

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SACRED HILL OF SĪSTĀN

SECTION I.—THE HISTORICAL INTEREST OF SĪSTĀN

Geographi-
cal impor-
tance of
Sīstān.

THE territory of ancient *Sakastanē*, the Sagistān of medieval Muhammadan writers, the modern Sīstān, had attracted me by its historical interest ever since the Old-Iranian studies of my youth. Geographical position has made Sīstān a link between Western and Eastern Irān, and a corresponding mixture of ethnic elements, not unlike the one to be found there at present, is significantly reflected in the duplication of the forms in which its early indigenous name is presented by classical records.¹ Nature, by placing Sīstān on the main line of communication between Persia and the western marches of India, has invested it with an importance which, whether for peaceful trade intercourse or invasion, has asserted itself all through history and makes itself felt to the present day. Nature has given to Sīstān the fertilizing waters of the Helmand, the greatest river of Irān south of the line which extends from the Hindukush to the Caspian, and has thereby provided resources which, if fostered by peace and efficient administration, would suffice to make the province the granary of central Irān and the seat of a flourishing civilization.

Early
historical
references.

It is obvious that great interest must attach to Sīstān for the student of ancient Irān, and extremely meagre as our extant records are for the earliest period of its history, they do not fail us altogether.^{1a} Sīstān is duly named among the provinces of the Achaemenidian Empire both by Darius I and Herodotus.² Alexander passed through it on his march towards the border lands of India, and the varying forms of the name by which our chief source of the great conqueror's exploits, Arrian's *Anabasis*, mentions the territory and its people,³ incidentally bring out the interesting fact that Sīstān lay then, as it does in a way now, on what may be called the linguistic watershed between Western and Eastern Irān. The peculiar position of the territory in this respect is itself probably the result of an ethnic division accounted for by factors of physical geography, and is curiously reflected throughout its political history, as for instance by the modern division of Sīstān between Persia and Afghānistān.

Religious
and epic
traditions.

The importance attaching to Sīstān in the ancient civilization of Irān is attested by the religious and epic traditions there localized since very early times. One of the most interesting sections of the extant Zoroastrian scriptures, Yasht xix of the Avesta devoted to the praise of the 'kingly glory', distinctly associates this sacred representative of lawful rule over Irān with 'him

¹ The Eastern Iranian form which meets us as *Zranka* in the inscriptions of Darius is reproduced in the *Σαράγγαι* of Herodotus, the *Zapάγγαι* of Arrian. Yet the latter knows also the Western Iranian form of *Δράγγαι* which appears in the *Drangianē* of Strabo, Ptolemy, and other classical writers. The Eastern Iranian form has survived in the medieval name *Zaranj* and in the modern designation of the *Zirrah* lake, derived from Avestic *Zrayô*, 'lake' (Old Persian *draya^h*).

^{1a} For a still useful synopsis of these and of early medieval notices, cf. Sir Henry Rawlinson's 'Notes on Seistan', *J.R.G.S.*, 1873, pp. 272 sqq.

² For an analysis of these references, cf. Dr. Thomas's instructive article on 'Sakastana', *J.R.A.S.*, 1906, pp. 181 sqq., where the question of the true origin of the designation of Sīstān as 'land of the Sakas', i. e. Scythians, is critically discussed.

³ The fact of the forms *Zapάγγαι* or *Zapaγγαῖοι* (VI. 17. 3, 27. 3; VII. 6. 3) and *Δράγγαι* (III. 21. 1, 28. 1; VII. 10. 5) being indifferently used by Arrian suggests that those contemporary writers whose records he used heard both forms among the local population.