

How we solved the 1,000-year-old mystery of the Druze people's origin – with a genetic Sat Nav

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For a thousand years, the mysterious origin of the Druze people – who live almost exclusively in the mountains of Syria, Lebanon and Israel – has captivated linguists, historians, and sociologists, who have not been able to agree whether the Druze are of Arabian, Turkish, Caucasus or Persian origin. But thanks to our [new research](#) that mystery may now have been solved, with the use of a genetic GPS system – that works in a similar way to the Sat Nav in your car.

There are thought to be around 1m Druze people in the world today, whose secretive religion was developed in 986 AD as a movement within Islam. While the spiritual elements of their religion are highly guarded and known only to the elders, the known practices are made up of various religions which include Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism. This variety is most likely based on historical gatherings that are typical of nomadic tribes.

Previous research has always placed the origins of the Druze in the [the Near East](#) region. And by zooming in on the area, our genetic GPS [traced most Druze](#) to the region that overlaps northeast Turkey, southwest Armenia and northern Iraq. This area borders the Zagros and the Ararat mountains and is the tallest region in Turkey.

This was discovered by applying our [GPS tool](#) to the genomes of over 150 Druze, along with Palestinians, Bedouins, Syrians and Lebanese to compare their ancestral origins.

Mountain dwelling warriors

Throughout history, the Caucasus region – which borders Europe and Asia – was subjected to political, military, religious and cultural conflict, which prompted many tribes to seek refuge in remote regions. The Druze were no different.

It is thought that the first Druze worshippers probably lived in Cairo, where Druzism was adopted by [Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah](#) who ruled in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean – known as the Levant – between 996 and 1021. But after his sudden disappearance, his successor prosecuted the Druze ruthlessly and abolished the faith in Egypt. By that time, however, the faith had already spread outside Egypt and become accepted among several Levantine groups.

The Druze were first recorded by the 12th century Jewish traveller [Benjamin of Tudela](#) who described them as fearless, mountain-dwelling warriors who favoured the Jews. And by that time, because of earlier persecutions, their faith was closed to new followers and they opposed marriage outside of the Druze faith.

The remote mountainous regions provided the Druze with protection and allowed them to maintain the close societal structure that is integral to their religious practices. Like other [Caucasus populations](#), the Druze may even be genetically adapted to cope with the thinner mountain air allowing them to live comfortably in these remote parts.

Druze meet the Jews

Though the Druze have previously been considered to have little genetic mixing – known as a "[population isolate](#)" by some geneticists – this is actually incorrect. And in fact by exchanging their diverse Near Eastern genes with Middle Eastern populations – such as Syrians and Palestinians – the Druze people created a more mixed genome than their ancestors, or other Middle Eastern populations.

Genetic evidence also suggests that over the years non-Druze tribes and individuals have contributed and enriched the Druze gene pool.

Previous research has also shown that [Ashkenazic Jews and Druze](#) are

genetically closer to one another than Middle Eastern populations – but until now, it was not clear why. Combined with our earlier research showing the northeastern Turkish origins of Ashkenazic Jews, we can explain that genetic similarity via the shared origin of Ashkenazic Jews and Druze. Medieval Ashkenazic Jews lived in ancient villages in northeast Turkey known as "ancient Ashkenaz" – which was close to the mountainous homeland of the Druze.

Our findings explain a 1,000-year saga of two people living side by side in these lands. And as the Ashkenazic Jews moved northward into the Khazarian Empire, the Druze moved southwards to Palestine – only for both people to reunite hundreds of years later. And although by that time, neither one recalled their common roots, both retained the evidence in their genes.

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