (Uastyrdži, behold, [our] praise [is] to you!) Many Ossetians have paintings, plaques, statues, or other images of him in their homes; he is also found on such things as t-shirts and car decals.

In Ossetian rituals, which in most cases are performed only by men and consist of a long series of toasts beginning with invocations to various deities, Uastyrdži is the object of the second toast, the first one being offered to the creator god, *Xuytsauty xuytsau*, “God of gods,” who, being remote and uninvolved in human affairs, is functionally less significant than Uastyrdži. When taking leave of fellow travellers encountered along the road, Ossetian men will often say: *Uastyrdži uæ’mbal*, “May Uastyrdži be your companion!”

Uastyrdži is available exclusively to males: women may not even pronounce his name, but simply refer to him as *Lægty Dzuar* ‘The Spirit (Patron) of Men’. Women are thus forbidden from approaching his shrines, but they may ask a designated male prayer leader, referred to as *Dzuary Læg* ‘holy spiritual man’, to pray on their behalf. The female interdiction against pronouncing Uastyrdži’s name recalls a more generalized ancient taboo on speaking the names of the Scythian (see SCYTHIANS iii. SPIRITUAL CULTURE, RELIGION, AND ART), and later the Sarmatian and Alan warrior gods (see [ALANS](#)), figures from whom Uastyrdži is likely to some extent descended (Foltz, p. 47).

The three most important Ossetian popular festivals are held in commemoration of Uastyrdži. Most widely observed is the *Džiorgwyba* festival which is held throughout North and South Ossetia, mainly in private homes, during the month of November—the Ossetian name for this month also being *Džiorgwyba*. The festival concludes with the sacrifice of a bull, suggesting its connection with the Iranian fall celebration of *Mehragān* (q.v.). In July there is a large annual gathering in Uastyrdži’s honor at the *Xetag Grove* near the entrance to the *Alagir Valley* (about 30 km west of *Vladikavkaz*). Another important annual public ceremony, the *Rekomy Bærægbon*, takes place at the *Rekom* shrine in the *Tsey Valley* on the second Saturday of June (see [REKOM](#)). Important shrines to Uastyrdži are also found at *Dzivgis*, *Kob*, and *Tapankau* in North Ossetia, and at *Džer* in South Ossetia. Smaller family shrines can be found on private lands all across the Ossetian territories.

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