

**The Melungeons:
Genetic, Linguistic, and Historic Evidence of Their
Turkish Roots**

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THESIS: There is strong evidence to see a footprint of the Turks in the New World.

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Hundreds of years ago, there were tales of a tri-racial people different from others. This tri-racial group of people was simply called mysterious. In eighteenth century Virginia this mysterious group was pushed and forced further west, higher up in the mountains as Scotch, Irish, English and other settlers moved into the area where the mysterious people had been living for centuries.

Only one, yes, only one word.

One awful word, a dark word, a lonely word, a mysterious but a powerful word continued over the centuries in confusion, derision but pride.

MELUNGEON!

Racial, social, and cultural differences over three hundred years made them second class citizens in the regions where this people was named Melungeons.

A little mention is made of these enigmatic Melungeons throughout history as a mysterious and lost people. Nobody seemed to know for sure who these people were or where they came from. They spoke an earlier form of English but with dark skin did not look white European.

The loss of rights and land caused many Melungeons to leave the areas where they lived for centuries and to start over in new areas where no one knew them. These people made themselves friendly with the Indians and lived in a peaceful Utopia of their own creations. Afterwards, they married the local Indians, and also subsequently their descendants married the local Negroes and the whites, thus this mixture was going to become the formation of the present day Melungeons.

Current popular theory suggests that the Melungeons were descendants of abandoned Portuguese and Spanish settlers.

The English word Melungeon has both Arabic and Turkish roots, meaning "cursed soul." Also in Portuguese, "Melungo" means shipmate. In the Turkish language Melungeons are called Melun-can, "Melun" being a borrowed word from Arabic meaning one that carries bad luck and ill omen. And "can," which is Turkish, means soul. Meluncan then means a person whose soul is a born loser (Melungeons' Home Page). This term was in common usage among sixteenth-century Ottoman Turks, Arabs, and Muslim converts to Christianity in Spain and Portugal, and is still understood by modern Turks as a self-deprecating term by a Muslim who feels abandoned by God.

Traditionally, Melungeons have been darker skinned people and, as a result, have frequently been discriminated against by their Anglo-Saxon neighbors. Many Melungeons have hidden their heritage, and until recently, history has not revealed where they came from or even how long they have lived on the American Continent. During the struggles for land, when the white settlers arrived to the territory of the copper-skinned Melungeons, the whites declared that they were "free persons of color." In many cases this legal designation stripped the Melungeons of their many rights, including the right to vote, to own their own land, educate or send their children to schools, to defend themselves in courts of law, and also to intermarry with anyone who was not also Melungeon. Kennedy, a Melungeon researcher, says that "Melungeons had always been precluded to get all those rights until 1942." This designation led to the taking of Melungeon land by the new white settlers.

Thus, Melungeons are a small group of people of uncertain origin who have lived for years in the mountains of the East Tennessee, Southwest Virginia, and Western North Carolina. The Melungeons are copper-skinned, dark eyed, and dark haired, but they mostly had English names and were commonly speaking Elizabethan English. Some historians claim that Europeans encountered the Melungeon settlers in the region of Carolina and Virginia. Also the Melungeons mixed with remnants of Indian tribes, but the Melungeons called themselves "Portygee," which means "Portuguese" (Melungeons' Home page).

They over time were generally pigeonholed into one of the four permissible (and inflexible) American racial classifications: white (northern European), black (African), Indian, or mulatto (a mix of the first three, or anyone of questionable racial background). And thus an entire layer of early American ethnic and cultural fusion was effectively "erased." By the time the first U.S. census was conducted, the mixing and cultural fusion had been underway for 200 years, ensuring that the story would remain buried and certainly never be told via standard census records. Around one thousand Melungeon descendants now live in the United States, but Melungeon researcher Kennedy claims that "the number more than doubles that, and included, to

the consternation of some family members, his own lineage" (Melungeons' Home page).

The Melungeons are most likely the descendants of the late sixteenth century Turks and Portuguese stranded on the Carolina shores when the Spanish force abandoned the settlement of Santa Elena and Carolina. They may have also been survivors of several hundred Turkish sailor slaves who were left on Roanoke Island by Sir Francis Drake in 1586. A large part of the Turkish fleet was destroyed by the Crusaders in the Inebahtin war in 1570 and several hundred Turkish sailors were captured by Sir Francis Drake in the same war. They were rescued from slavery in South America and put on the coast of Roanoke Island by Francis Drake in the late 1500s. The Melungeons later intermarried with the Powhatan, Pamunkey, Chickahominy, and Catawba Indians, and later the Negroes. After they were abandoned by the Spanish force, they started to survive in the Appalachians and intermarried with the Cherokees and afterwards with the northern European settlers, who were becoming part of the classic American melting pot (Melungeons' Home page). The resulting mixture created a unique appearance, which Europeans could not recognize.

The basis for the link between Melungeons and Turks is linguistic, genetic, medical, historical, cultural, etc.

More than 1000 Melungeon and related Native American terms have been preliminarily linked with Ottoman Turkish and Arabic words with identical pronunciations and meaning. The old name for Kentucky was "Kain Tuck" which means dark and also bloody ground in the local Indians dialect. "Kan Tok" is Turkish for "full of blood." "Kan" means blood and "Tok" means filled or full. The Turkish word for "huge noise" is "Ne yaygara," also pronounced identically to "Niagara". The Turkish term for "good cotton" is "pamukey" (pamuk iyi) similar to "Pamunkey," an eastern Virginia Native American tribe to which many Melungeons claim a relationship. The old Appalachian term "gaum," which means messy or sad, is pronounced identically to the Turkish "gam," meaning messy or sad. In the late nineteenth century the Melungeons of East Tennessee and also Southwest Virginia used to say "Satz" for a watch or a timepiece which is spelled as "Sotz." The Turkish word for timepiece or watch is "Saat." The top tribal administrator for the Creek Indian was called a "Mico." A Mico held the same position on a sixteen-century Ottoman galley. Hodja is also the Creek Indian word for the tribe's wisest and strongest warrior. Hodja is also the Turkish word for the most respected teacher in the Muslim community (Melungeons' home page). All of those words are still used and pronounced incredibly the same as Turkish people today pronounce them.

There is credible historical evidence that Turks were abandoned in the New World. The Ottoman archival confirmations prove that the Ottoman marines had been taken to the Canary Islands in both early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Also, a Turkish journalist discovered archival records of the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul that

report the Portuguese had sold to the British Navy a huge number of the Ottoman prisoners of war, who were probably taken to the New World for labor purposes by the British Navy (Nuri Yilnaz).

No trace was found of these people when later English vessels dropped anchor for re-supplying. It is possible, if not likely, that many of them survived and were absorbed into the surrounding Native American tribes. This is particularly intriguing when one considers that most sixteenth-century Turkish sailors were themselves of central Asian heritage, thus making them literal cousins to the Native Americans they would have encountered, if the purported Bering Strait-migration thesis is to be believed. Furthermore, there is documented evidence of the importation of Karachai and Kavkaz Turkish textile workers, artisans, and servants by both the English and the Spanish into sixteenth-century Virginia, the Caribbean, Brazil, and Mexico, lending even more support to previous Melungeon claims of a Turkish origin. All these people survived by blending into the various Native American, European, and African communities.

Turkish historical archives in Turkey, Eurasia, and Central Asia include cultural links, medical and genetic data, and linguistic similarities between Turks and Melungeons. The historical, cultural, genetic and oral traditions lend very important credence to the Melungeon-Turkic tie. "Qualified linguists and historians may find other explanations for the similarities in the language, and also culture," says Kennedy.

According to the English records only one hundred Turks were taken back to England where they were ransomed to the Turkish dominions, but there is no further mention of the other remaining Turkish sailors. "Perhaps those who returned to Turkey left statements regarding the others that were apparently left in North Carolina. History already shows through the archives, for example, that in the 1500s other Turkish sailors having no connection to Drake were also left in the Caribbean. The records are there," says Ozdogan.

Plans are also underway for similar cooperative efforts in general historical data, especially those data relating to Turkish and Ottoman naval efforts, as well as the transportation of Ottoman peoples, both captives and employed textile workers, to various destinations in the New World, generally by the Spanish, Portuguese, and English. "The Ottomans maintained wonderful records, though usually in old Turkish script. There may be a wealth of data pertaining to lost or abandoned Turkish sailors, for example, or the reports of those 100 young Turkish men who we know were documentably returned home by Sir Francis Drake in 1587," says Ozdogan.

Modern science has added new support to the Turkish theory in the form of DNA, related to disease and appearance.

Recent genetic studies show an undeniable link between the Melungeon people and the Mediterranean region. A 1990 reanalysis of blood samples taken in 1969 from 177 Melungeon descendants showed no significant differences between east Tennessee and southwestern Virginia Melungeons and populations in Portugal, Canary Islands, North Africa, Malta, Cyprus, and Turkey (the Levant). Furthermore, significant genetic relationships also appear to be present between the Melungeons and Virginia and certain populations in South America and Cuba. Perhaps Sir Francis Drake really did leave those people on Roanoke Island! Amazing "coincidences," but perfectly in line with what the first Melungeons had so persistently claimed (The Melungeons 127).

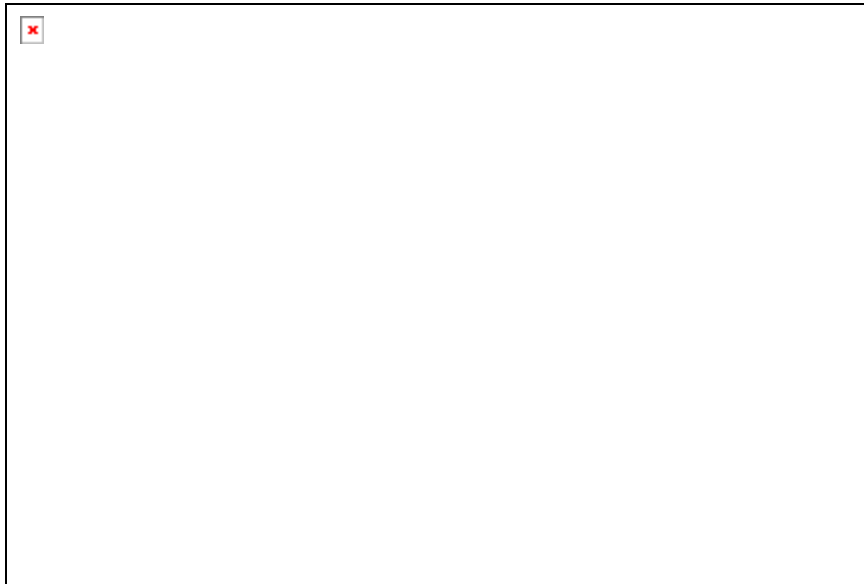
Modern-day Melungeons have found an intriguing link between their peculiar diseases and those of eastern Mediterranean. Diseases identified in the Melungeon population include thalassemia, Behcet's Syndrome, Machado-Joseph (Azorean) Disease, sarcoidosis, and Familial Mediterranean Fever.

"Behcet's Syndrome, which is a disease from the region of Anatolia and Mediterranean, is a relapsing, multi-system inflammatory disease in which there are oral/genital ulcers. There may be inflammation of the eyes, joints, blood vessels, central nervous system and gastrointestinal tract involvement. Attacks last about a week to a month and recur spontaneously. Onset is usually between twenty to thirty years of age with symptoms occurring up to several years after the onset. Twice as many men as women are affected. There is a genetic predisposition, with autoimmune mechanism and viral infection which may all play a part" (Morrison).

There are some physiological characteristics, which are not entirely documented, but seem to be passed on through the lines of some Melungeon descendants. There is a bump on the back of the head of some descendants of Melungeons, that is located at mid-line, just above the juncture with the neck. It is about the size of half a golf ball or smaller. Some people who live in the Anatolian region of Turkey also have that Anatolian Bump (Morrison).

The possible Turkish-Melungeon link has created considerable interest among both groups, leading to the establishment of sister cities.

The sister cities of Wise, Virginia, and Cesme, Turkey, were selected to receive the Diverse Community Award at the 35th Annual Awards Program of Sister City International's Annual Conference in San Diego, California in 1996.



in Cesme, Turkey

Wise Caddesi (Street)

"The Diverse Community Award "distinguishes sister city programs that best promote international understanding and long-term partnerships through community activities which involve participants that reflect the diversity of the community" (Melungeons' home page).

Wise and Cesme became sister cities in mid-1995. At the 1995 Wise Fall Fling, Mustafa Siyahhan, Director of Tourism of the Turkish Embassy in Washington, visited Wise to commemorate the growing relationship between Wise and Cesme.

In commemoration of the sister city relationship, the Town of Wise has erected a sign at its entrance paying tribute to its "sister" in Turkey. Cesme, in return, has renamed its main street "Wise Avenue," while the mountain overlooking Cesme has been renamed "Melungeon Mountain." Cesme, like Wise, lies in a mountainous area.

According to Kennedy, thousands of Americans share Melungeons heritage, such as, Abraham Lincoln, Elvis Presley, and Eva Gardner. However, some scholars, according to Virginia Demarse, the former president of the National Genealogical Society, dismiss the theories of Kennedy. Kennedy says, "I do not care who we are or were. I just believe that we need to know who we are or were" (Melungeons' home page).

The Melungeons have begun to clarify their past and future. Such clarification is a reminder for academics and policymakers about possible ramifications of their actions. There are some arguments at several points against the imposition of new racial categories, like the Turk-Indian-Negro blend. One too seldom hears from the scholarly community to point out that "all human beings harbor a racial diversity, known unknown." Although, differing in details, the story is one where colonized,

oppressed, and forgotten mysterious people are finally recognized. While interesting in its particulars, the true importance of the Melungeon story is its universality.

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