

The White Huns - The Hephthalites

The Origin of Hephthalites

The paucity of record in Hephthalites or Ephthalites provides us fragmentary picture of their civilization and empire. Their background is uncertain. They probably stemmed from a combination of the Tarim basin peoples and the Yueh-chih. There is a striking resemblance in the deformed heads of the early Yueh-chih and Hephthalite kings on their coinage. According to Procopius's *History of the Wars*, written in the mid 6th century - the Hephthalites

"are of the stock of the Huns in fact as well as in name: however they do not mingle with any of the Huns known to us. They are the only ones among the Huns who have white bodies...."

Ephthalites was the name given by Byzantine historians and Hayathelaites by the Persian historian Mirkhond, and sometimes Ye-tai or Hua by Chinese historians. They are also known as the White Huns, different from the Hun who led by Attila invading the Roman Empire. They are described as a kindred steppe people originally occupied the pasture-lands in the Altai mountain of southwestern Mongolia.

Toward the middle of the 5th century, they expanded westward probably because of the pressure from the Juan-juan, a powerful nomadic tribe in Mongolia. Within decades, they became a great power in the Oxus basin and the most serious enemy of the Persian empire.

The Westward Expansion and War with Sassanian Empire

At the time when the Hephthalites gained power, Kushan and Gandhara were ruled by the Kidarites, a local dynasty of Hun or Chionites tribe. The Hephthalites entered Kabul and overthrew Kushan. The last Kidarites fled to Gandhara and settled at Peshawar. Around 440 the Hephthalites further took Sogdian (Samarkand) and then Balkh and Bactria.

The Hephthalites moved closer and closer toward Persian territory. In 484 the Hephthalite chief Akhshunwar led his army attacked the Sassanian King Peroz (459-484) and the king was defeated and killed in Khurasan. After the victory, the Hephthalite empire extended to Merv and Herat, which had been the regions of the Sassanid Empire. The Hephthalites, at the time, became the superpower of the Middle Asia. They not only destroyed part of Sassanian Empire in Iran but also intervened in their dynastic struggles when the Sassanid royal, Kavad (488-496), was fighting for the throne with Balash, brother of Peroz. Kavad married the niece of the Hephthalites chief and the Hephthalites aided him to regain his crown in 498.

After conquest of Sogdia and Kushan, the Hephthalites founded the capital, Piandjikent, 65 kilometers southwest of Samarkand in the Zaravshan valley. This city later reached its prosperity, produced one of the best mural paintings in the seventh century and later was destroyed by the Arabs. The Hephthalites chose Badakshan as their summer residence. Their chiefs lived north of the Hindu Kush, migrating seasonally from Bactria where they spent the winter, to Badakshan, their summer residence. Under the Hephthalite control, the Bactrian script and language continued to be used and trade and commerce flourished as previously.

The Eastward Expansion to the Tarim Basin

With the stabilization at the western border, the Hephthalites extended their influence to the northwest into the Tarim Basin. From 493 to 556 A.D., they invaded Khotan, Kashgar, Kocho, and Karashahr. The relationship with Juan-juan and China were tightened. The Chinese record indicated that between 507 and 531, the Hephthalites sent thirteen embassies to Northern Wei (439-534) by the king named Ye-dai-yi-li-tuo.

Invasion to India

During the 5th century, the Gupta dynasty in India reigned in the Ganges basin with the Kushan empire occupied the area along the Indus. India knew the Hephthalite as Huna by the Sanskrit name. The Hephthalites or Hunas waited till 470 right after the death of Gupta ruler, Skandagupta (455-470), and entered the Indus from the Kabul valley after the conquest of Kushan. They mopped on along the Ganges and ruined every city and town. The noble capital, Pataliputra, was reduced in population to a village. They persecuted Buddhists and

burned all the monasteries. Their conquest was accomplished with extreme ferocity and the Gupta regime (414-470) was completely extinguished.

For thirty years the northwestern India was ruled by Hephthalite kings. We learned some of the Hephthalite kings ruling India from coins. The most famous ones were Toramana and Mihrakula ruling India in the first half of the 6th century.

The Language

There are numerous debates about Hephthalite language. Most scholars believe it is Iranian for the Pei Shih states that the language of the Hephthalites differs from those of the Juan-juan (Mongoloid) and of the "various Hu" (Turkic); however there are some think the Hephthalites spoke Mongol tongues like the Hsien-pi (3rd century) and the Juan-juan (5th century) and the Avars (6th-9th century). According to the Buddhist pilgrims Sung Yun and Hui Sheng, who visited them in 520, they had no script, and the *Liang shu* specifically states that they have no letters but use tally sticks. At the same time there is numismatic and epigraphic evidence to show that a debased form of the Greek alphabet was used by the Hephthalites. Since the Kushan was conquered by Hephthalites, it is possible they retained many aspects of Kushan culture, including the adoption of the Greek alphabet.

The Religion

It is equally inconsistent while comparing the references to the Hephthalites' religion. Although Sung Yun and Hui Sheng reported that the Hephthalites did not believe in Buddhism, though there is ample archaeological evidence that this religion was practiced in territories under Hephthalite control. According to *Liang shu* the Hephthalites worshiped Heaven and also fire - a clear reference to Zoroastrianism. However the burials found seem to indicate the normal practice in disposing of the dead, which is against Zoroastrian belief.

The Customs

Very little was known about these Hephthalite nomads. Little art has left from them. According to Sung Yun and Hui Sheng who visited their Hephthalite chief at his summer residence in Badakshan and later in Gandhara,

The Hephthalites have no cities, but roam freely and live in tents. They do not live in towns; their seat of government is a moving camp. They move in search of water and pasture, journeying in summer to cool places and in winter to warmer ones....They have no belief in the Buddhist law and they serve a great number of divinities."

Other than the deformation of skulls, the other interesting feature of the Hephthalites is their polyandrous society. The records of brothers marrying to one wife had been reported from Chinese source.

The Extermination

Between 557 to 561 Persian King Chosroes allied with another steppe people who had appeared from inner Asia. Chosroes wanted to profit from the situation to take revenge over the defeat of his grandfather Peroz; he married a daughter of the nomadic chief and allied himself with them against the Hephthalites. The chief Sinjibu was the boldest and strongest of all the tribes and he had the largest number of troops. It was he who conquered the Hephthalites and killed their king.

Mercilessly attacked on two sides, the Hephthalites were completely broken and disappeared by 565 that only small number of them survived. Some surviving groups living south of Oxus escaped Chosroes' grasp later fell to Arab invaders in the 7th century. One of the surviving groups fled to the west and may have been the ancestors of the later Avars in the Danube region. The decline of the Hephthalites marked a turning point in the story of the steppes. Another era was opening in Central Asia. For the allies of Chosroes were Western Turks, a new power was to dominate the steppe for next few centuries.

Medieval Sourcebook: **Procopius**: from History of the **Wars On Racing Factions** ... from **Procopius**, History of the **Wars**, Loeb Classical Library, (London: 1914), Vol 1, 218-220 ...

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Enciclopedia Britanica

HEPHTHALITE

also spelled Ephthalite, member of a people important in the history of India and Persia during the 5th and 6th centuries AD. According to Chinese chronicles they were originally a tribe living to the north of the Great Wall and were known as Hoa or Hoa-tun. Elsewhere they were called White Huns or H'pas. They had no cities or system of writing, lived in felt tents, and practiced polyandry. In the 5th and 6th centuries the Hephthalites repeatedly invaded Persia and India. In the middle of the 6th century under the attacks of the Turks they ceased to exist as a separate people and were probably absorbed in the surrounding population. Nothing is known of their language.

JUAN-JUAN

also spelled Jwen-jwen, Jou-jan, Jeu-jen, or Geougen, Central Asian people of historical importance. Because of the titles of their rulers, khan and khagan, scholars believe that the Juan-juan were Mongols or Mongol-speaking peoples. The empire of the Juan-juan lasted from the beginning of the 5th century AD to the middle of the 6th century, embracing a wide belt north of China from Manchuria to Turkistan. They were allies of the Hephthalite, or "White," Huns and were in continuous conflict with the Wei dynasty of northern China. In 552 the Turkish tribes living within the empire rebelled and, in alliance with the Wei, destroyed the Juan-juan. Many scholars believe that the Avars, who appeared in Europe in about 558, were remnants of the Juan-juan.

Sobre HUNOS

The Hephthalites, who invaded Iran and India in the 5th and 6th centuries, and the Hsiung-nu, known earlier to the Chinese, are sometimes called Huns, but their relationship to the invaders of Europe is uncertain. Yüeh-chih (Pinyin Yuezhi), also called Indo-scyth, ancient people who ruled in Bactria and India from about 128 BC to about AD 450. The Yüeh-chih are first mentioned in Chinese sources at the beginning of the 2nd century BC as nomads living in the western part of Kansu province, northwest China. When Lao Shang (reigned c. 174–161 BC), ruler of the Hsiung-nu (a powerful people of North China), defeated them and killed their king, the main body of Yüeh-chih moved westward into Sogdiana and Bactria, putting an end to Greek rule there. They and related tribes are the Asi (or Asiani) and Tocharians (Tochari) of Western sources. About 128 BC the Yüeh-chih were recorded living north of the Oxus River (Amu Darya), ruling Bactria as a dependency, but a little later the Great Yüeh-chih kingdom was in Bactria, and Sogdiana was occupied by the Ta-yuan (Tocharians). The remnant in Kansu were called Little Yüeh-chih.