CHAPTER ONE

PROLEGOMENON

No one can say exactly how long there has been an interest in the peoples of the Caucasus. Judging from the epigraphs presented at the beginning of the book, though, we might guess a very long time. Nevertheless, knowledge of the Caucasus in the modern era has been slow to emerge, in part due to the geopolitics of the empires and nation states surrounding it. The 1920s witnessed a division of the world into realms of economic influence and intellectual discourse with the nascent Iron Curtain as its border. Throughout the existence of the Soviet Union, anthropological research was conducted in all parts of the Caucasus by local and Russian archaeologists, linguists, and sociocultural historians. Monographs on Ossetian, Khinalug, Lak, and Circassian languages were published, and archaeological sites of great importance such as Shengavit, Vani, and Maikop were excavated. Thankfully, even after the Second World War, the doors between the two worlds were not slammed shut, although at times it was hard to squeeze through them.

Soviet archaeologists and linguists participated regularly in congresses, symposia, and workshops around the world. Their articles were sometimes translated into English or French, and some of their book publications featured summaries in these languages. Russian-language journals such as *Sovetskaya Arkheologiya* were available in university libraries and featured end-of-article summaries in English. Yet, for scholars west of the Iron Curtain, the Caucasus remained a shadowy corner of the northern Near East for much of the twentieth century. There was, of course, Charles Burney and David Marshall Lang's

The Peoples of the Hills (1971), which tied together Classical literature with the available works by Russian researchers such as B. B. Piotrovskiy (1950, 1967, 1969) and B. A. Kuftin (1941, 1949), who pioneered archaeological studies of Urartu and Trialeti, respectively. There were also accounts by 18th- and 19th-century mountaineers and adventures, such as Clive Phillipps-Wolley (1881) and Edmund Spencer (1838), as well as the writings of Classical and medieval authors who (allegedly) visited the Caucasus and described its inhabitants in exaggerated and fantastical terms.

It was not until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s that a fuller picture of Caucasus history and prehistory began to come into focus outside the region itself. Since this time, local and collaborative archaeological, linguistic, and textual research has continued to be carried out regularly on both sides of the mountains. A perusal of the bibliography of this book should give an indication of how many science and social science research reports have been published in the last thirty years. There are now also several book-length social histories and compendia of previous archaeological research that summarize subjects of long-standing interest, such as the Kura–Araxes, Trialeti, and Maikop cultures. New discoveries and ideas, ranging from the Dmanisi hominins to the regional advent of agriculture, are actively being explored, with more publications on these and other subjects being produced each year.

A more general development in studies of human prehistory, which also happened to gain traction around the time of the Soviet Union's collapse in the early 1990s, was the interrogation of the human genome. Although classical genetics methods, including blood group marker and immunogenetic analysis, had been practiced on both sides of the Iron Curtain for decades, the development of the polymerase chain reaction (PCR), Sanger dideoxy sequencing, and then next generation sequencing and enhanced genotyping methods have since allowed much more fine-grained insights into population histories of specific regions of the world, including that of the Caucasus. Initial research into autosomal, Y-chromosome and mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) variation in this region by scholars such as Guido Barbujani, Ivan Nasidze, and Mark Stoneking revealed a complex variety of relationships among resident ethnolinguistic groups, as well as an overall closer relationship with populations from the Near East compared to those from continental Europe. Although these conclusions may not have been revolutionary, they produced empirical data about human relationships that previous studies of material culture and linguistic relationships could only point toward.

The term "Caucasus" is used variously to mean the mountain range itself and the quasi-political region delimited by modern state borders. These borders reflect a recent history but one that bears striking resemblance to the physical system of the mountains. The assignment of the borders, like those in the Middle East and South Asia, do not strictly follow physical features but rather

reflect political decisions and negotiations. The southern border of the Caucasus was also the southern border of the former Soviet Union. This border runs partly along the Arax River, with a further portion of Azerbaijan located below this watercourse, as determined by the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay between the Persian and Russian empires.[1] The western border with Türkiye is the result of the 1921 Treaty of Kars, in which the Bolsheviks ceded this city to Türkiye in exchange for Batumi.[2] The remainder of the western border is demarcated by the Black Sea, while the eastern border is delineated by the Caspian Sea.

Although some researchers and news agencies consider the entire Caucasus region to be part of Europe, the geographer's divide of Europe from Asia runs, strictly speaking, east to west along the Greater Caucasus Watershed, as defined by mountaineer Douglas Freshfield.[3] However arbitrary it may seem, the Russian federated states that make up the North Caucasus (e.g., Daghestan, Chechnya) are considered part of Europe, and the sovereign states of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) are part of Asia.

The Caucasus is routinely called the bridge between worlds. Indeed, many papers and books on the subject begin with this observation. Despite the clichéd nature of this phrase, there is something quite important about the physical geography of the Caucasus in relation to its current assortment of languages, genetic lineages, and cultural practices. Even if, in certain ways, history has run on two different courses in the northern and southern spheres, it cannot be said that traditional highland peoples on either side of the Caucasus have recognized the mountains as a cultural barrier. Numerous footpaths connect Georgia with the North Caucasus, although their ways are tortuous and seasonally dependent,[4] with the most significant of them being the Georgian Military Highway, which runs from Tbilisi to Vladikavkaz.

Only with the establishment of the national borders of Azerbaijan and Georgia during the creation of the Russian Federation in 1991 (and the firm closure of Georgia's borders in 2008) did the frontier zone and millennia of transhumance come to an end. Indeed, ancient genomic data point to linkages between numerous prehistoric Eurasian populations who passed through, or perhaps evolved certain characteristics in, the Caucasus. Certain subbranches of mtDNA and Y-chromosome lineages, whose main branches are found everywhere from South Asia to western Europe, exhibit considerable time depth and diversity in these mountains. It is also notable that communities speaking languages in different families share a great deal of their genetic make-up, while other communities speaking related languages differ a great deal. All of this evidence gives the impression, again, of a highly complex sphere of interaction.

In addition, many linguistic and cultural traits permeate the mountain range.[5] Since there is more geographic obstruction within the Caucasus than

between it and its neighboring regions, studies of population history and phylogeography must therefore look primarily outward to the frontier areas to the north, south, and southwest of the region, including the Black Sea as a special case of a frontier zone, and secondarily at population movements between these regions. This simple fact goes a long way in explaining patterns of regional variation as they pertain to languages, ethnic identity, and genetics. DNA studies showing the diversification of nonhuman mammal species in the North and South Caucasus also support the idea that the Caucasus has long represented a semipermeable, at other times impregnable, biogeographic barrier.[6]

The time depth of human settlement in the Caucasus is apparently not greater than in continental Europe or Anatolia. Yet this small, rugged frontier region, with its diverse geographic environments – alpine highlands, dry steppe land, and subtropical lowlands only a few hundred kilometers apart – features a remarkably varied set of cultural communities. Aside from the linguistic diversity for which the Caucasus is storied, this region of 23 million individuals[7] is home to numerous tribal and ethnic groups that not only practice the three Abrahamic religions but also maintain Indigenous animistic belief systems.

Running between the Black and Caspian seas, the Caucasus mountain ranges create a pair of cul-de-sacs, with limited permeability head-to-head. The South Caucasus includes the sovereign states of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, as well as two disputed territories, South Ossetia and Abkhazia (two breakaway regions from Georgia, both with land bordering the Russian Federation). The total area of the South Caucasus is 186,000 km^2 (71,815 mi^2), and the total population of these states is approximately 16,730,000, inclusive of the breakaway regions. The North Caucasus includes seven North Caucasus republics (Daghestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Circassia, Adygea), all of which are subjects of the Russian Federation (Figure 1.1).[8] Beyond the Kuma-Manych Depression, the North Caucasus merges almost imperceptibly with the Russian steppe.

Each of these federal subjects and sovereign states is home to not only one language group but, in several cases, populations who speak multiple unrelated or mutually unintelligible languages. That such diversity exists in an area of just under 300,000 km^2 (115,000 mi^2), among some 23 million people, is surely testament to the cliché that the Caucasus is the bridge between worlds. Yet this diversity is also suggestive of a peopling process that began long ago.

In fact, it is language more than any other cultural feature that distinguishes the Caucasus from neighboring regions. As many as sixty different languages belonging to five different linguistic families are spoken in a region that is the size of Sweden or Papua New Guinea. Few regions on earth, Papua New Guinea included,[9] can boast of having so many languages per square kilometer.

1.1 A geopolitical map of the Caucasus. Image taken from Wikipedia Commons, File licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported, Attribution Jeroencommons. Modified by Theodore G. Schurr.

Indeed, without the enduring distinctness of the Georgian, Chechen, and Abkhaz languages, not to mention the Armenian and Georgian alphabets, geographers might well consider the Caucasus to be a part of the Middle East by virtue of its proximity to the Turco-Persian world.

It is also this characteristic, its ethnolinguistic distinctness, which has made it difficult to write a single social history of the region. Among the surveys that do exist, very few cover the peopling process in this region in any meaningful way, tending instead to focus on recent demography.[10] As a result, we must grapple with a patchwork understanding of the social forces shaping population variation and dispersal in the region.

The initial stages of human settlement in the Caucasus appear to be relatively congruent with the peopling process of continental Europe, west of the Bosphorus and the Urals. However, unlike continental Europe and the Middle East, which are more "cosmopolitan" in their patterns of genetic variation, the topography of the Caucasus has allowed for a great deal of

entrenchment in certain areas. This fact permits some degree of inference into the length of habitation and timing of settlement there.

In this book, we excavate and scrutinize a very specific, though not small, subset of scientific and social scientific literatures. While it may serve as a review of the archaeological, linguistic, and genetic data pertaining to the Caucasus, the book should also be read as an extended argument for multiple phases of the region's peopling process. In making this argument, we do not follow the vague and fraught path leading to theories of ethnogenesis. While it has become somewhat unfashionable in academic circles to speak of origins, this is not because science and historical inquiry can tell us nothing real about the past.[11] Instead, the concept of social origins relies far too much on analogies and statistical models that can never match the complexity of ethnogenesis, which is, after all, a process, not a moment. Thus, in this book, we will seldom ask whence came the peoples of the Caucasus, or what was the point of origin for their languages and traditions. Rather, we will explore the gradual, long-term processes that led to the social reality of the Caucasus as it exists today. And some of these processes began a very long time ago.

Because humans have been migratory for most of their history, claims about ethnonationality and homeland are shallow. However, it is not entirely pointless to ask about the "origins" of human communities. Groups of humans arrived in the Caucasus at different times. Like anywhere, these settlers, slaves, and families came from somewhere else. Some survived while others perished or moved on, and today's populations in the Caucasus represent the legacy of these survivors. While we will never know who they were as individuals, the archaeological, linguistic, and genetic evidence attests to the success, by chance or by determination, of their lineages.

Views of human settlement and ethnogenesis in the Caucasus, as in other regions, have tended toward the static and the essentialized. As a result, the older literature relies on the view of Caucasus peoples as discrete units, perhaps even with patriarchal and matriarchal founders. Such a view is attributable, in no small part, to the influence of two centuries of German physical anthropology and Soviet ethnogenesis theory, as well as the reliance on Old Testament historicity by scholars in past generations.[12] This is not to mention the use of the term "Caucasian" as a racial category for white Europeans, as coined by Meiners and expanded upon by Blumenbach a decade later.[13] By contrast, in the genomics era, it is possible to see that Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and other geographic regions were diversified long before the establishment of modern day ethnolinguistic groups, and as such there can be little essentialistic or monolithic about their processes of ethnogenesis.

The main concern of this book is establishing a model for the peopling of the Caucasus region in relation to known major human dispersal events. It includes anatomically modern human (AMH) expansion throughout Eurasia during the

Upper Paleolithic; Neolithic and Chalcolithic-Bronze Age settlers; and the emergence and spread of Caucasian, Indo-European, and Turkic languages. To contextualize these processes, this book will focus on the material record for lithic industries, the development of food production, theories of linguistic differentiation and areal diffusion, and human phylogeography and population genetics. Based on these lines of evidence, we will make the case for four basic population processes having occurred in the region.

Anatomically modern humans began settling in the Caucasus during the Late Pleistocene, some perhaps enduring the Last Glacial Maximum. During this time, humans lived in the numerous cave and open-air sites scattered across the landscape, particularly in the unglaciated lowlands. These populations were likely thinned but probably not reduced to zero during the LGM, which occurred 25–18 KYA.[14] Some continuity from the Epipaleolithic/Mesolithic to contemporary Caucasus populations is apparent, but the genetic signal is weaker when compared to that of continental Europe.

A small but steady pulse of settlement transpired during the Epipaleolithic/Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Chalcolithic periods, incurring cultural change but not wholesale population replacement. Despite geophysical and archaeological evidence indicating that material culture phases in the Caucasus were established somewhat later those of continental Europe, the phases themselves bear similarities. Although the permanent settlement of southern migrants into the Caucasus occurred during the Epipaleolithic and Neolithic periods, curiously, the weakest evidence for heterochthonous settlement occurs during the Neolithic and transition to agriculture, suggesting this was not only a slow and late change (relative to Anatolia and Europe), but a more localized one.

The emergence of metallurgy in the Caucasus led to expanded contacts with surrounding regions and notable population incursions from the north and south. With the beginnings and refinement of metal production, new cultures and populations intermingled with the previous ones. Interestingly, there is no obvious evidence for warfare, attrition, or population replacement during this period. Chalcolithic and Bronze Age migrants came from both the steppe to the north and the Middle East to the south. Contributions from populations east of the Caspian Sea or Europe west of the Black Sea appear to be negligible at this time, as they were in previous periods. However, populations from the Eastern European Steppe (i.e., eastern Ukraine, southwestern Russia) very likely settled both sides of the mountains during this period.

The Caucasus has long been both a repository and a source for human population diversity. Some of the diversity of which we speak – linguistic, material cultural, and even genetic – may be autochthonous. Some of it may also have spread out of the Caucasus into the greater Near East, Europe, and beyond. The latter is suggested by the movement of Kura–Araxes-related peoples from the Caucasus/Zagros region into the Levant during the Bronze Age, which very

likely continued into the Iron Age (and biblical era). Thus, the exact role of the Caucasus in the human settlement of Europe and West Asia requires fuller explication.

This book closes its review of Caucasus history at the dawn of Classical antiquity. It is at this juncture that the evidence for this history becomes increasingly literary in nature, and thus subject to an entirely different form of interpretation. In addition, demographic changes and the consolidations of ethnic identities, not to mention mass deportations, occurred throughout the Middle Ages and in the era of modern empires, especially with the settling down of nomadic peoples across the greater Mediterranean region. In avoiding the subject of ethnogenesis of modern ethnolinguistic groups such as Chechens, Ingush, Georgians, and Azeris, we instead propose that such studies necessarily will rely more on cultural theory models and historical documentation (extant or otherwise) than on population genetics and linguistic reconstructions.

Overall, we propose that the foundations for modern Caucasus populations were established long before the Common Era (CE), with several minor influxes of populations occurring thereafter. This review will further serve as a comprehensive (though not exhaustive) bibliography of sources both better and less known to scholars and the general reader.

NOTES

1. Entner 1965: 6–7, 10–11; Atkin 1980: 158–161.
2. Allen 1927: 434–435.
3. Freshfield 1868–1869: 71. See also von Haxthausen 1854; Moores and Fairbridge 1997: 34; Tsutsiev 2005: 52–61.
4. Levin 1938.
5. Catford 1977: 284–5.
6. Orth et al. 1996; Manceau et al. 1999; Seddon et al. 2002.
7. Coene 2010: 55–56.
8. Some geographers also consider Stavropol, Krasnodar, and Rostov Oblast to be part of the North Caucasus, although historically, as well as linguistically and culturally, these federal subjects are very different from the other seven.
9. Greenhill 2015.
10. Thorez 1983; Lortkipanize and Totadze 2010.
11. Weitzman 2017.
12. Knox 1850; Stalin 1942; Augstein 1999.
13. Meiners 1793; Blumenbach 1969 [1775]; Blumenbach 2016 [1797]; see also Bhopal 2007.
14. Golovanova and Doronichev 2012.

CHAPTER TWO

GEOGRAPHY AND ECOLOGY OF THE CAUCASUS

2.1 PHYSIOGEOGRAPHY OF THE CAUCASUS

The Caucasus has been conquered numerous times. Throughout the centuries, its strategic location within the isthmus of land dividing the Middle East from the Pontic-Caspian Steppe, not to mention its essential mineral resources, arable land, and wild game, have made it the prize possession of many a neighboring empire. It was these same resources and their strategic placement that must have made the region attractive in the first place to Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Age settlers. In fact, the Caucasus lies only just beyond the Fertile Crescent, where cereal grasses and mammals were first domesticated, and a relatively short distance from the first urban centers in Mesopotamia.

It is remarkable that, through the years of great Near Eastern empires and on into the eras of Persian, Greco-Roman, Arab, Turkic, and Russian domination, the Caucasus has retained a character of its own. To be sure, these experiences of imperial possession have left cultural marks on the region and its peoples that are still visible today. Yet, the languages, material culture, and aspects of genetic diversity in the region are distinctive. The endurance of these traits is further tied to the geography and terrain, most importantly the mountains themselves.

The Caucasus region is situated between the Black and Caspian seas and includes the northern and southern flanks of the Greater Caucasus mountain range. These flanks form the regions known as the North Caucasus and South

2.1 A topographic map of the Caucasus. Copyright held by www.freeworldmaps.net 2005–2021. Image modified by Theodore G. Schurr.

Caucasus, respectively. This range is an alpine and glacier system that runs about 1,200 kilometers (750 miles) west-northwest to east-southeast, from the Krasnodar port of Sochi on the northeastern shore of the Black Sea in the Russian Federation to the lowland Absheron Peninsula area north of the Caspian Sea port of Baku. The most recognizable features of the Greater Caucasus are its major peaks, Mount Elbrus (5,642 m) and Mount Kazbegi (5,033 m).

The Greater Caucasus mountain range is itself a physical entity with its own flora and fauna, and there are numerous topographic and ecological zones within its lowlands (Figure 2.1). Of the numerous schemes to describe these regions, Motzenbäcker has proposed five basic geographic zones for the Caucasus region, including (1) the North Caucasian forelands, bounded by the Kima and Manych rivers; (2) the Greater Caucasus mountains themselves; (3) the South Caucasus river basins and tributaries, flowing mainly through Georgia and Azerbaijan; (4) the Lesser Caucasus; and (5) the volcanic Armenian Highlands, which give way to Anatolia to the west.[1] Each of these zones has been important in different ways to the hominin groups who settled there.

As we have noted, the Caucasus mountain system is divided into two distinct parallel ranges, the Greater and the Lesser Caucasus, which are, in fact, part of the same Eurasian mountain system that includes the Pyrenees and Alps. At its easternmost extent, the Lesser Caucasus runs parallel to the Greater Caucasus at a distance of about 100 km to the south and includes the Trialeti and Javakheti ranges of southern Georgia and Mount Aragats in Armenia.[2] The Greater and