

Albasty: A Female Demon of Turkic Peoples

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Abstract: *Albasty* is one of the most commonly known malevolent beings among Turkic peoples from the Altay Mountains via the Caucasus and up as far as the Volga River. This article focuses on Turkic data from the Volga region (Chuvash, Tartar, Bashkir) and the Eurasian Steppe (Kazak, Kyrgyz, Nogay, Uzbek). Various areas can be ascertained on the basis of verbal charms and folk-belief narratives. On the Eurasian Steppe, for example, *Albasty* was first and foremost a puerperal demon. In this territory, specialists (*kuuču*) were called in to keep away or oust the demon at birth. Many recorded legends and memorates concern healing methods and the process of becoming a healer. In contrast, epic texts or narratives are rarer, in the Volga region, yet there are certain verbal incantations against the *Albasty*, which here is rather a push or disease demon.

Keywords: Turkic beliefs, Turkic folklore texts, Turkic demonology, folklore of Inner Asia

In this paper, I will endeavour to give an overview of a mythical creature, the concept of which is widespread among most Turkic peoples. This belief has a long history and can also be evidenced in the myths and beliefs of peoples neighbouring the Turks. No other Turkic mythical beast has such extensive literature devoted to it as the *Albasty*. Although most relevant literature deals with the possible etymologies of the term, there are plenty of ethnographic descriptions available as well. Unfortunately, few original texts exist in the case of the latter, but there are many summaries and interpretations.

Among Turkic peoples, the daemon *Albasty* can be found in four large areas: on the Eurasian steppe, among Turkic peoples in Siberia, in the region of the rivers Kama and Volga, and especially in the middle and northern regions of the Caucasus Mountains. However, this daemon is not familiar to the Oguz peoples (Turkish, Azerbaijani, Turkmenian), although a similar creature is designated by other names, such as *al*, or *yarım adam*.

The first part of the paper outlines the possible etymologies of the word *albasty*. Although it has no officially accepted etymology as of yet, the term is nevertheless ethnographically relevant.

Most Turkologists interpret *albasty* as a compound word, as its second part, *bas-ty* – ‘push-ed’ – can easily be understood in Turkic languages. The meaning of this word

shows a clear semantic match with the push-daemon (incubus, succubus) function of the creature. As for the first part of the compound (*al*), five explanations have been proffered in print so far, several of which regard it as being of Turkic origin, while some scholars regard it as of Iranian origin. According to its Turkic etymology, *al* can mean ‘red’ (RÄSENE 1969:14); a word with the same meaning already existed in Old Turkic (CLAUSON 1972:120–121). This theory is reinforced by the fact that in Kyrgyz and Kazakh, there is also a *kara-basty* i.e. ‘black-pushed’ version alongside the *al-basty* (1888:14; ABRAMZON 1949:95; BAIALIEVA 1972:95; TOLEUBAEV 1991:47–48) – although it is only found in a few sources and may have a folk-etymological background. However, this supposition is weakened by the fact that in mythical texts referring to the *albasty*, the colours associated with this concept are yellow and black in almost all areas, e.g. the colour of the *albasty*’s hair or the distinction made among the Kirghiz and Kazakh between two kinds of *albasty*: the more dangerous black one and the less dangerous yellow *albasty* (MIROPIEV 1888:14; KUSTANAEV 1894:48). However, since the *āl* is also an Iranian mythical concept – which can be found in several Iranian (and some Oguz-Turkic) languages (e.g. HAFNER 1986:345; JOHANSEN 1959:303) and is similar to the Turkic *albasty* in its function – several scholars consider the prefix *al-* to be of Iranian origin (ANDREEV 1953:76–79; BENVENISTE 1960; 1953:65–74; AHMET’IANOV 1981:17). We can certainly discard the suggestion that the Turkic word *el*, meaning ‘hand’, is hidden in the prefix (NASYROV 1880:251; KOBLOV 1910:436), as this poses serious phonological problems. Another approach takes as its starting point the Old Turkic word *al*, meaning ‘front’; thus, the name of the mythical creature would be a compound word meaning ‘pushed in the front’ (OSTROUMOV 1892:12–13; MAKSIMOV 1876:27; NASYROV 1880:251; KOBLOV 1910:436). There is also the possibility of a form *alp+basty* (ASHMARIN 1994:I:164), where the prefix had two different early meanings in Old Turkic: ‘brave/heroic’, referring to humans, and ‘heavy, hard, danger(ous)’, referring to inanimate objects (CLAUSON 1972:127–128).

Some linguists of Iranian languages propose an entirely different starting point, the form *almasty*, which is not a compound word. Moreover, they regard the sound *-m-* in the second syllable as the starting point instead of the sound *-b-*. This form can indeed be found in some Turkic languages and dialects (for example in Karachay-Balkar and Tuva), although far less frequently than the *albasty* version.¹ They trace the form *almasty* all the way back to the ancient Babylonian form *lamaštu*, which would have entered Turkic languages through Iranian languages (KLIMOV – EDEL’MAN 1979:60–63; RASTORGUEVA – EDEL’MAN 2000:309). Although this proposition does not deserve to be rejected immediately, the word initial *a-* sound of Turkic ‘data’ cannot be a Turkic development because an *a-* prosthesis would never have been prefixed to a first syllable *la*.

As for the ethnographic data regarding the *albasty* beast, this paper presents it from two distinct aspects. One is regional; that is to say, presented as a concept typical of specific areas on the basis of available data. In addition, the contamination of the concept by other mythical creatures will also be addressed.

¹ Actually, there is indeed a /b/ – /m/ sound alternation in Turkic languages.

Among Turkic steppe peoples (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Nogai), the term *albasty* essentially covers three different concepts. According to the most widespread of these, the *albasty* is a puerperal daemon, dangerous for mother and baby alike, one who may even cause an expectant mother's death during childbirth. Major summaries almost unanimously describe the *albasty* as both a long-haired and tangled-haired, large-breasted female figure who throws her breasts over her shoulders (VALIKHANOV 1904:277; DYRENKOVA 2012:240; KEREITOV 1980:122; TAIZHANOV – ISMAILOV 1986:117). In the majority of mythical stories about the puerperal daemon and protection against it, however, it usually appears in the form of an animal (dog or ram), carrying human lungs in its mouth and looking for some flowing water (river or stream) to throw the lungs into (POIARKOV 1891:41; BAIALIEVA 1972:96–98). According to the belief, the *albasty* takes out the lungs of a woman giving birth, but the victim does not die until the daemon throws the lungs into the water. Some legends claim that the daemon can be stopped before it finds water and the mother saved (MIROPIEV 1888:9–13). Only people with special abilities are able to recognise the *albasty* (POIARKOV 1891:43; NAUMOVA 2016:67), and they are also able to defeat it. The *albasty* must be severely beaten and made to flee (DIVAEV 1896:43–44; BAIALIEVA 1972:97). Among the Kyrgyz and the Kazakh, the person chosen to perform this act is not always the *baksī* (a local word for shaman), although there are stories about an “*albasty*-exorcist” by that name. However, the person most suitable for this task is the one called *kuuču* (e.g. DYRENKOVA 2012:233) – the word *kuuču* being a derivative of the verb *kuu-*, meaning ‘drive (out), herd, expel’ (Iudahin). Among the Kyrgyz, there are sources claiming that although the *baksī* is able to drive out the less dangerous yellow *albasty* (which primarily causes diseases), this does not apply to the more dangerous black *albasty* (the actual puerperal daemon) (BASILOV 1994:56). Only the *kuuču* is able to drive out the latter. Several stories (all of which are first-person accounts, some recounted by the *kuuču* himself) talk about how someone becomes a *kuuču*. Almost all of these claim that it was by chance that they realised they had a special skill. For example, when they see an animal, carrying human lungs, they immediately know that it is an *albasty* (MIROPIEV 1888:10–15). This recognition is mutual, as the given *albasty* can also identify individuals who recognise it and are thus able to defeat it. Therefore, it sometimes happens that no fight ensues at all and the *albasty* does not even have to suffer a beating because as the *kuuču* reaches a house where a woman giving birth has just been attacked by the *albasty*, he merely greets those inside saying, “The hero has arrived!” causing the *albasty* to flee immediately (BAIALIEVA 1972:97). There is also a source mentioning that a *kuuču* only sent his clothes to the house where the woman was giving birth, which was enough for the birth to proceed without any problem (BAIALIEVA 1972:97; ABRAMZON 1949:99).

“There is also a story in which Suleimankul tells of how he became a *kuuču*:

One night, on my way home from a visit, I stopped behind a big poplar tree. From there I saw a great fire burning in the distance. Two *albastys* were playing around the fire. I went closer and they did not notice me. I grabbed one of them and started to beat it hard. It yelled in a human voice:

‘I am dancing around, Suleiman Ake,
I am not going to the place
You are going!

Let me go!’

I did not let it go and carried on beating it. Then it gave me one of its hairs. Then I let it go. That was the time I became a *kuuču*.” (BAIALIEVA 1972:96)

According to another belief that is prevalent on the steppes, the *albasty* is a push-daemon, so-called because it pushes people at night while they sleep, appearing in the form of a man or woman or, in certain cases, even an animal. In the sources, it is typically a small-sized human (about three feet tall), often with long, tangled hair (SNESAREV 1969:32; BAIALIEVA 1972:98–100). There are several beliefs concerning the *albasty*’s hair. One of them claims that whoever obtains a strand of its hair will have power over it, as happens in the story above. Another version is that by possessing one of its hairs, the *albasty* can be forced to perform household chores, which it will do until its hair is returned (KEREITOV 1980:122). This concept of the *albasty* working around the house is not dissimilar to its third form, which has integrated some characteristics of house or stable-daemons. According to these ideas, the *alpasty* rides the horses at night until they foam at the mouth, and at other times plaits their manes (SNESAREV 1969:32). Among steppe-dwelling Turkic peoples, there are relatively fewer data on the latter. It is typical, however, that such an *albasty* cannot be defeated by beating, nor by getting hold of a strand of its hair. Instead, one must take and hide the book the *albasty* carries under its arm so that it cannot find it. In these stories, the book taken from the *albasty* brings wealth to the host (e.g. TAIZHANOV – ISMAILOV 1986:117).

Among Turkic people in Siberia, where the practice of shamanism continued until the first third of the 20th century, there are in essence two related concepts about the *albasty*. On one hand, it is an evil spirit bringing diseases to people, mainly psychiatric diseases and insanity (ANOHN 1924:6), and on the other, its role is related to the shaman’s activity. For shamans, the *albasty* plays a part in diseases during their initiation, and its name also occurs among the shaman’s helping spirits during their activity (VITASHEVSKII 1918:166; BASILOV 1994:59). Yakut shamans are sometimes divided into two groups, one of which is the *ayī* (‘good, holy’), and the other is the *albaasi*, ‘the shaman of evil spirits and devils’ (KSENOFONTOV 1930:113). These characteristics sometimes also occur in the steppe areas, where certain forms of shamanism (mainly the *baksys*, who had a healing function) were still extant at the beginning of the 20th century. An example of this was recorded in Horezm, which is interesting both from a linguistic and a religio-ethnological aspect: a professional reciter of the Koran, who was also recognised as a healer, provided information of a shaman song, the invocational part of which mentions the names of some 108 angels, spirits and saints, with the name *alpasty* among them (MURODOV 1975:100–118). The linguistic interest of the text itself is that one part of it is in Uzbek and the other part in Tajik. These two languages are not even related to one another, Uzbek being a Turkic and Tajik an Iranian language.

In the mythology of some Siberian Turkic areas, the *alpasty* appears as a kind of female forest spirit who enters into a sexual relationship with men logging or hunting in the forest (DYRENKOVA 2012:233–234).

The Turkic peoples of the Volga-area can be divided into two large, linguistic groupings. Tartar and Bashkir belong to the Kipchak languages (just as Kazakh and Kyrgyz, already mentioned), whereas Chuvash constitutes a separate branch among Turkic languages, with numerous special characteristics.

In the case of the Bashkirs, sources from the late 19th– early 20th century describe the *albasty* as a long-haired female daemon attacking at night, her breasts long enough for her to throw over her shoulders (LOSSIVEVSKII 1868:28; RUDENKO 2006:271). When she shoved people at night, they were unable to breathe because the *albasty* stuffed her large breast into the victim's mouth. A 19th-century source mentions the tearing out of one of the *albasty*'s hairs, but here it no longer has a mythical background (LOSSIVEVSKII 1878:28). In this source, the pulled strand of hair is only the proof of the pushing that had taken place that night, and that the *albasty* is to blame. In the incantation used to "drive out" the *albasty*, mention is also made of breasts as one of the 'places' where the *albasty* is sent:

"Whence thou came from,
 There thou should go
 Go thou to rich breasts
 Go thou to a light feather bed
 Go thou to a stormy flood
 Go thou and perish!
 There is no place here for thee,
 Whence thou came from,
 There thou should go!" (HISAMETDINOVA 2011–2012:I:60)

Among the 'sending-away' type of Bashkir incantations known to us, there is no other instance of 'sending to breasts'.

Unsurprisingly, stories regarding the *albasty* are common among Bashkirs. For example, a text recorded in 1906 describes the old woman living next door as an *albasty*, who appears to the little boy home alone in the form of a little girl, and who is eaten by the family dog a few days later (HISAMETDINOVA 2011–2012:I:59).

Among Tartars, the *albasti* is notorious as a push-daemon who shoves people at night, either in their sleep or while they are awake. During this process, the person being pushed cannot move and feels heavy pressure around their heart and a choking tightness in their throat (NASYROV 1880:269; SZENTKATOLNAI BÁLINT 1875:149; KOBLOV 1910:437–438). A victim can escape the assault by moving his or her little finger (NASYROV 1880:269). According to material recorded among Christian Tartars, the *albastis* mainly attack at Christmas, when they knock into people from the front and push them to the ground, putting their full weight on them, thus rendering them totally immobile (MAKSIMOV 1876:27). Some Tartar sources mention that the *albastis* not only push people but also suck their blood (NASYROV 1880:251), and one or two sources also say that the *albasty* is a creature who drives horses and generates wind (MAKSIMOV 1876:29). There are also several different sources regarding the physical appearance of the *albasty*. Here, the long-haired, large-breasted woman so typical elsewhere is not so prevalent. Some sources describe it as a human-looking figure (KOBLOV 1910:437), but there are other descriptions likening it to a large haystack (MAKSIMOV 1876:27–29).

Among the Chuvash, to whom the *albasty* mostly appears in incantations (RODIONOV 2012:225–229), early 20th century sources had difficulties defining what the term meant. Essentially, three different models of the creature are known (ASHMARIN 1994:I:166). One of them claims that the *albasty* is a kind of evil which can attach to a person and cannot be more clearly defined. Another source says that the *albasty* appears as a maiden

to young lads and as a lad to maidens, and that one must not turn around when it leaves. If someone does so despite the prohibition, the *albasty* says “Do not tell anyone!” and assaults the person. Although the source is rather vague here, it might be related to the idea that the *albasty* only appears to be human from the front and has no back, leaving its entrails visible. Such a belief exists among the Tuva as well, where a creature appears as a boy to girls and as a girl to boys (KATANOV 1893:522). The *albasty* might have been infamous among the Chuvash² as a push-daemon, also referred to by some sources. If a person experienced intense pain in their bones or “was pushed” at night, even if this was attributed to the evil spirit by the name of *usal*, the *alpastă* incantation had to be employed. It is clear from the text of the incantation that the *albasty* can now only be interpreted as an evil spirit – one which is hard to describe and which appears in many different compounds:

“Wind *alpastă* /*alpasti*³
 wealth *alpasti*
 water *alpasti*
 fiery *alpasti*
 fiery *xayar*
 fiery *sexmet*
 fiery *usal*
 returns to the meeting
 dog *alpasti*
 chicken *alpasti*
 beast⁴ *alpasti*
 bath *alasti*
 wind’s *văpăr*
 sun’s *văpăr*
 water’s *văpăr*
 dead man’s *văpăr*
 house *văpăr*
 beast⁵ *văpăr*
 money *văpăr*
 fiery *văpăr*
 fiery *sexmet*
 fiery *xayar*
 fiery *usal*
 returns to the meeting
 between Pitër and Moscow

² Chuvash: *alpastă*.

³ The word *alpasti* may be the third person singular, genitive form of *alpastă*, but in the present-day spoken Chuvash language, the word form *alpasti* also occurs (so it can also be a nominative case). Both possibilities are acceptable, as *alpasti* also occurs where it is certainly not a genitive case, for example: *vutlă alpasti* (fiery or fire *alpasti*), whereas below in parallel structures, certainly genitive case forms of *văpăr* occur (*văpri*).

⁴ The Chuvash word *kayăk* refers to all non-domesticated beasts and birds.

⁵ Non-domesticated animals (Chuvash *kayăk*).

there is a twelve-year-old girl,
 go thou there!
 Do not debate!
 Do not contradict!” (ASHMARIN 1994:1:166)

Of the other evil spirits in the incantation, the *usal* and the *sexmet* indicate ‘bad, disease, difficulty, trouble’, and *vupār* is fundamentally a nocturnal push-daemon as well as the name of the witch in fairy-tales.

Because of the traditions above, it may also be worth noting that in present-day spoken Chuvash language, the word *alpastā* denotes somebody that has unkempt hair or a generally untidy appearance (SKVORTSOV 1982:31).

As a conclusion to this paper, it is important to note that some mythical creatures have either been mixed up with the *albasty* or show great similarities to it.

One of these sources mentions a creature not yet discussed here, typical in Turkish language areas, the *yarım adam*, which denotes ‘half-human’. In Turkish, this is a puerperal daemon and also one that brings diseases to children, displaying a great likeness to the figures *Lamaštu-Lilith-Gello*, which are of Babylonian origin but are also recognised in South-Eastern Europe and in European Jewish beliefs. According to the story, Suleiman (Solomon) wanted to cast a *yarım adam*, which brought diseases to young children, into the fire. Responding to its cries for mercy, Suleiman settled for the following agreement: in the houses where Suleiman’s prayer and the names of the 12 and a half *yarım adam* are written, the *yarım adams* will harm neither the host, nor his wealth, nor the cradle (MÉSZÁROS 1906:26).

This parallel is especially interesting because the Bashkirs also recognise a half-human mythical creature called *yarımtığ*, who is basically a forest spirit. In an early twentieth-century source, however, the *yarımtığ* is described as a hairy creature with the ability of seeing into the future and a love for riding horses; not just riding them, in fact, but mercilessly so until they foamed at the mouth. According to several scholars, in the Bashkir language the name *yarımtığ* is only widespread in certain areas and is identical to the forest daemon called *šüräle* in other places. The name of the Bashkir *šüräle* also exists in the Kazakh language (*sorel*) and, according to some sources, this forest daemon is the *albasty*’s husband (VALIKHANOV 1904:277). The name “half-human”, on the other hand, can be related to the creatures that only appear to be human from the front, but which in fact seem only half-human as they have no backs, rendering their innards visible.

When studying both steppe Turks and Bashkirs, several scholars have identified the mythical creature called “yellow (or blond) girl” (*sari qiz*) with the *albasty*. The reason for this identification could be that the *albasty* is a yellow-haired or blond-haired creature. However, this identification is not satisfying, even though the two creatures do indeed have similar features. The *sari qiz* primarily appears in shamanic songs in the texts of steppe Turkic peoples as one of the spirits assisting the shaman (e.g. DIVAEV 1899:314; VERBITSKII 1893:55) but is not widespread either as a pusher or a puerperal daemon.

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