

THE DOMAIN OF ZARATHUSHTRA

[Pronounce a as in Fun; ā as in Far; e as in Fed; ē as in Fade; i as in Fill; ī as in Feel; o as in For; ō as in Fore; u as in Full; ū as in Food; ãñ nasally as in the Avestan word avāñ; ěñ as in the French ‘trés bien’; õñ nasally as in the French ‘bon voyage’; ũñ nasally as in ‘Humayũñ’. Please note BCE (for BC) refers to Before Common Era and CE (for AD) to Common Era]

These articles are presented courtesy of the FEZANA Journal, Fall 1995 & 1997.

[While trying to locate in the huge land mass the possible situation of the place of birth of the Prophet and his diocese all searches have centred around the identification of the Holy River Daitya, on the banks of the which Zarathushtra’s people lived. I have tried to discuss the various sources of information - historical, scriptural and of course the time-honoured traditional sources. Part I with its accompanying maps, has limited aims in that it restricts the search only south of the River Jāxārtes (Avestan: Yuwākhsh-ārtā).

There is, however, an equal body of opinion, which tries to trace the possible location of the Prophet’s birthplace somewhere in the vast hinterland north of the River Jāxārtes. This has been discussed in Part II entitled “The Domain of Zarathushtra - revisited” with additional maps.

Both articles have endeavoured to identify the location of the River Vanghui Daitya and to try and delve into geographical indicators hoping to recognize some characteristics of the River Daitya and the adjoining land of his peoples’ settlements as alluded to in our scriptures]

Part I

The Domain of Zarathushtra

*“As geography without history
seemeth a carcass without motion,
so history without geography
wandereth as a vagrant without habitation.”*

---John Smith in his ‘General Historie of Virginia’.

The land mass of Ariānā:

The domain of our Prophet lay somewhere within the huge land mass, which was situated between the **Avestan Zariāspa (Vedic: Thattā Kush/ Modern: Hindu Kush) Mountains** in the east and the eastern shores of the **Sea of Varkāna (Greek: Sea of Hyrcāniā/ Modern: Caspian Sea)** in the west. (See Map 1 below)

Appōlōdōrus (little is known about his life except that he thrived during the early part of the 2nd Century BCE & died sometimes after 150 BCE), who travelled extensively towards the East, initially triggered off Hellenic interest in this area. But it was **Strābō** (born at Amasia in the Pontus in 66 BCE-24 CE) who described in great details, in his ‘*Geographia*’, saying this land-mass encompassed the three lands of **Bactria, Sogdiānā and Hyrcāniā** (the Aryan Holy lands celebrated in the Young Avesta).

The vast hinterland of ‘**Āriānā**’ (**Avesta: Airyānā**) he wrote extended from the tapering ranges of the **Himalaya Mountains** in the East, to the shores of the **Sea of Hyrcāniā (Avestan Varkāna)** in the West; from the entire length of the **River Oxus (Avestan: Wākhsh-Āpa)** leading up to the **Aral Sea (Sea of Islands) in the North**, to the southern outskirts of the **Avestan Zariāspa Mountains** along an arbitrary line to the southernmost reaches of Hyrcāniā, including to the south the region of the **Ālbōrz Mountains**. South of this arbitrary border lay **Haraivā (Gk: Āriā)** and the great expanse of the **Salt Desert**. East of the Zariāspa Mountains lay the northwest frontiers of **Haptā Hindavā (Avesta: The land of the seven rivers. Modern Panjāb: The land of the five rivers)** and **Gandhārā**

(Avestan: **Vaēkērēta**, Modern: Southern Afghanistan and the adjacent Frontier Province). Beyond the arbitrary borders in the North lived the cattle-rustling predator tribes of the nomadic **Scythians** (Avesta and Vedas: **The eastern Sākās**), the **Dāhaē** and the **Turānians**.



He spoke of **Bactriānā** (Avestan **Bāgdhi**; Modern northern Afghanistan and adjacent Turkistan) in glowing terms, quoting his predecessor Apōllōdōrus as having said that 'the land of **Bactriānā** was indeed the ornament of all **Āriānā**.' Bactriānā is blessed, he wrote, with such advantages that would make it very far from remaining uninhabitable. He said that each vine produced a *Metrete* (3/4ths of a *Medianus*) of vine and each fig tree 60 *Mediani* (one *Medianus* = 12 imperial gallons - dry weight) of fruit, that the grains of wheat which fell from the husk on the earth, automatically sprang up the following year as plants and that beehives were found in trees, whose leaves flowed with rich honey.

In the north the **River Oxus** (Avestan: **Wākhsh-āpa**; Pāhlavi **Wākhsh-āb**; Gathic: **Vanghui Daitya** on whose banks Zarathushtra had received his revelation) divides Bactriānā from Soghdīānā. The veneration prescribed for water as a creation was, in the Prophet's time, concentrated chiefly on the divinised waters of this river Vanghui Daitya. This Oxus river (of the Greeks) was said to be in such easy navigation that the wares of India were brought up to the Sea of Hyrcāniā (the main stem of the Oxus River is surprisingly described as emptying into the Caspian Sea, rather than into the Aral Sea – the Sea of Islands) and thence, by various other rivers to the districts near the Euxine Sea (Avestan: **Kārā Sea**/ Modern: Black Sea). The land was so fertile that it produced almost everything except olive oil.

The country of **Sogdiānā** (Avestan: **Sughda**), lying to the north of the Oxus River was not as rich and fertile and being mostly composed of sand was sparsely populated. The cities he described were Bactra, Adraspa and 'many other cities equally beautiful.' (Strābō. The Geography of Strābō - trans. by Hamilton H C & Falconer W, p.1, 112).

The **City of Bactra**: **Avesta: Bākhdhi**, earlier called **Zariaspa** because of the river of the same name flowing along it and emptying into the Oxus and the name of the adjacent mountain ranges, too. In the later cuneiform inscriptions at Bēhistun however, the Achaemenian word is **Bākhthri (Pahlavi: Bākhthriš)**, the western Semitic influence having converted the 'DH' to 'TH'. Further, during the late Sassānian period, the word becomes **Bākhli** and **Bākhhal**. (It is interesting to note that among the 34 consonants of the alphabet the letter 'L' does not exist in the Avestan alphabet, but it does so in the Pāhlavi alphabet. In the Khordeh Avesta the pronunciation 'L' occurs only in the Pāzand portions of the prayer recitations). It was only during a later period that a new City gradually arose to the south & east, called **Bākh**. (Rawlinson H.G., Bactra - History of a forgotten Empire 1912, pg.1). The Gathic City of Bākhdhi, the Capital City of King Vishtāspa's kingdom has been mentioned on two occasions in the Avesta: -

1. **Vāndidād 1.7** says "the fourth best land and city I, Ahurā Mazdā created was Bākhdhi, of such elegance that its national banner is proudly raised high and mighty in order to help counteract the evils of pestilence, of destruction and of harmful intent.
2. **Vāndidād 1.8** places Nisā between Mouru and Bākhdhi.

The **City of Rāghā**, the birthplace of the Prophet and the major place of his ministry, as far as its geographical location is concerned, has been shrouded in profound obscurity, its location in the land of Bactria not having been pinpointed in relation to the major geographical features of the land. This is further compounded by the vagueness that has enveloped the history of Bactria itself. However, it has been mentioned thrice in the Avesta.

1. **Yasna 19.17** says: "What constitutes the four social classes among the citizens? These are the priests, the warriors, the husbandmen rendering prosperity to the country and the artisans."
2. **Yasna 19.18** says: "The land, generally the domain pertaining to Zarathushtra was Rāghā of the four Zarathushtrian Chiefs. Who are these four Chiefs? They are firstly the Lord of the House, secondly the Lord of the Borough, thirdly the Lord of the Province and finally the Lord Zarathushtrōtēmā (the Pontiff) in Rāghā.
3. **Vāndidād 1.16** says: "The twelfth land and city I, Ahurā Mazdā created was Rāghā of the three intellects, counteracting the evils of pestilence and of sinful non-believers.

As **conquests and migration** proceeded further westwards, the original Rāghā of the east was conveniently 'displaced' westwards into Mānda (Gk: Media), the (new) Rāgā (also called Rāyē). Obviously, orchestrated claims and counterclaims were instigated by the local priestly attendants of the region, who adopted early traditions of the faith to enhance the sanctity and renown of their own shrines and temples, succeeding among the local believers in gaining wide credence. It was then that the **Greeks of Babylonian times** after the conquest of Cyrus the Great, conveniently misplaced Zarathushtra (their Zoroaster being for them the first and the greatest Magus). Zarathushtra was even assigned to Babylon by the Greeks and was therefore improperly called the 'Chāldēan'.

Greco-Roman views:

The **later Macedonians and Pārthians** after the conquest of Alexander (Gk: Rāgae) put in claims, generally familiar in Greco-Roman times, of conflicting legends alleged to have been recorded within Iran itself, the scene of Zarathushtra's religious activity coming from Āzarbaijān, Pārthiā, Soghdiā, Siēstān, and the city of Merv in Mārgiānā, plainly at the instigation of the local priests seeking to further the cause of their own sanctuaries so as to make them major centres of pilgrimage.

Islamic period:

During the early Islamic period unfounded claims in the **Shāhrēstānihā-i-Ērān** described King Vishtāspā's son, Isphandiyār as having built the new part of the City of Rāyē, where Zarathushtra was born, and founded an Ātash Kadēh there. In the later Islamic period in the Shāhnāmā the source of such bizarre claims was the **Khwādaē Nāmag - the Book of Kings**. Bactra, it was falsely put down as built by King Vishtāspa's father, Lōhrāsp (Avestan: Aurvāt-Aspa) where he founded the Great Fire "Ādar Burzin Mēhēr", thus bringing the Bactrian Rāghā to the west and placing it in Media. (Boyce M., Zoroastrianism 1992 p.18, 19).

Allusions in Avesta and Pāhlavi texts:

There is no clear indication in the Avesta or the Pāhlavi Texts about the exact location of King Vishtāspa's capital. The geographical allusions, assisted by other references do point towards the East, more specifically the land of Zariaspa/ Bākhdhi as Zarathushtra's place of origin for the dissemination of his Gospel.

Zāmyād Yasht, 5.66 to 69 appears to suggest the place described is the region adjoining the Zariaspa Mountain range and the rivulets forming the Zariaspa River.

Āvāñ Yasht, 5.112 & 113 talks of King Vishtāspa's brother, Zairi-vairi offering sacrifice for victory in battle over Arējāt-aspā by the banks of the River Daitya and asks for a boon from 'the most beneficent Divinity of Waters, Arēdvi Sura Anāhitā.'

There is one clear reference in the **Bundāhishn** too which locates the scene of the battle against Arējāt-aspā being in eastern Khorāsān. (Jackson A V W, Zoroaster-The Prophet of Ancient Iran 1965, p.208-211)

Part II

The Domain of Zarathushtra, revisited

In the previous article, Part I of "The Domain of Zarathushtra" I had speculated the possibility of Zarathushtra's 'diocese' and the initial influence of his teachings having been prevalent mostly in an area of the vast expanse, south of the (present) River Jāxārtēs. My thoughts were mainly based on assumptions made from material in the much later surviving Pāhlavi writings (which are mainly citations, excerpts and commentaries) and on some of the mistaken thinking of the Graeco-Roman and Islamic periods. This second part is again a speculative search based on clearly omitted discussions on the other possibilities of the Prophet's domain being situated north of the River Jāxārtēs (Yuwākhsh-ārtā). Let us, then, re-explore and delve more closely into his domain, however shrouded in mystery it might appear to remain]

The ancient homeland:

Zarathushtra was born among the **Gāthic Airyās (Vēdic Aryās)**, the descendents of the proto-Indo-Iranians who, it would appear, inhabited (during his lifetime) part of the land occupying the northernmost areas of the vast Inner Steppes of (modern) part of the massive hinterland of Eurasia. Their inhabited Primal Homeland was known to them as **Airyānā Vaējāh – Vaēja refers to the origins/the seeds. Vedic equivalent is Baēja (Vēdic Homeland: Āryā Avartā).**

The migration:

As migration much after the death of the Prophet (in search of greener pastures and more amicable climes) proceeded and continued southwards and westwards (the Vedic Āryās mainly southwards and eastwards; some also moving westwards to Mittānni, (K)Hātti.... etc), they adjusted to the settled environment and mingled with the alien host populations. The memory of the exact location of their ancient Homeland, gradually, over the subsequent centuries and millennia, became enveloped in obscure mystery but they retained a tradition, placing their homeland somewhere far away (to the north of the River Jāxārtēs) in a north-easterly direction.

The Holy River Daitya:

Allusion to the passage "**Airyānā Vaējāh of the Daitya Vanghui**" (**Vendidād**, Fargard 2, verse 21; **Āvāñ Yasht**, verse 17 and 104, **Rām Yasht**, verse 2..... etc) is interpreted in the extant Avesta as "*the expanse of land*" irrigated by "*the good waters of the River Daitya*", which were channelled by the toiling of the tillers and watered also by the seasonal inundation of the river. In the present format of the **Āvāñ Yasht** (verses 9 and 10) the Prophet is credited as having been "*well known in the land of Airyānā Vaējāh*" (later Middle Persian - Ēran-vez; modern Gujarati word, a name - Arnavāz).

In his dialogue with Ahurā Mazdā Zarathushtra was urged to *"offer prayers along the banks of the river carry the libation of the waters and honour the waters with words of invocation and praise"*. In the **Zadsparm** (Chapter 22, verse 1 and 7) he is said to have *"received enlightenment on the banks of the Daitya"*. The **Greater Bundāhishn** (Chapter 35, verse 54) testifies to the fact that he *"first commenced his teachings to his people who lived along the banks of that River"*. In the **Vāendidād** (Chapter 19, verse 2) Zarathushtra prepares himself to *"combat the assault of the Evil one by sacrificing on the banks of the 'good daitya' "* [in the much later (Young) Avesta, **Āvāñ Yasht** (verse 104), *"the purity of the waters are, however, attributed to the immaculate Arēdvi Sura Anāhita"*].

The, later, misrepresentation of the Gathic Holy places in the neo-settlements:

Although in the extant Hymns of the Gāthās no names of these places occur, allusion to them does occur in the later (Young) Avesta, which contains verses of history and geography of the era of Zarathushtra and of the more ancient, pre-Zarathushtra times. To these ancient verses were added verses by subsequent generations of (well-meaning) priests who, thus inadvertently, created distortions of the ancient history of events and of places in favour of their own interpolations, thus promoting a gradual loss of the previous portions of 'tangible' legends and ending in a 'misrepresented whole' with other 'extraneous piled up material'. One typical example of this process of accretion can be seen in **Fravardin Yasht**, which is largely of pre-Zarathushtra origins but is admixed with names of Zarathushtra's times and of the many post-Zarathushtra generations of the prophet's followers, added in layers as time passed by. Similarly the names of the various original Airyānic settlements and of places of the pre-Achaemenian era, occurring in the Fravardin Yasht and other pre-Zarathushtra Yashts, seem to have remained unfamiliar or even unknown during the later conquests further southwards and westwards.

This suggests that the **generation after generation addition of names and places continued to occur in layer after layer until the Yashts, as we know them in the present format, ceased to change at some period in the post-Achaemenian times**. Consequently, it may be safely surmised, the original names of places the Prophet would have frequented did exist, but in a time and place far away from those described in and mentioned in the later (Young) Avesta, the Pāhlavi texts and those of the much later Graeco-Roman and Islamic periods.

While attempting to refute the claims of Airyāna Vaējāh being placed south of the River Jāxārtēs, it should not be presumed either that the ancient places named in the Avestan Texts were mythical. The 'transfer' of namesakes of ancient Avestan places to the neo-settled lands, south of the Jāxārtēs, were clearly orchestrated, the emotional claims having been instigated by local priestly attendants of the shrines and temples to maintain their close ties with the faithful and succeed in gaining wide commercial credence to inflate their coffers.

Let us study some of these **examples of misplacements of place-names:-**

1. **Mount Hārā** had been remembered even in the Greek inscriptions of a post-Achaemenian Greek temple in **Cappadocia** praising Thea Anaitis as 'barzoxara' (Anāhita of high Hārā).
2. **Mount Āsnuvant** was clearly confused with Mount Sabalan, the highest peak in Ādzerbaijān, to which place the ancient Avestan Adar Gushnāspa was also 'transferred'. The nearby town of **Urūmiyā** was also misidentified with the birth place of Zarathushtra and the adjoining Lake Urūmiyā with the **Avestan Lake Chaēchēsta** to fit in with the complete picture of the nearness of the Lake, the Mountain and the Fire, as in the ancient Avestan texts. Adjoining the nearby town of Ganzak, the capital of Ādzerbaijān, a smaller lake was wrongly named **Lake Haosravāh**, from the ancient Avestan namesake, an offshoot of the Sea Vourukasha.
3. **Lake Kansaōyō** was 'misplaced' as Lake Hāmūn in **Drāngiānā**.

4. Kai Vishtāspa's father, Lohrāspa (the Avestan Aurvāt-aspa) was incorrectly claimed by the Bactrians as having built the **city of Bākh** in Bactria and then founded the great fire, Adar Burzin Mēhēr. This claim was, in turn, 'challenged' by the (post-Achaemenian) **Parthians**, who declared that the fire, Ādar Burzin Mēhēr was founded by Vishtāspa in a temple (near **Tūrzhish on Parthian territory**) in the front portion of which Zarathushtra himself planted the Cypress Tree of Kashmar (later cut down in 861 CE by the orders of Caliph Jā'far al-Mutāwāqqil).

5. The **Sogdians** claimed that their capital, **Samarkhand**, was built by Kai Kāus (Kavi Usān of the Avesta) and by Siyāvakhsh (Kavi Syāvarshan of the Avesta). Further, they said, it was in Samarkhand that Zarathushtra came to the court of Vishtāspa.

6. The land of **Rāghā** of the Vəndidād, too, was 'transferred' via Bactria to become the Rāgā of the Medes (the holiest place of the Medes; present place, Rāyē in South Teheran) and during the Graeco-Roman period Zarathushtra's birthplace even became **Babylon**.

7. **Lake Frazduna**, on the banks of which Kai Vishtāspa sacrificed asking for a boon from the holy Arēdvi Sura Anahitā, was transferred to **Siēstān** during Achaemenian times.

Similarly, several other ancient Avestan places and events were 'misidentified' with the newly settled name-places during later migrations and conquests by claims and rival counter-claims made by the priesthood in Media (Mānda), Āzarbaijān (lesser Media), Margiānā (Marv), Arachōsiā (Harakhvaiti), Drāngiānā (Siēstān) and even Khwārezm (Chorasmia), Sogdiā (Sughda), Bactriā (Bākhdhi) and Haptā Hindavā. Firdowsi in his Shāhnāmā, unfortunately, gave the ultimate credence to the various distortions of our Avestan history and the name-places.

The Gāthic 'Settlements':

What then were the **Airyānic society and the way of life during the Prophet's time** like, in such a distant land of the Airyās?

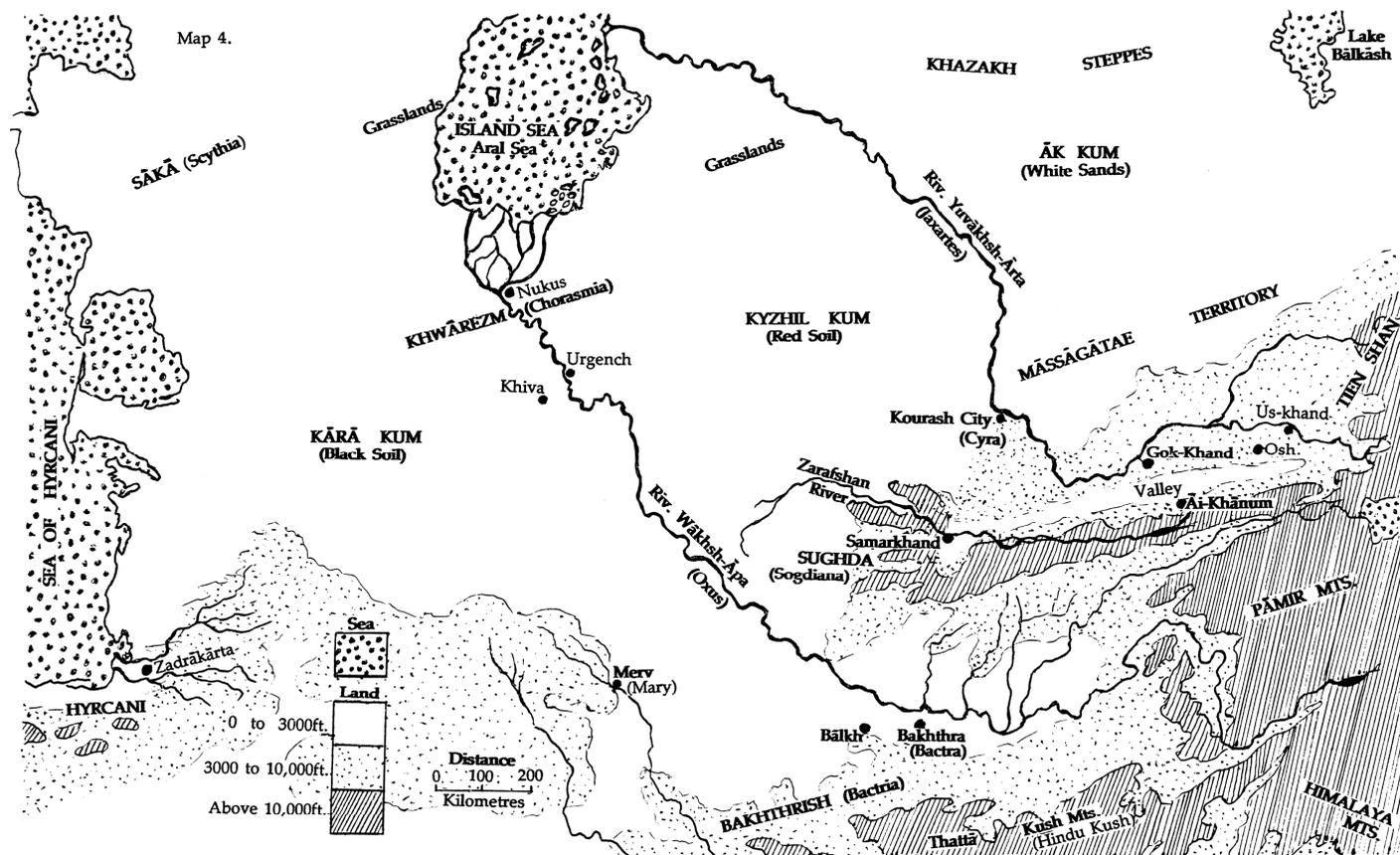
The Gāthic people: From the Gāthas, the Ahunāvar and the Ashēm Vōhu prayer and the Yasna Haptanghaiti it appears that there lived a fairly **homogenous group of people**, with some differences in the owning of wealth. There were no alien outsiders [the 'anairyas' of the later Zāmyād Yasht (verse 68) and Āshtād Yasht (verse 2)]. There was some religious diversity, too.

Their social life: An **orderly social life** in each settlement composed of family, village, and clan and own land (with its borders well delineated) existed, each probably inherited from an illustrious ancestor. The power was in the hands of a '**Khshathra**', the **Ruler** and a '**Sastar**', his **Commander-in-chief**. The **rich Lord Master** was the tribal chieftain, the '**Ahu**', the overseer of properties.

The **herdsman was the 'vasterya'** and the **household**, comprising of cattle and men, was the '**pāsu-vira**'. The **family home, 'dēmāna'** was a fixed abode for the **extended family 'khvaētu'**. There seemed to be no class or trade distinction. Zarathushtra described his followers simply as "**men and women**", the women always being on an equal par with the men.

Their beneficent animals: Of the five varieties of **hoofed domestic animals** (the horse, cattle, camel, sheep and goat), the **camel 'ushtra'** and the **ox** were harnessed to pull the laden cart, apart from riding and the **horse** was employed in riding and in driving the chariot. The **cow 'gāva'** was as much respected as the **productive land - Mother Earth** was. Among the **non-hoofed animals the domestic dog** (as opposed to the wild and corpse-eating dog - the wolf) was particularly esteemed for its faithfulness and duties in the homestead and the adjoining farm. The water-dog, the **otter** was named for its useful fur as appropriate clothing in a harsh climate. There was no indiscriminate killing of this friendly animal but an observant culling was done at the right age in its life cycle, which coincided also with the richness of its fur.

Among the domesticated **birds** the **rooster-'parodars'** was particularly so honoured that it could not ever be sacrificed for food.



Their way of life: Zarathushtra's people were, therefore, non-nomadic settled herdsmen with enough cows (gāva) and domestic beasts of burden (offering milk, meat, hide and labour) to till their amply watered soil. There existed a structured way of life based entirely on the slow cycle of the soil. The general picture we obtain is essentially one of a peaceful way of life in a soil-based social order in the '*land of Airyāna Vaējah of the good Daitya*'. There were, naturally, some who chose not to fall into this orderly pattern of society - the offensive ruler '*duzh-khshathra*', the non-herdsmen among herdsmen '*fshuyasu afshuyantō*' (Gatha Spenta-Mainyu, 49.4) and the non-pastoralist '*avastrya*' (Gāthā Ahunavaiti, 31.10) in wicked opposition to the pastoralist '*vastrya-fshuyant*'.

The forests adjoining the settlements:

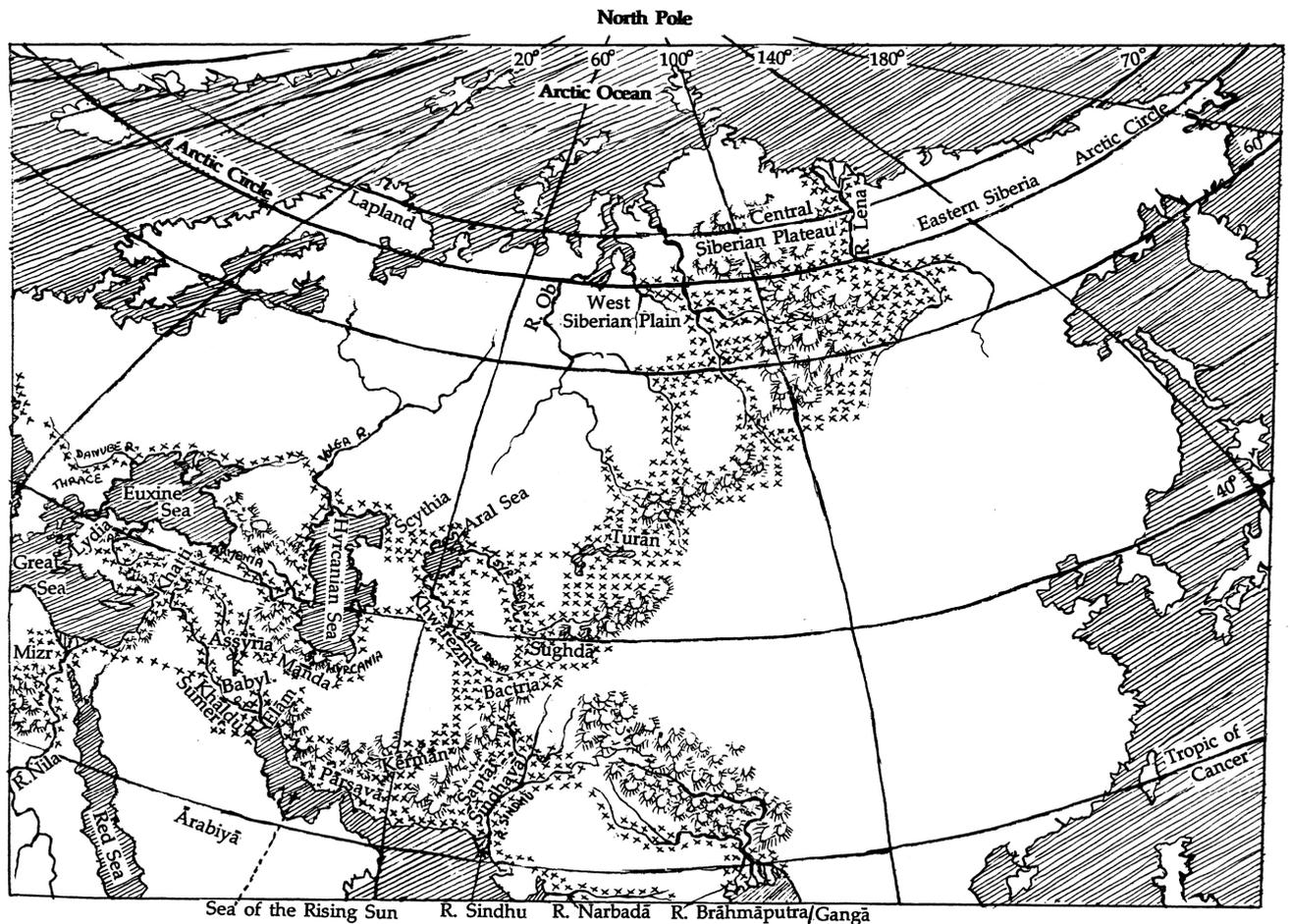
Surrounding such inhabitations were dense 'forests of the Airyās' and 'White forests of birch trees' [typical of the mid and northern steppes of (modern) Kazakhstan].

Archaeological findings:

Soviet archaeologists have identified **three cultures of the 2nd millennium BC (over a vast area of pastorous grassland and wooded forest regions)** similar to the above mentioned Gathic society. The **Abachevo culture** along the banks of the *River Don* and east bank of the *River Volga*; the **Srubnaya culture** along the west bank of the River Volga up to the *River Ural* and finally the **Andronovo culture** from the River Ural towards western Siberia. All three have much in common where lived people of diverse but closely inter-mingled ethnic groups.

Those specifically in the **Kazakhstān region were proto-Indo-Aryans and proto-Iranians** of the Andronovo culture living off the alluvial soil, watered by the *Rivers Ob, Lena and many smaller rivers and tributaries*. In the Sintasha diggings were found skeletons of horses, sheep, dogs and cattle (some in the collective burials) along with select parts of chariots (**the earliest known chariot remnants of the Inner Asian Steppes were dated 1600 BC**) and tillers' implements, clay vessels and pottery (nomads do not use clay vessels and pottery) and copper and tin implements. They were

obviously pastoralists, who tended cattle and sheep and goats and who kept dogs for herding and hunting. The region comprised of rich grasslands and dense forests, some abounding in the **white-barked birch trees** (the 'White Forests'- '*spaētinish razuraō*' of Rām Yasht, verse 31). They used **horse drawn chariots** and lived in closely packed rows of houses in **extended families**. The riding of the domestic horse, in this region of the chilly north wind, had to be accompanied by **appropriate clothing for the rider** - trousers, knee-length boots, long-sleeved jackets and protective tight-fitting headgear with ear flaps.



Map 1. PATTERN OF EARLY INDO-ARYAN TRADE, MIGRATION & CONQUESTS.

Reasonable inference:

The close relationship of the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age elements of the Andronova culture, of its way of life and of (in many ways) the geography to that of the Gāthic culture of the Airyās seems to be a **reasonable justification to attribute to this region (the mid and northern Eurasian Steppes) the most likely origin of the Gāthic and Vēdic Indo-Aryan peoples**. There is some evidence to suggest that **Zarathushtra's Airyānic people lived in an area north of the zone inhabited by their cousins, the Vedic Indo-Aryans** - the Āryās, who were, then, beginning to move into Central Asia, South of the River Jāxartes. It was after Zarathushtra's death that his people too began their long march, southwards and westwards. Enough material with clear pointers does not exist for it to be possible to pinpoint a more precise place for the Prophet's 'diocese' in this vast area. The Map (above) indicates this region has several plains quite adequately watered by the two major rivers – River Lena and River Ob. There are no scriptural pointers to help us decide which of these two main stems or their many tributaries could have been the Daitya. The Jaxartes was 'far away' from Airyana Vaeja even during the time of the Prophet. Our 'long march' had not begun. Such are the mysteries in the history of our most ancient scriptures.

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