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SOME NEW CLUES FROM THE ANCIENT LAND OF NIŠŠĀYA AND ITS RELATED TOPONYMS

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Abstract

The article focuses on the study of the ancient land of Niššāya during the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid periods, based on the inscriptions of the Assyrian kings Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BC) and Sargon II (722–705 BC), as well as on the inscription of Darius I in Bisotun (522 BC). It also considers information from ancient Greek and Roman historians and geographers, as well as archaeological evidence. Additional clues are presented for identifying the ancient land of Niššāya with the present-day Nahavand Plain, located in the southern part of the Hamadan Province. An important piece of evidence supporting this idea is an inscription of Tiglath-Pileser III, which indicates that the Niššāya region was an important and well-known center for horse breeding during the Neo-Assyrian period. This assertion is significant as there was previously no evidence supporting the importance of the Niššāya land as a center for horse breeding during the Neo-Assyrian period. Accordingly, the author suggests that Niššāya/Irnisa in the Neo-Assyrian inscriptions, Nisāya in the inscription of Darius I in Bisotun, and the adjective Nesaean mentioned by classical historians such as Herodotus and Strabo, all refer to a single place, which coincides with the current Nahavand plain in the southern part of the Hamadan province. In addition, this study also suggests the probable locations of two toponyms related to Niššāya, Ṣibur/Ṣibar and Urimzan/Urenzan. The author suggests that both territories were situated in the present-day Nahavand area.

Introduction

The inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II, prominent kings of the Neo-Assyrian period in the 8th century BC, provide significant insights into the Central Zagros region and the Central Iranian Plateau, which ancient geographers usually refer to as Media. These inscriptions contain a variety of toponyms related to ancient Media, including regions, towns, villages, mountains, rivers, and also tribes. These inscriptions are unique, special, and diverse when compared to other sources, such as the inscriptions of the previous Assyrian kings, of the later Assyrian kings, and of the later Iranian dynasties such as that of the Achaemenids. This article explores the significance and common occurrence of the toponym Niššāya and its related toponyms in the inscriptions of the Assyrian kings Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II, as well as in the inscription of the Achaemenid king Darius I at Bisotun. In addition, some classical texts and archaeological evidence will be used to support the argument.

Some scholars suggested that there were several Iranian regions and places called Niššāya/Nisāya, which cannot easily be distinguished from one another.[1] Therefore, various options have been proposed for the location of Niššāya: northeast of Hamadan; in Khorasan; around Kermanshah, etc.[2] Most suggestions put forward in the last two centuries focused on the location of the land Nisāya mentioned in Darius I's inscription at Bisotun (see below). In general, among the many previous proposals about the location of Niššāya, I agree with the following four:

1. R. Ghirshman's identification of Niššāya with Tepe Giyan in the Nahavand region;[3]
2. M. M. Ahadian's, who, considering the linguistic evidence, suggests that the modern toponym Nahavand has its roots in the ancient Niššāya;[4]
3. A. N. Sherwin-White and J. Wiesehöfer's, who believe that Laodicea (variously called Laodicea in Media, in Persia, also known as Antiocheia in Persia or Chosroes' Antiocheia), currently identified with Nahavand, was located in ancient Niššāya;[5]
4. I. Rezaei, S. Alibaigi and J. MacGinnis', who, in their study about the itinerary of Sargon II's sixth campaign as described in the Najafabad stele, identified the land Niššāya[6] mentioned in the Assyrian texts with present-day Nahavand, in the southern part of the Hamadan province.[7]

In this study, I present supplementary evidence indicating that the Niššāya mentioned in the Assyrian texts was the same as the Nisāya mentioned in the inscription of Darius I in Bisotun, and that it was the origin of the adjective (*nisbe*) Nesaean used by classical historians such as Herodotus and Strabo,[8] and that all referred to the present-day Nahavand plain.

Niššāya and Related Toponyms in the Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II

In two inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III,[9] the name of the land Gizin(i)kissi is mentioned along with the name of the land Niššāya, which was likely situated nearby. Considering that the direction of Tiglath-Pileser's army was from Niššāya (Nahavand) towards Uppuria (present-day Borujerd[10]), in a north-south direction,[11] I would suggest that the land of

1. Schmitt 2002; recently, Bagg 2020, 440.
2. Schmitt 2002; Bagg 2020, 440; Firouzi & Novotny 2023, 18, no. 413.
3. Ghirshman 1954, 93.
4. Ahadian 2010.
5. Sherwin-White & Wiesehöfer 2012.
6. Alibaigi & MacGinnis 2018, 203 first suggested the identification between the lands of Irnisa and Niššaya, and the land of Bīt-Ištar which is only mentioned in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III.
7. Rezaei *et al*. 2023, 137f.
8. Bagg 2020, 439f. s.v. "Niššāya", lists Niššaya together with the *Nis(s)aion pédion* of the Classical historians and with the *Ni/ussaja/n-i-s-a-y* of the Bisotun inscription. He also adds a *Nussayu* in Elamitic.
9. RINAP 1 41, 4′b–10′, and 47, 29–32.
10. Rezaei *et al.* 2023, 135. For a different location, however, see Bagg 2020, 591f.
11. In Tiglath-Pileser's inscriptions RINAP 1 41, 4′b–10′, and 47, 29–32, Niššāya is always mentioned before Uppuria. Since Niššāya and Uppuria are identified with modern Nahavand and Borujerd, respectively (see Rezaei *et al.* 2023), this implies that the direction of his campaign was from north to south.

Gizin(i)kissi, which is mentioned in the inscriptions before Niššāya, was located somewhere to the north of Niššāya, present-day Nahavand. On the other hand, considering the location of the ancient land of Uratista, which is the present-day Tuyserkan County[12] in the northeastern corner of Niššāya/Irnisa,[13] it is likely that the Gizin(i)kissi mentioned in Tiglath-Pileser's inscriptions was located northwest of Niššāya/Niššāyaey, specifically within the boundaries of the present-day Khezel district centred on the city of Firuzan. In the aforementioned inscriptions, the names of two cities, Urimzan and Ṣibur, are mentioned just after the lands of Niššāya and Gizin(i)kissi, which logically should belong to the aforementioned lands. In the following, I will scrutinize the evidence related to the location of the two cities.

Urimzan/Urenzan

Regarding the arrangement of the toponyms in RINAP 1 47, I believe that the ancient city of Urimzan/Urenzan was part of the land Niššāya, and, consequently, that it was located within the boundaries of the present-day Nahavand area. Accordingly, I suggest that Urimzan/Urenzan is the ancient name of the present-day town of Āvarzamān, located near the Nahavand city, for the following reasons: a) the phonetic similarity between the ancient toponym Urimzan/Urenzan in the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III and the present-day toponym Āvarzamān; in my opinion, the current toponym largely preserves its original ancient form up to the present day; b) as can be deduced from RINAP 1 47, Urimzan/Urenzan was the name of a town in the land of Niššāya. Today, the village of Āvarzamān is located in the Nahavand area. In other words, assuming the identity of the ancient land of Niššāya with the present-day Nahavand plain, the identification of the ancient city of Urimzan/Urenzan with the present-day village of Āvarzamān seems quite probable.

Āvarzamān, locally known as Uwerzemūn, is a small village and hamlet located in the southern part of the Hamadan province, ca. 20 km northeast of Nahavand, on the road towards Malayer and Hamadan. It is likely that the urban settlement of Urimzan/Urenzan in the Neo-Assyrian period coincided with one of the ancient hills in this region, perhaps Tape Imamzadeh in the Āvarzamān rural area. In a superficial survey, pottery from the second and first millennium BC has been identified on this hill. Today, this hill is registered with the number 7014 in the list of the national monuments of Iran.

Ṣibur/Ṣibar

The second ancient toponym associated with Niššāya is the city of Ṣibur/Ṣibar, which is also one of the most important and frequently mentioned toponyms linked with the land of Media in the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III[14] and Sargon II.[15] The inscriptions of

12. Rezaei *et al.* 2023, 138.
13. Rezaei *et al*. 2023, 135.
14. RINAP 1 15, 12; 17, 8; 35, ii 28′, 34′; 38, 4′; 41, 7′; 47, obv. 30, 37.
15. RINAP 2 1, 10; 43, 14; 65, 48; 76, 7′; 105, i′ 9′; 117, ii 65; 129, 14). The exact relationship between the Ṣibur/Ṣibar with Ṣibara from the land of Gizilbunda mentioned in the inscriptions of Šamšī-Adad V (RIMA 3 A.0.103.1, ii 59b–iii 27a) is not clear. It is possible that all these names actually refer to the same place. If this assumption is correct, the suggested location of Gizilbunda in the Zanjan plain

Sargon II mention several times the *topos* "whose great hand conquered the area from the land Ḫašmar to the city Ṣibar, which borders on the distant Medes in the east".[16] This phrase seems to indicate the approximate extent of Sargon's advance into Media, or, more likely, an area within the ancient Median territory that became part of the Assyrian tributary states under Sargon's rule. In Tiglath-Pileser III's inscriptions RINAP 1 41 and 47, the city of Ṣibur/Ṣibar is listed after the neighbouring lands of Gizin(i)kissi and Niššāya, indicating that Ṣibur/Ṣibar, like Urimzan/Urenzan, probably was under the jurisdiction of either Gizin(i)kissi or Niššāya. This possibility is strengthened in favour of the land Niššāya by the Najafabad stela, since it mentions Sargon's collection of tribute from Uardatti of the city Ṣibar after entering the land of Irnisa (Niššāya), despite Uardatti had not paid tribute to any previous Assyrian king.[17] Therefore, based on the available evidence, the connection between Ṣibur and Niššāya, present-day Nahavand, is almost certain. This suggests that Ṣibur/Ṣibar was located somewhere in the present-day Nahavand County.

Accordingly, and considering the archaeological evidence of the region, I would suggest that the most likely location of ancient Ṣibur/Ṣibar is the Tepe Giyan Hill, located 15 km west of Nahavand. Previously, I. Rezaei, S. Alibaigi and J. MacGinnis located Niššāya of the Assyrian texts at the Giyan Hill near the present city of Nahavand due to the absence of archaeological evidence from Nahavand itself.[18] We can assume that the lack of evidence for an Iron Age settlement within the modern Nahavand is due to the inadequacy of archaeological excavations. In such circumstances, Ṣibur/Ṣibar, as the most important and frequently mentioned toponym of the land Niššāya in the Assyrian inscriptions, most likely corresponds to the most important Iron Age site in the Nahavand County, *i.e.*, Tepe Giyan. According to RINAP 17 and 47, Tiglath-Pileser III erected a royal image in the city of Ṣibur, which, according to the author's proposed location, should be sought at the present-day Tepe Giyan.

Another crucial aspect of the ancient land of Niššāya is its renowned status as a main centre for horse breeding in the ancient land of Media, as documented in the writings of classical historians like Herodotus,[19] Strabo,[20] and others. Tiglath-Pileser III's inscription RINAP 1 35 provides a very interesting, new clue to the importance of ancient Niššāya as a main centre for horse breeding and its connection to the present-day Nahavand Plain: lines 30–44 give in detail the number of horses received as tribute from the rulers of the cities and regions of ancient Media. Unfortunately, this inscription is damaged, and parts of it are illegible. However, the surviving text contains the names of at least twenty Median towns and lands, including well-known places such as Bīt-Ištar, Bīt-Kapsi, Uppuria, Šaparda, Sikrâ, and Zakruti, which are often mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions. One significant point of this inscription is that, unlike other Median cities and lands that typically

(see Bagg 2020, 234), north of present-day Nahavand, would imply that in the times of Šamšī-Adad V (r. 811–824 BC) the city of Ṣibar was under the dominion of the principality of Gizilbunda for some time.

16. RINAP 2 1, 10; 43, 14; 76, 7′; 105, i′ 9′; 129, 14.
17. RINAP 2 117, ii 64–68a.
18. Rezaei *et al*. 2023, 138.
19. Hdt. VII, 40.
20. Strabo XI, 13.7; XI, 14.9.

paid tribute of 30–130 horses, the city of Ṣibur provided about 300 horses. This amount is significantly high, two to three times more than what most cities and lands contributed.[21] Most likely, in the Neo-Assyrian period, as was common in ancient times, the amount of tribute was determined in proportion to the capacities (κατὰ τὸ μέγεθος / κατὰ δύναμιν) of the subjects.[22] This suggests that the land of Ṣibar/Ṣibur was the most important, or at least one of the main centres of horse breeding in ancient Media. Given the location of Ṣibur in the land of Niššāya, *i.e.*, in the present-day plain of Nahavand, the issue of the correspondence of Niššāya with the plain of Nahavand, as well as the claim of classical writers that the Nesaean plain was a centre of horse breeding in ancient Media, is once again confirmed.

Certainly, the access to fertile plains with lush pastures and abundant running water was a key factor in achieving such a privileged position for horse breeding. In his description of the Nesaean plain, Diodorus writes: "This region could support enormous herds of horses".[23] This feature is consistent with the proposed location for Ṣibur at Tepe Giyan and in the large plain of Nahavand, where there are abundant running waters, including the Gāmāsīāb River, and an abundance of fodder for grazing. Ibn Faqih Hamadani (*fl.* 902 AD) pointed out this important feature: "The vegetation of Nahavand is more abundant than all the cities of God";[24] according to him, "Likhwast is a village among the villages of Nahavand. Here, there is a piece of grass shaped like a horse that remains green in both summer and winter. Locals say that this is a talisman for the greenery and fertility of the region".[25] Naser al-Din Shah, a king of the Qajar dynasty, also wrote in his travelogue (1891 AD): "The Nahavand valley is not more than two *farsakh* wide, but its length is fifteen to twenty *farsakh*. We drove a long way, and everywhere we looked, we saw cultivated fields. Whether it was seasonal or irrigated agriculture, there was not a single piece of barren land in sight".[26] It is clear that the conditions were optimal for horse breeding in such a favourable environment. It should be noted that the second major place for horse breeding in Tiglath-Pileser III's inscription RINAP 1 35, with 200 horses, was the town of Šaparda. Rezaei, Alibaigi and MacGinnis located Šaparda in the Zwairi Plain (Zubaydia in early Islamic texts), adjacent to the vast Mahidasht Plain in the Kermanshah Province.[27] These examples indicate the importance of the intermountain plains in the central Zagros as centres for horse breeding in ancient times.

Niššāya/Nisāya in the Bisotun Inscription

According to the Bisotun inscription, Gaumāta, a *maguš* who had usurped the throne from the Achaemenid dynasty, was killed by Darius I in 522 BC in the fortress of Sikayuvati located in Nisāya in the land of Media.[28] In the past, scholars have located the Nisāya

21. RINAP 1 35, ii 30′–44′.
22. Briant 1996, 602.
23. Diod. XVII, 110.5.
24. Ibn Faqih 1970, 95.
25. Ibn Faqih 1970, 95.
26. Naser al-Din Shah 1983, 120.
27. Rezaei *et al*. 2023, 132.
28. Schmitt 1991, i 26–61 (pp. 50–52).

mentioned in the Bisotun inscription somewhere not far from Ecbatana, modern Hamadan,[29] especially in its northeastern part.[30] E. Herzfeld believed that Nisāya and its fortress, Sikayuvati, were located in the Bisotun and Harsin region, including Sakawand.[31] Since the mid-twentieth century, most scholars have located Nisāya and the Sikayuvati fortress in the surroundings of Mt. Bisotun.[32] For example, W. Kleiss believes that the so-called Median fortress located under the Bisotun inscription is the same as the Sikayuvati fortress.[33] However, there are also different opinions, such as that of P. Azkaei, who considers the Nisāya plain to be the same as the present-day Mahidasht region in the Kermanshah province.[34] E. Herzfeld,[35] and, following him, P. Azkaei,[36] proposed that Sikayuvati could be equivalent to the land Sangibuti mentioned in the Assyrian inscriptions. However, it is clear from Assyrian inscriptions that Sangibuti and Nisāya were two independent toponyms.

The first point about the location of the Nisāya mentioned in Darius I's Bisotun inscription is that there is no reason or evidence to suggest that this toponym is different from Niššāya in the Assyrian inscriptions. On the contrary, given the tight similarity of the toponyms and the fact that both places were located in the ancient Median region,[37] it seems that the Niššāya/Nisāya land mentioned in the Assyrian and Bisotun inscriptions refers to the same place. Therefore, if we assume that the ancient Niššāya/Nisāya is the same as the present-day Nahavand, we can confidently conclude that the final part of the story of the *maguš* Gaumāta (Smerdis in Herodotus' account) took place in the present-day Nahavand region. I suggest that the name of the river Gamasiab, which springs from the Nahavand County and is now recognized as the primary and largest river in the Kermanshah and Hamadan provinces, could potentially be a modified form of the ancient name Gaumāta. This assumption is derived from the phonetic similarity of the names, and considering the historical fact that the *maguš* Gaumāta was killed in Nisāya, the present-day Nahavand. Similarly, in the Nahavand region, there are cases where the place names are derived from historical personalities. One example is the village of Sa'd Waqas, located 15 km northwest of Nahavand, which commemorates the Muslim Arabs' invasion under the leadership of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqas and the victory over the Sasanid army in the

29. Maspero 1900, 673.
30. Justi *et al*. 1905, 170.
31. Herzfeld 1934, 39; 1941, 205f.
32. Kleiss 1970; Schmitt 1991, 18; 2002; Von Gall 1994; Vogelsang 1998, 196; Huyse 1999, 57; Luschey 2013; Alibaigi & MacGinnis 2018.
33. Kleiss 1970.
34. Azkaei 2002, 46f.
35. Herzfeld 1941, 206.
36. Azkaei 2002, 46f.
37. During the Neo-Assyrian period, the regions of Bisotun and Nahavand, and in general the present-day provinces of Kermanshah and Hamadan, were considered as the western part of ancient Media, which bordered Assyria (see Rezaei *et al*., 2023: 141). In the Parthian period, Nahavand was part of Upper Media (see Rezaei, 2025), and in early and middle Islamic texts, the Nahavand region is referred to as "Māh-i Basra" (cf. Ibn-Rustah, 1986, 166; Al-Maqdisi 1982, 575), where the word "Māh" likely derives from the old word "Mād/Media." The naming was done because the tribute from Nahavand was sent to the city of Basra in Iraq (cf. al-Baladhuri 1988, 120; Ibn-Faqih 1970, 94).

Battle of Nahavand in 640 AD.[38]

The modern toponym Gāmāsīāb (locally known as Gāmāsīāw) is formed of two components, the second of them being *āb*/*āw*, "water"; it thus means "the river Gāmāsī". The name of this river is not mentioned in early and middle Islamic texts; however, historians such as Ibn Faqih Hamadani (*fl.* tenth century AD), Abu-Dulaf (d. 950), and Yaqut Hamavi (d. 1229) describe a snow charm on Mount Iza near Nahavand which is called "the 'Gāmāsī' of Nahavand", where water is pouring out of rocks shaped like a cow and a fish. The compound toponym Gāmāsīāb/Gāmāsīāw, thus, appears to be formed of Gāw, "cow", and Māhī, "fish".[39] Today, in the indigenous languages of the Central Zagros, including Lori, Kurdish, and Laki, Gāmāsī means "cowfish", or "large fish", which apparently refers to the same story. However, I believe that the existence of the talismans, such as Gāw and Māhī, and grass horses in the Nahavand region may have roots in historical events and characteristics of the region, such as horse breeding and the murder of Gaumāta the *maguš*.

Nesaean in the Greek and Roman Sources

A considerable number of Greek and Roman historians and geographers, such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Strabo, Arrian, and Stephanus of Byzantium mention a peculiar race of very large horses called "Nesaean". According to Herodotus, who is the first to mention this adjective, these large horses were bred in a very large plain in Media called *Nesaion*.[40] Another very interesting clue from the Assyrian sources confirms the connection between the large Nesaean horses and the Nahavand region: according to the Najafabad stele, when Sargon II entered the land of Irnisa (Niššāya), present-day Nahavand, he received as tribute "large horses trained for the yoke".[41] Diodorus and Strabo offer detailed information about the location of *Nesaion* as a centre for horse breeding. Diodorus, who actually does not mention this place name, describes it as lying between *Bagistana* (mod. Bisotun) and *Ekbatana* (mod. Hamadan): "Where of old they say that there were one hundred and sixty thousand horses grazing, but at the time of Alexander's visit there were counted only sixty thousand".[42] According to Strabo,

> Those who travel from Persis and Babylon to the Caspian Gates pass through it [here he refers to a meadow called *hippobótos*, which he locates south of the Caspian Sea]; and in the time of the Persians, it is said that fifty thousand mares were pastured there, and that these herds belonged to the kings. As for the Nesaean horses, which the kings used because they were the best and the largest, some

38. al-Baladhuri 1988, 115.
39. Zakariya ibn Muhammad Qazwini (ca. 1203–1283); Ibn Faqih 1970, 94; Abu-Dulaf 1975, 69; Hamavi 1995, Vol. 5, 313: "On Mount Iza in Nahavand there are two talismans shaped like a fish and a cow, made of snow, that remain unmelted throughout both winter and summer. These figures are easily recognizable from the city, depicting a standing cow with a fish trailing behind. Locals believe that these talismans are meant to ensure that the water in the area never diminishes".
40. See Schmitt 2002.
41 RINAP 2 117, ii 66.
42. Diod. XVII, 110.6.

writers say that the breed came from here, while others say from Armenia".[43]

Given the correspondence between Assyrian and Persian Niššāya, Greek *Nesaion* and the present-day Nahavand Plain, it can be assumed that the major route from Babylon to Ecbatana in Media, and further to the Caspian Gates, passed through the present-day province of Loristan. After passing through the Khorramabad-Aleshtar-Delfan road, and leaving behind Mount Garin, this route reached the Nahavand Plain before turning north towards Hamadan. It is worth noting that Sargon II reached Nahavand (Niššāya/Irnisa) *via* a similar route in 716 BC during his sixth campaign.[44] It is possible that the route from Persis to Ecbatana also passed through the Borujerd-Nahavand route.

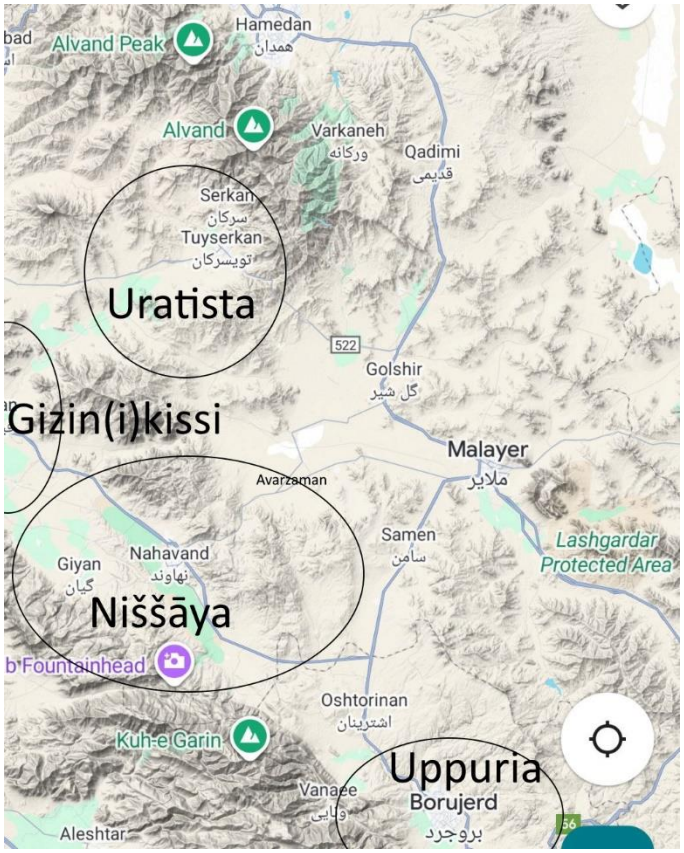


Fig. 1. Ancient toponyms (large characters) and modern towns (small characters).

Conclusion

This article presents new clues about the Niššāya region and its related toponyms, Ṣibur/Ṣibar and Urimzan/Urenzan, during the Neo-Assyrian period. It confirms the previous suggestions that Niššāya/Irnisa in the Assyrian texts of the 8th century BC was the same as Nisāya in the inscription of Darius I at Bisotun, and *Nesaion* (with Nesaean) mentioned by classical historians such as Herodotus and Strabo, all of which refer to the

43. Strabo XI, 13.7.
44. Rezaei *et al*. 2023.

present-day Nahavand plain. I suggest that the toponyms Ṣibur/Ṣibar and Urimzan/Urenzan mentioned in the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II were both located in the land of Niššāya, present-day Nahavand, and correspond to present-day Avarzaman and Tepe Giyan, respectively. In this regard, my analysis of Tiglath-Pileser III's RINAP 1 35 inscription shows that the city of Ṣibur/Ṣibar, located in the ancient land of Niššāya, was most likely a major centre for horse breeding in the Median region. This feature, which was probably possible due to the availability of all the required conditions and facilities, such as extensive pastures, is consistent with the characteristics of the land of Niššāya/*Nesaion* as a well-known centre for horse breeding, as noted by Greek and Roman writers. In addition, I believe that the Gamasi River probably took its name from the *maguš* Gaumāta. It seems that, as stated by Herodotus,[45] the pseudo-Smerdis or the *maguš* Gaumāta was a Median personality, likely from Niššāya or Nahavand, who took refuge in his homeland and was killed there by Darius I.

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