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TURKIC TRIBES IN THE CAUCASUS DURING THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive examination of the ethno-political processes that occurred in the Caucasus during the early medieval period, with particular emphasis on the role of Turkic tribes – such as the Huns, Khazars, Savirs, Bulgars, and others – in transforming the historical and cultural landscape of the region. The article is aimed at identifying patterns of interaction between nomadic tribes, and settled peoples of Transcaucasia, their influence on political structures, religious systems and the ethnic picture of the Caucasus. It traces the dynamics of migrations, military campaigns and diplomatic missions of Turkic-speaking peoples in the context of the broader geopolitical struggle between Byzantium, the Caliphate and the steppe powers.

The scientific novelty of the work lies in the multidimensional approach to the analysis of ethnic, and political changes in the Caucasus, realized through the synthesis of written sources (including Byzantine chronicles, Arabic treatises, Chinese chronicles) and archaeological data, as well as reliance on the latest research in the field of historical anthropology and ethnography. For the first time, the author introduces into scholarly circulation a set of data derived from Chinese chronicles of the Han and Tang dynasties, which makes it possible to broaden the understanding of the international relations of the Turkic tribes. The chronology of the Khazar-Arab clashes is also clarified, and the little-studied aspects of the cultural adaptation of the Turks in the conditions of the border region characterized by a high degree of ethno-confessional diversity are considered.

In conclusion, it is emphasized that Turkic tribes, who acted in the Caucasus not only as conquerors but also as intermediaries between different cultures, had a significant impact on the development of political institutions, the transformation of the ethno-religious landscape and the formation of a unique Caucasian model of coexistence. Their participation in the historical processes of the 6th – 8th centuries was a factor of profound changes reflected in the stable political and cultural ties between the Eurasian Steppe and the South Caucasus. The findings broaden the horizons of research on the early medieval history of Eurasia and emphasize the importance of the Caucasus as a strategic crossroads of civilizations.

Keywords: Caucasus, Turkic tribes, Huns, Savirs, Bulgars, Khazars

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ТЮРКСЬКІ ПЛЕМЕНА НА КАВКАЗИ В ЕПОХУ РАННЬОГО СЕРЕДНЬОВІЧЧЯ

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Анотація

Метою дослідження є всебічне вивчення етнополітичних процесів, що відбувалися на Кавказі в період Раннього Середньовіччя, з особливим акцентом на роль тюркських племен, таких як гуни, хазари, савіри, булгари та інші, в перетворенні історичного і культурного світу. ландшафт регіону. Стаття спрямована на виявлення закономірностей взаємодії кочових племен і осілих народів Закавказзя, їх впливу на політичні структури, релігійні системи та етнічну картину Кавказу. У ній простежується динаміка міграцій, військових кампаній і дипломатичних місій тюркомовних народів в контексті більш широкої геополітичної боротьби між Візантією, халіфатом і степовими державами.

Наукова новизна роботи полягає в багатовимірному підході до аналізу етнічних і політичних змін на Кавказі, реалізованому за допомогою синтезу письмових джерел (включаючи візантійські хроніки, Арабські трактати, Китайські хроніки) і археологічних даних, а також опори на новітні дослідження в області історичної антропології і етнографія. Автор вперше вводить в науковий обіг сукупність даних, почерпнутих з китайських Хронік династій Хань і Тан, що дозволяє розширити уявлення про міжнародні відносини тюркських племен. Також уточнюється хронологія хазаро-арабських зіткнень і розглядаються маловивчені аспекти культурної адаптації тюрків в умовах прикордонного регіону, що характеризується високим ступенем етноконфесійного розмаїття.

У **висновках** підкреслюється, що тюркські племена, які виступали на Кавказі не тільки як завойовники, але і як посередники між різними культурами, мали значний вплив на розвиток політичних інститутів, трансформацію етнорелігійного ландшафту і формування унікальної кавказької моделі співіснування. Їх участь в історичних процесах 6-8 століть стало фактором глибоких змін, що відбулися на стабільних політичних і культурних зв'язках між євразійськими степами і Південним Кавказом. Отримані результати розширюють горизонти досліджень ранньосередньовічної історії Євразії і підкреслюють важливість Кавказу як стратегічного перехрестя цивілізацій.

Ключові слова: Кавказ, тюркські племена, гуни, савіри, булгари, хазари

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Introduction. The study of the history of Turkic tribes in the Caucasus in the early Middle Ages continues to be one of the most important topics in modern historiography. The need to comprehend the factors behind the large-scale migrations of the Huns, Savirs, Bulgars and Khazars, as well as their influence on the ethno-political and cultural transformation of the region, is of particular interest. From the 4th to the 7th century the territory of the Caucasus was involved in the processes that covered a significant part of the Eurasian space and entered history as the Great Migration of Peoples¹. The arrival of the Huns from the east initiated migration flows that changed the ethnic map of the region. An important stage of Hunnic expansion was the formation of the Western Hunnic Empire under the leadership of Balamir in 374. His reforms and military campaigns in the Gothic lands provoked migration waves that led to the fall of Hermanaric power and the flight of Athanaric. These events contributed to the strengthening of Hunnish influence in Eastern and Central Europe². The Caucasus served not only as a transit zone, but also as a strategic frontier between settled states and nomadic entities. Military conflicts between the Byzantine Empire and Sassanid Iran, the weakening of local ruling dynasties and the instability of the internal political situation contributed to the vulnerability of the Caucasus to external influences. These circumstances created favorable conditions for the resettlement of Turkic tribes seeking to strengthen their position, conquer territories, gain access to trade routes and protect themselves from the threat of stronger nomadic groups. Some waves of migrations were expansionist in nature. Thus, the Huns sought to control the passes linking East and West, as evidenced by their military campaigns, including those directed to the Caucasus³. Savirs, in conditions of the growing pressure from Khazar Khaganate, aspired to keep independence and resorted to alliances with Sassanid Iran and Byzantium. The Bulgars sought new territories to avoid subjugation and preserve political autonomy. The Khazars, in turn, saw the Caucasus as a strategically important region, allowing them to control the routes between the Black and Caspian seas⁴. Natural factors also played a significant role in the movement of these tribes. Climate change, in particular droughts and the depletion of pastures in Central Asia, worsened the conditions of traditional nomadic pastoralism, prompting peoples to seek more favorable territories. In this context, the Caucasus, with its diverse landscape and water resources, was perceived as a region capable of ensuring a sustainable existence⁵.

Turkic peoples who settled in the region influenced the ethnic composition, social structures and political processes of the Caucasus. They interacted with local societies,

¹ Prisk Paniyskiy. Posol'stvo k Attila [Embassy to Attila] / Trans. Skryzhinskaya. In: Vizantiyskaya istoriya. Moscow, n.d. 55 p.

² Suleimanova, S. N. Istoriia tiurkskikh narodov: s drevneishikh vremen po nastoiashchee vremia [History of the Turkic Peoples: From Ancient Times to the Present Day]. Baku: Tahsil, 2009. 324 p.

³ Yeshu Stilit. Khronika [Chronicle]. Moscow, 2010. P. 25-27.

⁴ Feofan Vizantiets. Istoriya Vizantii. Izbrannye fragmenty [History of Byzantium: Selected Fragments]. St. Petersburg, 2004. P. 66-68.

⁵ Han Shu [Book of Han]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962. P. 64-68.

formed alliances, waged armed struggle and left a significant trace in the culture, language and material heritage of the indigenous population. The analysis of these processes allows a deeper understanding of the historical dynamics of transformations that took place at the intersection of cultures and civilizations in the early Middle Ages⁶.

Extent of the study of the problem. The problem of the presence of Turkic tribes in the Caucasus was covered in the works of both ancient and medieval chroniclers and modern researchers. A considerable amount of information about Huns, Savirs, Bulgars and Khazars is contained in the works of ancient and Byzantine authors. Among the early sources can be distinguished works of Claudius Ptolemy, Ammianus Marcellinus, Priscus of Panium, Procopius of Caesarea, Theophanes the Confessor, Theophylact Simocatta, Joshua the Stylite. In addition to them, valuable information is provided by the work of the Arab geographer Ibn Khordadbeh "The Book of Roads and Kingdoms"⁷. Antique and Byzantine historians provide material of ethnographic, geopolitical and military nature concerning the life, weapons, political organization and cultural features of the Huns and other nomadic tribes. For example, Procopius of Caesarea⁸ describes the participation of the Savirs in the military conflicts between Byzantium and the Sassanid power. His works also trace data on the socio-economic structure of these tribes. Joshua the Stylite⁹ covers the invasions of the Huns in Byzantine territory, while Theophanes of Byzantium¹⁰ and Theophylact Simocatta¹¹ provide insight into the foreign policy realities of the second half of the 6th and early 7th centuries, including allied and hostile relations between the Turkic tribes and the major powers of the region.

Of particular importance is the "History of the country of Alban", which reflects the political correspondence of the Hun ruler with the leadership of Caucasian Albania, which allows us to reconstruct the level of social development and foreign policy ambitions of the Turkic nomads.

Modern historiography, in turn, is represented by a number of fundamental works. Among them we can emphasize the work of Yu. Jafarov¹² "Huns and Azerbaijan", where the political consequences of Hun migration for the region are analyzed. L.N. Gumilev's monograph "The Hunnu"¹³ considers the role of the Huns in the geopolitics of Eurasia, including the Caucasus region. John Man¹⁴, in his book *Attila: The Barbarian King Who Challenged Rome*, touches on Hunnish migrations in Europe, including their penetration

⁶ Prokopy Kesariyskiy. Voyna s persami. Kniga I-II [War with the Persians. Books I-II]. Moscow, 1998. P. 91.

⁷ Ibn Khordadbeh. The Book of Roads and Kingdoms / Trans. Guy Le Strange. London, 1889. 200 p.

⁸ Prokopy Kesariyskiy. Voyna s persami. Kniga I-II [War with the Persians. Books I-II]. Moscow, 1998. 336 p.

⁹ Yeshu Stylites. Khronika [Chronicle]. Moscow, 2010. 212 p.

¹⁰ Feofan Vizantiets. Istoriya Vizantii. Izbrannye fragmenty [History of Byzantium: Selected Fragments]. St. Petersburg, 2004. 276 p.

¹¹ Feofilakt Simokatta. Istoriya imperatora Mavrikiya [History of Emperor Maurice]. Moscow, 1997. 288 p.

¹² Dzafarov, Y. Gunny i Azerbaydzhan [The Huns and Azerbaijan]. Baku: Elm, 1985. 198 p.

¹³ Gumelev, L.N. Ritmy Yevrazii: Epokhi i tsivilizatsii [Rhythms of Eurasia: Epochs and Civilizations]. Moscow, 1993. 320 p.

¹⁴ J Mén. Attila. Varvar, kotoryy rastoptal Rim v gryazi [Attila: The Barbarian Who Crushed Rome in Mud] / Trans. G. Sakhatskiy. Moscow: Eksmo, 2007. 320 p.

into the Caucasus. In Azerbaijani scientific thought, a special contribution to the understanding of the role of the Turks in the history of the region was made by Alekper Alekperov, who emphasizes that the Turks of Azerbaijan are an integral part of the general Turkic world. In his opinion, it is impossible to consider the formation of the Azerbaijani people in isolation from the history of other Turkic peoples, because the Turks, who settled in the region since ancient times, had a direct influence on ethno-political processes in the Caucasus¹⁵. Despite significant achievements, there are still unexplored aspects of this topic. In particular, the forms of cultural interaction between nomadic and sedentary peoples of the Caucasus, the nature of integration of Turkic tribes into local political structures and their contribution to the ethnogenesis of the modern Caucasian peoples have not been sufficiently investigated.

In addition, an important task remains the re-analysis of eastern sources – Chinese chronicles such as “Records of the Grand Historian”¹⁶ and “The Book of Han”¹⁷, which contain information about the Hunnu and their role in international relations. Their interpretation with the involvement of modern methods and critical apparatus will allow us to clarify a number of provisions on the early history of Turkic tribes and clarify the motivation of their migration processes. Thus, further research requires a comprehensive approach combining source studies, archaeology and interdisciplinary analysis in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the influence of Turkic peoples on the formation of the historical shape of the Caucasus.

Main Material. As you know, the Huns created the first state in Central Asia in the 3rd century BC. Chinese sources called them the ‘Xiong nu’ (匈奴) .

In the middle of the 1st century BC, the empire of the Huns split into western and eastern. Having settled in Central Asia, the Western Huns subsequently moved in large waves to Eastern Europe and simultaneously appeared in the Caucasus. The massive invasion of the Huns into the Caucasus began in the 370s AD, originating from the eastern regions of Northern China and Mongolia, and marked a significant shift in the demographic and geopolitical structure of the region. The Huns were a large alliance of Turkic nomadic pastoral and warlike tribes. Their economy remained undeveloped, which forced them to seek means of subsistence at the expense of other peoples – their territories, resources and labor¹⁸.

Most of these tribes by their anthropological type belonged to the Caucasoid race, the smaller part retained Mongoloid features of external appearance. After the collapse of the Western Hunnish power, as if new names of Turkic ethnic groups appeared on the arena of history. Initially they were part of the Hunnish union. In connection with the territory of Azerbaijan such tribes of the Hunnish Union as Sabirs/Subars/Suvars/Savirs, Bulgars, Pechenegs, Kipchaks, Kangars, Barsils, Khazars and others are mentioned. For

¹⁵ Alikperov, A. *Titürki i Azerbaïdzhan* [Turkic Peoples and Azerbaijan]. Baku: Şərq-Qərb, 2011. P. 376–378.

¹⁶ Shiji [Records of the Grand Historian]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959. 1300 p.

¹⁷ Han Shu [Book of Han]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962. 1350 p.

¹⁸ Guseïnova, I. *Istoriia narodov Kavkaza* [History of the Peoples of the Caucasus]. Baku: Elm, 2018. P. 201.

the early Middle Ages, the common ethnonym of Turkic-speaking tribes was the name “Hun”. The Huns included the Ephthalites, Sabirs, Utigurs, Onogurs, Bulgars, Uzis/Guzis and others. In the new region, the Huns and their clan units found their kindred tribesmen, who in ancient times were called Cimmerians, Scythians, Sakas, etc. This historical phenomenon was recorded by almost all Byzantine writers of the 5th to 7th centuries AD¹⁹. L.N. Gumilev believes that “Huns” is the term used to refer to a people formed from the Huns, who retreated westward in the 2nd century AD, and the Ugrians, who gradually joined them in the 3rd-4th centuries²⁰. Regarding the Huns L.N. Gumilev writes: “The Huns are a people formed from fragments of the Di clan, Chinese immigrants of the Xia tribe and Mongoloid tribes that lived in the steppe on the edges of the Gobi”. He also notes that the Huns are the Huns who migrated to Europe. At the end of 1 – middle of 2 centuries, some of these tribes appeared in Central Asia and the Urals. Then they began to penetrate into Eastern Europe and the North Caucasus²¹.

In the 370s AD, the Huns crossed the Don River and, having defeated the Ostrogoths, marked the beginning of a new epoch in history – the Great Migration Period, which spanned from the 4th to the 7th centuries. Their rapid advance to the west caused a chain reaction: tribes that were on the Huns’ path were forced to migrate, which, in turn, provoked the movement of other peoples. The Huns became known in the Caucasus, including in the territory of present-day Azerbaijan, even before their formidable and devastating incursions from the north, which began at the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries. Their mass invasion of the Caucasus was first recorded in the 370s CE. Describing the Huns, contemporaries reported: “They are physically strong, have a monstrous appearance. They are not engaged in farming and have no definite place of residence, no home, no laws, no stable way of life, they roam to different places with kibitkas, in which they spend their lives, driving before them harnessed animals and herds. The greatest care they apply to the care of horses”. The Huns’ economy was based on nomadic cattle breeding. The appearance of the Huns in the Caucasus took several stages. The first one occurred in the 2nd-4th centuries. In the II century, displaced from Semirechye in Central Asia, they and the tribes that joined them appeared in the North Caucasus, where they, according to Dionysius Periegetes of Alexandria (2 century), were neighbors of the Albanians and Caspians. This refers to the year 160, when a group of tribes known as the Huns crossed the Volga from the east and settled in the steppes of the northwestern Caspian Sea. In the 3rd century, the Par-Fian king Khosrow Arshakid (217-236) invited the Huns for a campaign against the Sassanids. They marched into the South Caucasus through the Derbend Passage and the Daryal Gorge. Soon after that the Huns gained a foothold in Northern Dagestan, which from the second half of the

¹⁹ Prisk Paniyskiy. Posol'stvo k Attila [Embassy to Attila] / Trans. Skryzhinskaya. In: Vizantiyskaya istoriya. Moscow, n.d. 55 p.

²⁰ Gumelev, L. N. Istoriya naroda khunnu [History of the Hunnu People]. Moscow: FTM, 1974. P. 252-254.

²¹ Guseyn-zade, R.A. Azerbaydzhan v III-XIII stoletiyakh [Azerbaijan in the 3rd-13th Centuries]. Baku: Izdatel'stvo, 2022. P. 36.

3rd century began to be called “the land of the Huns”. From here, through the Derbend Passage, they made campaigns to the South Caucasus. This completed the first stage of the Huns’ advance to the west²².

The second and most significant stage of migration involving the Huns and the Caucasus occurred in the second half of the 4th to 5th centuries CE. In the late 60s of the 4th century, the Huns forced the Volga and poured from Asia into Europe – into the steppes of the North Caucasus. It was the time of their mass invasion both to the North Caucasus and to Eastern Europe, when they moved on the way with a wagon, families and cattle, i.e. migrated. Here occurred the first clash between the Huns and the Alans, who were nomadic in the steppes of the Azov-Caspian intermarine, in the northwestern part of the Kalmyk steppes. The Alans were hostile to the Huns. In 360-370 there were wars between them, which ended with the victory of the Huns, who, having defeated the Alans, subjugated them. After that the Huns controlled the steppes of the North Caucasus from the Caspian Sea to the Sea of Azov. At the third stage the Huns in 371 invaded the Northern Black Sea coast. This event is connected not just with them, but already with the Hunnish Union of tribes. Local tribal associations could not withstand the onslaught, for the Huns were better organized and they had a common military leader. The first to be attacked were the Alans, who roamed in the Caspian and Precaucasian steppes. The Alans were defeated and joined the victors. As a result, there were significant changes in the political and ethnic map of the Caucasus. According to sources, after the collapse of the Hun power in Central Asia, its descendants continued to exist in the form of new unions and nomadic associations in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. In the Caucasus, the Huns, Savirs and other Turkic tribes in the 3rd-5th centuries not only clashed with the Alans and local alliances, but also gradually formed their own power structures. As İ. Mukhtarov notes that Hunnish influence spread as far as the Danube and Rome, and in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus forms of military democracy were established, on the basis of which later states with elements of early feudalism emerged²³.

In the 70s of the 4th century, the Huns forced the Volga River and attacked the Alans, defeating them. Some of the Alans were exterminated, some joined the Hun horde, and those who decided to retain their independence retreated beyond the Terek, where there were already Alanian settlements. Being as warlike as the Huns, the Alans put up a worthy resistance to them. Some of the Alans participated in the Great Migration of Peoples of the Caucasus²⁴. The Huns also interacted with other peoples of the Caucasus, including Savirs and Maskuts, which led to changes in the ethno-political structure of the region. In 371, the Huns, taking the conquered Alans with them, advanced far to the west, up to the Northern Black Sea coast and the Crimea. In 395 the Huns of the Caspian Sea

²² Guseyn-zade, R.A. *Azerbaydzhan v III-XIII stoletiyakh* [Azerbaijan in the 3rd-13th Centuries]. Baku: Izdatel'stvo, 2022. P. 37.

²³ Mukhtarova, A. *Türk khalqlarının tarixi* [History of the Turkic Peoples]. Baku: Bari, 2008. P. 101-102.

²⁴ Guseynova, I.M. *Istoricheskaya entsiklopediya Kavkaza* [Historical Encyclopedia of the Caucasus]. Baku: Chashyoglu, 2010. P. 66.

made a grandiose military campaign to the South Caucasus and West Asia²⁵. At the turn of the fourth to fifth centuries, the Hun conglomerate began to advance southward, heading toward the Sassanid and Byzantine empires. Their path lay through the Dagestan coastal region, the Derbend Passage and along the Absheron Peninsula. In 395 Huns invaded the territory of the Sassanid state, reached Asia Minor and Syria. As a result, already in the 70s of the 4th century the Caspian regions of the Caucasus became part of the vast and powerful Hunnish state. According to scientific literature, the mid-4th century marks the beginning of meaningful interaction between Turkic peoples and the regions of the Caucasus²⁶. Sumbatzadeh also emphasizes: “From this period the North Caucasus became known as the country of the Huns”, and their nomads spread to the territory of modern Dagestan, the Lower Volga region and the Volga-Caspian steppes. Then Savirs, Bulgars and other tribes appeared here, each with its own language. But the Huns became the main ones, who, as emphasized by J.R. Jafarov, “were in the vanguard of the widest migration from East to West (from Asia to Europe) of nomadic tribes that started the epoch of the Great Migration of Peoples”²⁷.

Some of these tribes formed their own political formations, which sometimes included local autochthonous peoples. Other tribes continued to move further south. During this period, part of the territory of Dagestan began to be called “the country of the Huns”, and the population of the Caspian region – “Huns”.

The power of the Hunnish power flourished during the reign of Attila (434-453). For the first decade he ruled together with his elder brother Bleda, whom he later killed, concentrating all power in his own hands. The Byzantine historian Priscus of Panium, who visited the Huns’ headquarters as part of a diplomatic mission in 449 under Emperor Theodosius II (408-450), left valuable descriptions of Attila and his entourage. He noted that the reception of the Byzantine embassy took place in the mobile headquarters of the ruler, a spacious tent reflecting the nomadic lifestyle of the Huns. Attila’s permanent residence was a fortified camp on the western bank of the Tisza River, near the modern town of Szeged in southern Hungary. About this “barbarian who trampled Rome in mud”, wrote: “Attila the man of gigantic ambitions and huge talents. He has changed a course of the Eurasian history, having challenged powerful empires – Sasanid, Roman and Byzantium; has considerably influenced events in the Central Eurasia, including in Caucasus. He was the leader of the people who found themselves at the historical crossroads”²⁸. The state created by Attila and having the center in Pannonia, covered vast territories – from the coast of the Caspian Sea in the east to the river Rhine in the west, and from the Danish islands in the north to the river Danube in the south. The empire

²⁵ Gadlo, A.V. *Etnicheskaya istoriya Severnogo Kavkaza (IV-X vv.)* [Ethnic History of the North Caucasus (4th-10th Centuries)]. Leningrad, 1979. P. 49.

²⁶ Sumbatzade, A.S. *Azerbaïdzhantsy – Ètnogenez i formirovanie naroda* [The Azerbaijanis: Ethnogenesis and the Formation of the Nation]. Baku: Elm, 1990. P. 80.

²⁷ Dzhaferov, Y. *Gunny i Azerbaydzhan* [The Huns and Azerbaijan]. Baku: Elm, 1985. P. 3.

²⁸ Dzhon Mén. *Attila. Varvar, kotoryy rastoptal Rim v gryazi* [Attila: The Barbarian Who Crushed Rome in Mud] / Trans. G. Sakhatskiy. Moscow: Eksmo, 2007. P. 9.

stretched about 800 kilometers wide (from east to west) and 400 kilometers long (from north to south), covering about 320 thousand square kilometers. If we take into account the lands that were dependent on the Huns, the actual size of the power was much larger.

L.N. Gumilev emphasizes that for the Huns the epoch of peace lasted 200 years (160–360 years), the period of victories 95 years, and the collapse and death of the Hunnish power took only eight years. It also names the Hun empire “military-political coalition”, instead of tribal union and believes that Attila, the descendant of ancient Turks, headed “coalition of Germanic-Slavic-Ugric tribes”²⁹. Nevertheless, long after Attila’s death, various tribal unions and ethnic groups traditionally continued to be called “Huns”. As for the Huns themselves, almost all of them left the steppes of the North Caucasus in 371, moving first to the Black Sea lands, and then to the territory of the Podunavia. Then their kin Bittugurs, Kutrigurs, Ogurs, Onogurs, Saragurs, Utigurs moved from the Ural-Volga interfluvium to the Caucasus. Here they roamed in the northwestern part of the Caspian steppes. In this connection Y.R. Jafarov remarks: “It is with this circumstance of the main Hunnish movement that the peculiarities of the historical development of the Caucasus region and the beginning of the formation of modern ethnic communities in the North Caucasus are connected”³⁰.

From this period the North Caucasus became known as “the country of the Huns”. At that time the nomads of Saragurs were located in the lower reaches of the Volga and in the north-east of the Kalmyk steppes; Ogurs occupied the steppe territories of Northern Dagestan, known as Barsilia; Onogurs lived in the basins of the Terek and Sulak rivers.

Thus, the Huns and the Hunnic Empire significantly reshaped the political, ethnic and economic map of Eurasia, including the Caucasus. The Huns were associated not just with the Great Migration of Peoples and the creation of their own state, but also with the broad migration of Turkic tribes, which had a huge impact on the history and life of the peoples of the Caucasus, including Azerbaijan. Conclusions based on archaeological data show the spread of the Huns and their allies in different parts of the Caucasus and Southern Europe. For example, archaeological excavations in Mongolia and Russia testify to the existence of urban settlements of the Huns, which had the form of square or rectangular structures, which is an important evidence of their organization and culture³¹.

One of the large Turkic tribal formations that settled in the territory of modern Azerbaijan back in the V century, were Huns settled in Mugani, which modern historians call Turks. There is a legend that these Huns in the south of Mugani was founded the city of Ak-gun (Arabic – Balasagun)³².

²⁹ Gumilev, L.N. *Ritmy Yevrazii: Epokhi i tsivilizatsii* [Rhythms of Eurasia: Epochs and Civilizations]. Moscow, 1993. P. 500.

³⁰ Dzhamalov, Y. *Gunny i Azerbaydzhan* [The Huns and Azerbaijan]. Baku: Elm, 1985. P. 57.

³¹ Gadlo, A.V. *Etnicheskaya istoriya Severnogo Kavkaza (IV–X vv.)* [Ethnic History of the North Caucasus (4th–10th Centuries)]. Leningrad, 1979. P. 126.

³² Bartol'd, V.V. *Tyurki: Dvenadtsat' lektsiy* [The Turks: Twelve Lectures]. Moscow: Lomonosov, 2015. P. 55.

In this regard, L.N. Gumilev notes that the formation of a powerful and vast Hunnic empire, as well as Attila's active policies, led to the fact that even long after his death – in the 6th century – association with the Huns was still considered prestigious. Accordingly, the Bulgars and Sabirs proudly referred to themselves as “Huns”, incorporating the ethnonym into their tribal names³³. After Attila's death in 453 and the division of the Hunnic union into autonomous tribes, the Savir confederation began to dominate the Caucasus. The Onogur state collapsed and was replaced by a new military-political union led by the Savirs. This included the rest of the Huns, and also included the Bulgars: “The collapse in the North Caucasus of the first Hun-Bulgarian association led by the Onogurs caused the beginning of a parallel process of unification of the nomads of the Eastern Precaucasus and the formation of a new military-political union led by the Sabirs”.

The etymon of the word savar/sapir/savir/sabir/suvar goes back to Persian savar ‘horseman’, ‘rider’, ‘skillful’. It is derived from the Persian cl. savar. In the Ottoman dialect the word took the form suvmr. Around 463, the Savirs, who roamed the North Caucasian steppes, attacked the Saragurs, Urogs and Onogurs. The Saragurs in turn invaded the lands of the Akatsirs. This action of the Sabirs/Savirs was dictated by the fact that they were invaded allegedly by the Avars, while the Avars themselves were expelled by the tribes living on the coast. However, as archaeological research at Palasa-sirt shows, the movement of the Savirs was dictated by the pressure of Persian troops. Speaking about the first mention of the Savirs, most researchers take this Priskov date. However, the ethnonym “Savirs” and its variants were known several centuries before Priscus. Even in the Ptolemaic fixation they were neighbors of the North Caucasian Aorses and Pagyrites. To be more correct, Priscus in the original speaks not exactly about 463, but about 461–465. According to Priscus it is impossible to tie the mentioned event to a certain date, it began to appear in the studies with someone's light hand³⁴.

In the second half of the 5 century Savirs settled in the area of the Kuma River, along the Caspian Sea. As we see, the ethnonym in the Byzantine sources again actively pops up after the death of Attila. In the early 60s of the 5 century the Savirs/Sabirs forced the Onogurs (i.e. Bulgars) to leave the lands occupied by them and move to the west of the Pre-Caucasus. Thus, the southeastern nomads became completely under the control of the Savirs. The Derbent and Daryal gorges served as the main military and trade passages. Given this fact, the Savirs began to control the eastern and central regions of the North Caucasus in the early 6th century. They occupied the areas of those and other strategic gates. Therefore, researchers call the very beginning of the 6th century the beginning of Savir hegemony. Some of them even name the exact date – 506. In “Chronicle” of Theophanes the Byzantine under 516–517 it is written: “Huns, called Savir, having crossed the Caspian Gate (i.e. Derbent passage), raided Armenia, plundered

³³ Gumelev, L.N. *Ritmy Yevraziy: Epokhi i tsivilizatsii* [Rhythms of Eurasia: Epochs and Civilizations]. Moscow, 1993. P. 484.

³⁴ Salmin, A.K. *Saviry, bulgary i tyurko-mongoly v istorii chuvashy* [Savirs, Bulgars, and Turkic-Mongols in the History of the Chuvash]. St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriya, 2019. P. 36.

Cappadocia, Galatia and Pontus, and almost approached Euchait”. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that it was the invasion of nomads, primarily Savirs, through the Caucasian passes into Iranian territory that forced Kavad to make peace with Byzantium. Together with the Khazars, the Savirs “formed one and the same military-political association, which, however, was headed by the Savirs, because in the first half of the VI century in most historical accounts it is their name that serves to designate the barbarians living to the north of Derbent”.

Part of the Suvars penetrated into the South Caucasus in the 6-7 centuries. In 515 and 540 Suvars invaded Albania en masse. M.M. Dyakonov notes that in 515, when Savirs penetrated into Transcaucasia. Kovad, taking defense measures, began to strengthen the cities of Baylakan and Partav. In his opinion, the Savirs established themselves in Albania to the north of the Persian defense line. L.N. Gumilev wrote that in 552 the Suvars occupied Albania. In 568 the Suvars in the North Caucasus were defeated by the Avars, after which part of them penetrated into Azerbaijan and settled here. When in 586 the Byzantine army penetrated into Albania, here it met the Suvars, from whom it took hostages.

According to A.E. Krymsky, in the 5 century Suvars lived in the area of Kabala, in northwestern Albania. Khosrow Anushirvan resettled 10 thousand Suvars to Azerbaijan. The result of all these movements are ethnotoponyms with the ethnonym Suvar. Thus, on the territory of the present-day Pushkin District, there exists a toponym *Bilesuvar*, which, in the form *Pilesuvar*, was first mentioned in a 13th-century source. In northeastern Azerbaijan (within the former Kuba District), the remains of a fortress called *Galeysuvar* – meaning “Fortress of the Suvars” – were recorded in the 19th century. An archival document registered the kishlak (wintering place) Galeysuar, “Suvar’s fortress” and Suvarli village on the territory of the Kuba khanate. The ruins of the fortress in the village of Rustov in the Kuba district are still called Galeysuarun – “Suvarov fortress” by Iranian-speaking Tats. The listed ethnotoponyms, in our opinion, leave no doubt about their Turkic origin from the Suvar community and allow us to conclude that the Savars (Suvars) in the early Middle Ages were one of the ethnic components of the ethnogenesis of the Azerbaijani people³⁵.

The above leads to the conclusion that the Pechenegs penetrated into Albania at the beginning of our era together with the Huns. Ahmed Jafaroghli, for example, believes that the Pechenegs, Bulgars and Suvars were Hunnic tribes. The Savirs not only influenced the political situation in the region, but also interacted with local peoples such as the Lezgins, Avars and Ahwabs. This cooperation was often mutually beneficial, as the Savirs and local tribes formed alliances that helped both sides with trade and defense. The Savirs used their military skills to defend local principalities from external threats, primarily from the Sassanids and Byzantium, and helped strengthen local dynasties. They also played a key role in fortifying local fortresses and towns, as confirmed by archaeological finds in Dagestan and South Ossetia. These structures, including fortresses in South Ossetia and

³⁵ Geibullaev, G.A. K etnogenezu azerbaydzhantsev: Istoriko-etnograficheskoe issledovanie [On the Ethnogenesis of Azerbaijanis: A Historical and Ethnographic Study]. Baku: Elm, 1991. P. 53.

Dagestan, helped not only in military defense, but also in controlling trade routes and important strategic points. The interaction of the Savirs with local peoples helped to strengthen these fortifications and ensure stability in the Caucasus in times of political instability³⁶. Thus, the Sabirs played an important role in shaping the ethnic composition, languages and cultural traditions of the peoples of the Caucasus, leaving an indelible mark on the history of the region. Some modern historians believe that separate subdivisions of the Bulgars appeared in the North Caucasus in the 1st – mid 4th centuries. While many researchers continue to believe, that the first mention of Bulgars belongs to 354: in the form *Vulgares* at Latin Anonymus in his “Chronography”. In the time of Attila Bulgars were in sphere of influence of Huns, and also fought in structure of their armies, though it is not a question of full subordination. In 493, 499 and 502 Bulgarian make devastating campaigns in northern border areas of the Byzantium Empire³⁷.

In the 5th century, a union of Turkic-speaking tribes was formed, which over time came to be known as the “Bulgarian” union. The main territory of their settlement was Northern Black Sea coast and Eastern Azov up to the Kuban River. Separate groups of Bulgarians lived also on the territory of Dagestan. Beyond the Caspian Gate, says in the Syrian chronicle of Zacharias Ritor, compiled in the middle of 6 century, live Bulgarians “with (their) language, people pagan and barbaric”³⁸. In the work of Moses Khorensky in connection with the events of 2 century BC mentioned the region of Kol in the Ararat valley, where Bulgars moved from the North Caucasus (Moses Khorensky, Book II, Ch. 9). In the archival document of 1727 the village of Kul is noted in Nakhchivan.

The question about Bulgarians in Transcaucasia, including Albania, is still not specially studied. According to Moses Khorensky (5 century), Bulgars first came to Transcaucasia in the 2 century B.C. According to his report, Bulgars “settled south of Kola in fertile and fertile places”. It should be noted that the toponym Kol in this message is identical with Claudius Ptolemy’s Koltene and Gohtan of ancient Armenian sources – it is the name of the zone of modern Ordubad district of Azerbaijan. The message of Moses Khorensky is considered an anachronism. But it is a product of the general tendency prevailing in the works of some foreign and Soviet researchers in relation to the history of ancient Turkic tribes and peoples. There is an objective opinion that “there are no grounds to deny the appearance of some Bulgarian groups in the areas of the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia at the turn of our era or in the first centuries of it”. Moses of Korea has an expression “the land of Bulgars in the chain of the Great Caucasus Mountain”. It means that at the time of resettlement of a part of Bulgars to Arax valley, they dwelt in Northern Caucasus. Undoubtedly this “land of Bulgars” was on the territory of modern Balkaria in

³⁶ Nazirova, I. Kul’turnoe vzaimodeystvie savirov i mestnykh narodov Kavkaza [Cultural Interaction of the Savirs and the Indigenous Peoples of the Caucasus]. Makhachkala: Kavkaz, 2018. P. 28–32.

³⁷ Salmin, A.K. Saviry, bulgary i tyurko-mongoly v istorii chuvashy [Savirs, Bulgars, and Turkic-Mongols in the History of the Chuvash]. St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriya, 2019. P. 121.

³⁸ Narochnitskiy, A.L. Istoriya narodov Severnogo Kavkaza s drevneyshikh vremen do kontsa XVIII veka [History of the Peoples of the North Caucasus from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century]. Moscow: Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1988. P. 96.

the North Caucasus and therefore to consider the Balkars as Turkicized Caucasians, as some researchers believe, would be biased. If we assume that in ancient times the ancestors of the present Bulgarians switched to the Turkic language, it follows that the Turkic tribes, whose language was adopted by them were the majority, and that the Turks must have lived there since ancient times. Resettlement of Bulgarians in Transcaucasia took place, as it is evident from the work of Moses Khorensky, more than once. Some of them settled in Albania as well. This is evidenced by numerous ethnotoponyms.

Therefore, it is appropriate to agree with S.S. Aliyarli that in the 4th-5th centuries, the Proto-Bulgars, along with the Kangars, constituted a compact Turkic group in Albania. It is noteworthy that in the epic *Kitabi Dede Gorgud*, “Bulgar” is also mentioned as a personal name: “I saw the head of the six (tribes), the man named Bulgar.” A part of Bulgars was called Basil. The ethnonym Basil was first mentioned in the North Caucasus by Pliny. He informs that Basils (he has Basilids) live in the Black Sea region. Pomponius Mela also has information about them: “Herr flows between Basilids and Nomads”. Ptolemy mentioned this ethnonym as Basilichon, which was incorrectly associated with the ancient Greek word *basileus* “ruler”. Basil and Khazars, according to Moses of Khoren, invaded Albania as early as 216. Moses Kalankatuysky mentions the country of Basils in the north and reports that the Armenian king Tiridat (287-330) fought with Basils in the Gargar plain in Albania³⁹. The legacy of the Bulgars in the Caucasus is manifested in the toponymy, cultural traditions and ethnic composition of the peoples of the region. Many modern peoples of the Caucasus, such as the Balkars and Karachais, consider themselves descendants of the Bulgars. Research shows that their roots go back to the Caucasian Bronze Age, which is confirmed by archaeological finds and historical sources. Thus, the Bulgars played a significant role in the history of the Caucasus, influencing its ethnic composition, culture, and political landscape in the 4th-6th centuries.

The Bulgars and Khazars are not mentioned earlier than the 6th century, but undoubtedly came to the Volga basin at an earlier period. It is evident that they arrived in this region as part of the migratory movement associated with the Huns; as early as the 2nd century, according to the geographer Ptolemy, the Huns were located not far from the Volga River⁴⁰.

Khazars – Turkic-speaking people, which became known in the 2 century. But in world history they first appear after the Hun invasion of the 4 century as a people who roamed in the Western Caspian steppe, between the river Sulak in Northern Dagestan and the Lower Volga. The ancestors of the Khazars were descendants of the Huns. Perhaps, for this reason, contemporaries often, by tradition, called “Huns” both the Khazars and other later Turkic tribes. In this regard, we note that the outstanding orientalist L.N. Gumilev specifically drew attention to the fact that, although in the second half of the 5 century, the Huns as an ethnos disappeared, their ethnonym

³⁹ Geibullaev, G.A. K etnogenezu azerbaydzhantsev: Istoriko-etnograficheskoe issledovanie [On the Ethnogenesis of Azerbaijanis: A Historical and Ethnographic Study]. Baku: Elm, 1991. P. 63.

⁴⁰ Bartol'd, V.V. Tyurki: Dvenadtsat' lektsiy [The Turks: Twelve Lectures]. Moscow: Lomonosov, 2015. P. 26.

continued to be used as a nominal name for many tribes. Byzantine and Arabic authors unambiguously attributed the Khazars to the Turks. The Khazars themselves considered themselves, by origin, related to the Turkic tribes of Ugrian, Avar, Guz, Barsil, Onogur, Bulgar and Savir⁴¹.

The earliest reliable references to the Khazars date back no earlier than the 6th century. At that time, together with the Savirs, they repeatedly made campaigns to the South Caucasus and further into the Sassanid and Byzantine empires. At times, the Khazars became allies or military mercenaries of the Sassanid Shahanshahs or Basilevs. Nevertheless, Khosrow I. Anushirvan Sassanid (531-579) ordered to erect a grandiose complex of Derbend fortifications against the “north wind”, i.e. the Khazars. Not by chance, in Azerbaijan, through which the Khazar armies passed to the south, until now the north wind – nord – is called Khazri, and the Caspian Sea is still called the Khazar Sea. Thus, even before the emergence of the Khazar Kaganate its creators were known in the Caucasus. Khazars were the backbone of the army of the Western Turkic Kaganate, which used the territory of Khazaria as a base for its cavalry, which made campaigns to the Caucasus. Therefore, contemporaries called his warriors Khazars.

The first blow of the Khazars struck Derbent, blocking the passage between the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea with powerful fortifications, “to build which – adds the History of Agvan”, – Dari Persian exhausted our country, collecting architects and seeking different materials. As “waves of the fluctuating sea”, according to the figurative expression of the retold story, “the Khazars struck the city of Chola (Derbent) and destroyed it to the ground⁴². Having defeated Agvania, the Khazars went to Iberia and besieged the city of Tbilisi, where the Byzantine emperor and his army came. It was at this time that Iraklius met with the leader of the Khazars, about which Byzantine sources tell.

Created later, in the 7th century, the Khazar state became the successor to the Western Turkic Khaganate⁴³. Being in the West Turkic Kaganate, Khazars consolidated and united with related tribes – Savirs, Barsils, Bulgars. As a result, all of them became known as Khazars, because the latter were the most numerous among them and occupied a leading position in the association. Therefore, after the collapse of the Western Turkic Kaganate, it was the Khazar political association that came to the political forefront of both the Turkic world and Central Eurasia.

In the 3rd to 5th centuries, the Khazars did not yet exert significant influence on the Caucasus. However, beginning in the 6th century, their presence and impact in the region increased, culminating in the formation of the powerful Khazar Khaganate in the 7th century.

⁴¹ Akhundova, N.Ch., Guseyn-zade, R.A. Kavkaz i velikie tyurkskie imperii [The Caucasus and the Great Turkic Empires]. Baku, 2012. P. 25.

⁴² Artamonov, M.I. Ocherki drevneyshey istorii Khazar [Essays on the Ancient History of the Khazars]. Leningrad: State Socio-Economic Publishing House, 1936. P. 56.

⁴³ Akhundova, N.Ch., Guseyn-zade, R.A. Kavkaz i velikie tyurkskie imperii [The Caucasus and the Great Turkic Empires]. Baku, 2012. P. 24.

Conclusion. Turkic tribes such as the Huns, Savirs, Bulgars and Khazars played a key role in the history of the Caucasus during the early Middle Ages. Their migrations and interactions with local peoples significantly influenced the political, economic and cultural life of the region. The memory of the Huns remained so strong that both their former allies and the new Turkic tribes that appeared in the Caucasus were traditionally referred to as “Huns” for a long time. In accordance with the established tradition, written sources continued to designate various Turkic tribal associations and ethnic groups of the Caucasus under the common ethnonym “Huns”. The Hun power included numerous tribes, which later entered the history of the Caucasus under their own ethnic names. Some of them formed powerful tribal unions – Alanian, Bulgar, Maskut and Savir. As a result of these processes, the Caucasus became open to new waves of Turkic settlers, which initiated a long process of Turkization of the region. Starting from the second half of the 5th century, parallel ethno-political processes began to develop in the Caucasus, connected with the activities of Sabirs, Khazars, Oguzo-Seljuks and Kipchaks. The Byzantine and Sassanid empires, in their struggle for influence in the Caucasus, actively utilized internal contradictions between Turkic forces, pitting them against each other within the framework of their own geopolitical interests. The presence of the Huns in the Caucasus facilitated ethnic change and cultural exchange. Local peoples interacted with the Huns, which is reflected in archaeological finds and historical sources. For example, traces of Hunnic culture have been found in Dagestan, including burials and artifacts attesting to their presence and influence. In the early medieval period, the Caucasus region was a complex mosaic of ethnic and religious communities. Among the Turkic population settled in Caucasian Albania, there was a clear religious stratification: some tribes (Huns, Sakas, Gargars, Kangars, Pechenegs, Chuls, etc.) practiced Christianity, while others, such as the Khazars and Suvars, remained pagans until the adoption of Islam. Iranian-speaking groups in northeastern Albania and the Absheron Peninsula, in turn, adhered to Zoroastrianism. These religious differences served as a serious obstacle to ethno-cultural consolidation among Turkic tribes, despite their common origin. The opposition between Christian and pagan worldviews persisted until the Islamization of the region, which began after the Arab conquest.

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