



COLCHIS

COLCHIS, ancient Greek name of the region at the eastern end of the Black Sea and south of the Caucasus mountains, corresponding to the Georgian provinces of Imeretia, Mingrelia (Samegrelo), Guria and Ač'ara and the Pontic regions of northeastern Turkey.

The ethnic composition of the ancient population of Colchis is unclear, but there is reason to believe that in the 1st millennium b.c.e. the predominant tribes spoke South Caucasian (Kartvelian) dialects, probably the forerunners of the Zan dialects that later came to be spoken in the area between the Caucasus mountains and the northeastern coast of Asia Minor (Lang, chap. 6). In the Middle Ages speakers of the two dialects of Zan, Mingrelian and Laz, gradually became separated by a wedge of Georgian speakers from the east (Iberia; Lang, chap. 4). From Assyrian sources of the 12th-11th centuries b.c.e. and Greek myths it appears that in ancient times Colchis was a country of some wealth and importance (Burney and Lang, chaps. 4-6; Lang, chap. 3; Allen, chap. 2). A trade route from the Black Sea crossed the Caucasus to the Caspian Sea and continued through Central Asia to India and China. Another route connected Colchis with Media via the Araxes (modern Aras) valley and Armenia (Urartu).

Colchis first came within the Iranian orbit in the Median period (ca. 850-550 b.c.e.). Beginning in the 8th century b.c.e. it suffered heavily in successive Cimmerian and Scythian invasions. The presence of such invaders is attested by burials and characteristic arrowheads excavated at various 7th-century b.c.e. sites in the region, which apparently served as a base for further



incursions to the south and west (*Camb. Hist. Iran* II, pp. 91-97). Scattered Scythian colonies may have survived in Colchis and adjacent regions for some generations and are possibly reflected in tribal names. A tribe called Skythēnoí (Skythinoí) living in the Akampsis (Čoruh) valley is mentioned by Xenophon (*Anabasis* 4.7.18) and later authors (see Pauly-Wissowa, II/2, pp. 946-47, s.v. Scythini). According to an alternative theory, however, the name is a Greek approximation to Zan *škvit- < Kartvelian *švid-, Georgian švid-, Laz šk(v)it- “seven”; a tribe called *Heptakōmētai* is located by Strabo (12.3.18) in the same region (see Vogt).

According to Herodotus (3.97), Achaemenid power extended as far as the Caucasus mountains, but the Colchians are not included in his list of the twenty Persian satrapies (*nómoi, arkhai*). Nor are they referred to in the lists of Achaemenid lands (*dahyāva*) given in the Old Persian inscriptions of Darius and his successors. In Xenophon’s *Anabasis* (7.8.25; probably an interpolation) the tribes of Colchis and East Pontus are referred to as independent (*autónomoi*). On the other hand, Herodotus mentioned both the Colchians and various Pontic tribes in his catalogue (7.78-79) of approximately fifty-seven peoples who participated in Xerxes’ expedition against Greece in 481-80 b.c.e. It is thus probable that the Achaemenids never succeeded in asserting effective rule over Colchis, though local tribal leaders seem to have acknowledged some kind of Persian suzerainty. Whereas the adjoining Pontic tribes of the nineteenth satrapy and the Armenians of the thirteenth are mentioned as having paid tribute to Persia, the Colchians and their Caucasian neighbors are not; they had, however, undertaken to send gifts (100 boys and 100 girls) every five years (Herodotus 3.97).

In the first half of the 1st century b.c.e. King Mithradates of Pontus subjugated Colchis (Reinach, pp. 206-410; Maksimova, pp. 169-285). After his death (in 63 b.c.e.) the country became a Roman protectorate (Lang, pp. 81-82; Allen, pp. 43-45). In the 3rd-4th centuries c.e. Colchis was for some time under Bosphoran (Sarmatian) rule. At the end of this period a new kingdom emerged in western Georgia, encompassing Colchis and part of Pontus. It was called by the Greeks Laziká after the leading tribe (Gk. Lazoí, Lázai; first mentioned in the 1st century c.e. in Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 6.12). Christianity was adopted as the state religion in 523 (Lang, p. 99). During the 6th century the Sasanians waged incessant warfare against Byzantium for control of Laziká, claiming that it had belonged to the Achaemenids and thus was theirs by right (Allen, chap. 6; *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/1, pp. 505-36). The kingdom, later called Abazgia



(Abkhazia), lasted until the 12th century, when it was united with Iberia under the rule of the Bagratid dynasty (q.v., 884-1045; Allen, chs. 7-8; Lang, ch. 5).

Because of the geographical position of Colchis and its orientation toward the Black Sea and the west, Persian influence was less profound than in Iberia and Armenia and was limited primarily to the upper classes. Iranian proper names were fashionable among local rulers (Andronik'ašvili, pp. 569-71 and passim; Wesendonk, pp. 1-10 and passim). Although Mazdaism gained some importance, especially in the Sasanian period, as is attested by fire temples and other Mazdean remains (Wesendonk, pp. 71-77; Allen, pp. 42-45), they are evidence of Persian religious influence, rather than of an influx of Iranians from the south. Local pagan cults also remained strong (Wesendonk, passim; Lang, pp. 87-90).

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