

The Making of Turan: The Fall and Transformation of the Iranian East in Late Antiquity

Contemporaneously with the fall and transformation of the Roman West, the Iranian Empire yielded its East to Hun—and later Turk—conquerors. This article traces the development of post-Iranian regimes through the dynamic interplay of nomadic and sedentary political institutions in the fourth through early seventh centuries. The conquerors adopted Iranian institutions, integrated the Iranian aristocracy, and presented themselves as the legitimate heirs of the kings of kings in a manner reminiscent of post-Roman rulers. At the same time, however, the Huns and the Turks retained the superior military resources of nomadic imperialism, included the Iranian East in trans-Eurasian networks, and distinguished themselves as ruling ethno-classes tied to the steppe. The resulting hybrid political culture came to be known as Turan.

In the Mediterranean, Near East, and East Asia, Late Antiquity was an era in which extra-imperial elites conquered and transformed empires in accordance with their own ambitions, traditions, and institutional resources. From Gibbon onward, historians have regarded the relationship between the rise of Germanic groups in Roman territory and the decline, fall, and transformation of the empire as a defining question of the discipline. Studies of the nature of the fourth-century migrations, the variable adaptation of imperial institutions and infrastructure, and the emergence of ethno-classes and kingdoms have produced sophisticated accounts of post-Roman political orders that foreground the dynamic interplay of barbarian and Roman agents. But, even as the field has shifted eastward, the transformation of the Roman West into early medieval Europe continues to be viewed in isolation from developments elsewhere in Eurasia. At the same time as the first Germanic groups crossed

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the Danube, Rome's eastern counterpart, the Iranian Empire, encountered new nomadic enemies from the Eurasian steppe that rapidly conquered its northeastern territories. The Huns were the first group of warrior elites to enter Iranian territory, but not the last: in the middle of the sixth century, the Turks followed the same route to incorporate the Iranian regions of Central Asia into their qaghanate. The ensuing transformations deserve to be considered alongside the fall of the Roman West as contemporaneous constructions of regimes of extra-imperial elites. The eastern and western conquests were, after all, interrelated: the Huns that pressed the Germanic groups over the Roman frontiers formed the westernmost branch of a larger fourth-century migration of nomadic elites from China's northern frontiers that included the conquerors of the Iranian East. The simultaneous loss of the Roman West and the Iranian East was part of a general narrowing of imperial horizons in Late Antiquity, with the consequence that both empires intensified the focus of their rule in their core territories at the expense of their peripheries. Viewing the eastern conquerors and their successor states alongside their western counterparts places the traditional collapse of the Roman Empire in a novel, global perspective.

Much as the elites of the post-Roman West combined Roman and Germanic institutions to produce the new orders characteristic of the fifth and sixth centuries, the conquerors of the Iranian East amalgamated the traditions of nomadic and Iranian imperialism to create a hybrid political culture that defined its constituent regions throughout the latter half of the first millennium and beyond. To designate the societies across the historic northeastern frontiers of the Iranian Empire, the term "Turan" became current in Late Antiquity. From its origin in the mythical-historical accounts of the late Sasanian court, the cultural-geographical concept differentiated the societies of Central Asia, whose political elites were nomadic, from the traditionally sedentary societies of Iran. It is in the great tenth-century epic of Firdawsī that Turan appears most clearly and consistently as the geographical antithesis of Iran.¹ It was the abode of the nomadic enemies of the Iranian Empire, from the mythical king Afrasyab to the historical Huns and Turks. Its environment comprised harsh steppe and desert. Its inhabitants practiced varieties of demon- and idol-worship—garbled characterizations of Indo-Iranian and Buddhist religious traditions—that distinguished them from the Zoroastrian, and later Muslim, population of Iran. And yet Iran and Turan were inextricable. The absence of obvious geographical, as opposed to cultural, boundaries made the frontiers between the two ambiguous and porous. The leitmotif of

¹ Firdawsī, *Šāhnāme* 7: 242 and 8: 64, 186, and 296 (ed. Khaleghi-Motlagh 1987–2008), to give only a handful of representative references to a concept ubiquitous in the work.

the account of Firdawsī—and of the late Sasanian mytho-historiographers—was the dialectical relationship of two civilizations that, for all their marks of distinction, were entwined in history and myth. Without endorsing its essentializing of the environment and culture of Central Asia, the present article suggests that the idea of Turan effectively characterized the remaking of nomadic political order in Iranian terms in Late Antiquity. The exponents of the concept suggested that the Turanians could not only draw on steppe sources of military power that surpassed those available to the Iranian court, but also legitimate their rule in an Iranian mythical–historical framework, albeit in a distorted or subverted form. Implicit in accounts of Turan was an understanding of the capacity of nomads to adapt Iranian institutions to their own purposes.

The Conquests of the Iranian East

The Iranian East designates the complex of territories the early Sasanians conquered from the Kushans in the middle of the third century. If the Kushan kingdom at its height under Kanishka in the second century CE extended from Sogdia to northern India, the early third-century Kushans were confined to the regions of Bactria and Gandhara, with strongholds such as Surkh Kotal and Begram in between.² It was this archipelago of agriculturally productive regions and mercantile routes spanning the Hindu Kush that the early Sasanians incorporated into the Iranian Empire. By circa 270, Shapur I (reigned 242–270) could claim to rule “the territory of the Kushans (*Kušanšahr*) as far as Peshawar.”³ But Kušanšahr retained political, economic, and social structures that distinguished its regions from the rest of the Iranian Empire. Its elites obtained their own ruling dynasty: the Kushano–Sasanian sub-kingdom ruled from Balkh on behalf of the Sasanian kings of kings. Iranian ruling elites preserved the gold coinage, Indo-Iranian symbolism, Bactrian and Brahmi scripts, and Buddhist institutions characteristic of Kushan political culture, even as they introduced the silver coinage, peculiar symbolism, Middle Persian script, and Zoroastrian institutions characteristic of the Iranian order.⁴ The concept of the “Iranian East” is deliberately amorphous, as the boundaries

² Stavisky 1986, 35–42.

³ *Inscription of Shapur I on the Ka'ba-ye Zardusht* (ed. and trans. Huyse 1999, 1: 23). The current consensus places an initial conquest of Bactria during the reign of Ardashir I, with an expansion into and beyond the Hindu Kush under Shapur I; see Grenet 2005, 129–30. Schindel 2012, however, dates the beginning of Kushano–Sasanian coinage to circa 300, a half-century later than the traditional date.

⁴ Shenkar 2014b, 76–79, 185; Schindel 2015, 153–64. Stavisky 1986, 198–200, argued for the expansion of Zoroastrianism at the expense of Buddhism under Iranian rule. The archaeology of the two religions in these regions merits reconsideration, especially in light of Shenkar's arguments.

of Iranian rule were indeterminate. With its center in Bactria, the further south into the valley of Kabul or Gandhara, or the deeper into the Hindu Kush one went, the weaker the remit and imprint of the Kushano–Sasanian court became. Still more difficult to define is the relationship of Kušānšahr to Sogdia. Geographically, Bactria was better connected with the cities north of the Amu Darya than to the south of the Hindu Kush, but despite the pretensions of Shapur I the Sasanians never managed to subordinate Samarkand, Bukhara, or other Sogdian centers. After the Huns and the Turks dismantled the political barriers separating Bactria from Sogdia, unprecedented levels of exchange ensued between societies on either side of the Hindu Kush and their counterparts to the north along the Zeravshan River.

In the latter half of the fourth century, the Iranian court yielded its northeastern territories to conquerors from the steppe. Shapur II (reigned 309–370) first encountered groups of nomadic warriors in Bactria in the 350s, and their arrival marked the beginning of nearly three centuries of contestation for control of the Iranian East.⁵ The conquerors were known to contemporaries as “Huns” (Sogdian *xwn*).⁶ The ethnonym—to the significance of which we shall return—communicated their claim to succeed the Xiongnu rulers whose empire on China’s Mongolian frontier had gradually collapsed in the first and second centuries CE. Some nomadic elites of the Xiongnu tradition had conquered parts of the Chinese core to establish successor states, such as the Northern Han dynasty in the early fourth century. Others migrated westward to re-create their fortunes beyond the Tian Shan, in Sogdia and the Iranian East, especially after the rise of the Xianbei in the third century. In founding the Northern Wei dynasty that dominated northern China from 386 to 535, this competing group of nomadic elites eclipsed the various Xiongnu in the East, compelling at least some of them to move westward where they reappeared in Indo–European languages as Huns. Although some of the warriors arriving in the West entered Iranian service as mercenaries, the great bulk of nomadic elites pursued their own imperial projects.⁷ By the 380s at the latest, they began to conquer Iranian territories in the name of two distinct groups of Huns: the Kidarites and the Alkhan. Despite occasional brief re-conquests of Balkh, the Iranian East remained henceforth in the hands of Hun and, from

⁵ Amm. 16.9.4 (ed. and trans. Galletier and Fontaine 1968, 164); Howard-Johnston 2010.

⁶ de la Vaissière 2005a, 6–16; Atwood 2012.

⁷ Amm. 19.1.7, 2.3 (ed. and trans. Sabbah 1970, 108, 122, and 124). The option of serving the Sasanians, or aristocratic rebels, as mercenaries would continue to attract some Huns and Turks throughout the period in question: *Patmut’iwn Sebeosi* (ed. Abgaryan 1979, 70, and trans. Thomson 1999, 11); Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rikh al-rusul wa al-mulūk* (ed. De Goeje 1964–1965, 994; trans. Bosworth 1999, 304); Harmatta 2002.

the mid-sixth century, Turk rulers until the beginning of the Islamic conquests in the latter half of the seventh century.⁸

Bactria fell to the Huns in the 370s, when a group of Huns known as the Kidarites began to mint Kushano–Sasanian gold and copper coins at Balkh.⁹ They continued across the Hindu Kush—probably using the eastern route via Chitral—into Gandhara in the following decades, taking control of the crucial axes of trans-Eurasian mercantile characteristic of the exchange with South Asia.¹⁰ Shapur II responded with a major campaign to reestablish Iranian control south of the Hindu Kush from a base of operations in Kabul, but a definitive victory in the 380s yielded even this region to the Huns.¹¹ After the conquest of the Iranian East in its entirety, another Hun group known as the Alkhan appeared as a counterpart, or possible rival, to the Kidarites. It was the Alkhan that took the region of Kabul from the Sasanians, and the group gradually emerged as the dominant power south of the Hindu Kush, supplanting the Kidarites in Gandhara before the middle of the fifth century and penetrating into the Punjab and Kashmir.¹² The Alkhan kingdom contracted around Gandhara in the first half of the sixth century, while sharing the region of Kabul with the Nezak, another Hun group. The Kidarites, by contrast, consolidated their rule in the north, in Bactria and Sogdia. Roman and Chinese sources document the existence of a kingdom of Kidarite Huns including the regional centers of Samarkand and Balkh from circa 420 to 470.¹³ It contained the Sasanian kings of kings Yazdgird II and Wahram V and dispatched diplomatic envoys to the court of the Northern Wei. But its loss of Balkh to Iran in 467 irreparably weakened its authority. A third Hun group, the Hephthalites, gradually displaced the Kidarites in Bactria and Sogdia. After recovering Balkh from the Sasanians in 474, they expanded their realm northward into Sogdia—incorporated in 509—and eastward into the Tarim Basin until the arrival of the Turks in 560.¹⁴ The relationship of the

⁸ For episodes of Iranian control, see Gyselen 2003.

⁹ Cribb 2010, 100–102, 107–8; Vondrovec 2014, 45–46.

¹⁰ Chinese sources, including the Buddhist pilgrim Faxian, attest to Kidarite rule in Gandhara before the first decades of the fifth century, as well as conquest via Chitral: Kuwayama 1999, 38–39; Wan 2012, 251–52 and 259–64.

¹¹ Archaeological evidence for extensive destruction in Bamiyan and Begram has been connected with the confrontation of Shapur II with the Huns: Tarzi 2012, 86–87.

¹² Cribb 2010, 113–14, argues for a shift to Kidarite rule in Gandhara already in the closing decades of the fourth century, but Pfisterer 2013, 24–25, suggests the Alkhan ascendancy occurred only in the middle of the fifth century.

¹³ Grenet 2002, 205–9; de la Vaissière 2005b, 107–109. They suggest that the Kidarites came to rule Sogdia when they first appear literary sources. But given the evidence for the fourth-century conquests and Kidarite minting in Bactria already in the late fourth century the gradual emergence of a robust kingdom from the mid-fourth through the mid-fifth centuries seems more plausible.

¹⁴ de la Vaissière 2007, 121–124; Vondrovec 2014, 405–406.

various Hun groups to one another remains obscure. On the one hand, they distinguished themselves with particular ethnonyms and political symbols on their coinage.¹⁵ On the other hand, Hun rulers seem sometimes to have collaborated, or even at times to have practiced a “collective sovereignty,” without forming a unified empire like the polities of the Xiongnu or the Turks.¹⁶ Although divided into Kidarite, Alkhan, and Hephthalite ruling groups, they provided a measure of political and economic unity across the routes of the Hindu Kush from the late fourth through the sixth centuries.

The Turks incorporated the regions to the north and south of the Hindu Kush in a qaghanate that extended from the North Caucasus to Manchuria. The empire had emerged in the historic territories of the Xiongnu in the 550s under the rulership of a *qaghan*, the equivalent of the Xiongnu *chan-yu*, who aspired to unify the nomadic elites of the steppe and to subordinate the sedentary societies of Eurasia—either directly or indirectly—to their own imperial project.¹⁷ With the partition of the empire into two halves in 584, the eastern and western *qaghans* exercised rulership in tandem, often in competition for the loyalties of the Turk aristocracy. If the Huns had effectively stimulated trans-Eurasian trade through the routes through their realms, the Turks aimed at comprehensive control of the networks connecting the Mediterranean, the Near East, South Asia, and East Asia, in league with the Sogdian merchants with whom they were closely allied throughout their history.¹⁸ The Turks therefore sought immediately to secure Sogdia and Bactria. In alliance with the Sasanians, they vanquished the Hephthalites before 558 and occupied Sogdia, while the Iranian court reestablished its rule in Balkh from circa 560 to 591.¹⁹ In the late 580s, however, the Turks turned against their erstwhile Iranian allies to conquer Bactria and to place almost continuous pressure on Iran’s Caucasian and Central Asian frontiers until the Islamic conquests. It was likely in the final decade of the sixth century that the Turks subordinated the remaining Hephthalite, Alkhan, and Nezak sub-rulers in Eastern Bactria, Kabul, and Gandhara. In the 620s, moreover, the western *qaghan* Tong Yabghu (reigned 619–629) directly ruled both sides of

¹⁵ Vondrovec 2005, 186.

¹⁶ The simultaneous, coordinated issues of the four fifth-century kings Khingila, Javukha, Mehama, and Lakhana points to a form of co-rulership among the Alkhan, and the relations of different Hun groups could have been framed similarly: Pfisterer 2013, 83–100. For the concept of “collective sovereignty” in nomadic political orders, see Sneath 2007, 178–79.

¹⁷ Sinor 1990 remains the starting point for early Turk political history.

¹⁸ de la Vaissière 2005b, 199–210; Stark 2008, 293–314.

¹⁹ Menand. Prot. fr. 4 and 6 (ed. and trans. Blockley 1985, 46–47, 64–65); Al-Tabarī, *Ta’rikh al-rusul wa al-mulūk* (ed. De Goeje 1964–1965, 1.2: 895–96, and trans. Bosworth 1999, 152–53); Kuwayama 1989, 119; Gyselen 2002, 164–66; Alram 2013, 90–91; Vondrovec 2014, 561–63.

the Hindu Kush from a northern power base in Semirechie.²⁰ The authority of the *qaghans* disintegrated after his reign, but local Turk rulers, together with various intermediaries, continued to dominate the agriculturally productive districts and mercantile routes between Sogdia and Gandhara until the famed campaigns of Qutayba bin Muslim from 705 to 715.²¹

However distinct the political orders they created, the Huns and the Turks shared an imperialist tradition deriving from the Xiongnu.²² Unlike the Germanic groups that conquered the Roman West, the conquerors of the Iranian East arrived with their own imperial institutions and templates of state formation. What characterized the Xiongnu tradition was the seamless integration of nomadic and sedentary societies, political structures, and economies. Nomadic elites combined their pastoralist sources of military and economic power with agrarian sources of ideological and economic power, forming ruling aristocracies of unprecedented martial might that employed literate administrative professionals based in urban or semi-urban centers to exact larger, more reliable surpluses from agrarian communities than their purely pastoralist counterparts could have yielded.²³ The emergence of nomadic empires depended on the existence of sedentary political systems producing a surplus that could be expropriated and distributed among imperial elites. As Thomas Barfield argued influentially, the exaction of tribute from China consolidated the Xiongnu elite as a reproducible ruling class.²⁴ In the absence of a surplus to redistribute, nomadic states rapidly disintegrated, as their elites—always in possession of their own portable sources of social and economic power,

²⁰ *Jiu Tang Shu* (trans. Chavannes 1903a, 24); *Xin Tang Shu* (trans. Chavannes 1903b, 52). As Kuwayama 1999, 40 and 53, suggests, the Turks refrained from installing themselves south of the Hindu Kush, too great a distance from their pasturelands.

²¹ On these Turk rulers, see Baratova 1999 and Inaba 2005. The fragmentation of power enabled the Buddhist monasteries, such as the storied Nowbahar near Balkh, to become major landowners and sources of social and political power: de la Vaissière 2010.

²² Di Cosmo 1999, 7, uses the term “tradition” to distinguish the evolving set of sedimented institutions that nomadic imperialists employed from the purported ethnic or ecological continuities that scholars have frequently invoked to account for commonalities among Inner Asian nomadic groups.

²³ Honeychurch 2013; Rogers 2012; Honeychurch 2014; and Rogers 2015 provide surveys of the vast literature and recent evidentiary advances. If agricultural production has now been extensively documented at Xiongnu sites in Mongolia, the scale and comparative economic importance of an agrarian surplus remains debatable: Wright, Honeychurch, and Amartüvshin 2009; Rogers 2012, 242. On nomadic urbanism, see Rogers, Ulambayat, and Gallon 2005. On taxation and the difficulties in identifying imperial infrastructures in the steppe, see Wright 2015.

²⁴ Barfield 1981, 52–54; Barfield 2001. See Di Cosmo 2002, 168–74, 190, and Drompp 2005 for critiques of the secondary state formation paradigm that preserve the centrality of a surplus extracted from sedentary societies. Recent archaeological work has emphasized heightened stratification in the era of Xiongnu state formation, indicating the emergence of a ruling class: see Honeychurch 2014, 301–8.

horses, genealogical networks, and movable wealth—abandoned the service of their rulers.²⁵ But, if a regular influx of resources from sedentary societies was a prerequisite for nomadic imperialism, the interactive dimension of state formation on the steppe should not be emphasized to the exclusion of internal social and political dynamics. The rise of the Xiongnu depended at least as much on the ideological innovation of the supernaturally sanctioned office of the *chan-yu* and the military reorganization of the aristocracy into governable hierarchies.²⁶ At the same time, the Xiongnu adopted the institutions of agricultural production and bureaucratic administration within the territories of their empire. Far from conducting predatory or parasitical relations with sedentary societies, nomadic elites from the Xiongnu onward frequently developed the institutions of urbanism, agriculture, and literate administration. The challenge of nomadic imperialists was to incorporate sedentary societies and structures into their political order without undermining the pastoralist power of the ruling class. It was this process that the making of Turan entailed.

Iranian Institutions of Hun and Turk Rule

It is only on account of the prodigious minting of Hun and Turk rulers that a history of Central Asia in Late Antiquity can be written. Over the past several decades, numismatists have laid the foundations for historical research, identifying dynasties, determining their chronologies, and even mapping the territorial extent of their rule. Such work has been possible because the conquerors systematically continued to operate the mints of the Iranian court, as well as of the urban kingdoms of Sogdia. The very moment of transition is evident from a series of Sasanian silver drachms minted in the region of Kabul during the reign of Shapur III (reigned 383–388): the Alkhan Huns used the original dies of the imperial mint, adding only the inscription *alxanno* in Bactrian to indicate their usurpation of Iranian political authority.²⁷ As Shapur II had moved the center of coin production to Kabul in the 360s in order to fund the military campaigns against the Huns, the loss of minting staff, equipment, and bullion in the region came as a major setback to the court of Shapur III. It was compelled to use new dies and minters in its future production.²⁸ For the conquerors, however, the appropriation of imperial mints gave them control of a technology the early Sasanians had also used to consolidated their

²⁵ Miller 2014 importantly shifts emphasis away from nomadic rulers to their elites and sub-elites and the modalities of their “participation” in steppe empires.

²⁶ Di Cosmo 2002, 178–96.

²⁷ Schindel 2004, 282–84; Vondrovec 2005; Schindel 2014, 12–13; Vondrovec 2014, 177.

²⁸ Schindel 2004, 283.

rule. The consistent minting of silver coinage of nearly uniform design with a remarkably high degree of purity across the territories of Iran had facilitated the cohesion of the disparate aristocracies of the late Parthian period. As the thinnest, purest, most artful silver coins hitherto produced in the Near East, the Iranian drachm rapidly displaced other currencies, with the exception of the gold coinage of Kushan Bactria which the Sasanians maintained in the form of the Kushano–Sasanian scyphate. Recipients of salaries and gifts from the court therefore enjoyed a clear advantage over their peers who did not enter into the service of the kings of kings. And in taking possession of drachms, elites entered into the discursive framework of a court that articulated its ideology of Ērānšahr trans-regionally through its coinage. The drachm functioned like the Roman *solidus* as both a symbol of empire and an incentive to participate in its networks.

The Huns readily adapted this economic and communicative technology to their own imperial projects. Under their rule, Sasanian-style silver coins became the preferred currency in Central Asia from the Tarim Basin to Northern India.²⁹ To the south of the Hindu Kush, Kidarite rulers minted drachms according to Iranian models at various sites in the region of Kabul and Gandhara, from the 380s until the middle of the fifth century, while the Alkhan and Nezak dynasties continued to do so well into the sixth.³⁰ To the north of the Hindu Kush, the Hephthalites minted their own silver coinage at Balkh on the model of the third drachm series of Peroz after 474, and a distinctive Hephthalite style of coin evolved that remained in circulation for at least two centuries.³¹ Each of the dynasties issued base metal coins, and the Kidarites and Hephthalites produced gold scyphates in imitation of the Kushano–Sasanians. With the Turk conquest beginning in the late 550s, distinct dynasties become difficult to discern in the various silver coins local rulers minted on both sides of the Hindu Kush until the incorporation of these regions into the caliphate in the early eighth century.³² More often based in Sogdia than in the south, the Turk rulers adopted Sogdian silver and base metal coinage, without creating a uniform monetary system for either the qaghanate or its constituent circumscriptions of the kind the Hun dynasties developed for their

²⁹ Zeimal 1994; Skaff 1988.

³⁰ Vondrovec 2005; Vondrovec 2008; Alram and Pfisterer 2010, 15–27; Cribb 2010.

³¹ Zeimal 1994, 252–57; Alram and Pfisterer 2010, 27–36. Schindel 2004, 408, argues that the Hephthalites retained the services of Sasanian minters in Balkh, like the Alkhan in late fourth-century Kabul. Before the Hephthalite issues, Sasanian drachms countermarked with tamgas in Bactria from the 380s to the middle of the fifth century can perhaps be identified with an otherwise unknown Hun dynasty: Pugachenkova and Rtveladze 1990, 129–31.

³² On Turk coinage, see Smirnova 1981, 54–63, Baratova 1999; and Baratova, Schindel, and Rtveladze 2012, 45.

comparatively modest realms. The appropriation of Iranian mints enabled the Huns to consolidate the two forms of their rule simultaneously. Silver was used to compensate and to co-opt the nomadic warriors in their service. The emission of a familiar coinage, moreover, reassured indigenous elites of the stability of the economic order to which they were accustomed. Iranian aristocrats would continue to receive salaries and gifts even if they redirected their loyalties to a Hun. As we will see, the inscriptions and symbols they placed on their coins communicated with each of these distinct elite constituencies.

Indeed the Huns succeeded in integrating the conquered aristocracy into their networks and the Iranian administrative apparatus into their infrastructure. The Iranian elite—the aristocrats of Bactria, Kabul, and neighboring regions that had entered Sasanian service in the third century—came to exercise its authority on behalf of Hun and Turk rulers. Thanks to the publication of the Bactrian documents over the past decade, a continuous history of the land- and office-holding elite of the richly irrigated districts between Balkh and the Hindu Kush from the third through early eighth centuries can be reconstructed. This archive of upward of 150 letters, contracts, receipts, and Buddhist religious texts recorded on parchment derived from a community in the vicinity of the “city” (*šar*) of Rob, approximately 200 kilometers south of Balkh along the route over the Hindu Kush to Bamiyan.³³ Known as the *azadag*, “the free men,” like their counterparts in the Iranian core described as *āzād* in Middle Persian, they were organized in patrilineal houses that possessed ancestral territories engaged in the production of wine and livestock to supply the urban centers of Bactria.³⁴ They also held offices on behalf of the Iranian court, as *kadagbid*, the Bactrian version of the Middle Persian *kadag-xwadāy*, a high-ranking intermediary between the aristocracy of the region and the Iranian court, and as *šarab*, corresponding to the Middle Persian *šahrab*, provincial governors.³⁵ These aristocratic houses survived the conquest with their estates intact and even continued to exercise their official functions in the service of the Hephthalites in Balkh. The *kadagbid* of a subregion of Bactria known as Kadagān recurs in one document as the “*kadagbid* of the famous (and) prosperous *yab[ghu]* of

³³ The dating of the so-called Bactrian era used in the documents has been the subject of ongoing controversy, but the prevailing views place its beginning in the 220s CE, in either 224 or 227: De Blois 2006; Sims-Williams 2008, 88–89; Schindel 2014, 28–30. Archaeological evidence for the elite of Rob is thus far restricted to the monumental mural—of either a king or, more likely, the local deity Zūn—at Nigar: Klimburg-Salter 1993; Shenkar 2014a, 109–10, 130.

³⁴ For market-oriented production on aristocratic estates in the documents, see Rezakhani 2010, 198–99.

³⁵ Gyselen 1989, 28–29; Gyselen 2002. The holders of these offices in at least some of the Bactrian documents represented themselves in the Iranian manner, with the characteristic headgear, *kulāb*, which the court granted them: Lerner and Sims-Williams 2011, 100–101.

Hephthal,” suggesting the aristocratic governor had redirected his allegiance from the Sasanian to the Hephthalite ruler.³⁶ *Šarab*, too, are documented exercising their authority within Hephthalite territory in the fifth century and in Turk territory in the eighth.³⁷

The operation of *kadagbid* and *šarab* in Bactria after the conquests suggests that the administrative institutions they commanded continued to function. The primary tasks of provincial governors were the levying of the land tax and the marshaling of aristocratic cavalymen—the Middle Persian *aswār*, Bactrian *asbar*—on behalf of the Iranian court.³⁸ If the enlistment of Bactrian *azadag* in Hun or Turk armies remains unattested, the conquerors unambiguously appropriated the Iranian fiscal system. The Hephthalites collected a tax known in the documents as the “Hephthalite poll tax” (*ēbodāl tōg*), and the efficacy of their representatives placed unprecedented pressure on the Bactrian elite.³⁹ It is unclear whether the *tōg* was a Hephthalite introduction, or simply the continuation of the poll tax the Sasanians had levied, although the use of the adjective *ēbodāl* is suggestive of its distinctive character. In order to pay the tax, one house was constrained to sell its “ancestral estate” (*bonag pidorišt*) for the sum of nine dinars.⁴⁰ During visits to Rob, the Hephthalites collected fees in silver drachms and gold dinars in place of the provisions the inhabitants were expected to supply and fined them for various eventualities, such as the death of a Hephthalite horse.⁴¹ In the middle of the seventh century, the Turks collected not only the *tōg*, but also the land tax (*uarg*, the equivalent of Middle Persian *harg*, whence the Arabic term *ḥarāj*).⁴² Renamed the “tax of the *qaghan*” (*khaganag tōg*), its collection clearly asserted the sovereignty of the distant Turk ruler, exercised through intermediaries. The post-Iranian polities rested on fiscal foundations no less robust than those the Iranian Empire had enjoyed, and the imperial administrative apparatus was adapted to the distinct demands and requirements of the Huns and the Turks.

³⁶ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2007, 124–25 (ja).

³⁷ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2012, 50–51 (J), 116–17 (V).

³⁸ For an example of the latter process in the documents, see *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2007, 68–69 (ca).

³⁹ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2012, 44–45 (I), 48–55 (J).

⁴⁰ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2012, 48–51 (J). The Bactrian term *bonag* corresponds with the Middle Persian *bun* used to describe patrimonial estates elsewhere in the Iranian Empire, notably in the leather documents from the region of Qom: see Macuch 2007, 253–55.

⁴¹ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2012 164–65 (al).

⁴² *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2012, 74–77 (Nn). Arabic documents from Bactria are the earliest attestations of *ḥarāj*, suggesting the term was first adopted in Central Asia before its introduction to the Near East: see Khan 2007, 209–10. The fiscal administration in the Iranian East was therefore sufficiently complex to inspire the conquering Arabs to adapt its terms to their entire empire.

Like the rulers they displaced, they minted coins with the aim not only of compensating the nomadic and landed aristocrats in their service, but also of collecting their revenues in silver and/or gold.

To command the processes of minting and taxation and to manage provincial aristocrats, the Huns and Turks ruled from the cities—Bactrian *šar*, Middle Persian *šahrestān*—that had served as Iranian administrative centers.⁴³ The claim of the Roman historian Procopius that the Hephthalite Huns distinguished themselves from other “barbarians” through their occupation of cities can now be substantiated with documentary, sigillographic, and archaeological evidence.⁴⁴ In the Bactrian documents, Balkh remained a focal point of regional economic and political transactions, suggesting the *šar* continued to function as the locus of political authority after the conquests.⁴⁵ The Kidarite Huns organized their campaigns against the Sasanians from Balkh in the 370s before the Hephthalites occupied the city in the middle of the fifth century, perhaps after a brief Iranian reconquest.⁴⁶ If the regional capital continued to function, the urban centers of northern Bactria seem to have experienced an overall contraction from the late fourth through seventh centuries.⁴⁷ The major Kushan and Kushano–Sasanian sites of Dalberjin Tepe and Emshi Tepe were abandoned in the course of the fifth century.⁴⁸ Numerous agricultural settlements disappeared from the hinterlands of Balkh, and the ancient capital itself appeared “thinly populated” to the Buddhist monk Xuanzang.⁴⁹ The contraction of urban and rural settlement in northern Bactria, however, could perhaps have reflected a shift toward the regions of the mountainous southeast, which remain unexcavated and unsurveyed. These were more defensible in the face of Iranian campaigns and nearer to both the routes across the Hindu Kush and to highland pastures.⁵⁰ The *šar* of Rob

⁴³ For the Turk use of cities, known in the runic inscriptions as *baliq*, even as they retained rural encampments and reserves, see Golden 2013, 40–46.

⁴⁴ Proc. 1.3.2–3 (ed. and trans. Dewing 1914, 14–15).

⁴⁵ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2007, 74–75 (cd).

⁴⁶ *Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk'* (ed. Patkanean 1883, 172, and trans. Garsoïan 1989, 197–98).

⁴⁷ de la Vaissière 2010, 522–24.

⁴⁸ Kruglikova 1973, 113; Dolgorukov 1984, 89. For an overview of sites on both sides of the Oxus, see Sedov 1987, 78–96.

⁴⁹ Xuanzang, *Datang Xiyuji* (trans. Beal 1906, 1: 44); Lyonnet 1997, 277–79. Although the report of Xuanzang is often cited as a definitive account of the post-Kushan city, he encountered Balkh in the early seventh century after the late sixth-century wars between the Sasanians and the Turks in the region. The Turks, moreover, considered Bactria more marginal than their Hun predecessors had.

⁵⁰ *Xin Tang Shu* (trans. Malyavkin 1989, 68) places the capital of the Hephthalites in eastern Bactria and emphasizes the co-residence of the nomadic and sedentary population. Lyonnet 1997, 280–84, documents the concentration of settlement from the fourth through seventh centuries in Eastern Bactrian, as well as the widespread presence of pottery plausibly connected with the

was one such center in an upland valley. The capital of the Hephthalites has tentatively been identified in the southeast of Bactria, near the Kushan site of Surkh Kotal.⁵¹ That the conquerors contributed to an overall urban expansion in Central Asia is evident in Sogdia. The Kidarite king ruled from Samarkand in the fifth century, and the well-known palace of a Turk ruler in its ancient district of Afrasyab attests to the role of the city as a political center for the qaghanate.⁵² As extensive excavations and surveys have demonstrated, the cities of Sogdia grew dramatically in spatial and infrastructural terms during the fifth and sixth centuries. Hun and Turk rulers presided over the expansion of existing cities, the establishment of new settlements, and the fortification of inner precincts and outer oases.⁵³ What de la Vaissière has called “an urban network” came to extend from the Oxus River through the Zeravshan Valley as far as Issyk Kul.⁵⁴ The revamped cities of Samarkand, Penjikent, Bukhara, and Paykend possessed the rectangular, Hippodamian plans characteristic of Sasanian *šahrestān*, hitherto unknown in Sogdia.⁵⁵ The conquerors not only integrated cities and their associated infrastructures into their polities, but also adapted the Iranian urban form in regions Iran had never incorporated, through infrastructural projects as massive as those their Sasanian contemporaries undertook.

In reconstructing cities as *šahrestān*, the Huns and Turks represented themselves in an Iranian manner at the same time as they repurposed urban infrastructure. The early Sasanians had reintroduced the “Residenzstadt” of the ancient Mesopotamian empires to the Near East: the urban form as the locus and icon of the ruler and imperial authority.⁵⁶ Their successors in the East similarly defined their rule in urban terms: the aforementioned Kidarite king presented himself in official seals as “the Samarkandian.” The redeployment of the *šahrestān* was one among multiple modes of Iranian political representation conquerors adopted. The mints gave them access to the symbolic vocabulary of the Iranian court, as well as a means of communicating in its terms. While introducing marks of distinction, the various Hun dynasties maintained the familiar Iranian image of a bejeweled and (usually)

nomadic conquerors. Gardin 1998, 117–19, notes continuity of settlement and irrigation structures in eastern Bactria and suggests the Hephthalites, like their Kushan predecessors, constructed a new capital that remains to be discovered. Southeastern Bactria offered far richer pasture lands than the region of Balkh: Kuwayama 1989, 112.

⁵¹ Kuwayama 1989, 126–30; Grenet 2002, 214–15.

⁵² de la Vaissière 2006.

⁵³ Grenet 1996, 372–74; de la Vaissière 2005, 105–6. For the fifth- through sixth-century fortification of Sogdian cities as well as the oases, see Semenov 1996.

⁵⁴ de la Vaissière 2005b, 112–16.

⁵⁵ Grenet 1996, 374–81.

⁵⁶ Novák 1997.

crowned ruler on the obverse with a fire altar on the reverse. The replacement of the Sasanians with busts of Kidarites, Alkhans, or Hephthalites indicated the claim of the latter to have legitimately succeeded the former, without disrupting the overarching framework of imperial organization. The Kidarite king in Samarkand in the 450s or 460s made the supersession of Iranian rule explicit in the Bactrian version of his official title: “Lord Ularg, the king of the Huns, the great king of the Kushans, the *afshiyān* of Samarkand.”⁵⁷ As the king of the Kushans, *Kushān-šāh*, he had succeeded to the Kushano–Sasanian dynasty that had ruled the Iranian East on behalf of the Sasanians. The fifth-century author of the Armenian *Epic Histories* recognized the legitimacy of the claim, referring to a late fourth-century Kidarite as the “king of the Kushans” (*tagaworn koušanacʻ*) and even ascribing him a Parthian lineage.⁵⁸ The Hephthalites more boldly supplanted not merely the Kushano–Sasanian sub-kings, but the Sasanian kings of kings. On the funerary couch of a Sogdian merchant in China dated to 579, the Hephthalite king appears wearing a crown with a pair of wings, the third crown that Peroz used after 474.⁵⁹ The ubiquity of the crown in regions the Hephthalites controlled suggests its use as the standard regalia of their rulers, at least after their definitive triumph over the Sasanians, in contrast with Alkhan contemporaries who employed crowns that distinguished them as Huns. In the absence of inscriptions, the precise language through which the Hephthalites represented themselves remains elusive. But the numismatic and artistic evidence suggests that they styled themselves the legitimate successors to Iran, foreshadowing the titles the Turks adopted after their conquest of the Hephthalite kingdom.

Thanks to the surviving Turkic and Turko–Sogdian inscriptions, the political ideology of the qaghanate and its forms of representation can be reconstructed with greater precision than is possible for the Huns. The *qaghan* aspired to the selfsame universal sovereignty the Chinese, Iranian, and Romans articulated, within a Turk cosmological framework that granted the ruling lineage a mythical–historical function.⁶⁰ But they identified and exploited convergences of the ideologies of other empires with their own, as several early seventh-century inscriptions make plain. A seal of the western

⁵⁷ Grenet 2010, 272; Lerner and Sims-Williams 2011, 72–74, 182; Vondrovec 2014, 48–49. The Brahmi title *Kidara kushana sha* [h], “Kidarite king of the Kushans,” and Bactrian title *kušan šau*, “King of the Kushans,” also appear on silver drachms from early fifth-century Gandhara: Cribb 2010, 104; Pfisterer 2013, 27. The Bactrian version of the title “king of the Huns” appears in Chinese transcription in the *Wei Shu*: Atwood 2012, 32–35.

⁵⁸ *Buzandaran Patmutʻiwnkʻ* (ed. Patkanean 1883, 172, and trans. Garsoïan 1989, 197–98). The reference to “chionitas et eusenios” in Amm. 16.9.4 (ed. and trans. Galletier and Fontaine, 1968, 164), perhaps also reflects an attempt to transmit a title including Kushan and Hun elements.

⁵⁹ Kageyama 2007, 12–13.

⁶⁰ Golden 2006b, 34–36, 40–50.

qaghan known as Shegui (reigned 611–618)—the Chinese transcription of his name—exhibited Middle Persian and Turk inscriptions. If the latter included a traditional formula in the runic script, the former affixed the Zoroastrian concept of *xwarrah*, “divine sanction,” to the title *qaghan*: “*Zīg qaghan, xwarrah!*”⁶¹ In a more extensive appropriation of Iranian titulature, a medallion that was perhaps produced in the course of Shegui’s 616 invasion of the Iranian plateau imitated the precise language of the coins of Husraw II: “May *xwarrah* increase! *Zīg* king of kings [*xwarrah abzōn. Zīg šāhānšāh*].”⁶² The successor of Shegui, Tong *yabghu qaghan* (reigned 618–628), was likewise portrayed as the Iranian king of kings in a medallion combining his Turkic titles with the ideological formula of Husraw II.⁶³ While emphasizing their distinction as Turks, the *qaghans* represented themselves in an Iranian manner, much as their Hun predecessors had adopted the representational language of the kings of kings.

The appropriation of the titles and functions of the kings of kings was not without foundation in a shared symbolics of sovereignty. The Kidarites and Hephthalites succeeded not only in conquering Iranian territory but also in subordinating the Sasanians as their tributaries. From the reign of the first king of kings onward, the Iranian court demonstrated its establishment and maintenance of Ērānšahr, the territorial rule (*šahr*) of the universally sovereign “Iranians” (*ērān*), through the collection of tribute, especially from the Romans.⁶⁴ The Huns, however, upended the cosmic order by exacting tribute from Iran, causing the court to develop new ways of underpinning its ideological framework. In the early fifth century, under circumstances the Iranian historiographical tradition has obscured, Yazdgird I, Wahram V, and/or Yazdgird II were compelled to submit tributary payments to the Kidarite Huns.⁶⁵ The Hephthalites continued to exact tribute, famously forcing Peroz to deliver 30 mule loads of silver eastward as the price of peace in 474.⁶⁶ By the 580s when the Turks turned against their erstwhile allies, the payment of tribute had become commonplace: Roman and Iranian courts competed

⁶¹ Harmatta 2000, 251. As Golden 2006a, 43–44, and Golden 2006b, 17–18, notes, the Turk notion of *qut*, “supernatural good fortune,” could easily be translated into Middle Persian as *xwarrah*.

⁶² Harmatta 1982, 168–71.

⁶³ Harmatta 1982, 175; Harmatta 2000, 252. See also Vondrovec 2014, 538, for the coinage of the late seventh-century Tegin of Khurasan.

⁶⁴ Payne 2013.

⁶⁵ Prisc. *fr.* 33 (ed. and trans. Blockley 1983, 2: 348–49), recounting the refusal of Yazdgird II to continue the payments. As confirmation of the account, a hoard of Sasanian drachms from the reigns of Yazdgird I, Wahram V, and Yazdgird II countermarked with tamgas has been recovered from the region of Dushanbe: Gariboldi and Šaripov 2012.

⁶⁶ Josh. Styl., ed. W. Wright 1882, 10, and trans. Trombley and Watt 2000, 10–11.

with one another to submit the most attractive offers to the *qaghans* in order to earn their support, or at least their neutrality.⁶⁷ Such demands for tribute have often been interpreted as examples of predation, or parasitism, the dependency of nomadic elites on the surplus of their sedentary counterparts. But, as we have seen, Huns and Turks generated their own surpluses and their own coinages on scales that rivaled what the Sasanians had achieved in the same territories. Schindel, moreover, has shown that the sums involved in the most famous payments of 474 were modest, even fiscally negligible.⁶⁸ The value of the silver coins the Iranian court dispatched to the Hephthalites—and other nomadic rulers—resided in their symbolism as tokens of submission in a semiotic system of interstate relations whose language became recognizable to rulers and elites across Eurasia in Late Antiquity. Unlike the Xiongnu under Modun, the Kidarites, Hephthalites, and Turks had already integrated urban and agricultural economies into their polities. They continued to exact commodities from sedentary societies as a means of constructing legitimacy among their aristocracies, nomadic and landed. In the eyes of Huns and Turks and of indigenous Iranian landowners alike, the receipt of tribute demonstrated sovereignty.

From the regional perspective, nomadic rule in Central Asia exhibited profound continuities with the pre-existing Iranian political order. An aristocracy of *azadag* fulfilled the functions of provincial government on behalf of urban-based imperial institutions. The fundamental rupture manifested, at the same time, continuity with the Iranian institutional matrix: the comparative decline of settlement in Bactria stimulated the expansion of *šahrestān* in Sogdia. It was therefore with a high degree of legitimacy in the view of the Iranian elite that Huns and Turks presented themselves as kings of kings, the heirs of the Iranian Empire in the East. Such a perspective, however, to some extent downplays the innovation of the conquerors and obscures the distinctiveness of the political orders they constructed. For in the process of adopting Iranian institutions they sought to maintain the infrastructural and ideological resources they brought with them from the steppe, to meld nomadic and sedentary institutions. It is to these resources and the efforts of the Huns and the Turks to maintain their vitality that we now turn, before we consider and characterize the institutional amalgamation that resulted from the interplay of the two forms of rule.

⁶⁷ Husraw II, for example, offered to outspend the Romans in coin, silk, and pearls when the Turks joined the 626 campaign of Heraclius: Movses Daskhurants'i, *Patmut'iwn Atuanits'* (ed. Arakelyan 1983, 134, and trans. Dowsett, 1961, 82).

⁶⁸ Schindel 2004, 416–17, calculates the total amount as 4500 kg of silver, less than a tenth of what Husraw I received as tribute from Justinian. On the modest nature of even the much grander sums given from the Romans to the Iranian court, see Börm 2008.

Nomadic Aristocracies and their Strategies of Distinction

Hitherto, the Huns and Turks have been presented as a collective, in terms of the inheritance of traditions of nomadic imperialism that the various conquerors shared and that facilitated the incorporation of Iranian institutions into their polities. At this stage, the varieties of nomadic rule need to be emphasized and examined. It was not only as “Huns,” but also as Kidarite, Alkhan, and Hephthalite Huns that the fourth- and fifth-century conquerors governed their realms. And the *qaghans* and their elite consistently stressed their distinction as “Turks” from Huns, Sogdians, and the landed aristocrats of the Iranian East. To introduce the problem of how the new ruling groups distinguished themselves from other elites is to pose a question long familiar to historians of the post-Roman West that remains to be raised in the post-Iranian East: what role did ethnicity play in the construction of the successor states? From recent scholarship on ethnicity in the West in the first millennium CE, one of the most productive subfields of premodern history, studies of Central Asia in Late Antiquity could benefit from three overriding insights that have found general acceptance.⁶⁹ Firstly, the various Germanic groups that occupied the Roman West gained their ethnic coherence in the course of the consolidation of their regimes and reconstitution as ruling classes. These were not pre-existing groups that conquered as “peoples,” but rather constructed their “group-ness” relationally to distinguish themselves as an elite from the Romans. Secondly, they drew on their peculiar cultural resources to define themselves as an ethnically distinct group. Authoritative elites defined their communities with myths of origin, labels of identification, and objects, all of which could be invested with ethnic significance, even if they were originally irrelevant to the political consciousness of those who came to consider themselves members of the group. Thirdly, ethnicity is a practice, not an essence. The salience of ethnic concepts fluctuates with political circumstances, and even specific contexts in time and space. Outsiders, moreover, could often adopt the practices that defined ethnic belonging, and the boundaries of groups were accordingly porous. The interpenetration of Roman and “barbarian” communities was particularly characteristic in the West, as new elites adopted Roman practices while asserting difference. Rather than the cause of the formation of barbarian kingdoms, ethnicity has emerged as a strategy of distinction crucial for the consolidation of the power of Goths, Vandals, Avars, and others as ruling elites in post-Roman political culture.

In light of this literature, the traditional question of whether the Huns were actually Xiongnu that had marched westward is less productive than an inquiry

⁶⁹ For orientation in the debates and the literature, see Pohl 2010 and Pohl 2013.

into the strategies of distinction they employed in the territories they conquered. If the migration of at least some nomadic groups unified under the banner of the Xiongnu seems clear, they were likely to have included other nomadic warriors in their ranks in the course of their conquests. After occupying the cities of Sogdia and the Iranian East, they faced the selfsame dilemma of the Goths in Roman Italy: how to define themselves relationally to the two elite constituencies on whose support their rule depended, namely the indigenous aristocracy and the nomadic aristocracy. As we have seen, they communicated their legitimacy in an Iranian framework through traditional media. They also patronized Buddhist monastic institutions that Kushan and Kushano–Sasanian elites had traditionally favored, especially to the south of the Hindu Kush.⁷⁰ But they also introduced new symbols into the political culture that defined the spheres of their authority and gave coherence to the conquerors as a class vis-à-vis the landed aristocrats now rendered sub-elites. Labels of identification appear on Hun coinage as early as the late fourth century. To return to the Sasanian mint appropriated in the 380s, the Huns immediately added a Bactrian inscription to the busts of either Shapur II or Shapur III: *alxanno*, “Alkhan.”⁷¹ In addition, they placed a *tamga*, a form of symbol used among nomads of the steppe from the early Iron Age to designate genealogical communities. The combination of a label identifying either a dynasty or an ethnicity and a *tamga* recurred in the coinage of the leading Hun groups ruling in formerly Iranian territories and beyond.⁷² The term *kidāra* appeared on Kushano–Sasanian dinars minted at Balkh and Kabul contemporaneously with the earliest Alkhan issues and on silver coins minted in Sogdia and Gandhara in the first half of the fifth century.⁷³ Silver drachms minted at Balkh in the last quarter of the fifth century similarly bore the term *ēb* or *ēbo*, an abbreviation of *ēbodāl*, “Hephthalite,” marking the beginning of a distinctive coinage that continued to evolve into the middle of the sixth century.⁷⁴

At the same time as the Huns appropriated Iranian institutions, they also differentiated themselves genealogically from the rulers they had supplanted.

⁷⁰ For the Kidarites and Hephthalites as patrons of Buddhism, see Kuwayama 1989; Deeg 2005, 240; and Wan 2012, 253–59. It was nevertheless a subset of the Alkhan, especially Mihirakula (reigned 513–542), who first militantly supported the Brahmins at the expense of Buddhism in Gandhara: see Verardi 2011, 155–59.

⁷¹ Alam and Pfisterer 2010, 16; Pfisterer 2013, 32.

⁷² Apart from the rare examples of silver drachms inscribed with *kidār* in Sogdian from Samarkand, Hun coinage in Sogdia did not emphasize dynastic or ethnic appellations, exhibiting only tamgas as indicators of the ruling elite. The direct encounter with Iranian institutions, including mints and their staff, seems to have stimulated the propagation of ethnonyms. On Sogdian coinage of the period, see Zeimal 1994 and Fedorov 2010.

⁷³ Zeimal 1996, 125; Grenet 2002, 206–7; Cribb 2010, 99–105; Pfisterer 2013, 23–25.

⁷⁴ Alam and Pfisterer 2010, 27–33; Baratova, Schindel, and Rtveladze 2012, 43–44.

As minting processes evolved, the representations of the Huns differed ever more sharply from inherited Iranian repertoires. The Alkhan rulers in Gandhara in the middle of the fifth century abandoned Sasanian busts on the obverse of their coins in favor of their own images: their artificially elongated foreheads, beardless chins, and headgear privileged the traditions of nomadic elites over their sedentary counterparts.⁷⁵ The coins, moreover, indicate that the Huns practiced cranial deformation visually to set themselves apart from the conquered, a practice current among nomadic elites of the steppe from the middle of the first millennium BCE onward.⁷⁶ If the Alkhans made the most dramatic break from the Iranian mode of representation, the Hephthalites also introduced the novel portrait of a ruler wearing a caftan and holding a goblet on the reverse of their imitations of the coinage of Peroz, whose bust remained on the obverse.⁷⁷ With respect to both terms of identification and symbols of representation, the Alkhans, Kidarites, and Hephthalites distinguished themselves not only from their subjects but also from one another. Although the Kidarite ruler of Samarkand called himself the “king of the Huns,” the traditional ethnonym was apparently inadequate as a focal point for the loyalties of the nomadic elites the various Hun rulers sought to maintain in their service. Collectively assuming the mantle of the Xiongnu as Huns, they formed distinct groupings of nomadic elites around their respective rulers after the conquests. They neither envisioned nor attempted a revival of the Xiongnu Empire.

The terms Alkhan, Kidarite, and Hephthalite designated sub-groups of Huns that, as we have already noted, alternatively cooperated with and contested one another. The nature of their identity, however, remains unclear. The prevailing view regards them as “tribal groupings” that participated in the initial migration under the Hun banner only to reemerge as competing entities in subsequent decades.⁷⁸ Although accurate in its emphasis on the emergence of distinct ruling groups from among the Huns, the term “tribe” connotes a lack of political complexity that mischaracterizes these elite communities.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Pfisterer 2013, 34–46; Vondrovec 2014, 161–66, 170–75.

⁷⁶ These coins demonstrate that the Huns used cranial formation as a marker of social status and group affiliation. The diffusion of the practice throughout the steppe and into Europe in the fourth through seventh centuries likely resulted from imitation of Hun practice, as well as migration. See Hakenbeck 2009, for a discussion of the evidence and the debates. Osteological analyses connect the practice not only with nomadic elites distinguished themselves from sedentary counterparts, but also with “hereditary aristocrac[ies]”: Sharapova and Razhev 2011, 216–18.

⁷⁷ Alram and Pfisterer 2010, 32–33; Vondrovec 2014, 403.

⁷⁸ de la Vaissière 2007, 124. Grenet 2002, 209–10, speaks of “federat[ion] of Hunnish tribes” and “tribal aristocracy.” A recent reinterpretation of the Chinese evidence suggests the Huns shared a Turkic language: Shimunek, Beckwith, Washington, Kontovas, and Niyaz, 2015.

⁷⁹ On the misuse of the term tribe in studies of Central Asian nomads, see Sneath 2007, 65–67, 88–90, with the discussion of Rogers 2012, 238–41.

In their formation of ruling groups based on shared descent, the conquerors resembled their sedentary aristocratic counterparts—such as the Iranians who imagined themselves the successors of the mythical–historical *ēr*—at least as closely as the nomadic elites of the steppe. Rather than preexistent tribes, the identities the Huns propagated on their coins and seals emerged in the context of a nomadic elite consolidating its integrity and stability as an aristocracy vis-à-vis the sedentary aristocracy. The redefinition of the aristocratic community in ethnic terms distinguishing its representatives from subordinate groups, whether sub-elite or commoners, served as a means of achieving enduring coherence. Crucial to the process of nomadic state formation was the reconstitution of warrior elites prone to pursue their own centripetal goals around a ruling house. From the Xiongnu to the Mongols, this consolidation of a state aristocracy took place through the formation of interdependent patrilineal descent groups that monopolized the highest imperial offices.⁸⁰ The co-constitution of genealogically intertwined elite houses could be represented ethnically, through the use of terms such as Xiognu, Turk, or Mongol that referred to the aristocratic communities their empires produced rather than pre-existing peoples or tribes. The formation of several distinct ethno-aristocratic groups in the Iranian East reflects the absence of a single *chan-yu* or *qaghan* to unite the Huns as well as the efforts of their rulers to craft new terms and symbols through which subgroups, if not the Huns as a whole, could cohere within their respective territorial spheres. The success of the ethonyms they introduced is apparent in the representations of outsiders: though they originally lumped the conquerors together as Huns, writers in Greek, Syriac, and Armenian came to describe at least the Kidarites and Hephthalites accurately, using the terms appearing on their coins and seals.⁸¹

The Turks, by contrast, entered Iranian territory with a coherent conception of their ethnic distinction. The label “Turk” appears as a fundamental attribute of the *qaghans* and their elites in Sogdian inscriptions and Chinese historiographical accounts in the latter half of the sixth century, that is, contemporaneously with the emergence of the qaghanate, as well as in later Bactrian documents and inscriptions.⁸² If the Huns formed identifiable ruling groups through their encounter with the indigenous aristocracies of the Iranian East,

⁸⁰ Sneath 2007, 114–18.

⁸¹ Prisc. *fr.* 33 (ed. and trans. Blockley 1983, 2: 348–49); Proc. 1.3.3 (ed. and trans. Dewing 1914, 14–15); *History of Mar Aba* (ed. Bedjan 1895, 267); Łazar P’arpec’i, *Patmut’iwn Hayoc’* (ed. Ter-Mkrtchean 1904, 155, and ed. Thomson 1991, 214); Menand. Prot. *fr.* 6 (ed. and trans. Blockley 1985, 64–65).

⁸² *Bugut Inscription* (ed. and trans. Kljaštornyj and Livšic 1972, 85); *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2012, 94–95 (S), 98–99 (P), 130–31 (W); *Inscription of Tang-e Safedak* (ed. and trans. Davary 2012, 264; Beckwith 2005, 13–18).

the Turks had already done so on China's northern frontiers before commencing their Western conquests. It is perhaps on account of the well-developed ethnic consciousness of the sixth-century conquerors that they had no need of coinage as a medium of communicating and consolidating their genealogical communities.⁸³ Despite numerous references to various Turkic-speaking groups in Greco-Roman and Chinese sources, however, the ethnonym Turk became current only under the *qaghans*, and the term owed its subsequent success to its potent invocation of the imperial age.⁸⁴ It replaced "Hun" as the ethnonym designating its bearers representatives of the most prestigious and powerful imperial tradition of the steppe. Regarding their empire as a *bodun*, an agglomeration of genealogically intertwined houses (*bod*), the Turks considered themselves as a discrete community of elites superior to their nomadic and sedentary peers.⁸⁵ The titles of the Turk elite underlined their distinctiveness. In addition to adopting the Xiongnu, Yuezhi, and/or Hephthalite offices of the *yabghu* (the second-in-command to the *qaghan*) and the *tarkhan* (regional ruler), they introduced a number of specifically Turk titles that designated representatives of the Western Turk ruler in the Bactrian Documents, as well as in inscriptions and historiographical texts: *iltäbir* (ruler of a region on behalf of the *yabghu* and/or *qaghan*) and *tudun* (fiscal official), and officials often included Turkic honorifics transliterated into Bactrian alongside their titles.⁸⁶ Emphasizing the ethnic distinction of the ruling elite had become a routine practice in the drafting of contracts, even in the highland valley of Rob.

To inscribe the terms Kidarite, Hephthalite, or Turk on coins or documents was to evoke genealogical communities rooted in the distant past. What defined Hun and Turk elites as ruling groups was their descent from common ancestors. The accounts through which the Kidarites, Hephthalites, and other Hun groups recalled their origins went unrecorded, but Chinese historiographers have preserved a variety of myths of Turk origins, most of which agree on descent from a she-wolf, a flexible account characteristic of the ethnic myth-making of the first millennium.⁸⁷ One aspect of the Turk myths bears con-

⁸³ The Turk preference for silk as a currency would also have reduced the ideological importance of coinage: see Trombert 2000, on silk as an instrument of exchange in the sixth and seventh centuries.

⁸⁴ Golden 2008–2009, 20–33, 60–63.

⁸⁵ Golden 2006a, 33–34. Wright and Amartüvshin 2009 provide an archaeological case study of how competing Turk identities were articulated in the landscape through tamgas, inscriptions, and stele.

⁸⁶ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2012, 68–69 (N), 94–95 (S), 104–5 (Tt), 106–7 (U), 112–13 (Uu), 126–27 (W); Golden 2006a, 51–55; Vondrovec 2014, 527–31.

⁸⁷ Sinor 1982; Golden 2006b, 10–12; Drompp 2015, 52–55. Monumental stele—if not the one bearing the *Bugut Inscription*, which Stark 2015, 480, shows to portray a dragon—depicted the ancestral wolf, communicating the myth spatially in highland landscapes: Drompp 2011, 519–24.

sideration in the context of the post-Iranian East: the mythical-geographical cave of the ancestors located in a mountainous grassland, to which the *qaghans* were reported to have returned annually with their fellow Turks to commemorate their predecessors.⁸⁸ In the various nomadic political cultures of the Iron Age steppe, sites of burial served as sites of commemoration of, and communion with, the ancestors. Journeys to the kurgans or other monumentalized funerary complexes—whether annual or less frequent—tied elites to genealogical communities that were necessarily distinct from the sedentary populations among whom they resided and over whom they ruled. Both Huns and Turks constructed mythical-geographies through funerary monuments in the territories they conquered, albeit in strikingly different ways. Their practices of cremation and tomb construction garnered the attention of Roman and Chinese observers alike.⁸⁹ Burial mounds containing (sometimes cremated) bodies have been documented archaeologically in the kurgans of northern Bactria, datable to the fifth and sixth centuries and identifiable with an elite purposefully distinguishing itself from the pre-existing population.⁹⁰ In locating their kurgans near their urban settlements in Bactria, the Huns rooted their ancestral traditions in the region. The Turks, however, commemorated their ancestors in the distant highlands of the Tian Shan, Altai, and Mongolia. As Sören Stark has emphasized, the comparative absence of Turk burial sites in Bactria and Sogdia provides confirmation for Chinese accounts of ancestral funerary complexes in the mountains to which the Turks made frequent pilgrimages that reconstituted them as a distinct group, irrespective of the cultures and environments in which they normally resided.⁹¹

Through the construction of ethnic imaginaries embedded in the landscape and in the institutions of nomadic imperialism, the conquerors formed

⁸⁸ Sinor 1982, 235. The Hephthalites were similarly reported to have venerated a cave in which a supernatural horse resided in northern Bactria: *Xin Tang Shu* (trans. Malyavkin 1989, 69).

⁸⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus reported that the Huns cremated their deceased, to the shock of the Iranians: Amm. 19.1.7 (ed. and trans. Sabbah 1970, 122–24). Procopius, on the other hand, claimed Hephthalite elites were interred in tombs: Proc. 1.3.7 (ed. and trans. Dewing 1914, 14–15). The contradiction is only apparent, as cremated bodies were still placed in monumental complexes. Similarly contrasting reports are found in Chinese accounts of the Turks and probably reflect the divergent practices of ruling elites who ritually cremated their dead and their sub-elite associates that did not: Stark 2008, 100–102.

⁹⁰ Sedov 1987, 47–48, 94–96, 109–10; Stark 2008, 270–74; Sverchkov and Boroffka 2012, 14–16. Kurgan burials had begun to proliferate in the region already in the Kushan period, likely a reflection of the influx of the nomadic Yuezhi in the first centuries BCE. The sedentary elites of Bactria, by contrast, employed mausolea, burial chambers, ossuaries, and rock-cut tombs, funerary practices characteristic of the ancient Near East in general and, in some cases, of the Zoroastrian religious culture of the Iranian world in particular: Mandelshtam 1975, 6–39; Litvinskii and Sedov 1985, 128–34, 172–76; Meytarchiyan 2001, 65–95.

⁹¹ Pugachenkova and Rtveldadze 1990, 145–46; Stark 2008, 282–86.

discrete ruling groups that could collaborate with the indigenous aristocracy and adopt its institutions without undermining their coherence or superiority over the conquered elite. Maintaining the integrity of the Huns and Turks as an elite was central to the successful functioning of polities that depended on nomadic warriors for their military power. But the constitution of ethnically conscious aristocracies of Kidarites, Hephthalites, and Turks did not prevent their acculturation or their penetration of the elite networks of the conquered. If anything, the setting of the boundaries that the ethnonyms demarcated facilitated the interaction of Iranian landowners and nomadic warriors as two unambiguously distinct classes, without endangering their integrity. Indeed, the evidence for Hephthalite and Turk onomastics suggests that the two groups were imitating one another and intermarrying even as they deployed their respective symbols of ethnic distinction. One aristocrat appearing in the Bactrian Documents in the first half of the fifth century bore the revealing name Gurambād Kērawān (or Khwadēwān): the personal name is characteristically Hun, while the patronymic suggests he was descended from the house of a *kadagbid* Kēraw documented in the late fourth century, or of another house of Iranian “rulers” (Bactrian *khwadēw*, Middle Persian *xwadāy*).⁹² The Hephthalite *yabghu* himself possessed the Iranian patronymic Khwadēwbandān.⁹³ Turk elites in the Bactrian documents of the seventh century had names that recalled the Iranian kings of kings: the *iltābir* Zun-lad Shaburān and the *tarkhan* Khusaru.⁹⁴ Whether such onomastic convergences emerged through marriage or mimicry is impossible to determine. The Mount Mugh Documents in Sogdian from the seventh and eighth centuries nevertheless suggest that intermarriage between indigenous landowners and nomadic aristocrats was routine. In a marriage contract dated to the first decade of the eighth century, a Turk married the daughter of a Sogdian aristocrat at Samarkand.⁹⁵ The vigorous polygyny of nomadic elites facilitated their integration into the aristocratic networks of their sedentary counterparts, as Jonathan Skaff has extensively documented for the Chinese borderlands.⁹⁶ It was in this context that Hun and Turk ethnicities were reconceived and reframed in Iranian terms.

⁹² *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2007, 106–7 (dg), 110–11 (eb); Sims-Williams 2008, 93; Sims-Williams 2010, 151–52.

⁹³ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2007, 126–27 (jb).

⁹⁴ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2012, 84–85 (P); Sims-Williams 2010, 65–66, 152, and 155. The component “Zun” in the first name evokes a local deity widely worshiped in Bactria: Shenkar 2014b, 130.

⁹⁵ *Sogdian Marriage Contract* (ed. and trans. Yakubovich 2013, 181–83; Livshits 2008, 23–24).

⁹⁶ Skaff 2012, 204–7.

Turanians

From the Iranian perspective, the various groups of nomadic aristocrats constituted an undifferentiated mass of enemies from the steppe that were culturally inferior to the civilized, sedentary agriculturalists of the Near East. In the earliest reference to the arrival of nomadic imperialists on Iran's northeastern frontiers, Ammianus Marcellinus described them as *chionitae*, the so-called "Chionites" who still frequently appear in the scholarly literature as historical actors.⁹⁷ The term, however, corresponded with a mythical–historical people, the *xyōn* in Middle Persian, who were the inveterate enemies of the Iranians, the *ēr*, in the Avesta.⁹⁸ The Roman historian reproduced the etic term the Iranians applied to the conquerors, not the emic ethnonyms which Hun, Kidarite, or Hephthalite deployed to represent themselves. In response to the ideological crisis the fall of the Iranian East precipitated, the court identified itself in various media with the mythical–historical Kayanian dynasty of the Avesta that had waged war against pastoralist enemies from the East who, at the instigation of the malevolent deity Ahreman, sought to destroy the Zoroastrian religion.⁹⁹ This coincidence between the mythical confrontation with the *xyōn* and the historical confrontation with the Huns and Turks enabled the Iranian court to represent the military campaigns against them as sacred ventures, designed to preserve Iran and its religion from destructive demonic forces. Middle Persian texts emerging from the circles of the Zoroastrian religious elite and historiographical texts the court produced portrayed the Huns and the Turks as *xyōn*, even though contemporary Syriac and Armenian texts from the empire differentiated between the various groups. The *xyōn*, moreover, possessed distinctive bodies with "broad front[s]," apparently a reference to cranial deformation.¹⁰⁰ In the mythologized accounts the fifth-century court circulated, nomadic rulers were the descendants of an Iranian king known as Tur, the son of the mythical king Fereydun who divided the realm of the *ēr* into three territorial zones.¹⁰¹ The sons Tur and Salm were endowed with kingdoms that corresponded with the Central Asian and Roman polities known in the fifth century. They then rebelled against Iran and initiated a multi-millennial, mythical–historical conflict between Iran and its Roman and Central Asian neighbors. The eastern kingdom, known as Turan after its first ruler, emerged as the foremost antagonist of Iran, identified with a

⁹⁷ Amm. 16.9.4, 18.6.22, 19.1.7, 19.2.3 (ed. and trans. Galletier and Fontaine 1968, 164, and ed. and trans. Sabbah 1970, 108, 122, 124).

⁹⁸ Cereti 2010, 59–65; Atwood 2012, 39–42.

⁹⁹ Cereti 2002, 695–97; Payne 2015, 288–90.

¹⁰⁰ Cereti 2010, 68–69. The term "Turk," however, eventually entered Middle Persian literature, likely in the early Islamic period: Cereti 2013.

¹⁰¹ Yarshater 1983, 428–29; Daryaei 2006, 389–91; and Shayegan 2011, 23–29.

pastoralism inimical to civilization and the demonic religion of Ahreman. If Rome appeared as a potential partner in the mythical–historical accounts of the court, Turan represented the cultural antithesis and primordial adversary of Iran.

The mytho–historiographers of the court drew not only on the text of the Avesta, but also on the oral tales of heroic kings and aristocrats that circulated in the audience halls of elites, especially in the eastern regions of the empire. Stories of the exploits of the ancestors of the ruling elite deriving from Avestan, Eastern Iranian, and Parthian traditions circulated widely, and the surviving versions of the *Book of Kings* preserved only the court’s reworking of mythical–historical tales that were continually retold and tailored to the circumstances of local elites. As the seventh-century murals of an elite residence in the Sogdian city of Penjikent reveal, the institution of mythical–historical storytelling flourished on both sides of the Iranian frontier. The learned studies of Marshak have demonstrated the extent to which the mythmakers of Sogdia amalgamated legends of Iranian and Indian origin, including at least one figure—the heroic warrior Rustam—to whom the historiographers of the Iranian court gave a prominent place in the *Book of Kings*.¹⁰² A fragmentary Sogdian text recounts the exploits of the mythical Iranian aristocrat Rustam against demonic enemies that closely resembled the *xyōn* of Middle Persian accounts.¹⁰³ Sogdian literary specialists are unlikely to have made direct use of the historiographical accounts the late Sasanians produced. Rather, Iranian and Sogdian authors of mythical histories tapped into a common storehouse of legends circulating textually and orally. They shared a common set of figures and formulae through which to represent the circumstances of the present in terms of a mythical past that could confer legitimacy on political actors and their actions. If the *Book of Kings* has preserved the Sasanians’ accounts of their own history within this mythical–historical framework, traces of the Hun and Turk adaptation of its terms to their political circumstances appear more fragmentarily in inscriptions, images, and medieval compilations of their myths.

Rustam, in particular, occupied a position as important in the mythical histories of the post-Iranian East as in the *Book of Kings*. The warrior recurs so frequently in Hun contexts that Grenet has called him a “Hephthalite hero.”¹⁰⁴ The personal name Rustam appears in seals and inscriptions, while his epithet “man with the panther’s skin” provided the name of the landowner

¹⁰² Marshak 2002, 34–52; Shenkar 2014a, draws attention to the comparable importance of Rustam’s son Farāmarz, mythical ruler of India, in the murals.

¹⁰³ Sims-Williams 1976, 54–57. For another fragment of Iranian epic in Sogdian, see now Yoshida 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Grenet 2002, 218–19.

Purlang-zin in one of the Bactrian documents.¹⁰⁵ The hero's son, Farāmarz, also appears as a personal name in the documents.¹⁰⁶ Most revealingly, the artists who produced the Penjikent murals modeled their portrayal of the epic hero on contemporary images of Hun rulers.¹⁰⁷ Rostam here exhibited the same cranial deformation and distinctive crowns encountered in seals and coins. At the same time, however, Iranian aristocrats claimed him as their ancestor: the house of Sūrēn, one of the leading dynasties of the late Sasanian era, identified themselves with the mythical hero, and their patrimonial territories lay just across the frontier from Hephthalite-controlled Bactria in Sistan.¹⁰⁸ The liminality of Rostam in the epic of Firdawsī captured the way in which the figure provided a mythical common ground for Iranian and Turanian constituencies in the preceding centuries. As the product of the union of an Iranian hero and the daughter of an idol-worshipping ruler of Kabul, he occupied the interstices of Iran and Central Asia, bridging two political cultures whose distinctive features were projected into the mythical–historical past.¹⁰⁹ In the Iranian version, he epitomized the valiant, strong-willed, and independent aristocrat who nevertheless remained loyal to the Kayanian—and, by extension, Sasanian—kings of kings.¹¹⁰ The accounts Huns and Turks gave of Rostam have not survived. But even the stories Firdawsī collected would have given them ample material with which to envision a hero who, in combining Iranian and Turanian traditions, became the greatest, most manifold aristocrat of the Iranian world, capable of overpowering and subordinating even the kings of kings. In representing Rostam in the guise of a Hun waging the cosmic struggle against Ahremanic figures, the Sogdian murals suggest nomadic rulers could claim to have usurped the Zoroastrian cosmological functions of kingship through their genealogical assimilation of the hero. The enemies of Iran according to Firdawsī could, through the hybrid figure of Rostam, be recast as the defenders of cosmo–political order.

The mythical hero could therefore facilitate not simply the appropriation of the Iranian mythical–historical framework, but also its subversion.

¹⁰⁵ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2007, 162–63 (xp); Sims-Williams 2010, 117.

¹⁰⁶ *Bactrian Documents*, ed. and trans. Sims-Williams 2012, 74–75 (Nn), 80–81 (O); Sims-Williams 2010, 53; Shenkar 2014a, 76.

¹⁰⁷ Marshak 2002, 37–38.

¹⁰⁸ Shahbazi 1993, 156–57. For the house and its rise, see Pourshariati 2008, 57–70. The hero appears in the eleventh-century compilation of historical traditions from the region of Sistan: *Tārīkh-e Sīstān* (ed. Bahār 2009, 53–54, and trans. Gold 1976, 4–5).

¹⁰⁹ Rostam was the son of Zal and Rudabeh, daughter of the idolatrous ruler of Kabul, and identified with the regions south of the Hindu Kush: Firdawsī, *Šāhnāme* 1: 179–90, 265–27 (ed. Khaleghi-Motlagh 1987–2008).

¹¹⁰ Yarshater 1983, 453–57.

In an eleventh-century compendium of early Turk traditions, the *Dīwān al-lughāt al-turk*, scholar Maḥmūd al-Kāšgarī recorded reworkings of the mythical accounts featuring in the *Book of Kings* that rendered the Turanians superior to the Iranians. The Turks were identified not with a liminal figure such as Rustam, but with the Turanian king Afrasyab, whom Iranian histories regarded as the archetypal enemy of Iran.¹¹¹ The mythical king became known as the “chief of the Turks,” with the ceremonious epithet of *tonga alp ār*, “a man, a warrior as strong as tiger.”¹¹² He recorded Turk laments over the death of Afrasyab, and identified the mythical king as the founder of various ancient cities within the territories of the Western Qaghanate, from Kashgar to Merv.¹¹³ If the Iranian kings of kings regarded themselves as the successors of Wishtasp, the Turks came to view Wishtasp’s Central Asian antagonist, Afrasyab, as their own ancestor, at some stage between their late sixth-century conquests and the eleventh-century redaction of their oral traditions.¹¹⁴ Dating the origins of such accounts proves difficult in the absence of a continuous Turk literary tradition. The evidence of onomastics and toponyms, however, suggests Huns and Turks began to repurpose the Iranian mythical histories in the sixth and seventh centuries. A late fifth- or early sixth-century king of Samarkand, likely a Hephthalite, entitled himself Tūrak in a Sogdian inscription on his bronze coinage, while a sub-king of the city of Chaganiān circa 650 described himself more colorfully as Tūrānteš, “the battle ax of the Turanians,” in a Sogdian inscription at the throne room of the Turk ruler of Samarkand.¹¹⁵ In addition to rulers and sub-rulers advertising their genealogical ties to the mythical enemies of Iran and their names, the foremost urban center of Hun and Turk rule, Samarkand, appears already to have been identified with the Turanian king Afrasyab in the pre-Islamic period, an appellation the site of the ancient city continues to bear.¹¹⁶

In the self-understanding of the nomadic imperialists, Turan had supplanted, subordinated, and surpassed Iran. The polities they developed combined the imperial traditions of the Near East and the steppe to create a hybrid order. The best preserved artistic monument of Hun or Turk rule captured the defining characteristics of a nomadic political culture reframed in Turanian terms, on the eve of its eclipse. At Samarkand/Afrasyab, the Turk Varkhūman, a regional ruler on behalf of the western *qaghan*, constructed a residence

¹¹¹ Yarshater 1983, 440–43.

¹¹² Maḥmūd al-Kāšgarī, *Dīwān al-lughāt al-turk*, ed. and trans. Dankoff 1982, 337.

¹¹³ Maḥmūd al-Kāšgarī, *Dīwān al-lughāt al-turk*, ed. and trans. Dankoff 1982, 189, 225, 270.

¹¹⁴ Golden 2015, 538.

¹¹⁵ *Inscription of the Embassy of Chaganiān*, ed. and trans. in Livshits 2008, 314. See also Smirnova 1981, 21; Pugachenkova and Rtveladze 1990, 133; and Lurje 2010, 395–96.

¹¹⁶ Cristoforetti 2006.

with an elaborately decorated throne room in the 650s. The murals depict envoys from Iran, China, and elsewhere delivering gifts to a ruler whose image has not been preserved, either Varkhuman himself or his overlord. Whether the *qaghan* or his representative, the Turk ruler was portrayed as the universal sovereign receiving tribute from empires and polities across the globe, in accordance with the court ceremonial of the Iranian kings of kings whose collection of gifts and diplomatic subsidies underpinned their claims to suzerainty.¹¹⁷ As de la Vaissière has demonstrated, the ceremony depicted in the throne room of Varkhuman took place at a rare conjuncture of Nowruz, the imperial Iranian new year, with the summer solstice.¹¹⁸ The event would have had great significance in an Iranian ideological framework that regarded the kings of kings as the successors of the mythical king Jamshid, who was identified with the sun.¹¹⁹ The murals therefore depict the culmination of the ongoing appropriation of Iranian political symbols, concepts, and mythical histories that began with the Kidarite arrogation of the title Kušān-šāh. But the representations of political authority were otherwise distinctively Turk. The warrior elite that cross-legged on carpets arrayed around the ruler, and the drums and weapons used in the ceremony were characteristic of the early Turks. The political horizons of the Turks, moreover, extended far beyond the Iranians, from Rome to Korea along steppe routes the *qaghans* could at least claim to control.

Conclusion

Turan comprised ruling Hun and Turk ethno-classes that combined the institutions of nomadic and Iranian imperialism to create political orders far more robust than those of their contemporaries in Europe. Maintaining their ties to the steppe and their integrity as pastoralist aristocratic communities vis-à-vis their sedentary counterparts enabled them to form the formidable armies that reliably humbled the Iranian Empire throughout the period. The processes of ethnogenesis that accompanied the consolidation of nomadic ruling classes in the Iranian East paralleled contemporary phenomena in the Roman West and in East Asia, even as the comparative proximity of the pasturelands of the steppe to the urban centers of agrarian economies enhanced the martial resources of the Huns and the Turks. It is in their adaptation of imperial institutions, however, that the conquerors of the Iranian East differed most consequentially from other extra-imperial rulers

¹¹⁷ Mode 1993, 115–16; de la Vaissière 2006, 148–52; Compareti 2013.

¹¹⁸ de la Vaissière 2006, 154–56.

¹¹⁹ Grenet 2006, 49–55.

in Late Antiquity. The Huns and the Turks did not simply anchor their regimes in former capitals, like the Ostrogoths in Rome or the Xiongnu in Chang'an. They actively expanded cities in accordance with the Iranian model of the *šahrestān*, on a massive scale. Their engagement in urbanization is suggestive of an effective administrative apparatus, and their continuous operation of the fiscal system is amply documented. If stable nomadic orders required the extraction of a surplus from agrarian societies, the Huns and the Turks successfully adopted the most reliable means of obtaining such revenues: taxation, not tribute. The mechanisms of Iranian imperialism, in other words, continued to function under their rule. Such continuities occurred under certain post-Roman and all of the Chinese regimes as well. What set the post-Iranian East apart was the marrying of nomadic and sedentary regimes, with their respective sources of power intact. The Xianbei and Xiongnu rulers of China rapidly assimilated, while the post-Roman kings lacked access to the institutional resources of nomadic imperialism.¹²⁰ The Huns and Turks established not successor states but rather imperial polities that enlisted Iranian institutions in the service of nomadic state formation. If the natural environments of Sogdia and Bactria made the combination of nomadic and sedentary imperialisms possible, the Iranian mythical–historical framework gave the resulting political culture its language of legitimation and representation.

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¹²⁰ An "ethnic" elite of "warrior conquerors" in the fourth-century Xiongnu and Xianbei ruling houses had, in many cases, become fully Chinese by the sixth, even if they retained aspects of nomadic political culture: see Chen 1996; Wong 2003; Corradini 2006; Eisenberg 2008, 47.

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