NOMADS IN LATE ANTIQUITY: GAZING ON ROME FROM THE STEPPE,
ATTILA TO ASPARUCH (370-680 C.E.)

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Abstract

The Roman Empire and the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian Steppe had a long history of interaction, one which became more intense in Late Antiquity (for this work, the period between 370-680 C.E.). In my dissertation I analyze the effects of interaction with the Roman Empire on the history of nomadic steppe peoples. I demonstrate Rome’s ability to actively and passively manipulate the social and political organization of nomadic groups, as well as the empire’s critical role in the history of nomadic migrations, wars, and diplomacy.

Although the field of Late Antiquity is diverse and expanding, it is essentially Romano-centric. In historiographic terms the field is obsessed with the “Fall of the Roman Empire”; whether one stands on the side of violent overthrow or transformation and accommodation, nomadic peoples are similarly understood to have been external factors that either hastened or played little to no role in the fall of the western empire. In my work, I flip this perspective on its head, asking instead “What were the effects of the Roman Empire on the peoples of the steppe in Late Antiquity?” To accomplish this task I incorporate a wide body of available evidence, including both textual as well as a wide array of archaeological materials rarely used by western historians.

An analysis of the relevant textual data allows me to reassess the history of nomadic-Roman interaction in Late Antiquity and to re-narrate the events of the relevant centuries from the perspective of the harm and damage caused to nomadic groups as a result of interaction with the Roman Empire. I argue that while Rome’s temporal power was on the wane in the Mediterranean, the empire’s presence on the steppe in fact grew
and became more invasive. Archaeological materials recovered from the steppe allow for confirmation of the vital role that Roman luxury items played in nomadic self-perception, particularly in relation to the expression of power. Finally, an analysis of the features, history, and tropes of Greco-Roman ethnographic descriptions of nomads is crucial for developing a model through which the Romans interpreted nomadic peoples and interacted with them.
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Introduction

My dissertation is an attempt to grapple with one important contradiction in the history of the interaction between “the steppe and the sown.” Nomads are thought to be the menace of the civilized world, both by ancient authors and modern scholars. Yet I argue that when viewed from a long-term perspective, the peoples of the steppe were menaced in a more systematic and consistent way by peoples of the sedentary world. The steppe experienced a continual coming and going of nomadic peoples and polities, especially when we place them in comparison to the relative stability of those they were said to terrorize, their neighbors to the south.

My work is a case study for the Roman Empire. I follow the lead of scholars of China who have attempted to study the interactions of various Chinese kingdoms and nomads of the eastern Eurasian Steppe. In Roman historiography, however, a serious study attempting to understand the role of Rome as a catalyst for political change writ large on the steppe is lacking. In particular, Roman historiography, despite the advances of those who study Late Antiquity (at its broadest roughly 250-700 CE) is still dominated by a discourse which is grappling with the concept of decline. Within the broader picture of Late Antique discourse therefore, nomads are considered the terrors of the Roman world. In this work I argue, to put it bluntly, that Rome was the terror of the steppe and its peoples.

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1 See the entries listed in the bibliography under Di Cosmo and Barfield. Studies of Persia and the steppe are also numerous. See entries under de la Vaissiere.
2 Here I refer to the swell of books which discusses nomadic peoples and their negative impact on the Roman Empire, in particular the “scourge” known as Attila the Hun. For examples see Christopher Kelly’s Attila the Hun: Barbarian Terror and the Fall of the Roman Empire (2008), The End of Empire: Attila the Hun & The Fall of Rome (2009), and Peter Heather’s The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History (2005). These two books emphasize the role of the Huns in catalyzing the migrations of the Goths,
In my dissertation therefore I stick to a track perhaps uncommon for studies of Late Antiquity, although I do not intend my work to be a piece of “knee-jerk” revisionism. This is because, unlike most studies, and although trained as a Late Antique Roman historian myself, my dissertation in actuality focuses on the Roman Empire’s impact on a single region and on similar groups of people who dwelt in that region: the steppe. In analyzing the steppe, most historians have been concerned, directly or indirectly, to address how the steppe impacted the history of Late Antiquity, by which they mean the Roman Empire. Rather, I want to know how it was that the Roman Empire impacted the steppe. Thus, I take as my point of analysis the steppe, and not Rome.

My chronological focus is Late Antiquity. Only in Late Antiquity, as the empire began to be centered more and more in Constantinople, and as peoples began to migrate westward at an increasing rate, did the steppe become one of the main regions of focus for Roman foreign policy. Although my focus is the steppe, I believe that the period of Late Antiquity was a crucial transition phase from the Principate of the first few centuries, when contact with the steppe was relatively sparse, into the middle and later Byzantine period when contact with the steppe was consistent and an integral part of Roman foreign policy. The historical experiences of Late Antiquity allowed the Byzantines to adeptly interact with the steppe to their own advantage and to project power onto the steppe and alter the course of political evolution for the peoples of the region. It is through Late Antiquity that we can then arrive at a more consistent foreign

Vandals, etc., events which directly resulted in the destruction of the Roman Empire in its classical form (Heather, p. 300 in particular). See also Heather, Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe (2010), the chapter “Huns on the Run,” pp. 207-265. This is by no means a new trend. The Huns as catalyst for the fall of the Roman Empire has antecedents throughout Roman historiography, going back to Gibbon, p. 1024: “The invasion of the Huns precipitated on the provinces of the West the Gothic nation, which advanced, in less than forty years, from the Danube to the Atlantic, and opened a way, by the success of their arms, to the inroads of so many hostile tribes, more savage than themselves.”
policy towards the steppe as laid out for example in Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus’ *De Administrando Imperio*.

**Perspectives**

I imagine my dissertation as a series of perspectives. This take on the history of the steppe in interaction with Rome in Late Antiquity is the result of an attempt to grapple with adequately accounting for a “nomadic” perspective of the history of the steppe. It is not possible to arrive at a “nomadic perspective,” just as it is impossible to arrive at a single “Roman perspective,” for several reasons. The first is that nomads left no texts in written form, and so it is impossible to hear the history of this period recounted in the actual words of a nomad himself. The issue is more complicated however. In terms of historiography, historians have up to now focused primarily on the negative effects of the arrival of nomadic peoples on the history of the Roman Empire, and have not considered the reverse, that is, the negative effects of Rome on the steppe. By focusing on these negative effects I am therefore considering as one of my perspectives a response to historiographical trends, and not strictly an historical perspective. It is unlikely that any particular nomad would have ever taken this perspective, given that although nomadic peoples suffered, in my view, as a result of interaction with the Roman Empire, nomads themselves possessed their own ideologies which would have influenced how they understood their fate, perhaps for example as a result of favor or disfavor among the gods, etc.

Having tossed aside the notion of a “Roman” or “nomadic” perspective, I have opted for three other perspectives. These three can be said to approximate to what a Roman or nomad would have perceived of their interaction, alongside a modern
analytical perspective. The first is contained in Chapters 1-3, and as I discussed above, is a historiographical perspective, specifically my own perspective on the history of the steppe. This is the perspective that governs the entire layout and tone of the dissertation. It is my intention to bring greater attention to Rome’s role on the steppe in Late Antiquity, and I do this by focusing on Rome’s impact on nomadic societies of the western Eurasian Steppe.

The second perspective is that of “nomadic” peoples as seen through archaeology in Chapter 4. Analyzing archaeological evidence is our best approximation of how nomadic peoples chose to be viewed by contemporary steppe peoples and Romans. I take their self-representation in burial costume, items, and ritual to reflect the concerns and ideologies that made up their lives as elites or leaders within nomadic societies in interaction with the Roman Empire. Archaeological materials allow us to approximate how nomads saw themselves with respect to the Roman Empire.

The final perspective is that of the tradition of writing about nomadic peoples by Roman and Greek authors, presented in chapter 5. By analyzing the Greco-Roman tradition of describing nomadic peoples we can approximate a general Roman attitude towards nomadic peoples among powerful, educated elites. An analysis of this attitude is important because it determined how the Romans gathered information on nomadic peoples and interacted with them, which allows us to understand the hows and whys of Roman foreign policy towards nomads. Ultimately all three of these perspectives make up a greater whole which is the study of steppe-Roman interaction in Late Antiquity.
Organization

Chapter 1 is constructed in a narrative style. This chapter is a “re-narrativization” of the history of steppe-Roman interaction. Historical studies have largely focused on the role of barbarian nomads in destroying Roman infrastructure or in causing harm to the Roman Empire. I show that the history of the steppe was not the history of Roman decline, but rather that, as opposed to simply resisting nomads successfully throughout a period of so-called decline, destruction, and contraction of frontiers, Rome actually increased its activity on the steppe and consistently improved its ability to disrupt nomadic groups through every new experience. I therefore focus in this chapter on the negative effects which nomadic societies suffered as a result of coming into contact with the Roman Empire. I open with strong language directly asserting the negative effects of Roman policy. I want to show how although the Roman Empire transformed from a Mediterranean wide empire to a small medieval version based around the Aegean Sea, its effect on the steppe actually increased. Over this period the Roman Empire became firmly linked to the steppe as a major region of foreign policy for defense of the hinterland of Constantinople. The story of Late Antiquity therefore from the perspective of the western steppe is the story of the Roman gaze shifting northwards and firmly fixing itself on the steppe as a decided sphere of influence.

In Chapter 1 I begin with Roman interaction with the Sarmatians as a foreground to later interaction with the steppe. Through interaction with the Sarmatians Rome maintained a knowledge base and developed experience in diplomacy and in fighting with nomadic peoples. Knowledge and experience came in very handy when the Huns finally migrated to Europe in the 370s. Throughout the early period of Hunnic settlement
north of the Danube, Rhine, and Black Sea, the Huns were kept in a fragmented state by employment in the Roman army, by the defeat of Hunnic raiding bands which had penetrated the Roman frontiers, and by diplomatic policies designed to foster disunity among the Huns. Only in the 430s did the Huns unite first under Rua and then under Attila and Bleda. Although the period of the Hunnic Empire is traditionally viewed as a time of grave danger both for the western and eastern empires, I instead argue that the Hunnic Empire was very unstable, prone to disintegration, and that the decisions of Attila to raid and demand greater sums of tribute were influenced by the constant pressure of maintaining and holding his overgrown state together.

Upon the death of Attila the Huns immediately disintegrated, and the steppe reverted to disunity for close to a century, as Hunnic groups mixed with new Oguric Turkic groups migrating from the east. Roman foreign policy, having learned from the experience of the Huns, was very adept from the 450s to the 550s in keeping the steppe in a state of disarray by alternatively making alliances with nomadic groups and compelling groups to make war on one another in competition for Roman wealth. Thus the steppe lay open for the incursion of the Avars who migrated from the east in the 550s and by the 560s were dominant in Pannonia and along the Pontic Steppe. The story of the Avars is once again however the story of constant threat from the Roman Empire. The Romans were militarily successful against the Avars and with their failed siege of Constantinople in 626 the Avars lost the ability to project power towards the Balkans as Slavic and Bulgar subjects decidedly revolted. With Rome not feeling the pressure to devote gifts and tributes to the Avars, their former preeminent power and status on the western steppe faded away.
The final group which I deal with in my narrative is the Bulgars. These managed a short-lived hegemony on the Pontic Steppe from 630-680 when Khazar raids forced some Bulgars to migrate to the Balkans. I end my history at this point, because with the migration of the Bulgars I believe that the final setting was created for the history of the Roman Empire in the Middle Ages, which we more properly call Byzantium. This is true with regard to the steppe, as the threat of the Bulgars on the doorstep of the Byzantine Empire permanently made the emperors in Constantinople, if they had not before, realize the dire need of maintaining the steppe as a zone of influence and control in the north to avert future disasters and dangers.

Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to the retroactive justification of the narrative style, language, and arguments employed in Chapter 1. I explicate six specific themes which define the history of steppe-Roman interaction in Late Antiquity. These themes can be conceptually divided into “active” and “passive”. Roughly speaking, active themes are those which deal with how the Roman Empire actively tried to shape the steppe through diplomacy and military activity. Passive themes however involve greater conceptual legwork in that they concern the historically attested ways in which nomadic pastoralists, whether those organized in a more traditional, diffuse manner or in the form of an expansive, nomadic, predatory state, interacted with large sedentary empires like Rome, China, and Persia. I discuss the distinction between active and passive themes further in Chapter 3. However, Chapters 2 and 3 are organized according to a different logic of progression which I believe is easier to understand, develop, and less systematic in a rigid way for the reader.
In chapter 2 I discuss the first of six themes, that of migration. I argue that migration should be understood in the context of unstable nomadic political and social conditions on the steppe. In my understanding migrations were typically the result of warfare, rebellion, or poor ecological conditions in a given region of the steppe. Furthermore, when on migration, nomadic peoples were very susceptible to existential threats which might destroy them as discrete political groups. Finally, migration, in the cases which I specifically survey, brought nomadic peoples into contact with the Roman Empire, which inaugurated a whole series of new trials and travails for the nomadic people in question, whether or not they experienced military success or not.

As a result of migration, nomads typically came into military contact with the Roman Empire. Traditionally steppe-Roman interaction in the military sphere is understood through the lens of nomadic military superiority, lightning quick raids, and the sacking of cities as well as pillaging and looting. This is not the case. Nomads surely experienced military success and the fact that they were excellent warriors is attested in our sources and in the fact that they were regularly employed as soldiers in the Roman army. However, I argue that nomadic peoples were outmatched by the Roman Empire in terms of preparedness for military conflict, tactics and strategy, logistical support, and in staying power. The Roman Empire regularly turned back nomadic raids and forced nomadic peoples to besiege heavily fortified cities if they were to have any success at successfully raiding the Roman Empire and coercing tribute from the Romans. Nomadic armies instead preferred to raid the Roman Empire when field armies were occupied elsewhere, and the available evidence shows that the Roman army regularly marched to conflict against large nomadic armies, at the Catalaunian Plains for example. While
Rome was defeated on several occasions, these did nothing to damage the staying power of the Roman Empire, while even draws, again at the Catalaunian Plains, severely damaged and weakened the ability of nomadic leaders to maintain a large nomadic army.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the remaining four themes of the six which justify my claims in Chapter 1. Migration, the first theme, engendered contact with the Roman Empire, which included military conflict, the second theme. With the establishment of new groups and tribes on the western Eurasian steppe in contact with the Roman Empire, nomadic groups typically sought to establish links with the Roman Empire which included payments of gifts, tributes, or trading relationships. This is the third theme. The reliance of nomadic peoples on Roman wealth for the political sustenance of their leaders occasions me to discuss the nature of nomadic pastoral socio-political organization and its role in the course of steppe-Roman interaction in Late Antiquity. The monopoly of Roman wealth allowed leaders to develop hegemony over larger and larger groups. However, as I discuss concerning theme 4, these nomadic leaders always possessed a very loose control over their subordinate nomadic and non-nomadic peoples even in the best of times. Because of the dispersed nature of nomadic pastoral political authority, nomadic peoples actively resisted hegemonic control except when it guaranteed the receipt of tributes and other prestige items from the Romans. The history of Late Antiquity demonstrates the active resistance of subordinate peoples and the constant warfare nomadic leaders were forced to engage in to maintain a semblance of control.

As a result of these tendencies, the steppe in Late Antiquity witnessed a series of cycles of political fragmentation and centralization, which is the subject of theme 5. Prior to the arrival of the Huns Germanic groups and Sarmatian nomads shared rule in
Pannonia and the Pontic Steppe. With the arrival of the Huns, the steppe remained in a state of fragmentation until in the 430s when the Huns began to centralize. This lasted only into the 450s, however, and after the Battle of Nedao in 454 the steppe reverted to fragmentation for a century as Hunnic groups and Oguric Turkic groups vied for control of the steppe, with no single group able to conquer or subdue the others. This state of fragmentation led to the success of the Avars who dominated Pannonia and the Pontic Steppe from about 560-630, when the steppe again fragmented. The Avars ruled in Pannonia, the Bulgars on the Pontic Steppe, and the Turks further to the east. These cycles were the result of the natural type of interaction between nomadic pastoralists and Rome, but also the result of the sixth theme, that of Roman diplomacy. Although less obvious than military activity, Roman diplomacy directly interfered with the functioning of nomadic politics and actively exacerbated tendencies towards disruption, fragmentation, and warfare. Rome took advantage when it could of the inherent instability in nomadic societies. It is through this final theme as a capstone on the previous five that I argue that Rome was a menace to nomadic societies and the primary causal agent in their disruption and destruction.

In Chapter 4 I shift gears entirely to examine a new body of evidence. The first three chapters examine textual sources, primarily in Latin and Greek, although other languages like Ethiopic and Syriac are utilized in translation. Chapter 4 however focuses on archaeological evidence, the result of two years in total spent researching the archaeology of the steppe in Late Antiquity in archaeological libraries in St. Petersburg, Russia and Kiev, Ukraine. In particular I focus on the methodological problems faced when incorporating archaeological sources into broad historical studies. I utilize grave
sites uncovered in what are known as kurgans, from the 4\textsuperscript{th} to the 7\textsuperscript{th} century, primarily along the Pontic Steppe, from the Carpathians east towards the Don River as the main zone of interaction between Rome and the steppe, although I also incorporate Hunnic and a few Avar finds from Pannonia. I argue that although the evidence is sparse and wanting in many areas, the materials discovered on the steppe in this period indicate the clear influence of Rome through the amount of golden and ornate items buried with nomadic leaders in kurgan burials. This chapter therefore provides material evidence to the arguments made above concerning the role of Roman wealth in nomadic society and its importance for supporting the political claims to superiority of various elites and clan leaders. My analysis of archaeology allows me to approximate how nomadic elites understood their relationship with the Roman Empire and with other nomads on the steppe.

In Chapter 5 I return to textual sources, although from a different perspective. Here I analyze the texts themselves. I argue that there is a clear ethnographic tradition of describing nomadic peoples in Greek and Roman literature which extends back into the time of Herodotus and earlier authors. Herodotus’ famous description of the Scythians set the tone for what I refer to as the “classical tradition” of describing nomadic peoples. Although new nomadic peoples appeared on Rome’s frontiers, especially during Late Antiquity starting with the migration of the Huns, a similar language was always used to depict, describe, and understand nomadic pastoralists. I argue that as a result of increased contact with the steppe writing on nomads increased in Late Antiquity. I further argue however that while much of the language remained the same, this system or tradition of describing nomadic peoples was not simply a literary genre, nor should it be mined only
for historical information. It should be understood as a self-contained system of knowledge and reporting on what the Romans actually witnessed with respect to the behavior and characteristics of nomadic peoples. As proof of this, I analyze the text of Maurice’s *Strategikon*. In this text Maurice utilizes ancient and archaic language to convey practical advice and information to Roman commanders who might face nomadic armies in the field. Thus, the classical tradition was both literary and scientific from a Roman perspective.

**Terminology**

I utilize several terms and concepts which may strike the reader as odd or even archaic, but which are justified within the parameters of my study. I do not stake any serious claims on my use of words like “barbarian,” “tribe,” or even “nomad,” but it would perhaps be useful to forewarn the reader and divert any resistance which is caught up in the usage of a specific term rather than the content of my study.

The terms “barbarian” and “barbaricum” are not value judgements on the people they are used to describe. If anything, this is a dissertation which seeks to resuscitate barbarians as actors in history who suffered as a result of empire. I use the terms as shorthand for describing the non-Roman peoples to the north of the Roman Empire’s frontier, whether these be nomadic, Germanic, or Slavic. My usage of the term corresponds to Roman usage of the term.

“Rome” simply refers to the Roman Empire and the emperors, whether these were based in Constantinople or not. When I discuss the 7th century I use the term Byzantine as well, but these two terms should be understood as synonymous.
“Nomad” refers to nomadic pastoralists, the main subject of this dissertation. The “steppe” refers to the Eurasian Steppe, the geography and topography of which characterized and defined nomadic pastoralists’ way of life. I discuss the steppe in greater detail in Chapter 2. I discuss the economic, social, and political features of nomadic pastoralism in both Chapters 2 and 3. My use of geographical terms like “the steppe,” “Eurasian Steppe,” “Pannonia,” and “Pontic Steppe” will be explained throughout these chapters as the need arises.

My use of “tribe,” “group,” “polity,” or “confederation” is not meant to convey anthropological or conceptual specificity except where explicitly stated. These terms are convenient for designating the loose groupings which nomadic peoples formed on the steppe, although it should be clear throughout when I am referring to nomads organized in a centralized, hierarchical “state” or empire, and those groups not organized as such. When possible I use Roman designations of people, alternatively referring to these as tribes or confederations for example. The evidence of archaeology however complicates the matter since the cultures which archaeologists have discovered on the steppe with respect to burial practices do not always map nicely onto what we know about peoples from Roman textual sources. I discuss this issue in Chapter 4.

“Germanic” as a term is meant strictly in the linguistic sense. I do not want to enter the field of ethnicity studies of Germanic peoples, only because for my specific project the debates are outside of my concerns. Germanic refers to those peoples who spoke Germanic languages in Late Antiquity or who were dominated by a Germanic speaking core. Germanic peoples, especially in the 4th – 6th centuries were the main peoples who interacted with nomadic peoples beyond the Roman frontier. These groups,
in the east and north of the Balkans, were largely supplanted in the 6th century by Slavic groups, which is also a linguistic designation.
Chapter 1: Rome and the Steppe: A Narrative, 370-680 CE

Introduction

There are two broad historical perspectives from which to analyze the interaction of the Roman Empire and nomadic pastoralists of the Eurasian Steppe in Late Antiquity. The first is that of the Roman Empire. The second is that of the nomadic peoples who migrated from the eastern steppe into the Pontic region and further west, from roughly 370-680. I situate the following narrative within the second of these two perspectives. I argue that the dominant feature of steppe-Roman interaction was the destabilizing and destructive influence which contact with the empire had on nomadic societies of the western Eurasian steppe; my foci therefore are the negative consequences for nomadic groups as a result of interaction with Rome. An overarching narrative from the “perspective of the steppe” brings into clear relief these destabilizing and destructive effects and is thus necessarily the first step in developing my argument.

Within my narrative I focus on six independent and yet interrelated themes which were ubiquitous and defined the history of steppe-Roman interaction in Late Antiquity. These are (1) the centrality of migration as a phenomenon among nomadic peoples in response to unstable ecological but more often unstable political conditions, (2) Roman military superiority in confrontations with nomadic armies and raiding parties, (3) the reliance of nomads on the Roman Empire as a source of surplus wealth and therefore political legitimacy, (4) the precarious political control of hegemonic nomadic states over subordinated groups on the Pontic Steppe, Pannonia, and in the rest of “barbaricum,” (5) cycles of political centralization and fragmentation and the inherent instability of nomadic tribes, states, and empires, and finally (6) the consistent interference of Roman
diplomacy onto the steppe to create favorable and peaceful conditions for the empire, the effect of which was widespread warfare and violence and ultimately the destabilization and destruction of nomadic societies.

There are in addition several minor thematic issues that recur throughout but which I have subordinated and categorized under the predominant themes. The actual discussion and elaboration of these six themes in the history of steppe-Roman interaction is the subject of chapters 2 and 3. In this chapter I provide a narrative in order to provide a skeletal framework for later thematic discussion. The history of nomadic peoples along the western Eurasian steppe in Late Antiquity was a history of political instability, unceasing warfare and struggle for survival, defeat, and ultimately disintegration and disappearance as independent political units. The textual source base for steppe-Roman interaction provides the historian with a clear and consistent narrative of nomadic misfortune in their dealings with the Roman Empire, however often ignored and misunderstood by traditional narratives of the period and topic.

**The Sarmatians**

The Roman Empire’s first contact with nomadic pastoralists of the steppe occurred in the 1st century BCE with the advance of the frontier north towards the middle and lower Danube. Groups known as the Sarmatians had come to dominate the Pontic Steppe by the 3rd century BCE, displacing the previous inhabitants of the region: the Scythians of classical antiquity. Rome interacted in a variety of ways, but always as the

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3 McGovern (1939), pp. 35-59 for a basic survey of Scythian history and culture. Rice (1959) for greater detail. Herodotus 4.21 placed the Sarmatians to the east of the Don (Tanaïs) River in the 5th century BCE. Sarmatian tribes migrated from the east and eventually displaced and absorbed the Scythians, much as these had previously done with the Cimmerians, in a process that was to be repeated on the steppe in future centuries.
dominant partner, with the Sarmatian Iazyges and Rhoxolani on the Danube and the Alans to the north of the Caucasus Mountains from the 1st-5th centuries CE.

Sarmatian tribes periodically conducted raids south of the Danube River and through the Caucasus Mountains into the eastern provinces of Anatolia. The raids of the Sarmatians onto Roman territory were consistently met with force and repulsed by Roman armies. Tacitus writes about one such event in 69:

“There the Rhoxolani, a Sarmatian tribe, had cut to pieces two auxiliary cohorts in the previous winter, and they were now encouraged to stage an ambitious invasion of Moesia. Their forces numbered some 9,000 wild and exulting horsemen, keener on booty than battle. These unwary rovers were suddenly set upon by the Third Legion, with its auxiliaries. On the Roman side all was set for the encounter. Not so the Sarmatians. Dispersed for plunder, laden with heavy spoils, and unable to profit by their horses' pace because the tracks were slippery, they were delivered as sheep to the slaughter. It is indeed curious to observe how completely the formidable Sarmatians depend on extraneous aids. An engagement on foot finds them utterly ineffective, but when they appear on horseback, there is scarcely a line of battle that can stand up to them. But this particular day was wet, and a thaw had set in. Neither their lances nor their enormous two-handed swords were of any use, because the horses lost their footing and the dismounted warriors were weighed down by their body-armor. This protective clothing is worn by the chiefs and notables and consists of iron-plating or toughened leather. Proof against blows, it is cumbersome when a man tries to get up after being unhorsed by an enemy charge. Moreover, the Sarmatians were time and time again swallowed up in the deep, soft snow. The Roman troops on the other hand wore breastplates allowing easy movement. They moved up, throwing their javelins or using their lances and, as occasion required, their light-weight swords to close in and wound the unprotected Sarmatians, who do not normally carry shields. Finally, the few survivors took refuge in swampy country, where they succumbed to the severity of the weather or their wounds.”

There were of course other Sarmatian tribes, for example, the Amicenses. Ammianus Marcellinus, 17. 13. The three mentioned here were the predominant groupings during the first four centuries CE.


6 Tacitus, Histories, 1.79.
Far more frequent were punitive raids conducted by Roman commanders across the Danube meant to bring Sarmatian tribes in Pannonia and the lower Danube into client dependency on the empire.\(^7\)

During the Dacian and Marcomannic Wars of the 2\(^{nd}\) century the Roman Empire initially annexed Dacia and then repeatedly invaded Sarmatian territory, effectively isolating the Iazyges, who dwelt along the Tisza River in Pannonia, from the Rhoxolani in the eastern Wallachian Plain.\(^8\) As a response to the crises of the 3\(^{rd}\) century the emperor Aurelian abandoned the province of Dacia, though Roman power was consistently projected north of the Danube against Sarmatian tribes, particularly during the reigns of Constantine, Constantius II, and Valentinian.\(^9\) By the mid-late 5\(^{th}\) century the Danubian Sarmatian tribes had been subsumed under various Germanic groups, conquered by the Huns, or settled on Roman territory.\(^10\)

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\(^7\) The first military encounter between a Sarmatian group and the Romans was a Roman punitive expedition in 78-76 BCE across the Danube against the Iazyges who had allied with Mithridates VI Eupator. Sulimirski (1970), p. 133.

\(^8\) First Dacian War 101-102; Second Dacian War 105-106; Marcomannic Wars 166-180. Rossi (1971). Mclynn (2009). For Wallachia, the region stretching from the Danube in the south to the southern arc of the Carpathians in the north, see Batty (2007), pp. 92-94. For the region east of the Carpathians to the Black Sea, what is known as Bessarabia, where the Rhoxolani dwelt in the first several centuries CE, see pp. 95-98. For Pannonia and the Tisza River see Mocsy (1974). Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 67-69, 72-73 is our main source for the Dacian and Marcomannic Wars and the role of the Iazyges in these conflicts. Mclynn (2009). In the second century the Rhoxolani and Iazyges had close ties. Marcus Aurelius even permitted the two to travel through Dacia to mingle with one another at the governor of the province’s discretion. Cassius Dio, 72.


\(^10\) By the fourth century the Danubian Sarmatians were designated by Roman authors not by their specific tribal names, but by the general term “Sarmatians.” Tentea & Matei-Popescu (2009), p. 129. Harmatta (1970), pp. 54-58 argues that the Rhoxolani disappeared from Roman sources because they migrated towards the Pannonian Plain in the fourth century under pressure from the Goths and were absorbed into the Iazyges. Other possibilities were that they were received onto Roman territory as fugitives under Constantine I, or subsumed by the Goths. Constantine settled a reported 300,000 transdanubians onto Roman territory. These may have in fact been the Rhoxolani. Barkocz (1959). See Harmatta (1950) and Sulimirski (1970) for outlines of Sarmatian history into the 5\(^{th}\) century.
Alanic raids into the eastern provinces were repulsed as well.\textsuperscript{11} In the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century Arrian, the Greek provincial governor of Cappadocia and author, wrote a treatise on the proper methods to engage and defeat Alanic raiding parties.\textsuperscript{12} As a result of the migration of the Huns in the late 4\textsuperscript{th} century and throughout the early 5\textsuperscript{th} century, groups of Alans split off and began to operate independently of one another. Several of these were defeated by the Huns and absorbed into their tribal confederation north of the Rhine and Danube. One major group of Alans migrated alongside the Vandals through Gaul and Spain, eventually settling in North Africa. Still others established short-lived kingdoms in Gaul. A final group remained tucked north of the Caucasus Mountains into the 13\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{13}

Through the experience of confronting Sarmatian tribes over the course of several centuries Roman diplomats, commanders, and emperors gained and maintained vital information on the social and political organization of steppe pastoralists as well as their military capabilities.\textsuperscript{14} The Roman army evolved to confront steppe pastoralists, adopting the strategies and equipment of steppe horsemen and even directly employing them as auxiliary and federate soldiers.\textsuperscript{15} Roman emperors frequently accepted refugee Sarmatian tribes onto imperial territory; contact with Sarmatian steppe tribes thus transformed from

\textsuperscript{11} There was an Alanic raiding party in 55 CE. Synkellos AM 4792 & Josephus, \textit{Jewish Antiquities}, 5.83 and 13.188.
\textsuperscript{12} Arrian, \textit{Taktika} (2010).
\textsuperscript{13} See Bachrach (1973) for Alan history in the west. See Agusti (2000) for a list of all relevant primary sources concerning the Alans.
\textsuperscript{14} I discuss the maintenance and updating of knowledge on nomadic peoples by Roman authors in Chapter 5. Important also was the role played by the Bosphoran state and Greek cities on the littoral of the Black Sea in providing Rome with information and as an advanced listening post for events along the steppe. Sulimirski (1970), pp. 92-93, 122, & 149-151. Gaiđukevich (1949).
an external phenomenon into one integral to the defense of the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{16} Through such mechanisms the Roman Empire became remarkably effective at countering nomadic threats and maintaining a proactive military and diplomatic policy towards the steppe and its peoples. As a result of this preparedness, the arrival of the Huns was taken in stride by the appropriate authorities within the empire; thunder was not felt in Constantinople since the Hunnic migration, at the time it occurred, was not perceived as a sudden storm.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{The Huns, Phase 1 (370s-430s)}

The Huns were first noticed by Roman authorities when bands of warriors began to appear west of the Don River in the early 370s, following a migration out of Central Asia.\textsuperscript{18} The Huns who arrived in Europe in the late 4\textsuperscript{th} century were related to groups which had dwelt to the east of the Caspian Sea in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} centuries; branches of this same group came into contact with the Persian Sassanian Empire in the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} centuries.\textsuperscript{19} All of these groups contained within their motley tribal makeup the political and ethnic descendants of the Xiongnu Empire.\textsuperscript{20}

The precise circumstances which compelled one portion of the Hunnic peoples towards the Pontic Steppe are unknown. There is however reason to suggest that a combination of ecological factors, particularly the rising aridity of Central Asia in the

\textsuperscript{16} Batty (2007), pp. 410-419 contains a full discussion of migrations into the Roman Empire. PP. 411-412 (Table 7.2) lists all of these migrations from the 1\textsuperscript{st} century BCE into the late 6\textsuperscript{th} century CE. Millar (1982), p. 8.
\textsuperscript{17} The perception of the Hunnic migration as a sudden storm was a later interpretation by authors like Ammianus Marcellinus. Ammianus Marcellinus, 31.3.2.
\textsuperscript{18} Heather (2010), p. 209.
\textsuperscript{19} De la Vaissiere (2015), p. 185. These are the Chionites, Kidarites, and Hephthalites. Golden (1992), pp. 79-83 has the most concise survey of the three groups. Vaissiere (2003) makes a strong case that all of the groups discussed here had a “common political and ethnic past,” p. 129.
\textsuperscript{20} De la Vaissiere (2015), p. 176. It is technically difficult to prove an unbroken chain from the Xiongnu to the Huns in Europe. More critical however is that the Huns in Europe employed the same ethnonym, the “Huns,” and self-identified as descendants of the Xiongnu. For this identification as an ethnic process see Pohl (2015), p. 257. For Xiongnu history, see Barfield (1989). For archaeological continuity, see Miklos (1995) & Zaseckaja & Bokovenko (1992).
mid-4th century, as well as conflicts with the ancestors of groups that would later found the Jou-Juan/Avar Khaganate are likely to blame.21 The main thrust of Hunnic migration crossed the Volga sometime around 350, where the Huns lingered for perhaps a generation.22 Roman sources indicate that no earlier than 370 some of these Huns had crossed the Don River and began to attack the Alans.23 It is unclear whether the first Huns to cross the Don were scouting warbands subsequently followed by a core population, or the majority of the migrating population which eventually came to occupy the Pontic Steppe and Central Europe.24 Regardless of the specific identity of those who made first contact with the preexisting groups north of the Black Sea, these Huns were immediately embroiled in fierce warfare with the Alans and subsequently with the Greuthungi and Tervingi, all of whom offered strong resistance in defense of their territories.25

23 Kulikowski (2007), p. 128. A treaty between Valens and Athanaric was signed in 369. At this time there was no mention or indication that the Huns were already posing a problem.
24 Heather (2009), p. 215-221 believes that these first groups were warbands, in agreement with the view that migration occurs in streams, rather than in waves. For this see Anthony (2006), p. 50, who specifically discusses earlier Iron Age migrations. Warbands are alternatively referred to as “charter groups.” I do not want to belabor the point, but I would point out that whether or not the first thrust of the Huns across the Don to the west consisted of several warbands, or the entire population of the migrating Huns, does not diminish the importance of victory for the Huns in their conflicts with the Alans and Goths. The defeat and destruction of Hunnic warbands, which in any case would have compromised the Huns’ military potential to overcome both the Alans and the extremely well-organized Goths, would have meant the evaporation of the Hunnic migrating body and its subsumption under another steppe power. My focus is on the meaning of victory or defeat for the Huns and other peoples of the steppe. I discuss migration as a dangerous and destabilizing element for nomadic pastoral societies in Chapter 2.
25 For resistance to the Huns, which was fierce and almost successful, see Kulikowski (2007), pp. 124-127. Ammianus Marcellinus is clear that the rumor of the attacks of the Huns was worse than they were in actuality. Ammianus Marcellinus 31.3.2. Ermaneric’s Greuthungi fought the Huns. It is unclear whether or not he died as the result of an assassination plot or suicide, induced by fear of the Huns. Ermaneric is said to have committed suicide because “rumour gave wide currency to and exaggerated the horror of the impending dangers.” Jordanes offers a different story: Ermaneric was wounded by personal enemies for punishing their sister for infidelity and as a result of his injuries was incapable of resisting the Huns and Alans. Jordanes claims that Ermaneric died at the age of 110, however, calling into question the veracity
Hunnic tactical prowess, the novelty of the Hunnic bow, and the dire necessity of expelling the Alans and Goths as a means to securing pastureland for their migrating herds, explain the Huns’ military success in the region.\textsuperscript{26} The willingness of the Roman Empire to accept fugitive peoples from beyond the Danube also played a crucial role; such events had occurred in the living memory of transdanubian peoples.\textsuperscript{27} However, although the Huns conquered the territory to the north of the Black Sea in the three decades preceding 400, they possessed relatively little authority over the peoples who resided there. Weak coercive authority over the peoples beyond the Roman frontier defined Hunnic rule even into the years of Attila’s and Bleda’s reigns. For example, the flight of the Goths in 376 indicates that the Huns, subsequent to their initial victories, lacked the force necessary to coerce groups to remain in the territory that was now nominally theirs. The same was true for the later Greuthungi, Vandals, Alans, and Goths of Radagaisus who opted to avoid the Huns by moving onto Roman territory.\textsuperscript{28} The ability of groups to migrate away from the Huns as an active form of resistance is our best evidence that Hunnic “hegemony” beyond Rome’s frontier was relatively weak during the first decades after their migration; decisions to avoid the Huns by moving

\textsuperscript{26} For the Hunnic bow see Harmatta (1951) and Laszlo (1951). Ammianus Marcellinus notes the military skill of the Huns. Ammianus Marcellinus 31.3.
\textsuperscript{28} Halsall (2007) discusses all of these migrations in detail. See Heather (2005), pp. 146-154 and 202-205 & Goffart (2006), pp.73-118 for two variant readings of the role of the Huns in pushing barbarian peoples into the Roman Empire. I generally agree with Heather as against Goffart that the Huns played an active role in pushing peoples across the frontier. However, I emphasize the choice to migrate as an active form of resistance against the Huns, not simply a knee-jerk reaction in the face of overwhelming Hunnic pressure and threat. If the Huns had been as threatening as Heather supposes, they would have had the force and ability to compel peoples to remain in their zone of control, as they did beginning only in the 430s. As we will see later with the issue of refugees, the inability to force people to stay on Hunnic territory was a constant stumbling block for Hun leaders.
south across the Rhine and Danube Rivers were facilitated by the increase in the permeability of Rome’s frontier after the defeat at Adrianople.²⁹

If the Huns did possess a centralized or unified political organization while on migration, about which we have no evidence, it was in any case non-existent upon their arrival west of the Don. Athanaric, king of the Tervingi, was already employing a band of Huns as mercenaries in the 370s to assist him in resisting the main body of Huns. This indicates that almost immediately after crossing the river groups of Huns were operating independently of one another.³⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus, who wrote in the 390s and therefore described the Huns’ political organization subsequent to their period of migration, wrote that

“They are subject to no royal restraint, but they are content with the disorderly government of their important men, and led by them they force their way through every obstacle.”³¹

Within two decades of Adrianople several groups of Huns were active from the Rhine to the Caucasus under separate and independent leaders.³² Although we know of several distinct groups of Huns, sources do not provide the name of any specific leader until 400.³³

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²⁹ The major difference with respect to migrations before the defeat at Adrianople was that these tended to be fully under the control of Roman authorities. Later migrations witnessed foreign peoples under the authority of their own leaders. Whitby (2000). For the breakdown of the frontier steadily after Adrianople see Halsall (2007), pp. 187-256.
³⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus 31.3.3.
³¹ Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.7. Syme (1968), pp. 17-24 dates Ammianus’ last books (book 31 included) to the end of the 4th century, sometime in 396. Maenchen-Helfen (1955) dates these books to the winter of 392/393.
³² Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 26-59. At the beginning of the 4th century Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 71 identifies four independent groups of Huns: “First, Uldin and his followers who, returning from the campaigns in Illyricum and Thrace, fought the troops of Generidus; second, Huns who in 408 formed a part of the Roman army in Italy; third, the Huns who joined it in 409; fourth, a group that rode with Athaulf’s Visigoths against the Romans.”
³³ Ibid., p. 59.
Politically disorganized and geographically scattered, the Huns wielded minimal authority over peoples beyond the Roman frontier. Although they tactically defeated Roman and barbarian forces on occasion, Hunnic leaders were unable either to establish a strong hegemony in barbaricum or to threaten Roman emperors into submitting to tribute payments until the 430s. I have mentioned how migration away from the Huns was a form of resistance, but Germanic and steppe peoples resisted the Huns outright in armed conflict as well. The Sorosgi, a steppe tribe, were not conquered until the late 430s, while the Akatziri maintained their independence into the late 440s. Orosius writes of the "many internecine conflicts between the barbarians themselves, when two divisions of the Goths, and then the Alans and Huns, destroyed one another in mutual slaughter." Such conflicts could be quite devastating, as for example in 430 when a large force of 10,000 Huns under Octar was wiped out by a much smaller band of 3,000 Burgundians.

The Huns are overwhelmingly featured in sources of the late 4th and early 5th centuries as mercenaries in the Roman army or in raiding bands. The majority of Hunnic raids were defeated. Only a year after the defeat at Adrianople Theodosius celebrated a triumph for victories over the Goths and Huns in the Balkans. The raid of 395 was nothing like the situation Jerome describes in which the Huns "filled the whole earth with

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34 Priscus, fr. 2 & 11.1.
35 Orosius 7.37.3. Also see Priscus, fr. 49 for an interesting episode. In the 460s Goths serving in the Roman army under Aspar were spurred to slaughter a contingent of allied Hunnic troops, fearful that the Huns would receive the lion’s share of land and booty during campaigns against the Ostrogoths in the Balkans. The episode reveals the resentment engendered by Hunnic suzerainty over the groups which traditionally dwelt beyond Rome’s frontier.
36 Octar is also known as Uptar in the sources. Socrates 7.30. Thompson (1948), p. 74. The numbers are probably exaggerated for effect. This is nonetheless serious evidence for a Hunnic defeat at the hands of Germanic peoples.
37 Themistius, oration 15 has a reference to a triumph already in 379 against Goths, Alans, and Huns. This may have been an exaggeration, but by 382, at the conclusion of the Gothic War, Hunnic groups were only known north of the Danube. Friell & Williams (1994), pp. 91-102.
slaughter and panic alike as they flitted hither and thither on their swift horses.”

One branch of the Hunnic raiding party was defeated by the Romans when they crossed the Euphrates; the eunuch Eutropius assembled Gothic troops and repelled the Huns, although they returned to the steppe with much of their booty. Another group was crushed by the Persians as they retreated from the environs of Ctesiphon. Those that survived retreated without prisoners or booty across the Caucasus. Only a third group managed to raid with any success in Syria and Asia Minor. The later raids of 408 and 422 across the Danube were similarly contained, in these instances by a combination of diplomacy and military force.

Through plunder, gifts meant to deter aggressive raiding, and payments for service in the Roman army, Hunnic groups received surplus wealth which the Roman Empire had on offer. The wealth which the Huns accrued engendered competition and conflict as leaders vied for payments, tributes, gifts, and titles from the Romans. Wealth and the ability to obtain and coerce it from the Romans became the primary source of political legitimacy among the Huns, as it later did among all of the nomadic steppe peoples of Late Antiquity. Hunnic leaders sought to monopolize Roman wealth and to redistribute it among followers to secure their loyalty.

An example of this type of political evolution among the Huns concerns the first named, historical Hunnic leader: Uldin. Uldin assisted the eastern Romans by defeating

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40 Priscus, fr. 11.
41 Maenchen-Helfen (1973), p. 52. For a discussion of sources, see Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 52-59. There may have been another Hunnic raid in 397. Claudian, Against Eutropius I, 245, and Against Eutropius II, 114-115 & 569-570. Maenchen-Helfen disagrees with Claudian.
42 Sozomen, 9.5 for the raid of 408. Marcellinus Comes, 422 for the raid of 422. Croke (1977).
43 I discuss this issue in greater depth in chapter 3.
the rebel Gothic commander Gainas around 400. He later aided Stilicho in his victory at Faesulae in 405. Uldin attempted to formalize whatever payments he had received in return for these services during a raid into the Balkans in 408. Sozomen writes:

“The prefect of the Thracian cohorts made propositions of peace to him; but he replied by pointing to the sun, and declaring that it would be easy to him, if he desired to do so, to subjugate every region of the earth that is enlightened by that luminary. But, while Uldis was uttering menaces of this description, and even threatening to impose a tribute on the Romans, God gave manifest proofs of special favour towards the emperor for shortly afterwards, the immediate attendants and chief officers of Uldis were discussing the Roman form of government, the philanthropy of the emperor, and his promptitude in rewarding merit, when they suddenly formed the resolution of ranging themselves under the Roman banners. Thus finding himself abandoned, Uldis escaped with difficulty to the opposite bank of the river. Many of his troops were slain.”

Following the raid Uldin dropped from the pages of Roman history; he is never mentioned again by any source. The case of Uldin demonstrates that the increase in the Huns’ reliance on Roman wealth as a source of political legitimacy directly corresponded to Rome’s ability to interfere in conflicts between nomadic leaders and to threaten individual leaders by withholding or diverting payments to rival elites and clans.

Nevertheless, political power gradually coalesced in the hands of a ruling clan of Huns around 430 under the leadership of Rua. Rua’s complex relationship with the Roman general and patrician Aetius likely contributed to his success in obtaining an official treaty from the eastern Romans. Among other things the treaty stipulated that

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44 Zosimus, 5.22. Philostorgius, 11.8. Socrates, 8.4 leaves the Huns out of the destruction of Gainas’ force, stating that it was a Roman detachment instead which killed the rebel commander. See Zosimus 5.26.4 for the Battle of Faesulae.
45 Sozomen, 9.5.
350 pounds of gold per year were to be delivered to Rua by the Romans, and that the Romans were not to receive refugees from Rua’s territory.\(^\text{47}\) Although Rua could claim the treaty as evidence of his political preeminence, his hold over the multiplicity of Hunnic groups in the early 5\(^{\text{th}}\) century was incredibly tenuous. His brother Octar, who dwelt nearer the Rhine, was effectively independent.\(^\text{48}\) Hunnic mercenaries continued to fight under Roman banners, particularly in the west, with only a nominal nod to Rua’s suzerainty.\(^\text{49}\) Furthermore, the eastern Romans paid little heed to the treaty. Several tribes of Hunnic refugees which were at odds with Rua were warmly received by Roman authorities in the Balkans.\(^\text{50}\) Migration away from the Huns was a form of resistance, and if Rua could not make his subordinates acquiesce to his rulership, he would have to resort to force. Rua sent his envoy Esla to Constantinople in 434, demanding that the Romans conform to the treaty or risk war. A planned expedition against the Romans came to naught when Rua suddenly died in 434.\(^\text{51}\)

\textit{The Huns, Phase 2 (430s-450s)}

A second phase of Hunnic history was inaugurated by Rua’s dominance in Hunnic political life and the later reigns of Attila and Bleda. The first phase was marked by migration and the steady development of relations between the Huns and Romans on the one hand and the Huns and other barbarian peoples on the other. These relationships were defined by weak Hunnic political authority beyond the Rhine and Danube, constant and often unsuccessful warfare by the Huns, and the centrality of wealth extracted from

\(^\text{47}\) Priscus, fr. 2.
\(^\text{48}\) Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 81-94.
\(^\text{49}\) Notably with Aetius in 425 and with Litorius in 439. Philostorgius, 12.14 and Prosper, 439. Jordanes, 34 mentions explicitly that the territory under Rua’s authority was considerably smaller than that of Attila.
\(^\text{50}\) Priscus, fr. 2. These were the Amilzuri, Itimari, Tounsoures, and Boisci.
\(^\text{51}\) Priscus, fr. 2.
the Romans as a source of Hunnic political legitimacy and steadily creeping political centralization. The second phase was defined by the acceleration of political centralization among the Huns which resulted in what we may call the “Hunnic Empire.”

As the Hunnic ruling clan monopolized power, it was able to convince Rome to submit to yearly tributes in gold as the price of peace. Through redistribution of this wealth Rua, Attila, and Bleda were able to legitimize their rule to both acquiescent as well as disgruntled subordinated peoples, who then contributed to the expansion of the Hunnic Empire. The growing power of the Huns was used as a threat and sometimes mobilized directly through military campaigns to compel the Romans to pay increasingly larger tributes. If the flow of wealth from Rome ceased the legitimacy of the Hunnic ruling clan as the sole font of wealth in barbaricum would quickly erode and the Hunnic Empire dissolve, which occurred in any case after the death of Attila.

During the second phase of Hunnic history in Europe (roughly 430-455) Hunnic leaders became preoccupied with securing tribute from the Roman Empire and eliminating potential rivals or alternative centers of power in barbaricum. One result was constant warfare among the Huns and the various Germanic and steppe peoples beyond the Roman frontier. By the reign of Attila and Bleda most non-nomadic peoples had either migrated to Roman territory or had been defeated and subjugated. However the Sorosgi, Akatziri, and other “Scythian peoples” resisted the Huns even into the sole reign of Attila. Only by 450, with the defeat of the Akatziri, could Attila claim dominion over all of barbaricum. He was forced to designate his son Ellac as direct ruler over the Akatziri, since the eastern Roman government had been trying for some time to

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52 I discuss in greater depth the differences between nomadic pastoralists of the steppe and the other barbarian groups beyond the Roman frontier in Chapter 2.
53 Priscus, fr. 2 & 11.2.
encourage pro-Roman elements within the ruling clans of the Akatziri to enter into an alliance against Attila.\textsuperscript{54}

The issue of refugees became a major sticking point for Hunnic-Roman relations already under Rua in the 430s. Rua was preparing for his first raid into Thrace because the Romans had accepted several tribes of Huns as refugees. The Treaty of Margus (435) and all subsequent treaties between the Huns and eastern Romans stipulated the prompt return of refugees.\textsuperscript{55} Priscus writes that Attila had the names of 17 refugees whom he wanted returned written on parchment and read aloud to the Roman ambassadors.\textsuperscript{56} On one occasion when the Romans returned refugees to Attila they were crucified on Roman territory.\textsuperscript{57} Later, Attila raised no protest when Hunnic refugees who refused to return to his territory were killed by the Romans.\textsuperscript{58} The object was clearly the elimination of those refugee elites and groups. That individuals might serve as potential challenges and focal points for resistance to Attila is indicated by the frequency with which we hear of this complaint in our sources. Furthermore, Rome repeatedly ignored the demands of the Huns that they not accept exiles.\textsuperscript{59} This, along with the government in Constantinople’s perennial tardiness and sometimes outright refusal to pay tributes to the Huns demonstrates that Rome was far from passive in its conflicts and deterrence of the Huns, and instead actively sought to destabilize and undermine Attila’s rule. Of course we know through the writings of Priscus that the Romans actively tried to assassinate Attila.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{54} Priscus, fr. 11.2. The Akatziri dwelt to the east of the Don River. Kazanski & Mastykova (2009).
\textsuperscript{55} Priscus, fr. 2.
\textsuperscript{56} Priscus, fr. 11.2. The issue must have been of critical importance for an oral people to write it down!
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., fr. 2.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., fr. 9.3.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., fr. 15.4.
\textsuperscript{60} The embassy in Priscus, fr. 11.1-2.
Attila, forced to spend his entire reign engaged in warfare subduing and policing the peoples beyond the Roman frontier, also possessed a relatively dismal record of military success against the Romans. The Romans were very active in fortifying the Danube against Hunnic incursions and always offered resistance to Hunnic raids and large scale incursions.\textsuperscript{61} His biggest successes came in two hard fought victories in the Balkans in 443 and 447, and in his ability to besiege and sack cities in the Balkans, Gaul, and Northern Italy.\textsuperscript{62} Through these activities Attila was able to place his hands on a great amount of plunder, ransom money for the wealthy Romans whom he captured, as well as slaves to work herds and fields north of the Danube.\textsuperscript{63}

Plunder however was a non-renewable resource, and so long as Constantinople stood firm, the eastern Romans were always a very serious threat to Attila. Even after defeat Theodosius II immediately reinforced the Danube and committed to maintaining the Balkans as imperial territory.\textsuperscript{64} Attila was forced to besiege and sack cities since these served as refuges for Roman troops who could sally out and harass the Hunnic train, as happened outside of Asemus.\textsuperscript{65} Besieging cities wasted men, materiel, and sapped Hunnic morale, as for example outside of Aquileia in 452.\textsuperscript{66} The massive Hunnic armies which plundered the Roman countryside were unwieldy, prone to disease, famine, and logistical problems, and they were unable to overcome well-organized and disciplined

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  \item \textsuperscript{61} Codex Theodosianus, 7.17.1. Another law of 410 (7.16.2) ordered Anthemius, Praetorian Prefect, to guard the frontiers of the empire to those who would enter “by violence or by stealth.” Two other laws are of interest here. Edict 7.16.3 in the year 420 forbids the export of “illicit goods” to barbarian peoples, which most likely referred to items used for warfare. Edict 9.40.24 requires capital punishment for those who would teach barbarian peoples how to build ships, in reference to a previous incident in Chersonesus.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Lenski (2015).
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Codex Theodosianus, 7.17.1.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Priscus, fr. 9.3.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Jordanes, 42. Marcellinus Comes, 452.
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Roman/barbarian armies, as witnessed at the Catalaunian Fields in 451. Therefore the Huns routinely avoided engaging Roman field armies or chose to raid when Roman forces were occupied elsewhere. Roman armies also went on the offensive, raiding transdanubian Hunnic territory in 452 during Attila’s drive into northern Italy. It is no wonder that rumors of assassination surrounded the death of Attila. The eastern Romans’ refusal to pay tributes, Roman raiding in his home territory, the defeat at the Catalaunian Fields, and the famine and disease which struck his army in 452 in northern Italy were clear signs that Attila’s Hunnic Empire had run out of steam and could no longer obtain the tributes and wealth it required to hold itself together. Neither could Attila compel the Romans to name him magister militum, a title which awarded him an official position in the Roman hierarchy and secured his legitimacy, as well as money to pay for his army. It is likely that had Attila not died there would have been internal challenges to his rule in the foreseeable future; rumors of assassination reflect the tension within the Hunnic Empire at the end of Attila’s reign.

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67 For disease and logistical problems see Hydatius, Olympiad 308, 29 which discusses Attila’s campaign in northern Italy. See also Maenchen-Helfen (1970), pp. 137-140. For an account of the Catalaunian Plains see Jordanes, 40-41. Hydatius, Olympiad 308, 28 triumphantly claims the victory for the Romans.
69 Hydatius, Olympiad 308, 29.
70 Marcellinus Comes, 454. Malalas 359.10 reports either that Attila’s new bride murdered him, or that Aetius bribed the spatharius of Attila to stab the Hun.
71 Sinor (1993), pp. 11-15 for an assessment of the difficulties Attila faced towards the end of his reign. Marcian refused to pay tribute to Attila upon his accession in 450. Priscus, fr. 20.1.
The Huns, Collapse (450s-460s)

Regardless of the immediate circumstances of his death, Attila either did not or could not make sufficient plans for his succession. What followed was 15 years of chaos, warfare, defeat, migration onto the steppe and into Roman territory, and ultimately the destruction of a separate Hunnic political identity. Roman holding efforts against the Huns, continual military pressure, the refusal to pay tributes, and the enticement of neighboring groups to revolt from, attack, or migrate away from the Huns paid dividends in the eventual fragmentation and destruction of the Huns.

Within 15 years of Attila’s death the Huns were nonexistent as independent groups. Immediately upon their father’s death the sons of Attila began quarreling over inheritances of peoples and territories.73 Without the persuasion of Roman tributes and the fear that a leader like Attila inspired, the subordinate peoples, mainly Germanic, were unwilling to endure the Hunnic yoke any longer.74 In 454 the critical defeat came for the main coalition of Attila’s sons; Gepids, Sciri, Rugi, Suebi, and Heruls overwhelmed the Huns in Pannonia, in the heartland of Attila’s Empire at the battle of Nedao.75 Ellac along with 30,000 Huns are said to have been slaughtered.76

After the defeat at Nedao the Huns scattered into several independent and fragmented groups. Some were settled in Africa as federates by the western emperor Majorian.77 A group under Ernac was defeated by Ostrogoths and fled to the Dnieper

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73 Jordanes, 50.
74 Eugippus, 1.1: “At the time when Attila, king of the Huns, had died, the two Pannonias and the other districts bordering on the Danube were in a state of utter confusion.” See Wolfram (1993) for discontent among Germanic peoples of Attila’s Empire, particularly among the Amal rulers of the Ostrogoths.
75 Jordanes, 50.
76 Ibid.
River. Others under Emnetzur and Ultzindur were settled in Dacia Ripensis around the forts at Utus, Oescus, and Almus. Hormidac challenged the Romans but was defeated by the general Anthemius at Serdica. Dengizich, in command of Huns and other tribes of Ultzinures, Angisciri, Bittugures, and Bardores vied with the Ostrogoths in Pannonia without success. In 468 he raided the Roman Empire in an attempt to open up a new round of trade and tribute relations. He failed and his head was shown on a pike in Constantinople. The last raid of a Hunnic group occurred in the early years of Zeno’s reign and was beaten back with little note by ancient authors.

**The Post Hunnic Period**

The end of the Hunnic Empire marks a shift on the steppe from a violently imposed and enforced, politically centralized order to a situation of political fragmentation and competing tribal groups. Political centralization would only return to the steppe a century later with the migration of the Avars in the late 550s. The history of the Pontic Steppe from roughly 460-558 is a dizzying swirl of new peoples who migrated from the east and combined with Hunnic and earlier nomadic elements already present in the area. Agathias points to the confusion on the steppe in the late 5th and early 6th centuries, before the arrival of the Avars:

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78 Jordanes, 52.
79 Ibid., 50.
80 Sidonius, *Panegyric to Anthemius*, line 241.
81 Jordanes, 53.
82 Priscus, fr. 48.1.
83 *Chronicon Paschale* 468, Olympiad 312. Marcellinus Comes, 469.
84 Evagrius, 3.2.
85 It is known from archaeological evidence that a major portion of the Huns who dwelt in Pannonia during Attila’s reign migrated back onto the Pontic Steppe in the 450s and 460s. Komar (2000).
“By their sudden and unexpected raids they (the Huns) did incalculable damage to the local populations, even to the extent of displacing the local inhabitants and occupying their lands. But their stay was destined to be a brief one, and at the end of it they vanished without leaving any trace of themselves. This fact is illustrated by the Ultizurs and Burugundi who were well known right up to the time of the Emperor Leo and were considered a force to be reckoned with, but whom we in our day and age neither know, nor, I imagine, are likely to, since they have either perished or migrated to the ends of the earth.”

From 460-558 Rome and the steppe became bound to one another and it is now that we can speak confidently of a Roman “sphere of influence” on the steppe. The receipt or extraction of Roman wealth by steppe tribes increasingly became the $sine$ $qua$ $non$ of political legitimacy along the steppe. Following the experience with the Huns Rome increased its diplomatic presence on the steppe by playing off tribes against one another and by continuing to employ nomadic mercenaries. The Roman Empire employed diplomatic means to keep nomadic steppe tribes in the late 5th and early 6th century in a fractured and competing state, thus creating the conditions that made it possible for a strong, centralized group like the Avars to arrive and dominate Pannonia and the Pontic Steppe.

**The Oguric Turks**

In 463 the Saragurs, Urogi, and Onogurs headed off the first wave of westward steppe migration in the wake of the collapse of the Hunnic Empire. In another round of

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86 Agathias, 5.11.3-4. These “Ultizurs” and “Burugundi” are not attested elsewhere in Greco-Roman literature. Moravcsik (1958, vol.2), pp. 107 & 230 points out possible links with other peoples.


88 The Urogi are to be identified with the Ogurs, who gave their name to the Oguric Turkic peoples. Moravcsik (1958), p. 227-228. The Onogurs are the Hunuguri of Jordanes, 5 who were said to have traded in martens skins, perhaps indicating a northern dwelling place on the steppe close to the forest belt. Jordanes
political turmoil in Central Asia, Priscus informs us that these new nomadic tribes moved west under pressure from the Sabir Huns, themselves driven west by the Avars, about whom we hear of for the first time in Roman sources.\textsuperscript{89} The predominant tribe among these groups, the Saragurs, easily overcame the Akatziri, weakened by their previous subjugation to Attila, and the Huns of Ernac who were at war with rebellious elements among the Akatziri.\textsuperscript{90} The Saragurs subsequently sent an embassy to Constantinople, where they were received and given gifts, perhaps signifying a client relationship.\textsuperscript{91} It is possible that the Saragurs’ probing raid beyond the Caucasus into Persia was requested by Roman authorities.\textsuperscript{92}

The Saragurs, Urogi, and Onogurs were Turkic speakers of the western Oguric branch; by 480 these Oguric tribal unions were the dominant elements along the Pontic steppe.\textsuperscript{93} In Roman sources of the late 5\textsuperscript{th} and early 6\textsuperscript{th} centuries these peoples were referred to generally as Bulgars.\textsuperscript{94} Bulgars were active in the late 5\textsuperscript{th} and early 6\textsuperscript{th} century in the Balkans as allies of the Romans particularly against the Ostrogoths, and as raiders.\textsuperscript{95} The Bulgars had mixed success in the Balkans. In 499 they defeated a Roman

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also notes that the Hunuguri were subordinate to their more powerful neighbors, perhaps the Saragurs. Jordanes, 50 mentions a people known as the Sadagarri, but these should not be identified with the Saragurs of Priscus, since the former were settled in Moesia, while the latter dwelt along the Pontic Steppe. Blockley (1983, vol. 2), p. 395, f. 156. \textsuperscript{89} Priscus, fr. 40.1-2. For Oguric tribes, see Golden (1990), 257-259. \textsuperscript{90} Priscus, fr. 40.2. \textsuperscript{91} Ibid., fr. 40.1. \textsuperscript{92} The raid occurred in 466. Atlas Zapadnyĭ Tiurskii Kaganat (2013), p. 671. Priscus, fr. 47. \textsuperscript{93} Golden (1992), pp. 97-104. See pp. 95-97 for Oguric Turkic. \textsuperscript{94} In the 460’s Ernac was unwilling to aid his brother Dengizich in pressuring new subsidies from the Romans because of turmoil in his home territory. His domestic issues were likely a combination of unruly Akatziri elements and the incursions of the newly arrived Saragurs. Priscus, fr. 46. Atlas Zapadnyĭ Tiurskii Kaganat (2013), p. 671. \textsuperscript{95} For use as allies against the Ostrogoths in 480 under Zeno, see Golden (1992), p. 104. These were defeated by the Gepids and their Hunnic allies in 504, the Romans subsequently able to retake Sirmium. Sirotenko (1972), ff. 27-28. Bulgars helped Vitalian in his rebellion in 513. Malalas, 402.6
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army and in 502 raided again successfully. Roman efforts in the period were generally successful however at deterring extensive Bulgar raiding in the Balkans. In 530 they were defeated and Justinian perhaps celebrated a triumph. The Slavic Antes were encouraged to settle close to the Danube so as to serve as a bulwark against nomadic raiding. In the early 6th century Anastasius, Justin I, and Justinian successfully defended the Balkans through massive rebuilding projects in the peninsula.

While a minor nuisance in the Balkans, the various Ogoric and Bulgar peoples of the Pontic steppe offered no serious challenge to the Roman state and were themselves too politically divided to coalesce into a major tribal union. The Kutrigurs and Utigurs later settled out of the dust of the period, but were only active from the 530s-550s. In the first third of the sixth century Constantinople’s primary steppe interaction occurred with a nomadic people known as the Sabirs.

### The Sabirs

We possess extensive documentation for the peoples who pushed the Ogoric tribes westward and who were themselves forced out of Central Asia by the rising Avars: the Sabirs. By around 500 these had crossed the Volga and in 502 are recorded north of the Caucasus, where they would remain dominant for the next 60 years. Already in that year the Sabirs were raiding the Ogoric peoples of the northern Pontus, contributing to

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97 Croke (1980). Five hundred of these were said to have been killed. Marcellinus Comes, 530. Some of the defeated Bulgars were sent to Lazica as federates. Theophanes Confessor, 539/540. Theophanes mistakenly dates the raid and its defeat to 540. Mango & Scott (1997), p. 318, f. 1. The Bulgar leaders were paraded in Constantinople.
100 Another people are mentioned as “Hunnic” by Jordanes, 5 but these are only attested once: the Altziagiri, who broke off from the Sabirs and formed an independent group of Huns.
the already confused and warlike state of the steppe in the period. In 515 the Sabirs raided Cappadocia which induced Anastasius to fortify several cities in the area and to remit taxes for three years. Procopius later refers to frequent attempted raids by the Sabirs.

It is likely that the Sabirs were attracted to the Caucasus region by the opportunity to participate in the Roman-Sassanian wars which flared up in the 6th century. The Sabirs quickly embroiled themselves in the diplomatic intrigues of both empires and played a critical military role in the period as allies of the Romans and Persians. The Sabirs first offered their assistance to Anastasius, proposing to seize and hand over the Caspian Gates to the Roman emperor, who refused for logistical reasons. Instead, a relationship of tribute payments and mercenary service developed between the Romans and the Sabirs. The relationship between the Sabirs and Romans was so intense that in the reign of Justinian the Persians mocked the Roman emperor for paying the Huns (and the Saracens) yearly to protect the frontier. The relationship was not exclusive to the Romans however. We know from a passage in Agathias how rapidly and willingly the Sabirs switched sides:

“They are always eager to raid strange lands and the lure of pay and the hope of plunder are sufficient incentive for them to fight now for one people, now for another, changing sides with bewildering rapidity. They have often helped the Romans against the Persians and vice versa...”

103 Malalas, 406. Marcellinus Comes, 515.
104 Procopius, Wars 1.21-22.
106 Procopius, Wars. 1.10.9-12.
108 Procopius, Wars, 2.10.
Later:

“At the end of the campaign they were discharged by the Romans after they had received the amount of pay agreed upon. Whereupon they offered their services to the very people whom they had recently been fighting. The men who did this perhaps may have been different Sabirs, but Sabirs they were all the same and they had been sent by their own people to fight in the Persian army.” 109

The Romans and Persians however were by no means the playthings of the Sabirs. In fact the two worked together extensively to contain the Sabirs beyond the Caucasus. 110 Throughout the first half of the 6th century the Romans and Persians worked together to defend the Caucasian passes, known as the Caspian Gates. 111 The Romans and Persians also worked together to remove potentially dangerous Sabir chieftains. In 522 Justin I won over the Sabir “king” Zilgides, having given him gifts to secure oaths of allegiance. The emperor intended to employ Zilgides’ force of 20,000 men in the east against Kavad. The fairly standard practice of employing steppe nomads in conflicts turned scandalous however when Justin learned that Zilgides, disregarding his alliance to the Romans and the gifts he had received from the emperor, intended to defect to the Persians. Justin informed Kavad of this treachery, who, when he learned that Zilgides had taken gifts

109 Agathias, 4.13.7-9.
110 Roman and Persian policy converged on the point of containing nomadic peoples. Priscus informs us of the worry that the balance between Rome and Persia and the steppe might be broken were Attila to penetrate the Caucasus and defeat Persia, effectively surrounding the Romans. Priscus, fr. 11.2.
111 The Romans and Persians had worked on this through the later 5th and into the 6th century. The treaty between the Romans and Persians in Menander, fr. 6.1 stipulates that the Persians are not to let the Huns or Alans pass through the Caspian Gates or Tzon to attack the Romans. Zacharias of Mytilene 8.5a & f. 65. Kavad’s request for 500 centenaria of gold to protect the Caspian gates led to war in 502. Procopius, Wars, 1.10. It is clear that the payments were not made on a yearly basis. However, from the episode it seems that it was not an entirely random request on the part of Kavad, since there was earlier precedent. When the Saragurs raided Persia in 466 they went around the Caspian Gates and ravaged Armenia. The Persians requested money from the Romans to defend a certain fort in the region called Iouroeipacha. The Romans politely refused. The issue became a point of contention once again in 571/572 between Chosroes and Justin II. Theophanes 6064, 571/572. Blockley (1992), pp. 50-51. Canepa (2009), p. 27.
from the Romans and yet decided to defect, attacked and annihilated the Hunnic force and murdered Zilgides.\(^\text{112}\)

Naturally Sabir Huns began to compete for Roman wealth which led to warfare and increased political fragmentation in their society. At the direct request of Justinian Boa, queen of a group of Sabirs, attacked and defeated a large force of rival Sabirs who were preparing to enter Persian service.\(^\text{113}\) Boa killed one king named Glom in battle; the other by the name of Tyranx was sent to Justinian and killed at St. Konon’s on the opposite side of the Golden Horn.\(^\text{114}\) Other Sabir leaders did service to the Romans without the express request of the emperor. Jaroks, otherwise referred to as Grod, visited Constantinople during the reign of Justinian. He was baptized in the city and entered into an alliance with the Romans.\(^\text{115}\) When Grod returned to the Bosphorus he melted down and destroyed all of the idols of his fellow tribesmen. Certain Hunnic shamans along with perhaps the supporters of Grod’s brother Mougel rose up, murdered Grod, and made Mougel king in his place.\(^\text{116}\)

\(^{112}\) The entire episode is described in three sources: John Malalas, 414-415, John of Nikiu, 90.42-46, & Chronicon Paschale, 522. See also Theophanes, 6013. John Malalas records the Hunnic king’s name as “Zilgibi,” John of Nikiu calls him “Zilgides,” and the Chronicon Paschale “Zilgbis.” Theophanes refers to him as “Zilgbi.” I have chosen here John of Nikiu’s rendition.

\(^{113}\) The scene occurs in Malalas, 431 and John of Nikiu, 90.61-65. It is also in Theophanes, 6020. Boa became queen of the ‘outer’ Huns as Nikiu records it, after the death of her husband Balach. The name appears as Blach in John Malalas. Malalas indicates that these were in fact Sabir Huns. John of Nikiu indicates that she, along with her two infant sons, ruled over a massive force of 100,000 followers.

\(^{114}\) Malalas, 431. John of Nikiu records the name of the two leaders differently. Aglanos was the leader murdered in battle while the other, Astera, Boa sent to Constantinople in chains. Justinian had him strung up and nailed to a tree in a public place.

\(^{115}\) Malalas, 431-432. Grod is referred to as Jaroks in John of Nikiu, 66-70.

\(^{116}\) I have here recorded John Malalas’ retelling of the events concerning Grod. In John of Nikiu, 66-70 the story differs slightly. In John of Nikiu Grod is known as Jaroks, and both he and his brother become Christians and vassals of Justinian. They are both murdered when they melt down their idols as well as ritual silver. Justinian, according to this account, not only punished the Huns with a strike by a combined force of Romans and “Scythians,” but also demanded that another leader, Grepes (which may be a confusion with the Grod of Malalas), travel to Constantinople, become baptized, and enter into the same relationship with the emperor as Jaroks and his brother.
The relationship of the Sabirs with the Romans and Persians thus led to disorganization, political infighting, and a sapping of Sabir military potential. The Romans and Persians actively fostered this state of affairs by employing Sabirs as mercenaries, the wealth from which engendered further competition among Sabir leaders. The disorganized state of the Sabirs north of the Caucasus was mirrored, though perhaps in a more extreme manner, among the Kutrigurs and the Utigurs of the north Pontic Steppe during the same period.

**The Kutrigurs and Utigurs**

In the middle decades of the 6th century two tribal groupings, the Kutrigurs and Utigurs, rose to preeminence among the Oguric tribes of the northern Pontic Steppe.\(^\text{117}\) During the reign of Justinian the Kutrigurs and Utigurs came to occupy a central place in Roman steppe policy; two episodes from this period highlight nicely the invasiveness and disruption of Roman diplomacy among steppe societies.\(^\text{118}\)

In the year 551, Procopius writes, the Gepids “sent envoys to the leaders of the Kutrigurs who dwell on this side of the Maeotic Lake” to persuade them to attack the Lombards, with whom the Gepids had been in perennial conflict.\(^\text{119}\) The Kutrigurs responded promptly: twelve thousand horsemen arrived in the territory of the Gepids under the command of Chinialon. The Gepids were unprepared for the Kutrigurs’ sudden arrival however, since a peace treaty with the Lombards would not expire for another

\(^{117}\) These were Oguric tribes. *Atlas Zapadnyĭ Tiukrsekiĭ Kaganat* (2013), p. 76. Golden 98-100 for a discussion of their origins within the greater tribal unions of Oguric Turks. Komar (2004) has an overview of Kutrigur and Utigur history. The Patriarch Nikephoros, 35 says that the Kutrigurs were of the same stock of the Bulgars.

\(^{118}\) The passages are from Procopius, *Wars*, 8.18.13-8.19.22 and Agathias, 5.11.1-5.25.6 respectfully.

year. The Gepids convinced Chinialon and the Kutrigurs instead to direct their attack against the Romans. The Kutrigurs were ferried across the Danube and proceeded to plunder Roman territory.

Justinian, informed of the incursion of the Kutrigurs, dispatched the general Aratius as envoy to Chinialon. From Aratius the Kutrigurs learned that their neighbors, the Utigur Huns, who dwelt to the east of the Maeotic Lake, had plundered the territory of the Kutrigurs in their absence, setting prisoners free and taking captive large portions of their flocks, as well as women and children. Chinialon and his Kutrigurs, already eager to return home to avenge their defeat, were given further incentive by Aratius through the emperor. Aratius presented gifts of money and offered to some of the Kutrigurs the option to settle in Roman territory as federates and allies if their home territory was too badly ravaged to occupy. A Kutrigur leader named Sinnion accepted this offer and settled with 2,000 men, women, and children in Thrace.

Prior to the embassy of Aratius, Justinian had dispatched several envoys to the Utigur Huns. A chieftain named Sandil received the ambassadors. Sandil heard the envoys speak of how the Kutrigurs, although they received money each and every year from Byzantium, had no desire to stop their attacks, had no respect for their neighbors, and ultimately attacked the Romans “for no reason.” The Roman envoys insinuated that Sandil should assist Justinian by arguing that the two peoples had been friends since ancient times. The envoys emphasized the amount of booty the Kutrigurs were removing from Roman territory which would not be shared with the Utigurs. The envoys also

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120 Procopius and Agathias differ slightly on the spelling of this Utigur chieftain’s name. In Procopius it is “Sandil,” while in Agathias it is “Sandilch.” I use “Sandil” throughout for consistency.
121 Procopius, Wars, 8.18.20: οὐδὲν λόγον.
brought gifts of money to the Utigurs. Sandil was persuaded and led a force across the Tanais River to ravage Kutrigur territory.

The Utigur chieftain had little time to appreciate the booty and prisoners he had taken however. Sandil became enraged upon learning of Justinian’s acceptance of Sinnion and his 2,000 followers and immediately sent his own envoys to Constantinople. Sandil’s envoys warned the emperor that he should be wary in treating with his former enemies, lest his allies become reluctant to go to war on Rome’s behalf from a knowledge that the defeated ultimately benefited to a greater degree. Justinian, unconcerned with Sandil’s advice, sent the envoys off with additional gifts of money.

Eight years later a similar series of events occurred. During the winter of 559 the Danube had frozen solid, providing the opportunity for Zabergan, the leader of the Kutrigurs, to cross the river and raid Roman territory. Zabergan passed through Scythia Minor and Moesia Inferior and, when he arrived in Thrace, divided his army into three groups: one he sent to Greece, another to the Thracian Chersonese, and a third group of 7,000 horsemen he himself led to the walls of Constantinople, plundering fields and towns along the way. Zabergan’s raid was damaging, but eventually Belisarius, called out of retirement by Justinian, organized a motley crew of veterans and mercenaries and drove Zabergan away from the immediate environs of the capital. Zabergan agreed to leave Roman territory after he had received payment from the Romans and all of his prisoners were ransomed. Justinian abided and the Kutrigurs retreated northwards.

During Zabergan’s incursion the emperor yet again sent envoys to Sandil. On this occasion the envoys spoke in a straightforward and harsh tone. Sandil was reproached for
not aiding the Romans; he was warned that Roman allegiance would be with the Kutrigurs from here on if he failed to come to their assistance. Agathias states:

“When Sandileh learned from an interpreter the contents of this letter it immediately produced the desired effect. He fell at once into a rage and was eager to punish the Cotrigurs there and then for their insolence, a predictable reaction in a man with the arrogant and mercenary mentality of a barbarian. Consequently he set off straight away with the army and made a surprise attack on the home territory of the enemy. Those that remained behind were caught off their guard and he took many women and children into captivity. When the Cotrigurs returning from Thrace had just crossed the Danube he confronted them suddenly, killing many of them and robbing them of the money which they had received from the Emperor and all of their booty. Then no sooner had the survivors returned home than they joined with the rest of their compatriots in preparing for war against the Utigurs. And so from that time onwards both people continued to make war against each other for a very long period of time and they became increasingly hostile as a result. On some occasions they would confine themselves to predatory incursions, on others they would resort to open warfare until they have so weakened themselves and their numbers have become so seriously depleted that they have lost their national identity.”  

The history of the Kutrigurs and Utigurs is our best textbook example of the invasiveness of Roman policy into steppe society. We know independently that Sandil was reluctant to raid the Kutrigurs repeatedly, since these were considered a kindred tribe, but that the necessity of maintaining Roman favor overwhelmed such sentiments. Thus it was

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122 Agathias, 5.25.1-4.
123 Menander, fr. 2 for Sandil’s reluctance to attack the Kutrigurs: “‘For they not only speak our language, dwell in tents like us, dress like us and live like us, but they are our kin, even if they follow other leaders. Nevertheless, we shall deprive the Kutrigurs of their horses and take possession of them ourselves, so that without their mounts they will be unable to pillage the Romans.’ This Justinian had asked them to do.”
Roman influence on both the Sabirs and the Kutrigurs and Utigurs that provided the conditions for a successful migration by the Avars in the late 550s.\textsuperscript{124}

\textit{The Avars}

The history of the Avars in the Pontic Steppe and Europe begins, as with all of the steppe peoples in contact with the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, with a migration in 557-558.\textsuperscript{125} These Avars were first recorded by Priscus in the mid-5th century as spurring the migration of the Ogoric Turks and Sabirs towards the Black Sea.\textsuperscript{126} The Avars themselves, among whom were the core elements of the Jou-Juan steppe empire of Mongolia and Inner Asia, were driven westward by the successful revolt of the Turks. Subsequent to their uprising the Turks established the Gök Turk Empire, the first pan-steppe empire to have dealings with China, Persia, and Rome simultaneously.\textsuperscript{127}

By 562 the Avars had overcome the motley assortment of peoples who inhabited the Pontic Steppe in the mid-6th century: Sabirs, Kutrigurs, Utigurs, and other Bulgar peoples.\textsuperscript{128} Their success was the twofold result of their incredible centralization and unity under a khagan, as well as the extremely fractured state of nomadic peoples politically in the region at the time.\textsuperscript{129} Nevertheless, as with the Huns, the Avars faced

\textsuperscript{124} Agathias, 5.25.5: “The scattered remnants of these Hunnic tribes has in fact been reduced to servitude in the lands of other peoples whose names they have assumed; so severe has been the penalty which they paid for their earlier misdeeds. But the complete annihilation of these peoples occurred at a later date…”
\textsuperscript{125} Pohl (1988) is the seminal work on the Avars.
\textsuperscript{126} Priscus, fr. 40.1
\textsuperscript{128} The Avars also drove the Berselt ahead of themselves. Theophylact Simocatta, 7.8.3. \textit{Atlas Zapadnyi Tirksckii Kaganat} (2013), p. 671. Zacharias of Mytilene, 12.k, lists the great number of nomadic peoples to be found on the steppe circa 550-555. Menander tells us that the Avars easily crushed the Zali, Unigurs, and Sabirs. These Unigurs should be identified with the Onogurs. Blockley (1985), p. 253, f. 23. Menander, fr. 5.2. For Kutrigurs under Avar rule see Menander, fr. 5.3 & 12.5. The Zabender Huns who settled with the Avars may have been a segment of the Sabirs. Szadeczky-Kardoss (1990), p. 215.
\textsuperscript{129} The \textit{Strategikon} of Maurice contrasts the centralized Avars and their military organization with the “Turks,” who were militarily capable but unorganized politically. These “Turks” refer to the western
considerable resistance from the non-Roman peoples beyond the Roman frontier during their migration and afterwards during their settlement in Pannonia in the mid-560s. Avar advances further westward were violently repulsed by the Franks in 566-567. The Onogur/Bulgar tribes that remained on the Pontic Steppe proved to be unreliable allies of the Avars throughout the 6th and 7th centuries. The Sclavenes and Antae acknowledged nominal Avar suzerainty but conducted independent raids in Roman territory and fought against the Avars on many occasions. The Avars led frequent expeditions through the Carpathians and to the north of the lower Danube to quell their Slavic subjects, mobilizing on one occasion a reported 60,000 warriors. Strife between the Slavs and Avars after the failed siege of Constantinople in 626 brought about a major crisis within

Onogur Turks who dwelt along the Pontic Steppe, not the eastern Turks, who, like the Avars, were centralized militarily and politically. *Strategikon*, 11.2. See Pohl (1988), chapters 1 & 2 for a discussion of the Avars use of the name “Avars” to inspire fear in the people encountering them. Theophylact Simocatta, 7.8-9.

130 Szadeczky-Kardoss (1990), p. 207. The Avars were nearly defeated in this conflict. A timely truce and the offer of supplies and provisions saved the Avar army from famine and possible destruction. Menander, fr. 11. Gregory of Tours, 4.16 & 4.22. Paul the Deacon, 2.10.

131 Bulgar tribes are witnessed frequently serving under Avar banners. The Roman general Priscus came across a band of 1,000 Bulgars moving westward along the left bank of the Danube towards Avar territory proper. His decision to engage them ended in defeat. Theophylact Simocatta, 7.4.1. The Bulgars are also mentioned in the host of Avars outside of Constantinople in 626. George of Pisidia, 5.197-199, referenced in Sirotenko (1970), f. 40. However, Avar control over the Bulgars was quite tenuous. In 631/632 Bulgars fled to the Bavarians but 9,000 families were slaughtered. Fredegar, 72 & Szadeczky-Kardoss (1990), p. 223. In Michael the Syrian, 10.21 a group of 30,000 Bulgars are said to have transplanted from the Caspian to Thrace under the protection of the emperor Maurice. The event is nowhere else recorded. This may be a confusion or a conflation with later events, since the Bulgar chieftain here is named Bulgaribus. If the event actually happened it means that a significant portion of a Bulgar tribe was insubordinate to the Khagan and migrated to Roman territory. Kuber, perhaps one of the sons of Kubrat, migrated with 10,000 warriors and their families to Avar territory around 680. The Avars placed these under the control of previously captured Romans. The Bulgars and Romans fled to Thessalonica after an uprising against the Avars and defeated an Avar army sent to punish them. The Roman captives were said to have returned to their families and these Bulgars to have settled down in the Balkans. Szadeczky-Kardoss (1990), p. 215-216.

132 The Slavic Antae came under the rule of the Avar Khagan during the first Avar raids into Antic territory in the early 560s. Szadeczky-Kardoss (1990), p. 207. Theophylact Simocatta, 1.207 states that the Avars “let loose the nation of the Sclavenes.” It is unlikely that the Avars possessed such extensive control over the Slavs so as to be solely responsible for their incursions into and later settlement of the Balkans. See John of Ephesus, 6.25 for the Slavs raiding and settling in the Balkans after 578. In Menander, fr. 25 a Slavic raiding party killed an Avar envoy and took the gifts he had received from Rome. Pritsak (1982).

133 For the 60,000 see Szadeczky-Kardoss (1990), p. 208. The Slavic chieftain Daurentius openly revolted from the Avars and slew the envoy of the Avar Khagan. Menander, fr. 21. In Theophylact Simocatta, 8.6.1 the Avars sent a force against the Antae but many of these defected.
the Avar Khaganate and effectively removed the Avars as a serious threat to the Roman Balkans.\textsuperscript{134} Thus Avar hegemony in the Balkans and throughout the steppe outside of their immediate hinterland in Pannonia was extremely attenuated throughout the 6\textsuperscript{th}-8\textsuperscript{th} centuries.\textsuperscript{135}

The primary threat to the Avars beyond the Roman frontier however came from the Turks of the eastern steppe. The Turks were the initial instigators of the Avar migration and continued to hound them throughout the second half of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century, the Khagan of the Turks stating that the Avars:

“are not birds to escape the sword of the Turks by flying through the air, nor fish to evade us by taking refuge in the depths of the sea, but they roam about the surface of the earth; and when I have finished my war with the Epthalites, I shall attack the Avars and they shall not escape my assault.”\textsuperscript{136}

The Turks eventually took control of the Bosphorus and dominated the eastern portion of the Pontic Steppe by the 580s.\textsuperscript{137} Throughout the late sixth century the Turks continued to verbally threaten the Avars, whom they claimed were their rightful subjects.\textsuperscript{138} On at least one occasion the threat of a Turkic attack was enough to persuade the Khagan to

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\textsuperscript{134} Curta (2005), p. 109, f. 101.
\textsuperscript{135} The Wendic Slavs of Bohemia also resisted Avar overlordship. Fredegar, 48. The Avars are never recorded as having any authority over the Alans. They did have friendly relations with the Alans early on, however; they requested the Alan chief Sarosius to seek an audience with the Roman emperor. Menander, fr. 5. Perhaps because of this initial aid, and since the Alans were tucked away into a small pocket of territory north of the Caucasus, they never posed a threat or were of any interest to the Avars.
\textsuperscript{136} Menander, fr. 4.
\textsuperscript{137} By the 570s the Utigurs had passed from under Avar hegemony to under Turkic hegemony. The first Roman embassy to the Turks passed through the land of the Utigurs, at that time ruled by a woman named Akkagas. Menander, fr. 19.1 The Sabirs submitted to the Turks in 567. Czegledy (1971), p. 148. They are unheard of after this, but the entire north Caucasus up to the Crimea came under Turkic suzerainty in the 580s. The Turks were in possession of the eastern flank of the Avars’ territory by 584. John of Ephesus, 45-49. The Turkic Khagan mentioned to the Roman embassy under Valentinian that the Turks were now the lords of the Alans and Unigurs. Menander, fr. 19. The Turks had conquered the Alans by 572. Blockley (1985), pp. 276, f. 225. For the Turks conquest of the Bosphorus, see Menander, fr. 19.2.
\textsuperscript{138} In Menander, fr. 10 the Sogdian envoy of the Turks, Maniakh, discusses how 20,000 Avars fled from the Turks. The Turkic Khagan’s (Istemi) rebuke of the Roman envoy Valentinian and his claim that the Romans “lie with ten tongues” was spurred on by the fact that the Romans had made accommodations with the Avars, were paying them tribute, and had given territory to them.
retreat back to Pannonia during a raid into the Roman Balkans. The Romans used the well-known fact of the Avars’ flight from the east to insult the Khagan in negotiations.

When the Avars first migrated to the Pontic Steppe they were received in Constantinople to great pomp by Justinian, given gifts, and asked to subdue their unruly neighbors in the region. It is doubtful that Justinian intended for a single powerful tribe to dominate the Pontic Steppe, in place of the organized chaos which the Romans had previously overseen; the Avars were likely initially considered another potential group to play off against the Sabirs, Utigurs, and especially the Kutrigurs who had recently conducted problematic raids near to Constantinople. As with all steppe tribes of the period, the Avars immediately sought recognition from the Roman Empire, which included a treaty, tributes, and territory. The Avars were granted Pannonia Secunda, a province no longer under Roman jurisdiction. Their migration to the region put them in conflict with the Lombards, Gepids, and Heruls. Roman policy shifted abruptly however with the accession of Justin II. When the Avars arrived for their customary yearly payments, the emperor refused and rebuked the Avar envoys, declaring:

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139 The Khagan retreated from the provinces, having been given 60,000 nomismata and faced with resistance from Roman forces and the threat of the Turks. Theophylact Simocatta, 6.6. The emperor Tiberius II earlier warded off the Avars from Sirmium by spreading the news that the Turks had only just arrived to Cherson in the Crimea. See Menander, fr. 25. Kardaras (2010), pp. 82-92.
140 The Roman commander Priscus reproached the Khagan in Theophylact Simocatta, 7.7.1. The emperor Justin II declared during his audience with the Avar envoys that “The bold Avar race, which you say subdued strong kingdoms, could not defend its own lands and left its home as a fugitive.” Corippus 3.319-320.
141 Menander, fr. 5.1-2.
142 In Menander, fr. 5.1 Justinian is said to have preferred diplomacy to warfare with the Avars, especially in his old age. Agathias, 5.23.7-24.1 and Procopius, 8.19.15-16 echo similar sentiments.
143 Menander, fr. 5.1.
145 Mirroring how Roman policy towards the Huns shifted from an attitude of conciliation and appeasement to a more bellicose stance with the accession of Marcian.
“Depart, therefore, having purchased from us a gift of the greatest value – your lives – and having received, instead of Roman gold, a terror of us which will ensure your survival. I shall never need an alliance with you, nor shall you receive from us anything other than what we wish to give you, and that as a free gift for your service, not, as you expect, a tax upon us.”

The refusal of tributes to the Avars initiated a long series of wars that began in the 570s and ended after the failed siege of Constantinople in 626. The Khagan, now the head of a large coalition, required Roman wealth to maintain his suzerainty and territorial claims. Sirmium and Singidunum were the initial targets of the Avars, since these were the lynchpins of the Roman security network based on cities in the northwestern Balkans. With the eventual fall of Sirmium and Singidunum the Balkans were laid open to the inroads of the Avars, particularly in the 570s and 580s. The Avars captured several cities in the Balkans which had been refortified since the time of the Huns by Anastasius and Justinian, using them as sources of plunder and redistributive wealth.

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146 Menander, fr. 8. Justin II also rebuked the Avars in Corippus, 3.310-405. While Justin II’s policy change may have been a hard right turn away from that of Justinian, it was not foolhardy. The experience of the Romans with other hegemonic nomadic peoples made it clear that war would have been inevitable as the Avars sought to increase their tributes, as their later history shows. In any case the Romans were informed quite early on by one of the Avar envoys named Kunimon that the Avars were “using their reasonableness as a mask for their treachery until by this means they had crossed the Danube. Their intent, however, was otherwise, and, if they managed to cross the Danube, they planned to launch an attack with their whole army.” Hostilities began to simmer when, warned of this, the Romans detained the Avar envoys in Constantinople and deprived them of the arms they had purchased in the capital. Menander, fr. 4.


149 From very early on the Romans were prepared for the military advances of the Avars. In Menander, fr. 4 the Romans are said to have kept a watch on the Danube River crossings before the outbreak of war with the Avars. Sirmium only fell after several years of siege and a complex ruse by the Avar Khagan to ford the Save river and cut off Sirmium from Singidunum. The Avars took the city after heavy fighting and after agreeing to let the Romans retreat in order from the city. Menander, fr. 25. According to Theophylact Simocatta, 1.3.1 the city fell in 581/582. The Avars took Singidunum after fierce struggle outside of the city. Theophylact Simocatta, 1.4.1. The city was later recovered by the Romans and another Avar siege of the city failed with the Avars agreeing to retreat for 2,000 solidi, a gold-inlaid table, and clothing. Theophylact Simocatta, 6.4.1.

150 In a series of campaigns the Avars captured Singidunum, and managed to sack Augustae, Viminacium, Rateria, Bononia, Aquis, Dorostolon, Zalda, Pannasa, Marcianopolis, Tropaion, and Apiaia. Theophylact Simocatta, 1.4.1, 1.8.1, and 2.15.13-2.16. There were successes in Illyria where the Avars
Roman resistance was vigorous and on more than one occasion humbled the Avars. Although the Avars besieged and took several cities in the Balkans, the wealth from plundered cities was not inexhaustible and came with a heavy time and effort investment; this we already witnessed in the case of the Huns. The Romans allowed the Avars to waste their strength on fortified cities and, where possible, denied or attempted to deny access to key cities in the Balkans. The Avars failed to take the major cities of the Balkans, including Beroe, Diocletianopolis, Philippopolis, and Adrianople. They failed to take Thessalonica twice and, of course, failed spectacularly outside of Constantinople in a joint siege with the Persians in 626. The Avars also suffered from the problems of logistics and disease in the Balkans. Nor was the Roman army passive throughout the later 6th century. In the 590s, with the successful conclusion of his Persian wars, the emperor Maurice sent out Roman forces against the Avars under the

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151 Justin II during a discussion with Tiberius II was said to have become “indignant at his generals who were delaying the fighting and he wrote telling them that they should show the barbarians that the Romans had not turned to a life of easy luxury, but were eager for war and ready to bear toil. When the arguments for fighting prevailed and war was imminent, Tiberius wrote to Bonus telling him to guard the crossings of the river.” Menander, fr. 15.

152 For the Avars use of siege equipment see Kardaras (2005).

153 For Beroe, Diocletianopolis, Philippopolis, and Adrianople, see Theophylact Simocatta, 2.16.2-2.17.4.


155 Sometime in the 580s the Avars, returning to their territory, had their tribute captured by bands of marauders known as “Scamars.” Eventually these were apprehended and the Avars had their tribute returned. Menander, fr. 15.6. During another campaign seven of the Khagan’s sons died from plague. Theophylact Simocatta, 7.15.1-3.

156 Comentiolum came upon and scattered the Avars pitched carelessly in Thrace. Theophylact Simocatta, 2.15.3. In another episode the Avars were defeated and their booty taken, although eventually returned to them. Theophylact Simocatta, 2.10.8. The Avar Khagan at one point was also compelled to retreat and take refuge on an island in the Danube so as not to be taken prisoner. Theophylact Simocatta, 2.10.8.
generals Peter and Priscus. These invaded Avar territory and won a succession of battles against the Khagan and his Gepid allies.

Militarily threatened from the south and the east, the Avar khagans were in a precarious position. Avar reliance on Roman wealth and tributes is emphasized throughout nearly all of the episodes in which the Avars appear; the wars which the Avars conducted were meant to secure tributes and treaties from the Romans. Much as with the Huns, treaties emphasized tribute payments and promises from the Romans not to receive refugees. The Avar envoy Targitius negotiated a treaty which entailed payments to the Avars of 80,000 golden solidi per year. Later the Khagan demanded the sum be raised to 100,000. Roman refusal led to war in the Balkans. We have seen how Justin II refused to pay the Avars. Tiberius II and Maurice were also tardy on their payments. The Romans also repeatedly received Avar refugees which challenged the

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158 The general Priscus is said to have captured 5,000 Avar prisoners at one point. Theophylact Simocatta, 6.11.4. 4,000, 15,000, and then 30,000 Avars and other barbarians are said to have been slaughtered in Roman campaigns across the Danube. Theophylact Simocatta, 8.2.1-8.3.1. The numbers are probably exaggerated but nevertheless indicate Romans success in the region.
159 The Khagan claimed the old Roman tributes given to the Kutrigurs and Utigurs by right of conquest. Menander, fr. 12.6. Outside of Sirmium the Avar Khagan demanded gifts so that he could save face in front of his army and would not be forced to pillage. He requested gold and silver plate and a Scythian tunic. He was granted 800 solidi. Roman commanders refused him more without the approval of the emperor. Menander, fr. 12.5.
160 In a moment of lucidity in Constantinople, the envoy of the Khagan in 574, with the Avars encamped outside of Sirmium, admitted the danger to the Avars that Roman gifts represented. The Khagan is said to have “been worrying about this and reflecting that many of the peoples who beforetimes had come to this land had first been enticed with such gifts by the Romans, who in the end had attacked and destroyed them utterly.” Menander, fr. 25.2.
161 Agreed upon in 574-575. Blockley (1985), p. 283, f. 295. Targitius came to receive the 80,000 solidi in 579. Menander, fr. 25. Theophylact Simocatta, 1.3 discusses the 80,000 solidi and how they were paid in silver and embroidered cloth.
162 Theophylact Simocatta, 1.3.13-1.4. The sum was eventually raised to 100,000 gold coins and then to 120,000. Theophylact Simocatta, 1.6.4-6 and 7.15.14 respectively.
163 That the Romans felt in no way compelled to give in to the Khagan is evidenced by the constant failure of negotiations in the capital. Menander, fr. 15. When Tiberius ordered the evacuation of Sirmium the Khagan demanded 3 years of back pay. Menander, fr. 27.
supremacy of the Khagan. As a response to these threats the Avar Khagan made wild boasts of his power, acted arrogantly towards Roman ambassadors, lied in his intentions, and at times refused tributes in displays which were meant to convey internally to his subject peoples the opposite of what was true, that he was not reliant on Roman tribute.

Roman diplomatic efforts played a major role of course in destabilizing the Avar Khaganate; the Romans received refugees potentially threatening to the Khagan onto Roman territory, were regularly tardy on payments, and frightened the Khagan with threats that the Turks had the intention to attack. In the later 6th century the Romans also conducted two extraordinary embassies to the Turkic Khagan in Inner Asia. While the relationship was not meant to explicitly garner Turkic help against the Avars, since it is hardly imaginable that the Romans wished for the Turks to entirely encircle them on their northern boundary, the topic certainly came up. The reputation of the Romans for deception among nomadic peoples was well known even to the Turks, the Khagan of whom declared:

164 The Avar Khagan outside of Sirmium demanded the return of the Gepid Usdibad. Menander, fr. 12.5. The Khagan claimed Usdibad and the Gepids by right of conquest. However, these Gepids offered resistance until at least 571. Wozniak (1979). The Khagan later claimed that he required Sirmium in his possession so that it not become a haven for refugees. Menander, fr. 27. Once Sirmium was seized the Khagan demanded that an Avar shaman who slept with one of his wives be returned to him. Menander, fr. 27.3. He also appears in Theophylact Simocatta, 1.8.2-9.

165 For Avar boasts see Corippus, book 3.270-275 & Menander, fr. 25. In Menander, fr. 12.4 the Khagan threw the Roman envoys Vitalian and Comita in chains outside of Sirmium. In Menander, fr. 25 the Khagan lied in his intentions for fording the Save River. The Romans were also earlier warned that the Avars intended to raid Roman territory once allowed to cross the Danube. Menander, fr. 5.4. The Khagan made an arrogant display in front of his assembled hosts when he received an elephant and a golden couch from the Roman emperor. He reacted in disgust to these gifts, an act which was meant to display to his army and followers how much he was worth and how much he could coerce the Romans into giving him. Theophylact Simocatta, 1.3.8-12.

166 The embassies were primarily established with the intention to secure an alliance, military and economic, concerning the developing silk route, against the Persians, who had now seized the southern routes through Arabia across which goods previously passed. De la Vaissiere (2005). For potential Roman fears that the Turks might find the way to the Roman Empire see Menander, fr.19.1.
“Are you not those very Romans who use ten tongues and lie with all of them? As now there are ten fingers in my mouth, so you Romans have used many tongues. Sometimes you deceive me, sometimes my slaves, the Uarkhonitai. In a word, having flattered and deluded all the tribes with your various speeches and your treacherous designs, when harm descends upon their heads you abandon them and take all the benefits for yourselves. Your envoys come to me dressed with lies, and he who has sent you deceives me equally.”

With these embassies the Romans were demonstrating a distinct interest in the farther regions of the steppe as places to conduct foreign policy. The steppe was now recognized as one of the key regions of Roman foreign policy, in distinction to the abruptness with which the Romans learned of the migration of the Huns in the mid-5th century. These policies came to fruition with the expeditions of Heraclius against Persia and his critical employment of allied Turks.

Following the series of defeats in the 590s, the Avars rebounded and were able to go on the offensive in the early 7th century during the revolt of Phocas and the massive upheavals in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire as a result of the Persian invasions of Syria, Egypt, and Anatolia. Wishing to secure his northern and western frontier while he went on expedition to the east, Heraclius arranged a meeting with the Avar Khagan in Thrace to discuss the terms of a peace treaty. The Khagan’s ruse to capture Heraclius at this meeting failed and hostilities continued. In the early 7th century the Avars and their Slavic allies attempted to capture Thessalonica twice but

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168 For the two embassies see Menander, frs. 10 & 19.
170 Curta (2006), pp. 75-76.
failed.\textsuperscript{172} The failure outside of Constantinople in 626 during a joint Avar-Persian siege effectively meant the end of the projection of Avar power into the Balkans. Slavic subjects immediately revolted, as did the Bulgars of the Pontic Steppe.\textsuperscript{173} With the migration of the Bulgars into the Balkans in 679/680, the Avars were effectively cut off from Constantinople and the Roman Empire as a source of plunder and tributary wealth, although their state managed to survive and thrive for over a century longer in the Pannonian Plain until their defeat by Charlemagne in the early years of the 9\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{174}

\textit{The Bulgars}

The Bulgar tribal union was the last major steppe group with which the Roman Empire interacted before the chaos of the Arabic invasions marked the shift away from the period of history known as Late Antiquity. Unlike the Huns and Avars, the Bulgars did not arrive from the east in the early 7\textsuperscript{th} century as a result of migration. Rather, the Bulgars arose out of the motley assortment of Oguric Turkic tribes which had been present in the region since the 460s.\textsuperscript{175} These took the opportunity in the late 620s or early 630s, in the wake of the collapse of the first phase of the Turkic Empire in the late 6\textsuperscript{th} century as well as the turmoil in the Avar Empire after the failed siege of Constantinople in 626 to establish an independent Bulgar state.\textsuperscript{176}

\textsuperscript{172} Lemerle (1978).


\textsuperscript{174} The last diplomatic interaction between the Avars and Romans is recorded in 678. Nikephoros, 34-36 & Theophanes Confessor, 6171, 678/679. There are very few references to the Avars after this. Szadeczky-Kardoss (1990), p. 216. See Pohl (1988), pp. 312-323 for the final years of the Avars in Pannonia.

\textsuperscript{175} These Ogur Turks were also known as the Onogurs. Golden (1992), pp. 100-104. Moravcsik (1967).

\textsuperscript{176} Often referred to as “Great Bulgaria.” For the dissolution of the first Turkic Khaganate, see Sinor (1990) & Golden (1982), p. 6.
The Roman Empire certainly supported the uprising against the Avars.\textsuperscript{177} It was Kubrat, nephew of Organa, who threw off the Avar yoke and established an independent Bulgar state.\textsuperscript{178} Kubrat then turned to Constantinople for an alliance, tributary gifts, and was even baptized.\textsuperscript{179} Finds at Malaya Pereshchepina have turned up rare evidence that Organa and Kubrat were named official patricians in the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{180} Kubrat remained a loyal ally of Heraclius; he became involved in accession disputes following the emperor’s death.\textsuperscript{181}

Kuvrat died sometime in the mid-late 640s.\textsuperscript{182} By the 660s the Bulgars were already under heavy pressure from their eastern neighbors, the Khazars, who had risen to power around the mouth of the Volga from the remains of the western wing of the Turkic Khaganate.\textsuperscript{183} The disunity of the Bulgars in this period certainly contributed to their inability to fend off the expansion of the Khazars. The Patriarch Nikephoros informs us of the fate of the five sons of Kubrat:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{177} Haldon (1990), p. 47.
\item \textsuperscript{178} Rona-Tas (2000) for discussion of Kuvrat and where his Bulgarian state was centered. As against most scholars (p. 2), who claim his kingdom to have been centered on the Kuban River, Rona-Tas argues convincingly that Kuvrat ruled around the lower and middle Dnieper region and west of the Don. Moravcsik (1967) for the older view.
\item \textsuperscript{179} Nikephoros, 22. John of Nikiu, 120.47-49.
\item \textsuperscript{180} Fedeseenko (1997). Werner (1984).
\item \textsuperscript{181} John of Nikiu, 120.47-49.
\item \textsuperscript{182} Rona-Tas (2000), pp. 6-7.
\end{itemize}
“In the days of Constantine who died in the West (Constans II), a certain man by the name of Kobratos became master of these tribes. On his death he left five sons, upon whom he enjoined not to part company under any circumstances, so that their dominion might be preserved thanks to their mutual friendship. But they took little account of the paternal injunction and a short time thereafter they divided, each one of them taking his own share of their people. The eldest son, called Baianos, in accordance with his father’s command, has remained until this day in his ancestral land. The second, called Kotragos, crossed the river Tanais and dwelt opposite the first; the fourth went over the river Istros and settled in Pannonia, which is now under the Avars, becoming an ally of the local nation. The fifth established himself in the Pentapolis of Ravenna and became tributary to the Romans. The remaining third brother, called Asparuch, crossed the rivers Danapris and Danastris and settled near the Istros, where he found a suitable place for habitation (called Onglos in their language), which happened to be difficult (of access) and impregnable by the foe: for it is secure in front because it is impassable and marshy, while at the back it is fenced by inaccessible cliffs. When this nation had thus divided and scattered, the tribe of the Chazars, (issuing) from the interior of the country called Bersilia, where they had lived next to the Sarmatians, invaded with complete impunity all the places that are beyond the Euxine Sea. Among others, they subjected Baianos to paying tribute to them.”

The infighting and competition among Kubrat’s sons after his death contributed to the vulnerability of the Bulgars in the face of Khazar aggression. As in the century before the arrival of the Avars, Roman authorities favored a Bulgar nomadic entity north of the Black Sea which was friendly and yet not entirely centralized; once again the disorganization of nomads in contact with the Romans created the conditions for the success of the Khazars, who would come to be Rome’s primary steppe partner through the remainder of the 7th and into the 8th and 9th centuries. Asparuch’s decision to move towards and cross the Danube mirrors that of the Goths in the 370s. As had his brother

who moved to Ravenna and entered Roman federate service, and countless other small to medium sized bands of nomads throughout the preceding three centuries, Asparuch was relying on service in the Roman army and territory to settle in the Balkans. The defeat of Constantine IV by Asparuch allowed events to play out in a novel fashion, differentiating the settlement of the Bulgars from the examples we have already surveyed: the establishment of the first non-Roman independent state in the Balkans.\textsuperscript{185}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The foundation of the Bulgar state marks the end point of our narrative. With the establishment of the Bulgars in the Balkans and the Arab invasions, the political and diplomatic situation of the empire altered drastically. Roman policy with regard to the steppe now became a central facet of its foreign policy as a means to deflect attacks into the Balkans as well as to harass both the Arabs and the Bulgars. The shift in Roman imperial diplomatic policy towards the steppe as one of the centers of its attention marks the transition from the classical period to the Byzantine period through Late Antiquity. The experiences of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity prepared it to effectively deal with the threat and volatility of the steppe in later centuries.

The narrative I have just offered may seem unusual, especially to historians of ancient Rome and the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity. This is because the history of steppe-Roman interaction is typically viewed from the perspective of the Roman Empire and the effects which nomadic peoples of the steppe in Late Antiquity had on the destruction and evolution of the Roman state. Both narratives are justifiable according to the source material we have available. I have retold the history in this manner however so

as to refocus our attention onto nomadic peoples who, although one half of the interaction, receive far less than half of the analysis.

Life on the steppe during Late Antiquity was anything but stable, and much of this has to do with the direct and indirect activity of the Roman Empire: direct in the sense of diplomacy and military activity; indirect in the sense that as a large empire Rome possessed the sort of wealth which appealed to nomadic groups and which set off a chain reaction within nomadic societies. These chain reactions resulted in repeated cycles of migration and the dissolution of groups which had longstanding contact with the Roman Empire. I will justify the narrative I have presented by arguing for the six themes listed above in the following two chapters. Through the presentation of these six themes I argue that far from nomadic peoples being an existential threat to the Roman Empire, the Roman Empire was in fact the most consistent and serious threat to nomadic peoples and the peaceful functioning of nomadic societies.
Chapter 2: Migration and Roman Military Superiority

Introduction

In the history of Eurasia there are hardly two terms more synonymous than “nomad” and “migration.” Migration as a concept or migrations as events dominate a considerable portion of all scholarly output on nomadic peoples in any time period or discipline.\(^{186}\) Perhaps the strict identification of the two terms is nowhere more compellingly obvious than in the field of Late Antique history. For no matter how advanced or nuanced our understanding of the transition from the Classical to the Medieval Age, however temporally defined, the issue of “The Fall of the Western Roman Empire” continues to hang like a specter in the background soliciting and demanding explanation. Students of Late Antiquity therefore must be prepared to analyze what has been called the period of “The Great Migration of Peoples.”\(^{187}\)

Migration must play a central role in the analysis of the phenomenon of the fall of the Western Roman Empire, regardless of whether one falls on the side of invasion, destruction, and forceful appropriation, or that of accommodation and transition.\(^{188}\) This

\(^{186}\) Grousset (1970) is an old source but compiles ancient and medieval Eurasian history under the general rubrics of migration and empire. For recent sources see Kim (2013) and Beckwith (2009). Kim and Beckwith are concerned to demonstrate the importance of the steppe and its peoples for the history of Europe and Asia. All three works advocate for the importance of the role of the steppe in the interaction between nomadic peoples and their sedentary neighbors to the south. Their emphasis however is on how nomadic peoples challenged sedentary states, for example how migrations brought steppe tribes into contact with sedentary states and forced them into tributary status. I however understand migration as a negative factor in the history of steppe peoples, as will become evident.


\(^{188}\) I am generalizing here of course, since there is not a strict dichotomy between the two positions. Indeed, one view is not mutually exclusive of the other. Heather (2005) & (2009) tends to emphasize the role of migration and the expropriation of Roman territory by nomadic and Germanic peoples. Others have emphasized destruction and cessation of the Roman way of life. Ward Perkins (2005). Halsall (2007) & (2014) presents a picture which deemphasizes migration, instead seeing internal factors as more critical for the breakdown of the Roman frontier starting circa 400. Peter Brown has been accused of leading the charge in the direction of accommodation and transformation (Ward Perkins, 2005), though I see no evidence in his work which minimalizes the destruction caused to the Roman Empire as a result of
much is obvious because the defining feature of “The Migration Age” is that large
counts of Germanic, Slavic, and nomadic peoples who previously dwelt beyond the
Rhine and Danube rivers up until the later 4th century came to occupy and dominate
former Roman territory. This process was set off by the arrival of the Huns west of the
Don River in the 370s. The movement of the Huns westward was without doubt a
migration. All of the nomadic peoples who dwelt along the Pontic Steppe in Late
Antiquity appeared as the result of migration.

In this chapter I argue for a new understanding of migration as it relates to the
history of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity. I do not, however, muster evidence in an
attempt to add nuance to the debate over the role of migration in the fall of the Roman
Empire in the west. In fact, I am not concerned about the fall of the Roman Empire, nor
how nomadic peoples affected the history of the empire. I do not consider migration an
external force which the Romans had to cope with. Rather, I argue that migration was a
force which affected the internal organization of nomadic societies and had manifest
negative implications for the evolution and history of these groups.189

I also discuss the broad military activity of nomadic peoples on the western end of
the steppe in Late Antiquity, both in terms of raids and incursions against the Roman
Empire, and in the service of the Roman army. Having migrated into Europe, nomads of
the steppe were involved primarily in military activity against or with the Roman Empire.
I argue that this military activity typically ended in defeat which created further

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189 This is one of many possible coherent narratives, and one which is justifiable because it takes as its
focus nomadic peoples. Barfield (1989), p. 2: “However, the main obstacle to creating a coherent Inner
Asian history has always been the lack of an appropriate analytical framework which made sense of events
there.” My framework is the effect of Rome on nomadic peoples as such.
destabilizing effects along the steppe. One result of political instability and cycles of violent centralization and fragmentation on the steppe was further migration. I take up the issue of political instability and the evolution of political organization among nomadic peoples in interaction with the Roman Empire in the next chapter.

**Three Factors**

Three factors have prevented an analysis of migration from the perspective of nomadic peoples among historians of Late Antiquity. The first of these I mentioned above: the specter of the fall of the Roman Empire in its traditional, classical form. This is the ghost of Edward Gibbon. Ever since Gibbon Roman historians have been at pains to explain why the empire fell and was replaced by barbarian successor kingdoms.\(^{190}\) Explanations vary widely between two extreme poles: that the western empire was violently overwhelmed and defeated by external intruders, or that the transition to the barbarian successor kingdoms was one of accommodation of external populations and the steady transition from a centralized empire to several centers of power each inheriting Roman forms of governance and legitimacy in its own unique manner.\(^{191}\) In such a debate the Huns play the role of either primogenitor of all the ills which befell the Roman Empire and instigator of the Germanic migrations, or as an exogenous factor in a process that had mostly to do with conditions internal to the Roman state. Within the terms of this particular debate the reality of migration for the Huns is extraneous.\(^{192}\)

\(^{190}\) Gibbon, p. 1024: “The invasion of the Huns precipitated on the provinces of the West the Gothic nation, which advanced, in less than forty years, from the Danube to the Atlantic, and opened a way, by the success of their arms, to the inroads of so many hostile tribes, more savage than themselves.”

\(^{191}\) See note # 3.

\(^{192}\) Khazanov (1984), p. 10: “Nomads were basically of interest to scholars in so far as they could be fitted into different historical conceptions and schemata, which were based on the agricultural and urban development of society and crowned by civilizations created by agriculturalists and townspeople.” Kelly (2015), p. 208: “The Huns’ origin as nomads marks them out as a disturbing and alien presence in a settled
The second of these factors concerns the lifestyle of Eurasian nomads and their mode of economic production. Eurasian nomads are pastoralists. While there are many varieties which pastoralism can take, the basic element of the life of a nomadic community involves movement of people and herds throughout the vast plains and grasslands of the steppe. Seasonal and annual movements of flocks and people have nothing to do with migration, however. The conflation of migration with cyclical economic and productive activity is the result of millennia of misunderstanding of and hostility towards nomadic peoples. Sedentary peoples primarily encountered nomadic groups when the latter came to settlements and cities to trade or raid or when migrating towards the territory of their neighbors. Reliance on the horse and the ability to cover vast territories at great speed added to the impression of the nomad as a being whose essence was movement and migration. It was and is natural to assume that nomads constantly migrated, and that this was a normal state of affairs on the steppe. History books are therefore speckled with the mention and deeds of nomads when they suddenly appeared as the result of migration: the Huns in the 5th, the Avars in the 6th, and the Hungarians in the 10th centuries for example. From this perspective the history of the steppe is a repetitive tale of migration and the sudden appearance of formidable foes on the northern frontiers of Rome, Persia, and China.

Mediterranean world. As complete outsiders, and without a voice of their own, the Huns can always be persuasively imagined as the ultimate threat to the (self-proclaimed) virtues of civilization.” Much the same can be said concerning interest in the Avars impact on urban decline in the Balkans. Dunn (1994).

Khazanov (1984), p.8: “Administrators and military commanders in sedentary lands who had to have dealings with nomads rarely bothered with academic research. Scholars for the most part lived far removed from nomads and, with only individual exceptions, were usually content with standard descriptions of the way of life and mores of nomads, which were so different from the way of life and mores of agriculturalists and townsmen.”

Grousset (1970). For Grousset, all of these events were phenomena of a single, dominant, and recurring “Empire of the Steppes.” P. xxi: “The paramount fact in human history is the pressure exerted by these nomads on the civilized empires of the south, a pressure constantly repeated until conquest was achieved.
The third factor is the nature of our textual source material on nomadic peoples in Late Antiquity. Nomadic societies were predominantly non-literate, oral cultures, with exceptions of course.\textsuperscript{195} Textual sources which describe a particular migration tend therefore to do so from the perspective of the sedentary peoples who wrote them.\textsuperscript{196} If not outright hostile to nomads, authors were nevertheless uninterested in migration as it was experienced by those undergoing the process. Thus Ambrose in \textit{De Fide} focuses on the consequences of the Hunnic migration for the Romans of his day:

\begin{quote}
“The Huns threw themselves upon the Alans, the Alans upon the Goths, and the Goths upon the Taifali and Sarmatians; the Goths, exiled from their own country, \textit{made us exiles in Illyricum}, and the end is not yet.”\textsuperscript{197}
\end{quote}

In another example, Ammianus Marcellinus only incorporated information on the migration of the Huns as a preface to the Roman defeat at Adrianople.\textsuperscript{198} We have also already seen the quote of Agathias concerning the nomadic tribes of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century who “either perished or migrated to the ends of the earth.”\textsuperscript{199} For Agathias the damage which the Huns caused to others was the focus, along with the observation that nomadic peoples come and go with such rapidity that it is impossible to keep track of them. In the Greco-Roman discourse on the nomad, migration was central not as a phenomenon at the heart

\textsuperscript{195} Golden (2011).
\textsuperscript{196} Kelly (2015), p. 208: “The Huns must always be seen through the eyes of others. Only a few words of the Hun language survive, no Hun literature, very little unambiguous material evidence, no explanation or justification of their actions or policies except by their enemies.”
\textsuperscript{197} De Fide, II.16, quoted in Maenchen-Helfen (1973), p. 33. Italics my own.
\textsuperscript{198} Ammianus Marcellinus, 31-33.
\textsuperscript{199} Agathias, 5.11.3-4.
of nomadic experience, but as a consequence of the nature of nomadic society and something which posed a potential danger to the Roman Empire.  

**Migration (I)**

**Introduction**

Regardless of these three factors it is quite possible, as well as necessary, to analyze migration from the perspective of its negative effects on nomadic society. I turn to migration as a phenomenon at the heart of nomadic experience and nomadic history in interaction with the Roman Empire.

The task is relatively simple concerning the traditional favoring of one perspective over another, as it simply involves a shift in focus from the Roman Empire to the steppe and its peoples. However, such a shift is complicated by the third factor. Since nomads did not write about themselves, the only depictions which survive were written by foreigners, i.e. the Romans. I discuss the issue of Greco-Roman writings and depictions of nomads in chapter 5. It suffices to mention that in spite of interpretive challenges, Greco-Roman authors provide sufficient detail from which to build an understanding of what migration might have been like for nomadic steppe peoples.

As for the second factor raised above, I make two claims about the nature of migration in nomadic societies which allow me to argue that migrations were negative factors in the history of nomadic societies in Late Antiquity. The first is that migration was an active decision taken by nomadic peoples and as such was a relatively rare

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200 I discuss the agenda of Roman authors who wrote about nomadic peoples in Chapter 5. For now it suffices to provide a general impression by quoting Benjamin Isaac, writing about the perspectives of Greek and Roman authors and the nature of their writing on outsiders: “Second, it is not their ambition to provide us with insights on how the others saw their position vis-à-vis the Greeks and Romans.” Isaac (2004), p. 6.
The second is that migration did not resemble the natural movements of nomadic peoples along the steppe to pasture their flocks; migration was an aberration which developed out of the mobile productive capacities of Eurasian steppe nomads. Migration was not a “natural” feature of nomadic society. The mobility of nomadic peoples provided the potential to migrate, but it was not necessary or inevitable. To make this clear we must understand the geography and ecology of the steppe and the nature of nomadic subsistence and production.

The Steppe

The Eurasian steppe is a vast expanse of territory which stretches for 8,000 kilometers from Hungary to Manchuria. The topography of the steppe is dominated by plains, rolling hills, and semi-arid deserts. Rivers of immense width and length which flow primarily on a north-south axis dissect the landscape and in some cases act as boundaries between regions of the steppe; rivers do not empty into the ocean proper as the steppe is entirely inland. In most regions the steppe experiences a continental climate. Harsh, cold winters are balanced by hot and dry summers. The western regions of the steppe, from the Urals and the Volga River to Hungary, are generally more temperate and experience more rainfall than the eastern portions, which in certain regions

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202 There are various geographical designations used by historians and scholars of the steppe. “Central Asia” and “Inner Asia” predominate and are quite useful. I will use these two on occasion. Central Asia refers to the steppe east of the Caspian Sea and west of Mongolia, from Russian Siberia and Kazakhstan in the north, south to Iran and the Pamir Mountains. Central Asia was the region historically in contact with the Persian world. Inner Asia refers to the farthest eastern stretches of the steppe, centered on Mongolia, and was that part of the steppe which interacted most with the Chinese kingdoms. Various scholars may use these and other terms in slightly different ways, but this is no problem so long as they are defined. Frenkel (2005), p. 201 & Di Cosmo (1990). For a detailed description of Inner Asia see Barfield (1989), 16-17. For Central Asia see Encyclopedia Iranica I “Central Asia i. Geographical Survey.”
203 For other more detailed descriptions of steppe topography and climate see Krader (1963), pp. 2-3 & De la Vaissiere (2012), pp. 142-144.
204 Simonenko (2012).
has a semi-desert climate and is much higher above sea-level than the western portions.\textsuperscript{206} The chernozem soil of the western steppe also makes this region by far the more fertile for agriculture and provides better and more consistent grazing than the eastern steppe.\textsuperscript{207}

**Nomadic Pastoralism**

Beginning at some point in the 4\textsuperscript{th}-3rd millennium BCE, with the gradual drying of the region, pastoralism came to dominate the Eurasian Steppe.\textsuperscript{208} Around the turn of the 1\textsuperscript{st} millennium BCE and throughout most of recorded history the steppe was dominated by peoples who practiced a form of production known as “nomadic pastoralism.”\textsuperscript{209} Nomadic pastoralism was an adaptation to the particular geographical, geological, and climatic conditions of the region in which they dwelt.\textsuperscript{210} Its defining feature was that nomads did not practice agriculture as their main form of economic production and subsistence, but rather relied on herds of animals which they pastured throughout the steppe.\textsuperscript{211} The animals kept could be regionally specific, for instance the

\begin{itemize}
\item [\textsuperscript{206}] Krader (1955).
\item [\textsuperscript{207}] This is the chernozem soil which was responsible for Ukraine being termed the “bread basket” of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Kristiansen (1998), p. 189. Encyclopedia Britannica, “Chernozem,” http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/708301/Chernozem.
\item [\textsuperscript{208}] Shnitnikov (1957).
\item [\textsuperscript{209}] Jonathan Skaff (2012), p. 31 has the most concise summary of what he calls “pastoral nomadism”. Here I quote him for an alternate explanation of essentially the same thing: “Pastoral nomadism is a sophisticated and specialized economy that allows humans to survive and prosper by exploiting the resources of the arid and semi-arid Eurasian steppe. Turko-Mongol pastoral nomads use pastures to sustain flocks—normally consisting of a combination of five grazing animals: sheep, goats, cattle, camels and horses—whose products supply them with food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and fuel. Nomads migrate with their livestock along fixed seasonal, round-trip routes timed to provide the animals continuously with fresh supplies of grass. The basic political and socioeconomic unit is the camp, which travels together. The size varies depending on the density of pasture and season, but five or six households are typical in Mongolia. The camp often is bound together by blood and marital ties, but unrelated families sometimes join.” For the difference between pastoralism and “nomadic pastoralism” proper, see Khazanov (1978), p. 119.
\item [\textsuperscript{211}] I rely on the seminal work of Anatoly Khazanov (1984), pp. 15-17 specifically, for the defining features of nomadic pastoralism. We know, thanks to the work of Khazanov, that nomadic steppe pastoralists rarely existed in isolation from agricultural peoples and were dependent to varying degrees on their products. There is little debate on this issue nowadays. The influential Owen Lattimore, in his earlier work, believed that nomadic pastoralists could be self-sufficient, but changed his mind upon contact with Khazanov’s
\end{itemize}
yaks of Inner Asia, the camels of Central Asia, or the reindeer of Siberia, but throughout the steppe horses, sheep, and goats were the mainstay of nomadic populations.\(^{212}\)

Herds were maintained all year round, and the dictates of grazing animals meant that nomadic peoples were constantly mobile.\(^{213}\) Mobility was aided by the domestication of the horse, which nomadic peoples began to ride in the 2\(^{nd}\) millennium BCE.\(^{214}\) The horse was essential for societies of the Eurasian steppe; it provided nomadic peoples with meat and materiel, as well as a means to make war on their neighbors.\(^{215}\) Horses also increased the range of seasonal and yearly cyclical movements in order to graze herds.\(^{216}\)

The economic activity of nomadic pastoralists was generally aimed at subsistence, not market exchange.\(^{217}\) Nomadic pastoralism was not capable of producing a large surplus and therefore population densities were relatively lower than those among

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work. Di Cosmo (1994). Lattimore invented the famous maxim that “the poor nomad is the pure nomad.” Lattimore (1938), p. 16. Moreover, it has been established that portions of nomadic populations could practice agriculture. Although rarely recorded by our sources, archaeological evidence indicates that agriculture was also present on the steppe and formed a key component of nomadic society. Di Cosmo (1994). Herodotus 4.53 mentions farming Scythians.\(^{212}\) Rudenko (1961).


\(^{214}\) There is some dispute over the exact time frame when horses were first saddled and ridden. Khazanov (1984), p. 119 thinks that it was in the first half of the second millennium BCE. Golden (1992), p. 42, argues for somewhere around 1500 BCE. Certainly the horse was ridden by the turn of the 1\(^{st}\) millennium BCE. Barfield (1989), pp. 28-30.

\(^{215}\) Sinor (1977).

\(^{216}\) The distances covered by nomadic pastoralists could vary tremendously, from 20-30 kilometers at a time, to 150 kilometers, to as much as 600 kilometers in Inner Asia or even 1,000-1,500 kilometers among certain Kazak populations. Of course, the distances moved at any one time or throughout the course of a season or year were determined by climatic conditions and the area controlled or accessible to any single group. See The Role of Migration (2000), p. 182 for a general overview and further citations. The types of pastoralism practiced on the steppe could also vary tremendously. There was flat steppe pastoralism (horizontal) practiced in regions which lacked mountains or other highland features; herds were moved along predetermined routes in a back and forth or cyclical pattern. Highland or vertical migration involved moving between highland summer pastures and lowland winter pastures and predominated in the mountainous regions of Central and Inner Asia. Johnson (1969), pp. 158-76 & Encyclopedia Iranica, “Nomadism.”

\(^{217}\) For the evolution of nomadic pastoralism subsequent to the domestication of animals by sedentaries, see Lattimore (1962), pp. 327-329.
agriculturalists.\textsuperscript{218} Nomads did however trade extensively and interact in a variety of other ways with sedentary populations and states.\textsuperscript{219} What surplus nomadic pastoralists did secure was almost always the direct or indirect result of military activities against agriculturalists.\textsuperscript{220}

Nomadic pastoralism as a type of economic production determined the social and political organization of nomadic peoples. Political authority in nomadic societies, even among those who had formed an imperial or royal state, was quite diffuse.\textsuperscript{221} Large herds can only be viably concentrated in a given region for a limited amount of time. Factors which influence the decision to move herds are climatic conditions and the time of year.\textsuperscript{222} Dispersed populations as a result of year-round herding resulted in a type of political authority on the steppe which was local and typically devolved onto the clan or tribal level.\textsuperscript{223} Local clan leaders were subordinate to tribal leaders, but there was significant room for autonomy. Even in large confederacies, like that of the Huns or later the Turks, authority devolved down a chain of command to territorial, regional, and sub-regional commanders.\textsuperscript{224} Nothing resembling the imperial bureaucracies of China, Rome, or Persia ever developed among the nomadic peoples of the steppe.\textsuperscript{225}

The economic, social, and political characteristics of nomadic pastoral societies along the Eurasian steppe provide a basis for an analysis of migration and the interaction

\textsuperscript{218} For the population carrying-capacity of nomadic pastoralists see Barth (1959).
\textsuperscript{219} For trade and the economic dependence of nomadic societies on the sedentary world, see Khazanov (1984).
\textsuperscript{220} This is addressed in Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{222} Khazanov (1978), p. 122.
\textsuperscript{224} For the organization of the Turkic Empire, see Golden (1992), pp. 146-149.
\textsuperscript{225} For an overview of nomadic political organization and an analysis of the interplay of state formation with tribal organization, see Barfield (1989), pp. 5-8 & 24-28. Paul (2003).
between the “steppe and sown.” Among nomadic pastoralists, political centralization was a relatively uncommon occurrence. When centralized polities formed on the steppe they were vulnerable to the centrifugal forces of devolved and diffuse social and political organization which were the results of nomadic pastoralism as an economic activity. This is in spite of the fact that nomadic peoples are famous in history as the founders of large, expansive empires. In addition however to the centralized organization of steppe empires, nomadic pastoralists also came together in united and politically centralized groups during migrations.

**Features of Migration**

The movements which comprised the cyclical grazing of herds differs sharply from the characteristics of migration. In their grazing movements nomadic peoples moved along paths which had become well-known and established over the course of many years and generations. Routes were determined by the availability of pasture during any given time of the year. Movements were highly organized and grazing rights were shared among the several clans of a tribal group. Rights to grazing lands were defended by force if need be. Although movements were highly organized, they were not dictated from the top down, but rather determined by agreement and tradition. Migration however was the result of a disruption in the normal workings of the nomadic economy and nomadic social organization.

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226 The phrase was coined by Lattimore (1962). It is commonly used as shorthand for the interaction of nomadic pastoralists and agriculturalists as well as figures in the titles of studies of the topic. See for example *Beyond the Steppe and Sown* (2002).
228 Barfield (2011).
Having elected to migrate, the entire population of a nomadic group, which included men of fighting age as well as elders, women, and children, along with herds and wagon trains, moved towards new and foreign pastureland. Migrations typically occurred over distances much greater than average grazing movements and were usually unidirectional. The exigencies of migrating forced the adoption of a unified political and military command structure, regardless of the linguistic, cultural, or ethnic diversity of the migrating group. The reason for this is obvious from a practical perspective, since the survival of the group depended upon rapid decision making and a unity of purpose. Unity was essential to the success of a migration; significant conflict was necessary for the purpose of expelling or subordinating the peoples whose land the migrating group was intent on occupying. Along the way the migrating group might itself undergo years of warfare, itinerancy, and raids from hostile groups.

The political centralization of a group or groups as the result of migration could form on an ad hoc basis, determined by the particular region or peoples involved, for example; this might result in new political and ethnic identities. Alternatively, it is clear that a specific political and/or ethnic unit could dominate a migration and attract to

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231 For the social and political features of a migrating nomadic group I largely follow Pletneva (2003), pp. 13-19.
232 For example, the distance from the Caspian Sea to Pannonia is well over 2,000 kilometers. The migration of the Huns and Avars originated well to the east of the Caspian Sea. Goldschmidt (2001), pp. 16-17.
233 We know, for example, that having left Central Asia before their arrival to the Pontic Steppe the Huns lingered between the Volga and Don for some thirty years. De la Vaissiere (2015), p. 177. Alternatively, the Avars had arrived in Pannonia from Inner Asia in less than a decade. Pohl (1988). See Heather (2009), p. 212 on the motivation to migrate and the potential dangers: “The potential gains of these moves had always to be balanced against the dangers of failing to find, or – more likely – establish, rights over sufficient grazing for their flocks at the new destinations.”
234 De la Vaissiere (2015) discusses the role of the name of the “Huns” as significant in the unification of various “Hunnic” groups who had decided to join the westward migration.
itself dependent and ethnically distinct groups. In both examples however migratory groups were more centralized than groups not on migration. As a result, nomadic groups on migration had an advantage during times of conflict over their politically diffuse neighbors, hence the success of migrating groups against the established neighbors of Rome on the Pontic Steppe throughout Late Antiquity.

**Motivations to Migrate**

There were two primary motivations which could compel a nomadic group to migrate: ecological factors and political factors. Ecological factors like drought, flood, or severe winters might compel nomadic peoples to migrate towards more fertile or temperate and stable climates. Severe storms, earthquakes, or other “hand of God” events could play a similar role. Herds were also susceptible to disease. Diminished flocks could turn one group into an aggressor as it sought to expropriate animals from its neighbors, leading to migration.

Political factors however were more common on the steppe as a cause of migration. Political crises could be the result of an internal revolution and the displacement of one ruling clan by another victorious clan. Alternatively, political crises could be sparked off by warfare with and defeat by a powerful sedentary neighbor like Rome, China, or Persia. Finally, political crises could be the result of invasion either

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235 The Avars, for instance. The name of the Avars played a very significant role in uniting this migrating group, much in the same manner as the Huns a century earlier. In the case of the Avars however the tribal kernel was more homogenous than that of the Huns. Pohl (1988) & (2015).

236 Drought may have played a role in the migration of the Huns and Avars. Cook (2013).


240 Lattimore (1968), pp. 514-515: “…the problem of the difference between migration as a technique of using resources of the steppe in order to keep alive, and conquest as a particular application of mobility not to the routine of keeping alive but to the political uses of exacting service and tribute both from peoples of the steppe and from peoples outside the steppe. The problem can be posed in another way: which generated
by a migrating group, or by an expansive and aggressive nomadic state or empire.\textsuperscript{241} Those that migrated sought to distance themselves from the threat of invasion and subordination. The effect of one migration could be a domino chain of migration as one group expropriated another, which then proceeded to migrate in the same direction.\textsuperscript{242}

Migration however was only one response to ecological and political instability, and certainly not the most common.\textsuperscript{243} The nature of the steppe climate was cyclical. Poor grazing years could be followed by rich grazing years at random intervals. Climatic variation was a normal part of the pastoral productive economy, and as such nomadic societies were accustomed to periods of flock growth alternated with periods of diminishment and drought-like conditions.\textsuperscript{244} The most common reaction to drought and other weather conditions like flooding, was to “weather the storm” and to build up enough of a surplus in flock size to overcome periods of difficulty.\textsuperscript{245} The extra herd animals raised during years of surplus could hold over a family unit during years of scarcity.\textsuperscript{246} A nomadic family group typically needed at least 60 herd animals to support itself throughout the year. Any drop below this figure because of disease, natural disasters, or the loss of pasture made pastoralism untenable as a subsistence activity.

\textsuperscript{242} Grousset (1970). Huntington (1907).
\textsuperscript{243} Meyer (2000), p. 289: “Why migration followed is a further question. For climate change does not automatically and mechanically, even among populations whose livelihoods are highly climate sensitive, compel relocation as the determinist thesis supposes. The occurrence of a climatic change can never be a sufficient explanation for a migration that ensued. Societies always possess a range of other ways of coping with any challenges that the shift presented, such as changing their activities or sharing losses, that may so buffer them from the effects of the change that the extreme step of moving elsewhere is not necessary.”
\textsuperscript{244} Krader (1955) & (1963).
\textsuperscript{245} For the role of climate variation in the Roman Empire and at its edges see McCormick, Büntgen, Cane, Cook, Harper, Huybers, Litt, Manning, Mayewski, More, Nicolussi, and Tegel (2012).
\textsuperscript{246} Khazanov (2008), p. 397-398.
Another common result of this was, besides migration and raiding, that nomads would sedentarize and become agriculturalists.\textsuperscript{247}

Within nomadic societies agricultural production was often looked down upon as the refuge of those too poor to pasture flocks full-time.\textsuperscript{248} We know however that the vast majority of nomads on the steppe were not pure nomads. Rather, they contained within their societies either native elements which farmed or had very close ties with agricultural communities who offered opportunities for raiding or trading the extra products which nomads needed.\textsuperscript{249} The natural variations within nomadic societies meant that a successful nomad one day might be forced to work the land for a short period of time; alternatively, the successful farmer might build up his flock size to be able to fully nomadize once again.\textsuperscript{250} To sum up then, there were constant ecological pressures present on nomadic groups, but there were common and natural mechanisms through which individuals and entire groups could respond appropriately that did not involve the mass movement of a militarized group along the expanse of the steppe.

Migration as a response to political crises was also quite rare. Rebellions often led to the destruction of the rebellious group or the previous ruling clan if it was successfully overthrown, rather than to migration. The new clan could take power and the previous ruling clan could submit, be destroyed, or be left too weakened with too few followers to affect a serious attempt at migration and flight. Those that remained typically entered the service of or lived under new rulership. Another response, and by far the most common,

\textsuperscript{248} Stepanov (2010).  
\textsuperscript{249} That nomadic groups were heavily reliant on agricultural production leads Khazanov to say that the nomadic economy was non-autarkic, which I agree with. There were pure nomads and semi-nomads, see Khazanov (1984) & Di Cosmo (1994).  
was that a defeated group would join the confederation of the victorious group. This reaction to the expansion of a powerful nomadic neighbor, typically a nomadic empire, explains the rapid expansion and huge geographical pretenses of nomadic empires like the Xiong-nu, the Huns in Europe, the Gök Turks, and the Avars. 251 Finally, defeated ruling clans or tribes could migrate under controlled conditions to neighboring sedentary empires, a phenomenon which occurred with regularity in the history of the steppe, particularly the Pontic Steppe in Late Antiquity. Large-scale, long-distance, and long-term migration was an option of last resort and one which always, especially in the period of Late Antiquity on the western steppe, was the result of crises at home in Central or Inner Asia, or, in the case of the Bulgars, on the Pontic Steppe itself.

Positive or “pull” factors were also powerful motivators in determining the direction of migration. The most important positive factor was the attraction of wealth to be derived from large sedentary empires in the form of plunder or tributes. The extraction of material wealth was an important factor in why Huns, Avars, and others moved towards the Pontic Steppe; it was however not the original spur. I consider the role of wealth in nomadic society when I discuss the organization of nomadic states and the archaeological remains of nomadic societies on the steppe. 252 However, for now it is important to understand that there was a pull factor involved in directing nomadic migration. Thus the Huns, Ogurs, Sabirs, Avars, and Bulgars all sought to establish

251 Nomadic peoples were notorious for mixing with one another and forming confederations with different ethnic and cultural traditions. Though there is much more at play in the use of terms like “Scythian” and “Hun,” I think their persistence in the literature is a basic acknowledgment of the similarity in economic, social, and political forms among nomadic peoples by Greco-Roman authors. Golden (1992) & Kim (2013). Bulgar in Turkic means “to stir, agitate, or disturb,” perhaps referring to the confused state of the steppes in this period and the mixing of various Hunnic and Oguric elements into new tribal unions. Kim (2013), p. 137 & Golden (1992), p. 104.
252 Chapters 3 & 4 respectively.
treaties and tributary relationships with the Roman Empire almost immediately upon their migration towards or coming to power along the Pontic Steppe.\textsuperscript{253}

\textit{Types of Migration}

There were two types of migration which occurred in Late Antiquity on the Pontic steppe and which impacted the relationship between the Roman Empire and steppe pastoralists. The first involved large scale cross-steppe migrations. During the period in question, there were three classic examples of large-scale nomadic migrations. The first was the movement of the Huns into Central Europe, a long term process begun sometime after 370 and concluding prior to the period of Attila’s and Bleda’s rule in the 430s. In the 560s the Avars appeared north of the Black Sea and in the last third of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century established themselves in the Pannonian Plain. Both the Huns and Avars maintained hegemony over much of the Pontic steppe for considerable amounts of time. The last of these three was the migration of the Bulgars in the late 670s and early 680s into the Balkan provinces of the eastern Roman Empire. There were also lesser migrations of this type, for example those of the Oguric peoples and the Sabirs in the second half of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{254}

The second type of migration in my system of classification involved the migration of groups of peoples, minor tribes, or elite members of ruling clans onto Roman territory. These migrations, like large-scale steppe migrations, were instigated by unstable political conditions on the steppe. These were however overseen, for the most part, by Roman officials; they were also commonly instigated to weaken nomadic groups

\textsuperscript{253} Heather (2009), pp. 214-215.
\textsuperscript{254} I classify them as lesser because the peoples involved in these migrations did not go on to found large nomadic states or empires on the Pontic Steppe.
on the steppe as a tool of Roman diplomacy. I return to the second category of migrations when I discuss Roman diplomacy in the final section of Chapter 3.

**The Huns**

The history of Roman-nomadic interaction in Late Antiquity begins with the arrival of the Huns in the last quarter of the 4th century north of the Black Sea. With the exception of the Alans, Sarmatian groups lost independence and either migrated onto Roman territory or became subordinated and subsumed in confederations of Goths, Huns, and other non-Roman peoples.255

The question of the identity of the Huns is as yet unresolved, and in all likelihood will remain a point of contention for the foreseeable future.256 Since the suggestion of Deguignes (1721-1800), scholars have debated whether or not the Huns of European notoriety were in any way related to the Hsiung-nu.257 The Hsiung-nu were the rulers of a nomadic confederation which dominated the eastern steppe for several centuries (209 BCE–155 CE), menaced Han China (206 BCE–220 CE), and whose history is well known to us thanks to Chinese chronicles and histories, particularly that of Ssu’ma

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255 Only the name of the Alans as a specific Sarmatian group consistently appears in the source record after the middle of the fourth century. However, the history of the Alans in Europe is much the same as other minor Sarmatian groups: Alans are secondary constituents of Attila’s Huns and the Vandals who settled in North Africa. Other groups settled in Gaul as Roman federates. Bachrach (1973). There are several scattered references to Sarmatians in the 5th century. A town in northern Italy was called “Sarmatian” because Sarmatians settled there in the fifth century. Paul the Deacon, 2.26. Jordanes, 36 mentions unidentified Sarmatians in Aetius’ army. He later (50) says that Sarmatians alongside Huns and Alans lived in the Balkans after the defeat of Attila’s sons. In Jordanes, 55 Theodoric is said to have crossed the frozen Danube with 6,000 men and defeated Babai, king of the Sarmatians. He took Singidunum from these in 473. Later (56) Thiudimer threatened the Sarmatians after crossing the Save. By the later 5th century independent Sarmatian groups along the Pontic Steppe are not mentioned in the source material, other than the Caucasian Alans. Alemany (2000).

256 See Wright (1997) for a full bibliography.

Ch’ien, the “Chinese Herodotus,” and excellent archaeological remains.\textsuperscript{258} In the past century western historical scholarship has come out largely in opposition to any identification of the Hsiung-nu with the Huns. Denis Sinor dismissed the suggestion as nothing more than the similarity between alike-sounding names.\textsuperscript{259} J.B. Bury disagreed with the identification.\textsuperscript{260} Maenchen-Helfen barely entertained the notion of their unity. Thompson refused to comment.\textsuperscript{261}

There is however significant support for the theory or a revised form of it. Archaeologists, particularly Soviet and Russian, have noted the similarity in ritual urns which spread from the region of Hsiung-nu settlement to Europe during the period when the Huns first appeared in the west.\textsuperscript{262} In recent articles Etienne de la Vaissiere has come out in support of the theory.\textsuperscript{263} Peter Golden also maintains that there was continuity between a portion of the Hsiung-nu and the dominant clans of the Hunnic confederation.\textsuperscript{264}

\textsuperscript{259} Sinor (1990), pp. 177-178: “According to a widely accepted but unproven theory, the Huns are the descendants of the Hsiung-nu, an identification first suggested in the 18th century by the eminent French orientalist Deguignes, which has little else in its favor than the fortuitous consonance of the two names, one known only in Chinese transcription.”
\textsuperscript{260} Bury (1928), pp. 49-50.
\textsuperscript{263} De la Vaissiere (2005b), (2007) & (2015). Wright (1997). De la Vaissiere (2012), p. 145: “For instance, the very old question of the ethnic and political identity of the invaders has been solved, after perplexing historians for a quarter of a millennium, that is, since De Guignes in the middle of the eighteenth century proposed identifying the invading Huns with the old foes of Ancient China, the Xiongnu. By a combination of textual and archeological sources, De Guignes’s theory has been confirmed.”
\textsuperscript{264} See Golden (2013), pp. 36-37 & (1992), p. 87: “We do not possess an unbroken chain of evidence that directly links the Hsiung-nu to the Huns. But, such a chain seems likely. The Hsiungnu core (whether
I do not take sides in this debate nor care to delve further into its many and confusing intricacies; both the difficulty of coming to firm conclusions on the matter, as well as the debate’s lack of utility for the purposes of this current work dissuade me from dwelling on the issue. I mention the debate because it relates to the earliest stage of Hunnic history and to my claim that the Huns in Europe were in a near constant state of political turmoil. The inauguration of Hunnic history in Europe proper is defined by the political disruption of migration. That is, the debate is legitimate because of general scholarly agreement that the steppe witnessed a series of wars, migrations, and formations of new nomadic political entities in the 4th century; the identification of the Hsiung-nu with the Huns is not out of the realm of possibility therefore. The appearance of the Huns to the north of the Black Sea was one of these events. The result was not only

ethnic or political is unclear) remained, retaining its prestigious name while undergoing the ethnic and very likely linguistic changes noted above. The Huns remained in Central Asia and posed on the border of Western Eurasia until ca. 350, when, under pressure from groups associated with the Jou-Jan, they began to move westward once again. We need not presuppose, however, that all the Huns moved westward. It is clear that many of the Huns, if not most, did not move westward. Hunnic groups pressured the Sassanian northern and eastern frontier throughout the 4th-6th centuries. Payne (2015).

For my part, I am undecided on the matter, though I tend to agree with those who emphasize the clear links between the Hsiung-nu proper, the Hunnic peoples who occupied Central Asia in the 3rd and 4th centuries, and the later Huns of Europe. If the question is “Were the Huns the Hsiung-nu?” then I find the debate uninteresting and pointless. There is little doubt that the archaeological and textual evidence indicates continuity in ritual, material, physiognomic, and perhaps linguistic characteristics between the Hsiung-nu and the European Huns. No one would suggest however that the Huns were the direct descendants of the Hsiung-nu, who after two centuries on the eastern steppe decided to move en masse towards Europe as a unified and unchanging group. We already understand too much about the mechanisms of ethnicity in societies, particularly in the late Roman world in barbarian societies, to suggest that the ethnic kernels of different groups themselves were immutable. This is all the more true for nomadic societies, who in comparison to sedentary peoples could undergo incredible changes in ethnic composition and political organization over relatively short periods of time. All this is to not even mention how ancient barbarian societies invented traditions or employed names, as was the case with the Avars in the sixth century, to justify the political dominance of particular groups or clans. In short, the debate has occupied too much of the time of scholars and has already outlived itself. In any case I have no interest since my purpose is to interpret the effect of the Roman Empire on nomadic societies and not the absolute origins of different nomadic groups.
the influx of new tribes and ethnicities into Europe. Central Asia and the entire eastern and northern frontier of the Sassanian Empire experienced severe disturbances as well.\footnote{Payne (2015). De la Vaissiere characterizes these movements as “one massive single episode of migration in the years 350-370, perhaps followed by some more limited movement during the fluid circumstances of the following decades.” De la Vaissiere (2015). Potts (2014), pp. 124-156.}

The appearance of the Huns north of the Black Sea was a migration. Our sources make this much known to us. For Ammianus Marcellinus the Huns were like a “sudden storm.”\footnote{Ammianus Marcellinus, 31.3.2} Other ancient authors agree that the Huns seem to have appeared out of nowhere.\footnote{Jordanes, 24.} The Huns were unknown to earlier Greek and Latin authors and as such posed a problem for how they could be incorporated into ethnographic schemata of the “Scythian” peoples.\footnote{Matthews (1989) gives credit to Ammianus Marcellinus for not attempting to fit the Huns into pre-established traditions, p. 336: “Once the Huns had intruded so rudely upon the civilized world, one would naturally expect the more recondite corners of Classical ethnography to be ransacked by writers anxious to discover plausible identifications. It would have been better to admit that within a Graeco-Roman perspective their origin was indefinable, and it is somewhat to Ammianus’ credit that he attempts no such identification in their case.” Matthews (1989), pp. 332-342.} Ancient authors however were either ignorant of or uninterested in the causes of the Huns’ migration. For Ammianus Marcellinus, the Huns were instead a point of focus as an exotic and brutish people, steeped in warfare and militaristic practices, in the same tradition of the Scythians of Herodotus.\footnote{The Huns constitute one of Ammianus’ digressions away from the main body of his text. Matthews (1989). Emmett (1981) & (1983).} An objective and neutral assessment was not a feature of such a text. The demands of Ammianus’ genre determined that the Huns were portrayed as flinging themselves on the Alans and Goths, as opposed to themselves potentially having been flung, for example.

Jerome saw in the Huns a punishment from God and indirectly identified them with Gog and Magog, locked behind the Caucasus Mountains by the Iron Gates.\footnote{Jerome, Letter LX. 16 & LXXVII (1939). Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 2-5. For Gog and Magog see Ezekiel, 38:1-39:20. Orosius, 7.32.10 simply states that they “rose up in anger.”} The factual conditions under which the Huns arrived to Europe had no place in religious
exhortations. A great number of other Roman and Byzantine writers peddled a fascinating story about the Huns chasing a deer across the Don River and unexpectedly arriving into Europe. In Jordanes the Huns were the offspring of wild spirits and Gothic witches, who then subsequently chased a doe across the Don. While all ancient authors describe the Huns as migrating westward, they were generally unaware of, unwilling, or unable to offer details on what that migration entailed for the Huns.

Ecological and political factors were responsible for Hunnic migration. The eastern portions of the steppe adjacent to the Altai Mountains suffered from extreme aridity and the presence of glaciers in lowland valleys during the winter months of the mid and late 4th century CE. The western portion of the steppe, more fertile and less arid in any case, was “basking in a climatic optimum, with long hot summers and plenty of sunshine.” Warfare in Central Asia further contributed to the movement of Hunnic groups southward and westward. The Xianbei, who were perhaps the later Sabir Huns of the 5th century, became active in Central Asia during the mid-4th century, pushing Hunnic groups towards the Persian Empire and west across the Volga. Oguric groups may also have played a role in the movements of the Huns.

What stands out is that the migration of the Huns towards the Roman Empire was the result of severe disturbances in their previous homeland. The exigencies of migration

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272 Isidore (1970), 29. Kelly (2015), p. 208: “The Huns were the “rod of divine anger” sent to scourge the unrepentant and “force them to turn away from the desires and errors of the age.”

273 The story is in Eunapius, Sozomen, Zosimus, Priscus, Procopius, and Agathias, as well as later Byzantine writers. Thompson (1948), pp. 19-21 says that the story is taken from the story of Io in Aeschylus. Not surprisingly, most authors tried to explain the appearance of the Huns with reference to Herodotus and other peoples known in ancient sources. Philostorgius, 9.17 claims that the Huns were the Neuri of Herodotus.

274 Jordanes, 24.


276 Heather (2009), p. 212. For the better climatic conditions on the western steppe, see Pletnëva (2003), p. 11.


compelled a unitary political structure on the Huns and the use of the name of the “Huns” as a prestigious marker which legitimated their new political identity and served to attract other non-Hunnic peoples to their banner. The Hunnic migrating group also physically forced groups along their path to join their movement; these were the peoples who “failed to get out of the way in time.” The Hunnic migration, inaugurated by instability in Central Asia, brought greater instability to the Pontic Steppe as the Huns conquered independent groups of nomads and forced others, notably the Alans and Goths, to flee before their advance.

The fact of Hunnic migration aids us in explaining their success against the Alans and Goths; the Huns defeated the Alans and Goths because of the unity of their military undertaking, the result of migration. For the Huns, their conflicts with the Alans and Goths were ‘do-or-die’ affairs, since defeat would translate into destruction. Migrations and movements which did not result in political revolution or the displacement of further groups are not mentioned in our sources; in this sense, we should

281 There was no doubt a positive pull factor to this migration to the west. I have already noted the better climatic conditions along the littoral of the Black Sea. Besides this, there was the attraction of Roman wealth, which the Huns would have witnessed firsthand as prestige and manufactured items among the Alans and Goths. The early raids of the Huns into the empire also opened up the prospect of plunder and later trade and tribute payments from the Romans. I agree with Heather that we should understand the raid of 395 beyond the Caucasus as a probing raid into the Roman Empire for plunder and as a means to discover what opportunities were available for wealth extraction from the Romans and Persians. Heather (2009), p. 215
282 Heather argues that the first incursions of the Huns were actually small warbands and that the migration of the Huns occurred in a stream-like manner towards the Pontic Steppe. It is true that migrating peoples send out warbands to probe and explore territory for further migration and movement. In this context we can understand the raid of 395 into Persia and the eastern provinces as a large-scale probing raid to explore the regions beyond the Caucasus Mountains. However, in arguing for the ‘warband’ theory, Heather does not touch upon my central point, which is that the migration of the Huns was caused by disruptive factors in the Hunnic homeland. The exact details of the encounter with the Goths and Alans is less important than establishing that the Huns were indeed migrating and as a migrating group were subject to a great many potential dangers. Heather (2009), pp. 215-218. The Huns moved quite rapidly, spending less than a generation between the Don and Volga. De la Vaissiere (2015), p. 177. Ammianus Marcellinus certainly exaggerated the Hunnic migration, per Kelly (2015), p. 196, but again, this does not refute a mass migration onto the Pontic Steppe.
understand that the only kind of migration was a successful migration.\textsuperscript{283} Of course, the military technology of the Huns also contributed to their success, as well as their organizational and tactical prowess, a fact confirmed by the large numbers of Huns who were employed in the Roman army.\textsuperscript{284} The Hunnic bow for example played a significant role in the early successes of the Huns against the Goths and Alans.\textsuperscript{285} I believe that Hunnic ferocity and innovation has been overplayed however. For example, while eventually overwhelmed by this new and unknown foe, the Alans and Goths resisted the Huns for several years in the mid 370s.\textsuperscript{286} The Greuthungian leaders Ermanerich, Vithimiris, and Alatheus and Saphrax offered resistance to the Huns. Only after two hard fought defeats and a failed attempt to construct a barrier dike to hold back the Huns did the Tervingian Goths desert their leader Athanaric and seek refuge to the south of the Danube.\textsuperscript{287}

\textsuperscript{283} Certainly in terms of a Roman perspective, since authors opted not to discuss migrations which did not result in altered political circumstances on the Pontic Steppe.

\textsuperscript{284} See Heather (2006), pp. 154-158. Heather sees in the Huns use of this bow a “military revolution,” p. 158. The Hunnic bow, larger than previous composite bows used on the western steppe, certainly gave the Huns an advantage. Harmatta (1951) and Laszlo (1951). Olympiodorus mentions the talent of Hunnic kings in archery. Olympiodorus, fr. 19. While the bow was a factor, I do not believe it to have been as decisive as Heather would have us believe. In the next section I discuss the military superiority of the Romans over nomadic peoples, including the Huns, and clearly demonstrate that the Huns were often at a disadvantage when engaging Roman forces. Furthermore, barbarian groups, as I discuss in Chapter 3, very successfully warred against or avoided Hunnic advances, further evidence that the bow was not a revolutionary piece of equipment.

\textsuperscript{285} Ammianus does not describe the campaigns of the Huns against the Alans, only stating that many were killed and that the survivors joined the Huns. It would be safe to assume that a people as fierce as the Alans offered considerable resistance. Ammianus Marcellinus, 31.3.

\textsuperscript{286} All of this in Ammianus Marcellinus, 31.3. Ammianus is clear that the rumor of the attacks of the Huns was worse than they were in actuality. In Ammianus Marcellinus, 31.3.2 Ermanerich is said to have committed suicide because “rumour gave wide currency to and exaggerated the horror of the impending dangers.” Jordanes offers a different story, however: Ermanerich was wounded by personal enemies for punishing their sister for infidelity and was therefore incapable of resisting the Huns and Alans. Jordanes also claims that Ermanerich died at the age of 110 however. Jordanes, 129. Ammianus also states that the Goths decided to migrate because a “report spread widely among the Gothic peoples, that a race of men hitherto unknown had now arisen from a hidden vent of the earth, like a tempest of snows from the high mountains.” Ammianus Marcellinus, 31.3.8. In any case, it is quite interesting that already by the time of the Huns’ raids against the Greuthungi there were bands of Huns assisting in the resistance to the Alans who were forced westward. This is a clear sign that very early on the Huns were transitioning from a phase
While disruptive, the migration of the Huns was neither a blizzard nor a lightning strike at the tip of an arrow which swept aside the Goths and Alans. It was rather one of the final steps in Hunnic migration across the Eurasian steppe. As the end point of one painful process, the arrival of the Huns to the north of the Black Sea was also the beginning of a different process, one which in hindsight we can understand to have reached its culmination in the rapid ascent and fall of Attila’s realm along the middle Danube. This period of some eighty years is marked by constant warfare which only increased in scale and ferocity as time proceeded, by disunity, and by political instability, all the result of being drawn into the orbit of the Roman Empire.

**After the Huns**

To be mentioned briefly is the interesting phenomenon of Hunnic backwards migration onto the steppe following their defeat at the battle of Nedao in 454. Upon the death of Attila his large conglomerated empire immediately began to split at the seams and then crumble into warring factions of various nomadic and Germanic groups. The major group of Huns represented by Attila’s sons was defeated at the battle of Nedao. Archaeological evidence confirms the general impression of our textual sources that a number of Hunnic groups migrated back eastwards onto the Pontic Steppe from the Pannonian Plain.\(^{288}\)

In this case once again migration was taken as a response to a political crisis, namely the disintegration of Attila’s Hunnic Empire and the defeat of the previous ruling

parties by subordinate peoples. To an extent there were ecological conditions which motivated the back migration. Although the Pannonian Plain is technically part of the Eurasian Steppe and therefore able to support nomadic pastoralism, the area of pastureland in the region was not capable of supporting the large numbers of Huns who had recently migrated and coalesced there around the camp of Attila. The large population of Huns and other peoples in the Pannonian Plain was propped up by tributary payments from the Roman Empire. When, upon the collapse of Attila’s Empire the Romans could no longer be coerced into making these payments, the artificial prop disappeared, compelling the Huns who still possessed herds to seek out larger pastures on the steppe east and north of the Carpathians.

The Hunnic back migration was met and overwhelmed by a new round of migration proceeding from the east. Two things are clear from the arrival of Oguric and Sabir Hun tribes to the Pontic Steppe in the 460s. First, the cause of their migrations was warfare in Central Asia. Second, migration was a response to political crises taken by a succession of peoples. This is the famous “domino effect” of nomadic migration which, while perhaps overplayed in most contexts, is certainly salient and relevant as an explanation in the case of migrations in Central Asia and the Pontic Steppe in the 460s. For the Huns and Akatziri already present north of the Black Sea at this time, the migrations of the Ogur Turks and Sabirs translated into warfare, defeat, subordination, and disintegration as discrete political and ethnic units. Priscus is our main source,

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289 On the number of horses which the Pannonian Plain can support, see Lindner (1981). For the location of Attila’s camp, see Browning (1953). Browning places Attila’s camp in the late 440s during the time of Priscus' embassy in the Wallachian Plain, a conclusion that is not entirely convincing, namely for its reliance on Jordanes, a 6th century source. Regardless, for back migration we are talking about movements to the north of the Black Sea, to Bessarabia and eastward.

290 Teggart (1983) is an example of how the “domino effect” has dominated in certain circles. He claims that even minor disturbances on the eastern steppe could be felt in terms of a migration on the western steppe.
although he resorts to legend and fantasy to explain the reasons for the migrations of the Sabirs and Oguric tribes:

“At this time the Saraguri, Urogi and the Onoguri sent envoys to the eastern Romans. These tribes had left their native lands when the Sabiri attacked them. The latter had been driven out by the Avars who had in turn been placed by the tribes who lived by the shore of the Ocean. In the same way, the Saraguri, driven to search for land, came into contact with the Akatirian Huns and, after engaging them in many battles, defeated that tribe. The Saraguri then approached the Romans, wishing to win their friendship, and the Emperor and his courtiers received them in a kindly manner, gave them gifts and sent them away.”

“These Avars drove out the Sabinores having themselves been displaced by tribes who lived by the shore of the Ocean. The latter had left their land on account of the mist which came from an inundation of the Ocean and because a flock of gryphons had appeared. It is said that they would not leave until they had eaten the whole race of men. Therefore, driven out by these evils, the ocean dwellers fell upon their neighbors, and since the attackers were more powerful, the Avars, who could not resist their onset, were displaced. In the same way the Saraguri were driven out and came into contact with the Akatirian Huns.”

The passages in Priscus are our first mention of the Avars who would come to play a major role in the Pontic Steppe a century later. On this occasion the Avars were responsible, with the foundation of their Khaganate in Inner Asia (the Jou-Juan Khaganate), for the political revolution that flung the Sabirs and Ogur tribes westward. Their arrival was contested by the Akatziri and the Huns of Ernac, much as the Alans and Goths had contested the migration of the Huns. Warfare was fierce between the

291 Priscus, fr. 40.1.
292 Ibid., 40.2.
295 Priscus, fr. 46.
newcomers and previous inhabitants of the Pontic Steppe, according to Priscus. On this occasion we know therefore that a domino effect developed as one tribe pushed another, ending with the subjugation of the Akatziri and the Huns and the rise to preeminence of the Ogoric tribes to the north of the Black Sea and the Sabirs north of the Caucasus. The migrations of the 460s were initiated by political turmoil in Central and Inner Asia and resulted in further political turmoil to the north of the Black Sea.\\footnote{I find it interesting that Priscus indicates the potential ecological problems which may have affected the initial migration of the Avars. While gryphons are fantastic elements, the idea that mist and flooding resulted in migration indicates a tenuous understanding of the volatile climatic conditions of the steppe and perhaps point to similar events which, in addition to pressure from other nomadic groups, compelled the Avars and others to migrate west.} Finally, we see the positive pull factor of the Roman Empire in that the Saragurs, and later the Sabirs, came to seek tributes and gifts from the Romans, as indicated by the passage above.\\footnote{By 515 the Sabirs were deeply involved in Byzantine-Sassanian diplomatic intrigues. Golden (1992), p. 105.} While the later history of the Ogurs and Sabirs contrasts with that of the Huns, Avars, and Bulgars, since they did not form large imperial nomadic states, nonetheless their history north of the Black Sea began under the same politically and militarily tumultuous circumstance that was migration. 

\textbf{The Avars}

In the case of the Avars, there is no doubt that their migration was spurred by political turmoil and revolution in their Inner Asian homeland.\\footnote{Pohl (1988) is the foundation for much of what I have to say concerning the Avars.} It is likely that the Avars can be identified with the Jou-Juan Khaganate of the mid-5th – mid-6th centuries in Inner Asia, though this cannot be proven definitively.\\footnote{Kollautz & Miyakawa (1970). Pohl (1988). Golden (1992), pp. 108-113.} These Avars may however have been a different subordinate tribe which fled the Turks, who revolted and declared their
first ruler Bumin as Khagan of a newly established Gök Turk Khaganate.\textsuperscript{300} The Turks hounded the Avars on their initial migration. In diplomatic correspondences and embassies between the Romans and Turks the Khagan referred to the Avars as “my slaves.”\textsuperscript{301} Turkic expansion towards the Pontic Steppe caused considerable anxiety to the Avar Khagan in Pannonia and deterred further Avar campaigns against the Romans on several occasion.\textsuperscript{302}

In any case, a group known by other nomadic tribes to the west and eventually by the Romans as the Avars migrated to the Pontic Steppe in the second half of the 550s. It is significant that these Avars took the name of the “Avars,” regardless of whether this was the legitimate title of their ruling clan or the usurpation of the name of a different ruling clan.\textsuperscript{303} The Avars were anxious to enter into negotiations with the Romans as a source of wealth and acknowledgement of their legitimacy as a powerful tribal confederation.\textsuperscript{304} The politics and tactics of taking such a name was meant to display outwardly the legitimacy and strength of the ruling clan of the Avars.\textsuperscript{305} This tendency to centralization under a Khagan coincided with the necessities of coalescing as a unitary group during the process of migration from Inner Asia to the Pontic Steppe. The unity of the Avars was contrasted by the extremely politically fractured state of the Pontic Steppe.

\textsuperscript{300} Golden (1992), pp. 115-154. Istemi, referred to as Silzibul in our Greek sources, was the commander of the western wing of the Turkic Khaganate, Bumin’s “Yabghu Khagan,” or subordinate. It is with him that the Romans made treaties and he who threatened the Avars and the Romans for making treaties with the Avars. During his reign the Turks spread westward towards the Pontic Steppe.
\textsuperscript{301} Menander, fr. 19.1.
\textsuperscript{303} Theophylact claims that these were “Pseudo-Avars.” Theophylact Simocatta, 7.7.6. Pohl (1988), chapters 1-2.
\textsuperscript{304} Menander, fr. 5.
\textsuperscript{305} Pohl (2015), p. 257: “When the Avars arrived from Central Asia in the sixth century, a Byzantine chronicler reported that in fact they were only Pseudo-Avars and had wrongly adopted that awe inspiring name; but the name stuck. That does not prove that ethnicity was meaningless: on the contrary, it was important enough to make faking it worthwhile.” See also Pohl (1998).
in the middle of the 6th century and was responsible for their quick victories and the successes of the Turks in the following decades along the Pontic Steppe.\textsuperscript{306}

The migration of the Avars and the expansion of the Turks led to a new power structure north of the Black Sea in the second half of the 6th century and resulted in the dissolution of independent Oguric groups and the Sabir Huns. We hear of nomadic tribes fearing the name of the Avars; these tribes had reason to fear the Avars, as well as the Turks.\textsuperscript{307} By the 570s the entire Pontic Steppe was split between Avar and Turkic hegemony. The Turks subdued the Alans, Sabirs, Utigurs, and the other tribes left in the region east of the Don River subsequent to Avar migration.\textsuperscript{308} Even in the face of insubordination and serious threat from the Turks, the Avars maintained their rule over the Bulgars north of the Pontic Steppe and over other nomadic tribes, like the Kutrigurs, who had migrated with the Avars to Pannonia.\textsuperscript{309} The situation established from the fallout of Avar migration changed in the early 7th century, with the internal troubles in the Turkic Khaganate and especially after the Avar failure to seize Constantinople in 626.\textsuperscript{310}

\textsuperscript{306} I discuss this issue in the Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{307} Theophylact Simocatta 7.8.3: “When the Barselt, Onogurs, Sabir, and other Hun nations in addition to these, saw that a section of those who were still Var and Chunni had fled their regions, they plunged into extreme panic, since they suspected that the settlers were Avars.”
\textsuperscript{309} The Bulgars feature in an interesting episode in Theophylact Simocatta, 7.4.1. The Roman general Peter, on campaign near the Danube encountered 1,000 Bulgars moving westward along the Wallachian Plain to unite with the main host of Avars in Pannonia. He was badly beaten. In any case, it demonstrates that the Avars at this time were recognized as suzerains over the Bulgars of the Pontic Steppe. The episode occurred sometime around 595-596. Whitby & Whitby (1986), p. 183, f. 16. The Kutrigurs feature prominently among the Avars. They were said to have fled to the Avars from the Turks, at least those portions which had not already been conquered and migrated with the Avars to Pannonia initially. Theophylact Simocatta, 7.8.16. The Kutrigurs were a prominent part of Avar armies. Baian sent them as an independent group to ravage Dalmatia. Menander, fr. 12.5.
\textsuperscript{310} The Turks were racked with successional disputes from the death of Istemi in the late 570s, though these picked up steam in the first decade of the 7th century. Golden (1992), p. 134.
The Bulgars

Unlike previous examples, the Bulgars did not rise to prominence along the Pontic Steppe in the 630s as the result of migration. The Bulgars, as part of the general movement of Oguric tribes, had arrived to the region in the 460s. From the 460s to the 630s various Oguric groups rose to power and fell or were conquered. The Saragurs headed off the Oguric migrations. Roman sources also mention Onogurs and Ugurs. The Kutrigurs west of the Don River and the Utigurs to the east dominated the region in the first half of the 6th century before the migrating Avars and later the Turks conquered them. The Dulo clan of the Bulgars was the last group to dominate the region beginning in the 630s. Although the history of their rule did not begin with migration, it did end in migration. The migration of the Bulgars to the Balkans brought a nomadic people to the doorstep of Constantinople on a permanent basis.

Kubrat, nephew of Organa, successfully revolted against the Avars in the 630s. At his death he left his realm to his five sons, who he

“As enjoined not to part company under any circumstances, so that their dominion might be preserved thanks to their mutual friendship.”

That most of the sons did not obey their father’s commands was the result of outside pressure, this time from the successors of the western Turkic Khanate, the Khazars. The most notable of these sons, Asparuch, migrated towards the Danube, defeated Constantine IV, and established a Bulgar state that would later come to be

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313 Nikephoros, 35.  
known as the Bulgarian Empire.\footnote{Fine (1991).} Once again, while the migration of the Bulgars ended in defeat for the Romans and the establishment of a threatening state on their doorstep, the migration was initiated by political crises and military defeats experienced by the Bulgars.

**Roman Military Superiority (2)**

The image of the migrating nomad is also the image of the conquering nomad.\footnote{Grousset (1970), p. xxvii: “He roved on horseback along the fringes of ancient empires, exacting regular tribute from those who complied with a relatively good grace or, when the victim was ill-advised enough to refuse payments, plundering open cities in sudden raids. These men were like packs of wolves – and is not the wolf the old Turkic totem? – prowling round herds of deer, to fly at their throats or merely to pick up stragglers and injured beasts.”} Huns, Ogurs, Sabirs, Avars, and Bulgars conquered new territory as a result of their movements westward, displacing and subordinating previous inhabitants. Migrations also brought nomadic peoples into contact with the Roman Empire. Interaction between the two, although comprised of economic and diplomatic relations, was predominantly military. Nomadic peoples served under Roman banners, raided Roman provinces, and conducted campaigns onto Roman territory in the hopes of cowing the Romans into accepting tributary status. Frequently nomads were successful and established tributary relationships with the Romans. On the whole however the balance of power lay with the Roman Empire: nomads were consistently defeated in battle, raids were thwarted, and nomadic contingents in Roman forces suffered heavily during conflicts.

Nomadic warriors were prized as mercenary and federate soldiers for their martial capabilities, hardiness, and effectiveness.\footnote{The Romans had a particular appreciation for nomadic warriors. A large literature existed discussing the martial capabilities of nomads, as well as strategic handbooks which instructed commanders what to expect from nomadic enemies and how to counter them. See Arrian (2011), *Takticheskoe Iskusstvo*, Vegetius (1993), *Epitome of Military Science*, & Maurice (1984), *Strategikon*. Nomadic tactics and equipment also} Nomads were ubiquitous throughout Late
Antiquity in the ranks of Roman and Persian armies. As allies or federates of the Romans, the Huns are first attested in 384 in Noricum, Rhaetia, and Gaul as allies of Valentinian II. These were charged by Bauto, the emperor’s Frankish commander, to defeat the Juthungi who had been set to raid Valentinian’s realm by the usurper Magnus Maximus. In 388 they served Theodosius and were a critical part of his victory against Magnus Maximus. They later served against Eugenius in 394 at the Frigidus River. Uldin’s Huns aided Stilicho in his defeat of Radagaisus at Faesulae in 405. Huns were involved in deterring Alaric from entering Italy in 409. Huns also served or were hired

infiltrated and influenced the development of the Roman army. Southern & Dixon (1996), Bannikov (2011), & Elton (1996). The Romans were not above using nomadic tactics either. Agathias, 1.22.1-7 notes how Narses employed a Hunnic feigned retreat to defeat a Frankish army in northern Italy in the 550s. Skaff (2012), p. 35 on why nomads were such prized warriors: “Warfare is a final critical aspect of Turko-Mongol society relevant to this book. As with sociopolitical organization, the nature of the pastoral nomadic environment and subsistence economy shaped their modes of fighting. During the medieval period, when a light cavalry of mounted archers was the preeminent rapid-strike military technology, Turko-Mongol nomads were expert practitioners of archery and horse riding. Tribesmen had no lack of mounts and riding experience. They could raise horses cheaply on the abundant grass of the steppe and learned to ride from an early age. Furthermore, men had plenty of time to practice the military arts because women and children could handle herding and milking. As men supplemented the family diet by hunting, they continuously honed skills at riding, archery, and teamwork that could be applied directly to cavalry warfare. Able-bodied males were expected to fight on horseback. The ability to attack and retreat rapidly allowed nomads to supplement their pastoral income with proceeds from predation and extortion. Stronger tribal groups raided weaker ones or settled villages. Despite the relatively low populations of the Turkic khanates of Mongolia, the excellence of their cavalry made them major players in the multilateral struggles for power in Eastern Eurasia.”

318 The primary sources are rife with examples. For a particularly interesting example of the fluidity with which nomads could ally with either side, see Agathias, 4.13.7. The author discusses a famous incident when the Sabir Huns, having finished their service with the Romans fighting against the Dilimnites, a Caucasian people, and their Persian allies, went over to the Persians after they were discharged and paid by the Romans. Nomadic warriors most often fought in their native tradition, as horse archers. This was not always the case however! Agathias, 3.17.5 discusses a group of 2,000 Sabirs who fought as heavy infantry in the Roman army. Teall (1965) discusses broadly the phenomenon of barbarians in the service of Roman armies during the reign of Justinian. Nomads could also be subject to Roman military discipline. Belisarius, at the outset of the expedition to Africa, had two ‘Massagetan’ warriors impaled for drunkenly murdering another soldier. Procopius, Wars, 3.12.

Ambrose, Letter XXIV.8.


322 Zosimus, 5.26.4.

323 10,000 Huns were employed to fight Alaric. These dwelt in Pannonia at the time. Zosimus, 5.50.1. A year earlier 300 Huns were stationed in Ravenna and engaged and defeated a force of 1,100 Goths. Zosimus, 5.45.6.
to fight under Aetius’ command before Attila’s rise to power. Finally, Huns served as the personal bodyguards of Roman commanders. Rufinus, Arcadius’ praetorian prefect had a personal bodyguard of Huns, as did Stilicho and Aetius later. Nomads of course continued to serve in Roman armies after Attila’s downfall. Hunnic contingents served with Belisarius in his campaigns in North Africa and Italy. At the Battle of Dara in 529 the Romans and Persians employed nomadic warriors. The Sabirs in particular were employed by the Romans and Persians in Mesopotamia and the Caucasus region. A large Turkish force famously assisted Heraclius in his campaigns against the Persians.

The most obvious effect of service in the ranks of the Roman or Persian armies was that nomadic contingents suffered heavy losses in battle. Nomads were often involved in some of the heaviest fighting in Roman civil and foreign wars. Roman civil wars were especially bloody affairs. Barbarian forces typically endured the brunt of the fighting so that Roman commanders could spare their own troops. Two of the most

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324 Aetius was sent by the usurper John to hire a large force of Huns. After John’s death, Aetius nonetheless engaged the forces of Aspar and the eastern empire with a supposed force of 60,000 men. In an inconclusive battle many fell on both sides. Philostorgius, 12.14.
325 Claudian, Against Rufinus II, 76. See Thompson (1948), p. 41, f. 90 for Rufinus’ bodyguard. Zosimus, 5.34 for the Hunnic bodyguard of Stilicho. Huns were not the only nomadic people favored by Romans as bodyguards. Gratian is said to have had a bodyguard of Alan cavalrymen whom he adored. This aroused the enmity of his other troops, contributing to his abandonment in the face of Magnus Maximus’ usurpation. Zosimus, 4.35.2-3.
326 The “Massagetae” are said to have served very valiently in North Africa. Aigan served in Belisarius’ bodyguard and commanded the cavalry at the battle of Tricameron in 533. Six hundred Massagetaen mounted horse archers served in this campaign under the command of Sinnion and Balas. Procopius, Wars, 3.11. Two hundred Huns served in the army of Belisarius that landed in Sicily in 535. Procopius, Wars, 5.5. Reinforcements were later sent to Belisarius, consisting of Huns and others. Procopius, Wars, 7.7. Uldach the Hun and his force assisted the Romans in battle against the Franks in Italy. Agathias, 2.2.5.
327 Sunicas and Aigan were in charge of six hundred Hunnic cavalry on the right flank. Six hundred on the left flank were under the command of Simmas and Ascan. Procopius, Wars, 1.13-1.14. Sunicas and Simas, following the defeat at Dara, repulsed the Persian army from the city of Dara. Zacharias of Mytilene, 9.3a.
330 For example the Goths after the Battle of the Save recognized that they were employed as front line troops to both defeat Magnus Maximus and to suffer heavy losses, thus weakening their contingency in the
brutal battles in a Roman civil conflict featuring Huns were fought by Theodosius, first at
the Battle of the Save in 388 against Magnus Maximus, and later against Eugenius in 394
at the Battle of the Frigidus; the Huns were on the front line of both conflicts. In 439
an entire detachment of Huns under the command of Litorius was destroyed by Gothic
troops. Service as bodyguards of Roman officials was also high risk. Rufinus’
bodyguard of Huns was cut down when he was overthrown in 395, as well as Stilicho’s
guard of Huns when Gothic troops murdered him in 408.

Nomads continued to endure heavy losses as allies of the Romans in the post-
Hunnic period as a result of being involved in nearly every major theater of Roman
military action. Procopius informs us that 800 Hephthalite Huns were slaughtered in
the vanguard of the Persian army during a war between Kavad and Anastasius in 503.
Entire nomadic contingents fought heroically in major pitched battles. For example, at the
battle of Dara Belisarius’ nomadic contingent was embroiled against the famed Persian
Immortals. These were probably Sabir Huns, who on several other occasions suffered
heavy losses in the Roman and Persian armies. Individual nomadic leaders served

Balkans. At the Frigidus River Theodosius employed his barbarian contingents, primarily Goths, as shock

331 For Huns at the Battle of the Save, see Williams and Friell (1994), p. 62. Zosimus, 4.58 specifically
mentions mounted archers in the front lines, who could have only been the Huns. A large number of these
federates were said to have perished on the first day of unsuccessful combat. Williams and Friell (1994), p.


333 Thompson (1948), p. 41, ff. 90 & 91. Zosimus, 5.34 for the murder of Stilicho and his guard of Huns by
Gothic troops.

334 Nomads were also present defending Roman cities from sieges. A Hun named Odolgan was in
command of the garrison at Perusia, Italy, during the reconquest. Procopius, Wars, 1.14. Chalazar, a
Massagetan by birth, was in command of Illyrian horsemen at a fortress near Rusciane, Italy. Totila
captured the fort and mutilated and killed Chalazar. Procopius, Wars, 7.30.

335 Procopius, Wars, 1.8. After the death of Kavad, Hunnic mercenaries raided Roman and Persian territory
alike. Five hundred of them were slaughtered at the Persian fortress of Maipherqat. Four hundred were
killed at the fortress of Qitharic (Citharizon). Zacharias of Mytilene, 9.6c.

336 Procopius, Wars, 1.14.

337 3,000 Sabirs sent against the Romans by the Persians were routed. Procopius, Wars, 1.14. Sabirs were
later defeated in Procopius 1.21-1.22. Persian allied Huns were repelled by the Romans in 544 outside of
notably in the Roman army; they often fought bravely and sacrificed their lives in combat against Roman enemies. 338

While they often served valiantly, nomadic forces were unwilling to identify too closely with their Roman paymasters. This was the result of the significant danger which they were exposed to as allies of the Romans and the fact that they often served in military theaters far from their steppe homeland and could not return without the approval and good graces of Roman commanders. One particular example from Belisarius’ campaign in North Africa highlights the fear of nomadic soldiers that they were trapped once involved in Roman conflicts. A contingent of “Massagetae,” we are informed by Procopius, was said to have gotten cold feet at the prospect of continued long term service in North Africa under Belisarius. 339 Gelimer, the Vandal king became aware of this and attempted to win the Huns over to his own side. The fear was that if the Vandals won, they would be forced into permanent service in North Africa. Likewise, if the Romans won, Belisarius would not allow the nomads to end their agreed upon term of service and return home. 340 Belisarius promised that he would send them home as agreed upon and ultimately the “Massagetae” tipped the balance in favor of the Romans at the

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338 Arnigisclus, an Alan, as magister militum was in charge of the Roman forces defeated by Attila in the Balkans in 447. Marcellinus Comes, 447. Askoum the Hun was magister per Illyricum in the reign of Justinian. He was captured by a group of marauding Huns. Malalas, 437-438. Ascum is later referred to as a Bulgar. Malalas, 528. There were three “Massagetae” in Belisarius’ bodyguard in Italy: Zarter, Chorsomanus, and Aeschmanus. Aigan was cut to pieces by Moors. Procopius, Wars, 4.10. The commanders Chorsomantis and Bochas fought bravely and died from wounds in combat with the Goths in Italy. Procopius, Wars, 6.1 & 6.2. Ascan died in the battle of Dara after killing many notable Persians. Procopius, Wars, 1.18. Outside of Edessa in 544. a Hun named Argek killed 27 Persians with his bow. Procopius, Wars, 2.26.

339 The whole episode appears in Procopius, Wars, 4.1-4.3.

340 It is not clear from Procopius who these particular nomads were since he referred to them only as “Massagetae.” It is likely that they were a mixed Hunnic/Bulgar group.
battle of Tricamerum in 533.\textsuperscript{341} The episode demonstrates the trepidation with which nomadic warriors entered into contracts of military service with the Romans. The image of the bloodthirsty nomad eager to plunder and maraud is contradicted by the image of the practical steppe pastoralist eager to win recognition and acquire wealth by serving for a reasonable period alongside Roman forces with the ultimate aim of returning home.\textsuperscript{342}

Of course nomads were not the unconditional allies of the Roman Empire. They are more frequently encountered in the textual sources as enemies. Incursions into the Roman Empire could vary between large scale invasions like those of the Huns under Attila and the Avars, or the more common raids by smaller nomadic groups which occurred throughout Late Antiquity. Raids were meant to acquire plunder and secure tributes and gifts from the Roman Emperor. These goals were often accomplished successfully. Attila engaged and defeated two large Roman armies in battle in the Balkans in the 440s; during these campaigns the Huns sacked several important Roman cities.\textsuperscript{343} In 499 a Roman army was defeated in the Balkans by a band of Bulgars.\textsuperscript{344} The Avars sacked Roman fortresses and minor fortified cities in the Balkans.\textsuperscript{345} Both the Huns and Avars were successful in securing tribute payments meant to deter them from mobilizing and attacking Roman territory. The Kutrigurs also secured tributes from the

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\textsuperscript{341} Belisarius, of course, did not send these nomads home. Ten Huns did escape from Roman service to Italy later on. Procopius, Wars, 5.3.
\textsuperscript{342} To quote Owen Lattimore (1962), p. 515: “War is not a necessary concomitant of nomad society any more than settled society.”
\textsuperscript{343} A Roman force was wiped out and its commander Arnigiscus killed besides the river Utum (Vit) in 447. Marcellinus Comes, 447.
\textsuperscript{344} In 499 a band of Bulgars defeated a force of 15,000 men and 520 wagons led by Magister Militum per Illyricum Aristus. Four thousand Roman soldiers were killed in this battle. Marcellinus Comes, 499.
\textsuperscript{345} Theophylact Simocatta, 7.15.1 & 8.2.1-8.3.1.
\end{flushright}
Romans as a result of their raids into the Balkans in the 550s. The Sabirs maintained Roman tributes through raiding and the threat of raiding.

However, it should be born in mind that in spite of occasional nomadic successes and the focus with which our sources turn to these events, the image of terrorized Romans and terrorizing nomads is a false one. Direct engagement between Romans and nomads did not solely result in trauma and defeat for the Romans. In fact nomads suffered more from engaging Romans than vice versa. On campaign against the Romans nomadic armies suffered the same sorts of calamities that accompanied all ancient and medieval armies. These included disease and famine. Attila’s forces were ravaged by disease during their campaign in northern Italy in 452. The Avars outside of Constantinople suffered greatly from plague. Theophylact Simocatta mentions that seven of the Chagan’s sons died of plague for despoiling the tombs of the martyrs outside Constantinople. The Avars were earlier forced to make a peace treaty with the Franks on the terms that the Franks would supply the Avars with food and supplies, suffering as they were from near-starvation.

More than physical suffering, defeat in battle could result in widespread instability within nomadic communities or polities. Even a slight difficulty in battle could prove damaging to a nomadic ruler’s prestige and therefore his ability to maintain social order. The battle at the Catalaunian Fields was a major defeat for Attila, and while his host was not entirely destroyed and his authority still held after the battle, his reputation was severely damaged and he lost considerable amounts of men in the hard fought

347 Procopius, Wars, 2.30 & Menander, fr. 18.5.
348 Hydatius, Olympiad 308, 29.
349 Theophylact Simocatta, 7.15.
350 Menander, fr. 11.
struggle, to the point where he himself considered committing suicide.\textsuperscript{351} The Avars lost their predominant role as Rome’s antagonist in the Balkans subsequent to their failed siege of Constantinople in 626 and the revolts of their Slavic allies and subjects. These cases demonstrate the extent to which warfare, whether waged successfully or not, had a more volatile effect on social and political stability within nomadic societies than it did on the Roman Empire, a topic which I cover in more depth in Chapter 3.

Roman armies were quite effective in outright defeating nomadic forces.\textsuperscript{352} Several Hunnic raids were contained or defeated by the Romans, or diverted through diplomacy and gifts. Theodosius expelled marauding Hunnic bands from the Balkans after Adrianople.\textsuperscript{353} He explicitly settled the Visigoths as a bulwark against the Huns.\textsuperscript{354} Uldin’s raid of 408 was turned away by the Roman commander in Thrace who bribed several chieftains and other followers and badly mauled his forces as they retreated.\textsuperscript{355}

The Roman government pursued a policy of lively military deterrence during this period as we can see from a novel in the year 413 ordering the construction and reconstruction of river patrol boats on the lower Danube for reconnaissance of potential Hunnic

\textsuperscript{351} Jordanes, 40.
\textsuperscript{352} There are a large amount of examples from Roman history. In 530 the \textit{magister militum per Illyricum}, Mundo, defeated a force of Bulgars and killed 500 of them. Marcellinus Comes, 530. Much earlier, in Tacitus’s \textit{Histories}, a Roman legion slaughtered an entire Sarmatian host, overburdened with the booty they had previously taken and bogged down in the wintry mud. Tacitus, \textit{Histories}, Book 1, 79.
\textsuperscript{353} Themistius, oration 15 contains reference to a triumph already in 379 against Goths, Alans, and Huns. This may have been an exaggeration, but by 382, at the conclusion of the Gothic War, Hunnic groups were only known north of the Danube. In 381/382 the Huns along with Carpi and Sciri were turned back by Theodosius. The raid of 392 was eventually defeated by Stilicho, although some years later. Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 47-48. Orosius, 7.34.5-6 confirms the triumph. Zosimus, 4.25 implies that the fighting was not very heavy. Lenski (1997), p. 140, ff. 35 & 36 for additional sources.
\textsuperscript{354} Eunapius, fr. 45.3. Justinian later settled the Antae as a bulwark against Kutrigur raids. Kardaras (2010).
\textsuperscript{355} Sozomen, 9.5. A large number of Sciri, who must have joined the Huns on their raid, were taken prisoner by the Romans and sold for very low prices particularly in Bithynia. Bauto also bought off the Huns in 384 who refused to leave after their victories over the Juthungi. Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 42-43. Ambrose, Letter XXIV.
inroads. The Huns were expelled from Pannonia in 427 by eastern Roman forces. Hunnic groups were therefore understandably willing to be at peace with the Roman Empire. Rufinus settled several thousand in Thrace who were later employed as federates in the Roman army.

In the 590’s Maurice adopted an aggressive strategy against the Avars, freed from his commitments in the east against the Persians. In his campaigns against the Avars, Maurice’s armies devastated several Avar villages and repeatedly defeated the Avars in battle, inflicting several thousands of casualties. It is no wonder how the Romans were able to repeatedly defeat nomadic forces. Superior logistics, infrastructure, and military science gave the Romans a distinct advantage. There existed an extensive literature which was meant to educate commanders on how to equip and train soldiers to defeat opponents, nomads included. Maurice’s Strategikon was not a text written by the emperor of a battered empire seeking to retain and propagate some level of military readiness and effectiveness in the face of overwhelming hordes of barbarians. It was rather a textual tour de force on how to inflict as much damage on nomadic and other enemy armies and how to dismantle the social cohesion among the groups from which these armies were assembled.

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356 The Theodosian Code, 7.17.1. Another law of 410 (7.16.2) orders Anthemius, Praetorian Prefect, to guard the frontiers of the empire to those who would enter “by violence or by stealth.” Two other laws are of interest here. Edict 7.16.3 in the year 420 forbids the export of “illicit goods” to barbarian peoples, which most likely referred to items used for warfare. Edict 9.40.24 requires capital punishment for those who would teach barbarian peoples how to build ships, in reference to a previous incident in Chersonesus.

357 Jordanes, 34. Marcellinus Comes, 427.

358 Claudian, Against Rufinus II, 270-271.

359 Theophylact Simocatta, 8.2.1-8.3.1. Theophylact lists a chain of Roman victories in the later 590s, when the Romans managed to defeat and kill first 4,000, 9,000, 15,000, then 30,000 Avars and allied peoples, taking a large number prisoner as well.

360 Kehne (2007).

361 Strategikon, 11. One can starve, ambush, and divide nomadic forces quite easily according to the text. It is also important to remember that the Romans did not play fairly by any means. In Menander, fr. 5, the
In sum however, Roman and nomadic armies clashed full-scale on the battlefield quite rarely. Equipping, organizing, and bringing a full army to combat was an expensive and risky affair for the Roman state. In the 440s, 499 and later in 679 full Roman armies were flung into retreat by nomadic forces. In light of the difficulty and danger which the battlefield posed, Roman emperors and commanders preferred other means for coping with nomadic threats and incursions. The first of these methods was to allow nomads to waste their time and strength besieging well-fortified cities. It was Attila’s success however in the Balkans, Gaul, and Northern Italy in besieging and taking fortified cities that compelled Roman armies to take the field. The Avars in the 6th century also had consistent success in besieging and taking cities. The Huns and Avars were quite capable at seizing Roman fortified sites, especially in comparison to Germanic and Slavic raiding bands and armies who almost never captured a Roman fortification and rarely attempted to.

We should not exaggerate however the effectiveness of nomadic armies based off of their performance in besieging cities; nomadic successes were limited and the cities

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Avar Khagan murdered an Antic envoy. Maurice however held the Avar envoy Targitius for 6 months of hard labor on Chalcitis. Theophylact Simocatta, 1.8.1.

362 The best examples are actually from Persian history. The Persian Shah Peroz was defeated and murdered against the Hepthalite Huns on the Persian eastern frontier. Procopius, Wars, 1.3-1.4. Besides the defeats listed above, examples go well back into the time of Herodotus. Cyrus the Great was killed fighting the Massagetae. Herodotus, 1.214. Darius’ campaign north of the Danube against the Scythians of Idanthyrus is further evidence for the inherent difficulty in fighting nomadic peoples. Herodotus, 4.127.

363 This as opposed to the poor record of the Visigoths and Ostrogoths in taking cities in the 4th and 5th centuries, notably in the Balkans. For the success of the Huns in besieging cities, see Jordanes, Priscus, & Marcellinus Comes. For the success of Avar campaigns in the Balkans in besieging and taking cities, see Theophylact Simocatta, 1.8.1 & 2.16.2-2.17.4. The Avars also repeatedly pressured Sirmium, Singidunum, and Thessalonica, as well as Constantinople itself in 626. In Theophylact Simocatta, 1.4.1 the Avars took Singidunum. Nomadic peoples also surprisingly possessed unexpected skills and technology for use in besieging cities. They recruited Roman engineers to help in manufacturing complicated siege weapons. Kardaras (2005). See Procopius, Wars, 8.11.27-32 for an interesting reference to the Sabirs fighting under the Romans in the east. They constructed siege engines, three light rams with 40 men each in them, totally unknown to the Romans, to take Petra (in the Caucasus). They later constructed these same rams for the Persians. Procopius, Wars, 8.14.
which were at the heart of Roman control over the Balkans, Constantinople and Thessalonica, while threatened, were never taken. Cities however were an important element of Roman defense against nomadic threats. Nomads were compelled to take cities to acquire plunder as a means to keep together the large contingents needed to undertake major campaigns. Cities were also staging grounds for threatening Roman counter raids against nomadic forces. Retreating to walled cities and fortresses imposed certain risks however for the Romans. Thus the Romans preferred other means to deter nomadic threats. These other methods included short-term, small-scale raids on nomadic settlements, especially while nomadic forces were on campaign and unable to defend their territories, and, of course, diplomatic deterrence.

Dangerous direct confrontational warfare occurred far less frequently between the Romans and nomads in comparison to a low intensity raiding and hit-and-run style of warfare. This style of warfare was meant to disrupt and confuse enemy forces, and in the case of the nomads, was employed as a means to draw them out of the Roman provinces and back homewards in defense of their territory. Marcian sent punitive raids against Attila’s heartland during his northern Italian campaign.\textsuperscript{364} The armies of Justinian raided north of the Danube and the Black Sea in retaliation against nomadic attacks. In 528 Justinian ordered Rufinus with a detachment of Roman troops, accompanied by Crimean Goths, to raid the Huns of the Crimea.\textsuperscript{365} During Tiberius’ reign the Romans attacked the Alans and Sabirs in the Caucasus region and took hostages from them as a security on peace.\textsuperscript{366} Roman forces also raided north of the Danube in 559 in an attempt to draw back

\textsuperscript{365} Malalas, 528.
\textsuperscript{366} Menander, fr. 18.5.
the Kutrigur Huns who were raiding the Balkans and the environs of Constantinople.\textsuperscript{367}

When the Hunnic king Grod was murdered by usurpers angered at his baptism in Constantinople and the newly formed client relationship he had entered with the emperor, Justinian ordered a raid on those same Huns in the Bosphorus.\textsuperscript{368} The townspeople of Asemus raided the Hunnic train and managed to capture a significant amount of booty from Attila’s Huns in the 440s.\textsuperscript{369} Belisarius famously sallied forth from Constantinople in 559 with a ragtag group of soldiers and killed 400 Kutrigur Huns.\textsuperscript{370} These episodes are important to keep in mind, as they remind us that Roman emperors were by no means passive observers as nomadic raiding parties crossed the Danube. Roman troops also left the confines of the provinces to threaten and punish recalcitrant nomadic communities.

**Conclusion**

The general picture we get from the discussion above is one of nomadic disadvantage when faced with the Roman Empire and other large sedentary empires. Migrations and nomadic raids presented the Roman Empire with new challenges. Germanic and Slavic enemies for example never posed the sort of military threat to the Roman provinces that Attila and the Avars did. I do not dispute the effect, for example, of Hunnic and Avaric raids on the Balkan provinces and their steady de-urbanization throughout the 5\textsuperscript{th} - 7\textsuperscript{th} centuries.\textsuperscript{371} What I have tried to do, alternatively, is describe how the events which caused concern for Rome in fact had much greater impact on nomadic societies. Migrations were events that put nomadic communities on the edge of

\textsuperscript{367} Malalas, 559. The raid of the Kutrigurs is discussed in Agathias, 5.11.1-5.25.6
\textsuperscript{368} Malalas, 431. John of Nikiu, 66-70. The Hun Grod is called Jaroks in John of Nikiu.
\textsuperscript{369} Priscus, fr. 9.3. In Menander, fr. 15.6 a group called the Scamars raided the withdrawing Avars and seized much of their booty.
\textsuperscript{370} Agathias 5.15-5.20.
destruction. If and when successful, migrations resulted in new contacts and relationships between the Roman Empire and nomadic communities. These relationships were overwhelmingly violent and caused considerable suffering among the nomads of the steppe.

With my discussion of Roman military superiority I have only discussed one aspect of the havoc wreaked on nomads through contact with Rome: defeat and loss of life in battle. However terrible, this was much less significant than the increase in violence and militarism which interaction caused internally to nomadic communities and polities. In the next chapter I explore how nomadic societies evolved in the presence of Rome, how nomadic societies became increasingly militarized and unstable and entirely reliant upon their relationship with Rome, and the role which Roman diplomacy had in fostering these developments and taking advantage of them whenever possible.
Chapter 3: Weak Nomadic States & Roman Diplomacy

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the nature of migration on the Eurasian Steppe. I argued that migrations were rare occurrences motivated by unstable political and ecological conditions on the steppe. The circumstances of migration were threatening to the continued survival of the nomadic groups involved. Nomadic tribes which migrated towards the Pontic Steppe in Late Antiquity were therefore already at a severe disadvantage when they came into contact with the Roman Empire. Nomads were newcomers to the region, compelled to make war for the acquisition of new territory. As newcomers they lacked relationships with outside powers and neighbors. These relationships, which consisted of raiding and the reception of tribute or gifts, were critical for maintaining the type of political centralization among nomads which was the result of migration. Naturally therefore, upon arriving on the Pontic Steppe, all steppe nomadic pastoralists sought to establish relationships with neighboring groups and states. I hinted in the previous chapter at a further reason that migration should be associated with instability: contact with the Roman Empire.

I also argued that the Roman Empire was militarily dominant in confrontations with nomadic steppe peoples. The Roman Empire consistently defeated nomadic armies and raiding bands and subjected nomadic contingents under Roman banners to bloody conflict and the prospect of prolonged and indefinite service. Nomadic military potential was sapped in various Roman theaters of war or was thrust against the Roman Empire in vain. What military advantage nomadic peoples possessed or secured over the Roman Empire was transient. The Roman Empire stood firm throughout Late Antiquity and
beyond while nomadic polities and empires rose and fell with relative rapidity; Roman authors noted and commented on this phenomenon. Yet the damage caused by direct military engagement with the Roman Empire was a surface phenomenon compared to the structural socio-political violence which political and diplomatic contact with the Roman Empire inflicted on nomadic groups.

In Late Antiquity the Roman Empire was the primary source of wealth extraction for nomads of the steppe. As the primary source of wealth Rome was consequently the source of political legitimacy for peoples of the western steppe. Leaders who could secure plunder, tribute, or trade rights from Rome could redistribute this wealth and were legitimated among their subordinates and followers. Redistribution secured for chieftains and other elites political allegiance and the potential to further coerce nomadic and non-nomadic groups into their fold, a process I refer to as centralization. Thus the tendency for expansion arose on the steppe, as one group conquered another, claiming its warriors and tributes.

However, as most regimes founded on brute force, leaders exercised a very precarious political control over their subordinates. The political power they exercised was predominantly dependent on relations with the Roman Empire. Centralized political power was therefore unstable, one reason being that the Romans were quite capricious and unpredictable in the payments they transferred to nomadic leaders. The result was

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372 Agathias, 5.11. Other authors provide imaginary lineages for contemporary nomadic peoples, often modeled on Herodotus and the account of the Scythian tribes each belonging to a son of the legendary ancestor Targitaus. Herodotus, 4.5-6. For example, Procopius links the Kutrigur and Utigur “Huns,” who were most likely predominantly Oguir Turks, to the Cimmerians of Herodotus and states that those dwelling to the west, the Kutrigurs, were the tribe belonging to a legendary king Kutrigur, while the Utigurs to the east belonged to a king named Utigur. In my view these are attempts to reconcile the political volatility on the steppe with stable classical knowledge on nomadic peoples and the earliest accounts of the Scythians in the work of Herodotus.

373 For redistribution see Uray- Köhlami (2005).
that the steppe was host to cycles of political centralization and fragmentation as groups coalesced and subsequently collapsed under the burden of having to constantly seek and acquire larger and larger tributes. Furthermore, Roman diplomacy was quite active and took advantage of the political tendencies of nomadic groups and leaders whenever possible. The end result was the repeated destruction of nomadic groups and their disappearance as discrete political and ethnic units.

In this chapter I discuss the remainder of the themes I laid out in Chapter 1. The four themes concern the political evolution of nomadic groups which existed in contact with the Roman Empire as well as Rome’s passive and active influence on this evolution. These themes are: (3) the reliance of nomads on the Roman Empire as a source of political legitimacy and wealth, (4) the precarious political control of hegemonic nomadic states over subordinated groups on the Pontic steppe and in the rest of barbaricum, and (5) cycles of political centralization and fragmentation and the inherent instability of nomadic tribes, states, and empires. Themes (3)-(5) concern the structural organization of nomadic societies and Rome’s passive influence on the steppe. I return to Rome’s active influence on the steppe, which I covered partially in arguing for Rome’s military superiority over nomadic tribes, at the end of this chapter, when I describe how (6) Roman diplomacy exacerbated and took advantage of the natural tendencies and weaknesses of nomadic pastoral socio-political organization.

**Militarism and Perceived Deprivation**

Anthropological models of nomadic social and political organization guide my analysis. Two abstract concepts also provide grounding for the arguments presented here. These are: *militarism* and *perceived deprivation*.
Militarism refers to a reliance on force of arms, for example raids, invasions, sieges, or any number of military maneuvers, as well as the threat of violent action to secure political power and the claims to power of elites, groups, tribes, clans, etc.\textsuperscript{374} Militarism is manifested outwards towards the neighbors of a society in invasions and raids, and inwards as increased competition among elites; competition itself manifests in the employment of violence to resolve claims to power. Militarism in the context of the steppe in Late Antiquity was one of the defining features of nomadic societies which had prolonged contact with the Roman Empire. Historically we witness two outcomes of militarism in nomadic societies. The first was the rapid centralization of nomadic societies as a single leader out-competed rivals and positioned himself as the primary recipient of Roman tributes and gifts on the steppe. This process characterizes the political evolution of the Huns in the 4\textsuperscript{th}-5\textsuperscript{th} centuries, for example. The second outcome was the political fragmentation of the steppe as tribes and leaders competed with one another without a single leader or ethnic group succeeding in dominating the others. During the second half of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century and the first half of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century the Sabirs and various Oguric tribes which dwelt around the Black Sea were in a state of fragmentation.

Perceived deprivation is inherently intertwined with that of militarism; it gives rise to militarism and is the result of the social and political organization of Eurasian nomadic pastoralist societies. Perceived deprivation refers to a mechanism in nomadic societies whereby nomadic leaders perceive themselves to be slighted by the Roman emperor, specifically in regard to a lack of tributes, gifts, or honors which they received. Roman tributes and gifts could be perceived to be insufficient in relation to the necessary

\textsuperscript{374} Di Cosmo (1999), pp. 17-19 refers to militarization.
minimum to support a nomadic following. Nomadic leaders felt their position of authority and legitimacy threatened as a result. The perception of deprivation motivated nomadic leaders to raid Roman territory in attempts to coerce tributes and gifts out of the Romans. It also resulted in aggression towards nomadic and non-nomadic peoples beyond the Roman frontier as a means to monopolizing and claiming the incomes which these peoples received from the Romans.\textsuperscript{375} Pressure from a chieftain’s followership to acquire greater tributes also fostered the desire to raid or increase payments. There are specific references to this type of behavior among nomadic peoples in Late Antiquity. In 559 the Kutrigur leader Zabergan, for example, raided south of the Danube. Agathias states:

“And so spurred on by these wild designs he dispatched to the Chersonese what in his view was a sufficiently large force for this task. He himself (Zabergan) made straight for Constantinople with 7,000 horse, ravaging fields and attacking towns on his way and creating havoc and confusion wherever he went. Though his real motive was the innate violence and rapacity that characterizes the behaviour of barbarians he used his hostility towards the Utigurs as a sort of excuse for his attack. The Utigurs were led by a Hun called Sandilch who was on extremely cordial terms of friendship with the Romans. He had won the esteem and affection of the emperor and was a frequent recipient of his largesse. The Cotrigurs on the other hand far from having any share in such favours were the object of open contempt. Consequently they felt that they ought to make this expedition in order to show that they too were a force to be reckoned with and feared and that they would tolerate no disrespect.”\textsuperscript{376}

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\textsuperscript{375} The Khagan of the Avars famously declared that he was owed the tributes of the tribes which he conquered: “Thereupon the leader of the Avars sent Targitius with Vitalian the interpreter to tell the Emperor to give him Sirmium and the money which the Kutrigurs and the Utigurs had customarily received from the Emperor Justinian, since he had conquered these tribes.” Menander, fr. 12.6.

\textsuperscript{376} Agathias, 5.12.5-7. Italics my own. “Wild designs” here refers to Zabergan’s intention to capture Romans ships in the Propontis for the purpose of sailing to and raiding Asia Minor.
From Procopius we have alternate confirmation about the Kutrigurs, specifically that:

“although they receive from the emperor many gifts every year, they still cross the Ister River continually and overrun the emperor’s land, being both at peace and at war with the Romans.”\(^377\)

Perceived deprivation and militarism as concepts come into greater focus in the context of the social and political organization of nomadic pastoralist societies of the Eurasian Steppe.

### Segmentary Lineage & Conical Clan Structure

The basic unit of organization in nomadic societies was the patrilineal family unit which possessed private ownership in flocks.\(^378\) The exigencies of herding animals over long distances and the need to stagger the number of animals present in a given pastureland meant that nomads were dispersed. Groups came into contact with one another only for important social or political occasions, during times of warfare, on religious holidays, or at particular times of the year.\(^379\) However, kinship relations existed outside of the family line and were important for the social organization of clans and tribes. Kinship in Eurasian pastoral societies expanded outwards in a manner which anthropologists refer to as “segmentary lineage.”\(^380\) The system of segmentary lineage

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\(^{377}\) Procopius, *Wars*, 8.5.

\(^{378}\) As opposed to private ownership in territory, although there was precedence among nomadic peoples over who had access to territory when and for how long. Krader (1963). Lindholm 1986, p. 335.

\(^{379}\) Nomadic pastoralism is defined as geographically “extensive” for this reason, as opposed to agriculture production which is “intensive.” Krader (1979), p. 226. Otherwise nomadic groups pastured flocks in groups referred to as camps. Camps tended to include family groups, but unrelated families could also be part of a single camp. Wolf (1982), pp. 32-34 & 88-100.

\(^{380}\) Goldschmidt (1979), p. 21: “Particularly useful for pastoral societies is the system of segmented lineages, for these provide a structure that links each individual independent household to ever larger structures until a major section of the whole social universe is incorporated. This in turn relates to the flexible requirements of the herding process itself, as well as to the demands for military collaboration.”
formed the basis for familial and extended relations in nomadic societies. \(^{381}\) Brothers and cousins linked their ancestry back through fathers, uncles, grandfathers, etc., to a known ancestor or even a legendary clan founder. \(^{382}\) Within this structure there was nominal equality among all members of a group, although age was typically a marker of seniority and carried with it social duties as well as social prestige and advantages. \(^{383}\) However, while seniority was the most important factor in determining rulership among Eurasian pastoralists, charisma and ability were also key ingredients which allowed for considerable social mobility on the steppe. \(^{384}\)

Hierarchical clan relations also played a critical role in the social system of Eurasian nomads, most notably when centrally organized states appeared on the steppe. \(^{385}\) There is considerable debate, particularly among anthropologists who study present and historic clan structures in nomadic societies, concerning how systems of segmentary lineage on the steppe interacted with or gave rise to conical and hierarchical clan relations. \(^{386}\) Some scholars argue that segmentary lineage dominated nomadic society and that the shift to a conical clan structure was strictly the result of contact with external, hierarchically organized agricultural groups, societies, or states. \(^{387}\) Within this

\(^{382}\) The ability of nomadic groups to look back to imagined ancestors provided room for newly minted clans or leaders of a powerful group to claim ancestral legitimacy. This facilitated the rapid ascent of some clans and the growth of their control and dominance over other groups. Golden (1982) & (2013). Uray-Köhler (2005). pp. 11-12.
\(^{384}\) Per Bacon (1958), p. 58: “seniority both of generation and of line were factors in selecting a [chiefly] successor but ability was also of importance.” Senior brothers could often hold formal power while deferring to their younger, more authoritative, brothers. Lindholm (1986), pp. 341-342.
\(^{385}\) Di Cosmo (1999) for a broad discussion of the debates surrounding state formation along the steppe in the ancient and medieval periods.
\(^{387}\) Burnham (1979). Irons (1979). Barfield (1988). Tosi (1992). Although Khazanov (1984) established the dominant paradigm for understanding the influence of sedentary societies on nomadic state formation, his later work is more extreme and argues that nomadic peoples were a secondary player in their own social and political evolution. See Khazanov (2001), p. 1: “However, the more I study pastoral nomads the more I
view the ability of nomads to extract wealth from agricultural societies led to stratification and the formation of nomadic states on the steppe which were inherently predatory.\textsuperscript{388}

The opposing view states that Eurasian pastoralists already possessed within their social organization a preexisting clan structure and therefore a tendency towards hierarchy and vertical power relations in the form of the conical clan.\textsuperscript{389} Ruling noble clans always existed and these consistently extracted a surplus from politically disenfranchised clans.\textsuperscript{390} Contact with sources of surplus wealth from agricultural societies and states aligned preexisting political structures on the steppe into the form of a state. In this view nomadic states are seen as natural extensions of nomadic social

\textsuperscript{388} Many scholars have pointed out the distinction between nomads, Berber and Arab primarily, of the Near East whose clan structure was more strictly egalitarian, and the clan structure of the Eurasian steppe nomads which possessed a clear hierarchical streak or tendency. Uray-Köhlami (2005). Crone (1980). Patai (1951). Tapper (1990) on the relationship between tribe and state in a Middle Eastern context. On the tendency towards hierarchy see Lindholm (1986), p. 442: “Based on original equality it leads to inequality on the steppe and the breakdown of the clans which it was founded on.” This in reference to competition over income and bride prices.

\textsuperscript{389} Sahlins (1961). Friedman (1979). Particularly Krader (1963). It should be noted however that many scholars who claim that the conical clan was the natural state of social organization on the steppe rely heavily on the example of the Mongols in The Secret History. The Mongols may in fact be an aberration since the events in The Secret History represent the Mongols after they had already risen to the status of world conquerors and their social organization had altered accordingly. Vladimirtsov (1948). For The Secret History see Onon (2001).

\textsuperscript{390} Krader (1963), pp. 340: “Nevertheless, this uniform kinship structure was divided into unequal estates, the nobility and the commoners. Both were estates related by descent from the clan founder; but in practice they were divided by differences in birth, wealth, accident migrations, wars. Descent lines were not equal; the line of the firstborn was more highly placed than any other, having the right of seniority. Leadership was a status that was not assigned by rote-it had to be achieved, and achievement was based on social recognition of leadership qualities.”
organization. In the prior view however, the state among nomadic pastoralists on the Eurasian steppe is an aberration from normal political organization.

The sides of the debate converge however on several critical issues, for example the tendency towards fragmentation among nomadic states, their dependency on agricultural surplus, and the threat of force to maintain strong centralization. Thus, in my estimation, the two sides agree on much more than they disagree on. Within the debate I prefer a synthesis similar to the one offered by Charles Lindholm. Lindholm suggests that within nomadic societies there were present both an underlying organization based on segmentary lineage as well as hierarchical tendencies based on the presence of competing clans. He notes a tension between the supposed equality and egalitarianism which forms a part of the ideology of pastoral nomadism, founded on the economic principles of herding animals over vast geographic territories and which is enshrined in the principles of segmentary lineage, and the tendency towards hierarchy and the eventual formation of the hierarchical clan:

The most extreme example of this is Sneath (2007), who argues against kinship as the basis in any way for the formation of the state among nomadic pastoralists of the Eurasian steppe. Instead, Sneath argues for the strength of aristocratic lineages among the nomads of Eurasia. An interesting debate followed the publishing of Sneath’s book between the author and Peter Golden. See Golden’s review (2009), Sneath’s rejoinder (2010), and Golden’s rejoinder to the rejoinder (2010).

An aberration from a natural, preexisting state of “democracy” on the steppe. Goldschmidt (1979), p. 23: “This matter of individual skill in political and economic manipulation, together with the natural volatile character of livestock as wealth creates a pattern of political and economic democracy.”

For example, Goldschmidt (1979), p. 23 admits of diffuse political control, which he calls “democracy,” while emphasizing that those with greater resources in flocks are typically the preeminent political voices: “I want to be careful that my meaning is clear. Stock-keeping societies are not made up of people of equal status; on the contrary, social standing normally varies widely. This variance is calculated in terms of the ownership of animals; those advantaged may or may not have better life-styles than those who are poor, but they always have much more prestige, power, and security and disdain those who are beneath them. When I speak of political and economic democracy, I mean that social mobility is high, is recognized as being a possibility, and that individuals can, through their own activities, advance in the status hierarchy with skill, work, and luck. Those who are born in advantaged conditions in such a democracy have a headstart in the furtherance of their career, both through greater inheritance and better opportunity for political apprenticeship, yet each person may rise and fall in the social order and he knows that this is the case and thus governs his behavior on this presumption.” Paul (2003).
“The contradiction is that the system assumes the basic equality of all the groups marrying within the circle, yet the process leads to hierarchy as one group seeks to accumulate more women or more surplus to compete in the payment of bridewealth. This contradiction has remarkable political ramifications. Friedman (1979) demonstrates that the speculative character of the system leads to increasing accumulation of surplus for the purpose of prestige payments and bridewealth. The spiral of accumulation, which allows successful entrepreneurs to acquire dependents, “companions,” and debt slaves, is limited by environmental constraints. The need for ever more surplus presses toward predatory expansion into new territory.”

The “need for ever more surplus which presses toward predatory expansion” is exactly the same impulse in nomadic society which I characterize as perceived deprivation and militarism. In Late Antiquity on the western end of the steppe, the impulse led to confrontation and diplomatic contact between nomadic societies and the Roman Empire.

How then could nomadic societies which were organized along the lines of a segmentary lineage system transform, and quite rapidly on occasion, into centralized states based on the principles of hierarchy and vertical rule? Anatoliy Khazanov notes how nomadic hierarchies were remarkably flexible and could transform from a system of loose political control into the form of a centralized state:

“The higher rungs of the nomads’ social structure (subtribe, tribe, tribal association) are amorphous and flexible; they show a capacity for restructuring on short notice, depending on the circumstances, in order to incorporate and assimilate foreign tribal groups. It is at this level that the traits of military-political organization are most evident. Nevertheless, decentralization was the most common state of nomadic societies, with central authority appearing only when there was an opportunity for regular military exploitation of other communities.”

Because of their clan structure and the flexibility of “military-political” organization, as Khazanov argues, nomadic societies were susceptible to the development of centralized and coercive political reorganization, which I refer to as the “state.”

Khazanov’s observation that nomadic states began to form as the exploitation of agricultural communities and states increased is correct. Exploitation was accomplished by force of arms. Nomadic societies were structured in such a way that military violence was the dominant mode of resolving conflict and of acquiring goods produced by external societies. Two factors were responsible for this feature of nomadic society. Nomadic economic life, which was not very labor intensive, freed the vast majority of able-bodied men for military training and warfare.396 Secondly, the geography of the steppe lent itself towards reliance on the horse and horsemanship, a feature which provided nomads with distinct advantages in combat.397 Coupled with the use of the bow, nomads were correctly perceived as excellent warriors by the authors of sedentary societies.398

Yet despite their ferocity and prowess, nomadic armies could not match the sustained and well organized military efforts of the Roman Empire. As I mentioned above however, defeat at the hands of the Romans could not compare to the destabilizing effects of the Roman Empire’s mere presence as a source of wealth extraction. Nomadic societies were susceptible to militarism and warfare because of the innate characteristics of nomadic pastoralism and the kind of social and political organization which it created. Thus, while nomadic tribes and states exploited the Roman Empire directly through raiding and the taking of tributes and gifts, it was in fact, as I argue, nomadic societies

who were ultimately on the losing end of such arrangements. Interaction with the Roman Empire and militarism on the steppe directly resulted in political instability, increased warfare, and finally the disappearance and destruction of political units in the region. The history of the peoples of the Eurasian steppe in interaction with the Roman Empire was tumultuous and one of warfare and suffering, primarily on the steppe.

**China in Comparison**

Anthropological studies of nomadic societies have the benefit of creating models that can be analyzed comparatively. There is much to be learned through a comparison of the Roman Empire with the history of another sedentary power in interaction with the Eurasian steppe: China. The work of Anatoliy Khazanov is crucial for establishing the degree to which the formation of states and empires on the steppe was dependent on nomadic societies’ relations with the “outside world.” Most scholars accept his theory and several have applied Khazanov’s concepts to particular cases in the history of Eurasia. Notable among these has been the work of Thomas Barfield.

Barfield invented the concept of the “Shadow Empire” with reference to the nomadic states and empires which arose in Mongolia and Inner Asia and had relations with China from the Han (206 BCE – 220 CE) to the Ching (1644 – 1912 CE) dynasties. Barfield argued that the rhythms of the growth and collapse of nomadic states like those of the Hsiung-nu and the Gök Turks mirrored periods of centralization and fragmentation in China. Periods of centralization in China allowed for the centralization of taxation,

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creating a wealthy base which nomadic empires could tap into. When China fragmented the tax base shrunk, creating problems for nomadic states which relied on the extraction of resources, leading ultimately to crisis, civil war, and collapse.

Barfield’s model, whatever its faults, demonstrates the extent to which nomadic states relied on resource extraction from sedentary empires. Unfortunately, his model cannot be transferred wholesale to the western end of the steppe and the interaction of nomads with the Roman Empire. First, the interaction of China with the steppe was much more intense than that of Rome. This, in my view, has largely to do with geography, since China’s entire northern frontier came into contact with zones suitable to nomadic pastoralism. The Eastern Roman Empire, alternatively, was shielded in the east by the Caucasus and to the north by the Black Sea. Pannonia, which fell to the Huns in the early 5th century, and the Balkans were the regions under Roman control most exposed to steppe raids. However by Late Antiquity the Balkans and especially Pannonia were regions of secondary concern to the Roman state. While the Balkans were affected by nomadic raiding, the richer and more critical eastern provinces were relatively untouched.

Chinese dynasties were far more preoccupied with the steppe than the Roman Emperors. Chinese imperial governments constructed the Great Wall, sent armies onto the steppe, often unsuccessfully, and regularly intermarried with steppe ruling clans.

Compared to China, the Roman Empire was safeguarded and kept a critical distance from

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401 Barfield’s model has been criticized in particular for its rigidity, i.e., that it too neatly castes events into a constructed model of interaction. Dunnell (1991). Drompp (2005) also takes issue with the transference of the model of “shadow empires” to the Turks from the 6th-9th centuries.
402 Skaff (2012) for the shared ideology of rulership between the Turks and the T’ang Chinese.
403 Lattimore (1962) & (1938).
405 For the effect of raiding on urbanism in the Balkans, see Dunn (1994). See also Lenski (2015).
406 Ying-Shih (1986).
the steppe, afforded this largely as a result of geography. Nor did the Roman Empire fluctuate between periods of strong centralization and fragmentation over the course of its history. Rather, there was a steady decrease in the temporal power of the Roman Emperors proceeding through Late Antiquity. The appearance of strong centralized nomadic empires under the Huns and Avars in Pannonia requires a different explanation therefore. Nevertheless, the Huns and Avars relied on the Roman Empire’s ability to control taxation from the center and direct it towards various requirements, i.e., tributes and gifts to foreign peoples.

The differences between China and Rome however ought not to dissuade a serious consideration of the Roman Empire as a major factor in the political evolution of nomadic polities on the western steppe in Late Antiquity. In fact, I argue that throughout Late Antiquity the western steppe became a clear zone of Roman influence. Nomadic states did not “shadow” the Roman Empire in the sense which Barfield describes, since Rome always remained a single centralized empire. However, the presence of Rome attracted nomadic peoples into its orbit and Roman diplomacy played a key role in the cycles of centralization and fragmentation that occurred on the western steppe. The Roman Empire was the primary determining force behind the history of nomadic peoples on the western Eurasian steppe in Late Antiquity.

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407 The case of Justinian’s reconquest of Africa and Italy representing a slight aberration from the general trend.
408 Others have sought, in my view less successfully, for cases of “Shadow Empires” on the steppe. Shingiray (2006) attempts to transfer the model to the Khazars and their interaction with the Arab world in the 8th-10th centuries.
Every nomadic tribe which came to inhabit the Pontic Steppe or the Pannonian Plain in Late Antiquity established diplomatic ties with the Roman Empire. Diplomatic ties included embassies, the presentation of gifts, trading rights, and tribute treaties. These ties, as well as nomadic raiding activity against the Roman Empire, all had as their motivation the acquisition of surplus wealth which the nomadic pastoral economy could not produce. Nomadic leaders sought diplomatic engagement with the Roman Empire by requesting embassies, by offering service to the Roman Emperor, which often manifested in military activity against other nomadic groups or Persia, or by directly raiding Roman territory and forcing Roman authorities to open negotiations. Establishing and/or maintaining diplomatic relations with the Romans was essential for any nomadic chieftain interested in increasing or securing his political future.

One of the most common ways Roman wealth reached the steppe was through payments made to allied mercenary bands of nomadic soldiers serving in the Roman army. In some cases we know directly the names and identities of the nomadic leaders who commanded such bands. Procopius lists several nomadic leaders, whom he frequently refers to as “Massagetae,” who played prominent roles under Belisarius. At the Battle of Dara in 530 men of steppe extraction named Sunicas, Aigan, Simmas, and Ascan commanded units of nomadic and Roman soldiers. At Tricameron in 533 Aigan,

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409 Nechaeva (2014) covers the general protocols and items which constituted diplomacy in a Late Antique Roman context.
410 Massagetae refers to a Central Asian nomadic people in the time of Cyrus the Great. The wars between Cyrus and the queen of the Massagetae are recorded by Herodotus, book 1. Procopius’ use of the archaic designation “Massagetae” fits in with the usage by Greek and Roman authors of classical terms to name contemporary peoples. I discuss the issue of classical literary models in Chapter 5.
411 Procopius, Wars, 1.13. Suncia was also mentioned in Zacharias of Mytilene, 9.3.a as a particularly fearsome enemy of the Persians at Dara.
Sinnion, and Balas were present. These commanders became the object of Roman wealth in the form of payments which they subsequently distributed to their followers. Service in the Roman army bolstered prestige on the steppe, where Roman wealth helped to maintain and grow followings. That these men were considered leaders on the steppe is evidenced by Sinnion, who later migrated with 2,000 followers to Thrace after Kutrigur territory was ravaged by Utigur attacks.

At other times our sources do not record the specific leaders of nomadic contingents; this was especially the case during the first several decades after the Hunnic migration. In 384 Bauto purchased the retreat of erstwhile allied Huns who refused to return to their homes after successful service in Italy against the Juthungi. Although unnamed there is no doubt that leaders were present. Payments had to be directed to individual leaders whom the Romans recognized as in command of federate or allied contingents or specific chieftains of distinct groups on the steppe. For the Huns in the late 4th century we have no mention of a specific leader. However, Basich and Kursich are mentioned much later by Priscus as leaders of the Huns who “later came to Rome to

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412 Procopius, Wars, 3.11.
413 A process that, in other cases, could lead to ethnogenesis. Curta (2005). Here we witness instead the consolidation of political units.
415 Procopius, Wars, 8.19.
416 Only an ancestral legendary king of the Huns is remembered from the time of their migration and the first two decades afterwards. Balamber is said to have led the Huns in their attacks against the Goths of Ermanerich. Jordanes, 24.
417 Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 41-44.
418 Even when not explicitly mentioned we know that there were leaders among the Hunnic contingents in the Roman army. In North Africa during Belisarius’ campaign against the Vandals a group of Huns is said to have destroyed a force of Vandals outside of Carthage. One of the Hunnic elites, although not named, began the conflict. Procopius explains how it was he, as the leader of a group of men, who had the privilege handed down to him from his ancestors of being the first to initiate combat. Procopius, Wars, 3.18. A similar custom may have been in action when Grumbates, the leader of the Chionites, hurled a bloodstained spear at the walls of Amida in 356, initiating the Persian siege of the city. Ammianus Marcellinus, 19.2.6.
419 Much has already been said about the process by which interaction with a large imperial neighbor can create political hierarchies and even ethnic distinctions among tribal and frontier peoples. See, for example, Curta (2001) for the role of this process in the creation of a Slavic ethnic and political identity. PP. 335-350 specifically.
make an alliance,” so we know that there were specific Hunnic individuals with whom the Romans treated before Uldin. In most cases, like that of Sinnion the Kutrigur, nomads were concerned to take the plunder or payments they had acquired in Roman service and return to the steppe. We know for example that Belisarius’ Hunnic federates in North Africa were eager to return home with the pay and booty they acquired from victory over the Vandals. Roman wealth conferred status on individuals and provided the opportunity for a successful political future.

Service in the Roman army however was a very ad hoc means of acquiring wealth. Nomadic leaders therefore consciously sought the formalization of specific arrangements with the Roman Empire. For the Huns we do not know of a named leader until Uldin. His service against Radagaisus in 405 at Faesulae and his earlier defeat of the rebel magister militum Gainas in 400 had likely won for him regular payments from the Romans, or at least one off payments or gifts. Uldin’s famous raid in 408 was intended to coerce a regularization of tribute payments as a means of perennial support of his rule north of the Black Sea. Instead, his subordinate chieftains were persuaded to accept payments directly from the Romans, circumventing the need for Uldin as an intermediary and destroying his claim to preeminence. Here we see very clearly the centrifugal and centripetal forces at play in nomadic societies as they progressed toward hierarchical centralization. Uldin’s concern was to compel regular payments from the Romans as a means to securing and maintaining his following and the authority which he had acquired

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421 Procopius, Wars, 4.1-4.3.
through previous successful action. However, his subordinate commanders did not possess any significant loyalty towards him, especially when presented with direct payments from Roman officials. The underlying threat that hard-earned followings could disintegrate quite rapidly underlay many of Attila’s later dealings with the Romans.

Later Hunnic leaders were more successful at obtaining treaties from the Romans, although only with the consistent use of force or threat of force. Rua concluded a treaty with the Romans in the 430s stipulating the payment of 350 lbs. of gold per year. To enforce the treaty provisions Rua was preparing for war with the Romans, having sent his envoy Esla to Constantinople, when in 435 he suddenly died. The famous treaty of Margus in 435 between Rua’s successors, Attila and Bleda, and the eastern Romans stipulated a doubling of the gold payments to 700 lbs. per year. This later increased to 2,100 lbs. only after the Huns had conducted massive and damaging campaigns into the Balkan provinces. The expeditions of Attila and Bleda were a type of maintenance work to secure sources of income, which the Romans were consistently tardy on. Attila’s death perhaps too conveniently coincided with his inability to further coerce the western and eastern Roman courts. Upon the disintegration of Attila’s empire his various sons vied to reconfigure themselves and their followings as a new threat to Rome worthy of official payments. Dengizich’s brash attempts at this resulted in his head being placed on a pike in Constantinople.

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425 Priscus, fr. 2.
426 Ibid.
427 Priscus, fr. 9.3. Heather (2005), p. 307 supposes that there was an intermediate increase to 1,400 pounds, but there is no specific evidence for this.
428 Priscus, fr. 46. The emperor Leo refused trade rights and markets to the sons of Attila because of the damage they had caused to Roman territory. The sons of Attila disagreed on the situation, with Ernac reluctant to attack the Romans because of domestic issues, while Dengizich ultimately decided to cross the Danube and make war on the Romans.
429 Chronicon Paschale, 468, Olympiad 312. Marcellinus Comes, 469.
Subsequent to the Huns other nomadic tribes sought recognition and gifts from the Romans immediately upon arriving onto the Pontic Steppe. The Saragurs sent envoys to the Romans when they arrived to the steppe in 463. The Sabirs raided Anatolia in the reign of Anastasius and soon were on the tribute rolls of the Empire. The migrating Avars made a fascinating display of themselves in Constantinople with their long plaited hair after having entreated the leader of the Caucasian Alans, Sarosius, to arrange a meeting for them with the Roman emperor. From the appearance of the Kutrigurs and Utigurs in our sources we know that they had established tribute relationships with the Romans. The withdrawal of these from the Kutrigurs was the reason for their raids in the 550s; the Romans used the fact that they offered tributes every year to the Utigurs as a prod to urge them into counter-raiding the Kutrigurs. The baptism of Organa and Kubrat and their entering into relations with Heraclius corresponded to their overthrow of the Avars in the region.

There were several means by which to open treaty or tribute negotiations with the Romans. Raiding Roman territory was a good way to get recognized. Alternatively, as in the case of the early Avars, nomads could entreat their neighbors with established relations with the Romans to request embassies on their behalf. Nomadic groups could also offer services to the Romans so as to prove themselves worthy of tribute payments.

One Sabir leader, a woman named Boa, offered her services against Sabir allies of the

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430 Priscus, fr. 40.1: “The Saraguri then approached the Romans, wishing to win their friendship, and the Emperor and his courtiers received them in a kindly manner, gave them gifts and sent them away.”
431 Malalas 406. Marcellinus Comes 515. Roman emperors sometimes offered specific amounts of gold to nomadic groups to perform specific tasks. For example, in Procopius, Wars, 2.29 the Sabirs agreed to raid Persia for three centenaria.
432 Menander, fr. 5.
434 Earlier the Kutrigurs had received payments from the Roman emperor, but raided south of the Danube regardless. Procopius, Wars, 8.5. Menander, fr. 2.
Persians in return for gifts from the Romans and a treaty relationship with Justinian.\textsuperscript{436}

We hear of Avar envoys to Justinian in the late 550s:

“One Kandikh by name was chosen to be the first envoy from the Avars, and when he came to the palace he told the Emperor of the arrival of the greatest and most powerful of tribes. The Avars were invincible and could easily crush and destroy all who stood in their path. The Emperor should make an alliance with them and enjoy their efficient protection. But they would only be well-disposed to the Roman state in exchange for the most valuable gifts, yearly payments and very fertile land to inhabit. Thus spoke Kandikh to the Emperor.”\textsuperscript{437}

In this passage the Avar envoy makes an implicit threat that, although worthy of Roman payments and willing to offer their services freely, there was always the possibility of directing violent force against the Romans.

However, although nomadic peoples were eager to acquire treaties with the Romans, even if violently so, such arrangements were often on offer by the Romans. The Romans preferred to keep nomadic tribes in friendly reliance on Roman wealth as a means to thwart nomadic raids and to maintain allies and sources of military recruitment.

In the reign of Tiberius the Romans took hostages from the Alans and Sabirs:

“When the envoys of the Alans and Sabirs who had surrendered arrived at Byzantium, the Caesar received them in an appropriate and kindly manner and he asked them how much money the Persian king gave to them. Although he gave them the opportunity to hide the truth by their exaggerations and by lying to inflate the amounts as much as they wished, he said, “I shall give double this amount, both to your leaders and to yourselves.” At this the barbarians were overjoyed and appeared to give thanks to God that they had become subjects of the Romans.”\textsuperscript{438}

\textsuperscript{436} Theophanes Confessor, 527/528, AM 6020. John of Nikiu, 61-65. Malalas, 431.
\textsuperscript{437} Menander, fr. 5.
\textsuperscript{438} Menander, fr. 18.5.
In this passage the Roman Emperor declares his willingness to make gifts to the Sabirs and Alans, since the relationship was mutually beneficial. Nomadic groups received monies and the Romans maintained useful allies as well as prevented the Persians from spreading their influence on the steppe.

The Avars maintained a series of treaties and formal agreements with the Romans very similar to those of the Huns. The sum of 80,000 golden nomismata was increased to 100,000 and later 120,000 throughout the decades of the later 6th century. However, Avar political evolution had a different trajectory than the Huns, although the two are comparable in many respects. In the case of the Huns there is a clear ratcheting up of political centralization from the last decades of the 4th century, into the first decade of the 5th century with the central role of Uldin among the Huns, and finally into the reigns of Rua, Bleda, and Attila. Roman wealth played an increasingly important role in fostering forceful centralization among the Huns and vertical political hierarchy. In the case of the Avars however there was already a clear hierarchy from the moment of migration in the late 550s. Thus the Avars negotiated for a specific tract of Roman territory. Embassies were conducted in Constantinople between Justinian and Justin and Avar ambassadors who were speaking on behalf of their Khagan Baian. The role of Roman treaties with the Avars and their accompanying wealth was to solidify the rule of Baian, who had a distinct role as leader of the migration westwards, but whose authority would be undermined were he unable to secure tributary relations with the Roman Empire. Baian’s

439 Theophylact Simocatta, 1.3, 1.6.4-6 & 7.15.14 respectively.
successes against the Romans ensured that the Avars would not dissipate into a variety of independent bands, much as the Huns did in the 370s and 380s.

Tribute and wealth were not the only items which nomadic leaders sought from the Romans, however; they also sought titles and formal inclusion into the Roman oikoumene. Attila sought to be named *Magister Militum* both because it came with the promise of yearly payments and with formal perennial recognition of himself as a component of the Roman state. The Hun leader Grod came to Constantinople and received baptism and a formal treaty from the Romans sometime in the reign of Justinian. Although the Romans never formally proselytized among nomadic peoples, it was a useful tool to bring individual leaders into the fold. Archaeological finds have turned up evidence that Organa and Kubrat were named patricians under the emperor Heraclius.

The textual source record is invariably clear: nomadic leaders considered a relationship with the Roman Empire essential to their dominance and without which their rule was gravely threatened. Reliance on Roman wealth created a political dependency which becomes evident upon examination of the weak political authority which nomadic chieftains possessed. However, before I discuss the nature of nomadic political rule on the steppe, there are two minor points to consider.

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442 Territory was also a goal, as with the Avars in Menander, fr. 5.4.
445 The Romans never consistently proselytized among nomadic peoples of the steppe. Zacharias of Mytilene however does mention the presence of a bishop among the Huns north of the Caucasus in the middle of the 6th century. Zacharias of Mytilene, 12.1-m. Theophylact also records an interesting story of the diffusion of some aspects of Christianity onto the steppe. In the 6th century Romans soldiers in the east captured several Turkic prisoners with the sign of the cross tattooed on their forehead. These said that they were told the spread of plague among their people would stop were they to tattoo themselves with the cross. Theophylact Simocatta, 5.10.13-5.15.15.
Although the treaties and sums of money which nomadic leaders received were considerable for nomadic societies, they were insignificant for the Romans. The Huns received 53,950 pounds of gold from 433-474. The Avars received 41,944 pounds in the later 6th century. These were only fractions of the income of the Roman Empire on a yearly basis. The sum of 2,100 lbs. of gold agreed upon as the yearly tribute amount to Attila in 447 was comparable to payments made to other northern barbarians in the 5th century. For example, in the 470s the Roman government in Constantinople under Leo I paid 2,000 pounds of gold to the Ostrogoths. The sums alternatively pale in comparison to, for example, that spent on the failed expedition to North Africa in 468. While crucial for maintaining political hierarchy on the steppe, there is little indication that Roman finances were seriously stretched by even the “excessive” demands of Attila.

Second, there is an issue concerning the terminology of “gift” versus “tribute.” Throughout Roman history subsidies were made to foreign peoples to ensure peace and loyalty, particularly to the Persians. Alternatively, subsidies could be paid for military service or as a reward for some beneficial activity to the Roman state. In Roman sources subsidies and payments to foreign barbarian peoples were frequently mocked, either by authors themselves or by interlocutors in the text. The view expressed was that Roman emperors were weak and ineffectual because they preferred to pay off barbarian

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450 Malchus, fr.2.
452 Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 180-186 puts these sums of gold in perspective.
453 Gordon (1949).
454 Blockley (1985).
enemies as opposed to confronting them in military operations. Authors complained that subsidies were ruining the finances of the Roman Empire. From this perspective payments were considered tribute, a sign of weakness and subordination.

The fear that such a perception existed was a component in Roman embassies and audiences with ambassadors or leaders of foreign peoples. In negotiations concerning whether the Romans ought to pay the Persians a yearly sum to remain at peace and to guard the Caspian Gates, since the Roman ambassadors were worried that such concessions would make them tributary, the Persian Shah argued that:

"you give an annual payment of gold to some of the Huns and Saracens, not as tributary subjects to them, but in order to guard your land unplundered for all time."

The Roman Emperor preferred to see himself as bestowing gifts freely, without coercion, as also evidenced in the passage in Menander concerning payments to the Sabirs and Alans. The nomadic perspective however was quite the opposite; nomadic leaders tended to see the Roman emperor as tributary when gifts or annual subsidies were handed over. Attila claimed that Theodosius had become his slave, “bound to the payment of tribute.”

The Avar Khagan’s peculiar behavior in requesting an elephant and a golden...
couch, both of which he returned as “something cheap and common,” suggests an air of privilege and entitlement.\textsuperscript{461}

There were therefore two conflicting perceptions of tributes/gifts which corresponded to the respective political ideology of the Roman Empire and Eurasian nomadic pastoralists. The emphasis in this and the subsequent section however is on the particular function of wealth and plunder which flowed onto the steppe from the Roman Empire. The ideologies involved affected when and how tributes or gifts were given. For instance, the perception that Rome was tributary to Attila during the reign of Theodosius II led Marcian to refuse tributes to the Huns.\textsuperscript{462} Much the same occurred when Justin II refused to pay the Avars unless of his own free will and largesse.\textsuperscript{463} Alternatively, the idea that nomadic leaders were not paid what they were owed might lead to raiding and warfare, a case we have already seen with the Kutrigurs of Zabergan. However, regardless of how the two sides viewed the matter, inevitably wealth trickled or flooded onto the steppe at various times and at various rates throughout Late Antiquity. The effect, ultimately, which I explore in the following section, was political instability and widespread militarism on the steppe.

\textit{Precarious Political Control (4)}

Of the six themes which are central to understanding the Roman Empire’s impact on nomadic societies of the western Eurasian steppe in Late Antiquity, the current one is perhaps the most essential. Why was it that the states and empires which nomadic

\textsuperscript{461} Theophylact Simocatta, 1.3. This comment in specific reference to the couch. The elephant was requested for its exotic value, the couch as a precious gift symbolic of royalty and rulership in Late Antiquity. Gifts of couches are recorded given to the Persian Shah. Nechaeva (2014), pp. 181-183.
\textsuperscript{462} Priscus, fr. 20.1.
\textsuperscript{463} Menander, fr. 8. Corippus, 3.310-405.
peoples established on the border of the Roman Empire were politically unstable and prone to civil war, fracturing, and disintegration? Above all the answer lies in the socio-political factors discussed throughout, namely the tension created between centripetal forces of centralization and vertical hierarchy personified in the strong central clan or in charismatic leaders, and the opposing centrifugal forces embodied in the natural tendencies for geographical dispersion and political “democracy” relating to the nature of segmentary lineage and kinship in nomadic societies.464

Political instability, at times resembling political chaos, was rampant on the steppe and exacerbated by direct Roman interference. One result of the ebb and flow of nomadic fortunes on the steppe was the occasional appearance of a single hegemonic state, e.g. the Huns and Avars. The Huns and Avars however, as with all nomadic tribes, lacked the type of administrative apparatus with which to control subordinate populations. There were no administrative bureaucracies or mechanisms in place to oversee subordinated peoples, to tax them, and to ensure that local leaders behaved in accordance with the wishes of the central leader.465 Rather, power was devolved to loyal clan members, particularly to the members of a chieftain’s family.466 Attila’s Empire was administered primarily by his sons and through a web of marriage alliances.467 When Attila conquered the Akatziri he was forced to rely on his eldest son Ellac as his direct

464 Di Cosmo (1999), pp. 15-16 refers to moments when states came into being, that is, when centripetal forces overwhelmed centrifugal forces, as moments of “crisis.”
466 Golden (1982).
467 For example in Priscus, fr. 11.2, the Roman ambassadors were treated lavishly by one of the widows of Bleda. It is likely that the marriage represented a tribal alliance secured by Bleda, which Attila continued to honor by maintaining Bleda’s widows. Attila also sought alliances through marriage: he died following his own wedding feast and earlier entertained the idea of marrying the sister of the emperor Valentinian III. Priscus, fr. 24.2 for Attila’s death. See also Chronicon Paschale, 450, Olympiad 307 & Malalas, 359. For the alleged marriage proposal from Honoria, sister of Valentinian III, see Priscus, fr. 17.
representative and ruler in the region, second only to Attila himself.\textsuperscript{468} Although united at the Battle of Nedao in 454, his sons nevertheless each independently claimed a significant portion of the large Hunnic Empire and its concomitant host of subordinated peoples which their father had forcibly gathered.\textsuperscript{469} The fact that the Bulgars easily replaced Avar rule with their own local rule in the 630s indicates that the native Bulgar aristocracy was already in place and had been administering the region on behalf of the Avar Khagan.\textsuperscript{470}

Nomadic leaders expanded outwards and attacked neighboring groups because of the advantage which subduing them might bring, as well as to neutralize the potential threat they posed.\textsuperscript{471} As far as this threat is concerned, neighboring groups could decide to invade or attack the stated group or leader in question; this was a direct military threat. More significantly however, neighboring groups might serve as a point of resistance or refuge for disaffected subordinate groups. The ability of subordinated or threatened peoples to move or migrate away, or to call in and urge assistance from neighboring groups posed a direct threat to any leader’s legitimate claims to monopoly of power. Power was only power if it was defended and maintained through the use of force. Furthermore, other groups might serve as alternative focal points for Roman monies reaching the steppe. If the members of one group were unsatisfied with subordination to a

\textsuperscript{468} Priscus, fr. 11.2.
\textsuperscript{469} Priscus, fr. 25: “For the sons of Attila, who because of his lust themselves amounted almost to a people, sought to divide the tribes equally amongst themselves and to allot warlike kings and peoples like household servants.”
\textsuperscript{470} Pohl (1988), pp. 268-274.
\textsuperscript{471} Di Cosmo (1999), pp. 23-26. Nomadic groups could expand with alarming rapidity. Denis Sinor quotes one of the Orkhon inscriptions: “My father the khagan set out with seventeen men…they gathered, and there were seventy-seven men. Because Heaven gave them strength, the army of my father was like wolves and his enemies were like sheep. Leading campaigns to the east as to the west, he gathered the people and made them rise. And all together they numbered seven hundred men. When they were seven hundred, in accordance with the institutions of my ancestors my father organized those who had been deprived of their khagan…” Sinor (1990), p. 311.
particular ruler, they might simply move away or seek alternative arrangements with the Romans. The presentation of alternatives was a major problem for nomadic leaders and explains why the issue of the return of refugees was so central to their diplomatic demands to Roman officials.

Subordinated and neighboring peoples actively resisted the centralizing tendencies of hegemonic leaders. Thus nomadic leaders were forced to spend a considerable amount of their time fighting with neighboring peoples, expanding their own power base, or maintaining that power base by putting down rebellious groups. Attila spent close to half of his time in power fighting against peoples beyond the Roman border. From the treaty of Margus in 435 until 440 he and his brother Bleda fought against Sorosgi and other Scythian tribes across the Danube. In the 420s and 430s, although certainly the strongest Hunnic leader, Rua by no means controlled all of the Hunnic groups beyond the Roman frontier nor those serving under Roman banners. His brother Octar dwelt alongside the Rhine and was essentially independent of Rua, while groups of Huns continued to fight in Gaul until at least 439. The warfare which Rua, Attila, and Bleda waged beyond the Rhine and Danube involved consolidating the Hunnic clans into a single group, as well as incorporating Burgundians and other middle Danubian Germanic peoples into a tightly controlled Hunnic political order. Even in the late 440s however the Akatziri were independent of Attila and only after several years

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472 Attila’s reign lasted just short of two decades, from 435-454/455. He spent the years 435-440 and 447-450 fighting beyond the Danube, a total of 7-8 years.
473 Priscus, fr. 2.
475 Warfare against the Burgundians was particularly brutal. They defeated and killed Octar. Socrates, 7.30. Earlier, Hunnic auxiliaries under Aetius slaughtered the Burgundians under King Gundahar. Hydatius, Olympiad 304. Prosper, 452.
of warfare were the eastern reaches of the Pontic Steppe finally under Attila’s sway.\textsuperscript{476} In return for years of warfare against peoples beyond Rome’s frontier Attila, the most powerful steppe leader to confront the Romans, achieved less than a decade of unstable hegemony.

The Avars were also constantly at war with peoples beyond the Danube. They first expelled the Lombards from their homes in Pannonia, and the Gepid’s subsequent subordination involved serious warfare and the threat of it to maintain them in subordination.\textsuperscript{477} The Avars possessed a loose hegemony over the Pontic Steppe during the 560s and 570s. The Sabirs, Utigurs, and Alans however remained firmly outside of their grip, especially with the encroachments of the Turks towards the Pontic Steppe.\textsuperscript{478} The Avars confronted their most serious insubordination of subject groups from the Slavs, among whom there was a considerable level of independence.\textsuperscript{479} It is unlikely that the Avars requested or sanctioned many of the Slavic raids south of the Danube and the steady infiltration of Slavic populations into the Balkans.\textsuperscript{480} Several Slavic chieftains openly challenged the Avar Khagan, for example, when Daurentius killed an Avar envoy who had been sent to him.\textsuperscript{481} Later, the Avars lost their ability to seriously threaten the

\textsuperscript{476} Priscus, fr. 11.1.
\textsuperscript{477} The Gepids were a particular point of contention between the Khagan and Justin. The Khagan frequently demanded that the Romans return to him Usdibad, a Gepid noble. Menander, fr. 12.5 & 12.6. The emperor rebuked the ambassadors of the Khagan in Constantinople, claiming instead that the Gepids “are our subjects” and “you demand Usdibad, but we demand the rest of the Gepids from you.” Menander, fr. 12.6.
\textsuperscript{478} For example, by 580 the Turks possessed control of the Pontic Steppe west as far as the Kuban and Don rivers. Near the Kuban dwelt Akkagas, the female ruler of the Utigurs, through which the embassy of Valentinus passed to Turxanthos, the Turk Khagan. Menander, fr. 19.
\textsuperscript{479} Curta (2006), pp. 53-69 & 75-81.
\textsuperscript{480} Madgearu (1996).
\textsuperscript{481} Menander, fr. 21.
eastern Romans after the failed siege of Constantinople in 626 and the subsequent rebellions of Slavs and Bulgars.\textsuperscript{482}

Although the above examples highlight the decisions individual leaders took of their own volition to expand and attack their neighbors or the Romans, in many instances such actions were simply demanded of leaders if they were to maintain their rule; militarism was in essence a structural feature thrust onto nomadic society by the presence of Roman wealth. The structural requirement to expand and raid contextualizes Zabergan’s raid south of the Danube in 559. His decision was made in the context of the threat which his neighbors, the Utigurs, posed to his own preeminence among the Kutrigurs. The Kutrigurs and Utigurs were two wings of a greater confederation of Ogoric Turkic peoples north of the Black Sea in the mid-5th century.\textsuperscript{483} Only in the mind of Roman authors were the two separate, distinct entities, although there is indication that the Romans had some understanding of the kinship between the two:

\begin{quote}
“Therefore, Sandilkh, who wished to be on friendly terms with the Romans, replied that utterly to destroy one’s fellow tribesmen was unholy and altogether improper. “For they not only speak our language, dwell in tents like us, dress like us and live like us, but they are our kin, even if they follow other leaders.””\end{quote}

Sandil and the Utigurs, as the favored allies of the Romans and in receipt of greater Roman allowances, represented a threat to Zabergan and an enticement away from his rule. We know from the example of Sinnion that there were semi-independent Kutrigur leaders who could freely move to Roman territory, so it makes sense that there were

\textsuperscript{482}Pohl (1988), pp. 248-255 & 268-274.
\textsuperscript{483}Golden (1992), pp. 97-100.
\textsuperscript{484}Menander, fr. 2. It is unclear whether Menander understands the Kutrigurs and Utigurs to be of a similar tribal family, or if the words of Sandil represent a common Roman view that “The Scythian race is one, so to say, in their mode of life and organization…” \textit{Strategikon}, 11.1.
leaders who might switch camps to the Utigurs. The steppe was a fluid place where identity need not correspond to political allegiance.

Attila was forced into military activities against the Romans by the need to secure tribute with which to pay his large and burdensome band of nomadic and Germanic peoples.\textsuperscript{485} To be clear, campaigns against the Romans were not the result of inherent greed on Attila’s part.\textsuperscript{486} The invasion of 447 may have been initiated by an insubordinate Hunnic group eager to obtain their own plunder independent of Attila.\textsuperscript{487} There is clear evidence of discontent among the Huns during the embassy of Priscus: some of Attila’s loyal subordinates were willing to assassinate their leader.\textsuperscript{488} In the context of the vulnerability of nomadic leaders, Attila’s decision at the Catalaunian Plains to immolate himself was not the reaction of a warlord too proud to countenance a defeat. His was a reaction of despair. Attila understood the severity of even a single defeat and how it could undo the Empire he created; his failures the next year in northern Italy and his subsequent death bear out his fading fortunes in the years following the Catalaunian Plains.\textsuperscript{489}

\textbf{Fugitives/Refugees}

Other evidence attests to the precarious political control which nomadic states exercised over their subjects. It is typical to view the “Great Migration Age” as inaugurated by the arrival of the Huns in the 370s.\textsuperscript{490} There is no doubt a relation; the Huns provided the first major impetus for the migration of peoples beyond the Rhine and

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{486} Sinor (1975).
\textsuperscript{487} Maenchen-Helfen (1973), p. 118.
\textsuperscript{488} Edeco in particular, ambassador for Attila and one of his bodyguards. Priscus, fr. 11.1.
\textsuperscript{489} Lindner (1981), p. 11.
\textsuperscript{490} I discussed this in Chapter 2.
\end{footnotesize}
Danube frontier. However, earlier when discussing nomadic migrations I made the claim that *the only true migration was the successful migration*. We can transfer this axiom to those peoples who moved out of the way of the Huns around the turn of the 4th-5th centuries. In order for a migration to be successful, there had to be present the conditions in a region for a migration to take hold and for a migrating people to claim new territory. What were these conditions?

Above all else barbarian migrations were successful because the Roman Empire’s borders became more permeable in the 4th century in comparison to earlier centuries, especially after the defeat at Adrianople.\(^{491}\) I will not discuss why exactly this occurred, nor do I have a dog in the fight between those who see the frontiers forcibly overwhelmed and those who see the Romans as willingly, to one degree or another, accommodating new groups of migrants. What is clear however is that on occasion the Romans were willing to settle and accept federates or independent groups of barbarians who might serve some use, usually military, inside the empire. At other times Roman authorities were unwilling but unable to prevent influxes of people.\(^{492}\) Regardless, what matters is that there was a host, i.e., somewhere for the barbarians to go and something for them to do there.

However, the issue of the Roman Empire’s reception of barbarians does not directly impact my claim about the significance of these movements. What is more relevant is that the act of migration was an act of resistance to Hunnic penetration into Europe and moreover, that the Huns were unable to prevent flights of this kind. Of

\(^{491}\) Stickler (2013), pp. 502-504.
\(^{492}\) Though it is important to remember that even after Adrianople barbarian armies were completely wiped out by Roman forces. For example, the Greuthungi were slaughtered when they crossed the Danube in 386, and Radagaisus was likewise obliterated in 405 at Faesulae by a combined force of Stilicho’s Romans and Uldin’s Huns.
course, groups like the Goths and Vandals fled from the Huns, who represented a new and significant military and political threat. However, had the Huns been in absolute control or possessed any serious political authority in barbaricum in the decades surrounding the turn of the 4th century, it is likely that they would have been able to compel Germanic and other barbarian peoples to remain beyond the Roman frontiers, as Attila was able to do during his reign. As it was, the migrations of the Goths in 376, the Goths of Radagaisus in 405, the migration of the Vandals and Alans in 406, and other lesser known movements like the migration of the Greuthungi in 386 across the Danube, were all indicators of a level of political independence among peoples nominally subject to the Huns. The same can be said for the migration of the Lombards from Pannonia to Italy with respect to the Avars in the 560s.\textsuperscript{493} Migrations across Roman frontiers were not, therefore, clear indicators of Hunnic dominance over barbaricum. Rather, in line with my general arguments, these migrations indicate how politically weak nomadic peoples were, in spite of their military prowess, and the extreme effort that was required to subordinate and maintain subordination over foreign peoples and tribes.

However, when the Huns and Avars did possess hegemony over the Pontic Steppe and Pannonia a separate and yet related issue came to the fore: the migration of small groups of individuals and elites with their followings onto Roman territory. The concern over political refugees and fugitives is a major \textit{topos} and complaint levied against the Romans by nomadic leaders in our textual sources. Who were these fugitives? There were two groups: entire minor tribes or significant populations, and groups of nobles. Both posed a challenge to nomadic rulership and the centralization of power particularly under the Huns and Avars. What is more, nomadic leaders clearly perceived the flight of

\footnote{\textsuperscript{493} Menander, fr. 12.1-12.2.}
refugees from their territories as direct threats to their rule. The object of their return was
to eliminate them as potential threats. After the Treaty of Margus in 435 Theodosius II
agreed to return to Attila and Bleda a group of Hunnic nobles who had fled to
Constantinople. Perhaps this group, among whom were Huns named Mama and Atakam,
fled with the clans received by the Romans who had been the object of Rua’s complaints
and declaration of war.⁴⁹⁴ When Mama and Atakam were handed over to the Hunnic
debtation they were immediately impaled in Thrace.⁴⁹⁵ Similarly, in the 440s, those
Huns who refused to return to Hunnic territory were slaughtered by the Romans without
complaint from Attila.⁴⁹⁶

Nobles who had fled posed a direct challenge because they presented an
alternative choice to elites who had submitted to Attila’s rule. Besides small groups of
elites, entire tribal populations fled to the Romans; this was quite a common phenomenon
throughout Roman history. Sinnion the Kutrigur was accepted onto Roman territory with
2,000 followers of men, women, and children. Later a Bulgar named Kuber fled to the
Roman Balkans in defiance of the Avar Khagan.⁴⁹⁷ Refugee populations presented a
similar threat to centralizing Hunnic and Avar leaders because they posed an alternative
to their leadership, which was made all the more vivid and real in that whole populations
could opt out of centralization, as opposed to a few disgruntled and dispossessed nobles.
Such groups also served the Romans loyally and valiantly and so depleted nomadic
numbers in favor of the Roman military.⁴⁹⁸

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⁴⁹⁴ Priscus, fr. 2. Mama and Atakam were “children of the Royal house.”
⁴⁹⁵ Priscus, fr. 2.
⁴⁹⁶ Priscus, fr. 9.3.
⁴⁹⁸ The Kutrigurs of Sinnion resisted a Lombard raid in Thrace in the later years of Justinian’s reign but
were wiped out. Procopius, Wars, 8.27.
The first treaty between the Huns of Rua and the Romans stipulated that nomadic refugees were not to be accepted onto Roman territory. The Romans broke this part of the treaty and received the Amilzuri, Itimari, Tounsoures, and the Boisci and other tribes living near the Danube. These peoples are recorded fleeing specifically so as to fight on the side of the Romans. Whether these groups represented entire tribes or clans and their nobles is unknown.⁴⁹⁹ What we do know is that Rua was preparing for war over the issue when he suddenly died and that the subsequent treaty with Attila and Bleda, the Treaty of Margus, stated that: “

“<it was agreed> not only that for the future the Romans not receive those who fled from Scythia, but also that those who had already fled should be handed back together with the Roman prisoners-of-war who had made their way back to their own country without ransom.”⁵⁰⁰

The Romans apparently ignored this aspect of the treaty repeatedly, since Attila was constantly incensed over the issue.⁵₀¹ During Priscus’ embassy to Attila’s court he witnessed that Attila:

“continued that there were many fugitives of his own race amongst the Romans and he ordered the secretaries to read out their names, which were written on papyrus.”⁵₀₂

It is extraordinary that the Huns, a nomadic and therefore primarily oral culture, had recorded the names of important fugitives in writing!⁵₀₃

⁴⁹⁹ Priscus, fr. 2. It is unclear whether these were wholesale tribes or significant numbers of individuals who were fleeing to Roman service. I would suggest that among their number were nobles and other nomadic elites fleeing from Rua and the expansion of power in his personal hands. Blockley (1983), pp. 379-380, ff. 3, 500 Priscus, fr. 2.
⁵₀₁ Attila used this as a pretext for a war which never occurred in the late 440s/early 450s. Priscus, fr. 11.2.
⁵₀₂ Priscus, fr. 11.
⁵₀₃ Procopius records that the envoys of Sandil came to Justinian to complain about his acceptance of the Kutrigur Sinnion and 2,000 Kutrigurs. Sandil “accordingly sent envoys to the emperor to remonstrate at what had been done, not putting any letter into their (the envoys) hands (for the Huns are absolutely unacquainted with writing and unskilled in it up to the present time, any they neither have any writing-
The Avar Khagan was concerned over the same issue. When the Avars migrated into Pannonia they claimed that the Gepids and specifically one of their leaders Usdibad were theirs by right of conquest. That Usdibad and other Gepids fled to the Romans threatened Avar hegemony over those Gepids who remained loyal to the Avars. The Khagan also demanded Sirmium as his by right of conquest and so that it not become a haven for refugees. His request indicates that there was a concern that a city immediately on the border with Avar territory would become an attractive place for those potentially opposed to the Khagan’s rule, and there would be many, since the Avars had recently displaced and subdued large numbers of Oguric peoples on the Pontic Steppe and Germanic/Slavic peoples in the Carpathian Basin and Pannonian Plain. These were not the final complaints levelled by the Khagan against the Romans regarding fugitives. Baian later demanded the return of an Avar shaman who had slept with one of his wives and subsequently fled to the Romans. Threats to nomadic leaders were not always of a mundane political nature!

Cycles of Centralization & Fragmentation (5)

That nomadic states exercised precarious rule over their regions and peoples is displayed by the rapidity with which nomadic tribes could lose power or confederations fall apart. Within 15 years of his death, the empire of Attila was shattered and the Huns could no longer be called an independent political unit on the steppe. The tensions which

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504 Menander, fr. 12.6: “In addition, he sought Usdibad the Gepid, claiming that all the Gepids were his subjects since they, too, had been conquered by him.”

505 Menander, fr. 12.5-12.6.

506 The incident was used as a pretext for war in 584, apparently since the harboring of refugees was also a stipulation of a treaty between the Avars and Romans. Theophylact Simocatta, 1.8.1-7. Whitby & Whitby, p. 30, f. 43. Menander, fr. 27.3 records the same incident.
were barely held together by Attila almost immediately flared up in Pannonia at the
Battle of Nedao.507 The Hunnic groups which did survive the fall of Attila’s Empire were
swept aside by Oguric nomads with minimal struggle. The Utigurs, Kutrigurs, and Sabirs
dominated the Pontic Steppe for a century after the Huns and yet were instantly
overwhelmed by an organized force of migrating Avars in the 550s. After suffering a
single major defeat outside of Constantinople the Avars lost what control they had over
the Slavs of southeastern Europe and the Bulgars north of the Black Sea. Finally, with
only slight pressure from the Khazars a large portion of the Pontic Bulgars migrated
south of the Danube. The power nomadic peoples possessed in the Pontic region and
Pannonia was tenuous and transitory; no single group ever dominated a significant
portion of the region for more than a few decades.

Although not nearly as strictly as elaborated by Barfield with regard to the eastern
steppe, the political history of the western steppe in Late Antiquity is best characterized
as a series of cycles which fluctuated between centralization and fragmentation. Cycles of
“boom and bust” are indicative of natural tendencies in the socio-political evolution of
nomadic peoples in interaction with strong, centralized, sedentary agricultural empires. A
longue duree perspective is the only possible vantage point to observe these cycles; it also
brings into focus the permanence of the Roman Empire as a factor which shaped and
influenced the rise and fall of nomadic states.

During their westward migration the Huns were centralized and organized
hierarchically, as was necessitated by the demands and dangers presented by long-
distance migration. The Huns may have migrated in streams or pulses from east to west,

507 The two major groups were those led by the Gepids, representing a significant portion of previously
subordinated Germanic groups, and the sons of Attila representing the old core of Attila’s ruling clan.
Neither of the two groups were homogenous to any extent. Priscus, fr. 25. Jordanes, 50.
but this need not negate the obvious fact that the Huns did undergo a tedious migration from Central Asia and that this movement involved the coalescing of separate and perhaps previously independent groups into a unit that was coherent politically, if not ethnically, for several decades. Centralized organization among the Huns was very tenuous however and began to disintegrate almost immediately subsequent to contact with the Tervingi of Athanaric.

Following Adrianople the Huns fragmented further as they fanned out across Eastern Europe, with various tribal bands alternatively raiding the Roman Empire or serving in its army. All such bands, as far as we can tell from Roman sources, were independent of one another at least until Uldin appeared around 400; it is only with difficulty that we speak of “the Huns” as a single political group in this period. With the steady rise of wealth inflow to Hunnic groups, certain leaders began to take prominence over others and to monopolize monies and engage in formal relations with the Romans. We witness this process increasing from the time of Uldin, who was still relatively weak and undone by Roman bribes to his subordinates. Later Rua was able to secure a treaty which the Romans obeyed at their own discretion. Finally Attila and Bleda led large coalitions of many if not most of the peoples beyond the Roman frontier.

At the death of Attila the Pontic Steppe reverted to a state of political fragmentation. Attila’s sons warred among themselves and with various previously subordinated Germanic peoples for less than a decade before fresh waves of migration.

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508 Warbands certainly played a role in probing new territories and plundering as the main host of Huns moved along. Perhaps these warbands also represented various independent wings of the main Hunnic body. Warbands themselves however cannot attempt and succeed in migrations of several thousand kilometers, nor can they alone expel large and established kingdoms of Alans and Goths, reflex bow or not. 509 It is worth pointing out again that Attila’s sole reign of hegemony north of the Roman frontier lasted less than a decade.
brought Ogric Turks and Sabirs into the Pontic region. Neither the Saragurs, Sabirs, Kutrigurs, nor the Utigurs managed to form a single, hegemonic state on the steppe in any way comparable to that of the Huns in the 5th century. The brief dominance of the Saragurs in the 460s and 470s was supplanted by peoples only referred to by the general epithet “Bulgar” in the decades around the turn of the 6th century. Out of this confusion arose the Kutrigurs and Utigurs in the mid-6th century. The Sabirs remained north of the Caucasus for nearly a century, intensely involved in the conflicts of the Romans and Persians, particularly during the reigns of Justinian and Chosroes I. The disarray of the steppes in the period led Agathias to say, specifically of the Kutrigurs and Utigurs that they have:

“so weakened themselves and their numbers have become so seriously depleted that they have lost their national identity.”

The environment of political fragmentation which characterized the Pontic Steppe from the 450s until the 550s left the peoples of the region susceptible to penetration and invasion by a large, unified, external nomadic group. This came in the form of the Avars who were politically and militarily united both as a result of their migration and the leadership of their Khagan. Within a decade the Avars came to dominate the region from the Sea of Azov to the Pannonian Plain. The early period of Avar rule, until the siege of Constantinople in 626, was the second period when a hegemonic nomadic power dominated the Pontic Steppe. However, the Avars exercised a very tenuous control over the Slavs and Bulgars and the projection of Avar power to the east was limited as a result of Turkic expansion westward. After the siege of Constantinople, when Avar power was

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510 Agathias, 5.25.1-4.
challenged by both the Slavs and more significantly by the Bulgars, the western half of the steppe again entered a period of fragmentation. Proceeding from west to east, the Avars dominated Pannonia and the Carpathian Basin. The Bulgars controlled the Pontic Steppe proper between roughly 630 and 680, while the steppe farther to the east, from the Don to the Volga, fluctuated as the fortunes of the Turks ebbed and flowed, eventually culminating in the rise of the Khazars who would fling the Bulgars out of the Pontic Steppe and across the Danube.511

The cycles of centralization and collapse which marked the history of nomadic peoples in Late Antiquity had two main causes. The first set I have outlined through thematic discussion of characteristics internal to nomadic social and political organization. These were exacerbated or “set in motion” by the presence of the Roman Empire and its transfer of large amounts of material wealth to the steppe. The themes of migration, the Romans Empire’s role as a legitimizing agent for steppe rulers, and the precarious political control of nomadic peoples over their domains are characteristics that are passive in nature. They function and impact nomadic society without conscious awareness on the part of any of the characters involved. Other themes, however, are active in nature. Roman military activity for example actively destabilized nomadic societies by inflicting defeats on particular groups and either fragmenting groups further or undoing the hegemony of groups and leaders. Far more influential on the cycles which I have described however, was the active role which Roman diplomacy took in exacerbating the instability of nomadic societies and in expediting the processes of militarism and destruction.

Roman diplomacy (6)

The topics and events which I cover in this section on Roman diplomacy have already been addressed for the most part. It is helpful however to reassess certain incidents and episodes from the perspective of the active and invasive role of Roman diplomatic policy. In the context of Roman diplomacy we observe that although nomadic peoples were never a serious existential threat to the Roman Empire, the empire was an existential threat to every nomadic group with which it came into contact. Roman diplomacy actively weakened nomadic political cohesion in several ways, most notably by encouraging nomads to fight one another. Roman diplomatic exertions affected both small and independent nomadic groups as well as large confederations and empires.

Most famous perhaps among Rome’s repertoire were the attempted assassinations of nomadic leaders, particularly the plot to murder Attila immortalized by the writings of Priscus and the vivid description of his role in the delegation to Attila. Assassinations seem like an obvious solution to eliminate pesky chieftains, but as a policy against nomadic peoples it could be remarkably effective. The reason was the amount of power invested in single charismatic leaders who literally reworked steppe allegiances in a pyramidal scheme with themselves at the top.\footnote{Di Cosmo (1999), pp. 19-21 refers to the eventual sacral investiture of these leaders as a move towards full legitimization. The story of Attila finding the sword of Mars was a type of sacral investiture of Attila, sanctioned by the gods to rule and conquer. Jordanes, 35.} Lacking an administrative apparatus and established hereditary rules of accession which subordinates would be expected to adhere to automatically, the elimination of a single leader could be remarkably effective in undoing incredibly powerful nomadic coalitions in a short period of time. Attila was aware of this danger to his person and was adequately prepared to thwart the plotting of Theodosius II and his legates. The fallout from Attila’s death however less than a decade...
later confirms the impossibility of holding together the Hunnic Empire and the limits of potential stability which it had exceeded. The possibility that Attila was ultimately murdered might indicate that the task had exceeded even Attila’s capabilities.

Another episode from the 410s provides alternate confirmation of a Roman policy aimed at assassination and the elimination of unfriendly leaders. The episode occurred in an embassy which the author Olympiodorus informs us of, and in which he, like Priscus, took part. The embassy of Olympiodorus travelled across the Black Sea and arrived at the domain of a king named Donatus. Ultimately the Romans achieved their purpose, which was the assassination of Donatus, a task they failed to do during the embassy to Attila. A Hunnic chieftain named Charaton succeeded Donatus and demanded gifts so as to placate him for the murder, which he received from the Romans. The assassination likely occurred in the year 412, at a relatively early stage in the Huns development to centralized power. There was not however the kind of collapse as occurred after the death of Attila. For the Romans the affair was relatively straightforward: the removal of one chieftain and the installation of one more favorable. Again, as with the episode concerning Uldin’s raids of 408, nomadic elites were quite willing to alter allegiances if provided with sufficient lucre from the Romans. I believe that this episode, if the date of 412 is correct, demonstrates a very active Roman diplomatic presence on the steppe immediately subsequent to Uldin’s raid and the realization that individual leaders were now of significant consequence among the Huns.

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513 All of this in Olympiodorus, fr. 19. The embassy likely occurred in 412. Thompson (1948), pp. 38-40 & 63-64.
514 Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 73-74 thinks rather that Olympiodorus travelled to Huns who dwelt in Pannonia. It is unlikely however since Olympiodorus would probably not have discussed in detail the hardships of his travel were he only traveling to another Roman province. It is interesting to note that nowhere is Uldin mentioned as having any relation to this group of Huns, indication that this was a separate group.
The episode of Donatus shows that the Romans were interested in supporting leaders who would maintain peace and lend military aid when needed. Hosting embassies in Constantinople was a particularly effective way to overawe nomadic ambassadors and chieftains into acquiescing to Roman demands or requests. Though skewed through the mouth of a panegyricist, the text of Corippus in praise of Justin probably does capture some of the amazement and even fear which the Avar ambassadors would have felt in audience with the emperor, despite what were perceived as their arrogant and haughty demands:

“The barbarian warriors marveled as they crossed the first threshold and the great hall. They saw tall men standing there, the golden shields, and looked up at their golden javelins as they glittered with their long iron tips and at the gilded helmet tops and red crests. They shuddered at the sight of the lances and cruel axes and saw the other wonders of the noble procession. And they believed that the Roman palace was another heaven.”

The Romans also presented nomadic leaders with titles and used official conversion, the ceremony of which was most likely elaborate and also employed to overawe leaders. We have seen how Grod was converted in Constantinople in an effort by Justinian to formalize relations with certain nomadic groups. His overt allegiance to Constantinople however proved his undoing and he was murdered by another faction of opposing leaders. The punitive expedition Justinian sent out against these leaders was a sign that when diplomacy did not work, the Romans were prepared to use force of

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516 Corippus, 3.235-245. Attila’s ambassador to Constantinople, Edeco, also “expressed wonder at the magnificence of the palace room” and “was praising the palace and congratulating the Romans on their wealth.” The Roman eunuch Chrysaphius persuaded Edeco to attempt an assassination against Attila with the promise that he could himself come to “become the owner of wealth and of rooms with golden ceilings if he were to disregard Scythian interests and work for those of the Romans.” Priscus, fr. 11.1.

517 In Nikephoros, 10 Roman patricians served as the baptismal sponsors of “Hunnic” noblemen and noblewomen.
arms. The reception of Organa and Kubrat in Constantinople, their conversion, and their inclusion into a Roman hierarchy as patricians was a major blow to the Avars, already reeling from their failed siege of Constantinople. These maneuvers protected the Roman Balkans, hindered any resurgence by the Avars, and kept a friendly and strong block of nomadic peoples on the Pontic Steppe who might prevent incursions from the east; they also kept the steppe fractured and divided among potentially inimical groups.

Nomadic leaders allied to the Romans performed several functions for the Roman state. They kept in check the potentially hostile and damaging raiding activities of their followers and provided allied mercenary soldiers. More importantly allied leaders served as advocates and agents for the Romans on the steppe, attacking hostile groups and on occasion raiding Persian territory. The end result of these activities was the constant political fragmentation of nomadic groups as they engaged in repeated hostile and violent acts towards one another at the behest of the Romans. Roman officials also blackmailed nomadic leaders with the withdrawal of their tributes if they would not act in defense of Roman interests. Thus the envoys to Sandil in the 550s spoke to the Utigur chieftain:

“But even if after having received such insults at their hands you still choose to be so timorous and utterly spineless as to take no action whatsoever, then you may rest assured that you will be struck off our pay-roll and that we shall be ready to bestow our largesse upon them. In that case you will have to learn humility and make way for your betters, since we shall most certainly have to transfer to them the treaty of alliance which we made with you and your nation.”

Roman arms did therefore, like in China, sometimes approach and enter the steppe, though quite rarely.

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518 Roman diplomatic efforts therefore led directly to the introduction of the Roman military onto the steppe. In Menander the same occurred with a Roman punitive raid and the taking of hostages among the Alans and Sabirs. Roman arms did therefore, like in China, sometimes approach and enter the steppe, though quite rarely.

519 Agathias, 5.24.7.
Such threats were remarkably effective. Sandil, although in protest, ultimately caved to the threat of having his yearly tributes withdrawn.

One view of the Huns and of nomadic peoples in general was that they were “faithless in truces.” The Romans accused the Avars of being:

“Superstitious and treacherous and unkind and unreliable, ruled by the greed of money, despising oaths, not guarding treaties, nor satisfied by gifts, but before receiving the thing given, they plan a plot and the overthrow of those things resolved.”

Roman accusations give the impression that it was nomadic peoples who were unpredictable in their observation of treaties. The historical record however makes it very clear that in fact it was the Romans who rarely observed the peace treaties established between themselves and nomadic peoples and they who were responsible for much of the aggressive activity which nomadic groups engaged in south of the Roman frontiers. For instance, Theophylact Simocatta writes often of the Avar Khagan threatening Roman envoys and placing them in chains. The Romans under Maurice did the very same thing however to the Avar ambassador Targitius for six months on Chalcis. The Romans also broke treaties with nomads by appealing to their subordinates to rebel.

Rome sought to entice the Akatziri into an alliance against the Huns, although nominally subject to Attila. This was explicitly banned by the treaty of Margus which stipulated that:

“the Romans should make no alliance with a barbarian people against the Huns when the latter were preparing for war against them.”

520 Ammianus Marcellinus, 31.2.10.
521 Maurice, Strategikon, 11.4.
522 Theophylact Simocatta, 1.6.1-3.
523 Theophylact Simocatta, 1.8.9.
524 Priscus, fr. 2.
Finally, the Roman Empire broke its treaties by not transferring the funds which it had agreed to with nomadic parties. In 447 Attila demanded a backlog of 6,000 lbs. of gold from Theodosius II, evidence that the emperor had not been handing over yearly payments as agreed upon at Margus. The Roman government obviously did not feel itself compelled to make these payments, even under the terms of formal treaties, nor were Attila’s devastating raids into the Balkans enough to compel the Roman government to be consistent.525 While these actions eventually resulted in war in the Balkans and the destruction of several important urban centers, it is worth remembering that Attila was in fact compelled to conduct these campaigns, since his empire could not survive without consistent Roman tributes.

Most damaging perhaps was that the Roman Empire actively kept and harbored nomadic refugees. The cases cited above of Mama and Atakam, the tribes which fled from Rua, the nobles demanded back by Attila on Priscus’ embassy, and the constant complaints of the Avar Khagan indicate that it was active Roman policy to harbor refugees; this was done for political leverage. Holding particular leaders and accepting populations of disaffected groups created and exacerbated resistance to nomadic leaders beyond the Roman frontier because it posed, in contradiction to Attila or Baian’s authoritarian rule an option that involved considerably more independence, consistent payments, and the possibility of receiving land. In Procopius, such complaints are put into the words of the Utigur leader Sandil:

“But if these things are by nature everywhere fixed, it is not, I think, a fair thing for you to receive hospitably the nation of the Cutrigurs, inviting in a foul set of neighbors, and making people at home with you now whom you have not endured beyond your boundaries.”

In this particular case, Rome’s reception of the Kutrigurs of Sinnion even undermined allied nomadic tribes of nomads, the Utigurs specifically, because, as Sandil notes, those who were previously the enemies of Rome were not better off than current allies:

“seeing that while we (the Utigurs) eke out our existence in a deserted and thoroughly unproductive land, the Cutrigurs are at liberty to traffic in corn and to revel in their wine-cellar and live on the fat of the land. And doubtless they have access to baths and are wearing gold - the vagabonds – and have no lack of fine clothes embroidered and overlaid with gold.”

Finally, it should be noted that Rome actively tried to inhibit the centralization of power in the hands of a single leader. However, in an oxymoronic fashion, Rome’s activity was directly responsible for creating the conditions under which a single leader could unite the Huns and pose a far more serious threat to the Romans. For as the Romans began to have increased diplomatic contact with the Huns, specific leaders among them became the focus for Roman diplomacy and the recipients of largesse, gifts, and treaties from the Romans. While Rome tried to make several leaders and chieftains the recipient of such largesse so as to dissipate the power of any single leader, in effect the increased competition between leaders and groups for these gifts inevitably led to a chain of events that left one leader dominant. Much the same can be said for the arrival of the Avars. It was Roman diplomacy that actively fragmented the steppe between Ogric

526 Procopius, Wars, 8.19.15.
527 Ibid., 8.19.16-17.
and Sabir groups. However, the weakening of these groups, while it prevented the rise of a single threatening entity, laid open the steppe for penetration from dangerous groups further to the east.

**Conclusion**

In the following two chapters I introduce two important topics that we must consider in order to round out the claims I have made: that the Roman Empire was the most important factor in the historical evolution of nomadic peoples on the western steppe in Late Antiquity, and that theirs was a history of instability, fragmentation, and destruction. The first of these, the topic of the next chapter, concerns the material remains discovered as a result of archaeological excavations on the steppe. Archaeological remains demonstrate the importance of items produced in the Roman Empire among nomadic peoples and how their display, particularly in the burials of elites and leading members of nomadic societies, was meant to convey power through designating an explicit relationship with the source of that wealth. The second, the subject of my final chapter, concerns the ethnographic depiction of nomadic peoples in Roman literature. I analyze how it was that Roman authors depicted and wrote about nomadic peoples, a tradition which stretched far back into the classical Greek past and was to continue throughout the entirety of Byzantine history and beyond. I argue that it is through this literature that we can understand how nomadic peoples fit into a Roman worldview and how, although often dismissed as literary exaggeration or as overly classicizing, the ethnographic writings of Roman authors on nomadic peoples allow us to understand how and why Romans interacted with nomads in the manner in which they did. In particular I turn to the text of Maurice’s *Strategikon* as an example of the use of classicizing
language to depict nomadic peoples which was simultaneously employed to convey serious military and diplomatic information.
Chapter 4: The Archaeology of the Steppe

Introduction

In this chapter I present an overview of the Late Antique archaeological evidence from the Pontic Steppe. Research in Russia and Ukraine has allowed me to develop a unique historical perspective on the finds which Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian archaeologists have uncovered throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. My research is an attempt to incorporate a new body of evidence into the discussion, one which stands in stark contrast to the primary and secondary textual sources which a majority of historians rely on for the study of nomadic peoples. Furthermore, these materials are rarely, if ever, discussed by western historians and archaeologists. The incorporation of archaeological materials is essential if scholars are to create a comprehensive picture of Roman–steppe interaction in Late Antiquity.

In a certain sense my presentation of archaeology is much attenuated. Since I discuss material which was deposited in the earth over the course of three centuries, my approach is at best a survey of the relevant evidence. I therefore split my efforts. On the one hand, I describe in broad strokes the material cultures of various steppe peoples and the cultural horizons which comprise the steppe in Late Antiquity. Since the steppe underwent frequent political upheavals and migrations in this period and in any case was

528 My interest and the focus of my research has been the Pontic Steppe, by which I refer to the region to the north of the Black Sea, from the Carpathians to the Don, though in some cases I survey material east of the Don towards the Volga. I focus on this region because I consider it the main zone of interaction on the steppe, between the Roman Empire to the south and west, and the nomadic cultures of the steppe farther to the east. I naturally, however, touch on Hunnic and Avaric materials in the Pannonian Plain. My discussions are more detailed concerning Hunnic archaeology than Avar, as a result of greater familiarity with the Hunnic material and because the richest Avar materials date from the mid to late 7th century, and therefore are found in a region and chronological frame which I do not cover in the other sections of my work. For Avar material specifically, see Vida, Stadler, & Somogyi in Curta (2008). See also Daim (2002). 529 See Tallgren (1936) & Klejn (2012) for two overviews of Soviet archeology, albeit separated by several decades.
never ethnically homogenous, I necessarily cannot focus my efforts on any single cultural horizon or burial styles. To counteract this deficiency I provide a “snapshot” into steppe material culture by describing in greater detail one exemplary site: the treasures found at Malaya Pereshchepina. The materials at Malaya Pereshchepina demonstrate the type of focused analysis that any single site deserves and in turn show how archaeological sites provide varying degrees of historical insights.

Archaeological evidence is certainly fascinating and revealing for the study of nomadic peoples and their material culture. However, the archaeology of the steppe in Late Antiquity is underdeveloped compared with, for example, the Scythian or Sarmatian periods, let alone the archaeology of Roman territory proper in Late Antiquity. As I describe below, nomadic archaeology in Late Antiquity faces a series of problems, not least of which is the relative scarcity of uncovered sites.

To what extent can or do archaeological finds on the steppe inform, support, or even refute the arguments presented in the previous three chapters? I argued previously that the wealth transferred to the steppe from the Roman Empire was determinant for the political evolution of western Eurasian steppe peoples in Late Antiquity. In particular I argued that Roman wealth negatively affected political and social equilibrium on the steppe. Wealth inflow, primarily in gold, was monopolized by leaders in competition with one another and served to legitimate their roles as the preeminent elites on the steppe; power was legitimated through a process of redistribution of wealth to the followers and subordinates of elites. From the 4th to the 7th centuries we observe two outcomes from this process for nomadic groups. On the one hand, nomadic states and empires could emerge through a process of military expansion and centralization of...
power in the hands of a single leader or ruling clan. Alternatively, the steppe could remain politically fragmented as groups competed among each other for Roman tributes without a single dominant leader or clan succeeding in subduing its competitors.

In order to develop these arguments I relied solely on textual sources from the period in question, support from historical studies of the period, the work of anthropologists on the nature of nomadic pastoralism, as well as comparative studies of other regions of the steppe, namely Inner Asia and the region’s close connections with various Chinese kingdoms. The glaring omission in my previous work however was the research and findings of archaeologists. In other words, thus far I have neglected material evidence.

Based on the strength of my previous arguments, one might expect direct material evidence of the centrality of Roman wealth within nomadic polities and tribal groups. Unfortunately, the archaeological evidence is much less straightforward than a historian might hope for. The nomadic sites on the steppe which have been examined and excavated contain incredible wealth and it is almost certainly without doubt that much of this wealth in the form of gold, clothing, weapons, and jewelry originated from within the

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531 As, for example, in the later 13th century Chungul Kurgan on the Ukrainian steppe. The kurgan contains burials dating back to the Bronze Age. One 13th century Cuman burial contains dress items which demonstrate Turkic methods of constructing clothing but which were in a Byzantine style, for example the *loros*, typically worn by Byzantine emperors. The clothing of this burial makes appeals to the world of the steppe while still engaging in the symbolism of rulership common to the Cuman’s sedentary neighbors. Woodfin, W., Holod, R. & Rassamakin, Y. (2010).

532 For a methodological framework I rely heavily on Kossack (1998). See p. 13 for the interpretive potentiality of archaeological remains as opposed to the textual sources of the historian: “The archaeologist is likely to be skeptical about posing such questions. In contrast to the written record, his material is not a direct manifestation of human coexistence. He must glean this information indirectly with reference to settlement structure, costume type, jewellery requirements, combat techniques, funerary rite and other phenomena, and in doing this he often relies on conclusions derived from historically known conditions. Yet, he has the advantage of knowing that every pattern in the objects recovered and excavated is the result of specific constraints or concepts of value.”
Roman Empire (through trade, Roman craftsmen, or plunder).\textsuperscript{533} In some cases, as I will demonstrate, there is clear evidence of direct transfers of wealth from the Romans to the steppe. In most instances however, the evidence is far from clear and it is impossible to make a direct link between the Roman Empire, the items discovered on the steppe, and the nature of their symbolic and semantic meaning. This chapter is devoted to explicating what types of historical conclusions are possible, and what is entirely conjectural, based off of the available archaeological evidence which I have been able to survey.

\textit{Nomadic Archaeology}

The archaeological materials presented here fall under the category “nomadic archaeology.” Nomadic archaeology is crucial to new research and conclusions on the movements and external relationships of nomadic peoples not just on the western steppe in Late Antiquity, but in all regions and during all periods, since it is essentially the only steadily growing body of evidence.\textsuperscript{534} The archaeology of the Eurasian steppe is perhaps most well-known for the presence of large and impressive burial mounds known as kurgans.\textsuperscript{535} Kurgans dot the steppe along its entire length and were constructed and functioned as burial sites for nomadic pastoralists from at least the Bronze Age through to the Early Modern Period.\textsuperscript{536} These were initially described by Herodotus in his depiction of the funeral rites practiced at the death of Scythian kings, who attached great

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\textsuperscript{533} For problematization of even such simple terms as “trade” see Kossack (1998).
\textsuperscript{534} Little (1992).
\textsuperscript{535} Alternatively known by the more general term “barrow.” Aibabin (2006).
\textsuperscript{536} From perhaps 3000 BCE. Anthony (2007).
importance to honoring and even defending these sites.\textsuperscript{537} The Scythian King Idanthyrsus famously rebuked Darius during the latter’s rash expedition across the Danube:

“But if nothing will serve you but fighting straightway, we have the graves of our fathers; come, find these and essay to destroy them; then shall you know whether we will fight you for those graves or not. Till then we will not join battle unless we think good.”\textsuperscript{538}

In modern times kurgans have become famous the world over for the ornate golden items discovered in them, as well as other pieces of jewelry, nomadic clothing, armaments, and horse accoutrements showcased in museums and at special exhibitions.\textsuperscript{539}

As expected, nomadic archaeology presents its own specific challenges.\textsuperscript{540} The most obvious issue is that nomadic pastoralists are hard to trace in the archaeological record due to their lack of fixed dwelling places relative to agriculturalists.\textsuperscript{541} Fixed dwelling places which did exist typically lacked the type of structures in stone which might survive to the present day for the archaeologist to uncover. Nomads rather constructed tents and dwelling places by making use of perishable materials like leather, felt, and wood.\textsuperscript{542} Rarely if ever are nomadic camping sites found, and even when excavated, they do not yield results on the level of the cities and villages of sedentary,

\textsuperscript{537} Herodotus 4.71: “Having done this they all build a great barrow of earth, vying zealously with one another to make this as great as may be.” The Scythians were said to practice sacrifices at the barrows of their kings one year after his burial. Herodotus 4.72.
\textsuperscript{538} Herodotus 4.127.
\textsuperscript{539} Probably most famous are the various Scythian and Sarmatian items decorated in the “Animal Style.” A huge amount of work has been dedicated to Scythian golden items. Rostovtzeff (1929). Yablonsky (2000). For a recent example of an excellent exhibition in New York City see \textit{Nomads and Networks: The Ancient Art and Culture of Kazakhstan} (2012).
\textsuperscript{540} Chang & Koster (1986).
\textsuperscript{541} For example, for the entire period 561-679 there is no record of a nomadic settlement on the western steppe. Komar (2004), p. 194. However, there is evidence on the eastern steppe during Late Antiquity of fortifications, presumably used to shelter flocks from raids. Khudiakov (1995).
\textsuperscript{542} For instance, not a single stone construction site is known from the entire period of Avar rule in the Pannonian Basin (568-800). Daim (2003), p. 518: “The equestrian herdsman’s greatest source of pride is his livestock: all other means of displaying his status are carried on his person.”
agricultural peoples. Nomadic peoples historically occupied cities, or even constructed them as for example in the case of the Khazars at Itil, but these are, generally speaking, exceptions. When nomads occupied or dominated cities the majority of the population of those settlements consisted of non-nomadic peoples. In any case, the materials in these settlements are more indicative of nomadic peoples in the process of sedentarization and not of their traditional lifestyles on the steppe. Thus, by and large, we lack archaeological materials from settlements for nomadic peoples.

Nomadic archaeology, lacking fixed dwelling places, has traditionally focused on burials and cemeteries as sites for recovering nomadic artifacts and for elucidating the material culture of the steppe. The most impressive of these burial sites are known as kurgans. Kurgans are large burial mounds resembling hillocks which were constructed by an entire community, since the movement of so much soil would require hundreds of labor hours. Construction took place around a single, sunken, burial shaft which contained a chamber where a body or several bodies could be interred along with sacrificial and other votive offerings. Tombs could also be placed in the embankment of the kurgan at the time of construction or much later, sometimes by even hundreds or thousands of years, by entirely separate communities. The most notable and influential members of nomadic society were interred in kurgans: chieftains, kings, prominent

543 For an explanation on how archaeologists might successfully find and excavate what few settled sites nomads did occupy see Chang & Koster (1986). For a survey of archaeological materials of Gothic and other sedentary peoples in the 5th and 6th centuries along the Bosporus and the Northern Caucasus region, see Gavritukhin & Kazanski (2010).
545 Khazanov (2008b).
546 For an excellent example of nomadic sedentarization in the region and period under discussion, see the evidence from Bulgar settlements south of the Danube in Fiedler (2008).
547 Chang & Koster (1986) argue for the use of survey archaeology and utilizing herding and grazing grounds as sources of information. This type of work is almost completely lacking on the steppe for the period under question.
548 Herodotus talks briefly about their construction. Herodotus 4.71-72.
549 Thus attesting to the importance of kurgans as sacral sites throughout recorded history.
leaders, and all variety of elites, both male and female. Nomadic cemeteries could also exist, typically in the vicinity of several prominent kurgans. Apart from kurgans and other burials, nomadic materials are also uncovered in hoards or chance finds on the steppe, or accidentally in the course of building projects or by farmers tilling fields, the most popular being that at Malaya Pereshchepina.

While the burials in kurgans present the researcher with a wealth of material and information, there is a tendency towards skewing in favor of elites and the richest members of nomadic society. Archaeologists in no small part have been to blame for this distortion, as they have rushed to interpret, make conclusions, publish, and excavate sites with well-known and beautifully adorned items, especially those which possess clear analogies in other regions of the steppe. Apart from this tendency however, the study of elite burials does little to elucidate social interaction between members of nomadic societies not wealthy enough to merit burial in kurgans, nor does it reveal social interactions which might be embodied in artifacts of everyday, common use. However, my own research has not been affected by this glaring omission. Since I am interested in the political relationships which items represented and the political messaging or semantics which they might have conveyed, it only makes sense to focus on the materials of those who formed and were the subjects of those relationships, namely elites, chieftains, khagans, and other prominent individuals.

550 For burials we are almost always discussing inhumation. Cremation is quite rare. For the Hunnic period, for example, cremation is known in three cases. Zasetskaia (1994).
551 Komar (2008c).
552 The finds at Malaya Pereshchepina were uncovered by a farmer tilling fields in an area that had once been partially covered by a river. Sokrovishcha Khana Kubrata. Pereshchepinskii Klad (1997).
The archaeological interpretation of nomadic societies is therefore based largely on finds from burials, a rich but narrow source of information for life on the steppe.\textsuperscript{554} There are also period specific difficulties with the archaeological material I present. For one, Late Antique western Eurasian steppe nomadic archeological finds are relatively sparse when compared to earlier centuries, for example the Scythian and Sarmatian periods.\textsuperscript{555} One explanation for this phenomenon is the greater frequency of migration and military disruption experienced on the steppe in the centuries under consideration when contrasted with earlier centuries.\textsuperscript{556} Furthermore, there is a certain level of bias in research and publications in favor of finds from earlier periods.\textsuperscript{557} Compounding this is the fact that nomadic peoples of the western Eurasian Steppe from the 4th to the 7th centuries rarely constructed new kurgans. The preference during these centuries was to

\textsuperscript{554} Other incidental problems affect the nature and quality of nomadic archaeological material. For example, it has been noted that while the region is rich in the amount of material uncovered and published, nevertheless Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian archaeologists have been somewhat slow in their publication of materials from the steppe and at times burial sites have been poorly documented. \textit{Stepi Evrazii v épochu srednevekov'è} (1981), pp. 6–10. \textit{Atlas Zapadnyi Tiurtskii Kaganat} (2013), p. 328. We must add to this slow pace of publication the aforementioned difficulty in grappling with data outside of one’s home discipline as well as an additional cultural barrier of working with material which traditionally has been published, discussed, and interpreted in the Russian Imperial and Soviet context, an intellectual world cut off from the west because of ideological and linguistic differences. Teasing out information relevant to my own designs has been a complicated process of interpreting the debates and concerns of Russian and Ukrainian archaeologists intellectually raised and still to a great extent steeped in discussions relevant to a broader Marxist interpretation of history. In particular, the discussion of nomadic archaeology and history raises intense questions and debates concerning the place of nomadic peoples in the Marxist progression of societies through the various stages of slave-holding, feudal, capitalist, and ultimately socialist and communist. For an excellent overview of these debates and the differences between sociologists/anthropologists/historians and archaeologists who work on the steppe, both in the western and Soviet/Russian/Ukrainian context, see the work of Kradin (1992) & (1997). 


\textsuperscript{556} Only the Sarmatians replaced the Scythians from the 5th century BCE to the 4th century CE; this in comparison to the repeated incursions and migrations experienced in Late Antiquity. Scholars, Russian archaeologists in particular, have argued that reduced finds in the region correspond to increased migrations and the subsequent disruptions to groups who would not have had the time and luxury to regularly deposit materials in burials. Pletnëva (1982) & (2003). There is also evidence to suggest a general drying out of the western steppe in Late Antiquity. Komar (2004). Such conditions would have had the effect of reducing population levels in comparison with the classical period. Komar (2005). Ambroz (1971).

\textsuperscript{557} Pletnëva (2003).
reutilize ancient Bronze Age and Scythian kurgans; nomadic peoples in Late Antiquity most often placed their own elaborate burials and conducted funeral rites at various points along the embankments or under the subsoil of ancient kurgans. The archaeologists who excavate such kurgans are traditionally scholars of the periods in which the kurgans were first constructed, which has created a certain bias, in the same way that archaeologists of classical Greek cities have been known to quickly and haphazardly dig through later “Christian” period burials and constructions. Thus, archaeologists uncovering these sites tend to be scholars of earlier periods and not intensely interested in Late Antique nomadic peoples; furthermore, they come across these burials only by accident and in the course of other work. Finally, kurgan burials, so prominent in the landscape, and because known often to contain rich and finely wrought items, are often looted by grave robbers, in most cases having been already combed over in antiquity.

Another series of problems arises from the dating of items, their provenance, and particularly their ownership. Throughout the 20th century, particularly among Soviet and Russian/Ukrainian archaeologists, there was intense debate over sites earlier identified as Sarmatian which are now commonly identified as Hunnic. Newly migrating groups are

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559 Archaeologists often come across these later date kurgan burials accidentally since they do not possess their own embankment or outer characteristics. Many are never published, since they are found in the course of other work and are considered tangential. One major effect is that later specialists are less likely to publish finds that they themselves did not discover. Furthermore, it is often the case that the burial rites and rituals performed at late period burials are unknown because data on the burial was gathered rapidly and haphazardly on the way to lower level and more ancient burials. Stepī Evrazii v ėpochu srednevekov’e (1981), pp. 11-12 & 19.
561 Semēnov (1988).
562 Zasetskaia (1994). Flērova (2001) argues that late Sarmatian traditions had a bigger influence on early Khazarian traditions than is otherwise expected and that the Turkic and Hunnic influence is overplayed. This is a caution to not exclude the possibility that conquered peoples in the so called “substratum” of
a mix of various peoples without a specific set of determined archaeological features; time is needed for features to settle out and for there to form something resembling a distinct culture.\textsuperscript{563} Archaeology confirms the migration of peoples, while styles could be carried on after the political subsumption or destruction of a people. This understanding has been used in the reinterpretations of scholars like I.P. Zasetskaia and A.V Komar to re-date and reincorporate sites which were previously considered to be Sarmatian as Hunnic; Sarmatian and other nomadic sub-elements and styles however remained prominent for some decades even after the arrival of the Huns.\textsuperscript{564} Another example occurs in the early sixth century when belt buckles of Hunnic type appear in regions assumed to be Kutrigur and Utigur territory; these buckles remained popular even a century later among a different nomadic people because of their connotations of and associations with political power derived from the Huns.\textsuperscript{565}

Despite the difficulties which archaeology presents, it is the richest source besides textual evidence for information on the material culture of nomadic societies and links with outside peoples and states.

\textsuperscript{563} Nomadic polities could have a considerable effect on material culture and ideology. See also \textit{Stepe Evrazii v epochu srednevekovye} (1981), pp. 6-10. Genito (1988).

\textsuperscript{564} Sarmatian elements remained strong even into the period of the Khazars on the Volga and may have heavily influenced the material culture of the Khazars. Flërova (2001). See Heather (1998) for a discussion of the ability of subsumed tribes to maintain distinct material cultures and political traditions, particularly p. 107. Heather uses the example of the Akatziri, as only the upper level of their leadership was eliminated by Attila.

\textsuperscript{565} Komar (2004), p. 182.
Hunnic Sites

The arrival of the Huns in the last third of the 4th century initiated a slow but steady shift in the ethnic composition and material cultures of the Pontic Steppe. From at least the 6th century BCE the western steppe, from Pannonia to the Volga, was dominated by the Indo-Iranian speaking Scythians. The Scythians were displaced by the Sarmatians, another group of Indi-Iranian speakers by the 2nd century BCE. The arrival of the Huns marked the first serious incursions and population displacements west of the Volga of nomadic people from Central and Inner Asia who did not speak an Indo-Iranian language.

The new migrants were markedly different in external appearance, particularly in the “Asiatic” facial features of the Huns and subsequent Turkic peoples who came to dominate the Pontus in Late Antiquity. The archaeological evidence from skull structures confirms the shift from Indo-Iranians to Turkic peoples. From the 5th to the 8th centuries “mongoloid” skull physiognomy came to dominate in the burials of the western steppe, as opposed to the previously predominant “europoid” skull structures of Scythian and Sarmatian burials. The items, assemblages, and burial practices included

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566 For ethnic mixing and the problem of ethnic identity within nomadic confederations, see Vida (2008) & Stadler (2008).
569 Pritsak (1982) is the best discussion of the little we know about Hunic as a language. Based on scanty evidence, Pritsak concludes that Hunnic was a form of Turkic, somewhere between Mongolian and Turkish. It may have also have had similarities with Chuvash and Old Bulgarian, two Turkic languages of the western Oguric branch. P. 470. The evidence is by no means conclusive. Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 376-443.
570 Ammianus famously remarks on the contrast between the hideous appearance of the Huns (31.2.2) and the natural beauty of the Alans (31.2.21).
572 Although the process was not instantaneous and there remained pockets of “europoid” burials throughout the Middle Ages, particularly south of the Kuban River and to the northwest of the Caucasus mountain range which corresponded to the territory of the Caucasian Alans. Arzhantseva (2007). Flyorov
in and surrounding kurganic and non-kurganic burials beginning in the late 4th century also indicate the eastern origins of Hunnic and later migrants. The rising influence of the eastern steppe on the material culture of the western steppe was a trend which continued throughout Late Antiquity and reached its apex in the 6th and 7th centuries with the establishment of the Gök Turk Empire; the process represents a general “Turkification” of the steppe.

From the last third of the 4th century to the middle of the 5th century, the entire study of Hunnic burials on the Pontic Steppe is based upon 54 burial sites and 10 non-mortuary finds. Of these, about 40 can be securely dated and are in possession of enough scholarly consensus to be more or less firmly considered Hunnic. The vast majority of Pontic Steppe Hunnic burials are interments, scattered in a relatively high concentration from the west bank of the Don River towards the Carpathian Mountains. Three Hunnic period burials however were discovered east of the Don in which the bones of the individual were cremated; one of these sites contained the skin of a horse. Cremation and


573 The Cherniakhov material culture associated with the Goths from the period of their presence on the Pontic Steppe in the third and fourth centuries also disappeared with the arrival of the Huns and the mass migration of Goths south across the Danube. There is evidence of a brief re-emergence of the Cherniakhov material culture in the final decades of the 4th century. Zasetskaia and Pletnëva believe that the resurgence represents the reliance of the Huns on agricultural products as produced by subordinate Gothic groups on the Pontic steppe. Zasetskaia (1994). Pletnëva (1982). Kazanski (1993). Stepi Evrazii v epokhu srednevekov’e (1981). Nagy (2010). The argument receives corollary support from evidence that the Huns helped to rebuild, or at the very least allowed the rebuilding of, cities which they had initially destroyed along the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea to facilitate trade. For example, the cities of Tanais and Panticapaea were rebuilt after their initial destruction in the late 4th century. Krym, Severo-Vostochnoe Prichernomor’ e i Zakavkaz’ e v epokhu srednevekov’ ia IV-XIII Veka Arkeologiya (2003).


576 There are also at least 17 Hunnic burials in the Pannonian Plain and along the lower Danube. These have all been identified by the inclusion of ritual cauldrons, a distinctly Hunnic feature in burial contexts. Erdy (1995). Zaseckaja & Bokovenko (1992).
the inclusion of significant portions of a horse, whether skull, other skeletal portions, or
the skin are features definitively connected with eastern Turkic practices and were
uniformly absent from Sarmatian and Scythian age burials in the region.\textsuperscript{577} Sarmatian
burials fade away from the archaeological record already by the close of the 4\textsuperscript{th} century,
although a distinct Hunnic culture does not immediately replace it.\textsuperscript{578} It is only by the
beginning of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century that the clearest indication of specifically Hunnic type burials
and burial items become commonplace in burials of the Pontic Steppe, although most of
these sites are marked by cultural heterogeneity.\textsuperscript{579}

The cultural variety exhibited in Hunnic burials was the result of the great variety
of pastoralists who existed on the steppe under Hunnic suzerainty in the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th}
centuries.\textsuperscript{580} One result of this in scholarship is that only until recently is there general
agreement on the dating of Hunnic age burials.\textsuperscript{581} However, Hunnic graves consist of

\textsuperscript{578} Abramova (1961). Sarmatian burial customs could however influence later burial cultures on the
steppe. For instance, Flërova (2001) argues that Khazar burials beginning in the 7\textsuperscript{th} century shared
similarities with Sarmatian burial assemblages.
\textsuperscript{579} Pletnëva (1982) & (2003) convincingly argues that nomadic groups in transition, that is, on migration,
amongst are most often composed of many groups and interact with a large variety of external groups on their
movements so that material culture becomes extremely susceptible to change and evolution. The first few
decades of Hunnic settlement along the Pontic Steppe was a transition period, before a new Hunnic
material culture had had the opportunity to “settle” and adopt features which we later recognize as properly
Hunnic. This does not mean that the main group or groups of Huns which migrated did not possess their
own “native” elements of material culture and that these elements did not play a determining role in later
manifestations of items and assemblages in burials. Hunnic cauldrons are our best evidence of this. Erdy
(1995). Hunnic bows were also a major element native to the Huns. Harmatta (1951) & Laszlo (1951).
Skeletal and linguistic evidence also supports the heterogeneity of the peoples comprising the Huns,
particularly during the imperial period under Attila and Bleda. Maenchen-Helfen (1973), pp. 358-443.
\textsuperscript{580} The cultural and ethnic heterogeneity of the Huns was especially marked, both in textual and
archaeological sources. Alföldi (1932). This was true of all steppe cultures, however, nomadic or otherwise.
Mordvintseva (2013) discusses the great heterogeneity in Sarmatian material culture, going so far as to call
into question the legitimacy of using a catch-all phrase like “Sarmatian.” Furthermore, it has been argued
that the influence of Indo-Iranian culture on the Huns and later Turkic peoples was enormous. This extends
into the appearance of ornamentation in the so-called “Animal Style,” linguistic evidence, and other
cultural manifestations, like the wolf as a symbol among the Turks. Pentti (1971).
\textsuperscript{581} Many burials had been previously thought to belong to a late Sarmatian material culture group.
several specific material items which mark them out as properly Hunnic.\textsuperscript{582} In comparison to earlier Sarmatian burials, Hunnic burials frequently contained the cremated remains of sacrificial animals. Rarely however were the remains of the individual cremated. Specifically Hunnic items include horse harnesses and belts decorated with precious metals, including gold and silver as well as plaques and jewels, complex reflex bows, saddles, and ritual cauldrons.\textsuperscript{583} Hunnic burials were also known for the peculiar tradition of skull deformation, the inclusion of mirrors, swords, and jewelry of the polychrome and glazed inlay style.\textsuperscript{584} Many elements that were clearly not Sarmatian, like cremations, non-kurgan burials, and burials with a part or the whole of a horse are totally unknown from the earlier Sarmatian period.\textsuperscript{585} Sarmatian graves also lacked items of horse attire, such as bridles, bridle ornamentation, saddles, and saddle ornamentation.\textsuperscript{586} All of this evidence from the horizon of Hunnic burials in Pannonia and the Pontic Steppe therefore points to a clear migration from the east in the later 4\textsuperscript{th} to 5\textsuperscript{th} centuries.

Perhaps one of the biggest issues concerning the identification of Hunnic age burials concerns ethnicity. That is, who were the individuals interred in burials in the 4\textsuperscript{th}-5\textsuperscript{th} centuries in Pannonia, the lower Danube, and the Pontic Steppe? Ultimately, it is impossible to know. Archaeological evidence points in certain directions, but in many

\textsuperscript{582} Rudenko (1962).
\textsuperscript{585} Zasetskaia (1994), p. 156. For Sarmatian burials see Simonenko (2010).
\textsuperscript{586} Zasetskaia (1994), p. 156.
cases cannot provide definite answers.\footnote{Werner (1956) argued that it is ultimately impossible to know the distinct ethnic identification of Hunnic burials because of the great variety of peoples present in the Hunnic Empire of Attila. Balint (1989) goes further and outlines theoretical propositions that prohibit the ethnic identification of items without a very clear and defined material culture in distinction to neighboring material cultures. See Daim (2003), p. 522: “It would be a grave methodological error to interpret the archaeological sources from the point of view of the scanty written evidence rather than empirically.” Also p. 524: “However it is highly problematic to label one or more of these “cultural groups” as “ethnic”, without extensive spatial comparison.”} For example, Hunnic age burials on the steppe roughly divide along an east-west axis at the Dnieper River. Burials to the east of the Dnieper were typically placed in kurgans and, on occasion, contained horse bones or a horse skin. These burials clearly evoke an eastern tradition and archaeologists have attempted to link these burials with the Akatziri, a confederation of nomads subdued by Attila in the late 440s.\footnote{Kazanski (1993).} West of the Dnieper, particularly west of the Carpathian Mountains, Hunnic burials resemble the burials of their Germanic subjects.\footnote{Germanen, Hunnen, und Awaren: Schätze der Völkerwanderungszeit (1987).} What clearly marks out Hunnic burials are the inclusion of ritual cauldrons, which have numerous analogies in Central and Inner Asia, but except for a few isolated examples along the Volga and north of the Caucasus Mountains, are found almost exclusively in Pannonia and the lower Danube and are dated roughly to the period of Attila’s rule.\footnote{Erdy (1995), pp. 17-18 & 59. Zaseckaja & Bokovenko (1992).} There is no way to determine whether these cauldrons represented anything ethnically “nomadic” since they are primarily found in regions with large populations of Attila’s Germanic subordinates, whereas on the steppe, where nomadic populations dominated, cauldrons are relatively absent. Finally, not even the popular Hunnic style of inlaid garnet and polychrome jewelry firmly marks out burials as Hunnic, since these fashions were...
also popular among the Romans, Persians, and Germanic peoples beyond the Danube in the 5th century.\textsuperscript{591}

The question that remains therefore is what can we learn about the relationship between Rome and the Huns through the archaeological record which the Huns left behind? The answer is, unfortunately, not much. There is much else we can know, however. For example, I have pointed out the transfer of burial rites and the inclusion of certain items which indicates a clear eastern migration by a group of nomads towards the western steppe in the 4th and 5th centuries. In terms of the interaction between Rome and the Huns, only the massive influx of gold in Hunnic age burials demonstrates that there was a relationship of tribute and plunder.\textsuperscript{592} Only in isolated cases however can we know directly whether items were constructed by Roman artisans or by artisans of nomadic origin working on the steppe.\textsuperscript{593}

\textbf{Post-Hunnic Introduction}

The post-Hunnic period on the steppe is chronologically divided according to the peoples who migrated from the east and came to politically dominate the western Pontic Steppe. There are four phases: the Ogur-Sabir period (479-559), the Turkic period (561-630), the Khazar/Bulgar period (631-662), and the Early Khazar period (662-737).\textsuperscript{594}


\textsuperscript{592} Werner (1956). Balint (1989) argues the same for the influx of gold which the Avars and Hungarians received as the result of plunder and tributes.

\textsuperscript{593} For example, the treasure horde at Vrap in modern Albania also contained golden ingots which indicates that there were artisans in the entourage of this Avaro-Bulgarian chieftain. Werner (1986).

\textsuperscript{594} The last of these phases falls outside of the bounds of this work and so I will not discuss it. These designations concern the dominant ethnic and political regimes of each period. See \textit{Atlas Zaporizhzhia Tiiurkskii Kaganat} (2013), pp. 660-667 for a full breakdown of the period. These phases focus on the Pontic Steppe, from the Carpathians in the west to the Don in the east. There may also be said to be an “Avaric period” from roughly 560-630. The period ranges from the Avars migration westward to the overthrow of their rule north of the Pontus by the Bulgars.
Archaeologists, particularly Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian, have attempted to match material culture horizons and trends in elite burial practices and assemblages with these specific periods, to varying degrees of success.\textsuperscript{595} It is important to mention however that archaeological changes do not shift strictly with the changing of the political or dominant ethnic guard. Some aspects of archaeological cultures and burials remain fixed, while other aspects change rapidly or at slower paces. Again, this trend indicates that several different ethnic groups could comprise any single political group on the steppe and that material cultures are not fixed according to ethnic or political distinctions. Nomadic burials and the loose cultures which archaeologists designate had their own logic which sometimes conform to and answer important historical questions about the political, ethnic, and social aspects of a given nomadic society; alternatively, archaeological evidence can muddle our understanding of historical events.

All post Hunnic burials and horizons show a clear dependence on trends originating out of and emanating from the east, i.e. Central Asia.\textsuperscript{596} Migrations are clearly indicated in the burials of the steppe in the post Hunnic period, for instance in the ritual cauldrons of the Huns or the increasing influx of Altaic items with the arrival of the Oguric Turks.\textsuperscript{597} This tendency marks the entire post-Hunnic phase and the rise to prominence of the Turks as a source of cultural and political hegemony on the steppe.\textsuperscript{598} On the western steppe at this time we witness a split between Turkic and Roman influence in the material culture among nomadic peoples. The spheres of influence were

\textsuperscript{595} This is a contentious issue in archaeological theory and methodology. For discussion see the articles by Yablonsky, Bashilov & Yablonsky, Koryakova, & Hanks in Davis-Kimball, Murphy, Koryakova, & Yablonksy (2000).
\textsuperscript{596} Kazanski & Mastykova (2009).
\textsuperscript{598} Golden (1992), pp. 115-154.
however quite different. Assemblages appealed to a general Turkic rubric of items and burial features which linked these people culturally, socially, and politically with the Turks. However, very distinct items in nomadic burials indicate Roman influence or explicit contact with the Romans. We can see this most clearly in the so-called Pereshchepinskii culture, named after the namesake site at Malaya Pereshchepina.\textsuperscript{599} Coins and belts are the most important indicators which directly link nomads to the Roman sphere of influence.\textsuperscript{600}

What follows is a discussion of some of the better known cultural horizons in the post-Hunnic period and what they might be able to tell us about political connections with Rome.\textsuperscript{601} In the final section I discuss the critical importance of coins in demonstrating the clearest material evidence available of links to the Roman Empire.

**Likhachëvskii Sites**

Dating to the Ogur-Sabir period (479-559) of nomadic habitation on the Pontic Steppe are burials known as the Likhachëvskii type.\textsuperscript{602} Burials of this type cluster around the Dniester though some have been found to the east along the lower Volga.\textsuperscript{603} Likhachëvskii sites are found to the north along the Dnieper towards the wooded steppe and the northern plains of the Pontic steppe.\textsuperscript{604} Likhachëvskii burials were overwhelmingly placed in bronze-age and Scythian kurgans, typically in the embankment

\textsuperscript{599} Komar (2006).
\textsuperscript{600} Komar (2005).
\textsuperscript{601} Following largely the work of Komar, particularly (2008c).
\textsuperscript{602} Oblomskiĭ (2004). There are, as always, very few Likhachëvskii sites. By different estimates, there are either 6 or 7 definitely defined as such, with perhaps a dozen more likely belonging to this group. Komar (2004), p. 194.
\textsuperscript{603} In addition to a few burials found in modern Moldova and to the north along the wooded steppe. Komar (2008b), p.104. One famous Likhachëvskii site at Sakharnaya Golovka is in the Crimea but takes on local traditions of burial. *Atlas Zapadnïy Tiurksckiĭ Kaganat* (2013), p. 680.
\textsuperscript{604} Komar (2008b), p. 104.
of the kurgan, rather than in the subsoil beneath. Likhachëvskiî burials are notoriously difficult to identify because of the relative lack, when compared to earlier Hunnic burials or later burials on the Pontic steppe, of distinct burial items. For instance, Likhachëvskiî burials did not have the famous decorated bridles of Hunnic burials. In addition, Likhachëvskiî burials resemble Sarmatian period burials. Likhachëvskiî burials were often placed in a birch bark coffin, a vessel placed near the head, and included belts, ornamental (non-functional) buckles, and a knife for male burials. Cranial vault modification attests to a possible continuity of cultural practices from the earlier Hunnic period. They are dated from the end of the 5th to the first half of the 6th century, thus marking the first horizon of relatively homogenous nomadic cultural practices along the Pontic Steppe not linked with the Huns. The Likhachëvskiî burials reflect the influx of Turkic Oguric nomadic peoples in the middle of the fifth century. Likhachëvskiî burials have been connected with the

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605 Ibid., p. 104.  
606 Ibid., p. 105.  
609 Atlas Zapadnyĭ Tiurksckiĭ Kaganat (2013), p. 680. This is a common problem with burials throughout the period. The work of Zasetskaia (1994) advanced the discussion by re-dating and re-identifying as Hunnic sites those which were previously considered Sarmatian. Previously, Soviet scholars had debated the dating of Likhachëvskiî sites, suggestions ranging from Sarmatian, to Hunnic, to 8th century burials. Komar’s work has generally settled the debate. Komar, A.V., Kubyshev, A.I., Orlov (2006), p. 355.  
611 Komar (2008a), pp.199-200. This does not necessarily speak to Hunnic influence, but rather a general trend in eastern nomadic burials. It is often a matter of debate whether later burial items reflect Hunnic influence upon contact along the Pontic Steppe, or traits deriving from Central and Inner Asia. For instance, some belt buckles of the Likhachëvskiî horizon and the later Sukhanovo horizon appear to be Hunnic, but may also indicate widespread belt buckle ornamentation popular among various groups of nomadic peoples at the time throughout the steppe. Komar (2004), p. 182.  
Kutrigurs who later migrated towards the Pannonian Basin with the Avars in the 550s, as well as with the Utigurs before the coming to power of the Turks in the 570s.\footnote{Komar (2008c), p. 111, (2008a), p. 199, & (2004), p. 193.}

Likhachëvskiĭ type burials are an excellent example of the type of difficulty associated with claiming the one-to-one correspondence of a nomadic cultural horizon with a specific nomadic people known from Greco-Roman texts. Likhachëvskiĭ sites contain elements of Sarmatian, Hunnic, and Turkic burials, and it is therefore impossible to claim that all associated sites correspond to a distinct ethnic or political unit. Burials could display a variety of semantic messages and were representative of a variety of ethnic groups with different burial traditions and perhaps even historical memory.\footnote{Curta’s (2001) work on the problems with linking archaeological cultures to specific ethnic groups is very revealing, although he concentrates on the Slavs. In particular, he argues that archaeological horizons cannot often be linked with specific ethnic units which we know from texts because it was in the Roman habit to label an entire complex group of various ethnic units as a single people which came about as a result of having to interact with a discrete group politically, militarily, and diplomatically. In this sense, the Romans “created” the Slavs by interacting with them on a formal level. In the same way the Romans may be said to have created (not out of thin air, naturally) the Utigurs or Kutrigurs, in the sense that they gave more political cohesion to groups which were no doubt highly fragmented in terms of existent ethnic groups. The variety of archaeological burial horizons which existed conterminously with one another attests to this phenomenon.} In fact it is only because of the evidence of coins that Likhachëvskiĭ burials have been identified as Kutrigur or Utigur and can in any way convey a link to the Roman Empire. I discuss this evidence in the section on coins below.

**Sukhanovo & Sivashovskii Sites**

The Likhachëvskiĭ style of burial tradition is succeeded on the steppe in the mid-sixth century with Sukhanovo style burials, with which it shares many similarities; it is eventually wholly supplanted on the steppe by the Sukhanovo style.\footnote{Komar (2008c).} In the 6th–7th centuries these sites range, alongside the Likhachëvskiĭ burials, from Moldova to the
lower Volga. Sukhanovo burials however are distributed along the central belt of the steppe plain as opposed to the northward distribution of the Likhachëvskii style. In terms of construction Sukhanovo burials are similar to Likhachëvskii burials. Sukhanovo burials however contained a higher frequency of ornate materials and pits were often lined with stone; there was also a higher frequency of deformed skulls in Sukhanovo burials.

Sukhanovo burials have typically been identified as later Sivashovskii sites or alternatively as earlier Likhachëvskii sites. Sukhanovo burials were generally placed in older kurgans in the embankment of the structure. Sivashovskii sites meanwhile were placed under kurgans in the subsoil. Sukhanovo burials were located on the central plains of the steppe and the buried faced northwest or northeast. Some however faced eastwards. The interred in Sivashovskii sites meanwhile faced primarily north, while a few face to the west. In comparison to Sukhanovo burials Likhachëvskii types were more ornately adorned and had well-constructed pits and caskets. Sukhanovo sites are dated from the second half of the 6th century to the first third of the 7th and are related to Oguric peoples, perhaps early Bulgar peoples.

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616 Ibid., p. 104.
617 Ibid., p. 104.
618 Ibid., pp. 104-106 & 112.
620 Komar (2008c), pp. 101 & 104. For instance, sites at New Odessa and Selishte have been classified alternatively as Likhachëvskii and as Sivashovskii burials.
622 This was a Turkic innovation. Komar (2008a) & (2008c).
623 Komar, A.V., Kubyshev, A.I., Orlov, R.S. (2006), 248-264 for Sivashovskii burials. The namesake site was located just to the north of the Crimea west of the Sea of Azov. The site contained a separate horse burial and was built into a Bronze Age kurgan, oriented to the north.
625 Komar (2008c), pp. 104-105 & 110. This is supported by the fact that Sukhanovo type burials are found among the Avars and along the south and east Urals, an area clearly under the control of the Turks. Their items represent a substratum of peoples living under the politically dominant Avaric and Turkic clans.
the Utigurs who migrated to the Black Sea region, especially after their subordination to the Turks.626

There is a clear difficulty in linking any single burial type with a specific group on the Pontic Steppe during the 6th and 7th centuries. All three horizons, Likhachëvskiï, Sukhanovo, and Sivashovskiï show a general chronological progression, though elements of each tend to remain and influence later burial practices. The predominant theme among all of the burials is the dominance of Turkic practices, particularly the inclusion of horse bones and parts of horses in burials or alongside burials, confirming one of the general themes throughout this chapter.627 Some burials of these horizons however do contain specific and important Roman items which can give clues as to the links of the peoples interred here with the Roman Empire. For example, Sukhanovo type burials demonstrate the influence of Roman items.628 In particular, Sukhanovo burials contain Byzantine prototype belts and belt buckles.629 Belts were often given to federate peoples, indicating close interaction with the Roman army and state.630 All Sukhanovo burials have Byzantine belt buckles and Byzantine belt decorations, primarily of the so-called Sucidava type; for this reason some scholars consider them to be linked to the Kutrigurs, although coin evidence suggests that Likhachëvskiï burials belonged to the Utigurs.631

626 Komar (2008c), pp. 111-112. However they also may indicate links to the Kutrigurs because of their striking similarity to Likhachëvskiï type burials. Komar, A.V., Kubyshev, A.I., Orlov, R.S. (2006), p. 258.
627 Komar (2008c), p. 111. For example, at the namesake Sivashovskiï site there was a separate burial for a horse, presumably belonging to the human burial. Komar, A.V., Kubyshev, A.I., Orlov, R.S. (2006), pp. 248 & 264.
629 Komar (2008c).
631 Komar (2008c), p. 101. These belt types are generally dated to the second half of the 6th century to the first few years of the 7th century. See also Fiedler (1992).
Belts play a very significant role in determining, fixing, and indicating rank among nomadic peoples. This was generally true throughout the Late Antique world. Belts indicated social and military rank, as well as, potentially, the origin of the individual and relationships with outside powers. Belts conveyed social significance in China, Persia, and most notably for our purposes, among Turkic nomadic peoples. Archaeologists have attempted to coordinate belt types and decorations found in nomadic burials with a system of ranked semantics according to the richness of the materials used in constructing belt buckles and belt ornaments. For example, most basic classifications group individuals with bronze or silver belt items among the rank of common nomadic male warriors, with rank and status increasing as ornaments increase in value, culminating in the richly decorated golden and bejeweled ornaments on belts of nomadic chieftains and leading elites at Malaya Pereshchepina or Glodosi.

Sukhanovo and Sivashovskiï burial horizons therefore add to the conundrum of Late Antique steppe archaeology. Is it even useful to speak about the identity of a particular cultural horizon or style of burial as corresponding to a discrete people? My own assessment is that textual sources and archaeological sources parallel one another. Texts attest a great variety of nomadic peoples on the Pontic Steppe in Late Antiquity,

632 Though not among all nomadic peoples, The Bulgars of the Danube and Volga and Black Bulgars seemed to have lacked belt semantics. Komar (2005), p. 184. In general however belt semantics were important among people of Turkic origin.
634 Ibid., pp. 160-161.
635 Ambroz (1971) & (1981), Orlov (1985), & Albabin (1982) & (1999). Ambroz was the first to comprehensively organize these belts, Komar the latest. These are arguments specifically about 7th century belt types, but it holds for other eras as well. Komar (2005), pp. 184-185.
636 I have not chosen to discuss the nomadic burial horizon known as Shipovo. Shipovo burials cluster around the Volga region. However the dating and ownership of these sites is still under intense debate within the Russian archaeological community. These sites have been alternatively dated to the period 460-560 and to 600-650. Komar, A.V., Kubyhev, A.I., Orlov, R.S. (2006), pp. 355-356. Komar (2004). Zasetskaia (2004), pp. 188-190. Kazanski & Mastykova (2009), pp. 118 & 124-125. While there is no general scholarly consensus I find it impossible to assess what role these sites might play in my conclusions.
while archaeology suggests constant migration, mixing, and variation in burial customs and traditions. However, only rarely do the two correspond, allowing the potential for the link between discrete burials and discrete peoples.\(^637\) The case of the Pereshchepinskiĭ burial horizon demonstrates potential links more explicitly, though not without its own series of complex problems.

**Malaya Pereshchepina**

The group of elite burials from the Pereshchepinskiĭ horizon, particularly the namesake site, offers some of the clearest material evidence that Byzantine items were directly transferred to nomadic leaders.\(^638\) Furthermore, specifically the site at Malaya Pereschepina includes items with clear Byzantine iconography and indicates that the interred person, or persons, saw significance in their relationship with the Roman Empire and the material wealth received from the Romans.\(^639\)

The case of the Pereshchepinskiĭ burials is also an excellent example of how an archaeological style can be alternately dated to various periods. Originally it was assumed that the site belonged to a prominent Khazar elite on the western reaches of the Khazar Khaganate in the later 7\(^{th}\) century, corresponding to the period of Khazar

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\(^{637}\) Kossack (1998), p. 29: “However, even if every imported object’s origin could be ascertained, the ideologically decisive aspects explaining their function in the ritual process cannot be understood through an analysis of the material assemblage alone.” Daim (2003), p. 516: “Traditionalist historians frequently ask the archaeologist – finally – to summarise his “historical” results. In fact, the results of archaeological research are usually concerned with other aspects of human life than written sources. The latter take no notice of what is “obvious”. Archaeological research is restricted to observing long-term structures and processes, in as far as these leave traces in the ground, for instance in types of settlements, burials customs, technology, cultural exchange, crafts and trade. Only in rare cases is it possible for archaeology to obtain data pertaining to political history.”

\(^{638}\) There are several sites that are part of this horizon. I only discuss the namesake site specifically. Other sites include: Glodosi, Makukhovka, Iasinovo, and Zachepilovska. Komar (2008b), p. 289. See for a discussion of these additional sites, specifically their coinage, Semënov (1986) & (1991).

\(^{639}\) The site is important especially in the context of so few finds in the region. For example, in the Volga there are only 5 burials found of the 6\(^{th}-7\(^{th}\) centuries. Furthermore, few of the sites have been published. Semënov (1986), pp. 92-93.
expansion westward. 640 This was refuted however by Joachim Werner who interpreted the anagrams on one of the golden rings found at the site to name Kubrat, the leader of Great Bulgaria in the 7th century, as a patrician in the Roman Empire. 641 Most scholars today agree with this interpretation and believe the burial to have belonged to Kubrat or his uncle Organa. 642 These items all represent direct gifts to the Bulgars and/or items taken on raid perhaps from the Avars. 643

Currently, it is widely accepted that Pereshchepinskiï burials correspond to the elites of Greater Bulgaria from roughly 630-680; that is, from the Bulgars’ emancipation from under Avar hegemony to their migration under the force of Khazar expansion onto Byzantine territory. 644 The problem lies in the fact that ultimately we can only guess with relative certainty the ethnic or political affiliation of the Pereshchepinskiï horizon burials. It is clear that, judging from the rich array of particularly golden and silver items found, that the burials belonged to elite individuals. 645 The question remains however whether these burials could have belonged to elites of an independent Greater Bulgaria, or to elites who had remained in the region after the Khazar conquest. Some claim that these are properly Bulgar burials. 646 Others argue that while Bulgar such burials were nonetheless indicative of Turkic burial practices and indicate political links to Turkic centers of power in Central Asia. 647 Still others consider that the Pereshchepinskiï burials

641 Werner (1956). Another ring belonged to Organa and another is unidentified.
643 Ibid., p. 44.
646 Werner (1956) the most significant of these.
are entirely Khazar in origin and style. Ultimately this debate, while important and certainly necessary for discerning questions related to ethnic, political, and even religious/symbolic aspects of the steppe in the mid-7th century, does not have much to add to or subtract from understanding Rome’s particular material impact on the steppe. As we will see from the site of Malaya Pereshchepina in particular, items of Roman origin had a symbolic meaning which linked nomadic leaders to Rome as a center of power and wealth.

The treasures at Malaya Pereshchepina were found accidentally on May 29, 1912 in a field by a farmer plowing his land in the Konstantinovgrad region of the Poltava Oblast in what is now Ukraine. Soon after the discovery the finds were scattered throughout Europe but eventually the majority of them were returned to the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg by the middle of the 20th century. Although it is not known if human remains were found at the site, reports of ashes and animal bones indicate that some form of burial ritual was performed. Horse bones in particular were found at this site. Large numbers of silver and golden items were found of Byzantine and Persian construction as well as items from Central Asia, including rings, swords, vessels of various shapes and sizes, and 69 Byzantine coins ranging from the reign of

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648 Kruglov (1992) & (2006). Zuckerman (2006) argues for Khazar ownership of the grave, linking Pershchepinskii sites with the incursions and conquest of the Pontus by the Khazars and Turkic peoples under their suzerainty in the late 7th century. He argues this based on the style of granulation on golden belt ornaments, which is generally agreed to be a Byzantine style of the last third of the 7th century. Furthermore, he argues that the inclusion of an inhumed horse in many of the burials was only a Turkic innovation of the last third of the 7th century. It is unclear however why these features cannot have become part of Bulgar burials before their migration towards the Danube, given that the burials also contained Turkic drinking vessels, for example.


651 50 years later the same farmers reported seeing a skull fragment near the site, perhaps confirmation that there were bodies associated or placed within the original burial context. Zuckerman (2006), p. 51.

Anastasius to that of Constans II.\(^{653}\) It has been conjectured that the site was a secret burial as opposed to a kurgan burial, which indicates a very high degree of importance attached to the leader interred and a desire to keep the riches secret.\(^ {654}\)

The items from the Malaya Pereshchepina burial, particularly the Byzantine items, have been very intensively studied. Many of these items show a clear Byzantine provenance and construction, and it is supposed that most if not all of these items were given as diplomatic gifts.

Byzantine items at the site include primarily silver vessels with Byzantine stamps and jewelry.\(^ {655}\) There was a bishop’s plate with a stamp from the time of Anastasius, an amphora of the Anastasian or Justinianic period, ladles, and a jug with a stamp from the time of Maurice. One plate is dated to the reign of Heraclius, post 629/630.\(^ {656}\) In terms of golden decorations, there was a golden belt buckle with a figured base, belt decorations, belt ends, a golden collar, a bracelet with incrustation, and three golden signet rings, all of Byzantine origin and construction.\(^ {657}\) The belt decorations had analogies in widespread Byzantine styles of the Mediterranean.\(^ {658}\) There are belt plaques at this site made of Byzantine coins.\(^ {659}\) The belts were probably a direct diplomatic gift to Kubrat from Heraclius.\(^ {660}\) Four daggers were found along with three swords, and a single


\(^{655}\) In addition to the coins. Sokrovishcha Khana Kubrata. Pereshchepinskii Klad (1997), p. 41.

\(^{656}\) Stamps on some vessels are from the late 5\(^{th}\) - early 6\(^{th}\) century (Anastasian) and there is one from the bishop of Tomi on the Danube. Stamps also date from the time of Justinian I and Maurice. There is also a necklace made from coins with stones soldered to them. Sokrovishcha Khana Kubrata. Pereshchepinskii Klad (1997), p. 76.


\(^{658}\) Ibid., pp. 42-43.

\(^{659}\) Ibid., p. 49.

\(^{660}\) Ibid., pp. 42-43.
reconstructed sword.⁶⁶¹ It is supposed that such swords were crafted by the Byzantines to fit the eastern tastes of elite nomads north of the Pontus in the mid-7th century.⁶⁶²

What the Malaya Pereshchepina site in particular demonstrates is a clear link to Rome which we can corroborate with textual sources. We know that the Romans began to court the Bulgars and even the Turks to the east during the reign of Heraclius, the former after the failed siege of Constantinople by the Avars and Persians as a means to detach steppe peoples from the Avars, and the latter as allies of the Romans against the Persians.⁶⁶³ We also have independent corroboration from the sources that Heraclius gave silver vessels and coins to the leader of the Turks in his meeting with them.⁶⁶⁴ Malaya Pereshchepina is one of the few sites where a firm link to the Roman Empire exists in terms of iconography and items that can be shown to have been most likely constructed by Roman masters or artisans in a nomadic context.⁶⁶⁵ The elite in question, whether Kubrat or not, considered in particular the rings which he received from the Romans as representative of his status.

Malaya Pereshchepina has become the type-site of a wider style of elite burial sites along the Pontic Steppe in the mid-7th century. The Pereshchepinskiĭ burials were strongly Pan-steppe. Through the inclusion of certain items they show a clear reliance on Turkic expression of power on the steppe, a trend which I have been highlighting throughout.⁶⁶⁶ In the 7th century, bows, the inclusion of the skull and skin of horses, and

⁶⁶³ See Kaegi (2003) for an overview of the Turks’ role in Heraclius’ campaigns into Persia.
⁶⁶⁴ Theophanes Confessor 624/625.
⁶⁶⁵ Heinrich-Tamaska (2008) discusses, in an Avar context, what nomadic metalsmiths and artisans were capable of and the techniques they borrowed from Byzantine masters.
the increase in horse bones show a clear rise in the influence of the Turks to the east.\textsuperscript{667} However, the site at Malaya Pereshchepina also shows us the clearest signs of a Roman presence on the steppe in terms of items and the potential semantic meaning which items had for nomadic peoples, associating them with the Roman Empire and a tribute relationship with Rome. Turkic rites coincide with the dominant presence of Roman belt ornaments, Roman prestige items, coins in graves, and even specific named items, like the rings of Kubrat. It is clear therefore that the individuals of the Pereshchepinskiĭ horizon had pan-steppe connections, incorporating Sassanian, Turkic, and Roman items and expressions in their dress and ornamentation, and that the inclusion of a high number of items of Roman construction indicate a strong relationship between the individuals interred and the Roman Empire as a source of wealth and ultimately political legitimacy.\textsuperscript{668}

**Coins**

In this final section I discuss coins as found in the burials of nomadic elites on the Pontic Steppe in Late Antiquity.\textsuperscript{669} In particular I highlight two large coin hoards already mentioned above: the one at Malaya Pereshchepina, and that at the Likhachëvskiĭ site known as Beliarovka.

Coins are one of the most frequent of finds in burials on the western Eurasian steppe in Late Antiquity. They provide direct evidence for the prestige attached to Roman goods and tributary relations with Rome, since the depiction of the emperor’s face on

\textsuperscript{668} Komar (2005).
\textsuperscript{669} A full listing of the solidi and other silver and bronze Byzantine coinage found on the steppe in the Soviet Union up until the early 60s, which covers all of the sites which I discuss and many more, is found in Kropotkin (1962). See also the update in Kropotkin (1965). For an overview of coins and their role in the Byzantine economy: Grierson (1968) & (1999). Hendy (1985).
gold coinage provided an outward depiction of a relationship with the Roman Empire. Unlike other artifacts however, which can often be attributed to specific cultural areas or origins by morphological or decorative characteristics, even when the archaeological context is absent or unknown, coins are most useful only when their original context is known. That is, the find spots and contents of a coin hoard or coin finds in a burial must be known in their proper context to make any conclusions about the owner of the coins or the dating of the finds.

The coins under discussion here are referred to as “solidi.” Roman solidi were renowned for the stability of their gold content, a single full solidus weighing somewhere around 4.54 grams or 24 carats. As I discuss below, standard full weight solidi were frequently found on the steppe alongside a large amount of light-weight solidi, minted primarily during the reigns of Justinian and Heraclius. Solidi are typically found within burial sites, though scattered finds are not unknown. Solidi may appear unaltered as coins or were more than occasionally pierced or mounted in the construction of jewelry and belts.

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670 The iconography on coinage also naturally spoke to Roman ideological concerns. See Abramzon (2001) for a discussion of the motif of submissive and defeated Pontic nomadic and non-nomadic tribes.
671 Coins of course always provide a terminus post quem for dating purposes, since we know the date of issue for most Roman solidi. The terminus post quem however is not always useful, since coins could exist in circulation or be found in hoards dating to even centuries after their initial issue. For coins we can determine when they were gifted or transferred to the steppe better than we can tell when they were committed to the soil. See in particular Komar (2011) who provides examples of solidi included in wealthy burials in northern China more than two centuries after they were originally minted.
672 Somogyi (2008). Komar (2011). The latest coin in a hoard or in a burial where several coins were found can give a terminus post quem, that is, a date after which the deposit was made into the earth. If however the coins from a burial or hoard are separated from their context by looting or improper archaeological recording, dating must be done in coordination with other means, since it is possible that there are missing coins from a later date.
673 Solidi were the dollar of the middle ages in some respects. They were minted from the 4th to the 11th century by the Eastern Roman Empire, were the main coins of taxation in Late Antiquity, and were so prestigious that the barbarian successor kingdoms minted their own fakes for a period. Hendy (1985) & Grierson (1999).
674 Smedley (1988).
Solidi are useful as pieces of evidence because we know that gold flowed regularly to the steppe from the Roman Empire, sometimes in specific amounts.\textsuperscript{675} Solidi were used as payments to barbarian nations as tribute or to maintain peace. The Huns famously received 700 pounds of gold per year beginning in 435, the amount increasing to 2,100 pounds during the reign of Attila. It is not known however in what form this gold was given to the Huns, whether in bars or in coins.\textsuperscript{676} The Avars however specifically received 80,000 solidi of gold which eventually increased to 200,000 solidi.\textsuperscript{677} The great amount of gold which reached the Avars is evidenced in the magnificent gold hoards found in former Avar territory and housed in the museums of central Europe.\textsuperscript{678} The massive gold flow to the steppe throughout this period is primarily evidenced in reworked forms, when coins or bars of gold were melted down and refashioned either by Roman or nomadic artisans into jewelry and other ornamentation. That these solidi were considered prestigious and to have possessed definite value is supported by the fact that they were often refashioned into jewelry, specifically necklaces and belts.\textsuperscript{679} Medallions could be stamped by the Romans with the image of the solidus,

\textsuperscript{675} Coin flow was generally constant to the steppe except for a period following the Arab invasions when gold was in short supply and gold and silver coins are only found along the lower and middle Don, connected with interaction with the Khazars. Ambroz (1971).
\textsuperscript{676} Nechaeva (2014), pp. 51-54. Iluk (2007), pp. 78-86 & (1985), pp. 81 & 97. There is evidence to suggest that payments reached the Huns in large batches of freshly minted coins. A massive coin hoard of 1439 solidi found in Hodmezovasarhely-Szikancs in Hungary is the largest hoard of 5th century golden coins found to date. All of the coins with the exception of 34 were coins of Theodosius II. Somogyi (2008), p. 131, f. 155.
\textsuperscript{677} Smedley suggests that the shift to payments in a specific number of coins could have facilitated the payment in light-weight solidi. This however is unlikely since the Avars would hardly have been fooled; they had plenty of contact with full-weight Byzantine coins to know the difference. Smedley (1988), p. 124.
\textsuperscript{679} Coins were directly fashioned into linked belts or necklaces, as evidenced at Malaya Pereshchepina and elsewhere. Sokrovishcha Khana Kubrata. Pereshchepinskii Klad (1997). Flërov (2000).
although larger and containing significantly more gold, as special gifts to nomadic leaders. 680

It is clear that Roman solidi on the steppe served as markers of prestige status and were not used for purposes of trade and market exchange. 681 The easy face recognition of the emperor denoted prestige value and served to link the holder of these coins to the rank and privilege of the emperor, sometimes directly, as the recipient and owner of coins often had a relationship with the Roman emperor, like that of a federate. 682 Roman solidi were too valuable individually and are found too rarely on the steppe to have served the purposes of widespread exchange. 683 On occasion Roman bronze coinage served the purposes of exchange, perhaps arriving on the steppe through the Pontic and Bosphoran cities along the northern Black Sea coast. 684 There is evidence as well that Sassanian dirhams were used as a means of exchange on the steppe, particularly in Central Asia. 685

There is further evidence that Roman coins were markers of prestige along the steppe in Late Antiquity. Solidi have been found as far away as the northern Altai mountain range. 686 In a region known as Ust’pristan along the northern Altai Mountains


681 Around the northern coast of the Black Sea we find primarily copper coins in contexts that indicate they were used for trade and exchange. Golden coins are found for the most part in burial contexts on the steppe proper in the territories of nomadic peoples. Smedley (1988), p. 118. Čechova (2014). Hahn (1978).


683 Kovalev (2005).


685 Savinov (2009). This was the case in later periods as well, when, for example Samanid dirhams were preferred for exchange along the Volga towards the Baltic Sea and even into southern Sweden, carried by Rus’ traders. The literally millions of dirhams dwarf the number of solidi found north of the Black Sea in the 9th and 10th centuries. Noonan (1986). Smedley (1988), p. 118, however, dismisses the idea that silver was the primary coinage of the steppe.

coinage from the reign of Anastasius, Justinian, and Maurice have been found.\textsuperscript{687} Furthermore, 46 solidi have been recovered from graves in northern China from the 5-7\textsuperscript{th} centuries. All of these have been found in gravesites, as opposed to Sassanid and Central Asian silver coins which are predominantly discovered in hoards. Byzantine coins must have been part of a burial custom in the region at the time; imitation disks have also been discovered from Chinese and Turkic territory in the 6\textsuperscript{th} and 7\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Coins were regularly considered high prestige items carried by the Sogdians to China for trade and other purposes. Some coins found are of decorative purpose and imitations resemble thin disks which were poorly constructed. In particular there are imitation coins from Turkic territory, indicating that they may have held symbolic value. These solidi date predominantly from the pre-Heraclian period. The Turks were the conduit of Byzantine solidi to the Chinese in the late 6\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{688}

There is a correspondence between the flow of coinage to certain areas of the steppe and regions of Roman interaction with specific nomadic steppe tribes. For example, in the mid-sixth century golden coins are found predominantly to the west of the Don River, where the Utigurs and Kutrigurs resided.\textsuperscript{689} We have seen from previous chapters the relationship of tribute and plundering which existed between the Romans and Kutrigurs/Utigurs in the decades towards the end of Justinian’s reign. The rich variety of golden reworked items in Avaria in the 6\textsuperscript{th}-8\textsuperscript{th} centuries also indicates how solidi were reused.\textsuperscript{690}

\textsuperscript{687} Savinov (2009), p. 305. Solidi are also occasionally found as far away as India.
\textsuperscript{688} For this paragraph I have relied exclusively on the excellent article by Yin (2003).
\textsuperscript{690} Daim (1998).
The majority of the coins found at Malaya Pereshchepina and Beliarovka in the Donetsk oblast of Ukraine are of a type known as “light-weight” soli. Debate surrounds the purpose of the light-weight soli although it is hard to reach firm conclusions since we have little to no reference in textual sources.\textsuperscript{691} While normal weight soli weighed 24 carats, the light-weight versions were issued in weights of 23, 22, and 20 carats.\textsuperscript{692} Light-weight soli were first issued in the late 530s under Justinian and were continuously minted throughout his reign. There was a lull in the decades on either side of the turn of the 6\textsuperscript{th} to 7\textsuperscript{th} centuries, with the issue picking up dramatically again under Heraclius, particularly in the 630s.\textsuperscript{693} Although not encompassing the full range of their usage, light-weight soli were most certainly used as gifts and tributes to barbarian leaders, specifically nomadic chieftains of the western Eurasian steppe. Smedley states:

“In conclusion, then, the current distribution of the 20-carat soli of Justinian I and of the period from Phocas to Constans II and the correlation of the issues with historical events in the relations between the Byzantine empire and the peoples of the Russian steppe and of Pannonia point unmistakably to the fact that the coins were minted in order to be sent as tribute, bribes, or gifts to buy peace from and ensure good relations with the barbarians on the empire’s northern frontier. Whether this was their original purpose it is impossible to say for certain, and this use does not necessarily exclude other ones – other uses must, indeed, be invoked to account for the distribution of the coins of the second part of the sixth century and their presence in the empire’s eastern provinces.”\textsuperscript{694}

\textsuperscript{691} Except for perhaps a brief mention by Procopius. The literature on light-weight soli is considerable. I rely primarily on the analyses of Smedley (1988) and Hendy (1972). See also Adelson (1957) & Lewis (1969).
\textsuperscript{692} Hendy (1972), pp. 58-59.
\textsuperscript{693} Hendy (1972), pp. 57-63 & Smedley (1988), pp. 118-129.
\textsuperscript{694} Smedley (1988), p. 129.
That light-weight solidi were a major presence within the overall number of coins on the Pontic steppe is shown by finds at thirty-four separate sites.695

Some of the more interesting and telling items recovered from the Malaya Pereshchepina burial are the golden solidi and other related items, which include necklaces with coin pieces as ornaments and specific coin-like medallions.696 In the burial were found 70 coins minted in Constantinople. Most were of the “light-weight” variant and weighed either 20, 21, or 23 carats or were half-weight solidi from the reigns of Tiberius/Maurice or Constans II.697 The remaining 8 were the normal 24 carat solidi. Almost all of these coins date to the reign of Heraclius, a few dating to the reign of Maurice and Phocas.698 This points to specific payments made to a nomadic elite male during the reign of Heraclius, somewhere, according to the most recent conclusions based on the coin dating and coin issue, between 629 and 632. The presence of two medallions of the emperor Heraclius, which weighed 2.5 solidi each and were stamped in the image of a solidus in the center, indicates special diplomatic gifts given to this nomadic elite from the emperor Heraclius, perhaps as a symbol and assurance of the chieftain’s loyalty and relationship with the emperor.

It was only with the help of Roman solidi that Likhachëvskiĭ sites have been firmly dated.699 The site of Beliarovka west of the Don River in the Donetsk Oblast of Ukraine contained a large hoard of golden coins from the reign of Justinian, dating to the

697 For further debate surrounding light weight solidi and their potential use as special diplomatic issues, see the references in Sokrovishcha Khana Kubrata. Pereshchepinskii Klad (1997), pp. 20-21.
years 546-547 according to coin studies. Fifty coins were found and it has been argued that they were all minted together, perhaps in Cherson. All of these coins were of the same type, thus denoting that they were made for a single payment to a nomadic leader; they were of the same lightweight 20-22 karat type, providing more evidence that lightweight solidi were indeed used to pay barbarians. It is likely that the coins were part of payments made by Justinian in the 540s and 550s to the Utigurs in alliance against the Kutrigurs. Their inclusion in a burial indicates the importance attached to representing a direct tributary relationship with the Roman Empire.

In sum then coins are one of the best pieces of evidence we have linking archaeological material with direct payments from the Roman Empire and, on occasion, with specific events which we observe in the textual sources, like payments to the Utigurs during the reign of Justinian and the alliance of Heraclius and Constans II with the Bulgars.

**Conclusion**

It is difficult to assess the archaeological material which I have surveyed in terms of its importance to the type of historical arguments I make in the other chapters of this study. The evidence displays clear signs that there was a relationship between the Roman Empire and nomadic peoples of the Pontic Steppe in Late Antiquity, namely through the presence of coins in hoards and burials, the general presence of large amounts of gold.

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700 The coin hoard was separate from the burials at Beliarovka. Coins were found at several other sites at this time. Komar (2004), p. 179. Bauer (1931). Smedley (1988) does not discuss this hoard in depth, since it falls outside of the 7th century chronological frame which he set for his study.
701 Bauer (1931).
704 An increased coin flow to Pannonia around 678-679 also indicates a renewed allegiance with the Avars at a time when the Bulgars were transitioning into an enemy of the Roman Empire. Daim (2003).
items in nomadic burials, and a few cases of items which directly reference Rome, like the signet rings of Kubrat. The evidence however is too piecemeal and anecdotal to provide further confirmation of the consistency of Rome’s presence on the steppe and the influence of the Roman Empire on steppe politics and the historical evolution of western Pontic Steppe peoples which I argue for through the use of textual sources.

The archaeology of this part of the steppe is not developed enough at this point to present a full picture of the material life of nomadic peoples in the period under survey. Perhaps however the question is a methodological one, as I have hinted at throughout. Archaeology may never be able to confirm the theories of historians or anthropologists, since the materials it presents answer different and only sometimes overlapping questions. That said, the evidence must be surveyed in order to do justice to the full range of materials on offer.
Chapter 5: Roman Ethnography: How to Write about and Fight the Nomad

Introduction

In Chapter 3 I distinguished between “passive” and “active” categories of the themes used to analyze steppe-Roman interaction in Late Antiquity. Passive themes encompassed the effects which the Roman Empire had on nomadic societies and their political evolution as a result of the socio-economic organization of nomadic pastoralists. For example, the reliance of nomadic elites on wealth extracted from their neighbors, regardless of whether it was in the form of tribute, gifts, plunder, or advantageous trading arrangements, and the use of this wealth as a source of political legitimacy (theme #3), was a widespread phenomenon witnessed over the entire geographical expanse of the steppe throughout the pre-modern age. It should be understood that for passive themes no single individual actor was responsible; effects were the result of fundamental characteristics inherent to interaction between steppe pastoralists and the Roman Empire.

Themes in the “active” category rather were the result of specific actions (or reactions) which Roman emperors, diplomats, or generals took in order to defeat nomadic armies or disrupt nomadic societies, thereby neutralizing the threat which they might pose to Roman territory. The two themes in this category were (#2) Roman military resistance against nomadic incursions, which I characterized as Roman military superiority in confrontation with nomadic forces, and (#6) Roman diplomacy. The effects of Roman diplomatic scheming, while less obvious than direct military confrontation,

705 I have previously noted the work of Barfield (1989) & Shingiray (2006) for examples of this phenomenon elsewhere on the steppe.
were more nefarious in sowing dissension within nomadic confederations and tribal groups. Logistical superiority, a greater resource base from which to draw on in times of warfare, and a complex and well-organized bureaucracy were critical elements in Rome’s military and diplomatic repertoire. Personal and historical experience however played a crucial role in Rome’s advantage over steppe peoples. In this chapter I analyze Rome’s historical experience with nomadic peoples as it was transmitted in textual form.

**The Problem**

What did the Romans know about nomadic peoples? How did the Romans classify and understand the peculiar cultural characteristics and lifestyle of nomads? How does this knowledge appear in textual form? In order to answer this question it is necessary to discuss the Greek and Latin texts which touch upon the history, culture, and geography of the steppe and its peoples.\(^{706}\) The writings I engage with are classified as “ethnographic” because they focus on the depiction of foreign groups.\(^{707}\) Greco-Roman writing on nomadic peoples has a particular history and was governed by certain rules and conventions; when referring to this tradition as a whole I will variably use the terms “classical tradition,” “classical genre,” or “classical model,” all of which refer specifically to depictions of nomads in the texts.

One glaring difficulty presents itself when engaging with the corpus of texts described above: the dissonance between the language employed to describe nomadic peoples and the actual content of Roman knowledge of the steppe and its inhabitants. On

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\(^{706}\) Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Coptic, and Ethiopic sources also have a role in this type of analysis, in so far as they come to adopt a Roman Imperial perspective in relation to the steppe. For example, Syriac sources (John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Joshua, & Zacharias of Mytilene), and even one Ethiopic text (John of Nikiu) are important for the history of the steppe in Late Antiquity.

the one hand, texts which depict nomads do so through a specific set of unchanging, idealized, stereotypical, and negative images developed during the first centuries of Greek encounters with Scythian nomads.\footnote{Shaw (1982-1983), p.5 for a specific negative “ideology” in Greco-Roman texts: “Further, it is my contention that these written accounts, as we have them, contain more than mere prejudices – that the views in them about nomads are a more organized and structurally consistent set of ideas that I would label an ‘ideology’.” Some go perhaps too far (an entire book length’s too far) in assessing Roman views as a negative ideology. For instance, Benjamin Isaac argues, anachronistically, that there was a concept of “racism” in classical antiquity which shares similarities to the modern conception of race. Isaac (2004).} It is quite difficult to imagine how such texts assisted in informing Roman officials and commanders on the “actual” characteristics of nomadic peoples. From such a perspective it would seem that the texts were incapable of providing a guide to action in moments of military and diplomatic tension between Rome and the steppe. However, as I have argued throughout, the Romans were incredibly well-informed on nomadic peoples. The intricacies of nomadic society were so well understood that the Romans could repeatedly interfere on the steppe with significant negative political consequences for steppe peoples.\footnote{Dagron (1987), p. 207 argues that war places peoples in direct confrontation with one another. We might therefore expect “objective” knowledge and details about the peoples with whom Rome came into conflict as a result.} The texts therefore must have contained and offered practical knowledge of use to Roman officials despite a language which corresponded to the “classical tradition” of depicting nomads.\footnote{It is difficult here and throughout not to quote Woolf (2011). On the dissatisfaction of modern scholars on approaching these texts, p. 33: “Yet ancient ethnographic explanations mostly strike us as unsatisfactory. Accounting for difference draws ancient ethnography close to its modern analogues, and at the same time reveals the distance between them. My aim is not to convict ancient ethnography of unscientific practices. But I am interested in why observation, recording and compilation in this sphere did not lead to the kind of specialized discourse we associate with medicine or mathematics, discourses where accumulation of consensus and knowledge (some of it incorrect of course) does in some respects seem to resemble that conventionally termed the Scientific Revolution of the early modern period. The explanatory frameworks appealed to in ancient ethnographic writing varied little from the earliest versions we have to the latest. They also seem incoherent and contradictory, even within the same text. How can we account for these deficiencies?” Italics my own.}

There is however a solution which takes us beyond the apparent dissonance in the texts into a perspective of harmony between language about and knowledge of the
nomad. I argue that Greco-Roman writings were representative of a Roman worldview; although monolithic and repetitive, the classical tradition possessed variation. More importantly however, although the classical tradition was steeped in pre-ordained *topoi* and stereotypes, it had significant *explanatory* power. Depictions of nomads were not simplistic prejudices set down in ink. Rather, they helped to explain why nomadic peoples behaved in certain ways. The classical tradition therefore amounted to what was known about nomadic peoples. Armed with nuanced and extensive knowledge as recorded in texts, Roman commanders and officials had the upper hand in encounters with nomadic peoples. The *Strategikon* of Maurice demonstrates the case for harmony as opposed to dissonance. This text gives practical advice to commanders on campaign against nomadic peoples in archaic language, proof therefore that the classical tradition was used to convey practical “workaday” knowledge on nomadic peoples.

*TWO EXTREMES*

Two extreme positions or methodologies define the limits of analyzing the classical tradition. In describing these two methodologies I am forced to make caricatures; many scholars are more nuanced in their approach and aware of the complexity of ethnographic writing. My own synthesis navigates a middle way, one tailored to the specific research questions broached in this dissertation. While I discard several of the assumptions of each approach, I also incorporate certain of their characteristics.

Scholars who hold the first position interpret Greco-Roman ethnography as a literary effort with specific conventions and traditions. Analysis of the literature involves understanding that Romans positioned themselves as the civilized center of the world in
opposition to the uncivilized, barbarian “Other.” In order to interpret specific passages scholars identify the agenda of an author and the literary or ideological purpose which including ethnographic descriptions or excurses served in a specific text. Francois Hartog’s *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* is a touchstone of this type of study.

For Hartog the original purpose of his book was to

“…reveal the way or ways in which the Greeks practiced ethnology; in short, to sketch a history of “otherness” with its own particular rhythms, emphases and discontinuities, always assuming these to be detectable.”

Thus Hartog committed himself to a study of Herodotus, as he

“…was, in fact, indissociable from it, or, rather, that is was worth concentrating on him since it was in his text par excellence that a whole complex of questions took shape and were played out, subsequently to be reiterated, denied, transformed, or raised anew by his interpreters.”

Herodotus therefore was not only the “Father of History;” for our purposes he is also the “Father of Classical Ethnography.” His writings established the basic outlines within which later authors depicted and described nomads.

Hartog’s methodology is important. He first proposes a model which he will not conform to, a model which is in fact the second methodology which I discuss. In Hartog’s own words:

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711 Although criticizing the dominant theories of alterity, Gruen offers a good bibliographic rundown of work in the past thirty years on the “Other” as a cornerstone of Greek self-representation. Gruen (2011), pp. 1-5.
713 Ibid.
“What questions should we ask? And who, in the first place, are Herodotus’ Scythians? One way of answering might be to compare what the text says and what archaeology has discovered, the Scythians of Herodotus and the Scythians of archaeology, the Scythian logos and the “real” Scythians; on the one hand a discourse and a representation of the Scythians, on the other what they really were. On that basis, passing from the text to the archaeological remains and from the remains back to the text, it might be possible to seize upon the convergences and, above all, to ponder upon the divergences. This might lead to some conclusions regarding the accuracy of Herodotus’ information: was his description good, or poor? His mistakes would probably be ascribed to misleading information, an insufficient critical approach or naiveté. The “points of agreement,” on the other hand, would be credited to his powers of observation and his freedom from preconceptions. If the debit side outweighed the credit side, he would be judged to have given a poor description; if, conversely, his credit was high, he would be deemed a truthful witness.”

Hartog rejects such an approach not because archaeology and Herodotus’ text fail to “tally,” since in several cases they clearly do, but because, as Hartog asserts, the methodology puts one “in danger of not seeing the text as a narrative with its own peculiar organization…” Thus his questions concern not “the Scythians in general but simply Herodotus’ Scythians.” He moves his analysis internally into the text, seeking to establish a logic by which Herodotus describes and depicts the Scythians, which he terms the Scythian logos.

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715 Ibid., p. 5. For example, Hartog himself briefly discusses how Herodotus’ descriptions of Scythian era kurgans correspond with archaeological evidence from the Kuban River and the northeastern Pontic Steppe.
716 Ibid., p. 6.
Hartog argues that the predominant methodology or theory governing Herodotus’ depiction of the Scythians is the concept of the “Other” or “Otherness.”\textsuperscript{717} The “mirror” in the title is meant to denote that as the “other” the Scythians and their customs reflected back onto Greek society; through a negative reflex, surveying what they were not, readers came to understand what Greek society consisted in and who the Greeks were. In this sense “we may read the text with the assumption that this or that Scythian practice may be interpreted to its homologue in the Greek world.”\textsuperscript{718} The text established an internal logic which the reader confronted through a negative comparison of Scythian society with his/her own. The uncivilized barbarian Scythians helped to consolidate and define Greek civilization in opposition to what it was not.\textsuperscript{719}

The logic of the “Other” clearly functioned in the writings of Late Antique authors.\textsuperscript{720} Late Antique ethnography defined barbarians as “Others” within the context of Roman law, through descriptions of inclusion and differentiation, and, increasingly as time progressed, Christianity began to play a role in defining “Romanness” and “Otherness.”\textsuperscript{721} The depiction of savage Hunnic customs like the slashing of babies’ faces and the Alanic worship of a scimitar in the ground in Ammianus Marcellinus served to differentiate the moral, ordered, religiously orthodox world of the Romans from the

\textsuperscript{717} For further elaboration of the theory of “Otherness” in Greek literature and in Greek self-conception see J. Hall (1997) & E. Hall (1989).
\textsuperscript{719} Roman authors adopt the same stance, so we need not distinguish between Greek and Roman “civilization” here. Rives (1999), p. 15: “Although Greek writers pioneered these techniques, Roman writers later adopted them, and the following comments, although framed for the sake of convenience only with reference to the Greeks, apply to Romans as well.”
\textsuperscript{720} Rives (1999), p. 14: “At any rate, it was by the mid-first century BC an established convention for Roman writers to incorporate ethnographic excurses into historical works.”
\textsuperscript{721} Maas (2003), pp. 153-156. For the role of Christianity as a fixing point for Roman/Byzantine civilization in later Byzantine centuries, see Dagron (1987).
steppe peoples, creating an image of Roman superiority.\(^{722}\) In Priscus’ text comparison through “Otherness” is explicit during his conversation with the Greek-merchant-turned-Hun.\(^{723}\) The dialogue allowed Priscus to demonstrate how Roman society was superior to Hunnic society, while also being sufficiently flexible to allow for an assumed critique of the flaws in the contemporary 5\(^{th}\) century Roman Empire.\(^{724}\)

The theory of “Otherness” was certainly functional in Greco-Roman texts on foreign peoples and is useful from the standpoint of literary interpretation. A modern historian however might find the theory of “Otherness” unsatisfying as a methodology. The theory is perfect for a literary understanding of Greco-Roman ethnography, but it does not engage with the flip side of Greco-Roman ethnography: what the actual customs and cultures of non-Roman peoples were like and how much the Romans actually knew about these aside from the distortion of literary conventions. Some scholars therefore adopt an attitude of cynicism to writings which are part of the classical tradition. In this type of mood Peter Heather states:

> “Essentially, Ammianus had at his disposal nomad digression 101, and just hit the recall button whenever he needed to employ it. This raises the issue of what status to accord the details that are specific to each version.”\(^{725}\)

Heather’s frustration arises because he wants to understand how Hunnic society in Late Antiquity evolved to incorporate large groups of non-Hunnic peoples and what this meant for the political and ethnic composition of “peoples” beyond the Danube in the 5\(^{th}\)

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\(^{722}\) Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.2 & 23.


\(^{724}\) The dialogue is also sufficiently ambiguous, allowing Priscus to indirectly critique Roman society in a manner that would not have gotten him into trouble. The fact that Priscus’ text contains elements of critique, as opposed to a strict historical accounting, leads Thompson to conclude that “Priscus’ *Byzantine History* is primarily a literary effort, and not a scientific history.” Thompson (1948), p. 215. Thompson falls into the trap of opposing “literary” against “scientific” efforts, which I argue is not a justified juxtaposition.

\(^{725}\) Heather (2009), p. 211. The words “each version” refer to all ethnographic digressions, not only those of Ammianus.
century. However, although ideas relating to “Otherness” are clearly functional in the texts, it would be wrong, as Heather and others do, to assume that Greco-Roman sources on the nomads are bereft of useful historical detail.

As a historian, Heather adopts the second methodological approach referenced above with the long quote by Hartog. Hartog discusses an historical methodology whereby Greek and Roman texts which depict non-Roman peoples are compared and contrasted with other types of source materials, archaeology for example. This is exactly what Heather does for Hunnic society, utilizing anthropology and comparative historical research to further develop his arguments. Another example of this type of work is the article of Bohumila Zasterova entitled “Les Avares et les Slaves dans la Tactique de Maurice.”

Zasterova’s purpose is to assess the quality of Maurice as an historical source for the Avars and Slavs in the later 7th century. She engages in a point by point examination of the ethnographic and historical detail which Maurice provides in Book XI of the Strategikon on the Scythian peoples and the Slavs. In part one of the article she situates details on the Scythians’ cultural, social and military characteristics within a long tradition of writing on the subject by Greco-Roman authors and acknowledges Maurice’s indebtedness to them. Zasterova concludes that Maurice embedded explanations for the

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727 Woolf (2011), p. 16: “Even if we choose not to regard ethnography as a ‘formulaic literary genre’, it is clear that the ethnographic mode included formulaic devices, conventional figures, motifs and presuppositions from which barbarian otherness might be generated and elaborated. That this process involved a consequential normalization of the Greek and the Roman has become a topos of subsequent writing on the subject. Yet whatever the importance of ethnography in various projects of self-definition, this by no means exhausted its uses.” Italics my own.
728 Note that this is no different from the methodology I employ in previous chapters.
729 Zasterova (1971).
military, political, and social behavior of nomadic peoples in his time within an established paradigm of depiction, otherwise referred to here as the classical tradition.

Zasterova also compares the Strategikon to other texts which describe the Avars and Slavs. Since what Maurice says tallies well with other textual sources, Zasterova concludes that the Strategikon is an historical source of high quality, despite the fact that he could not escape from the classical tradition. Zasterova is optimistic in comparison to someone like Heather. She concludes that Maurice is a respectable source for what the Avars and Slavs were like “in actuality” because, critically, she believes that the classical genre of portraying nomadic peoples can be pierced through to ascertain specific, reliable details. That is, the classical tradition may shroud details about nomads, but it is not impossible to remove this shroud and work with what remains. The question which historians and archaeologists ought to ask is whether or not the author under investigation is adding new knowledge or merely repeating older topoi.

Zasterova’s analytical approach is critical for my work since I reassess and reanalyze the history of interaction between steppe peoples and the Roman Empire.

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730 Here referring to the Avars specifically. The Slavs were relative newcomers on the scene in the late 6th century and did not possess the ethnographic pedigree of “Scythian” peoples.
731 Woolf (2011), p. 17: “It is easy to see why some readings refuse to ask about Realien, and why some historians and archaeologists find this style of criticism utterly inimical to their own, rather different, aims. I wish to argue a more optimistic case. Ethnographic knowledge and texts produced in an ethnographic mode of writing are not the same thing. But the relation between them is not beyond reconstruction…Besides, although the schematic effects of othering and geographical stereotypes contributed to the structure and contents of ancient ethnographic passages, the variety and detail of these passages is simply too great to be explained entirely in terms of the manipulation of tropes at the centre of the empire.”
733 Her methodology, of course, does have its shortcomings. For example, Zasterova unnecessarily perceives a contradiction in Maurice’s statement that the Avars were well-trained in war and yet preferred to overcome their opponents by surprise attacks and ambushes. Zasterova solves this apparent contradiction by claiming that the difference in tactics can be explained with reference to the different ethnic elements of the Avar horde. The Avars proper were well-trained for war, while the minor Oguric and other tribes tended to avoid pitched combat. Zasterova (1971), p. 38. I think that her assessment in this case is excessive. Maurice would have seen no contradiction or confusion in his assertions. Besides, there need not be a contradiction here: training in warfare included ambushes and sneak attacks. The Romans themselves,
My own narrative of events in Chapter 1 is based, first and foremost, on a diachronic analysis of textual evidence with the goal of creating a coherent understanding of this history from a specific vantage point: the negative political consequences for nomadic groups as a result of contact with Rome. Without a complex understanding of how to reconstruct events despite the shroud of a classical literary tradition my analysis would per force conclude absurdly that we can say absolutely nothing about the historical Huns or Avars.  

Yet, despite the necessity of such a methodology for my work in general, the purpose of this chapter is not to refine the techniques for mining nuggets of information from Greco-Roman sources. Rather, I want to understand how the classical tradition of depiction in ethnography helped the Romans to understand and interact with nomadic peoples. To do this I adopt the strategies of each of the two methodologies outlined above, although my approach is neither strictly literary nor strictly historical. My objective is to understand how a Roman reader might have obtained useful information through the lens of the inherited classical tradition, or how a writer might have tweaked the tradition to convey practical knowledge. I understand these texts as bearers of real knowledge in the Roman world, regardless if that knowledge corresponded to the “real” peoples as modern historians suppose them to have been.

\[^{734}\] I am not the only one to make positive conclusions about the ability of Greek and Roman authors to reliably collect and classify new information. Merrills (2005), p. 24 f. 78 discusses Latin historiography’s emphasis on travel and autopsy: “Just as personal observation of events was deemed indispensable to the composition of authoritative classical history, so travel was seen as an essential prerequisite to accurate historical and geographical writing. Historians from Herodotus to Ammianus asserted their authority on the strength of the breadth of their travels throughout the world, and similar impulses naturally motivated the most ambitious geographical writers.” Even Woolf (2011), p.9, who argues convincingly that much ethnographic production in the 1st centuries BCE-CE was done in libraries in Rome (Chapter 3), emphasizes the ability of ethnographers like Pliny and Strabo to criticize faulty and incomplete texts and sources.
Before I develop my own “middle way” however it is necessary to consider in greater detail the history of ethnographic writing on nomadic peoples and the particular characteristics or topoi which defined this type of writing, both of which can provide greater context to what the classical tradition actually was. As we shall see, one of my fundamental arguments is that there was in fact no inconsistency between the use of the Greco-Roman classical model with the full weight of its inherited stereotypes, and the acquisition and incorporation of new knowledge into its framework. The classical model is only deceptively static; it becomes more viable as a mode of understanding and interpretation of the “other” when we consider its evolution and the manner in which it was constantly rearranged.

**History**

**Herodotus**

Many of the basic descriptive aspects of the classical model reference the writing of Herodotus’ *Histories*, specifically the Scythian excurses in Book 4. Herodotus concentrated on two defining aspects of Scythian culture and society: their lack of fixed, permanent dwelling places and their warlike nature. For Herodotus, these two features were not distinct and separable, but rather mutually reinforcing:

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735 Dagron (1987), p. 213. I do not claim that Herodotus is the sole font from which the classical model derived. Later authors borrowed from the writings of their forebears in a variety of manners. Herodotus, as the most extant early source, is nonetheless the best starting point for detailing and developing a history of the genre specifically in regard to the depiction of nomadic peoples. For more information on the various strands of ethnography in classical Greek and Latin works see Rives (1999), pp. 11-21.
“For such is their manner of life that no one who invades their country can escape destruction, and if they wish to avoid engaging with an enemy, that enemy cannot by any possibility come to grips with them. A people without fortified towns, living, as the Scythians do, in wagons which they take with them wherever they go, accustomed, one and all, to fight on horseback with bows and arrows, and dependent for their food not upon agriculture but upon their cattle: how can such a people fail to defeat the attempt of an invader not only to subdue them, but even to make contact with them?”

In Herodotus’ writing permanent itinerancy and excessive militarism defined the nomadic “Other;” they were the *sine qua non* of nomadism. As features they were salient because they defined the nomad’s “Otherness” in opposition to the urban, settled, agricultural, and civilized society of the Greeks and Romans. By the first century CE with the beginning of Latin writing on nomadic peoples these had become established principles; to mention a nomadic people was to evoke one or both of these features. To read about Scythians or Huns in antiquity was to invoke the fundamental imagery established by Herodotus.

**Classicism**

There were two results of Herodotus’ establishment of a paradigm for depicting nomadic peoples. The first effect was that Roman authors referred to the depictions in Herodotus and earlier period authors as a mark of erudition and social status. Per Thompson:

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736 Herodotus 4.46.


738 This raises the issue of classicism in general throughout all of Greco-Roman literature, which encompasses all digressions on Scythians and non-Scythian peoples, as well as references to ancient writers and passages which would have been well known to any educated Greek or Latin reader. I cannot address all of the aspects of such a vast topic, except to say that the difficulties inherent in my work are representative of the difficulties in approaching any Greek or Latin text. The problem from a historical standpoint is, as I have argued above, how to navigate between “positivist” and “literary” interpretations. For my part, I consider Averil Cameron’s discussion of this issue with regard to Procopius’ works the most advanced and nuanced. Cameron (1985), p. 34 suggests that Procopius and other authors did not choose to write in a classicizing style, but rather that, in some sense, it was the only way they could write: “Only in
“Greek enquirers at that time (4th century) did not consider it their duty to venture out into the steppe and discover the exact truth about the ferocious barbarians who roamed there. An Ammianus or an Olympiodorus might have somewhat higher standards than their contemporaries; in general, however, neither the historians nor their public demanded the precise truth in descriptions of the northern nomads. But every writer considered it his duty to display his knowledge of the classics which were the heritage of his class.”

“To equate the Huns with the Massagetae, to believe of them what Herodotus had believed of the nomads of old, to decorate one’s account of their wars with the phrases of Thucydidies, was not a sign of childish credulity or indescribable stupidity. It was an indication that the writer belonged to that social class which Sidonius equates with the community of Rome…”

Since the ability to write itself presupposes education, writing on nomadic peoples was unavoidably cast in a mold ultimately deriving from Herodotus and all preceding authors.

We need not however take the route of the strict literary cynic discussed above and conclude that Greco-Roman ethnography was hopelessly out of touch with the basic tenets of observation, accurate interpretation, and the transference of knowledge. Rather, we can more positively assert that, since Greco-Roman authors could not escape depicting nomadic peoples within the framework of the classical tradition, everything that was possibly written about nomadic peoples is included in the style of the texts we have available to us. This justifies an attempt to reach beyond a strictly literary interpretation part does Procopius choose to write in a classicizing style; much more, it is part of him and part of his conception of history, which he would not have been able to write otherwise. So the understanding of the classicism of Procopius is not a simple matter of peeling off an external layer. The phenomenon goes far deeper and is much more pervasive, right to the heart of Procopius’ work.”

Thompson (1948), p. 23. Italics my own. I have already noted Thompson’s view of Priscus’ work. His generally negative view of ancient ethnography is encapsulated when he states “…neither the historians nor their public demanded the precise truth in descriptions of the northern nomads.” I do not agree with this assessment, but Thompson’s remarks are nevertheless on the mark concerning the expectations of both writers and readers.
of the textual sources, since if we are to find practical knowledge as it was conveyed to commanders and officials, it would appear in the form of the classical tradition.

**Naming**

The second result of Herodotus’ prominence as the first major writer on nomads concerns the names used to refer to nomadic peoples. Following Herodotus, Greek and Roman authors noted the similarity among peoples of the steppe with regard to their constant itinerancy, pasturing of flocks, political organization, and warlike nature. Nomadic peoples came to designate one of the specific types of barbarian peoples with whom the Greeks and Romans interacted. One consequence of the homogenization of steppe peoples in the Greco-Roman imagination was the development of specific names to refer to nomads, whether these were old or new groups. Following Herodotus, all nomadic peoples were considered “Scythians.” The Sarmatian tribes who eventually displaced and absorbed the independent Scythians were the first non-Scythian group to be called “Scythians.”

The designation “Scythian,” although eventually superseded in Late Antiquity by contemporary language, lasted well into the Byzantine period. The title of Maurice’s section on how to fight nomadic peoples preserves ancient language:

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740 For example, in *Strategikon* 11 they are one of the four types of barbarian enemies detailed, the others being the Persians, Rome’s most advanced and perhaps formidable foe, the Germans or “light-haired peoples” who dwelt along almost the entire span of Rome’s northern frontier, and the Slavs, relative newcomers to the Balkans in the mid-late 6th century.
741 The term “Scythian” also took on the qualities of a geographical designation, as when, for example, the Goths of the later 4th century were referred to as Scythians because of their previous inhabitation of the Pontic Steppe. Heather (1988).
742 Strabo 1.2.27: “I maintain, for example, that in accordance with the opinion of the ancient Greeks – just as they embraced the inhabitants of the known countries of the north under the single designation “Scythians” (or “Nomads,” to use Homer’s term…”
743 By Pliny the Elder’s time (23-79 CE) the name of the Scythians was already being superseded. *Natural History* 4.12.81: “The name of the Scythians has spread in every direction, as far as the Sarmatae and the Germans, but this old designation has not continued for any except the most outlying sections…”
Dealing with the Scythians, That is, Avars, Turks, and Others Whose Way of Life Resembles That of the Hunnish Peoples.”

Remarkably, the names used for nomadic peoples by Greco-Roman authors could be incredibly accurate and yet simultaneously ambiguous. For instance, Ammianus Marcellinus refers to a variety of Sarmatian tribes on the Danube in the late 4th century: Amicenses and Iazyges, for example. His writings demonstrate that he was well-informed about the lifestyles and habits of the Alans. Although this knowledge must have persisted, most later Roman sources, particularly in the 5th century, refer to the Sarmatians as a single uniform group along the Danube, excepting of course the Alanic groups who settled in Gaul, Spain, and North Africa. Maurice’s title is another example. The generalizing term “Scythian” stands in for an entire group of people under which the specific categories of “Avar” and “Turk” fall.

Maurice also describes Scythian peoples as “Hunnish.” With the arrival of the Huns and perhaps under the influence of Ammianus’ powerful description, the term “Scythian” was eclipsed by the name of the “Huns” in general usage. In Procopius’ Wars the Utigurs and Kutrigurs are referred to as “Huns,” although as I discussed in Chapter 1 it is more likely that their tribal confederations were dominated by Oguric Turks. Agathias directly addresses the contrast between generalization and specificity in naming:

744 Strategikon, 11.2.
745 Ammianus Marcellinus 17 & 19.
746 Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.13-25.
748 Procopius, Wars, 8.3-8.4.
“All these peoples were referred to by the general name of Scythians or Huns, whereas individual tribes had their own particular names, rooted in ancestral tradition, such as Cotrigurs, Utigurs, Ultizurs, Burugundi and so on and so forth.”

Although the term Huns persisted throughout Late Antiquity, older designations were frequently employed. Procopius was fond of referring to the “Massagetae,” often in reference to the contingents of nomadic warriors who served under Belisarius in North Africa and Italy. In subsequent centuries, with the rise of the Turks and Khazars on the steppe, the name of the “Turks” was also used as a stand-in for all nomadic peoples. The same issue of “mis-naming” continued to exist as well. In the De Administrando Imperio for example Constantine VII refers to the Magyars as “Turks.” Anna Komnena, writing in an overtly classicizing style, referred to the contemporary 11th century Pechenegs and Cumans as Scythians and Massagetae respectively.

The Romans possessed extensive knowledge on nomadic peoples, despite the ambiguity sometimes present in Greco-Roman naming practices. To understand how and why names were repeated by Greek and Roman authors and how these authors could simultaneously be very direct and clear in conveying knowledge and yet obtuse in their use of ancient terms, we need to understand the history and development of the ethnography of the nomad.

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749 Agathias 5.11.2.  
750 In the east as well. Sunicas and Aigan are referred to as Massagetan by birth. Procopius, Wars, 1.13. See also 1.21, 3.4, & 3.11. In 3.11 Sinnion was considered Massagetan. In 8.19 Procopius designates him as a Kutrigur Hun. Ammianus Marcellinus calls the Alans the modern Massagetae. Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.12. He later states that all of the Pontic Steppe Sarmatians took on the name of the Alans after having been conquered by the latter. Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.13.  
751 De Administrando Imperio 3-4.  
752 Anna Komnene, The Alexiad.
The Sarmatian Period

The writings of Roman authors allow us to trace the history of Sarmatian peoples north of the Danube and along the Pontic steppe. Through their writings we may inquire into what Roman diplomats, generals, and other officials might have known about nomadic peoples. Roman authors combined the writings of classical authors like Herodotus and others on Scythian and Sarmatian peoples with the information and knowledge accrued from contemporary diplomatic and military interaction with nomadic peoples. Roman authors updated what was known about nomadic peoples, including their geographical location, cultural and social habits, and political and military characteristics, although in a language which was meant to evoke the style and language of ancient authors.

The tradition of updating information while mirroring and adopting older forms continued into Late Antiquity and beyond. The extended historical experience of the Roman state with the Sarmatians formed a vital link between classical knowledge on nomadic peoples and what was known at the time of the first major event concerning nomadic peoples and Rome in Late Antiquity: the migration of the Huns. Through their historical experience, captured in the writings of Roman authors, Roman officials and commanders were adequately prepared to defend against the incursions of the Huns and to enact effective policies to disrupt and hamper the political stability of steppe peoples.

Roman authors possessed an extensive array of texts from which they could draw upon for discussing nomadic peoples well prior to the firm establishment of Rome’s permanent border at the Danube and the movement of significant numbers of Sarmatian

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753 Cato the Elder was the first Latin writer to include elements of ethnography in his writing. Rives (1999), p. 14.
peoples towards the frontier. Strabo’s (63 BCE – 24 CE) *Geography* is one example of the types of information which were present to the Romans from earlier writings, prior to significant military and diplomatic contact with the Sarmatians. Strabo wrote a “geography,” a genre which in antiquity straddled the modern disciplines of geography, history, and ethnography. His interests and efforts therefore were not directed towards contemporary interactions between Romans and Sarmatians; this would be left to later authors starting from the 1st century CE onwards.\(^{754}\) Strabo’s writings rather are a watermark for what educated authors and officials already knew about Sarmatian peoples in the early period of their interaction.\(^{755}\)

Strabo discussed the geography and history of Sarmatian peoples widely, as well as their social and political organization and habits. In the *Geography* the Sarmatians, referred to interchangeably as “Sauromatians” and “Scythians,” are described as “eaters of milk products” and “wagon dwellers.”\(^{756}\) References to ancient authors are rife in Strabo and his understanding so nuanced that he even challenges and refutes the ideas of earlier authors who argued that Scythian and other steppe pastoral peoples were foreign to Homer.\(^{757}\) Strabo’s geographical knowledge of the steppe is extensive. He describes in detail the strait of Kerch and the Black Sea, mentions cities like Panticapaeum (Kerch) and Phanagouria (Krasnodar), rivers like the Borysthenes (Dnieper), Tanais (Don) and Hypanis (Southern Bug), and details the severe winters of the steppe.\(^{758}\) He describes all of the lands east of Germania as a massive plain extending toward the Caspian Sea, and

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\(^{757}\) Among others, he mentions Homer, Hesiod, Eratosthenes, Apollodorus, Ephorus, and Aeschylus. See *Geography* 7.3.7 for his refutation of earlier authors.

\(^{758}\) Strabo, *Geography*, 7 & 11.
his knowledge of the human geography of the region is quite remarkable, specifically mentioning the Iazyges, Rhoxolani, and other minor Sarmatian tribes.\textsuperscript{759} Strabo’s understanding of the history of the region, while spotty, is quite considerable. For example, he mentions the wars of the Rhoxolani against Mithridates Eupator and draws lessons about the political and military organization of Sarmatian tribes from the episode.\textsuperscript{760}

Strabo’s text is not a work of antiquarianism; his textual criticism and knowledge of both the ancient world and the world in which he lived show that his text was an update of the current historical, geographical, and ethnographic knowledge in the early first century CE.\textsuperscript{761} The fact that nomadic peoples:

“…follow the grazing herd, from time to time moving to other places that have grass, living only in the marsh-meadows about Lake Maeotis in winter, but also in the plains in summer…”

or are

“…wagon-dwellers and nomads, so called, who live off their herds, and on milk and cheese, and particularly on cheese made from mare’s milk, and know nothing about storing up food or about peddling merchandise either, except the exchange of wares for wares…”

or again live in

“…felt tents, fastened to wagons on which they spend their lives, herds which give them meat, cheese, milk…”

may have amused the casual reader and displayed Strabo’s erudition by making reference to the writings of Herodotus and earlier writers on the Scythians.\textsuperscript{762} It signifies however

\textsuperscript{759} Ibid., 7.3.17 & 7.2.4 respectively.
\textsuperscript{760} Strabo, 7.3.17.
\textsuperscript{761} For a detailed positive assessment of Strabo which I agree with, see Batty (2007), pp. 297-319.
\textsuperscript{762} Strabo, \textit{Geography}, 7.3.17, 7.3.7, & 7.3.17 respectively. Strabo has much more to say on the Sarmatians and Scythians than can be included here. He writes extensively on the Central Asian steppe, discusses other nomadic peoples, particularly the Massagetae, the role of the Sarmatians in the silk-road trade, and the specific horse-rearing strategies and other customs of the Sarmatians. I mention in passing a few of these
much more, namely the vast knowledge from which Roman officials could draw upon when trading, creating treaties, or warring against nomadic peoples. The types of discussions and depictions in Strabo were constantly drawn upon and updated by authors throughout the first four centuries CE and beyond into Late Antiquity. In Strabo therefore we see an example of what the author himself considered an up-to-date account of the geography and culture of the peoples of the steppe cast in the very same language which Herodotus used four centuries earlier. For ancient authors the classical model of depiction, rather than a hindrance to accurate portrayal and the transfer of knowledge, was the very vehicle by which information was conveyed!

Roman authors were well-informed about the specific social and political organization of nomadic steppe pastoralists, especially as against Celtic, Germanic, or other “barbarian” groups north of the Rhine and Danube rivers. Tacitus for example, in his *Germania*, attempted a rigorous classification of barbarian peoples. He paid particular attention to whether particular tribes of Germanic peoples should have been properly considered Sarmatians, comments which give insight into what, in a Roman’s mind, distinguished steppe pastoralists from other barbarians.

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points in the text to indicate the large reserve of writings and information which Roman period authors could draw on to discuss and interact with Sarmatian peoples. See all of books 7 and 11.

763 Strabo was also known to Late Antique authors. Maas (2007) discusses Procopius’ close acquaintance with him.
“The Peucini, sometimes called Bastarnae, are like Germans in their language, manner of life, and settlements. They have mixed marriages with the Sarmatians and so are resembling them more and more. The Venedi have adopted Sarmatian habits… for their plundering forays take them all over the wooded and mountainous highlands that lie between the Peucini and the Fenni. Nevertheless, they are on the whole to be classed as Germans; for they have settled homes, carry shields, and are fond of travelling- and travelling fast- on foot, differing in all these respects from the Sarmatians, who live in wagons or on horseback.”\textsuperscript{764}

For Tacitus, what distinguished Sarmatian peoples first and foremost were plundering habits, mobile dwellings facilitated by the use of the wagon, and of course, the employment of horses for domestic and military activity. Additionally, in discussing the possibility that one group could adopt the customs of another, in the way that the Germanic Venedi had come to resemble Sarmatian peoples in some of their cultural characteristics, Tacitus admitted and understood the possibility of historical change and evolution among peoples of the frontier. Social and political customs and habits could and did change, life on the frontier was fluid, and Roman authors were well aware of the reality.\textsuperscript{765} Tacitus contradicts the impression that Greco-Roman depictions of nomadic peoples were static, unchanging, and governed by strict literary conventions. Even Roman authors who attempted to create strict classifications could admit of historical change and fluidity along the steppe and the possibility that groups might alter their identity, disappear, or reappear.

Roman authors drew upon writings like those of Strabo and, for example, Pliny the Elder’s \textit{Natural History}, to discuss Sarmatian peoples and current issues regarding

\textsuperscript{764} Tacitus, \textit{Germania}, 46.
\textsuperscript{765} For nuance in Tacitus’ text see Gruen (2011), pp. 159-178.
them. Already by the 1\textsuperscript{st} century CE authors were combining previous Roman knowledge on nomadic peoples with actual experiences on the battlefield or in diplomatic dealings with Sarmatians. The episode quoted at length in Chapter 1 from Tacitus’s \textit{Histories} demonstrates quite nicely the extent to which Roman commanders and soldiers employed this information to defeat Sarmatian raiding bands.\footnote{Pliny the Younger, nephew of Pliny the Elder. Pliny the nephew discussed his uncle in a letter to Tacitus. \textit{Letters and Panegyricus} 6.16.} While technically an historical account of the episode in question, Tacitus’ text can also be read like a military manual. From a Roman perspective the particular habits and customs of the Rhoxolani, for example their ambition and arrogance at having previously defeated a Roman force and their overweening desire for plunder and booty, as well as their particularly heavy armor and the fact that they fought exclusively on horseback, led directly to their defeat. The Sarmatians’ unpreparedness at fighting in difficult engagements, particularly in the winter when laden with booty, and their heavy armor was taken advantage of by the more appropriately armed and prepared Roman infantrymen. The episode demonstrates that by the middle of the first century CE Roman military commanders already had at their service adequate knowledge and training to deal with considerable nomadic threats.

The writings of other authors are rife with details on the military capacities of nomadic peoples and the types of arms and armaments they were known to employ on the battlefield. There could even be dispute between authors, as when opposed to Tacitus and his discussion of the heavily-armed Rhoxolani, Strabo notes that they were lightly-

\footnote{Platinus Silvanus. Sulimirski (1970), p. 137.}
armed in their wars against Mithridates Eupator, stating that a well-organized phalanx of 6,000 men could defeat 50,000 Sarmatians. He specifically mentions that they

“use helmets and corselets made of raw ox-hides, carry wicker shields, and have for weapons spears, bow, and sword; and most of the other barbarians are armed in this way.”

Pausanias (mid-2nd century CE) described Sarmatian armor constructed of horse hooves, a specimen of which he saw in the temple of Asclepius in Athens. Arrian’s *Taktika* was specifically dedicated to the methods a Roman commander should employ when encountering the Alans and other nomadic groups who employed feigned retreats.

The frequency of warfare between Romans and Sarmatians, the employment of Sarmatians as auxiliaries, resettlements within Roman territory, and the evolution of the Roman army throughout the 3rd-4th centuries under the influence of Sarmatian cavalry are all factors which indicate the close acquaintance of Roman officials with Sarmatian nomadic groups. The Roman Empire consistently neutralized the military potential of Sarmatian peoples through effective diplomacy and, on occasion, the use of direct force. Roman authors who recorded, maintained, and updated a wide variety of geographical, historical, social, and political information on Sarmatian peoples all portray the Roman state as politically and militarily dominant. The tradition of maintaining

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768 Strabo, *Geography*, 7.3.17. Again a demonstration perhaps of historical change or at least the great variety among nomadic peoples, all of which the Romans were informed about.
769 Ibid., 7.3.17.
771 Arrian *Takticheskoe Iskusstvo*.
772 Regarding auxiliaries, the most well-known example is the resettlement of 5,500 Iazyges to guard Hadrian’s Wall after a defeat towards the end of the Marcomannic Wars (166-180 CE). Cassius Dio, 72.16. For resettlement, see Barkoczi (1959) & Tentea & Matei-Popescu (2009). For the development of the Roman Army, see Southern & Dixon (1996), Bannikov (2011) & Elton (1996). For Sarmatian cavalry see Vegetius, *Epitome*, 1.20. Important also was the role played by the Bosphoran state and Greek cities on the littoral of the Black Sea in providing Rome with information and as an advanced listening post for events along the steppe. Sulimirski (1970), pp. 92-93, 122, & 149-151. Gaidukevich (1949).
773 For a discussion of Roman frontier policy throughout the first four centuries see Millar (1982).
information in texts, as well as Rome’s dominance over nomadic peoples of the steppe persisted into Late Antiquity and beyond.\textsuperscript{774}

\textbf{Ammianus}

Ammianus Marcellinus, who wrote in the late 4\textsuperscript{th} century, picked up the mantle of earlier authors who wrote about Sarmatian nomads. His work is full of information on the military conflicts between Roman emperors, particularly Constantius II and Valentinian I, and the Sarmatian peoples of the eastern Pannonian Plain. He describes the raids of Sarmatians in alliance with the Germanic Quadi into Pannonia and Moesia Secunda, imperial wars and treaties with these groups, as well as the character of their leaders, religious practices, and other peculiar customs, like the gelding of stallions in preparation for warfare.\textsuperscript{775} Ammianus knew much about the internal working of Sarmatian politics, as when he discussed the Amicenses, a Sarmatian tribe, and their conflicts with the Limigantes, former captured slaves who rose in revolt.\textsuperscript{776} He also wrote that Sarmatian groups, prior to the arrival of the Huns, dwelt from the Danube to the Don in concentrations around the Maeotic Lake.\textsuperscript{777}

Up-to-date accounts of Sarmatian peoples in the \textit{Res Gestae} are balanced by a style of depiction of nomads which was heavily influenced by earlier authors.\textsuperscript{778}

\textsuperscript{774} Nearly every later Roman source on nomadic peoples drew not only literary tropes but also concrete historical details from earlier Roman sources. A great example is Jordanes, writing in the 6\textsuperscript{th} century, whose information and sources on the Sarmatians extend back at least into the 1\textsuperscript{st} century CE. He describes how the Rhoxolani to the east and Iazyges to the west were separated in the Wallachian Plain by the Olt River (ancient Aluta), as well as the general dispositions of Germanic and Scythian/Sarmatian tribes almost exactly as Tacitus described them in the \textit{Germania}. See Jordanes, \textit{Getica} 3. Here is an example therefore of a legitimate use of the “fact-checking” methodology which I described above in the work of Zasterova. For the dispositions of Sarmatian tribes in the 6\textsuperscript{th} century Jordanes is not a reliable source.

\textsuperscript{775} Ammianus Marcellinus 17.12-13.

\textsuperscript{776} Ibid., 17.13.

\textsuperscript{777} Ammianus Marcellinus, 22.8.27 & 31.2.13.

Ammianus’ descriptions, particularly his excurses on the Huns and Alans, were cast so strongly in the classical tradition in form and content that some have argued he drew directly from Herodotus. It is unclear if Ammianus was personally familiar with the text of Herodotus. In any case, the *Res Gestae* is a clear continuation and transference of the classical tradition of depicting nomads into the 4th and 5th centuries CE which simultaneously updates it to correspond to the circumstances surrounding the migration of the Huns. We can observe the strength of Herodotus’ influence on nomadic ethnography in Late Antiquity in two passages from the *Res Gestae*:

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Matthews (1989), p. 332-342. Ammianus, for example, knew of peoples like the Nervi, Vidini, Geloni, Agathyrsi, and Melanchlanae first written about by Herodotus. This does not prove a direct link, but could indicate knowledge of the general tradition of writing on steppe peoples. P. 335: “In any case, Ammianus’ knowledge of Herodotus’ excursus may be indirect, or reflect only what, with additions from other sources, had entered the general ethnographical tradition.” With regard to Procopius, Cameron states: “We need not suppose that Procopius’ Thucydidean conception of history was owed to a close reading of Thucydides himself in order to accept the validity of the description. He could hardly have avoided the influence in any case, for the famous passages had gone through such a working and reworking in all the intervening centuries of rhetorical education that no educated Greek could have failed to know them; they were simply part of his consciousness.” Cameron (1985), p. 34. I believe that the same holds true for Ammianus and his Herodotean influence. Ammianus could not have failed to invoke Herodotus in some way.

Cameron (1985), p. 38: “It is usually too simple, then, to suppose that the classicizing and the ‘genuinely contemporary’ elements are clearly separable; much more often they are mingled together, and in differing degrees, from the simple use of classical vocabulary to the conscious evocation of a particular passage.”
“For they have no huts and care nothing for using the plowshare, but they live upon flesh and an abundance of milk, and dwell in wagons, which they cover with rounded canopies of bark and drive over the boundless wastes. And when they come to a place rich in grass, they place their carts in a circle and feed like wild beasts. As soon as the fodder is used up, they place their cities, as we might call them, on the wagons and so convey them: in the wagons the males have intercourse with the women, and in the wagons their babes are born and reared; wagons form their permanent dwellings, and wherever they come, that place they look upon as their natural home.”

“Just as quiet and peaceful men find pleasure in rest, so the Halani delight in danger and warfare. There the man is judged happy who has sacrificed his life in battle, while those who grow old and depart from the world by a natural death they assail with bitter reproaches, as degenerate and cowardly; and there is nothing in which they take more pride in than killing any man whatever: as glorious spoils of the slain they tear off their heads, then strip off their skins and hang them upon their war-horses as trappings.”

Ammianus’ work however possesses greater significance than merely as a link in the chain of textual transmission of writing on nomadic peoples from the classical through late antique periods. Ammianus Marcellinus is most well-known as the first Roman author to describe the Huns, and for the impressionable way in which he did so. His style of depiction, which was both a careful drawing on of Herodotean tropes and the writings of other ancient authors as well as the first reporting on the Huns, set the standard for understanding and describing the Huns by authors in later centuries.

782 Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.18.
783 Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.22.
784 For Ammianus’ restraint in drawing upon Herodotus and the novelty of his writing within the bounds of classical ethnographic excurses, see Matthews (1989), pp. 332-342. On p. 336: “Once the Huns had intruded so rudely upon the civilized world, one would naturally expect the more recondite corners of Classical ethnography to be ransacked by writers anxious to discover plausible identifications. It would have been better to admit that within a Graeco-Roman perspective their origin was indefinable, and it is somewhat to Ammianus’ credit that he attempts no such identification in their case.” Other authors take a negative view of Ammianus’ historical veracity and reliability. See Barnes (1998), pp. 95-106 and especially King (1987) [1995], pp. 77-95.
Ammianus was a sort of Herodotus for Late Antiquity; he revived the tradition of writing on nomadic peoples at the beginning of increased contact between Rome and the steppe.\textsuperscript{785}

It is reasonable to assume that tales of Huns slashing their children’s cheeks and their monstrous appearance haunted the minds of later authors and influenced their depictions of steppe nomads. However, the exotic nature of Ammianus’ text is not sufficient to explain the persistence of the image of the Huns as the menace of Rome and the civilized world among contemporaries in the later 4\textsuperscript{th} and into the 5\textsuperscript{th} century. Rather, it was the role which the Huns played in Ammianus’ narrative which is responsible for later reactions. For as Ammianus argues, the sudden appearance of the Huns flung the Goths against the Roman Empire and led directly to the defeat of Valens and the eastern field army at the Battle of Adrianople.\textsuperscript{786}

Ammianus’ argument has straightforward appeal for ancient and modern authors alike. Perhaps foremost among these, it possesses narrative simplicity.\textsuperscript{787} In a domino-like chain of events, the Huns defeated the Alans and then the Goths, the latter of whom sued for peace at the banks of the Danube in the mid-370s.\textsuperscript{788} Through the tragic combination of misfortune and mismanagement, Valens was killed and the eastern field army

\begin{footnotes}
\item[785] Dagron (1987) argues for a revival of ethnography in Late Antiquity. Kaldellis (2013), p. 3 also sees a proliferation in Late Antiquity.
\item[786] Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.1: “However, the seed and origin of all the ruin and various disasters that the wrath of Mars aroused, putting in turmoil all places with unwonted fires, we have found to be this. The people of the Huns, but little known from ancient records, dwelling beyond the Maeotic Sea near the ice-bound ocean, exceed every degree of savagery.”
\item[787] Simple to understand, yet not simplistic. Kelly, G. (2008), pp. 13-19 notes Ammianus’ nuance in his approach to the causes and consequences of Adrianople, citing Ammianus’ travel and experience as an officer on campaign with Julian. For a comparison with other contemporary accounts see Lenski (1997).
\item[788] Ambrose was probably the first to suggest such a concatenation of events. Maenchen-Helfen (1973), p. 20 & Halsall (2014), p. 529.
\end{footnotes}
army effectively wiped out at Adrianople. The underbelly of the empire exposed, the frontiers collapsed outright in some areas, crumbled slowly in others. Rome was sacked in 410 by the rampaging Goths under Alaric, and within another half century the western empire disintegrated. To Romans in the 4th and 5th centuries this was the most sensible grand narrative of what was occurring. Historians of the last two centuries have been entranced by these ideas even more so; for many the Huns spawned the “Great Migration of Peoples.”

Ammianus was not incorrect to assert that the Huns defeated the Alans, Ermanerich’s Greuthungi, and the Tervingi of Athanaric, spurring the Goths to seek refuge in the Roman Empire. Problems arise however if we extrapolate outwards too much about the initial wave of Hunnic migration in order to make general conclusions about the fate of the Roman Empire. These are the problems of exaggeration and conflation, and it is these tendencies which obstruct an accurate interpretation of the role of the Huns and other nomads in Ammianus’ writing.

The migration of the Huns was a novel event in Roman history for its rapidity and suddenness, but it was hardly extraordinary in its displacement of other peoples; the migration of the Goths therefore was hardly novel or extraordinary. Throughout its history the Roman Empire actively displaced barbarian peoples within its own boundaries

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791 Commonly referred to in German as the “Völkerwanderung.” The Huns as catalyst for the fall of the Roman Empire has antecedents throughout Roman historiography, going back to Gibbon, p. 1024: “The invasion of the Huns precipitated on the provinces of the West the Gothic nation, which advanced, in less than forty years, from the Danube to the Atlantic, and opened a way, by the success of their arms, to the inroads of so many hostile tribes, more savage than themselves.” Heather (2005) & (2010) in particular is a proponent of this theory. For the most up-to-date refutation of Heather’s position, see Halsall (2014).
792 Ammianus understood the disaster, but did not exaggerate it, as opposed to other writers. Lenski (1997). In fact, Ammianus argued that the Roman Empire would rebound from the disaster, as it had in the past. Ammianus Marcellinus 31.6.10-17.
as well as accepted supplicant peoples. A half century before the Goths Constantine settled a reported 300,000 transdanubians onto Roman territory. Had Adrianople not been such a blunder the Huns may not have warranted more than a few notes in Ammianus. Events leading up to and especially during the reign of Attila in the 440s and 450s however seem to confirm Ammianus’ original depiction of the Huns as merciless, invincible, and an existential threat to the empire. Regardless, we should resist the temptation to conflate the migrating Huns with the Huns of Attila. The two were separated by almost 80 years. More importantly, Ammianus wrote his text at the end of the 390s, and so had no knowledge of the later conflicts between the Huns and Romans. Ammianus’ writing on the Huns was meant to foreground the defeat at Adrianople, not the later campaigns of Attila.

Other aspects of Ammianus’ text minimize the novelty of the Huns. The famous digression on the Huns appears in the same chapter as the digression on the Alans; the

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793 “Barbarian” peoples were received onto Roman territory with increasing frequency in the 4th century. Tentea & Matei-Popescu (2009), pp. 129-137. See Batty (2007), pp. 410-419 for a full discussion of migrations into the Roman Empire. PP. 411-412 (Table 7.2) list all of these migrations from the 1st century BCE into the late 6th century CE. The major difference between migrations before the defeat of Adrianople was that these tended to be fully under control by Roman authorities. Later migrations tended to consist of foreign peoples under the authority of their own leaders. Whitby (2000), pp. 701-730.
794 These may have in fact been the Rhoxolani. Barkoczi (1959). The Goths in 376 were supposed to have been 200,000 strong according to Eunapius, fr. 42. Both figures may very well have been inflated.
795 In any case, the Romans were still quite effective for some time at thwarting unwanted migrations and invasions onto their territory. Exactly ten years after Adrianople the Romans led by Promotus, magister militum per Thraciam, crushed a similar attempt by the Greuthungi to cross the Danube. Claudian, Cons. Hon. 623-635 & Zosimus 4.35 & 38-39. Recall as well Stilicho’s defeat of Radagaisus in 406. Olympiodorus, fr. 9 & Zosimus 5.26.3-5.
797 Only for ancient historians could 80 years be considered a drop in the bucket.
798 Syme (1968), pp. 17-24 dates Ammianus’ last books (book 31 included) to the end of the 4th century, sometime in 396. Maenchen-Helfen (1955) dates these books to the winter of 392/393. This makes little difference here, except in one sense. If Ammianus wrote in 392/393 he would not have known about the famous Hunnic raid into the eastern provinces in 395. In any case, as argued previously, the raid in 395 was not as devastating as typically interpreted.
Huns in fact appear before the subsequent section on the Alans. The Huns and Alans resembled one another to the degree that they warranted a single excursus on lifestyle and migrations. The placement of the Huns before the Alans is odd however, since if Ammianus were attempting to describe their violence and foreignness in excess of other nomadic peoples, it perhaps would have been better to build to a crescendo with the Huns. Ammianus instead places the Alans after the Huns as if conducting a compare and contrast exercise. I believe that in Ammianus’ mind the Huns, while certainly recognized as a new group and foreign to the classical tradition, were essentially understood as an extension of the Sarmatians/Alans, the stock nomadic peoples contemporary to the Res Gestae. There is further proof in the details of the depictions. The Alans and Huns were alike in all essential ways, while their differences were superficial. Both Alans and Huns were reliant on horses and horseback riding, both excellent warriors, and both somewhat irreverent towards Roman civilizational norms. For example the Huns did not honor truces and the Alans lacked fixed places of worship. Meanwhile, the Huns were hideous and slashed their children’s cheeks in contrast to the Alans who were blond and handsome and took heads as trophies in battle. It is difficult therefore to argue that the Huns were any more savage than the Alans.

Ammianus structured his text and the digressions on Alans and Huns with a clear intention to cast the latter as the catalyst for the defeat at Adrianople. While diverging somewhat from Herodotus’ theory of the “Other,” Ammianus’ text nonetheless possesses its own internal logic. The strength of Ammianus’ text is evidenced by its subsequent influence on the image of the Huns in the Roman imagination. The Res Gestae’s impact

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is witnessed in later historical interpretations of Late Antiquity by contemporary authors and modern historians. At the same time however, Ammianus recounted historical events and his text had to conform to, or inform, what contemporary Romans understood about the Huns and the events leading up to Adrianople. Judging by the popularity of interpretations which plagiarize Ammianus, at least some of his depictions of the Huns should be considered “objective” or “accurate” in the positivist sense.\textsuperscript{801} To see how Maurice’s Strategikon carries the mantle of Ammianus in that it is both “literary” and “scientific,” I turn briefly to the specific characteristics, or topoi, of the classical tradition.

\textit{Topoi}

Although unified by accepted and inherited expression and description, classical ethnography on nomadic peoples was by no means homogenous. Authors, depending on period, experience of the steppe, outlook, and agenda employed a wide variety of acceptable depictions to create different images of nomadic tribes or peoples.\textsuperscript{802} In this way authors might push boundaries and introduce new elements into older patterns of depicting nomadic peoples. This was bound to happen over the course of more than a millennium, a period over which new nomadic peoples constantly migrated towards central Europe at the same time that the Roman Empire’s geopolitical situation evolved.

\textsuperscript{801} For example, the practice of using raw meat for saddles as recorded by Ammianus was later vindicated as a particular way of drying and carrying meat practiced by nomadic horsemen throughout the steppe into modern times. On the other hand, however, Ammianus states that the Huns used bone-tipped arrows, none of which have been found to date in the archaeological record. Heather (2009), pp. 211-212.

\textsuperscript{802} Dagron (1987), p. 213. Dagron discusses certain paradoxical images of the steppe. These were breeding grounds for a variety of interpretations which differed according to the intent of the author and genre of the text. For example, the steppe was known to be rich in gold, but relatively lacking in iron, and nomads were often presented alternatively as dwelling in riches at the same time that their lifestyles were considered rustic. See Strabo 11.8.6, for example, on the Massagetae. The steppe was supposedly deserted, but also a place from which great hordes of barbarians came. Ammianus claims that the lands of the Alans were exceedingly bounteous because of the fertile soil and massive rivers north of the Black Sea. Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.19. In Procopius’ Wars, 8.19 however the Utigur chieftain Sandil complains that he and his people live in a wholly unproductive land.
Interactions with nomadic peoples varied according to real-world situations and it is natural therefore that writing on nomadic peoples fluctuated according to the same rhythms. Nevertheless, several basic *topoi* consistently appear in depictions of nomadic people in Greco-Roman literature. Greco-Roman depictions tended to concentrate on the socio-political, military, and moral aspects of nomadic societies. Greed, for example, was one of their primary social characteristics.

**Military**

Perhaps the dominant *topos* of ancient steppe nomads was their ferocity in combat and military prowess, characteristics which were considered innate and which defined Scythians, Huns, Avars, and every other mounted steppe horseman.

Nomadic peoples were depicted as some of the most capable and well-trained warriors of the ancient world. Herodotus tells us that the Massagetae bore a variety of weapons, namely spears, bows, and axes. They fought on foot as well as on horseback, from which they could shoot massive barrages of arrows at their enemies. It is no surprise that most ethnographic depictions of nomadic peoples focused on their use of the bow and reliance on the horse. Aeschylus’ Prometheus in the play *Prometheus Bound* ...

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803 Rives (1999), p. 15: “Perhaps the most obvious, even from a very cursory survey given above, is a set of topics that occur regularly if not inevitably. The only invariable subject is the people itself, including their origin, their physical characteristics, and their various religious, social, and military customs; along with this there can also be a dynastic or political history. Another regular subject is their territory: its borders, its nature and topography, its climate, and its resources. Lastly, there are often descriptions of *thaumata*, any unusual natural or cultural phenomena peculiar to the region. Many of these topics could be omitted, depending on the specific subject, the context of the discussion, and the availability of information.”

804 The best single work on this topic is Denis Sinor’s article “The Inner Asian Warriors.” Sinor (1981). Sinor traces the origins of Greco-Roman writing on the military capacities of Scythian peoples and unites these with broad evidence for the fighting styles and capacities of northern nomads. Although I do not outline the various ethnographic “theories” which existed in Antiquity, it is interesting to note here that many authors considered climate to play an important role in nomadic ferocity during combat. Sinor, p. 133 notes the importance of climatological theories in the works of Aristotle and Vitruvius. Hippocrates’ *On Airs, Waters, and Places* is the best example of this kind of reasoning in an ancient author. Kuosmanen (2013), pp. 24-31.

805 Herodotus, book 1.
discusses the Scythians who strike with arrows from afar. In the words of Lucian in the 2nd century CE Scythians were supposed to be “good archers and better than all others in warfare.” Vegetius suggested that Roman soldiers be trained in how to shoot bows and arrows from foot as well as from horseback as do mounted nomads. Hunnic horses were considered heartier, more patient, longer lived, and able to endure hot or cold better than Roman horses. Nomads not only fought as mounted horse archers however; as we have seen the Romans knew well of the heavy cavalry of Sarmatian horsemen, as the example of the Sarmatian raid across the Danube in 69 amply demonstrated. Ammianus remarked on the bone-tipped arrows of the Huns. He also says that they close combat with swords and even use lassos.

For Ammianus the Huns:

“…also sometimes fight when provoked, and then they enter the battle drawn up in wedge-shaped masses, while their medley of voices makes a savage noise. And as they are lightly equipped for swift motion, and unexpected in action, they purposely divide suddenly into scattered bands and attack, rushing about in disorder here and there, dealing terrific slaughter; and because of their extraordinary rapidity of movement they are never seen to attack a rampart or pillage an enemy’s camp. And on this account you would not hesitate to call them the most terrible of all warriors…”

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808 Vegetius 1.18.
809 From the *Mulomedicina* of Vegetius. See Maenchen-Helfen (1973), p. 204 for a full discussion.
810 Tacitus, *Histories*, 1.79.
812 Lassos were a well-known war-weapon of nomadic peoples. In Herodotus 7.85 Sagartian nomads, enemies of the Persians, fought almost without armor, yet with lassos. In Josephus’ *Jewish War* 7.249 the Armenian king Tiridates was caught in an Alan war lasso. John Malalas describes war lassos used by Hunnic raiders in Moesia during the reign of Justinian. Malalas 437-438.
813 Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.8-9.
Reliance on horses provided nomadic warriors with an advantage in battle with non-nomadic peoples. Herodotus declared that the Scythians were impossible to defeat because they lacked cities entirely and thus could not be pinned down to fight. Herodotus’ long description of Darius’ failed expedition north of the Danube is the culmination of a basic understanding of the Scythians as inherently militaristic. As Darius advanced, the Scythians retreated until the Persians realized that it was impossible to overwhelm an enemy that would not engage. The ability to withdraw in the face of an advancing army had its mirror in the battlefield strategy of the feigned retreat, of which Greco-Roman authors were very aware. Arrian first described the feigned retreats of the Alans and how to confront this tactic during Alanic raids into Asia Minor. Procopius reported the feigned retreat employed by the Hephthalites to draw the Persian Shah Peroz into an ambush. In the *Strategikon* Maurice recommended that the Romans practice a type of feigned retreat called the *Alan Drill*.

Since nomads were raised from birth on horseback and all males participated in warfare, they had the reputation as the most skillful and savage of warriors. Greco-Roman authors paid special attention to their battlefield prowess and rather odd and savage habits in regards to war-making. Herodotus said of the savage conflict between the Persians and Massagetae that it was “the stubbornest of all fights that were ever

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814 See Herodotus 4.127 for the Scythian king Idanthyrsus’ rebuke of Darius who challenged the Scythians to engage in combat.
815 Narses is said to have employed a feigned retreat to defeat the Franks in northern Italy in Agathias 1.22.1-7.
816 *Contra Alanos* 25ff.
817 Procopius, *Wars*, 1.3.
818 *Strategikon* 6.2. Roman armies even employed feigned retreats against nomadic forces. The Roman commander Drocton defeated the Avar Khagan in a battle in 586 using this strategy. Theophylact Simocatta 2.17.9. Heraclius also utilized steppe nomad tactics in his wars against the Persians. Karantabias (2005-06).
fought by men that were not Greek.” Tomyris, queen of the Massagetae, created the impression of the savage steppe warrior when after her victory over Cyrus she found his body and stuffed his head into a bag of blood. As for their war customs, the Scythians drank the blood of the first men they had killed and took the skulls and scalps of their slain enemies. The scalps they either hung on their horse bridles or sowed into cloaks; the skulls they make into drinking cups.

Images of the Huns and Alans in Ammianus Marcellinus also create the impression of nomadic savagery and military ferocity. The Alans paid particular attention to the breeding of their horses. All of the young men were said to grow up riding, it being contemptible to walk about on foot. Ammianus interestingly notes that the Persians, like the Alans, were capable warriors because they were originally from Scythian stock. The Alans in particular were said to delight in war and were happy to die in combat; men who grew old on the other hand were reproached. To kill an enemy in combat was a blessing, and the scalps of their slain enemies were taken and hung on their horses as trophies.

While Ammianus Marcellinus’ descriptions are notably flamboyant, other Late Antique authors approached nomadic peoples as one of the key new enemies of the Roman Empire. We most frequently encounter nomads as enemies of the Romans or as their mercenary allies. The reality of near constant conflict or military interaction with nomadic peoples in Late Antiquity ultimately reinforced the presentation of them within the classical tradition as warriors first and foremost. Many authors in Late Antiquity had first-hand interaction with nomadic peoples or were in possession of reports that were the

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819 Herodotus 1.214.
820 Ibid.
821 Herodotus 4.64-65.
822 Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.12-25.
result of direct embassies with nomadic leaders. Priscus and Olympiodorus both went on embassies to the Huns in the 5th century.\footnote{Blockley (1983).} Menander Protector was in possession of official reports of the two embassies conducted under Justinian and Justin II to the Turks.\footnote{Blockley (1985).} Theophylact Simocatta meanwhile possessed a daily notebook of the itinerary of a Roman army on campaign against the Avars in the Balkans.\footnote{Whitby & Whitby (1986).} However, the intimacy of Roman authors with nomadic peoples in the 6th and 7th century did not lead to a new system of interpreting and analyzing the behavior of nomadic peoples. Rather, as is clear from the Strategikon, earlier ideas were retrenched and given new credence as current observations upheld and confirmed the assumptions upon which Greco-Roman authors operated.

**Socio-Political**

Greek and Roman writings on the socio-political organization of nomadic peoples were remarkably informed and yet quite frequently full of contradictions. Nomads were considered hierarchical from the time of Herodotus, who discussed in great detail the role of the kings among the Scythians. Yet at the same time the steppe was considered a wild land populated by diverse and sometimes fantastic peoples who owed little allegiance to one another and who followed their own leaders at their own will. What was recognized however was that the sociopolitical order of nomadic peoples was primarily organized for conducting war.

From the very earliest stages of Greek ethnography nomadic peoples were recognized as hierarchical and living under kings. Herodotus focused on the burial
practices and other odd customs surrounding the Scythian kings; particularly fascinating was the procession of the king’s corpse throughout his territory and the sacrifice of the members of his household at his tomb.\textsuperscript{826} Tomyris, queen of the Massagetae, and Anacharsis, king of the Scythians who was murdered for adopting Greek customs are prominent figures in classical literature.\textsuperscript{827} Idanthyrsus famously thwarted Darius’ plans to cross the Danube and punish the Scythians.\textsuperscript{828}

The experiences of Late Antique authors confirmed the fact that Scythian nomads were by and large peoples under a king or khagan. Attila was the first nomadic khagan with whom the Romans came to interact. Priscus’ writings on the embassy to Attila are filled with descriptions of the Hunnic royal court where he gathered all the leading men to his table in order of preeminence and political stature.\textsuperscript{829} From the writings of Menander and Theophylact the Romans understood quite well the structure of rulership among the Avars and Turks.\textsuperscript{830} The Avar Khagan figures prominently as a stock barbarian tyrant king with hordes of faithful warrior servants ready to do his bidding.\textsuperscript{831} The descriptions in Menander of the court of the Turkic Khan reinforced the image of nomads as centrally organized. The female queen of the Massagetae in Herodotus even had a parallel in Late Antiquity with the Sabir queen Boa.\textsuperscript{832}

There existed however a contradictory understanding that steppe peoples were wild and numerous, each following independent leaders.\textsuperscript{833} From its very early days

\textsuperscript{826} Herodotus, 4.71-72.
\textsuperscript{827} Ibid., 4.76-77.
\textsuperscript{828} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{829} Priscus, fr. 11.2.
\textsuperscript{830} Haussig (1953).
\textsuperscript{831} Blockley (1985), p. 28.
\textsuperscript{832} Malalas, 431, John of Nikiu, 90.61-65, & Theophanes Confessor, 6020.
\textsuperscript{833} That the Scythians were incredibly numerous was a characteristic of steppe peoples also popularized by Herodotus. He records an episode when one of their kings requested that each Scythian bring him a bronze
ethnography had built into itself the tradition of illuminating the peoples who dwelt near and far beyond the boundaries of the civilized world. In Herodotus this translated into listing the various Scythian peoples who dwelt on the Pontic Steppe and even further afield. There were the Callipidae, the Alizones, Melanchlaeni, Sauromatae, Royal Scythians, and farming Scythians, among others, each with their own territory and customs.\textsuperscript{834} The tradition of listing barbarian peoples dominated classical ethnography and was not exclusive to nomadic peoples. Tacitus’ \textit{Germania} is an example of a roll-call of a non-nomadic, barbarian people. In nomadic ethnography however it was a dominant feature to note the great variety of peoples. Nomadic peoples were both many and anarchical in their political organization.

Ammianus himself noted that the Huns did not have a proper hierarchy or royal line at the moment of their migration and wars with the Goths and Alans. He notes that:

“"They are subject to no royal restraint, but they are content with the disorderly government of their important men, and led by them they force their way through every obstacle.""\textsuperscript{835}

We have already seen Agathias’ list of the various tribes along the steppe, including the “Cotrigurs, Utigurs, Ultizurs, Burugundi and so on and so forth."\textsuperscript{836} Procopius also notes that “above the Saginae are settled numerous Hunnic tribes.”\textsuperscript{837} Zacharias of Mytilene included a long list of peoples in his account of the steppe, mentioning “the Onogur, a

\textsuperscript{834} Herodotus 4.17-19.
\textsuperscript{835} Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.7. Procopius also claims that the ancient Cimmerians were the Utigurs of his own day, another interesting phenomenon where the names and identities of ancient, Herodotean groups, could be directly transferred to tribes and peoples who came into being over a millennium later. This practice is rife in nomadic ethnography. Menander Protector saw in the Turks the former Sacae.
\textsuperscript{836} Menander, fr. 10.2. Philostorgius 9.17.
\textsuperscript{837} Agathias, 5.11.2.
\textsuperscript{837} Procopius, \textit{Wars}, 8.4.
tent-dwelling people, then the Ogur, the Sabir, the Burgar, the Korthrigor, the Avar, the Khasir, the Dirmar, the Sarurgur, the Bagarsik, the Khulas, the Abdel, the Ephthalite.”

The two contrasting stereotypes could come together however in the writings of ancient authors. Nestorius writes:

“For because the people of the Scythians were great and many and formerly were divided into people and into kingdoms and were treated as robbers, they used not to do much wrong except only as through rapacity and through speed; yet later they made them a kingdom and, after they were established in a kingdom, they grew very strong, so that they surpassed in their greatness all the forces of the Romans.”

In the *Strategikon* Maurice makes the same crucial distinction between a centrally organized nomadic people and diffuse political power divided among many groups.

**Moral**

Roman authors tended to emphasize the negative moral order of nomadic peoples. As a mirror image of Roman civilizational norms, the customs of the peoples of the steppe naturally reflected their contrasting, amoral and uncivilized character. Oaths, for example, were frequently discussed as a peculiar nomadic custom. Herodotus mentions the oaths sworn by the Scythians:

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“As for the giving of sworn pledges to such as are to receive them, this is the Scythian fashion: they take blood from the parties to the agreement by making a little hole or cut in the body with an awl or a knife, and pour it mixed with wine into a great earthenware bowl, wherein they then dip a scimitar and arrows and an axe and a javelin; and when this is done the makers of the sworn agreement themselves, and the most honorable of their followers, drink of the blood after solemn implications.”

Oaths seem to have been a particular preoccupation of authors because of how strongly they differed from Greek and Roman oath-taking in both the pre-Christian and Christian eras. Ammianus Marcellinus mentions the oaths of the Sarmatians with swords drawn before the armies of Valentinian. The Turkish envoy Maniakh also swore oaths in the presence of the emperor Justin when peace had been concluded between the khagan and the emperor:

“As they were speaking Maniakh and those with him raised their hands on high and swore upon their greatest oath that they were saying these things with honest intent. In addition they called down curses upon themselves, even upon Sizabul and upon their whole race, if their claims were false and could not be fulfilled. In this way the Turkish people became friends of the Romans and established these relations with our state.”

While oath taking perhaps struck Greek and Roman authors as odd, it was really the fact that they considered nomads unfaithful in their oaths that left a bad taste in the Romans’ mouths. The Avar Khagan in particular was known as a breaker of oaths. Baian carried out the siege of Sirmium despite swearing oaths to maintain a peace with the

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840 Herodotus 4.70.
841 Procopius, Wars, 4.18.6 mentions that the Huns in the bodyguard of Belisarius swore ancient “dread-oaths” to serve and protect their commander.
842 Ammianus Marcellinus 17.12.
843 Menander, fr. 10.1.
Romans. The Roman commander Comentiolus also rebuked the Avar Khagan in a speech, telling him to return to his home territory since he had broken his oaths and had shamed his ancestral gods.

There was however an alternative image of nomadic peoples in the texts as virtuous and uncorrupted by Roman civilization. Herodotus praises in particular the military capabilities of the Scythians:

“I praise not the Scythians in all respects, but in this greatest matter they have so devised that none who attacks them can escape, and none can catch them if they desire not to be found.”

Christian authors like Salvian of Marseilles criticized the common view that various barbarian groups were more amoral than the Romans. The acts of injustice committed by the Huns and Alans for example, ignorant as they were of the Christian faith, paled in comparison to the treacheries and faithlessness of the Romans themselves.

Greed

Greed in Greco-Roman literature was perhaps the most well-worn *topos* of nomadic peoples; as a characteristic of nomads it appears in a majority of sources, especially in Late Antiquity. Greed as an analytical tool explained much of the social, military, political, and moral order of nomadic peoples in the minds of Greco-Roman

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844 Menander, fr. 25.1. The Khagan also swore an oath in this passage with his sworn drawn, as did the Sarmatians before the army of Valentinian in Ammianus Marcellinus 17.12. The Khagan even swore Christian oaths on top of his own.
845 Theophylact Simocatta 1.5.1.
847 Herodotus 4.46.
848 Salvian, *On the Government of God*, p. 209. P. 127: “This being the case, we may indeed beguile ourselves with the great prerogatives of the name Christian, we who so act and live that by the very fact that we are said to be a Christian people we seem to be a reproach to Christ. On the other hand, what do we find of this sort among the pagans? Can it be said of the Huns: “See what sort of men these are who are called Christians?”
849 The topos was even more well-worn in Chinese historiography, perhaps reflecting a greater intensity of interaction between historical nomads and China. Sinor (1975), pp. 171 & 179. Di Cosmo (2010).
Nomadic peoples were said to possess an insatiable appetite for Roman gold, a desire manifest in constant demands for tributes, gifts, and plundering raids. Herodotus originally mentioned the heavy tributes which the Scythians exacted on the Greek city states along the Pontic coast. The Massagetae were said to have worn golden headgear, belts, and girdles and to have been so in love with the precious metal that they decked out their horses in golden bridles, bits, and cheek-pieces. However, the topos of nomadic greed appears not to have become a main focus of Greek and Roman writers until Late Antiquity, once interaction between the two parties, particularly military and political interaction, had become a standard feature of Roman diplomacy. In an earlier period Strabo identified the greed of Scythian peoples as arising from interaction with the civilized Greeks and Romans:

“And yet our mode of life has spread its change for the worse to almost all peoples, introducing amongst them luxury and sensual pleasures and, to satisfy these vices, base artifices that lead to innumerable acts of greed. This moral decay has befallen even the nomads, who have taken to piracy and because of their intercourse with many peoples have taken to peddling and luxurious habits. These things introduce cunning and corrupt morals.”

Later authors however considered greed an inherent aspect of the nomadic psyche and way of life.

Ammianus Marcellinus succinctly captured the Late Antique attitude towards nomadic greed, stating that “they (the Huns) burn with an infinite thirst for gold.” For

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852 Strabo 7.3.7.
853 Strabo 11.5.8 also mentions the golden ornaments of the Sarmatians, while 11.8.6 on the Massagetae mirrors that of Herodotus on their golden accoutrements.
854 Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2.11.
Roman authors greed explained all sorts of run-of-the-mill as well as bizarre nomadic behavior. Agathias expressed amazement at the Sabir Huns for whom “the lure of pay and plunder are sufficient incentive for them to fight now for one people, now for another, changing sides with bewildering rapidity.” While greed spurred nomads on to warfare and raiding, it was alternatively capitalized on to quell potentially aggressive nomads. Olympiodorus describes the wrath of the Hunnic king Charaton and how he “was calmed down and pacified with regal gifts.” Procopius explains that the greed of the Kutrigur Huns compelled them to raid Roman territory in spite of the fact that they were already in the pay of the Roman emperor. Meanwhile the Utigur chieftain, in the words of Procopius, seemed totally infatuated with the idea that the Kutrigurs were allowed to settle south of the Danube. These Kutrigurs, he stated, “have access to baths too and are wearing gold – the vagabonds – and have no lack of fine clothes embroidered and overlaid with gold.” Panegyrics expressed the insatiability of nomadic greed piquantly. For Claudian nomadic peoples did not till the soil because “their sustenance is spoil.”

Gold as an object of desire infuses most writings about nomadic peoples in Late Antiquity. We have already seen, particularly in the case of the Huns and Avars, the huge amounts of Roman gold which were transferred to the steppe. Roman authors described scenes where nomadic leaders were lavishly clothed and surrounded by profuse wealth. Outside of Sirmium in negotiations with a Roman commander the Khagan of the

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855 Agathias 4.13.7.
856 Olympiodorus, fr. 19.
857 Procopius, Wars, 8.18-8.19.
858 Procopius, Wars, 8.19.17.
859 Claudian, In Rufinum i.323-331.
Avars Baian sat in a golden throne canopied by two sheets of linen. Menander describes the opulence of the dwelling places of the Turkish Khagan in great detail. Silzibul was seated on a golden throne which had two wheels and could be drawn like a chariot. While guests with the Khagan, Zemarchus and the other Roman envoys saw silk cloths dyed in various colors and patterns. Silzibul met with the Roman envoys while seated on a golden couch, surrounded by statues made of precious metals and other golden and silver furniture and cookery. Images such as these reaffirmed the centrality of gold and other precious items in the nomadic psyche.

It is perhaps to Priscus’ credit then that he does not embellish the attire or dwelling places of Attila. Instead, Priscus presents us with another image, also ancient, of the austere and restrained nomad. Attila, for example, was seated on a wooden throne when he received the embassy of which Priscus took part. "Showed himself temperate in other ways also. For golden and silver goblets were handed to the men at the feast, whereas his cup was of wood. His clothing was plain and differed not at all from that of the rest, except that it was clean. Neither the sword that hung at his side nor the fastenings of his barbarian boots nor his horse’s bridle was adorned, like those of the other Scythians, with gold or precious stones or anything else of value."  

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861 Menander, fr. 27.
862 Dobrovits (2011).
864 Another common occurrence in the sources are the embassies sent by nomads or nomadic leaders to Constantinople for the sole purpose of receiving gifts. Menander, fr. 8 & Corippus, 3.310-405. Roman authors often considered diplomatic overtures as a pretext for receiving precious gifts.
865 The image also appears in Plutarch’s Life of Demetrius. In contrast to Demetrius, who overindulged in wine and lost his senses on occasion, Plutarch describes how the “Scythians have a custom of twanging their bow-strings in the midst of their drinking and carousing, as though they were summoning back their courage at the moment when it melts away in pleasure.” Plutarch, Life of Demetrius, 19.
866 Priscus, fr. 11.2.
867 Priscus, fr. 13.1. The image of the relatively austere Attila however is contrasted by his lavish funeral rites. Attila was set in three caskets, one of iron, one of silver, and one of gold. Jordanes, 49.
The austere image of Attila coincides with alternate understandings of nomadic peoples as rustic and restrained with respect to the benefits of civilization. This image has corollaries in the claims of Strabo that nomadic peoples became corrupted by Roman wealth, or in the image discussed above of the morally superior nomad. In Maurice’s depiction of nomadic peoples however, the image of the greedy nomad superseded other characteristics; greed as a strand of depiction was chosen for its specific explanatory purpose in the text of the Strategikon.

Maurice

In the late 6th/early 7th century the emperor Maurice (582-602), or more likely someone within his military entourage, composed, in Greek, the text of a military treatise today known as the Strategikon. The text provides information on nearly every aspect of military necessity: how to recruit and train soldiers, how to organize camps and to conduct an army on the march, and how to draw up an army for combat. Throughout the text Maurice mentions the variety of foes that Roman armies were likely to encounter and provides information necessary for countering each specific enemy.

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868 Lovejoy & Boas (1935) discuss images of barbarian peoples in Antiquity who, because of their closeness to nature or “primitivism,” were considered morally superior to the Romans in certain aspects. 869 See Wiita (1977), pp. 24-49 for a discussion of the authorship of the Strategikon. I refer to Maurice throughout for convenience. In other traditions, for example the Russian, “Pseudo-Maurice” is the preferred term. Shuvalov (2002). Shuvalov’s work is very important because he demonstrates that the text of Maurice’s Strategikon was composed of several parts, some of which pre-date the 6th century by a great deal. Shuvalov concludes that there were three layers to the text: two earlier sections which could have been written perhaps around the turn of the 5th century, and one later interpolation which is securely dated to the time of Maurice. I do not agree with all of Shuvalov’s conclusions, for instance that the use of the term “Scythians” and other older ethnic titles are anachronistic and are therefore clues that the text is much older. He does, however, to my satisfaction, prove that the author of the text was working extensively with older texts and knew much about how foreign peoples were depicted and written about in the past. 870 Maurice’s work may represent a new trend in Roman military treatises. Dagron (1987), pp. 209-210. For example, Vegetius’ work was concerned primarily with the recruitment and training of Roman soldiers in light of what they would have to face on the battlefield. Maurice’s text however dips into the psychology and ways of life of the peoples which the Romans would have to face. Vegetius Epitome of Military Science.
Book XI is singularly concerned with describing the habits and tendencies of each of Rome’s primary enemies in the late 6th century. These are the Germans, or fair-haired peoples, the Persians, Rome’s most consistent and formidable enemy in Late Antiquity, the Slavs, a relative newcomer in the 6th century, and the Scythians, which at this time primarily meant the Avars and Turks. In the 590’s Roman armies campaigned extensively, in an effort to restore hegemony south of the Danube River, against the Avars, who had only previously settled in the Pannonian Plain. In addition therefore to general historical knowledge on Scythian peoples and their tactics, the emperor had first-hand military and diplomatic experience with a very active and aggressive “Scythian people.”

The title of section 11.2 is remarkable and perhaps the only instance in Roman ethnography when nomadic peoples are titled “Scythian,” “Hunnish,” and “Turks” in the same breath. The wording simultaneously introduces the “Hunnish” peoples in what seems like an odd juxtaposition of precision and ambiguity:

“Dealing with the Scythians, That is, Avars, Turks, and Others Whose Way of Life Resembles That of the Hunnish Peoples.”

From the very title of the passage Maurice references almost the entire gamut of titles and names given to nomadic steppe peoples in antiquity; he expects his reader to be educated and familiar with these titles. The title and following passage, while simultaneously precise and yet generalizing, is not at all ambiguous about who the peoples under discussion are. While Maurice addresses the pertinent nomadic enemies a general was

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871 Curta (2006), pp. 61-69 & 75-81. Diplomatic contact had been established by the reign of Maurice with the Turks of Central and Inner Asia. The two embassies to them are recorded by Menander, frs. 10.2-10.5 & 19.1.
likely to face in the final decades of the 6th century, that is the Avars and Turks, he, by designating them as Scythians and Huns, makes a direct link with the ethnographic, classical tradition of depiction. Maurice therefore does more than expect his reader to be familiar with nomadic topoi. He seeks rather to enable his reader by appealing to a general Greco-Roman understanding of who nomadic peoples were and how it was that they behaved. Thus Avars can be Scythians in the general sense of their way of life, but that does not preclude an understanding of the Avars as the Avars in the sense of their specific historical interactions with the Romans in this period.

The title follows with a clarification on who exactly the “Scythian” peoples are:

“The Scythian nations are one, so to speak, in their mode of life and in their organization, which is primitive and includes many peoples. Of these peoples only the Turks and the Avars concern themselves with military organization, and this makes them stronger than the other Scythian nations when it comes to pitched battles. The nation of the Turks is very numerous and independent. They are not versatile or skilled in most human endeavors, nor have they trained themselves for anything else except to conduct themselves bravely against their enemies. The Avars, for their part, are scoundrels, devious, and very experienced in military matters.”

Maurice goes on to explicitly state what I noted above: that the Scythian peoples are simultaneously one, in the general sense of their lifestyles and organization, and yet distinct and possessing particular characteristics. They can be “one…in their mode of life,” and yet composed of “many peoples.” The text concerns the military capabilities of foreign peoples, so it is natural that Maurice would introduce distinctions among the Scythian peoples according to their war-making capability. This is nothing unusual since one of the defining characteristics of the Scythians in the Greco-Roman understanding
was their capacity to wage war. Besides conducting war, the Turks, for example, “are not versatile or skilled in most human endeavors.”

Interestingly, Maurice makes a clear distinction between the Avars and the Turks and the “other Scythian nations when it comes to pitched battles.” In chapter 3 I discussed the cycles of political consolidation and disintegration which nomadic peoples endured on the western Eurasian steppe in Late Antiquity as they fluctuated between diffuse political control and the opposite extreme of strong, hierarchical, vertically organized centralization. Maurice distinguishes between centralization and fragmentation specifically through the lens of military capability. The Turks and Avars were under the leadership of a single autocratic Khagan who could organize large campaigning armies for sustained military actions. This was opposed to the more capricious raiding activities of fragmented groups in the 6th century like the Kutrigurs and Utigurs. \(^{872}\) Maurice’s distinction segues into a discussion which is specifically geared towards the Avars as the nomadic people against whom Roman armies were most likely to campaign during his reign. \(^{873}\) In the final sentence he therefore repeats that the Avars are “very experienced in

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\(^{872}\) The Romans fought on many occasions with the Avars, and so knew their potential. One feature of the type of organization they were capable of was that the Avars could sustain defeats and continue to conduct campaigns in the same season or regroup for a campaign the next season. The raids of the Kutrigurs only a few decades earlier were turned back after a single defeat or misfortune. Maurice (539-602) would have been alive for the Kutrigur raid in 548, and so had experience in his own lifetime of both types of nomadic political organization. The military potential of the Turks was well known. For example, the Romans knew of the Turks’ destruction of the powerful kingdom of the Hephthalites around 560. Menander, fr. 4.2.

\(^{873}\) It should be pointed out that there is a potential confusion in this passage. Maurice refers to the Turks who, like the Avars “concern themselves with military organization” while at the same time referring to them as “numerous and independent.” In the late 6th century the description of the Turks as “numerous” makes sense, but an understanding of them as “independent” does not, given the existence of the Gök Turk empire with which the Romans had direct diplomatic contact and who by the reign of Maurice had already spread to the shores of the Black Sea. Macartney (1944). Wiita (1977), p. 122 solves this contradiction by arguing that the “independent” Turks refers rather to the variety of Ourgic Turkic tribes, the Bulgars, Kutrigurs, and Utigurs, for instance, who dwell north of the Black Sea at this time. His argument is appealing because it ascribes to Maurice an even more nuanced understanding of the ethnic and political arrangements of the steppe in his day. Furthermore, Maurice knew that these “independent” Turks had only recently been subjugated by the Avars and were anything but willing subjects, since he later advises Roman commanders to entice them away from the Avars with gifts and bribes. However, during this period we
military matters,” which serves as a transition from the introduction to the body of the next section. He also introduces a harsh moral judgment on the Avars as “scoundrels” and “devious,” terms which were meant to invoke an explanation of their less than desirable traits which were subsequently discussed.

After the introductory passage follows what is perhaps the most interesting and revealing section on the Avars and other Scythian peoples:

“There are nations have a monarchical form of government, and their rulers subject them to cruel punishments for their mistakes. Governed not by love but by fear, they steadfastly bear labors and hardships. They endure heat and cold, and the want of many necessities, since they are nomadic peoples. They are very superstitious, treacherous, foul, faithless, possessed by an insatiable desire for riches. They scorn their oath, do not observe agreements, and are not satisfied by gifts. Even before they accept the gift, they are making plans for treachery and betrayal of their agreements. They are clever at estimating suitable opportunities to do this and taking prompt advantage of them. They prefer to prevail over their enemies not so much by force as by deceit, surprise attacks, and cutting off of supplies.”

The tone of the passage is a clear negative moral assessment of nomadic peoples.

Maurice adopts this strategy of depiction because his purpose is to show the types of actions the Avars and other Scythians are capable of and the reason for their behavior. Nomadic peoples “are very superstitious, treacherous, foul, faithless, possessed by an insatiate desire for riches.” For Maurice nomads represent a negative moral order, opposed to the civilizational and behavioral norms of the Romans. It does not suit Maurice’s purpose to concentrate on the image of the nomad as primitive, rustic, and

have no independent confirmation that Roman officials or commanders understood the Oguric peoples as “Turkic.” They are simply referred to as Huns throughout the textual record. This is one area where it is impossible to pass final judgment and where the classical tradition does directly clash with a modern desire to cull different facts than perhaps interested the Romans from our sources.
untarnished by the taint of civilization which Salvian or Priscus appealed to in their texts. However, like Herodotus, who does not praise the Scythians “in all respects,” Maurice begrudgingly admits to the excellent military capabilities of the Avars. In fact, his respect for their military capabilities justifies the entire passage and motivates the negative tone which conveys his message forcefully to the reader.

What are the prime characteristics of the Avars in the passage? I single out two which I believe function as explanatory assertions: that the Avars are monarchical in their organization, and that they are exceedingly greedy, referred to as “an insatiate desire for riches.” Both of these traits, as I demonstrated previously, were classic *topoi* of nomadic peoples. The Avars were almost slavish in their obedience to the Khagan, as Maurice explains. Obedience was compelled out of fear, not out of love. Regardless, the effect of their willingness to endure all extremes of weather and suffering in order to achieve victory in battle is the same. The greed of the nomads however trumps all other aspects of Maurice’s depiction as an explanatory factor. Greed explains why the Avars are never satisfied by gifts, why they betray their agreements, and why in a later passage “Their first demands are very light, and when the enemy has agreed to these they impose stricter terms.”

Greed as a concept tinges the entire section. The greed of the nomad is mobilized by Maurice to explain the behavior of nomads and to provide Roman commanders with a way of countering Avar military threats. For example:

“They are seriously hurt by defections and desertions. They are very fickle, avaricious and, composed of so many tribes as they are, they have no sense of kinship or unity with one another. If a few begin to desert and are well received, many more will follow.”
Again the notion that nomadic groups were composed of many peoples is salient.

Combined with greed and the fact that many of the nomadic peoples under the Avars were unwilling subjects, Maurice explains that it is possible to bribe leaders and groups, which in the best case scenario could lead to the total evaporation of an enemy horde.

Finally, there are a group of passages which explain the behavior and capabilities of nomadic peoples through a basic appeal to what was already known about nomadic peoples within the classical tradition. Maurice relied on the classical tradition in these instances to actually explain and justify the behavior of nomadic peoples. For example, in the types of warfare which they conduct:

“They prefer battles fought at long range, ambushes, encircling their adversaries, simulated retreats and sudden returns, and wedge-shaped formations, that is, in scattered groups. When they make their enemies take to flight, they put everything else aside, and are not content, as the Persians, the Romans, and other peoples, with pursuing them at a reasonable distance and plundering their goods, but they do not let up at all until they have achieved the complete destruction of their enemies, and they employ every means to this end. If some of the enemy they are pursuing take refuge in a fortress, they make continual and thorough efforts to discover any shortage of necessities for horses or men. They then wear their enemies down by such shortages and get them to accept terms favorable to themselves.”

The passage makes reference to feigned retreats well-known to Roman commanders, and the powerful wedge-formations familiar to authors like Tacitus and Ammianus cited above. Nomadic vigor in battle and lust for victory are showcased in their ability to pursue and destroy their enemies and to harass enemies holed up in fortresses. The horses and archery of nomadic peoples is also a subject of discussion:

874 The discussion of siege warfare confirms that the Avars are the group specifically in mind, given their ability to take Roman cities and forts. Kardaras (2005).
“They are hurt by a shortage of fodder which can result from the huge number of horses they bring with them. Also, in the event of battle, when opposed by an infantry force in close formation, they stay on their horses and do not dismount, for they do not last long fighting on foot. They have been brought up on horseback, and owing to their lack of exercise they simply cannot walk about on their own feet.”

In other passages they are said to “give special attention to training in archery on horseback.” Also, “A vast herd of male and female horses follows them,” which they graze freely throughout the year.

**Conclusion**

In the mid-late 6th century the Roman Empire, particularly during the reign of Maurice, was faced with a dangerous upsurge in nomadic military threat along the Danubian frontier as a result of the migration of the Avars into Pannonia several decades prior. The challenge of the Avars seriously tested the resilience and mettle of the Roman state as the Avars raided the Balkans and besieged the cities which formed the backbone of Roman rule in the region. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the Romans met this threat head on. Contrary to the tone of many of our sources, the evidence is convincing that the Romans were quite successful at countering the threat of the Avars. Furthermore, the Romans critically destabilized the Avars through diplomatic intrigues and military victories both within and beyond the Roman frontier.

Faced with this new threat, the emperor Maurice recorded in his text the *Strategikon* how it was that Roman commanders were to effectively train their armies and achieve victory over the Avars and other Roman enemies. Although motivated to write by the novel threats which the Roman Empire faced during his reign, the emperor
Maurice did not invent a novel language with which to describe the Avars and teach Roman commanders how best to understand nomads. Rather, Maurice utilized the same language which Greek and Roman authors had been using for a millennium to discuss and depict nomadic peoples across all genres. For Maurice therefore, the classical tradition of depicting nomadic peoples was not merely a literary genre meant to reinforce Roman civilizational superiority. The classical tradition possessed explanatory power and the language and concepts it employed were deemed adequate to both explain the behaviour of nomadic peoples and to provide a basis for countering the military threat they posed. Thus, the classical tradition was a self-contained system of knowledge. As a system of knowledge it evolved in the presence of new information and could provide data which allowed the Romans to interpret their world and to interact with it.
Concluding Remarks on “The Steppe and the Sown”

In the late 4th century the Roman Empire’s diplomatic and military interaction with steppe peoples increased dramatically. The first major event was the migration of the Huns to the north of the Black Sea and the subsequent penetration of Goths, Alans, and Huns across the frontiers of the Roman state. Attila’s residency in the Pannonian Plain in the 440s and 450s necessitated that the Romans divert significant resources towards the steppe and the Balkan peninsula to ensure peace and protect the hinterland of Constantinople. During Justinian’s reign Bulgar groups like the Utigurs and Kutrigurs along the north Pontic Coast and the Sabirs north of the Caucasus required constant Roman vigilance and diplomatic interaction to protect against raiding and to ensure the hiring of mercenaries. In the later sixth century Roman embassies communicated simultaneously with the Avars, who in the 560s established themselves in the Pannonian Plain, and with the newly established Turkic Khaganate in Central Asia. In the mid-7th century good relations with the Bulgars were essential in order to keep the Avars in check in the west, as a shield and vital ally on the steppe who might resist incursions of new peoples from the east, and to maintain peace on Rome’s western and northern borders during years of near catastrophic changes on the eastern frontier.

All of these phases formed the historical basis upon which the Eastern Roman Empire was able to interact with steppe peoples in later centuries; the later “Byzantine” centuries of diplomacy on the steppe were the direct heir to Late Antique Roman steppe policy. By the tenth century diplomatic relations with nomadic steppe peoples was a long established and fundamental aspect of Byzantine foreign policy. The emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (913-959) could remark, in his treatise De
Administrando Imperio, usually translated as On How to Rule the Empire, addressed to his son Romanos II (959-963), with regard to the Pechenegs that:

“I conceive, then, that it is always greatly to the advantage of the emperor of the Romans to be minded to keep the peace with the nation of the Pechenegs and to conclude conventions and treaties of friendship with them and to send every year to them from our side a diplomatic agent with presents befitting and suitable to that nation…”

Later:

“For the Pechenegs, if they are leagued in friendship with the emperor and won over by him through letters and gifts, can easily come upon the country both of the Russians and of the Turks, and enslave their women and children and ravage their country.”

So far from being just an important feature of foreign diplomacy, the empire’s relationship with steppe tribes was essential; it developed into one of the cruxes and central nodal points around which the entire scheme of Roman foreign relations depended.

It was during Late Antiquity, from the years 370-680, that the Roman Empire forged diplomatic and military relationships with the peoples of the Eurasian Steppe. As I have tried to emphasize, there are several perspectives which govern how we ought to understand interaction between Rome and the steppe. The perspectives I analyze however have in their turn been determined more or less by one central theme: that throughout Late Antiquity the peoples of the western Eurasian steppe were largely at the mercy of superior Roman knowledge, logistics, and military and diplomatic potential. In contrast to the focus of many historians of Late Antiquity, who have attempted to explain the decline

875 Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio, trans. R.J.H. Jenkins, p. 49.
876 Ibid., pp. 51-53. Turks here specifically refers to the Magyars, the later Hungarians. See Gyula Moravesik, Byzantinoturcica, 2nd ed., p. 320.
or transformation of the Roman Empire, I argue that with respect to the steppe Rome enhanced its power in several crucial ways. The steppe became one of two regions (the other being the eastern frontier) which demanded significant resources and constant attention to ensure the safety of Roman territory and in particular the hinterland of the capital itself. In Late Antiquity therefore a clear Roman sphere of influence developed on the Pontic Steppe which at times extended towards the Volga and beyond.

Although there was occasional competition with the Persians for regional loyalties, for example over the Sabir Huns in the 6th century, in general the western steppe was clearly a Roman zone, while Persian influence was largely directed into Central Asia east of the Caspian Sea. Archaeological evidence bears this out. While not found in great abundance, Roman gold coins on the steppe and bronze or billon pieces along the Black Sea Coast indicate that Roman goods were the clear items of prestige in the region and that Roman coinage was used for exchange with nomadic peoples at Byzantine entrepots. In comparison, relatively few Sassanid dirhams are found west of the Caspian Sea except in isolated instances. Sassanid silver dominated as a means of exchange in Central Asia and silver coinage from Persia continued to play an important role in the region well into the Middle Ages. It was Samanid silver for example which first attracted the Viking Rus’ to come down the Volga; only in the 9th century and later did the Rus’ begin to turn south along the Dnieper for trading purposes with the Byzantines.877

Yet although the narrative of Rome and the steppe presented here contrasts with other narratives of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, it is neither meant to be revisionist, nor are my arguments necessarily in conflict with the work of historians of

Late Antiquity. I generally agree that Late Antiquity, for all of its qualities, was first and foremost a period of great change and evolution for the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean region, and the Eurasian steppe. And yet at the same time, the period was one in which certain elements remained constant, or altered only very slowly if at all. In my work I have attempted to capture both the tempo of change and the static nature of some phenomena. For example, the Roman Empire’s consistent military and diplomatic policy towards the steppe is contrasted with the great variety of ethnic, cultural, and historical evolution of the many peoples of the region.

To be more specific, it is clear that much changed in the period from 370-680. The Roman Empire shrank from a pan-Mediterranean state to a medieval polity barely straddling the Aegean Sea. Parity between Rome and Persia was first shattered as a result of the Persian wars during Phocas’ and at the beginning of Heraclius’ reign. Rome’s position in the east was undone for good with the sweeping rise of Islam and the Arab states in the Near East. Finally, throughout the period several waves of eastern nomadic pastoralists arrived on the doorstep of the Caucasus and Balkans, posing new and sometimes very serious challenges to the Roman Empire. Persia itself was shaken by repeated incursions of nomadic peoples along its eastern and northern borders throughout the 5th and 6th centuries.

And yet below the surface of these changes a few things remained constant. First and foremost, I have tried to show how Rome’s capability to deal adequately with threats from the steppe did not change. In fact, Rome’s capacity increased. Warfare with the Huns prepared the Romans for the raids of the Kutrigurs and Avars in the 6th century. Diplomatic dealings in Inner Asia with the Turks later facilitated alliances with similar
groups of Turks and with the Bulgars during the troublesome years of Heraclius’ reign. In short, the Roman Empire was a presence on the steppe before the migration of the Huns, its presence increased steadily throughout Late Antiquity, and by the time of the Bulgar migration to the Balkans, the steppe was fully under the keen gaze of authorities in Constantinople.

The evidence I have utilized throughout has been a focus for change and continuity. It is for reasons of countering traditional arguments that nomadic peoples were partially responsible for Rome’s “decline” that I have focused on the constants of Roman military and diplomatic force and competence on the steppe. Textual evidence allowed me unambiguously to re-narrate this history from the perspective of the destructive and destabilizing effects of Rome on the steppe. Archaeological materials, while sparse and sometimes quite difficult to find, study, and interpret, nonetheless show a clear zone of interaction between the steppe and Rome stretching from Pannonia eastwards to the Volga, with especially high concentrations in Late Antiquity along the lower and middle Dnieper and Don rivers. Finally, the methods and traditions of writing about and describing nomads and their way of life, although they altered at times and fluctuated in terms of frequency, largely remained the same. The continuity of the “classical tradition” is testament to the Romans’ skill and ability in interpreting the world around them, in interacting with it, and in creating systems of knowledge and terms of reference which functioned in the real world, regardless of whether or not we as modern observers find them simplistic, unscientific, or even racist.

As I discussed, I have drawn inspiration and insight from scholars who study the interaction of China and the steppe. I hope that my work can serve as a rallying point for
scholars of China who would like to reinterpret the interaction of the steppe and sown in ways which challenge similar paradigms to the ones I have challenged here with regard to Rome. I believe that I have convincingly argued for the subversive role of sedentary states, or at least one of them, in these interactions. No doubt a similar conclusion might be drawn about the disruptive effects of Persia or China on their neighboring steppe populations. This, however, does not mean we ought to ignore the fact that nomadic peoples did indeed raid sedentary societies, states, and empires and cause dislocation and destruction. Nevertheless, as historians we should consider ourselves obliged to develop new methodologies for giving voice to the voiceless.
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