

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

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Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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The Character of the Trade between the Nomads and their Settled Neighbours in Eurasia in the Middle Ages

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This paper is important for me by reason of the role and place of the Eastern European trade in the 8th-10th centuries (a period which was a heyday of trade in this region). That is to say, I look at this topic from the vantage point of Eastern Europe.¹ The aim of this study is the trade and exchange of goods of the nomads of the Eurasian steppe with their settled neighbours. I focus on the character of the contacts between the steppe empires (that is, the greatest nomadic confederations) and the medieval great powers: China, Sassanian Persia and later, the Caliphate and the Eastern Roman Empire.² I have separated five geographical zones and compared them with each with other. The zones are: 1. China and the northern/north-western peripheral zone, Mongolia, the Altai, and Manchuria 2. Iran and Central-Asia (the Kazakh steppe, in the neighbourhood of Transoxania and Khorasan) 3. Iran (its north western part) and the Caucasus 4. The Eastern Roman Empire and the Eastern European steppe north of the Black Sea and 5. The Eastern Roman Empire and the Carpathian Basin.

What kind of similarities and differences can we notice? Are there any universal regularities in these contacts, or are there different patterns for each territory? The starting-point are the asymmetric relations between the Eurasian nomads and their settled neighbours which have been analysed in detail for example by Anatoly Khazanov in his foundational work (Khazanov 1994), or for example by András Róna-Tas, before the edition of Khazanov's book (Róna-Tas 1983) or Ildikó Ecsedy (1999 and 1999a). In the case of the Eurasian steppes these asymmetric relations became visible especially in the eastern part, that is, in Inner Asia, where nomadism really predominated. In general, it is said that the nomad economy was without complexity and unbalanced, and needed the economy of the settled territories. This was especially true for the nomad tribal elite in contrast to the common people. The nomads had two possibilities: 1. expansion, that is occupation of territories with complex economies, or 2. continuous exchange

1 This study is a short version of a chapter of my book titled "Kelet-Európa kereskedelmi kapcsolatai (kb. 750-kb. 1000) (írott források alapján)" [Eastern Europe and the International Trade (cca. 750-cca. 1000) (on the Basis of Written Sources)] Balassi Kiadó, Budapest 2019.

2 István Zimonyi has compared the societies of the steppe region from China to Central Europe in regards to the nomad "imperial" strategies in the relations with the settled societies (Zimonyi 2016: 125-129).

relations with their settled neighbours. Or we can mention a third possibility, to settle in a rural territory and become a settled population.

The nomadic-Chinese exchange relations are well known first of all from the view of China. On the Chinese-nomad relations it is said in general (on the basis of studies of Jagchid and Symons, Ildikó Ecsedy, Mackerras) that trade and war were connected.³ The north/northwestern borderlands of China were at peace when goods and gifts went in both directions, but mainly to the nomads. During such times China was safe from the nomads. This was true also for the politically divided periods of China's history.

Usually the nomads were initiators. The nomads could at times effectively initiate the formation of great tribal confederations or empires. According to Thomas Barfield the great nomad empires in the neighbourhood of China emerged at times when China was politically united under the rule of one dynasty (Barfield 1996: 5-9). Barfield explains the coexistence of a "strong China" with a "strong nomad empire" by saying that a unified China had greater resources than a divided China, and it could give up goods to the nomads more easily.⁴ Following Barfield's train of thought the nomadic empires built on these unified Chinese periods and could support themselves for a long time. These nomadic empires seen from without were very unified, but from inside we can see a duality: centralization and hierarchy at the level of the empire and autonomy at the level of the tribes. On one hand a tribal clan was over the tribes and put their own members over the submitted tribes, they often preserved their original status and the chieftains could be relatively autonomous from each other. Because in this arrangement the tribal aristocracy could calculate on the goods from the leading clan, it was worth to stay inside the confederation (Zimonyi 2016: 126). The great steppe empires neighbouring China had two different strategies: 1. "outer frontier strategy" (Barfield 1996: 49-51; Dobrovits 2005: 18) 2. occupation of a part of China and starting a new dynasty. The first was typical for empires which emerged in Mongolia (Xiongnu, Rouran, Turks etc.), the second was typical for empires which were founded in Manchuria (Khitan, Jurchen). In the 13th century the Mongols tried both of these strategies. Here I focus on the first strategy, because it is characteristic of the nomad-Chinese relations over a long period of time. The relations developed step by step: first a mutual exchange of goods with the nomads, who occasionally employed threats with the aim of receiving additional gifts, later a dynastic wedding, and finally the opening up of the market places in

³ Jagchid & Symons 1989: 23, 186-187; Ecsedy 1968; Mackerras 1969; Mackerras 2004.

⁴ This theory is not universally accepted, for example, Michael Drompp pointed out that Barfield's theory is one-sided, focusing only on one aspect, and that it does not apply to all mentioned periods (it is true for the Han - Xiongnu period). We need to take into consideration other aspects, for example the role of long distance trade (Drompp 2005). On its role in the emergence of nomadic empires, see Kradin 2005: 152.

the border zone and permanent trade, which was not really permanent due to Chinese administrative regulations. The nomads usually desired more gifts and goods than the Chinese partners sent to them.⁵ For the Chinese emperors the gifts from the nomads did not mean they should also send goods, because for them they were simply a form of tribute or honour.

The nomads living in the vicinity of China took part in another system of exchange: the Silk Road. They sold a part of the goods they had received from China (cooperating with middlemen such as the Soghdians during the Turk and Post-Turk periods). The western connexions of the Turks reached up to Constantinople, and though the Uyghurs didn't have such long connexions, Chinese goods from time to time were exported to West. To sum up, the outer frontier strategy against the Chinese Empire was successful for a long time. Its results were more or less regular trade connectios and intervallic wars. Enforcement could be effective because China had a long overland border with the nomads, and the centres and prosperous regions of the empire were within easy striking distance of the nomad armies. There were especially frequent wars during the Xiongnu period.

The second region is the steppe zone bordering Iran and Central Asia. There are few written sources from ancient times and the early Middle Ages, so our knowledge is incomplete (while there are certainly records on ethnic history, the lack of the sources concerns trade contacts).⁶ In this zone there was no permanent tradition of nomad empires and it was not a constant geographical centre of nomad empires such as Mongolia and Manchuria in vicinity of China were. In this steppe there were periods without an empire, or there were ephemorous, short-lived empires, maybe as part of another empire, for example the Western Turk Empire. In additon, we may mention the Hephthalite Empire. The centres of the Iranian empires were far away from the steppes of Central Asia, separated from them by large highlands. The Sassanian emperors built walls and fortresses in the northern frontier zones of their empire, from the Caucasus to the oasis of Merv (Harmatta 2002: 65–69). The nomads of these regions were in contact first of all with the northern periphery of the Iranian civilization, with Soghdiana and Khwarazm, and developed with them peaceful trade. But there were periods of war also. For example the Hephthalites and the Turks fought against the Sassanid Empire which paid to tribute both of them, first to the Hephtalites and after that to the Turks, who helped the Sassanids to destroy the Hephtalite Empire.⁷ But the nomadic empires of this period were more precarious and volatile than those which were in the neighbourhood of China, and due to the outer frontier strategy, the threat of the nomads to the inner and central zones of the Iranian empires

5 Gift exchange is known from the Xiongnu period (e. g. Di Cosmo 2004: 284–285).

6 On ancient Iran, the Sassanids and the nomads, see Czeglédy 1983: 41–43, 55–62, 77–84.

7 On the Hephthalites, the Avar migration and the Sassanid Empire, see Vásáry 1993: 70–71.

(including in the early Islamic period) was not so dangerous and permanent as in the case of China.

After the Arab conquest a new period began in Central Asia. The Arabs confronted the nomads of the Eurasian steppe. The opposition was long-lasting. The image of the hostile nomads is preserved in the Muslim literature. There is a passage in the work of Yāqūt al-Rūmī (13th century) on the nomads (“Turks”) of Central Asia. According to the author, the caliph Hisham (724–743) sent an embassy to the northern nomads to convert them to the Islam. The king of the nomads refused the offer of the caliph, because the economy, culture, and urban life were strange for the nomads.⁸ But the situation later changed. In the 9th–10th centuries Muslim merchants frequently visited the nomads. Ibn Faḍlān reported on the Oghuz, living north of Khwarazm, who had a special connexion with the Muslim traders.⁹

In the 13th century the Mongol invasion changed this situation radically: Iran was conquered by a nomad empire.

The third region is the Caucasus, or more specifically Transcaucasia and the steppe north of the Caucasus. Although the Caucasus is a natural barrier, Transcaucasia was not fully safe from the northern nomads. The passes of the mountains were under Persian control, but the nomads (from the Scythians to the Khazars) in spite of the fact that there were built walls and fortresses, could get over the *limes* and invade Transcaucasia (Armenia, Media etc.). They often did this in alliance with local Transcaucasian kingdoms.¹⁰ There is a brilliant record on the nomad-settled relations in the historical work of Ibn Miskawaihī ‘The Experiences of Nations’. This passage on the northern nomads is based on the life of the Sassanian shah, Khosrow Anushirvan recorded before the Arab conquest. Around the year 540 the nomads (in the text they are ‘Turks’) in the vicinity of Lazike¹¹ (in the north western part of the Caucasus) sent a letter to Khosrow, asking for supplies because they were in need of goods and foodstuffs threatening that if he did not comply with the demands, the nomads would attack the empire of the shah. In addition they asked him for to receive nomad troops into the Sassanian empire. Khosrow visited the Caucasus region and settled two thousand nomads in the border zone, sending magi (Zoroastrian priests) among them to introduce the Iranian religion. But the most important for us was that Khosrow opened the market places in the border zone, so the nomads could exchange goods (Grignaschi 1966: 19–20). This story contains in brief all the elements which have already been mentioned regarding

8 Yāqūt, *Lexicon*, ed. Wüstenfeld 1866, I: 839. Hungarian translation: Kmoskó 2007: 29. Yāqūt’s passage goes back to reports of al-Hamadānī and Ibn Khurdādhbih (9th c.).

9 Ibn Faḍlān, *Risāla*, transl. Frye 2005: 35. On the trade between Muslims and nomads in Central Asia in the 9th–10th cc.: e. g. Mokrynin 1973.

10 Mako 2010: 50–52.

11 Lazike had usually been under Byzantine rule but in the 6th century came under Sassanian influence.

nomad-Chinese relations. Demands and threats from the nomads and the concessions of the shah in exchange for peace. These nomad-settled contacts changed after the Arab conquest. Similarly to Central Asia, the region of the Caucasus became a theatre of war in the first half of the 8th century. After 737 the war ended and a gradual rapprochement between the Arabs and the Khazars began. Around 758 on caliph al-Mansur's initiative the Arab governor of Armenia, Yazīd al-Sulamī married a daughter of the Khazar kaghan. The Muslim author Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī cites a letter which Al-Mansūr sent to al-Yazīd: "Arminiya cannot continue to exist and prosper unless a marriage league is established with the Khazars. It is, therefore, my opinion that a covenant by marriage must be established in order that the country may prosper. Otherwise, I have fears, because of the Khazars, regarding the safety of you and all your officials. They come together, whenever they will, and prevail."¹² The security in the border zone was important for the Arabs. On the basis of these peaceful Arab-Khazar relations trade contacts developed between the Caliphate and Eastern Europe.

The next territory is the Eastern European steppe. Here also emerged only a few nomad empires: the formation of the Hun and the Avar empires started here but finished in the Carpathians. In addition, Magna Bulgaria, Khazaria and the Golden Horde belong to Eastern Europe.¹³ Magna Bulgaria was an originally Eastern European nomad empire but it was short-lived. After it the empire of the Khazars existed for about three hundred and fifty years, and the Golden Horde for two hundred and fifty years. Apart from the above mentioned Caucasian region, the empire which was the neighbour to the steppe region was the Eastern Roman Empire. Not a single one of the above mentioned three Eastern European nomad empires became involved in a serious war with the Eastern Romans. They did not use force or threats for long time. Kuvrat, the head of Magna Bulgaria, was an ally of emperor Herakleios; and the Khazars engaged in marriage diplomacy with the Romans. But in the case of the so-called non-imperial nomad tribes or confederacies the situation was similar. The Scythians peacefully traded with the Greeks and there are a few sources on the trade between nomads and the settled population from later periods. Sometimes the Eastern European nomads attacked the Balkan provinces of Roman Empire, as for example the Protobulgars in the 5th and 6th centuries, but the same Protobulgars were sometimes allies of the Romans (for example against the Goths). This passivity of the Eastern European nomads could be explained on the basis of their geographical position: Constantinople is far from the northern coast of the Black sea, and the sea itself acts as a natural barrier. To reach the city overland was possible only across the Lower Danube and

¹² Al-Kūfī, *Book of Conquests*, Noonan 1984: 202 (on the basis of Károly Czeglédy's translation); Bunyatov 1981: 62.

¹³ On the ethnic and political history of Western Eurasia in the Early Middle Ages, see for example Golden 1992; Vásáry 1993.

the Balkan peninsula (incidentally Rome was in a safer region, so when the centre of the Empire was moved to Constantinople, the risk of a nomad attack increased a little). From the Pontus region (the northern coast of the Black sea) the Kutrigurs reached Constantinople in the year 559, but this campaign was fruitless. The Avars are another example. In 565 emperor Justin II stopped sending gifts to the Avars, but they made no threats or demands. Probably the Avar kagan Bayan did not want to risk a doubtful war against the empire, and instead forced out contributions from the Franks.¹⁴ But in this case we can take into consideration the threat of the Turks, which made the Avars to want to preserve the intactness of their army. The second reason for the passivity of the nomads could be the complexity of the economy. Although the nomads led a nomadic way of life in the steppe, their settled neighbours in the forest steppe zone provided them with food such as grains, vegetables and fruits. The third reason for their passivity could be the Greek population of the northern coast of the Black sea. The Greeks were ready to exchange goods with the nomads. From the 7th-6th centuries B. C. the Greeks contacted the Eastern European peoples and began to exchange goods with them. The main market places were at the estuaries of the great rivers of the northern Black sea region, the Dniester, Southern Bug, Dnieper, and Don and in the Crimean peninsula. The situation did not change during the rule of the Sassanid and Roman Empires. It was typical for the nomads to transport goods to the towns of the Greeks, as can be seen in the reports of Strabon or later John Malalas.¹⁵ Merchants arrived to these markets from the southern region of the Black sea. The nomads played an intermediary role in the fur trade between the forest zone and the Black sea region.¹⁶ The Volga region had trade contacts with the Caucasus region and Central Asia. Into this region there was imported silver from East (Iran, Sogdia etc.) and the ornaments of Central Asian art inspired the formation a local style.¹⁷ Central Asia (the Silk Road) and the Eastern Mediterranean alike were in connection with every region, that is, the regional trade zones of Eastern Europe were not isolated, and Eastern European trade was part of the 'world trade' system. Eastern Roman foreign policy also tried to employ this trade in its own interests, thus, it usually made peace with the nomads through gifts.

The last territory is the Carpathian Basin. The Carpathian Basin was conquered by the Huns in the 5th century, by the Avars in 567/68 and by the Hungarians at the end of the 9th century. The outer frontier strategy was characteristic of all of these

14 Menander protector, *Fragm.* 8, ed. Blockley 1985: 93–97; Corippus, *In laudem Iustini*, Ioannes Ephesinus, *Historia ecclesiastica*: Szádeczky-Kardoss 1986: 65–66; Szádeczky-Kardoss 1990: 207.

15 Strabon, *Geographica*, XI, 2. ed. Lasserre 1975: 44, 48. Malalas, *Chronographia*, ed. Thurn 2000: 499.

16 E. g. Iordanes, *Getica*, 37, ed. Skržinskaya 1960: 136.

17 E. g. Frye 1972; Noonan 2000; on the art and ornaments: e. g. Fodor 2008: 127–150.

peoples. The Huns and the Avars forced the Eastern Roman Empire to pay silver and gold tribute. The Hungarians seized goods and took captives in the Eastern Roman Empire, but they turned their attention to West and captured the Frankish and Italian kingdoms. An important reason for the successful campaigns against the Eastern Roman Empire was geography: the northern part of the Empire (including Constantinople) was an easily approachable territory due to the long overland border. The Eastern Roman defensive line, the *limes*, could not stop the nomad invasions. Thus, the nomad empires of the Eastern European steppe north of the Black sea were less dangerous than the nomad empires of the Carpathian Basin. If a strong nomad tribal confederacy formed here, it could easily become dangerous for the Eastern Roman Empire.

During the Roman period (1st-4th cc. A. D.) the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin was under the rule of Sarmatian tribes, who developed trade contacts with the Romans. The situation changed when the Hun tribal confederation conquered the territory (cca. 420–430). The Huns began to use the “outer frontier strategy” against the Roman Empire. Due to their strength the Romans paid tribute to the Huns, from 423 to 435 every year there came 350 pounds of gold from the Roman Empire. In 435 the Roman emperor Theodosius and the Hun king Bleda came to an agreement that the Romans would pay double the earlier tribute (700 pounds). The Romans promised not to form a league with the enemies of the Huns, the ransom for Roman captives was increased to 8 solidi and moreover, the Romans allowed to visit the borderland markets. István Zimonyi has compared the Roman-Hun treaty with the Chinese-Xiongnu treaties. The difference is that the Romans did not intermarry with the Hun royal dynasty (Zimonyi 2016: 127–128). In the 440’s the Roman tribute increased up to 2100 pounds and in this decade the Huns got 13.000 pounds of gold in total (Bóna 1991: 47, 55, 58, 60). Over 27 years circa 8 tons of gold flowed from the Roman Empire to the royal court of the Huns. But the Hun Empire was short-lived and the Eastern Roman Empire was secure from the nomads up to the middle of the 6th century. The Avars conquered the Carpathian Basin in 568 and from the 580’s began a war of attrition with the Eastern Roman Empire. The Avars successfully forced the Romans to pay tribute. From 573 to 585 they paid 80.000 solidi per year, from 585 to 598 100.000 solidi per year, and from 598 the Avars got 120.000 solidi per year. The culmination of the Eastern Roman tribute was in 623 when they paid 200.000 solidi per year. After the Avar defeat in 626 the Romans paid less and in the 8th century there is no mention of the annual tribute to the Avars. According to István Bóna, the total money which the Romans sent to the Avars was circa 4,5 million solidi, that is circa 27 tons of gold (cca. 400 kilograms per year, in fact less, about 350 kg due to debased coins) (Bóna 1987: 324; Zimonyi 2016: 128; Zimonyi 2014: 188–189). Adding to this money the booty and some more gold from ransom (for captives) the total sum comes up with six million solidi (Pohl 1990: 92). This was more than the gold given to the Huns. The strategy and military organization of the Avars for half a century was based on the tribute from Constantinople. There are no reports about the borderland markets

and exchange of goods with the Eastern Romans. But there may have been some exchange between the Avars and Romans, for example glass beads of the Millefiori type, and metal chairs and vessels indicate the possibility of exchange, perhaps an exchange of gifts between the ruling elites (Vida 2016: 95). We need to take into consideration that the Avar economy was a complex system, the Carpathian Basin had good ecological and climatic conditions, and the Eastern Roman tribute was important for the Avar elite in order to keep their “nomad empire”. The third major nomadic tribal confederation that conquered the Carpathian Basin was the *Hétmagyar* (Proto-Hungarians) (895–900). They followed the strategy of the Avars, forcing their neighbours to pay tribute or invading and plundering them. As for the Hungarians, there are different estimations on the sums which they got from the West: in a span of 40 years it could have been from 7 to 150 tons of silver (e. g. Kovács 2011: 14–18 and 211; Zimonyi 2014: 190).

To sum up:

1) In the various regions of the Eurasian steppe the strategy of the elites of the great nomad tribal confederations was similar: they tried to obtain goods and gifts from the neighbouring settled empires. This was the basis of the maintenance of their confederacies. In the East it was needed due to the unbalanced nomad economy, in the western part of the Eurasian steppe the economic pressure was not important, in Eastern Europe and the Carpathian Basin the economy was complex, here played important role only the political ambitions of the nomad elites.

2) In the analysed regions there are differences. In the territories adjacent to China the characteristic strategy of forced trade was typical and there emerged many great steppe empires over a long period of time.

3) On the opposite side of the Eurasian steppe zone, in the Carpathian Basin there was a similar situation which however lasted only during the Hun, Avar and Hungarian periods (the latter ended at the end of the 10th century).

4) In the Central Asian steppes adjacent to Iran forced trade was a less characteristic strategy and there were only a few great steppe empires. The northern Caucasus region is similar to Central Asia.

5) In the zone north of the Black sea peaceful trade and the exchange of gifts were dominant, and there was no permanent imperial tradition. The dominance of peaceful trade was a basis for the emergence of a network of long-distance trade in Western Eurasia. This emergence started under external influence. Khazaria, the empire of the Eastern European steppe easily and effectively joined this trade system.

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