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The Circassians

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Introduction

The Circassians, also known as Adyghe or Cherkess, are a people whose story stretches across millennia, continents, and civilizations. From their ancient homeland nestled between the mountains and coasts of the North Caucasus, they have witnessed and shaped the tides of history in a region that has long been a crossroads between Europe and Asia. Today, their legacy is not confined to a single territory; instead, it resonates globally, forging an enduring identity preserved through resilience and adaptability.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive portrait of the Circassian people—an exploration into their history, culture, languages, and the modern realities that define them in the 21st century. While the Circassians' early history is shrouded in legend and archaeological mystery, their cultural distinctiveness and complex interactions with powerful empires have always marked them as extraordinary. The evolution of their social structures, religious beliefs, and codes of behavior has created a community both deeply traditional and remarkably open to change.

Perhaps no event has shaped the Circassian identity more profoundly than the Russo-Circassian War and the subsequent trauma of genocide and mass deportation in the 19th century. The dispersal of the Circassians forced them to reestablish themselves in new lands, from Turkey and Jordan to Israel, Europe, and the Americas. Despite these dislocations, Circassians have steadfastly maintained their language, customs, and a sense of collective memory, turning the pain of exile into a shared narrative that binds their widespread communities.

In the chapters that follow, we will trace the arc of the Circassian experience—from ancient Anatolian and Caucasian origins through the turbulence of invasions and the flourishing of a proud, hierarchical society, through centuries of change, loss, and renewal. We will delve into the nuances of Adyghe Xabze, explore the significance of their music and dance, and examine the unique roles of women and elders in maintaining their traditions.

We will also bring the story into the present, where Circassians face new challenges: language endangerment, questions of political recognition, and the dual pressures of integration and cultural preservation. Across more than fifty countries, in villages and cities alike, Circassians struggle and strive to define a future where their heritage not only survives but flourishes.

Portrait of a People is an invitation to understand the Circassians—not simply as a people buffeted by the winds of history, but as active agents whose endurance,

dignity, and creativity continue to shape their destiny. Their story is one of loss, but also of incredible survival and ongoing renewal, and it offers timeless lessons in the resilience of human identity and the enduring importance of collective memory.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land of Circassia: Geography and Environment

To understand the Circassians, one must first understand the land that shaped them. Circassia, or historic Circassia, was not merely a territorial claim but a vibrant, diverse ecological tapestry woven into the very fabric of the North Caucasus. Stretching along the northeastern shores of the Black Sea, this ancient homeland encompassed a region of breathtaking natural beauty, where towering mountains met lush lowlands and fertile plains, creating a unique environment that profoundly influenced the development of its people.

The historical boundaries of Circassia were fluid, shifting with the tides of empires and tribal alliances, yet its core remained anchored by distinct geographical markers. To the west, the gentle lapping waves of the Black Sea defined its extensive coastline, providing both a bounty of resources and a gateway to distant lands. To the south and east, the majestic peaks and convoluted ridges of the Greater Caucasus mountain range formed a formidable natural barrier, often serving as a sanctuary and defense.

The northern reach of Circassia extended into the vast plains of the Kuban River basin, a fertile crescent that offered rich agricultural lands and pasture for livestock. This interplay of sea, mountains, and plains bestowed upon Circassia a remarkable climatic and environmental diversity, fostering a rich array of flora and fauna and demanding varied adaptations from its inhabitants over millennia.

The Caucasus Mountains, the "Spine of the World" as some ancient texts referred to them, were more than just a backdrop; they were an integral part of Circassian existence. Rising dramatically from the Black Sea coast, these formidable ranges included some of Europe's highest peaks, their snow-capped summits often shrouded in mists, lending an air of mystery and grandeur to the landscape.

These mountains were crisscrossed by deep, verdant river valleys, carved by countless streams and torrents fed by glacial meltwater and abundant rainfall. These valleys, often narrow and winding, provided natural corridors and defensible strongholds, shaping settlement patterns and influencing the strategic importance of various regions within Circassia. The rugged terrain made communication and travel challenging, yet it also fostered a strong sense of localized identity among the various Circassian sub-groups.

The coastal strip along the Black Sea was characterized by a subtropical climate, warmed by the maritime influence. Here, dense forests of oak, beech, and hornbeam

descended almost to the water's edge, giving way to vineyards and orchards in more cultivated areas. The coastline, with its natural harbors and coves, facilitated maritime activities, though it also rendered certain areas vulnerable to external incursions from the sea.

Moving inland and eastward, the climate transitioned from humid subtropical to more continental, with colder winters and warmer summers. The foothills provided ideal conditions for mixed farming and pasturage, while the higher elevations of the mountains supported alpine meadows and conifer forests, home to diverse wildlife. This natural progression of biomes offered a wide spectrum of resources to the Circassian people.

The Kuban River, a major waterway of the North Caucasus, was the lifeblood of the northern Circassian plains. Its broad floodplains, enriched by alluvial deposits, were exceptionally fertile, supporting extensive agricultural production. The river also served as a crucial artery for trade and transportation, connecting the interior with the Black Sea and beyond, although it also formed a natural frontier that was often contested.

Numerous other rivers and streams cascaded down from the mountain slopes, feeding into the Kuban or directly into the Black Sea. These waterways were vital not only for irrigation and sustenance but also for shaping the topography of the land, creating a network of valleys and gorges that defined the internal geography of Circassia and influenced the movement of peoples and goods.

The rich biodiversity of Circassia was a testament to its varied climate and topography. Dense forests, particularly in the western and central parts, provided timber, fuel, and shelter, along with a bounty of wild game. These woodlands were historically home to deer, wild boar, bears, and even the now-extinct Caucasian bison, providing important dietary supplements and materials for crafting.

The fertile soils of the plains and valleys allowed for the cultivation of various crops, including wheat, barley, millet, and maize, forming the bedrock of the traditional Circassian economy. The mild coastal climate was also conducive to growing fruits, nuts, and grapes, contributing to a diverse and self-sufficient agricultural base that supported a relatively dense population in certain areas.

Beyond agriculture and hunting, the land offered other valuable resources. Natural springs provided abundant fresh water, crucial for both human settlements and livestock. While not rich in major mineral deposits, the region possessed some useful materials, such as clay for pottery and certain types of stone for construction, though their economic significance was largely localized.

The geographical position of Circassia, nestled between the Black Sea and the

towering Caucasus, rendered it a strategic crossroads. For millennia, it stood as a bridge or a barrier between the vast Eurasian steppes to the north and the sophisticated empires of the Near East and Europe to the south and west. This centrality inevitably drew the attention of various powers, shaping its history as a contested territory.

This complex geography played a significant role in the Circassians' ability to maintain a distinct identity and a high degree of autonomy for centuries. The rugged mountains offered natural defenses, making it difficult for invaders to fully subjugate the entire region. Numerous fortified strongholds and mountain passes became scenes of fierce resistance throughout history, frustrating many attempts at prolonged occupation.

Conversely, the accessibility of the Black Sea coast facilitated interactions with various maritime cultures, allowing for cultural exchange and trade, even as it occasionally exposed coastal communities to raids. This dual nature of the landscape—providing both isolation and connection—fostered a people who were fiercely independent yet open to external influences, absorbing and adapting aspects from neighboring civilizations without losing their core essence.

The varied elevations also dictated settlement patterns. While some Circassian communities thrived in the fertile lowlands and coastal plains, others established themselves in the more secluded, defensible mountain valleys, developing unique adaptations to their immediate environments. This geographical fragmentation contributed to the development of various Circassian sub-groups, each with subtle dialectal and cultural variations influenced by their local terrain.

The very air of Circassia, imbued with the crispness of mountain breezes and the saltiness of the sea, contributed to the character of its people. The challenges and bounties of this diverse landscape demanded resilience, resourcefulness, and a profound respect for nature, values that became deeply embedded in the Circassian worldview and customary law, the Adyghe Xabze.

Even the aesthetic sensibilities of the Circassians were informed by their surroundings. The intricate patterns in their traditional clothing, the flowing lines of their dances, and the themes of their folklore often mirrored the natural beauty and power of their homeland—the soaring peaks, the rushing rivers, and the dense, protective forests.

The geographic boundaries of historic Circassia were broadly defined by the Taman Peninsula in the west, stretching eastward along the Black Sea coast to roughly the modern-day border of Abkhazia. Inland, the northern plains of the Kuban River formed a significant frontier, while the main ridge of the Caucasus Mountains defined its southern and eastern extent, often separating it from Transcaucasia.

The region's geological history also contributed to its unique character. The Caucasus

is a young mountain range, still tectonically active, leading to a dramatic landscape of steep slopes, deep canyons, and occasional seismic activity. This dynamic geology has sculpted a terrain that is both challenging and awe-inspiring, creating a dramatic backdrop for the human story unfolding within it.

The dense forests of the lower mountain slopes and foothills were particularly significant. These ancient woodlands provided not only building materials and fuel but also harbored wildlife, which was integral to the traditional diet and economy. The forest provided a natural cloak, offering concealment and sanctuary during times of conflict, reinforcing the defensive capabilities of the land itself.

The network of rivers, large and small, also profoundly influenced historical communication and movement. While major rivers like the Kuban facilitated trade, countless smaller streams and torrents created natural barriers, channeling movement along specific valleys and passes. This hydrological network was both a lifeline and a definer of internal regionality within Circassia.

In essence, the land of Circassia was a grand theater, its features playing a crucial role in the drama of its inhabitants. The Black Sea offered trade and contact; the mountains provided refuge and defined identity; the plains sustained life. This intricate relationship between people and place forged a distinctive culture, robust and resilient, prepared to face the many challenges that history would inevitably bring to its doorstep.

The rich vegetation, especially the variety of trees, was crucial for construction and crafting. Indigenous hardwood forests supplied timber for houses, agricultural tools, and even weapons. The availability of such resources underscored the self-sufficiency of Circassian communities, allowing them to thrive and build their society with materials readily at hand from their immediate environment.

The sheer scale of the Caucasus Mountains also meant that different parts of Circassia, though culturally linked, could develop with relative independence. The logistical difficulties of traversing the high peaks and deep valleys meant that various Circassian tribes and clans often operated with a degree of autonomy, their interactions shaped as much by geographical proximity as by political alliances.

The changing seasons brought dramatic shifts to the Circassian landscape, each with its own rhythm and impact on daily life. Harsh mountain winters blanketed the peaks in snow, isolating some communities, while the coastal areas remained milder. Spring brought torrents of meltwater and a burst of green, while summer ripened the crops and offered ideal conditions for mountain pasturing.

This inherent variety in the environment required a versatile and adaptable people. Whether herding livestock in alpine meadows, cultivating crops in fertile valleys, or

navigating the coastal waters, the Circassians developed a profound understanding of their surroundings, respecting its power and harnessing its bounty. Their intimate knowledge of the land was a key to their survival and cultural endurance.

The strategic passes through the mountains, though challenging, were historically significant. These were not just routes for local movement but also pathways for invaders, traders, and cultural influences moving between north and south. Controlling these passes was often key to regional power, making them highly contested points in the historical landscape.

The land's natural beauty, from the azure waters of the Black Sea to the formidable grandeur of the mountain peaks, was not just a resource but also a source of inspiration. It permeated Circassian folklore, songs, and poetry, creating a deep emotional connection to their homeland that transcends mere physical possession. It was, and remains, an integral part of their collective soul.

The interplay of altitude, proximity to the sea, and prevailing winds created distinct microclimates within Circassia, allowing for a remarkable diversity of agricultural practices and ways of life within a relatively small geographical area. This adaptability was a cornerstone of their long-standing presence in the region, allowing different groups to flourish according to their local conditions.

Even the soil itself, ranging from the fertile black earth of the Kuban plains to the stony mountain slopes, played a role in defining the character of Circassian life. Where the earth was generous, agriculture flourished; where it was lean, resilience and resourcefulness became paramount, influencing everything from dietary habits to settlement patterns.

The natural resources of the land also underpinned Circassia's self-sufficiency for much of its history. From the wood of its forests to the fish of its rivers and seas, and the bounty of its cultivated fields, the land provided the means for a vibrant and independent existence, allowing the Circassians to develop their distinctive culture without constant reliance on external trade for basic necessities.

The mountain forests were not only a source of materials but also a haven for traditional practices and a repository of ancient beliefs. Sacred groves, hidden within the deep woods, were places where Khabzeism rituals were performed, connecting the spiritual life of the people directly to the natural world around them. This deep reverence for nature was woven into the very fabric of their indigenous faith.

The contrast between the open, windswept plains and the secluded, often mist-shrouded mountain valleys created a dynamic geographical tension. This dual landscape may have contributed to the Circassian character—a blend of openness and hospitality, tempered by a fierce independence and a strong sense of private space

and individual dignity.

The presence of the Black Sea also meant that the Circassians were never entirely isolated. Despite the defensive nature of their mountains, they were always connected to a broader maritime world. This facilitated early Christian influences and later, the gradual adoption of Islam, as traders and missionaries utilized the sea routes to reach the Circassian coast.

The numerous natural springs and rivers provided not just drinking water but also opportunities for small-scale irrigation, which was crucial for their agricultural endeavors, especially in the more arid areas. These waterways were often sacred sites, their waters believed to possess healing properties, further cementing the bond between the people and their environment.

The sheer scale of the landscape also contributed to the Circassians' legendary horsemanship and martial prowess. The ability to navigate complex mountain terrain, often on horseback, for hunting or defense, became a hallmark of their society, directly influenced by the demanding physical environment they inhabited.

The deep river gorges and high mountain passes acted as natural barriers, often restricting large-scale invasions and allowing smaller, more agile Circassian forces to defend their territory effectively against much larger armies. This terrain played a crucial role in their ability to resist various empires for centuries, making Circassia a land renowned for its independent spirit.

Even the quality of the air, often described as crisp and clean, contributed to the perception of Circassia as a land of vitality and health. This environmental purity was likely a factor in the longevity and robustness often attributed to the mountain peoples, further tying their physical well-being to their natural surroundings.

The ecological diversity of Circassia provided a balanced ecosystem that sustained human life for thousands of years. From the rich fishing grounds of the Black Sea to the abundant game in the forests and the fertile soils of the plains, the land offered a generous and varied bounty, allowing the Circassians to develop a thriving civilization.

The strategic importance of Circassia was not solely due to its natural resources, but profoundly shaped by its geography. As a gateway between continents and a barrier between empires, its land was destined to be a focal point of geopolitical struggles, a fact that would come to define much of the Circassian historical narrative in the centuries to come.

Ultimately, the land of Circassia was far more than just a place on a map; it was a character in the story of its people. Its mountains imbued them with strength, its coasts fostered connection, and its valleys nourished their existence. This intimate

relationship between the Circassians and their environment formed the bedrock of their identity, resilience, and unique cultural heritage.

The constant interaction with such a dramatic and varied landscape meant that the Circassians developed an acute sense of navigation and an unparalleled understanding of their local topography. This practical knowledge was passed down through generations, becoming an integral part of their survival skills and their connection to the land itself.

The climate's variability also instilled a sense of preparedness and foresight. Adapting to the harsh winters of the mountains or the humid summers of the coast required planning and ingenuity, traits that became ingrained in the Circassian character and contributed to their ability to thrive in challenging circumstances.

The very stone of the mountains became a part of their identity, used in ancient burial sites and defensive structures. The dolmens found in the northwest Caucasus, indicative of a megalithic culture, speak to an early and profound connection between the people and the geological formations of their homeland, utilizing the very earth to mark their presence.

The abundance of water, whether from mountain springs, rivers, or rainfall, was a blessing, but also presented challenges. The seasonal flooding of rivers and the erosion in the mountains necessitated communal efforts for management and infrastructure, fostering a spirit of cooperation and collective responsibility within communities.

The forests, in particular, offered a degree of isolation that often allowed Circassian communities to preserve their traditions and governance structures with less external interference than those in more open regions. This natural seclusion fostered a distinct cultural continuity that persisted even as external powers sought to exert influence.

In summary, the geographic canvas of Circassia, with its majestic mountains, fertile plains, and strategic Black Sea coastline, was not merely a passive backdrop for the Circassian story. It was an active participant, a defining force that shaped their character, influenced their societal structures, sustained their economy, and ultimately contributed to their enduring spirit and unique cultural legacy.

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