

The Northern Nomads, Sogdiana and Choresmia

And First Usage of the Name *Hun*

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The steppes of Kazakhstan and the land extending to western Mongolia had been inhabited, albeit sparsely, by Iranian speaking nomads, but by the fourth century they were being replaced by Altaic speaking peoples from the east. Presumably the ancestors of the Turks were living in the Altai mountains and they learned the art of horse riding from neighboring Iranian nomads. Be that as it may, we first hear of the name Hun in the fourth century in a Sogdian letter found in Dunhuang in Gansu province of China. Presumably this name, pronounced Hun, is the same as that of the Chionites who invaded Iran from Central Asia a short time later. It is a new designation and probably refers to a new group of Altaic language speakers joined, as usual, with other peoples in a nomadic confederacy. Whether this name should be attached to the Xiongnu of Chinese sources, who vanished from records several centuries previously, is debatable but it is clear that the Iranian nomads on the steppes, the Sarmatians and their subdivisions such as the Alans and the As, were being replaced by Altaic speakers.

Just as formerly Western sources had called all the nomads on the steppes Scythians, now the generic name for the nomads became Huns. The Xiongnu empire which had been such a formidable foe of the Han dynasty had disintegrated and various nomadic tribes lived in the vast area from the Pacific Ocean to south Russia with none exercising dominion over the others. But similar to the migrations of the Germanic tribes in Europe at the fall of the Roman Empire, the Altaic speaking nomads began their forays to the west and south in the fourth century. This period of the history of Central Asia might be designated that of the Altaic migrations. The Chionites (possibly pronounced Hyun) who moved through Sogdiana to Iran, where they probably were absorbed by the settled population, may have been the first wave, similar to the Huns who a short time later invaded Europe and under Attila established a short-lived state centered in Hungary.

Whether the Huns were descendants of the Xiongnu is uncertain, but they certainly were their successors on the steppes. And just as we find many names of Germanic tribes in Western sources, so many tribal names of Central Asian nomads have come down in various sources of the settled peoples. Two kinds of

movement of the tribes appears in history, either a billiard ball effect of one tribe pushing another ahead of it, or the travel through territory belonging to another tribe or settled folk. The latter seems to have been the case with the Chionites who went through Sogdiana on their way south, as did the Huns and the Avars also in their invasions of Europe. As usual, they gathered others on the way in a kind of confederacy, which was the normal manner of creating a steppe state. In Mongolia after the disintegration of the Xiongnu empire we hear nothing until the middle of the fourth century when a people called Ruanruan in Chinese sources dominate Central Asia. This designation probably was a derogatory nickname and we do not know what the nomads called themselves. They constantly fought against the northern Wei or Toba dynasty (386–534) in China and in 471, after several defeats at the hands of the Wei forces, the Ruanruan captured Khotan in the Tarim basin. The Hua people, whose name may have been pronounced *War*, hence related to the Avars at least by name, who nomadized in the Ili valley and the Tarim basin, were either conquered or became vassals of the Ruanruan. Earlier one chieftain of the Hua gave his name to that part of his people who moved west and invaded Sogdiana and Afghanistan where they were called Hephtalites. In Mongolia inner disputes among the Ruanruan gave an opportunity for their subjects the Turks, who had been settled in the Altai mountains and were iron workers according to legend, to overthrow the Ruanruan in 552. Some of the latter fled westward and, according to some scholars these were the Avars who invaded Europe a decade later. Whether it was remnants of the Ruanruan or another tribe pushed by the billiard ball effect, is uncertain, but from this time onward the steppes became the sphere of the Turks who had certain administrative qualities which enabled them to establish the first Turk empire or kaghanate.

The religion of the nomads of Central Asia were different forms of shamanism, but missionaries of the Manichaeans, Nestorian Christians and Buddhists began to penetrate the steppes at the end of this period. The art of the Altaic nomads was not the same as the old animal style of the Iranian nomads but it was similar, though cruder. Trade, of course, was vital for the nomads who imported grains and foodstuffs, as well as luxury objects, from the Chinese and the oases of the Tarim basin and Sogdiana. In return they sent horses, honey, furs and skins to the settled folk.

It should be noted that about the sixth century the iron stirrup spread all over the steppes and this gave the nomads a great advantage in warfare since it enabled them to don armor and use heavier weapons than previously. Huge herds of horses were raised by the nomads and their wealth was counted by the numbers of horses they had, much as camels among the Bedouin of Arabia. The tents of the nomads, which they carried with them, aroused the interest of settled people who wrote about the Manchus and the mobility of the nomads.

The Sogdian alphabet, was the origin of other alphabets which were devised as their own systems of writing for the Turks, Mongols and Manchus.

This period also may be called that of the Sogdian diaspora for not only merchants travelled afar but Sogdian colonies were established in various areas. The Ferghana valley and the Chach regions had been completely Sogdianized before this time and the new colonies were established to the north and east. To the north in Semirechie there were Sogdian colonies and to the east in Kashgar and along the northern Silk Route Sogdian colonies existed, as we learn from Chinese sources. In Dunhuang, present Gansu province, there was even a Sogdian village where the older generation had Sogdian names but the rest had taken Chinese names. This was an agricultural community growing millet and other cereals but trade too was important and much of the adult population was absent, engaged in trade. The Sogdians living there followed the native Sogdian Mazdaist religion, and one Chinese geographical text speaks of a temple of the worshipers of the fire god close to Dunhuang. Between Dunhuang and Khotan was a group of Sogdian settlements in the Shanshan region, formed in part by migrants from Samarkand (Kang) between 627 and 649. Farther east Sogdian settlements were located in the Ordos region of north China and in several Chinese, including the capital of Changan, towns there were quarters where Sogdians lived.

In Mongolia Sogdians advised the Turkish rulers and a Sogdian headed a Turkish diplomatic mission to the Byzantine court. So the Sogdians were not only the great traders and entrepreneurs all over Central Asia, they were also bearers of culture to the nomads and representatives of the nomads in dealing with settled states. The art of the oasis states of eastern Turkestan bears witness to the influence of the Sogdians. By the seventh century, however, the Sogdians had competition from the Persians who expanded their trading activities in Central Asia. The latter had one advantage over the Sogdians and that was the purity of their coinage.

Apparently the Sasanian government understood the necessity of maintaining monetary stability in their silver coinage such that Sasanian coins came to be accepted as common specie all the way to China. And with the silver came Sasanian merchants. Already before Islam then the Persian language and traders began to displace the Sogdians, although frequently the two cooperated in joint ventures. Under Islam, of course, Persian rapidly replaced Sogdian as the new lingua franca of Central Asia. Choresmia or Khwarazm at first did not keep pace with the flowering of Sogdiana for it seems to have suffered more from the nomadic invasions than its neighbor. But Khwarazm had an advantage over the Sogdians, for the former was a unified kingdom with old traditions and by the seventh century the Khwarazmians were ready to emulate the Sogdians in sending trading missions principally to the northwest. Trade in furs, honey,

beeswax from the Volga and amber from the Baltic region became the main imports to Khwarazm and they were transhipped to Iran where especially furs fetched high prices. In turn the Khwarazmians exported locally made silver plates and ewers which were highly prized by various peoples living in north Russia. In this period irrigation canals from the Oxus River were expanded and more land was brought under cultivation than in the preceding centuries.

A local form of Mazdaism, similar to but not identical to the Sogdian form, held sway in Khwarazm but Christian missionaries also were active in that land. The art too was similar to but not identical with Sogdian art and the remains of wall paintings are not of the same high artistic quality as those in Sogdiana. There is no information about trade competition between the Khwarazmians and Sogdians but from all available evidence it seems there was a tacit, if not formal, understanding between the Khwarazmians and the Sogdians that the former would handle trade to the northwest, southwest and west, while the Sogdians controlled trade to the east, southeast and northeast. Traces of Khwarazmian merchant colonies are much fewer than for the Sogdians but this may be the result of unfavorable climatic conditions not conducive to the preservation of material remains.

Fortunately in Islamic times a famous native of Khwarazm, al-Biruni in the eleventh century, left information about the past of his land and texts in the Khwarazmian language. But the texts in Arabic script have survived, which is not the case with Sogdiana. In Islamic times both Khwarazm and Sogdiana continued to flourish and both became important centers of Islamic learning as well as lands of commerce.

