

IN THIS ISSUE: HOPLITES, SKIRMISHERS, AND CAVALRYMEN AT WAR IN ARCHAIC GREECE (700 - 500 BC)

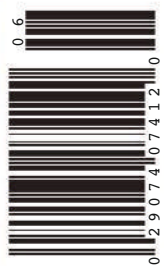
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WARRIORS IN BRONZE

Greece in the late Archaic period

THEME - SHIELDWALL TACTICS // THE BATTLE OF THE CHAMPIONS // CAVALRY IN ARCHAIC GREECE
SPECIALS - EMPIRE OF THE WHITE HUNS // DAILY LIFE FOR EGYPTIAN SOLDIERS // THE SPOLIA OPIMA

WHO WERE THE HEPHTHALITES?

THEIR NAME ALONE
TERRIFIES

The rise of the Abdals in the region of Turan in Central Asia, a people also known the Hephthalites, marks a pivotal, yet frequently underestimated, chapter in the history of Central Asia and the Near East. Emerging from a nomadic heritage, these formidable warriors carved out a vast empire that left an indelible mark on the geopolitical landscape of the fifth and sixth centuries AD.

By Mardonbek Rajapov

From the mid-fifth century to the mid-sixth century, the Abdals ruled the Turan region. Their centralized governance and powerful military ensured the state's growing strength. At the height of their power, their borders stretched from Khotan in the east to the borders of Iran in the west, and from the steppes of present-day Kazakhstan in the north to northwestern India in the south, encompassing Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, parts of India, and significant portions of China. They successfully warred with major powers like the Sasanians and the Gupta Empire in India.

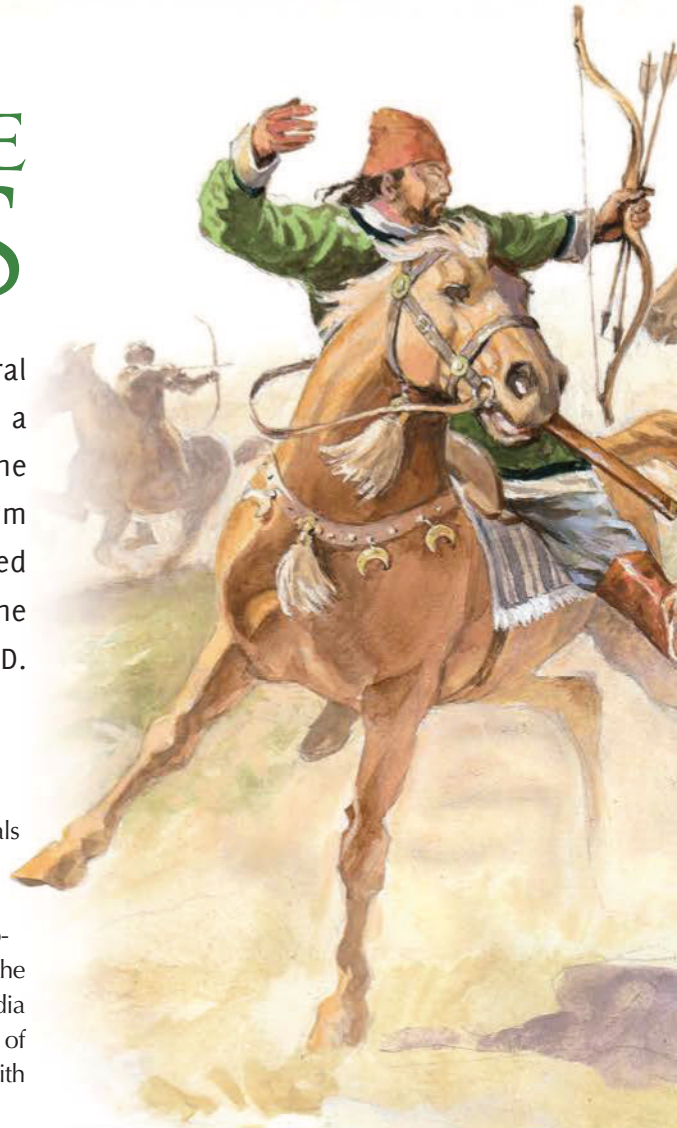
Military administration

Historical evidence strongly indicates that the Abdals preserved a significant portion of the administrative structures, titles, and court ceremonies inherited from the Kushan Empire (ca. AD 30–375). A prime example of this is the title *Kanurang*, meaning 'border guardian' or 'border defender', which originated in Kushan traditions. This title was not only widely used and maintained by the Abdals, but also by the Sasanian Empire, reflecting a broader cultural and institutional continuity across

the region. Beyond administrative titles, however, the Abdals likely adopted several aspects of Kushan military organization and technology, particularly in areas such as siegecraft and the maintenance of fortified urban centres, which would have been alien to their purely nomadic past. A synthesis of nomadic caval-

Detail of the silver 'Hephthalite bowl' from Gandhara, ca. AD 460-479, depicting two Kidarite royal hunters and two Alchon Huns hunting wild boar.

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Swift Abdal light horsemen employing the 'Parthian shot' to engage with and lure heavily-armed Sasanian cavalry either into a trap or onto terrain that worked against their heavy horse.

© Marek Szyszko

ry prowess with the more established military traditions of settled empires likely contributed to the formidable military power of the Abdals. Based on this information, the Abdals' military structure can be divided into three categories: cavalry, infantry, and siege specialists.

Our (limited) sources indicate that the Abdals possessed a formidable cavalry force. For instance, the Chinese *Book of Sui*, compiled by Wei Zheng in 636 AD, notes that "they maintained an army of five to six thousand cavalry, who were regarded as skilled warriors". Another Chinese chronicle, the *History of the Northern Dynasties*, compiled by Li Yanshou in 644 AD, describes the Abdals as "a stern and brave people, skilled in warfare". The cavalry



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was divided into two types: light and heavy. Light cavalry were agile riders primarily armed with bow and arrow, playing a key role in rapid attacks, ambushes, and pursuing the enemy. They typically wore light armour, made from leather or fabric. Heavy cavalry consisted of armoured horses and fully armoured warriors (wearing either scale or chain armour), designed to deliver decisive blows in direct confrontations. They used lances, swords, and maces. The Abdals skilfully leveraged the speed and agility of their cavalry, achieving superiority through surprise attacks, flanking manoeuvres, and swift retreats.

Abdal infantry were equipped with spears, swords, and maces. They

carried shields for defence and used 'projectile weapons' for ranged attacks. Historical records also mention the Abdals' use of flails.

Archaeological finds confirm that the Abdals developed specialized siege units. Wall paintings from the Kizil caves in the Tarim Basin depict armoured warriors using close-combat weapons, while a tomb relief from Virvak (China, excavated in 2003) shows Abdal archers in formation. In Iran, the Bandiyan complex presents detailed scenes of battle between the Abdals and Sasanians, including assaults on fortified cities depicting battering rams and siege towers. Similarly, inscriptions in India (from Eran and Gwalior) record the storming of fortified places in



Decorated gold facing for the top of a quiver. Found in Ukraine, seventh century AD.

© State Hermitage Museum



Iron-and-copper Spangenhelm-type helmet, dated between AD 600 and 800.

© State Hermitage Museum



Reproduction of a Chinese Southern and Northern dynasties lamellar helmet, dated to ca. AD 386-581.
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From clan to empire

The name 'Kushan' did not start as the title of an empire, but as the designation of a specific political unit within a nomadic confederation. The term first appears in ancient Chinese chronicles (specifically the *Hou Hanshu*) as Guishuang (貴霜). This was the name of one of the five xihou (principdoms or chiefdoms) of the Yuezhi people. It was only after the chieftain Kujula Kadphises united these five tribes that the name of his own clan—Guishuang—was elevated to cover the entire entity.

As the empire expanded south and west, the name underwent a transformation. In Kushan official records, utilizing the Bactrian language (an Iranian language written in a modified Greek script), they identified themselves as Koshano (Κοσανο). Meanwhile, as they penetrated the Indian subcontinent, Sanskrit inscriptions recorded them as Kuṣāṇa. This linguistic evolution—from the Chinese Guishuang to the Bactrian Koshano and Indian Kuṣāṇa—perfectly illustrates their role as a 'bridge' civilization, translating their identity across the languages of the Silk Road.

To understand the Kushan, one must trace their origins to the Yuezhi (月氏), a nomadic people originally inhabiting the arid

grasslands of the Gansu corridor in north-western China. Their history is defined by a massive, forced migration. Around 176 BC, a crushing defeat by their arch-rivals, the Xiongnu, forced the Yuezhi to abandon their ancestral homelands and flee westward (see also *Ancient Warfare* 104).

This domino-effect migration reshaped the political map of Central Asia. The Yuezhi first moved to the Ili River valley, and eventually, pushed by the Wusun, descended into the Greco-Bactrian territories (modern-day Uzbekistan and Afghanistan) around the second century BC. It was here, in the fertile lands of the Oxus, that they ceased their nomadic wanderings. Over the next century, they transitioned from steppe nomads into the sedentary rulers of a sophisticated empire, absorbing the Hellenistic and Iranian cultures they found in Bactria to forge the foundation of the Kushan Golden Age.



Sculpture of an armoured trooper of the Northern Wei dynasty, ca. AD 386-534.

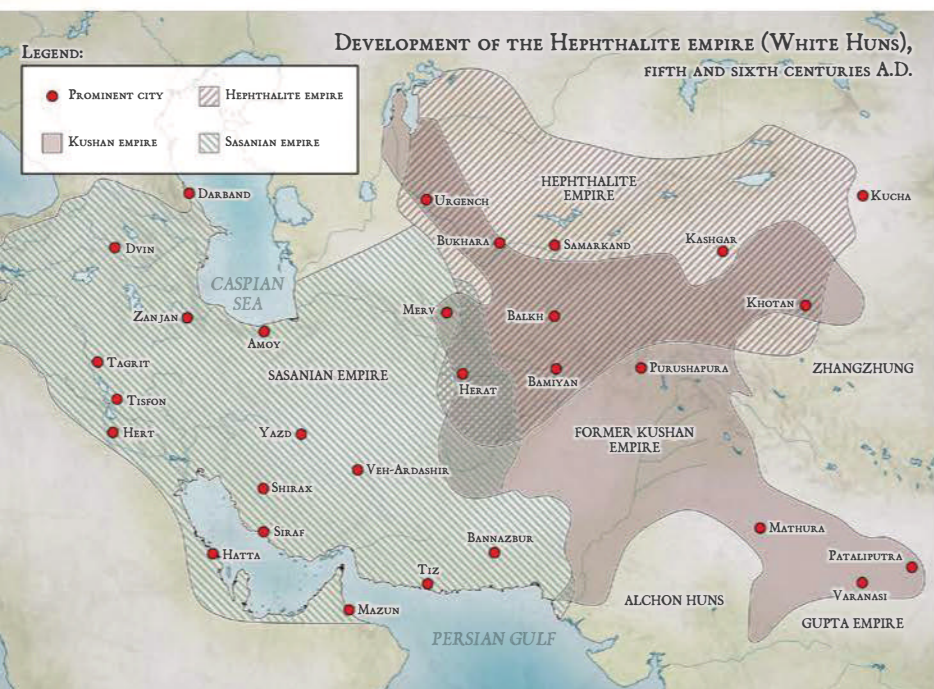
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The intersection of the Hephthalite, former Kushan, and Sasanian empires.

© Richard Thomson

the campaigns of Toramana and Mihirakula, two rulers of the Alchon Huns, who may be connected to the Abdals. Evidently, the Abdals combined nomadic cavalry warfare with

siege technology adapted from neighbouring civilizations.



Battle tactics

The Abdals were highly skilled in adapting their warfare to diverse geographical conditions, from deserts to mountains and open plains. At the onset of battle, relying on their cavalry's speed and mobility, they often weakened enemy forces by showering them with arrows before closing to engage in close combat. Late Antique and Medieval sources emphasize their tactical cunning. For example, the Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea described how the Abdals feigned flight, luring the Sasanian king Peroz (r. AD 459-484) deep into mountainous terrain before suddenly turning back and destroying his army with a smaller force. Similarly, the Armenian historian Elishe (or Yeghishe) noted that under Peroz' father, Yazdegerd II (r. AD 438-457), the Abdals



avoided open confrontation, retreating strategically and then launching unexpected counterattacks. Indian traditions add further detail. Inscriptions from Gwalior mention King Mihirakula's campaigns, where swift cavalry units carried out rapid raids and sudden withdrawals, spreading confusion among the defenders. These accounts resonate with depictions from the Bandiyān complex in Iran, which illustrates siege assaults, ambushes, and stratagems

Taken together, these sources reveal that Abdal warfare rested on a sophisticated blend of ambushes, rapid attacks, feigned retreats, and psychological intimidation, tactics that enabled them to outmanoeuvre even the powerful Sasanian and Gupta empires.

Conflict with Sasanian Iran

The region of Khorasan served as a constant point of contention between the Abdals and the Sasanians, leading to conflict over control over the territory. The fifth-century Armenian historian Egisha Vardapet records that, during the reign of the Sasanian ruler Yazdegerd II, the northeastern frontier of the Sasanian Empire faced a continuous threat from Turan. From AD 442 onwards, the Sasanians were compelled to engage in warfare with the Abdals to secure their borders, with Yazdegerd II even being forced to relocate his headquarters to the northern frontier. Egisha Vardapet records that:

"he [Yazdegerd II] immediately marched against the kingdom of the Huns [Abdals], whom they call Kushans; but after fighting for two years, he could not prevail against them. Then he sent the warriors back to their respective places and summoned others with the same equipment to his presence ... And thus, he established this custom year after year and built a city for himself to live there."

Yazdegerd II's first campaign against the Abdal lands occurred between AD 442 and 449, culminating in a Sasanian victory. The second campaign took place in AD 450. Regarding this campaign, Egisha Vardapet writes:

"he [Yazdegerd II] gathered an innumerable army and attacked the lands of T'etal [Abdal]. When the king of the Kushans [Abdals] saw this, unable to resist him in battle, he retreated into impassable desert



regions and lived concealed with all his forces. But the king of Persia attacked his provinces, territories, and lands, captured many fortresses and cities, collected captives, spoils, and plunder, and brought them into his empire"

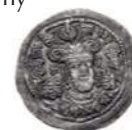
In AD 454, Yazdegerd II launched a third attack. Egisha Vardapet notes that a Turkic prince, who was part of the Sasanian army, warned the Abdal Yabghu about this campaign in advance. This timely warning allowed the Abdal army to prepare for the invasion. The Abdal forces withdrew from the numerically superior Sasanian army, before attacking the rear of their army, forcing them to retreat.

(Top) Fresco from the 'Cave of the Sixteen Sword Bearers,' part of the Kizil Caves. It may depict Hephthalites who are armed with long swords and daggers and wearing long tunics or caftans, ca. AD 432-538.

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(Bottom) Detail of the sarcophagus belonging to a Sogdian named Wirkak. Dated to ca. AD 580, its carved panels depicting a Hephthalite on horseback who is about to loose an arrow, and a Hephthalite wearing a Sasanian crown.

© Gary Todd / Flickr



A coin in Sasanian style issued by the Kidarite king Peroz - an early Kidarite ruler in Gandhara, ca. AD 395-425.

© CNG Coins / Wikimedia Commons



Sasanian sword with iron blade and gold-over-wood scabbard, seventh century AD, adopted by the Sasanians from the Huns.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Ivory Abdal saddle plates decorated with images of wildlife and emphasizing hunting.

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A tapestry of names

The Abdals, who first appear in written sources in the fourth century, were known by a remarkable variety of names depending on the civilization that recorded them. This linguistic diversity stems from the various peoples they encountered. In Armenian chronicles, they were recorded as Hep-tal (Հեփթալ) and Tetal, while Byzantine sources referred to them as Abdel (Ἀβδέλ) or Eftal, alongside the descriptor 'White Huns'. To the west, Syriac texts used the term Eptalit.

In the East, Chinese annals identified them as Ye-da (嚙哒) or Idan, while Indian sources feared them as the Huna (हूण). Within the Sasanian sphere, Middle Persian (Pahlavi) sources called them Eftal, a name which evolved into Hayatila (هياتيل) in later Arabic and Persian histories. Despite this external variety, the group possessed a distinct self-identity. On their own coinage and in indigenous Bactrian documents, they consistently referred to themselves as Abadalo (ηβοδαλο), a name that anchors their legacy in the region's local history, distinct from the labels applied by outsiders.

The conflict between Sasanian Iran and the Abdals did not cease there. Yazdegerd's son, Peroz, launched three military campaigns of his own against the Abdals, all of which ended in defeat. Procopius of Caesarea describes how, during the first of these campaigns, the Abdals, feigning to flee, drew the Sasanians under Peroz into densely forested mountains. The majority of the Abdals concealed themselves and were able to pass unnoticed through the forest, coming out behind the Sasanians, trapping them in the inhospitable terrain. Peroz asked the Abdals to grant him and his captive soldiers freedom, assuring them that he would not cross their borders again. The Abdals released him and his men and Peroz, true to his word, erected a large pillar to indicate the bor-

der. One of the (other) conditions for Peroz's release was a very large tribute. According to an agreement with the Sasanians and Constantinople, the required amount was paid by the Emperor Zeno (r. AD 474–491).

The only source recording the second war between the Sasanians and the Abdals in AD 478/479 is the tenth-century Persian historian Abu Ali Bal'ami. According to Bal'ami, when news of Peroz's advance reached Akhshunwar, the king of the Abdals, he was seized with fear. However, one of his servants offered to lead the Sasanians into a trap. He approached Peroz, claiming that he had been punished by Akhshunwar — his hands had been cut off, by his own suggestion — for telling him they could not resist the Sasanians, and offered to show him a path into Abdal territory. Peroz accepted his help, and the Sasanians followed him into the desert. Eventually, the man revealed that he had misled the Sasanians. Despite losing many men to thirst, the Sasanians marched on, for they could not turn back, and they eventually encountered the Abdals. Given their weakened state, they begged Akshunwar to conclude a peace treaty.

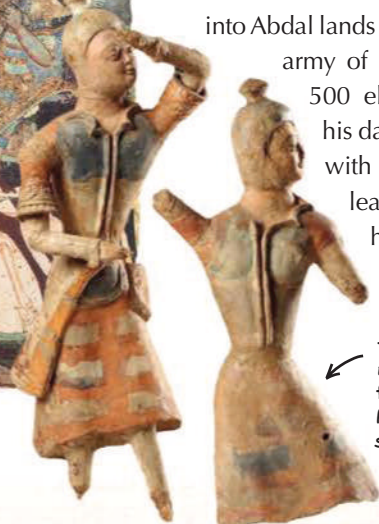
Despite this defeat, Bal'ami records how Peroz launched a third campaign into Abdal lands in AD 484, with an army of 100,000 men and 500 elephants. He took his daughter Perozdukht with him. The military leadership and the high priest objected to this, saying that

Painted straw and clay figurines of Shakya nobles or cavalymen from the Kucha kingdom, dated to the sixth century AD.

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Another fresco mural from the Kizil Caves, depicting heavily-armoured cavalry and riders wearing a type of Sasanian chainmail and lamellar armour.

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A fifth-century AD Sasanian helmet made of steel, iron plates gilded with silver, and a bronze band forming a rim.
© Metropolitan Museum of Art

it would be wrong to take a woman to war when the sons

were left at home, but their complaint was made in vain. When the Persians marched northeast from Gorgan and reached the pillar erected earlier to mark the border with the Abdals, Peroz had it dragged before his army with the help of 50 elephants. Peroz could thus claim to have fulfilled his oath not to cross the border, but, according to Bal'ami, the high priest still said that this was a deception. When the news of the third campaign reached the Abdal king, he sent his representative to Peroz with the following message: "You concluded a peace treaty with me in writing, under seal, and promised not to wage war against me. We have established common borders that neither side should cross with hostile intentions".

The history of the Arabic scholar Tabari, active in the late ninth and early tenth century AD, records a similar story. A tower was, indeed, built on the Abdal-Sasanian border

in accordance with the treaty concluded between the Abdals and the Persians that neither side should violate the border, but where Bal'ami claims it was built by Peroz, Tabari attributes it to the Sasanian king Bahram V (r. AD 420–438). Peroz, in turn, had promised the Abdal king Akhshunwar not to cross their borders. So, Peroz resorted to a diplomatic ruse and ordered Bahram's tower to be dragged in front of his army. Peroz walked behind and thus claimed that he was not violating his treaty with Akhshunwar, just as Bal'ami described. Upon learning this, Akhshunwar ordered deep pits to be dug, covered with thin planks, and with earth thrown over them. The Abdal army outflanked the Sasanians and attacked from the flanks and rear. Furthermore, the traps set on the path that his army was pursuing played a decisive role, breaking their battle formation and trapping many soldiers. Peroz was killed, and many of his close relatives, including his daughter, were taken captive by the Abdals, who also seized his treasury.

According to the archives of the Bactrian documents, Sasanian Iran was, thereafter, forced to pay tribute to the Abdals for decades, from AD 484 until

Remains of the fortress city of Shahr-e Zuhak, also known as the Red City, in Afghanistan. The city is thought to have been founded by the Hephthalites between AD 500–600. It was further fortified in the Islamic period and destroyed by the Mongols in the thirteenth century.

© Jono Photography / Shutterstock

An extremely well-preserved horse's chamfron made of silk, and thus more likely for ceremonial use than protection in battle. The weaving technique and pattern suggest it was made in Central Asia, and dates to between AD 400–700.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art





(Top) The colossal Boar of Eran, avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu. It contains an inscription in Sanskrit from the reign of Toramana, king of the Alchon Huns (r. ca. AD 493-515).

© Ms Sarah Welch / Wikimedia Commons

(Bottom) Battle scene with an archer and men wearing lamellar armour, sixth-eighth centuries AD, from the Penjikent murals of ancient Sogdiana, Tajikistan.

© Ninara / Flickr



Silver ceremonial dish depicting king Peroz as an archer out hunting.

© HistoryofIran / Wikimedia Commons

the middle of the sixth century. Some Sasanian coins were re-struck with the Abdal emblem, and these coins were used to pay tribute. This situation continued until the early years of Khosrow I's reign (AD 531–579). In his *History of Armenia*, Lazar Parpetsi, a contemporary of Elishe, in the aftermath of the Abdals' defeats of Peroz, wrote how "Even during peacetime, the mere sight or mention of the Abdals everywhere aroused terror, and no one dared to contemplate open war against them".

Resilient, versatile, and formidable

The Abdals represent a unique historical phenomenon, successfully blending their nomadic heritage with the administrative and military advancements of settled em-

Remains of an Abdal knife with an iron blade and gold decoration on the hilt.

© State Hermitage Museum



pires. Their military prowess was rooted in a versatile army comprising formidable light and heavy cavalry, resilient infantry, and specialized siege units, all employing innovative battle tactics such as ambushes, rapid attacks, and psychological warfare to demoralize opponents.

The series of decisive victories against Sasanian Iran, particularly the repeated defeats inflicted upon King Peroz, vividly illustrate the Abdals' strategic superiority and military might. These conflicts were not mere skirmishes but pivotal engagements that reshaped regional power dynamics, forcing the Sasanians into decades of tribute payments and instilling a lasting fear that resonated throughout their empire. The Abdals' ability to exploit Sasanian vulnerabilities, coupled with their cunning diplomacy and effective military leadership, cemented their position as a dominant force in Central Asia and eastern Iran for over a century. Their legacy underscores the profound impact that a well-organized and strategically adept power, even one with nomadic roots, could have on the established empires of the ancient world. **AV**

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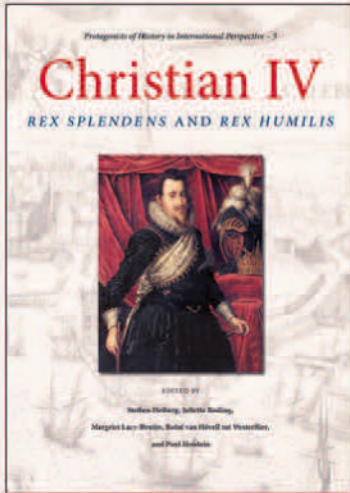
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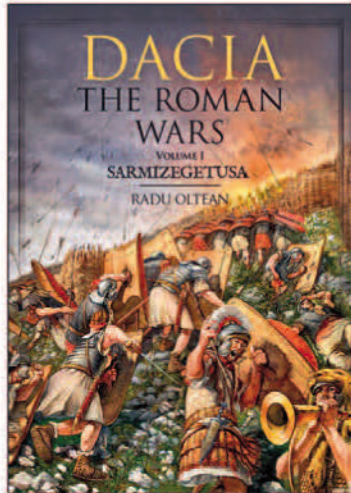
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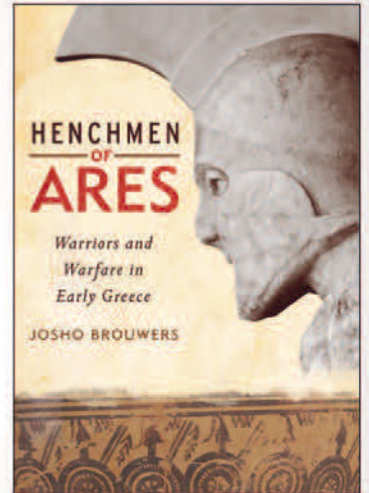
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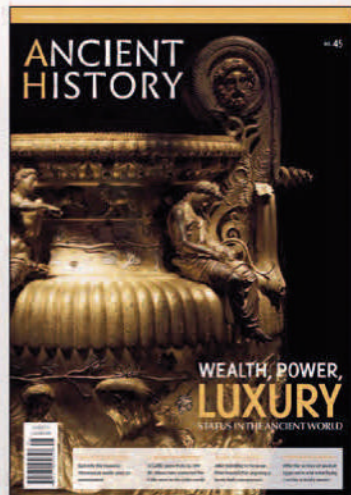
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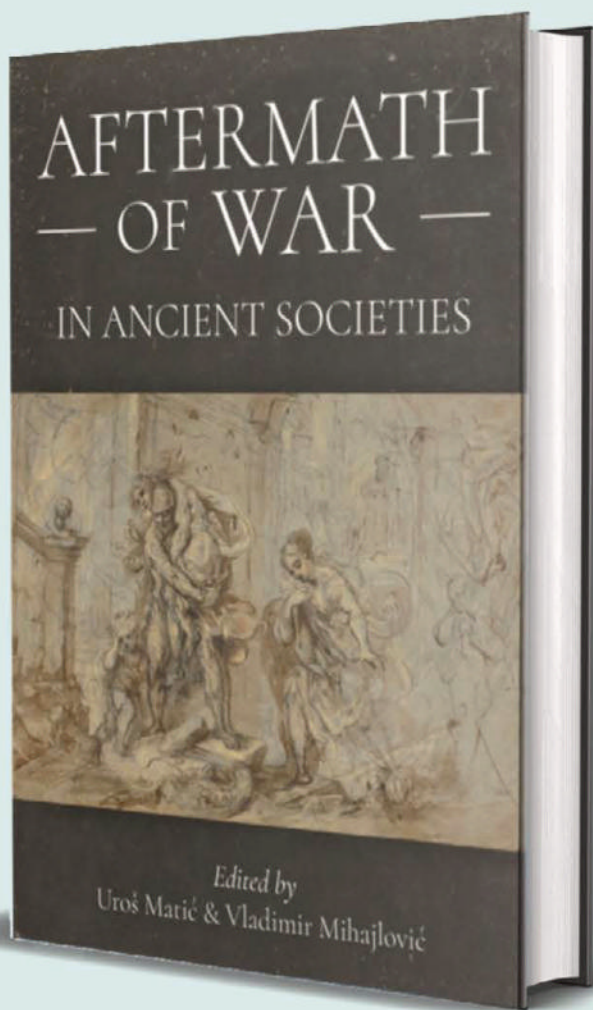
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