

Between the Colchians and the Medians: Re-Assessing Herodotus' Saspeires

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Resumen: A pesar de que Heródoto no fue el primero en describir un mapa del mundo, las Historias contienen el tratado griego más antiguo de la geografía y los pueblos del mundo entero, así como lo conocían los griegos. Dentro de las Historias, Heródoto también nos proporciona detalladamente la descripción más antigua del Cáucaso y sus alrededores (entre muchas otras áreas). En esta misma, Heródoto marca la frontera entre Asia occidental y oriental con cuatro pueblos que habitaban entre el Golfo Pérsico y el Mar Negro: los persas, los medos, los saspeires y los colquideos. Los saspeiros no figuran con ese nombre exacto en ninguna otra obra, pero autores posteriores hablan de sapeires, así como de nombres más diferentes, como los hespérites y la región de Syspiritis. Algunos autores han intentado vincular todos estos nombres, así como la región más tardía de Speri en el Alto Éufrates, ubicando a los saspeiros en esa área. Otros los sitúan más bien en el valle del Aras, en lo que hoy es en su mayoría la Armenia moderna, o en el Kurá, en la actual Georgia. Para los académicos de habla georgiana, el nombre de saspeires suscita argumentos a favor de su kartvelianidad, ya que el nombre parece seguir una construcción georgiana para topónimos (como el nombre de Georgia, «sa-kartvel-o») que lo atribuyen a una forma como lo sería «sa-sper-o». Se ha argumentado que la identidad y la ubicación de los saspeires son una parte importante de la etnogénesis georgiana y, como muchos otros aspectos similares de la historia, pueden ser utilizados con fines nacionalistas e irredentistas. Por lo tanto, es importante ser altamente preciso y riguroso al analizar e interpretar la evidencia disponible. Por esta razón, fue mi objetivo en este trabajo el reexaminar la evidencia antigua disponible que es relevante para descubrir la ubicación e identidad de los saspeires de Heródoto, al igual que realizar una breve evaluación de los argumentos lingüísticos a favor de su kartvelianidad. Los resultados de esta investigación revelan una situación mucho más ambigua y confusa comparada a la que normalmente se ha descrito hasta ahora, al igual que un pueblo cuya geografía e identidad probablemente no pueden determinarse con fiabilidad.

Abstract: Although Herodotus was not the first to describe a map of the world, the Histories contain the oldest extant Greek treatise on the geography and the peoples of the whole world as known to the Greeks. Within the Histories, Herodotus also provides us with the earliest detailed account of the Caucasus and its environs (amongst many other areas). In it, Herodotus marks the border between western and eastern Asia, with four peoples living between the Persian Gulf and the Black Sea: the Persians, Medes, Saspeires, and Colchians. The Saspeires do not figure with that exact name in any other work, but later authors speak of Sapeires, as well as more dissimilar names such as the Hesperites, and the region of Syspiritis. Some authors have tried to link all these, as well as the later region of Speri in the Upper

46 Euphrates, locating the Saspeires in that area. Others place them rather on the valley
47 of the Aras, in what is now mostly modern Armenia, or instead the Kura, in modern
48 Georgia. For Georgian-speaking scholars, the name of Saspeires invites arguments in
49 favour of them being Kartvelian speakers, as the name could follow a Georgian
50 construction for toponyms (such as the name of Georgia, 'sa-kartvel-o') that see
51 their name as deriving from some form such as 'sa-sper-o'. The identity and location
52 of the Saspeires have been argued to be an important part of the Georgian
53 ethnogenesis, and like many other similar aspects of history, it can be abused for
54 nationalistic and irredentist goals. It is therefore important to be highly precise and
55 rigorous when analysing and interpreting the available evidence. For this reason, in
56 this work I sought to re-examine the available ancient evidence relevant for
57 uncovering the location and identity of the Saspeires of Herodotus, as well as
58 perform a brief evaluation of the linguistic arguments in favour of their Kartvelian-
59 ness. The results of this enquiry reveal a far more ambiguous and unclear situation
60 than has normally been portrayed so far, and a people whose geography and identity
61 arguably cannot be reliably ascertained.

62 1 Introduction

63 In December 1918, the First Republic of Armenia and the Democratic Republic of Georgia
64 fought a short war over a border dispute¹. At stake were the then Georgian territory of
65 Borchalo (Borch'alu in Armenian) and Akhalkalaki (Akhalk'alak' in Armenian, also known
66 as Javakhk'²), which were at the time—and still are³—mainly populated by ethnic
67 Armenians⁴. The war ended in a stalemate, with Armenia ultimately gaining some of the
68 territory of Borchalo (the gains now forming part of the modern province of Lori, and the
69 rest part of the Georgian Kvemo Kartli) but not Akhalkalaki, which remained Georgian
70 (part of mod. Samtskhe-Javakheti)⁵.

71 While the conflict has not regressed to full-scale military action since, and both national-
72 level entities have for the most part tried to avoid outright conflict, tensions have
73 nevertheless not been fully eliminated⁶. For instance, the Armenian Revolutionary
74 Federation party, although in recent history only a minor opposition party in Armenia,
75 have in their current party programme the goal to "Build a Free, Independent and United
76 Armenia. The borders of United Armenia will include (...) the territories of Arts'akh,
77 *Javakhk'* and Nakhichevan"⁷, even if they have not openly acted against the Georgian
78 government on these irredentist goals⁸.

¹ HOVANISSIAN 1971b.

² Or Javakheti in Georgian.

³ Per the results of the last publicly available census results: NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE OF GEORGIA 2014.

⁴ HOVANISSIAN 1971a.

⁵ HOVANISSIAN 1997, p. 353.

⁶ TER-MATEVOSYAN-CURRIE 2019.

⁷ ARMENIAN REVOLUTIONARY FEDERATION 1998, translation and emphasis mine.

⁸ TER-MATEVOSYAN-CURRIE 2019.

79 The Saspeires (Σάσπειρες) are an ancient people first referenced in Herodotus' *Histories*⁹
80 as living near the Caucasus mountains, whilst also mentioned in other texts with a slightly
81 altered spelling¹⁰. In addition, some references in other ancient authors of similar-
82 sounding peoples¹¹ and regions¹² have also been putatively connected to the Saspeires of
83 Herodotus¹³.

84 The name "Saspeires" by itself provides a compelling connection to the Kartvelian
85 language thanks to its similarity to a comparable construction in the modern Georgian
86 language present even in the modern name of the country, Sakartvelo (*viz.* Sa-Kartvel-o¹⁴
87 and Sa-Speires)¹⁵. It is even more compelling due to the existence of a historical region by
88 the name of Speri, southwest of modern Georgia. Thus, the argument goes, the name of the
89 region of Speri was a continuation of the Saspeires (Sa-Spe[i]r) of Herodotus, and the *Sa-*
90 present in their name is a clear sign that they were Kartvelian speakers, marking them as
91 early ancestors of the modern Kartvelian Georgians¹⁶.

92 Through this lens, some researchers geographically link the Saspeires exclusively around
93 the later Speri region¹⁷. Others place them in the Araxes valley, where the modern country
94 of Armenia is located¹⁸, while even others place them on the valley of the Kura river¹⁹,
95 around—or equivalent to—the region of Caucasian Iberia (see Figure 1). Some scholars
96 instead propose a combination of two or more of these areas as to where the Saspeires
97 were located, whether in the Kura valley and in Speri²⁰, or encompassing both the Kura
98 and Araxes valleys²¹, or in Speri and the Araxes valley²², or all three areas²³. Importantly,
99 depending on how the extent of their territory is drawn, one can make these
100 presumptively Kartvelian tribes encompass the Armenian-majority disputed border

⁹ HDT., I 104; I 110; IV 37; IV 40; VII 79.

¹⁰ Sapeires (Σάπειρες): *Orph. A.*, 755; *A. R., Argon.*, II. 395-397; *AMM.*, XXII 8, 21 (as Sapires); *St. Byz.*, s.v. Σάπειρες; but see RAWLINSON 1862, p. 186, n.7 for the claim that this spelling is also found in MSS of HDT., though the earliest complete MS. only has the form 'Saspeires', even in scholia: CODEX LAURENTIANUS A n.d., pp. 28r, 29v, 155v, 156r, 282r; but see an important caveat on the history of the text: McNEAL 1983, pp. 128-129 (regrettably, POXY. 18 preserves the chapter *one after* the first mention of the Saspeires in HDT., I 104).

¹¹ e.g. Hesperites (Ἑσπεριτῶν) in *X., An.* VII 8, 25.

¹² Syspiritis (Συσπιρῖτις) in *STR.*, XI 4, 8; XI 14, 9; XI 14, 12.

¹³ e.g. LICHELI 2007, p. 1114; GARDAPKHADZE 2018, p. 36.

¹⁴ Roughly translatable as 'land of the Kartvelians'.

¹⁵ JANASHIA 1952, pp. 62-63; GARDAPKHADZE 2018, pp. 38-39

¹⁶ PUTKARADZE 2005, pp. 166-170.

¹⁷ e.g. SAGONA 2004, p. 302; LINT 2010, p. 260; SAGONA-SAGONA 2011, p. 389.

¹⁸ e.g. RENNELL 1800, pp. 277-278; JANASHIA 1940a; KURKJIAN 1964, p. 54.

¹⁹ e.g. GODLEY 1920, p. 143, n. 1 (placing them in modern Azerbaijan); RACHVELISHVILI 1925, p. 18; WARMINGTON 1934, p. 87 (in modern Azerbaijan); CHAUMONT 1987, § ii, p. 418; SLYE 2023, p. 135.

²⁰ e.g. RAWLINSON 1862, pp. 186-187; FIELD-PRICE 1950, p. 426; JANASHIA 1952, pp. 55-60; PLONTKE-LÜNING 2006; RAYFIELD 2013, pp. 12-20.

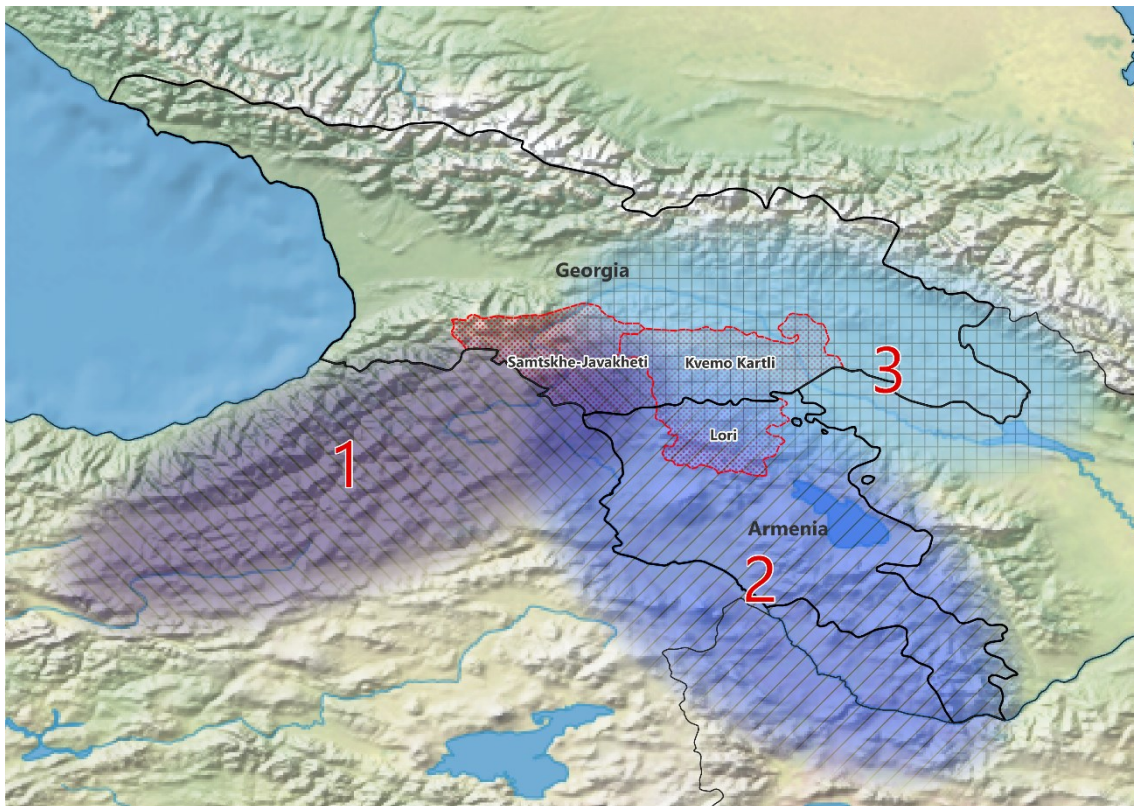
²¹ e.g. JANASHIA 1940b.

²² e.g. HOW-WELLS 1928, I 72, s.v. Ματιηνούς, n. 2; I 104; VII 79 s.v. Κόλχοι.

²³ e.g. JANASHIA 1952, pp. 55-60; LICHELI 2007, pp. 1113-1115; see also GARDAPKHADZE 2018, pp. 36-38.

101 regions mentioned earlier, if not also the entire territory of the country of Armenia (see
102 Figure 1).

103



104

105 Figure 1. The modern *de jure* borders of Armenia and Georgia, along with the modern provinces that now
106 contain the fought-over areas of the war of 1918 of Borchalu (now Kvemo Kartli in Georgia and Lori in
107 Armenia) and Akhalkalaki (now Samstkhe-Javekheti in Georgia), overlaid over the three main proposed
108 locations of the ancient Saspeires²⁴. 1): In the historical region of Speri and the Pontic mountains more
109 generally²⁵. 2): Around the Araxes valley, encompassing what is now Armenia. 3): Around the Kura river valley,
110 approximately conterminous with Classical Iberia.

111

112 It might be tempting to dismiss the notion that this ancient tribe may be used for Georgian
113 nationalistic purposes simply because of its relative obscurity, but the ancient world is a
114 very common stockpile of resources used for the creation of national symbols, narratives,
115 and mythologies.²⁶ For an example from the other side of the border, we can point to the
116 use of the Babylonian Map of the World in official Armenian stamps²⁷ and in the official

²⁴ JORELLANAF 2025d

²⁵ e.g. UTCHENKO *et al.* 1956, pp. 138-139.

²⁶ KOHL-TSETSKHLADZE 1995; ERSKINE 2009.

²⁷ HAYPOST 2016a.

117 social media account of the country^{28,29}. Similar references also exist from classical
118 antiquity as well³⁰.

119 The connection between ancient history and archaeology and modern nationalism has
120 already been discussed even for a specifically Transcaucasian context³¹; however, this
121 phenomenon is not something particular of this region of the world by any means³². It
122 should therefore not be surprising if the Saspeires, with their postulated Kartvelian-ness,
123 were already being used for nationalistic purposes: because they already have been, even if
124 in a minor way (see Figure 2)³³.

125 Considering this, it is imperative we turn to the evidence we have available on the location
126 and identity of these people, as well as the arguments made for or against a specific
127 identification.

128 2 The Saspeires of Herodotus

129 The first passage mentioning the Saspeires, HDT., I 104, 1, states that from the Phasis and
130 the Colchians to Media, there is only one *ethnos*, the Saspeires, and once these are passed
131 by (*παραμειβομένοισι*), one arrives in Media. The next section (I 104, 2) provides
132 additional context to their location, stating that the Scythians (when pursuing the
133 Cimmerians) did not enter Media in this way, but turned away to the much longer path
134 from above (*κατύπερθε ὁδόν*), keeping the Caucasus mountains to their right. This
135 narrative be further expanded in later books (see below).

²⁸ ARMENIA AM [@ARMENIA] 2023.

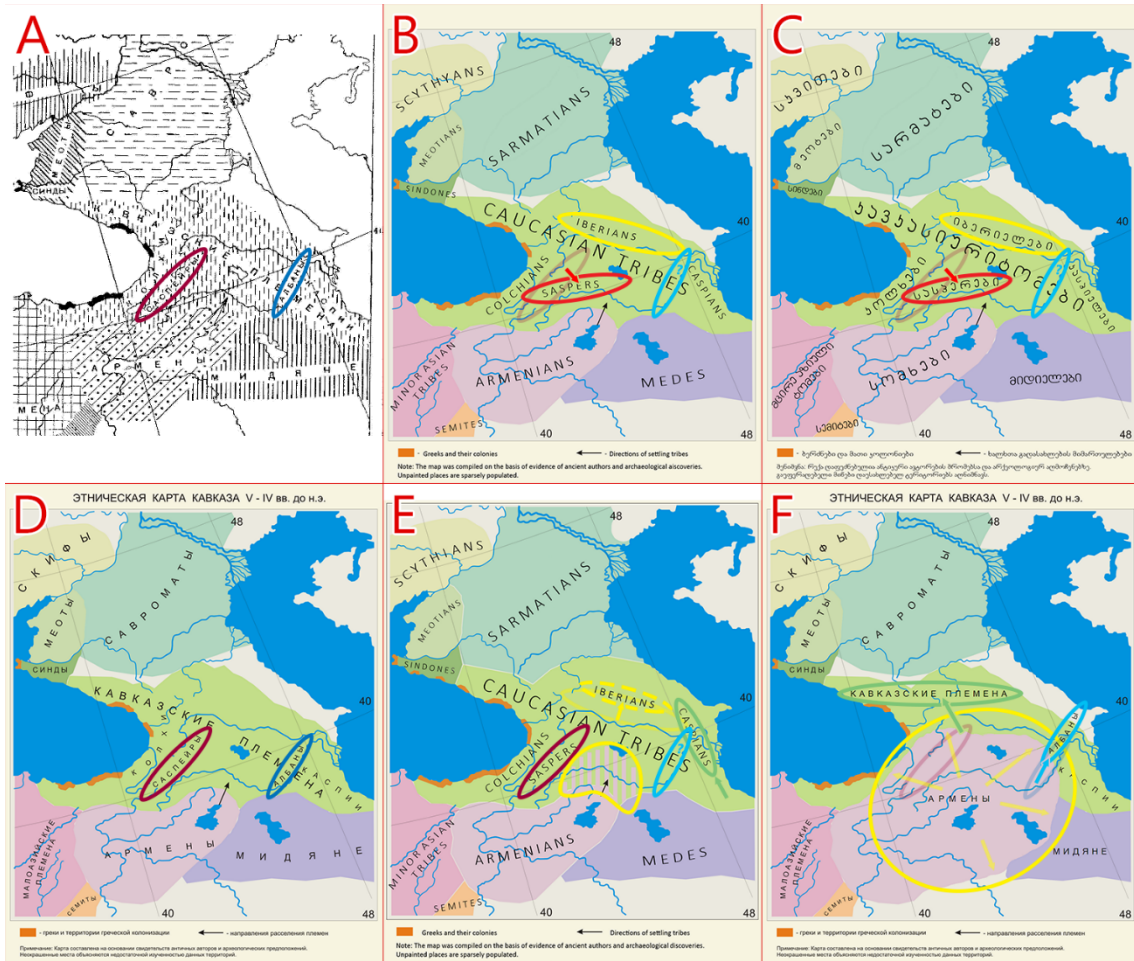
²⁹ Both illustrate the map as showing the term 'Armenia'; however, the actual term found on the map is 'Uraš[ṭu]' (Urartu). Despite this, the social media posts claims that Armenia 'is the only modern country found on the map'. One could be greatly generous in this regard by pointing to how the Old Persian and Elamite versions of the Bisitun Inscription use 'Armina' and 'Harminuia' (CUNEIFORM DIGITAL LIBRARY INITIATIVE 2021, l. 15 and CUNEIFORM DIGITAL LIBRARY INITIATIVE 2018, l. 12) for the Akkadian and Aramaic 'Urašṭu' and 'Urartu'/'RRT' (CUNEIFORM DIGITAL LIBRARY INITIATIVE 2017, l. 6 and TEXTS & SCRIPTS FROM ELEPHANTINE 2022 Pl. Kol. I, l. 9; Kol II, l. 2), so it could be argued that these terms could be equivalent, but there is little nuance in the way the object is portrayed or described to be this charitable.

³⁰ e.g. the stamp from the same series showing the map for Greater Armenia from one of the Nicolaus Germanus editions of PTOL., *Geog.* (HAYPOST 2016b), or the curious wine product named *Orchistene* (PARMA n.d.), which gets its name from its ageing in oak from Arts'akh, and whose box contains a veritable citation to STR.

³¹ KOHL-TSETSKHLADZE 1995.

³² ERSKINE 2009.

³³ Not only in a Georgian context, but also an Azerbaijani one, presupposing HDT.' Saspeires to have been Turkic due to the similarity of their name to the mediaeval Turkic Sabirs of the North Caucasus (a possibly even early conflation: ST.BYZ., s.v. Σάπειρες) in order to question the *autochthony* of Armenians in the region: QUORA 2018. I am thankful to Dr Julian Gieseke for sharing with me this curious find.



136

137 Figure 2. A different kind of Georgian-Armenian war: a minor edit *war* over a set of digital maps³⁴ portraying
 138 the ethnic situation in the Caucasus in the 5th–4th century BCE³⁵ based on a print map from a Soviet World
 139 History book³⁶. A): Original source image³⁷ used for the creation of the digital maps (B-F), with the location of
 140 the ‘Saspersi’ (near the Black Sea and historic Speri) highlighted in dark red, and the ‘Albani’ near the Caspian
 141 in blue. B): English-language version derived from the Russian digital map (D), with the location of the
 142 ‘Saspers’ (in red) now shifted from their original position (in light red) further southeast to encompass the
 143 northern part of mod. Armenia. Other changes include the addition of a label for ‘Iberians’ north of the
 144 Caucasus mountains (yellow) not present in the source, and the removal of the ‘Albani’ from the original map
 145 (light blue). C): Georgian-language version of the map, showing the same changes as the English version. D):
 146 Russian-language version of the image³⁸, which closely follows the source image (A), including the location of
 147 the ‘Saspersi’ (red) and ‘Albani’ (blue), unlike the English and Georgian versions. E): Now-reverted edit of the
 148 English-language version by a now-blocked user, who corrected the location of the label of the ‘Saspers’ to
 149 match the original but failed to restore the label for the ‘Albani’ (light blue). The user also added a hatched area
 150 of Armenian presence in the Araxes valley (yellow highlight in the centre), which was not present in the source
 151 map. Other minor changes include shifting the label for the Iberians further north-east, the label for the
 152 Caspians further north-west, and filling out certain areas left blank in the source with colours denoting
 153 Caucasian tribes. F): Now-reverted edit of the Russian-language version by an Armenian-speaking user, who
 154 considerably expands the extent of the Armenians from that present in the source map (yellow), removing the
 155 label for ‘Saspersi’ entirely (light red), and causing the labels for the ‘Albani’ and ‘Caucasian Tribes’ to be shifted
 156 away.

157

³⁴ ERCWLF 2015a; ERCWLF 2015b
³⁵ JORELLANAF 2025a
³⁶ UTCHENKO *et al.* 1956
³⁷ HISTORIC.RU 2025
³⁸ ZARR 2008

158 HDT. I 110, 2 says that the Median land north of Ecbatana and towards the Euxine Pontus
159 (mod. Black Sea) as well as the Saspeires—implying a northern or northeastern direction,
160 towards the modern northern border of Iran—is very mountainous and covered in woods,
161 but the rest of Media is a flat plain³⁹. Later, HDT. III 94, 1 defines the 18th Achaemenid
162 satrapy (or more technically, *nomos*) as consisting of the Matienians, Saspeires, and
163 Alarodians.

164 Herodotus then once again describes the route taken by the fleeing Cimmerians and their
165 pursuing Scythians in IV 12, saying that both the Greeks and *barbarians* mention this
166 narrative. Namely, that the Scythians pursued the Cimmerians and invaded Media when
167 they missed the way because the Cimmerians always fled along the (Euxine) sea, and that
168 the Scythians pursued them keeping the Caucasus on the right until they threw themselves
169 into Media, having been maintained inland of the [shorter?] path⁴⁰.

170 Shortly after, HDT. IV 37 states that the Persians extend to the Erythraean Sea (mod. Indian
171 Ocean), that to their north are the Medes, then Saspeires, then the Colchians, these
172 extending to the northern (Euxine) sea into which the Phasis river empties itself⁴¹, adding
173 also that these four *ethne* live between one sea and another. A similar statement is found a
174 few chapters later in IV 40, where HDT. marks the boundary between western and eastern
175 Asia as running between the Persians, Medes, Saspeires, and Colchians, with the portion of
176 Asia to their east being itself bounded by the Caspian Sea and east-flowing Araxes.
177 However, the identification of this river as the modern Aras in this case is not certain, as
178 we shall discuss in more detail below.

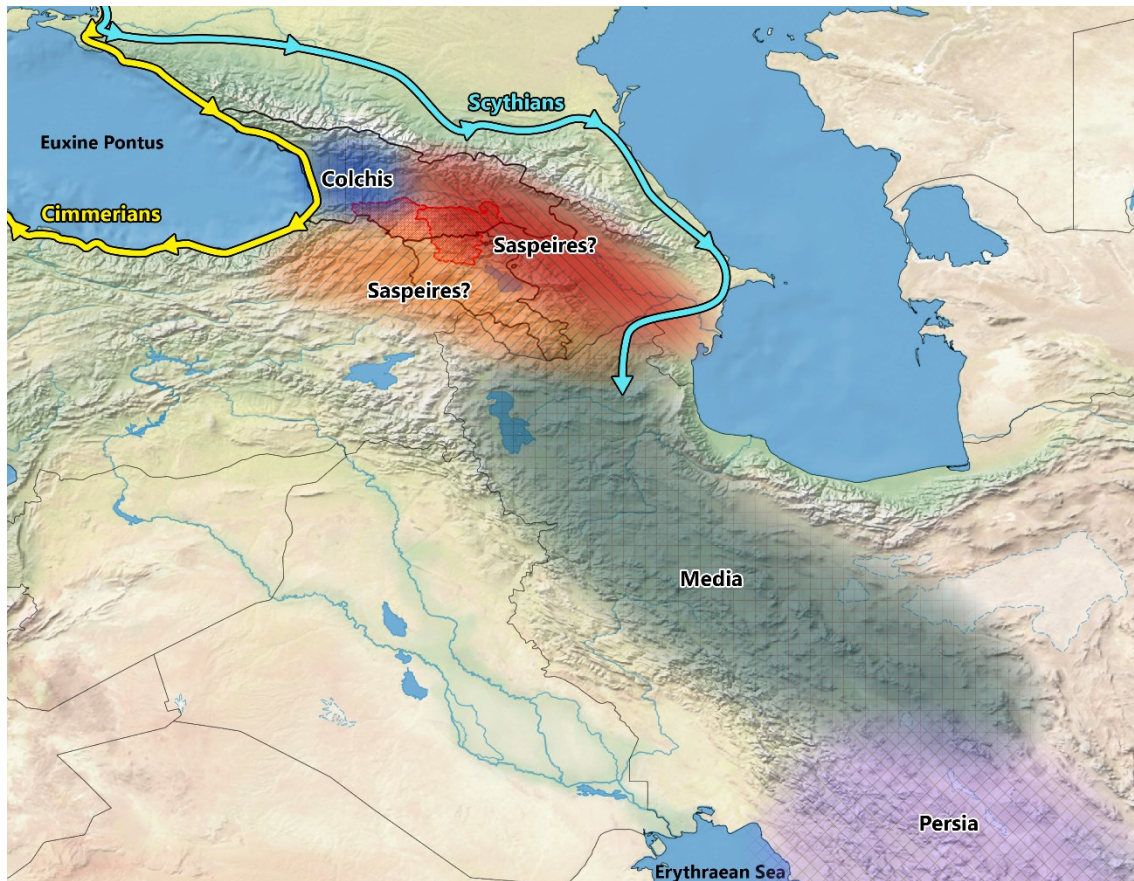
179 Finally, the last reference appears in VII 79 in the listing of the troops of the Achaemenid
180 army, where HDT. states that both the Alarodians and Saspeires (both also part of the 18th
181 satrapy) served in army armed like the Colchians (sensible, considering they were
182 apparently neighbours).

183 From these references alone, we can already draw a picture of the general geography of the
184 Caucasus as described by HDT., and the location of the Saspeires therein (see Figure 3).
185 However, the ambiguity of the description of the Araxes as a northern boundary to the
186 Saspeires and Medes is already causing some problems to arise. This is only but one of the
187 many issues present in HDT.' geography of the Caucasus. I will examine these in detail
188 below.

³⁹ A likely exaggeration, as argued by HOW-WELLS 1928, I 110, n. 2.

⁴⁰ My own proposed translation of 'ές μεσόγαιαν τῆς ὁδοῦ τραφθέντες'. GODLEY 1920, p. 213 translates this as 'turning inland on their way'. Another translation considered was 'having been maintained inland by the [taken] path', but such a rare use of the genitive is likely not warranted.

⁴¹ For Herodotus, the Phasis marks the boundary between Europe and Asia: HDT., IV 45, 2.



189

190 Figure 3. A possible mapping of the route taken by the fleeing Cimmerians (yellow) and pursuing Scythians
 191 (cyan), as well as the general location of Persia, Media, and Colchis, and the possible location(s) of the
 192 Saspeires based only on the passages in Herodotus that mention the Saspeires (see above)⁴². These are all
 193 overlaid onto modern national borders, and the modern provinces that now contain the fought-over areas of
 194 the Georgian-Armenian war of 1918 (dotted red). Note that the Alarodians and Matienians did not have their
 195 location specified in the aforementioned passages, so they are not included in this map. The Saspeires can be
 196 placed in two broad areas, depending on the interpretation of Herodotus. The northern location (red) is based
 197 on the placement of the Saspeires as being directly across the Scythian path to the north of the Caucasus, and
 198 in the less mountainous path between Colchis and Media. The southern location (orange) is based on the
 199 remark in HDT., IV 40 where the Araxes (assumed here as meaning the modern Aras; see below) acts as a
 200 northern boundary for the four peoples in question. These two locations are not exclusive, and one could argue
 201 that the Saspeires encompassed both areas, allowing for both their presence in later Speri whilst also matching
 202 the description of Herodotus with some fidelity (but see below).

203

204 2.1 The Problems of Herodotus

205 The geographical accuracy of the Caucasus in the *Histories* is far from perfect, though this
 206 is a problem not unique to this area⁴³. HDT. clearly states that there is only one *ethnos*
 207 between the Medians and the Colchians, but this suggests a clear lack of awareness of the
 208 Caucasian Albanians and Iberians, which are known to Roman-era authors such as STR⁴⁴.

⁴² JORELLANAF 2025c

⁴³ For instance, HDT., I 72, 2 describes the Halys flowing from Armenia and *through Cilicia*, where the actual course is several kilometres north of Cilicia, and even later correctly puts the Halys in Cilicia (HDT., I 75–76 and VII 26).

⁴⁴ Such as STR., XI 5; LIU., *Per.*, CI; PLIN., *HN*, VII, 98.7.

209 The Kura river goes unmentioned, and the description of the Araxes is clearly confused.
210 HDT. states that the Scythians, when fleeing from the Massagetae, crossed the Araxes into
211 Cimmerian land⁴⁵ before the later pursuit into the Caucasus (shown in Figure 1). The
212 Massagetae are also described as being present on the eastern shores of this Araxes in
213 multiple passages⁴⁶. However, one passage talking about a different Araxes is clearly
214 describing a river in the general vicinity of the south Caucasus, saying it flows from
215 Matienian land as does a river that flows into Mesopotamia⁴⁷, and describes this Araxes as
216 emptying into marshland and the Caspian Sea. Clearly these must be two different rivers
217 by the geographic situation alone. Whether HDT. is knowingly referring to two different
218 Araxes, or has conflated one or more rivers to one of these Araxes, is impossible to
219 ascertain with what little we know⁴⁸. The description of the Caucasian Araxes could refer
220 to the Aras, but that is contingent on the location of the Matienians (see below), while the
221 other Araxes could be either the Volga or the Amu or Syr Darya, or both⁴⁹. Thus, when HDT.
222 describes the northern boundary of Asia east of the Saspeires and their neighbours as
223 being bound to the north by the Araxes in IV 40, which river should we think of here? The
224 Aras? Volga? Amu Darya? Depending on which option we assume as correct, our placement
225 of the Saspeires will be affected. If the Aras, then we ought to place them south of modern
226 Armenia; if not the Aras, then we are left with a much wider berth since their extent to the
227 south is not strongly limited (see Figure 3).

228 One aspect of the Saspeires we have not examined yet is that of their satrapal partners.
229 Namely, does HDT. describe the location of the Alarodians and Matienians?

230 2.1.1 The Eighteenth Satrapy of Herodotus

231 The Alarodians only appear in HDT., and nothing is said about their geography or identity
232 beyond the passages already described above. Some have considered their name to be
233 reflective of the remnants of the Biainili due to the similarity of their Babylonian and
234 Aramaic exonym: Uraštu and Urartu⁵⁰, and thus propose to place them somewhere
235 between lakes Van and Sevan⁵¹. This assumption is not universal⁵², and it is indeed an
236 assumption, since we know next to nothing of the Alarodians to substantively evidence

⁴⁵ HDT., IV 11, 1, which seems to be referring to the area around mod. Ukraine, mentioning that the Cimmerians buried their dead alongside the Tyras, the mod. Dniester: HDT., IV 11, 4.

⁴⁶ HDT., I 201–202, 205–206, 209, 211, 216; III 36, 3.

⁴⁷ The Gyndes: HDT., I 202.3.

⁴⁸ Even Strabo was highly critical of Herodotus' description of the Araxes: STR. XI 14, 13.

⁴⁹ HOW–WELLS 1928, I 202, n. 1 suggests HDT. combines the Aras, the Syr and Amu Darya, and the Volga.

⁵⁰ RAWLINSON 1862, pp. 203–206; HOW–WELLS 1928, III 94, n. 1; JANASHIA 1940a, p. 30; KURKJIAN 1964, p. 54; CHAUMONT 1987, p. 418; SAGONA 2004, pp. 302–303; LICHELI 2007, p. 1113; SAGONA–SAGONA 2011, p. 389.

⁵¹ e.g. KURKJIAN 1964, p. 54; CHAUMONT 1987, p. 418

⁵² ZIMANSKY 2012, p. 557.

237 this claim. Despite the fact the translation for this term in Old Persian and Elamite is
238 always some variation of 'Armenia'⁵³, meaning that Achaemenid officials in the sixth and
239 fifth century considered the Babylonian and Aramaic terms equivalent with the Armenia
240 HDT. would describe, the Mesopotamian exonym would have also somehow survived as
241 semantically different, referring to the Hurrian Urartians specifically, and this term would
242 be known well enough to be communicated to Herodotus in a way that would be rendered
243 as '*Alarodoi*'. While it is certainly a possible scenario (stranger things have happened in
244 history), and parsimony is not a proof⁵⁴, it is important to remain aware of the not
245 insignificant series of steps required for such an assumption to be true.

246 However, another large problem for identifying the location of the Alarodians, and the
247 problem that looms largest over this 18th *nomos*, is that the satrapy cannot be matched to
248 any actual Achaemenid division found epigraphically⁵⁵. There is nothing suitable for any
249 proposed geographic situation of the 18th *nomos* nor its members⁵⁶. This is not unique to
250 this *nomos*; the entire list given by HDT. does not match the Achaemenid ones besides in
251 the broadest of senses⁵⁷. What source did Herodotus use for the Alarodians in the first
252 place if the list of satrapies does not agree with Achaemenid ones? And could that source
253 be trusted to have enough accurate knowledge to be referring to the Hurrian Urartians as
254 'Alarodoi'? At the very least, we can assume that Herodotus considered the Alarodians,
255 Saspeires, and Matienians to be located close to each other, but not much else. We will have
256 to turn to the remaining member of this *nomos*, the Matienians for more detail.

257 While HDT. is the only one to speak of Matienians, later authors make several references to
258 a Matiane and Matianians located in Media⁵⁸. I will first examine the statements made by
259 Herodotus. In HDT., I 72, 2, the Halys is said to divide the Matienians and the Phrygians,
260 although the description of the course of the river is confused⁵⁹, and no mention of the
261 Cappadocians is made. This passage implies the Matienians are in *western* Cappadocia, but
262 later descriptions of the course of the Halys do mention Cappadocians instead of the
263 Matienians⁵⁹. To add to the confusion, the next two references (HDT., I 189, 1 and 202, 3)
264 place the Matienians close enough to Babylon that a river with a source in Matienian land
265 flows to the latter, whilst also close enough to the Caspian Sea that the Araxes (see above)

⁵³ See n. 29 above, but can also be seen in e.g. the Naqš-e Rostam Darius inscription 'a': BEZOLD-HAUPT 1882, p. 35, IV, l. 16, cf. SCHMITT 2009, p. 102, l. S, and Xerxes' XPh Persepolis inscription: ARI0 n.d., ll. p20, e16, a15.

⁵⁴ PERREAULT 2019, pp. 7-22.

⁵⁵ See n. 53 above. Almost invariably all mentions of Armenia in inscriptions also have a province list.

⁵⁶ Unless the unknown *Akaufaka* of Xerxes' XPh Persepolis inscription (ARI0 n.d., l. p27) is to be considered by the simple virtue of being unknown, but see SCHMITT 2009, p. 166, n. V27.

⁵⁷ KLINKOTT 2005, pp. 106-109; KLEBER 2014

⁵⁸ PLB., V 44, 10; STR., XI 7, 2; 8,8; 13, 2; PLIN., NH, VI 48; MELA, I 13 (though more unclear); ST.BYZ., s.v. Ματιανή.

⁵⁹ See n. 43 above.

266 can empty into it. HDT., V 49, 6 mentions them in a speech from Aristagoras, placing them
267 after the Armenians and before the Cissians, in whose lands Aristagoras claims the city of
268 Susa to lie, thus placing the Matienians somewhere in western Media. Confirming this
269 general placement, HDT. V 52 describes the course of the Achaemenid Royal Road, and
270 states that after passing through Armenia, it passes Matienian land⁶⁰, and after that,
271 Cissian land. Finally, in HDT. VII 72, the Matienians are described as armed like the
272 Paphlagonians (as are the Cappadocians and Mariandynians), and a Dotus commands the
273 two. Once again, like the Araxes situation, HDT. is either exceedingly confused, or *knowingly*
274 (but confusing for us) describing two different Matienians: one of them located east of
275 Armenia somewhere around the Zagros, and one in Asia Minor east of Phrygia on the
276 Halys, more closely related to the Cappadocians. This leads to a difficult question; when
277 HDT. describes the 18th *nomos*, which of the two is intended? The western ones would
278 make sense if we think that HDT. would only list the peoples in the *nomoi* in the army roll
279 in VII 79, and would suggest the Saspeires could be placed in around later Speri (other
280 considerations notwithstanding), but the eastern ones make more sense if we follow the
281 Scythian-Cimmerian narrative more strictly (i.e. immediately south of the Caucasus) and
282 the Matianians of later authors. Let us then turn to these references by later authors to try
283 to obtain a clearer picture.

284 PLB., V 44 places the Matianians strictly within Media and towards its north, placing them
285 together with the Elymaeans, Anariacae, and the Cadusii (i.e. broadly between the Zagros
286 and the Caspian), and above (inland) the area bordering towards the Pontic Maeotis (mod.
287 Sea of Azov)⁶¹. Strabo agrees with this general positioning, stating that Atropatian Media is
288 east of Armenia, west of Greater Media, and between the southern Caspian and Matiane⁶²,
289 and that to the west of the Hyrcanians on the shores of the Caspian live (among others)
290 Anariacaeans (see above) and Cadusians, and these last border the Medians and
291 Matianians below the Parachoathras⁶³ mountains⁶⁴. Furthermore, STR., XI 14, 8 adds that
292 that there is a lake Mantiane in Armenia, which is claimed to be the largest salt lake after
293 the Maeotis, extending to Atropatia, though it is not clear if this related to the Matiane or
294 not, since it is placed in Armenia. PLIN., NH, VI 48 is far sparser, simply naming the Matiani
295 after the Cadusii and the 'Arsi', and before a Heraclea that was later renamed Achais⁶⁵ and

⁶⁰ Adding also that three Tigris rivers and the Gyndes (see above) flow through Matienian land, the first Tigris is *the* Tigris, and flows from Armenia, while the second from the Matienians.

⁶¹ 'ὑπέρεκείται δὲ τῶν συναπτόντων πρὸς τὴν Μαιῶτιν τοῦ Πόντου μερῶν'. Arguably, this passage could be stretched to provide more strength to the Speri location, but I would consider it an over-interpretation.

⁶² STR., XI 13, 1–2.

⁶³ STR., XI 8, 8.

⁶⁴ For Strabo, these are the Alborz and Armenian highlands, amongst others: STR., XI 8, 1; 12, 4; 14, 1.

⁶⁵ Generally somewhere around Media; for proposed locations, see COHEN 2013 s.v. Herakleia/Achais (Achaia).

296 the Dribyces on the Oxus. MELA, I 13 is as sparse but far more disorienting, placing Matiane
297 in the interior of Asia that extends to the Mediterranean, along with the Tibaranians⁶⁶,
298 Medes, Armenians and peoples further west and in Asia Minor. While this could prove a
299 piece of evidence for a Black Sea location of the Matienians (and thus Saspeires), MELA
300 could also arguably be defining the northern and southern limits of this protrusion of land,
301 or alluding to the western Matienians of HDT., but besides this passage, no authors speak of
302 Matianians outside Media. The last Classical reference to Matiane comes from ST.BYZ., s.v.
303 Ματιανή, who calls it a 'part of Media' (μοῖρα τῆς Μηδίας) and quotes STR., XI 7, 2.
304 Although these mentions allow us to further restrict the location of the Matienians east of
305 Armenia (and thus hopefully Saspeires), the base problem of the contradictory description
306 of Matienians in HDT., until now our only source for the Saspeires, remains as open to
307 interpretation as before. We cannot know whether the Matienians near the Halys or the
308 Median Matienians are part of the 18th satrapy, or even whether these western Matienians
309 are only a product of Herodotean confusion and conflation. Since exploring the other
310 members of the *nomos* did not yield anything but even more ambiguity, perhaps we can
311 obtain more clarity by examining references to similarly named people in other authors.

312 3 Beyond Herodotus

313 Although HDT. is the only source to mention Saspeires, there are other works that
314 references the Sapeires, which some have suggested that this spelling is also present in
315 some manuscripts of HDT⁶⁷. The earliest mention is in A. R., *Argon.*, II. 395-397 and 1242-
316 1245, listing them amongst the people of the Black Sea coast east of the Becheiri, Philyres
317 and Macrones, and west of the Byzeres and Colchians (i.e. somewhere east of Trapezous).
318 This order is lifted directly from SCYL., *Per.*, 81-92 with the order reversed⁶⁸ and with some
319 slight modifications⁶⁹; the Saspeires being one of them. Where SCYL., *Per.* Has the
320 Ececheirieis, A. R., *Argon.*, has instead the Saspeires. Again, while this could be seen as
321 further indication of the Black Sea connection of the Saspeires, I would instead argue that
322 this is a learned correction based on Herodotus, as the Macrocephalians of SCYL., *Per.*, are

⁶⁶ The Tibarenians of the Black Sea coast; this spelling is also found in STR., e.g. in XI 14, 1.

⁶⁷ See n. 10 above.

⁶⁸ Since the description of SCYL., *Per.*, goes clockwise but A. R., *Argon.*, anticlockwise.

⁶⁹ SCYL., *Per.*, has (summarised) the Colchians, Byzeres, *Ececheirieis*, *Macrocephalians*, Mossynoecians, Tibarenians, Chalybes, Assyrians and Themiscyra, Paphlagonia and the city of Carambis, *Mariandynians*, *Thynias island*, and Bithynians, A. R., *Argon.*, has (in summary and reverse order) the Colchians, Byzeres, *Saspeires*, *Macrones*, *Philyres*, Mossynoecians, Tibarenians, Chalybes, Themiscyra and Assyrians (only in 946), *cape Carambis* and Paphlagonia, *Thynias island*, *Mariandynians*, and Bithynians. Emphasis made on differences.

323 replaced with the Macrones right after⁷⁰. The later ORPH., A., 750-754, clearly influenced by
 324 A. R., *Argon*. has the Saspeires west of the the Byzeres and east of the Philyres, as does
 325 AMM.MARC., XXII 8, 21⁷¹. The Sapeires appear as their own entry in ST.BYZ.⁷², stating that
 326 they are a people in the inland area from the Pontus, and that at the time, they were known
 327 as Sabeires⁷³. Finally, the last reference to Sapeires is in an etymological entry for the
 328 Becheir⁷⁴, who are said to be a Scythian *ethnos*, also known as Apeir or Sapeir⁷⁵.

329 Apart from these scant sources likely all based on A. R., *Argon*. or a regrettably lost
 330 common source, some scholars also consider references to the Hesperites (as *Ἑσπεριτῶν*)
 331 and Syspiritis (*Συσπιρῖτις*) to be related to the Saspeires⁷⁶. The Hesperites appear in one
 332 passage only, in X., *An*. VII 8, 25, as being one of the people ruled by Tiribazus, along with
 333 the Phasians (*Φασιανῶν*). These Phasians are not those of the Phasis in Colchis, but rather
 334 those from a river in Armenia mentioned in IV 6, 4–5⁷⁷. What is also important to highlight
 335 is that Hesperites, while a similar word to Saspeires, also has a meaning in Greek of
 336 *westerners*. This is doubtlessly instead a reference to the *Western Armenians*, since in X., *An*.
 337 IV 4, 4, when the region (*Ἀρμενία ἢ πρὸς ἑσπέραν*) is first crossed and mentioned,
 338 Xenophon also names Tiribazus as its hyparch!

339 Then comes Syspiritis, a region mentioned only by Strabo⁷⁸ with an undefined location.
 340 STR., XI 14, 9 mentions gold mines in the region, near a city named Caballa, and an armed
 341 expedition by Menon, a subordinate of Alexander, but gives little information on the
 342 location of the region. Another passage, STR., XI 4, 8, recounts how the followers of an
 343 Armenus of Armenium in Thessaly settled Acilisene and Syspiritis⁷⁹. Acilisene is clearly
 344 defined geographically by Strabo as being east of Lesser Armenia with the Euphrates
 345 marking its border, and north of Sophene⁸⁰. Syspiritis then would indeed be suggestive of a
 346 region near Speri; however, XI 14, 12 marks the extent of this Thessalian settlement in

⁷⁰ Found e.g. in HDT., VII 78 and other authors, though Macrocephalians also appear in later authors such as in MELA, I 107 as east of the Mossynians and Chalybaeans, and in PLIN., NH, VI 11, mentioned next to the Tibarenians, Mossynians and Cerasus and separate from the 'Machorones' (Macrones?); cf. MANOLEDAKIS 2015.

⁷¹ Even maintaining the same anticlockwise order, despite the previous passage referring to the west, though adding some Dahaeans before the Chalybes either, though these are likely not the same Dahae of Central Asia despite the *identical* name (a good lesson to keep for the Saspeires, perhaps).

⁷² ST.BYZ., s.v. Σάπειρες

⁷³ Perhaps conflating the North Caucasian Sabirs; see n. 33 above.

⁷⁴ EM, s.v. Βέχειρ.

⁷⁵ There is another somewhat relevant entry (EM, s.v. Σάπειρες) but contains no useful information.

⁷⁶ e.g. JANASHIA 1952, pp. 62-63; PLONTKE-LÜNING 2006; LICHELI 2007, pp. 1113-1114; cf.

GARDAPKHADZE 2018, pp. 36, 38

⁷⁷ Context for it being Armenia is in X., *An*. IV 5, 34. Moreover, at least one translator considered this whole passage to have been an addition of a late editor in the first place: BROWNSON 1922 VII 8, 25, n. 1.

⁷⁸ STR., XI 4, 8; 14, 9; 14, 12.

⁷⁹ Note that, *contra* LICHELI 2007, p. 1114, the reading that Syspiritis is not in Armenia is unlikely, as the meaning is probably that Adiabene and Calachene, being in Assyria, lie outside the Armenian mountains.

⁸⁰ STR., XI 12, 3.

347 Syspirtis as reaching to Calachene and Adiabene (both in Assyria and around Nineveh⁸¹).
 348 Even if Strabo simply elided all the other regions between Syspirtis and Assyria, the
 349 passage could still be interpreted to be indicative of a much more southerly orientation
 350 from Acilisene (but also perhaps also east of Sophene) than Speri to the northeast.
 351 However, considering certain similarities in the geographical setting of Speri in a later
 352 Armenian source⁸², a connection between these is conceivably likely. Still, there is little
 353 here to suggest a connection with the Saspeires in the first place.

354 What does this leave us with? A single source and its likely derivatives mentioning
 355 Sapeires, arguably as a learned interpolation rather than genuine geographical knowledge,
 356 the Hesperites *westerners* that certainly must refer to Western Armenians, and a Syspirtis
 357 region next to an Acilisene in the Upper Euphrates, with mediaeval evidence allowing an
 358 interpretation as a predecessor of Speri, but no evidence to link them to the Saspeires yet.

359 For those who support a location near Speri, the passages referring to Sapeires on the
 360 shores of the Black Sea offer an enticing line of argument, but what would we make of the
 361 fact that these authors place them *on the coast*, rather than in the inland of later Speri? And
 362 since many of the proponents of the Speri connection consider the Sapeires a Kartvelian
 363 people⁸³, what about the statement in EM⁷⁴ that the Sapeires are *Scythian*? The former may
 364 be considered as some mild geographical confusion, and the latter could certainly be yet
 365 another example of ancient authors being careless with ethnicity (especially as it is so
 366 late), but these are also assumptions that we cannot leave unmentioned, and unjustified,
 367 since it could so easily lead to over-interpretation or even cherry-picking.

368 Another line of evidence exists that could allow us to connect the Saspeires, Syspirtes, and
 369 Speri. I will discuss it below.

370 3.1 Sa-Speri and Sa-Sper-eti

371 The Georgian circumfixes of *sa- -o*, *sa- -eti*, and the suffix *-eti*⁸⁴ are commonly used to form
 372 toponyms from nouns (amongst other uses), such as the name for Georgia, *Sakartvelo* (*sa-*
 373 *kartvel(i)-o*), the name for France, *Saprangeti* (*sa-prang(i)-eti*, with *prangi* meaning
 374 ‘French’), or the name of the region of the Svans (*svan(i)-eti*). Some researchers suggest
 375 that these circumfix constructions can be seen even in the Greek names of the Saspeires

⁸¹ STR., XVI 1, 1.

⁸² Where Sper and Ekeleats’ (Acilisene) are both part of Upper Armenia, near the upper reaches of the Euphrates: HEWSEN 1992, pp. 59, 59A, 249; cf. the *Sp’erasi* river called Ch’orokhi in the Kartlis Tskhovreba: TITUS PROJECT 2008, p. 17 ll. 19-20.

⁸³ As does every author cited in n. 76 above.

⁸⁴ In Georgian: *სა- -ო*, *სა- -ეთი*, and *-ეთი*. Note that there are more, such as *სა- -ია* (*სა- -ი*; e.g. Samtredia).

376 and Syspirtis, since they postulate their origin as *sa-sper(i)(-o)* and *sa-sper(i)-eti*, and thus
377 suggest from this that these peoples were Kartvelian speakers.⁸⁵

378 The prefix (*sa-*) has been reconstructed as Proto-Kartvelian **l'a-*, with a voiceless alveolar
379 lateral fricative⁸⁶. In many modern languages, this phoneme is transcribed as a variation of
380 the letter l in whatever alphabet is closest, due to the similar articulation, but it is not
381 unlikely that Greek authors would transcribe it as s, especially if the sound had already
382 shifted to /s/ in their time. For its part, the suffix *-eti* has been reconstructed as **-et*⁸⁷,
383 while *-o* has been reconstructed as **-o* itself⁸⁸. This may seem already very strong
384 evidence, but we have yet to pose the difficult question of: which branch of the Kartvelian
385 languages did the Saspeires speak?

386 The extant Kartvelian (or South Caucasian) languages are split into two main branches:
387 Svan on its own branch, and the group of Karto-Zan languages, which splits into Georgian
388 proper and the Zan languages: Mingrelian and Laz⁸⁹. A recent study has suggested the split
389 between Svan and Karto-Zan occurred around the eight millennium BCE, and the split
390 between Georgian and Zan around the seventh century BCE. If we associate the Saspeires
391 with the Colchians⁹⁰ (whose arms they had in common⁹¹) or simply place them near Speri,
392 where Laz speakers are most concentrated, then we would have to lean towards them
393 being Zan speakers⁹², not Georgian speakers.

394 Why would this be a problem? Well, in Mingrelian and Laz, **-eti* becomes *-ati*, and **l'a-*
395 becomes *o*-⁹³; the name for Georgia in Laz is *o-kortu-e*, or *o-kortura*⁹⁴. Unless we assume
396 the Georgian *sa-* *-o* was already borrowed, the correct construction of a people named
397 Speri would be *o-sper-o*, not *sa-sper-o*, and *o-speri-ati*, not *sa-sper-eti*. This would then also
398 make them generally incompatible with the idea that they were also the Classical Iberians,
399 and perhaps even that they lived in the Kura valley. If so, then it implies Herodotus has no
400 knowledge whatsoever of either the Iberians or Albanians.

401 We can sidestep this inconvenience by either being less trusting of a single study on the
402 split between Zan and Georgian, or also by assuming the Saspeires, regardless of their

⁸⁵ e.g. JANASHIA 1952, p. 62; see GARDAPKHADZE 2018, p. 38

⁸⁶ In IPA: /ɬ/; i.e. the same sound as the Welsh *ll*, or Adyghe *лб*: FÄHNRIK 2007 p. 720, s.v. **l'a-*; p. 722, s.v. **l'a-* -
o; cf. GEORGIJ A. KLIMOV 1998, p. 172.

⁸⁷ GEORGIJ A. KLIMOV 1998, p. 46; FÄHNRIK 2007, p. 146, s.v. **-et*2.

⁸⁸ FÄHNRIK 2007, p. 722, s.v. **l'a-* -o.

⁸⁹ BOEDER 2005, pp. 5-89; GAVASHELISHVILI *et al.* 2023.

⁹⁰ As e.g. LICHELI 2007, p. 1114 does.

⁹¹ HDT., VII 79.

⁹² The possible language of the Colchians is not a topic I will address here due to space, but suffice it to say that the westerly area of the Zan languages matches the location of Classical Colchis in relation to the Georgian Iberians; cf. GAVASHELISHVILI *et al.* 2023.

⁹³ See FÄHNRIK 2007 p. 720, s.v. **l'a-*; p. 722, s.v. **l'a-* -o.

⁹⁴ Mingrelian does retain *sa-* *-o* for country names (e.g. *sa-kortu-o*), but this could be a loan from Georgian.

403 location, were Georgian speakers. However, going from /sa/ in Saspeires to /sy/ in
404 Syspiritis is an incredible vowel shift, even if we account for a careless transcription to
405 Greek; completely raising and fronting while also rounding. Moreover, why would the
406 name of the region ultimately drop the putative *sa-* -*o* circumfix that is so important to
407 construct the toponym? What about the alternate spelling of Sapeires? With it, we are then
408 left with the form *sa-pe(i)r-o*, which would need an alternative derivation to arrive at
409 Speri⁹⁵, if such a path is even compatible with the circumfix, which to my limited
410 knowledge never elides into *s-*. This puts into question the assumption that the Saspeires
411 are indeed Kartvelian, at least for this linguistic reason, or at the very least forces us to
412 assume that Sapeires is a misspelling entirely. Finally, what does the spelling of Sapeires
413 imply for Syspiritis⁹⁶ as well? What derivation that makes use of the circumfix can
414 plausibly reconcile these two terms, along with Speri (and even Saspeires)? Can we really
415 be certain that the language of the Saspeires was not related to a now utterly extinct
416 branch of the South Caucasian languages, and therefore our reconstructions are
417 incomplete and misleading? Can we even be certain they did not speak a Northwest
418 Caucasian language instead, or even a language family that is now extinct without written
419 records?

420 Regrettably, even after pursuing this line of evidence, we are left with just as much
421 uncertainty as we had previously. The Saspeires–Speri connection is debatably not any
422 firmer than any of the other options, which all have arguments both in favour and against,
423 depending on our interpretation and the necessary assumptions we must make to arrive to
424 even an internally consistent putative location and identity.

425 4 Conclusion

426 Despite an exhaustive review of the ancient written evidence to assess the possible
427 location and identity of the Saspeires of Herodotus—as well as a brief look into the
428 linguistics arguments raised as evidence for a Kartvelian connection—the result can only
429 be ambiguous and unclear. No definitive proof linking the Saspeires to the Aras valley, the
430 Kura valley, or Speri could be reasonably uncovered. Their Kartvelian-ness also remains
431 arguable. This is not to say that none of the many proposed identifications of the Saspeires
432 can be correct, but only that it cannot be determined with the facts we have available.

433 One line of evidence that went unmentioned is that of archaeology, and that is for a good
434 reason. If the possible location of the Saspeires has such an enormous range, from the

⁹⁵ E.g. **sa-pe(i)r-ia* > **sa-per-ia* > **s-per-ia* > Speri.

⁹⁶ Which can have a derivation such as **sy-sper-eti* > **(s-)sper-eti* > **sper-i* > Speri, without the *sa-* prefix.

435 Caspian to the Black Sea, and from the Caucasus foothills to the Armenian highlands, there
436 how can we claim that a certain set of artefacts or material culture can be assigned
437 specifically to the Saspeires⁹⁷? Any sign of Saspeires we might find in earthenware is going
438 to require us to make a series of assumptions on where the Saspeires were located,
439 especially if we claim they migrated to or from one of the other areas they are said to have
440 inhabited⁹⁷. This is without even mentioning the known adage of ‘pots, not people’;
441 material culture can spread across social and political lines. A style of pottery present first
442 in the Kura valley and later in the Speri area can only tell us so much about the political
443 situation of those who owned them, and likely not enough to uncover a ‘Saspeires culture’.
444 Unless a very specific inscription referencing and defining the Saspeires and their location
445 is found, archaeology is regrettably of little use to bring clarity to the situation.

446 Any consistent hypothesis on the location and identity of the Saspeires, as mentioned
447 before, requires we collapse the existing uncertainty by making a series of assumptions,
448 and any contradictory piece of evidence can be explained away or reinterpreted to better
449 fit the desired hypothesis, if not the opposite: the hypothesis made so broad as to be
450 consistent enough with any evidence⁹⁸.

451 If we wished to argue that the Saspeires are equivalent to the later Iberians, perhaps even
452 going so far as to decompose the name as some form of *sa-iber-o*⁹⁹, to solve the issue of the
453 missing Caucasian Albanians, we could assume that they were subsumed under the
454 Saspeires, or had not yet arrived in the Kura valley by the time of Herodotus and this is the
455 reason they do not appear, or that the name Saspeires was given to a large number of
456 Caucasian peoples in the same manner as the Germani¹⁰⁰, or that indeed Herodotus was
457 simply not well-informed of the true ethnic situation in the Caucasus so the absence of the
458 Albanians is of no big concern. Or that the western Matienians of Herodotus were actually
459 near Speri, and we can then assume that these are the members of the 18th satrapy, rather
460 than the Matienians described east of Armenia, thus allowing for the Saspeires in Speri
461 without much trouble¹⁰¹. The description of the path of the Scythians by HDT. could have
462 been confused, and they kept the Lesser, not the Greater Caucasus to their right, with
463 implications on the location of the Saspeires. Any number of *plausible* assumptions could

⁹⁷ *pace* LICHELI 2007, p. 1114.

⁹⁸ PERREAULT 2019, pp. 8-14.

⁹⁹ See a similar idea in RAWLINSON 1862, p. 186, n. vii; also JANASHIA 1952, p. 57; RAYFIELD 2013, p. 18; GARDAPKHADZE 2018, p. 38.

¹⁰⁰ TAC., *Germ.*, 2.

¹⁰¹ cf. SAGONA-SAGONA 2011, and the notion that the Matienians were originally in the Upper Euphrates and gave their name to Matiene in Media; see also SAGONA 2004, p. 302.

464 be brought up that in some way or another can broadly connect the dots¹⁰². Indeed, this is
465 exactly the work of a historian lacking any way to directly access the past¹⁰³. However, we
466 must also be aware (also to ourselves) that we are indeed making a series of assumptions
467 to be able to propose a consistent hypothesis, that we should do it carefully, methodically,
468 and never neglecting contradictory evidence (even if only to argue against its relevance),
469 nor the pitfalls that come out of this process. I do not wish to pretend that I do not have my
470 own favoured interpretation on the matter of the Saspeires¹⁰⁴, it would be completely
471 disingenuous, but it is incredibly important to highlight the uncertainty that plagues the
472 identification of the Saspeires of Herodotus (see Figure 4), an uncertainty, that I argue,
473 cannot be satisfactorily resolved to arrive at an agreement.

474 This forthrightness is required especially due to the possible locations of the Saspeires and
475 their possible Kartvelian-ness can be deployed for nationalistic purposes (and have been,
476 even if in a trivial manner, as seen above), particularly as there is a clear overlap with
477 territory once disputed in the not-so-distant past (see Figure 1). Why someone would do
478 this is in many ways understandable; both the people of Armenia and Georgia have been
479 victims of ethnic conflict down to the present¹⁰⁵. Questioning what can serve as a claim to
480 the autochthony of a desired (current, lost, or contested) territory could be seen as
481 provocative, and even as an attack against the very existence of the people with ties to the
482 land¹⁰⁶.

483 The goal here, however, is nothing of the sort, nor is it to lecture entire groups of people
484 that they are doing, understanding, or deploying history wrong¹⁰⁷. Rather, it is to portray
485 the situation of the ancient world as we can glean from surviving sources; namely,
486 complex, confusing, and unclear. A situation that is not easily given to a simple solution, at
487 least not one without a score of assumptions made along the way, which should be made
488 explicit whenever advancing a proposal of how to reconcile the few data we have at our
489 disposal. Putting the ambiguity of our historical knowledge front and centre may not
490 prevent history from being weaponised for ethnic conflict, it may not even prevent people
491 seeking to stoke the latter from assuming a convenient interpretation as correct, but at

¹⁰² For the issue of the Sapeires on the Black Sea, we can assume a learned insertion made without care for the true geographical situation, for the ancient claim that they were Scythian, that it is too late to be reliable, etc.

¹⁰³ cf. PERREAULT 2019, pp. 7-22

¹⁰⁴ Namely: the name being taken from a smaller tribe (perhaps in the inland near Syspiritis/Speri, but not the coast) and applied to (and conflated with) a larger group that geographically (but not politically) contained the Iberians and Albanians on the Kura, and perhaps no *sa-* *-o* curcumfix in the name nor necessarily Kartvelian (*sensu stricto*) speakers.

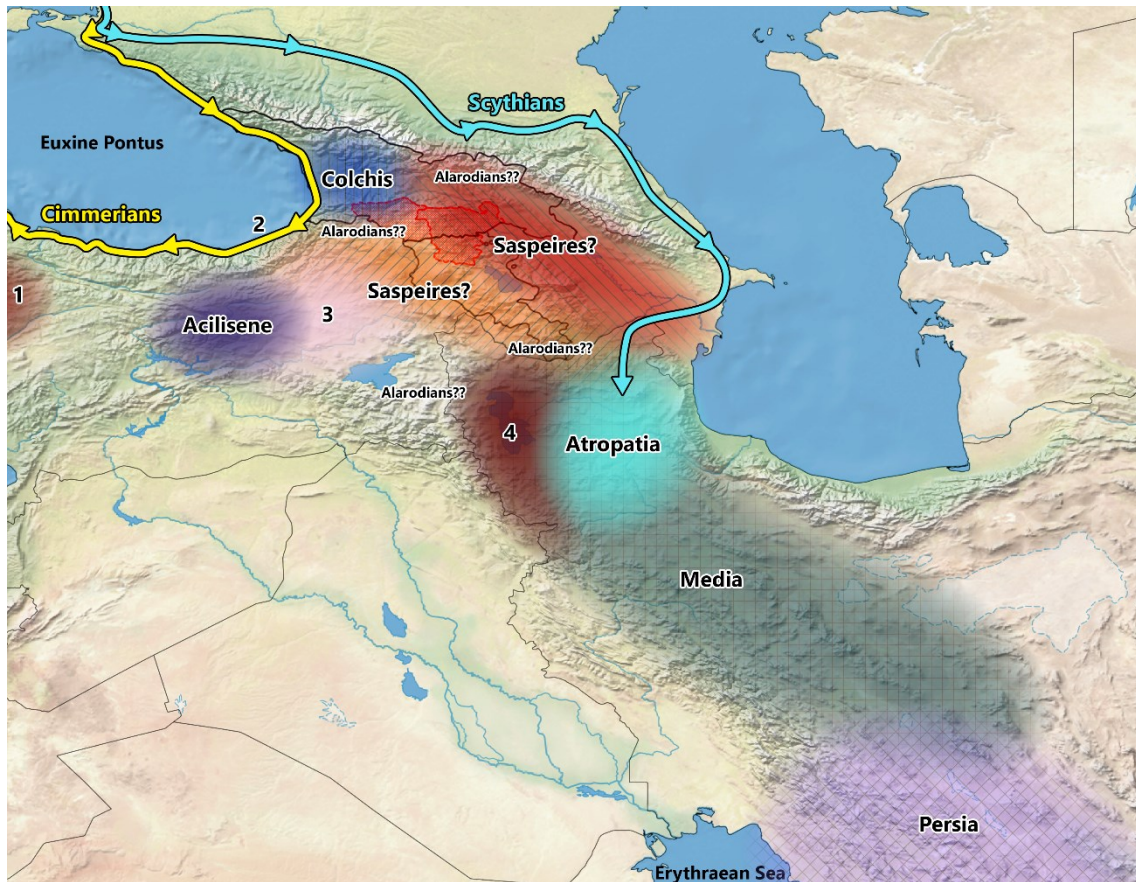
¹⁰⁵ SOULEIMANOV 2013; not to mention the Armenian Genocide as well. See also the suppression of the Lazic language: SARIGIL 2012, pp. 270-273.

¹⁰⁶ KOHL-TSETSKHLADZE 1995, pp. 151-162.

¹⁰⁷ see KOHL-TSETSKHLADZE 1995, pp. 149-151

492 least it will force them to put some effort to do so, rather than have it so easily given by us
493 historians.

494



495

496 Figure 4. Updated version of Figure 3 with the addition of various peoples and regions discussed in the
497 previous section¹⁰⁸. The numbers label the shaded areas representing the range of possible locations for the 1:
498 *western* Matienians (vivid red), 2: the Sapeires on the Black Sea coast (no shaded area), 3: the region of
499 Syspirtis (pink), and 4: the *eastern* Matienians (cf. Matianians; wine red). The possible range of locations for
500 the Saspeires remains unchanged even after examining the additional evidence in the previous section, and the
501 range of plausible positions is arguably even wider than before. The location of the Alarodians, since uncertain,
502 encompasses a wide range of possibilities depending on whether they are placed immediately south of the
503 Colchians, who bore similar armament, between the Saspeires and Matienians, at the very northern limits of
504 Media, assumed to be the remnants of the Urartians near lake Van, or even the very plausible location of *north*
505 of the Saspeires.

506

507 The Saspeires are a people seldom mentioned, indeterminately positioned, of obscure
508 identity, and dubious relations. All the evidence available for understanding their situation
509 does not make them less inscrutable, but only shows how ample the field of possibilities is,
510 and how little we can be certain of. Whether on the Aras, the Kura, or in Speri; whether in
511 multiple of these, whether Iberian precursors or not, and whether Zan, Kartvelian, or
512 otherwise.

¹⁰⁸ JORELLANAF 2025b

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