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ZEMO-KARTLI, OR UPPER GEORGIA.¹

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THE territory comprising the districts of Kars and Batum was for some time, upon its annexation to Russia, looked upon as a naturally rich and promising field of colonisation and enterprise, and even now is partly so considered, without any apparent reason, excepting the prestige of novelty. It is not my present object to give an account of its natural resources and local economic conditions, nor do I venture to assert that the potential capacities of the territory are unworthy of consideration. But I certainly feel no hesitation in stating that the land, and the people who have been occupying it for over one thousand years, if compared with any more or less prosperous locality of the world, are under present circumstances and conditions, from a purely economic point of view, both unproductive and poor.

With an area of about 10,000 square miles, and a population of 260,000 souls, it yields to its present rulers an average yearly revenue of about £34,000, which sum, it need scarcely be added, does not by far cover the various items of annual expenditure incurred by the Government in the two districts. As an important limb of a vast political body, it might, perhaps, in a certain sense, notwithstanding its financial deficiency, be considered a profitable acquisition; but as a market or a field of investment it offers but very little encouragement.

The topographical features and the climate of the country, the very character, habits, and tastes of the population, practically preclude the possibility of profitable co-operative agricultural or industrial life. Local production, as well as local consumption, are not only, in regard to the degree of development, confined to limits fixed, as it were, by immovable natural barriers and long-standing, deep-rooted social causes; the very methods of production, and the kind and nature of the articles locally produced or consumed, have been fixed with precision and uniformity by preceding generations, which it is not so easy to counterfeit or infringe upon as in the case of our ever-varying modern trade-marks.

The notion that this territory is, economically speaking, a new one, waiting only to be tapped, and that the native population has not yet had the requisite opportunities for displaying much vigour and energy in their

¹ Reprinted from *The Scottish Geographical Magazine* for July 1887.

[142]

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 304



industries and trade, etc., etc., is both misleading and erroneous. The soil is neither a virgin one, nor are the natives a young people open to foreign influence, and convinced of the necessity of improvement and progress. Their manners and customs are as old as those we read of in the Bible. Such traces of culture shown by the plots of land on almost inaccessible rocky hillsides, levelled and manured, and brought under tillage at enormous cost of time and labour; the many fruit gardens, vineyards, the groves of olive-trees in the secluded valleys of the Tchorokh (Choruk); the still practicable, arched stone bridges, spanning the different mountain-streams; the numerous remains of forts and castles, of Christian temples of worship, churches and monasteries, bearing inscriptions in the language spoken in the country even nowadays—all these point back to times when we Europeans were scarcely more than barbarians, whilst the people in possession of this territory, whose descendants we unmistakably recognise in the present populations, had attained to a comparatively high degree of social and economic development. The above remarks relate exclusively to the people inhabiting the interior, and not to the town populations.

The two towns, Kars and Batum, which gave their names to the territory annexed to Russia by virtue of the Treaty of Berlin, are, it should be borne in mind, in no way essentially connected with their respective districts. Both places have become famous and of importance, but not because of any growing agricultural and industrial life in the interior. Kars owes its importance to its forts and strategical position on the open table-lands of Armenia; Batum, to its deep and sheltered harbour, its famous though short-lived reputation as a "free port," and the fact of its having been eventually turned into a strongly fortified military port to serve Russia as a coign of vantage on the south-eastern coast of the Black Sea. However rapid the growth of its shipping and trade during the last few years, it has had, so far, no material effect on the lands lying in its close vicinity, and must be looked upon as the outlet and shipping-place, not of the district bearing its name, but of the distant markets and centres of production lying hundreds of miles away beyond the Suram range.

Although the districts of Kars and Batum may be said to occupy, on commercial grounds, but a very secondary position, they involve questions of no little interest from a purely geographical and historical point of view, to say nothing of their important political situation. Though now forming part of the extensive administrative region of the Caucasus, they cannot be justly said, geographically speaking, to belong to what is known under the general, but imperfectly defined, terms "Caucasus" and "Transcaucasia," the application of which terms, it would seem, has been successively extended, in proportion to the extension of Russia's political boundary in this direction. Before the last Russo-Turkish war, the territory comprising the present districts of Kars and Batum, whilst under Turkish rule, was spoken of as forming part of Anatolia or Asia Minor; and now being annexed to Russia, it is said to belong to the Caucasus or

Transcaucasia. Such laxity in regard to geographical nomenclature should certainly be avoided.

A glance at a map representing the configuration of the Caucasus on the one side, and that of Anatolia on the other, could scarcely fail to convince one that the volcanic table-lands of Kars, and the confused mass of elevations cut and split by the Tchorokh, and the different tributaries of that river, are orographically connected with, and have their backbone in Asia Minor, not in the Caucasus. Not one of the rivers draining this country has its head-waters in the mountain-range of the Caucasus. The principal streams come from a side quite opposite to the Caucasian chain, and in their general course through this locality flow, not from, but towards that mountain-range. They are fed by elevations departing from the eastern extremities of the Anti-Taurus, and forming in the vicinity of Erzerum the remarkable watershed which sends out the three well-known rivers, the Euphrates, the Arax, and the Tchorokh, from the same spot, as it were, to three widely separated seas respectively—the Persian Gulf, the Caspian and the Black Seas.

As regards the general aspect of the relief of the territory under consideration, it will be found to be very different from that of the Caucasus. The latter, being a regular chain of mountains trending in a well-defined direction, has scarcely any parallel ridges, no plateaux, and no mountain lakes. The former is all confused and irregular; consisting, as it does, of extensive table-lands impinging upon broken ridges stretching in all possible directions, along as well as towards the sea-coast, it has mountain lakes like the Tchildir Göl, more than 6500 feet above the sea-level; and there are not a few isolated peaks, like the Kartchkhak, 11,248 feet high, which one is at a loss to assign to the different distorted ranges to which they originally belonged. Between the two groups of massive elevations—that is, the Caucasus on one side, and the plateaux and ridges forming the eastern extremities of Asia Minor on the other—there is a vast depression, consisting partly of marshy and jungle bottom-lands, and partly of cultivated and exceedingly fertile open river valleys, turned, as in Imeretia, Gouria, Mingrelia, and Samurzakan, towards the Black Sea, and as in the districts of Tiflis, Elizavetopol, and Baku, towards the Caspian. The Meskhi-Suram range, rising above this depression, and dividing the same into the Cis-Suram and Trans-Suram lowlands, both forming parts of Trans-Caucasia, might be pointed out as the only conspicuous connecting-link between the two above-mentioned groups of elevations—namely, the Caucasus and Asia Minor. However, considering its connection with the Adjara-Akhaltikh range, its relative dimensions and heights, decreasing as it trends northward, and finally its peculiar direction, so entirely different from that of the main range of the Caucasus, one would, indeed, rather take it for an outgrown limb of the plateaux of Asia Minor, or otherwise for a bridge spanning two opposite banks, without necessarily forming an essential part of either of the two sides.

Whilst, from a geographical point of view, the territory comprising the



districts of Kars and Batum should thus be regarded as a group of elevations forming no part of the Caucasus, it must be admitted that, on historical grounds, it decidedly stands in very close and intimate connection with the Caucasus.

The names Lazistan and Armenia, as indiscriminately used by Europeans, the former in relation to the territory surrounding Batum, the latter to the table-lands of Kars, are neither officially recognised nor in general use among the natives, and convey an erroneous notion as to the proper limits of the ground that may justly claim those historical names. As it is, Lazistan occupies but a narrow strip of land along the sea-coast, stretching from the left bank of the Tchhorokh towards Riza; and, as to ancient Armenia, it comprised only a portion of the table-lands of Kars. The sea-coast being the most accessible and frequented part of the country, Lazistan naturally became better known than the secluded and almost inaccessible localities in the interior. Thus, the name Lazistan, though actually relating to a portion of a certain territory, was not unfrequently, owing to ignorance, applied to the whole. Armenia, to say nothing of its notorious past, has lately been made so prominent an object of political solicitude, that neither geographers nor the public at large were allowed to forget the historical name of that country. In the meantime, Georgia, having since 1801 virtually ceased to attract any attention on political grounds, not only facts and names of historical interest, but even still existing geographical terms relating to that country are being ignored and entirely forgotten. Thus, certain localities situated in the present district of Kars—such as Poskhov, Ardahan, Olti, etc.—unmistakably formed part of ancient Georgia, and are not on Armenian soil, though this fact is scarcely recognised.

The most detailed and trustworthy description of the territory forming the subject of this paper, as it was known before either Turkish or Russian influence had time to bring about any changes in the original place-names, belongs to the Georgian geographer and historian, Tsarevitch Vakhshet, the natural son of the Georgian King, Vakhtang VI. His admirable work, *The Geographical Description of Georgia*, was written in the first half of the eighteenth century, and eventually translated into French by M. Brosset, member of the Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg. The information therein contained, especially that relating to the different localities of the basin of the Tchhorokh and its tributaries, may be considered decisive and unimpeachable, not only because they tally with the historical records of Georgia, but also, and much more on that account, because of the evidence we find on the spot in the numerous remains and relics of the past, bearing Georgian inscriptions, the old Georgian place-names being still in local use; moreover, the physical and even the moral features of the natives, and the language spoken in the country, are those of the genuine Georgian race, the same as faithfully described by Vakhshet.

The whole basin of the Tchhorokh, with the numerous valleys and gorges of the rivers Olti, Smerkhevi, Adjaris-tskhali, etc., as well as the



elevated lands drained by the head-streams of the Kura, formed since ancient times a very important portion of the once extensive Georgian realm, and was known, owing to its comparatively elevated position, under the general name of Zemo-Kartla—a name which in Georgian means Upper Georgia, in contradistinction to Shida Kartla—or Central Georgia, situated lower down along the river Kura. Upper Georgia was also called at different times by the names of “*Samtskhe*” and “*Saathabago*,” the Georgian prefix *Sa* denoting “of” or “pertaining to.” Hence *Sa-Mtskheto*, or, in its abbreviated form, *Sa-Mtskhe*, meaning the country of *Mtskhetos* (the eldest son of *Kartlos*, to whose lot that portion of Georgia fell when that kingdom was divided upon the death of *Kartlos*); also *Sa-Athabago*—that is, the country of or subject to the *Athabeg* (the *Athabeg* being the supreme local authority established during the reign of *George the Illustrious*). “*Zemo-Kartla*,” or “*Samtskhe*,” or “*Saathabago*,” which we may call simply *Upper Georgia*, when a separate province, also comprised on one side the territory occupied by the present districts of *Akhaltstik* and *Akhalkalaki*, and on the other the *Tortum* valley and the head-waters of the *Tchorokh*, still in *Turkish* territory.

The boundary of ancient Georgia thus extended much further westward than the present *Russo-Turkish* frontier-line. It actually touched the mountains of *Deveboyun*, close to *Erzerum*; then stretching along the eastern head-stream of the *Tchorokh*, where the Georgian “*Sakartvelos-Keli*,” or the *Turkish* “*Gürdji-Boghaz*” is to be found (the former meaning “the throat of Georgia,” the latter “the gate of Georgia”); it reaches *Baiburt*, and thence takes a northerly direction towards the *Black Sea*, near *Riza*, to the west of which place were supposed to stand the famous *Georgian* iron pillars (“*Rkinos Palo*”), being the cairns or land-marks of the extreme western limit of ancient Georgia on the coast of the *Black Sea*. “Such was the boundary-line,” says *Vakhusht*, “between Georgia and Greece.”

The different inhabited localities of *Upper Georgia* retain their *Georgian* names to this day. *Adjara* occupies the whole valley of the river *Adjaris-tskhali* and the mountains surrounding the same; *Shavsheti* comprises the basin of the river *Smerkhevi*; *Livane* consists of the deep gorges and sheltered fruit-bearing valleys of the *Tchorokh* above and below *Artvin*; *Poskhov* is drained by a stream of the same name; *Taos Cari* by the *Olti-tchai*; and the *Göle*, the ancient *Cola*, by the numerous head-streams of the *Kura*. The bulk of the present population inhabiting the above-mentioned localities are of *Georgian* origin, and speak *Georgian*, excepting the people of the modern districts of *Olti* and *Ardahan*, who speak chiefly *Turkish*, and have almost entirely forgotten their native tongue.

The *Lazi*, on the left bank of the *Tchorokh*, occupying the tract of land stretching along the coast as far as *Riza*, and called by the *Georgians* *Djaneti*, the modern *Lazistan*, speak a language similar to—one may say



almost identical with—that of the Mingrelians, which is in reality but a dialect of the Georgian tongue.

It is an historical fact that these people of Georgian origin, who embraced Christianity as early as the fourth century, and were known for over a thousand years as the most zealous champions of the Christian faith in this part of Asia, became Mohammedans only in the seventeenth century, being converted to that creed under the pressure of Turkish rule. But although having forfeited their political independence and the faith of their ancestors, it is remarkable how little they have lost of the characteristic national features peculiar to all Georgians, and how unimpaired the native language has been preserved.

Kaghizman, Shuraghel, and Zarushad, occupying the banks of the Arax, the Arpatchai, and the Kars-tehai are, on historical and ethnological grounds, decidedly Armenian territories, with populations who have retained not only their native tongue, but also their national religion.

The total population of the Batum and Kars districts being about 260,000, it may be roughly estimated that not less than 120,000 belong to the Georgian, and about 40,000 to the Armenian race. The remaining 100,000 are of exotic elements, settled here at different times by way of immigration or conquest. Such are the Karapapakh, Kurds, Greeks, Turks, Russians, etc., met principally on the open table-lands of Ardahan and Kars, where the comparative plainness of the ground, as well as the soil and climate, admit of colonisation for purposes of farming or cattle-breeding, whilst in the deep and tortuous gorges of the Tchorokh, and on the almost inaccessible precipitous hillsides of Shavsheti, Adjara, etc., the aboriginals were naturally protected from foreign settlers, and it is the seclusion and isolation from intercourse with the outer world that account for the fact that the breed and the language of the Georgian race have been preserved here in a state of greater purity and integrity than in the open and more frequented localities of Transcaucasia.

Before concluding this very brief and incomplete account of Upper Georgia, I cannot refrain from alluding to a question which I have often asked myself:—If the hillsides and ridges of the basin of the Tchorokh are so precipitous and difficult, the gorges so tortuous, the streams so tearing and unmanageable, the climate so unhealthy owing to the sudden and frequent changes of temperature and the enormous annual rainfall (above 70 inches in the average)—if, as a result of all these hostile natural conditions, the country may be regarded even now, after having been inhabited for over a thousand years, as practically inaccessible and uncultivable. All communication in the interior is on foot, occasionally on horseback, but never by vehicles, the use of vehicles being impracticable and virtually unknown to the hill tribes; and in order to reach some inhabited or cultivated spot, one has to follow narrow, winding tracks, often with danger to life, and through close, dark gorges or ravines that feel, as it were, oppressed for want of space and light. How much more formidable and hostile must have been the nature of these



localities some thousand years ago, and what was it, then, that could have induced people to come to such almost inaccessible places and settle where there was scarcely a plot of level ground wide enough to pitch a tent upon? And yet it is here where the Georgians have left indelible traces of political and religious activity in the form of numerous remains of castles and forts, and churches, and monasteries, of a more ancient date than those met with in the open and comparatively more accessible fertile plains of the Kura and the Rion.

To the above question, for want of authentic historical evidence relating to the obscure period of the first Georgian settlements in this part of Asia, there can be but one answer. One may, I think with confidence, take for granted that in those dark and bloody times, when Georgia was but in a state of infancy, and continually threatened by more powerful neighbours and the numerous nomadic hordes of Asia, considerations of agricultural and economic advantages must have been out of the question: the defeated, the persecuted, the weak (to make life worth living) looked for refuge, not for comfort and riches. The mountain fastnesses of the Tchorokh and Adjara, rude and inhospitable as they may have seemed to the first settlers, offered the sought-for refuge and protection, and the people who resorted to these secluded and sheltered localities, once finding themselves beyond the reach of the enemy, and their lives and property secured, would cling to the rocks and hillsides, and build their nests there as best they could.

It was through this dark and wild and isolated country that the first ray of Christianity fell upon Georgia, and by its light awakened her people to a new and better life. According to Georgian traditions, the Apostles Andrew and Simon the Canaanite, as early as the year 40 A.D., visited Adjara, Taos-Cari, and Klardjeti. Later on, upon the conversion of Georgia to Christianity in the fourth century, owing to the zeal of St. Nina, commences the period of Georgia's real national and religious life, extending over a period of nine centuries—that is, from the fourth to the thirteenth century—with prolonged intervals of wars and feuds, being at the same time the period of her growth and formation.

It is especially to the latter part of this period that must be traced the construction of the numerous churches and monasteries, castles and forts, the remains of which may still be seen in many parts of the country. With this class of construction, relating to remote times, should not be confounded the erections of a comparatively recent date, which are, one may presume, the traces of a short-lived foreign influence. I speak of the stone bridges spanning the different mountain streams in the form of one or several arches of remarkable durability as to workmanship and of exquisite beauty in style. The natives have very vague and obscure notions as to when and by whom these bridges were built. On inquiring, one is sure to receive but one and the same answer: "These bridges are very old—much older than we are."

Throughout the country there are no vestiges of other ancient useful



works in the way of roads, canals, public buildings, etc. ; but there is scarcely a valley or a hill where one does not discover the remains of either a fort or a church, just as if the people whose work they are cared for nothing else but fighting and praying. Remains of that character are also met with in considerable numbers on Armenian ground—along the Arax, and especially on the right banks of the Arpatchai, where the well-known ruins of the ancient Armenian city, Ani, afford perhaps the greatest interest the archæologist could find in this part of Asia.

At the same time it must be admitted that there is very little left untold concerning the ruins of these ancient Georgian and Armenian buildings, and there is scarcely any obscurity with regard to the question when, by whom, and for what purpose such churches or forts were erected.

There are, however, works by human hands in this country which remind one of habitations of troglodytes, but which in reality remain so far a puzzle and a mystery. The number of excavations at different places in the hillsides and rocks is very considerable. They are either in groups, giving to the mountain the appearance of being honeycombed, or solitary, but always of regular shape and form, with accommodation as dwelling-places, though of a very rough and primitive style.

Subterranean caves are also very numerous in other parts of Georgia, to say nothing of the extensive and beautiful excavations of Vardzia and Uplistsikhe on the bank of the Kura. There is free scope for conjecture as to the time when, and the circumstances under which, caves were being used in this territory for purposes of refuge or habitation ; but we are not in possession of any positive knowledge on this subject. As to the people who made those caves, or dwelt therein, we may only ask ourselves, recalling to our memory a passage from the Bible, whether they were those who “ were driven forth from among men to dwell in the cliffs of the valleys, in caves of the earth, and in the rocks ” ?

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