

THE EURASIAN STEPPE EMPIRE AND GEORGIA: THE TÜRK AND THE WESTERN TÜRK KHAGANATES IN THE GEORGIAN PRIMARY SOURCES

ევრაზიის სტეპის იმპერია და საქართველო: თურქთა და დასავლეთ თურქთა
ხაკანატები ქართულ წყაროებში

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Abstract. The Türk Khaganate emerged as a vast Eurasian Empire in the mid-sixth century, expanding toward the Caucasus. Competing with the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) and Sasanian Iran (Persia), the Türks quickly achieved global political significance.

This article examines Türk history and their relationship with Georgia using Georgian sources. The eighth-century Georgian author Juansher Juansheriani was well-informed about the Türk Khaganate of the 580s and onward. He specifically mentions the Western Türks in connection with the events of the 620s, when Byzantine Emperor Heraclius allied with their ruler against Persia. The phrase "miiqvana dasavletit' türkni" in Juansher's text is proposed to refer to the Western Türks. The Georgian historian is well aware of the title borne by the Khagan of the Türks, but mostly refers to their ruler as King (mepè) of the Türks. Juansher's account is corroborated by other Georgian sources: The Chronicle of the "Conversion of Kartli" (7th c.) and Sumbat, son of David (11th c.).

The article chronologically analyzes the events of 625–630 using Georgian and Armenian primary sources, and secondary literature. It addresses the agreement between the Byzantines and the Türks to divide the South Caucasus. This treaty included a marriage alliance but was violated by the Byzantines once their Türk ally lost power at home. This breach prompted Shad, son of the Western Turk Khagan, to attack a region under Byzantine influence, but he was defeated by the locals. His father's subsequent loss of power and life in a civil war forced the Western Türks to abandon the South Caucasus.

Keywords: Byzantium; Empire; Eurasia; Georgia; Khaganate; Sasanian Iran; Türks.

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აბსტრაქტი. თურქთა ხაკანატი VI საუკუნის შუა ხანებში ვრცელ ევრაზიულ იმპერიად ჩამოყალიბდა და კავკასიის მიმართულებით დაიწყო გაფართოვება. აღმოსავლეთ რომის იმპერიასთან (ბიზანტია) და სასანურ ირანთან (სპარსეთი) კონკურენციით, თურქებმა სწრაფად მოიპოვეს მსოფლიო პოლიტიკური მნიშვნელობა.

აღნიშნული სტატია ეხება, ქართული წყაროების მიხედვით, თურქთა ხაკანატის ისტორიასა და მათ ურთიერთობას საქართველოსთან. VIII საუკუნის ქართველი ავტორი ჯუანშერ ჯუანშერიანი კარგად იყო ინფორმირებული თურქთა ხაკანატის 580-იანი წლებისა და შემდგომი პერიოდის შესახებ. ის ახსენებს დასავლეთ თურქებს 620-იანი წლების მოვლენებთან დაკავშირებით, როდესაც ბიზანტიის იმპერატორმა ჰერაკლემ მათ მმართველთან კავშირი შეკრა სპარსეთის წინააღმდეგ. ჯუანშერის ფრაზა „და მიიყვანა დასავლეთით თურქნი“, მოცემულია დასავლეთ თურქებთან კავშირში. ქართველი ისტორიკოსი კარგად იცნობს თურქთა ხაკანის ავთენტურ ტიტულს, მაგრამ, ძირითადად, მათ მმართველს თურქთა „მეფედ“ მოიხსენიებს. ზოგადად, ჯუანშერის ცნობებს სხვა ქართული წერილობითი წყაროებიც ადასტურებენ, მაგალითად: „მოქცევაჲ ქართლისაჲს“ მატიანე (VII ს.) და სუმბატ დავითის ძის თხზულება (XI ს.).

სტატიაში ქრონოლოგიური პრინციპის დაცვით გაანალიზებულია 625–630 წლების მოვლენები ქართული და სომხური ისტორიული წყაროებისა და სპეციალური ლიტერატურის მიხედვით. მასში განიხილულია ბიზანტიელებსა და დასავლეთ თურქებს შორის დადებული შეთანხმება სამხრეთ კავკასიის გაყოფის შესახებ. ეს გარიგება მოიცავდა დინასტიურ კავშირს. შეთანხმება დაარღვიეს ბიზანტიელებმა მას შემდეგ, რაც მათმა თურქმა მოკავშირემ ხაკანატში ძალაუფლება დაკარგა. შეთანხმების დარღვევამ აიძულა შათი, დასავლეთ თურქთა ხაკანის ვაჟიშვილი, თავს დასხმოდა ბიზანტიის გავლენის ქვეშ მყოფ ქართლსა და სომხეთს, მაგრამ ის ადგილობრივებმა დაამარცხეს. მამამისის მიერ დასავლეთ თურქთა ხაკანატში მიმდინარე სამოქალაქო ომში ძალაუფლების დაკარგვამ და დაღუპვამ დასავლეთ თურქები აიძულა სამხრეთ კავკასია დაეტოვებინათ.

საძიებო სიტყვები: ბიზანტია, იმპერია, ევრაზია, საქართველო, ხაკანატი, სასანური ირანი, თურქები.

Introduction

The Eurasian Steppe is a vast and expansive space that stretches between the steppes of modern-day Hungary and Mongolia and it is the largest in the world in terms of its size. This vast area was inhabited by numerous nomadic peoples. The Eurasian Steppe was the site of the formation of numerous large nomadic empires that subsequently spread across the region. Among the empires formed in antiquity, the Hunnic state was the largest and most extensive, reaching its zenith during the reign of Attila the Hun. Thereafter, the Hun Empire underwent a period of decline, which led to the rise of other formidable powers, including the Türk Empire.

The Türks, also known as Kök Türks (Heavenly Türks, or the Eastern Türks as some scholars interpret), were a people from the Asian part of the Eurasian steppe who extended their rule over a vast area of the Eurasian steppe and founded a massive Eurasian empire. Their ruler was known as the Khagan, thus leading to its designation in historical scholarship as the "Türk Khaganate" (Гумилев, 1967, сс. 9-246; Sinor, 1990, pp. 285-316; Golden, 1992, pp. 115-154). Georgian primary sources are informative about the Türk Khaganate. The most important is the evidence of Juansher Juansheriani (8th c.), a less trusted author in historiography. His information was long believed to be misleading, with claims that he lived later and did not write in the eighth century as indicated in the royal Georgian annals ("Life of Kartli"). The present article, as well as some other contemporary authors, challenges this view. The Chronicle of "Conversion of Kartli" is another Georgian primary source, written in the seventh century, that presents interesting accounts about the Western Türk Khaganate. This primary source confirms the accounts of Juansher Juansheriani regarding the Türks. The eleventh century Georgian author, Sumbat, son of David based his narrative on the Chronicle of "Conversion of Kartli". Armenian authors, such as Sebeos and Movses Kaghankatuatsi, provide good supplementary information on the Georgian-Türk relations. Hence, the article examines accounts by Georgian authors and attempts to reconstruct events based on Georgian and Armenian primary sources, as well as secondary literature.

Methodology

The article presents an overview of the Georgian primary sources in connection with Türk and Western Türk Khaganates. Armenian primary sources are also used to supplement the Georgian historical narrative. The narrative sources are analyzed together with numismatic materials to establish a more realistic picture of the events at the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries. Traditional research methods are employed, such as comparative study of sources, critical analysis of historical sources, and complex analysis to compare various types of primary sources, including narrative sources, numismatics, and secondary literature.

Discussion and results

According to ancient Georgian sources, the head of the powerful Eurasian state was known as the King of the Türks, therefore, the country was known as the Kingdom of the Türks (k'artlis c'xovreba, 1955, pp. 217, 200; k'artlis c'xovreba, 2008, pp. 226-227). In one particular instance, the eighth century Georgian historian, Juansher Juansheriani, refers to the ruler of the Turkic-speaking Khazars as "Khagan" (k'artlis c'xovreba, 1955, p. 180; k'artlis c'xovreba, 2008, p. 195). This designation indicates that the ruling elite of Kartli was aware of the local title held by the Türk ruler. Moreover, the same Georgian author knows about the Western Türks (k'artlis c'xovreba, 1955, p. 223; k'artlis c'xovreba, 2008, p. 229). He speaks about Heraclius, as he seized the power in Byzantium, secured his positions, "and brought the Western Türks, and assembled limitless troops, and marched for Persia" (k'artlis c'xovreba, 1955, p. 223-224).¹ In this particular instance, the initial segment of the phrase is occasionally interpreted and translated as "Heraclius brought the Turks from the West" (Juansher Juansheriani, 2014, p. 109). This is a more literal translation, as it does not consider the fact that the Türks were not from the west to Byzantium, nor did they live to the west of

¹ „და მიიყვანა დასავლეთით თურქნი, და შეკრიბა სპანი ურიცხვნი, და წარმოემართა სპარსეთად“ (k'artlis c'xovreba, 1955, p. 223-224).

Georgia; rather, they were from the western part of their habitat, i.e., the Western Eurasian Steppe. Therefore, "the West" should be understood from the Türks' perspective rather than from Byzantine or Georgian perspectives.

The nomads from the Eurasian Steppe that attacked Persia in the 580s and 620s were clearly identified as Türks in the Georgian primary sources. In modern Georgian academic literature Ivane Javakhishvili aligns with Josef Marquart's research, categorizing them as the Western Türks (Javakhishvili, 1979, pp. 301-306; Marquart, 1902, pp. 394, 498), despite this, he describes situation of Georgia in the 620s not following Juasher's accounts, but rather based on Movses Kaghankatvatsi (or Movses Dasxuranci, as some propose this name). Javakhishvili regarded Juasher's narrative as non-reliable for the study of Georgian history (Javakhishvili, 1977, pp. 189-194). Subsequent Georgian historians followed this pattern, disregarding the accounts of Juasher and accepting Movses Kaghankatvatsi and "Conversion of Kartli" as more reliable (Berdzenishvili et al., 1954, pp. 106-107; Bogveradze, 1973, pp. 280-282). Later, such an approach has been changed. Vakhtang Goiladze, primarily based on the works of Lev Gumilev, analyzed the history of the Türk Khaganate and gave more credit to the Georgian primary sources (Goiladze, 1977, pp. 90-102; Goiladze, 1997, pp. 8-120). This approach was later adopted by other Georgian historians as well; they also gave more value to Juasher's "History" and accepted the Northerners, the main participants of Byzantine-Persian war, as the Western Türks (Muskhelishvili, 2003, 315-341; Alasania, 2008, pp. 57-67, 87-104; Sanadze, 2017, pp. 450-476).

Juasher's account on the Türks is supplemented by the "Chronicle of Conversion of Kartli". This seventh-century "Chronicle" is one of the primary sources used by Juasher, the eighth-century author. The "Chronicle" was edited later in the 9th century, also in the 10th century. The former is the earliest that reached to us. The "Chronicle" specifies the title of the Türk commander that helped Heraclius against Persian, without indicating his ethnicity (mokčevay k'artlisay, 1963, pp. 95-96; mokčevay k'artlisay, 2007, pp. 19-20). The accounts of the "Chronicle" were employed by the eleventh-century Georgian historian, Sumbat, son of David, in his famous work on the history of Bagrationi dynasty (k'artlis c'xovreba, 1955, pp. 374-375; k'artlis c'xovreba, 2008, pp. 361-362). Juasher had more diverse accounts and his information is reach with narrative, even though he is biased against Stephanoz I of Kartli (k'artlis c'xovreba, 1955, pp. 222-226; k'artlis c'xovreba, 2008, pp. 228-232; Juasher Juasheriani, 2014, pp. 108-109). Juasher presents the commander of Türk army as *Eristavi*, thus the same as account of the "Chronicle", and he clearly differentiates the King of the Türk from the *Eristavi* of the Türks. Therefore, the commander of the Türk army during Heraclius campaign in Kartli was not a supreme ruler of the Khaganate, but rather he was governor of province just as the title of *Eristavi* means and was used to denote provincial administrator and military governor of the certain region, while the king (mepe) of the Türk was a supreme leader.

Hence, according to Georgian historical sources, the Türk king, also known as Khagan, was the head of a powerful Türk state. This state, according to the same sources, is in competition with "Greece" and "Persia". Georgian primary sources refer to the Byzantine Empire and the Sasanian Iran by these names. Such competition became a reality in the second half of the 6th century, when the Türk Khaganate expanded towards Central Asia and the North Caucasus and began to strengthen its position. In the second half of the sixth century, the Türk Khaganate made a substantial contribution to the defeat of the Hephthalite state. This achievement was realized through the joint efforts of the Sasanians and the Türks. The rulers of Sasanian Iran and the Türk Khaganate divided the Hephthalite territory. According to this division, the northern region of the Amu Darya came under the dominion of the Türks, while the southern region was subject to the rule of the Sasanians (Frye, 1984, p. 327; Мишин, 2014, сс. 581-588; Rezakhani, 2017, pp. 143-145). The Türk Khaganate and Iran became neighbors.

The existing political situation turned the Türk Khaganate and Sasanian Iran into the two leading hegemonic powers in Central Asia. The border drawn along the Amu Darya was quite extensive. It took some time to establish control over this space, in the regions on both sides of Amu Darya. The ambition to establish hegemony in Central Asia later turned the former allies against each other.

The Türk Khaganate and Sasanian Iran opposed each other over the territory of the Amu Darya River basin, a situation that was further complicated by the desire to gain supremacy in Central Asia and

dominance on the Silk Road. The involvement of the Turks against Iran was also prompted by the political activities of the Eastern Roman Empire.

According to Juansher, "the king of the Türks entered Persia, and the Greeks came and attacked the Persian Mesopotamia" (k'artlis cxovreba, 1955, pp. 217; k'artlis cxovreba, 2008, pp. 226). These events, which occurred in 588, enabled the Byzantines to launch an offensive against the Persian Empire, with the assistance of the Georgians (Bíró, 1979, pp. 177-185). Guaram Kouropalates, the ruler of Kartli at that time, received a substantial subsidy by order of Emperor Maurice (582-602). Guaram's objective was to recruit people from the north and, in collaboration with the Christians of the South Caucasus, launch an offensive against the northern provinces of Iran. Guaram, accompanied by the army of Kartli and mercenaries (Ossetians, Durdzuks, and Didoes) entered Adurbadagan and opened another front against Iran, this time on the marchlands of the South Caucasus and Northern Iran (k'artlis cxovreba, 1955, pp. 219-220; k'artlis cxovreba, 2008, pp. 226-227).

This campaign, the first of its kind against the Iranians, involved the active engagement of the Byzantine Empire, the Türk Khaganate, Kartli, and other Caucasian states, operating in three separate directions. The defeat of the Türks by the Iranian commander Bahram Chobin, a member of the Mihranid house, and the subsequent murder of their king Saba, which must have been the Türk Khagan Bagha (Sinor, 1990, p. 306; Гумилев, сс. 126-132. Although there are other versions, see: Golden, 2016, pp. 26-59), turned the Persian military power against the Georgians and their allies in Adurbadagan. Guaram Kouropalates was forced to retreat and withdraw from northern Iran. The Georgians began to fortify the country in response to the anticipated Iranian incursion. Bahram initiated a military offensive against the Georgians, the Byzantines, and their allies in the South Caucasus. However, Bahram's relationship with the Iranian Shah Hormizd IV soon deteriorated, leading to a revolt that resulted in a chaotic civil war (k'artlis cxovreba, 1955, p. 220-221; k'artlis cxovreba, 2008, p. 227).

The political unrest in Iran during this period provided the Kartli ruler, Guaram Kouropalates, with an opportunity to liberate his country from Persian oppression. In 591, with the support of Byzantium, Khosrau II Parviz ascended the Iranian throne, leading to the conclusion of a truce between the two empires. Kartli was formally designated as a sphere of influence of the Eastern Roman Empire. Juansher notes: "Then the king of the Persians obeyed Caesar and liberated the Georgians. And this Guaram Kouropalates submitted to the Greeks" (k'artlis cxovreba, 1955, p. 221; k'artlis cxovreba, 2008, p. 228). According to this account, Kartli broke away from Persian rule, although Armenian sources, which provide more details about this truce, speak of the division of Iberia. East of Tbilisi remained with Iran, and west of Tbilisi with Byzantium (Sebeos, 1997, pp. 18-19, 28-29). It seems that Kakheti, Kukheti, Mtiuleti and Hereti were declared the sphere of influence of Iran, while the rest of Kartli passed into the hands of Guaram Kouropalates and came under the influence of the Byzantine Empire. It is conceivable that the coins of Guaram Kouropalates in the name of Gurgen are the result of his Byzantine affiliation (Fig. 1), while the issue minted in the name of Juansher/Johnber, which is decorated with Iranian-Mazdean symbolism until end, with the exception of the Georgian inscription (Fig. 2), must belong to the ruler of Persian Kartli (i.e. the Eastern Kartli), and not to the ruler of unified Kartli, who, as is traditionally believed in historiography, ruled between Gurgen and Stephanos (Dundua, 1976, 45-53; Sanadze, 2017, pp. 380-393; Dundua T. & G. 2021, p. 131-173). This assertion needs revision because all historical sources directly after Guaram specify his son and successor, Stephanos, as the subsequent *erismatvari* of Kartli (mok'cevay k'artlisay, 1963, p. 95; mok'cevay k'artlisay, 2007, p. 19; k'artlis cxovreba, 1955, p. 221-222; k'artlis cxovreba, 2008, p. 228). The reign of Juansher is nowhere to be seen there, so he must have been the *erismtavari* of Iranian Kartli, or Eastern Kartli, which is a confirmed political union according to Sebeos, a nearly contemporary Armenian writer. The Eastern Kartli did not survive for long as a separate political entity. Stephanos, as we learn from the hagiographic monument "The Life of Shio Mgvime", controlled Mgvime and the surrounding territories (Skhirtladze, 2014, p. 130-134). Accordingly, it is conceivable that Stephanos soon annexed Eastern Kartli and completely subordinated it. The coins bearing the name of Stephanos fully inscribed on them may also symbolize this (Fig. 3).

Thus, the 7th century was marked by significant changes in the situation around Georgia, when the Georgian lands became the focus of attention of three great hegemonies – alongside the traditional Byzantium and Iran, the Türk Khaganate emerged.

The internal political conflict in the Türk Khaganate ultimately ended with the division of the united empire into two. The formal unity collapsed at the beginning of the 7th century. Two powerful political unions were established: The Western Türk Khaganate and the Eastern Türk Khaganate (Sinor, 1990, pp. 305-308; Golden, 1992, pp. 132-137; Гумилев, 1967, сс. 132-134, 148-164). Of these, the Western Türk Khaganate had interests in Georgia.

The Western Türk Khaganate reached its peak during the reign of Tong Yabghu Khagan (618-628). During his reign, the country began to expand towards the South Caucasus, and the invading hordes of the Western Türks had already appeared in Georgia. Their incursion into the territory of Kartli and Egrisi, as recorded by Movses Kaghankatvatsi, was precipitated by an appeal from Emperor Heraclius, who had dispatched his general, Andrew, to the northern regions to procure an auxiliary army from there to confront the Sasanian Empire.

According to Movses Kalankatuatsi's account, Andrew's actions prompted a response from the northern crown prince, Jebu Khagan, who was the second-in-command in the kingdom, "when the northern crown prince, who was the second man in the kingdom, named Jebu Khagan, learned of the plundering attacks on all the countries subject to Persia, he responded with great satisfaction" (Movsēs Dasxuranci, 1961, p. 87). Jebu Khagan, mentioned by Movses Kaghankatvatsi, is the same Jibghu (var. Jibgha, Jibgho. i.e. Yabghu) *Eristavi* mentioned in Georgian sources (mokčevay k'artlisay, 1963, p. 95-96; mokčevay k'artlisay, 2007, p. 19; k'artlis c'xovreba, 1955, p. 225; k'artlis c'xovreba, 2008, p. 230). There is a difference of opinion about his exact identification, with some scholars claiming that he is Tong Yabghu Khagan (Marquart, 1902, p. 498), others think that he is his brother, Bagha (Mokho) Shad (Гумилев, 1967, с. 159), and still others claim that he is Sipi Khagan, another brother of Tong, who overthrew Tong Yabghu Khagan and briefly took his place (La Vaissière, 2013, pp. 741-748). Whichever of the three versions given is correct (the last version seems to be more convincing), it is certain that the Western Türk Khaganate was already expanding in a southern direction towards Transcaucasia by 626.

The next year the Western Türk army, in alliance with the Byzantine army and their ally Adarnase, the prince of Kartli, had captured the city of Tbilisi. A little later, before Heraclius invaded the inner provinces of Iran and was encamped in the Gardabani area, the Türks captured Kala (citadel of Tbilisi), thus almost completely clearing Kartli of the Persians (mokčevay k'artlisay, 1963, p. 95-96; mokčevay k'artlisay, 2007, p. 19-20; k'artlis c'xovreba, 1955, p. 223-225; k'artlis c'xovreba, 2008, p. 229-231; Movsēs Dasxuranci, 1961, p. 85-86; Theophanes Confessor, 1997, 447; Ломоури, 1991, сс. 31-44; Goiladze, 1997, pp. 54-76; Howard-Johnston, 1999, pp. 22-24; Kaegi, 2003, pp. 143, 158; Zuckerman, 2007, pp. 399-417). The success of the Western Türks, especially after the capture of Tbilisi, increased their ambitions.

In 627, the meeting of the Byzantine emperor and the Khagan ended with an agreement. In addition to the money and property offered by the Byzantine imperial court to the Khazars, an agreement was reached on a dynastic marriage and the division of the South Caucasus. Heraclius offered his daughter in marriage to the Khagan of the Western Türks, to which he received consent (Zuckerman, 2013, p. 213). The Türk ruler also became the beneficiary and owner of the territories of Albania (Arran), Chor and Lp'in, while Heraclius affirmed the Georgian lands (Артамонов, 1962, с. 151; Goiladze, 1997, pp. 113-114). According to Movses Kaghankatvatsi, prince Shad (Šat') calls his father, the Khagan, the eternal owner of Albania, Chor and Lp'in (Movsēs Dasxuranci, 1961, p. 100). In this context, the Khagan of the Western Türks claimed the eastern Caucasus, while the Byzantine Emperor claimed the western part of the same region, which is well evident from the Georgian sources relating about Heraclius' military campaign in Georgia.

The prince, Shad, who was left to rule the eastern part of Transcaucasia by the Khagan of the Western Türks, began to conquer the Albanian country with greater intensity in 628, but since he did not want to completely destroy this country in order to receive some income from it, he offered a compromise to the Catholicos of Albania, Viro. Shad promised that if the Albanian population stopped resisting and recognized their supremacy, Türks would end the raids, bloodshed and oppression of the locals. A

compromise was reached, which calmed the country for a short period (Movsēs Dasxuranci, 1961, pp. 100-102).

Moreover, soon after the departure of Jibghu *Eristavi* (Jibu Khagan of Movses Kaghankatvatsi) from Caucasus, he dethroned and killed his brother, Tong Yabghu Khagan, and became a supreme ruler of the Western Türk Khaganate. Etienne de Vaissière identifies him as Sipi Yabghu Khagan (Ziebel of the Byzantine sources), assumption that best fits to available sources (La Vaissière, 2010a, pp. 157-167; La Vaissière, 2013, pp. 741-748). His son Shad was placed at top of western regions of the Empire. The Byzantine Emperor was ready to send his daughter to the court of Sipi, now installed as the Western Türk Khagan (Nikephoros, 1990, p. 67; La Vaissière, 2013, p. 744).

But conditions deteriorated soon after that, when in 629 Sipi Yabghu Khagan was defeated by his nephew, Tong's son, and was forced to flee in the Altay mountains to the north (La Vaissière, 2013, p. 744). This defeat was clear sign for enemies as well as allies that things had changed. As Etienne de Vaissière calculates, Sipi Yabghu Khagan was in a strong position in the Spring and the Summer, but in the Fall he was defeated; hence the daughter of Heraclius was called back from the East to Constantinople (La Vaissière, 2013, p. 744). Hence, at the end of this year relationship between the Byzantines and the Türks became tense. In the second year of Persian king Ardashir III (628-630), i.e. at the turn of 629 and 630, the Türks started plundering attacks against Armenia (Movsēs Dasxuranci, 1961, p. 104; Артамонов, 1962, cc. 153-4). The power of Ardashir was weak and was unable to respond. But, Persian commander Shahvaraz threatened the Türks with action and called his army to react against their atrocities (Movsēs Dasxuranci, 1961, p. 104-105). But, from the narrative of Movses it seems that deterioration of the situation in the northern provinces of Persia was used by Shahvaraz to launch the propaganda against Sasanian royal dynasty. Most probably, only after he managed to establish his rule in Ctesiphon, he was able to send the troops against the Türks in Armenia.

The main threat to the rule of the Türks was Iran, which had many supporters in the South Caucasus, including followers of Zoroastrianism. The Persian king Ardashir, in fact, accepted the loss of Albania. Their response for Türk's attack on Armenia was feeble. Shahvaraz was successful in his propaganda and confrontation with the royal dynasty. Ardashir lost support, he was dethroned and executed. After his overthrow, Shahvaraz, who came to power in 630, sent a ten-thousand-strong against the Western Türks. But the Persians were defeated, killed, and expelled from the country (Movsēs Dasxuranci, 1961, p. 104-106). The Western Türks prevailed. The position of the Türks was significantly strengthened after the defeat of the Persians.

However, soon after the situation in the Western Türk Khaganate became chaotic. The Emperor returned his daughter back to Constantinople, thus disrupting the dynastic union. The Türks attacked Georgia and Armenia, the relationship between the Byzantines and the Western Türks became hostile. The Albanians also came out against the Türks. According to Movses Kaghankatvatsi, after the defeat of the Persians, Türks advanced in direction of all three countries – Armenia, Georgia, and Albania – but were defeated (Movsēs Dasxuranci, 1961, p. 106). The locals managed to halt their attacks, which must have taken place in the second half of 630.

Therefore, in addition to Albania, Shad began raiding the territories of Kartli (Georgia) and Armenia. This action by the Western Turks requires an explanation. We believe it was in response to the Byzantines' violation of the agreement. The Byzantines broke their promise for a dynastic union. Etienne de Vaissière explains that the dynastic union broke down due to the ongoing war against Ziebel/Sipi Khagan, which began in the Western Türk Empire (Vaissière, 2013, p. 744). Additionally, it's clear that the Turks had increased their ambitions. Just four or five years earlier, when the Western Turk Empire entered the political arena of the South Caucasus, their motivations were modest. Later, they developed the ambition to conquer the entire Transcaucasia. They already occupied its eastern part, Caucasian Albania, and claimed the rest. They began organizing raids. This initiative, which began in 630 and was initially thwarted by local resistance. Simultaneously, the civil war in the Western Türk Khaganate aggravated, forcing Prince Shad to leave Albania and return to his homeland (Movsēs Dasxuranci, 1961, p. 106).

The death of Shad's father and the prolongation of the civil war left the Western Türks without the means to continue their struggle for the South Caucasus. Kartli and Egrisi survived the challenge from the Eurasian Steppe Empire this time.

In conclusion, the events of the early seventh century brought a new hegemon to the South Caucasus, which claimed hegemony in the Transcaucasia first as the Türk Khaganate and later as its western successor. The events of the 620s clearly displayed that the military power of the Western Türks did not have the function of a mere mercenary or raiding army, but they claimed hegemony over Georgia and, in general, the South Caucasus.

This was the first time that the Eurasian Steppe Empire prevailed in the South Caucasus and, with the consent and cooperation of the Eastern Roman Empire, took possession of the eastern part of the region. As demonstrated previously, the alliance between the Western Türk Khaganate and the Eastern Roman Empire was not solid and it was soon broken. After that, the Türks tried to conquer Armenia and Kartli, but due to the civil war in Eurasian Steppe, they were forced to abandon the region.

The legacy of the Western Türk Khaganate was continued by the Khazar Khaganate later in the same century.

Acknowledgement: This work was supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG) [FR-23-17033]

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Description of Illustrations:

Fig. 1. Anonymous coins with the depiction of cross on altar (Online English-Georgian Catalogue of Georgian Numismatics). It is most likely a coin issued by Gurgen *Erismtavari* of Kartli (he is Guaram Kouropalates in Georgian source) after the overthrow of Persian rule.

Fig. 2. Coins with the depiction of fire on altar. Jonber//Juansher's drachms (Online English-Georgian Catalogue of Georgian Numismatics). A coin issued by *Erismtavari* of Eastern Kartli under Persian rule.

Fig. 3. Coins with the depiction of cross on altar. Stephanos I – second emission (Online English-Georgian Catalogue of Georgian Numismatics). A coin issued after unification of Kartli by Stephanos I *Erismtavari*.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

