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Ilghazi the Star of Religion. The Victorious Muslim General Defeated by Georgian King David the Builder

Najm al-Dīn Ilghazi, the founder of the Artuqid dynasty and Muslim champion against the Crusaders may be called one of the most ambitious adventurers of his time. During his life Ilghazi did everything to gain power and popularity. He made alliances with different people; Muslims, as well as Christians, like Tutush, Sultan Muhammad, Tughtekin, Roger of Antioch and others, and then fought against his former allies. At different times he was governor of cities and provinces like Jerusalem, Mardin, Nisibin, Aleppo etc.

1119 was the year of Ilghazi's greatest triumph when he defeated Roger of Antioch in the valley of Tell 'Afrin. To the Franks this battle was known as the Ager Sanguinis, the Field of Blood. The reputation of Ilghazi as a great military commander and champion of Muslims against Christians spread far and wide. After this victory Ilghazi decided to join a Muslim coalition against Christian Georgians and lead the coalition's army. 1121 became a year that left his dreams in tatters; the King of Georgia, David the Builder won a great victory against the Muslim coalition army and its general Ilghazi at Didgori.

Many contemporary sources do describe Ilghazi's life and actions before 1121, but there are few details regarding his defeat at Didgori¹. However, there are some works dedicated to Ilghazi generally and the Didgori battle in particular².

¹ *Tskhovreba Mefet-Mefisa Davitisi*, by anonym author, in: *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, ed. by R. Metreveli, Tbilisi 2008, pp. 324–325; Matthew of Edessa, *On Didgori battle, conquest of Tbilisi and Ani by David the Builder* in: *Kartuli diplomatiis istoria*, ed. by R. Metreveli, Tbilisi 2004, p. 150; Walter the Chancellor, *Didgori Battle* in: *Kartuli diplomatiis istoria*, ed. by R. Metreveli, Tbilisi 2004, p. 155; Al-Fāriqī, *Tārīkh Maṣṣafarīqīn wa Amid*, in: C. Hillebrand, *The History of the Jazīra 1100–1150: The Contribution of Ibn al-Arṣaq al-Fāriqī*, vol. I, Thesis presented for the Degree of Doctor Philosophy, University of Edinburgh 1979, p. 189; Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*, taḥqīq Abi al-Fida' 'Abd Allah al-Qaḍi, vol. IX, Beirut 1987, p. 194; Kamāl al-Dīn, *Zubdat al-ḥalab min tārīkh ḥalab*, waḍa'a ḥawāshya Khalīl al-Manṣūr, Beirut 1996, p. 278; Ibn al-Qalānīsī, *Tārīkh dimashq*, taḥqīq Suhayl Zakkār, Dimashq 1983, p. 326.

² C. Hillebrand, op. cit.; S. Margishvili, *Mitebi da Realoba Davit Aghmasheneblis Mefobis Shesakheb*, Tbilisi 2006; G. Jafaridze, *Sakartvelo da Makhlobeli Aghmosavletis Islamuri Sam-*

The life and activities of Ilghazi are generally studied as part of wider events of the first decades of the 12th century. Almost all of them has a one-sided view of his personality as one of many Seljuk warlords. Crusader sources and scholars see him as an enemy of Christians and a winner of the Blood Field battle, the Muslim ones – as an adventurous Seljuk general, who was seeking power and glory, and the Georgians – as a leader of the Muslim coalition army against Georgian king David the Builder. Ilghazi is often represented as an untrustworthy person and a drunkard, who spent all his life in wars, intrigues and drinking, but his career is more interesting than that of an ordinary Turcoman general.

Najm al-Dīn Ilghazi was born around 1062. Unfortunately we have no details about his early life. We only can say that he was in the service of the Great Seljuk Sultan. However, after Malik Shah's death in 1092 everything changed in Seljuk Empire. The Seljuk state fell into the chaos of a civil war. Seljuk princes and Turcoman generals saw a great opportunity to serve their own interests. In the last decade of the 11th century, we find Ilghazi with his brother Sukman jointly ruling Jerusalem, inherited from their father, Artuq's Iqta, who was granted control of the city by Tutush. In 1095, Fatimids conquered Jerusalem, but allowed the brothers to leave the city. Sukman moved to Edessa and Ilghazi to Iraq. He joined Sultan Muhammad's service and received the post of "shihna" in Baghdad. In the Seljuk period, "shihna" was not only a military governor of a city or a region, but also a representative of the Sultan³. It must be mentioned that the population of Baghdad was very dissatisfied with Ilghazi, who allowed his men to loot the city. In 1104, he switched allegiances from Mahmud to Barkyaruk. According to a peace-treaty made between Muhammad, Barkyaruk and Sanjar, Barkyaruk became a lord of Baghdad, Jibal, Tabaristan, Fars, Kuzistan and Hirman, Muhammad received north-western Iran, Diyarbakir, al-Jazira, Mosul and Syria, and Sanjar remained in Khurasan⁴. After Barkyaruk's death in 1105, Ilghazi proclaimed Malik-Shah, the dead sultan's infant son, the new Sultan. Soon afterwards Muhammad captured Baghdad and replaced Ilghazi with Aq Suqur al-Bursuqi. Ilghazi first moved to Diyarbakir and then in 1107 took Mardin.

karo, Tbilisi 1995, pp. 38–50; Sh. Meskhia, *Dzlevai Sakvirveli*, „saistorio krebuli”, vol. III, Tbilisi 1986, pp. 94–105.

³ A.K.S. Lambton, *Shihna*, in: *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, new Edition, ed. by C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs and G. Lacomte, vol. IX – SAN – SZE, Brill 1997, p. 438.

⁴ C. E. Bosworth, *The Political and Dynastic History of the Iranian World (A.D. 1000–1217)*, in: *The Cambridge History of Iran, The Seljuq and Mongol Periods*, vol. 5, ed. by J.A. Boyle, Cambridge 2007, p. 111.

Sultan Muhammad tried several times to subdue the rebel amir, but in vain. Feeling threatened by Aq Sunqur al-Bursuqi, the new governor of Mosul and his old rival, Ilghazi fled to Damascus in 1115, where he was warmly received by the city governor Tughtekin. In the same year, Ilghazi and Tughtekin made a treaty with Roger of Antioch against Muhammad's troops, and the Sultan's army under the leadership of Bursuq was defeated near Danith⁵. The situation changed when the people of Aleppo sent for Ilghazi and asked him to take control of the city and Ilghazi turned against the Franks. In 1119, Roger of Antioch seized territories near Aleppo and Ilghazi decided to react immediately. He began to gather all of his troops and allies, about forty thousand warriors, to march against the Franks. Roger soon received news of Ilghazi movements and decided to act immediately. He requested help from Jerusalem and Tripoli, but did not wait and marched against the Muslims with just seven hundred horsemen and four thousand infantrymen. The battle happened in the valley of Tell 'Afrin, to the Franks this battle was known as the Ager Sanguinis, the Field of Blood. Ilghazi's army surrounded the Franks and easily defeated them. Roger himself was killed on the battlefield⁶. After this victory Ilghazi became the first champion of Islam against the Christians⁷. In 1121, Ilghazi made peace with the Franks and started preparing for a war against the Georgians⁸.

On the other side of the region it was a different picture. The Georgian kingdom had consolidation of all regional power under royal rule. After the disastrous rule of King George II, the Georgian kingdom had become disunited and under constant attack from Turcoman tribes. The young king, David IV, after ascending to the throne in 1089, began to reunite the kingdom under the King's rule. He punished rebel lords and brought the Church under his rule. In 1095, David the Builder imprisoned the rebellious lord Loparit Baghuashi, and deported him from the country two years later, placing all his

⁵ S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, vol. II, Cambridge 1995, p. 132.

⁶ Ibidem, pp. 148–149.

⁷ For detailed information about Ilghazi and his activities please see: Al-Fāriqī, op. cit., pp. 184–272, English translation pp. 273–343; Ibn al-Athīr, op. cit., pp. 170–2017; Ibn al-Qalānīsī, op. cit., 201–342; Kamāl al-Dīn, op. cit., pp. 267–282; C. Hillebrand, op. cit.; S. Runciman, op. cit., pp. 107–160; T. Asbridge, *The Crusades: The War for the Holy Land*, London 2012, pp. 164–166; G.C. Savvidas Alexios, *Ilghazi*, in: *The Crusaders an Encyclopedia*, ed. by A.V. Murray, Santa Barbara (California) 2006, p. 631; S. Margishvili, op. cit., pp. 65–72; G. Jafaridze, op. cit., pp. 38–50; idem, *Najm al-Dīn Ilghazi*, „Davit Aghmashenebeli”, Tbilisi 1990.

⁸ G. Jafaridze, op. cit., p. 45; S. Margishvili, op. cit., p. 137.

property under royal control⁹. Then, according to a Georgian chronicle, after the conquest of Antioch and Jerusalem by the Franks, King David stopped paying tribute to the Seljuks¹⁰. The King of Georgia chose the perfect moment for this important step, the Franks had just conquered the Holy Land and Sultan Barkyaruk was involved in internal conflicts. So there was no reaction from the Seljuk side against the Georgian king to punish him for his disobedience.

In 1103, the King of Georgia decided to destroy the opposition among the clerics. So he called for a clerical summit, which was known as a Ruis-Urbnisi Church Summit, where he limited the rights of clerics and force the church to obey the king¹¹. The next step was to defeat the Turcoman tribes, who were plundering the South Caucasus and return the ancient Georgian capital Tbilisi under royal rule. He started with the Turcoman tribes and used extended as well as new military tactics, employing them to attack with small detachments in winter time and massacre the enemy at their winter stations¹². After freeing the territory of the Georgian kingdom from the Turcomans, King David started to consider liberating the Georgian capital from the Muslim rule. This was no easy task. Tbilisi had been under Muslim control for more than 300 years, and although it was a semi-independent state in the Muslim caliphate, it was still part of the Muslim world.

In 1104 King David returned Kakheti Kingdom to royal rule. In the same year, a huge Seljuk army entered Georgia, but returned home defeated. In 1110, David decided to go on the offensive and crossed into enemy territory. According to Ibn al-Qalanisi in 503 of the hijra Calendar (1109/1110 A.D.), the Georgians attacked Ganja, but were defeated by the Sultan Muhammad's army¹³. Georgian sources do not have such information, but it is mentioned that King David captured Samshvilde fortress in Southern Georgia and the Seljuks left several other fortresses in the region and fled¹⁴. This act could be considered as proclaiming a war against the Seljuks. The Samshvilde region was under the direct control of the Seljuks from 1073, and in 1083 the King of Georgia, George II, recognized this territory as part of Seljuk Empire¹⁵. So in 1110 David the Builder for the first time attacked Seljuk terri-

⁹ *Tskhovreba...*, p. 304; Iv. Javakhishvili, *Kartveli Eris Istoria*, vol. II, Tbilisi 1983, p. 346.

¹⁰ *Tskhovreba...*, p. 309.

¹¹ Iv. Javakhishvili, op. cit., p. 348.

¹² *Tskhovreba...*, pp. 316–317, 322–323.

¹³ Ibn al-Qalānisi, op. cit., p. 269.

¹⁴ *Tskhovreba...*, p. 314.

¹⁵ S. Margishvili, op. cit., p. 50.

tory and took back control of the original territories of the Georgian Kingdom. The Seljuks could not leave this act unanswered. So Sultan Muhammad sent his troops in against the Georgians, but the Seljuk army was defeated at Trialeti¹⁶. It must also be mentioned that 1110 was an ideal date to begin a military campaign against the Seljuks, because in the same year Sultan Muhammad had started a jihad against the Franks of Edessa¹⁷. So as a consequence, he was unable to send a significant force to Georgia. Victory in Trialeti gave King David an opportunity to act and strengthen his army and kingdom which he did. In 1115, the year after the Muslim defeat at Edessa¹⁸, the King of Georgia captured the town of Rustavi, which was situated on the Ganja – Tbilisi main road¹⁹ and almost destroyed the Turcoman nomad tribes in Georgia and the adjacent regions²⁰.

In 1118, David captured the strategically important town of Lore. It was the right time to continue uniting and strengthening the Georgian Kingdom. This year also saw the death of Sultan Muhammad with his infant son, Mahmud, ascending the throne. These changes resulted in disturbances in the Seljuk Empire and no one could react to King David's actions. So, around 1120 the Georgian Kingdom was almost united and represented an important political and military power. Only the Emirate of Tbilisi remained as an independent Muslim enclave inside the Georgian state. After the capture of Rustavi, Agarani and Lore, King David took control over vast territories around Tbilisi and its main roads²¹. The last step to unite the Georgian Kingdom was to recapture Tbilisi, the ancient capital Georgia.

The Muslim population of Tbilisi and neighboring territories felt threatened by David's actions. According to Georgian chronicles, the Muslims of Tbilisi and the earlier defeated Turcomans asked the Great Seljuk Sultan for help, but unfortunately the name of the sultan is not mentioned²². Armenian historian, Matthew of Edessa, mentions only Turcomans, who addressed the ruler of Arran, Tughril and he himself asked Ilghazi to join the campaign against the Georgian king²³. Ibn al-Qalanisi²⁴ and Kamal al-Dīn²⁵

¹⁶ *Tskhovreba*..., p. 316; S. Magishvili, op. cit., p. 54; G. Jafaridze, op. cit., p. 30.

¹⁷ S. Runciman, op. cit., p. 115; T. Asbridge, op. cit., p. 150.

¹⁸ S. Runciman, op. cit., p. 129.

¹⁹ S. Magishvili, op. cit., p. 59; G. Jafaridze, op. cit., p. 30.

²⁰ *Tskhovreba*..., pp. 316–317, 322–323.

²¹ For detailed information about David the Builder and his activities please see: *Tskhovreba*..., pp. 307–348; Iv. Javakhishvili, op. cit., pp. 345–360; S. Margishvili, op. cit., pp. 37–203.

²² *Tskhovreba*..., pp. 323–324.

²³ Matthew of Edessa, op. cit., p. 150.

²⁴ Ibn al-Qalanisi, op. cit., p. 326.

²⁵ Kamal al-Dīn, op. cit., p. 278.

agree with Matthew of Edessa, that Tughril requested Ilghazi and Dubays ibn Sadaqa for support. Al-Fāriqī²⁶ said that the Muslim population of Tbilisi directly contacted Ilghazi, and according to Ibn al-Athīr²⁷, after exchanging letters, the Muslim rulers planned a joint expedition against King David. The identity of the organizer of the campaign remains unclear. Some scholars believe that it was Great Seljuk Sultan Mahmud bin Muhammad, but because of the situation in Iraq, Mahmud was unable to support any military campaign in the North. He was not on good terms with his younger brother, the ruler of Arran, Tughril and several other Seljuk amirs. However, Michael the Syrian directly states that the Seljuk Sultan of Khorasan, Sanjar had sent a great army against the Georgians. Yet, Sanjar did not have any direct connection to Georgian territory, he was interested in supporting his heir Tughril. So, after comparing different sources, we can see that the members of the Muslim coalition and its main organizer. The picture is as follows: as a result of a request from the Muslim population of Georgia, the ruler of Arran asked his uncle, Sanjar and a famous Muslim champion, and the leader of jihad Ilghazi for help. So, in the Georgian campaign the participants included Seljuks of Arran and Najm al-Dīn Ilghazi with the army of Syria, Turcomans of Diyarbakir and other supporters like Dubays ibn Sadaqa, the governor of Hila²⁸. It is hard to speak about the exact number of the coalition army. Some sources mention unbelievable numbers like 600,000²⁹ and 560,000³⁰. Ibn al-Athīr mentions a more realistic number of about 30,000³¹. After studying the usual numbers of armies from this period, we can say that it was between 30 and 40 thousand³². The Georgian king had prepared an army of between 15,000 and 18,000 warriors³³. The army, according to several sources, was composed of a Georgian feudal army, the King's personal guard, Kipchak and Alan mercenaries and a small detachment of Frank knights³⁴. In July 1121, the army of Ilghazi entered Georgian territory. It made its way directly to Tbilisi, which was almost surrounded by David. By this time, the Georgians had defeated

²⁶ Al-Fāriqī, op. cit., p. 190.

²⁷ Ibn al-Athīr, op. cit., p. 194.

²⁸ G. Jafaridze, op. cit., pp. 47–48.

²⁹ Walter the Chancellor, op. cit., p. 155.

³⁰ Matthew of Edessa, op. cit., p. 151.

³¹ Ibn al-Athīr, op. cit., p. 194.

³² S. Margishvili, op. cit., p. 85.

³³ Ibidem, p. 121.

³⁴ Matthew of Edessa, op. cit., p. 151; Walter the Chancellor, op. cit., p. 155; Ibn al-Athīr, op. cit., p. 194.

one of the coalition's members, Toghtekin. As the Georgian king was well aware of the coalition's plans, he decided to exclude one of the coalition leaders. In the first half of 1121, the Georgians twice attacked Turcoman tribes on the territory of Ganja Emirate and massacred them³⁵. As a consequence, the ruler of Arran was no longer able to participate in the campaign. Of course Ilghazi was informed about the defeat of his main ally, but it was too late to turn back, so he decided not to stop and continued on his march. As we have mentioned, he entered Georgian territory in July 1121. According to Al-Fāriqī, Ilghazi selected the route from Kars to Javakheti and Trialeti to reach Tbilisi, where he could camp, rest and then act against the Georgians³⁶. King David could not allow Ilghazi to unite with the Tbilisi Muslims, so he decided to intercept him on the way. To achieve their goal, the Georgians had to control all the movements of Ilghazi and a suitable location for the battle. It was not easy to do. The landscape of Ilghazi's route lay in a mountainous region, where it was impossible for the armies to face each other in open battle. So King David used a strategy of surprise and to entice the enemy step-by-step into a trap. He chose a mountainous and woodland area near Didgori Mountain range, situated between Manglisi and Tbilisi, to attack. The Georgian king decided to attack Ilghazi during his march and set the trap. The main battle happened on 12th August. According to Al-Fāriqī, Ilghazi was halfway to Tbilisi³⁷. So, it seems that on the morning of 12th August, he set off from Manglisi. It is impossible that the Georgian army was camped in Didgori and spent the night there, because it would have been observed by Muslim spies and Ilghazi would have been able to change his route or prepare for an attack. So, supposedly the Georgian camp was situated in the Mtkvari valley and the Georgians prepared an ambush in the morning³⁸.

We can find in Al-Fāriqī's chronicle, a fairly accurate description of dispositions from the Georgian army. According to the historian's story, King David and his son Dimitri attacked Ilghazi's army from the western side of the mountain, while the front section of the enemy's army was marching at the mountain's foot³⁹.

Kamal al-Dīn⁴⁰ and Ibn al-Qalanisi⁴¹ mentioned that first, the Muslims defeated the Georgian detachments and then started to pursue them. How-

³⁵ G. Jafaridze, *op. cit.*, p. 39; S. Margishvili, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

³⁶ Al-Fāriqī, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 189.

³⁸ S. Margishvili, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

³⁹ Al-Fāriqī, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁴⁰ Kamāl al-Dīn, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

⁴¹ Ibn al-Qalānisi, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

ever, a different version can be seen in Walter the Chancellor's chronicles. The Latin historian says that King David left Frankish knights on the road to battle with the enemy vanguard before the main Georgian army attacked the Muslims⁴². In Ibn al-Athīr's version, the vanguard of the Muslim army was attacked by 200 Kipchaks and then the main Georgian army joined battle. According to his chronicle, the Muslims thought that the small Kipchak detachment had left the Georgian army seeking protection, so the Muslims did not regard them as a threat. Using the self-confidence of the Muslims to their advantage, the Kipchaks safely entered the ranks of the enemy and then attacked them with arrows. This trick resulted in chaos and panic among the Muslims and when the main Georgian army joined the battle, the enemy was completely defeated⁴³.

After studying all of the available data, we can see a fairly clear picture of the battle⁴⁴. It seems that the plan of king David was to use the element of surprise against the enemy and engage when it was at its most vulnerable. The unexpected attack during the march through the mountainous region was the worst thing that could have happened to Ilghazi's army. Soldiers were unprepared for battle and the column was stretched over several kilometers. The first step of the Georgians was to entice the vanguard of the enemy into a narrow ravine, where they could not defend themselves and massacre them. The plan worked perfectly. A small detachment of the Georgian army (Ibn al-Athīr calls them Kipchaks and Walter the Chancellor – Franks) met the vanguard of the enemy, entered into small skirmishes, feigned defeat and retreat (Ibn al-Qalanisi and Kamal al-Dīn mention that first, Georgians were defeated and escaped) before enticing them into a narrow ravine, where the enemy was destroyed. Even this small skirmish brought the whole Muslim army to a standstill. Ilghazi and other commanders were in an ignorance of what was going on in front, so they had to stop the march before receiving precise information about the enemy's number and results of the skirmish. The first tactical step of King David was successfully completed, but the delay would not last for long and the Georgians had to swiftly act. The first maneuver could last for 30–50 minutes⁴⁵, so King David had less than one hour to organize the main attack. Details of the main assault can be read in Al-Fāriqī's chronicle:

⁴² Walter the Chancellor, op. cit. p. 155.

⁴³ Ibn al-Athīr, op. cit., p. 194.

⁴⁴ The best reconstruction of the battle is represented in S. Margishvili, op. cit.

⁴⁵ S. Margishvili, op. cit., p. 168.

King Da'ud accompanied by his son Dimītrī sallied forth from the western side with a large number of troops. He swooped down on them from the mountain while they were at the bottom of it⁴⁶.

It became impossible for the marching army to build any kind of defense. The main part of the Georgian army, supposedly cavalry, attacked a confused Muslim army. The rapid attack of the Georgian troops resulted in panic and chaos in the enemy's ranks. As Al-Fāriqī has mentioned, the Georgians attacked the enemy from the top of the mountain, so supposedly they covered a distance between them in several minutes and began to attack Ilghazi's soldiers. The results of this final assault are described by Al-Fāriqī and Ibn al-Athīr. Al-Fāriqī writes:

They engaged in a mighty battle, and Najm al-Dīn was defeated. The infidels killed a large number of his men and seized much plunder from them. Only Najm al-Dīn and Dubais escaped with a small band of men, so that the Georgians have retained prisoners right up to our own time⁴⁷.

Ibn al-Athīr:

They (Muslims) were defeated and people run escaping and due to the great jam injured each other. Great number of them was killed and infidels followed them for ten *farsakhs* (ca. 50 km) killing and taking captives. Most of them were killed and forty thousands were taken captives. King Tughril and Ilghazi and Dubais escaped⁴⁸.

Kamal al-Dīn mentions, that Dubais lost goods, amounting to a value of three hundred thousand dinars⁴⁹. It was a resounding victory for the Georgian Army. Ilghazi barely escaped from the battlefield, his army destroyed. Ilghazi returned to Diyarbakir where he died in 1122, a year of his defeat. After this victory there was nothing between King David and the Georgian capital. In one year, the Georgian king captured Tbilisi. It was the beginning of the Golden Era of the Georgian kingdom.

⁴⁶ Al-Fāriqī, op. cit., p. 189, English translation, p. 277.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 189, English translation, p. 277.

⁴⁸ Ibn al-Athīr, op. cit., p. 194.

⁴⁹ Kamāl al-Dīn, op. cit., p. 278.