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THE ABKHAZIANS

AND

ABKHAZIA

The modern Abkhazian ASSR lies in the north-western region of Georgia – in the historical and modern Western Georgia.

There is no consensus in the scholarly literature regarding the oldest ethnic map of Western Georgia, particularly its Black Sea littoral. However, this refers to such a remote period (6th-5th millennia B.C.) about which there cannot be any discussion of a concrete ethnos, whereas from the 2nd millennium B.C., when the picture is relatively clearer, mainly Kartvelian population is assumed in Western Transcaucasia.

Beginning with the indicated period up to Classical times, the archaeological material permits to conclude the existence here of a common Colchian, i.e. Kartvelian culture. According to specialists, separate regional-local variants are identifiable within this major culture, yet Colchian on the whole. In the 2nd and 1st millennia B.C. the Kartvelian (properly Svan) ethnic element was widespread in the mountainous as well as lowland zone of Western Georgia, one proof of this being the derivation of the name of Tskhumi (Sukhumi) from the Kartvelian (Svan) designation of hornbeam.

The conclusion is supported by the evidence of ancient Greek mythology – the expedition of the Argonauts to Colchis, and by the view-based on linguistic research – on the existence here of a Kartvelian language by the time of the advent of the Argonauts (2nd millennium B.C.), i.e. at the time of earliest contacts between Greeks and Colchians.

Such a view is fully backed by evidence of Classical written sources (Hecataeus of Miletus, 6th cent. B.C., Herodotus, 5th cent. B.C., Scylax of Caryanda, 4th cent. B.C., Strabo, turn of the old and new eras, and others), on the basis of which we find the statement in the specialist literature to the effect that at the period under discussion the Kingdom of Colchis embraced the entire lowland of Western Georgia. The land up to Dioscurias (Sukhumi) appears to have been populated mainly by Colchians, beyond which the population was relatively more mixed, with the Cercetae, the Coraxae, and other tribes being mentioned along side the Colchians. Some researchers consider these tribes of North-Caucasian origin. However, note should be taken of the fact that Hecataeus of Miletus calls the Coraxae 'a Colchian tribe'. In defining the ancient ethnic map of Georgia, significance attaches to the fact also that Arrian and Claudius Ptolemaeus, authors of the 2nd cent. A.D., refer to the geographical point 'Lazica' close to Nikopsia (modern Tuapse). It should be borne in mind that Arrian calls the place 'old Lazica', this being an authentic proof of the existence here of Colchian-Laz population.

It is absolutely clear from the evidence of Classical sources that in the 6th-1st cent. B.C. the territory of the modern Abkhazian ASSR was entirely within the Kingdom of Colchis. From Apsarus to Dioscurias (Sukhumi), the territory was inhabited by Colchians proper, then began a relatively mixed region where, alongside Colchians there lived other tribes as well (Kartvelian and perhaps non-Kartvelian too). To the north of the Colchians, the mountains were settled by the Svans; the habitat of the latter appears to have extended to Dioscurias. In this respect, considerable interest attaches to Strabo's evidence on the Svan over-lordship of Dioscurias.

From the 1st-2nd cent. A.D. the Apsilae and the Abasgoi are mentioned on the Black Sea littoral of Western Georgia. There is a difference of opinion as to the time from when the Abasgoi and the Apsilae, mentioned as inhabiting the Black Sea littoral in the 1st-2nd cent. A. D., lived here. In the view of some researchers, they had inhabited the region from earliest times but, since they belonged to the Colchian historical, ethnic and cultural word, they failed to be reflected in early sources. Other researchers believe that they appeared here with the mass settlement of Abkhazian-Adyghe tribes from the Northern Caucasus. There is also a difference of opinion concerning the ethnic affinity of these Apsilae-Abasgoi. Some researchers consider them to have been North-Caucasian Adyghe tribes. It has also been suggested that they are the same Kartvelian tribes as their neighbouring Egris (Laz), Svans, and others, while the modern Abkhazians are the Apsua that immigrated from the Northern Caucasus from the 17th century. Some scholars adhere to the autochthony-cum-migration view. i.e. the tribes under discussion are partly indigenous and partly immigrant. It has been hypothesized that the 'Abeshia', mentioned as the general name of the north-eastern Asia Minor mountaineers in 11th century B.C. Assyrian inscriptions may – due to the resemblance of the name – have been the ancestors of the Apsilae mentioned in Classical sources as inhabitants of the Black Sea littoral, later moving from the south to the north.

The Apshileti of Georgian medieval sources (Juansher) corresponds to the Apsilia of Greek sources. Juansher mentions Apshileti in connection with the expedition of Murvan ibn Muhamad against Western Georgia in the 730s.

Apshileti and its Prince Marin are mentioned by Theophanes the Chronographer in connection with the developments of the early 8th century. Henceforward there is no reference to Apshileti in the sources, which is accounted for by the fact that Apshileti ceased to exist as a political entity and, becoming part of Abkhazia, it came to be known under the name 'Abkhazia' ('Abazgia').

This was the first step of the broadening of the concept of 'Abkhazia' and this process occurred gradually.

Following the disintegration of the Kingdom of Colchis, several principalities, politically dependent on the Roman Empire, came into being. Among these Arrian name the principalities of the Apsilae and the Abasgoi.

In the second half of the 2nd cent. A.D. Western Georgia was united the Kingdom of Egrisi (Lazica). Apshileti proper, from the river Egris-tsqali (Ghalidzga) to the Kodori river, was within the Kingdom of Egrisi, while Apshileti, north of the Kodori, was united to Abkhazia, the latter, being a vassal of the Kingdom of the Laz.

This kingdom of Lazica of the Greek written sources (according to the Georgian sources, the Kingdom of Egrisi) was an immediate successor of the Kingdom of Colchis. When narrating about Lazica and the Laz, the 5th century Byzantine anonym and the 6th century historians: Procopius of Caesarea, John Lides, and Agathias Scholasticus note, as a rule, that the Laz are the successors of the ancient Colchians, that they were called Colchians in the past, that the Colchians are the ancestors of the Laz. These historians use the two terms synonymously.

In the 6th century, the Kingdom of Egrisi weakened gradually as the result of the Byzantine-Iranian wars. By the end of the 6th century Abazgia seceded from the Kingdom of Egrisi and became directly subject to the Byzantine Empire, the Abazgian princes (archons) becoming the emperor's vassals. Arab inroads also contributed to the further weakening of Egrisi. Abazgia gradually gained strength, for – as already noted – it now embraced the land of Apsilia (Apshileti) as well. Apsilia (Apshileti) ceased its political existence, and the significance of the concept of Abazgia (Abkhazia) broadened. It seems noteworthy that, in telling about the campaign of the Arab commander Murvan the Deaf in Western Georgia in the 730s, Juansher states that he destroyed the city of Tskhumi of Apshileti and Abkhazia. It is notable that such a reading of the text, namely that Tskhumi was a city of Apshileti and Abkhazia, has been preserved in the oldest extant manuscript (Queen Anne's) of Kartlis Tskhovreba. In the later MSS Apshileti is absent. Apparently, earlier there was awareness of Tskhumi being a city of Apshileti, but in the time of Murvan the Deaf Apshileti was already Abkhazia, politically. Subsequently this knowledge was lost and Apshileti dropped out of the context in the later MSS.

From the 780s, when Abkhazia and Egrisi united and the resulting state embraced the whole of Western Georgia, the meaning of the term Abkhazia' broadened still more; henceforward it designated the entire Western Georgia, and (in written sources) Abkhazians (Abazgians) proper as well as West-Georgians came to be called Abkhazians.

When Western Georgia united in the 780s Leon, Prince of the Abkhazians, became head of the state. The state extended from Nikopsia to the Chorokhi Gorge, and from the Black Sea to the Likhi Ridge, acknowledging Byzantine sovereignty. Ioane Sabanisdze calls the head of that state mtavar ('Prince').

According to Georgian written sources (other sources do not exist), Archil, the last male scion of the (royal) house of the Erismtavars of Kartli, gave the daughter of his deceased brother Mir in marriage to Leon, Prince of the Abkhazians, on whom the crown of Egrisi was conferred. Thus, Leon received Egrisi and the royal crown of the Kingdom of Egrisi through marital links, i.e. by inheritance, which meant symbolic and actual unification of Egrisi and Abkhazia. This gives ground for the view

according to which the union of Egrisi and Abkhazia was a dynastic, voluntary act. Later, the same Leon (at the end of the 8th century), freeing himself from vassalage to Byzantium, declared himself king. According to Matiane Kartlisa, "and held Abkhazia and Egrisi up to Likhi". Abkhazia was Leon's hereditary land; Egrisi was also inherited by him through dynastic marriage. And Leon 'possessed' these two countries equally, bringing them under his power independently of the Empire and "assuming the name of King of the Abkhazians". He assumed the latter title because the dynasty derived from the Principality of Abkhazia. The ethnic affinity of the Leon is unknown, for there is no indication on this in the written sources. Some researchers consider them Abkhazians proper, some believe them to have been Greeks, and some, Georgians. The three views remain within the hypothetical sphere with an equal right of existence. However, this is not essential. Important is the fact that with its language, writing, culture, religion, and policy the Abkhazian Kingdom was a Georgian state, and their kings – judged by these characteristics – were Georgians. It should perhaps be noted here that some 10th-11th cent. Armenian historians, e.g. Ovanes Draskhanakertsi refer to this state (the Kingdom of Abkhazia) as 'Egrisi', and to their king as 'the King of Egrisi', and the inhabitants as 'Egrisians'.

The Kingdom of Abkhazia was a Georgian (Western Georgian) state. A vast majority of its population were Georgians: Karts, Egris, Svans, and part were Abkhazians proper. According to Vakhushti Bagrationi, the Abkhazian Kingdom consisted of eight administrative units or saeristavos (eristavates). The saeristavo of Abkazeti and partly that of Tskhumi were inhabited by Abkhazians proper, while the remaining six were populated by Kartvelians: Egrisi (centre; Bedia), Guria, Racha-Lechkhumi, Svaneti, Argveti (centre: Shorapani), and lowland Imereti (centre: Kutaisi).

It was during the existence of the Abkhazian Kingdom (9th—10th cent.), and with the active participation of Abkhazian kings, that the Kingdom of Abkhazia finally seceded – in Church matters – from Constantinople, becoming subordinated to the Mtskheta See.

It was difficult to break loose of the political influence of Byzantium, but it was more difficult to eliminate the ecclesiastical dominance of Constantinople. To this end, the Abkhazian kings abolished Greek episcopal sees that served as Byzantine strongholds.

Thus were abolished the Poti, Gudava, and other Greek sees. In their place the Abkhazian kings established new Georgian episcopates. Thus, in the time of Giorgi II (922-957), King of the Abkhazians, the Chqondidi See was founded, in the time of Leon III (957-963) the Mokvi See, and in place of the abolished Gudava Episcopate that of Bedia was set up by Bagrat III (975-1014). These episcopates were centres of Georgian culture. Henceforward, the Georgian Church opposed its Greek counterpart with the Georgian language. The Georgian Church built its own churches and monasteries in the Abkhazian Kingdom.

Hagiographic and hymnographic works were written in the Kingdom of Abkhazia. Here, at the Abkhazian royal court was written the Divan of the Kings or the History of the Abkhazian Kings; in Georgian language. The Kingdom of Abkhazia took an

active part in the great struggle resulting in the creation of a single Sakartvelo feudal state.

Had the kingdom of the Abkhazians not been a Georgian state its capital would not have been Kutaisi, centre of ancient Georgian statehood and culture, in the heartland of Georgian population, but Anakopia, centre of the Abkhazian saeristavo; its Church would have not seceded from the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and if it did, It would have constituted itself into an Abkhazian proper Church and would have not joined the Catholicosate of Mtskheta, nor would it have introduced Divine Service in Georgian.

From the beginning of the 9th century-if not earlier – the Georgian language gradually acquired a dominant status in the Kingdom of the Abkhazians, becoming the language of culture, the Royal office, and the Church; Georgian epigraphy is evidenced in the Abkhazian Kingdom from the 9th century.

Thus, as already noted, with the establishment of the Abkhazian Kingdom, the meaning of the terms "Abkhazian" and "Abkhazia" broadened, and now it designated Western Georgia, as well as Western Georgian and Abkhazian proper.

The meaning of the term 'Abkhazian' and 'Abkhazia' broadened further from the 10th century, for the title of the kings of the unified Georgia began with that of 'King of the Abkhazians'. Bagrat, the heir-apparent to the Royal House of the Bagrationis ('the king of Kartvelians') was crowned first as 'King of the Abkhazians', for he was the only legitimate successor to the Kingdom of the Abkhazians in his mother's line. He received the title 'Kings of the Kartvelians only at the beginning of the 11th century, on the decease of his ancestor 'King of the Kartvelians. Following the incorporation of Kakheti and Hereti, Bagrat received also the title of 'King of the Hers (Heretians) and the Kakhis (Kakhetians)'. Thus, at this stage the title of the kings of the united medieval Georgia assumed the following form: "King of the Abkhazians, the Kartvelians, the Hers, and the Kakhis".

As a rule, in Georgian written sources of the period under discussion 'Abkhazia' and 'Abkhazian' generally implied (Sakartvelo) and Kartveli).

As 'King of the Abkhazians' came first in the title of the kings of unified Georgia, in foreign sources 'Abkhazian' was used generally in the meaning of Georgian, and 'Abkhazia' as designating Georgia. Incidentally, the foreigners – Greeks, Arabs, Russians – were well aware that 'Abkhazia' was the same 'Iberia' or Georgia. Thus, the Byzantine historian George Cedrenus refers to the Georgian King Giorgi I as the archon of Abkhazia, while his son, King Bagrat IV, as the archon of Iberia. John Zonaras, Byzantine historian of the turn of the 11th and 12th cent., refers to the same Bagrat IV as the Archon of Abazgia. In narrating about the Georgian campaign of the Emperor Basil II, Cedrenus writes that Basil set out against Giorgi the Abazgian, marching towards Iberia. In oriental (Arabic, Persian) sources Abkhazian stands for Georgian, and Abkhazia for Georgia. The 13th century Arab geographer and historian Yaqut writes that Abkhazia was a country inhabited by a Christian people called Kurj.

According to Ibn Bibi, Selchuq chronicler of the end of the 13th century, Tamar was the Queen of the Gurj (i.e. Georgians, M.L.); she ruled the Kingdom of the Abkhazians, the capital of which was Tbilisi. Abkhazia was identified with Georgia by Nizami Ganjevi, Khaqani, and others. It should be noted specially that according to Russian medieval sources, Iber is the same Abkhaz (Obez). Many more examples could be cited. The literature on this subject is extensive. There can be only one conclusion: 'Abkhazian' (appearing in various spellings) in medieval Georgian and foreign written sources, as a rule, means a Georgian. Abkhazian proper, which in the 9th–10th century West-Georgian state of the Kingdom of the Abkhazians was represented by the eristavates of Abkhazeti and Tskhumi, in the period of the existence of united Georgia was represented by a single eristavate – that of Tskhumi; its eristavi was Shervashidze.

The maximal extension of the meaning of the term 'Abkhazia' was following by a reverse process.

As is known, at the end of the 15th century, the unified Georgian state disintegrated into four independent states: the Kingdoms of Kartli, Kakheti and Imereti, and the Principality of Samtskhe. Abkhazia was part of the Kingdom of Imereti. The process of the feudal break up of the country deepened with the Principalities of Guria and Samegrelo (Megrelia, Mingrelia) coming into being. Abkhazian was within the Principality of Samegrelo (Odishi), and in the 17th century it (Abkhazia) constituted itself as a separate principality headed by the Shervashidzes. The Abkhazian Principality of the late feudal period was culturally and politically the same 'Georgia' as were the other 'Georgias'. Now, the land to the south-east of the Kodori formed part of Egrisi from the commencement of feudal relations (by tradition from ancient times). This land became part of Abkhazia in the 17th century. After the founding of this (Abkhazian) principality, the Georgians called its inhabitants Abkhazians proper.

From the 15th—16th centuries complex processes were in evidence in Georgia.

Nomadic tribes from the Northern Caucasus began to settle in Georgia. This immigration process – timed to the gravest situation obtaining in Georgia – resulted in the settlement of Daghestanian tribes in Kakheti, of Ossetes in Inner Kartli, and of people of Circassian-Adyghe stock in Western Georgia.

At the end of the 15th century, Georgia broke up into four independent Georgian states. From the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th cent. Georgia's neighbour in the south-east was the powerful and aggressive Safawi Iran, and on the south-west the powerful and likewise aggressive Ottoman, state. Throughout the 16th–18th centuries there was almost incessant warfare between these two powers (if there was a lull, the sides were preparing for fresh hostilities). This warfare, waged for the spheres of influence in the Near East, had as one of its main aims the subjugation of Georgia, her territory serving as the arena of hostilities. The Georgian states resisted as best they could the encroachments of Iran and Turkey. The struggle took a heavy toll, resulting in a drastic reduction of the Georgian population. The southern slopes of the Caucasus Range, with their population diminished or frequently deserted, were occupied by people crossing from the northern slopes. The migration of the

population from the hills to lowland areas is a natural process in mountainous countries, for the barren nature of the mountains fails to provide livelihood and the surplus population descends to the valley. Under peaceful conditions this is a normal process and is kept under control by the authorities. However, when the state is weakened and the process gets out of hand a grave situation arises. It was under such conditions that the so-called free ('lordless') communes of Char-Belakani came into being in Kakheti and in the mountainous region of Inner Kartli; and later in the foothill zone and in the valley too there appeared a compact Osetian population – people migrated from the north and settled on the south-western slopes of the Caucasus Range. We do not know how the people settling here were called in their original homeland. Presumably, Georgians called them 'Abkhazians' by analogy with the local Abkhazians! From that time, Christianity began to lose ground in Abkhazia, due, on the one hand, to the bringing by the immigrant population of their pagan beliefs, and on the other, to the ascendancy of the Turks who sought to establish here.

Georgian and foreign written sources give a clear indication of the narrowing of Georgian and Christian positions from the 15th century onward.

The secession of the Principality of Abkhazia from that of Samegrelo was followed by incessant feudal strife. At the end of the 17th century, the Abkhazian princes seized the part of Samegrelo lying between Kodori and the Inguri rivers, annexing it to the Principality of Abkhazia. This is the region known under the name of Samurzaqano.

From that time began the 'Abkhazianization' of Samurzaqano. This process of 'Abkhazianization' is well reflected in Georgian – chiefly documentary – and foreign written sources. The process in question is discussed in the specialist literature as well.

After the 15th century, the Abkhazians started raids against various provinces of Western Georgia, mainly Samegrelo. Vakhushti Bagrationi describes nearly all the inroads of the Abkhazians into Guria and Samegrelo in the 17th century and the first quarter of the 18th cent. Foreign written sources also tell about such raids.

Documents of the 15th century clearly distinguished Sukhumi (Tskhumi) from Abkhazia. According to Archangelo Lamberti (mid-17th cent.), Dranda, Mokvi, Ilori, and Bedia were in Egrisi.

The 15th cent. Georgian monument "Teaching on the Faith" states that "Abkhazia has totally abandoned Christianity – it has parted from the teachings of Christ". It was these Abkhazians, who had abandoned the teachings of Christ, that made inroads into Abkhazia. A document of the first half of the 17th century ("Levan Dadiani's letters patent granted to the Khobi church on the renewal of the possession of estates") states: "At that time the Abkhazians turned to godlessness and infidelity", "the Abkhazians corrupted the faith and the Catholicosate". The same documentary material shows clearly the gradual narrowing of the jurisdiction of the West-Georgian Bichvinta Catholicosate and the loss of the land for Christianity and the Georgians. According to Lamberti and other foreign authors Dranda, Mokvi, Ilori, and Bedia in the mid-17th

century were still within Egrisi; at the turn of the 16th and 17th cent. Nazhaneuli, across the Inguri, was still a Megrelian village. According to the 1626 Great Deftor of the Abkhazian Catholicosate, Nazhaneuli was in Egrisi, and a document of 1639 locates the same village in Odishi. The situation changed materially at the beginning of the 18th century. In a document of 1712 the Catholicos Grigol Lortkipanidze wrote: "At Nazhanevi the Abkhazian had driven out the village. The Catholicos Nepsadze had placed sixty residents in the custody of Qvapu Shervashidze. One elder had been lost". The Catholicos brought out whom he could and settled them in Khobi and Khibula". The names listed are all Megrelian (Georgian). In this way did the Georgians gradually lose their positions in historical Samegrelo (Mingrelia) to the invading Abkhazians. The document just quoted makes the interesting observation that they Catholicos places the Georgian peasants, raided by the Abkhazians, in Shervashidze's care; thus the invading Abkhazians are different from Shervashidze, the latter too seeking shelter from the invaders. The deference gradually became difficult. The Prince Levan Dadiani (1611-16571) of Samegrelo built a special wall to defend the land from the Abkhazians. Vakhushti Bagrationi writes about the wall: "The great Levan Dadiani built a wall to keep the Abkhazians out". On Lamberti's map this wall has a legend indicating that it was for defence from the Abkhazians.

It is worth noting that up to the 17th century, no one differentiated the land populated by Abkhazians socially, confessionally, and culturally from the other population of Georgia as a whole, and of Western Georgia in particular. Foreigners, who supply noteworthy observations, considered Tskhumi a Georgian city. Thus, Abul-Fida, Arab writer of the 12th-13th cent., called Tskhumi a Georgian city, while Pietro Gerald, Catholic bishop of Tskhumi, in a letter written in 1330 considers Georgians as well as Muslims and Jews as inhabitants of Tskhumi, which means that in Tskhumi of that time there were either no Abkhazians proper or if there were, they did not differ from Georgians in language, religion, and way of life, so that they were taken for Georgians by foreigners. The fact is worth noting that Pietro Gerald is called Catholic Bishop of 'Lower Iberia'. On 15th century Italian maps we find the legend 'Megrelian port' at the mouth of the Kelasuri river. However, the situation changed by the 17th century. The Italian Giovanni Giuliano da Lucca, who travelled to Western Georgia in 1630, writes: "The Abkhazians are scattered along the sea coast. Their way of life is like that of the Circassians The language of the Abkhazians differs very much from the languages of the their neighbouring peoples. They do not have any written laws, nor do they know how to use writing. By faith they are Christians, without any Christian customs and mores Woods serve them as a cosy shelter. When they have chosen a place to live in they never abandon it. They dress like the Circassians, but their haircut differs from that of the Circassians As they have no other habitat than the woods, their livestock is small and hence they have scanty material for their clothes. They content themselves with wine made from honey, game, and wild fruit. Wheat does not grow in their land. They do not use salt".

According to A. Lamberti, who in the 17th century spent twenty years in Western Georgia, the Abkhazians did not live in cities and strongholds. Several families of the same kin would come together and settle on an elevated place, building thatched huts; for the purpose of defence they would enclose the place with a fence and a moat. It is

interesting to note that they were never molested by others, but they attacked and plundered one another.

In the 1640s Georgia was visited by the well-known Turkish historian and geographer Evliya Chelebi, whose description gives a clear picture of the way of life and culture of the Abkhazians of his day. By the time of Chelebi's visit Islam had gained a fairly firm foothold. However, in his words, the Abkhazians "were not familiar with the Koran, nor had they any religion". The foregoing evidence seems to corroborate the opinion expressed in Georgian historiography on the backwardness of Abkhazians at the period under discussion, and on the loss of Christianity. As noted correctly, these authors "were not superficial observers. It was their purpose and obligation to study as thoroughly and precisely as they could the customs and mores, culture and socio-economic development of the peoples they came into contact with, as well as the relationship and difference of these peoples with other peoples, and so on".

What had caused such a change? This question is answered in Georgian historiography. As noted above, in medieval Georgia, an Abkhazian was not considered a non-Georgian. The 11th cent. Georgian historian Leonti Mroveli, in whose work this conception must date from the 7th-8th cent., in speaking about the origin of Caucasian peoples, considers Western Georgia as the land that fell entirely by lot to Egros. Niko Berdzenishvili writes about this conception: "This story is a noteworthy piece of evidence on the ethnic kinship of West-Georgian tribes and their centuries-old historical and cultural cooperation (which is seen so clearly in the light of the evidence of ancient Greek and Latin authors, and especially archaeological data)". Leonti Mroveli was perfectly aware of the existence of the Abkhazians and Abkhazia, but for him Abkhazia was Egrisi. When narrating about Western Georgia, Vakhushti Bagrationi observes that this is a land that was first called Egrisi, then Abkhazia, and then Imereti. For him Western Georgia was equally Egrisi-Abkhazia-Imereti, although he is well aware of the existence of the Abkhazians, and that they have their vernacular. This is accounted for by the fact that historically and culturally they were Georgians, irrespective of their origin.

We have no knowledge of the self-designation of the inhabitants of the Principality of Abkhazia at the time when Georgian historical sources referred to them as Abkhazians. They had their vernacular (at any rate from the 17th cent.). However, since they had neither script nor literature, it is not recorded. It is logical to assume that they called themselves then – as well as now – Apsua. In this connection the question of the language of the Abkhazians (Apsua) arises. In the historical work, tentatively entitled "Histories and Eulogies of the Sovereigns" and forming part of Kartlis Tskhovreba, in connection with the second name, 'Lasha', of Tamar's son Giorgi we find the statement: "which was translated as illuminer of the world /in the language of the Apsars/".

Along with the phonetic similarity of 'Apsua' and 'Apsar', the fact that in modern Abkhazian (the language of the Apsua) 'lasha' ('alasha') means 'clear', 'light' gives ground for the identification of this 'language of the Apsars' with the language of the modern Abkhazians (Apsua). However, one point should be borne in mind here. The

explanation: 'In the language of the Apsars' is absent in the Queen Mariam (17th cent.) MS of Kartlis Tskhovreba. Nor is it to be found in the Mtskhetan or the Machabeli MSS, the latter MS deriving from the Mariam MS. The explanation figures in 18th cent. MSS, which is duly indicated in the Qaukhchishvili edition.

The author of the Histories and Eulogies writes: "... Lasha, which was translated as illuminer of the world." The 13th cent, historian does not indicate from which language 'lasha' means 'illuminer of the world', whereas the 18th cent, historian and redactor of Kartlis Tskovreba explains that "it was translated from the language of the Apsars".

This evidence of Tamar's historian does not rule out the possibility of the people of his time, whom we call Abkhazians, had their vernacular, and that this was the language used today by the Apsua as their spoken and written language. But neither does the same evidence rule out the possibility that, at the time, the people speaking "the language of the Apsars", from which Tamar took the surname of her son, resided in the Northern Caucasus. The relations of Tamar's Georgia and the neighbouring North-Caucasian peoples does not rule out this possibility. If we accept the former hypothesis, then we should accept the view that the ancestors of the modern Apsua were indigenous inhabitants of Georgia, and that their vernacular was the 'Apsar' language. Inasmuch as modern Abkhazian (Apsua) does not belong to the Kartvelian family of languages but forms part of the North-Caucasian Adyghe family of languages, this gives ground for the point of view that the Apsua, settled here from ancient times, were not of Kartvelian stock, and that they genetically represented North-Caucasian tribes. But if we accept the latter hypothesis, then we shall have ground to assume that the people speaking the Apsar language arrived and settled in Georgia later, bringing with them their unwritten language, and that the redactor of the MS of Kartlis Tskhovreba added the information about the Apsar language.

As for writing, as is known, in the Middle Ages throughout Western Georgia, including Abkhazia proper, following the adoption of Christianity, the language of literature and Divine service was first Greek and, after the secession of the Georgian Church from Constantinople and its joining the Mtskhetan See, Georgian. In the 19th century, too, despite attempts by the Russian Empire, the Georgian language preserved its status. An Abkhazian (Apsua) alphabet was first created on the basis of Russian writing by the well-known scholar P. Uslar. As it proved very difficult to render Abkhazian sounds through the medium of Russian letters several attempts were made later to simplify this alphabet. Thus, in 1892, the educationist Machavariani and his pupil, Dimitri Gulia – subsequent founder and classic of Abkhazian literature – attempted to simplify and refine the alphabet. Then, N. Marr tried to create an Abkhazian alphabet on the basis of Latin script; however, neither did this attempt yield the desired result. In 1938, the same Dimitri Gulia, assisted by the Georgian scholars Akaki Shanidze and Simon Janashia, compiled a new Abkhazian alphabet on the basis of Georgian letters. But in 1954, a new Abkhazian alphabet was developed on the basis of the Russian script. The first book in the language of the Apsua came in Tbilisi in 1912 (a collection of Dimitri Gulia's poems).

As to the problems of the population, as already noted, in the kingdom of the Abkhazians the Georgian ethnos proper formed an overwhelming majority, while the Abazgians and the Apschals (Abkhazians) – if considered a non-Georgian ethnos – represented the majority of the population. The presence of North-Caucasian tribes, e.g. a part of the Jiki population, should be hypothesized in the Abkhazian Kingdom.

This situation seems to have been mainly preserved throughout the Middle Ages, despite the later immigration of a considerable wave of the Apsua from the Northern Caucasus. This is confirmed by the data of censuses from the 19th century. According to the lists of the 1886 Household Census, in Abkhazia (Sukhumi District, by the administrative division of the period) the total of inhabitants was 68,773. Of these 34,806 were Georgians and 28,320 Abkhazians. After this we have the Census of 1926, according to which the total of Abkhazia's population was 201,016; of these Georgians, 67,494; Abkhazians, 55,918; Armenians, 25,677; Russians 12,553; Greeks, 14,045; and representatives of other nationalities. According to the Census of 1939, both the Georgian and Abkhazian population shows a corresponding growth.

According to the latter census, the total population of the Abkhazian SSR was 311,900 (Georgians 91,900; Abkhazians 56,200; Russians 60,200; Armenians, 49,700). The Census of 1959 gives the total of 404,700 for the Abkhazian Autonomous SSR (Georgians, 158,200; Abkhazians, 61,200; Russians, 86,700; Armenians, 64,400 and others). The Census of 1970 shows the total of 487,040 inhabitants (Georgians, 199,600; Abkhazians, 77,300; Russians, 92,900; Armenians, 74,900). To be sure, the local, indigenous population of Georgians and Abkhazians does show a rise, but particularly striking is the growth of the number of the non-local population – of Russians and Armenians. From 1926 to 1959 the population of the Abkhazian ASSR increased by 192,000, the number of Russians growing by 66,300 and of Armenians by 30,300. This is a population specially settled here, and the purpose of this demographic policy is directed against the local indigenous population in Georgia, specifically in Abkhazia (against Georgians and Abkhazians).

Along with social and cultural division, political division also took place. In the 19th century, this division was promoted by every means by the Russian administration. In 1810, the Prince of Abkhazia Georgi (Sapar Beg) Shervashidze adopted Russian citizenship, and in 1864, Russian administration was established here; the Principality of Abkhazia was called the Sukhumi Military Department, and from 1883 it was Sukhumi District, under the Governor – General of Kutaisi.

The Russian administration and its colonial policy actively directed and supported the process of the separation of Abkhazia from Georgia. However, the administration was well aware that Abkhazia was a natural, inalienable part of Georgia, hence the assignment of the Sukhumi District to the Kutaisi Gubernia and its placement under the Kutaisi Governor. Notwithstanding the policy of tsarist Russia, when the Georgian Democratic Republic was established in 1918, Abkhazia formed its integral part, which was recognized by the government of the Russian Federation.

In the years of the existence of the Georgian Democratic Republic, Georgian Bolsheviks, backed by the government of the Russian Federative Republic, tried by every means available to weaken the Georgian Democratic Republic. This was the

aim set to itself by the Georgian Communist Party which was accorded the rights of a legal party by the Treaty of 7 May 1920 concluded between Russia and Georgia. The enemies of Democratic Georgia were most active in the country's peripheral areas. The risings in Abkhazia against the Georgian Democratic Republic were the result of the action of these forces.

The processes occurring in Abkhazia following the annexation of Georgia by the Russian SFR and the establishment of Soviet power on 25 February 1921 are reflected widely in the speeches and letters of Nestor Lakoba, leader of Abkhazian Bolsheviks.

On 21 March, 1921, Georgia's Revolutionary Committee issued a declaration on Abkhazia, and on 29 March, at a meeting of Transcaucasian leading figures it was decided to set up an Abkhazian SSR. It is worth noting that the Abkhazian Bolsheviks: Lakoba and Eshba, while demanding independence on behalf of Abkhazia, completely ignored the interests of the Georgian population of Abkhazia. At the 4th Congress of the Georgian Communist Party, Lakoba noted the question of setting up an independent republic of Abkhazia had been raised by himself and E. Eshba at the Batumi meeting on 29 March 1921. Sergo Orjonikidze, Sergo Kavtaradze, Malakia Toroshelidze, and Shalva Eliava took part in the work of the meeting. Lakoba and Eshba argued their demand by the necessity of eliminating inter-ethnic strife and the establishment of genuine Soviet power in Abkhazia. They demanded this independence "as a screen", to which the Georgian Bolsheviks replied: "If Abkhazia needs this independence to establish genuine Soviet power, they must receive it not only as a screen but as genuine independence".

On 15 February 1922, at the 1st Congress of Abkhazia's Soviets, Eshba stated that in the interests of the people, the working masses – in order to help them in the liberation from nationalism – it was necessary to proclaim independence. This should be done in spite of the fact that such a small republic did not exist anywhere in the world. "And then", he continued, "it was decided at the meeting of responsible workers that proclamation of Abkhazian independence – at least temporarily – was considered a necessity". It is evident that the leaders of Abkhazian Bolsheviks, who were well aware of the illegality of their claims, argued their demands by the 'extraordinary situation', considering it an interim measure.

It should be noted that the concession, which surprised the Abkhazian Bolsheviks, was not made accidentally by the leaders of Georgian Bolsheviks. The talks were conducted in conditions of a struggle for the consolidation of Soviet power in Georgia. Georgian Bolsheviks badly needed the support of their Abkhazian comrades. But Georgian Bolsheviks were neither interested in nor worried about the fact that by this concession they were compromising Georgia's unity – her historical borders in defence of which the Georgian people had fought over the centuries. They ignored and violated the legitimate rights of the Georgian people, in particular of that part of the Georgian people which had for centuries lived on their own land, and would now have to live in the Abkhazian state. Georgian Bolshevik leaders took this decision in conditions and within the boundaries of the newly established state in which – both before and at the time of the setting up of the Abkhazian SSR – the majority of the population were Georgians. Nor did the Abkhazian Bolsheviks care for the interests or

the fate of these Georgians. And symptomatically enough, neither did Georgian Bolsheviks, whose main concern was to preserve and strengthen their authority, care. That, in the obtaining situation, the so-called independent Abkhazian SSR was an artificially created entity, whose existence in isolation from Georgia was absolutely unnatural and untenable historically and culturally, immediately became obvious and it was soon abolished. It should be said, however, that the existence of Abkhazian autonomy in any form within the boundaries in which it took shape under Soviet rule is absolutely unjustified. This is so because the Autonomous Republic derives its name from the designation of its population which accounts for 17 or 18 per cent of the total, while the interests of the great majority of the population is today totally ignored – not only of the mixed, Georgian-Abkhazian population but also in regions of compact Georgian settlement.

Apropos of the population number, it should be noted that, historically, Georgians always represented the majority of the population. True, we have no statistical census date for the Middle Ages, but the materials available from the 19th century clearly demonstrate this. As is known, the *muhajir* movement resulted in a material reduction of the Abkhazian population in Abkhazia in the 1880s. However, after this the population here increased mechanically and artificially, but owing not to the Georgians but to Russians and Armenians.

As is seen from the foregoing, there is a considerable increase of population in Abkhazia, the growth being both natural and mechanical. Some researchers focus attention on the growth of Georgian population in Abkhazia. It should be noted in this connection that internal migration processes are natural and legitimate in the Georgian state. But such a large proportion of growth of Armenian and Russian population as is recorded in Abkhazia is of course unnatural and purposeful.

When emphasis is made on the numerical strength of the Georgian population in the Abkhazian ASSR, it should be noted that this is a natural and legitimate situation because the territory of the modern Abkhazian Autonomous Republic largely formed part of Georgian states, being the habitat of Kartvelian ethnos from earliest times.

This of course does not rule out the possible assumption of the non-Georgian, i.e. North-Caucasian, origin of the Abazgians-Apshilae. But these Abazgians-Apshilae here always constituted a minority. The attempts of me Abkhazian historians to demonstrate the Abkhazian origin of various tribes that inhabited Western Georgia, e.g. the Heniochi, Missimians, Sanigae, and Sazae, run counter to the actual situation. Not a single written source favours the Abkhazian origin of these tribes. Greek and Georgian written sources too point to the opposite. The literature on this subject is fairly extensive, so that I shall not elaborate on it any longer. As for the Abazgoi-Apshilae proper, their origin – as noted above – is controversial. However, it is probably not disputable that historically and culturally the Abkhazians were Georgians. There may exist two models regarding those who call themselves Apsua. If the Abazgoi-Apsilae were of Kartvelian stock, the Apsua that came later occupied their habitat (settled down alongside the Abazgoi-Apsilae), and the Georgians called the newcomers, too, 'Abkhazians'. But if the Abazgoi-Apsilae were not Georgian by descent, their kindred Apsua, who arrived later, strengthened the properly Abkhazian

(in the narrow meaning of the word) element, bringing with them their own language and customs. And when, under the obtaining historical situation, the decentralization tendencies gained the upper hand, the Apsua self-consciousness strengthened gradually and the Apsua nation took shape, whom we – following the old tradition – call Abkhazians.

Today those who call themselves Apsua, and whom we call Abkhazians, as already said constitute a nation that has no other homeland than Georgia.

The Abkhazians (Apsua) and the Georgians form an equally indigenous population of Western Georgia, with equal rights to the land. Neither the Georgians nor the Abkhazians are conquerors of this land. This is today's reality. The foregoing was its history. The Georgians have settled this land from ancient time, and the Abkhazians, either from ancient times or from the 17th century, or else both from ancient times and from the 17th century.

Thus, 'Abkhazian' is a collective name, not possessing a single meaning. From 'Abazgian-Abkhazian' it broadened to the concept of 'Western Georgian' (8th cent.), from "Western Georgian" to generally 'Georgian' (10th cent); after the foundation of the Principality of Abkhazia, 'Abkhazian' implied an inhabitant of this Principality.

After the foundation of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, 'Abkhazia' generally refers to that autonomous entity, but 'Abkhazian' refers only to the part of its population whose self-designation is 'Apsua'.