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IS THERE A POLITICAL HISTORY OF SARIR? SOME OBSERVATIONS BASED ON MUSLIM SOURCES. PART I: THE EXPEDITIONS OF MARWAN IBN MUHAMMAD

Abstract. Sarir, one of the smaller Caucasian states located in present-day Dagestan, is primarily known for its alleged Christianization, supposedly due to influences from Georgia or Albania. In this text, however, we will focus on the accounts of Arab historians. Based on these accounts, we can gain some understanding of the political role of Sarir in the emerging relations between Muslims and local political entities in Dagestan. I do not intend to discuss the numerous geographical works in which Arab authors mention Sarir. This topic has been discussed numerous times in existing literature, and the bibliography includes the main geographical works in which Sarir plays a significant role. Here, I will focus on specific references to the activities of Sarir's rulers, in particular the political and military situations. Studying selected geographical references might lead one to believe that this state played a significant role in Dagestan. However, Muslim historians' references to specific events in the history of Arab-Caucasian relations can significantly challenge such beliefs. This article is the first part of a planned discussion of the activities of Sarir's rulers from the 8th to the 11th centuries, covering events from the first half of the 8th century.

Keywords: Sarir, Caucasus, history of Caliphate, Marwan II, history of Islam

Sarir, one of the smaller Caucasian states located in present-day Dagestan, is primarily known for its alleged Christianization, supposedly due to influences from Georgia or Albania. Most of the available data on this subject originates

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from archaeological or epigraphic research¹. In this text, however, we will focus on the accounts of Arab historians. Based on these accounts, we can gain some understanding of the political role of Sarir in the emerging relations between Muslims and local political entities in Dagestan. I do not intend to discuss the numerous geographical works in which Arab authors mention Sarir. This topic has been discussed numerous times in the existing literature, and the bibliography includes the main geographical works in which Sarir plays a significant role. Here, I will focus on specific references to the activities of Sarir's rulers, in particular the political and military situations. Studying selected geographical references might lead one to believe that this state played a significant role in the historical Dagestan. However, Muslim historians' references to specific events in the history of Arab-Caucasian relations can significantly challenge such beliefs. This article is the first part of a planned discussion of the activities of Sarir's rulers from the 8th to the 11th centuries, covering events from the first half of the 8th century.

The eighth century marked the start of a period of conflict with Muslims in Sarir's history. This began with the famous invasion of the Caucasus in 738–739 by Marwan ibn Muhammad, the future Umayyad caliph. This is the topic we will focus on in the first part of this study. The operation was the culmination of a much broader plan to secure the northern borders of the caliphate, which Marwan began implementing around 735 when he assumed full control of the provinces of Armenia and Azerbaijan as their governor. Previously, he was probably solely responsible for military matters, while Sa'id ibn 'Amr al-Harashi was in charge of the entire operation. They faced the challenge of rebuilding the Muslim position in the Caucasus after Al Jarrah ibn Abdallah's unsuccessful campaign in 730. After initial successes, including an offensive on Tbilisi and the devastation of parts of Khazar territory, he was forced to retreat to defend Azerbaijan against the invasion of the chieftain Tharmakh. Khazars began the siege of Ardabil, the provincial capital, under the command of the probable Khagan Beq of the Khazars, Barjik². In December 730, a battle took place in which the Arabs were defeated³. Despite

¹ А.Р. Шихсаидов, *О проникновении христианства и ислама в Дагестан*, „Ученые записки ИИЯЛ Дагфилиала АН СССР” 3, 1957; Д.М. Атаев, *Христианские древности Аварии*, „Ученые записки Института истории, языка и литературы” 4, 1958; В.М. Бейлис, *Из истории Дагестана VI–XI вв. (Сарир)*, „Исторические записки” 73, 1963; Д.М. Атаев, *Нагорный Дагестан в раннем средневековье. По материалам археологических раскопок Аварии, Махачкала 1963*; М.Р. Гасанов, *Исторические связи Дагестана и Грузии*, Махачкала 1991; П.И. Тахнаева, *Христианская культура средневековой Аварии в контексте реконструкции политической истории (VII–XVI вв.)*, Махачкала 2004.

² И. Семенов, *Эпизоды биографии хазарского принца Барсбека*, [in:] *Proceeding of the Fifteenth Annual International Conference on Jewish Studies. Part 2: In Memoriam of Rashid Kaplanov*, ed. V. Mochalova, Moscow 2008, p. 282–297.

³ К.У. Blankinship, *The End of the Jihad State. The Reign of Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads*, New York 1994, p. 149–151.

his unfortunate death, Al Jarrah was considered a hero of Islam and achieved almost legendary status among Muslims in Azerbaijan⁴. Upon hearing of the Khazar successes, Caliph Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik entrusted command to Sa'id ibn 'Amr al-Harashi, who had distinguished himself by suppressing the uprising in Sogdiana and fighting the Turkish Turgesh confederation.

Marwan thus became the successor to the famous Maslama ibn 'Abd al-Malik, who attempted to capture Constantinople in 717–718. Both men descended from the caliphal family and achieved semi-legendary status in some Caucasian societies through their deeds. This leads us to suspect that their achievements must have been quite spectacular, leaving a significant mark on the balance of power in the Caucasus at the time. However, the legendary narratives make it difficult to verify and reconstruct the actual course of events⁵.

Marwan must have started his campaign in the Caucasus by suppressing a growing rebellion in Armenia led by the Mamikonian clan, who were traditionally the leaders of the nakharars. The Armenians' claims were, in fact, justified, as the governor himself admitted. However, the caliph Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik was engaged in a war with Byzantium and severely restricted the payment of wages to local garrisons, which partly comprised local Armenian troops. Marwan intervened in this matter in Damascus, together with an embassy from Prince Ashot III Bagratid, and at least some of the army's debts were paid. He finally quelled the rebellion by imprisoning the Mamikonian leaders, David and Gregory, who were exiled to Syria⁶.

After quelling the rebellion, Marwan may have hoped the Armenians would participate in his planned ventures in the north⁷. However, he began his campaign by conducting several expeditions to the mountainous regions of Tuman, Hamzina, Shandan and Tabasaran, securing their loyalty in the event of a war with the Khazars. This information comes from Ibn Al-Athir's *Complete History*, which dates it to 114 A.H. (732 or 733). The first expedition against Sarir and other Caucasian states differed from the later one (in 739–740) in terms of the scale of contributions imposed. Before the main clash with the Khazars, the contributions were much smaller, particularly with regard to grain supplies. In addition to the delivery of 1,500 men and 500 women as slaves being mentioned, only 1,000 mudd of wheat are recorded⁸.

⁴ P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses. The Evolution of the Islamic Policy*, Cambridge 1980, p. 132.

⁵ A. Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir. L'espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbassides (v. 72–193/692–809)*, Leiden–Boston 2011, p. 229–282; H.T. Norris, *The Sacred Sword of Maslamah b. 'Abd al-Malik*, „Oriente Moderno. Nuova Serie” 89.2, 2009, p. 389–406.

⁶ О.Г. Болшаков, *История Халифата*, vol. 4, Москва 2010, p. 186.

⁷ Баладзори, *Книга завоевания стран*, [in:] *Материалы по истории Азербайджана*, trans. П.К. Жузе, Баку 1927, p. 208–209.

⁸ Ибн ал-Асир, *Полный свод истории. Тарих ал-Камиль*, V, 70, [in:] *Материалы по истории Азербайджана из Тарих-ал-камиль (полного свода истории) Ибн-ал-Асира*, trans. П.К. Жузе, Баку 1940, p. 31–32.

However, this decisive restriction actually applied only to Sarir. According to the account, Sarir was obliged to pay 1,000 mudd of grain, whereas Tuman paid 20,000 and Sogdan 10,000. These proportions changed significantly after Marwan's expedition to the Caucasian states in 738–739. Sarir then became the main payer, which seems to confirm the state's relative power over other Caucasian political entities. Why was there such a visible restriction on Marwan's first expedition to the Caucasus? Unfortunately, we find no confirmation in the sources, but, in my opinion, it is worth considering whether Sarir supported Marwan in ways other than supplying provisions. Remember that while preparing for operations in the north, Ibn Muhammad did not receive sufficient assistance from Damascus; only his personal intervention with the caliph allowed him to retain the Armenian cavalry contingents. Therefore, it would not be surprising if he seized every opportunity to strengthen his expeditionary forces. Sarir may have been treated more leniently in terms of contributions because, at the time, he offered Marwan something more important: additional military strength to support him in the war against the Khazars. The presence of the Armenians confirms that, for the allies, the immediate effect of victory over the current enemy was more important than faith⁹.

Following a campaign in the Caucasus, Marwan's army crossed the Gates of the Caucasus (also known as the Alan Gates) and secured the area from the Caspian Sea with the help of a second expedition led by the governor of Derbent. This combined force disrupted the Khazar defence system, reaching the plains of central and northern Caspian Dagestan. There, Marwan captured two important centres: Balanjar and Semender. A battle then ensued with Khazar forces, resulting in Marwan's victory, which enabled him to conclude a treaty with Tuman. The scholarly literature debates whether the caliph's representative proposed that the Khagan convert to Islam as part of the peace talks¹⁰.

Following this success, Marwan decided to strengthen the position of Muslims in the Caucasus. Perhaps he was simply implementing the provisions of the treaty concluded with the Khazars. In any case, from 738 to 739, he led a series of expeditions against the Caucasian principalities, acting not as a suppliant but as the victor in the war for regional hegemony. Although the rulers of the Caucasian states put up strong resistance to the Umayyad governor, he concluded several favourable agreements with the kings and princes of Tuman, Zirikirana, Hamzina, Tabasaran, Lekia, Filan and Sarir. According to these agreements, they were

⁹ Wadād al-Qāḏī, *Non-Muslims in the Muslim Conquest Army in Early Islam*, [in:] *Christian and Others in the Umayyad State*, eds. A. Borrut, F.M. Donner, Chicago 2016, p. 83–127; Kh. 'Athamina, *Non-Arab Regiments and Private Militias during the Umayyād Period*, „Arabica” 45.3, 1998, p. 347–378.

¹⁰ А.П. Новосельцев, *Хазарское государство и его роль в истории Восточной Европы и Кавказа*, Москва 1990, p. 154.

obliged to pay tribute to the caliphate¹¹. In his *Book of Conquests*, Abū Muḥammad Aḥmad ibn A'tham al-Kūfī al-Kindī specified that the inhabitants of Sarir were obliged to pay the *jizya* by handing over one thousand slaves, ten thousand dinars and five hundred mudds of grain to the governors¹².

The Arab historian also provides details of the entire Caucasus campaign. Here, we will focus solely on the expedition to Sarir, which took place in 739, the second year of the campaign. After spending the winter in a town called Kasak, Marwan advanced on Sarir in the spring, having previously written to his governor, Usayda ibn Zafir al-Sulami, requesting military support¹³. It is unclear whether the Umayyad needed to replenish his army, or if he considered Sarir to be a more formidable opponent than the Caucasian states he had subjugated the previous year. The source is silent on this, but I believe the latter possibility should also be considered.

Marwan left Kasak, crossed the Kura River and bypassed the city of Shaki before entering the Sarir region, which was protected by the first of the fortresses mentioned in the source: Al-Balal. Al-Kūfī describes the inaccessibility and strength of the fortifications, but unfortunately, archaeologists and historians have not yet determined their exact location. The siege lasted a month without any success. It was only by hiring blacksmiths and preparing special structures that allowed the walls to be climbed from an inaccessible side that the Arabs were able to take the fortress by surprise (the defenders had not expected an attack from that direction). Unfortunately, the defeated suffered a regrettable fate. The men were killed. According to the historian's account, Marwan himself executed the defenders. Meanwhile, the women, children, and property captured in the fortress were distributed among his warriors. The account also provides information on the strength of his best troops in this campaign: approximately eight thousand men. As a last resort, Marwan ordered the fortress itself to be razed to the ground¹⁴.

According to the narrative, the ruler of al-Sarir learned of the scale of the invasion only after hearing about the events that had unfolded in a place called 'Amik. This name is most likely synonymous with the town of Gumik, where, according to tradition, the rulers of al-Sarir kept their treasury. As Al-Kūfī emphasizes, the Sarirs remaining in 'Amik put forth a stubborn defence, but suffered a similar fate to their compatriots in al-Balal: they perished, their families were captured and the fortress itself was destroyed¹⁵. Next, the author of the *Book of*

¹¹ А.Р. Шихсаидов, *Ислам в средневековом Дагестане (VII–XV вв.)*, Махачкала 1969, p. 99.

¹² Абу Мухаммад ибн А'сам ал-Куфи, *Книга завоеваний*, trans. З.М. Буниятов, Баку 1981, p. 55.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 52–53.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

Conquests tells us that the ruler of Sarir fled from Marwan until he reached a fortress called Hayzaj (Khunzakh). Despite several assaults, Marwan was unable to capture the fortress, so he began a siege¹⁶. Therefore, it seems that upon hearing of the siege of 'Amik, the ruler of Sarir set out with his remaining army and attempted to wage a guerrilla war aimed at halting the Arab invasion. When this proved unsuccessful, he was forced to retreat to his capital, Khunzakh. Marwan likely attempted to seize the opportunity to surprise the defenders with an assault, but when this failed, he resorted to a prolonged siege.

Al-Kūfī states here that the siege lasted a full year. This is also supported by recent studies, which extend the expedition from 739 to the end of 740. I. G. Semenov also suggests that the entire campaign may have continued until 743¹⁷. However, it is difficult to ascertain exactly what al-Kūfī meant, given that, in concluding his description of the 739 campaign, he stated that Marwan returned to Derbent for the winter. It should be taken into account that the Arab leader could have simply left part of his forces to besiege Khunzakh for the following year. The description of events at the capital of Sarir suggests that Marwan participated in the siege personally. He relates a story about Marwan's cunning, describing how he managed to infiltrate the fortress in disguise and pose as his own envoy. Marwan emphasizes this fact in his subsequent letter to the King of Sarir, acknowledging that he had thus fulfilled his oath to enter Khunzakh¹⁸. Al-Kūfī relates that, upon realizing how easily Marwan had gained entry to the fortress, the ruler became frightened and sued for peace. The terms of this peace are mentioned above. Marwan then signed similar treaties with the rulers of Tuman, Hamzina and Shandan, after which he retired to Derbent for the winter¹⁹. Naturally, it is difficult to consider the aforementioned account of Marwan's personal successes as entirely credible. The siege must have lasted long enough for the ruler of Sarir to surrender. A mountain fortress would have been difficult to capture, as evidenced by the experience of the Russians in the 19th century, despite their superior technical capabilities. Therefore, it is reasonable to suspect that the fortress was not well-prepared for defence, meaning it lacked sufficient supplies to sustain a prolonged siege. It is also possible that too many people had gathered there to effectively defend it.

Al-Kūfī's account is certainly the most extensive available, but it is not the only one. While al-Balādhurī does not mention how long the campaign lasted, he

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 53–54.

¹⁷ И. Семенов, *Хронология и маршруты арабских походов в Нагорный Дагестан в период наместничества на Кавказе Марвана ибн Мухаммада*, „Восток. Афроазиатские общества: история и современность” 6, 2018, p. 78–90.

¹⁸ Абу Мухаммад ибн А'сам ал-Куфи, *Книга завоеваний*, p. 54–55.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 55–56.

claims that the ruler of the Throne (a reference to the legend of the 'golden throne' located in Sarir) was forced to acknowledge Marwan's authority after he captured several fortresses. A treaty was concluded in which the king pledged to provide two thousand slaves (fifteen hundred men and five hundred women – 'black-haired, black-browed, with long eyelashes', as the historian was quick to point out) and one hundred thousand measures of grain annually, to be sent to the granaries of Derbent. Al-Balādhurī also adds that, to guarantee the agreement, Marwan was permitted to take hostages from Sarir²⁰. He doesn't specify who exactly they were. However, it's unlikely that they were minor figures. This raises the question of their exact status – could they have been members of the royal family? If so, what influence might Muslim or Arab culture have had on them? Unfortunately, the lack of source information prevents us from answering these questions. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the obligations imposed on Sarir. When compared with the effects of Marwan's other conquests as described by Arab historians, it is clear that Sarir was burdened with the heaviest obligations, with its food contribution being three to twenty times higher than that of the other states. This is true even when one country's resistance seemed much fiercer than Sarir's. Therefore, it does not seem to be a punishment, but rather a calm calculation of the economic capabilities of the countries under the governor's rule. Of these countries, the one in question should be considered the strongest. The same applies to slaves. In this case, the kingdom's demographic potential is also significantly greater than that of the others mentioned in the chronicle. The Arab historian mentions, among other things, one hundred and fifty female slaves, fifty male slaves, and twenty thousand measures of grain from Tuman; fifty male slaves and ten thousand measures from Zirikirana; one hundred male slaves and five thousand measures from Shandan; and five hundred male slaves and thirty thousand measures from Hamzina. However, he clearly states that Hamzina put up clear resistance to Marwan²¹.

It is worth noting that the information presented by Balādhurī can also be found in the *History* of Khalifa ibn Khayyāṭ, written by an Arab chronographer from the second half of the 8th and beginning of the 9th century. Considering the period in which the work was composed, it is remarkably detailed. Notably, the chronicle systematically divides and categorizes the fortresses successively occupied by Marwan: the Throne House (*bayt as-Sarir*); Gumik ('Amik, the fortress where the house of property and the residence of the throne's ruler, Malik as-Sarir, were located); and Khunzakh (where the legendary golden throne, *sarir az-zahab*, was located)²². This

²⁰ Баладзори, *Книга завоевания стран*, р. 18.

²¹ *Ibidem*, р. 18–19.

²² *Сообщения Халифы ибн Хаййата ал-Усфури об арабо-хазарских войнах в VII – первой половине VIII в.*, ed. В.М. Бейлис, [in:] *Древнейшие государства Восточной Европы*, ed. Т.М. Калинина, Москва 1998, р. 43.

proves the existence of a complex, hierarchical state structure, much more so than in the other Caucasian states mentioned by Khalīfa ibn Khayyāṭ, which do not have such a detailed division of the purpose of individual fortresses. Moreover, the author noted the fall of yet another fortified point between the lines, probably an 'ordinary' fortified point within the kingdom, but did not devote further attention to it. However, the description of the campaign itself is repeated. Interestingly, while the author of the account draws attention to the economic details of the signed agreements with Sarir (one thousand slaves and one hundred thousand mudd of grain), he does not mention this at all in the case of other countries conquered by Marwan. This would confirm the hypothesis presented above about Sarir's much greater importance compared to other political entities in the northern Caucasus at that time.

The hundred thousand measures are also mentioned in another account by Ibn al-Athīr. While essentially repeating al-Balādhurī's information, including Marwan's detailed itinerary during this campaign (which he dates to the years 739–740), he adds one significant but interesting detail. Before his escape, which was discussed in the analysis of Al-Kūfī's account, the King of Sarir is said to have participated in the defence of a fortress called Gumik, which is identical to the aforementioned 'Amik. Ibn al-Athīr implies that by capturing this fortress, Marwan also captured the King of Sarir's daughter, as well as the treasury and 'his throne', but not the legendary golden Sassanid throne. The author of the account emphasizes that this throne was located in Khayzakh. Despite this defeat, the Caucasian ruler decided to defend Khayzakh, and Ibn al-Athīr, like al-Kūfī, suggests that the clash lasted two seasons and ended in the summer of the following year²³. Although the Kurdish historian does not mention hostages, information about the captivity of the king's daughter is interesting in this context.

Descriptions of the expedition against the bordering kingdom of Lakia, whose ruler Arbīs (also known as Awiz ibn Ramadan to Ṭabarī and Khalīfa bin Khayyāṭ) refused to come to Marwan in Derbent in the early spring of 740, reveal what would have happened if the Saririans had not surrendered to Marwan. Interestingly, Sarir is not mentioned among the states whose representatives appeared before the governor. This could be significant evidence that the siege of Khunzakh actually lasted from 739 until the start of the spring campaign in 740, before which the aforementioned meeting took place. Returning to the subject, although the war for Lakia ended with the accidental death of the king and the subsequent plundering and abduction of women, the peace agreement itself was not as onerous as those imposed on other states. The inhabitants of

²³ Ибн ал-Асир, *Полный свод истории. Тарих ал-Камиль*, р. 32–33.

Lakia were required to deliver grain to Derbent. Depending on the source, the grain contribution was twenty²⁴ or forty (!)²⁵ times greater than that imposed on neighbouring Sarir. Unlike Sarir, however, Lakia was not required to provide the Muslims with monetary tribute or slaves²⁶. Why was this so? The answer can be found in al-Balādhurī, who recounts these events. The ruler of Lakia went to the Khazars for help, but was killed. A new ruler had already been appointed by Marwan²⁷. It seems that Lakia's fate differed from that of Sarir in that the former received a new ruler appointed by the governor of Armenia and Azerbaijan²⁸. Al-Kūfī does not mention this directly, but he provides more details about the last representative of the previous dynasty, who was killed accidentally. He was beheaded. His head was displayed in public in front of the main Lakze fortress. This was clearly a sign of disgrace for the previous rulers. Put simply, the price may have been the acceptance of a ruler who was at least associated with, if not already, a practising Muslim. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment of the Islamization of the Lakze, both the accession of their ruler to the throne of the Emir of Derbent in the 10th century²⁹ and the Shah of Shirvan's attempts to enlist them in the 11th century to convert some Caucasian nations to Islam³⁰ suggest that this process occurred much more swiftly than among the other inhabitants of present-day southern Dagestan. In conclusion, it is worth revisiting the available accounts of Marwan's second campaign against Sarir, specifically al-Ṭabarī's account. In addition to a brief description of the expedition itself, which is much shorter than those presented above, this Arab historiographer adds one important piece of information. When describing the terms of the peace agreement guaranteed by the transfer of hostages, he states that Marwan reinstated the ruler of Sarir in his territory and confirmed him as ruler (*mal-lakahu*)³¹. This somewhat resembles the establishment of a new dynasty in the kingdom of Lakia. Notably, the Arab historian treated the expedition to Sarir as being of equal significance to an expedition against the caliphate's most significant enemy at the time: Byzantium.

²⁴ Абу Мухаммад ибн А'сам ал-Куфи, *Книга завоеваний*, р. 58.

²⁵ Баладзори, *Книга завоевания стран*, р. 19.

²⁶ Абу Мухаммад ибн А'сам ал-Куфи, *Книга завоеваний*, р. 56–58.

²⁷ Баладзори, *Книга завоевания стран*, р. 19.

²⁸ Х.Х. Рамазанов, А.Р. Шихсаидов, *Очерки истории Южного Дагестана. Материалы к истории народов Дагестана с древнейших времен до начала XX в.*, Махачкала 1964, р. 36.

²⁹ А.Р. Шихсаидов, *Социальноэкономическое и политическое положение Дагестана в V–X вв.*, [in:] *История Дагестана*, vol. 1, ed. В.Г. Гаджиев, Москва 1967, р. 162.

³⁰ В.Ф. Минорский, *История Ширвана и Дербенда X–XI вв.*, Москва 1963, р. 131–132; А.П. Новосельцев, *Хазарское государство...*, р. 104.

³¹ *Перевод выдержки из книги ат-Табари „История посланников и царей”*, trans. А.Р. Шихсаидов, [in:] *Памятники истории и литературы Востока. Период феодализма*, Москва 1986, р. 80.

However, the period of Muslim domination did not last very long. There is no evidence to suggest that Sarir was granted any institutionalized Islamic protection. Marwan himself soon had to deal with the much more pressing issue of quelling the rebellions in the east. This ultimately resulted in his death in Egypt and the establishment of a new dynasty to rule the caliphate. Given the severe civil war that raged in Syria, Iraq, and Iran in the 740s, it is difficult to imagine that ruling circles in Damascus, Basra or Kufa would have been preoccupied with the Caucasus issue. The second period during which Sarir appears in political and military contexts in Muslim historical sources is the 9th–10th centuries. This topic will be addressed in the second part of this paper.

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