

The Easternmost attested Iranian language is Khotanese, which was the language of the kingdom of Khotan in the south of the Tarim Basin in Northwest China. Closely related to Khotanese is Tumšūqese, found in the north of the Tarim Basin. It is usually assumed that the language of the region of Kašgar, to the west of Khotanese and Tumšūqese, termed Kanjakī by Kāšgarī, contains traces of a language that was part of the same subgroup of Iranian languages. Although only Khotanese is well attested, the conclusion that languages of the Khotanese group occupied the entire west of the Tarim Basin seems justified. In the north of the Tarim Basin, the non-Iranian languages Tocharian A and B are found immediately to the east of Tumšūqese. The relevance of Tocharian for Iranian studies is that it preserves traces of contact with a number of Eastern Iranian languages: Khotanese, Sogdian, Bactrian (Isebaert 1980; Tremblay 2005a). However, even more important is the fact that Tocharian contains loanwords from an Old Iranian dialect that has such an archaic appearance that one is tempted to date it in the early 1st millennium BCE at the latest. It has been argued that this oldest layer is to be identified as the common ancestor of Khotanese and Tumšūqese, a so-called “Proto-Sakan” (Tremblay 2005a: 422). However, this assumption leads to insuperable problems in matters of details (cf. also Tremblay 2005b: 678). In this paper, it is therefore argued that the Old Iranian dialect attested by Tocharian is not of the Khotanese-Tumšūqese group. Instead, we have to assume that still more Iranian peoples were found in the east. This is likely in any case in view of evidence from archaeology (Kuz'mina 2008: 98–107). It has also been suggested on the basis of traces of a non-Bactrian Iranian dialect that are preserved in Bactrian (Sims-Williams 2002). The main topic of this paper will be to outline how arguments drawn from Tocharian can be used, and to identify possible affinities of the Old Iranian stratum with other Iranian dialects.

References:

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