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# On the Term *Abxāz* in Classical Persian Literature and Historiography[*]

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*To the Memory of*
*Enayatollah Reza*
(*1920-2010*)

***Abstract***

This article is devoted to the analysis of the occurrences of the term Abxāz in Classical Persian literature and Iranian historiography. Under the term Abxāz, generally, Persian poets and writers implied the whole territory of Georgia and not only proper Abkhazia located on the eastern coast of the Black Sea. New points have been made about the word *tamūk* in *Luγat-i furs* by Asadī Ṭūsī, as well as the Abkhaz language, based on a quatrain (*rubāʿī*) by Xāqānī.

***Keywords*:** *Abxāz* (Abkhazia), *Abxāzī* (Abkhazian), *Gurǰistān* (Georgia), Tamūk, Classical Persian Literature, Iranian Historiography

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The Abkhazians (endonym, *Apsua* or *Apsni*; for the attempt of etymology, see Čirikba 2013), a Caucasian people living on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, are mentioned as *Abasgoí* (by Arrian) or *Abasgi* (by Pliny) by the Classical authors (Bartol'd 1963: 861), as *Abxaz*/*Abxāz*/*Abxās*/*Afxāz* in the Arab texts (Reḍā 1995: 364-365), and as *apʻšił-kʻ*/*apšeł-kʻ* in the Armenian sources.

In the Classical Persian texts, however, Abxāz is the name of a land in which the ethnic group abxāzī (*Abxāz* + *yā-i nisbat*) lives. In the other words, in Classical Persian, Abxāz was rather a place-name, from which abxāzī, the name of the inhabitants of this region, is derived from. The term Abxāz was also often applied to the whole of Georgia because the Abkhazian Kingdom founded by Leon II around 800 A.D., was a vast territory including western Georgian lands in the Rion Basin (Minorsky 1958: 84).

For the first time, the terms Abxāz (Abkhazia) and abxāzī (Abkhazian) are attested in the 11th-century *Dīvān* by Qaṭrān Tabrīzī (1983: 148, 183, 339). They occur three times in this text:

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| تو ایدری و نهیب تو هست در بلغار | You are here and your fear is in *Bulγār* (Bulgaria), |
| تو ایدری و نهیب تو هست در **ابخاز** | You are here and your fear is in *Abxāz* (Abkhazia). |

| | |
|---|---|
| سوارشان همه گردان ارمن و **ابخاز** | Among their horsemen there were brave men from *Arman* (Armenia) and *Abxāz* (Abkhazia), |
| پیاده‌شان همه شیران لگزی و شروان | And their infantry comprised all the lions from Lezgins and Šarvān. |

| | |
|---|---|
| خیل **ابخازیان** از او مقتول | Abkhazian (*abxāzī*) troops (were) killed by him, |
| قوم قاؤردیان از او مقهور | The tribe of Qavurdiyān (was) defeated by him. |

Chronologically, the next appearance of Abxāz/abxāzī is again found in the 11th century, in the *Vīs u Rāmīn* by Faxr al-Dīn As'ad Gurgānī (1970: 326):

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|---|---|
| به چشم آورده تیرافگن ز **ابخاز** | Her eyes are like an archer from Abxāz (Abkhazia), |
| بـه زلـف آورده جرّاره ز اهـواز | And her tresses are like a scorpion from Ahvāz. |

It can be assumed from the above verse that the Abkhazians were famous for archery. Asadī Ṭusī (1940: 274), an 11th century author, in his *Luγat-i furs* also mentions a special arrow called *Tamūk*, which was produced in the land of Abkhazia (see also Beradze 1973: 77):

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| [تموک] تیرست که به **ابخاز** می‌باشد و اکنون به هر جای می‌سازند .... | [Tamūk] is an arrow that is made in Abkhazia and is now produced everywhere [...]. |

Some Iranian sources, like *J̌awāhir al-axbār* (1576 A.D.) by Budāq-Munšī Qazvīnī (2008: 206) and *Rauḍat al-ṣafawīyya* (1637 A.D.) by Mīrzā-beg J̌unābadī (1999: 523), mention a castle called *Tamūk*, located in Georgia. Tamūk was likely the name of a locality where these arrows were produced. Armenian data also confirm this conjecture. In Armenian Mediaeval sources, this name is recorded as *T'muk*/*T'mok'*/*T'mbuk*/*Tiwmuk*, and *T'mokvi*/*T'mogvi* (cf. Georg. *T'mogvi*). T'mogvi or T'muk was a fortress and mediaeval town in Samtskhe-Javakheti (Arm. *J̌avax-k'*), on the left bank of the Kura River (see Hakobyan et al. 1988: 459; cf. in Arm. T'mkaberd meaning "Fortress of Tamūk").

From the Niẓāmī Ganǰa'ī's *Xusrau u Šīrīn* (12th century) it can be assumed that Abkhazia, due to its suitable climate and pristine nature, was considered a hunting ground of the rulers of those areas. Niẓāmī (2007(3): 126) in his poem in praise of the Atābak of Aδarbāiǰān (Atūrpātakān) Abū-J̌a'far Muḥammad b. Ildegez J̌ahān-Pahlavān

(reign: 1176-1187), introduces Abkhazia and Derbend as the Atābak's hunting place:

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|---|---|
| شکارستان او **ابخاز** و دربند | His hunting ground (stretches to) Abxāz (Abkhazia) and Derbend, |
| شبیخونش به خوارزم و سمرقند | And his night-attacks (are directed at) Xᵛārazm and *Samarqand*. |

Cf. elsewhere (ibid.: 155) in the same source, describing the habits of Mihīn-Bānū, the aunt of Šīrīn, the poet says:

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| به هنگام خزان آید به **ابخاز** | She comes in the autumn to Abxāz (Abkhazia), |
| کند بر کردن نخجیر پرواز | And hunts with fervour (lit. 'flies for hunting'). |

Niẓāmī's *Šaraf-nāma* mentions an Abkhaz hero named Davālī who was the ruler of Abkhazia:

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|---|---|
| **دوالی** به نام آن سوار دلیر | Davālī by name, that bold horseman, |
| برآرد دوال از تن تندشیر | Brings forth the skin from the body of the fierce lion, |
| دلیران ارمن هواخواه او | The brave men from *Arman* (Armenia) were his supporters (followers), |
| کمربسته بر رسم و بر راه او | Loin-girt as to his order and path. |

When Alexander the Great enters Abkhazia, Davālī goes to greet him with many treasures. Alexander also warmly welcomes and dresses him in a robe of honour (*xil'at*) (Niẓāmī 2007(2): 247-248). One day, Davālī appeals to Alexander complaining of the brutality of the Russians and their attacks on and lootings of Abkhazia, Derbend, and Barda', and warns him that if he does not take revenge on the Russians, they will soon attack and plunder Rome and Armenia. Alexander promises to fight the Russians and destroy their land (ibid.: 354-356).

Most of the mentions of Abkhazia in Persian poetry and Iranian historiography are related to the "conquest of Abkhazia" by Muslims (see Aθīr al-Dīn Axsīkatī 1958: 119; Xāqānī 2003: 512, 522; Muǰīr al-Dīn Baylaqānī 1979: 190; Niẓāmī 2007(1): 113). The Abkhazians were counted among the *ahl al-dhimma* (*δimmi va bāǰguzār*)(Xāqānī 2003: 194), and also mentioned in the contexts of severe skirmishes with Muslims, particularly in taking revenge on them (see Muǰīr al-Dīn Baylaqānī 1979: 82; Abū al-Raǰā' Qumī 2010: 245, 247, 287; Ẓahīr al-Dīn Neyšābūrī 2010: 117; Rašīd al-Dīn Faḍlullāh Hamadānī 2007: 118; Mustaufī-Qazvīnī 1983: 461).

Generally, among non-Muslim nations, the name of Abkhazians is associated with kufr to a bigger extent than those of other Christian peoples, and the reason is that after the death of Malik-Šāh Salǰūqī (reign: 1072-1092), the last capable king of the Seljuk dynasty and until the arrival of Sulṭān Jalāl al-Dīn Xʷārazm-Šāh (1220-1231) to Aδarbāiǰān, the whole area has more than once been invaded and devastated by Abkhazians (Georgians). Particularly the Abkhazians showed extreme cruelty in Ardabil where they burned even a group of people; moreover, on their way back they took away the precious door of the Grand Mosque of the city (Kasravī 2009: 316). This explains the pejorative connotations of the names Abxāz and abxāzī in Persian. Xāqānī (2003: 512) called Abkhazia *šiš-dar-i kufr* (lit. "six gates of infidelity"): که هست ششدر کفر ابخاز, or *dār al-kufr* (lit. "the world of infidelity").

Rafi' al-Dīn Lunbānī (1990: 158), in the 12th century, and Maulavī (1984: 240), in the 13th century, express similar feelings towards Abkhazians, calling them infidels (*kāfir*).

In a verse from the 5th book of *Maθnavī Ma'navī* (Maulavī 1999: 695), Baghdad as the centre of the Islamic Caliphate is opposed to Abkhazia as the symbol of kufr, or *dār al-kufr*, the world of infidelity.

Abkhazians are characterised by insulting words, such as "dog"; cf. in Muǰīr al-Dīn Baylaqānī (1979: 190):

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|---|---|
| گر **سگِ ابخاز** سر ز حکمِ تو برتافت | If the Abxāz dog disobeys your command, |

هسـت بر او راهِ اعـــتذار گـرفتـه The excuse is closed to him.

Or in Rāvandī (1985: 26):

شیران لشکرش از **سگان ابخازی** برای کرکسان خوان نهادند. The lions of his army spread a xᵛān (tablecloth) from the Abkhazian dogs for the vultures.

In Persian literary and historical texts, the place-names Abxāz and Gurǰistān (Georgia) are rarely used to refer to two different lands: the two names seldom appear together in the same text. Especially in the poetry of Arrān, such as in Xāqānī, Niẓāmī, and Muǰīr al-Dīn Baylaqānī (all of them in the 12th century), there is no hint of Georgia; the only exception is Qaṭrān Tabrīzī from Aδarbāiǰān (11th century) who mentions both Abkhazia and Georgia (Qaṭrān Tabrīzī 1983: 87).

Further, in Xāqānī Šarvānī's (2003: 742) Dīvān there is a quatrain (*rubāʿī*), in which the poet draws a common line between the Cross (*ṣalīb*), Rome (Rūm), Abkhazia (Abxāz), and the Georgian language:

از عشـق صـلیب‌مـوی رومی‌رویی Out of the passion for a lovely and Cross-haired and Roman-faced (beloved),

ابخـازنشین گشتم و گرجی‌گـویی I became an inhabitant of Abkhazia and a Georgian- speaker,

از بـس که بگفتمش که مویی مویی As often as I repeated mōyī, mōyī,

شد مـوی زبانم و زبـان هر مـویی My tongue became like a hair, and each of my hair became like a tongue.

The word *mōyī* in the second hemistich of the quatrain means "come" in Georgian. In standard Georgian, however, based on eastern Georgian dialects, this form is pronounced *modi*. Jamshid Giunashvili (1995: 52-53) concluded from this verse that the mother tongue of the Abkhazians was Georgian, a view which cannot be substantiated by no means.

There are numerous attestations of the term Abxāz until the 15th century in Persian texts, but after that period it became less prevalent, so that the last occurrence of this word was attested in the Tārīx-i ǰāhān-ārāy-i ʻAbbāsī (17th century) by Vaḥīd Qazvīnī (2004: 650).

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