

# **AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LAND, LANGUAGE, RELIGION AND HISTORY OF DERSİM**

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## **LAND**

Dersim is an ethnical and geographical name that has been mentioned in the historical sources, at least since Xenophon's book called *Anabasis*, written at the turn of the 5th century BC. The once extensive territory has been reduced to Inner Dersim, that is today a province in the eastern part of Turkey, situated between the two branches of the river Euphrates, known as Karasu and Murat. It was renamed as "Tunceli" during a Turkish military expedition in 1935.

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## **LANGUAGE**

The People of Dersim speak an Iranian language called Kırmancki (Dımilki, Zazaki). Although some reject the non-Kurdish identity of Dersimis and thereby regard their language as a dialect of Kurdish, it is in fact a distinct and separate language, more ancient than Kurdish. This is also the view widely shared among the linguists. Kırmancki, if we search back, is the surviving representative of Parthian (Pahlavi) and Sasanian languages.

## **RELIGION**

The religious ideas of the Dersimis have always been of great interest to the outside world. They were at first among the adherents of an Iranian religion called Mazdaism, founded by Zoroaster (Zarathustra), the Prophet of ancient Iran, who is thought to have lived in the 6th century BC. From 4th century on, some sections of them converted to Christianity mainly through the Gregorian and Paulician sects. The Magian (Mazdaic) and Christian traces are still easily detectable in the land and beliefs of Dersim. The religion of Islam among Dersimis spread in the form of the Sufi ideas after 9/10th century A.D. From late 15th century onward they adopted a new religion, called Kızıl-Baş (Turkish word for the Iranian Surh-i Ser, having reference especially to the red head-dress worn by its adherents), founded by Shah Haydar Safawi of Ardabil. Due to their new religion, considered as heretical, Dersimis were heavily persecuted by the Ottoman and Turkish rulers time and again. These persecutions occasionally turned into the massacres of the worst kind.

## **ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE**

The early Dersimis are descendants of Mamans (the Mamikonians of Armenian sources), who were otherwise known as Tzanians to the classical writers. Sin, San or Çan are only different forms for Tzan, which can also be seen forming the second half of the name Der-Sim in a slightly distinct shape, i.e. Sim.

As to the name Zaza, it is simply a different pronunciation of that of Sasan. The account of their Sasanian origin is also recorded by many writers.

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There is also a Parthian element in the ethnical make-up of Dersimis as their traditions suggest. Briefly; Mamans, Sasanians and Parthians are the ones that formed the early substrata of the people of Dersim (Kırmanciye).

The Dersimi traditions also speak some late migrations into the country. These late migrations took place between the 10/11th and 15/16th centuries A.D., and the new comers referred to are identified with the Saltuqids, Rifais (Goranis?), Aqqoyunlus and Safawids, who were mostly from the same stock as that of early Dersimis, so far as their origins and nationality are concerned.

The Dersimis of modern times are descendants of the country's early and late inhabitants mentioned above.

As is known from historical sources during the centuries-long war between Safavids and Ottomans, Dersimis had sided with the former. After the collapse of the Ottomans, Turkish nationalists waged a bloody campaign against Armenians, Dersimis and Assyrians, the non-Turkish elements of the land. It

was a deliberate and sustain war in the course of which the resistance of the Dersimis with the sole purpose of self-defence in 1920 (Kochgiri) and 1937-1938 (Inner Dersim) had been ruthlessly suppressed one after another and thousands were forced into exile.

In 1937-38, at a time when world attention was focused on the Second World War, Turkey committed a genocide, by killing approximately 70.000 people in the process, which has never been forgotten.