
Analysis and Essence of Trade and Economic Relations of the Hephthalite State

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Annotation: Central Asia and the neighbouring countries have a very old and rich history. A poorly studied and complex period of this region is the early medieval one (4th – 6th century AD). During this time, “The great movement of peoples”, the migration of nomadic peoples (Huns) from Asia to Europe, took place. In South and Central Asia, great empires existed, including Sasanian Iran, Gupta India and several smaller states. Across Central Asia, mysterious new peoples appeared: the Hephthalites, the Kidarites and the Chionites, among others. Their origins are still debated. Some scholars suppose that they were part of a Hun confederation, while others suppose they each had different origins

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Among the new peoples on the historical stage of Central Asia the biggest impact was made by the Hephthalites (also known as White Huns in Byzantine sources - the name they used themselves is unknown). They are important in the development of the Turkic and later Islamic character of Central Asia – though primary sources are lacking. In the 5th - 6th centuries AD the Hephthalites founded a great empire on the later territory of the modern states of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and China. For two centuries they dominated this region and the political history. Sasanian Iran, most powerful empire of the period, was repeatedly defeated by the Hephthalites. Besides that, they overthrew the Gupta Empire in India and conquered a large part of that area. A true study of the Hephthalites must include both archaeological data and historical analyses of written sources. Such a study, integrating modern data on the archaeology of Hephthalite sites from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and the Central Asian republics with the historical data from written sources, has not been done. This thesis is intended as a major contribution in the historical understanding of this aspect of the special character of modern Central Asia. Generally, the early research on the Hephthalites was based only on written sources. They were mentioned for the first time in AD 361 at the siege of Edessa (modern Urfa in south-eastern Turkey).¹ The Hephthalites are mentioned in the sources under different names, depending on one or another issue of their name in different languages: • Armenian - Hephthal, Hep't'al, Tetal but Armenian sources also identify them with the Kushans. • Greek - Εφθαλιται (Hephthalites), Αβδελαι (Abdel/Avdel), or White Huns. • Syriac - Ephthalita, Tedal. • Middle Persian – Hephtal and Hephtel; the Zoroastrian source “Bundahišn” calls them - Hēvtāls. • Indian - Hūna. • Bactrian – ηβοδαλο(ebodalo). • In Chinese sources the Hephthalites appear as Ye-da, Ye-dien, Idi, Yeta-i-lito. • Arabic - Haital, Hetal, Heithal, Haiethal, Heyâthelites. In Arabic sources the Hephthalites, though they are mentioned as Haitals, are sometimes also referred to as Turks. In the 4th - 6th centuries AD the territory of Central Asia included at least four major political entities, among them Kushans, Chionites, Kidarites, and Hephthalites. Discussions about the origins of these peoples still continue. Ideas vary from the Hephthalites considered as part of the Hun confederation to different other origins. It is also uncertain whether the Hephthalites, the Kidarites and the Chionites

had a common or different origins – that is, are they three branches of the same ethnic group or are they culturally, linguistically, and genetically distinct from one another? This is explained by the fact that the written sources referring to this period are very scanty and fragmentary in nature. The archaeological material is also very limited and the dating is often approximate and inexact. The numismatic discoveries in some measure reveal interesting aspects of history, particularly as to monetary circulation. But, in spite of the aforesaid, the collection of available facts allows the reconstruction of a more or less clear picture of the political and socio-economic life of this region. This is primarily due to the limited number of sources, which are sometimes too contradictory to be harmonized. The literary evidence is not decisive, since reports by Chinese pilgrims and records by Indian authors are at times ambiguous; and the statements of the Roman and Greek historians, who hardly knew how to deal with the various Hunnic people of the remote eastern lands, are vague. In the absence of authentic evidence, the coins issued by the leaders of those people constitute one of the most reliable primary sources for the history of the Hephthalites. It must be emphasized that our knowledge of these Central Asian nomads is, to a certain extent, still vague; and the research on their history remains controversial. All above named medieval sources have served as the main base for multiple judgments on the ethnic history of the Hephthalites. Some researchers see descendants of the Yuezhi in the Hephthalites (V. de Saint-Martin, V. Bartold, N. Veselovsky, G. Grum-Grzhimailo),² others derive them from ancient Mongols (J. Marquart, R. Grousset)³ or Huns assimilated by Central Asian people (S. Tolstov, A. Bernshtam).⁴ Yet another theory considers an Iranian language of the Hephthalites and their Iranian origin (A. Mandelshtam, M. Dyakonov, B. Gafurov).⁵ Bartold, K. Enoki, L. Gumilev and Gafurov ⁶ think the Hephthalites were quite different peoples than the Chionites; others (R. Ghirshman, Tolstov, Bernshtam, Mandelshtam, V. Masson)⁷ try to prove their identity or consider that the Hephthalites were the name of the dominating class of the Chionites. The various authors presented above are only the more important who have grappled with the question of who the Hephthalites were. Many others have argued that the Hephthalites were Mongols or Turks or Huns or any number of other ethnicities. This shows how fragmentary and confused the historical sources are, and that they must be combined with other lines of evidence in order to understand the history of the Hephthalites. For the first time in European historiography the Hephthalites were mentioned in the “Bibliothèque Orientale” of D’Herbelot in 1697, under the name Haïetelah and then in the work of Assemani (“Bibliotheca Orientalis”) in 1719 as Haithal, where extracts from medieval Syrian sources are given. Later J. Deguignes dedicated one of the chapters in his multivolume work “Histoire générale des Huns”, to the Hephthalites, where he explained their name from the Persian word ab (water) plus Tie-lé or Telite (according to Deguignes one of the names of the Huns who moved to Transoxiana) - Abtelite (water Huns) because they had a residency near the Amudarya river.⁸ V. de Saint-Martin was among the first to suppose that the Hephthalites were descendants of the Yuezhi and had a Tibetan origin.⁹ Ed. Specht and E. Parker, who think that they were different tribes, argued against this theory.¹⁰ Gumilev also gives a number of arguments against the theory of Saint-Martin. First, Gumilev notes that the version of identity between the Yuezhi and the Hephthalites is unconvincing, because the “Beishi”, along with Yeda also referred to Da Yuezhi. Secondly, the author of the “Suishu” mentions only the ruling dynasty of the Hephthalites from the Yuezhi, but not all the people. Thus, according to Gumilev, Saint-Martin’s hypothesis is unproven.¹¹ He put forward his own hypothesis, suggesting that the Kidarites, the Chionites and the Hephthalites were different peoples: the Kidarites were Yuezhi; the Chionites (or Huni) were residents of “Marsh sites”, living on the northern shore of the Aral Sea and were descendants of the Saka tribe “Huaona”; the Hephthalites were mountain people, tribal descendants of light-hair Baidi people, who in the 7th century BC came to the mountainous area of the Pamir and Hindukush from northwestern China. For

eight hundred years, Baidi might have mixed with the local Aryan tribes of Indo-Iranian group and in the Kushan time (1st – 2nd centuries AD), one of the branches of the tribe Hua, settled in the valley Eftal, received a new name “Hephthalites” (Greek) or “Yeda” (Chinese) from the name of the valley or perhaps on behalf of the first leader. At the end of 4th century AD the Hephthalites were already an organized tribe, and at the beginning of the 5th century AD their state claimed hegemony in Central Asia and India. This expansion, according to Gumilev, occurred through a union of all the mountain tribes of the Pamir and the Hindukush, which involved the expansion of the concept Eftal. Thus, according to the hypotheses of Gumilev, the Hephthalites were the people of the mountainous areas of the Pamir and the Hindukush.¹² Before Gumilev, Enoki had come to a similar opinion by exploring Chinese sources. After his analysis, he indicated that Chinese authors had only approximate knowledge of the origin of the Hephthalites. Enoki agrees with Ghirshman in the question if the Hephthalites were people speaking an Iranian language, but he distinguishes them from the Chionites, who, in his opinion, were Huns. Kingdom of the Chionites in Sogd were conquered by the Hephthalites under the royal family Jauvla or Chao-wu. Enoki based his theory on the information from Chinese chronicle “Suishu” where recorded that royal family of Sogd was known earlier as Wen (Huns – on Enoki) and later as Chao-wu. Enoki suggests that two centres of the Hephthalite Empire were on the Upper Amudarya. One was in western Badakhshan and is identical to the country Hsi-mota-lo in Xuanzang’s description of the western countries. This name, which means “foot of the snow mountain” can be a sanskritized form of the ethnonym Hephthalites. It would have been situated high in Tokharistan and is isolated. The Hephthalites had lived in an isolated form from others and practiced polyandry. Another centre was in Ghur (south of Kunduz) and is the Hua of Chinese sources and Gorgo of Procopius. According to Enoki, this argument also supports the theory that the origin of the Hephthalites was eastern Tokharistan on the upper Amudarya or in the Hindukush mountains and therefore it could explain why the Hephthalites did not establish their centre near the Altai mountains as noted in Chinese sources as their place of origin. Another argument for the local origin of the Hephthalites is that Sogd was conquered almost 20 years later, after they had settled in Tokharistan and northwestern India. Ammianus Marcellinus describes this as follows: “He was carried out in the arms he was wont to wear, and placed on a spacious and lofty pile; around him ten couches were dressed, bearing effigies of dead men, so carefully laid out, that they resembled corpses already buried; and for seven days all the men in the companies and battalions celebrated a funeral feast, dancing, and singing melancholy kinds of dirges in lamentation for the royal youth... And the women, with pitiable wailing, deplored with their customary weepings the hope of their nation thus cut off in the early bloom of youth... When the body was burnt and the bones collected in a silver urn, which his father had ordered to be carried back to his native land, to be there buried beneath the earth, Sapor, after taking counsel, determined to propitiate the shade of the deceased prince by making the destroyed city of Amida his monument. Nor indeed was Grumbates willing to move onward while the shade of his only son remained unavenged.”⁵⁰⁹ An interesting parallel can be found among the funeral customs of the Chionites from the description Ammianus Marcellinus and among the ancient Turks as shown by Kyzlasov. Specifically, he writes that on one of the statues of soldiers from western Tuva was depicted a memorial scene. Below the waist of the main figure there are schematically depicted two participants of feasts, sitting in front of the sculpture. Turning to him, one of them holds in his hand a vessel, and the other lowered his hand, apparently in to leather jar with drink, to scoop up another cup. Another monument of two statues of people involved in the scene of funeral feast is also known. They are shown seated with crossed legs in steppe tradition. According to Kyzlasov, images of warriors with vessels in their hands were necessary to ensure that during the feast organised by close relatives of the buried person in his honor, he

could “drink” with them. All this was intended to appease the dead. Elements of such rites, as described by Ammianus Marcellinus, are seen in the excavations at the burial mounds Kanga-qala and Kunya-Uaz in left-bank Khorezm in the territory of northern Turkmenistan. Here, around the structures with powerful traces of fire the skull and parts of skeletons were located. We may also note that the vessels from Chash-tepe, dated to the 4th century AD, have analogies with the ones from Kunya-Uaz, mostly in technological features. According to Nerazik, cremation is performed here with the burial of ashes away from the burial pyre. Trofimova remarked that the admixture of Mongoloid elements close to a mixed north Chinese type in Kunya-Uaz and Kanga-qala can be explained by ties of the Khorezmian people with the Chionites, ancestors of later Hun-Hephthalite population. In Khorezmian Kalaly-Kyr skulls of adults and children in several cases showed of annular deformation.⁵ The question of the origin of people who were buried in Kunya-Uaz and Kanga-qala is of great interest. The similarity in the burial custom, the accompanying archaeological materials, circular deformation of skulls (fig. 86) and, finally, a single type of anthropology suggests the ethnic unity of the population of these fortresses in the 4th century AD. Comparison of the archaeological and historical data permits us to include these populations among the Chionites.⁵¹⁴

Socio-political structure and state The main feature of the Hephthalite period is supposed to be substantial change in archaeological material, in agriculture and urban life, accompanied by a process of political disintegration and government decentralization.⁸⁵² For the 4th - 6th centuries AD, which Tolstov names Kushano-Hephthalite, there was a crisis of the antique system: 1) decline of irrigation 2) a sharp decline of urban centers. This also meant a decline in the quality of pottery, and generally of crafts connected to cities. This process was provoked by the barbaric elements of the steppe tribes. The socio-economic crisis of the 4th – 5th centuries AD in the south of Central Asia and Afghanistan has been connected to the Chionites. This is supported by deserted towns and villages such as Dalverzin-tepe, Zar-tepe, Kai-Kubad Shah or Shahri-Nau. Then, in the 5th century AD the Hephthalites occupied these regions and development revived.⁸⁵⁴ In the economically stronger areas the recovery began earlier and took place rapidly. At the same time culture also revived. During the 5th - 8th centuries AD throughout Central Asia all forms of material culture generally changed: types of settlement, housing and urban topography.⁸⁵⁵ Albaum, examining monuments of right-bank Tokharistan (Angor district of the Surkhandarya region), conquered in the Hephthalite time, suggested that the idea of collapse as a result of the Hephthalite invasion is wrong. Quite to the opposite agriculture recovered. This is evidenced by large numbers of seeds of different plants discovered in excavations. There were gardens around the palaces, as well as cotton and cereal fields. Besides, shortly after the Hephthalite conquest the Zang irrigation system on the territory of Uzbekistan was restored. All preserved palaces are located on the banks of this canal.⁸⁵⁶ The revival of Samarqand similarly began in Hephthalite time. In a different region, Sedov remarked that: “Judging from the archaeological materials in the 4th - 5th centuries AD in Kobadian there was no socio-economic decline, but instead, we recorded the stabilization and even, perhaps, some recovery of organisation”. At the end of 5th – at the beginning 6th century AD new towns and fortresses were constructed, including interiors decorated by paintings, sculpture and wood carvings. In Northern Bactria these are Balalyk-tepe, Jumalak-tepe, Zang-tepe, etc., in Sogd - Samarqand, Pendzhikent and several other centers. The Hephthalite empire were composition which several more or less independent principalities of medieval Central Asia and neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan.⁸⁶ Litvinsky notes that “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”. The Western and Eastern written sources describe the Hephthalites under the designation of state. Within this society the upper level was provided

by nobles, so there was social division. If we agree with the conclusions of Tolstov and Trever, who believed that the Hephthalites were descendants of the Priaral Massaghetae, who, in their view, preserved the longest-kept community traditions, the existence of polyandry (in Chinese sources) in Hephthalite families would not be surprising. Thus, the “Zhoushu” reports: “In this country, brothers jointly have one wife. If her husband has no brother, the wife wears a hat with one horn. If her husband has several brothers, as many horns are added”. Similar data are given in the “Suishu” but with the additional information that any child born will belong to the eldest brother. This feature of the Hephthalites, according to Trever, is a relic of the Massaghet group marriage, who also had polyandry. As for the elite of Hephthalite society, the “Beishi” noted the custom of polygamy: “the owner’s wife lived separately at 200 and 300 li distance one from another, and he goes to them in order, each month visiting one place, and during the winter frosts stays three months, not traveling”.⁸⁶³ Xuanzang reported about similar custom when he described a population of the country Hsi-mo-ta-lo. “In respect of their modes of behaviour and forms of etiquette, their clothes of wool, and skin, and felt, they are like the Turks. Their wives wear upon their head a wooden horn about three feet or so in length. It has two branches (a double branch) in front, which signify father and mother of the husband. The upper horn denotes the father, lower one the mother. Whichever of these two dies first, they remove one horn, but when both are dead, they give up this style of headgear.” Vaissière thinks polyandry was a genuine Bactrian custom, not a Hephthalite one because Chinese sources mixed together customs of the various components of the Bactrian society and gave them the name of the leading tribe, that of the Hephthalites.⁸⁶⁵ This theory can be supported by new facts about polyandry in Tokharistan before the Hephthalites comes from a Bactrian marriage agreement (document A, dated AD 343) in the archive of Rob. It is the time when Bactria was ruled by the Kushanshahs. In this agreement the marriage of the two brothers Bab and Piduk with a woman called Ralik is mentioned. The text of the contract tells us that Bab and Piduk will be regarded as fathers of Ralik’s children. The social structure of the Hephthalites is also described by Procopius of Caesarea: “For they are not nomads like the other Hunnic peoples, but for a long time have been established in a goodly land. ... 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”. The “Beishi” states: “The throne can not be transmitted hereditarily, and is received according to the ability of the relatives. Penalties are severe. If a robbery happens, without determination of the amount stolen, beheading is imposed”.⁸⁶⁸ Menander Protector preserved the report of a Turkic embassy, which stated that Hephthalites lived in the cities with Turks, who defeated the Hephthalites and became masters of their cities. Theophanous Byzantios informs us that, after the victory over the Persians, the Hephthalites become masters of the cities and harbors, which were formerly owned by the Persians. The Chinese chronicles, in particular the “Beishi”, states differently: “They do not have cities, and live in places full of grass and water, in tents. During the summer they elect a cool place, in winter a warm one”. Song Yun wrote that the “Ye-da” (Hephthalites) have no cities with walls, but they maintain order through a permanent army, which always moves from one place to another. Another traveler, Xuanzang, said that the residents of Hsi-mo-ta-lo, who are the Hephthalites, lived in tents and wandered. He also stated that in the past they have conquered a lot of countries and ruled many fortified towns and settlements.

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