

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH194921-933>



Research paper

Inga A. Druzhinina,
Cand. Sci, Senior Researcher,
Center for Byzantine-Caucasian Studies
Institute of Oriental Studies of RAS, Moscow, Russia
inga_druzh@mail.ru

Milana Yu. Ilyushina,
Dr. Sci., Leading Researcher
Institute of Oriental Studies of RAS, Moscow, Russia
aspirant_vf@mail.ru

Inal B. Kabardov,
Research Assistant
Center for Byzantine-Caucasian Studies,
Institute of Oriental Studies of RAS, Moscow, Russia
inal-kabart@mail.ru

**“THE LIFE AND COUNTRY OF THE ZIKHS,
CALLED CIRCASSIANS. A REMARKABLE ACCOUNT”
BY GIORGIO INTERIANO: COMMENTARIES TO THE TEXT**

Abstract. This study explores the medieval history of the Circassians and other Northwest Caucasus peoples through a novel perspective by investigating the interactions between the Circassians of Trans-Kuban and the Mamluks of Burji (1382–1517). The primary focus is on the examination of the writings of the late 15th-century Genoese traveler Giorgio Interiano. Interiano’s observations, captured in his “Remarkable Account,” shed light on the lifestyle, customs, and appearance of the Adyghe nobility during a significant period of Circassian Mamluks’ active visits to their native lands in the Trans-Kuban region, coinciding with the reign of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay (1468–1496) in Cairo. Interiano’s depictions align well with descriptions of Burji Mamluk traditions found in Arabic sources, suggesting a direct transmission of these traditions to the original carriers – Mamluks returning from the Sultanate. The article also examines the reasons behind the Circassian Mamluks’ visits to Trans-Kuban. During the analysis of Interiano’s work, texts from contemporary Arab historians of the Burji Sultanate were drawn, including al-‘Aini (d. 1451), Ibn Taghri Birdi (d. 1469), al-Sahawi (d. 1497), Ibn Shahin al-Malati (d. 1514), and Ibn Iyas (d. 1524).

Keywords: Giorgio Interiano; Circassians; Mamluks; Northwest Caucasus; Middle Ages

For citation: Druzhinina I.A., Ilyushina M.Yu., Kabardov I.B. “The life and Country of the Zikhs, Called Circassians. A Remarkable Account” By Giorgio Interiano: Commentaries to the Text. *History, Archeology and Ethnography of the Caucasus*. 2023. Vol. 19. N.4. P. 921–933. doi.org/10.32653/CH194921-933

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH194921-933>

Исследовательская статья

Дружинина Инга Александровна
к.и.н., старший научный сотрудник
Центр византийско-кавказских исследований
Институт востоковедения РАН, Москва, Россия
inga_druzh@mail.ru

Илюшина Милана Юрьевна
д.и.н., ведущий научный сотрудник
Институт востоковедения РАН, Москва, Россия
aspirant_vf@mail.ru

Кабардов Инал Бесланович
лаборант-исследователь
Центр византийско-кавказских исследований
Институт востоковедения РАН, Москва, Россия
inal-kabart@mail.ru

«ЖИЗНЬ И МЕСТО ОБИТАНИЯ ЗИХОВ, ИМЕНУЕМЫХ ЧЕРКЕСАМИ. ДОСТОПРИМЕЧАТЕЛЬНОЕ ПОВЕСТВОВАНИЕ» ДЖОРДЖИО ИНТЕРИАНО: КОММЕНТАРИИ К ТЕКСТУ ИСТОЧНИКА

Аннотация. В настоящей работе в новом ракурсе, в свете изучения взаимосвязей черкесов Закубанья и мамлюков Бурджи (1382–1517), рассмотрено содержание ключевого источника по средневековой истории адыгов и других народов Северо-Западного Кавказа – сочинения генуэзского путешественника Джорджио Интериано. Этот итальянский автор конца XV в. посетил Северный Кавказ, по всей видимости, в период правления в Каире султана ал-Ашрафа Каитбая (1468–1496), на время которого приходится один из наиболее активных периодов посещения черкесскими мамлюками родных земель и племен Закубанья. В своем «Достопримечательном повествовании» Интериано запечатлел образ жизни, обычаи, облик адыгской знати в то время, когда их родственники управляли одним из самых могущественных государств Востока – Султанатом мамлюков Бурджи. Наблюдения Джорджио Интериано хорошо коррелируют с описанием целого ряда традиций мамлюков Бурджи, зафиксированных в арабских источниках. Представляется, что укоренение в среде черкесской знати Северного Кавказа специфических мамлюкских традиций было бы невозможно без их трансляции непосредственно «оригинальными» носителями – мамлюками, возвращавшимися из Султаната. В работе рассмотрены основные причины посещения черкесскими мамлюками Закубанья. При анализе сочинения Джорджио Интериано впервые привлечены тексты его современников – арабских историков Султаната Бурджи: ал-‘Айни (ум. в 1451 г.), Ибн Тагри Бирди (ум. в 1469 г.), ас-Сахави (ум. в 1497 г.), Ибн Шахин ал-Малати (ум. в 1514 г.), а также Ибн Ийаса (ум. в 1524 г.).

Ключевые слова: Джорджио Интериано; черкесы; мамлюки; Северо-Западный Кавказ; Средние века

Для цитирования: Дружинина И.А., Илюшина М.Ю., Кабардов И.Б. Тарханство в средневековых Грузии и Армении: особенности закавказского феодализма // История, археология и этнография Кавказа. 2023. Т. 19. № 4. С. 921–933. doi.org/10.32653/CH194921-933

In the examination of medieval Circassian history, Giorgio Interiano's work, compiled at the end of the 15th century and published in Venice in 1502 [1, p. 43–52], rightfully assumes a major role as a primary source. Comprehensive research into the spiritual and material culture of the Circassians, encompassing their social structure, customary law, foreign policy, cultural and trade interactions (including the slave trade) with the countries and peoples of the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions, as well as an exploration of the ethnocultural composition of the population of the Northwest Caucasus, necessitates a thorough consideration of this source. Additionally, understanding the content and origin of historical ethnonyms such as *Zikhs*, *Circassians*, and *Adyghe* is inherently tied to an examination of Interiano's work. A separate point of contention arises in the investigation of the Kromuk region, as mentioned by the Italian traveler.

While extensively scrutinized by historians, archaeologists, and ethnographers, it may appear that this text holds limited potential for yielding fundamentally new information. However, the evolving understanding of the medieval past of the Northwest Caucasus, coupled with novel approaches to its exploration, enables a substantial broadening of the scientific issues that can be addressed using the information within Giorgio Interiano's work. Simultaneously, this underscores the hermeneutical law emphasizing the inexhaustibility of information inherent in ancient written monuments.

Traditionally, Interiano's text has been predominantly regarded as a source on the "internal" history of the Northwest Caucasus population. Its value lies in being an encyclopedic portrayal of the life, traditions, and activities of the Circassians, compiled by an eyewitness and contemporary observer. The "Remarkable Account" is particularly valued for its comprehensive depiction, though not devoid of fantastical elements and recognized "ethnocultural eclecticism" in describing certain rituals. It is noteworthy that this historical text was the first to document the ethnonym *Adyghe*, highlighting its significance in the scholarly understanding of the region.

Regarding the analysis of the foreign policy content of the source, the focus is primarily on the Circassians' relations with the Crimean Khanate, the Great Horde, and their role in the history of the Mamluk Sultanate. In the case of the latter, the discussion is confined to a specific passage in the text: "*Most of those sold are taken to the city of Cairo, to Egypt, and thus [happens] that fortuna turns them from the most pitiful peasants in the world, which they were, into the greatest rulers in the world and sovereigns of our century, namely, sultans, emirs, etc.*" [1, p. 48].

However, it appears that the source harbors a trove of information not previously explored in historiography concerning the influence of the Sultanate on the population of the Northwest Caucasus and potentially hints at direct Mamluk presence in the region. Conversely, Interiano's text unveils details that were insufficiently covered in Arabic sources regarding the impact of North Caucasian Circassian traditions on the life and culture of the Burji Mamluks. Before delving into the analysis of these data, it is necessary to clarify why such a formulation of the question became possible in the first place.

For an extended period, both in domestic and foreign medieval studies, the prevailing belief held that immigrants from the North Caucasus, brought to Egypt and Syria as military slaves, irreversibly severed connections with their relatives, land, and culture. Within the Sultanate,

it was assumed that their cultural code underwent a complete reformatting: they converted to Islam, acquired military skills, established new, pseudo-family ties within the *Khushdashiya* framework and with their master (*ustaz*), and adopted new, Turkic names [2].

This latter paradoxical circumstance partly elucidates why the ethnonym *Adyghe* found its first mention in the writings of Giorgio Interiano, an Italian author of the late 15th century, rather than in the works of his contemporaries – Arab historians of the Sultanate of Burji – although it seems that this ethnonym was known to them. In the medieval Arabic written tradition, the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus were typically classified as Turkic. For instance, al-‘Aini traces the origin of the Circassians, including the Alans (*Alas*), to Japheth, the eldest son of Noah and the progenitor of the Turkic peoples [3, p. 15, 26]. This classification can be attributed to the subjugation of the *Zikhs* and *Kasogs* (ancestors of the Circassians), as well as Alans, and other peoples in the Western and Central Caucasus by the Mongols, resulting in their lands becoming part of the Ulus of Jochi. The term “*Circassians*” is undeniably a polyethnonym that gained prevalence in Arabic and Persian written traditions since the 13th century, likely tracing its roots back several centuries earlier and first recorded by al-Masudi in the mid-10th century to the generalized term for the population of the Northwest Caucasus – *Kashaks*, which entered Mongolian sources as *Serkesut* and later appeared in Western European sources. Throughout the thriving Black Sea slave trade from the 13th century onwards, involving the Golden Horde, Genoese, Venetians, Bahri Mamluks (1250-1382) and then Burji Mamluks (1382-1517), immigrants from the Northwest Caucasus were collectively designated with a common polyethnonym.

It should be taken into consideration that natives of the North Caucasus (representatives of the Adyghe-Abkhaz peoples, Alans), as well as individuals from Transcaucasia (Georgians, Armenians), who arrived in Cairo adhering to a practice established during the time of Sultan al-Malik an-Nasir ibn Qalawun (1294–1295, 1299–1309, 1309–1340), were given new Turkic names, by which they became known in written sources. Consequently, in the official documentation and historical treatises of the Sultanate, these people retained, at least to some extent, the names assigned to them at birth and the self-names of their tribes from their “past life.”

Nevertheless, the “new life” of the Mamluks in Cairo did not signify a complete severance of all ties with their native land and culture. Mamluk community was stratified along ethnic lines, with members of different ethnic groups distinguishing themselves not only through the new names acquired in the Sultanate but also in the ranks and positions conferred upon them [4]. Ethnic self-identification and solidarity persisted as the central organizing principle within the Mamluk corps. Moreover, in the latter half of the 14th century, these principles emerged as crucial tools in the internal political power struggles between the Turkic Mamluks of Bahri and the Circassian Mamluks of Burji. Subsequently, they became instrumental in upholding the authority of the triumphant Circassian dynasty [5, p. 276–277]. This reality objectively mandated the maintenance of ties with native tribes.

Evidence of such connections has been traced from written sources [6; 7; 8] and is supported by archaeological materials [9]. The examination of these connections enables the identification of several primary reasons why the Mamluks undertook visits to the North Caucasus.

Special missions on behalf of the Sultan, with the most frequently cited mission in historical sources being *the transportation of relatives of the Mamluk nobility to Cairo*.

Conducting such missions not only ensured the performers a pathway to career advancement but also contributed to the consolidation of their position within the Sultan's entourage. An illustrative example is the transportation of the relatives of al-Ashraf Barsbay (1422–1438) by Kanim min Safar Khuja, commonly known as at-Tajir (the Merchant). Kanim, a Mamluk of al-Mu'ayyad Shaikh, gained his freedom, joined the Sultan's guards under al-Muzaffar Ahmad (1421), and, upon al-Ashraf Barsbay's ascent to power, was dispatched to the Circassian region to transport the Sultan's relatives [10, vol. 6, p. 200–201].

Kanim earned a particular trust from the Sultan, a prerequisite for being entrusted with such a critical task. Moreover, it seems plausible that this emir either hailed from the Northwest Caucasus himself or possessed intimate familiarity with the region. His responsibilities extended beyond merely locating the relatives of al-Ashraf Barsbay; he needed a measure of credibility and trust within those communities to persuade a group of individuals to leave their homes and depart to the Sultanate.

Upon his return from Cairo in 1426 or 1427, Kanim entered the service of the *dawadar* ("keeper of the Sultan's inkwell" – manager of the Sultan's residence). Under al-'Aziz Yusuf (1438), he was honored with the title of *emir of dozen*. Subsequently, he embarked on diplomatic missions to the Ottomans and Kara Koyunlu. During al-Ashraf Inal's reign (1453–1461), he earned the titles of *emir of forty* and later, *emir of a hundred* and *commander of a thousand*. Serving under al-Mu'ayyad Ahmad, Kanim assumed the position of a *watch commander*. When the *khushdash* (fellow soldier) of Kanim al-Zahir Khushkadam (1461–1467) assumed power, Kanim was appointed *emir of the council*, becoming one of the most influential figures in the Sultan's entourage. Eventually, in 1465, he attained the prestigious position of *atabeg*. Remarkably, Kanim's ascension through the Mamluk hierarchy was halted just one step away from the Sultan's throne – he passed away in 1466 at the age of approximately seventy years [10, vol. 6, p. 200–201]. It appears that Kanim's remarkable advancement to the pinnacle of the Mamluk hierarchy could have been significantly influenced by his acquaintance with numerous relatives of al-Ashraf Barsbay. These individuals, grateful to Kanim for organizing their challenging and lengthy¹ transition from the foothills of the Trans-Kuban region to Cairo, where wealth, high positions, and advantageous marriages at court awaited them, likely played a crucial role in his successful rise.

Disgrace and exile. An illustrative example of how a high-ranking Mamluk fell out of favor, was dismissed from office, and exiled to the Caucasus is presented by Ibn Shahin al-Malati (d. 1514), a native of the Mamluk environment and the author of the multi-volume work titled "The achievement of hope about the completion of the States" (*Nayl al-amal fi dhayl 'al-Duwal*). *Atabeg* Aleppo Kanim min Azbek (d. 1480) faced exile to the *country of the Circassians*, but was later permitted to return, regaining the title of emir in Egypt [11, p. 273]. The latter part of this narrative is equally noteworthy: if Kanim min Azbek's *was allowed* to return, this implies that while in the Caucasus, he maintained a direct connection

1. The Kanim's mission came at a time of intensification of the conflict between the Mamluks and the Dulqadirites (1337–1522), who controlled the section of the route along which people from the Caucasus were brought to the Sultanate.

with the Sultanate and received word of his rehabilitation in the eyes of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay.

The works of Ibn Shahin al-Malati and Ibn Iyas provide instances of Mamluks traveling to the Caucasus for *personal matters* and on *private orders* from other Mamluks. Thus, Kansukh al-Alfi, a guard of Sultan Qaytbay, journeyed to the *country of the Circassians* in early 1479, bringing along a considerable assortment of gifts, rare items, offerings, and money. It was reported that his purpose was both for medical treatment, as he was afflicted with ailments affecting his eyes and ears, and to escort one of the Sultan's relatives. Many among the Julban (a faction of the Sultan's Mamluks purchased directly by the Sultan himself), took advantage of this opportunity to send gifts to the Circassian region [10, p. 220]. Kansukh al-Alfi returned to Cairo in the fall of 1480 [12, vol. 3, p. 145; 11, p. 239].

Return of the Mamluks to the Caucasus (including after the defeat of the Sultanate from the Ottomans in 1517). A comprehensive analysis of archaeological, ethnographic, and linguistic data uncovers a discernible influence of Mamluk traditions in organizing power on the evolution of political culture among the Circassians, particularly evident in the political structure of Kabarda [13].

Moreover, historical sources allow to trace additional reasons, beyond the slave trade, prompting the arrival of Circassians from Trans-Kuban to the Sultanate, and we can talk here mainly only about representatives of the nobility.

Reunion with relatives. At the end of 1472 Cairo welcomed al-Ashraf Qaytbay's sister, Jantin, who arrived from the *country of Circassians*. She was accompanied by her son and Circassian women [12, vol. 3, p. 78; 11, p. 53].

Similarly, from the Circassian region, Qasbay arrived to his son Janibek Fakih, serving as the *emir of arms* from 1475 until his death in 1478. Chroniclers noted that Qasbay, though advanced in years, had less gray hair than his son. Qasbay passed away in Cairo during the plague epidemic in 1477 [12, vol. 3, p. 121; 11, p. 182].

While the arrival of the Sultan's family members could be of political significance, the elderly Qasbay's arrival in the Sultanate seemingly held no political weight or consequences.

Conclusion of matrimonial unions. On January 16, 1450, Sultan al-Zahir Jaqmaq married Javan Suvar, a Circassian and daughter of Qurtbay. Qurtbay and his daughter had arrived in Cairo from the *country of Circassians* shortly before this event [11, vol. 5, p. 296].

These instances demonstrate the undeniable influence of the Mamluk factor on various facets of life in the Northwest Caucasus, particularly on the lives of the local nobility. Interiano's visit to the Caucasus seemingly occurred during the reign of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay in Cairo. The unprecedented number of relatives of this Sultan transported to Cairo mentioned in historical sources [6, p. 61] indirectly indicates the heightened frequency of Mamluks' visits to the North Caucasus during his reign. In this context, Interiano's portrayal of the lifestyle, customs, and appearance of the Adyghe nobility in his "Remarkable Account" is of particular interest. This source provides insights into the life of the North Caucasian Circassians during a period when their relatives held sway over one of the most formidable states in the East – the Mamluk Sultanate Burji.

The organization of power. Interiano notes that Circassians live “*in villages and in the whole country there is not [a single] city or fortified place with walls, and their largest and best settlement is a small valley in the interior of the country, called Kromuk, which has the best location and is more populated than others.*” [1, p. 47]. This “country of Kremukh” is also mentioned in the “Journey to Tana of Josaphat Barbaro, a Venetian nobleman,” a mid-15th-century source, where it is ruled by a sovereign named Biberdi, meaning “given by God,” the son of Kertibey, i.e. “true ruler.” Barbaro describes Kremukh as “*consisting of several villages, capable of fielding up to 2000 horsemen when needed, and characterized by forests and fertile plains irrigated by numerous rivers*” [1, p. 42]. Mamluk historians of the 15th century also make mention of the Karmuk region and its rulers [3, p. 28–29]. A comparison of information from Italian and Arab sources suggests that the *country of Circassians* comprised multiple such territories, and in the largest of them during the 14th–15th centuries, power was inherited.

From ethnographic materials, we know of another form of power and societal organization among the Circassians — *men’s unions* grounded in blood feuds and mutual assistance [14]. In the Adyghe tradition, this is known as *liakuelesh* (derived from “liakue” and “lesh,” meaning “*strong family*”), encompassing not only blood relatives but also male brothers [13]. While written sources document male unions in the Northwest Caucasus relatively late, archaeological finds trace them back to the 11th–12th centuries, a period when optimal conditions for the development of this social structure established in the region. This era marked a time of relatively independent existence for the local population after two centuries of subjugation to the Khazar Kaganate. During this period, the inhabitants of the country of Kasa paid tribute to the Khazars and were on the verge of submitting to the Golden Horde khans.

With the shift of power in the Sultanate to the Circassian Mamluks, the significance of male unions in the Northwest Caucasus should have amplified. This region under the Burjits not only served as a constant source of military strength supplied to Cairo, enabling the Mamluks to address foreign policy issues and maintain authority in the Sultanate, but also provided the human resources engaged in the intra-factional struggles within the Mamluk corporation. The internal political strife in the Sultanate, whether directly or indirectly, influenced the social relations of the North Caucasian Circassians, impacting their individual families and clans. It is evident that a single type of human resource alone would not have sufficed for the successful conduct of intra-factional struggles in the Sultanate. Consequently, ties based on artificial kinship, such as male unions and *atalychestvo* (more on this below), assumed particular importance.

It is evident that *liaquelesh*, alongside the relatives of the Circassian-Mamluk who remained in the Caucasus, holding influential positions in the Sultanate, garnered support and served as conduits for his influence in the Caucasus. The coexistence of blood relatives and opposing Mamluk emirs on the same territory may have contributed to the seemingly anarchic scenario described by Interiano: “*Among the nobles, there are many who have vassals, and all live without any dependence on each other and do not want to recognize any ruler over themselves other than the Lord God, and they have neither judges nor any written laws. Strength or ingenuity, or an arbitration court, resolves disputes between them*” [1, p. 48].

Beliefs. According to sources, notably Giorgio Interiano's one, the Circassians of the 15th century were under the care of the Church of the Diocese of Zikhs. Interiano describes their religious practices: "*They profess the Christian religion and have priests according to the Greek rite. Baptism is accepted only upon reaching the age of eight, and they baptize several people at a time with a simple sprinkling of holy water, and the priest pronounces a short blessing.*" A particularly noteworthy aspect is the characterization of the Christian beliefs of the nobility: "*Nobles do not enter the temple until the age of sixty, for, living, like all of them, by robbery, they consider this unacceptable, so as not to desecrate the churches. After this period, or about that time, they leave robbery and then begin to attend divine services, which in youth they listen to only at the door of the church and without dismounting from the horse*" [1, p. 47].

Attempts to Christianize the tribes of the Northwest Caucasus date back to the 6th century, initiated by Byzantium with the establishment of the Zikh diocese within the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The mission's endeavors were more successful in the North-Eastern Black Sea region, the land of the Zikhs, though the Christian faith's position remained relatively weak here. The inhabitants of the Eastern Trans-Kuban region were also influenced by the Alan diocese (10th century) and later by the metropolis in Constantinople, albeit with less success in Christianizing the local tribes. With the arrival of Italian colonists in the region, efforts were made to promote Catholicism among the Circassians [15].

In general, both archaeological materials and Interiano's text suggest the superficial nature of the Christianization of the Circassians in the 15th century. This process was largely and traditionally influenced by historical circumstances, much like the adoption of Islam by some Circassians during the Ottoman conquest of the North-Eastern Black Sea region.

The influence of Islam on the Circassians of the 15th century is a scarcely studied subject. The question was first addressed as an independent scientific problem, utilizing archaeological materials, particularly in the context of examining Mamluk influence on the tribes of the Northwest Caucasus [9]. Written sources provide information about the conversion of relatives of noble Burjits to Islam after their relocation to the Sultanate. For instance, Anas, the father of Barquq, embraced Islam. All the arriving relatives of Juluban, the wife of Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay, undertook Hajj with her in 1431 [8, p. 100]. Qurtbay and his daughter, the bride of Sultan al-Zahir Jakmak, converted to Islam upon arriving in Cairo [16, vol. 1, p. 170]. This information suggests that the mentioned representatives of the Circassian nobility were not Islamized before their arrival in the Sultanate.

Meanwhile, an investigation of one of the mounds near the Belorechenskaya stanitsa revealed a Muslim burial of a warrior dating back to the 15th century (mound 6, excavations by N.I. Veselovsky in 1906). The burial lacked inventory, and the deceased was placed in a simple grave pit, with the body oriented to the west and the skull resting on the right temple. Notably, the adherence to burial canon suggests that the ritual was conducted by Muslims.

An intriguing discovery was made in the most opulent female burial in Belorechenskaya (mound 10, excavations of 1896). A silk bag with earth was found near the deceased's belt, interpreted by N.I. Veselovsky as possibly taken "as a souvenir of a visit to Mecca or some other Muslim shrine." In the same complex, there was a wooden box adorned with carvings,

a gold belt with an Arabic inscription, a figured amulet, and other items of luxurious funeral furnishings [9, p. 222].

The regular pilgrimages of the sultans' senior wives to Mecca, surrounded by their retinue and thousands of pilgrims, were events of national importance that showcased the greatness of the Sultanate, the strength of the Mamluks' power, and their commitment to Islam [17]. It is plausible that the noble Circassian woman from Trans-Kuban, whose burial included a bag of holy soil, lived in the Sultanate for some time and participated in one of these pilgrimages.

On the contrary, the only reliably known burial of a Mamluk [18], and hence a Muslim, in the Kuban region was conducted according to a local pagan rite. These findings suggest that there were more adherents of Islam in the Northwest Caucasus than can be deduced from the number of burials performed according to Islamic canons.

In this context, Interiano's report on polygamy among the Adyghe nobility stands out: "*It often happens among nobles that relatives kill each other along with most of their brothers. And as soon as one of the brothers dies, the next night the other takes the widow, his daughter-in-law, for they are even allowed to have several wives, who are all considered legitimate*" [1, p. 48]. This observation highlights the legalized status of polygamy, a practice impossible in the context of Christian culture and unnecessary in the pagan paradigm.

Notably, sites of Christianity and Islam emerge in the Trans-Kuban region on the same territory and in the same historical period. Consequently, the Circassian society, regarding the influence of external forces (the Golden Horde, the Italian colonies of the Black Sea region, the Mamluk Sultanate of Burji), was not homogeneous. Especially from the 15th century, in the context of the weakening of the Golden Horde and increased competition for influence in this region, external players – Golden Horde aristocrats, Genoese and Venetian merchants (represented by individuals such as Giosafat Barbaro and partly Giorgio Interiano himself), Mamluk sultans, and emirs – pursued their interests by relying on specific individuals and individual intra-social groups, rather than the entire population of the Northwest Caucasus in general. The archaeological evidence aligns well with this scenario: the Belorechenskaya mounds, rich in Syrian and Egyptian imports, are situated away from overland trade routes and ports, particularly the main markets and centers of the Italian colonies like Matregi, Caffa, Sugdea, and Azak. Additionally, the uniqueness of household and funerary sites in the northeastern periphery of the provincial-Byzantine Crimean-Taman urban Christian culture, coupled with the diverse ethnocultural makeup of the population in the Lower Kuban region during the 14th–15th centuries, has been repeatedly highlighted. The influence of external cultural centers on the Northwest Caucasus tribes did not establish impenetrable boundaries around settlements or regions of the *country of Circassians* loyal to them, allowing for the infiltration of cultural traditions from competing sources. The impact of the Burji Mamluk Sultanate on a specific faction of the Circassians, particularly those related to the rulers of Egypt and Syria, becomes evident within the distribution zone of the Belorechenskaya mounds. This likely accounts for the observable disparity in living conditions between Kremukh and the rest of the Circassian region, a distinction noted by Interiano. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the sole Christian church [15, p. 57] identified to date in the Trans-Kuban region dated 14th–15th centuries is situated in the distribution area of the Belorechenskaya mounds, potentially corresponding to the church mentioned by Interiano. Among the burials

of the Belorechenskaya nobility, distinctive complexes enriched with Western European imports were identified.

Interiano's text even more clearly traces the influence of Burji Mamluk traditions on the life, occupations and social status of the Circassian nobility.

Equestrian culture. *“Nobility enjoys great honor among others and spend a significant part of their time on horseback. They do not tolerate their subjects keeping horses. If, by chance, a vassal manages to raise a foal, the nobleman promptly claims it, offering bulls in exchange with the remark: “This, not the horse, is more suitable for you”* [1, p. 47]. Such emphasis on equestrianism and the social ideal of the horseman in Circassian nobility subculture [19] can be interpreted, in part, through the lens of the influence of *furusiyya* traditions. *Furusiyya* constitutes a body of knowledge related to equestrianism, evolving from a fusion of traditions and teachings from diverse equestrian and military cultures in the medieval East. The pinnacle of warrior training within the *furusiyya* system was exemplified by the Mamluks [20, p. 234–237].

The exclusive and caste-like nature of the role of the horseman, as observed by Interiano in the context of the Circassians of the Northwest Caucasus, corresponds to the historical practice of imposing restrictions on the sale of horses to non-Mamluks during the Burji Sultanate. A decree enforcing such a prohibition was issued in January 1429, under the rule of Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay [21, p. 54; 13, p. 239].

Gifts of clothing. Describing the morals and customs of the nobility, Interiano points out that they *“highly praise generosity and willingly give all their property, with the exception of horses and weapons. And as for their clothing, here they are not only generous, but [simply] wasteful, and for this reason it turns out that they are for the most part worse dressed than their subjects”* [1, p. 49]. The tradition of presenting expensive clothing to rulers has deep historical roots, and in the context of the Burji Sultanate [21, p. 56–57], it served as a symbolic expression of power, a means of displaying favor, a form of reward, and a political language.

Interestingly, the red color, which was preferred by the Mamluk emirs [21, p. 80, 86], “was common” among noble Circassians [1, p. 50].

A remarkable cultural commonality between the Trans-Kuban Circassians and the Mamluks is their reverence for cups made of precious metals. Interiano writes: *“In their houses one can see massive golden cups, valued from thirty to five hundred ducats (I’m talking here about the nobility), alongside silver ones, from which they drink with the greatest solemnity, with which they decorate this ceremony more than any other rituals. They drink constantly for the glory of God, and in the name of saints, and for the health of relatives, and in honor of the memory of deceased friends, and in memory of some important and wonderful feats, and they drink with great solemnity and reverence, as if performing a sacred rite, always with bare head as a sign of the highest humility”* [1, p. 49].

Cups and ladles made of gold and silver, dating back to the 13th–14th centuries, were emblematic attributes of the nomadic culture of the Mongols. In the steppes of Eastern Europe, more than 30 burial complexes have been discovered with prestigious vessels, symbolizing the affiliation of the deceased to the clan and tribal aristocracy of the Golden

Horde [22, p. 275–289]. The significance of such vessels in rituals and various ceremonies, particularly during feasts, within the states of the Chinggisids was deeply embedded in the social sign system of their vassal territories. Similar to the Sultanate under the Mamluks of the Turkic Bahri dynasty, this tradition was introduced to the Northwest Caucasus during the era of the Golden Horde. Prestigious metal vessels are a common discovery in elite burials of the Trans-Kuban region during the 14th–15th centuries. In the Belorechenskaya mounds alone, 66 gold and silver cups, ladles, and goblets were unearthed. However, their significance and role in the funeral rites of the Circassians took on distinct local meanings, reflected in the specific placement of these objects in burials – near or under the skull, close to or beneath the hands, or at the knees. Another difference is noteworthy: in elite burials of the Trans-Kuban region during the 14th–15th centuries, silver and gold vessels are not discovered as solitary items, as seen in the burials of nomads from the 13th–14th centuries. Instead, they are found in groups of 2–3 or more. This may suggest a certain “devaluation” of the symbolic significance of these prestigious objects among the Circassians, emphasizing their role primarily as markers of material wealth.

It should also be noted that among the prestigious vessels discovered in the Belorechenskaya mounds, only one silver cup (mound 3, excavations of 1906) finds direct analogies to the bowls depicted on the Mamluk coats of arms.

Of particular interest are the traditions of the Circassians in the Northwest Caucasus, which were carried to the territory of the Sultanate and retained their significance there. In the scientific literature, attempts have been made to trace examples of this influence [see, for example, 6, p. 1–18], but this issue remains relevant and requires special in-depth research. Staying within the framework set by Interiano, we will highlight only one instance, which may be of fundamental importance in raising questions about the influence of interpersonal, inter-clan, and intra-clan relations that developed among the Circassians in the Kuban on the formation and development of connections within the Burji Mamluk corporation. More broadly, it sheds light on the study of intra-social relations of the Caucasian Circassians as a factor that had a certain impact on the inter-factional struggle of the Mamluks in the 15th century. The means or method of acquiring artificial kinship, and thus establishing new social connections, among the Circassians was the custom of *atalychestvo*. Interiano notes: “As soon as the son of a noble turns two or three years old, he is given to the care of one of the servants” [1, p. 48]. One of the earliest mentions of this custom among the Circassians is found in Arabic sources. Qurmush al-Zahiri Barquq, also known as al-A’war (d. 1436), belonged to al-Zahir Barquq (1382–1399) and rose to the rank of *emir of a hundred* and *commander of a thousand*. After the death of Sultan al-Mu’ayid Shaikh (1412–1421), he joined the ranks of atabeg Janibek al-Sufi and refused to switch allegiance to Barsbay, who had seized power. He declared that he “carried Janibek on his shoulders” and raised him as a son in the *country of the Circassians* [23, vol. 9, p. 64–65; 8, vol. 10, p. 220–221].

Concluding the commentary on the excellent source “Remarkable Account” by Giorgio Interiano, two significant circumstances require attention. Firstly, the depiction of the life, activities, and customs of the Circassians in the Northwest Caucasus, especially their nobility, aligns well with the descriptions of certain traditions of the Burji Mamluks as recorded by Arab medieval authors. It appears that the integration of specifically Mamluk traditions

among the Circassian nobility would have been implausible without direct transmission by the “original” carriers – the Mamluks returning from the Sultanate. Secondly, the materials scrutinized in this article suggest that the destiny and career path of Circassians who migrated to the Sultanate were influenced significantly not only by the *fortuna* mentioned by Interiano but also by their origin, the status and position of their kin, and the connections that permeated the socio-political life in the *country of Circassians*, on the one hand, and the presence of consanguinity with members of the closed group comprising the ruling class of the Sultanate, on the other.

Acknowledgement. The study was conducted with the financial support of the Russian Science Foundation, project No. 23-18-00869, <https://rscf.ru/project/23-18-00869/>.

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Received 13.06.2023
Accepted 28.07.2023
Published 15.12.2023

Поступила в редакцию 13.06.2023 г.
Принята в печать 28.07.2023 г.
Опубликована 15.12.2023 г.