

# PARTHICA

INCONTRI DI CULTURE NEL MONDO ANTICO

14 · 2012

OFFPRINT



PISA · ROMA  
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MMXIII

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Si prega di inviare manoscritti, dattiloscritti e stampati e la posta redazionale al seguente indirizzo:  
dott. CARLO LIPPOLIS, Dipartimento di Studi Storici,

Via S. Ottavio 20, I 10124 Torino.

I testi originali di contributi e/o recensioni sottoposti all'attenzione della redazione scientifica  
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«Parthica» is an International Peer Reviewed Journal.

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ANVUR: A.

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da consegnare alla redazione ed alla casa editrice, alle norme specificate nel volume FABRIZIO SERRA,  
*Regole editoriali, tipografiche & redazionali*, Pisa-Roma, Serra<sup>2</sup>, 2009.  
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Il capitolo «Norme redazionali», estratto dalle *Regole*, cit., è consultabile *Online*  
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Registrazione presso il Tribunale di Pisa n. 12 del 21 luglio 1999.

Direttore responsabile: FABRIZIO SERRA.

ESSAYS IN MEMORY OF  
BORIS ANATOL'EVICH LITVINSKY





# STUDIES ON THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF SOUTHERN CENTRAL ASIA

EDVARD RTVELADZE

I ENJOYED a long and close friendship with Boris Anatol'evich Litvinsky and his wife, Elena Abramovna Davidovich. I met him in 1963 at the Department of Archaeology in the History Faculty of the Lenin State University of Tashkent (early the State University of Central Asia). We studied under the same teachers at the same university, then went on to share the same academic interests for half a century. In their cosy flat the three of us would exchange reminiscences and discuss the archaeology, history and numismatics of Central Asia. Our conversations would range over such subjects as the Department of Archaeology, the 'iron professor' Michail Evgenevich Masson, and the YUTAKE (South Turkmenistan Archaeological Expedition).

Boris Anatolevich was not only a dear friend but a mentor who taught me his distinctive methods for analysing the complex problems of the ancient history of Central Asia. He was interested in many subjects and followed closely the excavations in Kampyr-Tepe, which he judged to be among the best in Central Asia for their methodology and range. He was always generous in answering questions arising from my dissertations, articles and books. During our last meeting, in Moscow in early June 2010, he said to me: «Edik, I've read the first volume of your history of the state of Uzbekistan very carefully. It's the best book on the history of Central Asia, despite a few reservations I have about its thesis».

His death is an irreparable loss to me; no one will ever be able to criticize my research and give friendly suggestions with such acuteness and such rigour.

This article is dedicated to his memory.

## 1. MARCUS TERENTIUS VARRO'S ROUTE FROM INDIA TO THE CASPIAN SEA<sup>1</sup>

Pliny the Elder cites a report by Marcus Terentius Varro (BC 116-27) about the existence of a trade route from India to the point where the river Bactrus (Balkhab) joined the river Oxus, and from there downstream to the Caspian Sea. When he speaks of the point where the Bactrus joined the Oxus, he is referring, in my opinion, to the Kelif Uzboy, the westernmost stretch of a former distributary of the Oxus, the Uzboy, which did indeed flow into the Caspian.

His words are as follows: «Varro also adds that exploration at the time of Pompey's campaign discovered that it was possible to get from India to Bactria in seven days along the river Bactrus, a tributary of the river Oxus, and [...] from this river across the Caspian Sea to the river Cyrus [...]» (PLIN., *Nat. Hist.*, VI:52).

The Roman historian Solinus, writing in the first half of the 3rd century AD, describes the route more precisely: «I would not to omit to mention that during that same period the same [Alexander the Great] Magnus was able to travel in eight days from India to Bactria as far as the river Dalierus, *where it flows into the Oxus* [my italics], then on to the Caspian Sea» (SOL., 19:4). With the exception of Theodor Mommsen, who was sceptical, all scholars have agreed in identifying the river Dalierus as the Bactrus.

From the confluence of the river Bactrus with the Kelif Uzboy, the route turned west towards the Caspian.

Kiessling,<sup>2</sup> and in particular Tarn,<sup>3</sup> expressed doubts about the authenticity of Pliny's report based on now lost writings of Marcus Terentius Varro. However, Lordkipanidze showed that Tarn's

<sup>1</sup> This article is only a small section of a book *Великий Индийский путь* [The Great Indian Road]: see RTVELADZE 2012.

<sup>2</sup> KIESSLING 1914.

<sup>3</sup> TARN 1985.

arguments were unconvincing and that there was no reason to doubt the existence of a trade route from India to the Euxine.<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of archaeological evidence, Lordkipanidze suggested that one section of this route in Transcaucasus, which at first was only of local use, survived until the pre-Hellenistic period. I would point out, however, that as early as the Bronze Age there existed routes which were not only of local use but joined regions very distant from each other – more than 1,000 km apart – and ran from India to the Caspian Sea. In my opinion, Varro's report concerning a trade route from India can be linked to a well-known account by Strabo of the Sarmatian tribe of the Aorsi, which occupied much of the coast of the Caspian, on the northern, north-western and north-eastern sides. «[...] and consequently – writes Strabo, – they could import on camels the Indian and Babylonian merchandise, receiving it in their turn from the Armenians and Medes» (STRABO, XI:5, 8, transl. by H. L. Jones).

Strabo's account has often been discussed in scholarly studies.<sup>5</sup> Their main concern has been to establish the route along which Indian goods were carried by the Armenians and Medes – the route through Colchis to the Maeotian Lake or the one along the western shore of the Caspian Sea via the Derbent Pass and Caucasian Albania. The second route is more likely, as several scholars have shown,<sup>6</sup> and Strabo's account of the transportation of Indian goods reflects the reality of his time (from the 1st century BC to the early 1st century AD).

For the purposes of the present article, however, there is a more important question: how and along which routes were Indian goods carried to the Armenians and Medes, who lived on the southern and south-western coasts of the Caspian Sea, or slightly to the west of it?

It seems to me that the answer to this question lies in direct links with the roads of the Great Indian Route from the Oxus to the Caspian Sea and beyond, but also in the travels of Isidorus of Charax, who described the route from Hyrcania to Margiana and its capital.

By putting together all these reports, it is possible to reconstruct the entire route of the movement of Indian goods from India. They were carried from India (Gandhara) along the road which followed the river Cophes (Kabul river), and through the passes of the Hindu Kush to the river Surkhab (Kunduz river), where the road forked. At this point some merchants went along the river Surkhab as far as its confluence with the Oxus, and then sailed on river boats down the Oxus to its confluence with the river Bactrus (Balkhab) (which was located on the now dry tributary of the Oxus known as the Kelif Uzboy); or along the river Kunar as far as Chitral, and from there via Zebak in Badakhshan, and then along the Kokcha river and down the Oxus as far as its confluence with the Bactrus. Others may have preferred to travel by land from Adraspa (Andarab) to Samangan (Kholm), then to the river Bactrus, and then down the river to its confluence with the Kelif Uzboy. From here the caravans went downstream to the town of Margiana or Antiochia Margiana (the ancient settlement of Old Merv). From here the road turned south-west towards the region of Apavarktikenā, through the towns of Ragav (in the area of Dushak) and Apavartika (probably the ancient settlement of Koine-Kaachka), then ran west towards the region of Parthiana, in the foothills of the Kopet Dag, through Sirok (near the modern kishlak of Gyaurs) and Gatar, identified by Marushenko as the ancient settlement of Anau. From there the road went to Nisa (the ancient settlements of Old and New Nisa), on the outskirts of the village of Bagir,<sup>7</sup> then along the Kopet Dag or the valley of the river Atrek to the region of Dagestan (the lower Atrek and the south-western coast of the Caspian Sea). As late as the nineteenth-century roads explored by Russian explorers linked the south-eastern coast of the Caspian Sea (Hyrcania, Dagestan) with Merv (Margiana).<sup>8</sup> From there the road ran to the region of Hyrcania, situated south of Dagestan, in the valley of the Gurgan river, and along the south-western coast of the Caspian Sea, where this region bordered on Media, and Media bordered on Armenia.<sup>9</sup> Along the entire south-western coast of the Caspian Sea as far as the mouth of the river Kura and beyond lived the ancient tribe of the Caspii (from whom the sea took its name).

<sup>4</sup> LORDKIPANIDZE 1957.

<sup>5</sup> GADZHIEV 2009.

<sup>6</sup> DAVIDOV 2009.

<sup>7</sup> MASSON 1949.

<sup>8</sup> PETRUSEVIČ 1880, ATAGARRYEV 1986.

<sup>9</sup> DYAKONOV 2008.

A passage in Aelian (17:32) provides some important evidence in support of my theory of the route along which Indian merchandise was transported. He states that the Caspii made a hardened glue from the internal organs of sturgeons, and that they used this glue for sticking together articles made of ivory. From his account it is clear that the Caspii imported ivory, which they used to make beautiful objects. But where could they have imported it from? The most likely answer is that it was transported along the Great Indian Route from India to Bactria and from there through Margiana and Parthiana to Hyrcania. From there it could have been transported either by boat across the Caspian Sea, or by land along the southern shore of the Caspian, or along the road that ran from Hyrcania through the Caspian Gates to Ecbatana (a road along which Alexander the Great travelled in the opposite direction), which was linked to the Caspian by a caravan route. According to Aelian, the Caspii transported dried and salted sturgeon on camels to Ecbatana.

This report by Aelian, who wrote at the turn of the 2nd-3rd centuries AD, undoubtedly reflects the reality of a much earlier time, because Strabo (who died c. AD 23; his account was written no earlier than AD 18) already describes the Caspii as a vanished people (XI:4, 5).

At that time the water route along the Oxus was also used. This is clearly indicated by accounts in the Chinese sources, *Shiji* and *The Book of Han*. These accounts, which date from the late 2nd century BC or the early 1st century AD, will be discussed in detail below. They state that dealers and merchants lived along the river Guishui (= Amu Darya = Oxus), and that they carried their goods several thousand li both by land and water. This means, since one li is about 0.5 or 0.6 km, that the merchants carried their goods over a distance of 1,000-3,000 km.

A distance of several thousand li (and several thousand kilometres) cannot be contained within the boundaries of Central Asia. For example, the distance from the Oxus, in the area of Kelif, to the point where the Atrek flows into the Caspian Sea is little more than 1,000 km as the crow flies, and the distances from other places are even shorter; the length of the Oxus from this point to the Aral Sea is about 800-900 km. The total distance of the route along the Oxus from Kelif to Sarygamysh Lake, and from there down the Uzboy is about 1,400 km.

It is clear that these Chinese accounts refer to an international, not a local trade route, and that when they speak of water routes they mean travel not only along rivers but across seas, probably the Caspian and the Black Sea, because the distance from the Bactrian stretch of the Oxus to other seas is even greater and does not fit the definition of several thousand kilometres.

The Chinese accounts also state that there were many traders in towns and settlements along the valley of the Oxus. They are probably referring to Bactria, and to Bactrian, Indian and Parthian merchants.

Evidence of the considerable extent of monetary trading in the valley of the Oxus is provided by imitations of Graeco-Bactrian coins, which were issued from the late 2nd century BC to the early 1st century AD.

Significant quantities of them have been found in the ancient settlements of Northern Bactria (especially imitations of coins of Helioklès); two have been found in Airtam, one in Khatin Rabat, more than ten in Old Termez, and nine in Kampyr-Tepe.<sup>10</sup> No examples have yet been found further along the Oxus valley, but some have been found in Margiana. In particular, an imitation tetradrachma of Helioklès has been found in Old Kishman (Kushmeikhan), 30 km north-east of Old Merv, on the ancient caravan route that led to the Oxus valley (MASSON 1961). Another similar coin was found in 1965 in the Christian monastery of Kharoba-Koshuk, during research by a group from the YUTAKE, in which I took part. An imitation coin of Helioklès was also found by L. L. Bukinich in 1961 in the bricks joint of the north wall of the Buddhist monastery at Gyaur Kala in Old Merv.

Imitations of Graeco-Bactrian coins have also been found in Transcaucasus and north of the Black Sea. For example, a silver imitation of the tetradrachm of Euthydemus, early series, 2nd-1st century BC, issued in the Bucharan Sogd, has been found at Pasaauri, Georgia, in the valley of the river Aragvi, which flows into the Kura.<sup>11</sup> A similar coin has been found in Ukraine, on the island of Khortytsia, in the lower reaches of the river Dnepr.

<sup>10</sup> RTVELADZE 2002.

<sup>11</sup> KAZAMANOVA 1961.

According to archival evidence, a bronze imitation of coins of Euthydemus was found in ancient Olbia in the late 19th century. It is square in shape with a representation of the Dioscuri on horseback and inscriptions in Kharosthi and Greek. The coin is now preserved in the collection of the National Museum of Warsaw.<sup>12</sup>

Coins of Sanabar, the ruler of Margiana, seemed to have reached the southern Caucasus along the same route; some have been found in Georgia, in the valley of the river Kura.<sup>13</sup>

Although these finds of coins from the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD that have so far been made on the Great Indian Route are few and far between, if we join up the points where the finds were made (the Oxus valley, Margiana, the Southern Caucasus and the northern shore of the Black Sea), it is clear that they all lie on a single trade route that was operating at that time. The locations of the finds are almost identical to those of similar finds for the much earlier Hellenistic period.

## 2. THE KOMARI-BOATMEN OF THE RIVER OXUS

Ptolemy, writing in the 2nd century AD on the basis of an account by Marinus, who had written in the 1st century BC, gives a list of tribes living in Bactria. He writes as follows (VI:11): «North of the river Oxus live the Salaterai and the Zariaspai, and south of them, beyond the Salaterai, the Chomaroi» (or, further south, below the Salaterai, live the Chomaroi. The word Χομάροι,<sup>14</sup> appears in a variant reading as κομαροι.<sup>15</sup>

Ptolemy places the northern border of Bactria along the river Oxus, which in the north and east bordered on Sogdiana, close to the remaining part of the river Oxus. The border between Bactria and Sogdiana along the Oxus seems to have passed through the area of Kerki, where in the Achaemenid period, as archaeological research by Pilipko has revealed, there was a fortress, which probably marked this border.<sup>16</sup> Here, in the area of Kerki, in antiquity and the Middle Ages, was one of the most important crossing points over the Oxus-Jayhoun, on the great caravan route from Southern Sogdia and Bukhara.<sup>17</sup> Evidence that this area may have formed part of Sogdiana is provided by the recent discovery at Talimardzhan, north-east of Kerki, of a large hoard of small silver coins with the image of Heracles and Zeus, issued by the mint of king Artat.<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of this evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that the Zariaspai («the people who ride fallow horses») and the Salaterai lived in the Oxus valley above Kerki. It seems that these tribes or one of them, left the necropolis of Babashov, dated by Mandel'stam between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD. In his opinion, it belonged to nomadic tribes.<sup>19</sup> The tribe of the Chomaroi or Komaroi, according to Ptolemy, lived further up the river Oxus, south of the Zariaspai and the Salaterai. In my opinion, he is referring to the area where the Oxus turns north, near the famous crossing point of Kelif.

The town of Kelif itself occupied both sides of the Amu Darya. Southern Kelif, on the Afghan side, has not yet been archaeologically investigated. Northern Kelif was on the Turkmenian side of the river; according to the archaeological investigations of Pilipko, the earliest finds here date from the Kushan period,<sup>20</sup> but my own excavations have revealed pottery of the Hellenistic period. According to legendary reports, the fortress of Kelif was erected by Alexander the Great, and according to Arabic sources there was a Rabat Dhul-Qarnayn (a figure who was often identified as Alexander the Great) on the right bank (the Turkmenian side) of the Amu Darya in the 10th century.<sup>21</sup>

Fifty kilometres above Kelif, on the northern bank of the Amu Darya-Oxus, is the locality of Kara-Kamar, where I have excavated a cave sanctuary, probably a *mithraeum*,<sup>22</sup> and where Bactrian and Latin inscriptions of a certain Gaius Rex from the Legio xv Apollinaris have been identified.<sup>23</sup> Here there was an old, now forgotten crossing point and a kishlak of the same name, Kara-Kamar; our research revealed remains of a settlement with pottery of the Kushan period. According to lo-

<sup>12</sup> MIELCZAREK 1997.

<sup>14</sup> RONCA 1971, 26.

<sup>16</sup> PILIPKO 1985.

<sup>13</sup> ABRAMISHVILI 1974.

<sup>15</sup> RTVELADZE 2010.

<sup>17</sup> MASSON 1935.

<sup>18</sup> RTVELADZE 2010.

<sup>20</sup> PILIPKO 1985.

<sup>22</sup> RTVELADZE 1990.

<sup>19</sup> MANDEL'STAM 1975.

<sup>21</sup> BARTOLD 1965.

<sup>23</sup> USTINOVA 1990.



cal inhabitants, stone bases of columns had also been found there, but unfortunately we could find no traces of them. South of the Amu Darya, in Afghan territory, are the important Palaeolithic caves of Kara-Kamar.<sup>24</sup>

In modern Persian and Tajik the word *komar* has several meanings – loins, waist, cave, belt, etc.<sup>25</sup>

But in antiquity it also had another meaning. According to Strabo,

After the Sindh territory and Gorgipia, on the sea, one comes to the coast of the Achaei and the Zygi and the Heniochi, which for the most part is harbourless and mountainous, being a part of the Caucasus. These people live by robberies at sea. Their boats are slender, narrow, and light, holding only about twenty-five people, though in rare cases they can hold thirty in all; the Greeks call them “camarae”.

(STRABO, XI:2:12, transl. by H. L. Jones)

The Roman historian Tacitus, however, uses a very similar word for a different type of boat. These are his words:

The barbarians had hastily built vessels and now roamed the sea at will, despising the power of Rome. Their boats they call *camarae*; they have a low freeboard but are broad of beam, and are fastened together without spikes of bronze or iron. When the sea is rough the sailors build up the bulwarks with planks to match the height of the waves, until they close in on the hull like the roof of a house. Thus protected these vessels roll about amid the waves. They have a prow at both ends and their arrangement of oars may be shifted, so that they can be safely propelled in either direction at will.

(TACITUS, *Hist.*, III:47, transl. by J. Jackson)

The type of vessel described by Tacitus is very similar to a kind of rowing vessel that was once widely used for transport on the Amu Darya. These boats were similar in construction, with a broad beam, high bulwarks and identical prows at both ends, and they were held together without metal nails, thanks to the use of wooden dowels. A detailed description of this type of Amudaryan rowing vessel is given by staff-captain A. Bykov, who in 1876 made a survey of the crossings over the Amu Darya;<sup>26</sup> drawings of the vessels were done by the artist N. Karazin, and photographs of them appear in various publications from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>27</sup>

The modern name of this type of Amu Daryan rowing vessel is very similar to the ancient Greek name *komar*. Bykov cites it in his book, in the somewhat Russified form *kime*. According to Snegarev these vessels were called *kema* in Khwārezmian.<sup>28</sup> In Kelif (Bactria), as we established at the time of a joint trip with B. X. Karmysheva and S. U. Ustaev in 1983, the last remaining elderly inhabitants who had formerly worked on the river crossing called this type of vessel *kama* or *kima*, and themselves *kamachi* or *kimachi*, ferrymen.

The etymological link between these two names – the Greek *komar* and the Amu Daryan *kema*, *kima*, *kama* – is clear; the absence of the final ‘r’ in the names of this vessel used on the Amu Darya does not seem very significant, since nearly two thousand years separate the two names: *komar* in the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD; *kama*, *kima*, *kema* in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The loss of the final ‘r’ might easily have occurred during such a long period of time.

As for the Greek name for the rowing vessel *komar*, it seems to me to be unquestionably linked to the name of the Bactrian tribe *Chomaroi* or *Komaroi* mentioned by Ptolemy. It may well be, in fact, that the stem of the name of this tribe is the word *komar*, a boat, reflecting the tribe’s main occupation – navigating on the river and transporting people and goods over the crossing.

In conclusion, the Bactrian tribe of *Chomaroi* or *Komaroi* occupied the territory along the banks of the Oxus, from Kelif to the settlement of *Kampyr-Tepe*. The three most important crossings over the Oxus in antiquity – at *Shurob* (ancient *Pardagvi*), *Chushka Guzar* and *Kelif* – were all located in this area, and remained in use until the early 20th century.<sup>29</sup> The terms for the men who operated them, *kamachi* (ferrymen), and the vessels themselves, *kima*, *kema*, *kama*, are relics of Old Bactrian and Ancient Greek names.

<sup>24</sup> ALLCHIN, HAMMOND 1978.

<sup>25</sup> *Persian-Russian Dictionary*, by B. V. Miller, 1953, 406.

<sup>26</sup> BYKOV 1879.

<sup>27</sup> RTVELAZDE 1999 and 2009a.

<sup>28</sup> SNESAREV 1975.

<sup>29</sup> RTVELAZDE 2002a.

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Stampato in Italia · Printed in Italy

★

ISSN 1128-6342

ISSN ELETTRONICO 1724-1928

ISBN 978-88-6227-643-6

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