

The Gupta Empire in India.

The story of the rise and fall of the Gupta empire is in many ways different from of the Roman empire. The Gupta empire was much younger, dating to about 320 CE. Before the rise of the Gupta, India had been governed by a number of kingdoms. All of them prospered from the enormous amount of trade that flowed through the region. The Roman Empire was a major consumer of Indian cotton and spices. Chandra Gupta, the Gupta founder, built his empire by conquering some neighboring kingdoms and establishing alliances with others. Unlike the Romans, who favored central control, the Guptas gained the loyalty and support of regional kingdoms by allowing them to retain a great deal of autonomy.

So long as the empire remained united and good order was maintained by regional authorities, Gupta rulers were content to devote most of their energy to promoting learning, religion, and art. This they did in spectacular fashion, resulting in what has been termed a “golden age” for India. Gupta scholars made remarkable achievements in many fields including literature, astronomy, and mathematics. Important discoveries were passed along the trade routes to be adopted by other civilizations.

One example is the use of Hindi (later termed Arabic) numbers, place value, and the decimal system. Gupta rulers also enthusiastically supported a revival of Hinduism, which had earlier suffered a decline owing to the rise of Buddhism. During Gupta rule the caste system was codified in greater detail, forming the basis for Indian law for centuries to come. For over two hundred years, India enjoyed a high level of organization, peace, and prosperity.

While Rome struggled to deal with attacks by pastoral nomads, the formidable Hindu Kush and Himalaya Mountains gave the Gupta some protection. The powerful Sassanian empire in Persia also provided something of a buffer against nomad invasion. But such defenses could not last forever. Central Asian nomads, sometimes referred to as “White Huns” or Hephthalites, invaded and occupied Bactria (Afghanistan) during the fourth century. In 455 CE, they crossed the Hindu Kush and Invaded Gupta territory. Gupta forces at first repulsed the Hephthalites. But defense was costly, and attrition of resources eventually left the Gupta at the mercy of the invaders, who finally rampaged across northern India. With Gupta authority fading, India broke up once more into regional kingdoms. By 550 the empire was gone. So, in contrast to the complicated disintegration of the Roman empire, the Gupta story is relatively simple.

The Hephthalites (The Who?)

Beyond the settled civilizations of Eurasia lived the little-known pastoral nomads of the Central Asian steppes. A great migration southward of one of these groups, known variously as the Hephthalites, Hunas, or White Huns, had a devastating effect on India. Beginning in the fifth century CE, wave after wave of these invaders terrorized settled peoples in lands ranging from the Tigris and Euphrates to the Ganges river valleys.

The origin of the Hephthalites is something of a mystery. The earliest information about them comes from Chinese chronicles. These accounts claim that the Hephthalites were originally a tribe of the great Yue-Chi, who lived north of the Great Wall. In the sixth century, the Roman historian Procopius wrote that the Hephthalites were “of the stock of the Huns in fact as well as in name; however they do not mingle with any of the Huns known to us. . . . They are the only ones among the Huns who have white bodies and countenances which are not ugly.” Because Procopius described them as having Caucasian features, some historians believe that the Hephthalites may have been

related to the Persians. Others think that they may have been distantly related to the Xiongnu, a pastoral people who lived in Mongolia and regularly harassed the Chinese.

Like other pastoral nomads of the Central Asian steppes, the Hephthalites had a markedly different way of life from that of the settled peoples with whom they came in contact. Moving frequently in search of game, water, and fresh grazing land for their animals, they practically lived on horseback. Portable round tents called yurts were their homes. Their clothing was made of felt or animal skins and included leather boots and fur caps. Hephthalite men were distinguished by their shaved heads, except for two braided pigtails behind their ears and a patch of hair on top. Many men also wore long wooden earrings.

According to two Chinese pilgrims, Sung Yun and Hui Sheng, who visited them in 520 CE: "The Hephthalites have no cities, but roam freely and live in tents. They do not live in towns; their seat of government is a moving camp. They move in search of water and pasture, journeying in summer to cool places and in winter to warmer ones. . . . They have no belief in the Buddhist law and they serve a great number of divinities." In the mid-fifth century, the Hephthalites expanded westward, probably because another nomadic group was pressing them from the east. As early as 440, their armies took Samarkand and Bactria (today Uzbekistan).

After the death of the Gupta ruler Skandagupta in 470, the Hephthalites entered India destroying towns and villages along the Ganges River. Pataliputra, The Gupta capital, was reduced in population to the size of a village. They persecuted Buddhists and burned their monasteries. Their conquest was accomplished with such brutality that the Gupta dynasty was completely extinguished. The Guptas were not the only Hephthalite victims. In 484, the Hephthalites struck westward into Persia, invading the Sassanian empire. They destroyed agricultural lands and killed the Sassanid king before withdrawing to the east once more.

Toramana and Mihirakula, the most famous of the Hephthalite kings, ruled India in the first half of the 6th century. Toramana led the successful invasion of India. His son, Mihirakula, succeeded him in about 515. In 520, the Chinese ambassador Song-yun described this king as cruel, vindictive, and barbarous, not believing in the law of Buddha, having 700 war-elephants, and living with his troops on the frontier. About ten years later the Greek Cosmas of Alexandria described Mihirakula as a ruler who exacted an oppressive tribute from subject peoples with the help of a large army of cavalry and war elephants. Mihirakula's reputation was so fierce that even today, oral accounts in India still include stories of him amusing himself by rolling elephants down a precipice and watching their agonies.

The cruelty of Mihirakula's rule caused a number of Indian princes to form a confederation and revolt against him about 528. He was not killed in this rebellion, however, but fled to Kashmir, where a few years later he seized the throne and then started attacking neighboring kingdoms. He died in about 540.