



ASII

ASII (or ASIANI), an ancient nomadic people of Central Asia, who about 130 B.C. put an end to Greek rule in Bactria.

According to Strabo, *Geography* 11.8.2 (if the ms. tradition is trustworthy), Bactria (Bactrianē) was taken away from the Greeks by four nomadic peoples who came from the country north of the Jaxartes. They were the Asioi, Pasianoï, Tochario, and Sakarauioi. Pompeius Trogus (*Prologue* 41 of the *Historiae Philippicae*) ascribes the conquest of Bactria to two peoples only, the Saraucæ and Asiani; subsequently, however, the Tochari are mentioned. Trogus also refers to an excursus on *reges Tocharorum Asiani interitusque Saraucarum* (*Prologue* 42). Either he was relating an occurrence (“how the Asiani became the kings of the Tochari, and how the Saraucæ perished”), or, more likely, he meant that the Asiani were the dynasty or the ruling class of the Tochari at the time of the conquest. The identity of Strabo’s Asioi and Trogus’ Asiani is obvious: The two terms represent a basic substantive and an Iranian adjectival form in *-āna- respectively. Neither the Asiani nor the Saraucæ are mentioned in Justin’s epitomes of Trogus’ *Historiae*. According to Justine (*Epitome* 42), the Parthian king Phraates II (138/7-127 B.C.) called in Scythian troops in his war against the Seleucid Antiochus VII about 130 B.C.; having defeated Antiochus, the Scythians ravaged Parthia and killed Phraates (127). There is an evident connection between these occurrences and the fall of Greek Bactria, since both cases illustrate the increasing pressure of the Saka (Scythian) nomads from beyond the Jaxartes. Both Strabo and Trogus are supposed to have drawn on the *Parthica* of [Apollodorus of Artemita](#) (1st



century B.C.), who knew Bactria and the Saka of Central Asia from personal experience.

The scanty information of the classical historians is elucidated by Chinese sources. Between about 174 and 160 B.C. the Hsiung-nu (Huns?) of northern China defeated the tribal horde of the Yüeh-chih (q.v.) and drove them from their abodes in the Kansu province of northwest China. The greater part of the horde emigrated westward to Sogdiana and Bactria, where they overthrew Greek rule (ca. 130 B.C.). Although the reconciliation of the Chinese and the Western sources causes difficulties, the identity of the Yüeh-chih with the Tochari, Asii, and the rest is established.

A part of the Asii moved eventually farther westward into the Ponto-Caspian steppes, where they constituted a subgroup of, or amalgamated with, the Alans (first mentioned in Classical sources in the 1st century A.D.). In Ptolemy (*Geography* 5.9.16) Asaioi are mentioned among the Sarmatian tribes on the Don; in the same source (6.14.10) the Asiōtai are said to live north of the Caspian Sea (the latter form of the name no doubt renders a Scythian plural in *-t(a)). Moreover, the Iastai of the same area (6.14.3, 11) possibly belong here too (a prothetic j- has parallels in Ossetic). In Pliny, *Natural History* 6.50 the enigmatic Astacae (Astocae) are mentioned among well-known peoples living beyond the Jaxartes. If the emendation to Asiotae, suggested by Josephus Barbarus (15th century), is accepted, the presence of As tribes east of the Caspian Sea in the early Christian era is corroborated by our sources.

In medieval Western sources the names As and Alani are frequently used as synonyms. Of the 13th century travelers William of Rubrouck writes *Alani sive Aas* and Johannes de Plano Carpini *Alanisive Assi*. Josephus Barbarus says that the Alans call themselves As. This tallies with Old Russian usage where *yasi* (plural, with a Slavonic prothetic y-) is the common name of the Alans. In Hungarian *jász*, borrowed from the Slavonic, is used of the Alans who settled in Hungary in the 13th century. In Georgian the Alans, and later their descendants, the Ossetes, are referred to as Os (Old Georgian Ovs, with an unexplained -v-), and their country as O(v)seti, on which modern Russian Osetiya is based. On the other hand, in his Book of ceremonies (*De Ceremoniis* 2.48) the Greek emperor Constantine Porphyrogennitus (10th century) distinguishes between Azia, one of the small principalities of the north Caucasus, ruled by local chieftains (*arkhontes*), and Alania, a kingdom ruled by a monarch (*exousiastēs*). By means of Greek and Latin sources alone the exact delimitation of the two terms is hardly possible. In modern Ossetic As̄i (As(s)i)



refers to the Turkic Balkars, who inhabit a territory which until comparatively recent times was in Ossetic possession.

Ossetic Asi/Asi points to an earlier form *Asya-; an ultimate connection with OIr. *āsu-* “rapid” is possible, but hardly provable. The identification of Asii etc. with Scytho-Sarmatian ethnic names like Arsi, Aorsi, Yazyges lacks linguistic as well as historical evidence.

See also [Alans](#); [Albania](#); [Arrān](#); and [Ossetes](#).

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