



DARBAND

DARBAND (دربند, Ar. Bāb al-Abwāb), ancient city in [Dāġestān](#) on the western shore of the [Caspian Sea](#), located at 42° 3' N and 48° 18' E at the entrance to the narrow pass (3-3.5 km wide) between the Caucasus foothills and the sea ([Figure 1](#)).

Name. The ancient city must have been one of the four coastal cities of Caucasian Albania mentioned by Ptolemy in his *Geography* (cf. sketch in Murav'ev, p. 121); nevertheless, specific identification with Gaitara, Albana (Isakov, 1959, p. 147; cf. Hewsén, 1984), Gelda (Kudryavtsev, 1982a, pp. 62, 105), or Telaiba remains hypothetical. In early Armenian sources the city was called Čor/Čoġ (*Elišē*, ed. Tēr-Minasean, pp. 74, 75); in the 11th century Movsēs Dasxuranc'i used both variants, as well as the earlier Armenian genitive Čoġay/Čoray as a nominative (pp. 87, 91, 105, 257). This Armenian name is to be connected with Tzour, documented in Byzantine sources as the name of the pass (Procopius, *De Bello Gothico*, 4(8).3-4); Tzon (in some manuscripts Chorytzon; Menander, ed. Blockley, pp. 70 fr. 6.1, 255 n. 48); Zōarou (gen. sing.) in the Greek rendering of Čoray by the Armenian Agath-angelos (*Patmut'wn Hayoc'* par. 10: cf. Lafontaine, pp. 178-79); evidently Syriac ʿTūrāyē in the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian (Marquart, p. 489; cf. Altheim and Stiehl, p. 110); and Arabic Ṣūl (e.g., Ṭabarī, I/2, pp. 895, 896). According to A. A. Kudryavtsev (1979a, p. 39), the city is still called Churul/Chulli in Dāġestān languages today (cf. Hübschmann, *Armenische Grammatik*, p. 219). The Middle Persian reading Vīrōi-pahr (*wylwḍ p'hl*; Nyberg, *Manual* I, p. 114; Utas, p. 118) for the fortress of Darband is unsubstantiated in texts (D. N. MacKenzie,

personal communication, 7 July 1990). The name of the pass, documented in many languages and various forms, was also frequently ascribed to the city.

The name Darband is first attested for the city in the 7th-century *Geography* incorrectly attributed to Moses of Khorene ([Pseudo] Moses of Khorene, ed. Soukry, p. 27 ll. 12-13). Although Kudryavtsev (1978, p. 245 and n. 20) reported it from 6th-century Middle Persian inscriptions on the city wall, it has not been possible to corroborate his report. The contemporary Russian name Derbent is derived from modern Persian *darband* (*dar* “gate” + *band* “bar,” lit., “barred gate”), referring to the adjacent pass. In Arabic texts the city was known as Bāb wa’l-Abwāb, Bāb al-Abwāb, or simply al-Bāb (Balāḍorī, *Fotūḥā*, index; Mas’ūdī, *Morūj*, ed. Pellat, I, pp. 305-06, 312; Yāqūt, *Boldān*, I, p. 439, distinguishing it from Bāb Šūl, which has caused considerable confusion). The view of H. S. Nyberg (*Manual* II, p. 56) that Čöl was a city in the vicinity of Darband and the differentiation between Čor and the pass of Čor (Trever, table 42; Hewsén, 1987) are thus incorrect.

Confusion has also arisen from mistaken identification in ancient sources of the pass at Darband with the Dar’yal pass in the central Caucasus (e.g., Procopius; cf. Gagloev; Kretschmer; Gerland). The term Caspian Gates in particular was used inconsistently. Although it originally designated a pass near modern Tehran (Strabo, 11.12.4; see Kolendo, correcting Anderson), it came to be applied also and eventually exclusively to the pass at Darband (Sebeos, p. 173). In some ancient sources the location of the Caspian gates is unclear (Lucan, *Prometheus* 4; Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.10.6; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 62 [63].8.1). In others (Josephus, *Antiquitates* 18.4.4; John Malalas, *Chronicon* 406, 472) the Dar’yal pass was probably meant; Tacitus (*Annals* 6.33.3) connected the “Caspian route” with the Dar’yal pass and clearly distinguished it from the “passage between the sea and the end of the Albanian mountains” (Aliev, 1986, pp. 113-14; cf. *Histories* 1.6.2: *claustra Caspiarum*, referring to the Darband pass; pace Heubner, p. 34; Koestermann, p. 321). Diodorus Siculus (*Bibliothēkē* 2.2.3) seems to have understood the Caspian Gates as the pass of Darband. Particularly important is Suetonius’ remark in his biography of Nero (19.1) that the emperor was preparing for war against the Albanians, with a clear indication that he identified the Caspian Gates with the Darband pass. In the 9th century Theophanes designated both the Dar’yal and Darband passes as the Caspian Gates (*Chronography*, ed. C. de Boor, I, pp. 161, 315-16).

More caution is required in interpreting the terms *porta Caspiaca* (Statius,



Silvae 4.4.63-64), *Caspiae pylae* (Pomponius Mela, *Chorography* 1.81), *Caspia claustra* (Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 5.124; Lucan, *Pharsalia* 8.22; Claudianus, *In Rufinum* 2.28), and *Alexandri claustra* (Jerome, 77:8; cf. Abel). In other classical texts *Sarmaticae portae* (e.g. Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 6.30) or *Sarmatikai pylai* (Ptolemy, *Geography* 5.8.5, 5.8.9) and *portae Caucasiae* (with variants) or *Kaukasiai pylai* are identified with the Dar'yal pass on the Georgian military road (cf. Mittelhaus), *Albaniai pylai* with the Darband pass (Ptolemy, 5.9.15, 5.12.6; cf. Chaumont, 1973; Hewsens, 1987). If, however, the latter were indeed located above the ancient Albanian capital, Cabalaca/Kapalak (Tomaschek, "Albaniai Pylai"), identification with the Darband pass would be out of the question. The mountain fortress Iouroeipaach, situated at the Caspian Gates (Priscus, fr. 41, *Excerpta* 15; Blockley, pp. 346-47; cf. John Lydus, 3.52: Biraparach; cf. Bandy, pp. 212-13), for which the Romans paid subsidies, is to be identified with the Dar'yal pass (Tomaschek, "Biraparach"; Justi, in *Grundriss* II, p. 535). Peoples advancing from areas north of the Caucasus were able to penetrate into Roman territory through this pass; had they already advanced through the Darband pass to Azarbaijan and into Media, the Romans would hardly have been interested in maintaining a border patrol there (pace Peeters, 1935, pp. 282-83, referring to an inscription from the reign of the emperor Marcianus [450-57] supposedly discovered in Darband in 716; cf. Trever, pp. 273-74). The Greek names Iouroeipaach and Biraparach were derived from the Armenian for "Georgian fortress" (assuming that *Virká*=Iberians); *wyrwphrg* is documented in Syriac (Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 103). Confusion arose when Heinrich Hübschmann (*Armenische Grammatik*, p. 36) and Josef Markwart (*Ērānšahr*, pp. 100-02) identified the fortress with that in Darband; Markwart and later Nyberg incorrectly read as *Iwroy parhak* the reference in Agathangelos' text (*Patmut'wn Hayoc'* par. 19; cf. *History*, tr. Thomson, p. 36: *Čoray pahak*) to gates that lay parallel to the Gates of the Alans; they thus equated the name with the fortress of Darband and the derived Greek names Biraparach and Iouroeiparach with the adjacent pass (Asdourian, p. 123; Peeters, p. 285; Dunlop, 1954, p. 19; see [ALBANIA](#), p. 806; for a related but apparently undocumented Virattarak, see Hewsens, 1987; idem, 1984). Other authors who have associated the Greek names with the Caspian Gates have offered only ambiguous documentation (e.g. Ensslin, col. 1953). No Middle Iranian name for the Darband pass appears in the 3rd-century inscriptions on stone; André Maricq has found little support for his identification of 'l'nn TR' with the Darband pass and his addition of *py[l]ō[n Alban]ōn* to the Greek version (pp. 80-89). Parthian Dar i Alān, from which the name Dar'yal was derived, is to be

connected with *Dareineatrapos* (path, ravine), preserved by Menander (fr. 10. 5, *Excerpta* 9; ed. Blockley, pp. 126-27 and n. 149, 266-67; for later Georgian documentation, cf. Tomaschek, “Dareine atrapos”); the Dar’yal pass is also called the Gates of the Alans in the Armenian texts (e.g. Elišē, ed. Tēr-Minasean, p. 198).

The most frequent and clearest documentation of the name of the pass at Darband is found in the Armenian sources in several variations, here cited uniformly in the nominative (Agathangelos, *Patmut’iwn Hayoc’* par. 19; tr. Thomson, pp. 36-37: “the sentry of Chor”; P’arpec’i, p. 66: “sentry of the wall,” probably from a misspelling of *pahak Čoray*; [Pseudo] Moses of Khorene: “city of *pahak Čoray*”; cf. Elišē, ed. Tēr-Minasean, pp. 12, 94, 198; tr. Thomson, pp. 66, 146, 242; Sebeos, pp. 69, 104, 169, tr. pp. 7, 52, 139; Moses of Khorene, 2.65, 3.12; tr. Thomson, pp. 211, 265; Dasxuranc’i, p. 13; tr., p. 9). Other documented variants include *kapank’ Čoray* “pass/defile of Chor” (Sebeos, p. 173, tr. p. 144), *pahak Honac’* “garrison of the Huns” (Elišē, ed. Tēr-Minasean, pp. 43, 78, 142; tr. Thomson, pp. 94, 129, 193), *Honac’ dụn* “gate of the Huns” (Sebeos, p. 173; tr., p. 144), *dụn Čoray* (more often written *dụn Čolay*) “gate of Chor” (Dasxuranc’i, pp. 70, 82, 110, 148, tr. pp. 55, 155 [with the addition “which is near Darband”], 190), and *drunk’ Čolay* (Dasxuranc’i, p. 110) or simply *drunk’* “gates” (Elišē, ed. Tēr-Minasean, p. 94; tr. Thomson, p. 146 and n. 8). The “gate of Tūrāyē,” mentioned in the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian (d. 1199), was interpreted by Markwart and Altheim and Stiehl as a translation of Armenian *pahak Čoray*, Tūrāyē being recognized as an equivalent of Čor (cf. most recently Dzhaferov, 1985, p. 19). In the 6th century Pseudo Zacharias Rhetor (*Ecclesiastical History* 7.3) wrote of the “gates that guard the way to Persia.” The “gate of Chor” corresponds to Arabic Bāb Šul (cf. Ṭabarī, I/2, p. 896) and Sadd Darband, “which is Bāb al-Abwāb” (Ḥamza, I, p. 57). Bāb al-Abwāb/al-Bāb eventually came to designate the city itself (Eṣṭakrī, p. 184; Moqaddasī, p. 376; Ebn Rosta, pp. 148-49; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 342; tr. Kramers, p. 335).

History. Owing to excavations conducted by Soviet archeologists beginning in 1971, the history of Darband can be traced back as far as the late 4th millennium B.C.E.; finds of stone and bronze axes and pottery suggest that the peak of the hill was settled by then. In the 1st millennium B.C.E. the history of Darband was closely linked to events north of the Caucasus and on the Eurasian steppes in general (cf. Kudryavtsev, 1979a, pp. 31-32), and the fortress was important in the defense of areas south of the Caucasus. Similarities between the pottery finds and those from farther north in



Dāgestān strongly suggest an ethnic and cultural unity among the population. In fact, the initial fortification of the hill at the end of the 8th century B.C.E. appears to have been a response by the indigenous population to Scythian invasions from the north (Herodotus, 1.104.2; cf. Kudryavtsev, 1982a, p. 166); it is clear that the strategic location and the natural advantages of the terrain were already appreciated (see sketch in Kudryavtsev, 1982a, p. 30). Archeologists have identified a period of construction subdivided into pre-Scythian (9th-6th centuries B.C.E.: settlement covering 4-5 ha on the protected northeastern side of the hill), Scythian (6th-5th centuries: settlement of the entire hill, ca. 15 ha), and late Scythian (5th-4th centuries) phases. The walls apparently attained a maximum height of 2 m and a maximum thickness of 7 m. The fortress seems to have been destroyed repeatedly during this and the following periods.

The so-called “Albano-Sarmatian period” is dated by the excavators from the 4th century B.C.E. to the Sasanian occupation in the 4th century C.E. At the beginning of this period the hill became the citadel of an expanding city. The varied and often conflicting names in the sources complicate historical interpretation (see above). It appears, however, that, with the political and economic development of Caucasian Albania in the first three centuries C.E., Darband experienced a new prosperity, accompanied by commercial expansion and social differentiation within the population. Neither Albania nor the city of Darband seems to have been conquered by the Romans in their struggle with the Parthians for hegemony in the Caucasus; nor, despite claims in the Armenian sources, is Armenian influence recognizable in the region. Coins and architectural details are evidence of interaction with the Parthians (cf. ALBANIA, p. 807), yet there was probably no direct dependence, and the presence of a Parthian garrison cannot be confirmed. Both the pass and the citadel first came to the attention of the ancient Mediterranean world through reports of Pompey’s campaign in 65 B.C.E. and of Nero’s supposed plans for the conquest of Albania. At the time of Pompey’s campaign Darband apparently already belonged to the kingdom of Albania and was probably located on its northern border (cartographic representations of the border are based on speculation; cf. Trever, table 42). As attacks by northern peoples became more frequent (Mask’ut’k’ and from the end of the 4th century Huns), Darband came to be the most important bastion and the symbolic boundary between nomadic and agrarian ways of life.

Darband was probably drawn into the Sasanian sphere of influence as a result

of the victory over the Parthians and the conquest of Caucasian Albania by Šāpūr I (240-70 C.E.; ŠKZ, Parth. l. 2, Gk. l. 3; cf. Kudryavtsev, 1979a, p. 35; Akopyan, appendix 2). Šāpūr identified “the gate of the Alans” as the border of his realm but not as the Albanian border (ŠKZ, Parth. l. 2; cf. KKZ, Parth. l. 12, KNRm, Parth. l. 39). Some modern scholars identify “the gate of the Alans” with the pass of Darband (Cereṭeli; Back, pp. 187-88; for another view, see Kasumova, 1979; idem, 1988, p. 88) and would thus interpret Šāpūr’s “gate of the Alans” as the Albanian border, but in this author’s view that is incorrect. Sasanian rulers must have endeavored to prevent the advance of peoples from the north along the Caspian coast and to protect the northern provinces of their realm. Albania remained Sasanian, though the precise position of its boundaries is obscure; Kudryavtsev (1978, p. 244; idem, 1982a, pp. 67-69), relying on historically worthless information in the so-called *Augustan History*, ascribes renewed Sasanian attempts to dominate Albania to Šāpūr II (309-79), following his defeat of the Romans near Amida in 359 (cf. Akopyan, map presupposing the loss of the entire coastal region before the 5th century). The Sasanians were certainly stronger in the Caucasian kingdoms after the peace treaty of Šāpūr III (383-88) with the Byzantines, concluded in 384 or 387, but a late 4th-century date for the construction of stone fortifications at Darband (Isakov, 1941, p. 156; Gropp, 1975, pp. 317-20, 330-31) can be ruled out. The earlier hypothesis of a gradual Sasanian advance into the northern areas of Caucasian Albania, accompanied by construction of defensive walls, is generally rejected today (Kudryavtsev, 1979a, p. 34). In the 5th century Darband functioned as a border fortress (Elišē, ed. Tēr-Minasean, p. 198; pace Trever) and the seat of a *marzbān* (Elišē, ed. Tēr-Minasean, p. 74; Dasxuranc’i, p. 87; on the political role of Darband, see Gignoux). Archeological findings reveal similarities with contemporary Azarbaijan coupled with differences from Dāğestān (pace Kudryavtsev, 1978, p. 253; idem, 1982a, p. 81, emphasizing contacts with peoples beyond the borders).

During periods when the Sasanians were distracted by war with the Byzantines or protracted battles with the Hephthalites in the eastern provinces, the northern tribes succeeded in advancing into the Caucasus. The first Sasanian attempt to seal off the road along the Caspian seacoast at Darband by means of a mud-brick wall (maximum thickness 8 m, maximum height ca. 16 m) has been dated by Kudryavtsev (1976a, pp. 87-92) to 439-50, in the reign of Yazdegerd II (438-57; cf. Elišē, ed. Tēr-Minasean, p. 78; cf. Khan-Magomedov, 1966, p. 229; Kavād I; Kudryavtsev, 1978, pp. 250-51: both Yazdegerd and Kavād). It was clearly intended to protect the rich and fertile



areas south of the Caucasus from the invading tribes. Little attention has been paid to the possibility that this wall was actually a reconstruction of earlier, damaged defenses. At any rate, in 450 rebellious Armenians and Albanians destroyed the fortifications, and in the reign of Pērōz (459-84) the Huns, led by Ambazuk, temporarily occupied the city.

In about 503 the Sabir Huns advanced on Darband (Dzhafarov, 1979, p. 166; Kasumova, 1988, p. 94). Archeologists date the next reconstruction to the second reign of Kavād I (498-531; cf. Mas'ūdī, *Morūj*, ed. Pellat, I, p. 209; Ebn al-Faḡīh, p. 343). Probably after 508, though the date is disputed, the long fortification walls at Besh Barmak and Šīrvān/Gil'ginchaī were constructed in a combination of mud brick, stone blocks, and baked bricks; as they probably served as models for the massive rebuilding of the fortifications at Darband (Khan-Magomedov, 1979, p. 40), their construction serves as a terminus post quem for the latter. The new city wall at Darband consisted of a core of rough stone blocks set in limestone mortar and faced with limestone slabs. Three building phases have been identified, extending almost to the end of the reign of Kōsrow I (531-79; Artamonov, 1946, pp. 129, 131; pace Gropp, 1977, pp. 1622-25), who is often credited in the Arabic sources with the entire construction (e.g., Ṭabarī, I/2, p. 896; Balāḡorī, *Fotūḥā*, pp. 195-96); certainly conditions would have been most favorable after the peace treaty with the Byzantines in 562 (Artamonov, 1962, p. 125). The wall measured 3,650 m on the north side and 3,500 m on the south. These two sides, which were 350-450 m apart (Spasskiĭ), extended on the east to the Caspian shore (cf. Kudryavtsev, 1979, p. 33), enclosing the harbor; the water level was much lower than it is today (Leont'ev and Fedorov; Huff; see [CASPIAN](#)). On the southwest the city wall joined the mountain wall (for photographs, see Khan-Magomedov, 1979), which extended west more than 40 km (Arabic sources: 7 farsakhs) into the wooded, virtually impassable mountains. This fortified wall, with its seven gates, apparently connected already existing freestanding fortifications (cf. Khan-Magomedov, 1966, pp. 235-37, 242-43; cf. idem, 1979, p. 208); it was never completed. The stone city wall was 4 m thick and reached a height of 18-20 m. On the north it was reinforced by seventy-three massive rectangular and round towers, spaced ca. 70 m apart, as well as by outworks at strategic points; on the south there were twenty-seven round towers at intervals of 170-200 m.

The northern city wall and the wall of the citadel were constructed first, obviously to protect the inhabitants against imminent invasions from the north. Their foundations are much deeper, and, as a result, the wall is almost



entirely preserved today, whereas the southern wall survives only in part. The northern wall follows the winding course of a ravine before straightening out toward the east; the southern wall, on the other hand, presents an almost straight line. Battlements and additional gates were added later; fourteen gates survived as late as 1720.

The impression of antiquity evoked by these fortifications led many Arab historians to connect them with Kōsrow I and to include them among the seven wonders of the world. In the Middle Ages [Alexander the Great](#) was credited with having cordoned off the Darband pass against the tribes of Gog and Magog advancing from the north (Ebn Rosta, p. 149; cf. Ezekiel 38-39; the reference to iron gates in Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* 7.7.4, cannot be connected with the pass at Darband; cf. Anderson, 1928, pp. 147-48). The Darband fortress was certainly the most prominent Sasanian defensive construction in the Caucasus (Artamonov, 1962, p. 122) and could have been erected only by an extremely powerful central government (Kasumova, 1988, p. 93; for an opposing view, see Gropp, 1977, pp. 1621-22). In construction technique it is similar to other 6th-century fortifications (see Frye, 1977; Cuneo, pp. 60-61), like those at Taḳt-e Solaymān (Huff; for another opinion, see Gropp, 1977). By 1985 twenty-five Middle Persian inscriptions (representing measurements for construction purposes) had been found in the walls of Darband (Kasumova, 1987, p. 102; idem, 1988, p. 93). The paleography belongs to a single period, and the vertical format is clearly late Sasanian, confirming attribution to Kōsrow I (Gignoux, pp. 304-05). Nevertheless, the readings, particularly of the dated inscription no. 3, remain controversial. Most scholars consider this inscription to belong to the 6th century (e.g., Lukonin, *Camb. Hist. Iran*, p. 683; Kasumova, 1979, p. 117). Kudryavtsev places it in the twenty-seventh year of the reign of Kavād I, that is, 515 (1982a, p. 94), whereas Vladimir Lukonin (1969, p. 45 and n. 23) arrived at the third year of the reign of Kōsrow I (534, not necessarily the date of completion), and E. A. Pakhomov (1930), M. I. Artamonov (1962, p. 464), and S. Yu. Kasumova (1979) arrived at the thirty-seventh year (567-68). Nyberg and Gerd Gropp differ dramatically, both having read the year as 700 but Nyberg basing his calculations on the Arsacid era, thus arriving at a date in the middle of the 5th century C.E., whereas Gropp used the Seleucid era, which yields the date 389. Neither of these dates has been generally accepted, however.

Movsēs Dasxuranc'i called Darband a city (2.41) and a large city (2.11), even though in the Sasanian period the developed area seems to have extended



only as far as the town of Dzhuma-Mechet' (Kudryavtsev 1982a, p. 116 map). The citadel, today the site of Naryn-kala (Artamonov, 1946, p. 123), served as the administrative, political, and military center, where Ƙosrow I stationed sentries (Kramers); the area between the city walls was settled primarily by artisans and merchants. Certain trades, like stonemasonry, were undoubtedly significant, and the city was also a major center of international trade. Driyōš (read by Gignoux, review of Kasumova, 1988) is documented as *āmārgar* of Ādurbādagān (*'twrp'tkn 'm'lk*) in the Darband inscriptions. The city was for a time also the seat of the catholicos of the Albanian church (Hewsen, 1987), but accounts of the founding of the diocese are legendary (Pseudo Faustus, 3.6); it was moved to Pērōz-Kavād/Partaw in 552. Despite the massive fortifications, in 627 the Khazars, allied with the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (610-41), succeeded in capturing the city, which probably remained under Khazar rule until 22/643, when it was conquered by Sorāqa b. 'Amr and became part of the Islamic empire (Ṭabarī, I/5, pp. 2663-67).

For Darband in the Islamic period, see [DĀĠESTĀN](#).

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