

INTRODUCTION: FRAMING ALANIA

One day in the late 1060s, an angry crowd was gathering. The place was Cherson, a strategic Byzantine garrison in the southwest corner of Crimea. What exactly this crowd was angry about, we do not know; modern historians have speculated that it was the latest iteration of a long history of factional unrest against Byzantine rule.¹ Who exactly threw the first stone, we do not know either; we are only told that, by the end of the incident, the Byzantine governor (*katepanō*) of the city lay dead.

From his seals, found in recent excavations at Cherson, we know that the governor's name was Nikēphoros Alanos and that he held the senior Byzantine court rank of *vestarch*.² His seal followed standard Byzantine sigillographic conventions, locating Nikēphoros within the imagined hierarchies of power that proceeded downwards from the Byzantine emperor. The authority that he wielded – or, rather, unsuccessfully claimed to wield – over the people of Cherson derived from this relationship to the Byzantine imperial court. This was a role that he apparently played so successfully that the Rus' chronicler who recorded his death identified him as a stereotypically treacherous servant of the 'Greeks' (*grītsī*), who got his comeuppance for having previously poisoned the Rus' prince Rostislav.³ But the name by which Nikēphoros identified himself, 'Alanos', complicates this picture.

¹ C. Zuckerman, 'The end of Byzantine rule in North-Eastern Pontus', *Materialy po istorii, arkhologii i etnografii Tavrii*, 22 (2017), 311–36 at 327–8; A. V. Sazanov, 'Kherson v XI veke', in A. V. Sazanov (ed.), *Russkii istoricheskii sbornik: Srednevekovyi Kherson X–XI vv.* (Moscow, 2015), pp. 232–345 at pp. 327–34.

² N. A. Alekseenko and Iu. A. Tsepkov, 'Katepanat v Tavrike: legendarnye svidetel'stva ili istoricheskie realii', *Khersonesskii sbornik*, 17 (2012), 7–17 at 8.

³ *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei (PSRL)*, vol. 1/1 (Leningrad-Moscow, 1926–2004), p. 166; trans. S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* (Cambridge, MA, 1953), p. 145.

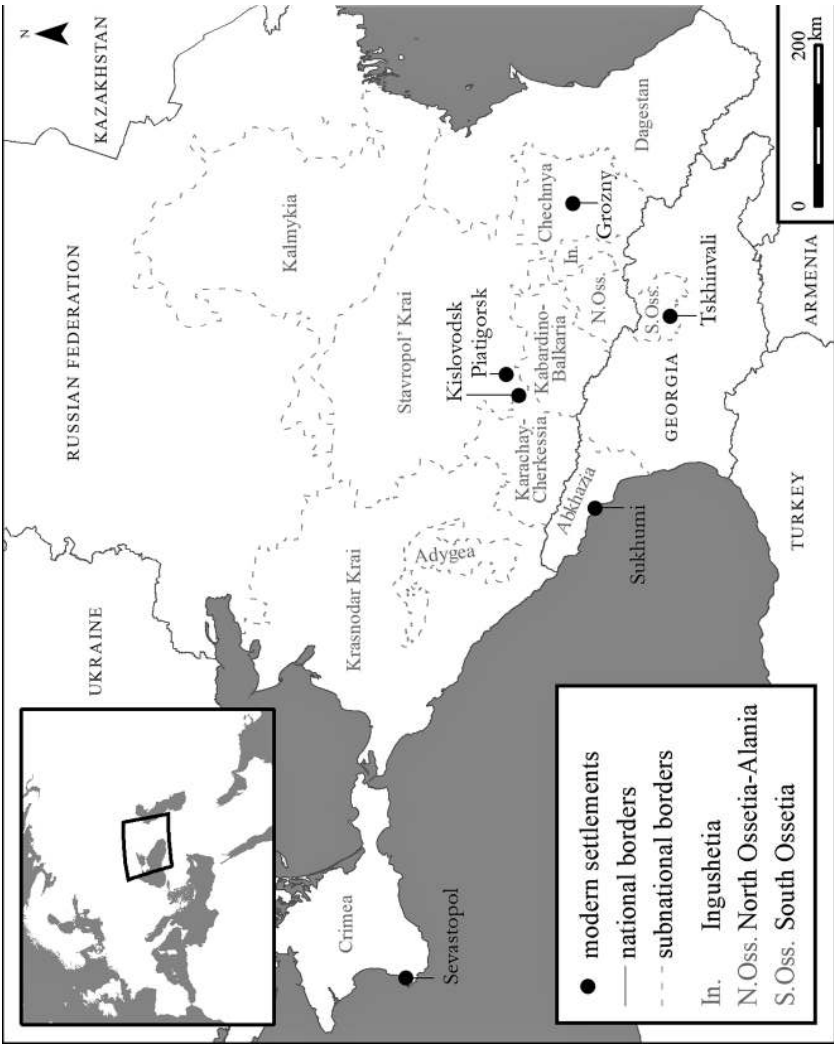
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Nikēphoros claimed to originally come not from the Byzantine Empire itself, nor from Crimea, but from the central part of the North Caucasus – a region of mountains, foothills and plains, great rivers, steppes and forests, which today lies in the southern Russian Federation (Map I.1).

This region was known to Byzantine writers and officials as Alania. Despite being mentioned relatively infrequently in Byzantine and Georgian textual sources, it was clearly of some considerable political importance, particularly in the tenth and eleventh centuries. From about 1030 it was ruled by a single royal family, which I have termed the Dorgholelids, until the kingdom's collapse in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Archaeological investigations of the North Caucasus have revealed that during the ninth to twelfth centuries, several urban centres grew to a population of several thousand, with the fortresses of Kun'sha and Il'ichevsk (the possible site of Magas, the Alan kings' capital) far exceeding the size of Rus' urban centres and rivalling the largest cities of the Islamic world in area. The kings of Alania expanded their reach from their core territory in the Upper Kuban region of modern Karachay-Cherkessia and eastern Krasnodar Krai to become sovereign over much of the western and central North Caucasus. All this took place in a region which, although well suited to agriculture and pastoralism, was geographically diverse, being split into numerous and sometimes inaccessible river valleys running up towards the crest of the Great Caucasus Mountains – a geography at first glance more suitable to political fragmentation than confederation. This book explores how the Alan Kingdom of the ninth to twelfth centuries emerged in this unlikely context, and in particular how its elites used foreignising goods, styles and cultural practices to create their political authority.

Following their conversion to Chalcedonian Christianity in the late ninth century, the Alan kings used the styles of Byzantium to establish their own power. Surviving depictions of these kings show them dressing like Byzantine emperors, using Byzantine titles, becoming patrons of Byzantine-style churches and even placing themselves, like the governor Nikēphoros Alanos, in a subordinate position in the Byzantine imperial hierarchy. Why would they do this? The Byzantine Empire never posed an appreciable military threat to the Alan kings; they were never compelled to recognise their rule by the direct application of force. Moreover, as this book demonstrates, we cannot view this process as the wholesale adoption of a Byzantine imperial package – the setting up of a Byzantine court-in-miniature which came as a boxed set with

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Map I.1 The North Caucasus with modern administrative divisions (drawn by Hans Blomme).

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conversion to Christianity. Rather, the Alan kings, like the *katepanō* Nikēphoros, used the selective appropriation of ‘foreign’ cultural elements to demonstrate their membership of a transregional elite class. They and other North Caucasians – elite and non-elite, men and women – utilised this ‘power of the foreign’ repeatedly in the medieval period, recalling not only the styles of the Byzantine court but also those of Georgian, Khazar, Qipchaq and Mongol elites.

The concept of the ‘power of the foreign’ draws on the work of Jonathan Shepard and Andrei Vinogradov, who have studied the Rus’, Bulgar and Caucasian use of material goods to emphasise links with the Byzantine imperial centre. This book extends this focus from material goods to the wider political system which they were used to construct.⁴ The appropriation of ‘the foreign’ – something coded as unusual by virtue of it lying on the fringes of knowledge – was a polyvalent sign, something which could mean different things to different people. To one who represented or identified with a non-Caucasian court, such as a Byzantine emissary, the adoption of familiar cultural elements made a foreign, ‘barbarian’ and frightening person legible and locatable within their existing epistemic structures. From a North Caucasian point of view, styling yourself in an unfamiliar way could set you apart from social rivals and perceived inferiors. This could be taken very literally: throughout medieval North Caucasian history, aristocrats claimed to be a different breed from their subjects because their ancestors had come from a different part of the world.⁵ Finally, an ostentatious display of access to the world outside the Caucasus could serve as an implicit promise of reward: *if I’ve got this for myself already, think what I can do for you*. As Jeremy DeAngelo has remarked of a similar phenomenon in the early medieval North Atlantic, this kind of display could imply that a person ‘may very well have abilities not readily apparent and potentially incalculable to someone who has stayed sedentary. With no frame of reference, one’s foreign holdings may appear inexhaustible, their esoteric knowledge supernatural, and their overseas alliances insurmountable.’⁶

Judging by how often it was used, this political strategy of delineating, emulating and appropriating ‘the foreign’ was highly effective. Even if a

⁴ J. Shepard, ‘Orthodoxy and northern peoples: goods, gods and guidelines’, in L. James (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantium* (Chichester, 2010), pp. 172–85; A. Iu. Vinogradov, ‘Vizantiiskie podarki kavkazskim pravitieli: dan’ i poddanstvo’, in G. Althoff and M. Boitsov (eds.), *Na iazike darov: Pravila simvolicheskoi kommunikatsii v Evrope 1000–1700 gg.* (Moscow, 2016), pp. 40–54.

⁵ See Chapter 1.

⁶ J. DeAngelo, *Outlawry, Liminality, and Sanctity in the Literature of the Early Medieval North Atlantic* (Amsterdam, 2019), p. 48.

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particular iteration of it gradually lost its efficacy, another could take its place. For example, in twelfth-century Alania the imitation of Byzantine styles was gradually displaced by the adoption of Qipchaq styles associated with aristocrats from the Eurasian steppe, yet the basic strategy of appropriating ‘the foreign’ remained. This book argues that this strategy was so effective that it enabled the kings of Alania to rise from regional, slave-raiding lords to holding sovereignty over much of the North Caucasus, all without adopting any of the state structures that are normally associated with this kind of concentration of elite power. From a historiographical point of view, their ability to appropriate foreignising styles and products dethrones the concept of ‘influence’, of forms of power diffusing from imperial centres to qualitatively dissimilar peripheral polities, which are defined (implicitly or explicitly) through a modern-tinged conception of ethnicity. This work thus questions whether forms and discourses of elite power in the North Caucasus and its imperial neighbours were really so different, given the eagerness with which aristocrats attempted to join West Eurasia’s transregional ruling classes, regardless of whether their power was coded in what we would see as a Byzantine, Qipchaq or Mongol style. The ultimate irony of the ‘power of the foreign’, when adopted as a strategy on a large scale, is that it served to collapse the socially constructed distinction between ‘foreign’ and ‘local’ which was critical to its efficacy.



This book further argues that we should consider the North Caucasus as an integrated part of the medieval West Eurasian world (the Pontic-Caspian steppes and the adjacent regions affected by its politics, such as Rus’, the Balkans, the Byzantine Empire and Iran). Not only were contacts with these neighbouring regions very important to the peoples of the North Caucasus, but the North Caucasus was surprisingly important to its neighbours as well.

Paradoxically, historians have often treated the Caucasus region as simultaneously highly isolated but also of vital strategic interest to the empires around it – for example, in its depiction as a choke-point on the Silk Roads.⁷ Furthermore, the Caucasus has served as a point of definition for the empires around it. It is not coincidental that its peaks served as the location of its neighbours’ foundational myths: Mount Elbrus’, the

⁷ K. Rezakhani, ‘The road that never was: the Silk Road and trans-Eurasian exchange’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 30 (2010), 420–33; K. Franklin, *Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: Living the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia* (Oakland, 2021), pp. 3–18.

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site of Prometheus' imprisonment; the Turkic holy mountain, Otoken; and the Avestan mountain of Harā Bərəzaitī.⁸ In our contemporary mental template, multiple epistemological borders intersect in the Caucasus: Europe and Asia; Byzantium, the Islamicate world and the Eurasian Steppe; and Russia and the Middle East. Even though the networks that constitute the North Caucasus' polities have changed over time, the fact that it is a place where these networks overlap has not.

Given these stakes, there is a clear need for a new appraisal of what exactly unifies the Caucasus, what is distinctive about it, and what is in fact a continuation of other networks. One might object that to treat the North Caucasus as an integrated part of medieval West Eurasia stretches the definition of Byzantine studies, Islamic Middle Period history or Russian history to their breaking points. But, to be frank, that is the point.



All this being said, one might reasonably ask: if the North Caucasus was so connected to – and important to – the rest of the world, why have we not heard more about it? For if the South Caucasus has been considered a world apart from the dominant currents of Byzantine and Islamicate history – an 'exotic, troublesome, uncivilized, violent, and overwhelmingly passive yet strategically crucial periphery' – then the North Caucasus is doubly so.⁹ The current literature on Alania in Western European languages by non-Russian authors consists of Nicholas Evans' excellent PhD thesis; Richard Foltz's book on the history of the Ossetians, which includes a short section on Alania; and a handful of articles which either rely heavily on Russophone literature or deal with specific geographical or art-historical sources.¹⁰ In Western

⁸ G. Charachidzé, *Prométhée ou le Caucase: essai de mythologie contrastive* (Paris, 1986), pp. 13–16; I. Shingiray, 'On the path through the shadow empire: the Khazar nomads at the north-western frontier of Iran and the Islamic Caliphate', unpublished PhD thesis, Boston University (2011), pp. 352–61; W. Eilers, 'Alborz i. The name', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (EI), online edn, ed. E. Yarshater (New York, 1996–), www.iranicaonline.org.

⁹ S. H. Rapp, *Caucasia and the First Byzantine Commonwealth: Christianization in the Context of Regional Coherence* (Seattle, 2012), p. 4; see also A. Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam: Islamic Rule and Iranian Legitimacy in Armenia and Caucasian Albania* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 19–25.

¹⁰ N. Evans, 'Mountains, steppes and empires: approaches to the North Caucasus in the early Middle Ages', unpublished PhD thesis, Wadham College, Oxford (2016); R. Foltz, *The Ossetes: Modern-Day Scythians of the Caucasus* (London, 2022); K. Tuite, 'Image-mediated diffusion and body shift in the cult of St. Eustace in the western Caucasus', in S. Bealčovski (ed.), *Le corps et le lieu: nouveaux terrains* (Montreal, 2018), pp. 141–54; C. Zuckerman, 'À propos du Livre des Cérémonies II, 48', in *Travaux et mémoires* 13 (Paris, 2000), pp. 531–62; P. Charvat, 'Northwestern Caucasus in the early Middle Ages: a few notes', *Iran and the Caucasus*, 21 (2017), 277–91;

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historiography, the Byzantine Empire's centuries-long relationship with the Kingdom of Alania is normally either passed over entirely or treated as a side note, considered interesting due to its relationship to some other aspect of Byzantine history but not as an object of study in its own right. Most commonly, Alania is mentioned primarily for its relevance in the history of Byzantine missionary conversion or diplomacy.¹¹ Similarly, within the Western historiographies of the Islamic Middle Period, Russia and even Georgia, Alania is firmly on the peripheries, being perhaps mentioned in passing in the context of military campaigns or trade.¹² Even Florin Curta's encyclopaedic *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages*, while covering the Volga-Don region's peoples (the Khazars, Oghuz, Pechenegs and Qipchaqs), stops when it comes to their North Caucasian neighbours.¹³ One can hardly fault these authors: one has to draw a line somewhere when delineating one's subject. However, this process of delineation is arguably more a consequence of modern disciplinary divisions than of medieval lived experience or even of our evidence base. The siloing of academic expertise is quite understandable from a practical point of view (one cannot realistically imagine talking to an enthusiastic student who wants to study West Eurasian history and then telling them to learn every one of its medieval written languages). But this structural division reflects the practicalities of the twenty-first-century university with its emphasis on individual rather than collaborative research, area-based funding structures and financial and political barriers to trans-national co-operation, rather than the historical experience of the people we study.

Contemporary political barriers have also inhibited co-operation with Russophone academics. This is particularly significant for the study of the medieval North Caucasus since Alania has been studied much more extensively in Russophone historiography than in its Western European counterpart. Given the region's archaeological richness – having the

S. Kovacs, 'Alan women in the neighbouring foreign courts in the 11th–12th centuries', *Chronica: Annual of the Institute of History of the University of Szeged*, 7–8 (2007–8), 134–43; I. Shingiray, 'Space and society beyond Mount Qaf: archaeology of memory and frontier communities of the North-East Caucasus (6th–10th centuries CE)', in L. M. Popova, C. W. Hartley and A. T. Smith (eds.), *Social Orders and Social Landscapes* (Newcastle, 2007), pp. 181–217.

¹¹ For example, S. A. Ivanov, *Pearls before Swine: Missionary Work in Byzantium* (Paris, 2015), pp. 113–21, 161–71; Shepard, 'Orthodoxy and northern peoples'; M. Whittow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600–1025* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), pp. 240–1.

¹² For example, T. S. Noonan, 'Why dirhams first reached Russia: the role of Arab-Khazar relations in the development of the earliest Islamic trade with Eastern Europe', in *The Islamic World, Russia and the Vikings, 750–900: The Numismatic Evidence* (Aldershot, 1998), vol. II, pp. 151–281; J. Shepard, 'Yngvarr's expedition to the east and a Russian inscribed stone cross', *Saga-Book*, 21 (1984), 222–92; D. Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (London, 2012), pp. 63–4, 76–7.

¹³ F. Curta, *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages (500–1300)* (Leiden, 2019).

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oldest surviving churches in the Russian Federation, for example – it is unsurprising that the medieval North Caucasus has attracted considerable archaeological and historical interest. Moreover, while there is one tendency within Russophone historiography which sees the North Caucasus as an isolated refugium for ancient steppe peoples, since the 1960s many scholars have emphasised the region's connections with the rest of the West Eurasian and Mediterranean world.¹⁴ However, outside Russian academia, these works have had little impact: for example, non-Russian publications rarely cite even the works of Vladimir Kuznetsov, the pre-eminent Russian scholar of the Alans, let alone the more specialised works of Dmitry Korobov, Vera Kovalevskaja or Sergei Savenko. This can be attributed to several factors: Russian authors having published relatively few articles in other languages; the often complex and technical language in which many Russian works on Alania are written; and political and cultural barriers between Russia and the West during the Soviet period and after.¹⁵ Moreover, many of these works' arguments about transregional connection are bound up with a primordialist and taxonomic discourse over ethnicity which is ultimately traceable to the formation of imperial knowledge about Russia's Caucasian frontier.¹⁶ While the problematic aspects of this discourse are undeniable, these

¹⁴ For example, A. G. Kuchiev, V. Kh. Tmenov and V. A. Kuznetsov (eds.), *Alany: Zapadnaia Evropa i Vizantiia* (Vladikavkaz, 1992); D. V. Beletskii and A. Iu. Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhiz i Senty — drevneishie khramy Rossii. Problemy khristianskogo iskusstva Alanii i Kavkaza* (NAS) (Moscow, 2011); V. A. Kuznetsov, *Khristianstvo na Severnom Kavkaze do XV v.* (Vladikavkaz, 2002).

¹⁵ The only book-length work in a Western European language on Alan history, V. A. Kuznetsov and I. Lebedynsky, *Les alains: cavaliers des steppes, seigneurs du Caucase* (Paris, 2005), was published prior to important recent archaeological work and is extremely broad in scope, covering the entirety of Alan history from the first to fifteenth centuries. Works on Alania in Western European languages by Russian specialists include G. E. Afanas'ev and D. S. Korobov, 'The Ash-Tigors' granaries and palaeo-climate of the 7th–12th centuries AD in the North Caucasus', in C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky and B. Genito (eds.), *'My Life is Like the Summer Rose': Maurizio Tosi e l'archeologia come mode di vivere* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 1–14; I. A. Arzhantseva, 'The cult of Saint Eustace in the North Caucasus', *Name-ye Iran-e Bastan*, 11 (2011–12), 1–12; I. A. Arzhantseva, 'The Christianisation of North Caucasus: religious dualism among the Alans', in W. Seibt (ed.), *Die Christianisierung des Kaukasus* (Vienna, 2002), pp. 17–36; V. N. Chkhaidze and A. Iu. Vinogradov, 'The seal of Konstantinos, the son of the protoproedros and exousiokrator of all Alania (about 1065–1075)', in T. Todorov (ed.), *Anticharismatos epiphraghis: Iubileen sbornik v chest na 70-godishnina na prof. d.i.n. Ivan Iordanov* (Shumen, 2019), pp. 182–93; A. A. Ierusalimskaia, *Die Gräber der Moševaja Balka: frühmittelalterliche Funde an der nordkaukasischen Seidenstrasse* (Munich, 1996).

¹⁶ F. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY, 2005); C. Dettmering, 'No love affair: Ingush and Chechen imperial ethnographies', in R. Cvetkovski and A. Hofmeister (eds.), *An Empire of Others: Creating Ethnographic Knowledge in Imperial Russia and the USSR* (Budapest, 2014), pp. 341–67.

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factors have nonetheless meant that much excellent research has not received the attention it deserves.

Given the major disciplinary differences between Russophone and Western European academia and the fact that the interpretative frameworks of the latter generally do not currently include Alania, this study necessarily departs from several existing historiographical conventions within both academic traditions. Most notably, this work asks us to rethink the definition of Alania as a political expression of a distinct ethnic group; the centrality of the concept of ‘the state’ to narratives of medieval polity formation; and the idea that medieval polities were distinct units which can be analysed in isolation from each other’s political and cultural practices. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising the tremendous debt that I owe to Russophone scholars of Alania, who have done the hard leg- and spade-work on which much of this book relies, even where I depart from their interpretations.

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Much of the uncertainty surrounding the medieval North Caucasus is rooted in our evidence for it. Our source base is, at first sight, paltry, although with some exploration it can be expanded to the point of being almost overwhelming. One major problem is the complete lack of written histories, legal codes or administrative documents from the Kingdom of Alania, whether written in one of the North Caucasus’ indigenous Northwest Caucasian, Northeast Caucasian, Eastern Iranian or Turkic languages or in a transregional language such as Greek, Georgian or Arabic. Apart from a post fourteenth-century tradition of Arabic historical writing in Dagestan in the Northeastern Caucasus, which is of major comparative importance but gives almost no direct information on Alania, the medieval North Caucasus essentially lacked a written historical tradition. Of course, North Caucasians took a keen interest in the past: their vibrant tradition of etiological oral stories proves that.¹⁷ However, this understanding of the past was generally not communicated in written form.

This does not mean that we have no textual sources from the North Caucasus which shed light on the Alan Kingdom, however. The adoption of Christianising religious practices in the tenth century was

¹⁷ For example, *Nart Sagas from the Caucasus: Myths and Legends from the Circassians, Abazas, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs*, ed. J. Colarusso (Princeton, NJ, 2002), pp. 169–70; T. Khadzhiilany, R. Ortabailany and D. G. Hunt (eds.), *The Narts: The Heroic Epos of the Balkar and Karachay People* (Moscow, 1994), pp. 108–9.

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accompanied by the introduction of Greek and Georgian memorial epigraphy.¹⁸ While the vast majority of surviving North Caucasian funerary inscriptions date to the fourteenth century and later, they are nonetheless vital sources for indigenous North Caucasian attitudes to the outside world, shedding light on religious and memorial practices which were initially adopted under the Kingdom of Alania. Moreover, two inscriptions provide highly significant insights into the construction of political authority. The first, the Greek Senty Inscription of 965 CE, is the only royal inscription known from Alania, providing critical evidence for its kings' attempts to appropriate Byzantine styles of rule.¹⁹ The second, the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century Nuzal Inscription, is the sole example of a Central North Caucasian text which we can consider historical, in the sense of presenting a narrative about events in the past.²⁰ In addition to epigraphic sources, a Greek liturgical manuscript tradition emerged in the North Caucasus during the medieval period, most likely during the period of Alania's Christianisation in the tenth and eleventh centuries.²¹ Only three much later manuscripts which were used in the Northwestern and Central North Caucasus survive today, but these nonetheless provide critical evidence for the adoption of Christian practices into North Caucasian culture.²²

However, for the political history of the Alan Kingdom itself, we must principally rely on works written by outsiders about the North Caucasus – a treacherous endeavour indeed. The main problem is the profound indifference of most authors to social and political conditions in the North Caucasus. For example, despite the Byzantine Empire's centuries of interaction with Alania, the longest Byzantine description of its society is only a few lines long.²³ Even Byzantine clergymen who

¹⁸ I. V. Pomialovskii, *Sbornik grecheskikh i latinskikh nadpisei Kavkaza* (St Petersburg, 1881); A. Iu. Vinogradov, 'Grecheskaia pis'mennost' na severnoi periferii vizantiiskogo mira i ee funktsionirovanie v inoiazychnoi srede', unpublished Doktor Nauk dissertation, Higher School of Economics, Moscow (2020).

¹⁹ NAs, pp. 241–3.

²⁰ M.-F. Brosset (ed.), 'Pièces diverses relatives à la Géorgie, traduites par M. Brosset', *Journal Asiatique*, 6 (1830), 305–72 at 310–12.

²¹ S. N. Malakhov, 'O grecheskoi pis'mennoi traditsii u narodov Severnogo Kavkaza v X–XVII vv', in Arkhipiskop German (ed.), *Mir pravoslaviia* (Volgograd, 1997), pp. 32–9.

²² The term 'Northwestern Caucasus' refers here to the regions of the Kuban basin, i.e. modern Krasnodar Krai and Karachay-Cherkessia. I use 'Central North Caucasus' to refer to the western half of the Terek basin, i.e. modern Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia and Chechnya.

²³ Nikēphoros Basilakēs, *In Ioan. episc. Bulg* 8, ed. Garzya, pp. 34–5; trans. Alemany, in *Sources on the Alans: A Critical Compilation (SOTA)*, ed. and trans. A. Alemany (Leiden, 2000), p. 229. I cite Alemany's edition here and on other occasions due to its accurate reproduction of primary source passages, reliable translation, and useful commentary.