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# AZERBAIJAN'S TERRITORY REFERENCED IN ARAB, MUSLIM MEDIEVAL SOURCES

*Following Azerbaijan's brilliant victory in the 44-day Karabakh war and the liberation of its territories, the world community once again focused its attention on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and the South Caucasus region. One of the main reasons for the conflict dwells upon Armenian claims to Azerbaijani territories, which are based on historical and ideological premises. The Armenian historical science and a number of agenda-driven political circles in Armenia and abroad maintain that no administrative and geographical unit called Azerbaijan existed in the Caucasus and that it allegedly emerged as late as in the 20th century. At the same time, the Armenian side is seeking to substantiate its territorial claims historically, referring to unverified, biased content or ancient and other sources that are non-existent.*

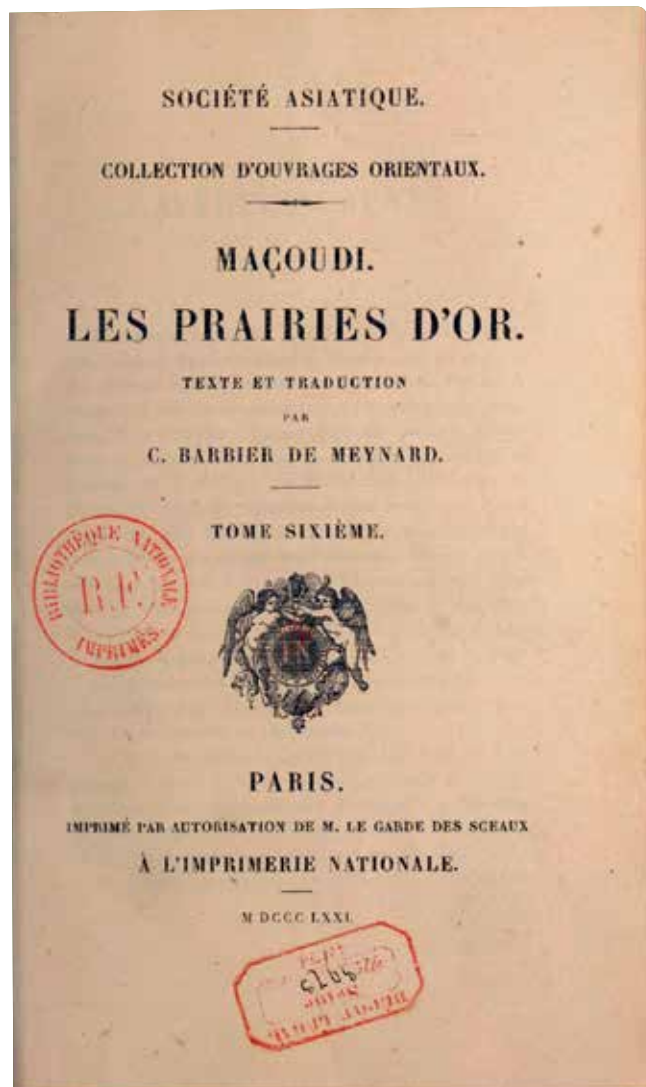
*In order to clarify the issue, this article provides quotes regarding the historical territories of Azerbaijan and its population from a number of medieval Arab and Muslim sources that have been recognized as reliable by the scientific community at large and included in the curriculum in many countries of the world. Given that the names of the same authors referenced in different editions and translations from Arabic may differ at times, a decision was made to preserve the original copy of the translations and also provide unified versions of the names or geographical names in the parentheses.*

**A**zerbaijan's territories up to Dagestan and onward to the north have been cited in numerous Arabic-language sources. Al-Tabari and Al-Mas'udi, Arab authors of the 9th-10th centuries, who described the reign of Anushirvan (Shahinshah from the Sassanid dynasty who was in power in 531-579) in their works, wrote that he had divided his state into four large satrapies, including Azerbaijan and the neighboring "Khazar country" (1, 614; 2, 167). Khazaria (the Khazar state) reached the north-western coast of the Caspian

Sea, all the way to Derbent, a point where it bordered on Azerbaijan. Arab historian Al-Tabari also said that Sassanid ruler Firuz had established a city "in the area of Azerbaijan, which he named Shahram-Firuz" (3, 450).

This piece of work created by Al-Tabari describes the developments of the 6th century whereby the Turks and their rulers, the Khagans, are mentioned, along with Turkic nations including the Hephtalites, Khazars and others who established powerful states in the territories of the Caucasus and Western Asia. Al-Mas'udi, another

*Title page of the French edition of the Al-Masoudi manuscript*



medieval Arab chronicler, refers to the Khazars as “Turkic savirs” (4, 127), while Arab authors Al-Baladhuri and Ibn al-Athir call the city of Kabala “Khazar” (5, 5; 6, 9; 7, 11, 16).

A. Krymsky, a well-known Soviet Orientalist, concluded that the city of Kabala/Khazar was the center of the Savir settlements in Azerbaijan (8, 295). According to Soviet historians, Savirs (Sabirs) and Khazars were part of the same military and political entity (4, 127), i.e. the Turkic peoples constituted the backbone and elite of Caucasian Albania, a state whose territory mainly covered Azerbaijan and parts of the North Caucasus, Georgia and present-day Armenia, from the ancient times and in the early Middle Ages. It is for this reason that the above-mentioned Arab medieval sources cite the Turkic nations and rulers among the Albans and those at the helm of the Albanian entities in Azerbaijan.

Data derived from the mentioned ancient sources leads to a conclusion that Azerbaijan covered territory stretching till the Khazar state (presently the North Caucasus) in the 6th century. The sources further noted that Sassanid Shah Anushirvan had concluded an alliance with people from an ethnic group called Chor who inhabited the eastern tip of the Caucasus in the vicinity of the “Chor passage” (Derbent). According to those accounts, he then defeated the Turkic peoples Banjar and Balanjar (another name for Bulgars - R.H.) and other ethnic groups, which had entered Armenia, and settled 10,000 survivors from among those people in Azerbaijan (4, 124-127).

Remarkably, traces of the Turkic Bulgar and Balanjar peoples may still be found throughout the geographic names used in Azerbaijan. For example, there is a settlement called Balajary in Baku.

Peter Christensen, a Norwegian historian and Orientalist, wrote in a book concerning the history, culture and territories of the ancient Iranian states of the 5th-16th centuries that Azerbaijan’s territories have included those located in the Caucasus since the ancient times. In his research based on ancient Persian, Arabic language and other sources, Christensen delineated the historic Azerbaijani territories that start south of Hamadan (Iran), cover a part of Armenia in the west, extend above Derbent in the north and border on the Caspian in the east (10, 206, 205-211).

A plethora of Arab and Muslim sources refer to Azerbaijan, its territories and nations that inhabited this land since time immemorial. However, few people know that the Holy Quran also has several references related to the land and peoples of Azerbaijan. The Holy Quran mentions the inhabitants of Ar-Rass (the Araz/Araks River and the interfluvium of Araz and the Kura river - R.H.), located in Azerbaijan, according to a conclusion reached by Muslim scholars.

“...And the people of Nukh...when they accused the messengers of lies...we drowned them and made it a precursor for people and prepared grievous punishment for the sinful ones – both Hell and Thamud, and residents of Ar-Rass, and there were many generations in between. And to all those we cited parables and We made all of them perish by death...” (11, 25: 38-39).

“...and before these Mecca infidels many nations had not come to faith, having rejected the messengers: both the people of Nukh and the inhabitants of ar-Rass (pit owners), Thamud and Hell, the Pharaoh and the people of Lut, residents of al-Ayka, the people of Tubb – all of

Manuscript sheet of the Persian version of the "World History" by Al-Tabari



them rejected their messengers. Therefore, they deserved death that I had promised them" (11, 50: 12-14).

Muslim scholar Ibn Kassir (1302-1373) offers his explanation of these ayats of the Quran in his piece of work titled "Kisas al-anbiya". Ibn Kassir also cites several Hadiths that say that Ar-Rass is a pit or a city in Azerbaijan. "It is reported that Ibn Abbas said 'Ar-Rass is a pit in Azerbaijan'" (12, 475-476; 13, 2695).

A semantic translation of the Quran made by Al-Azhar University, which is deemed an influential institution in the Islamic world, says in its explanations, "Ar-Rass is a rich valley whose inhabitants worshiped idols. Allah sent His messenger, Shuayb, to them (peace be upon him)."

Ibn Khordadbeh, a Muslim geographer who lived in the 9th century, wrote in "The Book of Routes and Countries" (14) that he specifically believed this location was the city of Beylagan in Azerbaijan.

"This is the very place of 'confluence of two people' that was mentioned by Allah the Great and it is considered holy (an excerpt from the Quran, XVIII, 59) (11, 28: 59). Arras and al-Kurr merge in this area. The city of al-Baylakan lies in between. Having merged, they run until they flow into the Jurjan Sea ..." (14, 136; 15, 114).

Citing ancient sources necessitates stressing another mention of Azerbaijan in the Holy Quran. A limited number of Muslim scholars and those interpreting the Quran are aware of this reference. Imam Tahir ibn-Ashur Maliki (1879-1973), a "mufassir" or explainer of the Quran who wielded authority in the Islamic world, noted while in-

interpreting one of the early Mecca Surahs of the Quran that the expression “and the carpets are spread out” (11, 88:16) implies special rugs (“zarabiyu” in Arabic) made specifically in Azerbaijan with the use of soft and dyed wool. Ibn-Ashur Maliki wrote that “zarabiyu” is not an Arabic word, but one that comes from the word “azribiya”, which implies anything pertaining to Azerbaijan. “The word ‘zarbiya’ refers to Azerbaijan, which is one of the Persian and Bokharan (Turkic - R.H.) countries.”

Thus, the Muslim scholar makes it clear that Azerbaijan is a Persian and Turkic-speaking country. Ibn-Ashur confirms that “azribiya” was later simplified in Arabic and pronounced as “zarbiya”, since it was an imported word with a foreign origin (16, 11-12)<sup>1</sup>.

It is also worth mentioning that a great number of mediaeval Islamic scholars praised Azerbaijan’s role and contribution to world culture and science. Hafiz Abu Tahir as-Salafi, a prominent 13th century scholar, said, “The state of Azerbaijan in the east is similar to Andalusia (a powerful mediaeval Cordoba caliphate in Spain’s territory - R.H.) in the west in the fields of science and literature” (16, 10; 9).

Ibn Qutaybah, an outstanding Baghdad-based, 9th century Islamic scholar who interpreted the Quran and researched Hadiths, said, “Abu Yagzan, referring to Juevriya, recalled that “you can’t find a poet or mawali (a word describing non-Arab Muslims, including mainly Turks and Persians - R.H.) who would not hail from Azerbaijan” (16, 11; 17).

More detailed accounts of Azerbaijan and its provinces, which, among other regions, included present-

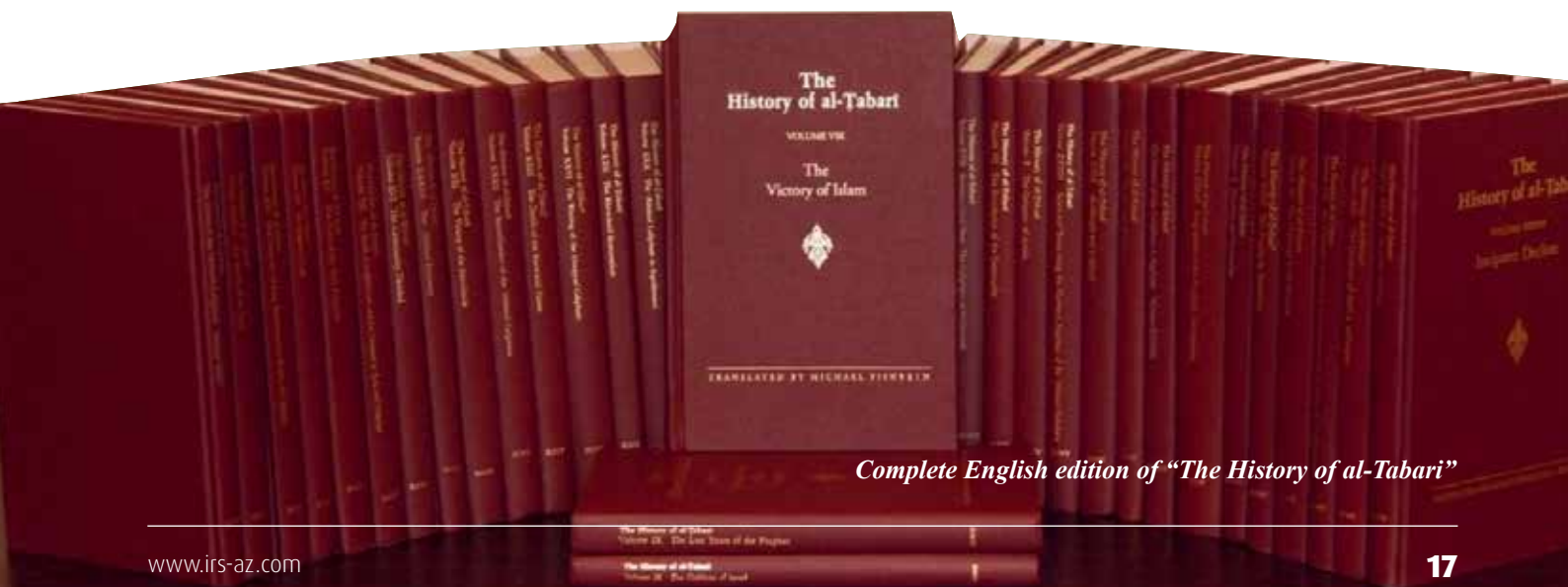
day Armenia, were provided by medieval Arab authors. Abu Muhammad Ahmad bin A’sam Al-Kufi wrote on this topic in “Kitab al-Futukh”; the issue was also covered by Jalaluddin al-Suyuti in “Tadrib-ur-Ravi” and Yakut al-Khamavi in “Mujam al-Buldan” (25, 30, 18, 28), Ahmad al-Balazuri in his composition “Kitab Futukh al-Buldan”, etc.

Hamdallah Mustawfi Qazvini, a medieval Persian scholar, wrote about Azerbaijan’s provinces, population and geographic range in “Nuzkhat al-Kulub”.

Azerbaijan was also described in the work of Ibn Hisham, a well-known 9th century Arab historian, who authored “The Life of the Prophet”, which is known well in the Islamic world. Ibn Hisham cites facts regarding the territory and ancient Turkic population of Azerbaijan in “The Book of Crowns” about Himyar kings. In addition, reliable Hadiths about Azerbaijan and its residents were referenced by such great personalities as Imam Al-Bukhari in his “Al-Jami as-Sakhih” anthology and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj in “al-Musnad as-Sakhih”; these are deemed the most trustworthy sources in the Islamic world. Islamic scholar Al-Heysami cites some Hadiths about Azerbaijan in “Majma’ Al-Zawaid”.

Numerous Muslim medieval sources dismiss the theories of present-day Armenian scientific ideologists seeking to prove that the territories of Azerbaijan did not cover the South Caucasus and that all Turkic peoples resettled to the region. Armenian scholars try to assert that Armenia existed in the South Caucasus since the ancient times, while Caucasian Albania (Arran) was allegedly part of “an ancient Armenia” and the historical heritage of the Armenian people.

1. *Special thanks to Islamic scholar Seymur Nasirov, who collected these and other little-known facts about Azerbaijan in his unique research based on medieval Arab sources and authors.*



*Complete English edition of “The History of al-Tabari”*



Let's start with the wordplay and falsifications used by Armenian ideologists while dealing with the history, culture and land of the ancient state of Caucasian Albania in Azerbaijan's territory. According to Armenian pseudo-scholars, Caucasian Albania and Albanians have no bearing on Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis as these are different names.

Arab authors who lived as early as in the Middle Ages often referred to the territory of Caucasian Albania as "Azerbaijan" or "Upper Azerbaijan".

Al-Kufi, an Arab historian of the 9th-10th centuries, describes the movements of the ruler of Azerbaijan, Al-Jarrah ibn Abdallah, in 723-724. Al-Jarrah had been ordered by caliph Yazid ibn Abd al-Malik to "stop over in Azerbaijan". He is said "to have reached al-Bab (Derbent) in the area of Azerbaijan". He further "headed to the state

of Azerbaijan and settled in Baylakan"; he "headed to the state of Azerbaijan and stopped over in Barda" (19; 53, 58).

Al-Kufi also wrote about the developments that occurred in Azerbaijan in 735.

"Marwan left Syria at the helm of 120,000 troops and reached Azerbaijan soon thereafter. He made a stopover in a residential area called Kasak, located 40 farsangs away from Barda and 20 farsangs away from Tiflis", the source said. The author is referring to Gazakh in the north-western part of the present-day Azerbaijan Republic.

Al-Kufi further said in the same publication that "following these developments Marwan headed to the Azerbaijani land and made military campaigns against the residents of Mukan" (Mugan, a region in the Azerbaijan Republic).

"Afterwards, Abu Muslim headed from this location to Nakhchivan, one of the Azerbaijani cities, invaded it, collected kharaj and distributed it among his associates. He headed onward toward the city of Dabil and kept it under siege over four months, but failed to capture it. He turned back and reached Baylakan through Sijistan and settled there" (20, 68).

Valuable facts that dismiss the modern biased Eurocentrist concept regarding the alleged foreign origin of all Turks in the Caucasus and Azerbaijan in particular are cited in a publication by Ibn Hisham, a well-known 9th century Arab historian.

It is noteworthy that Abu Muhammad Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham ibn Ayyub al-Khumeiri (al-Himyari) al-Basri (died in 218; Hijri calendar /833 CE) is the author of "The Life of the Prophet", which is the most popular publication in the Islamic world. In "The Book of Crowns", Ibn Hisham refers to a dialogue between Caliph Mu'awiyya ibn Abi Sufyan (ruled in 661-680) and traveler al-Jurkhumi (Ubeid ibn Shariyya al-Jurkhumi), who recently returned from a long trip to the East. Al-Jurkhumi talks about the pre-Islamic campaigns of Himyar kings into Azerbaijan. These military advances were believed to be reflected in the inscriptions made on stone-made bas-reliefs in Azerbaijan. Caliph Mu'awiyya became interested in this matter and asked, "In the name of the Almighty God, what can you say about Azerbaijan?" The traveler replied, "This is land of the Turks. They have resided there since the ancient times..." (21).

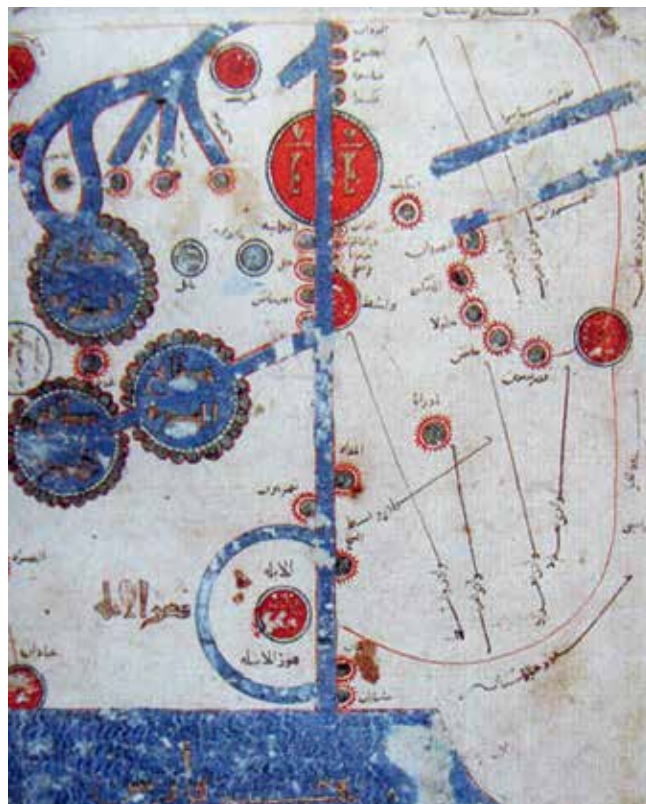
In another excerpt, Mu'awiyya asks al-Jurkhumi, "What is the connection between the Turks and Azerbaijan?" "These lands are their homeland," Al-Jurkhumi replies (21).

One of the original manuscripts of Ibn Hisham's book is stored at the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London. The manuscripts have been repeatedly published in a number of Oriental countries. In particular, this article refers to Ibn Hisham's works released in Yemen and Pakistan (21).

The "Al-Jami as-Sakhiih" anthology by Imam Muhammad Al-Bukhari (810-870) and a compilation of the same title written by Muslim an-Naysaburi (817-875) cite Hadiths that mention the letters of Muslims to Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab (he ruled in 634-644) describing their settlements in Azerbaijan and their performing namaz (Muslim prayers). In his letters of response, Caliph Omar ordered "not to harm anyone or commit violence in Azerbaijan as this country adopted Islam itself"

Azerbaijan is also mentioned in Imam Al-Bukhari's

*Map from the original Al-Istahri manuscript*



"Al-Jami as-Sakhiih" anthology of Hadiths, which is considered the most trustworthy source in the Islamic world.

The Hadith describing the tenure of Omar ibn al-Khattab (581-644), the second righteous caliph, says that "according to Abu Osman, the letter of Umar (Omar - R.H.) ibn al-Khattab reached them when they were in Azerbaijan together with Utba ibn Farqad (22).

The same Hadith concerning Azerbaijan is mentioned in "Al-Jami as-Sakhiih" by Imam Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (821-875), the second most popular and reliable anthology next only to Al-Bukhari's piece of work (23).

Al-Heysami cites a Hadith in "Majma' Al-Zawaid" that refers to Azerbaijan as well. "One of the dearest friends and associates of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s.), influential Islamic preacher Abdullah ibn Umar (died in 692), a son of the second righteous caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, said, "During my stay in Azerbaijan over two to four months, I performed four-rakat namaz in two rakats each" (24).

Arab historian Al-Kufi's "Kitab al-Futukh" contains information about Azerbaijan dating back to the time period from the 7th to the 9th centuries, in particular, its provinces and cities, rulers and their influence in the Caucasus in the epoch of Arab conquests and the initial

*World map from the original manuscript of Al-Idrisi*



years of the Arab Caliphate's rule. Al-Kufi cites the correspondence of Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (he ruled in 672-720) regarding Azerbaijan.

"Kitab al-Futukh" says, "Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz called up a man named Abd al-Aziz ibn Hatim, issued written instructions, appointing him the ruler of Azerbaijan. Abd al-Aziz ibn Hatim further headed to Azerbaijan. Afterwards, Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz learned about some of his tricks. He delegated a man who removed Abd al-Aziz ibn Hatim from office. The caliph appointed Adiya ibn Adiya al-Kindi to the post instead. Al-Adiya headed to the state of Azerbaijan and settled down in Baylakan. Its residents were suffering from thirst. Al-Adiya built a canal running through the area, launching water supply. It has been called precisely 'the Canal of Adiya' to date."

According to the publication, Al-Adiya remained at the helm for more than 10 months. Afterwards, Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz replaced him with Al-Kharis ibn Amraat-Taiy. Al-Kharis ibn Amraat headed to Azerbaijan and stopped over in Barda, the source said.

Al-Kufi cites other facts as well. "Barsbay, the khagan's son, started to bring together warriors from all over the area and had them join his fighters in Azerbaijan. He brought together a lot of men. Sa'id ibn Amr al-Harashi found out about it and sent out messengers to Varsan, Baylakan, Barda, Kabala and other parts of Azerbaijan. People came to join him both individually and in crowds,

including volunteers and others, and he ultimately created a huge military force," Al-Kufi wrote.

"Abu Muslim headed onward to Nakhchivan, one of the Azerbaijani cities, captured it, collected kharaj and distributed it among his associates," the source said.

Al-Kufi said further that "Khagan, the king of Khazars, sent out messengers to all parts of the country of godless people, who belonged to the same faith and tribe, urging them to wage war with the Muslims".

"All of them agreed to do so. He ordered their army to convene and join his son and launch a military campaign into Azerbaijan. Barsbay, the Khagan's son, led 300,000 troops comprised of Khazars and other infidel tribes. Shortly thereafter, he arrived with his troops in the interfluvium of al-Kur (Kura) and Ar-Rass (Araz)," the author noted.

"Having received an order in Syria with regard to his appointment as the ruler of Azerbaijan, Maslama ibn Abd al-Malik hit the road, reaching the city of Barda, and settled down there. From there he wrote al-Harashi so that he would leave the land of Shirvan to join him," the source said (25, 17-22, 39).

Evidently, the Arabs, who arrived in the region, pointed out the existence of such cities as Derbent, Baylakan (Beylagan), Nakhchivan, Gazakh, Barda, Gabala, the Mugan region, in Azerbaijan in the 7th-8th centuries. These cities are located in the territory of the present-day Azerbaijan Republic in the South Caucasus. Arab authors also note that this land has belonged to Turkic nations, who dominate and rule the region, since the ancient times.

Interesting facts regarding Azerbaijani territory derived from Arab sources were referenced in a landmark piece of work by the Asiatic Museum director, Academician B. Dorn (1805-1881), which focused on the military campaigns of ancient Ruses (26). The title and text of Dorn's book cites the Ruses as "Russians", though it is common knowledge that these are different peoples that existed in different periods of history. The term "Russians" emerged during the Russian Empire and B. Dorn apparently likens them to the ancient Ruses, who were known to have existed since the 9th century, for merely political considerations. Present-day Russians are considered to be one of the Slavic peoples, whereas the ancient Ruses were of Turkic ethnicity, which is also mentioned in the sources cited by B. Dorn. In particular, he quotes medieval Arab historian Ibn Khaldun as saying, "The Russians (Ruses in the original copy) are one of the Turkic peoples; they live in the vicinity of Rum (the

*European interpretation of Al-Idrisi maps*

Greek kingdom, i.e. Byzantium) and adopted the Christian faith a very long time ago. Their land borders on the regions of Azerbaijan. Some of them headed to the sea in 332 (943,4), whence they entered the Kura river and finally arrived in Berdaa, a city in Azerbaijan" (26, 516).

In other words, Ibn Khaldun's accounts make it clear that the Ruses were Turks who lived in the Greater Black Sea area and the Caucasus region, since their land bordered on Byzantium and Azerbaijan. Moreover, they accepted Christianity many centuries prior to the Kievan Rus, whose residents were baptized in 988, according to the conclusions made by scholars. The fact that the Slavs and Ruses were different and even hostile peoples was mentioned not only by numerous medieval Arab authors but also Nestor the Chronicler (the 11th-12th centuries) in the "Tale of Bygone Years".

The theme of the Slavs and Ruses is also covered in an article by A. Griber, who cited and compared a host of mediaeval sources that clearly indicate the difference between the Turkic Ruses and the Slavs (27).

Referring once again to B. Dorn's publication concerning the campaigns of the Ruses, it is worth mentioning a few more quotes taken from Arab medieval

sources which confirm that Azerbaijan has been localized since the ancient times in territories including the Caucasus.

"In...(332, i.e. 943) a bunch of Russians headed by the sea to the countries of Azerbaijan and sailed by sea into Kura, which is a great river. They reached Berdaa," one of the quotes said (26, 512).

Another quote says "that year when he (Caliph Mustakfi (333) (in 944) began to reign, various peoples



*Globe with the image of the world map of Al-Idrisi*



*Astrolabe is the most important device for determining coordinates. It was widely used by geographers, cartographers and navigators of the Muslim world*



emerged, including the Alans, the Slavs and Lezgi”.

“They broke through to Azerbaijan, took over the city of Berdau and went back, having killed 20,000 people there,” it said (26, 515).

“Kitab Futukh al-Buldan” (28, 107; 29, 128) by well-known Arabic-speaking historian Ahmad al-Balazuri (820-892) described the conquest of the territory of present-day Azerbaijan by the Arabs during the tenure of Caliph Umar ibn Khattab (634-644).

The author of the earliest chronicles of the Arab conquest, Muhammad ibn Omar al-Wakidi (722-747), also mentioned repeated campaigns of Muslim troops into Azerbaijan. In particular, he cited two campaigns of military leader al-Mughira ibn Shu’ba in 640-643, which resulted in the imposition of tax (kharaj) on the population.

Arab historian Jalaluddin al-Suyuti (1445-1505), one of the most prolific authors of Arab Muslim literature who wrote over 600 works, refers to the Azerbaijani city of Barda as well. His book titled “Tadrib-ur-Ravi” says in reference to the descent of great medieval Azerbaijani scholar Abu-Bakr Ahmad Al-Bardiji al-Barzaini (844-914) that “Bardij is a small area in Azerbaijan near Barda” (30, 1/238).

Hamdallah Qazvini (1280-1349), a Persian historian and geographer, cites extensive data about Azerbaijan after its capture by Mongol troops in “Nuzkhat al-Kulub”

(“The delight of hearts”). In particular, Qazvini notes that the Azerbaijan province “includes nine ‘tumans’ and 27 cities”.

“Most of it is distinguished by a cold climate and only a few areas have a moderate climate. Its boundaries stretch until the Persian Iraq, Mugan, Gurjistan, Arman and Kurdistan provinces. Its length from Baku to Khalkhal is 95 farsangs, while its width from Bajarvan to Mount Sipan is 55 farsangs,” the source said (31, 37).

“Mujam al-Buldan”, a book by Yakut al-Khamavi, another 13th century historian, cites numerous facts concerning the geography, history and population of Azerbaijan. This piece of work contains up to a hundred mentions and materials about Azerbaijan.

“Nakhjuvan (Nakhchivan) or Nakjuvan, as it is pronounced sometimes, is a town within the uttermost limits of Azerbaijan,” al-Khamavi wrote.

“Nashava is a city in Azerbaijan or in Arran, as some say. It borders on Armenia. It is popularly known as Nakhjuvan or Nakjuvan,” the book said (31, 13).

Thus, Azerbeyjan (Azerbaijan) and Arran (Caucasian Albania) were often considered by medieval scholars to be the same region or an interchangeable geographical name.

Summarizing the above-mentioned content, it is worth mentioning that the referenced sources allow us to confirm the groundlessness of the Armenian claims to Azerbaijani territory and the bias of some foreign scientific circles supporting these far-fetched allegations. ✨

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