

THE NORTHERN FORTRESS AND THE MYTH OF IRON GATE

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Abstract:

Forts and fortresses symbolise a security mechanism against the marauding forces. The Great Wall of China was constructed by the Chinese to resist oft-recurring Hun invasions. However, such forts or fortresses were not unique to Asia but to the eastern and southern part of the Caspian Sea, which too encountered threat of the Huns from time to time. One such fortress was located between the Caucasus Mountain and the Caspian Sea as the most important defence line against the Gog and Magog tribes, and on which was generated an amazing legend like the Alexander's Iron Gate in ancient times.

In this paper, the author intends to take a look at the said fortress keeping in view the excavation of a fort in Iran that too was constructed for protection against the Huns and that too had a legend associated with it.

Keywords:

Iron Gate, Fortress, Caspian, Caucasus, Huns, Sassanids.

Line of Red Dragon:

A few years ago, in 2007, two fortresses situated between Iranian Highland and Gumisan city, were found by the archaeologists of Edinburgh, Durham and Iranian Universities, in Iran. They could not find its name in historical sources, and thus christened it "Red Dragon" because of colour of the bricks. These were also called Gorgan wall, after the geographic name Gorgan that was erected to protect Persian soldiers and inhabitants from White Huns or Hephtalites, who invaded the eastern borders of Persia. It's another part, the Tammish-fortress, spread over the southern part of Caspian Sea, defended Persian Empire from Huns through the shore of Caspian Sea and Elburz-mountain passes. The fort is in modern Tammishah on the eastern border of Tabaristan adjoining Gorgan. Emperor Khusrou Anushirvan built a causeway to Gorgan and Khurasan over the marshes facing the Caspian to protect or to block the nomadic incursions into Persia, and it worked well even till the Sassanid times.¹

The Red Dragon was the first defence line of about thirty well-built forts, aqueducts, and carefully constructed canal network. It was the

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¹ C. E. Bosworth, "Storm and Stress Along the Northern Frontiers of the Abbasid Caliphate," Tr., *History of al-Tabari*, XXXIII, New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1991, 147-148.

second long throughout Eurasian steppes after the Great Wall of China, and was highly elevated than those of the forts and fortresses built by Hadrian and Antoine in Western Rome.² Eberhard Sauer, who excavated this amazing site, has concluded that Persian dynasty was able to mobilize huge labour of people to raise this massive construction in order to defend Persia against Hephthalite Huns, who attacked Central Asia and Northern-India around the 5th century. The defence line helped Persians from assault of the Huns of Central Asia near the eastern part of the Caspian sea and from the European Huns under Attila and his brother, who attempted to get into and occupy Northern-Mesopotamian territory through it.

The Caspian Gate:

Sassanid's also created huge fortresses in northern-north-eastern borders during the 5th-6th century, spanning Derbent to Besbarmah Hill (formerly Khursan-gala³) or from present-day Dagestan to Northern-Azerbaijan. This area is well known in Bronze Age, Biblical,⁴ and Scythian sources, all having ruled over vast territories of Trans-Caucasus. Name of Caspian Gate or narrow passage was first mentioned by Hekatei of Miletus in the 4th century BC, and was also used by numerous classical authors. Diodore Sicilian mentions that "there was a rather narrow passage called Caspian Gate" referring to its geographical location next to the Caspian Sea and served as a defence point against northern horsemen. According to experts, there existed a well-fortified settlement in ancient times (7-6th century BC), and its existence is also evidenced by archaeological excavations.

Caspian Gate is really a narrow coastal strip of the Caspian Sea near Derbent, Dagestan. It has been known through history as the only convenient natural route for passage from Northern-Caucasus steppes to Trans Caucasus and the Middle East. The strategic location of this site

² Hamid Omrani Rekavandi, *Eberhard Sauer*, Tony Wilkinson, Jebrael Nokandeh, 2008, 12-22.

³ Beyond Azerbaijan's most sacrificial mountain stood a medieval fort, which got its name after Khurasan (5-9th centuries). According to archaeologist, Murtalazi Gadjeiev, Khursan defined both geographical and personal name: the later was a Late Hunnic king.

⁴ It is said that Gog and Magog threatened the "humankind." They belonged to real people. Gog usually was identified with the Cimmerians or pre-Scythian, and Magog, Japheth's one son. Magog is kind of steppe or northern horseman King, who is supposed to be ancestors of some nations. Ancient Hungarian chronicle declared that they got this name Magyar from King Magog of Mesopotamia: Anonymous, *Gesta Hungarorum*, Magyar Helikon, Budapest, 1, 1977.

made Derbent, a strategic place; hence, vulnerable to the invasion of the Scythians, Huns, Khazars, Persians, Turks and Arabs.

Presently, Caspian Gate lies on the eastern outskirts of Derbent city on the Mahachkala-Baku highway. The complex comprises two parallel thick stone walls each more than 3.5 kilometres long from the top of Derbent Hill to the sea. Dagestan archaeologists, who discovered some parts of it, identified its main strongholds and small observation points.⁵ The centre of this fortress at Derbent was strategically placed on the Caucasian and Northern-Mesopotamian route from where horsemen invaded the Mesopotamians to reach Egypt.⁶

Owing to frequent invasion of the Huns under Attila, Sassanids built the great defence system with support from the Byzantine empire. Some parts of it can be seen until now. The biggest one is Derbent, where Caucasus Mountain and Caspian Sea created a defile, that's why it got name "gate" from the ancient times. It was the soul of the whole defence system with big walls all around the city. It was called as Hunnic-gate, where from Huns entered into the Persian Empire.

Some, lesser known elements of this defence system can be seen in Guba-Kachmaz region of Azerbaijan. The most amazing one is Chirag-gala, which was an ancient observer fort, 1232 meter high, built and rebuilt by the Caucasian Albania and Sassanid Kings. The typical Sassanid mode and material of construction like red bricks is amply clear from the said fort. From its height and excellent location, the guards overlooked the movement along the ancient commercial and military road,⁷ and alarmed, in case of an emergency or untoward development, the people of Derbent and Gilgichay-river by burning lights or fire.

The ruins of ancient observer points are at Beshbarmah Hill, not far from Chirag-gala. It is a pilgrim site for Muslims with ancient traditions. The name of this fort was Khursan-gala which remembers us of Khursan, King of Late Huns in Caucasus. Khursan was also a geographical name for that territory, which lied eastward to Iberia.⁸ It is also likely that Sassanid's were not able to protect the territory from Huns who settled down in this fertile land.

⁵ Murtalazi, Gadjeiev, Hunok és türkök támadásai és a Szaszanidák erődítési tevékenysége a Kelet-Kaukázusban, A hunok öröksége. Szerkesztette: Marác László és Obrusánszky Borbála, Hun-Idea, Budapest, 2009,240

⁶ Syrian scholars often dealt with a discussion on the Huns, because they invaded Mesopotamia and Middle-East during the 5th-6th century.

⁷ Fieldwork in Northern-Azerbaijan, July, 2010, 07-21.

⁸ There are some Khursanis on the history of Huns. Kalankatuyk mentioned a Hunnic King Khursan, but one Hunnic leader in Anatolia resembles one Kursid. Hungarians, who are the descendants of Huns, also preserved this name or Khursan in the course of 10th century. The name is mentioned by foreign – western sources too.

Derbent and the Legend of Iron Gate:

Derbent is still preserved in good condition. It was known by various names during the history, like Caspian gate, Hun-gate,⁹ but perhaps the most unusual name is the Demir gate meaning Iron Gate. The last name is associated with the legend related to Alexander the Great, wherein the great conqueror is said to have protected the northern people behind an iron gate.¹⁰

Pseudo-Callisthenes in the biography on Alexander the Great, has recorded an enormous construction of a gate, which is “12 elbows wide through which 22 people of the North weren’t able to pass.”¹¹ Pseudo-Methodius described the gate constructed from copper and iron.¹² The legendary story was not only popular in the Western countries, but among Eastern people also, like Syrians and Ethiopians. It also finds mention in *Surat al-Kahf* of the holy *Qur’an*: “two horns is a wall built to protect the innocent people from Gog and Magog, at the foot of the mountain.”¹³ Kalankatuyk, composer of History of Caucasus Albanian, also wrote conquest of Macedon in order to preserve Christianity from the northern peoples.¹⁴

Before the 5th century references to Gog and Magog occur many times in the preserved sermons and letters of St. Jerome and other early Christians: whenever Christendom was threatened by invaders the names of Gog and Magog are mentioned. In fact, the Scythian, Hun, Alan, Khazar, Turkic and the invasion of other tribal invasions, reminded the people of the region about the days of the threat of the Gog and Magog. However, Marco Polo rewrote the story about Cumans or Kuns, who settled down in Eastern Europe.

Whatever the truth, Iron Gate was used to obstruct the unwarranted movement of the marauders towards the settle areas. It was situated in the Eurasian steppe region or where the Yellow River bends in the Carpathian Basin. Older Pliny mentioned Meotis-swamp.¹⁵ It was also called Scythian Temerinda. “Temer” means iron—a narrow passage through marshland and the only gateway between Eastern Europe and the

⁹ Murtalazi Gadjeiev, *Hunok és türkök támadásai és a Szaszanidák erődítési tevékenysége a Kelet-Kaukázusban*, 2009, 243.

¹⁰ Mihály Kmoskó, “Szír írók a steppe népeiről. Szerkesztette: Felföldi Szabolcs,” *Balassi Kiadó*, Budapest, 2004, 83-94.

¹¹ Pseudo-Kallisthenes, Book III, chapter 27.

¹² “Szír írók a steppe népeiről. Szerkesztette: Felföldi Szabolcs,” *Balassi Kiadó*, 45,

¹³ “Szír írók a steppe népeiről. Szerkesztette: Felföldi Szabolcs,” *Balassi Kiadó*, 83-94.

¹⁴ Movses Daszuranci, *The History of the Caucasian Albanians*, Tr. by C.J.F. Dowsett, London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1961, 55.

¹⁵ Eastern shores of Azovian-Sea.

Caucasus regions¹⁶ at the southern edge of the Carpathian Basin at Lower Danube. Close to that, on southern part of Transylvania, near Hunedoara¹⁷ castle, was another iron gate again with a narrow passage.¹⁸ Katalin Czeglédi points to the Danube-bend, near Estergom city of Hungary, where laid a narrow passage or Dömör-kapu, the same as Demir kapi or Iron Gate. However, around the Danube Bend inside Pilis-Mountain, are other Iron Gates or “Vaskapu” in Hungarian languages. Next to Bakonykút, Western-Hungary, there is an Iron Gate Hill: incidentally Mehek Mountains has similar place names. Likewise, near Samarkand in Central Asia, there is a narrow passage also called as the Iron Gate situated near Khisar Mountains and Amu-Darya and between Bactria and Sogdiana. Rising Turks occupied this territory and as per Bilge Khan’s inscription it was the western border of the Khaganate. Not only here but also in the Tarim Basin there is a narrow passage near Yanqi Basin, which is called Iron Gate. Chinese translated this name as Tieman guan. This area belonged to Yue-Chi’s until 2nd century BC, when Huns invaded the territory and chased the former rulers. A Medieval Mongolian Chronicle, Golden Summary, reported that Genghis Khan’s troops led through western part of the Yellow-river, where they passed Iron Gate or Temür Khalgaan.

The description of Iron Gate, as the expressions in both the Western and the Eastern worlds show, could be mythical though, yet it specified a narrow passage in geographical terms. In any way, Red Dragon served to protect against the Huns and offered refuge to traders who traversed the caravan routes sine early times.

¹⁶ Géza Nagy, “Egy pár szó a szkítákról. 2,” *Ethnographia*. V. évf. 5. szám., 1894, 283.

¹⁷ Original name for that is Vajdahunyadvár

¹⁸ It has another name, which refers to a narrow passage: Khazan means cauldron.

