

*Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series*

# **DAGESTAN – HISTORY, CULTURE, IDENTITY**

Robert Chenciner and  
Magomedkhan Magomedkhanov



# Dagestan – History, Culture, Identity

*Dagestan – History, Culture, Identity* provides an up-to-date and comprehensive overview of Dagestan, a strategically important republic of the Russian Federation which borders Chechnya, Georgia and Azerbaijan, and its people.

It outlines Dagestan's rich and complicated history, from 5th c ACE to post USSR, as seen from the viewpoint of the Dagestani people. Chapters feature the new age of social media, urban weddings, modern and traditional medicine, innovative food cultivation, the little-known history of Mountain Jews during the Soviet period, flourishing heroes of sport and finance, emerging opportunities in ethno-tourism and a recent Dagestani music revival. In doing so, the authors examine the large number of different ethnic groups in Dagestan, their languages and traditions, and assess how the people of Dagestan are coping and thriving despite the changes brought about by globalisation, new technology and the modern world: through which swirls an increasing sense of identity in an indigenous multi-ethnic society.

**Robert Chenciner** was a Visiting Academic at St Antony's College, University of Oxford. He was an honorary member of the Dagestan Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

**Magomedkhan Magomedkhanov** is Head of the Ethnography Institute of the Dagestan Scientific Centre, Russian Academy of Sciences, Makhachkala, Republic of Dagestan, Russian Federation.

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# Dagestan – History, Culture, Identity

**Robert Chenciner and Magomedkhan  
Magomedkhanov**

**With contributions from, alphabetically:**

Alexander Bakanov

Saida Garunova

Magomed-Rasul Ibragimov

Maysarat Musaeva

Zoya Ramazanova

Ethnography Department of The Institute of History,  
Archaeology and Ethnography of the Dagestan Scientific  
Centre of Russian Academy of Sciences

First published 2024  
by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Chenciner, Robert, author. | Magomedkhanov, Magomedkhan, 1951– author.

Title: Dagestan – history, culture, identity / Robert Chenciner & Magomedkhan Magomedkhanov.

Description: New York : Routledge, [2023] | Series: Routledge contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023000417 (print) | LCCN 2023000418 (ebook) | ISBN 9781032483429 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032483450 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003388579 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Dagestan (Russia)—History. | Dagestan (Russia)—Ethnic relations. | Dagestan (Russia)—Social life and customs. | Ethnology—Russia (Federation)—Dagestan.

Classification: LCC DK511.D2 C478 2023 (print) | LCC DK511.D2 (ebook) | DDC 947.5/2—dc23/eng/20230111

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023000417>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023000418>

ISBN: 978-1-032-48342-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-48345-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-38857-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003388579

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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# Preface

Robert first obtained permission to visit Dagestan in 1986. Dagestan – a remote and mountainous region of the Caucasus – a place visited by few. His intention was to study closely related flatwoven rugs, but Dagestan and the eastern Caucasus provoked an interest far beyond this. Through years of ethnographic fieldwork, and with the help of Dr Magomedkhan Magomedkhanov and local scholars, Robert – known to many as Bob or Chence – visited hundreds of Dagestani villages.

He became a senior associate member of St Antony's College, Oxford, in 1987, and was similarly honoured as a fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, in 1989, and later as an honorary member of the Dagestan Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1990.

Robert would talk of how his heart should return to the Dagestan mountains as he loved them so dearly. This book is his last work and confirms this ethnographic legacy. It is dedicated to the people, lands and traditions of Dagestan.

Robert was sadly overtaken by cancer as he was writing this book, and he died in London on 30th October 2021. As a result, parts of this text have had to be edited, revised and even in places reshaped without oversight from Robert, as he would have otherwise liked. The authors must be excused for any remaining flaws and delays arising from these difficult circumstances. We would like to thank and commend James Waterfield who has been dedicated, kind and unendingly committed to this scholarly and editorial process, and to whom we are very much indebted.

We, the readers, would do well to remember Robert's prescient words reverberating from 1997, in the preface to his first text on Dagestan:

‘. . . the future for neighbouring Dagestan – at the whim of a hostile, lurching Russia – is bleak and uncertain. The only response is to build a monument to a rich and varied culture in celebration of the perseverance and diversity of the Dagestanis. Please join them in a wry laugh and forget nothing . . .’

We shall not forget.

Marian Chenciner  
Louisa Chenciner  
Isabel Chenciner  
June 2022



Robert in the mountains

### **Note to readers**

Please note

- ‘Dagestan’ is used throughout the text as a more modern version of the name, except when referring to previous publications that used the older form ‘Daghestan’
- centuries are in Roman numbers as cardinals, thus ‘XV century’
- referencing system: numbers are in brackets rather than superscripts and the numbers are not always sequential: if item 1 is referred to a second time we get [1] a second time, even if the sequence has got to [2] or higher
- italics are used in the first instance of foreign words but then not; similarly the meaning is indicated in the first instance but not subsequently; with exceptions to both these where there has been a long gap since previous use.

# 1 Introduction – what is Dagestan?

*History teaches even those who do not learn from it: it makes them study.*  
VOK, below.

Chenciner met Magomedkhanov about 1984, and we have been working on Dagestan together ever since, said to be the longest friendship ever between a Caucasian and a European, strong after 37 years.

The subjects covered here are wide and we are grateful for essential contributions from the following Dagestani scholars from the Dagestan Scientific Centre Russian Academy of Sciences: Murtazali Gadzhiev (chapter 3), Alexander Bakanov (chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 15, 25), Saida Garunova (chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 17, 25, 26), Maysarat Musaeva (chapters 17, 19), Zoya Ramazanova (chapter 22), A. N. Sadoyov (chapter 25) and Magomed-Rasul Ibragimov (chapter 17); and Novoe Delo Makhachkala's reports on Covid (chapter 19).

From outside Dagestan, further essential contributions were made by Stefan Williamson-Fa (chapter 27), B.H. Rodrigue (chapter 26), and the late missed Moshe Gammer obm (chapter 14).

We also acknowledge a welcome debt to Academician Vasily Osipovich Klyuchevsky (1841–1911) [1] the Russian scholar and teacher, called the Pushkin of Russian historiography, whose ideas have influenced this book. He was the first and leading Russian historian of material, economic and demographic history, not the history of victors, rulers and strong-men [2, 3, 4].

This book opens into two sections, the first a chronological review from 5th c ACE to post USSR times seen from the point of view of Dagestani people rather than Russia. We begin with a chapter on the unrecorded history of *Shaitans* and mythical monsters (chapter 2), then the material history of the Sassanian walls (chapter 3) and history of the growth of Russian power in the region from the Kievan Rus (chapter 4) to today (chapter 15).

## 2 Dagestan – History, Culture, Identity

The second section explores Dagestani culture, starting with pre-Soviet to contemporary culture (chapter 16), continuing with chapters on modern urban weddings, social media, clinical and traditional medicine, food cultivation, a little-known history of Mountain Jews during the Soviet period, heroes of sport and finance, new business opportunities, ethno-tourism and a music revival.

From all of these swirl an increasing sense of identity in an indigenous multi-ethnic society.

### What is Dagestan?

Fragmentary information about the tribes of the present territory of Dagestan from c.1000 BCE is known from ancient authors. Arabographic writing existed in Dagestan for a millennium in numerous manuscripts and epigrams (chapter 14). Early medieval Dagestan was described in IX-XIV centuries Arabic and Persian writings [5] but it is not known for how long Dagestan was perceived by the ‘external’ or ‘internal’ worlds as a single social entity. Historically, the name described a country of multilingual peoples, known to neighbouring nations as ‘Laks’, ‘Leks’, and ‘Lezgins’, which are unifying exoethnonyms. ‘Dagestan’ has been used since 1861 as the name of the Russian Empire administrative region [6–9]. *Tarih* (History of Dagestan) by Muhammad Rafi, 1312–3 [10], gives the earliest description of a common consciousness: “Know that Dagestan was a beautiful country, vast for its inhabitants, strong [to] a stranger, pleasing to the eye, abundant in the wealth of [the inhabitants] because of justice. It [had] many villages, a large number of cities and three regions (*nahiya*): Avar, Plain (*Sahl*) and Zirichgeran. The inhabitants of Dagestan were [formerly] infidels, vicious people from the war region (*dar al-harb*). They worshiped idols, were endowed with courage and wealth, [and at the same time] were more disgusting than dogs. In each village there were rulers who were unfit, vicious (*fajiruna*), and gripped by unbelief and sin. In every city there were criminal and sinful emirs who ‘command the unapproved and avoid the approved.’ The tyrant (*malik*) Suraka of at-Tanus city in Avaria, the strongest of Dagestan on account of his pagan power was worthless, a bearer of evil, violence and misfortune. He had the title *nusal* – it’s their custom to give their rulers nicknames. His income came from [subject] lords, possessions (*vilayat*), lands (emirate), and he collected *haraj*, *jizya* and *ushr* (*al-ashar*) a tribute at a tenth, from the inhabitants of all Dagestan, from the vilayat Charcas to the city of Shamakh . . .”

“These lines came from an old, decrepit manuscript, dated 318AH/ 930ACE,” so the perception of a territory of Dagestan likely existed before the XIV century. As indirect confirmation, in the XI century Leonty Mroveli recorded that Lekos (the fifth son of the forefather of the Caucasian peoples Targamos, grandson of Yaphet, great-grandson of Noah) received from his father “land with borders from the Derbent Sea to the Lomeki river and north, up to the great Khazaria river.”

Amri Shikhsaidov drew attention to Rashid ad-Din’s use of the term Lezistan for the first time, which contained a broad concept of Dagestan (1247–1318).

The Persian historian and geographer Hamdallah Qasvini (d. 1349), “describing the Caucasus Mountains (Elbrus), indicates that the western side of them, adjacent to the mountains of Gurzhistan, is called the Lekhi Mountains (Kuh-i Leksi) . . . They extended the term Leks to almost the whole of Dagestan . . . primarily intended to be territorial, rather than ethnic and political.” He deduced that during the XIII–XIV centuries there were no authors from Dagestan with a clear idea of its political geography.

In later histories Dagestan – Mountain (*Dag*) Country (*stan*) – and its inhabitants are mentioned with certainty, as a matter of course, having developed “ideas of a common Dagestan meaning” in the XI–XV centuries. XVII century and later manuscripts confirm that the societies and peoples of Dagestan considered themselves part of a larger grouping and the outside world considered “the inhabitants as a unity” [11] (chapters 5 and 6).

In Russian translation ‘people’ usually means ‘ethnicity.’

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- [9] On the struggle of the Dagestanis against the Persian conquerors c. 1600. ND corresp. 1851.
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- [11] Karpov. 2005. p. 119.

## 2 Shaitans, monsters, magic places and substances

### Introduction

Pre-medieval and medieval Arab authors wrote about the beliefs of the inhabitants of Dagestan. Ibn-al Faqih al Hamadani recorded that in the X century that there were two revered graves in Derbent of white stone with images of lions, where “rain was requested”. In the kingdom of Sarir/ Avaria, according to Ibn Rushd, his contemporary: “everyone . . . worships a dried head”. Al-Garnati wrote in the XI-XII century about the ancient pagan burial rites and belief in the afterlife of the Zirehgerans/ Kubachis.

From 1861–1881 surviving pre-Islamic beliefs were gathered in the *Collection of information about the Caucasian mountaineers; the Collection of materials describing the tribes and localities of the Caucasus; and the newspaper Kavkaz*. The literature was added to during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. G. F. Chursin (1874–1930) identified the ritual of ploughing to protect villages from evil forces, dangerous animals, and provided information about the petrification of people and animals. He also wrote about magical actions in wedding and birthing rituals, as well as beliefs associated with the cult of the dead and ancestors. He described the role of metal in wedding and birth rituals, to prevent evil forces “draining the source of the birth of the newly-weds, i.e. making them fruitless.” Together with their talismans and amulets, these made up the armoury in the highlanders’ fight against diseases and demons. Another Soviet, E. Schilling, described and analysed the fertility cult, rain rites, divination, sorcery and signs.

From the VIII century Dagestan joined the cultural orbit of the Muslim world. But its spread took several centuries. Pre-monotheistic beliefs and rituals were either forgotten or adapted to sharia. Ingrained Old-Testament superstitions that did not contradict Islam, such as rituals for invoking rain and the First Furrow gradually were perceived as Islamic. This nuanced fusion formed their ideology.

Dagestan is located at one of the busiest crossroads of Eurasia. From antiquity, a distinct Caucasian civilization evolved, on cultural washes from the Turkic, Iranian, Slavic, Jewish, and Greek worlds. As part of Caucasian Albania and the Sassanian Empire they developed relations with the Byzantine Empire, the Khazar

Kaganate, and the ancient Russian state, absorbing their spiritual values, governance, and technology. Christianity, Judaism and to some extent Zoroastrianism exerted influence. Indigenous local animist and shamanist beliefs were blended with these newer ideas.

“The inhabitants of Dagestan were [previously] unfaithful, vicious people [who] worshipped idols” [1], and however much Islam rejected them, idols and cults predating monotheism lingered. The significance of heavenly bodies, mountains, springs, earthquakes and other natural phenomena persisted in the mountaineers’ lives. The belief in the Shaitan (demon) in fact overlapped with Islam. Mentioned 88 times, the shaitan, together with the angels, are the most frequently mentioned supernatural entities in the Quran [2].

“In the mind of the people” [3], Shaitans are always negative spirits. They believed that everyone has a Shaitan, as an inseparable companion, penetrating even into his blood. According to legends, all the killings, outside quarrels, scandals and quarrels within the family came from Shaitans who would sow hostility between neighbours, turn everything upside down in the house, beat any person they came across, hide the necessary thing, throw it up after a while, and so on . . . They always tried to lead a person off the right path. They did this ostensibly most often with people who were unsure of themselves. Usually, if a person stumbled, they said that ‘his Shaitan had beguiled him’.

### **Demons, associated spirits, magic and surroundings**

The following demons, together with associated magic and surroundings, are taken from fieldwork since the 1860s. Professor Sir Harold Bailey thought that names were most important as historical identifiers. Also that if there was a name for something or a personage then either it existed or the concept of it existed where that language was spoken. In this chapter several unfamiliar names are given that could fruitfully be explored by philologists. The following examples are representatives of pre-monotheistic personages found in every village.

#### **1. The Khvarshin spirits [4]**

“All supernatural beings in Khvarshin are called *houbal*. A demon is visible to human eyes, commonly seen with the appearance of people or animals. A demon was recognisable, for example if a married woman’s eyes were slightly downcast; or a squirrel was covered with blood; or their feet were turned backwards. Chadorol gorge about Zhenizhdagayand or the Devils’ pit is a favourite home of all evil spirits.

“In one story a man named Pilma had the sheep farm of Kamilil Marku where he cooked his own food. A woman came and said: ‘*Va*, Pilma, let me prepare your food?’ She took her time, and spilled water on all his flour. He got angry and hit her, took a closer look, and saw that it was his wife. She began to scream loudly. The house shook all over. Pilma was frightened by a strange noise and rushed to hide in the

sheep house. Suddenly the roof appeared to raise itself and was filled with a multitude of men and women, peeping-in but staying outside as if they were afraid of the sheep. Pilma sat quietly, but his wife made a noise and pushed the roof down and next day went to the *dibir* or local Islamic scholar, who wrote a talisman to protect them.

“Khvarshins believed in forest hunting spirits called *Budalla* who lived on rocky mountain tops in the Osokiah area, who ruled all the wildlife. When game is eaten by *Budalla* they then return the meat to local people. The hunter only eats what is left by the forest spirits. Someone called *UlahIazhiyav* could not get to *Khvarsha* by night-fall, so he had to spend the night in the mountains. He lit a small fire to keep warm. In the middle of the night, a voice addressed him: ‘Hey, living being, since you are our guest, we are coming to you!’ *UlahIazhiyav* understood that this was *Budalla*. They assumed the guise of ordinary people. First of all they prayed. Then one of them clapped his hands – a *tur* (great mountain goat) came running. Immediately the second one killed and skinned the *tur*, put it on a skewer and roasted it. They all sat down at the table and ate. One of them collected all the bones, clapped his hands again, and the *tur* came back to life.

*UlahIazhiyav* felt uncomfortable and unwell and could not hide his amazement, but *Budalla* told him that they would only offer humans animals which they revived.”

2. The Kumyk demonic female character ‘*Albasty*’ is represented by an ugly woman with huge breasts draped over her shoulders, who usually harmed women in labour and in the three months before birth threatened to kidnap the baby from her womb. For protection, pregnant women left a piece of bread on the window sill at night and, if possible, did not stay at home alone. Among the peoples of Dagestan, she is also known as: *Absally*, *Albasty*, *Kish Kaftar*, *Syutkatyn* (the spirit of rain and fertility), *Suv-anasy* (Mother of Water, would drown bathers, later found transfixed by an axe or sword); *Basdyryk* (who in a dream can strangle people); *Sulag* (a voracious creature); *Ayuli*, *Khal*, *Alpab*, *Budallaba*, *KhuduchI*, (*-chI* represents an ejective) and *GuduchI*.

3. Habitats of evil spirits – In the forest, located on the east side of the village of *Tindi*, near *GarachI* farm there is a place called ‘*Bela Anchaba Tlo Gyini*’. Absolutely nothing may be taken from this place – grass or trees. The culprit would develop a fatal illness and his family or village will not escape misfortune.

On the way from *Tindi* to *Angida* there is a tree, and if someone breaks off its branch, he may die. In the same village, there is a place where if someone cuts grass to make hay, there would be trouble for him or his relatives. Even cutting a single tree from that forest caused the culprit’s death. *Belukatli*, located on the way to *Obatl* farm, is another such deadly place to touch anything, or even attend to nature’s call. It is the abode of devils who cause evil, called ‘*Gieri*’, ‘*Gjageri*’, meaning “full of blood”. Near *Guineici* farm, they believe that a *Shaitan* can lure a person, cloud his mind, create illusions that he is at a wedding or surrounded by his friends, having fun, singing, or playing the *zurna* (reed instrument somewhat resembling an oboe) – only to find himself in dark places, on the edge of an abyss or in a gorge, beaten and ill.

#### 4. Mental illness and sulphur

People believed that Shaitans and djinns caused memory disorder or mental illness. (In Islam a djinn was a spirit often capable of assuming human or animal form and exercising supernatural influence over people.) The causes of ‘external’ diseases such as abscesses, rashes or tumours were similarly attributed to Shaitans’ machinations. A person with mental illness was said to be “detained by Shaitans,” or “full of djinns.” Fumigation with sulphur was the preferred treatment. For defence from Shaitans and djinns, one had to additionally light a fire, shoot a gun, draw a dagger from its scabbard and/or read a prayer. Djinns are represented as small dark humanoid creatures that always act together. They only harm people, but sometimes they can correctly punish a guilty person. A healer, “associated with the djinns,” was able to cure the “disease of the djinns”, free him from the harm caused by the djinns, drive them away by lamentations, manipulations, magic actions (fumigating with sulphur, burying black chicken bones in places frequented by djinns, or breaking flat stone tiles on the victim’s back). People walking in the street in the evening or at night, especially to the mill, to the woods or to the cemetery, were advised to read a prayer, to bring matches, or a metal object such as a knife or scissors. They were forbidden to attend to nature in an unclean place, or to whistle. Any harmful effects of Shaitans and djinns were a consequence of the negligence of the victim.

Djinns were either harmful (*djin-kapura*, infidels) or harmless (*djin-muslims*). Nobody expected anything good from them. A person prone to lying was worse than a Shaitan; a good-hearted person ‘does not have Shaitan in his heart.’ Among fantastic achievements of Shaitans, it was said that in one day they could teach a person to play both the zurna and *pandur* (lyre).

#### 5. The mythical Azhdaha (serpent or dragon, in the Iranian languages)

The Azhdaha is very popular and has multiple forms. Its habitats range from impassable forests, behind high mountains, on land, on or under water, in the underworld, in an iron lock, in a palace of gold and silver plates, to household *sunduk* (chests).

It takes various forms from a huge male and female monster, with one to 12 heads, two eyes and two ears on each head, noses and lips; two or four legs; or single-headed and one-eyed with snakes and lizards in its hair. Flames erupt from its eyes, the sky darkens in the smoke from its nostrils. It makes a scary squeak or “the whole village shakes from its cough, its sneezing is like thunder, its eyes sparkle like lightning”. More reasonably it negotiates in human language and knows sayings such as “a brave man does not tease his enemy” and is grateful for politeness and values honesty.

It gets married, and has mock weddings and has siblings, parents, husbands and wives; it cooks and eats flour and meat dishes including pilaf, bread and people, and drinks milk and girls’ blood; it can fly and hunt for several days and sleep as long; it has herds of cattle and horses; it protects rivers and lakes from people; it keeps treasures, captures people, and abducts girls.

## 8 Dagestan – History, Culture, Identity

The old mother of Azhdaha can save girls and boys from her sons and daughters for a weekly tribute of a jug of water for each house, carried by a village girl.

Special weapons are required to kill them. Birds tear off their feathers and throw them down in token of worship. Creatures crawl in front of them and beat their heads three times on the ground in subjugation. It hides in the womb to quicken the dead and can turn people into stone and revive them. It is capricious, superstitious and its soul is hidden. It overcomes difficulties. It can turn into an eagle or a horse, or a royal messenger. It fears evil old women.

### 6. The mythical ‘Risis’ in Tindi village.

Tindi villagers say that there is an invisible indescribable creature called ‘Risis’, which only attacks a sleeping person, whom it first paralyzed and then crushes and chokes with his weight. The victim may also experience pain and aches, confusion and fear. Such domestic spirits are known by various names: *Kibishan, Ilbanhan, Kibiran, Chicabansan, Simagyad, Stigya* – in Dargin; *Kjegel, GyshI, Tamiho, Risi-sa Kegilu* – in Avar; *Sukhasulu, Sukhalutu, Appalav Kharytsu* – in Laki; *Lutu, Kval. Khvarts* – in Lezgin; *Basdyryk* – in Kumyk and Nogai; *Kurchel* – in Kvarshi; *Khvars* – in Russian.

### 7. Textile symbols.

Apotropaic designs appear in Kaitag silk embroideries c1600–1900 have brightly-coloured cosmic/solar signs, anthropo- and zoo-morphic and vegeto-morphic motifs, as well as birds, animals and human hands [5]. The amulet symbols protected a baby from the evil eye and evil forces; granted the bride happiness and wealth; and were part of the funerary ritual.

Woollen-pile carpets usually XIX century featured stylized animals, birds, multi-legged creatures, pin-wheel swastikas (the sun), flowers, circles, crosses, and diamonds. Davaghin and *dum*, long woollen tapestries, are given Dagestani names, inter alia *rukIzal*, Avar for ‘home’; *azhdaha*, dragon; *Gulyagdin kal*, Lezgin for ‘serpent’s lair’; *betIer*, ‘coil/snake/cat’s head’; *gozo*, Avar for ‘beak’.

Limbless snake/serpents are distinct from dragons. Snakes are endowed with both harmful and useful magical qualities, such as those with golden horns which protect homes and households. They live only in happy homes in the basement or in the main room facing the central pillar. It’s impossible to see them, but if someone does, the household will be happy.

### 8. *Kizilov* (Cornelian cherry dogwood)

A bundle of cornelian twigs (*bilikly* in Avar) are used as an apotropaic charm against the evil eye. It was tied to the wrist, to a shepherd’s crook, or to the horns of livestock. The cornel branch was favoured for the craftsman’s hammer handle, to avoid any jinx on his skill. A child was protected if he or she was smeared with cornelian soot, as were animals. A cow with a swollen belly could be healed if it was struck there with a cornelian switch.



*Figure 2.1* Stylized dragon: Kaitag silk embroidery detail, XVIII century



*Figure 2.2* Another dragon: woollen knotted carpet detail

## 9. Protection of children from the evil eye and diseases

His dried umbilical cord and first-cut hair, tied into a clean cloth were hung from the cradle until the baby outgrew it. Later the amulet was hidden under a roof or in a wall. If a snake touched a baby's first-cut hair, it would grow insane. Children were protected at night by a knife, matches, or other sulphureous items, as above.

Young children were barred from the flour mill. But if it was necessary, the child was taken into the mill head first, so it grew clever, fast and nimble. Against illness a raw chicken's egg was painted and put into the fire or hot ash. If it burst, then the child will recover. If someone was suspected of hexing the child, they unnoticeably tore a piece of cloth from his clothes, made nine holes in it and burnt it with sulphur, reading *Alham* (the first sura of the Koran) nine times. Old magical women such as fortune-tellers also nullified the evil eye. Various amulets and talismans were used, even his clothes were a patchwork of cloth collected from nine different male relatives.

As well as the above narratives, personages, materials and surroundings there are the following magic customs around death, fire, rain, sacred trees, ceremonial bread, wedding rites, and wolves.

### 1. Death cult

In the X century Ibn Rushd strangely recounted about his journey from Khazar to Sarir that 'the inhabitants of Sarir all worship a dried head' [6]. To explain, "Avar the Christian king who ruled over 20,000 ravines, towns and cities, had a throne of gold and a throne of silver in his castle, but the inhabitants of his state were all infidels."

Ibn Rushd was told, "When someone dies, he is taken on a stretcher to the square and left there for three days; then the inhabitants of the city wearing helmets and steel mail ride out to the square, pointing their spears at the deceased and circling threaten the corpse but avoid striking him." They explained to their guest: "We had a man who died and was buried, and after three days he shouted from his grave. Therefore, we leave the dead man for three days, and on the fourth day we threaten him with a weapon, in case he will return back to his body." This custom was then about 300 years old.

### 2. Magic wedding rites

The main objective was to protect young people from 'spoilage,' possible harm from ill-disposed people; and, second, to ensure their prosperity, ability to continue their line . . . There were various measures to protect the bride from the evil eye and witchcraft caused by detractors [7].

"The captured bride had to avoid meetings with people who had been jinxed with childlessness. Danger increased during her transfer to the groom's house. Detractors could scatter charcoal, black beans, millet dipped in female urine, manure, sewage or smash a jug to break the couple's dream of a happy life. For protection, the bride covered her face with a red or white cloth, or wore a brightly decorated dress. Her young protectors walked ahead of the procession with torches and daggers. At the door of her father-in-law's house a ram's throat was cut at her feet. A protective mirror and a lighted lamp were both compulsory dowry gifts. To make her new life bright and long-lasting with many children, her lips and cheeks were smeared with honey or sugary water. Sweets, grains and coins were thrown at the door of the groom's house, and also on the groom's knees. A broom was put in his

hands, to beget many children, especially sons. Talismans in the young friends' private room included a vessel filled with water with a chicken egg to protect the future children. At the door of her new house, the bride crushed a saucer underfoot, to break all evil thoughts of ill-wishers."

Our late lamented colleague Sergey Abdulkhalikovich Lugev, Doctor of Historical Sciences, observed that water rites with pitchers of water were used at traditional weddings to prevent evil. These would be deployed in the wedding procession leading the bride to the groom's house. Further rituals followed arrival: "In the private room of the young were containers filled with water. Persons performing the *maghar* rite and others present took a sip of water before the ceremony, and rinsed their hands. In the water rite for the newlyweds, one of the bride's girlfriends filled their ewer and emptied it at her feet. From the same ewer, all the women present sprinkled water on the bride, giving good wishes. The first ewer of water brought from the spring by the bride was offered to her father-in-law to drink" [8].

There were also mock weddings partly as rehearsals, partly as satire, partly as theatrical performance all of which had magical meaning connected to real weddings (*kyodoba*) [4, 7].

### 3. Ceremonial bread

Ceremonial breads also possessed apotropaic powers. As observed by an Abkaz ethnographer, "The image of a protective divine being or patron can be considered, first of all, in those ceremonial breads in the shape of a human figure," to be found in the Russian Ethnographic museum in St Petersburg [9]. In First Furrow celebrations we have also seen large sun-shaped loaves with *derkhap*, Dargin for 'good luck!', written in thin dough rolls on it and hard boiled eggs inserted around the perimeter.

### 4. Rain rituals [10]

Rain was vital in an arid zone. "A naked teenage boy, and sometimes a girl, was covered in branches and herbs, and a mask of dangling herbs was put on his/her head. Anonymous masked mummers were led through the village, accompanied by teenage youths. The procession stopped in front of each house and the mistress went out into the street, poured water over the mummers, and gave bread, cheese and eggs to the rest. After a progress around the village, the procession went to a sacred grave or walked around the cemetery, and then at the edge of the village or by the river shared out the food. The main character – a rain-donkey – was called *urtilunchov* by the Laks; by the Avars *cladulhJam*, *clIdudiIma*, *cludulhJam*; in Dargin – *myarkushi*; in Lezgin – *pepepai* or *peshepay*. On this day too ritual porridge was cooked from . . . cereals collected from all residents of the village . . . in the village of Akhar (present-day Laksky district) . . . a representative of one particular *tukkhum* (clan) had to clean the bottom of the man-made rain reservoir from silt, while praying and the women and children sang magical songs."

5. Fire and the spring festival [11]

“The most ancient mythological views go back to stories about the heroes who gave fire . . . they are women . . . the keepers of the hearth who taught people to bury embers in the ashes.”

At *Yaransuvar* the spring festival [12], “On the first day one of the mullahs carried a bowl of water to the homes of every villager, offering a drink with his prayers against poison, in exchange for a painted egg. All people on the first night, 21st March, lit bonfires and torches . . . fire was the mighty healing and cleansing force, so everyone who could, including the sick and the old, wanted to jump over the fire. When they jumped Laks declared: ‘My disease – fire – healthy body’ and Lezgins addressed the fire: ‘We have lived well all year until this spring, God grant that the next year should pass similarly.’ These ceremonies acted as a symbolic purification before the start of the new agrarian economic year.”

Also called *pervaya borozda*, the First Furrow [4] celebrated the vernal equinox, to cause rain. ‘Seeing off winter’ (*igbi*), a similar festival, was held by the Didoi of western Mountain Dagestan.

The First Furrow was not complete without the blessing of the imam. In the Soviet years of persecution of religion, red posters at the celebration proclaimed ‘Glory to the CPSU!’ Even Communist Party leaders took part in the festival. But the purpose of this holiday – to ensure a bountiful harvest and well-being – never changed. The Soviet repression of ‘obsolete’ customs and the introduction of new ‘socialist’ customs and rituals clumsily developed by the central and local ideological institutions turned out to be useless.

6. Sacred trees [1]

Ibn Rushd on his journey added: “At a distance of ten *farsangs* from Avar’s city is Ranhas where there is a huge tree that does not bear fruit, where every Wednesday the city dwellers gather and hang all sorts of fruits on the tree, to venerate it and make sacrifices”.

On expeditions we have seen sacred trees which are covered in coloured ribbons, each one supposedly tied to grant a wish or protect the owner.

7. Wolves

“The speed of a wolf – *batsI* in Avar, *bat* in Dargin, *bartz* in Lak – and courage in his raids were compared to a bold man. His gallbladder and fat were used as a healing agent for pulmonary diseases. His baked liver was given to a child to acquire his bravery, similarly domestic puppies were given wolf meat. In apiaries the pelt was hung as a talisman. A wolf’s tooth was hung on a child’s chest as a guard against the evil eye, and also on one sheep in the flock to divert the evil eye. For enhanced romance a husband had but to touch a shred of his fur on his beloved for

her to reciprocate. Negatively if a piece of the neck of a dead wolf was attached to a malevolent's throat and, facing his foe's house, he cursed: 'Divorce your wife!', then that couple would soon break up. To stop people loving each other, it was sufficient to carry a wolf's eye between them" [7].

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### 3 The Sasanian walls against the Huns

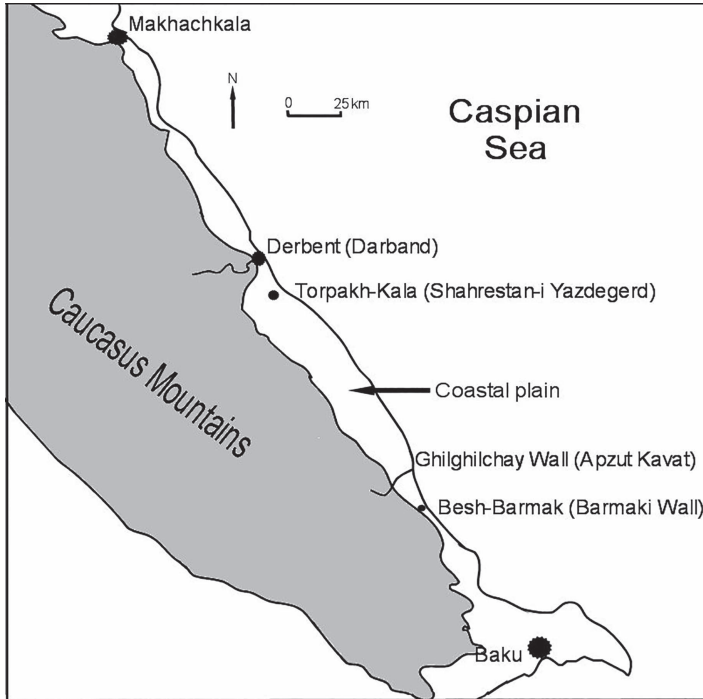
The following comes from *The Ghilghilchay defensive long wall new investigations* [1].

The appearance of the Huns in modern-day Europe initiated the great period of the Migration of Peoples and the beginning of the Middle Ages. In 395–396 ACE the Huns made their first devastating whirlwind campaign through the Caucasus range to Transcaucasia and the Near East. Contemporaries recorded it, in particular from the extreme limits of Meotida, between the icy Tanais and the furious peoples of Massagetes, where Alexander’s bolted locks constrain the wild tribes of the Caucasus. There the Hunnish hosts escaped [2] “along an unexpected way through the Caspian Gates and Armenian snows” [3]. The Huns’ invasion had inflicted a significant blow on Persia and Byzantium and confirmed the power of the new nomads.

Thus, the protection of the Caucasian borders became important to the Sasanians, especially for Ctesiphon, since after 387 almost all of Transcaucasia was incorporated within the Sasanian empire. By 408, a Persia-Byzantium treaty had been signed. Shahanshah Yazdegerd I (399–421) entered into negotiation with the Byzantine court and, as a result, took up legal trusteeship of the young emperor Theodosius II (408–450) and signed a treaty regarding the shared responsibilities for the protection of the Caucasian routes. [4] As these passes were within the territory of the Persian state (or Iranshahr), their protection was carried out by the Sasanian Persian forces, and Constantinople undertook to pay half of the necessary expenses. Under the treaty, Byzantium’s annual payment was 500 litres (160 kg) of gold [5].

About 424, a new treaty confirmed the charges for the protection of the Caucasian passes [6]. According to Priscus [7] and Egishe [8], in 441 the Huns, commanded by Basikh and Cursikh, and also by Attila’s youngest son Ernah (in Egishe-Heran), conducted another devastating invasion of Transcaucasia and Asia Minor through the Daryal pass and Derbent Gate [9] In the same year, Ctesiphon and Constantinople agreed an armistice, and in 442 signed the long-term peace treaty confirming the obligation of the treaty of 424 [10].

After this, in the mid-440s, Shahanshah Yazdegerd II (439–457) began building a defensive system on the western Caspian coast. At first Persia erected a solid



Map 3.1 Derbent Walls

In 2002 the Azerbaijani-Dagestani-American archaeological expedition carried out careful visual investigations and mapping of portions of the Ghilghilchay Sasanian fortification wall that was built in the VI century ACE on the Caspian coastal plain. There were identified inter alia over 300 tower buttresses spaced regularly along the wall, five towers with interior cultural deposits, three military garrisons or forts (two of which were unrecorded), and one apparently fortified Sasanian settlement.

mud-brick wall in the Derbent pass, which partitioned off a narrow 3.5 km seaside plain and the citadel on an elevated spur [11]. Between 447 and 450, a stronghold was constructed near Beliji, 20 km south of Derbent, which has been reliably identified as the city of Shahrastan-i Yazdegerd [12] consisting of a huge fortified settlement (approximately 100 ha) called Torpakh-kala [13].

When the emperor Marcian (r. 450–457) ascended the throne he concluded the union with Shahanshah Yazdegerd II, confirming the bilateral treaty signed in 442. Byzantium regularly paid Persia a half share of the charges for the protection of the Caucasian passes; the Armenian writer of the VIII century, Ghevond [14], states that in 717 ('in the second year' of the caliph Sulayman) the Arabs, having seized Derbent, discovered a plate in the masonry of the wall inscribed: 'Marcianus, Autocrat, Caesar has constructed this city, this tower with a great quantity of talents from his own treasury.' Apparently, these expenses were connected with the restoration of the Chor fortification that was damaged during the revolt of 450–51. It is indirectly confirmed in Michael the Syrian's (XII century) reference to John of