

**Lesson 4*****Student Handout 4.1—Golden Age Epic Poem***

An epic poem is a long narrative poem that celebrates a people's heroic traditions. As you study the Gupta period of South Asian history, you will create an epic poem to emphasize important events, people, and ideas of that “golden age.”

Research the events, people, and ideas important to the Gupta period. Make your notes thorough and clear.

1. Select from your notes the events, people, and ideas that you feel are most significant. Then compose verses that tell the story. Your epic poem must:
  - contain rhyming couplets. (The end of each pair of lines must rhyme.)
  - have a meter that scans. (There must be the same number of beats or syllables in each line.)
  - must contain 20 or more couplets. You may break the poem into as many stanzas as you like.
  - be historically accurate.

Here is an example of 5 rhyming couplets:

India, land of many races,  
Countless languages, varied faces;  
Of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Sikhs,  
Of palaces built of golden bricks,  
Towering mountains and fertile plains,  
Hot, dry deserts and tropical rains.

How did India come to be?  
Let's examine her history.  
These events that made her diverse  
Are to be rendered verse by verse.

## Lesson 4

### ***Student Handout 4.2—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 pigtailed 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.

Between 557 and 561, the Sassanid king opened contacts with a Turkic nomadic group who had appeared from Inner Eurasia. Seeking revenge for the Hephthalite murder of his grandfather, who had been king before him, he formed an alliance with the Turkic leader. This chief had the largest and most powerful army in the region; it was he who finally conquered the Hephthalites and killed their king. By 565, only a small number of Hephthalites remained in India. Their decline marked a turning point in the story of Inner Eurasia. For the allies of the Persian king were Turks, a new power that would dominate the steppes for next few centuries.

## Lesson 4

### *Student Handout 4.3— Shock and Awe: Nomad Style*

To the settled peoples who witnessed it, the arrival of nomadic peoples from the steppes of Inner Eurasia must have been an awesome and terrifying sight. They struck like lightning on swift, sure-footed horses, showering their victims with arrows. Then they galloped off before any counterattack could be organized, only to reappear when least expected. In wave after wave they came, wearing down their enemy until victory was theirs. Pillage and looting often followed, for the raiders were not interested in acquiring land and they did not fight for a particular cause or religion. Rather, warfare was the means by which the nomadic raiders extracted valuable resources from the rich settled peoples living within their range.

Who were these people and how did they manage to overwhelm the defenses of the well-organized civilizations they encountered? There is much we do not know about the origins and makeup of the many tribal groups that populated the steppes of Inner Eurasia. The pastoral nomadic way of life that evolved in this region took good advantage of the vast treeless grasslands of the steppes, which were perfect for grazing animals. Pastoral nomads raised horses, cattle, camels, sheep, and goats, and they moved from place to place in order to have fresh grazing land continuously available. We know from historical records the names of many groups. (And, in some cases, many names for a single group.) But because victims who did not know the history of their attackers wrote these records, it is unclear whether or how some of the nomadic groups were related. One example of this confusion is the group known as the Huns. They may be related to other Inner Eurasia Asian groups, including the Hephthalites and the Xiongnu. But lacking more definitive evidence, historians have been unable to determine whether any or all of these groups were related beyond a shared way of life.

One reason why the pastoral nomads of the steppes were such successful warriors was their superior technology. Although they were materially a more simple people than those they raided, these nomads developed or acquired particular technologies that enabled them to thrash just about everyone they encountered. These technologies included:

**The horse.** From early times, Inner Eurasian nomads bred excellent horses well suited to the arid steppes. Their horses were fast, easy to take care of, and could survive harsh winters. The Chinese prized Inner Eurasian horses, calling them “Heavenly Horses.” Horses were one of the main objects of trade between the Chinese and nomadic peoples. Not surprisingly, nomad children were taught from a very young age how to ride and spent much of their lives on horseback. In referring to one nomadic group north of the Black Sea, the Greek historian Herodotus said, “Their country is the back of a horse.” In short, the nomads of the steppes possessed the best horses and the most expert cavalry on the continent.

**The bow:** The composite bow was an innovation developed by the nomads of Inner Eurasia. It was easily one of the most powerful weapons of its time. Because of its laminated, curved design, it had more than double the tension and power of ordinary bows. Barbed, iron-tipped arrows fired by this weapon could penetrate armor.

**The iron stirrup:** Although the stirrup was probably invented in China, the neighboring nomadic peoples were quick to adopt any good technology having to do with horses. The use of stirrups gave a rider more control over his horse as well as better balance. With stirrups and very secure saddles, nomad cavalry were able to ride their fast, well-trained horses at a full gallop, while using their powerful bows to shoot with deadly accuracy in any direction.

### Questions

- Why do you think the written records about the various nomad groups of Inner Eurasia were written by their victims?
- Which of the three technologies do you think was the most important to the success of the steppe nomads?
- What do you think would be the best defense against raids by the nomads of Inner Eurasia?