

Views in Circassia, with Notes by the Late Admiral Saumarez Brock

Saumarez Brock

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There are probably many—even many Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society—who would be puzzled to say offhand in what part of the Caucasus is—or was—Circassia. The common blunder by which Schamyl, the hero of Daghestan, has been turned, in Western Europe, into a Circassian, is unfairly misleading.

The home of the Circassians—before they left it for the Turkish dominions—was, roughly speaking, the Caucasian range west of Elbruz, excluding Abkhasia—the coast lands about Sukhum Kaleh. Of recent years this region has been but little explored by Englishmen. Mr. Craufurd Grove touched only a corner of it, Mr. Philipps Wolley another corner. Mr. and Mrs. Littledale have recently sojourned in its forests in pursuit of big game, but no account has yet been published of their experiences. The forests of the Zelenchuk are still the abode of the aurochs, or wild bull, of magnificent deer and countless chamois.

About and before the time of the Crimean War, Circassia was frequented by Englishmen with political motives. The volumes of Spencer, Bell and Longworth are full of curious matter, though sadly wanting in topographical details. It is to the same period that the sketches lately shown in our rooms belong. Captain, afterwards Admiral, Saumarez Brock was sent on a political mission among the then still independent tribes, and made good use of his pen and pencil to record the features of their country. He gives, of course, but an imperfect picture; there is much left to be discovered—the snowy crests of the central chain, which even west of Sukhum Kaleh reaches a height of 10,600 feet, the strange remains of early races buried in the forests. There is probably no tract of country so near Central Europe so little known.

The pictures shown in the Society's Rooms were executed by an Italian artist, S. Bossoli, from the Admiral's sketches. It may be hoped that they may instigate some adventurous holiday-maker to give to the Western Caucasus a share of the attention that has been freely bestowed on the central portion of the chain. The notes Admiral Saumarez Brock wrote to illustrate them are still full of interest, and they will be serviceable if they stir up some travellers to fully investigate the park-like uplands and wooded crests of the western spurs and the glacier-clad peaks—the "Maritimes" of the Caucasus—which are seen from shipboard to the north and west of Sukhum Kaleh. Some of the tombs and dolmens hidden away in the mountains have been photographed for the Museum at Tiflis, but, so far as I know, no adequate description of them has been published by a competent archæologist.

The following are the descriptive notes mentioned above. The numbers refer to the drawings exhibited.

SOUTH SIDE OF THE CAUCASUS

I. The village of Ismael Bey, a Circassian chief having the rank of colonel in the Turkish service. It is situated in the valley of Bardan on the border of a small mountain stream of such a meandering nature that it has to be crossed thirteen times on the way down to the beach, which is only three miles distant from the village.

The Bay of Bardan is celebrated for the successful resistance always made there by the Circassians to repeated attacks of the Russians, who never effected a landing, but were invariably repulsed in their attempts.

II. Scenery on the river Subash; now apparently a small meandering stream, but in the spring, after the snows begin to melt, or after continued rain, it becomes a furious torrent utterly impassable and quite filling up the space between its banks. It discharges itself into the sea at Fort Goloven, now in ruins and deserted. This fort was formerly the scene of most bloody strife between the Circassians and the Russians.

The extraordinary blue and transparent atmosphere is peculiar to this region.

III. The habitation of Haji Yedic, a Circassian chief of large property, and who subsequently accompanied me during my wanderings into the interior of the Caucasus.

The time is sunset, with the sea appearing in the distance; the whole atmosphere on flood of golden light. The houses of this chief, in common with all I visited, are of the simplest construction of wicker-work, plastered with mud, and covered with reeds or shingle.

The spot chosen for their erection is on a natural plateau surrounded by streams and wood, with considerable patches of cultivated land in its vicinity.

IV. Tombs.—These extraordinary remains of a long-forgotten race (for the Circassians have no traditions respecting them, except that they were the residences of a nation of Pigmies who rode horses no bigger than hares, and whose gigantic slaves were the architects) are to be met with all over the country; in some places collected together in the plains in regular lines, to the number of hundreds, and in others to be found in dense forests, far from human habitations, thinly scattered over the hill-sides; hewn out of the solid rock, or enormous boulders of stone.

The drawing represents one of the latter, 13 feet long and 10 broad. The circular aperture in the face is common to all I saw, and is supposed by the Circassians to be the door through which the diminutive inhabitants found entrance. Many other tombs were in the neighbourhood, but inferior construction.

THE NORTH SIDE OF THE CAUCASUS

V. In the preceding view was portrayed the last tomb I saw on the south side, and I have reason to believe that I was the first European traveler who from that place crossed the Caucasian range over to the north side amongst the Abazecs. The remainder of the views will at any rate have the charm of novelty, and the accompanying sketch gives a faint representation of some of the beautiful scenery to be met with in that country.

The cluster of straw-roofed houses is the residence of a celebrated chief who was absent, but who now, at the age of eighty, is constantly engaged in that harassing warfare against the Russians, which I fear is likely to be waged for some time longer. The honours of his house were, however, efficiently done by his daughter, named Fish, the most beautiful woman I saw in all the country.

The range of mountains in the distance which we had crossed may give some idea of the difficulties we had to encounter in our journey, and forms the boundary between the Abazec and Ubikh tribes and is the common grazing ground of their flocks and herds during summer. It was formerly the scene of bloody battles between the various claimants, but their feuds are now forgotten and the flocks of the two tribes feed peacefully together.

VI. Tomb on the bank of the Saguasash, a most rapid and turbulent river and icy cold.

It is crossed by one of the only two bridges in that part of the country, constructed in the simplest manner from the trunks of wild vines suspended from rock to rock and floored with wicker-work. It vibrated awfully as we crossed, which we were obliged to do one at a time. This tomb was the most perfect I saw, and is placed in the midst of a dense forest, many miles distant from any habitation and most difficult of access. The formation of the tomb is different from the last show, as it is composed of large blocks of stone, well fitted, and of several pieces and not hewn out of the rock.

These tombs are doubly remarkable from the fact that there are in the whole country no stone buildings, neither houses nor walls, and that the inhabitants have now no traditional account of who were the architects, more than the silly legend before mentioned.

The mechanical skill requisite to place these large blocks of stone in position shows that their builders must have been acquainted with some moving power, the remembrance of which has entirely faded from amongst the recollections of this singular people, who themselves are unacquainted with the simplest mechanical contrivances.

The form and workmanship of these tombs, though unadorned, is not wanting in a certain sort of architectural beauty.

VII. A stranger's house—A Circassian dancing occupies the floor, moving to rough music of a bass viol and violin played by two Russian deserters, of who many are scattered over the country. This music was accompanied by a low clapping of hands.

Overhead on the cross beam is another Russian, who was arrested whilst I was present and carried off to prison. Sufficient evidence was found on his person to prove that he was a spy, and he was hanged a short time afterwards.

The wild dance, the glittering arms suspended from the walls, and burnished by the fire-light which coloured the swarthy countenances of the various Circassians seated around, created a picture not easily forgotten. The chief of this village was Hadji Kherandoc, one of the most influential and celebrated amongst that nation of brave men.

VIII. Abazec. Ipsaguak Valley.—The view represents one of the frontier villages nearest the Russian forts on the Laba river. It was destroyed twelve years ago by a Russian force on its way from one of the forts on the Laba to the seacost.

At present the scene is one of great beauty and peaceful retirement, and is remarkable for its enormous old oak-tree near the village, which is used as a place of meeting of the chiefs of the

Abazek and Nogai tribes when in council. The whole of this part of the country is undulating and fertile, interspersed with streams and forests of valuable woods, but uncultivated near the forts on account of the uncertainty of life and property in the mutual forays of the Circassians and Russians.

IX. Mountains of the Abazek.—The varied scenery of this most interesting country perhaps cannot be better shown than by contrasting the view here given of some of the extraordinary freaks of nature in the formation of the hills amongst the mountains, with the somewhat tame though lovely landscape of our previous sketch.

The fantastic shape of the mountain peaks and the brilliancy of the colouring of the cliffs and foliage, contribute to form an agreeable picture, and it was with no small degree of pleasure that I rested for some time there in contemplating its varied beauties, as a pleasant break in our fatiguing and dangerous journey. Mount Bubek in the distance, with its snow-clad peaks, lends its aid to form a most charming coup d'œil.

X. Interior of a cave on the summit of the secondary range* of the Caucasus, 9000 or 10,000 feet above the sea.—Being benighted on our road across the mountains we were necessitated to take shelter in the cave, which in the rainy season was the bed of a torrent. We were delighted to escape from our weary journey through the snow, and accompanied by two shepherds as guides carrying a huge kettle, took up our abode in it for the night.

Hungry and tired, we were truly thankful for the small lambs, cooked in snow water, without bread or any condiments to season them, and I do not remember to have enjoyed a dinner more heartily than that eaten amongst the snows of the Caucasus by the light of our scanty fire.

The scene represents Haji Yedic and another Circassian saying their prayers, and the important operation of cooking our lambs. The fitful blaze of our fire lighting up the cavern, the dark outside, and the stars studding the deep blue sky, rendered our position most picturesque, although intensely cold.

XI. View outside the cave.—At early dawn we were awake, and on reaching the mouth of the cavern, the view attempted to be described in the sketch met my gaze. On the left was Mount Elbruz, clad in eternal snows, towering to the height of 18,500 feet above the level of the sea, and just tipped by the beams of the rising sun, which clothed the mountain tops as he rose with a delicate pink, gradually changing into a golden hue.

Beneath our feet appeared what at first looked like a large bay studded with islands, with the sea breaking violently on the different points of the coast, in other places running into deep indentations, ending in a calm land-locked harbour, where apparently the fleets of the world might anchor. All was so silent, so tranquil and natural, that it was difficult to believe that what was apparently the sea was only the clouds in the valleys not yet dispersed by the sun's rays, and that large and mountainous promontory in front was nothing more than a group of mountains higher than those surrounding, and forming part of the grand chain of the Caucasus.

Mount Elbruz is the highest of the Caucasian ranges and had a glacier between its two peaks; between them is placed the scene of Prometheus' agonies by the mythologists, and the Circassians have a firm belief that he still lies bound there and that any man who could scale the snowy heights of the mountain would witness them.

* That is, the limestone ridge that runs parallel to the main granitic chain.

GEOGRAPHICAL NOTES.

XII. Mount Fisht.—The last view, with which I shall conclude these memorials of a most interesting journey, is a representation of Mount Fisht (9360 feet), amongst whose snows the river Saguasash takes its rise, and after flowing in a most tortuous course through the mountains, issues into the plain of Deguak and ultimately into the river Laba.

This mountain is in the centre of the secondary range of the Caucasus. Its abrupt red precipices and the patches of snow constantly found even during summer, contrast strangely with the green pine forests at its base and render it a remarkable feature, amongst the many beautiful scenes which Circassia affords to the artist.

With this view I close the sketches I have taken in the country, and if they afford to my readers only a tithe of the gratification they gave me in visiting the spots they represent, I am satisfied.



Circassian World is an independent non-profit web site dedicated to create an informational resource for Circassians and non-Circassians who wish to learn more about the heritage, culture, and history of the Adyghe-Abkhaz people. For more information regarding Circassian World, please contact info@circassianworld.com