

ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL AGES

Caucasian Albania: A contact zone of sedentary population and their states with Eurasian nomadic people (V-VII centuries CE)

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Historical conflict of nomads and sedentary

The emergence of nomadism has always been a hotly debated issue of historical science. It should be noted, first of all, that we are talking about the so-called movable cattle-breeding as nomadism could be a way of life of the people and large ethnic groups engaged in a variety of professional occupations - gathering, crafts, divination, jugglery, music, dancing, et al. However, it is nomadic herdsmen and settled farmers who have composed two biggest parts of humanity with antagonistic relationships in the history of civilization. According to popular worldview, nomadism seems like a more primitive form of economic and social organization. However, at the same time, a firmly established fact is that the mobile pastoralism as the main occupation of large groups of the population appeared relatively later in comparison with other industrial occupations of people, and it was a progressive event in the history of the production. It has emerged from a mixed pastoral-agricultural sector as a result of the increase in the cattle production efficiency. Of particular importance was the domestication of large pack animals, horses and camels, which required new additional resources for their breeding.

Specialization in breeding of these animals required new skills of production management and the nomadic way of life associated with it. According to the widely spread expert opinion, a shift to this new lifestyle in the Eurasian steppes and in the Near East has occurred at around the turn of the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE.¹ Since then, the world of nomads and farmers seemed to be separated from each other although, in fact, the elements of these alternative products survived in the economy

¹ G. E. Markov. "Nekotoriye problemi vozniknoveniya i rannikh etapov kochevnichestva v Azii". *Sovetskaya etnografiya*, no. 1 (1973), p. 105

of each of the two societies. Formation of nomadism was accompanied by the consolidation of the military resources of the society since the nomadic life organically corresponded to the development of the military skills of the adult male population, and the search for new pasture lands and booty led to military clashes with neighboring people, both nomads and farmers.

The relationship of the settled population and nomads had a variety of manifestations and features. Military-political and economic aspects of the interaction between nomadic and settled population, of course, had a fundamental importance. They determined the antagonistic nature of the relationship, as the economy of the nomads of the Eurasian steppes was built on the foundation of transhumance and extensive cattle breeding. Both types of pastoralism created a potential conflict between farming and nomadic communities. In the case of outrun pasture, the nomads were partly in need to occupy some arable lands. And in the case of extensive cattle breeding, the viability of nomadic economy was dependent on the volatility of climate conditions. Unfavorable weather and fodder shortages in steppe forced nomads to count for product withdrawal from the agricultural population, i.e. predatory wars became a necessity for them.²

The tightening of the conflict occurs with the emergence of nomadic empires, which could mobilize huge military resources of the Eurasian steppes. The first big state of Eurasian nomads was Xiongnu empire that emerged in II. BCE on the borderland with China. Since then, the conflict of nomads and settled farmers was one of the most important factors that used to shape the existence and development of the ancient and medieval societies. The productive and cultural life in nomadic societies was not located in stable settlements and cities, and thus the nomadic lifestyle was not conducive for generation of written historical tradition and establishment of functional collections of manuscripts or libraries. The nomads used to transmit the historical memory and knowledge mainly via oral communication between people and generations. The emerging empires could leave valuable inscriptions on the stones and rocks which could survive the climate impact and abandonments while the authors of those monuments migrated in steppes. However, those craft pieces and information sources were hardly relevant for accumulation of the details of pastoral life and interactions between nomadic people and settlers. They mostly aimed to make political declarations and prove the legitimacy of ruling dynasties although they could still serve as sources of some scarce information of everyday life and concerns of masses of herdsmen moving in vast deserts and steppes extracted from

² N. N. Kradin. "Kochevniki, mir-imperii i sotsialnaya evolutsiya." In: *Alternativniye puti k civilizatsii*, ed. A.V. Korotayev, N.N. Kradin, D.M. Bondarenko, V.A. Lynsha. Moskva: Logos, 2000. <http://abuss.narod.ru/Biblio/AlterCiv/kradin.htm>, c. 324-5.

concise text of dynastic political statements. That is why the contemporary researchers and curious readers used to take the information about the nomads from written sources created by sedentary people. The emotional background of these news was consequently pervaded by fear and hatred towards the people with alien way of life and culture.

Long walls

Migration of nomads occurred in two main forms: in the form of a billiard ball effect when a migrating nomadic nation pushed another nomadic nation ahead, and secondly, when the nomads passed through the territory of neighboring nations in search of new habitat land.³ Empires of the settled people reacted to the movement of the nomads in different ways, depending on geographic conditions, and the enemy's military power. The policy to use some nomadic peoples against others included the resettlement of nomads on the borders of the empire assigning them border guarding, and so did the emperors of China and Byzantium and Sassanid shahinshahs at their borders with nomads, where they erected immense fortifications. The Chinese Wall is the most impressive monument of this era.

The defeat of the first big nomadic empire of Xiongnu had set the tribes of the Eurasian steppes on motion. About 370 CE, the remnants of the Xiongnu and other Eurasian nomads involved in their movement defeated the Alans in the Caucasus, opening the era of the Turkic??? domination and their permanent pressure on the borders of the Middle East and East European countries. Sassanids, whose share was to come face to face with the increased strength of the nomads in the Caucasus and in Central Asia, started grandiose constructions to protect their borders. Almost simultaneously, they started building long walls in the South Caspian, in Gorgan province, and a fortification complex in the Caucasus.

North Caucasian ridge was a natural boundary between nomads and the settled population. The rising Sassanid empire sought to push its limits to this natural border. That was the boundary the Sassanids tried to keep shut. Of particular importance was the reinforcement of the Derbent pass - a narrow strip between the eastern extremity of the Caucasian mountains and the Caspian Sea. Nomad raids took place across this passage, or alternatively the Daryal passage passed in the central part of the Caucasus. Erection of the fortifications was apparently started in the days of

³ Richard N. Fray, and B.A. Litvinskiy. "Tsentralnaya Aziya i kochevniki: 24.2. Severniye kochevniki, Sogdina, Khorezm." In: *Istoriya Chelovechestva*, ed. J. Herrman and E. Zurcher, 443-84: Izdatelskiy dom MAGISTR-PRESS, 2003, p. 471.

Yazdegerd II (438-451).⁴ However, large-scale construction of the system of fortifications extended from Derbent to the west along the Caucasian ridge which was carried out during the reign of Khosrow Anushirwan (531-579).⁵ Passionate strife of Sassanids to advance to the natural border with the nomadic world was justified by considerations of military-strategic and economic nature. Arab historian al-Tabari informed us that after the completion of the construction of fortification system in the Caucasus mountains a grand military campaign of Turkic Kagan Sindzhibu (probably, Istemi Kagan (d. 576) was easily repelled by Sassanid forces of just 5 thousand soldiers.⁶

Interests of the South Caucasian states

It should be noted that the interests of the big powers and borderland population, especially its military and political elite, did not match up. Caucasian Albania, a country on the border with the nomadic world of the Caucasus, had counted several hundred years of statehood history by the time of the advancement of the Sasanian state to the North Caucasus. Albanians had a strong army, which participated in the battles of Alexander the Great on the side of the Achaemenids of Persia, as reported by ancient sources.⁷

Inclusion of the country into the realm of big power could only partly solve the problem of the nomad raids since the border forces of the empire were not able to fully protect the population from bellicose neighbors. However, the maintenance of the troops, of course, fell on the shoulders of the local population and was added to other charges in favor of the central treasury. On the other hand, being in the political dependence on big powers greatly limited the revenues of the local nobility and the merchants obtained from the profitable trade with nomads.

In the middle of the IV century BCE, Albanian kings officially adopted Christianity. Harassment against the people of other faiths, especially Jews and Christians, by the Zoroastrian clergy and the state had also caused a discontent of the Sasanian rule.

⁴ Vladimir Minorsky and Ahmad ibn Lutf Allah Munajjim Bashi, *A History of Sharvan and Darband in the 10th-11th Centuries* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1958)., p. 87, n. 2.

⁵ M.S. Gadjiyev. "K izucheniyu Limes Caspius." In.: "*Severniy Kavkaz i kochevoy mir stepey Evrazii.*". V "*Minayevskiye chteniya*" po arkheologii, etnografii i krayevedeniyu Severnogo Kavkaza., 79-82. Stavropol: Stavropolskiy Gosudarstvenniy Universitet, 2001, p. 80-81.

⁶ Abu Djafar Mohammad ibn Djarir At-Tabari, *Tarikh at-Tabari: Tarikh al-Umam wa al-Muluk*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 2005)., vol. 1, p. 251-252.

⁷ M.L. Chaumont, "Albania," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* (1985)., p. 807

Not coincidentally, the state and population of the contact zone with the nomads had every interest in peaceful cooperation with the warlike neighbors in the North. Albanian kings often turned to Caucasian nomads for help in the fight against the Sasanian rule. During the anti-Sassanid uprising in 459-462, Albanian king Vache II destroyed Sassanid fortifications to merge the forces with his Maskut allies⁸, and so did the rulers and the nobility of other South Caucasian states. Georgian king Vakhtang Gorgosal counted on the Huns in the fight against the Sasanian state. They, however, sent only a small force of 300 riders.⁹ Naharars, Armenian noblemen, shortly before the coming of the Arabs sought an alliance with the nomadic *Hons* to struggle against Iran and Byzantium, both striving to extend their power upon the country. Armenian historian Sebeos reports about negotiations of Armenian nobility with nomadic Hons to unite their forces on the left bank of the Kura river.¹⁰

Caucasian Albania - a zone of interaction and trading with nomads

These data point to the territory of Caucasian Albania as a zone of closest contacts with the nomads. Derbent passage was not only a way of movement of military units, but also the caravan route for the goods imported from China and from the northern lands. Strabo tells us that the nomadic people, Aorses, maintained trade with India and the Middle East along the western coast of the Caspian Sea in alliance with local merchants.¹¹ A sufficient number of Roman and Parthian coins unearthed in the hoards on the territory of Azerbaijan indicate the broad involvement of local people in international trade during this period.¹² A large number of Sassanid coins laid in hoards before the coming of the Arabs can be explained by the presence of the Sasanian administration on the territory of Caucasian Albania.

⁸ K.N. Yuzbashyan. *Armyanskaya Epopeya V veka. Ot Avarayrskoy bitvi k soglasheniyu v Nuarsake. Elishe. Slovo o voyne armyanskoy*. Moskva: "XXI vek - Soglasie", 2001, c. 327.; Mamedova, Farida. *Kavkazskaya Albaniya i albany*. Baku: Tsentr issledovaniy Kavkazskoy Albanii, 2005., c. 354.

⁹ Leonti Mroveli. *Zhizn kartliyskikh tsarey*. Moskva: "Nauka", 1976, p. 90.

¹⁰ Sebeos, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, trans. Robert W. Thomson and Historical commentary by Tim Greenwood with the assistance by James Howard-Johnston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press., 1999)., p. 32

¹¹ Strabon. *Geografiya v 17 knigakh. Perevod, statya i komentarii G.A. Stratanovskogo*. Moskva: "Nauka", 1964), p. 480

¹² Ilyas Babayev. "Kakiye monetnye upotrebyalis na rinkakh Azerbayjana v I v. do n. e. – III v. n.e." - «Irs», no. 1 (25) (2007), p. 6.; "Denezhnoye obrasheniye Kavkazskoy Albanii v ellnisticheskuyu epokhu (konets IV – pervaya polovina I v. do n.e.)" In: *Muzey Istorii Azerbayjana - 2002*. Baku: Natsionalnaya akademiya nauk Azerbayjana, 2002, p. 182

Albanian rulers minted their coins in imitation of the ancient coinage. Such coins minted probably in Gabala, the first capital of the Caucasian Albania, are abundantly found in coin hoards and attest the patronizing attitude of the Albanian rulers towards international trade.¹³ The scale of trade was so significant that required additional monetary mass, but, at the same time, it is also clear that international trade was the dominant area in the commodity-money operations in the country. As for the money circulation in tax levying and domestic commodity market, it apparently gave in to the international trade. Lesser development of centralizing functions of the Albanian state compared to the neighboring South Caucasus countries of that time can be explained with this feature of Albanian economy. In other words, the confederative principle of state-building in Albania, which can be figured out from the evidence of written sources concerning broader autonomy of the regions and tribes in the Albanian Union, could be explained by the wider engagement of the Albanian population in international trade.

The interaction with the nomads on the northern border and their penetration into the territory of Albania could occur in three different forms, or at three main levels: slow, gradual infiltration of small groups or clans; military campaigns, aiming at the spoils of war and captivity; and the political subordination of the territory, the establishment of administrative and political structures of nomadic unions in subjugated territories.¹⁴ As to Albania's population, Strabo noted that they were more committed to the breeding and stood closer to the nomads, but were not so warlike.¹⁵ This presumably indicates the existence of considerable masses of nomadic people dwelling within the borders of Caucasian Albania, or else to the process of gradual settlement of originally nomadic population of Albania. Both processes could run together.

The Sassanids used to settle the nomadic groups that came to their service predominantly in Albania to assign them border guarding. This has a direct indication in reliable sources. Ibn al-Athir, in particular, reported that after the failure of Istemi Kagan's campaign to the South Caucasus, Khosrow Anushirwan settled down ten thousand Turks in Azerbaijan.¹⁶ At the same time, eighty families of

¹³ "Denezhnoye obrasheniye Kavkazskoy Albanii v ellnisticheskuyu epokhu (konets IV – pervaya polovina I v. do n.e.)".

¹⁴ V.B. Kovalevskaya. "Noviye i traditsionniye podxodi k vzaimootnosheniyam stepnogo mira i mestnogo naseleniya Kavkaza" In.: "*Severniy Kavkaz i kochevoy mir stepey Evrazii. V Minayevskiyey chteniya po arkhologii, etnografii i krayevedeniyu Severnogo Kavkaza.*", Stavropol: Stavropolskiy Gosudarstvenniy Universitet, 2001, p. 3.

¹⁵ Strabon. *Geografiya v 17 knigakh. Pervod, statya i kommentarii G.A. Stratanovskogo.*, p. 501.

¹⁶ Izz ad-Din Abi al-Hasan Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Kamil Fi Al-Tarikh*, 4th ed., 11 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ilmiyya, 2006)., vol., p. 337-8.

notable Turkic warriors were moved from the South Caspian region Jurjan to the Caucasian frontier, most probably for the protection of Darband fortifications.¹⁷

The penetration and settling of nomads and the Khazar Turks on the threshold of the Arab conquest took place in the territory of Azerbaijan in ascending order. The description of the events of the Arab-Khazar wars contained stories, which indicated that there were people fluent in the Khazar language among population of many cities. Among the townspeople, the Khazars were found, who converted to Islam. Some of them facilitated the advancement of Arabs. Due to the betrayal of the Khazar warrior, who wished to convert to Islam, the Arabs managed to capture Darband. However, al-Kufi says that immediately after the departure of the Arab commander Marwan, the Khazars came back and "settled in the city of al-Bab as before."¹⁸

Conclusion

Nomads have always helped the local rulers keep their independence vis-a-vis the expansion of the great powers. Obviously, settling of nomads in the territory of Caucasian Albania took place from the time of antiquity, but this process intensified during Sassanid rule. Iranian rulers, while fortifying the boundaries in the Caucasus, resettled large groups of Turkic nomads to guard the borders. This process can be seen in the toponymy of Caucasian Albania, where the names derived from the Turkic ethnonyms are found. Peaceful relations with the nomads had a great influence on the forms of economic activity and the development of international trade through Albania.

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¹⁷ At-Tabari, *Tarikh at-Tabari: Tarikh al-Umam wa al-Muluk.*, vol. 1, p. 251

¹⁸ Abu Muhammad Ahmad ibn Asam Al-Kufi., *Kniga zavoyevaniy (Iz vlecheniya po istorii Azerbayjana VII-IX vv.)*, perev. Z.M.Buniyatov. Baku: Elm, 1981, p. 14-15.

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Summary

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The paper addresses the issue of antagonistic relationship between sedentary population and movable cattle breeders as experienced in Caucasian Albania - the buffer zone between big empires and Eurasian nomadic people in the early Middle Ages. Evidence of mediaeval Arab sources is provided to justify that the interests of ruling elite and population at the boundary with nomadic people might differ from those of big empires. Nomads used to help the borderland state to struggle for their independence vis-a-vis the expansion of the great powers. Political contacts between elites, cooperation in international trade and border guarding policy of superpowers of the time were the policies used to settle the Turkic nomads in the territory of Caucasian Albania since antiquity, but this was intensified during Sassanid ruling and continued at the time of Arab domination.

Keywords: Nomads and sedentary antagonism, Caucasian Albania, Caucasian Turks, Sassanid fortifications, buffer zone, international trade in Eurasia