

# The Circassians in Jerash

## Джэрэш кьалэм дэс(а) адыгэхэр

(Compiled and edited by Amjad Jaimoukha.  
Тхыгъэ зытхар: Жэмышьуэ Амджэдш [Амышц])

[This is an on-going project aiming for the eventual publication of a booklet on the Circassians in Jerash to document their history in the ancient town.

Suggestions and comments are most welcome.

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Jerash was an abandoned town when the Circassians chose to settle in its area in the second half of the 19th century. Plenitude of water, abundance of wooded areas, surrounding hills – were all physical characteristics of the environs of Jerash reminiscent of the geography of Circassia.<sup>1</sup> The boundary of the new village was defined by the Roman Wall to the east of the main ruins. A rough estimate is that between one thousand and two thousand Circassians found a new home in Jerash in the period 1878-1879.

In the beginning, the Circassians were the only occupants of the village. The Circassian settlers configured their new home town in accordance with the plans their ancestors had developed in the Caucasus with slight adjustments to take

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<sup>1</sup> A photo in the Harvard University Semitic Museum archives shows Circassian scouts (most probably in 1878) standing in the middle of the Roman stadium in the ruins of Jerash assessing the suitability of the area for settlement (especially the potability of the water) prior to the arrival of the main group (soon after). [The story of how an amazing collection of photos of the Middle East – which includes the photo in question – was found in 1970 is told by Will H. Rockett in his article 'The Bonfils Story: A Moment of Light', in *Aramco World Magazine*, Nov-Dec 1983; reproduced in *Al-Mashriq* (The Levant). Online. Available HTTP: <<http://almashriq.hiof.no/general/700/770/779/historical/bonfils/bonfils-history/bonfils-moment.html>> (accessed 6 July 2009).

account of the new situation.<sup>2</sup> The first settlers used stones from the ruins to build some of their structures (to the detriment of the old city). The houses and homesteads were built the North Caucasian way. They had a south-north orientation with the main entrance on the southern side. The guest-house was obligatory. A number of structures were devoted to kept animals and to store food and fodder. The Circassians planted lush orchards in their native style. The village was divided into quarters housing extended families of the constituent clans. The Circassians introduced bullock carts and water mills, amongst other innovations.

The main occupation of the Circassians was agricultural and animal husbandry. Each extended family was allotted (pieces of) land to cultivate with areas of about 80-100 dunums (1 dunum= 1,000 square metres, or roughly a quarter of an acre). Apart from the residential lots, each extended family owned cultivable plots of land and a share of the threshing floors (to the east of the town and bounded by the eastern section of the Roman Wall). There were also a number of artisans, including blacksmiths, carpenters and gold- and silver-smiths. Carpenters and blacksmiths manufactured agricultural implements and tools, including carts, ploughs, yokes, axes, pick-axes, shovels, etc. Carpenters fashioned Circassian tables (Іэнэ; *'ene*; round, small, three-legged) and cradles (гушэ; *gwsche*). Gold- and silver-smiths decorated weapons, belts and gunpowder cases (хьэзыр; *hezir*). 'Circassian émigrés brought niello work on silver to Jordan' (John Onians, 2004, p301).

Although each house had a guest-house, there was a number of guest-houses that were used as club-houses, where the (male) elders congregated (starting mainly in the early evenings) to spend time and to discuss issues of concern. Stories were told and songs were sung and critiqued. Younger (male) people were allowed to attend to learn the lore, but they were mainly passive receivers of the elders'

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<sup>2</sup> A diagram showing the plan of 'Circassian' Jerash was drawn by Muhammad-Ali Ramadan Marshen in 1976. It shows the Circassian quarters and their names and other salient features of the village, including water-springs (which had Circassian names, e.g. Qwndeit [Кьундет], and Psineshxe (?) [called 'Al-Qayrawan' in Arabic]), water-mills, the cemetery (the old cemetery was obliterated and a new one was allocated to the northeast, the piece of land being donated by Yismeil Shogwe), the hippodrome (not the Roman structure, but a field to the south-east of the village, outside the Roman Wall, where the Circassians enacted their varied and rough horse games), the sowing fields, the threshing floors, etc. I will try to scan the diagram and make it available on this webpage.

'wisdom'. Accounts of story-tellers and musicians (*jegwak'we*; джэгүакІуэ) are very sketchy, although it would be fascinating to reconstruct the cultural life that prevailed in the village prior to the 1930s.

Mastafa Ali X'wazch (Абезехе; Хъуажь Алий и къуэ Мэстафэ), who was a genuine Circassian minstrel, made rare audio recordings of toasts, tales and stories, which are still in the possession of his descendents. I was able to access this treasure-trove grace to the magnanimity of the great bard's daughter Suha X'wazch, the Vice-President of the Circassian Charity Association/Ladies' Branch. An hour's worth of Mastafa's lore has been made available online for the benefit of researchers and those interested in the history of 'Circassian' Jerash.<sup>3</sup> There were story-tellers among the first and second generation, but, as far as I know, none of their tales were recorded or written down. I know from my father (Mahmoud Kuchuk Yismeil Jaimoukha) that one of his aunts used to relate stories to him and his brothers in their childhood, including fantastic Nart tales.

In the early 1900s groups of Christian and Damascene settlers found home in Jerash amongst the Circassians.

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to <<http://iccs.synthasite.com/mastafa-xwazch.php>> for a journey into mastafa X'wazch's art and craft.

**The (almost) 90 Circassian clans that founded and settled in Jerash in the period 1878-1881 are:**

**Agashe (Агъашэ) (Абазэ):** One of the Abaza clans resident with the Kabardians.

Akamir (Акамыр) (?)

Arxest (Архэст)

Balhqer (Балькъэр)

**Beishto (Бешто):** (Literally: 'Five-Mountains' in Turkic; perhaps the clan originated in Bgiytxw [Pyatigorsk] in Northern Circassia)

Bekasch (Бэкаш)

Belagh (Бэлагъ)

Bigwe (Быгуэ)

Birs (Бырс)

Deniy (Дэний) (?)

Didu (Дыду)

Dighwzchoqwe (Дыгъужьокъуэ); *also* Heb (Хьэб) and Het'im (Хьэт'ым)

Dischek', Dischek' (Дыщэк'І)

Diydan (Дидан)

Dumenisch (Думэныш)

Dzihmisch' (Дзыхьмыш'І)

'Ex'wemix'w (Іэхъуэмышъу)

F'its'ex'w (Фыщ'Іэхъу)

Fomit (Фомыт)

Ghwbzhoqwe (Гъубжокъуэ)

Ghwk'e, Ghwch'e (Гъук'Іэ)

Heretoqwe (Хьэрэтокъуэ)

Hets'ik'w (Хьэц'Іык'Іу)

He'wpschi (Хьэ'Іупшы)

Hezhu (Хьэжу)

Jtim (Джтым) (?)

Katsu (Кацу)

K'efo, Ch'efo (К'Іэфо)

K'emp'are, Ch'emp'are (К'Іэмп'арэ)

K'esch, Ch'esch (К'Іэш)

Lhosten (Лъостэн)  
 L'igwasch'e (Лыгуашцэ)  
 L'up (Луп)  
 Mamxegh (Мамхэгь)  
 Marshen (Маршэн)  
 Masche (Мащэ)  
 Meldizh (Мэлдыж)  
 Meshiqwe (Мэшыкъуэ)  
 Miqwezch (Мыкъуэжь)  
 Mix'wezch (Мысхуэжь)  
 Nafsi (Нафсы) (?)  
 Nezeq (Нэзэкъ) (?)  
 Qalebate (Къалэбатэ)  
 Qalmiq (Къалмыкъ)  
 Qarden (Къардэн)  
 Qareschawe (Къарэщавуэ) (?)  
 Qart (Къарт)  
 Qashirghe (Къашырггэ)  
 Qazmih (Къазмышь)  
 Qwbatiy (Къубатий); *also* Hets'ik'w (Хъэцыкы)  
 Qwrshe (Къуршэ)  
**Qwschhe (Къушхэ):** (Literally: Mountain; the Kabardians referred to the Ossetes and Balkar as 'Qwschhe'; according to Mahmoud Kuchuk Jaimoukha, the Circassians of Jerash used the term for Ossetians) Most probably the Qwschhe are Kabardianized Ossetians.  
 Schawezch (Щавуэжь)  
**Schog'en, Schojen (Щогъэн, Щоджэн):** (Literally: Christian priest)  
 Sctim (Щтым)  
 Sebanoqwe (Сэбанокъуэ)  
 Serx'wesch (Сэрхуэщ)  
 Seyn (Сейн)  
 Shik'ebax'we, Shich'ebax'we (ШыкIэбахуэ)  
**Shikwe (Шыкуэ):** Kabardianized Abaza clan. A branch of the clan settled in Amman.  
 Shk'ax'we, Shch'ax'we (ШкIахуэ)  
**Shogwe (Шогуэ):** Many members of the Shogwe clan emigrated to the USA.

Shuts'ik'w (ШуцЫкІу)  
 Shuuat' (ШууатІ) (?)  
 Shuunik (Шуунык) (?)  
 Shuwizch (Шуужь)  
 Tazhg'e, Tazhje (Тажгъэ, Тажджэ); *also* Leshken, Leshk'en (Лэшкэн, ЛэшкІэн)  
 Thegheziyt (Тхьэгъэзит)  
 Thenax'we (Тхьэнахъуэ)  
 Theqax'we (Тхьэкъахъуэ)  
 Tighwzch (Тыгъужь) (?)  
 Tiqwe (Тыкъуэ)  
 Tirkw (Тырку)  
 T'ix'wzch (Тыхъужь)  
 Tsaghe (Цагъэ)  
 Ts'ivine (Цывынэ); *also* T'esh (Тэш)  
 Tubek (Тубэк, Тубэч)  
 Werezey (Уэрэзей)  
 Werq (Уэркъ)  
 Wetey (Уэтей)  
 X'imisch (Хьымыш)  
 X'wazch (Хьуажь); *also* Abezexe (Абэзэхэ)  
 X'west (Хьуэст)  
 X'wran (Хьуран)  
 X'wscht (Хьушт)  
 Yimik', Yimich' (ИмыкІ)  
 Zaniyle (Занилэ)  
[Zhemix'we \(Жэмышъуэ\)](#)  
 Zhenaq (Жэнакъ) (?)  
 Zhiloqwe (Жылокъуэ)  
 Zix'we (Зыхъуэ)

Nowadays, only a few hundred Circassians are left in Jerash, the majority choosing to remove to the comfort of Amman. A significant number of them emigrated to the USA, where they found a new home. The rump of the community decided to re-organise and reactivate their branch of the Circassian Benevolent Association in the early 2000s. A plot of land was purchased and a substantive building was erected in the east of the town. Help was forthcoming

from other Circassian communities and organisations, and from the 'expatriates'. It is expected that the Jerash Circassian Benevolent Association would be able to support its charitable and other activities.

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