



KIDARITES

KIDARITES, a dynasty that ruled Tokharistan (Ṭoḵarestān; now northern Afghanistan and southern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) and later [Gandhāra](#) (q.v.), probably also part of [Sogdiana](#) (q.v.); the initial date is disputed (ca. 390 CE/420-430), while the final period is better documented (loss of Tokharistan to the [Hephthalites](#) [q.v.] in 467, residual North Indian kingdom, perhaps in Swat, until 477).

The name of Kidara, the founder of the dynasty, is attested in Chinese transcription as *Jiduoluo* (in the *Wei shu* ‘History of the Wei’), in Sanskrit as *Kidara* or *Kidāra* (on coin legends in [Brāhmī](#) [q.v.] script; the length of the second syllable is uncertain), and in Sogdian as *kyδr* (on coin legends). The Bactrian form of the name is attested as *Kidiro* and *Kēddiro* (Sims-Williams, p. 338). In Greek we have only the ethnonym: *Ounnoi Kidaritai* ‘Kidarite Huns’. So far no convincing etymology has been proposed.

The most precise information concerning the beginning of the Kidarites as an imperial power is in the *Wei shu*: “The king of the Great Yuezhi called Jiduoluo, brave and fierce, eventually dispatched his troops southwards and invaded North India, crossing the great mountains to subjugate the five kingdoms which were located to the north of Gandhāra” (translation based on Kuwayama, 2002, p. 124). This information most probably reached China in 437; in any case the invasion took place after 412, since the Chinese pilgrim Faxian who visited Gandhāra at that time does not mention any such event. The Byzantine chronicler Priscus mentions the “Kidarite Huns” for the first time in 456 as adversaries of the Sasanian king [Yazdegerd II](#) (q.v.; r. 439-57 CE),



who had discontinued a tribute paid by his predecessors to Iran's eastern neighbors (*Excerpta de legationibus Romanorum* 8, ed. Blockley, pp. 336-37). Two earlier defeats of the latter king on the border of Tokharistan are mentioned by Łazar P'arpets'i (q.v.; tr. Thomson, pp. 294, 302-3); his foes, though conventionally styled "Kushans," are probably already the Kidarites (see [KUSHAN DYNASTY](#)). They might have been already involved in the eastern wars of Wahrām V (r. 420-38; see [BAHRĀM v. BAHRĀM V GŌR](#)), but their name does not appear in sources pertaining to his reign.

Therefore, as far as narrative sources are concerned, all information seems to point to the same period. On Gandhāran coin issues the ruler named Kidara assumed as his second crown that of Yazdegerd II (Göbl, II, issues 11-14). From this perspective, Kidara would have emerged in Tokharistan in the 420s or 430s and then crossed to Gandhāra via its northern valleys.

There is, nevertheless, a consensus among numismatists (Göbl; Cribb; Alram, 1996) to place the first king named Kidara in Kāpiśā (see [BEGRĀM](#)) as early as about 390. This identification rests upon the reading **kidaro* on the last series of gold coins present in the hoard in Tepe Maranjān near Kabul, buried at about this date. The reading is not incompatible with what is actually written on the corrupt legend (*bago kioooooo*), but there is some room for doubt (for an alternative see Grenet, p. 206).

There is less uncertainty concerning the continuation of the history of the Kidarites. From 457 onwards they were challenged by a rebellion of the Hephthalites (q.v.), with whom the Sasanian pretender Pērōz (r. 459-84; see [FĪRŪZ](#)) took refuge and from whom he obtained military help. As soon as he had established himself on the throne, war broke out again with a new Kidarite ruler called Kunkhas (*Kούyxas*). Eventually in 467 the Kidarites were expelled from their capital "Balaam" (= Balkh/Bactria?) (Priscus, 12 and 22; Blockley, II, pp. 349 and 361); the Sasanians claimed the victory, but most probably it was the result of combined operations with the Hephthalites. A residual Kidarite kingdom in the Gandhāran region (possibly in Swat: Göbl, II, p. 224, issue 15) continued to send embassies to China until 477.

A Kidarite conquest of at least part of Sogdiana seems to be safely attested by coins from [Samarqand](#) (q.v.), bearing on the obverse the schematized portrait of a ruler with the Sogdian legend *kyδr* (Zeimal, 1978, p. 208, pl. III, 11; idem, 1996, p. 120, Figure I, p. 128; see also [HUNNIC COINAGE](#)). On typological and metrological grounds these coins can be assigned to the fifth century.

Hypothetically this conquest can be connected with the interruption of Sogdian embassies to China between 441 and 457, and with a piece of information in the *Wei shu* (formerly dated to 437, but actually referring to 457, see La Vaissière, p. 107, n. 57), mentioning an earlier capture of Samarqand by the Xiongnu (q.v.; **CHIONITES**), the ruler in 457 being the third of the new dynasty. This Kidarite (?) dynasty maintained its hold over Samarqand until 509, after which date embassies from Samarqand were incorporated into Hephthalite ones.

It is difficult to form an opinion about the ethnic affiliation of the Kidarites. The information just mentioned about Sogdiana seems to link them with the Xiongnu, which is consistent with Priscus calling them “**Huns**” (q.v.). It has been proposed that the Greek transcription of the name (or title?) of their last ruler Kunkhas may reflect “khan of the Huns” (Tremblay, p. 188). On Gandhāran coins bearing their name the ruler is always clean-shaven, a fashion more typical of **Altaic** (q.v.) people than of Iranians. At the same time the *Wei shu* presents them as “Yuezhi” and “Kushans” when referring to their activities in Northern India, and on their coins in Gandhāra (and already in Kāpiśā if the Tepe Maranjān specimens belong to them) they style themselves “Kuśānśāh” (see **KUSHANSHAHS**) a title no other rulers assumed after them. In these scraps of historical information they appear as adversaries of the Xiongnu: “The state of the Little Yuezhi: the capital is Puruśapura [Peshawar] ... Kidara had been driven away by the Xiongnu and fled westwards, and later made his son assume the defensive” (translation based on Kuwayama, 2002, p. 128). This information is difficult to interpret: it might refer to hostilities in Gandhāra between the Kidarites and some Hunnish predecessors there, or to the Kidarites’ eventual expulsion from Tokharistan by the Hephthalites; yet another possibility is that this passage may contain a reminiscence of the Xiongnu’s expulsion of the ancient Great Yuezhi westwards out of China as recounted in the *Han shu* (‘History of the Han’).

To sum up, the Kidarites seem to have emerged from the Hunnish invaders (Sogd. *Xūn*, Lat. *Chionitae*, Chin. *Xiongnu*) who had overrun the Kushano-Sasanian kingdom in the second half of the fourth century, but they eventually posed as restorers of the former political order (a step their immediate successors the Hephthalites did not take). The official art of their period, documented by mural paintings from Tokharistan and by seals, shows continuity with the Kushano-Sasanian traditions together with some specific iconographic and stylistic features (Callieri, 1997, 2002). Bactrian seal



inscriptions document some titles inherited from the Sasanian administration, e.g., *hazāruxt* ‘chiliarch’ (q.v.; Sims-Williams, p. 339).

The direct or indirect Kidarite rule over Sogdiana coincided with the building of new fortifications (Samarqand, Paykent) and the foundation of new cities such as Panjikent and Kushaniya. The name of the latter probably indicates a Kidarite royal foundation, as neither the Great Kushans nor the Kushano-Sasanians had exerted control over that region. The art of Sogdiana, hitherto very provincial, began to flourish in this period, the school of painting at Panjikent apparently branching off directly from that attested at Dil’berjin (DELBARJIN) near Balkh. In 457 the ruler of Samarqand negotiated the liberation of Sogdian merchants who had been captured in China in 439 (on these various points see Grenet and La Vaissière, pp. 107-10, with reference to earlier contributions). All this tends to indicate that the relatively short Kidarite period was one of recovery and better integration of the Bactrian-Sogdian region, with transfers of populations and skills from south to north. These tendencies were confirmed and developed in the Hephthalite period, with a somewhat different cultural orientation.

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