



The Yourouks of Asia Minor

Author(s): Theodore Bent

Source: *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 20 (1891), pp. 269-276

Published by: [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2842269>

Accessed: 14/06/2014 02:48

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

- From the EDITOR.—*Nature.* Nos. 1078–90, 1094–99.
 ——— *Science.* Nos. 385–405.
 ——— *Timehri.* June, 1890.
 ——— *L'Anthropologie.* Tome 1. Nos. 4, 5.
 ——— *Revue Scientifique.* No. 26. Vol. xlv. Nos. 1–21. Vol. xlv.
 ——— *Bullettino di Paletnologia Italiana.* Serie II. Tomo v, vi. Nos. 5, 6.

The following paper was read by the Author:—

The YOUROUKS of ASIA MINOR.

By THEODORE BENT, Esq., M.A.

THE study of the habits, customs, and origin of the nomad tribes of Asia Minor is an exceedingly complicated and difficult one. There is an undercurrent of secrecy and mystery about them all, an unwillingness to communicate to the passing stranger anything about themselves, their customs, and more especially their religious opinions. Outwardly, they are all Mohammedans, though in their wild nomad life they never see either a mosque or an imam. Last summer I gave the results of my enquiries into the religious tenets of the Ansairée who dwell in and around Tarsus, and the secrecy with which they enshroud their belief. Investigations amongst the Afshars, the Kizilbashi, and the Yourouks, lead me to imagine that this secret religion is not confined only to the Ansairée, but is the religion of nearly all the nomad races who wander to and fro in the mountainous districts between the Mediterranean and the Caspian.

This evening I will confine myself entirely to the Yourouks, and set before you what anthropological facts I collected whilst amongst them, and, I will here bear testimony to the value of the anthropological "Notes and Queries" which suggested most appropriate questions just at those moments of emergency when one's mind assumes a steady blank and refuses to act.

The Yourouks, who inhabit the southern coast of Asia Minor and the heights of the Taurus, are of two distinct races, of origins quite as far apart as the Greeks and the Bulgarians of the Balkan peninsula. The Turks, however, have not distinguished between them, and call them all Yourouks. The first of these are called *Takhtagee*, and principally occupy themselves in wood cutting and charcoal burning. This name is derived from the word *takht*, a plank, and refers to their occupation; they prefer, however, to be called *Allevi*, the origin of which name I do not know. These people are generally to be found in such

parts of the district as are covered with forests, which they are year by year destroying, whereas the other branch of Yourouks are strictly pastoral, and are found in their tents in open spaces, or amongst the low brushwood which is suitable as fodder for their cattle.

First of all we will speak of the Takhtagee Yourouks. (Yourouk is derived from the Turkish word *youroumek*, to wander.) We came across them chiefly in Lycia and the confines of Pamphylia. Many of them adopt a semi-sedentary life, and dwell in huts built of rough stone, with walls three or four feet high, and a round thatched roof without central support, reminding one forcibly of the round Turkoman tents, from which pattern this form of architecture is doubtless derived.

The religious ideas of the Takhtagee are decidedly peculiar and suggestive of not only the Ansairee of the Lebanon, but also of the Yezedee from the district near Mosul. Their belief in the transmigration of souls is very marked: to them the peacock is the embodiment of evil, yet it is an animal which may rise to a higher position in a future existence. This at once connects them with the Yezedee, or so-called devil worshippers, who, as Dr. Badger relates in his history of the Nestorians, worship a brass representation of a peacock, *Melek Taoos*, or King Peacock, as they call it in their secret assemblies, which they consider to be the god of evil, and therefore the one to be most propitiated. Like the Yezedee, the Takhtagee never use the word *Sheitan*, and shudder if anyone else makes use of that very common Turkish oath. Ali to them is the great prophet, the latest and most perfect incarnation of the diety, which connects them at once with the Ansairee of the Lebanon, and the Ali-ullah-hi of Northern Persia, to both of whom Ali is God. There are many stories in connection with the secret assemblies of the Takhtagee, but most of them, I should imagine, like those told about the Ansairee, are chiefly the calumnies of their enemies. Curiously enough, the Takhtagee wash like the Shütés of Persia, from the wrist upwards, not like the Sonnee who wash in the reverse direction.

Perhaps in this secret form of religion we may be confronted with the survival of some heathen cult, perhaps it may be a half-formed or decayed form of Christianity. About the Ansairee, I have stronger opinions than about the Takhtagee. I feel at present wholly unable to form any definite opinion.

The physique of this race is peculiar; they have long, pointed heads, and it is a common custom amongst them tightly to bind the heads of their infants; whether this peculiarity is due to this custom or not, I am not prepared to offer an opinion.

The best time to study the Pastoral Yourouk is during the

winter, when they come down to the plains near the coast with their flocks and herds. This is their *Kishla*, or winter quarters (derived from *Kish*, winter), as opposed to the *Yaela*, or summer quarters (derived from *Yas*, spring).

Most of the inhabitants of the low-lying towns and villages go up to the mountains for their *yaela* in summer; so that during this period you can never be quite sure that you have got a genuine Yourouk or not for your study. The Yourouks are a finer race than the Takhtagee, lithe of limb and seldom under six feet in height.

Some of them have adopted a semi-sedentary life for three months of the year, dwelling in hovels erected out of ancient ruins, in the tombs of the ancient Greeks, but as soon as spring comes their abodes become uninhabitable from vermin, and they betake themselves again to their tents. They are an exceedingly peaceful and law-abiding race, a great contrast to their neighbours the Afshars, Kourds, and Circassians, whose habitat is more to the east, and the Turks look upon them as the policemen of the mountains, and they are always ready to give information concerning the thefts and smuggling of the less peaceful tribes, several instances of which came under our notice.

The natural abode of the Yourouk is his black goat's-hair tent, with the camel pack-saddles built round for a wall and the family mattresses spread in the midst; his life is occupied in looking after his flocks, and according to the season he moves from one pasture to another.

Their year they divide into three seasons—namely, *Yas*, spring, five months; *Güs*, summer, four months; and winter three months, which they again subdivide into three parts. (1) *Kampsin*, fifty days; (2) *Karadès*, black winter, ten days; and (3) one month, March, *Zembrai*, or the opening.

They are a fine, active race, insensible to fatigue and hardship, tall and strong, with open countenances, usually dark hair, but lighter complexions than most other tribes in Asia Minor. They dress in loose cotton clothes, and their women do not veil their faces. Their infants they swaddle, first binding round the child's body a rag containing earth heated with a stone; but infant mortality is enormous amongst them. Nearly every woman has had a large family, of which only two or three survive. Hence the survival of the fittest, and the healthy lives they lead contribute to the fineness of the race: they also tightly bind the infant's head, for what purpose I do not know. We found a considerable percentage of idiots amongst them, whom they treat with superstitious care; and many instances of abortion in the shape of infants without arms, a wrong number of fingers, &c. One man, from the village of Tapan,

north of Sis, had a horn like a goat's horn growing on his head. He is, I hear, coming to Europe to exhibit himself.

Diseases are uncommon amongst them, except *teletmeh*, or throat disease (to cure which they wrap the patient in the warm skins of newly-slaughtered animals), and spleen, which they treat with poultices and decoctions of mountain herbs.

Their intercourse with the outer world is very limited; often a well-to-do citizen of some town furnishes a body of Yourouks with flocks by contract; the Yourouk to provide so many okes of milk, cheese, butter, &c., whilst the tribes get what milk is over, the hair, &c., and the contractor agrees also to keep up the flock, if by chance it diminishes. This is termed "an immortal contract." In this way the Yourouks often amass flocks of their own, and in time pay off the lender. Their communication is generally done by tallies.

These nomads are very destructive to the country they travel over; lighting their fires beneath trees, they ruthlessly destroy acres of timber, and the valleys of this part of the Taurus are rich in tall, straight fir-trees used for masts; then they lay bare whole tracts of country, that they may have fodder for their flocks, and nothing is so destructive to timber as the habit they have of tapping the fir-trees near the root for the turpentine. A deep notch is cut, and the turpentine all flows to this part. After a while the tree is cut down, and the wood in the vicinity of the notch is used for torches, the only light they make use of. Again, they bark the cedars to make their beehives, and for roofing purposes, and are the most destructive enemy the forests of Asia Minor have. Luckily, the vast extent of forest and the sparsity of inhabitants makes the destruction of timber less marked; but it is a steady destruction if slow, and must in the end ruin the forests of the country.

In his mountain wanderings the Yourouk has regular visitors at stated times. The goat and sheep merchant comes in the spring, pitches his tent in a central place, sits with the big men of the tribe around him on cushions, smokes his narghili, and has a pot of coffee boiling in the embers, and buys from those who are willing to sell. When he has amassed as many as he can conveniently manage, he sets off to the nearest town to realize a large profit.

They are great camel-breeders, and produce the valuable sort of mule camel, common to Asia Minor and known as the Toulou camel, a cross between the Bactrian and the Syrian; and in spring large Bactrian stallions are brought round amongst the encampments. This cross produces a camel excellent for mountaineering purposes, alike impervious to the snows of the mountains and the heat of the plains.

Then the tax collector comes to gather in the Ashr, or tax on their cattle; he also pitches his tent, and is surrounded by the leading men, but as often as not he has a lot of trouble, for when they are advised of his advent the Yourouks hide a portion of their flocks in out-of-the-way caves to avoid the tax. Then comes the travelling tinker to mend their copper pots—the great importer of external gossip amongst them; he settles for a few days at each place where he finds ten or more tents, with his bellows and his assistant, and mends with nitre the quaint-shaped coffee-pots and household copper utensils which they use, in return for which he gets butter and cheese, and with these he returns to the town as soon as he has got together as much as his mule can carry. Visits are also periodically expected from the wool merchants, skin dealers, and the public circumciser, who initiates the young Yourouks into the first mysteries of the Mohammedan faith.

In food the Yourouks are exceedingly frugal—their bread in times of plenty is made of flour, in times of famine of acorns; it is of the oatcake type, and baked with great dexterity by women on copper platters over a few embers—cakes with vegetable inside, milk, cheese, and very rarely meat, and no wine. Coffee, however, is essential to them, and often I have wondered what these nomads, so unchanged in everything else, did before coffee was made known, until one day when coffee ran short an excellent substitute was provided for us, made of the seeds of a fine species of thistle, botanically termed *Gundelia Tournefortia*, for it was discovered by Gundelscheimer and Tournefort, who calls it the “finest plant in the whole Levant,” though he apparently was not aware of its use. It grows in dry stony places all over the southern slopes of the Taurus, and is, I understand, very plentiful in Afghanistan. The coffee produced by it is a little lighter in colour, but more aromatic and bitter than ours; they use it also as a stomachic.

By boiling the cones of the *Juniperus drupacea* in a large cauldron for a long time, a thick sweet stuff is produced; this they mix with flour, and the result is not unlike chocolate cream, and they call it *pelteh*.

In producing material from the mountain herbs the Yourouks are very cunning. Before aniline dyes were invented they drove a good trade in colours, but now it does not pay them to continue making them, and European dyes are used by their women in making the Karamanian carpets. The milk of a spurge, called *Galaxhidi* by the Greeks, is boiled with onion leaves. When the wool is put in, the colour does not at first appear until it is plunged into cold water, when a brilliant red is the result. From the gall of the *Quercus infectoria* they make another dye—in

fact, their mountains are covered with herbs useful for all kinds of purposes.

The Yourouk will do anything for tobacco. When it is not forthcoming they make use of certain leaves known to them, and even are known at times to use smoke-dried fig-leaves.

The Yourouks are an exceedingly polygamous race. Poor though he is, a man will often have seven wives, or more properly speaking, seven slaves. Each wife generally occupies a different tent; one minds one portion of the flock in one part, another in another direction, another wife looks after the camels, another stays at home to weave carpets, another collects wood and fetches water; and he must be a very poor man indeed who cannot boast of at least three wives. The natural result of this is that the female population, though in excess of the male, is not enough to meet the demand, so that much is done in the way of woman stealing, and if report speaks truly, a Yourouk who wants a wife is not particular in appropriating a married woman from another tribe.

On marriage the husband generally pays something to the father, and this has given rise to the idea that the nomads are in the habit of selling their wives for the harems of Constantinople, whereas they are only carrying out their legitimate idea of the marriage contract. The Yourouks are, strictly speaking, endogamists as far as they can manage it, only going outside when necessity obliges them. In this they are a marked contrast to their neighbours the Circassians, who generally seek a wife from a remote settlement. The Circassians also pay something down for a wife: the *kalim* or price is fixed in *baritals* or mares, their ordinary scale of measurement, 1 camel=5 mares, 20 sheep=1 mare, &c. At a betrothal the Yourouks kill a lamb, play the tambourine, let off guns, &c., and exchange handkerchiefs; nothing else. The marriage is a little gayer, dancing and feasting for three or four days, but the ceremony so often repeated seems to lose its zest.

The Turkish Government is anxious to get the Yourouks to settle in some of the more favourable localities on the southern slopes of the Taurus, where a few of the wretched hovels have been erected, but the Yourouks resent the idea, and doggedly refuse to have a mosque or a Hodja. We saw several attempts to thus bind them, but they resent the idea and the mosque falls into ruins. Their religion is a truly pastoral one, and impregnated with much secrecy though amongst them we never saw traces, as with the Takhtagees, of the Ali worship. They are, however, quite distinct from the Mohammedans, for they weep over a corpse, deck it with flowers, and give wine at bridal festivities. Sacred trees by the side of the pathways are hung with rags (to

cure fevers) wooden spoons, &c. ; and there is a little pile of stones hard by which passers-by add to, and when a Yourouk dies they bring his body to one of these open-air temples, read a little over it from the Koran, and take a few of the small stones to put over his lonely grave. They prefer to bury near a path so that the passer-by may say a prayer, and this has given rise to the erroneous belief that their cemeteries are those of villages which have disappeared. This tree worship amongst them is highly interesting ; like the sacred groves of Hellenic and biblical folklore, each sacred tree has its spirit and is never cut down for fear of driving away the genius loci, and the transference of evil to trees has its parallel in the East Indian Islands, where epilepsy is transferred to trees by striking the patient with the branches.

Their superstitions are few ; they have their Piri, who inhabit streams, and houses and cliffs like all savage races, but they believe in nothing that harms them, and have no special dread of ruins. In the mountains where rain-water has settled they say that if a wild animal—an ibex or a bear—has drunk there, if a man from civilisation drinks after it he will become wild like they are, and this is how they became Yourouks. Where the Yourouk is sedentary and produces crops his tools are of the most primitive nature, the threshing machine of pine wood, set with flint stones at the bottom fixed along the grain of the wood, cf. Isaiah xli, 15 : “The new sharp threshing instrument having teeth.” On this the man sits and is dragged by bullocks round and round. Their spade is the old Roman bipalium, and their sheep are the fat-tailed ones such as Herodotus described as being “one cubit in width” (Herod. iii, § 113), and such as one sees on the bas-reliefs of Persepolis. Their churns are skins hung on three sticks, and stirred with a dasher. Wooden utensils are the most generally in use, a wooden mortar for pounding coffee, wooden dishes, bowls, &c. ; but then each tent has its heirlooms of copper utensils, which are mended with great care and handed down for generations.

The Yourouks are believers in magic and have prophets among them, who look in water, open books, and from the grain of wood can tell who has stolen a goat and where it is. The evil eye, too, they strongly believe in, and the efficacy of an onion hung up in the tent to keep it off. Their games are mostly rough, and consist of wrestling and feats of strength.

Yourouk women often mark their heads with the sign of the cross, having seen Christian women doing so, and believe it brings good luck.

So that each family may know its own cattle they cut the ears of goats, camels, and cows with different marks, and some of them have a very grotesque effect.

It is difficult to obtain from their tradition any idea of the origin of the Yourouk. They will always tell you that they are the descendants of those who inhabited the ruins amongst which they now dwell, and that their kind ancestors put up letters on the walls to inform them concerning treasure they had concealed. I have seen a Yourouk hard at work with a chisel making his way into a column in which he is sure gold is hidden. I have seen them dig holes below Greek inscriptions with the same object in view.

Each tribe has its Agha, or chief, who is held responsible by the government for the good conduct of the tribe. Practically he is their legislator, and settles all disputes, for a Yourouk never thinks of taking his grievances before the Turkish law courts.

The advent of the Yourouks into Asia Minor and their origin is lost in obscurity. Bertrand de la Broquière tells us how two waves of them spread over Asia Minor in the fifteenth century, the first settling in the towns and blending with the Turks, the second preferring to keep up the nomad habits of their forefathers. The great number of Persian words in the dialect of Turkish that they speak—words never used by other Turks, such as *beruh*, “be off,” *shuma* for “you,” “pool” for money, &c.—stamps them as originally having used that language and coming from the Persian Mountains. In features and colour they are more akin to the Kourds than the Persians or the Armenians. Their skin is fairer, and their cast of countenance would argue that they are of northern origin, perhaps from the mountainous district east of the Caspian.

DISCUSSION.

Mr. WALHOUSE made some remarks regarding the aversion from the peacock, spoken of by Mr. Bent, as held by the tribes described by him. Mr. Walhouse asked whether the peacock is found in a wild state in the countries north of the Black Sea, as he had supposed the *habitat* of the peacock did not extend west of India. Mr. Bent, in stating that it is found in Persia, also mentioned that the turkey is included in the same condemnation of ill-omen and uncleanness. This is remarkable, as the turkey is an American bird, and can have been known only recently in those countries.

Prof. RUPERT JONES referred to the fact that a threshing-machine, set with flints, such as that described by Mr. Bent, had been brought from Aleppo, and forms part of the Christy Collection in the British Museum, Bloomsbury.