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## Reports of the 11th century Andalusian Geographer on the Peoples of Caucasus

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**Abstract.** This paper, for the first time in Russian historiography, provides information on the 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries history of Dagestan on the basis of translation, commentary and comparative analysis of excerpts in relation to the history of Caucasian peoples from Abū'Ubayd al-Bakrī's (d.1094) *Kitāb al-masālik wa-al-mamālik* (A Book of Routes and Countries). This work presents a brief description of different polities: indicating trade routes, distances between towns etc. sort of the administrative directory. *Kitāb al-masālik wa-al-mamālik* is considered as one of the important sources on south-western and north-western Africa history, particularly, during the period of the Almoravids' reign (1040–1147). As for the information about the Caucasus given by al-Bakri so it's largely not original. The paper discusses the main aspects of al-Bakrī's life and scholarly activities who was an expert in Islamic history and Arabic geography. He particularly outlines the history of different Caucasian polities like Derbent; describes the Caspian sea; gives detailed list of routes and distance between polities etc. Moreover, I compared some reports on Dagestan from *Muruj az-zahab* and *Kitab at-tanbih* by al-Mas'udi and al-Bakrī's work in order to find out whether the origin of the material is the same.

**Keywords:** Medieval history of Dagestan, early Arabic historical and geographical sources, Muslim historiography, Abū'Ubayd Al-Bakri, Abū Hasan al-Mas'udi, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-al-mamālik*, *Muruj az-zahab*, comparative analysis

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## Сведения Андалузского географа XI в. о народах Кавказа: Китаб ал-масалик ва-л-мамалик ал-Бакри

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**Аннотация.** Впервые в российской историографии приводятся сведения по истории Дагестана в VI–X вв. на основе перевода, комментирования и сравнительного анализа выдержек из сочинения Абу ‘Убайды ал-Бакри (ум. 1094) كتاب المسالك والممالك *Китаб ал-масалик ва-л-мамалик* («Книга маршрутов и стран»), относящихся к истории народов Кавказа. Сочинение на арабском языке представляет собой краткое описание стран с указанием областей, дорог, торговых путей и расстояний между населенными пунктами. *Китаб ал-масалик ва-л-мамалик* считается одним из важных источников того периода по юго-западной и северо-западной Африке времён правления Альморавидов (1040–1147). Что касается сведений о Кавказе, приведенные ал-Бакри, то они в большей степени неоригинальны. В ней обсуждаются основные аспекты жизни и творчества ал-Бакри, знатика мусульманской истории и географии, который, в частности, перечисляет политические образования Восточного Кавказа (Дагестана), и маршруты с указанием расстояний между ними, кроме того он дает краткое описание, Дербента, Каспийского моря и т.п. Выполнено сопоставление сведений о Дагестане произведения ал-Бакри и сочинений ал-Мас’уди (ум. 956) مروج الذهب ومعادن الجواهر *Мурудж аз-захаб ва ма’адин ал-джавахир* («Промывальни золота и рудники самоцветов») и كتاب التنبيه والأشراف *Китаб ат-танбих ва-л-ишраф* («Книга предупреждения»), чтобы выяснить, едино ли происхождение материала у обоих авторов.

**Ключевые слова:** средневековый Дагестан, арабская историко-географическая литература, историография, Ал-Бакри, ал-Мас’уди, сравнительный анализ

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### Introduction

The eleventh century, the period of the further rise of Muslim culture, is rich with distinct fundamental works in Arabic geography, literature, medicine, etc. This period of time produced a number of experts in geography, including such as al-Bakri. For the peoples of the Caucasus, and Russia in general, scholarly works written in Arabic are the sources of knowledge in the field of sociocultural and political-economic history. Fragmentation of the excerpts from Arabic sources and the scarcity of the source base do not allow researchers to study the medieval history of the region in detail.

The aim of this article is to highlight the information on the history of Dagestan in the VI-X centuries on the basis of translation, commentary and comparative analysis of excerpts from al-Bakri's *كتاب كل اسما او كل امم او كل اسما* *Kitab al-masalik wa-l-mamalik* ("Book of Routes and Countries") which are related to the history of the Caucasus peoples. In addition, this article compares for the first time in Russian historiography al-Bakri's information about Dagestan with al-Mas'udi's reports from *Muruj az-zahab wa ma'adin al-jawahir* ("Gold Washing and Gem Mines") and *Kitab al-tanbih wa-l-ishraf* ("The Book of Prevention and Revision") in order to find out whether the origin of the material is the same in the works of both authors.

### **Biographical information on the Andalusian geographer al-Bakri and historiography**

‘Abdallah b. ‘Abdulaziz b. Muhammad b. Ayyub b. ‘Amr, a Muslim geographer and an expert in Arabic literature of the fifth century A.H. who lived in Cordoba. He was descended from the noble Arab family of Bakr ibn Wa'il, and is therefore known by the *nisba* al-Bakri al-Kurtubi al-Andalusi, and by his nickname Abu ‘Ubaidah. Biographical information about him is scarce. The sources provide two different dates of his birth: according to one data he was born in 401 A.H./1010, and according to others in 432 A.H./1040. He was born in the south-west of Spain in the city of Huelva, the ruler of which and the small island of Saltesa was his father ‘Abdulaziz, who later with his family had to move to Cordoba, where our author received initial background and further education [1].

In the fifth century AH, Cordoba was the centre of Islamic culture, science and education in Muslim Spain. Here al-Bakri studied under the renowned scholars of the time. Among them were Abu Hayyan, Abu ‘Abbas Ahmad b. ‘Amr al-‘Uzri, Abu Bakar al-Mustafa, Hafiz Abu b. ‘Abd al-Birr. ‘Abd al-Birr. In 478 A.H./1085 al-Bakri, as a confidant of Muhammad b. Ma'na, the emir of Almera, was assigned in the Seville court to al-Mu'tamid b. ‘Ubbad. After that in 483 A.H./1090 al-Bakri returned to Cordoba, where he would spend his entire life, engaged in scientific and teaching activities [2. V.1. P.1-2]. In his biographical work *Mu'jam ad-diba irshad al-ariyb ila ma'rifat al-adiyb* Ya'qut al-Hamawi notes that "...he with his eloquence and knowledge of Arabic literature surpassed all those who were present at the literary circle at Ibn Manzur" [3. V.4. p.1-2]. [3. V.4. P.1534]. Al-Bakri was buried in Cordoba, in the cemetery of Umm Salamah in 487 A.H./1094.

Al-Bakri was the author of several works in Arabic literature, philology, geography, and medicine. Two of his works, *Mu'jam ma ista'jama* ("Dictionary of what is from non-Arabs") and *Kitab al-masalik wa-l-mamalik* ("Book of Routes and Countries"), are extant. Al-Bakri's work was utilised by later authors. In his last work, he gives details of the beginning of the spread of Islam in West African countries such as Mali and other countries of the Niger Basin in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century.

It should be noted that the work *Kitab al-masalik wa-l-mamalik*, has not reached us in its entirety, but it exists in different editions [4. P. 476], which are kept in foreign library collections such as: Nurusmaniye Library in Istanbul [5], the National Library of France in Paris [6], the Karwiyyin Library in Fez [7]. In addition, a critical text of this work was published in 1968 by the Iraqi historian ‘Abdurahman ‘Ali Alhaj [8].

At present, there is still no complete translation of al-Bakri’s geographical work from Arabic, only translations of some passages into European languages have been made. In particular, the fragments about the Slavs and their neighbours were translated into Russian by A.A. Kunik and R.V. Rosen in 1878 [9], and by T.M. Kalinina in 1992 [10].

In our study, we used the Beirut edition published in 1992 [2] to analyze the information about the East Caucasus in al-Bakri’s *Kitab al-masalik wa-l-mamalik* (“The Book of Routes and Countries”).

The purpose to compose the geographical work *Kitab al-masalik wa-l-mamalik* was not only to describe trade routes connecting cities and countries known to contemporaries, but also to narrate the history of certain regions, covering the events of a certain chronological period. For example, detailed descriptions of state formations and cities of North Africa, as well as valuable information about the basins of the rivers Senegal and Niger. The work consists of two volumes. In particular, the first volume is devoted to the issues about the creation of the world, the appearance of the first mankind, the hagiography of the prophets. After that, the geographical part follows: successively sets out the description of climates, lands, seas and rivers... It also contains information about Pechenegs, Bulgars, Khazars, Slavs, Rus, Sarirs etc.

Considering the issue of the sources of *Kitab al-masalik wa-l-mamalik*, it should be noted that al-Bakri used for his narration: *T’arih* al-Tabari, *Muruj az-Zahab wa ma’adin al-Jawahir* al-Mas’udi, *Kitab al-masalik wa-l-mamalik* of Muhammad al-Warraq, *Al-’Alaq al-Nafisa* of Ibn Rusta, *Kitab al-masalik wa-l-mamalik* of Ibn Khordadbeh and others.

### **Al-Bakri on Dagestan**

The information about Dagestan in al-Bakri’s work begins with the chapter “*Bahr Bab al-Abwab*”, which describes the Caspian Sea. It says that: “the sea of Bab al-Abwab [Caspian Sea], it is also known as Khazar, Jilal, Deylem, Jurjan, Tabaristan, [where along the coast of this sea lives the population] of different Turkic tribes. A part of this [sea] washes the coast of the country of Khorezm in Khorasan, so it is also called the Khorasan Sea. It is 800 miles long and 600 miles wide. Its appearance resembles the shape of a circle in length” [2. P. 206–207]. The mentioned information about the Caspian Sea in al-Bakri coincides with the message given by al-Mas’udi [11. P. 42; 12].

In this case we are interested in the question of what a mile corresponded to in the Eastern Caucasus. It should be noted that one *farsakh* consists of 3 miles, i.e. it is equal to 6 km. For example, the length of the Caspian Sea, according to al-Bakri is 800 miles, which is approximately 1596 km, which does not correspond to the real distance on the ground, which is approximately 1200 km. The width of the Caspian Sea is also 600 miles, which equals 1200 km, while the real distance on the ground is on average about 324 km.

Al-Bakri continues: “Often there are storms on this sea, like on the *Bahr ash-sham* [Mediterranean Sea]. On [the shore of] this sea, beyond Bab al-Abwab (Derbent), [in the neighborhood] there is a place called Baku (In the text Bagha (بَغَاب), from where white oil is exported. There are fire springs beating from the ground, visible at night at a very far distance, which [reach in their height] towers...”. [2. P. 207], and al-Mas’udi does not have these data.

The information about the mountain system located between the Caspian and Black seas — *Qabq* (In the text Kabkh (كَبْخ) is interesting. Al-Bakri describes this mountainous region very succinctly, pointing out that it has many forests, rocks, rivers, valleys, and nationalities. In particular: “As for the mountain system of *Jabal al-Qabq* [the adjacent mountains from Derbent towards the Main Caucasus Range], there are 72 nationalities in it, each with its own ruler and [different from others] language. It takes about two months or more to overcome the distance of this complex mountain system of *Jabal*. And as for the nationalities living there, they are [practically] unfamiliar with each other because of its harsh [geographical relief], as well as the presence of many forests, large passes, mountain rivers, gorges and cliffs” [2. P. 207], al-Mas’udi also writes the same [11. P. 62].

Then the author describes the Derbent defense wall, which was built by Khosrow I Anushirvan (d.579), as a barrier between the nomadic tribes, the mountain dwellers and the land of the Persians. “As for the city of Bab al-Abwab, it is located on one of the mountain passes of the *Qabq* [Caucasus Range]. The [Derbent defensive] wall was built by Khosrow Anushirvan, serving as a barrier between his [Sassanid] country and those nationalities [like Huns, Khazars, Sarirs, Alans, etc.] who were causing harm. And the wall itself [he supervised its construction] consists of hewn stone, where iron [rods] filled with lead were used. One edge of this wall goes into the sea for one mile [about 2000 m], and the other extends along the tops of the mountain range for about 40 *farsakhs* [about 240 km] to the fortress called Tabasaran (In the text Tabaristan). Along this wall, about every three miles [6. km], he erected iron gates [guard posts], for each he settled representatives of a separate peoples who had been called to guard the wall. And he appointed a ruler for each of these [Dagestani] nationalities. No one can count the number of nationalities inhabiting [the territory] along this wall except their Creator [God].” [2. P. 262]. The mentioned information about the history of construction of the Derbent defensive wall and its characterization in our author coincides with the report given by al-Mas’udi [11. P. 62].

Narrating about the city of Derbent, al-Bakri mentions the name and title of its ruler: “At present [most likely in 332 A.H./944] the ruler of Bab al-Abwab is a Muslim named Muhammad b. Yazid, a descendant of Bahram Gur (In the text Chubin *ن ي ب و ج م ا ر ه ب*). He [Muhammad], and the one who ruled in his place [before him], has the title of *Shirvan Shah*. To go through the territory of his state, then it takes a distance of about one month... The people of Bab al-Abwab [and Shirvan] embraced Islam during the reign of Maslama b. ‘Abdulmalik<sup>1</sup>” [2. P. 262]. Our author reports that the ruler of Shirvan and Derbent is Muhammad b. Yazid, and the role of Maslama in establishing Islam, as an official religion, in these two political entities is also as in al-Mas’udi’s work [11. P. 62].

Narrating about the ruler of Derbent, al-Bakri reports that “many rulers of *Qabq* were in vassal dependence on Muhammad [ibn Yazid], in particular, the Muslim ruler of Tabasaran [in the text Tabaristan], who comes from the *Ansars*” [2. P. 263], in al-Mas’udi’s work the data are the same. Most likely, the author speaks about Abu Tahir Yazid b. Muhammad b. Yazid — the sixth *Shirvan-shah* (917–948). In 944 the inhabitants of Derbent rebelled and drove away their emir Ahmad b. ‘Abdulmalik al-Hashimi. The inhabitants of Derbent wanted to accept power from *Shirvan Shah* [13].

Al-Bakri’s information about the political entity neighboring Derbent begins with a description of a Khazar city Samandar (modern Makhachkala) was the early capital of Khazaria approximately until its final conquest by Muslims in 723, as a result of which, the capital city of the Khazars was transferred to the city of Itil (near modern Astrakhan). He states that: “Samandar is a multinational city located at a distance of eight days’ journey [about 304 km] from the city of Bab. When the city [Samandar] was liberated during the early spread of Islam, the Khazar ruler was then forced to move to the city of Itil. The distance between them [Itil and Samandar] is seven days’ journey [about 266 km]” [2. P. 263], as in al-Mas’udi’s work [11. P. 63].

As well as his predecessors, al-Bakri provides the information on distances with mentioning some cities of the region under study, but unlike them, his distances are indicated not by *farsakhs*, but by day passages. It should be noted that usually one day’s journey by land was equal to 38–40 km.

Al-Bakri indicates that of all the nationalities in the neighborhood of Derbent and its district: “the worst are the inhabitants of the country of Khaidak (In the text Khayzan *ن ا ذ ي خ*). Currently their ruler is a Muslim, he is known by the name of Salifan. In his entire state there is no Muslim except him and his family” [2. P. 263], in al-Mas’udi’s work — the same [11. P. 68]. The above passage indicates the close dependence of the Kaitags on the Khazars during the period of their military and

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<sup>1</sup> Maslama b. ‘Abdulmalik (d. 738), a famous Muslim military commander, son of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abdulmalik b. Marwan (685–705), was the ruler of Iraq. Marwan (685–705) — was the ruler of Iraq. He achieved great fame during the siege of Constantinople and in campaigns in the Caucasus.

political power in the past, from whom they apparently received titles. In particular, “Salifan” is an Old Turkic title, transcribed in Chinese *se-li-fa* [13. P. 127],

In addition, al-Bakri writes about the Dagestanis of Arab origin who occupied a rather vast territory between the lands of Kaitag and Derbent: “They live [in villages] located in dense forests, gorges through which large rivers flow, and are about three days’ journey [apparently three miles] from [the city of] Bab. They have settled in these areas since the time when the Bedouin Arabs conquered these places in the past. They have preserved their national identity” [2. P. 264], al-Mas’udi also writes the same [11. P. 68].

Then,” al-Bakri continues: “next to [the country of] Khaidak lies the territory of Zerekgeran نازكيري [Kubachi], which is called the country of ‘ring armor masters’. Since they are engaged in the production of ‘ring armors, swords and other items. The terrain of their /living/ is harsh, and, therefore, they are inaccessible for [subjugation] to neighboring [rulers]” [2. P. 264], al-Mas’udi writes the same [11. P. 68].

As well as other Muslim historians, al-Bakri has information about Sarir. Thus: “After it [Zerekgeran] follow [the lands of] the ruler of Sarir, who also has the title of *Filan Shah*. He professes Christianity, and comes from the family of Bahram Gur [Bahram V Gur (421–438)]. When Yazdegerd, the last ruler of the Sassanid dynasty [632–651], fled [after Ctesiphon was captured by the Muslims], he sent before him his golden throne, wealth and property with a representative from the family of Bahram Gur in order that he should take [the enumerated property] to this country [Sarir] to be kept safe until his [Yazdegerd’s] arrival. But, [on his way to Sarir] Yazdegerd arrived in Khorasan, where he was killed. This event took place during the reign of Caliph ‘Uthman (644–656), may Allah be pleased with him. And as for that man [Yazdegerd’s confidant], he remained there [as the governor of Sarir].” [2. P. 265], al-Mas’udi also writes about it [11. P. 68].

Al-Bakri devotes a chapter where he provides a detailed description of Sarir, and proceeds to narrate about the population of this state, their beliefs, indicating that there is a fortress there, as well as the golden throne of their ruler. He writes about the distance between Sarir and the Khazar city (perhaps Itil), which is about fifteen days’ journey. Thus: “from the country [probably the city of Itil] of Khazar to a high mountain [most likely it is about the Sulak canyon] twelve days of travel on desert terrain, from there to the citadel of the *kal’a* ruler of Sarir still go three days [of travel on high mountains and gulleys]. The citadel, which is surrounded by a [defensive] wall, is located on the top of a mountain [of the Hunzakh plateau]. [There] the ruler has a golden throne, received [by inheritance] from the Persian [Sassanid] rulers. In the whole territory of the ruler [Sarir] there are 20 thousand mountain passages [settlements] where [live] people of different [ethnic groups] who worship the dry head” [2. P. 449–450]. Al-Mas’udi does not have these data, although he gives another number regarding the settlements. According to which: “He [the ruler of Sarir] has 12 thousand settlements” [11. P. 69]. Reports of al-Bakri

about the distance from Itil to the capital of Sarir, which is located on the top of the mountain, that the ruler of Sarir has a golden throne and 20 thousand settlements, the inhabitants of which are pagans as Ibn Rust wrote [14. P. 148].

Further on in this chapter our author writes that: “leaving the left side of the citadel of the ruler of Sarir, you walk for three days through the mountains and the meadows and finally come to the country of the ruler of Alan. They are Christians. The inhabitants of his land worship crosses mostly.” [2. P. 450], Ibn Rust also writes the same, except “the inhabitants of his land worship idols” [14. P. 148]. Al-Mas’udi does not have such information.

And, finally, the last information, which refers to 846, is about the region of interest to us. Al-Bakri reports about the expedition led by the Muslim traveller and polyglot Sallam Tarjuman, who, on behalf of the Abbasid caliph Abu Ja’far Harun al-Wasik b. Mu’tasim (842–847), headed through Dagestan to the country where there was a wall built by Zulqarnayn. Mu’tasim (842–847) travelled through Dagestan to the country where the wall built by Zulqarnayn was located.

“From Samarra we [the expedition led by Sallam set out] with a letter from al-Wasik to Ishaq b. Isma’il,<sup>2</sup> the ruler of Arminiyah who is in Tiflis, to give us the necessary help [for the further route]. And Ishaq wrote about us [a letter] to the ruler of Sarir, and the ruler of Sarir wrote about us to the ruler of Alan, and he wrote about us to *Filan Shah*, and the latter wrote about us to the ruler of Khazar...” [2. P. 456]. Al-Mas’udi does not have these data. It is very easy to catch the origin of this information by al-Bakri, who used reports of Ibn Khordadbeh [15. P. 163; 16].

## Conclusion

Thus, for the study of the medieval history of the Caucasus, the information of Arab authors is of significant value, and in particular, the work *Kitab al-Masalik wa-l-mamalik* deserves further in-depth study. The information about Dagestan given by the Andalusian geographer al-Bakri is more similar to that of al-Mas’udi. Al-Bakri’s work, written largely on the basis of eyewitness reports and documents from the archives of the libraries of Cordoba and other cities of Muslim Spain, begins a series of similar geographical chrestomathies by scholars from this region, such as al-Idrisi and al-Garnati. Al-Bakri’s presentation of historical and geographical information on Dagestan in the 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries has succinct and compilation of content, with a clear interest in methods of descriptive geography.

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<sup>2</sup> Ishaq ibn Isma’il ibn Shu’ayb was married to the daughter of the king of Sarir. Ishaq was defeated by the troops of the Caliphate commander Buga and executed in 853.



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