

"Brief Ecological Description of the Caucasus Relic Hominoid (Almasti) Based on Oral Reports By Local Inhabitants and on Field Investigations"

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Translated from Russian into English by Dmitri Bayanov.

Report:

This description of the natural history of the Almasti of the Caucasus Mountain Region is a summary of much detailed and long investigations. Koffmann presents the material in a straightforward, factual manner that will leave many skeptics aghast. Koffmann gives a detailed account of what the Almasti eats, when they can be seen, the territory they occupy and speculates on their possible population. Koffmann is convinced that these Almasti are a drastically declining population. On the other hand, the North American Sasquatch seems not to show any sign of a recent decline in population.

The morphology of relic hominoids, though it varies to a certain extent from one geographic region to another, is so well known today--both to the specialist and general public--that it seems preferable to dwell on some aspects of this species' biology.

My paper deals with the Caucasus and this should be specially stressed. The peculiarities of the Caucasus habitat have produced a unique situation for the hominoids and have deeply affected the ecology and ethnology of their local population.

Extending from the South-Russian steppes to the high plateaus of Anatolia in Armenia and Iran, the Caucasus takes up the whole isthmus between the Black and Caspian seas, covering an area of 440,000 km² (compared to Great Britain, 244,734 km² and Italy, 311,000 km²).

The main geomorphological features of the region is the Greater Caucasus which crosses the isthmus with a barrier of parallel ranges attaining great heights and running uninterrupted for 1,200 km.

Despite the greatest variety of ethnic groups, tongues, religions and cultures, the people of Caucasus as a whole are characterized by the deeply antiquated nature of their customs and traditions. For thousands of years their livelihood has depended on the breeding of sheep and even today they retain the traits of ancient pastoral peoples, such as spiritual rectitude and simplicity, great hospitality, and keenness of observation.

In the Caucasus, a theater of the earliest civilizations, the hominoid population, pressed by Homo sapiens to lifeless uplands of rocky ranges, turned out to be surrounded and imprisoned by humans, as it were. The hominoid's resemblance to man aroused in the latter both fear of and pity for the creature. Not seeing special harm in them, fearful of their great physical strength--and above all of their strange nature (neither man nor beast)--people preferred to maintain peaceful relations with the hominoids. The creatures even used to be offered food and old clothes by humans. Special sympathy used to be extended to their "women" with babies. The "Almasti" (this is a Kabardinian name for the creatures which I am familiar with) have had enough presence of mind to profit fully by the proximity of man. The kind of relationship that exists

between man and hominoid in the Caucasus is not to be met, as far as I know, anywhere else in the world at present.

The Caucasus habitat embraces practically all the territory of the isthmus: the Almasti is not confined to a definite landscape or certain climatic, temperature or altitude conditions. The hominoid can be encountered in the rush flood-lands of the Podkumok and Terek Rivers, on the open and severe pre-Elbrus plateau, on the rock walls of the Greater and Lesser Caucasus, on the hot, dry plateaus of Karabakh and Armenia, in the dense, moist, subtropical forests of Kolkhida and the Talysh, as well as in the sand hills of the Caspian depression.

All these different landscapes serve as a natural background for the hominoid. With all that he tries to avoid open country, if possible, and clearly tends to inhabit woodlands. It is not fortuitous that in all Caucasian languages he is called "man of the woods," or "forest man."

Food and Eating Habits

As can be expected from the variety of his biotopes, the Almasti is omnivorous. But one gets the impression that vegetarian food provides the staples of his diet, perhaps because of its abundance and easy availability. Coexistence with man has led to the Almasti's partaking rather freely from the larder of his neighbor.

The following example from my field observations will help illuminate the Almasti's alimentary ways:

A section of a corn field where an Almasti "girl," sighted in the vicinity by the locals a short time before, must have been searching for sweet cobs, opening the wrapping leaves and taking a bite here and there, apparently to test the sweetness of the corn, without even tearing some of them off; this allowed us to obtain the creature's tooth line contours of the upper and lower mandibles; left-overs of a rat, having some characteristic peculiarities: the rat had been disemboweled very neatly and expertly, with the tail bitten off; fresh feces consisting almost exclusively of cherry stones, over 160 in all (cherries were not ripe at the time), and "tails," plus some seeds of different plants; a collection of almost fresh but unripe vegetables and fruits lying on a bedding of dry grass inside a low grotto rather difficult of access: the collection contained: eight potatoes, three apples, two small pumpkins, a half-nibbled corncob, a half-eaten sunflower center, some dog rose berries, plus four round pellets of horse dung (it is believed the Almasti eats horse dung because of its salt content).

Among animal foods of the Almasti what strikes one as unusual is the placenta of domestic animals and, therefore, possibly of wild animals as well. The Almasti's taste for it is so well-known that old herders, being in retirement and not quite realizing how different the conditions of keeping herds are at present, advised me to visit herds of horses and flocks of sheep in the spring to catch the Almasti searching for placenta.

"You ask what the Almasti eats? He eats placenta, he eats dead horses, dead animals" (Report No. 19 K). "Sheep were giving birth then, and the Almasti was taking their placenta. Once, when I came nearer, he grabbed the placenta and, grumbling, went away behind the stones" (Report No. 111 K).

The following lists include only those foods that my informants insisted they had actually observed the Almasti eating:

Wild Plants Cultivated Plants

All kinds of Caucasian All kinds of fruits
Wild fruits and berries Watermelon
Sorrel Pumpkin
Bugloss Tomato
Wild chervil Onion
Cow-parsnip Green pepper
Shepherd's purse Potato
Meadow-rue Corn
Dog rose Sunflower
Ashberry Hemp
Moss
Ecphyomas, fungus formation,
on trees
Water mold
- - - -

Animal Foods

Frog's eggs
Squirrels
Carrion
Lizards
Rats
Placenta of ungulates
Tortoises
Bats
Frogs
Mice

Foods Taken from Man

Milk
"Airan" (sour, fermented milk) Mineral Food
Cheese Rock-salt
Bread Mineral concentrations
Flour at mineral water springs
Eggs White clay
Meat
Honey
Cooked meals (soup, porridge)

It is hard to determine the proportion of human-type food in the Almasti's diet, but I think it is quite extensive.

Information on the hunting activities of the hominoid in the Caucasus is very scanty in comparison with some regions of Eurasia and America. The Almasi's low hunting activity can be explained by good vegetarian feeding grounds in the Caucasus. It is worth mentioning that, according to locals, the Almasi can subsist on very little food, but when he gets to eating he does so in a greedy and rapid manner, yet never for a second letting down his guard.

As for drinking, the Almasi prefers spring water. "Having reached the spring, he knelt down, placed his hands on the ground and, just like man, bent to the water and began to drink. He was 15m from me. He drank for a long time, taking short intervals: after drinking for a while he would raise his head, glancing this way and that, and then drink again. He drinks like a horse, sucking in the water through his pressed lips" (Report No. 54G). Incidentally, the chimpanzee also drinks through his pressed lips.

The Almasi is believed to be able to do without drinking for long periods. When feeding in a cornfield he can stay put for several days, content with the liquid contained in the food.

Feeding mainly on plants, the Almasi is bound to be dependent on the vegetative conditions of his feeding grounds and to change them according to the season. And this is just the case: the annual cycle of migration is very well defined. In its simplest form this cycle is manifest; for example in Northern Azerbaijan, encounters are registered exclusively in the summer and fall months, i.e., the season of chestnuts, acorns, walnuts, hazelnuts, and all wild and cultivated fruits.

In the Northern Central Caucasus (Kabardino-Balkaria), roughly between Pyatigorsk and Nalchik where the difference in terrain elevation is not as abrupt as on the southern slopes, and where the vegetation zones change rather smoothly as a consequence, seasonal migration is not as sharply defined but is nevertheless apparent.

Sightings

On the average in the Caucasus sightings are distributed according to season. Although I did not copy the graph from John Green's *The Sasquatch File*, p. 63, I guess it will give him and our other American colleagues as much pleasure as his graphs gave to us.

Some regions, for example the Central Caucasus, are more important than others because encounters are taking place here almost throughout the year. However, here as well they are more numerous in summer (both the Almasi and the local residents are more active then), and rare in early spring (in March-April, just as they are in the western mountainous regions of Canada and the USA). The drop in the spring cannot be explained by a lesser activity of the people. On the contrary, the population is very active in the spring: a time of lambing, of sheep shearing, of spring agricultural work. But for a herbivore it is the hardest time of the year, worse even than the winter which is usually rather mild in the Northern Caucasus and quite temperate in Transcaucasia.

I have the impression that for this period the Almasi abandons the empty fields of the foothills, where

people dwell, and moves higher into the forest zone. There he can still find dry wild fruits, left from the previous year, and a lot of roots on the southern slopes where in some valleys it is quite warm.

I also think that during the leanest season the Almasti can fall to "sleep." This is not true hibernation, but a kind of protective reaction against adverse conditions, accompanied by a state of low metabolism, which helps the creature weather the adversity. Maybe this is why the Kabardinians, when speaking of something only superficially pleasant, say "There is as much fun in it as in the sleep of an Almasti."

I've heard people say that the creature must store up food for the winter, but those were just suppositions because nobody had ever actually found such stores.

We are also well aware of the daily activity rhythm of the Almasti, which transpires from the answers to two questions: at what hour of the day or night did the encounter take place? And what was the Almasti doing when encountered?

During the night (33% of encounters) the creature is busy looking for food; that is, to put it bluntly, engaged in thieving when in the area of man's habitation. At dawn (11% of encounters) the night activity ends. The Almasti sleeps a lot in the daytime (33 % of encounters), this time very soundly, sometimes unaware of people approaching. "We followed the trail which led into a spot overgrown with tall weeds. He was there, lying on his back and sleeping peacefully. There were eight of us; we surrounded him and stood looking" (Report No. 126 K). "I was walking in the grass and almost stepped on a sleeping Almasti!" (Report No. 135 K). Thus it follows that the Almasti is a crepusculo-nocturnal creature. Can it be accidental that Linnaeus attached three epithets to his second species of Homo: troglodytes, nocturnus, and sylvestris? Only the third is applicable to an ape, whereas all three fit the relic hominoid.

We know nothing of any weekly or monthly cycles of Almasti activity except for the fact that he is always on the move. Migration seems to be a specific characteristic and is an outstanding peculiarity of all populations of hominoids in different habitats the world over. Like his counterparts, the Almasti does not use a shelter for a long time, which, incidentally, testifies against the hypothesis of winter stores. In the winter he rests in chance refuges (an abandoned herder's cabin, a haystack, a grotto), in the summer simply lying on the ground in tall weeds or climbing a tree. On the ground he makes a lair with a bedding of rags and soft grass. He ties up the tops of tall weeds (making knots is one of his favorite pastimes) and covers this frame with a canopy of burdock leaves. Nests in trees are made of big branches, which are broken, intertwined and matted into a soft bedding.

Territories

It is very hard to get an idea of the size of an area on which a specimen or a group is wandering. It is not even known if there are any dividing lines between such territories within a geographical region. However, our preliminary data are in agreement with Dr. Krantz' surmising as regards territorial distribution of individuals. With the help of local witnesses, I managed to "spy" on the presence of five specimens, each in his own area, on a territory of about 250 km² during two summer seasons. Unfortunately, it was then that I had to interrupt my investigations for a number of years. Returning six years later I managed to recognize two of the old-timers by their behavior and territories. In his temporary territory each individual

was acting covertly and constantly moving from place to place, so that the information which reached us about his activities was invariably late by two or three days. The territories of the individuals overlapped.

Population

This brings me to one of the central questions which is hard to by-pass and which is difficult to answer--the number of hominoids in the Caucasus. I am only certain of one thing: the number is falling catastrophically and must presently be at a critical or even lower level, a process which began about 40 or 50 years ago and has been gaining momentum. In the 16 years of my work in the Central Caucasus the number of encounters has dropped significantly. There are a number of factors to explain the sorry plight of the hominoid in the Caucasus: war operations in the recent past, a demographic explosion, fundamental anthropogenic transformations of landscapes, a sudden advent of plenty of modern machinery in the recently feudal rural areas, etc.

If I do not risk pronouncing an absolute figure for the Caucasus population of the hominoid, then at least I can say something about its sex and age composition in the recent past. It is characterized by stability in each area and changes from area to area. Thus, in Northern Azerbaijan males accounted for 60% of identified individuals (in many cases the sex of the encountered hominoid remains unidentified), females accounted for 40%, while the young in that region in the last decades are not registered in my files at all.

Quite a different situation obtains in the north of the Central Caucasus: 54% females, of which 21% are with young, 18% juveniles (8-16 years old?), only 14% males and 14% of those sighted in groups. (The data of 1930-1965).

The groups of Almasti, invariably including the young, consist of four to six and, in rare cases, up to ten. In the old days such groups were not fearful of the local inhabitants and were noted for their boisterous behavior: it appeared that the Almasti would often start fights among themselves to the accompaniment of cries, screams and "weeping," which would rather suddenly change to peaceful mumbling in the intervals between fights.

Miscellaneous Gatherings

Not discussing the great variety of the creature's vocalization, I want only to note that the Almasti is given to mumbling even when alone. He is also capable of a cry of tremendous power, which is heard far and wide in the night and probably serves as a call.

His eyesight is excellent, both day and night vision, the latter confirmed by his "eye-shine," noted by almost every nocturnal observer of the Almasti (Napier 1973:169).

There is but little and contradictory information on the creature's sense of smell. It seems that the peculiarly nasty smell reported of some specimens could have a communicative significance. It is of such strength that even man can identify it from afar. Every time my informants mentioned this smell ("stinking like a toilet," "like a dead dog"), it was a case of a male or of a specimen of unidentified sex, which,

by certain traits, appeared to be male. I have no information on identified Almasi females giving off this smell.

I have two descriptions of Almasi births, one of them of twins, "The newborns are just like human, but small, no more than two kilos each, but otherwise just like human, you wouldn't tell them apart. The skin was pink...without hair" (No. 85 K). According to my informants, a one-year-old Almasi is already covered with short hair.

The age of young specimens is judged by witnesses using human standards and, naturally, considerable mistakes are thus possible. The "youngsters," beginning to appear alone, are guessed to be "eight years' old," and this may indicate that the young Almasi require extended care by the mother.

In the unanimous opinion of old men among locals, the life span of an Almasi is long and comparable to that of man. They cited examples of long-term associations of humans, including the parents and grandparents of the informant, with a particular Almasi, the latter receiving food offerings from the family over many years.

The Almasi has no natural enemies (I am not taking into consideration the rare brawls with a bear when feeding on wild raspberries or currants), and is hardly prone to traumatism. He is only threatened by wolves and the hefty Caucasian shepherd dogs which can induce panic in young and female almasi. (I have descriptions of Almasi corpses presumably bitten to death and disfigured by dogs.) But as a rule, the Almasi probably dies a slow, natural death (of old age or some ailment), which gives him time to seek a covert refuge.

The mathematical and graphical analysis of sighting reports and their interpretation in terms of anatomy have previously revealed the following:

1. The trustworthiness of morphological elements considered separately (the low and receding forehead with prominently protruding eyebrows, platyrrhinia, the chinless mandible, etc.).
2. The presence of classical architectonic correlations between these elements.
3. The coherence of morphology and function (for example, lack of thenar, and way of grasping) (Koffmann 1966, 1967a).

All categories of information about the Almasi--ecological, morphological, and ethnological (the last two left out here)--converge to produce a coherent and viable image, that of a primate, a hominoid, anatomically sound, biologically plausible, anthropologically sensible.

Being late by 30-40 years, we witness the end of the Caucasus hominoid. Remnants of the recently numerous population consist of only separate individuals roaming in solitude among the fragments of their habitat.

That is why, on the one hand, we are so well informed about the outward appearance of the Almasti and the main aspects of his way of life. This information has been supplied mainly by people of the older generation who are dwindling themselves. And that is why, on the other hand, we are so hard put to produce concrete proof of Almasti's existence.

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