

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS DURING THE HEPHTALITE PERIOD*Odilova Mohichehra**1st year master's student of the History Faculty of NUUZ*

Abstract: This article provides an analysis of sources on the diversity of religious beliefs in the territories covered during the Hephtalite period, which religion was dominant, why various religions were widespread, and the factors that influenced this.

Keywords: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Sun and Fire Cult, Hinduism

The period of the early Middle Ages, when the Hephtalites (Huns) ruled Central Asia, is noteworthy for its poorly studied nature. It is known that during this period, the Great Migration of Peoples began, the Huns began migrating from Asia to Europe, and the Hephtalites, Kidarites, Chionites, and others ruled in Central Asia and parts of Pakistan, India, and China. The Hephtalites politically united settled and nomadic peoples with different cultures and religious views. In the 4th-6th centuries AD, there were many archaic beliefs in this area, and at the same time, Zoroastrianism was mixed with the local cults of Anachita and Siyavush. As is known, in the 4th century AD, on the morning of Navruz, Zoroastrians sacrificed a rooster to the legendary Siyavush in Bukhara. There were also the cults of Vakhsh, Anahita, Mitra, and Tishtriya at that time.[1]

Several religions developed in the Hephtalite Empire: Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Hinduism, as well as ancient religious beliefs - Shamanism (kam). According to historical sources, shamanism emerged at a certain stage of animistic beliefs. The ancestors of the Turkic peoples firmly believed in the existence of helper spirits, i.e., fairihs, fathers and grandmothers, as well as the existence of demons and jinns. Not only believed, but also acted in spiritual harmony with them through shamans[2]. The Hephtalites themselves had different religious views. Since the sources are controversial and diverse, it is difficult to determine which religion was relatively dominant[3].

Buddhism was widespread during the Hephtalite period, especially in the southern regions of the state. However, there is much debatable information about the Hephtalites' attitude towards this religion. The "Beishi" source reports that the Hephtalite ruler's residence "had a complex of Buddhist temples and an obelisk, all of which were covered with gold." The same information is found in "Suyshu." The Japanese historian Kazuo Enoki, discussing the reports of Sun Yun and Xuan Jian about the Hephtalites, argues that they did not believe in Buddhism and even persecuted Buddhists. This view is consistent with Marshall's, who believes that the Hephtalites destroyed Buddhist temples in the territories of present-day Pakistan and Northwest India. Other scholars believe that although the Hephtalites were not Buddhists, Buddhism played a certain role in the major cities of the Hephtalite state. The famous scholar Kuwayama suggests that the conclusions about the destruction of Buddhist temples by the Hephtalites may have been the result of a misinterpretation of Chinese literary sources. Scholars who believed in the destruction of Gandhara Buddhism by the Hephtalites did not take into account the nature of the nomadic invasion. In essence, they linked two unrelated issues: massacres and non-belief in Buddhism. This error led to the misrepresentation of the Hephtalite king as the murderer of Buddhist monks[4].

Although the Chinese Buddhist monk Sun Yun noted that the Hephtalites did not believe in Buddhism, Buddhist religious institutions flourished in Tokharistan and other regions. However, in India, the Hephtalites pursued an uncompromising policy towards Buddhist religious



institutions. Over time, the beliefs of the conquered local population, including Buddhism, gradually began to spread among the Hephtalites. In Central Asia, as well as in the northern and western regions of Afghanistan, various forms of Zoroastrianism were widespread in competition with Buddhism. There were also many adherents of Hindu religious beliefs in Afghanistan and Tokharistan. Moreover, Manichaeism took firm root, and Christianity also began to spread[5].

Undoubtedly, Buddhism was quite developed among the Hephtalites who settled in Tokharistan. According to another Chinese monk, Xuanzang, the conquest of Kashmir and Gandhara by Hingila I (Vaxshunvarn) is explained by this king's adherence to the "Good Law" (Buddhism) and his desire to protect it from the attacks of "heretics"[6].

According to historians Litvinsky and T. Zeymal, the Hephtalite rulers pursued different policies towards Buddhism, and during military campaigns, Buddhist religious institutions in some regions declined and were plundered. In general, during the Hephtalite rule in Central Asia, Buddhism was not persecuted, and some Hephtalite rulers even supported Buddhism. After the collapse of the Hephtalite state, a small Hephtalite domain remained in the territory of Khsi-mo-ta-lo (the Hephtalite center in Tokharistan, west of Badakhshan), and its rulers were Buddhist.

The opinions expressed by archaeologist Bernshtam and Gafurov contradict each other. In one of his articles, Bernshtam writes that the Hephtalites, continuing the work of the Kushans, supported Buddhism. However, in another study, he emphasizes that the Hephtalites practiced Shamanism. Initially, the Hephtalites lived around the Altai Mountains, but later, under the influence of Uyghur tribes, they migrated to Central Asia. The headquarters of their leader was called Badian (Bamiyan in Afghanistan) and its territory was approximately 10 li (5 km). The Hephtalites probably practiced Shamanism, but during their reign, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism remained among the local beliefs. They adopted Buddhism from the Kushans[7].

Such contradictions are also found in Gafurov's works. According to him, Christianity was widespread among a certain part of the Hephtalites, and in the 6th century AD, the Hephtalite ruler sent priests to the Sasanian capital to Mar Aba I (Christian-Nestorian Patriarch of the Sasanian Empire), from whom he was asked to appoint this bishop as the head of all Hephtalite Christians. Later, Gafurov said that the Hephtalites did not believe in Buddhism, but he added that supporters of this religion appeared under the influence of the subjugated and Buddhist population. At the same time, he emphasizes that every morning they would leave their tents to pray, and it is possible that they worshipped the sun.

According to another scholar, Solovyov, the Hephtalites in Tokharistan were neutral towards Buddhism, neither supporting nor persecuting it. There is evidence that the Buddhist temple, located on the Toramana Salt Range, was supported. Scholar Dani also argues that there is no archaeological evidence indicating the destruction of Buddhist temples by the Hephtalites. Archaeologist V. Masson also believes that the Hephtalite rulers did not destroy Buddhist structures. This is evidenced by the fact that the complex of Buddhist temples, built during the Kushan period in the Bamiyan Valley, continued to function in the 5th-7th centuries AD.

The reports of the monk Sun Yun and the biography of Narendrayashas show that Buddhism flourished at least until the time of Hephtalite rule, or until the middle of the 6th century AD. Thus, the decline of Buddhism occurred in the Indian part of the Hephtalite Empire after the political retreat of the Hephtalites, i.e., in the second half of the 6th century AD. Buddhism was also widespread in the territory of Tokharistan in the 5th-7th centuries AD, and ancient Buddhist centers such as Karatepa, Fayaztepa, Ajinatepa, Dalverzintepa, and Zartepa continued their activities. Two marble statues of the Bodhisattvas were found in Afghanistan. One of them is a



standing statue with an inscription about donations, dating back to the 5th century AD; the second is a sitting statue without an inscription, which is also stylistically attributed to this period[8].

According to Kazuo Enoki's work on the Hephtalites, according to Book 83 of the Suishu source (page 4a), in the city of Balkh, another important center of the Hephtalites, many Buddhist temples and pagodas (round or polygonal Buddhist (sometimes Hindu) temple towers with roofs curved upward) were found, all of which were decorated with gold.

According to Xuanzang, the majority of the population believes in "san-pao," i.e., the triratna (three gems: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), and only a small number emphasizes the worship of other gods or spirits. There were ten sangharamas (Buddhist monasteries), in which several hundred followers lived. They studied the teachings of both Mahayana and Hinayana and followed the rules of both schools. Tuyang-tsu-tsu hsu-chi, and in Book 8, it is written: "In the Yen-ta country of the Hsi-yu region, there are families engaged in the maintenance of Buddhist temples. They loaded several donkeys with food and sent them to the temple on the mountain. These donkeys go there and back on their own, and there's no need for people to escort or drive them. They set out at yin (approximately 4:00 a.m.) and arrived at the temple at wu (midday). They never arrive earlier or later." However, this information mainly applies to the population living under the rule of the Hephtalites. The majority of the population were Iranians, who adhered to Zoroastrianism and various other religions, as well as Buddhism[9].

There is also information that the Hephtalites, besides Buddhism, believed in the god of the Sun and Sky. In particular, Sun Yun, describing the Hephtalites in the Badakhshan region, writes: "Most of them do not believe in Buddhism, most worship the vai-shen (foreign gods). They kill the animals and eat the meat raw." Regarding the Hephtalites who ruled Gandhara, Sun Yun says: "The character of this people is cruel and vengeful, carrying out the most savage oppression and violence. They do not believe in Buddhism, but rather prefer to worship kuei-shen (demons, evil spirits). In the 54th book of Liang-shu (page 8b), it is said: "They worship Tian-shen (God of Heaven) and Huo-shen (God of Fire). Every morning they first leave their tents to worship the gods, and then they have breakfast. They bow down only once. Undoubtedly, the "foreign gods" and "demons" recorded by Sun Yun correspond to the God of Heaven and the God of Fire mentioned in Liang-shu. The fact that the entrance to the Hephtalite tents was facing east may also indicate the presence of sun worship among them[10].

One could say that the sun cult is in some sense connected with Hinduism. During the Hephtalite period, several Hindu temples were active in the territory of Kashmir Smast. One of them was located in the Great Cave on the mountain top. The cave consists of three main halls and a side cave at the beginning of the last hall, and on the plain below the entrance there are several post-Kushan religious structures. The main Hindu goddess of the cave temple was Bhima. It is also worth mentioning here the two marble Surya statues found in the Khayr Khaneh area, 15 km north of Kabul, dating back to the late 4th - first half of the 5th centuries AD. In Hinduism, Surya is the "Supreme Light" and the main sun god. According to the French archaeologist Roman Grishman, who conducted research on the history of ancient Iran, under the influence of Brahmanism, a synthesis arose between the cult of the Sun god of Iran - Mithra-Mihira - and the Indian religion. As a result, Mihira harmonized not only with Surya, but also with Vishnu and Shiva, but at the same time did not lose the aspect of Iranian monotheism. He also asserts that the main deity of the Chionites and Hephtalites was the Sun god, and later the cult of this god was associated with the cult of Mithra[11].

There is information about the spread of Christianity among the Hephtalites in Syrian



sources. The oldest document in the Syrian language records the adoption of Christianity by the peoples of the Oxus (Amu Darya) in 196. In the Syriac Chronicles, the Syrian Nestorian Patriarch Ava I died in 549. It is noted that he sent a bishop to the Hephtalites on both banks of the Oxus and to the White Huns in Bactria. V.V. Bartold, studying the spread of Christianity in Turkestan, considered the city of Merv (located in the territory of modern Turkmenistan) as one of the centers of Christianity.

The spread of Christianity among the Hephtalites, their participation in the struggle against Iranian domination by the Armenians, shows that it was based on ideological harmony. Based on this, friendly relations developed between the Armenians and the Hephtalites, and the Hephtalites provided practical assistance to the Armenians with their campaigns into Persian territories[12].

The Syriac source "History of Mar Aba" reports that in 549 AD, the Hephtalites sent a priest to the Nestorian patriarch Mar Aba I. They asked to appoint this priest as a bishop for the Christian Hephtalites in their homeland. This plea of the Hephtalites was granted. Thus, part of the Hephtalites adhered to Nestorian Christianity, and representatives of this movement carried out extensive missionary work during this period. One of their main directions was Central Asia and China. According to Nikitin, Christianity existed as a religion among the Hephtalites in the form of Nestorianism. The headquarters of the Hephtalite bishop was located in Samarkand, where a metropole (a religious district under the metropolitan and its center) was later established. These facts show that Christianity was widespread among the Hephtalites. Also, in the 5th century AD, the city of Merv, which briefly came under the control of the Hephtalites, was transformed into a bishopric metropole. Merv became one of the main centers of Nestorianism in Central Asia, and there was a Nestorian church in the nearby Ruins of Kushuk[13].

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is ample evidence that the Hephtalites adhered to different religions. This was observed not only among the Hephtalites, but also among the Chionites and Kidarites. Because these three dynasties were one people, that is, the White Huns. However, due to the dynastic approach, these peoples with Hunnic roots are described separately in the sources. In the Hephtalite state Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity (mainly in the Nestorian direction), Manichaeism, Hinduism, as well as the worship of heaven and fire, were widespread among the population. Due to contradictory information in the sources, it is difficult to say exactly which religion was the dominant religion. For example, according to sources, while Buddhism was one of the main beliefs in some regions, we can see the complete opposite in other regions of the Hephtalite state. Based on this, it is evident that different religions coexisted, and religious tolerance was a characteristic feature of the Hephtalite Empire. It is known that tolerance was later observed among Turks and Mongols during the time of Genghis Khan.

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