


The Alan capital *Magas: A preliminary identification of its location

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Abstract

This article proposes that *Magas, capital city of the North Caucasian Kingdom of Alania, can be identified with the gorodishche (hillfort) of Il'ichevsk, in Krasnodar Krai in the modern Russian Federation. The Kingdom of Alania was the most powerful polity in the North Caucasus in the tenth and eleventh centuries; however, the location of its capital has never been satisfactorily established. This article reviews the evidence of written sources on *Magas – notably Mas'ūdī, Juvayni, Rashid al-Din, and the Yuan-Shi – and identifies four criteria which can be used to identify the site of *Magas. These are its occupation between the tenth and thirteenth centuries; the influence of the Alan kings over it; its massive fortifications; and its capture by the Mongols in 1239–40. All of these features can be identified at Il'ichevsk, in contrast to previously proposed sites of *Magas.

Keywords: North Caucasus, Alania, Settlement archaeology, Mongol Empire, Islamic geography

Introduction

In 1952, Vladimir Minorsky published the seminal article “The Alan Capital *Magas and the Mongol Campaigns” in the *Bulletin of SOAS*.² This article collated and analysed the bulk of the extant information from Persian and Arabic geographers and historians regarding the capital city of the Alan kingdom of the Central North Caucasus. The Kingdom of Alania was recognized by its Byzantine, Khazar and 'Abbāsīd neighbours as the most powerful political

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- 2 Vladimir Minorsky, “Caucasica III: The Alān capital *Magas and the Mongol campaigns”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 14/2, 1952, 221–38.

actor in the tenth–twelfth-century North Caucasus, playing a crucial strategic role in conflicts between the Byzantine and Khazar Empires.³

However, in Minorsky’s article, the actual location of the city of **Magas* was not firmly established, and this remains a debated question to the present day. This is a particularly acute debate due to the fact that essentially no written records survive from the kingdom of Alania, and the kingdom’s Byzantine, Georgian, and Khazar neighbours at no point recorded the city’s exact location. This article suggests a hypothesis whereby descriptions of the city in Arabic, Persian, and Chinese sources of the tenth and thirteenth–fourteenth centuries may be tested against previously excavated archaeological evidence from the North Caucasus, and future work to be performed.⁴

This article proposes that the city of **Magas* (Arabic: معس *ma‘as*, read: مغس *maghas*; Persian: مگس, مگس *makas, magas*; Chinese: 木栅山 *muzashan*) can be identified with the Il’ichevsk *gorodishche* (hillfort):⁵ a massive fortified site, with an area larger than fourteenth-century London, Milan, or Ghent, which lies on the border of Krasnodar Krai and the autonomous Karachai-Cherkess Republic in the modern Russian Federation (see Figure 1). This identification suggests that the heartland of the Alan kingdom lay in the Upper Kuban region: a region of fertile foothills and narrow mountain valleys cut by the headwaters of the Kuban river, which then flows into the Sea of Azov (see Figure 2). This, in turn, will allow a new understanding of the development of the Alan polity in the tenth century, in particular the process of its Christianization and its relationship with the Byzantine Empire and Georgia. Moreover, since **Magas* was captured and destroyed by the Mongol army of Möngke Khan in the winter of 1239/40, an identification of its location will help our understanding of the Mongol campaigns in the Caucasus. Finally, this is a question with modern political implications. The “ownership” of the legacy of the Alan kingdom is a hotly disputed question in the modern North Caucasus – for example, in 1995 the autonomous Republic of Ingushetia named its newly constructed capital Magas after the historic city.⁶ Future work to confirm this article’s hypothesis may help to resolve this longstanding historico-political question.

3 al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, tr. in *A History of Sharvan and Darband in the 10th–11th Centuries*, ed. Vladimir Minorsky (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1958), 155–60; Schechter Letter (tr.) in *Sources on the Alans: A Critical Compilation*, ed. Agustí Alemany (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 333; Constantine VII Porphyrogennētos, *De Administrando Imperio*, tr. in Alemany, *Sources on the Alans*, 173–5.

4 This methodology is based on Charles E. Cleland, “Historical archaeology adrift?”, *Historical Archaeology* 35/2, 2001, 1–8.

5 The term *gorodishche* (plural *gorodishcha*), usually translated as “hillfort”, is generally used in Russian archaeological literature to designate a fortified ancient site of indeterminate type, as opposed to the more specific use of *gorod* (city). I have used this term to refer to Il’ichevsk due to our relatively poor knowledge of the site and the extent and type of habitation within it.

6 See V.A. Shnirel'man, “The politics of a name: between consolidation and separation in the North Caucasus”, *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 23, 2006, 37–73; M.S. Gadzhiev, V.A. Kuznetsov, and I.M. Chechenov, *Istoriia v zerkale paranauki: kritika sovremennoi etno-sentristskoi istoriografii Severnogo Kavkaza* (Moscow: Institut etnologii i antropologii im. N.N. Miklukho-Maklaia, 2006), 149–53.

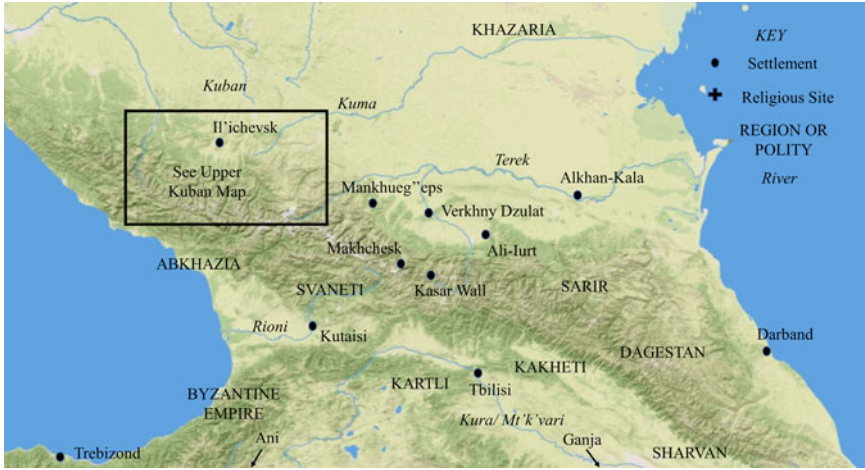


Figure 1. The medieval Caucasus with sites and regions mentioned in text.

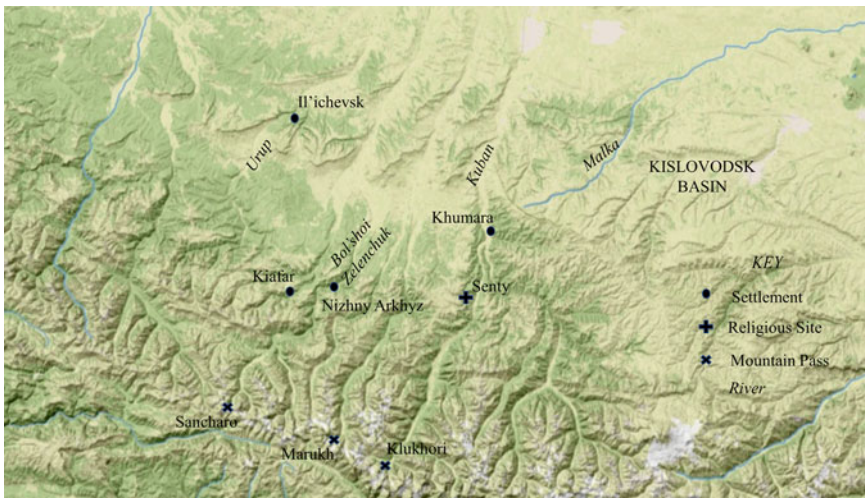


Figure 2. The Upper Kuban region with sites mentioned in the text.

Textual sources on *Magas

In his 1952 article, Minorsky suggested that the site of *Magas might be found at the village of Makhcheshk, in the Uruk valley of modern North Ossetia.⁷

7 Minorsky, "Caucasica III", 234. In proposing this identification, Minorsky definitively rejected previous suggestions that *Magas might have been located outside the North Caucasus, most notably V.G. Tizengauzen's identification of *Magas with Moscow. Since Minorsky's article, the identification of the *Magas of the Mongol campaigns with the Alan capital in the North Caucasus mentioned by al-Mas'ūdi has been firmly established; for example, Donald Ostrowski's association of *Magas with Kiev has

However, Minorsky admitted that this question was unlikely to be resolved except by archaeology, and his suggestion has not been widely adopted by specialists in North Caucasian archaeology, since no large fortified sites have been found in Makhchek's vicinity.⁸ Instead, six major candidates for the location of *Magas have been suggested by archaeological specialists.⁹

- a) **Alkhan-Kala.** The largest *gorodishche* in Chechnya, located 25 km west of the modern city of Grozny. Principal occupation layers date from the seventh century BCE to the early medieval period.¹⁰
- b) **Ali-Iurt.** A complex of seven *gorodishcha* between the town of Nazran and the village of Ali-Iurt in Ingushetia, surveyed during the construction of the modern city of Magas in the 1990s.¹¹
- c) **Verkhny Dzulat.** A *gorodishche* located in the El'khotovo Gates region of North Ossetia, a strategic pass through the Terek-Sundzha hills. Certainly occupied during the period of the Golden Horde's rule over the North Caucasus, and possibly a significant site during the tenth–twelfth centuries, judging by the large cemetery nearby at Zmeiskaia.¹²
- d) **Mankhueg''eps.** A cluster of poorly studied medieval sites in the mountain district of Mankhueg''eps in the interfluvium of the Baksan and Kishpek rivers in Kabardino-Balkaria. This site is also sometimes

not generally found favour, since this essentially relies on an assumption that a site in the North Caucasus could not be considered significant enough for the prominence it receives in Mongol accounts. See in general A.A. Tuallagov, "Magas-stolitsa Alanii", in his *Alanica: Sbornik izbrannikh statei doktora istoricheskikh nauk A.A. Tuallagova. K 50-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia* (Vladikavkaz: SOIGSI, 2017), 534–6; Donald Ostrowski, "City names of the western steppe at the time of the Mongol invasion", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 61/3, 1998, 465–75; V.G. Tizengauzen, *Sbornik materialov otnosiashikhsia k istorii Zolotoi Ordyy. T.II.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo akademii nauk, 1941), 21.

- 8 Minorsky, "Caucasica III", 238. For a map of archaeological sites near Makhchek, see Alina Akoeff et al., "Poteriannaia Osetia", <http://lostosetia.ru/object/579/> [accessed 18/11/2019].
- 9 This list excludes several other sites which have been proposed by the following authors as potential sites for *Magas, but without direct evidence being presented. These include the Kachkalykov ridge (M.P. Sevost'ianov) and Gudermes (R. Arsanukaev) in Chechnya; the Kurtatinsky Gorge of the Fiagdon Valley (V. Pfaff) or the region around Vladikavkaz (N.A. Karaulov, Kh.A. Akiev) in North Ossetia; Mokhachla in Kabardino-Balkaria (A. D'Ohsson). See E.I. Narozhnyi, "Lokalizatsiia goroda Magasa 'prodolzhaet ostavat'sia diskussionnoi, a, vozmozhno, i nikogda okonchatel'no ne reshennoi'", *Apriori. Seriia: gumanitarnye nauki* 2016/4, 2016, 1–20; Tuallagov, "Magas", 534–6.
- 10 V.B. Vinogradov, "Istoriko-kul'turnoe tolkovanie alkhan-kalinskogo gorodishcha", in *Arkheologiiia i kraevedenie: vuzu i shkole* (Grozny: Checheno-ingushskii gosudarstvennyi universitet im. L.N. Tolstogo, 1981), 35–6; Shnirel'man, "Politics of a name", 49–50.
- 11 N.D. Kodzoev, *Magas: po arkhologicheskim i pismennym istochnikam* (Magas: Serdalo, 2003), 6–8, 40–1.
- 12 R.F. Fidarov, "Rol' Verkhnego Dzulata v gosudarstvennoi ideologii Alanii", in *Istoriko-filologicheskii arkhiv 7*, ed. R.S. Bzarov (Vladikavkaz: Institut istorii i arkheologii RSO-A pri SOGU, 2011), 12–14; V.A. Kuznetsov, *El'khotovskie vorota v X–XV vekakh* (Vladikavkaz: Institut gumanitarnykh i sotsial'nykh issledovaniim. V.I. Abaeva, 2003), 18–24.

associated with a cluster of 20 large stone crosses uncovered at the nearby village of Zhankotekskoe during building work in 1977, although these most likely date to the fourteenth century.¹³

- e) **Nizhny Arkhyz.** A small city occupied between the mid-tenth and late-twelfth century, located in a narrow valley of the Bol'shoi Zelenchuk river in Karachai-Cherkassia. Noted for its three well-preserved tenth- and eleventh-century churches, and almost certainly the seat of the archbishopric of Alania during this period.¹⁴
- f) **Kiafar.** A *gorodishche* of tenth–twelfth century date, straddling a ridge line above the eponymous river, and located around 10 km north of Nizhny Arkhyz.¹⁵

In order to evaluate these putative identifications, it is necessary for us to review the information about the historical *Magas provided by our textual sources. The most important sources are as follows: the *Murūj al-Dhahab* of Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. Alī al-Mas'ūdī (written 332–6/943–7), the anonymous Persian *Hudūd al-'Alam* (372/982), the *Tarīkh-i Jahāngushāy* of Aṭa-Malik Juvaynī (649–659/1252–60), the *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh* of Rashīd al-Dīn ṭabīb (710/1310–11), and the biographical sections of the Chinese *Yuanshi* dynastic history (1369). This list excludes works which later relied on or reproduced the information of these works, such as the *Mu'jam al-Buldān* of Yāqūt al-Rūmī (625/1228), and brief references which only mention that the city was conquered by the Mongols, such as that in the *Secret History*.¹⁶ The information of each of these major sources regarding *Magas will be briefly summarized below.

Al-Mas'ūdī

Al-Mas'ūdī's account apparently reflects the situation in the North Caucasus in the mid-930s to early 940s, the periods in which he was respectively travelling in

- 13 Narozhnyi, “Lokalizatsiia goroda Magasa”, 15–18; V.A. Fomenko, “K voprosu o lokalizatsii srednevekovogo Magasa”, *Istoricheskie, filosofskie, politicheskie i iuridicheskie nauki, kul'torologiya i iskusstvovedenie* 11/2, 2014, 170–3, I.M. Chechenov, “Novye materialy i issledovaniia po srednevekovoi arkheologii Tsentral'nogo Kavkaza”, in *Arkheologicheskie issledovaniia na novostroikakh Kabardino-Balkarii*, ed. V.A. Kuznetsov (Nal'chik: Znak pocheta, 1987), 77–90.
- 14 V.A. Kuznetsov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz v 'X–XII vekakh: k istorii srednevekovykh gorodov Severnogo Kavkaza* (Stavropol': Kavkazskaia biblioteka, 1993), 225, 252 and *passim*; D.V. Beletskii and A.Iu. Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty- drevneishie khramy Rossii. Problemy khristianskogo iskusstva Alanii i Kavkaza* (Moscow: Indrik, 2011), 289–300 and *passim*.
- 15 V.A. Kuznetsov, “Durgulel' velikii i Nizhnii Arkhyz”, in *Metodika issledovaniia i interpretatsiia arkheologicheskikh materialov Severnogo Kavkaza*, ed. V.A. Kuznetsov, A.G. Kuchiev, and V.Kh. Tmenov (Ordzhonikidze: Ir, 1988), 82–89; Irina Arzhantseva, “Kamennye kreposti alan”, *Rossiiskaia arkheologiya* 2007/2, 2007, 75–88.
- 16 Yāqūt b. 'Abdāllah al-Rūmī al-Ḥamawī, *Dictionnaire géographique, historique et littéraire de la Perse et des contrées adjacentes, extrait du Mo'djem el-Bouldan de Yaqout, et complété à l'aide de documents arabes et persans pour la plupart inédits*, ed. Charles Adrien Casimir Barbier de Meynard (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1861), 51–2; *The Secret History of the Mongols*, ed. Igor de Rachewiltz (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 164.

the Caucasus and writing his *Murūj al-Dhahab*.¹⁷ It describes **Magas* as the capital of the Kingdom of the Alans (*dār mamlakat al-Lān*) and the possession of the Alan king; however, he describes the unnamed king of the Alans as peripatetic, travelling to other residences periodically. Elsewhere in his account, al-Mas'ūdī mentions that the Alan kingdom is densely populated, with villages so close together that a cock can be heard crowing in the morning from the next settlement. Finally, al-Mas'ūdī mentions that while the Alan king was formerly Christian, he and his kingdom were forced to renounce Christianity and expel the priests previously sent by the Byzantine Empire following a defeat by the Khazar Khaqanate in 320/932.¹⁸

The *Hudūd al-'Alam*

The *Hudūd al-'Alam*, a Persian geography probably composed in Gūzḡān (in modern Afghanistan) does not directly mention **Magas*. However, Minorsky argued that a strange marvel-story in its description of the Sarir, a kingdom of the Dagestani highlands and the Alan kingdom's eastern neighbour, may be a garbled reference to the city. In this story, the people of Sarir are forced to leave out food to stop themselves being eaten by giant flies the size of partridges. Minorsky suggested that this story may be a garbled reference to food renders or other tribute being sent to the city of **Magas*, a homophone of New Persian مگس *magas* (fly).¹⁹ This suggestion is rendered more likely by the fact that al-Mas'ūdī and Juvaynī also translate the name **Magas* as “fly”.²⁰

Juvaynī

Juvaynī is the first of several authors to describe the capture of the city of **Magas* by a Mongol army under the command of Möngke Khan. Juvaynī does not give a precise date for these events, but we can infer from our other sources that this took place in the winter of 1239–40. His sense of **Magas*'s location seems rather confused, as he implies that it was a city in Rus', rather than the North Caucasus, and in general his account suffers from a certain imprecision.²¹ Juvaynī describes the city as lying in dense woodland and as being heavily populated and fortified, which necessitated cutting pathways through the forest to bring up heavy siege equipment. Following the capture of the city, an extensive massacre occurred: Juvaynī claims a total of 270,000 right ears severed from corpses were counted following the assault, although this is undoubtedly an exaggerated figure.²² Finally, he notes that there was nothing

17 On the dates of al-Mas'ūdī's travels and the *Murūj*'s composition, see 'Alī ibn al-Husayn al-Mas'ūdī, Paul Lunde, and Caroline Stone, *The Meadows of Gold: The Abbasids* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1989), 12–14.

18 Minorsky, *A History of Sharvan and Darband in the 10th–11th Centuries*, 156–7.

19 *Hudud Al-Alam = The Regions of the World: A Persian Geography of 372 A.H.–982 A.D.*, ed. Vladimir Minorsky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), 160–1; Minorsky, “Caucasica III”, 233–4.

20 Minorsky, *A History of Sharvan and Darband in the 10th–11th Centuries*, 156–7; 'Aṭā Malik ibn Muḥammad Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, trans. J.A. Boyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), I: 269.

21 On the correction of this geographical error, see Minorsky, “Caucasica III”, 222.

22 Minorsky suggests that this may be an error for 2,700. See “Caucasica III”, 222–3.

left of the city except its namesakes – i.e. flies. This point is important for linking thirteenth-century descriptions of **Magas* with tenth-century descriptions, since the same pun was made about its name in both periods.²³

Rashīd al-Dīn

Rashīd al-Dīn's account of the siege of **Magas* is more detailed than that of Juvaynī. He mentions that it was necessary to concentrate two Mongol armies, one under Möngke and Qada'an and the other under Güyük and Buri, for the conquest of Alania, and that the siege of **Magas* took a month and 15 days during the winter following the year 636/1238–39 – i.e. the winter of 1239–40.²⁴

Taken together, this information corroborates Juvaynī's theme of the strength of this fortress.

The *Yuanshi*

The *Yuanshi*'s biographies of noted commanders in the service of the Mongol Yuan dynasty provide our most detailed information on the siege of **Magas*. While written immediately after the installation of the succeeding Ming dynasty, these biographies were based on older, Yuan-dynasty texts; moreover, as Geoffrey Humble has argued, while the order of events and stylistic choices in description sometimes departed from previous models, the overall shape of the biographies resembled their source texts.²⁵ The biography of Shiri-Gambu, a Tangut commander in Mongol service, indicates that the siege began in the eleventh lunar month of 1239 (27 November–26 December) and ended in the second lunar month of 1240 (6–24 February).²⁶ This same biography also mentions that the city was surrounded by a high wall, and was in a strong natural position. This location of **Magas* in rough terrain is reinforced by the transcription of the city's name as *muzashan*, containing the characters 木 *mu* (forest) and 山 *shan* (mountain).²⁷ It also mentions that the final assault was conducted by a

23 Juvaynī, I: 268–70. On the importance of the **Magas* = fly pun, see Minorsky, “Caucasica III”, 232. The fact that Juvaynī's account builds up to this pun renders unlikely O.B. Bubenok's suggestion that the M.K.S. of Juvaynī is in fact Moscow, since this pun would not work for the Russian city and the same pun was made in the century. See O.B. Bubenok, *Alany-Asy v Zolotoi Orde (XIII–XV vv.)*, (Kiev: Istina, 2004), 49–50.

24 *Classical Writings of the Medieval Islamic World: Persian Histories of the Mongol Dynasties*, ed. W.M. Thackston (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 232. The specific date given for the siege of **Magas* in Rashīd al-Dīn's account is the winter between the Chinese Year of the Pig and Year of the Rat, which corresponds with the winter of 1239–40 and the dates given for the siege by the *Yuanshi*.

25 Geoffrey Frank Humble, “Biographical rhetorics: narrative and power in *Yuanshi* biography” (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2017), 1–19.

26 *Yuanshi*, chapter 122, in R.P. Khrapachevskii, *Zolotaiia Orda v istochnnikakh (Materialy dlia istorii Zolotoi Ordy ili ulusa Dzhuchi)*. T.III. *Kitaiskie i mongol'skie istochniki* (Moscow: Tsentr po izucheniiu voennoi i obshchei istorii, 2009), 172; summarized in Thomas T. Allsen, “Mongols and North Caucasia”, *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 7, 1987, 5–40. This duration of three months is corroborated by chapter 2 of the *Yuanshi*'s history, and considered more reliable than Rashīd al-Dīn's dates by Allsen due to its greater specificity.

27 My thanks go to Stephen Pow (Central European University) for his help with the Chinese in this section. See Waltraut Abramowski, “Die chinesischen Annalen von

number of small squads, of which Shiri-Gambu led one. It appears that these small squads primarily consisted of allied troops in Mongol service, judging by Shiri-Gambu's Tangut ethnicity and an account of a group of Alans allied to the Mongols also taking part in this initial assault. This latter group is mentioned in the *Yuanshi* biography of Baduer, a descendant of one of these Mongol-allied Alans.²⁸ According to another *Yuanshi* biography, that of Balduchak, Qipchaq troops also served in the Mongol army during this siege.²⁹ Shiri-Gambu's biography mentions that his squad took 11 prisoners as slaves, from which we may infer the survival of a larger proportion of the population than Juvaynī's account implies.

Taken together, these five accounts provide us with a surprisingly large amount of information about *Magas, which can be used when identifying this site archaeologically. The most significant criteria, given their repetition by multiple sources and/or their containing information gathered in the Caucasus itself by al-Mas'ūdī, are as follows:

- a) *Magas was occupied from at least the early tenth century until at least 1239/40.
- b) It was the capital of the Alan kings – or at least under their influence – in the tenth century but remained a significant centre even after the collapse of the Alan kingdom in the twelfth century.³⁰
- c) It was heavily fortified and lay in a naturally strong defensive position, possibly due to the area being heavily wooded.
- d) It was captured by the Mongols in a bloody assault in the winter of 1239/40, leading to the massacre or enslavement of at least some of its population.

These criteria render unlikely all of the previously identifications of *Magas with North Caucasian archaeological sites. This is primarily due to a discrepancy in dates. Alkhan-Kala, Ali-Iurt and Mankhueg''eps lack any confirmed occupation layers from the tenth–thirteenth centuries.³¹ While a medieval settlement at Zhankotekskoe, near to Mankueg''eps, has been surveyed, this is apparently relatively small and dates to the eighth–eleventh centuries, according to I.M. Chechenov.³²

Ogodei und Guyuk – Übersetzung des 2. Kapitels des Yuan-Shih'', *Zentral-Asiatische Studien* 10, 1976, 117–67.

28 *Yuanshi*, chapter 132, in Alemany, *Sources*, 415.

29 *Yuanshi*, chapter 128, in R.P. Khrapachevskii, *Polovtsy-Kuny v volgo-ural'skom mezhdurech'e (po dannym kitaiskikh istochnikov)*, (Moscow: Tsivoi, 2013), 47.

30 The question of the date of the Alan kingdom's collapse or decline is highly disputed, with some older sources arguing that it persisted until the Mongol invasions. However, the general consensus in recent publications favours a twelfth-century date for its decline. See for example V.A. Kuznetsov, *Ocherki istorii Alanov* (Vladikavkaz: Ir, 1992), 319–20; for an overview of this historiography, see S.N. Savenko, *Kharakteristika sotsial'nogo razvitiia alanskogo obshchestva Severnogo Kavkaza po materialam katakombnykh mogil'nikov X–XII vv. n.e.* (Piatigorsk: Piatigorskii kraevedskii muzei, 2017), 45–55.

31 Savenko, *Kharakteristika sotsial'nogo razvitiia*, 109; Narozhnyi, "Lokalizatsiia goroda Magasa", 11, 15–16; Shnirel'man, "Politics of a name", 49–51; Tuallagov, "Magas", 537. While there is some activity in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries on the site of Alkhan-Kala, this seems ephemeral, consisting of a cemetery and the possible remains of a market.

32 Chechenov, *Arkheologicheskie issledovaniia na novostroikakh*, 67–75.

Occupation at the site of Kiafar is dated by its excavator, Irina Arzhantseva, to the tenth–twelfth centuries, and there is no evidence for a violent assault in the thirteenth century.³³ In a similar vein, it seems clear that the city of Nizhny Arkhyz, while highly significant in the late tenth and eleventh centuries, had been largely abandoned by the late twelfth century.³⁴ Moreover, there is no evidence of a violent assault on the city or a significant discontinuity in cultural practices, as might be caused by the death or deportation of a large proportion of its population – for example, despite the city’s abandonment, burials continued to be performed using the same rite around the city’s churches until the thirteenth century.³⁵ Similarly, there is no hard evidence for the existence of a large settlement at Verkhny Dzulat prior to the mid-thirteenth century. While a sizeable population in the region can be inferred from the size of the Zmeiskaia cemetery 3 km away, which is estimated to contain tens of thousands of buried individuals, there is no direct evidence that this population lived in Verkhny Dzulat itself in the pre-Golden Horde period.³⁶ Indeed, the very existence of a settlement at Verkhny Dzulat prior to the mid-thirteenth century is subject to dispute: V.A. Kuznetsov, the twentieth century’s pre-eminent researcher on the Alans, who had previously argued for a tenth–twelfth century date for Verkhny Dzulat, at the end of his life changed his opinion to argue that the archaeological evidence was too uncertain to judge whether the site existed prior to the mid-thirteenth century.³⁷ Moreover, as at Nizhny Arkhyz, there is no evidence for a violent assault in the mid-thirteenth century, or a significant cultural discontinuity in the local population: Zmeiskaia cemetery operated into the fourteenth century and the same “catacomb” burial rite continued to be used on a large scale.³⁸

Therefore, the chronology of each of these proposed sites and the lack of direct archaeological evidence for a Mongol assault renders their identification with *Magas unlikely. Moreover, none of these sites display any direct evidence of royal control or residence, as might be evidenced by royal patronage of churches or by the remains of a palace. By contrast, the site of Il’ichevsk *gorodishche* displays archaeological evidence of all of the criteria we identified from the textual sources on *Magas. At Il’ichevsk, we find the following:

- a) Occupation from at least the ninth to mid-thirteenth centuries;
- b) Evidence of the destruction of churches in the early tenth century, which may be linked to the renunciation of Christianity by the Alan kings (and, thereby, to royal influence over its inhabitants);

33 Arzhantseva, “Kamennye kreposti”, 87. However, Kiafar’s dates of occupation do not preclude it from being a residence of the Alan kings in the tenth or eleventh centuries, as Kuznetsov also suggested. See Kuznetsov, “Durgulel’ velikii i Nizhnii Arkhyz”, 86–7.

34 Kuznetsov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz v ‘X–XII’ vekakh*, 246.

35 Kuznetsov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz v ‘X–XII’ vekakh*, 246–8.

36 Savenko, *Kharakteristika sotsial’nogo razvitiia*, 178; R.F. Fidarov and D.E. Totaeva, “Materialy raskopok Zmeiskogo katakomnogo mogil’nika v 2001 g.”, in *Arkheologicheskoe nasledie: materialy i interpretatsii*, ed. R.F. Fidarov (Vladikavkaz: Institut istorii i arkheologii RSO-Alania, 2019), 173.

37 Savenko, *Kharakteristika sotsial’nogo razvitiia*, 61; V.A. Kuznetsov, *Verkhni Dzulat. K istorii zolotoordynskikh gorodov Severnogo Kavkaza* (Nal’chik: Insitut gumanitarnykh issledovaniï Kabardino-Balkarskogo nauchnogo tsentra RAN, 2014), 105; cf. Kuznetsov, *El’khotovskie vorota v X–XV vekakh*, 20.

38 Fidarov and Totaeva, “Materialy raskopok”, 174.

была залита известковым раствором, частично сохранившимся до сих пор. При расчистке апсиды и около нее найдено 360 фрагментов резной каменной алтарной преграды (рис. 3). Изучение фрагментов дало возможность выявить различные вариации плетенки (жгут, плетенка с шпичками), один

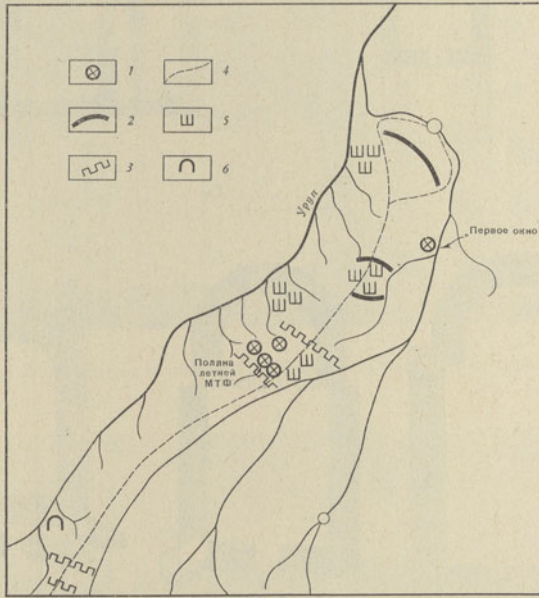


Рис. 1. Схематический план Ильичевского городища

1 — раскопанные храмы, 2 — рвы и валы, 3 — крепостные стены, 4 — дороги, 5 — скопления керамики на пашне, 6 — гончарная печь

фрагмент пальметты и фрагмент фестоны, украшавшего арку. Сюжетных мотивов не обнаружено.

Вдоль южной и северной стен зала выявлена одноступенчатая каменная

Figure 3. M.N. Lozhkin's schematic plan of Il'ichevsk *gorodishche*³⁹

© Russian Academy of Sciences. Translated key: 1 – Excavated churches; 2 – Ditches and embankments; 3 – Fortification walls; 4 – Roads; 5 – Clusters of ceramic material in fields; 6 – Pottery kiln. The cluster of churches in the centre of the site is labelled “MTF [milk farm] summer meadow” and the lone church to the east is labelled “Pervoe Okno” [the name of a cave in the Kuva river cliffs].

- c) Massive fortifications and a naturally strong defensive site in a heavily forested area;
- d) Evidence of a destructive attack in the thirteenth century.

I will address each of these factors in turn; however, first, I will give a brief introduction to Il'ichevsk *gorodishche*.

Il'ichevsk *gorodishche*: Introduction

The site of Il'ichevsk (Figure 3) lies in the valley of the River Urup, a tributary of the River Kuban, just south of the eponymous hamlet of Il'ich and immediately north-east of the border between Krasnodar Krai and Karachai-Cherkassia.

39 M.N. Lozhkin, “Novye pamiatniki srednevekovoi arkhitektury v Krasnodarskom Krae”, *Sovetskaia arkhologiiia* 1973/4, 1973, 270–77.

It was discovered in 1961 by Mikhail Lozhkin, a local schoolteacher and an amateur archaeologist, after pottery and building debris were found during the ploughing of a new field for the Il'ich collective farm.⁴⁰ From 1962 until 1968, Lozhkin and a professional archaeologist from the Krasnodar Local History Museum, N.V. Anfimov, conducted a series of small-scale excavations in the so-called “meadow” (*poliana*), an open area in the forests south of Il'ich. Further excavations were carried out in 1971 by A.V. Gadlo, in 1981 by Lozhkin at a cliff-top shrine site 1 km east of the *poliana* (the so-called “Pervoe Okno”), and in 1983, 1988, and 1994 by two archaeologists from Krasnodar, V.N. Kaminskii and I.V. Kaminskaia (Tsokur).⁴¹ Since 2010, it appears that a number of small-scale rescue excavations have been carried out; however, the results of these latest excavations have not yet been published.⁴²

This excavation history gives rise to a couple of caveats regarding archaeological evidence from Il'ichevsk. First, while Lozhkin conducted his excavations in consultation with professional archaeologists and with a generally high degree of rigour, certain aspects of these excavations did not conform to modern archaeological standards: for example, in the excavation of the stylistically important Church No. 3 (see below), no detailed stratigraphic records were kept.⁴³ Second, the excavations so far conducted at Il'ichevsk have been relatively small in scale, although Lozhkin also carried out an extensive surface survey.⁴⁴ Given the wooded and hilly terrain, this means that most of the site remains poorly understood.⁴⁵

- 40 S.K. Filippov, “M.N. Lozhkin i N.V. Anfimov- pervootkryvateli i issledovateli Il'ichevskogo gorodishcha”, in *Voprosy istorii Pourup'ia. Vyp. I. Il'ichevskoe gorodishche kak pamiatnik srednevekovoi arkhologii i tserkovnoi arkhitektury. Materialy kraevoi nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashennoi 50-letiiu otkrytiia i izucheniia Il'ichevskogo gorodishcha (stanitsa Otradnaia, 9–10 avgusta 2012 g.)*, ed. S.N. Malakhov and S.G. Nemchenko (Armavir: Izdatel' Shurygin B.E., 2012), 7.
- 41 M.N. Lozhkin, “Iazycheskie sviatilishcha i khristianskie khramy v Verkhov'iakh Kubani (Krasnodarskii Krai)”, in *Tserkovnaia arkhologiya. Materialy pervoi vserossiiskoi konferentsii. Pskov, 20–24 noiabria 1995 goda*, ed. S.V. Beletskii (St. Petersburg: Institut istorii material'noi kul'tury Rossiiskoi Akademii nauk, 1995), 69; E.V. Ter, “Sluchainye arkhologicheskie nakhodki v otradnenskom Priurup'e”, in *Voprosy istorii Pourup'ia. Vyp. I. Il'ichevskoe gorodishche kak pamiatnik srednevekovoi arkhologii i tserkovnoi arkhitektury. Materialy kraevoi nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashennoi 50-letiiu otkrytiia i izucheniia Il'ichevskogo gorodishcha (stanitsa Otradnaia, 9–10 avgusta 2012 g.)*, ed. S.N. Malakhov and S.G. Nemchenko (Armavir: Izdatel' Shurygin B.E., 2012), 39.
- 42 L.E. Golubev and G.G. Davydenko, “Problemy sokhraneniia Il'ichevskogo gorodishcha kak pamiatnik arkhologii”, in *Otradnenskie istoriko-kraevedcheskie chteniia. Vyp. III: materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashennoi 105-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia kraevedy Mikhaila Nikolaevicha Lozhkina*, ed. S.N. Malakhov and S.G. Nemchenko (Armavir: Izdatel' Shurygin B.E., 2015), 72.
- 43 Filippov, “M.N. Lozhkin i N.V. Anfimov”, 9; V.A. Kuznetsov, *Khristianstvo na Severnom Kavkaze do XV v.* (Vladikavkaz: Ir, 2002), 36.
- 44 Lozhkin, “Novye pamiatniki srednevekovoi arkhitektury v Krasnodarskom Krae”, 271.
- 45 The only previous attempt to correlate Il'ichevsk *gorodishche* with a ‘historical’ – or to be more accurate, folkloric – settlement that I am aware of was made by V.A. Kuznetsov. He argued that Il'ichevsk could possibly be identified with the fortress of “Uarp-Fidar” mentioned in the Nart Sagas, a cycle of heroic epics recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and common to the various peoples of the north-west and central north

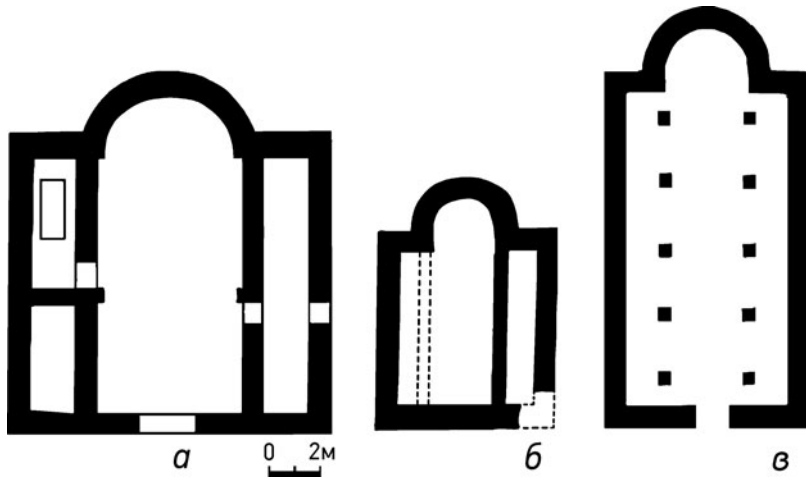


Figure 4. Plan of Churches No 3 (a) and No 6 (b) at Il'ichevsk *gorodishche*.⁴⁶
 © Andrei Vinogradov and Denis Beletskii.

Il'ichevsk *gorodishche*: dating

The most significant finds made at the *poliana* by Lozhkin, Anfimov, Kaminskii, and Kaminskaia were six churches, which appear to have been constructed between the late ninth and early thirteenth centuries (see Figure 4).⁴⁷

Caucasus. However, this identification seems relatively unlikely. For a start, the attempt to correlate a mythical place name – specifically, the home of the Ossetian divinity Wastyrji (St George) – recorded in the nineteenth century with a tenth–thirteenth century archaeological site, based only on its correspondence with the name of the nearby River Urup, seems overly speculative. Moreover, as I have previously argued, the formation of the Nart Sagas cannot be seen as a process of “preserving” older material, but more as a dynamic re-utilization of pre-existing cultural strands. In this context, any attempt to correlate mythical place names with real locations would have to demonstrate why exactly a real medieval place name had been re-utilized in a mythological narrative. Finally, there is no reason to suppose that, even if the name “Uarp-Fidar” did refer to the site of Il'ichevsk, this could not be an alternative or later name for the site, in addition to it being known in the medieval period as **Magas*. As a point of comparison, while the original name of the nearby tenth–twelfth century city of Nizhny Arkhyz is unknown, at least three other names (*Madzhar-Ounne* (brick houses), *Ellighkneiaunne* (Greek houses), and *Eski-Shekhir* (Old City)) were used to refer to it in the nineteenth century by the region's Adyghe and Karachai inhabitants. See V.A. Kuznetsov, *Alano-osetinskie etudy* (Vladikavkaz: Severo-Osetinskii institut gumanitarnykh issledovaniï, 1993), 57; Kuznetsov, *Khristianstvo na Severnom Kavkaze do XV v.*, 57–65; John Latham, “Sun-Gods and Soviets: Historicising a North Caucasian nart saga”, *Iran & the Caucasus* 20/2, 2016, 159–78.

46 Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 284.

47 The date of Churches No. 1 and No. 3 is disputed. In the case of the former, Lozhkin favoured a twelfth-century date due to the presence of a carved chancel barrier of apparent Abkhaz provenance, although V.A. Kuznetsov recently related this item to the tenth–eleventh centuries on the basis of surviving examples in Abkhazia. Similarly, Lozhkin favoured a late twelfth–early thirteenth-century date for Church No. 3, whereas Kuznetsov more convincingly argued for a considerably earlier date, perhaps the early

The bulk of scholarly attention in recent years has been devoted to Churches Nos. 2 and 6, a small rectangular chapel and a small three-aisled basilica respectively, which were dismantled in the early tenth century but then rebuilt: in the case of Church No. 6, Church No. 5 was built over the top of it and reused some of its materials.⁴⁸ The significance of these churches is that Church No. 6, and possibly No. 2, appear to have been built in the very early tenth or even the late ninth century, judging by the fact that construction debris from Church No. 6 covered over a ninth-century *poluzemlianka* (partially-underground dwelling).⁴⁹ Furthermore, recent studies of Church No. 3 have drawn attention to its unusual, three-aisled basilica design, which is only known from Il'ichevsk and one other site in the North Caucasus. Like Churches Nos. 2 and 6, this church was also apparently built over the remains of an older church, incorporating the apse into the new design.⁵⁰ A.Iu. Vinogradov, D.V. Beletskii and V.A. Kuznetsov have argued that this church also likely dates from the very early tenth century, or possibly even earlier, given its architectural parallels with basilica churches in Abkhazia and the Crimea.⁵¹

Taken together, this evidence may place these churches' construction prior to the generally accepted date of the conversion of the Alan ruler by Byzantine missionaries sent by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nicholas Mystikos.⁵² In any event, the occupation of Il'ichevsk in the tenth century seems clear; indeed, the inventory of cave burials found in the walls of the Kuva, Gamovskaia, and Balaban ravines that border the site may push the date of occupation back to the seventh–ninth centuries, according to Lozhkin.⁵³ A *terminus post quem* of occupation is provided by a thirteenth-century bronze temple ring (a type of hair ornament worn on the temple), found by Kaminskii and Kaminskaia next to a

tenth century, on the basis of architectural analogies in Asia Minor and the Crimea. See M.N. Lozhkin, "Alany na Urupe (arkeologicheskii ocherk)", in *Voprosy arkheologii i etnografii Severnoi Osetii*, ed. V.A. Kuznetsov, A.G. Kuchiev, and Vitalii Kharitonovich Tmenov (Ordzhinikidze: Severo-osetinskii nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut istorii, filologii i ekonomiki pri sovete ministrov severno-osetinskoi ASSR, 1984), 58; V.A. Kuznetsov, "M.N. Lozhkin i interpretatsiia tserkvi No 1 Il'ichevskogo gorodishcha", in *Voprosy istorii Pourup'ia. Vyp. I. Il'ichevskoe gorodishche kak pamiatnik srednevekovoi arkheologii i tserkovnoi arkhitektury. Materialy kraevoi nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashennoi 50-letiiu otkrytiia i izucheniiu Il'ichevskogo gorodishcha (stanitsa Otradnaia, 9–10 avgusta 2012 g.)*, ed. S.N. Malakhov and S.G. Nemchenko (Armavir: Izdatel' Shurygin B.E., 2012); Kuznetsov, *Khristianstvo na Severnom Kavkaze do XV v.*, 36.

48 V.N. Kaminskii and I.V. Kaminskaia, "Novye issledovaniia khristianskikh khramov mal'kh form v zapadnoi Alanii", *Istoriko-arkheologicheskii al'manakh* 2, 1996, 172–81.

49 Kaminskii and Kaminskaia, "Novye issledovaniia", 176–8.

50 Kuznetsov, *Khristianstvo na Severnom Kavkaze do XV v.*, 35.

51 Kuznetsov, *Khristianstvo na Severnom Kavkaze do XV v.*, 36–8; Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 284–5.

52 For example, see Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 19–25; V.A. Kuznetsov and Iaroslav Lebedynsky, *Les Alains: cavaliers des Steppes, seigneurs du Caucase* (Paris: Errance, 1997), 183.

53 Lozhkin, "Novye pamiatniki srednevekovoi arkhitektury v Krasnodarskom Krae", 276; Lozhkin, "Iazycheskie sviatilishcha i khristianskie khramy v Verkhov'iakh Kubani (Krasnodarskii Krai)", 68.

child's body in the porch of Church No. 5 and apparently contemporaneous with the destruction of the church.⁵⁴ These dates correlate with our textual evidence for the occupation of **Magas*.

Il'ichevsk *gorodishche*: dismantled churches and the question of royal control

From the point of view of identifying Il'ichevsk *gorodishche* with **Magas*, the most significant aspect of the excavated churches is their dismantling and reconstruction. All three of the early churches on the site, Nos. 2, 3, and 6, appear to have been dismantled in the early part of the tenth century. This has been correlated by Beletskii and Vinogradov and Kaminskii and Kaminskaia with the Alan kings' renunciation of Christianity around 932, as recorded by al-Mas'ūdī.⁵⁵ This suggestion is rendered more plausible by the fact that these sites appear to have been taken down around the same time, without apparent evidence of natural disaster; apparent evidence that they were deliberately dismantled by the local population in response to a single event.

It is notable that an analogous process appears to have also taken place at another early ecclesiastical site, Senty, which lies 60 km south-east of Il'ichevsk in the Kuban valley of modern Karachai-Cherkassia. Senty is especially important in Alan archaeology, as a unique Greek inscription from 965 which records the church's reconstruction confirms that this church was under the patronage of the Alan kings.⁵⁶ Beletskii and Vinogradov note that a mausoleum next to Senty church appears to have been constructed over an earlier building, the dismantling of which they also link to the events of 932.⁵⁷ This also explains why the church's dedicatory inscription refers to it being "dedicated [and] restored" (*enekenisthē, eneōsthē*).⁵⁸

It is therefore notable that another example of a church being dismantled in the early tenth century occurred at a site under royal patronage. This suggests that a similar process may have occurred at Il'ichevsk; which, in turn, suggests a strong degree of Alan royal influence at that site. This is rendered more likely when we look at the structure of the Alan kingdom. There is no evidence, such as written records or names of officials in inscriptions, for the Alan rulers possessing a bureaucratic apparatus that could enforce religious uniformity far beyond their "home territory". For example, burial customs in the Upper Kuban and Eastern Alania differed greatly, with elite burials in the Upper Kuban taking place inside churches, whereas in Eastern Alania these were performed in the same manner as non-elite graves, in so-called "catacombs".⁵⁹ Furthermore, these catacomb graves display considerable evidence of religious syncretism – catacomb grave 14 at Zmeiskaia, for example, contained a

54 Kaminskii and Kaminskaia, "Novye issledovaniia", 172. For the stratigraphic evidence for the church's destruction, see below.

55 Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 37; Kaminskii and Kaminskaia, "Novye issledovaniia", 174–5.

56 Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 245.

57 Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 37.

58 Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 241.

59 On differences in burial custom between Western and Eastern Alania, see M.E. Mamiev, *Alanskoe pravoslavie: istoriia i traditsiia* (Moscow: SEM, 2014), 97–140.

Quranic inscription and a riding bag decorated with a *senmurv*, as well as Byzantine-style crucifixes.⁶⁰ This syncretic religious environment does not seem to be one in which the more Christian-oriented Alan kings could force their own religious rites on to the local population. Conversely, it seems unlikely that the Alan kings could have forced the population of a region outside their direct control to have dismantled their churches, further suggesting the Il'ichevsk was, like Senty, a location over which the Alan kings held considerable influence.

A final piece of evidence may corroborate the location of the Alan rulers' residence in the Upper Kuban region, which includes Il'ichevsk *gorodishche*. The *Mat'iane Kartlisa*, part of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (Georgian royal annals) written in the 1070s, records a visit of the Alan king Dorgholel and a large retinue of Alan nobles to the court of Bagrat' IV of Georgia, which most likely took place in 1066.⁶¹ This passage records something of the route of the Alan king and his retinue: he arrived from Alania in Kutaisi, having taken "the road of Abkhazia". This may most likely be identified with either the Sancharo, Marukh, or Klukhori passes, which led over the North Caucasus into Abkhazia, from where one could then proceed to Kutaisi. It is notable that this meeting occurred in autumn – it had to be cut short so that the Alan king could return home before the onset of winter. This in turn implies that the winter residence of the Alan kings was located somewhere in the Upper Kuban region: a criterion which an identification of Il'ichevsk with *Magas would fulfil.

Il'ichevsk *gorodishche*: fortifications

One of the strongest arguments in favour of the identification of Il'ichevsk *gorodishche* with *Magas is its size and the strength of its fortifications. Lozhkin's surface survey identified no fewer than seven layers of defences, including ditches, embankments, and stone walls, protecting the site from north and south.⁶² The east and west flanks of the settlement were protected by the cliffs of the Kuva and Urup rivers respectively. The size of some of these defences was considerable: the northernmost bank and ditch was over a kilometre long, the two northern-facing stone walls were 4.4 and 6.6 metres thick respectively, and the ditches could be up to 10 metres across and 5 metres deep.⁶³

60 Kuznetsov, *El'khotovskie vorota v X–XV vekakh*, 71–85.

61 *Kartlis Tskhovreba: A History of Georgia*, ed. Roin Met'reveli and Stephen Jones (Tbilisi: Artanuji Publishing, 2014), 161–2. This event most likely took place around 1066 since it apparently occurred relatively soon after the joint Alan–Georgian raid on Ganja in 1065, but prior to the Seljuk invasions of Georgia.

62 Lozhkin, "Novye pamiatniki srednevekovoi arkhitektury v Krasnodarskom Krae", 270.

63 Lozhkin, "Novye pamiatniki srednevekovoi arkhitektury v Krasnodarskom Krae", 270; O.N. Evseeva, "Il'ichevskoe gorodishche – pamiatnik istorii i kul'tury federal'nogo znacheniiia", in *Voprosy istorii Pourup'ia. Vyp. I. Il'ichevskoe gorodishche kak pamiatnik srednevekovoi arkhologii i tserkovnoi arkhitektury. Materialy kraevoi nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashchennoi 50-letiiu otkrytiia i izucheniia Il'ichevskogo gorodishcha (stanitsa Otradnaia, 9–10 avgusta 2012 g.)*, ed. S.N. Malakhov and S.G. Nemchenko (Armavir: Izdatel' Shurygin B.E., 2012), 25.

Moreover, the construction of Il'ichevsk's defences was, in places, very unusual. The two southernmost stone walls, which guarded the narrow access to the Il'ichevsk plateau between the Gamovskaia and Perevertaika ravines, were constructed with a type of lime mortar construction which is very rare in the North Caucasus, where the normal form of construction was dry stone walling.⁶⁴ The only other sites in the North Caucasus where mortared construction has been noted are the fortress of Khumara in Karachai-Cherkassia, the churches of Nizhny Arkhyz and Senty, and the Kasar wall in North Ossetia.⁶⁵ In all of these cases, it has been hypothesized – and in the case of the Nizhny Arkhyz and Senty, it is practically certain – that their construction was performed by artisans from outside the North Caucasus, since in the last two cases the buildings being constructed were Byzantine-style churches of a *croix libre* design previously unknown in the North Caucasus. This unusual construction technique at the Il'ichevsk *gorodishche* once again suggests the importance of the site, and the power of its lords to bring in artisans from well outside the local area.

Perhaps most impressive was the sheer size of the area enclosed by these defences. The distance from the northernmost to the southernmost defences was 15 kilometres, and thus the total area enclosed was approximately 600 hectares. Indeed, they are so long that it is not clear how or whether the entire length of these defences could be manned at any one time. For comparison, this area is larger than fourteenth-century Milan, Venice, London, or Ghent.⁶⁶ It is also over twice the size of Ani, one of the largest settlements in the contemporary South Caucasus, and may indeed qualify as one of the largest settlements anywhere in the Caucasus in the medieval period.⁶⁷ This being said, it is highly unlikely that the entirety of the space enclosed by Il'ichevsk's fortifications was urbanized, given that at the smaller site of Nizhny Arkhyz, the outer walls enclosed an area of fields as well as the city proper.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the ceramic scatters identified by Lozhkin⁶⁹ suggest several distinct areas of occupation within the outer defences, perhaps suburbs or a cluster of villages of the kind that al-Mas'ūdī mentions. It therefore seems less than likely that occupation was limited to the area of the *poliana* contained within the two innermost stone walls. In any event, further study is necessary to determine the true extent of occupation within this heavily fortified urban site.

Given the emphasis on *Magas's strong defensive position and fortifications in all of our Mongol-era sources, this further suggests its identification with Il'ichevsk *gorodishche*. If, indeed, we can identify Il'ichevsk *gorodishche*

64 V.N. Kaminskii and I.V. Tsokur (Kaminskaia), "O fortifikatsii u alan Severnogo Kavkaza", in *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkheologii Kubani vyp. 1*, ed. I.I. Marchenko (Krasnodar: Kraibiblkollektor, 2001), 171.

65 Kaminskii and Tsokur (Kaminskaia), "O fortifikatsii u alan", 171–2; Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 156, 189–90.

66 Rudolf Cesaretti and others, "Population–Area relationship for medieval European cities", *PlosOne* 11.10, 2016, <<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0162678>>.

67 See UNESCO, "Archaeological Site of Ani", <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1518/> [accessed 18/11/2019].

68 Kuznetsov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz v 'X–XII' vekakh*, 13–14.

69 See Figure 3.

with **Magas*, the strength of its fortifications helps to explain why two Mongol armies were delayed for so long while besieging it.

Il'ichevsk gorodishche: destruction layers

While the excavations so far conducted at Il'ichevsk have been relatively small in scale, they have produced intriguing evidence that points towards the violent destruction of at least part of the settlement. Most notably, it is clear that Church No. 5 was destroyed by fire, with what appears to be the remains of its burnt roof being found on top of its floor.⁷⁰ It is particularly significant that it does not appear that the church was rebuilt or the debris cleared after this event; rather, the remains of the burnt roof were simply left on top of the floor. This suggests a population unable or unwilling to rebuild this site, which points towards a traumatic event of some kind, rather than an accidental fire.

Kaminskii and Kaminskaia discovered further evidence that this church's destruction was no accident, and it occurred in the thirteenth century. Most clearly – and heartbreakingly – the unburied body of a child was found in the porch of Church No. 5 in a sitting position, having apparently been killed during the destruction of the church. The aforementioned thirteenth-century bronze temple ring was found next to the head of the child, who almost certainly was wearing it when he or she died.⁷¹ The fact that this child remained unburied once again points towards some kind of traumatic event which did not allow for the burial of bodies afterwards, and the temple ring allows us to specify that this took place in the thirteenth century. Kaminskii and Kaminskaia also report that they found an arrowhead of Mongol type between the blocks of the outer face of the north wall of Church No. 5. This seems to provide *prima facie* evidence of the destruction of the church by a Mongol attack, and is consistent with archaeological evidence from Hungary from the period of the Mongol invasion, where buildings were not reconstructed and corpses left unburied.⁷² However, given the relatively long chain of inferences that this hypothesis requires and the general problems associated with written accounts related to destruction by Mongol armies, further study of this evidence is necessary – in particular, Carbon-14 dating and an osteological analysis of the child's body, dendro- or Carbon-14 dating of the church's charred roof timbers, and a comprehensive survey of the area around Il'ichevsk which might detect further evidence of destruction and/or the remains of siege works.⁷³

70 Kaminskii and Kaminskaia, “Novye issledovaniia”, 172; Filippov, “M.N. Lozhkin i N.V. Anfimov”, 9.

71 As far as I am aware, no osteological analysis was performed on the skeleton, and the sex of the child is therefore unclear.

72 Notably, sites on the Great Hungarian Plain apparently destroyed by Mongol attacks similarly feature unburied bodies and destruction to buildings that was not repaired. See Jozsef Laszlovsky, Stephen Pow, Beatrix F. Romhanyi, Laszlo Ferenczi, and Zsolt Pinke, “Contextualising the Mongol invasion of Hungary in 1241–2”, *Hungarian Historical Review* 7/3, 2018, 419–50.

73 On “chains of inferences” in associating archaeological evidence with events, see Ewan Campbell, “The archaeological evidence for external contacts: imports, trade and the economy in Celtic Britain AD 400–800”, in K.R. Dark (ed.), *External Contacts and the Economy of Late Roman and Post-Roman Britain* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press,

Conclusion, next steps and implications

In summary, Il'ichevsk *gorodishche* fits the description of **Magas* far better than any other archaeological site in the Central North Caucasus. It was occupied in both the tenth and thirteenth centuries; there is evidence of royal control over it, as evidenced by the apparent dismantling of its churches in the early tenth century; it seems to be in the right area of the Upper Kuban to be a residence of the Alan kings, according to the evidence of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba*; it seems to have been a site of major strategic significance, given its size, highly defensible natural position, and massive fortifications; and it appears to have been severely damaged or even entirely destroyed by an attack by a hostile force during the thirteenth century.

Given the relatively small scale of excavations previously conducted at Il'ichevsk, I would suggest that a number of steps are necessary to confirm this hypothesis. As a first step, the site needs urgent protection from the government of the Russian Federation. The site currently still lies on private land; moreover, illegal digging is a major problem, and many mounds in the *poliana* which Lozhkin did not excavate but suggested might be other churches or significant buildings have now been looted. Indeed, the walls of churches excavated by Lozhkin were left exposed to the elements and are now crumbling.⁷⁴

Beyond the urgent needs of preservation of the site, a renewed surface and/or geophysical survey of the site would act as a first step in identifying future excavation targets. One promising possibility, given the heavily wooded terrain, would be a LIDAR survey using drones or light aircraft. Such an approach recently produced promising results in the upland plateau above the Kislovodsk Basin region of Stavropol' Krai.⁷⁵ Finally, excavations along the defensive walls and ramparts of the site and of the ceramic scatters identified by Lozhkin might help us to understand the chronology of the site's construction and abandonment, and the precise extent and date of habitation within it.

If, indeed, Il'ichevsk *gorodishche* does prove to be identifiable with **Magas*, our understanding of the development of the Kingdom of Alania would be greatly advanced. First, the heartland of the Alan kingdom could be pinpointed in the valleys of the Upper Kuban, rather than further east. This, in turn, might suggest that the reasons for this kingdom's creation can be linked to control of the Kuban's valleys and passes. In turn, this implies the importance of access to the world outside the Caucasus for political

1996), 83. For general problems with accounts of destruction resulting from Mongol conquests, see Paul D. Buell, "Central Eurasia: Genocide as a way of life?", unpublished paper, https://www.academia.edu/241538/Central_Eurasia_Genocide_as_a_way_of_life [accessed 10/04/2020], 7–9.

74 Golubev and Davydenko, "Problemy sokhraneniia Il'ichevskogo gorodishcha", 72.

75 Sabine Reinhold, A.V. Belinskii, and D.S. Korobov, "Remote sensing data for survey [*sic*] in a high altitude mountain environment", *Quaternary International* 402, 2016, 46–60.

authority in this region. Second, the location of the Alan kings' heartland in the Upper Kuban throws into relief an apparent cultural divide between the western and eastern parts of Alania. For example, as we have seen, in the western region of Alania, it appears that certain elites were buried apart from the rest of the population in sacred spaces, such as churches and churchyards, whereas in the eastern region of Alania (the modern Piatigor'ia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia and Chechnya), elites were buried using the same rite and in the same cemeteries as the rest of the population – a difference interpreted by S.N. Savenko as relating to the separation or inclusion of elites within traditional clan structures.⁷⁶ Locating the capital of Alania in the western region may allow us to understand the political significance of these differences. Third, if we can identify the *Hudūd al-'Alam*'s marvel-tale as a garbled version of tribute being sent to *Magas, we may gain an idea of the reach of the Alan kings and the method whereby they were able to amass the resources to build such a large fortified site. Finally, the apparent construction of the earliest churches at Il'ichevsk/*Magas(?) before the arrival of Byzantine missionaries suggests that the Christianization of Alania was driven by the initiative of the Alan kings themselves, rather than by the Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos or other Byzantine elites. This implication is one that may further our understanding of processes of Christianization elsewhere on the Byzantine periphery. Overall, future work to prove or disprove the identification of Il'ichevsk with *Magas has strong potential to expand our knowledge not just of North Caucasian history, but also of processes of cultural exchange, interaction and state formation along pre-modern imperial peripheries.

Conflicts of Interest

None.

Appendix

Тезис на русском языке

Данная статья представляет новую попытку определить локализацию аланской столицы Магас. Хотя многочисленные городища, в том числе Алхан-Кала, Али-Юрт, Верхний Джулат, Манхуэггэпс, Нижний Архыз и Кяфар, определенные как местонахождение Магаса, ни один из этих предположений не доказаны.

Исследования авторами арабских, персидских и китайских источников определили четыре критерия сделать корреляцию между текстовыми и археологическими данными о Магасе. По сведениям письменностей ал-Масуди, Джувайни, Рашид ад-Дин и в истории Юань-Ши, Магас:

76 See Savenko, *Kharakteristika sotsial'nogo razvitiia*, 199.

- 1) был населён в X–XIII веках;
- 2) являлся столицей аланских правителей (или был под их влиянием);
- 3) имел мощные фортификации
- 4) был захвачен монгольской армией Монгке-Хана после трехмесячной осады в 1239–1240 гг.

На Ильичевском городище существуют сведения о всех этих четырех критериях.

- 1) По В.А. Кузнецову, А.Ю. Виноградову и Д.В. Белецкому, храмы 2, 3 и 6 Ильичевского городища построены в конце IX века или начале X века, а бронзовое височное кольцо XIII века найдено рядом со скелетом ребенка на паперти храма 5. Таким образом, Ильичевское городище было населено как минимум от начала X века до XIII века.
- 2) Демонтирование храмов 2, 3 и 6 в начале X века может быть связано с отречением от христианства аланским правителем в 932 г. после его поражения Хазарами.
- 3) Городище имеет крупные фортификации, с семью линиями обороны, состоящими из стен, рвов и валов.
- 4) Наконец, в раскопках храма 5 В.Н. Каминский и И.В. Каминская нашли следы пожара, разрушившего здание, которое после этого не было отремонтировано. По вышеупомянутому височному кольцу пожар датируется XIII веком и может быть связан со взятием Магаса монголами в 1240 году.

Мы абсолютно уверены в необходимости новых археологических раскопок Ильичевского городища, которые позволят подтвердить или опровергнуть предложенную идентификацию местоположения Магаса. Кроме того, в настоящее время городище нуждается в государственной охране, чтобы сохранить этот древний памятник для будущих поколений.