

Alans: between Byzantium and Khazaria

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In the first – early second millennium A.D. Central Ciscaucasia was inhabited by the Alans (a union of Iranian-speaking tribes who rose to be the main political force in the Northern Caucasus for a thousand years). The Alans were never at any point a mono-ethnic group. If we simplify this complicated process, we can say that the Alanian ethnos came about as a result of the interaction of immigrant Iranian nomadic tribes with a local settled population (about the ethnogenesis of Alan see – Kuznetsov 1992, 9–56; Kovalevskaya 1984, 74–92; Isaenko/Kuchiev 1995, 10–13). As the Alans held, geographically, a key position in the North Caucasus, which was the major cross-roads of Eurasian trading and military routes, they were, from the moment that they united into a coherent political group, constantly drawn into the orbit of the complicated relationships of the super-powers, whose interests clashed in the North Caucasus.

In the 5th–6th centuries these powers were Iran and Byzantium, who fought for control over the caravan routes that ran across the North Caucasus through territory occupied by the Alans.

Thus, during the wars between Iran and Byzantium the Alans could fight for either the Persians or the Byzantines. The whole history of Alania reflects a certain political dualism. Thus, probably by the 6th century A.D. two major Alan groupings had appeared. A western group lived on the Upper reaches of the Kuban, close to Lazica and Abkhazia, which were under Byzantine control. Therefore Western Alania also entered the sphere of Byzantine influence and often fought as an ally of Byzantium. The Eastern Alans were settled around the Darial Pass, which leads into Kartli, a country dependent on the Persians. In their politics they gravitated to Iran (Zeteishvili 1976, 85; Kuznetsov 1992, 155). There were

multilateral links between the Alans and the Byzantines, since Byzance attached great importance to the Alans and did all they could to consolidate the position of Byzantium in the Caucasus.

From the middle of the 7th century the Alans found themselves in the sphere of interest of a new political entity, the Khazar Khanate (Gadlo 1979, 74–78; Kuznetsov 1992, 154–155). By the middle of the 8th century the Alans were now virtually under Khazar rule (Artamonov 1962, 360; Kokovtsov 1932, 101–102), and they go almost unmentioned in Byzantine sources of the 8th and 9th centuries. It is difficult to state with any clarity what sort of subordination the Alans endured from the Khazars.

“The Alans were the force by dint of which the Khazars emerged victorious from the difficult struggle for overall control in the North Caucasus. The Alan union, even after this, remained intact as a coherent political entity with its ruler, even though its actual role was ambiguous and sometimes inconstant ... the Alans always appear to be a separately defined political entity who are at times allies of the Khazars and at times closer to Byzantium or, very rarely indeed, to the Caliphate” (Novosil'tsev 1990, 105).

Written sources indicate that, quite apart from help as allies and military support, the Alans paid tribute to the Khazars (Kokovtsev 1932, 25; 101–102; 105). Some experts, however, point out, and rightly so, that the Alans' core territory was unlikely to have formed a part of the state of Khazaria itself. We find more convincing the arguments put forward by those Caucasologists, who consider that the eastern Alans inhabiting the area around the Darial pass were most dependent on the Khazars, while the western Alans inhabiting the upper

Kuban valley retained a greater measure of independence and were traditionally more pro-Byzantine in their policy.

We archaeologists however focus our attention on the microzone which is situated in the zone bordering on Khazaria but which gravitated towards Western Alania (Kuznetsov 1992, 218, map). This is the south-west border of the Khazar Khanate. It is a region which has at all times had extraordinary attractions for a number of different tribes and which is rich in archaeological monuments stretching over a number of periods. This region is today that of Caucasian Mineral Waters, or, geographically, the Kislovodsk basin. It is very likely that in the 7th to 9th centuries this region did not form an immediate part of the Khazar Khaganate (Kuznetsov 1992, 153; Mamaev 1974). Yet it was here that a very intensive infiltration of Turkic elements took place in an Alan zone in early mediaeval periods (Abaev 1949, 257). These Turkic elements were very likely Kuban Bulgars who were subject to the Khazars (Kovalevskaya 1984, 172).

If we are to understand properly the nature of the tributaries and sovereign relationships involved, we must do so not only by interpreting the subjective and unreliable data to be found in written sources. We have to have a good idea of the structure and organisation of life among the Alans at this period (Atzhantseva/Turova/Bronnikova/Zazovskaya 2001, 115–123). From the point of view of understanding these problems we found that the most interesting micro-region was that of the Caucasian Mineral Waters or the Kislovodsk basin. Here the density of population from the 5th to 6th centuries rose rapidly because of an influx of Tanais Alans, who were attacked by the Huns after they forced the Volga, in 372 A.D. (Ammian Marcellin 1949, 305). The change in their habitual habitation zones and the new natural conditions forced the Alans to change the system of their economy. They had to change from a purely cattle-breeding economy to another one, a combination of agriculture and cattle-breeding. Archaeologically, these processes are represented by a quantity of Alan sites in the foothill plains.

The historical context requires a few words. This is the time in which a consolidation of the Western Alans took place. For a number of years (from 558 to 572 A.D.) Byzantine sources mention a “king” or “ruler” of the Western

Alans, Sarozius, who had a consistent policy of alliance to Byzantium (Menandr 1860, 374–384). Basing ourselves on these sources we can imagine the territory subject to the rule of Sarozius: this would be the Upper Kuban, the Piatigorie region and present-day Balkaria i. e. the Kislovodsk basin was part of this zone. Here, however, the routes over passes were beyond the control of Iran, the permanent rival of Byzantium. Correspondingly, it was here that the basic interests of Byzantium, which was subsequently to be, together with the Alans, an ally of the Khazars against the Arabs, were concentrated. The control and defence of these passes by the Alans was the key element in their union with the Byzantines and also with the Khazars. Sarozius was well acquainted with the most important political and diplomatic events then taking place in the Caucasus, and rulers of other tribes turned to him as a mediator if they wished to obtain support from Byzantium.

Carrying out such a determined and firm external policy was possible only by relying on a solid rear-ground. Here, too, it is natural to suppose that the sharp increase in the population numbers and the appearance at the end of the 6th and beginning of the 7th centuries of a series of settlements with a system of “strictly ordered organisation of defence” (Iessen 1941, 24–25) in all the mountain valleys leading to the paths over the passes must be linked to the activity of the same Sarozius.

The most densely settled areas have turned out to be the tributaries of the Podkumok river near Kislovodsk. Here at the end of the 6th or at the very beginning of the 7th centuries arose a network of fortified settlements (Korobov 2001, 133–135) which lasted until the 9th–10th centuries, i. e. virtually for the entire life of the Khazar Khaganate. These fortresses are striking by their homogeneity. The fortresses were set up every 2 or 3 kilometres at the furthest point of an outcrop that dominated a river along convenient cattle-driving paths. The fortress walls, towers, habitation and economic structures were made of large blocks of grey limestone which were quarried, as a rule, on the low rock on which the outcrop stood thus turning it into an impregnable citadel: the fortress walls were from 4 to 6 metres wide and, apparently about 6 to 8 metres high, with flanking and gate towers on a vertical two-metre monolith rock postament. The lower part

had steep, inaccessible slopes. The gates were in the lower part and they led to a flight of steps carved out of the rock, leading to the citadel. Theophilactus Simocattus describes absolutely identical fortresses in the episode about the capture by the Byzantine of one fortress in spring 583 A.D. (Theophilactus Simocattus 1957, 4). Typically, the Alan settlements in the foothills and mountains of the Central Caucasus have a grouped systematic distribution, there is a visual link between the settlements, they are of small size and they use naturally fortified outcrops and rocks. No sooner would an enemy appear than the bad news would be signalled through the valley: cattle had to be driven off and hidden in the mountains, supplies had to be tucked away and men prepared for battle. It is most likely that the population of these neighbouring fortresses were linked by social relationships. They appear to have taken part in campaigns together and are very likely to have used common pastures and hunting areas et cetera. Consequently, the organisation for defending these fortresses must also have been common. It is possible to trace definite changes which took place in the life of the population. If at the end of the 6th and in the 7th centuries small fortresses, homogeneous in their plan and layout, comprised a single defensive system which stretched from the foothills to the pass routes over the Great Caucasus (Arzhantseva 1997, 153–161), then in the 8th and 9th centuries certain fortresses show distinct signs of having been captured by nomadic Turkic peoples (Fedorov/Fedorov 1978, 83–84).

As a standard monument for archaeological work we selected the settlement Gornoe Ekho. The structure of the monument is very typical for small Alan fortresses as we have described them. At the present time we have virtually completed a large-scale topographical plan (1:500) and have marked on it the remains of structures visible on the surface. The plan shows about 40 objects and overall it is now possible to have an idea of the monument's structure. The largest object on the site is object 1, which occupies an area of about 600 square metres. This would appear to be the key structure in the site's fortification system. It may well have been a fort wall with towers and contre-forces. The object has been built at the narrowest place in the site and straddles it from one edge to the other. This

construction is very similar to what was described by Procopius of Caesaria (see his account in "The War with the Goths" VIII, 8,37). Thus, the wall we suppose to have stood there separated the greater northern part of the site on which most of the structures stood from the southern part. In the southern part there are virtually no structures which can be interpreted as habitations. It may well be that cattle were rounded up here at dangerous moments. Over large areas we can find traces of fires which can be dated to the middle or end of the 7th century (Arzhantseva 1998). The date of the monument can, on the evidence of the ceramics, be put somewhere in the 6th to 8th centuries. It may well be that the fortress was still operational in the 9–10th centuries.

In reconstructing the system of mountain agriculture of Alan settlements in the North Caucasus in the first millennium and the beginning of the second, we must ask how such a large population supplied its needs and how their economy was organised. What resources did the Alans have from which to pay tribute to the Khazars? At the same time, Constantine Porphyrogenitus intrigues us by his speculation that Alania had two ways of exerting pressure on the Khanate, foremost by interrupting the supply to Khazaria of 'the means of subsistence', since nine Khazar provinces ("climates") have common borders with Alania and from these areas Khazaria receives "all its supplies" (Constantine Porphyrogenitus, 52; 53). There is every reason to suppose that the Caucasian Mineral Waters region supplied Khazaria with agricultural produce. The data from excavating the site testifies to a high level of agricultural production, for on its territory we find a large number of grain stores, grindstones and so on – undoubted signs that the population undertook agricultural work. Research into the territory along the river Alikonovka valley of the Kislovodsk basin has shown that the mountain slopes have everywhere been turned into agricultural terrains by human hand, turning them into a system of stepped terraces (in detail see in Atzhantseva/Turova/Bronnikova/Zazovskaya 2001).

By the 10th century several dozens of strongholds had emerged in Western Alania. Their dimensions and structure were such that one can consider them fortress towns. Nearly all of them had complicated, well thought-out fortifications adapted to the environment (Arz-

hatseva 1997). It is clear that by the 10th century Alania had reached its political and economic prime, as state. The second half of the millennium A.D. Alania was a sort of buffer between three world religions – Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Islam had been installed by Arabs in Azerbaijan and Dagestan in the 8th century; Christianity was established in Armenia, Georgia and Abkhazia; Judaism was adopted by Khazars in the 9th century. The Arab-Khazar wars, where the Alans were allies of the Khazars, had a very strong anti-Islamic element. That is why the Alans also were anti-islamically oriented. Judging from the so-called “Cambridge document” of the 10th century, the penetration of Judaism to Alania was superficial and did not influence the Alans very much. Byzantine religious politics were more successful. In mid 10th century, with the fall of the Khazar Caganate, which had played an important role as a counterweight to Byzantium in the history of the Alans, the influence of Byzantine culture took on a new quality. This is expressed in the conversion of the Alans to Christianity, in the spread of Byzantine building tradition and in the construction of the monumental church complexes in the tenth to thirteenth centuries. At present, in the territory once occupied by the Alan state we can list several dozen such complexes. The mass conversion of the Alans by Byzantium did not begin, however, until the tenth century, under Patriarch Nicolas the Mystic (Kulakovsky 1898). Once they accepted Christianity, an Alan eparchy was established, with its own bishop. According to the letter of Nicholas, the Patriarch of Constantinople, there was a metropolitan see under the authority of Constantinople in Alania as early as in the 10th century A.D. a certain Peter was ordained its archbishop by Nicholas himself. The Patriarch paid considerable attention to the Alania diocese and was worried about the archbishop Peter. The latter, apparently, felt wretched among the Alans who clung to their pagan beliefs (Ivanov 2001). The court at Constantinople also gave the Alans a great deal of attention, which is reflected in Constantine Porphyrogenetes’s work “The Ceremonies of the Byzantine Court”. There are traces extant of a correspondence between Constantinople and Alania, which presupposes that the Alans

knew Greek and had translators available. The most interesting of the Christian monuments of the tenth to thirteenth centuries are concentrated in the Upper Kuban-river basin (Western Alania). The territory to which churches were confined belonged to the Alanian diocese. The churches served as bases for the missionary activity of Byzantium. Apart from these major churches in the upper Kuban valley, there are several dozen simple mono-apsidal chapels which functioned as parish churches and can be also found on every township site of the tenth to thirteenth centuries. It is obvious, that all the major churches of the tenth century were built with the direct use of Greek craftsmen who arrived together with missionaries. All the other small churches were very likely to have been built by local craftsmen who had undergone the necessary training by Byzantine builders (in detail see in Kuznetsov 1977; Arzhantseva 2001). The political environment of the conversion of the Alans was complicate. The conflict between Alania and Judaic Khazaria of 932 was provoked by Byzantium and ended in the defeat of Alania, a temporary abandonment of Christianity and the expulsion of Byzantine priests. The “Cambridge document” materials (60th years of 10th century) about a temporary abandonment of Christianity are confirmed by archaeology, in some Alans sites (e. g. Ilyichevskoe, Pervomaiskoe) traces of destruction can be shown with subsequent reconstruction of Christian chapels, and these traces date to the middle of the 10th century (Kaminsky/Kaminskaya 1996, 175; 178). A syncretic outlook came with the official acceptance of Christianity in the early 10th century. Missionaries and travellers both report that “the King of the Alans is a Christian at heart”, but that the population as a whole, though it was officially Christian and tolerant of Christianity, still remained pagan even in the 13th century.

The main Alan’s towns were very likely to have been abandoned by its inhabitants in the 12th or 13th centuries because of the political situation – the general decline of the Alanian state and the catastrophe that struck the whole North Caucasus: the Tartar-Mongol invasion.

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