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The Amyrgian Scythians and the Achaemenid Empire

“The Bactrians campaigned wearing (headgear) on their heads like those of the Medes and carrying native bows of reed, and short spears. The Sakai, the Scythians, had on their heads stiff, straight caps leading to a point, wore trousers, and held native bows and daggers as well as *sagari*-axes. These, who were Amyrgian Scythians, they called ‘Sakas’ (τούτους δε εόντας Σκύθας Ἀμυργίους Σάκας ἐκάλεον) because the Persians call all Scythians ‘Sakas’. The Bactrians and Sakas were commanded by Hystaspes, (son) of Darius and Atossa (daughter) of Cyrus”. (Herodotus VII 64).

The Scythian people known to Herodotus as the “Amygians” have long been equated with those found mentioned in the Old Persian inscriptions under the name written <h-u-m(a)-v(a)-r(a)-g(a)-a>, conventionally read as “Haumavargā”.

DNa 24-26. ...θαταγῆσ γαδαρα ἰνδουῆσ σακᾶ ἡαυμαβάργᾶ σακᾶ τῖγραξαυδᾶ... “Sattagydia, Gandara, Hinduš, the *H.* Scythians, the Pointed-Capped Scythians...” (among countries governed by Darius I; see likewise Dse 24-25.²

XPh 26-27 ...κατπατῦκα δαῆσ σακᾶ ἡαυμαβάργᾶ σακᾶ τῖγραξαυδᾶ... “...Cappadocia, the Dahai, the *H.* Scythians, the Pointed-capped Scythians...” (among countries ruled by Xerxes).³

A?P 14. iyam sakā haumavargā “This (is) the *H.* Scythians (sic)” (identifying a figure on a Persepolis relief).⁴

Judging from their position within the lists of Darius’ possessions, the Amyrgians must have occupied an area somewhere on the Central Asian frontier, and may well be the same as the “Scythians beyond Sogdia” men-

tioned elsewhere in the inscriptions of Darius⁵. The Amyrgians seem to have had closer ties to the Persians than many of the Scythians did, since Herodotus specifically singles them out as taking part in the campaigns of Xerxes.

The name of the Amyrgians/Haumavargā has long been taken to be a compound containing as its first element the term *hauma-*, a reflex of Indo-Iranian **sauma-*, the name of an intoxicating beverage which played a central role in early Indian and Iranian cultic practices (cf. Sanskrit *soma-*, Avestan *haoma-*⁶). While the first element of the compound has been felt to be clear, the nature of the second element is considerably less so. Since the beverage *hauma-* is associated with the religious sphere, it has been presumed that the element represented by the characters <-v(a)-r(a)-g(a)-> must have cultic significance of one sort or another, but neither Avestan nor Sanskrit provide a good parallel for such a form. The best potential evidence that find in support of an early Indo-Iranian stem **v(a)rg(h)-* with this meaning is the Avestan noun *varaxəδra-* of unclear meaning – it seems to be an instrumental derivative **varK-tra-* from an otherwise unknown verbal base **v(a)rk-*, **v(a)rx-*, or **v(a)rg-* – which Bailey (1972: 105) suggests is cognate to the second element of *Haumavargā*.

In search of a stem with the sense ‘worshipping’ within the name of the Amyrgians, several researchers have adopted the premise that, since the name by which the Amyrgians are known has proven resistant to an Old Persian analysis, it may well have originated within Scythian rather than Persian. This assumption entitles us to seek an etymology for the term on the basis of what we know of the Eastern Iranian languages.

Since we have no direct information on the Eastern Iranian languages used in the middle of the first millennium B. C., we cannot rule out the possibility that at least certain of these languages were already showing some of the developments later to be found in the earliest Eastern Iranian documents. As far as phonology is concerned, this means that we should allow for the possibility that the familiar lenition of consonants characteristic of East Iranian (i.e., voicing of non-initial voiceless stops and the spirantization of voiced stops) had already begun to take place among the eastern Iranians by the Achaemenid period. This assumption permitted Gershevitch (1969: 168-169) and following him Hinz (1973: 137) to propose that the name of the Amyrgians contains as its second element a cognate to Avestan *barəg-* ‘praise’ in the Eastern Iranian form **βarg-*, and that the Old Persian character *-va-* (which probably represented a sound on the order of *w*) was chosen as closest to the Scythian sound **β*.

A similar argument was employed by Duchesne-Guillemin (1960: 97f.) and Brandenstein and Mayrhofer (1964: 125), who suggested that the -g- of *-va-ra-ga-* represents an Eastern Iranian *g which had developed out of an early *k in medial position. This view enables them to adduce the Khotanese stem *aurgā/orgā* 'cult, adoration'. Tracing this Khotanese form back to an earlier **ā-varka-*, they concluded that Khotanese form provides an indirect indication that early Iranian might have possessed a stem **v(a)rk-* which has not survived in the other Iranian languages.

None of these interpretations can be ruled out, of course, but continuing along this line of exploration makes available another approach which does not oblige us to stray as far from the familiar Iranian lexicon. Specifically, it is possible to augment the views of Gershevitch on *-va-* and Duchesne-Guillemin on *-g-* by using what we know of the morphology of modern Ossetian. Following the studies mentioned above, which took the character <*v(a)*> to represent *-βa-* and ascribed the *-g-* to an earlier *k*, does not necessarily oblige us to assume a root of the specific shape "**bark-*", since the possibility exists that the **-k-cum-g-* was actually not a part of the root but a stem-suffix.

If this is so, it becomes possible to view the *-βarg-* (<**-bark-*) of the Amyrgians' name as a *k*-suffixed derivative from the well-known root *bar-* 'carry'. Modern Ossetian *-æg*, the reflex of the *k*-suffix (**-aka-*), is productively employed to form the active participle based on the verbal stem (e. g., *zar-æg* 'singing' inf. *zar-yn* 'to sing', *cæwæg* 'going' inf. *cæw-yn* 'to go'). From the point of view of the present discussion, it is noteworthy that modern Ossetian shows a systematic contraction of the ending *-æg* into *-g-* (or, with palatalization, *-dž-*) in conjunction with the formation of the plural *-zar-dž-ytæ* (Digor *zar-g-utæ*), *cæw-dž-y-tæ* (Digor *cæw-g-utæ*). Miller (1903: 42) suggested that the contraction of *-ak-* > *-k-* was already a live grammatical process in the Scythian of the first millenium B. C., since in his estimation the Σκυθαι of the classical sources reflects the authentic plural of *Saka-* (i. e., *Skutā* seems to have been the plural of *Saka*, just as modern Western Ossetian *cæw-g-u-tæ* (<**č(y)av-k-u-tā*) is the plural of *cæw-æg* (<**č(y)av-aka-*).⁷

In short, it is possible to analyze the "*-varg-*" of the name of the Amyrgians as the plural stem of the Scythian participle meaning "-carrying, -bearing" (i. e., *-βar-g-* +pl.suff.). Quite possibly the original Scythian name had the plural ending *-ta-* which we find in *Sku-thai*, *Sarma-tai*, *Massagetai*, *Saudara-tai*, *Parala-tai*, etc., but in the Persian form *Haumavargā* this has evidently been replaced by the normal Persian plural ending *-ā*. The singular of the name would presumably have contained the uncontracted -

ak- or *-ag-* (*-*βarak/g-*), but the Persians seem not to have been familiar with the singular form of the name – on the one occasion among the Old Persian inscriptions in which reference is made to a single Amyrgian (A?P 14), the individual depicted is identified by means of the full plural form (*iyam sakā haumavargā* ‘This (is) the Amyrgian Scythians’), despite the ungrammaticality of the construction.

On the basis of the phonology and morphology of Ossetian, the surviving representative of the Scythian languages, the form of the name of Amyrgians as it is documented is consistent with the shape which an early Scythian compound “*X-bearers” might have assumed. It is of course possible that the first element <h-u-m(a)-> represents the Indo-Iranian ceremonial beverage *hauma-*, and that the full name therefore represents “the (*)*Hauma-Bearers/Carriers*” – such a name, one might speculate, could refer to a role played by the Amyrgians in the production or shipping of the *hauma*-plant, or of the beverage derived from it. The interpretation of the characters <h-u-m(a)> as the well-known ritual beverage would be more compelling, however, if there were independent evidence linking the Amyrgians with *hauma-*. While the reading of <h-u-m(a)-> as *hauma-* never seems to have been questioned, it is not the sole possibility available to us. Since our investigation has already benefited from the perspective afforded by the modern Ossetian, I suggest that we again turn to that language in seeking the meaning of the “X” of the “*X-bearers”.

There are several ambiguities inherent in the spelling of the Old Persian name (<h-u-m(a)-v(a)-r(a)-g(a)-a>. Since the Old Persian script does not make a distinction between vowelless consonants and consonants followed by a short *-a-*, this spelling may potentially represent a rather differently configured word. The renderings of the name in both Babylonian and Greek (*um-mu-ur-qa-* and Ἀμύργ-) seem to point to a disyllabic stem, with the nasal and the *-v/β-* in direct contact (*Haumv/βarg-*), rather than to a trisyllabic *Hauma-varg-*. The reading with *-a-* between the *m* and the *v* is due to the assumption that an early Iranian compound containing a thematic-class stem in the first position would have shown a linking vowel *-a-*. While this was surely the case for the earliest stage of Iranian, the linking vowel of compounds has systematically been lost throughout most of the Iranian languages, including Ossetian. Since we have no *a priori* grounds for saying at what point in history the linking vowel was lost in a given descendant of Proto-Iranian, we should allow for the possibility that in certain branches the loss may have taken place earlier than in others.

It thus becomes possible to adopt a reading for the name of the Eastern Iranian Amyrgians without an intervening vowel, as the Greek and

Babylonian renderings suggest. If there was in fact no vowel between the *-m-* and the *-v/β-*, the labiality shared by these two elements might well not be coincidental. It would hardly be surprising if a syllable-closing nasal directly preceding a labial *-v/β-* were to undergo partial assimilation. We should therefore be aware that it is conceivable that the letter <*-m(a)-*> found in this word might represent either an underlying *-m-* or a partially assimilated *-n-* (*Haum-v/βarg-* < **Haun-*+ *-v/βarg-*).

Is it possible that the **haum/n-* which we find embedded in the name of the Amyrgian reflects something other than the ritual beverage? Let us reflect upon some evidence provided by Achaemenid iconography. Erich Schmidt's analysis of the Persepolis reliefs (Schmidt 1968: 111-116) casts an interesting light on the problem of the value of the first term of *hauN-βarg-*. Schmidt observed that, of the thirty figures carved on the royal tombs of Persepolis as representations of the constituent nationalities of the empire, only three – the Arabian and two Scythians – are depicted wearing torques, an emblem otherwise associated with Persian and Median nobles. Schmidt similarly noted that, of all the delegations shown in the tribute procession carved on the stairway of the Apadana, only two groups of Scythians seem to have been entitled, like the Persian ushers, to carry their weapons in the presence of the king.

On the basis of these details of iconographic protocol, Schmidt suggested that the Arabians and certain of the Scythians – whom he identifies with the “Scythians beyond the sea” (i.e., the European Scythians) and the Amyrgian Scythians of the inscriptions – enjoyed a status distinct from that of the other nations subject to the Achaemenid Empire. Schmidt points out that Herodotus refers specifically to the special position of the Arabians – “they did not yield the obedience of slaves to the Persians, but were united to them by friendship, as having given Cambyses passage into Egypt, which the Persians could not enter without the consent of the Arabians”(III 88). As Herodotus further remarks, the Arabians did not render tribute to the Persians, but instead supplied an annual gift in the form of a thousand talents of frankincense (III 91, 97). “In any event, during the reigns of Cambyses II and Darius I the Arabians were considered allies of the Persians rather than a conquered people. We conclude that the torque which adorns their representative on the tomb... of at least one Persian monarch is symbolic of their distinctive status...”(Schmidt 1968: 111).

Schmidt argues on the basis of the similarities in the depiction of the Arabian and the two Scythians that certain of the Scythian tribes occupied a position within the Achaemenid Empire comparable to that of the Arabians. One of these Scythian groups – the “Saka beyond the sea” – seem to have

been enlisted as allies of the Persians as the result of the campaign described in the fifth column of the Bisitun inscription, which relates how Darius I led an invasion of the Scythian lands, overthrew the local chief Skunxa, and established a new ruler in his place. Schmidt identified the other Scythians who enjoyed this special status as the Amyrgians, whom he likewise describes as allies of the Persians, “the guardians of the northeastern, Asiatic, frontier” (1968: 116). Like the Arabians, both the European Scythians and the Amyrgians evidently were peoples who, lying beyond the Persians’ direct military control, were enlisted as allies or clients in order to secure the Achaemenid Empire’s steppe borders.

Following Herodotus’s account of the Arabians, Schmidt concludes that the chiefs of these groups exchanged gifts with the Persian kings rather than rendering tribute – “... Parenthetically, we are convinced that the contributions of ‘gifts’ were reciprocal and that the nations concerned received substantial subsidies for their services to the empire” (Schmidt 1968: 114). It is therefore of potential significance that the first element which we find in the name of the Amyrgians, <h-u-m(a)->, is conspicuously reminiscent of the modern Ossetian word *xwyn* ‘gift’. Although the ultimate etymological source of *xwyn* remains unclear, the historical sound laws of Ossetian as we know them are consistent with a derivation from an earlier **hun-*, **hūn-*, or **haun-* (or perhaps **hum-*, **hūm-*, **haum-*). If the ancestor of Ossetian *xwyn* existed in the language of the Amyrgians, it is quite conceivable that it would have been rendered by the Persians as <h-u-m(a)>.

If Schmidt is correct in his view of the special nature of the ties between the Amyrgian Scythians and the Persian Empire, the name by which we know these people might well reflect a Persian rendering of the native Scythian term describing this relationship, i.e., the *hauN-βarg-V-tā* or “*Gift-Bearers”. This term “*Gift-bearer” may in fact have been a general expression for “ally” among the Scythians, as witness the fact that Ctesias employs what appears to be the same form, *Amorgēs*, as the name of a Scythian king identified as an “ally” of Cyrus (Auberger 1991: 67f).

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¹ An early draft of the following paper was presented at the 1997 meeting of the American Oriental Society held in Miami, Florida.

² The Babylonian versions of these inscriptions have *gi-mir-ri¹ ú-mu-ur-ga-²*; the Elamite version of DNA has *sā-aq-qa¹ u-mu-mar-qa-ip*.

³ Babylonian *gi-mi-ir ú-mar-ga-¹*; Elamite *sā-aq-qa u-mar-[...]*.

⁴ Babylonian *gi-mir-ri u-mur-ga-¹*; Elamite *sā-aq-qa u-mu-mar-qa-ip*.

⁵ The map in Schmidt's book (fig. 53) places the Haumavargā along the northwestern flank of the Tien Shan, with the Tigraxaudā between them and the Caspian area, "...but we believe that our map would indicate their relative importance more realistically if the name of the Sakā haumavargā were spread northwestward along the entire lower

Jaxartes (Sir Daria) and even beyond the Aral Lake...”(1968: 116). Bailey (1958: 132) speculates that the name of the Haumavargā has survived in the ethnonym *Brayáyo* used by the Munjan of the Pamirs.

⁶ Cf. also Ossetian *xwymællæg* ‘hops’ (see Abaev 1958-1989, s.v.).

⁷ On the artificiality of drawing a distinction between the Sakas and the Scythians note especially Herodotus VII 64 (cited above), and see Narain (1987).