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A Unique Alxon-Hunnic Horse-and-Rider Statuette

(Late Fifth Century CE)

from Ancient Bactria / Modern Afghanistan

in the Pritzker Family Collection, Chicago

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A Unique Alxon-Hunnic Horse-and-Rider Statuette
(Late Fifth Century CE)
from Ancient Bactria / Modern Afghanistan
in the Pritzker Family Collection, Chicago

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In Memoriam, Professor Dr. phil. Robert Göbl, Vienna, Austria

In this study the author offers a first attempt to describe, discuss, and interpret the bronze statuette of a noble horse-and-rider of the so-called Alkhon/Alxon wave of the “Iranian Huns,” dated to the end of the fifth century CE, from Northern Afghanistan. The statuette is now in the Pritzker Family Collection in Chicago.



Fig. 1. View of the horse-and-rider statuette. Figs. 1–10 are views of the same statuette from various angles. Courtesy of the Pritzker Family Collection, Chicago.

JÄGER, "A UNIQUE ALXON-HUNNIC HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE"



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

JÄGER, "A UNIQUE ALXON-HUNNIC HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE"



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

JÄGER, "A UNIQUE ALXON-HUNNIC HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE"



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

JÄGER, "A UNIQUE ALXON-HUNNIC HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE"



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.

JÄGER, "A UNIQUE ALXON-HUNNIC HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE"



Fig. 10.

The nomads called Alxon or Alkhon were the second wave of three that invaded and then occupied the Kushan Empire of Central Asia. Those regions mainly consisted of large parts of the modern countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Northern India, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The three waves of nomads are usually called Hephthalites, Hephthalite Huns, or by the more modern technical term “Iranian Huns.” The Iranian Huns, among them the Alxon/Alkhon, ruled Central Asia from the late fourth to the sixth centuries CE.

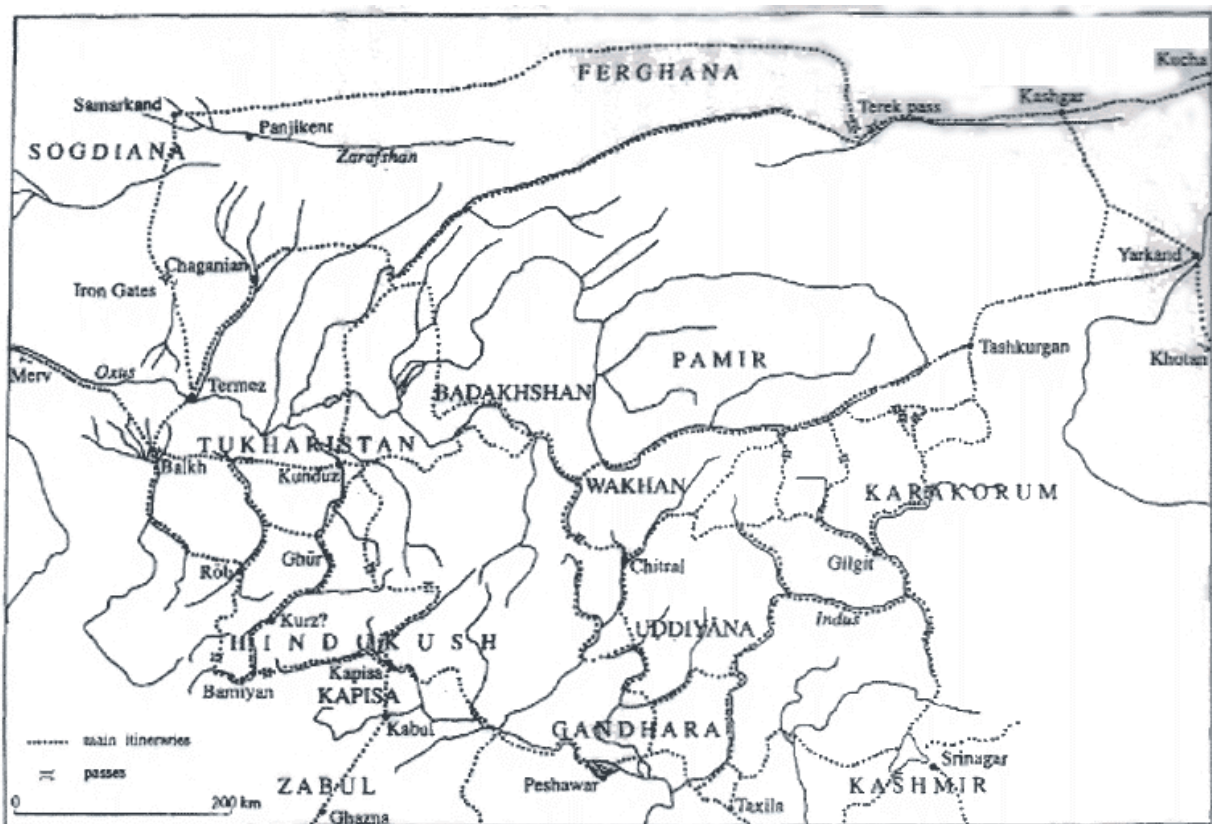


Fig. 11: Map of Central Asia, c. fifth–eighth c. CE. After: Grenet 2002, 204, fig. 1.

Before we start, it is necessary to offer some introductory remarks.¹

¹ The author wishes to express his deep gratitude to David and Tom Pritzker for the opportunity to study and publish this most important art object. This study is dedicated to the memory of Robert Göbl, Vienna, the author’s “spiritus rector” for more than a decade until his sudden death in 1997.

This short study cannot serve as a concise cultural history of the “Iranian Huns” (see Göbl 1967), but the author tries to

In the last few years, the art of Bactria and Gandhara,² an area mainly consisting of modern Afghanistan, Pakistan, northern India, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, has received a lot of interest from scholars in the field of pre-Islamic Central Asian archaeology and cultural history. Its art, which is predominantly Buddhist, belongs to the Kushan period, first to third centuries CE, and if one adds the art of what in a more recent publication has been called "Greater Gandhara," one can extend this "Greater Gandharan Art"³ up into the sixth to seventh centuries CE.

The period after the fall of the Kushan Empire, i.e., of the fourth to sixth centuries, is still a period one might call the "Dark Ages" of Central Asia, very similar to the same period in Europe; it is often also called the "migration period," or, in the German language, "Völkerwanderungszeit." In Central Asia this period is characterized by three invading waves of nomads from the north, invading regions that shortly before had been part of the Kushan Empire. Usually these nomads are called Hephthalites or, since 1967, when Robert Göbl published his groundbreaking study: "Iranische Hunnen"/"Iranian Huns." Until now the best short historical overviews on the Iranian Huns have been those published by S. Kuwayama, Frantz Grenet, Boris A. Litvinsky, and Boris I. Marshak, each with a different focus.⁴

If one leaves aside for the moment the Buddhist art of Gandhara and Greater Gandhara, one easily realizes that the number of art objects that belong to the so-called period of the "Iranian Huns"⁵ decreases rapidly in comparison to Kushan-period Gandharan art. We become aware of the degree to which we are uncertain about the history of the arts of the "Iranian Huns," or Hephthalites, when we read one of the most recent concise studies on the archaeology and history of the Hephthalites, that by Aydogdy Kurbanov.⁶ Apart from seals and sealings,⁷ the largest body of knowledge on the period of

discuss as much as possible the relevant various connected cultural and historic problems.

² Luczanits, Jansen, and Stoye, eds., 2008, with a rich bibliography.

³ Behrendt 2007, IX-X: 63–93.

⁴ Kuwayama 1989, 89–134, reprinted in Xinru Liu, ed., 2012, 225–274; Grenet 2002, 203–224; Litvinsky, ed., 1996, 38–39; 119–126; 135–144; 163–172; 176–182 and 185–189; Marshak 2002, in Juliano and Lerner, eds., 2002, 11–22; see 14–15 and 18.

⁵ This term goes back to the Austrian numismatist Robert Göbl; Göbl 1967.

⁶ Kurbanov 2013.

⁷ Callieri 1998; Lerner and Sims-Williams 2011.

the "Iranian Huns" has been learned through the rich studies of their coins, most prominently those organized and studied by the Viennese School of Numismatics at the Numismatic Institute of the University of Vienna and Austrian Academy of Sciences⁸ founded by Robert Göbl. A great impetus to the study of the "Iranian Huns" came from a concise collection of articles edited by Michael Alram and Deborah Klimburg-Salter et al. in 2011, containing a huge amount of the most recent studies in this field.⁹ Another stimulus to the revived interest in the "Iranian Huns" came via the translation and study of the so-called Buddhist copper inscription of Talangan, now in the Schoyen Collection, Oslo, Norway,¹⁰ which mentions a group of rulers of the second wave of the "Iranian Huns," i.e., the Alkhon or Alxon of the late fifth–earliest sixth century, which was responsible for the foundation or restoration of a Buddhist stupa. Recently N. Sims-Williams published an edited volume on the chronology of Bactrian(-language) documents from Northern Afghanistan.¹¹

In the following we will consider an outstanding, unique piece of metal-art of the Alxon-Alkhon Huns: the horse-and-rider statuette now in the Pritzker Family Collection in Chicago.

Before we get involved directly with the study of that remarkable piece of art, we must add that, until now, the metal art of the Hephthalites/Iranian Huns is known only through some silver bowls and a silver phalera.¹²

TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The horse-and-rider sculpture under discussion has a total length of 27.5 cm from the front hoof to the tip of the now-broken tail. Its broadest width, seen from the front, is 11.0 cm; the total height from the

⁸ Göbl 1967; Pfisterer 2013; Vondrovec 2014; Alram 2016.

⁹ Alram and Klimburg-Salter et al. 2011, like all the books mentioned above, is enriched by huge bibliographies.

¹⁰ Melzer and Sander 2006.

¹¹ Sims-Williams and de Blois 2018, with contributions by Harry Falk and Dieter Weber.

¹² Dalton 1964; Göbl 1967, II: 262–266; and vol. III, plates 93–95; Marshak and Krikis 1969, 67–76; Marshak 1986, 29–39, and 263–266; Gray 1991, 61–62; Nicolle and McBride 1996, figs B-D;

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object/details.aspx?objectId=247021&partId; Göbl 1989, 867–876.

base to the helmet measures 34.0 cm.¹³ Unfortunately the right front hoof broke off in antiquity and is now lost. The weight is 6100 grams (6.1 kilograms). The statuette was cast of bronze, which usually contains seven parts copper and three parts tin.¹⁴

The manufacturing technique used to create the statuette is the lost-wax technique. No part of the statuette was added later. The artist first created the whole statuette as a beeswax model, then added casting channels made of beeswax; soon after he covered the wax model with clay. After the mold was completely dried, it was turned upside down and the mold was heated to let the beeswax flow out completely. When this was done, the mold was turned rightside up again and filled with molten bronze. After cooling, the clay mold was destroyed, all casting channels were sewn and cut off, and the surface of the finished statuette was cleaned, polished, and then worked over with chiseling tools to add the fine details, such as the texture of the beard. In order to give the statuette a stable stand, the casting channel beneath the front legs was left in place. The surface was again polished, and the bactrian inscription around the helmet's rim was added by punching.¹⁵ If the horse-and-rider statuette ever had additional decoration, such as paint, which has elsewhere been proved to have existed on several Greek-Hellenistic bronze sculptures, this has not yet been determined.¹⁶

The statuette shows a helmeted noble Alxon warrior on his prancing/rearing horse, a long sword on his left side hanging from his belt. His left hand holds the reins, while the right hand once held an object now broken off and lost. My examination in Chicago, with the statuette in front of me, revealed that this lost object must have been a wreath-like ring. Most curious and as yet unsolved is the problem of a tube on the back of the rider's back, which was cast together with the statuette, i.e., not

¹³ We cannot totally rule out the possibility that the total length of the statuette (of 27.5 cm) is the ancient Macedonian foot, which exactly measures that length.

¹⁴ Unfortunately the exact results of research of the metal content was not finished when this publication appears. See: Trapp 1996, 206. Regarding the Buddhist art of Gandhara, it has been suggested that Gandharan artists used the Roman foot system; see: Ahrens 1989, 58–59; Rottländer 1979. As long as no real research in Afghanistan is possible, we unfortunately cannot substantiate the theory of ancient Greek length-measuring systems for the Hephthalites and Alkhons.

¹⁵ Bol 1985, 118–160; Forbes 1971. A very instructive video from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London showing the lost-wax technique is available online at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/l/lost-wax-bronze-casting/>

¹⁶ Descamps-Lequine 2015, 150–165.

added later. The rider is shown with finely combed and arranged hair visible beneath the back of the helmet; he also has a pointed beard and a fine moustache. The upper body is clad in a close-fitting kind of shirt, and the figure also wears a tight second shirt under that with long sleeves. He wears long, very tight trousers and shoes with clasps. The rider's ears are adorned with two large hoop earrings with seven visible "pearls" meant to be cast with it, or soldered onto it. The warrior sits on a special style of saddle, to be discussed later. The bridle is adorned with two frontal phalerae shown on the left and right sides of the horse's chest; on the upper hindlegs two "flying tassels" hang down from the bridle. This bridle surrounds the horse's back beneath its tail. The tip of the tail also was lost in antiquity.

Especially important to mention here — and we will come back to this later — is the fact that the warrior rides his horse without using stirrups! The horse itself is a strong but elegant animal on long legs with a marvellously curved neck, a standing, cut mane and a horn-like tuft between its ears. We can be sure that here we see the typical Hephthalite horse, as ridden by noble Alxon-Hephthalites of the period; and we will not go wrong calling this horse a thoroughbred.

At present the statue is covered with a patina varying in color from brown to greenish and red; only on the helmet and on the hind legs, as well as on the back of the horse, are there still areas where the golden shine of the bronze of this statuette has survived.

In the more expansive description following, I will discuss all of the details of this outstanding Alxon/Alkhon horse-and-rider statuette:

JÄGER, "A UNIQUE ALXON-HUNNIC HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE"

THE HELMET AND ITS INSCRIPTION



Fig. 12: A portion of the inscription on the helmet. Courtesy of the Pritzker Family Collection, Chicago.

Our noble Alkhon rider, sitting upright on his horse, is wearing a prominent but simple rounded helmet, evidently designed to be hammered from one sheet of iron or bronze; only a relatively separate rim surrounds it. On top of the helmet one sees a tiny hole, once used to hold a device like a feather, small flag, or something similar. Unfortunately this decoration on top of the rider's helmet is lost; but we can suggest that it was meant to show the noble rank of this mounted warrior.¹⁷ In a recent article, David Nicolle has shown that such rounded, "one-piece helmets" must have been popular in Sasanian-period Eastern Iran and Afghanistan.¹⁸ For the period of the Iranian Huns of the fifth–sixth centuries CE we have little evidence for helmets, but I note that the central rider on the so-called "hunting plaque" from Orlat, near Samarkand, Uzbekistan, shows a helmet similar to that of our rider.¹⁹

¹⁷ Jäger 1998, 1–9; Jäger 2006, 79–88, see 85–88.

¹⁸ Nicolle 2017, 211–222.

¹⁹ Ilyasov and Rusanov 1997–1998, 107–159, see p. 146, pl. IV.2, rider in center; Brentjes 1990, 173–182; Mode 2003.

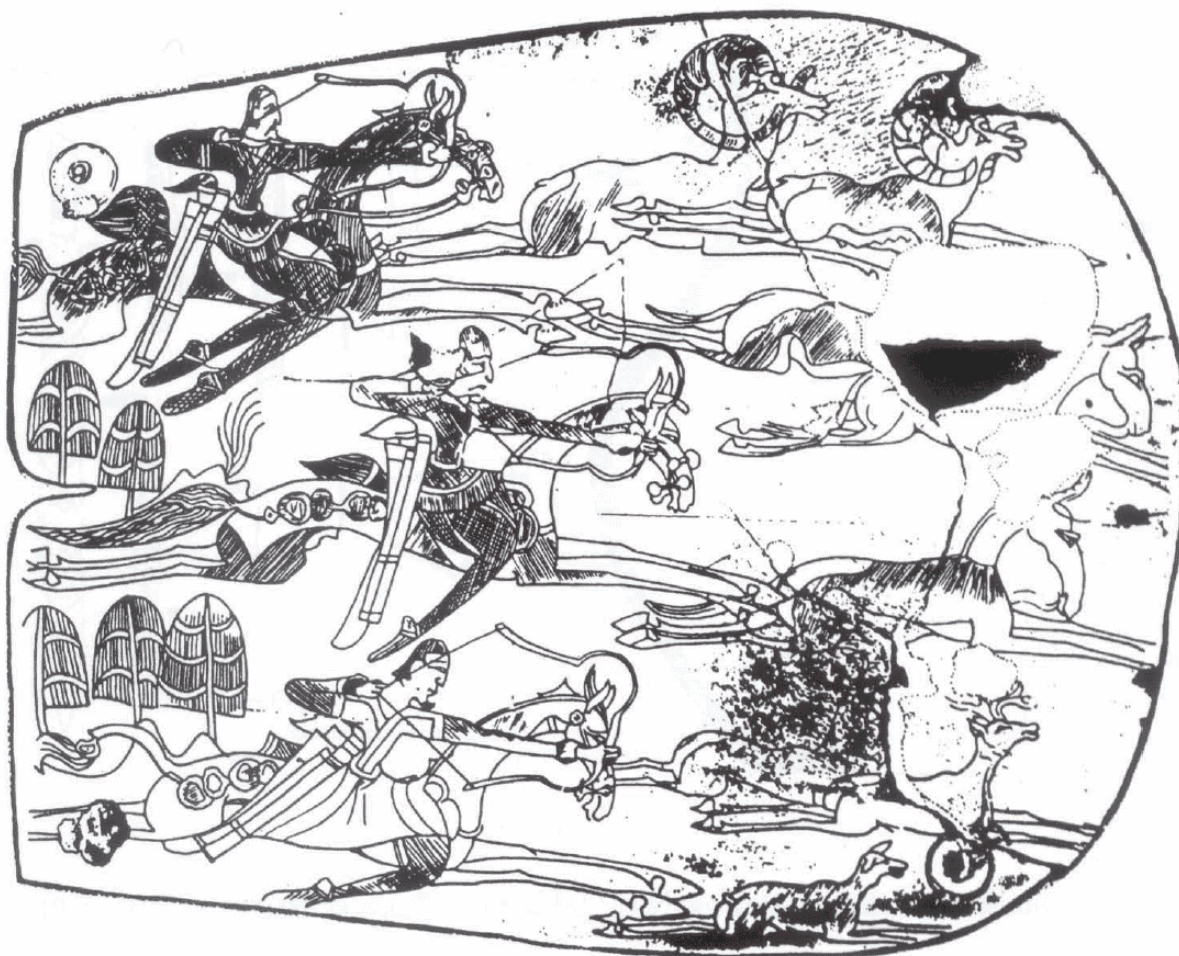


Fig. 13: Helmet of rider in the center of the Orlat “hunting-plaque.” After: Ilyasov and Rusanov 1997–1998, 146, pl. IV.2.

Even though the date of the Orlat plaque is still under discussion, I believe that a date in the period of the Iranian Huns of the fifth–sixth centuries CE is very likely.

Very important for the date of our statuette is the reading of the punched inscription written in cursive Greek letters in the Bactrian-Iranian language. This inscription has been read and discussed in detail by Nicholas Sims-Williams.²⁰ In his work, the inscription reads, translated: “Hrilad gave (this) to the God Zhun.”

Sims-Williams interprets the name “Hrilad” as the personal name of the donor of this stunning

²⁰ Sims-Williams 2010, 140.

horse-and-rider statuette, and he interprets the contents as indicating that this “Hrilad” gave and dedicated this statuette to the temple of the god Zhun. As for the question, who is this god Zhun, we will discuss this later in detail, but for the moment we should interpret “Zhun” as the name of the ancient Iranian god of time, “Zurwan.”²¹ Furthermore, and following an email exchange (November 20, 2017) in which Nicholas Sims-Williams kindly informed me that, due to the type of the starting Greek letter “ypsilon,” the inscription inscribed on our rider’s helmet dates it to no later than the late fifth century CE.

So far no scholar has questioned this, so we must assume that it is true, and it follows that our statuette was designed, cast, and worked not later than during the later second half of the fifth century CE, when the Alkhons ruled Bactria and Gandhara.

We do not know who the man calling himself “Hrilad” was, but we can assume that he was a Alxon/Alkhon noble from the entourage of an Alxon/Alkhon ruler.

Not only that, but for reasons to be discussed later, it can be asserted that the rider on our horse is not “Hrilad” but an Alxon/Alkhon ruler or king! Unfortunately we know next to nothing about the use of helmets among the Alkhons; but it should be mentioned here, that on some coins of the Alkhon ruler Mehama (461–493 CE)²² one can interpret the head of Mehama, facing to the right side, as having the same type of helmet as our rider. Therefore I would not follow numismatists in saying that Mehama’s coins of this fine type show him only with a thin diadem and flying ribbons and a moon-sickle, but actually with a helmet on his deformed skull. (For an explanation of the deformed skull, see below the section “Excursus: Does our rider show artificial cranial deformation?”)

THE EARRINGS OF THE RIDER

Another item useful for dating our horse-and-rider statuette is the pair of hoop-earrings with which the rider is adorned. They consist of relatively large, rounded rings, each decorated with eight pearls, obviously meant to be soldered all around the ring. These earrings are of an ancient Iranian earring type

²¹ Schaeder 1941, 268–299.

²² Vondrovec 2014, 45–48; vol. 1, : 316, coin-type 317;

https://www.vcoins.com/en/stores/coinsindia/36/product/india_alchon_huns_mehama_silver_drachm_fine

going back to the Achaemenid period, and the type was still used until the Parthian period in the region of Taxila/Gandhara,²³ but, as we see here, also for a much longer period. Having this in mind, we do not find it surprising that the Alkhons/Alxons as an Iranian ethnicum still used such hoop earrings during the fifth century CE. What is most amazing here is that only one Alkhon/Alxon ruler is depicted with such hoop earrings on his coins and that ruler is Javukha/Zabocho, who is mentioned in the Talagan Copper inscription among some other rulers.²⁴



Fig. 14: Hoop-earrings on a coin of Javukha. After: Alram, 2016, 84, 5.

Following the numismatic studies of Klaus Vondrovec, Matthias Pfisterer, and Michael Alram, Javukha must be dated to the mid-fifth to the very early sixth century CE.²⁵ If we take the type of hoop earring worn by the Alkhon/Alxon ruler Javukha as a dating point, then our horse-and-rider statuette must date from the same period, and this gets additional support from the studies of Nicholas Sims-Williams concerning the typology and the use of cursive Greek letters for the Bactrian inscription on the helmet of our rider, dating these to the end of the fifth century CE.

²³ Fabregues 2006, 71–79.

²⁴ Melzer and Sander 2006, 251–278, and plates.

²⁵ Pfisterer 2013; Vondrovec 2014, 1: 173–174, 321; Coin-type 82; Alram 2016, 84, fig. 5.

FACIAL FEATURES OF THE RIDER: POINTED BEARD, MOUSTACHE, AND HAIR STYLE

In examining the facial features of our rider on his prancing horse, we can compare them to those in artistic depictions from roughly contemporary periods in Central Asia and Sasanian Iran.

First of all, our attention is drawn to the bust of a mature Hephthalite nobleman on a Hephthalite silver bowl now in the British Museum in London, which depicts several busts of Hephthalite/Iranian Huns, dating to the later second half of the fifth century CE.²⁶



Fig. 15: Bust of an Alkhon, with moustache and pointed beard, on a silver bowl; British Museum, London. After: Marshak in Watt et al. 2004, 50, fig. 38.

²⁶ Dalton 1964, 59–60, no. 205, and pl. XXXV; Marshak 2004, in: Watt, et al., 2004, 50, fig. 38.

The bust of the man on this bowl is shown in three-quarters view, with a prominent pointed beard and moustache, very similar to our rider's beard and moustache. The fashion of prominent moustaches among Hephthalites and Alkhon Huns is known not only from the British Museum bowl, but also from coins and from an Alkhon silver phalera now in the Los Angeles County Museum, published by Robert Göbl.²⁷ The same combination of pointed beard and moustache can be found on Hephthalite seals, as has been shown by Pierfranceso Callieri.²⁸ One might logically conclude that such a combination of prominent pointed beard and moustache was not uncommon, and perhaps even might be the norm for such nomads as the Iranian Huns, but a closer look shows that contemporary Sasanian Iran of fourth to sixth century Iran is the source of this fashion. Since Parthian times such beards and moustaches were the fashion for noblemen in the Iranian world; a good example is the head of a Parthian man from Hatra, now in the Baghdad Museum, Iraq, dating to the second century CE.²⁹ Two seals from the Sasanian period published by Roman Ghirshman also show similar combinations of fine-pointed beards and moustaches.³⁰ Both seals depict Sasanian dignitaries of the fourth to fifth century CE. The same beard-and-moustache fashion is visible on a red Sasanian carnel seal of the late third–early fourth centuries CE, now housed in the Al-Sabah Collection in Kuwait.³¹

²⁷ Göbl 1989, 967–876, see 875, pl. II, and 874.1.

²⁸ Callieri 1997, 117, pl. 23, and Cat. 7.31.

²⁹ Ghirshman 1962, 90, fig. 101.

³⁰ Ghirshman 1962, 241, fig. 294, no. 1, above to the left; and lower left.

³¹ Harper 2015, 320–312.



Fig. 16: Sasanian nobleman with pointed beard and moustache. After: Harper 2015, 320–321.

So instead of thinking about a pure nomadic origin for this beard-and-moustache fashion, one should think about an older, Iranian background, going back at least to the Parthian and Sasanian periods.

When it comes to discussing the hairdo of our rider, we must confess that only a little can be said about this, because the head is fully covered by the helmet; but underneath the rim, at the back of the neck, we see a finely cut and combed roll of hair. One should not overstress this tiny detail, but at least we can say that such finely made hairstyles were obviously common among Alkhon Huns, as they are seen on an Alkhon silver phalera in the Los Angeles County Museum.³²

³² Göbl 1989, 874–875.



Fig. 17: Hairstyle of an Alkhon on a silver phalera, Los Angeles County Museum. After: Göbl 1989, 875.

The same hairstyle can be found on Iranian Hun seals.³³

³³ Lerner and Sims-Williams 2011, 107, AB 3.2 (HG 004), 108, AB 3.5 (HG015).

CLOTHES OF THE RIDER'S UPPER AND LOWER BODY: SHIRT, SKIRT, AND TROUSERS

The careful observer of our rider has meanwhile noted that he is clad in a very tight shirt and undershirt, as well as very tight trousers. Such close-fitting clothes might seem to be unusual for a nomadic Alkhon-Hunnic nobleman. We are used to thinking that Eurasian nomads wore wide kaftans and jackets, as well as wide breeches. We see Parthian, Sasanian, and Kushan men clad that way; an example is the Kushan rider on his horse shown on a belt clasp from Saksanochur, Tadshikistan, dated first to second century CE.³⁴



Fig. 18: Kushan golden belt clasp, second c. CE. After: Rickenbach 1989, 52–53, no. 25.

³⁴ Rickenbach 1989, 52–53, no. 25.

A more detailed look into the world of the Eurasian nomads, however, shows also that tighter shirts have been worn, even if not very often. Tight trousers have been reconstructed by K. A. Akishev for the noble rider of the so-called golden mound from Issyk in Kazakhstan, fifth to fourth centuries BC.³⁵ Furthermore, and this is most important, one sees tight upper-body clothes and tight trousers also in the depictions of the Apadana at Persepolis in the portrayal of a Saka/Scythian nobleman of the fifth century BC.³⁶ On the so-called Alexander sarcophagus we see mounted Achaemenidian warriors wearing such legging-like, very tight trousers.³⁷

It is necessary to say here that legging-like, tight trousers were a normal way to depict the attire of the mysterious Amazons³⁸ on Greek vase-paintings.³⁹ We cannot resolve here the question why such tight clothes might have been worn by Eurasian nomads alongside their tradition of wearing wide upperbody clothes and wide breeches, but the question why Eurasian nomads wore trousers has long been discussed.⁴⁰ There cannot be any doubt that trousers, wide or tight, were practical for horseback-riding. Trousers keep the legs warm during long rides when herding and hunting and during combat and battle. On the so-called hunting plaque from Orlat, near Samarkand,⁴¹ which we, like Markus Mode,⁴² date to the early period of the Hunnic invasion into Bactria, i.e., to the early fourth century CE, we observe again the wearing of very tight trousers. If this is true, then tight breeches must have been widely used on the Eurasian steppes since at least the fifth century BC. In the same context we must include the felted stockings from burial 2 at Pyzyryk in the Altai Mountains,⁴³ even if we do not know at

35 Akishev 1978, 51, fig. 69, and 128.

36 Ghirshman 1964, 185, no. 232.

37 Brinkmann, Dreyfus, and Koch-Brinkmann 2018, 142, fig. 54.

38 Mayor 2014, 191–208; David-Kimball with Behan 2002.

39 Trofimova 2007, 160–161, Cat. no. 65.

40 Wenskus 1961, 426; Calmeyer 1972–1976, 472–476; Jäger 2006, 26–30.

41 Ilyasov and Rusanov 1997–1998, 107–159, 146, fig. 2.

42 Mode 2003, 1–33.

43 Simpson and Pankova 2017, 127, no. 51.

present how such stockings align with the evolution of trousers. A closer look at the engraving of the tight trousers of our rider makes it clear that only two materials of manufacture can be indicated here: i.e., either the artist tried to show felt with its hairy surface structure, or leather. My interpretation is that it was felt that was being depicted, because leather, when cleanly prepared, would not show any remaining hair.

It is always difficult to judge the fashions of peoples by looking to depictions of such in contemporary art, but it seems necessary to compare the tight clothing under discussion with that of the Hephthalite riders on a silver bowl now housed in the British Museum, London.^{44 45}

⁴⁴ http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object/details.aspx?objectId=247021&partId=

⁴⁵ Dalton 1964, no. 201; Göbl 1967, vol. II, 262–266, vol. III, pls. 93–95.



Figs. 19–20: Kidarite and Alkhon riders on a silver bowl, c. fifth–sixth c. C.E. After: Göbl 1967, vol. III, pls. 94 and 95.

We immediately see that all four riders depicted are shown in tight shirts and tight trousers. Accepting that such depictions can be used for comparison, we see that our rider’s clothes are not totally uncommon among Iranian Hun noblemen. It makes sense — following Robert Göbl’s study of 1967 — that on this British Museum silver bowl, found in the Swat region of modern northwestern Pakistan in the nineteenth century, we see two Kidarite and two Alkhon rulers engaged in hunting from horseback.

More difficult to explain are the tight shirt with half sleeves as well as the undershirt with its long sleeves. As we cannot show direct comparisons for the combination of shirt and undershirt of our rider from the Iranian and nomadic world here, I consider the shirt and undershirt to be purely ceremonial clothing. I am nevertheless aware of the fact that the Bactrian-Hunnic hunters on the Orlat hunting plaque wear similar tight upper clothing.⁴⁶

It is important to mention and discuss here the half-sleeved upper shirt of our rider, because it shows a kind of laminar pattern beneath the front neck and on the breast. Laminar protection on the body armorment of Eurasian nomads has been widely discussed.^{47,48} It is interesting to see that our rider shows only a very short portion of his chest clad in such laminar scales. The reason for this, and the reason the upper body of the rider is not totally clad in laminar scales can only be that this was meant as a kind of “abbreviation,” i.e., worn for ceremonial reasons only: it marks our rider as a warrior, even if not one directly going into battle. A similar tight, half-sleeved shirt with laminar scales and an underlying shirt with long sleeves are known from Gandharan depictions of warriors of the preceding Kushan period⁴⁹ and elsewhere in Eurasia.⁵⁰ So we see here our rider depicted according to a Kushan tradition as regards his tight upper garment.

46 Ilyasov and Rusanov 1997, 146, fig. 2.

47 Jäger 2006, 89–101, with rich bibliography.

48 Mielczarek 1993.

49 Tissot 1986, figs. 133, 134, 135, and 142.

50 Jäger 2006, 89–101.

THE SHOES WITH CLASPS

More difficult to analyze and discuss are the shoes of our rider. They are shown to have a tight design, and they are twisted by a kind of thick string; additionally there are clasps on the upper side.

Usually we would expect our rider to be wearing boots, as often can be seen among Eurasian nomads in history.⁵¹ Geo Widengren has studied the history of riding dress among Iranian peoples in antiquity, and he adds to our knowledge that soft half-boots or shoes without a separate sole, like those worn by our rider, were common footwear for Scythians, Sarmatians, and other Iranian steppe nomads.⁵² This taken as a fact again, we do not wonder that our rider is not shown wearing thick high boots. We see similar strings twisted around the ankle, and then around the upper foot and underneath the sole, on depictions of Kushan period warriors, as on for example Kanishka I's statue from Mathura, from a relief in Toprak-kala, and from wallpaintings at Fayaz-tepe.⁵³ In a way this again reminds us of a Kushan influence on the material culture of the Alkhon-Huns.

THE SIMPLE BELT

Around the lower part of his upper body the rider wears a simple belt with a small rectangular buckle. Obviously this belt is not really needed for closing the upper garment, but it also must be mentioned that it is not used to carry the longsword on the left side of his body. One should note here also that, among Iranian warriors, wearing belts very likely was a sign of being part of a group of vassals, semi-religious in nature (German: "Gefolgsmann im Männerbund"), under a leader, king, or chieftain.⁵⁴ It cannot be ruled out that such ideas were an additional reason to depict our rider with a belt.

THE LONGSWORD

Our rider has a longsword that hangs down from a separate belt at his left side; no other weapons are

⁵¹ Jäger 2006, 22–26.

⁵² Widengren 1956, 228–276, see 230–231.

⁵³ Ilyasov and Rusanov 1997–1998, 154, pl. XII.

⁵⁴ Widengren 1969, 22, and fig. 7.

shown with him. It should be mentioned here, that, in antiquity and early medieval times, possessing a sword was exclusively possible for warriors of the upper stratum of the ancient Eurasian societies. In addition to their efficacy as weapons, swords had a symbolic, often mythical or religious meaning. Very likely the Alkhon society shared this idea of swords — that they had a significance beyond being sheer tools of warfare — with the preceding Kushans.⁵⁵ The Alkhon Huns must be incorporated into the ethnic groups called Hunnic nomads (as discussed by Helmut Nickel).⁵⁶ Unfortunately, we do not know what the role of sword-bearers and swordsmiths in the Alkhon society was; and this must also be said of the preceding Kushans. What we know and understand much better is the history of this kind of sword, because it was closely related to the development of longswords among Eurasian nomads ever since Scythian times.⁵⁷ There is no doubt that the longsword worn by our rider belongs to the very group of swords the Alkhons shared with the preceding Kushans⁵⁸ and their ancestors, i.e., the Yuezhi,⁵⁹ as well as with the Parthians and Sasanidians.⁶⁰ The sword of our rider shows the typical scabbard slide seen on several Kushan-period Gandharan sculptures (as twice discussed by Otto Maenchen-Helfen and William Trousdale)⁶¹ even if the scabbard slide on our statuette is slightly faded. In addition, this kind of longsword can be seen depicted on the famous sculpture of Kushan emperor Kanishka I, from Mathura, India.⁶²

55 Jäger 2006, 108–116.

56 Nickel 1973, 131–142.

57 Ginters 1928.

58 Trousdale 1975; Trousdale 1988, 25–30; Maenchen-Helfen 1957, 85–135.

59 Posch 1995; Benjamin 2007.

60 Ghirshman 1963, 293–311; Winkelmann 2003, 21–140.

61 Maenchen-Helfen 1957, 85–135; Trousdale 1988, 25–30.

62 Rosenfield 1967, 178–179; Mode 1997, 543–556.



Fig. 21: Longsword of Kanishka I on his portrait-sculpture at Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, India, second c. CE; sword to the viewer's right. After: Rosenfield 1967, fig. 2.

JÄGER, "A UNIQUE ALXON-HUNNIC HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE"

Our Alkhon-Hunnic rider is the first piece of fine art in such perfect condition to show this kind of longsword, with its suspension technique for the rider, except for a headless statuette in stucco from Hadda, Afghanistan, fifth–sixth century, now housed in the Musée Guimet, Paris.



Fig. 22: Stucco statuette of a warrior from Hadda, Afghanistan, fifth–sixth c. CE, Musée Guimet, Paris. After: Barthoux 1930, pl. 111.

THE MYSTERIOUS, BROKEN-OFF OBJECT ONCE HELD IN THE RIGHT HAND OF THE RIDER

I was fortunate enough to have the chance of performing direct research on the Alkhon-Hunnic horse-and-rider sculpture in June 2018, due to the kind invitation of the Pritzker family of Chicago. Close investigation with a magnifying glass made it obvious that the rider could never have held a bow, dagger, or any other weapon, as had previously been suspected, but clearly there had once been a ring-shaped appendage. When I looked for analogs in the contemporary cultural milieu of the Alkhon-Huns, I could find only one comparison for this once existing ring or wreath — the so-called investiture-rings/-wreaths of the Sasanians, shown on such prominent Sasanidian rock reliefs as that from Naqsh-e Rostam, Iran, showing Ardashir I (ca. 208–241 CE)⁶³ being introduced into power by the god Ahuramazda. On the rock relief from Bishapur, Iran, we again see the same motif for the investiture of King Bahram I (274–276 CE).⁶⁴

63 Schippmann 1990, 140.

64 Schippmann 1990, 141.



Fig. 23: Sasaanian rock relief from Naqshi-i-Rustam, Iran, third c. CE. After: Ghirshman 1962, 132, fig. 168

On each relief⁶⁵ one can easily see that it is Ahuramazda who still holds that investiture ring, and the kings stretch out their hands for it, or touch it loosely. In our case, the warrior holds the investiture ring firmly in his right hand. In my opinion, this is a clear indication that our rider is an Alkhon ruler or king, and that he is shown after investiture, i.e., while he rules. Furthermore, we here

65 Ghirshman 1962, 132, fig. 168; and 167, fig. 211.

clearly see the cross-fertilization of various cultures of the political powers in the region of Bactria and Gandhara during the reign of the Alkhon tribes during the late fifth century CE.

In the context of the investiture ring, we might add here that our Alkhon ruler is adorned with a very simple, undecorated neck ring, or torque, which is an ancient symbol of the king's power, best shown and worn also by the Parthian ruler of Shami, first century BC, now housed in the National Museum of Iran in Tehran.⁶⁶ That such neck rings go back to Achaemenidian times and symbolize kingship has been shown by Amelie Kuhrt.⁶⁷

THE HORSE

The prancing horse of the horse-and-rider statuette under discussion is a male with sturdy body features, long legs, and an elegantly shaped neck and head. The question of horse depictions in pre-Islamic Central Asia was discussed by this author some years ago.⁶⁸ Unequivocally the horse depicted here is neither a Przewalsky-horse nor a tarpan, known as the ancient wild horse types on the Eurasian steppes. Instead of this, we here see a thoroughbred that must have had a much longer history of horse-breeding behind it. Without any doubt our horse also does not belong to the heavy types of horses used by Sasanidian kings, depicted in Sasanidian art.⁶⁹ In fact, I believe we here see an intermix of the famous "heavenly, blood-sweating horses" of Ferghana⁷⁰ and the Akhal-teke horse, still bred in Turkmenistan.⁷¹ Such a horse is depicted here in our horse-and-rider statuette, and the same horse type can be found depicted on the so-called war plaque and hunting plaque from Orlat near Samarkand, to be dated to the Hunnic/Hephthalite period.⁷²

66 Canepa 2015, 82–93, see 87, fig. 6.4.

67 Kuhrt 1984, 156–160.

68 Jäger 2009, 75–82.

69 Ghirshman 1962, 161, fig. 205; 167, fig. 211; 178, fig. 220; 206, fig. 247.

70 Waley 1955, 55–103.

71 Masson 2001; Agent and Loboyona 2001, 155–158; Klimuk 2014.

72 Ilyasov and Rusanov 1997–1998, 146, pl. IV 1.-2.

THE MANE OF THE HORSE

On looking at the mane of the horse, we see that it is depicted as cut short, standing up slightly, and finely combed. Differently from many nomadic horse-depictions, where the mane is shown crenelated,⁷³ we here see the mane styled in the fashion of Sasanidian horses from a period of the third to the fifth–sixth centuries CE.⁷⁴ We again determine Sasanian influence and the cross-fertilization of different cultures among the Hephthalites and especially the Alkhon-Huns. On the famous Hephthalite silver bowl in the British Museum in London, the horses show the same treatment of the mane as our horse.⁷⁵

THE TAIL OF THE HORSE

Unfortunately half the tail of our horse was broken off in antiquity, but enough of it remains to enable us to discuss an interesting detail here. A close look reveals that the tail was not depicted as open, with all hair freely fluttering, but covered, perhaps meant to be covered by a sheet of leather or possibly a similar material, such as fabric. Annemarie von Gabain, the “grande dame” of Central Asiatic Studies in Germany, once explained that the covered tail was a clear symbol of setting out for nomadic hunting and warfare.⁷⁶ If this is a suitable conclusion for our Alkhon-period horse as well, then this means that the Alhons followed an ancient nomadic custom. The nomadic habit of covering a horse’s tail can be found depicted also on the so-called war-plaque from Orlat near Samarkand of the Hephthalites period.⁷⁷

THE BRIDLE / HEADGEAR OF THE HORSE

When searching for comparisons for our horse’s headgear, we must note that the simpler parts, the reins

73 Maenchen-Helfen 1957, 85–138.

74 Ghirshman 1962, 186, fig. 227; 192, fig. 235; 208, fig. 248; 220, fig. 262; 249, fig. 314.

75 Göbl 1967, vol. III, pls. 93–95.

76 von Gabain 1973, 1: 47–48; von Gabain 1979, 121, and personal communication by letter of 25th September 1986.

77 Ilyasov and Rusanov 1997–1998, 146, pl. IV 1.-2.

and their adornments, like the snaffle, belong to types described for the Hunnic period for Tuva, Southern Siberia, by Roman Kenk,⁷⁸ and by Bodo Anke for Western and Eastern Europe.⁷⁹

For the more simple phalerae hanging from the shoulders, no closely matching similarities or comparisons could be found; but their shape is uncomplicated, consisting of a ring-shaped plaque added to a short attachment-piece. A smaller, but similar, phalera hangs down on the front of the head of the horse.

Much clearer are the so-called flying tassels hanging down to both hindlegs of our rider's horse, because such have been described by Otto Maenchen-Helfen and Jangar Ilyasov.⁸⁰ According to Maenchen-Helfen, such flying tassels go back to the Yuezhi and Kushans and are signs of distinction, either of the horse or the rider, or of both rider and horse, in a strongly stratified society.

We can take for granted that the Alkhon-Huns had a very stratified society of riding warriors, so we cannot wonder that they still used flying tassels to adorn their horses. As the Alkhons began to the rule over Bactria and Gandhara, taking over from the late Kushans, it is very likely that they adopted these items from them. The other possibility is that the Alkhon Huns came from a region where the flying tassels had a much older history, but this original homeland remains a mystery.

THE SADDLE OF THE HORSE

Discussing the saddle of our rider is not an easy task, because photographs cannot show what one sees when the horse-and-rider sculpture in front of one for direct research. What the reader can see is the small undecorated saddle-blanket, which is of rectangular shape and adorned by short fringes hanging from it. One might think that we have to do here with a small knotted carpet.

It is impossible to show to the reader here the construction of the saddle in the widest sense of the word, which however can be seen during direct research: there are two tiny protuberances in front of the spread legs of the rider and the horse, which are very likely cushions or bolsters. When searching for comparisons, one is reminded of similar tiny cushions from the ancient Eastern Scythian tombs of

⁷⁸ Kenk 1984.

⁷⁹ Anke 1998.

⁸⁰ Maenchen-Helfen 1957, 85–138; Ilyasov 2003, 259–325.

Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains, now newly reconstructed for a saddle from Barrow 3, dated to the fourth century BC, by Elena V. Stepanova.⁸¹



Fig. 24: Reconstruction of a nomadic saddle from Pazyryk, Altai Mountains, Russian Federation, originally fourth c. BC. After: Stepanova 2016, 6, fig. 6.4.

Such saddles continued to be typical for nomad riders from the fifth–fourth centuries BC to the fifth–sixth centuries CE all over the Eurasian steppes, before saddles with wooden frames were in use.⁸² We cannot be sure, due to a lack of archaeological research for Hephthalite and especially Alkhon saddles and riding equipment, but it is not unlikely that the saddle our rider uses here belongs to the ancient nomadic saddles similar to those now reconstructed by Stepanova, saddles from Pazyryk in the

⁸¹ Stepanova 2016, 1–18.

⁸² Jäger 2006, 57–64.

High Altai mountains. If this is true, then the Alkhons were in a very old “Scythian,” i.e., nomadic tradition.

THE STIRRUPS OF THE HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE: WHY ARE THEY MISSING?

A broader audience among the readers, especially those having a connection with horse-riding, might be astonished to see that our rider is mounted stirrupless on his horse.

Stirrups, usually used in pairs, are attached to the saddle by leather-straps. The stirrups make it easier for the rider to mount his horse, and support riding. Besides this, stirrups increase the rider’s ability to stay in the saddle and control the mount, increasing the horse’s usefulness.

Furthermore, and this is very important, they help the rider to stand up while mounted and armed, and they thus enable him to use several weapons, especially the reflex bow, but also spears, lances, and swords.

It is common knowledge among historians and archaeologists that no ancient culture of ancient Eurasia knew of stirrups, neither the Greeks, nor the Romans, the Parthians nor the Sasanians: so, for example, Alexander the Great and his armies occupied the Achaemenid Empire without stirrups. When Roman armies occupied large parts of the Near East up to the Euphrates in 117 CE, under Emperor Trajan, they did so without stirrups as well. The Huns who occupied the eastern parts of the Roman Empire during the fourth and fifth centuries did not know the stirrup. Stirrups also are completely lacking in Hunnic-period archaeological complexes.⁸³

The history of the research on stirrups goes back more than eighty years, when Paul Reinicke wrote a first short article about this subject.⁸⁴ He then traced stirrups back to Eastern Asia, but he could not really show more details at that time. The same question was studied twice since then by A. D. H. Bivar,⁸⁵ who saw the origin of stirrups as being located somewhere in Central Asia. For Bivar, it became obvious that the Huns who invaded the Roman Empire by the fifth century (sic) did not know the stirrup. Only by the late sixth century CE did stirrups suddenly appear in Europe, brought from Central Asia by

83 Anke 1998.

84 Reinicke 1933, 220–222.

85 Bivar 1955, 3–7, and Bivar 1972, 273–291.

the Avars, a nomadic confederation that became a continuous danger for the Byzantines and the Germanic realms of central and western Europe during the next two hundred years.⁸⁶ The location at which stirrups must have had their origin became clearer when later, during the 1970s, a rich tomb was found in Liaoning Province, China, containing a real stirrup; the tomb dates to the early fifth century.⁸⁷ In 1981 M. A. Littauer, on the base of the find in Liaoning, published the idea that the stirrup was an invention made by nomadic groups in Northern China during the early fifth century. It was her idea that only slightly later stirrups had been brought westwards. This leaves no other solution than that obviously the invention of stirrups had not reached the Alkhons or other Hephthalite groups by the end of the fifth century CE, because they are not shown on Hephthalite pieces of art, such as on the silver bowl with riders in the British Museum, as mentioned above. Earlier in this discussion we saw that Nicholas Sims-Williams argues for a late-fifth-century CE date for our horse-and-rider statuette, due to the type and use of Greek letters for the inscription on the helmet of our rider. As a matter of fact, stirrups do not appear in fifth-century archaeological complexes in Central Asia, but do appear not earlier than by the later sixth century CE, when the Western Turks appeared on the stage of history of Central Asia. Accepting all this, it is no wonder that our rider does not show the use of stirrups. Stirrups were still unknown to the Alkhons of Bactria and Gandhara at the end of the fifth century CE, during the time our unique Alxon horse-and-rider statuette was designed. The alternate hypothesis, that stirrups are lacking on our statuette because the rider and his horse were shown on a kind of "ceremonial ride," must be rejected, because this makes absolutely no sense at all.

The ongoing political and military turmoil in Afghanistan since 1979 make archaeological research there close to impossible, and unfortunately it is true that only from there could we find fresh archaeological evidence, not only for the history of the stirrup, but for all subjects of cultural history.

86 Pohl 1988, 89, 171, 285.

87 Dittrich and Lin 1974, 111–125; Werner 1981, 137–155.

EXCURSUS: DOES OUR RIDER SHOW ARTIFICIAL CRANIAL DEFORMATION?

It was Robert Göbl, in his groundbreaking study concerning the coins of the “Iranian Huns” of Bactria and India, who dealt with the factor of artificial cranial deformation for the Alkhons.^{88, 89, 90} Göbl rightly suggested that it was the Kushans who first introduced this custom of body alteration (i.e., skull alteration) into Central Asia, visible best on coins of the early Kushan king Herais.^{91, 92} For Göbl it became clear that it was the Hephthalites — and very likely especially the ruling clan of the Alkhons — who followed this custom and who minted coins showing it. The preceding Kidarites and the later Hephthalites do not show rulers with deformed skulls on their coins, nor on any contemporary piece of their art.

Before we continue here, we must explain what the custom of artificial cranial deformation means. The term denotes an intentional alteration of the still-soft bones of an infant’s skull by applying binding with bandages and/or wooden boards. Flat skull-shapes, elongated ones, rounded ones, or conical ones are among those mainly chosen. The deformation usually begins approximately a month after birth and continues for about six months. According to anthropologists and physicians, artificial cranial deformation has no negative health effects, but only changes the shape of the skull.⁹³

88 Göbl 1967, 2: 235–246.

89 De Ujfalvi 1898, 259–277, and 384–407.

90 Werner 1956; Werner 1958, 162–164.

91 Göbl 1967, 2: 236–237.

92 Cribb 1993, 107–134, and pls. XXIII–XXVII.

93 Dingwall 1931; Imbelloni 1934, 165–189; Kiszely 1978; Schröter 1988, 258–265; Melk-Koch 1999, 65–72; Alt 2004, 571–577; Teschler-Nicola and Mitteröcker 2007, 270–281; Tobias, Wiltschke-Schrotta and Binder 2010, 279–337.



Fig. 25: Artificially deformed skulls from Austria, western Hunnic, fifth c. CE. After: Alram 2016, 64, fig. 49.

The reasons for this custom very likely include the intention to signify group affiliation or to demonstrate social status, for example, in the case of the Alkhons, to demonstrate the high status of Alkhon rulers.

On their coins no ruler of the Alkhons is shown wearing a helmet, except in the rare case of the coin of Mehama, mentioned above; they are only shown wearing diadems, but if one sees our rider's head in profile, at least the idea arises that he shows artificial cranial deformation underlined by the high rounded helmet; the eyes and the shape of the nose do not differ from the face-features of the skull-deformed heads of Alkhon rulers on their coins.

After my direct research on the horse-and-rider statuette, I personally am convinced that nothing I saw speaks against the fact that the rider shows artificial cranial deformation.

THE ALKHON HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE AND ITS GENERAL ART
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

I consider it more than likely that our statuette is a reduction in size of a life-sized statue of the same design. Horse-and-rider statues appear in art history as an invention of Greek Art since the late archaic period of the sixth century BC, but they became most popular in the Hellenistic period of the fourth to first centuries BC.⁹⁴ Bactria and Gandhara, i.e., modern Afghanistan, northwest Pakistan and adjacent regions, had become part of the Hellenistic world up to the shores of the Indus, since Alexander the Great's campaign, the first half of the fourth century BC. It is more than likely that Hellenistic horse-and-rider statues existed also in Bactria and Gandhara then. In the so-called Classical West, i.e., the Mediterranean World and the Near East, only a very limited number of such statues have survived; and these stem from Roman times. From the Graeco-Bactrian East we have no finds of such statues. What we know about Hellenistic horse-and-rider monuments is limited to Roman copies of such statues for the Mediterraneanum. In the Hellenistic East, to which also Bactria and Gandhara belonged, no such statue or monument has survived the centuries.

Our statuette shows a rider on a prancing horse, its front legs raised from the ground. The prototype for this design must be Alexander on his horse Bukephalos. That exact type of statue we only know from a Roman copy found at Herculaneum in Italy.⁹⁵

94 Wünsche 1999, 63–75.

95 Hansen, Wieczorek, and Tellenbach, eds., 2009, 240, Cat. No. 1.



Fig. 26: Alexander the Great on his horse Bucephalos, bronze statuette, Herculaneum, first c. CE, after a Hellenistic prototype of the fourth c. BC. After: Hansen, Wieczorek, and Tellenbach, eds., 2009, 240, Cat. Nr. 1.

Even though the statical problem of Alexander on his horse was solved by adding a rudder-support underneath the front of the horse from Herculaneum, it is clear that such prototypes must have influenced the artist of our statuette. That very prototype statue of Alexander on his horse Bucephalos

is thought to have been designed by the famous Greek artist Lysippos (ca. 390–300 BC).⁹⁶ Alexander the Great is most often shown on his prancing horse Bukephalos, for example, on the famous Alexander mosaic from Pompeii, now housed in the National Museum in Naples, Italy; this mosaic was very likely originally designed during the second century BC at Alexandria in Egypt and then transferred to Pompeii later during Roman times.⁹⁷ In the same way, we find Alexander the Great depicted on the famous Alexander sarcophagus from Sidon, Lebanon, now housed in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. The sarcophagus must have been carved around 325 BC for a very important Greek-Hellenistic ruler at Sidon.⁹⁸ That such statues of Alexander the Great on his prancing horse must once have existed in Bactria too we can see from a coin image, i.e., the reverse side of a tetradrachmon of the Bactrian-Greek king Philoxenos, to be dated to circa 100 to 96 BC, now housed in the Münzkabinett of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna.⁹⁹



Fig. 27: Coin of the Greco-bactrian king Philoxenos, ca. 100 BC from Gandhara, Münzkabinett KHM, Vienna, Austria. After: Hansen, Wiczorek, and Tellenbach, eds., 2009, 373, Kat. Nr. 281.

⁹⁶ Moreno 1983–1984, 13–70; Serwint 1996, 852–854; Steward 1983, 262; Calcani 1989.

⁹⁷ Andrae 1967; Stähler 1999; Pfrommer 2001; von Hase 2009, 67–75.

⁹⁸ Winter 1912; Schefold and Seidel 1968; von Graeve 1970; Neudecker 1996.

⁹⁹ Hansen, Wiczorek, and Tellenbach, eds. 2009, 373, Cat. No. 281; Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Münzkabinett, Inv. No. GR 035189.

JÄGER, "A UNIQUE ALXON-HUNNIC HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE"

Besides these comparisons there is the fragment of a rider-statuettes of Alexander the Great from the famous Kushan-period hoard of Begram in Afghanistan, dating to the first century CE, now housed in the National Museum in Kabul.



Fig. 28: Fragment of a bronze statuette of Alexander the Great on his horse Bucephalos, first c. CE, after a Hellenistic prototype of the fourth c. BC, found at Begram, Afghanistan. Nationalmuseum Kabul, Afghanistan. After: Hiebert and Cambon 2008, 208, fig. 227.

Unfortunately this cast bronze statuette has survived only as a fragment, leaving just the upper part showing Alexander with spread legs, as though sitting on his horse.¹⁰⁰ H. von Rogues de Maumont¹⁰¹ and H. B. Siedentopf¹⁰² have both argued that this fragment from Begram shows Alexander the Great on his prancing horse; and this has been agreed to by M. Canepa.¹⁰³ I share this idea, and one must agree that the likelihood of an image of Alexander on his prancing horse as an artistic motif must have been spread as far as the Hellenized Orient as far as Bactria/Afghanistan and Greater Gandhara up until the Kushan period. Therefore it is not impossible that large, life-sized statues of Alexander the Great on his prancing horse could still have existed later during post-Kushan periods, at least until the time of the Alkhon Huns. Such a statue of Alexander the Great on his prancing horse could have been the prototype for the artist of our horse-and-rider statue. It is well known that Alexander the Great's fame lasted deep into the Islamic period, and logically one can assume that it was the same during the Kushan and post-Kushan periods. I additionally accept that during the post-Kushan and Hephthalite periods a Roman copy of a Hellenistic-period horse-and-rider statuette was imported from the Roman West, and then was used as a prototype for the design of our statuette.

THE HORSE-AND-RIDER STATUETTE IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIONS DURING THE ALKHON PERIOD, LATE FIFTH CENTURY CE: A FIRST ATTEMPT

It has been shown in detail above that two features of our statuette determine the approximate date for this unique, fascinating piece of art from the period of the Alkhon-Huns:

1. the use of old Greek letters for writing, i.e., the type of punching of the Bactrian-language inscription around the helmet of the rider, as analyzed by N. Sims-Williams,¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Cambon 2008, 145–161; and Mehendale 2005, 162–209, 208, no. 227.

¹⁰¹ von Rogues de Maumont 1958, 25 with fig. 12.

¹⁰² Siedentopf 1968, 80.

¹⁰³ Canepa 2015, 82–93; 86, fig. 6.3.

¹⁰⁴ Sims-Williams 2012, 140.

2. the type of earrings worn by the rider, ascribing them to the period of the Alkhon ruler Javukha due to the fact that only Javukha is shown wearing such earrings on his coins.¹⁰⁵

Holding this date at the end of the fifth century CE as the most likely one for the manufacturing of this perfectly unique piece of Alkhon-period art, we should shortly try to analyze the situation of the contemporary-period religions and their cultural milieu in the realms of the Alkhons.

N. Sims-Williams reads the inscription on the helmet of the rider, translated, as: “Hrilad gives (this) to the God Zhun.”

This provokes the question, who is this god Zhun? Hrilad, according to N. Silms-Williams, is the donor of our statuette, possibly (?) an Alkhon nobleman. For N. Sims-Williams it is not unlikely that Zhun derives from the Iranian god Zurvan,¹⁰⁶ the Zoroastrian god of time¹⁰⁷; and he underlines this by following the examination of H. H. Schaeder.¹⁰⁸ M. Shenkar in his outstanding study comes to the conclusion that Zhun was possibly connected to the god of the river Oxus, the modern river Amudarya. Furthermore he holds it most likely that the god Zhun was the greatest god worshipped in Zabulistan, Bactria, in Late Antiquity.¹⁰⁹ It was C. E. Bosworth who earlier suggested that the god Zhun might have been brought to Bactria by the Hephthalites.¹¹⁰ Early Islamic sources of the ninth century CE describe a large sanctuary of the god Zhun in the province of Zamindavar in Eastern Afghanistan on the “Hill of Zun,”¹¹¹ where a golden statue of the god was worshipped, adorned with rubies for the statue’s eyes.¹¹² F.

¹⁰⁵ Vondrovec 2014, 1: 173–174, and 190–191.

¹⁰⁶ Sims-Williams 2010, 39.

¹⁰⁷ Widengren 1961, 77–108.

¹⁰⁸ Schaeder 1941, 268–299.

¹⁰⁹ Shenkar 2014, 130–131.

¹¹⁰ Bosworth 1968, 35.

¹¹¹ Marquardt and deGroot 1915, 248–292.

¹¹² Shenkar 2014, 42.

Grenet is convinced that Zhun might have been connected with the Iranian solar god Mithra, and this god might have been the one shown on the painting at Dokhtar-i Noshirvan, Afghanistan.¹¹³

A.-H. Habibi¹¹⁴ and later A. Wink¹¹⁵ saw clear connections between the Iranian god Zhun/Zun and the Indian, i.e. Hindu, god Shiva. Such a syncretic mixture of the Iranian god Zhun and the Indian god Shiva again makes good sense in the Indo-Iranian borderlands of ancient Bactria, especially because Shiva also was often worshipped in sanctuaries build on top of hills and mountains.

How significant Hinduism was in the region under Alkhon rule is shown by the important cave-sanctuary of Kashmir Smast near Mardan in northwest Pakistan, excavated and examined by Muhammad Nasim Khan and his team.¹¹⁶ At Kashmir Smast it was the goddess Bhima, a shivaitic goddess, who was dominantly worshipped.

Fire altars on the reverse sides of Alkhon coins, adopted from Sasanian and Kushan coins show that Zoroastrianism must still have played a big role when it comes to the religion of the Alkhons.¹¹⁷ Which form of Zoroastrianism was in favor with the Alkhons must stay more or less unknown until scholarly excavations are possible in Afghanistan again.

Beside these religions was Buddhism, which was a widely spread belief since the Kushan emperors, among them prominently Kanishka I (ca. 127–150 CE) who was the only ruler ever to have minted coins with the image of Buddha in human form.¹¹⁸ For a longer period it was acceptable to insinuate that the invasion of the Hephthalites during the fourth century had brought a quick and lasting negative impact on Buddhism in Central Asia, especially in Bactria and Gandhara. This idea was mainly spread by Sir John Marshall, based on his excavations at Taxila.¹¹⁹ Later Shoshin Kuwayama was the first to doubt this idea of the decline of Buddhism under the Hephthalites, based on new research

113 Grenet 1995, 105–119, see 108.

114 Habibi ND; and Habibi 1972.

115 Wink 2002, 118–119.

116 Khan 2001 (2003), 218–272; Khan 2018.

117 Vondrovec 2014, 1: 167–168.

118 Cribb 1985, 59–87; Cribb 1999–2000, 151–189.

119 Marshall 1951; Marshall 1960.

in the sources and on the basis of new finds.¹²⁰ Elizabeth Errington substantiated this view by a fresh look on coin finds from Gandhara.¹²¹ This fresh look into the question of whether or not Buddhism fell into decline with advent of the Hephthalites brought Frantz Grenet to the idea that “the second conquest of Buddhism of Central Asia was more far-reaching (under the Hephthalites) than the first one in the Kushan period.”¹²² During the last few years most recent excavations in Afghanistan by our Afghan colleague Zafar Paiman have shown in fact that Buddhist monasteries were founded and built under royal patronage under various Hephthalite rulers,¹²³

A few years ago a unique find was made: the Talangan copper scroll, now housed in the Schoyen Collection, Oslo, Norway.

¹²⁰ Kuwayama 1989, 89–134; reprinted: Kuwayama 2012, in: Liu 2012, 225–274.

¹²¹ Errington 1999–2000, 191–216, see 199–203.

¹²² Grenet 2002, 203–214, see 213.

¹²³ Paiman and Alram 2010, 33–58; Paiman 2018, 95–121.

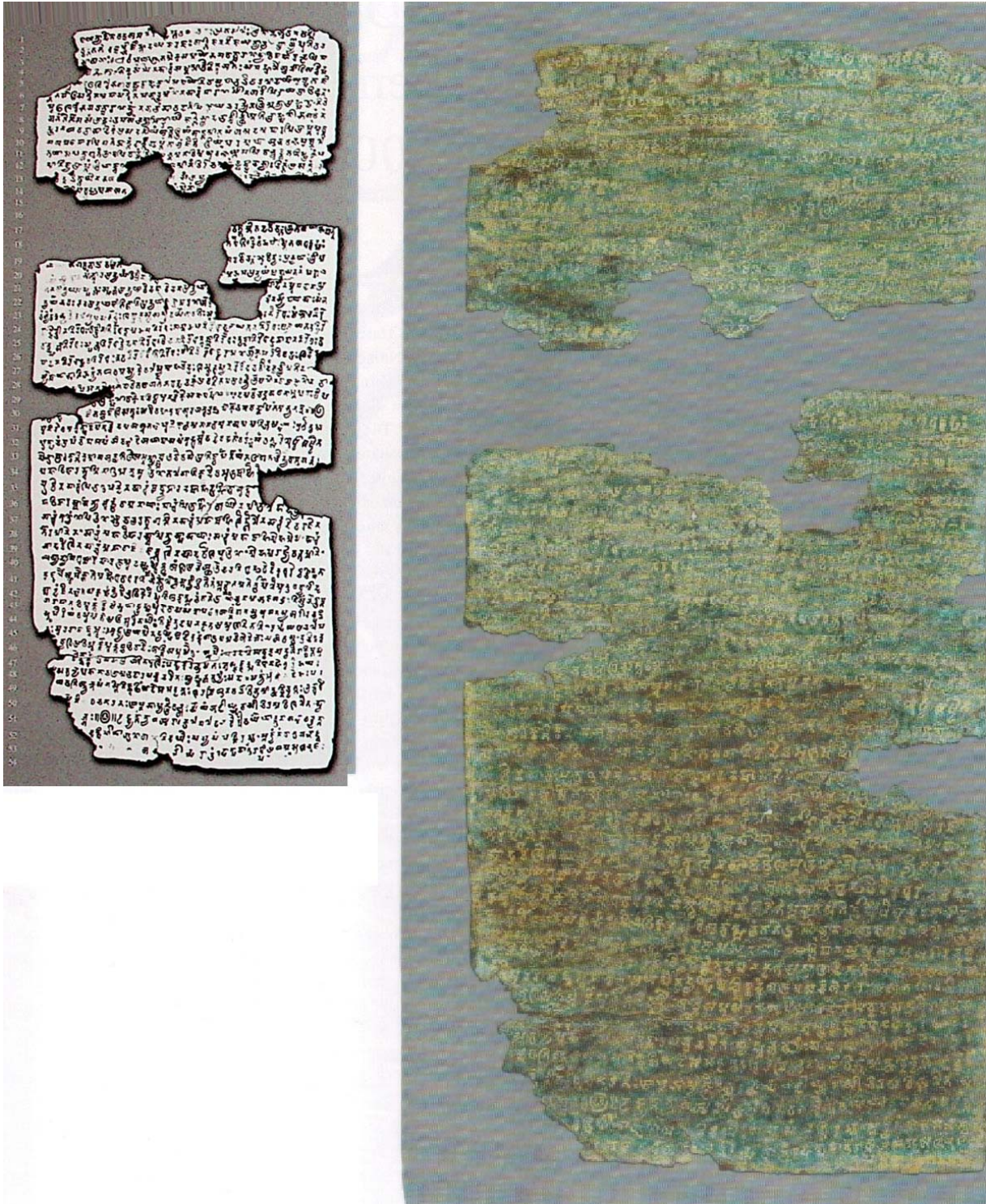


Fig. 29: Talangan Copper Scroll, from Talangan, Northern Afghanistan, end of fifth c. CE. Schoyen-Collection, Oslo, Norway. After: Alram 2016, 80, fig. 59.

This copper scroll is written in Sanskrit and in Brahmi script on copper,¹²⁴ and it measures 58 × 27 cm. The scroll is dated in the Laukika era, with dates to 492–493 CE, but was commissioned by the Alkhon ruler Mehama in 493–494 CE. The content deals with the building of a Buddhist stupa and mentions the Alkhon rulers Khingila, Toramana, Javukha, and Mehama. The scroll must have been deposited in that very stupa at a place named Talangan or Talaqan. Historically the Talagan Copper Scroll dates to the time after 460 CE when Gandhara and Taxila had been occupied by the Alkhons, but before the so-called Hunnic Wars on India, which took place in between 496 and 534 CE. The question of which place is Talangan/Talaqan is still under discussion; and two places are possible: either Talangan in Bactria, to the east of modern Kunduz in Northern Afghanistan, or Talaqan in the Punjab, north of the Salt Ranges.

The Talangan Copper inscription will later be of interest again, because it relates to the Alkhon ruler Javukha; and he is very likely, as mentioned above, connected to our horse-and-rider statuette.

Without any doubt, we can state here that the Alkhon rulers at the end of the fifth century CE ruled over large areas formerly ruled by the preceding Kushans, and they seem to have shown the same tolerance toward all religions of the regions they controlled, i.e., various forms of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Unfortunately it is yet unknown what the Alkhons's religion or belief was before they occupied Bactria and Gandhara.

SUMMARY

The above research and discussion can be summarized as follows:

The horse-and-rider statuette in the Pritzker Family Collection, Chicago, is perhaps the most important art object produced by the Hephthalites yet known, and especially of the art of the Alkhons now being fully presented here for the very first time. Like a wide open window it offers a view into the world of the Hephthalites, especially the Alkhons, with details telling us much about their arts, ideology, religion, riding culture, weaponry, and fashion. Seen as a monument of art of its time and geographical background, somewhere in Bactria / modern Afghanistan, the sculpture shows the cross-fertilization of various cultures of the political powers in that region.

¹²⁴ Melzer and Sander 2006, 251–278; de la Vaissiere 2007, 127–130.

Besides clear evidence for a Hellenistic-Bactrian background for the prancing horse, going back to Alexander the Great on his horse Bukephalos, there are Iranian, especially Sasanian, influences made clearly visible by the type of helmet worn by its rider, and for instance by the once existing wreath or ring in his right hand that served as an investiture symbol. Tight legging-like trousers might go back to types of trousers common on the “Scythian” steppes of Eurasia, also used at that time by Achaemenidian riding warriors. The only weapon worn by the rider is the common but precious longsword of the preceding Kushans, but its type and shape go back to longswords known from the Eurasian steppe-belt. The same can be said about such horse equipment as the tassels and phalerae. The fashion of the trappings of the horse’s mane and the covered tail are a typical features of Eurasian nomadic culture too. The earrings of our rider go back to Achaemenidian prototypes, but must have been in fashion over many centuries from the times of the Alkhons at the very end of the fifth century CE. For some items shown on our statuette it cannot be clearly said whether they are Iranian in the widest sense of the word, or if they are of nomadic origin, i.e., “Scythian” or “Sarmatian”; but the influences from the nomads of the Eurasian steppes are clear.

Until now we have not known of such three-dimensional bronze works or statues and statuettes from Hephthalite times. Except for clear influences from a Graeco-Bactrian, Hellenistic background for the design of a horse-and-rider sculpture, there is no influence of Gandharan works of art in bronze.¹²⁵

The art of the period of the Hephthalites, including the Alkhons, has often been seen as being mainly dominated by the Buddhist art of Gandhara in its latest phase.¹²⁶ Influence of Gupta-period India cannot be detected on our horse-and-rider sculpture at all; and the only outstanding statue of a horse of the period of Samudragupta (365–375 CE) is sculpted and designed completely differently.¹²⁷

In a way, Robert Göbl can be said to have been the only scholar who tried to understand the art of the Hephthalites and Alkhons,¹²⁸ not only by studying their coinage, but also by turning to all available pieces of art for comparisons.

125 Barrett 1960, 361–365; Barrett 1962, 35–44, and pls. XXII–XXXII; Pal 1975, nos. 8, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20–38, 39, 71, 72, 82.

126; Frye 1984, 341–357, see 351.

127 Williams 1982, fig. 11.

128 Göbl 1967; Göbl 1987, 65–79; Göbl 1989, 867–876.

Still the question remains, who is the rider on our sculpture? And what was the meaning of the sculpture in Antiquity, i.e., what meaning did it have for the contemporary peoples?

The man mentioned in the inscription: "Hrilad gave (this) to the God Zhun" was the donor who donated this most fascinating piece of art to a temple of the aforementioned god Zhun; so he cannot be the rider!

What we see is a behelmed, aristocratic, noble Alkhon ruler on horseback with all necessary insignia and symbols of power during, or soon after, his investiture. Once he held a ring or wreath in his right hand, which clearly means that this Alkhon ruler is shown in the moment of getting his power in a ceremony of investiture from a god. We cannot decide yet if this power-giving god really should have been Zhun; but this cannot be ruled out, because the inscription looks as if it were punched into the helmet directly after the statuette's surface was finished.

Provided that the results of the intense study of the coins of the Alkhons by Klaus Vondrovec are right, and I do not doubt it, then only one Alkhon ruler can and must be identified as the rider on our statuette; and this ruler is Javukha; and he is the same Javukha mentioned in the Buddhist Talagan copper scroll.

He is the only Alkhon ruler shown adorned with those hooped earrings¹²⁹ on his coins, — no other Alkhon ruler is shown with such earrings!

It must also be mentioned here, that Javukha is the only Alkhon ruler whose coin designs show an Alkhon ruler on horseback.¹³⁰ Javukha's horseman-type coins are styled after Gupta-Indian prototypes, i.e., those of Chandragupta II (375–415) and Kumaragupta I (415–455).

This necessarily means a decided interest of Javukha in horses as a religious and ideological symbol. If and how the horse and rider of our statuette, i.e., Javukha as a Hunnic ruler can be connected with the sacral kingship suggested for pre-Islamic rulers of Central Asia, cannot be ruled out, but also

129 Vondrovec 2014, 190–191, see fig. 3.38; 321, type 82.

130 Vondrovec 2014, 191, see fig. 3.39; 204–207; 322, type 117.

not be proved.¹³¹ Another question we cannot yet decide is, whether the horse itself is a symbol of the solar god Mitra.¹³²

It is possible to think that, in such religiously tolerant times as those under the Alkhon-Huns, a man like Hrilad, from the entourage of Javukha, might possibly have donated the horse-and-rider statuette at a temple of the god Zhun in the morning, while in the afternoon he joined the inauguration of the Buddhist stupa at Talangan.

One last remaining mystery is the prominent tube on the back of the rider. It is impossible to judge whether this was a holder for a separate umbrella or parasol, or was planned to hold incense-sticks, or for any additional, now lost insignia. Unfortunately we will never be able to decide this.

We might well conclude, in the way described above, that an Alkhon nobleman named Hrilad ordered the horse-and-rider statuette, showing his (?) contemporary ruler or King Javukha, and donated it to the god Zhun for a temple somewhere in Bactria (modern Afghanistan) at the very end of the fifth century CE.

This statuette is certainly the most important piece of fine art of the Hephthalite and Alkhon period of Bactria (modern Afghanistan) to be discovered within the last hundred years, and it should and must be discussed again in the future.

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¹³¹ Czegledy 1966, 14–66; Waida 1976, 179–190.

¹³² Metzler 1978, 619–638.

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