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Analysis of research by foreign scholars on the origins of the Hephthalites

Eftaliylarning kelib chiqishi bo'yicha xorijiy olimlar tadqiqotlarining tahlili

Анализ исследований зарубежных учёных о происхождении эфталитов

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Abstract. This article discusses the research and opinions of foreign scholars on the origin and characteristics of the Hephthalites, and clarifies information about the rulers of the Hephthalites.

Keywords: Hephthalites; Tokharistan; Central Asia; Richard Nelson Frye; Franz Altheim; Vakhshunvar; Faganish; Toraman; Hephthalite symbols

O'ZBEKCHA

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Annotatsiya. Maqolada xorijiy olimlarning eftaliylarning kelib chiqishi va o'ziga xos xususiyatlari haqidagi tadqiqotlari hamda qarashlari ko'rib chiqilgan, eftaliy hukmdorlari to'g'risidagi ma'lumotlar aniqlashtirilgan.

Kalit so'zlar: eftaliylar; Toxariston; Markaziy Osiyo; Richard Nelson Frye; Frans Altxaym; Vaxshunvar; Faganish; Toraman; eftaliy ramzlari

РУССКИЙ

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются исследования и взгляды зарубежных учёных на происхождение и особенности эфталитов, а также уточняются сведения об эфталитских правителях.

Ключевые слова: эфталиты; Тохаристан; Центральная Азия; Ричард Нельсон Фрай; Франц Альтхайм; Вахшунвар; Фаганиш; Тораман; эфталитские символы

1. INTRODUCTION

The Imperial Hephthalites, based in Bactria, expanded eastwards to the Tarim Basin, westwards to Sogdia and southwards through Afghanistan, but they never went beyond the Hindu-Kush, which was occupied by the Alchon Huns, previously thought to be an extension of the Hephthalites. They were a tribal confederation and included both nomadic and settled urban communities. They

formed part of the four major states known collectively as Xyon (Xionites) or Huna, being preceded by the Kidarites and by the Alkhon, and succeeded by the Nezak Huns and by the First Turkic Khaganate. All of these Hunnic peoples have often been controversially linked to the Huns who invaded Eastern Europe during the same period, and/or have been referred to as "Huns", but scholars have reached no consensus about any such connection.

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The stronghold of the Hephthalites was Tokharistan (present-day southern Uzbekistan and northern Afghanistan) on the northern slopes of the Hindu Kush, and their capital was probably at Kunduz, having come from the east, possibly from the area of Pamir. By 479 the Hephthalites had conquered Sogdia and driven the Kidarites eastwards, and by 493 they had captured parts of Dzungaria and the Tarim Basin (in present-day Northwest China). The Alchon Huns, formerly confused with the Hephthalites, expanded into Northern India as well.

2. METHODS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The sources for Hephthalite history are sparse and the opinions of historians differ. There is no king-list, and historians are not sure how the group arose or what language they initially spoke.

They seem to have called themselves Ebodalo (ηβοδαλο, hence Ephthal /Hephthal), often abbreviated Eb (ηβ), a name they wrote in the Bactrian script on some of their coins.[1:89]

The origin of the name “Hephthalites” is unknown, it may stem either from a Khotanese word Hitala meaning “Strong”, from hypothetical Sogdian Heṣṭalī, plural of Heṣṭalak, or from postulated Middle Persian haft āl “the Seven Al”.

There are several theories regarding the origins of the Hephthalites, with the Iranic and Altaic theories being the main ones. The most prominent theory at present seems to be that the Hephthalites were of Turkic origin, and later adopted the Bactrian language.

According to most specialists, the Hephthalites adopted Bactrian as their official language, just as the Kushans had done, following their settlement in Bactria/Tokharistan. [7:63] Bactrian was an Eastern Iranian language which was written in the Greek alphabet, a legacy of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom in the 3rd–2nd century BCE. Bactrian, beyond being an official language, was also the language of the local populations ruled by the Hephthalites.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

The Hephthalites inscribed their coins in Bactrian. The titles they held were Bactrian, such as *χσάδης* (khsadēs) or *šao* and of probable Chinese origin, such as *yabghu*. The names of Hephthalite rulers given in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* are Iranian and gem inscriptions and other evidence shows that the official language of the Hephthalite elite was East Iranian. In 1959, Kazuo Enoki proposed that the Hephthalites were probably (East) Iranians who originated in Bactria/Tokharistan, based on the fact that ancient sources generally located them in the area between Sogdia and the Hindu-Kush, and the Hephthalites had some Iranian characteristics. [1:92] Richard Nelson Frye cautiously accepted Enoki's hypothesis, while at the same time stressing that the Hephthalites “were probably a mixed horde” Frye writes:

Just as later nomadic empires were confederations of many peoples, we may tentatively propose that the ruling groups of these invaders were, or at least included, Turkic-speaking tribesmen from the east and north, although most probably the bulk of the people in the confederation of Chionites and then Hephthalites spoke an Iranian language. In this case, as normal, the nomads adopted the written language, institutions, and culture of the settled folks. [7:65]

A few scholars, such as Marquart and Grousset proposed Proto-Mongolic origins. Yu Taishan traced the Hephthalites' origins to the Xianbei and further to Goguryeo. [1:94]

Other scholars such as de la Vaissière, based on a recent reappraisal of the Chinese sources, suggest that the Hephthalites were of Turkic origin, and later adopted the Bactrian language, first for administrative purposes, and possibly later as a native language.

According to Rezakhani (2017), this thesis is seemingly the “most prominent at present”. [9:143]

According to Martin Schottky, the Hephthalites apparently had no direct connection with the European Huns, but may have been causally related with their movement. The tribes in question deliberately called themselves “Huns” in order to frighten their enemies. On the contrary, de la Vaissière considers that the Hephthalites were part of the great Hunnic migrations of the 4th century CE from the Altai region that also reached Europe, and that these Huns “were the political, and partly cultural, heirs of the Xiongnu”. [9:145] This massive migration was apparently triggered by climate change, with aridity affecting the mountain grazing grounds of the Altay Mountains during the 4th century CE. According to Amanda Lomazoff and Aaron Rabby, there is a high synchronicity between the “reign of terror” of Attila in the west and the southern expansion of the Hephthalites, with extensive territorial overlap between the Huns and the Hephthalites in Central Asia. [7:71]

The 6th-century Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea (*History of the Wars*, Book I. ch. 3), related them to the Huns in Europe, but insisted on cultural and sociological differences, highlighting the sophistication of the Hephthalites:

The Ephthalitae Huns, who are called White Huns [...] 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; but their territory lies immediately to the north of Persia [...] They are not nomads like the other Hunnic peoples, but for a long period have been established in a goodly land... 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 neighbors, in no degree less than the Romans and the Persians. [1:95]

According to a recent reappraisal of the Chinese sources by de la Vaissière (2003), only the Turkic Gaoju origin of the Hephthalites should be retained as indicative of their primary ethnicity, and the mention of the Da Yuezhi only stems from the fact that, at the time, the Hephthalites had already settled in the former Da Yuezhi territory of Bactria, where they are known to have used the Eastern Iranian Bactrian language. The earliest Chinese source on this encounter, the near-contemporary chronicles of the Northern Wei (Weishu) as quoted in the later *Tongdian*, reports that they migrated southward from the Altai region circa 360 CE. [9:147]

The Hephthalite (White Hun) state (5th–6th centuries) had a system of government in which the throne was not inherited from father to son, but was given to the most worthy and powerful representative of the dynasty. [1:96] The most famous Hephthalite rulers and leaders preserved in historical sources and on coins are:

3.1. High rulers in Central Asia and Tokharistan

- Ephthalon (Vakhshunvar / Akhshunvar) (c. 450s–480s) — the founder and one of the greatest rulers of the Hephthalite state. The entire tribe and state began to be called “Hephthalites” after his name. He successfully defeated the Sasanian king Peroz and established a powerful empire.

- Kun-hi (c. 484) — A ruler mentioned in the sources in the period after Peroz's death.

- Yandai Yilituo (c. 516) — A Hephthalite king, preserved only in Chinese chronicles, who sent envoys to China.

- Ghaftar (Ghatfar / Varoz) (c. 550s–565) — The last great Hephthalite supreme ruler. In the 560s, he was defeated in a decisive battle near Bukhara against a coalition of the Turkic

Khaganate (Istami Khagan) and the Sassanids (Khusrav I Anushirvan), and the Hephthalite empire subsequently disintegrated.

- Faganish (after 565) — After the empire disintegrated, he united the small Hephthalite possessions in Tokharistan and Chaghaniyan and was recognized as a local tsar.

3.2. Hephthalite (Alkhan-Khun) rulers in Northern India and Gandhara

At the end of the 5th century, a part of the Hephthalites invaded India and formed a separate dynasty and state structure there:

- Khingila (Tunjina I) (455–484) - a leader who initiated the first campaigns into the Indian territories and consolidated Hephthalite power there.

- Turamon (484–515) - a king who brought the Hephthalite power to the peak in India, struck at the Gupta Empire and conquered vast territories.

- Mihirakula (515–533) - son of Turamon. An extremely harsh and warlike ruler, sources say that he destroyed Buddhist temples. After being defeated by a coalition of Indian rulers, he retreated to Kashmir.

- Pravarasena (537–597) was one of the last major rulers to rule Kashmir and the surrounding areas after Mihirakula.

Among them is the Hephthalite ruler Faganish, whose name appears in many sources. Faganish was a Hephthalite prince who ruled Chaghaniyan in the mid-6th century. Initially a vassal of the Hephthalites, Faganish became a vassal of the Sassanid state around 560. This happened after the Hephthalite Empire was defeated by the Sassanid-Turkish troops at Gol-Zarriun and broke up into several small kingdoms.

Faganish was a descendant of the powerful Hephthalite ruler Khushnawaz, who defeated and killed the Sasanian king Peroz in 484. [1:98] Faganish was a local ruler of Chaghaniyan, serving under the supreme ruler of the Hephthalites. Around 560, a combined Sasanian and Turkic army defeated the Hephthalite king Gadfar and his army at a place called Gol-Zarriun near Bukhara in Sogd. As a result, the Hephthalite empire collapsed and broke up into several small kingdoms. [7:65] Faganish became the ruler of Chaghaniyan. [9:148] Gadfar and his men fled south to Sasanian territory, where they found refuge. Meanwhile, the Turkish governor Istami reached an agreement with the Hephthalite nobles and appointed Faganish as the new king of the Hephthalites. [1:98] This was a very unpleasant situation for the Sasanian king Khosrow I Anushirwan (531–579 AD). He considered the cooperation of the Turks with the Hephthalites a threat to his rule in the east. Therefore, Khosrow I Anushirwan began to march towards the Sasanian-Turkish border in Jurjan. Arriving at the designated area, Anushirwan was met by the Turkish representative Istami and presented with gifts. There, Khosrow demonstrated his authority and military power and persuaded the Turks to form an alliance with him. According to an agreement contained in the alliance, Faganish was required to be sent to the Sasanian court in Ctesiphon and receive Khosrow's consent to receive the status of king of the Hephthalites. [1:94] Thus, Faganish and his Chaghaniyan kingdom became a vassal of the Sasanian Empire. As a result of this event, the Sasanians established the Oxus as the border between themselves and the Turks. [7:68] The subsequent fate of Faganish is unknown. It is possible that he was the founder of the Chaghaniyan principality, which ruled from the early 7th to the late 8th centuries.

4. CONCLUSION

The Hephthalites appear in several mural paintings in the area of Tokharistan, especially in banquet scenes at Balalyk tepe and as donors to the Buddha in the ceiling painting of the 35-meter Buddha

at the Buddhas of Bamyan. Several of the figures in these paintings have a characteristic appearance, with belted jackets with a unique lapel of their tunic being folded on the right side, a style which became popular under the Hephthalites, the cropped hair, the hair accessories, their distinctive physiognomy and their round beardless faces. The figures at Bamyan must represent the donors and potentates who supported the building of the monumental giant Buddha. These remarkable paintings participate “to the artistic tradition of the Hephthalite ruling classes of Tukharistan”.

The paintings related to the Hephthalites have often been grouped under the appellation of “Tokharistan school of art” or the “Hephthalite stage in the History of Central Asia Art”. The paintings of Tavka Kurgan, of very high quality, also belong to this school of art, and are closely related to other paintings of the Tokharistan school such as Balalyk tepe, in the depiction of clothes, and especially in the treatment of the faces. This “Hephthalite period” in art, with the caftans with a triangular collar folded on the right, the particular cropped hairstyle, the crowns with crescents, have been found in many of the areas historically occupied and ruled by the Hephthalites, in Sogdia, Bamyan (modern Afghanistan), or in Kucha in the Tarim Basin (modern Xinjiang, China). This points to a “political and cultural unification of Central Asia” with similar artistic styles and iconography, under the rule of the Hephthalites.

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Author contributions CRedit

Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript and has given her consent to its submission and publication. The study involved no human participants and no personal data.

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All sources analysed in this review are listed in the reference list of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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