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## The Name “Sakā”

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## The Name “Sakā”

Yu Taishan

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### A

According to the *History* of Herodotus,<sup>1</sup> Cyrus II (558–529 BCE) of the Achaemenids planned to command in person the campaign against the Sacae who lay in his path. (I, 153) There is, in fact, no record of Cyrus’s campaign against the Sacae in the whole book, but it does record the campaign against the Massagetae after his conquest of the Babylonians. (I, 201–204) Since in Herodotus’s *History* the Massagetae were not included among the block of nations targeted by Cyrus II as the Sacae, the “Massagetae” have also been interpreted as being the “great Saca horde” against whom Cyrus II planned to campaign.

According to Herodotus’s record, the Massagetae lived to the east of the Sea of Caspia, “a plain that stretches endlessly to the eye.” (I, 204) The Sea of Caspia is the present day Caspian Sea, and so the land of the Massagetae must have been located on the great plain to the north of the Caspian and Aral Seas, i.e., the northern bank of the Syr Darya.

The Massagetae occupation of the northern bank of the Syr Darya was the result of the migration of nomadic tribes across the whole Eurasian Steppe before the end of the seventh century BCE. Herodotus recorded this migration based on various sources. In one section, he states that the Scythians were driven out by the Massagetae and “crossed the river Araxes into Cimmerian country.” (IV, 11) In another section, he writes that the Scythians were pursued by the Issedones, and so pressed the Cimmerians. (IV, 13) In fact, it is possible that the Issedones defeated the Massagetae, the latter defeated the Scythians, and the Scythians were forced into Cimmerian country. The pressure on the

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<sup>1</sup> D. Grene, tr., Herodotus, *The History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Scythians came indirectly from the Massagetae, and directly from the Issedones. Finally, the Scythians traveled to the shore of the Black Sea, and the Massagetae then lived to the north of the Syr Darya. The latter must have lived in the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu before they moved to the northern bank of the Syr Darya.

According to Herodotus, the Massagetae lived "toward the east and the rising of the sun, beyond the River Araxes and opposite the Issedones." (I, 201) Since the land of the Massagetae was located to the north of the Syr Darya, the land of the Issedones, whose land was opposite that of the Massagetae, must have been located in the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu. After the Massagetae had been driven from the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu by the Issedones, they moved to the northern bank of the Syr Darya.

In sum, the name "Sacaе" was first used by the Persians to designate the Massagetae who roamed as nomads in the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu and later on the northern bank of the Syr Darya.

## B

According to Herodotus, "the Persians call all Scythians Sacaе." (VII, 64) Since "Sacaе" was at first the specific name for the Massagetae, this sentence of Herodotus should be interpreted to mean that the Persians later used the specific term "Sacaе" to refer to all Scythians in a general sense, and the reason for this can be found in Herodotus. According to Herodotus, "the Massagetae wear the same kind of clothes as the Scythians and live much the same," (I, 215) and, in fact, "some say, moreover, that they are a Scythian people." (I, 201) Here, the statement "live much the same" refers to their nomadic lifestyle.

Based on the inscriptions of the Achaemenids,<sup>2</sup> during the reign of Darius I (521–486 BCE) at the latest, the Sakā (i.e., Sacaе) had not yet become the specific designation for a particular tribe.

The Naqš-e Rostam inscription A of Darius I mentions three groups of Sakā: Sakā haumavargā ("the Sakā who venerate hauma"), Sakā tigraxaudā ("the Sakā who wear pointed hats"), and "the Sakā who are across the sea." The first two groups have been listed in inscriptions after "Gandara [and]

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<sup>2</sup> For the Achaemenian inscriptions, see R. G. Kent, *Old Persian, Grammar, Text, Lexicon* (New Haven, 1953).

Sind," and so they can in fact be regarded as living in one land or even as one group, and they were only regarded as two separate groups because of differences in customs. Yet they were obviously distinct from "the Sakā who are across the sea," who were listed following the "Ionians."

We discover that apart from appearing in the Naqš-e Rostam inscription, the Sakā haumavargā and Sakā tigraxaudā also appear in Persepolis inscription E and Sūšā inscription E of Darius I. In the Persepolis inscription E both are listed after "Sind, Gandara," and in Sūšā inscription E they are similarly listed after "Gandara, Sind." However, in Persepolis inscription E and Sūšā inscription E "the Sakā who are across the sea" have not been discovered. In Persepolis inscription E and Sūšā inscription E the Sakā who are listed after the "Ionians" were respectively described as "countries which are across the sea" and "(people) across the sea," two designations that are undoubtedly equivalent to the "Sakā who are across the sea" in the Naqš-e Rostam inscription. In the first two inscriptions these people were not yet designated Sakā by the Persians, but nevertheless while they might sometimes have been called Sakā, they were different from the Sakā haumavargā and the Sakā tigraxaudā.

It is generally acknowledged that the "Sakā who are across the sea" ["countries which are across the sea" or "(people) across the sea"] were in fact the Scythians who were expelled by the Massagetae and moved west. In other words, the "(people) across the sea" listed after the "Ionians" in the Naqš-e Rostam inscription were the Sakā in the broad sense, the Scythians.

In sum, Sacae or Sakā was at first the specific designation for the Massagetae, but was later used to refer to the nomadic Scythians in a general sense.

## C

According to Herodotus, Cyrus II's punitive expedition against the Massagetae was not successful. Not only was the Persian army completely annihilated, but Cyrus II was himself also killed in the action. (I, 204–214) This shows that up to the end of the reign of Cyrus II, the land of the Sacae to the north of the Syr Darya was not yet subject to the Achaemenids. Cambysēs II (r. 529–522 BCE), who ascended the throne after Cyrus II, went on an expedition to Egypt in the fourth year of his reign, and died there. No record refers to him launching an expedition against the Massagetae or the Sacae.

However, in the Behistun inscription (II, 5-8) of Darius I it is recorded that while Darius I was in Babylon the following provinces became rebellious: "Persia, Elam, Media, Assyria, Egypt, Parthia, Margiana, Sattagydia, Sakā." Obviously, the Sakā mentioned in the inscription would have already been subject to the Achaemenids before Darius I ascended the throne. From the same inscription (V, 20-30), it can also be seen that the Sakā who became rebellious were attacked very quickly and ferociously by Darius I.

In Darius I's Persepolis inscription (H, lines 3-10) it is recorded that the kingdoms held by Darius extended "from the Sakās who are beyond Sogdiana, thence unto Kūša (Ethiopia): from Sind, thence unto Sardis." From this it can be seen that the land of the Sakā was located "beyond Sogdiana." This location is the same as the location of the Massagatae before they were attacked by Cyrus II, which is to say that the Sakā attacked by Darius I were probably not the Massagetae — both only happened to have been located in the same territory.

In sum, the Persians used the term "Sacae" not only to designate the nomadic Scythians, but also at one time to refer to other nomadic tribes on the northern bank of the Syr Darya, who followed a way of life similar to that of the Massagetae.

## D

Since there are no records showing that the Massagetae were subject to Cambysēs II, one can infer that the Sakā who appear in the Behistun Inscription of Darius I were the Issedones. In other words, the Issedones continued to advance west and occupied the land of the Massagatae on the northern bank of the Syr Darya, from the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu, at a time when Darius I had not yet ascended the throne and Cyrus II had already died. It is possible that the Issedones acknowledged allegiance to the Achaemenids after they occupied the land of the Massagetae in order to consolidate their victory over the Massagetae. The Issedones had rebelled while Persia was in dire straits following the death of Cambyses II. After that, they were called Sakās by the Persians.

In the *Anabasis of Alexander* of Arrian,<sup>3</sup> the Scythians are broadly divided into two types, "the Asian Scythians" and "the European Scythians," with the former also sub-divided into the Abian Scythians, the Massagetae, and the Sacae.

Here, Arrian clearly distinguishes the Massagetae from the Sacae: the land of the Sacae encountered by Alexander was undoubtedly located on the northern bank of the Syr Darya, while the Massagetae mostly lived to the south of the Syr Darya and Sogdiana. This shows that the word "Sacae" was no longer used to designate the Massagetae, but instead designated a particular nomadic tribe on the northern bank of the Syr Darya.

The Sacae encountered by Alexander were the same tribe encountered by Darius I. Since the latter tribe could not have been the Massagetae, they were most likely the Issedones driven by the Massagetae from the northern bank of the Syr Darya. The Massagetae encountered by Alexander must have been the survivors of the Massagetae who were driven from the northern bank of the Syr Darya by the Issedones.

Arrian classified the Massagetae and the Sacae as Scythians, which shows that the Massagetae and the Sacae "had similar lifestyles." This seems to be circumstantial evidence for the conjecture above that the Persians used the term "Sacae" to designate successively the Massagetae and the Issedones.

In sum, the Persians probably used the term "Sacae" to designate the Issedones who moved to the northern bank of the Syr Darya from the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu.

E

Regarding the Sacae, the *Geography* of Strabo<sup>4</sup> records: "Now the greater part of the Scythians, beginning at the Caspian Sea, are called Däae, but those who are situated more to the east than these are named Massagetae and Sacae, whereas all the rest are given the general name of Scythians, though each people is given a separate name of its own. They are all for the most part nomads. But the best known of the nomads are those who took away Bactriana from the Greeks, I mean the Asii, Pasiiani

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<sup>3</sup> E. I. Robson, tr., Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri* (London and New York, 1929).

<sup>4</sup> H. L. Jones, tr. *The Geography of Strabo, with an English translation*. 8 vols. (London, 1916–1936).

(Gasiani), Tochari and Sacarauri, who originally came from the country on the other side of the Iaxartes River that adjoins that of the Sacae and the Sogdiani and was occupied by the Sacae." (XI, 8) According to the above, in the period described by Strabo, those who occupied the northern bank of the Syr Darya were all Scythians, including the Massagetae, Sacae, Asii, and the other tribes.

In the following passage Strabo states very clearly that the Sacae "occupied Bactriana," and "those who took away Bactriana from the Greeks," i.e., the four tribes of Asii, Pasiani (Gasiani), Tochari and Sacarauri, must belong to the Sacae, who were known as the Scythians, together with the Däae and the Massagetae. Thus we call the Asii and the others "the four tribes of the Sacae." However, if we combine this passage with other statements in the same chapter, we find that there are many ambiguities in the above-quoted records that need to be clarified.

First, Strabo says that "Cyrus made an expedition against the Sacae" (XI, 8-5) when he describes Cyrus II's war against the Massagetae, while at the same time he states that "the Massagetae disclosed their valor in their war with Cyrus." (XI, 8-6) From this it can be seen that "Massagetae" and "Sacae" were interchangeable synonyms for Strabo. However, in the above-quoted records Strabo also mentions "Massagetae" and "Sacae" in the same sentence, which would suggest that he distinguished between the two.

Second, according to the above-quoted records, it is beyond doubt that the Massagetae were with the Sacae on the northern bank of the Syr Darya. However, following this, quoting Eratosthenes Strabo states that the "Massagetae are situated alongside the Bactrians towards the west along the Oxus River." (XI, 8-8) This is bewildering.

Third, if the Sacae who lived on the northern bank of the Syr Darya as recorded by Strabo were different from the Massagetae, they could only be the Sacae whom Alexander the Great and even Darius I had encountered, and would also be the Issedones recorded by Herodotus. The Asii and the other tribes recorded by Strabo must be a tribal confederacy of the Issedones; not only could Asii be regarded as a precise transcription of Isse[dones], but the Asii and the others would have invaded Bactria from the northern bank of the Syr Darya. Strabo, however, simply calls the Asii and the others "Scythians" generically in order to distinguish them from the Sacae.

It is quite obvious that Strabo has piled up information from various times and different sources. Despite this, Strabo's records can still be regarded as providing important information on the Sacae:

1. First, Strabo clearly records the location of the four tribes of the Asii and others before they invaded Bactria, namely "the country on the other side of the Iaxartes River that adjoins that of the Sacae and the Sogdiani and was occupied by the Sacae." Since Strabo calls the Massagetae against whom Cyrus II undertook an expedition "Sacae," "Sacae" here can be taken as designating the Massagetae. In other words, the Asii and the others came from the northern bank of the Syr Darya, which had been occupied by the Massagetae. This region neighbors on the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu in the east, and connects with Sogdiana in the south. The valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu were the earliest land of the Massagetae that can be determined. This fact can be used to confirm the above deduction that the Issedones drove the Massagetae from the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu and the northern bank of the Syr Darya successively, and that, based on the northern bank of the Syr Darya, they fought against Darius I and Alexander.

2. Strabo also clearly records the composition of the Sacae (Issedones) who fought against Darius I and Alexander the Great.

We know that the name "Sacae" first specifically referred to the Massagetae, but Massagetae means "great Saca horde," which seems to show that it was a nomadic tribal confederacy with the Sacae at the core. Such a confederacy often had a tribe bound together by blood relationships as its suzerain. However, it is not known what that tribe was, nor whether or not its name was "Sacae." The name of a tribal confederacy did not necessarily agree with that of its nuclear tribe.

The "Sakā haumavargā" and the "Sakā tigraxaudā" listed after "Sind, Gandara" or "Gandara, Sind" in the inscriptions of Darius I were located in the same lands. They were the Sakās described in the Behistun inscription of Darius I as those attacked by Darius I. They were a single entity arrayed against the advancing forces of Darius I, and thus would have been called simply "Sakā" in the Behistun inscription of Darius I.

The Sakās attacked by Darius I were divided into two types with different customs. It is possible that they belonged to two different tribes, not only because their customs were different. Of course, customs may be spread or interact, and different tribes can have the same or similar customs,

especially among tribes in an alliance. In other words, the Sakās who were attacked by Darius I probably included more than two tribes. However, we cannot know the details.

By virtue of Strabo's records, we know the names of the tribes that composed the Issedones. Of them, the Asii obviously were accorded priority. The Tochari and the Gasiani were related tribes of the Asii, and the Sacarauli were obviously the remains of the Massagetae who stayed in the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu.

Therefore, we can affirm that the nuclear tribe of the Massagetae was the Sacarauli, which is why the Massagetae were called the Massagetae or Sacae.

In other words, the Massagetae was a tribal confederacy with the Sacarauli at its core. They lived originally in the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu, and were called Sakā by the Persians. By the end of the seventh century BCE the Massagetae were expelled by the Issedones who came from the East and so they moved to the northern bank of the Syr Darya, but remnants of them stayed on in their original lands and were subject to the Issedones. The remnants of the Massagetae were the Sacarauli, one of the four tribes of the Sacae. The Massagetae were driven from the northern bank of the Syr Darya by the Issedones who expanded west on the eve of Darius I's accession to the throne, at the latest. Some of them traveled south across the Syr Darya and entered Sogdiana. The Sacae whom Darius I and Alexander encountered were the Issedones who occupied the northern bank of the Syr Darya.

The reason the Issedones were called Sacae is different from the reason the Massagetae were called Sacae, mainly because the latter successively occupied the lands (the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu and the northern bank of the Syr Darya) of the Massagetae, and were a nomadic tribe like the Massagetae, enjoying a similar lifestyle and production mode.

In sum, Strabo calls the four tribes of the Asii, Pasiani (Gasiani), Tochari, and Sacarauli, the "Sacae," but the name Sacae was originally the specific designation "Sacarauli."

## F

The ethnonym "Sai" 塞 that appears in Chinese historical texts was undoubtedly a transliteration of the names "Sakā" or "Sacae" found in Western historical accounts. Discussing the state of Wusun, the

"Xiyu Zhuan B" of the *Hanshu* 漢書<sup>5</sup> states that "originally it was the land of the Sai." Since the land of the Wusun was located in the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu, the so-called "land of the Sai" must also have been located in the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu. The statement "the Da Yuezhi 大月氏 turned west and defeated and expelled the king of Sai" in the above-mentioned memoir refers to the event whereby the Da Yuezhi were driven out and moved west to the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu in 177/176 BCE. The set of events whereby "the *Kunmo* 昆莫 of the Wusun 烏孫 attacked and defeated the Da Yuezhi" took place in c. 130 BCE.

The "king of the Sai" who was "defeated and expelled" was obviously not the Massgetae, but the Issedones, i.e., the Asii and the others. The reason the Issedones were called "king of the Sai" was mainly that, because the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu were originally the lands of the Massagetae, it followed that the "land of the Sai" became the name of this region. The Issedones expelled the Massagetae, made themselves suzerain of "the land of Sai," and so were of course viewed as "the king[s] of Sai." The "land of Sai" and "[the country] occupied by the Sacae" were synonymous.

Combining the records of Strabo, we know that, except for a component of the Issedones who moved south and crossed the Suspended Crossing, most of them retreated to the northern bank of the Syr Darya, from which they moved south to invade Bactria after they had been driven out of the "land of Sai" by the Da Yuezhi.

It is certain that there were remnants who stayed in the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu when the Massagetae moved west by the end of the seventh century BCE, and, similarly, "among the people of Wusun there are the Sai race and the Da Yuezhi race" after the Wusun occupied the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu.

After the Da Yuezhi were driven out by the Wusun and moved west, the "land of Sai" was occupied by the Wusun, and "among the people of Wusun there are the Sai race," the "Sai race" being a reference to the Issedones, i.e., the Asii and the others.

The Issedones who drove out the Massagetae and occupied the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu were called the "Sacae." In a similar way, it is entirely possible that the Persians called the

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<sup>5</sup> *Hanshu* 漢書. Compiled by Ban Gu 班固 in the Han dynasty, with commentary by Yan Shigu 顏師古 in the Tang dynasty (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975).

Issedones who drove out the Massagetae and occupied the northern bank of the Syr Darya, the "Sakā."  
The Chinese knew that the Sai certainly came from the Persians.

The "Suoju" 莎車 that appears in the "Wanghui Pian 王會篇" of the *Yizhoushu* 逸周書,<sup>6</sup> can be regarded as a transcription of the "Sacae" or "Sakā." They would have been one branch of the Sacarauli who moved east from the "land of the Sai," i.e., the valleys of the Rivers Ili and Chu.

Conclusion: "Sai" was a transcription of "Sacae" or "Sakā." However, the name does not refer to the Massagetae, but rather to the Issedones.

(Edited by Bruce Doar)

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<sup>6</sup> *Yizhoushu Huijiao Jizhu* 逸周書彙校集注. Compiled by Huang Huixin 黃懷信, Zhang Maorong 張懋鎔 and Tian Xudong 田旭東, and examined by Li Xueqin 李學勤 (Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1995).

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