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THE OXUS TEMPLE: LOCALIZATION OF THE AVESTAN VAHVI DĀITYĀ

The article describes an attempt to determine the localization of the Avestan river Vahvi Dāityā using archaeological materials from the Oxus Temple (southern Tajikistan). A comparative analysis of archaeological materials and written sources makes it possible to identify the Amu Darya River with the Avestan Vahvi Dāityā.

Keywords: *Oxus Temple, Takht-i Sangin, Avesta, Vahvi Dāityā, Amu Darya.*

The Oxus Temple represents one of the largest structures of Oriental architecture and is an important Central Asian historical and cultural monument dating to the second half of the 1st millennium BC. The Oxus Temple is situated in the Kobadian Region of the Khatlon Province, Republic of Tajikistan, on the right bank of the Amu Darya (the Greek Oxus) below the confluence of the Vakhsh and the Panj (the zero point). The Oxus Temple is located on the territory of the Takht-i Sangin fortified settlement (late 4th century BC – early 3rd century AD) (Litvinsky, Pichikian, 2000: 181–182). Excavations of the temple began in 1976. Until now scholars have not been able to come to an agreement concerning the structure's function, whom it belonged to (to the Bactrians or to the Greeks), and whether it was dedicated to the River Oxus (Briant, 1990; Boyce, Grenet, 1991; Bernard, 1992, 1994; Sherwin-White, Kuhrt, 1993; Litvinsky, Pichikian, 1996, 1998; Litvinsky, Pichikian, 2000; and others). This article attempts to trace connections between the Oxus Temple and the Vahvi Dāityā, one of the major Avestan rivers associated with many historical events described in the Avesta.

In the Avesta*, the Vahvi Dāityā (Vahvuyā Daity-ayā, Vahvi Dāityā (Bartholomae, 1904: Sp. 730, Sp. 1350)) is mentioned in Yasna (49.7), Vendidad (1.2, 2.20–21, 2.19), Ormuzd Yasht (1.21), Arədvī Sūra Yasht (5.17, 104, 112), Tishtar Yasht (8.2), Drvasp Yasht (9.29), and Ard Yasht (17.45, 49.61). In the late Zoroastrian source Bundahishn**, written in Pahlavi, the river is called Daitik (Bd. 20.1, 13–14) and Veh-rōt (Bd. 20.1–6). The text also has it that this is the World River which flows through Aryānām Vaejā (Middle Persian Ēranvēj). The name of the river is interpreted as “good Dāityā” (Bartholomae, 1904: Sp. 1350; Benveniste, 1933–1935: 268).

The problem of localization of the Vahvi Dāityā first began to interest scholars in the 19th century, but there is still a lack of consensus regarding this issue. Most scholars identify the Vahvi Dāityā with the Amu Darya (Yule,

*In this article, the English, Russian, and Persian translations of the Avesta will be used (The Zend-Avesta, 1880, 1883; Avesta... 1998; Bundahis-i Hindī, 1989).

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1872: XXIII; Bailey, 1932: 952; Benveniste, 1933–1935: 271; Christensen, 1943: 25; Duchesne-Guillemin, 1962: 143; Bartold, 1965: 319; Nyberg, 1975: 510–18; Boyce, 1975: 144; Abaev, 1990: 202; Boundahis-i Hindī, 1989: 35; Pyankov, 1996: 14; Steblin-Kamensky, 1978: 72–73; 1999: 6). Key arguments are related to the fact that the Avestan name of the river in the Bundahishn is ‘Veh-rōd’, and are based on linguistic analysis of the hydronym in its comparison with some modern place names (Markwart, 1938: 52; Steblin-Kamensky, 1978: 72–73; 1999: 6). The name of the river in the Middle Persian texts is also compared to the hydronym Oxus found in Ancient Greek sources (Yule, 1872: XXIII), and, finally, the fact that the proposed localization is connected to events described in the Avesta (Nyberg, 1975: 510–518).

The identification of the Vahvi Dāityā with the Vakhsh is explained by the fact that the name of Wakhan (Wax) is derived from the Ancient Iranian ‘vaxšu’ (Morgenstierne, 1938: 433), which is also identical to the Ancient Greek Oxos, that is, to the name of the Vakhsh, primarily used for the lower reaches of the Amu Darya. I.M. Steblin-Kamensky (1978: 73) believed that according to the logic of historical phonetics, this etymology is unconvincing.

Several other hypotheses exist. Based on an analysis of Middle Persian writings, the Vahvi Dāityā is identified with the Wakhandarya, the left constituent of the Panj (Inostrantsev, 1917: 893). Based on the list of peoples from Herodotus, some scholars have come to the conclusion that the Vahvi Daitya was one of the Khorasan rivers Tejen (the Hari Rud) or the Atrek (Masson, 1967: 173; Khlopin, 1971; 1983: 32–37, 44). Having analyzed the sources from Antiquity and compared them to the Avesta, I.V. Pyankov tentatively identified the Vahvi Dāityā with the Kunduz (1983: 66). S.G. Klyashtorny made a “geographic review” of Aryānām Vaēja based on the Avestan texts, which resulted in his identifying the Vahvi Dāityā with the Syr Darya (Klyashtorny, Sultanov, 1992: 25). Referring to the localization of the place name “Raga,” F. Grenet associated the Vahvi Dāityā with the Panj (2002: 199–202).

I. West identified the Vahvi Dāityā with the Indus, relying on Armenian sources of the 7th century, which state that the Persians called the Oxus “Vehrud” and placed it in India (see (The Bundahis, 1880: 77, rem. 7; Ibid.: 80, rem. 5)). J. Darmsteter identified the Vahvi Dāityā with the Araxes (the Aras) in Transcaucasia (see (The Zend-Avesta, 1880: 3, rem. 3; Ibid.: 5, rem. 2)) on the basis of the localization of the Aryānām Vaēja and information provided by Herodotus (I, 202; IV, 40; III, 36; IV, 11) indicating the Oxus and the Aras were one and the same river. The same view was held by J. Herzfeld (1930: 56). Relying on information derived from Pahlavi sources and medieval Arabic sources, A. Jackson (1899: 41, 197, 211) identified the Vahvi Dāityā with the Kyzyl-Uzen or the Sefid-Rud in Northwestern Iran.

The present author’s opinion on this matter has been expressed in previous publications (Khojaeva, 2000: 52–54, 65–71; 2003: 70–79) and concerns the identification of the Avestan Vahvi Dāityā with the Amu Darya based on new data. All previous suggestions have mainly been based on written sources; here the issue is addressed for the first time within the context of archaeological findings from the Oxus Temple.

The original core of the Avesta was created in the era of Zoroaster and Vištaspā, and the main events involving these figures took place near the banks of the Vahvi Dāityā (Yashts, 5.104; 8.2; 17.45; 49.61). The Avesta speaks of sacrifices which played a huge role in the life of the Ancient Iranians and which were made near the Vahvi Dāityā (Yashts, 5.112). If this is the case, then confirmation should be sought among archaeological materials.

The Avesta is a multilayered text with various parts being created at different times. Thus, the Arədvī Sūr Yašt which is mostly concerned with sacrifices is dated to the 6th–4th centuries BC–2nd century AD (Braginsky, 1956: 193; 1972: 101; Kellens, 1988; Abaev, 1990: 202). This date coincides with the time when the Oxus Temple functioned (6th–4th centuries BC – 4th century AD).

Ancient Greek sources also contain information about sacrifices made by the Persians, that is, the Ancient Iranians, “and with earnest prayer they (the Persians) offer sacrifice in a purified place, presenting the victim crowned...it is especially to fire and water that they offer sacrifice” (Strabo, XV. 13–14); “They likewise make offerings to the sun and moon, to the earth, to fire, to water, and to the winds. ... the man who wishes to make a sacrifice brings his victim to an area of ground which is pure from pollution, and there calls upon the name of the god to whom he intends to make the offering” (Herodotus, I. 131, 132). Perhaps the Oxus Temple was just such a “pure” place. The transformation of sacrifices using the example of the Takht-i Sangin should be more closely examined.

The Oxus Temple is a good example of a ritual monument with the altar of fire and special pits for collecting the bones of sacrificial animals (Pichikian, 1979: 89; 1982: 81; 1983: 104; 1984: 109). In addition to the pits, bones were found in many areas of the temple. A particularly large number of bones was found in the southern part of the temple; the assemblage included several dozen dedicatory objects (arrowheads) (Pichikian et al., 1977: 571; Pichikian, Dubrovin, Sarabyanov, 1978; Pichikian, 1982: 79; Litvinsky, Pichikian, 1981: 206–210).

Excavations conducted at the Oxus Temple in recent years (Druzhinina, Khudjageldyev, Rott, 2008; Druzhinina, Khudjageldyev, 2009; Druzhinina, Inagaki, Khudjageldyev, 2010) have provided new materials confirming the ritual character of the bones of animals

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