



ČARKAS

ČARKAS (Cherkes), term used in Persian, Arabic, and Turkic for the Circassian people of the northwest Caucasus who call themselves Adygeï and speak a language of the Abazgo-Circassian branch of Caucasian (see caucasian languages). In Persian, however, the word is sometimes applied generally to peoples living beyond Darband/Derbent (*Tadkerat al-molūk*, tr. Minorsky, p. 163 n. 5).

i. The people.

ii. Circassians under the Safavids.

i. The People

The name Čarkas (Cherkes) appeared in the mid-8th/14th century, replacing the term Kashak (Russian *Kasog*; Volkova, pp. 18-23), and was sometimes applied to all Caucasian peoples beyond Darband. Mostawfī (pp. 11, 21, 256) places the country of the Čarkas (also Jarkaz) north of Persia at 350 farsangs from Baghdad. In Soviet usage it designates one of the three groups into which the Circassians were divided in the 1930s: the Adygeï, the Cherkes, and the Kabard.

The Čarkas are a mountain people with strongly hierarchical social structure and aristocratic tradition, famed within the Caucasus and beyond for personal beauty and martial skill (Klaproth, pp. 557-603; Kosven, pp. 142-57). Little is known of their origins and early history. We do not know where they came



from or when they settled in the Caucasus (Halasi-Kun, p. 5). The name Čarkas is an outside designation for these people of uncertain derivation. The suggestion that it derives from the name of the earlier people, Kerkets, has been disproven, and a number of other etymologies have been suggested, deriving the name from Persian, Turkish, or, more recently, Ossetic (Lavrov, p. 40; Bang and Marquart, p. 181; Vasmer, I, s.v. “kasog,” III, s.v. “Cherkes”; for Turkic derivation, Klaproth, I, p. 558).

From about 1300 b.c. the northern Caucasus came under the influence of the Iranian and Altaic steppe peoples (Halasi-Kun, pp. 3-7, 9-11, 13-15). It was not until much later, however, that the Circassians, living between the upper Kuban river and the Black Sea coast and protected by the Caucasian mountains from direct interference by most states of the Middle East and the Volga steppe, came under the influence of coastal powers: Greece, Byzantium, and the Ottomans. Classical authors, notably Herodotus and Strabo (Kosven, p. 64; Latyshev, I, p. 85, 105, 133), mention several groups in the northwest Caucasus: the Zikh, Sanig, and Akhey, probably Caucasian, the Meot, Sind, and Kerket, of different origin (Lavrov, pp. 38-40). Local tribes exported grain, livestock, skins, honey, and beeswax; thus their 19th-century lifestyle of mixed agriculture, transhumant livestock breeding, and bee-keeping was apparently already in existence in ancient times. In 438 b.c. the Hellenic state of Bosphorus took control of the eastern [Black Sea](#) coast. After its fall, late in the 2nd century b.c., Greco-Roman influence remained strong, and northwest Caucasians converted to Christianity in the early 6th century (Wixman, pp. 66-8, Kosven, p. 68), retaining some pagan beliefs and practices (Tardy; Allen, p. 40). In the 7th century the Caucasus became a battlefield between the Caliphate and the Turkic Khazar kingdom of the Volga. Although nominally within the Khazar sphere, the Circassians remained apart, so the influence of Judaism and Islam did not reach them. The arrival of the Rus’ affected them more directly: they clashed with Sviatoslav in 965 (Likhachev, ed., p. 47), and with Mstislav of Tmutorokan’ in 1022, later appearing as part of his army (ibid., p. 99).

The Čarkas were subjected by the Golden Horde in 634-37/1237-39, but offered considerable resistance and retained some independence (‘Omarī, ed. Lech; Kosven, pp. 74-75). At that time population movements brought Čarkas tribes into the mountainous territory of the upper Kuban and the Terek rivers; the eastern tribes eventually formed the Karbard principality, gaining considerable local power. In the late 15th century the Čarkas came within the



sphere of the Crimean khanate and the Ottoman empire, and the upper classes began to convert to Islam; by the 19th century the majority of the population was Muslim (Klaproth, I, pp. 567-69). While marrying into Ottoman and Crimean ruling classes, the Čarkas maintained their independence (Inalcik, p. 25). They allied themselves with the Russians, fighting in the army of Ivan IV (1533-84; Brokgauz and Efron, vol. 26, p. 780), whose second wife was Čarkas. When the Russians advanced into the Caucasus the Čarkas became inimical, joining Shaikh Manşūr (1199-1213/1785-98; Baddeley, pp. 47-56) and continuing to resist throughout the 19th century. In 1864, when the Russian conquest was complete, about 90% of the Čarkas emigrated to Ottoman territories, suffering many casualties.

The 1979 census lists 109,000 Adygeĭ, 116,000 Cherkes, and 322,000 Kabard, living in enclaves within the Kabard-Balkar Autonomous Republic, and the Karachaĭ-Cherkes and Adygeĭ Autonomous Regions. The Čarkas have a distinct language, but share a common folk heritage with other north Caucasian peoples, notably the oral epics, known as the Nart Saga (q.v.). The customary law, dress, and manners of the Kabards have had wide influence throughout the north Caucasus. A literary language in Arabic script developed in the 19th century; the script was changed in the 1920s to Latin and to Cyrillic in 1938.

The Čarkas were known in the Middle East primarily as slaves renowned for their beauty and military skills. There are occasional mentions of them in early geographical works (notably in Mas'ūdī; see Minorsky, 1958, pp. 157-58), and they became prominent in the 7th/13th century, when the center of the slave trade moved to the west. They formed part of the Mamluk slave establishment and, from the reign of Sultan Sayf-al-Dīn Barqūq (784-801/1382-99, himself a Čarkas) became the dominant element in the Mamluk ruling class (Ayalon). The Safavid rulers beginning with Jonayd (d. 864/1460) raided Čarkas regions and carried off prisoners (Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 17-18), who from the time of Shah Ṭahmāsb (930-84/1524-76) played an important political role (see ii, below). Though less numerous than Georgian ones, Čarkas commanders rose to important posts, and the women were common in royal and aristocratic harems. Some Caucasians were settled on the land (Oberling, pp. 139-43); traces of Čarkas settlements have lasted into the 20th century (ibid.).



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ii. Under the Safavids

The Safavids introduced a considerable number of Caucasian elements into the Persian society, either as prisoners of war or as population segments relocated by force, for instance, the Čarkas tribe of Fārs mentioned in Fasā'ī's *Fārs-nāma* about the turn of this century (II, p. 331). Between 947/1540 and 961/1553, Shah Ṭahmāsb (930-84/1524-76) led four expeditions to the Caucasus. In the course of these campaigns, Čarkas prisoners, as well as Georgians and Armenians, were taken in large numbers and were brought back to Persia. The majority of the prisoners were women and children (Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 84-88; tr. Savory, I, pp. 139-46), and many of them were introduced into the court. The men were employed as royal pages (*ḡolām*), while some of the women were married to the king or the princes. Shah Ṭahmāsb had several wives from the Caucasus, and, of his nine sons who reached adolescence, at least five were of Caucasian mothers, four Georgians (Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 133-34, tr. Savory, I, pp. 215-17) and one Čarkas (Eskandar Beg, I, p. 133, tr. Savory, I, p. 215). Gradually they grew into a powerful faction, which at the time of Ṭahmāsb's death (984/1576) was vying with the *qezelbāš* for power (Savory, pp. 67-68). The court was the scene of numerous intrigues involving the ladies of the royal harem, each of whom, supported by her ethnic faction, tried to place her own candidate on the throne.

A very influential figure in the middle of the 10th/16th century, from the latter half of the reign of Ṭahmāsb to the beginning of the reign of Solṭān-



Moḥammad Ḳodābanda, was Parī-ḳān Khanom, daughter of the Čarkas woman, Solṭān-Āgā Khanom (Qomī, p. 671), a wife of Ṭahmāsb. She was “more intelligent than the other royal princesses” and “her opinion and counsel were valued by her father” (Eskandar Beg, I, p. 119; tr. Savory, I, p. 199). She was once engaged to a cousin, but as the marriage was never consummated she was constantly in attendance on her father (*ibid.*, I, p. 135; tr. Savory, I, p. 218). A Čarkas party formed around her and her brother, Solaymān Mīrzā, and her uncle, Šamḳāl Solṭān. Her residence (*manāzel*), which was so large that Shah ‘Abbās later used it as a temporary palace just after his coronation at Qazvīn (*ibid.*, I, p. 380), was next to the garden (*bāgčā*) of the royal harem, and she could enter the palace freely (Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 192-93, tr. Savory, I, pp. 283-84, 337).

Parī-ḳān Khanom acted as a king-maker in two instances. Once she worked to promote the succession of Esmā‘īl Mīrzā upon the death of Shah Ṭahmāsb (984/1576). Having detested the Georgian mother of Ḥaydar Mīrzā, who had been a favorite son of Ṭahmāsb and regarded as heir apparent, she gave the keys to the royal palace to her maternal uncle, Šamḳāl Solṭān, who took control of the palace immediately and filled it with 300 Čarkas. Her plot succeeded, and Ḥaydar Mīrzā was murdered by some assassins among whom was Jamšīd Beg, a Čarkas *golām* of Solṭān Solaymān Mīrzā (*ibid.*, I, pp. 192, 195; tr. Savory, I, pp. 83-84, 288-89). But the new king, Esmā‘īl II (984/1576), was not the man she had expected. To the amirs who made it a habit to call at the house of Parī-ḳān Khanom even after his accession he said, “the interference in matters of state by women is demeaning to the king’s honor” (*ibid.*, p. 201; tr. Savory, p.298). After this declaration, the amirs ceased to visit her.

Esmā‘īl was killed after less than two years. According to Eskandar Beg, one possible explanation for his murder is that Parī-ḳān Khanom “had conspired with maidservants of the harem to arrange that poison be inserted in the electuary mixture” (*falūniā*; *ibid.*, I, p. 219; tr. Savory, I, p. 327). *In view of her habitual attachment to the political power, his theory is not impossible. In any event, she was effectively the sovereign after her brother’s death, shouldering the responsibility for the conduct of state affairs (ibid., I, p. 223; tr. Savory, I, pp. 333-34).*

Solṭān-Moḥammad Ḳodābanda, the next king she put on the throne, had become aware of the dangerous influences of Parī-ḳān Khanom and her Čarkas group on state affairs and had decided to eliminate her party. On the very day of their entrance to the capital, Qazvīn, they ordered the execution of



the princess and her uncle, Šamkāl (ibid., I, pp. 226-27; tr. Savory, I, p. 337).

With the death of Parī-kān Khanom, the intervention of the Čarkas in the political arena of the Safavids was suspended for a time, but it did not cease. During the reign of ‘Abbās I, Farhād Beg, a Čarkas favorite (*moqarrab*) of the shah who had begun his career as a falconer (*gūščī*) and had been promoted to the office of “chief of the hunt” (*amīr-e šekār*) was suspected of forming a seditious relationship with the shah’s eldest son, Moḥammad-Bāqer Šafī Mīrzā, whose mother was a Čarkas. The shah handed Farhād Beg to the prince, who, to show his loyalty, ordered that he be put to death immediately and his property confiscated (1023/1614). Soon after this execution, however, a Čarkas *gōlām*, Ūzūn Behbūd Beg, murdered the prince by the order of the shah, who feared the popularity of the young prince (ibid., II, pp. 881, 884-85; tr. Savory, II, pp. 1096, 1099; Falsafī, II, pp. 175-80). Contrary to the general image of the *gōlāms* as being faithful and loyal to the shah, such incidents of treachery were not uncommon, even just after the initiation of the *gōlām* system by Shah ‘Abbās. This is one of the reasons the system did not function well.

Among other Čarkas during the period of Shah ‘Abbās, we can cite the name of Qazāq Khan. He was appointed *amīr al-omarā*’ of the Šīrvān in 1034/ 1624-25 and led the Qezelbāš (Qarāmānlū and Kēneslū) following the new policy of the shah of putting a *gōlām* commander over troops of the Qezelbāš to diminish their political influence.

During the last days of Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn (1105-35/1694-1722) and his nephew, Loṭf-‘Alī Khan, the talented vizier Faṭḥ-‘Alī Khan Dāğestānī, *e’temād-al-dawla*, exerted a strong influence on state affairs (Lockhart, pp. 106, 465-66).

We have little evidence concerning the Čarkas after the fall of the Safavids. As the *gōlām* system did not survive well under the succeeding states, it is not difficult to suppose that the days of the Čarkas *gōlāms* had ended (See also barda and barda-dārj, v).

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