



ABARSĒN

ABARSĒN, Middle Persian form of the Avestan name *Upāiri.saēna*, designating the Hindu Kush mountains (Average. *iškata*; Mid. Pers. *kōf, gar*) of central and eastern Afghanistan. *Yašt* 19.3 lists it as one of the ranges envisaged as spurs of the High Harā (see Alborz), which, as the mythical world-encircling range, is the source of the mountains. The divine Hōm is said in *Yasna* 10.11 to have been carried to the *Upāiri.saēna* range by birds (the Pahlavi version says “Powers” in the shape of birds). Thus already appears an association between the mountains and a bird motif. This is already implicit in their name, “Above the eagle[’s flight].” (Cf. similar Avestan compounds, *upairiazəma-*, “above-ground,” and *upairi.dahyu-*, “above the country.”) A parallel Sanskrit form occurs in the “*Upariśyena* heaven” of the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*. (See J. Wackernagel, “Altindische und Mittelindische Miszellen,” *BSOS* 8, 1935-37, p. 830; he corrects Bartholomae’s attribution, in *AirWb.*, col. 398, of the long vowel in *upāiri-* to *vṛddhi*.) The archaic character of the name is indicated by the apparently “realistic” sense of *saēna* as an actual bird, which can not mount to a heroic height such as might be appropriate to the *sēnmurw* (q.v.) and other mythical birds of Zoroastrian tradition. (*Saēna*/OInd. *śyena* will be discussed under *sēnmurw*. For literature, see M. Mayrhofer, *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen* III/22, Wiesbaden, 1970, p. 385. See also *Mēnōg ī xrad* 62.37-39; *Bundahišn* 24.24ff./p. 154 on the mythical birds).

The *Bundahišn* repeats the information of *Yt.* 19.3 (9.3/p. 76.14) and adds further particulars. The *Abarsēn* are the mountains of greatest value next to



the Harzburg; from them originate the Harī Rōd, Hilmand, Marw Rōd (the modern Morġāb), and Baxl Rōd (the modern Balkāb; 11.A.11-12, 16-17/pp. 87.11-88.3). The mountains are even glossed as “Kōh ī Bāmyān;” thus the Kūh-e Bābā is explicitly included in the chain, but clearly forms only a part of the whole Abarsēn (cf. note in Avesta [Darmesteter] I, p. 102). The *Bundahišn* ms. TD₂ is to be emended where it states that the base of the chain is in Sagistān and the head in Xūzistān (17.A.1/p. 122.10-12, thus identifying the Abarsēn with the southern Zagros). *Zātspram* 3.22, more correctly, places its head “at the border of Čīnistān.” The same passage gives a popular etymology of Abarsēn as *abar-sahm*, “frightful.” Whether or not the concept of Abarsēn is here intended to include the Pamirs generally, this epithet is suitable; the rigors of the Hindu Kush (“Snowy Mountains”) for the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims may be recalled (see below).

The early Old Iranian toponymy of Afghanistan apparently contrasted the region of *Uparisaina with that of *Para-uparisaina (“in front,” i. e. to the south of *Uparisaina). The two regions may have been delimited by the Ġorband and Panjšīr valleys, so that *Para-uparisaina would especially designate the area of Parwān, Kabul, and Laġmān. The latter region was regarded as an extension of India, not only in classical geography (Strabo 15.1.11) but by the Achaemenids. The Akkadian and Elamite versions of Darius I’s Bīstūn (Behistun) inscription cite the name of the northwest Indian province not as Gandhāra but as Akkadian Pa-ar-ú-pa-ra-e-sa-an-na (sec. 6; F. H. Weissbach, *Die Keilschriften der Achämeniden*, Leipzig, 1911, pp. 12-13). This name *Para-uparisaina was transmitted in Greek as, ultimately, Paropámisos. (For the process of distortion of the word in Greek, see J. Markwart, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte von Eran* II, Leipzig, 1905, pp. 75-76; summary in I. Gerchevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge, 1959, p. 174). Apparently already in Achaemenid times the name Paropamisus tended to include the Hindu Kush mountains as well. The historians of Alexander’s campaign follow this usage, terming the mountains themselves Paropamisus. The combined area of *Uparisaina and *Para-uparisaina, as distinct from the mountain range alone, could be referred to as the country of the Paropamisadae (as in Ptolemy 6.18; cf. Strabo 15.2.9). When Alexander marched north from the Kabul valley to Bactria, he probably traversed the Paropamisus (which the Macedonians nicknamed the “Caucasus;” see Arrian *Indica* 2.3, 5.10) by the Kāwāk pass. In crossing the pass a mountain was pointed out to him as containing the cave of Prometheus and the eyrie of the eagle which tormented him (Arrian *Anabasis* 5.3.1-4, Quintus Curtius 7.3.22,



Diodorus Siculus 17.83.1). The eagle theme occurs again in Alexander's journey south through Swat; reaching the Indus, he came to a rock called *áornos* ("Avernus," i.e., "birdless;" see Arrian *Anabasis* 4.28; and M. A. Stein, *On Alexander's Track to the Indus*, London, 1929, pp. 120-48).

The name Abarsēn for the Hindu Kush (or a part of it) apparently persisted through the Sasanian period. In A.D. 644 the Chinese pilgrim Hūan Tsang returned north, proceeding up the Panjšīr valley from the Kapiśa country. He made a difficult crossing to the Andarāb valley, necessarily by the Kāwāk pass. He gives the name of the pass as P'o-lo-si-na, *Parasena/*Varasena, a sanskritized form of Abarsēn (Markwart, *Untersuchungen*, pp. 74-75, and his *Ērānšahr*, p. 286). The bird motif reappears; he remarks that birds could not fly over the top of the pass but had to walk (S. Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, London, 1884, pp. 285-86).

See also [HINDU KUSH](#), PAMIR, PAROPAMISUS.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See also W. Geiger in Geiger and Kuhn, *Grundriss* II, p. 393.