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HUNS

HUNS, collective term for horsemen of various origins leading a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle. They have been thought to have descended from the Hsiung-nu (also transliterated as Hiung-nu, Xiong-nu, meaning “the cruel slaves”), a nomadic people first mentioned in Chinese sources in 318 B.C.E.

In order to defend against the Hsiung-nu, the unifier of the Chinese empire Qin Shi Huangdi (221-210 B.C.E.) had existing border ramparts joined together to form a great wall. In the early decades of the Han dynasty (from 206 B.C.E.) the Hsiung-nu king Maodun (d. 174 B.C.E.) organized a powerful tribal confederation, which put great pressure on China and enforced payments of tribute (especially silk). It was not until the reign of Wudi (141-87 B.C.E.) that the Hsiung-nu were defeated in wars involving large numbers of casualties. After having joined the Chinese system of tributes in 52 B.C.E., they split up into the northern and southern Hsiung-nu in 48 B.C.E. The northern Hsiung-nu were defeated by the Chinese in 89 C.E., and disappeared from Chinese sources in the 2nd century. The southern Hsiung-nu, who were allied with China, established several short-lived dynasties in northern China in the 4th-5th centuries, before being absorbed within the Han population. Since the 18th century, when this derivation was first suggested (De Guignes, I, 1756, p. 217; cf. Kiessling, cols. 2584-85), the Hsiung-nu have been called “Eastern-Asiatic Huns.” This was primarily due to the similarity of the two names. A more substantial reason seemed to have been provided by the statement in a letter written in Sogdian, dated after 311 C.E., which reports the destruction of the Chinese capital Lo-yang by “Huns” (*xvn*), evidently referring to the conquest of

this city by the southern Hsiung-nu (Bivar, 1983, p. 211). However, the people who plundered this city cannot in any way be identified with those who fought against the Goths a few decades later. There apparently exists no irrefutable archeological proof that the northern Hsiung-nu emigrated westwards (cf. Spuler, p. 262); and, while it is possible that certain scattered populations who used to belong to the Hsiung-nu empire could have later been counted among the tribes of the Huns, whether these people were aware of this evolution is debateable to say the least, and an historical association between the upper stratum of the Hsiung-nu and the Huns is out of the question (Sinor, pp. 178-79).

The European Huns and Iran. In ancient literature the Huns were first mentioned by Ptolemy (3.5.10), who attests for the first half or middle of the 2nd century C.E. a population of the “Khounoi”together with six other tribes mentioned by name in the Ukrainian forest and steppe areas. A detailed analysis of the text has made it possible to locate the habitations of the Khounoi at the time, whose identification with the later Huns is beyond doubt (Kiessling, col. 2591; Altheim, I, 1959, pp. 3 ff.; Werner, p. 487). They lived between the Don and Manych in the north, the upper reaches of the Kuban in the south, and the Sea of Azov in the west. To the east, their habitations may have extended as far as the Caspian Sea and the area near the mouth of the Volga (Werner, p. 488). During the following 200 years they do not appear to have moved, since Ammianus Marcellinus continued to locate the Huns “behind the Maeotic marshes,” and hence near the Sea of Azov (Amm. Marc., 31.2.1). His simultaneous statement that the settlement of the Huns had extended as far as the Arctic Ocean has been the object of various attempts at interpretation (cf. Kiessling, col. 2583; Sinor, p. 179, Haussig, 1992, p. 146) but is hardly credible. Important, however, is the fact that Ptolemy and Ammianus both located the Huns in the neighborhood of the Iranian-Sarmatian Alans, and that the land of the Alans between the Sea of Azov and the Caucasus was still considered by Byzantine historiography as the country of origin of the Huns (Priscus, frag. 1; Procopius, *Bella* 4.5; Agathias, 5.11). The Alans are known to have been the first victims of the sudden expansion of the Huns between 370 and 375 C.E., and to have been forced by the latter to participate in subsequent military expeditions (Amm. Marc., 31.3.1).

A direct confrontation between the Huns and the Persian empire first occurred twenty years after the beginning of the great migration. In the summer of 395, hordes of Huns crossed the Don near its estuary, turned

southeast, and made their way through the Caucasus into Persia and the Roman provinces. While the plundering of the Roman areas is variously attested (for sources, see Maenchen-Helfen, pp. 38-42), only Priscus (frag. 11) and the Liber Calipharum (*Chronicon miscellaneum* 3.4; tr., pp. 106-7) report the invasion of the Persian empire. Under the leadership of Basikh and Koursikh, a detachment of Huns rode down the valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris to Ctesiphon. Upon the news that a Persian army was marching towards them, the Huns turned back; but they were eventually caught. The Persians then managed to kill some of the Huns, to take almost their entire booty from them, and allegedly to free 18,000 prisoners. The rest of the Huns troops made their way back into the steppe over the Darband pass. This inroad into Persia was remembered by the Romans and the Huns more than fifty years later: when Priscus was staying at Attila's court in 449 C.E., he heard from the Western Roman envoy Romulus that the king was planning a campaign against Persia, which was to be carried out on the route previously taken by Basikh and Koursikh (Priscus, frag. 11). Attila's death in 453 C.E. saved the Sasanians from an armed encounter with the Huns while they were at the height of their military power.

In the tribal movements which took place after the dissolution of the European empire of the Huns, the Sabires were particularly prominent. After being ousted by the Avars from their previous home between the Altai and the Ural, they pushed the Saragures westward. The latter then conquered the Akatziresin 466 C.E. and proceeded against Persia (Priscus, frag. 47), possibly goaded on by Byzantium (Moravcsik, I, p. 65). The later fate of the Saragures is unknown. A tribe which soon after 500 C.E. invaded northern Iran and was simply called "Huns" (Ounnoi) by Procopius (*Bella* 1.8) might be identified with the Sabires themselves, who from then on participated in the Persian-Byzantine wars for several decades, siding alternately with the Persians and the Eastern Romans. In the conflicts of the mid-6th century, both warring parties were supported by Sabire detachments. After having fought on the Persian side in 573 C.E., the Sabires subjected themselves a year later to the Eastern Roman emperor and were settled in the Byzantine part of Armenia (Moravcsik, I, p. 68).

Iranian Huns. The term "Huns" was also used for several tribes who posed a continuous threat to northeastern Iran and northwestern India from the 4th century C.E. Earlier research attempted to establish a connection between the different tribes mentioned in the sources, and to consider them all as

Hephthalites (cf. Ghirshman, pp. 69-134). Altheim (III, 1961, p. 7) viewed the Hephthalites as the original tribe of the Huns, from which the European Huns had split off. In addition, he also assumed a Turkish origin for all these tribes (Altheim, I, 1959, pp. 45 ff.). However, this far too simplistic perspective has been succeeded by a more discriminating view based on Robert Göbl's research. According to Göbl, Iran and India underwent several successive invasions by clearly distinct tribes, whom he referred to collectively as "Iranian Huns." They apparently had no connection with the European Huns, but may have been causally related with their movement. A prominent characteristic, which they shared with all other Central Asian power constellations, was their ethnic mixture, among which the elite was said to be Iranian, or at least expressed itself as such through its coinage (Göbl, 1978, p. 107). It is noteworthy that the tribes in question deliberately called themselves "Huns" in order to frighten their enemies (Frye, pp. 345-46).

According to Göbl's classification, which is based on numismatics, there were four different "waves" of Iranian Huns. This system does not include the Chionites (q.v.) because of the lack of numismatic evidence, despite the fact that there is written evidence for their existence from the 4th century C.E. The first wave of Iranian Huns was accordingly triggered by the Kidarites, named after a ruler called Kidara who settled in the Kabul and Peshawar area, possibly with the consent of Šāhpūr II. Here they acquired the inheritance of the Kushano-Sasanian governors and used their mints. The chronology of the Kidarite immigration as represented by Göbl and his school (cf. Alram, pp. 136 ff.) has since been disputed. The combined areas under Kidarite rule north and south of the Hindu Kush have also been ascribed by Chinese sources to the years between 412 and 437 (Enoki, 1970, pp. 13-38; cf. Sinor, p. 299). An extant literary testimony by Priscus (frag. 41) mentions a war of Pērōz against the "Kidarite Huns" under Kounchas.

The second wave of Huns according to Göbl's account was that of the so-called "Alkhon." Their name is almost exclusively known from inscriptions on coins (but cf. Markwart, p. 141), which Göbl (cf. 1967, I, pp. 56-57, 70-72, 218-219; II, pp. 59-66) interprets as ALXONO, in which the component *–xon* represents a Hun name (Göbl, 1978, p. 107). The Alkhon pushed back the Kidarites step by step and finally occupied the whole of northwestern India. They represented the group of Huns who were called "Hūṇas" in the Indian sources. Particularly well known were their rulers Khiṇgila, his successor Tora-māṇa, and the notorious animal torturer Mihirakula, who was eventually defeated by a

group of Indian maharajas. After his death ca. 542–50 C.E., part of the Indian Alkhon appear to have migrated back to Afghanistan (Göbl, 1967, II, pp. 58, 70; Alram, p. 138; but cf. Frye, pp. 348, 355-56).

A group whose name on coins had formerly been interpreted as Napki (npky; cf. Bivar, 1971, p. 304) and was read by Göbl as Nspk (cf. Göbl, 1967, I, pp. 24-26, II, pp. 248-49) were responsible for the third wave of immigration (after 450 C.E.). The correct reading, which was accepted by Göbl, is, however, *nēzak* (cf. Frye, pp. 355-56), which probably represents the title of a ruler (Göbl, 1978, p. 107). The territory of the Nēzak was in present-day Afghanistan south of the Hindu Kush with main centers in Ḡazni (q.v.) and Kabul.

The fourth and most important wave of "Iranian Huns" was that of the genuine Hephthalites, who considerably damaged the Sasanian empire in the 5th and 6th centuries C.E. They were first expressly documented in the reign of Pērōz and were graphically described by Procopius (*Bella* 1.3). According to his testimony, the "Ephthalitai" were a tribe of Huns and were also called "White Huns." Procopius points out, however, that they did not mix with the other known Huns, that they differed from them in their looks and lifestyle, and that they lived away from the others further north from the Persians. Unlike the other Huns, he said, the Hephthalites were not nomads; they had a king and possessed a well-organized state equal to that of the Romans or Persians. During the reigns of Pērōz and of his son Kavād I, they exercised much political influence on the Sasanian empire. However, around 560 C.E. they lost their power due to what may have been jointly undertaken actions by the Western Turks and the Sasanians (under Ḵosrow I). Although the latter managed to destroy the state of the Hephthalites, the core of the Huns power in what is now southern Afghanistan resisted longer. The Arabs called the Hephthalites "Hayātela," and had to come to terms with local leaders descending from both Iranians and Huns (Bivar, 1971, p. 304; Bosworth).

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