Geographical Location of Vedic Iriṇa in Southern Rajasthan

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Abstract: Vedic literature refers to a place or region by name Iriṇa. In the Rgveda it appears as a locale frequented by a particular wild animal for drinking water. But with the passage of time, in the Yajurveda texts, the word acquires a negative meaning as a desert or a place devoid of water. Gradually, in the ritualistic Vedic texts Iriṇa gets more and more associated with disaster or misfortune. The physical features associated with Iriṇa, as described metaphorically in the Vedic texts, are analysed to identify its probable location. It is possible the word Iriṇa is the progenitor of the Greek name (gulf of) Eirinon of Periplus which is presently designated as the Raṇ-of-Kutch. During the Rgveda period Iriṇa was in all probability, situated a little north of the Raṇ-of-Kutch. Available data indicates its location in the Luni-Jawai plains west of the Aravallis, in Rajasthan. The small town Eriṇpur (25°5' N, 73°3' E) appears to retain memories of the Vedic Iriṇa.

Keywords: Indian pre-history, Vedic literature, Aravallis, Raṇ-of-Kutch, Southern Rajasthan.

INTRODUCTION

The Raṇ-of-Kutch, a vast region of wasteland, in north Gujarat is generally described as a salt marsh. The region is of considerable interest to historians, archaeologists, geologists as well as common people. One of the ancient cities of the Harappan period, now called Dholavira, has been excavated in this region. Many other Harappan settlements have been unearthed in Kutch, making the region of special importance in delineating ancient Indian history. Since the River Sarasvati, also flowed in the same broad geographical province, Vedic culture must have been influenced by its nearness to this region. Starting from the Rgveda (RV), Vedic literature refers to a special type of land called Iriṇa, quite often in a nuanced fashion. In the scheme of Vedic rituals, as described in the Brahmaṇas and Sūtras, Iriṇa occupies a significant place associated with Nīrtti the deity of disaster. The word is used in the epics in the sense of empty or barren land. In one place, the Mahābhārata refers to it as land formed by recession of the sea. Gradually, the word is rarely used and disappears from classical Sanskrit literature altogether. There are, however, sufficient hints available in Vedic literature to discern what could have been the most likely region indicated by Iriṇa. In the past, Iriṇa no doubt had been identified with the Ran-of-Kutch (Bisht, 1989; Agrawala, 1953), but a proper evaluation of this identification appears necessary. The present paper critically reviews the literature about the word Iriṇa taking into account, associated names, legends and other metaphorical hints. This is followed by a discussion on the identification of dominant physical features around Iriṇa. It is concluded that the Vedic Iriṇa was in all probability located a little northward of the Raṇ-of-Kutch.

Iriṇa in the Rgveda (RV)

Rgveda is the most ancient literature of India that has attracted worldwide attention for more than a century. Transmitted through an unbroken oral tradition of remarkable accuracy, it is the source to which many social, philosophical, religious and scientific concepts of later India can be traced. The word Iriṇa occurs six times in the RV. In the first book (mandala) of RV, hymn (sūkta) 186 is a prayer addressed to several deities; Savitar, Aryanā, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, Indra, Tvasṭar, Marut and others. Verses (mantra) 8 and 9 are about a place called Erīna a variant of the word Iriṇa. The text in its translation by Griffith (1896) reads:

So may the Maruts, armed with mighty weapons, rest here on heaven and earth with hearts in concord. As gods whose cars have dappled steeds like torrents, destroyers of the foe allies of Mitra. They hasten on to happy termination their orders when they are made known by glory. As on a fair bright day the arrow flieh over all the barren soil their missiles sparkle. (RV 1.186. 8-9)

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Griffith translates the word *Eriṅam* as barren soil. The context is that of Maruts, who armed with their mighty weapons can discharge sparkling arrows over a region or place called *Iriṇa*. Next, we do not meet the word till the eighth book. In verse 8.4.3 addressed to Indra the word gets translated as *desert’s watery pool*. In hymn 8.87 addressed to Āsvins, it appears twice in its basic form *Iriṇa*, interpreted as a *pool*. The interesting point here is that in all the three cases *Iriṇa* is associated with a special animal called *Gaura*. The simile in the hymn refers to the thirst and swiftness of *Gaura* to go to the pool. Griffith is not sure of the meaning of *Gaura*, since he takes this animal to be *wild-bull* in one place, and an *antelope* in another place (RV 8.4.10). The nature of this animal is mentioned in RV (7.69.6) as being thirsty and going to a glittering place. Thus, it may be inferred that the composers of these verses associated *Iriṇa* with water holes and the habitat of animals called *Gaura*. The next usage of *Iriṇa* is in the tenth book, where tradition interprets it as a dice board.

Sprung from tall trees on windy heights, these rollers transport me as they turn upon the table….Cast on the board, like lumps of magic charcoal, though cold themselves they burn the heart to ashes.

(RV 10.34.1, 9)

The first verse refers to objects that sprung from tall trees at a height. This could refer to the nuts of the *Vibhītaka* tree out of which dice were made. Also another interpretation is possible, as the second half of verse 9 above in original reads,

_Divyā angāri Iriṇe nyu dpāḥ sītāh santo ṣaḍayam nirdahaniḥ_

Heavenly charcoals having ploughed into Iriṇa, though cold, burn the heart.

The above are the six places in RV where the word *Iriṇa* appears. These apparently are not sufficient to identify the place unequivocally. Yajurveda Samhita and other related texts provide further clues for its identification.

**Iriṇa in the Yajurveda**

*Iriṇa* acquires a ritualistic position in the sacrificial practices as described in the Yajurveda texts. Taittiriya-Samhitā (TS) of the Krṣṇa-Yajurveda first refers to it in the legend of Viśvarūpa. The legend in brief is: Viśvarūpa, son of Tvaṣṭr had three heads. Indra killed him by cutting off the heads, but was accused of being guilty. Earth agreed to take one-third of the guilt of Indra, in return for a boon. This head (guilt) became *Iriṇa* on the earth and hence orthodox people are advised not to stay at *Iriṇa* (TS. 2.5.1.3). This legend of Viśvarūpa is suggestive of orthodox Vedic people emigrating out of *Iriṇa*, which for some special reason became uninhabitable. The translation of *Iriṇa* as a natural fissure (Keith, 1914) does not appear to be appropriate as can be inferred from other hymns (TS 3.4.8.5) where pradara (fissure, opening) is suggested as an alternate to *Iriṇa*. *Iriṇa* and pradara were both natural (svakṛta), in contrast to man-made fields or openings. The two landforms were equivalent as far as the ritual was concerned but were not physically identical. *Iriṇa* is said to have been seized by Nirṛti, the deity of disaster and misfortune, equating *Iriṇa* with disaster or misfortune. If *Iriṇa* meant a region, the additional reference to pradara here may hint at the existence of a natural crevice or opening. Through Nirṛti, a direction is also indicated for *Iriṇa* as in (TS 5.2.4.3). This in translation reads (Keith, 1914):

They go in this direction (to this quarter). This is the direction of Nirṛti; verily in her own direction he propitiates Nirṛti. He places (it) in self-made *Iriṇa* or in a fissure; that is the abode of Nirṛti; verily he propitiates Nirṛti in her own abode.

The Maitrāyani Śamhitā (3.2.4) has similar statements associating Nirṛti, *Iriṇa* with the southwest direction without mentioning the *pradara*. Preoccupation with *Iriṇa* is not limited to the Kṛṣṇa-Yajurveda. The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa of the Śukla-Yajurveda also provides similar directions for locating *Veriṇa*, a variant of the word *Iriṇa*. The translation of Eggeling (1885) is

They go south, where the self-created (natural) *Veriṇa* is reached or a fissure due to a whirlpool.

(5.2.3.2)

With them they go towards the southwest direction (quarter). That is the direction of Nirṛti. Verily he places Nirṛti in the abode of Nirṛti. He places those (bricks) in the self-created *Veriṇa* or in the fissure of a whirlpool. Verily Nirṛti grasps that part where there is a ground fissure or a place where no herbs grow.

(7.2.1.8)

The tradition of Sāyana (14th Cent A.D.) explains *Iriṇa* and *pradara* as two alternate places, both in the southwest direction. The first is a natural region devoid of grass and the second, a natural circular ground opening. Svabhra is usually taken to mean a deep pit or a hole. It is interesting to note that River Sabarmati flowing through Gujarat
derives its name from the original Śvabhrama, the river with whirlpools or caverns (Majumdar, 1960). Satapatha Brāhmaṇa in its 13th kānda (8.1.14) uses the word āsara to denote saline or barren soil (Eggeling 1885). This again differentiates Iriṇa from other known ancient landforms. The above Vedic texts taken together indicate a direction associated with Niṛṣṭi and hence with Iriṇa. This is clearly the southwest, which in later Sanskrit and other Indian languages became known by the word naṣṭya. The texts hint at Iriṇa as a region that suffered a natural disaster. It became uncultivable on its own without human intervention. This also implies that during the time of the 8th mandal of RV, Iriṇa was at least in parts inhabited. This was, in all likelihood, located southwest of a central region culturally important to the composers and followers of the Vedas. Bharadwaj (1986) has indicated that the Vedic madhyadesa or central land as the area between the rivers Sarasvati and Dṛṣṭadvatī including Kurūkṣetra. Hence, the broad outlines of Iriṇa and Raṅg-of-Kutch appear to agree. There are, however, other limitations to be considered.

Iriṇa in the Epics

Outside the Vedic texts, the earliest mention of Iriṇa appears in the epics. Rāmāyaṇa in the Bāla-kānda (54.24) describes the hermitage of Vasiṣṭhā after an attack by Viśvāmitra as having become silent like a desert. The phrase used is Iriṇa-sannībham to describe the eerie silence.

In the Mahābhārata the word occurs in two places. In the aḍī-parvan (64.2-3) it is used in the sense of a barren or vacant land at the end of a forest and in the Aṇuśāsana-parvan, (Ch.139 v.24-26) recounting the episode of River Sarasvatī drying up.

darśyasvasya sthalam bhadre saṭ-sahasra-śata-hradam|
tatastad Iriṇam jātam samudrauṣka apasarpitam||
tasmān deśānadi m caiva pravāca asau dvijottamah|
adrṣṭya-gaccha bhīrā tvam sarasvatī marum prati||
apunyah esa bhavatu deśaṣṭakasūvatvā śubhe|

‘Show me Dear, the place with six thousand one hundred water holes. Then that place became Iriṇa and the sea was pushed aside. Then he said to the River ‘O timid Sarasvati, disappear from this place and come towards the desert. Let this place, discarded by you, be devoid of merit.’

These verses imply that Iriṇa and Maru were distinctly different regions. The above is an ancient literary reference to the sea receding to bring out a landform called Iriṇa. Mahābhārata clearly associates this place with the drying up of River Sarasvatī.

Iriṇa in Classical Sanskrit

Pāṇini (c 7th Cent. BC) the well known grammarian does not refer to Iriṇa, but mentions two generic suffixes or word endings -kaccha and -agni. The first refers to marshy land, the standard example being Bharu-kaccha (Bhrugukaccha, Broach). Examples with suffix -agni are Vībhujāni and Khaṇḍāgni (Agrawala, 1953). These notations are still recognizable in the names Bhuj and Khaṇḍā in the Kutch district of modern Gujarat. The association of the suffix agni with Bhuj, which is the doorway to the Raṅg-of-Kutch, is possibly reminiscent of a natural fire that devastated this region.

The earliest use of the word Iriṇa in classical literature is traceable to the Arthaśāstra of Kautilya (4th-3rd Cent. BC). In the classification of forts, Iriṇam type of fort is described as being without water (Shamashastri, 1988). Manusmrti, which describes Aryans as those living east of River Sarasvatī and north of the Vindhya Mountains, prohibits in (4.120) reciting Vedas while being in Iriṇa. Several popular books on architecture refer to Iriṇa-type fort. Maya-mata (Ch.10, 36b, 38b) classifies forts into seven types, depending on their location. These are mountain, forest, water, marsh, Iriṇa, natural, and mixed types. Usually Iriṇa is explained as desert, since that type of fort is said to be in a place without water and trees (Dagens 1995). Brhat-samhitā of Varāha-mihira, which is a standard reference on ancient geography, does not cite Iriṇa. Popular lexicons Amara-kośa and its successor Trikāndāśeṣa do not list this word. However, Kaccha as a geographical name appears prominently in many texts. Thus, in medieval India Iriṇa as an identified location had been forgotten except possibly in the small area where the Vedic Iriṇa was originally located.

Iriṇa of Periplus

Iriṇa associated with the Raṅg-of-Kutch, gets independent validation from a Greek source. Periplus of the Erythrean Sea is a navigator’s guide belonging to 1st century BC. It is instructive to quote extracts from this text as translated by McCrindle (1879). “After the river Sinthos is passed we reach another gulf, which cannot be easily seen. It has two divisions – the Great and the Little by name – both shoal with violent and continuous eddies extending far out from the shore, so that before ever land is in sight ships are often grounded on the shoals, or being caught within the eddies are lost. Over this gulf hangs a promontory which, curving from Eirinon first to the east, then to the south, and finally to the west, encompass the gulf called Barake, in the bosom of which lie seven islands.”
On this, McCrindle comments: “The first place mentioned after the Indus is the Gulf of Eirinon, a name of which traces remain in the modern appellation the Raṇ of Kachh. This is no longer covered with water except during the monsoon, when it is flooded by sea water or by rains and inundated rivers. At other seasons it is not even a marsh, for its bed is hard, dry and sandy; a mere saline waste almost entirely devoid of herbage, and frequented but by one quadruped – the wild ass.”

Geographical Constraints

Eirinon of Periplus is easily recognized as the Raṇ-of-Kutch of present day. The resemblance of Eirinon to the Vedic word Irīṇa is significant. Periplus provides an eyewitness account of the northwest coast of India some two thousand years ago. There were seven islands and the present day Raṇ region was a shallow sea. This immediately brings up the question of where the coastline was, in those days. This question has not been answered satisfactorily on the basis of geological, marine and climate data. There are strong pointers, however, to indicate that Nagar, Bela, Khadir, Wagir and Pacham were islands along with Kutch. Sivewright (1907), the first person to carry out engineering survey of Kutch region, has constructed a map showing the probable ancient shoreline, two thousand years before present. He has collated accounts of Alexander’s campaign (325 BC), the Periplus and the notes of Arab writers (712 AD) with his own leveling operations to delineate the approximate position of the ancient coastline. As per this study, during Alexander’s time Raṇ was navigable with its northern limit almost coinciding with the 25°N parallel. However, thousand years later in the 8th century AD this coastline had shifted considerably southwards forming a line joining Nagar and Debal near Karachi. As a working approximation Sivewright proposed that the 100 feet (33 m) contour of his time (1900 AD) on land could be treated as the ancient shoreline circa 100 BC. Hence, two thousand years before present, for people living in Rajasthan, Eirinon of Periplus would have represented the southern sea.

Evidence of River Sarasvātī

The above leads one to believe that the recession of the sea could have created the Vedic Irīṇa as mentioned in the Mahābhārata. As per this epic, sea recession was coterminal with the migration of River Sarasvātī relatively westwards towards the desert. In recent years the history of the dried up River Sarasvātī has been investigated by scientists using sophisticated modern methods (Radhakrishna and Mehr, 1999; Roy and Jakhar, 2001; Valdiya, 2002). This has produced considerable scientific literature that can be used to compare and verify ancient textual evidences. Integrating the results of several scientific researches, one gets the broad picture of Sarasvātī being the major river in northwest India during 7000-5000 B.C. In the following period of 5000-3000 BC the region was affected by severe neo-tectonic activity and by the onset of a regime of aridity. This was also the period when proto-Yamuna, initially flowing southwest, shifted on to an easterly course. This is attributed to the subsidence or down-sagging of the northern limbs of the Aravalli Mountains and consequent flattening of the region. The subsequent period up to 1000 BC saw the slow desiccation of rivers Sarasvātī and Drṣadvatī. Ghose et al. (1979) have analyzed satellite imagery of paleo-channels indicating westward shift of Sarasvātī, which was once flowing along the foothills of Aravallis ending in the Little Raṇ-of-Kutch. The western limit of the disrupted drainage is now seen as the dry bed of the River Ghaggar ending in the Great Raṇ-of-Kutch. The sediments brought down by the mighty Himalayan Rivers would have contributed in no small measure to the filling up of ancient estuaries and raise the land relative to the sea. Investigations do show that Dholavira was a port around 2500 B.C. This would mean that the ancient sea level was four to six metres higher than at present (Gaur and Vora, 1999; Mathur 2002). Hence Vedic Irīṇa has to be located north of the northern shoreline of Eirinon of Periplus. Since dating of the Rgyeda is not a settled problem, it may be tentatively concluded that during the Vedic period the coastline was at least half degree north of Sivewright’s approximation of 25° N. A map of the region, based on the results of Sivewright and Ghose et al. is shown in Fig.1. It can be seen that the ancient sea in Vedic times washed the foothills of the Aravalli Mountain ranges and made the Vedic Irīṇa in the alluvial plains near the confluence of the present River Luni (Skt. Lavanāvātī) with the Raṇ-of-Kutch. In this scenario the most conspicuous physical features to be associated with Irīṇa would be the near-by sea and the Aravalli Mountains. The current name of this mountain range is derived from the local name Arbālī meaning haphazard (Sinha-Roy et al. 1998, p.15). In turn, this word is traceable to the Sanskrit name Arbuda. Presently, this word can be recognized in the name of its prominent peak Mt. Abu. This takes us back to the Vedic texts to look for associations between Irīṇa and Arbuda.

Irīṇa and Arbuda

In the RV text the word Arbuda appears seven times. The first reference is in RV (1.51.6), where Indra is said to
have *trod mighty Arbuda under his foot*. This hymn is in a sequence of laudatory poems to Indra for his heroic acts. In the past, scholars have interpreted Indra and his acts in a variety of ways ranging from the mystical to the trivial. But the conspicuous act of Indra hitting a mountain most probably called *Arbuda* cannot be easily overlooked. RV (1.55.3) is quite specific about one of his acts, when it says: ‘you bend, as it were, even that famed mountain down’. The second book of RV refers to *Arbuda* twice in hymns (11.20) and (14.4) again in connection with the mighty acts of Indra. In RV (2.11.20) Indra is said to have ‘cast down Arbuda’. Curiously enough, the preceding hymn RV (2.11.19) informs ‘Tavaśṭar’s son Viśvarūpa was given to Tṛta’. The above RV hymn further says that ‘Indra sent forth his whirling wheel like Sūrya and aided by the Angirases rent Vāla’. The other hymn RV (2.14.4) is similar in mentioning that Indra ‘cast down headlong Arbuda and slew him’. Further, three references to *Arbuda* are in the eighth book, which is the only family book in RV referring to *Irīṇa*. Hymn RV (8.3.19) is about Indra driving out cattle of *Mrgaya and Arbuda from the mountain*. Here *Arbuda* appears to be a personal name, but is connected with the mountain. This hymn equates Indra with the highest God and also mentions his above deeds as most ancient. Another hymn RV (8.32.3) by the same seer, lauds Indra as having brought down the height of lofty *Arbuda*. In the same hymn RV (8.32.6) it is mentioned that *Arbuda* was pierced with snow (or frost). The last reference is in RV (10.67.12), translated by Griffith as: ‘Indra with mighty strength cleft asunder the head of Arbuda the watery monster’. In the original, the Sanskrit text reads ‘*arṇavasya arbudasya*’. There is nothing to indicate that *Arbuda* was a monster. Moreover *arṇava* is sea and not just any water. The inference can only be that *Arbuda* that was hit by Indra, was connected with a sea. All the above seven references strongly indicate that *Arbuda* was a mountain close to the sea. The act of Indra highlighted in the verses should be taken to mean, bringing down the height of a peak or renting a hilly region from above. Shorn of the
metaphors, the above may be the description of a spectacular natural event, which could have lead to a chain of disasters over a period of time.

The geographical constraints as dictated by modern scientific investigations about River Sarasvatī, match with the Rgvedic description of the decrease in height of Arbuda as a real topographical change.

**DISCUSSION**

It is well accepted that the RV text is not chronologically ordered. It is also generally conceded that the first and the tenth books are later than the other eight books. The ninth book is a collection of hymns by various seers belonging to different families. From the remaining family books, it appears reasonable to infer that the seven families and their members have visualized Indra and his acts differently in successive generations. Thus the hidden timeline in RV is not linear, but is cut and stacked generation-wise, within individual family books. It would be a challenging exercise to decode the stratification and come out with a probable relative chronology for the 521 sūktas of the seven family books.

Notwithstanding this difficulty, it is easy to observe that Viśvarūpa Tvaśṭra and his link to the act of Indra slaying Arbuda in the second book, is the earliest version of the same episode recounted in the 8th Book. Viśvarūpa being given to Tṛta (RV 2.11.19) is most likely an archaic but picturesque way of saying that the personified celestial object got divided into three parts. This surmise is reasonable since the Yajurvedic legend describes the same Viśvarūpa Tvaśṭra as having had three heads. One of the heads cut by Indra eventually formed the Iriṇā, as per TS. This was coeval with the renting of Vaśīt, which in modern terminology could indicate the formation of a crater. This appears to be the reason for Yajurvedic ritual texts to prescribe pradāra as an alternate for Iriṇā. The ritualistic text of the RV school, namely Aitareya Brāhmaṇa does not recognize Iriṇā as special. Hence the associations found in the YV texts should be treated as later proposals indicating the reason for Yajurvedic ritual texts to prescribe Iriṇā as an exception to this order. However, RV does not associate Nirṛti with the southwest direction. This happens first in the Yajurveda practices that originated in the broad Kuru-Pāñcāla land. Thus, we may safely conclude that the Vedic Iriṇā was in the Arbuda region southwest of Kurukṣetra. Since the Raṇ-of-kutch in those days was still a sea, Iriṇā has to be located north of the Raṇ near the Luni river delta. Information available in the epics, purāṇas and historical literature supports this conclusion. Mahābhārata, (Aranya P. 82.55) describes Arbuda Mountain as having an ancient crevice or fissure.

\[
\text{tato gaccheta dharmajīvo himavatsutamarbudam|}
\text{prthivyām yatra vaicchidram pūrvam āśid yudhisthira}||
\]

Yudhisthira! Then one should go to Arbuda son of Himavān, where previously there was a fissure in the ground.

Skanda-purāṇa describes this as a deep pit near the hermitage of Vasiṣṭha. It also describes allegorically, a sea wave or tsunami killing several thousands in the hermitages of Vasiṣṭha, Viśvāmitra and others (Iyengar, 2004). Ptolemy (2nd Cent. AD) knew about the association of Arbuda with a natural disaster. In Indika (McCirndle, 2000) he names Orbadarou or Arbuda as punishment of gods, which synchronizes with the Vedic legend. It has not been possible yet to study the local literature of the region to find about the reminiscences, if any, of the ancient Iriṇā. However, not surprisingly, a town by name
Erinpura (25° 5’ N, 73° 3’ E) is located in this region. It is also famous in geological literature as the type locality of Erinpura granites.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

An attempt is made in this paper to identify the location of a place or region called *Iriña* mentioned in the Vedic literature, starting from the *Rgveda*. Analysis of literature indicates location of *Iriña* to the north of the Ran-of-Kutch. The nearness of *Iriña* to Arbuda in ancient times indicates that it was probably west of the Aravalli mountain ranges near the delta of River Luni. A more precise location is not possible at present. The small town Erinpura in the identified area indicates, through its name, that the Vedic *Iriña* was perhaps not far from it.

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