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PANORAMA OF A RIVER IN ANTIQUITY: THE ARAXES

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Abstract

Rivers are an indispensable component of human life, providing not only a critical source of water, but also contributing to the development of ancient civilizations. The Araxes River, presently known as Aras, is one of the largest rivers in Eastern Anatolia and played a pivotal role in the emergence of ancient societies. In ancient times, the river served not only as a source of water, but also as a trade and travel route that extended from the Caspian Sea to Artaxata and from there to Asia Minor, and was regarded as a natural border. Ancient authors referred to the regions traversed by the Araxes and the settlements established alongside the river, shedding light on the political, socio-economic, and cultural patterns that were formed around the river. This study aims to examine how the Araxes influenced the regions it flows through based on ancient sources, while also highlighting any misconceptions regarding the river through an evaluation of its relationship with human populations.

Keywords: Aras, Araxes, Araxene, Caspian Sea, River.

Antikçağda Bir Nehrin Panoraması: Arakses

Öz

Nehirler yaşamın vazgeçilmez bir parçasıdır. Antik dönem toplumları için nehirler sadece canlı yaşamının devamını sağlayan su kaynakları olarak hizmet etmemişlerdir. Antik yerleşimlerin daha çok

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nehirler etrafında kurulması, birçok uygarlığın nehirler etrafında gelişmesi nehirlerin insan hayatında ne kadar belirleyici olduğunu göstermesi açısından önemlidir. Günümüzde Aras olarak bilinen ve Doğu Anadolu bölgesinin en büyük nehirlerinden biri olan Arakses de uygarlığın gelişmesine katkıda bulunmuştur. Nehrin antikçağda sadece bir akarsu olarak değil, hem Kaspia Denizi'nden Artaksata'ya ve oradan da Küçük Asia'ya ulaşan bir ticaret ve seyahat güzergâhı olarak kullanıldığı hem de doğal bir sınır olarak kabul gördüğü anlaşılmaktadır. Bu açılarından bakıldığında, antik dönem yazarları eserlerinde, Arakses'in geçtiği bölgeler ve nehrin etrafında kurulan kentlerden bahsederek aslında bir bakıma nehir etrafında şekillenen siyasi, sosyo-ekonomik ve kültürel yapıyı gözler önüne sermişlerdir. Bu çalışmanın amacı antik kaynaklar temelinde söz konusu nehrin geçtiği bölgeleri nasıl etkilediğini incelemek, nehir ve insan arasındaki ilişkiyi değerlendirerek Arakses'e dair hatalı yorumlamalara dikkat çekmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aras, Arakses, Araksene, Kaspia Denizi, Nehir.

To comprehend the image of river in the mind of ancient people is, in a sense, to determine the historical and social significance of rivers because rivers have their unique pasts as well. They need to be considered not only as a water resource but also as a factor depicting social life within the concepts of time and space. Yet, rivers and cultures are in a constant state of interaction with each other. The river, which is the main subject of this study and referred in ancient sources as Araxes (Ἀράξης)¹ today takes its source from the northern and northwestern slopes of the Bingöl (Abos) mountains in the Eastern Anatolia region and continues its route towards the east in the direction of Erzurum. After flowing for a certain distance in the southeast and northeast directions, the river follows the southeast route towards the Caspian Sea.² Pseudo-Plutarch claims that the name of the river comes from Araxes,

¹ On the meaning of the river's name as "to split, to separate", see Strab. XI. 14. 13. Stephanus of Byzantium mentions the Araxes as τὸ τοπικὸν Ἀράξιον ὕδωρ. (Steph. Byz. *Ethnika*, Ἀράξης). The name 'Araxes' is derived from the *Luwian* verb *aršiya* meaning "to flow, to strike", see Emmanuel Laroche, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Louvite*, (Paris: Librairie Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1959): 32; on formation process of the Araxes and its valley, see Nurcan Avşın and Metin Aras, "Aras Nehri Vadisi ve Yakın Çevresinin Jeomorfolojisi (Kağızman-Gaziler Arası)", *Sosyal, Beşerî ve İdari Bilimler Dergisi* 4/5 (2021): 375-384.

² Minorsky recorded the Arakses as *Arus* in his work. According to him, the river originates from a point at the eastern side of the Armenia mountains and turns eastward and flows into the Caspian Sea. (Vladimir Minorsky, *Hudûd al-Âlam, The Regions of the World*, Translated and Explained by Vladimir Minorsky, (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 11a, 55). For further information about the Araxes River, see also Edward Herbert Bunbury, *A History of Ancient Geography: Among the Greeks and Romans from the Earliest Ages till the Fall*

the son of Pylos. Moreover, it is recorded that Araxes is one of the rivers in the Armenian region and an Armenian king was referred to as Araxes. It is also reported that as a result of various events, the name Araxes was given to different rivers.³

The Araxes River, which creates a substantial ecosystem, is a valuable life source that nourishes the regions it passes through. Ancient authors mention the route followed by the Araxes River before flowing into the Caspian Sea and the surrounding regions it gives life to. According to the presumptive descriptions of historiographer Herodotus of Halicarnassus who indicates that the Araxes River flows towards the east, it can be concluded that the ancient Greco-Roman world did not have certain knowledge about the river in the fifth century BCE yet:

“The Araxes is said by some to be greater and by some to be less than the Ister [Istros]. It is reported that there are many islands⁴ in it as big as Lesbos, and men on them who in summer live on roots of all kinds that they dig up, and in winter on fruit that they have got from trees when it was ripe and stored for food; and they know (it is said) of trees bearing a fruit whose effect is this: gathering in groups and kindling a fire, the people sit around it and throw the fruit into the flames; then the fumes of it as it burns make them drunk as the Greek are with wine, and more and more drunk as more fruit is thrown on the fire, until at last they rise up to dance and even sing. Such is said to be their way of life. The Araxes flows from the country of the Matieni (as does the Gyndes, which Cyrus divided into the three hundred and sixty channels) and empties itself through forty mouths, of which all except one issue into bogs and swamps, where men are said to live whose food is raw fish, and their customary dress sealskins.

of the Roman Empire, (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), 282; Ebü'l Fida, *Takvimü'l-Büldan, Ebü'l Fida Coğrafyası*, Translated by Ramazan Şeşen, (İstanbul: Yeditepe Yayınevi, 2017), 68.

³ Pseudo-Plutarch, *De Fluviorum et Montium Nominibus, Nehirler ve Dağ İsimleri Hakkında*, Translated by Mesut Kınacı, *Libri III*, (2017): Ps.-Plut. *de. fluv.* XXIII. 1-2. The Araxes, which is among the six major rivers of ancient Armenia and runs close to many significant Armenian cities, has become a symbol for the people of the region. See Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog, *The Mongols and the Armenians (1220-1235)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 32.

⁴ For the view that seasonal changes in precipitation regime led to the formation of river islands on the Araxes, see Nurcan Avşin and Metin Aras, “Aras Nehri Vadisi ve Yakın Çevresinin Jeomorfolojisi (Kağızman-Gaziler Arası)”, 375, 382.

The one remaining stream of the Araxes flows in a clear channel into the Caspian Sea.”⁵

Supposititious information narrated by Herodotus about far and isolated geographies brings questions about the sources used by the ancient historiographer. In this regard, he probably benefited from the information carried by merchants, sailors and travelers. It is also important whether the information Herodotus narrated contains his personal judgments or not. If it is taken into consideration that it was difficult to confirm information in the ancient period, it could be inevitable to accept some mistaken information by the historiographer. For instance, Herodotus is of the opinion that the Araxes River takes its sources from the lands of Matiens (the territory between Lake Urmia and the Zap River). In this case, Herodotus seems to have been mistaken in his account about the river. Apart from this, he makes a comparison with other known rivers of the ancient times to depict the size of the Araxes. He tries to clarify width and length of the river in people’s minds as if he wants to make them clearer. Moreover, he presents brief anecdotes about the lifestyles⁶ of the people settled along the river. In this context, the historiographer reports that people living around the river were consuming a sort of plant growing naturally in the soil as a food. The Araxes was surrounded by diversified tree populations, and dwellers of the area stored the products they collected from these trees to consume in the winter. As the historiographer provides greater details, he emphasizes that there were rumors that people became intoxicated and had fun inhaling the smoke spreading

⁵ Hdt. I. 202; IV. 40. Herodotus localizes the Araxes River to Skythia. The historiographer possibly confuses the Araxes with the Jaxartes or Oxus Rivers (Eric Herbert Warmington, “Araxes”, S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, (Oxford, 1996), 137; Burchard Brentjes and Hans Treidler, “Araxes”, H. Cancik and H. Schneider (eds.), *Der Neue Pauly Enzyklopädie der Antike*, Band I, (Stuttgart-Weimar:1996), 962; cf. Oliver Thomson, *History of Ancient Geography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 84-85). The act of people smelling the smoke from the fruit they threw into the fire and losing conscious resembles the rituals of the Brahmins (Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Experience of India: From Alexander to the Indo-Greeks*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 27).

⁶ For the cultural structure around the Araxes and its sphere of influence, see also Catherine Marro, “Where did Late Chalcolithic Chaff-Faced Ware Originate? Cultural Dynamics in Anatolia and Transcaucasia at the Dawn of Urban Civilization (ca 4500-3500 BCE)”, *Paléorient* 36/2, (2010): 52; Giulio Palumbi and Christine Chataigner, “The Kura-Araxes Culture from the Caucasus to Iran, Anatolia and the Levant: Between Unity and Diversity, A Synthesis”, *Paléorient* 40/2, (2014): 247-258; Ayhan Yardimci, “İğdır Ovası’nın Orta Tunç Çağı ve Transhümanist Yaşamındaki Rolü”, *Amisos* 1/Orta Aras Havzası Özel Sayısı, (2022): 66-68; Sepideh Maziar and Michael Glascock, “Communication Networks and Economical Interactions: Sourcing Obsidian in the Araxes River Basin”, *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 14, (2017): 36.

around when the fruits of a different tree thrown into the fire. In spite of all these details, it can be stated that the extent of the effect of the Araxes River on economic and social lives of the ancient people is not clear in the work of Herodotus. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to conclude that the river gave life to the surrounding lands. It provided food sources such as fish, vegetables and fruits for the people who settled around it and offered meadows for animals.⁷

Another work giving information about the Araxes River and its vicinity in the ancient period is the *Anabasis* by Xenophon. The subject of the work is about the campaign of Cyrus the Younger attempting to dethrone his older brother, Persian King Artaxerxes II, at the end of the fifth century BCE. Xenophon was also among the commanders accompanying Cyrus the Younger. In *Anabasis*, the death of Cyrus the Younger in the Battle of Cunaxa (401 BCE), retreat of Greek mercenaries (*Ten Thousand*) under the command of Xenophon, and failure of the campaign is narrated. In the passage regarding the period before the Battle of Cunaxa, Xenophon at one point indicates that they reached the Araxes River and there were many villages filled with grain and wine around the river from which they received supplies.⁸ Even though this narrative reveals the socio-economic status of the settlements around the river, it can be understood that Xenophon made a mistake here because he thinks the river he encountered was Araxes. However, it is known that the river he mentioned was actually the Habur River, which is a tributary of the Euphrates River.⁹ This mistaken narration is probably because of Xenophon's lack of sufficient knowledge about the region. On the other hand, Xenophon tells us that they marched northwards through inner Armenia by following the branches of the Phasis River on their retreat and that Chalybians, Taochians, and Phasians were living around this river.¹⁰ Phasis, a branch of the Araxes River, is identified by Pasinler Çayı. In this case, it is clear that the Araxes and its tributaries were a passage route for Xenophon and his army at this impassable and mountainous territory in the late fifth century BCE. In addition to the strategic importance of the river, the emphasis on the existence of

⁷ In antiquity, animal husbandry was generally preferred over agriculture in this region. One of the reasons for this is that in the event of unforeseeable environmental changes such as drought, livestock can be easily moved to favorable areas and pastoral life is more flexible and less risky (Roman Hovsepian, "On the Agriculture and Vegetal Food Economy of Kura-Araxes Culture in the South Caucasus", *Paléorient* 41/1, (2015): 79).

⁸ Xen. *Anab.* I. 4. 19.

⁹ Eric Herbert Warmington, "Araxes", 137; cf. Fred Donner, "Xenophon's Arabia", *Iraq* 48, (1986): 3. See also William Farrell, "A Revised Itinerary of the Route Followed by Cyrus the Younger through Syria, 401 B.C.", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 81, (1961): 154.

¹⁰ Xen. *Anab.* IV. 6. 4-7.

different peoples settled in its surroundings suggests that these dwellers may have used the Araxes and its tributaries to meet their food needs.

Apollonius of Rhodes, a luminary of the ancient Greek literary tradition who flourished during the third century BCE, recorded the legendary journey of Jason and the Argonauts in their quest for the coveted golden fleece in his magnum opus titled *Argonautica*. Within this epic work, the Araxes River is poetically referenced as κελάδοντος Ἀράξεω, and its tumultuous roar is depicted in vivid detail. As evidenced by the testimony of poets, the Araxes River held a recurring thematic position within the corpus of Hellenistic literature. In its integration into the aforementioned mythic voyage, the Araxes River serves as a powerful symbol of the ineffable and inaccessible.¹¹

The Sicilian historiographer Diodorus who lived in the first century BCE, in *Bibliothēke Historike*, quotes that Alexander the Great crossed with his army over the Araxes River when he set out towards Persepolis, the capital of the Persian Kingdom. According to this account, Alexander the Great marched along the Araxes valley as a route during his eastern campaign.¹² In Diodorus' work, Araxes is a river located near Persepolis. Diodorus, who wrote a general world history largely based on the works of previous authors, does not actually provide detailed information about the Araxes River and its surroundings. He only refers to the name of the river while describing the campaign of Alexander the Great. The obscurity left by Diodorus is cleared partly by Strabo. He considers the Araxes River, which he noted had many branches as a natural border. He indicates that the Kyros (Kura) River passes over Iberia and Albania whereas the Araxes River passes through Armenia and both rivers flow into the Caspian Sea.¹³ Strabo reports that these rivers contribute to the productivity of the regions they pass through: the Araxes flows fiercely through Armenia and also has a mouth near the Kyros River, and the lands where Massagetai lived are irrigated by the Araxes. Strabo also notes the Araxes River constitutes a border between Armenia and Atropatane.¹⁴ He suggests the Araxes rises from a spring at Abos (Bingöl) mountains and passes by the cities such as Azara and Artaxata then follows its way across the Araxene plain. In his view the plain formed by the mouth of the Araxes is quite suitable for agriculture.¹⁵ At this point, organic remains along the river confirm Strabo's narrative because there have been traces of

¹¹ Apoll. Rhod. *argon.* IV. 133; Ronald Syme, "Exotic Names, Notably in Seneca's Tragedies", *Acta Classica* 30, (1987): 50.

¹² Diod. XVII. 69. 2; Burchard Brentjes and Hans Treidler, "Araxes", 962.

¹³ Strab. XI. 1. 5; XI. 14. 7.

¹⁴ Strab. XI. 4. 2; XI. 8. 6; XI. 13. 3.

¹⁵ Strab. XI. 14. 2; XI. 14. 3; XI. 14. 4; XI. 14. 13.

agriculture around the Araxes River since ancient times. While it cannot be determined how people specialized in agriculture, it is possible to mention the existence of a formed agricultural economy where various grain crops such as wheat, barley, maize, and rye were grown with the help of the river.¹⁶ Thus, it is possible to make inferences that fertile lands around the river motivated people to engage in agriculture and a population density formed in the region due to the surplus of products, which probably over time led to an increase in settlements along the Araxes.

Pomponius Mela, a geographer who lived during the first century BCE, mentions the Araxes River as well as people inhabiting around the Caspian Sea. Mela reports that a number of large and small rivers were flowing into the Caspian Sea and that the Araxes flowing down from the Taurus mountains continued its way calm and steadily into the Armenian plateaus. Additionally, Mela indicates that it was difficult to determine the flow direction of the Araxes River even when observed closely. For example, the flow rate increased when the river started to travel through rough terrain but later slowed once it reached the plains again.¹⁷ Pomponius Mela appears to concentrate on characteristics of the Araxes River rather than its socio-economic benefits.¹⁸ In spite of this general information, it is clear that in the eyes of Greco-Roman geographers the Araxes was one of the largest rivers known in the ancient period.

Another author who mentions the Araxes River is Roman naturalist, Pliny the Elder. While giving information about the historical geography of the Armenian region, he indicates that—similarly with other ancient authors—the Araxes took its source from the same mountains with the Euphrates River; then it travels into the Caspian Sea after joining the Kyros River. By referring to Strabo, Pliny reports that cities were established in proximity to the Araxes plain. But he is mistaken about the sources of the Araxes and Euphrates Rivers being in the same place.¹⁹ Nevertheless, his report that settlements continued to be established around the river during the first century CE suggests that the Araxes and its surroundings were a center of attraction.

Plutarch, who mentions the Armenian campaign of the Roman general Lucullus in 68 CE, reports that Romans planning to capture Artaxata, the

¹⁶ Roman Hovsepyan, “On the Agriculture and Vegetal Food Economy of Kura-Araxes Culture in the South Caucasus”, 69-80.

¹⁷ Mela III. 39-40.

¹⁸ Even Seneca similarly draws attention to the waters of the river in his work named *Phaedra*. Seneca refers to the river as “*fera quae gelidum potat Araxen*”. See Sen. *Phaed.* 58.

¹⁹ Plin. *nat.* VI. 9-10.

capital of the Armenian Kingdom had to cross the Arsaniās (Ἀρσανίας) River - ὄν ἐξ ἀνάγκης διαβατέον ἦν τοῖς Ῥωμαῖοις τὴν ἐπ' -.²⁰ Actually, the city of Artaxata mentioned by Plutarch was established near the Araxes River, not Arsaniās. Moreover, it is known that Artaxata could not be reached without crossing the Araxes. In this case, it is highly possible that Plutarch confused the Arsaniās River with the Araxes. Despite this confusion, it is notable that the Araxes River was recorded as a geographic barrier by Plutarch. Similarly, Appian of Alexandria also mentions the Araxes as a difficult obstacle to cross.²¹ Appian emphasizes that in 66 BCE, Roman general Pompeius chased Mithridates VI, the king of Pontus until Colchis and that during his exploratory campaigns in the region he had a bridge²² built over the Araxes, the largest river in the area.²³ As seen in Appian, rivers can sometimes be conceived as and fictionalized on a single term, namely “bridge”. The underlying presence of the feeling of having control over nature creates the idea in people’s minds to prevent the uncontrollable behaviors of rivers. In this regard, the case of building a bridge over the Araxes in Appian’s narrative can be considered as a metaphor for the need to overcome and control the Araxes. Thus, crossing the river is shown as a great and challenging task and the construction event is reflected as the first step of Pompeius’s success. In

²⁰ Plut. *Luc.* XXXI. 2-4.

²¹ The impassibility of rivers is also discussed in the *Anabasis*. Accordingly, Xenophon states that it is nearly impossible to cross the rivers as one moves away from their sources, but as one gets closer to the sources crossing the rivers becomes very easy. At their sources, rivers are not large; as they move away from their sources, they combine with other rivers and their currents strengthen. It is likely that Xenophon uses the force of this argument to overcome the soldiers’ fear of “impassable rivers”. See. Xen. *Anab.* III. 1. 2; III. 2. 22-23; II. 4. 6

²² Rivers are perceived as living beings in the ancient period. Every river has its own characteristic. At times, a river that is praised for its calmness can be criticized for its speed and violence. In this regard, the Roman poet Virgil, who lived in the first century BCE, mentions the Araxes as a “bridge-destroying river” in his famous work *Aeneas* (Verg. *Aen.* VIII. 728). In Virgil’s account, the Araxes appears as a border river separating the tribes that Romans have not yet subjugated. It is as if the river has become a symbolic expression of the political and military situation in that region, which draws attention to the dangers. By emphasizing the high flow rate, the poet probably sees the Araxes as an unyielding being, and he points to the anxiety and fear (of barbarians?) caused by the natural power of the river. Virgil seems to get this information from Theophanes of Mytilene. Theophanes, in his account of the eastern campaign of the Roman general Pompeius, also emphasizes the difficulties of the terrain with large rivers such as the Araxes. Theophanes, who served as a military engineer in the Roman army, may have faced the problem of building a bridge over the Araxes (Kenneth Wellesley, “Virgil’s Araxes”, *Classical Philology* 63/2, (1968):141; Leendert Weeda and Marc van der Poel, “Virgil and the Batavians (“Aeneid” 8.727)”, *Mnemosyne* 67/4, (2014): 589-595). See also, Ronald Syme, “Exotic Names, Notably in Seneca’s Tragedies”, 50.

²³ App. *Mithr.* 103.

addition to this, the construction of Pompeius's bridge over the impassible Araxes is the herald of the success of Pompeius's campaign.

Ancient Roman historian Florus indicates in the chapter about Marcus Antonius's Parthian campaign that a treaty of friendship was signed between Antonius and the Parthian king. According to Florus, Antonius, with the desire to obtain new honorary titles, wanted to have the names of Araxes and Euphrates engraved under statues, and launched a sudden attack against the Parthians in 36 BCE²⁴ to accomplish his goal. His wish to engrave the names of the rivers in question under the statues may be related to an attempt to claim rights in the regions where these rivers pass through. The fact is that there is a possibility that Antonius claimed rule over the shores of the rivers as part of Roman eastern policy.²⁵ If that's the case, the Araxes River mentioned in Florus should be perceived as political discourse.²⁶ So, the Araxes is both a geographical reality and a political border.

Historiographer Curtius Rufus who provides information about Alexander the Great's advance into Persia and the unfolding events, also mentions the Araxes River. Curtius Rufus states that there were fertile lands, many villages and towns at the foothills of the Caucasus mountains and reports that the Araxes River flows through these lands and carries the water of many springs.²⁷ In this context, assuming that the information provided by Curtius is accurate—that is, he did not confuse the Araxes with another river—it can be understood that the Araxes River and its surroundings are suitable for settlement; and people benefit from the fertile lands around the river. The Roman geographer Claudius Ptolemy suggests a regional description of the river. Ptolemy states that the regions of Kolthene and Sodoukene are located around the Araxes River, and he mentions it flows into the Hyrcania Sea. As it is reported by him, many cities such as Armaouria and

²⁴ Antonius marched towards Media probably through the Araxes valley with a large army to catch the Parthian king off guard (See, Plut. *Ant.* 38. 1-3; 49. 3-4; 52. 2). The Araxes, which Plutarch (*Ant.* 49) describes as a deep and flowing river that separates Media and Armenia, is a suitable river where basic food and logistical need can be met. Due to these features, the river served as a campaign route for the Romans in their attacks on the east, just as it had done during the reign of the Alexander the Great and maintained this significance for a long time (Julian Bennett, "The Origins and Early History of the Pontic-Cappadocian Frontier", *Anatolian Studies* 56, (2006): 84).

²⁵ Giusto Traina, "Mark Antony's Arrangements in the Roman East, 41-37 BCE", G. Masalçı Şahin, A. Doğan (eds.), *War and Diplomacy in Ancient Times*, (İstanbul 2021), 351-360.

²⁶ Flor. *epit.* II. 20. 2-3.

²⁷ Curt. V. 4. 7-9; V. 5. 3-5. About the association of the river referred to as Araxes by Curtius Rufus with the modern Bund-Amir River, see Benjamin Davies, *A New System for Modern Geography, or a General Description of the Most Remarkable Countries Throughout the Known World*, (Philadelphia: Jacob Johnson & Co, 1815), 218.

Artaxata were established along this river route.²⁸ Considering all these anecdotes, it can be said that the information about the Araxes River began to concentrate in sources from the first century CE onwards. Probably, a reason for this increase was from the increase in Roman interactions in the east, which led to a focus of ancient sources on Araxes and its surrounding area.

On the other hand, in the Tabula Peutingeriana²⁹ a map known to belong to the Roman Imperial period, initially prepared during the second and third centuries CE and revised in the fourth century CE, describes a river recorded as “*Araxes*”. According to this map, the river takes its sources from the Taurus mountains and flows into a different place (possibly the Pacific Ocean?) instead of the Caspian Sea. At this point, it is inferred that the information provided on the map about the origin and the destination of the river is inconsistent and incorrect.³⁰

Istahrî, one of the eminent geographers of the tenth century CE, provides information about the Caspian Sea in his work called “*Mesâlikü'l Memâlik*”. He argues that this sea has no connection with any other seas; and if anyone wants to circumnavigate around it, they will only return to the starting point without encountering any obstacles other than a freshwater river. It can be suggested that Istahrî may have referred to the Araxes River as the river that prevents the passage to the Caspian Sea even though he does not mention its name directly.³¹ Again, Abû Dulaf, an Arab traveler and geographer who lived in the same century, mentions that pomegranates and figs are grown in some lands along the route of the Araxes. It is understood from the information given by the geographer that he was fascinated by the pomegranates. That is, the Araxes valley sustained its appeal with its fertility, just as it did in the earlier periods and whetted the appetite of people living in different geographies.³²

²⁸ Ptol. *geogr.* V. 13. 3; V. 13. 6; V. 13. 9. About the possibility of Ptolemy’s confusion of the Araxes with the Euphrates River, cf. Ptol. *geogr.* V. 13. 12.

²⁹ Regarding that the map was dated to the Hellenistic period rather than the Roman Imperial period and continued to be enriched with new contributions until the Late Antiquity, see Michael Rathmann, “Die Tabula Peutingeriana, Stand der Forschung und Neue Impulse”, *Philia*, Supp. 1, (2016): 714-735.

³⁰ Tab. Peut. *Araxes*, Segmentum, XII. 5; Miller, Konrad, *Itineraria Romana: Römische Reisewege an der Hand der Tabula Peutingeriana*, (Stuttgart, 1916), 847.

³¹ Istahrî, *Mesâlikü'l Memâlik, Ülkelerin Yolları (Değerlendirme-Metin)*, Translated by Murat Ağarı, (İstanbul: Ayışığı Kitapları, 2015), 218. For the comparison with other rivers flowing into the Caspian sea, cf. Ibn Hawqal, *Sûretü'l-Arz, 10. Asırda İslâm Coğrafyası*, Translated by Ramazan Şeşen, (İstanbul: Yeditepe Yayınları, 2014), 25.

³² Abû Dulaf, *er-Risâletü's-Sâniye, İran Seyahatnamesi: 10. Yüzyılda Kafkasya'dan Fars Körfezine Yolculuk*, Translated by Serdar Gündoğdu, (İstanbul: Kronik, 2017), 16.

According to traveler and geographer Al-Makdisî who lived in the tenth century CE, the Araxes River is one of three most famous rivers [together with the Samurçay and Kyros Rivers]. Of these rivers, Kyros has the freshest water. In terms of freshness and lightness in taste, the river that is most similar to the Kyros River is the *Rass* (Araxes) River. According to Al-Makdisî, the river continues its route through Armenia and flows into the Caspian Sea. In his work named *Ahsenü't-Takâsim*, he states that there were supposedly a thousand cities on the shores of the river in the past. Such information conveyed by Al-Makdisî may seem exaggerated, however, it is notable in terms of emphasizing the fact that many settlements were founded along the river.³³ Additionally, another author reporting information on the Araxes River and its surroundings is Ibn Hawqal, a geographer who lived in the same century and was enthusiastic about getting information on countries and cities. Similarly, Ibn Hawqal mentions about the characteristics of the river water. According to him, the Araxes River has water with fresh, light and pleasant taste and a wide variety of fish species. One of the fish species was so delicious that they were being exported to places such as Erdebil, Rey, Iraq or sent as a gift.³⁴

Undoubtedly, since the existence of mankind, rivers have represented different meanings for different cultures, within their symbolic network they have encompassed many ideas and beliefs. In this context, local faiths emerged around rivers, which sometimes symbolize creative and sometimes destructive power.³⁵ Probably, the Araxes—similar to the Nile River—was one of the rivers influencing people's beliefs in the ancient period. It is possible that a healing or purifying power was attributed to the river, and it had certain sacredness. As such, there are sources suggesting that god and goddess worship associated with the river existed around the Araxes since the early periods, and even today, the Araxes River lives on in local myths.³⁶ This information reveals the organic relationship between the river and humans.

³³ Al-Makdisî, *Ahsenü't-Takâsim (İslam Coğrafyası)*, Translated by Ahsen Batur, (İstanbul: Selenge Yayınları, 2015), 380-381; 393-394. Cf. According to narratives, there were three hundred and sixty ruined cities behind the Araxes (Abû al-Fida, *Takvimü'l-Büldan*, 68).

³⁴ Ibn Hawqal, *Sûretü'l-Arz*, 21; 263; 269.

³⁵ Wyman Herendeen, "The Rhetoric of Rivers: The River and the Pursuit of Knowledge", *Studies in Philology* 78/2, (1981): 108-110. See also, Alican Doğan, Barış Gür and Ayhan Yardımcıel, "Ağrı ve Iğdır İlleri "Orta ve Son Tunç Çağı Aras Boyalıları Kültürü Kale, Nekropol, Yerleşim Yeri ve Çanak Çömlekleri 2019-2020 Yüzey Araştırması", Candaş Keskin (ed.), *2019-2020 Yüzey Araştırmaları*, (Ankara: 2022), 229-240.

³⁶ Pseudo-Plutarch mentions about existence of a black colored sacred stone called Sikyonos (σικύωνος) near the Araxes, and a ritual in which young girls were offered as sacrifices to avoid the wrath of the gods, and the stone was placed next to a temple there (Ps.-Plut. *de*.

Consequently, it can be said that the route of the Araxes River not only drew the attention of Greek historiographers and geographers but also of Roman authors. In their eyes, the Araxes was one of the largest known rivers of the ancient era. Majority of the early period authors did not have detailed information about the location and the route of the river. Sometimes, they confused the Araxes River with other rivers. This situation opens a question about to what extent ancient authors were sensitive to anachronism. On the other hand, it is understood from the sources that information about the Araxes was recorded more accurately from the first century BCE onwards. As Roman rule began to be directly felt here, information about this region also increased. Ancient sources generally agree that the river, which is often emphasized as a natural border, flows rapidly and turbulently. The Araxes must have shaped the daily lives of its inhabitants: along the Araxes route that extends from the Caspian Sea to the east of the Asia Minor, people probably engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, which must have been the main livelihood for local people. Moreover, the quality of the relationship between people living along the Araxes and the river itself is mostly ambiguous. There is limited information about whether agricultural activities and their trade were made in cities or rural settlements. Nevertheless, it can be claimed that the river played a crucial role in people's socio-economic lives throughout history; and to the extent permitted by the Araxes, people may have transported their commercial goods by boats over the river to other regions. With such characteristic, the Araxes can be viewed as a communication means that provides contact between different regions. The establishment of various cities around it proves that the river and its tributaries were utilized as a commercial route. Similarly, ancient artifacts such as potteries, bone tools, metal objects, ceremonial and ritualistic objects, and ornaments are physical evidence that give witness to the development of culture around the Araxes. Analysis of these findings can be helpful to comprehend the culture developed around the river. On that sense, the Araxes River goes beyond political borders and should be seen not only as a water source in the ancient period but also as a socio-cultural environment shaping people's lives. Thus, more research should be conducted on the ancient river system.

fluv. XXIII. 3). See also, James George Forlong, *Rivers of Life, or Sources and Streams of the Faiths of Man in All Lands*, Vol. II, (London: Forgotten Books, 1883), 30, 112; Antonio Sagona, "Social Identity and Religious Ritual in the Kura-Araxes Cultural Complex: Some Observation from Sos Höyük", *Mediterranean Archaeology*, 11 (1998): 25.

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