



ANALYSIS OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE HEPHTHALITE STATE IN GERMAN- LANGUAGE STUDIES

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Abstract

This article deals with the foreign policy of the Hephthalite state. The political and economic relations with the Iranian Sassanids, the Chinese Empire, Byzantium and India are discussed in German historiography, and the similarities and differences in the sources and literature we have studied are analyzed.

Keywords: Hephthalite state, Chinese Empire, Byzantium, Sassanids, Byzantium, Toraman, Gatifar, Mihirakul, Sogdian administration.

Relevance of the Study

It should be noted that one of the relatively understudied periods in the history of Uzbekistan is the Early Middle Ages. During this era, the territories of Central Asia successively came under the rule of the Chionites, Kidarites, Hephthalites, and the Turkic Khaganate. Although these groups initially entered the region as nomadic tribes, they did not come into serious conflict with the local population. From a historical perspective, this can be explained by the political circumstances of the time. The region was fragmented into numerous small principalities and lacked a unifying force. Consequently, the emergence of a strong power capable of consolidating these territories became a historical necessity.

The rise of the Hephthalites occurred under precisely such conditions. They sought to unite the fragmented political entities of Central Asia and succeeded in establishing a state that could rival the major empires of its time. Their principal competitor was the Sasanian Empire of Iran. Relations between the Hephthalites and the Sasanians were characterized by both diplomatic cooperation and military confrontation. Historical sources document periods of alliance as well as prolonged warfare. However, the reasons why initially favorable relations frequently evolved into armed conflicts require further scholarly investigation. Therefore, the study of Hephthalite-Sasanian relations remains an important issue in the historiography of the Early Middle Ages.

Methods and Literature Review

This study is primarily based on German-language scholarship. The available data were comparatively analyzed, and conclusions were drawn through a critical examination of the



relevant literature. German historiography contains a considerable number of studies devoted to the relations between the Hephthalites and the Sasanians.

Among the most significant works are Franz Altheim's four-volume *History of the Huns*, particularly the second volume entitled *The Hephthalites in Iran* [2], and Theodor Nöldeke's *History of the Persians and Arabs in the Sasanian Period* [6]. Nöldeke's work provides a comprehensive analysis of Sasanian history, while pages 90–167 contain valuable information concerning the Hephthalites and their interactions with the Sasanian Empire. This study is particularly useful for examining Hephthalite-Sasanian relations from multiple perspectives.

In addition, the works and monographs of Nikolaus Schindel [5], Walter Pohl [9], Michael Alram [3], Michael Ferdinandi [4], Robert Göbl [7], Daniel Potts [1], Timo Stickler [8], and Wessendonk [10] also address various aspects of Hephthalite-Sasanian relations. Their findings were analyzed through a comparative approach in order to identify common interpretations and differing scholarly viewpoints.

Research Results

The Hephthalite Empire maintained diplomatic and political relations with the major powers of its era, including China, Byzantium, India, and Iran. The first Hephthalite envoys arrived in China during the reign of Emperor Wen of the Northern Wei dynasty in 456–457 CE [1, p. 137].

By 458 CE, the Hephthalites had become sufficiently powerful to intervene in the affairs of the Sasanian Empire. Around 466 CE, with Sasanian assistance, they succeeded in seizing Transoxiana from the Kidarites. Shortly thereafter, however, they occupied Balkh, a territory that had previously belonged to the Persians [2, p. 97].

During the second half of the fifth century, the Hephthalites consolidated control over territories stretching from the Caspian region to Merv. By approximately 500 CE, they had established authority over the whole of Bactria, the Pamir region, and parts of Afghanistan. In 509 CE, they launched a campaign against Sogdiana and succeeded in capturing its capital city. These developments demonstrate the rapid expansion of Hephthalite political influence and their emergence as one of the dominant powers of Central Asia during the Early Middle Ages. In the 560s, the Hephthalite Empire was destroyed by the alliance between the Turkic Khaganate and the Sasanian Empire. Nevertheless, a portion of the Hephthalite ruling elite remained in Tokharistan as local rulers under the suzerainty of the Western Turkic Khaganate for approximately the next 150 years. Even after the Turkic conquest, the Hephthalites retained control over certain territories, including Khuttal and Chaghaniyan in the Vakhsh Valley.

Thus, the Hephthalites succeeded in bringing under their authority nearly all territories previously controlled by the Kushan dynasty, thereby significantly strengthening their political power. Moreover, they compelled their powerful southwestern neighbor, Sasanian Iran, to pay tribute for an extended period, reportedly until 554 CE.

The political history of the Hephthalites in the fourth–sixth centuries was closely connected with the internal and external political developments of Central Asia. S.P. Tolstov



characterized this era chronologically as the Kushano-Hephthalite period. According to Tolstov, this complex historical stage was shaped by several factors, including the relations between the Kushan Empire, the Kidarites, the Chionites, the Hephthalites, Sasanian Iran, and the ruling dynasties of China, as well as military-political processes that contributed to the fragmentation of Central Asia into numerous small principalities [6, p. 235].

By the beginning of the sixth century, the Hephthalite dynasty had become so powerful that it launched a campaign against Byzantium in 502 CE and concluded a peace agreement in 506 CE. According to historical accounts, the Hephthalites returned with substantial spoils from these campaigns. The Sasanian rulers Kavadh I, son of Peroz, and later Khosrow I Anushirvan continued paying tribute to the Hephthalites until approximately 554 CE. Only after the powerful attacks launched by the Turkic Khaganate did Iran free itself from Hephthalite dominance.

During this period, the Hephthalites were ruled by kings such as Toramana (496–510 CE) and Mihirakula (510–540 CE). It was only during the reign of Gatifar (540–556 CE) that the Hephthalites faced a formidable new rival in the form of the Turkic Khaganate [4, p. 28]. In addition, during Mihirakula's reign, the Hephthalites concentrated on strengthening their eastern frontiers. In 516 CE, they dispatched envoys to the Liang dynasty court in China and established diplomatic relations with the Chinese state.

Subsequently, the Hephthalites came into repeated conflict with the Avars, who were themselves rivals of China. In an effort to ease tensions, the Avars employed a well-established diplomatic strategy by arranging dynastic marriages. Mihirakula married the sister of the Avar Khagan Ainagai (521–551 CE). The Avars were concerned about the growing power of the Turks, and an alliance with the Hephthalites offered them greater opportunities to resist Turkic expansion. Nevertheless, both the Avars and the Hephthalites eventually proved unable to withstand the military strength of the Turkic Khaganate [7, p. 94].

In 567 CE, the Hephthalites suffered a decisive defeat near Bukhara. Taking advantage of their collapse, the Sasanians recovered territories that had previously been lost to the Hephthalites. Additional information regarding the Hephthalites can be found in several general chronicles, including the works of Zacharias Rhetor (5th–6th centuries), John of Ephesus (6th century), and Joshua the Stylite (6th century). These sources contain fragmentary accounts of the Hunnic peoples, including the Chionites, Kidarites, and Hephthalites, as well as their relations with Byzantium, the Turks, the embassy of Zemarchus (569 CE), and the downfall of the Hephthalite state [1, p. 238].

Chinese historical traditions, especially medieval chronicles and the records of Chinese envoys, pilgrims, and travelers, preserve valuable information regarding the political organization, social life, customs, and ethnonym (“Haital”) of the Hephthalites. These sources also contain various theories concerning their origin. Some Chinese historians associated the Hephthalites with the Turkic Gaoju tribes, others connected them with the Cheshi tribes of Turfan, while some regarded them as descendants of the Great Yuezhi (Kushans) or successors of Kangju.



The records of Chinese travelers such as Song Yun (6th century), San Yang Gi, and Haya San Gi contain important descriptions of the political structure, territorial extent, capital city, and economic activities of the “Land of the Hephthalites.” Similar information is found in the accounts of Xuanzang (7th century) and Hui Chao (8th century), who traveled through Central Asia during subsequent centuries [2, p. 83]. Although these travelers were primarily interested in the role of Buddhism in Hephthalite society, their observations also provide significant insights into the social, economic, ethnic, religious, and cultural life of the Hephthalites.

Among Indian written sources containing references to the Hephthalites are the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, Varahamihira’s *Brihat Samhita*, the Prakrit work *Kuvalayamala*, and the anonymous chronicle *Purana* (4th–6th centuries). Particularly valuable information is preserved in the Kashmiri historical chronicle *Rajatarangini*. Likewise, Arabic and Persian sources play an important role in illuminating various aspects of the Hephthalite question, especially from historical-geographical and historical-political perspectives [5, p. 114].

This period was also characterized by a certain degree of political stability. Furthermore, the Hephthalites generally refrained from interfering in the internal affairs of settled principalities. Taking advantage of these favorable conditions, the rulers and merchants of regions such as Sogdiana and Fergana intensified their economic and diplomatic relations with China. Chinese dynasties, particularly the Northern Wei Dynasty (385–534 CE), likewise demonstrated increasing interest in Central Asia due to political and economic considerations.

Chinese chronicles such as the *Wei Shu* (6th century) and *Bei Shu* (7th century) record numerous diplomatic contacts. According to these sources, embassies and trade caravans from the independent state of Chach (Chjeshe/Chiachiat) arrived in China in 437 CE, while envoys from Fergana (Polona) reached China in 479 CE. China, in turn, regularly dispatched representatives—especially Buddhist monks—to Central Asia.

One of the earliest Chinese envoys known to have traveled to Central Asia was Zhang Qian, who served during the Han Empire and died in 114 BCE. Chinese authorities often awarded distinguished diplomats the title *Buowang-hou* (“far-sighted and knowledgeable nobleman”) after the successful completion of their missions. This title was sometimes also granted to military governors. For example, the Han commander Li Guangli, who campaigned in Fergana, received the title *Ershi Jiangjun* (“General of Ershi”). Although such titles were specific to Chinese diplomatic institutions, they are important for understanding the official status and functions of Chinese envoys and representatives operating in Central Asia.

Delegations from Central Asia to China were dispatched on a regular basis. According to Chapter 97 of the *Beishi* Chronicle, in 229 CE, during the third year of the Taihe reign period, envoys from Fergana were sent to the court of the Wei emperor. They presented the emperor with a remarkable horse said to “sweat blood.” Sources from this period indicate that diplomatic relations between Central Asia and China involved not only the exchange of horses but also the presentation of skilled artisans and performers.



According to Volume 3, Chapter 193 of the *Tongdian* Chronicle, during the ninth year of the Zhengjun reign of the Northern Wei ruler Taiwu (416 CE), envoys arrived from Yuepan (a Hunnic state). Among the gifts they brought was a magician who reportedly demonstrated extraordinary abilities by severing a person's head, restoring it through the use of medicinal herbs, and reviving the individual. The emperor was so impressed that he ordered others to learn and make full use of this skill. Such accounts raise the possibility that certain therapeutic methods later associated with traditional Chinese medicine may have been influenced by medical practices originating in Central Asia.

In general, during the Hephthalite period, diplomatic missions from Central Asia often included gifts such as pedigree horses and valuable livestock. Furthermore, the source *Taiping Huanyu Ji* ("Records of the Universal Geography of the Taiping Era"), compiled between 990 and 1007 CE, records that Han envoys returning from Fergana brought back grapevines and alfalfa seeds to China. Diplomatic missions frequently consisted of several hundred individuals, and some envoys held the title *Buwanghou* ("learned governor"). Diplomatic exchanges could occur five or six times a year, and occasionally even ten times. Depending on the distance involved, diplomatic journeys lasted from several years up to eight or nine years.

Chinese envoys often had little choice but to undertake such difficult missions, as they were sent by imperial decree. Han sources indicate that some envoys came from poor backgrounds and occasionally behaved inappropriately abroad, resulting in a decline in the prestige of Han diplomats among foreign states [1:245]. Despite these difficulties, diplomatic contacts continued uninterrupted.

The custom of presenting horses to Chinese emperors by envoys from Central Asia, particularly from Fergana, continued throughout the Hephthalite period. According to the *Tongdian*, such gifts were recorded during the sixth year of the Heping era (465 CE) and again during the third year of the Taihe era under Emperor Xiaowen (479 CE).

During the Hephthalite era, commercial competition among Central Asia, China, and Iran intensified significantly. In some cases, economic rivalry contributed directly to military conflicts. Although the Hexi Corridor was officially declared an autonomous or semi-autonomous and stable region, as historian Li Minwei notes, various restrictions were imposed on Central Asian merchants operating there. Consequently, merchants from Central Asia encountered increasing obstacles to free trade. In 439 CE, Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei captured the important commercial city of Lanzhou and imprisoned many merchants, most of whom were Sogdians. Upon learning of this development, Sogdian authorities dispatched envoys to China and successfully negotiated the release of the captives through substantial ransom payments. Subsequent negotiations resulted in Hexi being recognized as a demilitarized zone free from warfare.

Although Sogdiana was incorporated into the Hephthalite Empire during the fifth and sixth centuries, it retained considerable political autonomy and virtually complete economic independence. This situation was made possible by the distinctive administrative practices of



the Hephthalites, which were influenced by their nomadic traditions. The Hephthalites effectively utilized the economic potential and commercial expertise of the settled populations under their rule [5:146]. At the same time, they created favorable conditions for economic activity and protected the interests of local principalities.

The extensive territory controlled by the Hephthalites opened new opportunities for trade and diplomacy. Moreover, the Hephthalites themselves gradually adapted to urban life and increasingly resided in cities. Their military strength and well-armed forces maintained internal stability throughout the empire. The security of merchant caravans and diplomatic missions was ensured by these military units.

The Hephthalites' policy of allowing local rulers considerable freedom in conducting external relations had both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, rulers of Central Asian principalities were able to develop independent trade and diplomatic relations with foreign states while merely paying tribute and taxes to the Hephthalite rulers. On the negative side, envoys from Central Asia often lacked sufficient protection when dealing with powerful empires such as China. This vulnerability is reflected in the cautious behavior of diplomats and their efforts to secure imperial favor through lavish and expensive gifts.

Overall, the Hephthalite period created favorable conditions for economic integration among the peoples of Central Asia. The Hephthalite rulers generally refrained from interfering in the internal affairs of local states such as Sogdiana, Fergana, Chach, Ustrushana, and Tokharistan, thereby facilitating their active participation in international relations [1:248]. Furthermore, the Hephthalites' role in protecting Central Asian territories from Sasanian aggression contributed significantly to the stability and development of local political entities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the foreign policy of the Hephthalite state has received substantial attention in German historiography. German scholars have focused primarily on issues related to the origins, migrations, political organization, and diplomatic activities of the Hephthalites. Studies of Hephthalite foreign relations have largely been conducted within the broader context of Sasanian history, largely because of the abundance of available sources and scholarly research concerning the Sasanian Empire. As a result, much of the relevant literature is devoted to Iranian history. Nevertheless, these studies provide valuable insights into previously unexplored aspects of Hephthalite history and offer opportunities for a deeper understanding of the political, diplomatic, and military dynamics of Central Asia during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

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