



GEORGIA VIII. GEORGIAN COMMUNITIES IN PERSIA

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Many thousands of Georgians, Armenians, and Circassians who were transplanted to Persia by Shah 'Abbās I (996-1038/1588-1629) were peasants, and they were settled in villages in the Persian hinterland. A large group of Georgians and Armenians were moved into the Farīdan region, west of Isfahan, probably in 1603-5, when the shah embarked upon a systematic depopulation of the area north of Azarbaijan to discourage Ottoman incursions (Eskandar Beg, pp. 667-70). Because the Isfahan-Borūjerd road, which passed through their territory, was seldom used by European travelers, we have very little information about them before the 19th century. When J. M. Kinneir visited them in 1810, he estimated the number of Georgians in the region at one thousand families. By then, they had already converted to Islam, but they were not yet intermarrying with Persians (p. 128). In 1896, Lado Aghniashvili wrote that the Georgians of Farīdan comprised 2,500 households, or 15,000 individuals (p. 192). According to A. F. Stahl, by the early 1900s they were intermarrying with Persians (p. 9). However, most of them continued to speak Georgian, as is indicated by Basil Nikitin. According to Nikitin, their chief center was Ākora Bālā (also called Farīdan and Martqopi), which



contained 1,600 homesteads, 20 mosques, and 7 public baths (pp. 284-85).

In the 1950s, Ḥosayn-‘Alī Razmārā described eleven villages (Ākora Pāyīn, Afūs, Āqča, Bādejān-e Ākora, Bū‘īn, Jaqjaq, Čoqyūrt, Dāžgān, Sībak, Šeš Javān) in the districts (*dehestān*) of Gorjī and Mūgū‘ī in which Georgian-speaking individuals also resided (*Farhang* X, pp. 5, 24, 31, 41, 56, 63, 84, 116, 120). At least two groups of Georgians were settled along the Isfahan-Shiraz road, perhaps to protect that thoroughfare from raids by predatory nomads. According to Thomas Herbert, Amīnābād, southeast of Qomša, had a part-Georgian population when he passed through the village in 1627. By then, they had already converted to Islam (p. 153). In any case, they must have been quickly absorbed by the local population, for no subsequent travelers have mentioned them. A larger group of Georgians, along with a group of Circassians, was settled in and around the small town of Āspās, west of Dehbīd, on the old Yazdkvāst-Zarqān stretch of the caravan route. During the 17th century, they were visited by several famous travelers, including Pietro Della Valle in 1621 (p. 50), Herbert in 1627 (p. 152), Jean Baptiste Tavernier in 1665 (p. 246), Jean de Thévenot in 1665 (II, pp. 121-22), and John Fryer in 1677 (II, pp. 231-32). By 1677, many of the Georgians of Āspās had already embraced the Muslim faith (Fryer, loc. cit.). When the new road through Ābāda and Dehbīd was built in the 18th century, most of the caravans bypassed Āspās and the economy of the region steadily declined.

When Robert Ker Porter visited Āspās in 1818, he saw “nothing but dilapidation, poverty and wretchedness” (II, p. 16). Oddly enough, some of the Georgians of Āspās were absorbed by the Fārsīmadān tribe of the Qašqā‘ī tribal confederacy, becoming one of its clans. These Georgians, who are called Gorjā‘īlū, are Turcophone and constitute the only tangible vestige of the Georgian community of Āspās (Oberling, p. 142). A large group of Georgians and Armenians was transplanted to Māzandarān beginning in 1024/1615 as a result of further campaigns in the Caucasus by Shah ‘Abbās I (Eskandar Beg, II, pp. 881, 913; Perry, p. 207). Most of them were settled around Faraḥābād and Ašraf (Behšahr), the shah’s favorite Caspian resorts. According to Della Valle, who passed through the area in February 1618, the forests around Sārī, south of Faraḥābād, were cut to make room for the newcomers who, by the time of his visit, had already started cultivating the land (p. 50). Some of the Georgian immigrants were also employed as sericulturists, and a large number of mulberry trees were planted in the vicinity of Faraḥābād. At the same time, more Georgians were settled in the towns of Faraḥābād and Ašraf (Della Valle,



p. 51; Rabino, p. 63; Napier, p. 119). But these Georgians were gradually absorbed by the surrounding population in Māzandarān, so that today no trace of them exists except in the form of suggestive village names, such as Gorji Maḥalla and Gorji Kalā (Rabino, p. 13; Razmārā, *Farhang* III, p. 253; de Morgan, I, pp. 162-63).

Yet another group of Georgians was forced to establish itself midway between Šāhrūd and Sabzavār for the purpose of protecting a barren stretch of the Tehran-Mašhad route from attacks by Turkman bandits. A village by the name of ‘Abbāsābād was built, complete with a fort and a spacious caravanserai, and the settlers were provided with a firman which guaranteed them an annual stipend, as well as a yearly ration of wheat (Smith, I, p. 376; Bassett, p. 208). These Georgians, like those of Māzandarān, were rapidly converted to Islam (Bassett, p. 209), and, when Vladmir Minorsky visited them in 1934, he was told that only one very old woman could remember some Georgian (*Tadkerat al-molūk*, tr. Minorsky, p. 18, n 2). The most detailed descriptions of ‘Abbāsābād are those of J. B. Fraser (pp. 367-71), J.-P. Ferrier (pp. 159-62), and Bassett (pp. 208-10). They portrayed a dwindling community living in abject misery. According to Razmārā, in the 1940s ‘Abbāsābād had 750 Persian-speaking, Shi‘ite inhabitants (*Farhang* III, p. 194). Finally, according to de Morgan, in 1890-91 there was a small colony of Georgians in Dezful, Kūzestān. “They have preserved in very pure form the traits of their ancestors” he observed, “and, although they have become Muslims, they have not yet given up their language” (p. 58). But no trace of these Georgians exists today. In conclusion, it can be said that the Georgians in Persia have at all times displayed a special talent for adaptation to their new environment. While their Armenian neighbors in Farīdan have remained Christians, they long ago espoused Shi‘ism, and, while their Circassian neighbors at Dez-e Kord, near Āspās, have survived as a tight-knit community, they have become thoroughly assimilated to the surrounding population.

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