**Project Description: *Inequality and History in the Caucasus, 1395-1792***

In recent years, the ubiquity of systems of human bondage has increasingly been recognised, particularly in the history of Eurasia. Recent approaches to Eurasian slavery have emphasised its position within wider systems of unequal patronage relations, whether in the late Ottoman Empire or pre-Petrine Russia (Toledano, 2007; Witzenrath, 2015). However, these approaches have not been widely applied to the pre-19th century Caucasus, a particularly surprising absence, given the extensive cross-border connections of enslavement, patronage and *kunak*dom which played a major part in the Russian Empire’s decision to expand in the region (Kurtynova-D’Herlugnan, 2010). Without a full view of the context of Caucasian slavery, our view remains a partial one, emphasising only one part of this system of social dependence: the slave trade. As a result, we risk viewing the Caucasus primarily from an external viewpoint, whether Russian or Ottoman, and essentialising its peoples as culturally and economically impoverished objects of imperial powers.

My proposed project, *Inequality and History in the Caucasus, 1395-1792,* will examine the long-term systems of social dependency which underpinned Caucasian slavery. In particular, it will concentrate on the point of view of Caucasians themselves, as expressed through material culture, textual sources, and folklore. If appointed to this position, I will first publish a monograph, entitled *The Power of the Foreign: Political Authority in North Caucasian Alania,* based on my doctoral dissertation on long-term systems of power in the Central North Caucasus. I will then work on a second monograph, which will examine the way that the past, broadly defined, was used by peoples of the Caucasus to create, legitimate, and challenge systems of power and domination between 1395 and 1792, i.e. between Timur’s invasions and the Treaty of Jassy. This project will concentrate on the North Caucasus, although for comparative material it will also look at Georgia. In particular, it will examine whether these conceptions of the past can be called a coherent body of historical thought; and if so, how this related to systems of social control. Moreover, it will examine changes in the use of the past as the Caucasus fell into the orbits of the surrounding empires, up to the establishment of Russian hegemony.

 \*

It is clear that systems of slavery in the North Caucasus were long-standing and deeply rooted in the culture of the region (Kurtynova-D’Herlugnan, 2010). The Caucasian slave trade stretches at least as far back as the period of Greek colonisation, and was prominently noted by Arab sources in the medieval period (Ibn Butlan, in Muller, 1980; al-Mas‘ūdī, in Minorsky, 1958). However, this trade can only be understood as part of a wider system of social dependency which enmeshed much of North Caucasian society. For example, the Kabardian law code of 1844 placed slaves at the very bottom of a class system with 11 levels (Leontovich, 2002 (1882)). Other lower levels of this system also included classes who could also be bought and sold but had greater rights than outright slaves, such as the *lagunipit,* who could refuse to be sold to a particular buyer. While the hierarchical structures of some North Caucasian societies have been widely noted (e.g. Khodarkovsky, 2011; Lemercier-Quelquejay, 1992), their long-term ideological underpinnings have not been systematically studied. Similarly, where the reasons for the prevalence of Caucasian slavery have been addressed, the focus has been firmly economic (e.g. Kurtynova-D’Herlugnan, 2010), rather than social, cultural or psychological. Indeed, I am aware of no systematic study of Caucasian slavery prior to the 19th century. We may therefore ask the question: just as Russian enslavement of Muslims was justified by reference to the biblical past, and Muslim enslavement of non-Muslims was justified through the example of the Prophet (Witzenrath, 2015), which past examples justified the Caucasian system of social dependency?

North Caucasian polities present a particularly interesting case, since in most polities a state structure was lacking and could not reify systems of inequality. As I argued in my thesis, ideological factors were particularly important in binding together the complex non-state societies found in the region. Access to the outside world, as demonstrated by titles and prestige goods, was a particularly important legitimating force. As a result, it is impossible to disentangle North Caucasian systems of social dependency from those of their neighbours. Understanding these systems therefore directly affects our view of neighbouring systems of power– for example, the dynamics of the Russian imperial frontier (cf. Khodarkovsky, 1992).

 It is clear that these systems of social dependency were frequently underpinned by reference to events in the shared past of the North Caucasus and its neighbours. For example, written sources from Dagestan, such as the 11th-century *Ta‘rīkh Bāb al-Abwab* and the 17th-century *Derbend-Name,* frequently draw on the pre-Islamic and early Islamic past in order to justify current power structures– for example, tracing the lineage of the Sarir Kingdom of Dagestan back to the last Sassanians. These images of the past could be directly invoked to legitimise systems of social dependency and slavery. This is illustrated by the 1844 law code cited above, in which Kabardian classes were defined not only through their economic rights and obligations, but also through descent from the legendary Egyptian Prince Inal; that is to say, through the imagined past as expressed via genealogies. As Jan Vansina (1985) has emphasised, a genealogical conception of the past can have a strong legitimating function, as can myth in general. However, this insight has so far not been applied to the Caucasian evidence, with secondary literature largely treating these genealogies as an accurate reflection of past events (e.g. Abaev, 1982).

There is much more untapped evidence for the ideological underpinnings of Caucasian systems of social dependency, particularly in the mythic and folkloric sphere. For example, the Kabardian Andemyrkan Saga serves to question the rule of the princes who betray the half-commoner hero, similarly to other *abrek* (outlaw) tales (see Gould, 2016). The Nart Sagas are especially significant. These are a cycle of heroic epics common to most peoples of the North Caucasus, recorded in the late 19th century, which can have a strong aetiological and legitimating function. However, certain cycles of tales can also question systems of social dependency. For example, the lower-class trickster figure of Shyrdon can, in some cases, serve as the antagonist of the sagas’ noble protagonists, but in others, he can serve as a vehicle to criticise the power structures they represent. However, the Nart Sagas remain an almost completely untapped resource for the history of the 18th and 19th centuries, and as far as I am aware there are no studies of the Shyrdon cycle. I have, however, amassed a considerable database of Nart Sagas during my doctoral research, and look forward to utilising it if appointed to this position. These sources are particularly significant since different recensions of these tales were recorded at different times. As a result, they are exceptionally valuable in tracing changes to perceptions of the past in reaction to changing political conditions, notably the Russian Empire’s advance.

Other sources I will draw on include the considerable Dagestani epigraphic record, which implicitly links the foundations of systems of social dependency to the Arabic ancestry of contemporary individuals and social groups. The Greek and Arabic epigraphic record of the Central North Caucasus may do the same, but this tradition has never previously been systematically studied. However, I conducted a survey of this material during my doctoral research, which can serve as a source base during this project.

Among written sources, accounts of travellers such as Giorgio Interiano, Evlia Chelebi, and Julius von Klaproth are particularly useful. Whilst these sources must be read with great caution, I aim to shed new light on their descriptions by utilising the same methodology as in my doctoral research, of ‘reading along the grain’ (i.e. picking out elements of foreign accounts which do not make sense in their epistemic contexts). In addition, whilst there has been considerable work on the Russian and Ottoman archival evidence for the North Caucasian slave trade (see Kurtynova-D’Herlugnan, 2010; Toledano, 2007), it seems that the Persian evidence has been worked on far less. I will therefore investigate this evidence for leads on Caucasian conceptions of the past, and potential parallels with Caucasian communities in Safavid and Qajar Iran, such as the Julfa Armenians.

This project will build on the work I have performed during my doctoral thesis. In this work, I examined the system of power which underpinned the Kingdom of Alania, the most powerful polity in the medieval Central North Caucasus. During my research, I worked closely with the *Dirhams for Slaves* project at Oxford, which examines the early medieval history of the Eurasian slave trade. Writing this thesis has given me a thorough understanding of long-term patterns of power in this region, and of the source challenges they present. As a result, I have learned sufficient Russian and Persian to be able to work with primary sources in these languages; this is in addition to my pre-existing knowledge of Latin, Classical Greek, French and German. I am also starting to learn Georgian. I have taken palaeography classes as part of my MA, and conducted epigraphic fieldwork in the North Caucasus.

If appointed to this position, I plan to continue my progression by participating in a Transottomanica Summer School to improve my Russian and Persian palaeography skills, and studying Georgian over the summer in Tbilisi. My plan of work is as follows. In the first year and a half, I would spend 50% of my time on turning my thesis into a book, and the other 50% on *Inequality and History*– specifically, on amassing primary source data, such as further Nart Sagas published in Russian. This will allow me to publish a preliminary article on these sagas by the second year in this position. In the second half of the second year, depending on teaching commitments, I hope to make a series of research trips within Western Europe (e.g. to Paris and London), followed by a summer research trip to St. Petersburg, Moscow, Tbilisi, and possibly Makhachkala, Tehran and/or Isfahan. The third year and fourth years would be devoted to the writing of *Inequality and History,* with a view to publishing at some point during the fifth year. If the position is extended beyond this, my future plans include looking at long-term relationships between systems of social dependence in the Caucasus and collaboration with foreign invaders- such as parallels between Georgian collaboration with the Seljuk Turks and with the Russian administration of Prince Vorontsov.

To conclude, this project will help us understand the regimes of power which underpinned the Caucasian slave trade, and restore agency to those who benefitted from and suffered under them. In doing so, it will shine a light on the ambiguous role of history in systems of power and domination: its ability to legitimise systems of dehumanisation and bondage, but also to question and challenge these same systems.

Bibliography

Abaev, V.I., ‘Proiskhozhdenie osetinskie famil'nykh imen’, *Literaturnaia Osetiia* 60 (1982), 115-123

Gould, R., *Writers and Rebels in the Caucasus,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016)

Khodarkovsky, M., *Where Two Worlds Met: The Russian State and the Kalmyk Nomads, 1600-1771,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992)

Khodarkovsky, M., *Bitter choices: Loyalty and Betrayal in the Russian Conquest of the North Caucasus,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011)

Kurtynova-D’Herlugnan, L., *The Tsar’s Abolitionists. Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire,* (Leiden: Brill, 2010)

Lemercier-Quelquejay, C., ‘Co-Optation of the Elites of Kabarda and Dagestan in the 16th Century’, in Avtorkhanov, A. and Bennigsen Broxup, M., *The North Caucasus Barrier: The Russian Advance towards the Muslim World,* (London: Hurst, 1992)

Leontovich, F.I., *Adaty Kavkazskikh Gortsev. Materialy po obychnomu pravu Severnogo i Vostochnogo Kavkaza,* (Nal’chik: El’-Fa, 2002 (1882))

Minorsky, V., *A History of Sharvan and Darband,* (London: W. Heffer & Sons, 1958)

Muller, H., *Die Kunst des Sklavenkaufs, nach arabischen, persischen und türkischen Ratgebern vom 10. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg: Schwarz, 1980)

Toledano, E., *As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007)

Vansina, J., *Oral Tradition as History,* (London: James Currey, 1985)

Witzenrath, C. ‘Slavery in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia: An Overview of the Russian and Ottoman Empires and Central Asia’, in Witzenrath, C. (ed.), *Eurasian Slavery, Ransom and Abolition in World History, 1200-1860* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015)

**Reference Contact Details**

Teresa Bernheimer

Lecturer in Islamic History, Department of History

Room 306

School of Oriental and African Studies

Thornhaugh Street

Russell Square

London

WC1H 0XG

Tb31@soas.ac.uk

+44 (0)20 7898 4605

Agusti Alemany

Professor Titular de Filologia Greca i Linguistica Indoeuropea

Building B, Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Autonomous University of Barcelona

08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona (Spain)

agusti.alemany@uab.cat

(+34) 93.581.41.54