

CUSHITES, COLCHIANS, AND KHAZARS

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WHEN Herodotus visited Colchis (Mingrelia) in the fifth century B.C.,¹ he found its people to be, as he described them, black-skinned and woolly-haired—that is, seemingly, of Negro type. They were, he says, circumcised. “The Colchians, the Egyptians, and the Ethiopians,” he remarks, “are the only races which from ancient times have practised circumcision. The Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine” (i.e., the Jews) “themselves admit that they adopted the practice from Egypt. . . .” He noted that the Colchians wove linen (a main export of their country) in the same way as the Egyptians and differently from all other peoples. After making inquiries both in Colchis and Egypt about Colchian origins, he came to the conclusion that the legendary Egyptian world-conqueror Sesostris must have left part of his army on the river Phasis as he was returning from what is now South Russia.

How and Wells² try to discredit Herodotus’ statement by suggesting that he only called the Colchians “black” because he thought of them as Egyptians and that his ideas of Egyptian appearance were confused by the many Negro slaves seen by him in Memphis. Herodotus, however, records nothing as to his having seen a single Negro slave in Egypt, whereas he was constantly in conversation with priests who presumably were typical Egyptians of Mediterranean race. Since Herodotus (noted as a meticulously careful observer) says that the Colchians were black and woolly-haired, there seems to be no reason for supposing that they were

otherwise. How and Wells quote Herodotus’ account³ of the origin of the Dodona shrine as evidence that he thought of Egyptians as black; what he says, though, is not that Egyptians *are* black but that the oral tradition of the priestesses might have changed “Egyptian women” into “black doves.”

Near Sukhumi in Abkhazia, in almost the same district where Herodotus talked to the black-skinned and woolly-haired Colchians some twenty-two centuries ago, John Gunther⁴ noted the existence of a small Negro community; he was told that its members were descended from slaves imported from Africa many centuries ago by Georgian princes. The same community was noted by Corliss Lamont⁵; he was told that its members were descended from slaves imported from Africa more than a century ago by Turkish landowners—and, in this connection, he mentions Sukhumi’s active slave-trade in former times. J. Malte-Brun, however, mentions Sukhum’s slave-trade as an export one, in local inhabitants—especially Circassian girls for shipment to Constantinople; he describes Abkhazia as a lawless land of continual slave-raiding by local chiefs.⁶ Even if Georgian princes or Turkish landowners were ever settled in Abkhazia, it seems unlikely that they would go to the trouble and expense of bringing “coals to Newcastle” by importing slaves from Africa in sufficient numbers to form an enduring community. The “explanations” given for the origin

² *Histories* ii, 57.

³ “Russia’s Riviera,” *Harper’s Magazine*, October 1957.

⁴ *Peoples of the Soviet Union* (1946), p. 73.

⁵ *System of Geography* (American ed., 1834), p. 227.

¹ *Histories* ii, 104.

² *A Commentary on Herodotus*, I, 218.

of this community might well be on a par with the "explanation" formerly given for the Andaman Islands Negritos—that they were descended from the cargo of an African slave-ship that had once been wrecked there.

This in Abkhazia is (so far as I know) the only Negro community in the Old World outside of Africa and the coastlands of the Indian Ocean. It would certainly be a great coincidence that it should be located within a few miles of the Negro community that Herodotus visited, if there is no connection between them. That the Abkhazian Negroes are a surviving remnant of the ancient Colchians seems to be a valid hypothesis.

The dolichocephaly of the Abkhazians in general is noted both by Malte-Brun⁷ and by W. E. D. Allen and Paul Muratoff⁸; the latter authors remark that "negrito types have been seen." Long skulls seem as anomalous in these lands of broad-skulled "Alpine" peoples as broad skulls would be in Africa.

If the Colchians were ultimately of African origin, then how, when, and why did their ancestors reach the southern slopes of the western Caucasus? The distance is great but is less than the distance between the Tokhari in Sinkiang and their linguistic cousins the Celts of western Europe.

With the name "Abkhaz" we may put the "Bzyb" dialect of the Abkhazian language,⁹ the "Basians,"¹⁰ and also the "Basilians" (or "Barsilians"), "B-n-j-r" and "Balanjar"¹¹ north of the Caucasus; there seem to be many ethnic names in this region beginning with Ba- (Ab- or B-).

⁷ *Op. cit.*

⁸ *Caucasian Battlefields*, p. 14.

⁹ W. K. Matthew, *Languages of the Soviet Union*, p. 93.

¹⁰ Malte-Brun, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

¹¹ D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton University Press, 1954).

If there is a tropical African element in the population, there might be a possible connection with the Bantu ethnic prefix Aba- (Ba-), the plural prefix for the grammatical class of human beings. We do not know that the people whom the Greeks called Colchoi called themselves by that name; it is conceivable that they called themselves Aba-Khaz—and that the modern country of Abkhaz (in that case) took its name from them. If so, the syllable "Khaz" is the root or real name of the Abkhazian people and country, as with (e.g.) Ba-Ganda and Bu-Ganda in Africa. The use of quasi-Bantu grammatical classes is a feature of some East Caucasus languages.¹²

The warlike and powerful "barbarians" of Kash (Kashka), northeast of the Hittite empire, were dangerous neighbors to the rulers of Hattusas in the second millennium B.C. Genesis 10:8-12 connects "Cush" with the origin of the Assyrians; this is more likely to have been Kash in Asia Minor, across the mountains from Assyria, than the far-off Kash (Cush) on the Upper Nile. The identity of name, though, suggests a connection between the two countries, while on the other side "Kash" has a resemblance to "Khaz" that suggests a connection between the Hittite kings' enemies, the modern Abkhaz and (hypothetically) Herodotus' Colchians.

Between Ethiopia (Kash) northeast of Khatti and Ethiopia (Kash) south of Egypt the Greeks located the legend of Andromeda at Joppa. She was described as the daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopeia, king and queen of the Ethiopians in Palestine. Among the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Palestine were giants (Anakim)—and the Nilotic Negroes and black Hamites of northeast Africa are among the world's tallest peoples. Possibly it might not be too far-fetched to connect

¹² Matthew, *op. cit.*

the (tribal) name of "Anak" with the "Anuak" tribe of Nilotes in the Sudan.

At the end of the Old Kingdom, Egypt was invaded by barbarians from the south. It has been believed¹³ that these were Negroes and that there was Negro blood in the great Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom (Dynasty XII). Later authorities state that the "C People" who came into Nubia about this time were of Mediterranean race, as were their predecessors the "A People."¹⁴ However, there must certainly have been Negro peoples south of Nubia; in Nubia itself there may have been remnants of its original Negro inhabitants. The arrival of non-Negro settlers about the twenty-second century B.C. in the northernmost district of the Middle Nile region hardly disproves the possibility that Negro tribesmen may have moved northward down the Nile Valley in the same period of folk-wandering.

If so, some of these warlike invaders may have passed on northward beyond Egypt and (after leaving some of their number to become a ruling people in Palestine) reached the highlands of Cappadocia before the arrival of the Indo-European Hittites. Such a march could have been the origin of the legend of Sesostriis—whose name was borne by Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom. In Cappadocia the proto-Hittite or Hattian language¹⁵ made great grammatical use of prefixes; this might possibly show influence from Bantu Africa. The name, too—Pamba—of the king of Khatti who fought Naram-Sin of Akkad, while it cannot be claimed as evidence, has an African sound (cf. *pombe*, the banana-beer of Uganda, and the island of Pemba).

¹³ H. R. Hall, *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. I, chap. VII, iii.

¹⁴ A. J. Arkell, *A History of the Sudan to A.D. 1821*, p. 46.

¹⁵ O. R. Gurney, *The Hittites* (1952), p. 122.

Another Ethiopian in Greek legend—the jet-black prince Memnon—is described as "handsomest of the men who fought at Troy"; the modern Nilotes, such as the Shilluk and Dinka, have been classed among the handsomest of the world's peoples. He came to the aid of the Trojans, with his Ethiopian army, not from the south—the direction of far-off Ethiopia on the Nile—but from the east, where Pontic Kash lay less than six hundred miles away, only a fraction of his traditional route from Nubia via Elam, Babylon, and Armenia. His mother was either the dawn-goddess (emphasizing his eastern origin) or Cissia (Kissia), which could well be a form of the name "Kash." His father was Tithonos, whose name, it has been suggested,¹⁶ is probably a form of the name Dedun of the great god of Cush on the Nile; he could have been the god of Cush on the Halys also. "Dedun" is almost identical with "Dodona," and the "Egyptian women" or "black doves" who founded the Dodona oracle may have come not from Egypt but from Memnon's Kash, and so may have been actually black.

Nonnos¹⁷ locates the first battle between the followers of Dionysos (who are specified as Lydians) and the "Indians" (who are repeatedly specified as being of Negro type, black-skinned and woolly-haired) at a definite spot in western Asia Minor—the mouth of the Astacid Lake in Ascania, not far from Troy—a place having no conceivable connection with India. Nonnos, notorious as a plagiarist, may well have taken this from Xanthos' now-lost History of Lydia. Xanthos may have written of a real battle between Lydians (possibly under their prophet-leader Mopsos, shortly before the Trojan War) and Negro warriors such as those

¹⁶ J. Forsdyke, *Greece before Homer*, p. 101.

¹⁷ *Dionysiaca* xiv. 247–410.

who fought soon after, in the same region, under Memnon.

Across the Caucasus from Colchis and Abkhazia the Khazar people ruled a wide empire between the sixth and eleventh centuries A.D. The Arab geographer Istākḥrī, describing them, remarks that a section of the Khazars were brown or even black of skin "as if they were a kind of Indians."¹⁸ The nearest regions of India, however, are as far from Khazaria as from Lydia, and are inhabited by comparatively fair-skinned peoples, whereas Herodotus' black Colchians were, and the Abkhazian Negroes are, just across the mountains that were the southern defense of Khazaria's border. It is much easier to imagine that these black Khazars had moved over the Caucasus passes rather than from India on a two-thousand-miles route over mountains and deserts and through organized kingdoms. The very name of the Khazars might well be derived from "Khaz" (if that was the root name of the Colcho-Abkhazians) and ultimately from "Kash."

The Khazars had a double kingship—a secluded sacred ruler under the Turkish title of Khaqan and a secular ruler and war-leader under the Turkish title of Beg. The Abasgoi (as the Greeks called the Abkhazians) had two kings¹⁹; one was said to rule the east and one the west, but they are mentioned as a pair rather than as two independent sovereigns. The institution of a secluded sacred king seems more African than Asian; besides early Egypt, where "the God" was contrasted with "the Man,"²⁰ there are instances in West Africa at Shark Point, Fernando Po, Benin, Loango, Onitsha, and elsewhere.²¹ Strabo²² mentions it in Ethiopia. Among

the Mosynoeci of Pontus, in the ancient Anatolian Kash, the same is recorded by Xenophon²³ and others.²⁴ Nilote-Negro kings were not allowed to go out to battle.²⁵

The Khazars were believed to be proselytes to Judaism, but accounts are few and conflicting as to when or how they were converted. One of these accounts, in the so-called Letter of Hasdai states that

... our fathers have told us that in the beginning of their (or your) settlement the place was called Mount Seir, but my lord knows that Mount Seir is far from the place where he lives. Our elders say that formerly it was called Mount Seir, but persecutions prevailed, and they went out from affliction to affliction, till they got possession of the land where they now dwell. Also the old men of the former generation who can be relied on have told us how on account of their faithlessness a persecution was decreed, and an army of Chaldaeans rose up in anger and wrath. They hid the Books of the Law and the Holy Scriptures in a cave, and for this reason they prayed in the cave. On account of the books they taught their sons to pray in the cave morning and evening, till the times were lengthened and they forgot and no longer knew about the cave, why they were accustomed to pray therein. But they practised the customs of their fathers without knowing why. After a long time there arose a man of Israel who was eager to know why. He entered the cave, found it full of books and brought them out from there. From that day they set themselves to learn the Law. Thus have our fathers told us, as the earlier generation heard, the one from the other. The whole matter is very ancient.²⁶

The "Man of Israel," distinguished as such, seems to stand apart from the Khazar people; he may well have been a Jew from outside the Caucasus region,

¹⁸ Dunlop, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

¹⁹ Procopius *Wars* VIII, iii, 10-21.

²⁰ H. R. Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

²¹ James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, III, 123-24.

²² XVII, ii, 2.

²³ *Anabasis* V, iv, 26. ²⁴ Frazer, *op. cit.*

²⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, art. "Nilotes."

²⁶ Dunlop, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-67.

perhaps a refugee. If he found, in Abkhazia or Khazaria, a circumcised people who said that their ancestors had come out of Egypt, he might well have assumed that they were Jews who had forgotten all but a few items of their heritage. He may have told them so and, challenged for proof, "discovered" the cave and the books forthwith—a pious fraud to bring the wanderers back to the fold.

The only reference to outside events in this account is the mention of the "army of Chaldaeans." The Hurrians of Urartu have been called Khaldians; Khaldis was their great god. It may be they who are meant, and the rising of an army of Khaldians "in anger and wrath" may be a reference to the rise of the kingdom of Urartu (Van) in the ninth century B.C., which may have forced the Kashkans out of their Anatolian land and northward (before the Cimmerian and Scythian invasions) to the flanks of Caucasus, where Herodotus met their "Colchian" descendants some four hundred years later.

Long after Herodotus' time, the inhabitants of Colchis seem to have been still of the same physical type as he found there. P. H. Larcher²⁷ states that "St. Jerome and Sophronius, cited by Bochart,²⁸ call Colchis the second Ethiopia;

²⁷ *Notes on Herodotus*, Vol. I of the second edition of Cooley's translation (London, 1844), at p. 332.

and Sophronius, in his Life of St. Andrew, informs us that towards the mouth of the Apsarus,²⁹ and on the banks of the Phasis, there were Ethiopians." Since St. Jerome wrote *circa* the end of the fourth century A.D., and Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, over two centuries later, it seems that this Negro nation in the Caucasus region remained in being for at least a thousand years after Herodotus—and, some three centuries after Sophronius, Istakhri was writing of Black Khazars north of the Caucasus and on the Volga. It may have been in Sophronius' lifetime that the black Abkhazo-Colchians were overwhelmed, for it was about then that the Khazar nation and empire (founded, it may be surmised, by Colchian refugees) began its career.

The Arabic work *Tāj-al-Arūs* says that, according to some, the Khazars are descendants of Kāsh-ḥ, son of Japhet.³⁰ This sounds very much like a reference to the "Kashka" of the Hittites.

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²⁸ "Geogr. Sacr., iv, xxxi, p. 286."

²⁹ Apparently an error or corruption, Apsarus being a town at the mouth of the Acampsis river (lower Boas). This, the Coruh Su, the "Phasis" of Procopius, rising near the sources of the Euphrates and Tigris and of the Jihun (?or Thermodon) which "compasseth the whole land of Kash," may perhaps be the Pison of Gen. 2:10-14; gold-rich Havilah might well be gold-rich Colchis.

³⁰ Dunlop, *op. cit.*, p. 13.