

The Tale of How Warzameg and Yimis Came to Be

Nart Sagas of the Caucasus
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It is told that the Narts had a golden tree. This was no ordinary tree, not least because it was golden. If an apple were to sprout from it in the morning, then by the evening of the same day it would have fully ripened. This same apple held within it an amazing magical power. One side of the fruit was red, and the other was white. It was said of it:

If a barren woman tastes of the white side,
Then to her will be born a daughter
With hair silken white.
If a barren woman tastes of the red side,
Then to her will be born a Nart son,
A great son, a white son,
With hair silken white.

But it came to pass that the Narts could no longer enjoy the wonders of this marvelous apple. Each time an apple would sprout forth, it would be secretly stolen in the dark of night. For a long time, no one could discover this thief.

"Now, alas! What are we to do?" said the Narts as they sat together at their council. Some of the wisest among them said, "A guard must be set!" And so, a guard was posted by the tree. But, alas, this effort was to no avail, for during the night the apple once again disappeared.

"We must enclose the tree within a high fence made of thorns!" others then said, and a fence of sharp thorns was built around the tree. But, alas, this too was to no avail. Once more the apple disappeared during the following night.

"Now, surely we must surround the tree with a whole band of mounted warriors!" some said, and so a mighty band of armed horsemen was set around the tree. But, alas, this too was in vain. No one was able to catch a single glimpse of the thief, not even of his feet or his footprints. And in this way the theft of the apples continued for a long time.

There was one Nart, Tatemquo, who had two sons. The elder was called Pija, the younger Pizighash. These two brothers were famous throughout the land of the Narts and beyond for their skills in battle. Their arrows never went astray; their swords never failed to slash. They came to sit guard through the night beneath the golden tree of the Narts. While they were thus sitting, the elder brother, perhaps being more tired than the younger, fell asleep. Pizighash, the younger brother, remained sitting, however, with his bow and arrows at the ready. Suddenly three doves flew up to the golden tree of the Narts and alighted on it.

"Ah, now! What should I do?" he asked himself, but he did not waste much time in thought. Quickly he took aim and shot at one of the doves and wounded it. Despite this, the three doves rose up and flew back from whence they had come, taking with them the golden apple.

Pizighash took out his white handkerchief and blotted some of the blood that the wounded dove had spilled, then he called to his brother and woke him up. He told him all that had happened,

and together they set off. They followed the trail of blood left by the wounded bird until they came to the shore of the Sea of Azov. There the trail disappeared.

"Now," said Pizighash, "you and I sprang from the same mother and father. So if we turn back without discovering who these thieves are, then not only will we surely be disgraced, but so will our mother and father. These three doves who returned to this sea, I shall go after them. Stay here on the shore. Wait one year for me, and if I have not returned by that time, you must assume that I am dead."

"So be it," said his elder brother. "Seek them upon the waves! Seek them in the depths! May your quest be blessed!"

Nart Pizighash struck the sea with his sword. The waters parted and he descended straightaway to the seafloor. Once in the dark depths, he set off and traveled far until he came upon a mist-filled ravine. There, nestled deep within it, was a beautiful white house. He entered, and as he did so there appeared seven brothers, all of the exact same size and appearance, who followed behind him.

"Welcome!" they said. They bowed before him and showed him great respect. They stood ready to serve his every need. Two young women then entered, one carrying an ewer, the other a snow-white towel. They let him wash himself and then they retired. In a few moments they returned, bearing a small three-legged serving table laden with food. First Pizighash saw only the sumptuous array of food on the table, but then he discovered the apple that sprouts from the golden tree of the Narts lying among the delicacies.

"Aha! What is unfolding is a marvel," said the Nart youth as he sat there. "As things have happened, I have chanced upon the exact spot where my quest lies!"

They fed him and gave him drink. These men sat together as one and they stood together as one. All that they did they did as one. Finally, they said to him, "We are the children of the goddess of water. In all we are seven brothers and three sisters. If you will speak honestly, then why should we keep secrets? Those you see before you are our two sisters. The third is unable to wait upon you."

"What is amiss with her? Is there any way at all that I can be of help?" asked Pizighash.

"We shall speak to you of what has befallen her," said the sons of the Lady of Flowing Waters, "if it does not seem importunate."

"Speak," replied their guest.

"The three sisters used to put on the skins of doves and in this guise would fly to Nartia, land of the Narts, in search of husbands. They would bring back the apple, which sprouts in one day on the golden tree of the Narts. Until now no one has ever followed them back here, but after this flight the youngest of the three sisters, the damsel Meghazash, returned wounded. Now she lies in bed, bleeding and in need of help."

"Well then, what is needed?" asked the young Nart.

"You would not be able to find it. Her cure is some of that same blood that she shed in Nartia," they replied.

"If that is so," said the young Nart, "then I happen to have some of that very same spilled blood."

He then reached into his pocket and brought forth the white handkerchief with some of the dove's blood on it. The brothers took it from him and moistened the cloth. When they applied it to her wound, the lovely damsel Meghazash was suddenly restored to health.

The sons of the water goddess were overjoyed and sang Pizighash's praises:

"The sea's floor and the land's plane for you are both alike
But nowhere have we seen a man who is your like.
Here from our three lovely sisters, dear guest, choose you one.
We shall give you her who is dearest to your heart."

"Then if that is so," said the young Nart, "give me the one whom I have restored to health."

"The one you healed is the damsel Meghazash, and so the damsel Meghazash is your good fortune," said they. So saying, the brothers gave the youngest of their three sisters to Nart Pizighash as his boon and his bride, as his reward and good fortune.

Thus the Nart who came from the dry land and the damsel who lived on the seafloor were joined together, and their families became linked one to another.

The brothers then showed great respect to Nart Pizighash and held him in the highest esteem. A great banquet was held in his honor, and he departed with the damsel Meghazash as his companion.

When Nart Pizighash returned from the sea and approached the place he had left, his brother was waiting for him. Pija was overjoyed when he saw him. "As long as you have returned alive, nothing else matters." With the maiden as companion, the three set off for their people. Once back among the Narts, a great feast was given to honor them. For seven days and nights the Narts were overjoyed. They were as happy as dogs or pigs:® they ate, they drank, and they danced. The feast lacked nothing.

They remained together, and as life passed Meghazash gave birth to two boys. The youngest they named Warzameg. and the elder they called Yimis. These sons of Meghazash rose to become the leading men in Nar-tia, the Circassians say, but this is another tale.

NOTES:

1 The name (tatémg°e) - /t-ah-tá-m-4°a / 'father intimate.possession-father-oblson / naming suffix would appear to mean "grandfather." He represents the oldest of four generations of Narts, of which only oblique references such as the present one survive.

2 Pija (póg'e] +- /p'3-g'-a / 'sever-spear-in,' "he who spears."

3 Pizigash (p'ozayés) -- / p'o-zo-yá-S/ 'sever-who-causes-fall.off', "he who severs" or "he who causes parts to fall off, to be lopped off."

4 In Circassian / ma-w54t'a / 'not-val+ dig, that is, "that which cannot be dammed up." the source of the Greek name for this sea, Maeotis. Note also Circassian [t'áne] « /tana /

"the Don River', Greek Tanais, the name for the Don and its vicinity, and Iranian don 'river', perhaps a borrowing from a northern Circassian-like language.

5 Note the obvious biblical parallel. God tells Moses: "But lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it: and the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea" (Exod. 14:16).

6 The name of this water goddess is Ipsethe g°48°e] < /ps-tha g°<as a / 'water-god lady', at one point, and /ps5-X°a g°áas°a / 'water-flow (river) lady' at another.

7 This may be an Iranian name, *maga-zac, Sanskrit maha, Greek mega-, English much, and for the second stem Ossetic zaic 'offspring, that is, "(she with) many offspring," similar in sense to Setenaya, Iranian sata, Latin centum, Lithuanian Simtas, English hund(red), Circassian /na-ya / 'mother-the.one.of', "mother of one hundred," the fertility figure of the next generation. In purely Circassian terms, it would be /mo-ya-za-8' / 'not-let-(be)one-inst', "the one who is not abandoned," which in fact accords well with the tale and therefore probably reflects a folk etymology.

8 Literally, (hek"efq°sk'ef]«/ha-k*af-q°s-k*af/'dog-happy-pig-happy. The Circassians consider dogs and pigs the happiest of animals.

9 The name has no clear etymology within Circassian. It appears in various Circassian dialects as 'Warzamayg, 'Warzamaj', or 'Warzamas.' It reflects the form *warza-maka, borrowed from an Iranian language other than Ossetian, which has Uryzmag. The name would be an adjective (maka) based on the Indo-European stem *Hwerg- 'to strangle', as in several Germanic legal terms that have an association with strangling or being hanged, such as Old Norse vargr 'wolf, outlaw', Old English wear 'monster, outlaw', Modern English worry, and even Hittite hurkel 'outlaw, sex criminal' (see Gerstein 1974, 172), though for the last one Held, Schmalstieg, and Gertz (1987, 151) have only the gloss 'outrage, offense'.

So, originally he was the great wolf or outlaw, which is in keeping with his scruffy appearance in some accounts. This etymology receives support for the tale of the rape of Setenaya, something now expressed through the separate figure of the Gorgon swineherd (saga 4) but perhaps originally a deed performed by proto-Warzameg.

Abaev (1996, 4:127; 1990, pp. 246-47) does not know what to make of this root, noting only that it has an Iranian pedigree and belongs to that group of names ending with -maka.

Knobloch (1991, 64, §218) takes the form back to Iranian *warāza- wild boar' solely on the basis of the Armenian form (borrowed from Iranian) Varazman, which may or may not be relevant.

Benveniste (1959, 129) takes it back to a hypothetical *(a)varazmaka, but notes that it is devoid of sense even if of obvious Iranian form.

10 This name would appear to be linked with an Indo-Iranian source; cf. Sanskrit Yama and Avestan Yima, both gods of death. Circassian folk etymology takes the name to be /ya-mo-s/ 'inside-not-sit', "the one who is never home, the wanderer." In fact, the Circassian form may have been reshaped from an earlier Iranian one to fit this folk etymology.

The link to an Indo-Iranian death figure, specifically to the Iranian form yima-, is strengthened by the fact that in the saga "How Warzameg, Son of Meghazash, Won the Damsel Psatina" (saga 3) a third brother is added after Yimis, Pshimaruguo, whose name means "Prince of Death" (see the end comments in saga 39). He would seem merely to be an epithet of Yimis elevated to the status of a character.