

## **The Hunnic Dilemma: Between Identity and Environmental-Economic Crises**

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### **Abstract**

*The presence of the Huns between Central Asia and the North-Western sections of the Indian subcontinent between the late IV and the VI centuries AD has often been a point of discussion amongst scholars. This article aims to gather the research results of various academic authors, archaeological findings and some written primary sources to give the reader a summary of the information currently available on the subject, along with a few insights by the author. The identity, presence and impact of the Huns in the above-mentioned areas are the main focuses of this article.*

**Keywords:** Huns, Huna, Identity, LALIA

The second half of the IV century AD was a period marked by significant migratory movements in the Eurasian steppes with an East-to-West axis. The Huns are an exemplary case of this phenomenon: understanding their identity and their movements is a difficult endeavour due to the scarcity (or complete absence) of archaeological findings, numismatic evidence, and written records ascribable to them. The issue of identification is a *topos* of studies concerning the Eurasian steppe peoples, especially ones from the I millennium BC and the I millennium AD. Indeed, they primarily used perishable materials which did not last to our current day, and their culture was mostly based on oral traditions; moreover, they were ethnically heterogeneous: “Dans la steppe, la langue et le sang important peu” (La Vaissière 2005). A study of written records left by the peoples the Huns encountered and fought against is of fundamental importance, along with further developments of archaeological discoveries.

Many authors in a geographically broad field recount of a nomadic entity which seems to have appeared in the second half of the IV century AD. All these writers refer to this group in relatively similar phonetic forms: Οὐννοι or Χιονίται in Byzantine/Eastern Roman sources, *Xiyon* in Persian sources, *Xwn* amongst the Sogdians, *Huna* in India, and *Xiongnu*

in Chinese texts<sup>1</sup>. This last term had already been used in China in the III-II c. BC to refer to a confederation of nomadic peoples which had come into conflict with the Han dynasty in many instances. La Vaissière has proposed a plausible continuity between this entity and the Huns of the IV c.: through a thorough analysis of Chinese sources and a discussion on some of his colleagues' positions on the matter, he suggests that the Huns originated from a unitary migration which began approximately in 360 AD from the Altai mountains, where the remnants of the Xiongnu resided; consequently, the Volga Huns, as well as the so-called "Iranic Huns", would have been branches of this initial movement (La Vaissière 2003, 2005). Ammianus Marcellinus reports in his late IV c. account that a group called *Chionitae* were present among Shapur's forces at the siege of Amida in 359 AD (Hamilton 1986). It is not possible, though, to determine a clear ethnic identity of this people, partly due to the absence of relevant archaeological findings; an exception to this could be the discovery of xiongnu cauldrons and their imitations in Central Asia and Hungary, which represent a continuity of specific ritual practices (La Vaissière 2003). La Vaissière does not in any way take into consideration another important factor: the *elongated skulls* problem. Examples of such cranial deformations have been found in Hunnic burials in Hungary, and could be inferred from Ammianus Marcellinus' account<sup>2</sup>:

"They have squat bodies, strong limbs, and thick necks, and are so prodigiously ugly and bent that they might be two-legged animals, or the figures crudely carved from stumps which are seen on the parapets of

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<sup>1</sup> Written sources are also a possible point of confusion in the identification process. The *Weishu* and its treatment of the Kidarites is a fine example of this issue: "At the same time the *Weishu* 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 "Kuśāhśāh," 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 Purusapura [Peshawar] . . . Kidara had been driven away by the Xiongnu and fled westwards, and later made his son assume the defensive" (transl. 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 Tukharistān 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 *Hanshu*." (Grenet 2005).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that Ammianus Marcellinus gives a biased depiction of the Volga Huns.

bridges. Still, their shape, however disagreeable, is human.” (Hamilton 1986)

The rulers depicted on Alchon coinage all possess this same peculiar feature. This is not the same on Kidarite coins, and this brings forth the question of whether it was a tradition of certain clans or élites or whether the Kidarites were not displaying these features because, as it will be explained below, they were imitating previous coin models. The Hephthalites pose the same problem: Procopius describes them as “those who have white bodies and countenances which are not ugly” (Dewing 1914); this might suggest an intermingling between the Hephthalites and the local Bactrian population or could point to the Hephthalite’s origin as a previously existing Iranian nomadic people integrated into the “Hunnic” category. These observations, though, remain only conjectures.

The Iranian Huns, having emerged from these movements, have brought a succession of dynasties between the lands north of the Hindu Kush and Northwestern India. Traditionally, the clans are placed in the following sequence: Kidarites<sup>3</sup>, Alchons, Hephthalites and Nezaks. However, using this method can be misleading in certain cases, even when one looks at the internal successions of a single dynasty. The case of the Alchons<sup>4</sup> is emblematic if we take into consideration their monetary production and the Brahmi inscription on a copper scroll of Talakan/Talagana<sup>5</sup>, published in 2006: Vondrovec points out the presence of the names of four Alchon kings in the inscription, kings who have already been identified on various coins. This discovery makes it plausible to assume that there was a contemporary lordship of Khingila, Toramana, Mehama and Javukha (Vondrovec 2008, Bakker 2020b): before this finding, scholars would usually place them in a chronological sequence. The location of the scroll in Talakan/Talagana has been questioned by La Vaissière and Hans Bakker (Bakker 2018): a more proper location of the scroll and the Buddhist foundation linked to it would be Talagang, in the Punjab. The earliest Alchon coinage further strengthens the hypothesis of a confederation: the first “kings” are without name, suggesting a series of contemporary leaders with a common political identity; thus, the individuals portrayed on these coins have been called “Anonymous Clan

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<sup>3</sup> The “Chionitae” reported by Ammianus Marcellinus, according to Bakker 2020b.

<sup>4</sup> Or Alkhan, according to the transliteration in Vondrovec 2010.

<sup>5</sup> A peripheral area of Bactria, according to Vondrovec and other scholars.

Rulers” (Vondrovec 2005). This political structure is not at all unusual in a nomadic context: for example, one could recall the case of the *Guishang*, the Kushans, who are mentioned in Chinese sources as one of the five tribes of the *Da Yuezhi*; in the end, the Kushans obtained supremacy over the other four. Another example is, again, Ammianus Marcellinus’ account on the Volga Huns:

“When they need to debate some important matter they conduct their conference in the same posture. They are not subject to the authority of any king, but break through any obstacle in their path under the improvised command of their chief men.” (Hamilton 1986)

The Alchon-Nezak coins are another element which demonstrates the necessity to avoid a rigid and traditional approach to chronology: these coins show a mixing in monetary production between the two dynasties. The *terminus post quem* of the Nezak’s appearance<sup>6</sup> is 474 AD, with *šahanšah* Peroz’ defeat by the Hephthalites, “although we do not know exactly how much later they [some features of Sasanian coins] appeared on the Nezak coinage” (Vondrovec 2010). Despite of the Hephthalite hegemony, new and pre-existing dynasties continued to exist as subjects of the new dominion or outside of it, such as the Alchons of Mihirakula<sup>7</sup>, who were defeated in Gandhara by an Indian coalition in 528 or 532 AD. Their presence in India is attested in the Gwalior inscription and in the one in Malwa, the *Eran boar*, both placed in Brahmanic religious contexts: the first one is linked to Mihirakula, while the second one refers to Toramana as ruler of the local lands. Hans Bakker gives an extensive list of inscriptions in Sanskrit related to the Huna, and notices that in those such as the ones mentioned above the term “Huna” is absent: “it seems also to lend support to the view that the Sanskrit word *huna* had a pejorative

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the origin of this dynasty is not exactly clear. See Grenet 2002: “The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, who in 629 stayed in their capital, Kāpisā (Begrām), mentions that the king belonged to a family of *chali*, i.e., *kṣatriyas*, which seems to indicate a local Hindu origin; but at the same time they claimed ancestry from the 5th-century Hephthalite ruler Khingila, hence the name “Khingal dynasty” by which they are sometimes designated by scholars. One cannot exclude the possibility that they were originally a branch of the Hephthalites who had escaped from regions to the north of the Hindu Kush.”.

<sup>7</sup> The ruler famously described in the *Rājataranṅinī*: “man of violent acts and resembling Kala [...]. In him the northern region brought forth, as it were, another god of death [...]” (Bakker 2020a)

connotation” (Bakker 2020a). This statement might not be correct: the absence of “Huna” could simply be due to it being obvious to the Huns themselves, who would not have needed an ethnic identifier in their inscriptions.

The Huns’ presence in the Hindu Kush and Gandhara, despite the numismatic evidence, has left scarce archaeological traces, considering the current findings. A significant footprint of Hunnic presence is a makeshift structure belonging to the last phase of the Kushan royal sanctuary of Surkh Kotal, located in Baghlan, north of the Hindu Kush. This newer temple was built with wooden materials and stones from the previous phases. The most plausible authors of this structure are the Kidarites, due to the presence of a Kushan stele, which must have been moved from the remains of the old central temple (Olivieri and Sinisi 2021). This new sanctuary seems to be an attempt to recall the Kushan era, an important form of legitimisation employed by the Kidarites in their coinage and in their sealings (Bakker 2020b), where they adopted the title “Kuśāhśāh”<sup>8</sup>. The Kidarites’ activities in Sogdiana and Gandhara are attested exclusively through the findings of coins and through written sources, especially Chinese ones. According to Grenet, the travels of the monk Faxian are important to pinpoint a possible *terminus post quem* of the arrival of the Kidarites in Gandhara: 412 AD, the year of Faxian’s return to China (Grenet 2005), because the monk describes Uddiyana as a rich Buddhist center:

“Crossing the river we arrive at the country of Ou-Chang. This is the most northern part of India. [...] The law of Buddha is universally honoured. The names given to places where the priests take up their fixed abodes is Sangharama. There are altogether about 500 of these (in this country), all of which are attached to the system called the Little Vehicle.” (Beal 1869).

Grenet’s hypothesis is not certain. The importance of Uddiyana as a Buddhist center could have lasted during the Kidarite dominion: the finding of Kidarite coins in the consecration deposits of Butkara, a short distance from the abandoned city of Barikot, is significant. This, along with the cases mentioned above, helps to explain the kind of authority and legitimacy the Kidarites were seeking to establish and/or make their own.

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<sup>8</sup> See note 1.

Furthermore, a depiction of a ruler belonging to the Kidarite dominion has been identified on a local stupa, even though it is not Hunnic art. Hans Bakker also points out that the appearance of coins with the writing “Kidara” in Gandhara, starting from 388 AD, demonstrates how the region was under Kidarite rule far earlier than what Grenet suggested. Grenet then proposed another Chinese source as the *terminus post quem* of the fall of the Kidarites: “A residual Kidarite kingdom in the Gandhāran region (possibly in Swat: Göbl 1967, II, p. 224, issue 15) continued to send embassies to China until 477.” (Grenet 2005)<sup>9</sup>. The Alchons’ descent from Kabulistan, where donations to Buddhist stupas are attested, to Gandhara is thus placeable after this date. It is for this reason that the Alchons are generally placed in a chronological phase between 450 and 560 AD. These identifications, though, are approximative at best, and the monetary evidence is not numerous: the excavations in Taxila, the beating heart between Gandhara and India, have brought to light only 60 coins<sup>10</sup>, while other large deposits, such as the Shahji-ki-Dheri stupa, contained only 16 Alchon coins. The geographical origin of the coins is also often difficult to determine, such as in the case of the “coins of Kashmir Smast”, which do not belong to that area; a further issue lies in the wide phenomenon of coins which have circulated in the black market. Coins are not the only victims of this illegal trafficking: the “Hephthalite silver bowl” needs to be taken into consideration. Both Alchons and Kidarites are depicted<sup>11</sup>, engaged in the hunting of lions, boars, and rams. Its place of origin is not known, but its artistic style recalls Persian and Indian elements. There are some Brahmi inscriptions present on this bowl, which have been analysed by various scholars: Hans Bakker notes how the names “Kidara” and “Khangi(la)” can be read, the latter followed by a number, “206”, which might refer to the Bactrian era<sup>12</sup> or to the weight of the bowl (Bakker 2020a). Bakker also refers to a similarly styled bowl found near Datong, “which reads according to Sims-Williams: χιγγιλο ι χοηο χοβο, ... ‘Property of Khingila the lord’”. Taking into consideration the tribal

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<sup>9</sup> The Kidarite presence is also attested in Taxila and Kashmir, but possible dates linked with the fall of these last holdings have not been proposed yet (DAF).

<sup>10</sup> Of which 29 Kidarite golden dinars, which imitate the local coinage, similarly to what happened during the phase north of the Hindu Kush (DAF).

<sup>11</sup> One can distinguish between Kidarites and Alchons due to their differences in head shape and headgear, in a similar way as with their coinage.

<sup>12</sup> “which started in AD 223, the year of the foundation of the Sasanian Empire by Ardashir I. If this is correct, it would date the bowl to AD 428/9.” (Bakker 2020a)

structures of the Huns and the findings of Alchon-Kidarite bowls (of Alchon production), Hans Bakker suggests the presence of a confederacy formed by these two ethnic groups, which would explain the difficulty to ascertain transition between the two peoples and, plausibly, the combined and simultaneous military efforts by the Sasanian Yazdagird II and the Gupta Samudragupta to defeat this imposing force (Bakker 2020b).

While the evidence pertaining the Kidarites and Alchons in these regions is somewhat present, the Hephthalites, despite their geopolitical importance, have left even less evidence. Not unlike the other Huna rulers, the Hephthalites moved frequently, mostly living in encampments rather than in cities. Song Yun reports in the early VI c. that the ruler of the “Yethas” (the Hephthalites) “continually abode with his troops on the frontier, and never returned to his kingdom [...]. Song-Yun repaired to the royal camp to deliver his credentials.” (Beal 1886). Ammianus Marcellinus, with some exaggeration, also reports that (concerning the Volga Huns, not the Hephthalites):

“They have no buildings to shelter them, but avoid anything of the kind as carefully as we avoid living in the neighbourhood of tombs; not so much as a hut thatched with reeds is to be found among them. [...] On foreign soil only extreme necessity can persuade them to come under a roof, since they believe that it is not safe for them to do so.” (Hamilton 1986)

Procopius provides a different picture concerning the Hephthalites:

The Ephthalitae 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, for they occupy a land neither adjoining nor even very near to them. [...] For they are not nomads like the other Hunnic peoples, but for a long period have been established in a goodly land. As a result of this they have never made any incursion into the Roman territory except in company with the Median army. They are the only ones among the Huns who have white bodies and countenances which are not ugly. It is also true that their manner of living is unlike that of their kinsmen, nor do they live a savage life as they do; but they are ruled by one king, and since they possess a lawful constitution, they observe right and justice in their dealings both with one another and with their neighbours, in no degree less than the Romans and the Persians. (Dewing 1914)

Procopius' positive opinion on the Hephthalites is probably derived from their distance from Roman lands and their enmity with the Persians: indeed, this passage on the "White Huns" is placed in Procopius' account on *šahanšah* Peroz' war with them. Moreover, Song Yun, who was a contemporary of Procopius and, as we have seen, had visited their lands, does not give a very positive account of his encounter with the Hephthalite king; Song Yun's perspective could also be due to the Chinese bias towards the peoples of the steppe. As one can see, dealing with written sources means treading on a not so solid ground. Procopius' "Have been established in a goodly land" could be interpreted literally, as in "the Hephthalites have settled in Bactria", but there is no current archaeological evidence on the "city of Gorgo", their capital according to Procopius; this passage could also be interpreted simply as "they stopped their destructive migrations, establishing a stable dominion in Bactria". Procopius was also not aware of Hunnic operations in India. A 2003 finding from Xi'an could be of help in the understanding of Hephthalite life: a sarcophagus belonging (plausibly) to the *Sabao*<sup>13</sup> Wirtak (494-579). The reliefs decorating the stone sarcophagus reveal scenes pertaining to Wirtak's life, from his birth to his journeys in the "Western lands" and finally to his days in China and Gansu in particular (Grenet and Riboud 2007). The celebration of Nowruz, the presence of both nomadic and urban settings and of crowns modelled after the late crown of Peroz attest to a complex and diverse setting which goes beyond the simplifications of contemporary written sources such as the ones cited above.

Having taken these accounts and the findings of Huna coins - in particular in devotional deposits - into consideration, it seems clear how the presence of these nomadic dynasties had not brought significant economic investments in their dominions, be they in the market, in urban planning (let alone the construction or expansion of a central capital like Gorgo) or in the building of new places of worship<sup>14</sup>. Kuwayama's observations on the false myth of "Hephthalite destruction of Gandharan Buddhism" also need to be taken into consideration. Beyond showing the Hephthalites' lack of interest in Buddhism, as one can see in the absence

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<sup>13</sup> "an official Chinese title given to the administrators of foreign communities, inherited from the Sogdian word *s'rip'w* [sartpāw], meaning <<caravan leader>>" (Grenet and Riboud 2007)

<sup>14</sup> It is important to remember the aforementioned Alchon and Kidarite donations to already existing sanctuaries, and the construction of the makeshift temple at Surkh Kotal.



of donations to stupas, Kuwayama cites further Chinese sources (chiefly Song Yun and the biography of Narendrayasas) which clearly show the continuing prosperity of Uddiyana in the early VI c., when the area was under Huna control<sup>15</sup>: the main element of Kuwayama's thesis is the mention in those sources of numerous relics of the Buddha, which show "how important the relics can be as clues to proving the flourishing Buddhism in Gandhara in the first part of the sixth century". Furthermore, he argues that "Dissatisfaction from the general populace with the Hephthalite king was likely to be a reaction to an unpopular and costly war" (Kuwayama 2002). The collapse of the region can only be seen in Xuanzang's report from a century later:

On both sides of the river Su-po-fa-su-tu, there are some 1400 old *sangharamas*. They are now generally waste and desolate; formerly there were some 18,000 priests in them, but gradually they have become less, till now there are very few. They [...] have pleasure in reciting texts relating to this subject but have no great understanding as to them. [...] There are about ten temples of Devas, and a mixed number of unbelievers who dwell in them. (Beal 1884)

As Kuwayama states, "The decay of Buddhism therefore came in the Northwest in the latter half of the sixth century after the political withdrawal of the Hephthalites whose homelands in Tokharistan were mostly occupied by the Turks in the sixth and seventh decades of the sixth century." (Kuwayama 2002). The collapse of Uddiyana was thus mostly caused by economic and religious factors: the abandoning of the important city of Barikot between the III and IV c.<sup>16</sup> was the symptom of a larger decline of the second urbanisation in India. This resulted in Buddhist monasteries taking the role of administrators of the land, and of the irrigation systems especially; despite this, the Buddhist communities slowly lost their influence with the emergence of a reformed Brahmanism<sup>17</sup>. Behind all these processes, the LALIA (*Late Ancient Little Ice Age*, 536-660 CE; Olivieri 2021), a global climatic crisis, played a major role in triggering the collapse: the bounteous harvests of Uddiyana

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<sup>15</sup> Song Yun also mentions a war between the "Ye-thas" and the "country of Ki-pin (Cophene), disputing boundaries of their kingdom" (Beal 1886), which implies a conflict between the Hephthalites and the Huns ruling in the Swat and surrounding areas.

<sup>16</sup> The main reasons behind its downfall were two major earthquakes (Iori and Olivieri 2019).

<sup>17</sup> The "ten temples of Devas" mentioned by Xuanzang.

were severely hampered, since rice could not survive the drastic drop in temperature. Furthermore, the increase in snow and cold weather made the northern passages impassable, putting an end to Uddiyana as a point of interest of political and religious routes linking Central Asia and India, which would switch from the mountain passes of the Karakorum linking Yarkand and the Tarim Basin to India to the Balkh-Bamiyan-Kabulistan path (Kuwayama 2002). The Xi'an sarcophagus further demonstrates the intermingling of "proper" Hunnic traditions and local ones, such as the already mentioned celebration of Sogdian Nowruz, and the adoption of Chinese clothing styles for women.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the Huns were not the simple yet utterly destructive force described in Indian sources, but an actor - better, a series of actors - in a period of significant environmental, economic and civilizational shifts which encompassed the whole of Eurasia and beyond. One must take this into consideration in the study of the Huns. Beyond their conflicts with the Sasanians, the Guptas and the Indian princes, they were seeking to legitimise their power by recalling echoes of past powers, adopting local symbols and customs, and donating to Buddhist sanctuaries, while keeping some of their nomadic roots, such as in their political structure and in their lack of investments in the settled economy.

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