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# Ancient Iberia and the Gatekeepers of the Caucasus

Nicolas Preud'Homme

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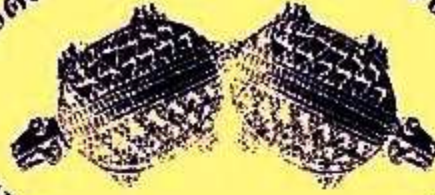
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GEORGIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM

# იბერია-კოლხეთი

საქართველოს კლასიკური და ადრემედიევური პერიოდის  
არქეოლოგიურ-ისტორიული კვლევანი

## IBERIA - COLCHIS

Researches on the Archaeology and History of Georgia  
in the Classical and Early Medieval Period



№ 16

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საქართველოს ეროვნული მუზეუმის  
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GEORGIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM  
Otar Lordkipanidze Institute of Archaeological Studies



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თბილისი 2021 Tbilisi

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## ANCIENT IBERIA AND THE GATEKEEPERS OF THE CAUCASUS

Nicolas J. Preud'homme

Research works on the Caucasian passes have given rise to an abundant bibliography, fuelled by thorough considerations on a varied material of archaeological and literary sources. The concern of great empires for these strategic ways used by Sarmatian, Alan and Hun invaders was repeatedly emphasized. Several studies produced by David Braund, Albert B. Bosworth and Roger C. Blockley have shown how, for the Persians as for the Romans, Iberia occupied a major place in the border defence system, as well as in the control of the Darial Gorge in the face of invasion threats from the north [Bosworth A. B. 1976, 1977, 1983. Braund D. 1984, 1986, 1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1994. Blockley R. C. 1984, 1985, 1987]. A collective volume edited by Eberhard Wolfram Sauer addresses the Sasanian relations with the areas surrounding Iran [Mashkour M. and *alii*, 2017]. The archaeological knowledge of the Caucasian Gates has recently benefited from the publication of the excavations and surveys carried out between 2013 and 2016 on several sites in the Darial Gorge [Sauer E. and *alii* 2020]. In this presentation, I would like to shift the focus to the Iberian kingdom and investigate how the Caucasian Gates have enabled the Iberian kings allied with Sarmatians and other peoples of the Caucasus to exert their power and legitimacy during eight centuries, from the Hellenistic period until the Sasanian hegemony on South Caucasia in Late Antiquity. This approach involves revisiting Classical Latin and Greek sources and cross-referencing them with data from Iberian epigraphy and archaeology as well as later indications from Georgian and Armenian chronicles.

### **1. The Darial pass as a synopsis between the worlds.**

The Darial pass was locking the main access route through which, over the centuries, the various invaders went for their raids, notably the Alans during 2<sup>nd</sup> century, as well as the Huns during 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries [Greatrex G. B. and M. 1999: 66; Dignas B. and Winter E. 2007: 188-195; Sauer E. and *alii* 2020, vol. 2: 857-927]. Some roads existed indeed to cross the Caucasian isthmus between the Black Sea and the Caspian, impeded by its chain of high mountains. In addition to the coastal routes of Derbent and Abkhazia, the most important land way was crossing the Caucasian Gates, commonly identified with the Darial pass, the 'Gate of the Alans', also called *drunk' Atanac'* in Armenian, *Dar-e Alān* in Persian and *Bāb al-Lān* in Arabic [Bosworth A. B. 1977: 217-255; Giardina A. 1996: 109-119 and 120-142]. In pointing out the substantial number of one hundred and twenty bridges crossing the Cyrus river (present-day Kura or Mtkvari), Strabo gives an idea of the dense road network crossing South Caucasia (Strabo, *Geography*, XI, 3, 4). In addition to Hakob Manandian's work on Armenia's trade routes, Robert H. Hewsen's cartographic study produced an attempt to reconstitute the roadways that crossed the kingdom of Iberia [Lomouri N. 1958. Manandian H. A. 1965. Hewsen R. H. 2001, maps 55 and 59]. At first sight, the importance of the corridor following the course of the Cyrus river is due to its extension to the east, reaching the catchment basins of Iori, Alazani, and beyond, the regions of Albania (Strabo, *Geography*, XI, 3, 5): this route was one of the segments composing a wider network of land and sea ways connecting Caucasia to the Black Sea, the Caspian and Central Asia [Melikishvili G. A. 1959: 440. Lordkipanidze O. 1996: 114-119. Gagoshidze I. 2008: 24-25]. The second major axis, linked to the Darial pass, descends the Aragvi valley to its confluence with the Cyrus at Armazi-Mtskheta, continues south on a segment of the river, then, roughly at the current city of Tbilisi, diverges to cross the Gugark-Somkhiti borderland and, beyond the Little Caucasus mountains, joins the Armenian capital of Artaxata

[Markwart J. 1928; Lordkipanidze O. 1996: 120; Olbrycht M. J. 1998: 149-150]. If our knowledge of the routes crossing Eastern Colchis, Upper Iberia and Chorzene remains very uncertain, it is likely to imagine two routes connecting Iberia to its western borders, one passing south of the Moschian mountains to go up the course of Cyrus, the other crossing the Surami pass through the Likhi mountains forming a barrier with Colchis, to join the course of Phasis (Rioni). This reconstitution would correspond perfectly to the indications of Plinius the Elder, who indicated a commercial route connecting the mouth of Cyrus River to the Phasis and another road guarded by the fortress of Cumania on the Caucasian Gates, descending towards the capital Harmastus (Armazi) (Plinius the Elder, *Natural History*, VI, 30; 52) [Gagoshidze I. 2008: 19]. A formula from the author of *Natural History* summarizes the particular situation of an Iberian place where “a gate (was enough) to close (the entrance of) a world (litt. ‘the circle of lands’)” (Plinius the Elder, *Natural History*, VI, 30: “*ibi loci terrarum orbe portis discluso*”): as a hinge of empires, the kingdom of Iberia thus held the function of an in-between whose size was paradoxically as modest as its strategic position proved to be influential in the geopolitical game of the first centuries CE [Giardina A. 1996: 142].

About Iberian places, Strabo mentions the fortresses of Seusamora (Tsitsamuri) and Sarapana (Shorapani), in addition to the city of Harmozike, comparable to the Harmastus of Pliny the Elder, the Armaktika of Ptolemy as well as the Acropolis of Cassius Dion, which archaeologists identify with the citadel of Armazi (*Armazis Tsikhe*), capital of the Iberian kings (Strabo, *Geography*, XI, 3, 5: Ἀρμοζική. Ptolemy, *Geography*, V, 11, 3: Ἀρμάκτικα. Plinius the Elder, *Natural History*, VI, 30: Harmastus/Hermastus) [Lordkipanidze O. 1991: 159; Lordkipanidze O. 1996: 272-274; Bähler B. 2019: 19-20]. The position of this city on a lock separating the basins of Upper Iberia and Lower Iberia crossed by the Cyrus or Mtkvari river gives this capital a strategic place of first order. Moreover, without naming it, Strabo mentions a fortress which watched the end of a narrow path along the Aragos valley, present-day Aragvi (Strabo, *Geography*, XI, 3, 5). Perhaps this fort should be identified with Cumania appearing with Pliny the Elder. Serge N. Mouraviev likens this fortress guarding the south of Darial pass with the current village of Kumlistsikhe [Mouraviev S. N. 1996: 50]. However, the archaeologists of Eberhard Sauer’s team who excavated the Darial Gorge remain skeptical about this hypothesis, as no ancient remains have been found in the village of Kumlistsikhe [Sauer E. and *alii* 2000: 863-864]. On the other hand, I disagree with Mouraviev’s wish to identify Plinius’ Cumania with Ptolemy’s Loubion Kōmē, since this place is to be situated in the land of Lupenians near Albania, in Kakheti (Plinius the Elder, *Natural History*, VI, 29) [Hewsen R. H. 1989: 18. Mouraviev S. N. 1996: 46].

Around the Darial, the archaeological site that attracts the most attention is the medieval fortress located on the left bank of the r. Terek, commonly called Tamar Castle. The dating of the remains of the fortress of Darial had been the subject of various opinions. Some Georgian researchers thought that the remains of ancient fortifications, situated under the medieval wall in front of the north gate of the fort, should be dated back at least to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE [Mindorashvili D. 1991: 3; 2005: 105-150; Gamkrelidze G. and *alii* (eds.) 2013: 176]. This archaeological dating would correspond to the emergence of the Iberian kingship established in Armazi during the Hellenistic period and its appearance in Greek and Latin literary sources. However, new excavations carried out between 2013 and 2016 did not find on the site of this Darial fortress any trace prior to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE [Sauer E. and *alii* 2020, vol. 1: 10-11]. These archaeologists do not exclude that there was a first previous fortress on the site, but this one was obviously completely destroyed and rebuilt during Late Antiquity [*Ibid.*: 32].



Darial was not of course the only strategic pass in Ancient Iberia, insofar as the complex geomorphology of South Caucasia is rendered by quite confuse explanations from ancient authors. The geographical notice opening Orosius' *Histories against the Pagans* thus evokes the chain of the Acroceraunian Mountains which would connect 'the Caspian Gates' to 'Armenian passes' confining to 'the source of the Tiger between Armenia and Iberia (Orosius, *Histories against the Pagans*, I, 2, 40) [Janvier Y. 1982: 43, 89]. Several approximations complicate the restitution of Orosius' geographic vision, given, firstly, that the author may have confused the Caspian Gates of Elburz or Derbent with the Caucasian Gates of Darial, secondly, that the source of the Tiger is not located in the Armeno-Kartvelian borders, but further south, in the Taurus chain, in Eastern Anatolia [Janvier Y. 1982: 90-92]. Yves Janvier locates the Acroceraunian mountains in the Little Caucasus which bordered the plain of Kura, supposing a shift of the map probably followed by Orosius [Janvier Y. 1982: 94-96]. I believe for my part that it is also possible to identify these Acroceraunian mountains with one of the meridian chains crossing South Caucasia, like the Likhi mountains in the west of Shida Kartli, or the mountainous complex uniting the crests of Trialeti, Saguramo, Gombori and Tbatana, between Kartli and Kakheti.

The issue of mastering the Caucasian passes gained indeed a renewed interest in the last third of the first century CE. Suetonius reports Nero's plans to conquer the Caspian Gates, which did not survive the death of their designer (Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, XIX, 2, 4) [Wheeler E. L. 1994-1996: 62. Gregoratti L. 2013: 530]. Everett L. Wheeler considers that this project of Nero responded to the distancing politics operated by a king of Albania who would have moved away from the Roman alliance concluded after the war of Canidius Crassus in 36 BCE [Wheeler E. L. 1994-1996: 63]. It is possible that the source of the Suetonius on the plans of Nero's expeditions in the Caucasus was identical to the document used by Plinius the Elder for his Caucasian notice in his *Natural History*, published towards 77. Intending to correct the description of the Caucasus left by the authors who accompanied Corbulo, Plinius tries to unravel the confusion made by the Ancients between the Caspian Gates, corresponding to the Derbent, and the Caucasian Gates identical to the Darial (Plinius the Elder, *Natural History*, VI, 40). Following the hypothesis of a geographic confusion in the source of Suetonius, it would be possible for David Braund, with Plinius' testimony, to replace Nero's aims of conquest not in the direction of Albania and the Caspian, but towards Iberia and Alans beyond the Caucasian Gates [Braund D. 1994: 225-226]. Thus appears the whole symbolic dimension of the project conceived by the last Julio-Claudian emperor, eager to illustrate himself as a new Alexander defending the civilized world against the nations of the north, once again closing the Caucasian passes [Bais M. 2001: 86-87]. Echoing Suetonius, Flavius Josephus, a contemporary of the Flavian dynasty, evokes, probably about Elburz near Hyrcania, "the pass which Alexander had closed with iron gates" (Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War*, VII, 244-245: "ἢν ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξανδρος πύλαις σιδηραῖς κλειστήν ἐποίησε") [Chaumont M.-L. 1976: n. 392, p. 126], thus attesting to the importance that this mythical place had acquired in the minds of the Hellenized world. The legendary idea of an Alexander the Great conqueror of the Caucasus consequently made its way during the first century CE in the circles of the imperial court. Several testimonies tend to suggest a direct military presence of Rome in South Caucasia in the last decades of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Both the stele for the fortification of Armazi defences dedicated by Vespasian in 75 on behalf of the Iberian King Mithridates II [SEG, XX, 112. Qaukhchishvili T. 1999-2000: II, n. 229 p. 251-252. Canali de Rossi F. 2004: 1], as well as the Latin inscription of the centurion Lucius Iulius Maximus on a stone on Mount Böyük Dash in Albania, highlight the importance that the Flavians attached to control the southern outlets of the Caucasian passes, Darial and Derbent [*Année Épigraphique*, 1951, n°263.

Wheeler E. L. 1994-1996: 63. Bais M. 2001: 88-90. Gagoshidze I. 2008: 16. Schottky M. 2014: 96. Hartmann U. 2019: 38]. Another epigraphic document describes the career of the legate Marcus Hirrius Fronto Neratius Pansa, who took him around 75 CE to the East in order to carry out certain military missions in Armenia Major, in Albania or against the Alans [*Année Épigraphique* 1968: 145. Torelli M. 1968: 173. Migliorati G. 2004]. The Darial was probably the pass through which the Alans invaded South Caucasia in 135, invited by the Iberian king Pharasmanes II, eager to weaken his Caucasian neighbors and thus affirm the supremacy of his dynasty (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXIX, 15, 1. Themistius, *Orations*, XXXIV, 8. Movsēs Xorenac'i, *History of Armenia*, II, 65) [Chaumont M.-L. 1976: 144-146; Bosworth A. B. 1977: 229; Braund D. 1991a; Wheeler E. L. 1994-1996: 67; Schottky 2014: 94; Hartmann U. 2019: 32-34].

In the first Georgian chronicles of the medieval compilation *Life of Kartli (Kartlis Tskhovreba)*, the Darial pass appears in three occurrences, the first one being in the *Life of the Kings of Kartli*: “*The Khazars knew two roads, namely the Pass of the Sea, Daruband, and the Pass of the Aragvi, which is the Darial*” (*Life of the Kings of Kartli in Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Simon Qaukhchishvili (ed.), 12, Robert W. Thomson (transl.), p. 14). While the *Royal List I* alleges that the legendary king Mirvan contributed in 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE to building Armazi, the *Life of the Kings* mentions, about the great works carried out by the same sovereign, only the fortification of the Darubal pass, identifiable with Darial (*Royal List I* (in *Moktsevai Kartlisai*), Iliia Abulaže (ed.), 82<sub>12-13</sub>. *Life of the Kings* (in *Kartlis Tskhovreba*), Simon Qaukhchishvili (ed.), 28). Another match regards the *Life of Vakhtang Gorgasali*, narrating an expedition led by the King Vakhtang in Ossetia across the “pass of Darialan” at the junction of two rivers called “Aragvi”: “*Then the kings of Ossetia assembled their troops and were joined by a force from Khazareti. They met him on the river which flows from the Darialan and descends into the valley of Ossetia. This river is also called Aragvi, because the source of them both flows from the same mountain: the Aragvi of Kartli and the Aragvi of Ossetia*” (*Life of Vakhtang Gorgasali, Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Simon Qaukhchishvili (ed.), 151, Robert W. Thomson (transl.), p. 166). This Ossetian Aragvi, which can be identified with Terek, perhaps corresponds to the watercourse “with the nauseating odor” evoked by Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, VI, 30), as well as with the Alontas River mentioned by Ptolemy (*Geography*, V, 9, 12) and the Alutus appearing in Caius Iulius Mansuetus’ inscription [Kerler G. 1970: note 39 p. 43. CIL, XIII, 8213]. Serge N. Mouraviev considers that “*diri odoris*” is a corruption of “*Diricdone*”, “the river Diric (Terek)”, with *donus* as a Latin derivation from the Scythian word *dānu*, ‘river’ [Mouraviev S. N. 1996, p. 51-52; Pokorny J. 1959: 175]. The *Life of the Kings* underlines the matrimonial links which united Iberian kings with the peoples of the Caucasian mountains, as in the case of Saurmag with the Durdzüks (*Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Simon Qaukhchishvili (ed.), 26-27).

## **2. Darial – a jail for the high-ranking prisoners of the Iberian king?**

The *Life of the Kings* reports that the legendary kings Armazel and Azork would have allied with Ossetians, Leks and other Caucasian nations to carry out a plunder expedition in Armenia. On their way back, the Caucasian coalition forces were overtaken by the Sumbat army, which caused them to suffer a great defeat. Wounded, Azork and Armazel took refuge in Mtskheta, while the Armenian general in turn ravaged Kartli and built a fort in Samtskhe. Faced with counterattacks by the Kartvelians and the Ossetians, King Artashan (in Armenian Artašēs) in turn entered the campaign, laid siege to Mtskheta and forced his enemies to ask for peace (*Life of the Kings of Kartli in Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Simon Qaukhchishvili (ed.), 45-48). After a period of calm, the Georgian chronicle indicates that a new war pitted the Kartvelians against the Armenians. Following a battle in Javakheti, Kartli soldiers allied with the Ossetians inflicted a severe defeat on Prince Zaren, the son

of King Artashan, even managing to capture him. The chronicler specifies that the Kartvelians kept Zaren in detention in the fortress of Darialan, without listening to the opinion of the Ossetians who would have demanded his death. After three years, Artashan, Sumbat and Tigran launched a devastating offensive which led the Kartvelians to once again conclude peace. In exchange for the release of Zaren and the striking of a coin bearing the image of Artashan, the Kartli recovered the territories lost in previous wars. As this compromise satisfied the two camps, a lasting peace was thus established between Armenians, Kartvelians and Ossetians, therefore allowing Armazel and Azork to die with the pride of the accomplished task (*Ibid.*, 48-50).

This Zaren from *Kartlis Tskhovreba* has very strong similarities to the figure of Prince Zareh appearing in the Armenian account of Movsēs Xorenac’i (Movsēs Xorenac’i, Manowk Abelean and S. Yarowt’iwnean (eds), *History of Armenia*, II, 53. Mahé J.-P. and A. 1993: 208 and note 8 p. 366). The Armenian historian reports that this man, described as “proud, daring hunter of wild beasts, but cowardly and soft in fight”, was appointed by the sovereign of Armenia to guard the northern borders. After he identified Zareh’s weaknesses, the Iberian King Kharzam then launched an attack on his territory, before capturing him and locking him up “in the Caucasus”. King Artašēs, assisted by Sembat and Tiran, would then have made war against Kharzam to finally manage to rescue Zareh from the “muddy pit” where he was languishing. Despite the fact that the two sources diverge on the name of the Iberian sovereign who took Zareh prisoner, it is nevertheless visible that the two traditions overlap in a concordant manner on most points of this account.

The imprisonment of high-ranking figures in a jail fortress is relatively well documented in the Sasanian Empire (Christensen A. 1944: 307. Ciancaglini C. A. & Traina G. 2002). The most famous prison of the Sasanians was the Fortress of Oblivion located in Khuzistan (Susiana), attested through many classical and Armenian sources. The name “Fortress of Oblivion” would result from a paronymology performed by Byzantine and Armenian authors from a Middle-Persian expression \**anōš bard* whose original meaning was “immortal fortress” [Ciancaglini C. A. & Traina G. 2002: 414-418]. The first explicit mention of the fortress dates back to around 368 CE, when the king of Armenia Arsaces (Aršak) was deposed from his throne by Šāpūr II (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, XXVII, 12, 3. Movsēs Xorenac’i, *History of Armenia*, III, 35. *Buzandaran Patmut’iwnk’*, IV, 54; 5, 7. Procopius, *The Persian War*, I, 5, 9-40: “φρούριον τῆς Λήθης”) [Ciancaglini C. A. & Traina G. 2002, p. 399-401]. Aršak’s successor, Khosrov III, was also a prisoner of the Fortress in Xuzistan (Movsēs Xorenac’i, *History of Armenia*, III, 50 and 55). Around 496, the Fortress also had a Persian host: the fallen King Kavād I whom the nobles preferred to save with a view to avoiding shedding royal blood. However, this king succeeded in escaping and recovering his throne (Procopius, *The Persian War*, I, 5, 7; I, 6, 1-9; Agathias, *Histories*, IV, 28, 1-8; Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle*, §24; al-Tabari, *History*, 135-138 and 143-145) [Ciancaglini C. A. & Traina G. 2002, p. 401]. The location was provided by Theophylactes who situates the fortress inside Media, in the region of Bizae not far from the town of Bendosabora (Gundišāpūr), near the fort of Giligerda (Theophylactes, *Histories*, III, 5, 2) [Ciancaglini C. A. & Traina G. 2002: 402-405]. According to the sources, we can distinguish at least two types of imprisonment in the Fortress. On the one hand, there was the incarceration with chains, intended for political prisoners and religious capital crimes. On the other hand, there was a milder detention, a kind of police custody reserved for the sons of kings or for princes as well as for the notables of allied communities who, as hostages, guaranteed the loyalty of the agreements [Ciancaglini C. A. & Traina G. 2002: 407].

The Georgian narrative about the detention of Zareh indirectly relates to the various Byzantine, Armenian, Syriac and Georgian traditions concerning the imprisonment of prominent prisoners by

the Sasanian kings. Should we see in this Iranian reference a pure commonplace of a literary narrative trying to give the Iberian king his own “Fortress of Oblivion” like his Persian model? Or can we accept to consider that this anecdote on the imprisonment of Zareh reflects a nutshell of truth? Did the Darial serve effectively as a jail for the prisoners of the Iberian king? As often, the truth must lie between these two hypotheses, between the plausibility of the practice and the relevance of the ideological motivation.

### 3. Darial in Late Antiquity – a cooperation between Romans and Iranians?

The Caucasian Gates of Darial are the pass evoked by the historian Procopius in the description he gives of them in his *History of the Wars* (I, 10, 1-8) even if he confuses their name with the Caspian Gates.

“The Taurus mountain range of Cilicia passes first Cappadocia and Armenia and the land of the so-called Persarmenians, then also Albania and Iberia and all the other countries in this region, both independent and subject to Persia. For it extends to a great distance, and as one proceeds along this range, it always spreads out to an extraordinary breadth and rises to an imposing height. And as one passes beyond the boundary of Iberia there is a sort of path in a very narrow passage, extending for a distance of fifty stades. This path terminates in a place cut off by cliffs and, as it seems, absolutely impossible to pass through. For from there no way out appears, except indeed a small gate set there by nature, just as if it had been made by the hand of man, which has been called from of old the Caspian Gates. From there on there are plains suitable for riding and extremely well watered, and extensive tracts used as pasture land for horses, and level besides. Here almost all the nations of the Huns are settled, extending as far as the Maeotic lake. Now if these Huns go through the gate which I have just mentioned into the land of the Persians and the Romans, they come with their horses fresh and without making any detour or encountering any precipitous places, except in those fifty stades over which, as has been said, they pass to the boundary of Iberia.”

**Procopius, *History of the Wars*, I, 10, 1-8:** “Τὸ Κιλικίων ὄρος ὁ Ταῦρος ἀμείβει μὲν τὰ πρῶτα Καππαδόκας τε καὶ Ἀρμενίους καὶ τῶν Περσαρμενίων καλουμένων τὴν γῆν, ἔτι μέντοι Ἀλβανούς τε καὶ Ἰβήρας, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα ἔθνη αὐτόνομά τε καὶ Πέρσαις κατήκοα ταύτη ᾤκηται. Ἐξικνεῖται γὰρ ἐς χώραν πολλήν, προϊόντι δὲ ἀεὶ τὸ ὄρος τοῦτο ἐς μέγα τι χῆρμα εὐρους τε καὶ ὕψους διήκει. Ὑπερβάντι δὲ τοὺς Ἰβήρων ὄρους ἀτραπὸς τίς ἐστὶν ἐν στενοχωρίᾳ πολλῇ, ἐπὶ σταδίου πεντήκοντα ἐξικνουμένη. Αὕτη δὲ ἡ ἀτραπὸς ἐς ἀπότομόν τινα καὶ ὄλως ἄβατον τελευτᾷ χώρον. Δίοδος γὰρ οὐδεμία τὸ λοιπὸν φαίνεται, πλήν γε δὴ ὅτι ὡσπερ τινὰ χειροποίητον πυλίδαν ἐνταῦθα ἡ φύσις ἐξεῦρεν, ἢ Κασπία ἐκ παλαιοῦ ἐκλήθη. Τὸ δὲ ἐνθένδε πεδία τέ ἐστιν ἱπήλατα καὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν ἀτεχνῶς ἔμπλεα, καὶ χώρα πολλὴ ἵπποβοτὸς τε καὶ ἄλλως ὑπτία. Οὗ δὲ τὰ Οὐννων ἔθνη σχεδὸν τι ἅπαντα ἴδρυται ἄχρι ἐς τὴν Μαιῶτιν διήκοντα λίμνην. Οὗτοι ἦν μὲν διὰ τῆς πυλίδος, ἧς ἄρτι ἐμνήσθη, ἴωσιν ἐς τὰ Περσῶν τε καὶ Ῥωμαίων ἦθη, ἀκραιφνέσι τε τοῖς ἵπποις ἴασι καὶ περιόδῳ τινὶ οὐδαμῆ χρώμενοι οὐδὲ κρημνῶδεσιν ἐντυχόντες χωρίοις, ὅτι μὴ τοῖς πεντήκοντα σταδίοις ἐκείνοις, οἷσπερ εἰς τοὺς Ἰβηρίους ὄρους, ὡσπερ ἐρρήθη, διήκουσιν.” H. B. Dewing (transl.), p. 77-79.

Describing the situation of this pass, Procopius makes it clear that Darial is not inside the kingdom of Iberia, but “beyond the boundary of the Iberians” (ὕπερβάντι δὲ τοὺς Ἰβήρων ὄρους). It would therefore be possible to suppose that at the time when Procopius was writing his historical work, these Caucasian Gates in the north of Iberia were included in a particular territorial regime, leaving open the hypothesis of a co-management between Imperial powers and Caucasian actors. The interval of fifty stades mentioned by Procopius seems to correspond to a strip of approximately 7 or 8 kilometers, established on the pass in its more practicable part.

The Byzantine author John Lydus, in his treatise on the magistracies of the Roman State, writes that the question about sharing the costs between the two parties for the fortifications' maintenance of a pass crossing the Caucasian mountains was debated during the Roman-Persian negotiations of 363, however only the Persians built there a fort named Biraparach, implying in this way their authority on the spot. John Lydus indicates that the Romans discussed with the Persians on the shared defence of the Caucasus, but does not affirm that an agreement was found, and he even seems to say that until the reign of Anastasius, no Roman contribution was made to this enterprise. It is therefore very difficult to consider the establishment of a Roman-Persian agreement on Caucasian passes from the time of Jovian.

“On the side where the sun rises in Leo constellation, in the first gorges of the Caucasus, where, exposed to the north wind on the side of the Caspian Sea, the foothills of the Caucasus naturally separate, there is a path of access for barbarians unknown both to the Persians, who are staying in Hyrcania, and to us – it was there that the barbarians attacked the lands, both in the east belonging to the Persians and in the north belonging to the Romans, to plunder them. As long as the Romans controlled Artaxata and the regions even beyond, they were able, since they were on the spot, to resist them. But when they evacuated these and other regions under Jovian, the Persians were unable to defend both their own and the former Roman territory, and the Armenias subject to both states were gripped by unbearable turmoil. Therefore, after the failure under Julian, talks were held between Salutius, who was then prefect, and the Persian grandees and later with Isdigerd [sc. Yazdgird], in order that, sharing the cost, both states should build a fortress on the aforementioned pass and bring help to the area in checking the barbarians who were overrunning it. But since the Romans were embroiled in wars in the west and north, the Persians, since they were more exposed to the barbarians' incursions, were compelled to build the fortress against them there, naming it Biraparach in their own language and establishing a garrison there. And the enemy was unable to effect an entrance. For this reason, the Persians attacked the Romans and spread little by little over Syria and Cappadocia, alleging that they had been wronged and had been deprived of the money for the common project to the amount of the Roman contribution. As a result, the first Sporacius was sent by Theodosius the Great to negotiate with the Persians. He, through the power of his money and his ability at speaking, almost persuaded the Persians to leave the Romans in peace and be their friends since the Romans were so generous towards them. And this affair dragged on until the reign of our Emperor Anastasius, having been talked over, decreed about and, in short, having been prevaricated over. It was under Anastasius that the old Koades [sc. Kavād I, r. 488-496 and 499-531] has united the whole Persia against Rome, and the war took place. And the Romans, who could be victorious sword in hand, because of the libertinism and the softness of the last Areobindus (he loved singing, flute and dance), and the inexperience and cowardice of Generals Patricius and Hypatios, were dominated at first, when the Persians by surprise melted on them, but when they had launched the pursuit against the Persians and drawn from their hands Amida which they had taken, it was now the Persian who engaged talks with Celer, who was the master of the offices of Anastasius, on Biraparach, as we said before, and the expenditure carried out specifically by the Persians for this post. And the quarrel ended, with some modest concessions from Anastasius to Koades; in his magnanimity and his weighting, Anastasius bore with piety the loss suffered for peace. This is, in essence, the story left by the historians of Rome on the Caspian Gates.”

**John Lydus**, *On the Magistracies of the Roman State*, III, 52-53: “Πρὸς ἀνίσχοντα ὑπὸ λέοντι ἥλιον ἐν ἀρχῇ στενῇ τοῦ Καυκάσου, πρὸς βορέαν ἄνεμον κατὰ τὴν Κασπίαν χωριζομένων φύσει τῶν τοῦ Καυκάσου σφυρῶν, εἴσοδος ἀπετελέσθη βαρβάρων τοῖς ἀγνοουμένοις ἡμῖν τε καὶ Πέρσαις, οἳ περὶ τὴν Ὑρκανὴν νέμονται· δι’ ἧς

εισβάλλοντες τά τε πρὸς εὐρον Πέρσαις, τά τε πρὸς βορέαν Ῥωμαίους ἀνήκοντα ἐδήουν. Καὶ ἕως μὲν Ἀρτάξατα καὶ ἔτι ἐπέκεινα εἶχον ὑφ' ἑαυτοῖς οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι, ἀντέβαινον παρόντες ἐκεῖ· ὡς δὲ τούτων ἐξέστησαν καὶ ὄσων ἄλλων ἐπὶ Ἰοβιανοῦ, οὐκ ἐξήρκουν οἱ Πέρσαι τά τε ἑαυτῶν τά τε πάλαι Ῥωμαίων φρουρεῖν καὶ θόρυβος ἀεὶ τὰς ἐκατέρων Ἀρμενίας εἶχεν ἀφόρητος. Γίνονται δὴ οὖν λόγοι μετὰ τὴν ἐπὶ Ἰουλιανοῦ Ῥωμαίων ἀστοχίαν Σαλουτίω τε, ὃς ἦν ὕπαρχος, ἐξ ἡμῶν καὶ Περσῶν τοῖς ἐξοχωτάτοις καὶ Ἰσδιγέρδη ὕστερον, ὥστε κοιναῖς Περσῶν τοῖς ἐξοχωτάτοις καὶ Ἰσδιγέρδη ὕστερον, ὥστε κοιναῖς δαπάναις ἄμφω τὰ πολιτεύματα φρούριον ἐπὶ τῆς εἰρημένης εἰσόδου κατασκευάσαι, ἐπιστῆσαι τε βοήθειαν τοῖς τόποις πρὸς ἀναχαιτισμὸν τῶν κατατρεχόντων δι' αὐτῆς βαρβάρων. Ῥωμαίων δὲ τοῖς περὶ τὴν ἐσπέραν καὶ τὴν ἄρκτον πολέμοις ἐνοχλουμένων, οἱ Πέρσαι ἔσχον ἀνάγκην, οἷα προσεχέστεροι ταῖς τῶν βαρβάρων ἐφόδοις, ἀντοικοδομεῖν φρούριον ἐκεῖ, Βιραπαράχ πατριῶς αὐτὸ καλέσαντες, καὶ δυνάμεις ἐπέστησαν· καὶ πολέμιος οὐκ εἰσῆει. Ἐκ ταύτης τῆς ἀφορμῆς οἱ Πέρσαι Ῥωμαίους ἐπετέθησαν, κατὰ σμικρὸν ἐπὶ τὰς Συρίας καὶ Καππαδοκίας ἐκχεόμενοι, ὡς δῆθεν ἀδικούμενοι καὶ τὴν ὑπὲρ τῶν κοινῶν γενομένην δαπάνην κατὰ τὸ ἐπιβάλλον Ῥωμαίους ἀποστερούμενοι, ὥστε Σποράκιον τὸν πρῶτον ὑπὸ Θεοδοσίου τοῦ μείζονος ἐκπεμφθῆναι διαλεχθησόμενον Πέρσαις· ὁ δὲ δυνάμει τε χρημάτων καὶ συνέσει λόγων ἐγγύς ἔπειθε Πέρσαις, Ῥωμαίων ὥσπερ χαριζομένων αὐτοῖς, ὑποφόρων Ῥωμαίων ἡσυχάζειν καὶ φίλους εἶναι. καὶ ταῦτα ἕως τοῦ καθ' ἡμᾶς Ἀναστασίου διεσύρη λαλούμενά τε καὶ τυπούμενα καὶ ἀπλῶς ἠρτημένα. Ἐπὶ δὲ αὐτοῦ, Κωάδου τοῦ γέροντος ὄλην Περσίδα κατὰ Ῥωμαίων ἄγοντος, γίνεται πόλεμος. καὶ χειρὶ μὲν νικᾶν οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι δυνάμενοι, ἀσπίτι δὲ καὶ τρυφῇ Ἀρεοβίνδου τοῦ τελευταίου (ἦν γὰρ φιλωδὸς καὶ φίλαυλος καὶ φιλορχήμων) καὶ ἀπειρία καὶ δειλία Πατρικίου καὶ Ὑπατίου τῶν στρατηγῶν, ἠλαττώθησαν μὲν τὸ πρότερον, ἐξαπίνης τῶν Περσῶν ἐπιχεθέντων, τὸ δὲ λοιπὸν τοὺς τε Πέρσας διωξάντων καὶ Ἄμιδαν ἀλοῦσαν ῥυσαμένων αὐθις, ὁ Πέρσης λόγους ἐκίνησε πρὸς Κέλερα, ὃς ἦν μάγιστρος τῶν <Θείων ὀφθικίων> τῷ Ἀναστασίῳ, περὶ Βιραπαράχ, ὡς προέφαμεν, καὶ τῆς κατὰ μόνας ὑπὸ Περσῶν γενομένης περὶ αὐτοῦ δαπάνης. Καὶ πέρας ἔσχεν ἡ φιλονεικία, μετρίων τινῶν ὑπὸ Ἀναστασίου χαρισθέντων Κωάδῃ· τὸ γὰρ μεγαλόφρον Ἀναστασίου καὶ εὐμέθοδον εὐσεβῶς τὴν ὑπὲρ εἰρήνης ζημίαν ὑπέμενεν. Τοιοῦτος μὲν οὖν ὁ περὶ τῶν Κασπίων πυλῶν τοῖς Ῥωμαίων συγγραφεῦσιν ὁ λόγος". Translation adapted from Jacques Schamp, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006, and partly from Blockley R. C. 1985: 63-64.

The interpretation given by John B. Bury, dealing with the existence of agreements between Romans and Persians about the defence of the Caucasus in 363 and in 442, seems to be explained by an amalgam between the indications of John Lydus and those of an excerpt from the Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite, composed at Edessa at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This Syriac source ordering its documentation chronologically, it seems to link, in chapters IX and X, this treaty of mutual assistance with certain payments made by the Romans to Pērōz I (r. 459-484) in order to help him in his wars against the Kidarites Huns (Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle*, VII-VIII, William Wright (transl.), p. 7) [Bury J. 1958, 2: 6]. According to Joshua the Stylite, there would have been a treaty of military cooperation between the Greeks (that is to say the Romans) and the Persians, so that, if one of the parties called the other for a military assistance, this party was to send the applicant three hundred men or three hundred staters per missing man. This pact is not dated by Joshua and could have occurred some time before the reign of Pērōz I (r. 459-484). However, it could also relate to a broader agreement than the covenant mentioned by John Lydus, because Joshua the Stylite makes no explicit reference here to the Caucasian passes [Blockley R. 1985: 65]. If the mention of this pact of defensive cooperation in the Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite directly follows a reference to the treaty of Jovian, the two events appear logically very distinct and separated in time.

The passage of John Lydus is therefore as imprecise as it is suspicious. Ammianus Marcellinus certainly indicates that the Praetorian prefect Salutius was one of those who negotiated the treaty of Jovian in 363 (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, XXV, 7, 7). He may have discussed the defence of the Caucasus on this occasion, but it is unlikely. John Lydus himself asserts that it was the inability of the Persians to defend their territories which led them, probably on their own initiative, to request cooperation with the Romans. As a result, it is unlikely that the Persians asked the Romans, whom they had just defeated, for their cooperation in territories that the winners were not supposed to be able to defend. John Lydus adds to the confusion by mentioning Julian (r. 361-363),

who appointed Salutius well to his post, after Jovian (r. 363-364). Since Salutius was prefect until 367, it is possible that the events John Lydus evokes can be dated between 363 and 367. It also remains difficult to reconcile the will of the Persians to drive the Romans from Armenia with this plan to include them in a cooperation on the Darial, while in 370, during the Roman intervention in Iberia, the Persians were very dissatisfied (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, XXV, 7, 12; XXVII, 12, 10-15). For these reasons, Roger C. Blockley argues that these negotiations refer to a period after 370, when the Romans began to interfere in both the affairs of Armenia and Iberia, perhaps building on past negotiations led by Salutius, in any case by having succeeded in establishing a partition of the kingdom of Iberia between a pro-Roman sovereign, Sauromaces, and a pro-Iranian sovereign, Aspacures (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, XXVII, 12, 17-18) [Blockley R. 1985: 65-66].

According to John Lydus, the response of the Persians, unable to obtain a Roman contribution to the defence of the Caucasus, was to launch attacks on Syria and Cappadocia, which led Theodosius I (r. 379-395) to send "the first" Sporacius as plenipotentiary representative. This Sporacius is not attested anywhere else. The authors of the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* conjecture that he was the ancestor of Flavius Sporacius, consul in 452, and identify this embassy with the one that was negotiated during the partition of Armenia in 387 (Jones A. H. M. and *alii* 1971, s. v. "Sporacius"). However, John Lydus establishes that the mission of Sporacius had almost succeeded in establishing peace, while the embassy intended to complete the partition of Armenia had indeed managed to accomplish its mission by leading to a peaceful agreement, which lasted until 420. It is therefore probable that the embassy of Sporacius was prior to 387, although we have on it no other certificate than the testimony of John Lydus. The latter adds that negotiations were held with the *šāhān šāh* Yazdgird on the defence of the Caucasus. The hypothesis of an agreement contained in the treaty of 442 between Theodosius II (r. 402-450) and Yazdgird II (r. 438-457) could certainly have been envisaged (Bury J. B. 1958, 2, note 3 p. 88). There remains the idea in John Lydus' work that these diplomatic efforts were failed negotiations, and not a duly concluded agreement. Yazdgird I (r. 399-420) had more conciliatory positions towards the Romans, but the fact of whether he was the one who negotiated on the defence of the Caucasus does not benefit from hard evidence. Consequently, following the advice of Roger C. Blockley, the negotiations dealt with by John Lydus would relate to the third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, and until the reign of Anastasius (r. 491-518), these talks would have resulted in no concrete device [Blockley R. 1985: 66].

On the toponymic level, Biraparach corresponds to the Armenian term Virapahak, 'bulwark of Iberia' [Blockley R. C. 1985: note 15 p. 66]. The main point of certainty resides in the fact that this fortress kept a pass on the chain of the Great Caucasus. A comparison can be made between the Biraparach (Βιραπαράχ) of John Lydus and the toponym of Iouroeipaach (Ἰουροειπαάχ) appearing in a 5<sup>th</sup> century historian, Priscus of Panium (*Fragments*, XL1, 1). The latter maintains that the Persians sought the help of the Romans in the defence of the Caucasus, particularly around the fortress of Iouroeipaach which guarded the Caspian Gates, whether by giving money or by providing a garrison. The same embassy also requested financial aid in a war in which the Persians were fighting the Huns Kidarites. These requests would have been made in 464-465, and the request for Roman aid in the Caucasus would have been repeated in 467, but the Romans would have rejected it (Priscus of Panium, *Fragments*, XLVII). Priscus makes no reference to any treaty between Romans and Sasanians concerning the Caucasus. Arguments used by the Persians suggest that there was no existing defensive cooperation agreement. For Joshua the Stylite, during the first part of the reign of Zeno (r. 474-491), the *šāhān šāh* Pērōz I (r. 459-484) received on several occasions Roman subsidies in order to fight against the Huns Kidarites and Hephthalites (Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle*, VIII-X,

William Wright (transl.), p. 7-8). The chronicler insists that these payments were not a tribute but an aid coming within the framework of a treaty of mutual assistance between Romans and Persians. Although the existence of such payments remains entirely possible, there is however no indication that a specific agreement on the defence of the Caucasus was concluded on this occasion [Blockley R. 1985: 66-67].

Opinions diverge to identify the toponyms of Iouroeipaach and Biraparach with the Darial pass [Gozalishvili G. 1944: 105; Braund D. 1994: 269-270; Talbert R. J. A. (ed.) 2000, map n. 88] or Derbent [Inadze M. 1996: 65]. Through his explicit reference to the Caspian Gates, John Lydus seems to favour the second option, unless we consider that he, like Procopius, confused the Derbent with the Darial, also called Caucasian Gates. However, both the Darial and the Derbent were not the only passes to cross the Caucasus. Procopius refers to another fortress, called Tzour (Τζοῦρ), or Tzon, located further east than Darial Gorge (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, VIII, 3, 1). The *Life of Kings in Kartlis Tskhovreba* indicates that King Mirvan I built the Darubal Gates – a variant for Darial – in the land of the Durzüks who revolted. This pass in Durzuketi would be situated on the road from Pshav-Khevsureti to Chechnya (*Life of the Kings in Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Simon Qaukhchishvili (ed.) 27<sup>24</sup>-28<sup>21</sup>) [Brosset M.-F. 1849 (transl.), p. 45-46]. Despite these uncertainties, it is likely that the Persians did not ask for cooperation on the part of the Romans to oversee a territory over which the latter had no claim; in this sense, the hypothesis of seeing in Biraparach a pass into Iberia, perhaps the Darial Gorge, seems to me more likely than the Caspian Gates of Derbent, too far to the east to concern Roman interests in South Caucasia.

Thus, John Lydus writes that after the Roman defeat of 363 was debated a draft agreement according to which the two parties in presence would share the costs of the fortification of a pass crossing the Caucasian mountains, but that only the Persians there built a fort named Biraparach and thus strengthened their hold on the site. This information is not found anywhere else and is disputed: according to Roger C. Blockley, John Lydus would have confused the negotiations of the peace treaty of 363 with other discussions which occurred later [Blockley R. 1985: 63-67]. However, since this author, a senior official in the imperial administration, was able to access a number of official documents, his testimony therefore remains precious. On the one hand, the Darial pass was probably the pass mentioned by John Lydus; on the other hand, Rome and Iran had a strong interest in agreeing to monitor this essential strategic area. The fate of this space had probably been addressed as early as 244, when Philip the Arab, defeated by Šāpūr I, had to commit to paying a tribute, perhaps for his upkeep. In the event that the Persians began to build the fortress of Biraparach during the last third of the fourth century, and that these fortifications concerned the Darial Gorge, or at least a pass in Central Caucasia, it should then be considered that Iberia was indeed under Sasanian domination at that time. If opinions remain divergent on the question of this draft defensive agreement between Romans and Persians on the Caucasus, the fact remains that these Imperial policies resulted in the weakening of the Iberian power during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, which until then had remained very influential in the mastering of the Darial pass [in favour of the thesis of the Darial pass clause in the treaty of 363: Markwart J. 1901: 95-103; Christensen A. 1944: 238; Toumanoff C. 1961: 236; Bullough V. L. 1963: 61; Frézouls E. 1981: 217-218; Lenski N. E. 2002: note 117, p. 173-174; against this thesis: Blockley R. 1984: 37. Chrysos E. K. 1976: note 3 p. 30, thinks that John Lydus refers to the Huns attacks in the end of the fourth century]. Insofar as the Iberian king and his allies were no longer the only ones to hold the key to opening and closing the Gates of the Caucasus, the sovereign of *Armazi-Mtskheta* therefore lost the most precious guarantee of his independence.



Procopius attributes to Alexander the Great the construction of the fortress which guards the “*Caspian Gates*”, telling that “this was held by many men in turn as time went on” until the time of Anastasius when the fort was controlled by Ambazoukes, described as a Hun friend of the Romans (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, I, 10, 9-10). At the end of his life, around the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Ambazoukes would have proposed to Anastasius to recover the fortress in exchange of a sum of money. Considering “that it was impossible for him to support soldiers in a place which was destitute of all good things, and which had nowhere in the neighbourhood a nation subject to the Romans”, the emperor “expressed deep gratitude to the man for his good-will toward him, but by no means accepted this proposition”. After Ambazoukes’ death, the *šāhān šāh* Kavād I took advantage of the vacancy by expelling the sons of the Hun prince and established his control on the Darial pass (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, I, 10, 11-12). Procopius and John Lydus thus relate with some variations the complicated evolution of the imperial guardianship established on the Darial, from a Roman influence to a Sasanian control at the turn of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Procopius’ narrative points a subcontracting of Darial supervision devolved by Imperial powers to the local actors. This indirect control, which was probably to be fed by grants and diplomatic gifts, saved the Romans or the Iranians from setting up an expensive garrison, but it was all the more subject to the vagaries of political reversals.

If the political weight of the Sarmatian and Hun tribes in the mountains remains important, on the contrary the role of Iberian kingship has deeply declined, even if until the end of the fifth century, the Iberian sovereigns seem to have kept some leeway. Łazar P’arpec’i reports in his *History* the ties of alliance woven by King Vakhtang with the Caucasian Huns, whom he invoked towards his Armenian allies engaged in the revolt against the Persians between 482 and 484 (Łazar P’arpec’i, *History of Armenia*, III, 66-73). The Sasanian rule established progressively over Kartli and the Darial Fortress has been registered in some Georgian chronicles redacted during the Bagratid period [Toumanoff C. 1969: 29-31. Schleicher F. 2019]. The Georgian chronicle *Royal List II*, in the corpus of *Moktsevai Kartlisai*, suggests that this process was very gradual: a Sasanian *bidaxš* took control of the fortress of Tbilisi during the reign of Varaz-Bakur, in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century; in the time of Parsman V, around the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, an incursion by the Persians “*disturbed the Kartli and the cities*” (*Royal List II* in the *Conversion of Kartli (Moktsevai Kartlisai)*, Ilia Abulaže (ed.), 94-95; Constantine B. Lerner (transl.), p. 148). The *Life of the Successors of Mirian* gives a concordant narrative describing how Varaz-Baqar refused to open the Darial and to call to the rescue the Ossetians and the Leks against the Persian invaders (*Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Simon Qaukhchishvili (ed.), 136-137. Brosset M.-F. (transl.) 1849: 140-141; Thomson R. (transl.) 1996: 150). The same Georgian chronicle reports also the Persian attack against Parsman V and the hegemonic policy led by *šāhān šāh* Hormizd IV (r. 579-590) over the Kartvelian aristocracy (*Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Simon Qaukhchishvili (ed.), 204-217, Brosset M.-F. (transl.) 1849, p. 201-215). Around 580, after the reign of the last Mihranid King Bakur of Kartli, the version B (Codex Chelishi) of the *Moktsevai Kartlisai* indicates, without explicitly mentioning the Darial, that the Persians solicited their allies among the Caucasian highlanders to build and guard several passes, including two in Dvaleti, one in Parcuani of Durzuketi and others in Ossetia. The chronicler finally reports that “*the Persians built up the Khazarian Gates and exiled the Khazars*” (*Royal List II* in the *Conversion of Kartli (Moktsevai Kartlisai)*, Ilia Abulaže (ed.), 94-95; Constantine B. Lerner (transl.), 149). It is a break from a previous situation where the royal Iberian power had forged close links with Sarmatians and Alans of the Caucasus, which the chronicle seems to designate here anachronistically under the name of Khazars (Strabo, *Geography*, XI, 3, 3, about the close links between Iberians and Sarmatians).

In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the battles opposing Arabs and Khazars, the two camps often used the Darial pass. In this regard, Arab historians have repeatedly mentioned the Darial Gorge. Ibn Rustah mentions the fortress of Bāb al-Lān surrounded by high mountains, with a fortification wall guarded by a garrison of 1.000 men (Ibn Rustah, N. A. Karaulova (ed.), p. 49-51). The Persian geography *Hudūd al-‘Ālam* also written in 10<sup>th</sup> century refers to the Dar-ī Alān fortress as “a town situated like a fort on the summit of a mountain”, precising also the number of 1.000 soldiers guarding its wall (*Hudūd al-‘Ālam*, Vladimir Minorsky (transl.), § 48, p. 161). The *Meadows of Gold*, written by al-Masudi in 10<sup>th</sup> century, describe a “Castle of Alans” near a gate crossing “a considerable river”, built by “one of the ancient princes of Persia, Isbendiar, son of Gushtasp”, who “he had placed a guard responsible for closing the Caucasus route to the Alans” (al-Masudi, *Meadows of Gold*, Charles Adrien Casimir Barbier de Meynar and Abel Jean Baptiste Pavet de Courteille (eds.), volume II, p. 43-44). This Isbendiar is no other than the legendary character Isfendiyar appearing in the *Shāh Nāmeḥ* of Ferdowsī (Ferdowsī, *Shāh Nāmeḥ*, Arthur George Warner and Edmond Warner (transl.), volume 9, p. 208-212, s. v. ‘Asfandiyār’). Ibn al-Fariqi, who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century at the court of the Georgian king Demetre I, attributes the construction of the Darial fortress to the Sasanian king Khosrow Anushirvan (r. 531-579) (Ibn al-Fariqi, N. A. Karaulova (transl.), p. 15). In another excerpt, Ibn al-Fariqi refers to a “forbidden citadel” where a foreign prisoner was held, but its position isn’t clear, since the author mentions his travel with Georgian King Demetre “as far as al-Lān (the land of Alans) and the edge of Darband”; this fortress could consequently concern the Derbent pass, not Darial (Ibn al-Fariqi, Carole Hillenbrand (transl.), II, p. 523). Despite their partially fictitious content, these documents confirm this strong Iranian investment to develop the fortifications of Darial during Sasanian hegemony. Sasanians had therefore invested the Darial with their own myths and narratives to assimilate the history of this famous place to Iranian thought frames, even if its Alan component has not been forgotten. For the Late Antiquity period, excavations led on the site of the Tamar Fortress have made it possible to identify some walls built at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century [Mindorashvili D. 1991: 3]. The archaeological remains testify that the fortress continued to be occupied until the end of the Middle Ages [Gamkrelidze and *alii* (ed.) 2013: 176].

#### **Conclusive Remarks.**

Despite their numerous geographical approximations, ancient authors and medieval chroniclers were aware of the important place held by Caucasian Gates in the strategic device to ensure the security of territories located south of the isthmus between the Black Sea and the Caspian. From the Hellenistic period to the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, Darial pass was associated with the kingdom of Iberia whose capital, Armazi, was situated on an extension of the trade route that connected the Caucasian Gates to the corridor of Kura River, through the valley of Aragvi. Several sources from different origins and times establish that at least one fortress kept this Darial pass, even if the complexity of toponymy and ethnonymy doesn’t simplify identification. Rather than a single Fortress of Darial, the Caucasian Gates formed a complex system of fortifications around several strategic passes throughout Ossetia and Pshav-Khevsureti. The Iberian kings, gatekeepers of Central Caucasus, thus had a formidable strategic leverage to conduct their policy. The defense of these passes associated a royal power, assumed by the Iberians, then by the Sasanians, with local actors recruited from the Alan, Sarmatian and Hun confederations living in the Caucasus. The opening of Caucasian Gates to Alano-Sarmatian forces of the north appeared as a terrible hazard in the eyes of other powers in South Caucasia and beyond. The ties of military and matrimonial alliances made by the Iberian kings with the Caucasian Sarmatians facilitated this cooperation for the defense of the Darial Gorge. The defences of Darial

could also be used for internal political purposes for the Iberian king, in particular by the detention of high-ranking prisoners. The Roman-Persian rivalries for the control of Southern Caucasia running through Late Antiquity gradually led Sasanian rulers to strengthen their direct presence in these territories. The political change which resulted from this loss of territorial control could probably explain the disappearance of the Iberian royal power during the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.

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