



GREECE XII. PERSIAN LOANWORDS AND NAMES IN GREEK

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The Greeks came into direct contact with speakers of Iranian languages when Cyrus II conquered the Lydian empire in 547 B.C.E., thus becoming the ruler of most of Asia Minor and its Greek population. However, the possibility of linguistic borrowings in prehistoric times cannot be ruled out: e.g., Gk. *tóxon* “bow” has been regarded as possibly borrowed from proto-Iranian by Émile Benveniste (1966, pp. 480-81). It was primarily the long series of conflicts between the Greeks and the Persians, stretching from Achaemenid to Sasanian times, that prompted Greek authors to deal with Persian topics, all the more so since Persia appeared to them as a distant and different world. Extensive records on pre-Islamic Persia are preserved in the Greek language, with Herodotus as the first author in surviving Greek literature whose work shows more than a superficial knowledge of Persia.

The literary sources dealing with Persian topics and thus often containing Persian loan-words and names are not limited to geographers like Strabo or historians like Herodotus (see Schmitt, 1967a; 1976 [1979]), Thucydides (see



Schmitt, 1983), Xenophon, and the biographers of Alexander (see Werba, 1982). Unfortunately many works concerned with the Achaemenid Empire and bearing the title *Persiká* by authors such as Ctesias (q.v.; see Schmitt, 1979a), Dinon (q.v.), or Heracleides of Cyme (q.v.) survive only in fragments. In this context one should also include later writers using sources no longer extant, as is the case in several of Plutarch's *Lives* (esp. that of Artaxerxes) or in encyclopaedic works like those of Athenaeus (see ATHENAIOS) and Pollux. A number of Iranian names and words are attested in Aeschylus's drama *The Persians* (see Schmitt, 1978b) and in comedies by Aristophanes (see Schmitt, 1984), who in the *Acharnians* has an alleged messenger speak a smattering of Persian. In addition to all that, epigraphic sources, too, chiefly those from Asia Minor, contain relevant onomastic (see Zwanziger, 1973) or lexical information.

Whether literary or epigraphic, Iranian words and names usually appear in Latin sources in their Greek form. That applies to proper names (particularly the many slave names of Oriental origin) as well as terms such as *gaunaca* "cloak," *gāza* "treasure," *oryza* "rice" or *satrapa*, *-pēs* "satrap." Likewise, we have to assume Iranian mediation (sometimes actually ascertainable) in the case of Indian words and names such as that of the Indus river (*Indós*, reflecting OIr. *Hindu-* from OInd. *Síndhu-*).

Iranian forms came to the Greeks mainly in two ways: First, overland by the famous Royal Road (*hē hodòs hē basilēíē*) from Susa to Sardis (as described by Herodotus 5. 52 f.); second, and the more common one, partly by sea (i.e., along the coast from Syria to the Aegean), avoiding the arduous crossing of the mountainous terrain of Asia Minor. The outcome of using the latter route was that many Iranian words and names become known to the Greeks indirectly, through the (oral) mediation of speakers of indigenous languages (see Mancini, 1991). In view of the sea route, several scholars have thought of a special influence of the Lycian language (e.g., Jacobsohn, 1927, p. 260, n. 3, etc.). Occasionally, we also find evidence of the presence of Persians in Greece. These include Persians by birth, travelers and visitors as well as craftsmen and mercenaries, but the majority were slaves, as we can establish from persons bearing Iranian names as attested for Rhodes, Athens and Delphi (see Baslez, 1985).

It should be borne in mind that when a word was called "Persian" or "Median" (used synonymously) it need not necessarily mean that it was Persian in origin. It might have simply implied that it came from some place (and some



language) within the Persian empire. In a similar manner the first attestation of a foreign word is only a kind of *terminus ante quem* and does not convey the precise date of the borrowing.

The Iranian linguistic material attested in Greek sources contains: 1) a very large number of proper names (personal names, ethnonyms, and geographical names of different kinds); 2) genuine loan-words which became more or less established in Greek; 3) so-called “glossai,” which retained their foreign identity and flavor; 4) loan translations such as the military title *hekatóntarchos* “centurion,” a calque on the Iranian model (even if known to us only indirectly from Elamite and other sources) by means of the Greek language (as the above form from OPers. **θata-pati-* “commander of hundred [men]”). Modern research from the Iranian point of view started with Pott (1859; on personal names) and de Lagarde (1866, pp. 147-242) whose study of Persian words attested in classical authors, though somewhat dated and in dire need of revision, still remains the most comprehensive study available.

The particular problems inherent in the Greek scribal tradition, however, have not always been considered with due care. The Greek rendering of the original Iranian forms is often quite imprecise or even careless and sometimes clearly reshaped after Greek models by so-called “folk etymology” (e.g., *Mega-* for OIr. *Baga-* after Gk. *méga* “great”; *-phrénēs* instead of *-phérnēs* from OIr. *farnah-* “splendor of fortune,” etc.). It should also be remembered that normally several different Iranian forms might have been available as the original, and therefore attested languages like Old and Middle Persian, Parthian, etc., need not necessarily have been the actual source. A separate problem is the morphological question of how the foreign Iranian words and names have been incorporated into the stem classes of the Greek language.

Among the geographical loan-words from Persian, there has been some debate on the etymology of the name of the Black Sea (q.v.). Gk. *Póntos Áxeinos*, literally, “inhospitable sea” (and by euphemistic antiphrasis *Póntos Ēxeinos* “hospital sea”), which in fact reflects OPers. *axšaina-* “dark colored,” i.e., “Northern,” (following the ancient system in which cardinal points had their own corresponding colors, with black for north) cannot be Scythian in origin, as it was first presumed (see in detail Schmitt, 1996c, who argues in favor of an Achaemenian origin, and the above cited article on the Black Sea).

A selective classification of Iranian loan-words according to their natural and cultural context:



1) Fauna and flora characteristic of the Iranian lands: *martichórās* “tiger” (Ctesias: literally “man-devouring”); *rhyntákēs*, *rhyndákē*, a small bird (Ctesias); *spáka* “bitch” (Median word according to Herodotus, 1, 110, 1); *taōs* or *taōs* “peacock”; *margarítēs* “pearl” (cf. Sogd. *maryārt*); *rhadinákē* “black stinking petroleum.” Both for phonological (cf. OIr. **vṛda-*) and historical reasons, it seems unlikely that *rhódon* “rose” is an Iranian word. One may also mention in this context terms using the adjectives *Persikós* “Persian” or *Mēdikós* “Median” like *Persikòs órnis* “cock” (literally, “Persian bird,” since the cock became known to the Greeks through Persia), *mēlon Persikón* “peach” (literally, “Persian apple”), *Persiké* “peach-tree,” *mēlon Mēdi-kón* “citron,” *Mēdikē póā* “lucerne.”

2) Foodstuffs and dishes: *óryza* “rice” (Theophrastus; from OIr. **vṛīzi-*, as attested in El. *mi-ri-zi-iš*; = Ved. *vṛī-hí*) with *oríndēs* “rice bread” (Phrynichus, Sophocles; cf. MPers. *brinj*); *pistákē*, *-kion* “pistachio-tree, -nut” (cf. MPers. *pistak*), *siptachórā* “tree with sweet secretions” (Ctesias; see Cipriano, 1994); *abyrtákē* “sour sauce of various herbs” (Pherecrates).

3) Clothing, textiles, and jewelry (testifying to the luxurious Oriental lifestyle): *anaxyrídes* “Persian trousers”; *gaunákē(s)*, also *kau-* “Iranian cloak or blanket” (from OIr. **gaunaka-* “hairy, shaggy”); *kándys* “Median upper garment with sleeves” (with *kandytānes* “clothes-bag,” containing OIr. *-dāna-* “holder”); *kídaris*, also *kít-* “Persian headgear”; *kyrbasíā* “Persian pointed cap” (reminding Aristophanes of a cockscomb); *mandýā(s)* “woolen cloak”; *maniákēs* “necklace” (cf. Arm. loan-word *maneak* “idem”); *paragáudēs*, *-gódās* “Iranian garment” (cf. Parth. *brywd* “curtain, veil”); *sarábara* “wide trousers” (connected with NPers. *šalwār*); *sárāpis* “Persian garment, tunic” (cf. El. *sa-ra-pi-iš* “cloth, cape”); *tiā'rā(s)*, also *tiérē(s)* “tiara, Persian headgear.”

4) Persian institutions: *gáza* “(royal) treasure, treasury” (from OIr. **ganza-*; with the hybrid loan-formation *gazophýlax* “treasurer” after OIr. **ganza-bara-*); *parádeisos* “enclosed wildlife park (of Persian kings or nobles),” later “garden, plantation” (cf. YAv. *pairi.daēza-* “fenced plot”); *tyktá* “annual royal banquet” (according to Herodotus 9, 110, 2). Evidence is given for the road-system by *parasángēs* the distance covered within a certain time, according to Herodotus of 30 stades (cf. MPers. *frasang*; literally perhaps “announcer,” denoting the milestones) and for the public posting-system by *ángāros* “mounted courier” (perhaps reflecting OIr. **ham-kā/āra-* “executing (orders)” and *angārēion* “posting-system” (as described in detail by Herodotus 8.98. 1.f.). The priests’ title *mágos* (from OIr. *maguš*), however, seems to have been



established in Greek early, since Sophocles calls the wise seer Teiresias a *mágos*.

5) Administrative and military titles: *astándēs*, *asgándēs* “courier” (cf. Man. Parth. *izgand*); *orosángēs* “benefactor (of the King)” (from OIr. **varusanha* “widely known”); *satrápēs* (Xenophon) and variants with initial *x-*, *ex-* “satrap” literally “protecting the rule or the kingdom” (reflect-ing OIr. **xšaθra-pā/ā-*, neither OPers. *xšaça-pā-van-* nor **xšaθra-pā-na*; see Schmitt, 1976) with secondary *satrapēīē* “satrapy” (Herodotus); *argapétēs*, *arkapátēs* “commandant of a fort” (cf. MPers. *hrgwpt*, Parth. *hrkpty*); *kárdakes* “foreign mercenaries” (cf. MPers. *kārdāg* “traveler, merchant”). High officials of the Achaemenid court were “the King’s Eyes” (*ophthalmòs basiléos*) and “the King’s Ears” (*tà basiléōs ôta*). The original Iranian titles on which these Greek calques are based remain uncertain except perhaps for the “Ears” (OIr. **gaušaka-* “listener”). The decimal system of *dek-árchēs* “decurion,” *hekatont-árchēs* “centurion,” *chili-árchēs* “commander of 1,000 men” and *myri-árchēs* “commander of 10,000 men” described by Herodotus (7.81) and often mentioned elsewhere is a rendering of OIr. **daθa-pati-*, **θata-pati-*, **hazāra-pati-* (cf. the gloss Gk. *azarapateīs* “ushers”) and **baivar-pati-*, respectively, part of which is now actually attested in Elamite garb.

6) Weapons and other objects: *akīnákēs*, also *kīnákēs* “Persian sword” (cf. Sogd. *kyn’k*), *gōrýtós* “bow-case, quiver” (maybe a Scythian word); *ságaris* “Scythian battle-ax”; *tóxon* “bow” (maybe of Scythian origin); *bati-ákē*, diminutive *-ákion* “(small) cup, bowl” (containing OIr. **bāta-* “wine, must,” cf. MPers. *bādag*); *máragna* “lash, scourge.”

7) Names of Persian measures and coins: *achánē* (Persian measure); *áddix* (a dry measure); *artábē* (measure of capacity; cf. El. *ir-ti-ba*, etc., Aram, *ardab*, etc.); *áspron* (Byzantine coin; see Schwyzer, 1931); *danákē(s)* and derivatives (Persian coin and weight unit, first attested for Heraclides of Cyme and reflecting OIr. **dānaka-*; see Schmitt, 1993); *dareikós*, also *darikós* (daric [q.v.], the Persian gold coin; not to be connected with the name of Darius, but based on OPers. **dari-* = YAv. *zairi-* “yellow, golden”); *kapétis* and *kapíthē* (Persian measures, denoting a fraction of the *artábē*); *máris* (Persian liquid measure; cf. El. *mar-ri-iš*, Aram. *mry*, Parth. *mry*; see Schmitt, 1989).

Real “glossai,” which are attested only in lexicons and usually with reference to Persians or other Iranians, include: *abiátaka*, “*mnémōna*,” i.e. “with a good memory” (cf. MPers. ‘byd’t *ayād* “memory”); *árxiphos* (to be read *árziphos*)



“eagle” (cf. YAv. *ərəzifiia-*); *azā'tē* “freedom” (cf. OIr. **āzāta-* “free,” also in Aram. 'zt) with *azētai* “those next to the King” (with Ionian *-ē-*); *Deúas* (reflecting OIr. *daiva-*) “the evil gods” in the Magians’ view; *gándoma*, *gándómēn* “wheat” (cf. YAv. *gaṇṭuma-*); *kamárai* “girdle” (cf. YAv. *kamarā-*); *kérsa* “Oriental coin” (cf. OPers. *kṛša-* weight unit); *opastón* “supply” (cf. OPers. *upastā-* “aid”); *símōr* “(Parthian) mouse-like animal,” *sparabárai* “shield-bearers.”

A number of instances show that the rendering of Iranian words and names became more exact and closer to the original form when the Greeks, especially from the time of Alexander, became better acquainted with Persia through direct contact. Older and younger forms are found side by side, e.g., for *satrápēs* “satrap” vs. *(e)xa-trápēs*, etc., and the names *Kyros* vs. *Kóros* (quoted from some unknown source), *Germánioi* vs. *Karmánioi* (see Schmitt, 1996) or *Sarángai* vs. *Zárangoi* (for the inhabitants of Drangiana; q.v.). That applies of course only for cases not influenced by tradition and the traditional form.

Only those Iranian loan-words already attested in ancient Greek, have been discussed in this article. It should be noted that the process of borrowing Persian loan-words continued after the Islamization of Persia and instances of borrowings can be found in Byzantine and modern Greek sources (cf. Hemmerdinger, 1969).

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