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Kavad and the Huns: Conflict and Cooperation with the Nomads of the Steppe

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Abstract: *Kavad's reign (488-496, 498/9-531) was a turning point for the Sasanian Empire. Although many aspects of his rule have been discussed in detail by scholars, his attitude, strategies, and policies regarding the steppe nomads have been somewhat overlooked. In this paper, the authors have used the descriptive-critical-analytical approach to examine the scattered information regarding Kavad's interactions with the Hephthalites and several steppe tribes for providing an analysis of his eastern affairs.*

Keywords: Kavad, Huns, Hephthalites, Sasanian, Eurasian Steppe, Nomads, Conflict and Cooperation

Introduction

The frontier between the Sasanian Empire and the steppes was long and porous and the Sasanians had to directly face the formidable nomadic powers along the full length of this frontier.¹ Thus, the principal constituent of the Sasanian grand strategy was to keep the fierce, unpredictable, and diverse steppe adversaries at bay.² This “geopolitical orientation to the east” was duly justified as economic motive, also linked to the Sasanian political drive for legitimizing their power in Iran.³

The Sasanian income gained from trade on the “Silk Road”⁴ collapsed after Bactria was captured by the Hunnic group in the mid-4th century. Shapur II's (r. 309-379) dealings with the Chionites (sometimes identified as Kidarites)⁵ in the 350's is the first

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¹ Thompson, 2004: 22, 36, 52, 229; Howard-Johnston, 2010: 41-43; Rante *et al.*, 2013: 204.

² Howard-Johnston, 2016: 599-601; Maksymiuk, 2025a: 193-194.

³ Maksymiuk, 2026.

⁴ Rezakhani, 2010, Maksymiuk, 2021a.

⁵ Zeimal, 1996: 119-120; Grenet, 2002: 206; Cribb, 2010; Bakker, 2020: 10.

known contact between Sasanians and the Huns.⁶ The seriousness with which Shapur confronted the situation is most clearly illustrated by his redeployment of the entire Iranian army, which he personally accompanied, to the northeastern areas of the Sasanian Empire.⁷

The common threat from the Huns, who had occupied territories north of the Caucasus, led the Romans and the Persians to compromise. Armenia was partitioned as a result of an agreement in the 380s.⁸ Securing the two passes of Dar'yal and Darband, through which the invaders had to pass to attack northern Mesopotamia, became the strategic priority.⁹ It is likely that the Roman Empire, impressed by the size of Hunnic invasion which sacked parts of Asia Minor and Syria in 395¹⁰ concluded an agreement with the Sasanians to share the costs of Iran's defense of the Caucasus.¹¹

Bahram V Gor (r. 420-438) carried out a victorious campaign against the Kidara Huns, who were to reach as far west as Rayy. As a result of the retaliatory military actions the Sasanian forces reached the territories across the Amu Darya (the king was said to be slain and Bahram captured his family).¹² As a result of the agreement, the border was established. It was probably then that Bahram founded the city of Marw al-Rūd as a garrison along the Murghab River. In 450, Yazdgerd II (r. 439-457) took Talaqan from the Kidarites, but due to a rebellion in Armenia, he had to move his troops westward. Upon his return (453/4), he suffered a humiliating defeat, as a result of which he agreed to pay tribute to the Kidarites. The first attempt to close the road along the Caspian Sea coast took place during the reign of Yazdgerd II.¹³

The situation on the eastern border of the empire radically changed in the middle of the fifth century when the Kidarites were pushed out of their domains by the new Hunnic power, the Hephthalites.¹⁴ According to the literary sources, Peroz (r. 459-484), supported by thirty thousand strong army of the Hephthalites,¹⁵ to whom he transferred Talaqan, seized the power in Iran abolishing his own brother Hormizd III (r. 457-459).¹⁶ However, after only a few years, he himself had to face the threat posed

⁶ Rezakhani, 2017a: 85, 87-93; Edwell, 2021: 167, 183, 191, 194, 196, 198-9, 205, 216, 253; see also Kim, 2013; de la Vaissière, 2015; Payne, 2014; Jackson Bonner, 2017: 98-99; these Huns were not clearly defined and the modern scholars have divided them into several inter-related groups, as the Kidarites, Alkhans, Nezaks, and Hephthalites. See especially Haug, 2024: 509-513.

⁷ Maksymiuk, 2024: 450.

⁸ Greatrex, 2000.

⁹ Jackson Bonner, 2020: 94-102.

¹⁰ Socrates Scholasticus, 6.1.7.

¹¹ Maksymiuk, 2016.

¹² Anachronistically described as the Turks. Ṭabarī 863-865.

¹³ Gadjeiev, 2021: 214. The actions of the king were due to the Hunnic invasion to the South Caucasus and Iran, about 440. Khalifa-Zadeh & Maksymiuk, 2023: 170.

¹⁴ Peroz won the victory over the Kidarites in 467. On the political complexity on the east border of Iran in this times, see Haug, 2024: 511-529.

¹⁵ Dīnawarī, p. 362.

¹⁶ Ṭabarī 872.

by the Hephthalites. It is likely that Peroz was responsible for completing the construction of the Great Wall of Gorgan dated to the mid-5th century.¹⁷ The *shāhānshāh*, however, was defeated three times by the Hephthalites and was killed in the third war.¹⁸ After the defeat of Peroz, the Sasanians decided to turn its strategy from military to diplomatic action, they tried to secure their eastern frontier by paying off the Hephthalites with tribute.¹⁹

This study aims to analyze and explain Kavad's policies, strategies, and diplomacy regarding nomadic peoples, particularly the Hephthalites. For this purpose, several concepts have been used in the paper, including strategic orientation, grand strategy, realism, border policy, nomadic diplomacy, geopolitical thought, power struggle, and opportunism. The authors' hypotheses at the commencement of the research was that "Kavad was not the Hephthalite puppet king as represented in majority of ancient sources. Kavad was also the instigator of several anti-nomadic measurements that crystalized during the reign of Khosrow I". With the absence of Sasanian and steppe nomads' historical narratives, the authors deemed it necessary to introduce every available source. Since the historical narrators (i.e. Romans, Armenians, Arabs, etc.) were not informed (nor interested) by the interactions of Sasanians and whoever dwelled in their eastern/northeastern lands, the information that they provide is scattered and scant in most cases. As a result, it is virtually impossible to discard (or disregard) any source, although the authors have prioritized Roman, Armenian, and Syriac Christian narratives as they were chronologically closer to the events described in the text.

Kavad at the Hephthalite court

Following his second defeat (476/477), Peroz was unable to pay the promised ransom to the Hephthalites. Therefore, Peroz dispatched his son, Kavad (r. 488-531), as a pledge and hostage to the Hephthalite king until the debt was fully paid. When Peroz returned to his kingdom, he relieved the young Kavad by paying the ransom.²⁰

In 484, Kavad's uncle Balash (r. 484-488) was declared king.²¹ Kavad's fate is uncertain in the aftermath of the Third Hephthalite War. Some sources state that he was captured again, while others say that he remained in Iran and fled to the Hephthalites following internecine conflict over the Sasanian throne. The sources

¹⁷ Sauer *et al.*, 2013: 594-595. See also Tabarī 874; see also Hopper, 2017.

¹⁸ Khonsarinejad & Khorashadi, 2021; Syvānne 2021.

¹⁹ Priscus of Panium, 6.41.3; On the importance of tribute in Sasanian diplomacy see Maksymiuk & Skupniewicz, 2025.

²⁰ Yesu' the Stylite, 10-11; Kurbanov, 2010: 166-167; Jackson Bonner, 2020: 137; see also Hekmatizadeh, Jozi & Sarhaddi-Dadian, 2024.

²¹ Rezakhani, 2017a: 130; Iranian aristocracy under leadership of Zarmihr (or Sukhra?) elected Balash as a king. Zareh, one of the sons of Peroz raised against the new king. Jackson Bonner, 2015: 106-107.

are also not in agreement regarding the total death toll of Peroz's offspring.²² However, it seems that there was a confusion in the source texts and that Kavad was actually held hostage by the Hephthalites while his father was still alive. There is no convincing evidence to suggest that he traveled east again immediately after Balash took power.²³

Whatever the case, the young Kavad was at the Hephthalite court for some time. During this time, Kavad may have been influenced by Hephthalite culture and traditions. Perhaps one of these was Kavad's sexual ethics,²⁴ as polyandry was practiced by the Hephthalites.²⁵ Kavad (or generally the Sasanians) also did leave an impression in the Hephthalite-dominated Tokharistan. The name of the district of Qubadian, should be assigned to the presence of Kavad. He may have lived there while he was at the Hephthalite court, or he may have founded its capital city of the same name.²⁶

Balash kept peaceful relations with the Hephthalites by giving tribute.²⁷ Thus, the authors note that the Hephthalites may have considered Balash more suitable to their agendas at that moment. Kavad was eager to seize the Sasanian throne, but his requests for military assistance was constantly ignored by the Hephthalite king.²⁸ Nevertheless, Kavad's request was finally granted. Assisted by the Hephthalite troops, he seized the Sasanian throne in 488.²⁹ But why did the Hephthalite monarch ultimately change his mind? According to Ṭabarī:

Qubadh [Kavad] became tired of waiting and sent a message to Khagan's wife requesting her to adopt him as her own child, and requesting her to speak with her husband regarding him and ask him to fulfill his promise. She did this, and kept on at length pressing Khagan until he dispatched an army with Qubadh.³⁰

The account of Ṭabarī concerning the adoption of Kavad by the wife of the king of the Hephthalites is not very credible.³¹ This lack of credibility would mean

²² Ghazar P'arpets'i, 85. 156; Procopius, I 4. 2, 4. 34; Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, 26; Vardan Arevelc'i, 29; Theophanes, 123; Sebeos, 5; Chronicle of Seert, XII 11-12; Ṭabarī 873, 883-884, 886-887, 879-880; Ferdowsi, 1417, 1422-1423; Dīnawarī, p. 364.

²³ Jackson Bonner, 2015: 106.

²⁴ Khorashadi & Vahdati Nasab, 2022: 533-534.

²⁵ Kurbanov, 2010: 5-6, 26-27, 132, 207-208; Crone, 2012: 402.

²⁶ Rezakhani, 2017a: 133n 23.

²⁷ Daryaei, 2009: 25.

²⁸ Ṭabarī 884.

²⁹ Litvinsky, 1996: 140; Rezakhani, 2017a: 130-131.

³⁰ Ṭabarī 884. Schindel (2004, 447, n. 1967) believes that this part of the Ṭabarī's narrative (alongside a passage in the Chronicle of Seert) is a duplicate of the stories of Kavad's second stay at the Hephthalite court.

³¹ However, if it is confronted with information that Kavad attempted to have Khosrow adopted by Emperor Justin I (c. 525), but the project failed due to the objections raised by some of the elites on both sides (Procopius, I 11. 5-30; Börm, 2007: 306), one would ought to consider if that was not in fact an attempt of gaining the support of the Hephthalites as the guarantors of the right to the throne of juvenile Kavad.

a misinterpretation of Kavād's marriage to one of the daughters of the Hephthalite king, which should not raise any doubts, even if it was only reported by Agathias.³²

Dīnawarī, however, has narrated that "[Balash] ruled for four years. Then he died. And after him Šūḥar [Sukhra] gave the kingdom to his brother Qubād."³³ Ferdowsi has also asserted that Sukhra was fundamental in the deposition of Balash.³⁴ Although the role of nobility and the priests cannot be ignored,³⁵ we must give some possible credit to Kavād's Hephthalite backup.

The first reign of Kavād (488-496)

Kavād's first reign was a troubled one. Kavād inherited a depleted treasury, a weakened ruling faction, a battered empire, civil disorders, and an exasperated military. He owed his reign to the noble families as well as the Hephthalites.³⁶ Kavād had to pay annual tribute to the Hephthalites,³⁷ and they preferred Sasanian gold dinars.³⁸

The fickle Huns posed a constant threat of irruption, and they could be easily suborned by the opposing power.³⁹ Kavād needed funds in order to address these issues.⁴⁰ He sent an embassy to the Roman court to demand gold in 491. Although the demand was made under the threat of war, Anastasius refused to pay.⁴¹ Kavād renewed his demands at a later time (any time before his expulsion). This time Anastasius offered a loan, but only gave a receipt of a written acknowledgement.⁴² Not long after this, Kavād's situation deteriorated. The nobility, alongside Zoroastrian clerics, rose in rebellion and ousted him from the throne in 496.⁴³ On this occasion,

³² Agathias, IV 28. 4.

³³ Dīnawarī, p. 364.

³⁴ Ferdowsi, 1424; Pourshariati, 2008: 78. According to the source material Sukhra was a prominent figure on the Persian court of the break of fifth and sixth centuries. Originating from the pahlav clan of Karin, at the rank of *marzbān* of Sistān, he was the shadow figure at the court of Peroz (Ṭabarī 878) and Balash (Ṭabarī 883).

³⁵ Daryaei, 2009: 25. More on faction rivalry on the Persian court after the death of Yazdgerd II, see Jackson Bonner, 2015: 108-117; Maksymiuk, 2015a: 166-173; Maksymiuk, 2017, see also Börm, 2007: 320 and Haug, 2024: 530-531.

³⁶ Greatrex, 1998: 49.

³⁷ Greatrex, 1998: 48-49; Schindel, 2004: 446, 448; de la Vaissière, 2005: 111; Börm, 2007: 227, 229; Kurbanov, 2010: 171.

³⁸ Yesu' the Stylite, 9n 38.

³⁹ Greatrex, 1998: 125.

⁴⁰ Yesu' the Stylite, 9n 38, 19n 81.

⁴¹ Greatrex, 1998: 49; Nicks, 1998: 84-85. According to John Malalas (XVIII 44) Kavād in his letter to Anastasius referenced the written oath of mutual assistance which he found in the archives, Maksymiuk, 2016: 151.

⁴² Greatrex, 1998: 50; Nicks, 1998: 85.

⁴³ According to Procopius (I 5. 3-7), the commander of the Sasanian troops on the Hephthalite border, the *kanārang* Gushnaspdad (Pourshariati, 2008: 266-271; Börm, 2018: 24-29), suggested the assassination of Kavād in the conference of nobles. As a result, he was later executed by Kavād after his second

he was replaced by his brother, Jamasp (r. 496-498).⁴⁴ Some sources state that Kavad was incarcerated in a prison (some mention the Prison of Oblivion), and that he later escaped to the Hephthalites.⁴⁵ Yesu' the Stylite, however, has narrated that "The nobles of the Persians secretly plotted to kill Kawad... but when this became known to him, he abandoned his kingdom and took refuge among the Huns".⁴⁶

Back to the Hephthalite court

According to Yesu' the Stylite, Kavad married the daughter of his sister, who had been captured in 484 and became a wife of the king of the Hephthalites.⁴⁷ The authors note that the rest of Yesu's narrative is similar to the stories of Kavad's first stay at the Hephthalite court.⁴⁸ That he was bonded by family ties to the Hephthalite king and he was constantly requesting for an army to help him re-establish himself in Persia. Like the previous stories, he was finally given a substantial army and he invaded the Sasanian territory. His brother fled when he heard of it, and Kavad seized the throne unopposed.⁴⁹ Procopius and Theophanes has also narrated this part of the story but with less details.⁵⁰ Both historians, however, confuse these events with Kavad's first stay with the Hephthalites.⁵¹ According to Dīnawarī, "[the Hephthalite King] made this condition for them that he [Kavad] yield to him the realm of Ṣigāniyān [Chaganiyan]".⁵² Ferdowsi, while narrating the same story also adds that Kavad promised that he would never make a claim on that territory.⁵³ McGovern, believes this meant that "he [Kavad] was required to take a vow that never, under any condition, would he undertake an offensive war against the Ephthalite domain".⁵⁴ Some sources

reinstatement (I 6. 18). Börm, 2024: 571. See also different dating proposed by Jackson Bonner (2015: 105), according to whom Kavad was deposed in 498: "En considérant que cette structure est fiable, nous pouvons ainsi établir que la déposition de Balāš et le début du règne de Kavād ont eu lieu en 488, sa destitution en 498 (la onzième année de son règne), sa restauration (après quatre ans du règne de Jāmāsp) au milieu de 502".

⁴⁴ Daryaei, 2009: 27; Rezakhani, 2017a: 131.

⁴⁵ Procopius, I 6. 1-10; Agathias, IV 28; Theophylact Simocatta, IV 6. 6-10; Dīnawarī, p. 368-369; Chronicle of Seert, XII 14; Ṭabarī 886-887; Tha'alibi, 382-383; Miskawayh, I, 90-91. Zarmihr, son of Sukhra was to help Kavad escape from prison and accompany him to the Hephthalite court. See especially Jackson Bonner, 2015: 112-118.

⁴⁶ Yesu' the Stylite, 23.

⁴⁷ Yesu' the Stylite, 24. Börm (2007, 128, n. 2, 227, n. 4) believes that the assumption that Khosrow was the son of this Hephthalite princess who married Kavad in c. 497 is without any basis, despite being chronologically possible.

⁴⁸ Also see n. 30 of this article.

⁴⁹ Yesu' the Stylite, 24.

⁵⁰ Procopius, I 6. 10-11; Theophanes, 123-124.

⁵¹ Theophanes, 191n 6; Yesu' the Stylite, 21n 104.

⁵² Dīnawarī, p. 369. As noted by Haug (2024: 531) "which then opened Sogdiana up to Hephthalite authority".

⁵³ Ferdowsi, 1431.

⁵⁴ McGovern, 1939: 414.

have asserted that Kavad's Hephthalite backup was very formidable.⁵⁵ Dīnawarī and Ferdowsi, has stated that these troopers numbered 30000.⁵⁶ But Daryaei has stated that: "This action [Kavad's second enthronement] also demonstrated the beleaguered situation of the empire, where in a time of chaos a small force was able to overrun the nobility-priest alliance".⁵⁷

If we consider that Kavad only had a limited Hephthalite military support, then why would Jamasp and his allies give up their position? In other words, if they favored Kavad, why he was ousted in the first place? While exploring the reasons of Kavad's dethronement is out of the scope of this paper, we must pay attention to the fact that Kavad was reinstated twice by possible Hephthalite interference. If the Sasanian nobility and the clerics were so scared of the Hephthalite martial prowess that they did not dare to even face a small portion of their forces, why they didn't they speculate the possibility of a Hephthalite interference and make sure that Kavad would not reach them? As a result, if Kavad indeed had Hephthalite backup, it would have been substantial. Although Rezakhani has stated that: "After this episode [Kavad's second reinstatement], we do not hear anything about the state of Sasanian interactions with the Hephthalites",⁵⁸ there are actually some minor references. These references are in the form of military cooperation and the presence of Hephthalite detachments in the Sasanian army. Kavad still had to pay annual tribute to the Hephthalites and it is plausible to assume that they expected some reward for their involvement in Kavad's restoration.⁵⁹

The second reign of Kavad (499-531)

Early in his second reign,⁶⁰ Kavad faced the old issue of the exhausted Persian treasury.⁶¹ As a result, he sent another embassy to the Roman court.⁶² According to Procopius, Anastasius's advisors persuaded him to not make the loan. They believed that the emperor should not help Kavad establish friendly relations with

⁵⁵ Yeshu' the Stylite, 24; Procopius, I 6. 10-11; Agathias, IV 28. 4; Theophylact Simocatta, IV 6. 10; Theophanes, 123-124; Tha'alibi, 382-384.

⁵⁶ Dīnawarī, p. 369; Ferdowsi, 1431.

⁵⁷ Daryaei, 2009: 27.

⁵⁸ Rezakhani, 2017a: 133.

⁵⁹ Blockley, 1985: 68; Greatrex, 1998: 7, 51. This can be confirmed by the large number of the coins from Kavad's second reign with Hephthalite countermarks. Haug, 2024: 531.

⁶⁰ Another chronology is offered by Jackson Bonner, 2015: 117: "La seconde accession au trône de Kavād en 502 orchestré par Seoses (ou Sūkhra si j'aie raison) et les Hephthalites entraîna immédiatement une guerre contre les Romains qui fut aussi acharnée qu'inattendue".

⁶¹ According to Greatrex (1998: 76) the reason of the Persian attack were the financial issues of Kavad. Haug (2024: 531) suggests that the war was carried partly to receive the tribute which the Persian court was to transfer to the Hephthalites. On the analysis of the Persian invasion, see Jackson Bonner, 2020: 151-153.

⁶² John Malalas, XVIII 44. p. 449-450; Procopius, I 7. 1; Theophanes, 144; Theodore Lector, I 28. [552].

the Hephthalites. The refusal from the emperor was to provoke Persian attack.⁶³ John the Lydian, however, mentions that the negotiations was over the defense of the Caucasus.⁶⁴ Regardless of Kavad's true motivations, the Romans were less concerned with Hunnic incursions *via* Caucasus, as their empire laid at some distance from the zone most vulnerable to these raids.⁶⁵

Kavad invaded Roman territories late in the summer of 502.⁶⁶ Börm, has also pointed out that there was a pro-Hephthalite circle among the Sasanian elites (at least from 496) who usually promoted war with the Romans. Not surprisingly, there also was a pro-Roman circle, who usually opposed the propositions of the pro-Hephthalites.⁶⁷ From a strategic point of view, it must be assumed that the attack by Kavad had to be consulted with the Hephthalite court.⁶⁸ Such a large military operation forced Kavad to concentrate his troops in northern Mesopotamia, thereby weakening his potential defense of the east. Kavad had to be certain that the Hephthalites would not launch military operations against Iran, which would force him to fight on two fronts.

This view is also supported by the participation of the Hephthalite army in the campaign of Kavad, as mentioned in source accounts. According to Yeshu', "Kawad... coming up by the northern (route), crossed the Roman border with the army of Huns which he had with him". Trombley and Watt believe that "at least some of the Huns were Hephthalites serving as mercenaries".⁶⁹ Indeed, Procopius has mentioned that, "they [the Hephthalites] have never made any incursion into the Roman territory except in company with the Median [Sasanian] army."⁷⁰ Procopius also states that Hephthalite contingents were present in the Sasanian army at the siege of Amida. He narrates an instant of raiding the countryside "Now some of the Ephthalitae who were overrunning the country thereabout saw this Jacobus and with great eagerness drew their bows with intent to shoot at him. But the hands of every one of them became motionless and utterly unable to manage the bow",⁷¹ which may have been a part of their deal. He also mentions that the Romans "happened upon eight hundred Ephthalitae who were marching in advance of the Persian army, and they

⁶³ Procopius, I 7. 1-7. The refusal was the pretext to start the war. Börm, 2024: 572.

⁶⁴ Lydus III 52-53. Thus Kavad had some justification in asking Anastasius to pay for the defense of that region. Greatrex, 1998: 125-126; Greatrex & Greatrex, 1999: 65-75.

⁶⁵ Greatrex, 1998: 125-126.

⁶⁶ Greatrex, 1998: 7.

⁶⁷ Börm, 2007: 321-322, 326-327.

⁶⁸ Howard-Johnston, 2010: 44; Jackson Bonner (2015: 117), suggests that this attack was arranged and ordered by the Hephthalites and their supporters on the Iranian court.

⁶⁹ Yeshu' the Stylite, 48, 50n 243.

⁷⁰ Procopius, I 3. 3-4.

⁷¹ Procopius, I 7. 8.

had killed practically all of them” near Nisibis in 503.⁷² Yeshu’ mentions that the Huns were also present in the sieges of Theodosiopolis (502) and Edessa (503) and the engagement at Tell-Beshmai (503) and Opadna.⁷³ A Hunnic chief was captured near Harran.⁷⁴ Yeshu’ states that:

As he was a well-known figure, and held in great honor by the Persian king, (the latter) promised the Harranites that he would not fight against them if they would give (the Hun) back alive. They were afraid of fighting and handed over the Hun, sending along with him as a gift fifteen hundred rams and other items.⁷⁵

Sometimes later, the Huns swept across the Caucasus in 504/505. They severely affected the northern parts of the Sasanian Empire, and Kavad had to withdraw his troops from the Roman territory to face them.⁷⁶ It seems that the Sasanians had lost the control of the Darband pass⁷⁷ in the Caucasus, at an unknown date, but more likely at the last phase the Anastasian War of 502-506.⁷⁸ According to Procopius, the fort was held by a Hun (probably the Sabirs) named Ambazoukes.⁷⁹ Regardless of Ambazoukes actual ethnicity,⁸⁰ control of the Caucasus passes (Dar’yal and Darband) was not perpetual and undisputed at that time. As Sauer has noted: “The master(s) of either pass would have had the power to enable Hunnic allies to cross the mountain chain and employ them in wars in Transcaucasia and the wider Near East.”⁸¹ After death of Ambazoukes, Kavad annexed the Gates to Iran.⁸² Agathias writes literally about the Sabir Huns: “A mercenary force of Sabir Huns was serving with the Persians.”⁸³

⁷² Procopius, I 8. 13; Ghirshman, 1948: 92; Greatrex, 1998: 58. Unfortunately we do not possess even the rough estimates of the Hephthalite troops at Kavad’s command.

⁷³ Yeshu’ the Stylite, 48, 51, 57, 59, 62. The Hephthalite mercenaries were primarily cavalry. Haug, 2024: 531.

⁷⁴ Yeshu’ the Stylite, 59; Ghirshman, 1948: 92-93.

⁷⁵ Yeshu’ the Stylite, 59. This “Hunnic chief” may actually have been a Hephthalite warlord. Altheim, 1969: 260.

⁷⁶ Procopius, I 8. 19-20, I 9. 24-I 10. 9, *De aedificiis* II 1. 5; Greatrex & Greatrex 2002: 78; Kim, 2013: 138-139.

⁷⁷ Kettenhofen, 1994; *contra* Greatrex (1998: 129; 2023: 130-132), arguing for the Dar’yal pass. Citing Procopius (I 10. 12), Sauer (2020: 876-877) believes that the Sasanians retaliated and captured the Dar’yal gates probably after 504/505.

⁷⁸ Khalifa-Zadeh & Maksymiuk 2023: 173.

⁷⁹ Procopius, I 10. 9-10; Martindale, 1980: 68. Procopius (VIII 11. 22-25) has pointed to one of these people, the Sabirs, whose numerous chieftains could be paid into a temporary alliance by the Romans or the Sasanians. On the Sabirs see Jackson Bonner, 2020: 159.

⁸⁰ Czeglédy, 1960: 77; Maenchen-Helfen, 1973: 390.

⁸¹ Sauer, 2020: 876-883. Such a situation took place, when the Albanian King Vache II (ca. 440-462), has not recognized the supremacy of Peroz, and he let pass the Mazkut’s through the Darband pass, and in alliance with them took military action against Iranian troops. Peroz’s response was to let the Huns through the Dar’yal pass, who then ravaged Albania. Khalifa-Zadeh & Maksymiuk, 2023: 172.

⁸² Procopius, I 10.12.

⁸³ Agathias, IV 13. 7.

However, both Agathias⁸⁴ and Procopius⁸⁵ report that the Sabir Huns conducted military operations in the Caucasus in the interests of both the empire and the court in Ctesiphon, depending on who paid them.

By 506, the Sasanian expedition against the Romans was over but a truce was set for only seven years.⁸⁶ The two conditions of the truce which we can be certain of are, that Amida was to return to Rome and that Kavād was to receive one thousand pounds of gold.⁸⁷ It is plausible that Kavād demanded and received the resumption of Roman subsidies for the Iranian defense of the Caucasus.⁸⁸ Key to the present discussion is a statement by Procopius that the main motive for the conclusion of the truce by Kavād was the fact that the “hostile Huns had made an invasion into his [Kavād’s] land”.⁸⁹

But Kavād finally had enough of the Hephthalites⁹⁰ and the pro-Hephthalite elites⁹¹. He had already tried to bring the mountainous region of Tabaristan into subjugation and appointed his eldest son Kawus as prince governor, who was tasked with dealing with the incursions of the nomads into Khorasan and Tabaristan.⁹² The Hunnic invasions in c. 503 may have alerted Kavād, that an alliance with the Hephthalites was not synonymous with securing the northern border.⁹³

At any rate, Procopius no longer mentions any Hephthalite contingents in the Sasanian army after 506 and the Hephthalite-Sasanian alliance appears to have been dissolved.⁹⁴ After this episode, the numismatic evidence suggests the reopening of the Khorasan mints. One of the main Zoroastrian fires, the Adur-Burzen-Mihr, also came back under direct Sasanian control. While these developments can point out to a possible Sasanian reconquest of that region, they do not allow a detailed reconstruction of the possible military events. At any rate, it is quite obvious that the Hephthalites did not give them back on a silver platter.⁹⁵

In 515, the Sabirs made their way through the Caspian Gates.⁹⁶ They invaded Armenia, attacking Sasuns (in the province of Aghdshnik). Mijej, chief of the Gnumians, repelled the invaders from that province. He then united himself with several Armenian

⁸⁴ Agathias, IV 13. 8.

⁸⁵ Procopius, II 29. 29, VIII 17. 10.

⁸⁶ Procopius, I 9. 24: “After this the Persians, since their war with the Huns kept dragging on, entered into a treaty with the Romans”.

⁸⁷ Procopius, I 9. 4: “So a proposal was discussed between them according to which the Persians were to deliver over the city to the Romans upon receipt of one thousand pounds of gold”.

⁸⁸ Jackson Bonner, 2020: 158.

⁸⁹ Procopius, I 8. 19. According to Procopius invasion on the northern Iran was to start in 503.

⁹⁰ Schindel, 2004: 487; Börm, 2007: 238.

⁹¹ Börm, 2007: 322, 237.

⁹² Marquart, 1901: 130.

⁹³ Börm, 2007: 322, n. 2.

⁹⁴ Börm, 2007: 322, n. 2.

⁹⁵ Schindel, 2004: 490.

⁹⁶ Marcellinus Comes, 515. 5; John Malalas, XVI 17; Victor of Tonnena, 96 [515]; John of Antioch, 242. 15; Theophanes, 161; Greatrex, 1998: 125; Sauer, 2020: 880.

chiefs, and drove Sabirs out of Armenia. As a result, Kavād deposed Burghān and appointed Mijēj as the prefect of Armenia.⁹⁷ Sabirs also invaded Roman territory, plundering Cappadocia, Galatia, and Pontus.⁹⁸ Since no Sasanian territory was affected by Sabirs,⁹⁹ it has been assumed that the Sasanians deflected the Huns into Roman territory,¹⁰⁰ or used them as surrogates.¹⁰¹

According to Zacharias Rhetor, in c. 518/519, Kavād was constantly demanding a tribute five hundred lbs. “from the emperor of the Romans for the expense of the Persian army guarding the gates facing the Huns”.¹⁰² In the early 520s, the Romans had forged an alliance with Zilgibis, a Hunnic king (probably a Sabir), who could attack Sasanian territories in the Transcaucasia and beyond. The fickle Huns, however, soon allied themselves with Kavād. Justin came up with a cunning solution, revealed his earlier dealings with the Huns and claimed that they were planning to betray Kavād. The outraged king then ordered Zilgibis’s execution and killing of his men.¹⁰³ John Malalas and *Chronicon Paschale* mention that the Hunnic host was consisting of 20,000 men. They claim that the Huns were caught off guard in the night and many of them were slain, while some managed to flee.¹⁰⁴ By a few years later, Kavād had secured the alliance of other Hunnic kings, called Tyrānx and Glom, who had 20,000 troops under their command. The Romans countered this by paying a Sabir queen, named Boa. In 528, She intercepted them as they were passing into Sasanian territory and killed Glom, along a large number of the Hunnic host. Tyrānx was captured and sent to Constantinople, where he was executed.¹⁰⁵ The chroniclers have stated that Boa commanded 100,000 warriors, but as Robin has noted, “These hundred thousand steppe warriors were no doubt one of them [Roman Propagandas], designed to calm the population of the eastern provinces, but perhaps also to intimidate Persians”.¹⁰⁶

In the battle of Dara (530), two detachments of 600 Hunnish cavalymen (Procopius calls them Massagetae) were among the Roman ranks. Each Hunnic detachment was led by two leaders (one under Sunicas and Aigan, the other led by Simmas and Ascan) who may each have commanded 300 men.¹⁰⁷ Zacharias Rhetor and Procopius have emphasized on the effectiveness and bravery of these Hunnic commanders and their warriors.¹⁰⁸ Sasanians, in turn, recruited three thousand Sabirs for attacking Satala in

⁹⁷ Michael Chamich, XIII; Howorth, 1892: 615.

⁹⁸ Victor of Tonnena, 96 [515]; Theophanes, 161.

⁹⁹ Sauer, 2020: 880.

¹⁰⁰ Greatrex, 1998: 130.

¹⁰¹ Howard-Johnston, 2013: 874.

¹⁰² Zacharias Rhetor, VIII 77; Greatrex, 1998: 130-131.

¹⁰³ John Malalas, XVII 10; *Chronicon Paschale*, 615-616; Theophanes, 167; Greatrex, 1998: 133-134.

¹⁰⁴ John Malalas, XVII 10; *Chronicon Paschale*, 615-616.

¹⁰⁵ John Malalas, XVIII 13; John of Nikiû, 90 61-65; Theophanes, 175.

¹⁰⁶ Rubin, 1961: 268.

¹⁰⁷ Procopius, I 13. 20-21; Howorth, 1892: 615; Greatrex, 1998: 173.

¹⁰⁸ Zacharias Rhetor, IX 94; Procopius, I 13.

530.¹⁰⁹ Early in 531, the Sasanians sent Mihr Girovi to recruit more Sabirs. Some arrived early, and joined the siege of Martyropolis.¹¹⁰ Procopius reports that the Romans successfully tricked the Persians into believing that the approaching Sabirs “had been won over with money by the Roman emperor, and were about to come against them that very moment”. In the meanwhile, Kavād passed away and Khosrow ascended the throne, and the word reached the besiegers. Negotiations began, and fearing the possible double-cross of the Sabirs and receiving two Roman hostages, the Sasanians retreated homeward.¹¹¹ The additional Sabirs finally arrived, but the siege was already lifted.¹¹² So they proceeded to raid the Roman territories, and reached as far as Euphratesia, Second Cilicia and Kyrrhestike.¹¹³ Acquiring much spoils, they withdrew. But the Romans tracked them and killed some of their troops, recovering some of the booty.¹¹⁴ Although Rufinus conducted an enquiry, he reported that the Sabirs did not enter the war on behalf of the Sasanians. But as Greatrex has noted, “[this does not] imply that they were not responsible: The Roman desire for peace was such that they might have been prepared to overlook evidence of Persian involvement”.¹¹⁵

Discussion

The greatest challenge facing Iran's rulers was to maintain the territorial integrity of the state, both by preventing the decentralization tendencies characteristic of multi-ethnic empires and by defending the vast territory against external enemies. In the case of the Sasanians, the situation was even more difficult, as they seized power as a result of a civil war, overthrowing the Parthian (Pahlav) Arsacid dynasty.¹¹⁶ Despite these issues the Sasanians managed to stay on the throne for over four centuries.

Although the ultimate power was held by *shāhānshāh*, his competences were limited by the internal, hierarchical structure of the state. The policies of the empire were decided by the three highest hereditary categories of nobility: the *shahrdārān* (local kings), the *wāspuhragān* (members of the Sasanian dynasty), and the *wuzurgān* (the most important noble families, primarily of Parthian/Pahlav origin). It was representatives of the great Parthian families who provided contingents of elite units, which they commanded during the king's military campaigns. Source records mention

¹⁰⁹ Procopius, I 15. 1.

¹¹⁰ Zacharias Rhetor, IX 97-98; Greatrex, 1998: 211-212.

¹¹¹ Procopius, I 21. 12-28.

¹¹² Zacharias Rhetor, IX 97-98; Greatrex, 1998: 211-212.

¹¹³ Zacharias Rhetor, VIII 82-83, IX 98; John Malalas, XVIII 71; Procopius, I 21. 28 (brief mention); Greatrex, 1998: 211-212.

¹¹⁴ Zacharias Rhetor, IX 98; John Malalas, XVIII 71; Greatrex, 1998: 212.

¹¹⁵ John Malalas, XVIII 71; Greatrex, 1998: 212.

¹¹⁶ Maksymiuk, 2021b.

commanders from the Mehran and Suren families during the campaigns of Shapur II,¹¹⁷ or in later period, they mention the commander of Peroz from the Mehran Pahlav clan in the Battle of Dara (530),¹¹⁸ or Siyawush (Seoses, Sukhra?) from the Karin Pahlav, who, as the last one before reorganisation of the army held a military title of the *artēštārān sālār*.¹¹⁹ The members of the Pahlav houses led also Sasanian diplomacy carrying the peace negotiations on behalf of *shāhānshāh*.¹²⁰

The most important competence of the great houses was participation in the empire's supreme council, which elected a new monarch from among the members of the Sasanian dynasty.¹²¹ It was natural that fierce rivalries between opposing court factions arose in this latter field, as we can see, for example, in the circumstances surrounding the coronation of Shapur II.¹²² Such a situation can also be observed in the description of the activities of the House of Mehran Pahlav in his seizure of power by Peroz,¹²³ the actions of the house of Karin Pahlav supporting the aspirations to the throne of Kavad I or the steps taken by Mahbod from the house of Suren Pahlav, who played the key role in the time of election of Khosrow I.¹²⁴

Shapur I in the inscription on the Ka'be-ye Zartosht at Naqsh-e Rostam when listing the provinces under his domain, describes the empire stretching in the north until forward to the Cauasus and the Alans' gate, and in the east including the Kushan-land until forward to Pushkabur (the region of modern Peshawar).¹²⁵ What should be noted is that the inscription also mentions the sons of Shapur I, along with their titles: Hormizd-Ardashir as great king of Armenia, Shapur as king of Mesene and Narseh as king of India, Sakestan and Turan.¹²⁶ Based on this, it can be assumed that at the time of writing the inscription, the Kushan state had lost the northern parts of the realm (Tokharistan) and had been incorporated into the Sasanian sphere of influence, but had retained its political autonomy.¹²⁷

Until the middle of the 4th century, the military activity of the Sasanians was mainly directed towards the western front. There were several reasons for this,

¹¹⁷ Amm. Marc., XXV 1.11; Amm. Marc., XXIV 3. 1, XXIV 4. 7.

¹¹⁸ Procopius, I 13.16.

¹¹⁹ Procopius, I 6. 18, I 11. 38.; Maksymiuk, 2023: 165-166.

¹²⁰ Maksymiuk, 2015b; Maksymiuk, 2025c.

¹²¹ Ṭabarī 836; Procopius, I 20.20-22; I 21.17-19; Börm 2021: 322-323; Maksymiuk, 2025a: 192-193.

¹²² Maksymiuk, 2025b.

¹²³ Maksymiuk, 2015a: 166-167.

¹²⁴ Procopius, I 21.22; Maksymiuk, 2015b.

¹²⁵ ŠKZ 2/2/3-3/2/5.

¹²⁶ ŠKZ 23/18/41-24/19/44.

¹²⁷ Rezakhani, 2017a: 46-69. In the retrospect, it seems that the annexation of Kushan and the subsequent Kushano-Sasanian Kingdom's lands (Zeimal, 1983: 203, 209-210; Rezakhani, 2017b: 202-205) was a huge blunder, as it eliminated the buffer zone between mainland Iran and the realm of steppe folks. The Kushans were effective against nomadic incursions, they even once gave military support to the Chinese to repel the nomads (de Crespigny, 2007: 5-6), but the reasons behind the quick conquest of Kushan is not currently known (Haug, 2019: 51).

the main one being the need to legitimize their rule, both through military successes, which justified Ahura Mazda's granting of power over *Ērānšāhr*, and, above all, the need to remove the representatives of the younger Arsacid line from the throne of Armenia.¹²⁸

A turning point in the geopolitical strategy of the Sasanians was the establishment of a Kidarite kingdom, which replaced the Kushano-Sasanians in Bactria. Shapur II took immediate action: he halted military operations against Rome in northern Mesopotamia and agreed to the enthronement of Arsaces II (c. 350-364) in Armenia.¹²⁹ The gravity of the threat is further illustrated by the need to regroup the entire Iranian army and the personal presence of the Shah in northeastern Iran.¹³⁰ After several years Shapur II succeeded to neutralise the threat from the east and form an alliance with the king Grumbates, which is confirmed by the participation of the contingent of this king in the siege of the city of Amida in 359.¹³¹

Another turning point was the emergence of a new steppe power on the eastern borders, the Hephthalites. Not only did they take over the territories previously occupied by the Chionites (the Kidarites), who had been defeated by Peroz, but they also actively joined the power struggle at the court in Ctesiphon, providing military support to Peroz. The *shāhānshāhs* were aware of the threat from the steppe, and two walls were erected during the 5th century. The Wall of Gorgan and the Wall of Tammisha,¹³² extending from the Caspian Sea to the Alborz Mountains and North-East mountain ranges of Persia, directed against the Hephthalites.

The attempt to remove the threat posed by the Hephthalites by force ended with the death of Peroz in the third war. The Sasanians decided to turn its strategy to diplomatic action, they tried to neutralizing the threats of the steppe people by paying off the Hephthalites with tribute.

Kavad resided twice among the Hephthalites, which may have lasted up to 7 years. During this time, Kavad must have been made familiar with the Hephthalite way of life. According to Yeshu' the Stylite, Kavad married a Hephthalite princess.¹³³ If that was indeed the case, this marriage of state would have enhanced Kavad's understanding of the Hephthalites and further improved his relations with them. Kavad's requests for military assistance was accepted twice by the Hephthalites, which may also indicate that he had good standing among the Hephthalite elite.

¹²⁸ McDonough, 2013: 688-691; Maksymiuk & Hossein Talaei, 2022; Maksymiuk, 2024.

¹²⁹ Maksymiuk, 2024: 450.

¹³⁰ Howard-Johnston, 2010: 41-43.

¹³¹ Farrokh, Maksymiuk & Sánchez Garcia, 2018.

¹³² Bivar & Fehérvári, 1966.

¹³³ Yeshu' the Stylite, 24.

Kavad paid annual tribute to the Hephthalites during the entire course of his reign,¹³⁴ and Hephthalite contingents were present during Kavad's invasion of Roman territories. There was a pro-Hephthalite circle among the Sasanian elites¹³⁵ and even the Romans had become weary of the Kavad-Hephthalite relations and tried to sabotage it.¹³⁶ At any rate, the Sasanian-Hephthalite alliance appears to have been dissolved after 505,¹³⁷ with Sasanians taking back some of the lost territories in Khorasan.¹³⁸

In the context of the terms of the truce concluded by Kavad with the Roman emperor, the issue of Rome's obligations to participate in the costs of defending the Caucasian passes should be considered.¹³⁹ As a result of the truce Anasthasius paid Kavad in 506 10 *centenaria* gold (equivalent of 72 000 *solidi*).¹⁴⁰ According to the Western sources, it was money for the redemption of the city of Amida from the Persians,¹⁴¹ but perhaps these were the overdue payments for the years 507-508. All the more so because when Justin came to power in 518, Kavad demanded that the emperor hand over 50 *centenaria* (360,000 *solidi*), which could have been an outstanding payment for 10 years (5 *centenaria* per year). A similar situation occurred after Justinian I came to power.¹⁴² Malalas, describing the peace treaty between Justinian and Khosrow of 532, mentioned the obligation of rulers to provide mutual assistance, not only military but also financial.¹⁴³ What is more, Justinian paid exactly 110 *centenaria* (792 000 *solidi*),¹⁴⁴ what would equal overdue payment for 22 years, i.e. years 509-530. If we compare this with the demand of Khosrow, who, after conquering Antioch in 540, expected a one-time payment of 50 *centenaria* (360,000 *solidi*), and emphasized that this money did not guarantee that Iran would refrain from military action, we can assume that this amount was an outstanding payment for the years 531-540. This is all the more likely given that the Persian ruler also demanded annual payments of 5 *centenaria* (36,000 *solidi*), which, according to source reports, were to be used as subsidies for the defense of the Caucasus.¹⁴⁵

It should be emphasized that these payments were very unpopular in Rome, as we can conclude from a passage by Procopius, who, writing about the truce of 551,

¹³⁴ Greatrex, 1998: 48-49; Schindel, 2004: 446, 448; de la Vaissière, 2005: 111; Börm, 2007: 227, 229; Kurbanov, 2010: 171.

¹³⁵ Börm, 2007: 321-322, 326-327.

¹³⁶ Procopius, I 7. 1-2.

¹³⁷ Börm, 2007: 305-306, 322, n. 2.

¹³⁸ Schindel, 2004: 490.

¹³⁹ See Maksymiuk, 2016.

¹⁴⁰ Solidus – a gold Roman coin equivalent to 1/72 of a pound (referred to in later sources as *nomisma*).

¹⁴¹ Yeshu' the Stylite, 83; Procopius, I 9. 24.

¹⁴² Zacharias Rhetor, VIII 5.

¹⁴³ John Malalas, XVIII 76.

¹⁴⁴ Procopius, I 22. 3-5; Zacharias Rhetor, IX 7.

¹⁴⁵ Procopius, II 10. 19-24; Ṭabarī 898.

ironically stated: “giving to the tribute the name of treaty”.¹⁴⁶ To sum up the above, we can cautiously assume that from 506 onwards, the Roman emperor was obliged to pay regular annual subsidies for the defense of the Caucasian passes in the amount of 5 *centenaria* gold.

The war of 502-506 also showed that the steppe peoples crossing the Caucasus posed a real threat. Khosrow attached particular importance to strengthening Iran's military position in this region. This was reflected in construction activities aimed at creating an extensive network of fortifications. Sources and archaeological research confirm construction work in Darband, Kabala and P'artaw. During Kavad's reign, Baylakan was built, identified with the fortified settlement of Ören Qala (in Mil Steppe). He was also supposed to build walls to secure the eastern Caucasus: the so-called Zaqatala, the “long wall Apzūt-Kavāt” and the Besh-Barmak.¹⁴⁷ It must be noted that the construction works in the region was concentrated in eastern part of Caucasus. The archaeological surveys confirm building activities also in fortifications in Albania, perhaps also in Balasagan (Ultan Qalasi in Mughan Steppe).¹⁴⁸ Khosrow I continued the actions of the father extending the best known Sasanian defensive structure in Caucasus being Darband.¹⁴⁹

Following the death of Yazdgerd II in 457 CE, a political crisis regarding the succession arose between his two sons. Ultimately, Peroz succeeded in seizing the Sasanian throne with the support of Raham from the House of Mehran.¹⁵⁰ As a result, influential members of the Mehran Clan held key state positions during his reign. Towards the end of Peroz's rule, however, the house of Mehran's authority as the dominant clan was challenged by the Karen clan, perhaps as a result of catastrophic Sasanian defeats in the East. After the death of Peroz, the Karen and Mehran clans, successfully installed Balash on the throne¹⁵¹ but their alliance proved short-lived. The ensuing power struggle between the two clans concluded with the deposition of Balash and the accession of Kavadh in 488 CE. This was a shift orchestrated by Sukhra (or Zarmihr?) of the Karen Clan, marking the ascendancy of his House.¹⁵² Kavad, however, chose a different path in 493 CE,¹⁵³ unlike his predecessors who throughout their reigns maintained close cooperation with the very clan that had played a pivotal role in their accession. Displeased with the immense power wielded by Sukhra, Kavad ordered Shapur of Ray of the House of Mehran, to put an end to his

¹⁴⁶ Procopius, VIII 15. 16-18.

¹⁴⁷ Gadjiev, 2017.

¹⁴⁸ Alizadeh, 2011.

¹⁴⁹ Khalifa-Zadeh & Maksymiuk, 2023: 175-176.

¹⁵⁰ Eghishē 1982: 242.

¹⁵¹ Yeshu' the Stylite (19), however, has reported that the clergy deposed and blinded Balash as “he was annulling their laws and wanted to build municipal baths for bathing”. Since the military's payment was overdue, they decided not to intervene on Balash's behalf.

¹⁵² Pourshariati, 2008: 71-78.

¹⁵³ Schindel, 2013.

influence.¹⁵⁴ According to Ṭabarī “People commented at that time, Sukhra’s [i.e. the House of Karen’s] wind has died away, and a wind belonging to Mehran has now started to blow”.¹⁵⁵ It must be noted that all of these events had undermined the power of the nobility and the clans. They had suffered from the heavy losses of the Hephthalite wars, long running feuds (especially for controlling the court), and the Mazdakite rebellion.¹⁵⁶ While it is known that the nobility and great clans had much influence on the king,¹⁵⁷ there are several reports that the king could exercise his will despite staunch opposition. In the case of dealing with the Hephthalites, for instance, Ghazar P’arpets’i has reported that Peroz acted “as he wished, with no regard for anyone and without consulting anyone”, which finally led to his downfall by the Hephthalites.¹⁵⁸ Ṭabarī has also stated that Peroz attacked the Hephthalites “despite the advice of his viziers and his close advisers against this”.¹⁵⁹ Whatever the causes¹⁶⁰, it seems that the nobility and great clans did not do anything to do with the Hephthalites. Early in his reign, Khosrow I’s “council” also insisted on refraining from launching a military expedition against the Hephthalites.¹⁶¹ Since most of the grandees that constituted his council were those who served under Kavād, we may conclude that Kavād also exercised his will against the Hephthalites despite the usual naysay of the prominent figures. To make matters worse, Kavād also faced the lobbying of the pro-Hephthalite circle of elites,¹⁶² which he seems to get rid of after 505.¹⁶³ It must also be noted that the Sasanians (like the Romans) had very strict protocols and standards regarding foreign affairs and diplomacy and any diplomatic act required the king’s authorization.¹⁶⁴ To sum up, Kavād double-crossed the Karen Clan and the Hephthalites who helped him in ascending the throne, which can portray him as a Machiavellian.

¹⁵⁴ Pourshariati, 2008: 80-81

¹⁵⁵ Ṭabarī 885.

¹⁵⁶ Schippmann, 2017: 54, 92-93.

¹⁵⁷ Schippmann, 2017: 51-52.

¹⁵⁸ Ghazar P’arpets’i 87. 311.

¹⁵⁹ Ṭabarī, 875.

¹⁶⁰ Farrokh, 2017: 216.

¹⁶¹ Ferdowsi, 1506-1508.

¹⁶² Börm, 2007: 321-322, 326-327.

¹⁶³ Börm, 2007: 322, 237.

¹⁶⁴ Wiesehöfer, 2007: 130-134.

Conclusion

Assessing Sasanian Empire's relations with steppe tribes, especially the Hephthalites in the 5th century CE, which coincided with the beginning of Kavad's reign, can provide a clearer picture on Kavad's understanding of the power structure of the steppe people and the extent of their threat and danger on the northern borders of the empire. Kavad faced a multitude of internal crises, border threats in the east and sometimes in the west, and the growing power of the Sasanian clergy and nobility, which had shifted the balance of power to the detriment of the Sasanian Empire. Kavad was also forced to deal with crises that were the legacy of his predecessors' military actions.

Despite the widespread crisis and threats at the time of his accession to the throne, Kavad's performance was far better than his fifth century processors. Unlike his father Peroz who adopted a disastrous militarized approach, Kavad adopted a more realistic, diverse, and flexible approach to confront the Hephthalites, the emerging enemy of the Sasanians on the eastern borders. Early on, Kavad had to accept the precarious position of the Sasanians, and as a result he got into a political marriage, ceded the territory of Chaganiyan, promised the continuity of the payment of annual tribute, and to take the Hephthalites on raid and plunder expeditions of Roman territories. He thus gained the military support and perhaps an alliance, albeit an unstable one, of the steppe giant in order to rest on the Sasanian throne. Although Kavad's initial actions and decisions led to his temporary dependence, they were very useful in curbing the expansionism of the Hephthalites towards the Sasanian Empire. Despite Kavad's efforts, the dangers that threatened the eastern borders were never neutralized due to the unpredictable and unreliable nature of the steppe dwellers. Therefore, during the second period of his reign, Kavad gradually distanced himself from the Hephthalites, and by 505 CE, it seems that he had cut the ties to the Hephthalites. Then, Kavad cleverly exploited the confrontations of the steppe tribes to stabilize the position of the Sasanians. By taking advantage of the rivalries, Kavad prevented the concentration of power in the hands of a particular tribe, such as the Sabirs. Kavad payed, hired and even diverted these tribes to feast on Roman territories, using them as a lever for putting pressure on the Romans. In other words, Kavad pitted his steppe enemies against his western enemy, i.e. the Romans. In this instance, however, the Romans also retaliated by paying and hiring the tribes to trouble the Sasanians. The geological position of the Eastern Empire, however, did not allow the Romans to divert the nomadic incursions toward the realm of Sasanians. Kavad began exploiting this Roman counter-measure by accusing the tribes on double crossing and then proceeding to eliminate every host who got caught by the Sasanian army and confiscate their properties.

Kavad's requests to the Eastern Roman Empire to participate in the defense of the Caucasus are another sign of his deep understanding of the structural threats in

the East. He correctly recognized that confronting the steppe nomads was a task that could not be single handedly done by the Sasanians, as it was an issue that also affected the interests of the Romans. Kavad knew well that there were no more buffer zones and small kingdoms between the Sasanian empire and the steppe dwellers and the Empire's precarious situation in the east would not last much longer.

On the whole, Kavad was not only a successful king and politician, but he should also be credited as the architect of the redefinition of Sasanian eastern politics. With the application of realism, in-depth analysis of the power structure, and the simultaneous use of diplomacy, alliances, threats, military actions (despite the usual opposition of the *grandees*), and opportunism, Kavad attempted to shift the balance of power in the East in favor of the Sasanian Empire. His efforts, whether in temporarily containing the power of the Hephthalites, in exploiting the steppe tribes as leverage, or in developing a defensive approach on the northeastern borders, paved the way for broader military and strategic reforms that crystallized during the reign of Khosrow I. The actions of Kavad paved the way for his son, who, in alliance with the Gök Türks, finally eliminated the threat posed by the Hephthalites and succeeded in breaking their power.¹⁶⁵

In summary the Iranian concept of the past must be mentioned, according to which mythical Feredun divided the world between his three sons: Salm received Rum (West), Tur received Turkastan (East), and Iraj inherited the *Ērānšāhr*. The land of Iraj (murdered by the jealous brothers) was in this concept understood as the centre of the world.¹⁶⁶ A duty of the Sasanian, who identified as the heirs of Iraj, the only possessors of royal *xwarrah*, was an attempt to “re-unite” the world under their reign.¹⁶⁷ The feud with the steppe folks was a fundamental part of their religion and mythology in the context of the religion war with Turan.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Maksymiuk, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Daryaei, 2010.

¹⁶⁷ Maksymiuk, 2018: 598-601.

¹⁶⁸ Yarshater, 1983: 436-473. Shayegan, 2013: 807-809.

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