

Harry T. Norris

---

## EARLY MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC FOLK EPIC AND ROMANCE AMONG THE MUSLIM PEOPLES OF THE CAUCASUS REGIONS OF EASTERN EUROPE

From the very limited documentary sources which we know of, it would seem that the earliest folk-epics of the medieval Muslim peoples of Eastern Europe (specifically the Circassians, the Daghestanis, the Pechenegs, the Bashkirs, the Volga Bulgars and the Qipchaq Tatars) were a selection of varied tales (part Arab, part Turco-Persian, part indigenous) and a *corpus* of folk-epic and legend which were blended to compose a myth of their origin which often attached them to the ancient Arabs, either to the pre-Islamic Arabs from the age of the pagan 'Ādites, or to the early Muslim warriors, led by Arab commanders in the days of the earliest Islamic conquests and who had imposed their faith upon parts of Asia Minor adjacent to Byzantium and upon the Caucasus. It then spread within the empire of the Khazars and parts of the Volga region and along the routes that led from Central Asia to China.

Evidence of this is to be found in Wahb b. Munabbih's/Ibn Hishām's, *Kitāb al-tijān* (AH 218/AD 833) where the long march of the Koranic, Dhū'l-Qarnayn (in his Yemenite Pseudo-Alexander guise) is described. It is suggested by 'Ubayd b. Sharya, the storyteller, that the source of his information was derived from Turcic peoples who lived to the north-east of the Khazars. He remarks:

The king desired to raid China and he swore on oath that he would do so. He made ready for the raid against it and he marched with his army and his people from the people of the Yemen. He marched along the coastal tract until he went forth along the route which was taken by his grandfather, al-Rā'ish, who had taken it when proceeding to the Orient. When he reached Khurasan he marched to the right, as his grandfather had done, until he came to the "thin and puny men" (*al-rakā'ik*) and the "wearers of black cowls" (*ashāb al-qalānis al-sūd*) and he entered China. He looted it, he slew many, he took captives and he ruined much there. Seven years and ten months elapsed during the course of his march, his sojourn and his return from that raid of his. He returned homewards and he left behind in China a man who was from amongst the elite of his companions. He was called Bārid b. al-Nabat, and with him he had

twelve thousand knights, among the best. They were a band (*rābiṭa*) in league together in a company with him wherever he was in the country. Then it was that the *Tubba'* swore that he would not leave a land which his forebears had previously encompassed from those of the non-Arabians (*al-a ḥājim*) and of others, but therein he would establish a league and a garrison from those of his own men and soldiery. That took place at the time of his return from China.

Mu‘āwiya [the Caliph] said, “May your father belong to God, O ‘Ubayd. Is it known whom he left behind as his successor in China?” ‘Ubayd said, “O Commander of the Faithful, they are the Baynūn<sup>1</sup>, Turk (?) and Iram (?) (Arim)<sup>2</sup>. When asked, they report that they are of Arab origin. They say that they have a temple (*bayt*) wherein they worship their Lord. They perambulate it seven times<sup>3</sup> and here they make sacrifices. That takes place during one month in the year.” He added, “When the foe are in great number amidst the structure of that temple, as in our wont, we go forth to it out of reverence for it. We isolate ourselves without. When the first amongst us [Muslims] beheld that [ritual] they placed in their land, and in the locality where they dwelt, a temple like unto it. We, to this day, reverence it and we perambulate it seven times and we sacrifice there for the sake of it during one month in the year and whosoever comes from the people adores and shows reverence there for three days.”

Mu‘āwiya [the Caliph] said, “O ‘Ubayd, who informed you of that?”. He said, “I raided, O Commander of the Faithful, the land of the Turks via this direction.” He said, “From which direction?” He said, “From the direction of the Khazars. There are people amongst them who are scholars and who profess a [revealed] religion. I enquired about them and about those who were adjacent to them. This is what they mentioned to me.” Mu‘āwiya [the Caliph] said, “I have been told of this report regarding the Turks of the *Tubba'* I do not know who amongst the *Tubba'* left a people from the Yemen in China?” He said, “This is the explanation for that tradition (*hadīth*).”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Baynūn. This is a Yemenite name that could bear a likeness to a tribal name or a toponym in Central Asia or on the Chinese borders. See Nabih Amin Faris, *The Antiquities of South Arabia*, (Princeton, 1938), 21, 25, 37, 40, 53, 56, 71.

<sup>2</sup>‘Arim, or Iram, *ibid.*, 25, 85-6.

<sup>3</sup>Perambulation (*tawāf*). On similarities between the Arabian *Ka‘ba* and its perambulation and pilgrimage rites and those of pre-Islamic religions in Arabia, Israelite ritual and those of non-Islamic religions, in general, see F. Buhl’s “Tawāf,” in the *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (Leiden, 1953), 585-6.

<sup>4</sup>Wahb b. Munabbih, *Kitāb al-tīḥān fī mulūk ḥimyar*, (Yemen, 1347 AH), 450-1. There may appear to be some connection between these expeditions, which are referred to in the *Kitāb al-tījān*, and the accounts of the relationship between the Arabs and the Tibetans; see Denis Sinor, *The Cambridge History of Early Asia*, (Cambridge, 1990), 382-5.

The nature of the religious building perambulated which is described in ‘Ubayd’s narrative, above, is not clear. It suggests some sort of Meccan ka‘ba in the Arab mind, hallowed, it was believed, by Arabian expatriates who had wandered into Central Asian regions at a date prior to the reign of Mu‘awiya, the Umayyad. Conceivably, they might be Manichaens or Christianised Huns, who had been converted and settled in villages by Nestorian or Syrian or Armenian missionaries. Alternatively, the account may have some connection with the reported wanderings of ‘Alid fugitives, such as the descendants of ‘Ali’s son, Husayn, whom some had allegedly met and seen in the region of Khotan.<sup>5</sup> The *terra incognita* of the North and the East slowly took shape in the minds of Arab and Persian geographers, as has been argued by Minorsky,<sup>6</sup> it was to include a “town of the ‘Alids” (*baldat al-‘alawiyya*) and a “town of Women” (probably Amazons or Sauromatae), which, as “the Island of Women” (*jazīrat al-nisā’*) came to be sited by many later Muslim geographers in Turkic regions, or within

<sup>5</sup> On the ‘Alids in Khotan, see Sharaf al-Zamān, *Tāhir Marvazion China, the Turks and India*, Arabic text (c. AD 1120), with an English translation and commentary, translated by V. Minorsky (London, 1942), 17, which says:

Near the city there is a river, one of the greatest in existence; in the middle of it there is a large island and on it a large castle inhabited by Tālibid ‘Alid Muslims who act as middle men between the Chinese and the caravans and merchants coming to them. These Muslims come forth to meet them, examine the merchandise and goods, carry them to the Lord of China and come back with their equivalents when these latter have been established. One after the other the merchants enter the castle with their goods and often remain there for several days. The reason why the said ‘Alids are found on the island is that they are a party of Talibids and had come to Khorasan in the days of the Omayyads and settled there. But when they saw how intent the Omayyads were finding and destroying them, they escaped in safety and started eastwards. They found no foothold in any Islamic country because of fear of pursuit. So they fled to China, and when they reached the banks of the river the patrol, as is the custom, prevented them from crossing, while they had no means of going back. So they said: “Behind us is the sword and before us the sea.” The castle on the island was empty of inhabitants because snakes had grown numerous in it and overrun it. So the ‘Alids said: “To endure snakes is easier than to endure swords or be drowned.” So they entered the castle and began destroying the snakes and throwing them into the water until in short time they had cleared the castle (of them) and settled there. When the Lord of China learnt that (for him) there was no trouble behind them and that they were forced to seek refuge with him he established them in this place and comforted them by granting them means of existence. So they lived in peace and security, begot children and multiplied. They learned Chinese and the languages of the other peoples who visit them, and became their middlemen.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.66.

remote Baltic areas, especially in Wenland, Poland, Estonia and Finland<sup>7</sup>.

The earliest instances for much of the substance of the above tale may be gleaned from the accounts of the early contacts between the Arabs, the Khazars and the Caucasians. This may be illustrated from the several instances that are to be found in al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-dhahab* (AH 336/AD 947). He was writing about a century later than Wahb/Ibn Hishām:

The Muslims dominate in Khazaria since it is they who form the royal army; they are known as the Arsiyya. Originating from the neighbourhood of Khwārazm, they came a long time ago in order to establish themselves in the kingdom of the Khazars, a little after Islam first appeared, fleeing from the double scourge of drought and plague which swept through their land. They are powerful and courageous. Upon them the Khazar king bestows his trust and confidence during times of war.

In establishing themselves in his empire, they have stipulated amongst the conditions that they will be free to exercise their religion, that they can have mosques and recite the call to prayer openly and that the king's minister will always be selected by them. The one who today fulfils these high functions is a Muslim, in fact, who is named Aḥmad b. Kūyah. Every time that the Khazar king wages war against Muslims, they [those who serve in his army] stay aloof. They do not fight their coreligionists, however, they march against all infidels. Today, some seven thousand amongst them form the units of the mounted archers of the king. They wear the breastplate (*jawshan*), the helmet and the hauberk. Equally amongst them are to be found lancers who are equipped and armed as in the common practise amongst the Muslims<sup>8</sup>.

Such a description of these mercenary Muslim Khwrāzms highlights a role that was to be played in a later age by Muslim warriors in medieval Hungary, by the Cumans and Polvtsi in Russia and the Ukraine and, at an earlier date, by elements of the Bulgars of the Volga region and the Danube basin (at times the distinction is obscure, just as these peoples were loosely incorporated in the term "Slav" (*saqāliba*) whose own contribution is made clear in several sections of al-Mas'ūdī's account.

<sup>7</sup> On the 'Island' or 'City of Women', which was believed, in the World of Islam, to be located in the remotest areas of the globe, see Minorsky, *Ibid.*, 38, 66, 67, 122 and Séamas Ó Catháin, Páraig O Héalaí, *The Heroic Process, Form, Function and Fantasy in Folk Epic*, ed. Bo Almqvist, (Dublin, 1987), 542-45, in my chapter devoted to 'Folk Epic in the Wilderness, Arabia and the Nordic World.'

<sup>8</sup> al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345 AH/956 Ad) in *Murūj al-dhahab* (*Les prairies d'or*) trans. Barbier de Maynard and Pavet de Courteille, revised and corrected by C. Pellat, vol. 11, (Paris, 1965), 162, para. 450.

He shows, for example, the territorial, commercial and religious links between these Bulgars, the Khazars, the Khwārazms, the Russians and the Arabs, via the Caucasus, Central Asia and the gateways to the Balkans:

As we have previously said, Burtās is also the name given to a Turkish people who are established on the banks of this river to which they owe their name. It is from its territory that one exports the skins of black or ruddy foxes, known as *burtāsi*. It is above all the black pelts which are worth one hundred *dīnārs* or more. Those that are red are of a lesser worth. The first are worn by the kings of the Arabs and non-Arabs who willingly adorn themselves and hold them in high regard. They do so more than the sable (*sammūr*)<sup>9</sup>, the ermine (*fanak*) and the other furs of this kind.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Mas'ūdī continues:

The Volga (*nahr al-Khazar*), in the upper part of its course, is linked by one of its arms with a gulf of the Sea of Azov, known also as the Russian Sea, since these latter, who are the sole navigators of it, inhabit one of its banks. They are a nation who are many in number and who recognise no authority, nor revealed law. Several of their number who engage in commercial transactions carry on trade with the Bulgars. In their country, the Russians possess a silver mine which is similar to that which is situated in the mountain of Banjhir in Khurasan. The Bulgars have their capital beside the Sea of Azov.<sup>11</sup> These people who are a type of Turk inhabit, if I am not mistaken, the Seventh Clime. Caravans leave continuously for the Khwārazm country, which depends upon Khurasan, or they return from thence. As this route crosses the localities where other Turks are encamped they are obliged to put themselves under their protection. At the moment (AH 332/AD 943), the king of the Bulgars is a Muslim who became converted having a dreamt a dream. It was in the reign of al-Muqtadir bi-'llāh, after the year AH 310/AD 943. One of his sons has made the pilgrimage and while on his way, the Caliph in Baghdad delivered a standard to him, a robe of office black in colour and silver money. These people have a great mosque. Their king carries out raids

<sup>9</sup> *Sammūr*. According to E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, (London, 1863) (Cambridge, 1984), part 1, 1426, "Sable, *mustela zibellina*, or *viverra zibellina*. A certain beast or animal well known, found in Russia beyond the country of the Turks, usually resembling the ichneumon, in some instances of a glossy black red."

<sup>10</sup> H. T. Norris (n. 7), *Ibid.*, 537-8 and Minorsky, *Ibid.*, *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> al-Mas'ūdī, p.164, para. 455.

on the territory of Constantinople at the head of a cavalry which numbers some fifty thousand men”<sup>12</sup>.

Elsewhere, al-Mas‘ūdī refers to the Bulgars and to their cavalry as being involved in raids well within the Mediterranean region, boarding ships moored in Tarsus. He gives high praise to the bravery of the “Muslim Bulgars” who, individually, could stand up to “one hundred, or even two hundred, infidel cavaliers.” It is probably in the context of the early accounts of the Khwārzmian mercenaries in the Khazar court and the martial valour of cavalry of the Islamised Volga or Danube Bulgars that one should interpret the identification by Ahmad Nazmy (citing al-Ṭabarī) of a “Bulgar warrior” from Antioch called Salsāq, the commander of the “Slavs” (*ṣaqāliba*) in the battle of Qinnaşrīn,<sup>13</sup> during the last days of the reign of the Umayyad Marwān II. Salsāq (variant of *Salsāk* or *Saltak*) itself signified “warrior”. Here we have a non-Arab Muslim hero, associated with Antioch, who combined the role of Sayyid Baṭṭāl, also of Antioch, with the Saljūq hero of the Gagauz, the heterodox dervish, Sārī Salṭūq, whose town Ibn Baṭṭūta allegedly visited in the fourteenth century to the north of the Black Sea or in the Qipchaq Steppes.

But despite the presence of Bulgars, it is overwhelmingly with the peoples of the Caucasus that the settlement of Arabs and the exploits of Arab commanders figure in al-Mas‘ūdī’s records. There were Arabs, it was alleged, in the Derbend region of Daghestan.

Between the Kingdom of Khaydhān (Khaydhāq) and Derbend, were to be found Muslims who were Arab in origin and who know no other language save Arabic. They live in villages in a region covered with thickets and marshes, valleys and great rivers. They have established themselves there since the time when the Bedouin Arabians invaded it as conquerors.<sup>14</sup>

The Arabs and others had contact with the local fabricators of weaponry.

<sup>12</sup>The King of the Bulgars who had been converted to Islam is presumably the ruler of Bulghār, on the Volga. The Bulgars who raided Byzantine territory are most likely to have been Bulgars of the Danube region.

<sup>13</sup>Ahmad Nazmy, “Some aspects of military relations between the Arabs and the Slavs (as-Ṣaqāliba) during the Umayyad dynasty 40 AH/661 AD to 138 AH/750 AD,” *Studia arabistyczne i islamiastyczne*, 3 (1995): 36.

<sup>14</sup>For an unusual view of the relationship between conquering Arabs, the Khazars and the Christian Caucasians, see “The Passion of St. Abo of Tiflis” (written soon after St Abo’s death in the eighth century) in D. M. Lang’s *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, (London, 1956), 115-33.

Near to Ghūmiq, still in the same direction as the mountain, and of Sarīr, is situated the kingdom of the Zirīgarān (Zirigarān/ Zirīh Gārān), a (Persian) word which means “those who manufacture hauberks of mail”. In fact, most of its inhabitants manufacture hauberks, stirrups, bits, swords, and other instruments of warfare. They are of varied belief, amongst them are Muslims, Christians and Jews. Their country is of a difficult access and this protects them against the activities and the violence of their neighbours.<sup>15</sup>

The kingdom of the Alains had associations with ancient Persian heroes. After the triumph of Islam, under the Abbasid dynasty, the Alain princes, who were formerly infidels, embraced Christianity. After AH 331/AD 931, they forsook their new religion and they banished the bishops and the priests which the Byzantine Emperor had sent to them. Between the kingdom of the Alains and the Caucasus there is a citadel and a bridge which is upon a river of some considerable size. The castle is called *Qal'at Bāb al-Lān*. It was built by a Persian king of ancient times at the very beginning, namely Isbāndiyār, the son of Hystaspe (Bistāsf)<sup>16</sup> The latter hero was to become integrated into the Muslim vision of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn from the Yemen, on the one hand, and with the Arab commander Maslama b. cAbd al-Malik, on the other.

Al-Mas'ūdi continues,

This latter prince (Isbāndiyār) had to sustain numerous wars against the different peoples of the Orient. He penetrated into the remotest regions of the Turkish lands and he destroyed the *City of Brass* (*Madīnat al-Sufr*)<sup>17</sup> which was such an inaccessible locality that it seemed to defy all attacks. Its resistance had become proverbial amongst the Persians. These great deeds and the other exploits of Isbāndiyār, about which we have spoken, are to be found explained in detail in the work which bears the title *Paykār-nāme* (*Kitāb al-*

<sup>15</sup> al-Mas'udi, p.172, para. 477.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.180, para. 499.

<sup>17</sup> The legend of the ‘Copper City’, or ‘City of Brass’, which appears widely in Oriental literature, in most cases in the Arabic sources is located in North Africa or in Spain. In Persian and Central Asian traditions, this city is located in the Caucasus, in Iran or in Central Asia. See Annette Destrée, “Quelques reflexions sur le héros des récits apocalytiques persans et sur le mythe de la Ville de Cuivre,” in *Acts of the International Conference on the Theme La Persia nel Medioevo (Rome 31 March-5 April 1970)*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei Quaderno 160 (Rome, 1971): 639-53. This copper fortress (*dez-i-royin*, *royindiz*, etc.) at times brings together stories about the iron underground citadel of Afrasiāp. Bukhara was said to have underground chambers for the processing of the bodies of the dead, akin to the account of Abū Ḥāmid in regard to the Zirīh Gārān in Daghestan. A sacred “Copper Mountain” is to be found in Tibetan Lamaist tradition. The subject, viewed from the North African account, is discussed in Charles Genequand, “Autour de la Ville de Bronze: d’Alexandre à Salomon,” *Arabica* 39 (1992): 328-45.

*baykār*), which has been translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>c</sup>.<sup>18</sup> When Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān arrived in the country and its inhabitants had submitted to him, he placed an Arab garrison in the citadel. The descendants guard this position up to the present day.

This garrison received its supplies from the city of Tiflis. Georgia was the centre and its prince, known as al-Manbaghī resided in a place known as The Mosque of Dhū'l-Qarnayn (Mtskheta). In Tiflis, itself, the Arabs had an ally in a certain Isḥāq b. Ismā‘il, later to be deposed and slain during the reign of al-Mutawakkil. According to al-Mas‘ūdī<sup>19</sup>, Isḥāq claimed to be one of the Quraysh. The kingdom of the Sanarians (*al-Sanariyya*), although Christian by faith, claimed to be Arabic and descended from Nizār b. Ma‘add and a fraction of ‘Uqayl. In short, they claimed to be Yemenites and al-Mas‘ūdī notes that “the Sanarians claim, in tales which are very detailed, that they separated themselves (from the rest of their tribe) at the same time as these Banū ‘Uqayl from the country of Ma’rib [in the Yemen] whom we have just mentioned.”<sup>20</sup>

Something of this same Yemenite tradition was to be traced elsewhere, on its western side, in the region of the Circassians. Al-Mas‘ūdī’s information was merely hearsay, but they were said to have lived in a region called the Seven countries (*Sab‘ Buldān*). An adjacent group, separated from the Circassians by a river, were called Iram,

<sup>18</sup>Ibn al-Muqaffa<sup>c</sup> (see the article by J. D. Latham in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, ‘Abbasid Belles Lettres, [Cambridge, 1990]: 48–77), translated a number of Persian and Indian works into Arabic. From al-Mas‘ūdī’s account it would appear that he was not only an important source for the importation of the expeditions of Isbandiyar into Arabic but also that the Asian settings of the “Copper City” legends in the *Kitāb al-baykār* appear to be wholly distinct from those in the Muslim West where Mūsā b. Nuṣayr is the warrior hero.

<sup>19</sup>al-Mas‘ūdī, p.180 , para. 498.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, On the Sanāriyya, p.180, para 499. On Daghestan in general, and on the Arab presence there see the article ‘Daghستان’, in *EI* (2nd edition), by W. Barthold and A. Bennigsen, V. Minorsky, *A History of Sharvan and Darband in the 10th-11th Centuries* (Cambridge, 1958), 166–7, M. N. De Khanikoff, “Mémoire sur les inscriptions musulmanes du Caucase,” *Journal Asiatique* 20 (1962): 60ff., (in particular, pp 78–98). On p. 82 is found a folk epic of Abū Muslim. This text, together with translation, continues until p. 98. An Arabic poem, of uncertain date, on p. 80, attributed to Saraqā b. ‘Amr, in verse 5 (wa-al-ḥamānā l-jibālu jibālu qubḥ wa-jāwara dūrahū minnā diyāru) may be read as, “the mountains, hideous to behold (?) the Caucasus (?) bound us together (?) (gave us our food?) and our camps and their dwellings became neighbours one to another.” This article should be consulted in conjunction with the recent study of Arabic inscription in the region by A. R. Shikhsaydov, *Epigraficheskiye pamyatnikii dagestana X-XVII, kakistoricheskii istochniik*, (Moscow, 1984).

which also had a nominal link with pre-Islamic Yemenite tradition. They had pagan beliefs that were associated with a magic fish, the body of which was sacrificed to feed the tribe each year and which was revered by them.<sup>21</sup>

In the Caucasian traditions discussed, two in particular emerge as of primary importance for the myths of origin that were to be constructed in later ages. The first of these was that of the founding "Companion", usually Maslama b. 'Abd al-Malik, the other was that of descent from an Arab exile (often from the Yemen) whose origins were to be associated with the pagan, pre-Islamic, 'Ādite giants, and whose archeological remains or whose living descendants were reported to have been found or met by the Muslim travellers in the northernmost regions of the globe where outposts of Islam were located.

By far the most detailed and dramatic account of the heroic Caucasian view of the warrior and Companion of the Prophet, Maslama b. 'Abd al-Malik (whose defeat in the siege of Constantinople is well known) is found in the composition entitled *The Gift of Hearts and Minds* (*Tuhfat al-albāb*) by the Arab Abū Ḥāmid al-Andalusī of Granada (d. AH 565/AD 1169) who, on the way to and from his sojourns in Hungary and the Orient, passed through the region of Derbent and Daghestan. In the following passage he takes up the brief mention by al-Mas'ūdi, quoted above, and he offers an exotic scenario for a tale that did not escape the eye of the literary composers and compilers of the famous *Romance of Antar* (*Sīrat Ḫantara*), which did not achieve its final forms until a far later date.<sup>22</sup>

In the town of Derbent (namely *Bāb min al-Abwāb*, or *Bāb al-Abwāb*) there is a nation called al-Tabarsalān. In their territory, there are twenty-four districts. In each of them is a chief (*sarhang*), like an *amir*. They are Muslims, converted during the time of Maslama b. 'Abd al-Malik, when Hishām b. 'Abd al-Malik became Caliph and he sent him to conquer *Bāb al-Abwāb*. Many nations embraced Islam at his hand, amongst them also al-Lakzan, the Q (F)ilān and the Khaydaq and the Zaqlān and the Ghariq and the Darhah. There are seventy nations amongst them. Every nation has a language. When Maslama wished to leave, having settled in Derbent twenty-four thousand families from the Arabs from Mosul, Damascus, Homs, Palmyra, Aleppo and other towns of Syria and the Jazira [of Iraq], the Tabar-salān said to him, "O *Amīr*, we are afraid lest, when you leave us, these nations will apostatise

<sup>21</sup>al-Mas'ūdi, pp.174-5, para. 483.

<sup>22</sup>H. T. Norris, "From Asia to Africa: the *Tuhfat al-albāb* by Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī (473/1080-565/1169) as a source for the chronology and content of the *Sīrat 'Antar b. Shaddād'*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57, pt. 1, (1994): 174-83.

and we shall suffer hardship and wretchedness in their neighbourhood." So Maslama unsheathed his sword, and he said, "My sword is between you. Leave it here. As long as it is between you, none of these nations will rebel." So they converted his sword into a sort of *mīhrāb* out of the rock. They set it upright in the middle of that rock like a [mound] where it was established. Now it remains in that land. People visit it. Whosoever makes it his destination, if it be in winter, he is not prevented from wearing blue clothes and other attire. But, if his visit be during the harvest time, one is not allowed to visit it unless one is clad in a white garment. If one visits it and the garment one wears is not white in colour then heavy rain will come and the crop will be ruined and the fruit will be spoilt. This is a matter which is widely observed amongst them.

*Near to Derbent*, is a huge mountain at the base of which there are two villages. In these dwells a nation called Zirih Gārān which means "armourers and makers of mail". They handle all instruments of war and weaponry, be they hauberks, breast-plates, helmets, swords, spears, bows, arrows and daggers, and all kinds of copper implements. They include all their women folk, their sons and daughters and their male and female slaves, all of whom are engaged in these crafts. They do not plough, nor are there gardens, yet they are the folk who are the most well off and have most money. People go to them with all their gifts from every quarter. They have no religion, nor do they pay the poll tax. If one of them dies, and if he be a male, then they hand him over to the men who dwell in underground houses. They collect his flesh and they give it as food to the black crows. They stand with bows and they prevent other birds from devouring his flesh. If the deceased is a female then they hand her over to the men who dwell underground. They extract her bones and they give her flesh to a sparrow hawk and they stand with their arrows preventing other birds approaching her flesh. I said to the *Amīr*, "Isfahslar 'Abd al-Malik b. Abī Bakr in Derbent how was it that they left this nation alone since it had not embraced the religion of Islam, nor did they pay either the poll tax or the land tax?" He said, "They are the grief of the king. The *Amīr*, Sayf al-Din Muḥammad b. Khalifa, the Sultan and the lord of Derbent, may God have mercy upon him, commanded me, I being his stipendiary. He has honoured me, may God reward him with good. I left and I assembled together nations of the Turks and others. The *Amīr* left with the people of Derbent and the nations of the mountains, the Lakzan and the Filān and others came and we were in any army like a rock and we made for those two villages. They have no fortress, nor castle and they locked their doors. I was the first to enter one of the villages and from underground out came a group of men who were unarmed and they stood, pointing with their hands towards the mountains and they spoke words which I did not understand. Then they vanished underground. A cold wind buffeted us and huge falls of snow and hail. We left with no idea in which direction we were heading, neither I nor the others. Some of us killed each other due to the fact that one horse battered against another that was weak. So the latter fell and with it the rider of that horse so that the people trampled upon him and he perished together with his

horse!" He said, "Somebody of whom I was unaware hit me with his arrow in my left shoulder and it came out from below my arm-pit and I almost died. I kept a firm grip until we were far away from them at a distance of several *farsakhs*. That snow, wind and hail abated in regard to us when we had lost many men amongst the army. I drew the arrow out of my shoulder and I remained sick for four months as a result. We were not able to take even a loaf from them nor did we engage in combat with a single one of them. That was only due to magic, used by those who extract the bones of the deceased and who place their bones in the bags of the rich. As for the lords, their bags are made from golden Byzantine brocade and as for the slaves, male and female, they are of sacking and material for clothing of a similar type. They hang them up in the houses and upon every bag they write the name of its occupant and this is a great wonder."<sup>23</sup>

In the vicinity of Khwārazm there is a mountain upon which there are many castles. It has its own districts. It is a mighty mountain and it stretches within the country of the infidels until it reaches Balkshān (Badakhshān). Near to Khwārazm, in that mountain, there is a gorge in which there is mound-like hill. On that hill there is a large dome. It has four doors which open on large vaults. Within it there are bricks of red gold which are stacked, some upon others, up to a number which is unaccountable and it fills the plot in that locality. This resembles the dome which is upon that mountain, to the eye the height of the gold being more than five cubits. Around that hill whereon the gold is located, there is stagnant water and it is turbid, having no content other than rain water and snow. Upon the ground there is found a scum. No one is able to cross over it. If anyone should enter it, he becomes stuck hard in it and is sucked down and no-one extricates him from it. If a skiff be cast into that water, or any other thing, it is gone for ever and nobody may take it out from there."

It should be noted that, despite the relatively late date of Abū Ḥāmid's accounts of these marvels of the Caucasus, the Caspian region and beyond, nothing is said by him to suggest that the local heroic tales had already been influenced to any degree by Turco-Iranian tales and the folk epics, characteristic of the fourteenth century. These latter habitually confused Maslama with Abū Muslim, "*Le Porte Hache*" of Khurasan, who on June 9th, AD 747, unfurled the black banner of the Abbasids near Merv. To cite R. Nicholson, "The triumphant advance of the armies of the Revolution towards Damascus recalls the celebrated campaign of Caesar, when after crossing the Rubicon he marched on Rome. Nor is Abū Muslim, though a freedman of obscure parentage —

---

<sup>23</sup>Gabriel Ferrand, *Journal asiatique* 207 (1925): 82-6 and Ana Ramos, Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnātī (m 565/1169), *Tuhfat al-albāb* (*El regalo de los espíritus*) (Madrid, 1990), 56-8.

he was certainly no Arab — unworthy to be compared with the great patrician".<sup>24</sup>

Irene Mélikoff, has pointed out such a confusion of these personalities in the later *Azerbayčānnāme*:

This work was probably inspired by the Arab expeditions in Sirvan and in Daghestan under the command of Maslama who captured Derbend in 723, subjugated the princes of Sirvan and established a colony of 14,000 Syrians in the region. In 731, he was replaced by Mervan who waged war in the Caucasus until he came to the throne. Maslama's conquests have been attributed to Abū Muslim in popular tradition by reason of the great expansion of the romance of Abū Tāhir amongst the Daghestan mountaineers. Perhaps, also, the similarity between the names of Maslama and Muslim, very similar to one another in Arabic calligraphy, contribute to this confusion.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Reynold, A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, (Cambridge, 1969), 251-2.

<sup>25</sup>Irene Mélikoff, *Abū Muslim, le 'Porte Hache' du Khorasan*, (Paris, 1962), 78-9 and De Khanikoff, 81-98.

According to the Russian scholar, Anna Zelkina, (Open University), who is currently completing her thesis on the later Islamic movements in Chechnia and Daghestan, to quote the unpublished comments which she gave at a seminar, when in Oxford:

"The Lacks claim that they have been converted to Islam in the seventh century and directly from Abū Muslim, whom they confuse with Maslama and whose false tomb they are very keen to show in Kazi-Kumuh until now. They also trace their later rulers who had title Shamhal to the Arab conquest and claim that it is derived from the Arab word "Sham" — Syria and explain it by the fact that the first vice-regent; appointed by Maslama in their lands, came from Syria, from the place called Hal and thus was called Sham-Hal. The Avars claim to be the second people in Daghestan after the Lacks to accept Islam, also directly from Maslama and also trace their rulers of later times to Arab roots. The Dargins also believe that the *aul* Kurush was founded by some Kureish Arab at approximately the same period.

That is, however, no more than an attempt to place the later events into the earlier period. In fact, though Maslama had founded mosques and appointed qadis in some areas on the plain, like Derbent, Tabarsalan, Kijtak, and in the foot-hill areas of Kura, it is most unlikely that he could have done that in more remote areas like Akusha, Khunzah, Kumuh, or even in Ashty. And even in the areas where he tried to impose Islam, the Islamisation was by no means deep and profound. His conquest was also very short-lived. Half a century later all the areas above the Derbent were liberated by the joint effort of the Khazars and Daghestanis themselves. Even Derbent was for a short time conquered by the Khazars in 799 AD. The second wave of the Arab conquest was led by Marwan, who pursued quite a different tactic towards the conquered peoples. Unlike Maslama, he did not force them to convert to Islam, but he taxed with a special tax (*Kharāj*). The Marwan conquests also proved to be very superficial and short-lived. They succeeded only in Derbent and the rest of Daghestan practically remained independent. And after death of al-Mutawakki Derbent was ruled by an independent dynasty of Hashimite Khalifs. It in fact submitted to the Shirvan-shah, though occasionally pursued an independent policy. The rest of Daghestan, even if nominally, was independent of the Arab rulers.

Later examples of this continuous tradition may be read in Mirza A. Kazem Beg's edition of the *Derbent nāmeh* (the so-called *History of Derbent*) which was printed in St. Petersburg in 1851. Turkish sources which drew, in turn, upon earlier Arabic sources were used. The latter include the fifth part of al-Ṭabarī's *Annals* (d. 923). Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik is the central heroic figure who was the lieutenant in the Caucasus of the Caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb.

The account given by Kazem Beg, seemingly derived from al-Ṭabarī,<sup>26</sup> reasserts the same stories which are cited by al-Mas‘ūdī and Abū Hāmid:

One day, *Abdur-rahman* said to *Shehrizar*: "I will pass beyond these *derbents* with an army, and will make war with infidels and establish Islam in the city of these *derbends*" (i.e. in the capital of those passages, which was the actual Derbend). For *Shehrizar* had said that it was difficult to lead an army beyond those *derbends*:— that when one passes over the *wall* and *Khazaria*, there are many cities and principalities: the country is called Bulkher, it includes the climates (countries) of *Russ* and *Yadjudi* and *Madjuj*; that it was the country where *Iskender dul-gkernein* had constructed the wall; and he (*Abdul-rehman*) could scarcely pass to that country, for those quarters are very strong." *Abdul-rehman* answered him: "I (will) make industry my companion; I hope to pass then with my army even to the boundaries of *Bulkher*, see those places and make war for religion."<sup>27</sup>

One might assume that Volga Bulghar, or the Bulgarians of the Danube, are meant here, though Balkhar is one of the Circassian regions to the North-West of Ossetia. Balkhar and Bulghār have ethnic links and could easily be confused. Marvazī (circa 1120) speaks of Burṭās cavalry in the service of the Khazar king making the raids on the Blkār (more likely Bulghār and the Pechenegs). Geographical exactitude was not important in the story teller's mind. It should also be noted that, in this account, Maslama's role has been usurped, or assigned, allegedly by the Caliph, to quote another Arab or Muslim commander. A proliferation of names and eponyms is to be observed in the writings of Arab and non-Arab Muslim writers. Thus, mini pseudo-epics were composed, with variants, which are at the heart of the inflated late medieval accounts, especially in the Mamlūk and Mongol eras. These tell of Arabian links with the Circassians, with the peoples of Bulghār, the Qipchaq Tatars and the Saljūq émigrés into the nomadic

<sup>26</sup>Kazam Beg, *Derbend Nameh, or the History of Derbend*, Translated from a Turkish Version, (St Petersburg, 1851), xix-xx.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 26-7 and 161-2.

regions of the Dobrudja in Orthodox Bulgaria and Romania. Stories circulated in the Volga region, in Bashkiria and amongst the Spanish Muslim merchants in Hungary (Abū Ḥāmid amongst them) and in the Danube region. A variant cycle of tales of Arabic, Persian and Turcic inspiration was to gradually pervade the eastern region along sundry routes, some ancient, which led north from the Crimea, from Asia Minor, across the Qipchaq steppes and the Caucasian and trans-Caucasian region. They explain much of the content of the wars of the dervish hero, Sārī Salṭūq, in the Romanian Dobrudja, in the Crimean peninsula and in Southern Russia. No doubt the religious and crusading spirit increased on account of the close proximity of Genoese settlement near the Danube's mouth.

In the sixteenth century, when the cultural links between the rulers of Bulghār, the Qipchaq desert and Transcaucasia had long been established, the Circassian Mamlük ruler of Egypt, Sultān Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī brought to light, in the following passage, which is to be found in the *Majālis al-sultān al Ghawrī*<sup>28</sup>, an Arabian pedigree for his Caucasian people:

Our Lord, the *Sultān*, said, "the origin of the Jarkas (the Circassians) is Šārkas. He came with the Banū Ghassān during the Caliphate of 'Umar, may God be pleased with him. They [the Circassians] became Muslims and they performed the pilgrimage. Their *Sultān* perambulated the *Ka'ba*. A poor man came up to him. So he pushed him aside and the poor man fell. He died. A group of the poor folk came and they sought for the blood of the slayer. 'Umar ruled that he should be given the death penalty, or else that he satisfy them. But they were not appeased unless his life was forfeited. The *Sultān* of the Circassians] said "Grant me a three day respite." That night he fled and he came to Heraclius, the ruler of Byzantium (*al-Qayṣar*). He embraced Christianity. So Heraclius sent them to the Qipchaq desert. The Circassians are their descendants.

There are points in the above story that suggest source material common to the accounts of the Dobrudja Gagaouz and the Turcic groups who accompanied the dervish Sārī Salṭūq to Byzantium and later to Dobrudja<sup>29</sup>. An Arabian calque that emerges here is that of the tribesman

<sup>28</sup>Ṣafahāt min ta'rīkh Misr fi-l-qarān al-āshir al-hijrī, ed. 'Abd al-Wahhāb Azzām, (Cairo 1360/1941), p.85. According to Ahmad al-Rubā'yah (University of Yarmouk, Jordan), in an article on the subject of the Circassians in Jordan, entitled "Māzāhir al-tagħayyur fi 'ādāt al-zawāj ladā'l Sharākisa f'il-mujtama' al-urdunni: dirāsa f'il-tamaththul (al-indimāj) al-thaqāfi wa'l-jtimā'i", in *Dirāsāt* (Amman) 14 (July, 1987): 204, n. 1. *Jarkas*, or *Sharkas*, is a deformation of *Karkat*, the ancient Greek nomination.

<sup>29</sup>P. Witteck, 'Yazijioghlu 'Ali on the Christian Turks of the Dorbruja', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 14 (1952): 654-58.

who flees from Arabia under threat of his life. A. Y. al-‘Udhari, in his thesis, “Jahili Poetry Before Imru al-Qais,”<sup>30</sup> says that Sāma b. Lu’ayy, a fourth-generation Qurayshite, had an argument with his brother ‘Āmir, and in a fit of anger he slapped his face and blinded one of his eyes. Fearing retribution, Sāma left Mecca and settled in Oman where he married a local girl. Al-Musayyab b. ‘Alas recorded the life of Sāma in a long narrative poem, fifteen lines of which are quoted in Abū Ubayd’s *Mu‘jam mā‘asta‘jam*. Such stories explain the wars of the *Ayyām al-‘arab*, which, in the opinion of W. Caskel and F. Gabrieli have little value as historical accounts, though they have an undoubted literary value within the Arabian society concerned.<sup>31</sup>

A considerably expanded and comparable account about the Arabian —in this instance Qurayshite— origin of the Circassians may be found in a latish Arabic work which was composed to glorify the lineage of the Mamlük Amīr, Ridwān Bey<sup>32</sup>. This was dated AH 1041/AD 1632 although it is obviously based on earlier versions. The manuscript in the John Ryland’s Library, which has been studied by P.M. Holt, is dated AH 1092/AD 1681. Hence it was composed a century later than al-Ghawrī’s text, translated above. In this version, a Qurayshite of the Banū ‘Amir (compare with the story of Sāma b. Lu’ayy above), Kisāb. ‘Ikrima was compelled to flee from Arabia during the reign of ‘Umar, having blinded a fellow Arab in a sporting contest. He had fled to the Greeks and he was granted asylum by Constantine (possibly the son of Heraclius in al-Ghawrī’s account) and he was allowed to choose the locality of his exile in the lands that stretched beyond Byzantium. These are specifically identified in the copies consulted by Holt.

So he passed beyond with his people and he withdrew to the waste land that lay to the east and to the west of Constantinople. He found the country of al-‘Abūbān, formerly known as the land of al-Niyāriq, in the land of Bulghār. It was once in the possession of the Armenians. The Byzantine Greeks (*al-Arwām*) overcame them... In it he found the remainder of the Armenians in numerous groups. He fought and he defeated them and made his home in their country. His kinsmen said to him, “We wonder at the speed with which

<sup>30</sup> Abdullāh ‘Ali Yaḥya al-Udhari, “Jahili Poetry before Imru al-Qais,” unpublished thesis submitted at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, March, 1991, 103-4.

<sup>31</sup> Francesco Gabrieli, “Elementi epici nell’antica poesia araba,” in *Atti del convegno internazionale sul tema: La poesia epica e la sua formazione*, (Rome, 28 March-3 April 1969), (Rome, 1970), 751-8.

<sup>32</sup> P. M. Holt, *Studies in the History of the Near East*, (London, 1973), 220-30.

territories submit to us", so he said to them, "It is because of the strength of our courage (*min quwwat bainā*). (They asked him), "what shall we call this abode?" He said, "*Ba'sna* (Bosnia?). So it received its name and it became a land which was pleasant in its climate, plentiful in its soldiery and now it is known as the land of the *Jarākisa* (Circassia)."

In the same passage there is to be found a reference to Albania and to the settlement of "Arabs" of the Banu Ghassan there, hence some confusion between Circassia, and even Bosnia, cannot be excluded.

In another copy of the opening pages of this same work, earlier in date, tracing the Qurayshite origin of the Circassians down to the Mamlük rulers in Egypt, al-Zāhir Barqūq b. Anas al-Jarkasī is also stated to be from "Bulghār" (*al-Bulghārī*) although Holt believes that this is a copyist's mistake for *Yalbūghāwī* (Mamlük of *Yalbūgha*). He also points out that the great Arab historian, Ibn Khaldūn, attributed a Ghassānid origin to the Circassians, thus bringing his statement into line with the earlier assertion of Sultān Qānsawh al-Ghawrī.

The Turco-Iranian folk-epic of *Abū Muslim*, which is seemingly a variant of the early Arabic folk-epics of the exploits in the Caucasus of Maslama b. 'Abd al-Malik, extend far beyond the Caucasus itself, embracing both Central Asian Khwārazm and Volga Bulghār. As Mélikoff has pointed out, its impact extends northwards into the Qipchaq steppes, and the Volga region and beyond:

It is pertinent to add a geographical fact: amongst the countries which border Khwārazim, in the Romance of *Abū Muslim*, are cited the land of *Bulgār*, separated from Khwārazim by the *Bulgār* desert, the steppe (*dast*) of the Kipcaks and Turkestan. Now the *Bulgār* empire of the Volga was destroyed by two Mongol invasions; a first in 1236, a second in 1241; as for the Kipcaks, they appeared in the eleventh century in the steppe, to the north of Khwārazim and of the territory then occupied by the Oguz Turks, and they maintained themselves there until the Mongols arrived.<sup>33</sup>

To pursue the theme of the Arabisation of folk tale into the Islamised regions of the Volga, and the northern territories beyond, is a fascinating topic that demands a far wider range of sources and as much hypothetical guess-work as analysis of the sparse documentation. I shall leave this for another occasion. That these influences were there and even at work later in the Kazan Khanate of the Golden Horde is undeniable and demonstrable. It is sufficient here to draw attention to the earliest sources and to the light that they shed on the first contacts

---

<sup>33</sup>Mélikoff, *Abū Muslim*, 34.

between the Christian and the Muslim Arabs, the Caucasians and the peoples to the north of the Caspian, to identify the perennial themes and to illustrate the persistence of variants of these legends over many centuries. The manner in which the Caucasian and proto-Bulgar peoples, who were non-Muslim, adopted, neglected or countered these Muslim *apologia* is a subject for further research.<sup>34</sup>

*University of Leeds*

---

<sup>34</sup> Irène Mélikoff, "La geste de Melik Danişmend", *Étude critique du Danişmendname*, vol. 1. *Introduction et traduction*, (Paris, 1960), p.43. This study also contains considerable detail in regard to the heroic exploits of Sayyid Baṭṭāl who is associated with Maslama b 'Abd al-Malik and also Sārī Salṭūq (see n. 29, above).