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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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The spurious fifth century date for the cultivation of sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*) in Khuzestan

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(New York University)

First published in 1683 at Constantinople in Armenian,¹ Ananias of Širak's *Geography* (*Ašxarhac'oyc'*) only became accessible when William and George Whiston published their Latin translation of the work in 1736.² The paragraph (§31) of interest in the present study reads as follows:

Elymais, sive Chusti-Chorasania orientalem Tigris, occidentalem Persidis oram contingit. Complectitur autem Elymais regiones has minores; Chuzastaniam, Maziam, Maspanam, Mirhanam, Chertaciam, Chastariam, Garmanacaniam, Eranastaniam, Carcavatiam, Notartam, Siracaniam, Marzinam, Surhenam; & præterea urbes quinque, ac fluvios quatuor, quorum unus est Gundi-Sapores, ubi pretiosum Saccharum conficiunt, itémque insulas duas, ipsi in finu Persico objectas.³

1- As Hewsen 1971, 186 noted, the presence of "Marseille" on the title page was a ruse used by the Armenian editor of the work to hide the fact that it was in fact printed in the Ottoman capital, Constantinople.

2- Attributed originally to Movsēs Xorenac'i by Whiston and Whiston 1736, the *Geography* was later assigned to Ps.- Movsēs Xorenac'i by Marquart 1901, and finally to Anania Širakac'i by Suren Eremean in the 1950s. See Hewsen 1968, 33 and n. 12. For the complete English edition see Hewsen 1992.

3- Whiston and Whiston 1736, 364.

In 1819 Antoine-Jean Saint-Martin (1791-1832) published a French translation of Ananias' *Geography*. His version of the same paragraph runs thus:

L'Elymaïde, qu'on appelle aussi K'houdi-khorasan, est à l'orient du Tigre et à l'occident de la Perse; elle contient plusieurs petites provinces, tels que Khoujasdan, Maj, Masban, Mihran, K'herdag, K'haschdar, Karmagan, Eranasdan, Gargavad, Nodard, Schiragan, Mardsin et Serhen; elle renferme quatre fleuves et cinq villes, dont l'une est Kountischabouh, dans laquelle on prépare le sucre avec art. Ce pays a aussi deux îles au-devant de lui, dans le golfe Persique.⁴

Finally, in Robert H. Hewsen's English translation we read:

The thirty-first country of Asia is Elymais, i.e. Khuzistan, which the Greeks call Susiana because of the city of Susa, and the Arabs, Basra. It is bordered on the west by the Tigris which separates Babylonia from Khuzistan, on the south by the Persian Gulf and on the north by Assyria. It has three rivers and five *ostans*, that is, provinces, where the following cities are located: *Ormšir*, *Sulura*, Susa, which is mentioned by Daniel, and *Gundir-Šapurh*, where fine sugar is made. The land is good and fertile and there are two islands opposite in the Persian Gulf.⁵

The first scholar to highlight Ananias' reference to sugar in Khuzestan was the influential German botanist and historian of medicine, Kurt Polycarp Joachim Sprengel (1766-1833).⁶ However, it was the prolific German geographer, Carl Ritter, who explicitly cited the *Geography* as the earliest written evidence of sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) cultivation west of the Indus River, dating it to the early 5th century.⁷ Even though Saint-Martin had already outlined in detail the arguments in favor of *not* attributing the *Geography* to Movsēs Xorenac'i,⁸ Ritter and other scholars after him persisted in their belief that he was the author and that he was active in the 5th century, largely because of his self-identification as a student of St. Maštoc' who died in 440.⁹ Hence, a 5th century date for the cultivation of sugar cane in Khuzestan came to be widely cited in the literature, a belief that has persisted right up to the present day.¹⁰

Even before it was recognized that the author of the *Geography* was not Movsēs Xorenac'i but Ananias of Širak, a number of scholars expressed doubts about the date of this testimony. Based on a reference

⁴- Saint-Martin 1819, 371–373.

⁵- Hewsen 1992, 74.

⁶- Sprengel 1807, 246, "ad Gondisaporam prope Euphratem Moses Chorenensis (*geogr.* p. 364)."

⁷- Ritter 1840a, 176, "das nach Moses v. Choren hier schon zu Anfang des V. Jahrhunderts bei Jondishapur gebaut ward und die erste Zuckerplantage im Westen des Indus sein würde, die uns durch die Geschichte bekannt wird."

⁸- Saint-Martin 1819, 305-306, referred to him as "le traducteur Arménien" and "le prétendu Moyse de Khoren."

⁹- For the date of his death see von Gutschmid 1892, 333. It is unnecessary here to consider all of the internal dating criteria in the *History of Armenia* that have been carefully analyzed by many scholars. See with earlier bibliography e.g. Carrière 1893, Toumanoff 1961 and Thomson 1978.

¹⁰- Without any pretense to completeness, one may cite the following scholars who have made such a declaration: Lassen 1843, 270, 273; von Humboldt 1847, 425, n. 85; Lortet 1859, 13; Zoéga 1868, 4; Maumené 1878, 83; Anonymous 1889; Krüger 1889, 121; Houtum-Schindler 1889, 230-231; Ellis 1905, 37; Rümpler 1906, 3; Daniels and Menzies 1996, 192; Chiffolo and Hesse 2006, 362; Ouerfelli 2008, 19.

to Russians, Saint-Martin, for example, dated it to c. 950.¹¹ Referring to Whiston's Latin edition, Ritter, for example, noted the reference to Basra which, according to Abulfeda (Abū al-Fidā'), was only founded in 635.¹² Ritter was followed in this by Cohn.¹³ Alfred von Gutschmid, on the other hand, having satisfied himself, incorrectly as it turns out, that Movsēs Xorenac'i had indeed written both the *History of Armenia* and the *Geography*, suggested that, on the basis of ethnonyms and anachronisms, he must have been active c. 634–642.¹⁴ More recently, the *Geography* has been dated by Hewsen to c. 615–636, and its author, Ananias of Širak, to c. 590–670.¹⁵ With this, a fifth century date for the production of sugar at Gondēšāpur falls by the wayside.

There is, however, another error that remains to be corrected, one that was introduced by a faulty understanding of the alternate name of Elymais given by Ananias. As the Latin and French translations of §31 in the Geography cited above show, Whiston rendered the name *Chusti-Chorasania*, while Saint-Martin transcribed it as *K'houdi-khorasan*. Unfortunately, basing himself on Whiston's edition, Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) misinterpreted the phrase as a reference to 'die Bereitung des Zuckers aus dem

11- Saint-Martin 1819, 307, "Toutes ces considérations réunies me font croire que c'est vers l'an 950 que la géographie qui nous occupe a été composée; car c'est alors que les Russes commencèrent à faire la guerre aux empereurs de Constantinople, sur les bords du Danube, et qu'ils portèrent même leurs ravages dans l'Asie mineure." Cf. Cf. Schär 1889, 16, "Wenn demnach die Schriftsteller jener Zeit, so der im X. Jahrhundert lebende armenische Geograph Moses von Choren u. A., von der blühenden, mit Kunst ausgeführten Zuckergewinnung in Chusistan sprechen und nebenbei der künstlichen Bewässerung erwähnen, so ist anzunehmen, dass in dem besagten Landstriche das Zuckerrohr systematisch angebaut und direkt auf Zucker ausgebautet wurde."

12- Ritter 1840b, 68, "diejenem Autor zugeschriebene *Geographia Armena* offenbar aus späterer Zeit herrührt; man braucht nur auf die vorhergehende Seite 383 zu sehen, wo Basra mit in derselben Beschreibung aufgezählt ist, das doch erst im Jahr 635 gegründet ward (nach Abulfeda)... Wenn daher auch die Zeit ihrer Abfassung immer erst gegen Ende des VII. Jahrhunderts fallen kann: so bleibt auch dann noch jene immerhin sehr frühe Angabe von der Zuckerrohrkultur in Jondisapur oder an dem gleichgenannten Flusse, dem Kuran (oder Karun)... sehr merkwürdig und die erste Erwähnung einer solchen so weit im Westen."

13- Cohn 1887, 402, "In der armenischen Geographie, welche von Moses von Choren in der ersten Hälfte des 5. Jahrh. verfasst sein soll, jedoch viele spätere Interpolationen enthält, wird zuerst der Anbau des Zuckerrohrs, Schakharn, in Susiana oder Elymais bei der Stadt Gondisapur am Flusse Kuran (Karun) erwähnt, der östlich vom Tigris sich zugleich mit dem Schat el Arab in das Nordende des Persischen Golfs ergießt." However, Cohn qualified this in a footnote on the same page where he wrote, 'Nach Ritter kann die betreffende Stelle der armenischen Geographie nicht vor Ende des 7. Jahrhunderts geschrieben sein.'

14- Rühl 1892, 335–336, "Den Beweis liefern einerseits die durch das ganze Werk sich hindurchziehende und mit der Erzählung selbst oft eng verwachsene geographische und ethnographische Nomenklatur einer späteren Zeit und ähnliche Anachronismen, andererseits die Identität des Verfassers der Geschichte mit dem der Geographie, an der abgesehen von der Gleichheit der geographischen Terminologie eine Reihe ganz individueller Berührungen jeden Zweifel ausschließt: das Urtheil über die Geographie ist ohne Weiteres entscheidend auch für die Geschichte." In this opinion he was followed by Lippmann 1890, 91–92, "Aus einer wenig späteren Periode stammt auch die erste Errwähnung des Zuckerrohrs westlich vom Unterlaufe des Indus. Moses von Choren (Khorni) nämlich, der in der zweiten Hälfte des fünften Jahrhunderts in armenischer Sprache seine 'Geographie' verfasste... berichtet 'dass in Elymais, bei Gondisapur, kostliches Zuckerrohr (Schakhara) angebaut werde.' Das Werk von Moses von Choren ist nun allerdings vielfach ungenau und oberflächlich, auch enthält es zahlreiche Einschübel deren Alter sich nicht feststellen lässt, und wurde so oft umgearbeitet, dass die jetzt vorliegende Redaktion, nach v. Gutschmid... wahrscheinlich erst gegen 640 entstanden ist; hindurch verliert auch jene Erwähnung des Zuckerrohrs an Bedeutsamkeit, da sie möglicherweise erst später, — obwohl keinesfalls, wie einige Forscher, z. B. St. Martin, annahmen, erst um 950 —, in den Text eingefügt worden sein kann."

15- Hewsen 1968, 35, n. 25; Hewsen 1971, 186. This dating shows how remarkably accurate Ritter was already in 1840. Cf. n. 12 above.

Safte des *Saccharum officinarum* in der Provinz Chorasan umständlich beschrieben.¹⁶ In this misguided transposition of sugar cane from Elymais or Khuzestan to Khorasan, von Humboldt was unfortunately followed by a number of scholars.¹⁷ This, however, must be rejected as a misunderstanding of the toponym in question. Ananias of Širak's reference is to sugar in Khuzestan, not *Khorasan*.

Even though Ananias of Širak's *Geography* must be shifted from the fifth to the early seventh century, the reference it contains to sugar production at Gondēšāpur still remains the earliest reference to sugar and, by implication, sugar cane, in Iran. Nevertheless, any number of scholars, beginning with Ritter in 1840, have emphasized that the testimony discussed above is merely the first *written* reference to sugar west of the Indus River, and need not imply that the cultivation of sugar cane did not antedate this period.¹⁸ Many scholars have cited the well-known passage in the *Periplus Maris Erythræi* (§14), dated to the mid-1st century, attesting to the export of 'honey from the reed called *sacchari*' from India. This is, of course, far from a credible argument for sugar cane cultivation and sugar production in Khuzestan at such an early date and even if Gondēšāpur, known as a foundation of Šāpur I's, was in fact a re-foundation of an earlier Arsacid-era site,¹⁹ nothing at this point allows us to presume sugar cane cultivation in the area prior to the seventh century.

16- von Humboldt 1847, 425, n. 85.

17- E.g. Zoéga 1868, 4; Maumené 1878, 83.

18- E.g. Ouerfelli 2008, 19, "il n'est pas exclu que cette culture ait été introduite bien avant le Ve siècle dans la région de Khūzistān."

19- Potts 1989, 334.

ՄՈՎՍԵՍԻ ԽՈՐԵՆԱՑԻՈՒ ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹՈՒՆ
ԵՒ ԱՇԽԱՐՀԱԳՐՈՒԹՈՒՆ.

Moses ^{moves of Choren} CHORENENSIS
HISTORIÆ ARMENIACÆ

53321.

L I B R I III.

Accedit ejusdem Scriptoris

EPITOME GEOGRAPHIÆ.

P R A E M I T T I T U R

P R A E F A T I O,

Q U Ä D E

LITERATURA, ac VERSIONE SACRA ARMENIACA agit;

E T S U B J I C I T U R

A P P E N D I X,

Q U Ä C O N T I N E T

EPISTOLAS DUAS ARMENIACAS,

Primam, CORINTHIORUM ad PAULUM Apostolum, Alteram, PAULI Apostoli ad CORINTHIOS; nunc primūm ex Codice MS integrè divulgatas.

Armeniacè ediderunt, Latinè verterunt, Notisque illustrarunt
GULIELMUS & GEORGIVS, GUL. WHISTONI Filii,
Aulæ Clarenſis in Academiâ Cantabrigiensi aliquandiu Alumni.

Լաւ են երկու քան զմի, որոց գոն վարձք բարե՞ն կատակս նոցա-
Աշածու ու ծառ սար ու նու էնա, օւս ըստ աստու մածու աշածու ու մոշթա աստա. Eccles. IV.9.

L O N D I N I:

Ex OFFICINA CAROLI ACKERS TYPOGRAPHIS

Apud JOANNEM WHISTONUM BIBLIOPOLAM.
MDCCXXXVI.

1736

Titel page of the 1736 edition of Movses Xorenac'i's *History of the Armenians* (*Mosis Chorenensis Historiæ Armeniacæ*)

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