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Comments
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Huns and Xiōngnú: New Thoughts on an Old Problem

Christopher P. Atwood

In a recent article, Étienne de la Vaissière has marshaled a strong case that the people identified in Sogdian as Xwṇ and in Sanskrit as Hūṇa are indeed exactly the same people as the Chinese Xiōngnú.\(^1\) Given that Xwṇ and Hūṇa are usually identified with the Greek Ounnoi or Latin Hūṇi, this would lead us to agree with de la Vaissière that the old theory that Xiōngnú=Hun has defeated its antagonists and is worth of consideration once again.

There is one serious problem with this equivalence, though, one that de la Vaissière does not address very concretely. This is the very poor phonological match between Chinese Xiōngnú, Sogdian Xwṇ, Sanskrit Hūṇa, Greek Ounnoi, and Latin Hūṇi.\(^2\) As Otto Maenchen-Helfen put it long ago: “the equation \(Hun = \text{Hüng-nu}\) is phonetically unsound.”\(^3\) While de la Vaissière criticizes H. W. Bailey for just assuming that the Avestan \(\text{Xyaona}\) and \(Hun\) must be phonological matches, he too offers no explanation for the rather large gap between Chinese Xiōngnú and, for example, Greek Ounnoi, except to invoke vaguely different dialects and unnamed potential intermediaries.\(^4\)

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\(^2\) The list of Greek and (in less exhaustive detail) Latin, Sanskrit, Armenian, and Iranian variants is found in Gyula Moravcsik, \textit{Byzantinoturcica, 2: Sprachreste der Türkvolker in den byzantinischen Quellen}, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958).


\(^4\) De la Vaissière, “Huns et Xiöngnu,” 7–8.

Taking the western Eurasian transcriptions together, they differ from 
Xiōngnú in up to four significant ways:

1. Xiōngnú is a two-syllable word, but Sogdian xwɔn- ywn, Syriac 
Huŋ, Armenian Hon, and Pahlavi Xyön have no second syllable, 
while the second syllable in Greek Oumnoi, and Latin Huṇnī 
seems to be simply a case ending;
2. Xiōngnú begins with a velar spirant [x], but Sanskrit Huṇa, Syriac 
Hūn, and Armenian Hon have a glottal spirant [h], and Greek 
Oumnoi has no initial spirant at all;
3. Xiōngnú has a velar nasal [ŋ]; Sanskrit Huṇa has a retroflex ṇ, 
while the other forms have a dental nasal [n];
4. Xiōngnú has some form of glide or semi-vowel [j] or [i] preceding 
the main vowel; except for Avestan Xyaona and Pahlavi Xyön, the 
other western Eurasian variants do not.

I will not belabor here the additional fact that the rounded vowel seems to 
vary between u and o both within and between the various transcriptions.

Of course, Xiōngnú is only the modern Mandarin pronunciation of the 
characters 匈奴. Perhaps some or all of these features might be the result 
developments in Chinese phonology postdating the time when those charac-
ters were first applied to the Xiōngnú. In fact, only with the last of the four 
discrepancies mentioned is this possible. Xiōngnú 匈奴 was pronounced in 
Early Mandarin (of the Yuan dynasty) as [xuŋ-nu], in Tang-era Middle Chi-
inese (Northwest dialect) as [xuŋ-nu]. Older reconstructed pronunciations 
include Wei-era Middle Chinese of Luoyang as [xuawŋ-nu] and *huŋ-no in

5 It should be noted that the X in Xiōngnú is a conventional marker used in the modern 
Pinyin transcription system to mark the Chinese phoneme [x]. It has nothing to do 
with the velar spirant [x], although in this case it does develop historically from [x] in 
Early Mandarin and earlier.
6 I omit here the Syriac and Armenian gentilics -āgē, and -kē.
7 The rough breathing mark found in some cases seems to be everywhere insertions of 
later editors, influenced by the Latin.
8 W. South Coblin, A Handbook of Phagspa Chinese (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i 
Press, 2007), §§36, 244.
9 Tokio Takata, Tonkō shiryō ni yoru Chūgokugo shi no kenkyū: Kyū jisseiki no Kasei högen 
10 Edwin G. Pulleyblank, Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, 
Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin (Vancouver: University of British Columbia 
Press, 1991), s.v. xiōng 匈 and nú 奴.
Old Northwest Chinese, c. A.D. 400. Finally, for the Han era, when the transcription would have been actually coined, Old Chinese (Han or Zhou dynasty) reconstructions include:

*χ(r)jοŋ-na;12
*hionɡ-na < *hoŋ-nà;13
*xoŋ-NA.14

As one may see, the speculations of Pulleyblank15 about an initial consonant cluster in xiōng 馮, have mostly not been confirmed by subsequent researchers, although Baxter does posit a possible initial consonant cluster. Three of the four features that differentiate Xiongnu from Ounnoi—the second syllable, the velar spirant [x], the velar nasal [n]—can be found as far back as one can go. Only the glide, whether [j], [u], or [i], might be a feature of later Chinese phonetic evolution.

It is sometimes thought that the second syllable in the Chinese transcription, nü 奴, must have been added simply in its meaning as “slave” and hence may be removed from consideration in analyzing the phonetic elements. But this purely arbitrary; no case of xiōng 馮 alone is ever attested for this ethnonym in Chinese. Nor is nü a semantically significant classifier attached to a purely phonetic core transcription; xiōng 馮 and nü 奴 form a whole phrase, “savage slaves,” and are both simultaneously phonetic and semantic in content.

We thus have a serious problem: while the Sogdians used the word ग्र and the Indians the word ᾃ to designate quite specifically the people called Xiōngnù in Chinese, the names appear to be quite different. So far there

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have been three broad schools addressing this problem (my analysis follows that of de la Vaissière in “Huns et Xiongnu”). The first, represented by Otto Maenchen-Helfen insists that the philological difficulties cannot be overcome and the whole issue has been a tissue of coincidences and misunderstandings. As I have stated, I believe the data marshaled by de la Vaissière makes this position untenable. Sogdian Xωn and Sanskrit Ḥûṇa were used to designate the historical Xiongnu—that is a plain fact which must be explained, not just ignored. A second position is what de la Vaissière calls the “pan-Iranian” position, espoused by Harold Bailey, S. Parlato, and recently by Jamsheed Choksy. In this position, all or most of the terms—Sogdian xων-γον, Khorazanian Ḥûn, Khotanese Saka Ḥûṇa, Syriac Ḥûn-, Armenian Ḥûn, Pahlavi Ḫyôn, and Sanskrit Ḥûṇa—are to be derived from the same Iranian word, attested in Avestan as Ḫyaona, which has the generic sense of “hostiles, opponents.” Greek Ounnoi, Khounoi, Khiones, etc. are all derivatives of these Iranian forms, in various stages of phonetic evolution. Thirdly, de la Vaissière’s own explanation may be called the “steppe transmission” position. In this position, Xiongnu and Ounnoi are connected as autonyms of steppe peoples of uncertain language. The philological difficulties involved in their connection are outgrowths of our ignorance of the particular languages involved. Such a position has the benefit of not offering any hypotheses which can be disproven, but it can hardly be considered satisfactory. Nor does it offer any way to distinguish real cognates from fake.

How these terms could be versions of one another is a major philological puzzle involving the very first case in which a people originating in Mongolia impinged on the history of Europe. I believe that I can shed significant new light, particularly by highlighting the key role of India in the process of sound change. Its resolution will be a fitting tribute to Donald Ostrowski, whose research has so illuminated a later phase in this history of East-West interaction in Central Eurasia.

The Greek Terms and Their Eastern Correspondences

The place to begin this discussion is with the range of Greek forms that have been linked to the Huns, considering for each their possible origins in Central Asian or Eurasian steppe languages

Ounnoi

The general Greek term for the Huns, and the only one used for those in the Pontic and Hungarian steppes and in Roman service, is Ounnoi or Ounoi. This

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is a masculine plural, implying the unattested singular *Ounnos*—*Ounos*, with the *-os* being the nominative ending and presumably not part of the root. Greek had already lost the glottal spirant by the second century A.D.,
so it is not surprising that the original form lacked the “rough breathing” that in Ancient Greek had marked the glottal spirant [h]. The geminate consonant *-nn-* is presumably not significant, since it varies with a non-geminate spelling in *-n-* and in any case Greek geminate consonants had become simple consonants long before this time. This Ounnoi, without the initial *h-*, is probably the origin of the Latin *Hunni* of Ammianus Marcellinus, Marcellinus Comes, and Jordanes. Given the Greek form, it is likely that the Latin *h-* in Hunni was in fact not pronounced, any more than Ammianus Marcellinus’s *h-* in *Halani “Alans”* or Jordanes’s *h-* in *Hunuguri “On-Oghur” (Greek *Onongoirooi*) was intended to be pronounced. Later Latin variants in *ch-* should be the result of confusion with either the name *War-Khunni* that designated the Avars and/or Ptolemy’s *Khounoi*.

In John Malalas’s *Chronography*, however, there is one attested example of a different form: *Ounna*—*Ouna* (a feminine singular). Given the expectation that ethnonyms would be masculine plurals, the less expected feminine form is more likely to be the original, which was then conformed to the expected masculine plural. This also then demonstrates that the second syllable in Greek is not simply a case ending, but was originally part of the word, and was only later reinterpreted as a case ending.

What non-Greek form can be linked with *Ounna*—*Ouna*? Only forms with an initial glottal spirant [h] could possibly be considered, since any form with a velar spirant [x] would become *kh-* in Greek. Similarly, if the original form is a disyllabic *Oun(n)a*, then any form with only one syllable may be excluded. Finally, any form with the glide *-y-* may be excluded, since that too would be represented in Greek (see *Khōyn* below). These considerations eliminate Ptolemy’s earlier *Khounoi*, Armenian *Hon-*, Syriac *Hun-*, Khorazmian *Hūn*, Sogdian *xw-an-gyan*, Avestan *Xyaona*, and Pahlavi *Xyōn* from consideration. The only extant Asian variant which could conceivably be the origin of the Greek *Oun(n)a* is Sanskrit *Hūna* and Khotanese Saka *Huna*. But Saka *Huna-* is attested only in the ninth century and in an obviously “generic” context. By

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19 Ibid., 607–608.
contrast, Sanskrit Hūṇa is attested from at least the third century A.D., and probably from the first century B.C., and in an ethnically specific context (see below). Thus the Sanskrit version would seem to be the only possible origin of Greek Ounηα.

But historically, deriving a Greek name for a people of the Pontic steppe directly from a Sanskrit name seems quite problematic. Could there be a basis for Ounna in an Iranian language, one that would be more historically and geographically plausible? Since Henning’s seminal article (1948)22 it has been proposed that the xων found in the Ancient Sogdian Letter II of c. 312 is the origin of Greek Ounna, etc. Since then, the term has been found as γων and xων in the eighth-century documents of Mgū.23 As mentioned, a Greek origin in Sogdian would presuppose that γων–xων must represent a form in initial h-. Sogdian itself has only a velar spirant [x], although a glottal spirant [h] has been recently proposed as an allophone.24 But in foreign words x (Semitic heth) may represent “any kind of foreign h-sound,” and hence Xων could represent Xun, Xūn, Hun, or Hūn.25 The variant in γ may be particularly significant here, since γ (Semitic gimel) is the usual representation of Sanskrit h in Sogdian (Table 1 at the end of this article). That this word is a glottal spirant is confirmed by the form in Arabic-script Khorazmian, where it is hūn, with a glottal spirant [h] (the Arabic script has both a glottal and a velar spirant). Syriac Ḥunayē and Armenian Honk’ would suggest the same reading in [h].26

Even so, however, Sogdian-Khorazmian Ḥun–Hūn cannot be the origin of the Greek Ounna, because it does not have the second syllable. Fortunately, however, Chinese records preserve a word used in Sogdiana with a second syllable ending in the vowel -a. In a well-known passage from the Wēi shū 魏書, deriving from the record of a tribute mission sent from Sogdiana to North China in 457, a new dynasty in Sogdiana is described as of Xiōngnú origin:

The country of Sogd 栗特 is situated to the west of the Congling [Pamir mountains]... It is also called Wēnà Shā 温那沙....27

22 Henning, “The Date of the Sogdian Ancient Letters.”
26 Cf. ibid.
27 I have omitted the phrases “It is what was Yancai in ancient times” and “It lies on a great salt sea and to the northwest of Kangju. It is 16,000 li distant from Dai.” As Kazuo Enoki already realized, all of these comments are taken from the Hsüan Fu account of Yancai, and are relevant to Sogd only on the condition that Sogd is in fact “Yancai”; Enoki, “Sogdiana and the Hsiung-nu,” Central Asiatic Journal 1 (1955): 43–62, here 47–50. This identification is, however, certainly incorrect. See also A. F. P. Hulsewé, China and Central Asia: The Early Stage. 125 B.C.–A.D. 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1979),
Formerly, the Xiōngnú killed its king and took over the country. King Hūnǐ 忽倪 was the third ruler of the line.

粟特國，在葱嶺之西。。。一名溫那沙。。。先是，匈奴殺其王而有其國，至王忽倪已三世矣.28

This passage has a long history in Western writings about the Xiōngnú and Huns. Enoki and de la Vaissière have clarified its historical situation, purging it of previous speculations about Alans and Crimea and so forth. Even so, the passage still clearly links the history of the Xiōngnú with the Ounna–Ounnoi. As Kazuo Enoki recognized, Wěnnà 温那, to be read in Middle Chinese as 'Onna, can be identified with Greek Ounnoi, and even more exactly with John Malalas’s original Ounna.29 With shā 沙 being the well-known Iranian royal title shāh, Wěnnàśhā 溫那沙 is “Shāh/King of the ‘Onna.” Later, Wēn 温 (approximate Middle Chinese: ‘On), in an abbreviated form minus nā 那, became the family name of the kings of Samarqand.30

But a closer look at the Chinese transcription and its historical context shows, I believe, that this form found in Sogdiana must be derived from a Bactrian Greek reading of Sanskrit Hūṣa.

The phonoeme in Middle Chinese marked in the transcription above by ‘represents the glottal stop [ʔ], the presence or absence of which remained a phonemic distinction in Chinese up through the Ming dynasty, depending on the dialect.31 Within the Chinese transcription of Sanskrit (which should also

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30 Although the form in ʿ-, rather than ʿ- may seem to be a block to associating this with Greek Ou- and Sanskrit -ʿ-, Chinese at this time did not have a final in -un, only -on, and syllables with this final transcribed Tibetan -on and Sanskrit -un indifferently; W. South Coblin, Studies in Old Northwest Chinese, Journal of Chinese Linguistics Monograph Series, no. 4 (Berkeley: Project on Linguistic Analysis, University of California, 1991): 94–95. Thus its use as transcription is not significant for our purposes.

31 Ibid., 23; Coblin, A Handbook of Phagsfa Chinese, 45.
apply to South Central Asian languages generally), the glottal stop corresponds to a “plain vocalic onset,” while Sanskrit \( h \) (which may be voiced as \([\mathrm{ɦ}]\), at least in some contexts) is always represented by Chinese syllables with reconstructed initials as \([\mathrm{x}]\) or \([\mathrm{ɣ}]\).\(^{35}\) \( \text{Wēn̄nāshā 溫那沙} \) and \( \text{Wēn 溫} \) thus must represent a variant that has already lost any initial spirant and has a plain vocalic onset. In short, something more or less identical to Greek Ounna can be found as far east as Sogdiana in the fifth century, if not before.

The word \( \text{shāḥ} \), in this variant ‘\( \text{Onnāsāh} \),\(^{34}\) offers an important clue to its historical origin, linking it to Baktria after the Sassanids. Sogdian has a variety of forms for “king” — \( γ\text{'}s\text{'}wn\text{'}k \), \( γ\text{'}s\text{'}wvn\text{'}k \), \( x\text{'}swny \), and \( x\text{'}gwny \),\(^{38}\) to be read as \( \text{khshēwanē} \) or variations thereof—which all represent a much more conservative form of this common Iranian word than the Pahlavi \( \text{shāḥ} \). The term \( \text{shāḥ} \) is attested in Sogdian only in a borrowed compound form, “shah of shahs”: \( s\text{'}hās\text{'}y \) (read as \( \text{shanshāy} \)), cf. Saka \( \text{shahenishāhi} \).\(^{39}\) But in Baktria, after the fall of the Kushans, the term \( \text{shāḥ} \) was used under Sassanid influence widely in coins and documents as a compound in terms such as \( \text{Košanoša(h)} \) to “Kushānshāh” and \( \text{Šahanoša(a)} \) “Shāhansāh.”\(^{40}\) The term ‘\( \text{Onnāsāh} \) closely parallels this form in having an ethnonym followed by the word \( \text{shāḥ} \), in its Pahlavi form; it thus indicates influence from the post-Kushan rulers of Baktria.

This derivation of the ‘\( \text{Onnāsāh} \) from Baktrian fits perfectly with the history of Sogdiana at this time. The ‘\( \text{Onnāsāh} \) dynasty came to Sogdiana not by a fresh invasion from the northern steppes, but by a conquest of Sogdiana from the south. The conquest is associated with the Baktrian king Kidāra.

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\(^{32}\) Inspired by the use of “East Central Asia” to refer to Xinjiang in Mallory and Mair’s *The Tarim Mummies*, I use the term “South Central Asia” to refer to roughly modern day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the neighboring areas of northeast Iran and northwest Pakistan. See J. P. Mallory and Victor H. Mair, *The Tarim Mummies: Ancient China and the Mystery of the Earliest Peoples from the West* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002).


\(^{34}\) I will write this variant hereafter with the geminate consonant, given that it is found as such in both Greek and Chinese reflex. But Greek had already lost geminate consonants and the gemination of consonants is a common feature of Chinese transcriptions and does not necessarily represent a geminate -\( \mathrm{n} \)- in the original.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., §727.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., §10666.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., §10676.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., §9157.

whose people appear in Sanskrit sources as Hūna and in Greek as Ounnoi.\footnote{Richard N. Frye, The History of Ancient Iran (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1984), 345–46, 349, 355; Moravcsik, Sprachreste der Türkvolker, 159, citing Priscus.} According to de la Vaissière’s reconstruction, Kidāra began to expand from his Bactrian base area both north into Sogdiana and south into India around 420.\footnote{Étienne de la Vaissière, Sogdian Traders, trans. James Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 97–117.} The southern origin of the ‘Onnashāh title and the ‘On family is confirmed by the Chinese statement in the later Sūi shū 隋書 that Samarqand’s Wēn’On dynasty was of Yuēzhī 月氏 origin.\footnote{Wei Zheng et al., Suishu, ed. Linghu Defen (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 83/1848; cf. Enoki, “Sogdiana and the Hsiung-nu,” 158–59.} By this time, in Chinese, Yuēzhī 月氏 designated Bakttriana, where the Yuēzhī had settled, and all its resident people.

For the same reasons as Greek Ounna, the ‘Onna in this title ‘Onnashāh can only be derived from Sanskrit Hūna, out of all known ethnonyms in the region. The only differences are the alteration of the retroflex r to a coronal n and the elimination of the initial glottal spirant. (The gemination of the -n- is probably an artefact of the Greek and Chinese transcriptions and has no significance.) Both of these changes would normally be expected in any Greek transcription of a Sanskrit word. To be sure, the Bactrian language did have a glottal spirant (represented in the Greek script as the upsilon υ) and did not necessarily eliminate that sound in its transcriptions of Sanskrit.\footnote{Sims-Williams, “Ancient Afghanistan and Its Invaders,” 230–31.} But we do find examples of eliminated [h], as seen for example, in the name Heracles (Erakilo) and the Hepthalites (Evadhalo).\footnote{Ibid., 228, 233.} Given the profound influence of Greek in Baktria, and the attested Greek inscriptions, some written by ethnic Indians;\footnote{Nicholas Sims-Williams, “News from Ancient Afghanistan,” The Silk Road 4, no. 2 (2006–07): 5–10, here 5.} it is an irresistible conclusion that the transition from Sanskrit Hūna to Greek Ounna happened not in the East Roman Empire, but directly in Baktria. This is also suggested by the attestation of the form Ounnia in the Christian geographer Cosmas Indicopleustes, writing around A.D. 550. In this work, he alternates Ounnai and Ounnia (each used twice) and links them consistently to Baktria and northern India.\footnote{E. O. Winstedt, ed., The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 69, 119, 325, 324 [text], 335, 345, 356 [notes].} If that is the case, and given the rapid decline in Baktrian Hellenism after the first century B.C.,\footnote{Sims-Williams, “News from Ancient Afghanistan,” 5.} the first use of Ounna in Greek should long predate the “great invasions.”
But where did Sanskrit Hūṇa come from? I believe the clue to this lies in two terms, Greek Khōnai and Chinese Ḥùnì 忽倪, which have not yet been linked.

Khōnai(oi)

This name, as the “nation of the Khōnai(-ōn),” appears in an East Roman itinerary to the Garden of Eden, dating to the sixth century. Such an itinerary may seem unpromising as a source of geographical data. Indeed Otto Maenchen-Helfen has arbitrarily rejected its value, claiming these Khōnai are to be sought “somewhere around the Red Sea.”49 But the itinerary, especially when read alongside Cosmas Indicopleustes,50 clearly links this “nation of the Khōnai” to India.51 Moravcsik associated the name with the Pahlavi term Xyōn, and thus with Greco-Roman Khōn(ītai) and with the War-Khōn(ītai).52 In fact it looks quite different from either Khōn(ītai) or War-Khōn(ītai), themselves quite distinct from each as well in origin and form. From Ḥūṇī it differs in the absence of the glide -i-, while from both it differs in the presence of a second syllable with a diphthong -ai. This diphthong, as well as velar spirant [x], makes it likewise different from Sanskrit Hūṇa.

There is, however, a name with which this term may be matched quite closely, and that is found in the passage from the Wei shì I have already cited. In addition to the title ’Onnashāh 溫那沙 already examined, there also appears the name of the current king, Ḥūnì 忽倪. In Tang-era Mandarin Ḥūnì is attested as xɔér-tʂɨi,53 while Coblin reconstructs the Old Northwest Mandarin as *hot-ŋjei and Pulleyblank reconstructs the Wei-era Luoyang Mandarin as

49 Maenchen-Helfen, “Pseudo-Huns,” 103–04. Maenchen-Helfen claimed that since the “neighbors of the Chonai to the West were the Diaba (Diva in Latin, Davad in Georgian) [who] lived east of India maior (Ethiopia), Axioma (Aksum), and India minor (Southern Arabia), the Chonai must be sought somewhere around the Red Sea” (104). What he hides from his readers is that between this Diaba–Diva and the African and Arabian places mentioned later is stated to be a journey to a port and a sea voyage of seven stages. Nor does he mention Pigulevskaja’s plausible link of this Diaba–Diva to Sanskrit dvipa; N. Pigulevskaja, Vizantiia na putiakh v Indiiu (Moscow: Akademiia nauk, 1951), 121–22.

50 Cosmas Indicopleustes has Ounnia, and the Georgian text of the “Itinerary” corrupted Greek Khōnai to Khounia. I wonder therefore if Cosmas Indicopleustes did not originally have Ounnai, which might have been corrupted to Ounnia, as a parallel to the India associated with it.


52 Moravcsik, Sprachreste der Türkvolker, 236, s.v. Ounnai.

53 Takata, Tonkò shiryo ni yoru Châgokugo shi no kenkyû, §§0787, 0227.
"xuɑ̌-ŋei." Keeping in mind that rùshēng 入聲 ("entering tone") characters were used very freely in transcriptions, with their character being usually determined by the initial consonant of the following character, the actual Middle Chinese pronunciation of this binome should be something like *xuŋjai or *xɔŋei, that is, a rather close match for the Greek Khônaï. The only major difference was the switch from a velar nasal to a dental nasal. But this is easily understood by the limitations of Greek syllable structure, where a velar nasal can be found only at the end of a syllable and before a g-, k-, or kh- which begins a new syllable (i.e., -γγ-, -γχ, etc.). From the Chinese transcription, it is evident that the syllable structure was *xu-ŋei, and in this situation, transforming the velar nasal to a dental nasal did no more violence to the word than would have the other possibility, transforming it into *xɔŋgei.

The semantic implication is that *xɔŋei 忽倪 represents not a personal name, but the king’s title, "King of the *Xɔŋei/Khônaï." Such a confusion of royal titles and personal names is common enough and should cause no surprise. But such an identification also leads irresistibly to an identification of King of the Khônaï/Xɔŋei with the Shâh of the ‘Onna/Hûna, and both ethnonyms with the Xiōngnû.

Now if Ounna/Hûna may seem hard to relate to Xiōngnû, Khônaï/Xɔŋei actually bears a rather close resemblance to *Hôj-ŋâ which in one reconstruction, at least, is given as the conjectural common Chinese form of the word. The two significant differences are the ŋ in *Xɔŋei for ŋ-ŋ in *Hôj-ŋâ and the final -i in *Xɔŋei. The first may actually be an idiosyncrasy of the transcription. As mentioned, Chinese transcriptions of foreign words frequently geminate consonants in transcription. In the original Chinese transcription of Xiōngnû, one may plausibly assume that ŋa was rendered as na (modern Mandarin nu  nues) both because of its meaning and because the final velar nasal of xiong 頂 "covered" that part of the pronunciation. That is, the ŋ-ŋ combination could be simply rendering a ŋ.

As for the -ái vs. -a, Paul Pelliot early recognized a paradigm in Mongolian in which personal, place, or ethnonyms appear frequently in three forms: -O, -i, and -n, giving as examples alasha-alashâi-alashan, as well as altái-altan

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54 Coblin, Compendium of Phonetics in Northwest Chinese, §§0787, 0227; Pulleyblank, Lexicon of Reconstituted Pronunciation, s.v. hú 忽 and ní 皈.
55 This term in Chinese philology refers to characters which were pronounced in Middle Chinese and earlier forms with non-nasal final consonants, -p, -t (or -r), and -k.
57 Schuessler, ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese, 541, 404. Note that Schuessler’s ‘ŋ is actually an [x].
58 On such use of a syllable final and syllable initial together to render a single foreign sound, again see Pulleyblank, “The Chinese Name for the Turks.”
and qitai–qitan as examples of the second two.\textsuperscript{59} To the latter two one may add alta, a common form of “gold” today, and khatā, the form that qitai–qitan took in many Western transcriptions. The same three-way variant is found in adjectives and verb forms as well: thus with the adjective “bad,” we have maghu, maghui, and maghun.\textsuperscript{60} The exact semantic valences of -Ø, -i, and -n are still unclear (definiteness and plurality seem to be involved), but they were certainly productive of variant forms in ethnonyms.

Nor does invoking such a variation necessarily depend on seeing the Xiōngnú as Mongolic in language. As Pelliot’s examples show, the variant forms once generated easily cross language boundaries. Kitan is found in Mongolian, Khitay is found in Russian, and Khatā is found in Turkic languages—but all were generated as variant forms of a single stem. Moreover the -i and -n as morphemes, perhaps having a collective or plural meaning, may well cross language family boundaries, just as the Altaic vocational suffix -cht was borrowed into Tajiki and the Romance plural in -s was borrowed into English.

But if Khōnai can, via *Xonai 忍倪, be seen as a variant of Xiōngnú 伺奴, then Hūna too can likely be seen as a variant of Xiōngnú. If we assume the Chinese -ngh- of Xiōngnú actually represents a single velar nasal, then Sanskrit too, just like Greek, would have a serious problem representing this sound. Velar nasals (whether the n or m) must be followed by a stop, not a vowel. Sanskrit also has no velar spirant [x] and so would have to represent it with an [h]. Khōnai and Hūna can both be seen, therefore, as independent transcriptions, not mediated through each other or through any other attested form, of the term Xiōngnú in two reconstructed variant forms: *Xon’ai–*Xoña.

With regard to the four differences between Osmon and Xiōngnú, the exact point at which they occurred can now be pinpointed:

1. The second syllable was lost twice independently, once in Greek as the final vowel -a was assimilated into the nominative plural -oi, and once in the Eastern Iranian languages Sogdian and Khorazmian as a result of a usual process of dropping short final -a from Sanskrit loan words.
2. The velar spirant [x] became a glottal spirant [h] in the Sanskrit transcription, because Sanskrit does not have velar spirants. It was lost in the process of transfer from Sanskrit to Greek, which took place in Baktria.


3. The semi-vowel or glide -i- or -r- in Xiōngnū is an artefact of later Chinese phonetic evolution.

4. The nasal was originally a velar nasal [ŋ] followed immediately by a vowel. This sequence was impossible in Sanskrit and so [ŋ] was replaced by the retroflex dental nasal ñ. The retroflex sound was likewise impossible in Greek and Iranian languages and was replaced by a coronal dental.

For a general summary of my conclusions on this group of terms related to Greek Ounna and Khōnai, see Table 3.

Khiōn(es-ītae)

This term appears by itself only in Latin, in Ammianus Marcellinus’s account of the years 356–59. There the Chionitae appear as a people in the east of the Sassanid empire, under their king Grumbates, who first fought against and then allied with the Sassanids. Ammianus Marcellinus explicitly defines these Khionites as a type of Hunnī (“Huns”), although he says they were racially different from the other Hunnī. As Étienne de la Vaissière has pointed out, the name Grumbates is now attested in Bakhtrian as Gorambad, adding to the verisimilitude of the account. The Latin name Chionitae appears to be also related to the term Kermikhōnēs, which the historian Theophanes Byzantios (author of a chronicle covering A.D. 566–81) says was the Persian name for the Türks. This may be analyzed as Middle Persian Karmīr Xyōn (Red Xyōn).

Although Khiōn(es-ītae) is not particularly common in Greco-Roman sources, it is well-known in the Persian world. There it appears in Pahlavi sources as Xyōn and in Syriac as Xyōn-. The Pahlavi Middle Persian certainly goes back to Avestan, where the name appears twice in the Mazdean scriptures as local enemies of the prophet Zarathustra. The Avestan form is Xyaoma, where the X marks a unique letter with a diacritical, of unclear reading. As Jamshed Choksy has noted, this certainly gives Xyaoma the appearance of being a foreign word, even as the scriptural narrative seems to treat him as the ruler of an Iranian kingdom, whose king, Arejataspa (Pahlavi:

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Arjsap), has an Iranian name.\(^6\) In any case, the Avestan form is certainly the origin of the Greco-Roman variants: Avestan \(\tilde{X}yaona\) > Pahlavi \(Xy\ddot{\text{o}}n\) > Latin \(Chionitae\), Greek \(Khi\ddot{\text{on}}\)es. Moreover, the vehicle of transmission to the Roman empire was via the Sassanid Empire, not the Pontic steppe. In Sassanid usage, the name designated both the ancient enemies of Mazdeism, but also the contemporary “Huns” broadly speaking, of which the Türks were seen as but a variety.

Can \(\tilde{X}yaona\) be linked to the \(\text{Xi}\ddot{o}ngni\)? Not according to the present state of knowledge. Until Zarathustra’s time and place is located more specifically than “Bronze Age Central Asia,” any proposed link of \(\text{Xi}\ddot{o}ngni/\text{Xo}\ddot{n}a(i)\) to Avestan \(\tilde{X}yaona\) must remain purely speculative. Moreover, while Baxter reconstructs the name as \(*x(r)\text{j}"na, in which the initial \([x(r)]\) could possibly represent the rare initial \(\tilde{X}y\text{-}\), Schuessler’s reconstruction of the \(\text{Xi}\ddot{o}ngni\) name goes back to \(*\text{hio}"n-\text{na}\) and eventually to \(*\text{ho}"n-\text{n"a}\) which I link to \(\text{Hun}"ni/\text{Xo}\ddot{n}a(i)\) 胡倪.\(^6\) This much simpler initial is rather harder to link to \(\tilde{X}yaona\) than Baxter’s complex reconstruction. Finally, \(\text{Xi}\ddot{o}ngni/\text{Xo}\ddot{n}a(i)\) was not an ethnonym, but a dynastic name, almost or completely unknown before the time of the first ruler Mô\text{dûn} 冒頓 around 200 B.C.\(^6\) This makes a historical link to \(\tilde{X}yaona\), a term attested at least several centuries earlier and far to the west, problematic, to say the least.

Not so difficult, but also not without its problems is any relation of Pahlavi \(Xy\ddot{\text{o}}n\) to the parallel Sogdian \(\text{xyw}n-\text{\v{g}wv}\) and Syriac \(\text{Hun}\ddot{\text{g}}\ddot{\text{e}}\). As regards the Sogdian, the Khorazmian form \(\text{H}"n would seem to indicate that Henning was correct in his argument that the initial consonant in \(\text{xyw}n-\text{\v{g}wv}\) is to be read as a glottal spirant \([\text{h}]\), not a velar spirant \([x]\). Likewise although Choksy points out that the \(-\text{yaov}\) of Avestan “experienced a variety of resolutions ranging from \(\text{yo}\) (as discussed below for \(xyc\)) to \(\delta\) (written as \(w\) and \(v\)),”\(^6\) it seems very doubtful, even on the evidence he presents, whether an evolution of \(-\text{yaov}\) to \(-\text{d}\) could have occurred by the 3rd century A.D. in the conservative Eastern Iranian dialects, if it had not occurred in the more progressive Pahlavi dialects even by the 9th century. Meanwhile in Syriac, that \(\text{Hun}\ddot{\text{g}}\ddot{\text{e}}\) (\text{hu\text{ny}v}) does not derive from \(Xy\ddot{\text{o}}n\) is indicated by the fact that Syriac does have a di-

\(^6\) Choksy, “\(\tilde{X}iaona\) or Hun Reconsidered.” For these references in context, see the translations from the Mazdean scriptures in Mary Boyce, trans. and ed., Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 77 (\(\tilde{X}yaona\)), 76, 77, 78, 79 (\(Xy\ddot{\text{o}}n\)), 96.

\(^6\) Baxter, Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology, 798, 779; Schuessler, ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese, 541, 404.


\(^6\) Choksy, “\(\tilde{X}iaona\) or Hun Reconsidered,” 98.
rect derivation from *Xyôn which is quite different: *Xyônâyê (kyûnyû). The presence of *h instead of *h, and *yw instead of *w in this second written form makes their absence in the first all the more significant. Joshua the Stylite indeed uses both forms, with *Kûnâyê as a kind of specialized equivalent of *Hûnâyê: “In our own time the Persian king Peroz received gold on many [occasions] from the Romans for his wars against the Kûnâyê, i.e., the Hûnâyê.” Clearly this passage demonstrates that *Kûnâyê and *Hûnâyê are seen as two different words for the same people. The term is also found occasionally in other historical works, such as the Martyrology of Mar Ma’tûn (dated to c. 363), and the list of maphrians (roughly metropolitans) in Bar Hebraeus, demonstrating that the term here is no corruption. Since *Kûnâyê is obviously derived from Pahlavi *Xyôn, *Hûnâyê is then just as obviously not.

Moreover, even if Sogdian *xwôn–*γwôn could be derived from *Xyaona that does not mean it was. The Sanskrit *Hûna, which as I have argued had already spawned Greco-Baktrian ‘Onna/Onuma in Baktria, and would later spawn Khotanese Saka *Hîna, could certainly have spawned Sogdian *xwôn–*γwôn, to be read as *Hun. If there is a link between Sogdian *xwôn–*γwôn, then certainly Sanskrit *Hûna must be the origin of Sogdian *Hun, not the other way around. First, while Sanskrit has both retroflex and ordinary coronal *n, Sogdian has only the coronal *n. If this *Hun(n)a form was borrowed into Sanskrit from Sogdian, it would be represented with an ordinary coronal *n and not with a retroflex, but a retroflex *n in Sanskrit can only be represented by a coronal *n in Sogdian (see Table 2). Secondly, Sogdian frequently omits final -a in borrowed Sanskrit words, but there is no reason for Sanskrit to add a paragogic -a to Sogdian or other Iranian words. In Tokharian languages, it is a general rule that Sanskrit final -a becomes -e/â with animate nouns and -Ø (zero) in inanimate nouns. In Sogdian, however, even animate nouns ending in -a frequently go to -Ø (see Table 2). We see another example of this in the dynastic name *Wênnâ 那那 < *Onna which from the mid-fifth to the late sixth century was abbreviated to *Wên 呉< *On. Finally, if *xwôn–*γwôn is to be read like

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69 Moravcsik, Sprachreste der Türkvolker, 236, s.v. “Onnmai,” citing Janos Harmatta.


71 Jean-Maurice Fiéy, “Ma’in, général de Sapor II, confesseur et Évêque,” Le Muséon 84 (1971): 437–53, here 441; Jean-Baptiste Abbeaos and Thomas Joseph Lamy, ed. and trans., Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Ecclesiasticum, 3 (Louvain: E. Peeters and Maison-neuve, 1877), 159–60. See Dickens, “References to Chionites in Syriac Literature.” I would like to thank Mark Dickens for sharing with me his expertise on Syriac philology.


73 The same is true in Baktrian; see Sims-Williams, “Ancient Afghanistan and Its Invaders,” 230–31.
Khorazmian Ḥūn, then it has a glottal spirant, a sound not native to the language, but found in Sanskrit. As noted the Sogdian г is used especially for the л borrowed from Sanskrit (see Tables 1 and 2). Thus Sanskrit Ḥūṇa could generate Sogdian Ḥun but not vice versa.

For these reasons, I think it most likely that de la Vaissière is correct and Pahlavi Xyön, when used to designate various nomads to the east, is a purely learned Sassanid and Mazdean term, derived not from any living tradition, but solely from an identification of contemporary nomads with the Ḫyāona of the Zoroastrian scriptures. It is thus the equivalent of the Greek designation of the Onnna as Massagetai or Sauromatai, one more of the many “archaistic names” of the Huns. Sogdian xon-γon, Khorazmian Ḥūn, and Khotanese Saka Ḥuna- are all most likely to be derived from Sanskrit Ḥūna, not from Avestan Ḫyāona.

For a general summary of my conclusions so far, see Tables 3 and 4.

Khounoi-Khon(ita) i

This brings us to the last Greek forms with a velar spirant. Under a form with a velar spirant [x] comes the earliest name to be identified, by some at least, with the “Huns”: Khounoi in Ptolemy, placed in the western Pontic steppe between the Iranian Roxolani and the Dacian or Germanic Bastarnae. A form in Kh- next appears in the Chronicle of Menander Protector, covering years A.D. 558–82, and in the continuation by Theophylactus Simocatta, covering years 582–602. In these sixth-century instances, the name appears in a compound with Ouar (= War), as Ouarkhōntai in Menander, and as Ouar and Khounni [sic] together in Theophylactus Simocatta and Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopulos (c. 1256–1317) who cites him. This twin people is part of the Türkic Oghur and is identified with the Avars (Abaroi) in the Pontic and Caspian steppes.

The name thus appears to be of a Turkic people. No explicit identification is made with the “Huns” by any ancient author, although the variant in Theophylactus Simocatta, with -ou- for ḥ, the geminate n, and a plural in -i, seems influenced by a Greek back-translation of Latin Hunni. This name could be dismissed except that it is the only one of the names found in Greek sources

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75 See de la Vaissière, Sogdian Traders, 98.
76 Maenchen-Helfen, “Archaistic Names of the Hiung-nu.”
that can be plausibly associated with Sogdian *xun* (probably *Khôn*). This name would certainly have entered Greek with an initial velar spirant *[x] (≈ kh-)*. Moreover, in the link with the War-Khôn, this seems to be the first name that we can convincingly call an autonym of the steppe peoples themselves, uninfluenced by Sanskrit or Avestan.

There is, moreover, a very similar etnynym attested in Turkic languages: the *Qun* (attested in Chinese as 淳, pronounced Hūn in Modern Mandarin). This name appears as one of many clan names among the original Turkic-speaking peoples, the Oghuz (also known as *Tegreg* or “High Carts”), during the Türk and Uyghur eras. The Greek velar spirant *kh* [*x*] regularly corresponds to [q] in Old Turkic. Indeed the Greek and Chinese histories of the Qun and War-Khôn appear to refer to the same events. Just as the War-Khôn were opponents of the Türk empire, so too in the *Sūishū*, the Abar (Ābā 阿拔) and Qun 淳 appear alongside the Tegreg 鐵勒, Izgil 思結, and others in a list of peoples rebelling against the qaghan Tardu of the new Türk empire. Later, the Qun also appear in al-Birūnī’s *Taḏḏīk* (c. 1029), and the geography of al-Marwazi (fl. 1056–1120) as one of the “eastern Turks.”

There is every reason to accept the identity of the War-Khôn(itai) with the Qun of Turkic history. It is thus the only Greek etnynym I have reviewed so far which actually has a clear link to the Altaic world. Qun is often related to Quman, as two derivations from a single stem, Turkic *quba* “pale yellow, grey, dun” or Mongolian *gho’a* “beautiful, elegant; fallow (as an animal

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82 Moravcsik, *Sprachreste der Türkvolker*, 36, 344, s.v. “Kherkhis.”
color). This etymology is reflected in such terms as “pallid ones” that later become closely associated with the western half of the Qipchaq confederacy, which dominated the Pontic steppe from the 12th to 13th century. As part of the Quman-Qipchaq confederacy taking refuge in Hungary, Qun became the origin of the well-known Kun family name there. On the other hand, if we accept an identification of the Qun with Ptolemy’s Khournai, it is most likely not an originally Turkic term, but one derived from Iranian or some other language; its association with quba~gho’a “fallow, pallid” would then be a folk etymology. In any case, I can see no justification for associating any of these terms with the Huns or Xiōngnú.

For a general summary of my conclusions on these terms, see Table 5.

III. From *Χονά(i) to Hūna

Given the picture presented so far, the greatest difficulty in understanding the succession of variant names is not in their philological connections but in their historical connections. It has generally been assumed that the movement of the names for Xiōngnú and Hun followed the steppe migration routes westward. But instead we find a succession of variant forms that leap from Mongolia to India, and then from India spread north and west to the Roman empire.

To help explain this seemingly anomalous pattern, I would like to return now to Sanskrit Hūna and the origin of the “Huns.” As I have argued, Hūna is likely a straightforward transcription of the name Xiōngnú, in its original pronunciation as [*xoṇa] (with a variant [*xoṇai]). Confirming this fact is the clear evidence that Hūna was believed by well-informed Indians to be the same word as Xiōngnú. As Étienne de la Vaissière has demonstrated, the Buddhist translator Dharmarakṣa (Ch. Zhu Fahu 竺法護) in 288 and 308 found the word Hūna mentioned in two different Buddhist sutras, the Tathāgatācintya- guhyānirdeśa-sūtra and the Lalitavistarasaṅga as one of the far-flung peoples of the world and translated them both into Chinese as Xiōngnú. As a man of

Yuèzhī/Tokharian ancestry working at Dunhuang, he was presumably well-informed about these things.\footnote{De la Vaissière, “Huns et Xiongnu,” 11–12; Boucher, “Dharmarakṣa and the Transmission of Buddhism to China,” Asia Major 19, no. 1–2 (2006): 13–37, esp. 24, 26.}

When was *Xoṇa(i)* transcribed into Sanskrit as Hūṇa? This certainly happened well before the fifth-century Hūṇa invasions of India. The earliest known use of the term in Sanskrit is in the Buddhist sutras from which those translations were drawn, the *Lalitavistarasūtra* and *Tathāgatācintyayuhyanirdesa-sūtra*. Sadly, these two texts, like most Buddhist sutras cannot be dated, except that they must obviously have been written before they were translated, that is, before 288–308. However, Étienne de la Vaissière has argued that the historical context of the other references to peoples such as the Saka, Parthians, Greeks (Yavana), and Tokharians (Tukhāra), but without Kushans, place this text roughly around the first century B.C., and in any case before the Kushan expansion. Within this context, the *Tathāgatācintyayuhyanirdesa-sūtra* refers to the Hūṇa/Xiongnu as a language group, one distinct from these others mentioned.\footnote{De la Vaissière, “Huns et Xiongnu,” 11–14.}

Thus knowledge of the Hūṇa/Xiongnu must have entered India as part of an early expansion of Indian geographical knowledge and international trade, long before the Hūṇa actually impinged on India’s borders.

It may seem surprising that the eastern Iranian languages (Sogdian, Khurazmian, and Khotanese Saka) derived their name for these nomads from the south, from Sanskrit, and not directly from them as neighbors. But the same is probably true for their terms for China itself. The Indian and Iranian terms for China are fairly similar: Sogdian ćyn > čynstan, Sanskrit Čīna,\footnote{See Bailey, *Culture of the Sakas*, 81–82; Gharib, *Sogdian Dictionary*, §§3341, 3355; Henning, “The Date of the Sogdian Ancient Letters,” 608–09.} and as Pelliot demonstrated, they certainly derive from the Qin 秦 dynasty.\footnote{Paul Pelliot, “L’origin du nom de ‘Chine,’” *T’oung Pao*, 2nd ser., 13, no. 5 (1912): 727–42; Pelliot, “Encore à propos du nom de ‘Chine,’” *T’oung Pao*, 2nd ser., 14, no. 3 (1913): 427–28.} The rather important philological question of whether the sequence of Qin 秦, in Middle Chinese dzin > cīna > ćyn or dzin > ćyn > cīna is more plausible or else whether dzin generated ćyn and cīna independently has never been investigated, to my knowledge. But once again, a form with final -a is much more likely to be the origin of a form without, than the other way around.

Two avenues of contact between China and the West are documented. The first one is that through the Gansu 甘肅 corridor and the Tarim Basin that was opened by HanWudi’s 漢武帝 conquests, from 121 B.C. on. The other began almost two centuries earlier with the Qin dynasty conquest of Sichuan 四川 in 316 B.C. This opened up trade through Yunnan 雲南 through Assam and Bengal into Northern India. That this route, much less famous than the
much bally-hooed “Silk Road,” predated the Central Asian route is demonstrated by the astonishment of the Han envoy and scout Zhang Qian 張騫 who found Sichuanese cloths and bamboos already in the markets of Baktria.91 It is by no means impossible then, that the Xiōngnú came to the attention of India as early as the second century B.C., and via trade through Sichuan and Yunnan, not Central Asia.

As de la Vaissière argued, the Xiōngnú do not appear to have actually directly impinged upon the eastern Iranian speakers until around A.D. 350. Serindia was mostly Tokharian-speaking, and one might imagine that there would be an independent Tokharian reflex of the Xiōngnú name in those languages, but such names have not survived. But Serindia itself was in no position to be an exporter or transmitter of Chinese or Xiōngnú names and terms to the eastern Iranian people. The image of Kashghar, Khotan, Kucha and others as flourishing cities along the Silk Road must not be projected back anachronistically. In a seminal article, Erich Zürcher pointed out that Serindia was until about 120 A.D. quite poor and underpopulated. Chinese was its only written language. By 260 at the latest, Serindian cities had begun writing in a non-Chinese language—not the native vernacular, but instead Prakrit in the Kharoṣṭhī script, derived from northwest India. Far from being a transmitter of East-West interaction, Serindia, until the third century, was an obstacle to cultural interchange (Zürcher 1990; Boucher 2006: 34-37; Hansen 1998). Even after that time, until the sixth century Serindian cities continued to use Indian languages exclusively, at least for religious purposes (Nattier 1990). It should thus not be surprising that the eastern Iranians did not adopt whatever term the Serindians had been using for the Xiōngnú but instead simply adopted the already well known Indian term. This the Serindians carried with them to the cities of China when they began trading there.

Contact with the Hūna/Xiōngnú, or at least with those that they and their neighbors all identified with Hūna/Xiōngnú, became much closer in the mid-fourth century. After a period of nomadic settlement in South Central Asia, around A.D. 350, Baktria emerged again, as it had under the Kushans/Yuezhī, as a base for an expanding empire built by the new settlers. The Sassanids reached back into their history and revived the ancient Avestan term 𐏚𐏠𐏠 (Xyaema/Xyōn/Khōn) to designate the invaders. By 420, these nomads, who continued the Kushan tradition of writing in Greek-script Baktrian, seem to have accepted the Sanskrit version of their ethnonym, i.e., Hūna, as their own. Thus Kidāra’s dynasty was called Ounnoi by the Greeks, Hūna in India, and, as I have demonstrated, ‘Onna’ by its own branch dynasty in Sogdiana.92 But with

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91 A. F. P. Hulsewé, China and Central Asia: The Early Stage. 125 B.C.–A.D. 23 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 211.
92 That the *Xorga(i) accepted their sedentary neighbors’ version of their own ethnonym, Hūna, as their own can be compared to how the Mongols in Central Asia
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an actual influx of Xiöngnú, the native ethnonym finally made its occasional appearance in direct transcriptions: *Xoneïi/Hêní 忽倪 into Chinese and Khônai into Greek.

V. Hûna, ’Oonna, and the Origin of the “Huns”

But how did it happen that around 375, when the East Roman Empire heard of a new nomadic empire from across the Don attacking the Alans, the term that they took over to designate these new nomads was not an Iranian, Turkic, or other native term, but a Greco-Baktrian version of the Sanskrit word for the Xiöngnú of Mongolia?

The answer must be that this encounter was the first chapter in the well-documented history of symbiosis between Central Asian merchants and sedentary empires. Although Ammianus Marcellinus presents his Huns as utterly alien, with no conceivable policy or desire other than slaughter, the fact that he and the other Greco-Roman historians used for them a term which had passed through Baktria and Sogdiana shows that South Central Asians must have mediated the knowledge that the Roman frontier generals and armies had about this people. Either the people of this new polity themselves actually called themselves Huna/Ounna, in which case their state or confederation must be seen as a result of Sogdian/Baktrian leadership and organization, or else this term was simply what they called themselves when speaking with Romans, in which case South Central Asians must have been their interpreters and diplomats. Either way, the appearance of the name Huna—Ounna—Ounnoi beyond the Don River can only mean that oasis Iranian influence had penetrated through the steppes of Kazakhstan and was shaping a political unît on the Don River, at least in part, to fulfill its purposes.

But this Central Asian mercantile influence must have been working on an ethnic reality that was already being shaped by movements from the east. In the case of South Central Asia, the fact that the new fifth-century monarchs in Samarqand titled themselves not just the ’Onnashäh, but also the King of the *Xopai (transcribed as *Xoneïi/Hêní 忽倪, or Khônai) bears witness to a fresh influx of people named *Xopai/Xiöngnú into South Central Asia. In the Pontic steppe the evidence is less direct, but the fact that even the earliest of these Khônites and the Kidarites were identified by their Greek and Roman historians as species within the genus of Humni/Ounnoi speaks to some linkage, however distant. And if nomads calling themselves *Xopai(i) were the titular powers in this new polity, it would explain why at least the Greek writers, unlike the Syriac and Armenian ones, borrowed the name in a form that preserved the final -a.

evolved eventually came to call themselves by the Persian version of their name, i.e., Moghuls or Mughals.
The *Xorai'/Onna/Ounna assault west over the Don was likely intended to serve the aims of mercantile clients, by establishing an outlet to the sea, such as at Sudak in Crimea which was later known as a Sogdian colony. 93 Jordanes refers to “Cherson [i.e., Crimea], where the avaricious traders bring in the goods of Asia” as being under the protection of the Akatziri Huns. 94 This is quite late, around A.D. 551, but at least testifies that this link between Asian commercial centers and Crimea predated the rise of the Türk empire. But if Sudaq in Crimea was one anchor of a “Silk Road,” the other anchor was not in China, but in India. In the year 313, Sogdian merchants were writing about China that “all the details of how China fared, it would be a story of debts and woe; you have no wealth from it” 95 — nor by 375 had Chinese affairs improved much. By contrast India was under the powerful and stable Gupta empire. Although Indian merchants and their trade in Central Asia and Russia have too long been neglected by historians, 96 India was probably the ultimate destination in view for the money used to pay for the “goods of Asia.”

Conclusions

My conclusions may be summarized fairly briefly in the form of certain identifications and historical propositions:

1. Sanskrit Hūṇa and Greek Khōnai are transcriptions of the word Xiōngnû 鄫奴, transcribed in Old Chinese as *Xoṇa (variant: *Xoṇai). Sanskrit writers were using this term well before any migration of the Xiōngnû from Mongolia. They may have learned about the Xiōngnû not via the “Silk Road” but via the Sichuan-Yunnan route.

2. Sanskrit Hūṇa was read by Greeks in Baktria as Onnna (Middle Chinese 'Onna), a term that was probably used for the far off Xiōngnû nomads by the first century B.C. Only in the fourth century A.D. did these Ounna/Onna become a matter of immediate political importance.

3. Sogdian xun–γων is to be read as Hun. It is a close relative of Khorazmian Hūn and Saka Huna. All derive from an original Sanskrit Hūṇa.

93 De la Vaissière, Sogdian Traders, 242–49.
96 See, however, Scott Cameron Levi, The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and Its Trade, 1550–1900 (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
4. Sometime around A.D. 350, a polity in today’s Kazakhstan/Caspian steppe formed, in which Central Asian (Sogdian? Baktrian?) merchants played a major part as merchant partners. People from the old *Xoŋai(i) empire also certainly played a leading role in this new polity.

5. Starting around 350 in South Central Asia, and around 375 in the Pontic Steppe, this new Hūnaí/Onnaí/Hun force launched various attacks on the Sassanid empire and the Alans of the Pontic Steppe.

6. Greeks called these new invaders Ounna following Baktrian Greek usage, soon nativized to Ounnoi (Latin Hunni). The Sassanids used an archaic scriptural term to call them Khyōn from the name of the enemies of Zarathustra in the Avesta. But the Syriac and Armenian writers used their reflexes (Syriac Hunayē, Armenian Honk’) of the most common Sogdian form Hun (written xwn-ywn) to refer to them.

7. After a ‘Onnaí/Hūnaí/Khōnai/*Xoŋai king conquered Sogdiana, the rulers of Samarqand called themselves ‘Onnashāh, or King of the *Xoŋai/Khōnai, a title modeled on that of their Baktrian liege lord, “Kushānshāh.”
### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Sanskrit</th>
<th>Sogdian</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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<td>ḫryʾr</td>
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<td>Kara 2000: s.v maqarač</td>
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### Table 2

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Table 3

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<tr>
<td>*Xọŋa(i)</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt;Skł. Hụnα</td>
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<tr>
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<td>&gt; MC ‘Onna</td>
<td>&gt; MM Wènna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td>溫那</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; Sgd. Hun</td>
<td>&gt; Syr. Hunāyē</td>
<td>&gt; Arm. Honk’</td>
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<td>(xwnγwn) = Kh. Hūn</td>
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Table 4

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<td>&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; L. Chionitae</td>
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<td>&gt; Gk. Khiones</td>
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Table 5

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<td>Qun/ Xun?</td>
<td>Tu. Qun</td>
<td>&gt; MC x&quot;on 譯</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</table>

Notes to Tables 3–5
Ancient and Medieval are roughly divided about A.D.150–200
OC = Old Chinese
Arm. = Armenian
Av. = Avestan
Gk. = Greek
Kh. = Khorazmian
L. = Latin
MM = Modern Mandarin
MC = Middle Chinese
Pah. = Pahlavi
Sk. = Khotanese Saka
Skt. = Sanskrit
Sogd. = Sogdian
Syr. = Syriac
> indicates derivation