

Old Udi

Until recently, none of the roughly 30 East Caucasian languages could be described in terms of a deeper diachronic documentation. The earliest documents so far (mostly glosses) concern Awar (1485), Dargi (1507), and Lak (ante 1700). A small number of inscriptions found in Northern Azerbaijan are usually related to the tradition of Caucasian Albania, the third Transcaucasian Christian kingdom in the early Middle Ages (~ 300-700 AD). According to a longstanding tradition, the script and language of these inscriptions (dated roughly ~ 600 AD) are interpreted as ‘Caucasian Albanian’ although we have to bear in mind that the region concerned probably was inhabited by a multilingual community. Hence, the language of these inscriptions that could only be interpreted in very superficial way until the year 2002 seemed to represent some kind of state language rather than Caucasian Albanian in the narrow sense. Historical documents and a very few medieval sources suggested that this language has to do with Modern Udi, spoken by some 7.000 people in Northern Azerbaijan (Nizh), in Eastern Georgia (Zinobiani) as well as in scattered places in the Diaspora (Russia, Armenia etc.). The so-called Caucasian Albanian Palimpsest, discovered in 1975 in St. Catherine’s monastery of Mt. Sinai, has now changed this picture dramatically. We have to deal with two heavily damaged manuscripts (Sinai M13 and Sinai M55) of roughly 180 folios, the underlying script of which can be related to the Caucasian Albanian script reported to have been invented by the Armenian scribe, monk, and (later on) missionary Mesrop Maštoc’ (362-440). A famous passage in the Armenian *patmowt’ iwn (ašxarhi) ałowanik* (History of the Albanians) by Movsēs Kalankatuac’i (or Dasxowranc’i; 7th century (?)) tells us that Mesrop has “created with the help [of the bishop Ananian and the translator Benjamin] an alphabet for the guttural, harsh, barbarous, and rough language of the Gargarac’ik’” (Pat.Ał. Book II, 3, compare Dowsett 1961:69). The Gargarac’ik’ represented one of the peoples of the kingdom of Albania the name of which is already attested in Strabo XI,5,1 and which can be associated to the Armenian toponym *daštn Gargarac’owc’*, a region southeast of the central part of the Kura river (compare the contemporary river name *Gargar*, a tributary to the Araxes). Most likely, the Gargarac’ik’ whose habitat was located to the east of the Aluan province Utik’ played a crucial role in the state’s administration at least by the time of conversion to the Christian faith. Although the ‘Albanian’ state started to disintegrate soon after 705, the Aluan script seemed to have been in continuous use until at least the 12th century. For instance, the Kilikean historian Haythōn (Hethum), a nephew of the Kilikean king Hethum I (1226-1269), reported in 1307: “Literas habent Armenicas, et alias etiam, quae dicuntur Haloēn” (*Haythōni Armenii historia orientalis, quae eadem et De Tartaris inscribitur*, Coloniae Brand. 1671:9). The existence of an Aluan alphabet has been confirmed by two (re-copied, in parts corrupt) alphabet lists that have survived in medieval manuscripts (now kept in the Matenadaran museum, Erevan; M 7117, f 142 and M 3124, see Abuladze 1938:70, Kurdian 1956).

Based on preliminary work by Zaza Alkesidze, Jost Gippert (University of Frankfurt) and Wolfgang Schulze (University of Munich) started to work on the decipherment, translation, and edition of the Sinai Palimpsest in 2003. It soon turned out that the Palimpsest (dated ~650-700) corroborates the hypothesis that its language is a precursor of Modern Udi. The Palimpsest itself includes fragments of an early Christian lectionary with passages especially from the New Testament recited during religious services and lengthy fragments of the Gospel of John. The amount of data is considerable: The text covers roughly some 10,000 tokens (~ 2,500 types). The text now allows us to describe in detail the phonetics, grammar, and lexicon of an East Caucasian language in a state prior to the massive intrusion of the ‘Oriental’ tradition (Islam-based language contact). Moreover, the language of the Palimpsest (‘Old Udi’) can help to describe tendencies of

language change in East Caucasian embodied in terms of changes from Old Udi to Modern Udi (over a period of roughly 1500 years). In this sense, the Palimpsest is relevant not only for the description of the internal history of Udi as such, but also for the understanding of processes of language change in the Eastern Caucasus. In addition, the language of the Palimpsest clearly shows that Old Udi had been marked by a (nevertheless modest) impact from Old Armenian, a fact that helps us to better understand the local history of pre-Islamic Azerbaijan.

In my paper, I want to give a brief outline of Old Udi as it shows up in the language of the Palimpsest. I will mainly deal with questions of morphosyntax (emergence of floating agreement patterns, case system, TAM constructions etc.) and with the structure of the Old Udi lexicon (its Lezgian layer, loan layers etc.). This presentation will include constant reference both to what we know from Proto-Lezgian and to Modern Udi. The Old Udi data suggest that Udi does not form a separate branch of Proto-Lezgian, but that it must have emerged from a proto-Eastern Samur dialect cluster (including Lezgi, Aghul, and Tabasaran), from which it split off first. Likewise, the data suggest that Old Udi must have had at least three dialects (Northern Old Udi developing into Vartashen Udi, Western Old Udi developing into what later has become Nizh Udi, and Central Old Udi (the language of the Old Udi inscriptions, Gargarac'ik')). In this context, I will add a brief report on the emergence of Modern Udi dialects as well as a new proposal to interpret the (Central) Old Udi inscriptions.