

## Noose in the Ethno-cultural Tradition of the Alans-Ossetians

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Ancient authors are unanimous in the fact that the tribes living in Scythia and Sarmatia were excellent riders and masters of a special equestrian discipline: the art of noose throwing on their enemies at full gallop. If we recall the Scythian custom of rewarding warriors who proved that they had killed their enemies (Herodotus IV, 64; 66), as well as the custom of the Savromatian Amazons to marry only after killing three enemies, then the noose would be the optimal weapon to deliver to the chief the corpse of a slain enemy for getting access to the division of booty, or a living captive for ransom or sale as a slave. The latter became particularly relevant in an era when military elites began to don heavy armour, which meant the possibility of capturing a warrior, or even a king, who could pay a huge ransom for freedom. In this regard, the Roman military historian and theorist Vegetius wrote that “*Cataphracts (armoured horsemen), because of the heavy armour they wear, are protected from wounds, but because of the bulkiness and weight of the weapons are easily captured: they are caught with nooses*” (Epitome of Military Science III, 23). According to the Latin author of the 4th century Pseudo-Hegesippus (On the ruin of the city of Jerusalem V, 50), the Alans are “*a fierce people and long unknown to ours, very “skillful in battle to throw a noose and entangle the enemy” (laqueos iacere atque hostem innectere ars Alanis bellandique mos est)*. The same is mentioned by its primary source Josephus Flavius, describing the Alanian raid on Armenia in the 1st century AD, during which the Armenian king Tiridat was almost captured by an Alan who threw a noose on him: “*Producing plunder with ease and meeting no resistance, they, making desolation, reached Armenia. Here Tiridates ruled, who came up against them and gave battle, but narrowly escaped capture during the battle, for the enemy, having thrown a noose (βρόχος) from afar, would have dragged him away from the field of battle if he had not immediately managed to cut the rope with his sword and escape*” (Jewish War 244–251). Cassiodorus conveys the same thing in his translation of the “Jewish War” (*procul enim quidam misso laqueo circumdatum tracturus fuerat nisi celeriter gladio rupisset laqueum atque ita fugisset*, Bell. Iud. VII, 42). The Armenian historian of the 8th century Ioannes Mamikonyan in his report about the raid of the “Northmen” on

Armenia (The History of Tavrion xxiv) tells that during the duel of the leaders, the leader of the “Northmen” threw a noose on the king of Armenia, turned his horse and rode back, but Tiridat, in order not to be torn from the saddle, directed the horse after the enemy (Nefedkin 2011: 181). Movses Khorenatsi tells about the Basilian tribe that lived in the Volga steppes and invaded Armenia in the 3rd century through the Derbent Passage. The Armenian author writes about the king of the Basilians, who were probably Eastern Alans or Roxolans: “The king of Basilians comes up to the sovereign, takes out from under the horse’s equipment a noose of veins covered with leather and, skillfully throwing it on from behind, wraps it around his left shoulder and right armpit, for his hand was raised to strike with a sword” (History of Armenia II, 85). Long before the appearance of the Alans on the historical scene, many authors wrote about the use of nooses among Iranian nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes. Thus, for example, Herodotus tells about the tribe of the Sagartians (Σαγάρτιοι), a semi-nomadic people living on the northern borders of Achaemenid Persia, whose main offensive weapon was a noose made of woven leather straps. “This is the manner of fighting of these men: when they are at close quarters with their enemy, they throw their ropes, which have a noose at the end; whatever he catches, horse or man, each man drags to himself, and the enemy is entangled in the coils and slain” (Herodotus VII, 85). As for the Scythians proper, no direct archaeological evidence indicating to the use of nooses by the Scythians has been found so far, which is not surprising due to the organic materials from which the noose was usually made. The absence of noose blocks or rings indicates, probably, the existence of archaic types of nooses, whose loops were made in a special technological way, from the same material as the noose.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, there are indirect pictorial and written sources which testify to the use of noose among the Scythians. Greco-Scythian toreutics is rich in everyday details of Scythian life, one of the most famous examples being, of course, the famous silver amphora from the Chertomlyk barrow (4th century BC). The middle frieze of the amphora depicts scenes of horse breeding and sacrifice, which is in detail similar to the written description of this rite by Herodotus. The “father of history” wrote in his work that the Scythians sacrificed horses in a special way: by strangulation with a noose thrown around the horse’s neck (Herodotus IV, 60–61). Machinskij rightly saw in this image

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1 Such nooses are still used by reindeer herders in Siberia, for example, Evenki *maut* is made of twisted reindeer skin taken from the neck of a reindeer killed during the rut, when the neck skin thickens to protect it from wounds caused by antlers during reindeer tournaments. The lug is made in a special way from the same piece of leather as the noose. Probably, Scythian nooses were made by a similar method from the neck skin of horses sacrificed.

exactly the sacrifice of a horse with the help of nooses, traces of which were left on the amphora in the form of fragments of thin silver wire on the horse's neck and the characters' hands (Machinskij 1978: 236f.). However, the poses of the characters and the horse do not cause much doubt that they used nooses. The Scythians noosing horses on the side images of the same Chertomlyk frieze (see illustrations) use an identical tool. Two other images on gold objects of the 4th century BC deserve attention; the image of an old warrior on a cone from the Perederieva Mogila in the Dnieper region, and an identical character on a similar object from the Sengileev barrow, recently discovered in Stavropol. In both images we see a one-type character whose torso from the right shoulder under the left armpit is wrapped with multithreaded loops resembling a rope or a noose.<sup>2</sup> Apart Herodotus, Lucian of Samosata mentions Scythian nooses in a list of various items of armour, which according to an assumption of his character Mnesippos could well be, on a par with the *akinak*, embodiments of the Scythian god of war (Toxaris xxxviii, 4). Valerius Flaccus specifies that the Scythian tribe of the Auchates were "skilful in *throwing great circles of flying noose and in using the noose (laqueis) to drag distant enemies towards them*" (*Argonautica* vi, 132). Similar military practices are attributed by Pausanias to the early Savromates: "*They throw nooses on the enemies confronted by them and then, having turned their horses, overturn those caught in the nooses*" (*Description of Hellas* i, 21, 5). From the Sarmatian time the narrative of Pomponius Mela dates, in which the tribe of the Syraks and the customs of their female warriors Amazons are described: "*The women participate in mounted battles, and they do not strike with a sword, but, having thrown a noose on the enemy, drag him behind them, and thus kill him*" (*Descriptive Geography* i, 19, 5 / i, 103). The image of a she-warrior on horseback with a noose in her hand has been preserved in the Ossetian Nart epic (see below).

A symbolic image on an early Sarmatian gold belt buckle made in the animal style with turquoise inlays is also of interest. It depicts a fanged wolf struggling with a buffalo snake, which throws a deadly loop around the wolf's neck, reminiscent of a noose. In this respect, some data of the Ossetian epic are very interesting, where the hero, who wants to master a miracle horse, is forced to weave a miracle noose from the skins of the Zali snakes he destroyed, which turns out to be stronger than the noose woven from six buffalo skins (*zaljag kælmytæ fæcaŷta jæ mæstyjæ æmæ wydon cærmttæ bastyŷta æmæ sæ sbydta*

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2 I express my gratitude to A. Y. Alexeev for pointing out these images and for his valuable observations.

*wydonæj arqan*, Kokajty 2014: 73).<sup>3</sup> It is also worth notion a similar Old Indian object called *nāgapāśa* ‘snake noose’. This attribute of gods and heroes is described in various sources including the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana as a type of magic noose used in battles and consisting of a snake or intertwined snakes (Liebert 1986: 188).<sup>4</sup> Its other synonyms are *pāsapannaga*, *nāgāstra*, *nāgapāśāstra*,<sup>5</sup> *nāgābandha*, *citrabandha*, *sarpabandha* (Emeneau 1960:

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- 3 In my previous work, which focuses on some issues related to the vestiges of the image of the Indo-Iranian god Vayu in the tradition of Iranian-speaking nomads, I have already suggested that the image of the fighting wolf and snake should be seen as a metaphorical representation of the struggle between the two antagonistic origins of this ambivalent god: the snake is the embodiment of the “evil Vayu” and the wolf of the “good Vayu” (Mysykkyaty 2019: 327f.). If this assumption be true, then we can assume that originally the noose functioned as an attribute of the Indo-Iranian god of life and death Vayu, from whom the Vedic Yama inherited this attribute. After all, it was Vayu who was the lord of the breath-*prana* of all living beings, which he could interrupt with the help of a strangling tool, i. e. the noose. Important in this respect is the fact that Vayu is associated with horse-breeding (see Mysykkyaty 2019: 309, 312, 314, 320). This feature of him, reflected in particular on the Novosvobodnensk fresco, is most archaic. Perhaps, the Scythian special way of horse sacrifice with the help of a noose, as described by Herodotus (cf. the name of the Ossetian Wayug \**Æfsagbid*, literally “tormenting horses”), goes back to these ideas (Dzitssojty 1992: 211). It is noteworthy that in the same tale (Kokajty 2014: 73) the Ossetian descendants of Vayu, the *wayug* giants, appear, whose role is to test the hero’s noose for strength. Having torn the first two nooses woven from buffalo skin, they find it impossible to tear the noose woven from Zali snakes (*Anæcydyty wæjgwytyæ dæer æmæ Qaraman dæer, æmæ fefidar is wyj, wycy arqan*, Kokajty 2014: 73). Interesting enough, in the epic Mahabharata the son of Vayu, Bhima, is known for his enmity towards snakes and rakshasas. One of the stories of his youth tells how Duryodhana set many poisonous snakes on him, which Bhima killed with his bare hands (and in several instances the term *sarpabandha* “snake noose-rope” is used in describing this incident) (Emeneau 1960: 299f.). In the Ramayana, his other son, Hanuman, finds himself entangled by *nāgapāśa* “snake noose” from which he manages to free himself with difficulty (Emeneau 1960: 294f.). These epic motifs are partially illustrated in zoomorphic form by the plot of the struggle between the wolf and the snake depicted on a Sarmatian buckle (on the connection of Vaiyu and his sons with the image of the wolf see Mysykkyaty 2019).
- 4 This information was kindly provided by Y. V. Vasilkov in personal correspondence. According to the Hindu tradition, *nāgapāśa* was originally an animate being, a character of myths, later transformed into an attribute of gods and heroes (the torque-snake of the god Shiva, the noose of Durga, the arrow-arcane of Arjuna, Lakshmana, Indrajit). In some cases, *nāgapāśa* is called *nāgāstra* or *nāgapāśāstra* literally “snake-noose-arrow”, and is used in archery as an arrow, which, once hit the enemy, turned into a bondage from which it was impossible to free oneself (sometimes into a *padabandha* leg bondage; cf. a similar Iranian term: Pashto *puwāśa* ‘noose, shackles’ from \**pada-bastrā-*, where the second part goes back to the base *band-*). Its epithet in Buddhist texts (including Khotanese), *amoghapāśa* ‘irresistible noose’, reminiscent of the symbolic ‘noose of fate’ in the Persian epic Shahnameh, is also worth noting.
- 5 For the Scythian representations of the snake-arrow and analogues to this image, see Alekseev 2015: 6ff.

291ff.). The Parthians, related to the Sarmatian tribes and led by natives of the Sarmatian tribal union of the Dahae, continued to adhere to traditional warfare and used the noose with similar skill as their northern brethren. According to the medieval Byzantine Encyclopaedia Suda, the Parthians are called ‘noose-bearers’ (σειροφόροι): “With nooses (Σειραῖς) – of woven straps; and the people of Parthians, those who are called ‘noose-bearers’ (σειροφόροι). They fight from their horses, spinning nooses made of straps; approaching their enemies, they throw loops of straps and, turning back, rapidly drive their horses back, and with an onslaught drag those who are caught in the loops dead or alive” (Suda σ278, see Adler 1928–38: IV/346; Nefedkin 2011: 180). A loop-shaped device for fastening a noose is preserved on a horse carapace from Dura-Europos, which is kept in the National Museum of Damascus (Khazanov 2008: 120).

Nooses were used not only by the Parthians, but also by the military nobility of Armenia, which was greatly influenced by the Parthians and adopted this practice from them. In the epic song about the wedding of King Artashes to the Alanian princess Satenik, recorded by Movses Khorenatsi in the 5th century, it is sung about the Armenian king: “And he swept a swift-winged eagle across the river, | And threw a noose of red leather with a golden ring, (*oskēōt šikap’ok paranri*) | And encircled the camp of the princess of the Alans” (History of Armenia II, 50, s. Dumézil 1976: 52).

The tradition of using the noose in warfare and hunting took root in Parthian Persia to such an extent that when the Sassanids replaced the Arsacid dynasty, they appreciated the noose as an auxiliary armament of the rider. By the way, the close contact of Byzantines with the peoples of late antiquity and early Middle Ages such as Alans, Sassanid Persians, Huns and Avars led to the inclusion of the noose in the equipment of the professional mounted warriors, as described in the writings of the Byzantine expert of military matters Emperor Mauritius: “Saddles should be provided with large coverings; bridles should be of good quality; two iron stirrups should be attached to the saddle, a noose on a strap (*λωρόσσοκον*),<sup>6</sup> slings, a travelling bag large enough to hold provisions for a soldier for three or four days” (Strategikon I, 2). There are at least four known Sasanian dishes depicting a heroic king hunting with a noose (pehl. *gyān-nizār*; Persian *kamand*), and in only one case is he depicted on foot. A silver dish from the Abkhazian State Museum in Sukhum depicts Bakhrām II hunting a bear with a noose; a bow is visible behind the shoulders of the shah, and a killed bear lies under the hooves of his horse.<sup>7</sup> Another dish from the Azerbaijan

6 Cf. the loop-shaped device on the horse armour from Dura-Europos (see illustration above).

7 According to the Avestan tradition bears, along with monkeys, were considered to be the creations of Ahriman, originating from the mating of humans and divas (avest. *daēva*) of the

Museum in Tabriz contains an image of Shapur I hunting an ostrich or bustard, one bird lying under the hooves of his horse galloping while the other is noosed by the neck. The third dish is decorated with an image of a rider putting a noose around the neck of an onager (wild donkey, Pers. *gōr*). The same plot can be seen on a dish from Nizhniy Novgorod (kept in the State Hermitage Museum), which depicts Shapur III on foot, noosing an onager by the neck.<sup>8</sup> These iconographic sources indicate that the noose was held with one hand, and the second hand was *used to* control the stock of noose strap collected in the bay. One can also cite interesting information from the Pahlavi text *Draxt ī Asūrīg*, in which a goatskin noose is mentioned, “*which is used in many battles, and it never comes off from the saddle fastenings*” (Dmitriev 2008: 66ff.). In the *Shahnameh* there is a well-known story about a punitive expedition of the Sassanids against the North Caucasian Alans, during which Shah Khosrow I Anushirvan (531–578) sends a messenger to the Alans with a warning that mighty warriors who are “*skilful with the arrow, the mace and the lasso*” have arrived (Alemany 2000: 357). The validity of this data about the use of noose by horsemen in the time of Khosrow Anushirvan is confirmed by the historian al-Tabari, who described a complete list of armament and equipment of the Sasanian mounted warrior of that era. The noose is also mentioned in the hands of skillful horsemen in later Persian works, such as “Warka and Gulshah” by the poet Ayuki, etc. (Theotokis 2018: 161f.).

The noose is most often found in the Iranian epic tradition, where it is an integral part of the hero’s panoply. Moreover, it appears that Iranian kings sent their sons to learn using the noose from Saka heroes of Sistan. For example, the Saka hero Rustam taught the Persian prince Siyavush using noose.<sup>9</sup> In the poem, nooses are mentioned most often in the hands of the Sistan heroes as well as of the enemies of the Persians, nomadic Turanians, who invaded Iran from the northern regions. Scholars rightly regard the Turanians as a collective image of the northern Iranians of the Scytho-Sarmatian world, just as in the Georgian chronicles (which were greatly influenced by the Persian written tradition) they appear under the collective ethnonym Ossetians (Old Georgian

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night, having caught up with a diva, he nooses and beheads him. It is not excluded that there is a hint of this epic plot on Sasanian dishes.

8 In the Iranian epic poem *Shahnameh* there is a story about Akvan-diva (Avest. *akamanah* “evil intent”), who appears before the protagonist Rustam in the form of a buff onager with a black stripe from mane to tail. The rider pursues him for three days and three nights, having caught up with the diva, he nooses him and beheads him. It is not excluded that there is a hint of this epic plot on Sasanian dishes.

9 In India, princes practiced the use of the noose from a young age as part of their compulsory training (Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 240).

*ovsni*). The Turanians manage to steal even the famous Rakhsh, the horse of Rustam himself, with the help of nooses.

In the *Shahnameh* the noose is mentioned at least three hundred times, the review of which is not appropriate within the framework of this paper. This issue undoubtedly deserves a separate study, I will only note that the noose is presented in a rather multifaceted way: it is not only a weapon, but also a metaphorical image. In some cases, the noose is allegorically referred to as the braided tresses of a beautiful princess (“the *maiden is given a fatal, irresistible noose*”); in other cases it is an image of death, time, fate, which holds an invisible noose around the neck of each person, which is tightened at the fateful hour (“*It is the custom of fate: with one hand he gives the crown, and holds the noose in the other. | When you sit on the throne, glowing with triumph, the noose slips you off the throne*”). The noose is also used as a measure of length, with each ring of the noose corresponding to one cubit (“*Ten kamands each, if you measure them*”), as equipment for climbing or ascending a fortress wall (“*The brave man threw the noose on the sharp prong of the tower and was up in no time*”), etc.

But primarily, the noose is an indispensable attribute of the Sistani heroes. Sukhrab's great-grandfather, named Sam, says to the Shah of Iran: “*I will travel around the world, clad in armour, I will throw my noose, I will defeat my enemies*”, asking his permission to set off on a journey. And when Sam decides that his son Zal should take his place, he explains to the Shah that “my arm has *become weak for the noose*”. Zal also turns into a noose-bearer hero, with its help he gets his wife Rudaba, hunts lions, etc. However, it is the exploits of his son Rustam “Sak” (*Rustam-i Sagzī*, under this epithet he was known in Persia, and in Armenia as *Rostom Sagčik*) that are described most extensively in Firdausi's poem, and accordingly, the noose is most often in his hands. Among other feats, he uses the noose to master the miracle horse Rakhsh, kill a sorceress, defeat the king of Damascus Aulad, nearly capture the king of Turanians Afrasiab, capture the Hakan of China, the ruler of Sham, drive Turanians away from Mugan, defeat the Keshan hero Kamus, and so on. His sons also perform feats with the help of the noose, Faramarz avenges with it the Shah of Kabul for Rustam's death, and Sukhrab's “*sixty-rings noose of exorbitant length*” serves the hero in hunting, war and even for capturing the beautiful Amazonian woman Gordaferid.

As known, before the Sassanid rule, the territory of Sistan was called Sakastan, i.e., the “Land of the Saks”. The Saks are none other than the Eastern Scythians of Herodotus, who in the 1st century BC founded a powerful Indo-Scythian kingdom in the north of Indostan, whose borders also included the territories of Persian Sistan. In this regard, it is interesting to note that on a

number of Indo-Scythian coins of the 1st century BC the noose is the main attribute of the king, i.e. it replaces the bow as traditional royal regalia, depicted, for example, on Parthian coins of the Arsacid dynasty. In the oral folklore of Sistan, the noose is mentioned quite often (Grjunberg/Stebelin-Kamenskij/Boldyrev 1981: 28, 165, 214, 225f., 243ff.).

Iranian-speaking nomads known in the Chinese chronicles as Yuezhi, who had come to the region to replace the Indo-Scythians and Parthians, established a powerful empire, the Kushan Kingdom. The Chinese sources say that the horsemen of the Kuei-Hu tribe, in the west of Kushan, “*used nooses of raw-hide, which they, whipping the horses, threw on people*” (Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 240).<sup>10</sup> The monuments of material culture of the Kushans testify to their use of nooses in war, hunting (Brit. Mus. No. 1880.35), raids (1880.52), as well as in everyday life (1880.887). We see such scenes on stone reliefs of a Kushan stupa of the 3rd c. AD from Jamal Garhi, in the very north of Pakistan (historical region of Gandhara), fragments of which are kept in the British Museum. Kushan coins often depict a deity holding a noose and a trident, which closely adjoins the iconographic tradition of India (Shiva-Rudra). In Hinduism, the noose (*pāśa*) is an attribute of a number of gods. In particular, Varuna punishes sinners with it, and the gods of death Yama<sup>11</sup> and Kala<sup>12</sup> use it to kill living beings,<sup>13</sup> which has a direct parallel in the Iranian tradition with its invisible noose of time “*from which neither the poor man nor the king can dodge*”. It is quite remarkable in this context that in the Avesta, the most ancient Iranian written source, the noose is mentioned precisely as an attribute of the demons of death Asto-Vidotu and Vizarsh (Rak 1998: 423). This fact is not

10 Cf. in the *Shahnameh* mention of a Saka noose: “Having taken out a raw-bark noose from the belts, the giant threw it with a swing”.

11 Cf. in the ancient Indian epic “Mahabharata” the expression “Son, drive away from you Shakuni, already covered with the noose of Death!” (Neveleva/Vasil’kov 1998: 79, 172).

12 Cf. in India the sect of “stranglers” of the Thags, who kill their victims by strangulation, sacrificing them to the goddess of death Kali.

13 This symbolism is particularly vivid in the ancient Indian epic “Mahabharata”, in the book about the night “beating of sleeping warriors” (Sauptikaparva). “Black, with red eyes and mouth, wearing red garlands, painted with red ointment, clothed in red robes, with nooses in her hands, whirling, the Night of Death appeared to them in their own eyes, advancing (on them) with laughter, entangling men, horses and elephants with formidable nooses, dragging behind her countless *pretas* with hairless heads entangled with nooses.” (Neveleva/Vasil’kov 1998: 27f.). The night massacre of the Pandavas’ camp is mythologically juxtaposed with the eschatological motif of Kālarātri, the Night of Death, i.e. the night of the death of the universe at the end of the world period, the final moment of the world destruction at the end of the *yuga*. Kālarātri is identified with Durga, the female hypostasis of Shiva (Rudra) or his consort (Neveleva/Vasil’kov 1998: 121, 172).

surprising in view of the connection of the noose with the nomadic world and the Avestan general demonization of all images and attributes associated with nomadic life.<sup>14</sup>

Considering this topic, one cannot avoid another interesting and controversial issue: the interpretation of late Roman mosaics depicting riders on the hunt from Borj Jedid, Tunisia. The fact is that to date the problem of attribution of their characters remains controversial. One of the main arguments (certainly not the only one) against attempts to attribute these images to Roman horsemen (Duval 2002) is the presence of a noose in the hands of one of the horsemen noosing a horned deer by the neck at full gallop. Strangely enough, the researcher who put forward this interpretation does not discuss this motif in any way and mentions it only twice (... *deux cavaliers, dont l'un capture un cerf au lasso ... Le cavalier au lasso*, see Duval 2002: 334f., fig. 2). While from the vast amount of surviving images and written data there are no known cases of noose used by Roman or Berber horsemen, there are Roman mosaics depicting pedestrian children and teenagers catching ducks with a loop and noose (Villa Casale, Sicily; Villa Aviario, Tunisia, etc.). However, riders with a noose in their hand are not known anywhere in the western part of the Roman Empire except on mosaics from Borj Jedid.<sup>15</sup> This circumstance makes us return to the previous theory about the depiction on these mosaics of horsemen from the times of the Vandal Kingdom, which included Alans who participated in the Great Migration of Peoples (the official title of the king was *rex vandalarum et alanorum* “king of Vandals and Alans”). There is no information about the use of the noose by the Vandals.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the only Germanic tribe that used the noose were the Goths,<sup>17</sup> a tribe that moved the furthest to the east, neighboured in the Northern Black Sea coast with Iranian-speaking nomads

14 In another paper, I tried to trace a similar fate of the wolf image revered by the nomads and demonized in the Avestan tradition as well as in the epic poem *Shahnameh* (see Mysykaty 2019: 337f.).

15 A good example of the use of nooses by foot soldiers are the images of gladiators *laquearii* armed with a noose and a dagger, which appeared in the late antique period. The consular diptych of Flavius Anastasius Probus (first half of the 6th c. AD) shows in the lower register gladiatorial games organized by him, with the participation of two foot *laqueatores*.

16 G. Theotokis in his special work on the Byzantine nooses admits that this mosaic from Tunisia depicts a Vandal rider (“probably a Vandal, lassoing a deer”), thus contradicting his own, quite fair statement that only the Goths used the nooses, having borrowed them from the Huns or the Alans (“the Goths, as they were the ones who took over the lasso from the Huns and the Alans”, see Theotokis 2018: 162, 168).

17 According to John Malala (*Chronographia* 364, 14, 23) the Goth Areobindus, the leader of the Gothic federates (*comes foederatorum*) in the service of the Romans in the first half of

for several centuries, and felt a huge cultural influence from them. Based on these data, it can be concluded that the mosaic from Borj Jedid depicts an Alanian rider, or that the Alans had a strong cultural influence on the Vandal elite, whose members, like the Goths of the Northern Black Sea region, began to practice such Alanian customs as horse hunting with a noose.

It is also worth noting that the motif of a rider hunting a deer is one of the most popular among ancient nomads: we often find it in Scythian, Saka and Sarmatian images, and it appears also in the tales about the reasons of the migration of the Huns and Hungarians in Europe. Besides, it is one of the favourite motifs of the Nart epic of the Ossetians, where the horned deer is the hunter's favourite and most desirable prey. According to Abaev's fair description, the deer is "a favourite animal of Ossetian folklore. Hunting a deer is hunting *par excellence*, and deer meat is an obligatory treat for any Narts' feast" (Abaev 1949: 49). The motif of catching a deer with a noose is also known in Ossetian folklore.<sup>18</sup> Thus, for example, in a late medieval song about Belle Azaukhan, the heroine promises to marry the one "who from the deer herd on the Kum Plain will separate a deer with hundred horns (*sædsigon sag*), | will drive it by the Dzulat tower, | and, having baited it, (*Arqan ibæł ragæłzǵæj*) | will tie it to a horse-brace under the Dzulat tower" (Khamitsaeva 1992: 111f.).<sup>19</sup>

## 1 Noose in the Narts' Epic of the Ossetians

Nooses are not mentioned very often in the Ossetian epic, but the cases that I have managed to collect suffice to convince me that the Narts were well acquainted with this unsophisticated device.

The deep antiquity of the noose is indicated by an Ossetian epic motif about the use of nooses by the oldest population of the earth, the Wadmer giants, a generation of beings preceding the creation of the Narts. The resurrected giant tells Soslan that they "caught beasts with a noose, then killed them with stones" (Libedinskij 1978: 416). The giants Gumirs and Wadmers

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the 5th century, defeated the Persian champion Ardazan in a one-on-one fight by noosing (ἐσόκκευσεν), threw him off his horse and killed him (Theotokis 2018: 157f.).

18 Similar motifs are also found in other Nart stories, though they speak only about catching a live deer or a fallow deer, but there is no mention of a noose in them (see, for example, Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: v/6).

19 The name of the tower implies a medieval Alan town, named Lower Dzhaulat in literature; it was destroyed by Mongol conquerors, then rebuilt by the Golden Horde and destroyed again by Tamerlane during one of his campaigns in the Caucasus.

are convincingly explained as the tribes of the Cimmerians, who preceded the Scythian-Sarmatian nomads.

In a Digor legend, the white horse of the Atsaevs advises the young Atsamaz to dig a deep hole and hide in it, having tied the horse with a strong noose (*mænbælbafedar arqan nibbættæ*), and to keep hold of its end so that the horse could stand on a puff and defeat the enemy horse in a duel (Khamitsaeva/Bjazyrov 1989–91: 11/317; Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: 1V/317).

The young hero Sauway invaded a distant overseas country where a herd of foals grazes on the plain. Riding up to the herd, he “caught a three-year-old motley foal and took it out of the herd” (*ærtæazdzyd qulon bajrag ærcaxsta æmæ jæ ralasta*), then drove the whole herd, repulsing an attack of a group of herd owners, and drove it to the Narts (Abaev et al. 1975: 329; Libedinskij 1978: 406).

In the story about abduction of the cow, Soslan catches Syrdon’s dog with a noose: “Suddenly he saw, pale with anger, | That Syrdon’s dog was chewing bones. | Thinking that the hour had come, | He quickly caught the dog with a noose” (*Wæd Sozyryqo arqan ajxældta | Æmæ zy kwyzy wajtağd racaxsta*, s. Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: VI/293). The motif of catching a horse with a noose is found in the story “*Narty Chyzg*”. “The girl got on her horse, took a noose (*arqan ajsta*) and rode round the herds. An iron-faced horse saw her and chased after her. The girl turned her horse sharply and threw the noose (*arqan fexsta*). She caught the iron-furred horse and the horse collapsed on the ground. The girl pulled him to herself and then brought him to the Narts” (Gutiev 1996: 93).<sup>20</sup>

The hero, who wants to get the miracle horse, advises his younger comrade to noose it (*Arqanbast æj bakæn*) so that it does not hit his head (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: VII/492). Another story says that “the *Nart man sat on an Arab (horse), took a noose, swung it and caught a bison*” (*næرتون læg ..., arabbagyl'ysbadtī arqan rajsta, nyzzyltda jæ æmæ dombajy ærcaxsta*, s. Abaev 1958–89: 1/69).

The numerous horse herds of Marguz the Noseless are guarded by shepherds who are armed with special devices for horse breeding (*Qojraxti xæccæ, arqanti xæccæ*, s. Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: V/500). The word *qojraxti* is interpreted by the commentators of the edition as “some device for catching horses” (Khamitsaeva/Dzhikaev 2003–12: V/709). The etymology of the word helps to clarify its meaning. The word *qojrax* does not really exist in Ossetic, but there is *qorrağ* | *qojrağ* with the meaning “pole with a hook”, which goes back

20 Cf. above information about Sarmatian Amazons killing enemies with a noose and a sharp turn of the horse.

through Adyg. *qorağ* “pole with a hook” and Kabard. *qūrag* ‘pole’, to Kumyk *quray* ‘pole’ (Abaev 1958–89: 11/312). In fact, we have a device known among Turkic-Mongol nomads for catching grazing horses, consisting of a long light pole to which a noose with an open loop at its end was attached (Mong. *uurga*, Tat. *uquruk*, Russ. *ukrjuk*).

As one would expect, in the South Ossetian epic of Daredzan, whose main characters are Persian epic figures such as the mighty Rostom, the noose is often used for military purposes, for catching horses, as a climbing tackle when climbing out of a deep well, etc. (Kokajty 2014: 23, 25, 32, 49, 72f.). On the contrary, in the published versions of the tales of the epic of Tsartsats (Taqazyt 2007) the noose is not mentioned.

The noose is also mentioned quite often in the variants of tales about the Narts of the Balkaro-Karachays (Alieva et al. 1994: 366, 381, 399f., 450, 537, 539, 540, 543, 593, 596, 598), Adygs (Alieva et al. 1974: 221, 224, 289, 316; Gutov et al. 2017: 73, 182, 194, 266, 268, 354, 388, 409, 449) and Kabardians (Zvjagintseva et al. 1957: 252, 291).<sup>21</sup> These tribes, unlike the Ossetians, preserved quite a high level of horse breeding culture after the Mongol conquests. At the same time, the noose is not found in Ingush and Chechen variants.<sup>22</sup>

## 2 Noose in Ethnography, Folklore and Folk Literature of the Ossetians

In addition to the Narts’ epic, nooses are found in Ossetian folk tales. In one tale, seven brothers use nooses (*arqanæj arxajync*) to try to catch a miracle horse, but none of them succeeds (Salamov 2006: 70; Æmbalty 2009: 113). In another tale, an old man wields a noose and helps the hero (Æmbalty 2009: 70). A poor man named Batraz manages to snare a tiger that rushed at him (Kaloev 1976: 52). In another case, the hero reasoned: “whether to throw a noose on him, but he will probably not get it” (*obæl max arqan gældzæn æma nin ibæl ku næ raqæta*, Abaev 1958–89: 1/69). In the tale of the poor man and the angel of death, the noose is metaphorically represented in the image of old age tightly constricting the legs of the elder Yerman (Farniev 2005: 69). Similarly, Farniev conveys the meaning of folk wisdom in verse, but in this case

21 I am grateful to K. Rakhno who kindly pointed out this source.

22 Only once in a metaphorical sense, at that in the meaning not “a noose for catching”, but “a thick rope” (Dalgat 1972: 74; cf. the same turn in Alieva et al. 1994: 414, 381, 422, 423, 463).

the noose acts as a metaphor of need, which tightened ferociously the neck of poor mountaineers (Farniev 2005: 307).<sup>23</sup>

The short story “*Ænæivgæ som*” tells about a rich villain who planned to make himself a noose made of human skin straps torn from the backs of his guilty employees (*adæjmag ærqwydy kodta lædžy carmæj arqan sarazyn*, s. Khamitsaeva 2010: 70; *Æmbalty* 2009: 113).

Abaev also gives a number of examples with the mention of noose in folk literature “the horse was grazing on a noose between the meadow and the pasture” (*bæx arqanæj xiztæj igwærdænæj særvæti ’xsæn*, Abaev 1958–89: 111/88); “then I will drag you away with my own hand on a noose” (*wæd dæ mæxi kuħæj arqanæj arqanæj alasdžynæn*, Abaev 1958–89: 11/14).

In folk poetry, the image of the noose is often found both literally and metaphorically. Khariton Pliev says that Ossetia itself at a young age gave the hero a noose so that he could catch horses and participate in races (*Mæ Ir ... Nyssağtæj myn arqan mæ k’uxy*, Kodzati 2012: 164). In Alexander Tsarukaev we find the image of a heavenly thunder throwing a long noose like a chain of red-hot metal (*Ærvnærd myl darg’ arqan tyxta syrxyng ræxysaw*, Kodzati 2012: 237).<sup>24</sup> In the heroic “Song about Aslambeg”, the hero, planning a raid to steal cattle from a Balkar gorge, asks to bring to him the Alagirian *kævdæsard* (son of a noble’s concubine) Dzarakhmat, “instead of a hair noose (*qisyn arqanæj bæsty*)”.<sup>25</sup> The folklore collector *Ambalty* Tsotsko (Uvar Ambalov) specified in a note to the recorded song that Dzarakhmat was so strong and adroit that he did not need a noose to catch horses (*wyj axsta ænæ arqanæj*), he grabbed them by the neck and so caught them (Salagaeva 2007: 1/533). Thus, it becomes obvious that catching horses without a noose was not within the power of everyone (cf. Slanov 2007: 93), which is why the name of the poor *kævdæsard* Dzarakhmat has been preserved in folk memory due to his extraordinary ability.

In the mountain song “Princess Daum”, telling about the Kabardian raid on Donifars, it is said that when Aslanbek Kaitukin and his cousin Tatarkhan Bekmurzin made another raid on Digors, the sad result of this failed enterprise

23 Cf. similar metaphors in the Avestan tradition.

24 Cf. in the epic of the Balkars and Karachays information that the fiery noose of the hero Joruzmek is lightning, “which he throws at enemies. [Sometimes] the noose, having broken off, reaches the ground” (Alieva et al. 1994: 596). Cf. also the mythological image of the Ossetian thunderer Watsilla, who noosed the serpent Ruimon with a red-hot heavenly chain, symbolizing the lightning (see the depiction of this myth on the late Alan stone Etok stele Duka-bek).

25 This obscure phrase could also be translated as “bound with a hair noose”, but in that case it is not quite clear why Tsotsko *Ambalty* makes a rather long comment about Dzarakhmat’s ability to catch horses without a noose.

was that *“Alisultan was chopped into a kebab ... the last descendant of the Shaugenukovs Zhenchek was strangled with a noose”* (Warziati 1989: 103). It follows from the lyrics of the song that Digors continued to use noose in military actions as late as the 19th century.

The legend about the folk hero Chermen (the Tulatovs' *kævdæsard*), recorded in Russian, also deserves attention. It tells how Chermen collected tolls for the princes of the Tulatovs on the Daryal road. Once during his absence, a Georgian prince passed by, who did not want to pay the toll and used force against the hero's comrades at the outpost. When Chermen returned and learnt about the incident, he chased the offender, *“caught up with him, noosed him and brought him to the assembly post ...”* (Bzarov 1993: 56).

Interesting ethnographic information about nooses is given by Izmail Ajlarty in his work *“Iron Farn”*. According to him, nooses were woven from strong materials, then they were crumpled and kneaded. Hair nooses made of horsehair were easier to use. The end of the noose was tied on the right side of the saddle bow. It was almost impossible to get free from the noose thrown on the head, the horse would stumble and the rider would fall out of the saddle. Nooses were also used by foot soldiers during the war. Other users of nooses were robbers, who caught their victims alive, waiting for travellers in ambushes near the roads. The information that Ossetians also used nooses with iron hooks instead of a loop (*æfsæjnag k'ænzytæ, k'æpsyrtae*) is also very interesting.<sup>26</sup> Thanks to these devices, one could climb a wall or a steep cliff by throwing the noose upwards so that the iron hook caught on the stone and thus climb to the intended place (Ajlarty 1996: 509).

According to M. A. Tsallagov, after one of the battles of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, the Ossetian horsemen were reluctant to leave the battlefield, and many of them *“dragged prisoners with noose in a Mongolian way”* (Tsallagov 1967: 108).

The skill of hunting with a noose was also retained by the Alans-Yasses, who migrated to Hungary in the 13th century. There is information that in the Hungarian Alföld (the Pannonian lowlands, where Sarmatian and Alanian emigrants settled and accumulated since the 1st century AD and where medieval Yasses and Kuns settled by order of King Béla IV), mounted shepherds hunted wolves and other predatory animals with nooses (Kalojev 1993: 142).

26 In this respect, one should mention a battle hook suspended on a belt on a medieval stone stele from Western Alania (Stanitsa Ispravnyaya, Karachaevo-Circassian Republic). Kuznetsov and Minaeva regard it as a battle hook *“for pushing the enemy off the horse”* (Kuznetsov 2015: 41f.).

### 3 Conclusion

For several millennia, the noose has not lost its relevance due to its uncomplicated design, low cost of manufacture and a huge range of spheres in which it could be used. Ancient writers mentioned the noose in the hands of Scyths, Sarmates and Alans mainly in connection with robbery raids and military conflicts, which is not surprising because in the vast majority of cases the authors described only important incidents, whereas the peaceful side of the nomad life was of little interest to them. In fact, as ethnographic and folklore material in particular shows, the noose served the ancestors of the Ossetians first of all as a tool of cattle breeding. It was used for catching and controlling cattle and especially horses grazing freely on the boundless expanses of steppes and plains, as well as on the mountain plateaus of the North Caucasus. In addition, the noose was similarly used for hunting, especially for a big game such as deer. It also served as an excellent tool for ensuring a man by forced movements, such as crossing a turbulent river, climbing a cliff, descending steep or slippery surfaces on glaciers in high mountainous areas, when retrieving the carcass of a shot animal that had fallen from rocks, by mowing hay on dangerous steep areas, etc.

Written, ethnographic and folklore data indicate that the noose was attached by a special device, like a strap, to the right side of the saddle bow. According to some information, its end could be attached to the saddle, at the right moment the rider took it in both hands, holding the reins and the coils of the noose with the left hand, and throwing the noose on the victim with the right hand.

The material indicates that nooses were used in a variety of ways, both in terms of their material component (woven straps made of leather of goat, deer, horse, ox, snake and even human, strips of special fabric, made of horse veins covered with thin leather, made of hair from horse manes and tails, sometimes mixed with human hair, made of strands of coarse goat hair, of hemp fibres, etc.) and in terms of their construction (braided, twisted, with a metal, bone or stone ring, with a leather eyelet of a special design instead of the ring, with a handle, a pole, an iron hook etc.).

#### Appendix: to the Etymology of the Ossetian Name of the Noose

The Ossetian name of the noose, like its Caucasian and Eastern European names, goes back to the Turkic word *arqan*. However, there is no reason to assume that the Ossetian ancestors were not familiar with it before their contact with the Turkic peoples. As described above, literally all tribes of Iranian-speaking nomads, especially the Alans, knew handling a noose masterfully.

As for its name, the displacement of its original name during the hegemony of Turkic-speaking tribes in the steppes of Eurasia can be seen as a quite natural phenomenon of renewal of the lexical fund of the medieval Alanian language.<sup>27</sup> After all, Turkic loanwords constitute the second largest group of borrowings in the Ossetic language after Caucasian. This could have happened, for example, when mastering a more perfect or new type of noose used by one of the Turkic tribes with which the Alans came into close contact at a certain historical stage. It is quite possible that this process began already with the appearance of the Huns, who opened the era of a thousand years of Turkic rule in the steppes. The Huns arrived in Eastern Europe with novelties of their time, such as a compound bow of the Hun type, which amazed contemporaries with its armour-piercing power and range of fire. Probably, in a similar way, the Hun noose<sup>28</sup> differed technologically from the previous models used by the Alans, which naturally led to its adoption, together with its Turkic name.

The Turkic word probably replaced an Iranian word of the same meaning. Since Turkic *arqan* means primarily “thick rope”, “rope”, “noose”, then the assumption suggests itself that the lost Alan word may have originally had this meaning. It is interesting that the Ossetian ethnographic definition of *arqan* is interpreted as *xæston bændæn* “military” or “battle rope” (Ajlarly 1996: 509). It is also noteworthy that in the Adyghe versions of the epic about Narts the noose is called *ark'en klapse* “noose-rope” (Alieva et al. 1974: 263, 266). In Kurdish texts, a similar expression is known: “*Let the youth, besides sabres, shields and spades, prepare rope nooses (warised xarboqa) to put them (enemies) around their necks and drag them*” (Tsabolov 2001–10: II/432, 450).<sup>29</sup>

Rope is called in Ossetic *bændæn*, which derives from Iranian *\*bandana* parallel to Old Indian *bandhana* “rope”, (Abaev 1958–89: 1/250), both of them going back to Indo-European *\*bhendh-* ‘to bind, tie’. In ancient texts of India,

27 Similarly, in Kurdish, apart from Kurdish *fitrāk* ‘noose’, synonyms like *kamand* (from Persian *kamand* ‘noose’) *xarbōq* (the second part going back to Turkic *boy* ‘knot’) are attested (Tsabolov 2010: 432, 450). In Persian, along with *kamand*, one can find *rabqa*, *ribqa* ‘loop, noose, lasso’, a later borrowing from Arabic *ribq* ‘lasso’, *ribqa* ‘lasso, loop’ (Tsabolov 2001–10: II/197).

28 L. N. Gumilev considers the noose as perhaps the main weapon of the Huns. Hunnic nooses are repeatedly mentioned by ancient authors (John of Ephesus VII, 26, 8; John Malala 438, 18, 21). Ammianus Marcellinus writes that they “cast tightly coiled nooses in order to entangle the members of their opponents, to deprive them of the possibility to sit on a horse or leave on foot” (XXXI, 2, 9). Bone and stone blocks from nooses were found in some Hunnic burials (Khazanov 2008: 120).

29 I express my gratitude to K. Rakhno for valuable observations and rare editions sent to me.

*bandhana* appears as a full synonym of *pāśa* “noose” (Liebert 1986: 217).<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in some synonymous compounds, such as *nāgapāśa*, *pāśapannaga*, *nāgābandha*, *sarpabandha*,<sup>31</sup> the elements *pāśa* and *bandha* interchange (Liebert 1986: 188; Emeneau 1960: 291ff.).

Besides, analogies are also found in Iranian languages, particularly in Pashto, which is closely related to the languages of the Scyths, Sarmates and Alans. Such words as *wāš* ‘rope (of goat hair, hair), noose’; *pulwāša* and *palwāša* ‘noose, shackles, buttonhole’, go back, via *\*bastrā-*, to the same Iranian root *\*iband-*: *bad-* ‘to bind, tie’ (ESIJ: II/68, 77). It is interesting to note that Pashto *wāš* corresponds to Ossetic *bos* ‘bandage, lace’, which allows us to assume for Ossetic the connection of the concept “noose” with another derivative of the root *\*band-*, which was quite probably the word *bændæn*.

Thus, the reconstructed Scythian-Sarmatian name of this archaic everyday object in the form *\*bændænæ* goes back to the Indo-Iranian epoch, i.e., to the times of the first horse riders of Eurasia, who in their everyday life could hardly do without nooses. It is not without reason that it was among the peoples of the Indo-Iranian branch that the noose took an important position in warfare, hunting, cattle breeding, as well as in mythological and religious symbolism and iconography.

In Ossetic, rope is often called *qisbændæn* or *qis sinag*, literally “hair rope”, which finds a parallel in the folklore epithet of noose (*qisyn arqan* “hair noose”). It is noteworthy that Makharbek Tuganov in one of his ethnographic sketches (see above) depicted Ossetian horseman Abai Alborov with such a hair noose in his hand. According to ethnographic material, horse ties, nooses and ropes were *woven* from the hair of the trimmed manes and tails of young stallions

30 I express my deep gratitude to Ya. V. Vasilkov for pointing out this work and for his valuable observations.

31 As for the term *sarpabandha*, Yu. A. Dzitstsojty (personal correspondence) expressed an interesting idea that allows reconstructing another probable Ossetian name of the noose. The word *ærvædzæg* “loop, knot”, in Abaev’s dictionary remained without etymology (“The origin is not clear”, Abaev 1958–89: I/183). Its second part undoubtedly hides the word *cæg* ‘loop; ring; link in a chain’. Its first part *ærvæ-* may go back to the reconstructed base *\*harpa-* “snake” and mean something “tied like a ring of a snake”, i.e. like a snake coiled in a ring, which reminds of a noose folded in a bay. The base *\*harpa-* is reconstructed on the basis of Old Indian *sarpa-*, because Old Indian *s-* in the position before *a* regularly corresponds to the phoneme *\*h-* in Old Iranian, which in Ossetic gets regularly lost. Old Iranian *\*r̥p* yields Ossetic *-rv-* (cf. *carv* ‘clarified butter’ from *\*čarpa-*, s. ESIJ: II/233). It is noteworthy that in all the examples given by Abaev this word either designates ‘noose’ or is accompanied by the word for ‘rope’ (*bændæn jæ xurxyl ærvædzæg aværdta* “threw a noose of rope over her throat”; *Tærqani bæxi ærvægzægæg bastæj fejjaftan* “we caught Tarkan’s horse tied with a noose”, s. Abaev 1958–89: I/183).

(Kaloiev 1993: 76, 83), from coarse goat hair (cf. Pashto *wāš*) or from hemp fibres (Tsallagova/Chibirov 2015: 132, 182).

In view of the above, it is interesting to pay attention to the fact that the rope was part of the obligatory household items that every illegitimate son of a feudal lord (ir. *kævdæsar*d, dig. *kumaj'ag*) had to inherit at his separation from his father's house (Bliev/Bzarov 2000: 160; Bzarov 1988: 52, 112).<sup>32</sup> Perhaps, this late custom reflects a remnant of archaic ideas about the necessity of a rope-arcane in the herdsman's economy.

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32 Cf. above the noose of Chermen.