

Map 85 Oudon-Rha

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Introduction

The lower reaches of the R. Volga (ancient Rha), and in general the steppe to the north and north-west of the Caspian Sea, were of particular significance to the classical world as the homeland of the Sarmatians (traditionally, from the fourth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D.). The latter term is fraught with difficulties. The distinctions which archaeologists commonly draw between Sarmatians and Sauromatians are no more than modern constructions, whereas ancient writers tend to use the terms interchangeably (Smirnov 1980, 140). The Alanoi, who appear in classical sources from the first century A.D., are usually understood to be a Sarmatian grouping (see the general discussion in Kovalevskaya 1984; Yatsenko 1993), though our classical sources typically refer to them as Scythians (RE Alanoi). Further, the Alanoi are often harder to distinguish from the Albanoi (Map 88 D1) than modern discussions like to acknowledge. The similarity of their names and the textual uncertainties of our manuscripts combine with their close physical proximity to make such distinctions highly problematic, both in general and from case to case (Braund 1994, 225 n. 116). Moreover, the Caucasus mountains, by reference to which the northern limits of the Albanoi tend to be located (Akopyan 1987, 30-31), were regularly imagined in antiquity as stretching further north along the Caspian shore than they do in reality.

In any event, it is clear enough that the Sarmatians of this region, and doubtless also the Alanoi, were an amalgam of different political groupings under their own chieftains—termed by Tacitus “scepter-holders” (*sceptuchi*, *Ann.* 6.33)—who could as well act against each other as in concert. Rome and Parthia/Persia carried on a diplomatic struggle in this region for the support of such leaders. The Iberoi and Albanoi evidently played a large part in that diplomacy, for their relations with the Sarmatians entailed friendship as well as enmity (Braund 1994, 208-209).

The elite of the region are traditionally imagined to have originated in the east, and they had some access to goods from there, as well as from the classical world. Their burials amply illustrate this mixture of east and west. At Krivaya Luka on the lower Volga (but north of this map, as are the other burials mentioned; modern Astrakhan is marked for orientation only) a black-glaze cup and stamped amphora of Heraclea (Map 86 B2) were found in a rich female burial, deposited in the first half of the third century B.C. (Dvornichenko 1989, 5). Another burial at Krivaya Luka, however, contained bronze work similar to that of central Mongolia, of a type found nearby again in the important burial close to the village of Kosika, located 70 miles north of Astrakhan on the right bank of the Volga. Both burials are dated to a period from the end of the first century B.C. into the first century A.D. (Dvornichenko 1989). The latter one also contains outstanding gold and silver work, as well as a bronze Roman ladle which, for all its polychrome- and animal-style, includes such elements as a meander and is attributed to Greek craftsmen. The pottery here recalls finds in burials in the R. Hypanis area (Map 84 C3), a key link between the Black Sea region and the northern Caspian.

Mounds were usually raised over the burials of the elite, often augmented further by sites on elevated ground, as near Kosika. There is a distinct absence of such burials in the Volga delta south of the modern village of Nikol'skoye, though chance finds indicate that this area was not entirely uninhabited. Its population was evidently the same as that further north along the Volga (Dvornichenko 1989, 6). A thorough survey is needed to establish the extent to which the level of the Caspian Sea was higher at the mouth of the Volga in antiquity, but one may reasonably suppose that the delta was substantially wetter even than it is today (on Caspian levels, see further the introduction to Map 90).

The classical world had only an outline knowledge of the entire region. This was developed in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods, not least no doubt by the expeditions of Pompey, Corbulo and Arrian; but there was little firsthand knowledge before Late Antiquity. Of particular significance was Zemarchos' return through the region after his embassy to the Turks c. 568 (Menander the Guardsman, frag. 10.4). For most of antiquity, the

Caspian was regarded as an inlet of a great northern Ocean, with the Volga imagined as a connecting channel (Strabo 11.6.1; Pliny, *NH* 6.36-38; cf. Dion 1977, 216-19). Pliny imagines that channel as narrow enough to make for an easy passage between the nomads and Sauromatians to its west and the Abzoae to its east. Since all these peoples are in his view Scythians, he records the name Scythicus Sinus for the channel. Here he was evidently drawing upon the work of M. Varro, who seems to have visited the general area with Pompey in the mid-60s B.C., as part of an entourage which produced several accounts of the region (unless we take Mithridates VIII of Bosphorus to be his source). The extent to which Pompey's forces explored as far as the Volga is unknown, if they did so at all (Braund 1994, 152). At least the Abzoae are marked on the map.

The R. Volga has been identified with Herodotus' otherwise mysterious Oaros (4.124), which he thought emptied into the Sea of Azov, not the Caspian. From Hellenistic times, it seems, the Volga was known as the Rha; it enjoyed a certain fame as a source of the medicinal root of a plant of the rhubarb family (AmmMarc 22.8.28). Kiessling (RE Ra) notes that this plant was also thought to come from the region of the Crimean Bosphorus, a further indication of a link between the Volga and the Sea of Azov (Map 84 B2). Certainly, goods—especially light goods—could be conveyed from the Volga across to the upper reaches of the R. Tanais (Map 84 F1), and then down that river to Azov and the Black Sea. Attendant circumstances permitting, this was the easiest route between the northern Caspian and the Mediterranean world. Accordingly, if there was any substance to the emperor Claudius' report that Seleucus Nicator entertained the notion of cutting a channel from Caspian to Azov (Pliny, *NH* 6.31; cf. Strabo 11.1.5), the movement of such goods may have provided an impetus to the plan. Further, an underground link between Azov and Caspian was also imagined (Strabo 11.7.4).

In Late Antiquity, the Volga seems to have acquired its Turkish name, Atel (Theophanes, *Chronographia* 356). That is no doubt why it occurs in the tradition of Zemarchos' return from the Turks with the name Attila (Blockley 1985, 266). At the same time, the Armenian geographical tradition not only records the Turkish name, but also suggests that the Volga delta may have consisted of still more watercourses in antiquity than it does today. Accordingly, the Volga delta appears on the map only in approximate form.

The peoples of the region were still more problematic for classical writers (note Pliny, *NH* 6.19-22). Indicative of our sources' ignorance is the regular inclusion of the Amazons among the peoples of the lands of the northern Caspian (Strabo 11.5.1; Pliny, *NH* 6.35; Ptol. 5.8.13). Similarly, the Issedones/Essedones, although somehow imagined in the region of the northern Caspian by Herodotus and others, seem to have no basis in fact and are therefore omitted. More mundane is a disagreement among classical writers over the location of the Geli and the Legae (as well as the associated R. Mermadalís), who are variously placed to the north-west of the Caspian or to its south-west, and are here listed as unlocated. The ancient R. Soanas presents a similar problem. It is usually identified as the modern Sunzha, a tributary of the Terek just south of the map, though it is tempting to link it with the Souanoi further west. Since the Soanas has also been regarded as part of the lower Terek proper, it is listed here as unlocated.

Strabo (11.5.8) seems to have envisaged an Aorsian sphere of influence which reached from the west—perhaps even from as far as Olbia (Map 23 E2)—almost to the north and north-east Caspian (cf. Braund 1994a; Vinogradov 1994; Klochkov 1996). In this respect, the Aorsoi seem to have been the forerunners of the Alanoi in the region.

Directory

All place names are in Russia unless otherwise noted

Names

Grid	Name	Period	Modern Name / Location	Reference
F1	Abzoae	HR	KAZ / RUS	Pliny, <i>NH</i> 6.38
B3	Alanoi	RL	RUS / UKR	Matthews 1989, 334-35
A2	Aorsoi		RUS / UKR	See Map 84
F1	<i>Astrakhan</i> Attila fl. = Rha fl.			See Introduction

E3	Caspium/ Hyrcanium Mare			See Map 90
A1	Hippika? Ore Hyrcanium Mare = Caspium Mare	HR		RE
	Kopphen fl. = Oudon fl.			
D2	Orinaioi	HR		RE
D3	Oromouschoi Oudai = Udini	L		Blockley 1985, 124, 266
B3	Oudon/ Kopphen fl.	HR/ L	Kuma	RE Udini; Blockley 1985, 124, 266
D2	Ougouroi	L		Blockley 1985, 124, 266
E1	Rha/ Attila fl.	HRL/ L	Volga	RE Ra; Blockley 1985, 124, 266
C1	Sapothrenai	HR		RE
B3	Sarmatia § Sarmatae	CHRL		See Map 84
E1	Serboi	HR		RE Σέρβοι
D3	Udini/ Oudai	HR		RE Udini

Unlocated Toponyms

Name	Period	Probable Location	Reference
Geli	HRL		RE
Issedones/ Essedones	ACHR		RE Issedoi
Legae	HR		RE Legai
Mermadalis fl.	HR		RE Μερμάδαλις
Oaros	C	Volga?	RE
Sakanoi/ Sacasani	HR		RE Σακανοί
Skymnitai	RL		RE Σκυμνῖται
Soanas fl.	HRL		RE Σόανας 1
Telaiba	R		RE Τέλαιβα
Thilbis	R		RE Θιλβίς

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