

Some Questions of the History of the Huns in Azerbaijan

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ABSTRACT

The Huns played a decisive role in the ethnogenesis of many peoples living in the Eurasian steppe region, especially the Hungarians and the Turks. At the end of the 1st century, they started to move towards Europe via Central Asia and according to the latest research they reached the Caucasus at the end of the 1st century AD. The Huns left behind many artefacts and are also mentioned in contemporary historical sources. I did research in both Georgia and Azerbaijan in order to uncover their traces. Memorials of the Huns appeared in Georgia, especially along the Darial Pass, where typical Hun polychrome-style gold objects as well as the distorted skulls of nobles draw the path of the Huns. They lived in that region between the 2-3rd centuries AD. The northern and western regions of Azerbaijan were the main settlements of the Huns, however, archaeological excavations revealed that Huns also lived in the central part of the country, the so-called Mughan Steppe. Based on contemporary descriptions, it is probable that many Huns settled in the territory of modern Azerbaijan, and are referred to as Huns, Massages, and Sabirs. Particularly they may have settled in the northern part of the country, where some geographic names have preserved their tribal names (Sabirs, Khachmaz, etc.) The traces of the Hun culture can be found in some other places as well.

Keywords: Huns, Migration age, Sabirs, Caucasian Albania, Turkic ethnogenesis

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Introduction

A certain stage in the history of the Huns still divides historians today (Gadjiev, 2009). Theories on the Huns from the second half of the 19th century seem to be overturned nowadays; the results of anthropologists and archaeogenetics as well as archaeologists increasingly show that ancient sources wrote accurate data about the Huns.

In the territory of the historic Azerbaijan steppe, equestrian peoples have settled and played a decisive role in the politics of the region since the Bronze Age. From the beginning of the 2nd century CE until the 8th century, the Huns dominated the Caucasus region (Gmirya, 2005; Jafarov, 1985) and left deep traces on the region; the contemporary records contain writings about their deeds and campaigns. Some monuments of the region are also related to the Huns; East Romans and Persians erected monuments in order to defend themselves against the northern invasion of the Huns. Despite this effort, the Huns and related tribes settled in the territory of Azerbaijan and their tribal names appeared in some geographical names (Geybullaev, 1985).

As for the presence of the Huns in Azerbaijan, we can distinguish three periods of time: the early Hun period, the imperial period, and the late Hun period. Regarding the first part, the scholar almost clarified when the Huns arrived in the Transcaucasian region. Based on an archaeological and historical approaches, they had already appeared there in the 2nd century AD. Among the Latin sources, Dionysius Periegetes¹ mentioned the Huns in 117 AD; Claudius Ptolemy mentioned the Huns, too.² Written data on the Huns have multiplied from the 3rd century, as at that time the Huns, along with the members of the Armenian Arsacid dynasty, overran Persia many times. Agathangelos reported on these events in his work on the life of Saint Gregory. Based on this, we can find out what role the Huns played in the series of political events in the region (Lukácsy, 1870, s. 143). It was recorded that Khosrov, ruler of Armenia, together with the Iberians, Albanians, and the Huns, invaded Persia in 227 AD. Later on, Tiridates (s. 286–341), who was also Arsacid, ran a campaign against the Persians with Hun troops (Lukácsy, 1870, s. 144). Moses Khorenaci recorded the following: “Tiridates chased the Khazars and the Basils all the way to the country of the Huns” (Lukácsy, 1870, s. 144). This late note confirms that the Huns had their own sovereign state in the Caucasus. Péter Váczy has also found historical data related to the Huns, who lived in the Caucasus region in the middle of the 4th century AD. Their names appeared in a Persian campaign in 359 AD when the Huns broke into Asia Minor. Between 363 and 373 they overran the Caucasus into the Persian Empire and then advanced all the way to Edessa.

The late antique Albanian and Armenian sources mentioned Huns as Honks. We can find the personal name Honagur, who was a local Hunnic king. But Georgian sources do not mention them at all. The reason for that is that Georgian chronicles are quite late, from the 10-11th century AD, and they confused Huns with Turks, Khazars, etc.

1 He was a famous geographer of Caesar Hadrianus (117–138). His map shows that on Northwestern side of Caspian sea live Unns the Caspians and then followed by the Albanians and Kaduses , who lived in the mountainous region.

2 Ptol. Geogr. III. 5. The Roxolans lived on the north of the Maeotis marshes and later moved to the region of the Lower-Danube (Strabo. Geogr. VII.3.17). They lived between the Tanais (Don) and the Borysthenes (Dniester) rivers between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD. He drew their homeland precisely on the map: they dwelled between the Bastards and the Roxolans.

It is difficult to prove the early presence of the Huns in the Caucasus for many reasons, but in the end the issue can be clarified archaeologically. One reason is the archaeological finds in the region are often regarded as the relics of local archaeological culture, whereas in certain places the typical Hun polychrome style appears from as early as the 2nd century AD. According to I. Zasetkaya, S. Botalov, and other Russian archaeologists, the key to the westward migration of the Huns could be hidden in the Late Sarmatian and Alan archaeological material (Botalov, 2013, s. 40-55). It is very likely that the Huns already arrived with them in the foreground of the Caucasus, and then the newly arriving peoples concluded alliances with local equestrian communities like the Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans etc. Anthropological remains also prove the presence of Huns in the region. In 2017, the result of an anthropological investigation was published in which the scholars pointed out the similarities between skeletons of the Carpathian basin and Georgia during the Hunnic age (Mavall, Pilbrow, Bitadze, 2017). The authors connected them via Alans and Sarmatians.

The typical art style of the Huns was the polychrome style, with gemstones enclosed in gold objects. Among gemstones, turquoise and granet are the most common garnets. The polychrome art style is sometimes associated with the Sarmatians and the Huns, but in older literature it was considered to be of Gothic or Merovingian origin. According to Peter Baofu, the Goths took over from the Scythians and Sarmatians in the 2nd century AD (Baofu 2012. 219). However, European researchers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did not notice that these objects were also found in Asia. This was first brought to the attention of the Russian Bernstam excavations (Bernstam 1951). It was Harhoriu from Romania who noticed that this art could be linked to the Huns. We do not find the antecedents of this branch of art in Europe, but among the archaeological relics of the Huns of Central and Central Asia we can trace how this style was formed and developed (Harhoriu 1977). It also reached the Goths through the Huns; the loyal subjects wore the Hun power badges, so it can be found in many places in Western Europe. John Niles also confirmed that this style reached the Goths through the Huns, and even drew attention to the fact that the Sutton Hoo-I so-called Anglo-Saxon finds also evolved from Hun art. It is widely accepted that deformed skulls from the Caucasus to Western Europe belongs to Huns (Niles 2016). Archaeologists gathered such findings from the above-mentioned territories but did not pay attention to the Georgian treasures, which are listed as local Georgian finds. The treasure of Zghuderi, Kldeeti burials is related to the periods of the 2nd–3rd century AD. The Armaziskhevi (Mtskheta) 2nd century AD burial contains some objects which are similar to Hunnic style, too. The treasure and fortress are located next to the great military road – Darial Pass- where the deformed Hun skull also has been excavated. The Georgian chronicle mentioned that period in which Georgia was ruled by foreign dynasty, “Nimrod,” which belonged to the Iranians, maybe the Parthians.³

Nándor Fettich had already pointed out that these products could not be made anywhere, but only in royal courts, such as in certain workshops of the Hun Empire, and when the empire split

3 Kartlis Tskhovreba, History of Georgia. 18. Iberia and a large part of the Caucasus region were dominated by the descendants of Nebrotids. The chronicle listed nine rulers who belonged to this royal clan. We find similarities to the Hungarian historical chronicles – Anonymous: Gesta Hungarorum, Kezai Simon’s Gesta Hungarorum, Chronicle Pictum, Tarihi Üngürüs, etc. – where ancestors of Huns and Hungarians, Hunor and Magor’s father was Nimrod (Jones, 2014).

into pieces after Attila's death, expensive gold finds disappeared and only silver objects were made, or the Goths and related nations preserved the heritage from the Hun period (Fettich 1951).

On the basis of this data, we can state that Huns left their own traces in the Caucasus as well. Although the records are fragmentary and incomplete, we can observe from the data that the Huns gradually extended their rule to the peoples living on the northern shores of the Azov and Black Seas, and they attacked the Trans-Caucasian regions and settled down between Derbent and Beshbarmaq.

In the next phase of the history of the Huns, they migrated west in order to liberate Pannonia from Roman rule (Tarikhi Üngurus, 1984, s. 39). They set up their headquarters there, and the Caucasus territory as the east wing still belonged to the Hun Empire. According to the Hungarian *Chronicum Pictum*, this territory was ruled by Bendeguz (Latin sources: Mundzuk) (*Chronicum Pictum*, 1986, s. 20). After Attila's death, Irnek returned to "Scythia" or the eastern wing of the Hunnic Empire and Bendeguz governed that territory (*Chronicum Pictum*, 1986, s. 20). This means that the Huns came under the control of the Caucasus region, meaning a certain part of present-day Azerbaijan.

During King Attila's reign (434–454) the Huns, around 440 of them, undertook a devastating invasion of the countries in the South Caucasus and Persia.⁴ The Huns in the Caucasus, especially King Attila, united many tribes, as Maskuts Sabirs/Savirs acted as part of Attila's forces and were called Huns or at best, "Hunno-Savirs," or "the Huns" called Savirs. They have archaeological traces as well, for example, 4th-5th-century burials on the Palasa-Syrt upland contain combat weapons like swords and daggers, and bows and arrows as well. They belong to Hun types. The archaeologists agree that they would have applied to the Savirs, who inhabited the Derbent region at time (Salmini, 2016, s. 4).

Typical Hun finds have also been unearthed from what is now Azerbaijan, such as a golden falcon and a female tiara. These findings can be seen in National Historical Museum in Baku.

The Hun invasion demonstrated the extreme danger of their growing power to Persia and Byzantium. In 441, short-term hostilities between Persia and Byzantium culminated in the conclusion of a truce and the payment of a large sum by Emperor Theodosius II (401–450) to Shah Yazdegerd II (439–457). In the following year, they signed a long-term peace treaty confirming Byzantium's commitment to pay an annual fee in gold to Persia to protect the Caucasian passes. Moreover, the Huns helped the Caucasian Albanians, who revolted against Persian rule at the end of the 450s – early 460s. (Dasxuranci, 1961).

As Salmin noticed, Attila united many tribes and in fact usurped power. Until Attila's death, only isolated episodes are recorded in which the Savirs/Sabirs displayed particular bravery in combat. On all other occasions the Savirs acted as part of Attila's forces and were called Huns, or at best "Hunno-Sabirs" or "the Huns called Sabirs" (Salmin, 2013, s. 199).

4 Prisc. Fragm. 8. In: Blockley, R. C. 1983. Vol. 2.

The third phase is an important period of the history of Huns in Transcaucasian history, because after Attila's death, his sons left the headquarters of the Huns -- the Carpathian basin -- and some of them, e.g. the youngest son of King Attila or Irnak, returned to the land of their ancestors, Scythia, perhaps to today's Dagestan and/or the northern part of Azerbaijan. The Huns did not disappear in the area, as is claimed in the Western literature, which accepted the theory of huge migration in 463, which would have abolished the state of the Caucasian Huns. But there are no local sources which prove it (Obrusanszky 2016). We have only one fragmentary and late-copy report from Suda lexicon, which preserved the fragment of Priscus Paniu, which mentioned the year 463. So in the lexicon in the title Avar we can find two unrelated sentences. The first sentence is about a diplomatic mission of Ogurs, Saragurs, and Onogurs headed to Byzantium in 463. The next sentence reports that the Avars drove out the Sabirs. In the old days, he hardly noticed whether the two data belonged together or whether they were two different events. This may have been due to the fact that the linguists examining the text were unaware of the chronological order of events in the area, so misinterpreting Priscus's report, they believed that there was a large wave of migration in 463, although a completely different event was paired by chance during the Middle Ages. One was the 463 procession in Byzantium, in which Onogurs (Hungarians), Ogurs and Saragurs, and Hun peoples took part, and the other was the appearance of the Avars in the foreground of the Caucasus, which, however, occurred only around 558, so the two events are separated by almost a century. There is no trace of a 463 migration wave of the Great Caucasus in the contemporary chronicles. No, any movement could not have happened from Central Asia to the Caucasus, because of the strong empire, the Hephthalites (the White Huns of Central Asia), who brought together the tribes of the steppe from the middle of the 5th century. The empire reached the peak of its power only in the second half of the 5th century, so it is unlikely that a strong, powerful state would have allowed large crowds to pass through it.

It seems from the historical sources, that instead of new, foreign peoples arriving in the Caucasus, the Huns strengthened their position in the region. As the Hungarian chronicles inform us, Irnak had brought a wife from Khoresm, the territory of White Huns of that time, in order to strengthen their position in the region. The White Huns or Hephthalites reached the peak of their rule only in the second half of the 5th century. Some local princes or kings used the help of the Huns against the Persians. In 481, an anti-Persian uprising flared up in Iberia, led by Prince Vakhtang Gorgasal. By 483, this uprising extended to both Albania and Armenia. The Huns intervened in power struggles in the Caucasus and a heavy war began in Central Asia with the Hephthalites, or the White Huns, and finally they had a battle and the Persian shah, Peroz, died in it in 484. The Huns strengthened their regional influences. Persian Shahs were also engaged in securing borders through the construction of massive defensive walls, and establishing planned cities and irrigation canal systems. Negotiations began with the Byzantines to establish a system of fortifications in the Caucasus region so that they could defend themselves against the attacks of the Huns. Kawad I (488-96, 498-531) and Khosrow I Anushirwan (AD 531-79) also carried out large-scale projects. The Persians also built a system of defence on the borders of Central Asia and on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea. Despite the efforts, the Huns repeatedly broke into the Derbent Gate, then also known as the Hun Gate, and settled in northern Azerbaijan today.

Because of the constant threat of the nomadic people from the north, the Persian shahs decided to build strongholds in the southern part of the Transcaucasian region, e.g. the Mughan steppe, in order to keep the Huns away from the Sassanid motherland. Archaeologists have excavated Ultan Qalasi fort near Pashavad (Iran) in the Mughan steppe (Alizadeh, 2011), which was a strong fortification, surrounding moat and network of irrigation canals. Maybe other fortified centres will be found on the Mughan Steppe, which will show the presence of the Huns in the Transcaucasian region.

One branch of the Huns, the Sabirs or Savirs, gained control of the eastern and central regions of the Northern Caucasus. Jordanes wrote that tribes were the core of Hun confederation.⁵ Not only Jordanes, but the further East, Roman author Theophanes of Byzantium also wrote the same information in his chronicle: “The Huns called Savirs penetrated beyond the Caspian Gate (the Derbent pass), raided Armenia, plundered Cappadocia, Galatia and Pontus and almost reached Euchaita” (Moravcsik, 1942, s. 133). This happened around 517. The author also mentioned a queen, Boarix, a woman of the Huns called Savirs around 527-528. She had begun to rule in the land of the Huns after the death of her husband Valakh, and had 100 thousand warriors under her control (Helfen, 1973, s. 196).

The Huns and their allied tribes, such as the Savirs, occupied both the Cis- and Trans-Caucasus, settled down, and preserved some folklore elements, such as building sacrifices, the cult of Rising Sun, and the symbolic rebirth. The memory of the Huns is faithfully preserved by the geographical names, in connection with which a comprehensive work has been published by Geybullaev, who considers the following geographical names to be of Hun origin: Hunakert, Huni, etc., as well as some of the tribal names associated with the Huns or Hun descendants described above, such as Chol / Chul, Yudvar, Chakar, Kurigir, Kul, Kazan, Iskil, and so on (Geybullaev, 1986, s. 35). Imre Baski, a Hungarian Turkologist, adds the tribal name “Shal” (Baski, 2008, s. 232).

The Huns played an important role in the Persian-Byzantine wars, which took place for the conquest of a part of the Caucasus region. In the middle of the 6th century, hostilities between Iran and Byzantium erupted in Lazica. The Huns or Savirs concluded an alliance with the Romans, but they changed their mind and joined to the Persians. So, we see that for almost the entire sixth century the Savirs migrated unhindered around an area extending from the northern Caucasus to Asia Minor. Late in the century, according to Menander Protector, a Roman military commander forced the Savirs and Albaninas to resettle on the River Kür (Kura) (Menandros, s. 43). They also settled in Shamkir or Aghstafa, or the western region of Azerbaijan (Ashurbeili, 1983, s. 62); Masudi mentioned them between Ganja and Tbilisi regions. The Sabirs/Savirs converted to the Christian faith, protesting against the Arab conquest. Summarising the information of the historical sources, the Savirs settled not only in

5 Farther away and above the Sea of Pontus are the abodes of the Bulgares, well known from the wrongs done to them by reason of our oppression. From this region the Huns, like a fruitful root of bravest races, sprouted into two hordes of people. Some of these are called Altziagiri, others Sabiri; and they have different dwelling places. The Altziagiri are near Cherson, where the avaricious traders bring in the goods of Asia. In summer they range the plains, their broad domains, wherever the pasturage for their cattle invites them, and they take themselves in winter beyond the Sea of Pontus. Now the Hunuguri are known to us from the fact that they trade in marten skins. But they have been cowed by their bolder neighbours (Jordanes, s. 37).

the northern part of Azerbaijan, where Sabran city has preserved their name. According to the historical sources, Savirs kept their identity until the Middle Ages and sometimes they were called Hungarians or Madjars as well (Thury, 1897, s. 393). So the history of Huns, Madjars or Hungarians became connected with the Savirs in the Trans Caucasian region.

The various disciplines (history, archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, etc.) together prove that the Huns played a decisive role in the territory of present-day Azerbaijan. As Jafarov noted earlier, they contributed to the ethnogenesis of Azerbaijanis and other Caucasian peoples. Further research could deepen this type of research.

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