THE EARLY MUSLIM GEOGRAPHERS ON THE
ETHNIC SITUATION IN KHURASAN
(IX-XIII centuries A.D.)

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The ethnic problematic does not represent an independent object of studies in the Islamic geographical literature of the 9th up to 13th centuries. It occurs incidentally along with a description of provinces and towns, in cases when a geographer considers the ethnic definition of population in any locality as one of the characterological peculiarities of the area. Some geographers pay more attention to ethnic points, others - less, or simply don't touch the problem at all, in any context. All that, of course, creates the impression of a motley of mixed data, which can not set up the full picture of the population in the lands of Eastern Iran and Afghanistan during the early-Islamic epoch. However, the summarized information helps a historian to define more precisely the settling regions of the principal ethnic groups.

The conception of the main nation, i.e. the Persians, in Muslim geographical literature has been influenced by the ancient Iranian state doctrine, which granted to Zoroastrian Persians the prominent role amidst the other, subjugated nations in the vast territories between the Euphrates and the Hind.

In the middle of the 10th century, al-Masudi in such a way outlined the regions with predominant Iranian population: mountainous districts of Media and adjacent provinces, Azerbaydjan (i.e. genuine Iranian Azerbaydjan) up to Armenia; Arran and Baylaqan up to Darband; the coastal Caspian provinces Shabaran, Tabaristan and Gurgan; Ray, Masqat (Eastern Oman); Abarshahr (Nishapur), Herat, Merw and other provinces of Khurasan; Sistan, Kerman, Fars, Akhwarz (Khuzistan), "and the rest of Iranian lands, adjacent to this area at present". All these provinces made up in the past one power with one sovereign, one common language and insignificant differences between dialects. Among the Iranian languages the geographer indicates the Pahlavi, the Dari and the Azari (al-Masudi, pp. 77-78).

It is not difficult to admit that the term "Persians" in the above context means a totality of all Iranian-speaking people in the lands of Eranshahr in the Sasanian and early Islamic periods.

The relativity of al-Masudi's general scheme will be obvious if we collate it with information given by other geographers on the peoples in different regions. At the end of the 9th century al-Yaqubi mentions Iranians (al-'ajam) in Tus, Nishapur, Serakhs, Merw, Herat, Bushendj and Sistan, that is in the Western provinces of Khurasan (al-Yaqubi, pp. 277-281). But according to the same source, the Persians are living there side by side with the Arabs: in Tus there is a settlement of the Arabs of Tay, but the Persians make up the majority of the population; in Nishapur and Serakhs live the Arabs and the Persians (a quantitative attribution is omitted); in Merw - "the nobility of Iranian dehqans" and the Arabs of Azd, Tamim and other tribes; in Herat - "the Persian nobility" and the Arabs; in Bushendj - "a mixture of the Iranians" and not many Arabs; in Sistan - the Iranians, the majority of whom pretend to be of Yemenite origin.

The geography of the Persian and the Arab settlements in the work by al-Yaqubi doesn't cover all the territory of West Khurasan. It seems, that the author's aim was not so much to illuminate the ethnic situation in this or that region, as to assign the Arab people in the area. His information on the subject points out the results of the Arab migrations to the East during repeated campaigns against the infidels.

In the opinion of al-Yaqubi and some other geographers, the Arabs were not an ordinary phenomenon in Khurasan and neighbouring provinces, and therefore writers tried to fix the large masses of a foreign population. In other geographic sources Arab settlements in Khurassan exceed the limits, outlined by al-Yaqubi. So, al-Muqaddasi at the end of the 10th century reports on the Arabs in Khulm of the Balkh province ("Khulm is a small town, inhabited by Azd tribe")¹, in Simindjan of Tokharistan ("Its population consists of Tamim")², in the woody region Khast of the Nalkh province ("there are Arabs there") (al-Muqaddasi, p. 560.6x813.8

ALIY KOLESNIKOV

303). Mahan of Kerman province in the work by al-Muqaddasi is introduced as an Arab city (Ibid., p. 462).

The Persian contemporary of al-Muqaddasi - the anonymous author of “Hudud al-Ālam” (“The Regions of the World”) - states only, that there are “many Arabs” in Herat and that 20 thousand Arabs in the deserts of Guzganan are engaged in breeding sheep and camels; he notes in addition: “These Arabs are more wealthy then other ones dispersed through all Khurasan” (Hudud al-Ālam, text: fol. 19b, 21a). Although being well-informed about the Arab settlements in Khurasan, the author found it necessary to limit his report by remarking on the abundance of Arabs in one of the main cities of Khurasan (in this case - Herat) and their mode of occupation in another regions of that province.

As an indirect characteristic of the ethnic situation in any province may be regarded as a source of information on the spoken languages in the concerned area. Of course, the speaking of Arabic does not obligatorily presuppose Arab origin; on the contrary, a prevalence of Persian speech testifies to a majority of Iranian population. Up to now, the best medieval description of the language situation in Khurasan and Mawera-annahar in the second half of the 10th century can be found in the work by al-Muqaddasi (p. 334-336). It had been translated in to Persian by Muhammad Moin and placed as an Introduction to the well-known dictionary by Muhammad Tabrizi (Borhān qāte, vol. I, pp. 43-44).

European scholars as a rule restricted their studies in the linguistic excursus by citing the short passage and remarking on the importance of al-Muqaddasi's information for learning the Khurasanian dialects. Meanwhile the text itself deserves more detailed illustration. While omitting the fable about the functional purposes of different languages and the greater part of description of Mavera-annahar dialects, we include our English translation of the excursus: “They are speaking various languages. As to the language of Nishapur (one has to admit that) it is fine and clear, but they put kisra in the beginning of words and add ya, for example (they say) bigā, bīšāw. They add a useless san, for instance (they say) bīxurdastī, bīgufīstān, bīxuftastī and so on. There is mildness and persistence in it. The inhabitants of Tus and Nisa have a better language. The speech of the population of Sistan is characterized by hostility and enmity. They throw out words from their breast and speak loudly. The language of Bust (population) is better.6

The language (of the population) in both Merws (i.e. Merw and Merwurd) is not bad, but they are used to lengthening the end of phrases. For instance, when Nishapurians say barā-ye in, they (Merwians) utter be tarūn-e in, i.e. “for this”. They add one letter and it looks proper. The language of Balkh’s population is the best language, but there are bad words in it. The speech of the Herat population is wild.4 They give themselves airs, behave aggressively and expel swear words....

All that (i.e. the above-mentioned languages, or rather - dialects) makes the basis of the Khurasanian languages. The others follow them, branch off from them or revert to them. So the language of Tus' and Nisa’s inhabitants is close to the speech of Nishapurians. The languages of Serakhs and Abiwerd’s population are close to Merwian.5 The language of Gardj al-Shar takes a middle position between the Heratian and Merwian languages, and the language of Djuzdjan - between the Merwian and Balkhian ones.6 The languages of Bamian are close to the Balkhian, but there are obscure words in them.

The speech of Khorasmia’s people is incomprehensible.7 In the language of Bukhari-ans are to be found reiterations, and one can’t catch their speaking (while they say): (a'ṭaytu) yak-i diram-i and ra'aytu yak-i mard-i. The others say only a'ṭaytu diram-i.8 Moreover they add in conversation the word dānisīt without need.

However the Dari language for that reason is called “Dari”, because it is suitable for composing the sultan’s edicts and dispatches, addressed to him (sultan). The term goes back to dar, which signifies “royal court”. Dari means a conversational language at court”.

The cited passage shows, that al-Muqaddasi has been well informed in the linguistic situation of Khurasan in his time. The description of dialectal differences and the author’s partiality for one or another dialect introduce him as an inhabitant of Khurasan or as a person, who was living in that area for a long time.

According to the information by al-Muqaddasi, the boundaries of diffusion of the Persian in Khurasan enclosed the territory from Nishapur and Tus in the West upto Bamian and Tokharistan in the East, from Merw and Amudarya in the North to Sistan and Bust in the South. The occasional setting off of townsman’s speech against countrymen’s conversa-