

## SOME ASPECTS OF SAVIRS IN AZERBAIJAN

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**Abstract.** The Savirs played an important role in the early medieval history of the Caucasian people, and many historical sources mention them. They had involved in the Byzantine-Persian wars during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, then actively participated in the struggles against the invading Arabs in the 6-7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most historical sources considered them to be Huns. They lived on the western part of the Caspian Sea, and we can find early historical sources, which mentioned them on the eastern parts of the Black Sea. Traces of the steppe horsemen can still be found in some parts of Azerbaijan, where some monuments preserved their memories. Archaeological excavations revealed their material culture almost the whole territory of Azerbaijan. In my presentation, I would present the memories left behind by the Savirs, referring some ancient historical sources and results of the archaeological excavations as well.

**Keywords:** *Huns, Savirs, Azerbaijan, Caucasus, Nomads, Byzantine, Persia*

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The Transcaucasian region was a melting pot for various horsemen peoples in the early Middle Ages. Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to this topic in the last centuries. However, thanks to archeological excavations and new historical approaches, more data is being found about them. According to Jafarov, a researcher of the Huns in Azerbaijan, Savirs, as a member of the Hun alliance, played decisive role in the politics and ethnic image of Azerbaijan. [Jafarov (1985): 69] The name of the Savirs have preserved in many places in Azerbaijan: we can find Sabir, Sabirkend, Samukh, Sabir names throughout the country. [Geybullayev (1986): 34] The Savirs are often mentioned by Hungarian scholars as well. Archaeological excavations have increased in recent times, through which a hitherto unknown phase of the Huns who lived in the Transcaucasian region can be revealed.

Some Azerbaijani and foreign scholars believe that horsemen of the Eurasian steppe not only invaded the territory of present-day Azerbaijan, but also settled down and merged with the local population. Jafarov was one of the first scholar, who periodized the history of the Huns in the Transcaucasian area in his monograph. According to him, the Huns have established a strong power in the territory of present-day Azerbaijan during the 3-4. century, and one group of them, the Savirs, occupied quite few areas of Caucasian Albania, mainly in the northern and western parts in the 5th-6th century. [Agaev (2017): 46]

Two significant theories have emerged among historians and linguists regarding the origin of the Savirs. According to the first and the earliest concept, they arrived from Siberia and appeared in the Cis-Caucasus at the very beginning of the 6th century. Because of the superficial similarity of the words, some scholars derived the name of Siberia from the Savirs.<sup>1</sup> However, this theory has been rejected in recent years due to archaeological and linguistic contradictions. (The name of Siberia does not come from Savir either, but from the Mongolian word Shivar, which meant swamp. It is an expression from the 13<sup>th</sup> century.) The second theory is based on the records of ancient historical sources presented below, the Savirs were associated with Huns. They were the part of the Hun alliance during the 5th-6th centuries. However, it is not clear whether the Savirs came from Inner Asia together with Asian Huns or they lived in the Caucasus and made an alliance with the newly arrived people. In any case, their first mention is related to the appearance of the Huns in the 2nd century A.D.<sup>2</sup> There is no convincing evidence of their earlier presence.<sup>3</sup>

Let's examine, what historical sources recorded about the Savirs. The first is from the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A. D. The Roman geographer Ptolemy<sup>4</sup> recorded people called Savaroi below the peoples Aorsi and the Pagyritae. [Ptol. Geogr. III, 5, 22] The Azerbaijan scholar, Geibullaev thought that Ptolemy mentioned this tribe among the peoples living around the Caspian Sea. [Geybullayev (1986): 33] After that, Ammianus Marcellinus wrote the history of Rome, in the 4th century. He mentioned the Saphir tribe lived on the eastern coast of the Black Sea in 361-362, somewhere between the Halys and Phasis rivers, the territory of today's Georgia. [Marcellinus 22.8.] However, the author did not indicate a specific place of residence, because Romans had no direct contact with these peoples. Stephanus of Byzantium was an Eastern Roman grammarian and the author of an important geographical dictionary entitled "Ethnica" mentioned the people Sapire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, living on the River Akampis (Coruh), between Colchis and Persia. [L. Balint 1901. 33] After the Hun invasion to the Roman Empire, the Greek-language sources consider Savirs as a tribe of the Huns. Sabirs or Savirs gained control of the eastern and central regions of the Northern Caucasus during the 5-6th centuries.

Jordanes mentioned them as a member of Hun confederation: "From here (Black Sea- O.B) the Huns, like a kind of very fertile sod of exceedingly strong tribes, expanded with two-pronged ferocity against other peoples. Some of these are called Altziagiri,

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<sup>1</sup> According to Z. Ya. Boyarshinova, this term comes from the name of the ethnic group "Sipyr" (Sopyr, Sabir), whose language was the ancestor of the Ugric language group. Later, they assimilated into the Turkic-speaking group living along the river Irtysh in modern city Tobolsk. (Boyarshinova 2013. 152.) V. Ya. Petrukhin and D. S. Raevsky noticed that the Savirs migrated from the south of Western Siberia to the North Caucasus, and then to the Middle Volga region. (Petrukhin-Raevsky 2004. 416.)

<sup>2</sup> Dionysios Periegetes, the geographer of Emperor Hadrian (117-138) already mentioned the Huns in 117 A.D: "...after the Huns, the Caspians, and after them the Albanians and Kadus, who live in the mountainous region. L. Bálint 1901, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Anton Salmin found some tribal names, which was similar to Savirs, as Sasperians in Herodotus, or Saperires (Apollonius of Rhodes), etc. Salmin 2016. 17.

<sup>4</sup> The Ptolemy world map is a map of the world known to Greco-Roman societies in the 2nd century. It is based on the description contained in Ptolemy's book Geography, written around 150 A. D. Based on an inscription in several of the earliest surviving manuscripts, it is traditionally credited to Agathodaemon of Alexandria. So, the information recorded by Ptolemy, can be earlier than the middle of 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.

others Sabiri; and they have separate dwelling places. The Altziagiri are near Kherson, where the avaricious trader brings in the goods of Asia. In summer they range the plains, their broad domains, wherever the pasturage for their cattle invites them, and in winter returning to over the Black Sea. [Jordanes 1904. 33–37] The Eastern Roman author Theophanes 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. 133] This event happened around 517.

The Savirs are also mentioned by Zakharias rhetor, who wrote a short note about the northern horsemen peoples around 518. According to him, *saber, ungur, abar, abdel, burgars, ogur*, etc. thirteen peoples belong to the Huns, they live inside the gates, some live in tents, and some lead a settled lifestyle." [Kmosko (2004): 99] Then, Procopius, the historian of Emperor Justinian, provides data on the presence of the Savirs in the Caucasus. According to him, a Hunnic people, the Savirs, live in the region beyond the Caucasus, about the Alans and Abazges. [Procopius II. XXIX. 15] He had no knowledge of the exact location, just like Marcellinus, but he roughly placed their residence next to Iberia, which could be the western region of today's Azerbaijan and eastern part of today's Georgia. The author also mentioned a queen, Boarix, a woman of the Huns called Savirs around 527-528. She had begun to rule after the death of her husband Valakh and had 100 thousand warriors under her control. [Helfen (1973): 196]

The Huns played an important role in the Persian-Byzantine wars during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, which were about the possession of the Caucasus, and mainly involved Iberia and Lazica. In the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, hostilities between Iran and Byzantium erupted in Lazica.<sup>1</sup> Procopius and Agathias, as well as later Eastern Roman chroniclers, reported on the event, in which the Savirs often appeared. The Huns or Savirs concluded an alliance with the Romans, but some parts joined to the Persians as a mercenary. We can see the process for almost the entire sixth century that Savirs migrated unhindered around an area extending from the northern Caucasus to Asia Minor.

Later, according to Menander Protector, a Roman military commander forced the Savirs and Albanians to resettle between the River Kür and Araz. [Menandros Exc.de. Leg. Gent 2.] They also settled in Shamkir or Aghstafa, or the western region of Azerbaijan. [Ashurbeili (1983): 62] From the fragments of Menander we can also read that the Byzantine-Persian negotiations at Dara in 561 stipulated that "Persians, Huns, Alans or other barbarians" could not cross the Chor Pass or the Caspian Gates to attack Roman territories. Masudi from the 10<sup>th</sup> century mentioned the Savirs living between Ganja and Tbilisi regions. [Thúry (1898): 325] According to the historical sources, Savirs were able to preserve their own identity until the Middle Ages and sometimes they were called Hungarians or Madjars as well. [Ibidem, 393] So, the history of Huns, Madjars or

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<sup>1</sup> Lazica, situated on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, and controlling important mountain passes across the Caucasus. It had a key strategic importance for both neighboring empires. That's why a war broke out between the Byzantine Empire and the Sasanian Empire for control of the ancient region of Lazica. The Lazic War lasted for twenty years, from 541 to 562, with varying success and ended with the fifty-year peace treaty.

Hungarians became connected with the Savirs in the Trans Caucasian region as well, they had various names, as Sevordik, Siyavurdi, etc.<sup>1</sup>

Some parts of Savirs lived in the northern part of Azerbaijan, where the state of Caucasian Huns had been established. It was carried out by Jafarov, who presented that Hun-Savirans owned some parts of Albania, especially territory of Gabala. [Jafarov (1985): 124]. Azerbaijani historian Farida Mammedova placed residence of the Savirs in the 6<sup>th</sup> century in ancient provinces Kambisena, Udi and Sakasena, which are the northwestern and western half of today's Azerbaijan, and they also extend into the eastern part of today's Armenia.

Geibullaev mentioned place names suvar/savar and referring to Procopius he thought savir/sabir etc. place names are linked to the Savir people and they settled down in the 6th century northern part of Derbent, in today's North Dagestan, where a strong Hun kingdom existed at that time. In the 19th century, the fortress of Galeje-Suvar and Gala-Suvar still stood in the modern province of Guba. In the middle of the 19th century, the place name Suvarli also appears several times in the north. The name of the city of Shabran (in the Republic of Azerbaijan) is associated with the Savirs also. The local name "Suvar", "Sabiroba", located in the Khachmaz region of the Republic of Azerbaijan, is exactly related to the Savirs. [Geybullayev (1986): 34] Archaeological finding also proved that Savirs lived in the regions of today's northern Azerbaijan and northward, the regions of today's Dagestan, as well. A secondary burial at the Uch-Tepe tumulus in Azerbaijan is associated with the northern tribes. The finds made there include a Byzantine gold coin of Justin I (518–527). The grave goods (a sword with a single-edged blade, a gold belt set and gold ring with a Pahlavi inscription) make it possible to date the interment to the late 6th – early 7th century A.D. [Fedorov (1978): 61, 64] That was the heyday of the magnificent Varachan and the 'Kingdom of the Huns' in general. In the Caucasus, some burial sites, such as Verkhny Chiryurt (Kizilyurtovsky District, Dagestan). The inconsistent orientation of the graves there testifies to the ethnic diversity of the Sulak basin lowlands in the early Middle Ages. That is also reflected in the craniological material. Considering the evidence of written sources, it is possible to assume that the population that left this site behind included a certain portion with Savir characteristics. Furthermore, in ground burials occupy a particular section. On the Palasa-Syrt plateau (30 kilometers south of Derbent) there are cemeteries between the 5-6<sup>th</sup> centuries contain close combat weapons (long and short swords and daggers) and long-range weapons (bows and arrows). Their design suggests a Hun origin. The adult male population participating in military activities in one way, or another had a high degree of military preparation at the time. [Saidov (2014): 24–25]

The name of the Huns also preserved in Arran, where Hun galasi or fort of Huns stood. It is also called as "Hunan güzü", on the western shore of the River Kür.

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<sup>1</sup> The origin of the Sevordik is analyzed in the works of many authors including the book of Naila Velikhanly. She notes that Arab authors of the 9-10th centuries as Balazuri, Masudi and Istahri mention that the tribes titled as Siyavurdi, who were outlaws and robbers, inhabited an area between Ganja and Tiflis even before Azerbaijan was occupied by the Arabs. Thus, Velikhanly identifies the Sevordiks as Savirs who, during the sway of Albanian ruler Vachagan III (503), could cross the Derbent-gate guarded by the Sasanid military contingent against northern nomads, annihilated the Onogur union of tribes, and invaded Albania and Iberia.

[Geybullayev 1986. 126]. The fort was situated on the road from Barda to Tbilisi. Ibn-Khaukal said it is laid between the Shamkir city and Ibn Kendmen castle. Minorsky supposed that fort Hunan situated on the road between Ganja and Tbilis. [Minorsky (1958): 47] According to the latest researches, some researchers as Vakhidov and Guliyev studied the record of Arabic author al-Istakhri, who wrote about the Hun fort, and it is probably that it is close to city Tovuz, maybe near the village of Ikinji Shihli (Gazakh province), where a big pile, Giz galasi stood. [Agaev (2017): 49] So, it is an evidence of Hun presence in the western part of Azerbaijan.

Due to the high mountains, transport was limited. There were only two passes (Darial and Derbent) in the area, which had strategic importance from the ancient time. These gateways connected the Eurasian region with the Caucasus and the Middle East. That is why all the regional powers tried to gain control over the passes. Between the 3-7<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D, the Persian Sassanid dynasty gained control over these territories. However, in some period of time, especially, in the 5-6th centuries these two passes belonged to the Huns. Procopius mentioned that there was a certain Hun leader named Ambazoukes who gained control over the Darial Pass. The Byzantine author noted that he was a friend of Anastasius, the Eastern Roman Emperor. When Ambazoukes fell ill and he was about to die, he sent an envoy to Emperor Anastasius and asked him to rebuild the fortress. However, the emperor did nothing with him. The Hun leader died and after that Kabades or Persian Sasanid-dynasty occupied the fortress. [Gadjiev (2009): 239-265]

Because of the constant attack of the nomadic people from the north, the Persian Shahs of the 6<sup>th</sup> century decided to build strongholds and massive defensive walls against the Huns and Savirs and establishing planned cities and irrigation canal systems to monitor coastal movements of the Huns and related peoples as Savirs. [Ibidem] The system of forts in the territory of present-day Dagestan and northern Azerbaijan remained until now. This is perhaps the best-known and strongest line in Derbent, which played a decisive role in the defense, where they tried to stop the Huns attacking from the north. Kavad I (488-96, 498-531) built a rammed earth wall between Shirvan and the Daryal gorge with a series of forts along it. Despite their efforts, the Huns repeatedly broke into the Derbent Gate, known as the Hun Gate, and settled in northern Azerbaijan today (Kachmaz, Shabran regions). Their remains can still be observed in Azerbaijan, in the Guba-Kachmaz region. One of the best-preserved forts is Chirag gala, which situated at a height of 1,232 meters and offers a good view of the surrounding area. The guards could sign some information by smoke signals. The southernmost part of this defensive system is in Beshbarmag hill, where an ancient stronghold, Kursan gala stood. [Obrusánszky (2013)]

Khosrow I Anushirvan (531–579), constructed the famous Derbent wall (this time from large cubic stone blocks). The large-scale fortification works started from 568-569, when the Persian ruler forced the Byzantine Emperor to pay him an annual tax and used part of this amount to fortify Derbent against Huns (Savirs as well). For a long time, this gate was also called the Hun gate because the Huns passed through it.

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. Mughan steppe, to keep the Huns away from the Sassanid motherland. Menander's report



that Persian king Khosrov Anushirvan (501- 579) settled 10,000 Sabirs 78 at the interfluvium of the Rivers Kura and Arax is confirmed by at-Tabari, who indicates that the Sasanid Shah placed 10,000 Khazars in Azerbaijan. Agaev mentioned they settled down in Mughan steppe in the 5th century, near Balasakan, Nakshe-Rustam and Aghun (Balasagan).<sup>1</sup>[Agaev (2017): 48] Archaeologists have excavated Ultan Qalasi fort near Pashavad (Iran) in Mughan steppe, [Alizadeh (2011): 55-77] which was a strong fortification, surrounding moat and network of irrigation canals. Maybe other fortified centers will be found on Mughan Steppe, which will show the presence of the Huns in the Transcaucasian region. The scholars think, Savirs lived there, because the local place name as "Bilasuvar" (Mugan steppe) is mentioned in many Persian works. Close to this region, we can find a city name as Sabirabad.

Some scholars noticed, that Savirs had settled down outside of the Caucasus region, in Carpathian basin and along the River Volga. The theory was based on the record of Byzantine Emperor, Constantine Porphyrogenitus from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, who referred to Hungarians as Savartoi Asphaloi. Based on the above information, some Hungarian historians began to search the ancient history of the Caucasus region to find evidence the presence of the Hungarians. Among the modern Hungarian historians, József Thúry (1861-1906) was the first to write a comprehensive study on the question of the "Savard Hungarians". He paid attention of Emperor Constantine's report about the Hungarians, who settled down in the Carpathian basin, maintained contact with the Savirs of the Caucasus even around 950. He thought that Savirs lived permanently there, which was a part of former "Persia", then other historical sources also must be reported on them. That's why he studied ancient Persian, Muslim, Byzantine, and Armenian historical sources, and found out they also mentioned Savirs with almost the similar names. That is why he studied the Muslim, Byzantine, and Armenian sources of the time, in which he noticed some records about the Savirs. He has published a two-part study about his result on Savir and Hungarian connections in 1898. He pointed out, that the name Savarti-Asfali is not only known by the Emperor Constantine VII., but it is also can be found in the literature of the five nations, who lived in the region. According to his research, from the beginning of the 10th century until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, eleven historians wrote about Savirs, who lived in former Persia. Some of them called Savirs as Madjar, which is the name of Hungarians, who live in the Carpathian basin. [Thúry 1898. 324] The Caucasian Albanian author, Movses Kalankatuyk and some Arabian and Armenian authors called Savirs as Khazars. [Dowsett 1961. 83]

Later, Hungarian historian György Györffy noticed, that the memory of the Savirs was not only remained in foreign chronicles, but it can be found among ancient Hungarian tradition as well. He found out, that one of the first Hungarian historical chronicle, *Gesta Hungarorum* by Anonymus mentioned the name of leader Zuard (or Sovard), who was the cousin of Prince Arpad, who led the Hungarian invasion to the Carpathian basin.<sup>2</sup> So, according to the ancient historical source, the Savirs belonged to

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<sup>1</sup> Movses Kalankatuyk mentioned that those Huns, who lived in Caucasian Albania, named as „King of Balasakan” [Dowsett (1961)].

<sup>2</sup> *Gesta Hungarorum* by Anonymus 6. Zuard or Sovard was Prince Arpad's cousin. So, he belonged to the royal or Hun line of Hungarians.

the royal line of Hungarians, who kept themselves as the descendants of Hun Attila. It means nothing more than the memory of the Savirs have remained in the Hungarian tradition for a long time. Hungarians traditionally originated from the Huns. The ancient royal chronicles mentioned that the first king of them was Attila, the king of Huns. It is very likely, that the common ancestor for Savirs and Hungarians was the Huns, who had dominated the vast territories both Caucasus and Eastern and Central Europe for centuries and left behind many memories, both materially and intellectually [Obrusánszky (2016)]. According to these results, it is likely that Savirs got connected two regions-Caucasus and Carpathian basin as well. In addition to that, some researchers, such as Anton K. Salmin, found, that the descendants of the Savirs remained among the Volga Bulgarians (whose name was Suvar). He thinks, that some parts of the Savirs migrated northward in some waves, from the death of Attila, King of the Hun Empire in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The last migration way had happened in the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when the Arabs invaded the Caucasus.

Salmin thinks, that Suvars, the descendants of Savirs, left the main territory of Volga Bulgaria around 922, when Bulgarians converted to Islam faith, crossed over to the right bank of the river, and established a stronghold named Suvar. Salmin has found archaeological evidence of that migration and similarities of the material culture in Caucasus and Middle Volga Region.<sup>1</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Summarizing the historical role of Savirs in today's Azerbaijan, we can see, that horsemen tribes migrated in various places of Eurasian steppe and its outskirts. It is conceivable that the Savirs migrated from the Caucasus to other places, where horsemen tribes previously lived. Probably they reached the Bulgarians and Hungarians, referred to as the Hun people in the above-mentioned historical sources, and preserved their own names there. According to the historical sources of the Caucasus, the Savirs kept their identity for a long time, then assimilated into the neighboring people in the territories of modern Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Maybe their traces can be revealed through detailed research, like archaeogenetics, archaeology, and ethnography.

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<sup>1</sup> Salmin (2014). Archaeologists confirm that the Suvars established themselves on the right bank of the Volga in the early 10th century CE. On the territory of the present-day Chuvash Republic, Suvar settlements appeared on the chernozem lands along the Rivers Bula, Ulema and Kubnya. Sites of ancient habitation have been discovered near Bolshiye Yalchiki, Baideryako vo, Arabuzi, Novoye Akhperdino, Starye Toisi, Russkiye Norvashi, Yanashevo and other places. Finds include pottery shards, spindle whorls, the bones of domesticated animals and other cultural remains.

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