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SELJUK EXPANSION INTO AZERBAIJAN: ALP ARSLAN'S MILITARY CAMPAIGNS AND THEIR IMPACT

SELÇUKLULARIN AZERBAIJAN'A GENİŞLEMESİ: ALP ARSLAN'IN ASKERİ HAREKATLARI VE ETKİLERİ

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Öz

Alp Arslan'ın Azerbaycan'a yönelik Selçuklu ilerlemesi, bölgenin tarihindeki önemli bir dönüm noktasını oluşturmuş ve bunun sonucunda bölgenin siyasi ve kültürel yapısını nesiller boyu etkilemiştir. Bu makale, Alp Arslan'ın Azerbaycan'daki askeri hareketlerini incelemekte ve bunların taktiksel önemi, askeri stratejileri ve bölgenin sosyo-politik dinamikleri üzerindeki kalıcı etkilerini vurgulamaktadır. Birincil tarihi kaynakları inceleyerek ve Selçukluların yerel güçlerle olan etkileşimlerini değerlendirerek, bu çalışma Selçuklu İmparatorluğu'nun büyümesinin daha geniş arka planını aydınlatmaktadır. Özellikle 1071 Manazkert Meydan Muharebesi'ne özel bir vurgu yapılmakta, bu zaferin sadece Alp Arslan'ın Anadolu üzerindeki egemenliğini pekiştirmekle kalmayıp, aynı zamanda Azerbaycan'daki Selçuklu etkisinin yolunu açtığı ifade edilmektedir. Makale ayrıca, Alp Arslan'ın fetihlerinin Azerbaycan'da Türk kültürünün yayılması ve yeni siyasi ile idari yapıların oluşturulması gibi kalıcı sonuçlarını da ele almaktadır. Sonuç olarak, araştırma, Alp Arslan'ın askeri yaklaşımlarının önemini ve bunların Azerbaycan ile daha geniş bölgenin evrimi üzerindeki kalıcı etkilerini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Alp Arslan, Selçuklu genişlemesi, Azerbaycan, Manazkert Meydan Muharebesi, askeri seferler, Türk kültürü, siyasi etki, tarihsel analiz.

Abstract

The Seljuk advancement into Azerbaijan under Alp Arslan represented a crucial juncture in the region's history, influencing its political and cultural framework for generations. This article examines Alp Arslan's military operations in Azerbaijan, highlighting their tactical importance, military strategies, and lasting effects on the region's socio-political dynamics. By scrutinizing primary historical records and assessing the Seljuk's interactions with local powers, this study illuminates the broader backdrop of the Seljuk Empire's growth. Particular emphasis is placed on the Battle of Manzikert (1071), a critical triumph that not only cemented Alp Arslan's dominion over Anatolia but also opened up avenues for Seljuk influence in Azerbaijan. The article further delves into the enduring consequences of Alp Arslan's conquests, such as the diffusion of Turkish culture and the creation of new political and administrative frameworks in Azerbaijan. Ultimately, the research highlights the importance of Alp Arslan's military approaches and their lasting influence on the evolution of Azerbaijan and the larger region.

Keywords: Alp Arslan, Seljuk expansion, Azerbaijan, Battle of Manzikert, military campaigns, Turkish culture, political impact, historical analysis.

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Introduction

The Azerbaijan region has historically attracted attention due to its geographical and geostrategic importance. From the Middle Ages to the present, the political borders of this region have changed over time. Alp Arslan's military campaigns against Azerbaijan marked a crucial phase in consolidating the Seljuk Empire's control in the region and deeply influencing its political structure. Azerbaijan has been a critical region in the expansion of the Seljuk Empire, and under the leadership of Alp Arslan, the military campaigns in this region not only enhanced Azerbaijan's strategic importance but also solidified Seljuk control over it.

The process, starting with the Oghuz raids in 1038, paved the way for the expansion of Seljuk influence in Azerbaijan, which became a key area in the lead-up to the Battle of Manzikert. During this period, Seljuk territorial expansion policies in Azerbaijan, combined with Alp Arslan's military strategies, not only led to conflicts with local powers but also laid the groundwork for Seljuk expansion into Anatolia. An example of this is the 1064 event when Tuğ Tekin brought the Oghuz tribes in the Marand region under Seljuk control, which highlights Alp Arslan's military campaigns and the collaborative efforts that shaped the Seljuk's influence in Azerbaijan. Particularly after the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, Alp Arslan's military actions in Azerbaijan not only secured control over the region but also paved the way for the Seljuk Empire's expansion towards Anatolia. This article aims to examine Alp Arslan's military campaigns in Azerbaijan and their long-term effects on the region. The expansion of the Seljuk Empire in this region resulted in significant transformations, not only in military terms but also in cultural, economic, and political aspects. In this context, the geopolitical role of Azerbaijan in the Middle Ages, Alp Arslan's strategic decisions, and the lasting impact on the region will be discussed.

Azerbaijan as a Strategic Gateway: Early Oghuz Invasions and Alp Arslan's Governance

The complexity of the period is further intensified by the activities of the Oghuz, who, having come from Central Asia, launched raids into the southern provinces of Azerbaijan and then into Arran. In 1018-1021, the Oghuz crossed the Araz River and, from the southern territories under the control of the Ravvadids, infiltrated the lands of Arran, attacking Nakhchivan and then the city of Dabil. The Seljuks' more decisive actions against the Ravvadids and the Shaddadids took place a few years later, during Sultan Tughril's campaign in Azerbaijan in 1054-55. Like the leaders of other feudal states, both Ravvadi Vahsudan and Shaddadi Shavur accepted the authority of the Seljuk sultan, began mentioning his name in sermons, and started paying taxes. The Shaddadids even became allies of the Seljuks and key supporters of their policies in the region. Towards the end of Tughril Bey's reign, the topics of Azerbaijan and Tabriz are mentioned in historical sources. After putting affairs in Arab Iraq and al-Jazeera in order, Tughril Bey returned to the Jibal region. In 1059, Abu Nasr, the son of Vehsudan, revolted against the Seljuks. In 1060, Tughril Bey laid siege to Tabriz but was unsuccessful. During this time, news of his wife's death arrived. Abu Nasr went to Baghdad and complained to the caliph about the destruction caused by the Seljuks in Azerbaijan. The caliph asked Tughril Bey to prevent further damage. In 1062, Tughril Bey returned to Azerbaijan and brought the Ravvadids under his control. As part of the Seljuk military campaigns, particularly under the leadership of Alp Arslan, Azerbaijan played a critical role in the Seljuks' expansion into Anatolia (Məmmədov, E. Ə., 2015).

After Tughril Bey's passing, Alp Arslan continued his predecessor's strategy and turned Azerbaijan into a strategic launch point for military operations. Sultan Alp Arslan was one of the most important rulers in Turkish history, who ruled the Great Seljuk Empire from 1063 to 1072. Alp Arslan, the son of Çağrı Bey, who was a descendant of Selçuk Bey, the founder of the Seljuk dynasty, ascended to the throne in Rey after winning the succession struggle following the death of Sultan Tuğrul Bey. He made significant contributions to the expansion of the Great Seljuk Empire's borders and played a crucial role in making the name of the state known to the world. The campaigns in the region, such as the conquest of Ani and the subsequent movements into Georgia and other parts of the Caucasus, highlight how Azerbaijan became an essential base for Seljuk power. Sultan Alp Arslan launched a campaign to increase the Seljuk influence over the feudal holdings in Azerbaijan. He captured Ganja in 1064 (Kesik, M., 2016). This campaign took place in February 1064, when Alp Arslan moved from Rey to Merv and then to Nakhchivan, where he ordered the preparation of ships to cross the Araz River. After assembling his army, he marched towards the Georgian territories, capturing the two important fortresses, Sürməri and Karabakh, which he handed over to the governor of Nakhchivan. Nakhchivan was already under Seljuk control. It is clear that after this period, local rulers in Nakhchivan and other regions were replaced by Seljuk governors. Consequently, this region became an essential part of the Seljuk Empire's strategic expansion.

After this campaign, the main goal of the Seljuk's Caucasus campaigns was to capture the city of Ani, which was of great strategic importance to the Byzantine Empire as the "Eastern Gate" of Anatolia. After continuing his campaign through the Kars-Ani region, Sultan Alp Arslan laid siege to the city of Ani, which had been annexed by the Byzantine Empire and was under the control of a Byzantine governor. Ani, a heavily fortified city surrounded by the Arpaçay River and mountains, was well-protected with strong defensive structures. Upon arriving at Ani, Alp Arslan's army faced initial resistance, with Byzantine soldiers attempting to defend vital resources like crops and water channels (Osman T., 1965). However, they withdrew without engaging in combat. The Seljuk forces then initiated a full siege, and after a period of struggle, they used earth and hay bags to fill the city's defensive moat. On August 16, 1064, the city was captured after the defenders, exhausted and defeated, agreed to pay tribute. The fall of Ani, which was renowned for its many churches, brought great joy to the Islamic world. In recognition of his victory, the Caliph sent a congratulatory letter to Alp Arslan, granting him the title "Abu'l-Fath" (Father of Victory). Sultan Alp Arslan appointed Menuchehr, the ruler of the Shaddadid dynasty, to govern the city and took measures to rebuild and fortify it, including the construction of mosques.

Following the conquest of Ani, Alp Arslan focused on consolidating Seljuk rule in the region and prepared for further expansion into Anatolia. The region became increasingly significant as it provided a strategic vantage point for incursions into Byzantine territory, eventually leading to the decisive Battle of Manzikert. Azerbaijan thus served as a critical stepping stone in the Seljuks' larger geopolitical ambitions, with its position enabling them to control key territories and carry out successful military campaigns across the region (Şahin Demir, M., 2017).

The Turkmen, who had played a significant role in the establishment of the Seljuk State and had endured great efforts and hardships, continued to migrate out of necessity, still searching for a homeland. As is well known, these migrations were directed towards Anatolia as part of state policy, guided by the Seljuk sultans and members of the royal family. Indeed, Sultan Alp Arslan, through his campaigns in the Caucasus and Azerbaijan in 1064 and 1067, ensured the security of the routes leading the Turkmen to Anatolia.

Alp Arslan's Second Campaign to Georgia and Its Impact on Azerbaijan

Parallel to the migration of the Muslim Oghuz Turks, who formed the backbone of the Near Eastern Turks, from the south of the Caspian Sea, their non-Muslim kinsmen were also migrating from the north. The arrival of large masses of the Pechenegs, Oghuz, and Kipchaks caused turmoil in the Caucasus, the northern Black Sea region, and the Balkans (Tokan, Ö., 2020). Indeed, this caused significant disturbances in Azerbaijan, where the remnants of the Khazars, as well as the Kumuks and Alans descending from the Caucasus, created unrest. Local emirates, such as the Shaddadids and Shirvanshahs, who ruled under the Seljuks, were unable to resist them. For this reason, the Georgian/Abkhaz prince Bagrat invaded Sheki and advanced as far as Barda. This situation, which would also result in the disruption of the migration routes to Anatolia, forced Alp Arslan to launch a new western campaign.

When the Sultan arrived in Arran in November 1067, the Shirvanshah and Shaddadid emirs came to meet him. The Seljuk army crossed the Aras River and entered Georgia. They recaptured Sheki. Aqsartan, the governor appointed by Bagrat to Sheki, came to the Sultan's presence with valuable gifts and pledged his allegiance, requesting to convert to Islam through him. The Georgian king, not daring to fight, fled. The Seljuk army could only advance through forests where sunlight did not penetrate by following paths opened by fires fueled by oil extraction machines. Entering the central Georgian region of Kartli, Alp Arslan captured many cities and fortresses.

After suffering from a harsh winter, the Seljuk army stayed in Kars for a while before reaching Tbilisi. Upon capturing the city, the Sultan ordered the construction of a mosque. In response, Bagrat sent envoys to Alp Arslan, offering to pay an annual tribute in exchange for vassalage. He married his daughter to the Seljuk sultan. After leaving the administration of Rustov and Tbilisi to the Shaddadid emir Fazlûn, Alp Arslan returned to Khorasan (Vəlixanlı, N. M., 2016).

After the Seljuk army's departure, some disturbances broke out in the Caucasus, which were not intended as revolts against the Seljuk State. These were resolved upon the dispatch of Emir Savtegin, who was familiar with the region due to his previous conquests there.

Alp Arslan's second campaign to Georgia in 1067 was prompted by the Alan invasion in October 1065, which threatened the northern borders of the Great Seljuk Empire, particularly the regions in Azerbaijan and surrounding areas. The Alan forces, after crossing the Alan Gate, plundered the Shaddadid territories in Arran and advanced towards Ganja, causing widespread devastation. The Shaddadid ruler, Ebü'l-Esvâr, had retreated to Ganja and was unable to respond effectively. Following this, the Alan forces reached the Muslim town of Berda, which they also looted (Cevad H., 2004).

Upon arriving in the region in November 1067, Alp Arslan found that Ebü'l-Esvâr had died, and his son, Fadlûn, had succeeded him. Fadlûn quickly submitted to Alp Arslan and offered the Sultan his treasures and supplies, accepting Seljuk vassalage. This move further solidified the Seljuks' hold on the region. Additionally, during this campaign, the Seljuks also captured Shirvan. The Shirvan ruler, Faribuz, after facing Oghuz raids, came to Alp Arslan with valuable gifts and pledged his loyalty. Faribuz later participated in the Georgian campaign alongside the Seljuk forces.

The Seljuks advanced further into Georgia, where they encountered strong resistance from Georgian and Armenian forces, especially in the Shakki region. The ruler of Shakki, Ahastan, eventually surrendered and converted to Islam (Köymen, M. A., 2000). The Seljuk forces successfully captured several important regions, including Kartli, after significant battles. The city of Tbilisi was also taken, and new mosques were constructed as part of the Seljuk's efforts to solidify their control.

The successful campaign in Georgia had important implications for Azerbaijan. With Azerbaijan secured under Seljuk influence, it became a vital base for future operations in Anatolia. The strategic importance of Azerbaijan in securing the Seljuks' position in the Muslim world was paramount. The stability achieved in Azerbaijan also allowed Alp Arslan to prepare for the larger goal of expelling the Byzantines from Anatolia (Öğün Bezer G., Çevik, A., Tufantoz, A., & Kucur, S. S., 2019).

In the aftermath, the Georgian King IV. Bagrat initially made peace but later resumed hostilities. However, the Seljuks, through strategic military and political actions, managed to weaken Georgia, paving the way for future Seljuk dominance in the region. One of the key reasons behind the Seljuks' expansion into Transcaucasia was to secure Azerbaijan, which played a crucial role in managing future military operations against their adversaries in the Muslim world (Özmenli, M., 2021). Azerbaijan became an important region for the Seljuks, serving as a strategic base for their future incursions into Anatolia and contributing to the broader establishment of Seljuk dominance in the region.

The Battle of Manzikert (August 26, 1071) marked a decisive defeat for the Byzantine Empire and a pivotal victory for the Seljuk Turks, opening the gates to Anatolia. After Byzantine Emperor Romanos Diogenes embarked on an eastern campaign, his 50,000-strong army faced off against the Seljuks' 24,000 troops on the plains of Manzikert. The disorganization of the Byzantine forces and Romanos' aggressive tactics fell into the hands of the Seljuks, who employed the crescent formation, leading to the capture of Romanos Diogenes. Alp Arslan signed a peace treaty with the Roman emperor for a ransom of 1,500,000 dinars and, with due respect, sent Diogenes back to his homeland. Based on historical sources, it is possible to say that during the Battle of Manzikert, Alp Arslan's command and armament center was in Tabriz, where the Seljuk forces were equipped and organized.

This victory solidified Seljuk control over Anatolia and paved the way for the Turks to establish their dominance in the region. The Battle of Manzikert remains a critical turning point in both Turkish and world history. It heralded the start of a new chapter in the interaction between the Seljuks and the Byzantine Empire, and it indicated the rise of a formidable Turkish presence in Anatolia (Soofizadeh, A., 2023). The Battle of Manzikert, in conjunction with Alp Arslan's earlier campaigns in Azerbaijan and Georgia, established the foundation for the future creation of the Sultanate of Rum, which would become a key hub of Turkish influence in central Anatolia. Through these military achievements, Alp Arslan not only expanded the territory of the Seljuk Empire but also guaranteed the persistence and flourishing of Turkish culture and influence in the region, whose effects would resonate through the ages.

Conclusion

Alp Arslan's military actions in Azerbaijan, especially during the mid-11th century, were revolutionary not just for the Seljuk Empire but also for the wider geopolitical and cultural framework of the area. These actions represented a vital turning point in the history of Azerbaijan, as they initiated a fresh phase of Turkish governance, establishing the basis for centuries of Turkic supremacy in the South Caucasus. The strategic significance of Azerbaijan, owing to its geographic location and closeness to the core of the Seljuk Empire's ambitions in Anatolia, was essential for the success of Alp Arslan's larger military goals. This study has offered a deeper insight into how these military endeavors contributed to shaping the region's future, especially regarding the Seljuks' consolidation of authority and their impact on both the Muslim and Christian communities in the vicinity.

Azerbaijan acted as a crucial gateway for Seljuk expansion, serving as a launchpad for military actions into the Caucasus, Anatolia, and further afield. The measures taken by Alp Arslan, notably his consolidation of dominion over vital regions in Azerbaijan and his victorious campaigns in Georgia, paved the way for the eventual Seljuk invasion of Anatolia, culminating in the pivotal Battle of Manzikert in 1071. This victory against the Byzantine Empire represented a landmark moment in history, allowing the Seljuks not only to take control of Anatolia but also to cement their status as the prevailing power in the region.

Azerbaijan's significance as a crucial region for the Seljuks is also mirrored in the cultural changes that ensued after the military victories. The advancement of Turkish culture, language, and Islamic customs in the area was considerably hastened by the military campaigns carried out by Alp Arslan and his successors. The arrival of Turkmen settlers, who were vital to the establishment and sustenance of Seljuk authority, played a significant role in the cultural evolution of Azerbaijan and its adjacent regions. The creation of new political and administrative systems further reinforced the Seljuk grip on the area, marked by the construction of mosques, the creation of new governance structures, and the incorporation of local leaders into the Seljuk administrative system.

Furthermore, Alp Arslan's engagement with local authorities in Azerbaijan and Georgia showcases his talent in fusing military strength with diplomatic tactics. His capacity to incorporate local leaders and incorporate them into the Seljuk governance framework enabled him to efficiently oversee the area and diminish pushback against Seljuk expansion. The peaceful incorporation of the Georgian monarch, Bagrat IV, who consented to pay tribute and align himself with the Seljuks following the conquest of Tbilisi, exemplifies Alp Arslan's effective diplomatic strategies that complemented his military triumphs.

The enduring impacts of Alp Arslan's endeavors in Azerbaijan were not limited to military or political successes alone. These efforts were also crucial in molding the socio-political landscape of the area for generations. The Seljuks' dominance over Azerbaijan fostered an environment conducive to the dissemination of Islamic culture and the formation of Turkish dynasties that would persist in shaping the region long after the decline of the Great Seljuk Empire. The integration of local societies into the Islamic sphere, the adoption of Turkish as the administrative and cultural language, and the introduction of novel architectural designs and artistic styles all significantly contributed to altering the cultural and social dynamics of the region.

In summary, Alp Arslan's military actions in Azerbaijan were not just territorial gains; they were vital in influencing the long-term strategic, cultural, and political development of the area. These initiatives established the groundwork for the Seljuk Empire's supremacy in the South Caucasus and Anatolia, facilitated the spread of Turkish culture and Islam, and ensured the Seljuks' position as a dominant force in the medieval era. The historical importance of these initiatives remains relevant today, as they contributed to shaping the trajectory of Turkish and Middle Eastern history. By comprehending the intricacies of these military and political actions, we not only gain a better understanding of the operations of the Seljuk Empire but also appreciate the lasting legacy of Alp Arslan's rule, which profoundly influenced the region for centuries to follow.

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