



AVESTAN GEOGRAPHY

AVESTAN GEOGRAPHY. It is impossible to attribute a precise geographical location to the language of the Avesta. The Avestan texts, however, provide some useful pointers, while their comparison with Old Persian inscriptions offer further evidence: Geographical references in the Avesta are limited to the regions on the eastern Iranian plateau and on the Indo-Iranian border. Moreover, the Old Persian inscriptions are written in a language different from that of the Avesta. With the exception of an important study by P. Tedesco (“Dialektologie der westiranischen Turfantexte,” *Le Monde Oriental* 15, 1921, pp. 184ff.), who advances the theory of an “Avestan homeland” in northwestern Iran, Iranian scholars of the twentieth century have looked increasingly to eastern Iran for the origins of the Avestan language (e.g., G. Morgenstierne, *Report on a Linguistic Mission to Afghanistan*, Oslo, 1926, pp. 29f.; W. B. Henning, *Zoroaster, Politician or Witch-doctor?*, London, 1951, pp. 44f.; K. Hoffmann, “Altiranisch,” in *HO I*, 4: *Iranistik* 1, *Linguistik*, Leiden and Cologne, 1958, p. 6); and today there is general agreement that the area in question was in eastern Iran—a fact that emerges clearly from every passage in the Avesta that sheds any light on its historical and geographical background. Many scholars have maintained (see, for example, D. Monchi-Zadeh, *Topographisch-historische Studien zum iranischen Nationalepos*, Wiesbaden, 1975, p. 126) that the Avesta mentions a place in the so-called Raghian Media, Raya (*Vd.* 1.15; *Y.* 19.18), but there is no foundation (G. Gnoli, *Zoroaster’s Time and Homeland*, Naples, 1980, pp. 59ff.) to the theory that the first chapter of *Vidēvdād* (*Vendīdād*) conserves the names of some western lands in boustrophedonic order (H. S. Nyberg, *Die Religionen des alten Iran*,



German tr. H. H. Schaeder, Leipzig, 1938, pp. 324ff.). Moreover, the question of the identification of Avestan Rāya with the Raga in the inscription of Darius I at Bīsotūn (DB 2.71-72; 3.2-3), with the Rhāgai of the Greeks, the al-Rayy of the Arabs, and finally with Ray (J. Markwart, *A Catalogue of the Provincial Capitals of Ērānshahr*, ed. G. Messina, Rome, 1931, pp. 112-14) has by no means been settled; in fact, there is considerable evidence that this is not the case (see below).

The first stumbling-block in the study of Avestan geography is the mixture of mythical and historical elements characterizing all the data we have at our disposal. Actually the tendency has often been to interpret as mythical a good deal of data that probably have historical significance. When tackling Avestan geography, the practice has been to assume that historical elements were superimposed on a body of myths. It was common among the Indo-Iranians to identify concepts or features of traditional cosmography—mountains, lakes, rivers, etc.—with their concrete historical and geographical situation as they migrated and settled in various places.

There are many shared elements of undoubted significance in Indo-Iranian cosmography. Comparison of the various ancient Indian cosmographic systems (cf. W. Kirfel, *Die Kosmographie der Inder nach den Quellen dargestellt*, Bonn and Leipzig, 1920, pp. 1ff., 178ff., 208ff.) and the Avesta or, indeed, the whole body of Zoroastrian writings, including the Pahlavi literature of the ninth century, reveals a number of common features: the concept of Mount Harā, or Haraitī, *barəz/bərəz* or *bərəz-zaitī* “high” (cf. W. Eilers, *Geographische Namengebung in und um Iran*, Munich, 1982, p. 42), and that of Mount Meru, or Sumeru, in Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jainist cosmography; the idea of the seven regions of the earth, the Iranian *karšvar-* (Pahlavi *kešwar*) and the Indian *dvīpa*; the idea of a central region, Xʷaniraθa (Pahlavi Xwanirah) and Jambūdvīpa; the idea of the “Tree of All Seeds” in the Vourukaša sea, south of the Peak of Harā and the *Jambū* tree, south of Mount Meru (for the connection of Iranian cosmography with the Indo-Iranian background, cf. M. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 130ff.). These elements, common to the Iranian and Indo-Aryan vision of the earth, are certainly to be considered essentially mythical when related to the historical periods during which these groups were living on one side or the other of the Indus. Yet they do not seem to be totally devoid of any geographical reference if the so-called nordic cycle of Indo-Iranian mythology is anything to go by. According to some Soviet scholars, the ancestors of the Avestan Iranians and the Vedic Indians, before migrating to



the lands they eventually settled in, had lived side by side with Finno-Ugric populations. This would account for their “nordic representations,” the sacred mountains in the north, the Nordic Ocean and the “polar” lands (G. M. Bongard-Levin and E. A. Grantovskij, *De la Scythie à l’Inde. Énigmes de l’histoire des anciens Aryens*, French tr. Ph. Gignoux, Paris, 1981, p. 112).

As far as these points are concerned, we must at any rate bear in mind that the great mountain ranges running from the Hindu Kush to the Pamir and the Himalayas could, with their arctic temperatures, have inspired the various successive identifications of nordic, polar elements with the ancient cosmology and traditional geography of the Aryans (G. Gnoli, *De Zoroastre à Mani. Quatre leçons au Collège de France*, Paris, 1985, p. 17). This could be the explanation of the story of the severe climate of Airyana Vaējah (see below) rather than that deriving from theories about nordic origins and reminiscences favored by Bongard-Levin and Grantovskij (op. cit., p. 56).

There are not many passages in the Avesta that refer to historical geography, but they raise a great many problems. In the first place, they are of various kinds because, together with specifically “geographical” texts like the first chapter of the *Vidēvdād*, there are short passages mentioning real geographical features included in all sorts of contexts. The places where the hero offers sacrifices to the gods, a river-bank, for example, or the peak of a mountain visited by the god Mithra, provide occasions for fleeting references, at times containing interesting geographical information. In other cases names of places or areas are associated with names of peoples or characters famous in other periods. This information is found not only in Avestan texts, especially in the *Yašts*, but also in Pahlavi literature, whether of direct Avestan derivation, like the commentaries on the Avesta, or, at least from the textual point of view, independent of it. Examples of the latter category are to be found in some chapters of the *Bundahišn* (IX-XII) and some brief works like the *Abdīh ud sahīgīh ī Sagistān* (The wonders and magnificence of Sīstān) (recently published by B. Utas, “The Pahlavi Treatise Avdēh u sahīkēh ī Sakistān,” *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 28, 1983, pp. 259-67). These are of great use in the reconstruction of Avestan geography.

As already pointed out, the main Avestan text of geographical interest is the first chapter of the *Vidēvdād*. This consists of a list of sixteen districts (*asah-* and *šōiθra-*) created by Ahura Mazdā and threatened by a corresponding number of counter-creations that Anra Mainyu set up against them (*paityāra-*). The structure of this chapter is very simple: Twenty paragraphs, consisting of



an introduction, fourteen paragraphs dedicated to one district each, four dedicated to two districts (two paragraphs for each of the two districts), and a final paragraph stating that there existed still more districts worthy of praise. It is likely that paragraphs 2 and 14, dealing with Airyana Vaējah and Haētumant are interpolations or later additions, as they interrupt the flow of the whole text which gives one single paragraph to each district. In fact, paragraphs 2 and 13 deal with Airyana Vaējah and Haētumant respectively. The period the text belongs to is uncertain: While the contents and lack of any reference to western Iran suggest that it should date back to the pre-Achaemenian period, the form in which it survives would seem to place it in the Parthian period.

Set right at the beginning of a whole *nask* of the Avesta, dedicated to prescriptions for purification and the rules for the atonement of sins, the first chapter of the *Vidēvdād* probably has the same purpose as the lists of the sixteen Great Districts, *Ṣoḍaśa mahājanapada*, in the Buddhist and Jainist sources and the epic poetry of India in the sixth century B.C., which were subject to the Aryan element. It seems likely that this geographical part of the Avesta was intended to show the extent of the territory that had been acquired in a period that can not be well defined but that must at any rate have been between Zoroaster's reforms and the beginning of the Achaemenian empire. The likely dating is therefore between the ninth and seventh centuries B.C., starting from the period of the domination of the Aryan followers of Ahura Mazdā (Gnoli, *De Zoroastre à Mani*, pp. 24ff.). In any case, there is considerable disagreement among the interpretations that have been attempted: H. S. Nyberg (op. cit., p. 326) read into it the stages of Zoroaster's mission; S. Wikander (*Vayu I*, Lund, 1942, pp. 202ff.) those of the cult of Vayu or of Vayu/Anāhitā; A. Christensen (*Le premier chapitre du Vendidad et l'histoire primitive des tribus iraniennes*, Copenhagen, 1943, pp. 78ff.) the progressive expansion of the Aryan tribes; E. Herzfeld (*Zoroaster and His World*, Princeton, 1947, pp. 744ff.) a list of the provinces of the Parthian kingdom; M. Molé ("La structure du premier chapitre du Videvdat," *JA* 229, 1951, pp. 283-98) a geographical "structure" that conformed to Dumézil's theory of a tripartite ideology; F. Altheim (*Geschichte der Hunnen IV*, Berlin, 1975, 2nd ed., pp. 166-82) a sign of the Zoroastrian renaissance that was to take shape around the middle of the seventh century A.D.

The first of the sixteen districts, Airyana Vaējah, presents a particular problem which is dealt with below. The other fifteen districts are, in order: 2. Gava =



Sogdiana; 3. Mōuru = Margiana; 4. Bāxδī = Bactria; 5. Nisāya = a district between Margiana and Bactria, perhaps Maimana (W. Geiger, *Ostiranische Kultur im Altertum*, Erlangen, 1982, p. 31 n. 1); 6. Harōiva = Areia, Herat; 7. Vaēkərəta = Gandhāra (S. Levi, “Le catalogue géographique des Yakṣa dans la Mahāmāyūrī,” *JA* 5, 1915, pp. 67ff.; Christensen, op. cit., p. 28; W. B. Henning, “Two Manichaean Magical Texts,” *BSOAS* 12, 1947, pp. 52f.); 8. Urvā = probably the Ġaznī region (Christensen, op. cit., pp. 33f.; Gnoli, *Zoroaster’s Time and Homeland*, pp. 26-39; 9. Xnənta = a region defined as *vəhrkānō.šayana*– “the dwelling place of the Vəhrkāna,” where Marquart placed the Barkānioi of Ctesias (Photius, *Bibliotheca*, Cod. 72, 36b-37a), an ethnicon analogous with that of Old Persian Varkāna, the inhabitants of Hyrcania, the present Gorgān (J. Marquart, *Die Assyriaka des Ktesias*, Göttingen, 1892, p. 616; idem, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte von Eran I*, Göttingen, 1896, p. 514, II, Göttingen, 1905, p. 143 n. 1; idem, *Ērānšahr nach der Geographie des Ps. Moses Xorenac’i*, Berlin, 1901, p. 72 n. 3; Gnoli, *Zoroaster’s Time and Homeland*, pp. 39, 235, 236, 239; see Eilers, op. cit., p. 19 on the name Gorgān) or, less probably, Hyrcania; 10. Haraxvaitī = Arachosia; 11. Haētumant = the region of Helmand roughly corresponding to the Achaemenian Drangiana (Zranka) (G. Gnoli, *Ricerche storiche sul Sīstān antico*, Rome, 1967, p. 78 and n. 3); 12. Rāya = a district north of Haraxvaitī and Haētumant in the direction of the district of Čaxra (Gnoli, *ibid.*, pp. 65-68, 77-78; idem, *Zoroaster’s Time and Homeland*, pp. 23-26, 64-66), to be distinguished, given its position in the list (I. Gershevitch, “Zoroaster’s Own Contribution,” *JNES* 23, 1964, pp. 36f.) from Median *Ragā* (see above) and probably also from *Rāya zaraθuštri*– of Y. 19.18 (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 89 and cf. pp. 40, 42, 66, 254, 279; G. Gnoli, “Ragha la zoroastriana,” in *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*, Leiden, 1985, I, pp. 226ff.); 13. Čaxra = Čarx between Ġaznī and Kabul, in the valley of Lōgar (Gnoli, *Ricerche storiche sul Sīstān antico*, pp. 72-74; idem, *Zoroaster’s Time and Homeland*, pp. 42-44; D. Monchi-Zadeh, op. cit., pp. 126-27), not Māzandarān, as Christensen thought (op. cit., pp. 47-48); 14. Varəna = Bunēr (S. Levi, art. cit., p. 38; Henning, art. cit., pp. 52f.; but cf. also Monchi-Zadeh, op. cit., pp. 127-30), the Varṇu of the Mahāmāyūrī, the ‘Aornos of Alexander the Great, the homeland of Ōraētaona/Frēdōn/Afrīdūn (Gnoli, *Zoroaster’s Time and Homeland*, pp. 47-50); 15. Hapta Həndu = Sapta Sindhavaḥ in Vedic geography, the northeastern region of Panjab (Monchi-Zadeh, op. cit., p. 130; but cf. also H. Humbach, “Al-Bīrunī und die sieben Strome [sic] des Avesta,” *Bulletin of the Iranian Culture Foundation* I, 2, 1973, pp. 47-52); 16. Raṇhā = Rasā in Vedic geography, at times mentioned together with Kubhā (Kabul) and Krumu (Kurram), as in *RV*. 5.53.9 (Gnoli, *Ricerche storiche sul Sīstān antico*, pp. 76f.;



idem, *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland*, pp. 50-53; and cf. also H. Lommel, "Rasā," *ZII* 4, 1926, pp. 194-206), a river situated in a mountainous area (Monchi-Zadeh, op. cit., p. 130, who associates it with the Pamir), probably connected with the Indus, not with the Jaxartes (Geiger, op. cit., pp. 34ff.; Nyberg, op. cit., p. 323) or with the Volga (J. Markwart, *Wehrot und Arang*, ed. H. H. Schaeder, Leiden, 1938, pp. 133ff.).

There is further geographical interest to be found in another passage from the Avesta *Yt.* 10.13-14, where the whole region inhabited by the Aryans (*airyō.šayana-*) is described. The description begins with Mount Harā, the peak of which is reached by Mithra as he precedes the immortal sun: The entire Aryan homeland, according to this passage, consisted of the districts of Iškata and Peruta, Margiana and Areia, Gava, Sogdiana, and Chorasmia. The names of Sogdiana, Suxδəm, and Chorasmia, Xvāirizəm, appear here, as E. Benveniste has demonstrated ("L'Ērān-vēž et l'origine légendaire des iraniens," *BSOAS* 7, 1933-35, pp. 269f.), in Medo-Iranian forms; this suggests that they were later additions (G. Gnoli, "Airyō.šayana," *RSO* 41, 1966, p. 68; idem, *De Zoroastre à Mani*, p. 21). The geographical extension of *Mihr Yašt* (the subject of an analytical study by Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge, 1959, pp. 174ff.), covered the eastern part of the Iranian territory, the central part being occupied by the regions of the Hindu Kush, represented by Mount Harā, Iškata (Kūh-e Bābā?), Paruta (Ġūr?), the district of Herodotus's Aparūtai (3.91) or Ptolemy's Paroûtai or Párautoi (6.17.3).

Like the *Mihr Yašt*, the *Farvardīn Yašt* also contains some passages of use in the reconstruction of Avestan geography, in particular *Yt.* 13.125 and *Yt.* 13.127, where some characters are mentioned because of their venerable *fravaši*. For each of these the birthplace is given: Mužā, Raoždyā, Tanyā, Aṇhvī, Apaxšīrā. Only the first of these place-names can perhaps be identified because Mužā recalls the Sanskrit Mūjavant, which should be in a region between the Hindu Kush and the Pamir (W. Eilers, "Der Name Demawend," *Archiv Orientalní* 22, 1954, pp. 277, 324 n. 74; T. Burrow, "The Proto-Indoaryans," *JRAS*, 1973, p. 138 n. 31; Gnoli, *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland*, pp. 59f.; M. Witzel, "Early Eastern Iran and the Atharvaveda," *Persica* 9, 1980, p. 87 and n. 16). But it should be borne in mind that the character related to the land of Apaxšīrā, Paršaṭ.gav, may be connected with a Sīstāni tradition (Gnoli, *Ricerche storiche sul Sīstān antico*, p. 80 and n. 4) and that the passage in *Yt.* 13.125 is dedicated to the *fravaši* of members of the family of Saēna, the son of Ahūm.stūṭ, who also had connections with Sīstān (Gnoli, *Zoroaster's*



Time and Homeland, pp. 138f.).

There is no justification for the supposition expressed by M. Boyce (op. cit., I, p. 250) that the districts in Yt. 13.125 and 127 belonged to regions “in the remote northeast, at some distant time in the prehistory of that area”: It seems more than likely that they belonged to the same geographical area as the great *Yašts* and the first chapter of *Vidēvdād*.

The *Zamyād Yašt*, dedicated to X^varənah, is of very great importance for Avestan geography as it provides a surprisingly well-detailed description of the hydrography of the Helmand region, in particular of Hāmūn-e Helmand. In Yt. 19.66-77 nine rivers are mentioned: X^vāstrā, Hvaspā, Fradaθā, X^varənahvaitī, Uštavaitī, Urvaδā, Ǝrəzī, Zurənumaitī, and Haētumant; six of these are known from the *Tārīk-e Sīstān* (ed. M. Bahār, Tehran, 1935, pp. 15-16). Other features of Sīstāni geography recur in the same *yašt*, like the Kāsaoya lake (Pahlavi Kayānsih) or Mount Uši.δām (Kūh-e K^vāja), both closely bound up with Zoroastrian eschatology, so that with the help of comparisons with Pahlavi and classical sources, mainly Pliny and Ptolemy (cf. A. Stein, “Afghanistan in Avestic Geography,” *Indian Antiquary* 15, 1886, pp. 21-23; Markwart, *Wehrot und Arang*, pp. 19ff.; E. Herzfeld, “Zarathustra. Teil V. Awestische Topographie,” *AMI* 2, 1930, pp. 92f.), we can conclude that the *Zamyād Yašt* describes Sīstān with great care and attention. In Avestan geography no other region has received such treatment. There is an echo of Sīstān’s importance in Avestan geography in the brief Pahlavi treatise *Abdīh ud sadīgīh ī Sagistān*.

Yet another reference to Sīstān is to be found in another passage of the great *yašts*, Yt. 5.108, in which Kavi Vištāspa, prince and patron of Zoroaster, is represented in the act of making sacrifice to Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā near Frazdānu, the Frazdān of Pahlavi literature, that is, one of the wonders of Sīstān; it can probably be identified with Gowd-e Zera (A. V. W. Jackson, *Zoroastrian Studies*, New York, 1928, p. 283; Herzfeld, “Zarathustra, Teil V,” p. 91; idem, *Zoroaster and His World*, p. 762; Gnoli, *Ricerche storiche su Sīstān antico*, pp. 14ff.).

If we compare the first chapter of the *Vidēvdād* with the passages of geographical interest that we come across mainly in the great *yašts*, we can conclude that the geographical area of Avesta was dominated by the Hindu Kush range at the center, the western boundary being marked by the districts of Margiana, Areia, and Drangiana, the eastern one by the Indo-Iranian



frontier regions such as Gandhāra, Bunēr, the land of the “Seven Rivers.” Sogdiana and, possibly, Chorasmia (which, however, is at the extreme limits) mark the boundary to the north, Sīstān and Baluchistan to the south.

One of the old, thorny problems in studies on Avestan geography is represented by Airyana Vaējah (Pahlavi: Ērānwēz), “the area of the Aryans” and first of the sixteen districts in *Vd.* 1, the original name of which was *airyanəm vaējō vañhuyā dāityayā*, “the Aryan extension of Vañuhī Dāityā” (Benveniste, art. cit., pp. 267f.; against Christensen, op. cit., p. 74; Herzfeld, *Zoroaster and His World*, p. 698), where Vañuhī Dāityā “the good Dāityā” is the name of a river connected with the religious “law” (*dāta-*). The concept of Airyana Vaējah is not equivalent to that of *airyō.šayana-* in *Yt.* 10.13, or to the group of *airyā daiñhāvā* “the Aryan lands” which is recurrent in the *yašts*; this, in fact, refers to just one of the Aryan lands, as the first chapter of the *Vidēvdād* clearly shows. It does not designate “the traditional homeland” (Boyce, op. cit., I, p. 275) or “the ancient homeland” (R. N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*, Munich, 1984, p. 61) of the Iranians. These definitions perpetuate old interpretations of the Airyana Vaējah as “Urheimat des Awestavolkes” (Geiger, op. cit., p. 32), “Urland” of the Indo-Iranians (F. Spiegel, *Die arische Periode und ihre Zustände*, Leipzig, 1887, p. 123), “Wiege aller iranischen Arier” (J. von Prášek, *Geschichte der Meder und Perser bis zur makedonischen Eroberung* I, Gotha, 1906, p. 29), drawing from the texts more than the contents really warrant. Airyana Vaējah is only the homeland of Zaratuštra and of Zoroastrianism (Nyberg, op. cit., pp. 326f.; Henning, *Zoroaster*, p. 43). According to Zoroastrian tradition Ērānwēz is situated at the center of the world; on the shores of its river, Weh Dāitī (Av. Vañuhī Dāityā), there were created the *gāw ī ēw-dād* (Av. *gav aēvō.dāta*) “uniquely created bull” and Gayōmard (Av. *Gayō.marətan*) “mortal life,” the first man; there rises the Čagād ī Dāidīg, the “lawful Summit,” the Peak of Harā, in Avestan also called *hukairya* “of good activity”; the Činvat Bridge is there, and there too, Yima and Zoroaster became famous. Taken all together, these data show that Zoroastrianism superimposed the concept of Airyana Vaējah onto the traditional one of a center of the world where the Peak of Harā rises (see above). The fact that Airyana Vaējah is situated in a mountainous region explains its severe climate (*Vd.* 1.2.3) better than does its supposed location in Chorasmia (Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 155). This is not surprising if we consider the analogy between the Iranian concept of the peak of Harā with the Indian one of Mount Meru or Sumeru. The Manicheans identified Aryān-waižan with the region at the foot of Mount Sumeru that Wištāsp reigned over (W. B.



Henning, “The Book of the Giants,” *BSOAS* 11, 1943, pp. 68f.), and the Khotanese texts record the identification of Mount Sumeru in Buddhist mythology with the Peak of Harā (*ttaira haraysä*) in the Avestan tradition (H. W. Bailey, *Indo-Scythian Studies. Khotanese Texts* IV, Cambridge, 1961, p. 12; idem, *Dictionary of Khotan Saka*, Cambridge, 1979, p. 467). All this leads us to suppose that the concept of Airyana Vaējah was an invention of Zoroastrianism which gave a new guise to a traditional idea of Indo-Iranian cosmography (Gnoli, *Ricerche storiche sul Sīstān antico*, pp. 86ff.). At any rate, identifications of Airyana Vaējah with Chorasmia are quite unfounded (Markwart, loc. cit.; H. W. Bailey, “Iranian Studies I,” *BSOAS* 6, 1930-32, pp. 948-53; idem, “Iranian Studies IV,” *BSOAS* 7, 1933-35, pp. 764-68; Benveniste, art. cit.; Nyberg, op. cit., p. 326; Christensen, op. cit., pp. 66-76; Monchi-Zadeh, op. cit., pp. 115f.), whether this is understood to refer to K̲vārazm itself or to a “greater Chorasmia” (Henning, *Zoroaster*, pp. 42ff.; Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, pp. 14ff.). As for the river of Religious Law, it is not at all easy to identify (see H. Humbach, “About Gōpatšāh, His Country, and the Khwārezmian Hypothesis,” *Papers in Honour of Mary Boyce* I, p. 330): The most likely hypotheses seem to be those that identify it with the Oxus, or rather the Helmand, which at times appears to be in a curious “competition” with the Oxus (Markwart, *Wehrot und Arang*, pp. 122 n. 3, 159 note; Gnoli, *Ricerche storiche sul Sīstān antico*, pp. 13, 38, 87) in the Zoroastrian tradition.

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