

Huns 101 – A survey of Central Asian Hunnic civilizations and Coinage

The “Huns” is a large overarching name applied to a large group of people who left northwestern China around 200-300 AD. In many ways it was used to broadly, and many civilizations naming “Hun” as foreigners who showed up. However, historically there have been groups labeled Huns and they created fairly significant civilizations. This brief survey will serve to document this history and give an overview of coins that can be collected issued by them.

The field of history of Hunnic people is unfortunately very incomplete and conclusions are constantly at odds with each other and changing. Any conclusions I have stated here are my own, based upon reviewing the latest research and reviews of current investigations. If a reader reads differently s/he is encouraged to first check the date of the publication they are reading since a lot of new research has changed many opinions in the last 50 years, but short of that accept maybe that author is right and I am incorrect. Many different conclusions have been reached for identification of certain tribes, and this is simply my belief based upon this various research.

BACKGROUND

“Hun” actually comes from the middle Persian name of “Hunna”. Most historians agree the “Huns” were in fact mainly the Xiongnu from NW China. They believe this same large group of people that the Huns came from were also the same group that later conquered the world under the name of the mongols. The Xiongnu that left in the 3rd and 4th century may have been weaker tribes of the larger group, since Chinese historians clearly state that the Yuechi were displaced by groups of Xiongnu in the 1st century ad.

The Yuechi of course, then traveled first to Sogdia then into Bactria and displaced the Greek leaders there. Later on in history they were renamed Kushan after the name of the strongest of the five tribes of Yuechi took control of the group. The coinage and history of the Kushan is outside the scope of this work, but inevitably they ended up like so many other groups being pushed into northern India and slowly being absorbed into that culture. Their name surfaces later, though, confusing historians. Later on in histories like Armenian or Byzantine, they are claimed to still exist when in fact it was Huns to whom they are referring.

After the Yuechi were displaced, the NW frontier of China seems to be at peace for a couple of hundred years. Then, for reasons unknown, the Xiongnu started to emigrate west into Central Asia. Certain groups migrated across the continent and became the Huns of which Attila made famous, and sacked Rome. This group is also known as the “Black Huns”. While these Black Huns are popular because people have more generally heard of them, they did not issue coins, and are outside the scope of this paper. Who we will deal with are their brethren who didn’t choose to go across Asia, rather they settled much closer by.

Black versus Red versus White Huns

There were three main groups of Xiongnu, the Black, the Red, and the White. Like previously mentioned, the Black Huns moved westward to Europe and will not be covered here. Red Huns are generally agreed to all Juoan Juoan, (from the Chinese name for them). The main part of the Juoan Juoan stayed in NW China, eventually using Turkish people as their blacksmiths and slaves. The Turks rebelled and defeated the Huns around the 8th-9th century. Even the name of Turks nowadays comes from this groups of Turkish speakers who rebelled against their Hunnic masters. The third group was the White Huns, who predominantly moved as a whole to Central Asia. Most of them were originally called Chionites.

The Red versus White distinction shows up numerous times in names and historical documents. What I believe this shows us that the name "Huns" was used for a large amount of invaders, some groups of which very well may have been more of a mixed population like the Allamani in Europe. Anyway, for now we will just make the distinction that many groups of people who had direct contact with multiple different "Hunnic" civilizations make this distinction. Generally, it is accepted that groups such as the Alchon, Nezak, and Juoan Juoan were labeled "Red" Huns, and "White" Huns referred to the Chionites/Hepthalites. I have not read specifically if the Kidarites were labeled "Red" or "White", though there is a case to be made the Kidarites were Juoan Juoan, who were Red Huns. A reason why the Chionites/Hepthalites might have been referred to "White" Huns will be discussed later.

Kidarites

The first Hunnish group to make their appearance are what later called the Kidarites. They are named after Kidara, their leader during their most powerful phase. The Kidarites first conquered Sogdia, displacing some Kushan elements and minting a few rare sogdian coins with a Kidarite tomgha. Later, they moved south and over the course of a few decades completely routed the Kushanshahs. However, even before the Sassanians had captured Bactria and displaced the Kushans, there were pressures on the northern border of "barbarians". It is my postulation that these northern "barbarians" were tribes of Juoan Juoan, who which later gradually displaced the Sassanids in Bactria and later were renamed Kidarites after their most famous leader, Kidara.

A quick word about the Kushanshahs. They were not Kushan in any way. When the Kushans defeated the Bactrian Greeks and took over their territory, they also pushed out some elements of Persians, who at the time were under the Parthian empire. There was friction between the Parthians and Kushans for numbers of years, including open warfare at times, along the eastern frontier of Persia. For a time there were even Parthian supported local leaders named Indo-Parthians who issued coinage from this area. When the house of Papak/Sasan from Fars defeated the Parthians to found the Sassanian dynasty, the founder Ardashir continued on his conquests and defeated the Kushans, driving them into India. The local Sassanian rulers of this former Kushan territory, (frequently non-crown princes to the Sassanid throne), struck coins in their own names, and in the coinage system they inherited.

So, the Kidarites appeared and defeated the Sassanid Persians and took over control of this area. This happened gradually, starting around 270AD, and generally being finished around 300AD. Peroz is credited with defeating the Kidarites, finishing the war his father Yazdigerd II left him, and reclaiming this territory around 457AD. This is where the confusion between Kushan/Kidarite comes in, since Armenian history records the struggles of this leader with “the Kushano”, and the great wars that ensued. We know from numismatic evidence, though, (which by the way is one of the greatest sources of our knowledge for all of these things), we know the Kushans by this point are in India, if they even are identifiable as Kushan anymore.

Numismatically, we have the Hunnish group you are most apt to see gold coins from. Since they took over the former Kushan/Kushanshah territory that had a long bimetallic, (gold/copper), tradition, Kidarite gold coins are as available as any Hunnic coin. Also, because of their close connection to Persia, (both through warfare and close proximity to trade), they also struck silver coins. This makes them the only group of Huns where coins in all three metals are normally available.

Early Type:



Juoan Juoan imitation of Kushan Huvishka circa 200 AD

Kidarite:



Imitation of Vahran,



Kidara, circa 360AD



Kidara, (Gadahara), circa 320 AD



Kidarite copper, king standing, Shiva and Bull

Kidarite coinage is in general is scarcer than other Hunnic coins, which is saying something since most Hunnic coins are scarce at best. Juoan Juoan attributed pieces are even scarcer, since they are thin imitative issues issued near Sogdia, where we know soil conditions were not conducive to copper coin preservation.

Alchon Huns

The next group of Huns is the Alchon Huns. They settled west of Bactria, but were Juoan Juoan like the Kidarites. They settled later, though. They are most known from their coins and we know them from their unique tamgha used. In this way they are very similar to the Nezak Huns.

Historically, the Alchon started moving into western Afghanistan and Pakistan areas about the same time Peroz was defeating the Kidarites. About 520 AD they were attacked by the Sassanian/Turk armies, and moved totally into modern day Pakistan and India. There, they merged with the Nezak Huns, as well as remnants of the Kidarites. In modern day Pakistan and India these Red Huns continued to rule locally until the conversion of the area to Islam around the 9th century.

Their coinage is also recognizable by the deformed skull. This was done starting at infancy, attaching an iron pointed helmet tightly on the baby boy's head. It is thought that this unique look struck fear into their enemy, announcing their coming from a long distance. Like Genghis Khan afterwards, the Huns were very aware of the value of psychological warfare.



Khingila circa 450-490 AD



Narana, circa 580-600 AD

The Khingila series appears in many variations, but shows best the pointed skull that most people believe was indicative of all Huns, not just Red Huns. Alchon Hun coins are, along with Nezak Huns, usually more available than Kidarite. They are scarce coins versus most Roman issues, but can be found if patient. These two types are the most commonly found and most easily recognizable.

Nezak Huns

Like the Alchon, this group settled west of Bactria. The Nezak were mainly settled around Kabul and south in modern day Pakistan. They also used a unique tamgha. Also like the Alchon, their coinage shows the very recognizable skull deformation of the Red Huns.



Early Bull Crown Type



Bull Crown Type. These appear in Silver, billon, and bronze.



Later Crown Type, imitating Hormizd I, (scarce)





Some rarer types. I own one of the upper right issues, with a gold plug in the neck. There is controversy of whether Turkish or Hunnish in origin.

Chionites/Hepthalites

Historically, we hear first about the Chionites taking over Sogdia and settling NE of Persia. There are written accounts both of the wars between the Sassanids and the Chionites, (being called the fiercest warriors of all), as well as documentation of the Sassanids using Chionite mercenaries in their wars with Rome. It is said the Chionites were instrumental in breaking the siege and capturing the great fortress city of Amida in 359. So, it appears there was a complex relationship between the Sassanids and this group of Huns. All that is known is by 400 AD at the latest the Chionites were living adjacent to the Sassanids to their northeast, and most likely they were receiving tribute from the Sassanid rulers.

This is the group called “White Huns”, and is probably the group the Roman historian Procopius noted were “of fair skin, and did not live on horseback like others, but had proper cities and were ruled by a king”. This leads me to believe that since they were the last major group to enter Central Asia, had documented marriage practices much different than other Huns, and many other differences that this group was more likely a heterogenous mix of Huns, Persians, and likely Turks. Later on, their name others referred to them by changed from Chionite to Hepthalite, (or hepthal/heptal). Whether this name is due to one leader becoming dominant in the group enough to unite them all, (like the Yuechi becoming the Kushan), was the most famous leader, (like Kidara with the Kidarites), was the dominant family name, we do not know. We do know that most historians after this point only refer to heptal, hepthal, or Hepthalites.

The marriage custom, which was unique to Hepthalites in all of world history, was that a woman who married a man, at the same time married all of his brothers. She even wore a special hat with upright attachments that matched the number of husbands she had. It’s a unique cultural adaptation to Central Asian living with many advantages. Since she was married to all of the brothers, if any one of them fell due to warfare or just harsh living, she and her child could still be taken care of.

No history can be complete with documenting the Hepthalites history with the Sassanid ruler Peroz, (especially since for us it is interrelated with their numismatic history). Peroz really didn’t like paying tribute to a large group of Huns on his NE border, and after his success in defeating the Kidarites, decided he must wage war against this group. His first attempt ended in defeat, and additional

payments that had to be made. The second attempt resulted in his capture and ransom. He had to promise 30 donkeys of silver coins in exchange for his release. When his government could not produce that, he had to have his son and crown prince Hormizd sent to the Hephthalites to hold until the rest of the coinage arrived to secure his release. The third attempt by Peroz to conquer the Hephthalites ended up in his death.

Numismatically, this huge infusion of silver coins of Peroz spurred Hephthalite coinage. First they simply used the coins as they were, but later they started countermarking them to show they were authorized to circulate in Hephthalite territory. When the coins ran out, by this time this design to them was a “coin”, so they simply made copies of Peroz silver coins and also added a countermark. Shortly after this they figured out it is just easier to add the countermark into the die, and strike it that way. Even these coins at times got new countermarks that are decidedly Hunnish in origin, we just don’t know what new additional function they served.

As noted before, Hormizd, the future ruler, spent time with the Hephthalites. This worked to his advantage when he was deposed he fled back to the Hephthalites for protection. He took a Hephthalite princess as his wife, and was able to raise an army with them that returned him to the throne. However, Hormizd’s son Khusrow I evidently did not carry the same good will towards those who helped his father regain power, since he teamed up with the new power in Central Asia, the newly arrived Turks, and between the two “totally defeated the Hephthalites”. This “total defeat”, of course, was an exaggeration, but they did break the main source of Hephthalite power. Hephthalites, and Hephthalite/Turkish groups continued to strike coins for quite a while, (until the total conquest of Islam), and had pockets of power throughout their former domain. One late noted Hephthalite leader was the local clan leader who killed the last Sassanid king, Yazdigerd III. He and his family became known as the “King Killers”.

Numismatically, the Hephthalites continued to countermark Sassanid silver coins, and examples exist of Hormizd and Khusrow I countermarked with Hephthalite countermarks are fairly common. Small pockets of Hephthalites further south survived, and occasionally they would countermark a later Sassanid coin, and even more rarely strike some small issues of their own. These are all scarce coins, though, and further and further become more tenuous to associate with the Hephthalites versus Turks or other groups. Overall, their coinage was mainly silver, either countermarks on Sassanid coins or imitating Sassanid coins, with small amounts of crude bronzes issued. While they controlled Sogdia at the time, no Sogdian coins are associated with any specific mark that would tie the two groups together, it seems they allowed Sogdia to handle their own coinage matters.



Peroz Imitation. Key to identifying them are the dots instead of design elements at the four corners.



Imitative of Peroz with countermarks. Interestingly, they started countermarking their own imitations, then simply engraved the “countermark” into the die. Then, they started punching even more countermarks into these coins.



Late Peroz imitation. Be careful, looks much like “Indo Sassanian” issues of later.



Imitating Hormizd IV, this one with “phoro” countermark. Some appear w/o countermark



Imitating Vahran V, (note CM upper left)



Countermarks on Khusro II. Note the scrape on reverse. Very commonly found and a good sign. Most seem to have been tested when countermarked.

These are just the most commonly found Hephthalite coins. The most common are countermarked Khusro II and Peroz imitations. There are series of copper coins that may be attributed to Hephthalites, but that conversation is still very much in flux. If a collector wishes to accept an attribution like that, they are free to do so but just know its very much new attributions. The coins shown here, along with some expected issues like countermarked Sassanid coins of all emperors between Peroz and Khusro II, are well known and documented coins of the true “White Huns”. Because of the notoriety of the “White Huns” or Hephthalites, it seems any central Asian coin for many dealers, especially any Hunnic coins, always get attributed to “Hephthalites”.

Regarding Sogdia, the Hunnish invasions also had a long lasting effect on the Silk Road. Previously the Silk Road ran more southerly, through the territory conquered by the Kushans. However, between the wars of Greeks/Kushans, Kushans/Sassanians, Sassanian/Kidarites, and Kidarites/Sassanians, this land was in constant upheaval for centuries. Contrast this with Sogdia, that freely fell and accepted whatever ruler was stronger at the time, and you can see how much more attractive a northerly route became. So, the main Silk Road moved and became much more northern and Sogdian dominated route. The effects of such a move had long term consequences, such as lessening India’s involvement with the silk road thereby encouraging Arab traders to instead take up trade with India, and they continued and later used this trade to spread their new religion of Islam throughout SE Asia, as well as encouraging the Chinese in the Tang dynasty to expand into Central Asia to control the silk road and the riches it brought China. This is the basis of Chinese control of both Tibet and Uighur populated Western China today.

The coinage of Sogdia, however, is the basis of another paper.

REFERENCES:

The standard reference on these unfortunately for US collectors is written in German and is pretty scarce. It’s a four Volume work, “*Dokumente Zur Geschichte Der Iranischen Hunnen In Baktrien Und Indien*” by Robert Gobl printed in 1967. The last two books are the catalog, and are pretty easy to use. One is coins, the other countermarks. Other coin references I would recommend would be a new reference on the Sunshine collection published by CNG. Michiner’s *Oriental Coins and their Values*,

ACW, is valuable since so many people use this book. Its great to see what coin they are referencing, but I would not use his book to understand this series.

As a background book, “From Persepolis to the Punjab” is terrific. Published by the BM, it’s the new standard of dating all of Central Asia.

For internet resources, I would HIGHLY recommend The Coins and History of Asia.

<http://www.grifterrec.com/coins/coins.html>. All photos published here are courtesy of this website. This is where I got interested in these coins, and I hope a few others are as well.

