

Wastyrgy's Three-Legged Horse in Religious and Mythological Beliefs of the Ossetians

Anzor Darchiev

One of the main characters of the Ossetian religious pantheon is Wastyrgy, the heavenly patron of men, warriors and travellers. A thorough study of mythological plots and images associated with him should contribute to a more complete reconstruction of archaic religious and mythological beliefs of the Ossetians. Folklore texts depict him as a horseman who descends from heaven to help honest people and punish their offenders. Wastyrgy is among the main actors of the Ossetian Narts' epic. The narrators call his marvellous white horse a three-legged horse (*ætyk'axyg*), and researchers have different opinions about this peculiarity.

1 Hypothesis of E. G. Pchelina

The first to attempt interpreting the image of the three-legged horse of Wastyrgy was E. G. Pchelina. The researcher connected the bronze artefacts depicting hippocampi, i.e., horses with fish tails, which she found in the village of Sokhta and in the sanctuary of Rekom, with the three-legged horse of the Ossetian Narts' epic (Pchelina 1986: 45ff.). It should be noted for fairness' sake that the hypothesis of a correspondence between the mythological hippocampus (a sea horse with a fish tail instead of hind legs) and the mythologeme of the three-legged horse was expressed long before Pchelina. The German Iranist Georg Hüsing wrote as early as in 1932: "Das Roß Poseidaons ist aber auch der dreifüssige Hippokamos, der mit zwei Vorderfüßen und einem Schlangen- oder Fischleibe dargestellt wird" (Hüsing 1932: 9). However, the question arises, how grounded the comparison of Wastyrgy's three-legged horse with the fish-tailed hippocampus is.

All the passages in the editions of the Narts' epic, which Pchelina claims to contain direct references to Wastyrgy's three-legged horse with a fish or snake tail, prove to fail doing it upon examination (Darchiev/Darchieva 2019: 144ff.). Moreover, these tales repeatedly testify that the water depths are beyond the control of the divine rider: in nearly all the variants, the daughter of the water

deity Dzerassa eludes him by diving into the sea (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: 1/19, 32, 40, 44, 47, 53, 65, 70, 74, 80, 86, 92); Wastyrgy cannot cross the river or the sea, and when he and his horse were almost carried away by the current, the Nart Marguts comes to his aid (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: v/525, 532). True, there are tales in which Wastyrgy crosses the sea on horseback (Dzagurov 1925: 3), but even here nothing is said about the fish or snake tail of his horse and nothing points to it even at the level of tropes. On the contrary, Wastyrgy crosses the sea, “swimming like a goose” (*qazy lenk gaengæ*) (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: v/535).

That the three-legged horse belonging to Wastyrgy in the epic is rather loosely correlated with the water element and quite clearly connected with the air sphere follows from many facts. When crossing the river, Wastyrgy counts not on the fish tail that his horse allegedly has, but on its wings: *Arast sti æmæ ju ran ju styr dony wasmæ baftydy sti æmæ sæ donæn je'nnae farsmæ cæwyn qwyd. Wastyrgy bakatai kodta: “Ja, mæ bæx zy acæuzan, mæ bæx bazarǵyn u, felæe zy Marǵucy bæx kwyd acæuzæn?”* // “They set out on their journey and in one place they found themselves on the bank of a big river, and it was necessary for them to cross to the other side of it. Wastyrgy was worried: «Well, my horse will cross it, since my horse is winged, but how will Marguts' horse cross it?»” (Dzagurov/Guriev/Khamitsaeva 2011: 91f.). As noted above, the narrator compares Wastyrgy crossing the sea not to a fish, as one might expect, but to a waterfowl (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: v/535). In another tale, Wastyrgy appears among the Narts riding a lame horse (which, in mythological terms, is equivalent to a three-legged one). But at the right moment the lame horse slowly treading the ground turns into a winged horse and soars upwards, becoming unattainable for any earthly horse (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: v/494). Apparently, here too we are dealing with relics of ancient mythology, because, as E. E. Kuz'mina notes, “in all Indo-Iranian traditions the likening of a horse and a bird is widespread” (Kuz'mina 1977: 100). Yet some correspondences can be pointed outside the Indo-Iranian tradition: in German folklore a three-legged horse flying through the air is also mentioned (“In Husby stob ein dreibeiniges Pferd durch die Luft davon”), which is associated with archaic ideas about the supreme god of Germanic-Scandinavian mythology Odin (Wolf 1852: 22).

The absence of ichthyomorphic features of the miraculous horse of Wastyrgy in the most complete scientific edition of Narts' texts makes one skeptical about Pchelina's hypothesis. Nevertheless, there are important observations in Pchelina's study that help to elucidate the mythological content of the image of the three-legged horse. Pchelina correctly emphasizes the solar features of the three-legged horse in the epic, although she does not directly

connect the interpretation of the motif of three-leggedness with this fact (Pchelina 1986: 45 f.). However, in the mythologies of different peoples of the world elements of triplicity are inherent in the solar symbolism, and we believe that it is the solar symbolism of the horse which can be explained by such an unusual feature of the horse as the three-leggedness (for more details see in the next chapter). In this connection, it is necessary to note bronze plaques in the form of “whirling rosettes”, discovered by Pchelina in the sanctuary of Rekom. On one of them, instead of curved arcs diverging unilaterally from the centre, three miniature horse heads are depicted (Pchelina 1986: 47 f.). The connection of triple elements with the image of the horse and with the solar myth in the Indo-Iranian tradition, is perhaps evidenced by one interesting observation of Kuz'mina: both in the ancient Indian rite of Ashvamedha, and in the Scythian ritual the number of sacrificed horses is a multiple of three (Kuz'mina 1977: 111f.).

2 Criticism of the Hypothesis about the “Fire-Footedness” of the Marvelous Horse

In 1976, the journal *Max Dug* published an article by the Ossetian poet and prose writer Georgi Chedzhemov entitled “*Narty næرتون Wырызmæg*”, in which special attention was paid to the motif of the three-legged horse belonging to Wastyrgy. Chedzhemov assumed that the three-legged horse is found exclusively in the Ossetian mythology (in fact, it is known in the folklore of various peoples of the world from Northern Europe to Siberia; see below). Considering a horse, even a mythological one, possessing only three legs instead of four to be nonsense, the author proposed the following interpretation of the epithet *ærtk'axyg*. In his opinion, the image of Wastyrgy was coined on the basis of the image of Nart Wырызmag, and therefore the horse belonging to Wastyrgy must have absorbed the features inherent in Arfan, the horse of Nart Wырызmag. And since Arfan emits sparks with his steel hooves, the same property should be possessed by Wastyrgy's horse, and, therefore, he could be called *Wastyrgyyy artk'axyg bæx* “fire-footed horse of Wastyrgy”. Over time, *artk'axyg bæx* or *ærtk'axyg bæx* “a fire-footed horse” could change into *ærtk'axyg bæx* “a three-legged horse” (Chedzhemty 1976: 96).

Even if we accept the hypothetical thesis about the relationship between the images of Wastyrgy and Wырызmag, the proposed interpretation inevitably raises questions. The assumed “fire-footedness” of Wastyrgy's horse derives solely from the comparison with Arfan, the horse of Nart Wырызmag. But why then we do not find texts, in which the epithet *ærtk'axyg* “three-legged” or

ærtk'axyg “fire-footed” would have been applied to Arfan himself? On the other hand, apart from Wastyrgy, in the Ossetian Narts’ epic the owner of a three-legged horse is also Nart Soslan: 1) *Wædta æ ærtik'axug bæxbæl, æ tær-nixi ba ewnæg cæstæ, wobæl sarġ fevardta æma jeci æxsævigon ranæxstær æj, sæwmæ sabat wozænæj, zæggæ, wæd* “Then [Soslan] saddled his three-legged horse with one eye on its forehead and set out the same night, on the eve of the Sabbath” (recorded by Konstantin Gardanov in the village of Khristianovskoe, no later than 1902, s. Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: 11/494); 2) *Je 'rtik'axug Zynz-alasabæl / Jeci æ bajvæd bærgæ rabaduj, / Narti bæstæmæ, zæġuj, bærgæ fæjjagajuj* (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: 11: 498) “[Soslan] sat on his three-legged *zynz-alas*, / He went to the Nart country” (narrator Dabeg Gatuev, 68, from the village of Khristianovskoe; recorded by Kazbek Kazbekov on 5 February 1941). The image of Nart Soslan cannot be deduced from the image of Nart Wyrzymag, and therefore the three-leggedness of his horse cannot be explained by extrapolating the hypothetical “fire-footedness” of Arfan. However, the main difficulty lies elsewhere: in the Nart epic there is not a single case of using the epithet **artk'axyg*/**ærtk'axyg* “fire-footed”. There is no such word in any lexicographic source, and we do not find any documented quotation confirming its existence in the Ossetian language before the above-mentioned article by Chedzhemov. Thus, the replacement of *ærtk'axyg* with **artk'axyg*, i.e. the replacement of a three-legged horse with a “fire-legged” horse, has no basis in the Ossetian folklore and literary tradition.

Nevertheless, this witty and not devoid of poetic elegance hypothesis has gained many supporters both among unsophisticated lovers of the epic and among experienced researchers. Chochiev, in his 1982 monograph, also writes about the reinterpretation of the “fire-footedness” *ærtk'axyg* of the winged horse Wastyrgy into the “three-footedness” *ærtk'axyg* (Chochiev 1985: 168f.). He calls Wastyrgy’s horse Arfan and lists *ærtk'axyg* “fire-footed” as one of his most frequent epithets, but without specifying even single source confirming this position (Chochiev 1985: 165). Relying on Chochiev’s book, these conclusions are repeated by Ivanchik (2005: 163f.) and Chibirov (2018: 13). The “Dictionary of Ossetian mythology and way of life” compiled by Tsgoev testifies to how much influence this hypothesis has acquired at present. It also states, without any reference to sources, that Ossetians have long called the horse Wastyrgy *ærtk'axyg* “fire-footed”, and the epithet *ærtk'axyg* “three-footed” is just its incorrect variant (Tsgoev 2017: 671).

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the motif of the three-legged horse belonging to Wastyrgy is clearly recorded in the Narts’ texts written by different narrators. Here are examples. 1) *Wycy wyngæg saxaty jæm Xwycaw Wastyrgijy ærbawaġta jæ æ ærtk'axyg bæxyl æmæ jæ egærttimæ* “In this difficult hour

God sent her Wastyrgy on a three-legged horse and with greyhounds" (narrator 80-year-old Kavdyn Guriev from the village of Guli of Kurtata gorge; in March 1896 recorded by Gagudz Guriev, s. Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: 1/18). 2) *Kæcæjdær fæzindi Wastyrgý æmæ kwy bambærsta Narty sæfty xabar, wæd je 'rtyk'axyg bæxyl Narty qæwy smidæg* "Wastyrgy appeared from somewhere and, when he realized that the Narts were perishing, on his three-legged horse he found himself in the Nart village" (narrator 127-year-old Pepe Begizov from the village Yedys, South Ossetia; 3 February 1939 recorded by Dudar Begizov, s. Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: 1/463).

3 Three-Legged Horses in the Epics and Mythology of the Peoples of the World

Three-legged horses are found in the mythology of many peoples of the world, and researchers compare them with a similar image in Ossetian folklore. For example, Tuallagov notes three-legged horses in the Karachai-Balkar and Kabardinian epic, in the tales of the Vainakhs and Avars. By the Yakuts, a three-legged horse is considered an animal that carries a shaman to another world (Tuallagov 2001: 53ff.). To this series we will add three-legged horses from French (Cosquin 1886: 1/135ff., 209), Swiss (Tscheinen/Ruppen 1872: 241ff.), Russian (Afanas'ev 1957: 11/4), Hungarian (Kovács 1966: 171), Georgian (Mourier 1888: 50, 51, 58), Ket (Nikolaev 1985: 104), Turkmen (Sakali 1945: 1938) and Kurdish (Braginskij/Olderogge 1989: 165) tales and legends. The image of a three-legged horse is widespread in German folklore (Panzer 1901: 262), and its deep meaning was investigated by Carl Gustav Jung from the point of view of analytical psychology (Jung 1948: 37ff.).

In Greek mythology, Charon, the carrier of the souls of dead people in Hades, was originally represented as a three-legged horse (Scheibelreiter 1976: 46). In Danish legends, the goddess of death Hel is after the souls of people riding a three-legged horse, but, according to M. Oldfydd Howey, originally Hel was honoured as a mother goddess on a snow-white three-legged horse (Howey 1923: 205). Odin (Wodan), the supreme god of Germanic-Scandinavian mythology, possesses an eight-legged horse Sleipnir, but in German legends about the "Wild Hunt" Odin appears as the leader of the army of the dead and rides not on an eight-legged horse, but on a three-legged one (Menzel 1855: 203; Obermüller 1866–72: 11/418; Ninck 1935: 142). P. Wolfram regarded it as a mythological reflection of the ancient ritual action, performed by members of the male union and preserved in the form of processions of rural youth in different parts of Europe until the beginning of the 20th century (Wolfram 1932:

364). Thus, for example, in different villages of Kent County the central place in such processions belonged to a three-legged horse: “The image of the horse is presented in the following form: on the end of a stick four feet long is fixed a very ancient, carved from wood and painted horse’s head. Attached to this structure is a cloth sack in which the man (“Hoodner”) takes shelter. He actually has to walk bent over to mimic the elongated, elongated torso of a horse, while leaning on a vertically held stick on which a horse’s head is attached, so that the animal appears three-legged (the stick in front is the third leg). This reveals to us the mystery of the ghostly animals in Wild Hunt, which are again and again labelled as three-legged. This figure occurs also in Romania, not differing in appearance from the English one” (Wolfram 1932: 363f.).

4 Solar Interpretation of the Motif of Three-Leggedness of the Miracle Horse

What is the meaning of the three-leggedness motif in relation to the horse of Wastyrgy? As Abaev noted, Wastyrgy is endowed with the features of a solar deity (Abaev 1990b: 133 f.), and it is not by chance that he is the owner of miraculous horses, since the solar symbolism of the horse is widespread both in the Indo-European tradition and beyond it. We believe that the three-leggedness of the horse can be explained through its solar nature, because in archaic cultures the triple symbolism was closely connected with the idea of the sun (Evsjukov/Komissarov 1984: 58 ff.). In Asia Minor, for example, the sun was often depicted in the form of the so-called triskelion: a disc from which three running human legs emerge (“radiate”) (Goblet d’Alviella 1891: 71f., 90, 221f.). The tripod, a common household and religious object in antiquity, is also considered a solar symbol, because its three supports correspond to the three “moments” of the sun’s path: sunrise, zenith and sunset (Cirlot 1971: 352).

The connection of the three-leggedness of the horse with the solar symbolism of this animal is also suggested by some facts of Indo-Iranian mythology. The ancient Indian solar god Vishnu in one of his zoomorphic incarnations appears in the image of a horse and is endowed with corresponding epithets: “having the face of a horse”, “horse-headed” (Gonda 1954: 148). At the same time, according to the Vedic myth, Vishnu makes three miraculous steps (*tripada*), which, according to one of the most widespread interpretations, denote the movement of the sun: sunrise, zenith and sunset (Kuiper 1962: 139f.). It should be noted that the ancient Indian *pad-* denotes both step and foot (Toporov 2010: 114 f.). The conclusions by V. V. Evsjukov S. A. Komissarov about the semantic identity of the triple step and three-leggedness, confirmed by many details

of Indo-European rituals as well as by materials of ancient Chinese mythology (Evsjukov/Komissarov 1984: 58ff.) appear thus to be well-founded. We believe that it is this identity that explains the images of three-legged Vishnu known in Indian art (Varadpande 2009: 51).

Another idea of Vishnu is also associated with the mythologeme of three steps. The Dutch priest Philip Baldaeus (1632–1671), author of the “Description of the Shores of the East Indies”, gave a lot of interesting information on Hindu mythology. He describes the tenth avatara of Vishnu as a white flying horse (“weiß fliegend Pferd”, s. Baldaeus 1672: 553) in the heavens, which stands on three legs and keeps the front right leg raised (“ein weiß Pferd oben im Himmel/welches auf drey Füßen stehe/ und das rechte Forderbein in die Höhe halte”). When the sinfulness of men reaches its limit, the horse will lower the fourth leg and the earth will be destroyed (Baldaeus 1672: 552). It is believed that Baldaeus used some unpublished manuscript work on the ten incarnations of Vishnu, the author of which drew materials from both written and oral sources (Charpentier 1924: 420). There is also a tradition according to which the tenth coming *avatara* of Vishnu is a rider on a white flying horse and with a flaming sword in his hand (Vollmer 1836: 997).

M. Jähns compared Baldaeus’ information with an Iranian legend from the “Zardusht-nama”, according to which the legs of the favourite horse of the King Gushtasp were pulled into the torso, i.e. hidden. The prophet Zardusht was able to heal the animal by pulling out its hidden legs with the help of prayer. Apparently, Jähns considers the raised leg of Vishnu’s horse as a correspondence to the motif of “hidden legs” in the Zoroastrian legend, and he refers to Vishnu’s horse itself as “three-legged” (Jähns 1872: 409).

The three steps of Vishnu denote not only the movement of the sun, but also the way to the higher solar world, where people stay after death (Dumézil 1986: 235). There is a similar notion in Iranian mythology. With three steps Ameshaspenta (the highest deities of the Zoroastrian pantheon) ascend from the earth to the solar sphere and reach the paradise abode of righteous souls (Darmesteter 1892–93: 1/401). Zoroastrians describe paradise as consisting of three levels, passing through which the soul of a righteous person makes three steps, and the third step belongs to the sphere of the sun (Pavry 1929: 93, 104), just as in the Rigveda the third step of Vishnu is identified with the sun at its zenith (Kuiper 1962: 139f.).

In the Ossetian rite of dedicating a horse to the deceased (*bæxfældisyn*), one of the old men first circled a saddled horse around the deceased three times, then with a cup of beer or *araka* made a dedicatory speech and, after giving the horse a taste from the cup, poured the drink on its hooves (Khamitsaeva 1992: 365). In another variant of the rite, the cup must be broken on the hoof of

the horse (ПРКОО-2: 11/700). The meaning of the connection between horse hooves and intoxicating drink can be clarified in comparison with the data of Vedic mythology. According to Austrian ethnologist Karl von Spieß, in archaic cultures the vessel for the drink of immortality could have the form of a horse hoof. Thus, in Vedic mythology, 100 jugs of intoxicating drink *sura* or *madhu* (both words mean honey or some drink made of honey) flow out of a horse hoof at the command of divine twin horsemen Ashvins. Moreover, the three footprints left by the three steps of Vishnu are referred to as “full of honey” in the Rigveda (RV I, 124, 4). It is also said that “the source of honey is in the highest footprint Vishnu” (RV I, 124, 5). Since Vishnu, on the one hand, leaves three footprints, and, on the other hand, is directly identified with a horse standing on three legs, he should be imagined as three-legged. Thus, von Spieß concludes, the three Vishnu’s horse tracks (“drei (Pferde-) Stapfen”) filled with honey, reflect the mythological idea of the horse hoof as a source of an intoxicating drink (honey) (Spieß 1914: 42).

Wastyrgy not only moves between the worlds on a three-legged horse, but he also endows dead people with miraculous horses so that they could get to the Land of the Dead faster. Generally speaking, Wastyrgy is somehow especially closely connected with the otherworld. In the Nart epic, it is he who performs the burial of Akhsar and Akhsartag, having built a crypt for them with a single blow of a felt whip (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: 1/32, 52, 65). When Donbettyr’s daughter Dzerassa cunningly escaped from him into the sea, he throws after her: “*Ėæy, dodojag dæ kona! Wælæwyl dyl nal fæxæst wyžynæn, fælæ myn Mærdy ta kædæm irvæžzynæ!*” / “Hey, woe to your hearth! In this world I can no longer catch you, but where will you hide from me in the other world?” (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: 1/65, cf. Miller 1881: 46). In this threat, apart from the bitterness of deceived male expectations, one cannot help but feel Wastyrgy’s confidence in his unlimited power in the world of the dead. He penetrates into Dzerassa’s crypt (again, the action is in the zone of the inanimate) and brings the dead beauty back to life, whereas in other Narts’ texts the power to bring dead people back to the world of the living for a while is vested in Barastyr, the lord of the Land of the Dead.

When trying to understand the surprising connection of Wastyrgy with the world of the dead, one should, obviously, remember the inherent functions of a war deity. According to Abaev, he “inherited the features of that Alan god of war, which the Alans worshipped in the image of a sword” (Abaev 1990: 109). But the same god of war, according to B. Bachrach, was also worshipped by the Alans as the god of the afterlife (Bachrach 1973: 111). Probably, it should be assumed that Wastyrgy together with military functions inherited those features of the Alan god of war, which characterized the latter as the lord of the otherworld. In this case, it becomes clear why in traditional Ossetian religious

beliefs it is Wastyrgy who is considered the founder of the rite of dedicating a horse to a dead man (Khamitsaeva 1992: 179).

An anonymous article of 1868 about religious beliefs of Ossetians (it is believed that its author was P. I. Golovinsky) contains a highly interesting description of a farewell speech given to the deceased: "This speech, which is either shortened or stretched, depending on the skill of the speaker, is the same in content for everyone; only in relation to dead brave men – friends of St. George (i.e. *Wastyrgy*, A. D.) in arms – a special turn is observed. When a brave horseman had died, the news thereabout was conveyed to St. George by a "hero"-swallow (*Narty zærvatykk*), the fastest of all birds. Having flown to St. George and sat on his right shoulder, it reported: "Your friend, so-and-so has died". St. George ordered the *narty zærvatykk* to give the deceased the best horse or the fastest *æfsūrǵ* (miraculous stallion) from his herd. Immediately after death, the deceased is washed, dressed in clean linen, a bridle is put in his right hand, and one of his relatives, addressing him, says: "You are a good, kind, brave man, you should appear on the best horse before Barastyr. I advise you to take a horse from the *kanta*. Horses of this people have deer ears, big, shining eyes, amber lips, ivory teeth, golden manes, silver wool. If all the horses of the *kanta* are in a race, try to take a horse in the herd of St. George; if he has horses in a race, then take the purest wheat and bait the *æfsūrǵ* of St. George with it. Having obtained a horse or an *æfsūrǵ*, ride on it to Barastyr" (PPKOO-2: 11/786f.). It is clear from this speech that St. George / Wastyrgy gifted horses not to all the dead, but only to brave warriors. Deceased brave men are called "friends" of Wastyrgy (Saint George) himself, and in this we see an echo of the ancient ideology of a military male alliance, whose heavenly head and patron was the god of war. A. I. Ivanchik (1993: 317ff.) and K. Kershaw (Kershaw 2000: 186) have already written in their studies that it is Wastyrgy / Saint George who is such a patron deity of military male alliances by the Ossetians.

The sequence of searching for a horse by a deceased brave man is worth special attention in this text. Having failed to find a suitable horse among those of the *kanta* people, he must try to choose one from the herd of Wastyrgy (St. George); if this fails, the deceased is offered a third and, apparently, the most difficult option – to lure a miraculous horse (*æfsūrǵ*) belonging to Wastyrgy. The note explains that "Afsurg is a three-legged animal, similar to a horse, the fastest of all animals" (PPKOO-2: 11/787). So, the dead brave goes to the realm of the dead on the marvellous three-legged horse of Wastyrgy himself, a fact that may seem strange, but we find a close parallel for it in Germanic-Scandinavian mythology. Here Odin (Wodan) is the god of war, the patron of male unions and the ruler of Valhalla, the heavenly parlour ("paradise") where brave warriors fallen in battles stay. Only Odin possesses the marvellous eight-legged horse Sleipnir. At the same time, researchers have discovered one very curious

detail: memorial steles of Gotland (Sweden, the second half of the 1st millennium AD) from Ardre, Hablingo and Tjangvide contain the image of a dead man travelling to the other world on Odin's eight-legged horse (Wolfram 1932: 367). According to O. Höfler, this indicates that the lord of Valhalla himself was sometimes represented as a horse (Höfler 1934: 38). Yet, for us the analogy with the Ossetian text of the dedication, in which the dead brave man moves to the other world on a three-legged horse belonging to Wastyrgy, is especially important.

5 “Limpness” and “Three-Leggedness”

Sometimes Ossetian narrators, while calling the horse three-legged, in the same text also refer to it as a lame horse (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: v/494). A similar situation can be traced in other folklore traditions. In the same stories miracle horses are so often called three-legged or lame that researchers have long ago come to the conclusion that lameness and three-leggedness are identical (Hüsing 1909: 73f.). Let us give only some examples. In the Russian fairy tale “Sivko-burko” the youngest of the three brothers, Ivan the Fool, leaving home, begs his brothers to give him at least some horse: “The brothers could not fight back: “Well, take, fool, a three-legged mare!”. As time passed, Ivan the Fool again set out on his journey and asked his brothers for a horse. They again could not refuse him and “told him to take the lame mare again”. This story with persuasions was repeated for the third time: “No, they could not fight back, they fought and fought, they told him to take a skinny lame mare” (Afanas'ev 1957: 11/4f.). As we can see, here “three-legged”, “lame” and “thin” act as equivalent characteristics of the horse.

The third equivalent of the three-legged horse, “thin mare”, should perhaps be compared with an interesting observation of Karl von Spieß. The Austrian ethnologist saw the reflection of the three-legged horse motif in the name of the Iranian hero Kersaspa, which means, according to Spieß, “he who has a damaged horse” (“der mit dem schadhafte Pferde”, s. Spieß 1931: 131). The more precise etymology of this name is somewhat different: “having thin, skinny horses” (“magere Pferde habend / having lean horses”, s. Mayrhofer 1956–80: 1/263), and its connection with the mythologeme of the three-legged horse may cause certain doubts. However, it should probably not be completely excluded, given the identity of the definitions “three-legged” and “skinny” applied to the horse in the above Russian tale.

Georg Hüsing cites Edmund Küttler's information that the “flawed / thin”, three-legged horse is found in Georgian folklore under the name of Raši (Svan. Rašū) and it is none other than Raḥš, Rostahms' horse (Hüsing 1911: 38).

Also in German folklore, the character partly resembling Ivan the Fool of Russian fairy tales and having the same unrepresentable nickname – Grindkopf “Lousy-headed”, in the plots close to the above-mentioned Russian fairy tale, also strives to participate in battle, hunting, searching for living water, etc., but receives only a lame (“three-legged”) horse for these heroic deeds (“... aber man giebt ihm ein lahmes (‘dreibeiniges’) Pferd”, s. Panzer 1901: 262).

To explain the mythological significance of the three-legged (lame) horse Georg Hüsing tried to include it in the context of the Iranian lunar myth, but on a very shaky basis. Seeing similarities between the miraculous three-legged donkey of the Pahlavi texts and Apaosh, the demon of drought in the form of a black horse, he extrapolated to the latter the sign of three-leggedness (Hüsing 1909: 52f.), although there is no indication of this in the sources. Rolf Neumann supported Hüsing’s interpretation and even tried to apply it to the interpretation of the lame eight-legged horse Sleipnir belonging to Odin (Neumann 1913: 224f.). However, this hypothesis was not further developed.

As noted above, Odin/Wodan’s horse appears in German legends not only as eight-legged, but also as three-legged, and its three-leggedness is again associated with lameness or equated with it: “His (Odin’s, A. D.) three-legged, i.e. lame, horse was called Sleipnir, Schleifer, Celt. slaopairean” (“Sein dreibeiniges, d.h. lahmes, Pferd hieß Sleipnir, Schleifer, kelt. slaopairean”, s. Obermüller 1866–72: 11/418).

Victoria Prasser notes also that in German folklore the lame or three-legged horse (“das hinkende oder dreibeinige Pferd”) is the animal of Wodan and interprets lameness as a sign of theriomorphism. Prasser gave interesting examples from German ethnography (peasant dances with movements imitating lameness, running competitions in which the last man had to tie a bundle of straw to his knee and limp as if he had a padded knee), which, in her opinion, are the remnants of the rituals of male union and the cult of Wodan (Prasser 1940: 118f.). The legends in which the protagonist not only appears on a three-legged horse, but also finds himself wounded in the leg, i.e. lame, testify to the theriomorphic character of this hero and to the connection of these legends with the mythology of Wodan, who originally appeared as a horse (identified with his famous horse Sleipnir): “Demnach würde auch das Hinken des großen erwarteten Sagenhelden auf seinen einst theriomorphen Charakter zu deuten sein; verständlich wird dies dies uns wieder, wenn wir in dem Sieger eben den Gott der Männerbunde, Wodan, erblicken, der, wie bereits dargelegt, die anthropomorphe Hypostase des ursprünglich pferdegestaltigen Dämons ist” (Prasser 1940: 118f.).

In this connection, it is interesting to note an Ossetian text in which Wastyrgy appears among the Narts on a three-legged, lame horse. When the Narts offered him to dance with them, he replied: *Mæ bæx k’wylx u, mæxædaeg*

dær k'wylyx dæn mæ bæxaw, æmæ mæ awazut fæltaw mæ fændagyl // “My horse is lame, and I myself am lame like my horse, so it is better to let me go my way” s. Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: v/494). In this fragment we see an echo of the same archaic representation that was noted above in the mythology of Odin: the divine rider identifies himself with his lame horse.

6 Conclusion

The three-leggedness of the horse belonging to Wastyrgy is not a later semantic aberration of his “fire-footedness” but a mythological motif belonging to a very archaic layer of traditional spiritual culture of the Ossetians. The motif of three-leggedness of the horse of the solar deity Wastyrgy belongs to those triple elements, which are inherent in solar symbolism in religious and mythological beliefs of many peoples of the world. The three-legged horse belonging to Wastyrgy functions also as a psychopomp, a feature which finds correspondences in ancient Greek and Germanic-Scandinavian mythology.

The closest analogies are found in genetically related mythological systems (the ancient Indian sun god Vishnu takes three miraculous steps that mark the way to the heavenly abode of ancestors, he is depicted as three-legged or identified with a horse standing only on three legs; in Iranian mythology – three steps by which after death a man ascends to the solar sphere).

Taking into account the obvious connection of the solar Wastyrgy with the world of the dead, we can assume that his three-legged horse, carrying the deceased to the other world, is a zoomorphic embodiment of the Indo-Iranian mythologeme of the three steps of the solar deity, taking the soul of the righteous to the abode of bliss.