

Colarusso, John and Tamirlan Salbiev, eds. *Tales of the Narts: Ancient Myths and Legends of the Ossetians*. Translated by Walter May. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Bibliography. Glossary. lxviii + 442 pp. \$24.94 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-691-21152-7.

Popular tales of a legendary people known as the Narts are a major part of the shared cultural heritage of many peoples of the Caucasus, including the Adyghe (Abkhazians, Circassians, Kabardians), Turks (Karachay and Balkars), Vainakh (Ingush and Chechen), and Ossetes. The term “Nart” itself is Ossetian and derives most likely from an Iranian root meaning “manly.” The origin of this body of oral literature is likewise Iranian, tracing back to the medieval Alans and in some cases to the ancient Sarmatians and Scythians before them, although in their modern forms—which differ considerably from one cultural community to the next—the tales and their characters have been embellished and re-shaped by the various Caucasian groups just mentioned, each of whom claim them as their own. The Nart stories, which modern Ossetian scholars have organized into an “epic,” were until quite recently a loose and flexible collection of tales about a vanished race of men who lived for “feasting and fighting,” reflecting a clan-based raiding culture of which one can still perceive echoes in the Caucasus today. The ideal Nart is both fearless and cunning, unafraid to face giants, descend into the underworld, or even to kidnap the daughter of God himself, yet willing to resort to ruse when confronted with a stronger enemy. In the highly patriarchal Nart society women play supporting roles—mainly preparing week-long feasts for their victorious menfolk—although some female characters stand out for their intelligence and initiative.

Insofar as the Nart legends are built upon an Iranian core, they exhibit many commonalities with other bodies of Iranian oral literature including Ferdowsi’s heroic *Book of Kings* and Gorgani’s romance *Vis and Ramin*, both of which were redacted into verse during the eleventh century. One may note that while the latter two works were written down in Persian, the mythical world they portray is not that of civilized Persia but rather the wild, nomadic one of the Central Asian steppes. Today’s Ossetes, who are the only surviving linguistic and cultural descendants of the warlike Iranophone pastoralists who dominated the Eurasian plains from the Balkans to Mongolia throughout the first millennium BCE, largely avoided the cultural disruptions brought by Zoroastrianism and later Islam to other Iranian peoples, so that the Ossetian Nart legends—which remained oral and thus fluid up until they were finally written down only as late as the nineteenth century—may in some ways provide our most direct window into the earliest forms of identifiably Iranian culture, and by extension that of their proto-Indo-European ancestors. They thus hold unique value for the student of comparative mythology.

That being the case, it is unfortunate that the Narts have remained so little-known and rarely studied by scholars outside the former Soviet Union. The main barrier has surely been language, so that the editors have done us a great service by finally making this literature available in English. The lead editor of the FOLKLORICA 2021, Vol. XXV

volume under review, John Colarusso, first introduced the Narts to English readers in 2002 with his edition of the Circassian versions of the stories. For the present edition of the Ossetian versions he has used translations from Russian by the late Walter May, a British communist who spent the latter half of his life in the USSR. Colarusso also relied on an Ossetian scholar, Tamirlan Salbiev, in preparing May's translation for publication.

Since the stories in question were preserved in Ossetian, it would have been desirable for the English edition to have been done from the original Ossetian, as Dumézil did for his French editions published in 1930 and 1965. A new French translation by Lora Arys and Iaroslav Lebedynsky was also done directly from Ossetian and, since Arys is a native Ossetian speaker, it may be somewhat more reliable than Dumézil's. It may be hoped that an English translation from the Ossetian will appear at some point in the future. For the time being English readers will have to content themselves with the May-Colarusso-Salbiev version. They will be reasonably well served by doing so, although those who can read French would be better advised to read the Dumézil or Arys-Lebedynsky versions. The standard Ossetian and Russian editions were both produced in the USSR during the mid-twentieth century but did not entirely eliminate variants, which are still known and transmitted within Ossetian popular culture. The French editions, while overlapping in many cases with the English, organize the stories differently and include some that do not appear in the English version.

The importance of the Nart legends for studies of Indo-European and comparative mythology cannot be overstated. Indeed, Georges Dumézil is said to have first come up with his famous tripartite analysis of Indo-European society as a result of his encounter with the Ossetian Narts, who are divided according to function into three clans. Happily, this material is at long last readily available to English readers in an inexpensive, reliable English-language edition.

Richard Foltz
Concordia University
Montréal, Quebec, Canada
Richard.Foltz@concordia.ca