

Steppe Iranian in the *longue durée*: contact, relative chronology, and internal reconstruction

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For over a millennium, from c. 900 BC until the early centuries AD, the Eurasian steppe zone from the Pontic region to eastern Central Asia was home to numerous Iranian-speaking peoples whose names and movements are known from the testimony of neighboring civilizations, primarily Greco-Roman and Persian. These historical records, along with the rich archaeological evidence of burial sites from the Danube to the Altai, revealed that groups continuously migrated — generally from east to west and often over considerable distances—linguistic variation. It thus comes as little surprise that despite enormous advances in Iranian philology over the past 50 years, our knowledge of the linguistic history of Steppe Iranian has not progressed greatly beyond that of such seminal works as Abaev (a949) or Harmatta (a970).

Recent developments herald a welcome change, however, such as the appearance of two new studies of Iranian loanwords in Tocharian (Dragoni 2022, Bernard 2023). As the source of the earliest such Iraniana borrowings in Tocharian, Bernard posits an “Old Steppe Iranian” spoken in the Altai region and Dzhungaria, though a location in eastern Central Asia is also imaginable. Of the features ascribed to this “Old Steppe Iranian,” the appearance of [l] for OIr. *r before dentals (cf. TB *melte* ‘pile’, TA *malto* ‘in first place’ ← OIr. *marda- ‘head, top of the body’; TB *speltke*, TA *ratäk* ‘army’ ← OIr. *rata-ka- ‘line, formation’) contrast with Ossetic, where OIr. *r is usually retained except before *l or *y and apocope preceded syncope (Cheung 2002:69-85). Otherwise it exhibits few innovations, corresponding to the meager Scythian evidence (Mayerhofer 2006). The one alleged defining trait of Scythian, the shift of OIr. [ð] > [l] in the name Παράλαται < OIr. *para-dāta-, is not in fact probative but could simply represent an attempt by Greek speakers to render the voiced interdental fricative [ð]; this would square with recent arguments against lambdacism in Sogdian (Lurje & Yakubovich 2017).

It is only from the Sarmatian period that the defining phonological changes ancestral to Ossetic such as voicing of intervocalic stops or palatalization of *ti > *dʲ > [dz] vel sim. Are reflected in the extensive onomastic material (see most recently Palunčić 2019). Importantly, the ethnonym Ἀορσοί, whose etymological connection with Oss. D *ors*, I *urs* ‘white’ and OIr. *aruša- has long been debated, confirms the early syncope of *u required by D *ford*, I *furd* ‘great river’ < OIr. *paruta- and D *mex*, I *mix* ‘stake’ < OIr. *mayuŕxa-.

The absence of connected texts greatly hampers investigation of morphological developments, so that e.g. although the collective suffix *-tā- is known from ethnonyms recorded as far back as Herodotos (Sauromatai/Syrmatai, Thyssagetai, Massagetai, Iaxamatai/Ixibatai), one cannot know when it became generalized as the productive plural formant. Here it is historical-comparative investigation of Ossetic grammar that can offer some guide to the chronology of prehistoric changes. For instance, the Oss. Periphrastic future in -ʒVn- (e.g. D *cær-ʒæn-æn*, I *cær-ʒyn-æn* ‘I will live’) must have its origin in nominal compounds *X-čānāh ‘desiring X_N’ (whence deverbal ‘(be) wanting to X_V’ > ‘X_V-FUT’; Kim fthc. A); given the derivational isolation of *-čānah- in Iranian, this construction must have evolved already in OIr. Times. Another example

is the Oss. Transitive preterite, which with Christol (1990: 43-4) goes back to a periphrasis of past participle + *dā- ‘make.’ As simplex *dā- ‘put’ was already becoming rare in OIr., this construction is likely to be an innovation of the late Sarmation or early Alanic period (Kim fthc. B); the formal resemblance to the Germanic dental (weak) preterite is suggestive and raises the possibility of contact-induced change, but extralinguistic evidence for sufficiently early contacts is so far lacking.

Abbreviations: D = Digor; I = Iron; OIr. = Old Iranian; Oss. = Ossetic; TA, TB = Tocharian A, B.

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