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HYDRONYMIA ṚGVEDICA

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ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that hydronyms represent the most archaic attainable language stratum in any language with adequate documentation. It is precisely river-names that have been preserved from the older layers of languages more frequently than other proper names or borrowed appellatives. This indicates that river names offer a unique witness to a language's prehistory, preceding the first literary documents.

In the Indian subcontinent the oldest preserved literary text is the Ṛgveda, dated to approx. 1500 BCE e.g. by Michael Witzel (2003, 2011). On the basis of complete textual documentation this article presents the geographical identification and etymological analysis of 10 hydronyms attested in the Ṛgveda. It is possible to conclude that the center of gravity of the early Indo-Iranic dryans was situated in the North West of the Indian subcontinent, in the basin of the mid- and upper streams of the Indus, plus basins of the upper streams of the Ganges & Yamuna (cf. Witzel 2003b, 2011, 2012). Most of the hydronyms analyzed here are etymologically as Indo-Iranic in the first approximation, but this could be a result of secondary reinterpretation ("folk etymology"). In only two cases (3, 4) are Indo-Iranic, namely Bernartshukh, etymologies more probable. In other four cases (1, 2, 5, 6) there are Dravidian alternative solutions. The hypothesis of Near Eastern or Mundic (Austro-Asiatic) origin of some hydronyms were also tested, but were not confirmed. It means, for c. 1/3 hydronyms attested in Ṛgveda the pre-Indo-Iranic origin is more or less probable.

KEYWORDS

hydronyms; etymology; Indo-Iranic; Dravidian; Bernartshukh; Dravidian; Mundic; Austro-Asiatic; Near Eastern.

The purposes of the present article are to summarize all hydronyms attested in the Ṛgveda with their complete textual documentation, identification including geographic characteristics, both with hydronyms documented by the Greek & Latin authors and with contemporary river names, and finally discussion of their etymologies.