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THE HEPHTHALITE EMPIRE*

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Origins

From the mid-fifth to the mid-sixth century Central Asia was ruled by the Hephthalite tribes. There are many gaps in our knowledge of the origin of the Hephthalites and the formation of their state, the first difficulty being that they are given different names in the various sources. In Chinese sources the name of the dynasty is I-ta (a variant of I-tien, ancient *iep-t'ien) and their king bears the name Yen-tai-i-li-t'o (ancient *Yeptalitha).¹ In Syriac sources they are called *eptalit*, *αβδελ*; in Greek-language sources, *Αβδελαι*, *Εφθαλιται*; in Armenian sources, *hep't'al*; in Middle Persian sources, *ēftāl*, and also *hyōn*; in Arabic

* See [Map 3](#).

¹ Enoki, 1959, p. 7.

sources, *haital*; and in New Persian sources, *hētāl*.² Another name for them is Chinese Hua. According to Bal^cami, the etymology of the word ‘Hephthalites’ is as follows: ‘in the language of Bukhara’, it means ‘strong man’.³ In Khotanese Saka a similar word exists, meaning ‘brave, valiant’.

The legends on Hephthalite coins are in the Bactrian script. They feature a Bactrian title, *XOΔHO*, for the ruler together with another Bactrian title, *šao*. One coin bears the title *bogo*, meaning ‘lord’ or ‘ruler’. The names of Hephthalite rulers given in Firdausi’s *Shāh-nāme* are Iranian. Gem inscriptions and other evidence⁴ show that the official language of the ruling upper class of the Hephthalites in their Tokharistan territories was an East Iranian language.

Chinese sources do not agree on the origin of the Hephthalites. Some hold that they originated in Ch’e-shih, that is, from Turfan; others consider them to be ‘descendants of K’ang-chü’ in southern Kazakstan; still others postulate that they were descended from the Great Yüeh-chih. The Chinese writer Wei Chieh, who personally conversed with some Hephthalites, dejectedly observed:

However, the information has come from remote countries, and foreign languages are subject to corruption and misunderstanding. Moreover, it concerns matter of very ancient time. So we do not know what is certain. [In this way] it is impossible to decide [the origin of the Hephthalites].⁵

Information about the physical appearance and language of the Hephthalites also lacks precision. For example, Procopius of Caesarea (I, 3) writes:

Although the Hephthalites are a Hunnish people and are so called, they do not mix and associate with those Huns whom we know, for they do not share any frontier region with them and do not live close to them. . . They are not nomadic like the other Hunnish peoples, but have long since settled on fertile land. . . They alone of the Huns are white-skinned and are not ugly. They do not have the same way of life and do not live such bestial lives as the other Huns, but are ruled by one king and possess a legal state structure, observing justice among themselves and with their neighbours in no lesser measure than the Byzantines and Persians.

With regard to language (see also pages 148–9), the Chinese chronicle the *Peishih* reports that ‘Their language differs from that of the Juan-juan, Kao-ch’e and various Hu’ and the account in the *Wei shu* is similar. The reference to the Hu language testifies to the fact that the language of the Hephthalites was distinct from that of those Iranian-speaking people of Central Asia who were called Hu by the Chinese.

² Altheim, 1959, Vol. 1, pp. 41–3.

³ Bal^cami, 1869, p. 128.

⁴ Maenchen-Helfen, 1959, pp. 227–31; Livshits, 1969, pp. 64–75.

⁵ Enoki, 1959, p. 7.



FIG. 1. Afrasiab. Wall-painting. (Photo: © Vladimir Terebenin)

In the seventh century, after the destruction of the Hephthalite state, Tokharistan was visited by a Chinese pilgrim, Hsüan-tsang, who wrote of the Hephthalite population:

[Their] language and letters differ somewhat from those of other countries. The number of radical letters is twenty-five; by combining these they express all objects around them. Their writing is across the page, and they read left to right. Their literary records have increased gradually, and exceed those of [the people of] Su-le or Sogdiana.⁶

⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

This is a clear reference to a Greek-based script of Bactrian origin used in southern Central Asia and Afghanistan up to the eighth century.

In Middle Persian, Byzantine and Indian sources we find the designation ‘Red’ and ‘White’ Huns. This may reflect a division among the Hephthalites or a distinction between Hephthalites and Türks.⁷ This is also reflected in the mural art: for example, some of the envoys in the scene of the Hephthalite embassy in the Afrasiab palace are ruddy-faced, while others are pale (Fig. 1). These were possibly ethnolinguistic (less probably socio-economic) population groups. The total size of the Hephthalite population is unknown, but in Tokharistan alone there were 5–6,000 Hephthalite warriors – with their families, this suggests some 50,000 individuals, but there must have been considerable fluctuations during the period.

Political and military history

The political history of the Hephthalites can be deduced from Armenian, Arabic, Persian, Byzantine, Chinese and other sources. Under Yazdgird II (438–457) the north-eastern borders of the Sasanian Empire were under threat from Central Asian tribes. The fifth-century Armenian historian, Elishe Vardapet, who was a contemporary, reports that the emperor was obliged to do battle with the tribes of the Hephthalites from 442. The situation was so serious that Yazdgird even had to transfer his residence to the northern border. It has been suggested that this was also the time when the Hephthalites made their appearance.⁸ As early as 456, an embassy from the Hephthalites arrived in China.⁹

According to the Arab historian al-Tabari, Peroz, while still a prince, fled to the ‘country of the Haitals, or Hephthalites’ and asked the king to provide him with troops to ‘take possession of the kingdom of his father [Yazdgird II]’. Another source states that Peroz ‘was supported by the inhabitants of Tokharistan and the neighbouring regions’ and refers to ‘the people which conquered Tokharistan called Haital [that is Hephthalites]’.¹⁰ In the mid-fifth century the Hephthalites increased greatly in strength and Tokharistan, with the surrounding regions, came under their rule. According to Harmatta, ‘it is likely that the Hephthalites attacked the Transox[an]ian territory of the Kidarites in 466’ and at the same time they ‘took possession of the eastern part of Kusansahr, and then very soon they occupied also Balx [Balkh] from the Persians’.¹¹

⁷ Chavannes, 1903, pp. 229–33; Bailey, 1931, pp. 585–6; 1954, pp. 13–20.

⁸ Trever, 1954, pp. 136–7; Gafurov, 1972, p. 198.

⁹ Enoki, 1955, p. 234, Table.

¹⁰ Shmidt, 1958, pp. 447–8; Nöldeke, Tabari, 1973, pp. 117–19.

¹¹ Harmatta, 1969, p. 394.

In gratitude for their assistance, Peroz extended the power of the Hephthalites still further. In particular, he ceded to them the district of Taliqan.¹² But there were disagreements between the Central Asian tribes and the Sasanians, leading to conflict and wars. First, Peroz clashed with the Hephthalites, who are considered by some scholars to have taken advantage of the civil war in Mesopotamia to seize Balkh (Priscus of Panion, 35).¹³ There is, however, some doubt about this. What is known is that in the 460s or the 470s Peroz waged three wars against the Hephthalites. The first war ended in his being taken prisoner and later released for a ransom partly paid by the Byzantine emperor. The second war ended as ingloriously as the first: Peroz was defeated and was once more taken prisoner. He was forced to give assurances never again to oppose the Hephthalites and to send instructions that a huge ransom should be paid for him. Since the treasury was unable to send the ransom, Peroz left his son as hostage.

The Hephthalites had strong forces. Sources describe them as skilful warriors and their army as powerful. They were armed with clubs and the Chinese considered that they were excellent archers. According to other sources, their main weapon was the sword. Judging by their military operations, they probably possessed a strong cavalry force led by an *asbarobido* (cavalry commander).¹⁴

In Iran, according to Lazar of P'arp:

Even in time of peace the mere sight or mention of a Hephthalite terrified everybody, and there was no question of going to war openly against one, for everybody remembered all too clearly the calamities and defeats inflicted by the Hephthalites on the king of the Aryans and on the Persians.

Not only the common soldiers but also the dignitaries and military chiefs feared the Hephthalites. When Peroz set off on campaign, 'his troops went forward more like men condemned to death than warriors marching to war'. When news of the third campaign reached the king of the Hephthalites, he sent his representative to Peroz with this message: 'You concluded peace with me in writing, under seal, and you promised not to make war against me. We defined common frontiers not to be crossed with hostile intent by either party.'¹⁵ An important point to emerge from this text is that the Hephthalites appear not merely as a group of nomadic tribes but as a state formation, on an equal footing with Sasanian Iran and fully versed in statesmanship.

Al-Tabari's text is very similar in this respect, although he incorrectly calls these tribes Türks (instead of Hephthalites). According to his account (which, however, also contains

¹² Balcami, 1869, pp. 127–8.

¹³ Marshak, 1971, pp. 63–4.

¹⁴ Altheim, 1960, Vol. 2, p. 269.

¹⁵ Ter-Mkrtichyan, 1979, pp. 55–6.

some elements of legend), Peroz reached the tower which had been built by Bahram Gur (Bahram V, 420–438) on the border between the regions of Khurasan and the Hephthalites to prevent them crossing into Khurasan; this was in accordance with the pact concluded between the Hephthalites and the Persians (i.e. Sasanians) that neither party should violate the border. Peroz, for his part, had promised Akhshunvar, the king of the Hephthalites, that he would not go beyond their borders. Peroz had 50 elephants and 300 men harnessed to Bahram Gur's tower. They drew the tower along in front of him while he marched behind, declaring that in that way he was not breaking his pact with Akhshunvar.

The Hephthalite troops retreated, but then Akhshunvar ordered deep pits to be dug, lightly timbered over and topped with soil. These booby traps, laid in the path of the pursuing Sasanian army, played a decisive part, breaking its battle formation and ensnaring many soldiers. Peroz was killed and many of his retinue, including his daughter, were taken prisoner by the Hephthalites, who seized his treasure. One of Peroz' followers, called Sukhra, subsequently managed to retaliate and forced the Hephthalites to withdraw.¹⁶ A similar account is given by al-Dinawari.¹⁷

Following internecine conflict over the Sasanian throne, one of Peroz' sons, Kavad, fled to the Hephthalites. Having lived with great honour among them for four years, he married the daughter or sister of the Hephthalite king, who provided him with troops. Kavad seized the throne with these troops in 488, becoming king of Sasanian Iran.¹⁸ As a result of political and kinship ties, the Hephthalites subsequently took part in Kavad I's military campaigns and Hephthalite troops armed with cudgels were present at the siege of Edessa.¹⁹

As a result of internal events in Iran – the Mazdakite movement (see [Chapter 17](#), Part One) and the revolt of the nobility against the king – Kavad once more fled to the Hephthalites. The Hephthalite king agreed to provide him with 30,000 troops; in return, Kavad was obliged to make territorial concessions and in 498 he handed over Chaganiyan to his allies.²⁰ Iran had to pay tribute to the Hephthalites for many decades, from 484 until the middle of the sixth century. Part of the Sasanian coinage was countermarked with a Hephthalite sign, and these were the coins used for payment of the tribute.²¹ This situation continued into the early years of the reign of Khusrau I (531– 579).

¹⁶ Schmidt, 1958, p. 449; Nöldeke, Tabari, 1973, pp. 122–34.

¹⁷ See Altheim, 1960, Vol. 2, pp. 51–2.

¹⁸ Nöldeke, Tabari, 1973, pp. 135–7.

¹⁹ Pigulevskaya, 1941, p. 64.

²⁰ Schmidt, 1958, pp. 476–7.

²¹ Göbl, 1967, pp. 193–4; 1971, p. 70.

In the second half of the fifth century and the first half of the sixth, silver coins of Peroz (and imitations with various overstrikes) circulated in northern Tokharistan. The genuine Peroz drachms belong mainly to the time when some of those regions, particularly Chaganiyan (Shi-han-na in the Chinese sources), were still under the Sasanians. Peroz drachms were subsequently minted in Chaganiyan with Bactrian and Sogdian overstrikes, together with imitations of Peroz coinage with Bactrian legends. Many coins were issued under Khusrau I, particularly from the 540s onward. Coins were subsequently minted which were imitations with overstruck names and portraits of local Hephthalite leaders. This series is completed with the issue of a coin of the type of Khusrau I, but with the name of a local ruler.²²

The Hephthalites thus entered the historical arena in the mid-fifth century, apparently in eastern Tokharistan. By the end of the century they had taken possession of the whole of Tokharistan, including the Pamirs, and a considerable part of Afghanistan. At the same time, they seized much of East Turkestan. In 479 they subjugated the region of Turfan, and between 497 and 509 the region of Karashahr and what is today Urumchi. In 522 P'o-lo-men, the leader of the Juan-juan in an area to the north of Dunhuang, fled to the Hephthalites to seek their protection. Earlier, probably in the late fifth century, Kashgar and Khotan had come under the power of the Hephthalites, who subjugated practically the whole of East Turkestan. As Enoki has correctly pointed out, the Hephthalites reached the zenith of their power with their seizure in 509 of Sughd (the capital of Sogdiana), which then ceased sending embassies to China.

Conquests in Gandhara and northern India

The late fifth and early sixth centuries saw the start of Hephthalite raids on Gandhara and subsequently on the whole of northern India. In 477 the Kidarites in Gandhara had sent an embassy to China,²³ but the Chinese pilgrim Sung Yün, who visited Gandhara in 520, noted that the Hephthalites had conquered the country and set up their own ruler. 'Two generations then passed.'²⁴ On this basis, Marshall assumes that the invasion took place earlier (reckoning one generation to be 30 years: 520–60=460).²⁵

In the early second half of the fifth century the Hephthalites came into conflict with the Guptas, who had by then passed the zenith of their power and prosperity. According to the Junagadh rock inscription of c. 457, King Skandagupta won a victory over hostile kings

²² Rtveladze, 1983, pp. 74–5.

²³ Enoki, 1955, pp. 234–5; 1959, pp. 25–7.

²⁴ Yang Hsüan-chih, 1984, p. 235.

²⁵ Marshall, 1951, p. 75.

and over tribes which seem to have been Hephthalites (or Kidarites; see pages 123–4). Another inscription proclaims that he bore the title, ‘lord of a hundred kings’.²⁶ The initial attacks of the Hephthalites were thus repulsed, but at the price of stretching all the forces of the Gupta Empire.²⁷

Skandagupta was the last great ruler of that dynasty, reigning from *c.* 454 to *c.* 467.²⁸ The central power of the Gupta state subsequently declined, particularly in the last quarter of the fifth century under King Budhagupta,²⁹ the time at which the penetration of the Hephthalites into the subcontinent began. In the late fifth and early sixth centuries the Hephthalites in India came under the leadership of Toramana (see also [Chapter 7](#), Part One), described in one Indian inscription as the ‘renowned Toramana, the boundlessly famed ruler of the earth’. Launching an offensive from Panjab, he conquered the whole of western India and even Eran (in modern Madhya Pradesh). Numismatic evidence indicates that he ruled in Uttar Pradesh, Rajputana, Panjab and Kashmir.³⁰ His conquests brought with them the destruction of towns, villages and Buddhist monasteries, and the monasteries never recovered. Many local rulers acknowledged themselves to be subjects of Toramana.³¹

In the time of Toramana, the Hephthalites in India began to operate independently of the Central Asian branch, though the link between them does not seem to have been broken.³² According to the Gwalior inscription, Toramana’s son was called Mihirakula (in Jain sources, Caturmukha-Kalkin or Kalkiraja). He intensified his father’s efforts to conquer the whole of northern India, and in this he was highly successful.³³ Over a century later, the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang paid particular attention to this ruler’s life and activities in the account of his travels. He writes of Mihirakula: ‘He was of quick talent and naturally brave. He subdued all the neighbouring provinces without exception.’³⁴

The account of Cosmas Indicopleustes (writing in the early sixth century) confirms that the Hephthalites in India reached the zenith of their power under Mihirakula, with their capital at Sakala (modern Sialkot). Hsüan-tsang recounts the fate of Mihirakula: he was ultimately opposed by the Gupta ruler Baladitya, who had previously been paying him tribute (this is assumed to have been Narasimhagupta I).³⁵ Baladitya’s opposition stemmed

²⁶ Fleet, 1888, pp. 14–15.

²⁷ Altekar and Majumdar, 1954, pp. 163–4; Majumdar, 1954, pp. 26–7. Concerning the Huns in Gupta inscriptions, see Sharma, 1978, pp. 133–4; Biswas, 1973.

²⁸ Gupta, 1974, pp. 329–38; cf. Singh and Bannerji, 1954, p. 89.

²⁹ Bongard-Levin and Il’in, 1969, p. 513.

³⁰ Majumdar, 1954, p. 35.

³¹ Fleet, 1888, pp. 88, 159.

³² Harmatta, 1969, pp. 400–1.

³³ Pathak, 1917, pp. 215–16; Gupta, 1974, pp. 372–7.

³⁴ Beal, 1969, p. 167.

³⁵ See Gupta, 1974, pp. 364–6.

from the atrocities perpetrated by the Hephthalite leader and the destruction of Buddhist buildings, which is also reported in the Kashmir chronicle the *Rājataranṅiṇī* and in Jain sources.

According to Hsüan-tsang, Mihirakula was taken prisoner by Baladitya, but was subsequently released. Power over the Hephthalite tribes had meanwhile been seized by Mihirakula's brother and Mihirakula himself set off for Kashmir, where the king received him with honour. A few years later, Mihirakula incited the townspeople of Kashmir to revolt against their king and seized power there. He then went westwards and occupied Gandhara, where he killed many of the inhabitants and destroyed the Buddhist shrines, only to die shortly afterwards.³⁶ While the details of this account by Hsüan-tsang may be unhistorical, the broad outline is worthy of note.

In assembling the events of Mihirakula's life, the *Rājataranṅiṇī* asserts that he was a powerful king who ruled Kashmir and Gandhara and even (this is clearly an exaggeration) conquered southern India and Ceylon. Cosmas Indicopleustes calls him 'king of India', though he mentions that the possessions of the Huns in India (i.e. Hunas) were divided from the other Indian kingdoms by the mighty River Phison (Indus).

Persecution of the local population, combined with religious intolerance, set the local Indian population against the Hephthalites and deprived them of support. At the same time, the difficulties facing the Hephthalites of Central Asia in their struggle against the Türks, who utterly defeated them, deprived the Hephthalites in India of their Central Asian base, of the 'flow of fresh forces and support, and this led to their decline'.³⁷ Although small communities and even principalities of Hephthalites survived in India after the middle of the sixth century, they did not wield any significant political influence.

The Hephthalites of Central Asia

By the middle of the sixth century, the Hephthalites of Central Asia found themselves squeezed between Sasanian Iran, whose power had increased tremendously under Khusrau I, and the Türks, who had conquered much of the north-east of Central Asia. The opponents of the Hephthalites entered into diplomatic negotiations with one another, but when the *kaghan* of the Türks dispatched ambassadors to Iran, they were killed in Hephthalite territory at the command of the Hephthalite king. The *kaghan* moved his forces and seized Chach (modern Tashkent) and continued to the Syr Darya (Jaxartes). The forces of the Hephthalites gathered in the region of Bukhara, towards which Hephthalite detachments

³⁶ Beal, 1969, pp. 169–72.

³⁷ Gafurov, 1972, p. 201; see also Majumdar, 1954, p. 39.

marched from Termez, southern Tajikistan and even the Pamirs. An eight-day battle was fought in the Bukhara area, in the course of which the Hephthalites were routed. Their troops fled south and there elected a new king, Faganish (or Afganish), but the south of Central Asia had been occupied by Sasanian troops and the new Hephthalite ruler acknowledged the supremacy of Khusrau I (see also [Chapter 7](#)). This marked the end of the Hephthalite state in Central Asia. (These events took place in the period 560– 563.)³⁸

Central Asia was devastated as a result of this struggle, whereupon relations between the allies (Türks and Sasanians) became strained. This worked to the advantage of the Hephthalites: individual semi-independent Hephthalite principalities continued to exist in the Zerafshan valley, paying tribute to the Türks (Menander, fragment 18). The situation was similar in the south, except that here the Hephthalites paid tribute to the Sasanians. Khusrau I found a pretext to cross the Amu Darya (Oxus). Power over the littoral of the Amu Darya later passed to the Türks, who then occupied all the territory of Afghanistan. Small Hephthalite principalities continued to exist in southern Tajikistan and Afghanistan for a long time; some of them (in particular Kabul) remained independent.³⁹

According to Gafurov:

The Hephthalites thus established a huge state structure even greater in geographic extent than that of the Kushans, but at the same time it was more loosely-knit and more unstable. They succeeded both in halting the armies of Sasanian Iran in the east and in inflicting a shattering defeat on the Sasanian kings. Hephthalite rulers even settled succession claims to the title of *shahanshah* of Iran, while regular payment of tribute to them was a major concern for many Iranian governments. In conclusion, the Hephthalites played an important part in the ethnogenesis of the peoples of India, Afghanistan and, in particular, Central Asia.⁴⁰

Social structure and administration

Although some evidence remains of the society of the Hephthalites, their customs and ways of living, the information is extremely contradictory. According to Procopius, the Hephthalites had ‘since time immemorial’ lived a settled life, ‘were ruled by one king’ and ‘had a state system based on law’. A Türk mission reported to Byzantium that the Hephthalites were ‘a tribe which dwelt in towns’ (see also pages 149–50); indeed, after their victory over the Hephthalites, the Türks became ‘the masters of their towns’ (Menander, fragment 18). Theophanes Homologétés (fragment 3) states that after their victory over the Iranians, the Hephthalites became the masters of the towns and ports previously held by their

³⁸ Mohl, 1868, pp. 306–16; Schmidt, 1958, p. 453; Nöldeke, Tabari, 1973, pp. 158–9; Moravcsik, 1958, pp. 275–6; Grignaschi, 1980.

³⁹ Harmatta, 1969, p. 402.

⁴⁰ Gafurov, 1972, p. 202.

enemy.⁴¹ Chinese chronicles and travellers, however, provide a different picture. For example, according to the *Sui shu* [Dynastic Annals of the Sui], the *Pei-shih* and other sources, in the land of the Hephthalites there were ‘neither cities and towns nor fixed residence of their king’.⁴² Sung Yün reported in 518 that, in the land of the Hephthalites:

there were no walled cities for residences; [the area] was kept in good order by a patrolling army. The people lived in felt [tents], moving from one place to another in pursuit of water and pasture lands: they moved to cooler areas in summer and warm regions in winter. The natives were simple rustic folk, unversed in writing the rites or moral precepts.⁴³

Even the Chinese sources do not agree, however. Thus, according to the *Chou shu* [History of the Chou Dynasty] (15a), ‘it [the land of the Hephthalites] has its capital in the walled city of Pa-ti-yen’, a name meaning something like ‘the walled city in which the king resides’.⁴⁴ Hsüan-tsang’s report on the country of Hsi-mo-ta-lo (a Sanskritized form of the ethnonym, Heptal) helps to resolve these conflicting accounts. According to the Chinese pilgrim, after their ancestors had established a strong state and subjugated their neighbours, the Hephthalites ‘migrated and scattered in foreign countries where they rule scores of strongly walled cities and towns with so many chiefs. They [also] live in tents of felt and remove from one place to another.’⁴⁵

The following explanation may be advanced for all the differing accounts. The core of the Hephthalite population was originally nomadic or semi-nomadic but later, after seizing control of vast regions with towns and fortresses, the Hephthalite élite, like other conquering nomads (for example, the Karakhanids and the Seljuks), began to settle in towns and were followed by other groups from the newly arrived non-urban population. The sources simply mention isolated episodes in this complex story – hence the discrepancies.

One of the most difficult questions concerns the Hephthalites’ social structure. From the description of their funeral rites in the Chinese chronicles (see pages 147–8), we learn that there were both rich and poor Hephthalites and that their rites were completely different.⁴⁶ Consequently, it was a class society with marked social and property differentiation. In his description of the luxurious dwelling of the Hephthalite king with his golden throne, and the magnificent clothes of the king and queen inlaid with gold and precious stones, Sung Yün notes that ‘there were differences, it was observed, between the nobleman and

⁴¹ For a detailed analysis of Byzantine sources, see Moravcsik, 1958.

⁴² Enoki, 1959, p. 10.

⁴³ The traveller, of course, meant Chinese writing, rites and moral precepts. See Yang Hsüanchih, 1984, p. 225.

⁴⁴ Miller, 1959, p. 12.

⁴⁵ Enoki, 1959, p. 35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

commoners'. He continues: 'For the people's clothing and ornaments, there was nothing but felt.'⁴⁷

At the apex of Hephthalite society was the king, whose residence was a fortified town.⁴⁸ According to Byzantine sources, the Hephthalites 'were ruled by one king'. The legends on coins sometimes contain the terms *XΔHO* and *XOΑΔHO* (sovereign) and the expression 'great sovereign' is occasionally encountered.⁴⁹ Names of individual monarchs are known (some from historical accounts). Thus, according to Firdausi, the Hephthalites were led by a king called Gatfar during their struggle against the Türks, which ended in their defeat at the battle near Bukhara (see page 143 above). It is possible that the kings were chosen in peacetime as well as in exceptional circumstances but it is not known who chose them, perhaps the élite. One Chinese account states that the throne of the Hephthalites 'was not transmitted by inheritance but awarded to the most capable kinsman'.⁵⁰

The Hephthalite state covered a huge territory and the regions forming it were dependent upon the central authority to varying degrees. According to Sung Yün, 'the state received tribute from a number of countries. . . altogether delegates from more than forty countries came to pay tribute and offer congratulations on appropriate occasions'.⁵¹ According to another source, countries 'large and small, altogether more than twenty, are all subject to it [the Hephthalite state]'.⁵²

There was an administrative machinery at both central and regional levels. During the 550s the Hephthalite king had an adviser (minister?) by the name of Katulf (Menander, fragment 10). Such titles as *oazorko*, *fromalaro*, *hazaroxto* and *asbarobido* (commander of the cavalry) are known from inscriptions on gemstones.⁵³ The state system was a complex amalgam of institutions originating in Hephthalite society and frequently going back to ancestral tribal arrangements, as well as institutions which were native to the conquered regions. Money was minted and we know of many series of coins. Excellent classificatory and typological works have been published,⁵⁴ but insufficient use has been made of these coins as a historical source.

Central control in the Hephthalite state was weak and local dynasties continued to rule in a number of regions. Such was the case in Chaganiyan, on the upper and middle reaches of the Surkhan Darya. One of the rulers of this dynasty was Faganish (see page 143

⁴⁷ Yang Hsüan-chih, 1984, pp. 224–6.

⁴⁸ Miller, 1959, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Livshits, 1969, pp. 69–71.

⁵⁰ Bichurin, 1950, p. 269.

⁵¹ Yang Hsüan-chih, 1984, p. 225.

⁵² Miller, 1959, p. 21.

⁵³ Livshits, 1969, pp. 66–7.

⁵⁴ Göbl, 1967.

above), whose name is known from written sources; the names of other rulers appear on Chaganiyan-Hephthalite coins. The name of another Chaganiyan ruler, Turantash, appears on a long inscription at Afrasiab. In the first quarter of the eighth century, Chaganiyan was ruled by Tish, the ‘One-Eyed’ (in the Sogdian language, Tish is the name of the star Sirius). The Manichaean religion was widespread in Chaganiyan together with Buddhism.⁵⁵

Another powerful domain, Khuttal (Kou-tou or Kou-tou-lo in the Chinese sources), was also associated with the Hephthalites. It was located in the basin of the River Kyzyl-su, but at times also included the basin of the River Vakhsh. Khuttal also had a local dynasty with an established order of succession to the throne, according to Arabic sources. The rulers took the Iranian title of *Khuttal-shah* or *sher-i Khuttal*. The Arabs referred to them as *mulūk* (pl. of *mālik*, king).⁵⁶ In the southern part of Central Asia and northern Afghanistan, in the region known as Bactria under the Achaemenids and later as Tokharistan (T’ou-ho-lo or Tou-ho-lo in Chinese sources from 383), there were some 30 dominions in the sixth to the seventh century with their own rulers, some of whom were of Hephthalite extraction.

Religious life and polyandry

Information about the religion of the Hephthalites is provided by the Chinese sources. Sung Yün reports that in Tokharistan ‘the majority of them do not believe in Buddhism. Most of them worship *wai-shên* or “foreign gods”.’ He makes almost identical remarks about the Hephthalites of Gandhara, saying that they honour *kui-shên* (demons). The manuscripts of the *Liang shu* (Book 54) contain important evidence: ‘[the Hephthalites] worship *T’ien-shên* or [the] heaven god and *Huo-shên* or [the] fire god. Every morning they first go outside [of their tents] and pray to [the] gods and then take breakfast.’ For the Chinese observer, the heaven god and the fire god were evidently foreign gods. We have no evidence of the specific content of these religious beliefs but it is quite possible that they belonged to the Iranian (or Indo-Iranian) group.⁵⁷

Although Sung Yün states that the Hephthalites did not believe in Buddhism, Buddhist religious establishments flourished in Tokharistan and other areas. In India, however, the Hephthalites showed intolerance towards Buddhist religious establishments. It may be supposed that the beliefs of the local subject populations – including Buddhism – gradually began to gain ground among the Hephthalites. Various forms of Zoroastrian beliefs were widespread in Central Asia and northern and western Afghanistan in competition

⁵⁵ Rtveldadze, 1973; Bosworth, 1981.

⁵⁶ Marquart, 1901, p. 30; Belenitskiy, 1950, p. 115.

⁵⁷ Enoki, 1959, pp. 45–9.

with Buddhism. There were also many adherents of Hindu beliefs in Afghanistan and in Tokharistan. Lastly, Manichaeism had taken firm root and Christianity was spreading.

Chinese sources provide the following account of the funeral rites mentioned above: ‘if a man dies, a wealthy family will pile up stones to form a house [to keep the corpse]; a poor family will dig the ground for burial. The articles of everyday use are buried with the dead.’ Another source describes a third type of burial: ‘In burying the dead, the coffin is laid in a wooden case. When a parent dies, the child will cut off one of his ears.’⁵⁸ It is known, however, that various types of burial structure, including small, surface-level stone houses, pit graves and wooden coffins, were employed at the same period in Ferghana; hence the hypothesis that these Chinese accounts are actually descriptions of life in Ferghana.⁵⁹

Polyandry was the Hephthalites’ most noteworthy social custom. Brothers had one wife in common and the children were considered as belonging to the oldest brother. The number of ‘horns’ on a married woman’s headdress corresponded to the number of her husbands. This custom was practised in ancient times among the Central Asian Saka people, the Massagetae (Herodotus, I, 216); in medieval Afghanistan (according to al-Biruni); and among present-day Tibetans.⁶⁰

Language and scripts

Two accounts of the Hephthalite language have been quoted above, but they are not very informative. Some scholars believe that the Hephthalites spoke a Turkic language while others affirm that their language belonged to the East Iranian group. Although the reading of Hephthalite coins and gemstones is still the subject of much controversy, an interpretation of the names and titles appearing on them, and of the names of Hephthalite rulers in Firdausi’s *Shāh-nāme*, is possible from East Iranian languages. This does not, however, constitute a conclusive argument. At present it can only be asserted that Bactrian enjoyed the status of an official language in the Hephthalite domains in Tokharistan.⁶¹

Late Bactrian script is a development of Bactrian script, which was itself an adapted form of the Greek alphabet. Hephthalite script is typically semicursive or cursive and much of it is difficult (or impossible) to read. Examples of the Hephthalite written language have been discovered in East Turkestan, Central Asia, Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. However, these are only insignificant vestiges of the large quantity of written material

⁵⁸ Enoki, 1959, pp. 49–50.

⁵⁹ Litvinsky, 1976, p. 56.

⁶⁰ For details, see Enoki, 1959, pp. 51–6.

⁶¹ Livshits, 1969, p. 67.

which, if we are to believe Hsüan-tsang, was to be found in the regions occupied by the Hephthalites and particularly in Tokharistan.⁶²

In the vast region controlled by the Hephthalites, people spoke various languages, including Iranian (Middle Iranian, especially Bactrian, but also Sogdian and Middle Persian, or Pahlavi), Indian tongues and others of which we have no written records. Various scripts were also in use, particularly Bactrian, Pahlavi, Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī.

Towns

The Hephthalite economy was composed of three sectors: urban, settled agricultural and nomadic. Urban settlements did not outnumber rural settlements, yet the economic, political, religious and cultural role of the towns was far more important than that of the villages. Although very little is known about the towns during the fifth and sixth centuries, it has been established that one of the largest towns was Balkh, where exploratory excavations have been undertaken. Hsüan-tsang (writing in 629) describes Po-ho (Balkh) as the Hephthalite capital, with a circumference of approximately 20 *li*. He continues: 'This city, though well [strongly] fortified, is thinly populated.' Balkh had about 100 Buddhist *vihāras* (monasteries) and some 3,000 monks. Outside the town was a large Buddhist monastery, later known as Naubahar.⁶³ Some idea of what Balkh looked like in the fifth and sixth centuries may be obtained from the descriptions of Arab authors,⁶⁴ but their accounts all date from a later period. Unfortunately, little archaeological work has been carried out on Balkh.⁶⁵

Of the same size as Balkh was the early medieval town of Termez which, according to Hsüan-tsang, lay on an east-west axis and had a circumference of about 20 *li*. Termez had some 10 *saṅghārāmas* (monasteries) and perhaps 1,000 monks.⁶⁶ Excavations have been conducted there but little evidence has been found of the town between the fifth and the seventh century. It consisted of a rectangular *shahristan*, or town (roughly 10 ha in area), and a large suburb enclosed by a wall. The total area was approximately 70 ha and the entire town was probably surrounded by a wall about 6 km long. It is likely that there was also a citadel.⁶⁷

⁶² Steblin-Kamenskiy, 1981.

⁶³ Beal, 1969, pp. 43–6; cf. Hui-li, 1959, pp. 50–2.

⁶⁴ Schwarz, 1933, pp. 434–43.

⁶⁵ See Le Berre and Schlumberger, 1964; Young, 1955.

⁶⁶ Beal, 1969, Vol. 1, pp. 38–9.

⁶⁷ Shishkin, 1940, pp. 150–1; Belenitskiy et al., 1973, pp. 177–8.

According to Hsüan-tsang, the capital of Chaganiyan was half the size of Termez and Balkh in terms of its circumference (10 *li*) and had five Buddhist monasteries.⁶⁸ It has been identified with the site of Budrach, which even in Kushan times had an area of 20 ha and at the period under consideration occupied a much greater area than the Kushan town. The expanded town had a rectangular citadel, a fortified *shahristan* with an area of over 50 ha and, beyond that, a large suburban area with farms, forts and religious edifices.⁶⁹

The capitals of other regional domains were roughly similar to or larger than the capital of Chaganiyan. The capital of the province of Hu-sha (or Vakhsh) had a circumference of 16–17 *li*⁷⁰ and is the site of Kafyr-kala in the Vakhsh valley. It has a walled citadel (measuring 360×360(m) in one corner of the rectangular town, which is, like the citadel, surrounded by a wall with towers. The citadel contained the palace of the ruler (see below). The town was divided in half by a central thoroughfare on which stood dwellings, and religious and commercial buildings. Outside the town fortifications lay extensive suburbs.⁷¹ There were also medium- and small-sized towns such as Kala-i Kafirnigan.⁷²

Architecture

An idea of the architecture of Tokharistan at the time of the Hephthalites is provided by the palace (KF-II period) in the citadel of Kafyr-kala (see [Chapter 7](#)). It had a square plan (70×70 m) and was encircled by two walls, a main inner wall and a secondary outer one (*proteikhos*). Strong rectangular towers were located at the corners, and in the centre of the wall stood semi-circular projecting towers. Between the corner towers and the projecting towers were recessed bays with arches containing false arrow slits. The passages running along the protective walls had a defensive function.

In the courtyard of the citadel stood the palace buildings. The palace was laid out around a central rectangular hall with an area of 200 sq. m and was surrounded by smaller halls and domestic buildings. In the north-west corner stood a circular hall (8 m in diameter) with a corbelled cupola. This hall was entered from the east side. In the south-east corner was a Buddhist *vihāra*, a square sanctuary whose walls were decorated with polychrome murals depicting the Buddha and other Buddhist motifs. Buildings serving various purposes were located on the square of the *shahristan*. One complex has been excavated consisting of a central rectangular hall with a bay flanked by columns in the rear wall, and by subsidiary

⁶⁸ Beal, 1969, Vol. 1, p. 39.

⁶⁹ Rtveladze, 1983.

⁷⁰ Beal, 1969, Vol. 1, p. 40.

⁷¹ Litvinsky and Solov'ev, 1985.

⁷² Litvinsky, 1981.

rooms.⁷³ Whereas the palace had only one storey, there were also two-storey buildings such as Kuëv-kurgan near Termez which, on the second floor, had a frieze of painted statues.

Some of the Buddhist buildings were extremely large, such as the ‘New *Saṅghārāma*’ near Balkh, which contained a magnificent statue of the Buddha in a spacious room. Both the statue and the room were decorated with rare and precious substances. There was also a renowned statue of the deity Vaishravana Deva. ‘To the north of the convent is a stupa, in height about 200 feet [61 m], which is covered with a plaster hard as the diamond, and ornamented with a variety of precious substances.’⁷⁴ The tenth-century Arab geographer Ibn al-Faqih calls the main building *al-asbat*: the diameter and height of the stupa were said to be 100 cubits (about 35 m). It was surrounded by porticoes and contained 360 separate rooms.

The principal building materials were large, rectangular, unbaked bricks and large *pakhsa* blocks (made of clay mixed with finely chopped straw). The walls were often composite, consisting of *pakhsa* blocks with intervening layers of brick, or else the lower part was made of *pakhsa* and the upper part of brick. Little use was made of baked brick but wood (for columns, and so on) was often employed. The roofs were either flat (often supported by columns) or arched and domed. The arches were faced with sloping segments while the domes were either corbelled (and formed of a horizontal brick overhang) or supported by squinches.⁷⁵ In areas south of the Hindu Kush mountains such as Kapisa and Gandhara, the main building material was stone.

Art and crafts

Several murals at Dilberjin near Balkh date from the fifth to the seventh century. In the centre of one of these murals is a large female figure sitting on a throne with her knees wide apart. In her left hand she holds a shield, and on her head is an intricate headdress reminiscent of a helmet. Hornlike projections rise above her shoulders and behind her head is a halo. She has ornaments on her neck and hands; a cloak is thrown over one shoulder and she is wearing a belt round her clothing. Two smaller figures, one very small, are moving from the sides towards the central figure. Other murals feature a procession of men standing *en face*, some armed with daggers. They are dressed in narrow kaftans with turned-down flaps on the right-hand side. A distinctive feature of these figures is their position ‘on tiptoes’. Another scene shows a feast with sitting or semi-reclining figures

⁷³ Litvinsky and Solov’ev, 1985, pp. 8–95.

⁷⁴ Beal, 1969, Vol. 1, pp. 44–8.

⁷⁵ Litvinsky and Solov’ev, 1985, pp. 49–85; Pugachenkova, 1976, pp. 157–62.

holding goblets in their hands. There are also elaborate compositions whose significance is not yet clear.⁷⁶ A comparison between some of the Dilberjin paintings and those at Kyzyl (see illustrations in [Chapter 11](#)), particularly ‘the cave of the 16 swordsmen’ and ‘the cave with the picture of Maya’, demonstrates the link between them and enables us to date these Dilberjin paintings to the fifth or early sixth century.⁷⁷

The remarkable cycle of paintings at Balalyk-tepe depicting a feast dates to the end of the sixth or beginning of the seventh century. Great lords are seated with beautiful ladies, drinking wine from golden goblets while servants hold large umbrellas over them. The garments and ornaments of the figures at Balalyk-tepe are similar to those of the figures at Dilberjin.⁷⁸



FIG. 2. Bamiyan. Panoramic view of the complex. (Photo: © Andrea Bruno.)

⁷⁶ Kruglikova, 1976; 1979; see also Buriy, 1979.

⁷⁷ Litvinsky and Solov'ev, 1985, p. 139.

⁷⁸ Al'baum, 1960; on the dating, see Antonini, 1972, pp. 71–7; Belenitskiy and Marshak, 1979, p. 35.



FIG. 3. Bamiyan. View of the stone cliff. (Photo: © Andrea Bruno.)

An enormous quantity of artistic and architectural remains have been preserved in central and south-eastern Afghanistan, amongst which are the objects found at the world-famous complex in Bamiyan (Figs. 2 and 3). There, in a mountain valley, lived a population whose customs, literature and coinage, according to Beal, ‘are the same as those of the Tokharistan country. Their language is a little different, but in point of personal appearance they closely resemble each other.’⁷⁹

It was at Bamiyan that Hsüan-tsang saw gigantic standing figures of the Buddha and 10 Buddhist establishments with 1,000 monks. They belonged to the Hinayana and the Lokottaravadin schools. The Chinese traveller was also struck by the size of the figure of the Buddha reclining in Nirvana. Two huge standing figures of the Buddha carved in the stone cliff have been preserved, one 38 m in height (Fig. 4), the other 53 m (Figs. 5–7). At a distance of some 1,800 m, the cliff is pierced at different levels by Buddhist cave edifices (of which some 750 remain) in which splendid paintings (Figs. 8–11), mainly with

⁷⁹ Beal, 1969, Vol. 1, p. 50.



FIG. 4. Bamiyan. Figure of the 38-m-high Buddha and cave edifices.

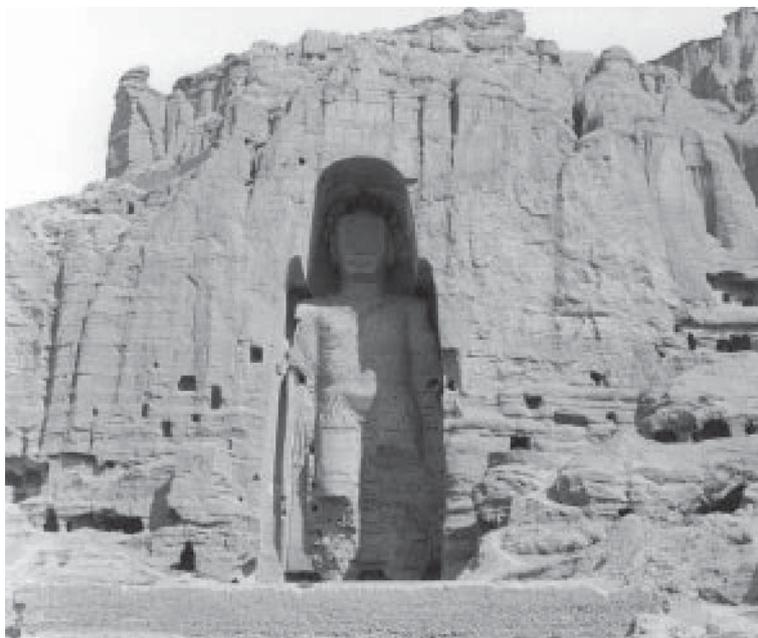


FIG. 5. Bamiyan. Figure of the 53-m-high Buddha. (Photos: © Andrea Bruno.)



FIG. 6. Bamiyan. Close-up view of the highest Buddha. (Photo: © UNESCO/A. Lézine.)

Buddhist motifs, remarkable high reliefs, and so on (Figs. 12–14), have been preserved. The entire complex dates from between the third and the seventh century. The large figure of the Buddha is probably linked to the Hephthalite period.

Also dating from that period is an entire series of works of art, particularly from Balalyktepe and Kyzyl, in which Indian, Sasanian and Central Asian influences can be traced. Also worthy of mention are the complexes at nearby Kakrak (Figs. 15 and 16) and, much further



FIG. 7. Bamiyan. Close-up view of the drapery on the highest Buddha. (Photo: © Andrea Bruno.)

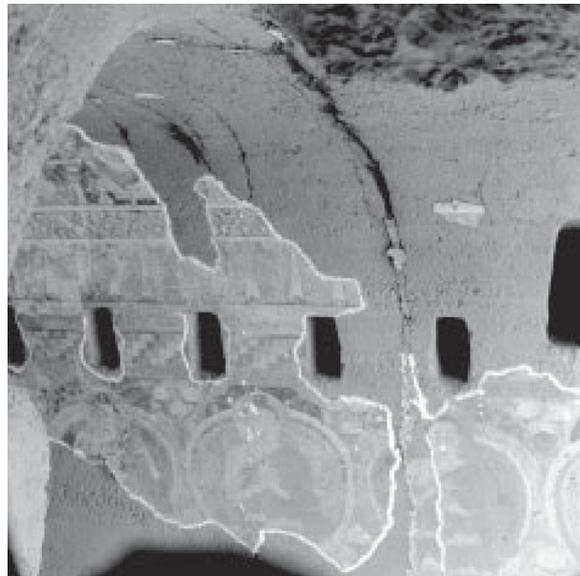


FIG. 8. Bamiyan. Detail of the painted decoration in the cave of the highest Buddha. (Photo: © Andrea Bruno.)



FIG. 9. Bamiyan. Detail of the painted decoration in the cave of the highest Buddha. (Photo: © Andrea Bruno.)



FIG. 10. Detail of a wall-painting. Musée Guimet, Paris. Photo: © R.M.N./© Ravaux.



FIG. 11. Bamiyan. Wall-painting. Woman musician. Photo: © R.M.N./© Droits réservés.



FIG. 12. Bamiyan. Detail of a relief *laternendeke* from cave 5. Musée Guimet, Paris. Photo: © R.M.N./© Droits réservés.



FIG. 13. Bamiyan. Interior *laternendeke* decoration from a cave. (Photo: © Andrea Bruno.)



FIG. 14. Bamiyan. Interior *laternendeke* decoration from a cave. (Photo: © Andrea Bruno.)



FIG. 15. Kakrak. Wall-painting from the ceiling of a cave. Musée Guimet, Paris. Photo: © R.M.N./© Richard Lambert.



FIG. 16. Kakrak. Statue of a Buddha. (Photo: © Andrea Bruno.)

off, at Dukhtar-i Nushirvan, and their paintings.⁸⁰ Huge sculptures of the seated Buddha and Buddha in Nirvana have been excavated at the vast Buddhist monastery of Tepe Sardar in Ghazni, where the central stupa and many surrounding votive stupas and places of worship have been unearthed.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Godard and Hackin, 1928; Hackin and Carl, 1933; Rowland, 1946; Tarzi, 1977; Higuchi, 1983–4, Vols. 1–3; Kuwayama, 1987; Klimburg, 1987.

⁸¹ Taddei, 1968; 1974.



FIG. 17. Chilek. Decorated silver bowl. (Photo: © Vladimir Terebenin.)



FIG. 18. Chilek. Decorated silver bowl. (Photo: © Vladimir Terebenin.)

Alongside monumental art, 'chamber arts' such as toreutics and the modelling of figurines were highly developed during the Hephthalite period. In India and Tokharistan, toreutic artists produced fine work, including silver (sometimes silver gilt) bowls depicting nude and semi-nude women: for example, dancers with scarves over their heads hanging down to their thighs at a royal feast, where the central element in the composition is the bust-length image of a king that resembles the portraits of kings on Hephthalite coins (see the Chilek bowl: [Figs. 17 and 18](#)). Episodes from the hunt are depicted on a bowl from Swat. The entire scene is executed with panache: horses race in a frenzied gallop; hunters and their prey are not only shown in movement but with complex foreshortening; and some episodes express the authentic drama of a real hunt.⁸²

The modelling of figurines also achieved a high level. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, this art form was represented by appliqué work in the shape of human busts under the handles of vessels and, in later examples, under the spouts (Ak-tepe II, Tutkaul, and so on). It sometimes took the form of entire scenes pressed out of a mould and applied to the walls of large vessels or, at other times, separate ceramic tiles with impressed images.⁸³

⁸² Dalton, 1964, pp. 53–5, 58–9, Pl. XXIX–XXXIII; Marshak, 1986, pp. 29–31, [Figs. 11–13](#); Yakubov, 1985; Pugachenkova, 1987.

⁸³ Litvinsky and Solov'ev, 1985; Sedov, 1987, pp. 103–5.