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Like dust on the Silk Road: an investigation of the earliest Iranian loanwords and of possible BMAC borrowings in Tocharian

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Citation

Bernard, C. B. A. S. (2023, April 20). *Like dust on the Silk Road: an investigation of the earliest Iranian loanwords and of possible BMAC borrowings in Tocharian*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3594385>

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English summary

The thesis bears on the topic of the contacts of Tocharian with Old Iranian and with the language of the so-called BMAC culture. The Tocharian languages A and B form a branch of the Indo-European language family, and were spoken until the end of the first millennium BCE in the Northwest of China, in the Tarim Basin in the region now known as Xīnjiāng. Although they are now extinct, Tocharian A and B are known through Buddhist manuscripts which were discovered at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century. The Iranian languages, such as, for instance, Persian, Kurdish and Balochi, belong to the Indo-Iranian branch of Indo-European.

The contacts Tocharian had with Old Iranian must have taken place a long time before the earliest attestation of Tocharian around 500 CE, since the loanwords in Tocharian that are proof of these contacts can be reconstructed for Proto-Tocharian, the common ancestor of Tocharian A and B. The Iranian source too is not directly attested: we are dealing with an archaic stage of Iranian that is not directly attested, and should be reconstructed on the basis of the loanwords in Tocharian. One of the conclusions of this thesis is that the sound substitutions in the relevant loanwords are highly regular, so that the Iranian source was most likely a single variety, and it is not necessary to assume dialects or multiple stages of borrowing within the Old Iranian period. This Old Iranian variety I have named “Old Steppe Iranian”. Chapter 1 contains a short introduction to the topic as well as a discussion of the methodology that is used to study the loanwords.

Chapter 2 is principally concerned with the discussion of Old Steppe Iranian loanwords (§2.1–2.5). A number of these words was already discussed in the scientific literature, but this chapter contains also newly proposed loanwords. The corpus is divided in different categories: in total 28 loanwords are considered plausible (§2.2), 12 possible (§2.3), 8 difficult (§2.4) and 7 possible loanwords are rejected (§2.5).

The last part of chapter 2 (§2.6) is concerned with the features of Old Steppe Iranian in order to determine the phylogenetic position of this variety within the Iranian branch. Old Steppe Iranian seems to share the most innovations with Ossetic, such as the palatalization of **-θj-*; the loss **h* between vowels, with contraction of **aha* to **ā*; the shortening of **ā* to **a* before **j*;

and the vocalization of **ɣ* to **ar*. Ossetic, nonetheless, cannot come directly from Old Steppe Iranian, because Old Steppe Iranian has undergone the sound change **rd* to **ld*, which has not taken place in Ossetic. Also, the Ossetic reflex of Old Iranian **mānija-* means ‘husband’, while the Old Steppe Iranian reflex means ‘servant’. Since the Ossetic meaning cannot be derived from that of Old Steppe Iranian, the word must have meant ‘that of the house’ in the ancestor of both languages. The palatalization of **-θj-*, the contraction of **aha* to **ā* and the vocalization of **ɣ* to **ar* did not occur in Khotanese-Tumshuqese, a branch of Iranian attested in the direct vicinity of Tocharian, in the Tarim Basin. For this reason, the Khotanese-Tumshuqese branch cannot be derived from Old Steppe Iranian, so that Old Steppe Iranian probably has to be located not in the Tarim Basin, but rather to the north of it.

Chapter 3 treats a small group of Tocharian words which cannot be inherited, but cannot be derived from Iranian either. Rather, these words seem to derive from the language of the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC). This concerns mostly words for natural phenomena, such as a type of soil, animal names, etc. In total 12 words are studied, of which one is rejected, because an Iranian origin is more likely for it. On the basis of small differences in the phonology, these words are derived from a different variant of the BMAC language than the Indo-Iranian words for which a BMAC origin has been proposed.

On the basis of differences in the semantics between loanwords from the BMAC language on the one hand and Old Steppe Iranian on the other hand, it is assumed that Tocharian was first in contact with the BMAC language, and then with Old Steppe Iranian. The loanwords from Old Steppe Iranian presuppose a militarily and economically dominant culture, and it is improbable that the animal names from the BMAC language were borrowed afterwards. The contacts of Tocharian with Khotanese-Tumshuqese are old too, but must have taken place after those with Old Steppe Iranian, likely at the time when the speakers of Tocharian entered the Tarim Basin.