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BALḴĀB

BALḴĀB (Bactros of the classical authors), the river of Balḵ (locally pronounced Balḵaw). This perennial river is a major feature of the geography of northern Afghanistan. The 4th/10th-century geographers Eṣṭaḵrī (p. 278) and Ebn Ḥawqal (p. 488, tr. Kramers, p. 433) call it the Dah-ās (ten-mills) river, because a total of ten mills were driven by its waters. The name Dah-ās was still in use in the 13th/19th century (J. P. Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, and Beloochistan*, London, 1857, repr. Westmead, 1971 and Karachi, 1976, p. 224), though apparently then given only to one of its delta branches. It is called the "river of Balḵ" by the author of *Ḥodūd al-ʿālam* (pp. 38, 43, tr. Minorsky, pp. 70, 73, 336), a name often applied to the Oxus (Jeyḥūn) by early Muslim geographers (e.g., Eṣṭaḵrī, pp. 6, 12, 143; Moqaddasī, pp. 19, 23). It passed by the towns Madr and Rebāṭ-e Karvān in the regions of Andarāb and Gūzgānān before it reached the plain of Balḵ where it passed by the Nowbahār Gate of the city, branched off into twelve irrigation canals, and finally reached Sīāhgerd on the road to Termeḏ in the north. Its water was all used for irrigation (Eṣṭaḵrī, p. 278; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 488; *Ḥodūd al-ʿālam*, p. 99, tr. Minorsky, p. 108).

The Balḵāb is 471 km long, and the area which it drains has been estimated at 19,250 km^2, for the most part mountainous country. Its course starts at the point, about 2,880 m above sea level, where the cascade-like outlets of the Band-e Amīr lakes in the Kūh-e Bābā converge. For this reason the upper course is called the Band-e Amīr River. The use of this name has also been extended to reaches further downstream (C. E. Yate, *Northern Afghanistan*,

Edinburgh, 1888, repr. Lahore, 1976, p. 255). Flowing initially in a southwestward direction, the Balḵāb pierces the ridges of the Kūh-e Bābā and its northern outliers (known as the Kūh-e Balḵāb) in a series of narrow defiles and sharp bends before finally taking a northward direction. After leaving the final gorge of Kūh-e Alborz the Balḵāb debouches onto the Bactrian piedmont. Here it has formed a huge alluvial fan of more than 2,000 km^2, on which it splits into divergent arms so as to form a real inland delta. Along its very twisty lower course of about 100 km, which runs at an oblique angle to the westernmost generatrix of the alluvial fan, successive distributaries branch off between Pol-e Emām Bokrī at the head of the fan, where six separate channels diverge, and a place called Seh Darak 12 km upstream from Āqča, where the Balḵāb splits into three arms and loses its distinct identity.

Any water left over at the end of each distributary is now lost when it reaches the sands of the Afghan Kara Kum, which separate the Bactrian piedmont from the valley of the Āmū Daryā (Oxus). On the other hand, traces of old branches running well beyond the present forward limit of the delta have recently been discovered by Soviet archeologists (A. V. Vinogradov, “Issledovaniya pamyatnikov kamennogo veka v severnom Afganistane,” in *Drevnyaya Baktriya* II, Moscow, 1979, pp. 7-62, esp. p. 14). Moreover, the distribution of the archeological sites from different period and the lie of the ancient great wall built to protect the Balḵāb oasis attest to a crucial phase of delta retreat sometime between the Achaemenid and the Kushan periods (I. T. Kruglikova and V. I. Sarianidi, “Pyat’ let raboty sovetsko-afganskoĭ arkheologicheskoĭ ekspeditsii,” ibid., I, 1976, pp. 3-20, see map p. 16). It is suggested that some undetermined natural factor (neotectonic movement, change of course following an exceptional flood?) may have caused this retreat, which is greatest in the center of the deltaic structure, reaching 10-12 km in the vicinity of Dalberjīn and Dašlī as against 4-5 km in that of Nečka and Altin Tepe to the east (V. I. Sarianidi, *Drevnie zemledel’tsy Afganistana*, Moscow, 1977, pp. 28-30). The delta has thus acquired its present bilobate front. Its moribund parts are mainly occupied by expanses of uncultivable salt-encrusted clay.

The Balḵāb throughout its course has a regime typical of snow-fed mountain rivers. High water occurs in May and June when the snow on the Kūh-e Bābā is melting. At Rebāṭ-e Bālā, where the river enters the lowland, its average discharge in that season is approximately 100 m^3 per second. A peak of 531 m^3 per second was recorded on 29 May 1977. The low water season normally

shows a somewhat greater drop in winter, when the snow lies on the ground, than in summer and autumn, when rain is rare. The lowest discharge recorded at Rebāṭ-e Bālā was 16.7 m^3 per second on 12 July 1971. The lakes in the upper part of the Balḵāb basin perform a remarkably effective regulatory function in moderating seasonal and annual fluctuations of the discharge, as Table 18 shows.

Up to the point where the river enters the Bactrian lowland, the discharge shows a constant increase. This is due to the fact that in the mountains it receives many tributaries and its valleys being narrow, little water is diverted for irrigation, except in the small plains of Nayak (Yakāwlang) on the upper course and Boynaqara (Šōlgara) lower down. Thanks to the resultant abundance of the available water, the Balḵāb's alluvial fan is the biggest oasis in central Bactria. It is usually called the Balḵ oasis though it stretches without interruption from Mazār-e Šarīf to Āqča. An appropriate name for it would be Balḵāb oasis.

The irrigation network is very old, the first communities of oasis cultivators having come into being in the Bronze Age (e.g., at Dašlī), and its development has been complex. Some of the canals are mere natural distributaries which were fixed and brought under control. Others are wholly man-made and fed by means of diversion dams such as the Band-e Sūḵta southwest of Balḵ. The *Ḥodūd al-ʿālam* (p. 99, tr. Minorsky, p. 108) gives the number of the principal irrigation canals in the 4th/10th century as twelve. Modern sources, while differing as to the names of the canals, generally agree in putting their number at eighteen, which accords with the name Haždah Nahr often given to the whole oasis area (A. Mukhtarov, *Pozdnesrednevekovyĭ Balkh*, Dushanbe, 1980, pp. 101ff.; L. W. Adamec, ed., *Gazetteer of Afghanistan* IV, 1979, pp. 249-64). In a recent but unreliable report, the total is given as only eleven (Asian Development Bank, *Technical Assistance to the Government of Afghanistan for the Balkh River Irrigation Project*, n.p., 1971).

In the 19th century, when the local rural depopulation was at its height, the volume of the unused water was great enough to generate extensive marshes around Āqča (C. E. Yate, op. cit., pp. 255, 267) and even in the heart of the oasis (F. E. Ross, ed., *Central Asia: Personal Narrative of General Josiah Harlan 1823-1841*, London, 1939, p. 26). Since then, cultivation in the oasis has been considerably expanded. Water losses, however, are still substantial as a result of seasonal fluctuations in the discharge of the Balḵāb. With a view to better management of the water, a contract with the Soviet government for

construction of a reservoir dam at Čašma-ye Šafā in the Kūh-e Alborz gorge was signed in 1355 Š./1976. The contract also provided for a hydroelectric generating station and remodeling of the irrigation network in the oasis. Preliminary studies were undertaken before the revolution of 1357 Š./1978 but, so far as is known, construction work has not yet been started.

Balḵāb is also the name of a district (*ʿalāqadārī*) in the province of Jawzjān. It covers 2,476 km^2 in the middle part of the basin of the river of the same name. The census of 1358 Š./1979 recorded its population as 27,900. Its administrative center is Tarḵō, also called Tarḵōj (altitude 1,750m).

Search terms:

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Given in the text. See also Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 230; idem, *Wehrot und Arang*, Leiden, 1938, pp. 3f.; Pauly-Wissowa, II/2, col. 2814; and the following hydrological reports: V. L. Shul'ts, *Reki Afganistana*, Moscow, 1968; Ministry of Water and Power, *Hydrological Yearbook 1964-1975, Part IV-9 to 13 (Murghab, Shirintagab, Sarepul, Balkh and Khulm River Basins*, Kabul, n.d.); idem, *Hydrological Yearbook 1976-1978, Part IV (North Flowing Rivers)*, Kabul, 1980.