On the Systematic Classification of Iranian Toponyms

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Abstract   The article first presents a brief explanation of the different classifications that the writer applied on the toponymical system of Iran in a comprehensive study as of 2008. A database of 12,000 Iranian place names was collected mainly from the series of volumes of "Farhang-e joɣrāfyāyī-e Īrān[1], (Iranian Geographical Encyclopedia), published by the Persian Army Survey (1949-53), several locally published sources from local private libraries, and scattered articles from patriotic scholars like Ahmad Kasravi[2]. Moreover, finding the published sources still inadequate, due to the socio-political developments affecting the toponymy of the country after 1953, several field studies were also done in various provinces of Iran like Azarbaijan, Kurdistan, Gilan, Mazandaran and Khorasan to update the corpus. The collected data were categorized from different aspects regarding the origin of the toponyms, their meanings, and their word formation. The article ends with a particular look at the tentative etymology of a place name of the Iranian origin (*Šām- aspī*), attested in Ardabīl district.

Keywords   Toponymy, Topoformants, Iranian Place Names

1. Introduction

The world famous Orientalist Vladimir Minorsky once mentioned in his article, "Mongol place names in Mukri Kurdistan" (1957), that unlike Iranian personal names widely investigated by Justi, though quite old now (1895), there has been no systematic study regarding the Iranian toponyms. Apart from a few "partial, scattered" investigations, according to him, few studies like that of Hoffman's painstaking analysis of Aramaic place names in "Ausziige aus syrischen Akten persischer Martyrer" (1880), or H. Hübschmann's "Die altarmenischen Ortsnamen" were done in the field of Iranian toponymy; thus, a prompt desideratum was felt for the apparent lack of a systematic classification in the field.

It has been with this presupposition that the author started a thorough research on the Iranian toponmy as of 2008. Using the series of volumes entitled Farhang-e joɣrāfyāyī-e Īrān (Iranian Geographical Encyclopedia), published by the Persian Army Survey (1949-53), and several locally published sources from local private libraries, articles from patriotic scholars like Ahmad Kasravi, etc. a database of over 12,000 Iranian place names was prepared. A field study, including the Iranian provinces of Azarbaijan, Kurdistan, Gilan, Mazandaran and Khorasan were also added to enrich and update the corpus.

The collected data was classified in different categories:

The first classification, regarding the origin of toponyms, included pre-Iranian substrate forms, Iranian forms, Mongolian and early Turkic toponyms, and late toponyms.

Meaning was the basis upon which the second classification was made, and included toponyms derived from specific characteristics of the region and peoples' businesses, hydronyms, ethnonyms, eponyms, and religious names.

Finally, the last categorization was based on the word-formation, and separated simple, compound, and complex toponyms as well as those which contained topoformants.

2. Toponymy of Iran

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[1] *Cf.* Farhang-e joɣrāfyāyī-e Īrān (ābādīhā-ye kešvar-e Jomhūrī-ye Eslāmī Īrān), v. 1-138, Tehran, entešār-e setād-e kol-ee arteš, 1949-1982.

Farhang-e Joɣrafyāyī-ye ābādīhā-ye kešvar-e Jomhūrī-ye eslāmī-ye Īrān, Ardabīl, vol. 8, *Tehran,* 1371/1992: 111.

[2] Kasravi, A. Nāmhā-ye šahrhā va dehhā-ye Īrān, I, II. Tehran, entešārāt-e mouqūfāt-e Mahmūd Afšār Yazdī, (1918-1919).

Toponyms are those linguistic elements that reflect the ethnographic picture of a given area, and reveal the linguistic identity of its primary dwellers and later occupants and invaders.

As an ancient country, Iran enjoys a wealthy toponymical heritage. During the centuries-old history, multiple ethnic groups and religions were created in the region, geographical changes took place, and wars and natural disasters annihilated one group of people and replaced them by others. Residential areas, mountains, and rivers were recurrently named and renamed by dwellers. However, an in-depth analysis of the present place names, together with the genealogical and etymological analysis of the available names allows to determine that, though tarnished by multilingual images, original Iranian toponyms are dominant in the territory. Turkic, Mongolian, or even Arabian penetration into Iran's toponymical system happened only through random historical events.

3. Toponyms Based on the Origins

From the view point of the origins, the toponymy of Iran can be divided into four conventional groups:

3.1. Pre-Iranian Substrate Forms

To the first group of place-names belong, for instance, the district name of *Xalxāl*, south of Ardabīl; *Karkar*, a small village near *Zunnūz*.[3] Uskū (Oskū in modern pronunciation), a township to the south-east from Tabrīz (cf. Ašqaịa-, Aškaịa-, Uškaịa-of the Urartian inscriptions)[4], as well as, Tabrīz[5], Qazvīn (cf. Κισβίνα in Ptolemy, 6.2.17), Urmiya, Ušnuh[6], Hīrīs (<Hērīs), Sīs, Sīvān (or Sayvān), may also belong in here.

3.2. Iranian Forms

The second group of place-names in Iran includes pretty old names, a good example of which is the toponym Āturpātakān (present Azerbaijan), (Assadorian, 2010), a region in northwestern Iran administratively divided into West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and Zanjan provinces. Many old place names with toponymic formants were found in this region: *-bēl/-wīl* (*<wēl* < OIr. **waiti-*): *Ardabīl* (*<*Arta-waiti-*, Arm. *Artawēt*), *Andabīl*, *Šūrābīl* (the name of a lake in Ardabīl), and *Lavandvīl* (near Āstārā), as well as *Abhar*, Ahar, Marand, *Sabalān* (a mountain name), *Zanǰān*, *Xašīrān*, *Razgān*, *Dīmān*, and many others.

3.3. Mongolian and Early Turkic Toponyms

The numerous invasions of Mongol and Turk troops to Iran left their footnotes with toponyms like *Sāʾīn* (*meaning great, pure in Turkish*), a village, which lies in the south of Ardabīl (cf. also *Sāʾīn-gedük*, a pass between Ardabīl and *Sarāb*; *ge-dük* in Turkish means "a pass"), *Āǰarī, in the same region,* (*from* the original *Aghajari* meaning "woodmen", the name of an Oghuz tribe)[7], *Qāzānlū,* in Šāhīn- dēž, etc[8].

3.4. Late Toponyms

A new category of toponyms refer to more recent place names, and are formed by the application of common topoformants such as those with *–ābād, _dašt, _stān* (*'Ali-ābād*, *Ḥāǰī-ābād*, *Pāk-dašt, Tākestān*) etc.), or the obvious Persian/ Turkic/Arabic formations (*Pīr-zādeh*, *Qalʻe*, *Qara-dāγlū*, *Qešlāq-čāy*, etc.).

4. Meaning Based Toponyms

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[3] The toponyms with the element *gargar-/karkar-* (cf. the river *Gargar* in Kara-bakh) are attested also in the regions to the north from the Arax river, in Shirvan and Arran (in the historical Caucasian Albania and the eastern parts of Armenia), which points to the more larger area of habitat of this pre-historical people (cf. S. T. Eremyan, *Hayastanə əst "Ašxarhac" oyc "i"*, Erevan, 1963: 46; see also H. Hübschman, *Die altarmenischen Ortsnamen*, Strassburg, 1904: 273-274; *Ḥudūd al-ʻAlam "The Regions of the World", A Persian Geography* 372 A.H.(982 A.D.) edited by V. Minorsky (reprinted edition), Cambridge, 1982: 396, fn. 2, also p. 214. On the whole, there are 16 names of localities (with *Gargar*), attested in the Armenian Highland and the surrounding areas (see T. X. Hakobyan et al., *Hayastani ew harakic' šrǰanneri teˡkanunneri baˡaran*, vol. 1: A-D, Erevan, 1986: 808). *Qarqa-* in *Qarqa-bāzār*, the name of a small village near Tabrīz, can be hardly referred to in this connection, as it is, likely, a distorted form of the Arm. dial. *kiraki-bazar*, Sunday-market.

[4] See N. V. Arutyunyan, Toponimika Urartu, Erevan, 1985: 48.

[5] J. Markwart ("La province de Parskahayk", *RÉArm.*, N.S., tom III, 1966: 275) considers it also possible that this toponym could have been further Iranized by analogy with the similar Iranian forms, implying a proto-form type of **tapa-raiča-*, cf. *Nayrīz*, from **ni-raiča*.

[6] J. Markwart (ibid.: 269-270) believes that Ušnuh is an Iranian toponym, derived from OIr. **xšnauϑra-* (cf. Avestan xšnaoϑra-, Arm. šnorh, meaning grace).

[7] See in more detail V. Minorsky, "Mongol Place-Names in Mukri Kurdistan (Mongolica-4)", BSOAS, 19/1 (1957): 65 ff., where the author discusses some structural characteristics of the Mongol and Turkic toponyms of the area.

[8] Ibid.

Toponyms classified based on the meanings are also divided into four categories.

4.1. Toponyms Derived from Regional Characteristics

Toponyms that have originated from the specific regional characteristics and landmarks form maximal number of place names in Iran. These names were mainly formed due to the frequency of occurrence of plants and animal species in a given area, geographic landmarks, and climatic conditions. Examples are *Kajāb* (tilted waterway), *Golābād* (where flowers are abundant), *Šūrābad* (place with salty water), etc.

4.2. Hydronyms

Many place names that initially have been hydronyms are classified in this category. Examples are *Rūdbār* (having plenty of rivers), *Sīmīnrūd* (silver river), *Kohāb* (where water runs from the mountain).

4.3. Toponyms Derived from Natural Phenomena, Residents' Occupations, Ethnonyms

This category of names include those toponyms that bear names derived from natural phenomena, like *Asbrāhān* (path for horses); local residents' occupations and businesses, like *Gūštpazān* (those who cook meat)*, Ābforūšān* (those who sell water); and etnonyms like *Xalxāl* (discussed above), *Gorjābād* (where migrant Georgians live).

4.4. Eponyms

A number of place names refer to the name of the founder or conqueror of that town or village. Examples are *Āturpātakān*[9] (consisting of the eponym Āturpāt and the patronymic topoformant–akān)*, Alidār, Hoseynābād* (both names simply derived from Islamic religious figures and a place topoformant).

4.5. Toponyms Based on the Religious Beliefs of the Residents

The history of religion is extremely rich in Iran. This fabulous heritage is well reflected in the geographical names of the area revealing various religious practices from idolatry to Zoroastrianism, and from Buddhism to Christianity[10]. Vast investigations conducted by archaeologists and local explorers imply the existence of old cultures and worshipping markers like plantain, willow, pomegranate, and myrtle trees to which worshippers would hang pieces of their clothes, or sacred oil coated stones that were found near holy places. Frequently, these places were named after those trees, or the religious personalities buried in the vicinity.

5. Toponyms Based on the Word Formation

5.1. Simple Toponyms

There are a few Iranian toponyms made up of simple words. These are usually the names of geographical borders, ethnonyms, single word modifiers, or even the names of plants. Examples are *Borj, Gonbad, Gargar, Xānik*, etc.

5.2. Compound Toponyms

A considerable number of Iranian toponyms are categorized as compound place names and are often made of two nouns, a noun and a suffix, a prefix and a noun, or a combination of two or all of the mentioned ones. *Čāh Ali, Češme gol, Kalāte pāydār, Deh pāy bīd,* etc.

5.3. Toponyms Containing Topoformants

The majority of Iranian toponyms fall in this category. These are mainly place names that include particles which make toponyms. Examples are *Āzerbāijan, Ardabīl, Zanjān, Tehrān, Dastgerd,* and a lot more.

5.4. Complex Toponyms

Distinguishing the compound names from those of the complex ones is a complicated issue. However, in a number of toponyms, particularly those containing cardinal numbers, they are distinctively clear. Examples are *Davāzdah emām* (12 imams)*, Panj angošt* (5 fingers)*, Čehel* češme (40 springs)*, sīyo se marde* (33 men)*, etc.*

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[9] Ibid.

[10] See Malandra's '*An introduction to ancient Iranian religion* (1983) for the diversity of religions in ancient Persia.

6. *Šām-Aspī*: A Toponym from Ardabil

As a place-name of the Iranian origin, i.e. pertaining to the fifth group of the above classification (Toponyms Containing Topoformants), reference can be made to the toponym, *Šām-aspī*, which is the name of a small village near Ardabīl, to the left from the main road to Āstārā[11]. Local people, identify the first part of this name with *Šām meaning* "Syria" in Persian, and interpret it as a place where "Syrian brought horses dwell in". However, the toponym seems to be an old compound and, therefore, the folk interpretation of *Šām* can hardly be satisfying. The final–*ī* points to a patronymic formation, considering which we can reconstruct the Middle Iranian form of this place-name as **Šāmaspīk*, or **Šāmāspīk*, i.e. "a village under the control of (or founded by) **Šāmāsp*", the latter being a well-known personal name, from OIr. **S(i) yāmāspa-* "(a man) having black or dark studs" (cf. Avestan *Syāvaspi-*, Armenian   *Šawasp*)[12], with the secondary dissimilation of the initial *s-* to *š-*.[13]

7. Research Methodology

The survey is a consistent application of several methods. Linguistic, statistical, and geographical analyses, as well as historiographical methods were used simultaneously. Through the linguistic analysis, the Iranian word formation procedures and methods were investigated diachronically; around 52 topoformant suffixes were identified in a corpus of over 12,000 Iranian place names; topoformants' linguistic attributes and meanings were analyzed; and toponyms made from those suffixes as well as their frequency of occurrence was reported.

8. Research Goal

The goal of this study is to suggest a systematic classification for the Iranian toponymy; provide a synchronic and diachronic analysis of a great number of placenames; identify topoformant suffixes and their origins, study their frequency and distribution, in order to help clarify some historical events, geographical changes, and political developmnts, and create an opportunity for the new language design to maintain the nature of the language in a way that matches the system, and stays attached to the old heritage.

The study is significant in that it presents a systematic classification of the Iranian toponymy having a comprehensive corpus of almost all place names available. The material and the results can contribute to the study and clarification of the present place names in Iran and the neighboring countries as well as the issues raised among them. Moreover, the topoformant suffixes collected in the survey can be of paramount significance in discovering the etymology of the placenames, the origins of their early settlers, their distribution, and paths of immigration.

9. Conclusions

Iranian toponymical studies have been limited and scattered and the lack of a comprehensive and scientific research is profoundly felt. The systematic classification of toponyms and the topoformant affixes can methodologically serve as a fundamental base to conduct any scientifically reliable research on the toponymy of the region.

In an ancient country like Iran, toponymical studies are a necessity not only for understanding how the place names were created and formed, but also because they can solve many ethnological enigmas in the history of nations from India to Asia Minor and the Caucasus.

Regardless of the variety and complexity of the Iranian place names, due to the antiquity of the region, numerous historical events, vast ethnic migrations, and a great number of other phenomena, the accurate and scientific etymology of the toponyms allows us to identify the prevalent Iranian layers and prove that the random invasions of Mongol, Turk, and Arabian layers are only due to certain historical events of a given period.

Different categorizations were applied on the collected data based on the origin (pre-Iranian substrate forms, Iranian forms, Mongolian and early Turkic toponyms, and late toponyms), meaning (toponyms derived from specific characteristics of the region and peoples' businesses, hydronyms, ethnonyms, eponyms, and religious names), and the word formation (simple, compound, and complex) of the toponyms.

New toponymical suggestions can be made to unify the toponymical system and preserve and maintain the old heritage.

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[11] *Cf. Farhang-e J̌oɣrafyāyī-ye ābādīhā-ye kešvar-e J̌omhūrī-ye eslāmī-ye Īrān, Ardabīl, vol. 8, Tehran, 1371/1992: 111.*

[12] Cf. Mayrhofer, *Onomastica Persepolitana*, Wien, 1973: 234, N 8.1559; idem, *Iranisches Personennamenbuch, Bd 1. Die altiranischen Namen*, Wien, 1979: 75, N 293. In Old Iranian we had two parallel variants of the lexeme meaning "black, dark": **s(i)yāwa-* and **s(i)yāma-*, with –*w*- and –*m*-.

[13] The initial *š-* can hardly be the result of **s(i)y- > š-*, as in Sogdian *šāw* "blak", at- tested also in Arm. *Šawasp* (<OIr. **S(i)yāwāspa-*).

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