From Antiquity to the Present Day: A History of the City of Gagra

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Abstract

This article examines the history of the city of Gagra from antiquity to the present day. It also discusses the structures built during the periods of the Russian Empire and Soviet rule, and offers an interpretation of the city's toponymy.

Keywords: Gagra, history, toponymy, Lesser and Greater Abkhazia, Novorossiysk.

Gagra is one of the oldest cities in the Caucasus. It is located in north-western Abkhazia, in the Gagra District, and serves as its administrative centre.

The city lies at the foot of the Gagra Range. Today, it is a very well-known resort town, but the history of Gagra extends back more than two thousand years. As early as the first century CE, the territory of Abkhazia was divided among three small kingdoms known as Apsilia, Abazgia, and Sanigia,[1] with the city of Gagra located within the territory of Sanigia.

All three kingdoms formed part of the Roman Empire; at that time the city was called 'Nitica' (*Nitika*) by the Romans.[2] In the first–second centuries CE, the Roman Empire built a series of small fortresses along the Black Sea–Caucasian coast, including one on the territory of present-day Gagra. In what is now the old part of the city, one can still see the remains of this Roman fortress, which today is known as 'Abaata' (from Abkhaz, *"the place of the fortress"*).

Inside this fortress, in the sixth century, the Abkhaz erected a church. The nineteenth-century archaeologist and researcher Dubois de Montpereux wrote the following about it:

> 'A square space, also surrounded by a wall of which almost no trace survives, adjoined the northern side of this fortification. On this side stood a church built of massive blocks, like the towers, the walls and the vaults. The church of the earliest period shows what is most primitive and simple: nothing but a completely vaulted nave, semicircular choirs to the east, a vestibule or pronaos to the west, and two very rough porticoes on the sides. No decoration at all. The Russians turned it into a guardhouse and a powder magazine.'[3]

In the eighth century, the city would become part of the Abkhazian Kingdom (*Apsua ahra*), whose centre was in the city of Anakopia (now New Athos) and later in Kutaisi (now in western Georgia).

By the late thirteenth century, the geopolitical situation in the Black Sea basin changed dramatically, and this inevitably affected Gagra as well. As is known, in 1204 the Crusaders captured the capital of Byzantium, Constantinople. As Judith Herrin notes:

> '…after the capture of the city, when the Crusaders began to divide up the empire, Venice demanded the largest portion for itself.'[4]

After the creation of the Latin Empire, the Venetians gained the opportunity to establish commercial factories both in the Mediterranean and in the Black Sea. However, this period did not last long, and already in 1261 the Byzantine Greeks — with the help of the Republic of Genoa — liberated Constantinople from the Crusaders and Venetians, signing with Genoa the Treaty of Nymphaeum. In return for their assistance, Genoa received extensive commercial privileges throughout the Black Sea basin.

Five years after the restoration of Constantinople, in 1266, Khan Oran-Timur, who had been granted the Crimea by his uncle, the Golden Horde khan Mengu-Timur, permitted the Genoese to establish a trading factory and colony in Caffa, on the site of ancient Theodosia, on the condition that they:

> '…pay him duties on the import and export of goods, whilst granting all merchants the right to buy and sell here goods brought from elsewhere.'[5]

Thus, the *Officium Gazarie* was formed, a Genoese administrative-commercial network seeking monopoly over trade across the Black Sea region. Abkhazia and the entire north-western Caucasus also came under Genoese influence. In Abkhazia they established several trading bases, including one in Gagra.

It was during this Genoese period that the city first appears on medieval portolan charts under the name 'Cacari' (*Kakari*). This toponym has Abkhaz roots. As the linguist V. A. Chirikba points out:

> 'The form *Cacara* represents a reflection of the original full-vowel variant of the Abkhaz toponym Ga-ky-ra, "the place that closes the shore" (Kvarchia 2006: 142), more precisely, "that which secures the coastline".'[6]

Interestingly, on the map of Nicolo Pasqualini from 1408 (or 1448), the toponym appears as *Cacarj Uucassia*, that is, 'Gagra Abkhazia'.

Listing the Genoese trading factories, the scholar A. G. Emanov notes:

> '…the sites of Cacari (Gagra) and Pitsunda. They are marked on all Italian medieval maps — from the compass chart of Pietro Vesconte in the early fourteenth century to the 1546 atlas of Battista Agnese. These names were often highlighted in red, which emphasised the high importance of the harbours of Cacari and Pitsunda for Genoese seafarers.'[7]

In the fifteenth century, Abkhazia suffered attacks by the Ottoman fleet, and in the second half of the sixteenth century it officially became part of the Ottoman Empire. Merchants from the empire settled in Gagra and conducted trade with the local population.

During this period, the city was given a new name:

دربنا — Derbena,
derived from the Persian *Darbandī* ('gate', 'barrier'), from the same root as the name Derbent in Dagestan.[8]

During the Ottoman era, Abkhazia was divided into "free" and "princely" territories — also known as Lesser and Greater Abkhazia. Gagra became part of Lesser Abkhazia, which stretched approximately from the Bzyb River to the Shakhe River.

Along this stretch of coastline lived the Ubykhs and Jigets, also called Sadz, the latter inhabiting the territory from the Sochi River to the Bzyb River. Thus Gagra belonged historically to one of the Abkhaz ethnographic groups: the Sadz (Jigets).

However, the history of the city changed fundamentally in the early nineteenth century. In 1810, the Abkhaz Principality became part of the Russian Empire, and later the imperial commander and statesman I. F. Paskevich developed the idea of stationing a Russian garrison in Gagra.

As A. V. Zelenin wrote:[9]

> '…in 1830 Major-General Hesse was instructed to occupy the Gagra Pass and establish a fortification there.
>
> In July 1830, having boarded a small detachment of only 650 men (from the 41st Jaeger Regiment) and two cannons onto ships in Sukhum, Hesse approached the Gagra roadstead and began landing on the shore…
>
> Having seized the narrow pass, Hesse immediately began laying the foundations of a fortress on the site of an ancient fortification, near the ruins of an old monastery. These ruins, as well as the materials brought aboard the ships, enabled the Russians to quickly erect the walls of the fortification…
>
> A garrison of three companies of the Linear Black Sea Battalion was left in the fortification.'

Before long, however, the Crimean War (1853–1856) echoed as far as Gagra, endangering the imperial garrison:

> '…the situation of the Gagra garrison became catastrophic. It faced serious danger of being destroyed by the fire of the Anglo-French squadron.'[10]

The rescue of the imperial detachment was organised by the Ruler of Abkhazia, Khamyt-bey Chachba (known in Russian documents as *Mikhail Shervashidze*), and the Commander of the Black Sea Coastal Line, Vice-Admiral L. M. Serebryakov.

Zelenin provides a vivid description of the event:[11]

> ‘Responding to General Serebryakov’s call, one fearless Greek skipper — Sarando Fotii — volunteered, without any payment, to undertake the dangerous mission of saving the unfortunate Gagra garrison.
>
> On a dark night, Sarando weighed anchor on his vessel *Ioann* and, skilfully manoeuvring, slipped between the enemy cruisers without being noticed.
>
> Early in the morning of 20 April, the officers and soldiers of the Gagra Fortress saw with extreme agitation a ship flying the Russian flag approaching the roadstead and dropping anchor not far from the shore.
>
> Immediately, the embarkation of the soldiers began; 600 men were somehow accommodated aboard Sarando’s vessel.’

Upon withdrawing from the fortress, the Russian forces blew up the walls and destroyed all supplies. The garrison was evacuated to Kerch.

However, by the late nineteenth century, a new idea emerged: the creation of the first resort on the Black Sea–Caucasian coast, situated in the picturesque bay of Gagra.

The writer A. Zander romantically described the coast of Crimea and the Caucasus:[12]

> ‘…but on the third day you find yourself at the Caucasian shore. From Novorossiysk, the spurs of the Caucasus descend to the sea, at first only bare rocks are visible, then your gaze is soothed by the gentle outlines of mountains framed in greenery, their summits sometimes veiled by clouds; and in late autumn, already on your way south from Novorossiysk, long before reaching Sukhum, you may glimpse the snowy peaks revealed at times behind the coastal spurs of the higher mountains retreating from the Main Caucasian Range to the sea.
>
> The steamer passes the young Black Sea resorts of Tuapse and Sochi — and you approach your destination: Gagra.’

Another account described the surroundings of Gagra:[13]

> ‘The surroundings of Gagra abound in beautiful and interesting places for walks.
>
> The famous Circassian Trail, the mountain paths leading to the sources of the Gagripsh River and to the Zhoekvara Waterfall, offer magnificent examples of Caucasian nature, proud and majestic, striking in its richness and diversity: sheer

> ravines, hollows and cliffs covered with forest and shrubs; a mountain stream making its way far below toward the roaring waterfall reveals layers of pink marble and black asphaltic limestone.
>
> Everywhere there is dense, luxuriant greenery. In the warm, humid gorges there is an astonishing richness of floral forms, species appear that are not found even on the French Riviera.'

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Prince Alexander of Oldenburg, a relative of Emperor Nicholas II, visited Gagra and became enamoured of the region. Its climate was described as:

> '…exceptionally remarkable',[14]

and everything he saw in Gagra:

> '…produced such a strong impression on the August Visitor that by October 1901 work was already in full swing on establishing a climatic station in Gagra.'[15]

The well-known nineteenth-century archaeologist, ethnographer and Caucasus specialist A. N. Dyachkov-Tarasov described the territory of Gagra with great admiration:[16]

> 'Opened on 9 January 1903, the Gagra Climatic Station possesses all the qualities necessary to take its place alongside the best foreign institutions of this kind.
>
> Its buildings are distinguished not only by convenience and comfort, but by the originality of their style.
>
> All the conditions of life here can satisfy the capricious tastes of a wealthy man, accustomed to every convenience of urban life, and can bring to a state of rapture the provincial unspoiled by comfort.'

The following facilities were constructed or renovated during the administration of Prince Alexander of Oldenburg:

- A wood-and-cardboard house
- Restoration and illumination of the 6th-century Church of St Hypatius of Gagra
- The Administration Building, which housed:
    - the climate station administration
    - the magistrate's court
    - the forestry office

    - the police department
    - the border guard post
    - with the second and third floors serving as apartments for staff
    - A second, identical building contained shops on the ground floor and furnished rooms on the upper floors
- A primary school
- A temporary hospital
- A pharmacy
- A restaurant
- Two bathing pavilions (female and male) at the mouths of the Zhoekvara and Gagripsh rivers
- A horse-drawn tramway, replaced by an electric tram in 1905
- A so-called “temporary hotel” in the Art Nouveau style
- A second hotel
- Furnished rooms and shops
- An agricultural farm
- A bakery
- A laundry
- An electric power station
- A water-supply system on the Gagripsh River
- The Palace of Prince A. P. of Oldenburg
- A barracks for a company of the 79th Kurin Infantry Regiment
- A sericulture (silk-production) station

- And other facilities

By the time the climatic station was established, the Novorossiysk–Sukhum highway already ran through the entire city of Gagra, a crucial factor for the development of the Black Sea coast and for Gagra's growth as a resort.

As is known:[18]

> 'The construction of the Black Sea highway began in 1881.
> That same year, the construction of the Novorossiysk–Tuapse section was completed, and in 1883–1887 the Tuapse–Sochi section.
>
> In 1887, the road Sukhum–New Athos was laid.
>
> In 1891, under the direction of General Annenkov, work continued on constructing the Black Sea highway from Novorossiysk to Sukhum, a distance of 509 versts…
>
> The construction continued until 1894.
>
> By 1896, 27 bridges had been built on the Novorossiysk–Sukhum section within Abkhazia, and by 1900, along the entire highway, 1,500 large and small bridges had been constructed.'

An essential and still cherished part of the resort is the Seaside Park, with its ponds and fountain. Here a wide range of exotic trees and plants were cultivated; today one finds:

- Canary Island palms
- Washingtonia palms
- Chilean wine palms (*Jubaea chilensis*)
- Pines
- Chinese bamboo
- Laurel
- Plane trees
- and many other species.

The archaeologist, scientist and founder of speleology A. É. Martel, who visited Gagra in 1903, was deeply impressed by the resort. He wrote:[19]

> ‘Gagra is a luxurious creation of His Highness Prince Oldenburg, which rose from the ground with fantastic speed in just one year.
>
> On the road to Sukhum, it will be like Monte-Carlo, attracting the aristocracy and the financial elite, the complete opposite of Sochi both in geographical location and in the composition of its society.’

Given that the resort was intended for the wealthy classes of the Russian Empire, a 60-bed hospital was built:

> ‘It had surgical and therapeutic departments and served mainly representatives of the higher classes.’[20]

In 1904, the resort of Gagra was incorporated into the Black Sea Governorate.[21]

A brief historical preface is necessary here.

On 10 March 1866, the Black Sea Okrug of the Russian Empire was established.
Its north-western boundary was the city of Anapa (inclusive), and its south-eastern boundary was the Bagrypsta River.

On 23 May 1896, the Black Sea Governorate was created, incorporating the territory from the Bagrypsta River (*Abkhaz: Bagrypsta — “the land of the Baga clan”*) to the Bzyb River, that is, practically the entire modern Gagra District, including the city of Gagra itself.[22]

On 13 March 1918, the Black Sea Soviet Republic was established on this territory.[23]
On 30 May 1918, it was announced that the Kuban–Black Sea Soviet Republic had been formed, but already on 7 July 1918, the North Caucasian Soviet Republic was proclaimed here.

Throughout this period, the territory of the city of Gagra and what is today the Gagra District of Abkhazia formed a part of these political entities.

In 1918, the army of the GDR (Georgian Democratic Republic) invaded Abkhazia with the aim of occupying the entire country, and by 25 June 1918 Georgian troops had reached the border between Abkhazia and the North Caucasian Soviet Republic along the Bzyb River.

From 28 June to 27 July, they occupied the territory from Gagra to Tuapse.[24]

In 1920, on 7 May, the GDR and the RSFSR signed a treaty by which the border between the two states was to run along the Psou River (*Abkhaz: Псоу/Psou — “the long river”*)[25].

However, in February 1921, Abkhazia was liberated from the Georgian occupation.

A 1928 document states:[26]

> ‘When the Red Army broke through the Pilenkov front, it was forced for strategic reasons to halt at the Kholodnaya Rechka.
> As a result, the Pilenkovo volost was temporarily transferred to the jurisdiction of the Sochi District, where by that time a Revolutionary Committee had already been formed.
>
> After the Sovietisation of Abkhazia, the Revkom immediately raised the question with the Central authorities of recognising Abkhazia’s borders up to the Mzymta River.’

As the researcher V. A. Kvarchia notes:[27]

> ‘In the Soviet period, the question of Abkhazia’s north-western border was first examined by the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR on 31 October 1924, and the decision was adopted:
>
> “To attach the Pilenkovo volost of the Black Sea Okrug to the Gagra Uezd of the Abkhaz ASSR, while safeguarding the national and everyday needs of the population of this volost”.
>
> However, the practical transfer of this territory to the Abkhaz SSR became protracted due to the protest mood of the leadership of the Black Sea Okrug.’

The issue was finally resolved in 1928, and the north-western border of the Abkhaz SSR came to run along the Psou River, thus making the entire modern Gagra District part of Abkhazia.[28]

During the Soviet era, Gagra developed rapidly. New sanatoria and hotels were built, including:

- Gagripsh
- Zhoekvara
- Kolkhida
- Ritsa

As the historian and archaeologist V. P. Pachulia wrote:[29]

> ‘From 1930–1931, the Gagra resort began to operate year-round.
> A meteorological station was built on Mount Dzykhcha,
> a resort polyclinic opened,
> and the medical beach was improved.
>
> The hotels *Zhoekvara* and *Kolkhida* were used in winter as rest homes.

In 1933, rest homes of the People's Commissariat of Finance of the USSR were commissioned at the resort.
In 1934, the House of Rest named after the XVII Party Congress and the Sanatorium named after the Chelyuskinites opened;
in 1935, the Sanatorium "Ukraine" was opened.

From 1921 to 1941, more than forty million roubles were spent on resort construction in Abkhazia, including the Gagra resort.'

In Gagra, additional major facilities were built:

- The large Kavkasioni health resort (1971)
- The Energetik and Iskra holiday bases
- The holiday homes Armenia, Georgia, Skala[30]

Aleksandr Fadeev, Konstantin Fedin, Leonid Leonov, Oles Honchar, Leonid Sobolev, Konstantin Gamsakhurdia, Olga Berggolts, Rasul Gamzatov, Irakli and Grigol Abashidze, Evgeny Evtushenko, the famous Turkish poet Nazım Hikmet, the English writer and great friend of the Soviet Union James Aldridge, the Hungarian writer Zoltán Fábián, and the eminent literary scholars Evgeny Pertsov and Boris Solovyov.

Thus, the city of Gagra became the "Soviet Nice" or "Soviet Riviera", but all good things eventually come to an end.

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the Georgian–Abkhaz War began on 14 August 1992. Already on 15 August, Georgia deployed a naval landing force to western Abkhazia, and:

'…they took control of the city of Gagra.'[32]

As a result, the city was severely damaged.

After the end of the war, Gagra began to recover slowly but steadily.

The following major sites were restored:

- The Hotel "Abkhazia"
- The former Energetik boarding house, now Amza Park Hotel
- The Sanatorium "Ukraine", now Gagra Garden Resort

After many years of abandonment, the colonnade, originally built in 1953, was fully restored.

The Church of St Hypatius of Gagra continues to function, and so on.

Today, the city is actively restoring its tourist infrastructure, and Gagra is now the most popular destination in Abkhazia among visitors.[33]

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