



DAHAE

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i. The name.

ii. The people.

i. The Name

Already in 1912 the Old Persian ethnonym Daha- (Gk. *Dáoi*, *Dáai*; Lat. *Dahae*) had been connected by Sten Konow with Khotanese *daha-* “man, male,” an etymology that is all the more plausible as it is common throughout the world for nations to designate themselves with the words meaning “man” in their respective languages (for a few examples, see Bailey, 1958, pp. 109-10). The corresponding long-grade form **dāha-* is represented by New Persian *dāh* “servant,” Buddhist Sogdian *d’yh*, Christian Sogdian *d’y* “slave woman,” and apparently also Avestan **Dāha-* (or rather **Dāṅha-*), attested only as feminine *Dāhī-*, in *Yašt* 13.144, where it occurs, together with the *Airiia-*, *Tūiriia-*, *Sairima-* and *Sāinu-*, as the name of one of the tribes that followed the Zoroastrian religion. The fact that Old Persian *Daha-* and Avestan **Dāha-* seem to be related etymologically is not, however, necessarily proof that the two names referred to the same ethnic group; if the *Daha-* were indeed a Scythian tribe (see *ii*, below) it would be difficult to identify them with a group that is clearly excluded from the *Airiia-* (Aryans) in the Avesta. The ancient Indians



also knew of a people called *Dasa- (attested only in adjectival *dāsa-*), depicted in the Rigveda as enemies of the Ārya-. The same root is also apparent in Avestan *daḫiiu-*, Old Persian *dahyu-* (*dahayu-*) “province” (i.e., “(mass of) people”; cf. Skt. *dasyu-* “(hostile) people, demons”), and perhaps also Avestan *aži-* *dahāka-* “manlike serpent” (cf. Schwartz, 123-24).

See [AŽDAHĀ](#).

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(François De Blois)

ii. The People

Herodotus (1.125) referred to the Dáoi as one of the nomadic tribes of the Persians, together with the Mardians, Dropicans, and Sagartians. The name also occurs in the so-called “Daeva inscription” of the Achaemenid king Xerxes I (486-465/4 b.c.e.), where the Dahā are included in a list of thirty *dahyāva* (lands, provinces) that formed part of the Achaemenid empire (Kent, *Old Persian*, XPh 26, p. 151). Near the end of the list the Dahā are mentioned together with two clearly Scythian groups, the Sakā *haumavargā* and the Sakā *tigraxaudā*, among various lands and peoples along the periphery of the



empire. Furthermore, it is possible that delegates from the Dahā are depicted among the subject peoples in the reliefs in the Central Building and in the Throne Hall at Persepolis (Schmidt, 1953, pls. 118-20, 135-36). Four of the delegates (nos. 17/W9, 18/E9, 22/E11, 28/E14) on each relief are shown wearing almost identical costumes (including the cutaway coat), clearly connecting them with the Scythian groups from the far northeastern part of the empire (see [clothing](#) i, v). From the evidence of the provincial lists in various Achaemenid inscriptions, only the Sakā *haumavargā*, the Dahā, and the people from Sugda- and Uvārazmī- could be identified with these four delegates.

In various classical sources the Dahae are listed in the rosters of the Persian army that fought against Alexander the Great at [Gaugamela](#). Arrian (*Anabasis* 3.11.37) reported that the Dahae fought in the left wing, together with the Bactrians and the Arachosians. Curtius Rufus (4.12.5ff.) also placed the Bactrians and Dahae in the left wing. In addition, both authors noted that beyond the Persian ranks, at the extreme left, there were Bactrian and Scythian cavalry and scythe chariots (Arrian), or the Massagetae (Curtius Rufus). It is thus clear that the left wing of the Achaemenid army was formed by troops from the northeastern part of the empire, predominantly of Scythian descent, and that the Dahae were one of these groups.

According to his biographers, Alexander later also incorporated Dahae into his own cavalry (Arrian, *Anabasis* 5.12.2; cf. Curtius Rufus, 7.7.32). They were described as “horseriding” bowmen (cf. Appian, *Syriaca* 167) and were said to have lived in the wastes northeast of Bactria and east of Sogdiana. At least some of the Dahae must thus be placed along the eastern fringes of the Karakum desert, near ancient Margiana, a conclusion confirmed by information found in some other classical sources (e.g., Ptolemy, *Geography* 6.10.2; Tacitus, *Annales* 11.10). It is possible that the Dahae were thus responsible for nomadic invasions of Margiana and Areia some time around 300 b.c.e., in which the towns of Alexandria and Heracleia, the first located in Margiana, the latter apparently in Areia, were destroyed (cf. Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 6.47-48; 33; 6.67; Strabo 11.516).

The spread of the Dahae farther west, at least by the mid-3rd century b.c.e., is indicated in other sources, which refer to Dahae who settled in the lands north of ancient Hyrcania, along the southeastern shores of the Caspian Sea. This area was later known as Dahistān (Dehestān). In this connection Strabo



(11.508, 11.515) referred to the (S)párnoi (cf. Justin 41.1.10). He also mentioned two other Dahā tribes, namely the Xánthioi and the Píssouroi, who lived east as far as the lands north of ancient Areia (11.511). The (S)párnoi are of particular interest, as elsewhere Strabo reported that Arsaces, the founder of the Parthian empire, who lived around the middle of the 3rd century b.c.e., was the chief of this Dahā tribe (11.515). Strabo added that the (S)párnoi lived along the Ochus; this reference cannot be separated from another (11.509) to the Ochus as one of the rivers that crossed Hyrcania. All this information suggests that the (S)párnoi lived in or near what was later called Dahistān; at least one ancient tradition linked their presence in this area to the Scythian invasions of Parthia that led to the foundation of the Parthian empire. The ensuing history of the Dahistān steppes and their role as a cradle for future rulers on the Persian plateau (cf. the sequence of Turkmen dynasties in Persia since the Middle Ages) appear to support the hypothesis that these lands formed the basis for nomadic inroads into the plains along and between the Khorasan mountain chains.

When exactly the (S)párnoi or Dahae settled along the southern and southwestern fringes of the Karakum desert remains unclear; they may have moved there in the late 4th or early 3rd century b.c.e., when other Scythian tribes invaded Margiana and Areia (see above), though the Dahae may have settled in ancient Dahistān much earlier.

It could thus be concluded that the main group of the Dahae resided in the arid steppes of the Karakum, in lands inhabited in recent centuries mainly by Turkmen.

There is no need to assume, however, that the present harsh conditions already existed in the 1st millennium b.c.e.; archeological finds, for example, a fortress of the Parthian period at Igdy along the banks of the now dried-up Uzboi river (Koshelenko, 1985, pp. 211, 214, 216), suggest that the Karakum was far from completely deserted. The Dahae must have been one of those Scythian groups that dominated traffic between Hyrcania and Parthia to the south and ancient [Choresmia](#) to the north. Whether or not the Dáoi listed by Herodotus as one of the Persian tribes should be identified with the Dahae of the Karakum remains uncertain, but in the light of other evidence of northern infiltrations onto the Persian plateau and beyond during the early 1st



millennium b.c.e. (cf., e.g., the name of the Mardians), it cannot be excluded that Scythian groups, including the Dahae, were present in southwestern Persia at a fairly early date.

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