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HUNNIC COINAGE

HUNNIC COINAGE, coins struck from the late fourth to the early eighth century by successive Central Asian invaders (so-called Iranian Huns) of northeastern Iran and northwestern India in imitation of Kushan or Sasanian money. (See Plate I. Examples of the Hunnic Coin Series; identifying captions are given below, preceding Bibliography.) The term “Iranian Huns” was introduced into the history of ancient Central Asia by Robert Göbl (1967). It must be emphasized that our knowledge of these Central Asian nomads is, to a certain extent, still vague; and the research on their history is controversial. This is primarily due to the limited number of sources, which are sometimes too contradictory to be harmonized. The literary evidence is not decisive, since reports by Chinese pilgrims and records by Indian authors are at times ambiguous; and the statements of the Greek and Roman historians, who hardly knew how to deal with the various Hunnic people of the remote eastern lands, are vague. In the absence of authentic evidence, the coins issued by leaders of those people constitute one of the most reliable primary sources for the history of the “Iranian Huns.”

Based on the studies of Alexander Cunningham (1893, 1894) and Roman Ghirshman (1948), Göbl (1967) worked out a basis for interrelating the coins which, to date, appears to be correct in its fundamental structure. He distinguished four typological groups, and he interpreted them as indicating four successive, partly overlapping, waves of migration of the “Iranian Huns”: the “Kidarites,” the “Alchons,” the “Nēzak kings,” and the Hephthalites. It must be conceded, however, that the discussion of the clan or dynastic names

mentioned on the coins, as well as of the ethnic identity of their bearers, can by no means be considered definitive. (For divergent interpretations and reconstructions, see Harmatta, 1969, pp. 399, 431; Bivar, 1983, pp. 211-17; Frye, 1984, pp. 346-49; Kuwayama, 1998; Grenet, 2002.) Furthermore, it is far from easy to fix a clear division between the coinage of the "Iranian Huns" and that of the local Central Asian rulers (Zeymal, 1994).

In spite of the relatively large number of coins found, numismatics is not in a position to offer final solutions. The number of coins is still far too low for this. The relative chronological sequence of the individual coin types within the four coinage groups is established in its broad outlines, but the absolute chronology is far from settled. The same is true of the mints. Although many interrelated ensembles bearing the mark of a common mint can be discerned as being connected, too many links are missing in the chain to give a clear picture. The place names attributed to the mints are to be understood as hypothetical; thus a region or province is cited more often than a specific town. Only finds of established provenance can help us here. As the coin issuers concealed their personal names in many cases, the assignment of the individual types to certain persons remains more or less hypothetical. Finally, the legends written in Middle Persian, Bactrian, or Indian are problematic, as their reading and philological interpretations remain controversial. What follows is specifically an account of the coinage of the "Iranian Huns" and deals with the chronology and history of these peoples only insofar as these matters can be deduced from numismatic sources. The sparse information provided by literary and archeological sources is not always easy to reconcile with the numismatic data; for example, some of the names found on the coins are hardly attested elsewhere, so it is not surprising that those who approach these problems from a different point of view often arrive at quite different results. (See HEPHTHALITES, HUNS, NĒZAK, XIONGNU.)

(1) Kidarites. The first wave of the "Iranian Huns" according to Göbl's reconstruction is formed by the so-called Kidarites. They began minting coins following the Kushano-Sasanian, Sasanian, and late Kushan examples in the Kāpiśa-Kabul area and in Gandhara during the last two decades of the 4th and the first half of the fifth centuries C.E. The Kidarites came into the legacy of the Kushano-Sasanian governors and used their mints. In the area of Kāpiśa (present-day Begrām, q.v.) and Kabul they struck gold scyphate dinars after the Kushano-Sasanian examples. The obverse represents the king sacrificing at an altar accompanied by the Bactrian legend *bago kidoro oazorko košano šao*

"Lord Kidāra, great king of the Kushans." The reverse depicts Śiva in front of his bull Nandi. Decisive evidence for the chronological and local setting of this coinage is provided by a hoard from Tepe Maranjān (near Kabul), which contained eleven scyphate dinars of Kidāra as well as a number of Sasanian drachms, the latest of which were those of Šāpūr III (r. 383-88). The hoard thus establishes that the beginning of the Kidarite rule was in the 380s (Curiel and Schlumberger, 1953; Göbl, 1967, II, pp. 29-36; idem, 1984)

The Kidarites minted drachms in Gandhara, also in imitation of the royal Sasanian type. The Indian (Brāhmī script) legend *kidāra kuṣāna ṣāhi* "Kidāra king of the Kushans" can be read on some of these issues. These are joined by dinars of the late Kushan type, which portray the deity Ardoxšo enthroned on the reverse and are probably to be localized in Punjab. The name "Kidāra" is to be interpreted as originally a personal name adopted in due course as a clan or dynastic designation. The coin legends describe Kidāra not as a Kushan but as the ruler over the Kushans.

Numismatic data suggest that the Kidarite rule in Gandhara must have come to an end before 450 C.E., even though the last delegation of the Kidarites is said to have been sent to the Chinese court after 477 C.E. Only in Kashmir were the Kidarites able to assert themselves for a longer period. It should be mentioned, however, that historians, who mainly rely upon Chinese and Byzantine chronicles, differ sharply from numismatists in their reconstruction of the history of the Kidarite period. Frantz Grenet (2002) has questioned the reading of the Bactrian legend on the golden scyphate dinars from the hoard of Tepe Maranjān, a keystone in the numismatic argument, and has interpreted the first part of the legend as *bago kiooooo* "Lord Kay Wahrām" rather than as "Lord Ki-dāra." Thus he attributes the coins to Wahrām Kušānšāh, one of the last Kushano-Sasanian rulers.

(2)Alchons. Göbl's second wave of "Iranian Huns" was formed by the so-called Alchons. Their name is known only from coins and seal inscriptions. In the last decade of the 4th century they crossed the western passes of the Hindu Kush to the Kāpiśa-Kabul area, where they displaced the Kidarites. In the mint at Kabul, Sasanian drachm dies of Šāpūr II fell into their hands. By the simple expedient of recutting the Sasanian obverse legend in Bactrian as *alxanno*, the old dies were prepared for the new coinage. In the case of a drachm of Šāpūr III (383-88) recently found in the Sasanian trays of the Münzkabinett in Berlin (Alram 1999), original dies of Šāpūr III were used to strike the coin; but on the obverse die, in front of the bust, the Pahlavi legend is recut to a somewhat

corrupt form of Bactrian *alxanno*. Again the Sasanian type is closely related to Šāpūr III's drachms from the hoard of Tepe Maranjān, which were probably struck in the mint of Kabul. Thus this coin corroborates Göbl's hypothesis that the Alchon Huns occupied the Kāpiśa-Kabul area and conquered the Sasanian mint located there in the last decade of the 4th century. Kuwayama (1998) tries to show that the Alchon Huns (whom he calls "Heph-thalites") did not invade India through the Kāpiśa-Kabul region but through the area between the eastern Hindu Kush and the western Karakorum. His attempt to prove the absence of the Huns in Kāpiśa is based on an analysis of the Chinese sources, but the numismatic evidence clearly demonstrates that the Alchon Huns reached India via the Kāpiśa-Kabul area (see Göbl, 1967).

It is not yet established whether the Bactrian *alxanno* is a personal name that was subsequently used as a dynasty name, or whether it is the name of a tribe or a title. It is certain that the name Alchon links a whole range of coinages. To these can be related further issues which do not attest the name but show typological criteria attributed to the Alchon group. It is, however, by no means to be ruled out that Alchons are to be understood as a clan of the Hephthalites.

The Alchons moved from Kāpiśa-Kabul farther east to Gandhara, where they gradually drove back the Kidarites and finally occupied all of northwest India. Their leader was the great Khiṅgila (430/440–ca. 470), whose coin portraits count as among the most outstanding in late antiquity. In this phase the Alchons transcended the stage of pure imitation, and the "Hunnic" element clearly became visible on the coins: typical is the artificial skull deformation. The king wears a diadem with flapping ribbons, which are also attached to the necklace. Later, Khiṅgila assumes a crown, at first only in the form of a simple crescent on the forehead, later joined by other decorative elements such as a trident, wings, and horns. The legends are in Bactrian, Indian (Brāhmī), or in both languages and mention various titles and sometimes also the name of the king (in Brāhmī *khigi*, *khigila*, or *khiṅgila*). There is a plethora of control marks and symbols, which belong mainly to the Indian religious sphere. The Sasanian fire altar remains on the reverse (Göbl, 1967, II, pp. 59-66).

Khiṅgila was succeeded by Toramāṇa (490–ca. 515), called in Brāhmī *tora*, *toramāṇa*). Under his leadership the Huns advanced, in about 500, even into the heart of the Gupta kingdom. This is proved by a gold issue of Śrī Prakāśāditya struck there. The last clearly attested Hunnic king in India was Mihirakula (ca. 515-28), called in Brāhmī *jayatu mihirakula* or *śrī mihirakula*, who gained notoriety for excessive atrocity. An increasing deterioration of the

silver content of the drachms is observed in the coins issued during his reign. After his death about 542/550 C.E., some of the Alchons moved back westwards into the Kāpiśa-Kabul-Ḡazni area and clashed there with the Nēzak kings. The leader of the Alchons Naraṇa-Narendra (in Brāhmī *na*, *nara*, *naraṇa* or *narendra*) assumed the bull's-head crown of the Nēzaks on his own drachms minted in Gandhara. Further evidence for the Alchons' remigration from India is offered by overstrikes between Alchons and Nēzaks, found in a hoard near Kabul, dateable to the second half of the 6th century (Alram, 1996). This is supported by the further typological development of the Nēzak coinage from the Kabul-Ḡazni area, which unexpectedly shows elements of the Indian Alchon coinage (Göbl, 1967, II, pp. 66-71).

(3)Nēzaks. A third group of coins of the "Iranian Huns" can be attributed to the so-called Nēzak kings, who settled south of the Hindu Kush in the Ḡazni and Kabul area in the middle of the 5th century. The Nēzak kings minted drachms that are completely unmistakable and that, as is the case with all the Hunnic silver coins, follow the Sasanian examples. Like all the other "Iranian Huns," they became acquainted with money first through Sasanian currency, which they received as payment for military service rendered for Persia; they minted it themselves only when the payments stopped.

The prominent characteristic of the Nēzak coinage is the bull's-head crown of the kings, which is unmistakably encountered throughout the coin series. This is accompanied by the Middle Persian legend (mostly written incorrectly) *nycky MLK'* "Nēzak Shah," which János Harmatta (1969) and Richard Frye (1974) first read correctly. One can also observe the Sasanian fire altar with attendants, over whose heads are suspended two small wheels or sun rosettes, a feature which is a typical element of the Nēzak coinage.

Nēzak coins divide into two clearly distinguishable groups, separated typologically. Göbl (1967) assigned them to two different mints, which he provisionally localized in Ḡazni and Kabul. This conclusion is based on the provenance of the coins; the broad mass of the Nēzak coins found south of the Hindu Kush circulated in the area that included these two cities. The attribution can be proven only with more definitive evidence through the discovery of new hoards. The fineness of the drachms is exposed to increasing fluctuations over time and finally drops to pure copper. This phase of inflation runs partly parallel to that of the Indian Alchon coinage of Mihirakula.

(4)Hephthalites. The fourth group of the coins of the "Iranian Huns" is that of

the Hephthalites proper, whom ancient sources also call the “White Huns” and Arab-Persian texts name as the Hayāṭela. These powerful nomads mounted severe attacks on the Sasanian state during the fifth and sixth centuries. This group did not cross the Hindu Kush, however. Their main seats were in eastern Khorasan. They defeated and captured the Sasanian king Pērōz (r. 459-85) but released him after he paid a heavy ransom in Sasanian drachms. When he renewed his attack on the Hephthalites in 485, they vanquished him and the Persian army, took a number of Persian provinces, and imposed heavy tribute on the Persians. Thereafter, the third coin type of Pērōz determined the mon-etary system of the Hephthalites, and they eventually minted imitations of it (Göbl, 1967, II, pp. 89 ff.).

One of the largest imitation groups attributed to the Hephthalites is Göbl’s (1967) issue 287. On the obverse is shown an imitation of the bust of Pērōz with his third crown, on which, over the crown cap, are outspread wings, perhaps symbolizing the *vārəγna*, the bird of Və-rəθraγna/Mid. Pers. Bahrām, the Iranian god of victory. In front of the bust are written the Bactrian letters *ēb*. Outside the circle four big dots are engraved on the dies. The reverse imitates the third type of Pērōz’s coinage with the characteristic monogram M-P (MLKʾ Pērōz “King Pērōz”) in the left field. In the right field the name of the mint *baxlo* “Balk̲” is written in Bactrian letters, which confirms that the place of issue was north of the Hindu Kush. The letters *ēb* were rightly interpreted by Humbach (1996) as an abbreviation of *ēbodalo* “Hephthal,” and they have since been read on another Hephthalite issue that shows the bust of a Hunnish prince holding a drinking cup in his right hand (Alram, 2001). The reverse shows an imitation of the bust of a Sasanian king, probably Pērōz. The clearly attested Bactrian letters *ēb* behind the head decidedly link this issue with Göbl’s issue 287.

Around the middle of the 6th century the first Western Turks appear as the new power to the north and the east of the Hephthalites in Khorasan. The Sasanian king K̲osrow I Anōširavān (r. 531–72) made an alliance with them against the Hephthalites, and in about 560 they defeated the latter and divided their kingdom among themselves. The influence of the Western Turks is not clearly discernible on the coins, however. Nor was this the end of the Hunnic groups. Some of them were still able to assert themselves in parts of Afghanistan for a long time, and finally there came a time when Sasanians, Western Turks, and remnants of the Huns, as well as local princes, all fought side by side against the Arab invaders and the penetration of Islam into

Central Asia. Even in this late phase, which continued up to the middle of the 8th century, the issuing of drachms according to Sasanian examples continued. Above all, the vast quantity of coins minted by Ḵosrow II Parvēz (r. 591–628) were imitated with additional local elements. The legends are often in three languages: Middle Persian, Bactrian, and Indian. From the 6th century on, diverse countermarks are used in the Central Asian monetary system, on both locally issued and foreign (Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian) drachms. These were intended to restrict circulation within specific political domains.

Plate I. Examples of the Hunnic Coin Series.

a. Kidāra (?) after ca. 384/85 C.E. Dinar (7.69 g), obv. and rev. Kabul (?) (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

b. Kidāra. Drachm (3.64 g), obv. and rev. Gandhara. Göbl, 1967, Issue 11 (The British Museum).

c. Alchon ca. 390/400 C.E. Drachm (4.02 g), obv. and rev. Kabul (?). Original dies of Šāpūr II with re-engraved Bactrian legend and tamga. Göbl, 1967, Issue 36 (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

d. Alchon. Drachm (3.34 g), obv. and rev. Kabul (?). Original dies of Šāpūr III with re-engraved Bactrian legend. Alram, 1999/2000, Issue 36B (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin).

e. Alchon: Khiṅgila, ca. 440–ca. 490 C.E. Drachm (3.60 g), obv. and rev. Gandhara. Göbl, 1967, Issue 44 (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

f. Alchon: Khiṅgila (?). Drachm (4.00 g), obv. and rev. Gandhara. Göbl, 1967, Issue 80 (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

g. Alchon: Toramāṇa, ca. 490–ca. 515 C.E. Copper coin (3.63 g), obv. and rev. Panjab. Göbl, 1967, Issue 120 (The British Museum).

h. Alchon: Mihirakula, ca. 515–ca. 540 C.E. Drachm (3.51 g), obv. and rev. Gandhara. Göbl, 1967, Issue 135 (The British Museum).

i. Alchon: Naraṇa/Narendra, ca. 540–ca. 580 C.E. Drachm (billon; 3.73 g), obv. and rev. Gandhara. Alram, 1999/2000, 108A (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

j. Alchon: Naraṇa/Narendra. Drachm (AE; 3.19 g), obv. and rev. Kabul (?).

Overstrike: obv. struck over rev. of a Nēzak type (see below, coin l). Alram 1999/2000, 44 (Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien).

k. Nēzak, Group I, ca. 460–ca. 560 (?) C.E. Drachm (3.45 g), obv. and rev. ḡazni (?). Göbl, 1967, Issue 217 (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

l. Nēzak, Group II, ca. C.E. 515–ca. 650 (?). Drachm (3.96 g), obv. and rev. Kabul (?). Göbl, 1967, Issue 198 (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

m. Hephthalites, end of the 5th, beginning of the 6th century C.E. Drachm (3.96 g), obv. and rev. Balkh. Göbl, Issue 287 (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

n. Hephthalites. Drachm (3.49 g), obv. and rev. Balkh (?). Alram, 2002, Issue 287A (Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien).

o. Turkish Shahi Dynasty: Shahi Tigin, early 8th century C.E. Drachm (3.10 g), obv. and rev. Kabul. Göbl, 1967, Issue 208 (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

p. Fromo Kesaro, first half of the 8th century C.E. Drachm (3.59 g), obv. and rev. Kabul. Göbl, 1967, Issue 250 (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

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