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KURA RIVER

KURA (CYRUS RIVER), the largest river in the Transcaucasus region, flowing from modern day Turkey, through Georgia and the Republic of Azarbaijan into the Caspian Sea (q.v.).

The origin of the Kura (Ancient Gk. Cyrus, [Strabo, 11.1.5]; Lat. Cyrus [Pliny, 6.52]; Ar. al-Korr [Moqaddasi, p. 379]; Pers. Korr; Georgian Mtkvari, Arm. Kur; Turk. Kür), lies in the uplands of northeastern Turkey near Kars. It meanders northwards towards the modern border of Georgia, whereupon it flows in narrow gorges, past the rock-cut monastery of Vardzia and briefly westwards towards the city of Akhaltsikhe. From this point, it heads northeastwards through the Borjomi Valley, and dividing the Meskheti and Trialeti mountain ranges, before opening out into a broader valley against the southern flanks of the Great Caucasus. The course of the Kura then flows southeastwards through Tbilisi and across into the modern Republic of Azarbaijan, where in 1945-53 it was dammed to create the extensive Mingəçevir reservoir. The extensive waters still flow onwards from the Soviet lake following the historical river course southeastwards across the flat basin of central Azarbaijan (see Azarbaijan i. Geography), meeting its largest tributary, the Araxes River (q.v.), near the modern town of Sabirabad, before finally pouring into the Caspian Sea.

Owing to the size and current of the river, it has played an important role in the history of the Caucasus, as a landmark and dividing feature, as a connecting artery, and in sustaining a broad belt of fertile agricultural land between the Greater and Lesser Caucasus mountains. While the substantial

presence of Palaeolithic occupation in the region is generally confined to the upper reaches of the Kura, from the Neolithic onwards, archaeological sites have been discovered along its length. From the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age, the cultures of the region, characterized most notably by their distinctive ceramics, gained the name Kura-Araxes (also known as the Early Transcaucasus Culture, ETC), as this group was thought to originate in the wider Kura basin. It is evident that while the spread of the material associated with the Kura-Araxes phenomenon goes far beyond the Transcaucasus region, there are at this point shared cultural styles across this geographically diverse river, from ceramic and metalwork to burial practices (Kohl; Kushnareva).

Greek and Roman sources dealing with the Kura (Cyrus/Cyrnus) are comparatively rare, given its location at the far reaches of the Classical world. It is mentioned most notably in the campaigns of Pompey (Dio Cassius, 36.53-54; Appian, *Mith*. 103; Plutarch, *Pomp*. 34-36). A handful of further geographical details are recalled by Strabo (11.1.5; 11.3.5; 11.4.2) mostly in relation to its role for the navigation of Iberia and Albania. Archaeological excavations in the Kura basin have elucidated considerable remains dating to the Antique period (ca. 400 BCE – 200 CE), not only confirming the presence of the Iberian capital of Mskheta on the banks of the Kura and its hinterland (Lomtatidze), but a range of remains dating to the Antique period further downstream (for example at Minğəçevir, see Vahidov).

Armenian sources documenting the history of the first millennium refer to the Kura mostly in passing, as a geographical marker in Caucasian Albania and tributary of the Aras (Aluan) (Dasxuranc'i, 1.5; Širakac'i, sec. 20, p. 57). Dasxuranc'i recounts an apocryphal incident on the river in around 831-32 CE when a great flood of the river brought upstream a giant "dragon-fish" that ate all the other fish in the river (Daxuranc'i, 3.20). It arguably features somewhat more heavily in early Georgian history (*K'art'lis tskhovreba*, ed. Jones; Rapp), particularly given the Antique capital Mtskheta was placed strategically at its confluence with the Aragvi river, whose valley connects to the most important historical pass through the Greater Caucasus at Dariali. Likewise Tbilisi, successor capital of Iberia from the 5th-6th century CE onwards, emerged on both sides of the river with a pontoon bridge between (Moqaddasi, p. 375-76).

From the early Arabic sources, the Kura River is mentioned with reference to the campaigns of ʿOṯmān's commanders in the Caucasus (Balāḏori, pp. 203, 206, tr. pp. 319, 323). As with Classical authors, it features mostly as a symbolic Rubicon, crossed to quiet the unrulier left bank and reinforce against the

tribes north of Darband (q.v.). In 10th century geographical sources, it is placed variously as flowing within or at the edge of the province of Arrān (q.v.; Ebn al-Faqih, p. 295; Ebn Rosta, p. 89) and it is often mentioned in the same breath as the administrative centers of Tbilisi and Barḏaʿa (q.v.), located close to its banks. Moqaddasi confusingly divides the river into two—the Korr being separate from another river, the Nahr al-Malek, meaning that latter is the label applied in the place of the Nahr al-Korr on the maps which come to accompany this text (Moqaddasi, p. 379; Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, MS Sprenger 5-Ahlwardt 6034). While some contemporary authors were seemingly confused about the Kura's upper reaches, beyond Tbilisi (*Ḥodud al-ʿālam,* p. 77, sec. 56), others are clear on its origins in the western part of the lesser Caucasus (Masʿudi, sec. 506). It is worth noting that notwithstanding the paucity of sources on the use of the river in the pre-modern era for transportation, Ebn Ḥawqal (p. 338) specifically mentions it as one of the two navigable rivers of the region.

Perhaps the most famous reference to a historical event on the river is the 10th century appearance of a group of Rus (q.v.) raiders who, according to information provided by Abu ʿAli Moḥammad [Ebn] Meskawayh (q.v.; in Margiolouth, II, p. 62) navigated up the Kura from the Caspian Sea with the intention of seizing the city of Barḏaʿa (situated on the Terter river, a tributary of the Kura, and located approximately 18 km from the latter). These foreign troops besieged the city for a year before contracting a disease and retreating with decimated numbers, apparently the same way that they had come.

A full account of the geography of the river course is given by the 17th-18th century Georgian geographer Vaxušt'i of Kartli, who describes in detail the extraordinary number of fish species in the river at its various stages, a bounty that is often overlooked in earlier sources, though doubtless a key part of the economy in all ages (Vaxušt'i, in Brosset, pp. 76-79, 135-37).

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