



Sixth Century Alania: between Byzantium, Sasanian Iran and the Turkic World

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This paper tries to collect and analyse all available evidence –mainly from Byzantine, Iranian and Arabic sources– on the role played by the Alans in the Byzantine-Persian Wars which took place during the long reign of Husrav Anōšrīvān (531-79). Special attention is paid to Sasanian army reforms and Caucasian politics in the early sixth century.

Alanic history has often reached a premature end in Western tradition, associated with the days when the last remnants of the bands taking part in the first wave of the *Völkerwanderung* (4th-5th c.) were wiped out in Europe and North Africa. However, through mixed fortunes, the Alans went on with their wandering life for almost a millennium, until the Mongol storm reduced progressively their area of influence to the Caucasian lands which still remain under the sway of their Ossetian heirs.

Since I have spent the last three lustra dealing with sources on the Alans one way or another, sometimes I have been asked to write a history of the Alans –a task which I hold to be too complex for the time being, due to the lack of evidence for many periods. Nevertheless, today I would like to devote this paper to reconstructing the historical framework of an eventful century in the aftermath of their westward migrations, hoping that it arises Prof. Marshak's interest and, of course, as a humble homage to him.*

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1. Kavād I (488-531) and the Gate of the Alans

1.1. Al-Balāḍurī states that, in reply to Khazar raids against Armenia, king Kavād I (*Qubād b. Fīrūz*) despatched one of his generals, who ravaged Albania (*bilād Arrān*) and conquered the region between al-Rass river and Šarwān; then, Qubād himself founded several cities in Albania and erected a brick dam (*sudd al-libn*) between Šarwān and the Gate of the Alans (*Bāb al-Lān*), this is, the Darial pass, located East of Mt. Kazbek and South of present-day Vladikavkaz.¹ His son and successor Husrav I Anōšruvān (*Anūšīrwān Kisra*) is said to have built both the city of Darband (*madīnat al-Bāb wa'l-Abwāb*) and the fortress of Darial (*qal'at Bāb al-Lān*).²

1.2. On the other side, according to Al-Ṭabarī, Husrav had to face an alliance of Northern peoples bursting into Armenia (*Armīniyah*), made up of *Abḥaz*, †*Banğar* (Bulgars?), *Balanğar* (later the name of a Khazar city in the Caucasian region) and *al-Lān*.³

1.3. Finally, Ferdūsī tells of an expedition led by Husrav (*Kesrā Nūšīnravān*) against the Alans, because “the border of Iran lived in terror of them” (*vazīšān bodī marz-e Īrān be-bīm*); however, no battle was fought after all, because some aged Alans arrived before the king’s tent with presents, begged for pardon and were forgiven. Then the Alans were ordered to raise a castle (*yekī šārsānī*) and also a high wall to surround it (*yekī bāre-ye gerd-aš andar boland*).⁴

¹ The Darial pass has been variously named throughout history: [1] Gr. *Σαρματικαὶ Πύλαι* “Sarmatian Gates” (Ptol. 5.9.11 & 15); [2] Lat. *Portae Caspasiae / Hiberiae* «Caucasian / Iberian Gates” (Plin. *N.H.* 6.30 & 40); [3] according to Plin. *N.H.* 6.30 *magno errore multis Caspiae dictae* (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 6.33.3 *Caspia via*), a usual mistake among Byzantine authors: thus Proc. *Bell.* 8.3.4; Men. Prot. fr. 11 (*FHG* IV ed. C. Müller, p. 212a); Const. Porph. *De cerim.* 2, 48: *Κάσπια / Κασπέια Πύλαι* [4] after the Sasanian inscriptions of Šābuhr I and Kirdīr (3rd c. AD) widely known in Oriental sources as “the Gate of the Alans”: MPers. *'l'n'n BBA*, Parth. *'l'nn TROA /Alānān dar'*, Gr. *πυ[λ]ω[ν] Αλα[ν]ω[ν]* (ŠKZ Gr. 3), Arm. (Pl.) *drownk' Alanac'*, NPers. *dar-i Alān* (whence Georg. *Dariala* and our “Darial”), Arab. *Bāb al-Lān*.

² Al-Balāḍurī *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān* 227-8 (ed. Šalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munağğid, Cairo 1956, p. 231-2; trans. P.K. Hitti, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, New York 1916, p. 305-7).

³ Al-Ṭabarī ed. M.J. de Goeje, Leiden 1879-1901, vol. I, p. 895; trans. Th. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sassaniden*, Leiden 1879, p. 157 and n. 3). Arabic *Armīniyah* must be here equivalent to MPers. *kust-i Kapkōh* “the province of the Caucasus” (= Albania, Armenia and Iberia).

⁴ Ferdūsī *Šāhnāme* 41, 330-360 (ed. J. Mohl, vol. VI, p. 186-190). According to al-Mas'ūdī *Murūğ al-ḡaḥab* II.43 (trans. Ch. Pellat, *Les prairies d'or*, I-III, Paris 1962-71, § 479), the so-called “Castle of the Gate of the Alans” (*qal'at Bāb al-Lān*) was built by the Persian king Isbandiyār b. Bistāsf (the mythical Esfandyār, son of Kei Goštāsp), in order to prevent the Alans from reaching the Caucasus.

1.4. These sources give witness to raids led by the Alans against the Transcaucasian provinces of the Persian empire, most probably at the beginning of the 6th century. Even if al-Balāḍurī’s Khazars appear to be nothing but an anachronism, since they are not known to Western sources before the 7th century, this objection does not rule out the fact that peoples other than the Alans, mainly of Turkic stock, like Bulgars or Caucasian Huns, could also have been involved in such inroads.⁵ Procopius tells that the Huns invaded the Sasanian empire under Kavād *ca.* 503 and that this king had to wage a long war against this people “in the northerly portion of his realm” (ἐς τῆς χώρας τὰ πρὸς ἄρκτοι), which even forced him to enter into a peace treaty with Emperor Anastasius in 506;⁶ and a “Hunnic war” (Οὐννικὸς πόλεμος) is still mentioned under Husrav.⁷ Besides, Ambāzuk (Ἀμβαζούκης), a Hun by birth,⁸ controlled the Caspian Gates (Darial) and the fortress (τὸ φυλακτήριον) guarding them, but after his death Kavād took possession of the passes.⁹ In 532, Justinian paid Husrav to maintain the Caucasian defences at the Caspian Gates, when they concluded the so-called “Everlasting Peace” (ἀπέραντος εἰρήνη).¹⁰ Relying on this evidence, it can be conjectured that, as a result of these wars and border raids, Persian offensives were launched under Kavād and his son Husrav, which gained control of the Darial pass, and then the Alans themselves were compelled to erect some kind of fortress, perhaps to defend this same strategic military post against Turkic nomads. This statement fits in with the system of defences –a long wall and series of forts– built by Husrav in Eastern Caucasus, including the massive fortification of Darband.¹¹

2. Husrav I Anōšruvān (531-78) and the Marches of Alania

2.1. The so-called “Letter of Tansar”, only preserved in a Persian version dating from the 13th century and ascribed to a counsellor of king Ardashīr Pābagān (224-40), but considered by modern scholars to be a work dating from the Later Sasanian period, mentions the Lords of the Marches (*aṣḥāb-e ṣogūr*)

⁵ Cf. Arm. *Honac’ pahak* “pass of the Huns” = Darband.

⁶ Proc. *Bell.* 1.8.19; 9.24; 10.15.

⁷ Proc. *Bell.* II.16.3.

⁸ But holding an Iranian name, close to that of the Ossete *Anbazuk* in *K’art’lis C’xovreba* (ed. S. Qauxč’išvili, T’bilisi 1955-59, p. 45-46; trans. R.W. Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, Oxford 1996, p. 54-55).

⁹ Proc. *Bell.* 1.10.9-12.

¹⁰ Proc. *Bell.* 1.22.5.

¹¹ Cf. al-Mas’ūdī *Murūğ al-dahab* II.2-3 (trans. Ch. Pellat, *Les prairies d’or*, I-III, Paris 1962-71, § 442).

of Allān, the Region of the West (*nāhyat-e maḡreb*), 𐬨𐬀vārazm and Kābol as the only four men not belonging to the royal household who could be named kings (*šāhān*).¹²

2.2. In a similar way, and according to Ferdūsī, Husrav II Abarwēz (*Ḥosrō Parvīz*: 590-627) divided the world into four parts (*čār bahr*), whose boundaries were the Byzantine border (*marz-e Rūm*), Zābolestān, the Alans (*Alānān*) and 𐬨𐬀rāsān.¹³ These place names are easy to reconcile with those given by the Letter of Tansar, following the cardinal points: N/NW *Allān* ~ *Alānān*; W/SW *nāhyat-e maḡreb* ~ *marz-e Rūm*; E/NE *Ḥvārazm* ~ *Ḥorāsān*; and S/SE *Kābol* ~ *Zābolestān*. However, this division dates back to the times of Husrav I, under whose reign most army reforms were carried out: the two Husravs, like the two Šābuhrs, are frequently confused.

2.3. Husrav II himself is said to have been appointed “king of the Alans” (*Alān šāh*) by his father Ohrmazd IV (579-90),¹⁴ which clearly shows that this was a Persian title, maybe close to Pahl. *štr’l’nywc’n* /Šahr-Ālānyōzān/ and Gr. *Σαραλανεοζαν* (cf. Arm. *Alanayozan*).¹⁵

2.4. Otherwise, Procopius records the office of **kanārang* (*ἀξιωμα δὲ τὸ χαναράγγης*), comparing it to *στρατηγός*; this title was held under Kavād I and Husrav I by three Persians, Gušnaspdād (*Γουσαναστάδης*), **Ādurgundbād* (*Ἄδεργουδουνβάδης*) and his son Vahrām (*Ὀυαρράμης*), “whose province laid on the very frontier (*πρὸς αὐταῖς που ταῖς ἐσχατιαῖς*) of the Persian territory, in a district adjacent to the land of the Hephthalites”.¹⁶ Therefore, this Eastern **kanārang* was nothing but the Lord of the Marches of 𐬨𐬀vārazm –or 𐬨𐬀rāsān, where Ferdūsī situates “the border of the Hephthalites” (*marz-e Heitāl*).¹⁷ Beyond any doubt, the available evidence suggests that all three

¹² Ed. M. Mīnovī, *Nāme-ye Tansar*, Tehran 1975², p. 9; trans. M.F. Boyce, *The Letter of Tansar*, Rome 1968, p. 11-13.

¹³ Ferdūsī *Šāhnāme* XLIII.3231-51 (ed. Mohl, vol. VII, p. 272-4).

¹⁴ Cf. Ferdūsī *Šāhnāme* XLIII.314 (ed. Mohl, vol. VII, p. 30), where 𐬨𐬀sro Parvīz says: *Alān šāh mā-rā pedar karde būd*.

¹⁵ Cf. D. Weber, “Ein bisher unbekannter Titel aus spätsassanidischer Zeit?”, *Corolla Iranica. Papers in honour of Prof. Dr. D.N. MacKenzie on the occasion of his 65th birthday*, Frankfurt 1991, p. 228-235, who explains *Ālānyōzān* as “die Alanen bekämpfend”.

¹⁶ Proc. *Bell.* 1.5.4; 6.12; 23.7; 23.22. This title seems to have become a proper name, as shown by Procopius himself (*Bell.* 1.21; VII.32), and is the same word as Bactr. *καραλαγγο*, a borrowing explained by W.B. Henning, “The Bactrian Inscription”, *BSOAS* 23/1, 1960, p. 50-51 as **karān-drang-* < **kanār-drang* “who secures the borders”; cf. V.G. Lukonin *CHI* III [1983] 731 and Ph. Gignoux, *Noms propres sassanides en moyen-perse épigraphique* (IPNB II/2), Wien 1986, p. 104, § 488.

¹⁷ Ferdūsī *Šāhnāme* XLIII.3248 (ed. Mohl, vol. VII, p. 274).

(Tansar's *šāhib-e saġr*, named *šāh*; Ferdūsī's *šāh* in *Alān šāh*; and Procopius *χαναράγγης*) are used to designate one of the hereditary *marzbānān* or *spāhbedān* established by Husrav I as margraves of the Sasanian Empire.

3. The Alans and Justinian's Second Persian War (540-62)

3.1. In 541, Husrav took the strong fortress of Petra, on the Black Sea coast, and established a protectorate over Lazica, a country which had been at least nominally subjected to the Romans up to that time. But in 548, Gubazes, king of the Lazi (541-55), decided to throw off the Persian rule, requested aid from Justinian and brought Alans and Sabirs to an alliance. Procopius, our main source for these events, only says that they agreed for three *centenaria* "not just to assist the Lazi in guarding their land from plunder, but also to render Iberia so empty of men, that in the future not even the Persians would be able to come in from there".¹⁸ But it is worth mentioning that, according to the Medieval Armenian adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles, the Ossetes (Alans) attacked and ravaged K'art'li (Iberia) under king P'arsman (547-61), prompting him to request aid from the Persians and to submit to them with tribute.¹⁹

3.2. The following year, a large Sasanian army led by general Farroxān (*Χοριάνης*) attacked Lazica, and many Alan allies were brought up in his support. But when they went into battle near the river C'xenis-c'qali (*Ἰππις*), Farroxān was killed by a stray arrow and the Sasanian army withdrew in disorder towards their camp, which was seized by the Romans and Lazi, who won the day.²⁰

3.3. Otherwise, when the Fifty Years Peace was signed in 562, its first decree forbade "Persians, Huns, Alans or other Barbarians" to attack the Roman Empire through Darband (*Χορουτζόν*) and Darial (*αἱ Κάσπιαί πύλαι*), which clearly shows that at least an act of aggression was to be feared on the side of the Alans, if it had not actually taken place.²¹ In fact, Procopius states that the Alans are "an independent people, most of whom are allies of the Persians (*οἱ δὴ καὶ Πέρσαις τὰ πολλὰ ξυμμαχοῦσιν*) and march against the Romans and their other enemies".²²

¹⁸ Proc. *Bell.* II.29.29.

¹⁹ Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, p. 225; however, this version differs from that given by the Georgian original in the "History of King Vaxt'ang Gorgasali", where nothing is said about the Ossetes and an unprovoked Persian aggression is recalled.

²⁰ Proc. *Bell.* VIII.1.4; 8.8.

²¹ Men. Prot. fr. 11 (*FHG* IV, p. 212a).

²² Proc. *Bell.* VIII.3.4.

4. Saroes, king of Alania (ca. 557-73) and the Western Turks

4.1. The Ps.-Zacharias Rhetor locates the Alans beyond the Caspian Gates (*tar 'ā d-Qaspiyūn*), which lie in the land of the Huns (*Hūnāyē*), and next to thirteen Hunnic or Turkic peoples who live in tents, i.e. Onoghurs, Oghurs, Sabirs, Bulghars, Kutrighurs, Avars, *Ksr* (*Acatziri), *Dyrmr* (*Itimari), Saraghurs, *B'grsyq* (*Barselt), *Kwls* (*Choliatae), Abdelae and Hephthalites.²³ As we have seen, both the Alans and “the Huns who are called Sabirs” (*Οὐννοι, οἱ Σάβειροι ἐπικαλοῦνται*) are often recorded in Byzantine and Sasanian service, though not always on the same side.²⁴ And when the Avars reached the land of the Alans in 557, they took up their first diplomatic relations with Byzantium through the mediation of the Alan king Saroes.²⁵

4.2. Some fragments from the lost historical work written by Menander Protector, extant in Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *Excerpta de legationibus*, refer to an embassy headed by the Senator and *magister utriusque militiae per Orientem* Zemarchus, which left for the court of the Turkic Khan Sizabulus (*Ištāmi qaγan*) in 569. After carrying out their mission, Zemarchus and his retinue went on the return journey accompanied by a Turkic *tarqan* named Tagma and made their way along the Northern shore of the Caspian and through the Caucasus. When the expedition reached the Alans, their king Saroes was pleased to receive the Roman delegation, but Tagma's Turks were not allowed to enter into his presence until they put down their arms, which gave rise to a true diplomatic incident that lasted for three days. Finally, Saroes warned them against the Persians, who were ambushed throughout Suania (Svanet'i),²⁶ and they decided to take an alternative route through the so-called path of Darine (*ἡ Δαρεινὴ ἀτραπὸς*) instead of the Mindimian path (*ἡ τῶν Μινδιμιανῶν ἀτραπὸς*),²⁷ and crossed Apsilia (Ap'žvilet'i) down to the Black

²³ Ps.-Zacharias Rhetor, ed. E.W. Brooks *CSCO* 84 / Syr. 39, p. 214-5.

²⁴ Proc. *Bell.* II.29.14-15; see our §§ 3.1, 5.2.

²⁵ Men. Prot. fr. 4 (*FHG* IV, p. 203a). Saroes (*Σαρῶης*, also *Σαρῶδιος*, *Σαρῶσιος*, cf. Oss. *sær* “head”) is called both *ἡγεμών* and *ἡγούμενος* by Menander, but also *βασιλεύς* by Theophanes of Byzantium.

²⁶ On Alans bordering with Svanet'i (and not with the Armenian province of Siwnik'), see also Proc. *Bell.* I.15.1.

²⁷ According to Agath. III.15-16, in 556 the Misimians –or Mindimians– killed the *magister utriusque militiae* Soterichus (*Σωτήριχος*) because he was suspected of plotting to hand over to the Alans one of their fortresses (*φρούριον δὲ δὴ Βούχλοον ὀνομάζουσιν*), built near the border with Lazica, an event which reveals a certain enmity between these two peoples.

Sea, where they sailed to Trebizond, arriving in Byzantium *ca.* 571/2.²⁸

4.3. This or other similar episodes could have been of consequence to the Alans. Some years later, in 576, a new embassy was sent to the Turks in order to incite them to war against Persia, but Sizabulus had just died and one of his sons, named Turxathus (**Türk-šad*), was not willing to cooperate and gave a hostile reception to the Byzantine ambassador, a certain Valentine, speaking of both Alans and Utigurs as having become his subjects.²⁹

5. The Alans in the Persian Wars from Justin II to Maurice (572-91)

5.1. War between Byzantium and Persia was resumed under Justin II (565-78), and the Alans fought again on either side. John, *strategos* of Armenia, was supported by the Alans under Saroes –as well as by Colchian and Abasgian troops– when he defeated the army led by the Persian general Vahrām (*Βαραμαάνης*) in the battle of Sargathon, near Nisibis, in the spring of 573.³⁰

5.2. Under Caesar Tiberius (574-78), when Byzantine generals took hostages among Alans and Sabirs in Albania (*Alania?), these peoples sent ambassadors to Byzantium. They were received by Tiberius himself, who won their favour by providing them with twice as much money as they said they were paid by the Sasanian king, a fact which bears witness to the existence of Alan groups in the service of Persia in the first years of the war.³¹

5.3. On the other side, according to the Georgian Chronicles, Guaram (*ca.* 588-602?), first *curopalates* of K‘art‘li (Iberia), led down troops of the North consisting of Ossetes, Durjuks and Didos (Lesghians) combined with a Georgian army and ravaged Persian Aderbadagan (Azerbaijan) on the orders of the Byzantine Emperor Maurice (582-602), who had financed this campaign

²⁸ Men. Prot. fr. 21-22 (*FHG* IV, p. 229b-230a). This episode is briefly recalled by Ioan. Epiph. fr. 2 (*FHG* IV, p. 274a), Theophyl. Sim. 3.9.7 (ed. C. de Boor, p. 128-9) and Theoph. 378B (ed. C. de Boor *BT* I, p. 245), whose reports seem to rely on each other and ultimately on Menander’s narrative. All of them tell of the embassy making its way through Alan territory, but both John of Epiphania and Theophylact Simocatta mention a Sasanian attempt to bribe the Alans as well, in order that the latter would get rid of the Romans –an event held to be one of the *casus belli* of the Byzantine-Persian war which broke out in 572.

²⁹ Men. Prot. fr. 43 (*FHG* IV, p. 246b): *ταύτη τοι καὶ ὑπακούουσιν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐν μοίρᾳ καθεστήκασι δούλου* “they obey us and have become our slaves”. The Orkhon inscriptions say nothing on the Alans, and their identification with the people Az (2nd Turk Kaghanate) is hardly convincing, at least on actual evidence (see my “Historical Contacts Between Alanic and Turkic Peoples in the West Eurasian Steppes”, *The Turks*, Ankara 2002, vol. I, p. 548-52, esp. 549b).

³⁰ Theoph. Byz. fr. 4 (*FHG* IV, p. 271a-b).

³¹ Men. Prot. fr. 42 (*FHG* IV, p. 244ab).

with much treasure.³²

6. Aftermath

The analysis of the available sources suggests the following milestones for the history of sixth century Alania:

(a) Alan and Hun raids against Persian Transcaucasia in the early sixth century provoked a Persian counterattack which gained control of the Darial pass, fortifying it and allowing the creation of the Marches of Alania. This enclave was under the sway of a ruler in Persian service (= *Alān šāh*, **ṣāhib-e ṣaġr-e Alān*, perhaps *Šahr-Ālānyōzān*), eventually identified as the *marzbān* governing the Northern (or North-Western) quarter of the Later Sasanian Empire.

(b) The Alans fought on either side during the Byzantine-Persian wars, but, leaving aside the ups and downs of a mercenary life, which could explain this behaviour, I prefer to share the hypothesis of a division between “Eastern”, pro-Persian, and “Western”, pro-Byzantine Alans, the former around Darial, the latter following king Saroes, the main character of our sources for almost two decades.³³

(c) The growing pressure put by the arrival of successive Turkic peoples (Huns, Sabirs, Avars, Western Turks) on the Alans speaks in favour of the fact that the latter fell under the dominion of these newcomers, sooner or later, although the situation of Alania in the seventh century –a period characterized by a striking paucity of sources– remains almost unknown. At least, when we hear of them again during the Arab-Khazar wars, beyond all doubt they had become subject to a Turkic empire.

³² *K'art'lis C'xovreba* ed. Qauxč'išvili, p. 219-20 (trans. Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, p. 230).

³³ Thus e.g. V. Kouznetsov–I. Lebedynsky, *Les alains. Cavaliers des steppes, seigneurs du Caucase*, Paris 1997, p. 64.