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## **PRE-ISLAMIC EARLY TURKS AND AZERBAIJAN IN THE BYZANTINE SOURCES**

*This research delves into the intricate relationship between the Byzantine Empire and the early Turkic tribes, particularly those inhabiting the Western Caspian region, namely current Azerbaijan Republic. By analyzing Byzantine chronicles, the study aims to uncover the multifaceted interactions between the world's leading empire, Byzantium, and Caucasian Albania, including military conflicts, and cultural perceptions.*

*The Byzantine authors, such as Priscus, Procopius, Agathias, and Menander, provide invaluable firsthand accounts of these encounters. Their ethnographic descriptions of the early Turks offer a unique window into their social, political, and military organization, as well as their cultural practices and beliefs.*

*Through a meticulous examination of these primary sources, this research seeks to shed light on the role of Turkic tribes in the political and social landscape of Azerbaijan during the pre-Islamic era. It will also explore how Byzantine authors perceived and represented these nomadic peoples, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between these two civilizations.*

**Keywords:** *Pre-Islamic period, Azerbaijan, early Turks, Byzantine chronicles, Albania, Atrapaïca, Adrabiganon*

**Introduction.** The Turkic world interested Europeans much earlier than the Seljuks and Ottomans, although, in their perceptions they were barbarians, and are described by the corresponding expressions. Byzantine authors followed this traditional attitude towards those who were not Hellenes. In the 4th century Roman Latin author Ammianus Marcellinus provides valuable information on the Huns and their leader Attila. Demonstrating the disdainful attitude, he uses the words such as “sturdy limbs”, and “thick necks” to describe the slant-eyed Mongoloids Huns [4, 31, 1-2]. In almost all the Byzantine Greek sources the Huns, Avars, Sabirs, Gokturks and other Turkic tribes were called the Scythians. Even medieval sources for renaissance theories on the origins of the Ottoman Turks claims that they were actually Scythians.

Byzantine chronicles, such as those written by Priscus [13], Procopius [14], Theophanes the Confessor [16], and others, provide valua-

ble information about the interactions between the Byzantine Empire and the Huns, Avars, Hephthalites, and Gokturk Khaganate, and further Khazars. These chronicles offer detailed accounts of diplomatic missions, military campaigns, and political developments. The aim of this research is to collect and analyze the records, contained in the early medieval Byzantine chronicles that related to the Turkic world and the Caucasus, the region under consideration. Hence it focuses on the information that has been available in the early medieval sources and discusses what channels of exchange have been reason for its transmission.

The Byzantine Empire, a major power in the Mediterranean region for centuries, had a profound and enduring relationship with the Caucasus. This mountainous region, located between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, was strategically important for the Byzantines due to its proximity to their eastern borders and its rich resources. The main goal of this study

to seek interactions of the Turkic tribes with the Caucasus in early medieval period, based on the accounts of Byzantine author, as the Byzantium interacted widely with the Turks and the Caucasian region.

Modern historiography pays special attention to the study of the issue on the early Turkic contacts in Europe. It would be appropriate to recall several works recently published in the "Reconstructing the Past: Journal of Historical Studies" [6; 7; 9; 10;]. Especially, Borbala Obrusanszky's pieces focus on the Onoguris in the Caucasus and the Savirs in Azerbaijan. The issue of the Huns in Azerbaijan was examined in the monograph by Yusif Jafarov, where, along with other sources of his research, he also mentions the Byzantine authors [19, 10-11]. This issue was carefully studied by Ramil Agayev based on the works of Arab authors [2, 46-55]. Moreover, the pre-Islamic Turks in the Caucasus was considered by Giuli Alasania in her "The Georgians and the Pre-Islamic Turkic" [3], basically referring to the Georgian chronicles.

Based on the work done, this study attempts to examine the issue of early contacts of the Huns, the early Turkic tribes in the Caucasus, especially in the territory of modern Azerbaijan Republic based on the works of Byzantine authors in the early Middle Ages, more precisely pre-Islamic period. As for the method and methodology, employing a rigorous analytical approach, this research draws upon comparative textual and historical analysis to interpret the primary sources. In accordance to the aims and objectives of the research the sources for this study were the works of Byzantine authors from the 4th to the 10th centuries.

**The Main Text.** Based on linguistic and cultural similarities, the Huns have been part of the Turkic-speaking nomadic groups that migrated across Central Asia to Europe. However, there is no doubt that the Hun confederation have been a mix of different ethno-linguistic groups, including Indo-European, Mongolic, and perhaps, Uralic, alongside with the Turkic. Encounter with the Huns in the late antiquity could not be pass over by the Byzantine authors. The Huns and early Turks and their contacts with Europe are widely described by Byz-

antine authors in connection with the political events of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. But the purpose of this study is to examine these connections in the context of the Caucasus and the Western Caspian Sea coast.

The eyewitness account of Priscus of Panium about his embassy trip to the Hun Attila is reliable information that should be considered first not only according to the chronological principle. Priscus's first-hand account of life at Attila's court shows another side of the Huns' ruler. Calling the Huns Scythians, he gives them a detailed ethnographic description and presents Attila as a humble person [12, 46-48; 13]. There is an opinion that the Scythians were originally Indo-European nomads speaking an Indo-Iranian language, and the Byzantine authors mistakenly called the Huns and Turks "Scythians", which is refuted by new archaeogenetic data. Firstly, 'Scythian' was a general term for various nomadic peoples of Eurasia. For the Greeks of antiquity, all non-Hellenes were Scythians, in other words, uncivilized barbarians. For example, Strabo calls the peoples of the ancient Caucasus Scythians. Research on the Scythians suggest that they probably spoke Indo-Iranian, Altaic and Caucasian languages. And genetic analysis suggests that Scythian populations in the eastern and western parts of the steppe region were a blend of people with ancestral ties to Indo-European and East Asian groups. Russian paleogeneticists have sequenced the DNA of a noble warrior whose rich grave was excavated last year in the Chinge-Tei-I burial mound, located in Tuva in the Scythian "Valley of the Kings". On his father's side, the man belonged to one of the lines of the Y-chromosomal haplogroup Q [20]. It is widely known that this haplogroup is attributed to the Huns.

The Huns were directly reported in the territory of the Caucasus by Procopius of Caesarea (490-565), who was appointed by Emperor Justinian in 527 as secretary and advisor to Flavius Belisarius. He mentions the Sabirs Huns, in the forms of Sabeiroi, in the Caucasus, writing that in the boundaries of the Iberians lie on the right, and the Caucasus ends directly opposite, many nations have their homes, including the Alans and Abasgoi, who are Christians and

friends of old to the Romans; also the Zechoi and after them the Huns who are also called Sabeiroi [14, II, XXIX, 14-15]. Furthermore, Procopius, in light of the clashes between Byzantium and Sassanid Iran, reports on the Hephthalites in his "History of the Wars of Justinian" [14, Book I, III-IX]. Procopius has a direct indication that the Ephthalitai are a Hunnic people and are called Huns [Ibidem, Book I, III, 3].

It should be noted that the main reason for mentioning the Huns and early Turks in the Caucasus, including Azerbaijan, is related to the Iranian-Byzantine wars. The Iranian Sassanids frequently clashed with the Byzantine Empire over control of the Caucasus. These conflicts, known as the Persian Wars, had a profound impact on the region's history and culture. In the search alliances against each other, these to powers very often encountered with the Turkic people, such as the Huns, the Hephthalites, Gokturks and others. The analysis of the treatment of the Turkic world in the Byzantine textual sources goes hand in hand with a study of the composition of these important pieces of evidence and the western perception of the Turks they attest. Procopius reports about the Sabir Huns, who served in the Sassanid army. The Sassanid king Kavad sent army into the Roman-controlled Armenia. This army was composed of Persarmenians and Sounitai, the neighbors of the Alans. Moreover, there were three thousand Huns with them, known as Sabeiroi, a particularly warlike people [14, I, XV, 1]. The Sabiris Huns were allies of Gubazes II of Lazica. As Procopius points out, long before he had made an alliance with the Alans and Sabeiroi, and they had agreed for three kentenaria not merely to assist the Lazoi in preserving the land from plunder but also to make Iberia so destitute of men that not even the Persians would be able to come in from there in the future. Goubazes had promised that the emperor would give them this money. And the emperor Justinian sent the money to the Sabeiroi [Ibidem, II, XXIX, 29]. Procopios, in Book Eight, Chapter 11 of his famous work gives some details on Sabirs and their relations with Byzantium and the Sassanids. He states, by some chance there were a small number of the

barbarians called Sabeiroi in the Roman army, for the following reason. The Sabeiroi are a Hunnic nation and live by the Caucasus mountains; they are a numerous people and so divided among many different rulers. Some of these rulers from ancient times side with the emperor of the Romans, while others side with the king of the Persians. Each of these two kings were accustomed to pay a fixed amount of gold to the Sabeiroi allied with him, but not annually, only when need forced him to do so. [Ibidem, VIII, XI, 22-25]

Agathias, a contemporary of Procopius, also mentions one of the Hunnic tribes in the Caucasus, the Onoguris. This issue was studied by B. Obrusanszky [9, 5-16]. The author suggests that the names "Honagur" and "Onogur" have been associated with both the Huns and the Hungarian (Ibidem, 1). This Hunnic group of Onogur played a significant role in the Caucasus during the 5th and 6th centuries. Actually, Agathias reports the Persian garrison at fortress Onoguris, which was established in the district of Archaeopolis as a hostile base against the Romans [1, Book II, 22]. Describing the war between the parties, Agathias over and again mentions the fortress Onoguris, and then he explains the meaning of the name: "Onoguris was the ancient name of the place and may have arisen as the result of an encounter at some time in the past between a branch of the Huns called the Onoguri and the Colchians in which the latter were victorious, the local inhabitants then commemorating the success by naming the spot after it". [1, Book III, 6]

Of course, this is an assumption, not a fact. In any case, the existence of a fortress with such a name indicates the presence of Onogurs in the territory of the South Caucasus, including Azerbaijan. Moreover, Agathias mentions the Turks and Avars, although not in connection with the Caucasus. However, his description gives us an opportunity to have an imagination of the Turkic tribes in general. He writes that the Frankish kings have a custom of never cutting their hair. They never cut it from childhood, and because of the parting in the center of the head, the strands hang down on both sides directly onto the shoulders. However, this is not like that of the Turks and Avars, unkempt, dry

and dirty, tied in an unsightly knot [1, Book I, 4]. It should be noted that the name Turk appears here for the first time in the 6th century Byzantine author's work, referring to the Gokturks. Although the Avars, one of the Hunnic tribes, were also linguistically Turks, Agathius distinguishes them from the Gokturks.

The 6<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine author Menander Protector and Theophylact Simocatta left the valuable accounts on the early Turks and their actions in the Caucasus and Azerbaijan in light of the turbulent political events of the era. As for Menander Protector, the follower of Agathias, the notion 'Scythian' is used as a generic term for the peoples of Central Asia [8, 9]. And he also uses the names Turk and Avar side by side, while on the one hand he considers them related, but different groups of Turkic peoples.

Menander covers extensively the relations between Byzantium on the one hand, and the Hephthalites and Gokturks on the other. The Byzantine diplomacy and its relations with the Turkic nomadic confederations, renowned for its intricate maneuvering and strategic alliances, has been for long time an object for the historical research. Although this does not have a direct relation to the Caucasus and Azerbaijan, Menander's fragments contain very important messages. He states that, Sizabul (Istemi Kaghan\_ L.A.) consented to this proposal and sent Maniakh and some others as envoys to the Roman Emperor carrying greetings, a valuable gift of raw silk and a letter. Carrying this letter Maniakh set out on his journey. ...Then he crossed the Caucasus and finally came to Byzantium. When the Emperor read the letter, written in Scythian," through an interpreter, he most willingly granted an audience to the embassy. [8, 115]

In this fragment, attention is drawn to the fact that the letter from the Turkic Khagan was in Scythian, that is, Menander associates the language and ethnicity of the Turks. By the way, he also calls them Sakas: "When the Turks, who had formerly been called the Sacae, sent an embassy to Justin concerning peace, the Emperor decided to send an envoy to the Turks." [Ibidem, 117].

Fragments of Menander contain messages directly about the territory of Azerbaijan and

Derbend. In the fifty-year treaty, signed between the Persian Sassanids and Greek Byzantium in 562, the first article, specified by Menander, states that through the pass at the place called Tzon (Chor\_ L.A.) and through the Caspian Gates the Persians shall not allow the Huns or Alans or other barbarians access to the Roman Empire, nor shall the Romans either in that area or on any other part of the Persian frontier send an army against the Persians (Ibidem, p. 71). So, the Huns and Alans are indicated in the region. A very important information was given on the Sabirs, another Hunnic people, who had been driven across the Volga in the 460s [8, Fr. 40], lived in the Kuban area to the east of the Black Sea. Some of them apparently fled southwest towards Albania [8, Fr. 18, 5]. In this fragment Menander reports on the Byzantine invasion of Albania. This first invasion of Albania, whose purpose would have been to protect Iberia, probably took place in late 575, the second invasion (Fr. 18,6) in spring of the next year [8, 273].

B. Obrusanszky states that according to Menander's Fragments, the Byzantine military commander forced the Sabirs to resettle between the Rivers Kura and Araz. They also settled in Shamkir or Aghstafa, or the western region of Azerbaijan, and Masudi from the 10th century mentioned the Savirs living between Ganja and Tbilisi regions [10, 7]. The Persian shahs, facing the persistent threat of nomadic incursions from the north, sought to fortify the southern frontier of the Transcaucasian region. To deter the Huns and safeguard the Sassanid heartland, they established strongholds in strategic locations such as the Mughan steppe. Menander's account corroborates this strategy, mentioning that King Khosrov Anushirvan (501-579) settled 10,000 Sabirs in the region between the Rivers Kura and Arax [Ibidem, 10].

In Fragment 10,3, Menander mentions "the land of the Kholiatat". The Kholiatat (or Kalakh) were one of the four divisions of the Western Turks [8, 265] and could be localized in the north of Caspian Sea, the Romans with Zemarchus would probably have been sent. Kalakh resembles the toponym Khalaj in Azerbai-

jan. But the Byzantine embassy did not arrive in Azerbaijan at that time.

Theophylact Simocatta (580-630) can be considered chronologically the last Byzantine historian of the pre-Islamic period. Making a record of barbarian wars, he first mentions the action against the Avars, substantiating this with "the close proximity of the events and of the appropriateness of the arrangement." Then he openly expresses his negative perceptions on the Avars, indicating that they impetuously ventured numerous violent deeds at that time. These people are Huns, who dwell beside the Ister (Danube\_L.A.), a most untrustworthy and insatiable nation among those who live as nomad [18, Book IV, 3, 1-2].

In connection with the wars between the Byzantines and the Sassanids, he mentions Azerbaijan, indicating it in two forms, Adrabi-ganon [18, Book IV, 3, 13; IV, 9,1; IV, 12, 10; IV, 15, 1] and Atrapaïca. He states that the Sassanid king had dispatched the usurper Baram, whose forces were gathered from every quarter. He assembled the army and collected as quickly as possible the men from the region of Adrabi-ganon, those stationed in the area of the river Zab, in addition to those encamped at Nisibis [18, IV, 9, 1]. Further he writes that When Khosrow II was having been ousted from his kingdom, he left Ctesiphon and crossed the river Tigris; he was in despair about exactly what to do; some advised him to approach the eastern Scythians, whom we are accustomed to call Turks, others to save himself in the mountains of Caucasia or Atrapaïca [18, Book IV, 10, 1].

Also the Byzantine historian references to the Caucasian Albania several time [Theophylact Simocatta, 1986, Book III, 6, 17; III, 7, 13]. Theophylact Simocatta describes how the Byzantine troops and the Huns camped in Albania. He writes that the two forces, meaning the Romans and Huns, were camped in the plain of Albania; a steep-sided ravine that extended from the river Araxes kept them apart from engagement. And so the troops camped on the banks of this interposed stream and exchanged words with each other [18, III, 7, 13].

Theophylact Simocatta, like his predecessors, reports on the Huns, Avars and other early Turkic tribes. One of the reports concerns the

Sabirs. As is known, in 515, there was an invasion of the Caucasus by the Sabir Huns. The end of their power, according to Theophylact Simocatta (that placed these events between 558 and 560) happened when them, together with the Onugurs and the Barsils suffered the invasions of other steppe peoples, the Uar and Chunni, two ancient tribes of Ogurs [6, 24].

The historical accounts, such as Ravennatis Anonymi [15], Theophanes Confessor [16], Theophanes Continuatus [17], Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople [9] and Constantine Porphyrogenetos [5], suggest that the relationship between Khazaria and Byzantium was multifaceted and enduring, dating back to the reign of Emperor Heraclius in the early 7th century. Political, commercial, and social ties were established between the two entities, with a particularly strong connection between the Khazar Khaqan and the Byzantine court. Byzantine diplomacy in the 7th century and beyond relied heavily on the military might of the Khazars to influence the political landscape of the Steppes. This strategic alliance continued into the 10th century, even as new military powers like the Pechenegs and Rus emerged in the region. The Khazars' role as a pivotal force in the Steppes contributed significantly to Byzantine geopolitical interests and security. For the most part, these relations developed in the period after the emergence of the Arab Caliphate, and they go beyond the chronological scope of this work.

**Conclusion.** The Byzantine Empire, with its strategic location and powerful influence in the Mediterranean, had a significant relationship with the Caucasus. The Turkic tribes, including the Huns, Avars, Hephthalites, and Gokturks, were also active players in the region during this period. Through diplomatic missions, military campaigns, and trade, these groups interacted with the Byzantines and the Caucasian peoples.

The early medieval Byzantine chronicles provide valuable insights into these interactions, offering detailed accounts of events and relationships. By analyzing these sources, this study contributes to a better understanding of the historical dynamics between the Turkic world and the Caucasus in the early Middle Ages.

The Byzantine chronicles report the early contacts between the Turkic tribes and the Byzantine Empire and frequently focusing on the Caucasus make it possible to obtain specific for region information. Analysis on the accounts of Byzantine historians, such as Priscus of Panium, Procopius of Caesarea, and Agathias, provide valuable information about these interactions.

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## Xülasə

Lalə Əliyeva

### İslamdan əvvəlki dövrdə ilkin Türklər və Azərbaycan Bizans mənbələrində

Bu tədqiqat Bizans İmperiyası ilə erkən türk tayfaları, xüsusən də Qərbi Xəzər regionunda, yəni indiki Azərbaycan Respublikasında məskunlaşan tayfalar arasındakı mürəkkəb münasibətləri araşdırır. Tədqiqat Bizans salnamələrini təhlil etməklə dünyanın aparıcı imperiyası olan Bizans və Qafqaz Albaniyası arasında çoxşaxəli qarşılıqlı əlaqələri, o cümlədən hərbi münaqişələri və mədəni qavrayışları üzə çıxarmaq məqsədi daşıyır.

Priskus, Prokopius, Aqafi və Menander kimi Bizans müəllifləri bu münasibətlər haqqında əvəzsiz ilkin hesabatlarını təqdim edirlər. Onların erkən türk qəbilələrinin etnoqrafik təsvirləri onların sosial, siyasi və hərbi təşkilatına, habelə mədəni təcrübələrinə və inanclarına unikal pəncərə təqdim edir.

Bu ilkin mənbələrin diqqətlə öyrənilməsi yolu ilə bu tədqiqat islamdan əvvəlki dövrdə türk tayfalarının Azərbaycanın siyasi və ictimai mənzərəsindəki roluna işıq salmağa çalışır. Burada həmçinin Bizans müəlliflərinin köçəri xalqları necə qavradıqlarını və təsvir etdiklərini araşdırır, bu iki sivilizasiya arasındakı mürəkkəb dinamikanın daha dərinə dərk edilməsinə cəhd göstərir.

*Açar sözlər: islamdan əvvəlki dövr, Azərbaycan, erkən türklər, Bizans salnamələri, Albaniya, Atrapaika, Adrabiqanon*

## Summary

Лала Алиева

### Доисламские ранние Тюрки и Азербайджан в Византийских источниках

Это исследование изучает сложные отношения между Византийской империей и ранними тюркскими племенами, особенно теми, которые населяли Западно Каспийский регион, а именно нынешнюю Азербайджанскую Республику. Анализируя византийские хроники, исследование направлено на раскрытие многогранных взаимодействий между ведущей мировой империей, Византией, и Кавказской Албанией, включая военные конфликты, и культурные восприятия.

Византийские авторы, такие как Приск, Прокопий, Агафий и Менандр, предоставляют бесценные рассказы из первых уст об этих встречах. Их этнографические описания ранних тюркских племен открывают уникальное окно в их социальную, политическую и военную организацию, а также их культурные практики и верования.

Благодаря тщательному изучению этих первоисточников, это исследование стремится пролить свет на роль тюркских племен в политическом и социальном ландшафте Азербайджана в доисламскую эпоху. Оно также исследует, как византийские авторы воспринимали и представляли эти кочевые народы, способствуя более глубокому пониманию сложной динамики между этими двумя цивилизациями.

*Ключевые слова: доисламский период, Азербайджан, ранние турки, византийские хроники, Албания, Атрапаика, Адрабиганон*