Scythian elements in Old Iranian

ALEXANDER LUBOTSKY

1.1. DURING THE FIRST MILLENNIUM B.C., the Central Asian steppes were inhabited by a group of tribes, called Sakas by the Persians and Scythians by the Greek. They controlled an enormous territory from the banks of the Danube across the Pontic steppes to Central Asia. We do not know whether these peoples spoke the same language, but they presumably were culturally homogeneous, as follows from the archaeological evidence: all over the Eurasian steppes we find in the first millennium the 'Scythian' short sword, the trilobate arrowhead and the so-called 'Animal Style' decoration.

From Classical and Mesopotamian sources we learn that sometime during the late eighth and seventh centuries B.C., the Scythians invaded Media and the Near East and dominated the lands of the Urartians, the Mannaeans and the Medes for several decennia. This period led to inevitable amalgamation. In the seventh century B.C., Urartian soldiers start wearing a Scythian bashlyq, very different from the helmet worn by the Urartians in the preceding centuries. Various peoples of the Iranian plateau and beyond wear Scythian clothing and weaponry at least by the end of the sixth century B.C., as can be seen on the Persepolis reliefs. Scythian influence can further be deduced from the story told by Herodotus (1,73) that the Median king Cyaxares sent young boys to the Scythians to learn their language and the art of archery.

On the basis of extensive historical and archaeological evidence, my colleague Willem Vogelsang convincingly argued in his 1992 book that the Scythians must have played an essential role in the rise and organisation of the Achaemenid empire. It therefore seems legitimate to ask whether we can find Scythian loanwords in the Old Iranian languages, namely Avestan and Old Persian. It must be borne in mind that since all three languages are closely related, it is not simple to prove borrowing. As is well known, Old Persian vocabulary contains many words which must be of Iranian but non-Persian origin. These words are usually attributed to Median, but it is in principle equally possible that they are borrowed from any other Iranian language, including Scythian. Only when we find phonological features which are characteristic of Scythian can we be confident that we are indeed dealing with a Scythian loanword.

Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about the Scythian of that period—we have only a couple of personal and tribal names in Greek and Persian sources at our disposal—and cannot even determine with any degree of certainty whether it was a single language. Our information about Sarmatian and Alanic, which represent the 'Middle Iranian' stage of Scythian, is also practically restricted to personal names, whose etymological analysis is often uncertain. We only get onto firm ground when we consider the historical development of Ossetic, the modern representative of one of the Scythian dialects. In a situation like this, it seems necessary to start from Ossetic and then to move backwards. In other words, we must select Ossetic sound changes which belong to the oldest layer, check whether these are also reflected in Sarmatian and Alanic names, and then hypothesise that they already took place in Scythian. Needless to say, the last step must necessarily remain uncertain. Nevertheless, if we find an apparently Iranian word in Avestan or Old Persian that does not agree with the sound laws of these languages, and if the specific sound change concerned is typical of Ossetic and Sarmatian-Alanic, we may seriously consider the possibility of a Scythian origin.

1. There are two major isoglosses which separate Ossetic from the other Iranian languages, namely Iranian *p > Oss. f and Iranian *ti > Oss. c. Both developments are already found in Scythian names in Greek inscriptions from Southern Russia (1st cent. B.C. to 3rd cent. A.D.), at least if our analysis of the names is correct.

The problem with the sound change *p > f is that the inscriptions write both π and φ, cf. Πολυθεός (Olbia) / Φούρκας (Tanais) (< *pubra-, Oss. fyrčur 'son'); Πυθός (Berezan) / Φιθός (Tanais, Panticapaum) (< *pitā, Oss. fyldi 'father'). Abaev (1949: 212f; 1979: 332) interpreted the π/φ alternation diachronically, but, as indicated by Bielmeier (1989: 240), the different reflexes may belong to different dialects: forms with π are attested in the West (Olbia), whereas forms with φ are found in the East. We may therefore assume that the sound change *p > f was typical of East Scythian dialects.

Assibilation *ti > *τi (with voicing to *dI in intervocalic position) is found in two Sarmatian names from Olbia: Ιωσεθος, which is usually interpreted as Oss. *insαςγ 'Vicentius' (Abaev, IESJ IV, 277; cf. Oss. ysa:3insa:j 'twenty' < Proto- Ossetic *insας < *insati), and, possibly, Кοοζθος, if this is connected

with Oss. k'uz 'puppy' (thus Abaev 1949: 171, who compares the Ossetic personal names K'uza and K'uzag). Here, too, we may hypothesise that the assibilation may already have occurred in Scythian or in some of its dialects.

2. Avestan x'aranah- / Iranian *farman-

2.1. I have recently discussed the etymology and concept of Avestan x'aranah- and its Iranian cognates (cf. Lubotsky 1998), so that I shall only indicate the main lines here.

The best semantic analysis of x'aranah- was given by Sir Harold Bailey in his Ratanbai Kattrak lectures (1943: 1ff.). On the basis of a meticulous analysis of Avestan and Pahlavi passages, Bailey arrives at the following rendering of x'aranah- (p. 29): 'from the primary meaning "the thing obtained or desired" by way of "good things" and "riches" to the "good fortune" assured by riches to the possessor of hvarnah, and thence to "Fortune", a divine (mēnōkikh) hypostasis, and a force bestowing "good fortune" including all success and victory'. In anticipation of the discussion later on, I shall tentatively gloss Av. x'aranah- by 'prosperity'.

Let us look at the major constructions involving Av. x'aranah-. The most frequent formula with x'aranah- is the octosyllabic line ahe (manađoghnam) raiia x'aranahpaca 'on account of his (my/their) wealth and prosperity', which occurs hundreds of times in the Yašt. A typical example is Yt. 3,18 (et passim):

ahe raiia x'aranahpaca tom yazii surumuita yasna
'On account of his wealth and prosperity, I will worship him with audible veneration.'

'Wealth and prosperity' appear together in other formulae, too, cf. raščka x'aranascal, raįgamca x'aranahqmcam, raęuwn: x'aranahpant-. They are attributes of a god, who can bestow them on a devotee. In Yt. 10,108, for instance, Mithra asks:

kahmāi raščka x'aranascal kahmāi tanuwo druauatām azam bašchēi xšaianmō 'On whom shall I, who possess them, bestow riches and prosperity, on whom health of the body?'

Another frequent juxtaposition is formed by x'aranah- and sauua: 'power', cf. sauuača x'aranascal, x'aranapho sauuapho mazdaďāhwe, x'aranō mazdaďāhtem ... sauuō mazdaďāhtem ... etc.

Our knowledge about x'aranah- comes primarily from the Yašt. In Yt. 19, two types of x'aranah- are distinguished: kauaem x'aranō 'the prosperity of the Kavi-dynasty' and ax'aratam x'aranō. The kauaem x'aranō belongs to the gods, who by its power create and preserve the world. It also accompanies the ancient kings and heroes and gives them extraordinary powers. The ax'aratam x'aranō, on the other hand, is described as an object of desire for divinities and heroes,
who constantly struggle for it. Ahura Mazda even prescribes that every mortal should fight for the axvaranah xaranoh. The meaning and etymology of the adjective axvaranah are disputed, but it must mean something like ‘undistributed’.

In Yt. 18, the Aryan xaranah- (airianan xaranoh) is honoured. It was created by Ahura Mazda, is full of milk and pastures and overcomes the daevas and the non-Aryan countries.

2.2. The major problem we encounter when dealing with the etymology of this word is its initial. Whereas Av. xaranan-, Pahl. xvarrah and Pers. sura point to initial *x-, the other languages show initial *f-, cf. OP *farnah- in the PN Vpda-farnanah-, Man. MP and Parthian prh, frh farnah ‘fortune, glory’, Sogd. (Buddh.) prn, (Man.) fn, (Chr.) fn farn ‘glory, high rank’; Bactrian φαρφο (φο) on Kushan coins, Khot. phārā ‘splendour, rank (of Buddha)’, Pers. farr(a), Oss. farnifarnae ‘happiness, wealth, well-being’.

For a long time it was held that the initial f- is due to a specific Median sound-law PDr. *x- > Med. f-. It was assumed that farnan- was borrowed by Old Persian from Median, and then disseminated all over the Iranian territory in the period of the Achaemenid empire. In 1983, however, Skjærvø convincingly showed that the ‘Median’ theory is untenable. His conclusions can be summarised as follows:

a. It is impossible to prove that farnan- is an originally Median word and that there was an exclusively Median development *x- > f-.

b. Forms with f- are attested throughout the whole Iranian territory, whereas *x- is confined to Avestan. Pahl. xvarrah and Pers. sura can be considered loanwords from Avestan.

c. There is no evidence that farnan- was so important in the Achaemenid empire that this term should have been borrowed by all Iranian dialects of that time and replaced the local variants.

I agree with Skjærvø that the distribution of the forms clearly shows that farnan- must be the original form. The initial x- of Av. xaranan- can easily be explained by substitution of x- for fa-, which is frequently attested in loanwords. For instance, in South Russian dialects, f in loanwords regularly appears as x-, cf. xAbrǐča ‘factory’ (Standard Russ. fabrika), xandar ‘lantern’ (Standard Russ. fonar), a borrowing from Gr. φωτισμός; Middle Welsh Chfwerb ‘February’ is a borrowing of Latin Februarius; in Finnish, we find sohva ‘sofa’, kirahvi ‘giraffe’ etc.

Furthermore, there is an important linguistic argument against a Proto-Iranian reconstruction *harna-, which, as far as I know, has never been mentioned in the literature. (For a detailed discussion of the evidence I refer the reader to Lubotsky 1999.) Avestan compounds with second members in *x- normally appear with -st-.ja- after i, u, r, which is a result of the RUKI rule, cf. huaxaqua, 3 sg. pf. *xap- ‘to sleep’; paitīs.xaranah- ‘disturbing noise’; paitiš.xarta- ‘surrounded on all sides’; paitītis.xaranah- ‘jaws’; aifs.xarātha- ‘suitable for consumption’; mainiir.xarātha- ‘reared on supernatural food’; paus.xarātha- n. ‘food for cattle’. The exceptions are very few: apart from three compound verbs, unchanged x- is only found in compounds with *xaranah-.aiši.xaranah- ‘full of xaranah-’; pous.xaranah- ‘with much xaranah-’; viut-i.xarananah- ‘with found xarananah-’; and the personal names dārā.xaranah- and aifs-xarananah-.

Also in the position after -ā, the initial x- of *xarananah- remains unchanged (ušta.xarananah-, vipāš.xarananah-, barō.xarananah-, haamō.xarananah-), whereas, for instance, the initial x- of *xarana- ‘eating’ often appears as -n- (āŋhara- ‘dish, bowl’, haŋhara- ‘cheek’).

This state of affairs clearly shows that the initial x- of Avestan xaranan- cannot reflect Proto-Iranian *h- < PIE *sy-. 

2.3. The insight that *farnan- is the original form opens new perspectives for the etymological analysis. In the following I shall argue that farnan- goes back to PDr. *pariha- and is cognate to Skt. pārīṇas-, which is not only the same morphological formation but has the same range of meanings.

Skt. pārīṇas- n. is traditionally glossed ‘fullness, abundance, prosperity’ and derived from the PIE root *phelh₁- ‘to fill’ (cf. Mayrhofer, EWAĩa, s.v.). For Skt. pārīṇas- we can reconstruct PIE *phel₁- nos-, the expected Iranian reflex of which is *pariha- with regular loss of the laryngeal in inlaut. We shall return to the problem of the Iranian initial f- below, but first we have to look at the actual occurrences of Ved. pārīṇas-. This word is attested only in the Rgveda (all other attestations being Rgvedic repetitions or variants). It occurs eleven times as a simplex and twice in the compound gopariṇas-. Finally, there is one attestation of the adjective or neuter pariṇas-. Among the eleven occurrences of pārīṇas-, we find four times an asyndetic formula rāyā pārīṇasā at the end of the line, three times referring to Indra and once to Agni. A typical example is 8.97,6a-d (other passages are 1,129,9a; 4,31,12b; 5,10,1c):

sā naḥ somaṃ saṃapāḥ
mādhyasva rādhasa suṁñavatā-
ūndra rāyā pārīṇasā //

‘Get intoxicated with our pressed-out Soma-juices, O Indra, Soma-drinker, Lord of power, with (your) bountiful gifts, with (your) wealth and (your) pārīṇas.’

The formula rāyā pārīṇasā is no doubt identical with the Avestan formula (ahelmanalāḫm) raia xarananaphaca and goes back to Indo-Iranian times. Let us now review the other passages with pārīṇas-. At the end of a hymn to the Maruts, 1.166,14, we read:

yena dirghāṃ marataḥ śākāvama
yaṃkana pārīṇasā turasaḥ
ā yut tāttan trpirāṁ jānasa
ebhīr yajñēhīs tād apiḥśīm aśyam //

‘Your pārīṇas-, O Maruts, through which we shall stay powerful for a long time, O strong ones, and which (other) people will try to draw into their surrounding, is what I seek to acquire with these sacrifices as a gift.’
First of all, the passage shows that there is a direct connection between pāriñas- and power (root ści-), which is reminiscent of the Avestan pair suuvatva x'aranasca. Furthermore, we may conclude from the passage that pāriñas- is not simply ‘abundance’, but also some kind of military superiority or sovereignty. The imagery is essentially the same as that of Avestan aštriya x'aranā.

Just like Av. x'aranah-, Vedic pāriñas- is a quality possessed by the gods (especially Indra and the Maruts), which can be bestowed on the devotees. This also follows from 8,21;7:

nāmā ēd ēndra te vāyāmū
vidmā purā pāriñasah  //

‘We of the new generation are dependent on your help, Indra. We have known your pāriñas, not (only) now but also before, O master of the pressing stones.’

A more profane aspect of pāriñas- becomes apparent from 1,133,7a: vanōth ḫī sunvān kāṣyām pāriñasah ‘The presser (of Soma) wins indeed a house of pāriñas-’. The idea that x'aranah- is present in the house of a devoted man follows, for instance, from Y. 60,7: mā yauue ināt mnāanm x'ādrauun x'aranā frasahīt ‘May the comfort-bringing x'aranah- never leave this house’.

2.4. We can now return to the question of the initial f- of Iranian farnah-instead of the expected *p-. Since farnah- is most probably a dialectal Iranian form, it must originate from an Iranian language where *p regularly yields f. As indicated above (§1.2), this sound change is only found in Ossetic and Scythian. The first attestation of the element farnah- in Median onomastics can be dated around 714 B.C. (the reign of Sargon II, 721-705 B.C., cf. Lecoq 1987: 678). At that time, Media was invaded by Scythian tribes and most probably many Median princes and high military officials were of Scythian descent.

We may conclude that Iranian farnah- is of Scythian origin and is cognate with Vedic pāriñas-, as shown by the Avestan and Vedic formulae. The original meaning of Indo-Iranian *parhm- was ‘sovereignty, control’, then ‘abundance’. Avestan x'aranah- is a borrowing from Scythian with substitution of x'a- for the initial fa-.

There are two additional arguments for the Scythian origin of this word.

First, ‘sovereignty, dominion, control over a territory’ seems to be an essential element of Av. x'aranah- and its Iranian cognates (note, for instance, the continuall struggle for a*xaradam x'aranā ‘the undistributed dominion’, described in Yt. 19). Control of a vast territory is especially vital for a nomadic society: it has been calculated that in order to raise 6-7 cows or horses in the Eurasian steppes one needs 1 square km of pasture (Kuz'mina 1994: 205).

Secondly, if we look at the meaning of *farnah-words in all Middle and Modern Iranian languages, we see that the broadest range of meanings is attested in Ossetic, where farnafarnae is not only an attribute of heroes but also refers to the happiness, peace and prosperity, which can be wished for and achieved in every house. In all other languages, *farnah- is in general only a technical term.

2.5. The Scythian origin of x'aranah- has important chronological implications for dating the Avesta, since this word is already attested in the Gathas (x'aranā, Y. 51.18).6 When could the speakers of Avestan have borrowed the word x'aranah- from the Scythians? The answer to this question cannot be definitive, since the Scythians must have been in contact with Avestan speakers for a long period of time. (It is traditionally assumed that the Avesta was composed in Eastern Iran, in Marv or Herat, cf. Hoffmann and Narten 1989: 87.) On the other hand, the Scythes became probably powerful somewhere around the end of the ninth century B.C., before they came to the Iranian plateau and conquered Media. It is therefore likely that the borrowing of the word x'aranah-, which was an important Scythian concept, took place not before the late ninth or early eighth century. This argument thus furnishes a terminus post quem for the creation of the Old Avestan texts. It is only slightly later than the conventional dating, which, on linguistic grounds, places the Old Avesta somewhere around the tenth century (cf., for instance, Hoffmann and Narten 1989: 88 with references). There are also other points of view, however. For instance, Skjervø (1994: 201) assumes that Old Avestan texts were composed in the period 1700-1200 B.C., which is much too early if our reasoning concerning x'aranah- is correct.

3. Old Persian forms with ṭi and the month-name ṭiigraci-

3.1. I have found three Old Persian words containing the sequence ṭi where on etymological grounds we would expect tiːː yadārṭi ‘portico, colonnade’, škautī škautī ‘weak, poor’ and *tīgra(k)a- ‘garlic’ (from which the month-name ṭiigraci- is probably derived, see below). Theoretically, the -ṭ- of the former two words can be explained by generalisation from the oblique cases of an original hysteroodynamic paradigm with *ṭi < *ṭ, in the same way as gātiu- ‘place, throne’ must have got its *ṭi (cf. Av. gātiu, gen. sg. gātūwō, with generalisation in the other direction). In the case of *ṭi we have the additional complication, however, that *ṭi yields OP śćī (e.g. ṭhaṭi > OP haśṭi- ‘true’), so that the ṭ would have to have spread to the strong cases before the development *ṭi > OP ści took place.

6 The passage has received various interpretations, but all scholars agree that x'aranā must be a form of x'aranah-.
7 Traditionally, OP śājaṭiya- ‘king’ has already been seen as a non-Persian word because of its *śia- (allegedly from Pr. *śi-u- > *śu-). As Hoffmann (1976: 637 n. 26) has convincingly argued, however, OP śaṣṭaṭiya- is a vrddhi-formation derived from *śāyaṭha- ‘reign’ with the suffix -ya- < *-iya-.
the oblique cases subsequently generalising the θ on the basis of the strong cases. Although this explanation is not totally generalisable, it is not very appealing either, especially since the hysterodynamic inflection is moribund in Indo-Iranian languages and is only attested in a few archaic words, whereas ‘portico’ and ‘weak, poor’ do not belong to the basic vocabulary. Therefore, some scholars have seriously considered borrowing from Median. For instance, Mayrhofer (1964: 118 with references) writes about duvartī-: ‘das Hinterglied viell. ursprünglich *v(ə)rti-, mit -i- aus obliquen -by-Kasus. Die Lautumgebung wäre medisch’. This solution is of course impossible for *bīgra(k)α-, so that I would rather suggest borrowing from a Scythian dialect with assimilation of *ti > *ti (cf. §1.2) for all three words. The θ of Old Persian may be due to substitution (cf. the Greek rendering of the Old Persian name Aspαcanαy- by Αναοδίναν), but if the borrowing is sufficiently old—the contacts of the Persians with the Scythians may date back to the 8th cent. B.C.—Scythian *θ could have been taken over with *θ or *ς (the same as the reflex of PIE *k), which only later merged with θ in Old Persian. A similar scenario must at any rate be assumed for the name of Egypt, which had an emphatic θ in Semitic languages (Akk. mi-bar-a, Hebrew miqrayim) and which was borrowed by Old Persian in a form like *μυ(d)zraya-> mudraya (cf. Hoffmann 1958: 3).

Let us now look at the etymologies of these words in more detail.

3.2. duvartī- ‘portico, colonnade’ is found in the passage XPa 11f, which reads: bātīy Xşavārdā xšāvādira vašā Ašuramāzdāhā iman duvartim visadahyəm adam akunavaam ‘Says Xerxes the King: by the favor of Ahuramazda, this Colonnade of All Lands I built’ (tr. Kent 1954: 148). It is beyond any doubt that duvartī- is derived from the word for ‘door’. The only moot point is whether duvartī- is a derivative with the suffix -ti- or represents a haplologised compound *duvar-v(ə)rti-, as already suggested by Bartholomae in his dictionary. The communis opinio opts for the latter derivation, but I see no reason for this: the suffix -ti- is of course rare in denominative formations, but since we find words like Skt. pātī-, OP pāstī- ‘pedestrian’ (for the denominal -ti- see Wackernagel and Debrunner 1954: 639ff.), the analysis of duvartī- as *duvar-ti- seems to me perfectly acceptable.

The word for ‘portico’ is also attested with an additional suffix) in MP dʰhlyc [dahlīz], Man. MP dhrz [dahrīz], Persian dahlīz, and has been borrowed from Middle Persian into Armenian (dahlīč).9

3.3. The etymological explanation of skausti-/škauθi- ‘weak, poor’ is problematic. The word is always used in the Old Persian inscriptions in opposition to /tauviyā/ ‘the stronger one’ (DSe 39f.). The initial θ is only found in the Behistun inscription,10 but it is likely to be sprachwirklich, since both skausti- and škauθi- are reflected in Western Middle Iranian, as Man. Parthian škʰw iškʰiθi and Man. MP škʰw iskʰiθi (see Schmitt 1990: 47 contra Wüst 1966: 284 n. 1). The initial š-, which can hardly be explained as a regular IE formation, the vacillation between šk- and šk- and the unclear -bi- clearly point to borrowing; therefore I quite agree with Kent (1950: 40, 52) that skausti- is a loanword.11 It need not be borrowed from an Iranian language, of course, but if it is, we can think of the original *skʰw(ə)tuθi- (assuming again that θ- stands for Scythian -ti-), a derivative with the suffix -ti- from the root *skuθ- ‘to tear’ (see Mayrhofer, EWAθ, s.v. SKAV-). For the formation and semantics we can even compare Oss. skʰyθag/ skʰdθag ‘a torn off piece, scrap, shred’, also used for a ‘torn off, isolated, weak person’ (cf. the examples cited in Aabae, IESOJ, s.v.), which is derived from the verb skʰyνθi/ skʰunun ‘to tear, exterminate’, intransitive skʰyθinθi/skʰuθuθun ‘to be torn, to grow scarce, die out’.12 The only problem is the full grade in OP skausti-, because for a ti-derivative we would expect zero grade in the root (although full grades are also occasionally found, cf. Wackernagel and Debrunner 1954: 630). Since we are presumably dealing with a loanword here, we can also explain it as an adaptation or mishearing of a foreign word. It is conceivable, for instance, that Scythian 욯 was more open than the Old Persian one and was therefore rendered by au.

A similar root etymology (but of course on the assumption of an inherited word) was already proposed by Herzfeld (1938: 307f), who pointed to Av. kutaka- ‘small’. This was accepted by Wüst (1966: 284), who added Lithuanian cognates such as škūtas ‘shred’. Hoffmann (1957: 62 = 1976: 414) also took Av. kutaka- and OP skausti- together, but connected them with the Indo-European verbal root *kauθ- ‘to humiliate’ (Skt. kava- ‘Erniedrigung, Beeinträchtigung, Minderung’, Goth. haunθ ‘humble’, etc.). As for the formation of skausti-, Hoffmann took it as a vrddhi derivative to *skaθuθa- ‘Erniedrigung’, which seems hard to reconcile with the short diphthong in the OP word (cf., for instance, OP ṭaiigraci- in the next section).

8 The semantics of these words is typical of borrowed vocabulary.
9 Incidentally, Slav. *dvorec ‘palace’ may also be an Iranian loanword, but this cannot be demonstrated, since the Slavic word could represent a derivative of *dvore ‘court’ with the suffix *-isko-.
10 For the reading see Schmitt 1990: 46f.
11 Gershevitch (1954: 55) suggested a connection with Sogd. ḟswərd ‘difficult’ on the assumption that -r- is secondary in Sogdian. In answer to my query about the form, N. Sims-Williams wrote to me (26 November 1999): ‘Sogd. ḟswərd is written lkwərθ in Chr. Sogd. Final -θ may be due to metathesis as in kwərd, Chr. kwərd < kʰdθaθa ‘whither’ etc., so ḟswərd is likely to represent *kʰaudra- or *kʰadra-. Since the -r- is constant it cannot be ignored as Gershevitch assumed in 1954. The initial š- can possibly be explained from Ofran. *skh- (see Gershevitch), but of course OP already has the variant škauθ-, cf. MP škʰiθ. I suggest that the OP and Sogd. meanings represent as it were passive and active senses: “subject to oppression/difficulty” vs. “causing oppression/difficulty”. The problem with this etymology is however that the suffix *-raθ- never forms adjectives in Indo-Iranian.
12 The Ossetic skʰyθag/iskʰdθag need not be an old formation, since the suffix -θag enjoys a certain productivity in Ossetic.
3.4. The Old Persian month-name ṭāigracı- (Elam. sa-a-kur-ri-zi-i3) is attested in the Behistun inscription (DB 2, 467) in the gen. sg. ṭāigracals < *t-a-i-g-r-e-i-i3. This is the third month of the pre-Zoroastrian calendar (May-June), corresponding to Aram. Sivan, Akk. Simanu. As a result of the studies of Justi, Eilers and Wackernagel, there is now a kind of hesitant consensus on its reading, formation and etymology (cf. Brandenstein and Mayrhofer 1964, Sims-Williams 1991: 178, etc.).

The first step was taken by Justi (1897), who pointed out that Old Persian ṭāigracals is ‘ein mit Vydhi gebildetes Beizwort zu “Monat”’. Justi further considered *ēgra- to be the ancestor of Modern Persian sīr ‘garlic’, with the same sound development as in tīr ‘arrow’ < *ti-gri-. He analysed *ēgra-as a compound ‘Knoblauch-Sammler’, containing the root ci- ‘to gather’, and explained the name of the month as ‘der Monat der Knoblauchsammler’. Justi further stressed the important role of garlic in the ancient world and mentioned the Persian Sīrsūr ‘feast of garlic’. As to the etymological connections of the apparent Proto-Iranian *ēgri-, Justi mentioned Skt. śīrura- ‘Moringa pterygosperma’ (horseradish tree) (Sū+14) and sāigraca- ‘its fruit, ben-oil (pressed from its seeds)’.

Justi’s explanation was originally met with enthusiasm (for instance, it was accepted by Horn, GIP, 1/2: 85, and by Bartholomae), but gradually a more sceptical attitude became prevalent: Meillet and Benveniste (1931: 163) call *ēgri- ‘d’origine obscure’ and Kent (1953: 55) says ‘etymology uncertain’, although on p. 187 he refers to Justi. The situation has changed since the publication of Eilers’ work on the name of the Persian New Year festival (1953). Eilers accepted the major elements of Justi’s explanation except with respect to the formation of ṭāigracals. Developing ideas expressed earlier by Marquart (1905: 126ff.) and Justi (1897: 247), Eilers has shown that several months of the Old Persian calendar are named after the festivals which were held during them: Bāgayādi- (the seventh month) after *bāgayāda- ‘(festival of) the offering to Baga’, Āciyādiya- (the ninth month) after *āciyāda- ‘(festival of) the fire-offering’. Eilers therefore assumed (p. 43) that ṭāigracals contains the feminine suffix *ci- ‘zu einem maskulinen Eigenschaftswort auf -ka gehörig’ and means ‘die mit Knoblauchverbundenen (Zeit)’; however, he recognised the problem that the feminine gender is rather unexpected since the Old Persian months seem to be masculine declensions qualifying the noun māḥ- ‘month’ (Kent 1953: 55).

3.5. I would like to add to the discussion on OP ṭāigracals - a piece of Ossetic evidence, which, to my knowledge, has never been mentioned in this connection. One of the Ossetic spring festivals is cyrvisse/cyrvesen, in Iron also called Aynæng (after the Greek saint Aδηνηγ, cf. Aabaev, JESOJ, s.v.). This festival marks the beginning of the mowing season. In the excellent book by Čibirov on the Ossetic agrarian calendar, we find the following description (1976: 193; translation mine): ‘Nobody among the Ossetians is allowed to start mowing when he chooses, until in July all the inhabitants of a village and district come together for a celebration, called Aynæng. During this festival, the old men after long deliberations decide whether it is time to start mowing. When the day is set, it is announced that whoever takes a scythe in his hands before this date will be responsible for bad weather.’ The festival is always held on a Sunday, whereas the actual mowing starts on Monday or Tuesday depending on the local tradition.

The formation of ṭāigracals was further clarified by Wackernagel (cf. Wackernagel and Debrunner 1954: 303), who saw that Indo-Iranian vydhī derivatives often substitute -i- for -a- in the second member. Among Iranian examples such as Av. māzdaiasni- ‘belonging to the Mazda-worshippers’ to mazdaiasna- ‘victory’ to varāθra+yā ‘victory’, he also mentions the Old Persian month-names bāgay专业人士- aḏukani- and ṭāigraci- (spelled thus). In other words, ṭāigracals must be analysed as a vydhī-formation ‘(the month) belonging to the θ.-festival’. The name of the festival cannot be determined with certainty, but it was most likely *ēigraka- or *ēgriacals.

One of the Benennungs motive for ‘garlic’ is the arrow-like shape of its shafts. For instance, English garlic, OE gærlec is actually ‘spear-leek’ (OE gær ‘spear, lance’). It is therefore attractive to assume that Pers. sīr and, possibly, OP *ēgра- are related to Ir. *ēgri- ‘sharp’, *ti-gri- ‘arrow’, which would mean that these words are borrowed from an Iranian, presumably Scythian, language with the regular development of *ti- into *fi-. An additional argument in favour of the Scythian origin of this word is the fact that garlic is native to Central Asia (Encyclopaedia Britannica). It is possible that Skt. śīrura- ‘Moringa pterygosperma’ also belongs here as an Iranian loanword. Its connection with ṛgvedic Śīrura, the name of a people (see n. 14), remains hypothetical, although not impossible.

13 The Persian garlic festival Sīrsūr, during which people eat meat with garlic in order to keep off the Jinn and send children to school to learn a trade (Steingass s.v.), is held on the 14th of Dādy (Eilers 1955: 42), i.e. in December. Since the time schedule of the festivals may have changed during the centuries, this does not invalidate the connection.

14 Cf. Wust 1966: 135ff., who further adduced Skt. śīrura- (QV), the name of a people, and, possibly, Av. sīpūre (in comp. sīpūre cyтра ‘of S. origin’) < *śīrura-.

15 Sims-Williams 1991: 182 recently adduced Sogd. n’wśrēč, Chorasmian น’ว’ร’ช (apud Biruni), which point to *Nāvasa-rdačya- ‘(month) of the New Year festival (*Nāwa-sa-rda-ka-i3)'.

16 In the Encyclopaedia Britannica, we find the following description of Moringa pterygosperma: ‘The drumstick tree, also called horseradish tree, small, deciduous tree, of the family Moringaceae, native to tropical Asia but also naturalised in Africa and tropical America. Drumstick trees can reach a height of about 9 m (30 feet); they have coryck gray bark, branching, fernlike leaves, and scented clusters of white flowers. The dagger-like fruits sometimes are 45 cm (18 inches) long. Flowers, pods, leaves, and even twigs are cooked and eaten. A horseradish-flavoured condiment is prepared from the crushed roots. Ben oil, extracted from the seeds, is used by washmakers. Perfume makers value it for its retention of scents.’ It seems attractive to suppose that the tree has got its name from the dagger-like (or spear-like) fruits.
Similar festivals also take place elsewhere in the Caucasus, in Georgia, Abkhazia, Ingushetia etc. 17

The name of this festival is usually interpreted as a compound meaning literally ‘[time for] taking up the sharp [things]’; cf. Abaev, IESOS, s.v. cyry: ‘vrem’ja, kogda berutsja za ostro’ (t.e. za kosy, na’co senokosa) (‘time when people take up the sharp things, i.e. the scythes; the beginning of mowing’). The first part of the compound is cyry/cir’y ‘sharp, sharp thing’, 18 which is a regular reflex of PIr. *tigra-. The second part is isyn/esun (from PIr. *tiyasa- + *-ana-), a verbal noun to isyn/esun ‘to take’. 19 This transparent analysis has a strong flavour of folk etymology, however. It remains a distinct possibility that the original meaning of the festival was ‘collecting garlic’. When the Ossetians took to using a different word for ‘garlic’ (iron nury from Georgian niori; Digoror bodan < PIr. *boudana- ‘smelly’), 20 they no longer understood the name of the ancient festival. As a result of the reinterpretation, cyry/isyn/cir’yesen has become one of the names of the mowing festival.

This brings us back to Justi’s idea that the old name of the festival may have been *bigra- ‘garlic collector’. Wüst (1966: 151f.) has argued that this interpretation of bigra-bigra- is morphologically impossible, since the root ci- ‘to gather’ is anit and all root nouns of this structure have a final -t in Indo-Iranian. 21 This argument does not hold if we are dealing with a loanword, however. Scythian may have lost the final -t very early, so that the word was taken over into Old Persian as an i-stem. In Ossetic, where the verb *ci- was replaced by isyn/esun, the original compound *tigra-čit may have been remade into the virtual *tigra-dyasa-ta > cyry/isyn.

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17 In Georgia, for instance, June or July is called tibisay ‘month of mowing, a grass-month’ (cf. Gippert 1986: §3.3).

18 In Modern Ossetic, the word for sharp things in general is cyryag/cir’yes.

19 Abaev, IESOS, s.v. follows Miller’s derivation of the verb from PIr. *tigra- ‘to rule’, which is implausible because this root does not appear in the full grade in Indo-Iranian. Abaev further considers possible contamination with PIr. *yas-, but this is an unnecessary complication: PIr. *d-jasa- (an inchoative to *d-jam-) can regularly yield Oss. isyn through the stages *dajas-t > *dajista (East Iranian shortening before *s) > *sajista (Oss. syncope, for which see Cheung 2000) > Oss. isyn/esun.

20 Sergey Starostin points out to me (p.c.) that the Darginian and Lezgian words for ‘garlic’, Darg. surar, Lezg. sorg, are likely to be borrowed from Alano-Sarmatian *cigr’ ‘and not related to Proto-East-Caucasian *swW’, as hesitantly suggested in Nikolaeve and Starostin 1994: 972), thus indirectly proving that Oss. cyry originally had the meaning ‘garlic’.

21 Incidentally, Justi himself saw the difficulty, but in his time it was not certain that this rule applied to Iranian as well.

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