THE EARLIEST ATTESTATION OF THE TOPONYM
AFGHANISTAN AND THE LEGEND OF THE
ORIGIN OF THE AFGHANS

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The Afghans, or Pashtuns, like many peoples who are deprived of an ancient literary tradition, have very vague ideas about their origin. Very often their legends have a late religious attribution or include obvious anachronistic genealogical information, e.g. they connect their origin with a Jewish chieftain called Qays.

One should stress in this connection, that for various reasons and in various periods the genealogical folk stories of the Iranian peoples often refer the origin of the given people, as a rule, to a Semitic ancestor; it became even a certain locus communis. And many authors of the past have followed this tradition as well. Josephus Flavius, a Jewish author of the I c. A.D., for example, reckoned among the Semitic peoples not only the Persians and Bactrians, but even the Armenians. In more later times V.B. Pfaf considered the Ossetes a Semitic tribe, and Sir Henry Rawlinson said the same about the Gurans, etc.

One can explain this tendency by the efforts of Christian historians to derive the origin of well-known peoples from a Biblical forefather. For instance, Movses Khorenatsi (V c.), considers the Parthians (or their first king Arshak the Brave) as descendants of Father Abraham’s grand son Emran (Zimran). According to him: «3LIy.u?w?...» Khorenatsi made use of the Biblical story about the off-spring of Keturah, Abraham’s concubine (Gen. 25; 1-6); he also quotes as a proof the words of God addressed to Abraham and his wife: “I will make nations of thee and kings shall come out of thee” (Gen. 17, 5-6; cf. 17, 15-16).

The so-called genealogical “semitization” is widely attested also within the tribal traditions, especially among the nomadic and seminomadic ethnic groups of Western Iran: many Kurdish, Luri and Bakhtiari tribal genealogies, e.g., claim the Semitic origin of these peoples. This phenomenon, of course, has nothing to do with historical reality and is purely legendary, being determined, evidently, by the tendencies of the artificial archaization of ethnic origins. To some extent, this tendency has probably influenced the mentioned view of the origin of the Afghans, according to which, they are descendants of the patriarch Qays (Pathan), the chief of the Israelites of the Ghor region (in Afghanistan). When converted to Islam, Qays got a new name (Abd-ar-Rashid) from the Prophet Muhammad. Contradicting this, the information of the same Afghani authors (13-18th cc.), based mainly on the “History of the Afghans” by Ne’amet Ullah-khan, shows that Qays Abd-ar-Rashid (Pathan) must have been living...
in the 11-13th cc. However, the legend about Qays, likely, reflects an earlier tradition. Tovma Artsrouni, an Armenian historiographer of the 9th century, reported a remarkable legend on the origin of the Pashtuns or of another East-Iranian people inhabiting Afghanistan. Describing the beliefs of the Hephthalites, the nomadic Skythian tribes, Artsrouni adds: «Քայսը զիջից հայ տեղակայված զարդարվել է Վաֆիանի համար, տփաստակ է եղել Հայաստանի հյուսիսն ու հարավն իրավապանում առնվազնի» ("I got to know about this from many persons being called Շառիկ'. Accidentally I met them who had come from the land of Apkastan..."). As far as I know, this is the oldest attestation of the toponym Afghanistan in written sources, as the European orientalists are still searching for this name in 10th century Arabic sources.

Artsrouni's Apla[n]stan phonetically reflects the original *Afyanstan; in the 9th century Armenian language, especially in its written tradition, the phoneme /f/ was replaced by /p`/ or /p/: the phoneme /l/ in Armenian has a later origin and first appeared in the Middle Armenian period. Although in the 9th c., during the compilation of Artsrouni's work, this phoneme may have existed in the vernacular language and in dialects, nevertheless literary tradition for a long time avoided it, replacing it by the "normatives classic" substitute, i.e. p or p`. At the same time, Artsrouni's Apla[n]stan, evidently, may come from *Apla[n]stan, as a result of secondary dropping of -n- before -s-, or due to a scribe's error.

The Apla[n]stan of Artsrouni cannot be a different country, because the mention of the Hephthalites themselves hints at the region of "Eastern Iran", where Afghanistan is found. As to the term šaxrik', it certainly reflects a Middle-East-Iranian (Sogdian or another) form *šaxrïk (M.Pers. šahrlk), which, perhaps, means "aboriginal". According to Hr. Acharian, šaxrik' is from pl. šahrik-k' "noblemen".

Artsrouni says that the newcomers from Apla[n]stan land whom he met in Armenia (?) “instead of our remote forefather Adam regarded as the first man a certain camel driver, the son of Shurrel, who had been disgusted with an unknown country... then driven out from there with his wife, had come and become their chieftain” («Ղազարերը իրենց նպատակով ու առաջին անգամ վճառել են վարզան, որին գտնելով հայրենիքում, բարձրորակություն վճառելու հետևում կարելի էր կարճ ժամը գնել թագավորների մեջ դառնալ»). This is probably a local version of the legend of the expulsion from Paradise. As to the mentioned "unknown country", it, as those Shakhris thought, was found near the world's topmost mountain, beyond which there lived no human being («Ջխարիս ինձ է ներկա ամռանքի բարձր, որից այնքան քան երբ ունենալիք մարմնի»).

The only common feature between Artsrouni's legend and the tradition about Qays is the forefather's arrival in Afghanistan from a distant country. The latter, preserved in Afghan historiography, says that all Pashtun tribes come of three sons born in wedlock (Sarban, Gòrgyzh and Batan) and the fourth, step son (Karran or Karlan) of the patriarch Qays. They are, in turn, the ancestors of the Pashtun four tribal confederations: Sarbani (Dorrani), Karrani, Gòrgyzh and Batani (Gilzay).

Analogically the Parthians were divided into four principal confederations: Sureni, Kareni, Spahpeti and the royal family (Varazi). According to Khorenatsi, in the I c. a mutiny arose between the children of the Parthian king: “Because the king Aršavir