

“Mountain of Tongues” The Languages of the Caucasus in Arabic-Islamic Sources

Andrii Danylenko

Pace University, New York, USA

Abstract The paper is devoted to the linguistic diversity of the Caucasus as reflected in the writing of Arab-Muslim geographers and historians. Dealing with the locus classicus *jabal al-alsun* ‘mountain of tongues’ in the output of Arab-Muslim authors, the author juxtaposes the current state of the study of Caucasus polyglossia with the description of the jumble of languages in the works of Ibn al-Faḥīh, al-Mas’ūdī, Abū al-Fidā’, al-Muhallabī and other authors. Outlining some parallels in Graeco-Roman historians, the author concludes that the diversity of languages spoken in the Caucasus as described by Arab-Muslim geographers appears to be in concord with the degree of the linguistic diversity as conceived today in areal-typological studies.

Keywords Linguistic diversity. Caucasian languages. Areal-typological studies. *Jabal al-alsun* ‘mountain of tongues’. Arab-Muslim geographers.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Who is the Author and How Many Languages?. – 3 Linguistic Diversity. – 4 *Jabal al-alsun*. – 5 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

This paper was inspired by Catford (1977) who was the first to connect the discussion of the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Caucasus with its first attestations in the records of ancient Greek and Roman historians (Herodotus, Strabo, Pliny) and early medieval Arab geographers (al-Mas’ūdī).¹ To the ancient Greeks the Great Cau-

1 I would like to thank the participants in the panel on literature and tradition at the ASIAC yearly conference (December 2-5, 2020) for valuable comments on my presentation on the topic of this article. My special thanks goes to an old colleague of mine,



casian mountain range, spanning the isthmus from the Black Sea to the Caspian, and the lands that lay below and around them were a place of mystery and legend; thither, for instance, the Argonauts went in quest of the Golden Fleece, and Prometheus was chained to the mountain behind Phasis (the modern Poti), and the Greek city of Dioscurias (the modern Sukhumi) (Catford 1977, 283). Catford did not go into possible prehistoric contacts between the Proto-Indo-Europeans and the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus (cf. the Abkhazian, Georgian and Armenian legends of a Prometheus-type hero chained to, or inside of, a mountain; Tuite 1996, 185). Instead, he centred on linguistic diversity as reflected in the writings of some Graeco-Roman historians, who counted from 70 to 130 languages allegedly spoken in the Caucasus region, and especially the Arab travellers who bore continuing witness to Caucasus polyglossia, and it was one of them, according to Catford (1977, 283), the tenth-century geographer al-Mas‘ūdī, who purportedly labeled the Caucasus *jabal al-alsun* ‘mountain of tongues.’

In this paper, I explore the geo- and ethnolinguistic earmarks of the jumble of the languages in the Caucasus as reflected in early medieval Arabic-Islamic sources. Before introducing the reader to the vagaries of textual transmission of the locus classicus *jabal al-alsun* in the output of Arab-Muslim authors, one should note at the outset that Catford’s attribution of the above metaphor ‘mountain of tongues’ is erroneous. As a matter of fact, al-Mas‘ūdī had nothing to do with this phrase, although he allots a separate chapter to the description of the *Jabal al-Qabkh* (Mountain of the Caucasus) in his *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma‘ādin al-jauhar* (Venae auri et fodinae gemmarum, ca 947) (al-Mas‘ūdī, 2: 1-78, al-Mas‘ūdī-Pellat, 1: 209-44). Who authored this locus classicus and under what circumstances, as well as how the respective Arabic-Islamic account may be correlated with the evidence amassed within the Graeco-Roman sphere, are those few issues I address in the study at hand.

My purview is very limited in this paper. It should be borne in mind that the Graeco-Roman and Arab-Islamic spheres developed many parallel features when they arose from the residue of the enormous transformations of Late Antiquity (König 2015, 68). In order to reduce the exaggerated estimates of languages spoken in the Caucasus offered by some Graeco-Roman and Arab-Muslim authors, I briefly elaborate on the linguistic diversity in this region as reflected in areal-typological studies and descriptive grammars of the Cauca-

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sian languages (§ 3). All this makes it possible to assess the validity of some estimates in the Arabic-Islamic geographical works and helps ascertain possible relations between the narratives found in Graeco-Roman records, on the one hand, and Arabic-Islamic sources, on the other.

The proposed study is structured in the following way. I begin by reviewing the current state of the historiographic interpretation of the linguistic diversity of the Caucasus, including the attribution of the phrase *jabal al-alsun* (§ 2). Then I proceed to a description of this diversity treated typologically (in terms of convergence vs. divergence and a *Sprachbund*) and even in the framework of gene-language coevolution (§ 3); the modern understanding of the linguistic diversity in the Caucasus region is projected onto the geo- and ethnolinguistic data found in Arabic-Islamic records (§ 4). Conclusions with regard to the Arabic-Islamic attestations and their relation to the modern interpretation of the linguistic diversity in the Caucasus are drawn in the final section of this study (§ 5).

2 Who is the Author and How Many Languages?

The attribution of the phrase *jabal al-alsun* and various estimates of the ethnic and linguistic diversity in the Caucasus appear to be interrelated in some studies dealing with both the historical and ethnolinguistic setting of the Caucasus region. Having erroneously identified al-Mas'ūdī as the author of the aforementioned phrase, Catford did not specify the number of languages (peoples) described by al-Mas'ūdī; he counted, instead, "more than 50 languages" in the mountain valleys and foothills of the Caucasus, and in the closely adjoining plains; some of these languages belong to well-known language families – the Indo-European and Turkic ones, although a residue of 37 languages which were not imported into the area in historical times are believed to have been spoken in the Caucasus area for at least 4,000 years (Catford 1977, 283-4). These "indigenous" languages comprise the group commonly called Caucasian or Caucasian (see Alekseev et al. 1998), and previously most commonly "Ibero-Caucasian" in Russian sources (Bokarëv et al. 1967). There are two major groups of Caucasian languages, Northern and Southern. The North Caucasian languages fall into three groups: Abkhaz-Adyghe or Northwest Caucasian, Nakh or North Central Caucasian and Dagestanian or Northeast Caucasian; the South Caucasian languages, also known by the Georgian-derived name Kartvelian, form a single major group; within each of these groups there are subgroups of closely related languages, as well as a few isolated languages (see Catford 1977, 284).

Pereltsvaig (2017, 148) stated that this relatively small area (about the size of New England) is home not only to over "one hundred lan-

languages" but to three distinct language families that are unique to the region with no kin elsewhere: the Northwest Caucasian family, the Northeast Caucasian family and the South Caucasian (Kartvelian) family; in addition, languages from two families also spoken elsewhere – Indo-European and Turkic – are used by several groups in the Caucasus. When compared with the estimate ranging "from thirty to forty languages" in Bokarëv et al. (1967, 7), Pereltsvaig's number of languages spoken in the Caucasus region seems to be exaggerated, even if all other languages of the Caucasus, including Greek and Ukrainian, are taken into consideration. One can agree with this scholar's number if one considers the actual linguistic diversity in the Caucasus region which contains a fair amount of genealogical diversity, with at least five different language families comprising over 150 described varieties of around 45 languages (Grawunder 2020, 356-7). Parenthetically, Pereltsvaig (2017, 148) fails to solve the authorship of the enigmatic phrase *jabal al-alsun* by claiming that it was a certain "tenth-century Arab geographer and historian al-Azizi". As I demonstrate in § 4, "al-Azizi" was in fact not a geographer but a geographical work named so after the Caliph al-'Azīz (see also fn 3).

Quite recently, Sagona † (2018, 30) noted that the Caucasus presents a linguistic diversity matched by few other areas in the world of comparable size; according to him, this region, referred to as 'mountain of tongues' (*jabal al-alsun*) by the tenth-century geographer al-Mas'ūdī, harbors some 54 languages belonging to three major phyla – the Indo-European phylum, the Altaic phylum, and the Caucasian phylum. While indicating linguistic diversity in the Caucasus as the source of the aforementioned metaphor, Sagona also wrongly attributed the aforementioned phrase.

Our objective here is to explore the reflection of the linguistic diversity in early medieval Arabic-Islamic sources, including the authorship of the phrase *jabal al-alsun*; the Arabic-Islamic testimonials are likely to contain some parallels with the modern understanding of the linguistic diversity in the Caucasus region.

3 Linguistic Diversity

An insightful survey of the linguistic diversity in the Caucasus is found in Comrie (2008). While referring to the "mountain of tongues", this author mentions about 45 languages, if one includes as "languages of the Caucasus" languages that are spoken predominantly in the Caucasus or at least have geographically consolidated large numbers of speakers in the Caucasus (Comrie 2008, 132).

In addition to the number of languages spoken and the relatively small number of speakers of each, Comrie also mentions the most startling fact that these languages belong to several different lan-

guage families. The linguistic diversity in this region is represented by languages belonging to three major language families which are Indo-European (Armenian and three Iranian languages Ossetian, Tat, and Talyshi), Turkic (Azerbaijani, Kumyk, and Karachay-Balkar), and finally three families of the Caucasian languages: Kartvelian (South Caucasian) family, Northwest (Abkhaz-Adyghe) family, and Northeast (Nakh-Dagestanian) family (Comrie 2008, 133-4; cf. Bokarëv et al. 1967). In addition to Russian, the principal lingua franca of the area today, and small enclaves of Greeks and speakers of other Indo-European languages, one can also mention Mongolic, represented by Kalmyk-Oirat, and the Semitic “Neo-Assyrian” (or Aisor/Aysor) languages (Johanson 2013, 657-8; Grawunder 2020, 357).

To use the terminology of Nichols (1992), the Caucasus is a good general example of an accretion zone, i.e., an area with high genealogical diversity (a large number of language families relative to population and area), high structural diversity, deep language families (with a common ancestor spoken far back in time), no large-scale spreading of individual languages, no clear centre of innovation, increasing diversity with the passage of time, and no lingua franca (Comrie 2008, 132; see Tuite 1999, 24). Thus, the Northeast Caucasian (Nakh-Dagestanian) family is an instance of the real linguistic diversity of the Caucasus. This is an old family, with a time depth comparable to that of Indo-European, and contains a number of branches (Nichols 1992, 14). A similar (deep) diversity is demonstrated by Dargi, officially considered a single language, with about half a million speakers today. The diversity across varieties of Dargi is significant. It is said to have around 70 dialects whose integration into the standard variety is different, with several so-called dialects being “mutually unintelligible” (Comrie 2008, 134; see Musaev 1998). I will get back to this remarkable fact when discussing evidence found in early medieval Arabic-Islamic sources (see § 4).

The linguistic diversity in the Caucasus can be aptly assessed today in terms of the structural convergences and divergences across languages spoken in this region. All three language families indigenous to the Caucasus are known for their complex systems of consonants, including uvulars and glottalized obstruents (ejectives), agglutinative morphology, and the ergative case systems (Pereltsvaig 2017, 152). However, the aforementioned convergences demonstrate increasing degrees of differentiation. Thus, Northwestern Caucasian is characterized by an extreme abundance and complexity of consonants and paucity of vowels. For instance, Abkhaz has 58 consonants but only 2 vowel phonemes, and Budukh, a Northeast Caucasian language, has 33 consonants and 9 vowels (Šejxov 1998, 91; Dešeriev 1967).

The only morphosyntactic features shared by the Caucasian languages are reflections of typological universals characterizing the expression of ergativity in all languages (Tuite 1999, 1). In all other

respects, the grammatical differences between the three groups of languages are significant. Abkhaz-Adyghe (Northwest Caucasian) is polysynthetic (head-marking and prefixal), when each verb is marked for agreement with all arguments, not only with subjects; see (1) where the verb agrees with both its subject (through the first-person singular suffix, which derives etymologically from a form of the copular verb) and its object (through the noun class IV prefix).

1. Lak na qqatri d-ullalissa-ra
 I house IV-build-1SG
 "I am building a house". (Comrie 2008, 137)

Nakh-Dagestanian (Northeast Caucasian) is dependent-marking, and agreement with absolutes refers to gender rather than person. In example (2) the subject is marked with the help of the adelative suffix *-vqj*, while the object is used in the nominative case:

2. Lezgian dieddi-vaj nek alakh'-na
 mother-ADEL milk-NOM let.go-AOR
 "Milk boiled over at the mother". (Mejlanova 1967, 540)

The Kartvelian (South Caucasian) family has a complicated double-marking split system sensitive to aspect, noun-phrase type, and lexical verb class. In example (3a) we have a transitive sentence with the verb in the aorist (past) tense: the subject is used in the ergative case, while the object is marked with the help of the nominative/absolute case. In sentence (3b) the intransitive verb is still in the aorist, although the subject is marked with the nominative/absolute suffix *-i*. dog-NOM

3. Georgian (a) bič'-ma jağl-i bağš-i damala
 boy-ERG dog-NOM garden-DAT hid.AOR
 "The boy hid the dog in the garden"
 (b) jağl-i bağš-i daimala
 dog-NOM garden-DAT hid-AOR
 "The dog hid in the garden". (Pereltsvaig 2017, 167)

Showing divergences at different levels of the language system, the Caucasus can hardly be viewed as a *Sprachbund*. However, following Chirikba (2008; see Dirr 1928), Grawunder (2020, 366, 387) argues

that the Caucasus is "a clear linguistic area and an area of contact". This statement is based exclusively on the postulates of a phonetically oriented areal typology which considers the diversity and variation that occurs with the phonetic implementation of a phonemic contrast. Thus, according to Tuite (1999, 24), one can rather discern "mini-Sprachbünde" within the region. Abkhazia, for example, has been the scene of a long-standing exchange of linguistic features and vocabulary between the Northwest language Abkhaz and the South Caucasian Zan language (especially Mingrelian). Each language has borrowed numerous lexemes from the other. In addition to other morphological convergences, the Mingrelian system of directional preverbs has evolved the capacity to reflect orientational meanings in a manner highly reminiscent of the Northwest Caucasian languages, and otherwise unknown in the South Caucasian languages (Tuite 1999, 25).

It is, therefore, legitimate to ask why the Caucasus has retained such a high degree of typological and genetic diversity, despite millennia of intensive and long-standing contacts both within the region and with adjoining parts of Eurasia. Arguably, contact is commonly viewed by modern typologists as the primary driving force of linguistic change, that is, grammatical replication and contact-induced grammaticalization, both of which involve transfers of meanings and structures rather than of form meaning pairings or of phonetic substance (Heine, Kuteva 2005, 40-122). Since this areal-typological interdependence appears not to apply in the case of the languages of the Caucasus, one wonders whether the entire theory of contact-induced grammaticalization, primarily based on the Indo-European genealogical foundation (see Wiemer, Wälchli, Hansen 2012), lacks any heuristic potential.

Leaving aside the discussion of contact-induced grammaticalization and its shortcomings (see Danylenko 2015), it is tempting to relate the degree of linguistic diversity to the terrain, with the highest levels of linguistic diversity being found in the most mountainous areas, where communication is most difficult, and lower levels being found in the plains of the South Caucasus. Nichols (1992, 13-24) argued that mountainous regions such as the Caucasus tend to generate and maintain a considerably higher degree of linguistic diversity than neighbouring "spread zones", such as the Eurasian steppes. A congenial conclusion is drawn by the so-called gene geography. Comparison of genetic and linguistic reconstructions covering the last few millennia shows striking correspondences between the topology and dates of the respective gene and language trees and with documented historical events. Overall, in the Caucasus, unmatched levels of gene-language coevolution occurred within geographically isolated populations, probably due to its mountainous terrain (Balanovsky et al. 2011).

Arguably, linking linguistic patterning to physical geography, particularly specific types of terrain is highly problematic. Comrie (2008, 140) mentions endogamy as a major factor in the preservation of linguistic diversity: a major concern in the Caucasus is shortage of agricultural, especially arable, land, and this shortage is particularly acute in the most mountainous areas. Practicing endogamy minimizes outside influence and maximizes the effects of internal change, thus increasing the level of differentiation among neighboring communities (Comrie 2008, 140-1). By resorting to the postulates of sociolinguistic (systemic) typology (Me'lnikov 2003; Trudgill 2011), one can expand on the sociolinguistic parameters outlined by Comrie. The linguistic diversity in this area can depend on such societal valuables as tiny speech communities, loose social networks, large amount of shared background information, and social stability due to living conditions in the mountainous areas with a shortage of arable land (see Danylenko 2018). All these valuables are obvious in the case of a similar “mountainous” linguistic area found in the Carpathian region characterized by a shortage of agricultural land likewise (Danylenko 2019, 371-5).

4 *Jabal al-alsun*

One wonders to what extent the major parameters of the aforementioned linguistic diversity are reflected in Arabic-Islamic sources. We can leave aside cases of phonological and grammatical convergences and divergences as discussed above. The early Arabic grammarians had a fixed linguistic corpus at their disposal, consisting of the text of the *Qur'ān*, pre-Islamic poetry, and the idealized speech of Bedouin. In other words, their grammar was not a prescriptive discipline. It was not a description, either. Since (the Arabic) language was part of God's creation, its structure was perfect to the tiniest detail. Since the first grammarian Sibawayhi (d. 793?), the framework of the Arabic grammarians served exclusively for the analysis of Arabic and therefore has a special relevance for the study of that language (Versteegh 2001, 74-5).

As was the case with Western European languages, the languages of the Caucasus, especially viewed in their diversity, did not seem to constitute a major field of interest of early medieval Arabic-Islamic scholars (see König 2015, 89-93). To an Arabic-Islamic world, imbued with Greek science in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, geography, and the like, not only the medieval Latin-Christian world but also other “less civilized” peoples still had little to offer. Conceivably, the information on linguistic diversity in the Caucasus could have been reduced by the Arab-Muslim authors to sociolinguistic data such as estimates of the number of languages spoken in the Caucasus and the level of their intelligibility; in compliance with the descriptive geog-

raphy in the spirit of "Roads and Kingdoms" (*al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*) (see Kračkovskij [1957] 2004, 18-9), the Arab authors might have been interested in the geographical conditions under which the Caucasian speakers were living at the time of the invasion of the eastern Caucasus by Arabs in the seventh and eighth century.

The Arab authors were aware that *al-Qabq* or *Jabal al-Qabkh* (Caucasus), the most common rendering of the name derived from Middle Persian *kāfkōh* 'the mountain of Kāf' (Bosworth 1997, 341), had never been ethnically homogeneous; it was composed of a mixture of peoples, whence a spectacular variety of languages used by local tribes and those who interacted with them had emerged. The image of the Caucasus as a system of high, unsurmountable mountains was so predominant in Arabic-Islamic geographical and historical literature that it becomes clear why this region appears so linguistically motley and ethnically parceled in extant Arabic-Islamic records, in particular, from the tenth century.

To begin with, estimates of the number of languages spoken in the Caucasus do not exceed, on average, 80 languages. In his *Kitāb al-buldān* (Liber regionum, early tenth century; see Seippel 1896-1928, 10), Ibn al-Faqīh writes:

And the inhabitants of the mountain of the Caucasus [*Jabal al-Qabq*, جبل القبق] speak 72 languages and neighbors could hardly understand each other without an interpreter. (Ibn al-Faqīh, 295; Ibn al-Faqīh-Massé, 351)²

Quite in the same vein, al-Mas'ūdī narrates:

The Qabkh [القبق] is a big chain of mountain whose vast terrain encompasses a many kingdoms and tribes, and no fewer than seventy two tribes have their own rulers and speak their own languages [not comprehensible to their neighbors]. (al-Mas'ūdī, 2: 1-2, al-Mas'ūdī-Les Prairies d'Or, 1: 159, al-Mas'ūdī-Pellat, 2: 209)

Remarkably, practically the same number of languages spoken in the Caucasus is attested by the end of the tenth century by another notable geographer, al-Muqaddasī. In his description of the region of al-Rihāb (*Ādharbayjān - Armenia*) he writes:

A mountain is here which has a dimension of one hundred forty *farsakh*,³ all of it villages and farms. It is said that there are seventy languages spoken here. (al-Muqaddasī-Collins, 303; al-Muqaddasī, 375)

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Arabic are from the Author.

³ A measure of distance, usually just short of six kilometers (Hinz 1970, 62).

Overall, the linguistic diversity of the Caucasus as mentioned by the earlier Muslim geographers who ascribe to the Caucasus 70 or 72 different languages, all mutually unintelligible, is proverbial and is reiterated by Yāqūt al-Hamawī (d. 1229), the author of the *Muʿjam al-buldān* (Lexicon geographicum); by referring to Ibn al-Faḡīh, he writes:

In the mountain of the Caucasus [جبل القبق] they speak 72 language, and not everybody understands the language of a neighbour without an interpreter. (Yāqūt, 4, 31)

As has been mentioned, the Caucasus region is an example of an accretion zone without a lingua franca. However, in Ibn Ḥawqal's *Ṣūrat al-arḍ* (Liber imaginis terrae, 961-88), one comes across an account of infidels, living in *Ādharbayjān* and *Armīniyah* who speak a large number of different languages (Ibn Ḥawqal-Kramers, 2: 349). Ibn Ḥawqal adds, though, that most of them utilize one common language, *al-fārisiyyah* (Persian or Avar?), which seems to function like a lingua franca in this region, although they also use Arabic; it is, in fact, rare for speakers of *al-fārisiyyah* not to understand Arabic, a language used by merchants and noblemen with elegance (Miquel 1975, 270 fn. 12; Ibn Ḥawqal-Kramers, Wiet, 342).⁴ In general, the use of Persian (or Arabic) as a lingua franca in this region in the 10th century recalls the current situation in the Caucasus where Russian is employed as the principal lingua franca of the area today.

To tackle the puzzle of the authorship of the phrase *jabal al-alsun*, one should recall the geographical treatise, *Taqwīm al-buldān* (Ratio terrarum, 1331) penned by the Syrian geographer and historian Abū al-Fidā' (1273-1331). Following the tradition of mathematical geography, describing towns and places in a tabulated form with their coordinates, his *Geography* covers almost all the regions of the world known at that time (Ahmad 1995, 196). In his narrative, Abū al-Fidā' mentions many times a geographical work belonging to the descriptive genre *al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, authored by al-Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad al-Muhallabī (المهلبى) (d. 990) (see Kračkovskij [1957] 2004, 391). No surviving copies known to exist, al-Muhallabī's work is called simply *al-'Azīzī* [العزيزي], a title derived from the name of the most successful Fāṭimid Caliph al-'Azīz (reigned from 975 to 996).⁵

⁴ In view of the above diversity of languages as recorded in the tenth century for the peoples living in the Caucasus, Minorsky (1942, 91) inferred that the extraordinary complexity of historical, ethnical and linguistic problems raised by the "mountain of tongues" (*jabal al-alsun*) rendered the identification of some names found in Arabic-Islamic sources very difficult, and each name requires a considerable amount of explanation.

⁵ The fifth of the dynasty, al-'Azīz was probably the wisest and most beneficent. He built several new mosques, palaces, bridges, and canals in Cairo and its environs, and

Al-Muhallabī's book provided Yāqūt's most important source when writing about Sudan; he quoted from it on more than 60 subjects (Kračkovskij [1957] 2004, 234). Al-Muhallabī did not, however, confine himself to the subject of Africa alone and Yāqūt was to return time and again to his work to check on a wide variety of matters. Yāqūt also visited al-Muhallabī informally and recorded the personal details of their meetings for posterity (Yāqūt, 3: 19-20; see Sayyid 2011).

This is how the respective passage from the *Taqwīm al-buldān* by Abū al-Fidā' is translated by Joseph Toussaint Reinaud:

On lit dans l'Azyzy [العزيري], qu'elle [La montagne des Caytac (Caucase); جبل القَيْتَق] a reçu le nom de montagne des Langues (djebel Alalson) [جبل الالسن], à cause du grand nombre de langues qu'on y parle; ces langues sont, dit-on, au nombre de trois cents. (Abū al-Fidā'-Reinaud, ii, 1: 93; Abū al-Fidā', 71)

As evidenced in Arabic-Islamic sources, Abū al-Fidā' was the first to name the Caucasus *jabal al-alsun* 'Mountain of Tongues' due to its linguistic diversity, a metaphor routinely ascribed, with rare exceptions, to al-Mas'ūdī. In the account of Abū al-Fidā', what catches the eye is the number of languages allegedly spoken in the Caucasus, i.e., 300. It is difficult to say whether al-Muhallabī (and Abū al-Fidā') employed for this description some classical (Graeco-Roman) records or their translations. Yet one finds it striking that a large number of languages is also cited by Pliny the Elder (d. 79 AD) who in his *Naturalis Historia* (Natural History) writes:

Subicitur Ponti regio Colica, in qua iuga Caucasi ad Ripaeos montes torquentur, ut dictum est, altero latere in Euxinum et Maeotium devexa, altero in Caspium et Hyrcanium mare. Reliqua litora fera nationes tenent Melanchlaeni, Coraxi, urbe Colchorum Dioscuriade iuxta fluvium Anthemunta nunc deserta, quondam adeo clara, ut Timosthenes in eam ccc nationes dissimilibus linguis descendere prodiderit; et postea a nostris CXXX interpretibus negotia gesta ibi.

Below this lies the Black Sea district named Colica, in which the Caucasus range curves round to the Ripaeian Mountains, as we have previously stated, one side sloping down towards the Black Sea and the

extended a measure of toleration never enjoyed before to the Christians under him. According to Hitti (2002, 620), he might have been influenced by his Christian vizir 'Īsa ibn-Nasṭūr and his "Russian" [Russian-A.D.] wife, the mother of his son and heir al-Ḥākīm, and sister of the two Melkite patriarchs of Alexandria and of Jerusalem.

Maeotis, and the other towards the Caspian and Hyrcanian Sea. The tribes occupying almost all the rest of the coasts are the Melanchlaeni and the Coraxi, with the Colchian city of Dioscurias on the river Anthemus, now deserted, but once so famous that according to Timosthenes 300 tribes speaking different languages used to resort to it; and subsequently business was carried on there by Roman traders with the help of a staff of 130 interpreters. (Pliny, 2.5.15)

Among the ancient Greek historians, one should name Herodotus (d. ca 425 BC) who in Book 1 of his *Persian Wars* writes about the ethnic diversity of the Caucasus region without, however, mentioning the linguistic diversity stressed by later Graeco-Latin authors. While speaking about the Caspian Sea, Herodotus offers, instead, a picture of what can be labeled the ‘mountain of nations’:

καὶ τὰ μὲν πρὸς τὴν ἑσπέρην φέροντα τῆς θαλάσσης ταύτης ὁ Καύκασος παρατείνει, ἐὼν ὀρέων καὶ πλήθει μέγιστον καὶ μεγάθει ὑψηλότατον. ἔθνεα δὲ ἀνθρώπων πολλὰ καὶ παντοῖα ἐν ἑωυτῷ ἔχει ὁ Καύκασος, τὰ πολλὰ πάντα ἀπ’ ὕλης ἀγρίας ζῶοντα.

Along its western shore stretches the range of Caucasus, which has more and higher mountains than any other range. Many and all manner of nations dwell in the Caucasus and the most of them live on the fruits of the wild wood. (Herodotus, 1.203, 257)

More detailed information on the linguistic diversity of the Caucasus is found in the famous *Geography* by the Greek geographer and historian Strabo (d. after 21 AD) who pulled some of his data from Eratosthenes, a Greek polymath (d. ca 196 BC) active in Alexandria. Speaking about Caucasian Albania, situated between the Iberians and the Caspian Sea, Strabo writes:

νυνὶ μὲν οὖν εἷς ἀπάντων ἄρχει, πρότερον δὲ καὶ καθ’ ἐκάστην γλώτταν ἰδίᾳ ἐβασιλεύοντο ἕκαστοι. γλώτται δ’ εἰσὶν ἕξ καὶ εἴκοσιν αὐτοῖς διὰ τὸ μὴ εὐεπίμικτον πρὸς ἀλλήλους.

At the present time, indeed, one king rules all the tribes, but formerly the several tribes were ruled separately by kings of their own according to their several languages. They have twenty-six languages, because of the fact that they have no easy means of intercourse with one another. (Strabo, 5.11.4.6)

The fact that, leaving aside Herodotus, the work of Pliny the Elder and not of Strabo could have been used by al-Muhallabi in the tenth century and, most likely, by Abū al-Fidā’ in the early fourteenth century seems, at first blush, curious.

One should remember, however, that the knowledge of classical languages, and especially of Latin, among the Arabs in the tenth century and even somewhat later was minimal since Arabic-Islamic scholars, historians and geographers failed to develop motivations to study both Greek and Latin (König 2015, 92-3, 84-5). There seem to be two possible explanations for the numerical discrepancy in the description of the linguistic diversity in the Caucasus. First, unlike other earlier Muslim geographers, al-Muhallabī worked in Egypt in one of the most culturally advanced milieus during the peaceful and beneficial reign of the Fāṭimid Caliph al-‘Azīz; he could easily had access to Latin sources in preparing his work belonging to the descriptive genre *al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, and had a keen motivation to use them. Second, one cannot exclude the possibility that Abū al-Fidā’ himself might have used the respective source inasmuch as Western European languages, primarily Latin, could by that time have instigated the interest of Islamic scholars, including geographers and historians, who began using larger quantities of data on the Latin-Christian orbit and beyond.

Viewed in isolation and parcellation, the local communities in the Caucasus seemed unattainable and mystifying to Arab-Muslim authors. In his description of the Caucasus mountains and their inhabitants, al-Mas‘ūdī gives a cathartic picture of four mountains whose peaks are hidden in the sky; a deep cavity can be seen between these mountains with villages and their inhabitants who look so tiny from the bottom. Nobody knows the race of these people because it is impossible for them to reach the surface and there is no way to descend into this two-mile deep abyss where they dwell (al-Mas‘ūdī, 2: 48-9, al-Mas‘ūdī-Les Prairies d’Or, 1: 175, al-Mas‘ūdī-Pellat, 2: 232). This “mountainous narrative” fits well into the sociolinguistic explanation of the linguistic diversity in the Caucasus today. To make use of Comrie’s reasoning (see § 3), the fact that shortage of arable land was particular acute in the Caucasus region as early as the tenth century (and, to be sure, much earlier) is inferred from major Arabic-Islamic geographical descriptions.

5 Conclusions

The diversity of languages spoken by different small communities living in the mountainous area as described by al-Mas‘ūdī and other Arab-Muslim authors appears to be in concord with the degree of the linguistic diversity as conceived today in areal-typological studies. Even more so, al-Mas‘ūdī, though unwittingly, laid emphasis on the mountainous terrain as a “geophysical precondition” of such a diversity. It is also worth stressing the fact that the number of languages used in the Caucasus, as evidenced in the output of Arab-

Muslim authors, does not largely exceed today’s respective statistics. Some deviations in Arabic-Islamic sources are easy to explain. For instance, the exaggerated estimate of the linguistic diversity offered by al-Muhallabī (and Abū al-Fidā’) is, to be sure, secondary – it was influenced by Pliny’s account. In addition to al-Mas’ūdī’s description, the most reliable are attestations found in the works authored by Ibn al-Faḡīh, Ibn Ḥawqal, al-Muḡaddasī, and Yāqūt al-Hamawī. Yet, with rare exceptions, these geographers did not identify major Caucasian languages. Even Al-Muḡaddasī, who was the first geographer to account for differences in local patois at the level of villages and regions (Miquel 1973, 324), failed to name any of the languages spoken in the Caucasus.

The Arab-Muslim authors did not leave any evidence on the phonological or grammatical structure of the languages spoken in the Caucasus. The linguistic enterprise in the Islamic world at that time was limited and oriented toward the analysis of Arabic only since the Islamic geographers and historians lent themselves to the representation of a non-Muslim sphere as viewed from inside the Islamic world. What the Arab-Muslim authors noted was the unusual jumble of languages in the Caucasus region as compared with the dialects of the pre-Islamic peninsula, to say the least about the Qur’ānic language and the language of pre-Islamic poetry. It comes as no surprise that, in compliance with the elements of linguistic geography (Miquel 1973, 286 fn. 2), they centred on regional differences in the languages of some peoples of both Arabic and non-Arabic extraction, including the unusual abundance of tongues in the Caucasus.

Abbreviations

ADEL	adelative
AOR	aoist
DAT	dative
ERG	ergative
NOM	nominative
SG	singular

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