

The Turkish kingdom of Kābul-Zābul (7th – 8th c. CE): a claim to *translatio imperii*?

From c. 660 to 870 (or perhaps earlier) Kābul and Zābul, i.e. the Ghazni and Qandahar region, were ruled by kings belonging to the Khalaj confederation and known in some sources as « Turki-Shāhi ». Like that of their predecessors the « Alkhān » (who eventually became a component of the Hephtalite empire) and the « Nēzak-shāh » (independent rulers of Kābul), their religious affiliations appear somehow eclectic. Though the iconography of their coinage contains on the whole Zoroastrian symbols (fire altar, Fire God in the flames, flying Farn), they are known to have been benefactors of Buddhism and Hinduism as well. The only juridical document known in their kingdom, a Bactrian family contract issued in Khēsh (between Kābul and Bāmiyān) in 726, though dated according to the Zoroastrian calendar, is not specific in this respect, as the name for « priest » is *kēd* which Xuanzang associates with the cult of Zhūn, probably Zurwān, whose connection with Zoroastrianism at this date and in these regions appears problematic.

In any event, some rulers of this dynasty posed as political heirs to the Sasanian dynasty which had been dispossessed shortly before their coming to power in Kābul. The second ruler, whose own name is not known, titled himself « *tegin* of Khurāsān », which could be a Turcicized version of « *spāhbed* of Khurāsān », the military governor of the northeastern quarter of the empire in the late Sasanian period. According to a recent proposal (Agostini & Stark, forthcoming), in c. 730 he gave shelter to Sasanian pretenders who had not been able to achieve anything north of the Hindukush ; until 747 (or perhaps 762) they kept some sort of « court in exile » in Kābul or in the associated kingdom of Zābul, and from there they occasionally made the trip to the Chinese capital or dispatched embassies. This situation could explain why in some Zoroastrian apocalyptic texts (*Bundahishn*, *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*) « Kāwulistān », « Zāwul » or « Hindūg » are named as the countries from where the final liberator will come.

The next ruler who reigned from 737 to 745 went one step further and titled himself « Cesar of Rome » (*Frum Kēsar*). I propose to link this initiative with the prestige Byzantium had gained after its resounding victory over the Arabs in 718. In 727 Zābul had defeated and killed the Arab governor of Sistān. During a short period Byzantium and the Turkish kingdoms south of the Hindukush could appear as the only powers able to stand up to the Caliphate. In such a context the Kābulshāh probably wished to raise his status within the « family of kings », symbolically proclaiming himself Cesar, i.e. sub-emperor to the *basileus*.

This adventure had a long continuation in Tibet with the epic stories of *Gesar of From, the Drugu*. The fact that his name meant « Cesar of Rome, the Turk » had long been recognized by Tibetologists, but the story could be pieced

together only when the coins from Kābul were deciphered by H. Humbach in 1966. Recently N. Sims-Williams has brought forward one more piece of evidence, with the coin legend « Frum Kēsar, the lord, the prince, who smote the *Tazīg* (Arabs) and thereby saved prosperity ». I propose to recognize here the origin of one motif in Gesar's story, his last exploit: the capture of the fortress and treasure of the « Tazig king of the West ».

Main references :

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