



HEPHTHALITES

HEPHTHALITES (Arabic *Hayṭāl*, pl. *Hayāṭela*), a people who formed apparently the second wave of “Hunnish” tribal invaders to impinge on the Iranian and Indian worlds from the mid-fourth century C.E. The first invaders, known simply as “Huns” (see [CHIONITES](#)), representing Gk. *Χίων “Hun” plus tribal suffix -itai, were reported by the Latin historian Ammianus Marcellinus (16.9.3-4) as engaged in hostilities on the northeast frontier of Iran with the Sasanian Šāpūr II in 356. Subsequently, around 380 C.E., a certain Kidara emerges in Kōrāsān with the Sasanian title of Kušānšāh “King over the Kushans,” his name appearing in Greco-Bactrian script on Kushano-Sasanian type gold coins as Kidaro. Later drachms, showing a younger portrait, give the name Kidara in Brahmi script, suggesting a successor of the same name. Thus the dominant confederacy of Hunnish tribes became known as Kidarites, evidently designating a political, rather than an ethnic, grouping. Hunnish incursions into Iran in the time of Bahrām V Gōr (420-38) and of Yazdegerd II (438-57) may also have involved the Kidarites (see [SĀSĀNIAN DYNASTY](#)). However, when Priscus, describing events under the Sasanian king Pērōz (457-84), repeatedly mentions the “Kidarite Huns” under a king “Kouchas” [Kunkās] (ed. Bornmann, pp. 95, 97-98, 106; tr. Blockley, pp. 337, 347, 355, 361), his usage is probably anachronistic, since Procopius (*Persian Wars* 1.3.1-7), in his classic account of these Huns, attributes the same role to the (H)ephthalite Huns. The latter, also known as White Huns, he describes as entirely distinct from the other Huns and as dwelling close to the Persian border, where their center is a city named Gorgo. This name is usually interpreted as referring to the medieval Jorjān, near the present Gonbad-e Qābus (q.v.). However, there is



a Persian eyewitness account reported by the Armenian historian Lazar describing the wars of Pērōz with the Hephthalites, his disastrous defeat and death, and the extent of the conquest of the eastern borderland. It says: “a few men escaped the slaughter; reaching Vrkan they told every one of these grievous events” (tr. Thomson, 1991, pp. 214-15). It thus appears that the Hephthalites did not reach Gorgān, and the reference may rather be to Gorgānj/Jorjāniya in Choresmia.

Procopius claims that the Hephthalites live in a prosperous territory, are the only Huns with fair complexions, do not live as nomads, acknowledge a single king, observe a well-regulated constitution, and behave justly towards neighboring states. He also describes the burial of their nobles in tumuli, accompanied by the boon-companions who had been their retainers in their lifetimes; this practice contrasts with evidence of cremation among the Chionites in Ammianus (19.2.1: *post incensum corporis . . .*) and with remains found by excavators for the European Huns and remains in some deposits ascribed to the Chionites in Central Asia. It is therefore assumed that the Hephthalites constituted a second Hunnish wave who entered Bactria early in the fifth century C.E., and who seem to have driven the Kidarites into Gandhara.

The campaigns of the Sasanian Pērōz against the Hephthalites are widely reported in the Islamic sources; they are also mentioned by Joshua the Stylite (Luther, 1997, pp. 109-14), as well as described by Lazar. Apparently Pērōz launched three campaigns against these Huns, all disastrous: in the first being led to a waterless desert and forced to surrender, and in the third charging to his death in a concealed ditch with all his cavalry. His coin series tends to confirm this version, depicting the king with three different successive crowns, thus implying two separate restorations. Ṭabari, who reports these events (I, p. 873; tr., V, p. 110), claims that hostility between Pērōz and the Hephthalites was aggravated by reason of their practice of sodomy, an allegation found also in Balāḍori (*Fotuhā*, p. 403) and in Bal’ami’s expanded Persian translation of Ṭabari (ed. Bahār, p. 955). These events are also narrated by Ta’ālebi and by Moḥammad ‘Awfi, *Jawāme’ al-Ḥekāyāt* (apud Niẓāmu’d-dīn, pp. 148, 168). The fullest account of the defeats of Pērōz is probably that of the *Šāh-nāma* (ed. Moscow, VIII, pp. 12-17; tr. Warner and Warner, VII, pp. 165-69), where the Hephthalite king is reported as ẖoṣnavāz (so also in Bal’ami), while the Arabic sources record the name as Akṣonvār (q.v).



Thereafter the Hephthalites exercised undisputed control of an extensive territory in Central Asia, *Korāsān*, and Afghanistan. When Kawād (488-96) succeeded in Iran, he was deposed and imprisoned; but he escaped, and, benefiting from his acquaintance with the Hephthalites, amongst whom he had lived as a hostage after the defeat of Pērōz, obtained the help of their ruler and a military contingent, enabling him to recover the Sasanian throne. A large indemnity in coin had also been paid by Pērōz, after his various defeats, and Kawād no doubt also had to pay the Hephthalites substantially for his restoration. It was only with the rebuilding of Sasanian power under Kōsrow I Anošīrvān, between A.D. 558 and 561, when the Persians acted in concert with the newly-arrived Turkish horde under their Khāqān Sinjibu (Silzaboulos, with variants, in Byzantine sources), that the two powers were finally able to crush the Hephthalites in an epic battle near Bukhara, dividing their territories along the line of the Oxus (Amu Daryā). The *Šāh-nāma* names the defeated Hephthalite king Gātfar (ed. Moscow, VIII, p. 157), though in Ṭabari (I, p. 895) he appears as Warāz (variant Wazar). Yet, though the power of the Hephthalites was destroyed in Transoxania, Hephthalite kingdoms remained in Afghanistan, of which fragments survived for some time even after the Arab invasions.

It is not entirely clear what relationship had existed between these Hephthalite principalities in Transoxania and those which grew up in Afghanistan and impinged on the kingdoms of India. These last may have derived from the Central Asian Hunnish states, but more probably were separate and independent. Indian sources do not distinguish precisely between the Kidarites and the Hephthalites, designating the invader merely as Huṇas, though there are allusions to the *Śveta Huṇa* “White Huns” (evidently the Hephthalites). There is also possible mention of “Red Huns” and “Black Huns” (Bailey, 1954). The Gupta emperor Kumāragupta in his final year, 454-55 C.E., faced a Hunnish invasion, which was repelled by his crown prince Skandagupta, who then succeeded, but had to encounter several later attacks, with varied success.

Around 510 C.E., a Hephthalite ruler Toramāṇa established his power over much of northern and western India. He was succeeded in about 525 by his son, Mihirakula, whose ferocity and cruelty became legendary. The latter is mentioned in inscriptions of his fifteenth year at Gwalior and also at Mandasor. According to the last he was eventually defeated and captured by Yaśodarma, and apparently succeeded by his uncle or brother (?)



Hiraṇyakula. However, he was finally released, and he re-established his power in Kashmir, where he survived until about 540 C. E. He is said to have derived entertainment from having elephants driven over the precipices there and listening to the squeals of the terrified animals as they fell. Succeeding rulers of the Hephthalite kingdom seem to have been based in Afghanistan, though whether in Kabul, Bamiyan (Bāmiān), Gardez, or, most probably, Ghazni, is uncertain. From the coin series, and brief notices in the Kashmir chronicle *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* (which seems, however, to be affected by some chronological disarrangement), we learn of other rulers, Lakhana Udayāditya and Khiṅgala Narendrāditya, and the latest king, known only by his honorific title Purvāditya, whose demise could have taken place shortly before 600 C.E. The epoch of the Hephthalites seems to have seen a striking revival of accomplished sculpture in Afghanistan, this time using marble, and with a preference for Brahmanical subjects. A marble image of the Hindu deity Gaṇeśa, reputedly found at Gardez, was dated in the eighth year of Khiṅgala (Sarcar, 1963). It is linked to the horrific painting of a Hephthalite king at the cave of the 53-meter Buddha in Bamiyan by the fact that in the painting the adjoining figure of a prince wears a jewel in the form of a bull's head, seen also on marble sculptures related to the Gaṇeśa image (Bivar, in press).

Subsequently, in the seventh century, among opponents of the Arab invaders is included, in north and northwestern Afghanistan, a personage named by Arab historians Tarkhān Nēzak, to whom are now plausibly attributed the many coins read by older numismatists as *Npky MLK'*, better understood as *Nyzky MLK'* (Nēzak Šāh; see [NĒZAK](#)). In Arachosia coins are known of a seventh-century ruler called in Pahlavi *Tkyn ḥwl's'n MLK'* (Tegin Kōrāsān Šāh), probably identical with the personage named by Biruni as Varhategin, a founder of what that author calls the "Turkish" dynasty. Yet although this name indeed suggests a Turkish origin, both these survivors may have represented Hephthalite remnants. The Tegin Kōrāsān Šāh was probably the founder of Teginābād, a city on or near the site of present-day Kandahār. A tribal element with a claim to Hephthalite descent was the medieval Kālaj (q.v.). There are indications that sections of this group were originally Turkish-speaking, though federated in the earlier Middle Ages with Pashto-speaking tribes. It is also claimed that the tribe of the Gurjaras accompanied the Hephthalite invaders, giving their name to various localities on their route to Gujarat, and that they are ancestral also to the Gujar pastoralists who today frequent the higher elevations of the North-West Frontier Province and Kashmir.



The newly-discovered Bactrian documents studied by N. Sims-Williams (1997, 2001) throw interesting light on Afghanistan during the Kushano-Sasanian and Hephthalite periods, containing references to a tax collected specially as tribute for the Hephthalites (Sims-Williams, 1997, No. 16). Under them, a surprisingly orderly administration is shown to have been carried on, thereby substantiating the report of Procopius above. These documents make clear that the Middle Iranian Bactrian language written in Greek script was not the native idiom of the Hephthalites, as some have claimed, but the traditional language of administration in this region from Kushan times and possibly earlier. There is, as mentioned above, some evidence of the use of Turkish language under the Hephthalites. The name Mihirakula possibly represents a Sanskritization of a Turkish designation *mīhr-qul* “slave of Mithra,” a familiar theophoric formation. The Bactrian documents also attest several Turkish royal titles, though these could also be explained by later Turkish infiltration south of the Oxus.

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