

## 19th Century Circassian Settlements in Jordan

Recent research has shown that Ottoman society in the nineteenth century was characterized by great changes in settlement patterns. The political and economic upheavals undergone by the Ottoman Empire led to far-reaching changes in the fabric of society, giving rise to new types of settlements as well as changes in the relations between existing groups. One of the characteristics of this period also appears to be the increase in migration within the Empire as well as across its boundaries. A reconstruction of the impact of such migrations awaits more detailed regional historical-geographical studies along the lines of Abu Jaber (1989), Lewis (1987) and Marfoe (1980). Case-studies of particular groups can also help clarify the emergent configurations of population and settlement that took shape in the last century and which continue to inform the social structures of today. Since an in-migrating group always faces the problem of finding a niche within the structures and established relationships of its new context, the study of such migrations and settlements clarifies not only cultural and social structural features of the immigrant group but also of the host society.

This paper presents the main features of Circassian settlement in Jordan in an attempt to understand the specific historical conjuncture at which the Circassians settled in this area and which, to a large extent, determined their future role and position.\* Circassian emigration from the Caucasus starting in 1864 will be briefly described, and then the process of settlement and incorporation into Jordanian society will be examined. The study of this case also illustrates an important aspect of the period, that of Ottoman state policy towards settlement and immigration.

**The Circassians: From the Caucasus to Bilad ash-Sham**  
The Circassians are one of the indigenous peoples of the north-west Caucasus and call themselves *Adyge* ("Men"), a name that appears in historical sources as early as the fifth century A.D. (Sarkisyanz 1961). The earliest full account, from the 16th century, describes a group speaking one language but split into various dialect-groups such as the

Kaberdey, Shapsoug, Bjedoug, Abzakh and others. Each group inhabited distinct, though contiguous, regions and were split into clans, phratries, and in some cases into highly-stratified princedoms (Allen 1970). The name *Adyge* designated the widest unit of self-identification of these groups.

The main factor that shaped Circassian society in the 18th and 19th centuries, and led to its eventual diaspora, together with other Caucasian peoples such as the Chechen who also formed settlements in Jordan, was the protracted competition between the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire over the control of the Caucasus and the Black Sea region which led this area to become a buffer zone between these two great powers (Baddeley 1908). The Russian policy of dispersing Circassians and settling Cossacks in their place, led to a wide-based participation in the war by the various Circassian groups. The nineteenth century witnessed a complex set of local alliances and conflicts as well as Ottoman, French and British intervention (see Baddeley 1908; Bell 1840; Berkok 1958; Shami 1982). However, the military confrontation with the Russians was hopelessly unequal. The final Russo-Circassian battle was fought in May 1864 and the process of emigration began.

### A. *The Emigration Process*

The Circassian migration must be seen as part of the Ottoman policy at that time, of encouraging immigration into Ottoman domains, both to overcome its shortage of manpower and also to increase its Moslem population in turbulent regions (Karpas 1972). The deportation of people from the Caucasus had already begun in 1856, and in 1860 the Russians had negotiated a treaty with the Ottomans, whereby the latter agreed to accept 40,000 to 50,000 Circassian immigrants (Karpas 1972). The process gathered momentum due to continuing Russian policies of dispersal, exile and expulsion, in addition to Ottoman inducements, religious considerations and economic factors (see Shami 1982; Traho 1956).<sup>1</sup> About 1.1 million Circassians eventually arrived and settled in Ottoman lands (Karpas 1972),

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<sup>1</sup>Also cf. Başbakanlık Archives, Cevdet Dahiliye I #3097 (1215H/1790AD) and Cevdet Dahiliye II #9935 (1243H/1818AD) for the earlier role of Circassian nobility in obtaining military manpower for the Ottomans from the Caucasus.



and oral traditions recall in song and poetry those who perished in ships that caught fire at sea and died from disease and exposure in overcrowded ports while awaiting resettlement.

The first area of resettlement was the Balkans where, in 1864, about 175,000 Caucasians were settled (Eren 1966). After the 1877 Russo-Ottoman war, these areas too were lost to the Ottomans and in that year alone 50,000 Circassians left the area, together with other Moslem groups, and were sent to Syria (Eren 1966). Consequently, the Ottoman Empire was subjected to large-scale immigration from two directions — from the Caucasus starting in 1860, and from the Balkans, starting in 1877. This flow of immigrants soon necessitated new state policies.

In 1860, the government established the "Immigration Bureau" with a large staff and budget, in order to organize favorable conditions to receive the immigrants (Eren 1966). Buildings were rented in Istanbul and barracks were built to house the newcomers. The various provinces designated to receive the immigrants were given instructions to allocate them free land, building materials and to exempt them from most forms of taxation (Eren 1966). Soon, however, the number of immigrants overwhelmed both the facilities provided by the Bureau, as well as the capacity of the provinces to absorb them. One disgruntled official in the southern Turkish port of Antalya reported that 9100 Caucasian immigrants had arrived even though he had earlier informed the Bureau that the province could only absorb 1500.<sup>2</sup> Reports and letters of provincial authorities show that the influx of immigrants was so sudden and fast that families became separated from one another and officials could not document from where each group was coming. As the provinces became unable to handle the settlement process, more and more immigrants tended to drift towards the cities, where they remained idle in coffee-houses.<sup>3</sup>

### B. The Syrian Province in the Late 19th Century

The basic issue that emerges about Ottoman immigration policy, especially after 1877, is the overriding concern of the state with agriculture. Thus the Circassians, as well as the other migrating groups, were sent to grain-producing areas of the Empire. When existing villages no longer could absorb the immigrants, the provincial officials were instructed to forbid any movement towards cities and to build new villages, complete with mosque and school, wherever arable and empty lands could be found (Eren 1966).

State concern with agriculture and rural settlement was not a new one since, even before this period, peasants had been penalized for leaving their land, and from the 17th century on, efforts had been made to settle the nomads of Anatolia and Syria and to engage them in agriculture

(Swedenburg 1980). The latter part of the 19th century, however, saw a renewed concern due to a congruence of interrelated factors: the loss of the Balkans which was the main agricultural region of the Empire (Karpas 1972), the changing role of the region in the world economy resulting in the rapid commercialization of agriculture and the penetration of European capitalist interests, and the attempts of the Ottoman state to re-assert its dominance in the Syrian province and to curtail the power of local officials (Ma'oz 1968; Owen 1981; Swedenburg 1980).

Among the concrete manifestations of this *Tanzimat* period, was land reform measures aiming at extending settled agriculture, the establishment of commercial routes and railways controlled by the central state rather than the local population, and administrative changes including the appointment of Syrian advisors to the Sultan (Baer 1969; Ma'oz 1968; Swedenburg 1980). As recent studies have begun to show, it was not only the Circassians who were settled by the Ottomans with the purpose of establishing firmer state control over agricultural production and taxation but also the Druze (Lewis 1987), the Kurds, Armenians and Assyrians (Swedenburg 1980), and a number of nomadic and semi-nomadic bedouin groups (Abu Jaber 1989; Lewis 1987). Furthermore, the land code of 1858 laws led to changes in land-use systems including the creation of new villages and the permanent settlement of areas that had previously been farmed sporadically (Baer 1969; Lewis 1987; Shami 1987; 1989).

The Circassians were settled primarily in the Aleppo region, the Golan Heights, in the Amman-Balqa' region, and in the Tiberias region of Palestine. Although the policy was clear, the actual process of settlement was often disorganized. The only branch of the Immigration Bureau was in Aleppo, and was overwhelmed by the number of immigrants (Eren 1966). At best, the Bureau seems to have provided transportation, located the immigrants on state (*miri*) lands, allocated them some money, and then left them to fend for themselves. Many immigrants waited years until settlement and often tried to go back to Anatolia.<sup>4</sup>

### Circassian Settlement in Jordan

In the area that was to become Jordan, various Circassian settlements began to slowly take shape. The in-coming groups varied in size and were led by those who had arranged for their departure from the Caucasus, or around whom they had clustered during their wait at the Ottoman ports. Some groups appear to have first come by boat to the Palestinian coast while others came through Damascus after spending some years in Anatolia.

A group of Shapsug were the first to arrive in 1876-8, and settled in the site of present-day Amman making their first

<sup>2</sup>Başbakanlık Archives, İrade 93990 (1308H/1883AD).

<sup>3</sup>Başbakanlık Archives, Ayniyat Defteri, #1139 (1290H/1873AD).

<sup>4</sup>Syrian Ottoman Archives, Ayniyat: Süriye-Beyrüt 906, (1290-1294H).



dwellings in the caves and ruins around the Roman Theatre. The Kabardey followed in 1880-1885 and settled upstream from the former group, and also established the village of Jarash. The Bjedug and Abzakh and more Shapsug, coming in 1880-1901 settled in Wadi as-Seer and Na'ur. After 1900 more Kabardey settled in Şweileḥ, Zarqa and Ruşeifeh. The very last large group of immigrants were also Kabardey and arrived around 1906-7 and settled in Amman, a little to the south of the Shapsug. They were called "muhajirin", or immigrants, by their "settled" compatriots, and that neighborhood of Amman is still known by that name. At present, the two groups are still occasionally referred to in Circassian as *Yerlij* (old inhabitants) and *Yerlij'a* (new inhabitants). At the same time as this last group, the Chechen also arrived and settled in Zarqa, Şweileḥ, and Azraq and Sukhneh in the north. Much of the areas the Ottomans allotted for Circassian settlement in Jordan, although uninhabited, were the summer watering grounds of the surrounding Bedouin tribes (Hacker 1960). The nearest official Ottoman presence was in the town of Salt and the region was mainly the stronghold of large nomadic and semi-nomadic Bedouin tribes. The changes in Ottoman rural policy described above had already led to a major increase in conflict between nomads and peasantry. The Bedouins had lost access to the central plains of Palestine as well as control of the trade caravans, and therefore began harrasing the peasantry (Ma'oz 1968; Swedenburg 1980). At the same time, peasants were being heavily taxed by the state and the new land-code stipulated that land left uncultivated for more than three years would be confiscated (Baer 1969). Therefore they could no longer afford their traditional means of self-protection, that is withdrawal into the mountains or to towns to escape Bedouin encroachment (Swedenburg 1980).

With Circassian settlement, the Bedouins were now also being denied grazing land. Since what the Ottoman government considered state land, and hence available for settlement, the Bedouins considered tribal land, clashes were bound to happen between them and the new settlers. According to some informants, at first the Bedouins were taken aback by the sudden appearance of a people who looked and spoke so differently. Also, the Circassians did not wish to fight their fellow-Muslims. Soon, however, conflict arose over water and pasturage land. Furthermore, the Circassians refused to enter into the indigenous peasant/bedouin relationship of paying protection money. Due to this, oral history records that fights mostly occurred around harvest time. The Circassians were able to hold their own against Bedouin attacks, and also sometimes received help from the small Ottoman gendarmerie at Salt (Hacker 1960). A kind of mutual respect for each other's prowess seems to have grown out of these clashes and soon a pact of friendship was conducted between the large and powerful tribe of Bani Şakhr, and the Amman Circassians (Mufti 1962).

**The Circassian Community at the Turn of the Century**  
 Estimating the number of the initial Circassian immigrants is difficult. Informants say that there were about 5000 in all. A study based on tabulating family names shows 233 families in Amman; 64 in Wadi as-Seer; 52 in Na'ur; 41 in Şweileḥ; 63 in Jarash; and 24 in Ruşeifeh (Haghanduqa 1982). Since Zarqa was settled by families who moved from the other villages, the same families would be found there. These 477 families were extended families, and remnants of clans. Therefore if one took the very conservative estimate of 10 persons per family, this would indicate a population of about 4770, of which 2330 lived in Amman. Supporting this, an Ottoman report from 1901 states that there were 400 *hanes* in Amman at the time (Salname: Suriye 1317H). These figures tally well with estimates of the Amman population in the 1920's as being between 3000 - 5000 (Hacker 1960), especially since there was an influx of Arabs into Amman by that time. Thus one could roughly state the Circassian population up until World War I as being in the neighborhood of five to six thousand people.

By the turn of the century Amman had grown, an Ottoman gendarmerie post had been established and Arab shop-keepers and merchants from Salt, Nablus and Damascus had moved in, at first renting rooms and houses from the Circassians. In addition, Circassians were transporting to Jerusalem, in their distinctive two-wheeled carts, the barley cultivated by Bedouins (Hacker 1960). Similar processes were taking place in the other Circassian villages in Jordan. Gradually the Circassians became integrated into local economic structures by being drawn into the network of internal trade controlled by merchants from towns and cities such as Nablus and Damascus.

In each Circassian settlement there were neighborhood leaders, each with his guest-house, which was the place for the men of the community to gather, discuss community affairs, mediate disputes, plan defences, and also to reminisce about the Caucasus and recount legends and folk tales. Although these local leaders regulated the affairs of the community, their resources were limited. Serious disputes had to be taken to Damascus, as did requests for aid, schools and mosques. In general, the stories recounted from that period illustrate that officials at Damascus were not very responsive to these requests, showing that local-level leaders had little power or influence with the Ottoman government.

The situation changed with the building of the Hijaz Railway in 1905. The railway was an important step in the attempts of the Ottomans to extend and centralize their power in the outlying provinces of the empire. The railway passed through Amman, the major Circassian settlement, and threatened an important source of income that the Bedouins had made through extracting protection money from the passing trade caravans. The Bedouins began to systematically attack the railway. Circassians were hired both to work in building the railway line and in guarding it from attack. This provided an opportunity for wage labor



for the Circassians, and also attracted a number of Circassians from different parts of the Empire who, for one reason or another, had not been successful in their first location of settlement. The railway track became the boundary between the Circassians and the Bedouins. It also became the dividing line between the Ottoman domain and that of "lawlessness". As one person put it: "If a man killed another (in Amman) he would cross the railway". Beyond the railway Bedouin territory began, where the Ottoman officials would not venture.

According to oral history, it was at this time that the official distribution and registration of farming land to the Circassians took place. Every *hane* of up to five persons was allocated 60 donums and larger ones were allocated up to 80 donums. The distribution was carried out by the local level leaders under the supervision of a Circassian official from Damascus.

These changes led to an increasing differentiation within the Circassian community. First of all, due to the railway, Amman gained importance over the other villages. Also the formalization of land ownership led to the emergence of economic inequalities. These inequalities were due, in addition to the usual vicissitudes of a peasant economy, to the fact that some who worked on the railroad could afford to buy more land than they were allotted while others chose, or were forced, to rely solely on their income from the railroad and sell their land. In addition, each settlement now was appointed a Mukhtar and an Imam which consolidated the power, as well as the wealth, of some local-level leaders. There was also some scope, though very limited, to obtain positions in the Ottoman bureaucracy. Those who were literate in Turkish and Arabic could be appointed as governors of provinces and sub-provinces and a government position began to be an important avenue for leadership. Some families began to send their sons to Al-Azhar in Cairo, or to schools in Damascus and these families began to rise in social status and wealth.

### Conclusion

These, briefly, were the main features of the Circassian community in the first decades of the century just before the geo-political context changed completely and a different set of factors began to operate. Initially, the social structure of each settlement in Bilad ash-Sham was determined by the specific conditions of its locality. In addition to the nature of Ottoman rule and state policies, the prevailing economic conditions shaped the relations that the Circassians established with the indigenous groups. Within the Circassian community cultural concepts of leadership, family, group solidarity and conflict influenced the type of social order that the Circassians attempted to establish,<sup>5</sup> hence also affecting their relationship with the other groups in the region. After the turn of the century,

economic and political changes affected the Circassian community as it did the whole of the population. Increasing opportunities of government employment and education led to more access to the Ottoman administration and at the same time to contact with Arab Nationalist ideas and links with nationalist movements in Damascus. By 1921, when the state of Jordan was established, the Circassian community was no longer an implanted immigrant group but one integrated into the local population and polity.

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<sup>5</sup>This important aspect could not be elaborated in this paper due to limitations of space. See Shami (1982) for an extended discussion.

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