

## ACHILLES AND THE CAUCASUS

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0. INTRODUCTION. It appears more and more probable that the Proto-Indo-European speech community — or a sizeable component of it, in any event — was in the vicinity of the Caucasus as early as the 4th millenium BCE. According to the most widely-accepted hypothesis and its variants, Proto-Indo-European speakers are to be localized somewhere in the vast lowland region north of the Black and Caspian Seas (Gimbutas 1985, Mallory 1989, Anthony 1991). The competing reconstruction of early Indo-European [IE] migrations proposed by Gamkrelidze and Ivanov (1984) situates the Urheimat to the south of the Caucasus, in eastern Anatolia (see also the interesting attempt to harmonize these two proposals by Sergent 1995). Whichever direction it might have come from, intensive contact between Indo-European speakers and the indigenous Caucasian peoples has left abundant evidence in the languages and cultures of the Caucasus. Numerous lexical correspondences between IE and Kartvelian [South Caucasian] may be due to ancient borrowing (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1984: 877-880; Klimov 1991) or perhaps even inheritance from a common ancestral language (Blažek 1992; Manaster-Ramer 1995; Bomhard 1996). The possibility of an “areal and perhaps phylogenetic relation” between IE and the Northwest Caucasian family, suggested by Friedrich (1964) and more recently by Hamp (1989), has been elaborated into a plausible hypothesis through the painstaking work of Colarusso in

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<sup>1</sup>A shorter version of this paper was read at the McGill University Black Sea Conference on 25 January 1996, at the invitation of Dr. John Fossey. I have profited greatly from the advice and encouragement offered by Drs. John Colarusso (Hamilton, Ontario), Paul Friedrich (Chicago), C. Scott Littleton (Los Angeles), Yves Duhoux (Louvain-la-Neuve), Winfried Boeder (Oldenburg), Ambako Tchkadoua, Pierre Bonnechère and Christine Jourdan (Montréal). The research has been supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and les Fonds pour la Formation de Chercheurs et l’Aide à la Recherche du Québec.

comparative mythology (1984, 1985, 1987) and historical linguistics (1981, 1989, 1992). Building upon Dumézil's research into IE and Caucasian symbolic systems, Charachidzé (1986, 1987a) has unearthed what appear to be extremely ancient variants of IE motifs associated with the initiation of warriors which have been preserved, like insects in amber, in Georgian folklore.

In this paper I will present a symbolic cluster shared by the peoples of the western Caucasus — the Abkhazians and Georgians in particular — and two IE speech communities: the Ossetes, who have lived in the central Caucasus for over two millenia, and the Greeks. Evidence of prehistoric links between the ancestors of the Greeks and Caucasians has been presented from time to time by comparative mythologists (Abaev 1963; Chikovani 1966, 1971; Charachidzé 1986) and linguists (Gamkrelidze & Ivanov 1984: 904-909); the linguistic innovations shared by Greek and Armenian may betoken a distinct Greco-Armenian (“Pontic”) dialect of early IE spoken somewhere to the east or southeast of the Black Sea (Hamp 1995; cp. Sergent 1995: 115). In the opinion of Charachidzé, “des groupes indo-européens proches des futurs Grecs, ou encore les précurseurs mêmes de ces derniers, se sont trouvés en contact durable quelque part entre les Balkans et l’Asie centrale avec des peuples d’une autre origine, et dont les descendants occupent encore aujourd’hui le Caucase du Sud, notamment le territoire de l’antique Colchide [most probably corresponding to western Georgia and Abkhazia — KT]” (1986: 336). Before one rushes to formulate overly precise hypotheses concerning the nature of Greek-Caucasian links, however, one must take into consideration the mounting evidence of Near Eastern influence on ancient Greek mythology and religion (Burkert 1963, 1979, 1992; West 1967; Duchemin 1974). Surrounding the more or less well-documented cultures of ancient Anatolia and Mesopotamia are their shadowy neighbors of uncertain or unknown linguistic affiliation. Some of these — the Hattians, Hurrians and Urartians — wrote in languages which scholars have linked with the indigenous Caucasian families (D’jakonov 1967), though not all specialists consider the

affiliations satisfactorily proven. This opens the possibility of an archaic Pontic Sprachbund stretching from the North Caucasus well into Anatolia, entailing shared cultural features as well. Even if one rejects the scenario of Proto-Greeks in Colchis a millenium before the Argonauts, this does not rule out the attribution of Greek-Caucasian parallels to a continuum of cultures stretching across Neolithic and Bronze-Age Anatolia, linked by trade routes and migration if not always by common ancestry.

The Greek mythological dossier which will be examined from a comparative perspective here attaches to one of the most celebrated figures in classical literature: Achilles. The attempt of a Caucasologist to elucidate the prehistoric antecedents of the protagonist of the *Iliad* may strike some readers as going well beyond the acceptable limits of scholarly hubris or even chutzpah; it is my hope that card-bearing classicists will find my attempt merits at least criticism and comment, if not unqualified acceptance.

1. THESSALIAN ACHILLES AND HOMERIC ACHILLES. The Achilles represented in the *Iliad* is a demi-god, born of the union of the sea-goddess Thetis, and Peleus, a renowned hunter and warrior. Their wedding feast is attended by everyone of note in the Greek pantheon, and it is on this occasion that Paris, called upon to declare which of the goddesses Hera, Aphrodite and Athena is the most beautiful, accepts the bribe of her whose face will launch a thousand ships. Of Achilles' parents, only Thetis plays a role of importance in the Homeric epic (Slatkin 1991), and little mention is made of Achilles' childhood before he joins the troops heading for Troy. The most detailed 'biographies' of the young Achilles and his father Peleus which have come down to us are in Book III of Apollodorus' *Library*, a compendium of Greek mythology composed around the 1st c. CE (van der Valk 1958). Many of the sources consulted by Apollodorus have been lost to us, and although the manuscript versions of the *Library* date only to the Middle Ages, the materials they contain may reflect archaic motifs

of which no other record has been preserved (Simpson 1986: 1-2).<sup>2</sup> Achilles himself, and the principal figures in his lineage — Thetis, Peleus, and the latter's father Aeacus — are associated with the region of Thessaly, where place names (e.g. *Akhilleion*) and local cults in their honor were recorded in classical times (Mayer 1936; Burkert 1984: 172; Dowden 1989: 49-58). His father Peleus (*Pēleús*) and the centaur Cheiron, who raised the young Achilles, are linked in particular with Mt. Pelion (*Pēlion*) in Thessaly, and Peleus's name and that of the mountain may be etymologically linked (Lesky 1937). Mayer (1936: 221-224) correlates these traditions with an ancient cycle of songs and myths concerning Achilles ("vorhomerische Achilleis"), distinct from the "Uriliads" drawn upon by the Homeric poet.<sup>3</sup> Dowden (1989) proposes a link between the distribution of the Achilles cult in Thessaly and adjacent areas, and the spread of the Aeolian dialects in Bronze Age Greece. It appears to him likely that the epic poets drew upon an ancient Achillean tradition in mainland Greece, and recast it in an Anatolian setting (not only Achilles, but even his Trojan rival Hector "had been a figure of mainland cult or tradition before he was used in the story of Troy" (Dowden 1989: 53)). Let us now look at what has come down to us concerning the parentage and birth of Achilles.

Thetis, a sea-goddess and one of the Nereids, is the eldest of the fifty daughters of the nymph Doris and the shape-changing old man of the sea Nereus. According to prophecy, Thetis is destined to bear a son greater than his father. Warned of this prophecy by Prometheus (scholion to Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, 167), Zeus and Poseidon, both of whom lust after the sea goddess, decide the more prudent course is to marry her off to a mortal, entailing that the child born to the union would pose no threat to him, but at the same time condemning him to mortality (Mayer

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<sup>2</sup>Lesky describes Apollodorus's biography of Peleus as "ein fortlaufender Peleus-Roman", in which "junges und altes Sagengut in einen Rahmen gespannt [wird]" (1937: 273).

<sup>3</sup>Prof. Yves Duhoux (personal communication) has been kind enough to point out that the name, if not necessarily the mythical figure, of Achilles (*a-ki-re-u*) is attested as early as the Linear B corpus of Pylos, dated to about 1190 BCE.

1936; Lesky 1937).<sup>4</sup> In the words of one scholar, “the price of Zeus’ hegemony is Achilles’ death” (Slatkin 1991: 101).<sup>5</sup>

Zeus selects his own grandson, Peleus, to be Thetis’s mate. Peleus is the son of Aeacus, the son of Zeus and the mortal Aegina (*Library* III.xii.6; *Iliad* 21.189). He excels in sports and the martial arts, but with unfortunate consequences for at least two close relatives. He kills his half-brother Phocus by slinging a discus at his head, and while hunting with his father-in-law Eurytion, he accidentally slays the latter with a javelin.<sup>6</sup> In a hunting contest with Acastus, Peleus demonstrates his skill by catching more animals than the others, but instead of killing them he merely cuts out their tongues, stores them in a pouch, and releases the beasts. When the other contestants ridicule Peleus for not having caught anything, he shows them the tongues to prove he is the best hunter (*Library* III.xiii.3).

When Peleus first approaches Thetis, the goddess resists his advances, seeking to put him off by a sequence of shape transformations, successively turning into fire, water, wind, bird, tree, tiger, lion, serpent, cuttle-fish (*Library* III.xiii.5; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 11.217ff) before accepting to couple with him.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Kullmann (1960: 370) considers this version, in which the principal motivation is Zeus’s forestalling that a son of his do to him what he did to his own father, to be particularly ancient. Homer alludes only to a more recent account, mentioned in the *Kypria* summary (text in Evelyn-White 1982: 496), according to which Thetis refused the advances of Zeus out of respect for Hera.

<sup>5</sup>Slatkin translates *Iliad* 1.352-354 as: “Mother, since you did bear me to be short-lived (*minunthádion*), surely high-thundering Zeus ought to grant me honor”, which she interprets to mean that Achilles believes honor is due him from Zeus in return for “his being *minunthadíos*, whereby Zeus’ sovereignty is guaranteed” (Slatkin 1991: 102).

<sup>6</sup>Peleus’s javelin shot was aimed at a boar which he and his father-in-law were hunting. Except for a reversal of roles, the slaying of Eurytion bears a close resemblance to the plot of the Georgian folksong *Ia mtazeda* “Violet on the mountain”, in which it is the son-in-law who is killed by his new bride’s father while deer-hunting (text and commentary in Tuite (1994: 106-109, 141)).

<sup>7</sup>The motif of mating with a shape-changing sea-goddess is echoed in the biography of Peleus’s father Aeacus, who “had intercourse with Psamathe, the daughter of Nereus, who changed herself into a seal to avoid making love with

Achilles is born from this union.

In order to make her half-mortal son fully divine, Thetis “hid him in the fire (*eis tò pûr egkrúbousa*) by night in order to destroy the mortal element which the child had inherited from his father” (*Library* III.xiii.6).<sup>8</sup> While Achilles was in the process of being immortalized over the fire by Thetis, Peleus snatched him out of her hands, at which point Thetis abandoned child and husband, and returned to her home in the sea (Scholion to Aristophanes *Clouds*,

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him, and who bore him a son, Phocus” (*Library* III.xii.6). Lesky considers it “eine sekundäre Doublette zu dem Liebesringkampf zwischen Peleus und Thetis” (1937: 274). The power of metamorphosis is not only shared by Thetis and her sister Psamathe, but as well by their father Nereus (*Library* II.v.11; Bader 1986), Metis the first wife of Zeus, and several other aquatic divinities. The numerous correspondences between Metis and Thetis are discussed at length by Detienne & Vernant (1974: 127-164). Both were destined to bear a son that would usurp the sovereignty of his father (which outcome, in the case of Metis, Zeus averted by swallowing her whole), and both, surprising as it may seem, appear as the creators of the universe in ancient Greek cosmogonies. A poorly-preserved commentary on the Spartan poet Alcman (7th c. BCE) refers to an otherwise unknown cosmogony by the latter in which Thetis fulfills the demiurgic role of separating light from darkness and establishing the beginnings of order in primordial chaos (West 1963, 1967). Her work is described with terms appropriated from the vocabulary of metal-working (the *hulē* ‘raw material’ from which the cosmos is formed is compared to *khalkós* ‘bronze’, and Thetis is the *tekhnitēs* ‘artisan’), which betokens for Burkert (1963) the coming together in the figure of Thetis of two master tropes for creation: the primal ocean, as in the Book of Genesis, and the activity of a blacksmith. (I would add that Thetis’s fire-treatment of the infant Achilles may be yet another offshoot of the second trope, especially in the light of the Caucasian evidence to be presented further on). According to Detienne & Vernant (1974: 138) “une des raisons pour lesquelles ces divinités marines étaient aptes à jouer, à l’origine du monde, ce rôle cosmogonique, c’était leur pouvoir de métamorphose. Elles contenaient en quelque sorte par avance à l’intérieur d’elles-mêmes, les dissimulant puis les révélant tour à tour à la lumière, toutes les formes susceptibles d’apparaître dans le cours du devenir.”

<sup>8</sup>This may not have been her first attempt at such an operation. A scholiast commenting on a passage in Lycophron’s *Alexandra* (ll. 177-179: “... the Pelasgian Typhon, out of seven sons consumed in the flame, alone escaping the fiery ashes”) asserted that Achilles was the seventh child of Thetis and Peleus. The earlier ones perished during attempts at immortalization by fire.

line 1068).

Some authors have seen in this account, and in similar interrupted immortalizations by fire performed by Medea and Demeter, the reflections of ancient rites of initiation, a ritual representation of death and rebirth, through which adolescents attain adult status.<sup>9</sup> Bonnechère (1993: 72-73, 145, 164-180) and Halm-Tisserant (1994: ch. VII, esp. pp 212-213, 221) set the “hiding” of the child in the fire in parallel with gestation in the womb. In both cases the child is enveloped in warmth, enclosed in a sort of incubator — the Greek sources specify that Achilles was placed in the fire, not simply held over it — which is intended to render him immortal.<sup>10</sup>

The not-quite immortalized Achilles is described in several accounts as having a single vulnerable spot, on his foot. In the best-known version of the attempted immortalization of Achilles — albeit a relatively late one (Richardson 1974: 245) — the infant is immersed in the river Styx. This leaves him invulnerable over his entire body, save, of course, his heel, by which he was held while being dipped in the river. An interesting variant of the Achilles-heel motif was recorded by one of the commentators on the above passage in Apollodorus: When Peleus interrupted the operation only Achilles’ ankle-bone had been burnt away. The missing part was replaced by the centaur Cheiron with an ankle taken from the exhumed skeleton of the giant Damysos. This gave

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<sup>9</sup>The descriptions of Thetis heat-treating Achilles (especially that recounted by Apollonius of Rhodes 4.869ff) and Demeter doing the same to Demophoön (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 232-274) are so close, that either Apollonius is imitating the Hymn to Demeter, or both are drawing on “an early epic version of the childhood of Achilles” (Richardson 1974: 237).

<sup>10</sup>The adult Achilles is described as shining by Homer on a couple of occasions, though there is no evidence that this attribute was believed to have been imparted by Thetis’s placing him in the fire (Colarusso 1985; King 1987: 18-19). For example, with the aid of Athena his head emits a bright light, which serves to distract the Trojans during the fight for Patroclus’s body (*Iliad* 18, 202-227), and upon donning his new armor he is “all shining like the sun” (*Iliad* 19, 398).

Achilles tremendous speed, until one day, while he was being pursued by Apollo, the transplanted ankle fell out. Apollo overtook Achilles and slew him (see Frazer's notes to *Library* III.xiii.6; Waser 1901).

To judge from the textual evidence, Thetis abandoned her infant child immediately after being interrupted by Peleus. The two scholia to Aristophanes' "Clouds", line 1068 (*kât' apolipoûsá g' autón* "she [Thetis] abandoned him [Peleus]") describe the two events as being causally linked, and happening in quick succession.<sup>11</sup> Peleus placed the child in the care of the centaur Cheiron, who raised him in the mountains on a diet of "the innards of lions and wild pigs, and bear's marrow" (... *étrephe splágkhnois leóntōn kai suōn agríōn kai árktōn mueloís*, *Library* III.xiii.6), a curious substitute for the maternal milk he was denied.<sup>12</sup>

When Achilles was nine years of age it was prophesied that Troy could not be taken without him. His divine mother, knowing that he would die if he went on the expedition, "disguised him as a young girl and put him in the keeping of Lycomedes" (*Library* III.xiii.8). It was at Lycomedes' court that Odysseus deceived Achilles into revealing himself by a clever ruse, and recruited him into the expedition against Troy. I will return to this phase of

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<sup>11</sup>Dübner (1969: 124): *kai tōn 'Akhilleá oun tekoûsa epéthēken eis tō pūr: kai gnoûs ho Pēleüs ebóesen. hē dē lupētheîsa ekhōrísthē*. (And the mother put Achilles in the fire; and Peleus, finding this out, screamed. She, being annoyed, departed.)

Holwerda (1960: 630): *hōs dē kai tōn Akhilléa tekoûsa epéthēken eis tō pūr, idōn ho Pēleüs ebóesen. kai Thētis mèn diazeukhtheîsa Pēlēōs pròs thálassan es tàs adelphàs ápeisi Nērēidas. Akhilléa dē hoūtō sunēbē paída kataleiphthē'nai Pēleî* (when the mother put Achilles in the fire, Peleus, seeing [this], screamed. And Thetis parted from Peleus [and] returned to the sea to her sisters the Nereids. Achilles, [still] being a child, she thus left-behind with Peleus.)

<sup>12</sup>According to a folk etymology recorded by Apollodorus (*Library* III.xiii.6), Achilles received his name (*Akhilleús* < *a* [not] + *kheîlos* [lip]) because he never put his lips on his mother's breast (Escher 1893). The diet of Achilles during his sojourn in the mountains is described by other classical authors (Sergent 1996: 292): honeycomb and fawn's marrow (Philostratus *Heroica*, XX.2), deer's marrow (*Etymologicum Magnum*, s.v. Akhilleus).

Achilles' childhood below, but at this juncture I will point out that the image of the young hero, half-god and half-human, living first in the wild, then dressed as a girl, is very much that of "a marginal figure ... suspended between two worlds", as Redfield put it in describing the adult Achilles (1984: 126). The liminality of nine-year-old Achilles anticipates, on the one hand, that of the warriors before Troy: men in a marginal space, neither inhabited nor fertile, engaged in a predatory enterprise that assimilates them to carnivorous animals, as underscored by the numerous comparisons to lions, wolves or dogs in the *Iliad* and culminating in the outrage committed by Achilles on the corpse of Hector (Redfield 1984: 235; see also Hellwig 1964). On the other hand, one can see similarities between Apollodorus's Achilles and the *éphēboi*, young men in transition between childhood and adulthood, sent to do military service in the frontier-lands outside the city, and whose festivities include such images of inversion as transvestitism (Vidal-Naquet 1981, 1992).<sup>13</sup>

Being the son of a water goddess and a hunter, Achilles occupies not only an intermediate status between the divine and the human, but also between human society and the savage spaces outside of the settlement (the village or *oikos*).<sup>14</sup> Both of

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<sup>13</sup>“C'est par ailleurs un fait bien connu que le travesti féminin ... a été pour les sociétés grecques archaïques ... un moyen de dramatiser l'accès du jeune homme à la virilité et à l'âge du mariage. L'exemple classique, dans la mythologie grecque, est celui d'Achille à Skyros, déguisé en jeune fille mais ne pouvant résister à la vue d'une arme” (Vidal-Naquet 1981: 139; cp. Burkert 1979: 29-30). Dowden (1989: 57) points to a series of associations between Achilles and the symbolism of initiation — death of young men and women, education in the arts of war in a liminal setting — and to ephebic rituals performed at a shrine of Achilles in Laconia. Like several other short-lived figures from Greek mythology, he “tread[s] the path of initiation and death” (Dowden 1989: 68).

<sup>14</sup>According to Austin & Vidal-Naquet (1977: 36-48) the central institution of the Homeric world, corresponding roughly to the post-Mycenean Dark Ages of the 9th-10th centuries BCE, was the aristocratic *oikos*, a semi-autonomous homestead housing an extended family and its slaves. Exchanges with the outside, to obtain goods and prestige items not produced by the *oikos*, were essentially limited to: (i) war and pillage; (ii) gift and counter-gift between

Achilles's parents circulate between these two regions. Thetis, a Nereid whose home is beneath the sea, leaves her watery domain to marry Peleus (after he impregnates her in a cavern by the seacoast), and then returns abruptly after Peleus interrupts her attempt to immortalize Achilles. Peleus in a sense follows the reverse trajectory when he engages in the hunt: leaving the *oikos* in search of game in the forests or mountains, then returning home with his kill. When the two meet for the first time, Thetis, the hunted, takes on the form of various natural phenomena (fire, water, wind) and wild animals, while Peleus, the hunter, holds on until she yields. This opposition between a goddess associated with the natural world, and a human who exploits the riches of that world, will be of importance in the comparison proposed below.

The child exploits the riches of nature like his father, living off the flesh of wild animals, but unlike him he does not return to the *oikos*. He is in a liminal state, neither fully at home in nature like his mother, nor in human society like his father.<sup>15</sup> Homer appears to have been aware of this second duality in Achilles' nature, since he represents the shield Thetis commissioned for her son as adorned with a microcosm of the Homeric world, in five concentric circles, moving from nature to society and back to nature (*Iliad* 18: 478-608). From the center outward these depict: (i) the earth and the sea, surrounded by the sun, moon and stars; (ii) two cities, one in peace, the other in war; (iii) a royal demesne surrounded by fields, vineyards and pastures; (iv) a dancing-place, with young people dancing in a circle; (v) the mighty River Oceanos encircling the whole. As interpreted by Redfield, the shield moves from nature to culture, then to agricultural production (the inclusion of nature in culture); then culture, and finally nature once again, at the outer limit. "The whole consists in a symmetrical

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equals; (iii) a limited degree of commerce, associated with foreigners ("Phoenicians") (see also Finley 1981: 211-32).

<sup>15</sup>The centaur Cheiron, who raises and educates Achilles, is an especially striking case in point, reflecting in his very body — half-human, half-horse — the conjunction of the human and the savage which lies at the heart of the Thessalian Achilles saga (cp Escher 1899, Bethe 1921).

construction of the Homeric type: A-B-C-B-A” (Redfield 1984: 232-233).

As was foretold, Achilles did not return alive from Troy. According to tradition Achilles was killed by Apollo, either directly, or by proxy, Apollo guiding the arrow shot by Paris toward the vulnerable heel. Within the context of the Trojan War, the role played by Apollo in Achilles’ death is motivated by the former’s support for the Trojans against the Greeks, and more particularly as revenge for Achilles’ having killed Tenes (a son of Apollo) or Troilus (ambushed in a temple consecrated to Apollo) (Escher 1893: 227-229). Whatever the proximate cause might have been, it is to be noted that in Greek mythology — and in the Homeric poems in particular — Apollo generally functions as an agent of his father Zeus.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore with at least the tacit approval of the supreme deity that Achilles meets his end. At the same time, it is a curious fact, but one that matches perfectly the Caucasian dossiers to be presented below, that Zeus, rather than eliminate with his own hands the son of Thetis who theoretically poses a threat to his sovereignty, acts only indirectly, through a subordinate deity.

I conclude this section with a sort of thumb-nail sketch of Achilles’s biography, with which the motifs from Caucasian mythology in the following sections will be compared:

*A nature goddess, who can take the shape of wild animals, is destined to bear a son capable of overthrowing the supreme deity. The goddess mates with a mortal hunter in a cavern. When the child is born, she attempts to render him immortal, but is interrupted by her mate before the process is completed. She abandons the infant, and returns to her home at the bottom of the sea. The child, deprived of his mother’s milk, is raised in the wild, and fed an unusual diet intended to make him strong. He grows up*

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<sup>16</sup>“La lecture de l’*Illiade* ne laisse pas de doute: Apollon n’y est pas séparable de Zeus ... Apollon est toujours dans un accord spontané avec Zeus et le seconde dans l’accomplissement de ses desseins, quels qu’ils soient” (Dumézil 1987: 74).

*to be a redoubtable warrior, but not powerful enough to unseat God.<sup>17</sup> After spending a long time in a liminal state, outside of human settlements, the hero is killed, not by God himself, but by his proxy.*

We turn now to the Caucasus, in particular the west-central part of that region. The three folk traditions to be studied, although communicated through three unrelated languages (the Northwest Caucasian language Abkhaz, the Kartvelian language Svan, and the Indo-European Ossetic), share numerous elements of social structure, ritual practice and mythology. The Ossetic tradition, in particular, has drawn the attention of scholars for its Indo-European/Caucasian syncretism, on the one hand retaining elements of archaic Indo-European social ideology and, on the other, adopting many beliefs and practices from their Kartvelian and Northwest Caucasian neighbors (Abaev 1949, Dumézil 1978, Charachidzé 1987b). This is, however, but a relatively recent stage in the history of contact and exchange between the Caucasus and the Indo-European world, which goes back at least two millennia before the arrival of the Ossetes in the North Caucasus. The Caucasian myths and epics to be discussed here, those within which the parallels to the Achilles myth are imbedded, share elements with IE mythology and social ideology which might derive from at least three contexts of cultural contact at different time depths: (i) myths of great antiquity widely diffused in the Near East and perhaps further abroad; (ii) elements dating to early (or even proto-) IE times; (iii) elements which most likely reflect contact between the Greeks (or Proto-Greco-Armenians?) and the western Caucasus.

2. AMIRAN. In Caucasian mythology, as in that of classical Greece, “the divine and the human come together on mountains ... Any hunter or herdsman on an imaginary Greek mountain will

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<sup>17</sup>Throughout this paper ‘God’ with a capital G refers to the supreme deity of the community in question: the Greek Zeus, the Svanetian Xoša ɣerbet, the Ossetic Xutsau, etc.

probably meet a god” (Buxton 1994: 91). In particular, they are likely to encounter the female supernaturals who watch over the game animals. The best-known of these is Dæl, the divine patron of the horned game animals of the high mountain (ibex and mountain goat) among the Svans, a Kartvelian-speaking people of the northwest Georgian highlands. Dæl is said to be extraordinarily beautiful, with golden hair and radiant white skin. Dæl and her Abkhazian counterparts, the daughters of the god Až<sup>o</sup>eipšaa, are reputed to seduce human hunters, who thereupon enjoy great success as long as they observe a series of taboos imposed by the goddess. She is extremely sensitive to any kind of impurity, and especially women’s blood flow.<sup>18</sup> A man must be absolutely certain that he, and everyone in his household, is ‘pure’ before he goes into the mountains to hunt. The slightest violation, even if unintentional, of a taboo is thought to have fatal consequences for a hunter (Gabliani 1925: 36, 140; Virsaladze 1976). Note that this is a sexual relation with the usual roles and valuations inverted: the goddess is pure, unlike a human female, and she makes the decision to initiate, and terminate, the love affair.

2.1. THE GODDESS, THE HUNTER AND THEIR SON. The golden-haired Svanetian goddess Dæl takes many human lovers — usually hunters who have intruded upon her mountain domain — but only one is said to have fathered a child by her: a man named Darejan or Darjelian.<sup>19</sup> While hunting Darejan encounters the golden-haired

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<sup>18</sup>On similar beliefs in the Hindu-Kush/Karakorum region, see Jettmar, 1975; Tuite 1996, 1998.

<sup>19</sup>In several variants, mostly from eastern Georgia, the father is named *Sul-k’almaxi* “soul-trout”, an anthroponym that clearly demands to be looked at more closely, especially in view of the comparison made here between the Caucasian nature goddess Dæl, the Greek Nereid Thetis, and the unnamed daughter of the Ossetic sea-god Donbettyr who was the mother of Batradz. Georgian folklore includes numerous accounts of a “woman (or queen) of the waters”, e.g. the Mingrelian *c’q’ariš-mapa*, who shares many features with Dæl, including golden hair and a fondness for romantic dalliances with fishermen (Virsaladze, 1976: 120-121). The name *Sul-k’almaxi* may have originally been associated with an aquatic variant of the Dæl myth.

goddess in her cave, spends several nights with her, and — in many variants, after his wife catches the pair in bed and cuts off Dæl's golden braids — the goddess suddenly breaks off the relationship. She announces that she is pregnant and commands her lover to cut the fetus out of her belly; in several versions, she justifies this drastic measure by declaring that if the child were to be carried to term in her womb, “he would be capable of standing up to God himself; but now he will fall short of that” (Chikovani 1966: 220, 227, 271; Charachidzé 1986: 57, 168; Nizharadze 1962: 151).<sup>20</sup> Once extracted from his mother's womb, the embryonic Amiran is transferred to the belly of a cow, calf or lamb to complete the gestation period, then left beside a ‘milk spring’. God finds the child, and names him. The child is adopted by a peasant family, grows inordinately quickly and becomes a redoubtable fighter.

To give the reader a bit of the flavor of the Svanetian Amirani corpus, I will quote from two Upper Svan texts which are not in the corpus studied by Chikovani (1966) and Charachidzé (1986). The translations are from a handbook of the Svan language which I am preparing in collaboration with Ambako Tchkadoua. Here is the opening of one tale, recited by Darik'o Chark'viani in the village Ushguli in 1927 (Shanidze and Topuria 1939: 64-7). In this account there is no mention of the setting of the embryo in a substitute womb, and St. George replaces the supreme deity as the godfather.

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<sup>20</sup>Likewise in a version recorded by Dzidziguri (1974: 339) in the Mtiulian province of eastern Georgia: A hunter encounters a ‘non-human’ (*uqorcielo*) woman, whom he gets pregnant. She orders the child cut out of her belly three months early, saying “If he had grown in my womb, he could have challenged God” (*es rom gomši ro gazrdiliq'o, ymerts šeeč'ideboda*).

žæmzəraχ ʏertem! dæl i May God bless you all! (This is the  
darželiān. darželiān metχwær li. story of) Dæl and Darjelian.  
mewar itχær. dæl χalæt'. amēču Darjelian is a hunter; he hunts a lot.  
æriχ. gogwer dedber yeχwd χaq'a He loves Dæl. They are there (at her  
darželiāns. «ži nōsa ogwbažas, place). Darjelian has a crippled old  
aža gogwer zurāl li.» ušχwid woman as his wife. 'She cannot find  
æriχ. «atχe si ader argite, ado out about us. She is a crippled  
isgwi χeχw, gogwer li, ži woman.' They are together. 'Go  
gwabženi.» «aža im ænmeqri, ado home now, lest your wife, cripple  
eš i amaw deš qedni.» «ader, ado though she may be, find out about  
mišgwa wokwre lusdgwærs esa us!' 'What can she find out? She  
kāmč'k'werne, ažnurd merde cannot climb up here.' 'Go, for if she  
māma χwi.» cuts off my golden braids, I cannot  
live.'

«aža deš qedni noma ʏed žār.» 'She cannot get up here, do not  
ala otbaža gogwer dedbers. worry about it!' The crippled old  
æmčedli mæšk'idte, oχw-šk'ādāla woman found out about this. She  
lurcmanær. æmčedēli k'ožæ went to the blacksmith, had him  
zirteysga, χat'q'ci lurcmæns k'ožš forge some nails; she went to the  
es ʏri ažži. žæmčedēli k'ožā base of the cliff, hammers the nails  
tχumiēysga. čwaq'wreχ alyær into the cliff, and goes (up) on them.  
ušχwid. žeshīda am žīn miča She went up to the top of the cliff.  
yeχw. oχk'id tærkæd tχumræš They are lying together. His wife  
kāχku-cūre lusdgwær miča found them like this. She took out  
wokwreš lusdgwær. čanqæd amži. hair-cutting scissors, and cut off her  
braids, her golden braids. She went  
down like this.

atχe žænyecχnæñ haši laχād Now (Dæl) woke up. Her head felt  
tχwim. ænk'æmre lusdgwær; light. She checked for her braids.  
lusdgwær dēsa χār. «sabra She has no braids. 'Alas, Darjelian!  
darželiān lusdgwær kōχč'k'əra Your wife has cut my braids. I can  
isgwa yeχws. atχe mi merde no longer live. What can I do? Cut  
māma χwi. mæ čomina? me open. I am one month pregnant.  
čamubqw. ešχu tew li, ʏanaw χwi. Cut me open with your pen-knife,  
čamubqw žaq'wšw, bepšw kæχik', take out the child, bring him down to  
čatχæ ləžēmi saragteži, ečeču the milk spring, and leave him there.  
česəg. ačalækwa anqdeniχ ʏertæl. The gods will come down there. Set  
mi wokwre k'ubteysga amgen me in a golden coffin, bury me  
χočāmd amuštχw.» well!'

*χamč'ir mewar darželiāns ami libqwe. «isgwaur mi mæy mešdeni?» «ala žek'wæd i ala čemn! argite er mōd ader, atχe ala čemn!» ču lečwme χāda; žānk'id žæq'w, čwabiqw ala, miča zurāl. kōχk'id bepšw sgādq'wine wokwre hakwænte. čadye ləžēmi saragteži, čacwir ameču.*

Darjelian does not want to cut her open: 'What will I do without you?' 'This is what you wanted, so do it! You did not go home, so now you must do this!' He had to do it; he took out his knife, cut her open, his woman. He took the child out of her, laid it in a golden cradle. He brought it down to the milk spring, left it there.

*amelækwa žgəræg anqæd. žanp'irsde miča moc'apšw, t'wet' žoχk'id hak'wæn-χænka, dašnæ ka lāχwem, amiran atžæχ. «isgwi mæc're nōru æri wode sumin krisdē tæsdweb d<e> āk'uši.»*

St. George came down there. He baptized him as his disciple, took him from the cradle, gave him a sword, named him Amiran. 'May no one defeat you, so long as you do not violate an oath taken in the name of Christ three times.'

A version in the Lower Bal dialect of Svan begins with the three sons of King Iwa encountering a cowhide ball rolling and bouncing on the mountainside. They finally succeed in catching it, and bring it home [Svan text in Davitiani et al (1957: 255-260)]:

*ašχw ladey alyær lætχwart<e> ačadχ. ašχw zagærzi χec'adχ ži lugwrize qanwem gwerā. al gwere mæ ležaw ik'rank'el, mæ lekwwaw, mæ žibaw i mæ čubaw, ežži ka sip', ere tes wend gar χætχp'ine mare.*

One day they went hunting. Upon a mountain-ridge they caught sight of a twisted-up (balled-up) bull-skin. The skin sometimes rolls upwards, sometimes downwards, sometimes upriver (= eastward), sometimes downriver (= west-ward), turning so (quickly) that one's eyes could hardly follow it.

King Iwa tells his sons to capture the bouncing hide-ball in a silk net which his godfather Christ God had given him. They bring the ball home, open it, and out jumps the infant Æmirm (Amiran), glowing "like a candle":<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup>In a study consecrated to Mesopotamian mythology, K'ik'nadze (1976: 108-112) points to several parallels between Amiran and the Babylonian weather-deity Marduk, most of which are solar attributes. Amiran is born glowing "like the sun"; during one of his adventures he is swallowed by a dragon, then cuts his

*mine mud ɣermat didæb χækwe, q'or i laqwra kotde: kadunk'wile, čwadpəšgəre gwere i amχenži let'wre mut'-wərsəl naɣwžurd ansk'ine. amnem q'ors i laqwras læybine lizwrel, mare alyær laχa ka lučwmin esχwidχ, č'erka læybine lip'orel i amži ukwicd ip'oral ašχw letni-ladeɣn. merma ladeɣ čwanqad i q'erbcu esəgan. iwad tχwim oxnik'w, ɣermat didæb χækwe i amži krisde ɣermeti anqad.*

*žənp'irsde al bepš i æmirm atžæχ, ečkanɣwe čwadmezre al kor i ačad. iwa χelc'ipχd i miča gezlirdi didæb χækweχ krisde ɣermat i æmiš nazunɣwe ka-čadχ æmirmište, liq'hæld gwi laχadχ i liprebæl-lišdræld mare amnem čvesgene alyær i χækwe «ži eser qanwem t'upt-eysgaid met'eχ li. semi let i ladeɣ eser χar ečeysga larde. χočamd ži næšwminunɣw eser kænqdeni i minecaχæn gar irdi.»*

*iwa χelc'ipχd i miča gezlird t'k'isd amži čeminχ. sam let i ladeɣunɣwe gweraxenka kan-qad i ežk'ælib li lesgdi maχeɣwæž, ere lesgdid li cod. ka læχcχorp'an laq'hals am bopšærs. iwa χelc'ipχd gezald læyywene æmirm i miča gezlird χošilid χalæt'.*

*ašχw tewisga yerwešd ləzæ maχeɣwæžs ætmažonan.*

Their father gave glory to God, shut the door(s) and window(s). He made them stand back, opened the hide, and a youth, (glowing) like a lit candle, sprang forth. He tried to go out the door and win-dow, but as he found them shut, he began leaping toward the ceiling, and thus he leapt without stopping, all night to the following day. The next day he came down and sat down before the hearth. Iwa bowed his head, gave glory to God, and thus Christ God came.

He baptized the child, and named him Æmirm; then he blessed the household and left. King Iwa and his children gave glory to Christ God and after he left they went to Æmirm, (because) they wanted to kiss and caress him, but he stopped them and said: 'I am to return inside the bull's hide. I have to stay inside it for three nights and days. After a good rest I will come out and will be with you.'

King Iwa and his children did just this. Three nights and days later, he came out from the hide, and he is such a (beautiful) youth, that it is painful to behold him. He embraced and kissed the children. King Iwa declared Æmirm his son, and loves him more than his own children.

In one month he resembled a twenty-year-old young man.

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way out through the dragon's side, leaving a hole through which the sun can exit when it is swallowed by the beast (a just-so story to explain solar eclipses).

The young Amiran, at first accompanied by his half-brothers Usip' and Badri, later completely alone, wanders the open spaces in search of adventure, avoiding home, hearth and family. Amiran takes on, and defeats, all challengers. (In the Lower Bal narrative in which the extract cited above appears, Æmirm and the sons of King Iwa overcome such picturesque opponents as giant grasshoppers, man-sized bees, iron soldiers and a gargantuan fire-breathing ogre). At last, after a long series of battles, Amiran fears that there is no worthy opponent left for him on earth. He issues a challenge to his godfather, the supreme deity, to come down and measure his strength against him. God punishes him for his audacity by chaining him to a pole driven deep into the earth, and encloses him inside a mountain high up in the Caucasus. His faithful dog Q'ursha (Black-ear) tries to gnaw through the chains, but every time Amiran is close to freeing himself, he is thwarted by either a woman who talks too much, a wagtail perching on the pole, or the combined activity of the local blacksmiths, who reinforce the chains by banging on their anvils every Holy Thursday morning (for details see Chikovani 1966 and Charachidzé 1986). Here, in translation, is the conclusion to the Lower Bal tale of Æmirm:

*One day Christ God came before them. Æmirm stood before him and pleaded: No one standing on the earth can defeat me, so now you should fight me.*

*Christ replied: That would be shameful, I cannot fight you. Let us go aside.*

*They go and go, and come to a plain by a hill, and there his godfather (= Christ) said to him: I will stick this pole into the hill, and if you can pull it out, we will fight.*

*Good, said Æmirm.*

*He stuck the pole in (the hill) and Æmirm grabbed it. He pulled and pulled and finally extracted it. He (Christ) stuck it in again, and Æmirm again pulled it out. He said to his godfather: Why are you toying with me? If you are going to fight me, let's fight, and if not, leave me be!*

*The godfather replied: Let's do it once more, and then you can*

*do what you want.*

*He drove the pole into the cliff and (said): May your roots spread through the whole world.*

*The pole in fact spread its roots all the way through the earth. Æmirm pulled and pulled, but it did not budge. After a full year he nearly pulled it out, but then his godfather set a bird on its tip, and gave a hammer to Æmirm. He swung at the bird, it flew away, the hammer hit the pole and drove it back (into the ground) again. The godfather bound him to the pole and set the dog Q'ursha to be his companion. Q'ursha licks the chain holding Æmirm almost to the point of breaking; therefore it is the task of blacksmiths to restore it to wholeness and make the chain thick again. All year long Æmirm pulls on the stake, but cannot pull it out. The bird sits on its top, Æmirm swings the hammer at it, missing the bird and driving the pole back down. Æmirm's heart is bursting from anger. They say that Æmirm must not break out, or else he will not leave a single blacksmith nor bright-eyed one [= woman] on the face of the earth.*

2.2. AMIRAN AND PROMETHEUS. The punishment of Amiran will remind the reader, of course, of the fate of the Titan Prometheus, enchained and imprisoned in the Caucasus mountain range at the order of Zeus for having restored fire to the human race. The specification of the Caucasus seems almost too good to be true, and in fact there is more to the story than simple choice of locale or type of punishment. In a brilliant and detailed comparison of the two traditions, Charachidzé (1986) demonstrates that the correspondences between the Amiran and Prometheus cycles are too deep and systematic to be attributable to chance or simple borrowing.

Charachidzé's argument makes extensive use of episodes and symbolic material from the life and punishment segments of the two stories, such as the three-phase punishment inflicted on Amiran and Prometheus, in which the protagonist is first chained to a pillar, then enclosed in a mountain, then exposed to the sky atop the Caucasus; and the eagle, "winged dog of Zeus" (*Diós ptēnòs kúōn*), which torments Prometheus, compared to the winged

dog Q'ursha, hatched from an eagle's egg, who keeps company with Amiran in his mountain prison (detailed description in Nizharadze 1962). Of greater importance for our investigation into Achilles' Caucasian parallels is Charachidzé's reconstruction of the ideological background of the Prometheus-Amiran myth, which is one of the major contributions of his book. The principal elements of the complex are:

(i) *The male fantasy world.* Prometheus and Amiran are associated with an imaginary world-order of abundance and unconstraint, in which one could live off the riches of nature without having to engage in labor or exchange. The confrontation between Prometheus and Zeus “marque une coupure décisive dans l'histoire de l'humanité” (Charachidzé 1986: 233). In the bygone age when his fellow Titan Cronos ruled upon the earth, and before his brother Epimetheus took the fatal step of opening Pandora's box, mortals “lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them ... and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint” (Hesiod *Works and Days* 112-119; tr. Evelyn-White). As for Amiran, his is a world in which men lived by hunting and fighting, taking what they needed without having to give anything back. Food came from the hunt rather than the drudgery of agriculture. The only woman Amiran is said to have obtained was a battle prize, won by the annihilation of her father and his army, rather than by the long sequence of negotiation, gift and counter-gift, that Caucasian society demands. In sum, the worlds of Prometheus and Amiran are a projection of the misogynistic and anti-social fantasies of the Greek or Caucasian male, marked by the absence of the principal constraints imposed by civilization: settled life, marriage through alliance and exchange, the toil and risk of agriculture.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>In a recent study of the traditional beliefs of the Khevsurs and Pshavs of northeast Georgia, K'ik'nadze (1996: x) astutely observes that the Amiran cycle never achieved the level of popularity there that it has in the western Caucasus, because of subtle differences in the structure of their respective religious systems. In the *andrezebi*, or myths of foundation, of local cults, the divine and

(ii) *The challenge to God.* The Greek Titan and the Caucasian superman confront the supreme deity, but without having recourse to religion or magic. The resources they rely on, however, are radically different: Prometheus employs intelligence and cunning, Amiran draws on brute strength.

(iii) *The rebel punished to ensure the social good.* Both challenges to divine and terrestrial order are suppressed before an open conflict can arise. Prometheus and Amiran are captured and each is chained to a pillar on a high mountain peak. As was stated at the end of the Svanetian text cited earlier, Amiran must be maintained in captivity lest he exterminate blacksmiths<sup>23</sup> and the “bright-eyed ones”, bringing an end to society as we know it.

While the Prometheus-Amiran complex explored by Charachidzé draws principally upon the latter phases of the story of the god-challenging male-fantasy hero, the Achilles-Amiran comparison presented here includes all stages of the protagonist’s life history, and especially his conception, birth and childhood. Rather than being evidence against Charachidzé’s thesis, or a revision of it, the facts presented here are precisely what would one expect as confirmation of the “très vieille et longue cohabitation entre groupes caucasiens méridionaux et groupes d’origine indo-européenne” — in particular, the ancestors of the Greeks — which the Prometheus-Amiran correspondences point to (Charachidzé 1986: 338-9). Under conditions of long-term contact, direct or

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semi-divine warrior heroes of the northeast Georgian mountains slay demons and ogres in order to liberate the territory for settlement by the community (*saq’mo*) of believers. Amiran, by contrast, has no such ties to a community; indeed, an anti-social nature is one of his defining characteristics.

<sup>23</sup>More precisely, as pointed out by Charachidzé, both cycles are characterized by an ambivalence toward blacksmiths. On the one hand Prometheus and Amiran have associations with metallurgy, the former as conveyor of fire and technology to humans, the latter as son of a blacksmith (in a handful of West Georgian variants), and as wielding a hammer, with which he perversely drives the stake to which he is chained back in the ground. On the other hand, both are imprisoned by deities of the forge by the command of God (Hephaistos enchains Prometheus, the demonic metal-working Kadzhis capture Amiran in some Georgian versions).

mediated, one would expect elements of a culturally-important symbolic cluster to crystallize onto more than one personage, and — as noted by Dumézil in the case of the Romans — for symbolic material pertaining to social ideology to be projected onto supernatural actors in a text framed as ‘myth’ in one region or period, and onto human actors in a text framed as ‘history’ or ‘epic’ in another.<sup>24</sup>

3. ACHILLES AND THE CAUCASUS. In the following sections we will consider the representations in west-central Caucasian mythology of the principal elements of the Achilles story. In addition to the Svanetian Amiran cycle, the texts to be analyzed here are the descriptions of Batradz in the Ossetic Nart epics, and of Tswitsw in the Abkhazian legends of the Ats’an dwarves. The following groups of motifs will be compared:

(1) *parentage*

(2) *threat to celestial sovereignty, interrupted incubation and near-invulnerability*

(3) *warrior exploits, sojourn in the wild, and destruction by indirect action of God*

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<sup>24</sup>The motif complex discussed here may well have surfaced, at least in fragmentary form, elsewhere in Greek mythology. The legend of Caeneus, likewise recounted by Apollodorus, is a case in point. Caeneus “was originally a woman, but when Poseidon made love with her, she asked to be made a man and invulnerable. And so in the battle with the Centaurs he was scornful of being wounded and killed many of them. But others stood around him beating him with fir trees and buried him in the ground” (*Library* III.xxvi.22, tr. Simpson). The scholia to the *Iliad* and the *Argonautica*, as noted by Sergent (1996: 286), contain a different and more detailed account of the fate of Caeneus: He plants his spear in the middle of the agora, and demands that the people worship it as a god. Zeus is infuriated by this insult to the Olympian gods, and sends the Centaurs to punish Caeneus. The parallels to the Amiran complex include (i) near invulnerability, (ii) challenge to divine sovereignty, (iii) the motif of a pole-like object thrust into the ground (although its function in the Caeneus story is quite different), and (iv) punishment by proxies sent by the supreme god. Note as well that Caeneus is buried by the Centaurs, a theme recalling the entombment of Prometheus and Amiran inside of a mountain.

3.1. PARENTAGE. Achilles, as was mentioned above, is the son of a shape-changing nature goddess and a human hunter who coupled with her in her seaside cavern.

3.1.1. AMIRAN. Amiran is the offspring of Dæl, the Svanetian goddess of mountain game animals, and a human hunter who enters her domain (the mountains), and sleeps with her in her cave. Among the numerous characteristics attributed to Dæl in Svanetian mythology is the ability to take on the form of the animals she watches over, especially the ibex. When Dæl transforms herself into an ibex, it is usually marked by a golden horn or unusual beauty.

Darjelian encounters Dæl while wandering in the mountains in search of game. In traditional Caucasian religious ideology, broadly speaking, the hunter was a type of intermediary between the domestic and alpine spatial realms.<sup>25</sup> In these societies the primary division of space is between the domestic, ‘civilized’ realm, centered around the village, and the savage, exterior realm. Of the various component spaces of the latter, the high mountains, home of the ibex and their divine patrons, is deemed especially pure compared to the village and the lowlands. The principal occasions of impurity were death and women’s blood flow (during menstruation or childbirth), for which reason women were excluded from spaces associated with a high degree of purity, such as churches and the mountains.

In this intermediate space, between the inaccessible peaks where Dæl and her sisters dwell, and the village in the valley, the goddess and the hunter meet. Underlying their encounter is a competition for the exploitation of natural resources. The game

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<sup>25</sup>Just before preparing the final version of this paper, I came across this striking observation by K’ik’nadze (1996: 64), which is wholly consistent with the argument developed here: “The hunter who goes up into the pure mountains is like an oracle (*mk’adre*), who has the right to cross into sacred (*k’vrivi*) places”. The principal function of the *mk’adre* in the traditional religious system of the Georgian mountaineers is to assure communication between the celestial world of the deities and the terrestrial community of humankind (Charachidzé 1968: 205-223).

animals dwelling in the mountains — ibexes, deer, mountain goats — were believed by a number of Caucasian peoples to be under the protection of supernatural beings who herded them like sheep or goats and exploited them for food, just as human pastoralists do (Dirr 1925). Dæl is often pictured leading a herd of ibex to graze in alpine meadows, or milking a female ibex. Her Abkhazian counterparts, Až<sup>o</sup>eipšaa and his daughters, are believed to slaughter the ibex in their herd and feast on their meat. The animals are subsequently brought back to life from their bones and skin (Salakaia 1991a). The exploitation of wild caprids by hunters, and of their domesticated cousins by herdsman, thus parallels the animal husbandry practiced by the gods, and contrasts with the economic activities assigned to women, such as milking cows (see Table 1).<sup>26</sup> As long as hunters respect the conditions imposed by the animal patrons, they are allocated a limited number of beasts from the latter's herds, and the divine and human exploitation of game animals are harmoniously integrated and balanced.<sup>27</sup> Insofar as they draw profit from the resources of nature for the benefit of human society, hunters are under the protection of the deity St. George (Svan *žgəɾæ:g*), whose principle function is, as Charachidzé puts it, “mettre les espaces naturels à la disposition des hommes” (1986: 183). As such, he is the patron of hunters, woodcutters, and beekeepers; the Svans refer to wolves, the predators par excellence, as “St. George's dogs” (*žgəɾæ:gi žeɣər*; Shanidze et al #106, p 90). In some regions the patronage of St. George extends to war and raiding parties — referred to as *veloba* (“exterior activity”, from the root *vel-* “undomesticated space”) —

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<sup>26</sup>Milking cows is women's work throughout the Caucasus, whereas, in some regions, sheep are milked by men (Kosven et al (1960: 488) on the Laks).

<sup>27</sup>According to Abkhazian and Mingrelian sources, the animal patrons only allow hunters to kill those animals which they, the deities, had previously eaten and revived (Anshba 1982: 36; Salakaia 1991a; Tsanova 1990: 55-6; Danelia & Tsanova 1991: 345-347). On quotas for hunters, and the consequences of overkilling, see note 29 below. Warriors, whose predatory activity parallels that of hunters, are restricted to twelve kills per battle (K'ik'nadze 1996: 243).

for the same reasons (K'ik'nadze 1996: 202). As deities watching over the space outside of the mountain village, the pair Dæl-Jgøræ:g, and their Abkhazian and East Georgian homologues (Až<sup>o</sup>eipšaa-Aerg<sup>28</sup> and Samdzimar-Giorgi, respectively), work more or less in tandem, though the relationship between the patron of game animals and sponsor of hunters can easily degenerate into conflict (Tuite, ms).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>As patron of herdsmen, warriors, hunters and travellers — men venturing out of the community into the wild to achieve some goal — the functions of Aerg overlap with those of the Georgian and Svan St. George. His complementary functional relation to Až<sup>o</sup>eipšaa is reflected, for example, in the characterization in an Abkhazian folksong of the ideal hunter “to whom Aerg first gave the stick [for protection — KT], to whom Až<sup>o</sup>eipšaa first granted the liver [of a game animal — KT] (*Airg'aa rapx'a alaba zdark'ez, Až<sup>o</sup>eipšaa rapx'a aguac<sup>o</sup>'a zdark'ez*). The cult of Christian St. George in Abkhazia has assimilated many elements from that of Aerg, and an etymological connection between the names Aerg and Giorgi has been suggested by at least one Abkhazian linguist, S. T. Zvanba (Anshba 1982: 26-33; 1991).

<sup>29</sup>The ballad of the legendary Svan hunter Chorla recounts how the title character incites the wrath of Dæl and her sisters, referred to collectively as *dalær* “the Dæls”, by slaughtering more than his quota of ibexes. According to traditional hunting lore, one can kill as many animals as there are empty-handed hunters in the party, but no more. As long as hunters observe this regulation, as well as several others concerning ritual purity, treatment of the bones, etc., the Dæls will allow them to kill a few animals from their herd (Chikovani, 1972: 228). Chorla, although he has no companion other than his dog, kills three ibex and is taking aim at a fourth when the Dæls seize him and hang him by his right foot and left hand from the cliff face. The desperate hunter sends his dog for help. The dog returns with St. George, who threatens to bring a source of pollution into the mountains unless the Dæls release Chorla (Chikovani, 1972: 99). St. George promises the hunter that henceforth he can kill without limit, and that he will take his side against the Dæls, “*maîtresses du gibier, qui veillent au contraire à préserver la nature d'un pillage inconsidéré et finalement dévastateur*” (Charachidzé 1986: 185).

**TABLE 1. THE CAUCASIAN POTNIA THÊRÔN COMPLEX.**

<i>SPACE</i>	<i>HUMANS</i>	<i>ANIMALS</i>	<i>DEITIES</i>
high mountains (antagonistic to pollution)	— — —	game animals (ibex, deer) herded by goddess	protectress of game animals (extreme of purity)
INTER-MEDIARY (men and caprids)	herdsman, hunter (chosen lover of goddess), warrior	goats/sheep in alpine pastures	‘St. George’, patron of men exploiting riches of nature
village, household (domestic space)	woman (impure)	bovines tended near village by women	goddesses of hearth, women (childbirth), dairy animals

3.1.2. BATRADZ. The warrior Batradz is one of the principal characters in the Ossetic sagas of the Narts, legendary heroes who are said to have lived in the remote past. Batradz — the name has been etymologized as “hero (*batur*) of the Ossetes (*As*)” (Abaev 1988) — was born from the union of the Nart hunter Xæmyts and an unnamed shape-changing woman from the lineage of the sea-god Donbetyr (“[St.] Peter of the waters”) (Kalojev 1991b; Dumézil 1930: 50-74). According to one version of the story, Xæmyts catches sight of a white hare while hunting, and shoots at it. The animal falls dead, but suddenly comes back to life and runs on. Xæmyts kills it three more times, and each time it revives. Finally the hare runs to the seacoast and plunges into the waters. Some time later an old man rises from the sea and tells Xæmyts that the white hare is in fact a transformation of the daughter of Donbetyr, and that he is to return in a month to marry her. At the wedding feast he is told that his wife must spend the daylight hours inside a tortoise shell, only assuming her radiantly beautiful female form at night (Dumézil 1978: 214). In another version she takes on the form of a frog by day, and returns to human appearance only at

night.<sup>30</sup>

Donbettyr lives at the bottom of the sea in a magnificent palace, with his beautiful Nereid-like daughters. He is the patron of fisher-men, and his daughters the guardian spirits of rivers and lakes. They also have significant kinship ties with the Narts: besides Batradz, three of the principal characters among the older generations of Narts — Uryzmæg, Satana, and Xæmyts himself — were born to Dzerassæ, one of Donbettyr’s daughters, who also resembles the Svanetian Dæl in several respects.<sup>30a</sup>

3.1.3. TSWITSW. One of the more striking heroes in the Abkhazian cycle of Nart sagas is Tswitsw (*c<sup>o</sup>əc<sup>o</sup>* “wood-chip, shaving”, from his habit of sitting by the fireplace and whittling). He is the son of Zylxa, a woman of the Ats’an (*ác’an*) race, and the Nart Kun (*K<sup>o</sup>ən*) (Salakaia 1976: 49-51; 1991b). The Ats’ans are dwarves of superhuman strength, believed to have been the first inhabitants of Abkhazia. At that time there was no night, no cold or snow, no illness, neither birth nor death. The Ats’ans lived in the mountains, where they herded large, long-bearded goats, enclosing them in stone pens (*ac’an-g<sup>o</sup>ara*), the ruins of which are still found here and there in the Abkhazian uplands. Since they did not know the use of fire, they subsisted on raw meat, supplemented by milk from their goats, as well as from wild deer (Inal-ipa 1971: 122-127). In many respects — superhuman power, mountain residence,

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<sup>30</sup>The Ossetes also have an Amiran cycle, in all likelihood based on the Svanetian/Georgian versions, but with interesting differences linking it to the Batradz myth. The mother of Amiran, from whose belly he is prematurely extracted, is an aquatic deity, the sister of Donbettyr. The child has a body of gold and silver, with an image of the sun on one shoulder, and of the moon on the other. The family of Donbettyr takes the newborn child to the sea bottom, where he milks at the breasts of the ‘sea cow’ and plays with the ‘sea bull’ (Chikovani 1966: 190-1; K’ik’nadze 1976: 111).

<sup>30a</sup>Dzerassæ is portrayed as a beautiful, golden-haired woman who can take on the shape of a bird or deer. John Colarusso (pers. comm.) suggests a link between the first syllable of *Dzerassæ* (< \*der-a:ssya) and *Dæl*, with transmission via Circassian accounting for the phonetic changes.

herding of wild animals — the attributes of the Ats'ans resemble those of Dæl and her sisters. The Ats'ans are either ignorant of God, or outright disrespectful toward him, a character flaw which will eventually lead to their extermination.

3.2. THREAT TO CELESTIAL SOVEREIGNTY, INTERRUPTED INCUBATION, NEAR-INVULNERABILITY. It was prophesied that any child born to Thetis would be stronger than his father. Hence Zeus arranged to have Thetis married to a mortal. After Achilles's birth, Thetis treated him with fire to render him immortal. Her spouse Peleus interrupted her while she was holding Achilles in the fire. Thetis fled, leaving Achilles invulnerable over all but a part of his body, and returned to her home at the bottom of the sea. Deprived of his mother's milk, the child subsists on the innards and marrow of wild animals fed him by Cheiron.

3.2.1. AMIRAN. In most of the variants of the Amiran myth collected by Chikovani, Dæl orders Darejan to cut the child out of her womb after only a few day's gestation. In some cases this follows an incident in which the hunter's wife finds the couple while they are sleeping together in Dæl's cave. She cuts off the goddess' golden braids, and quietly leaves. On waking the goddess declares that she can no longer live, that she is pregnant, and gives her lover instructions on how to extract the child and complete the gestation. In two versions he spends three months in the belly of a calf or lamb, then is transferred to the belly of a bull for three more months before he is born; in others the prematurely-born infant is wrapped in the hide of a bull (Chikovani 1966: 220, 227, 237; Charachidzé 1986: 57). Nearly all of the variants describe Amiran's prodigious growth-rate ("after one month he resembled a twenty-year-old man"), but not his diet. The two exceptions I know of are the Upper Svan text in Chikovani's corpus (1966: 227), in which the infant's father is instructed to "put the heart of a bull in the child's mouth" to replace his mother's breast, and a text from Rach'a, a Georgian province to the east of Svaneti, describing how a deer comes to the abandoned child and suckles him (Rexviashvili 1953: 166-167). The 'milk spring' by which he is abandoned by his biological father may also be a source of nourishment. In any

case, he is denied the diet of mother's milk an ordinary child would have had. According to several versions from east-central Georgia (Pshavi, Kartli), Amiran has only one vulnerable spot on his body, his little finger or his leg (Chikovani 1966: 215, 248, 256, 263, 308; Charachidzé 1986: 49).

3.2.2. **BATRADZ.** The descendents of Donbetyr are dwarves with superhuman strength, extremely quick to take offense (Dumézil 1965: 173-5). One day Xæmyts, against his wife's wishes, brings her in her frog shape with him to an assembly of the Narts, where she is ridiculed by the trickster Syrdon. Although pregnant, she refuses to remain with her husband any longer. She blows the fetus out of her mouth onto Xæmyts' shoulder, implanting it in an abscess, stating: "Had he been able to drink my milk, he would have been without rival in the world" (ibid, 179). Satana, the mother of the Narts, counts the months of gestation, and opens the abscess. The new-born child is of white-hot steel, and straightaway he plunges into the sea, turning the waters to steam. The divine smith Kurdalægon tempers the young Batradz in intense fire. He comes out of the fire completely hardened save at one spot, either on his skull or inside his gut. (Dumézil 1930: 70-72; 1965: 188-9).

3.2.3. **TSWITSW.** The Ats'ans are noted for their touchiness as well as their strength. One day Zylxa takes offense at a remark made by her husband. She cuts the fetus she has been bearing out of her womb, and returns to her people, leaving embryo and husband behind. The child is too hot to touch or breastfeed. The Narts send a man to enquire of Zylxa what to do. She replies that the child must be fed molten steel rather than milk. He grows at an astonishing rate, and all realize that he will be a great hero (Inal-IPA 1977: 161-162).<sup>31</sup> While there is no mention in the texts known to me of a vulnerable spot on Tswitsw's body, his mother's people, the Ats'ans, are said to be nearly indestructable. God becomes

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<sup>31</sup>As was mentioned earlier, Achilles was said to have received his name because he never put his lips on his mother's breast. The stories of Batradz and Tswitsw, and the description in the Homeric Hymns of the attempted immortalization of Demophoön by Demeter (Furley, 1981: 73-77) explicitly mention that these children did not drink their mother's milk, though they did receive some other form of nourishment (molten steel, ambrosia).

angry at the Ats'ans because of their haughtiness, and wishes to find out how they can be destroyed. God sends a boy from the sky to be raised by the Ats'ans. He learns that the Ats'ans are vulnerable to fire, and that they can be annihilated only by covering the earth with cotton and setting it ablaze (Inal-IPA 1977: 164-8).

3.3. WARRIOR EXPLOITS, SOJOURN IN THE WILD, AND DESTRUCTION BY INDIRECT ACTION OF SUPREME DEITY. Achilles spends his childhood in the mountains, under the care and tutelage of the centaur Cheiron. After Odysseus finds him disguised as a girl at the court of Lycomedes, he joins the expedition against Troy, where he leads the Greeks to victory. He is killed, directly or indirectly, by Apollo, the son and agent of Zeus. There is nothing to compare to the (literally) titanic struggles for Olympian sovereignty marking the preceding generations of gods as recounted in Hesiod's *Theogony*: Cronus castrating his father Uranus, and in turn being overthrown by his son Zeus. Indeed there is no confrontation at all, a fact all the more curious in the context of the violence marking almost every page of Greek mythology.

3.3.1. AMIRAN. Amiran enjoys nothing more than hunting and fighting, and refuses to leave the wild to return to human society. "Sans maison, sans foyer, il vit dehors, parmi les démons, les fauves, le gibier" (Charachidzé 1986: 29, 202). His avoidance of the give-and-take of social life is especially marked in his attitude toward marital alliance.<sup>32</sup> The Svan and Georgian texts refer to

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<sup>32</sup>In his study of traditional Caucasian social thought as reflected in the character of Amiran, Charachidzé (1986: 203) emphasizes the symbolic opposition between, on the one hand, the hunter-to-excess (maybe one could call him the 'hunter-who-never-grows-up'), imagined as one who practices his livelihood beyond the limits of human society, taking what he needs from nature without giving in return, and, on the other hand, the peasant bound by a web of reciprocal obligations to wife, hearth, clan and village. "L'idéologie géorgienne conçoit le chasseur excessif comme un anti-gendre ... La libre activité du prédateur absolu ... implique la destruction du foyer et du mariage, la vanité de tous les travaux quotidiens, la négation du groupe social tel qu'il est, dans sa structure et ses entreprises". Perhaps the closest Greek parallel to this facet of

only one occasion where Amiran seeks a wife, though in fact what appeals to him most is the opportunity to fight to obtain her rather than the possibility of forging a relationship with her and her clan. Once the carnage, which ends in the annihilation of her father and his followers, is over, Amiran leaves his new bride and continues on his way in search of greater challenges to his prowess. Amiran takes on all comers, annihilating ogres and monsters, until no living thing is left on the face of the earth save “three blind ogres and three oak trees” (Chikovani 1966: 236). Convinced that no opponent worthy of his strength remains on earth, Amiran issues his fateful challenge to God (or he violates oaths taken in the name of God, which amounts to the same thing). In some versions the supreme deity invites Amiran to a test of strength (for example, planting a stake into the ground so deep that it reaches to the center of the earth, and daring Amiran to pull it out), but in no instance do they actually come to blows. The dénouement is eerily anticlimactic: God makes a sign of the cross, or calls on his angels, and Amiran is bound to a pillar with unbreakable chains (Charachidzé 1986: 66-84). In a few versions the task is entrusted to the supernatural masters of metallurgy: the Kadzhis (a race of demonic blacksmiths) or, in an Ossetic recension of the Amiran saga, to the god of the forge Kurdalægon (Charachidzé 1986: 70, 304).

3.3.2. BATRADZ. The newborn Batradz, his body of white-hot steel, plunges into the depths of the sea to cool off. He spends his early childhood on the bottom of the sea, where he grows “as much in a month as an ordinary child does in three years”. It is there that he receives the name of Batradz (Dumézil 1965: 179). He is

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Amiran’s character is the “chasseur noir” studied by Vidal-Naquet (1981, 1992), the legendary epebe who refuses to complete the passage from raw youth to civilized adulthood. A chorus in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* (781-796) recounts the legend of a youth appropriately named Melanion, who “fled to the desert to avoid marriage. He lived in the mountains and hunted ... And he never returned home, because he detested women so much.” Melanion’s female counterpart is Atalanta, raised by a she-bear in the mountains, “qui marchait sur les cimes élevées des montagnes, fuyant les désirs du mariage” (Vidal-Naquet 1981: 145).

coaxed onto dry land by the wise mother of the Narts, Satana, who employs a ruse that will be discussed toward the end of the paper.

Later in his career the hero Batradz lives far above the land of the Narts, either in the heavens or on a mountain peak, cooling his steel body on the surface of a glacier. Shooting down like a thunderbolt, he wreaks havoc not only upon monsters and human enemies, but also upon the Narts themselves and various minor deities and protective spirits (Dumézil 1965: 181-218). These latter complain to God (Xutsau) that Batradz is mistreating them.<sup>33</sup> Batradz thereupon issues a challenge to God. God determines that the only way to kill his presumptuous rival is to burn his vulnerable intestine. He calls on the sun to give as much heat in a day as it ordinarily does in a full year, which produces the desired effect.

3.3.3. TSWITSW. Tswitsw is a curious case, a kind of Abkhazian Cinderella: he spends his time sitting idly by the fire, whittling (hence his name), refusing to participate in the activities appropriate to a man. But when the Narts depart on an adventure or raid, he quickly disguises himself, painting half of his body and clothing white, the other half black, and sets off on a similarly colored horse. He catches up to the Narts, outdoes them in heroism and strength, then returns home to take up his place by the fire. Although he returns to the village, he does not participate in its social life, nor reveal his true identity to his comrades. It would appear that the mythemic feature of distance from the hearth has been inverted in the case of Tswitsw, but without changing his fundamentally anti-social nature.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Dumézil (1978: 50-66) points out that Batradz's assault on the angels and spirits is contextualized in the ancient Indo-European thematic framework of the "three sins of the warrior", in which the protagonist commits a wrong against representatives of each of the three functions. In the case of Batradz, he seeks revenge for the death of his father Xæmyts by successively victimizing a rich farming family (third function), the Nart warriors (second function), and finally the spirits and divinities (first function).

<sup>34</sup>Charachidzé (1986: 166 note 1) observes that the Abkhazian variants of folktales and myths often contain symbolic inversions relative to their Georgian and Circassian homologues.

As was the case regarding invulnerability, the Ats'ans as a whole correspond to the single god-defying hero of the Georgian and Ossetic cycles. They behave more and more disrespectfully toward people and toward God (turning their heads toward heaven while urinating, etc.) Irritated by their insolence, God seeks a way to destroy them. He sends as a spy a child to be raised by the Ats'ans. Once he finds out that only fire can destroy them, God causes wads of dry cotton to fall from the sky like snow, which he then ignites with lightning.<sup>35</sup> Only those Ats'ans who hid in rivers or caves were spared from the holocaust; the former turned into frogs, the latter into demons or snakes (Inal-Ipa 1977: 165-166).

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<sup>35</sup>This bizarre detail drew the attention of Dumézil, who noted that the ancient Scythians, remote ancestors of the Ossetes, knew “le motif de la fausse neige, ennemi de l’homme” (1978: 339-351), associated with a spatial division between uninhabitable and inhabitable territory. The Scythian account recorded by Herodotus specifies that a blizzard of snow-like flammable material (in this case, feathers) renders the vast territories to the north of the Scythian homeland an inhospitable desert. In the Abkhazian legends, the division is by altitude: once upon a time there was no snow, and even the high peaks of the Caucasus were inhabited by the Ats'ans. The deluge of cotton led not only to the destruction of the sacriligious dwarves, but also to a fundamental change in the geography of Abkhazia. Henceforth the mountains are covered with eternal snow, leaving only the lower altitudes suitable for human occupation. Dumézil surmised that the false-snow motif was known to the peoples occupying the north and east coasts of the Black Sea, but there is reason to wonder if the theme did not have wider distribution. Folklorists studying the oral traditions of the Pyrenees have recorded a number of legends concerning the pre-human inhabitants of the region, a race of giants who pastured their animals and cultivated wheat high in the mountains at a time when there was as yet no snow. One morning an elder of the tribe awakens to find the ground covered with a strange white powder, the likes of which had never been seen before (one text likens it to wool). He recognizes that it betokens the dawning of a new era, which most of the legends associate with the coming of Christianity. The Pyrenean stories end either with a collective suicide of the giants, or the descent of some of them to the lowlands, where they introduce the arts of agriculture and metallurgy to humans (de Marliave 1989: 14-6). One recognizes a series of parallels with the Ats'an cycle: a mountain-dwelling race of humanoids of unusual size, living in prosperity and ignorant of or hostile toward the current religious order, the end of whose reign is signalled by a mysterious white substance falling from the sky. The matter merits further study.

The Caucasian myths all conclude with a surprisingly easy, almost effortless punishment of the hero, before he realizes his desire of actual combat with God. According to Charachidzé, “il n’arrive jamais que Dieu et le héros se mesurent l’un contre l’autre, malgré le désir qu’en manifeste Amiran. Un combat tel que celui de Jacob et l’Ange demeure inconcevable au Caucase, même au niveau du mythe” (1986: 68). Likewise in the case of Zeus: although he overthrew his father, who had overthrown his father before him, and despite the existence of at least two goddesses who were destined to bear him a son who would be capable of defeating him, Zeus never confronts Achilles or any other son of his in a battle for sovereignty. The lengths to which the threatened deities go to avoid such a battle are often quite ingenious:

(i) trickery: God challenges Amiran to uproot a stake, and then chains him to it; periodically he sends a bird to perch on the stake, goading Amiran into hammering it back into the ground.

(ii) magic: God makes a sign of the cross, and Amiran is straightaway bound to the stake.

(iii) the action of subordinates: God commands his angels / the sun / demon blacksmiths to execute the punishment.

(iv) preventive (in)action: Zeus resists the urge to mate with Thetis, and gives her to Peleus; Zeus swallows Metis before she can give birth to a son.

In view of the recourse to hand-to-hand combat in all other challenges to honor or status in these myths, it is clearly the absence of a direct confrontation which is the significant feature in the dénouement of the Amiran-Achilles-Prometheus complex.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>According to Devereux’s psychoanalytic reading, “la périodicité et la répétitivité notoire des opérations maléfiques grecques ... rendent inévitable la castration éventuelle du castrateur ... Il va sans dire que tant que Zeus était dieu suprême, aucun mythe racontant sa castration ne pouvait être créé. Cependant ce thème constitue l’arrière-plan *latent* de toute une série de mythes de Zeus” (1982 110).

**TABLE 2. ACHILLES AND HIS CAUCASIAN COUNTERPARTS.**

	<b>ACHILLES</b>	<b>AMIRAN</b>	<b>BATRADZ</b>	<b>TSWITSW</b>
mother (divine shape-changer)	Thetis	Dæl	frog-woman	Zylxa ( of Ats'an dwarves)
son threat to God's sovereignty	yes	yes	yes	race disrespectful of God
father (hunter)	Peleus	Darejan	Nart Xæmyts	Nart Kun
premature birth	no (abandoned by Thetis)	yes (fetus cut from womb)	yes (spit out)	yes (fetus cut from womb)
born flaming	tempered in fire as newborn	"like candle"	born white-hot, tempered in fire	born hot, drinks molten iron
interruption by spouse	Peleus disrupts Thetis	Darejan's wife cuts Dæl's hair	insult to wife	insult to wife
abandoned by mother	yes	yes	yes	yes
substitute for mother's milk	marrow, innards of wild beasts	bull's heart, deer's milk	(not specified)	molten steel
vulnerable spot	ankle	little finger	intestine	race vulnerable to fire
infancy in nature	raised in forest by centaur	abandoned by 'milk spring'	grows up on sea bottom	[ <i>inversion</i> ]: sits by hearth
named by substitute father	named by Cheiron (in mountains)	named by God (by spring)	named on sea bottom	named by father's brother Sit
warrior on fringes of society	warrior outside of Troy	fighter and hunter in the wild	warrior, living atop mountain	warrior in disguise
defeat by indirect action of God	killed by Apollo	chained by angels or demons	killed by heat (ordered by God)	cotton ignited by lightning from God

4. ACHILLES AND HIS COLCHIAN COUSINS. The Georgian, Ossetic, Abkhazian and Greek treatments of the mythic framework laid out in Table 2 are concerned in different ways with the unbridgeable divide between the immortal gods and the mortal non-gods, human and animal (Halm-Tisserant 1993: 149; Buxton 1994: 74), and the supremacy of the “patriarchal” status quo (Chikovani 1966; Virsaladze 1976). This simple statement does not, obviously, exhaust the symbolic content of the myth cycles discussed here. As Charachidzé (1986) demonstrates, the adventures and punishment of Amiran and his equivalents among the Abkhazians, Armenians and Circassians, served as a problem-space within which were worked out the tensions between the sexes, the obligations of marriage, the contrast between the hunter in the savage space of the mountains, and the peasant in the domesticated space of the village.

The individual traditions of a God-challenging superhero, and the variations on the theme which have come down to us within each one, reflect, as would a group of languages with a long history of contact and mutual influence, shared elements of different time depths and different ranges of distribution. Before returning to the principal theme of this paper, I will take a brief look at some of these layers of motifs shared by some or all of the cultures in question.

4.1. THE MERMAID AND THE MORTAL. The specific and geographically-restricted correspondances in the Thetis-Peleus-Achilles story enumerated above are set against the backdrop of themes of much wider distribution. The marriage of Thetis and Peleus, for example, bears an uncanny similarity to folk tales from as far away as Japan of a mortal marrying a mermaid, who subsequently abandons him and returns to the sea (Mayer 1936; Lesky 1937). Burkert sees in Thetis and others of her clan (Leucothea, the Old Man of the Sea [*hálíos gérōn*]) the distant echoes of the possibly Paleolithic motif of “a Master or a Mistress of the Animals who must be won over to the side of the hunters ... [although] in the official religion of the Greeks this survives at little more than the level of folklore” (Burkert 1984: 172).

4.2. THE BIOGRAPHY OF A HERO. Achilles and his cousins from the other side of the Black Sea share many of the features of mythical heroes from around the world: semi-divine origin, abandonment at birth, youth spent in a liminal space, choice of everlasting fame over long life (Meletinsky 1991, in press).<sup>37</sup> Several elements characterizing the careers of Achilles and Amiran appear in the cycle of legends featuring the Irish hero Fionn mac Cumhail (Finn MacCool), for example, though their sequence and distribution among the members of his lineage are not always the same. Fionn's father, Cumhail, secretly wedded the daughter of a king who had received, from the mouth of a Druid, the prophecy that his daughter's son would overthrow him. Cumhail died before his son was born, and the child was "reared in the wilds, where, while still a child, he strangled a polecat and had other adventures." The written accounts and folk ballads link Fionn with several shape-changing women, including Saar (Sedb), the mother of his son Oísín (Ossian), "whom a Druid changed into a deer. Spells were laid on Fionn to marry the first female creature whom he met, and this was Saar, as a deer..." (MacCulloch 1918/1964: 164-168).

4.3. THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND THE AEGEAN. Archeological evidence — most notably Mesopotamian cylinder seals excavated in mainland Greece and the islands — indicates contact between the Aegean world and the Near East since at least the early Bronze Age (Crowley 1989; Lambrou-Phillipson 1990). While contact most likely was interrupted during the Dark Ages, Burkert (1992) argues for an "orientalizing period", marked by an intensive renewal of Eastern influence, in the Homeric epoch (roughly 750-650 BCE). The art of writing, which had been lost in mainland Greece after the fall of the Mycenaean civilization, was reintroduced at this time from the Semitic world. The epics of the

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<sup>37</sup>Stories of this kind clearly have an ineluctable appeal, at least to certain audiences working through the often difficult and conflict-ridden stages leading toward adulthood (perhaps the ancient counterparts to the consumers of Hollywood action films and interactive video games? One is reminded of Bettelheim's celebrated theory on the eternal appeal of folktales).

Archaic Period, written in the context of this lively interchange with the Near East, indicate some degree of familiarity on the part of Greek writers, not only with motifs of Anatolian and Mesopotamian origin, but even with Near Eastern narrative style and form (Auffahrt 1991: 131-140; Burkert 1992: 88-127).<sup>38</sup> The battle between Achilles and the river Scamander in *Iliad* 21 — to which we return below — has been compared to the deluge scene from the Akkadian epic of Atrahasis (c. 17th c. BCE): the personified waters spew dead bodies onto the land, bellowing like a steer; both accounts are “nach altorientalischen Drachenkampfmuster stylisiert” according to Auffarth (1991: 136).

Of particular relevance are the oft-noted parallels between Achilles and Gilgamesh, the hero of the widely-diffused Mesopotamian epic that bears his name.<sup>39</sup> Both were invincible warriors, of partly divine, partly human origin.<sup>40</sup> Both forged a bond of love and comradeship with a fellow warrior, who in a sense died in their place: Patroclus was killed by Hector while wearing the armor of Achilles, who was still refusing to fight alongside Agamemnon (*Iliad* 16). After Enkidu and Gilgamesh kill the Bull of Heaven sent against them by Ishtar, the god En-Lil decrees: “let Enkidu die, but Gilgamesh must not die” (*Gilgamesh* VII.6).

The deaths of their friends provoke a reaction of grief and rage

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<sup>38</sup>“Ein Vergleich altorientalischer Epik mit der frühgriechischen zeigt erstaunliche Gemeinsamkeiten ... in der formalen Gestaltung, in der Verwendung typischer Szenen und in einzelnen Erzählmotiven” (Auffahrt 1991: 133).

<sup>39</sup>The Epic of Gilgamesh, which dates back to at least 2000 BCE, was translated into many of the Near Eastern literary languages of the Bronze Age. “By some route or other, the name Gilgamos even penetrated into Greek literature” (Burkert 1992: 33).

<sup>40</sup>In some Sumerian texts of c. 2000 BCE, Gilgamesh is said to be the brother of King Shulgi of Ur, and son of the zoomorphic goddess Ninsun ‘Lady Wild Cow’ and the hero Lugalbanda (*Gilgamesh* I:240-241; Kovacs 1989: xxiii-xxviii; D’jakonov 1977: 331). The parallel with Achilles’ and Amiran’s parentage is remarkable, and needs to be looked into further.

in Achilles and Gilgamesh, followed by the inquiry into the sense of the human condition which forms the heart of both epics. In the end, the Mesopotamian and Greek heroes, despite their semi-divine pedigrees, accept their humanness, and the mortality it entails. The lessons derived from these two quests for immortality are different, though the difference is essentially one of highlighting particular consequences of the human condition. The *Iliad* foregrounds the quest for ‘incorruptible fame’ (*kléos áphthiton*), as the only hope for anything approaching the immortality of the gods. This two-word expression can be reconstructed as a key formula in the Proto-Indo-European poetic vocabulary (Schmitt 1968), and as an integral part of early IE ideology.<sup>41</sup> The *Epic of Gilgamesh* places particular emphasis on what human beings make of their life before death, and in particular on their development as members of society. In view of what Charachidzé’s study of the Amiran cycle revealed about the tensions between savage freedom and civilized constraint in the imagination of the traditional Caucasian male, the representation of social development in *Gilgamesh* merits a digression here.

Enkidu, of course, is a marvelous example of humanization in its most literal form. When he is first spied by a hunter, he is living in a state of nature: “ His whole body was shaggy with hair ... He knew neither people nor settled living, but wore a garment like Sumukan<sup>42</sup> ... He ate grasses with the gazelles” (I.86-91). Along with other aspects of human intercourse, Enkidu is untouched by

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<sup>41</sup>The fostering of belief in post-mortem reward through good reputation may have contributed to keeping the violent impulses of warriors directed toward external enemies, and not against the structures of IE society itself (Lincoln 1987: 4-15). The quest for undying fame is by no means absent from the Gilgamesh epic, though it does not receive the same degree of emphasis, nor is it expressed the same way. On returning home empty-handed from his search for immortality, Gilgamesh tells the ferryman Urshanabi to inspect the solid wall encircling the city of Uruk, which he had built (XI.310-319). The implication is that the wall at least will remain as a testament to him after his death.

<sup>42</sup>Sumukan = “God of wild animals” (Kovacs 1989: 6); “Gott der Jagd” (D’jakonov 1977: 336).

sexual contact. The hunter who first discovered him returns with a ‘harlot’ named Shamḥat, who spends a week mating with Enkidu. At the end of this experience, Enkidu returns to his beloved animals, but they run away from him:

*But when he turned his attention to his animals,  
the gazelles saw Enkidu and darted off,  
the wild animals distanced themselves from his body. ...  
Enkidu was diminished, his running was not as before.  
But then he drew himself up,  
for his understanding had broadened. (I.178-184)*

The civilizing process has already begun (Tigay 1982: 198-213; K’ik’nadze 1976: 161-183).<sup>43</sup> Shamḥat leads Enkidu to the city of ramparted Uruk, where the former wildman learns to eat and drink like a human, and even to dress like one. The clothes make the man:

*He splashed his shaggy body with water,  
and rubbed himself with oil, and turned into a human.  
He put on some clothing and became like a warrior(?).  
He took up his weapon and chased lions,  
so that shepherds could rest at night.  
[from the Old Babylonian version (Kovacs 1989: 16, note 2)]*

Civilization implies not only improved table manners, but more importantly a need — indeed, an obligation — to form alliances. In Shamḥat he has found a sexual companion, in Gilgamesh he finds a friend. Yet a new-found awareness of his humanity has come at the price of confronting his mortality, and as he lies dying, Enkidu

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<sup>43</sup>According to D’jakonov (1977: 351) the story of Enkidu is to be read, one might say, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically: It represents the Old Mesopotamian folk-theory of the evolution of human society from savagery to urban civilization, as well as the development of each individual through the stages of socialization, mating, friendship, adult activity, and death.

curses Shamhat for having lured him away from his garden of Eden (*Gilgamesh* VII.88-121). The god Shamash, however, rebukes him:

*“Enkidu, why are you cursing the harlot, Shamhat,  
she who fed you bread fit for a god,  
she who gave you wine fit for a king,  
she who dressed you in grand garments,  
and she who allowed you  
to make beautiful Gilgamesh your comrade?”* (VII.122-128)

whereupon Enkidu relents and changes his curse into a blessing. But the most eloquent summing-up of the ancient Mesopotamian ideology of human destiny, of ‘family values’, one might say, come from the mouth of Siduri, the tavern-keeper whom Gilgamesh encounters on his search for the secret of immortality:

*“Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?  
The life that you are seeking all around you will not find.  
When the gods created mankind,  
they fixed Death for mankind,  
and held back Life in their own hands.  
Now you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full!  
Be happy day and night,  
Of each day make a party,  
dance in circles day and night!  
Let your clothes be sparkling clean,  
let your head be clean, wash yourself with water!  
Attend to the little one who holds onto your hand,  
Let a wife delight in your embrace.  
This is the (true) task of mankind(?)”* (X.iii.1-14)  
[from the Old Babylonian version (Kovacs 1989: 85, note 1)]

In terms of their portrayals of the human condition — and specifically that of the male half of humanity — the Mesopotamian

and Caucasian epics, focusing upon the situation of the man before his death, differ notably from the Indo-European hope for incorruptible fame conveyed by the Homeric poems. The latter doctrine is furthermore embedded in the distinctly IE ideology of three social functions — perhaps realized as distinct classes: priests, warriors and food-producers (Dumézil 1992; Littleton 1982) — with the corresponding need to harness the aggressive activity of the warrior class. On the other hand, the epics of Gilgamesh and Amiran reflect fundamentally opposite perceptions of women as partners of men. During his career as an itinerant warrior, Amiran shows little interest in women as anything other than pretexts to do battle, but this indifference turns to overt hostility during his imprisonment in the mountain. As was expressed in the final episode of the Svan myth cited earlier, should Amiran escape, it is feared he will wipe the earth clean of ‘blacksmiths and the bright-eyed ones’. The text-internal motivation for this destructive misogyny is usually a scene in which a hunter or shepherd encounters the enchained Amiran on the one day each year (or each seven years) when his rocky covering opens, exposing him to the open air. Amiran instructs the hunter to fetch the chain from his hearth, which Amiran needs in order to reach his enormous sword, which he will use to break his chains. He also demands that the man neither speak nor turn back while doing this. On returning home, the villager is pestered with questions by his wife, who is not unreasonably curious as to why her husband is hauling the hearth chain off to the mountains. He turns to rebuke her, or in some versions, to hit her. By the time he reaches the spot where he saw Amiran, it is too late; the mountain has already closed up again (Charachidzé 1986: 120-123). While on the face of it this is a rather feeble pretext for the destruction of an entire gender, Charachidzé has demonstrated that the Amiran cycle is embedded in a dominant ideology which portrays women as impure, dangerous and of demonic origin (Charachidzé 1968; Tuite 1993). By contrast to early-20th century Transcaucasia, the image of gender relations reflected in the Mesopotamian epic composed five millennia earlier is one of cooperation rather than

hostility. Although society in both contexts demands that men renounce their dreams of license and one-sided exploitation, the message of *Gilgamesh* is that by forsaking the state of nature one attains wisdom and a superior form of happiness; underlying the Amiran cycle and related texts is at best a grudging acceptance of the constraints of social reciprocity and the concomitant obligation to enter into contact with impure, dangerous women — as long as they don't get too close, too often.

4.4. IE WARRIOR-INITIATION MOTIFS. The early Indo-Europeans, unlike their Near Eastern, Old European and Caucasian neighbors, institutionalized violence as the primary function of a distinct social class. The accession of an adolescent to the status of adult warrior was marked by initiation rituals of different sorts, some of which can be reconstructed on the basis of comparisons of the traditions of widely-flung IE peoples. One of the strangest of these — one that seems almost comic from a modern perspective — was the presentation of the initiand before a monstrous mannequin, which he was forced to attack (Dumézil 1985: 215-229).<sup>44</sup> The myths and legends from which the mannequin ritual was reconstructed all feature a confrontation between a hitherto-invincible hero and an inert massive object of some kind, which pins him beneath its enormous weight, or which cannot be moved, despite the hero's superhuman strength.<sup>45</sup> The hero only succeeds in overcoming the inert resistance by appealing to the gods for a supplement of strength. The Amiran cycle contains a comparable confrontation between an immobile object and an irresistible force, along with numerous other episodes and symbols which can only be explained as borrowings from early IE warrior-initiation traditions (Charachidzé 1986: 25-61). Archaic Greek civilization,

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<sup>44</sup>“Were he able to summon up the necessary courage to do so, he discovered that his seemingly ferocious and formidable opponent was only a joke, with the implicit lesson that all of his future (non-IE) enemies would be no more formidable than this dummy” (Lincoln 1987: 12).

<sup>45</sup>The best-known IE examples are from the antipodes of the IE world: Scandinavia (Þórr crushed beneath the foot of the stone monster Hrungir) and India (Indra vs. Vrtra “Resistance”) (Dumézil *loc. cit.*).

despite the heavy influence it underwent from various non-IE cultures of the Near Eastern and Aegean worlds, has managed to preserve some initiation-related symbolism of common IE origin, a few of which, I believe, are to be found in the biography of that most exemplary of Greek warriors, Achilles. I will only discuss those which are also attested in the Caucasus.

(i) *The inert mass.* In search of an adventure, Amiran hears of a giant named Ambri (or Andrerob), who is said to have extraordinary strength. Amiran goes in search of him, but finds him already dead, his corpse loaded into a wagon which twelve yoke of oxen can barely move. One of the giant's massive legs is hanging over the side of the wagon and dredging a furrow in the ground. Ambri's mother asks Amiran to set the leg back in the cart, but despite his heroic strength, Amiran cannot even budge it. He sinks into despair at this failure, until God takes pity on him and grants him the muscle power to do the job (Chikovani 1966: 90-91; Charachidzé 1986: 50-51; Nizharadze 1962: 150-161).

A possible parallel in the *Iliad* is Achilles' confrontation with the River Scamander in Book 21. The river, angry at Achilles for having clogged its waters with Trojan corpses, overflows its banks and rushes after him, putting him to flight. Achilles, for the first time in his career forced to flee from an opponent, appeals to the gods for help, and Hephaistos sends fire to subdue the river and burn up the corpses. While the river is not exactly inert in this scene — indeed, it is the manifestation of a deity — it attacks Achilles in the form of a huge rolling wave, that is, as a mindless natural force rather than as a personified being.

(ii) *Death and revival.* The symbols of death, especially suicide, and subsequent return to life are featured in the initiation rituals of cultures around the world. In an incident recorded in the majority of Amiran legends, the superhero and his two half-brothers face the innumerable demonic host of the King of the Kadzhis. By the time Amiran succeeds in slaying the king, his two brothers lie dead by his side. Crushed by despair at the sight of their bodies, he seeks to kill himself, but, as in the case of Ajax, this can only be effected by striking his one vulnerable spot (leg or

little finger). The Kadzhi princess, whom he has just won as a battle prize, revives him and his brothers with an herbal medicine,<sup>46</sup> after which he is stronger than ever (Chikovani 1966: 103).

The imagery of death and rebirth is a well-known feature of ancient Greek rites of passage (Dowden 1989; Halm-Tisserand 1993; Bonnechère 1994), but there is no mention of this motif in the biography of Achilles, save for one curious incident. When Achilles takes on the Amazon queen Penthesileia, who has come to fight alongside the Trojans, the principal sources describe the outcome as a simple victory for Achilles. According to a couple of minor sources, things were not so straightforward: After a hard fight, she kills him, and his soul descends to Hades. Thetis implores Zeus to release her son, which he does. Achilles comes back to life, kills Penthesileia, and returns to the underworld (Escher 1893: 236; Schwenn 1940).

(iii) *Casting one's hair upon the waters.* An odd motif appearing in the *Iliad* and in the Ossetic tale of Batradz might reflect an Indo-European rite of passage. The newborn Batradz, his body of white-hot steel, straightaway plunges into the depths of the sea to cool off, and remains there throughout his early childhood. Satana coaxes him onto dry land by a clever ruse: She has Uryzmæg receive a haircut on the seashore. Batradz, who has never seen such a thing, rises up from the depths and asks to have his hair cut too. The Narts do so, throw the hair into the sea, and by this means Batradz is prevented from returning to his watery home.

The motif of sacrificing hair to a body of water appears in the *Iliad* as well (23.142). Achilles sacrifices in honor of his friend Patroclus a lock of his hair which had been intended for the River

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<sup>46</sup>She kills a mouse whom she caught licking Amiran's blood. The animal's mother appears bearing the leaves of a mysterious plant, with which she revives her child. The princess uses the same herb to resuscitate Amiran and his brothers. In a Chechen variant of this motif, a snake plays the role of the mouse (Dalgat 1972: 160-161). Apollodorus recounts a story remarkably similar to the latter version: a certain Polyidus discovers a secret life-restoring herb from observing how one snake revived another he had killed (*Library* III.iii.1).

Spercheios on the occasion of his safe return from Troy. (By this point in the narrative, of course, Achilles knows he will not return alive from the war). In view of the abundant initiatory symbolism in the stories of Achilles and his Caucasian counterparts, one wonders if this rite of tonsure is yet another mark of the transition from childhood to adulthood. The adolescent cuts his or her long hair, a symbol in many cultures of youth and unconstrained liberty, and sacrifices it to the waters as a sign of separation from nature and acceptance of the strictures of adult status.

(iv) *A Caucasian 'Trojan-horse' motif?* Several myths and legends from separate regions of the Caucasus employ the motif of a divine, or at least superhuman, hero wrapping himself in the carcass of a cow or horse in order to enter the otherwise impregnable fortress of a redoubtable enemy. The Ossetic and Abkhazian corpora of Nart legends include the story of a hero, either Soslan (in the Ossetic version) or Patraz (= Batradz, in the Abkhazian recension), laying siege to the fortress of an adversary who refused to deliver a woman he had promised to give in marriage. After all attempts to enter the castle fail, the hero resorts to a ruse which requires him to slip inside a dead cow: Soslan does this in order to feign death and putrefaction, thus luring his enemies into a trap; Patraz wraps himself in a cow skin and then has his men launch him like a projectile behind the walls, the skin presumably cushioning the impact. In both cases the trick works, and the Narts take the fortress. The Georgian mountaineers of Khevsureti work the motif into a rather different context. In an important myth relating to the establishment of religious practices and the institution of marriage, an army of deities led by Giorgi (St. George) lays siege to the fortress of the Kadzhis in the subterranean land of the dead. Their attempts to break through are in vain, until Giorgi “slips into the cadaver” of a dead horse, and thus succeeds in entering the fortress. The deities sack and burn the castle of the Kadzhis, returning to the surface with cups and plates of silver, metal-working tools, and the three Kadzhi princesses Ashekala, Mzekala and Samdzimari, the last of whom becomes the divine partner of Giorgi (Charachidzé 1968: 520-530).

Abaev (1963) was struck by the resemblances between these legends and the Homeric account of the Trojan War: the besieging of an impregnable fortress in order to recover a woman; the use of a trick involving entering an animal cadaver (of which the artificial Trojan Horse is a distinctly Greek, and perhaps literary, transformation) in order to break through; and even the death of a Patroclus-like companion of the hero.<sup>47</sup> He traced both the Homeric and Caucasian traditions to an ideologically-charged ancestral myth affirming the preeminence of shaman-priests over warriors. (Abaev relates the animal-carcass motif to legends recorded in Central Asia of shamans doing battle in the shape of animals). Dumézil (1978: 273-282) remained unconvinced by Abaev's arguments; I find them sufficiently interesting, especially in the context of the parallels presented here, to merit reconsideration.<sup>48</sup>

5. CONCLUSION. In view of the strong similarities among the attributes and motifs attaching to Achilles, Amiran, Batradz and Tswitsw, as well as the evidence amassed by Charachidzé in his comparison of the Prometheus and Amiran myths, I hypothesize that the traditions preserved in ancient Greece and early 20th-century Georgia, Abkhazia and Ossetia are derived from a common source, a mythic framework centered upon a character I will call 'Proto-Achilles'. The principal elements of the Proto-Achilles symbolic cluster, as I have reconstructed it, are as follows:

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<sup>47</sup>In the Nart versions a young man is fatally wounded while trying to throw rocks down from a mountain overhanging the fortress, and Soslan's attempt to resuscitate him is foiled (Dumézil 1978: 273). In the Khevsurian myth of the campaign against the Kadzhis, Giorgi is accompanied by a human shaman, who must undergo a temporary physical death so that his soul can descend to the underworld (Charachidzé 1968: 525).

<sup>48</sup>One potentially fruitful approach to exploring the role of the Trojan-Horse motif in earlier forms of the myth is to set it in juxtaposition to the accounts of the birth of the semi-divine hero: his conception by a theriomorphic goddess, and, in the Georgian Amiran cycle, the completion of his gestation in an animal-skin incubator. I hope to return to this matter in later work.

Proto-Achilles is born from the union of two individuals representing two very different worlds. His mother's people dwell in nature, outside of and either above (mountains) or below (sea) the spaces domesticated by humans. They are an ancient race, largely female in some traditions (e.g. the Nereids and the Dæls), with an economy based on herding, hunting or fishing, ignorant of agriculture (and perhaps even of fire), but immortal. The Abkhazian legends of the Ats'ans go even further, depicting a golden age without night, cold, illness, or death. Their relationship to the supreme deity, the male celestial sovereign I have referred to as "God" throughout this paper, is problematic: In one way or another they present a threat to his dominion or a challenge to his amour-propre.

It was mentioned earlier (§3.1.1) that the goddess of game animals stands in opposition to a divinity named after St. George, who functions as the patron of men who exploit the riches of nature. His patronage of the male gender can take on a more generalized character as well. A Georgian legend recounts how he "rewards" a woman by changing the sex of her newborn child from female to male (Charachidzé 1986: 178). Ossete women do not participate in festivals in honor of their St. George, Wastyrdji, nor even speak his name, substituting the expression *lægty dżuar* "god of males" (Kaloëv 1991c).<sup>49</sup> While St. George and God are certainly distinct characters in the indigenous Caucasian pantheons, their functions overlap to the extent that both take a particular interest in the affairs of men, rather than those of women (Charachidzé 1968). In the context of the Amiran cycle, it is to be noted that Svanetian texts credit the finding and naming of Amiran to either "Christ God" (*krisde yermet* (Davitiani et al 1957: 257)) or St. George (*žgərag*).

The father of Proto-Achilles is a mortal, a hunter intruding upon the domain of the goddess. As a man sojourning in the wild

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<sup>49</sup>A similar taboo has been described in Khevsureti (northeast Georgia), where women refer to St. George of Qaqmat' as "my husband's (or father's) deity" (K'ik'nadze 1996: 221).

for purposes of exploitation he is under the sponsorship of the patron of males, this being the supreme deity and/or a ‘St. George’ equivalent. (In the Greek account Zeus is Peleus’ grandfather, and it is he who chooses the latter to be the mate of Thetis). The hunter gets the goddess pregnant, but through a careless or rash action — intruding on her immortalization of the child, refusing to leave Dæl’s cave before his wife finds them, allowing her to be humiliated — causes the child to be thrust into the world, or even ripped prematurely out of the maternal womb, before he can fully become his mother’s son. Because of this original sin, so to speak, Proto-Achilles is caught between the fundamentally different worlds of his parents: deprived of immortality, he wanders in the savage spaces, living off their riches, but neither dwelling in harmony with nature as his mother’s people do, nor leaving it, bearing meat or wood back to the village, as men do.

By the end, the semi-divine hero has wrought destruction upon all within reach, including nature itself; Amiran leaves nought but “three blind ogres and three oak trees”. The final punishment serves both to reinforce the sovereignty of the supreme divinity, and the world order he represents, in which men have dominion over nature, but dare not aspire to be the equal of God. The texts analyzed here are the products of countless elaborations and appropriations over the centuries, having been utilized and contextualized in a slightly different way with each retelling.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>The reader cannot but be awestruck by the ingenuity and artistry of Homer drawing upon the characteristics of the Thessalian Achilles — his marginality, ambiguity, tragic nature — to create his monumental representation of the Greek heroic ideal, with all of its tensions between glory and shame, short life and incorruptible fame, submission to communal goals and the touchiness of honor (Friedrich 1973; King 1987). Consider the following remarks on the marginality of “Achille, personnage à la fois exemplaire et ambigu, en qui s’inscrivent toutes les exigences mais aussi toutes les contradictions de l’idéal héroïque. Si Achille semble pousser jusqu’à ses dernières conséquences — jusqu’à l’absurde — la logique de l’honneur, c’est qu’il se situe en quelque façon au-delà des règles ordinaires de ce jeu. ... Cet extrémisme de l’honneur fait d’Achille un être en marge, retranché dans la solitude hautaine de son courroux. Les autres Grecs

Through all this, the distinct traditions discussed in this paper have retained key elements pointing to the ideological content of the proto-myth, and also to its tragic aspect. The boy-child separated from his mother so as to become like his father, dreaming of an unrestrained life in the wild spaces as he is forced to submit to the inevitable demands of social life, cannot help but respond with empathy to the plight of the enchained Amiran, the savage Ats'ans, and the hero of the *Iliad*. How the womenfolk responded is another, and perhaps more interesting, question.

### **Postscript**

Several months after sending the manuscript of this article to the JIES, I came across three publications of direct relevance to the arguments presented here. The first of these, published over a decade ago, appeared in a Soviet series on Balkan and Slavic studies which regrettably I did not take notice of while researching the Proto-Achilles problem. The other two publications only appeared within the past year.

Just a short while ago, Prof. Aleksandra Aikhenvald of the Australian National University kindly called my attention to a brief paper by V. N. Toporov entitled “K rekonstrukcii Proto-Axilla”, which appeared in the 1986 collection *Balkany v kontekste sredizemnomor'ja. Problemy rekonstrukcii jazyka i kul'tury*, ed. V. V. Ivanov, et al., pp 25-37. (Moscow: Nauka, Istitut slavjanovedenija i balkanistiki). Drawing on the remarkable combination of erudite philological analysis and uncanny intuition that is the hallmark of his scholarship (and to varying degrees that of an entire generation of East-European researchers whose work has been regrettably under-appreciated in the West), Toporov undertook an investigation of the prehistory of the Achilles myth which arrived, via a very different trajectory, at results startlingly similar to those reported in my paper. I will not attempt to

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condamnent dans cet excès un égarement de l'esprit, une forme de l'Erreur personifiée, de l'Âtê.” (Vernant 1989: 42-3).

condense even further Toporov's already highly-condensed presentation. Of particular importance to the Russian scholar's argumentation are Achilles' name, the epithets or kennings used in reference to him by Homer, and his genealogy, which Toporov traces considerably further back than I did here. Achilles' ancestors on his mother's side include a number of deities linked to the chthonic and aquatic realms, and to serpents in particular: his shape-changing mother Thetis, great-grandfather Ocean (who encircles the earth like a giant snake), and grand-uncle Acheloos, a divinized river which is likened to a serpent or dragon. Achilles himself, according to Toporov, has certain "serpentine" associations, including the very root upon which his and his grand-uncle's names are based. In Toporov's proposed etymology, the radicals *akhil-/akhel-* are linked to IE *\*egʰi-*, a variant of the proto-lexeme meaning "snake, serpent". Toporov, as I do, reconstructs a myth culminating in the confrontation between Proto-Achilles and Zeus, though he places greater emphasis on the former's serpentine nature, and makes no mention of the numerous correspondences between the biographies of Achilles and the Caucasian heroes presented here. The key motif of his "pra-Axilliada" is a duel between a celestial deity and an aquatic, shape-changing, dragon-like opponent, which leads Toporov to seek parallels in various Near-Eastern myths of parent-child combat for celestial sovereignty (the Babylonian *Enuma elish*, the Hittite-Hurrian myth of Kumarbi and Ullikummi), and also the Egyptian narrative of the subterranean battle of Ra and the water-serpent Apop. He concludes with the hypothesis that the source of his reconstructed Proto-Achilles is to be sought in the ancient "Near-Eastern/Southwest-Caucasian area" [*maloaziatsko-jugozapadno-kavkazskij krug*], though (1) no specifically Caucasian data are adduced, (2) nor do the Near Eastern parallels he cites contain all or even most of the mythemes I listed in Table 2. It is nonetheless worth noting that the newly-born stone monster Ullikummi was affixed in some unclear fashion to the right shoulder of Ubelluri (the Hittite Atlas), and after growing at a prodigious rate was cut free from his host's body. This bears an interesting resemblance to

the gestion of Batradz, but I hesitate to make much of the similarity before further examination.

A link between Achilles and Batradz, this time within the context of the study of specifically Indo-European mythology, has been arrived at as well by two Francophone scholars, in books that did not appear in print until after this manuscript was sent to the JIES. Christophe Vielle [*Le mytho-cycle héroïque dans l'aire indo-européenne*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters, 1997] and, building upon Vielle's work, Bernard Sergent [*Genèse de l'Inde*, Paris: Payot, 1997] reconstruct two Proto-IE "heroic mytho-cycles", each one centered around a semi-divine warrior. Both heroes are associated with Dumézil's second function, but form a contrasting set to a certain extent paralleling the Mitra-Varuna first-function pair. One of the warriors, whose reflexes include Achilles, Batradz, the Indic Arjuna, and the Irish Cúchulainn, is born of the "Melusinian" union of a goddess and a mortal, and is represented fighting within the context of a regular army, with the spear as his weapon of choice. Sergent [op. cit., 345-348] points to several parallels between the Trojan War and the great battle of the Mahâbhârata, including a figure corresponding to Paris. The Achilles-like hero has as his opposite a supernatural strong-man born of an adulterous liaison between a god and a woman. His distinguishing features include an animal-pelt garment, the club as favored weapon, and a preference for solitary battles on the margins of society. The counterparts to the above-mentioned heroes are thus Greek Herakles, Ossetic Soslan, Indic Râma, and Irish Brian. As was the case with Toporov, the results at least partially corroborate my own, though for different reasons. It is however unclear to me whether any correlate to the bifurcation reported by Vielle and Sergent can be found in Georgian or Abkhazian mythology. I am at present inclined to expect that there is none to be found, and that Achilles and Herakles — and, it appears, their Indic, Irish and Ossetic counterparts — represent a distinctly IE reworking of the material present in the single figure I have named Proto-Achilles. In this respect, at least, Amiran resembles his antecedent more closely than does Achilles.

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ACHILLES AND THE CAUCASUS.

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ABSTRACT

Achilles, the hero of the *Iliad*, is based on a mythical personage of pre-Homeric antiquity. The details of his “biography” can be reconstructed from other sources, most notably the *Library* of Apollodorus. In this article features relating to the parentage, birth, childhood and career of Achilles are compared to those of legendary figures from the Caucasus region, in particular the Svan (Kartvelian) Amiran, the Ossetic Batradz and the Abkhazian Tswitsw. I argue that the striking correspondances between Achilles and his distant cousins from beyond the Black Sea derive from a mythic framework in which were represented the oppositions between domesticated and savage space, and between settled life, with its alliances and obligations, and a sort of male-fantasy life of exploitation and unconstraint. The core elements of the figure I term “Proto-Achilles” appear to be quite ancient, and can be added to the growing body of evidence relating to ancient contacts between early Indo-European-speaking populations and the Caucasus.