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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Research on Scientific References of Geography and Ancient Iranian Geographers

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Abstract: The extended breadth, brilliant historical background and powerful ancient empires lead researchers to conclude that Iran must have been powerful enough in those eras in scientific domains especially in terms of geographical knowledge. But the remaining scientific works in geographical arena isn't considerable enough. In the present study, using the literature review method, an attempt has been made to reveal few geographical references about Iran prior to the advent of Islam. These references are books, manuscripts, inscription and epepee forms. Among the books, the Avesta, Bundahišn, Dēnkart, and Menog-i Khrad have a significant importance. Moreover, Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr, The wonder and remarkability of Sagastān, History of Karkā de Bēt Selōk, The Chronicle of Arbela, Parthian Stations and Movses Khorenatsi are geography books that too discuss geographical issues of ancient Iran. The letters of ancient kings such as Ardashir-e Babakan, Tansar and Artabanus to Susa citizens also contain information about geography. Some inscriptions from ancient Iran have geographic concepts such as Darius, Persepolis, Susa, Xerxes I and Shapur I. There is a lack of geographers' name in ancient Iran same as scientific references about geography. Only two people named Isidore Charax and Movses Khorenatsi could be found who studied the Iranian geography, directly.

Keywords: Ancient Iran; Geography; Geographer; Scientific References.

Introduction

There aren't lots of scientific documents and references available from ancient Iran and thus, to know different scientific sides, references from other countries such as Greece are inevitably utilized. Nevertheless, in Geography, it is a popular method to cite the other nation's scientific references. Since there lacks a professional study about the ancient Iranian geography, scientific references and geographers, the researchers who have focused on this domain can be divided in three categories.

The first group believes that there is no considerable book and scientific resource on the ancient Iranian geography. According to some like Shibli Nomani, an Indian historian, there weren't any significant geography books in ancient Iran. Others such as Georgi Zidane believe that Iranian books could have perished or destroyed in wars (Safa, 1997).

The second group consists of researchers whose geographic information can be extracted from scientific works such as Pourdavoud in *Avesta* (1998, 2001), Eftekharzadeh in *Avesta* (1998), Tafazoli in *Menog-i Khrad* (2004) and Torabi in *Bundahišn* (1992).

The third group has professionally studied geography of ancient Iran such as Moshiri (1994), Daryaei (1996), Khodadaian (2001), Jafari Dehaghi (2003), Tafazoli (2004) and Maghami Moghim (2012). This group's studies are mostly focused on *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, *The wonder and Remarkability of Sagastān*, *History of Karkā de Bēt Selōk*, *The Chronicle of Arbela*, *Isidore Charax' Parthian Stations* and *Movses Khorenatsi* (Maghami Moghim, 2012).

All studies show that there are not extensive written resources available in this domain. On the other hand, the Iranian scientific ability cannot be neglected, considering its breadth, its background and morality.

Considering the aforementioned contents, it can be assumed that the geography in ancient Iran was not a professional knowledge and documents could found in other resources especially in religious books. Here, it has been tried to study the related geographic content in other scientific

resources, in addition to geographical references. The knowledge about the ancient Iran geography and geographers can undoubtedly help future researchers.

Research Methodology

This research has been done, using the literature review method. More than 300 books, related to ancient geography, at first, were borrowed from Iran's national library, Tehran University, Razavi Shrine, Ferdowsi University and Tabriz University libraries. Data gathering was started in 2007 and finished in 2013. The process led to books entitled *Iranian Geography Celebrities* and *Geography in Ancient Iran*.

The Study Area

The maximum domain of Persian Empire, Achaemenid, was chosen as the study area. It was limited to the Sind Valley in India, the Nile River in Egypt and the Benghazi area in Libya, the Danube River and Central Asia and the Indian Ocean and the Sea Oman from East, West, North and South respectively.

Theoretical Discussion

Geographic Documents from Iranian Geographers before Islam

These documents include books, manuscripts and inscriptions which are discussed briefly below.

A. BOOKS

1) Avesta

In ancient Iranian texts, the first peripheral works can be found in Avesta, determining the regions (Fani, 2006; Aryamanesh, 2023; Dara, 2023; Kakouris, 2024; Rahbar, 2024). The most important sections of this book contain geographic contents, including Yasna, Vendidad and Yašts.

a. Yasna

Yasna means praise and worship, this section of Avesta has 38 seasons in which the first, second, ninth and tenth seasons talk about Iran's geographical location, including Alborz Mountain, Damavand, Urmia Lake, Sahand and Sabalan Mountains and Aras River (Pourdavoud, 2001)

b. Vendīdād

Vendīdād is a collection of religious orders from the Aryan religions before Zoroastrianism (Eftekharzadeh, 1998). Vendīdād has 22 seasons, in which, the first and 21st mention 16 Ahura countries and properties which were coordinated to Zoroastrian teachings. The stated properties are relative location, population, people living way and the eastern cities of Iran (Razi, 1997). Some other valuable information includes organisms, mountains, seas, lakes, plants and famous ancient Iranian cities (Yarshater, 1994).

c. Yašts

Yašts are praising texts which deal with religion but some of them contain geographical contents of ancient Iran. Zamyad Yašts is one of the most important ones. The recognition and praise of the mountains, rivers, lakes, waters and seas of the ancient Iran and some rules about their worship have been pointed (Pourdavoud, 1998). A mountain called Mazishont has come in the second clause of Zamyad Yašts. This mountain was in Armenia (Jackson, 1973). Also in this part, a mountain called Waiti Geuss, has been mentioned, which is located on the eastern borders. In 67th clause of Zamyad Yašts, one of the ancient rivers has been pointed, called Hoospa. This river was flowing into Hamoon Lake from the east (Doostkhah, 2003). In this section of Avesta, most geographical phenomena have been interpreted based on Zoroastrian religion rulings, however, some of them are similar to present events (Maghami Moghim, 2015).

2) Bundahišn

This book has been written in Pahlavi language containing 36 seasons. Its content is divided into 3 sections, in which, the second and the third sections relate to geography of ancient Iran. The shape of the Earth, the origination of mountains, seas, rivers, lakes, planets, the organisms birth and population have been expressed (Tafazoli, 2004). There are two editions of this book, the Iranian Bundahišn and Indian one. There are some contents about the creation basics, the world end prediction, ancient lands, disasters and the stagnations that threaten countries, in Iranian edition (Torabi, 1992). The universe has been created in 7 steps include sky, water, soil, plants, human and fire respectively, based on this book. In addition, the sky is a dome which has been made by brilliant and precious stones and surrounds the earth. The water occupies the bottom of the sky and flows under the ground, based on this book. The authors of this book believe that the animal life was started with bull creating Airyanem Vaejah in Veh Daeiti River bank. The humankind has been originated in 6th step and the fire was created afterward.

3) Dēnkart

This book has been written in 9 volumes, with each containing a special subject. This book has many writers, most of them anonymous (Amouzegar and Tafazoli 2007). The 5th volume has 24 seasons, in which, 2nd, 19th and 24th have some contents about the relative location of Iranian, Arabian lands and their people, background and relationship to the Sasanian government. In the season 24, also, creation of mountains, plants and animals has been stated.

4) Menog-i Khrad

Menog-i Khrad, is one of the most important scientific texts of the Sasanian era. There is mention of the Earth and universe origination in a part of it. It says that sky, earth, water and all things in it are egg shape. It says that the sky and under the ground are egg shape which regulated by Ahura Mazda. Other part of this book has been dedicated to questions and answers, with question 7 being

about the earth, planets and stars origination, while question 8 is about migrations. Question 11 is about the twelve months whereas the question 20 is about the universe's beginning and end. The 48th question, also, is about the sun and stars (Tafazoli, 2004). Paying attention to the book contents, it is defined that ancient Iranians were the first people who talked about the earth's sphericity. The earth similarity to egg has also been mentioned in religious books of ancient Iran.

5) *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*

Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr is the only manuscript in Pahlavi language, talks directly about the problems of the ancient Iran geography and can be assumed the oldest geographical manuscript about ancient Iran (Khodadaian, 2001). Its final edition belongs to the late Sasanian era. The introduction of this book says that Iranin cities were generated and developed in various historical periods, therefore, they are assumed as the oldest cities of the world (Kiani, 1989).

In *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, Iran as a country, is divided into 4 regions, based on its geographical directions. Eastern cities begin from tSamarkand and end to Shad Farrokh Khosrow. Western cities are from Ctesiphon to Madinah. The southern area is about Kabul and the northern area begins from Azarbaijan and ends at Amol. In this book, regional studies have been done, dividing the Iran's cities to 4 climates for the first time in the world (Jafari Dehaghi, 2003).

6) **The Wonder and Remarkability of Sagastān**

This is one of the oldest books about the ancient Iran geography. It was written in the late Sasanian era about the Sistan geography, southeast of Iran, and its writers had taken it into account as superior than the other lands, considering 16 reasons (Daryaei, 1996). Most of these reasons are Sistan altitudes, Loot Desert, etc. In another part, also, it has pointed about the destructive storms which destroyed cities of this area. These storms referred to uncontrollable hurricane (Tafazoli, 2004). The expressed contents in this manuscript show the ancient Sistan development. A precise study of this manuscript can give valuable information about the climate change in eastern Iran.

7) The History of Karkh-e Beyt Salouq (Karkā ǰe Bēt Selōk)

Bēt Selōk, “house of Seleucos,” abbreviation of Karkā ǰe Bēt Selōk, “fortress of the house of Seleucos,” the capital city (modern Kirkuk) of Bēt Garmē in Iraq (Morony, 1989: 188). It contains local documents and gathered in 600s. The aim of this book was to make Karkh Beyt city famous (Maghami Moghim, 2015). The main source for its early history is the sixth-century Syriac account of the martyrs of Karkā ǰe Bēt Selōk, according to which it was founded by Assyrian ruler, Sardanā (Sardanapalus), and after Sargon built a palace there called Karkā ǰe Sargōn (Morony, 1989: 188).

In this manuscript, the city construction was assigned by Assyrian king called Sargon. The Karkh was introduced as the capital of Bēt Garmē province and a part of Adiabene realm (Pigulevskaya, 1998).

The ruler of this city is said to have helped Ardašīr I overthrow the Parthians, and in the twentieth year of Šāpūr I (ca. 260) two missionary disciples of Mani, Addai and Abzakīyā, began to make Manichean converts there (Morony, 1989: 188).

It is said that this city had 2 gates and 65 towers. One of the gates was located in northwest and the other located in the southeast. King’s palace was in the center of city, which had 72 avenues and each migrant settled on a distinct avenue based on his/her profession. Governmental migrants were also settled at a special location, which had the better weather and was safer (Maghami Moghim, 2015).

8) The Chronicle of Arbela

The Chronicle of Arbela, a Syriac church history of Adiabene, was written in the 6th century by Mēšīhā-Zēkā under the title Kētabā ǰ-ēqlisyastīqī ǰā-Mēšīhā-Zēkā, chosen in conscious imitation of the *Ekklesiastikē historía* by Eusebius of Caesarea (Kawerau, 2011: 548-549). Mēšīhā-Zēkā introduced the Erbil as one of the most important, most populated and the most developed cities in Adiabene (Maghami Moghim, 2015). For the Parthian period, Mēšīhā-Zēkā drew primarily on

the only Syriac writer to have an exact knowledge of Parthian history, Habel the Teacher (Kawerau, 2011: 548-549).

9) **Kār-Nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pāpakān**

Kār-Nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pāpakān (Book of the Deeds of Ardashir, Son of Papak) is one of the unique works about Persia that was written in the late Sasanian era and has some contents about Azarbaijan, Alborz mountains, Kermanshah, Hamedan, Isfahan, Loot desert (Pigulevskaya, 1998). This book has been taken into consideration by Persian researchers. Ferdowsi, for the first time, in *Shahnameh* at the beginning of the Parthians' history, cited it.

B. LETTERS

1) **Letter from Artabanus II to Susa**

This letter has been carved on marble by Artabanus, Parthian king, in year 21-22 AD to two famous persons of Shush called Antiochus and Farhad. He asked from aristocratic families to buy the properties of people to release them from bankruptcy (Pigulevskaya, 1998). This letter has some rules on how to manage cities and choose their custodians.

2) **Letter of Tansar**

Tansar's letter is one of the precious ones, which was written between the 6th and 7th centuries. It has some contents about the geographic location of fire temples in Iran (Minovi, 1975). Another important content is about Iran's social classes.

C. Inscriptions

Some of the ancient Iranian inscriptions contain the geographic information. The most important ones are as below:

1) Persepolis Inscriptions

There are 7 inscriptions of Darius in Persepolis, which have some contents about the realm, tax-giver regions and his dominated territories (Tafazoli, 2004). The most geographical information, indeed are about the borders of his realm and territories.

2) Behistun Inscription

These inscriptions have been carved in Taq-e Bostan in Kermanshah and have important information about the countries which Darius ruled. These inscriptions explain maps indicating the discovered world at that time. These have historical, political, natural and martial importance.

3) Suez Inscriptions of Darius

In these inscriptions, the Darius realm has been introduced briefly and there is a hint about his order for Suez Canal digging (Eftekharzadeh, 1998). This canal, which was constructed in Darius era, connecting the Red sea to the Nile River and the Mediterranean Sea, had 4 natural and 3 synthetic sections. The natural sections include Great Bitter Lake, Alligator Lake, and branches of the Nile River. The synthetic sections are the distance between Suez to Bitter Lake, the distance among the Bitter Lake to Alligator Lake as well as the distance between Alligator Lake and Nile branches. The ships traveled to the Nile via Nile branches and to the Mediterranean Sea and beyond (Moradi Qiasabadi, 2009).

The most undestroyed Persian text in this inscription belongs to Shalouf and Kebrit versions. The first part of it has just one row and one word that is Darius. Second part has 7 rows in ancient Persian language behind the Darius also it has 4 rows in Elamite language and 3 rows in Akkadian which has been written behind the Ahura Mazda on the left side of inscription. Third section is contained the command of canal construction (Moradi Qiasabadi, 2009). In this paragraph, Darius has said: I am Persian, I conquered Egypt and commanded to make this canal among the River Pirva and the Pars Sea to ships can move from Egypt towards the Pars and my great dream becomes

true (Tavangar Zamin, 2006). This inscription can be assumed as the oldest political and geopolitical document.

4) Xerxes I Inscriptions

Some of the books of ancient historians are historical novel rather than historical books, so we cannot trust them too much (Arabzadeh Sarbanani, 2023) Therefore, the inscriptions are very reliable. During the 465 to 486 AD, 18 inscriptions remained from Xerxes I that the Persepolis inscriptions have the more information about the ancient Iran geography. Iran's colonies, how Xerxes I conquered them and the suppression of riots have been explained (Tavangar Zamin, 2006).

5) Shapur I Inscription

The famous "Shapur Cameo" is an important object and appears in various studies of Sasanian art, as well as of arms and armour (Skupniewicz, 2022). Shapur I Inscription in is an important object too. This inscription was carved on the order of Shapur I. It has some contents about the Sasanian borders and properties of the adjacent countries. Considering the detail, it can be known as one of the ancient Iran geographic documents (Eftekharzadeh, 1998). In this inscription, moreover, the numbers of Iran's states and colonies have been determined.

D. Ancient Iranian Geographers

Studying and surveying remaining scientific works shows that there aren't spectacular geographers in the ancient Iranian era. However, there are geographical works, remained from that era, which their writers can be assumed as geographers.

1) Ardeshir Era

Ardashir Babakan had been one of Sasanian kings. Some texts from his reign show the country he governed, the natural circumstances and social and political classes. Ahde Ardeshir (Ardeshir Era) is another manuscript, in which, social classes in ancient Iran have been pointed in paragraph 12th and 13th (Hashemi Nejad, 2006).

2) Khosrow I

Lots of scientific texts are attributed to Ardashir I and Khosrow I (Anushirvan), of the Sasanian kings. Anushirvan respected scientists and commanded to translate the Aristotle and Plato's books into Pahlavi language. His book "Andarznameh (Books of Advice)" was translated by Ibn al-Muqaffa' into Arabic (Tafazoli, 2004). The 3rd and 4th sections point to the lands that were captured from Romans. In the section 6, he talks about his journey to the Caspian region and the Caucasus.

3) Isidore of Charax

Isidore of Charax (Ἰσιδωρος ὁ Χαρακηνός) and Movses Khorenatsi are probably the only geographers of ancient Iran. They studied geographical issues directly and professionally. He was from Charax, a city in the Persian Gulf, and lived in early Christian era. His valuable book "Parthian Stations" has a significant importance with regard to the Parthian geography. He described, in this book, the Parthian royal road, which started from Euphrates Zeugma until Alexandria.

He reported about the pearl catching in the Persian Gulf, the Second Mehrdad victory over Scythians and the conjunction of the Parthians' eastern border to India (Jafari Dehaqi, 2003). He spoke, moreover, about a commercial road from Nishapur to the Caspian Sea. This road began from Nishapur to Esfarayen and reached to the Caspian Sea, crossing the Aladagh Mountains (Moshiri, 1994). He also wrote a book about the Parthian geography and talked about a road which started from Syria and ended to Central Asia (Pigulevskaya, 1967).

4) Movses Khorenatsi

He lived between 407 and 492 A.D. in the present Armenia region. He briefly wrote about Iran, Zoroaster and ancient Iran religion (Eftekhar zadeh, 1998; Maksymiuk, 2021). He wrote a book about the geographical condition during the Parthian Dynasty (Bayat, 2000). His contents about history and geography have a spectacular importance and Josef Markwart has written his book based on it (Markwart, 1994).

Conclusion

Iran is one of the ancient countries which has a brilliant historical background although scientific resources, especially geographic ones from its ancient era are limited and few. So this problem needs to be studied precisely. Considering the lack of the geographic resources, these references hasn't been studied completely yet. In the present study, it was revealed that only 6 books have been remained from the ancient Iranian era, with geographic theme, including Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr, The wonder and remarkability of Sagastān, Parthian Stations, Iran Geography, the history of Karkh-e Beyt Salouq and The Chronicle of Arbela. These are fewer than the other contemporary empires such as Rome and Greece where books on geography found in abundance. Some inscriptions, manuscripts, religious books and governmental letters, remained from ancient Iran, can give some unprofessional geographic information; however, they do not mention all sides aspects of geography. Therefore, other geographic resources such Roman and Greek books can be utilized in order to get a lucid knowledge about the geographical conditions in ancient Iran. Considering the abovementioned reasons, the number of geographers is either unknown or was scant except Isidore Charax and Movses Khorenatsi who can be assumed as Iranian geographers.

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منابع جغرافیایی و جغرافیدانان ایران باستان

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چکیده

گسترده‌گی و پیشینه تاریخی درخشان امپراتوری‌های باستانی، محققان را به این نتیجه می‌رساند که ایران باید در آن دوران در حوزه‌های علمی به‌ویژه از نظر دانش جغرافیایی به اندازه کافی قدرتمند بوده باشد. اما آثار علمی باقی‌مانده در عرصه جغرافیایی به اندازه کافی نیست. در پژوهش حاضر تلاش شده است تا منابع جغرافیایی ایران پیش از اسلام بررسی شود. این منابع به صورت کتاب، نسخه خطی، کتیبه و ... است. از میان کتاب‌های اوستا، بندهش، دینکرد و مینوی خرد از اهمیت زیادی برخوردار است. علاوه بر این، شهرستان‌های ایرانشهر، شگفتی و برجستگی سیستان، ایستگاه‌های پارتی و اثر موسی خورناتسی، کتاب‌های جغرافیایی باستانی هستند که درباره مسائل جغرافیایی ایران نیز بحث می‌کنند. نامه‌های ارد شیر بابکان، تدریس و نیز اردوان به شهروندان شوش حاوی اطلاعات جغرافیایی است. برخی از کتیبه‌های ایران باستان دارای مفاهیم جغرافیایی مانند کتیبه داریوش بزرگ، خشایارشا اول و شاپور اول هستند. تنها دو نفر به نام‌های ایزدور خاراکسی و موسی خورناتسی را می‌توان یافت که مستقیماً به جغرافیای ایران پرداخته‌اند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: ایران باستان، جغرافیا، جغرافیدانان، منابع علمی.

