

*Notes on the role of Alania
in international trade in the early
Middle Ages (eighth-tenth centuries)
on the basis of written sources**

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The aim of this paper is to analyse the role of Alania and the Western Caucasus region in international trade and commercial contacts in the early Middle Ages. Alania was the most important country in the North-Western Caucasus and reports on the commercial contacts of Alania were recorded above all by Muslim authors. An important report was recorded by al-Mas'ūdī (943) in his book entitled *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Precious Stones*. He wrote that among the Hungarians and Pechenegs lived tradesmen who came from the Khazars, Ardabil, Derbend and Alania.¹

Ibn Hawqal (around 970) wrote that Al-Bāb (that is Derbend) was the main port of trade for the Caspian Sea, al-Sarīr, Alania, Ṭabaristān, Ğurġān and Daylam. Clothes made from flax similar to shirts were exported from Derbend, a product not found in Arrān, Armenia or Ādarbayġān. There was also saffron in large quantity in Derbend. Moreover this city had plenty of slaves.² Another source, the *Ḥudūd al-'ālam* (982) mentioned that the city *Kāsak* was a pleasant place and there were merchants in it. *Kāsak* was situated on the coast of the Black Sea and it

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¹ *Maçoudi: Les prairies d'or*. II. Texte et traduction par C. B. de Meynard et P. de Courteille. Paris 1914, 59, 61 (New, revised edition by Ch. Pellut, Beyrouth 1966, Vol. 2. 236-237.); *Mas'ūdī: Les prairies d'or*. Traduction française de B. de Meynard et P. de Courteille revue et corrigée par Ch. Pellat. I. Paris 1962, 178. (French transl.)

² *Opus geographicum auctore Ibn Haukal*, ed. J. H. Kramers, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum II/2. Lugduni Batavorum (Leiden) 1939, 339; *Ibn Hauqal: Configuration de la terre*. Intr., tr., indices J. H. Kramers and G. Wiet. II. Beyrouth-Paris 1964, 332-333. (French transl.)

was in the land of the Tcherkes, which belonged to Alania at the end of the tenth century.³

Yāqūt, the famous Muslim geographer of the thirteenth century, mentioned in his geographical dictionary in the article on the Alans that slaves were exported from Alania.⁴ Slaves as export wares are mentioned two times in the cited sources, one of which refers evidently to Alania. The slave trade was wide spread in Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages and slaves were exported into the Caliphate or the Byzantine Empire. The greatest number of slaves came from the forest zone of Eastern Europe. Yāqūt does not mention the origin of the Alanian slaves, but it does not seem probable that they were transit wares from Khazaria or Volga Bulgaria. Probably they were prisoners of war. In the tenth century the territory of the Alans was extensive and the possibility of Alan raids against the Khazars is mentioned by Constantine Porphyrogenitus,⁵ who also wrote of Alanian attacks against the Zikhs, neighbours of the Alans.⁶

People could also become slaves because of debt or misery. There is an interesting parallel. In the thirteenth century, the Hungarian monk Julianus and his companions travelled from Hungary to search for Eastern Hungarians who lived far away from the Carpathian Basin. They came to Alania and, suffering from poverty, decided to sell two of the monks into slavery, expecting to be able to continue the journey due to the price they received for their companions. However, the Alans would not buy them, because they were not experts in agriculture, in the plowing and milling of corn.⁷ This information proves that people could be sold as slaves in Alania in the Middle Ages.

Evidently, there were other goods exported from Alania. As for the import goods, al-Mas'ūdī indirectly mentions the Alans in his report on textile manufacturing and export amongst the Tcherkes. He writes that Tcherkes clothes were exported to the neighbouring countries,⁸ possibly including Alania. Valuable clothes and carpets were also exported from Armenia,⁹ possibly into Alania.

The contacts of the Muslim countries with Alania are indirectly confirmed by the geographical work of the Samanid *wazīr* al-Ġayhānī, which includes an inde-

³ *Ḥudūd al-'Ālam. The Regions of the World. A Persian Geography* 372 A. H. - 982 A. D. tr., expl. V. Minorsky, Gibb Memorial Series ns. 11. London 1937, 160-161.

⁴ *Jacut's geographisches Wörterbuch*, IV. Hrsg. F. Wüstenfeld, Leipzig 1862, 343.

⁵ *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: De administrando imperio*. Greek text edited by Gy. Moravcsik, English tr. R. J. H. Jenkins. CFHB, Vol. 1, Dumbarton Oaks 1967, c. 10-11., 62, 64 (text), 63, 65 (transl.).

⁶ *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: De administrando imperio*, c. 42., 188 (text), 189 (transl.).

⁷ *Scriptores rerum hungaricarum tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum*. Vol. 2. ed. E. Szentpétery, Budapest 1938 (reprint: Budapest 1999, epilogue by K. Szovák-L. Veszprémy), 538.

⁸ *Maḡūdī: Les prairies d'or*, II, 46 (text) (New, revised edition by Ch. Pellut, Beyrouth 1966, 230.); *Ma'sūdī: Les prairies d'or*, I, 174. (transl.)

⁹ *Opus geographicum auctore Ibn Haukal*, II, 342, 344-345; *Ibn Hauqal: Configuration de la terre*, II, 335, 338.

pendent chapter on the Alans.¹⁰ No doubt, Muslim merchants visited Alania in the ninth-tenth centuries. The information of al-Mas'ūdī on the Muslim merchants coming from Alania to the Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin in the tenth century deserves some remark. Constantine Porphyrogenitus writes that a part of the Hungarians was separated due to the attack of the Pechenegs at the end of the ninth century. According to Constantine the eastern group of the Hungarians settled in the east, somewhere "in the regions of Persia."¹¹ The question of their location has not been solved yet, but many scholars think that they lived in the Northern Caucasus.¹² Al-Mas'ūdī's passage can indirectly support this theory of the Caucasian Hungarians. Thus, the Muslim merchants took part in contacts between the two groups of Hungarians.

As for the trade routes between the Islamic countries and Alania, the Muslim merchants could reach Eastern Europe from three main directions. One route came from Transoxania, Khorasan and Khwarizm to the Volga region. The second led from Persia and Azerbaijan to the delta of the Volga River. Here the city (or cities) of the Khazars were located in the ninth-tenth centuries. The third route led from Tbilisi via the Alan Gate (Darial Pass) to Khazaria. There is information which confirms that the Muslims used this route in the ninth century; the travel report of Sallām the Interpreter mentions the route from Tbilisi to Khazaria. According to the story, caliph al-Wāṭiq (842–847) had a dream about the collapse of the wall which, according to legend, had been erected by order of Alexander the Great. This wall separated the northern barbarians from the rest of the world. The caliph sent a mission to investigate the wall. Although in many ways the story is obscure and hard to explain, there is no doubt that the description of the route to Khazaria via the Darial Pass is true and realistic. The envoys travelled from Tbilisi to the country of the Sarīr, from Sarīr to Alania, from Alania to Filān and from Filān to Khazaria.¹³ It seems that they turned south-east and visited the walls of Derbend also. Maybe they entered Khazaria via Derbend. It was a special mission and the unusual route reflected the aim of the journey, to investigate both of the great wall-systems of the Caucasus: Darial and Derbend. Apart from this, the story could prove that Muslims travelled via Alania.

Alania had contacts not only with Muslim countries, but also with the Byzantine Empire. Clothes and textile wares came from the Byzantine Empire. Ibn

¹⁰ H. Göckenjan–I. Zimonyi, *Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter. Die Ġayhānī-Tradition*. Wiesbaden 2001, 92–94 (Ibn Rusta), 183–184 (Gardizī), 215–216 (Ḥudūd al-'ālam), 229 (al-Bakrī).

¹¹ *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: De administrando imperio*, c. 38., 170, 172 (text), 171, 173 (transl.).

¹² E. g. I. Fodor, *In Search of a New Homeland. The Prehistory of the Hungarian People and the Conquest*. tr. H. Tarnoy. Budapest 1975, 271–273; A. Bartha, *Hungarian Society in the 9th and 10th Centuries*. tr. K. Balázs. Budapest 1975, 60–61; I. Zimonyi, *The Origins of the Volga Bulgars*, *Studia Uralo-Altaica* 32. Szeged 1990, 158–160; Gy. Kristó, *Hungarian History in the Ninth Century*. tr. Gy. Novák, Szeged 1996, 145–147.

¹³ T. Lewicki, *Zródła arabskie do dziejów słowiańszczyzny*. I. Wrocław–Kraków 1956, 78–80 (Ibn Ḥurdābih).

Hawqal and al-Mas'ūdī mention that Trapezunt was an important port and trade center on the southern coast of the Black sea,¹⁴ a city which had contacts with the Caucasus region. From Trapezunt trade wares were imported into the land of the Tcherkes and vice versa. The towns of the Crimea and the ports of the eastern coast of the Black Sea thus played an important role in trade between the Byzantine Empire and the Western Caucasus. When the land of the Tcherkes came under Alan authority in the second half of the tenth century, the trade also came under the control of the Alans.

There was also an important land route, which crossed the north-western part of the Caucasus. This was a part of the Silk Road, which connected China and Central Asia with the Mediterranean. The aforementioned section of the Silk Road went north of the Caspian Sea, crossed the Volga River near the delta and led to the steppe. There is a detailed record of a journey from the sixth century. A Byzantine envoy, Zemarchus, and his companions came from the Turk Kaghannate, crossed the Volga and reached a river, which is mentioned in the report under the name *Kofin*. There was a lake into which the Kofin river emptied. Here the Byzantines were afraid of the Persians, but they did not meet them. At this time, Byzantium and the Sassanid Empire were at war. The envoys reached Alania, crossed the lands of other peoples and came to the Black Sea. From Rogatorium they continued the journey by ship.¹⁵

There are some difficulties in reconstructing this part of the journey between the Volga and the Black Sea. Most scholars think that Zemarchus did not pass through the Darial Pass (Alan Gate), because it was under Persian control. According to the Muslim historians, the walls and fortifications in the frontier zone of Alania were built by order of the Sassanid Shahs.¹⁶ Zemarchus thus crossed another Caucasian pass, probably in the Western Caucasus, maybe the Marukh Pass, the Klukhor Pass, the Cagerker Pass or the Sanchari Pass. There were routes in the valleys of the Vzib and the Kodori rivers which connected these passes with the Black Sea coast. The identification of the aforementioned Kofin River is debated. Some identify it with the Kuma River,¹⁷ which has marshlands or moorlands in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea. But then it is hard to explain why the envoys turned south from the delta of the Volga River. This route led to Persia and the Byzantines needed to go round the territories which were under the influence

¹⁴ *Opus geographicum auctore Ibn Haukal*, II, 344; *Ibn Hauqal: Configuration de la terre*, II, 337; *Maçoudi: Les prairies...*, II, 46–47 (text) (New, revised edition by Ch. Pellut, Beyrouth 1966, Vol. 2. 230–231.); *Mas'ūdī: Les prairies...*, I, 174.

¹⁵ *The History of Menander the Guardsman*. Intr., text, tr. notes by R. C. Blockley, Liverpool 1985, 125–127.

¹⁶ J. Harmatta, *The Wall of Alexander the Great and the Limes Sasanicus*. i J. Harmatta, *Selected Writings. West and East in the Unity of the Ancient World*. ed. L. Havas–I. Tegyei, Agatha XII, Debrecen 2002, 69. The study first was published in the *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 10 (1996), 79–84.

¹⁷ E. g. *The History of Menander...*, 266, note 145; Gy. Györffy, ed. *A magyarok elődeiről és a honfoglalásról. Kortársak és krónikások híradásai*. [On the Ancestors of the Hungarians and the Conquest. Reports of contemporary chroniclers] Budapest 1986³, 279, note 134.

or control of Sassanid Iran. It is possible that the Kofin is the Kuban River.¹⁸ There are Byzantine and other authors who mention the name *Kouphis* (*Couphis*), referring to the Kuban river.¹⁹ The Hungarian scholar Janos Harmatta analysed the inscriptions on the walls of the fortress Khumara, situated in the valley of the Kuban, on its upper course. He pointed out that the inscriptions were made by Persians, and the fortress belonged to the Sassanid Empire as an advance post. This fact could explain why the Byzantine envoys were afraid of the Persians on the Kuban River.²⁰ Apart from this detail, the report proves that the Alans had close connections with the Byzantines. The envoys of the Avars were sent to Constantinople via Alania in 557–558.²¹ Probably the upper valley of the Kuban river, Pjatigor'je (present-day Balkaria), was under Alan authority during the reign of Sarosius, the king of the Alans in the middle of the sixth century.²² Later, during the tenth century, the land of the Tcherkes lost its independence and fell under the authority of Alania. Al-Mas'ūdi wrote that the Tcherkes were independent, had more principalities and needed to defend themselves against the Alans.²³ Ac-

¹⁸ E.g., V. A. Kuznecov, *Očerki istorii alan*. Ordžonikidze 1984, 59.

¹⁹ River *Cuphis* was mentioned in various works: e.g., Anonymus Ravennatis, *Cosmographia* IV, 1. ed. J. Schnetz, *Ravennatis Anonymi Cosmographia et Guidonis Geographica. Itineraria Romana* II. Leipzig 1940, 44; *Κούφης, Κούφιν*. Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, ed. I. S. Čičurov: *Vizantijskie istoričeskie sočnenija. „Hronografija“ Feofana, „Breviarij“ Nikifora. Tekst, perevody, kommentarij*. Moskva 1980, 36, 38, 9 and note 17; *Κώφιν* (Nicephorus, *Breviarium*, ed. Čičurov, *Vizantijskie istoričeskie sočinenija*, 153; *Κούφης*: De Administrando Imperio c. 42., Moravcsik–Jenkins, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus*, 184, 59 (text), 185 (transl.). This *Cuphis* could mostly be identified with the Kuban river (Anonymus Ravennatis, *Cosmographia*, e. g. A. V. Podosinov: *Vostočnaja Evropa v rimskoj kartografičeskoj tradicii. Teksty, perevody, kommentarij*. Moskva 2002, 248; Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, Nicephorus, *Breviarium*, e. g. I. S. Čičurov, *Vizantijskie istoričeskie sočnenija*, 110, note 262; G. Schramm, *Nordpontische Ströme. Namenphilologische Zugänge zur Frühzeit des europäischen Ostens*. Göttingen 1973, 96; A. Róna-Tas, „Where was Khuvrat's Bulgharia?“ *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 53:1–2 (2000), 11. In Theophanes' *Chronographia* and Nicephorus' *Breviarium* the *Cuphis* now is identified with the Kuban, and then with the Southern Bug river. The *Cuphis* mentioned by Constantine Porphyrogenitus (DAI c. 42.) is the Southern Bug river also: G. G. Litavrin–A. P. Novoselcev, *Konstantin Bagrjanorodnyj: Ob upravlenii imperiej*. Tekst, perevod, kommentarij, Moskva 1991², 403, note 37. The ethnonym *kupi-bulgar* of the Armenian Geography (seventh century) refers also to the Kuban river: *The Geography of Ananias of Širak (Ašxarhač'oyc')*. *The Long and Short Recensions*. Intr., tr. and comment. by R. H. Hewesen, Wiesbaden 1992, 55, 110, note 19. Á. Paulik, „‘A világ bemutatása.' Egy 7. századi örmény földrajz a steppe népeiről,“ [The Description of the World." An Armenian Geography from the seventh century on the peoples of the steppe] in *Források a korai magyar történelem ismeretéhez* [Written sources to becoming acquainted with the early Hungarian history] ed. A. Róna-Tas, Budapest 2001, 56, note 42.

²⁰ Harmatta, *The Wall of Alexander the Great*, 70–73.

²¹ *The History of Menander*, 48 (text), 49 (transl.).

²² V. B. Kovalevskaja: *Kavkaz i alany. Veka i narody*. Moskva 1984, 134.

²³ Maçoudi: *Les prairies d'or ...*, II, 45–46 (text) (New, revised edition by Ch. Pellut, Beyrout 1966, Vol. 2. 230.); *Mas'ūdi: Les prairies d' or*, I, 174. (transl.); A. V. Gadlo, *Predystori-*

ording to the *Ḥudūd al-'ālam* (982), the land of the Tcherkes (Kasak) belonged to Alania.²⁴ Thus, the western border of Alania reached the coast of the Black Sea, which was important for contact with the Byzantine Empire. Possibly the Alan-Tcherkes alliance was reflected in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, in the report on the war of the Kievan prince Sviatoslav Igorevich against the Khazars, Alans and Tcherkes.²⁵ There is archaeological evidence that the routes from the Volga region to the eastern coast of the Black Sea were in use in the eighth–ninth centuries. The finds from Chasaut and Moshchevaja Balka confirm that trade contacts existed not only between the Western Caucasus and Byzantium, but also between Central Asia and Byzantium in the eighth–ninth centuries.²⁶

To sum up it can be concluded that:

1) There are only a few reports about the commercial activity of Alania in the eighth–tenth century, in comparison with reports on Khazaria, Volga Bulgharia, the Rus and other peoples of the eastern European forest zone. The great trade centers were in these countries.

2) There were important trade routes which crossed Alania, which had an important political role in the Caucasus region in the ninth–tenth centuries, between the Byzantine Empire and the Caliphate. Thus, the great powers endeavoured to be at peace with the Alans. In the tenth century, Alan power was strong in the north–western region of the Caucasus, when the Tcherkes (Kasak), their western neighbours, came under Alan authority. The Tcherkes had trade contacts with the Byzantine Empire and this trade came also Alan control.

ja Priazovskoj Rusi. Očerki istorii russkogo knjaženija na Severnom Kavkaze. Sankt Peterburg 2004, 217–218.

²⁴ *Ḥudūd al-'ālam*, 160–161.

²⁵ *Povešt' Vremennyh Let. Čast' I. tekst i perevod*: D. S. Lihačëv–B. A. Romanov, red. V. P. Adrianova-Peretc. Moskva–Leningrad 1950, 47.

²⁶ A. A. Ierusalimskaja, "Alanskij mir na „sëlkovom puti“ (Moščevaja Balka, istoriko-kul'turnyj kompleks 8–9 vekov). in *Kul'tura Vostoka. Drevnost' i rannee srednevekov'e*. Red. V. G. Lukonin, Leningrad 1978, 151–162; B. Borkopp–A. A. Ierusalimskaja, *Von China nach Byzanz. Frühmittelalterliche Seiden aus der staatlichen Ermitage Sankt Peterburg*. München 1996. Kuznecov, *Očerki istorii alan*, 115.