

Geography of Iran

Ancient Iran's Geographical Position in Shah-Nameh

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Iran is the most familiar name that the reader of "Shah-Nameh" (A poetry book by the well-known Iranian Poet Ferdowsi) encounters. This name has been repeated over 800 times in this book. Now, where does this name in Shah-Nameh refer to? Most certainly, the readers of this poetry book have realized the vagueness of this term, geographical-wise. What are the borders and boundaries of Iran in this book? This vagueness is primarily due to the nature of this book, in which as a national epic, the spatial and temporal dimensions are of no value. As they say, an epic should not be limited in time and space, because the clearer these aspects, the clearer the incidents. In this case, the epical stories get closer to "History" and their epical values diminish. This vagueness we sense in the geographical names becomes a norm, when you read this book. For instance if we don't know where Alborz Mountain is, many other names linked to it will be left in ambiguity. The way we used these terms, make them unclear.

Maybe, the 2nd reason for this ambiguity is that Iran only has natural borders in the south. It is not limited with natural boundaries like other states, which are in the form of islands or peninsulas. We should find the third reason in the following note:

Iranian ancestors were living in a land called "Airyana Vaejah" prior to coming to Iran plain. The researchers believed this plain was located at Caucasus northern plain and old Kharazm. However, the majority of contemporary researchers believe that the Aryan tribes were resident in the upper parts of Yenisei river at Siberia.

The geographical names that Iranians referred to, prior to moving to Iran plain are projected in the book "Avesta" (The holy book of Zoroastrians). These names have an epical aspect in Avesta. For instance, the Alborz Mountains mentioned in Avesta is not the Alborz Mountains we are familiar with. The name Alborz in Shah-Nameh has the same connotation as Alborz in Avesta.

In this article, we want to glance at the word "Iran" in Shah-Nameh. We intend to find its boundaries and present an explanation for this word in the ancient stories and Ferdowsi's book.

The first time that we encounter the word "Iran" in Shah-Nameh is during the Kingdom of Jamshid. Prior to that, in the times of Giomars, Hushang and Tahmoures, they were referred to kings of the world, or just "kings". The times of these kings coincides with the beginning of civilization. Giomars makes clothes from furs. Hushang rekindles fire, makes iron by heating the stone with fire and produces tools for human needs. Tahmoures makes clothes out of fleece and tames animals. Hence, they belong to humankind and have been known as the fathers of civilization, such that after these three kings, Jamshid makes warfare from iron, excavates gold and silver from mines, makes ships and invents other artefacts. Meanwhile, even in the period of Jamshid's rule, there is no reference to the name Iran. It is mentioned in his last days which coincide with Zahhak's appearance in Shah-Nameh. It is then that the reader realizes there are two lands: Iran and Arabia. Meanwhile, Jamshid refrains from praising the Almighty, God turns away from him and people support Zahhak. It is at this section that the title of "King of Iran" is first stated.

It is surprising that the title of King of Iran is first referred to a non-Iranian king, the Arabic Zahhak. But the first Iranian person who clearly calls herself an Iranian is Faranak, the mother of Fereydoun. Realization of the word Iran as a specific land starts from the early days of Kaveh and Fereydoun's revolt, which coincides with the final days of Zahhak. This word gradually finds its way and separates itself from Arabia and India. Meanwhile, during the late days of Fereydoun, Shah-Nameh's geography is further established. In this manner, the reader realizes that Fereydoun is the king of the world. However he is stationed in Iran and there are other countries such as Turkistan, China, Morocco and Rome. Fereydoun divides the world between his sons. He hands over Rome and Morocco to Salam, Turkistan and China to Toor, Iran and Arabia to Iraj. It is from this period onwards that Iran finds its geographical status in Shah-Nameh. Its northeastern boundaries are gradually established. We find out that Amu Darya separates Iran and Turkistan. This fact has been mentioned several times in Shah-Nameh and

Turkistan's king Afrasiab has mentioned it repeatedly.

Northern Border

Amu River is the most specific Iranian border with another country. But where is the eastern border? In this regard, the following notes are worthy:

1- In Rostam and Sohrab story, which happens in the time of Kavous, Rostam goes hunting. Turkistan's horse riders take him to Samangan. Samangan is considered as a part of Turkistan. According to the oldest geographical book in Farsi language, "Hodoud Al-Alam", Samangan is located in Takharestan. It was a beautiful city in 4th Century. Most probably, the word Samangan in "Hodoud al-Alam" refers to the same Samangan of the story. Therefore, the western border of Takharestan and/or its vicinity should have been interpreted as Iran's eastern borders.

Stretched across the north, this border reaches Amu Darya. If we want to sketch a map for Iran during these epical times, we might be able to sketch a vertical line to the north and south.

2- Going toward south from Nekharestan, we reach lands which were ruled by Saam's family. Manouchehr was the successor to Fereydoun. He handed over Kabul, Zabol, Maay, India and lands between China Sea to Sand Sea, in addition to the lands between Zabolestan to Bast to King Saam. The ruling headquarters of the Saam family is Sistan-Baluchestan. His family was residing next to Hirmand River. During Ferdowsi's time, Zabolstan and Sistan were lands, which cover a major part of Afghanistan, today. According to the compiler of Hodoud al-Alam, the Gazanain and all the locations annexed to it were called Zabolestan. The southern lands of Zabolestan were named Sistan. However, in Shah-Nameh, Zabolestan and Sistan are interpreted as one location. Are Zabolestan and Sistan considered parts of Iran in Shah-Nameh? We will study this matter. If we judge by the text of several stanzas, we should consider Zabolestan and Sistan separate from Iran.

As you realize, Zabolestan and Sistan are taken as separate to Iran. Therefore these lands shouldn't be considered as a part of Iran. However, the following notes make us rethink this assumption:

A- The word Iran in these cases refers to Iran's capital. Most certainly, in the mind of storywriters and Ferdowsi, Nayshabour is considered as a part of Iran. But when they say that Sasan went from Iran to Neyshabour, "Iran" refers to the capital and center of the ruling family. Capitals are mainly unspecified in Shah-Nameh. In some cases, we have to speculate to find out the capital.

B- If Zabolestan is not a part of Iran; its residents shouldn't be taken as Iranians. But, if there is only one truly Iranian in Shah-Nameh, he should be Rostam, who resides in Zablo. Therefore, we can't consider Zabolestan outside Iran.

Rostam in Shah-Nameh is the symbol of Iranians.

With due regard to what was mentioned, Zabolestan and Sistan should not be considered as parts of Iran. In addition to Zabolestan, Manouchehr had handed over the kingdoms of May and India, and the lands between China Sea and Sand Sea, to the King Saam. Are these lands considered as parts of Iran in the mind of the storywriters? There are no clear reasons proving such a claim.

So Kashmir and Kabul are parts of Rosita's Kingdom. Later on, in the Davazdah-Rokh battle, the king calls on Rostam to conquer Kashmir and Kabul. Throughout the battle, Keykhosro writes a letter to Goudarz, informing him of the invasion of Kashmir and Kabul by Rostam. So, Kashmir and Kabul were at times lands conquered by Iranians and at other times they were not seized by them. In general, one can conclude that in the mind of Ferdowsi, the eastern border of Iran was the eastern corners of Zabolestan.

Alborz Mountain

Another geographical name which is mentioned when talking about the eastern borders is Alborz Mountain. Rostam travels to Alborz Mountain to bring Keyqobad. Afrasiab's entourage confronts him on the way. When Rostam returns with Keyqobad, he meets Turkistanis. Hence, to get to Alborz Mountain, you have to pass by

Turkistani riders. Such a mountain should be compared with Hendukesh. Prior to this, Faranak took Fereydoun to the furthest eastern point in order to safeguard him from Zahhak. Hence, she took him to Alborz Mountain.

Professor Mojtaba Minavi has speculated that Alborz Mountains refer to the mountains in Northern India. Alborz in the book Avesta, has been stated as Haraiti. The word "Haraiti" in the Pahlavi language is equivalent to "Harborz", and it has turned into Alborz in Farsi language. In the viewpoint of late "Pour Davoud", Haraiti should have been an epical mountain.

Western Borders

If the north-eastern and eastern border in Shah-Nameh is relatively specific, the western border is unclear and vague. The first time that the western border is referred to, it is when Fereydoun goes to the capital after Kaveh's revolt for suppressing Zahhak. Zahhak's capital in Shah-Nameh is Beit ul-Moqqadas. The other books such as "Mojmel al-Tavarikh" and "al-Qesas" mention his capital as Babul. In order to reach Zahhak, Fereydoun wants to cross Arvandroud River. Meanwhile, the river's guard calls for a license and a stamp for Fereydoun's crossing over the Arvandroud River.

Does this mean that Arvandroud River separates Iran from Arabia, or this measure has been taken to safeguard Zahhak's residence? With due regard to the following, maybe the second option is right.

2nd Kiani King, Kavous, dispatches troops to Hamavaran and Mazandaran. In order to reach Hamavaran and Mazandaran, Kavous doesn't pass any other country. So, one can conclude that Hamavaran and Mazandaran must have had common borders with Iran. At which side of Iran were these two lands located? Prior to answering this question, it's better to have a glance at the battle of Kavous with Hamavaran King. This denotes the vagueness of locations in the epical works.

Kavous goes to Turkistan and China through Iran. From China he goes to Makran and from there to Zereh (apparently the western parts of Sistan). He then travels to Barbar (northern Africa). He battles with the Barbar king and occupies that land. Thereafter he returns to Makran and passes by Qaaf and Baakhtar Mountain. Finally he goes to Zabolistan and is Rostam's guest for a month. Then, incoming reports have it that Arabs have revolted in Egypt and Syria. He travels over there and reaches a point through the sea, in which Barbarestan is to the right and Egypt is to the left and Hamavaran is to the front. The sea that Kavous passes by is Zereh Sea. Despite the vagueness of Kavous' journeys, the reader can guess that the western border of Iran, in the viewpoint of the storywriters, has been the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea and the proximity of Egypt and Syria.

Mazandaran

Another land, which according to Shah-Nameh is linked to the western border is Mazandaran. In the viewpoint of ancient storywriters, Mazandaran has been considered as a land outside Iran and Mazandaran troopers have been introduced as Iran's foes. The occupation of Iran was taken as a difficult task. Hence, Jamshid and Fereydoun never thought of invading Mazandaran. The only individuals who managed to go to Mazandaran are Saam and Rostam. Apparently, Saam had captured Mazandaran. He refers to this point, in a letter he writes to Manouchehr. We see Saam in Sagestan at the beginning of Nozar's kingdom. If Saam had captured Mazandaran, it is not known when Mazandaran's residents revolted. Because prior to Rostam's birth, the fortune tellers said he must conquer Mazandaran. Rostam conquers Mazandaran at Kavous' time. Kavous plans to dispatch troops to Mazandaran, but all the high-ranking figures are against such an intention. Kavous ignores their advice and sends troops to Mazandaran. He is entangled in a quagmire until Rostam reaches Mazandaran after numerous difficulties and saves Kavous. In the way to Mazandaran, Rostam passes through dry and barren lands. According to the storywriter, Mazandaran is a location far from Iran. In a letter to Kavous, Afrasiab rebukes the former for going to Mazandaran.

Mazandaran in Shah-Nameh is not the current Mazandaran province which is located in northern Iran. It is a land in the west. Today's Mazandaran province was referred to as Tabarestan in the past. Yaqout Hamavi says: "I don't know when they started to name Tabarestan as Mazandaran. I didn't find it in ancient books."

Apparently, Mazandaran was a local term for Tabarestan. Yaqout had heard the term "Mazandaran" from Tabarestan's locals. Meanwhile, Manouchehr Damqani was familiar with the term "Mazandaran" due to the

vicinity of Damqan and Mazandaran. However the term Mazandaran in Shah-Nameh is the same Mazandaran that has been mentioned at the introductory section of the "Abu Mansouri" version of Shah-Nameh and several other books. In accordance to that introductory, Syria and Yemen were named as Mazandaran. Meanwhile the compiler of "Mojmel al-Tavarikh" knew there were two Mazandarans.

Northwest

Iran's north-western border was in the vicinity of Azerbaijan and Aras River. Azerbaijan or a part of that was conquered by Keykhosro during the last days of Kavous' dynasty.

Throughout these days, there is a difference of opinion between the high-ranking officials about whether Fariborz or Keykhosro should be the successor to Kavous. Kavous notes he would send them both to invade Bahman fort in Ardebil. Whoever invades this fort will be his successor. First, Fariborz fails to conquer this fort. However, Keykhosro invades the fort and builds the fire house "Azar Gashsb" over there. The reader never sees any other Iranian kings and champions on the other side of Azerbaijan. Therefore in the viewpoint of Ferdowsi, the northern parts of Azerbaijan must have been Iran's north-western borders.