

Chapter 2. The Origin of the Abkhazian People

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The ethnogenesis of any people is a complex problem. It can be tackled by marshalling evidence from a variety of disciplines: linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, etc... Below I shall deal, somewhat briefly, with the first two of these; their data prove crucial in the search for the origin of the Abkhazian people.

Proto-West Caucasian

The common ancestor of the modern Abkhazo-Adyghean languages, Proto-West Caucasian, can be dated approximately to the IIIrd millennium B.C. At the final stage of its development it split into at least three dialects: Proto-Circassian, Proto-Abkhaz, and Proto-Ubykh. Though Ubykh linguistically occupies an intermediate position between Abkhaz and Circassian, some features indicate that originally it was closer to Abkhaz, only later undergoing substantial Circassian influence. One may, therefore, suppose that initially Proto-West Caucasian was divided into Proto-Circassian and Proto-Abkhaz-Ubykh dialects, later splitting into Proto-Abkhaz and Proto-Ubykh:

The Split of Proto-West Caucasian

Proto-West Caucasian

Abkhazian branch

Circassian branch

T'ap'anta

Abkhaz

Ubykh

Adyghe

Kabardian

Analysis of the common Abkhazo-Adyghean lexicon allows one to speculate on the economic activities of the distant Abkhazo-Adyghean ancestors: they grew different plants (apples, pears, plums, figs, nuts) and cereals (including different sorts of millet), bred cattle, sheep, goats, swine, horses, donkeys, and were hunting and fishing; they developed crafts such as weaving, spinning, metal-working (in copper, lead, silver, gold); they had a rich religious cult, worshipping *inter alios* gods of the smithy (Shaf^wy = Circassian *lapfy*) and thunder and lightning (Afy = Circassian *fy(-)ble*) (Chirikba 1986.397-401).

External connections of the West Caucasian languages

1. East Caucasian

On the basis of research by such scholars as Trubetzkoy (1922; 1930), Dumézil (1932; 1933), Balkarov (1964; 1966), Shagirov (1977), Abdokov (1976; 1981; 1983), and Nikolaev & Starostin (1994; cf. also Starostin 1985) I am personally convinced that the West Caucasian languages cannot be separated genetically from the East

Caucasian languages. Abdokov and Nikolaev with Starostin have proposed patterns of regular sound-correspondences between the East and West Caucasian languages, publishing etymological dictionaries of the North Caucasian linguistic family. Their works provide to my satisfaction the final proof for the existence of a compact North Caucasian linguistic family with two branches: Western (or Abkhazo-Adyghean) and Eastern (or Nakh-Daghestanian, containing the Nakh group, consisting of Chechen, Ingush and Bats, plus the Daghestanian group, with some 26 languages such as Avar, Lezgi, Lak, Dargwa, Tabasaran, etc...). The term 'North Caucasian languages' is to some extent relative, as several members of this family are spoken in Transcaucasia (e.g. Abkhaz, Bats, Udi). The term 'Ibero-Caucasian languages', traditional in Soviet Caucasology, which presupposed a genetic relationship between both branches of North Caucasian, on the one hand, and Kartvelian, on the other, can no longer be sustained.

2. Hattic

Besides the modern West Caucasian languages, other languages belonging to the same group might have existed in the past. Over recent decades a hypothesis has been gaining ground according to which a genetic relationship existed between Abkhazo-Adyghean languages and Hattic, the most ancient known language of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), spoken some 4-5 thousand years ago. Texts in this language, written by Hittite scribes in cuneiform script, were found during the excavations in Hattusas, capital of the Hittite empire (east of modern Ankara). Hattians, who had created quite a high civilisation of their own and who are regarded as the inventors of the metallurgy of iron, had made a substantial impact on the social organisation and religious system of the kingdom of the Indo-European speaking Hittites.

The very first investigator of Hattic, E. Forrer (1919.1033-34), established its non-Indo-European character and suggested its relationship with Abkhazo-Adyghean languages. The same view was proposed at roughly the same time by Bleichsteiner (1923). The main reasons were striking structural similarities (particularly, extensive use of prefixation) between this ancient language of Asia Minor, extinct since the early IInd millennium B.C., and the languages of the West Caucasian group. These structural affinities were later discussed by Dunaevskaja (1960), Diakonov (1967) and Ardzinba (1979). These latter two also noted some material correspondences (in affixes) between Hattic and West Caucasian. Ivanov (1985) proposed many Hattic-West Caucasian material parallels, both in radical and affixal morphemes. Though not all these comparisons are equally convincing (largely because of the poor preservation of Hattic), Ivanov did in general manage to demonstrate the existence of this relationship. Hattic-West Caucasian similarities in lexicon and grammar have

been further investigated by Braun (1994), Taracha (1995) and Chirikba (1996.406-432).

It has been suggested that Hattic was related to the language of the Kaskians, the warlike tribes inhabiting the vast mountainous territories to the north of the Hattians in the Anatolian Black Sea coastal area. The union of Kaskian tribes was a rather formidable power which caused much strife for the neighbouring Hittite kingdom, whose rulers had tenaciously to fight the turbulent mountaineers until the very end of the Hittite state. At the upper reaches of the river Halys (modern Kızıl-Irmak in northern Turkey) Kaskians founded the powerful state of Kasku.

Analysis of Kaskian personal names and toponyms allowed Giorgadze (1961.209-210) to postulate their linguistic relationship to Hattic (cf. also Melikishvili 1960.9; Diakonov 1968.12). One of the tribes known to be in the Kaskian tribal union were the Abeshla, whose name in some contemporary sources (e.g. Assyrian texts of the XIIth century B.C.) was given as a synonym for Kaskians (cf. Inal-Ipa 1976.129). It has been suggested that the name Kashka (Hittite *Kashkash*, Assyrian *Kashka*, Egyptian *Kshksh*) could be connected with the later designation of the Circassians (cf. Xth century Arabic *kashak*, Old Georgian *kashag-i*, Old Armenian *gashk*, Old Russian *kasogi*, Ossetic *kasæg*, Byzantine Greek *κασαχία* 'Circassia', etc...). At the same time the name Abeshla resembles the later designations for the Abkhazians (Old Georgian *apshil-*, Old Armenian plural-form *apshegh-k*, Greek *apsilai*, Latin (*gens*) *Absilae*). These facts formed the basis for the hypothesis according to which Kashka represent the ancient ancestors of the Circassians, and Abeshla the ancestors of the Abkhazians. This would mean that already at that period Kaskians (later Circassians) and Abeshla (later Abkhazians) were separate, though closely related tribes (Melikishvili 1960.9; Diakonov 1968.12; Inal-Ipa 1976.122-135).

On the other hand, it is probable that the Nakh-Daghestanian languages can be linked with the ancient (extinct) Hurrian and Urartian languages, whose speakers lived some 5-3 thousand years ago on the territory of the Armenian plateau and adjacent areas, creating the high civilisations of Hurri and Urartu (Diakonov & Starostin 1986).

The origin of the Abkhazo-Adyghean peoples

There exist several hypotheses explaining the formation of the Abkhazo-Adyghean peoples (Anchabadze 1976.8-25; Inal-Ipa 1976; Markovin 1978.283-325; Fedorov 1983.27-31, 39-41, 56, 80-84; Klimov 1986.52). According to one of these, these peoples were formed approximately within the territory of their modern habitat (i.e. the West Caucasus), which can be confirmed by the existence of a shared lexicon reflecting the characteristic features of the geography of the Caucasian Black Sea coast: sea, beach, big fish, (bushy) mountain, ice, snow, cold/frost, wood, fir-tree,

beech, oak, cornel, chestnut, wolf, bear, etc... (cf. Klimov 1986.52). Important support for this hypothesis is the series of West Caucasian toponyms and hydronyms interpretable only in terms of Abkhazo-Adyghean languages.

On the other hand, popular native tradition indicates a more southern origin for the Abkhazo-Adygheans.

In discussing the origin of the Abkhazo-Adyghean peoples, one can address at least three important questions linked to this problem: the ethnic identity of the people belonging to the Maykop culture; the appearance in the West Caucasus of the dolmen-culture; the probable genetic link of the West Caucasian languages with Anatolian Hattic and probably also Kaskian.

The early period of the famous Maykop culture is dated to the middle of the IIIrd millennium B.C. It originated on the territory of the North-Western Caucasus (around the valley of the R. Kuban and its tributaries) and then spread east, upto modern Chechenia, Ingushetia and the borders of Daghestan, where it approached the area of another major Caucasian civilisation, Kuro-Araks culture. The famous tumuli found near the Adyghe city of Maykop (which gave the culture its name) contained large quantities of gold and silver ornaments and vessels, which resemble similar finds from Asia Minor (e.g. Alaca Hüyük in north-central Anatolia, on territory most probably populated by Hattians) and in the Middle East (Ur, southern Mesopotamia). The Maykop culture can be explained by local development, while providing evidence of intensive contacts with the ancient southern civilisations. It is noticeable that the territory of Abkhazia remained mostly outside the sphere of this culture.

The monuments of the mysterious dolmen-culture appeared about the same time as the Maykop culture developed (i.e. mid-IIIrd millennium B.C.). The area of this culture covers the whole Western Caucasus (Abkhazia included), but dolmens (burial stone-'houses') are unknown in Georgia, or indeed in other parts of the Caucasus, existing only in the area populated (or historically populated) by Abkhazo-Adygheans. The Russian investigator of the West Caucasian dolmens, V. Markovin, who undertook a comparative analysis of the dolmens of Eurasia, found that the earliest West Caucasian dolmens closely resemble similar monuments found in Thrace (modern European Turkey), Spain, Portugal, southern France, Sardinia, Syria, Jordan, and North Africa. According to the rather plausible conclusion of Markovin (1978.285), the dolmen-culture does not have its genetic roots in the cultures of the Kuban region and Caucasian Black Sea coast but can be regarded as an importation from the south-west of Europe. As Markovin suggests, a large group of Mediterranean builders of dolmens might have migrated by sea to the Western Caucasus and settled here. Their first contacts with the local people of Maykop culture will have been peaceful, so that both co-existed, but later, according to

Markovin, the dolmen-builders may have pushed the people of Maykop eastwards, which could explain the eastward spread of this culture. Subsequently, the dolmen-people might have fallen under the cultural influence of the tribes of the Maykop and the later North Caucasian cultures, becoming assimilated by the indigenous population and adopting their language.

As to Abkhazia, the Mediterraneans were perhaps rather quickly assimilated by the proto-Abkhazians. Markovin even noticed local differences in the architectural features of the stone-'houses', which makes it possible to distinguish between the two dolmen-culture areas: north-western, which coincides with the Circassian-speaking domain, and south-eastern, now occupied by the Abkhazians. By the IInd millennium B.C. the Mediterranean dolmen-builders would have completely merged with the local Abkhazo-Adyghean tribes, for thereafter no visible population-changes are perceptible in the Western Caucasus. This allows Markovin (1978.321-323) to conclude that the group of people who brought the idea of dolmens to the Western Caucasus would have been one of the major components in the formation of the Abkhazo-Adyghean ethnos.

Other authors, however, deny the imported character of dolmens and attribute their construction exclusively to the ancestors of the Abkhazo-Adygheans. Fedorov (1983.29) thought that Maykopians were proto-Circassians, while the dolmen-builders were ancestor of the Abkhazians. This seems unlikely, as dolmens are found in much greater numbers in the North Caucasus than in Abkhazia, and it is difficult to suppose a major Abkhazian expansion to the North Caucasus prior to the periods of the Abkhazian Kingdom and the later northward migration of the ancestors of the Abazinians. On the other hand, the identification of the people of the Maykop culture with the ancestors of the Circassians seems quite plausible.

According to Lavrov (1960), the idea of building dolmens was brought to the Caucasus not by a group of newcomers but by West Caucasians who themselves had travelled to the Mediterranean countries, bringing home from there the idea of dolmens. Inal-Ipa (1976.79-100), who is also sceptical about the notion that dolmens were built by foreigners, argued that both archaeological and ethnographic evidence undeniably points to the local population, ancestors of the Abkhazo-Adygheans, as the builders of the dolmens in Western Caucasia. The question, however, remains as to exactly how the idea of building dolmens reached the Caucasus, as it is impossible to separate the West Caucasian dolmens from contemporary parallels found in the Mediterranean.

It is noteworthy that, despite differences in opinion as to the origin of the West Caucasian dolmen-culture, most authors (Lavrov, Inal-Ipa, Markovin, Fedorov) agree that their builders must have been one of the major components in the formation of

the Abkhazo-Adygheans. Note that in Northern Anatolia dolmens are unknown, which means that the idea of building them could not have been brought from there to the Caucasus.

Let us now turn to the third of the afore-mentioned themes concerned with the ethnogenesis of the Abkhazo-Adygheans -- the problem of Hattic. With Hattic and probably also Kaskian being likely to represent the most ancient specimens of Abkhazo-Adyghean, two important questions arise: firstly, must Hattic be regarded as the oldest attested West Caucasian dialect, or should we rather speak in terms of a Hattic-West Caucasian unity, much as some linguists place Hittite in relation to the rest of the Indo-European languages? Secondly, was the appearance of Hattic (and Kaskian) in central and north-eastern Asia Minor due to migration from the Caucasus, or, on the contrary, did the ancestors of Abkhazo-Adyghean speakers come to inhabit West Caucasia as a result of migration from their ancient Anatolian homeland? The third possibility is that the whole area, including north-eastern Anatolia and West Caucasia, was occupied by ethnically and linguistically related Abkhazo-Adyghean tribes, who became extinct in Anatolia but who managed to preserve themselves in the mountains of the Western Caucasus. This hypothesis finds some justification in the toponyms of ancient Anatolia, which might contain traces of an Abkhazo-Adyghean presence. Thus, the typical West Caucasian toponymic element **-psy* 'water, river' is probably attested in such ancient Anatolian toponyms as *Aripsa* (city and fortress in northern Anatolia -- cf. Diakonov 1968.84); cf. also the oldest name of the R. Ch'orokh in Adzharia (S.W. Georgia) and north-eastern Turkey, namely *Apsara*, earlier called *Akampsis*, and the name of the city *Apsaroûs* in Byzantine Lazica (somewhere on the border between modern Adzharia and Turkey). Furthermore, the element *-psa* is also attested in such West Georgian hydronyms as *Supsa* and *Lagumpsa*.

The fact that Abkhazo-Adyghean toponyms (more specifically, hydronyms) are found not only in the Western Caucasus but also in the south (in West and South Georgia and in north-eastern Anatolia) could support the notion that at the turn of the IIIrd and IIrd millennia B.C. nearly all the coastal area, approximately from modern Sinop in Turkey to Abkhazia and further to the north-west, was populated by proto-Abkhazo-Adyghean tribes (Diakonov 1968.13; Gordeziani 1975.8, 10; Inal-Ipa 1976.111, 117). It is quite feasible that some of these tribes might have been migrating within this vast expanse, leaving traces in the popular ethnogenetic traditions of these peoples. Thus, the fact that in the 8th century B.C. Kaskians were still mentioned in Assyrian sources among the peoples inhabiting Anatolia might indicate that only a part of these tribes had moved to the Caucasus, whilst the rest

remained in Asia Minor, where they were subsequently assimilated by their neighbours.

Archæological data also point to the southern connections of ancient West Caucasians, the most impressive of which are the monuments of the Maykop culture. Links with the ancient Middle Eastern civilisations are also attested by the so-called Maykop Tablet (found near Maykop), containing an undeciphered text, the writing-system of which finds some analogues in the system used in Byblos in Phoenicia (XIIIth century B.C.) and in the signs of Hittite hieroglyphs or even the Sumerian pictography.

The formation of the Abkhazian people

According to the data provided by archæology, from as early as the dolmen-culture one can trace a cultural continuity in Abkhazia upto the times when indisputably Abkhazian tribes become known to history thanks to the reports of Greek and Roman authors. This means that since the IInd millennium B.C. the Western Caucasus had not witnessed any significant population-changes.

In the later part of the Ist millennium B.C. and the beginning of our era the population of the Caucasian Black Sea coast was characterised by a substantial tribal diversity, as noted by contemporary Greek and Roman writers, who mention here such tribes as Heniokhs, Achæans, Kerkets, Koraksians, San(n)igs, Missimians, etc... It is possible that most of them represented linguistically and culturally related tribes. Though Romans and Greeks, sadly, did not record specimens of the speech of the Caucasian tribes with whom they were directly or indirectly familiar, some of the names assigned to them from the start of the modern era can certainly be identified as references to the ancient Abkhazians.

The first known mention of one of these tribes, namely (*gens*) *Absilae* (or *Apsilae*), occurs in the *Naturalis Historia* of Gaius Secundus Pliny Major (Ist century A.D.). The modern continuation of this ethnonym is the Abkhazians' self-designation 'Aps(y)-wa'. In the IInd century Arrian has Greek *Apsilai*, whilst VIIth century Georgian attests *apshil-eb-i* = Armenian *apshegh-k* 'Abkhazians'. A slightly different rendition is the Old Georgian form *apsar-*, inserted into the Mariam and Machabeli manuscripts of the chronicle known as 'History and Eulogy of the Monarchs' by a scribe presumably demonstrating his erudition and knowledge of neighbouring languages. The text informs us that Queen Tamar of Georgia (1184-1213) gave her son Giorgi the second name Lasha 'which is translated,' the chronicler explains, 'as "illuminator of the world" in the language of the Apsars' (in Abkhaz 'a-lasla means 'light').

Etymologically Proto-Abkhaz **apC'-wa* (reflecting the alveolo-palatal fricative still used in the Bzyp dialect) is probably derived from the root **pC'* 'die' (**a-* being a

deictic prefix, *-*wa* the usual ethnic suffix) and originally served as a general designation of human beings in the sense of 'mortal one'. The designation of humans as 'mortals', common in many traditions, had in ancient times its own ideological significance: all the world was, to the archaic mentality, divided into the realms of immortal gods and mortal humans. The semantic evolution from 'mortal' to the ethnonym 'Abkhazian' can be imagined thus: 'mortal' > 'people' > 'Abkhazian people' (Chirikba 1991).

The name of the other ancient Abkhazian tribe, *Abasgoí/Abaskoí*, first attested in Arrian, is preserved in the form *abaza*, which is the modern self-designation of the Abazinians (cf. also Turkish *abaza* 'Abkhazian(-Abazinian)', Old Armenian *avaz* and Old Russian *obezû* 'Abkhazian'). Conceivably the Greek plural *Abasgoí* has its source in Circassian *abaze-xe*, plural of *abaze*, which today signifies in Circassian only 'Abazinian(s)'. The modern name by which the Abkhazians are known in Russian and other European languages came via Georgian, where *apxaz-i* 'Abkhazian' appears relatively late, in the Middle Ages; its original form was most probably **abazx-i* (cf. Greek *Abasgoí*). The transformation of **abazx-i* into *apxaz-i* could have occurred in Mingrelian (as was suggested at the start of the XXth century by Marr), where metathesis (transposition of sounds) is a regular phenomenon in consonant-complexes. This mingrelianised form (with additional devoicing of **b* to *p* by assimilation) will have been borrowed by Georgians, who then passed it on to the Armenians (*apxaz*), Persians (*ab/fxa:z*) and Russians (*abxaz*), whence also English acquired *Abkhaz(ian)*. It is most probable, however, that Mingrelians borrowed this term not directly from Circassian *abaze-xe* but from Greek. One can conjecture that the Mingrelian form with *p* (from **b*) was borrowed before Greek beta, originally pronounced [b], was spirantised to [v], whilst the presence of a back fricative indicates that at the time in question Greek gamma, originally [g], had already been spirantised to [ɣ]. But even if the borrowing occurred after the Greek shift of [b] to [v], the cluster in the supposed Mingrelian form **awxaz-i* (from **awazx-i*, cf. Georgian *awazgia* 'Abkhazia' in the Georgian chronicle of Dzhuansher) could have given *apxaz-i*.

Another name known from ancient sources which also refers to an old Abkhazian tribe is the Greek *Misimianoí* 'Missimians' (VIth century Agathias). The most convincing explanation for this ethnonym, referring to a tribe inhabiting the mountains of ancient Abkhazia in the upper reaches of the R. K'odor, derives it from the name of the dominant Abkhazian aristocratic family in that region (around modern Ts'abal/Ts'ebelda) who in later times are known as *Mar'fan-aa* 'the Marshans' (Inal-Ipa 1976.233-34).

It is remarkable that the modern Abkhazian name for their country, *Apsny*, seems to be attested as early as the VIIIth century Armenian Geography in the form *Psinun* (Butba 1990.12-13).

The ancient tribes were clearly consolidated into a single nation by the time of the Abkhazian Kingdom (VIIIth century).

Between the XIVth and XVth centuries a part of the Abkhazians moved from their historical Transcaucasian homeland to the North Caucasus, into regions formerly occupied by Iranian-speaking Alans, who had been defeated by the Mongol army and had fled the area. These Abkhazian newcomers settled along tributaries of the R. Kuban (Great and Little Zelenchuk rivers) and R. Kuma. The move was not a single act: various Abkhazian groups at different times were crossing the Great Caucasus range and settling on its northern slopes, rich in land and pastures. The descendants of these migrants are the present-day T'ap'antas, or Abazinians. Though in specialist literature (mainly historical) one reads that T'ap'anta Abazinians came to the North Caucasus from the territory of north-western Abkhazia and adjoining areas, there are indications (folklore, toponymical, historical and archaeological) pointing at southern Abkhazia as the starting place for at least some (if not all) of the T'ap'anta groups (Lakoba 1991.120-121). Analysis of the Kartvelian (specifically, Mingrelian) loans in T'ap'anta speaks in favour of this view (Dzhonua 1992). Later, probably at the beginning of the XVIIth century, another group of Abkhazians migrated to the North Caucasus from Abkhazia's mountain-regions -- whence their name 'Ashkharywa' (in Abkhaz *a-ḡa-ry-wa* means 'mountaineer'). Some Ashkharywa speakers still call themselves *apsawa* 'Abkhazian'. To the present day the Ashkharywa dialect is much closer to Abkhaz proper than to T'ap'anta, though some features of it may be regarded as transitional between the two. Intensive contacts between T'ap'anta and Ashkharywa stimulated the process of their convergence, with overwhelming and ever growing influence of T'ap'anta, on which standard Abaza is based. Note that it was mainly Ashkharywas who migrated in the XIXth century to Turkey. The mutual similarity is also strengthened by a considerable Kabardian influence on both of these North Caucasian dialects.

The Split of Proto-Abkhaz

Proto-Abkhaz

North Abkhaz

South Abkhaz

South-western

South-eastern

T'ap'anta Ashkharywa Sadz Ahchypsy Bzyp Abzhywa