



ĀMŪ DARYĀ

ĀMŪ DARYĀ, Gk. Oxos, Lat. Oxus, Sasanian Mid. Pers. Wehrōd, Ar. Jayhūn (to the 7th/13th cent.), Chinese Kui-shui, Wu-hu, or Po-tsu, river about 2,500 km long, regarded in ancient times as the boundary between Iran and Tūrān. The modern name may be derived from Āmol, the town at which in antiquity the road from Khorasan to Transoxiana (Ar. Mā Warā' al-Nahr) crossed the river. The Āmū Daryā rises in a number of turbulent headwaters; the Panj, whose tributaries include the Vaḳšāb, the Pāmīr Daryā, the upper Morḡāb (Bārtang; Turk. Aq Su), and the Kūlāb Daryā, is considered by local inhabitants to be the source of the river. In the 9th/15th century the upper course of the river was thought to be the Vaḳšāb, though today it is considered to be the Morḡāb. The headwaters have been explored only since the 19th century, and the details provided secondhand by the 4th/10th-century Arab geographers do not accord with what is now known. Eṣṭakrī names six streams, of which only the Vaḳšāb is readily identifiable; others count the “river of Kondož” (Dergam, Aq Saray) among the headwaters. The last stream to join the river (on the right), 1,175 km from its mouth, is the Sorḳān (Daryā); several other rivers end in the desert before reaching the Āmū Daryā. Some medieval geographers give the river this name only beyond its juncture with the Kāfernehān (or “river of Qobādīān”) near Awḏaj/Ūḏaj (modern Ayvaḡ). Historical documents mention the medieval names of the districts in the valleys of the upper Āmū Daryā and its headwaters: Šoḡnān, Ḳottal(ān), Vāšjerd, Qobādīān, Čaḡānīān, Ṭoḳarestān (on the left bank, near Balḳ), and Badakšān. North of Balḳ the river enters the desert and flows on without tributaries, losing much water through evaporation: The Qara Qum lies on the left bank, to the southwest; and the



Qızıl Qum stretches to the northeast, from the right bank. The Āmū Daryā flows in a northwesterly direction towards Lake Aral; the river-mouth widens near modern Nukus. The khanates of Khiva and Bukhara lay along the lower course of the river to the 19th and early 20th centuries; in the south, the Āmū Daryā has marked the Russo-Afghan frontier since the treaties of 1886-93, from Basaga in the west 1,100 km to Qaḷ'a-ye Panj in the east. The lower course of the river serves as a boundary between the Turkmen and Uzbek republics of the U.S.S.R.

The middle reaches of the Āmū Daryā are 3,570-5,700 m in width and 1.5-8 m in depth, and are often in spate from April or May to July. The land along its banks, particularly the left bank, was periodically cultivated in the medieval period. The mountainous upper reaches sometimes freeze over in winter, as do the delta and the lower course from the end of December to the end of March, to a depth of 30 cm on average.

Beyond the town of Kālef, the Āmū Daryā has changed its course over the centuries. According to Ptolemy (in the 2nd century A.D.) and Bīrūnī, the river flowed in a westerly direction from modern Kark/Kerki, not northwesterly as at present, and evaporated in the Qara Qum desert. An ancient river bed can be detected, and still today the Āmū Daryā occasionally betrays a tendency to break its banks here and spill out to the left. But geological research has shown that the 350 m narrows near modern Pitnyak are so old that the river cannot possibly have shifted its course here since the beginning of the historical period. Medieval irrigation canals, beginning just beyond the narrows, were built in the K̄vārazm region; canals still branch out in various directions, as far as the Soltan Uiz (Oways) Dag, and the rich agriculture of the region depends upon them. Here, too, are Jānbas Qaḷ'a, Ṭoprak Qaḷ'a, and the other pre-Islamic fortresses that have been excavated by S. P. Tolstov since 1936.

In the 19th century it was suggested that the Āmū Daryā had flowed through the Özboy into the Caspian Sea at the time of the Mongol conquest of Gorgānj (later Orgeņč) in 618/1221, and had turned back towards Lake Aral only about 1575. W. Barthold tried to substantiate this thesis with historical evidence, but it has been disproved in this century by Soviet geologists, who have shown that the Özboy could never have been the lower reach of the Āmū Daryā, if only because of their relative size. Other evidence, including traces of the agricultural exploitation of the Özboy bed in the medieval period, also contradicts Barthold's view. But still today the Āmū Daryā, particularly when in spate, sometimes extends a lateral channel (*daryalıq*) into the depression of



Sarı Qamış. The historical proofs adduced, themselves subject to varying interpretation, are not sufficient to outweigh the geological facts, yet certain zoological parallels between the Āmū Daryā and the Özboy point to a connection between the two river systems, so the “Özboy problem” is still argued. Arab geographers refer to changes in the lower courses of the river near Lake Aral; because of the silting up of river beds, the medieval Khwarazmian capital, Kāt, was deserted, and the town of Gorgānĵ was abandoned several times. These changes explain the rise of Khiva as the regional capital and the shifting dimensions of the delta island (Turk. Aral) that gives the lake its name.

In the 18th century, in 1873, and in the mid-20th century, the Russians had planned to use the water of the Āmū Daryā to irrigate distant regions, but nothing was done. Nevertheless, even the agricultural use of the Āmū Daryā waters that has been made has lowered the level of Lake Aral substantially.

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