

ETHNOGRAPHICAL SOURCES ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF THE CHUVASH

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It has been hypothesized that the ancestors of the Chuvash were known as *Savirs/Suwars* [Taimasov 2001: 7–33; Mukhamadiyev 2011: 80, 86; Salmin 2011a: 22–28]. Although that statement is still open to question, it provides sufficient grounds for historico-philological inquiry. Researchers believe that the Savirs, the ancestors of the Chuvash, came from southwestern Siberia [Artamonov 1962: 69; Golden 1980: 34–36]. They also reckon that the Savir-Ugrians in Western Siberia were a significant amalgamation of tribes [Novosel'tsev 1990: 82].

During the Caucasian period in their history, the ancestors of the Chuvash were often called a Hunnish tribe—Huns from among those known as the Sabirs or Hunno-Sabirs. For example, Procopius wrote explicitly that “the Sabirs (Σάβηροι) are a Hunnish tribe” (475–560 AD) [Procop. BG. IV.11, 23]. Jordanes called the Altziagirs and Savirs “mighty Huns that had sprouted as if from the sod” [Jordan. Getica. 37]. Jordanes’ elegant phrase, Alexander Anfert’yev suggested, derives from a text by Cassiodorus, while the information comes from Priscus. We should not take this to mean that the Altziagirs and Savirs emerged as two branches of the Huns (Douglas Dunlop’s interpretation [Dunlop 1954: 27]). “The image here is a different one: just as many plants grow from a tree, from its tangle of roots, so among the Huns many very powerful peoples grew up, two of which the author (Priscus?) found it necessary to mention” [Anfert’yev 1994: 142]. Anfert’yev also believed that behind the spelling *Sauri* lies the Greek Σάβηροι, as in Priscus. In the 17th chapter of Book III, Agathias Scholasticus wrote of “the Huns who are called Sabirs (Σαβείρων).” In another place (Book IV, Chapter

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13), he indicated that the Persians had auxiliaries recruited from the Hunno-Sabirs (Ούννοι Σάβειροι) (552–558). In the opinion of Theophylact Simocatta, the Barselt, Onogurs, and Sabirs (Βαρσηλτ και Ουνουγούροι και Σαβίροι) were Hunnish tribes (589–596) [Theophyl. Hist. VII. 8, 3]. Under the year 682, Moses of Chorene wrote that north of the Derbent wall lived Huns who had a city called Varachan [Khorenskii 1877: 38]. However, historians and ethnographers have long known that in this period, the Huns no longer had their own country, still less a capital. The Savirs, who more than two centuries previously had belonged to the Hunnish confederation, were called Huns by inertia. Furthermore, researchers identify Varachan with the capital of the Savirs. The “Huns” who, together with Khazars, defended the fortress of Derbent against Armenian forces in 785 [Ghevond 1862: 112] should also be taken to be Savirs. Evidently the frequent mentions of the ethnonym “Hunno-Sabirs” in historical sources enabled some researchers to speak of the Huns as the direct ancestors of the Chuvash. Shiro Hattori, for example, wrote: “The Chuvash tribes may be one of the branches of direct descendants of the Huns, who in the 370s provided the impetus for the ‘Great Migration of Peoples’ and departed from the historical stage in the late 5th century” [Khattori 1980: 94]. However, the opposite is correct—in the post-Attila period the Huns of Daghestan were a part of the Savir tribes. To put it more simply, after disintegrating, the Huns were absorbed by the Savirs. Many tribes belonging to the Hunnish union were ethnically close to the Savirs—the Utigurs, Kotrigurs, Hunugurs, Onogurs, Barselt, and Zals. In Yelena Skrzhinskaya’s opinion, the Hunugurs were a Hunnish tribe that was close to or merged with the Savirs who inhabited the Northern Caucasus [Skrzhinskaya 2001: 219]. The tribes known as Sabirs and Sabeiroi were believed by Gavriil Destunis to be related to the Huns [Destunis 1860, note 98]. In the writings of Theophanes of Byzantium, the name “Huns” is used not only for the Huns themselves but also for the Hunno-Savirs, Avars, Bulgars, and Turkic tribes. Movses Kalankatuatsi (Kaghankatvatsi) calls Varachan the capital of the Khons, which can also be read as the capital of the Hunno-Savirs.

The primary sources confuse the Savirs not only with the Huns but also with the Khazars. For example, in chapter 43 of Book II of his *History of the Country of Albania*, Movses Kalankatuatsi states that the great and pious

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prince of the Huns Ilituer sent two nobles of his country, Itgin-khursan and Chat-khazr, for the saintly Israel with a request to be allowed to appoint him the spiritual leader of the land of the Huns. In chapter 45, under the heading “The Reply to the Huns’ Letter,” we learn that Eliazr, the Catholicos of Caucasian Albania, and Prince Varaz-Trdat turned down the request of the envoys Itgin-khursan and Chat-khazr and were unwilling to let Israel go to be a spiritual leader of the Khazars. Clearly, there is a substitution of the concepts “Huns” and “Khazars” here. However, in actual fact, the text is referring to the Savirs, whose prince at that time (682 AD) was Alp Ilituer, and who believed in the might of their god of lightning, Kuar. In 724, an Arabic source noted that the 300,000-strong army of the Khakan was made up of “Khazars and other tribes of infidels” [Al-Kufi. Book VIII]. Most probably the “other tribes of infidels” referred to the Savirs. The ethnonym *sabartoi aspaloi* that occurs in the writings of Constantine Porphyrogenitus is usually translated as “invincible Sabarts.” Anatoly Novosel’tsev identified *aspaloi* as the Persian word for “white” and proposed that this name should be translated as “the White Sabirs.” This solution undoubtedly establishes a link between the Hungarian tribes and the Savirs/Sabirs. According to al-Masudi, the Turkic peoples called the Khazars Sabirs, which in turn indicates that the main role in the ethnogenesis of the Khazars was played not by the Huns but by the Savirs [Novosel’tsev 1990: 79ff].

In the 6th and 7th centuries, the Armenians called the Sabirs who sojourned in Armenia Sevordik. Based on the sources, Novosel’tsev suggested that some of these Savirs were Armenianized [Novosel’tsev 1990: 83].

The Savirs were also recorded by Ibn Khordadbeh: “Beyond the limits of al-Bab lie the lands of the rulers of the Suvars, Lezgs, Alans, Muskuts and Sarirs and the city of Samandar” [Ibn Khordadbekh. Book 63]. The Persian author was presumably writing about the situation in the first half of the 8th century. In any case, he was referring to the Northern Caucasus and the Stavropol-Astrakhan steppe and not the Volga basin as N.M. Velikhanov indicates in his commentary on Ibn Khordadbeh (note 133). Moreover, by the 10th century, Samandar was already known as Djidan. Hence, the time frame for Ibn Khordadbeh’s account of the Suvars is the 8th century to the first half of the 9th. The phonetic form of the ethnonym clearly reflects the Arabic

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pronunciation of the tribal name. The context allows us to place them between the cities of Derbent and Atil.

It is known that by the mid-6th century the Savirs had become the most powerful and numerous tribe in the Caucasus. They captured the whole of Northern Albania (Shirvan and Aran) and consolidated their hold on the Derbent-Kabala area. They spent more than 100 years in these places. Sara Ashurbeili believes that at this time, the Savirs adopted a settled way of life, becoming assimilated with the native population of the country [Ashurbeili 1983: 62]. Archaeozoological studies in Phanagoria show that Khazarian society was at a higher level of economic development than that of the Huns or the Turkic Kaganate [Dobrovol'skaya 2010: 439f]. It is legitimate to consider that the Suvar farmers' move to the fertile lands on the right bank of the Volga took place in pre-Mongol times. This is also borne out by archaeological excavations.

In the late 17th century, the Dutch traveller Nicolaes Witsen observed that in winter, the Ostyaks lived in dugouts roofed over like huts. In the summer, they moved into small houses [Witsen 2010: 788]. This is the same kind of winter habitation as was used by the Syvyrs. Agathias Scholasticus wrote of the temporary camps established by the Savirs: "Around 500 Savirs (Σαβείρων) installed themselves on some elevated spot." The walls of such temporary fortifications were not very high—the face of a mounted man outside the enclosure could be seen. The camp consisted of a fence of stakes within which were "huts made of poles and hides" [Agathi. Hist. III.18; IV.14]. Such settlements of framed shelters could be set up very quickly. This passage relates to the events of the year 554 in Lazica (Western Georgia). Commenting on it, Alexander Gadlo correctly observed that these types of dwellings and fortifications are typical for the forest and forest-steppe tribes of Siberia. "Thus the description of the wartime life of the Savirs provides information about their ancestral homeland—the forest-steppe part of Western Siberia" [Gadlo 1979: 88]. In 555, a Syrian source, Zacharias Rhetor, recorded the Savirs' having tents [Zakhar. Chron. 12.7]

According to Priscus of Panium, who visited Attila's dwelling at the end of the first half of the 5th century, "benches stood by the walls of the room" there [Prisc. Hist. 8]. A similar placement of long, venerable benches the full length of the wall is typical of the Chuvash (especially the southerners).

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Benches began to be supplanted by purchased furniture only in the late 20th century [Salmin 2010: 158f].

The Suvar engaged in close interaction with the surrounding world. Common cultural traditions developed, especially in clothing, such as “elongated toggle-buttons with little cubes at the ends and loops in the middle to sew them to the clothing” [Fyodorov 1972: 37]. This tradition can also be traced in the archaeological sites of Volga Bulgaria. As Yury Shevchenko correctly noted, the impulse that brought items belonging to the Hunnish legacy (buckles and bone arrowheads) to the Volga-Urals region is associated with the Sabirs [Shevchenko 2001: 218].

According to Zacharias, in 555 the Sabirs carried weapons, hunted wild animals, and ate the meat of cattle and fish [Zakhar. Chron. 12.7] as, indeed, did their neighbors (the Bulgars, Alans, Kurtargars, Avars, Khazars, and so on). The population of the city of Suvar was living in tents in the year 985. They had plenty of land under cultivation and an abundance of grain [Al Mukaddasi 1994: 289]. In Volga Bulgaria, the inhabitants hunted squirrels and beavers for their fur [Ibn Sa'id 2009: 32].

Undoubtedly valuable are the written descriptions of banquets given for a Byzantine embassy to Attila, the leader of the Huns, in 448 and for an Arab mission to Almysh, the ruler of Volga Bulgaria, in 922. A comparison of the associated ceremonies is particularly interesting. The first occasion was recorded by Priscus of Panium, the second by Ibn Fadlan. Both were describing what they had seen personally. Here are a few details. Priscus: “When all were arranged, a cup-bearer came and handed Attila a wooden cup of wine. He took it, and saluted the first in precedence, who, honored by the salutation, stood up, and might not sit down until the king, having tasted or drained the wine, returned the cup to the attendant. All the guests then honored Attila in the same way, saluting him, and then tasting the cups; but he did not stand up. Each of us had a special cupbearer, who would come forward in order to present the wine, when the cup-bearer of Attila retired. When the second in precedence and those next to him had been honored in like manner, Attila toasted us in the same way according to the order of the seats. When this ceremony was over the cup-bearers retired, and tables, large enough for three, four, or even more, to sit at, were placed next to the table of Attila, so that each could take of the food on the dishes without leaving his

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seat. The attendant of Attila first entered with a dish full of meat, and behind him came the other attendants with bread and viands, which they laid on the tables.” Ibn Fadlan: “The rulers [sat] to his right and he invited us to sit on his left, while his sons sat in front of him and he alone [sat] on a throne covered with Byzantine brocade. He ordered that a table [with food] be brought and it was presented to him. There was nothing but roast meat on it. And so he began—he took a knife, cut off a slice and ate it, then a second and a third. Then he cut a slice and gave it to Susan the ambassador. When he had received it, a small table was brought to him and placed before him. And such was the rule, that no-one touched the food, until the ruler had presented him with a slice. And as soon as he had been given it, he was brought a table. Then he gave [meat] to me and I was brought a table. Then he cut a slice and presented it to the ruler who was on his right and he was brought a table, then the second ruler and he was brought a table...then the fourth ruler and he was brought a table, then he gave to his sons and they were brought tables and so it went on until each of those before him had received a table and we ate, each from his own table, without sharing a table with anyone else, and beside him no-one took anything from his table” [Ibn-Fadlan 1956: 132]. Nuances aside (Attila’s simplicity and Almysh’s pomp, etc.), both meals followed the same pattern. In other words, at Almysh’s court, they did the same as the Huns had done five centuries earlier.

Traces of the banqueting ceremony described by Priscus and Ibn Fadlan can be clearly detected in the Chuvash ritual meals known as *čükleme* and *al valli* [Salmin 2011: 327–337]. The guests are seated at the table in the corner that is the place of honor. Here, the preliminary part of the performance takes place. In the *čükleme*, the women occupy a certain place. The wife of the host, for example, repeats the actions and words of her husband. In the ritual, she is seated at the table straight after her spouse. Immediately, beer is brought and placed on the table in a large wooden vessel, and scoops (up to nine in number) are provided. Each of the participants has to have ritual food and drink presented by the host. It is these that serve as the official permit to participate in the ritual generally and the shared food in particular. Each share, received in the hands, is called *al valli*, literally, “for the hand.” Both those seated at the table and the other participants face the door. At a wedding, the praying begins with the serving of beer, from a fresh cask, and

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bread. The head of the household or his wife gives each of the company a piece of bread spread with butter. Both this process and the piece of bread received are known among the Chuvash as *al valli*. Everyone stands up. They look toward the door, which is left slightly ajar, and hold the bread in their right hand. A candle is lit. First they address Tură and Pülëh, then other deities. They ask for health for the new couple and for offspring to be born to them, wishing them a whole field of lambs and a benchful of children. Of course, they ask Tură for the opportunity to pay visits to one another. Effectively, it is after this collective act of prayer and the eating of the pieces of bread and butter that the marriage contract is considered to have been concluded.

Did the Savirs adopt this ritual from the Huns? Or did the Bulgars, while part of the Hunnish confederation, borrow the scenario for the banquet from the Savirs? Both things are possible, and the questions remain open.

Researchers into the history of the ethnic structure of the Chuvash have noted the term *turhan*. Pavel Kokovtsev and Anatoly Novosel'tsev regarded it as a borrowing from Iranian, in the meaning of "judge" or "translator." Then the word found its way into the Khazar, Turkic, and Russian languages. Evidently, it was combined with a personal name, in the same ways as, for example, the title *pasha* in Turkey. In Khazaria, the term denoted the privileged class [Novosel'tsev 1990: 117–119]. It also exists as a personal name; the name of settlements, districts, streets, and other toponyms; and the name of deities, spirits, and holy places. There are, for example, settlements called Turkhan in the Batyrev, Krasnye Chetai, Shumerlia, Tsivilsk, and Morgaushi districts of the Chuvash Republic and elsewhere. Rail Kuzeyev noted that ethnonyms and toponyms incorporating the element *tarkhan* occur across almost all the territory west of the Altai and Central Asia. With regard to ethnogenesis, the ethnonym *tarkhan* established ties between the Danube Bulgars, Hungarians, Volga Bulgars, Chuvash, and Bashkirs. "Contacts between these formations may have taken place in the Northern Caucasus and the region of the Sea of Azov, where ethnonymic parallels formed that were then carried to the Danube and Volga" [Kuzeyev 2010: 323]. Movses Kalankatuatsi's *History of the Country of Albania* does indeed confirm that in the 7th century, the Hunno-Savirs used *tarkhan* as a title [Kalankatuatsi. Hist. II.42]. However, it is conceivable that the tribal name Tarkhan existed in

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southern Siberia and the Urals area in the previous millennium. Kuzeyev, for example, pointed to subdivisions of the Bashkir Tangaur and Katai tribes that were called Darkhan.

Traditional culture in a broad sense is known to preserve the vocabulary, etiquette, mentality, habitation, food, clothing, and religious attitudes of an ethnic group. All these primordial elements of culture can now be found “in the living flesh” only in the milieu of the still unbaptized Chuvash (mainly in the basin of the River Cheremshan). Study of their way of life in particular promises the most fruitful theoretical and practical results.

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