

Colonel Khodzko assembled one of the largest and most organized expeditions of Ararat in history and spent five days on the summit of Ararat. Consider that this was accomplished in 1850, the scale of this expedition is very impressive.

Chapter 2

1850 Russian Colonel J. Khodzko

Colonel Khodzko's goal on Mt. Ararat was to systematically study the mountain. This account comes from the article by D. Longuinoff, "Ascension de l'Ararat," published in the Bulletin de la Societe de Geographie for 1851.

Sixty persons combined their talents in this expedition, conceived on a vast plan with its object (in line with a desire specifically expressed by Abich) to establish a long-term operation on the peak of Ararat. In this way, it would be possible to carry out the most delicate techniques of modern scientific investigation—those depending on precision instruments. First and foremost, the idea was to complete the triangulation of Transcaucasia as soon as possible. This Herculean task, commenced six years ago by Colonel Khodzko, was thus brought to its successful termination by him.

On the 29th of the month of July, we pitched camp on Greater Ararat, seven versts [4.67 miles] from Sardar Bulak and close to the snow line, which had receded to an unusual extent that year. After a last load of charcoal and rations had arrived, Colonel Khodzko scheduled departure for August 1.

The day was heralded by magnificent weather, and we went right ahead with the packing of the scientific instruments. Personal baggage was put on horseback and we broke camp at 6 A.M... At the head of the column marched an Armenian named Simon who had served as Abich's guide in 1845; he carried a black Cross about a sagine in length (2.1 meters) which he determined to plant on the summit of Ararat...

At 6 A.M. on the 2d of August, the detachment resumed its climb. The difficulties of the terrain multiplied, however. We surmounted the rocky ridge, which skirts the left side of the ravine and proceeded little by little to the higher altitudes. The sky, which had been rather clear early in the morning, became heavily clouded; toward noon, a west wind came up, driving swirls of icy snow and hail before it. This change in the weather obliged Colonel Khodzko to remove everything from the sleds except for the instruments. The Cossacks, with their chief as their example, then proceeded to function as bearers; and they resumed their arduous task not with a lowering of morale, but the intrepid, energetic, devil-may-care attitude so characteristic of the Russian soldier.

Here we took a short break, hoping that the weather conditions would improve. In vain! At 2:30 P.M., the window increased in violence and, to add to the difficulties, a dense fog swallowed up the peak. The expedition therefore resolved to push ahead so as to gain the protection of the rocks of the escarpment before the storm broke. We climbed the slope halfway, but there was no chance of going farther that same day... We resigned ourselves to this awkward position until the morrow.

The fury of the wind never ceased. Occasionally it would rend the thick mantle of clouds which encircled the entire mountain at that level. Then in the pale moonlight would suddenly be revealed either a corner of the Araxes valley or the contours of Lesser Ararat, whose peak was already beneath us—or we would see the gloomy precipices surrounding our inhospitable refuge, which lay at an altitude considerably higher than that of Mt. Blanc.

To complete the misery, about 10 P.M. a violent electric storm arose. By the brilliance of the lightning and the force of the thunder, the expedition soon became convinced that it was at the very center of the electric discharges. At each explosion, the electricity did not zigzag across the sky in the usual manner, but instantaneously filled the place where we were with a blinding flash and green, red, and white side effects. The thunderclaps following the lightning with no appreciable interval; their drum-like rolls were distinctly repeated over and over by echoes from the innumerable gorges of the mountain.

Toward midnight, the storm died down, but the snow continued to fall in thick flakes; those of us who did not move were covered to a depth of three or four inches. Finally, dawn broke, but it did not exactly come up to our expectations. True, the peaks were no longer enveloped by clouds, but, to compensate, the slopes of Lesser Ararat and the entire area within view below us had disappeared under an impenetrable mantle of cloud, which, from our vantage point, resembled an undulating, ice sea...

The company's situation had become so impossible that we resolved to continue the ascent, in the hope of finding, above the rocks, the level space or plateau-like area which we knew to be contiguous to the summit.

At 4 A.M., the expedition started off again. However, we reached the plateau only after climbing over still a third ridge of rock. The plain was on at least a fifty-degree incline, and it is strewn rather heavily with pyrites, which give off an intolerable smell of sulphur...

On reaching the middle of the plateau, the company was forced to halt some two hundred paces short of the peak: exhaustion and the wind absolutely forbade another step. Incredible effort resulted in the pitching of two tents on ground less steeply angled than the average, but even this incline was thirty to forty degrees. The detachment retained

this post for three nights and two days (August 3-5), and during that time the wind, accompanied by snow, hail, and ice, kept up almost without interruption...

Colonel Khodzko determined to use the morning for the exploration of the peak areas, as well as for the discovery of an advantageous location for the scientific instruments and for the high camp itself. At 8:45, he started out with the Cossacks, and a quarter of an hour later he reached the upper-level plain... Three peaks dominated. On two of them, we saw pyramidal formations, made of rocky debris and surmounted with testimonies to the Faith. These had been put up by some soldiers who, a month before, had voluntarily climbed Ararat under the leadership of one Tchougoukoff, and who had reached this solitary place on July the 12th. We rapidly climbed the closest of these summits, and then proceeded to the second (the eastern summit, which is some thirty feet lower than the western peak climbed by Parrot in 1829), which Abich had conquered in 1845.

But great was our surprise when, on reaching the top of that peak, we saw before us yet a third summit, incomparably higher than the other two and separated by a wide gully. The steep projections of that gully, which dropped off perpendicularly to a depth of about a sagene and a half [ten and a half feet], made it hard to cross. Nonetheless, we conquered the obstacle with the aid of the soldiers and, at 10 o'clock in the morning (it was the Feast of the Transfiguration), Messrs. Khodzko, Khanykoff and their compatriots stood on the highest peak of Greater Ararat. Previously, only Parrot and Spasski had succeeded in doing this, and they had come up by the opposite slope [Khodzko apparently was not aware of Abich's ascent and potentially a few others].

First and foremost, we set about to erect the Cross. When our guide Simon had been otherwise occupied and—characteristically—at the places where the climb had been most treacherous, the Cross had been put in the safe-keeping of Cossack Dokhnoff. When he reached the spot, that man fell on his knees, prostrated himself three times before the sign of our Redemption, and forthwith went to work to plant it in the ground. Then we, his helpers, gathered around this Christian symbol, which had just been placed on the summit of the biblical mount, and concluded the ceremony with a fervent prayer...

Before his final departure from the summit area, Colonel Khodzko had his men build a snow pyramid a sagene in height [Russian measure of length equal to about seven English feet] where his camp had been, and on it the Cross was raised with a bronze plaque affixed. The inscription read:

IN THE YEAR 1850
 FROM THE 6TH TO THE 18TH OF AUGUST
 UNDER THE PROPITIOUS REIGN OF
 EMPEROR NICHOLAS I
 AND THE CAUCASIAN LIEUTENANCY OF
 PRINCE WORONTSOFF
 THE ASCENT OF GREATER ARARAT WAS
 ACHIEVED BY COLONEL KHODZKO, WHO
 DIRECTED THE TRIANGULATION,
 N. KHANYKOFF, J. ALEXANDROFF, A. MORITZ, J. SCHAROYAN AND SIXTY SOLDIERS.

