

# Azrah: The Endonym of the Hazara People and Its Avestan Origin

## Abstract

This article investigates the self-designation Azrah (Āzrah) used by the Hazara people of central Afghanistan. Linguistic analysis traces the name to the Avestan Arəzahī, the eastern clime in the seven-fold division of the world (Karshvar), which appears in the Avesta (Yt. 10.15, Bundahišn 8.2) as the land where the sun first rises. The word developed through Middle Persian Arzah into the modern Hazaragi pronunciation Āzrah. Genetic data show that the Hazara carry the Neolithic Iranian farmer lineage J2a1-Page55 at a frequency of 13%, second only to Iran (23%). Combined with archaeological evidence (Helmand Civilization, Bamiyan Buddhas) and historical records (Xuanzang's Hosala), this study argues that the Hazara are the indigenous population of the Avestan land Arəzahī, identified with the central highlands of Afghanistan (Bamiyan, Daikundi). The article challenges the common narrative that reduces Hazara identity to a Mongol origin and restores their historical place as heirs to the ancient Iranian civilization of the east.

## 1. Introduction

The Hazara people of Afghanistan have often been labelled as descendants of Mongol soldiers of the 13th century, a view reinforced by the external name Hazara (from Mongolian ming, thousand). However, they call themselves Azrah (Āzrah) in their own dialect. This paper investigates the origin of this self-name and its implications for understanding the deep history of the region. By combining linguistic, genetic, and archaeological evidence, we show that Azrah is the living continuation of the Avestan geographical term Arəzahī, which designated the eastern clime in the Zoroastrian cosmological system. This identification places the Hazara's ancestral homeland at the very heart of the ancient Iranian world.

## 2. Linguistic Evidence

The Avestan word Arəzahī (𐬀𐬵𐬀𐬵𐬀𐬀𐬀) appears in the list of the seven karshvar (climes) as the eastern region. It is the land where the sun first rises. In Middle Persian (Pahlavi) texts such as the Bundahišn, the name becomes Arzah, still referring to the same eastern clime. The modern Hazaragi pronunciation Āzrah [ʔär.zɔ:] is a regular phonetic development from Arzah. This evolution is documented in the Wiktionary entry for the Persian word arze, which lists the Hazaragi pronunciation as a distinct form. Crucially, the self-designation Āzrah predates the exonym Hazara by millennia.

## 3. Genetic Evidence

Di Cristofaro et al. (2013) report the frequency of Y-chromosome haplogroup J2a1-Page55, a marker of Neolithic Iranian farmers, in the Hazara of the Hindu Kush at 13%. This is the second-highest in the region, after Iran (23%). By contrast, the frequency among Pashtuns is only 3%. The data indicate that the Hazara retain a substantial pre-Mongol, pre-Aryan indigenous genetic component. Haber et al. (2012) recorded total J2 (J-M172) in Hazaras at 26.6%, further confirming the presence of this ancient Near Eastern lineage.

## 4. Geography and Archaeology

The territory where the Azrah speakers live – the central highlands of Afghanistan, known as Hazarajat – is precisely the area that ancient texts describe as Arəzahī. This region is the source of the Helmand River (Haētumant), which has been identified with the sacred river Dāityā where Zoroaster received revelation (Gnoli 1980). The Helmand Civilization

(3300–2350 BCE) flourished here, and the Bamiyan Buddhas (6th–7th century CE) were carved and guarded by the local population for centuries. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (630 CE) called the area Hosala, a transcription of the same name, and described it as a flourishing Buddhist center with colossal Buddha statues.

## 5. Historical Continuity

The name Arəzahī appears in the Avesta (Yt. 10.15, Bundahišn 8.2) and continues through Pahlavi texts. In Greek sources, Ptolemy (2nd century CE) mentioned a region called Ozala in Ariana, which scholars have linked to the same name. Xuanzang's Hosala (7th century CE) confirms the toponym in the Bamiyan Valley. Today, the people of this land call themselves Āzrah. This unbroken chain of attestation over 3500 years demonstrates the continuous presence of the Azrah people in their homeland.

## 6. Discussion

The convergence of linguistic, genetic, and archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Hazara (Azrah) are not merely descendants of 13th-century Mongol invaders but the indigenous people of a land with a recorded history of at least 3500 years. The Mongol invasions added a later genetic layer (haplogroup C2), but the core population (J2a) and its cultural memory remained intact. The name Āzrah itself is a direct link to the Avestan Arəzahī, the sacred eastern clime. This identification restores the Hazara to their rightful place as the heirs of the ancient Iranian civilization of the east, contradicting the widespread narrative that dismisses them as Mongol newcomers.

## 7. Conclusion

This study concludes that:

- The Hazara self-name Azrah (Āzrah) derives from Avestan Arəzahī via Middle Persian Arzah.
- Genetic data show that the Hazara retain a significant Neolithic Iranian ancestry (J2a1-Page55: 13%), second only to Iran.
- The land of Arəzahī is geographically identical to modern Hazarajat (Bamiyan, Daikundi), the source of the Helmand River and home to the Helmand Civilization and the Bamiyan Buddhas.
- The common identification of the Hazara solely with Mongol origins is a historical distortion that ignores the far deeper, continuous presence of the Azrah people in their homeland.

Future research should further explore the linguistic ties between Hazaragi and other Eastern Iranian languages, and the role of the region as a crossroads of civilizations.

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