THE BYZANTINE REVIEW

ByzRev 08.2026.019
doi: 10.17879/byzrev-2026-9473

JOHN LATHAM-SPRINKLE, The North Caucasian Kingdom of Alania, 850–1240 (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2025. 330 pp. – ISBN 978-1-009-37348-7

• NIKOLOZ ALEKSIDZE, Free University of Tbilisi
(n.aleksidze@freeuni.edu.ge)

As the first English-language monograph devoted to the intricate history and even more convoluted historiography of medieval Alania, Latham-Sprinkle's book is a landmark in Caucasian studies. Beyond providing a comprehensive and critical account of this political entity, the author methodically addresses the theoretical and conceptual dilemmas inherent in the study of Alania – issues that are vital for contextualizing the broader region and for re-evaluating the notions of kingship, statehood, and authority in medieval studies. Throughout the volume, the author engages with a diverse array of Arabic, Byzantine, Georgian, Armenian, and Turkic sources, while maintaining a critical dialogue with the extensive scholarly literature produced in Russia and the Caucasus. It is noteworthy that while the study is theoretically rigorous, LATHAM-SPRINKLE's conceptual discussions are never forced; empirical evidence is never distorted to fit a preconceived framework, ensuring that the analysis remains firmly grounded while the narrative remains consistently engaging.

Notwithstanding its significance to both the Caucasus and greater Eurasia, primary sources originating from Alania remain remarkably sparse, particularly regarding the early period. The Alans left no indigenous written record, neither administrative documents nor narrative literature, and their languages of liturgy and governance were Greek and Georgian. Nor did they produce a substantial epigraphic corpus, leaving behind only a handful of inscriptions, most of which post-date the fourteenth century. Consequently, the majority of our information is drawn from foreign observers – Byzantine, Georgian, and especially Arabic – who frequently conceptualized the Alans as a vague, depersonalized, and generalized 'other', often using 'Alania' as a catch-all term for North Caucasians. In these accounts, Alania and its people often appear as peripheral footnotes to what were deemed more important regional developments.

In the opening theoretical chapters, LATHAM-SPRINKLE unravels the tangled web of archaeological, linguistic, and political dilemmas inherent in

the historical concept of Alania, establishing a foundation for his assessment of the field's more contentious aspects. He successfully argues that rather than an isolated zone, Alania and the North Caucasus must be viewed as integral components of the medieval West Eurasian world, contributing significantly to the political and cultural ecology of the wider region. While this statement may seem intuitive, it counters the common academic tendency to treat the North Caucasus as an isolated enclave or merely a transit point.

The dearth of native written records has compelled an over-reliance on archaeology and, more problematically, ethnography, two of the most disputed disciplines in Caucasian scholarship. Shaped by imperial, Soviet, and nationalist legacies, these disciplines in both the North and South Caucasus remain prone to heavy interpretation; they have become lamentably 'ethnicized', frequently serving as purported evidence for ethnic presence and historical continuity. Consequently, ethnographic data, largely recorded no earlier than the nineteenth century, is often employed as a direct lens for interpreting medieval realities. This approach results in the anachronistic projection of relatively modern (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century) mythological, epic, and social structures back into the Middle Ages, a methodological tendency prevalent across various fields of Caucasian studies.

This shortage of reliable data is further compounded by the historiographical hurdles intrinsic to Alania and the broader Caucasus. Despite the recent integration of the medieval Caucasus into Western academic discourse, regional scholarship remains deeply colored by a Soviet legacy, fostering a persistent methodological friction with Western research paradigms. Central to this issue is a lack of rigorous theoretical frameworks. Many decades of adherence to a pseudo-Marxist paradigm effectively stalled the evolution of historiographical thought in the region, prioritizing the accumulation of empirical data over interpretive depth. The Western study of Alania has been complicated by a nearly total reliance on Russophone sources and the region's complex relationship with the Russian state. Thus, a significant achievement of this book is the construction of a methodological bridge between rich Russian scholarship and modern Western historiography, introducing the reader to the idiosyncrasies of Soviet, modern Russian, and Georgian historiography that may be unfamiliar to a Western audience.

Another problem of Alan and Caucasian studies is that it remains plagued by parochialism and the entanglement of medieval history with contemporary nationalist agendas. Scholars of the North and South Caucasus often

operate in isolation, lacking a comprehensive understanding of historical developments on the opposite side of the mountain range. Ironically, while Soviet 'Caucasiology' purported to frame the Caucasus as a unified region and object of study, the actual result was a profound regional compartmentalization, creating isolated fields of study that rarely acknowledge each other's existence.

As a Georgian scholar whose education was partially molded by the post-Soviet system, I am not immune to this parochialism. Despite having published extensively on Caucasian history, my formal training was centered on the South, leaving the North largely as a *terra incognita*. In this respect, I am an heir to a tradition in which scholars of medieval Georgia or Armenia often possess a rather superficial understanding of the history north of the Caucasian watershed, thereby mirroring the vantage point of the medieval sources we engage with. Consequently, as I approached this volume as a learner rather than a specialist in North Caucasian archaeology, I finished it deeply indebted to LATHAM-SPRINKLE for introducing perspectives I had seldom considered. This review is thus written from the perspective of an engaged scholar discovering new horizons. Since Alania is not always on the radar of medievalists, it is worth briefly summarizing its history as presented by the author.

To define the entity: Alania was a substantial medieval polity encompassing much of the western and central North Caucasus, flourishing as a kingdom from the ninth through the thirteenth centuries. It occupied a strategic position at the intersection of trans-Eurasian trade routes and served as a crucial bridge between the Byzantine Empire, the Islamic Caliphates, the Khazar Khaganate, and the nomadic societies of the Eurasian steppes. Despite this textbook description, a researcher must first face a fundamental choice: its historic location. Depending on the national or ethnic perspective of the author, Alania is variously situated in modern North Ossetia, Chechnya, or Ingushetia. Because the modern Ossetian language is the closest relative to medieval Alanic, North Ossetia is widely viewed as the ethnic heir to the kingdom, a belief ingrained in the official name of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania. However, LATHAM-SPRINKLE convincingly argues that linguistic and archaeological remains (such as burial types) cannot serve as precise indicators of medieval territorial formations. Aligning with recent scholarship, he places the heart of Alania in the Upper Kuban region of Karachay-Cherkessia and the eastern Krasnodar region – the northwestern Caucasus.

While Byzantine and Georgian sources identified the Alans as an ethnographic group as early as the sixth century, Alania first emerged as a distinct political entity in the ninth century. LATHAM-SPRINKLE attributes the rise of the Alan kingdom to two interconnected factors: 'external' pressures arising from the Eurasian trade network, largely shaped by Khazar imperial practices, and 'internal' developments marked by the sophisticated adoption of Western Eurasian cultural elements. This latter process, which LATHAM-SPRINKLE conceptualizes as the 'power of the foreign', serves as the central interpretive framework and a pillar of the book's analysis.

By the end of the ninth century, the Alan kings began converting to Christianity – a process that was gradual rather than a sudden transition or the singular result of a radical royal decree. Rather than being a mere byproduct of Byzantine influence, the adoption of Christian practices by Alan rulers represents, in LATHAM-SPRINKLE's view, the most illustrative case of the 'power of the foreign'. The author analyzes the various factors contributing to this establishment, including the Byzantine resurgence of the tenth century, the ambitions of the Georgian kingdoms to the south to unify the Caucasus under their suzerainty, and the Alan tactic of balancing between competing Eurasian powers – a strategy widely practiced by South Caucasian Bagratid rulers as well.

In the tenth century, following the collapse of the Khazar Khaganate, Alania emerged as a dominant power in the North Caucasus. Alongside the South Caucasus, it re-entered the Byzantine sphere of influence, while the Georgian Church actively promoted Christianity and its ecclesiastical hierarchy there. The Alan kings solidified their status by highlighting their connections to the Byzantine and Georgian monarchies. While challenging the traditional view that Alan Christianity was merely 'superficial', LATHAM-SPRINKLE demonstrates through meticulous analysis how thoroughly the Alans appropriated Christian practices, from the cult of saints and church architecture to the liturgical calendar. He is also acutely aware that this dismissive view of Alan – and broader Caucasian – Christianity is rooted in nineteenth-century Russian imperial rhetoric, which framed its expansion as the restoration of 'authentic' Christianity in a region supposedly dominated by paganism and Islam.

In the final section, LATHAM-SPRINKLE examines the collapse of the Alan kingdom between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Here too, he avoids reductive reasoning that would attribute a major historical shift to a single

catalyst, such as the Qipchak or Mongol invasions. Instead, he posits that a primary driver was the growing autonomy of the North Caucasian aristocracy, who had learned to access and manipulate the 'power of the foreign' independently, bypassing the need for royal mediation.

Beyond its historical depth, a primary objective of the book is to apply Alania as a case study to challenge entrenched concepts like ethnicity, statehood, 'influence', and hierarchy. For example, a notable theoretical contribution is the conceptualization of the 'kingdom-as-network'. LATHAM-SPRINKLE argues that the medieval kingdom of Alania was not a 'bounded entity' in the modern sense, but a geographic region defined by allegiance to a court – a central node in a power network comprising the ruler, their entourage, and the physical manifestations of authority (palaces, treasuries, and churches). This framework effectively illustrates the fluid nature of Caucasian politics.

The central theoretical pillar, as mentioned, is the 'power of the foreign' – the status accrued by elites through their access to distant material and spiritual goods. Using this concept, the author explores how Alan rulers utilized 'vocabularies of power', such as Byzantine titles and architectural styles, to legitimize their authority locally. This strategy was common among other Caucasian principalities; notably, the Georgian word *uc'xo* historically denoted both 'alien' and 'excellent' or 'precious'. North Caucasian elites often claimed foreign origins to legitimize their rule, a practice that mirrors claims by South Caucasian elites, such as the Mamikonean claim to Chinese origin or the Bagratid claim to Davidic descent, as well as the Dadeshkeliani mythology that pinpointed the origin of this Svan aristocratic house in the North Caucasus.

In arguably the most compelling portion of the book, the author examines the mobility of material culture, personnel, and architecture. He identifies five distinct aspects of the 'power of the foreign': the rhetorical construction of a power centre in the 'outside world' beyond the Caucasus; the importance to indigenous political legitimacy of contacts with these foreign power centres; the widespread recognition of these claims to legitimacy, even across cultural and linguistic boundaries; the possibility of expressing these contacts in terms of ancestry and descent; and the demonstration and rei cation of these contacts through the possession of prestigious foreign goods.

Having spent years studying similar theoretical concepts south of Alania, specifically in the pre-modern history of Svaneti, I found LATHAM-SPRIN-

KLE's insights profoundly illuminating. The way the Alan elite utilized prestige goods and foreign spiritual symbols (manuscripts, ecclesiastical objects, and cults of saints) to bypass formal governance mirrors the political strategies observed in other remote Caucasian mountain communities, particularly Svaneti, meanwhile providing rich comparative material.

LATHAM-SPRINKLE's book will inevitably possess certain deficiencies; the evidence he examines and the scholarship he critically engages with are simply too vast, and the stakes involved are high. However, the purpose of this review is not to litigate these points, as I am certain the work will be more than sufficiently analyzed by specialists in North Caucasian archaeology. In truth, LATHAM-SPRINKLE's work is a delightful read, where the label 'thought-provoking' is not a mere cliché but a statement of fact. It is essential reading not only for those with a general interest in medieval Caucasia or Eurasia but also for anyone intending to contribute to the scholarship of this region, as the book will undoubtedly establish itself in the canon of Caucasian studies.

Keywords
mediaeval Caucasus