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Research paper

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“THE HILL OF POWER”: A STUDY OF A SACRED LOCUS OF THE AKUSHA-DARGO DARGINS

Abstract. This study examines the sacred hill at *TsakhInabyakhladirka*, a site of assembly for the representatives of the Akusha-Dargo federation of free societies. The research aims to interpret the signs and symbols associated with this sacred location and determine its historical and mythological import. To this end, the study undertakes: an examination of existing data regarding the hill; a mythological exegesis of related narratives; and a comparative analysis of this site with analogous sites among other Dagestani, North Caucasian, and global cultures. The methodological framework of this study employs several historical approaches, including comparative-historical, historical-systemic, and retrospective methods, alongside semiotic analysis. The research demonstrates that the sacred hill at *TsakhInabyakhladirka* possessed a complex significance. It functioned not only as a meeting place for representatives of rural community unions, but was also conceived as a microcosm of a mountain, a world centre, and a divine dwelling. The golden bow, arrows, and other treasures reputedly concealed within it endowed it with a particular sacredness linked to fertility and authority. The federation’s leader, the Akushin qadi, presided from the hill’s summit, thereby reinforcing his legitimacy and sacral standing. Analysis of the assembled data suggests classifying this hill as a “hill of power,” exhibiting parallels with meeting places, sanctuaries, and cult centers across the region and globally. This study highlights the diversity of orolatory manifestations and the importance of sacred sites for socio-political organization. It further proposes that the sacralization of this hill as a venue for assemblies of community union leaders may be connected to earlier eras of military democracy.

Keywords: Akusha-Dargo; orolatory; symbolism and semantics of sacral loci; hill of power; world tree; mother goddess; bow and arrows

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Исследовательская статья

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«ХОЛМ ВЛАСТИ»: К ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИИ ОДНОГО САКРАЛЬНОГО ЛОКУСА ДАРГИНЦЕВ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ АКУША-ДАРГО

Аннотация. Данная научная статья посвящена исследованию сакрального холма в местности «ЦахІнабяхъладиркъа», служившего местом сбора представителей союзов вольных обществ федерации Акуша-Дарго. Целью работы является интерпретация знаков и символов, связанных с этим сакральным локусом, а также выявление его исторического и мифологического значения. Для достижения цели были поставлены следующие задачи: изучение доступной информации о холме, мифологическая интерпретация связанных с ним преданий, а также сопоставление данного локуса с аналогичными объектами у других народов Дагестана, Северного Кавказа и мира. В качестве методологической основы исследования использован комплекс исторических методов: сравнительно-исторический, историко-системный, ретроспективный методы и метод семиотики. В результате проведенного исследования установлено, что сакральный холм в местности «ЦахІнабяхъладиркъа» имел многоаспектное значение. Он не только служил местом сбора представителей союзов сельских обществ, но также воспринимался как уменьшенная копия горы, центр мира и место пребывания богов. Скрытые в его толще золотой лук, стрелы и другие сокровища наделяли его особой сакральностью, связанной с плодородием и властью. На вершине холма восседал глава федерации, акушинский кадий, что подчеркивало его легитимность и сакральный статус. Анализ собранного материала позволяет рассматривать этот холм как «холм власти», имеющий аналогии с местами собраний, святилищами и культовыми центрами у других народов региона и мира. Статья подчеркивает вариативность проявлений оролатрии, а также значение сакральных мест для политической и социальной организации общества. В статье также дается гипотеза о том, что сакрализация данного холма, как места сбора глав союзов обществ, может быть связана с древними периодами военной демократии.

Ключевые слова: Акуша-Дарго; оролатрия; символика и семантика сакральных локусов; холм власти; древо мировое; Великая Богиня Матерь; лук и стрелы.

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Introduction

This study interprets the signs and symbols associated with the sacred hill of the Dargin people within the Akusha-Dargo Federation. This objective necessitates addressing several key issues: 1) a review of all extant data associated with this hill; 2) a mythological exegesis of the attributes, narratives, and traditions associated with it; and 3) a comparative analysis of this Dargin sacred site with analogous sacred objects related to orolatory among other Dagestani, North Caucasian, and global cultures.

The methodology employed in this study draws upon established historical methods. The comparative-historical method facilitates the identification of shared and distinct features within various regional expressions of orolatory in Dagestan, the North Caucasus, and beyond. The historical-systemic method enables the examination of this historical sacred object among the Akusha-Dargo Dargins as a cohesive historical system, allowing for the determination of its morphology and genesis. The retrospective method provides a basis for analyzing the historical factors contributing to the sacralization of this site. Finally, semiotic analysis allows for the interpretation of the meaning and associations of signs and symbols connected with this topos.¹

Although the object of this study has been referenced in pre-revolutionary, Soviet, and contemporary historical sources, previous scholarship has not undertaken an interpretation of the symbolism and semantics of this sacred site's attributes. The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of all currently known sources pertaining to the hill and its interpretation of the symbolic and semantic significance of its image. The findings of this research may be of use to historians, ethnologists, religious studies scholars, and cultural scientists in the development of broader studies on the history and culture of the peoples of Dagestan.

The hill at TsakhInabyakhladirka and folklore legends associated with it

The study of natural objects and phenomena venerated by various populations has consistently been a focus of scholarship on the Caucasus. As N.A. Krinichnaya observes, “in regions where mountains dominate the landscape,” “tangible elevations, rocks, stones, hillocks, hills, and mounds, standing out like islands from the surrounding terrain, are mythologized in tales and narratives” [1, pp. 122–123]. Historical sources and the folklore of Dagestani peoples have preserved information regarding both natural (mountains, rocks, hills, buttes) and artificial (mounds) sacred elevations that served as locations for calendrical and social rituals and festivals, often subject to specific taboos. These instances may be categorized as examples of “veneration of heights” [2, p. 110].

One such elevation is a hill situated at the centre of a clearing that served as a gathering place for representatives of five free society unions (Akushinsky, Tsudakharsky, Mekeginsky, Usishinsky, and Muginsky) within the Akusha-Dargo federation. Presiding over these gatherings was the highest official, the Akushin qadi, who held both secular and spiritual authority. The assembly site for these rural community union representatives was a clearing located several kilometers east of the modern village of Burgimak-Mahi in Dagestan's Akushinsky district, known as *Khyarbukidirky* or *TsakhInabyakhladirka* (“Gathering Clearing,” “Assembly Plain”) [3, p. 185]. These gatherings were convened “in urgent need sometimes 3 or 4 times a year” [4, p. 14]. They addressed matters affecting all unions, including declarations of war, conclusions of peace, and dispute resolution. Decisions reached at these meetings were binding on all Akusha-Dargo rural community unions [3, pp. 185–186]. F. I. Gene provides pertinent information regarding this clearing and its central hill: “to deliberate on matters among themselves, the qadis and elders gather, depending on the importance of the matter, at specific locations chosen long ago for this purpose” [5, p. 346].

The local historian Bulach Gadzhiev also provides information about this hill, writing: “Near Burgi-

1. Both categories denote a “place.” Locus, as a rule, is related to a closed, concrete spatial image referring to reality, and topos – to an open spatial image, a place where meanings unfold.

mak-makhi there is a hill and plain called *TsakhInabyakhladirka*. Envoys from across Darginia gathered here. During meetings, no one was permitted to look at the hill. It is said that a golden bow, arrows, and other valuables are hidden within it. The sick believed that walking around the hill could cure them of their ailments” [6, p. 32].

This hill at “TsakhInabikala-dirka,” which served as a site for public assemblies, is also mentioned by the historian R.M. Magomedov. He describes it as a flat river terrace overgrown with dense grass, featuring a domed hill at its centre. The steep slopes surrounding this amphitheatre-like hill were dotted with large stones that served as seating for representatives of each “troop” (*khureba*) within the Akusha-Dargo federation. The Akushin qadi was seated on the hill, from which orators delivered their speeches. Custom dictated that passers-by avoid even looking at the sacred hill. It was believed that even an accidental glance at the hill while travelling to market would inevitably result in misfortune. A golden bow and other treasures were purportedly concealed within this hill [7, pp. 399–400]. Prior to the revolution, mountain cattle breeders would lead sick horses around the hill, believing this practice to be curative [8, p. 45].

This information indicates a taboo surrounding a “sacred hill” upon which the elected secular and spiritual leader of the federation, the Akushin qadi, presided during gatherings of Akusha-Dargo rural community union representatives. The hill’s taboo manifested in several ways: a prohibition against looking at it; the belief that treasures were concealed within; and its use in folk medicinal rituals [6, p. 32].

The golden bow, arrows, and other treasures believed to lie within imbued the hill with a distinct sacredness. It is worth noting, for instance, that in Russian folklore, “everything painted gold belongs to the other world” [9, p. 159]. Expanding on this theme, mythological narratives frequently depict mountains (and hills) as liminal spaces between worlds, with crevices among the rocks serving as passages to the otherworld, often localized behind the mountain [1, pp. 127–128].

Mountain ranges were considered boundaries between this world and the otherworld among Dagestani peoples. For example, among the Tabasarans, the malevolent actions of the witch Kaftarhyuch could be neutralised by seizing her hair and reciting the spell: “Kyarkyul-tablyanva Dzhukhnag-dagdilanmuulduchvan!” (“So that you do not cross the ridge of Mount Kyarkyul and Mount Dzhukhnag!”).² Upon recitation of this spell, the demon was supposedly unable to cross the magical demarcation of these mountains.³

In the Didoi folktale “The Khan’s Son and the Khan’s Daughter,” the khan’s son embarks on a search for his sister, who has been abducted by a “black man.” Having traversed “one of our mountains and two foreign mountains,” he “passed one gorge, passed two gorges and reached one large clearing,” where, together with a stranger he encountered, he lifted a large stone and descended into an underworld below. There, they found themselves in a large gorge where his sister was held [10, pp. 291–295].

Regarding the bow and arrow, in global belief systems, the arrow has symbolized both war and peace. In Islam, the arrow represented the wrath of Allah [11, pp. 289–291], while in Christianity, the bow signified secular authority [12, p. 190]. In numerous world myths, bows and arrows were attributes of deities (e.g., mistresses of animals, thunder gods, healers). “Bows and arrows are also a ritual-mythological metaphor for mother earth and father sky, united in sacred marriage” [13, p. 75]. Finally, they “can be interpreted as structurally uniform replicas of a single paradigm — a vertical model of the world, represented by a circle with a cross inscribed within it” [13, p. 77] — a recurring motif in Dagestani petroglyphs [14, pp. 25–27].

E.B. Besolova, in exploring the semantics of the term *nart* and its connection to solar symbolism among the Scythians, notes: “It was from the time when warriors became mounted archers that the symbolic meaning of this type of weapon increased significantly, and it was probably no coincidence that during this period the bow became an insignia of royal dignity among the Scythians. For the Scythians, the bow and arrows symbolized weapons as such and the military power of the king” [15, p. 120].

The golden bow and arrows (along with other treasures) believed to be hidden within the hill, combined with the prohibition against market-goers looking at it (associated with loss and profit), suggest

2. Murtuzaliev Yu.M. Mythological prose of Tabasarans: Cand. Sci. Diss. Makhachkala, 2008. P. 96.

3. Ibid, p. 151.

a connection between these objects⁴ and the fertility cult prevalent in Dagestan, often personified as the *Great Mother Goddess* [17, pp. 146–154].

Thus, the hill at *TsakhInabikala-dirka* (conceived as a miniature representation of a mountain — an “image of the world,” a “world centre,” a “model of the universe,” a “dwelling place of the gods” [18, pp. 311–315]), which functioned as a site for public gatherings, together with the golden bow, arrows, and other treasures concealed within it, constituted a sacred locus (likely connected to insignia of power). The hill’s sacredness was manifested in the fact that the head of the Akusha-Dargo federation — the Akushin qadi — presided from its summit, surrounded by federation representatives who deliberated on military, economic, administrative, and contentious matters. It was subject to a taboo for ordinary community members. Furthermore, folk medicinal rituals were performed there. This hill can also be interpreted as the “fruit-bearing centre” (or “fruit-bearing womb”) of the *Great Mother Goddess*, given that the bow and arrow, associated with fertility, are among her attributes.

It appears that the socio-political institution under consideration — the custom of convening representatives of Akusha-Dargo rural society unions several times annually to address significant issues at a designated sacred location — represents a tradition persisting into the medieval and early modern periods, originating in the era of military democracy, characterized by a military leader and an assembly of armed warriors, which subsequently evolved into a state through intermediary military-hierarchical structures (chiefdoms) [19, pp. 47–48]. This was historically preceded by a late primitive, primitive neighbourly, or proto-peasant community transitioning towards a class society [20, pp. 110–111]. During this period, tribal cults [21, pp. 180–182] were undergoing decomposition and transformation into communal cults [22, pp. 140–142], with the clergy occupying a privileged position [23, p. 105]. These processes were also characteristic of Dagestan from the second half of the 1st millennium BC until the Great Migration of Peoples [24, pp. 142–143].

Returning to the sacred hill of the Akusha-Dargo Dargins, it is important to note that other Dagestani peoples also possessed similar natural and artificial elevations associated with legends and traditions, some of which were employed in various social and everyday rituals. For example, near the village of Inchkha in the Kazbekovsky district, there are two burial mounds known locally as *Khazinadalgokh* (“Treasure Mounds”) [25, p. 54].

According to information provided by Lieutenant Sotnikov concerning 1867, the election of the Tabasaran qadi by elders from the Tabasaran villages of Khurik, Khanag, Ruguzh, Khrakh, and Khiv, in the presence of the people, took place at *Kherba-Kuran*, located below the village of Tatil. Other “places of public gatherings” included: “*Khanik* — the square in front of the village of Khanaga; *Kurkarindagrak* — above Khushny, towards the village of Kyuryukh; *Bakantyl* — in the middle of the Kukhrik magal, near the village of Kuvlig; *Ursharik* — between the villages of Ursil and Bukhnakh; *Khuma* — between the villages of Khrakh, Shilya, and Khudzhinik; *Chekhtil-Suvak magal* of Southern Tabasaran — below the village of Fergil; *Gyuni-Ratsarih* — above the villages of Guchtyl (Dyrgynsky Magal of Southern Tabasaran); *Garzig* — between Kug and Yarshly (Southern Tabasaran); *Chalakarín-Dagran* — between the villages of Yarik and Chalak (Southern Tabasaran)” [26, p. 49].

Existing data suggests that some of the “places of public gatherings” listed by Sotnikov (*Chekhtil*, *Gyuni-Ratsar*, etc.) were, in the past, pagan sanctuaries, centers of the cult of patron gods of rural community unions, astronomical observatories, venues for calendrical rituals, the resolution of military and economic issues, conflict resolution, and memorial monuments [27, pp. 23–25, 50–51, 111; 28, pp. 52–64; 29, p. 292].

Sacred loci — often taboo sites for public gatherings, calendrical and religious festivals, and folk medicinal rites — were also situated in other parts of Dagestan.

Thus, serving as venues for public assemblies, social and everyday rites, and celebrations, the natural and artificial elevations of Dagestani peoples can be considered sacred loci. These objects of pre-Islamic

4. The Khakass symbols of the mother goddess Umai were “a bow and arrow, a spindle, a bronze button and a cowrie shell on a thread.” [16, p. 151]

cultic practices were associated with specific taboos, folk medicinal rites, and agricultural rituals.

In his study of the topography of East Slavic settlements from the 9th to the 11th centuries, B.A. Rybakov observes that their structure typically included sanctuaries located on hills: “Chronicles and teachings repeatedly mention pagan places of worship on hills. Ethnographic and toponymic information concerning Red Hills and Red Mounds is connected with this” [30, p. 225].

It is important to note that such sacred elevations are documented not only in Dagestan and medieval Rus', but also in Chechnya. For example, in his description of the toponymy of the village of Tsentaroy in the Nozhai-Yurtovsky district of the Chechen Republic, A.S. Suleimanov mentions the hill “Khetash-Korta” (“Council Summit”), where the Council of the country convened for extended periods, deciding matters of war and peace [31, p. 306] and establishing *adat* (customary law) [32, p. 17].

According to A.S. Suleimanov, atop “Erdi Korta” on Ertina Mount was an ancient cult site used during both pagan and Christian periods. For many years, the Council of Elders of the country (*Mekhkankhel*) met there to resolve matters of peace and war, establish rules of conduct, set prices for food and livestock, and negotiate compensation for injuries during armistices between opposing parties [31, pp. 74–75].

S.A. Natayev identified 23 meeting points of the Council of the Country within Chechen territory [33, p. 359]. Some of these held pan-Chechen significance, while “the rest sometimes became the place for meetings of mountain or flat Chechens” [34, pp. 24–25].

As is evident, many Chechen cult sites located on hills share functional similarities with analogous sacred loci among Dagestani peoples. Elevations used in various social and everyday rituals were also found among other North Caucasian groups. For instance, D.N. Anuchin describes such a sacred burial mound among the Ossetians: “Not far from the aul [Elhot] there is a minaret... around it are ancient cemeteries, and a little further — burial mounds... Of the burial mounds, two, more significant, have special names: one is called the ‘oath mound’; a whip was placed on it, and the accused, asserting his innocence, had to climb the mound and take it, which was possible only if the conscience of the accused was truly clear” [35, p. 19].

Commenting on the custom of erecting kurgans in the funerary rites of steppe tribes, B.A. Rybakov wrote that “the construction of hemispherical mounds, in all likelihood, reflects the idea of three horizontal tiers of the Universe: the kurgan depicts the middle, earthly tier; it is like a model of the horizon of visible earthly space. Above the kurgan — earth is the sky, the upper world, and below the kurgan is the underground world of the dead” [30, p. 75].

In our view, the Ossetian “oath mound,” as well as the mounds of the steppe tribes and their isomorphic counterpart — the sacred hill of the Akushins — also embody the concept of the middle earthly tier within a tripartite vertical model of the world (expressed in the mythologemes of the *world tree* [36, pp. 398–406] and the *world mountain* [18, pp. 311–315]), where the upper tier is the abode of the gods and the lower tier is the underworld, inhabited by the dead and chthonic demonic figures.

G.F. Chursin provides examples of the veneration of such taboo “holy places” in Abkhazia, writing: “For example, the shrine of Mount Dydriph — ‘Anyps-nykha’ — became such a ‘sacred place’ for Bzyb Abkhazia... only members of the Chichba family have the right to offer prayers at this shrine, take oaths there, receive income for this, etc.” [37, p. 28]. Its summit was inaccessible “due to its supposedly extraordinary holiness.” Anyone who dared to ascend to the summit of Dydriph would be immediately struck by lightning. Women and cattle were also prohibited from ascending the mountain’s peak. The sacred site where oaths were taken and sacrifices were made was located above the village of Achandara, at the foot of Mount Dydriph [37, pp. 39–40]. Another Abkhazian sacred site is *Lashkendar*. The summit of this mountain is considered sacred and inaccessible in the Tkvarcheli community. Local residents believed that anyone who dared approach the sacred place would be struck dead by a resulting thunderstorm [37, p. 35].

Elevations used in various rituals are also documented among other cultures globally. For instance, according to J.G. Frazer, the kings of Gallic monarchies in East Africa performed sacrifices on mountain peaks and oversaw the offering of human sacrifices. The Spartans also conducted sacrifices on the summit of Mount Taygetos. On Mount Agu in Togo, a fetish or spirit named Bagba was believed to reside. He lived in a house on the highest peak and kept the winds contained within a large jug. People also appealed to him for rain [38, pp.

19, 95, 195]. Frazer also provides examples of taboos applied to leaders and rulers: “The divine personality is the source of both benefits and dangers; it must not only be protected, but also guarded against” [38, p. 231].

Among the Khakass, a specific taboo also applied to women: they were prohibited from uttering the names of mountains and from appearing bareheaded in their presence [39, p. 86]. It appears that the taboo associated with the hill at *Tsakh nabikala-dirka* stems from the fact that the Akushin qadi presided there and orators delivered their speeches from its summit. However, the question remains open as to whether this hill was originally revered, with this pre-existing reverence being subsequently utilized by the Akushin qadis to legitimize and sacralize their authority, or whether this elevation on the plain became sacred because the head of the Akusha-Dargo federation sat upon its summit.

Conclusion

Analysis of the presented material concerning the hill — the assembly site of the Akusha-Dargo Dargins — attests to its antiquity and multifaceted character. It functioned as a meeting place for representatives of the Dargin rural society unions, thus qualifying it as a regional sacred topos. This sacred hill, imbued with polysemantic meanings and rich symbolism, served to further legitimize and sacralize the authority of the Akushin qadis, justifying its designation as a “hill of power.” It exhibits broad parallels with similar “places of public gatherings,” former pagan sanctuaries, centres of deity cults, venues for social and everyday rites and folk medicinal rituals, and sites for resolving military, economic, and inter-group disputes among other peoples of Dagestan, the North Caucasus, Russia, and globally. This demonstrates the diversity of manifestations within various regional forms of orolatory.

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