



IRAN VI. IRANIAN LANGUAGES AND SCRIPTS (1) EARLIEST EVIDENCE

IRAN vi, continued

vi(1) Earliest Evidence

Archeological identities of the proto-Indo-Iranians and proto-Iranians. The Indo-Aryan and Iranian tribes separated about 2000 B.C.E., but attempts to correlate the proto-Indo-Iranians with archeological sites are all problematic. Theories about this also have to take into account the presence of Indo-Iranian words in typically Indic phonetic form in the Near East in the first half of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. (for an overview, see Mayrhofer in *Indogermanische Grammatik* I, Heidelberg, 1968, pp. 23-24, with bibliog.).

The archeological identity of the early Iranians is also a problem. Several scenarios have been considered (see, e.g., Young, 1967; Ghirshman, 1977), but recently the so-called Bactrian-Margiana Archeological Complex (BMAC) in Bronze-Age Central Asia (see Hiebert, 1994) has been proposed as that of the Iranians (see, for instance, Hintze, 1998). The archeological picture of Central Asia and the Iranian Plateau is quite sketchy, however; most of the exploration has taken place in the area of modern Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and there are still large, unexplored areas that contain potentially crucial



evidence, notably most of Kōrasān, but also the area to the northeast of the Caspian Sea. The archeological picture of the BMAC, notably its spread throughout the Plateau, is therefore not yet known in all its details and is constantly changing (see, especially, Hiebert and Dyson, 2002).

References in the texts (Rigveda and Avesta) to material culture are also problematic, since much of the terminology and many of the expressions do not belong specifically to the individual Indian and Iranian, but to the Indo-Iranian, literary tradition. On these controversial issues, see now the detailed discussion with comments by various scholars in Lamberg-Karlovsky, 2002. For theories about archeological and ethnic-linguistic correlations in Central Asia, see also Lamberg-Karlovsky's detailed review (2005).

The earliest documentary evidence for an Indo-Iranian presence also to the south of Central Asia comes from the Ancient Near East. The El-Amarna tablets from Palestine (mid-15th century B.C.E.) contain the Indo-Iranian-looking royal names Artamanya (“he who thinks Order”; cf. OAv. *yə́ mantā ašəm* “he who has thought Order” in *Yasna* 31.19) and Suwardata (“given by the Sun”). In the early 14th century B.C.E., a treaty was concluded between the Hittite king Supiluliuma and the Hurrite king of the Mitanni, Matiwaza, in which the Mitanni gods are listed, among them: Mitra-Varuna, Indra, and the two Nāsatyas (all known from the Old Indic pantheon). Finally, a text by a Mitanni named Kikkuli about horses and horseracing written in Hittite contains technical terms such as *aika-vartana* “one turn/round.” The 20th-century discussion about these words has centered around the question of whether these are Indo-Iranian, before IIr. *s* became Iranian *h* (cf. OInd. *suvar*, OIr. **huwar* “sun”), or simply Indic words, with *aika* “one”; cf. OInd. *eka-*, but OIran. **aiwa-* (Pers. *yak* is from **ēk* from **aiwaka-*). On these forms, see, most recently, Carruba (2000).

Part of the problem is how to explain the presence of Indo-Aryans in this area at a time when the Indo-Aryan population of Central Asia was, presumably, well on its way into India. Today, however, there is a tendency not to underestimate the mobility of people in these early times, and one possible explanation for the Indo-Aryan presence may be that they had been “imported” (invited or captured) from Central Asia as experts in horse matters.

The evidence of the Young Avesta. The Avestan texts contain no historical allusions and can therefore not be dated exactly, but Old Avestan is a language closely akin to the oldest Indic language, used in the oldest parts of the



Rigveda, and should therefore probably be dated to about the same time. This date is also somewhat debated, though within a relatively small time span, and it seems probable that the oldest Vedic poems were composed over several centuries around the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. (see, e.g., Witzel, 1995). Similarly, Young Avestan is grammatically close to Old Persian, which ceased being spoken in the 5th-4th centuries B.C.E. These two languages were therefore probably spoken throughout the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. (see, e.g., Skjærvø, 2003-04, with further references).

The Young Avesta contains a few geographical names, all belonging to roughly the area between Chorasmia and the Helmand, that is, the modern Central Asian republics and Afghanistan (see, e.g., Skjærvø, 1995; Witzel, 2000). We are therefore entitled to conclude that Young Avestan reflects the language spoken primarily by tribes from that area. The dialect position of the language also indicates that the language of the Avesta must have belonged to, or at least have been transmitted by, tribes from northeastern Iran (the change of proto-Iranian **-āiā/ā-* > **-ayā/ā-* and **jīwa-* > **juwa-* “live,” for instance, is typical of Sogdian, Khotanese, Pashto, etc.).

Persians, Medes, and Scythians. The Iranian immigration onto the Plateau probably proceeded in several “waves” and along different routes, and Iranian tribes may have been established throughout the Plateau by the beginning of the 1st millennium, except perhaps the southernmost parts. Several scenarios for the Iranian immigrations have been proposed along with, allegedly, corroborating archeological evidence.

The earliest evidence for Persian and Median presence on the Plateau comes from the Assyrian records. In the descriptions of campaigns by Assyrian kings, peoples they came into contact with or subdued are commonly mentioned. These records, therefore, give us a good chronology, although the geography is only approximate. Often, the peoples can be located only within a very general area, and personal names are rare. Here, Parsuwash and Matai are first mentioned in the 9th century in the area of Lake Urmia in the records of Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.E.), who, in 835 B.C.E., is said to have received tributes from 27 kings of Parsuwaš. Subsequent kings, Shamsi-Adad V (823-811) and Adad-Nirari III (810-783) also campaigned against them; in the annals of Shamsi-Adad for the year 821, a civil war is mentioned in a land stretching from Bīt Bunaki to Parsumash (with *-m-* used to spell *-w-*). Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727), who campaigned as far as Mount Bikni (= Mount Alvand. q.v.), refers to the Medes as the “mighty Medes” or the “distant Medes.” From



Sargon II's reign (721-705) we have the mention of a nephew of King Dalta of the Ellipi by the name Aspabara, which can hardly be other than Iranian **aspabāra* "rider, knight," but his uncle's name is un-Iranian. At the battle of Halule on the Tigris in 691, Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.E.) faced an army of troops from Elam, Parsumash, Anzan (Anshan, q.v.), and others. In the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon (680-69 B.C.E.) and elsewhere, "kings" of the Medes are mentioned (for the sources, see Waters, 1999; Zadok, 2001).

Although doubt as to the actual identity of the Parsuwash may persist, linguistically the word matches Old Persian *pārsa*, which can come directly from older **pārcwa*. This word has, occasionally, been derived from **parcu-*"rib" (cf. Pers. *pahlu* "side") and supposed to denote a "marginal" people, a people from across the borders. That might seem to imply that the term was invented by an Iranian-speaking people to denote other Iranians.

Adad-Nirari III conducted several campaigns against the Manneans and the Medes from 809 to 788. The name of his mother, Sammuṛāmat, is probably identical with that of Queen Semiramis of the Classical authors; according to later legends, she is said to have campaigned as far as Bactria. This story was reported by Diodorus Siculus on the authority of Ctesias (ca. 400 B.C.E.; q.v.), according to whom Semiramis' Bactrian adversary was called Oxyartes (q.v.). In still later traditions, the king of Bactria was said to have been Zoroaster, who, in this way, was connected with Semiramis and Babylon (see Jackson, 1899, pp. 154-57). This "Bactrian connection" was to play an important role in the study of Iranian languages.

The only other source for the early history of the Medes and Persians is Herodotus (q.v.), who describes them in some detail in his *Histories* (ca. 470 B.C.E.). Although what he describes happened several centuries earlier and he can only have relied on obviously unreliable oral accounts, his description can be correlated to some degree with the Assyrian and Babylonian sources. Thus, while his account of the first two Median kings cannot be verified, the last two Median kings he names are also mentioned in the Mesopotamian texts.

According to Herodotus's account (1.98), the Medes were united under a king, Deioces (q.v.), who reigned for 53 years (1.102), that is from 700 to 647 by his chronology; this statement, to some extent, agrees with the evidence of the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon that the Medes were divided into numerous city-states, each with its own kinglets (on the question of the "Median empire," see Brown, 1988, and Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1988). Deioces had his capital built at



Agbatana (more commonly called Ecbatana [q.v.], modern Hamadān), a city with seven concentric walls, each of a different color (1.98). The name of the city, unless changed by popular etymology, has the obvious Iranian etymology **hangmatāna-* (**ham-gmatāna-*) that is, “the place of coming together,” presumably of roads or travelers (from east and west; cf. Av. *hąm.jaymana-*, a place where [waters] come together; it could also be a gen. plur. **hangmatānām* “[the place] of those who have come together”; cf. *ērān* “[the land] of the Aryans”). The name of Deioces has been compared with that of a certain Dayukka, a governor of Mannea, who is mentioned in the annals of Sargon II under the year 715 as being deported to Syria and could possibly be Iranian (**dāyuka-* “the nourisher”[?]; R. Schmitt prefers **dahyuka-* “man of the land(s)”; see [DEIOCES](#)).

According to Herodotus, Deioces was succeeded by his son Phraortes, who subjected the Persians, conquered Asia, ruled for 22 years, and lost his life in battle against the Assyrians (1.102). Phraortes has an Iranian name. Darius names a certain Fravartī, a Mede (DB 2.14, etc.), who called himself Xšaθrita, son of Uvaxštra (= Cyaxares [q.v.]; cf. also Av. *frauuarəta-*, someone who has recited the *Frauuarānē*, the Zoroastrian “profession of faith”; see also *Iranisches Personennamenbuch* II, p. 20). No Median king by such a name is known from the Assyrian sources, although attempts have been made to connect him with a certain Kaštaritu, a rebel city-chief from Kar Kašši in the Zagros, who is mentioned in an omen text by Esarhaddon.

Phraortes’ son Cyaxares ruled for 40 years, reorganized the Median army, and led it in alliance with Babylonia against Assyria, which he defeated in a battle. He was laying siege to Niniveh when he was interrupted by an incursion of Scythians under their king Madyes, son of Protothyēs (1.103). The name of Madyes can, conceivably, be Iranian, for instance, **maduya-* “he who seeks intoxication,” but his father’s name is less obviously Iranian (see below).

Having recovered his power, Cyaxares went on to conquer Niniveh and the rest of Assyria except Babylonia before he died (1.106; see [ASSYRIA](#)). The *Babylonian Chronicle* confirms both Herodotus’s account and his name, which it writes Umakištar. Darius, in column 4 of the Bisotun inscription, mentions a certain Mede called Xšaθrita, of the family of Uvaxštra, which must be the same name as Cyaxares. If the name is to be analyzed as **hwa-xštra-* “he who has his own command,” it must be relatively old, with *-xštra-* an old compositional form of **kšatra*, the preform of Median **xšaθra-* (= Avestan, but OPers. *xšaça-*; see also *Iranisches Personennamenbuch* II, p. 27).



Cyaxares' son Astyages (q.v.) ruled for 35 years before he was overthrown by Cyrus (II) the Great of Persia (q.v.; Herodotus, 1.130). The *Babylonian Chronicle* confirms both his name, Ištumegu, and the fact that he was king of the Medes when they were conquered by Cyrus in 550 B.C.E. His name, too, is presumably Iranian, *r̥šti-waiga- "he who brandishes a spear" (cf. Av. *Vaežiistarsti*; *Iranisches Personennamenbuch* II, p. 98, no. 384).

Both Herodotus and the Assyrian sources mention Cimmerians (q.v.; Gimirri, Gimirrāi) and Scyths (Aškuzāi, Iškuzāi) in Media or the Zagros during the reign of Cyaxares. In 679 B.C.E. the Cimmerians under their king Teušpā invaded Assyria but were defeated by Esarhaddon. The king's name could conceivably be Iranian (e.g., *tawā-spā- "he whose power is swollen").

Aside from the Medes and the Persians, the only other presumably Iranian-speaking tribe mentioned in the Assyrian records and by Herodotus are the Scythians. According to Herodotus, after being expelled from Asia, the Scythians probably crossed the Caucasus, and part of them may have remained in the area northwest of the Caucasus. The Scythians, then, defeated the Medes and remained masters of Asia for 28 years (1.104) until Cyaxares and the other Medes invited most of them to a banquet, got them drunk, and massacred them (1.106).

The Scythians, Herodotus tells us, ruled Media for 28 years; and, although the historicity of this "Scythian interregnum" is doubtful, the Scythians are mentioned in the Annals of Esarhaddon, who gave his daughter in marriage to one of their leaders, Bartatua, a name reminiscent of Herodotus's Protothyes, father of Madyes. The Iranian form of the name is not obvious, but it could, conceivably, represent something like *brta-tuwa- "he who carries power" (?). The Assyro-Babylonian name for the Scythians, Aškuzāi, Iškuzāi, and similar, also found its way into the Bible, where, in Genesis 10:2-3, we find listed Gōmer and his sons, among whom was Aškenaz, names that probably reflect that of the Cimmerians and the Scythians (with a misreading of <÷ækwz> as <÷æknz>?). The kingdom of the Aškenaz is listed together with the land of Minnī, i.e., Mannea, and Arāraṭ, i.e., Urartu. According to the annals of Esarhaddon, in the early 770s, the Scythians under their leader Išpakāi allied themselves with the Manneans, but were defeated. The leader's name seems to be an Iranian name containing *spaka- which Herodotus informs us is the Median word for "dog" (1.110).

The Achaemenids. Darius himself tells us that his father was Persian, and his



and his ancestors' names are clearly Iranian names in the Avestan tradition: great-grandfather *ariyāramna*, Ariaramnes (q.v.; see also *Iranisches Personennamenbuch* II, pp. 10-11); grandfather *aršāma*, Arsames (q.v.; and *ibid.*, p. 12), “who has the force of a male” (camel, etc.); *vištāspa*, Hystaspes, “who lets the horse run freely” (*ibid.*, II, p. 29); and *dārayavahu*, Darius (q.v.), “who upholds good [things/thought]”; cf. *Yasna* 31.7 *yā dāraiaīaṣ vahišṭəm manō* “by which he upholds best thought” (*ibid.*, pp. 18-19).

It may be noted that the names Čišpiš, Kuruš (Kuraš), and Kambujiya, the great-grandfather, the grandfather, and the father of Cyrus the Great, respectively, have no obvious Iranian interpretations, and could possibly be Elamite names adopted by these rulers of Anšān, an Elamite territory (see also [CYRUS](#) and Waters, 2004).

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