

Circassian Corsets, ... a Fashion Craze, Amazons, Disposable Body Parts, and Ancient Circassians

A Quaint Tale Told in Quotes

[selected by Amjad Jaimoukha]

Адыгэ куэншыбэм и къежъапІэри и тхыдэри

Псысэ зыІуатэр Жэмыхъуэ Мыхьмуд и къуэ Амджэдщ

Circassian Corsets

Arrested development ... a measure of beauty

‘At the onset of puberty, girls were required to wear corsets (Kabardian: куэншыбэ, *kwenshibe*; Adigean: шьохътан, *schwex'tan*) in the form of short tight-fitting sleeveless vests made from red-morocco, leather or cloth and worn under the chemise. The corset was fastened tight with silk laces and covered the chest right down to the belt. Besides giving support to the body, it served to limit the development of the bosom area, as was demanded by the strict norms of beauty, among which physical symmetry was of paramount importance. Corsets kept being worn (day and night; when worn out, they were replaced by others of equal tightness) until the girl’s wedding night.

Hunter’s knife ... to unwrap the grand prize

‘*Consummation of marriage* — When eventually the newly-weds were left alone in their quarters, the bridegroom initiated the consummation of the bond by cutting the laces of the corset with his sharp dagger. This required high skill, and the infliction of any scratch on the bride’s body, no matter how small, brought a great shame upon the groom. The operation was complicated by the fact that it was interdicted for the bridegroom to see his bride in full glory in her birthday suit. It seems that even in conjugal relations restraint was a cultivated trait amongst the Circassians.’ – Amjad Jaimoukha, *Circassian Culture and Folklore: Hospitality Traditions, Cuisine, Festivals & Music* (Kabardian,

Cherkess, Adigean, Shapsugh & Diaspora), London and New York: Bennett and Bloom, 2009.

The Circassian's lot: Abstemiousness, surreption, and amazia

'The happy moment, midnight, having arrived, the bridegroom mounts his horse, and seeks his friend, who, in the interim, takes up his abode in the neighbouring woods. On being introduced to his bride elect, he draws his poniard, and instantly performs the ceremony, so peculiar to the whole of the Caucasian tribes of cutting open the corset that has confined her form from infancy.' – Edmund Spencer, *Travels in Circassia, Krim Tartary, & C. Including a Steam Voyage down the Danube, from Vienna to Constantinople and round the Black Sea, in 1836*, London: Henry Colburn, 1837. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.circassianworld.com/Edmund_Spencer.html> (accessed 30 September 2008). [Also available on Google Books]

Circassian corsets in vogue in the West in the early 19th century

Circassian corset ... a godsend to Europeans

'... and certainly nothing was ever so well calculated to display a fine shape to advantage as the Circassian corset, which has been patronized and recommended with incredible celerity by ladies of the highest distinction, who are unanimous in declaring it to be the only corset ever introduced that has in every way answered the encomiums bestowed upon it. The superior ease, gracefulness, and elegance which it gives to the female figure, are too obvious to need a comment; while, on the other hand, its beneficial effects upon the health are daily attested by ladies who rejoice in the success of an invention which has freed them from the tortures inflicted by whalebone, steel, &c. – 'La Belle Assemblée: Being Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine', October 1814, Published by J. Bell, 1815, p134. [Available on Google Books]

Fashion aficionados swear by Circassian corsets

'The Circassian corset has now become so universal a favourite, that no lady of taste will wear any thing else; our fair fashionables are astonished how they could so long have submitted to the torture of steel, whalebone, &c, from a mistaken idea of improving their shapes, a purpose which the

Circassian corset answers most admirably, while at the same time it gives to the figure that perfect ease which is the soul of grace and elegance: the only class whom we should expect to find fault with the Circassian corset, is the physicians, who certainly lose many a fair patient by its beneficial effects upon the health; joking apart, we are authorised in saying, that many of those complaints of the stomach to which it is so difficult to give a name, certainly proceeded from improper stays, and such ladies as have adopted the Circassian corset, have no hesitation in saying, that the use of it has entirely removed the spasms, &c, which they found so troublesome before.’ – ‘La Belle Assemblée: Being Bell’s Court and Fashionable Magazine’, November 1814, Published by J. Bell, 1815, p182. [Available on Google Books]

[**Note:** Whereas the principal purpose of the Circassian corset as used by the Circassians was to subdue the breasts, the Circassian corset in the West was used to augment and embellish the busts and cleavage, in addition to boosting the body’s stature: bereavement to Circassian men and a boon to English gentlemen]

Beauty at a high price

‘The crazed quest for beauty at any cost has led to some bizarre detours along the way. Consider, for instance, the highs and lows of fashions regarding a woman’s breasts. In ancient Greece and again in 14th century Europe, breasts were hidden and tightly bound. The ideal torso was a flat torso, the same ideal that re-emerged for the flappers of the 1920s and the mod models, like Twiggy, of the 1960s. Among the Circassian women of Eurasia – reputed to be the most beautiful women in the world because of their symmetrical features and their lily-white skin – a young girl was sheathed tightly in leather garments from before puberty until the day she was married. On her wedding night, the bridegroom ritualistically cut apart the leather with his hunting knife.’ – Robin Marantz Henig, ‘The Price of Perfection’, in *Civilization Magazine*, April 1996. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.nasw.org/users/robinhenig/price_of_perfection.htm> (accessed 7 October 2008).

Original Source on the Amazons

The father of historiography and ancient Circassians

‘It is reported of the Sauromatae, that when the Greeks fought with the Amazons, whom the Scythians call *Oior-pata* or “man-slayers,” as it may be rendered, *Oior* being Scythic for “man,” and *pata* for “to slay” - It is reported, I say, that the Greeks after gaining the battle of the Thermodon, put to sea, taking with them on board three of their vessels all the Amazons whom they had made prisoners; and that these women upon the voyage rose up against the crews, and massacred them to a man. As however they were quite strange to ships, and did not know how to use either rudder, sails, or oars, they were carried, after the death of the men, where the winds and the waves listed. At last they reached the shores of the Palus Maeotis and came to a place called Cremni or “the Cliffs,” which is in the country of the free Scythians. Here they went ashore, and proceeded by land towards the inhabited regions; the first herd of horses which they fell in with they seized, and mounting upon their backs, fell to plundering the Scythian territory.

‘The Scyth[ians]s could not tell what to make of the attack upon them – the dress, the language, the nation itself, were alike unknown whence the enemy had come even, was a marvel. Imagining, however, that they were all men of about the same age, they went out against them, and fought a battle. Some of the bodies of the slain fell into their hands, whereby they discovered the truth. Hereupon they deliberated, and made a resolve to kill no more of them, but to send against them a detachment of their youngest men, as near as they could guess equal to the women in number, with orders to encamp in their neighbourhood, and do as they saw them do – when the Amazons advanced against them, they were to retire, and avoid a fight – when they halted, the young men were to approach and pitch their camp near the camp of the enemy. All this they did on account of their strong desire to obtain children from so notable a race.

‘So the youths departed, and obeyed the orders which had been given them. The Amazons soon found out that they had not come to do them any harm; and so they on their part ceased to offer the Scythians any molestation. And now day after day the camps approached nearer to one another; both parties led the same life, neither having anything but their arms and horses, so that they were forced to support themselves by hunting and pillage.

‘At last an incident brought two of them together – the man easily gained the good graces of the woman, who bade him by signs (for they did not

understand each other's language) to bring a friend the next day to the spot where they had met – promising on her part to bring with her another woman. He did so, and the woman kept her word. When the rest of the youths heard what had taken place, they also sought and gained the favour of the other Amazons.

‘The two camps were then joined in one, the Scythians living with the Amazons as their wives; and the men were unable to learn the tongue of the women, but the women soon caught up the tongue of the men. When they could thus understand one another, the Scyth[ians]s addressed the Amazons in these words – “We have parents, and properties, let us therefore give up this mode of life, and return to our nation, and live with them. You shall be our wives there no less than here, and we promise you to have no others.” But the Amazons said – “We could not live with your women- our customs are quite different from theirs. To draw the bow, to hurl the javelin, to bestride the horse, these are our arts of womanly employments we know nothing. Your women, on the contrary, do none of these things; but stay at home in their wagons, engaged in womanish tasks, and never go out to hunt, or to do anything. We should never agree together. But if you truly wish to keep us as your wives, and would conduct yourselves with strict justice towards us, go you home to your parents, bid them give you your inheritance, and then come back to us, and let us and you live together by ourselves.”

‘The youths approved of the advice, and followed it. They went and got the portion of goods which fell to them, returned with it, and rejoined their wives, who then addressed them in these following words: “We are ashamed, and afraid to live in the country where we now are. Not only have we stolen you from your fathers, but we have done great damage to Scythia by our ravages. As you like us for wives, grant the request we make of you. Let us leave this country together, and go and dwell beyond the Tanais [the River Don, called ‘Tana’ by the Circassians; it flows into the Maeotian Lake (the Sea of Azov); the Maeots or Maeotians are ancient ancestors of the Circassians].” Again the youths complied.

‘Crossing the Tanais they journeyed eastward a distance of three days’ march from that stream, and again northward a distance of three days’ march from the Palus Maeotis. Here they came to the country where they now live, and took up their abode in it. The women of the Sauromatae have continued from that day to the present to observe their ancient

customs, frequently hunting on horseback with their husbands, sometimes even unaccompanied; in war taking the field; and wearing the very same dress as the men.

‘The Sauromatae speak the language of Scythia, but have never talked it correctly, because the Amazons learnt it imperfectly at the first. Their marriage-law lays it down that no girl shall wed till she has killed a man in battle. Sometimes it happens that a woman dies unmarried at an advanced age, having never been able in her whole lifetime to fulfill the condition.’ – Herodotus, *The Histories*, 440 BC. Translated by George Rawlinson, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1992. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://classics.mit.edu/Herodotus/history.mb.txt>> (accessed 30 September 2008). [Provided by The Internet Classics Archive]

Amazons: Different Interpretations

Ancient Circassian writings on the Maikop Slab

‘The women-warriors Amazons (*Amazones* in Greek) lived in a region of the foot-hills of the Caucasus and of the Sea of Azov (Takho-Godi 1991: 63), and their name was associated in my opinion with Circassian *myzh''o* “stone”. The latter term is written down on the Maikop Slab (the 3rd c. B.C.) with the help of the signs of the Linear B (Linear A) as *maza* (Rjabchikov 1998a: 23). It is an Indo-European word, cf. Latin *massa* “lump, piece” and German *Masse* “thickness, layer”. – Sergei V. Rjabchikov, ‘The Scythians, Sarmatians, Meotians, Russians and Circassians: Interpretation of the Ancient Cultures’, in *The Slavonic Antiquity*, 1999. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://public.kubsu.ru/~usr02898/sl2.htm>> (accessed 30 September 2008).

Amazons ... the Circassian connection

‘This myth, as short as it is, has clear parallels with the tradition of those female warriors of Ancient Greek myth, the Amazons, who were supposed to dwell in Scythia, the land that is now the Ukraine, Crimea and northernmost Caucasus. These were women warriors, who fought in a savage frenzy, who maimed or killed all male children, and who were finally killed in battle, particularly by the hero Theseus, when they tried to invade Athens. The name *amazon* had a Greek folk-etymology as : *a-* ‘not’, *maz-* ‘breast’, *-on* ‘being’, *i.e.*, the one without (a) breast(s), an allusion to the belief that the Amazons removed the right breast of baby

girls so that they would better be able to hold their bow and arrows in adulthood. A hypothetical Iranian word, **a-maz-an* ‘the-warrior-s’, has also been suggested as lying behind the Greek word. All this becomes transparent if one turns to the Circassian myth.

‘Lady Nart Sana, because of her realm in the forest, bears the epithet of ‘The Forest Mother’. In Circassian this is *a-maz-ahn* the- forest-mother, which is pronounced by the rules of Circassian as ‘Amazon’, precisely what one finds in Greek (the last vowel is long in both languages)! Furthermore, some scholars have taken note of an obscure link between Greek Amazons and an old figure of the Moon, called Moon Mother. This apparently marginal interpretation is the direct result of homonymy with Circassian pronunciation. ‘The-Moon-Mother’ would be *a-maaza-ahn* with *maaza* ‘moon’ instead of *maz* ‘forest’. By Circassian rules of pronunciation, however, this is pronounced in precisely the same way as ‘The Forest Mother’. Both are ‘Amazon’! Thus, the confusion merely reflects features of ancient Circassian pronunciation, preserved even today in the dialects.

‘We can now see the Ancient Greek myths surrounding the Amazons as borrowings from the lore of the ancient Circassians, undoubtedly by way of the Greek trading ports on the Circassian coast of the Black Sea. The medicinal and beneficent aspects of the Forest Mother, as well as the significance of her name, were lost to the Greeks, so that what has come down to us is merely the image of a race of fierce, enigmatic women warriors. The oldest form of the Caucasian myth most likely conformed to something like Lady Tree, wherein the procreative and intellectual powers of womankind are embodied in the vital image of the cosmos-encompassing tree. The Forest Mother would merely be an extension of this central figure, a specialization of the all-powerful form down into one concerned with fermentation, battle frenzy (induced by the resulting brew), and healing (initially of battle wounds). The tendency to represent intellectual and magical powers by a woman accords well with the high status accorded women in Circassian society. The ancient representation of this powerful goddess as a tree is more widespread, but in conjunction with the female motifs of the Caucasus one might see a Caucasian origin for tree veneration as well.

‘The next time one gazes upon the Christmas tree, with its boughs of lights and balls, or strolls through an impressive wood gazing upon mighty trees, one might pause a moment to reflect upon how these lovely

plants one seemed to humankind to be a living embodiment both of life-giving powers and of the very span and breadth of the cosmos itself.’ – John Colarusso, ‘Myths from the Forests of Circassia’, in *The World & I*, December, 1989, pp 644-51. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.circassianworld.com/colarusso_3.html> (accessed 30 September 2008).

‘There is even a sort of Christmas tree figure, Lady Tree, and a warrior “Forest-Mother”, Amaz-an, from which the Greeks took the figure of their women warriors, the Amazons.’ – John Colarusso, ‘Peoples of the Caucasus’, in *Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life*, Pepper Pike, Ohio: Eastword Publications, 1997. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.circassianworld.com/colarusso_2.html> (accessed 30 September 2008).

Circassians–Chechens ... Amazons–Gargareans

‘Across the Caucasus

Genetic relatedness between the Vainakh (Chechens and Ingush) and Hurrian-Urartian languages led to the hypothesis that elements of the Urartians migrated across the Caucasus after the break-up of their state, which is borne out by some writings of antiquity. According to Strabo (*Geography*, XI, V, pp 1-49), the Gargareans (*gergara* = ‘kindred’ in Nakh), presumably a proto-Nakh, or Nakh-related people, and the Amazons migrated from Asia Minor to the Eastern Caucasus, in the Keraunian Mountains, above (Caucasian) Albania, where they met Eobeans and Thracians who came from the west.¹ A legend has it that the Gargareans and Amazons, who lived in separate but adjoining regions, indulged in procreative rituals that lasted for two months on a border mountain, sharing the offspring such that the Gargareans kept the males, the Amazons the females. If the hypothesis that the Amazons were one of the elements that went into forming the Circassian nation, and the Gargareans the Chechens, then this cute myth might provide another clue on the putative connectedness between the two peoples.² –

¹ For more information on Gargareans and their written language, refer to Y. Jaffarov, 2001. The scholarly consensus is that Udi, a NE Caucasian language that is related to Nakh, is the nearest modern language to Gargarean and Caucasian Albanian.

² ‘Amazon’ is explained by some scholars as deriving from Circassian *maze* = moon. It is thought that the female warriors doubled as moon priestesses.

Amjad Jaimoukha, *The Chechens: A Handbook*, New York: Routledge; London: RoutledgeCurzon (Taylor & Francis), 2005, p50.

Taming the formidable female warriors: Matriarchy loses out to patriarchy

‘Historical familial structures

Classical Circassian society went through two phases of gender domination. There is some evidence that the society was initially matriarchal, later transforming to patriarchy when the physically more powerful males sought to overturn the tables. According to Maxime Kovalevsky (1893), there were some aspects of the customs and traditions of the Circassians that could only be explained by assuming an antecedent matriarchal society. He constructed a model of Circassian society in which confraternities were the basic units of social structure. These prescribed exogamous marriage, and the ‘bought’ bride became a communal possession. Circassian custom had it that a widow was obliged to remarry one of the brothers of her deceased husband. In Kovalevsky’s model, the widow was only able to remarry outside the group if she could redeem her price. Otherwise, any member of the confraternity could claim her. The offspring of the union were considered those of the deceased.

‘In the seminal tale “The Council of the Matriarchs” of the Nart Epic, we learn that:

... in the olden times, there was the Council of Matriarchs, which was made up of wise and far-sighted mature ladies. The Council discussed the day-to-day issues of the young Narts, and legislated laws and customs by which the youth had to abide in their mundane life. The Council members relied on their long experience and perspicacity in formulating relevant edicts.

‘In other tales, marking the transformation to patriarchy, the formidable Nart Nesrenzchach’e expressed his refusal to obey and swear allegiance to Lady Satanay, imploring the Narts to appoint a male leader.

‘Kovalevsky cited the legend of the Amazons in Circassian oral tradition as the record of transition to patriarchy. The Amazons and Circassians had been engaged in continual war. One day, the former resolved to enter

into parleys with the latter. The queen of the Amazons spent a few hours in Prince Toulmey's tent, and came out intent on putting an end to the futile conflict. She declared that war was over and she announced her betrothal to her erstwhile adversary. She advised her followers to follow suit and pair with Circassian warriors. They took her counsel—and there an end to matriarchal rule. In Kovalevsky's estimation, the temporary union between groups of men and women of different societies preceded the patriarchal custom of life-long marriage consecrated by vows of fidelity. He considered male domination as a later development in Circassian society.' – Amjad Jaimoukha, *The Circassians: A Handbook*, London: RoutledgeCurzon (Taylor & Francis); New York: Palgrave and Routledge, 2001, pp 164-5.

'Rottier adds: "even the women of this warlike nation follow their husbands to the field, not merely to dress wounds, or rouse the courage of the men, but to combat by their side." This certainly tends to prove that the history of the Amazons is not quite fabulous. Most readers are aware that Zonoras relates, that on the field of battle where Pompey conquered the Albanians, cuirasses were found, which could only have belonged to women; and Procopius relates a similar circumstance of a battle between the Romans and the Huns. But in more modern times some Cherkessian tribes having been repulsed in an attack on the people of Karatchai, several suits of armour were brought to the prince of that country, taken from the corpses of women who had fallen in the battle. "Each consisted of a helmet, braces, and a cuirass composed of small steel plates. A vest of woollen stuff, of a bright red colour, was attached to the cuirass, and reached about half way down the leg.'" – John Stuart Mill, 'Appendix B: The Vixen, and Circassia, April 1837', in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XXXI – Miscellaneous Writings [1827]*, edited by John M. Robson, Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1989. Online. Available [HTTP: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=238&chapter=53609&layout=html&Itemid=27>](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=238&chapter=53609&layout=html&Itemid=27) (accessed 30 September 2008).

'One of the best known legends of classical authors relates to a fabled nation of warlike women, deprived of the use of one breast by a process of cauterisation and known as Amazons. According to a well-

authenticated custom, still current among the Cherkes [Circassians] or Adighé [Adiga], the Abkhas [Abkhaz], and to some extent among the Osets [Ossetes],³ the growth of both breasts during maidenhood is artificially repressed by means of a leather corset. The object of this paper is to offer an explanation for the origin of the modern custom, and to show reason for believing it to be lineally descended from an older one anterior to the time of Herodotus, and having, therefore, a possible ancestry of twenty-five centuries.

‘In Asia, which at that period was separated from Europe by the river Don, the ancient Greeks knew of Amazons in two localities: on the banks of the Thermodon near Sinope, and on the isthmus north of the great chain of the Caucasus... According to Herodotus, Amazons were found among the Sauromatai, who lived between four and five days’ journey north-east of the upper end of the Sea of Azov. Hippocrates places the Sauromatai in Eurape, that is to say, west of the Don and of the Sea of Azov. But Scylax, in his *Periplus* of the Euxine, locates them much in the same position as Herodotus, on the left bank of the Don and contiguous to the Maiotai [Maeots]. Scymnus of Chios and the second anonymous author of the *Periplus*, place them in Europe, and identify the Maiotai with the Sauromatai, who were themselves a tribe of the Sarmatai. Strabo gives us three versions, which do not greatly differ. According to one, the Amazons were believed to live among the mountains above Albania (the lower valley of the Kur), but separated from the Albanians by the Scythian tribes of Gelai and Legai, and by the Mermadalis river (Terek?). Others maintained that the Amazons bordered upon the Gargarenses [Gargareans], who lived at the northern foot of the Caucasian mountains, called Ceraunia, by which Strabo meant the south-eastern end of the range. According to a third report, the country of the Amazons and of the Siracene was traversed by a rapid torrent called the Mermodas, which descended from the mountains and discharged into the Sea of Azov. ... There is, therefore, considerable ground for assuming that the Sarmatai, including the Sauromatai,

³ According to Klaproth [J. von Klaproth, *Travels in the Caucasus and Georgia, Performed in the Years 1807 and 1808*, London: Henry Colburn, 1814], this custom is confined to the Osetan [Ossetian] nobility, and it, together with the dress and other fashions, seems to have been adopted from the dominant Adighé [Circassian, Adiga] race. The Osets [Ossetes] are a comparatively small, not very important people, located in nearly equal numbers on both sides of the Great Chain. Nothing is known for certain when this Aryan-speaking population entered the Caucasus. To judge from various peculiarities in their language, it is probable that they migrated from the south-east, and that their earliest settlements were on the south side of the mountains.

Maiotai, and the many other tribes into which they were sub-divided, whom ancient writers aver to have been Caucasians, to have had racial affinity with the Iberians, to have been different from Scythians, in Herodotus' narrow sense of the word, and to have had Amazons among them, are now represented by the Cherkes [Cherkess] and Abkhas [Abkhaz], or Absne [Apswa], who occupy, or have occupied, much of the same geographical area, who are Caucasians...' – John Abercromby, 'An Amazonian Custom in the Caucasus', in *Folklore*, vol. 2, no. 2, June 1891, pp 171-81. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.circassianworld.com/pdf/Abercromby.pdf>> (accessed 7 October 2008).

Ancient Circassians ... Maeots, Sinds, Kerkets, Toretians, Heniokhs

'Iron Age

The Iron Age in the NW Caucasus began in the eighth century BC. Some archaeological finds have been attributed to proto-Maeotian culture, which is dated from the eighth to seventh centuries BC. Pre-Kuban culture is attributed to the proto-Circassian Maeots who inhabited the NW Caucasus and the steppes north of the Black Sea. Their civilization lasted for some 1,200 years. They maintained close relations with tribes in southeast Europe. The Maeot State was contemporaneous with the Greek colonies, which were established in the seventh and sixth centuries BC and lasted for almost a millennium. Some Greek records of this culture go back to that era.

'Maeots, Greeks and Iranian tribes

The first reference to the Maeots by an ancient writer was in the sixth century BC. The Maeots and the mercantile Greeks established trade links. The Greeks provided the Maeots with wine, olive oil, table-ware and luxury articles. The Caucasians, whose economy was agrarian in nature, reciprocated with cereal produce, meat, wool, hides, and slaves.

'Close relations were also maintained with the Iranian-speaking nations, like the Cimmerians and Scythians, who inhabited the northern Black Sea regions in the west and the Sarmatians who occupied the lands between the Don and Volga. Contacts go back to the eighth century BC, as can be evidenced by similarity in weaponry and horse-riding equipment of proto-Maeots and Scythians and Cimmerians.

‘Mutual influences persisted for a long time, which fact can be corroborated by the wealth of artefacts of the Maeotian-Scythian period that goes back to late seventh to fourth centuries BC, and to the Maeotian-Sarmatian period, from the last few centuries BC to the first few centuries of our era. Archaeological finds attributed to the first period in the Kurzhips, Kostromskaya, Karagodeuashkh, and other tumuli in Circassia confirm the accounts of antique writers on both the Maeots and Scythians. Relics of the Maeotian culture are found in the museums of Adigea, Moscow, and St. Petersburg.⁴

‘Some art treasures found in Maeotian tumuli were attributed to the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece and Persia, suggesting cultural and mercantile contacts. The chain of contact must have passed through the Greek Black Sea ports and the inland Maeotian towns.

‘In 480 BC, the Greeks established the Bosporan Kingdom on the eastern Crimea with a capital at Panticapaeum, modern-day Kerch. This unique State was ruled by Greeks and by local dynasties, mainly Maeotian and Scythian. Starting from 438 BC, when Spartocos I assumed power, the Kingdom pushed eastwards and subjugated the Maeotians and Sinds on the Eastern Shore of the Black Sea.⁵

‘In the late fourth century BC, two Sarmatian tribes, the Siraci and Aorsi, made their first appearance in the steppes of the North Caucasus. Soon after, they pushed south into the Kuban and occupied the lands on the right-bank. Archaeological evidence suggests that some time later they either crossed to the left side, or else established close ties with the indigenes. The symbiosis of the Maeots and Sarmatians lasted for centuries. Maeotian cultural borrowings were found throughout the lands occupied by the Sarmatians from the Ural Mountains to the Dniester.

‘**Sindika**

By the fifth century BC, the Sinds, a people kindred to the Maeots, had set up the magnificent Sindika civilization, which spread over the lower reaches of the Kuban, the Black Sea coastal strip between Anapa and

⁴ See A. M. Leskov and V. L. Lapushnian (eds), 1987.

⁵ There are fascinating accounts of the Bosporan Kingdom and the interaction of the Greeks on the northeastern shores of the Black Sea with native Northwest Caucasians and Iranian invaders in Neal Ascherson, 1995. The Amazons also get a fair covering in this work (pp 111-24).

Taman Peninsula, inclusive. A description of the Sinds and Sindika can be met in Efes, fourth century BC. The city-state lasted for two centuries until the Bosporan Kingdom absorbed it. It achieved a high level of social and economical development, with a maritime culture. Its capital was Gorgipp(i)a, present-day Anapa, which had a large port. This splendid city was an expansion of an Ionian trading settlement built in the sixth to early fifth centuries BC. Antique writers referred it to as Sindian Harbour. It came of age in the first half of the fourth century BC and survived for seven centuries until it was gutted by an apocalyptic conflagration in the middle of the third century AD.

‘Trade occupied an important place in the economy of Sindika. Handicrafts and artefacts bear testimony to the advanced state reached by this culture. Beyond doubt the locals learnt a great deal from the Greek colonists, but gradually they developed their own artistic identity. Sind sculptures and drawings were found in Taman. G. Turchaninov analyzed texts that are attributed to the Sinds, perhaps the first records of proto-Circassian writing.

‘According to a Greek scribe, the king of the Sinds, Ekatay, was deposed. Satyrus I, King of Bosphoras, restored him to the throne and gave him his daughter for marriage to cement their alliance. He stipulated that Ekatay must kill his first wife, Tirghetau, who was daughter of the Maeot king. Caught between the hammer and anvil, Ekatay chose to imprison his ex-wife, rather than face the ire of the mighty Maeots. Tirghetau used her cunning to escape. She married her father’s successor and convinced him to wage war against the Sinds and Bosphorans. The Maeot army devastated Sindika and upon reaching Bosphoras, Satyrus and Ekatay entreated for peace. Satyrus handed over his son Mithradates as a pledge. After a failed attempt on her life, Princess Tirghetau raised and led an army, which defeated Satyrus around 400 BC. The tyrant took his own life. His successor sent many gifts to the Princess and pledged his allegiance. Circassian folklore still keeps memory of this indomitable female-warrior.

‘Roughly in the middle of the fourth century BC, Gorgippus, after whom the Sindika Capital was named, incorporated the Sinds into the Bosporan Kingdom.

‘NW Caucasian nations’⁶

Scylax (Scylacis Caryand), who journeyed along the Black Sea coast in the sixth century BC, provided a description of the peoples of the NW Caucasus including the Maeots and Sinds. According to him, the Kerkets, the ancestors of the Zyghoy, lived in the strip of coastal land between Anapa and Ghelenjik. The Achaeans, who lived between the Kerkets and Heniokhs, roughly in the area around present-day Sochi, were the neighbours of the Bosporan Kingdom, which dominated some Circassian tribes.

‘Other nation-tribes included the Toretians who occupied lands to the south of the Sinds, the Dandari and Tarpeti on the eastern shore of the Sea of Azov, the Psessi and Thatei who occupied the upper reaches of the Kuban and its tributaries, perhaps as far as the Laba. The picture was completed by the Heniokhs, who formed a mighty mercantile state roughly in the area occupied by present-day Abkhazia, and the Colchians. Scylax was the first to mention the Kerket, which name, together with Sinds, was also mentioned in Orpheus’ poem ‘The Argonauts’ almost 2,500 years ago. Archaeological finds give credence to the theory that all NW Caucasian peoples, the Maeots, Sinds, Kerkets, Toretians, Heniokhs, were ethnically and linguistically related and that they were the ancestors of the Circassians and Abkhazians.

‘The Roman era

A subsequent hiatus extends well into Roman hegemony on the Eastern Coast of the Black Sea in 64 BC. In 65 AD, Mithradates escaped his vanquisher, Pompei, and spent the winter in Dioscurias, modern-day Sukhumi. He then travelled along the coast of ancient Circassia. According to him, the Heniokhs had four kings. It was Strabo in 26 AD who first mentioned the name Zyghoy, which replaced the old appellation Kerket. In his account, the Achaeans and Heniokhs maintain their states, but the Kerkets are replaced by the Zyghoys, their descendants. These nations had small sea vessels that could carry about twenty people, which the Greeks called *camaras* (or *q’wafe* in Circassian).

⁶ For detailed analysis of historical sources on ancient Circassian nations in the Iron Age, refer to AYTEK NAMITOK, 1939.

‘In the second century AD the Roman traveller, Arriani, recorded the presence of the Sanighs, the Abaski and the Apsiles, in place of their forebears the Heniokhs.⁷ These three nation-tribes were undoubtedly the forebears of the present-day Abkhaz and Abaza. The Zyghoy and Achaeans were replaced by the Zikhis, their progeny. All these peoples were under Roman domination, the emperor appointing the four reigning kings.’ – Amjad Jaimoukha, *The Circassians: A Handbook*, London: RoutledgeCurzon (Taylor & Francis); New York: Palgrave and Routledge, 2001, pp 42-5.

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⁷ Arriani undertook his voyage in 110 AD.

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