

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-00906-6 - The Huns, Rome and the Birth of Europe  
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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction*STEPPE EMPIRES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN THE  
HISTORY OF WIDER EURASIA AND LATE IMPERIAL ROME

In the heyday of the Mongol Empire in the late thirteenth century AD, the Grand Vizier of the Ilkhan Ghazan (the Mongol King of Persia), the famous Rashid al-Din, set about writing a history of the known world – the whole world, not just of Islam or Europe, as many previous histories claiming to be world histories had been, and even today often are. Rashid, a Jewish physician turned Muslim and later Prime Minister of a Mongol Khanate, working in union with scholars and administrators from every corner of Eurasia subdued by the Mongols, set about his task declaring:

Today, thanks be to God and in consequence of him, the extremities of the inhabited earth are under the dominion of the house of Chinggis Qan and philosophers, astronomers, scholars and historians from North and South China, India, Kashmir, Tibet, (the lands) of the Uighurs, other Turkic tribes, the Arabs and Franks, (all) belonging to (different) religions and sects, are united in large numbers in the service of majestic heaven – This book –, in its totality, will be unprecedented- an assemblage of all the branches of history. (Rashid al-Din/ Alizade, vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 16–17)<sup>1</sup>

It was indeed an unprecedented undertaking<sup>2</sup> and no similar work was to emerge until the twentieth century. A history which covered the whole of Eurasia from the realm of the Franks, i.e. western Europe, through Muslim lands into India and past the Nomadic world of the steppe to the plains of China and beyond. Even places as far as Java, Korea and Japan are included in this grand survey. This was a historical undertaking made possible by the dominance of the Mongols, the greatest of the steppe empires, over the whole of Eurasia. The world had indeed become one under the Mongols, not just in terms of political unification of most of the known world under the dynasty of Chinggis Khan (better known as Genghis Khan), but intellectually and economically.<sup>3</sup>

Strangely enough this intellectual unity in our age of globalization and fervent cultural exchange is sadly lacking in the discipline of history. The branches of history that Rashid referred to are today in discordant disunion in a way that would have appalled our thirteenth-century predecessors. World history of the type Rashid engaged in, in our age of departmentalization and compartmentalization, has without doubt lost something of its former allure. The monumental works of intellectual giants such as Max Weber and Arnold Toynbee, never mind distant luminaries of the past, the likes of Rashid, Ibn Khaldun, Sima Qian and Herodotus, are well and truly relics of the past. Those who dare to engage in work that is broad-ranging enough to be categorized, perhaps, as world history, do so with fear that their work may be castigated for lacking specialist knowledge or be lampooned as a random collection of trivial generalizations.<sup>4</sup> However, fortunately (or alas!) for those historians who engage in the history of the fourth and fifth centuries AD (i.e. Late Antiquity), the centuries characterized by the rise of steppe empires and the collapse of the western half of the Roman Empire, departmentalization and selective specialization are wishful thinking and in fact wholly inappropriate.

Many in fact have tried to engage in such limited research and have arguably produced erroneous conclusions as a consequence. Dependence on nothing but Greco-Roman sources has produced valuable insights to be sure, but has fallen short of providing satisfactory answers to one of the key issues raised in this book: why indeed did the imperial structure of Rome, which had held firm for so many centuries previously, fail miserably in the last century of its existence? To unravel this 'mystery' a much broader interdisciplinary and comparative analysis, the type that calls to mind some of the ambitious eclecticism of Rashid al-Din's enterprise, is needed. In short 'a Eurasian perspective' must again be adopted.

Such an analysis would prove the main argument of this book – that the most important historical development of Late Antiquity, which was of critical importance to the later history of the world, was not the fall of the Western half of the Roman Empire, which was one of its consequences, but the world-changing dynamics or convulsions, a veritable revolution in the strategic and political balance of the global power structure,<sup>5</sup> which originated in a region that Central Asian specialists identify as Inner Asia,<sup>6</sup> the steppe region that has historically linked the main civilizations of Eurasia: China, the Greco-Roman world, Iran and India. Indeed the fifth century AD, which saw the collapse of Western Rome, saw these cultural zones linked together by and under the domination of four well-organized and long-lived empires: the Hunnic Empire in Europe; the White Huns (Hephthalites) in Central Asia,

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Northwestern India and Eastern Iran; the Rouran Khaganate in Turkestan and Mongolia; and finally the Xianbei Toba Empire in Northern China.<sup>7</sup> Of these, the first three had a core Hunnic/Xiongnu element and the fourth (Xianbei) had likewise originated from the Xiongnu/Hunnic political entity.

We will return to these empires shortly, but first a brief and by no means comprehensive overview of the background to these world-changing developments is needed. Scholars have already discussed at some length what the remarkable polymath Hodgson<sup>8</sup> and after him Chase-Dunn and Hall identify as the Afro-Eurasian interactive system.<sup>9</sup> Between the fifth century BC (perhaps even earlier) and the fifteenth century AD, before the discovery of the New World, this interactive system, in essence a network of trade routes (the most famous being the Silk Road)<sup>10</sup> across the Eurasian continent and sea lanes which linked China and India to the Middle East and East Africa via which to the Mediterranean, constituted the most vital avenue of cultural exchange and economic prosperity in the world. This system expanded and contracted over nearly two millennia and arguably reached its climactic apogee with the establishment of the pan-Eurasian Empire of the Mongols under Chinggis Khan.<sup>11</sup> The Mongols, as Rashid al-Din so accurately demonstrates, dominated virtually all the traditional continental trade routes and created an unprecedented mechanism for cultural exchange across the known world.<sup>12</sup> Their contribution (in fact that of all the steppe polities that had preceded it) to the birth of what is now called the Modern world is somewhat underrated<sup>13</sup> and a vast amount of historical data and information concerning this remarkable Eurasian Empire still remains under-researched.<sup>14</sup>

Tempting as it is to discuss this matter further, the Mongol Empire is only of peripheral concern to the main subject of this book and hence it is hoped that more scholarship will in the future further highlight the importance of this critical phase in world history.<sup>15</sup> However, it must be noted in passing that the Mongol Empire was the culmination of nearly a millennium of domination of much of Eurasia by Turkic or Mongolic empires (with a greatly heterogeneous population base<sup>16</sup>) of the Eurasian steppe. Between AD 311, arguably the beginning of the great Inner Asian incursions into China,<sup>17</sup> and AD 1405, which marked the death of perhaps the most brutal of the numerous inner Asian conquerors of the known world Timur or Tamerlane,<sup>18</sup> every corner of Eurasia from Gaul (France) to the Pacific, from the deep frozen recesses of Siberia to the fertile plains of the Ganges in India, had at one stage or another been ruled by a Turkic (heavily mixed with Iranian<sup>19</sup>) or Mongolic ruling elite.<sup>20</sup> This is surely remarkable and there is simply no parallel in world history to this persistent and millennium-long

dominance by a single cultural group originating from basically the same region, the eastern steppes (from the Altai to eastern Mongolia). Arguably, not even the Romans or the Chinese at their height under the Tang Dynasty (seventh to ninth centuries AD) came close to exerting such a far-reaching and long-lasting influence geographically or in temporal terms.

With the exception of the significant, but in fact comparatively brief, interlude of Arab Muslim and Tang Chinese dominance between the seventh and ninth centuries AD (roughly 200 years),<sup>21</sup> the millennium that we identify as the Dark Ages-cum-Middle Ages was without a doubt the era of Turco-Mongol supremacy. In this world order Inner Asia formed the core and Europe, China and the Middle East merely the periphery.<sup>22</sup> Such a reality was difficult to accept for most historians in both the West and also the East. No Sinocentric or Eurocentric writer could ever admit that their world was of secondary importance in the grand scheme of things and that the 'nomadic', steppe barbarians, whom they despised, were at one stage even in the distant past their superiors and overlords.

The solution had been to basically ignore this period of history altogether (as the relative dearth of scholarly interest in the so-called Middle Ages in comparison to the previous 'Classical Period' of Greco-Roman pre-eminence and the later Pre-Modern European era shows) or relegate the Turks and the Mongols to oblivion by attributing to them unbelievably primitive and bestial levels of cultural development and a comprehensive lack of any redeeming civilized features.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, the Huns and the Mongols were extremely cruel in their conquests and caused substantial destruction,<sup>24</sup> but can we argue that the Romans or even the Macedonians destroyed any less? The Persians at Persepolis, the Greeks of Thebes, the Phoenicians of Tyre, the Sogdians of Cyropolis and the countless thousands of innocent victims in India and Central Asia who were massacred by Alexander's conquering army<sup>25</sup> could hardly appreciate the argument that 'Greek'<sup>26</sup> Macedonian conquest brought them the benefits of a superior civilization.<sup>27</sup> The brutal efficiency of Roman conquest doesn't even need a survey. The ruins and mass slaughter of Carthage, Etruria, Gaul and Jerusalem would be sufficient evidence of that.

However, any student of Classical civilization would certainly reply that the Romans and the Macedonians, after the initial brutality of conquest, left behind them shining monuments of cultural brilliance that are the heritage of the Western world. That is certainly true too. But by the same logic the Seljuks, the Timurids, the Moghuls, the Mongol Yuan Empire and the Ottomans, after the initial terror, all bequeathed to posterity architectural and artistic wonders and a fabulously rich cultural legacy,

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no less significant than the Romans'.<sup>28</sup> They were a brutally efficient and capable group of conquerors and rulers, in every way the equals of the Roman Caesars or the Macedonian kings.

Yet in the plethora of rhetoric concerning racial/ethnic superiority, democracy, western orientalism, Chinese nationalism etc., the group that was the real instigator of momentous changes in the millennium before European dominance has been largely forgotten. The public in both the West and the East are vaguely aware of them, if at all, as simple savages who killed, looted and plundered their ancestors. It is perhaps time to give the steppe empires their due and acknowledge the fact that their world constituted another, important civilization,<sup>29</sup> which made a significant contribution to our 'modern' civilization by first bringing together the disparate cultural centres of Eurasia out of their comparative isolation into a Eurasian whole and then contributing to the moulding of a new global culture. Central Asians, though they certainly weren't peace-loving sages, were also certainly not the paradigm of unrestrained barbarism.<sup>30</sup> In this book I seek to introduce the reader to the people who began the legend of the 'rapacious' and fearsome nomad in the West, the Huns who brought down the Roman and Chinese Empires and ushered in the era of Turco-Mongol pre-eminence.

THE HUNS, A NEW WORLD ORDER AND THE  
BIRTH OF 'EUROPE'

Between the year AD 311, when Luoyang the capital of the Jin Dynasty of China was sacked by the eastern Huns (Southern Xiongnu),<sup>31</sup> and the 450s AD when the last vestiges of Western Roman military supremacy over Europe vanished as a consequence of losses inflicted on the Empire by the European Huns, in the space of little over a century the steppe powers, mostly referred to as Huns ('hiungnu', Hunas, Chionites, etc.) in our various sources, caused the total or partial collapse of four sedentary empires: Rome, Jin (China), Sassanian Persia (which lost its eastern territories to the Hephtalite and Kidarite Huns) and the Guptas (India). The Huns, who brought about these cataclysmic changes and threatened the borders of all the major powers of the ancient world simultaneously across the whole length of the immense boundaries of Inner Asia, were, as mentioned earlier, the forerunners of a whole millennium of military and political dominance emanating from the steppe in world affairs. Han China and Rome, the superpowers of the ancient world, were eclipsed by the third power group, the Huns and other steppe peoples.

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This revolutionary shift in the balance of power from the sedentary world to the steppe or rather from the Eurasian periphery to its centre, turned what had once been the poorest and most desolate region of world civilization into the very core of the Eurasian interactive system. Through the ‘nomads’, much maligned and underrated, the Eurasian world became further integrated.<sup>32</sup> The concept of east and west was rendered irrelevant and peripheral. Steppe empires ruled both East and West and under the Mongols a truly universal empire was brought into existence. In effect both East and West became merely the wings of the central Inner Asian core.

This dominance of Inner Asia was only broken gradually between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries by a combination of factors, one of which was European maritime activity from the fifteenth century onwards.<sup>33</sup> Until in some cases the twentieth century the residual states of this old order, e.g. the Manchu Qing Empire, the Ottoman Turkish Sultanate<sup>34</sup> and the Uzbek Khanates of Bukhara and Khiva, survived. The green ‘oceans’ of the steppes and the steppe horse, the old vehicle of rapid movement, were gradually replaced by blue oceans and mechanized ships. East and West Eurasia, in large part due to the unity brought about by Central Eurasians (steppe peoples), which alerted them to the existence of each other and the great benefits (i.e. trade and exchange) that could be gained through greater interaction, chose to meet directly and no longer via Central Asian intermediaries. The world became closer than ever before. In a way the histories of both Greco-Rome and China became the history of the whole world, not just their parochial locality. Steppe history, however, made this later development possible.<sup>35</sup> A fourteenth-century sinicized immigrant in Jiangxi, southeastern China, from the west called or rather renamed Wang Li (1314–89), aptly sums up the impact of the steppe empires in the following way:

The land within the Four Seas had become the territory of one family, civilization had spread everywhere, and no more barriers existed. For people in search of fame and wealth in north and south, a journey of a thousand li was like a trip next door, while a journey of ten thousand li constituted just a neighbourly jaunt. Hence, among people of the Western Regions who served at the court, or who studied in our south-land, many forgot the region of their birth, and took delight in living among our rivers and lakes. As they settled down in China for a long time, some became advanced in years, their families grew, and being far from home, they had no desire to be buried in their fatherland. Brotherhood among peoples certainly reached a new plane.<sup>36</sup>

Yet while the impact of later steppe empires is finally getting some belated recognition at least among interested academics, the significant historical,

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cultural and political contributions made by earlier steppe empires, especially the Hunnic Empire, to world history and civilization, are still almost entirely neglected by both many academics and the general public. It is the argument of this book that the political and cultural landscape of early medieval Europe was shaped by the fusion of Roman and Inner Asian (Hunnic and Alanic) cultural and political practices. Most importantly, this book will trace the origins of certain elements of early medieval 'feudalism' in Inner Asia.<sup>37</sup> It will demonstrate that the Hunnic Empire played a decisive role in the unravelling of Roman hegemony over areas that would later become Western Europe and actively facilitated the political formation of the so-called 'Germanic' successor kingdoms. It proposes that early medieval Europe was as much Inner Asian as Roman and that this has significant ramifications for how we should view and categorize 'Europe' and our 'modern' civilization. The book will address these critical issues specifically and is not intended to be a full history of the Huns or the later Roman Empire, though substantial information about the history of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages will be provided as part of the effort to elucidate the main arguments of the book.

For the sake of clarity it is also necessary to explain here in the introduction the relevance of the concept of 'ethnicity' to the subject matter of this book. I have already used terms such as 'Germanic', 'Iranian', 'Turkic' and 'Turco-Mongol'. All these terms are broad linguistic terms referring to speakers of groups of languages (belonging to language families<sup>38</sup>) and not specific ethnic appellations. In contrast terms such as Goth, Hun, Alan, Parthian, Scythian, Frank, etc., which will regularly appear, refer to primarily political and ethnic categories. I need not remind the reader that the term ethnicity is a neologism coined in the middle of the twentieth century. Yet in scholarship the ideas and concepts embraced by this neologism have often been used to define and categorize historical ethnic entities and political groupings.<sup>39</sup> An extended discussion of ethnicity is out of place here and I must refer the reader to my earlier publication<sup>40</sup> on the subject, but a brief overview will be provided to clarify just what is meant when terms such as Hun and Goth are used in this book.

Scholarship on ethnicity is divided among those who follow the model of the Norwegian ethnologist F. Barth, the so-called Modernists (or instrumental approach), who argue that an ethnic group is in reality purely a self-created, artificial entity formed to protect specific political and economic interests<sup>41</sup>, and the primordialists (sometimes also called the perennialists) who tend to argue that ethnic groups are the product of specific cultural and historical realities such as blood ties ('race'), language,

common territory, common religion and common historical memory that function as 'primordial' ties.<sup>42</sup> A synthesis of aspects of both positions is now generally accepted as best reflecting the reality of ethnicity and ethnic consciousness in history.<sup>43</sup>

As will be shown in due course, groups such as the Huns, the Goths and the Franks were neither entirely concrete ethnic entities in the sense advocated by the primordialists, nor simply artificial political-economic constructs as proposed by the modernists. They were a complex agglomeration of peoples who were united for a number of different reasons: political, economic, military, putative blood links, at times by common language(s) and historical memory. Multilingualism was very often a feature of a number of these groups, especially those originating from Inner Asia, and heterogeneity both in terms of language and 'genetic' makeup, especially of the elite, was common. Therefore, when reference is made to the Huns or Goths, one should not consider automatically a racial category or a clear-cut ethnic identity. The reality was much more complex, fluid and ever-changing. Identity (both ethnic and political) was inherently unstable. A Hun could transform himself into the leader of the Goths or Franks whom he dominated, as we shall see, and become a Frankish or a Gothic leader. A Goth could also become a Hunnic noble. Such complexities should therefore be recognized when reference is made to 'ethnic' names such as the Huns and the Goths.



## CHAPTER 2

*Rome's Inner Asian enemies before the Huns*

## THE PARTHIAN EMPIRE

Before we begin our inquiry on the Huns, however, it is necessary to examine briefly the steppe peoples who came into contact with the Romans before the Huns. Firstly in order to determine how the strategic situation in Western Eurasia was altered by the rise of the Hunnic Empire and secondly to determine what influence, if any, Inner Asian peoples had on the political organization of Rome's most formidable sedentary enemy, Persia.<sup>1</sup> This section is not intended to be a full-length or in-depth history of the Parthians and the Sassanians, but will focus specifically on the steppe characteristics of the Parthian and to a lesser extent Sassanian political systems. It will also attempt to show how these traces of Inner Asian practices in the Persian (i.e. Parthian and Sassanian) political landscape bear witness to the political complexity of Inner Asian society from which the Huns later emerged. It is often taken for granted that the Parthian Empire was a state-level entity that possessed a complex political organization. Yet the Huns, who like the Parthians originated from Inner Asia, are often viewed as politically primitive by modern ancient historians. In this chapter and the following chapter the myth of a politically primitive and backward Inner Asia will be refuted.

Among the handful of steppe peoples in whom the Romans had any interest, without a doubt the Parthians were the most famous or most dreaded. The military power and organization of the early Parthian state, before its precipitous decline in the second century AD, was formidable and stable enough to sustain this steppe-derived political entity for half a millennium, all the while gaining the respect of its rival, the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Yet the steppe origins of the Parthians have not received the attention that they deserve and are not widely regarded as an essential element of the imperial structure that the Parthians created,<sup>3</sup> despite the attestations of our ancient sources regarding the persistence of steppe

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customs and institutions among the Parthians (Strabo (II.9.2; I6.I.I6, 743 C) and Trogus/Justin (4I.2–4)).

One could of course argue that the Achaemenids, who preceded the Parthians before the Macedonian/Seleucid interlude and without a doubt provided a model for imperial rule on which both the Seleucids and later the Parthians built, being Indo-Iranians, also had an Inner Asian origin.<sup>4</sup> The critical impact of Inner Asian Saka (Scythian) nomads<sup>5</sup> on the culture and administrative practices of the Median and later Achaemenid Empires has indeed been vigorously argued for by Vogelsang.<sup>6</sup> It has been proposed that the highly militarized population of Eastern Iran, who are likely to have included a significant Saka/Scythian element and were governed in ways very reminiscent of practices found in later steppe political entities and tribal confederacies, may in fact have provided the framework within which the Persian kings built their administration and empire.<sup>7</sup>

The political system of this Persian Achaemenid empire has been called 'feudal' or quasi-feudal<sup>8</sup> because it was a system in which the king ruled through local intermediaries (in the eastern half of the empire possibly military lords of Scythian/Saka origin) who provided levies for the king's army<sup>9</sup> and were tied to the central government by an intricate web of land grants in return for providing military resources (as in later Medieval Europe), tribute payments and gift exchanges<sup>10</sup> (a system which, as we shall see later, strikingly resembles the Xiongnu imperial structure in Central Asia and the Hunnic imperial system in Europe). Now of course the use of the term 'feudal' with its Marxist and 'ahistorical' connotations is highly problematic and it is very questionable whether the term is applicable to pre-modern societies outside Western Europe without serious qualifications. However, as outlined in the introduction, part of the aim of this book is to trace the origins of elements of early Medieval 'feudalism' in Inner Asia. Therefore, before we progress any further, I will take this opportunity to briefly clarify what is meant by early medieval 'feudalism' and whether modified variations of that term can legitimately be used to describe similar political systems and practices in Ancient Inner Asia and Inner Asian dominated Ancient Iran.

The 'feudalism' that I am referring to is 'feudalism' in the political sense of a formal division of state power between the king and his subordinate great vassals (sub-kings and great nobles) within the upper aristocratic elite, so centralized 'feudalism', and not the fragmented political-economic system which we identify with later medieval Europe, the *seigneurie* or manorialism.<sup>11</sup> Manorialism is a system in which there is a near complete breakdown of central government authority, where small local fief holders