

THE OXUS CIVILIZATION (BMAC) AND THE LOCATION OF MARKHASHI AROUND 2300-1800 BC.

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The problem of the location of ancient Oriental place names in cuneiform records has attracted the attention of scholars since a long time. A number of places located East of Mesopotamia are mentioned in cuneiform sources of the late third and early second millennium. They are quoted in relation to the acquisition of some resources or to diplomatic or political events. Some of these lands or countries are identified quite clearly, if not always precisely. Such are Elam, Awan, Anshan and Simashki in the in South and South West Iran. Such are also Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha in the Gulf area, up to the Indus valley and Harappan civilization. Tukrish is perhaps to locate in the North West of Iran and Aratta in the Kerman province. What is the situation about the identification of Markhashi?

It is clear that, in later periods, Old Babylonian, the country of Marakhshi or Barakhshi was relocated in an area closer to Mesopotamia, perhaps in the Zagros.

But at the end of third and beginning of second millennium, Markhashi was definitely a country independent of Elam and Mesopotamia, situated in an area East of Elam. Some hypotheses have been put forwards by various scholars. Steinkeller locates Markhashi in Kerman and Vallat in "Iranian Baluchistan". The purpose of the present paper is to discuss the various former hypotheses and to propose a location in Central Asia, identification with the Oxus Civilization (BMAC).

All the historical records of the campaigns of Akkadian and Ur III kings in the East, all the lists of countries, all the "exotic" minerals (metal, stone), plants and animals point towards a country East of Elam and close to Makan and Meluhha. A close examination concludes that no one of the realia mentioned allows locating definitely Markhashi but they permit to propose the Oxus Civilization as an alternative working hypothesis to Kerman.

As stated by Steinkeller: "Markhashi was a major political power, which controlled the eastern section of the Iranian Plateau and acted as an intermediary between Mesopotamia and Elam in the west and Meluhha in the east".

Historically, the country is mentioned only from the reigns of Sargon to Ur III and not after Hammurabi. This is precisely the period of flourishing of the Oxus Civilization according to the best and most updated chronologies of Bactria and Margiana. After 1800-1700 a phase of decline occurs, obvious in the long distance relations.

Geographically, the Oxus Civilization was largely expanded in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Tadjikistan, that means North and South of the Hindu Kuch. It had its borders, defined by location of archaeological sites with materials well identified, in Eastern Iran in Nishapur area, in Seistan in Nad-i Ali (bordering with Magan), in Baluchistan at Mehrgarh Nausharo (bordering with Meluhha) and in NE Afghanistan at Shortughai (again bordering with Meluhha) . This is exactly the expected location.

Culturally, the material recovered from the sites of Margiana and Bactria includes many precious artefacts and art representations imported from, or parallels with, Mesopotamia and Elam on the one side and Indus civilization on the other side. On the West, the international relations of the Oxus Civilization extended as far as Anatolia and Syria, as we know now. This fits well with the role of intermediary country on long distance relations and exchanges proposed for Markhashi. However, this is not yet sufficient for preferring the Oxus Civilization rather than the Kerman for Markhashi.

The Kerman hypothesis for Markhashi is now weaker since the recent very important discoveries of Jiroft and Halil Rud in Kerman (Iran). These sites have their flourishing and their Mesopotamian connexions at a time earlier than the BMAC. On the other hand, no strong or direct Indus Civilization connexion is attested. Kerman seems definitely better suited for identification with Aratta (Madjidzadeh) or with Simashki (Vallat) for example.

The Oxus Civilization hypothesis finds also a strong support by the location by Moorey of Tukrish in NE Iran. This country is placed by the text called the "Geography of Sargon" "between Markhashi and Elam". The Mesopotamian and Syrian recordings of lapis lazuli and of precious coloured inlaid metalwork as coming from Tukrish may concern the blue stone from Afghanistan (of course) and the precious jewellery with coloured inlays from the Oxus Civilization, well known from the tombs Bactria and Margiana. The technique of the goldsmith is specific and the mineral resources and gems of the Bactrian mountains were controlled by the Oxus Civilization, as we know.

Linguistically, no direct link can be traced from Markhashi to Avestic Mouru or Old Persian Margush. But specialists linguists have proposed that Markhashi was the transcription of an original Warakhshi or Warghushi. More investigations are necessary and only more archaeological material, new texts and fresh interpretations can settle the question.

Therefore no definitive argument concludes the discussion, but the Oxus Civilization hypothesis is at present to be considered seriously, thanks to the Turkmenistan excavations and the discoveries of Professor V.I. Sarianidi and his team.

MARGUSH AND THE INDO-EUROPEANS

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In June 2003, Victor Sarianidi made us the great honour to deliver a conference at the College de France. Facing an audience comprising all the French scholars interested in the past of Iran and Central Asia present in Paris, he detailed the last results of his Gonur excavations, fresh from the dig. They were impressive, indeed astonishing, even for those who were acquainted with his precedent discoveries and who, like me, had be lucky enough to see under his guidance the dig going on.