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THE ROLE OF SASSANIDS IN PROTECTING EASTERN BORDERS OF IRAN IN THE FACE OF KUSHANS, HEPHTHALITES, AND TURKS

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ABSTRACT

During the Sassanid era, the activities of three main powers in the east of Iran made serious challenges for the Sassanid government. The Kushan Kingdom conquered the entire territories of Yuezhian and Tocharian and took the control of a large land between Seyhun and Ceyhun. The most powerful Kushani king, Kanishka, promulgated Buddhism and until the entrance of Islam to this land, Buddhism was the dominant religion in this territory. The Hephthalites, or the White Huns, were nomadic tribes who intruded on Iranian northwestern borders since the mid-4th century A.D. The Hephthalites showed great resistance against the Sassanids. However, in the mid-6th century, at the time of Khosrow I's reign, the Sassanids defeated the Hephthalites. The threatening presence of Turk tribes in Mesopotamia began around the fifth century A.D. The Turks migrated to the western lands in great populations at the time of Khosrow Anushirvan's reign. After the fall of the Hephthalites, they not only came to political power but also obtained great economic power since the longest Caravan route that connected the west to the east was controlled by them. The Turks were ultimately defeated by Bahram Chobin during the Sassanid Empire era and the reign of Hormizd IV.

Keywords: Sassanids, Kushans, Hephthalites, Turks.

INTRODUCTION

The Sassanid territory was threatened and invaded by various tribes and states during their 426-year reign (226-652 A.D). Yet, it can be said that the unity and integrity of the main part of this territory lasted until the invasion by Arabs. The eastern borders of Sassanids were always threatened by tribes whose main goal was migration from the eastern parts of Central Asia to the west and peripheries of Iranian borders. In addition to political and military threats, these tribes imposed excessive pressure on the Sassanids by dominating important economic routes such as the Silk Road and controlling the profitable trade by the East-West route. These invading tribes, with significant cultural and racial diversity, greatly influenced the region in terms of ethnic, religious, and linguistic effects. The most important tribes were the Kushans, Hephthalites, and Turks. The Buddhist kingdom and civilization of Kushans, in addition to cultural achievements in the region, were a serious barrier to the influence of the Zoroastrian religion in the far eastern regions. The presence of nomadic Hephthalites also made Sassanids numerous headaches and pushed them to the brink of collapse. Finally, in alliance with the Turks, the Sassanids annihilated the Hephthalites. However, the Turk allied forces, with the increase in their political and economic power, gradually became a new enemy to the Sassanids.

The Kushan Kingdom (60-375 A.D), the Parthians and Sassanids neighbors from the east, was established by the Yuezhi tribe (Christensen, 2011). The Yuezhi are of Scythian race. The Scythians were Iranian nomadic tribes who lived in the lands bounded to the north by Siberian plains, to the south by the Caspian Sea and Aral Lake, to the east by Chinese Turkistan, and to the west by the Danube River. The Achaemenid Behistun Inscription also mentions four groups of Scythians: 1. Sakā paradrāya/Dahae (Scythians on the other side of the sea: Crimea, Danube), 2. Saka tigraxaudā/Massagetae (Tigraxauda, Scythians beyond Seyhun), 3. Sakā haumavargā/Amyrgians (Scythians of Homneush, Scythians beyond Ceyhun), and 4. Sakā para Sugudam (Scythians beyond Sogd) (Kent, 1953: p 133). according to Belenitskii (1985, 123), at the end of the 8th century BC, the Scythians were scattered in North Central Asia and South Siberia, North of the Caspian Sea and west to the Caucasus Mountains. According to him, and René Grousset, the race, language, and thoughts of the Scythians were totally Iranian. The nomadic Scythians advanced in the eastern borders of the Parthians in the 2nd century BC and conquered modern Kandahar and Sistan. In this era, they made big problems for the Parthians and pushed them to the brink of collapse in a way that Farhad II (128-137 BC) was killed fighting against the Scythians and his successor, Ardavan II (123-128 BC) was lethally wounded in the battle with the Scythians. It was in Mehrdad II's (87-123 BC) era that the Parthians managed to defeat the Scythians and he succeeded in bringing the Scythians of Sistan under the command of the Parthians (Rene, 1998, 7).

After being expelled from Forghaneh Valley, invaded Bakhtar and Rakhj provinces, and after that Zaranj/Zarang was named Sakestan. The Scythians or Indo-Sakas established a kingdom in this area and became tributaries of the Parthian government. During the first century BC, a branch of Parthians replaced the Scythians. Gondfars or Gondfar, who came to the reign about the year 20 A.D. was one of the powerful kings of this branch/dynasty. Apparently, he refrained to obey the Parthians and tried to establish an independent government. Coins bearing his name have been found in Sistan, Herat, Kandahar, and even Punjab (Christensen, 2011, 11).

a little while after Gondfars reign, Kandahar and Punjab were conquered by the Scythian Yuezhi tribe who were known as Kushans. The Kushan kings had almost the entire Yuezhi and Tocharian territories under their control (Christensen, 2011, 12). Kushans entered history in the mid-first century A.D. with their King kujula-kadphise (Girshman, 2008, 307-308). Among the very important phenomena in the Kushan Kingdom was the expansion and influence of Buddhism in Central Asia (Christensen, 2011, 12). In fact, Buddhism entered the eastern areas of Iran during the reign of one of the Maurya Empire named Asoka (237-260 BC). Some coins have been found from one of the local kings of Rakhj and Zarang which were minted in the second half of the second century BC and contain Buddhist motifs. However, Kanishka (151-?), the most famous Kushan King assigned Buddhism as the official religion of his country. He put much effort to promulgate this religion. His name has been mentioned in Central Asian Buddhist documents and Khotani-Scythian texts and Takhari, Uyghur, and Sogdian dialects (Behzadi,

2012, 165). Balkh's Nobahar Temple, which was mistakenly called the Nobahar Fire Temple in Islamic times, is a Buddhist place of worship and belongs to the same period (Sami, 1963, 232).

Kushan Kingdom was weakened at the time of two Sassanid kings, Hormizd II (302-310 A.D) and Shapur II (310-379 A.D), and finally surrendered to the Sassanid. At the time of Bahram/Varharam III's reign (388 A.D) in which the Hephthalites ruled that area, at least a great portion of the former territory of Kushans was annexed to the Sassanid's Iranian territory (Zarrinkoob, 2011, 449). However, Buddhism, which was promulgated by Kushan Kings, remained in the region. Although Buddhists were harassed by the Sassanids and their temples were destroyed by them, they clearly continued to live until much later (Emeric, 2008, 336). The coins obtained from Pirouz Shah, the ruler of Khorasan, on which the name Buddha is written beside Mazda's name (Sami, 1963, 23), if not a sign of Buddhist inclinations of the Sassanid ruler, is indicative of the influence and development of Buddhism in Khorasan region.

The foreign factors for the collapse of the Kushan Kingdom are almost clear, among which, the expansion of Iranian territory in the early Sassanid era, the establishment of the Gupta Dynasty in India, and the invasion of a new wave of nomadic tribes from Central Asia can be named. All these events and incidents did not occur at once, as the first attack by Sassanid on the Kushan Kingdom, or at least their first pressure on Kushans, occurred in the first years of the 3rd century A.D., while the Gupta Dynasty and the emergence of nomadic tribes in the political arena occurred in the first half of 4th century A.D. (Belenitskii, 1985, 165).



Invasion of Hephthalite Nomads from Central Asia:

The Hephthalites, or White Huns, intruded the northeastern borders of Iran in the mid-4th century A.D. They invaded southward from Syr Darya and Amu Draya and managed to expand their borders by Hamoon Lake and Kabul periphery (Altheim, 2014, 4-5). Some researchers consider the Hephthalites to be the main reason behind the disappearance of Kushans. According to these researchers, the Hephthalites first settled in a part of Kushan lands as allies of the Sassanid Empire (Girshman, 2009, 357). Apparently, like Kushans, a population of Hephthalites advanced toward the northern areas of the Indian subcontinent and struggled with the forces of the Gupta Kingdom (320-550 A.D). The Guptas managed to stop the Hephthalites' advancement in central India (Belenitskii, 1985, 166-167).

The Hephthalites' relationship with the Sassanids was not always friendly, and they did not continue to be allies. They started battles several times. the Hephthalites showed great resistance against the Sassanids' invasion and attacks. During one of these invasions, the Sassanid King, Pirouz Shah (459-484 A.D) was killed and his successors had to pay heavy compensation to the Hephthalite King. During this period, the Sassanid Empire underwent heavy defeats. However, in the mid-6th century A.D, at the time of Khosrow I (53-570 AD), Iran regained its economic and military power and initiated its attacks against the Hephthalites (Belenitskii, 1985, 166-167).

Gobl, based on numismatical evidence, considers the Hephthalites to be among the original Iranian tribes (Gobl, 1967). However, through an investigation of the contents of some Byzantine, Sassanid, and Arabic documents, it seems that the Hephthalites (White Huns) are not only a tribe with Hun race (Turk) but also they are exactly the mother ethnic group of the Huns. Since the later migrations of Huns have occurred from northeastern areas of Iran, which is the territory under influence of the Hephthalites, it seems that not only the European Huns, but Avars, Khazars, and proto-Bulgarians were also part of the Hun tribes union. The Byzantian sources also, like the Arabic ones, consider the Hephthalites to be Turkic language. The linguistic evidence remaining from that era, proper names, and nicknames also approve this claim (Altheim, 2014, 4-5). Procopius, the Byzantine historian, writes about the Hephthalites: “It is true that the Hephthalites are from the Hun race, but they have not included themselves in the Huns we know, and are by no means not related to them. Unlike other Hun tribes, they are not nomadic and settled in prosperous lands since a long time ago. Among all Huns, they are the only tribe that has pale skin and is not ugly. Their lifestyle is also different from other Huns. They, like others, do not live savage life. They are under the ruling of a single king and have a government with an ordered organization that supports justice and fairness and implement it among themselves and other adjacent groups” (Belenitskii, 1985, 168).



Among the physical traits of the Hephthalite noblemen is the transformation of the skull (Frye, 1984, 34) some evidence of which can be seen on the coins and in the graves. This type of skull has been also seen in Caucasian graves and graves in other areas, which are attributed to the Hephthalites. Among other traits of Hephthalites, which are mentioned in the Chinese sources, is the polygamy of women which is common among the people of Tibet. According to this evidence, some researchers have considered the origin of Hephthalites to be the Badakhshan mountains.

Anyways, the racial and linguistic mix of the White Huns (Hephthalites) with other Hun tribes makes it difficult to comment on whether they were Iranians or Turks. But undoubtedly, they were a part of tribes that, under the name of Huns Union, were a great threat to the two great empires of the ancient time, the Sassanids and the Romans. The events of the time of Ghobad I's reign (488-496 AD for the first term, and 499-531 AD for the second time) greatly reveal the extent of the Huns Union. While the Hephthalites are allies of Ghobad I and this Sassanid king has come to power with their help, another group of Huns (Yellow Huns?) is threatening the northern borders of the Sassanid empire. Finally, Ghobad I, after a long battle, could repel the invasion of the Huns in the north of Iran (Zarrinkoob, 2011, 466-469).

In a Syrian chronicle, during the events in 395 AD, it is reported that: “In this year, the damned tribe of Huns invade the Roman land. They trampled Armenia (Sophene), Mesopotamia, Syria, and Cappadocia to Galatia. After taking many as prisoners, they returned to their own land. They entered the Iranian Kingdom territory along Tigris and Euphrates and reached the Iranian capital. They did not harm it, but they destroyed many villages on the riversides of Tigris and Euphrates, killed many, and took many as prisoners. When the Huns realized that the Iranian Army is coming for them, they escaped. Iranians chased them and killed a group of them. They

confiscated all the booty that the Huns had plundered and in addition, freed eighteen thousand prisoners. They took the prisoners to their own cities, Seleucia and Ctesiphon. The prisoners stayed there for a long time. The Iranian King ordered to set a pension for them: Bread, wine, and oil. From among these eighteen thousand prisoners, only a few stayed (the first ten thousand). Iranians sent them back to their homes and lands. When Yazdgerd reigned, he sent one thousand three hundred and thirty people back to their homes. The rest of the captives died due to the epidemic of dysentery, the pressures, and the hardship that the damned Huns inflicted on them. All this is said to us by the prisoners. Also, the Christians and monks cited it. The latter clerics have reported about the favors given to them according to their testimonies and their gratitude towards King Yazdgerd, the virtuous, Christian, and blessed among the kings, may his memory be blessed and his end be better than his beginning because he did good to the poor and helpless during his lifetime (Altheim, 2014).

What is important is the rapid advancement of the Huns in Western Asia and the fact that they have been a threat to the two powers of the ancient world (Iran and Rome). The Sassanid Empire had to repel the Huns and defend its land against them on the eastern and western sides. The importance of this common enemy of Iran and Rome becomes more evident when the Sassanid king, Pirouz, managed to force one of the emperors of Eastern Rome (called Zeno) to financially aid the war against the Hephthalites. While trying to get Zenon's support, Pirouz reminded him of the losses that the Huns had caused to Syria and Rome in the days of emperors Arcadius, and Honorius (Altheim, 2014).



The intrusion of the Turks, the Last Serious Threat to the Sassanid Territory by the Nomadic Tribes:

Arabs called all nomadic warriors living in the northern areas of Sogd as Turks. Therefore, many of the tribes living in Central Asia are mistakenly called Turks while they have never been Turks (Reza, 1986). The word 'Turk' means strong and firm. Kononow, the Russian scientist, believes that later this name was given to a group of Turkic tribes. These tribes migrated to the Gobi Desert around 439 AD. According to Barthold, the assumptions on activities of Turkic tribes in the western side of Central Asia before Christ and early AD years have not been confirmed, yet. It is only by citing the classic ancient works that it can be emphasized that, in addition to Indo-Europeans, the Greeks also knew other tribes that belonged to another group. Even based on the Orkhon inscriptions, it cannot be said with certainty what tribes have been specified as Turks at that time. Furthermore, we do not know how the domain of reputation of this name (Turk) gradually reached where it was given to various ethnicities (Barthold, 1997). Since around the 5th century AD, i.e., in the mid-Sassanid era, Turkic-Speaking people, who were scatted from Amu Darya to Ceyhun, emerged in the Transoxiana for the first time (Belenitskii, 1985). The Turks advanced toward the western lands in great numbers at the time of Khosrow I (531-579 AD) and passed through the eastern and northern lands of the Caspian Sea. They battled Huns and Avars on the north of the Caspian Sea, and Oghurs on the east of this sea, and after defeating them, they reached the banks of the Volga River. From 567 to 571 AD, the Turks conquered the northern lands of the Caspian Sea and went for the Northern banks of the Black Sea to establish close relationships with the Eastern Roman Empire. Later, this close relationship turned into an

alliance between the Turkish State of the Western Khaganate and the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Heraclius in Eastern Rome. At that time, Khosrow II and then, Ghobad II (591-628 AD) reigned the Sassanid Empire (Reza, 1986). This way, the Turks extended their tiny empire from the Chinese borders to the Iranian and Roman borders. During the next centuries, they absorbed the Iranian elements of the Transoxiana including the Sogdian, Kharazm, and Scythian nations, and were influenced by the culture and customs of these nations. The Uyghur Turks invaded Luoyang County in China in 762 AD and stayed there for a while. With the familiarity of Böğü Qaghan, the Turk leader, with the Manichaeen Sogdians who lived in that county and promulgated Manichaeism in China since 694 AD, he converted to this religion. After returning to his homeland, he took some Manichaeen clerics to his capital city, Ordu-Baliq. The trilingual inscription of Qarbal Qosum which was discovered in Northern Mongolia, written in Sogdian, Uyghur, and Chinese languages, is the historical proof of Turks' inclination to Manichaeism (Gharib, 2007).

The emergence of Turks against the Sassanids coincided with the battles of this dynasty's kings with the Hephthalites. Khosrow Anoushirvan (501-579 AD) took advantage of the enmity between the Hephthalite princes and captured the Hephthalite principalities in the south of Amu Darya around 557-558 AD. At the same time, the Turks also advanced on the north of this river, however, they failed to totally conquer the Hephthalite territory. The first peaceful communications and relationships between the Turks and Khosrow Anoushirvan did not last long. Probably, a part of such an incident root back to Khosrow's expectation to control the trade route between Central Asia, China, India, and the Maghreb. Accordingly, the subsequent relations between Turks and Iranians went cold (Frye, 1984).

However, the short alliance between the Sassanids and the Turks ended to the detriment of the Hephthalites in a way that they had to fight on two fronts, or sometimes three fronts, against the Turks, Iranians, and Indians. The first region conquered by the Turks was Tashkent. After that, Khosrow Anoushirvan marched to Khorasan and fought the Hephthalites. After his success in the annihilation of the Hephthalites, Iran felt threats from the Turks. Subsequently, the dissension between the Turks and Iranians, which had remained hidden until then, was revealed and gradually became irreconcilable. The Turks, after conquering the lands in the north of Iran, gained control over important trade routes. It was then that they added Sogd to their territory. After the collapse of the Hephthalites, the Turks gained not only great political power but significant economic power since they took control over the longest Caravan route that connected the east to the west. This route extended from Kashgar to southern Central Asia and Khorasan. This important highway passed through Khorasan, Rey, and Hamedan and extended to Nusaybin (Iran-Rome border) and Constantinople (Reza, 1986).

The abovementioned economic and political reasons led to the alliance of neighbors of Iran against the Sassanids at the time of Khosrow Anoushirvan's successor, Hurmizd IV (579-590 AD). Husham ibn Abdulmalik states that: "Turkan rebelled against Hurmizd, and in the 11th year of Hormizd's reign, Shabeh Shah, the great king of Turks, marched with 300,000 men and advanced to Badghis and Herat. The Emperor of Rome also went to the Syrian desert with eighty



thousand warriors to fight with Hormizd. The Khazarian king also went to Darband with a large group and made numerous destructions (Nöldeke, 1980). Undoubtedly, such a great alliance was aimed at totally annihilating the Sassanid Kingdom which had previously annihilated a powerful rival as Hephthalites. The Turks' defeat from the Sassanid Kingdom occurred at the time of Hormizd IV (579-590 AD) by Barham Chobin. It seems that after this conflict, the power of the Turks collapsed and they could not be considered a serious threat to the Sasanian territory until the decline of the Sassanid government and the Arab invasion (Zarrinkoob, 2011).

Conclusion:

Migration of the nomadic tribes of Central Asia to the west in various historical periods of Iran has been significant and a topic that deserves investigation. This wave imposed excessive pressure on the Sassanid government and perhaps, it can be considered among the top repetitive challenges the Sassanids faced on their eastern borders and one of the important foreign factors in weakening of the Sassanids. This continuous migration and invasion, which lasted from the beginning years of the Sassanid era to its last years made the Sassanid kings ally with other nomadic tribes to confront their threats, which themselves later became a serious threat to the Sassanid Empire. Yet, the Sassanids managed to remove these threats and maintain their approximate borders on the east. With the conquest of Iran by the Arabs and the collapse of the Sassanids who were always a barrier to the invasion of eastern nomadic tribes, migration of these tribes into the Iranian plateau was initiated, which is proven by the emergence of various Turk



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